

The Flying Dutchman



The Flying Dutchman painted by Albert Pinkham Ryder c.1887 (Smithsonian American Art Museum)

The legend of the Flying Dutchman concerns a ghost ship that can never make port, doomed to sail the oceans forever. It probably originates from 17th century nautical folklore. The oldest extant version dates to the late 18th century.

Sightings in the 19th and 20th centuries report the ship to be glowing with ghostly light. It is said that if hailed by another ship, its crew will try to send messages to land or to people long dead. In ocean lore, the sight of this phantom ship is a portent of doom.

She was an Amsterdam vessel and sailed the world ocean. It was remarkable fast going up and down to Java. Indonesia, one of the Dutch colonies. Her master's name was Van der Decken. He was a staunch seaman, and would have his own way in spite of the devil. For all that, never a sailor under him had reason to complain; though how it is on board with them nobody knows. The story is this: that in doubling the Cape they were a long day trying to enter the Table Bay. Without any success. The need to make it into the harbor of Cape Town to get fresh food and water.

The wind headed them, and went against them more and more, and Van der Decken walked the deck, swearing at the wind. Just after sunset a vessel spoke him, asking him if he did not mean to go into the bay that night. Van der Decken replied: 'May I be eternally damned if I do, though I should beat about here till the day of judgment'. And to be sure, he never did go into that bay, for it is believed that he continues to beat about in these seas still, and will do so for ever. This vessel is never seen but during foul weather..... it appears again and again !

These little sailboat are also called 'flying Dutchmen'.



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