

The Lay of the Ancient Puebla

About September one-nine-four-three,
Ye good ship Puebla came in from the sea,
They piloted her through the Golden Gate
To determine her fortune, or her fate:
They might have sold her or sunk her, of course,
Or salvaged her steel, without remorse,
But they thought that the loss would be much too big,
So they transformed her into a guinea pig—
The ship so big, just a poor guinea pig!

They gathered on board in parliament—
The people's money would be well spent,
And in their fashion they would recreate
A reborn vessel for men or freight.
They behaved like physicians (and what a hoard
Of would-be doctors gathered on board!),
And inwardly gloated over the fun
They were going to have before the sun
Would shine or a work very well done,
Though at the moment it had not yet begun.
Experts and officers bellowed orations,
Notes were crammed into specifications,
And the poor Puebla was slowly towed into dock,
Quite unprepared for the forthcoming shock.

The captain was proud of his open admission
That the vessel was in a deplorable condition,
It had to be thoroughly overhauled;
So when the technicians came and called
He took them everywhere on the craft,
He led them fore, he pursued them aft,
He showed them the defective cargo boom,
He pointed down to the engine room,
He detailed the weaknesses in the galley,
He let them wander in each shaft alley,
And as they walked they piled note upon note,
Again assembled and took a vote:

The job would be done, it was work and not fun,
And a better ship beneath God's sun
Would surely be seen by the next September;
Yes, they would dismember, nor leave an ember
Or worthless stuff on her by next September:
That's the date to remember: one, nine, four, four, September.

So specs were written, page upon page:
The Puebla would soon be a monstrous stage,
And the ship would forthwith be heavily staffed
With the best of workers in every craft;
Union deputies were next ushered in,
But impatient officers cried: "Begin!
Begin, begin show your patriotism,
We want no strikes, will permit no schism,
It is our duty to work very hard,
And may the record of this yard
Become preeminent throughout the Nation"—
Thus they explained the situation.

Led like a horse into a stable,
They tied her with a mile a cable,
They pulled it tight, they yanked it taut,
They saw that she was completely caught,
Then tested her pulse (so to speak) and her heart,
And proceeded to tear her all apart.
Her mighty engines were then dug out,
Her inners clustered all about,
Examined to ascertain their sins,
From powerful pistons to poor cotter pins.
Soon the engines were all undone
And the ship reduced to a mere skeleton—
The mighty Puebla once so proud
Had to be boarded by a crowd
Of Bethlehem's men endowed with skill,
Ready for duty; to have their fill
Of long and profitable employment,
To the expert's keen enjoyment,
And all of the work was sure to be done
Before a full twelve months were run.

Meanwhile they would dig from wheelhouse to brig,
In this huge stentorian guinea pig,

Nor, were they very hard to please,
For the ship was cursed with malignant disease,
Suffering thrombosis of the glands,
Carrying filth from other lands.
Needing far more than a new coat of paint
To be properly riddened of her taint.
To accomplish this rejuvenation,
They performed a cyclopean operation:
The hatches were removed from the top,
The engines lifted and sent to the shop:
Diesels, boilers, motors—all
Were included in the great withdrawal.
Next the vessel was properly preened,
Bilges, bulkheads, boiler rooms cleaned,
Sides were Scraped and given new paint
And everything done to remove the taint.

Shops and warehouses were assigned their part,
For the Puebla would soon have a marvellous heart;
Engines were overhauled, pistons relined,
Armatures wounded, tubes cleaned and refined,
Pipes were refitted, properly trued,
All of the plumbing fixtures renewed,
But as the ship's inners were then revealed,
They found fault after fault which had been concealed,
And though time was passing, with much unfinished,
The specs were augmented, nothing diminished
Except that the months and the days left remaining
Till the deadline would come, and no explaining,
No argument seemed to account
Why the incomplete jobs continued to mount,
the list of 'musts' would increase and ascend,
And unsuspectables gathered sans end.

Now this strange enigma only increased the fury
Of that valiant patriot, good Captain Drury.
He was sure of a hidden plot, and his fire
Was directed against all stallers; the fire
Of his personality fell upon those
Who seemed to think there was time for repose.
He rushed fore, he rushed aft, all over the craft,
Thinking the vessel was far understaffed,
He did all he could to hasten the job,

He wanted to hear the Puebla's heart throb,
He wanted her to again sail the great seas,
He pleaded, he threatened, he tried hard to please,
But despite all endeavor, it was to no avail,
No one could guess when the Puebla would sail,
No one would bet when she would slip from the pier,
No one would hazard that the time was yet near.

Then up spake Mr. Somerville, the chief director,
The ever vigil expert engineer inspector:
"My dear Captain, be calm, please hold your peace,
I am sure the time is coming when this work will cease,
I am willing to place all my cards you will see
The Puebla assail before we beat Germany."
Now Captain Drury did not wish to raise a false alarm,
And if the expert said it, he thought it would not harm
The Army or the Navy, let things go their usual way—
But time was passing and they neared the expected dead line day.
Yes, day passed day and week passed week,
Though the men were working at their peak;
Yes, week pawed week and day passed day,
And yet the completion seemed far away.
Alas, the Puebla was not a mere brig,
And far too renown to be a poor guinea pig,
And she had had operations before;
It seemed that ever since the start of the war,
Whenever she would return from a trip,
They docked her at a mending slip,
That just as soon as she left the shore,
She would have troubles, troubles galore,
And though they might repaid and mend.
Her symptoms kept piling, end upon end.
She seemed to be playing a dangerous game,
Preferring notoriety to fame,
And though Captain Drury did his best,
It needed more than just zeal and zest,
It seemed that whatever was the cause,
It lay outside of accepted natural laws.

So one day the Captain said: "I will
Go once again to friend Somerville,
In fact I am getting so perplexed,
I think this Puebla is really hexed.

I think it is hexed, and what is worse,
It seems to be shrouded by a cruse.
The "Flying Dutchmen" once was cursed,
And though its skipper faced the worst,
It did not matter, it would not sink;
But the case of the Puebla is different: I think
The curse is that it should not sail,
That all our efforts are of no avail,
I'll call a council, that I will,
But first of all consult Somerville."

But they would not let the matter rest,
And on second thought, it appeared best
To call the captain of the ship,
No longer let the problem slip
By them and cause further pain,
For what they were doing was done in vain,
They met; the skipper shook his fist:
"We must consult a psychometrist,
This ship **is** hexed, and what is worse,
It long has been covered by a curse;
Consult my officers or my crew,
They will agree that this is true."
While on the ocean they've hardly slept,
Their dreams are nightmare; they have wept
Like infants, not behaved like men,
Yes, this has occurred over and over again.

Say, if the ship has such a twist
Why not consult a psychometrist
He will uncover the Puebla's ghost
Or lay a leprechaun or a host
Of hobgoblins or of vile jinn,
Of the evil spirits hidden within
The ship. Let us hasten to consult,
And I will vouch for a good result,"

They had to look through list upon list,
But at last they found a psychometrist,
A respected gent from Hollywood
(That Southland city where there is a brood
Of such queer specimens of the race
For down there they find a welcome place.)

So they fixed a date and held a séance,
And watched the “psych” go into a trance.

The “psych” had said: “What I like most
Is to show my skill in catching a ghost.
A gremlin is much preferred by Aces,
And soon you gents will be taking places
With the very, very greatest of Aces
Who believe planes are hexed,
So are never perplexed,
But send often for me, let me do the rest,
For in catching goblins, I’m one of the best.”

Then this skilled psychometrist
Helloed and hooted and howled and hissed,
Grumbled and grunted and growled and groaned,
Mumbled and muttered and mooed and moaned,
Bellowed, and then became very still,
For that was the way he showed his skill,
And very soon they could hear his boast:
“Be satisfied, friends, I’ve encountered a ghost,
And though I cannot bring him to view,
This fiendish imp will now talk to you.”
“I am not a fiend;” the voice replied,
“Nor was it my choice to reside
On this ship; I know my place but
I guess I have fallen into a rut,
My grandfather used to haunt the seas,
And though he did his best to please
He sometimes failed, and if you reckon
He used to sail with Vanderdecken
You will see I am very proud,
Though you can’t hang me on a shroud,
And though I always enjoy a gale,
I prefer a vessel without a sail.
While in every way I have tried to protect
The Puebla, lest she become wrecked,
And though I say she is within sin,
The cause of her trouble lies within,
And all your efforts will have no avail
Until you have listened to my long tale.”

“The Germans once built a wonderful ship,

Using all their prowess to equip
Her with every modern convenience,
So that under no circumstance
She would fail them; another case
Of the genius of the “superior race.”
And when they had finished their work they called
A wizard who by sorcery installed
Essences of his poisons and potions,
Washed her with his magic lotions.
And then, disguised as an electrician,
He demonstrated the art of a black magician.
He mixed secret brews in the solid steel,
In the plates of the keelson and bottom keel,
And in some hidden nook he would make
Concoctions for bulkhead, rib and strake—
And in this work he proved so deft
That he hexed the ship fore and aft, right and left,
So that the elixirs of his magic art
Permeated the vessel in its every part.
When it was finished, he roamed the deck,
Waved over all from keel to smoke stack,
Always adding his impassioned curse:
‘I can not conceive anything would be worse
Than a world not entirely ruled by Germany.
As for civilization, there would not be any
If it were not for our profound **kultur**.
Is this not evident? I am so sure
Of that that I hereby utter this curse:
Should this mighty Germany suffer reverse,
Should it be that she ever is stricken,
May every atom of this vessel sicken,
May she suffer from pelvic thrombosis
Endure the agonies of arteriosclerosis
Exhibit the symptoms of carcinoma,
Experience the worst form of sarcoma,
Develop sweating in her sweat bands,
Show deterioration in her glands,
And be beyond repair, for even the laws
Of nature can not harm Germany’s cause.’

“Then, my methods rather quaint,
He poured a tincture into the paint,
And this was thoroughly applied

To all the steel on the outside,
Then to floorings sad to halls,
To galley, cabin and mess-room walls.

“It is said that the tincture permeated
Every part of the ship, impregnated
The whole with the wizard’s spell and thought;
He then leased a host of goblins caught
In the brew and they henceforth obsessed
The Puebla. Who could have guessed
That these antebellum gremlins would be
An unknown menace, bringing catastrophe
To the owner, trouble for the crew,
Which modern erudition could not undo.”

When the Puebla was reversed lend-leased
The problems very notably increased
(Lend-lease property can easily be reversed,
But this hardly affected ships accursed);
No one had been warned in advance,
And while the psych was still in his trance,
The witnesses present frankly admitted
That the explanation clearly fitted
The problems that they had to face,
Driving them to the edge of disgrace.
Then from the medium-tranced came a voice:
“Listen, you Americans, you need not rejoice!
For so long as you fight Germany,
Your Puebla shall not sail on the sea.
You cannot by argument set an adverse
Current against a well-planned curse.
And you, with all your so-called erudition
What do you say now of this “superstition?”
Only when the war is finished.
Will the power of hexing be diminished,
The psychic power lose their force,
And the Puebla allowed to go on its course.”

They then paid the “psych,” sent him away,
But between themselves did not know what to say,
Then Captain Drury said: “By God, he’s right,
But men, I have not yet begun to fight
But mark my words, as sure as I am living,

We'll have the Puebla out by next Thanksgiving.
Indeed, until the ship sails on the sea,
There will be no Thanksgiving day for me."

Then answered technician Somerville:
"We are men still; as for ghosts I will
Not stop my work; gremlins, bah! science
Has disproved their existence: what reliance
Can we place on superstition;
We'll have this ship in first-class condition
In a short time, and whatever the cause
Of the trouble, I am sure nature's laws
Will account for it, The Puebla will be on the sea,
Despite spooks and ghosts, yes, despite Germany!"

But the Puebla's master said: "Yes, we are men,
But men alone will not repair her again,
And I have seen so such, I readily can believe
What this man said; if science does not conceive
Gremlins and witches and spooks and elves,
The scientists speak only for themselves;
Whoever has lived long years on the ocean
Would hold there is soundness in the notion
That unseen creatures abound on the main,
And although I cannot make this plain,
If you should make many trips on the sea,
You would sooner or later agree with me.
Yes, an exorcism is what we need most,
Lest the Puebla go and give up its ghost,
And men, you are going to remain perplexed
Until she is completely and fully unhexed."

L'Envoi

Alas, I cannot end this tale,
I did not see the Puebla sail,
I do not know if it will return,
Or travel in triumph nor do I yearn
To have that magical knowledge
Which is not taught in any college,
But I bet we beat Germany because
We know more, not less, of nature's laws.