

# “KLABAUTERMANN”

## THE REAL STORY

Reinhard Zollitsch  
March 2018

I just read a brief story about the German “Klabautermann” in the March issue of *Messing about in Boats*. The author was sailing in the Adriatic Sea, with no wind, so they stopped for a swim. At that point, the author lowered a mesh bag 150' (?) into the water with a six-pack of beer to cool, but to her surprise later found only 5 bottles in the net. Her conclusion: the Klabautermann, “that old prankster”, took it.

Well, let me tell you this about that. It's a good story, for gullible landlubbers, that is, who have no knowledge whatsoever about the real German Klabautermann concept. Granted, every person is entitled to his/her own beliefs, interpretations and recollections. But I feel compelled to share with you readers/boaters what I feel is “the Real Story” about the Klabautermann.

He is everything but “a symbol of luck...insuring a safe journey”, nor is he a prankster stealing anything as trivial as a bottle of beer. Ask any North Sea or Baltic sailor or fisherman (rather than going to Wikipedia) to get a definition of the Klabautermann.

Correct, the name is of north German/Dutch origin (my neck of the woods) and is used for a sea spirit/hobgoblin that makes a lot of noise, like a real person clambering about below decks, bumping into everything. In the older North Sea dialect, also known as Low German, the verb was *klabautern/klabastern*. A Klabautermann, though, has never been seen, only heard, so there are no tangible pictures of him. He is just a spirit, and never a good one. He does not help sailors out of a tight situation or save sailors gone overboard; he is but a bad omen for imminent doom. Sailors do not pour a shot of “schnapps” overboard “to insure a safe journey”, as our author does. (By the way, that ritual is reserved for Neptune, who gets the first measure of rum, not any old “Schnapps.”)

The Klabautermann also never appears at anchor or in a light breeze, but only in a severe storm of about force 11(60 knots), with a matching sea state of about 15 feet. When the Klabautermann appears, the boat and its crew are in serious trouble. His appearance is a foreboding and dreaded warning of the worst to come, as in the old German folk song about a boat going down on the North Sea Doggerbank with all hands. All my sailing friends including my grandfather, the old windjammer sea captain, agree with this interpretation.

I can't say I ever saw the Klabautermann myself, but I heard and felt him around me on at least three significant moments. He is the sailor's personification of the powers of nature in a severe storm. If you have ever sailed under those conditions, with storm jib and try sail, or just lay hove to, with hopefully enough

sea room downwind, you know what I am talking about. There is so much power in the rigging, that shrouds and stays begin to vibrate vigorously and shake the entire boat. Everything begins to shake and quiver, everything hums, whistles and screeches. The noise is horrendous, on deck and even worse below decks.

If you happen to be on watch, you have to yell at the top of your voice to be heard, while below decks everything begins to rattle: pots are clanking, dishes are clinking, silverware is tingling. It sounds as if someone, though invisible, is having a big and loud drunken party below. Sail bags fall off their shelves with a loud thud, cabinet doors will eventually open, disgorging their contents with an unbelievable crash. It is mayhem! And when the boat falls off a specially big wave, the bell on the foremast rings, one eerie ring only...

The Klabautermann has arrived! You can't see him, but you hear him for sure, and you hope he won't take the boat down. It is a bad situation that sailors dread.

So you see, there is nothing funny about a Klabautermann. He is no good luck charm and does not look like the jolly old fellow with a corn cob pipe. How landlubbery can you get!

I grew up in northern Germany between the Baltic and the North Sea, where I sailed and worked on all kinds of ships/boats. Even worked in a shipyard. Since coming to the US, I have sailed trans-Atlantic twice (on a 45' schooner and a 60' classic racing yawl).

I have felt the presence of the Klabautermann 3 times in my life, the worst one in a 60 knot storm near Sable Island off Nova Scotia that lasted 36 hours, 36 hours of hell, sailing **in** the ocean instead of **on** the ocean. I was a watch captain on a trans-Atlantic crossing on a Maine-built 45' wooden schooner, owned and skippered by a French pharmacist. He was almost always more or less inebriated, and never let us reef down in time. Already at 40 knots you can no longer get out on the bowsprit of a schooner or reef the large mainsail. We were finally forced to take down all sails except for a triple-reefed foresail. But with that sail configuration, we had lost all fore and aft control of the boat and were at the mercy of wind and waves, and that in the area that later became known for the Perfect Storm. And the waves on those fishing banks near Sable Island were horrific and so confused that we rolled from gunwale to gunwale. And the noise above and below decks was just as bad as I described above.

The situation was particularly disturbing for me sailing aboard a schooner named "Fiddler's Green", where the ocean floor suddenly becomes the dance floor for deceased sailors, with the Fiddler being Death, the Grim Reaper. (Listen to The Irish Rovers' song "Fiddler's Green".) Not a happy thought. We were in shock, pummeled into submission by the wild forces of nature, barely hanging in there.

It took me 25 years to write up that story and revisit Nova Scotia. It was such an intense experience. It was a true Klabautermann scenario. I would gladly have shared my beer with him, to pacify him. But no, we had to claw our way out of that situation, and we did.

For you sailors out there, I wish you never encounter a Klabautermann. He

is no prankster, no good luck charm; avoid him if you can.

The last half of Connie's article is then taken verbatim from Wikipedia (although missing proper quotation marks, to indicate that, even including their picture, without giving proper credit). Wikipedia admits basing their Klabautermann info on one source only, which, however, is never identified. So, how much trust do you boaters out there have in something like that? But worst of all, it totally fails to explain how the Klabautermann got his name, what he stands for and implies: **the Klabautermann is the sailors'/fishermen's personification of the loud, intimidating noises of nature in a severe and threatening storm at sea. A visit from him mostly means the end for boat and crew.** Now you know!

Stay safe,  
and stay away from the Klabautermann!  
Reinhard

Reinhard Zollitsch  
[HYPERLINK "mailto:reinhard@maine.edu"](mailto:reinhard@maine.edu)[reinhard@maine.edu](mailto:reinhard@maine.edu)  
[HYPERLINK "http://www.ZollitschCanoeAdventures.com/"](http://www.ZollitschCanoeAdventures.com/)[www.ZollitschCanoeAdventures.com](http://www.ZollitschCanoeAdventures.com/)

Connie Benneck: An Encounter with the Klabautermann. In: *Messing about in Boats*, March 2018, Wenham, MA.  
Reinhard Zollitsch: Fiddler's Green across the Atlantic. (check out my website listed above).  
The Irish Rovers-Fiddler's Green – You Tube  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JaRnXzEsB5U>