The bewitching stealth of Jean Laffite is quite legendary. In books and movies, he is forever suddenly and mysteriously appearing from behind moss-laden trees, through curtains, etc. Perhaps this is just accepted as natural with the French/Cajun/Creole bayou dwellers.

One captain with whom I sailed on cargo runs in the Caribbean had such a talent — an amazing ability to blend in with the scenery, and completely unintentionally.

I recall one windy, summer day when the vessel was docked, waiting on the stevedores to load the barge with containers. Something had come up in the wheelhouse, and I was ringing around the various decks and departments of the vessel, trying to locate "le capitain." Getting nothing but a crabby remark from the cook, I began to search the exterior decks. Still coming up empty-handed, I returned to the cool comfort of the wheelhouse and began to scour the docks with the glasses.

"Where the !@#$% is he?" I remember muttering.

Growing impatient, I rang up a seaman and sent him scampering onto the dock to find the captain.

As I watched the young kid go loping down the gangplank and about the dock, I suddenly spied the captain, serenely sitting on a crate, completely oblivious to the world. The very same crate over which I had just passed my binoculars only a moment before.

"Well, this won't take long," I thought as the seaman began to walk up to the captain — and then right past him. Furrowing my brow, I walked out on the wing of the wheelhouse, still watching the seaman.

He walked up to the head stevedore and apparently quizzed him. The man only shook his head while continuing to study his clipboard holding the ship's manifest. The seaman then walked right past the captain — as he gazed at him. Receiving yet another negative reply from a forklift driver as to the whereabouts of the man who steers the boat, the kid turned and strolled past the captain. Again.

Apparently finding the task a little thirst-provoking, he stopped and lolled about the water can, looking up and down the docks while he slaked his thirst.

Then, as he tossed his crumpled water cup up and down, he strolled one more time past the pondering captain.

Muttering to myself more and more, I began to look for a shackle to bounce off the little, pointy head of the wandering sailor. The din and roar of cranes, forklifts, and shouting dock bosses precluded my calling out to him. And one had better have a good reason for using the ship's whistle.

"This is ludicrous," I thought as I rambled down several decks of stairs and off the gangplank. Angrily eyeing the seaman as he strolled further and further away, I walked up to the crate to relay the urgent message to the captain.

And he was gone.

Beginning to think that I had sailed through the Bermuda Triangle one too many times, I turned to look down the dock.

"What's up, Wil?"

At the sound of the voice I must have jumped about five feet and then twirled around.

There sat the captain.

"I, uh...duh..." I tried to remember what in the blazes I had needed to relay.
The captain eyed me for a second and then glanced at the meandering seaman.

"What's the deal with Tatoo? He's walked past me five times now." [Note to readers: this "Tatoo" is not the Cajun cook of whom I have written in a previous article, but rather a Creole seaman with the same nickname.]

The captain turned his study back to the loading of cargo.

"He's...uh..." I almost said "blind as a bat" - but stopped.

Instead, I intently queried, "How long you been sitting there?"

The captain looked back at me like a thoroughly unconcerned Sphinx and said, "Bout a half-hour. Why? What's up?"

"I...uh...oh, yeah. The office called," I warbled.

"They want us to leave early," the captain related.

Mesmerized again, I asked, "How'd you know that?"

"They always want us to leave early," was the sage-like reply. "What's the matter with Tatoo?" He looked back at the still-wandering seaman.

The latter had turned and was headed back toward us. I was about to say that he needed to get the !@#$% off the boat (as in "time off"), being that he had blundered and re-blundered right past the captain. But, then again, thinking that I had done the exact same thing, I reconsidered requesting that I get the !@#$% off the boat!

Having taken note of the fact that I was having trouble forming an intelligent sentence, the captain said, "Have a seat, Wil."

Great, I thought. Now he thinks that I'm about to pass out from the sun. Oh, well.

As I sat on the other end of the crate, I began to wonder with what mystical insights the dock chameleon was about to shower me. Or, perhaps a mermaid was about to enticingly poke her head over the dock's edge. In the meantime, the strolling Tatoo waltzed right past us, turned, and did it again.

It was then that I realized that the captain had allowed me to enter his spell of concealment. And I am thoroughly convinced that, should we have continued to sit there, lama-like, the stevedores would have loaded us, crate and all, onto the barge.

This curious ability of that particular captain was noted on several other occasions.