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Left by the Tide

By EDWARD E. SCHIFF

WERE it not for that four-inch scar upon my forehead, I would have thought it a nightmare—some ghastly hallucination, even though it happened in broad daylight. But there is that scar, which mars my features for life, tangible and terrible evidence to prove that I did not dream it.

I had gone down to the beach with the rising sun, but I was the only one there. None of the other guests from the hotel had yet come down to take their early morning plunge. A charity affair that did not break up till 3 o'clock that morning kept them abed. So I was alone upon that sun-drenched stretch of sand.

The tide was low and I had to walk some hundred yards before I was waist-deep and breasting the invigorating waters of old ocean. I swam out at once to a pile of rocks, a good quarter of a mile from the shore, and climbed out upon them. Now, at low tide, they formed a nearly circular, barnacle- and weed-covered island, about fifty feet in diameter and rising only a few feet above the waters. After resting a few minutes I clambered over the jagged stones toward the center, where there was a depression about six or seven feet deep and about the same width, and where the retreating waters sometimes left strange denizens of the deep, which could be observed under ideal conditions.

Just before I reached the little pool, I thrilled to the sound of a splash of a heavy body. The tide had left something there with a vengeance, I

thought gleefully, and I hastened forward to see what it was.

I stared, sickened by what I saw—a dead man, with shriveled, shrunken skin, hollow cheeks, and hideous in apparently the last stages of putrefaction. There he was floating on his back a bare few inches below the surface. His hands were under him, and at first I thought he was naked. Then, as I overcame my first horror, I noted that he had a sort of apron about his loins—an apron made of what appeared to be the scales of a large fish. It was a curious garment and covered with green algæ or sea moss. The man must have been dead a long time to have allowed for the formation of that slime. I puzzled over this, wondering how it was he remained whole and not half devoured by the scavengers of the sea. Then suddenly I remembered the splash I had heard. Who had made it? Not the dead man. Closely I searched the pool for some other sign of life, but except for a sea crab or two there was none.

Turning my attention to the body again, I scrutinized it closely and felt my scalp twitch when I thought I detected a barely perceptible rising and falling of the chest. The more I stared the more certain I was that I was not mistaken. But drowned men do not breathe, I told myself; I must be laboring under a hallucination. I turned my eyes away and gazed out over the sea and sky to rest them, and when I turned them back again I was shocked into an exclamation. The body had moved toward me. I could

still see the faint traces of the eddy it had made to reach me. But dead men can not move and there was no wave or tide or any breath of wind that could propel it within that enclosed space.

Now I was certain it was breathing. The slight but definitely regular expansion and contraction of the chest were caused by respiration. I could not be mistaken.

Then suddenly the lids flashed open and I was staring into its eyes. And they were the eyes of a living creature, sea-green and evil, that probed through mine into the very recesses of my brain with satanic curiosity. Then, still holding me with its baleful gaze, the thing reached for the brink with huge hands that were webbed like those of some aquatic bird, and started to pull itself up.

Somehow I broke the spell by which the thing held me, and, half mad with loathing and horror, I kicked him with my bare foot back into the pool.

I think I stumbled half back to the open water before I recovered my courage and paused to look back. It had come out of the pool and was dragging its slimy length over the rocks toward me. I realized at once it could not walk upright and that I would have no difficulty in evading it. With unmitigated loathing I watched it crawl until it approached to within a few feet of me. Then I backed away from it, taking care to avoid being crowded into the sea where it could easily outmaneuver me with its finlike appendages.

Again it tried to hold me with its hypnotic stare, but I avoided its eyes, and, stooping down, picked up a fragment of rock and tried to threaten it back. Suddenly it, too, reached out and picked up a stone, and we both threw at the same moment. But I was completely beside myself with horror and missed him by inches, while he caught me fairly on the chest

—a blow that knocked the breath out of me and dropped me to my knees. The next moment he was upon me, his powerful hands closing about my throat, his cold, slimy body against my cringing, warm flesh, his fetid breath in my nostrils.

But I fought, fought in a stark, frenzied madness that promised to rid me of his clinging, hateful weight, when suddenly he released one of his hands from my throat, and I could feel him fumble around his waist. The next moment I would have been free of him, but his hand came up again wielding a stone or coral knife.

I screamed and tried to evade the blow, but while I spoiled his aim for my throat he managed to inflict that awful gash on my forehead.

WHEN I came back to consciousness it was with a cry of terror, in the arms of two men who were lifting me into a skiff; and for some minutes I struggled with them, before I realized they were my rescuers.

Their story is briefly told. They had observed me from the beach apparently trying to avoid some creature which they thought was a seal. They quickly got into a skiff and rowed to the rocks, shouting to frighten off the creature when they saw me struggling with it. Then for a minute or two I was out of their sight, hidden by a projecting rock, and when they again saw me I was alone and lying flat on my back, though a moment before they had heard the thing splash into the sea.

That is their story. Mine they would not believe. In fact, they tried to stop me in the telling of it, and attempted to soothe me as if I were a terror-stricken child, or crazy. They said I had injured my forehead by falling on a jagged stone.

But that day two bathers were pulled down to their death by some creature of the sea. Sharks, they all said. But I know better.