

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

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D. McLWRAITH, Editor

Skydrift

BY EMIL PETAJA

LAST night's storm had left the desolate beach littered with drift. Drift of every kind imaginable, the flotsam of a harried ocean; and two human derelicts as well. The sky was antiqued copper, sheathing the earth, protecting it from the menaces lurking in outer space. Last night the wind had howled like a thousand demons, thunder had bellowed along the foothills, lightning had lashed. They had cowered in the deepest, driest cave they could find until dawn drove them out, or rather sharp hunger and cold. The wind had crased itself, a strange calm possessed the nervous gray ocean. But it was unseasonably cold for late April along this ragged skirt of ocean thirty miles north of San Quentin.

Big Tom's heavy lips were blue. They shivered when he curled them and spat on the packed sand in anger.

"P-pick it up, jerk! We n-need dry wood. I'm freez-zing my t-tail off!"



Heading by Vincent Napoli

Spawned from the sky bearing improbable properties to change the lives of men...

Bony little Aino shivered, too. But he said nothing, he only hunched closer against the wet, smelling sand, staring at a chunk of drift in front of him, clutching some others to his scrawny chest.

The piece of drift was half-poked into the sand, as if it had been flung there like that. It was about ten inches long, flat, bleached and smooth. It was like all the other chunks of drift along the beach, half-rounded by gnawing waves, serrulated in curious rows so that you might almost imagine it had writing on it.

Big Tom Clegg scratched his paunch where his cowhide belt divided him. His wide stubbled face darkened when Aino didn't answer him right away or do what he said. Then his foot went out. Aino toppled. He almost touched the curious piece of drift. He would have had he not dropped his load and plunged his hands against the wet sand.

"I said pick it up!" There was that ominous quantity to Big Tom's command which had heretofore caused Aino to respond like a well-trained hound, back in the iron cell they'd shared for three years.

Aino Halvor was weak physically. Perhaps he was born to obey somebody stronger than he. Perhaps something in him demanded that he take orders from someone more able to bargain with life than he was. Tom Clegg had appointed himself that somebody back in San Quentin, and since their release eight days ago had continued to demand servility as his right by reason of superior physical strength. But now, for the first time in three years and eight days, Aino hadn't obeyed his order.

"Pick it up!" Big Tom's voice rose warningly. He set down his load.

Aino turned and looked up. His thin pocked face turned white. His mouth—it was like a careless gouge out of slovenly turned clay—gaped and showed little overlapping teeth. His eyes leaped with terror.

Aino was afraid of Big Tom. Especially when Big Tom looked at him like that, his left eyelid drooping a little and his pendulous lower lip pushed out. Big Tom had carefully nurtured this fear, punctuating it with generous samples of what would hap-

pen to Aino if he didn't do what Big Tom told him to.

Aino's fearful eyes whipped back to the piece of drift in question. He whimpered like a puppy, but he didn't touch it.

Big Tom's hand lashed out.

Aino rolled across the sand almost to the ragged line of wetness which the surf claimed. His eyes were fearfully open. There was blood on his face. He made no move to wipe it off. He didn't move at all, only waited, until Big Tom crabbed across the sand to him and yanked him up on his feet. Big Tom shook him as a terrier shakes a rat.

"Why the hell didn't you pick it up like I told you? Why the hell didn't you, eh?"

He kept repeating this over and over, as if it were something past all understanding. After awhile he let Aino loose so he could catch a breath and answer him. Aino gulped air and swabbed a furtive hand over his cut mouth, as if his bleeding was something he should be ashamed of.

"I—"

"Spit it out!" Big Tom's left eyelid drooped.

"It's not a chunk of drift," Aino muttered. "It— It's got writing on it. It came—out of the sky, in the lightning."

BIG TOM stared at him. Then he started to laugh. This was rich! Here he had been scared Aino was getting next to himself, was going to stop being a sucker, that he, Big Tom, was going to lose his slavish tool. Aino might be a shrimp and a jerk, as Big Tom continued to remind him, but he could read and write. When they panned on Third Street in Frisco it was Aino who copped the handouts. He looked sick, hungry. Big Tom got only cold stony looks as they hurried past. Those looks said, *why don't you get a job, you big ox.*

"I suppose you got that out of those damn books in the stir library," Big Tom jeered, in sadistically good humor again. "I knew I shouldn't ought to left you read so damn much. I should of knew it would drive you nuts. That's what books does to people, don't you know that, jerk?" He walked back to the white piece of drift. "Want to see me pick it up, shrimp? What am I

supposed to do? Drop dead if I pick it up?" He grinned.

"Don't—" Aino's narrow teeth nipped his lipless mouth.

But there was no use telling Big Tom. *Big Tom had never heard of Charles Fort or thunderstones. He'd never heard about the terrors that lurk in the wind and the storm, about Them outside. . . .*

Big Tom chuckled as he reached down and pulled up the flat piece of drift. "See?" he jeered. "You thought it was going to kill me. You think it's some kind of a— a magic thing, a god even. Is that what you think, jerk?"

He walked over and pushed it in Aino's face. Aino jumped back, whimpering. Big Tom roared.

"Still think so, eh? *Why?* Answer me that! What makes you think it ain't just another chunk of drift out of the sea, eh?"

Aino's eyes approached the thing in Big Tom's hand timidly, but once there, they clung, pupils dilating. His mouth curved and then he spoke, with a new dignity.

"It isn't drift, Tom. It came out of the sky, not out of the sea. It came down in the storm. Sometimes *they* send something down, or come down *themselves* in different shapes. Charles Fort calls the things from outside thunderstones. He knew about them, but he didn't know that—"

Big Tom interrupted with a snort. "So now you're smarter'n them guys who wrote them books, eh? Think you're pretty cute, don't you, jerk? Pretty smart, eh?"

"No, Tom. I just know—"

"Look at it! It's only a hunk of seadrift!"

"It has writing on it."

Big Tom squinted. "Call that writing? Hell, I can't read but I know writing when I see it. Where's your letters?"

AINO didn't try to explain. He didn't bother to tell Big Tom that there were books in many languages and that some languages used different phonetic symbols, and that if something came out of the sky and had writing on it. . . .

"That's from being in the sea so long," Big Tom snorted. "It's the wood grain. Anybody with brains can see that. Make good firewood."

Fear and worry crossed blades in Aino's mind as he gathered up his load of drift-wood. On their way back to the cave his fears spilled out in words.

"Tom, you aren't going to try to burn it!"

"Ain't it?" Big Tom grinned. "Just stick around!" His heavy shoe squashed a rubbery rope of kelp.

"You can't, Tom!" Aino cried. "It's not—what it looks like. It's *alive*—like a god."

THEY walked on along the black curve of the beach.

"You're wacky, Aino," Big Tom said. "I knew it would happen, reading all them books. What makes you say a dumb thing like that, anyway?"

Aino hesitated. "It—it talked to me."

"Oh, it just opened its mouth and talked to you!"

"It talked to my mind."

Big Tom whirled impatiently. He had had enough. His lips curved in a sadistic grin as he shifted his load of drift and tossed the thing Aino was so worried about down at Aino's feet.

"Kick it!" he commanded Aino. "Kick it to pieces! See if there's a god hid inside of it. Go on! Kick it to pieces before I kick you to pieces!"

Aino shivered, but there were beads of sweat on his face. "Don't, Tom! Don't make me touch it!"

Big Tom crowded in. "If you don't you know what'll happen to you." Over the droning of the sea his voice cracked like a whip.

Aino fell whimpering to his knees. He stared at the object they had found. He stared. Wordless syllables rattled in his throat. He looked up at Big Tom. Big Tom's face was merciless. He was annoyed, impatient, and plain sore. His was the anger of a common animal man who has had his limited intelligence outraged, who must have a retraction or he will smash something.

Aino's eyes rolled. Behind them the ocean sighed wetly. Overhead in the coppery sky a gull dipped, bleated, and went on. Around them was nothing but desolation. Aino looked down at the thing in front of him. Then, reverently, he bowed his head and touched it with his mouth.

AFTER he had beaten and kicked Aino until his limbs were worn out, Big Tom jerked him back on his feet and pushed him ahead toward the cave. He made Aino carry the thing. Aino stumbled ahead, his legs like rubber. The sky and the sea and the desolate beach were nothing but a crazy blur to his swollen eyes. But he strained and kept going until they reached the rocky entrance to the cave. Then he flopped. Driftwood scattered, but he held it fiercely against his skinny chest.

"Get up!"

Big Tom kicked until he clawed at boulders and managed to gain his feet.

"Go on back to Bolinas. Get something to eat while I build a fire. Get going!"

"I have no money, Tom."

"Gee, do I have to tell you everything? Panhandle it, or swipe it. Only make damn sure you bring me back something to eat." When Aino weaved away, he grabbed his wrist. "And make damn sure you come back, too, because if I have to come after you, so help me, I'll kill you. Think I'm fooling, eh?"

"I'll come back, Tom," Aino gulped.

It was near eleven by the time the wide curve of familiar beach met his sight again. He limped across it toward the sea-lashed rocks and the cave. His back and his legs ached where Big Tom had punched and kicked him. His sallow face was bruised and purple with clotted blood. But the sun was warm on his back. He kicked little spurts of half-dried sand ahead of him with each step he took. Aino felt good.

Funny how some days you struck things just right, he mused. Like this morning in Bolinas. Everybody was nice to him. They smiled at him and were friendly. He had already had coffee, two cups, and a bear claw with frosting on it. He wouldn't tell Big Tom about the coffee and the bear claw. Make him sore. The big sack he carried had plenty of food for them both, enough to last two days. And he hadn't had to swipe it, either. Big Tom wouldn't be sore when he saw all the food Aino had brought back with him.

He looked up at the coppery sun and hurried. Big Tom's reactions were sure to be tempered by the lateness of the hour and the emptiness of his stomach.

"Beans!" Big Tom snorted, peering critically down into Aino's store sack. "I'm sick of damn stinking beans!"

Aino hastily dug deeper and produced two cans of Spam, and one of pressed chicken.

"Where'd you swipe these?" Big Tom asked, more mildly.

"Grocer gave them to me." Aino displayed his narrow teeth in a self-conscious grin. "He said I reminded him of somebody."

"Bugs Bunny?" Big Tom grinned and spat as he flicked open his pocket knife. "Never mind. I know you swiped 'em. Heave some wood on the fire. Let's get at it. My belly thinks my throat's cut."

THEY wolfed down their meat and beans in silence. Aino wanted to say what was bursting inside him. But he thought better of it. He wanted to say, *I didn't steal anything. I didn't have to. Everybody was swell to me. Not like a vag who just got out of San Quentin. Not like I was a vag, but real folks. . . .*

He ate with relish. This seemed to be the most satisfying meal he had ever eaten.

Belly filled, Big Tom yawned and slid his rump down and slept. But Aino just sat by the fire and thought. His mind was filled with all kinds of thoughts, new ones, thoughts he had never had or dared to have before. His mind stretched out into the future with a calm sense of well-being. Things were going to be different from now on. He didn't know how or why, but they were. He continued to feed the fire and think until Big Tom hawked and coughed himself awake.

"I just remembered something," Aino remarked cheerfully.

"Did, eh?" For Aino to make a statement like that on his own was unusual. Big Tom wasn't sure he liked it. What was coming over the jerk?

"That box we found yesterday down near Stinson."

"What about it? It's only a kid's tool box washed ashore."

"We should open it," Aino said.

Big Tom frowned. "It's probably got some kid's stuff in it."

"Mind if I open it?"

"Help yourself." Big Tom cleared his throat and spat. "I tried for an hour yesterday to open it. It's only nailed shut and the nails are rusted solid, that's all. We got no hammer, nothing to pry it open. But you can do it, sure."

Aino bent down, stepping to the low cave corner where Big Tom had heaved the flat oblong box yesterday, when they took shelter from the gathering storm. Big Tom watched him with derisive eyes. The box was sodden, heavy. When Aino started to lift it Big Tom grinned. Aino's arms were like spindles. But to Big Tom's astonishment Aino lifted the box easily, carried it over by the fire and set it down. As if it were full of feathers. Then, to his further amazement, Aino proceeded to open it without difficulty. He seemed to know just how to do it, to sense where the weakest part of the nailed-down lid was. He pried a sharp stick under it and lifted the lid off with scarcely any effort.

Big Tom watched, and his left eyelid drooped. He identified this with the books Aino read. Big Tom hated books. They represented a threat. Aino was showing him up, doing something he couldn't do. Big Tom didn't like it.

"Well?" he growled. "What's in it? A toy gun or something?"

"No," Aino said. "It's full of money. Full of old coins and jewels."

FIRST Big Tom couldn't grasp it. He couldn't assimilate this fact, that this box that looked like a child's tool box nailed shut and heaved into the sea, contained a fortune in gold coins and jewels that gleamed with colored fire when you rubbed the sea-scum off. His mind could not easily manage such heights. He tested the coins and the pieces of fire with his teeth and his mind was squeezed into a corner. It had to accept the fact that Aino and he—two vagrants with shady pasts—between them possessed a great fortune.

"Where'd it come from?" he demanded, showing Aino aside and hovering over the open box.

"Who knows? It could have come from China, or from Persia, or Mu." Aino's slate

eyes wandered beyond the mouth of the cave, to the far horizon. "Maybe even further."

"We got to get busy and hide it, bury it, or they'll come and take it away from us."

"They can't," Aino told him. "Nobody can touch this treasure. It's ours. We found the box floating in the surf. That means no one can claim it. It's treasure trove, by law it belongs to us."

Big Tom started to refute him, but something in the little man's voice halted his blusterings. It was as if Aino, standing there looking at the horizon, were looking into the future, seeing what must be. Aino's words held conviction. This thing was true. They had found this treasure in the surf and nobody could take it away from them.

Then, after this solidified in his mind, Big Tom Clegg became what Big Tom Clegg was. Big Tom was by nature a scoundrel and a thief. Aino was a thief, too, but through necessity, because he had been told to be one. You could blame it on environment, or on the system, or on hunger. Actually, it was because someone way back had told Aino to be a thief. It was in Aino's make-up to serve somebody. Now Big Tom's cupidity and lust went to work.

This treasure, it was theirs. But Aino didn't matter. Aino was a jerk. So the treasure was *his*. Aino was handy, sure. He'd served Big Tom well in the past three years. Come to think of it, Aino first saw the box, bobbing up and down in a foaming eddy between two jutting rocks near Stinson Beach. It was Aino who found a stick and poled it in, Aino who suggested they take it along with them, in spite of the rumbling skies and windy gusts of rain. But Big Tom didn't need Aino now. This fortune would buy him other servants, better ones.

Big Tom ruminated and gloated over the box. He ended up deciding that Aino must never leave this cave. This desolate outcrop in the rock would be Aino's last resting place. There was nobody to worry about what happened to Aino. . . .

It was night. Outside the sea drummed. Framed by the jagged rock, the sky had faded to brushed charcoal gray, with only the faintest thread of luminescence to distinguish it from the far-away ocean. That

far-away ocean seemed to have no connection at all with the savage breakers that pounded closer and closer with the incoming tide.

Aino slept like a child.

THE fire was nearly gone. Only a few darting tongues of flame were left to etch the craggy cave roof over Aino's head, to shimmer on the flat closed box between them; then, as Big Tom held vigil, wiping a covetous hand over his wide lips, these needle-flames died and only the glowing memory of fire remained.

He couldn't see Aino. That was bad. Big Tom frowned into the darkness. He must have light to do what he meant to do, just a little light. But there was no more wood left. He didn't want to leave the cave to find any. Aino might wake up. Besides, he wanted to do it *now*. He wanted to go to sleep tonight knowing that the treasure was all his.

He squinted, trying to see Aino lying there in the deep shadows. He couldn't see him, but he saw something. What he saw glowed with a faint luminescent whiteness. It stuck partway out of Aino's shirt.

Big Tom grinned.

It was the piece of drift they had found this morning, the one that had got Aino all worked up, the chunk of wood that brought Aino his beating. Big Tom grinned wider, remembering how Aino had humbled himself before it. What a jerk he was!

Big Tom had forgotten all about it until he saw it there, sticking out of Aino's shirt. The jerk must have carried it around with him all day, hidden under his shirt so he wouldn't see it. Now, while Aino slept, it had fallen partway out invitingly.

This was rich! Aino thought it had magic in it, that it was a god. Now this god of Aino's was going to light his way to heaven.

Big Tom moved like a cat. His hand scuttled over the closed box, then snaked across Aino's pigeon chest and grabbed back the piece of drift. Big Tom grinned as he tossed it on the glowing embers. For a minute he crouched by the fire, clenching and unclenching his cold-stiffened fingers for practice. He watched the white piece of drift smoulder and smoke. Then a tiny flame

sprouted, mirroring twin flames of red murder in his eyes.

Outside the incoming tide drummed louder.

Big Tom heard Aino stir and whimper. He turned and made ready. Aino's hands were fumbling over his shirt. He was hunting for the piece of drift. When he opened his eyes Big Tom gave a low growl and plunged forward.

His blunt fingers closed down on Aino's throat before he could move or scream. His thumbs pressed. It was so easy it wasn't much fun. If only Aino would fight back a little, but he didn't even squirm. He just lay there, his eyes bulging. The pressure on his windpipe made it look as if he was staring behind Big Tom, staring at something that terrified him.

Big Tom was almost tempted to turn and see for himself, but he had a job to finish. He pressed harder. Then his fingers loosened and he let out a scream that echoed from the cave walls and funneled out hideously across the sea. Smoke was pouring from the fire behind him. He couldn't see, but the smoke had arms, tentacles, and the tentacles were around his throat, choking him. He couldn't see. He couldn't even see any longer if Aino's eyes were bulging. The smoke was a black pillar, a pillar of whipping snakes. The snakes wrapped themselves around his throat.

He screamed and backed away. He fell across the fire, which leaped up hungrily. . .

THERE wasn't much left of Big Tom. Just some indistinguishable bones. It might seem that some itinerant had camped in this cave for the night, that he had overheated his fire, then had been overcome by the fumes and, trying to get out had stumbled into the fire and been burned to death. It wasn't too plausible an explanation, considering the condition of those bones, but it might suffice. Or were they human bones after all?

Aino looked gravely down at the charred mess for a long moment, then he fished under it carefully for the piece of drift. It came out white and whole as ever, as cool and smooth to his touch as fine silk. Aino caressed it with reverence. He bowed his

head to it, and put it back under his shirt, his face luminous with humble pride.

He turned. Oh yes, the box. He nudged open the lid with his foot. A wry smile touched his lips as he looked down at a tangled mass of rocks and mud and feline

bones. Some imaginative youngster had given his dead cat a sea burial. Aino faced the drumming tide. He squared his thin shoulders and stepped out of the cave. He walked rapidly down the lonely beach. Born to serve, Aino had found a new master.