

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

MARCH, 1946

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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

Published bi-monthly by Weird Tales, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y. Reentered as second-class matter January 26, 1940, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 15 cents. Subscription rates: One year in the United States and possessions, 90¢. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. English Office: Charles Lavell, Limited, 4 Clements Inn, Strand London, W.C.2, England. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. Copyright, 1945, by Weird Tales. Copyrighted in Great Britain. Title registered in U. S. Patent Office.

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

Vol. 39, No. 4

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The Jonah

You'd expect the sole survivor of a gruesome sea tragedy to be close-mouthed—but you'd never guess why!

DOES the crash of thunder and the zigzag streak of lightning across a storm-flayed sky send you cowering into the furthest cellars? It does me—and for good reason. . . .

I was the sole survivor of the *Bonheur*, the ill-starred and badly named little tramp steamer which perished in North Atlantic waters some fifteen years ago. You will recall how the newspapers termed it "a sea

BY EMIL PETAJA



Heading by A. R. TILBURNE

mystery to rank with the *Marie Celeste*," rehashing the oft-told tale about how that vessel sailed into harbor in perfect condition, but minus its human cargo, as if every living soul on it had been snatched off the face of the earth.

The derelict *Bonheur* was sighted by a coast guard off the Ungava shore, but hardly in perfect condition. It gave the appearance of having been battered about by gigantic, playful hands. The most curious fact—and this was what coupled its unguessed-at tragedy with that of the *Marie Celeste*—was that no single body was to be found on board, neither living nor dead.

A life boat was picked up at sea, drifting at will, with a wreck of a man in it. He was, from his sodden but readable papers, identified as one Peter Drang, a mathematics teacher from North Falls, Idaho. All but dead, he could do nothing but babble wild incoherencies.

AN enterprising newshawk discovered that Drang had shipped as the sole passenger on the *Bonheur*, from Bergen, Norway, months before. As the only living man who could solve the mystery of the *Bonheur*, Drang was hounded unmercifully by newspapermen, after he was released from a New York hospital. But Drang refused to talk. He would say nothing of his experiences, even became violent on several occasions.

How did it happen, they asked, that he—a timid, small, scholarly man in his late thirties, whose heavy glasses and nervous mannerisms indicated anything but a robust, swashbuckling character—should contrive to escape the doom that had obviously overtaken the hard-bitten horny-handed ship's crew?

Peter Drang said nothing, and as soon as he was able returned to Idaho to resume his prosaic life as an algebra instructor in a small town high school.

As you have guessed by now, I am that Peter Drang. I alone survived the *Bonheur* disaster, and now it pleases me to present, for the first time, the truth behind the "mystery of the *Bonheur*," under the guise of fiction. I do not expect to be believed. I do not want to be believed.

But now, to begin my story. . . .

This sheltering green Idaho valley, many miles from the ocean, gave me birth. But my earliest childhood memories are all curiously tangled up with a powerful, strange longing for the sea.

But my odd, inborn impulse was many years in awaiting fulfillment. When my father was struck by lightning, during a terrific summer storm, on one of his frequent rambling foot-journeys, it was left to me to care for my invalid mother. I found myself trapped in this prosaic teacher's job—far from the calling sea.

When my mother died I decided to take a long holiday. The money I had painstakingly saved was sufficient for a six months' trip to Europe, where I spent a good deal of my time delving into the lives of my antecedents. Geneology was my hobby, and in my case it was necessary to journey across half of Europe to unravel the tangled skeins of my mingled ancestry. It was in a small Norwegian village that I came upon some odd facts, and it was here too that I suffered a painful shoulder injury which was complicated by a ghastly return of an old nerve complaint.

The doctor in Bergen told me this nerve illness was brought about by over-exertion. For weeks I lay in a raging fever, plagued by hideous dreams, but then at last it was over.

It left me weak and enervated. My mind, which had always been sharp and precise, became foggy and confused. I found it difficult to remember things, and had lost all interest in geneology. My shoulder gave me considerable pain, so I kept it tightly bandaged, and that helped.

Most of all, I was possessed with a deep longing for home. I decided not to go back to London, but to return on the first boat leaving Bergen. And that boat was the little *Bonheur*.

WE WERE three days out. The engines had begun to give trouble, and to make matters worse, the Captain was taken ill and confined to quarters. I myself had been under the weather, kept to my cabin, and the only crew member I'd talked with was Flann O'Shea, the Irish lad who brought me my meals. He was a handsome chap, with curly auburn hair and lively

brown eyes, and I found him to be very intelligent and filled with Irish wit.

"How is it today?" I inquired, over my breakfast tray.

"Smooth as a baby's hand, sir," he grinned. "But the sky's dull and strange. Looks like it looked off Tahiti just before the typhoon."

"I think I'll chance a turn around the deck," I smiled.

I found it to be as he said. Sea and sky blended in an ominous slate grey hue, and the glassy appearance of the water had a forbidding look.

In my stroll I passed one of the crew, wearing the usual striped dark sweater and wide-bottom dungarees, but with something unusual about him. He was a small man, with a sombre, stony face staring out to sea, and his knotty fingers clenched the rail tightly.

"Good morning," I offered.

He didn't so much as bat an eyelash.

"Do you think we'll—" I tried again.

"No use talking to Suva," a deep voice behind me broke in. "He won't answer you."

IT WAS big First Mate Carl Jorgsen, and he was puffing on his curved pipe, as he had been that day when I signed up as the *Bombeur's* only passenger. His creased leathery cheeks and black beard, and intensely blue eyes, suggested somehow that here was a man who had followed the sea all his life—that it was in his blood, and that he would die aboard ship and be buried in it.

He sauntered along with me in silence, for a time, then I asked, "Why won't he answer me?"

"Martin Suva's a deaf-mute."

"Oh." I nodded, feeling a little foolish. I knew the crew considered me a landlubber of the most useless specie, and I felt uneasy about displaying my vast ignorance of maritime matters. "I—I suppose that makes it rather difficult," I ventured.

Jorgsen's eyes gleamed out, and his jaw went out, as if I'd touched on a sore spot.

"That's not the half of it. If I'd had my way Suva wouldn't be here now—or ever."

"Why?" I asked. "Don't the men like him?"

"No," he replied succinctly, and moved swiftly away down the deck.

My curiosity was aroused. Martin Suva. A deaf-mute. He looked harmless enough. Surely that was no reason to band against him. I felt a wave of sympathy for him as I watched him covertly. Imagine the desolation of it—cut off forever from normal contact with his fellow-beings; a shunned, miserable derelict.

I sought out Flann O'Shea about his duties, and questioned him about Suva.

"Sure and Suva's as good a worker as any man on this old tub. Strange? Well, you might say so. Not bein' able to talk and all, naturally the men leave him pretty much to himself. I try and sound him out sometimes, but don't have much luck. He's shy of us all. Then, too, he's a Finn."

"So what?" I blurted, in great surprise. I'd met many Fianish people, both in Europe and back in Idaho, and had been very favorably impressed with their friendliness and their scrupulous honesty.

"Don't you know?"

"No!"

Flann smiled wryly. "Understand, I don't necessarily hold with any of it. Still, I *have* heard a lot of stories. . . ."

"What on earth are you talking about?" I exclaimed, bursting with curiosity.

"It's all the old tales sailors tell about Finns. How they are a race of magicians and warlocks. How they can sing up a storm any time they've a mind to. Why, back in the old sailing days you'd be hard put to find a captain who would sign up a Finn—or a crew who would tolerate having him aboard!"

"Ridiculous!" I cried. "Superstitious nonsense!"

"Maybe. . . ." Flann shrugged and went on with his work.

Back on deck, I leaned on the rail, and thought all this over in my mind. So that was why the crew disliked Martin Suva!

THEN I remembered what I had read about the Finns, as a "mystery race." Their language, their legends, their physical characteristics—utterly different from those of their Scandinavian neighbors. Conjecture as to their origin has run rampant, in fact, is still under dispute. Some students claim

that there is an ancient thread of connection with the Magyars, but this has scant proof. A subtle and highly intelligent people, as evidenced by their great architecture and important music, their civilization springs from an unknown "Land Of Heroes"—and their legends tell of mighty magicians who possessed vast power, were able to sing things into existence, and control the elements.

My imagination went a step further. Suppose certain members of the Finnish race still remembered these ancient songs of magic—and with them were able to control the sea, the wind, the storm. . . .

This reverie was shattered by the sound of weird, tuneless keening. The sky was dark and sulphurous, now, and a low, sibilant wind was stirring the jet sea. I whirled sharply to see where the weird singing came from.

It came from Martin Suva, the Finn. He stood motionless, facing the north, and there was something of a worshipper of elemental things in his attitude, as he sang a soft, wordless chant which blended curiously with the sudden wind. I shivered.

"PETER! Get up!"

It was Flann O'Shea. He was quite drenched, and he was shaking me in great excitement. The ship pitched and rolled under his feet, and it was a wonder I hadn't been flung awake before now. Probably the tablets the Bergen doctor gave me for my nerves were the answer.

"What is it?" I cried sleepily.

"Trouble!" he shouted back, for the wind was like a thousand banshees. "Engines have gone bad. We're off course! Icebergs! Get dressed, and on deck at once!"

HE DISAPPEARED like a phantom, and I hurriedly scrambled into my clothes and staggered on deck as best I could, donning a life jacket as I went.

First Mate Jorgsen was shouting orders through cupped hands to the deck crew, who labored like slickered shadows under the death-black sky.

The snarling wind knocked the breath out of me, flung me back against the cabin door.

I wanted to help, but knew I would only be in the way, so I stood by, watching with

wide eyes. Within five minutes I was soaked to the bone.

Icebergs. . . . We were in northern waters, and the storm had catapulted us far off our course. I fully realized the great danger, with submerged icebergs lurking in wait, and the engines out of commission.

The night crept on, filled with terror. I helped Flann the best I was able, and that kept me from thinking. It finally seemed as though the sun had forgotten to rise or—as if the ravening storm had driven us clear off the face of the earth, into some sinister other dimension. There are times when I think it *did!*

Then we sighted the iceberg. It loomed ahead, cragged and white and terrifying. Under the impetus of the merciless wind, the little *Bonheur* was driven straight toward it. In the engine room men had been working like demons, and, just when all seemed lost, the heave of the engines sent hope flooding through our half-frozen veins.

With the engines working, the *Bonheur* was diverted from this icy doom. Then the wind subsided a little, and faint streaks of dawn caressed the eastern horizon.

Jorgsen gathered the deck crew about him, and thanked them briefly but sincerely for their herculean efforts. I noticed Martin Suva standing by the rail, as he had earlier. He was staring northward and howling in a low, unnatural voice.

Then they came.

They came swathed in great purple-black clouds from out the north. Formless at first, like swift-rolling thunderheads, then they couched down in a sinister fashion against the black, choppy swells. The wind sobbed itself down to a whisper.

"What are they?" one of the men demanded.

"I don't know," Jorgsen cried grimly. "But I know who brought them."

He made a move toward Suva, who stood transfixed, staring at the weird phenomenon. Flann stopped him.

"It's only clouds, sir. Can't hurt us."

The silence that followed was shattered by the sound of cackling laughter—shrill, sardonic, and wholly alien. It came from the unnatural bank of purple-black clouds.

One of the men began to pray.

Suddenly the clouds broke. A roaring rush of ice-cold wind hurtled out at us. There was yelling and screaming among the men, then a scramble for the life boats. There was no semblance of order, now. No attempt to save the ship. Only panic, and sheer unbridled fear. We had all *seen*—and we knew there was no hope.

How shall I describe *them*? Like giant women in the wind, with long streaming ice-blue hair, with terrible, white, beautiful faces. Lightning seemed to flash from their fierce bright eyes, and the gleeful cackle of their laughter was like unholy thunder.

I had the brief, tacit knowledge that their intention was to destroy us as a child might playfully destroy his dolls. They were elemental beings—creatures who belonged to the storm because they were a part of it, visible to us now under some special circumstance.

All this was born in my tormented mind as I crawled painfully against the brutal wind, in a futile attempt to reach the remaining life boat. Then suddenly a catastrophic wave leaped up and swept me out into the freezing ocean, and consciousness left me.

I SHIVERED, coughed, then opened my eyes to find that I lay in the bottom of a life boat. Someone was forcing a fiery liquid between my shivering lips.

It was Martin Suva.

I drank, and the fiercely burning liquor helped. I lifted myself up on one elbow and looked about me. I saw Flann smiling at me encouragingly. And Jorgsen. That was all. And I was wearing Suva's dry coat over my shoulders.

"Are you all right?" Flann asked. "We thought sure you were a goner when we fished you out."

I felt my injured shoulder gingerly. It ached a little, and the bandage was gone. Otherwise I was all in one piece.

Suva offered me food, and as I ate I noticed that the sun was directly overhead. I'd been out a long time.

"The others?" I asked.

"All dead," Jorgsen said bitterly. "The *sturm-frauen* got them all!"

I turned to Flann appealingly.

"That's what they're called in old

legends," he told me. "Storm-wives. Some kind of elemental spirits who can't make themselves seen or felt unless—"

"Unless—what?"

Flann sighed.

"Unless there's a jonah on board. The legends say that in the old days certain humans made unholy pacts with these elementals. In return for certain favors the *sturm-frauen* are able to show themselves when there is a jonah on board ship; and they will, never harm anyone who bears the mark of the jonah. . . ."

The mark of the jonah.

Preposterous, my mathematical mind insisted. And yet—I had seen.

It was toward evening, after our frugal meal of hard tack and tinned fish, that Jorgsen went berserk.

He went after Martin Suva with his strong, hairy hands, and would have choked the life out of him had not Flann and I pulled him off.

"Let me kill him!" he panted eagerly.

"Let me destroy the dirty jonah!"

"No," Flann gritted. "We can't be sure."

"Don't you understand?" he blared out. "Don't you realize why we were saved, when all the others were taken? It's because of him—the jonah!"

"Maybe what we saw was an illusion," I said weakly. "Like St. Elmo's fire, or something. The storm and all. We were overwrought and—"

"Why you poor over-educated idiot!" Jorgsen raged. "You think because you've never read of such things, in books they don't exist. Just wait and see, that's all. Wait and see!"

That night Carl Jorgsen vanished.

I GROANED in the grip of nightmare, when Flann's hand on my shoulder wakened me. It was hardly light enough to see yet. Martin Suva lay in exhausted slumber—or so it seemed—at the other end of the boat.

"Jorgsen's gone," Flann said, in a dry hollow whisper.

"Gone?" I blinked.

"See for yourself."

I stared in bewildered amazement. It was as the boy said.

"But *how?*" I protested. "I heard nothing!"

"Nor I. But they came in the night and took him. . . ."

There was no other explanation, and later, after a frugal breakfast and a few sips of precious water, we decided to question Martin Suva. Surely if what Jorgsen had believed was true, the Finn would betray himself.

I wrote our questions, then handed him the paper and pencil, to scribble his answers. From the books Flann had seen in Suva's gear, he was sure Suva understood English.

"Do you believe the *stürm-frauen* legend?" I wrote.

Laboriously he wrote, *Yes.*

"Have you seen them before?"

Yes.

"Where do they come from?"

From somewhere else.

"Do they hate men?"

No. They only love to destroy.

I glanced over at Flann. I had been beating around the bush, and he knew it. He nodded grimly, and I wrote, "Did you call the *stürm-frauen?*"

No.

"Did you kill Jorgsen?"

No.

We gave up. It was natural that he would lie, if he had stealthily slain Jorgsen as he slept—it was more than possible—but his answer was given so unhesitatingly that I was almost inclined to believe him. Perhaps the *stürm-frauen* did exist, were able to manifest themselves during peculiar storms, did murder the ship's crew in the midst of their lustful sadistic revels. As for the rest of it—we had nothing to convince us that Suva was responsible, aside from the fact that he was a deaf-mute, was Finnish, and made weird noises when he thought no one was about. . . .

WE DETERMINED to take turns sleeping, and the watcher was to waken the others at the slightest hint of trouble. Flann's turn was first, and when he awakened me, I pulled Suva's coat about me against the rising wind, and settled down to scan the dark sea for any signs of lurking terror.

The sky, although clearer than on previous nights, was still draped with great scudding clouds, through which I could occasionally glimpse small patches of white stars. The sea was ink-black.

My mind wandered over the hopelessness of our plight. Lost at sea, thousands of miles from any trafficked sea-lane; what difference would it make who got us—the *stürm-frauen*, or the ocean?

The wind sang a sibilant song. Under its influence I became drowsier and drowsier. Finally I must have dropped off. I was startled by Flann's shrill boyish scream.

I leaped to my feet, then stood frozen. Flann was writhing helplessly in the embrace of something I couldn't quite see. Then, in a naked flash of lightning, Flann was torn from the boat into the air, and I saw her.

Her maenadic hair whipping behind her in the singing wind, her eyes glowing down with fierce satisfaction at the boy in her embrace. . . .

Flann screamed in terror as his fists beat against her voluptuous breasts. She crushed him in her arms with savage delight.

His last shrill plea, "*Peter! Help!*" shocked me out of my horror-hypnosis. I sprang forward to slash out at the storm-thing. But she evaded my feeble attempts easily, then, laughing in a manner that turned my spine to ice, she drifted off into the north sky, Flann still writhing impotently in her sadistic embrace.

I fell sobbing to the bottom of the boat. Now I knew. Now all doubt was gone. The presence of Suva, the jonah, had enabled the *stürm-frauen* to appear and to destroy, and their storm-lust would not be sated until all but the jonah were dead. Tomorrow they would come for me. . . .

THE night was alive with fear. Every sound the wind made played on my sick nerves as a fiddle bow plays on a taut E-string. The slapping of the black waves against the boat made me shudder. All of the elements had taught me to fear them—knowing as I did now that strange and terrible entities possessed and controlled them. . . .

When the sickly light of the mock-sun

made its appearance I managed to fall into fitful slumber. I lay in a semi-stupor during the day, forgetting to eat or drink—remembering only my fear. It seemed the briefest of time-divisions before daylight faded and beclouded dusk crept stealthily over the heavens.

In the livid burst of terror that swept over me when I realized it was almost time, I decided that I would kill Martin Suva. Of course! Why hadn't I thought of it before! With him gone, the *stürm-frauen* would have no earthly contact—they would be unable to appear.

Suva was asleep, exhausted. I chuckled. How simple! He was smaller than me. I could manage it easily. I seized a heavy iron oar-lock, and crept toward him. Careful, no noise. I would bash his brains out before he knew what was happening, then toss him to the fishes. I tittered feebly with joy. It was escape! *Escape!*

I HUNG over him wild-eyed. He looked haggard and worn, near death already. His clothes, like mine, were in tatters. There were dark patches around his eyes. His cheeks were gaunt. As he slept he uttered frightened little moans.

A last-moment shred of doubt assailed me. Was I *sure*? Did I have the right—? Just because Martin Suva was a deaf-mute, because he was Finnish, because he was secretive and strange, did that mean he . . . ?

The thought of Flann, of Jorgsen, and of all the others caused my misgivings to vanish in a wild burst of anger. Of course it was he! Who else?

His eyes opened. They widened when he saw me there, the oar-lock poised. He

gave a bleat of terror. I brought the weapon down, but he avoided it. He grabbed my arm, and then we were struggling, clawing like madmen to tear each other's throats. I was bigger, and had a kind of insanely desperate strength. I knocked him backwards over a seat, while my fingers circled his throat, tightened.

With a wild cry he flailed about with his arms, managing to grasp my—his—coat and tear it off my shoulder. Then his eyes bulged in their sockets, and he unleashed a harsh scream that shall haunt me to my dying day.

I forgot then that I meant to kill him. My fingers slipped nervelessly away.

It was a birthmark on my right shoulder, an odd bluish mark that resembled a woman's head, a woman's head as seen through swirls of her own long hair. I'd always been ashamed of that mark, even as a boy, keeping it always covered. And now, when Martin Suva screamed, I knew why . . .

I fell back in a daze, only dimly conscious of Suva's forlorn cry as he leaped into the sea and vanished.

I came out of my stupor to find myself alone. Alone with the mocking wind and the dreadful secrets the sea never tells. I was alone with the mind-blasting memory of the *stürm-frauen*, and of how they had killed my companions, one by one, leaving only the man whose distant ancestor had conceived an unholy bargain with them and they had presented him and his progeny with a token of immunity from their ravings. The mark of the Jonah. And that this man—who had unwittingly unleashed them to prey upon his companions as their prototype the storm preys upon all mankind was—*myself*.