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WEIRD TALES

408 Holliday Building

Indianapolis, Ind.

*A Five-Minute Tale of
Maritime Superstition*

THE JONAH

By GUY PAIN

ASULLEN, shrouded gloom hung over the *Meandering Margaret*, a bark of 15,000 tons en route for the West Indies. She was lying in the midst of a sweltering calm. Scarce a breath, a capful of wind, disturbed the sails which hung idly downward from their masts in loose folds. An oily sea washed lightly against the sturdy sides of the bark, so gently that it assumed a heaving motion repellent to the eye and the stomach. Not a flicker of a white-capped roller, never a splash as a tiny wave overtopped itself to break up in confusion. Just a regular, smooth rise and fall.

The crew of the *Meandering Margaret* lounged idly about, except under the direct glance of the first mate, whose watch it was, when they carelessly continued their work with a pretense that deceived no one. The watch off lay about on the foredeck. Below it was stifling.

The calm had lasted a week now, and during that time the ship had made a progress of one hundred and twenty nautical miles. The oppressive heat seemed worse each day, while discipline became correspondingly slack.

The captain was below, feverish. The second mate had died under the influence of the heat the day before, and so the first mate and the bosun divided up the watches between them.

Superstitious to the last degree, the crew were hourly expecting tragedy, horror, death. The voyage had commenced badly. When the men signed

on, they found as bosun the notorious Jim Green, Jonah of Jonahs. Jim Green had thrice been wrecked, twice on the cruel rocks of the Cornish coast, and once off South Africa. Each time most of the crew had lost their lives.

Once a boat he was on caught fire. It was a privately owned wind-jammer and uninsured—there was a subsequent suicide when the news of its total loss reached London.

He had seen four burials at sea—and he was cross-eyed.

The sum total made him one of the most feared men at sea, and no sailor ever willingly slept in the same ship as he.

That was the first of bad omens. Three days out the ship's cat, black as coal, after giving birth to white kittens, jumped overboard. Then Miller, the second mate, died.

JIM GREEN fished for sharks during his off time. He could not sleep, so to while away the time he trailed a line behind. There had been a certain shark following the ship for days. Another evil omen.

Pickled pork is a tasty piece, but though the line had hung down from the aft-deck for three days it was still untouched, while the shark still haunted the *Meandering Margaret*.

"Mark 'e my words, lads," grumbled old Amos, a bearded, grizzled old seaman who had sailed the seas nigh on sixty years, "that shark's a-waiting for 'uman food."

"Ye'r right, and I says so too," agreed 'arry Bodley. 'Arry Bodley was a rat-faced, ferret-eyed, cockney sailor, a typical inhabitant of the sunless, insanitary, crowded tenements of the East End of London. A vivid scar ran down his face, making its appearance evil. Its sinisterness was farther enhanced by the cunning expression set deep back in his eyes. "Yus, old Amos, this 'ere ship is curst, that's wot I says. Wot can yer expect with a blasted Jonah on board?"

There was a murmur of assent from the rest of the men, and a muttered growl. The watch off sat round, blackened pipes in blackened teeth. One bell went; that is, a quarter to eight bells. In another quarter of an hour eight bells would chime, and the watch would change.

Bodley, with one eye on the bosun to see that he caught no word of what he was saying, continued his discourse, while the remainder listened to him with an eager attention, every now and again interrupting with an imprecation, signifying agreement, or expectorating skilfully a mouthful of tobacco-tainted spittle.

THE sun had sunk, a blazing ball of fire, and night had fallen. Still the *Meandering Margaret* lay wallowing, creaking at every joint, where the tar had melted and oozed out.

The bosun was leaning over the side of the ship watching the fish leaping in and out of the water, leaving behind a sparkling shower of phosphoric drops which glowed as they fell back to the surface.

Night had brought no appreciable difference in the temperature, and Jim Green felt as if he were slowly melting away. He wore no shoes and stockings, only a pair of pants, and a shirt, rolled up above his elbows and open at the chest. Listlessly he gazed overboard.

Behind him there crouched a shadow which turned its head this way and that to see whether it was observed, then it crept slowly, noiselessly toward the unconscious figure of the bosun. Other than the faint splash of the leaping fish, the creaking timber, and the helmsman, who was whistling "Home, Sweet Home" in anything but a tunely key, the night was silent.

The shadow sprang forward. There was a thud, and Jim Green sank to the deck. Instantly the shadow, the rat-faced, ferret-eyed cockney, lifted the body up and flung it overboard.

The helmsman ceased his monotonous tune, cocked his head to one side and listened. "Some fish!" he muttered to himself. Before he had more time to cogitate on the sound of the big splash, he heard something else. There was a low, cooing, sibilant whispering, and suddenly the gaff topsail cracked like a pistol shot, the bark jerked forward, the sails billowed with a series of slight explosions. There was wind—*wind!*

THE disappearance of the bosun was scarcely a nine days wonder. five days being its limit, for on the fifth day the *Meandering Margaret* reached its destination.

Enquiries had been made, and the only clue to Jim Green's disappearance was the splash which the helmsman had heard, and which significantly had preceded the sudden wind by a matter of a minute, or less. The crew looked at each other queerly. No sooner had the Jonah fallen overboard, which was the assumption arrived at, than the prayed-for wind had arrived.

Only the cunning cockney knew the real truth, and he metaphorically hugged himself. He had paid back the beating up the mate had given him for slacking, and disposed of the Jonah, with successful results, in one

blow. Therefore he was pleased with himself.

Arrived in harbor the crew decided on a swim. With a boat to keep off unwelcome sharks, six naked men disported in the transparent blue water.

"Cum on, wot abart a race?" yelled out Bodley. "I uster swim the old Thames. Round the boat and back fer a tot of stout and tonic." The men accepted the challenge, and twelve powerful arms commenced to cleave the water.

Bodley lagged behind. He knew he could beat any one of the swimmers. In his younger days he had been the accepted champion of the urchins who used to swim in the muddied waters of London's great river. He had a spectacular temperament, so he meant to give them a start, then beat them.

As they rounded the stern he was two yards behind. The occupants of the protecting boat watched the race. Bets passed.

"My Gawd!" shouted one suddenly. "Look."

The placid calm in which Bodley had been swimming a second past was now a turbulent mass of heaving water. "Shark," hazarded one of the crew. "Octopus," guessed another.

Quickly they pulled toward the struggling cockney, but as they reached within three yards of where the helpless Bodley vainly kicked his arms and legs to free himself of whatever was clutching him, he sank be-

neath the water. A few bubbles rose to the surface.

The limpid water held no secrets. Some way down in the clear water they could see the body of Bodley, still and motionless. What puzzled the men, however, was some black, inert, seaweedy substance that was curled round him.

"Blimey," muttered one; "looks like as 'ow Bodley got caught in some seaweed."

Helplessly they peered down, stupidly doing nothing to rescue the cockney, who could not possibly be living. Presently the swimmers returned. They heard the story, and one volunteered to dive below.

His white body flashed beneath the surface, and within thirty seconds he returned with Bodley—and "something."

The first thing that the crew saw was the horror depicted on the rufface of the late cockney. Terror, fright—nameless, indescribable horror was writ on his features.

Then old Amos suddenly vomited over the side, and with shaking fingers pointed to the "something" that was entwined round the dead body.

Stuck on a hook attached to a long line, which trailed from the ship and had once been used as a shark hook, was a slimy, seaweed-covered body, decaying and mortifying, the face of which, however, was just recognizable as that of Jim Green, the Jonah of the *Meandering Margaret*.

