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Author of "Death-Waters" and "The Desert Lich"

I HEARD Boucke beating with his bare fists upon the cabin door and the wind whistling under the cracks. I objected to both and I opened the door wide. Boucke came in then, with a fierce rush of wind. He was a curious little man, with the sea and sky in his eyes, and he spoke in pantomime. He pointed towards the door and ran his fingers savagely through his reddish hair, and I knew that something had nearly finished him—I mean finished him spiritually, damaged his soul, his outlook.

I didn't know whether to be pleased or horrified. Boucke seemed more human with his queer, vivid gestures and flaming eyes, but I couldn't imagine what he had seen up on deck. Of course I found out soon enough.

The men were sitting about in idiotic groups of twos and threes and no one saluted me when I stepped out from the shadows of twisted cordage into a luminous stripe of moonlight.

"Where's the boatswain?" I asked.

Several of the men heard my question, and they turned and stared at me, and deliberately tittered.

"It took the boatswain!" said Oscar.

Oscar seldom spoke to anyone. He was tall and lean and his jaundiced

scalp was fringed by yellow hair. I distinctly recall his dark, hungry eyes and his fringe of hair glistening in the moonlight. But the rest of Oscar I can no longer visualize. He has faded into an indefinite ghost of memory. It is curious, though, how clearly I remember every other shape and incident of that amazing night.

Oscar was standing by my elbow, and I turned suddenly and gripped his arm. It reassured me to grip his strong, muscular arm. But I knew that I had hurt him, for his shoulder jerked and he looked at me reproachfully. I presume Oscar wanted me to stand upon my own feet. But he made a sweeping motion with his arm to assure me that it didn't matter. The wind whistled about our ears and the tattered sails flapped and wheezed. Sails can speak, you know. I have heard sails protest in chorus, each sail with a slightly different accent. You get to understand their conversation in time. On still mornings it is wonderful to come up on deck and hear the sails whispering among themselves. They make gestures, too, and when they are tired they sway pathetically against the sky.

I took a turn about the deck and bawled out the men and told them to

go to the devil. Then I got my pipe out and blew grotesque yellow effigies into the cold air. They danced in the moonlight and made the situation irredeemable. I came back to Oscar eventually and asked him pointblank what he meant by "it." But Oscar didn't answer me. He simply turned, and pointed.

Something white and gelatinous oozed over the rail and ran or slid for several feet along the deck. Then a larger bulk seethed out of the darkness and stood poised above the black stern-post. A second object descended upon the deck, coming down with a thud and running at a tangent with the first over the smooth, polished boards. I saw two of the men get quickly to their feet, with wildish, jerky motions, and I heard Oscar shout out a curt command.

The thing upon the deck spread out and became broader at its base. It reared into the air a livid appendage encircled with monstrous pink suckers. We could see the suckers loathsomely at work in the moonlight, opening and closing and opening again. We were affected by a queer aromatic stench and we felt an overpowering sense of physical nausea. I saw one of the men reel backward and collapse upon the boards. Then a second idiot keeled over, and a third—a third actually advanced toward the loathsome object on his hands and knees, as if fascinated.

At that moment the moon seemed to draw nearer, to actually careen down the sky and hang above the cordage. Then suddenly the amorphous tentacles shot forward, like released hawsers, and struck against the nearest mast, and I heard a splintering, and a noise like thunder. The arms quivered and seemed to fly in all directions. Then they flopped back over the side.

I fastened my eyes upon our black topsail mastheads, and questioned

Oscar in a very low voice. "Did *that* take the boatswain?"

Oscar nodded and shuffled his feet. The men on the deck whispered among themselves, and I knew intuitively that a spirit of rebellion was rife among them. And yet even Oscar exonerated me!

"Where would we have been if you hadn't brought us in here? A-drifting, probably—rudderless and sailless. Our sails may look like the skin on a water-logged corpse, but we can use 'em—when we can get the masts into shape. The lagoon looked innocent enough, and most of us were for coming in here. But now they whine like yellow puppies—and blame it on you. The idiots! If you just say the word—"

I stopped him, for I didn't want the men to take his proposal seriously, and he spoke loud enough for them to hear. The men, I felt, were scarcely to blame—under the circumstances!

"How many times has the *thing* crawled over the sides?" I asked.

"Eight times!" said Oscar. "It took the boatswain on the third trip. He shrieked and threw up his arms, and turned yellow! It twined itself about his leg, and set its great pink suckers to work on him; and the rest of us could do nothing—nothing! We tried to get him away, but you cannot imagine the sheer pull of that white arm. It oozed slime all over him, and all over the deck. Then it flopped back into the water, and carried him with it!

"After that we were more careful. I told the men to go below, but they only glowered at me. The thing fascinates them. They sit there and deliberately wait for it to return. You saw what happened just now. The thing can strike like a cobra, and it sticks closer than a lamprey; but the idiots won't be warned. And when I think of those quivering pink suckers I feel sorry for them—and for myself! He didn't utter a sound, you

understand, but he turned livid under the gills and his tongue stuck out horribly, and just before he disappeared over the side I noticed that his lips were all black and swollen. But as I told you, he was immersed in yellowish slime, in ooze, and the life must have gone out of him almost at once. I'm sure that he didn't really suffer. With God's help, it's we who have to suffer!"

"Oscar," I said, "I want you to be quite frank, and if necessary, even brutal. Do you think that you can explain that thing? I don't want any wretched theories, Oscar. I want you to fashion a prop for me, Oscar, something for me to lean upon. I'm so very tired, and I haven't much authority here. Oh, yes, I'm supposed to be in command, but when there is nothing to go upon, Oscar, what can I say to them? How can I get them down into the cabin? I pity them so. What do you think it is, my friend?"

"The thing is obviously a cephalopod," said Oscar, quite simply, but there was a look of shame and horror in his eyes, which I didn't like.

"An octopus, Oscar?"

"Perhaps. Or a monstrous squid! Or some hideous unclassified species!"

A FABRIC of greenish cloud covered the face of the moon, and I saw one of the men crawling on his hands and knees along the deck. Then he gave a sudden, defiant scream, ran to the rail and held out his arms. A white exudation ran the entire length of the rail. It rose up and quivered amidst illimitable shadows, and then it poured in an abominable stream over the scuppers and enveloped the hectic form of the wretch, and it made no sound. The poor fool tried to get away. He screamed, made shocking grimaces, fell down upon the deck and tried to draw himself along by his hands. He pawed at the smooth slippery surface, but the thing had wound its tenebrous tentacles about his leg,

and it pulled him. It pulled him slowly and hideously.

His head struck against the scuppers, and a crimson stream, no wider than a hawser rope, ran down the deck and formed a miniature pool at Oscar's feet. A sucker fastened upon his right temple, and another got in under his shirt and set to work upon his bare chest. I tried to get to him, but Oscar held fast to my arm, and would not tell me why. The body became white, slimy, changed before our eyes. And not one man stepped forward to prevent it. Suddenly, while we watched, the dead man, whose eyes had already glazed, was jerked forcefully toward the scuppers, again and again.

But he wouldn't go through. His head was soon pounded into an unimaginable resemblance of something we didn't care to think about, and we became deadly sick. But we watched, strangely fascinated, even perhaps more than a little resentful. We were watching something brutal and incredibly alive, and we beheld it in an unrestrained exercise of all its faculties. There, under a shrouded moon, in the phosphorescent wilderness of exotic waters, we saw the law of man outraged by something mute, misshapen, blasphemous, and we saw industrious retching matter, brainless and self-sufficient, obeying a law older than man, older than morality, older than sin. Here was life absorbing another life, and doing it forcefully, and without conscience, and becoming stronger and more exultant through the doing of it.

But it couldn't get the body through the scuppers. It pulled and pulled, and finally let go. The wind had gone down, and oddly enough, as it let go and fell back into the dead calm of water, we heard an ominous splash. We rushed forward, and surrounded the body. It seemed to swim in a river of white jelly. Oscar called for something which had become nec-

essary, and we wrapped it up decently and threw it overboard. But Oscar repeated a few words mechanically out of the little black prayer-book, which he imagined were appropriate. I stood and stared at the dark opening in the fore-castle.

I don't know to this day how I got the men through that dark opening. But I did it—with Oscar's aid. I can see Oscar standing with his glistening head against a voiceless wilderness of stars. I can see him shaking his fists at the slinking cowards on the deck, and shrieking out commands. Or were they insults? I know that I stepped forward and helped him, and I think I must have used my fists, for later on I discovered that my knuckles were bruised and discolored, and Oscar had to bandage them. It is queer how Oscar has faded in my memory, for I thought a great deal of him, in spite of his queer ways, and his large hungry eyes, and his fringe of yellow hair. He helped me get the men into the fore-castle, and so did Boucke. Boucke, with perfectly horrified face, and with lips quivering and struggling with a vicious inarticulateness!

We drove them in like sheep, but sheep often rebel and are troublesome. But we got them in, and then we turned and looked back at the gaunt masts, swaying soullessly against the lifeless, somber regularity of calm sea and sky, at the hanging ropes and frizzled sails, and at the long, moon-washed rails, and the encrimsoned scuppers. We heard Boucke inside, blubbering idiotically to the men. Then something made a dreadful guggling sound in the water, and we heard a loud splash.

"It's risen again," said Oscar, in a tone of despair.

## 2

I SAT in my cabin, reading a book. Oscar had bandaged up my hands, and left, and he had promised not to disturb me.

I endeavored to follow the little printed signs on the white page before me, but they called up no images, stimulated me to no response. The words did not take shape in my mind, and I did not know whether the stupid phrases that I sought to understand formed part of an essay or a short-story. The title of the book itself I cannot now recall, although I think that it had something to do with ships and the sea, and derelicts, and the pitfalls of over-imaginative skippers. I fancied that I could hear the water lapping against the side of the ship, and now and then a great splash.

But I knew that a portion of my brain hotly repudiated both the lapping and the splash, and I assured myself that the nervous excitement under which I labored was but physical and momentary, and in no sense psychic or due to outside causes. My senses had been appalled, and I now suffered a natural reaction from the shock; but no new danger threatened me.

Something pounded upon the door. I got quickly to my feet, and it did not occur to me at that moment that Oscar had promised that no one should disturb me.

"What is it you want?" I asked.

There was no direct or satisfactory answer, but a queer guggling noise came to me through the door, and I fancied that I could hear a quick intake of breath. A horrible, intense fear took grim possession of me.

I looked at the door in white horror. It shook like broadyards in a gale. It bent inward under a terrific impact.

Thud followed thud, as if some monstrous body had hurled itself forward only to withdraw and to come back with additional momentum. I quelled an impulse to cry out, and I opened my mouth and shut it, and opened it again. I ran forward to assure myself that I had really bolted the door. I fingered the bolt caress-

ingly, and then I retreated until my back was against an opposite beam.

The door bulged inward hideously, and immediately afterwards there followed a great crash, and a splintering and a sundering of wood and a retching of hinges. The door gave, fell inward and was lifted up on the back of something white and unspeakable. Then the panel was hurled violently against the wall, and the thing under it rolled forward, with terrible and increasing velocity. It was a long, gelatinous arm, an amorphous tentacle with pink suckers that slid or oozed towards me across the smooth floor.

I stood with my back pressed against the beam, with only my harsh, stertorous breathing to keep it at bay. I could see that it did not fear me, that arm, and I could do nothing. It was long and white and it *slid* towards me. Can I make you understand? And Oscar had bandaged my hands, and they were but feeble, fumbling instruments. And that thing was utterly intent upon its purpose, and it did not need eyes to guide it across the floor.

An ungodly, aromatic odor had entered the cabin with the thing, and it overpowered me almost before the tentacles seized upon me. I endeavored to slough off the great, loathsome folds with my bandaged hands, but my crippled fingers sank into the jellylike tissue as in soft mud. It was palpitating, living tissue, but it seemed to lack substantial body, and it gave horribly. It *gave!* My hands went right through it, and yet when it gripped me it was elastic and it could tighten its grip. It strangled me. I felt that I could not breathe. I bent and twisted but it had wound itself about me, and it held me, and I could do nothing.

I remember that I called for Oscar. I shouted myself hoarse, and then I think I was dragged ruthlessly across the floor, through the smashed-in door, and up the stairs. I remember now

how my head pounded upon the stairs as we ascended, I and the thing, and I think that my scalp bled, and I know that I lost three teeth. I received dreadful blows, cuffs, from the corners of stairs, from the edges of doors, and from the smooth, hard boards of the deck itself.

**T**HE thing dragged me out across the deck, and I remember that I saw the moon through folds upon folds of obscenely bloating jelly. I was buried deep down within fatty, obscene folds that shivered and shook and palpitated in the moonlight!

I no longer felt any desire to protest or to cry out, and the thought of Oscar and a possible rescue did not fill me with elation. I began to experience sensations of pleasure. How am I to describe them? A peculiar warmth pulsed through me; my limbs quivered with a weird expectancy. I saw through the folds of animate jelly a great reddish sucker, or disk, lined with silver teeth. I saw it descend rapidly through the folds. It fastened upon my chest, and a momentary revulsion made me claw ludicrously at the nauseous tissue surrounding me. There was a kind of cruelty in the refusal of the flimsy stuff to offer any resistance. One could go on that way forever, clawing and tearing at the fatty folds, and feeling them give, and yet knowing that nothing could possibly come of it. For one thing, it was utterly impossible to get a hold on the stuff, to get it between your hands and squeeze it. It simply flipped away from you and then it rushed back and solidified. It could condense and dilate at will.

My feeling of horror and antipathy disappeared, and a new tide of exaltation, of warmth, of vigor surged over me. I could have wept or screamed with pleasure and genuine ecstasy.

I knew that the monster was actually drawing up my blood through

its fumbling, convulsive suckers. I knew that in a moment I should be drained as dry as a grilled carbonado, but I actually welcomed my inevitable dissolution. I made no effort to conceal my glee. I was frankly hilarious, although it seemed unjust to me that Oscar should have to explain to the men. Poor Oscar! He tied up the loosened ends of things, smoothed over vulgar and disagreeable realities, made the raw, ungarnished facts almost acceptable, almost romantic. He was a precious stoic, and gloriously self-reliant. That I knew, and I pitied him. I distinctly recalled my last conversation with him. He was slouching along the docks, with his hands in his pockets, and a cigarette between his teeth. "Oscar," I said, "I didn't really suffer when that thing fastened upon me! I didn't, really. I enjoyed it!" He scowled, and scratched his ridiculous fringe of hair. "Then I saved you from yourself!" he cried. His eyes blazed, and I saw that he wanted to knock me down. That was the last I saw of Oscar. He faded into the shadows after that, but had I kept him with me I might have been wiser.

The jelly about me seemed to increase in volume. It must have been three feet thick about my head, and I am sure that I saw the moon and the swaying mastheads through a prism of varying colors. Waves of blue and scarlet and purple would pass before my eyes, and a taste of salt came into my mouth. For a moment I thought, not without a certain resentment and hurt pride, that the thing had really absorbed me, that I was a portion and parcel of that quivering, gelatinous mass—and then I saw Oscar!

I saw him looming above my obscure prison-house with a lighted torch in his hand. The torch, viewed through the magnifying folds of jelly, was a thing of flawless beauty. The flames shot out and appeared to cover

the entire deck, and to go flying up against the darkness. The cordage and the luminous rails seemed afire, and a red and ravening serpent lengthened parallel with the scuppers. I saw Oscar clearly, and I saw the great spiral of smoke that streamed from the tails of flame, and I saw the swaying, ember-stained masts, and the black sinister opening in the fore-castle. The darkness seemed to part to let Oscar through with his torch and his stoicism. He swayed in the darkness above me, that silent, quixotic man, and I knew that Oscar could be trusted to put an end to things. I had no clear idea of what Oscar would do, but I knew that he would make some sort of brilliant and satisfying end.

I was not disappointed, and when I saw Oscar bend and touch the folds of jelly with his great, flaming torch I wanted to sing or shout. The folds quivered, and changed color. A maddening kaleidoscope of color passed before my eyes—flaming scarlet and yellow and silver and green and gold. The sucker released its hold upon my chest and shot upward through the voluminous folds. A terrific stench assailed my nostrils. The odor was unbearable: I threw out my arms and fought savagely to break through to reach the air and light and Oscar.

Then I felt the heat of Oscar's torch upon my cheek, and I knew that the tissue about me was falling away and burning to shreds. I saw that it was dissolving also, turning into oil, into grease, and I felt it hotly trickling down my knees and arms and thighs. I closed my lips tight, to keep from swallowing large quantities of the nauseous fluid, and I turned my face to the deck to protect my eyes from the falling fragments of sizzling tissue. The creature was literally being burnt alive, and in my heart of hearts I pitied it!

When Oscar at length helped me to



my feet I saw the last of the thing disappear over the side. Its arms were horribly charred and the suckers were gone, and I caught a momentary glimpse of dangling, frayed ends and reddish knobs and bulging protuberances. Then we heard a splash and a queer guggling sound. We looked at the deck, and saw that it was covered with greenish oil, and here and there great solid chunks of burnt tissue swam in the hideous porridge.

Oscar bent and picked up one of the fragments. He turned it right side up in his hand, so that the moonlight fell upon it. It contained in its five-inch expanse a four-inch sucker. And the sucker opened and closed while Oscar held the thing in his hand. It fell from Oscar's hand like a leaden weight and bounded into the air. Oscar kicked it overboard and looked at me. I looked away towards the black topsail masthead.