

Weird Tales



March, 1953

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

THE RAFT by Kirk Shaw



Out of the heat it floated, bearing the fruits of a fearsome curse.

WE WERE one day's steaming north of Jabal-at-Tair at the southern end of the Red Sea when we first saw the raft drifting slowly on the deep breathing waters, conspicuous on the empty sea as a solitary tea leaf on the congealing surface of a cooling teacup.

Three hours previously the Chief had told us we would have to stop to enable them to carry out some repairs below, and in that time we had all acquired some idea of what purgatory was going to be like. From overhead the blistering sun blazed down unhindered from the cloudless sky and reflected in an agonizing glare from the sheet smooth sea. In the cabins there was no respite to be found from the heated air that turned

them into untenable sweat boxes and drove us back on deck to the partial shade of the bleached awnings, where sprawled listlessly, our bodies gleamed and glistened with sweat, like sugar babies melting in a confectioner's window.

After the unnerving monotony of the shimmering sea it was a relief to watch this tiny dot that slowly bobbed toward us. At first it was but an idle interest for the bare planking showed it to be derelict, but when it became obvious that the drift was going to carry it close to us, first one person, then another moved to the bulwark rail and watched its progress.

On the bridge the Second Mate trained his binoculars, curious to know if it was

some crude native craft or a more finished product lost from some steamer, with perhaps some useful lifesaving gear on board. After a moment he raised his voice and hailed one of the watch on deck.

"Roberts! See if you can land the small grapnel on that raft and bring it alongside. There's something lying on it that looks like a bundle or package."

AT THE third cast the sharp pronged grapnel hooked itself on the dry planking, and as the raft was hauled alongside a seaman climbed down a pilot ladder and boarded it, passed a heaving line round the package and sent it on board to the Mate who untied and opened its wrappings. These proved to be just an old, tattered and torn shirt, tied by the arms around a dilapidated ledger whose warped covers and stained pages indicated its immersion in water.

The book was taken to the Captain, and our curiosity, unsatisfied and unlikely to be enlightened, we drifted back to what shade we could find, too exhausted with the heat to even discuss what the book might contain. But that evening, after we had got under way again, the Captain sent for me.

"Come in Sparks," he called in answer to my knock. "There's something I'd like you to do for me before we reach Aden."

I nodded silently, wondering what was coming now, for the sultry night was not one for working in, but my interest quickened when he lifted a book from his knees and I saw it was the one from the raft.

"You saw this coming aboard, Sparks? Well, what's written here makes rather a terrible story. It may be a hoax, but somehow I don't think so, yet if it's true—" He left his sentence unfinished, then recalled himself with a start. "Anyway, I'd like you to take the book to your cabin and try to type out a copy of what's been written. The writing's a bit difficult at first but you'll soon get the hang of it, and once we can read it through without stopping and stumbling over a word, we'll have a better idea what to make of it."

Consumed with curiosity I did as I was bid, and the following is what I read on that sticky night in the Red Sea. The writing

was in English, but with a curious, almost old fashioned style at times that made it difficult to guess at the writer's nationality. Never very legible it became more and more difficult to make out, and gave the impression of having been written over a considerable period, as without preamble it began.

I START this journal in my solitude to aid me forget the continual pains, and in the hope that whoever may find it will pray for my soul and know pity for one of the accursed of God.

How He Whom I mocked and forsook must smile contemptuously at my plea for mercy. I who have never shown mercy myself and who turned a deaf ear on the anguished cries of those in my power.

My sole remaining hope is that by my story I may prevent others from following in my footsteps, and thus gain some mitigation of my torment.

None are left who will mourn me so my name is unimportant, sufficient that my skin was white and my homeland far from this antechamber of Hell. In my youth I was neither better nor worse than my companions, but avarice and greed changed me from that to one of the vilest of men.

An engineer by profession I was working in Port Sudan when I first heard of the easy money that was to be made by anyone unscrupulous and daring enough to exploit it. With a little capital and a disregard for the sufferings of others, the money was there, and with these unworthy qualifications I was well suited so I threw up my job and traveled to Massawa.

Arriving there, after careful and guarded inquiries, I approached an Arab merchant of unsavory reputation, but known to have an interest in several of the dhows that lay in the harbor. His price for selling one was high, but when I had finally convinced him that my means were limited I became the owner of one of these ungainly craft. Through him I was also put in touch with Yussuf who was to become my right hand man and partner in treachery.

Yussuf was ideal for the purpose I had in mind. A great strong rogue, half Arab half Negro, fear was unknown to him and money his only god. Always at his waist he wore a

wickedly curved knife which recently he had used too often, and which had brought unwelcome police attention to him. But more important from my point of view, he knew the waters around the thousand islands like the palm of his hand. With his assistance I picked out the two villainous wrecks from the Kafba who were to act as our crew, and together we set out to make, and made our fortunes.

OUR trade was the vilest but most profitable of all, our cargo human freight; picturesquely named Black Ivory, it was simply slave running. Stamped out in Europe it still flourishes in all its old viciousness in this forsaken corner of the world where human life is cheap, and authority willing but too weak to combat the traders. In return for a little risk, money was to be made from the sale of human beings. Men for toil and menial tasks degrading to their manhood, and women, especially if young and attractive, for the harems of petty chiefs. A trade as old as the hills, but still as lucrative as ever.

Like all sin it was easy. At nights we would sail silently into a prearranged bay on the deserted Eritrian coast to meet the slave caravans from the interior. Bargaining was carried out on the spot, and when agreement had been reached, the slaves were herded on board with rawhide whips and battened down in the holds.

Before the next dawn we would sail, out across the straits to Yemen where the slaves would be taken off our hands with no awkward questions asked, and another handsome profit would be split between us.

So it went on, year after year with our luck holding good and never a sign of one of the few police patrols that might have meant our finish. How I wish to God now that we had been caught; but no, we were destined for more terrible ends.

On our last voyage we met with the Arabs as usual, and after the bargaining we were preparing to take on board fifty-two poor black wretches, each securely shackled and fettered to his neighbor, when my attention was suddenly attracted to one of them—a young girl.

Despite the chains her carriage was grace-

ful, as steadying an elderly man who tottered with weariness beside her, she walked towards me. With her head held proudly she seemed more like some haughty young queen than one doomed to the misery of slavery, and the contempt in her eyes when her glance met mine shamed my very soul and roused the brutal desire to break her fine young spirit.

I watched closely as she crossed the narrow planking to the hot wooden deck. Never had we carried such a fine black pearl. The single sari like garment she wore could not conceal the slender hips and thighs, and accentuated the soft curves of her figure. Her long black hair, unusually long for a native, mantled her shoulders in smooth, glossy waves. Her features were clear cut and attractive to western eyes, and her brown skin velvet as any peach.

Such was my curiosity that I questioned one of the slavers about her, although previously some last lingering spark of humanity had kept me from ever inquiring where these poor devils had come from.

According to the Arab, the girl and the elderly man with her were related though he did not know how closely. All he could say was that they came from a village on the fringe of Abyssinia where the man had acted as an administrator for the Emperor. Her fine features were thus explained, for the nobility of her race was renowned since the Queen of Sheba.

The man had been a dabbler in the mysteries of black magic, and had so enraged the local witchdoctors that they had bargained with the arabs and then lured their victims into the forest, and the waiting slavers. Then not all his cunning nor her tears had saved them from the fate of the leg-irons.

Meanwhile, their betrayers would have caused the word to be spread around that the beasts of the night had killed and devoured them both—we were the beasts of the night, but we lacked the mercy that makes the savage kill at once.

Before the dawn we sailed. Our human freight were packed in the bowels of the dhow, well away from the curious eyes on any passing ship we might chance to meet, and so hardened were we to the suffering

we caused that no one even noticed the muffled cries of anguish that came from the depths as the heat of the sun intensified.

That evening, with Yussuf and his whip beside me, I went down among them.

The girl sat huddled in a far corner, her arm around the man who lay with his head supported on her firm breasts. As I held my oil lamp aloft, she raised a hand to shield her eyes from the dazzle which even that poor light caused after the blackness of the hold, and by its flickering glare Yussuf brutally kicked the man aside. Stooping, he unlocked the fetters from around the girl's ankle, and she cringed back as I grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her upright, anxious to get away from the loathsome stench of the place.

Sick though he was, when the man realized my intentions he howled like a wounded animal and flung himself bodily at me. His chains brought him up short and the loaded stock of Yussuf's whip thudded soggly across his face, sending him spinning to the deck at my feet. The girl whimpered and tried to get to his crumpled form, but I tightened my grip on her wrist and hauled her back while the native slowly raised his head and stared at me.

Streaked with blood and dirt, by the fitful light of the lantern, he looked like a devil incarnate rising from the dark depths of Hell. Never have I seen a look so malignant as his lips writhed hatefully and a meaningless jumble poured from them.

But it was his eyes I feared. Those piercing, unblinking, hate consumed eyes that seemed to bore deep into my skull.

Shuddering, I hastened from their sight, pulling the weeping girl roughly along with me. Then aft, in the hovel I used as a cabin, I threw her on the pallet bed and doused the reeking oil lamp.

The following morning I was awake with the dawn, but the girl had already awakened before me, if indeed she had slept at all. Her face was drawn and tear stained, but not one sound did she utter as with loathing and hate in her eyes she watched me. I cursed her loudly and went on deck.

On these runs, providing there were no ships around, it had been our custom to

allow the slaves on deck for a brief five minutes. Not from any sense of humanity, but because dead slaves meant only lost money. This morning was no exception, and I seated myself on one of the bollards to watch the shuffling wretches being herded along by Yussuf and one of the crew.

When the Abyssinian came on deck his eyes immediately sought mine and never for one moment did they relax their baleful glare as he limped along.

Suddenly, just as he was passing me, he kicked out savagely and the fetters fell from his legs as he threw himself at me.

Somehow during the night he had picked the lock that had imprisoned him, then cunningly replacing the steel band around his ankle had awaited this moment.

But I had no time to consider this now. Already his long bony talons were dug agonizingly into my throat, and caught in a half risen position I reeled back until the low bulwark caught the small of my back and I was bent over the shark infested waters.

Back and back he forced me, his fetid breath clogging my nostrils, his legs locked around mine. Frantically I pulled my revolver clear and clubbed at his head and face until with a grunt he relaxed his grip. Mad with fear I hit again and again as he slumped against me before he finally collapsed on the deck, a dark stream of blood oozing from his battered features and staining the bleached planking around his still, ungainly form.

Gasping for breath I staggered upright, my hand seeking my bruised throat. It was all over in a minute that had seemed a lifetime, and now Yussuf was kneeling by his side and rolling him over.

"He's dead!" he announced, and I cursed, for I had not meant to hit so hard, but stark fear knows no reason.

To cover my terror I shouted angrily at the two sailors, and silently they bent to pick up the body by head and heels while the other slaves, wild eyed but cowed were driven below by Yussuf.

With two or three swings to gain momentum the sailors let go, and the body arched through the air to hit the water as the black triangular fins swept in.

A piercing scream brought me sharply round. The girl, one hand pressed to her mouth and horror on her face, was standing in the doorway of the cabin, a witness of all that had happened.

I moved towards her, but before I could get near, she darted forward and sprang lightly onto the side. For a moment she swayed, her head turned and staring straight at me, then before any of us could get near her she jumped—right in the middle of those dark, thrashing bodies.

Stunned, I stood rooted to the spot. And when my unwilling legs carried me to the side all I could see was the fighting sharks.

Screaming and raging I emptied my revolver at the monsters; but she was gone.

The shock and horror of that day I tried to dissolve in spirits and by the afternoon I was completely drunk and maudlin. The death scene of the girl and the old man's eyes haunted and tormented me until I was babbling and laughing insanely. At last I shouted for Yussuf, and when he appeared, demanded to know what the man had said on the previous night as he lay in that stinking hold.

Yussuf hesitated, and slowly I realized that for the first time since we had formed our unholy alliance he was afraid. His fear communicated itself to me, and I raved and ranted at him. His eyes narrowed, and I groped drunkenly for my revolver, but with an effort he regained his control.

"He cursed you, white man. Cursed you with all the hatred in his shrivelled body. Rotten!—he said. Rotten you were and rotten you would die. The black soul in your white body would corrupt before the grave had closed over your head, and the worms of corruption would feed on your flesh before your rotten heart had ceased to beat. The misery you brought in life to others would heap a hundredfold on your own head. A man but not a man. One of the living dead, held in the clammy hand of the grave!"

When Yussuf stopped I howled and tugged again at my gun, but in two strides he was by my side and his great hand closed over mine. I was not a weak man, but he imprisoned my fingers as I might hold a struggling sparrow.

"Don't be a fool!" he hissed, shoving his bearded face close to mine. "I was not the one who cursed you, and we may need each other soon—the Kharif is coming!"

The Kharif! Dreaded sandstorm of this inland sea. Dangerous at any time, but deadly to us in the close waters around the reefs and islands where we were now sailing.

Even in my pitiful state, Yussuf's news penetrated and had a partial sobering effect on me. And two hours later when I staggered on deck the worst effects of the alcohol had worn off.

Already the gray cloud of the sandstorm had climbed across the sun, turning the white hot orb into an inflamed ulcer in the darkening sky. The wind was increasing in strength, but it brought no coolness with it. A warm gritty wind that seemed to spew from the mouth of a blast furnace—and then the sand struck us.

Many of these Devil's storms have I seen but never have I known such a demon.

EVERYTHING was blotted out as the stinging, blinding, particles engulfed the dhow in a solid gray blanket. Sand forced its way in everywhere, gritting between our teeth. Stinging and inflaming the eyes, and fouling every breath we drew.

I could not see beyond the length of my arm as I stumbled towards the tiller from where I could hear Yussuf's voice rising above even the roar of the storm as he belated instructions at the sailors who were struggling to lower the great patchwork sail. But even as I reached him the sail ripped and shredded from peak to foot, and the tattered canvas whipped around us.

Yussuf was throwing all his great weight on the tiller, trying to bring the dhow's head us to meet the full fury of the wind, for it would have been suicide to try and run blind before it. I added my weight to his and slowly she started to feel the helm.

From below decks came a wail of fear from the slaves as we heeled over. Then, with a splintering crash we struck!

The tall wooden mast rived and toppled—down it crashed with the crack of splintering timber and shattered the heavy tiller—under it, squashed like a beetle, lay Yussuf!

The dhow lurched on her beam ends.

The wail of the slaves became the shriek of the damned as the water boiled in. The tattered sail slipped overboard, and round my ankle a trailing guy tightened painfully. Screaming with agony as the sodden canvas threatened to pull my leg from the groin I clung desperately to the shattered rudder post. My hands slipped, and slithering across the sloping deck my head struck some object, a thousand lights flashed before my eyes, and I was overboard, unconscious.

Perhaps the rough seas saved me from the sharks, I'll never know, but when I regained my senses I was lying on the sharply shelving beach of a small island. Of my late companions and captives, I saw no more—they at least had not suffered long.

THE Kharif had blown itself out, and I dragged my battered and bruised body to the shade of an overhanging cliff to escape the murderous heat of the sun. All I could see of my past life were some pieces of broken boarding awash in the surf, part of the torn sail caught on a rock, and this book lying in a shallow pool.

When my strength had sufficiently returned, I hauled the flotsam higher on the beach and set out to explore the island.

As far as I could discover, in circumference it was little over a mile; a bare peak of rock rising sheer from the sea without so much as a blade of grass to relieve its harsh uniformity. Laboriously I climbed and scrambled over ever inch of it, searching desperately for some sign of water, for without it I could not hope to survive long in the blistering heat. But not one drop could I find; when exhausted I returned to the narrow beach I had landed on. There I crawled into a cave-like fissure in the hard rock and lay down to die in the dark.

But presently, as I stretched out and mused on the value of my fortune now, I thought I heard a faint drip. Intently, but with little hope, I strained my ears.

Again I heard it! A slow monotonous drip, but steady as a metronome that sent me scrambling madly deeper into the cave. And there I found it—water! A shallow pool formed by the drippings that came through a crack in the roof. God knows where it started, for since that day I've

searched the island repeatedly and can find no trace of its source, but though just a dirty brownish puddle whose overflow disappeared into the bowels of the earth, it tasted like nectar to my parched throat as I lay on my belly and lapped the brackish water.

The pool was shallow, and all too soon I finished its meager supply, and though I cut and scrapped my tongue licking at the bare stone only patience could refill my pitcher.

Heartened by my discovery I set forth once more, this time to seek for food. But all I could find were a few small fish trapped in a rocky pool; had I but known it, in time I was to be thankful for what I could find beneath the heavy stones.

I had no means of telling exactly where I was but I knew I was far from the shipping lanes, and my only hope would be to build some type of raft and by moving in easy stages try to reach the mainland or one of the islands with a police post.

Setting to work on the salvage from the dhow I managed to make a crude kind of catamaran with a broken spar serving as a paddle. Then just when I was ready to set out came fresh disaster. I discovered I had nothing in which to carry water, and I knew how unlikely I was to find any on the other islands.

I could not escape by sea, and all that was left was the slight chance that some steamer off her course might see and rescue me.

To attract attention I tied my tattered shirt to the spar and stuck it upright on the highest part of the island, but though occasionally I saw the smoke of distant steamers, none ever hove in view or came near enough to see my distress signal.

SLOWLY the dreary days dragged past and I marked their passage by scratching a stroke on the rock face. When three weeks had thus gone by my reckoning, I was awakened one night by the first of the pains. Deep in my innards it started, a gnawing constant pain like a small fire trying to burn its way out. My life became a burden to me. At nights I couldn't sleep, and by day my food would not lie in my shrunken stomach.

Steadily the pains spread through my whole body until I was just one living mass

of agony. Sores appeared, disgusting, sickening sores that would not heal but spread and spread. My hair dropped out; my teeth went rotten—the curse had come true!

Corruption had started before the grave had closed over my head and I became a walking lump of repulsiveness, nauseated by my own existence.

Now I knew I could never leave this island, for no one could ever again bear to look at me. I was one of the walking dead and the island my tomb. I brought down my flag, and finding a stump of a pencil in the pocket of the shirt, thought of writing this chronicle so that if my bones were found, the story of my death would be known.

Since I started writing the cancer of my flesh has continued until I am barely able to hold the pencil, and a new idea has occurred to me.

To ensure I shall never leave this island, I am going to push off my raft and let it drift where the current wills, and on it I shall put this history.

Beyond me as I write, I can see the dark

fins of cruising sharks, if I thought that even they would not be too disgusted to touch me I would finish this miserable existence here and now.

But no! I must live out the curse.

"The black soul in your white body will corrupt before the grave has closed over your head. The worms of corruption will feed on your flesh before your rotten heart has ceased to beat. The misery you brought in life to others will heap an hundredfold on your own head. A man but not a man. One of the living dead, held in the clammy hand of the grave!"

Oh, reader, if you have any mercy in your soul, then pray for my early death. I have sinned, but I have suffered an hundredfold. The man and the girl are revenged.

THERE is the story as I read it.

Is it true, is there a man dragging out that living death on some lonely island in the Red Sea?

Or is the whole thing just a cruel hoax?
I'll never know, thank God.