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# When the Sea Gives up its Dead. by Robert PEERY



"Die! Ah, die, grave-wreckers! Destroyers of the peace of souls!"

DOAK

**W**ITH slow strokes I pushed my tiny craft among the dead brown grasses of the creek that wound its way over the flatlands of southern Carolina toward the distant sea. About me, as far as my eye could see, there stretched a level waste of melancholy sands topped with sparse dead grasses. Now and then a low-flying beach bird trailed its legs in dejection and uttered its long wailing cry, wending a dispirited way toward the quagmires of the swamp lands in search of food. In the east, black clouds were banking toward the zenith; jagged lightning darted eerily, blue and white and yellow, before the ominous ascension of the cloud masses. The wind was rising; the grasses bowed down to the water, as if accom-

plishing some ritual to a gray, forbidding god. And now and then, breaking the depressing silence, the slow mutter of a thousand drums in the distance—the guttural complaint of the god of thunder—rolled up to me like waves of the sea, and receded again into a fearful silence.

Loneliness! It is more than a word to one in a small boat upon the meandering stream that will carry one to the beaches of Carolina. Melancholy! The word, upon that depressing shoreland, drips with the ooze of despair, when one's lips roundly utter its syllables.

For many days I had found myself becoming more and more depressed at being away from my family. Perhaps this depression, this saddened condi-

tion of my spirits, accounted for my being on that creek in my boat that late afternoon in September. I had not returned to the government camp with my fellow workers, but had turned my boat seaward and had by the time the storm broke gone miles farther than any of us had been before. It was not a pleasant work in which we were engaged—this discouraging search for the breeding-place of an insect that was destroying millions of dollars' worth of crops annually—but someone had to do it, and the bureau had selected me to head the investigation.

My first intimation of the nearness of the storm came with a crash of thunder that followed hard upon the most tremendous lightning stroke I ever saw. The very heavens seemed to split asunder and the echo of the thunder rolled almost endlessly against the gray, forbidding horizon. Then came the rain, a typical South Carolina coast rain—the beating sheets of gray water of those dreary savannahs.

I turned my boat about and began poling furiously upstream. Somewhere, I remembered, along the creek was a shack that had been pointed out to me as the habitation of an old beachcomber and odd-job man of the neighboring town. I searched the landscape as I moved sluggishly up the stream. It was difficult to see any great distance through the gray avalanche of rain. But at last I espied the shack set back about fifty yards from the marshy bank of the creek. I shunted the boat into the bank, tied it to a clump of small willows, and raced up the path toward the shelter of the shack.

When I entered—the door was not locked, and I pushed it open without ceremony—the old man was kneeling before the open hearth lighting a fire of grasses and driftwood. He turned his face when I entered and said—with a note of petulance, I thought—“The hospitality of necessity.”

“I shall not trouble you long—only until the storm is over,” I told him. “It is not pleasant punting along in the pouring rain. And then, the lightning, you know.”

“Oh, you're welcome, as far as that goes,” he said, in that whining, creaking voice that is so often an affectation of the aged. “Nobody can ever say that Sailor Jack ever turned a needy man from his door.”

He motioned me to take one of the two chairs with which the room was furnished, but I stood for a moment or so in the doorway under a small sheltering awning of planks so that I might not wet the floor more than I could help.

“Don't mind the water,” he said. “Come on in and dry yourself by the fire.”

I complied, and when I was seated I looked about the room. I had heard many tales of Sailor Jack—tales the town folk didn't believe—old sailor myths he'd strewn through the district. People wondered how he managed to live on the little work he got to do.

In the room were two bunks, one above the other, sailor fashion, and in a corner an old chest of black, carved wood. In a room at the back I could see a skillet hanging from a nail and a small iron stove in which a fire was already lighted. A coffee-pot was bubbling and the faint aroma of good strong coffee came to my nostrils. A cup of coffee, I decided, would be just the thing to take the sudden chill from my body.

Evidently Sailor Jack thought so, too, because I saw him go into the kitchen and pour a cup from the pot. He was very old, was Sailor Jack. His face was wrinkled like old parchment, and his beard and hair were streaked with a yellowish tinge. The beard was splashed with brown stains from the lips to the tip of the white straggly growth. His eyes were “hollows of madness.” Upon his head was a curiously shaped blue cap, some-

thing similar to the cocky little hats that French sailors wear in port. He was terribly thin, and stooped, and old.

He returned with a cup of coffee, which I drank without sugar or cream. It warmed me deliciously, and I forgot the raging wind and the rain for a moment or so. Sailor Jack seated himself in the other chair and lighted his knotty black pipe.

"Bloody night," he said between puffs. English, was Sailor Jack.

"Bad storm," I said.

"They don't last, though," he said, staring into the fire. "Be all over betimes the dance goes on."

I stared at him rigidly. "The dance?" I queried.

There was within the cabin only the puffy sound of his thin old lips over the stem of the black pipe and the licking whirl of the flames on the logs of the hearth. Sailor Jack gazed abstractedly into the brightness of the fire and spoke as if he were not talking to me but only reiterating some thought that haunted him and must have utterance. It had grown quite dark outside; the lightning threw the windows into shimmering, dazzling flame at each forked bolt.

"The dance," said Sailor Jack. "The dance of the dead of the bark *Greta*. You must be a stranger to Pineville, else you would have heard ere now about how the men who perished when the *Greta* foundered offshore near here more than fifty years ago come back each dark of the moon to dance and drink above the grave. Always at the hour of 9 at night they come whimpering out of their sea graves to dance upon the grave of Naika. Always at 9 because that was the hour at which we buried her; 9 o' the night when the moon was dark."

A heavy blast of the wind tore the door from its fastenings and the rain swept into the room. Sailor Jack got to his unsteady feet and together we

shut the door and tied the leather thong more securely.

"Tonight is the night for them. Be a wild night, but what do the dead care? Aye, what do they care? It is the living who suffer."

"Is there a story?" I asked.

"Aye, lad, well you ask if there is a story! A story of goblins and the sea-dead. A body never rests beneath the waves. All will tell you that. The earth is a man's proper burial ground, and the poor spirits of the dead doomed to a watery grave are never at rest. I hear 'em coming up across the savannahs, to dance their monthly rituals. Always at Naika's grave, too. I know where she was buried; I helped cover her wasted body."

"When — where ——" I began, drawing my chair closer to the fire.

"Of course," he said. "You're wantin' to hear, an' it's me as would be tellin' yo' about the night we buried the poor brown body of the dead Naika. She's never at rest, and the ship's crew, it never rests.

"THIS all happened, lad, more than fifty years ago when I was a strapping lad myself, and mate o' the bark *Greta*, keeled at Bedford by Derwood who was one o' the best o' the builders in those old days. A sweet ship, she was, as easy to handle with dry sticks up above as when she was all plain sail with heavy jib and spanker. Sweet to the helm as a brood mare. A bird of a ship, lad. She'd never ha' foundered off the savannahs if three-fourths o' the crew had not been down with the fever—the tropic fever as Naika give 'em.

"But you don't know about Naika, do ye? Naika was mine in the beginning. I found her at the wharf at Pameti an' she begged me to bring her home with me. I did, or I started with her. I smuggled her aboard at night and she kept herself stowed away for three days after we pulled anchor from the harbor. She was a beauty, lad—brown, seductive, limbs

and a face as any man might ha' fancied. The cap'n—Beideman, his name was—the dirty lying dog—he took her away from me an' we fought for her, an' he won! I was near wild, I tells ye, lad. For I loved her, an' he—he only wanted her for his evil purposes!

"Well, we was coming home under a good wind with all sail aloft, whipping it in easy after touching Montevideo on the coast of South America. Bedford was our next point of call. An' at Bedford—I had figgered it out—was where I'd leave the ship. With Naika, yo' understand. But I reckoned without consulting that fate that follows the sailor. Naika took down with a fever. She died, an' never once did that beast of a Beideman let me see her. We anchored off shore here."

Sailor Jack pointed to the east and resumed his tale.

"The cap'n detailed the five o' us to bury Naika on the beach. She'd made him promise her he'd give her a decent burial on land an' he meant to keep the promise. She knew the dead at sea never rested. For Naika was wise with the wisdom of women. They shrouded her body in a sheet and lowered it away into the bum-boat and we pulled to shore. It was at 9 o'clock that we digged the grave. Before we buried her I swept back her shroud to see her face for the last time. I touched her eyelids and said a little prayer for the peace of her soul. I touched her little brown hands. I saw the ring on her finger. I drew back in surprize! The last link of her spirit with me, who really loved her, was gone! The ring I had given her was gone and in its stead was a ruby set about with green stones, the whole set in a gold band. I knew it was Beideman's ring. I wanted to snatch that ring from the finger but something held me back. The men of the crew, who watched me at my prayer, warned me of the dreadful penalty that follows the robbing of the dead. So it was that we buried Naika, the beautiful, the be-

loved, on the sands of the beach behind a rotting hull of a ship's boat."

The storm was decreasing now. I had leaned forward under the strange spell of the old man's words. His eyes were beginning to fill with tears. His breath became more labored.

"But she was never allowed a moment's rest from that night to this. Her soul, that she wanted buried in decent Christian ground, is desecrated by the terrible carousals of the crew of the brig *Greta*. For the *Greta* foundered that night, trying to draw off the shore. The crew was short on account of the fever Naika had spread among them and she went down before a single boat could be lowered. I was strong and I swam ashore, and was saved."

He grew silent then, and I feared to question him. It was so evident that his mind was filled with the memory of the burial of his beloved Naika. It was an almost unbelievable tale; I cast about in my own mind for reasons to doubt his story, but the crowding memories were so plain in his dim old eyes that I could do naught but believe.

"They will not let her spirit rest," cried Sailor Jack. He sprang to his feet and cast his arms upward and raised his head to stare at the ceiling. "They dance their fiendish dances over her grave at every dark of the moon. They drink their rum and sing their braggart songs above her grave and her spirit is never still! Beideman leads their drunken revels!"

I stepped to his side and helped him back to his chair.

"Forgive me," he said softly, his head bowed into his hands. "I forget myself when I think of Naika's soul that never rests."

I looked at my watch. It was after 8 o'clock.

"I think I'll try it back," I said to him. "The rain has stopped."

He rose and confronted me. "No," he answered, "you must go with me tonight to watch the dance of the

dead at Naika's grave. It is not too far across the marsh. Come and I will show you that I am telling the truth. Come and you will hear the creaking of the sails of the *Greta*; you will hear the lowering boats, and the landing; you will hear all I have said you would hear, but you will see nothing! No man is privileged to see save me! I alone must bear the horror of the sight."

I made feeble protest but he only stared into my eyes and placed his hands on my shoulders in entreaty.

"I will go," I said at last.

He went then into the kitchen and prepared a supper of bacon and milk with a hard bread he had made of cornmeal. We washed this coarse fare down with great cups of hot coffee. When we had finished he went into a cupboard and fetched an old ship's lantern, lighted it and set it down near the door. He delved into the trunk, or chest of black wood, and brought forth a silk scarf of blue and an old curved simitar.

"We will go now," he said.

He led the way along a path that curved around the house toward the sea. For an hour I walked behind him. We passed no word between us. The lightning had passed around us, and now made futile yellow glares in the southwest. The wind still swept in gusts over the wet brown grass of the savannah. I began to suspect something of the foolishness of the night's affair. Why should I be here with this crazed old man? What would my friends at the camp four miles up the stream think of my absence? They perhaps might set out to search for me. I was just on the point of stopping the old sailor when he turned off the path and sat down in the sand behind a clump of willows. I could hear the rushing of the waves along the beach that could not be very far away. His hand touched my shoulder. He extinguished the lantern.

W. T.—3

"There is the place. You can see the ribs of the old boat half-buried in the sand of the beach. It is beneath the bow of that rotting old boat that Naika is buried. The stream enters the bay just there—the stream you came down this afternoon. Our way was shorter, that is all."

I settled myself into the sand beside him and waited.

"What is the time?" he asked.

"Almost 9 o'clock," I replied.

"I will know when 9 comes," he said. "I will hear the flapping of the sails of the *Greta* as they pull her inshore."

I WILL make no effort here to say what I heard that night; I can only say what I, under the recurring monotone of his voice, thought he made me hear. The space before us was possibly fifty yards wide, running to the right into a dark clump of willows and large grasses; to our left the same. Between were the lapping wavelets of the sea and the sand of the beach, in the center of which I could just distinguish the black ribs of a ship's boat buried quite more than half its depth in the sand. The willows nodded and shifted in the wind. Complete silence pervaded this deserted strip of beach, except for the heavy wheezy breathing of Sailor Jack; that was the only sound.

I did not hear the first sound, but I knew that Sailor Jack did. His skinny, clawlike hand almost cut into my flesh with the tenacity and the fear with which he gripped my arm. He sat half erect.

"The sails! The *Greta* is pulling inshore!"

I listened intently. The sound was of bellying sails, booming low, but quite audible, down the wind. There was then a clanking, a creaking, a sound so tiny that I feared for an instant that I was only imagining I heard. Sailor Jack had not released his grip upon my arm.

"The boat is going over. There will be two of them lowered. You will hear; I have heard every month for fifty years. They are coming to dance their terrible rituals of sacrilege over the grave of Naika so that her soul can have no rest!"

The flesh of my body tightened perceptibly. The sounds were real! I could no longer doubt their reality, try as hard as I might! I heard the splash of lifted oars, the scraping of a boat upon the sand! And nowhere the sight of any moving thing or human figure. Had I seen any tangible substance, a wraith, a moving ghostly figure, it would not have been so terrifying to my spirits, my nerves. But there was nothing except the rattle of phantom chains and the splash of shadowy oars in the surf. It seemed to me that the waves grew larger at the point where I had heard the scraping of a boat's keel along the sand.

"They will roll their casks of rum along the sand," said Sailor Jack.

His voice startled me. I looked at his face. Every muscle was drawn in horror.

"They will stamp their feet upon Naika's grave in a ghost dance. They hate Naika! Naika, whom I loved with all my soul and my heart! Naika comes to my cabin at night and lays her woes at my feet. Her lips touch mine in a kiss that is of her hungry, searching soul!"

His voice grew louder in his wild, demoniacal denunciation of the despoilers of his sweetheart's grave. My mind grew weary with the dreadful thoughts that thronged its avenues. The dance began—smothered voices, the clinking of mugs, the low, shrill laughter of drunken men! Sounds without bodies capable of producing them! It is indescribable!

"Come," said Sailor Jack. "It is time to avenge her desecration! I shall slay the spirit of Beideman, who leads these ghastly revels!"

He sprang with a loud cry from his

hiding-place behind the willows and ran, crouching, toward the hull of the boat. The sounds died away! There was none except the soft murmur of the wind in the willows. I sprang behind him, quite confident now that he had gone mad. He was brandishing the simitar at an unseen adversary close to the rotting hull of the boat.

"Die! Ah, die, grave-wreckers! Destroyers of the peace of souls!"

Suddenly he stumbled back into my arms. It was almost as if some tremendous blow had been delivered upon his head. His simitar—rusted, useless thing that it was—fell from his grasp. Sailor Jack was dead.

I bent over him, not daring to move, cold with a sudden fear! The sounds had begun again. I dared not look. The rattling of boat-hooks, the creaking of windlasses, the bellying and the popping of sails—I heard them all and I dared not raise my head. I knelt there in the sand above the grave of Naika and held the poor old body of Sailor Jack in my arms.

I tried later to bring him back to his cabin, but the burden was too great. I set off alone in the darkness then, found my boat, and went to the camp for help. We brought Sailor Jack to Pineville and left his body with the local undertaker. I told no one of the night's affair, except that I was on the beach with the old man when he died. The local doctor pronounced it heart-failure.

The next afternoon I went alone to the beach where the rotting hull still stood half buried in the sand. I found Sailor Jack's simitar and the blue silk sash. I had brought a spade along with me and I began excavating the sand upon the spot where the old man had engaged his ghostly enemy in combat.

I had not to dig long. I came at length upon a sort of white earth, the crumbled remains of human bones, and a little to one side I found a ring—a ruby set about with green stones in a gold band.