

Stirring Stories of the Sea



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From the Darkness and the Depths

A Sea Tale Worthy of Edgar Allan Poe

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I HAD known him for a painter of renown—a master of his art, whose pictures, which sold for high prices, adorned museums, the parlors of the rich, and when on exhibition were hung low and conspicuous. Also, I knew him for an expert photographer—an "art photographer," as they say, one who dealt with this branch of industry as a fact, an amusement, and who produced pictures that in composition, lights and shades rivaled his productions with the brush.

Yet it never occurred to me that the wonderful and technically correct marines hanging on his walls were due to anything but the artist's conscientious study of his subject and only his casual mispronunciation of the word "leeward," which landsmen pronounce as spelled, but which rolls off the tongue of a sailor as "looward," and his giving the long sounds to the vowels of the words "patent" and "taofole" induced me to ask if he had ever been to sea.

"Why, yes," he answered. "Until I was thirty I had no higher ambition than to become a skipper, but I never achieved it. The best I ever did was to sail first mate for one voyage. It was on that voyage that I learned something of the mysterious properties of light, and it made me a photographer, then an artist. You are wrong when you say that a searchlight cannot penetrate fog."

"But it has been tried."

"With ordinary light. Yes, of course, subject to refraction, reflection and absorption, by the millions of minute globules of water it encounters."

"But what other kind of light can be used?" I asked.

"Invisible light," he answered. "I do not mean the Röntgen ray nor the emanation from radium, both of which are invisible, but neither of which is light, in that neither can be reflected nor refracted. Both will penetrate many different kinds of matter, but it needs reflection or refraction to make visible an object on which it impinges. Understand?"

"Understand?" I answered dubiously.

"What kind of visible light is there if not radium or the Röntgen ray? You see a photograph with either, can't you?"

"Yes, but to see what you have photographed you must develop the film. And there is no time for that aboard a fast steamer, like the ill-fated Titanic, rushing through the ice and the fog. No, it is mere theory, but I have an idea that the ultra violet light—the actinic rays beyond the violet end of the spectrum, you know—will penetrate fog to a great distance, and in spite of its higher refractive power, which would distort and magnify an object, it is better than nothing."

"But what makes you think that it will penetrate fog?" I queried. "And if it is invisible itself how will it illuminate an object?"

"As to your first question," he answered, with a smile, "it is well known that ultra violet light will penetrate the human body to the depth of an inch, while the visible rays are reflected at the surface. And it has been known to photographers for fifty years that this light will act on a sensitized plate in an utterly dark room."

"Yes, but how can you see by this light?"

"Here you have me," he answered. "It will need a quicker development than any now known to photography—a sensitizing film, for instance, that will show the picture of an iceberg or a ship before it is too late to avoid it—a sensitizing film sensitized by a quicker acting chemical than any now used."

"Why not puzzle it out?" I asked.

"I am too old," he answered dreamily. "My life work is about done. But other and younger men will take it up. We have made great strides in optics. We shall ultimately use this light to see through opaque objects. We shall see colors never imagined by the human mind. We may possibly see creatures in the air above never seen before."

"We shall certainly see creatures from the depths of the sea, where visible light cannot reach—creatures whose substance is of such a nature that it will not respond to the light it has never been exposed to—a substance which is absolutely transparent because it will not absorb and appear

black; will not reflect and show a color of some kind and will not refract and distort objects seen through it."

"What?" I exclaimed. "Do you think there are invisible creatures?"

"He looked gravely at me, then said: 'I know'—he spoke with vehemence—that there are creatures in the deep sea of color invisible to the human eye, for I have not only felt such a creature, but seen its photograph taken by the ultraviolet light."

"Tell me," I asked breathlessly. "Creatures solid, but invisible?"

"Creatures solid and invisible because absolutely transparent. It is long since I have told the yarn. It was so horrible an experience that I have tried to forget it. However, if you care for it and are willing to lose your sleep tonight I'll give it to you."

He began to smoke, and some of the polish of the artist and clubman left him. He was an old sailor spinning a yarn.

"It was," he began. "Twenty-nine years this coming August, at the time of the great Java earthquake. You've heard how it killed 70,000 people, 30,000 of whom were drowned by the tidal wave."

"It was a curious phenomenon. Krakatoa island, a huge conical mountain rising from the bottom of Sunda strait, went out of existence, while in Java a whole mountain chain was leveled. I was 200 miles to the southwest, first mate of one of those old-fashioned, soft pine, centerboard barkentines, with the mainmast stepped on the port side of the keel to make room for the centerboard, a craft that would neither scud nor heave to, like a decent ship."

"But she had several advantages—she was new and well painted; hence she was not water soaked. She was fastened with 'trunnels,' not spikes and bolts, and hemp rigged."

"Perhaps there was not a hundred weight of iron aboard of her, while her hemp rigging, though heavier than water, was lighter than wire rope, and so when we were hit by the back wash of that tidal wave we did not sink."

"Submarine earthquakes sent fountains of water and mud from sea bottom into the air. The air was hot, sultry and stifling, and I had difficulty in keeping the men at work. The conditions would try anybody's temper, and I had my own troubles. There was a passenger on board, a big, fat, highly educated German—a scientist and explorer—whom we had taken aboard at some little town on the Western Australian coast and who was to leave us at Batavia."

"He had a whole laboratory with him, with scientific instruments, maps he had made, stuffed beasts and birds he had killed and a few live ones, which he kept in cages and attended to himself in the empty hold, for we were flying light, bound to Batavia for a cargo."

"It was after a few eruptions from the bottom of the sea that he got to be a nuisance. He was keenly interested in the strange dead fish and nondescript creatures that had been thrown up. He declared them new, unknown to science, and wore out my patience with entreaties to haul them aboard for examination and classification."

"Tidal wave, you know, is a name we give to any big wave, and it has no necessary connection with the tides. We got it just after a tremendous spouting of water and mud and a thick cloud of steam on the northern horizon."

"We were terrified by the combers on its edge and the terrific speed of its approach. There was no wind, and we headed about west, showing our broadside. Yet I got the men at the downhauls, clewlines and stripping lines of the lighter kites. Then the moving mountain hit us and buried us on our beam ends as I sang out, 'Lash yourselves, every man!'"

"I passed a turn of the mizzen gaff topsail downhaul about me, belaying to a pin as the cataclysm hit us. I did not speak nor breathe nor think, unless my instinctive grip on the turns of the downhaul on the pin may have been an index of thought. I was under water."

"Then there came a lessening of the turmoil, and I roused up to find the

craft floating on her side, but apt to turn bottom up at any moment from the weight of the water soaked gear and canvas.

"I was hanging in my tight rope from a belaying pin, my feet clear of the perpendicular deck and my ears tortured by the sound of men overhead crying for help—men who had not lashed themselves."

"Nothing could be done for them. They were adrift on the back wall of a moving mountain that towered thirty degrees above the horizon to port. And another moving mountain, as big as the first, was coming on from starboard, caused by the tumble into the sea of the uplifted water. I finally got a grip on the belaying pin and rested. Then with an effort I got my right foot up to the pin rail and rested again. Then, perhaps more by mental strength than physical, for I loved life, I hooked my right foot over the rail, reached higher on the rope and finally hove myself up to the mizzen rigging."

"Forward I saw men who had lashed themselves to the starboard rail, and they were struggling, as I had struggled, to get up to the horizontal side of the vessel. They succeeded."

"The soaked hemp rigging and canvas might be enough to drag the craft down, and with this fear in my mind I acted quickly. Singing out to the men to hang on, I made my way aft to where we had an ax. With this I attacked the mizzen lanyards, cutting everything clear, then climbed forward to the main."

"Hard as I worked I had barely cut the last lanyard when a second wave crashed down on us. I just had time to slip into the bight of a rope and save myself. But I had to give up the ax, and it slid down to the port scuppers."

"That second wave righted the craft. We were buried, choked and half drowned. But when the wave had passed on the main and mizzen masts, unsupported by the rigging that I had cut away, snapped cleanly about three feet above the deck, and the broad, flat bottomed craft straightened up and lay on an even keel, with foresail, staysail and jib set, the fore gaff topsail, flying jib and jib topsail clewed down and the wreck of the masts bumping against the port side."

"Six men were clearing themselves from their lashings at the fore rigging, and three more, who had gone

from his neck, was gathered into a milkshapen mass about two feet from his neck.

"Nonsense!" he answered. "Something alive which we cannot see is contrary to all laws of physics. Mine you! What is it?"

"He suddenly went under water himself, and dropping the pike pole, I grabbed him by the collar. Something was pulling him away."

"Help! Something has my right foot!"

"Lend a hand here!" I yelled to the men, and a few joined me, grabbing him by his clothing. We wrested him free. Then I distinctly saw the mass of red mud slowly forward and disappear under the forecastle deck."

"You were right!" cried the professor. "There is something invisible in der water—something dangerous, something which violates all laws of physics and optics: Oh, mine foot! How it hurts!"

"I grabbed the pike pole again, cautiously hooked the barb into the dead man's clothing and, assisted by the men, pulled him aft to the poop, where the professor had preceded and was examining him."

"Frank, the dead man, had been strong, robust and full bodied. But he bore no resemblance to his living self. He lay there, shrunken, shortened and changed, a look of agony on his emaciated face."

"He was sucked dry, like a lemon," said Herr Smidt. "Perhaps in his whole body there is not an ounce of blood nor fluid of any kind."

"I secured an iron belaying pin, tucked it inside his shirt, and we hove him overboard at once, for, in the presence of this horror, we were not in the mood for a burial service. There were, eleven men on a waterlogged hulk, adrift on a heaving, greasy sea, and an invisible thing forward that might seize any of us at any moment it chose, in the water or out, for Frank had been caught and dragged down."

"Still, I ordered the men to remain on the poop and to expect no hot meals, as we could subsist for a time on the canned food in the storeroom and lazaret. While the professor went down into his flooded room to doctor his ankle, I armed every man of us with a sheath knife and belt, while the sky grew muddier and the sun darker. It was the Java earthquake, but we did not know it for a long time."

"Soon the professor appeared and announced that his instruments were in good condition."

"I must resensitize my plates, however," he said. "Der salt water has spoiled them, but the rest of my things are dry."

"Well," I answered, "that's all right. But what are they in the face of this emergency? Are you thinking of photographing anything now?"

"Perhaps, I had been thinking."

"Have you thought out what that creature is forward, there?"

"Partly. It is some creature thrown up from der bottom of der sea and washed on board by der wave. Light, like wave motion, ends at a certain depth, and we have over 12,000 feet beneath us. At that depth there is absolute darkness, but we know that creatures live dere."

"But why can't we see that thing?"

"Because it has never been exposed to light. I mean visible light, der light that contains der seven colors of der spectrum; hence it may not respond to der three properties of visible light—reflection, which would give it a color of some kind; absorption, which would make it appear black, or refraction, which, in der absence of der other two, would distort things seen through it, for it would be transparent, you know."

"But what can be done?"

"Nothing, except that der next man attacked must use his knife. If he cannot see der creature he can feel it. Und perhaps we may see it—its photograph. You know," he said, "that objects too small to be seen by the microscope, because smaller than der amplitude of der shortest wave of visible light, can be seen when exposed to der ultraviolet light—der dark light beyond der spectrum. Und you know that this light is what acts der most in photography, that it exposes on a sensitized plate new stars in der heavens invisible to der eye through the strongest telescope."

"Don't know anything about it," I answered.

"I must think," he said dreamily. "I haf a rock crystal lens which is permeable to this light and which I can place in mine camera. I must have a concave mirror, not of glass, which is opaque to this light, but of metal, thus to throw der ultraviolet light on der beast. I can generate it with mine static machine."

"How will one of our lantern reflectors do? They are of polished tin, I think."

"Good! I can repolish one."

"This I procured from the lazaret, and he pronounced it available. Night came down, and safely I lighted three masthead lights to inform any passing craft that we were not under command."

"The steward brought up all the blankets there were in the cabin, but there were not enough to go around, and one man volunteered, against my advice, to go forward and bring aft bedding from the forecastle. He did not come back. We heard his yell, that finished with a gurgle, but in that darkness not one of us dared to venture to his rescue."

"We did not find the dead man when the faint daylight came. His body must have washed over the rail with a sea, and we hoped the invisible killer had gone too. With courage born of this hope a man went forward to lower the masthead lights."

"He peered closely at the dead man, who looked curiously shrunken. The blood, no longer a thin stream issuing

from his neck, was gathered into a milkshapen mass about two feet from his neck.

"Nonsense!" he answered. "Something alive which we cannot see is contrary to all laws of physics. Mine you! What is it?"

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"We watched him closely, pike pole in one hand, his knife in the other. But he went under at the fore rigging without even a yell, and the pole went with him, while we could see that his arms were close to his sides. After a few moments, however, the pike pole floated to the surface, but the man's body, drained no doubt of its buoyant fluids, remained on the deck. It was an hour later, with the pike pole for a feeler, before we dared approach the body and tow it aft. It resembled that of the first victim, a skeleton clothed with skin, with the same look of horror on the face. We buried it like the other and held to the poop, choked by ashes from the sky."

"Before the afternoon was half gone it was as dark as night, and down below, up to his waist in water, the Ger-

"Yes," I answered.

"A cat's eyes are searchlights, but they send forth a visible light, such as is generated by freeds and some fish. Und dere are fish in der upper strata of der Amazon which haf few eyes, der two upper of which are searchlights, der two lower of which are organs of perception, or vision. But visible light is not der only light. It is possible that der creature out on der deck generates der invisible light and can see by it. Der creature may live in an atmosphere of ultraviolet light, which I can generate myself. When mine plates dry I may get a picture of it. Then we may find means of killing it."

"God grant that you succeed."

"But, as I said, the thing killed all but the professor and myself. If there is anything an oriental loves above his ancestors it is his stomach, and the cold, canned food was falling upon us all. We had the turpentine torch for heating water and some dry coffee in the steward's storeroom, but not a utensil of any kind. So these two poor heathen, against my protest, went out on the deck and waded forward, waist deep in the water."

"I could see them as they entered the galley to get the coffeepot. I did not see them come out nor did I hear even a squeal. The thing must have been in the galley. Night came on, and we slept as best we could."

"I roused the professor when I saw the masthead and two side lights of a steamer approaching from the starboard, still about a mile away. I had not dared to go up to the rig that lantern at the mizzen stump, but now I nerved myself to go up with a torch, the professor following with his instruments. He had a Winsburst machine—to generate a blue spark, you know—and this he had attached to the big deck light, from which he had removed the opaque glass. Then he had his camera, with its rock crystal lens."

"He trained both forward from the cabin top and waited, while I waved the torch, standing near the stump with a turn of rope around me for safety's sake in case the thing seized me. No sooner was there an answering blast of a steam whistle, indicating that the steamer had seen the torch, than something cold, wet, leathery and slimy slipped around my neck. I dropped the torch and drew my knife, while I heard the whir of the static machine as the professor turned it."

"Use your knife," he called, "and reach for any blood you see!"

"I struck as I could, but could make no impression and soon felt another stricture around my legs."

"Still another belt encircled me, and, though I was clad in woolen shirts and monkey jacket, I felt these garments being torn from me. Now I was nearly bent double."

"And all the time that German was striking my machine and shouting to strike for any blood I saw. But I saw

man professor was working away. He came up at supper time, humming cheerfully, and announced that he had replaced his camera lens with the rock crystal, that the lantern, with its reflector and a blue spark in the focus, made an admirable instrument for throwing the invisible rays on the beast and that he was all ready, except that his plates, which he had resensitized, must have time to dry. And then he needed some light to work by when the time came, he explained."

"Also another victim," I suggested bitterly, for he had not been on deck when the last two men had died.

"Better devise some means of killing him," I answered.

"Der only way I can think of," he responded, "is for der next man—you hear me all, you men—to stick your knife at the end of the blood, where it collects in a lump. Dere is der creature's stomach, and a vital spot."

"A shriek suddenly sounded. A man lashed with a turn of rope around his waist to the stump of the mizzenmast was writhing and heaving on his back, while he struck madly with his knife. With my own knife in my hand, I sprang toward him and felt for what had seized him. It was something cold and hard and leathery, close to his waist. I lunged with the knife. The next moment I received a blow in the face that sent me aft six feet."

"When I recovered my senses the remnant of the crew were around me, but the man was gone—dragged out of the bight of the rope that had held him against the force of breaking seas and down to the flooded main deck, to die like the others."

"I went on deck at 6 in the morning. The lantern still burned at the stump of the mizzenmast, but the lookout was gone. He had not lived long enough to be relieved. We were but six now."

"Did this thing kill any more men?" I asked.

"All but the professor and myself, and it almost killed me. Look here."

He removed his cravat and collar, pulled down his shirt and exposed two livid scars about an inch in diameter and two apart.

"I lost all the blood I could spare through those two holes, but saved enough to keep alive."

"Go on with the yarn," I asked.

"Some things should be forgotten," he added, "but as I have told you this much I may as well finish and be done with it."

"It was partly due to a sailor's love for tobacco, partly to our cold, deratched condition. A sailor will stretch quickly, but go crazy if deprived of his smoke."

"Our slop chest was under water and the tobacco utterly useless, but the bos'n had an upper bunk in the forward house, in which was a couple of pounds of navy plug, and he and the sailor talked this over until their craving for a smoke overcame their fear of death."

"By this time all discipline was ended, and all my commands went for nothing. They sharpened their knives, and, agreeing to go forward, one on the starboard rail, the other on the port, and each to come to the other's aid if called, they went up into the darkness. I opened my room window, which overlooked the main deck, but could see nothing."

"Yet I could hear. I heard two screams for help, one from the starboard side, the other from the port, and knew that they were caught. What manner of thing it was that could grab two men so far apart nearly at the same time was beyond all imagining."

"This thing," I said to the professor, "must be able to see in the dark."

"Why not?" he answered as he puttered with his wires. "Cats and owls can see in the dark, and the accepted explanation is that by their power of enlarging der pupils they admit more light to the retina. But that explanation never satisfied me. You haf noticed, haf you not, that a cat's eyes shine in der dark, but only when der cat is looking at you—that is, when it looks elsewhere you do not see der shiny eyes."

"Nothing but a giant squid, or octopus. Did you ever read Hugo's terrible story of Gilliat's fight with a squid?"

"I had and nodded."

"Hugo's imagination could not give him a creature, no matter how formidable, larger than one of four feet stretch. This one had three tentacles around me, two others gripped the port and starboard pinnacles, and three were gripping the stump of the mizzenmast. It had a reach of forty feet."

"But there was one part of each picture ill defined and missing. My knife and right hand were not shown. They were buried in a dark lump, which could be nothing but the blood from my veins. Unconscious, but still struggling, I had stuck into the soft body of the monster and struck true."

"Minard's Liniment Cures Burns, Etc."



The Moving Mountain Hit Us and Buried Us.



Something Was Pulling Him Away.



"Use your knife," he called, "and reach for blood!"