

THE LITTLE FINGER

OF THE GOD by Owen Oliver.

COLLECTORS of the antique and the curious know Mr. Levy and his queer little shop, in a queer little alley, that sailormen of all hues and tongues and carles and characters take as a short cut to and from the docks. All day and much of the night they pass in two thin lines, a straight line toward and a zigzag toward their ships. A good many look in to see Mr. Levy on their first journey ashore, for he comes before the public house or the opium den. A few look in to see him on their final journey aboard, for when he buys from them he tries to persuade them to take their payment then. He is partial to the sailormen and they are partial to him. I think he went to sea in his young days, for he is tattooed on the arm. It is not the best of places for selling his wares, Mr. Levy owns, but it's a rare good place for buying them.

"There's nobody picks up things like a sailor," he has often told me. "They've knocked about all over the world and know what's out of the common, and when they see a thing they fancy they generally manage to get it. But they don't carry it past the first shop where they're treated fair; and as for collectors, they'll come anywhere after you, once they find you've got good stuff and tell the truth about it."

I have dealt with Mr. Levy for several years, and I am bound to say that I consider him a truthful man, in spite of the following story. It came out when I was selling him the last boxful of things that my brother sent home from Burma, and this was the way of it:—

"Forty pounds for the lot," he pronounced, "and you can keep the joss." It was a queer little idol with two gilt heads. "I'd reckon on fifty," I said. He smiled. "Well, nearly. Make it forty guineas and take the joss as you call it." He tapped his teeth with his pencil.

"I'll make it forty guineas," he agreed, "but I won't have the joss. I never deal in them; and if I were you I'd advise your brother to leave them alone, the next time you write. Most of them aren't pukka josses, only shams; but you may happen to get landed with a real one."

"Come, come, Mr. Levy!" I protested. "You don't mean to tell me that you believe in them?"

He spread out his left hand and held it up to me. I saw that the little finger was missing.

"It's the little finger of a joss now," he stated grimly; "a god they call him."

"Well," I said, "I'll take forty guineas—and the story."

He considered thoughtfully.

"If don't suppose it matters now," he decided. "It was a good many years ago; but, if you tell any one, keep names out of it."

—And this is the story that Mr. Levy—as I have called him—told me in the dark little parlor behind his shop:—

An American sailor brought it here in a cab. It was life size, and so exact to life that, upon my word, I almost thought he was pulling a body out of the sack at first, and then I stood and stared at it and didn't say a word.

It was a man—leathery a god—carved out of a fleshy brown wood that panned for the natural color of the face and hands without touching up. The hair was real hair, black and long and harsh with age. The teeth were real teeth, too. I judged, though how they were put in the mouth, which was only slightly open, I could never make out. The head seemed to be cut out of a solid block, and I couldn't see any joints or feel them under the hair. The eyes were some kind of glass, and I couldn't see how they were put in, either; and another curious thing was that the clothing was made of a different kind of wood, and where it opened you could see the

flush brown body, but you couldn't find how it was got over of body or the body underneath it. The cloak was hard black wood carved with flowers—well, not exactly flowers, but figure shaped something like flowers, as you see in some wall papers. The hem of it was ornamented with metal beaten in to form a smaller flowery pattern. The sailor called it gold, but it wasn't. It was a composition of brass, but I've never seen the exact kind before or since. There were buckles of

gold on the sandals. The sandals were just an ordinary shape cut out of a yellowish wood, but the legs were covered with stockings, which is unusual—stockings carved out of ebony, and yet as thin as silk and looking like open lace, showing the brown legs through. The figure was squatting cross legged and it had a dagger in its right hand. The dagger was steel, very real steel, and as sharp as a razor and engraved with deep cut lines. All the engravings represented portions of the human body; hands and feet and ears and noses and fingers and toes and two heads—one on each side. The figure mayn't sound anything extraordinary from my account, but if you'd seen it! The workmanship was wonderful, wonderful!

"It's a beauty, isn't it?" the sailor said, when I had looked at it for a whole minute.

"Yes," I agreed. "It's good."

"What will you give for it?" he asked. "Umph!" I said. I was a little puzzled myself to know what it was worth. "How did you come by it?"

"That's my business," he answered. "But, I'll tell you this. The law can't touch me, or you—not over here."

I looked at the man—I'm a pretty fair judge of men—and I believed him. And besides, if it had been stolen in this country, I should have heard of it. He'd robbed some joss house over-sea, I made no doubt, and they'd never trouble me. "What part did he come from?" I inquired. "And who is he supposed to be?"

"You'll have to guess that too," he told me.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Then I'll have to guess what it's worth," I said, "and I'm not going to guess against myself. It may be worth a great deal—I'm frank with you—or it may not. I'm not going to give a fancy price on spec; but I'll sell it on commission if you like."

"Commission be hanged," he growled. "I want my money now, and when I say now I don't mean to-morrow, or this evening, do you understand?"

"Well," I said, "what do you want?"

He sat on the edge of the table—we were in this room, and he sat just there—and folded his arms.

"The thing's unique," he said—he meant unique—"and I've run a risk for it that I wouldn't run again for a fortune. I'll tell you my price, and give you five minutes to decide. It's take it or leave it, mind, and no haggling. Look at me!"

I looked at him and judged that he was a man who knew his own mind.

"Very well," I agreed. "How much?"

"Two hundred pounds," he said, and he laid his watch on the table, and I walked to the door over there and called into the shop.

"Isaac," I said, "come here for a minute."

I don't open my safe alone with a stranger of that kind. I called Isaac in and I got out the money and paid the American sailorman. Then I sent Isaac back to the shop.

"Now," I said, "I've bought it. Tell me what you can."

"If I wouldn't tell you when I was selling," he said, "it isn't likely I'll tell you when I've sold; but I warn you of one thing. You go for small profits and come after it—men with broad noses like that—be pointed to the joss—and no eyebrows like that hasn't, and a left little finger gone, like that has—if you have them come after it, you take whatever they'll give and close sharp. That's all. Good morning!" And he went.

"Ah!" I said to myself. "He'd steal it from a joss house. If they're following him by any chance—well, I'm not afraid of any dagoes, but I warn you of a fuss. I'll put it away for a month or so, till they give up looking round here."

So I stowed it in this big cupboard just behind me and didn't mention it to a soul for a fortnight and told Isaac to hold his tongue. He can do that, or he wouldn't be here. Then I had a call from a strange gentleman, a tall thin, very dark man of about forty-five, dressed all in black; the sort who's spent

his life among antiquities till he's grown to look a bit like them. Professor Settel, Lee, F. R. S., he called himself. He came in to inquire about some ancient Japanese bronzes that were made in England; at least that's what he made out he came in for. A lot of them beat about the bush first.

"Do you guarantee these?" he asked. "No," I said, "I don't." And he smiled. "Made by Hammerston's," he told me, "some time last year. They've improved the bronze since."

"That's it," I said, "and that's how they're priced, if you look."

"So I saw or I shouldn't have come in. I don't want faked stuff. Now these"—he took up some little figures, and examined them very carefully, using a microscope and tasting them with his tongue and holding them up to the light and then in the shade—"they are modern Japanese forgeries of earlier work," he pronounced; "but they've used genuine old metal melted down again. Clever, very clever! They'd take in many people who call themselves experts."

"Ah!" I said. "They aren't right, then? I wasn't sure. How did you tell?"

He explained it to me, and finding that he knew a lot about these things I thought I'd ask him about the joss. "I've got a figure in the back room," I said, "a sort of idol, that I can't place at all. I wish you'd have a look at it."

So he stepped in. Before I'd got the joss half way out of the cupboard—it was heavy and took a lot of moving—he'd pulled down the blinds of the window and door for fear any one should see, and lit the gas.

"Man alive!" he cried. "Man alive!" He stared at it, and his mouth seemed to water.

"Do you know what it is?" I asked. "Yes," he told me. "I know. It's a my friend, you'd better not know. A chance word let slip! No. You'd better know nothing about it. How did you come by it?"

I told him and he listened with his eyes on it, nodding continually.

"You were wise not to show it," he said. "And if you take my advice you'll dispose of it quickly for what you can get—from an amateur! He won't give you what it's worth because he won't know what it is. Those who do know won't buy it, unless—Is it whole? Quite whole?"

"There's a little finger gone," I admitted.

"Ah-h-h!" he said. "Ah-h-h! I might have known!" He looked at it and muttered to himself. "It looks like an accidental breakage," he said, "and if so it may have been lost. If I were sure of that!"

"What difference does it make?" I asked.

He sat down and looked at me.

"If they have the finger," he said, "it will bring them to it. You may smile, but—well, it makes this difference, anyhow. If I believed that the finger was lost, I'd buy the figure for a thousand pounds!"

"Seeing that you can't know," I said, "it's a cheap offer. Anyhow, if you'll tell me what it is I'll advertise it and take my risk."

He shook his head.

"You'd be a dead man in a week if you did that. That's what I couldn't tell you. The name they call it means—well, it means several things—The God Who Repays, The God Who Strikes! It does, or they do. It is hard to know how much is the priests' doing and how much the gods. Von Struymer holds that the priests are hypnotists and the god is only a man on an offer. If you'll put it in your shop window for a month and if you suppose some one thought that he would make him safe—your friend, the American sailor, perhaps. Well, put it in the window, and then give him to them; he would kill me, or they would, I was not sure which. Anyhow I took up a dog whip—Swede brought it from Iceland—and then they were going the professor came in. He caught hold of my arm and stopped me from running after them."

"It's no use," he decided, "you'll have to let it go."

"Not for all the woodlacked dagoes in the world," I said. "I'll advertise the thing with a sketch of it, and if you won't give me a thousand for it some one else will!"

"Very likely," he shrugged his shoulders—"if that's the price you put upon your life."

I turned a bit cold, for I knew that he understood a lot about those things.

"Look here," I offered, "seven hundred and fifty down and you can take it now."

"Not as a gift," he said, "unless—what did they say?"

"How do I know. It's all jabber, jabber, jabber, talk. Do you know it?"

"Then stop and talk to them if they come back."

"No," he refused. "I don't want them to connect me with it, but I'll stay in your room and listen to them if you like."

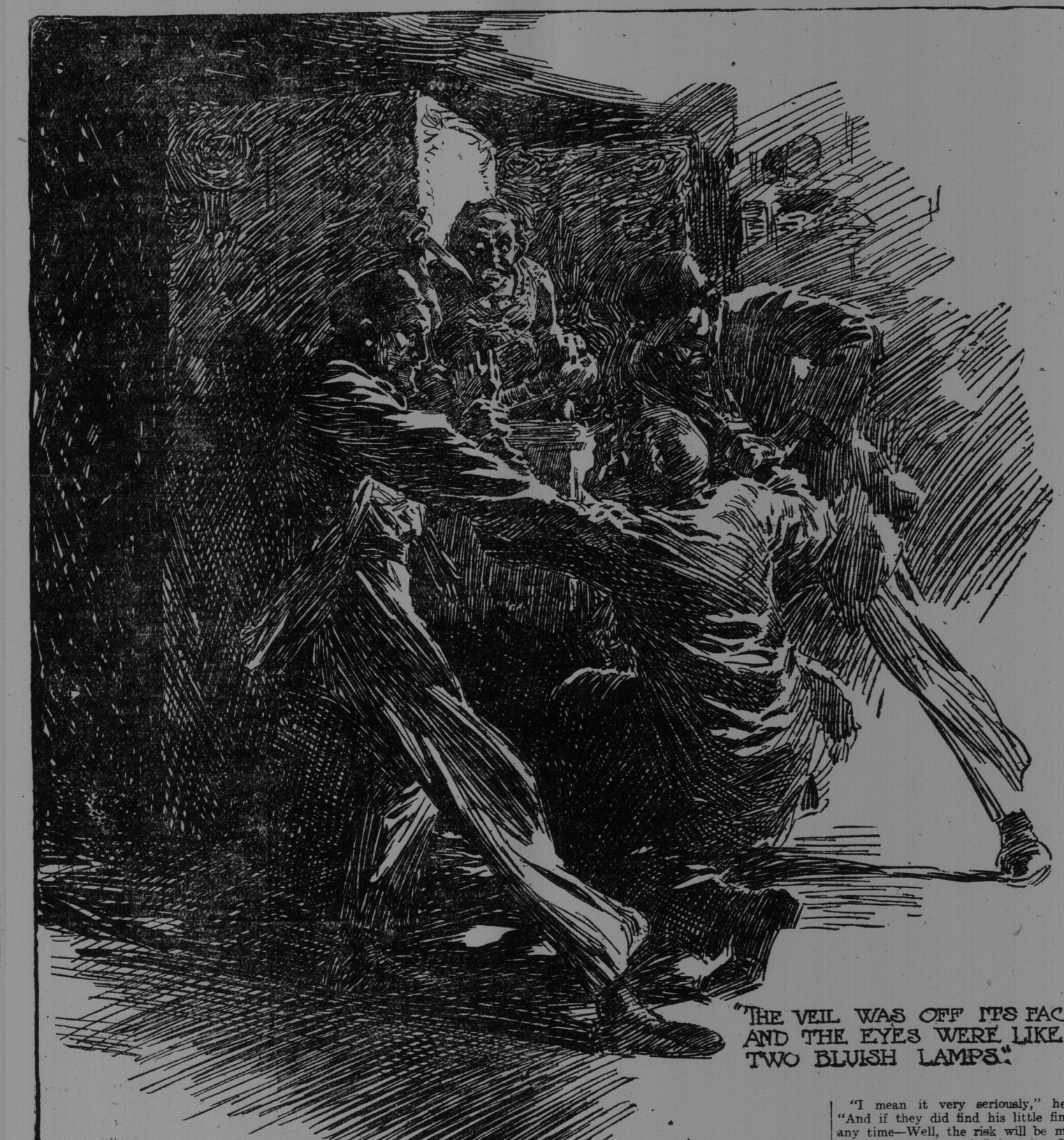
They came back just after tea and went through the same pantomime as before, and when they had gone I went in and asked him what they said.

"They diled to you to do obeisance to the god so that he could lift his little finger and go home, and when you did not do it they called you 'The Neck to the God Who Smiles.' You'd better give it up and let me make the best terms for you that I can."

"Terms be—!" I cried in a rage.

"Very well," he said, "I've warned you. Then he went."

I took the joss up to my room again at night. I didn't get to sleep at first, and presently I heard a noise below and opened my window. The wooden floor new were trying my lower windows. They ran away as fast as they could go, and I got back in bed and fell asleep. I had the same dream as before, only I



"THE VEIL WAS OFF ITS FACE AND THE EYES WERE LIKE TWO BLUISH LAMPS."

to mention it to any one until our business is settled."

"Very well," I promised.

I put it in the window the next morning. Acting on his advice, I covered the face with a thick veil. It was not supposed to be seen by vulgar eyes, he explained, and they would deal better with me if I had treated it with respect. It was a god that took sacrifices, he assured me, and he showed me that the right arm strike, he believed, but we could not find it. The dagger came down just in front of the crossed legs where a man's neck might be if he knelt at its feet.

"If he was favored by the priests," the professor explained, "he would be told to kneel a little to one side, or perhaps to cross his hands over his neck—so. Then the dagger would only take off an ear, or a finger. The god had to have blood; he was offended, and—but the less you know about it the better."

"It has lost a finger itself," I said, "is there any meaning in that?"

There was a proverb that 'A god has only to raise his little finger, and so, I suppose, some one thought that he would make him safe—your friend, the American sailor, perhaps. Well, put it in the window, and then give him to them; he would kill me, or they would, I was not sure which. Anyhow I took up a dog whip—Swede brought it from Iceland—and then they were going the professor came in. He caught hold of my arm and stopped me from running after them."

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didn't wake till I had fallen with my head on the knees of the joss, and felt a fearful blow on the back of my neck, and when I did wake, I found myself out of bed and kneeling in front of him. And I had been struck there, and nothing but the sacking had saved me. The knife had cut through several thicknesses of it. I found when I got a light. I didn't sleep any more that night.

I had a nap after Isaac came and we had carried the joss down stairs, and I had just finished a late breakfast, when the professor turned up. He had been worrying over the business, he said, and he had come to urge me to give it up.

"For nothing!" I cried. "Not I; but I'll take five hundred pounds, you can tell them."

"They will not pay," he said. "For one thing they would consider it an insult to the god to buy his freedom. It would be doubting his power to free himself. For another thing, they consider that you have to pay for the insult that you have done to him. But if you'll let it go I'll make the best terms that I can with them."

Just then the wooden faced man came in and I went out in a fury and took up a big knob ker; the man who sold it to me said it came from the Pretoria Kaffir police. But they did not run, only came to me to look at the joss. Then they pointed me out to him and chanted slowly. There was no one near it to touch a spring, but the arm with the dagger went slowly up and quickly down. The two men bowed to it with their palms together. Then they bowed to me with their palms apart, as if "You see!" was what they meant. Then they went.

"Isaac," I said, "I've had enough of this. Get out the axe and the coal hammer and we'll smash the thing up. But the professor came out from behind the curtained door.

"No, no!" he begged excitedly. "No, no! It would be a sin. Such wonderful work! Such wonderful work! You may have your thousand pounds yet. Come and listen to me."

We went into the shop parlor and sat down, and what he said was this:—"You haven't kept it while they're after it," he said, "and I don't take it, but suppose we can get them to give it up. What then?"

"It would murder one of us," I said. "No, no. When I had it I'd soon find the spring and make it safe. Anyhow I'll risk the idol if I can get free from its followers."

"You'll never persuade them to go," I declared.

"No," he said, "but—the god might!"

"The god?" I stared at him.

"They might mistake my voice for his—he laughed a dry laugh—if they broke in, as they thought of doing last night, in the dark."

"I see!" I cried. "I see!" I almost danced with delight; I was younger then and not so stout. "You'll talk to them in their lingo as if you were the joss and tell them to go off and never come back, eh?"

"I shall tell them that I (that is, the joss, as you call it) will not come to my finger. They must bring the finger to me. They haven't it, or they would have been here before you put him in the window."

"Do you seriously mean to say that a wooden finger would have brought them to it? Show them the way?"

"I mean it very seriously," he said. "And if they did find his little finger at any time—Well, the risk will be mine, if they go tonight, and I buy it. If they don't—"

"If they don't," I said, "so much the worse for them. I'm not afraid of a couple of wooden faced brown men."

We assumed that they would make an attempt for it that night. So we did not carry it upstairs, but set it in the middle of the shop on a low carved chair, behind with ivory, that looked like a throne—as I rather think it was; but the black who brought it didn't speak English well, and I could only make out that it was something to do with a "great juju," called Ko-ko. We put a screen behind it, and I could only make out that it was something behind an Indian cabinet that stood near the door from this room. It was dark except for a faint glimmer from the fanlight over the shop door. The shutters were up on the door and the window. The darkness got on my nerves, and whenever the professor stirred I jumped, thinking that it was the joss moving.

Twelve struck, one, two; then I heard a faint noise at the window of the shop parlor—the room we're in now. They were evidently trying to force the latch.

"They'll come close by me," I whispered. "Hain't I better more?"

"No, no!" he whispered back. "You might knock something over and they'd hear. They can't see you. They'll be between you and the light—what there is. Keep quiet."

I kept quiet, shivering with excitement; or if it was anything else it wasn't from fear of them. I'll own I didn't feel quite easy about the joss.

At last the fastening went back with a sharp "clack." Then the window was opened slowly. Then I heard them in the room; and then they crept into the shop and stood just inside it, close to my elbow. The glimmer from the fanlight showed them. They saluted to the figure and spoke in soft deprecating tones, and suddenly a voice came from it—well, I suppose it was the professor, but it sounded unearthly and angry. It seemed to be giving orders. When it stopped they turned half round, as if they were going, and suddenly the man next to me pounced upon me in the dark and almost threw me over his shoulder into the arms of his companion. Then both seized me from behind and pushed me toward the joss. The veil was off its face and the eyes were like two bluish lamps. One of the men put his leg in front of me and tripped me. I went down on my knees before the thing. I saw the dagger going up. My head was pressed upon his legs, and my left arm was seized by the wrist and forced forward. I felt a sharp pain in the hand, and then I think I fainted.

When I came to I was lying on the floor, bound and gagged. I could move a thumb and three fingers of the left hand. There was only a pain and a bandage in place of the little finger—so I judged by the feel. The professor and the two wooden faced dagoes were lifting the joss into a great basket with handles. They had lighted a lamp somewhere and it shone upon the figure as they lifted it. Its left side was toward me, and I happened to notice the left hand. The little finger was complete.

"Of course," Mr. Levy remarked when he had finished the story, "lots of the josses you come across aren't the real thing. They're just parlor ornaments, so to speak. But you can never tell, and no more josses for me."

"Did you ever hear any more of them?" I asked.

"No," he said, "and I hope I never shall; but there's some sort of a bet did; and that's the American sailor. Well, that's the story. Will you take the money in notes or gold?"



"ITS EYES WERE STARING AT ME."

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