



Author of "Hullabaloo," "The Brass Dolphin," etc.

THERE were seven of us aboard the schooner *Terrapin* when she sailed north from Maranhão. There were still seven of us the third day up, when we were becalmed somewhere out of sight of the Brazil coast. But during the next three nights, four men disappeared.

We were lying in the flat calm of the doldrums when it happened. A flat, glistening sea, like hot, blue steel; a blazing sky, so glaring that it threatens to put out your eyes; hot, heavy air, that presses against you and bears you down; motionless sails, an idly drifting ship, a steamy smell of tar—that is the doldrums by day. By night the biggest thing is the silence.

Somehow, the doldrums seem worse on a little ship; and the two-masted schooner *Terrapin*, beating up and down in the catch-as-catch-can cocoa-trade, was little, very little. Perhaps it is the sense of confinement on a little, becalmed ship that makes a man want to get off and walk; or perhaps it is the dullness of a small crew. Nothing happens to break the stifling monotony. Or, if things do happen, as they did on the *Terrapin*, they are such that you never want to see them happen again.

Of the seven of us Cap Dorkin was the hardest boiled. He was a short, square-built man of indeterminate age, with the fishy kind of eyes that show the whites below the irises. Three of his four-man crew were similar—of the surly type of seamen. Jimmy, the cook, was of the other type,

round-faced and merry. I was the fourth man of the crew, and was supposed to be mate, which meant that I slept in the cabin instead of the forecabin.

There was one other, a passenger named Harris; he was probably the only passenger the *Terrapin* ever had, a roughly dressed man with a fat, smooth face. And these were the seven of us that started the voyage from Maranhão to Santiago.

We were becalmed late in the afternoon of the third day up from Maranhão after two days of sluggish progress; sunset found us weltering under sails that caught not the slightest breath of air. The night was heavy and still, and not until morning did anyone suspect the thing that happened in the dark.

Dorkin was the first to notice something wrong when we woke for breakfast.

"I don't smell no coffee," was the first thing he said. "Shake a hoof forward and see why that fat slob of a cook ain't cookin'."

There was no one in the galley, and the stove was cold. Nor was the cook in the forecabin, nor about the deck. Joe Bates and Sharky Steve were stretched out near the capstan, lounging drowsily.

"Where's Jimmy?" I sung out. "And why ain't he slinging the rat-killer?"

Joe and Sharky looked blank.

"Guess the old man must have him aft," Joe offered. "Don't we eat no more?"

"If Jimmy don't come forward a-hopping," Sharky added, "I figure to up with a mast and

knock down that there cabin. I've eat every now and then for forty years, and I figure to keep right on."

"Well, he ain't aft," said I.

They sat up, at that. I turned to go aft, but paused with an afterthought.

"Where's Bill Grimes?" I asked.

"Ain't he aft neither?" asked Joe.

"There's somethin' pequiliar goin' on here," decided Sharky Steve, getting to his feet, "and I figure to know what it is. Bill ain't been forward all night."

"Naturally not," said I; "it was his watch."

"That don't account for it," said he, and I turned and went aft, the two seamen at my heels.

Cap Dorkin took the news of the disappearance without a word. He squirted tobacco over the rail and set about to search the ship, the rest of us following along, and Harris, the passenger, trailing after and looking blank. We found nothing. That is, nothing but one thing.

Hitched to the taffrail, and trailing in the water astern, was a half-inch line that had been coiled on the deck when last noticed. Cap Dorkin snatched at the line and hauled it in; but there was nothing on the end of it, and we knew less than we did before.

The men were gone.

"Maybe they gets in a fight and falls overboard," suggested Joe Bates. "And drowns, locked in each other's arms, as y' might say."

"All without makin' a sound, I suppose," sneered Sharky Steve.

"Maybe they falls down a hatch and busts a leg," Joe advanced. "An' can't yell, bein' knocked cold as a herring."

"Followin' which the rats eat 'em, leavin' no trace," Sharky supplied. "Can't you think up no more o' them good ideas?"

"Get forward," ordered the captain, and they went.

That day we lived miserably, sweltering under a melting sun, and eating little of the stuff that Sharky Steve scraped together in the galley. Forward and aft there had come over us that stolid uneasiness that falls upon men in the presence of circumstances unnatural and unexplained.

Cap Dorkin was especially silent and stubborn. Harris asked permission to search the ship again, and got it; but he found nothing more. After his own special search Harris was disposed to discuss the affair with Dorkin; but the captain was short of

speech.

"Well," Harris would start up again, "what *could* have happened to them?"

"I dunno," Cap Dorkin would reply.

"Did you ever hear of anything like this before?"

"Like what?"

"Like these two men disappearing, this way?"

"I dunno." From the captain no further opinion was to be drawn.

Up forward there was a different sort of talk going on between Joe Bates and Sharky Steve.

"These here is bad waters at best," commented Joe. "I've heared of queer things goin' on in these seas before now."

"Specially on sailin' vessels," said Sharky.

"Yeah," agreed Joe.

"Take that there brig, now, the *Rantoul*. She that was found aground on the Carragda Beach, with all sail set, an' not a hand aboard."

"What's the rest of it?" asked Joe.

"There ain't no more," said Sharky. "Her cargo was all there, just as it was stowed. But no hide nor hair of captain or crew heard of from that day to this. It's goin' on two years now."

"Real queer," admitted Joe, swearing, "but no queerer than the case o' Crazy Jim Clancy. Jim, he shipped on the *Pelican*, that there old brigantine. The *Pelican*, she sails out and don't never put into port again. Jim, they picks him up drifting in a longboat. When they asks him what happened he says nothin' didn't happen, only all hands disappeared off the ship, one by one—so he got scared and left in the boat. But the *Pelican*, she ain't been heard of since. Some say Jim's crazy," Joe added, "an' some say he ain't."

"There's queer things goes on in these seas," Sharky repeated.

"There's queer things goin' on on *this* vessel," said Joe.

And so it went. To these yarns I paid little attention, for I was familiar with their like; but Harris, when he wandered forward, drank them in silently.

As night closed down a faint breeze fluttered the sails for a bit; but presently it died, and the night again became silent, clear, breathless. Cap Dorkin moved Joe and Sharky aft for the night. It was the first sign he had given of recognition that, aside from a peculiar accident, anything was wrong on the *Terrapin*.

No one slept before the dog-watch, which was Joe's.

I WAS wakened by a sudden outcry from Sharky, and in an instant I was on deck, the captain at my heels. Through the starlit dimness of the tropic night I could see Sharky leaning over the taffrail, peering down into the black water astern.

"What's wrong—what's wrong?"

"Joe! Joe's gone!" Sharky answered.

Cap Dorkin shouldered past me. "Did you see what happened?" he demanded.

"I didn't see nothin'," Sharky whimpered. "I woke up feelin' somethin' was wrong. Too quiet like. I come on deck, and Joe was missin'!"

"Nothing?" Dorkin demanded again, thrusting his head forward with dog-like menace.

"Nothin', I swear! 'Ceptin' this here." He indicated the taffrail.

Tied to the taffrail with a couple of loose-thrown bights, as if bent by a man in great haste, was that same length of line, trailing in the sea as before. I hauled it in, waking phosphorescent sparks in the dark waters below; there was nothing on its end.

"Put up your hands—all of you!" came the captain's voice, low and hard. We turned to face a heavy automatic.

For the next few minutes I thought that Sharky, Harris and I were about to meet the mysterious end that had overtaken Joe and Bill Grimes and Jimmy the cook. I was convinced that a strange insanity had deranged the mind of Cap Dorkin, inciting him to uncanny and purposeless murder.

In single file, covered by the automatic, we were marched down the short ladder into the cabin. Once in the lantern-light Dorkin made us stand against the bunks while he minutely scrutinized the faces of each of us in turn. Then, after some moments of this, he stepped back. A baffled look was in the captain's face as he put away the gun.

"No," he said, "none of you done it. None of you done it. I'd know if you did. But you didn't."

There was no more sleep that night. We sat in the cabin smoking and speculating gravely. Sharky Steve spun a wild yarn about a giant octopus that once came up from unknown depths to fasten itself upon the bottom of a becalmed schooner. Three men, he said, were dragged over the side in two nights by the monster. So huge was this sea-horror that when it shifted its hold upon the bottom the

ship listed. It was this slight listing of the ship in dead calm that led to the monster's discovery.

"Be still a minute!" said Harris. "Didn't the deck tilt a little bit just then?"

We sat silently looking at each other for a few moments, every nerve alert to discern a barely perceptible shifting of the hull. So greatly had my nerves been affected that for an instant I actually thought that the little *Terrapin* was listing, ever so slightly.

"There!" said Harris again. "Didn't she tip just a little then?"

"I—I dunno whether she did or not," Sharky Steve admitted.

"She did not list," said Dorkin decisively, and we accepted his judgment.

Sharky told other yarns, of strange unexplained disappearances, such as we just had seen; of weird sea-curses that followed ships to their dooms; of monsters unknown to men. He thought that some evil and mysterious fate was pursuing the *Terrapin*, taking her sailors one by one with the intention of at last taking her. Any other time, we would have laughed.

Dawn came at last, bringing another blazing day.

The next night was the third night of the calm. It was also the last night, had we but known. The four of us did not attempt to sleep, but sat upright in the lantern-light of the cabin. How I happened to doze at last I do not know; but I remember that Harris was dozing before me.

When I woke, at the sound of feet upon the deck, Sharky Steve was gone.

The circumstances were the same as before. The same line trailed from the taffrail, without other clue. As Harris and Cap Dorkin and I looked at each other, each knew the other's thoughts. Who would be the next to go? We had given up asking how.

If only we could have wind! Just a capful of air—Sharky Steve was gone—

IT WAS morning. A breeze was coming up, very gently, and the *Terrapin* was beginning to forge ahead, very slowly and stodgily. Then Cap Dorkin sighted a sail.

It was evident to me that we had somehow got far out of our course, for in three days we had not sighted more than the distant smoke of a vessel of any sort. But now, plainly enough, a schooner had

come into sight, a ship of about our own tonnage, headed our way.

Why Cap Dorkin wanted to take in all sail and put out the sea-anchor until the other vessel should come up I did not understand, but that is what we did. The breeze that early morning had promised did not increase, and all day long we lay waiting while the approaching vessel worked her way toward us. Slowly she drew nearer hour by hour; and at evening she answered our signal and lay to.

Captain Graves, of the *Molly Bruce*, wore a face totally without expression, but his gray eyes were keen. The two captains greeted each other coolly as we three from the *Terrapin* came aboard.

"I need men," explained Dorkin briefly when we were in the cabin of the *Molly Bruce*. "What can you spare?"

"Not a man," answered Graves. "I'm short-handed myself."

"All right," said Dorkin. "Will you take a passenger?"

"No," answered Graves. "I never take passengers."

"But I can pay!" Harris broke in. "I can pay well!"

"I'm not interested," said Graves again.

"Look here," cried Harris. "You don't understand me. I tell you, I can pay almost anything!"

Slowly Graves turned and surveyed the other man. The captain's face was still as a mask, but his eyes were hard as steel.

"I know you can," he said.

Harris appeared taken aback, and several moments of silence followed. "Then make me a proposition," he presently suggested.

"You know that I know who you are," said Graves, "and yet you want a proposition from me?"

Harris hesitated.

"Yes," he answered.

"Your name is Singleton," said Captain Graves. "You are probably under another name just now because you had to ship out of Maranhão on either the *Terrapin* or the *Molly Bruce*—or else lay over in Maranhão waiting for one of your own ships. You wouldn't dare ship under your own name because your business methods and the ships you inherited from your father have killed the little-vessel trade in the small ports. You went out to get us, and you've done well at it. Yet you want a proposition from me?"

"Yes," said Harris again, his voice cold.

Graves got out a pen and wrote for several moments, then handed the paper to the *Terrapin's* passenger.

"Will you sign that?" he asked.

Harris' face flushed as he read the sheet.

"I'll see you in — first!" he flashed.

Cap Dorkin had been staring gloomily through the porthole at the *Terrapin* lying deserted fifty yards away in the thick gloom.

"My sidelights are out," he remarked. "I've got to be getting back."

Then suddenly an oath burst from him.

"Step here," he said, his voice low, "and see do you see what I see!"

I peered out of the porthole and saw nothing, save the *Terrapin*, floating lightless under bare poles in the twilight.

"What was it?"

"Lanterns! They're gone now. No! There they are again! Look!"

He sprang up the ladder. Yes, I saw the lanterns, two of them, moving rapidly and with a peculiar smoothness along the little schooner's starboard rail. Then they disappeared, as quickly as if quenched in a bucket.

Cap Dorkin's hail roared from above. "Ahoy! The *Terrapin*, Ahoy! Answer, — you!"

There was no answer; except that I saw the two lanterns appear again at the forward rail of the *Terrapin*, and slide aft with that same strangely smooth movement. It was enough to send the shivers along any man's spine. I thought, "Ghost lanterns, Sharky Steve would have called them."

"Kind of funny," commented Graves, "that there's no answer from your crew."

Harris was beside me, staring through the port. In the young light of the cabin-lantern his face was white as surf.

"The crew?" he said in a strange voice. "There—isn't any—crew."

Silence held while Harris and I stared across the still water at the *Terrapin*, lying lonely and deserted.

"Your captain wants to leave," said Graves. "You'd better stand by to go back to your ship."

"Go back? Go back to the *Terrapin*?"

Captain Graves' voice was like a saw on steel. "You are going back now," he stated, "unless—you like my proposition!"

"I can't go back there!" cried Harris.

“Then sign!” Graves shoved the paper toward him.

“It’s unreasonable—impossible—”

“Sign!”

“I can’t—”

“Then get back to your ship!”

Harris wavered, squinting through the port. “Ahoy! Ahoy, the *Terrapin!*” boomed Dorkin’s voice above, in a long wailing hail. But the ghost lanterns appeared no more. Unmanned and silent, the little ship looked even more hopeless than when those weird lights had slid along her rail.

“For the last time, sign or go!”

“I’ll sign,” said Harris, at last.

He signed, and sat down weakly upon a locker. I witnessed the signature, then followed the captain up the ladder. Then, as the two skippers met, once more a peculiar thing happened. The two men gripped each other’s hands and shook heartily.

“All O.K., Bob?” asked Cap Dorkin.

“All set,” answered Graves. “Good boy, Sam!”

I rowed Dorkin slowly back to the *Terrapin*.

“Eight years,” said Cap, “eight years we’ve

bucked that yellow-backed ship owner. Eight years of fighting upwind and losing. And now we’ve got him! That paper he signed turns the tables in the small-port trade! We’ve got him at last!”

“But what about—” I began.

“All that show? All for him! Why do you suppose I got clear off our course? Why do you suppose the *Molly Bruce* came up just at the right time? It was all planned out, you fool! I didn’t tip you off because you’re too young—you couldn’t have faked it right. The boys had a terrible time stowed away in the hold, though. Hot and stuffy like. I’ll sure have to make it up to them!”

Jimmy the cook, and Bill Grimes, and Sharky Steve were playing poker in the cabin when we boarded the *Terrapin* again. And Joe Bates was complaining that he had burned his thumb on a “ghost lantern.”

“It was a phony idee anyway,” he growled. “Why not stick a gun to the mucker’s head in the first place, and be done with it?”

But some of these old-timers do things in odd ways!

