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BLOOD-BAIT for HUNGRY MERMAIDS

by John Wallace

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My Pamela would be the most beautiful mermaid of them all, and that was what mattered—not that a fiend's fishhook would be torn from her lovely mouth, not that her lovely body would be split in two!

I was not careful how I withdrew the bloody hook from her mouth

THE afternoon was grey, cheerless, and suffused by a miasma of melancholy. The sea seemed to whisper mournfully of inscrutable mysteries within its depths. My big white cabin cruiser bobbed listlessly upon the Florida inlet, as if even it, an inanimate thing of wood and metal, felt the depressive influences of this day.

I crossed over to starboard, where Jack Wilson was helping the two girls with their fishing tackle. Wilson was an artist who spent six months of each year here in his villa on the East Coast. Moody, dark, saturnine, he had always impressed me as having strange wells of morbidity within his spirit. Today he was unusually morose, and I knew the reason why.

"I suppose we may as well return and look at the stuffed fish in the game room," I said. "They just aren't hungry out here today."

"It *is* a poor day," said Pamela. "An odd day." She shivered slightly, looked up at me. And forced a smile with her beautiful brown eyes. Her hair was golden, her body a gorgeous tan. Men's hearts could well be excused for pounding wildly in her proximity.

From the corner of my eye I saw Wilson's eye smolder, saw his hand clench involuntarily, saw him take a deep breath. He was jealous, certainly, and he didn't want to show it because I never had shown jealousy to him. I actually liked the man in a way, for he *was* a first rate artist. It wasn't altogether impersonal generosity on my part which made me invite him on fishing trips and to house parties where Pamela could divide her time between us: it was simply the knowledge that intelligent women dislike jealous men—and that the surest way for a man to lose the woman he loves is to display jealousy.

I'D given Pamela every chance to choose Wilson, if she wanted him. And the result was that she gradually came to favor me. I didn't gloat in this knowledge, nor even show it. I assumed an easy, friendly attitude about the whole thing. But Wilson, being I suspected, tempestuous as well as temperamental, had been less successful in hiding his feelings. He never yet had allowed his jealousy to explode, but he had given those slight indications of it a number of times.

"I wanted to catch a barracuda," Lucy complained. She was nineteen, blonde and pretty. Pamela's sister. Unofficially, Wilson was escorting her, but it was plain enough whom his thoughts were on.

I went for'ard and told Hawkins: "Heave to. We're going in."

"Aye, sir," Hawkins said. He was about forty, scar-faced, and surly. He could handle the boat. But sometimes, when he looked right through both girls, I wasn't sure it was sensible to keep the man around.

Forsythe was reeling in his tackle on the port side. A big, handsome man, greying at the temples. And my new partner in business since the death of my father three weeks past. John Forsythe had been my father's partner in a large wholesale establishment in Philadelphia. My father had shot himself in his study, in a fit of despondency. His health and mind had been failing for several years. It had been as much a shock to John Forsythe as it had been to me. It's hard to be business partner and friend to a man for ten years and then have it end that way. I'd invited him to come down to Florida with me for a month. A change of scene is always the best antidote for grief.

The boat headed in for shore and as we passed Mermaid's Rock, Lucy pointed and said: "Those mermaids are so contrary! They never appear when anybody's looking—except for a couple of crazy natives! Folk tales are stupid, but interesting, things."

If I had known the portent of those words!

Mermaid's Rock was a flat plateau jutting out from a shallow part of the cove, on the south. There was a local superstition that every twenty years or so a group of mermaids returned to the rock to bask in the moonlight. The story was so common around there that we paid no attention to it anymore.

The sun had set when the boat touched shore and the clouds began to split to let a few stars and a fragment of moon through.

I went down into the big cabin, pulled the cork from a nearly full bottle of port, filled some glasses and came up on deck. "To mellow the day's hard luck, and to better luck next time," I said, passing the glasses around and sitting down. It was pleasant sitting there in the cool of the evening. We sipped and breathed deep in the semi-dark, relaxed and chatted.

After awhile I arose and started for'ard to find Hawkins and give him instructions for going over the boat. And that was the last thing I remembered for some time.

The deck arose suddenly and slapped me hard in the face. . . .

When I awoke it was because somebody was pouring cold water in my face and shaking me vigorously. I opened my eyes to see the stars and the moonlight among fleecy clouds which drifted eerily overhead. My head throbbed with a great ache.

"Come with me, Barton, now! The fish! The fish are biting. Beautiful fish! We shall catch them!"

It was Jack Wilson, I saw, who spoke to me. His dark eyes were alight with a fierce, primitive light. He pointed out toward Mermaid's Rock. He jerked me to my feet, quite beside himself with excitement.

"I'll come!" I heard myself say. "Fish? Did you say the fish are biting? I love to fish!"

"Then come!" Wilson half dragged me ashore, dragged me a furlong around the cove to where the shoreline dipped down to Mermaid's Rock. The man's enthusiasm had a strange contagion. I reeled along

beside him, my heart pounding, with a strange feeling that I was walking on air. We went down over the dip toward Mermaid's Rock.

Bizarre! The scene? Incredible! And yet—very real.

SITTING on the rock with stout fishing lines in their hands were Hawkins and a silly-faced hulk of a youth who had huge protruding teeth and a mass of long unruly corn-colored hair. The latter was baiting a great hook on the end of his line with something. As we scrambled up on the rock to join them, this monstrous creature threw his hook far out into the water with a wild atavistic yell.

Swimming around out there were three mermaids, rising and dipping gently in the surf.

Their faces were unmistakably girls' faces. Their full white breasts were also those of the human female. But their tails—scaly, bluish, finned—were as unmistakably piscatorial.

"I've got lines!" Wilson exclaimed. "And bait. This is a chance we have but once in twenty years. They like roast pork for bait. I had a hard time getting this."

"It was good you could get it," I heard myself say, and I could feel my heart thumping madly against my ribs with cruel desire. I noted that the hooks floated in the water. There was a big cork on the near side of each.

I hurled my hook out into the water and it landed near a blonde mermaid. She saw it, turned swiftly, smelled the bait and began to nibble.

With a cruel subtle technique I maneuvered the hook and, as the mermaid opened her mouth for a full bite of the pork, I jerked the hook into her mouth. The sharp barbs cut through each cheek. She screamed—whether in pain or masochistic ecstasy I could not determine—and threshed in the water.

Ruthlessly I bore back on the line, hauled it in hand over hand, slowly but surely. She flailed, beat at the hook, cried a weird song of agony as I pulled her in toward the rock. The half-witted youth grabbed for my line to help me and I slapped him roughly, snarled at him.

I drew the mermaid in until her arms touched the rock. I reached down and grasped her blonde wet tresses, dragged her up on the rock. I was not careful how I withdrew the bloody hook from her mouth.

She gasped, her blue eyes filled with a strange hungry light. Suddenly she reached out with her teeth, sunk them into my wrist, while the scaly fishlike lower part of her body threshed to and fro on the rock. I yelled, tried to jerk my wrist away. Then Wilson drew a knife from his belt, stabbed the scaly lower part of her body. She opened her mouth to scream and I jerked my wrist away furiously.

"She shall bite no more!" Wilson exclaimed and jerked a sheaf of little silver wires from his belt, gesturing to me.

"I shall assist you—but how?" I asked.

"You shall place your knee upon her stomach and hold her head prone upon the stone," a somber voice behind me said. "For that is as Mr. Wilson desires it."

I turned about and Forsythe stood there, his eyes alight strangely; and there was a gory bruise on one side of his head.

"That's so," said Wilson. "I discovered these mermaids and I brought the equipment. Hold her head down."

I placed my knee against her stomach, held her head down solidly against the rock.

Wilson grasped her full sensual lips, jabbed a large needle through them cruelly, making a series of holes through each lip, about one-sixteenth of an inch apart. The mermaid writhed in pain, made guttural sounds in her throat. Wilson put the little strands of wire through the holes, twisted them tight, sealed her mouth most effectively.

I GLOATED in the feel of her warm white body under my knee as she writhed and struggled ineffectually. Overhead the clouds floated like fantastic ghosts, and the half-moon cutting into the soft whiteness of one of those fleecy clouds was a symbol to make my pulses pound. I well knew that within every man there is a vestigial beast, a merciless lustful monster eager to prey upon the weak innocent softness of femininity. And this mermaid was at least half human; she seemed, indeed, more human than fish, for her body was warm-blooded, pulsing with life and emotion.

The eerie dimness of the night's light, the ceaseless mysterious murmur of the sea, the strangeness of the endeavor—all these were very real and accepted. It was the most natural thing in the world, this adventure.

"And now the catch must be cleaned and hung up," Wilson murmured, his dark eyes glittering. "I think I shall stuff this specimen and keep her as an object of art, for she is a thing of beauty."

He jabbed his long needle into the upper part of one of her full white breasts. The mermaid writhed with tremendous vigor, moaned, flung her arms about my neck and clasped me to her soft body as protection against the onslaught of the needle.

I reveled in the shuddering thrill of her body for a moment, felt jealous possessiveness surging up within me like coals of fire. Her blue eyes opened wide with fear and pain, looked pleadingly into mine.

"This catch is my own!" I snarled at Wilson, turning my head toward him.

"And the idea, the discovery and the preparations are *mine!*" he said hotly. "I shall have my choice!"

He grabbed my head, jerked me away. I sprawled on the rock panting angrily.

Forsythe strode toward Wilson, as the latter threaded the wire through the mermaid's breast. Forsythe glanced

at the halfwit, who had just hooked a brunette mermaid.

"The supply is running low, Master," Forsythe said to Wilson. "Shall I attempt to drive a further supply within reach of your lines?"

"Yes!" Wilson snapped. "As many as you can!"

Forsythe came back to me. "Do not be angry. Perhaps I may send you some even more beautiful."

I arose, and Forsythe walked off the rock and around the rim of the cove to where it turned southward out of my sight perhaps a hundred yards away.

I returned to Wilson and the mermaid. I felt strangely subdued, and my head spun with an odd dizziness. I seemed half in one world, half in another, somehow.

"Hold her!" Wilson snapped.

Obeying automatically, I watched as he pierced the top of the mermaid's other breast and threaded the wire through. He put half a dozen wires through the holes, to give strength, enough to support her weight.

"And now—" Wilson produced a sharp knife, poised the point of it between the mermaid's bleeding breasts and with sadistic fiendishness he raked the point of the knife slowly downward, cutting through the skin and into the pulsing flesh of her. A rivulet of blood appeared, and she squirmed tortuously, moaned deep in her throat. "The heart of a fish is wonderful when fried," Wilson murmured.

I stared. Everything was hazy for a moment. And then I observed the halfwit dragging his brunette mermaid up onto the rock at his feet. He reached down for her gleefully. I sprang up, leaped toward him, to grab her away from him.

FOR suddenly I seemed to have re-achieved some degree of sanity. I stared about me dazedly. The same sea, the same erotic moon above, the same fleecy clouds, the same mermaids and the same men. And yet—my brain. *My brain was different!* My thoughts were their *normal* selves again!

The full horror of the scene struck me with a force that sent chills coursing over me, made everything go black before my eyes for an instant. When I regained my vision and started for the halfwit again, I was amazed to see the brunette mermaid bounding up onto the rock, grasping him in her arms, biting him savagely on the throat. The halfwit keeled over backwards, yelling in surprise, his protruding teeth and upstanding straw hair making him look a thing of grotesque terror.

My shocked eyes turned back to Wilson. He was slitting the blonde mermaid's stomach clear down to her thighs, through the scales.

And—before my astonished eyes the outer scaled skin of the fish half-parted to reveal the soft white skin and stomach of a human female!

The sight seemed only to whet the morbid passions of Wilson. He jerked the knife downward avidly, savagely. The fish skin split to her knees, revealing graceful young thighs . . .

"Wilson, you swine! What are you doing!" I cried, striding toward him.

He looked up at me, snarled: "She's mine! Keep away!"

I sprang at him, swung a fist hard. It grazed his jaw and he swung his knife, which barely missed my throat. The effort threw him momentarily off balance and I swung my fist hard again. This time it landed on his jaw, knocked him backwards gasping.

He struck his head on the great brown rock, moaned, rolled his eyes, and stretched out limp. I looked around wildly.

Hawkins, the scar-faced seaman, was angling for the third mermaid, unsuccessful in hooking her as yet. Hearing the scuffle, he turned and looked at me, and when he saw the hateful gleam in my eyes, his face twisted into a lustful leer. "Fine fishin', ain't it?"

"No more, it isn't!" I snapped. "Hawkins, what do you know about this? What happened to us on the boat? How did we get into this incredible mix-up?"

"What boat?" Hawkins asked. He looked at me suspiciously. I saw there was a big swelling on the back of his head. "Leave me alone," he said. "I'm tryin' to catch me a mermaid. An' when I catch 'er I'm goin' to see if they're made like women. I always wondered about that—"

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" I grated. "My God! What is this—a mad nightmare? Have we all gone crazy?"

"*You* must be, if you think you can stop me from fishin'," Hawkins said. He pointed suddenly southward: "Look! There comes another'n—a young blonde one!"

I turned and stared where he pointed. Certainly enough, she was young and blonde, beautiful in the moonlight. She swam from around the corner of the cove south of us. The moon was unclouded now and I stared in amazement. *Almost beyond chance of mistake, that mermaid was Lucy, Pamela's sister!*

And if Lucy were there, Pamela couldn't be far away—and what was happening to her?

I GAZED around me, the chill within me multiplied a hundredfold. I remembered pitching forward on the boat, I vaguely remembered being awakened by Wilson and coming here and accepting this bizarre scene and the activity as a matter of course. And then my sanity had returned—suddenly, in a dizzy moment of shock. But these others were still out of their minds, plainly enough. What strange madness was this?

Staring at the halfwit still struggling furiously with the berserk brunette only added to my confusion. Whence came these mermaids—these crazed girls, rather, disguised as mermaids? Had they all been doped, crazed by drugs? Then why, and by whom?

My first thought was of Wilson, jealous, knowing

that he was losing Pamela. He had said that the project was his, the equipment his, the idea his. . . .

Who else?

I strode over to him swiftly, looked at him. Unconscious, his face was still contorted evilly, lustfully. I knelt, searched him rapidly.

In his coat pocket there was a hypodermic, with just a trace of light fluid in it. There was a small printed label on the rubber bulb. I held it close to my eyes.

Scopolamine.

The liquid hypnotism! That was what this strange drug was called by the medical profession, and in my work in the wholesale drug business I knew it well. Scopolamine—perhaps the most amazing drug thus far known to man. It made virtual slaves of people who are heavily injected with it. Caused them to follow commands implicitly, to follow pre-instruction and detailed plans of action and conduct over the full period of its sway—this period varying with the individual and the quantity administered. The drug had the further astounding property of killing all memory of action and thought engaged in while under its influence, if the dose was sufficiently heavy.

Speedily I jerked some of the silver wires from Wilson's belt, bound him securely hand and foot with it. Then I looked about me for a moment in indecision. *Where was Pamela?* That was the thought burning hotly through my brain. If that blonde mermaid swimming this way were Lucy, as I was certain it was, then Pamela must be around that bend to the south.

I hesitated no longer. I ran off the big rock onto the shore rim, sprinted southward as rapidly as I might, not knowing what to expect, but following my instincts blindly—to find and to protect the girl I loved, if she were in danger. . . .

I must have been a weird sight; I, Bob Barton, running wildly in the moonlight along the rim of the sea, running like some mad creature of another world, with the soft pounding of the waves furnishing a musical background—the music of tragedy.

I rounded the bend, stopped abruptly, stared down. And my blood seemed to turn to ice within me.

For my glorious Pamela lay down there on the beach, moaning in a delirium of ecstasy as John Forsythe, an evil glitter in his eyes, stripped the last filmy silken garment from her lovely young body. She moved sensuously on the sands as Forsythe stood above her.

"You shall be the most beautiful mermaid of them all, Pamela," he was gloating. "I shall see that your lover is the man who catches you, who wires your lovely mouth forever shut, who cuts from you your vital organs. And then he shall die and the police shall come and they shall never understand, for I shall be in the clear. You will love that—no?"

"Yes, yes!" Pamela moaned.

"Lift your gorgeous legs, Pamela," he said.

IN his hand was the scaly mermaid skin, similar to those which clothed the lower halves of the other girls. Pamela obediently lifted her legs and Forsythe slipped the pseudo fish skin over them. There was a tight elastic to hold it above her hips.

The sight paralyzed me for those moments as I stood above them on the rim-rock staring down. The white sands . . . the eerie moonlight . . . the amoral detachment of the pounding sea. . . .

I jumped, a dozen or more feet straight down, and I landed squarely on Forsythe's broad back We hurtled to the sand together. Flailing, lashing out with fists and feet, releasing hoarse oaths, plowing up the sand.

My advantage lay in the surprise of my attack. Forsythe was a bigger man than I, but it was a sudden shock to him and my fury was that of a madman. Our hands found each other's throats, we rolled over several times, then I drew back my right fist, hit him savagely on the unprotected jaw twice.

Forsythe shuddered spasmodically, rolled his eyes, and lay still.

I staggered to my feet, disheveled, my clothes in disarray, my hair a tangled black mass full of sand. I turned to look for Pamela, and saw her crawling toward the sea, her full young breasts making marks in the soft sand and the fish fin leaving a deeper, thinner trail.

In a frenzy of fear, I ran after her, grasped her in my arms. "Pamela! It's Bob! Don't you know me?"

Her answer to that was to throw her arms around my neck and to bite me savagely. I twisted her face away, carried her struggling and moaning. I tied her wrists behind her with a fragment of her lingerie, tied a wide strip of it tightly around her mouth. I bound Forsythe hand and foot with his shoelaces.

I carried Pamela part way back to Mermaid's Rock. Then, looking down at the sea, I saw Lucy below, swimming strongly, and no more than a rod away from Hawkin's cruel hook. I didn't hesitate. I dropped Pamela and I dived off the shallow rock shoreline, swimming as fast as possible. Lucy turned to look at me, her blue eyes glittering.

"Lucy! come with me!" I reached out and grasped her arm. She clasped the other arm suddenly around my neck, and we both went under.

Lucy was half-drowned when I dragged her up onto the rocks, and there was a great roaring in my ears. I lay her face down between two boulders, worked enough water out of her lungs so that she might breathe freely.

MY actions were a blur for the next few minutes. I recall going up to the parked automobile, driving up to my villa and phoning the police in the nearest village. I hurried back down to the rock, in time to keep the halfwit from being killed by the berserk brunette mermaid. When Hawkins came at me in a jealous rage for jerking the line from his hands, I tripped him, batted

his head against the rock until he was unconscious.

The police came presently, stared in amazement. I helped them load the crazed and the wounded into automobiles. The blonde mermaid, who had been cut by Wilson's knife, was nearly dead. Eventually she recovered, never knowing what had happened to her.

Nobody except myself and Forsythe remembered, the next morning. I, because I was the last to be injected with the scopolamine by Forsythe—and his supply was nearly gone from the hypo by then, so that I received a much smaller dose.

Chemical tests proved that he alone had not been injected, which was proof enough of his guilt. And the police finally broke him down so that he confessed:

He had murdered my father—making it look like suicide. For several years, Forsythe had been looting the business, and he feared discovery and a prison sentence. My father being in feeble health and mental condition, Forsythe had figured to kill him and falsify the books, so that he could buy my half of the firm for a pittance. But I had shown a business alertness that worried him. He maneuvered me into inviting him down to Florida with me.

The man's mind was crazed sadistically from fear and consciousness of guilt. Having been down to our villa before, he knew the story of the mermaids.

He doped the port wine with laudanum to knock us all out. While we were out, he injected us with the scopolamine. Hawkins, he had hit over the head, when the seaman found me on deck and was kneeling over me trying to revive me. Only the fact that he injected me last, and lightly, saved us. He planted the hypo on Wilson to throw the guilt on him, talked Wilson, in his hypnotic state, into thinking it really was Wilson's idea.

The fish costumes to create the mermaids he had bought anonymously at a costumer's house in New York, and had brought them and the other items with him in the bottom of a trunk.

As for the three original mermaids and the halfwit: Forsythe knew the three girls bathed nightly in the nude on a strip of beach a quarter mile north of the cove. He had made furtive trips in the night to locate them. He had also located the halfwit, peeping lasciviously at the nude girls from behind a nearby fringe of bushes. He had promised the halfwit his choice of the girls if he'd sneak up and jab each girl with a hypo. The halfwit had done this, then Forsythe took the hypo and jabbed the halfwit, forced all four to come back to the boat, where he proceeded to inject his evil commands into submissive brains.

He intended to have his sadistic fun, watching the girls be mutilated. When sated, he would kill us all except the girls, and run for the police, screaming about a murderous orgy—*with the guilt all pointing at Wilson*. That done, Forsythe's mad brain figured, he would have no further trouble. . . .

I alone of the living have any memory of that ghastly night's horrors. Thank God that Pamela will never suffer. The police and I withheld the facts from her.

To this day Pamela looks at me oddly when I shudder at the sight of a fish, when I refuse to eat the meat of one, when I refuse to permit one in the house.

She cannot understand the reason. Nor why I never again shall desire to go fishing . . . an activity which is to me the most gruesome sport in all the world.