

THE REEF

By Samuel Scoville, Jr.

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Lune-Green and amber, a strip of fading sky glowed across the trail of the vanished sun. Far below, the opal sea paled to mother-of-pearl. Then, over sea and sky, strode the sudden dark of the tropics and in an instant the southern stars flamed and flared through the violet night. A long, tense moment, with sea and sky waiting, and a rim of raw gold thrust itself above the horizon as the full moon of midsummer climbed toward the zenith. Rising, its light made a broad causeway across the sea clear to the dark reef which lurked in the shimmering water.

Suddenly, inked black against the moon-path, showed the lean shape of a canoe. All the way from Carib Island, a day and a night away, Jim Tom, who in his day had been a famous sponge-diver, had brought his grandson Jimmy Tom for a first visit to the reef. Both had the cinnamon-red skins of the Red Caribs, who once had ruled mightily the whole Caribbean. Jim Tom's hair was cut to an even edge all the way around his neck; his small, deep-set eyes were like glittering crumbs of black glass, and ever since a day when he dived below the twenty-five-fathom mark both of his legs had been paralyzed.

Swiftly the little craft neared the reef, and only the splash of the paddles broke the stillness. Then in an instant the molten gold of the water was shattered by a figure like a vast bat, with black wings which measured all of thirty feet from tip to tip, a spiked tail, and long antenna: streaming out beyond a huge, hooked mouth. Like a vampire from the pit, it rose into the air, blotting out the moon with its monstrous bulk, and then dropped back with a crash, raising a wave which nearly swamped the canoe. As it disappeared beneath the water, Jimmy Tom turned and looked questioningly at the old man. The latter laughed silently.

"Only a manta ray," he said at last.

"They like to fly around in the moonlight and frighten untried young men," he added slyly.

For answer his grandson stretched out his paddle at full length. It showed in the air rigid and motionless as an iron bar. The old man grunted approvingly.

"You may tremble yet before you are through with the reef," was all that he said however, as he steered toward, the circle of coral which separated the lagoon from the

ocean, which beat against the barrier in a crashing surf. Waiting until several of the great rollers had passed, the paddlers caught the crest of a huge wave and in an instant were swept ten feet in air toward the patch of beach which showed beyond the little lagoon. Just as the wave broke, the canoe tilted and rushed down its long slope like a toboggan, clearing the rim of sharp coral and leaping into the still lagoon beyond.

All the rest of that glorious night, as the moon went westering down the sky, the two slept on the rose-red, honey-brown sand, until, without any dawn, the sun suddenly rose above a heliotrope horizon. Then they breakfasted, and Jim Tom became quite talkative—for a Carib.

“We must not waste a moment of this day,” he said. “Perhaps before night we may make the hundred of dollars you need for that sloop about which you have been bothering me so long. In my day,” he went on severely, “boys were glad enough to have a good canoe.”

Jimmy Tom grunted.

“Whoever heard,” he said at last, “of making a hundred of dollars in one day?”

“It has been done—and here,” returned his grandfather, positively; “but it takes good lungs and—a brave heart.”

As they talked, the canoe reached a point where the reef sloped away in a series of terraces to unfathomable depths. There they stopped paddling and started down through the water which lay before them like a thick sheet of plate-glass. The great ledge over which they floated was dotted with thickets of colored corals and purple and gold seafans, among which schools of brilliant fish sped and lazed and drifted like birds in the air. Molten-silver tarpon shot through shoals of chubby cow-pilots, all green and gold and indigo, while turquoise-blue parrot-fish raced here and there, and crimson cardinal-fish crept in and out of crevices in the rocks. There were angel-fish in gorgeous robes of emerald and scarlet, and jet-black butterfly-fish with golden fins, orange gills, and vivid blue mouths, while warty purple sea-cucumbers showed among clumps of yellow sea-anenomes.

“This is the treasure-ledge of the reef,” said Jim Tom, suddenly. “Here too,” he went on, “death hides and waits,” and he paused for a moment.

Jimmy’s answer was to slip out of his unbleached cotton shirt and trousers and stand poised like a red-bronze statue of speed with the long, flat muscles rippling over his lithe body and graceful limbs.

“It was here that your father died,” said Jim Tom again. “I was lying watching him search among the sponges,” he went on after a pause, “when before my very eyes he was gone. My only son,” he went on, his voice rising as he harked back over forgotten years, “in the jaws of one of those accursed sculpins of the deep water, a *tonu* ten feet long.”

“And then,” asked Jimmy Tom, very softly, as the old man stopped.

“And then,” went on the old man, fiercely, “everything went red around me. I gripped my spike and dove and swam, as I never swam before, down to that lurking, ugly demon. In a second I was on him and stabbed him with all my might,—once, twice, three times,—until, dying, he went off the ledge into the depths below and I followed him beyond, to where no man may dare to swim. There he died. As his hateful mouth gaped I dragged out your father by the arm and brought him back to the top; but when I climbed with him into the canoe he was dead, and I was as you see me now—dead too from the waist down. All the rest of that day and all the night beyond and the next day I paddled and paddled until we came home—my dead son and I. No, no,” went on the old man, “let us try the safer side of the reef.”

For answer, Jimmy Tom quickly fastened in place the outriggers on either side of the canoe, which made it firm and safe to dive from. Around his neck he slipped the “toa,” the wide-mouthed bag with a drawstring into which a sponge-diver thrusts his findings. Around his neck, too, he hung the “spike,” a double-pointed stick two feet long of black palmwood, hard and heavy as iron. Then, standing on the bow seat, he filled his great lungs again and again until every air-cell was opened. The old man looked at him proudly.

“You are of my blood,” he said softly. “Go with God. I will watch above you and be your guard. Forget not to look up at me, and, if I signal; come back to me fast—for I cannot go to you,” he finished sadly.

The young man gave a brief nod and, filling his lungs until his chest stood out like a square box, dived high into the air with that jack-knife dive which was invented by sponge-divers and, striking the water clean as the point of a dropped knife, he shot down toward the beautiful depths below. Into his lithe body rushed and pulsed the power and energy of the great swinging sea as he swam through the air-clear water toward a thicket of gorgonias, which waved against the white sand like a bed of poppies. In thirty seconds he was twenty fathoms down, where the pressure of seventy pounds to the square inch would have numbed and crippled an ordinary swimmer, but meant nothing to his steel-strong body, hardened to the depths by years of deep diving. Even as he reached the gleaming thicket he saw, with a great throb of delight, a soft, golden-brown tuft of silk sponge hidden beneath the living branches. The silk sponge is to spongers in the sea what the silver fox is to trappers on the land, and the whole year’s output from all seas is only a few score.

With a quick stroke, Jimmy Tom reached the many-colored sea-shrub. The moving branches had to be parted carefully with the spike, lest they close and hide, beyond finding, the silky clump growing within their depths. Even as the boy started to slip over his head the cord from which swung the pointed stick, he looked up to see Jim

Tom beckoning frantically for him to return. Yet nowhere in the nearby water could he see anything unusual, except a little fish some eight inches long marked with alternate bands of blue and gold, which came close to him and then turned and swam out to sea. Still his grandfather beckoned, his face contorted with earnestness.

The boy hesitated. An arm's length away lay a fortune. It might well be that never again could he find that exact spot if he went back to the surface now. All this passed through his mind in the same second in which he suddenly plunged his bare arm into the center of the gorgonia clump without waiting to use the spike, as all cautious sponge-divers do. Following the clue of the waving silken end, he grasped a soft mass. Even as he pulled out a silk-sponge, worth more than its weight in gold, something sharp as steel and brittle as ice pierced his hand deep, and he felt a score of spines break and rankle in his flesh like splinters of broken glass. By an ill chance he had thrust his hand against one of those chestnut-burs of the ocean, a purple-black sea-urchin, whose villainous spines, like those of a porcupine, pierce deep and break off. Setting his teeth against the pain, the boy shifted the silky clump of sponge to his other hand and swam for the canoe with all his might. As he rose he saw his grandfather mouthing the word "Hurry!" every line on his tense face set in an agony of pleading.

Even as the boy shot toward the surface, he caught sight once again of the same brilliant little fish returning from deep water. Close behind it, dim at first, but growing more and more distinct as it came, showed a sinister shape, slate-gray, with yellow-brown stripes, the dreaded tiger-shark of deep water, convoyed by that little jackal of the sea, the pilot-fish. It was fortunate for Jimmy Tom that the tiger-shark is not among the swiftest of its family and that he was half-way to the surface before the cold deadly eyes of that one caught sight of his ascending body. With a rush like a torpedo-boat, the thirty-foot shark shot toward the straining, speeding figure, and reached it just as, with a last desperate effort, Jimmy Tom broke water by the canoe. Only the fact that a shark has to be on its back to bring into play its seven rows of triangular, saw-edged teeth saved the boy's life. The tiny tick of time which the fish took in turning enabled the old man, with a tremendous heave of his powerful arms, to drag Jimmy Tom bodily over the gunwale just as the fatal jaws snapped shut below him.

For a long minute the sea-tiger circled the canoe with hungry speed. Then, seeing that his prey had escaped, he swam away, guided, as always, by the strange pilot-fish, which feeds on the scraps of the feasts which it finds for its companion.

As the shark turned toward deep water Jimmy Tom sat up from where he had been lying at the bottom of the canoe and grinned cheerfully after his disappearing foe. Then, without a word, he handed Jim Tom the clump of sponge which, throughout

his almost dead-heat with death, he had held clutched tightly in his left hand. With the same motion, he stretched out his other hand, filled like a pincushion with keen, glassy spines from the sea-urchin.

“Not twice in a long lifetime,” said his grandfather, “have I seen a finer silk-sponge. Already that sloop is half-paid for.”

Without further words, he drew from his belt a sharp-pointed knife and began the painful process of removing one by one the embedded spines from the boy’s right hand before they should begin to fester. He finished this bit of rough-and-ready surgery by washing out each deep puncture with stinging salt water. When he had entirely finished, Jimmy Tom carefully tucked away the sponge in a pocket fastened to the inside of the canoe and, slipping the wide-mouthed bag again over his neck, stood on the thwart ready for another dive.

“Try to remember with your thick head,” said his grandfather, severely, “all that I have told you, and if I signal you to come back, you *come*.”

The boy nodded briefly, took several deep breaths, and again shot down through the water, directing his course toward another part of the reef, where the white sand was dotted with shells, all hyaline or clouded with exquisite colors. As he reached the bottom, the boy’s swift, supple fingers searched among crystal-white, purple and rose and gold olivellas, dosinias, and tellinas which, in spite of their beauty, had no special value. Just as he was about to return to the surface empty-handed, his eye caught the gleam of several spires of the rare, sky-white coral showing among the waving water-weed. A hasty look aloft showed no signal of danger from his sentinel, and he still had nearly three minutes before water would exact her toll of oxygen from him. A swift stroke brought him to the edge of the weed-bed. Just as he was about to reach for the coral, his trained eye caught sight of a gleaming white, beautifully shaped shell nearly as large as the palm of his hand. With a quick motion, he reached under the wavering leaves and, even as his fingers closed on its corrugated surface, realized that he had found at last a perfect specimen of the royal wentle-trap, among the rarest and most beautiful of shells.

In the collections of the world, there are perhaps not six perfect specimens, and sponge-divers and shell-gathers along a thousand lonely coasts are ever on the look-out for this treasure of the sea. The pure white rounded whorls of this one were set off with wide, frilled varices, each ending in a point above, the whole forming a perfect crown of snow and crystal indescribably airy and beautiful. The sight and feeling of this treasure put every thought out of Jimmy Tom’s mind save to reach the surface with it as soon as possible. The coral could wait. For that shell anyone of the collectors who called at Carib Island would gladly pay him twice the hundred dollars he needed.

Suddenly, even as he turned toward the surface, from a deep crevice in the coral close to his side, shot a fierce and hideous head, like that of some monstrous snake, ridged with a fin which showed like a crest. Before the boy could move, two long jaws filled with curved teeth snapped shut on his right hand and wrist, and he realized with a dreadful pang of fear and pain that he had been gripped by one of the great conger-eels which lurk in the crevices of the reef. Eight feet in length and as large around as a man's leg, they are among the most fearsome of all the sea-folk which a diver must brave. For a second, Jimmy Tom tugged with all his strength, but with no result except that the greenish-gray body retreated deeper into its cave. Then it was that he remembered what his grandfather had told him was the only way to escape from the deadly jaws of a conger-eel. Relaxing every muscle, he allowed his hand to lie limp in the great fish's teeth. Sooner or later, if he kept quiet, the monster would open its jaws for a better grip.

As the cold, deadly eyes stared implacably into his, the beating of his laboring heart sounded in his ears like a drum of doom. If so be that the fierce fish did not relax his grip within the next thirty seconds, the boy knew that his life would go out of him in a long stream of silvery air-bubbles. By a tremendous effort of will he strove against the almost irresistible impulse to do something, to pull, to struggle, to slash with his knife at the horrid head. Yet, clenching his teeth grimly, he set himself to that hardest of all tasks—to wait and wait. His eyes, hot and dim with suffused blood, fell on the crowned shell which he held in his free hand, that shell which was to win for him the sloop, and suddenly through the luminous, gleaming water he seemed to see his cabin on far-away Carib Island and his mother's face looking into his.

As the vision faded he felt a slight shifting and loosening of the grim jaws. With a last effort of his will, dimming before the flood of unconsciousness creeping up to his brain, he allowed his body to float limp, and relaxed every straining muscle. Even as he did so, the great jaws gaped apart for an instant and the fierce head thrust itself toward him for a fresh grip. Fighting back the waves of blackness which swept across his eyes, by a quick turn and wrench he freed his imprisoned hand and, with a tremendous scissors-kick of his powerful legs, shot away just as the curved teeth struck, empty, together.

Up and up and up he sped, swimming as he had never swum before, yet seeming to himself, under the desperate urge of his tortured lungs, to move slow as the hour-hand of a clock. The sunlit surface seemed to move away and away and recede to an immeasurable distance. Just as he felt despairingly that he could no longer resist the uncontrollable desire of his anguished lungs to act, even if they drew in the waters of death, his head shot above the surface. There was a sudden roaring in his ears as the strong arms of Jim Tom pulled him into the canoe. Too weak to speak or move, he

lay experiencing the utter happiness there is in breathing, which only the half-drowned may know.

All the rest of that day the boy lay in the shade of the towering coral wall, while old Jim Tom dressed his gashed and pierced hand. As the calm weather still held, the old man decided to spend the night in the canoe just outside the sheer wall of the reef, where the water stretched away to unknown depths. Toward evening the boy's strength came back; and after eating and drinking ravenously, he showed but little effect of the strain to which he had been subjected.

"When the moon rises," said his grandfather at length, "we will start for home."

The boy shook his head obstinately.

"Tomorrow, as soon as it is light," he said, "I dive again to bring up such white coral as has not been seen on Carib Island in my day."

"In your day!" exclaimed old Jim Tom, much incensed. "In your minute—for that is all you have lived. Never has any man made a better haul than you. Be satisfied. The reef is not fortunate for the greedy."

"My silk-sponge was won from the jaws of a shark and my shell from the conger-eel," returned the boy, doggedly. "I ask no favors of the reef."

The old man glanced around apprehensively, while the water seemed to chuckle as it lapped against the coral.

"It is not lucky to talk that way," he said softly. "Sleep now," he went on after a pause. "When morning comes, perhaps there will be a better spirit in you and we will go home."

A little later, while the great moon climbed the sky and the golden sea stretched away unbroken, the two slept. Hours later, Jim Tom awoke with a start. Through his sleep had penetrated the sharp sinister scent of musk, and, even before he opened his eyes, he felt some hostile living presence near him. As he raised his head above the side of the canoe, the still surface of the sea beyond was all a-writhe with what seemed a mass of white sea-snakes. Suddenly from out of the livid tangle shot toward the boat two thirty-foot tentacles larger around than a man's body, tapering to a point and covered with round, sucking discs armed with claws of black horn, sharp and curved as those of a tiger. The great white squid, the devil-fish of unknown depths, which hardly once or twice in a generation comes to the surface, was before him.

For a moment the old man stared in horror at the twisting, fatal tentacles. Then, with a hoarse cry, he roused Jimmy Tom, who started up, grasping the keen machete which always lay in a sheath at the bottom of the canoe. Even as he unsheathed the curved blade, one of the vast, pale streamers reached the canoe, flowed over its side, and licked around the waist of the old man. On the instant, red stains showed through his thin shirt where the armed discs sank deep into his flesh as the horrid arm dragged

his helpless body toward the water. Just in time, the boy swung the machete over his head and severed the clutching streamer; and then, with a return stroke, cut through another that licked out toward him across the boat.

As he turned the old man stretched his arm out toward the sea with a gasp of horror. Up through the water came a vast cylindrical shape of livid flesh, many times the size of the canoe, from which long tentacles radiated like a wheel. In the middle of the shapeless mass was set a head of horror, with a vast parrot-like beak which gnashed over a mouth like a cavern. On either side of the demon jaws glared two lidless eyes, each larger than a barrel, rimmed around with white. Of an inky, unfathomable black, they stared at the boat with a malignancy which no earth-born creature could equal or endure. Unable to sustain their appalling glare, both of the Caribs thrust their arms before their faces, expecting every second to feel the deadly touch of the armed tentacles.

It was the boy who recovered himself first. Setting his teeth grimly, he suddenly raised his head to face again this demon of the lowest depths. At his exclamation of surprise, the old man forced himself to look up. The water stretched before them empty and unbroken. Only the scent of musk and grisly fragments of the death-pale tentacles in the bottom of the canoe were there to prove that the monster had not been a ghastly dream of the night. Without a word, Jimmy Tom shipped the outriggers and, gripping his paddle, took his place in the bow. All the rest of that night and far into the next day they paddled, until at last Carib Island loomed up on the horizon.

From the sale of the wentle-trap and the silk sponge Jimmy Tom bought not only his sloop and a new canoe for Jim Tom, but still had the hundred of dollars which makes a man rich on Carib Island. Yet in spite of the fortune he brought back from the reef, he has never returned to it again. When urged by friends or collectors, he only shakes his head and says oracularly, "Enough is plenty."