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**D**URING A terrific storm some years ago, an unidentified sailing schooner carrying treasure struck the rocks on the southeastern tip of Malpelo Island, north of Colombia, and had her bottom torn away. Seven attempts by salvage organizations were made to retrieve the mysterious treasure hoard, supposedly resting in the shattered hulk.

In each attempt, the diver had failed to return to the surface. His air line had snapped; there was no sign of what might have caused the tragedy.

When I heard the story, it sounded like a challenge. The reason for the numerous failures, I thought, was that the divers had met with some unusual condition for which they were unprepared, or that they had drowned when attacked by large tiger sharks which abound in these South American waters. Having fought tiger sharks and huge octopi, and on one occasion a giant squid, I decided to be the eighth man down.

We chartered an auxiliary sloop and sailed from the little seaport town of Buenaventura, Colombia, to the tip of the island where the ill-fated schooner had reportedly gone down. We dropped anchor about 200 yards offshore over a spot where the wreck allegedly rested. In a short time, we were ready for actual diving operations.

As I stood on the short ladder waiting for my helmet to be screwed to my shoulder plate, I thought of those seven divers who had never returned. But it was no time to dwell on their undiscovered fates. Making sure my long, double-edged shark knife was securely attached to me, I stepped from the ladder into the water.

A short distance down, I signaled to stop lowering, as the air pressure needed adjusting; I also wanted to know if the responses of the crew above were correct and rapid.

Then I continued my descent until the hulk of a vessel appeared directly beneath me. I knew this was the ship I was seeking, for it had very little encrustation on it.

I manipulated my lines carefully among the sharp rock outcrops, as a hard rub on one of the jagged edges might have torn my

# I Was the 8th

*Beneath the sea was a storied lost treasure; but something claimed seven divers and was awaiting the next!*



air hose. The black hole beneath me was not inviting, but there were no signs of sharks or any large fish among the strings of underwater plants that hung, like leafy pendulums, about the wreck. A few more moments and I had landed on the slimy deck of the shattered schooner-wreck. A large craft, it rested on an almost even keel in a rocky ravine, her bottom buried deep in the sand.

In the pale light that penetrated from the surface, the hulk looked sinister. It lay there, white and ghostly, with a high black wall of rock around it like a gigantic coffin.

**T**HE AFTERHATCH was open, its cover partly off. Just forward appeared the companionway. Making certain that neither of my lines was fouled, I loosened my shark knife and climbed cautiously down the sand-covered steps to the heavy door of the chamber below. There I received the jolt of my life!

Beside the half-opened door of the cabin and immersed in several inches of sand, lay a copper diving helmet. I dug it out of the sand and debris and, in the light of my torch, looked inside. I was gazing down upon a skull—the white jaws wide apart in a set and uncanny grin!

I began to dig in the sand about the diving dress, and finally unearthed the remains of the suit. A skeleton was encased in the shredded remnants. Here was one of the seven divers who had not returned!

I cleared the sand away from the door of the cabin and entered. It was approximately 15 feet wide and partly filled with crates of various sizes and shapes. One had the top pried off. I flashed my torch into the opening. *Silver bars!* They were darkened by the salt water, but after I rubbed the butt of my torch against them, the white metal shone through.

Yes, treasure was here all right! How

*Its tentacles came closer. I drew my knife. I would give the giant creature a fight!*

ILLUSTRATION BY TONY KOKONIS