

Man Down!

else, too—some mysterious killer who had already

By LT. HARRY E. RIESEBERG

much could not be computed then, nor whether all the boxes held treasure; but I felt certain it was a tremendous hoard.

I signaled for those above to send down a steel sling for hauling my find to the surface. After stowing six of the boxes in the sling, I gave the signal to haul them up.

Spying a length of tarpaulin covering something large alongside the remaining boxes, I tore away at it. A golden gleam reflected in the water. I gave the tarpaulin another jerk, and the water-rotted substance dropped away, revealing a beautiful statue.

It was bronze and had large eyes which seemed to be made of multicolored precious stones. At the base of the statue were a number of small bones, whitened and half buried. Among them, two human skulls grinned up at me. Close by lay a lead-soled boot, with remnants of a diver's dress still clinging to it. I stood there trembling. I could not shake the uncanny feeling that somebody or something was watching me.

SO STRONG was this sense of a presence in this lonely, silent tomb that I turned my torchlight about the cabin. It moved over the boxes and crates and returned finally to the statue. As it shone past the bronze figure, I saw a huge shape rising behind the dim outlines of the crates.

My heart pounded wildly, and I became faint with terror. It was moving across the cabin doorway, and I saw that the shape was a massive octopus! The huge monster was fully 20 feet across with a ball of a body at least four to five feet in width. Its long, slimy tentacles were lined with great saucerlike cups.

Now I knew the fate of the seven lost divers, and I realized that I, too, was trapped in this watery grave. There was only one way out, and that was blocked by this giant creature! Its tentacles swerved and quivered continuously, as if waiting for an opportune moment to crush me. Then it began to crawl slowly along the sandy floor toward me. In spite of its great bulk and spreading arms, it moved quickly. And all the while, its terrible eyes watched me.

As I backed away, the creature lunged at me. One of its powerful arms stirred the sand into a great cloud. Backing as far as I could into the corner of the cabin, I drew my shark knife from its sheath and waited. The 14-inch blade didn't seem much good against a powerful octopus, but with half a chance I could give the creature a fight. It was a desperate measure.

Now, the octopus was enraged, changing

from one color to another, its tentacles reaching closer and closer. I stood waiting. Suddenly, an arm shot directly at me. With a sideswipe, I sliced through it, almost without knowing that my knife had made contact. Each time another tentacle came forward, I severed it from the sickening wart-covered body. I was so close to the creature, I could see directly into the eyes, watching me fixedly with a blank stare.

A stream of blue-black fluid began pouring forth from the octopus' ink sac, spreading slowly upward in the water. But its strength was unconquerable. Despite the wounds, one arm had twisted itself around my helmet.

With a scream that sounded hideous in my own ears, I drove my knife upward at the quivering arm wrapped around my helmet. The blade sliced through the boneless flesh, and its grip relaxed as the sinuous tentacle parted in two.

Suddenly, amid this slashing, something seemed to tear at my belt. I felt a savage jerk as a stream of air bubbles shot out of the front of my diving dress. It was punctured. A small rivulet of blood discolored the water close to me! I was bleeding, and the smell of blood in the sea would attract sharks by the dozen!

I could visualize their dark fins cutting the surface above as I was being pulled to the salvage ship—if I were fortunate enough to get that far. That was the last thing I remember before I blacked out.

WHEN I OPENED my eyes with a start, I saw my partner, who had remained on deck and supervised the handling of my lines and crew.

"Well, Lieutenant," he said quietly, "you did come back."

"How—how did you get me up?" I stammered, unbelievably.

"When we didn't hear from you for so long, I ordered two of the native divers to go down and see what was the matter. They found you with your lines fouled and three tentacles of an octopus clinging to you. The octopus was dead. They closed the air-pressure valves in your torn suit, cut away the lines and tentacles, and got you clear just in time. The dress was leaking fast, but they were able to get you on board before all the air was gone."

"Thank God!" was all I could say.

I was the eighth diver who had gone down to that wreck and the *only* one who had escaped a terrible death—and got the treasure, too!

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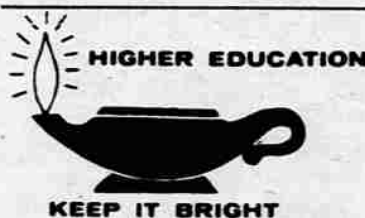
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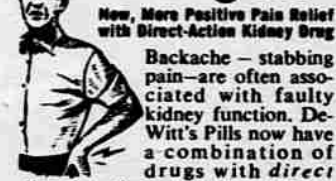
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