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# Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# Black Gold

By THORP McCLUSKY

*An atrocity committed on a slave-ship comes to shocking discovery to wreak revenge on one of the captain's descendants*

**H**ENRY CABOT WADE stood in the small main cabin of the schooner *Marianne*, his patrician forefinger pointing out a small black cross that enigmatically marked the faded chart beneath his hands. Henry Cabot Wade's thin shoulders were stooped, for the cabin, although comfortably appointed, was low-ceiled. The last of the Wades was not as rich as his forefathers had been; as the family fortunes had shrunk so had their sailing craft.

"I think that this is the spot, Captain Manly." Wade's voice was thin, New Englandish, like the bite of frosty air.

Jeremiah Manly nodded. He spoke in a slow, twangy drawl.

"Yes. These are without doubt the two islands indicated on the chart. The strait between is the proper width, and our soundings indicate six fathoms of water."

Wade smiled bleakly.

"I suppose it is too late to begin the search today."

"Yes. The sunlight is fading. We'll remain at this anchorage for the night, and begin work around ten in the morning."

Wade's precise smile broadened.

"That glass-bottomed boat should get results in quick time. This isn't a wide channel." For a moment he squinted at the chart. "I wonder what we'll find?"

Black gold! What a secretive way for my revered ancestor to put it down on paper! Ten tons of black gold! And he hid this chart away in the bottom of his personal chest, so carefully. What *is* black gold?"

Both men stared down at the chart.

It *was* enigmatic—that black cross marked at the mouth of a narrow strait that ran between two small islands. But more enigmatic than the aged chart was the incoherent message written in irregular, angular letters across its face:

Here lie, six fathoms down, ten tons of black gold. And I know now that for this crime I am accursed. May God have mercy on my soul!

Captain Manly cleared his throat in embarrassment.

"You know how your ancestor Ebenezer Wade got his wealth, I assume?"

The owner's lips curled in a thin smile.

"Oh, yes, Captain," he assented, not at all apologetically. "He ran slaves. He bought them on the west coast of Africa and sold them in Savannah and New Orleans. There was money in it. We Wades, until the stock market up and busted us, always made money. Buying furs from the Indians, running loan banks, plunging in stocks—we were always exploiters, we Wades. Don't worry, Captain Manly; I know the bourgeois opinion of our family. But, as man to man it's the only way to get along."

Captain Manly did not lift his eyes from the chart.

"Perhaps," he said then, dryly. "A great many people seem to agree with you. But all this is beside the point. Mr. Wade, did you ever hear the old story that your great-grandfather dumped a shipload of niggers overboard—one time a curious frigate chased him? That he never went to sea afterward?"

Wade laughed sardonically.

"No Wade would have been that soft."

Captain Manly stroked his grizzled

chin. He kept his eyes focused on the chart as he replied:

"This is a narrow, shallow channel, Mr. Wade. A light vessel, if chased, would very likely put in here, where a square-rigged frigate might be expected to have trouble, especially with a quartering wind. It would give a man time to unload his cargo. Nigger smell isn't real evidence, Mr. Wade."

For an instant the small cabin was still. Then Wade smiled, a trifle thinly.

"You're trying to tell me that one of my ancestors was fool enough to draw a chart showing where he'd dumped overboard a shipload of niggers?" he snapped. "You don't know the Wades."

Captain Manly's eyes lifted to the owner's finely chiseled face.

"No person can say with certainty what another human being might do," he said quietly.

Wade laughed harshly.

"We Wades *aren't* human beings—or so a great many people have said. I'll go on deck now and join Evelyn."

Slowly, as the owner stooped through the companionway, Captain Manly rolled up the chart.

## 2

"**T**HANK Heaven, Aunt Leona's gone to bed at last."

Evelyn Phelps' clear, faintly metallic voice tinkled the words. With an appreciative laugh her fiancé hunched his deck chair closer to her own and slipped his wiry right arm possessively about her shoulders. Behind their backs the foremast, a naked black finger, reared up toward the stars. The tropic breeze, balmy from the near-by Gulf Stream, fragrant with the scent of near-by land, whispered in their faces; the islands to port and starboard were low-lying, palm-fringed masses edged with gleaming white. The

moon climbing over the bowsprit was bigger than an orange.

Henry Cabot Wade chuckled.

"A chaperone can be a nuisance on a night like this."

The girl sighed. "Isn't it lovely? Boston seems so far away—and money so unimportant."

For an instant, while the thought of their desiccated family fortunes swept between them, they were silent. No one knew better than they that if this search for black gold proved a failure she must marry someone else.

Restlessly, Henry Cabot Wade stirred.

"We'll get it up," he promised her, the words hard, "if we have to search every inch of this damned channel. We've brought the best diver money could buy, dynamite enough to blow up a city——"

She turned toward him and kissed his cheek, the fringe of his eyelashes, his thin, cruel lips. She admired his profile, sensitive, aquiline, somehow like that of a great predatory bird. . . .

They made love, while the moon crept from above the bowsprit to the foremast. . . .

Suddenly he stiffened, sat erect.

"Look there," he said sharply, pointing forward. Then he shook his head bewilderedly. "It's gone. Did you see it?"

She was touching her disheveled hair into place.

"See what?" she asked, her voice sleepy and warm. "I didn't see anything."

Puzzledly he muttered, "I thought I saw a—a head appear momentarily above the rail, and then vanish. It was just a—sort of dark blob. Optical illusion, I guess." He shrugged, took her, unresisting, in his arms. For long minutes they loved.

Then, abruptly, he loosed her, turned his head to peer forward. He had heard, distinctly, a soft, naked shuffling behind him!

And in that instant a strangled, high-pitched scream burst from his lips, and he was stumbling, scrambling to his feet, his face ashen, his mouth and eyes hideous with terror.

"Run, Evelyn, run!" He was flailing out with his fists in the moonlight, flailing out into—emptiness!

Swiftly she rose, took one step toward him. But he motioned her back. "Run! run! Get Captain Manly—I'll hold them off as long as I can!"

She found her voice, then. "Henry Cabot Wade," she said sharply, "have you gone suddenly crazy? Or is this your idea of humor?"

He did not seem to hear. And suddenly her flesh crawled.

His right fist, lashing out frenziedly, had jolted to an abrupt stop, as though it had struck something she could not see. And slowly, step by step, he was backing, backing toward the rail.

She could see his face now, half turned toward her. And she could see that this was no play-acting, that whatever was happening was, to him at least, horribly real. And still his fists lashed out, until suddenly his left arm lashed out no more, but remained close to his side, tugging, struggling weirdly, as though pinioned to his body by invisible hands.

And through his screams came nightmarish words:

"Run, Evelyn, run! For God's sake, get help! They're swarming over the rail; they're too many for me. Big black niggers, in rusty chains—ahh!"

The words ended in a bubbling moan. His right hand clawed frantically at his throat.

Like a puppet dangling at the end of invisible strings, he rose up and over the rail, *backward*, and vanished from sight. There was a hollow splash. . . .

Evelyn heard her own voice, babbling incoherently. Intermittent, chill waves of

terror swept over her, waves of terror and of horror. For she knew that no man could have leaped like that—over the rail. And the deck was moon-bathed, serene in its utter desertedness. . . .

## 3

CAPTAIN JEREMIAH MANLY stood at the *Marianne's* rail, ear-phones clamped to his head, looking down into the gray, gently heaving channel. His face, in the early dawn, was pale, and there was an odd quaver in his voice as he talked, in low tones, with the diver thirty feet below.

Except for the rhythmic sougning of the pump and the murmur of his own words there was no sound on the *Marianne's* deck. Evelyn Phelps was below, asleep; her aunt had given her morphine. The three members of the crew who were on deck did not speak.

The diver's mechanical speech came through the ear-phones.

"All right. Haul away. Then bring me up. I'm gettin' the jitters."

Half a minute later Henry Cabot Wade's body, the end of a half-inch rope knotted beneath the armpits, came over the rail. The sailors put the dripping corpse down gingerly on the deck and covered it with a tarpaulin.

The diver came up next, bulbous and cumbersome in his heavy suit and helmet. While the sailors stripped him of his helmet Captain Manly took the ear-phones from his own head and put them down with a sigh of relief. The sougning of the pump had ceased.

The diver climbed out of his suit, left it lying in a dripping heap on the deck. He looked at Captain Manly, and Captain Manly saw that the pupils of his eyes were enormous. Suddenly he began to tremble. He was afraid, now that he was safe on deck.

When he spoke, his voice was a croak.

"They were down there, dozens of them—skeletons picked clean by barracuda and shark—all linked together by one endless chain with half a ton of ballast on the end."

Captain Manly's lips moved. But no distinguishable words came forth. The diver sat down weakly beside the pump. He did not look toward the tarpaulin-shrouded form.

"Wade was tangled up in them—there were twenty or more of them piled *on top of him!* They broke all apart when I touched them.

"And one of them, right on the bottom of the pile, had him by the throat. I had to pick the fingerbones out of his neck. And the strangler wore this—this thing."

He extended a peculiar-looking ornament toward Captain Manly. Both men stared silently at the object.

It was a necklace of enormous *teeth*, curiously carved, and bound together by a thin golden wire.

Captain Manly cleared his throat. His mouth felt oddly dry.

"God!" he said, then, slowly. "He must've been a witch-doctor, a *shaman*. I've read about such things in the National Geographic Magazine. He must've put a curse on the Wades."

