



Weird Tales

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Volume 24 CONTENTS FOR JULY, 1934 Number 1

Cover Design	M. Brundage	
<i>Illustrating a scene in "The Trail of the Cloven Hoof"</i>		
The Trail of the Cloven Hoof	Arlton Eadie	2
<i>An astounding weird mystery novel by an English master of eerie stories</i>		
The Master of Souls	Harold Ward	30
<i>A gripping tale of a Satanist, to whom murder was a commonplace and who wallowed in human misery</i>		
The Illusion of Flame	Paul Ernst	53
<i>A withered stranger from far-off Tibet made the blood run cold in the Great Caprin's veins</i>		
Through the Gates of the Silver Key	H. P. Lovecraft and E. H. Price	60
<i>A brilliant story, cosmic in its scope, by two acknowledged masters of weird fiction</i>		
Wild Grapes	August W. Derleth	85
<i>A strange story about the white cloud that hung over the unmarked grave of a murdered man</i>		
Magic Carpets	Ethel Morgan-Dunham	88
<i>Verse</i>		
Vampires of the Moon (end)	Arthur William Bernal	89
<i>A sensational weird-scientific novel of the mind-stealers that inhabited the moon</i>		
The Thunderstones of Nufflo	Ralph Allen Lang	104
<i>A story of revived corpses and the gruesome death that stalked the deck of the Oberon</i>		
The Disinterment of Venus	Clark Ashton Smith	112
<i>Strange yearnings beset a brotherhood of monks when the statue of a pagan goddess was dug up in the abbey garden</i>		
One Christmas Eve	Elliott O'Donnell	117
<i>This peculiar story was told to the author by a little boy who generally speaks the truth</i>		
Drowned Argosies	Jay Wilmer Benjamin	121
<i>A weird story of the sea</i>		
Weird Story Reprint:		
The Dead Man's Tale	Willard E. Hawkins	124
<i>A fascinating story from the very first issue of WEIRD TALES</i>		
The Eyrie		138
<i>An informal chat with the readers</i>		

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Drowned Argosies

By JAY WILMER BENJAMIN

A weird tale of the sea

THE *Volcania* had gone down. This much Charteris knew. It was all he felt he could possibly lay claim to knowing. Drifting five days in an open boat in the Carribbean Sea is not conducive to sanity.

Not that Charteris was going mad. Far from it. But he couldn't understand the ghastly people who seemed to be trying to talk to him.

They were sailormen. He knew it. But what a peculiar crew! There were

half-naked galley slaves with the great calluses still on their palms. There were old shellbacks, barefoot, and naked above the waist. There were men who had driven the great clipper ships from Canton to London in sixty days. And there were men like Charteris, who knew the intricacies of the great liners' guts.

They were trying to talk to him—then Charteris shook his head.

"Dead men can't talk!"

The sun beat down. The brazen sea re-

flected it. Water — *water* — WATER! That was Charteris' sole thought.

Finally one old shellback, whose gaunt figure betokened great strength and greater endurance, beckoned him, and Charteris heard: "I say, maty—don't worry. Who do you want to sign on with?"

"What do you mean?" asked Charteris. "You can't——"

The old shellback laughed, and Charteris shuddered. It is odd to hear ghosts laugh, and Charteris knew these were ghosts. Where else could men have come from in all that dying sea?

"Think we're dead, don't you?" said the shellback. "Well, we ain't! Only time a sailor dies is when they plant him six feet under in a churchyard. There's men here who served in every kind of craft, from a bireme to a liner."

"Who are you?" asked Charteris.

"Me? Why, bless you, I sailed with Paul Jones on the *Ranger*. A good cap'n, that, only a bit of a driver."

"*Paul Jones?* Why, man, he's dead nearly two hundred years!"

"Not quite that," said the old shellback, and laughed.

"Ugh!" thought Charteris, "I *must* be going mad."

"Not quite that," said the old shellback again. "Now you take Petrus here"—and he waved a hand toward a squat hairy half-naked man—"he sailed with Quintus Maximus when they stripped the Mediterranean of the Carthaginian boats."

Petrus grinned and gabbled something. The old shellback translated. "He says it was a hell of a good fight, and you should have seen 'em scatter when the bires came."

"What? Served under Quintus Maximus? Why, man, that's nineteen hundred years ago!"

"Nigher two thousand—but what's time, what's time?"

And he spat.

That, thought Charteris, was the ragged limit. He must be mad.

There was silence once more until Charteris leaned his head against a thwart and began to cry, in long, racking sobs. The shellback reached over, and Charteris shivered at the touch of his hand. It was icy cold, in spite of the brazen sun still sending its red-hot rays to beat on Charteris' back.

"I felt that way when they left me to drift, too. You know, I was the man they lost from the *Ranger*. But hell—here's Hendrik Hudson. Want to talk to *him* about driftin'?"

"No," said Charteris, "no—no—no—no—no—no—no——"

A voice broke in, a deep voice vibrant with sympathy.

"Poor youngster! They all feel that way just before they sign on. Myself, I felt it too."

"Who are you?" Charteris asked wildly.

"Hendrik Hudson, cap'n of the *Half-Moon*."

"What are you doing here?"

"I signed on to sail under Admiral Beresford. I command the *Saturnia*. Do you want to sign on with me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Young fool! Do you not know that we who sailed the seven seas still sail beneath her bosom? Look!"—and he stabbed a thick fat finger at the green waves.

Weakly Charteris crawled to the gunwale and looked. Down below he saw a tall clipper ship sailing serenely. Her sails were gone, and in their places were long streamers of kelp. From truck to keelson she was wreathed with flying seaweed, but about her decks moved sailormen going to and fro quite as if it were their normal life. Muffled by sixty fathoms of water, he heard the strokes of a

ship's bell and a dim voice: "*Three bells! Relieve the wheel and lookout.*"

"But I know nothing about sailing-ships, Cap'n. I'm an engineer."

"So? Nat!" And Hendrik Hudson turned to the old shellback. "Does Cap'n Lucks need an engineer?"

"Depends, Cap'n. I hear he needed a man with an extra first's certificate."

"Call him up, will you?"

And Charteris' eyes bulged as he saw the sailor, Nat, produce a bosun's whistle and blow an odd piping call.

The sea boiled, and up rose a man dressed even as Charteris' old captain. The four gold stripes of a master mariner shone as they had in the days when Captain Lucks had proudly trod the deck of the *Titania*.

"Hello. What's up?" he boomed.

And Charteris noticed that there was a slight hiss to the S's, as though the captain had false teeth.

"This man, Cap'n," said Nat, respectfully pulling his forelock, "is gonna sign on with you."

"Hmm. What can he do?"

"I'm an extra first, sir," said Charteris, convinced by now that all this was more than just a dream, that it was indeed actually life.

DIMLY on the horizon rose a faint smudge of smoke as a long, lean coast-guard cutter drove its knife-like prow through the waters, searching for survivors of the *Volcania*. On the bridge a tense officer quartered the sea with terrible efficiency.

"God!" he thought. "To be left adrift here! Bos'n!"

His voice was sharp. He had picked up the white speck that was Charteris' boat.

"A quarter west! Call the cap'n. I see a boat!"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

The wheel spun. A messenger raced aft to get the captain.

The captain took his position on the bridge and whistled down the speaking-tube.

"Engine room," he said, "bridge speaking. Can you get a couple more knots outta this hooker?"

The funnels belched black smoke. The destroyer's frame quivered as her mighty engines thrust her forward with renewed speed.

She stood by Charteris' floating prison. A boat was lowered and able seamen lifted Charteris, trying weakly to salute someone they could not see, to its security.

"I'll be honored to sign on, sir," mumbled Charteris vaguely.

They had seen men adrift in open boats before. They knew what the sea and sun can do. So they looked at him sympathetically and went about the business of transferring him to the cutter.

Tenderly the hard seamen carried him below, still talking of things they did not understand, of drowned ships, and that ghostly whistle on the *Saturnia*.

Charteris gazed wildly about him. He seemed to be trying to place his surroundings. "My new quarters, Cap'n?" he asked hoarsely.

"Take it easy, son—you're all ship-shape now," advised a grizzled bosun's mate.

Charteris looked at the speaker without comprehension. Suddenly he fell back and began to babble unintelligibly.

The old bosun's mate pursed his lips and spat thoughtfully. Then he bent forward.

His eyes widened. Swiftly he straightened and crossed himself reverently.

"Cripes!" said he in amazement; "how'd *this* guy know Lucks—and *know* he had false teeth?"