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Black Marlin

A Novel by Ben R. Williams

Chapter XXIII: The Lowest Ebb

Bill scowled at the battered desk in his Captain's quarters, a cigarette jutting loosely from his lips. "Help me to understand," said he. "You boarded the ship. Darling revealed Papa Shillingi to be an escaped slave. A scuffle ensued. Darling somehow made the ship begin exploding. You all escaped, save Ten, who is presumably dead, as is Darling. Am I accurate so far?"

"Yes sir," Pincus said. "Dreadful business! Just dreadful!"

Bill inhaled half his cigarette and tapped the ashes on to his desk. He spoke through a blue plume exiting his nostrils. "Here is where I have a problem. Before his presumed demise, Darling shared the location of the Black Marlin, yes?"

"Yes," Mulligan said.

"And the location he gave," Bill said, exceedingly slowly, "Was Crocker Land."

"Indeed!" said I, excited to be a part of the conversation.

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Bill placed his cigarette on the table, a curl of smoke drifting up from its tip. He scrutinized it a moment, then violently slapped his good hand down atop it and lunged from his chair!

"There is no Goddamn Crocker Land, you fucking idiots!" he screamed. "It's an optical illusion! A Fata Morgana! The only asshole dumb enough to believe in it was Peary, even though his Eskimos told him it was merely mist! And now you've been suckered by it, too! Suckered by a dead man!"

(Of course, dear readers, I hear your plaintive cry. "But Isaac!" you cry plaintively, "I am of course familiar with 20th century geographical surveys, and I know with certainty that the mirage believed to be Crocker Land was first sighted by Robert Peary in 1906 at Cape Colgate and only proven to be a phantom after his ill-fated 1916 northern expedition! And yet, Isaac, you have indicated that this narrative is taking place in the year 1899! How then was your Captain to know of both the existence and confutation of the landmass a full seven years before its very discovery and naming?"

This seeming plot-hole is, of course, easily explained.

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Imagine a common phonograph record. As the record rotates on the player, you may notice that the outer edge seemingly moves faster than the inner edge, yet the entire record is obviously moving at the same speed. What you do not realize is that the outer edge of the record is in fact moving forward in time, albeit incrementally. This is why a well-used record will sometimes appear particularly weathered at the outer edges: the outer edges are, in fact, older than the inner portion closest to the needle. This same principle may be applied on a larger scale. As we all know, the Earth orbits the sun and rotates on its axis, which would lead the observer to believe that the Earth's equator (being most distant from the point of rotation) would be farther forward in time than the poles. This is not the case, for the more dramatic point of rotation is the Earth's sun. If we were to look down on the Earth and sun from some high vantage, gazing directly at their northern poles, we would see that the Earth's pole is the most consistently distant point from the true origin of rotation, as the pole remains in stationary orbit with the sun while the outer edge of the earth constantly rotates, thereby canceling out the effects of rotational futurism. Therefore, time passes more quickly the closer you are to a pole. It is a little known fact that when Roald Amundsen

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set foot on the exact point of the south pole in December 1911 (equator year 1858), he aged fifteen years in an hour and quite nearly died. Conversely, many South American people may appear to be mere children while actually being middle-aged if not elderly. It is even said that one of the great tortoises Charles Darwin encountered while in the Galapagos was a first-hand witness to the birth of Christ. While any sailor knows this odd phenomena by heart, most world governments have quietly agreed to keep it a secret from civilians, as they would find it deeply confusing and troubling. Additionally, the knowledge could potentially cause a vast migration to the countries surrounding the equator, which would have a devastating impact on out-lying real estate values.)

Mulligan and I exited the Captain's Quarters sufficiently brow-beaten. Behind the Porta Sancta, Bill raged and howled, heaving various items from one end of the quarters to the other and then back again. We ascended the stairs and returned to the frigid deck.

"Will the Captain be all right?" I asked of my burly compatriot.

"He'll be fine," Mulligan said, jabbing his pipe-stem between his teeth. "I'm just happy to see that he is still

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capable of rage. When a broken man can no longer be roused to fury, that is when you must become concerned."

A fair point fairly stated. And though I myself was not nearly so aggrieved as our Captain, I will admit that a pervading sense of failure entered my own mind after finding ourselves once more directionless in our hunt for the Black Marlin. It is fortunate, then, that as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once observed, "Defeat may be victory in disguise; the lowest ebb is the turn of the tide," for it was at that precise moment that Mulligan and I heard Weems beckon from the Temperance's prow:

"Gentlemen, come quickly!"

We arrived at the gunwale to be greeted by two strange sights. The first was Papa Shillingi seated upon a barrel, rubbing alcohol spirits into his arms, his hands coming back smeared blue, for it seems that the intricate tattooed scrollwork which covered his body was little more than carefully applied ink designed to complete the image of the mysterious islander. But the second sight was even more uncanny: Weems stood apart from the gunwale holding Darling's fishing-pole, the pole to which he had attached his strange insectile lure. Dangling from the line, dripping wet and squirming unsettlingly, was a snow-white be-tentacled monstrosity with piercing golden eyes.

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"It is *Albusoctopus ferox*," Weems said proudly, his face ruddy from the exertion of suspending the beast. "The White Octopus."

"Pretty crazy, right?" Shillingi said, scrubbing at his hands.

"Wonderful," Mulligan said, "I'm happy you've made a new friend."

"Ho ho," Weems said, "You gentlemen don't understand. What you are observing is no mere cephalopod. It is a myth made manifest. The only biologist to ever see it was my mentor, the late Dr. Murphy. He encountered a small island off the coast of Chile, the inhabitants of which worshipped the White Octopus as a living God. They practiced a primitive form of sacrament, consuming the flesh and drinking the blood, believing that it would transubstantiate within them and remake them as Gods, all-wise and all-knowing, opening their minds to arcane cosmic truth. Dr. Murphy claimed the species dead, hunted to extinction by the islanders. The only specimen he saw was a tattered skin. But this one, gentlemen, still lives. It is, perhaps, an unintended gift from Professor Darling."

"Why did the islanders believe such hogwash?" Mulligan asked.

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"Because, my friends," Weems said with an impish grin, "Every cell of the creature's body is steeped in potent hallucinogenic venom."

We watched quietly as the ivory mass squirmed and writhed, its grotesque suckers quivering, its golden eyes observing us with a disconcerting intellect.

"Gentlemen," Mulligan said, "We've been duped. There is no Crocker Land. We are no closer to the Black Marlin than when we began. Our Captain is out of sorts. Our cabin boy exploded. And I am powerfully hungry."

Mulligan paused to tap his pipe ash over the gunwale.

"It is time for a vision quest."