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Black Marlin

A Novel by Ben R. Williams

Chapter VIII: Weems and His Diving-Bell

It was still dark when I awoke, Luna not yet having been relieved from her late shift by her brother Sol. The massive presence that had previously shared my hammock was gone, and all around the sounds of rousing sailors greeted my ears: clinks of tin coffee cups, scrapes of rigging dragging the deck, and muttered expletives regarding the early hour. I laid very still and kept my eyes shuttered, in the hope that my fellow sea-men, respecting my difficult transitional period from "land-lubber" to sailor, would appreciate my desire to remain a-bed a bit longer and respond by leaving me be until noon, and then possibly bringing me a plate of eggs and some hot tea. This was not to be; before long, a nasally voice beckoned me:

"Hey. Hey, you. Wake up, you hump."

"Go away," said I. "God dammit."

"You have ten seconds before I heave a bucket of slop-water in your face. One..."

I opened my eyes to see a man standing before me, an odd-looking fellow to say the least, though since I often find it difficult to say the least, I will offer more

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detail. His suit and tie were strikingly unattractive, dyed a shade reminiscent of egg-yolk, and of a cut that had fallen out of favor at least twenty years prior, and was likely unpopular during its heyday. A pair of round wire-rim spectacles adorned his pinched, intense face, and his hair was slicked with some species of animal fat, giving it a glistening, vaguely rancid appearance. A small rubberized scabbard, perhaps six inches long, hung from his belt, a stag handle poking from it, and in his left hand he held a black ironwood cudgel, its head stained with dried blood. In sum, the man was not precisely the sight that anyone hopes to witness immediately upon awakening.

"Twothreefourfivesix—"

I rolled from the hammock in one smooth motion and stood groggily before the man. He extended a palm to me.

"Henry Earl Weems," he said.

"Isaac Laquedem," I replied, taking his mitt and giving it a brief shake.

"I understand you wish to learn the ways of the fisher-man, Isaac," Mr. Weems said, the gaze of manic intensity never leaving his beady eyes.

"Sure," said I.

"Follow me."

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Weems stepped quickly, making a path for the forecastle, and I followed, stepping over coils of rope and bricks of kentledge. The ship was cutting speedily southward, the sails full, and the rocking gyrations of the old boat made it difficult to keep my footing; I had not yet developed my "sea-legs," nor any other oceanic appendages. Weems stopped at the port side of the forecastle, facing the shore, a scrap of western land visible at the horizon, though dark still, not yet exposed to the gradually rising sun. At Weems' feet rested a collection of fishing-poles and tackle-boxes, along with several buckets and all manner of scaling and filleting knives.

"This is where I like to fish," Weems said, lifting one of the smaller fishing-poles. "This portion of the ship is far from the engines, so you don't have to worry about the motor vibrations interfering with the resonant frequency of your skull."

"Of course," said I.

"Have you ever been fishing before, Isaac?" Weems asked, jerking a few feet of line from the brass reel.

"Yes, sir," I said. "I used to fish the Smith River as a young man, angling for brown trout. I have also pulled in

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a few whiskery cat-fish in my day, along with the noble bluegill. Delicious creature, the—

“Were you wearing a crinoline dress at the time? Because those are women’s fish. Fish for women to catch.”

“All right,” I said.

Weems affixed a great lead sinker to his line, then, about a foot further down, a sharpened steel hook. With this done, he returned his concentration to the lecture.

“Sea-fishing is as different from freshwater-fishing as a horse race is from a child’s sack-race. The stakes are higher; the losses more devastating. A man may have his life ruined; he may even lose it entirely.”

“I have never heard of a man losing his life at a horse race,” I said, the unpleasant early hour stirring up my contrarian spirit.

“You fool,” Weems muttered. “A horse may break free of the track, enter the stands, and trample the onlookers. It is how I lost my father. Now pay attention. When you cast your line into a pond or river, there are but a set number of fish species you may anticipate catching, most of them rather diminutive. But when you cast your line in the sea... ah! Only God knows what you’ll haul up from the depths. Perhaps it will be a nourishing fish, a sea-bass or tuna. Or perhaps it will be a razor-toothed shark bent on your

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destruction. You may even hook Old Char... well, the less said about him, the better."

In spite of myself, I found Mr. Weems speech elevating to my mood. I have often felt, in this modern age of ours, that while our scientists kindly offer up a finer standard of living in one hand, they slip the other into our pocket and steal our sense of mystery. There is so little left to explore on our colonized continents, yet these bold sailors venture every day into the last wild frontier and bear witness to places and creatures still unknown to civilization. A frightening prospect? Certainly, but any anxiety, when faced squarely, must also be followed by fulfillment; the fulfillment of knowing that you have seen God's own wonders, and further, been the first to lay eyes on them since that strange clay rolled from the Creator's hands.

"What a wonderful menagerie you've likely seen, Mr. Weems."

Weems spat over the gunwale and reached into a bucket of fish-parts, removing a severed chub-head. He jabbed his steel fishing-hook through the eyes.

"Wonderful, hell! Oh, I used to find it wonderful, once..." Weems gently cast his hook into the sea, letting the

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line spool out until the sinker quite nearly dragged the bottom. He continued:

“But then I set foot inside that cursed diving bell.”

Weems spat out the phrase “cursed diving bell” with such enmity that the sky overhead almost seemed to darken. Then, upon closer examination, I discovered that the sky actually had darkened, the clouds perhaps willed into existence by Weems’ animosity, or, more likely, as the result of natural weather patterns. In either case, it seemed appropriate to the dark tale soon to follow.

“It was nearly fifteen years ago,” Weems said, staring out at the shadowed sea. “I was in graduate school at the time, serving as student assistant to the great Doctor Montrose Murphy, the pre-eminent marine biologist at Harvard. The other students called him Doctor, though he gave me the rare honor of calling him by his nick-name, ‘Murph.’ He took a shine to me, you see. Before I became his student assistant, I was merely his student, though I won his respect due to my incredible propensity for poking holes in the logic of my fellow classmates, confronting them with their own idiocy, and making them burst into tears of shame. This, you see, was Murph’s greatest joy; while he enjoyed teaching to an extent, his true love was witnessing the uncontrollable weeping of the ignorant. He

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could never crack Henry Earl Weems, however; I was too prepared, too studious. I was a scholar, his star pupil, and I suppose that when he watched me in his laboratory berating my classmates, mocking their idiotic questions while parading about wagging a pickled sea-cucumber as though it were my own enormous genital organ, which I would then suggest I had used on their mothers the night previous, he saw in me a bit of himself, and halfway through the first semester, I became the Doctor's right hand. We would meet in his office an hour before class, split one or two bottles of wine, and then arrive at the lecture hall, Murph screaming out his biology sermon while beating upon his desk dictatorially, I at his side laughing uproariously and whipping sharpened pencils into the audience. We became a notorious duo around Cambridge-town, and new students were offered whispered warnings against entering Dr. Murphy's marine biology gauntlet.

"At the end of the first semester, it became clear that Dr. Murphy wanted me to be his protégé. The day of his final exam (which I was able to opt out of due to my stellar performance) he took me aside and offered me a bit of exciting news: he had just received word that Dr. Sadler, dean of the biology department, was planning a record-setting deep sea dive. A diving bell was to be taken

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a few miles off the coast of Massachusetts, and a two-man team would be lowered to a depth of 700 feet. They would then emerge from the moon pool at the bell's base, clad in sophisticated diving-suits, and gather up whatever unusual fauna they could collect from the sea floor before being returned to the surface. Dr. Sadler had only two candidates in mind; Dr. Murphy and myself. The choices were obvious, as we were clearly the two glittering jewels in the department's moribund crown. The dive was to take place shortly before Christmas. I agreed immediately, as did Murph.

"It wasn't long before I found myself aboard a large research vessel, purchased earlier that year by the well-to-do father of one of Harvard's more imbecilic students. As we bobbed along the Massachusetts coast, Dr. Sadler explained to Murph and myself that due to the crushing pressure we would experience at 700-plus feet of depth, the dive was to be a short one, a mere half-hour, in order to prevent potential neurological damage. We would have but a few minutes to explore the ocean's floor before we must return to the bell and be hauled back to the ship. I recall how merry Dr. Sadler seemed, smiling and laughing as we climbed into those heavy brass-and-canvas suits. So close

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to Christmas, he could have easily been mistaken for Saint Nicholas himself.

"Before long, we were inside the descending bell, dropping down into the murky depths while the water below our mounted chairs stayed at the same level as if by magic. The moon pool is an amazing feat of physics; the water below the bell stays perfectly level due to the pressure of the air being pumped in at the top. If those pumps were to reverse for but a second, the water would rise up with the force of a speeding locomotive; it is an ominous situation to be in. However, Murph and myself were in fine spirits, eagerly looking forward to strolling the ocean's floor and collecting new species, all of which we intended to name after ourselves. We sat on our mounted benches, hunched from the weight of our bulging helmets. Through the thick glass porthole of my headpiece, I watched Murph sort through the fine mesh bags we intended to fill with the bounty of the sea-floor. After a few minutes, the bell jerked and settled at the end of its cable: 700 feet, a world record.

"Two bright arc sodium lanterns had been affixed to the inside of the bell, both pointed towards the moon pool. I switched them on, and just four feet below the bell, I could see the ocean's muddy floor. A remarkable sight;

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flecks of 'benthic snow' swirled and eddied through the water, tiny fragments of scales and flesh from the fish being predated upon above us. In the mud, swirls and tracks from the worms and stars and batfish that wriggled and trod the Neptunian landscape. The Doctor and I checked our breathing tubes and plunged into the water, collecting sacks in hand. For the next five minutes, we gathered frantically. Brittle stars, sea squirts, tube worms, mantis shrimp; whatever was too slow to evade our grasp (and large enough to be spotted through the foggy portholes of the diving helmets) was gathered up and collected. Unsatisfied with our collection (as is the natural state of all collectors) though certain that our allotted time had run out, we hastened back to the bell and heaved ourselves back upon our opposing benches.

"As we waited to be pulled back up to the surface, we gazed through the moon pool, watching the procession of denizens of the deep carrying on about their business. Any fisher-man will tell you that a strong light aimed into the water at night will draw small water-bugs and single-celled animals close, followed by small fish to feed on them, followed by larger fish to feed on those and so on. The effect on the ocean floor was much the same, and before long we were astounded by the panoply of tiny creatures

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swimming about our pool. We watched this frenzy transfixed, until the Doctor paused and waved for my attention. He unlatched his diving helmet and set it aside, and I followed suit.

“‘Say Weems,’ he said, ‘We were only supposed to be in this bell for half an hour, yet I feel certain that more time has passed.’

“I agreed with his assessment and we decided it was time for action. The bell had been outfitted with an emergency pull cord, its string running the length of our air-tube and terminating at a small silver bell mounted on the deck of the research vessel; a pull of the cord and subsequent ring of the bell would indicate to the crew above that something was amiss and we needed to be brought back to surface. I gave the cord a light tug, expecting to feel a bit of resistance due to its vast length, yet I was surprised to find no resistance, as the cord was attached to nothing at all and fell off in my hand.

“It was at this point that Doctor Murphy shared with me a concern that our current predicament may have been related to his proclivity for bedding Doctor Sadler’s wife.

“There is little I can tell you of our remaining time in the diving bell, Isaac. It comes to me only in flashes. It was cold, I’ll tell you that, colder than the ninth

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circle. Had it not been for the meager warmth of those twin arc sodiums I'd have surely died. Yet this, Isaac, was the ironic catalyst for Dr. Murphy's demise. As I said, those lights drew in a food chain, and the longer we sat huddled in that frigid bell, the larger the links on that chain became. And as I sat there on the bench above the moon pool, talking idly to Murph about the terrible things we would do to Sadler if we survived this ordeal, a massive Humboldt squid rose up from the pool, wrapped its savage tentacle around Dr. Murphy's legs, and dragged him down to his death. It happened so quickly that the water barely splashed; one moment he was there, and the next moment, there was nothing left but an empty bottle of Pinot Gris bobbing in a silent pool. There was nothing I could do; nothing but wait. I couldn't tell at the time if I'd been down there for two hours or two years. I had to drink my own urine, Isaac. Admittedly I'd been doing that for years, but this was the first time I drank it purely for survival rather than just the restorative health effects. I began to day-dream, and over time, my fantasies turned to delusions and hallucinations. I saw fish with women's faces, ghosts of dead sailors; I had developed Dementia Atlantica, popularly known as 'Sea-Madness.' Eventually, I snapped. I knew I'd die if I stayed in that bell; I knew I had to make

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my escape. I took my diving helmet, chewed through the air hose, and plugged the orifice with a piece of Dr. Murphy that had floated up to the moon pool's surface. I then took a deep breath, put the helmet back on, and pushed myself off the bench, dropping down through the pool to the ocean's floor. And then, Isaac, I don't remember how I did it, but I climbed 700 feet up the diving bell's tether, never looking back. I was Orpheus leaving hell. And then I dropped to the deck of the research vessel and shed my helmet, only to find Dr. Sadler, seated in a lounge chair and drinking a gin and tonic. I thought his eyes would fall out of his head when he saw me. I suspect he thought I was a ghost."

"My God," I said. "Whatever happened to him?"

"He died somehow," Weems said, giving his rod a sudden hook-setting jerk. "And that, Isaac, is the story of why the ocean no longer enchants me as it once did. I have seen its true face, and I assure you it is the face of a hideous, cold-hearted scum-whore."

Weems began hauling in his line with studied speed, pausing here and there to let the creature at the end fight its feeble fight before resuming his slow reelings. After a time, a healthy if singularly unattractive fish emerged from the turbid water. Weems slapped it on the gunwale to

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stun it, then stared into its eyes, near as beady as his own.

"Look," he remarked, "A God damn flounder."

Weems dark tale had held me in thrall, and it was only at its completion that I regained an awareness of my surroundings; most particularly, the gathering darkness which I had noted early on in the recounting had become quite dramatic, the rising sun all but blotted out by a mass of sickly purple thunderheads approaching from the east. Lightning flashed within the front as regularly as the pop of magnesium bulbs in a gathering of photographers recording a particularly grisly scene.

"Mr. Weems," said I, "I believe a tempest approaches."

Weems plunged a filleting knife into the flounder's white belly and peeled back the skin, a look of ominous satisfaction in his vulpine smile. "Then call me Prospero!" said he, and bellowed with laughter, slinging a rope of fish innards into the hungry sea. I felt a Nameless Fear wash over me, a sense of black impending doom, though had I been pressed to finger the catalyst, I would have been hard-pressed to limit myself to a single one.