

Story no. 01

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A tale by Captain Don, written for his mate Percy. This is a yarn deep and diabolical from the chest of Davy Jones himself.

May 1962 had been a confused period; our recent passage a drastic failure. Various islands had informed us that it was best for us to transit because of our immigration status. Disappointed and disillusioned, we had sought for greener pastures and decided to make for the island of Antigua in hopes of a better existence. Nelson's Harbor, with charter possibilities and maybe a few divers, could be our best bet.

The last twenty-four hours had been overcast with a hint of rain. The seas were choppy as was to be expected since we were beating our way up the coast of South America against the trade winds and Caribbean currents. A lot of spay was in the air, making it cold and miserable; I felt the time perfect for a good, scary story.

I was a natural bag of yarns and Percy, my Aruba-born mate, loved stories of the Twilight Zone. Some of my best yarns came from the dark side, and the boy had become entranced by these tales.



The Valerie Queen

Bound for the island of Antigua out of San Francisco 1954

May 1960

The Story of Ralph

Through the night I fretted in the darkness, dreading the arrival of the morn. Standing alone under a towering mass of pulling canvas, a station which normally was a sailor's ecstasy, I felt unusually ill at ease, the scream of the waves unusually loud as the bow hammered relentlessly through them. Again and again the thought of Ralph occupied my thoughts.

Repeatedly, I would tell myself that it was, of course, completely insane to even imagine such nonsense.

The story of Ralph buried deep in the ship's ballast probably had no basis in fact at all; I damned myself for even allowing such nonsense to enter my head and tried to cast all thoughts of Ralph to the wind. Nevertheless, there was a story. Ralph Enncus, a friend of the ship's owner, was said to have been murdered while the ship was visiting the island of Catalina off the coast of California during the summer of 1923, crewed by William Randall, Marion, a lady called Louella and, of course, poor Ralph, who supposedly had become a permanent part of my ship.

The moon came and lingered to meet with the sun, and I still fought the ridiculous idea that Ralph...well, that Ralph somehow was still aboard my ship. When Percy, my mate, finally awoke in the morning, I knew what action I must take; there was no choice for me other than to disprove the very diabolical story that I had retrieved when researching my ship's history.

"Percy," I said to a very sleepy and inattentive boy, "How would you like to help me with a bit of a job?"

"What's that?"

"Fixin' a leak in the hull," I informed him.

"Oh, lez jus' put da pump on some more," he summed up the conversation with a deep frown.

Armed with a heavy sledge, chisels, and assorted tools, I lifted the midship hatch, and went below to the exposed concrete and boiler plate punching, additional ballast reportedly poured in 1923, and set about the horrendous task of removing some of it. How much, I had no idea.

Under a blazing sun with ventilation to a trickle, I worked. The hammer rang in the confines below as I struggled with my chore. The steel chisel now began to roll its edges. Then, wok! A single echo of the hollow blow filled the cabin as smoke fills a pool hall. I sat, stunned. Hours, with always the same hard, sharp ring and now this sound, as if striking a wooden block with a wet rag. I lifted the hammer once again, steadied myself against the roll of the ship, and brought it down smartly. Wok! “Only a wooden plank that carelessly had become buried!” I said to myself and set about the task of uncovering it. The next blow sent the chisel through and into a hollow. I was terrified, my heart thudding in my ears.

I felt like I had penetrated a crypt. I felt the chill of the cool, sour bilge air reach out and spread over my body. Frantically, I smashed at the orifice that I had breached. Piece by piece, the wound soon became larger. My hands dug at the chips as they fell. I wasn't aware that behind me stood Percy, looking down into the hole I had opened.

“Well, Cappy, now what you gone and done?”

Percy startled me, and I turned to look up into the face of a very serious lad. For the first time, I noticed that he did not have that ever-present youthful appearance and I thought it strange that he could have

aged so rapidly. I shook my head, perhaps in bewilderment or maybe in answer to his question, and stared down at what my efforts had uncovered. I heard him quietly leave. Sitting deep in concert chunks and dust, the heat enough to bake bread, I considered chipping deeper. Instead, I sought the cool air of the deck.

Topside, for the first time since early morning, I stood looking forward when an awesome pain struck me full between the eyes. I reeled and stumbled against the cabin side. Percy secured the wheel and rushed to my side then half dragged me back to the seat by the wheel. When he thought me secure, he went forward, returning with a large bucket. I noted it was filled with rubble chippings. As he drew near, my head felt as if it were in a vice, and I vomited over the side.

He did not understand and stood gawking at his captain whom he thought had gone insane. At the same moment, the unattended ship gave a lurch, knocking him off balance; as he fell backwards, he dropped the bucket onto the deck, spilling its contents.

In that second my memory was gone; the next thing I remember was waking in my own cabin. Percy had hove to the ship and was standing at my side looking very frightened. My intense pain was gone, though, leaving only an inkling of pain over my left eye.

“Well, Cappy, how you feelin’?” He looked worried and haggard, like an old man who had just lost his pension.

“Okay, Perce,” and I tried to smile. I was very thankful for that boy. He grinned and left the cabin. I heard him make his way to the deck and soon felt the ship getting under way again. I lay in thought for some moments then went to join Percy on deck, relieved to find no pain reoccurred.

I looked at the mess on the deck where the bucket had fallen. I approached the bucket and its spilt contents gingerly, not wanting to reactivate the pain. It was almost as if there were a will drawing me closer. I looked down, seeing nothing more than the concrete chips that had filled many buckets before.

As a magnet it pulled me. Now on my hand and knees, I willed my fingers to sift the chippings left in the fallen bucket. And at a moment, as if an electric shock zapped my hand, the fingers of my left hand found something metal. I hurriedly cleared the object, my heart hammering. What I saw was a simple gold ring. With care I lifted it, noting its heaviness, and confirmed it was a gold band.

I went below again to have a look at the hole and shook my head in bewilderment. I then carefully placed the ring with the inscription “*RE Love ME*” gently on the left side of the cavity, piling some rubble over it to hold it in place. I would pour new concrete and tidy everything up when we were next in port.

Strangely, I never considered keeping the ring myself, or even selling it, although we could have used the money. I didn’t even feel any pull to dig

deeper into the cement or into the mystery. After all, Ralph had supposedly been murdered back in 1923, before I was even born. Feeling content now with my discovery, I reflected that possibly Ralph had lost the ring while helping to pour the cement. Or, maybe not. Maybe he had just wanted me to know that he was here.

“Good night, Perce,” I said as the boy slipped down into the engine room where there was a fold-down bunk over the big Hall Scott engine where the watch slept. He had a comfortable bunk forward but during times when we were underway at sea this is where we slept to be at hand, just in case.

I could hear him fidgeting about and couldn't help but wonder if he was thinking of all that concrete in the bilge only a few feet under him.

Well, so be it, and I wrapped a woolen night coat tightly around me and settled in for a long and squally night at the helm. It was nights like this that I sometimes really hated myself for wanting to be a sailor.