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HE PICKED UP THE FALLEN SPEAR AND HELD IT READY (*page 6*)

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THE TWISTED FOOT

BY

HENRY MILNER RIDEOUT

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
G. C. WIDNEY

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
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Fine money

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TO MY NEPHEW

SAMUEL RIDEOUT WEBBER

FOR THE SAKE OF MANY DAYS OUTDOORS, WHEN

WE SHOT AND TRAMPED THROUGH THE WOODS,

FISHED THE FLOWAGE, SWAM IN NASH'S LAKE,

OR CHOPPED THE CHRISTMAS TREES THAT

SHOWERED US WITH SNOW

H. M. R.

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THE TWISTED FOOT

CHAPTER I

THE SILVER LOCKET

THE captain's biscuits, a Huntley and Palmer tin, were slung — high beyond reach of white ants or more nauseous vermin — on a lanyard made fast to the awning stanchion. There they swung dimly, beside a bunch of ripe bananas, in the darkest part of the boat-deck. If Agapito, the *mestizo* steward, had stayed awake long enough to coil up loose ends . . . but a tale was hanging by that slender cord, along with the captain's biscuits.

Into this tale, David Bowman plunged head first over the side, through the unguarded gap astern of the long-boat. The rotten cord snapped from his ankle, and he fell whirling, in a shock of surprise and blind rage. A long time, it seemed, he fought and choked in the cool darkness under the ocean. Then, as he shouted between air and water, his streaming eyes, blinded and stung with salt, cleared to show him the golden jet of phosphorus squirting from his mouth, the unbroken swell of the tropic sea like black oil moving under

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the gray mist of moonshine, and the Santo Niño's lights already far ahead.

"Wait!" he sputtered peevishly; then shouted, "Ahoy, Santo Niño! Help! Man overboard!"

Midnight, on the Sulu Sea, was astonishingly wide and still. The swimmer heard only a muffled, mechanical panting which, from that black bulk ahead, reached him fainter and thinner, like the low-trailing stink and dropping cinders of Mitsui coal. No other sound; no other stir, he thought, but the breath of the departing ship.

He choked again, coughed, and at last, catching a mouthful of air without water, shouted. His voice rose frail and angry, an atom of sound.

"No use," he perceived, in a flash of lonely terror. The Tagalog crew were all asleep, of course; and of course his friend, the captain, dozed in a chair by the wheelhouse, and wondered what kept him aft so long, when the two good-night drinks waited. Now they would wait forever. His drink would be the last bitter draught of brine and darkness.

He cried out against that fate. The two dull lanterns faded more and more through the smoke, above the hoary wake of phosphorus. No one heard.

A moment ago, when his foot caught in the slatternly coils of the lanyard, he had been walking forward, prosperous, his head full of important

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things to do, up north, in Manila. Now remained only two great unrealities, — a swimmer, and the moonlit ocean. The act of staying afloat became so heavy, all at once, that he would have flung up both arms and let go, had not a fragment from an unknown book haunted him, ringing like a sunken bell:—

"the bubbling cry
Of some strong swimmer in his agony."

"That means — me!" He lashed out in dismay; but the lights grew less, the black shape lowered and shrank upon the heaving, liquid foundation of his sight. Only the unknown line, a dread stimulus, kept him at work above water. "Some strong swimmer," — that was all he or his final contest meant, to the tropic ocean and the tropic moon.

He groaned. Anguish of the spirit, it might have been; but before the sound went wide and was lost, he knew it for anguish of the body. "Swimming too hard: ease up," commanded some unconquerable secret part of him; and obeying, his arms and legs no longer jerked out violently, but began to move with the strong, deliberate ease of habit. Presently, by the same impulse, he found his fingers tugging stubbornly, under water, at buttons and belt. All day, by a lucky chance, he had gone about the decks bare-

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foot; and now, at last, he managed to wriggle and tear loose from the leaden wrappings of jacket and trousers. He swam naked, as light — by contrast — as a floating sea-gull.

Behind him, for the time of a few strokes, the swollen folds of white drill glistened in the moonlight, like ghostly spirals of a water-snake.

Before him, the Santo Niño had already faded to a pair of twinkling points, often smudged out by the tiny black squall of smoke. Beyond these, on his right hand, stretched a continuous gray vapor, the fusion of sky and sea in the moonlight; but, on his left hand, the distant contours of island mountains floated like darker vapors, almost equally dissolved. Land — shore: they were too far off, and swept by strong, impassable currents; yet toward these he set his face, and, without plan or hope, began doggedly to swim.

"As long as I can, anyhow," he grumbled.

After a weary time, the ship's lights were gone, and he moved alone, interminably, through the wide ocean. Whenever he turned on his back to float and rest, the great moon, straight overhead, surprised him by her pale splendor. After a breathing-space it made him dizzy to watch her, for sky and sea grew topsy-turvy, as though the ceiling of the world had become the floor, and he himself swung aloft, looking deeply down at the

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inverted orb. He rolled over quickly and struck out, to escape the vertigo of space.

Then, through the slow drift of hours, he found the moon lowering into his range of sight. Her path began to glimmer on the glossy, heaving surface ahead. The long mist of western mountains gradually took on edge, and blackness, and substance.

"I can't make 'em." He thought vaguely, and with effort; for the growing chill, and the dull pain of weariness which clogged his muscles, now began to steal through his brain.

"How long, do you suppose?" he asked himself, aloud. The water had no more buoyancy. The path of the moon faded. Over the flat void settled a pale smoke, pink and gray. He noted the changes with profound apathy, wondering only if he should be afloat at sunrise.

All at once he spun bolt upright, treading water so hard as to lift himself out, breast-high.

"*Anito!*" said a guttural voice, close by. "*Anito!*"

The sound ran through him like a fiery shock; for the voice had spoken almost in his ear, out of the lonely mist.

A long, slim, black shape bore down slowly from the right. It focused as the body, mast, and outriggers of a sailing *banca*, in the stern of which huddled the figures of two men.

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"Ahoy! *Hombre!*" called David, suddenly limp and sick at the vision of this godsend. Finding no words but English, he waved his hand. Two faces peered at him through the obscurity, — gray faces, strangely drawn and puckered. The hard, shrewd eyes met his, and stared, large and wild, in the milky light of the sea dawn.

"Here!" he cried, choking, and beckoned feebly. "Help! *Sigue!*"

The paler of the two men laughed softly. Neither stirred. The slender boat continued to drift by.

Spent as he was, and bitter cold to the marrow, David burned inwardly with sudden anger. Cleaving the water with a powerful overhand stroke, he raced up the low, smooth slope of the intervening swell, dove beneath the outrigger, and spluttering, rose to clutch the heavy gunwale. Still blind with salt, he saw dimly, in amazement, a scowling bronze face and a shock of long, yellow hair below some uplifted weapon. With a sob of rage, he contrived to grip one bare ankle and to jerk. A brown, tattooed body fell splashing over the opposite gunwale, in the same instant that he hoisted himself on board, picked up the fallen spear, and held it ready.

The paler man, still squatting aft, made no effort to help or hinder. Naked, slim yet beautifully muscular, he smiled with keen, cynical brown

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eyes, and waved his shapely hand in a sign rather of command than of surrender. In the luminous mist his body shone light-golden, his face stood forth bold and suave, barbaric and cruelly sophisticated. His hair, the coarse black hair of Asia, was cropped in the fashion of Europe.

"You speak English," said David confidently.

The fellow eyed him without blinking, and again, impatiently yet gracefully, signaled for him to drop the spear.

The man who had toppled overboard now reared his strange blond head at the stern, and, climbing in, crouched behind his master, over whose shoulder he peered with a frightened, savage face. From his broad chest up to his powerful shoulders, there spread in greenish-blue tattooing, like a pair of ferns drooping asunder, the Bontoc *chak-lag* which marks him who has taken a human head in war.

"*Anito!*" he mumbled, shaking his yellow mop, and staring at the white man from the sea.

"*Anito?* No, I am not a ghost," said David, in such fragments as he could recall of the northern hillmen's speech. "What are you doing so far south?"

The pale man turned, and over his shoulder murmured to the bronze head-hunter. Then both, as though agreed, sullenly watched the intruder. Whether or not they had understood,

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