

# TALES OF VOODOO

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# THE WOLFMASTER

■ ADAM FALCON sailed at dawn, and Margaret Deveral, the girl who was to marry him, stood on the wharfs in the cold mist to wave a good-bye. At the dusk Margaret knelt, stony-eyed, above the still white form that the crawling tide had left crumpled on the beach.

The people of Faring town gathered about, whispering. "The fog hung heavy; mayhap she went ashore

on Ghost Reef. Strange that his corpse alone should drift back to Faring harbor—and so swiftly."

The body lay above the tide mark, as if flung by a vagrant wave; slim, but strong and virile in life, now darkly handsome even in death. The eyes were closed, strange to say, so it appeared that he but slept. The seaman's clothes he wore had fragments of seaweed clinging to them.

"Strange," muttered old John Harper, owner of the Sea Lion Inn,

and the oldest ex-seaman of Faring town. "He sank deep, for these weeds grow only at the bottom of the ocean, aye, in the coral-grown caves of the sea."

Margaret spoke no word, she but knelt, her hands pressed to her cheeks, eyes wide and staring.

"Take him in your arms, lass, and kiss him," gently urged the people of Faring, "for 'tis what he would have wished, alive."

The girl obeyed mechanically, shuddering at the coldness of the body. Then as her lips touched his, she screamed and recoiled.

"This is not Adam!" she shrieked, staring wildly about her.

The people nodded sadly to each other.



"Her brain is turned," they whispered, and then they lifted the corpse and bore it to the house wherein Adam Falcon had lived—where he had hoped to bring his bride when he returned from his voyage.

And the people brought Margaret along with them, caressing her and soothing her with gentle words. But the girl walked like one in a trance, her eyes still staring in that strange manner.

They laid the body of Adam Falcon on his bed, with death candles at the head and feet, and the salt water from his garments trickled off the bed and splashed on the floor. For it is a superstition in Faring town, as on many dim coasts, that monstrously bad luck will follow if a drowned man's clothes are removed.

And Margaret sat there in the death room and spoke to none, staring fixedly at Adam's dark calm face. And, as she sat, John Gower, a rejected suitor of hers, and a moody, dangerous man, came and, looking over her shoulder said: "Sea death

brings a curious change, if that is the Adam Falcon I knew."

Black looks were passed his way, whereat he seemed surprised; and men rose and quietly escorted him to the door.

"You hated Adam Falcon, John Gower," said Tom Leary, "and you hate Margaret because the child preferred a better man than you. Now, by Satan, you'll not be torturing the girl with your calloused talk. Get out and stay!"

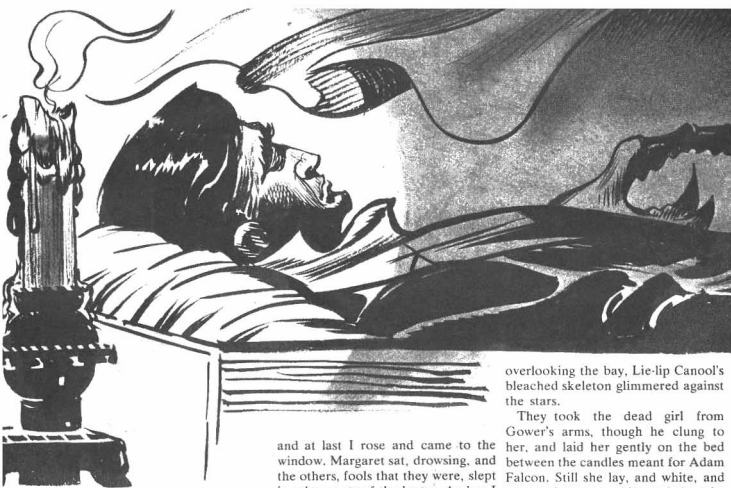
Gower scowled darkly at this, but Tom Leary stood up boldly to him, and the men of Faring town back of him, so John turned his back squarely upon them and strode away. Yet to me it had seemed that what he had said had not been meant as a taunt or an insult, but simply the result of a sudden, startling thought.

And as he walked away I heard him mutter to himself: ". . . Alike, and yet strangely unlike him . . ." Night had fallen on Faring town and the windows of the houses blinked through the darkness; through the windows of Adam Falcon's house

glimmered the death candles where Margaret and others kept silent watch until dawn. And beyond the friendly warmth of the town's lights, the dusky green titan brooded along the strand, silent now as if in sleep, but ever ready to leap with hungry talons. I wandered down to the beach and reclining on the white sand, gazed out over the slowly heaving expanse which coiled and billowed in drowsy undulations like a sleeping serpent.

The sea—the great, gray, cold-eyed woman of the ages. Her tides spoke to me as they have spoken to me since birth—in the swish of the flat waves along the sand, in the wail of the ocean-bird, in her throbbing silence. *I am very old and very wise (brooded the sea). I have no part of man: I slay men and even their bodies I fling back upon the cowering land. There is life in my bosom, but it is not human life* (whispered the sea), *My children hate the sons of men.*

A SHRIEK shattered the stillness and brought me to my feet, gazing wildly about me. Above the stars



gleamed coldly, and their scintillant ghosts sparkled on the ocean's cold surface. The town lay dark and still, save for the death lights in Adam Falcon's house—and the echoes still shuddering through the pulsating silence.

I was among the first to arrive at the door of the death room and there halted aghast with the rest. Margaret Deveral lay dead upon the floor, her slender form crushed like a slim ship among shoals, and crouching over her, cradling her in his arms, was John Gower, the gleam of insanity in his wide eyes. And the death candles still flickered and leaped, but no corpse lay on Adam Falcon's bed.

"God's mercy!" gasped Tom Leary. "John Gower, ye fiend from hell, what devil's work is this?"

Gower looked up.

"I told you," he shrieked. "She knew—and I knew—'twas not Adam Falcon, that cold monster flung up by the mocking waves! 'Tis some demon inhabiting his corpse! Hark—I sought my bed and tried to sleep, but each time there came the thought of this soft girl sitting beside that cold inhuman thing you thought her lover,

and at last I rose and came to the window. Margaret sat, drowsing, and the others, fools that they were, slept in other parts of the house. And as I watched . . ."

He shook as a wave of shuddering passed over him.

"As I watched, Adam's eyes opened, and the corpse rose swift stealthy from the bed where it lay. I stood without the window, frozen, helpless, and the ghostly thing stole upon the unknowing girl, with frightful eyes burning with hellish light and snaky arms outstretched. Then, she woke and screamed and then—oh Mother of God!—the dead man lapped her in his terrible arms, and she died without a sound."

Gower's voice died out into incoherent gibberings, and he rocked the dead girl gently to and fro like a mother with a child.

Tom Leary shook him. "Where is the corpse?"

"He fled into the night," said John Gower tonelessly.

Men looked at each other, bewildered.

"He lies," muttered they, deep in their beards. "He has slain Margaret himself and hidden the corpse somewhere to bear out his ghastly tale."

A sullen snarl shook the throng, and as one man they turned and looked where, on Hangman's Hill

overlooking the bay, Lie-lip Canool's bleached skeleton glimmered against the stars.

They took the dead girl from Gower's arms, though he clung to her, and laid her gently on the bed between the candles meant for Adam Falcon. Still she lay, and white, and men and women whispered that she seemed more like one drowned than one crushed to death.

WE BORE John Gower through the village streets, he not resisting; but seeming to walk in a daze, muttering to himself. But in the square, Tom Leary halted.

"This is a strange tale Gower told us," said he, "and doubtless a lie. Still, I am not a man to be hanging another without certainty. Therefore, let us place him in the stocks for safekeeping, while we search for Adam's corpse. Time enough for hanging afterwards."

So this was done and as we turned away, I looked back upon John Gower, who sat, head bowed upon his breast, like a man who is weary unto death.

So, under the dim wharfs and in the attics of houses' and among stranded hulls we searched for Adam Falcon's corpse. Back up into the hills behind the town our hunt lead us, where we broke up into groups and couples and scattered out over the barren downs.

My companion was Michael Hansen, and we had gotten so far apart that the darkness cloaked him from me, when he gave a sudden



shout. I started toward him, and then the shout broke into a shriek and the shriek died off into grisly silence. Michael Hansen lay dead on the earth, and a dim form slunk away in the gloom as I stood above the corpse, my flesh crawling.

Tom Leary and the rest came on the run and gathered about, swearing that John Gower had done this deed, also.

"He has escaped, somehow, from the stocks," said they, and we legged it for the village at top speed.

Aye, John Gower had escaped from the stocks and from his townsmen's hate and from all the sorrows of life. He sat as we had left him, head bowed upon his breast; but One had come to him in the darkness, and, though all his bones were broken, he seemed like a drowned man.

Then stark horror fell like a thick fog on Faring town. We clustered about the stocks, struck silent, till shrieks from a house on the outskirts of the village told us that the horror had struck again, and, rushing there, we found red destruction and death. And a maniac woman who whimpered before she died that Adam Falcon's corpse had broken through the window, flaming-eyed and horrible, to rend and slay. A green slime fouled the room and fragments of seaweed clung to the window sill.

Then fear, unreasoning and shameless, took possession of the men of Faring town, and they fled to their separate houses, where they locked and bolted doors and windows and

crouched behind them, weapons trembling in their hands and black terror in their souls. For what weapon can slay the dead?

And through the deathly night, horror stalked through Faring town and hunted the sons of men. Men shuddered and dared not even look forth when the crash of a door or window told of the entrance of the fiend into dome wretch's cottage, when shrieks and gibberings told of its grisly deeds therein.

YET THERE WAS one man who did not shut himself behind doors to be there slaughtered like a sheep. I was never a brave man, nor was it courage that sent me out into the ghastly night. No, it was the driving power of a Thought, a Thought which had birth in my brain as I looked on the dead face of Michael Hansen. A vague and illusive thing it was, a hovering and an almost-being—but not quite. Somewhere at the back of my skull it lurked, and I could not rest until I had proved or disproved that which I could not even formulate into a concrete theory.

So, with my brain in strange and chaotic condition, I stole through the shadows, warily. Mayhap the sea, strange and fickle even to her chosen, had whispered something to my inner mind, had betrayed her own. I know not.

But all through the dark hours I prowled along the beach, and, when in the first gray light of the early dawn, a fiendish shape came striding down to the shore, I was waiting there.

To all seeming it was Adam Falcon's corpse, animated by some horrid life, which fronted me there in the gray gloom. The eyes were open now, and they glimmered with a cold light, like the reflections of some deep sea hell. And I knew that it was not Adam Falcon who faced me.

"Sea fiend," I said in an unsteady voice, "I know not how you came by Adam Falcon's apparel. I know not whether his ship went upon the rocks, or whether he fell overboard, or whether you climbed up the strake and over the rail and dragged him from his own deck. Nor do I know by what foul ocean magic you twisted your devil's features into a likeness of his.

"But this I know. Adam Falcon sleeps in peace beneath the blue tides. You are not he. That I suspected—now I know. This horror has come upon Earth of yore—so long ago that all men have forgotten the tales; all except such as I, whom



men name fool. I know, and knowing, I fear you not, and here I slay you, for though you are not human, you may be slain by a man who does not fear you—even though that man be only a youth and considered strange and foolish. You have left your demon's mark upon the land; God alone knows how many souls you have reft, how many brains you have shattered this night. The ancients said your kind could do harm only in the form of men, on land. Aye, you tricked the sons of men—were borne into their midst by kind and gentle hands—by men who knew not they carried a monster from the abysses.

"Now, you have worked your will, and the sun will soon rise. Before that time you must be far below the green waters, basking in the accursed caverns that human eye has never looked upon save in death. There lies the sea and safety; I alone bar the way."

He came upon me like a towering wave, and his arms were like green serpents about me. I knew they were crushing me; yet I felt as if I were drowning instead, and even then understood the expression that had puzzled me on Michael Hansen's face—that of a drowned man.

I was looking into the inhuman eyes of the monster, and it was as if I gazed into untold depths of oceans—depths into which I should presently tumble and drown. And I felt scales.

Neck, arm, and shoulder he gripped me, bending me back to break my spine, and I drove my knife into his body again—and again—and again. He roared once, the only sound I ever heard him make, and it was like the roar of the tides among the shoals. Like the pressure of a hundred fathoms of green water was the grasp upon my body and limbs, and then, as I thrust again, he gave way and crumpled to the beach.

He lay there writhing and then was still, and already he had begun to change. Merman, the ancients named his kind, knowing they were endowed with strange attributes, one of which was the ability to take the full form of a man if lifted from the ocean by the hands of men. I bent and tore the human clothing from thing. And the first gleams of the sun fell upon a slimy and moldering mass of seaweed, from which stared two hideous dead eyes—a formless bulk that lay at the water's edge, where the first high wave would bear it back to that from which it came: the cold jade ocean deeps. ●