

The Horror of Herring Hill

By Frederick Louis Richardson

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In the year 1750...

For the priest the deadly shoals of Mal-de-Mer was a Godsend—

A coastline too treacherous to navigate with a coral reef submerged and commonly regarded as “the doorway to the deep.” As usual he came armed with musket rifle and flintlock pistols with wadding and cartridge. His leather pouch brimmed with ammunition: musket balls that he used by design to scare and scatter. He would fire birdshot to wound without doing serious harm—not to murder or maim but simply to frighten and discourage.

A former British buccaneer for whom religion was the last refuge of a scoundrel, Thomas Southard now propagated (to some degree) reverence for the sanctity of life. Unlike the Jesuits who operated The Mission of St. Mark, he lived outside the monastery. Not closeted therefore not inclined toward monastic thought and introspection...even so, he cheated no man; neither did he stint on favors. Nothing tampered with his mind but the straw hat worn on his head.

St. Mark’s hilltop sanctuary overlooked the archipelago where Thomas fully expected to spend the rest of his life. For him the sun would rise on what suggested more the working of some miracle—an accretion of gigantic rocks and deserted atolls amounted to seventy miles of geographical happenstance. This nominal collection of “small islands” along the eastern frontier of the West Indies had an oddly shaped emptiness between abundant coral reefs sundered from mountainous slabs of towering boulders; however the chain of coral did find thirty-six square miles of terra firma at its most southern reach. The so-called “big island” of Queensberry prospered as a port city settled by the British and sutured to an isthmus, its passage leading to New Afrika—a humble village clinging to a mountain of volcanic rock that the English laughingly called “Herring Hill.”

Thomas Southard had left the Mission en route for his appointment with the Governor. He rode the hard back of a mud-colored mule pulling a small donkey wagging its sad little tail. The burro now carried the satchel with Siata scrunched inside. The bag had been intended for “souvenirs.” Riding the desolate beach that rung the northern reach of the island, the priest had come to the cove in search of “mementos” where once he had uncovered a bag of gold from a sunken pirate ship.

Typically after a shipwreck he would tread the wrack line collecting broken lumber, usually wooden beams or the strake gone from the hull. He would also gather such “relics” as gold coins plucked out of the sand or maybe a saber caught up in a tangle of seaweed. The *William George* had gone down in the night and he had come to comb the beach for whatever the sea may tell. And he knew the sea had a long memory.

The *William George* was the ship and all else was the sea.

As ship’s watch Faisal would commonly scamper up the riggings to be struck by the glamour of the wind, and roost gladly in the crow’s nest to worry over the weather and those matters of seagoing concern. But tonight he leaned on the taffrail well on the watch—not for high winds or any rise in the sea but for any fresh evidence of the *vampire*!

From inside the wicker basket on the platform near the top of the mast he would keep a keen eye on the vessel’s stormy pitch across a wildly vast and implacable sea. Nearer the helm where sharp flickers of light glinted upon a golden bell, circumstances had stationed Faisal on the poop.

Despite the icy chill he stood near the wheel where it was impossible to stand without holding fast. The current smashing solidly against the boat with every explosive plunge forward sent a damp drizzle with the shock of the swell to rattle the wheel bound by gnarled and twisted hemp.

Spiritedly, the arc of the bowsprit pointed the flying bridge toward a low line of colorless clouds spreading thinly across the horizon. Pushed by Atlantic breezes the hardwood vessel sagged deeply into the swells pursuing paltry patches of twilight just ahead of the prow. A narrow strip of vapor floated above the fading edges of the earth where the unclean fall of night tarnished those last glimmers of daylight.

As the ship pitched and yawed under full sail toward the sun’s decline, the tip of the wave brimmed over the deck and the bell tolled without mirth or rhythm.

Several muskets both loaded and primed strengthened Faisal in his faith more than the crucifix around his neck. Flushed with pink skin in crisis he seemed neither robust in his woolen jacket nor remarkable otherwise. The fanning of the wind tousled his hair unkempt as he squirmed against the end of a grim day and the coming grime of night. Drenched by the coalescing ointment of cold air and ocean mist in the high-sea balm, his face hidden behind stubble and bitten badly by the wind had wizened into a windburn whiskered façade now frozen into a permanent squint.

Tasting the brine through his nose, as he was accustomed to the stench, he experienced the sump of a deep malaise...

Although brass cannons protruded through her portals, the brig could equal no man-of-war, but rather a goodly ship scarred by those customary carvings to cure the dinginess of the hull. On the bow at the stem head, where the statuesque figure of a female bust voluptuously portrayed an angel, the ruddy luster of words spread evenly identified the boat as "Her Ladyship William George."

Slipping her moorings to catch English winds in a bouffant of sails bent upon the mast, the boat had gotten into the current and soon underway, heaving her beam through the chilly Atlantic. The brig flying before the wind, bobbing from billow to billow with the airy glide of a sea gull, had Faisal enjoying such small grabs of excitement to which the ship and crew were bound.

After some time the vessel had made port off the West Coast of Africa in the British colony of Zwetoland. Captain Samuel S. Breckenridge had ordered all cloth furled and the anchor let go where the *William George* stood along the coast without incident.

The ship's cargo of rum and long knives had been traded for black men and women (with a few children) kidnapped by brigands and detained by local tradesmen for parole into slavery. Within a fortnight the slave ship with winds going up her crowds of sails, puffed and full, had put out to sea.

Embracing wind and weather the brig for several months had gained headway across the tides bearing off a northeasterly blow. And then one evening after night came on to scare off the last glimmers of daylight, the vampire brought the horror aboard.

Nightfall had sent the sun plunging over the brink and the moon with its dim corona clambering into Heaven with a sullen glow. The boat had been churning the swells, delving into the depths then returning with vigorous heft toward the sky's deepest dark. No watch had been set so Faisal had joined his fellow shipmates below decks where everyone in excessively good humor imbibed from a barrel. All had quickly gotten drunk on tumblers of rum, when Luther the boatswain realized that no one had seen Captain Breckenridge ever since he had ordered Noah the coxswain to lash the wheel.

Only after curiosity had gotten the better of him did Luther barge into the skipper's cabin—
and stumbled upon a chamber of horrors!

In a morbid scene of blood and madness a gruesome assault on the ship's captain had laid Breckenridge nude head to foot. A brutal attack upon his throat had his head unbalanced and nearly decapitated.

The men boisterously intoxicated had raucously bumbled about fighting to get a peek when struck dumb by the horror of the thing!

One glance had harvested a collective gasp of astonishment.

The captain's flesh had obtained that hideous color of a ghost, relieved only by a deep gash spewing blood like a macabre fountain unabated in its flow—a ghastly distortion suggestive of where a human throat used to be.

Luther had instructed Jacob the sail-maker to sew up the corpse inside a hammock so that the skipper might be given a burial at sea. But a sudden attack of terror had Jacob begging his shipmates to perform this disgusting task.

The whole gang had then set about quibbling over ownership of the captain's death, yet everyone knew the culprit as a simple demon confined to a simple threat. Suspicious of the other Africans wasting in the hold had most griping that maybe the whole lot could be a bloodsucking, murdering horde!