

IDRIS THE DIVER.



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CHAPTER I.

The Waters of the Bay.

From the time Idris was a tiny boy, only able to step barefoot into the brim of the water, the seabottom had a curious charm for him. The bay where his village stood was sheltered from the great winds, and during the summer the waves that broke on the shore were no more than a ripple showing every pebble and shell that lay below. And the little fellow would wade in and, stooping, thrust his hand down and bring up one treasure after another that shone with glistening colour while wet; and a moment after when the hot sun had dried them into dulness he would fling them away in vexation and seek yet more of the mock jewels from below, heedless of the pain when the sea-urchins stabbed his feet as he trod on them in the deeper pools.

By the time he was nine or ten he would have been ashamed of such child's play. But with the boy heart of adventure that was waking within him, the ocean depths still held their charm, and he could learn more of them now. Below the cliff that

* Pron. Idrees.

bounded the bay to the west, a kilometre from the village, a long reef of rocks ran out into the sea. They stood so close to each other that, clambering and swimming by turns, the lads of the neighbourhood loved to reach the furthest point.

All along this barrier, on its outer side, the waves beat in surf, sending streams of foam through the gaps; but on the bay side the water was still and clear, and there was one ledge after another from which the boys could dive. The boldest and most skilful of all the band was Idris, outstripping the others of his age. Further and further along the reef he ventured, till he could plunge fearlessly off the rock at the end, where the surf was as though it boiled, and down he would go into the enchanted under world with its forests of sea-weed, shimmering in a pale green light, where fish darted like gleams of silver. Longer and longer he could stay below till his comrades feared sometimes that he would not rise again.

And in truth there were dangers in the strange places where he ventured. Once when attempting to rise to the surface, he found his foot entangled in a mass of sea-wrack, and it was only with a huge

struggle that he broke away while breath lasted. On another occasion he struck into a transparent group of jelly fish, and returned stung all over so that every limb ached and smarted for days. Another time, when trying how far he could swim under the surface, he was caught and sucked along by the undertow, and when he found his way, exhausted, to the top he found himself half a kilometre away from the shore. But no matter what happened, no sooner was he out of the waves than he longed to be in them again.

CHAPTER II.

The Waters of the Harbour.

Two or three more years passed, the play-days of the boy were over, and he must get to work. His father owned a fishing boat, and needed no longer to hire a man to drive the cart before dawn into the great town two hours off, to get his merchandise there by the time the fish market opened.

Idris was old enough now for this, and morning by morning he took in the haul, bringing the cart back in the late afternoon.

This involved many hours of loitering on the quay, with rarely a job by which he could earn a few pence: and he longed for his own cool bay. The water sparkled in the port, but it did not draw him as the clear waves at home: it was muddy and warm.

But as the summer passed, the passenger steamers began coming more frequently, and a new amusement arose. He noticed the heads of other lads bobbing in the water around the ships as they came to anchor, and soon found out what it meant: the passengers were throwing down coins, and the boys were diving for them. Next time that a great boat steamed in, he was among them. He forgot the muddiness of the harbour that had filled him with contempt: here was something worthy of his powers, and he darted after prize upon prize, as it sank eddying down, with a swiftness and sureness of aim which roused the vexation of the town boys. Up he came, again and again, with the coin between his teeth, and trod water while he secured it in his girdle, and when the passengers grew tired of throwing, and the lads swam to shore, Idris had to fight two or three before he could carry off his gains.

Before long he managed, through bestowing a share of the spoils among the country-born swimmers, to win these latter on his side, and thus make a counter gang to wage war with the city-bred boys, and the fight continued through that season, and the next, not only on land but in the water, to the amusement of the passengers of each fresh ship that came to the port.

But by the third season, another change had come to Idris. His father died suddenly, and as he had lost his mother years before, and was an only child, he found himself free to do as he would with his life. He felt no heart to go back and settle in his village, so he dismissed the man who worked the boat with his father, and sold the boat and cottage, and sat one night for the last time within its doors before it was made over to the purchaser, meditating what he would do next. He was tired of the strife in the muddy waters of the port, the pools of his own bay that used to seem a "land of dreams" had lost their charm; the sea depths with their fascination seemed to call and call him again, urging him to fresh adventure, fresh excitement, if possible fresh gain.

CHAPTER III.

The Waters of the Ocean.

Though Idris had made but few friends in the town, he had formed many acquaintances with seamen from other lands, and of all their tales the one that attracted him most was that of the pearl divers in the Persian Gulf. He counted the price of the boat and cottage, and his savings from the coins flung overboard, and knew they would not take him far on such a journey. He could work his passage, maybe, on a ship, but then came the question, Would he, a stranger, be able to make his way among the men who considered those fisheries their rightful trade?

He locked his cottage door next morning and took the key to the purchaser and went back to the town to see what would befall him. And so it was, that a day or two later, in the café frequented by his village, he heard two men talking of a new salvage company that was being formed, for exploiting the wrecks around the ocean and raising from them all that was worth saving. He listened silently till he had gained the information he wanted, and next

morning presented himself at the office. They gave him a few tests of strength and skill, and placed his name on the list of accepted divers, telling him he would be called when all was ready to start.

And now began a series of adventures too many to be told. Clad in his diver's dress, with the helmet and air tube through which to breathe, and the signal cord to pull when he wished to be drawn up again to the surface, he felt he could stay down in the world below, instead of paying it flying visits as before. His life and his work lay in those terrible depths among the wreckage, seeking treasure and releasing material that could be used again.

Truly there was excitement and to spare, and the deeper he went the more weird were his surroundings: there was only a glimmer of light as of faint moonshine: great ghostly fish of uncouth shapes like creatures of a nightmare, swam slowly in and out of their caves and seaweed forests, and here and there hung half devoured corpses, caught in the tangle as they drifted from the wrecks that he was visiting. All the playground of his childhood with its beautiful pools of light and colour seemed far away from these grim places to which he was growing accustomed: one could hardly think it was the same ocean.

Time passed on, and Idris was once more reckoned the head, this time of all the band of divers on the ship, and entrusted with the most difficult and dangerous tasks. They were a rough wild set of men, drinking and swearing and quarrelling endlessly, and it seemed strange one day to see among them a face that looked as if it belonged to another world from theirs, so pure and strong and true was it. The crew could find out nothing about the stranger except he that had taken passage to the next port for which they would be making, which, as it happened was the one near Idris' old home. They held aloof from him and mocked and jeered, feeling in some curious way that his silent presence was a rebuke to them. And in the jeering, as in all else, Idris, in his masterfulness, took the lead.

CHAPTER IV.

The Last Dive.

It was the final day of the stranger's stay on board. The wreck they had searched proved to be worth but little, it lay in comparatively shallow water near the shore, and was therefore much broken up. They would leave it and go on to find the fresh orders that

would be awaiting them in the port. The divers had returned on deck and had laid aside their diving clothes, and were half asleep in the shade, waiting till they were called on to help heave anchor.

After a while Idris slipped below and quickly came back in his helmet and diving dress. "How now?" asked one man, still awake. "I find I have left a tool below" he answered. "Tell the Captain this if he asks for me. Work the air pump and watch for my signal when I need to come up", and he swung himself over the ship's side and disappeared.

His words were a lie, he desired one more look at the wreck, for he had noticed a half hidden doorway that he thought might lead to another cabin; something worth taking might be found there. With his giant strength he pushed aside a little the timber that was jammed across it, and felt round in the darkness. All was empty, his trouble had been for nothing. Cursing his bad luck he turned to the doorway. To his surprise the gleam of twilight through it was barely visible. Something huge and dark seemed swaying backwards and forwards outside. He put his arm on the edge of the doorway to pull himself forward

to see what it could be. Something clammy slipped round his wrist and held it with a horrible clinging clutch winding up and up his arm. In a moment he knew what had befallen him: one of the huge octopus fish that lurk in the ocean was blocking the way back, and had caught him already with its suckers. Quick as thought he seized the hatchet from his belt and chopped off the great writhing arm of the monster, but escape was only for a moment. Another arm was darted into the doorway, and he could see now that yet another was anchored to the beam that he had moved in order to make his way in. He huddled back into the far corner but he knew he could not stay there. The ship was due to sail in half an hour, and his jailor did not move. He could ring his signal bell, but how could they drag him past his enemy without being seized afresh?

Why—why had he come? He had sold his life for nought at the last.

The minutes seemed like hours: surely it was time for the ship to heave anchor: he thought he could hear the chains beginning to rattle. The creature's head was in front of the doorway now: he could see the glaring eyes and the parrot-like bill. The head

was the only place where a fatal blow could be struck. He could not get near enough to strike with his hatchet, for the arm that had entered the cabin was waving to and fro in the water: the only way would be to fling his one weapon from the safe distance of his corner, and while the octopus was stunned he could slip past. It was his only chance of life and he knew it. He flung with all his force and dashed forward, not daring to wait and see the result.

He cleared the door, but as he did so another horrible coil slipped up his leg, and his hatchet had fallen out of reach. The monster was not dead, hardly even wounded afresh and only enough to rouse it to new fury. Tighter and tighter grew the grasp till it seemed the flesh would be pressed from the bone. Madly Idris rang the signal bell: a moment more and he realised that it had been more than useless; for the octopus was anchored still to the beam and if they began to draw him up, he must be torn to pieces. Yes, the pull from above was beginning . . . a pause . . . and then came another tug, and he gave himself up for a dead man.

CHAPTER V.

The Stranger.

At the sound of the signal bell, the diver above who had been told to watch, roused a drowsy man near him: together they gave that first pull, and looked stupidly at each other when they found it had no effect and left the rope stationary. They tried again with the same result, and asked each other "What has happened?"

Just then the stranger, who was pacing the deck, came up to them with his grave far-seeing look. "What do ye?" he asked. "Idris has gone below, he has signalled to be drawn up, but we cannot draw him: he must have got caught in some trouble, and the ship is due to sail in a few minutes." The stranger looked at the two men and saw that no help was likely: they were still both half asleep. "I will go and see" he said, "keep on pumping," and he threw off his outer garments and plunged down by the signal line.

And thus it came to pass that at the moment Idris had given up himself as lost, expecting a third pull that would rend him to pieces, he saw, sweeping down

through the water above him, the face and form of the stranger. He reached the deck, held for a moment the broken mast to steady himself, stooped for the hatchet, flung himself forward, and struck the death blow between the eyes of the monster. But as he did so, the limbs still free writhed convulsively round the rescuer, and Idris, held helplessly, saw the man's face go deathly white and his eyes close for ever. He could not reach him, could not even speak to thank him, could only dumbly watch him die.

And in his death he had destroyed the octopus, the suckers relaxed from Idris' foot till he could shake them off, the creature lay there a heap of coils, still living but powerless to hold. He darted to the stranger in his new freedom but it was too late, he knew as he drew him out that life was gone. With his own heart breaking he gave once more the signal to be drawn up, and he rose to the surface with the lifeless body of the stranger lashed alongside.

What passed that night in Idris' soul he never told: but he came out of it a changed man. He went to the Captain in the morning and said, "I go on land to stay, do me the favour of putting some-

one else in my post." The crew laughed when they heard the news, and said that fear had seized him, and no wonder. But he knew it was not so. The horror of that hour of yesterday was upon him truly but time might mend that. It was the face of the friend who had given his life for him that had slain, and slain for ever, the craving for pleasure and excitement and gain; had slain the lure of the sea-depths that had been in him since childhood. He never wished to look at the ocean again.

And so it was that when they went ashore, and had enquired in vain for those who knew the stranger and whence he was, and had laid him in his tomb, Idris only waited to place on the stone the stranger's name, and then he went off far inland to share in the vintage work. And in years to come his home was on the mountains, and as his children gathered round him, he told them the story of that last dive, and the face of the stranger, pale in death, that had wakened him, as it were, from the dream of wild pleasures and their gains, and had made a new man of him for ever.

Now have patience, my brothers, and read to the end, for it is because of this last page that I have written the story. You will understand that there is no harm in the beautiful ocean that God has made, and no evil in diving into it—the swimming and diving are good for health of man and boy. But it is taken in the story as a figure of other depths around us—the depths of sin where lie “the pleasures of sin” that draw the heart of man as the ocean depths drew Idris. Satan beautifies to his eyes these pleasures till the underworld of evil looks far more attractive than things right and good.

To small boys these things are but as shallow pools with the pebbles that turn dull and the sea urchins that prick their feet. They lose at pitch and toss, they “eat the stick”, maybe, but they try again. And thus they get tempted on till they plunge as it were into the muddy waters of gambling and cheating and drinking. And the older boys know still deeper depths of guilt and impurity; depths more foul and more terrible than those where Idris grew accustomed to spending his time; for their wrecks are not wrecks of ships but wrecks of souls. Excitement and curiosity may have tempted you to

this underworld, and having begun you long to enter it again, but in its depths the devil lurks like the octopus, and holds you fast, crushing your very soul. These “pleasures of sin” lure down to hell.

It is to you older boys that I speak now. The younger boys need a Saviour too. But some of you, my brothers, *know* that you need to be rescued. You want to break free and are almost in despair. You are torn between the wish to do right and the power that holds you down.

There is One who can free you. A Stranger came to this world and fought with our enemy Satan for our sakes, and gave him a death blow. He was Christ the Lord. In His strife with Satan He laid down His life, as you may read in the Injil. He laid it down for you and for me.

But here the parallel fails — He is not a dead Friend. He took His life again and lives for ever. When you turn to Him in your heart and see what He did for you, the coils of Satan will loose from you, and you will grow to hate the pleasures of sin, and everything will become new in you.

“He gave Himself for our sins, that He might redeem us from all iniquity.”

Amen.

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