

# A Game of Honor

By W. C. Morrow

Four of the five men who sat around the card-table in the cabin of the "Merry Witch" regarded the fifth man with a steady, implacable look of scorn. The solitary one could not face that terrible glance. His head drooped, and his gaze rested upon some cards which he idly fumbled as he waited, numbed and listless, to hear his sentence.

The more masterful one of the four made a disdainful gesture towards the craven one, and thus addressed the others:

"Gentlemen, none of us can have forgotten the terms of our compact. It was agreed at the beginning of this expedition that only men of unflinching integrity should be permitted to participate in its known dangers and possible rewards. To find and secure the magnificent treasure which we are seeking with a sure prospect of discovering it, we must run the risk of encounters with savage Mexican soldiers and marines, and take all the other dangerous chances of which you are aware. As the charterer of this vessel and the leader of the expedition I have exercised extraordinary care in selecting my associates. We have been and still are equals, and my leadership as the outfitter of the expedition gives me no advantage in the sharing of the treasure. As such leader, however, I am in authority, and have employed, unsuspected by you, many devices to test the manhood of each of you. Were it not for the fact that I have exhausted all reasonable resources to this end, and have found all of you trustworthy except one, I would not now be disclosing the plan which I have been pursuing."

The three others, who had been gazing at the crestfallen one, now stared at their leader with a startled interest.

"The final test of a man's character," calmly pursued the leader, "is the card-table. Whatever there may be in him of weakness, whether it be a mean avarice, cowardice, or a deceitful disposition, will there inevitably appear. If I were the president of a bank, the general of an army, or the leader of any other great enterprise I would make it a point to test the character of my subordinates in a series of games at cards, preferably played for money. It is the only sure test of character that the wisdom of the ages has been able to devise."

He paused, and then turned his scornful glance upon the cringing man, who meanwhile had mustered courage to look up, and was employing his eyes as well as his ears to comprehend the strange philosophy of his judge. Terror and dismay were elements of the expression which curiously wrinkled his white face, as though he found himself standing before a court of inscrutable wisdom and relentless justice. But his glance fell instantly when it encountered that of his judge, and his weak lower lip hung trembling.

"We have all agreed," impressively continued the leader, "that the one found guilty of deceiving or betraying the others to the very smallest extent should pay the penalty which we are all sworn to exact. A part of this agreement, as we all remember, is that the one found derelict shall be the first to insist on the visitation of the penalty, and that should he fail to do so—but I trust that it is unnecessary to mention the alternative."

There was another pause, and the culprit sat still, hardly breathing and permitting the cards to slip from his fingers to the floor.

"Mr. Rossiter," said the leader, addressing the hapless man in a tone so hard and cold that it congealed the marrow which it pierced, "have you any suggestion to make?"

The doomed man made such a pitiful struggle for self-mastery as the gallows often reveals. If there was a momentary flash of hope based on a transient determination to plead, it faded instantly before the stern and implacable eyes that greeted him from all sides of the table. Certainly there was a fierce struggle under which his soul writhed, and which showed in a passing flush that crimsoned his face. That went by, and an acceptance of doom sat upon him. He raised his head and looked firmly at the leader, and as he did so his chest expanded and his shoulders squared bravely.

“Captain,” said he, with a very good voice, “whatever else I may be, I am not a coward. I have cheated. In doing so I have betrayed the confidence of all. I remember the terms of the compact. Will you kindly summon the skipper?”

Without any change of countenance, the leader complied.

“Mr. Rossiter,” he said to the skipper, “has a request to make of you, and whatever it may be I authorize you to comply with it.”

“I wish,” asked Mr. Rossiter of the skipper, “that you would lower a boat and put me aboard, and that you would furnish the boat with one oar and nothing else whatever.”

“Why,” exclaimed the skipper, aghast, looking in dismay from one to another of the men, “the man is insane! There is no land within five hundred miles. We are in the tropics, and a man couldn’t live four days without food or water, and the sea is alive with sharks. Why, this is suicide!”

The leader’s face darkened, but before he could speak Mr. Rossiter calmly remarked,— “That is my own affair, sir;” and there was a fine ring in his voice.

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The man in the boat, bareheaded and stripped nearly naked in the broiling sun, was thus addressing something which he saw close at hand in the water:

“Let me see. Yes, I think it is about four days now that we have travelled together, but I am not very positive about that. You see, if it hadn’t been for you I should have died of loneliness. . . . Say! aren’t you hungry, too? I was a few days ago, but I’m only thirsty now. You’ve got the advantage of me, because you don’t get thirsty. As for your being hungry—ha, ha, ha! Who ever heard of a shark that wasn’t always hungry? Oh, I know well enough what’s in your mind, companion mine, but there’s time enough for that. I hate to disturb the pleasant relation which exists between us at present. That is to say—now, here is a witticism—I prefer the outside relation to the inside intimacy. Ha, ha, ha! I knew you’d laugh at that, you sly old rogue What a very sly, patient old shark you are! Don’t you know that if you didn’t have those clumsy fins, and that dreadfully homely mouth away down somewhere on the under side of your body, and eyes so grotesquely wide apart, and should go on land and match your wit against the various and amusing species of sharks which abound there, your patience in pursuing a manifest advantage would make you a millionaire in a year? Can you get that philosophy through your thick skull, my friend?”

“There, there, there! Don’t turn over like that and make a fool of yourself by opening your pretty mouth and dazzling the midday sun with the gleam of your white belly. I’m not ready yet. God! how thirsty I am! Say, did you ever feel like that? Did you ever see blinding flashes that tear through your brain and turn the sun black?”

“You haven’t answered my question yet. It’s a hypothetical question—yes, hypothetical. I’m sure that’s what I want to say. Hypo—hypothetical question. Question; yes, that’s right. Now,

suppose you'd been a pretty wild young shark, and had kept your mother anxious and miserable, and had drifted into gambling and had gone pretty well to the dogs. Do sharks ever go to the dogs? Now, that's a poser. Sharks; dogs. Oh, what a very ridiculously, sublimely amusing old shark! Dreadfully discreet you are. Never disclose your hand except on a showdown. What a glum old villain you are!

"Pretty well to the dogs, and then braced up and left home to make a man of yourself. Think of a shark making a man of himself! And then—easy there! Don't get excited. I only staggered that time and didn't quite go overboard. And don't let my gesticulations excite you. Keep your mouth shut, my friend; you're not pretty when you smile like that. As I was saying—oh! . . .

"How long was I that way, old fellow? Good thing for me that you don't know how to climb into a boat when a fellow is that way. Were you ever that way, partner? Come on like this: Biff! Big blaze of red fire in your head. Then—then—well, after awhile you come out of it, with the queerest and crookedest of augers boring through your head, and a million tadpoles of white fire darting in every direction through the air. Don't ever get that way, my friend, if you can possibly keep out of it. But then, you never get thirsty. Let me see. The sun was over there when the red fire struck, and it's over here now. Shifted about thirty degrees. Then, I was that way about two hours.

"Where are those dogs? Do they come to you or do you go to them? That depends. Now, say you had some friends that wanted to do you a good turn; wanted to straighten you up and make a man of you. They had ascertained the exact situation of a wonderful treasure buried in an island of the Pacific. All right. They knew you had some of the qualities useful for such an expedition—reckless dare-devil, afraid of nothing—things like that. Understand, my friend? Well, all swore oaths as long as our leg—as long as your—oh, my! Think of a shark having a leg! Ha, ha, ha! Long as your leg! Oh, my! Pardon my levity, old man, but I must laugh. Ha, ha, ha! Oh, my!

"All of you swore—you and the other sharks. No lying; no deceit; no swindling. First shark that makes a slip is to call the skipper and be sent adrift with one oar and nothing else. And all, my friend, after you had pledged your honor to your mother, your God, yourself, and your friends, to be a true and honorable shark. It isn't the hot sun broiling you and covering you with bursting blisters, and changing the marrow of your bones to melted iron and your blood to hissing lava—it isn't the sun that hurts; and the hunger that gnaws your intestines to rags, and the thirst that changes your throat into a funnel of hot brass, and blinding bursts of red fire in your head, and lying dead in the waist of the boat while the sun steals thirty degrees of time out the sky, and a million fiery tadpoles darting through the air—none of them hurts so much as something infinitely deeper and more cruel,—your broken pledge of honor to your mother, your God, yourself, and your friends. That is what hurts, my friend.

"It is late, old man, to begin life all over again while you are in the article of death, and resolve to be good when it is no longer possible to be bad. But that is our affair, yours and mine; and just at this time we are not choosing to discuss the utility of goodness. But I don't like that sneer in your glance. I have only one oar, and I will cheerfully break it over your wretched head if you come a yard nearer. . . .

"Aha! Thought I was going over, eh? See; I can stand steady when I try. But I don't like that sneer in your eyes. You don't believe in the reformation of the dying, eh? You are a contemptible dog; a low, mean, outcast dog. You sneer at the declaration of a man that he can and will be honest at last and face his Maker humbly, but still as a man. Come, then, my friend, and let us see which of us two is the decent and honorable one. Stake your manhood against

mine, and stake your life with your manhood. We'll see which is the more honorable of the two; for I tell you now, Mr. Shark, that we are going to gamble for our lives and our honor.

Come up closer and watch the throw. No? Afraid of the oar? You sneaking coward! You would be a decent shark at last did the oar but split your skull. See this visiting card, you villain? Look at it as I hold it up. There is printing on one side; that is my name; it is I. The other side is blank; that is you. Now, I am going to throw this into the water. If it falls name up, I win; if blank side up, you win. If I win, I eat you; if you win, you eat me. Is that a go?

"Hold on. You see, I can throw a card so as to bring uppermost either side I please. That wouldn't be fair. For this, the last game of my life, is to be square. So I fold one end down on this side, and the other down on that side. When you throw a card folded like that no living shark, whether he have legs or only a tail, can know which side will fall uppermost. That is a square game, old man, and it will settle the little difference that has existed between you and me for four days past—a difference of ten or fifteen feet.

"Mind you, if I win, you are to come alongside the boat and I am to kill you and eat you. That may sustain my life until I am picked up. If you win, over I go and you eat me. Are you in the game? Well, here goes, then, for life or death. . . . Ah! you have won! And this is a game of honor!"

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A black-smoking steamer was steadily approaching the drifting boat, for the lookout had reported the discovery, and the steamer was bearing down to lend succor. The captain, standing on the bridge, saw through his glass a wild and nearly naked man making the most extraordinary signs and gestures, staggering and lurching in imminent danger of falling overboard. When the ship had approached quite near the captain saw the man toss a card into the water, and then stand with an ominous rigidity, the meaning of which was unmistakable. He sounded a blast from the whistle, and the drifting man started violently and turned to see the steamer approaching, and observed hasty preparations for the lowering of a boat. The outcast stood immovable, watching the strange apparition, which seemed to have sprung out of the ocean.

The boat touched the water and shot lustily forward.

"Pull with all your might, lads, for the man is insane, and is preparing to leap overboard. A big shark is lying in wait for him, and the moment he touches the water he is gone."

The men did pull with all their might and hallooed to the drifting one and warned him of the shark.

"Wait a minute," they cried, "and we'll take you on the ship!"

The purpose of the men seemed at last to have dawned upon the understanding of the outcast. He straightened himself as well as he could into a wretched semblance of dignity, and hoarsely replied,—

"No; I have played a game and lost; an honest man will pay a debt of honor." And with such a light in his eyes as comes only into those whose vision has penetrated the most wonderful of all mysteries, he leaped forth into the sea.