

The Quest for the Great Gray Mossy

Harry Turtledove

Call me Milvil. It is not my name, but it will serve. And let me begin my tale with my tail, and the rest of me, in a boat bound for Faraway Island. The wind, at our backs, filled the sail and made the canvas thrum. So also my thoughts thrummed with excitement and the hope of gain, for from Faraway Town I purposed putting to sea to hunt and try the great monsters that dwell subaqueously.

When I turned my head into the wind to survey the other passengers, a tiny bit of grit—or maybe it was smoke from an old fellow's pipe—made my eye sting. My nictitating membrane flicked across it, wiping away whatever the trouble was. Would that all my woes might so easily be swept away!

I wondered who among those aboard the neat little cutter with me might also intend to go over the wide sea in a greater ship. I at once dismissed the old chap with the pipe. His snout was wattled with fat; the feathers on his head and down his spine hung pale and limp with age. Seeing him, in fact, induced in me a strange kind of terror, as if he were a vision of what cruel time would one day work on me if by some strange chance the line of my existence should stretch as long as his.

No, not for him plying an oar in a swift mossy boat. Not for him standing in the bow, finger-claws digging into the hardwood shaft of a harpoon ere letting fly. He might be one who profited from oil and meat, but never would he earn his profits in terror and exultation.

Nor would the three females, who might have been sailcloth weavers or might equally have danced for the entertainment of seafarers. They would not put to sea. Ships full of hunters are better off without the confusion and quarrels rutting hatches.

But there were also a couple of young fools like myself who might have aimed to test their luck that way. How many such burst from the egg every day? Enough to keep the mossy ships never short of crews, enough to carry blunderbusses and muskets and fight the brownskins in the distant West, enough to hunt drosaws and hornfaces and even savage rannos on the plains there, enough for every sort of savage stupidity under the sun. By the gods, I should know.

A lovely bit of steering let us glide into Faraway Town's neat little harbor. There's not another

harbor in the world that smells like Faraway Town's. Oil, meat, curing hides . . . Gulls and ramiophies circled over the moored ships, screeching, on the hunt for scraps or even for fish if they had to stoop so low. Some perched on the spars. You'll never see fatter terries or birds than you will at Faraway Town. There's so much to eat there, people don't even begrudge them their thievery—or not so very much, anyhow.

When I disembarked, I made for the finer lodging houses, the ones set farther back from the water, to escape as best I could at least some small portion of that pungent, persistent aroma. One landlord after another turned me away. "We're so full up, we couldn't squeeze in even a mammal," a fat fellow with a patch covering an empty eye-socket told me.

My guess was that he'd put to sea once too often and come back to Faraway Island after his mutilation. Be that as it may, I didn't care to have him liken me to a nasty, hairy little nighttime skulker. "I dare say you will already guest a great plenty of them," I said and took myself elsewhere.

"Now see here! What's that supposed to mean?" he called after me, but he was talking only to the tip of my tail.

I worked my way through the better establishments, pausing once for fried cod and once for a beaker or two of something refreshing. By then, the sun was sinking toward the horizon. As twilight began to deepen, I found myself back by the seaside. The smell was still there, but by then, through familiarity, I began to notice it rather less. At any rate, I told myself I began to notice it rather less.

By the look of it, there were mammals aplenty prowling at the dive that called itself the Plessy's Flipper. By then, I'd gone through the better places in Faraway Town. Unless I cared to sleep in the street like someone who'd downed a great many beakers indeed, I could not afford to turn up my snout at whatever shelter I might find.

"Aye, I can give you a place to doss," said the chap who also served the drinks and immolated the meat and fish and shellfish. "I can if you don't mind taking only half a bed, anyhow."

"Half a bite's better than empty," I said, and so the bargain was made.

He handed me a little oil lamp whose wick, once lit, smelled as vile as if its essential fuel had been rendered from the fat carcass of some mammal whose habits were even fouler than those of most of that foul breed. The faint, flickering flame was all that lit my way up the stairs and along a winding corridor until at last I found the room with the verdigrised brass number 27 on the door.

I wondered whether the key he'd also reluctantly doled out would fit in the lock, which seemed as much suffused in antiquity as the numbers near it. Rather to my surprise, it did, and with a loud click the door came open.

Another lamp, even more odoriferous than the one I held, guttered toward extinction on a stand beside the bed. Anyone who can whilst sleeping in an establishment like the Plessy's Flipper will make a light to keep creeping mammals and other crawling vermin from scuttling over him in darkness. There are places where one would not have to worry about such things, but that inn, alas!, was not among them.

Someone wrapped in all the blankets suddenly ceased snoring; the click of the lock must have awakened him. He stuck out his head and peered curiously in my direction. My own curiosity was likewise excited. His scales were the pale green—almost yellow—of the folk who hatch in the various southern islands of the Peaceful Ocean.

"Sorry to disturb you," I told him. "The landlord sold me half your bed for the night."

"Ah. Him do that?" My to-be-bedfellow spoke our language poorly at best. He did, however, seem friendly. "Well, you come on, then. Me have name Geekgeek. What you have name? Not like to sleep by someone me not know name to."

I told him what to call me. With the rude simplicity of the savage, he seemed satisfied: so satisfied, indeed, that with my requesting it he divested himself of half the bedclothes and vouchsafed them to me. As it was growing chilly—Faraway Island, full of fogs and mists, is seldom warm during daylight, much less by night—I was glad enough to have the covers, even if they smelled powerfully of Geekgeek, and perhaps also of some indefinite but large number of previous occupants of the bed.

As I was lying down, Geekgeek asked me, "You go on mossy ship?"

"I was looking to, yes," I said. "I've never done it before. I've been to sea, on ordinary traders, but never like that."

I could not have told him why I sought this adventure, either; had he asked me, which he did not. I fled no failed love affair. I had none to flee; no one on earth cared whether I lived or died or wished I would do one or the other. I was not particularly greedy for adventure. If I sought anything at all, I sought to be settled instead of gliding hither and yon like a huzzard on the breeze. Settle, you say, on a ship that cruises all the world's oceans at its skipper's whim or lore, on a voyage that may last four months or four years? But yes: on such a ship someone will always set you your tasks, leaving you with scarcely a shred of time in which you must think for yourself. Sure enough, if I was after anything, that would have been it.

Geekgeek cared not a copper for whatever made me do whatever I did. "Me harpoon man," he said. "Not have no mossy ship without harpoon mans, no. You come with I, they take you, too, sure sure."

After I spoke, I saw the lamplight glittering from the steel heads of the tools of his trade. I should have spied them sooner, but we all should do a great many things at which we fail. "My thanks," I told him. "Likely I will."

"Good. Now us sleep." He turned his back at me, so that his tail brushed my legs. And sleep he did: the sleep of barbarism, of savagery, of innocence, the sleep I would have thought surely extinct in this modern, bustling age. After a long while, I slept as well. My slumber was light, fitful, suitable to the present day. But it was what the gods gave me, and I endeavored to make the most of it. At any rate, I knew little more till the rising sun drove the mammals back to their hiding places and woke Geekgeek and me.

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After we broke our fast, Geekgeek slung his harpoons on his back and repaired to the harbor. I followed in his wake, swept along by his purpose when I had so little of my own. The mossy stink was still there, but I minded it less, having continued to accustom myself to it. Thus habit simplifies life for us all.

"Which ship do you have in mind?" I asked the harpoon man.

He waved to the nearest one, which was even then taking on barrels of salt meat and water. Its name—*Queepabd*—was written in letters of gold (well, letters of gilt or possibly polished brass) on the stern, above the skipper's cabin. "Us try here first," he said. "Them no want, us go till them somewhere yes want."

By the way he said it, he was ready to work his way through every mossy ship tied up at the quays till he found one where his services were desired. He might have been a South Sea savage, but he showed more persistence and ambition than many an individual who is called civilized.

As for me, I still drifted on his current of resolve like a leaf fallen in a river and floating downstream. With no purpose to my name, I was more than content to borrow his. "Why not?" I said and followed him along the tarry planking.

"Come aboard?" he called, and the first mate, seeing those fangèd harpoons, waved him forward at once. I continued to follow as we walked along the gangplank, and no one said me nay.

The mate, whose name was Stabbak, hired Geekgeek at once. That he was a barbarian from distant, heathen lands fazed Stabbak not a whit. The reverse, if anything. "Some of the best harpoon men come from the strangest places," the mate remarked. "With you, we'll have Ootag, who escaped from slavery, and Tashteg, a brownskin from somewhere in the West."

He waited to see how Geekgeek would take that. The natives of this continent are not of our kind. They know less than we; we push them harder year by year. Not reckoning them truly people, some want nothing to do with them. What would have passed had Geekgeek been one such, I cannot say. But he merely shrugged and remarked, "Him can stand I, me can stand he."

"Good enough," the mate said, and then, at last, deigned to notice me. When he observed, "This will be your first time on a mossy ship," it was not a question.

"True enough." I admitted what I could scarcely deny. "I have been to sea before, though."

"That helps you less than you might think," Stabbak replied. "Well, tell me about yourself and

what you may be able to do.” To the best of my ability, I did. He scratched behind his earhole with a fingerclaw in a way that suggested my best was none too good. “I’d better take you back and let Captain Baja decide about you.”

“However you please, of course,” I replied. If I did not suit the *Queepabd’s* skipper, I would bid Geekgeek godspeed and try my fortune on the next mossy ship, and, if need be, on the ones after that. On the way to the skipper’s cabin, I met in passing Shtup and Frask, the second and third mates. One was old; the other, short. Past that, they left little initial impression on me.

Stabbak tapped softly on the door that gave the captain’s cabin more privacy than most enjoy aboard any ship. Hearing nothing, he tapped again, hardly louder than before. This time, a harsh, rusty voice came through the oaken planking: “Enter.”

The mate opened the door and ducked inside. As I had followed Geekgeek aboard the ship, so I followed Stabbak into the cabin. He said, “Your pardon, sir, but here’s one who’d sail with us. He’s been to sea before, he says, but on a mossy ship he’s still an unhatched egg. I thought I’d best get your view before taking him on.”

“Thou’rt care itself, Stabbak,” said Baja, turning to survey me. As he moved, his tail scraped against the deck beneath it. This tail was made from highly polished mossy bone, and attached to the stump of his gods-given appendage by a cunning arrangement of drosaw-leather straps. It was, I suppose, better than no tail at all, but not nearly so good as the one of which he’d been robbed by some catastrophe, I knew not what.

That artificial tail was the most remarkable thing about him, but not by any great stretch. He was the most weathered old salt I’d ever seen; his green-scaled hide was nearly as leathery as the straps sustaining his tail. Even his feathers were sad and draggled, showing the effect of sun and rain and storm. A great scar seamed his jaw and just missed his left eye. That and its corresponder on the other side were two of the piercingest I’d ever encountered. Not to put too fine a point on it, at first glance he terrified me, a sentiment that increased on further acquaintance rather than dissipating.

“A seaman, art thou?” quoth he and hurled questions nautical at me one after another, as if they were so many harpoons with which he aimed to pin down the truth. I answered as best I could. He scratched at himself with a sharp-clawed forefinger, then continued, “Well, thou know’st somewhat. ’Twill serve thee less well than thou think’st. For the true query is: When the mossy rises from the sea with toothy maw all agape, wilt thou hold steady or give way to fear?”

“I hope I’ll be steady. I’ll try to be steady,” I said. “Before the egg of fate hatches, though, how may anyone know?”

Stabbak’s hiss showed he thought I’d thrown away my chance to ship aboard the *Queepabd*. But the banked fires in Captain Baja’s terrible eyes glowed a bit brighter. “Thou’rt honest, at any rate,” he said. “And thou’rt friends with a harpoon man.”

I looked at him in surprise. So did the first mate. Neither of us had mentioned that I boarded the ship with Geekgeek and his spears. Baja was in his cabin all the while. He could not have known—except he did. This was the first time he startled me that way, but it would not be the last.

“Go along, go along,” Baja said. “Stabbak’ll see to thy papers. I care little for such foolishness. But friendship is a line that binds together those who share it. With thy friend at the bow of thy mossy boat searing the monsters from the vasty deep, thou’lt betray him not, for fear of severing the sacred line.”

And so it was decided. Had I slept elsewhere at the Plessy’s Flipper, or found a room in some other hostel altogether, this would be a different story. Different in which ways? Reader, I cannot tell you. We may have the potentiality to live many lives, but we knowingly realize only one of them. Thus I tell the only tale I—*this* I—can tell.

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A light but fair breeze let us escape the harbor at Faraway Town. We sailed north until we could round Great Point—the lighthouse there is most impressive—and then spread all sail to hasten south across the Ocean of Storms to the watery territory in which mossies best thrived.

Day followed day, each a little warmer, each a little milder, than the one before. The sun stood

higher in the sky each noon when Captain Baja shot it with the sextant to fix its position and note that in his log. The *Queepabd* might as well have been an ordinary trading ship, for we were not yet on the hunt. I could scarcely have asked for a more delicate introduction into my strange new world.

Masts and spars and lines and sails . . . I had their measure. Scrambling about up there fazed me no more than it did any of the others who went aloft to keep the ship headed as the skipper decided it should be. No one without a head for heights will ever put to sea, except as passenger.

As we got farther south, flying fish began leaping from the water. Some would wind up on deck. They are tasty raw and even tastier roasted or fried. The cook's spices improved the blandest of victuals and got to prove as much over and over again with dried and salted drosaw and hornface flesh. Next to that bill of fare, the odd flying fish was a bit of excitement on the tongue.

I did not go aloft every shift. There was also plenty to do on deck and belowdecks, and Captain Baja made it all too clear how little he thought of idleness amongst the crew. Thus I was holystoning dirt mostly imaginary from the deck timbers when someone high above sang out, "Turtle! King turtle off the port bow!"

As it happened, I was working on the port side, not far from the rail. I gave over holystoning; the skipper's view to the contrary notwithstanding, one does not live by labor alone. I had heard of these monsters of the deep, but set eyes on only a couple of them, and those but fleetingly. I wanted a proper look, if one was to be had.

King turtles are both smaller and scarcer than mossies or plessies. Not many go out to hunt them, and mossy ships will not lower boats to pursue them, reckoning them not worth the trouble. Nevertheless, they are not to be despised. A big one, like this fellow snapping up jellyfish now, will be longer than two people from nose to tailtip, and will weigh, I suppose, as much as twelve or fifteen. I got a good look at the monster's ribbed blue-green carapace and at its great head. As I watched, its mighty maw opened to swallow down a stinging galleon. If it felt the stings from the jellyfish, they troubled it not, but perhaps added piquancy to its repast, much as the cook's peppers did with ours.

Just for a moment, the king turtle's little squinting eyes met mine. What long, slow thoughts ran through its brain? What did it make of the thing of wood and canvas that glided through its world? Did it reckon the *Queepabd* strange and abnormal, a thing of ill omen, or did it with animal resignation take the ship for granted? These were all questions easier asked than answered.

And then another question was asked of me, in a rough voice I recognized at once: "Why'rt thou not working as thou shouldst? She who laid thine egg is not here. She will not holystone for thee."

My mouth started to fall open, but I arrested the motion ere it was well begun. I could not show the skipper my teeth; he had the right to order me about and to correct me if he found me wanting. All save the captain aboard ship are slaves—voluntary slaves, it may be, but slaves just the same.

And so I said, as meekly as I might, "I pray your pardon, sir. I sought but a quick glimpse of the king turtle we're sailing past."

Mollify him I did not; I might have known I wouldn't. "Faugh!" he said: not a word but a sound of pure disgust. "If thou'dst scan the sea with some purpose, scan for the Great Gray Mossy, the one who robbed me of the trusty tail I was hatched with."

Turning abruptly, he stumped away before I could give him any of the myriad question suddenly all abubble in my head. Mossies are commonly green, but that was the smallest thing I wondered about. Wonder I would have to keep on doing. Captain Baja's artificial tail thumped against the timbers until I could hear it no more, the sound it made being drowned out by the holystone's harsh, monotonous scraping.

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I thought of seeking more about the skipper's Great Gray Mossy from Stabbak, but in the end fought shy of that. I could not be certain the mate would not inform Baja of my untoward curiosity, a consummation devoutly not to be wished. Thus, I sought out Geekgeek instead. A harpoon man would know the things that were in the sea: might even know them better than the skipper

would. And a harpoon man, unlike the first mate, would feel no temptation to bear tales.

Yet I was balked of my questioning for some little while, as I found Geekgeek busy at his devotions. He was propitiating a little black idol of carven wood with dried meat and blood. "Have to keep Yojo happy or me lose my luck," he said, indicating the statuette with a thumbclaw.

"Yojo?" I echoed foolishly.

"One of the gods of my people. Most stay home, but him travel with I, look over I as me look out for he."

"Where did you get the blood?"

Geekgeek shrugged. "Kill a rat, me did."

"Oh," I said on a falling note. Of course mammals *will* get aboard any ship ever built. Many skippers let a couple of small raptors roam free to keep them down, but no hunting, not even the most diligent, will ever root them out altogether. Like ticks and mosquitoes, mammals are an unfortunate part of life.

I reckon myself a loyal, if not an overly pious, follower of the creed of the World Egg. Though I do not follow it, the belief that life instead came Down from the Sky fails to offend me. Geekgeek's ritual, by contrast, seemed a relic of outworn paganism, one almost forgotten in this modern, busy day and age. I waited with such patience as I could muster whilst he propitiated his precious and surely nonexistent Yojo.

At last, the rude little ceremony was complete. Geekgeek began to pay heed once more to things other than his much-traveled godlet. I asked him a question: "May I ask you a question?"

"Ask," he said with a grand gesture. Then he tempered that by adding, "Maybe me answer. Maybe no."

"Even if you do not, I shall be no worse off," I said. "What can you tell me of the Great Gray Mossy"—I spoke the name as Captain Baja had, with majuscules audible—"that took off the skipper's tail?"

"Bad fish, that one. Terrible bad fish," Geekgeek said.

Any naturalist will tell you mossies are not fish, no more than plessies are. They may swim in the sea, but they have no gills and breathe air. Their blood is warm, not fishy-cold. They do not spawn, rather giving birth to live young. Geekgeek cared nothing for naturalists' fine distinctions. In his simple view of the world, anything that lived in the water had to be a fish.

After a moment, he continued, "Old bad fish. Big bad fish. Many hunt Great Gray Mossy. Him still live. Them say him charge boats. Them say him charge ships, even. Years ago, him sink one, eat half the mossy hunters. Like you say, him take captain's tail." His toothy jaws opened and shut to show what he meant by *take*.

"But Baja yet survives," I said.

Geekgeek dipped his head in agreement. "Them rescue he after Great Gray Mossy wreck his boat. Blacksmith sear tailstump with hot iron"—this punctuated by a hiss, as of hot metal cauterizing flesh—"so him no bleed out. Him swear big revenge oath. Big, big oath."

Skippers, being themselves little gods whilst aboard ship, can go a long way down the path of eccentricity without anyone's having the temerity to remark on it. It had already struck me that Captain Baja luxuriated in this license. Now, having heard what the harpoon man divulged to me, I could not help asking, "Does he have all his oars in the water? Or is he more dangerous to the *Queepabd* than any mossy, no matter how great or gray, is ever likely to be?"

"Baja, him number one ship handler." Geekgeek did not try to misunderstand me, for which I felt myself indebted to him. "Him number one mossy hunter. Him number one mossy killer. Number one, you hear? Him go against Great Gray Mossy again, not know number one good enough." He tapped his curious South Sea idol with a fingerclaw. "So me feed Yojo. A god are happy with you, chances better. Maybe not good, but better."

"But will not Yojo be grateful to you and not to the skipper?" I asked.

"Me tell he who me feed he for," the savage harpoon man replied. "Him listen, me bet."

Normally, I should have had no truck with such heathen superstitions. But nothing aboard a mossy ship is normal, not when compared to the life a landsman leads. And, I was coming to see, precious little having to do with Captain Baja was normal, not even when compared to life

aboard your common mossy ship.

Had I walked along some other gangplank, I might have been happier than I now was. Having walked along the one I chose, I was in Baja's power until the cruise ended, whether in six months or three or four years. A skipper may be a little god, but plenty big enough to rule a little world like that of the *Queepabd*.

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Not long after I had my colloquy with Geekgeek and Yojo—heaven forfend I should omit Yojo from the colloquy—one of the watchers on the foremast cried, "Plessy! Plessy to starboard!"

I was in the rigging myself then, halfway up the mainmast, and, if I turned my I in the direction the lookout indicated, Captain Baja was most unlikely to criticize. In fact, he stood at the wheel, so he could ensure that his ship followed the exact path of his implacable, inexorable will.

The plessy was one of the long-necked kind, not the thicker variety that puts one more in mind of mossies. Its head thrust up more than my length above the salty sea and twisted this way and that. Plessies hunt that way; I've seen their toothy maws snatch flying fish out of the air, and seabirds, and once even a terry I should have thought too large to go down such a narrow throat. But in thinking that I should have been mistaken, for the big flyer vanished, never to be seen again.

And thrusting its head so far up into the air also let the plessy see farther than it could have otherwise. No sooner had it seen the *Queepabd* than we aboard the *Queepabd* saw it no more, for it dove deep. Under the sea, its sculling paddles would swiftly take it away from what it perceived to be mortal peril.

At the wheel, Captain Baja lifted one fist from the polished wood to make claws at the plessy. "Thou coward! Thou fool!" he shouted after it in his rough, hard voice. "I sought thee not! I'd not dirty my ship's harpoons with thy blood. Thou stupid creature, this is a mossy ship. I'm after nobler prey than thy kind!"

As I believe I have mentioned ere now, ships do put to sea to slay plessies. A person not familiar with those who go to sea in ships for the purpose of greasing our wheels, lighting our cities, and feeding our hatchlings could never distinguish between the one sort of vessel and the other. No more could the plessy. As far as it was concerned, any kind of ship meant danger; it impartially fled all.

"That's a rare fine rant from the skipper," said one of my comrades aloft, with obvious delight in Baja's mighty pride and scorn.

Those roused different feelings in me. I could not help thinking that, no matter how mighty a man might be, was he mighty enough to measure himself against the sea? What was Baja next to the Ocean of Storms on which we sailed? Why, less than a biting tick when compared to the drosaw whose blood it sucked.

Yet bold tick Baja, knowing himself to be so minuscule, nonetheless persisted in his war on mossies in general and on the Great Gray Mossy in especial. He would have boiled the ocean, were that in his power, to rid the world of what he hated most. It was folly, but was it not grand folly?

Then again, is not even the grandest of follies folly still?

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Two or three of our sailors had not crossed the Equator until doing so on our voyage. As is the custom, they were hatched from the egg anew. They were besmeared with yolk—not the freshest of yolk, either—and had other indignities visited on them as well. Most of the filthy, menial work fell to them over the next few days.

The mate on the trading ship aboard which I was hatched anew had been harsher to his first-time crossers than Stabbak was on the *Queepabd*. But then Stabbak was a genuinely good-natured soul and very much needed to be such to mitigate Captain Baja's holystoned harshness. On my old ship, the skipper was honey-sweet, whilst the mate did his level best to make life intolerable anyway.

South and east we cruised. We spied plessies, and even a plessy ship or two, though the ships that hunted the creatures were not near enough to the ones we spied for our intelligence of those

long-gone beasts to do them any good.

The plessy ships' skippers had likewise seen mossies now and then, but not recently enough to help us in our quest. They disdained mossies as we disdained plessies, regarding ours as a trade conducted without due regard for life, limb, or tail. They did not say as much in so many words, not after seeing what sort of tail our skipper sported, but they meant it nonetheless.

(I think they were wise to have chosen circumspection. Had one of their skippers been rash enough to have twitted Captain Baja about his abridgement, I do believe he would have served out cutlasses to his crew and led the boarding party himself. And the offending plessy ship's deck would have run with blood that did not stream from its quarry. Say what you would about Baja, but he required being taken seriously.)

Since we did not have to turn pirate, then, in due course we rounded the Cape of Good Hope. By that time it would have been autumn back on Faraway Island, but in traveling as we had we'd turned the seasons upside down. The weather was not much different, but got better instead of worse. If only one could travel fast enough, one might enjoy summer the year around. Or, in a mossy ship, be too busy to enjoy it.

Once we were well into the Southern Ocean, where mossies might be found and hunted in this season, Captain Baja took a mallet and two sturdy nails from the ship's blacksmith. Summoning the crewfolk to foregather by the mainmast, he held up a goldpiece and let the sun glint from the snout of the famous dead individual immortalized on its obverse.

"Do ye see this, lads? Do ye?" he called.

See it we did, and loudly attested to the fact.

"Good," the skipper rasped. Taking one of the nails, he spiked the coin to the pine of the mainmast. "It goes to whoever first spies the first mossy we catch and kill on this cruise. Is that all right by you?"

"Better than all right!" Tashteg shouted in his mushy voice—being of distinct species, brownskins can't properly form all the sounds in our language, any more than we can properly shape all those in theirs. However odd he sounded, though, no one was left in any doubt as to what he said. Geekgeek and Ootag gave forth with cheers, nor were Tashteg's fellow harpoon men the only ones to do so. I confess a whoop of glee—or, if you would rather, a whoop of greed—escaped my own teeth.

But Captain Baja had not yet finished. He took from a pouch on his belt another goldpiece, a great fat lump of the precious metal, all stamped to perfection and worth ten times the first one; worth, to be honest, many times the concatenated wealth of most of the crewfolk.

"By the gods and by the Great Egg from which the world hatched at the beginning of days, my rogues, do ye see *this*?" Baja cried.

For a moment, a moment that stretched and stretched, he got no response at all. Staring at so grand and gaudy a goldpiece paralyzed us all, as the sea serpent's venom is said to paralyze whatever it bites, leaving the victim ready to be engulfed. But then we all hissed and snarled as if we were so many middle raptors, not properly men at all. What a hornface's meaty carcass might do for hungry animals, gold does for—or, I might say, does to—hungry people.

"This," Baja said, "*this* to the huzzard-eyed rogue who spots for me the Great Gray Mossy, to be paid after we lower and harpoon and try the monster!" He nailed the second coin to the mast, well above the first. With a fierce laugh, he added, "I've spiked it well, I have. No thief will walk off with it in the middle of the night!"

I would not have wanted to try that, not when it ran the risk of having the skipper—who seemed to sleep very little—catch me in the act. What would he do to me, or to any other foolish, luckless would-be thief? If he only fed the miscreant to the ever-hungry sharks, the fellow might well count himself lucky.

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There are terries that dive headlong into the sea after fish or squid or ammonites that they spy from great heights. They are, generally speaking, terries of the tropics, relying on the bright, nearly vertical sun to illuminate their meals for them.

And there are other terries, more widely spread in respect to latitude, that glide low above the

ocean's surface and scoop up unwary little fish with great, underslung lower jaws. Skimmers earn a more reliable, steadier living than hellsdivers, even if every now and then a plessy will snatch one out of the air and abruptly turn it from eater to eaten.

Sailors, now . . . sailors admire hellsdivers for their boldness and enterprise. But sailors on mossy ships know skimmers are the terries more likely to guide them to their prey. For skimmers skim where the fishes swim thickest, and where they have the highest hope of reward. Mossies likewise gather in such places, for in those places they may fill their gigantic stomachs with the least labor. Laziness is not a trait known on dry land alone.

And so, when one bright, hot, humid morning we spied skimmers flocking almost like gulls, there was a singular rush to go aloft, as if everyone aboard the *Queepabd* were suddenly stricken with incurable gold fever. Where there were skimmers, there would be fish; where there were fish, there would be mossies; where there were mossies, there would be gold, whether of the smaller minting or the greater.

Or so we fondly believed. Skimmers we saw in great profusion, and fish so many that we watched them springing from the sea in their fear. Yet of mossies that first day full of skimmers we spied none. It was enough to drive one mad, assuming anyone's service in a mossy ship not to be prior evidence of lunacy.

"Where is them?" Geekgeek sounded angry at the monsters of the depths for not queuing up to be slaughtered. "Where them hiding?"

Of all the things in the world, or in the watery portions thereof which they inhabited, hiding was among the last I should have expected from mossies. They lorded it over the ocean; even the greatest thick-bodied plessies and murder-tooth sharks commonly chose to swim away from them, not toward them with a view to combat. Only we in our wooden ships challenge them for supremacy of the sea; and, as Captain Baja's artificial tail attested, even now the fight is far from one-sided.

Slyly, I asked Geekgeek, "Cannot your little wooden idol, your Yojo, order the mossies to make themselves known to us?"

He tossed his head to show it was a thing impossible. "Him little god. You see he. *Little*. How him make to do things, mossies? Him have trouble plenty give *I* luck, and me smaller, lots smaller, than mossies."

With that I had to be contented, or rather discontented. Where was the logic in assuming that, because the god's image was small, the god himself had to be likewise? Where was the logic in assuming that small size meant small power? Where? Inside Geekgeek's skull, that was where. And that skull proved thick as a bonkhead's, and impervious to penetration by rational thought.

No help for it, then, but to wait until mossies manifested themselves of their own accord. If they did so soon, Geekgeek might graciously allow Yojo to take credit for the apparition. If not, he would generously forgive the small god for failing to accomplish that which lay beyond the reach of his small divinity.

Three days went by. No sign of mossies saw we. Perhaps Yojo was talking, or he was pursuing, or he was in a journey, or peradventure he slept. Everyone in the *Queepabd* grew irritable; we were one and all annoyed with the world and with one another, from the cook's helper, a half-grown lad named Fredugg, of the same oft-times-servile race as Ootag without even feathers yet on his arms, to Captain Baja himself.

Those who had the duty at the mossy ship's stern whispered of strange noises emanating from the skipper's cabin. I wondered whether Baja was in his own way communing with Yojo, or with some private daimon all his own. He called himself an Egger, as I did, but I was sure orthodoxy mattered nothing to him when measured against the pursuit and extermination of the Great Gray Mossy.

Stabbak seemed worried. Of all aboard the mossy ship, he had to be the least blind to and the most concerned with the skipper's savage obsession. It thrust all our lives into danger. Baja might not care about that, but the good first mate did. Perhaps even worse, from Stabbak's perspective, was that the skipper's obsession thrust the owners' profits into danger. Baja might play at killing other mossies, but he cared about killing only one. If he could carve what is known as

scrimshander work into one of the Great Gray Mossy's teeth torn from its dead jaw, every other such creature might go hang for all he cared.

Worse—from the mate's view of things, at any rate—was his own inferior position in the grand scheme of things. Stabbak could not order the skipper to desist from his impetuous folly. Baja would have clapped him in irons for making a mutiny had he attempted any such thing, if in his fury he did not slay him on the spot. No maritime court in the world, I feel sure, would have condemned the skipper for such a killing. On the contrary; Stabbak would have been weighed in the balances and found wanting. A mossy ship's skipper—any ship's skipper—is, as I have said, a small god, but a god nonetheless.

Stabbak grasped all this perfectly well. He was a good mate, maybe even a mate better than Baja was a skipper. He would suggest; he would implore; he would importune; command, he could not, nor did he ever seek to do so. If his suggestions and importunations fell upon plugged earholes, as they assuredly did, he could but go on with the ship's business in the best way he knew how to manage it.

Which he did. And he worried every heartbeat whilst doing it. The skipper had spiked gold to the mainmast to show what the Great Gray Mossy meant to him. About Stabbak's worries he cared not a counterfeit copper. The first mate doubtless knew as much, and doubtless worried even more as a result. He was, as I say, a most excellent mate.

Then one hot, muggy morning, half a daytenth before the sun reached its daily zenith, a sailor sang out in high excitement from even higher in the foremast's rigging: "Spout! By the Eggshell, it's a spout! Mossy off the starboard bow!"

* * *

Like plessies, mossies blow out vapor and water when they come to the surface for a sip of the fresh air their continued existence requires. A long-necked plessey will commonly thrust its head well out of the sea, leaving no doubt as to what it is. A thick-bodied plessey may be distinguished from the mossy it resembles at a distance by the shape and size of its spout. Those with any experience of both will never mistake the one for the other.

The first mate began to hurry aft to let Captain Baja know what had chanced if by some misfortune his aging earholes had not caught the cry from aloft. But a slam of the cabin door and the rattle of the skipper's artificial tail on timber told Stabbak and everyone else aboard the *Queepahd* that Baja was alert to all that passed on his ship. Soon he appeared on deck, nor was he alone, for five of the lean, all but demonic folk who roam the deserts south of the Middle Sea accompanied him.

I think we were all less astonished than we might have been without those reports of odd sounds coming from his cabin at odd daytenths. Not unastonished, mind, but less astonished. By then, I believe, nothing the skipper did could have astonished us very much. His having a secret boat crew all his own did not stand tall amongst the ranks of possible surprises.

For that was what those scrawny raptors of the desert—I do them no insult, that being but their own name for themselves—plainly were. The largest, leanest, and most villainous of them carried a harpoon even more deadly-looking than any I'd seen clutched in Geekgeek's scaly fist. The others, broader in the shoulders and thicker in the arms, must have done their share of rowing and more.

"Stabbak, thou'lt stay aboard and tend to the ship," Baja declared. "Faidal here and his gang of thieves and I, we'll go after the mossy in your boat."

"But, Captain—" The mate would not protest a lawful order but wanted to with every fiber of his being. This was his courage, his spine, being questioned, or so he could not help seeing it.

The skipper understood why the mate's tail quivered. "Thou'rt a man, Stabbak. Thou'rt a fine man, and I know it. Also I know thou'rt a young man, with wife and hatchlings back in Faraway Town. Should anyone's luck be out, let it be mine. But I expect to slay, not be slain, for the gods will assuredly take me not till I've had my try at vengeance against the Great Gray Mossy."

To that the good mate could offer no response save acquiescence. He dipped his head and mumbled, "As you say, sir, so shall it be."

Ootag, his harpoon man, who had once been a slave, might have had somewhat to say to

Stabbak on the question of unquestioning obedience. Since Stabbak would not put to sea, neither would Ootag. He looked unhappy that he would not be rowed into peril of his life. So he looked, and so, no doubt, he felt. This willingness to hazard all for the sake of others' approval is a curious business. And I had my own smaller share of it, else I should not have taken ship aboard the *Queepabd*, much less rowed in Shtup's boat to take Geekgeek out where he could harpoon the mossy.

"We'll do our job, by the gods," quoth the second mate. "We won't let those funny foreign sons of sour yolks get ahead of us, either, will we, boys?" As we raised a cheer, Shtup seemed suddenly to recall something of importance. He dipped his head to Geekgeek. "Meaning no offense to you, I'm sure."

Geekgeek waved aside the apology, if such it was. "Us here. Mossy there. Us go kill he," he said, as single-minded in his purpose as the most modern captain of manufacturing.

Down went the boats, into the warm sea. Down scrambled the crews after them: harpoon men, rowers, and, at the rudders, the second and third mates and the skipper himself. Baja's unlimber, artificial tail made his scramble more awkward than most, but he accomplished it. Faidal and his fellow desert demons traveled down the ship's flank as easily if they were so many geckos with sticky toes.

The three boats pulled away from the mossy ship. "Give it all you have, lads," Shtup said; to him, everyone on the ship save Baja would have seemed a lad. "Pull! Pull, curse you! We'll not let the other boats beat us, not either one of 'em!"

Pull I did, along with my fellows at the oars. Facing the stern, I had to trust to Shtup and Geekgeek, who could see where they were going, not merely where they'd been. The *Queepabd* shrank behind us, as hatchlinghood does when time moves us away from it. Then I had not worried about how I was directed; I had to hope now that Shtup knew how best to guide boat to target and that Geekgeek could do what wanted doing when the instant came.

I could glance to either side. We stood neither much ahead of nor much behind Frask's boat and the skipper's. Those lean desert raiders could row, but so could we all. And so we did, as if possessed.

"Ah, the mossy's spied us," Shtup said. "Now we find out what he does."

Mossies have not intelligence in the sense that people do. They build no cities; they make no laws. Yet neither are they foolish creatures of the fishy kind. Aboard ship, I had listened to a great deal of talk about this crucial moment, the one wherein the mossy first sets eyes on the little boats full of folk who will slay him if they can.

Four things are possible, experienced crewmen averred. The naïve mossy, the one never before hunted, may simply wait to find out what these curious creatures are. This sort is easy to harpoon. Or the creature may flee, at a speed oars cannot match. Or it may dive, in which case the steersman turns prophet, as it were, divining where it will surface again after a stay in the depths of half a daytenth or more.

Or, if the hunters' luck be out, the mossy may charge their boats, toothy jaws agape, tail ready to smash and break. Some mossies that charge have been oft pursued and understand aggression is the better part of valor. Others, say those in a position to know, are simply possessed of an evil temperament, as some people are.

This mossy dove. "Oh, the stinking rotten egg!" Shtup said. "Now we'll be out here gods know how long, and we may never get another glimpse of him."

Geekgeek pointed back toward the *Queepabd*. "That way, me think." No less than steersmen, harpoon men fancy they can think themselves inside a mossy's long, narrow, savage skull. Being savage himself, Geekgeek might have enjoyed some advantage in that regard.

"I don't know." Shtup seemed less than sure of himself.

Frask's boat was making off in exactly the opposite direction. As for Baja, his desert demons were resting on their oars, as if believing the mossy would seek air again from the very point whence he departed.

"That way," Geekgeek repeated.

"Well, we'll try it." The second mate hissed laughter. "If it doesn't work out, I'll blame you."

This sally sailed straight over the crest of feathers atop the harpoon man's head. Shtup went on, "Half speed, rowers! We have the time to get in place, I reckon." We turned in as small a circle as the rudder allowed, and the mossy ship's wooden walls began to rise before us. At length, Shtup asked, "Will this do, your Excellency?"

"Little more," Geekgeek responded, and on a little more we went.

I would have bet that the skipper's boat would prove closest to the mossy's surfacing point. Both Baja and Faidal seemed to own all but occult powers of insight into the way the monsters of the deep swam and even thought. I said nothing; I was the least experienced, most ignorant fellow in our boat, and had wit enough to understand as much.

And it is as well that I did not open my jaws, for when the mossy rose to breathe once more, it breached no farther from us than a couple of huzzards' wingspans. Shtup stared at Geekgeek. "You can call them, sure enough," the mate said.

"Smelled right," Geekgeek answered smugly, which might have meant anything or nothing.

To us at the oars, Shtup said, "Softly, lads, softly, and we'll be on him before he ever dreams we're there."

I rowed soft as ever I could, wishing I might look back over my shoulder to see how close we were getting and what the mossy was up to while we neared it. But I was a mere gear in the vast machinery of slaughter. Such knowledge being inessential to my function, I was denied it. Shtup used hand signals to slow us further and worked the rudder in accordance with Geekgeek's guidance; though I could not see the harpoon man at the boat's bow, I felt his every move and shift.

And I felt him lean back and then forward, casting the harpoon at the mossy with all the strength in his well-thewed left arm. A great groaning hiss broke from the mossy's mouth as it swam along the surface as fast as it could go, dragging us along behind on what they call a Far-away sled ride.

The rope, coiled in the tub with utmost care so it would not twist and catch harpoon man or rower in a deadly embrace, hissed from its storage place, so fast that Shtup exclaimed, "By the gods, Geekgeek, wet it before it catches fire!" But Geekgeek, being not without practice in such matters, had already knelt and dipped a long-handled pot into the sea so he could use the salt water to cool the line as it unwound.

For a while, all we could do was let the mossy tow us and pray to whatever gods we owned that it would not turn round on us instead (I added a small petition to Geekgeek's Yojo, which, though it might not help, would surely do no harm).

Baja's boat, and Frask's, both followed us to lend what aid they might. For the moment, they could do naught; the mossy, in its pain and rage, swam faster than any boat might go. Then Geekgeek exclaimed, "Him dive!"

"He won't stay down long," Shtup predicted. "He'll have to breathe again soon, same as anybody who's run a long way with a spear in his gizzard. When he comes up, we'll find out just how bad hurt he is."

True to the second mate's prognostication, the mossy soon rose and spouted. Geekgeek sounded disappointed as he said, "Same blow like usual."

I did not fully grasp the significance of that, being on my first hunt on my first cruise in a mossy ship. Shtup, who fancied hearing himself talk, spelled out the harpoon man's meaning for him, saying, "He'll blow blood out his snout soon enough, I reckon."

Up from behind us came Baja's boat, which had taken a considerable lead on Frask's. At the bow, Faidal waved a question to Shtup, who returned a silent gesture of agreement or permission. Baja, at the rudder, dipped his head slightly, acknowledging the assent. The desert demons rowed the skipper's boat past ours and up to the mossy, which had greatly slacked its pace as the wound took a toll on it.

Faidal undid the line from his harpoon before casting it at the mossy. Geekgeek's line still secured the creature. The mossy jerked and leaped as if lightning-stricken when the spear went home, then tried to tear off as it had when our harpoon man hit it.

But, doubly tormented by barbed iron in its vitals, it lacked the vim for another wild jaunt across the water. Its speed soon flagged and, as Shtup had foretold, it spouted red rather than

white. Soon it lay on the surface, two flippers upturned, twitching its life away.

Baja took a long lance with a pennon on the butt end and thrust it into the aquatic monster so it stood straight up. Those aboard the *Queepabd* could spot the pennon from farther than they could see the mossy, and in spotting it they would realize the pursuit had succeeded and they might bring up the ship to commence converting the creature to its essential oils and other worthwhile parts.

“Bravely done, boys, bravely,” Shtup said. “I’m proud of you all. Geekgeek, don’t reckon you could’ve hit him any better.”

The savage held out his left arm as if it were not part of him but rather some independent entity with powers of its own. And he spoke of it in the same wise, replying, “Him do good, yes.”

Looking behind me, I could see the *Queepabd* approaching, her sails full of wind. Sailors on the deck and in the rigging cheered our prowess. At the wheel, Stabbak dipped his head in salute to the skipper. By the way Baja accepted the gesture of respect, he reckoned it no less than his due.

* * *

With the rest of those who’d gone out on the mossy boats, I scrambled up from them to the ship once more. Small and cramped as the *Queepabd* commonly seemed, it might have been a continent by comparison to the boats. No sooner was I arrived than I helped hoist the boats aboard and aided in securing the enormous floating corpse of the mossy to the ship’s starboard flank.

Even as we were making it fast with hooks and chains and lines, sharks drawn by the delicious scent of blood in the water gathered for the feast we had set out before them. Baja grumbled at the wastage, though he understood perfectly well that it was an inevitable accompaniment to what mossy ships did.

“They run from live mossies,” Frask said, “but when their betters slay them they aren’t ashamed to take their place at the table. Huzzards of the sea, that’s all they are.”

In turn, Geekgeek, Tashteg, Ootag, and Faidal went to work with spears and saws to sever the mossy’s head from its body so it might be brought up on deck for the special treatment it required. This was a hard labor, and a dangerous one. They stood on the corpse to dismember it. A wave might crush one of them between the dead mossy and the ship’s timbers. Or that same wave, or its mischievous brother, might playfully swipe them into the ocean. The sharks gorging themselves on mossy meat would not disdain fresh harpoon man should they find it on the menu.

When Geekgeek came back on deck, all tired and bloody after a long shift of carving the carcass, I told him, “By the gods and the Eggshell, whatever they pay you, it is not a sufficiency.”

He shrugged. “Want to spear shark for I. Shark great big good eating. Feed Yojo shark liver, too, you bet.”

“He’s welcome to my share,” I said. I have heard that, in large quantities, shark liver will poison you. Not finding liver of any sort appetizing, I cannot speak to the truth of this.

In due course, as has befallen both kings and those who fought kings, the mossy’s head and body parted company. Much hard work on capstans and much profanity led to the great head—it was a third the length of the whole animal, and nearly as heavy as the rest put together—being hauled up on deck. Seawater-diluted blood spread over the planking; in my mind, I envisioned long dreary day-tenths with the holystone, restoring shipshape cleanliness once more.

One of the tools a mossy ship carries is a combined axe blade and pick mounted on a stout staff, stouter than that which holds a harpoon head. Yes, something so medieval as a halberd still has a place in our modern, hurrying world, not for discomfiting warriors armored in plate but for splitting mossy skulls that scoffed at any less imposing implements of persuasion.

Ootag, the largest and burliest of the harpoon men, took up the halberd. He leaned so far back on his tail that I thought he must surely topple over, but used his enormous strength to come forward once more and swing his skull-cleaver in a glittering arc through the mild, moist subtropical air. It smashed against the very midpoint of the mossy’s head with a sound like that of a butcher’s shop, though greatly magnified.

The stalwart skull rebuffed it like a dainty votary of the Great Egg spurning the town drunkard. Unfazed as the drunkard cut by the votary, Ootag delivered another blow, and yet another. At the third, a rending crunch proclaimed that the escaped slave had at last set at liberty the valuable contents of the mossy's braincase.

Once the breach was effected, subtly replaced brute force. Spreaders widened the gap between the thick hard bones on one side and those on the other, so that the sun shone in on the mossy's brain.

A mossy may easily weigh as much as five hundred people. Its brain, though larger than a person's, is not proportionally larger. Mossies with the brains of five hundred people would contrive to hunt us on land rather than being themselves hunted in the water. The scarcity and difficulty in obtaining mossy brains add to the value of those that are obtained. For, after fermentation in the cask, as it were, nothing will help turn hides to leather like the organ which guided the living mossy in its progress through the sea. Other brains may suffice for lesser leathers, but only the mossy's will produce the very best.

Once the brain was properly casked and carried below to commence its curing process, Ootag handed his halberd to an ordinary sailor for cleaning and took a rather smaller weapon—an ordinary knife—from the sheath on his belt. He used it to slice off a choice gobbet of the meat between the mossy's hide and skull and pop it into his mouth without visiting upon it fire or even salt.

"Ah!" he said with a deep hiss of satisfaction. "Nothing's better!"

This proposition struck me as dubious, but others with more knowledge of such matters seemed to agree with him. After allowing him the first morsel, they swarmed over the severed head, each after his favorite bit of flesh. Some carved chunks from the top of the mossy's head, as Ootag had; others chose theirs from near the neck, still others from the mossy's tongue. It was the rudest of feasts, one our barbarous ancestors would have fully appreciated.

So I thought, at least, until pangs of hunger prompted me to join it. We were at least marginally more civilized than the raptors, for we did not bite and claw each other as we fed ourselves. Then again, there was such a great plenty of meat to go around as to make quarrels over who claimed which portion simply preposterous.

I hacked off a great slice of mossy tongue, popped it into my mouth, chewed briefly, and gulped it down. It was sweet, it was mild, it was tender—as with flying fish, it was *not* the timberlike smoked and salted drosaw and hornface flesh upon which we had all been so long subsisting. As Ootag said, nothing could have gone down better. Perhaps unfamiliarity enhanced flavor and texture, but you could not have told me so whilst I consumed it. As soon as it was done, I cut myself another slab, from as close to the first as I could get.

After satisfying hunger, some of the sailors began worrying the mossy's teeth from their sockets with knives and pliers, for scrimshander work or to sell to landlubbers once the *Queepabd* came home to Faraway Island once more. Here, however, Stabbak took a hand. "Half the teeth to the crew, half to the ship," he said. "You all know the bargain as well as I do—and as well as Captain Baja does. The ship *will* have its half. What's over and above that will be yours. Forty-four for the ship, the rest for you."

Mossies commonly have eighty-eight teeth, sometimes a few more, sometimes a few less. But eighty-eight is the number on which the two moieties are based.

Sometimes it so happens that the smaller and poorer fangs go the ship, the larger and finer to the sailors. Aboard less happy ships, the converse may come to pass. On the *Queepabd*, I was given to understand, the division would be as even and exact as ingenuity, sharp eyes, and a good set of scales could make it. In this regard, the skipper was a god and the first mate a prophet of scrupulosity.

I would have expected nothing less from Captain Baja. He might have been mad; indeed, there can be no doubt he *was* mad in his pursuit of the Great Gray Mossy. He owned as much himself; on days when the wind was southerly he knew a hawk from a huzzard. But no single speck of dishonesty tarnished his madness.

* * *

Once the head and its valuable contents were eaten and otherwise disposed of, we hoisted the remainder of the carcass aboard for skinning and rendering into essential oil and for the search for gray amber. The meat from the head that the sailors had not devoured was already bubbling in the cauldron of the tryworks, which sat and smoked like some dark deity's altar betwixt mainmast and foremast. Fire is always a great fear aboard ship despite water all around; stout and sturdy brickwork shielded our timbers from the furnace's flames and heat.

Nothing, though, could shield our snouts from the stench the tryworks sent forth. We might go belowdecks or high as we pleased in the rigging without escaping the reek of baking flesh, charring flesh, and bubbling oil. We inhaled mossy with every inspiration, and thought we should go on smelling it until our expiration.

Stabbak seemed contented enough and to spare. "That's the odor of money, boys!" he would say to anyone who would listen. "That's what the owners back on Faraway Island want to smell! And we all get our share! Every single drop of oil we render makes us money!"

"Mossy, him still stink," quoth Geekgeek, and most of us found ourselves in his corner rather than the mate's. The mossy even fueled its own destruction; chunks of flesh from which all oil had been cooked away went into the furnace smoking beneath the cauldron to keep it hot and enable the rendering of yet more oil from yet more flesh.

Once all the oleaginous meat had been flensed away from them, the strips sliced spirally from the mossy's scaly hide got special treatment of their own. They were tanned—no, not in mossy brains, for this would be leather of the roughest, of the toughest, kind—and set aside to cure. As needed, strips or squares would be cut from them and used to effect shipboard repairs. Whatever the *Queepabd* had left at her eventual (her most extremely eventual) return to Faraway Town would be sold, the proceeds, such as the might prove to be, adding to the profit the ship brought her owners and those of us who labored aboard her or, if worse came to worst, mitigating whatever losses she might suffer.

And mossy oil went from the tryworks into the barrels that would also be sold once we came to port again. Mossy oil helps light the world, and helps grease it as well, also greasing commerce as it leaves the mossy, leaves the mossy ship, and becomes a corpuscle in the bloodstream of trade. Few who fill their lamps or lubricate their lathes pause to consider how the oil they pour with lavish hand is won. I seldom did myself before my chance association with Geekgeek took me on to Baja's vessel.

The skipper seemed strangely indifferent to the liquid gold pouring from cauldron to barrel. The mossy we had slain was not the mossy whose blood he thirsted after. Somewhere in the broad blue ocean, the Great Gray Mossy still swam; still slaughtered sharks and plessies, king turtles and tunnies, great squid and ammonites; still *lived*. To Captain Baja, that was affront grandiose and unpardonable.

Yet he was not altogether uninterested in the proceedings—in the *breaking down* of the great sea beast, as mossy sailors are wont to call it. "Have a care when ye slice the guts, lads!" he said, not once but several times. "Have a care, aye! For remember, if there's gray amber to be found in there, it's worth even more, weight for weight, than the finest fermented mossy brains. If it's there to be found, find it you must, and whoever does will win handsome reward, I vow."

This gray amber is a product of sickness in mossies, not of health. It accretes like soft, slimy nacre round squids' beaks and bits of ammonite shell that fail to digest as they should. Whilst fresh, it reeks powerfully of what you would expect to find in a mossy's gut, which fouls the water on passing out through the creature's cloaca.

Yet dung remains dung for ever. Gray amber, once washed and heated and otherwise treated, becomes, by some near-mystical transmutation I cannot claim to comprehend, the basis of many of the finest fragrances and perfumes ever concocted.

This mossy had fed well before Geekgeek harpooned it. Its gut was full of dung, through which the sailors had to guddle in search of the precious commodity they sought. Breaking down a mossy is never work for those whose hands must be clean at all times and under all circumstances. Going after the gray amber may be the worst of it. As sailors will, they laughed and chaffed one another and played with bits of excrement as if it were a hatchling's toy.

Basins of seawater and strong soap adapted to use on the ocean let them wash their scales and feathers after the search was done (incidentally, they found none of what the skipper had hoped for).

Standing by watching them splash one another with salt water and soapsuds as they had before with dung, Stabbak murmured, "They can clean their outsides well enough, but what of their souls?" After a moment, he added, "I might have told Baja the quest for gray amber would lay no eggs. The mossy was too healthy; only beasts sick from clogged guts produce what he wanted. Is he as daft in his hunt for the Great Gray Mossy? Of course he is, but he has caught all of us in the net of his obsession there."

He fell silent then. He might have noticed my listening to his mutterings, or he might simply have said all he had to say. I could not very well ask him; no one on shipboard wants the name of snoop stuck to his hide. I did not know then, and I do not know now, after so much has gone by and so many extraordinary things have happened. Myself an invention of the gods, whatever that may mean, I am inventing on my own here.

* * *

Since rounding the Cape of Good Hope, the *Queepabd* had roamed the oceans all solitary, without companions but for those that fly above the water or swim in it. Yet mossy ships and plessey ships do meet upon the sea now and again, as I have said. Vast though it is, they often travel similar watery tracks. When they encounter one another, especially when one is inbound whilst the other heads out, they will exchange letters and papers and magazines—anything to ease the tedium of existence in our floating coffins.

And they will exchange news, news of what has happened back home and on the sea. When we encountered another vessel, Captain Baja would always hail it with, "Hast spied the Great Gray Mossy in these waters?"

The other skipper would always tell him he had not, so monotonously that, were it not for Baja's absent caudal appendage and the testimony of others who confirmed the creature's existence in the material world, I should have begun to wonder whether the Great Gray Mossy was naught but a figment of our lord and master's unwholesome imagination.

Once a chance acquaintance had denied knowledge of the object of Baja's obsession, matters would proceed as they did between any two ships passing in the daytime. If there followed a note of melancholy on our side of the exchange, we could pray our new and brief comrades would little note nor long remember it.

Once I happened to eavesdrop on the harpoon men hashing out how things stood. Geekgeek made no attempt to disguise his views. "Captain, him big crazy," he said.

"Have to be crazy to do what he does, what we do," said Tashteg, and I thought the brownskin had got to the yolk of things at once.

Ootag laughed at both of them. "What difference does it make?" he said. "As long as we go home to Faraway Town with mossy brains, with oil in the barrels, with meat smoked and salted, Captain Baja can be as crazy as he likes," he declared.

"Him too crazy, him get ship sinked," Geekgeek said. "Him maybeso crazy enough, do just that."

Until then, Faidal had kept silent, so silent I had not been aware the skipper's desert demon was even present. But he let out a soft, deadly hiss, of the kind one might expect to burst from the throat of a castanet viper. "You know not what you speak of, none of you," he said softly.

"What you know?" Geekgeek demanded. "What you *think* you know?" I do believe Faidal frightened him some, as Faidal frightened everyone save perhaps Captain Baja. But he gave a good, game try of not showing it.

"Can you not see the gods hold the captain in the hollow of their hand?" Faidal said. I doubt I was the only one to wonder which gods he meant. Not clarifying that, he continued, "How can a mossy harm someone who will perish only from a hempen necklace?"

"Who told you? Your lying gods?" Tashteg, at least, did not reckon Faidal's to be his own as well.

"Sometimes it is given to one to know such things," Faidal said, which could have signified

anything under the sky and above the sea.

He might have added more, but Shtup came along just then and spoke as officiously as it is ever given to second mates to speak: "Come on, you lazy mammals' hatchlings, you! If you can't be busy, at least look busy, so you don't shame the ship!" The harpoon men broke up their gathering and went off each his own way, intent, I am sure, on looking busy. Shtup strutted around the corner and spotted me. I endeavored to look busy, but did not succeed sufficiently so as to satisfy him. He ground his gizzard stones by shouting at me as he had at the men who flung the darts of iron.

Two days later, we descried another sail on the northeastern horizon. With a favorable wind, we sailed toward it with all canvas set. The strange ship also seemed desirous of meeting us, for it tacked to help narrow the distance. Someone high aloft with a spyglass called down to the deck, saying, "That's the *Flowerbud*, skipper!"

"I know that ship. She's also out of Faraway Town," said Captain Baja, whose clawed fists clutched the wheel. "Captain Kain is an able fellow—no one has ever dared claim otherwise. But his luck is not in. It has not been in for some years now. I wonder whether it will ever run his way again."

He summoned Stabbak to take control of the *Queepabd* whilst he himself went forward to hail the *Flowerbud* and enquire after the Great Gray Mossy. But Captain Kain raised a leathern loud-hailer to his snout and called out to us first: "Ahoy, the *Queepabd*! Have you seen any sign of a wayward mossy boat, or of any sailors clinging to the wreckage of such a boat?"

"We have not," Baja shouted back through our ship's loud-hailer, though his unaided voice was so loud and brassy that he scarcely needed the artificial aid. On hearing the reply, Captain Kain at once slumped as if harpooned in the vitals. Baja went on, "This is a boat from thine own vessel, I would guess?"

"It is," Kain said in a dead voice, "and carried my eldest hatchling till the cursed Great Gray Mossy stove it in and either slew or set adrift the whole crew."

Captain Baja could have stood no stiffer and straighter had lightning flashed down from the cloudless heavens to electrify him. Even the tip of his artificial tail seemed suddenly to quiver with his excitement. You may tell me it was a dead thing, a thing of polished, cleverly jointed mossy bone with leather strapping to hold it to the living part of him, and incapable of any such motion. You may tell me whatever you please. I shall tell you what I saw.

"Thou'rt certain sure 'twas the Great Gray Mossy and none other?" the skipper demanded.

"As certain as I stand here talking to you," the skipper of the *Flowerbud* replied. "Can you help me search for my poor lost hatchling or any of the others who were in the boat with him? I fear for them all—that monster knows no mercy."

"Tell me where the mishap occurred," Baja said.

Captain Kain pointed back in the direction from which he had come. "That way, a bit more than a day's sail."

"Then that is where we shall make for; that is where we shall search." Baja turned to call to Stabbak at the wheel: "Steer us northeast by north! Crowd on all sail, lad, as much as we have. We'll pickle the Great Gray Mossy's brains and boil him down for oil. And I shall feast on his tongue and his tasty cheek meat."

"But the currents would bring the boat back this way!" protested the skipper of the *Flowerbud*.

"Kain, I wish thee good fortune; gods know thou'rt deserving of it," Captain Baja said. "If they be kind, thou'lt find thy hatchling. Do as thou must, and I shall do likewise. My quarrel's not with thee; 'tis with the monster that assailed thy boat. I shall avenge thee as I avenge myself."

Kain stared across the water at him even as the *Queepabd* spread more canvas and began to leave the *Flowerbud* behind. "You're daft!" he cried out. "Daft as a barking mammal!"

Baja dipped his head in what might have been mere acknowledgment or agreement. "Thy servant, sir," he said. "I wish thee no ill. Pray do not make me regret I wish thee no ill. We all go where and as the gods' winds blow us."

"The gods' winds have blown you into madness, if your yolk wasn't addled before you ever

hatched!" Captain Kain said furiously. Had the *Flowerbud* been a sloop of war rather than a mossy ship, surely he would have given the *Queepabd* a broadside.

That he could not do, nor ought else unless he wanted to board us and fight it out with harpoons and shortswords and whatever pistols might be on board the two vessels. I do believe he was sore tempted, but he desisted.

"I grieve for thy hatchling, but he is not mine. Thou hast thy quest, I mine own," our skipper answered, to the eye or earhole not a bit put out. The *Queepabd* sailed in one direction, the *Flowerbud* in the other. They speak of ships that pass in the night, but these, that passed in broad daylight, were never so far apart as when they came closest together.

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Back at the wheel once more, with Stabbak relegated to some menial task, Baja tapped a fingerclaw against the great gold coin he had spiked to the mainmast. He'd used the carpenter's claw hammer to free the smaller one so he might present it to the sailor who'd fist spied the mossy that went through our tryworks.

Tap! Tap! Though the goldpiece made no music while so rudely nailed in place, still any contact with it seemed to own a magnetism that drew our notice as a lodestone draws iron—as, it was once said, lodestones on some distant shore drew the nails from sailing ships so they fell to pieces and drowned their crews. I could not help but wonder whether Baja himself was likewise falling to pieces. Perchance he wondered the same himself, but, if he did, he did not care. The Great Gray Mossy swam somewhere not far ahead. He cared for nothing but that.

Tapping again, he said, "Do ye hear it, lads? Well? Do ye? That's the sound of gold! That's the sound of victory! It goes to the first to spy the Great Gray Mossy, as I told ye aforesomes. Be on watch! Don't let your nictitating membranes flick across your eyeballs, lest ye miss summat ye should have seen. The chase has been long, but it's not got far to go now!"

Faidal came up to him and waited respectfully to be noticed. The desert devil did not care to distract the skipper whilst he had the helm. In due course, Captain Baja dipped his head to the harpoon man. They spoke together, too low to be overheard for a little while. Then the skipper, nettled, tossed his head and bared his teeth. All submission—at least the shell of him was all submission—Faidal bent nearly double and crept away.

And yet I could see the skipper's hands all aquiver on the wheel as he conned the ship toward the Great Gray Mossy, or toward where Captain Kain swore it swam. Which of Baja and Faidal was master and which slave still lay in the realm of the undetermined, for all that Baja might have come out on top in this particular encounter.

Also still in the realm of the undetermined lay whether the skipper pursued the sea beast out of love or out of hatred. For Baja and the Great Gray Mossy were very much alike when it came to the boundless determination of each to prevail regardless of the magnitude of the forces aligned against him. For Baja to purpose killing with his own lance the Great Gray Mossy was like some tiny, miserable, skulking mammal to purpose killing Baja. The difference in size and power between hunter and hunted was in both case immeasurably great.

And yet the Great Gray Mossy struggled against not just Baja but every mossy ship, every skipper, every sailor on the sea: in effect, against every soul in this great land of ours. One against thousands, if not against millions! War with the world! When looked upon in that fashion, the Great Gray Mossy's fight seemed as crazed and as futile as Baja's campaign against it did when viewed from another perspective.

Yet we sailors dwelt but little upon such transcendental concerns. Every one of us spent aloft all the time he could, the better to see farther and quicker. The lure of gold sent folk flying across the continent like huzzards after carrion when the precious metal was found near the shore of the Peaceful Ocean two years gone by. So the lure of that great goldpiece got every one of us itchy and excited.

How many had died when their hopes of riches in the unexplored West sank on reality's jagged rocks? No more than my comrades in the *Queepabd* did I ask myself such questions. No more than they did I wonder what fate had in store for me. The sooner we staked our claim, the better off we would be. We were all certain of it.

Well, almost all of us were certain of it. Stabbak made so bold as to approach Captain Baja that night, when the skipper held the wheel for another shift. "Sir, would you not do better to give over?" the first mate asked. "Would we not be better off filling our hull with barrels of oil and meat and pickling brains from lesser mossies than pursuing this profitless quest?"

"I will do what I must do until the egg of my great vengeance hatches," Baja replied. "And answer me this, sirrah—when is it the mate's duty to tell the skipper how to steer the ship?" One fingerclaw of his ominously tapped the wheel then.

"It is the mate's duty to speak when the captain steers the ship astray," Stabbak answered bravely. "O Captain—my Captain!—I know you have a wife and hatchlings back in Faraway Town, just as I do. Do you aim to leave her a widow, bringing them up on whatever scraps you've left behind?"

"I have not left scraps. I have provided a sufficiency, and more than a sufficiency." Pride rang in Baja's voice. "An thou hast not, 'tis thy lookout alone. As for my wife, she knew what she was marrying when we pledged each other before the gods. She'd scorn me if I shed this skin now!"

"Give me leave to doubt, sir," Stabbak said. "Surely she'd sooner have you than not have you, if you take my meaning."

"Not if what she has falls short of what she wed," the skipper replied. Stabbak must have known he would fail before he spoke. Yet speak he did anyhow, so as to be certain he left no stone unturned in his effort to soften the skipper and unruffle his feathers. Baja pointed imperiously toward the bow. "Go tend to thy duties."

"Captain, I am tending to them now," Stabbak said in a low voice. But he went. What else could he do? He was but the mate, lesser in rank than the skipper he served. And he was lesser in his self than Baja, too; he had none of Baja's mad, driving assuredness. He would have been first to agree to that, though he would have argued he was better off without it.

Better or worse, it did not matter. He tried; he failed. And Baja and the *Queepabd* sailed on toward their appointed end.

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"Mossy spout off the starboard bow!" The shout came from high above me whilst I was holystoning the deck. What I felt when I heard the cook's helper's high, thin cry was nothing but jealousy that blazed like a forest fire. Orders kept me at a menial duty away from the shrouds when good fortune dipped its snout to the lucky little fellow in the rigging.

Had I known the price of the great goldpiece he hoped to claim . . . Well, who can say what I would have done? A great many questions are easier asked than answered.

Captain Baja asked a question, loudly: "A mossy or *the* mossy, Fredugg?"

"By the gods, skipper, I do think it is *the* mossy!" Down floated Fredugg's answer, even more impassioned than before. "Never have I seen on of such great size or of this color."

"Thou shalt have the gold, after the beast is slain." Baja raised the call all mossy hunters live for, crying, "Lower all boats! Shtup and Frask, your crews will go. So too will mine own. Stabbak, as before, take charge of the ship whilst I go to win my revenge. Then shalt thou have the better hope of sailing home safe to thy wife and hatchlings small."

"I am not afraid to put to sea in a boat, sir," the first mate said stiffly.

"I said naught of fear. But thou has spoken of thy family, which was in my mind even before thou didst, as thou may'st recollect. See? I hear thee, yet thou'rt not content," Baja said. "Such is life. But thou shalt do my bidding here."

Stabbak might have argued further. I knew not; I was scrambling down the *Queepabd's* wooden flank and into Shtup's boat. Geekgeek took his place at the bow a feather before I seized my oar. "Now pull your hearts out, my dears, my lovelies! Pull your tails off, my beauties!" Shtup shouted. "The skipper may reckon he'll scuttle the Great Gray Horror, but I want the critter chalked up to our account. What say you, my darlings?"

We all cheered as we commenced the long pull out to the mossy. Frask was likewise exhorting his crew to great effort. Captain Baja said never a word to his desert demons. But he stood at the bow in their boat, in the harpoon man's spot, consigning to Faidal the handling of the rudder.

Faidal owned as much pride as anyone who ever came from an egg. I reckoned he would make

the skipper pay when the time came. But that would be later. We were affixed in the moment, as a scorpion from vanished time may be affixed forever in golden amber.

The three boats flew over the blue water. Try as any crew would, none could gain the least superiority over the other two. Ahead—not so far ahead now—the Great Gray Mossy spouted once more. So Shtup said, at any rate; all I could see was the *Queepabd* receding behind us. It did not in fact recede so very much, for Stabbak sent the mossy ship after the boats. If by chance he and the sailors still aboard might lend us any aid, lend they would.

Never have I known a sweeter, kindlier fellow than Stabbak. Oh, how dear it cost him!

“Great Gray Mossy! Great green harpoon man! Me kill he!” Geekgeek’s shout rang out across the ocean. He sounded excited, almost gay.

“Great brown harpoon man!” Tashteg shouted back. They brandished their harpoons at each other in mock ferocity, laughing all the while. It was a game. It was a sport . . . until, all at once, it was no more.

With Shtup whooping us on, we outdid Frask’s boat and even the desert devils who rowed the skipper toward his fate. “Be ready, you rowdy savage!” the second mate called to Geekgeek. “Be ready and cast hard. Gods, I reckon this here’s the biggest, meanest mossy I ever seen!”

We stroked up alongside the sea beast, which continued disporting itself on the surface as if unacquainted with the word *fear*: I glimpsed a mountainous gray flank and a tail blithely stroking from side to side. Then the boat bobbed as Geekgeek flung the harpoon with all his strength.

“Hit!” Shtup screamed. “Oh, gods love you, a hit!” Rope smoked out of its tub. The mossy streaked away. But the Faraway sled-ride on which it took us did not drag us far away at all. Only a few heartbeats after the mossy began its run, the line of a sudden went slack. The second mate let out a cry of horror. “Back oars and swing to starboard, hard as you can! The monster’s heading straight at us!”

Usually, a wounded mossy will flee. The Great Gray Mossy was no usual creature. Geekgeek grabbed another harpoon to fend it off. Too late, too late! Its huge jaws closed on him and on the rower right in front of me. How I escaped I shall never know. But those of us who still lived were pitched into the ocean. I held my oar and seized a plank from the riven boat. They kept me from drowning straightaway.

Up sped the boat with Captain Baja in the bow. “Take thy just deserts, foul fiend!” Baja shouted, as if the Great Gray Mossy could understand. Then he cast his harpoon. As Geekgeek’s had, it struck home.

The mossy again fled for little while. Line hissed from the tub and paid out after the beast. We always take care to coil the hemp with the greatest of care, lest any kink spell disaster. But we are all only imperfect creatures, not the gods themselves. A kink there was, one that had escaped everyone’s notice. The line seized the skipper round the throat and resistlessly threw him into the sea.

The mossy meanwhile turned back, as it had with us. Faidal, his prophecy fulfilled, cut the line to give the skipper what chance he could, but how could anyone hope to swim well, or at all, without a true tail and with a false one dragging him down toward doom? Then the desert demon seized another harpoon from the floor of the boat and rushed to the bow to defend it as best he could, as Geekgeek had before him. Never let it be said he lacked for bravery.

But also never let it be said bravery alone will defeat all foes. Faidal might as well have stood against the volcano or the hurricane. He had scant time for his cast, which gashed the Great Gray Mossy’s snout but then bounced almost harmlessly away instead of sinking deep into the sea monster’s flesh. Faidal was stooping to snatch up yet another spear when the mossy’s jaws closed on him. A shriek, and most of him was gone forever. One of the sailors went into the sea as the creature destroyed the boat. The rest either sank or were devoured. Then the Great Gray Mossy dove again.

I peered down into the limpid water, fearing the last thing I should ever see was that pair of massive jaws opening wide to take me in. The Great Gray Mossy, though, was a beast of deep and subtle cunning. It knew wrecked boats posed it no threat, and likewise knew the harpoon man at the bow of an intact mossy boat was the source of danger for it. And so it rose from the

depths directly *under* the boat carrying Tashteg, Frask, and their rowers, hurling it into the air and spinning it about like a hatchling's toy. Then the mossy beat the water with its tail, flailing the helpless mariners until they had no hope of survival.

And still the Great Gray Mossy had not finished its war upon the land-dwelling tormentors who went down to the sea in ships to pursue it. Rather than swimming away in triumph, the beast swam straight at the *Queepabd* fast as a speeding locomotive, and struck the vessel with no less force than a runaway locomotive would have possessed. After breaking a great hole in the mossy ship's side, it drew back and finally departed the scene. Water jetted over the gunwales as frantic sailors worked the pumps for every copper they were worth, but I saw from the outset it was hopeless. More poured in than could possibly be ejected. The *Queepabd's* deck sank toward the surface of the ocean. Then the ship turned turtle, which surely doomed all those yet aboard.

It may be that Geekgeek's dart, or Captain Baja's, at length put paid to the Great Gray Mossy once for all. No report of the monster has come to my earhole since the sinking of the *Queepabd*, at any rate. But then, I know not what, if anything, that may prove, for I have not gone to sea in a mossy ship since that dreadful day. The gods will take me in their own good time come what may, and mix me into the new and perfect Eggshell they are forming, so that I may be rehatched perfect in my own self. I have no desire to meet them ere I must, and hunting mossies is not calculated to foster longevity in those who practice it again and again, or even once.

Indeed, I thought my doom had met me there, in those warm blue waters so far away from Faraway Island. I alone, though, survived to tell the tale. Some of my shipmates the Great Gray Mossy slew directly, with teeth or pounding flukes. Others drowned, aboard the *Queepabd* or after being cast from her boats. Still others, flotsam like me, were taken by sharks or plessies. I saw dorsal fins and fanged heads on long necks, and heard more than one mortal shriek, but none of the sea's lesser terrors chose to dine on me.

This would not have lasted much longer; sharks were circling the wood to which I clung when a sail came into sight on the southwestern horizon. I thought at first I must be dreaming it, but no! It was real. The *Flowerbud*, searching yet for Captain Kain's lost hatchling, had doubled back upon her course.

One of the sailors aloft in her rigging spied my feeble thrashings. I was a disappointment to them when they hauled me up on deck, they hoping I would prove to be someone else. But the skipper was gracious, saying he was glad to have saved someone even if not the someone he most longed for. And so I came back to civilized lands once more, and set these things down as best I recall them. The writing was for me a cleansing; may the reading be for you the same.