

# The Green Sheaf

## A DEEP SEA YARN.

By *John Masefield.*



P away north, in the old days, in Chester, there was a man who somehow never throve. Nothing he put his hand to ever prospered, and folk came to look upon him as an unchancy fellow, one of the better-dead and so forth.

Like enough he was just one of these weak give-aways, but, as his state worsened, his friends fell away, and he grew a sort of desperate, having none to lean against, and moped more than was good, and thought the black thoughts more than was purely Christian.

So one night when he was alone in his room, thinking of the rent due in two or three days and the money he couldn't scrape together, he says (being sore put to it) "I wish I could sell my soul to the Devil like that man the old books tell about."

Now just as he spoke the clock struck "Twelve," and, while it chimed, a queer sort of sparkle began to burn and glimmer all about the room, and the air, all at once, began to smell very foul of brimstone.

"Will these terms suit you?" asked a voice.

He started and looked at the table and saw that someone had just placed there a great parchment, red-written, the ink yet moist, which had wicked black figures at the head, at the foot and in the margins of it.

He picked it up, shuddering, reading it through by the bluey corpse-light still glimmering in the room, and being so sore-driven he answered "yes," though maybe he was stricken too fear-sick to say "no," to a cold quiet voice without visible body (just a pale glimmer of wild fire to it instead thereof), so he answered "yes" and looks around for a pen.

"Take and sign," says the voice again, "but first consider what it is you do. Do nothing rashly. Consider."

Which was said of course because an ill-deed done after taking thought is far worse and fouler than one of these hot-blooded, done-in-a-clock-tick sins which are merely the copper coin in the Black Account Book.

So this poor, tempted human error thinks awhile, then "yes" he says again, "I'll sign," and with that he gropes for the pen.

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“Take this and sign,” says the voice, and at that he sees a ghostly finger (with a talon to it like a hawk’s claw, and burning, as it were, in a thin reddish flame), which held a pen towards him.

“Blood from your left thumb and sign,” says the voice.

So he pricks his left thumb and signs. “Blue Snakes,” he says, “what sort of pen is this I write with?”

The voice just chuckled, “Why ’tis a thorn o’ the tree where Judas hanged himself.”

Now when our poor lamb heard that you may well think of the cold sweat was on him.

“Here,” he gasps, “give me back that scroll” (for somehow, you see, the scroll vanished as soon as his name was on it) “I’ll cancel that mark o’ mine. Honour-bright I was but fooling.”

“Here is your earnest money,” replied the voice, “nine and twenty silver pennies. This day twenty years hence you will have your scroll. You will find your silver alright I think. Good morning.”

Here that bluish marsh-light flickered and died out, leaving our poor dummel creature dithering in the dark (’tis thought he swooned) and as he went off, something ghostly, not of this world, whispered him a chilly sentence in his ear to hearten him. Later on ye’ll hear more of it.

Now early next morning, towards second cock-crow, our friend came to himself and felt like one of the drowned. “What a dream I’ve had,” he says. Then he wakes up and minds a bit clearer what sort of game he was at in the mid-watch, and when he sees those nine and twenty silver pennies and smelt a faint smell of brimstone I tell you he went as cold as a dead cod.

So he sits in his chair there, and thinks of things, remembering that he had sold his soul to the Black Fiend for twenty years of heart’s-desire, and whatever fears he may have had in him as to what might chance at the end of those twenty years, like enough he found a warm clove of comfort in the thought that, after all, twenty years was a goodish stretch of time, and that throughout them he could eat, drink, merry-make, roll in gold, dress in silk, and be care-free, heart at ease, and jib-sheet to windward.

So for nineteen years and nine months he lived in great state, having his heart’s desire in all things; but, when his twenty years were nearly run through, my grief, there was no sicker man in all the world than that poor lamb. So he throws up his house, his position, riches, everything, and away he goes to the port o’ Liverpool, where he signs on as A.B., aboard a Black Ball packet, a tea clipper, bound to the China Seas.

(My heart, they were the ships, those Black Ball clippers—there are none such in blue waters nowadays.)

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They made a fine passage out, and when our poor lad had but a three days more, there they were in the Indian Ocean (lat. and long. just so-and-so) lying lazy, looking for a slant o' wind, in a belt o' blue calm.

Now it was our lad's wheel that forenoon, and it being dead calm, all he had to do was to take his plug like a sailor, and just think of things; the ship of course having no way on her.

So he stood there, hanging onto the spokes, groaning like a foul block, and weeping the scuppers full. Just twenty minutes or so before eight bells were made, up comes the old man for a turn on deck before he takes the sun.

He goes aft o' course, takes a squint aloft, and sees our poor lad blubbering like a martyrdom. "Hello, my man," he says, "Why, what's all this? Ain't you well? You'd best lay aft for a dose o' salts at four bells to-night."

"No, cap'n," comes his answer, "There's no salts nor Gregory Powder'll ever cure *my* sickness."

"Why, what's all this?" says the old man. "You must be powerful rocky if it's as bad as all that. But come now, tell a fellow, your cheek is all sunk, and you look as if you ain't slept well. What is it ails you, anyway? Have you anything on your mind?"

"Cap'n," he answers very solemn, "I *have*. I've sold my soul to the Devil."

"Blue snakes," cries the old man, "Why that's bad. That's powerful bad. I never thought them sort o' things ever happened outside a Penny Blood."

"But, cap'n," says our friend, "That's not the worst of it, cap'n. At this time three days hence the Devil will fetch me home."

"Heart-alive," groans the old man, "Here's a nice hurrah's nest to happen aboard my ship," (and he stumps up and down in a mighty flurry). "But come now," he goes on, "Did the Devil give you no chance—no saving-clause like? Just think calm for a moment."

"Yes, cap'n," says our friend, "Just when I made the deal, there come a cold whisper like, right in my ear. And," he says, speaking very quiet, so as not to let the mate hear, "IF I CAN GIVE THE DEVIL THREE JOBS TO DO WHICH HE CANNOT DO, why *then*, cap'n," he says, "I'm SAVED, and that deed of mine is reckoned ripped up and slung overboard."

Well, at this the old man grins like a mess-kid, "Why," he says, "You just leave things to me, my son. I'll fix the Devil for you. Aft there, one o' you lads, and relieve the wheel. Now, sonny, you run forrard, and have a good watch below. Be quite easy in your mind, I'll foul his hawse for him. Buy your soul, would he—the Black Dog? Well, we'll *see*."

So away forrard goes our friend, and the old man takes the sun, and chuckles in his chart room till the dog-watch.

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And so that day goes by, and the next, and the one after that, and the one after *that* was THE day.

Soon as eight bells was made in the morning watch the old man calls all hands aft.

"Men," he says, "I've got an all-hands job for you this forenoon. Bear a hand cheerly and you'll each get a tot of grog in the first dog this evening."

"Mr. Mate," he cries, "Get all hands onto the main-tops'l halliards and bouse the sail stiff up and down.

"Hoist the main taws'l stiff up-and-down? Ay, ay, sir," sings out the mate.

So they pass along the halliards, and take the turns off, and old John Chantyman pipes up.

"There's a Black Ball Clipper comin' down the river," and away that yard goes to the mast-head till the bunt-robands jam in the sheave.

"Belay there," says the mate, "Don't lose any." So they belay and one o' the boys coils down.

"Very well that," says the old man. "Now get my dinghey off o' the top o' the half-deck and let her drag alongside."

So they do that, too, and any sort o' notions they have o' the old man's brains they just keep among themselves; that being the healthier way aboard ship as may happen you'll have found.

"Very well that," says the old man. "Now forrard with you, to the chain-locker, and rouse out every inch o' chain you find there."

So forrard they go, and the chain is lighted up and flaked along the deck all clear for running.

"Now, Chips," says the old man to the carpenter, "just bend a spare anchor, an old sail full o' ballast (and any holystone you may have) on to the business end of that chain, and clear away them fo'c's'le rails so as we'll get a fair-lead, like, when we lets go."

"Ay, ay, sir," says Chips, and he makes it so.

"Now," says the old man, "get them tubs of slush from the galley. Pass that slush along there, doctor. Very well that. Now turn to, all hands, and slush away every link in that chain a good inch thick in grease. Slather it on like sailors, and don't go leaving no holidays on the studs."

So down goes all hands—mates and all—and a fine Bristol job they make of it. I tell you, when they were done, that chain would have rove through a jewel block, it was that slick.

"Very well that," cries the old man. "Now get below all hands! Chips, on to the fo'c's'le head with you and stand by! I'll keep the deck, Mr. Mate! Very well that."

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So all hands tumble down below ; Chips takes a fill o' baccy to leeward of the capstan, and the old man walks the weather poop looking for a sign of hell-fire.

It was still dead calm—water all oily blue—with shark's fins astern cutting up black and pointed like the fingers on them things called sun-dials.

Presently, towards six bells, he raises a black cloud far away to leeward, and sees the glimmer o' the lightning in it ; only the flashes, somehow, weren't altogether canny. They were too red and came too quick.

"Now," says he to himself, "stand by."

Very soon that black cloud works up to wind'ard, right alongside, and there comes a red flash, and a strong sulphurous smell, and then a loud peal of thunder as the Devil steps aboard.

"Mornin', capt'n," says he.

"Mornin', Mr. Devil," says the old man, "and what in blazes will you be wantin' aboard *my* ship ?"

"Why, cap'n," says the Devil, "I've come for the soul o' one o' your hands as per signed agreement ; and, as my time's pretty full up in these wicked days, I hope you won't keep me waiting for him longer than need be."

"Well, Mr. Devil," says the old man, "the man you come for is down below, sleeping, just at this moment. It's a fair pity to call him up till it's right *time*. So supposin' *I* set you them three tasks. How would that be ? Have you any objections ?"

"Why no," says the Devil, "fire away as soon as you like."

"Mr. Devil," says the old man, "ye see that main-tops'l yard ?"

"Not being naturally blind," says the Devil.

"Quite so," says the old man. "Well, as I was going to say—suppose you lays on that main-tops'l yard and takes in three reefs single-handed."

"Ay, ay, sir," the Devil says, and he runs up the ratlines, into the top, up the topmast rigging and lays along the yard.

Well, when he finds the sail stiff up and down, he naturally hails the deck—

"Below there ! On deck there ! Lower away ya halliards !"

"Quite a pretty view up there, ain't it ?" shouts the old man.

"Lower away ya halliards," the Devil yells.

"Not much," sings out the old man. "Nary a lower."

"Come up your sheets, then," cries the Devil. "This main-topsail's stiff up-and-down. How'm I to take in three reefs when the sail's stiff up-and-down ?"

"Why," says the old man, "*you can't do it*. Come out o' that ! Down from aloft you hoof-footed Port Mahon Sodger ! That's one to me."

"Yes," says the Devil, when he got on deck again, "I don't deny it, cap'n. That's one to you."

"Now, Mr. Devil," says the old man, going towards the rail, "suppose you was to step into that little boat alongside there. Will you please ?"

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“Ay, ay, sir,” he says, and he slides down the forward fall, gets into the stern sheets, and sits down.

“Now, Mr. Devil,” says the skipper, taking a little salt spoon from his vest pocket, “supposin’ you bail all the water on *yon*’ side the boat onto *this* side the boat, using *this spoon* as your dipper.”

Well!—the Devil just looked at him.

“Say!” he says at length, “which o’ the New England States d’ye hail from anyway?”

“That don’t cut any ice as far as I see,” says the old man. “Not Jersey, anyway. That’s two up, alright; ain’t it sonny?”

“Yes,” growls the Devil, as he climbs aboard. “That’s two up. Two to you and one to play. Now, what’s your next contraption?”

“Mr. Devil,” says the old man, looking very innocent, “you see, I’ve ranged my chain ready for letting go anchor. Now Chips is forrard there, and when I sing out, he’ll let the anchor go, and, if I’m not greatly in error, it’ll go. Supposin’ you stopper the chain with them big hands o’ yourn and keep it from running out clear. Will you please?”

So the Devil takes off his coat and rubs his hands together, and gets away forrard by the bitts, and stands by.

“All ready, cap’n,” he says.

“All ready, Chips?” asks the old man.

“All ready, sir,” replies Chips.

“Then, stand by—— Let go the anchor,” and clink, clink, old Chips knocks out the pin, and away goes the spare anchor, and the sail full of ballast, and a few hundredweight of spare holystone into a five mile deep o’ God’s sea.

My heart the way the chain skipped.

Well—there was the Devil making a grab here and a grab there, and the slushy chain just slipping through his claws, and at whiles a bight of chain would spring clear and rap him in the eye. You’d understand *how* if you seen a ranged cable running. I tell you it’s good to stand from under at them sort of times.

So at last the cable was nearly clean gone, and the Devil runs to the last big link (which was seized to the heel of the foremast), and he puts both his arms through it, and hangs on like grim death.

But, my heart, the chain gave such a YANK when it came-to, that the big link carried away, and oh, roll and go, out it goes through the hawsehole, in a shower of bright sparks, carrying the Devil with it.

’Tisn’t any fault o’ that old man if Mrs. Devil ain’t a widow. You should aheard the piteous screech he give as he took the water.

As for the old man he just looks over the bows watching the bubbles burst, but the Devil never rose. Then he goes to the fo’c’s’le scuttle and bangs thereon with a handspike.

“Rouse out, there, the Port Watch,” he shouts, “an’ get my dinghey inboard.”