

The Curse of Isla Cura

By George Mann

The treasure. The *treasure*. It haunts my dreams, my waking hours. I can see it now, if I close my eyes, glistening in the watery sunlight, taunting me like a siren-song from a far-away land. Yet it is still so close. So very close. I know now that I have but hours before they are upon me. Those *things*. Those ungodly *things*.

The treasure has been my undoing. This hastily scrawled note must be my valediction. Once written I will cast myself to the mercies of the ocean.

It began in one of the less frequented ports in the Indian Ocean a little over a week ago (I write this now as our ship, *The Salamander*, drifts aimlessly off the coast of Isla Cura; an abandoned ghost ship, a piece of unwanted flotsam). Captain Symes had been entertaining the notion for some time that there was treasure to be found amongst the small indigenous islands that looped across the map here, following the coastline like a string of pearls. My career as a buccaneer was still in its infancy; a former British naval officer, I had recently found myself discredited and stripped of rank, following a misdemeanour that I shall not discuss here in any detail. Nevertheless, let it be understood that I was still green around the gills and finding my feet amongst the ragged band of seadogs that I found myself sharing both a vessel and an occupation with. Captain Symes had proven to be a good man, taking me in and harbouring me from the authorities that still sort me from port-to-port for a series of unpaid fines and legal fees. Thus, I had no reason to doubt his tenacity when he approached me to join him for a drink with a fellow traveller in a less than salubrious bar at the trading port where we had made our berth for the night.

Whilst the other men made merry with the local wenches, the Captain and I kept his appointment. We found the man we were looking for propped in the corner of the bar. He looked already well into his cups when the Captain approached him and slammed a smattering of gold coins down before him on the bar. The man, an Arab, was unlike any person, living or dead, I had ever seen. His eyes were sunken pits that gave him a haunted, melancholy look, and his face was drawn and weary. I could tell immediately from his wild demeanour that he was dangerous, mad, even, and unconsciously my hand strayed to my dagger. It was not my place to question the company that the Captain chose to keep, but the sight of the man filled me with a sense of unease. I resolved to keep a watchful eye on him.

At the sight of the coins, the Arab leered up at Symes, his white teeth glinting in the flickering candle-light as he offered his wicked smile. Symes took a seat beside him and ordered himself a cup of ale. For an hour they talked, and though my duty was more one of watchman I couldn't help overhearing much of what they said. The Arab talked of an island, south of where we were, where a great treasure was said to be hidden, nestled in a natural bowl that formed between three mountains. The treasure was said to be a remnant from the ancient world, a prize so great that many had gone in search of it and never returned, driven mad by its promise. The Arab claimed to know the location of this treasure, however, and promised to draw the Captain a map in exchange for further gold. There was only one cautionary note: the treasure was said to be cursed. Scoffing at all talk of curses, (for the Captain had long ago discovered that curses were the talk of madmen and prophets alone) he emptied the contents of his purse onto the bar and accepted the word of the Arab. When we left the hostelry a little later, Symes had already hidden the map in the inner folds of his coat.

As I have already stated, I was new to the ways of the buccaneer and knew little about their business. That the Captain should keep our meeting secret from the other members of the crew, or that he should have taken to believing the rants of strange, drunken men seemed in no way unusual, I blame on my own ignorance; I perhaps placed a greater confidence in the man than he deserved. I confess I felt a little nervous, due not to talks of curses and mysterious islands, but more with the sense I had that the man in the bar was a charlatan who would take the Captain's gold and disappear. I think, then, that I honestly believed that Isla Cura did not truly exist. How wrong I would turn out to be.

Four day's sailing was all it took to prove me wrong. Yates, the look-out, called down from his nest to announce his sighting of land on the horizon. Both the Captain and I rushed forward towards the bow and, sharing the Captain's looking glass, spied the island in the distance. He slapped me across the shoulders then, whispering to himself, and I saw in his eyes a little of the lustre that had so unsettled me when I had met the Arab, back at the port just a few days before. There were no outward signs that the island was in any way foreboding; from what I could see through the looking glass it was covered in a dense layer of green foliage that spilled down almost all the way to the water. At first glance there didn't seem to be anywhere to take anchor, so I conferred with Captain Symes and agreed that we'd circuit the small island in the first instance to establish the lay of the land.

A couple of hours later we made our approach. As we inched our way towards the island, my initial survey was in no way challenged; the place looked serene and unspoiled, a raw, untamed island that had not yet been contaminated by human occupation or industry. Why then, did I notice a dark feeling of trepidation curdling my stomach?

After a further hour of circling the small landmass, Yates shouted down from the nest that he'd located a small bay where the ship could make anchor. Captain Symes steered *The Salamander* into the calm waters there, whilst the rest of us hugged the sides of the ship, straining to take in the view of the island. The bay was surrounded by cliffs of dark granite which seemed to plunge upward out of the water like enormous monoliths, preventing us from getting too close. The cliffs were cut in two by the flow of a wide river that poured out into the ocean, the mouth of which was tangled in an overgrown mess of low-hanging branches and vines. Birds wheeled in the sky overhead, describing wide, concentric rings above the cliff-tops. The ship listed briefly to the right, as the Captain tried to avoid being bottomed out on a rocky outcropping, and then the anchor was dropped and we came to a steady rest. Everything was quiet, save for the chatter of the birds high above us.

We were a small crew, with only a handful of men, so we divided our number in two. After a brief meal of ship's rations (and a splash of sour brandy), myself, Symes, Yates and Almarez were lowered over the starboard side in a small rowing boat, the plan to make our way upriver towards the centre of the island and the bounty that both Captain Symes and the Arab had insisted we would find there. As to the nature of the treasure, I had not inquired, and if Symes was in full possession of the facts I do not believe he would have led us towards that heart of darkness. In my darker moments I wonder if we'd have been better to drown there and then, if a freak wave had sent us splashing

towards a watery grave, rather than face the horrors that were to come. Yet, it was not to be, and so we mounted our expedition towards the interior of the island in search of riches, half our number staying behind to man the ship.

The river made hard work of the journey, as if it wanted only to push us away, to send us back downstream towards the ocean and the relative safety of *The Salamander*. Now, I see the irony in that and wish we had heeded its warning. We rowed in shifts; the Captain sat at the prow of the small vessel scanning the horizon for any signs of our goal. Trees lined both banks of the river and cast finger-like shadows across the water, clutching at the boat like so many scrabbling hands, pulling us this way and that. We rowed on, mindful of the encroaching darkness. At one point, as the light was indeed starting to wane and we had begun to discuss our options for mooring the boat for the night, Almarez exclaimed something undecipherable in his broken English and pointed furiously towards the sky. We all followed his gaze, searching the heavens for what had aggravated him so. At first, it looked as though he was indicating a flock of birds that circled above the trees, but then I realised what it was that had appalled him so; it was not birds that circled so in the air, searching for prey, but huge flying reptiles of a variety I could never have imagined in my wildest dreams. Long, elongated heads ended in sharp beaks filled with rows of serrated teeth, whilst leathery bat-like wings allowed them to glide through the air, scanning the ground below for vulnerable prey. They looked prehistoric, like some sort of monster, and consequently we agreed to continue rowing through the night, fearful that sleeping may bring with it attacks from above. I couldn't help but be reminded of the Arab's story, of the treasure being a remnant from the ancient world. I shuddered, and continued to row.

It was approaching dawn when the Captain signalled us to cease our rowing and draw the boat to a stop. Up ahead he had spotted the three peaks of the mountains that the Arab had said would form a natural bowl at the centre of the island. The river forked off to the right, away from the direction we needed to take if we were to continue with our strange expedition. After a brief conference we agreed to set out on foot, the others following the Captain without question, still ignorant of the source of his information or what he hoped to find out here in the midst of the Indian Ocean. Yates was first to leave the boat, and taking a rope waded through the water to secure the vessel to the bank of the river with a large stake. From there we all climbed out and pulled ourselves onto land. If, indeed, land is what you could call it. For the ground here was a mire of peaty, black sludge, such as one would imagine an enormous marsh, half dried out in the sun. Our feet left deep impressions in the slime, and we knew it would hinder our progress. Hesitantly, we gathered our handful of provisions and set out on foot, all the while guided by Captain Symes and his secret map. By this time the dawn was upon us and with the light came further revelations. The sticky ground was smattered with a layer of decaying fish and other fleshy remains, the stench of which caused us all to cover our mouths and noses with our hands. How the remains of so many fish had ended up here, near the centre of an uninhabited island, I knew not. I wondered at the time if it had something to do with the flying reptiles we had witnessed the previous day, but now I know how ignorant I was of the truth, and in that ignorance had pressed on regardless, following Symes like a blind fool. I believe I even looked forward to my share of the treasure and to settling old debts, perhaps even buying my freedom from the law. Had I known then what the treasure

would be, and the damnable curse it would bring upon me, I believe I would have turned about on my heel and fled.

We trekked for another half day, barely stopping to even take breath, let alone food and water, and by the time we neared our final destination I was tired, hungry and near-feverish. The stench of the rotting fish was a constant distraction and the exertion of the last two days, with little or no sleep, had taken its toil. The sun should have been high in the sky as, by my reckoning, the time was approaching midday. Yet instead we were shrouded in a pale half-light that was neither day nor night, but an eerie twilight somewhere in between. The three mountainous peaks sat proudly on the skyline around us and before us the ground reared up to form a wide lip, before dropping away again towards the large crater at the very heart of the island. From our position, we could not yet see what the crater contained, although from the glint in the eye of Captain Symes I could tell he was hopeful that the Arab's story would prove true.

Instinctively, each of us drew our cutlass as we approached the rim of the crater. Symes was first to mount the lip, disappearing a few seconds later as he stumbled his way down the incline towards whatever lay at the bottom. I watched the others follow him, suddenly filled with a startling sense of trepidation. It wasn't until I heard the Captain call my name that I actually found the reserves within myself to push forward and examine whatever it was that they had found.

Now, the very thought of what I saw is enough to drive sanity from my mind. There, at the centre of the island, stood a monolithic structure so strange, so impossibly ancient, that I had no notion of how to even bear witness to it. Yet I could not avert my eyes. It was a gigantic stone of pure white, erupting from the ground to stand fifty feet tall, seeming to scrape the very underside of the clouds with its tip. But most incredibly, the stone had been *hewn*, cut by living hands to form a sequence of pictograms or hieroglyphs. I started to edge closer towards it, to better see the bizarre runes that emblazoned its surface. As I did, I noticed that the other three members of my party had grown silent. I presumed, in my rapture, that they were simply given over to a state of awe as I was, lost in the realisation of aeons. The thing must have been *ancient*, untold millennia old. As I moved towards the monolith I noted that the hieroglyphs that covered its surface took the form of oceanic images; fish, octopi, crabs and other, larger creatures. I noted also that my feet were splashing through pools of water as the ground once again gave way to water; the monolith stood within a small reservoir that had formed at the bottom of the crater around its base. I began to circle the artefact, at once amazed and appalled by the pictorial reliefs that decorated its flanks. There were images of human-like forms prostrate in worship, bearing offerings and gifts to their Cyclopean god. Most disturbing, however, were the faces of these creatures which, whilst retaining a resemblance to men, appeared to have grotesque aquatic features also; wide, flabby lips and bulging, beady eyes, gills around their throats, webbed fingers and toes. I was at once fascinated and horrified.

And then I saw it, rising out of the water before me. A shockingly huge example of the fish-men I had seen displayed on the sides of the monolith, rendered in flesh and given life. It flopped from the water and issued forth the most disgusting, yet mesmerising sound, a sound that still reverberates in my mind, a sound that haunts me, echoing through every thought. I heard Almarez scream behind me. Then I saw another of the creatures, shambling around the monolith, its sickening webbed fingers stroking

the structure like a religious icon, its grey skin glistening in the pale sunlight. I turned and ran, scrabbling up the marsh-like side of the crater, my fingers clutching at the loose ground, trying desperately to put as much distance between myself and the repulsive creatures as my exhausted frame would bear.

Of the others, only Captain Symes escaped the crater with me, Almarez and Yates both collapsed in fitful spasms, foaming at the mouth. I had not the energy or inclination to attempt to rescue them from the clutches of those *things*; I know now that they were rendered totally insane by the knowledge, the *treasure*. For that was both the treasure and the curse: the gift of too much knowledge. The Arab had been true to the end, and I understand now the wild look in his eyes, the need to nullify his memories with drink. He is a stronger man than I. For I now know insanity, the torment of knowing too much, of living with the curse, and know also of the ancient world beneath the sea and the coming fate of mankind.

I remember little of the journey back to *The Salamander*, or of what passed afterwards. In my lucid moments I recall finding the boat still moored to the river bank and fleeing down the river, the Captain giggling uncontrollably as he rowed.

The Captain was the first of us to give in to the malady. A day after the flight from the monolith I recall he began screaming at the sky, recanting gibberish about ancient cities under the sea and the former masters of the world. Of how those masters would rise again to claim the Earth and pull the remnants of the human race back down to their watery hell. There is one word he spoke softly though, between his bouts of screaming, as would a mother to a child, one word that has been etched into my mind and will not leave hold: '*Dagon*.'

I killed him after that, spreading a thin ribbon of red around his throat with my cutlass. He smiles in his sleep now, blissfully at peace, dreaming of his ancient cities and their risen spires, of Dagon and his palace under the sea.

Of *The Salamander*'s crew, none survived. I killed them all on my return to save them from the blight of the *treasure*, the pirate's curse, as surely it would have taken hold of them too, in time. I watch them sleep, now, resting their weary heads upon pillows of blood and straw.

The Salamander drifts now, the anchor cut free, the sails lofted to catch the wind. Let her mark the island like a warning for future travellers, a beacon of despair. If you have found this testimony, then it is already too late; Isla Cura will have you in its clutches, its siren song too strong to disobey. The ancient creatures will rise from their watery hole again, just as they have risen now, just as they make their way towards *The Salamander*, their grotesque webbed fingers clutching at the sides of ship as they search me out. I can hear them now, scrabbling at the netting, pulling themselves aboard! I must waste no more time. They come for me, and death can be the only way to escape them. To my watery grave then! Beware!