

# Scream at Sea

## Algis Budrys

Illustration by Kandis Elliot

*I have never felt I couldn't write anything but SF. When the late Rogers Terrill put out word that Ziff-Davis Publishing Co., which then paid well for pulp fiction, was looking for sea stories in a hurry, I provided. I was living in an apartment house on the corner of Eighth Avenue and 23rd Street in New York. The rent was more per month than I was earning in six months. Ziff-Davis paid a respectable sum for the story, and gave me the feeling that I was breaking into the general fiction market. Then the magazine failed, and this story has twice appeared in Fantastic, a former Z-D property, presumably because I had an established SF byline. I apologize to all SF magazine buyers who felt done-on by this tactic; it wasn't mine. Now here it is again--the story and the tactic, both--but the circumstances are more appropriate.*

**A** man, a cat, an ocean...

THE PRINCIPAL FEATURE of Harry Meglow's life had been his ability to escape from seemingly complete disaster. True, his means of escape usually required trips to out-of-the-way corners, but Harry had been tailored by some Providence with the foresight to ensure that he would feel at home in them.

Consequently, he had found life in Venezuela not disagreeable, and not financially unrewarding. However, it became necessary, as a result of the latter circumstance, to find urgent employment as a cook's helper on a Panamanian tanker which had the desirable quality of departing for Lisbon almost immediately. He might have preferred a more elevated position, but he was completely ignorant of the sea. Moreover, hustling slops is still preferable to a South American jail and the good offices of the Venezuelan penal code.

The tanker was a thousand miles into the Atlantic when Meglow's special kind of good fortune reasserted itself. He was standing casually on deck, scratching the ears of the cook's cat, when some spark touched off the cargo of casing head.

Gasoline vapor is one of the more vicious explosives. Meglow found himself in the sea, and it was not until he tried to scramble aboard a raft that had whirled into the water near him that he became sufficiently conscious of what had happened to notice that the cat was still in his arms. He tossed it aboard and pulled himself up after it.

He and the cat were equally uncomprehending observers as the tanker tore itself completely open with one final blast, fountaining debris and fire.

It was near twilight. Meglow found no survivors in the darkening water--or, rather, none cried out or swam toward him as the raft drifted away. This fact did not particularly bother him, for he was used to the undemanding company of himself. The thought that he was alone in the Atlantic was not particularly disquieting either, for by now the roots of his faith in the inevitable survival of Harry Meglow were sunk deep into the past, so thoroughly intertwined with every significant event in his life that it was a fundamentally optimistic Harry Meglow whose raft carried him farther and farther from the place where the tanker had wallowed down into the sea.

So, once he had accustomed himself to the raft's staccato motion on the choppy water, he was able to sleep without first giving any special thought to his present situation, the sequence of preceding events which had brought him to it, or the course of the future.

He woke up once during the night. The chop had subsided, but an overcast had left the ocean almost completely black, without stars or moonlight. He stared around him at the featureless unfamiliarity of the Atlantic at night, hearing no sound except the slap of water against the raft and the sibilance of his breath.

The water around him was pouring out the warmth it had stored up during the day. Nevertheless, his wet clothing was a cold and clinging shell around him. He tried to peel off his sweater, but the sodden wool bound around his neck and shoulders, smothering him, and he fought his face free with a flail of his arms and a frantic twist of his body. Breathing in spasms, he pulled the sweater back down over his stomach, but in a few minutes he managed a chuckle, and a little later he was asleep again.

He was awakened in the morning by the clawing and meowing of the cat. He rolled over, pushed the animal away from him, and stretched. The slats of the raft's superstructure were 1 x 2 lumber, spaced a half inch apart--an unyielding surface that stiffened muscle, bruised bone, and cut into skin. His sweater had shrunk, and clung tightly to his chest and arms. Both it and his dungarees were stiff and crusted with salt. His skin itched. He put his hand up to his eyebrows and hair. They were clogged and sticky. He grimaced in disgust.

It was too early to tell, but he thought he might be getting a cold. His nasal passages were congested, and his throat was raw. Perhaps it was merely irritation from salt water inhaled during his frantic lunge for the raft. If it was a genuine cold--well, at least he was alive to have it.

He stood up and moved about in bursts of energy, quickening his circulation. It took him a while to become accustomed to the yielding surface the raft presented, but he was soon able to adjust his movements to it. He began to look around the raft.

The raft itself was more properly a float. It consisted of a slat superstructure around and on a series of metal drums--one of them, a makeshift replacement, actually was an empty oil drum--and stood about a foot out of the water. It was well in keeping with the ship from which it had come.

He found the food locker and watertank after a short while, sunken into the superstructure. There was a considerable supply of biscuits and some canned stuff with a Spanish label that turned out to be ham. He had no way of estimating how long it would last him, but there certainly seemed to be enough of it for some time to come. The watertank was full, and he

had no great worries there, either, though again he did not know how many days' supply this actually was. To the problem of survival and rescue, he brought only his perversely optimistic fatalism.

He dug some ham out of the can with his fingers and began to eat it. When the cat rubbed up against his leg and wailed, he bent down absently and put some food on the deck for her, where she ate it hungrily. As he ate, he continued to survey his surroundings.

The raft was on smooth water, with a clear blue, white-flecked sky overhead. The wooden slats of the raft were warped in places, and some pieces of the deck--the top of the raft could be called a deck, he decided--had been replaced, the newer wood contrasting with the old, which was weathered and dotted with black pockmarks where the heads of nails had lost their paint and corroded. The entire raft needed repainting badly.

He finished the ham and threw the can overside, after which he bent down to the watertank for a drink.

The tank, as far as he could see, was the only piece of modern--or almost modern--equipment on the raft. It had a lid with a cup clipped to the underside, and a rubber seal to prevent as much evaporation as possible. He drank thirstily, then refilled the cup and set it down on the deck for the cat.

Idly, he swept his glance around the horizon, not especially hoping to see a ship, and was only mildly disappointed when he did not. There was something vaguely disquieting about the empty sea, not for its lack of any sign of rescue, but because of the sense that he was the only living man in at least thirteen hundred square miles--that is, if his memory was right about the horizon line being about twenty miles away, and if the formula for the area of a circle was  $A = \pi r^2$ . The raft, hence a structure that it was, embodied the only evidence that anything of Man had ever stirred this featureless water.

Meglow had never in his life been twenty miles away from another human being. The visualization of himself alone in the middle of a vast circle of emptiness was completely outside his experience.

He looked at the water around him again. It was no different in one direction than in another. It was all smooth water, apparently changing from dirty green to blue as it stretched farther away, but he knew that actually, even beyond the horizon, it was still dirty green.

Becoming conscious for the first time of the volume of sheer emptiness that an ocean could present, he lost some of the sense of romantic adventure which he had felt up to now--and still felt, but to a lesser degree. Still optimistic, if somewhat subdued, he spent the remainder of the day simply sitting on the raft with his hands around his knees, occasionally stroking the cat, which seemed to be having little difficulty in adjusting to a ten-by-ten environment. After eating some more ham, and drinking another cupful of water, he fell asleep.

He was awakened by the pitching and bucking of the raft, which shook with a completely unfamiliar and mechanical vibration. The cat, somewhere in the darkness beside him, was scratching at the slats.

He looked to his left, and saw something huge and gray slipping past him in the blackness. Running lights tracked a colored line across the sky, and the open door of a radio shack

was a moving square of light. Paralyzed, he crouched on the bucking raft, riding the white froth of the ship's wake. When he finally managed to shout, the sound was thin and empty under the beat of the propeller in the water, and he knew it had not carried to the deck.

"Hey! Hey there! *For God's sake--*"

He shouted after the retreating ship for a long time, rasping his throat, and it was only after the raft had steadied down once more that he stopped, realizing with even greater force just how large an ocean was, how rare a thing had just occurred, and passed him by. Even on the deck of a ship, the closeness of bulkheads and cargo booms made the sea a thing that was somehow not as desolate as it actually was. Only a man alone on a miniscule platform of warped and dirty slatting could appreciate the closeness, the immediacy of the ocean. To a man on a ship, the sea was a stretch of broad uniformity which carried him on its back. To a man on a raft, the sea was a wilderness.

His heart was pounding. He could not sleep. When it began to rain shortly thereafter, he lay down flat on his stomach, his hands over the back of his head, the slats digging into his face. He felt the cat burrowing against him, but he continued to lie stiff and unmoving. It was up to her to take care of herself.

It rained into daylight. He was stiff and wet, and now he definitely had a cold. Moreover, either because the raft was bobbing on a chop even heavier than that of the first day, or as a reaction to his disappointment during the night, he was feeling sick. His eyes were burning, and his mouth was full of a thick spittle that tasted like corroded copper. The back passages of his nose felt swollen, he was nauseous, and his throat was ragged from the periodic rushes of bile that fought their way up into his esophagus. He was coughing a little.

He looked at the cat, which was huddled miserably against him, and this somehow made him feel better. He managed to chuckle at her unintelligible cries.

The fact that he was still able to laugh made him feel better, and once the mood had been cracked, it broke and left him optimistic again, in spite of the steady downpour of rain and his coughing, which was complicating his nausea.

All right, so he'd missed the ship. For all he knew, it was headed for Venezuela, where the police would be only too happy to have him. As a matter of fact, the more he thought about it, the more he became convinced that something unpleasant would have awaited him aboard that vessel. No disaster in his life, no matter how serious it had been at first look, had ever really been as bad as it seemed. He had gotten into trouble in the States, and had found his way to South America. Once there, he had gotten quite a bit of money. Of course, he'd had to run for it, but the tanker had been readily available. And when the tanker exploded, he had survived. Come to think of it, it was probably because some harm waited for him in Lisbon that the ship had sunk.

He stared out over the white-capped ocean at the steel-gray horizon, and some of this new mood left him. He began to worry about the possibility of a full-fledged storm. Somehow, the sea seemed to be outside the abilities of his protecting destiny. On the raft, he was still Harry Meglow, still a living human being, with faith in himself and the future. But the Atlantic ran a foot below him, and in the Atlantic he would be a chip, an insignificant, purposeless something that would drift through the water for days before the pulped and fish-eaten remains settled down to the soundless bottom.

He tried to visualize the death of Harry Meglow. He tried to picture a world without him--and

failed.

It rained until very late in the day, when the clouds broke and left the ocean in sunset. He was able to eat and drink a little. He fed the cat at the same time. She seemed to have come through the rain without any harm, and although her fur was still damp, it was drying rapidly. He became conscious of his own wetness. The temperature had dropped, and he began to shiver. His cough had gotten worse, and the glands in his throat had swollen, so that every time he swallowed, a painful pressure caught him around the neck. The breath whistling out of his nostrils was hot, and he knew he had a fever.

This time, he managed to get the sweater off. He sat with the wind chilling his bare skin, until finally he stood up, took off the dungarees as well, and began to exercise violently. He was warm and dry in a few minutes, but it would be hours before his clothes would dry. He was caught with the choice of putting them on again, or of remaining naked, in which case he would have to keep moving around.

Even as he considered the matter, he cooled off again, and began swinging his arms and running in place.

After five hours, the dungarees were dry enough to wear, and he put them on gratefully. The sweater was still wet, and he crouched on the slats with his arms folded over his chest. He tried hugging the cat for warmth, but she clawed at his arms and finally bit his hand. He dropped her with a curse and barely restrained himself from flinging her into the ocean.

The following day, the fever was worse, and his eyes were burning badly. Each time he swallowed, his eardrums popped, and his throat was almost closed. His bones ached, and there was a sharp pain in his chest. His vision was a little blurred.

When he got to his feet, the headache that pounded his skull made him stagger, and he closed his eyes at the pain. The cat was hungry again, and he opened a can of ham. By now, he had come to hate the salty taste and the mushy consistency, but he forced down a few mouthfuls and left the rest for the cat, which had a difficult time eating out of the flat, narrow can, but made the best of it. He opened the lid of the watertank and drank a cupful of water, seeing another cupful down for the cat, but when he lurched away, his foot struck the cup, and kicked it overside.

He stared at the place where it had gone over, his face dull, but then he shrugged. He could always use an empty ham can to bring water up out of the tank. The cat would go thirsty in the meantime, but that was the cat's problem. He collapsed on the deck, and lay staring at the sea.

On his side, as he was, his eyes were only a little more than a foot above the water. The illusion that he was actually in the sea had grown more powerful, and a corresponding fear of the Atlantic had grown with it.

It was not merely the realization of the ocean's incredible area that overwhelmed him. It was the knowledge that the ocean was as old as all the Earth itself, and as enduring. Where the wrecked tanker had been, there was not even a dimple in the water. A ship had passed him in the night, tossing the water under his raft. Where was the ship? Where was the wake? They had existed for a few moments, then disappeared, and left the sea unmarked.

He realized that the sea could take him, and that the ripples would not reach a hundred yards. There would be no marker, no sign to the world that it had lost him.

"No!" The word burst out of him, a croaked shout. He sat up, trembling, sharp chills running through his body, his chest heaving as he coughed. Somehow, he would live through this. The sea would not have him.

He fell back, his jaw clenched, his body rigid, his hands in tight fists.

But that night it rained again, a cold, sharply driven rain from the north that first cooled his dry and feverish skin, but which was soon an icy slick that shot his temperature up and had him delirious by morning. He thrashed about on the raft, retching past the agony in his throat. The raft was tossing badly, and the cat had dug its claws into one leg of his dungarees in an effort to hang on.

Enough consciousness returned to permit a lance of fear at the thought that he might roll off the raft. Shuddering with chills, his teeth chattering, he got to his hands and knees and took off his belt. He passed it around a slat and buckled it around his waist again. Then the bone-wrenching fever took hold of him once more, and he lost consciousness.

He regained consciousness another time and lay staring up into the bright sky, with his eyes running from the fever. The pain in his chest was like a spike transfixing him. He tried to move, could not, and remembered the belt. His cracked lips twisted into a grimace as he plucked at it feebly but could not find the buckle. He heard a scratching sound, and turned his head. The cat was clawing at the trap over the food locker and the watertank. His own mouth was dry, and he tried to open the belt once more, but when he finally located the buckle, he could not open it. His hands were weak, robbed of strength.

Dully, he turned his head in the opposite direction, and looked at the sea.

Once again, and for the last time, his perverse luck had made sure that things were not as bad as they might have been. The sea would not get him.

He coughed, and smiled at the pain. His breath was hoarse--harsh, labored. No, the sea had not killed him. He was going to die of pneumonia. He had not starved, or died of thirst, or been swept overboard. The sea had lost. He snorted again, a painful "huh" that gusted from his nostrils.

The cat was clawing at his leg. He managed to raise his hand and swing it through the air, and the cat jumped back, mewing.

"Sor--sorry, cat," he grunted. "Nobody's going to--be around--to open--any food for--you."

His head fell back, and he chuckled. He had even managed to leave a living thing behind to regret his passing. Somehow, the thought appealed to him.

And then he realized to what precise end his special Providence had brought him, and he found the energy, buried deep in his system somewhere, to cry out, the harsh yell flinging itself over the whitecaps. He braced his shoulders against the deck and tried to break free,

but the effort drained him, and he collapsed. He lay motionless, except for the tears that poured from his eyes.

The raft was picked up three weeks later by a Brazilian tramp. The cat had not starved to death. It was not even hungry.

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