

## The Reef (excerpt from the short story, The Reef)

By Samuel Scoville, Jr. 1923

*Samuel Scoville, Jr. (1872-1950) was an American writer. In this short story, a young Caribbean boy accompanied by his grandfather goes sponge diving in the reef where a tiger shark killed his father—and where he faces dangers of his own. As you read, identify the methods Scoville uses to build suspense throughout the story.*

Lune-green and amber, a strip of fading sky glowed across the trail of the vanished sun. Far below, the opal sea paled to mother-of-pearl. Then, over sea and sky, strode the sudden dark of the tropics and in an instant the southern stars flamed and flared through the violet night. A long, tense moment, with sea and sky waiting, and a rim of raw gold thrust itself above the horizon as the full moon of midsummer climbed toward the zenith.<sup>1</sup> Rising, its light made a broad causeway across the sea clear to the dark reef which lurked in the shimmering water.

Suddenly, inked black against the moon-path, showed the lean shape of a canoe. All the way from Carib Island, a day and a night away, Jim Tom, who in his day had been a famous sponge-diver, had brought his grandson Jimmy Tom for a first visit to the reef. Both had the cinnamon-red skins of the Red Caribs, who once had ruled mightily the whole Caribbean. Jim Tom's hair was cut to an even edge all the way around his neck; his small, deep-set eyes were like glittering crumbs of black glass, and ever since a day when he dived below the twenty-five-fathom mark both of his legs had been paralyzed.

Swiftly the little craft neared the reef, and only the splash of the paddles broke the stillness. Then in an instant the molten gold of the water was shattered by a figure like a vast bat, with black wings which measured all of thirty feet from tip to tip, a spiked tail, and long antenna: streaming out beyond a huge, hooked mouth. Like a vampire from the pit, it rose into the air, blotting out the moon with its monstrous bulk, and then dropped back with a crash, raising a wave which nearly swamped the canoe. As it disappeared beneath the water, Jimmy Tom turned and looked questioningly at the old man. The latter laughed silently.

“Only a manta ray,” he said at last. “They like to fly around in the moonlight and frighten untried young men,” he added slyly.

For answer his grandson stretched out his paddle at full length. It showed in the air rigid and motionless as an iron bar. The old man grunted approvingly.

1. **Zenith** (*noun*): the highest point of an object, place, or trajectory
2. A reference to an indigenous people in the Caribbean, though this exact terminology is not in use today.

“You may tremble yet before you are through with the reef,” was all that he said however, as he steered toward the circle of coral which separated the lagoon from the ocean, which beat against the barrier in a crashing surf. Waiting until several of the great rollers had passed, the paddlers caught the crest of a huge wave and in an instant were swept ten feet in air toward the patch of beach which showed beyond the little lagoon. Just as the wave broke, the canoe tilted and rushed down its long slope like a toboggan, clearing the rim of sharp coral and leaping into the still lagoon beyond.

All the rest of that glorious night, as the moon went westering down the sky, the two slept on the rose- red, honey-brown sand, until, without any dawn, the sun suddenly rose above a heliotrope<sup>3</sup> horizon. Then they breakfasted, and Jim Tom became quite talkative—for a Carib.

“We must not waste a moment of this day,” he said. “Perhaps before night we may make the hundred of dollars you need for that sloop<sup>4</sup> about which you have been bothering me so long. In my day,” he went on severely, “boys were glad enough to have a good canoe.”

Jimmy Tom grunted.

“Whoever heard,” he said at last, “of making a hundred of dollars in one day?”

“It has been done—and here,” returned his grandfather, positively; “but it takes good lungs and—a brave heart.”

As they talked, the canoe reached a point where the reef sloped away in a series of terraces to unfathomable depths. There they stopped paddling and started down through the water which lay before them like a thick sheet of plate-glass. The great ledge over which they floated was dotted with thickets of colored corals and purple and gold seafans,<sup>5</sup> among which schools of brilliant fish sped and lazed and drifted like birds in the air. Molten-silver tarpon shot through shoals of chubby cow-pilots, all green and gold and indigo, while turquoise-blue parrot-fish raced here and there, and crimson cardinal-fish crept in and out of crevices in the rocks. There were angel-fish in gorgeous robes of emerald and scarlet, and jet-black butterfly-fish with golden fins, orange gills, and vivid blue mouths, while warty purple sea-cucumbers showed among clumps of yellow sea-anemones.

“This is the treasure-ledge of the reef,” said Jim Tom, suddenly. “Here too,” he went on, “death hides and waits,” and he paused for a moment.

Jimmy’s answer was to slip out of his unbleached cotton shirt and trousers and stand poised like a red- bronze statue of speed with the long, flat muscles rippling over his lithe body and graceful limbs.

“It was here that your father died,” said Jim Tom again. “I was lying watching him search among the sponges,” he went on after a pause, “when before my very eyes he was gone. My only son,” he went on, his voice rising as he harked back over forgotten years, “in the jaws of one of those accursed sculpins<sup>6</sup> of the deep water, a tonu<sup>7</sup> ten feet long.”

“And then,” asked Jimmy Tom, very softly, as the old man stopped.

3. a variable color averaging a moderate to reddish purple
4. A sloop is a fore-and-aft rigged boat with one mast and a single jib.
5. Sea fans are a type of horny coral with a vertical treelike or fanlike skeleton, living chiefly in warmer seas.
6. A sculpin is a spiny large-headed bottom-dwelling fish with large fanlike fins. It should be noted that Jim Tom is comparing the shark that killed his son to a bottom-dwelling fish, but not that his son was actually killed by one.

“And then,” went on the old man, fiercely, “everything went red around me. I gripped my spike and dove and swam, as I never swam before, down to that lurking, ugly demon. In a second I was on him and stabbed him with all my might,—once, twice, three times,—until, dying, he went off the ledge into the depths below and I followed him beyond, to where no man may dare to swim. There he died. As his hateful mouth gaped I dragged out your father by the arm and brought him back to the top; but when I climbed with him into the canoe he was dead, and I was as you see me now—dead too from the waist down. All the rest of that day and all the night beyond and the next day I paddled and paddled until we came home—my dead son and I. No, no,” went on the old man, “let us try the safer side of the reef.”

For answer, Jimmy Tom quickly fastened in place the outriggers on either side of the canoe, which made it firm and safe to dive from. Around his neck he slipped the “toa,” the wide-mouthed bag with a drawstring into which a sponge-diver thrusts his findings. Around his neck, too, he hung the “spike,” a double-pointed stick two feet long of black palmwood, hard and heavy as iron. Then, standing on the bow seat, he filled his great lungs again and again until every air-cell was opened. The old man looked at him proudly.

“You are of my blood,” he said softly. “Go with God. I will watch above you and be your guard. Forget not to look up at me, and, if I signal; come back to me fast—for I cannot go to you,” he finished sadly.

The young man gave a brief nod and, filling his lungs until his chest stood out like a square box, dived high into the air with that jack-knife dive which was invented by sponge-divers and, striking the water clean as the point of a dropped knife, he shot down toward the beautiful depths below. Into his lithe body rushed and pulsed the power and energy of the great swinging sea as he swam through the air- clear water toward a thicket of gorgonias,<sup>8</sup> which waved against the white sand like a bed of poppies. In thirty seconds he was twenty fathoms<sup>9</sup> down, where the pressure of seventy pounds to the square inch would have numbed and crippled an ordinary swimmer, but meant nothing to his steel-strong body, hardened to the depths by years of deep diving. Even as he reached the gleaming thicket he saw, with a great throb of delight, a soft, golden-brown tuft of silk sponge hidden beneath the living branches. The silk sponge is to spongers in the sea what the silver fox is to trappers on the land, and the whole year’s output from all seas is only a few score.

With a quick stroke, Jimmy Tom reached the many-colored sea-shrub. The moving branches had to be parted carefully with the spike, lest they close and hide, beyond finding, the silky clump growing within their depths. Even as the boy started to slip over his head the cord from which swung the pointed stick, he looked up to see Jim Tom beckoning frantically for him to return. Yet nowhere in the nearby water could he see anything unusual, except a little fish some eight inches long marked with alternate bands of blue and gold, which came close to him and then turned and swam out to sea. Still his grandfather beckoned, his face contorted with earnestness.

7. “Tonu” is a term of indigenous origin referring to a dangerous creature (usually a shark) that lurks and hunts in the caverns of coral.
8. Gorgonias (or gorgonians): see “sea fans”
9. A fathom is a unit of length equal to six feet (or 1.83 meters) used commonly for measuring the depth of water.