

# DEADLY DEPTHS by John F. Dobbyn

## EXCERPT

We arrived at an area of private docks in a town called Oistins. The driver stopped at the base of a wharf that anchored power boats of every size, speed, and description. One power yacht stood out as the choice of the fleet. The Sun Catcher. My guide hustled us both directly to the carpeted gangplank that led on board a vessel that could pass for a floating Ritz Carlton.

The engines were already revving. I was escorted to a padded deck-lounge with maximum view on the foredeck. I had scarcely settled in, when we were slicing through late-afternoon sea-swells that barely caused a rise and fall.

My guide, still in suit and tie, brought me, without either of us asking, a tall, cool, planter's punch with an ample kick of Mount Gay Rum. For the first moment since Mick O'Flynn told me that someone was asking for me, I made a fully-considered decision. This entire fantasy could easily turn into a disaster that could outstrip New Orleans and Montreal together, but to hell with it. It was just too elating not to accept it at face value – at least for the moment.

My mind was just settling into a comfortable neutral, when I heard footsteps from behind that had more heft than I imagined my guide could produce. I made a move to swing out of the padded deck-chair, when I felt the touch of a hand with authoritative strength on my shoulder. The voice that went with it had the same commanding undertone.

“Stay where you are, Michael. I'll join you.”

A matching deck-chair was set beside me. I found myself looking up at a shadow against the setting sun that appeared double my bulk and yet compact as an Olympic hammer-thrower. The voice came again. “You're an interesting study, Michael. I may call you ‘Michael’, right? I should. I probably know more about you than anyone you know. You might have guessed that by now.”

An open hand reached down out of the shadow. I took it. The handshake fit the shaker. It took some seconds for the feeling to come back into mine.

Before I could answer, the voice was coming from the deck-lounge beside me. “No need for coy name games. You know that I'm Wayne Barnes. And you know that I'm one of the, shall we say, associates in that little clique we call the Monkey's Paws. In fact, your escort here, Emile, tells me it was the mention of my name that swung your decision to get on that plane.”

He nodded to my nearly empty Planter's Punch. “Another?”

Before I could answer, he gave a slight nod to someone behind us. Before I could say “Yes”, or possibly, but less likely, “No”, a native Bajan in a server's uniform was at my left taking my empty and handing me a full glass.

I was three good sips into the second glass before I said my first word since coming aboard. I looked over at Wayne. I seemed to have his full focus. His engaging smile seemed to

carry a full message of relaxed hospitality, and none of the threatening undercurrents I was scanning for. “You have an interesting way of delivering an invitation, Mr. Barnes.”

He raised a hand. “Wayne.”

“Wayne’ it is. You must have an interesting social life.”

“I do. Do you find it offensive?”

I looked over the bow, past the deepening blue crystal water to the reddening horizon. I felt the soothing caress of the slightly salted ocean breeze. I took one more sip of the most perfectly balanced planter’s punch of a lifetime, and looked back at Wayne. “Not in the slightest. Yet.”

“Ah yes, ‘yet’.”

“Right. I’m sure this won’t impress you, Wayne, and it’s not a complaint, but I’ve had a week full of enough tragedy to fill a lifetime. Hence the ‘yet’.”

His smile and focused attention remained. “I know more about your week, perhaps, than even you do. But go on.”

The second planter’s punch was having a definitely mollifying effect. “I have no idea what you mean by that last statement, Wayne, so I’ll just pass on. Given that week, and the abrupt transport from hell on earth to . . . paradise on earth, I’d have to be Mrs. Shane’s backward child not to listen for a second shoe to drop.”

The smile expanded. Still no alarms. “Or perhaps you’ve come into a sea-change of good luck, Michael. Why not go with that?”

“Why not indeed? For the moment. Just one question. ”

“Alright. One question. For now. Make it a good one.”

“Oh it is. It’s a beaut. Ecstatic as I am with all this, why the hell am I here?”

That brought a bursting laugh. “I think I’m going to enjoy having you around for a couple of days, Michael. You have an instinct for the jugular. No chipping around the edges. We won’t waste each other’s time.”

“Thank you. But that’s not an answer.”

“No it isn’t.” He looked out to the diminishing sunset. “The only answer I can give you at the moment that would do justice to the question is this. And you’ll just have to live with it for now. You’re here for a quick but depthful education. I think you’ll find it well worth two days of your life. Are you in?”

“Do I have a choice?”

We both looked back at the rapidly diminishing shore-line behind us. “None that comes to mind. Now are you in?”

That brought a smile from me, another healthy sip of the planter’s punch, and a deep breath of the ocean-fresh breeze. “I’m in.”

We chatted through the sunset on far-ranging subjects that had no association whatever with Monkeys Paws, Maroons, murder-suicides - in fact nothing that gave a clue as to why my gracious host had chosen my company over the undoubtedly vast range of his acquaintances. By then, the moon had risen.

At some point, I was aware that the engines had stopped. The splash of two anchors could be heard on either side. The sun had set. The shift from twilight to a darkness, penetrated only by a quarter moon went unnoticed.

I was slowly sipping away at my third or possibly fourth Planter's Punch, when I became aware of a bobbing light approaching from the port side. Without interrupting the flow of conversation, I noticed that Wayne was following its approach with more than the occasional glance until it reached the side of the yacht.

Within a few minutes, my original guide, still in suit and tie, approached Wayne's side with an inaudible whisper. I sensed that a bit of steel crept into Wayne's otherwise conversational tone. "I'll see him."

I began to get up to provide privacy. Wayne held my arm in position. "Stay, Michael. Let your education begin." My guide nodded to someone behind us and lit his path with a small flashlight.

I settled back, as a fiftyish man with narrow, cautious eyes and thinning grey hair that might have last been combed by his mother came up along Wayne's right side. The loose wrinkles in his ageless cotton suit indicated that he might have been close to six feet, but for a constant stoop as if to pass under an unseen beam. The stoop caused his head to bob and gave him the look of one asking for royal permission to approach.

Wayne's eyes turned to him. I noticed the stoop of the back became more noticeable. Wayne's voice was calm and soft, but it commanded his visitor's full attention. "Do you have it? I assume you wouldn't be here without it, yes, Yusuf?"

The thin mouth cracked into a smile that conveyed no humor. "Of course. Of course. But perhaps our business . . ."

Wayne nodded toward me. "No fear. Mr. Shayne is here for an education. We shouldn't deprive him of that, should we?"

The smile on the man's lips did not match the apprehension in the tiny eyes, but he nodded. "As you say."

"Then what are you waiting for?"

The man gave a slight glance to either side as if it were the habit of a lifetime. He reached into some deep pocket inside his suitcoat. I noticed a slight but tell-tale hesitation before he slipped out what appeared to be a hard, flat, roundish object, about seven inches across. It was wrapped in several layers of ragged cloth.

He held it until Wayne extended a hand and took it onto his lap. He laid it on the small tray on his stomach. He looked back at the man, who simply forced a smile .

"I assume it all went well?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Barnes. No problems,"

Wayne smiled back. "How I do love to hear those words."

My eyes were glued to Wayne's hands as he carefully peeled back one layer of cloth after another. When he turned over the last layer, the object in the shape of a disc sent out instant glints of reflections of the rising moonlight.

I could see Wayne running the tips of his fingers over the entire jagged surface of the disc. He took a flip cigarette lighter out of his pocket, opened it, and lit the flame. When he held it

close to the object, I could make out the resemblance of a human face, coarsely pieced together from chips of green stone.

Wayne held it up toward me and ran the flame in front of it.

“Do you recognize it Michael?”

“I’m afraid not.”

He nodded. “Most wouldn’t. Your friend, Professor Holmes, would spot it immediately. The Mayans made death masks to protect their important rulers in their journey to the afterlife. They go back to around 700 A.D.”

“What stones are these? They look like jade.”

“Good spotting. The eyes were made of rare seashells.”

“And I assume valuable?”

He laughed again. “Right to the crux of the issue. Right, Michael.”

He turned the object over and ran his fingers over the back side of it. “One that apparently goes back as far as this, and belonged to the ruler we have in mind, the right collector will pay half a million. Isn’t that right, Yusuf?”

Yusuf’s grin was beginning to become genuine. “Oh yes. Oh yes. And more, as you would know, Mr. Barnes.”

Wayne swung his legs over the deck-lounge toward me. He sat up and very carefully replaced the wrapping that had covered the mask. He stood up and walked toward the man. “And the key to its value is that it is absolutely authentic.”

Wayne looked down at the grinning eyes of Yusuf for several seconds. I think I let out a yell that came from the pit of my stomach when Wayne hurled the wrapped object over side of the yacht, into the pitch blackness that absorbed it with barely a splash.

I thought that the man would crumble to the deck. He barely held his balance. In the blackness of the night, I couldn’t make out his features, but I know to a certainty that every drop of blood left his face.

Wayne called a uniformed attendant.

Before the man moved, Wayne took hold of his arm. I was almost as frozen to the spot as the man. I think we were both certain that he would be following the object into the blackness below.

Wayne held him close enough to speak directly into his ear, but spoke loudly enough, I’m sure, so that I could hear.

“It’s a fake, Yusuf. I’m sure you know that. But you’ll live to do me a service. You’re a delivery boy. Nothing more. I want you to take a message back to Istanbul. I want you to say just this. ‘You had my trust. I give it sparingly, and not twice. Rest assured, we’ll speak of this again.’ Do you have that Yusuf?”

The man had all he could do to nod.

Wayne signaled his attendant. “Take him back.”

The man was escorted, practically carried toward the back of the vessel. In a few minutes, I could see running lights heading away from the yacht.

Wayne sat back down. “What do you think, Michael? One more Planter’s Punch before dinner?”

I could only smile at the abrupt change of tone and subject.

“No? Then shall we go in to dinner. The chef should be prepared by now.”

When he stood up, I saw that he took something from under his deck-lounge. My mouth sprung open when a glint of light from an opening door of the yacht cabin lit up the death mask. I could see amusement in the smile of my host.

“What on earth did you throw overboard?”

“Oh that. I substituted my lap tray in the wrapping for the desk mask. I’ll keep the mask.”

“But if it’s a fake.”

“It is, but a fake by a well-respected forger of these antiquities. It has enough value for that reason alone to pay the expenses I’ve already incurred in acquiring it. Shall we go to dinner?”