

CHAPTER III

Wolf Larsen ceased swearing as suddenly as he had begun. He relighted his cigar and glanced around. His eyes chanced upon the cook.

“Well, Cooky?” he began, with a suaveness that was cold and of the temper of steel.

“Yes, sir,” the cook eagerly interpolated, with appeasing and apologetic servility.

“Don’t you think you’ve stretched that neck of yours just about enough? It’s unhealthy, you know. The mate’s gone, so I can’t afford to lose you too. You must be very, very careful of your health, Cooky. Understand?”

His last word, in striking contrast with the smoothness of his previous utterance, snapped like the lash of a whip. The cook quailed under it.

“Yes, sir,” was the meek reply, as the offending head disappeared into the galley.

At this sweeping rebuke, which the cook had only pointed, the rest of the crew became uninterested and fell to work at one task or another. A number of men, however, who were lounging about a companion-way between the galley and hatch, and who did not seem to be sailors, continued

talking in low tones with one another. These, I afterward learned, were the hunters, the men who shot the seals, and a very superior breed to common sailor-folk.

“Johansen!” Wolf Larsen called out. A sailor stepped forward obediently. “Get your palm and needle and sew the beggar up. You’ll find some old canvas in the sail-locker. Make it do.”

“What’ll I put on his feet, sir?” the man asked, after the customary “Ay, ay, sir.”

“We’ll see to that,” Wolf Larsen answered, and elevated his voice in a call of “Cooky!”

Thomas Mugridge popped out of his galley like a jack-in-the-box.

“Go below and fill a sack with coal.”

“Any of you fellows got a Bible or Prayer-book?” was the captain’s next demand, this time of the hunters lounging about the companion-way.

They shook their heads, and some one made a jocular remark which I did not catch, but which raised a general laugh.

Wolf Larsen made the same demand of the sailors. Bibles and Prayer-books seemed scarce articles, but one of the men volunteered to pursue the

quest amongst the watch below, returning in a minute with the information that there was none.

The captain shrugged his shoulders. "Then we'll drop him over without any palavering, unless our clerical-looking castaway has the burial service at sea by heart."

By this time he had swung fully around and was facing me. "You're a preacher, aren't you?" he asked.

The hunters,—there were six of them,—to a man, turned and regarded me. I was painfully aware of my likeness to a scarecrow. A laugh went up at my appearance,—a laugh that was not lessened or softened by the dead man stretched and grinning on the deck before us; a laugh that was as rough and harsh and frank as the sea itself; that arose out of coarse feelings and blunted sensibilities, from natures that knew neither courtesy nor gentleness.

Wolf Larsen did not laugh, though his grey eyes lighted with a slight glint of amusement; and in that moment, having stepped forward quite close to him, I received my first impression of the man himself, of the man as apart from his body, and from the torrent of blasphemy I had heard him spew forth. The face, with large features and strong lines, of the square order, yet well filled out, was apparently massive at first sight; but again, as with the body, the massiveness seemed to vanish, and a conviction to grow of a tremendous and excessive mental or spiritual

strength that lay behind, sleeping in the deeps of his being. The jaw, the chin, the brow rising to a goodly height and swelling heavily above the eyes,—these, while strong in themselves, unusually strong, seemed to speak an immense vigour or virility of spirit that lay behind and beyond and out of sight. There was no sounding such a spirit, no measuring, no determining of metes and bounds, nor neatly classifying in some pigeon-hole with others of similar type.

The eyes—and it was my destiny to know them well—were large and handsome, wide apart as the true artist's are wide, sheltering under a heavy brow and arched over by thick black eyebrows. The eyes themselves were of that baffling protean grey which is never twice the same; which runs through many shades and colourings like intershot silk in sunshine; which is grey, dark and light, and greenish-grey, and sometimes of the clear azure of the deep sea. They were eyes that masked the soul with a thousand guises, and that sometimes opened, at rare moments, and allowed it to rush up as though it were about to fare forth nakedly into the world on some wonderful adventure,—eyes that could brood with the hopeless sombreness of leaden skies; that could snap and crackle points of fire like those which sparkle from a whirling sword; that could grow chill as an arctic landscape, and yet again, that could warm and soften and be all a-dance with love-lights, intense and masculine, luring and compelling, which at the same time fascinate and dominate women till they surrender in a gladness of joy and of relief and sacrifice.

But to return. I told him that, unhappily for the burial service, I was not a preacher, when he sharply demanded:

“What do you do for a living?”

I confess I had never had such a question asked me before, nor had I ever canvassed it. I was quite taken aback, and before I could find myself had sillily stammered, “I—I am a gentleman.”

His lip curled in a swift sneer.

“I have worked, I do work,” I cried impetuously, as though he were my judge and I required vindication, and at the same time very much aware of my arrant idiocy in discussing the subject at all.

“For your living?”

There was something so imperative and masterful about him that I was quite beside myself—“rattled,” as Furuseth would have termed it, like a quaking child before a stern school-master.

“Who feeds you?” was his next question.

“I have an income,” I answered stoutly, and could have bitten my tongue the next instant. “All of which, you will pardon my observing, has nothing whatsoever to do with what I wish to see you about.”

But he disregarded my protest.

“Who earned it? Eh? I thought so. Your father. You stand on dead men’s legs. You’ve never had any of your own. You couldn’t walk alone between two sunrises and hustle the meat for your belly for three meals. Let me see your hand.”

His tremendous, dormant strength must have stirred, swiftly and accurately, or I must have slept a moment, for before I knew it he had stepped two paces forward, gripped my right hand in his, and held it up for inspection. I tried to withdraw it, but his fingers tightened, without visible effort, till I thought mine would be crushed. It is hard to maintain one’s dignity under such circumstances. I could not squirm or struggle like a schoolboy. Nor could I attack such a creature who had but to twist my arm to break it. Nothing remained but to stand still and accept the indignity. I had time to notice that the pockets of the dead man had been emptied on the deck, and that his body and his grin had been wrapped from view in canvas, the folds of which the sailor, Johansen, was sewing together with coarse white twine, shoving the needle through with a leather contrivance fitted on the palm of his hand.

Wolf Larsen dropped my hand with a flirt of disdain.

“Dead men’s hands have kept it soft. Good for little else than dish-washing and scullion work.”

“I wish to be put ashore,” I said firmly, for I now had myself in control. “I shall pay you whatever you judge your delay and trouble to be worth.”

He looked at me curiously. Mockery shone in his eyes.

“I have a counter proposition to make, and for the good of your soul. My mate’s gone, and there’ll be a lot of promotion. A sailor comes aft to take mate’s place, cabin-boy goes for’ard to take sailor’s place, and you take the cabin-boy’s place, sign the articles for the cruise, twenty dollars per month and found. Now what do you say? And mind you, it’s for your own soul’s sake. It will be the making of you. You might learn in time to stand on your own legs, and perhaps to toddle along a bit.”

But I took no notice. The sails of the vessel I had seen off to the south-west had grown larger and plainer. They were of the same schooner-rig as the Ghost, though the hull itself, I could see, was smaller. She was a pretty sight, leaping and flying toward us, and evidently bound to pass at close range. The wind had been momentarily increasing, and the sun, after a few angry gleams, had disappeared. The sea had turned a dull leaden grey and grown rougher, and was now tossing foaming whitecaps to the sky. We were travelling faster, and heeled farther over. Once, in a gust, the rail dipped under the sea, and the decks on that side were for the moment awash with water that made a couple of the hunters hastily lift their feet.

“That vessel will soon be passing us,” I said, after a moment’s pause.

“As she is going in the opposite direction, she is very probably bound for San Francisco.”

“Very probably,” was Wolf Larsen’s answer, as he turned partly away from me and cried out, “Cooky! Oh, Cooky!”

The Cockney popped out of the galley.

“Where’s that boy? Tell him I want him.”

“Yes, sir;” and Thomas Mugridge fled swiftly aft and disappeared down another companion-way near the wheel. A moment later he emerged, a heavy-set young fellow of eighteen or nineteen, with a glowering, villainous countenance, trailing at his heels.

“Ere ’e is, sir,” the cook said.

But Wolf Larsen ignored that worthy, turning at once to the cabin-boy.

“What’s your name, boy?”

“George Leach, sir,” came the sullen answer, and the boy’s bearing showed clearly that he divined the reason for which he had been summoned.

“Not an Irish name,” the captain snapped sharply. “O’Toole or McCarthy would suit your mug a damn sight better. Unless, very likely, there’s an Irishman in your mother’s woodpile.”

I saw the young fellow’s hands clench at the insult, and the blood crawl scarlet up his neck.

“But let that go,” Wolf Larsen continued. “You may have very good reasons for forgetting your name, and I’ll like you none the worse for it as long as you toe the mark. Telegraph Hill, of course, is your port of entry. It sticks out all over your mug. Tough as they make them and twice as nasty. I know the kind. Well, you can make up your mind to have it taken out of you on this craft. Understand? Who shipped you, anyway?”

“McCready and Swanson.”

“Sir!” Wolf Larsen thundered.

“McCready and Swanson, sir,” the boy corrected, his eyes burning with a bitter light.

“Who got the advance money?”

“They did, sir.”

“I thought as much. And damned glad you were to let them have it. Couldn’t make yourself scarce too quick, with several gentlemen you may have heard of looking for you.”

The boy metamorphosed into a savage on the instant. His body bunched together as though for a spring, and his face became as an infuriated beast’s as he snarled, “It’s a—”

“A what?” Wolf Larsen asked, a peculiar softness in his voice, as though he were overwhelmingly curious to hear the unspoken word.

The boy hesitated, then mastered his temper. “Nothin’, sir. I take it back.”

“And you have shown me I was right.” This with a gratified smile. “How old are you?”

“Just turned sixteen, sir,”

“A lie. You’ll never see eighteen again. Big for your age at that, with muscles like a horse. Pack up your kit and go for’ard into the fo’c’sle. You’re a boat-puller now. You’re promoted; see?”

Without waiting for the boy’s acceptance, the captain turned to the sailor who had just finished the gruesome task of sewing up the corpse.

“Johansen, do you know anything about navigation?”

“No, sir,”

“Well, never mind; you’re mate just the same. Get your traps aft into the mate’s berth.”

“Ay, ay, sir,” was the cheery response, as Johansen started forward.

In the meantime the erstwhile cabin-boy had not moved. “What are you waiting for?” Wolf Larsen demanded.

“I didn’t sign for boat-puller, sir,” was the reply. “I signed for cabin-boy. An’ I don’t want no boat-pullin’ in mine.”

“Pack up and go for’ard.”

This time Wolf Larsen’s command was thrillingly imperative. The boy glowered sullenly, but refused to move.

Then came another stirring of Wolf Larsen’s tremendous strength. It was utterly unexpected, and it was over and done with between the ticks of two seconds. He had sprung fully six feet across the deck and driven his fist into the other’s stomach. At the same moment, as though I had been struck myself, I felt a sickening shock in the pit of my stomach. In this instance this to show the sensitiveness of my nervous organization at the time, and how unused I was to spectacles of brutality. The cabin-boy—and

he weighed one hundred and sixty-five at the very least—crumpled up. His body wrapped limply about the fist like a wet rag about a stick. He lifted into the air, described a short curve, and struck the deck alongside the corpse on his head and shoulders, where he lay and writhed about in agony.

“Well?” Larsen asked of me. “Have you made up your mind?”

I had glanced occasionally at the approaching schooner, and it was now almost abreast of us and not more than a couple of hundred yards away. It was a very trim and neat little craft. I could see a large, black number on one of its sails, and I had seen pictures of pilot-boats.

“What vessel is that?” I asked.

“The pilot-boat Lady Mine,” Wolf Larsen answered grimly. “Got rid of her pilots and running into San Francisco. She’ll be there in five or six hours with this wind.”

“Will you please signal it, then, so that I may be put ashore.”

“Sorry, but I’ve lost the signal book overboard,” he remarked, and the group of hunters grinned.

I debated a moment, looking him squarely in the eyes. I had seen the frightful treatment of the cabin-boy, and knew that I should very

probably receive the same, if not worse. As I say, I debated with myself, and then I did what I consider the bravest act of my life. I ran to the side, waving my arms and shouting:

“Lady Mine ahoy! Take me ashore! A thousand dollars if you take me ashore!”

I waited, watching two men who stood by the wheel, one of them steering. The other was lifting a megaphone to his lips. I did not turn my head, though I expected every moment a killing blow from the human brute behind me. At last, after what seemed centuries, unable longer to stand the strain, I looked around. He had not moved. He was standing in the same position, swaying easily to the roll of the ship and lighting a fresh cigar.

“What is the matter? Anything wrong?”

This was the cry from the Lady Mine.

“Yes!” I shouted, at the top of my lungs. “Life or death! One thousand dollars if you take me ashore!”

“Too much 'Frisco tanglefoot for the health of my crew!” Wolf Larsen shouted after. “This one”—indicating me with his thumb—“fancies sea-serpents and monkeys just now!”

The man on the Lady Mine laughed back through the megaphone. The pilot-boat plunged past.

“Give him hell for me!” came a final cry, and the two men waved their arms in farewell.

I leaned despairingly over the rail, watching the trim little schooner swiftly increasing the bleak sweep of ocean between us. And she would probably be in San Francisco in five or six hours! My head seemed bursting. There was an ache in my throat as though my heart were up in it. A curling wave struck the side and splashed salt spray on my lips. The wind puffed strongly, and the Ghost heeled far over, burying her lee rail. I could hear the water rushing down upon the deck.

When I turned around, a moment later, I saw the cabin-boy staggering to his feet. His face was ghastly white, twitching with suppressed pain. He looked very sick.

“Well, Leach, are you going for’ard?” Wolf Larsen asked.

“Yes, sir,” came the answer of a spirit cowed.

“And you?” I was asked.

“I’ll give you a thousand—” I began, but was interrupted.

“Stow that! Are you going to take up your duties as cabin-boy? Or do I have to take you in hand?”

What was I to do? To be brutally beaten, to be killed perhaps, would not help my case. I looked steadily into the cruel grey eyes. They might have been granite for all the light and warmth of a human soul they contained. One may see the soul stir in some men’s eyes, but his were bleak, and cold, and grey as the sea itself.

“Well?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Say ‘yes, sir.’”

“Yes, sir,” I corrected.

“What is your name?”

“Van Weyden, sir.”

“First name?”

“Humphrey, sir; Humphrey Van Weyden.”

“Age?”

“Thirty-five, sir.”

“That’ll do. Go to the cook and learn your duties.”

And thus it was that I passed into a state of involuntary servitude to Wolf Larsen. He was stronger than I, that was all. But it was very unreal at the time. It is no less unreal now that I look back upon it. It will always be to me a monstrous, inconceivable thing, a horrible nightmare.

“Hold on, don’t go yet.”

I stopped obediently in my walk toward the galley.

“Johansen, call all hands. Now that we’ve everything cleaned up, we’ll have the funeral and get the decks cleared of useless lumber.”

While Johansen was summoning the watch below, a couple of sailors, under the captain’s direction, laid the canvas-swathed corpse upon a hatch-cover. On either side the deck, against the rail and bottoms up, were lashed a number of small boats. Several men picked up the hatch-cover with its ghastly freight, carried it to the lee side, and rested it on the boats, the feet pointing overboard. To the feet was attached the sack of coal which the cook had fetched.

I had always conceived a burial at sea to be a very solemn and awe-inspiring event, but I was quickly disillusioned, by this burial at any rate. One of the hunters, a little dark-eyed man whom his mates called "Smoke," was telling stories, liberally intersprinkled with oaths and obscenities; and every minute or so the group of hunters gave mouth to a laughter that sounded to me like a wolf-chorus or the barking of hell-hounds. The sailors trooped noisily aft, some of the watch below rubbing the sleep from their eyes, and talked in low tones together. There was an ominous and worried expression on their faces. It was evident that they did not like the outlook of a voyage under such a captain and begun so inauspiciously. From time to time they stole glances at Wolf Larsen, and I could see that they were apprehensive of the man.

He stepped up to the hatch-cover, and all caps came off. I ran my eyes over them—twenty men all told; twenty-two including the man at the wheel and myself. I was pardonably curious in my survey, for it appeared my fate to be pent up with them on this miniature floating world for I knew not how many weeks or months. The sailors, in the main, were English and Scandinavian, and their faces seemed of the heavy, stolid order. The hunters, on the other hand, had stronger and more diversified faces, with hard lines and the marks of the free play of passions. Strange to say, and I noted it all once, Wolf Larsen's features showed no such evil stamp. There seemed nothing vicious in them. True, there were lines, but they were the lines of decision and firmness. It seemed, rather, a frank and open countenance, which frankness or openness was enhanced by

the fact that he was smooth-shaven. I could hardly believe—until the next incident occurred—that it was the face of a man who could behave as he had behaved to the cabin-boy.

At this moment, as he opened his mouth to speak, puff after puff struck the schooner and pressed her side under. The wind shrieked a wild song through the rigging. Some of the hunters glanced anxiously aloft. The lee rail, where the dead man lay, was buried in the sea, and as the schooner lifted and righted the water swept across the deck wetting us above our shoe-tops. A shower of rain drove down upon us, each drop stinging like a hailstone. As it passed, Wolf Larsen began to speak, the bare-headed men swaying in unison, to the heave and lunge of the deck.

“I only remember one part of the service,” he said, “and that is, ‘And the body shall be cast into the sea.’ So cast it in.”

He ceased speaking. The men holding the hatch-cover seemed perplexed, puzzled no doubt by the briefness of the ceremony. He burst upon them in a fury.

“Lift up that end there, damn you! What the hell’s the matter with you?”

They elevated the end of the hatch-cover with pitiful haste, and, like a dog flung overside, the dead man slid feet first into the sea. The coal at his feet dragged him down. He was gone.

“Johansen,” Wolf Larsen said briskly to the new mate, “keep all hands on deck now they’re here. Get in the topsails and jibs and make a good job of it. We’re in for a sou’-easter. Better reef the jib and mainsail too, while you’re about it.”

In a moment the decks were in commotion, Johansen bellowing orders and the men pulling or letting go ropes of various sorts—all naturally confusing to a landsman such as myself. But it was the heartlessness of it that especially struck me. The dead man was an episode that was past, an incident that was dropped, in a canvas covering with a sack of coal, while the ship sped along and her work went on. Nobody had been affected. The hunters were laughing at a fresh story of Smoke’s; the men pulling and hauling, and two of them climbing aloft; Wolf Larsen was studying the clouding sky to windward; and the dead man, dying obscenely, buried sordidly, and sinking down, down—

Then it was that the cruelty of the sea, its relentlessness and awfulness, rushed upon me. Life had become cheap and tawdry, a beastly and inarticulate thing, a soulless stirring of the ooze and slime. I held on to the weather rail, close by the shrouds, and gazed out across the desolate foaming waves to the low-lying fog-banks that hid San Francisco and the California coast. Rain-squalls were driving in between, and I could scarcely see the fog. And this strange vessel, with its terrible men, pressed under by wind and sea and ever leaping up and out, was heading away into the south-west, into the great and lonely Pacific expanse.