

## CHAPTER XV

There was a deal of cursing and groaning as the men at the bottom of the ladder crawled to their feet.

“Somebody strike a light, my thumb’s out of joint,” said one of the men, Parsons, a swarthy, saturnine man, boat-steerer in Standish’s boat, in which Harrison was puller.

“You’ll find it knockin’ about by the bitts,” Leach said, sitting down on the edge of the bunk in which I was concealed.

There was a fumbling and a scratching of matches, and the sea-lamp flared up, dim and smoky, and in its weird light bare-legged men moved about nursing their bruises and caring for their hurts. Oofy-Oofy laid hold of Parsons’s thumb, pulling it out stoutly and snapping it back into place. I noticed at the same time that the Kanaka’s knuckles were laid open clear across and to the bone. He exhibited them, exposing beautiful white teeth in a grin as he did so, and explaining that the wounds had come from striking Wolf Larsen in the mouth.

“So it was you, was it, you black beggar?” belligerently demanded one Kelly, an Irish-American and a longshoreman, making his first trip to sea, and boat-puller for Kerfoot.

As he made the demand he spat out a mouthful of blood and teeth and shoved his pugnacious face close to Oofy-Oofy. The Kanaka leaped backward to his bunk, to return with a second leap, flourishing a long knife.

“Aw, go lay down, you make me tired,” Leach interfered. He was evidently, for all of his youth and inexperience, cock of the forecastle. “G’wan, you Kelly. You leave Oofy alone. How in hell did he know it was you in the dark?”

Kelly subsided with some muttering, and the Kanaka flashed his white teeth in a grateful smile. He was a beautiful creature, almost feminine in the pleasing lines of his figure, and there was a softness and dreaminess in his large eyes which seemed to contradict his well-earned reputation for strife and action.

“How did he get away?” Johnson asked.

He was sitting on the side of his bunk, the whole pose of his figure indicating utter dejection and hopelessness. He was still breathing heavily from the exertion he had made. His shirt had been ripped entirely from him in the struggle, and blood from a gash in the cheek was flowing down his naked chest, marking a red path across his white thigh and dripping to the floor.

“Because he is the devil, as I told you before,” was Leach’s answer; and

thereat he was on his feet and raging his disappointment with tears in his eyes.

“And not one of you to get a knife!” was his unceasing lament.

But the rest of the hands had a lively fear of consequences to come and gave no heed to him.

“How’ll he know which was which?” Kelly asked, and as he went on he looked murderously about him—“unless one of us peaches.”

“He’ll know as soon as ever he claps eyes on us,” Parsons replied. “One look at you’d be enough.”

“Tell him the deck flopped up and gouged yer teeth out iv yer jaw,” Louis grinned. He was the only man who was not out of his bunk, and he was jubilant in that he possessed no bruises to advertise that he had had a hand in the night’s work. “Just wait till he gets a glimpse iv yer mugs to-morrow, the gang iv ye,” he chuckled.

“We’ll say we thought it was the mate,” said one. And another, “I know what I’ll say—that I heered a row, jumped out of my bunk, got a jolly good crack on the jaw for my pains, and sailed in myself. Couldn’t tell who or what it was in the dark and just hit out.”

“An’ ’twas me you hit, of course,” Kelly seconded, his face brightening

for the moment.

Leach and Johnson took no part in the discussion, and it was plain to see that their mates looked upon them as men for whom the worst was inevitable, who were beyond hope and already dead. Leach stood their fears and reproaches for some time. Then he broke out:

“You make me tired! A nice lot of gazabas you are! If you talked less with yer mouth and did something with yer hands, he’d a-ben done with by now. Why couldn’t one of you, just one of you, get me a knife when I sung out? You make me sick! A-beefin’ and bellerin’ ’round, as though he’d kill you when he gets you! You know damn well he wont. Can’t afford to. No shipping masters or beach-combers over here, and he wants yer in his business, and he wants yer bad. Who’s to pull or steer or sail ship if he loses yer? It’s me and Johnson have to face the music. Get into yer bunks, now, and shut yer faces; I want to get some sleep.”

“That’s all right all right,” Parsons spoke up. “Mebbe he won’t do for us, but mark my words, hell ’ll be an ice-box to this ship from now on.”

All the while I had been apprehensive concerning my own predicament. What would happen to me when these men discovered my presence? I could never fight my way out as Wolf Larsen had done. And at this moment Latimer called down the scuttles:

“Hump! The old man wants you!”

“He ain’t down here!” Parsons called back.

“Yes, he is,” I said, sliding out of the bunk and striving my hardest to keep my voice steady and bold.

The sailors looked at me in consternation. Fear was strong in their faces, and the devilishness which comes of fear.

“I’m coming!” I shouted up to Latimer.

“No you don’t!” Kelly cried, stepping between me and the ladder, his right hand shaped into a veritable strangler’s clutch. “You damn little sneak! I’ll shut yer mouth!”

“Let him go,” Leach commanded.

“Not on yer life,” was the angry retort.

Leach never changed his position on the edge of the bunk. “Let him go, I say,” he repeated; but this time his voice was gritty and metallic.

The Irishman wavered. I made to step by him, and he stood aside. When I had gained the ladder, I turned to the circle of brutal and malignant faces peering at me through the semi-darkness. A sudden and deep sympathy welled up in me. I remembered the Cockney’s way of putting it.

How God must have hated them that they should be tortured so!

“I have seen and heard nothing, believe me,” I said quietly.

“I tell yer, he’s all right,” I could hear Leach saying as I went up the ladder. “He don’t like the old man no more nor you or me.”

I found Wolf Larsen in the cabin, stripped and bloody, waiting for me. He greeted me with one of his whimsical smiles.

“Come, get to work, Doctor. The signs are favourable for an extensive practice this voyage. I don’t know what the Ghost would have been without you, and if I could only cherish such noble sentiments I would tell you her master is deeply grateful.”

I knew the run of the simple medicine-chest the Ghost carried, and while I was heating water on the cabin stove and getting the things ready for dressing his wounds, he moved about, laughing and chatting, and examining his hurts with a calculating eye. I had never before seen him stripped, and the sight of his body quite took my breath away. It has never been my weakness to exalt the flesh—far from it; but there is enough of the artist in me to appreciate its wonder.

I must say that I was fascinated by the perfect lines of Wolf Larsen’s figure, and by what I may term the terrible beauty of it. I had noted the men in the forecastle. Powerfully muscled though some of them were,

there had been something wrong with all of them, an insufficient development here, an undue development there, a twist or a crook that destroyed symmetry, legs too short or too long, or too much sinew or bone exposed, or too little. Oofy-Oofy had been the only one whose lines were at all pleasing, while, in so far as they pleased, that far had they been what I should call feminine.

But Wolf Larsen was the man-type, the masculine, and almost a god in his perfectness. As he moved about or raised his arms the great muscles leapt and moved under the satiny skin. I have forgotten to say that the bronze ended with his face. His body, thanks to his Scandinavian stock, was fair as the fairest woman's. I remember his putting his hand up to feel of the wound on his head, and my watching the biceps move like a living thing under its white sheath. It was the biceps that had nearly crushed out my life once, that I had seen strike so many killing blows. I could not take my eyes from him. I stood motionless, a roll of antiseptic cotton in my hand unwinding and spilling itself down to the floor.

He noticed me, and I became conscious that I was staring at him.

"God made you well," I said.

"Did he?" he answered. "I have often thought so myself, and wondered why."

“Purpose—” I began.

“Utility,” he interrupted. “This body was made for use. These muscles were made to grip, and tear, and destroy living things that get between me and life. But have you thought of the other living things? They, too, have muscles, of one kind and another, made to grip, and tear, and destroy; and when they come between me and life, I out-grip them, out-tear them, out-destroy them. Purpose does not explain that. Utility does.”

“It is not beautiful,” I protested.

“Life isn’t, you mean,” he smiled. “Yet you say I was made well. Do you see this?”

He braced his legs and feet, pressing the cabin floor with his toes in a clutching sort of way. Knots and ridges and mounds of muscles writhed and bunched under the skin.

“Feel them,” he commanded.

They were hard as iron. And I observed, also, that his whole body had unconsciously drawn itself together, tense and alert; that muscles were softly crawling and shaping about the hips, along the back, and across the shoulders; that the arms were slightly lifted, their muscles contracting, the fingers crooking till the hands were like talons; and



that even the eyes had changed expression and into them were coming watchfulness and measurement and a light none other than of battle.

“Stability, equilibrium,” he said, relaxing on the instant and sinking his body back into repose. “Feet with which to clutch the ground, legs to stand on and to help withstand, while with arms and hands, teeth and nails, I struggle to kill and to be not killed. Purpose? Utility is the better word.”

I did not argue. I had seen the mechanism of the primitive fighting beast, and I was as strongly impressed as if I had seen the engines of a great battleship or Atlantic liner.

I was surprised, considering the fierce struggle in the forecastle, at the superficiality of his hurts, and I pride myself that I dressed them dexterously. With the exception of several bad wounds, the rest were merely severe bruises and lacerations. The blow which he had received before going overboard had laid his scalp open several inches. This, under his direction, I cleansed and sewed together, having first shaved the edges of the wound. Then the calf of his leg was badly lacerated and looked as though it had been mangled by a bulldog. Some sailor, he told me, had laid hold of it by his teeth, at the beginning of the fight, and hung on and been dragged to the top of the forecastle ladder, when he was kicked loose.

“By the way, Hump, as I have remarked, you are a handy man,” Wolf Larsen

began, when my work was done. "As you know, we're short a mate. Hereafter you shall stand watches, receive seventy-five dollars per month, and be addressed fore and aft as Mr. Van Weyden."

"I—I don't understand navigation, you know," I gasped.

"Not necessary at all."

"I really do not care to sit in the high places," I objected. "I find life precarious enough in my present humble situation. I have no experience. Mediocrity, you see, has its compensations."

He smiled as though it were all settled.

"I won't be mate on this hell-ship!" I cried defiantly.

I saw his face grow hard and the merciless glitter come into his eyes. He walked to the door of his room, saying:

"And now, Mr. Van Weyden, good-night."

"Good-night, Mr. Larsen," I answered weakly.