

CHAPTER XXII

I knew what it was as she came toward me. For ten minutes I had watched her talking earnestly with the engineer, and now, with a sign for silence, I drew her out of earshot of the helmsman. Her face was white and set; her large eyes, larger than usual what of the purpose in them, looked penetratingly into mine. I felt rather timid and apprehensive, for she had come to search Humphrey Van Weyden's soul, and Humphrey Van Weyden had nothing of which to be particularly proud since his advent on the Ghost.

We walked to the break of the poop, where she turned and faced me. I glanced around to see that no one was within hearing distance.

"What is it?" I asked gently; but the expression of determination on her face did not relax.

"I can readily understand," she began, "that this morning's affair was largely an accident; but I have been talking with Mr. Haskins. He tells me that the day we were rescued, even while I was in the cabin, two men were drowned, deliberately drowned—murdered."

There was a query in her voice, and she faced me accusingly, as though I were guilty of the deed, or at least a party to it.

“The information is quite correct,” I answered. “The two men were murdered.”

“And you permitted it!” she cried.

“I was unable to prevent it, is a better way of phrasing it,” I replied, still gently.

“But you tried to prevent it?” There was an emphasis on the “tried,” and a pleading little note in her voice.

“Oh, but you didn’t,” she hurried on, divining my answer. “But why didn’t you?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “You must remember, Miss Brewster, that you are a new inhabitant of this little world, and that you do not yet understand the laws which operate within it. You bring with you certain fine conceptions of humanity, manhood, conduct, and such things; but here you will find them misconceptions. I have found it so,” I added, with an involuntary sigh.

She shook her head incredulously.

“What would you advise, then?” I asked. “That I should take a knife, or a gun, or an axe, and kill this man?”

She half started back.

“No, not that!”

“Then what should I do? Kill myself?”

“You speak in purely materialistic terms,” she objected. “There is such a thing as moral courage, and moral courage is never without effect.”

“Ah,” I smiled, “you advise me to kill neither him nor myself, but to let him kill me.” I held up my hand as she was about to speak. “For moral courage is a worthless asset on this little floating world. Leach, one of the men who were murdered, had moral courage to an unusual degree. So had the other man, Johnson. Not only did it not stand them in good stead, but it destroyed them. And so with me if I should exercise what little moral courage I may possess.

“You must understand, Miss Brewster, and understand clearly, that this man is a monster. He is without conscience. Nothing is sacred to him, nothing is too terrible for him to do. It was due to his whim that I was detained aboard in the first place. It is due to his whim that I am still alive. I do nothing, can do nothing, because I am a slave to this monster, as you are now a slave to him; because I desire to live, as you will desire to live; because I cannot fight and overcome him, just as you will not be able to fight and overcome him.”

She waited for me to go on.

“What remains? Mine is the role of the weak. I remain silent and suffer ignominy, as you will remain silent and suffer ignominy. And it is well. It is the best we can do if we wish to live. The battle is not always to the strong. We have not the strength with which to fight this man; we must dissimulate, and win, if win we can, by craft. If you will be advised by me, this is what you will do. I know my position is perilous, and I may say frankly that yours is even more perilous. We must stand together, without appearing to do so, in secret alliance. I shall not be able to side with you openly, and, no matter what indignities may be put upon me, you are to remain likewise silent. We must provoke no scenes with this man, nor cross his will. And we must keep smiling faces and be friendly with him no matter how repulsive it may be.”

She brushed her hand across her forehead in a puzzled way, saying, “Still I do not understand.”

“You must do as I say,” I interrupted authoritatively, for I saw Wolf Larsen’s gaze wandering toward us from where he paced up and down with Latimer amidships. “Do as I say, and ere long you will find I am right.”

“What shall I do, then?” she asked, detecting the anxious glance I had shot at the object of our conversation, and impressed, I flatter myself, with the earnestness of my manner.

“Dispense with all the moral courage you can,” I said briskly. “Don’t arouse this man’s animosity. Be quite friendly with him, talk with him, discuss literature and art with him—he is fond of such things. You will find him an interested listener and no fool. And for your own sake try to avoid witnessing, as much as you can, the brutalities of the ship. It will make it easier for you to act your part.”

“I am to lie,” she said in steady, rebellious tones, “by speech and action to lie.”

Wolf Larsen had separated from Latimer and was coming toward us. I was desperate.

“Please, please understand me,” I said hurriedly, lowering my voice.

“All your experience of men and things is worthless here. You must begin over again. I know,—I can see it—you have, among other ways, been used to managing people with your eyes, letting your moral courage speak out through them, as it were. You have already managed me with your eyes, commanded me with them. But don’t try it on Wolf Larsen. You could as easily control a lion, while he would make a mock of you. He would—I have always been proud of the fact that I discovered him,” I said, turning the conversation as Wolf Larsen stepped on the poop and joined us. “The editors were afraid of him and the publishers would have none of him. But I knew, and his genius and my judgment were vindicated when he made that magnificent hit with his ‘Forge.’”

“And it was a newspaper poem,” she said glibly.

“It did happen to see the light in a newspaper,” I replied, “but not because the magazine editors had been denied a glimpse at it.”

“We were talking of Harris,” I said to Wolf Larsen.

“Oh, yes,” he acknowledged. “I remember the ‘Forge.’ Filled with pretty sentiments and an almighty faith in human illusions. By the way, Mr. Van Weyden, you’d better look in on Cooky. He’s complaining and restless.”

Thus was I bluntly dismissed from the poop, only to find Mugridge sleeping soundly from the morphine I had given him. I made no haste to return on deck, and when I did I was gratified to see Miss Brewster in animated conversation with Wolf Larsen. As I say, the sight gratified me. She was following my advice. And yet I was conscious of a slight shock or hurt in that she was able to do the thing I had begged her to do and which she had notably disliked.