

CHAPTER XXIV

Among the most vivid memories of my life are those of the events on the Ghost which occurred during the forty hours succeeding the discovery of my love for Maud Brewster. I, who had lived my life in quiet places, only to enter at the age of thirty-five upon a course of the most irrational adventure I could have imagined, never had more incident and excitement crammed into any forty hours of my experience. Nor can I quite close my ears to a small voice of pride which tells me I did not do so badly, all things considered.

To begin with, at the midday dinner, Wolf Larsen informed the hunters that they were to eat thenceforth in the steerage. It was an unprecedented thing on sealing-schooners, where it is the custom for the hunters to rank, unofficially as officers. He gave no reason, but his motive was obvious enough. Horner and Smoke had been displaying a gallantry toward Maud Brewster, ludicrous in itself and inoffensive to her, but to him evidently distasteful.

The announcement was received with black silence, though the other four hunters glanced significantly at the two who had been the cause of their banishment. Jock Horner, quiet as was his way, gave no sign; but the blood surged darkly across Smoke's forehead, and he half opened his mouth to speak. Wolf Larsen was watching him, waiting for him, the steely glitter in his eyes; but Smoke closed his mouth again without having said

anything.

“Anything to say?” the other demanded aggressively.

It was a challenge, but Smoke refused to accept it.

“About what?” he asked, so innocently that Wolf Larsen was disconcerted, while the others smiled.

“Oh, nothing,” Wolf Larsen said lamely. “I just thought you might want to register a kick.”

“About what?” asked the imperturbable Smoke.

Smoke’s mates were now smiling broadly. His captain could have killed him, and I doubt not that blood would have flowed had not Maud Brewster been present. For that matter, it was her presence which enabled Smoke to act as he did. He was too discreet and cautious a man to incur Wolf Larsen’s anger at a time when that anger could be expressed in terms stronger than words. I was in fear that a struggle might take place, but a cry from the helmsman made it easy for the situation to save itself.

“Smoke ho!” the cry came down the open companion-way.

“How’s it bear?” Wolf Larsen called up.

“Dead astern, sir.”

“Maybe it’s a Russian,” suggested Latimer.

His words brought anxiety into the faces of the other hunters. A Russian could mean but one thing—a cruiser. The hunters, never more than roughly aware of the position of the ship, nevertheless knew that we were close to the boundaries of the forbidden sea, while Wolf Larsen’s record as a poacher was notorious. All eyes centred upon him.

“We’re dead safe,” he assured them with a laugh. “No salt mines this time, Smoke. But I’ll tell you what—I’ll lay odds of five to one it’s the Macedonia.”

No one accepted his offer, and he went on: “In which event, I’ll lay ten to one there’s trouble breezing up.”

“No, thank you,” Latimer spoke up. “I don’t object to losing my money, but I like to get a run for it anyway. There never was a time when there wasn’t trouble when you and that brother of yours got together, and I’ll lay twenty to one on that.”

A general smile followed, in which Wolf Larsen joined, and the dinner went on smoothly, thanks to me, for he treated me abominably the rest of the meal, sneering at me and patronizing me till I was all a-tremble with suppressed rage. Yet I knew I must control myself for Maud Brewster’s

sake, and I received my reward when her eyes caught mine for a fleeting second, and they said, as distinctly as if she spoke, "Be brave, be brave."

We left the table to go on deck, for a steamer was a welcome break in the monotony of the sea on which we floated, while the conviction that it was Death Larsen and the Macedonia added to the excitement. The stiff breeze and heavy sea which had sprung up the previous afternoon had been moderating all morning, so that it was now possible to lower the boats for an afternoon's hunt. The hunting promised to be profitable. We had sailed since daylight across a sea barren of seals, and were now running into the herd.

The smoke was still miles astern, but overhauling us rapidly, when we lowered our boats. They spread out and struck a northerly course across the ocean. Now and again we saw a sail lower, heard the reports of the shot-guns, and saw the sail go up again. The seals were thick, the wind was dying away; everything favoured a big catch. As we ran off to get our leeward position of the last lee boat, we found the ocean fairly carpeted with sleeping seals. They were all about us, thicker than I had ever seen them before, in twos and threes and bunches, stretched full length on the surface and sleeping for all the world like so many lazy young dogs.

Under the approaching smoke the hull and upper-works of a steamer were growing larger. It was the Macedonia. I read her name through the

glasses as she passed by scarcely a mile to starboard. Wolf Larsen looked savagely at the vessel, while Maud Brewster was curious.

“Where is the trouble you were so sure was breezing up, Captain Larsen?” she asked gaily.

He glanced at her, a moment’s amusement softening his features.

“What did you expect? That they’d come aboard and cut our throats?”

“Something like that,” she confessed. “You understand, seal-hunters are so new and strange to me that I am quite ready to expect anything.”

He nodded his head. “Quite right, quite right. Your error is that you failed to expect the worst.”

“Why, what can be worse than cutting our throats?” she asked, with pretty naïve surprise.

“Cutting our purses,” he answered. “Man is so made these days that his capacity for living is determined by the money he possesses.”

“Who steals my purse steals trash,” she quoted.

“Who steals my purse steals my right to live,” was the reply, “old saws to the contrary. For he steals my bread and meat and bed, and in so

doing imperils my life. There are not enough soup-kitchens and bread-lines to go around, you know, and when men have nothing in their purses they usually die, and die miserably—unless they are able to fill their purses pretty speedily.”

“But I fail to see that this steamer has any designs on your purse.”

“Wait and you will see,” he answered grimly.

We did not have long to wait. Having passed several miles beyond our line of boats, the Macedonia proceeded to lower her own. We knew she carried fourteen boats to our five (we were one short through the desertion of Wainwright), and she began dropping them far to leeward of our last boat, continued dropping them athwart our course, and finished dropping them far to windward of our first weather boat. The hunting, for us, was spoiled. There were no seals behind us, and ahead of us the line of fourteen boats, like a huge broom, swept the herd before it.

Our boats hunted across the two or three miles of water between them and the point where the Macedonia's had been dropped, and then headed for home. The wind had fallen to a whisper, the ocean was growing calmer and calmer, and this, coupled with the presence of the great herd, made a perfect hunting day—one of the two or three days to be encountered in the whole of a lucky season. An angry lot of men, boat-pullers and steerers as well as hunters, swarmed over our side. Each man felt that he had been robbed; and the boats were hoisted in amid curses, which, if curses

had power, would have settled Death Larsen for all eternity—"Dead and damned for a dozen iv eternities," commented Louis, his eyes twinkling up at me as he rested from hauling taut the lashings of his boat.

"Listen to them, and find if it is hard to discover the most vital thing in their souls," said Wolf Larsen. "Faith? and love? and high ideals? The good? the beautiful? the true?"

"Their innate sense of right has been violated," Maud Brewster said, joining the conversation.

She was standing a dozen feet away, one hand resting on the main-shrouds and her body swaying gently to the slight roll of the ship. She had not raised her voice, and yet I was struck by its clear and bell-like tone. Ah, it was sweet in my ears! I scarcely dared look at her just then, for the fear of betraying myself. A boy's cap was perched on her head, and her hair, light brown and arranged in a loose and fluffy order that caught the sun, seemed an aureole about the delicate oval of her face. She was positively bewitching, and, withal, sweetly spirituelle, if not saintly. All my old-time marvel at life returned to me at sight of this splendid incarnation of it, and Wolf Larsen's cold explanation of life and its meaning was truly ridiculous and laughable.

"A sentimentalist," he sneered, "like Mr. Van Weyden. Those men are cursing because their desires have been outraged. That is all. What desires? The desires for the good grub and soft beds ashore which a

handsome pay-day brings them—the women and the drink, the gorging and the beastliness which so truly expresses them, the best that is in them, their highest aspirations, their ideals, if you please. The exhibition they make of their feelings is not a touching sight, yet it shows how deeply they have been touched, how deeply their purses have been touched, for to lay hands on their purses is to lay hands on their souls.”

“You hardly behave as if your purse had been touched,” she said, smilingly.

“Then it so happens that I am behaving differently, for my purse and my soul have both been touched. At the current price of skins in the London market, and based on a fair estimate of what the afternoon’s catch would have been had not the Macedonia hogged it, the Ghost has lost about fifteen hundred dollars’ worth of skins.”

“You speak so calmly—” she began.

“But I do not feel calm; I could kill the man who robbed me,” he interrupted. “Yes, yes, I know, and that man my brother—more sentiment! Bah!”

His face underwent a sudden change. His voice was less harsh and wholly sincere as he said:

“You must be happy, you sentimentalists, really and truly happy at

dreaming and finding things good, and, because you find some of them good, feeling good yourself. Now, tell me, you two, do you find me good?”

“You are good to look upon—in a way,” I qualified.

“There are in you all powers for good,” was Maud Brewster’s answer.

“There you are!” he cried at her, half angrily. “Your words are empty to me. There is nothing clear and sharp and definite about the thought you have expressed. You cannot pick it up in your two hands and look at it. In point of fact, it is not a thought. It is a feeling, a sentiment, a something based upon illusion and not a product of the intellect at all.”

As he went on his voice again grew soft, and a confiding note came into it. “Do you know, I sometimes catch myself wishing that I, too, were blind to the facts of life and only knew its fancies and illusions. They’re wrong, all wrong, of course, and contrary to reason; but in the face of them my reason tells me, wrong and most wrong, that to dream and live illusions gives greater delight. And after all, delight is the wage for living. Without delight, living is a worthless act. To labour at living and be unpaid is worse than to be dead. He who delights the most lives the most, and your dreams and unrealities are less disturbing to you and more gratifying than are my facts to me.”

He shook his head slowly, pondering.

“I often doubt, I often doubt, the worthwhileness of reason. Dreams must be more substantial and satisfying. Emotional delight is more filling and lasting than intellectual delight; and, besides, you pay for your moments of intellectual delight by having the blues. Emotional delight is followed by no more than jaded senses which speedily recuperate. I envy you, I envy you.”

He stopped abruptly, and then on his lips formed one of his strange quizzical smiles, as he added:

“It’s from my brain I envy you, take notice, and not from my heart. My reason dictates it. The envy is an intellectual product. I am like a sober man looking upon drunken men, and, greatly weary, wishing he, too, were drunk.”

“Or like a wise man looking upon fools and wishing he, too, were a fool,” I laughed.

“Quite so,” he said. “You are a blessed, bankrupt pair of fools. You have no facts in your pocketbook.”

“Yet we spend as freely as you,” was Maud Brewster’s contribution.

“More freely, because it costs you nothing.”

“And because we draw upon eternity,” she retorted.

“Whether you do or think you do, it’s the same thing. You spend what you haven’t got, and in return you get greater value from spending what you haven’t got than I get from spending what I have got, and what I have sweated to get.”

“Why don’t you change the basis of your coinage, then?” she queried teasingly.

He looked at her quickly, half-hopefully, and then said, all regretfully:

“Too late. I’d like to, perhaps, but I can’t. My pocketbook is stuffed with the old coinage, and it’s a stubborn thing. I can never bring myself to recognize anything else as valid.”

He ceased speaking, and his gaze wandered absently past her and became lost in the placid sea. The old primal melancholy was strong upon him. He was quivering to it. He had reasoned himself into a spell of the blues, and within few hours one could look for the devil within him to be up and stirring. I remembered Charley Furuseth, and knew this man’s sadness as the penalty which the materialist ever pays for his materialism.