

CHAPTER XXXV

Next day, the mast-steps clear and everything in readiness, we started to get the two topmasts aboard. The maintopmast was over thirty feet in length, the foretopmast nearly thirty, and it was of these that I intended making the shears. It was puzzling work. Fastening one end of a heavy tackle to the windlass, and with the other end fast to the butt of the foretopmast, I began to heave. Maud held the turn on the windlass and coiled down the slack.

We were astonished at the ease with which the spar was lifted. It was an improved crank windlass, and the purchase it gave was enormous. Of course, what it gave us in power we paid for in distance; as many times as it doubled my strength, that many times was doubled the length of rope I heaved in. The tackle dragged heavily across the rail, increasing its drag as the spar arose more and more out of the water, and the exertion on the windlass grew severe.

But when the butt of the topmast was level with the rail, everything came to a standstill.

“I might have known it,” I said impatiently. “Now we have to do it all over again.”

“Why not fasten the tackle part way down the mast?” Maud suggested.

“It’s what I should have done at first,” I answered, hugely disgusted with myself.

Slipping off a turn, I lowered the mast back into the water and fastened the tackle a third of the way down from the butt. In an hour, what of this and of rests between the heaving, I had hoisted it to the point where I could hoist no more. Eight feet of the butt was above the rail, and I was as far away as ever from getting the spar on board. I sat down and pondered the problem. It did not take long. I sprang jubilantly to my feet.

“Now I have it!” I cried. “I ought to make the tackle fast at the point of balance. And what we learn of this will serve us with everything else we have to hoist aboard.”

Once again I undid all my work by lowering the mast into the water. But I miscalculated the point of balance, so that when I heaved the top of the mast came up instead of the butt. Maud looked despair, but I laughed and said it would do just as well.

Instructing her how to hold the turn and be ready to slack away at command, I laid hold of the mast with my hands and tried to balance it inboard across the rail. When I thought I had it I cried to her to slack away; but the spar righted, despite my efforts, and dropped back toward the water. Again I heaved it up to its old position, for I had now

another idea. I remembered the watch-tackle—a small double and single block affair—and fetched it.

While I was rigging it between the top of the spar and the opposite rail, Wolf Larsen came on the scene. We exchanged nothing more than good-mornings, and, though he could not see, he sat on the rail out of the way and followed by the sound all that I did.

Again instructing Maud to slack away at the windlass when I gave the word, I proceeded to heave on the watch-tackle. Slowly the mast swung in until it balanced at right angles across the rail; and then I discovered to my amazement that there was no need for Maud to slack away. In fact, the very opposite was necessary. Making the watch-tackle fast, I hove on the windlass and brought in the mast, inch by inch, till its top tilted down to the deck and finally its whole length lay on the deck.

I looked at my watch. It was twelve o'clock. My back was aching sorely, and I felt extremely tired and hungry. And there on the deck was a single stick of timber to show for a whole morning's work. For the first time I thoroughly realized the extent of the task before us. But I was learning, I was learning. The afternoon would show far more accomplished. And it did; for we returned at one o'clock, rested and strengthened by a hearty dinner.

In less than an hour I had the maintopmast on deck and was constructing the shears. Lashing the two topmasts together, and making allowance for

their unequal length, at the point of intersection I attached the double block of the main throat-halyards. This, with the single block and the throat-halyards themselves, gave me a hoisting tackle. To prevent the butts of the masts from slipping on the deck, I nailed down thick cleats. Everything in readiness, I made a line fast to the apex of the shears and carried it directly to the windlass. I was growing to have faith in that windlass, for it gave me power beyond all expectation. As usual, Maud held the turn while I heaved. The shears rose in the air.

Then I discovered I had forgotten guy-ropes. This necessitated my climbing the shears, which I did twice, before I finished guying it fore and aft and to either side. Twilight had set in by the time this was accomplished. Wolf Larsen, who had sat about and listened all afternoon and never opened his mouth, had taken himself off to the galley and started his supper. I felt quite stiff across the small of the back, so much so that I straightened up with an effort and with pain. I looked proudly at my work. It was beginning to show. I was wild with desire, like a child with a new toy, to hoist something with my shears.

“I wish it weren’t so late,” I said. “I’d like to see how it works.”

“Don’t be a glutton, Humphrey,” Maud chided me. “Remember, to-morrow is coming, and you’re so tired now that you can hardly stand.”

“And you?” I said, with sudden solicitude. “You must be very tired. You have worked hard and nobly. I am proud of you, Maud.”

“Not half so proud as I am of you, nor with half the reason,” she answered, looking me straight in the eyes for a moment with an expression in her own and a dancing, tremulous light which I had not seen before and which gave me a pang of quick delight, I know not why, for I did not understand it. Then she dropped her eyes, to lift them again, laughing.

“If our friends could see us now,” she said. “Look at us. Have you ever paused for a moment to consider our appearance?”

“Yes, I have considered yours, frequently,” I answered, puzzling over what I had seen in her eyes and puzzled by her sudden change of subject.

“Mercy!” she cried. “And what do I look like, pray?”

“A scarecrow, I’m afraid,” I replied. “Just glance at your draggled skirts, for instance. Look at those three-cornered tears. And such a waist! It would not require a Sherlock Holmes to deduce that you have been cooking over a camp-fire, to say nothing of trying out seal-blubber. And to cap it all, that cap! And all that is the woman who wrote ‘A Kiss Endured.’”

She made me an elaborate and stately courtesy, and said, “As for you, sir—”

And yet, through the five minutes of banter which followed, there was a

serious something underneath the fun which I could not but relate to the strange and fleeting expression I had caught in her eyes. What was it? Could it be that our eyes were speaking beyond the will of our speech? My eyes had spoken, I knew, until I had found the culprits out and silenced them. This had occurred several times. But had she seen the clamour in them and understood? And had her eyes so spoken to me? What else could that expression have meant—that dancing, tremulous light, and a something more which words could not describe. And yet it could not be. It was impossible. Besides, I was not skilled in the speech of eyes. I was only Humphrey Van Weyden, a bookish fellow who loved. And to love, and to wait and win love, that surely was glorious enough for me. And thus I thought, even as we chaffed each other's appearance, until we arrived ashore and there were other things to think about.

"It's a shame, after working hard all day, that we cannot have an uninterrupted night's sleep," I complained, after supper.

"But there can be no danger now? from a blind man?" she queried.

"I shall never be able to trust him," I averred, "and far less now that he is blind. The liability is that his part helplessness will make him more malignant than ever. I know what I shall do to-morrow, the first thing—run out a light anchor and kedge the schooner off the beach. And each night when we come ashore in the boat, Mr. Wolf Larsen will be left a prisoner on board. So this will be the last night we have to stand watch, and because of that it will go the easier."

We were awake early and just finishing breakfast as daylight came.

“Oh, Humphrey!” I heard Maud cry in dismay and suddenly stop.

I looked at her. She was gazing at the Ghost. I followed her gaze, but could see nothing unusual. She looked at me, and I looked inquiry back.

“The shears,” she said, and her voice trembled.

I had forgotten their existence. I looked again, but could not see them.

“If he has—” I muttered savagely.

She put her hand sympathetically on mine, and said, “You will have to begin over again.”

“Oh, believe me, my anger means nothing; I could not hurt a fly,” I smiled back bitterly. “And the worst of it is, he knows it. You are right. If he has destroyed the shears, I shall do nothing except begin over again.”

“But I’ll stand my watch on board hereafter,” I blurted out a moment later. “And if he interferes—”

“But I dare not stay ashore all night alone,” Maud was saying when I came back to myself. “It would be so much nicer if he would be friendly with us and help us. We could all live comfortably aboard.”

“We will,” I asserted, still savagely, for the destruction of my beloved shears had hit me hard. “That is, you and I will live aboard, friendly or not with Wolf Larsen.”

“It’s childish,” I laughed later, “for him to do such things, and for me to grow angry over them, for that matter.”

But my heart smote me when we climbed aboard and looked at the havoc he had done. The shears were gone altogether. The guys had been slashed right and left. The throat-halyards which I had rigged were cut across through every part. And he knew I could not splice. A thought struck me. I ran to the windlass. It would not work. He had broken it. We looked at each other in consternation. Then I ran to the side. The masts, booms, and gaffs I had cleared were gone. He had found the lines which held them, and cast them adrift.

Tears were in Maud’s eyes, and I do believe they were for me. I could have wept myself. Where now was our project of remasting the Ghost? He had done his work well. I sat down on the hatch-combing and rested my chin on my hands in black despair.

“He deserves to die,” I cried out; “and God forgive me, I am not man

enough to be his executioner.”

But Maud was by my side, passing her hand soothingly through my hair as though I were a child, and saying, “There, there; it will all come right.

We are in the right, and it must come right.”

I remembered Michelet and leaned my head against her; and truly I became strong again. The blessed woman was an unfailing fount of power to me.

What did it matter? Only a set-back, a delay. The tide could not have carried the masts far to seaward, and there had been no wind. It meant merely more work to find them and tow them back. And besides, it was a lesson. I knew what to expect. He might have waited and destroyed our work more effectually when we had more accomplished.

“Here he comes now,” she whispered.

I glanced up. He was strolling leisurely along the poop on the port side.

“Take no notice of him,” I whispered. “He’s coming to see how we take it. Don’t let him know that we know. We can deny him that satisfaction. Take off your shoes—that’s right—and carry them in your hand.”

And then we played hide-and-seek with the blind man. As he came up the port side we slipped past on the starboard; and from the poop we watched him turn and start aft on our track.

He must have known, somehow, that we were on board, for he said “Good-morning” very confidently, and waited, for the greeting to be returned. Then he strolled aft, and we slipped forward.

“Oh, I know you’re aboard,” he called out, and I could see him listen intently after he had spoken.

It reminded me of the great hoot-owl, listening, after its booming cry, for the stir of its frightened prey. But we did not stir, and we moved only when he moved. And so we dodged about the deck, hand in hand, like a couple of children chased by a wicked ogre, till Wolf Larsen, evidently in disgust, left the deck for the cabin. There was glee in our eyes, and suppressed titters in our mouths, as we put on our shoes and clambered over the side into the boat. And as I looked into Maud’s clear brown eyes I forgot the evil he had done, and I knew only that I loved her, and that because of her the strength was mine to win our way back to the world.