A COMPLETE NOVEL EACH WEEK IN THE EVENING WORLD

THE SKY MAN

The Romance of a Girl and an Aviator

By Henry Kitchell Webster

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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

Philip Cayley, formerly an army lieutenant in the Philippines, blacklisted by charges made against his moral conduct by his closest friend, Perry Hunter, becomes a recluse, takes up aviation and equipped with wings of his own design, seeks isolation from man in the Arctic regions. While flying over an uncharted coast hundred miles from Point Barrow he sees a leather clad man killed by a dart flung by one of a band of skin clad men. Later he comes upon a young man upon whose he meets a girl, Jeanne Fielding, by horse that she is with a party which has come to find a lost Polar expedition which had been led by her father, Capt. Fielding. He is concerned over the absence of a searching party from the yacht and Cayley departs to find Hunter, unknowingly leaving behind the throwing stick by the murderer of the leather clad man and which he had picked up. Roscoe, the giant of Scandic proportions, who had murdered the leather clad man and who is the present leader of a band from the whaler Walrus, which had joined the lost Fielding party, plots with Capt. Planck, former commander of the Walrus, to steal the yacht, while the searching party is absent and to get away with a quantity of gold mined from a gold ledge in the neighborhood. Planck learned that Roscoe had murdered Capt. Fielding when the gold was discovered, fears for his own safety. While Jeanne is telling the story of the sky man to old Mr. Fanshaw, Capt. Fielding's long friend and leader of the relief party, his son, Tom Fanshaw, returns to the yacht with a troubled table. Interested in the story of the sky man, Tom identifies Cayley as his old classmate at West Point and tells Jeanne the story of his disgrace. A member of the shore party brings the news of the death of its leader, Perry Hunter, through falling Cayley had witnessed from the sky, that Hunter was killed with a dart; that the sky man had left behind the throwing stick and that Cayley's disgrace had been brought about by Hunter. Tom combines as evidence that Hunter must have been murdered by the sky man. Cayley visits the yacht and is told of the charge against him by Tom after a mutual recognition. After the sky man's departure Jeanne announces her disbelief in his guilt, pointing out that the throwing stick was made for a left-handed person, while Cayley is right-handed.

CHAPTER VI.

Tom's Confession.

AT intervals during the day those enigmatical words of Mr. Fanshaw's recurred to the girl with the reflection that they wanted serious thinking over at the first convenient opportunity. But the day wore away and the opportunity did not appear.

It was a hard day for everybody. The news which Tom had brought aboard just after breakfast of the strange, half-crazed creature who had walked into the camp of the searchers and showed a wish to guide them somewhere—the man whose language consisted of two words, most suggestive, most tantalizing in their mystery, to those who clustered round him—this, in itself, would have been enough to awaken, among the people on the yacht, a sense of strange, uneasy expectation, and give a promise of further developments soon.

But the hours had worn away and not another word had come back from those who had followed this strange guide. And then there was the horror of Donovan's discovery. He had started to accompany Tom back to the yacht, but finding the two sailors a sufficient escort for him had lingered behind to make some explorations of his own, with that grim result.

Last of all had come the most incredible thing, suggested by the scene which Cayley reported to Jeanne. The idea that there were ten or a dozen exiles on this remote, unknown land who, instead of greeting the rescue which the yacht brought them, had gone into hiding at the first sight of it and murdered one stray member of the rescuing party who fell into their path and meant, perhaps, to murder the rest should opportunity offer.

Though this strange story added to the feeling of uneasiness among the people who remained on the yacht, it was received with a good deal of incredulity. Tom Fanshaw openly avowed his disbelief in every word of it, and his father, though less outspoken, was almost equally skeptical.

The captain of the yacht—his name was Warner—was on shore in command of the searching party, but the first officer, Mr. Scales, remained on board. His opinion coincided closely with that of the elder Fanshaw. He was in possession of all the data, though they had not told him the story of Philip Cayley's old relation with the murdered man.

"It stands to reason," he said, "that the only party of white men that could be here would be the survivors of the Fielding expedition. We know from the news that young Mr. Fanshaw brought aboard that there is one such survivor here. If there were any considerable number of them left, able-bodied enough to walk across the glacier, we could be sure they'd be here on the shore waiting for us. We could be certain they would have made some attempt to signal us as soon as they sighted us.

"If they weren't white men, but Indians—Chucotes—they'd have been quite as glad as white men to get a chance to go back with us as far as St. Michaels. And in the third place, if they were not Chucotes, but some strange, unknown, murderous band of aborigines, there wouldn't have been even one survivor of the Fielding expedition.

"Of course that's not an absolute water-tight line of reasoning, but it seems to me there is a tremendous probability that it's right, and that this flying man has lost his wits."

Gradually everybody on board the yacht, with two exceptions, came around to Mr. Scales's view of the affair. The only exceptions were Jeanne and Tom Fanshaw. Jeanne clung to the theory that Cayley was innocent, as indignantly as she did Tom's idea that he was a malicious liar. It might be hard to account for the presence of a party of white refugees on the shore, who didn't seem to want to be rescued, but if Cayley said they were there, then there they were, and a source of great, though undefined, peril they must be to the unsuspecting shore party. And though she was one converts to her belief, still her earnestness added a good deal to the uneasy feeling which mounted steadily, aboard the yacht, for the safety of the party that had gone ashore.

In this uneasiness Tom himself had unwitting a share, although he reiterated his belief that the only living person ashore, besides the members of their own party, was the half-crazed stranger who had come into camp just as he had been leaving it.

For all that he spent a good part of the day sweeping the land, or as much of it as he could see, with a powerful glass. But for all he saw, or any one else, during the long hours of that day, there might not have been a human being, except those on the party nearer than Point Barrow.

There was neither sight nor sound; there was not even a glint of Cayley's bright wings high up in the cloudless Arctic sky.

So utterly deserted did the land appear, so impossible was it to believe that any danger could lurk there, that, after their unsuccessful attempt to recover the body of Hunter, old Mr. Fanshaw and Scales, the first officer, took Jeanne ashore in one of the boats for an exploration of the beach and of the cluster of empty, half-buried huts that stood just back of it. They were gone from the yacht about an hour.

By 4 o'clock, however, they had decided that, whether or not the skyman's story might be true, it was high time to send a relief party ashore to find the lost ones. There was a good deal of necessary consultation about who should go. Clearly it would be folly to send a party of three or four on such a mission. They must carry, in the first place, rations sufficient not only for themselves, but for those they expected to find. They must be strong enough, in the second place, to overcome this mysterious, unknown band of refugees, supposing such a band to exist. To form such a party would take practically every able-bodied man remaining on the yacht, and there was, naturally, some demur to this.

But Tom settled the matter. "I can't go ashore on account of this confounded ankle, and Jeanne, of course, will stay here, too. But everybody else can go. Jeanne and I are enough to defend the yacht. Even supposing there was a party of twelve murderous ruffians ashore there, armed with darts and throwing sticks, they can't get aboard the yacht without putting off in boats. She's as good a shot as I am. We'll keep a brisk lookout, and if we see any piratical expedition setting out to capture us we will be able to account for the whole lot of them before they can hope to reach the Aurora's side.

At 5 o'clock accordingly the relief expedition went ashore, and Tom Fanshaw and the girl were left alone on the yacht.

Two hours later, perhaps, after they had eaten the supper which Jeanne had concocted in the galley, they sat, side by side, in their comfortable deck chairs, gazing out across the ice floe. The evening was unusually mild, the thermometer showing only a degree or two below freezing, and here in the lee of the deckhouse they hardly needed their furs.

Finally the girl seemed to rouse herself from the train of thought that had preoccupied her mind, straightened up a little and turned for a look into her companion's face. But this little movement of her body failed to rouse him. His eyes did not turn to meet hers, but remained fixed on the far horizon.

A moment later she stretched out a hand and explored for his beneath the great white bear skin that covered him, found it and interlocked her fingers with his. At that, he pulled himself up, with a start, and abruptly withdrew his own from the contact.

She colored a little, and her brows knitted in perplexity. "What an old bear you are, Tom," she said. "What's the matter to-day? It's not a bit like you to sulk just because we disagree about something. We disagree all the time, but you've never been like this to me before."

"I always told you I was a sullen brute when things went wrong with me, although you never would believe it," he said. "I'm sorry."

After a little perplexed silence she spoke again. "I didn't know things were going wrong with you. I did not even suspect it until this morning, when Uncle Jerry said"——

"What!" Tom interrupted. "What does the governor know about it? What did he say?"

"Why, nothing, but that you were playing in rather hard luck, he thought, and that I was to be nice to you. Is the world going badly—really badly—really badly?"

"Yes." That curt monosyllable was evidently all the answer he meant to make. At that she gave up all attempt to console him, dropped back in her chair and cuddled a little deeper down under her bear skin, her face, three-quarters away from him, turned toward that part of the sky that was already becoming glorious with the tints of sunset.

"You've never had any doubt at all, have you, that I really deserve the job of being your big brother; that I was that quite as genuinely as if I had been born that way?"

"No," she said, "of course not, Tom, dear. What put such an idea into your head?"

He paled a little, and it was a minute or two before he could command the words he wanted, to his lips. "Because of my hopes, I suppose," he said, unsteadily, "because I had hoped absurdly enough for the other answer; because—because—I've come to love you in the other way."

She looked at him in perfectly blank astonishment. He would not meet her eyes, his own, their pupils almost parallel, gazed out, unseeing, beyond her.

"But, Tom," she cried, "you can't mean that!—Oh, yes, I know you mean it, but it's only a temporary aberration, it can't be more than that! We've known each other from the time when we were quite small kids—yes, I was a kid as much as you; no politer term would describe us. We've always loved each other, and played together, and spatted and plagued each other, and made up again, and relied on each other to see us through each other's scrapes, and pointed out each other's faults and gloated over each other's whippings. We've got more civilized, of course, now that we've grown up, but the relation is really the same. There can't be any romance about it, no mystery about me for you. You can't possibly love me like that!"

"Can't I?" he said. "Can't I? Will you give me the chance and see if I can't? Love you? I love you so much that the touch of a stray lock of your hair drives me half mad, so that the sound of your step makes my heart stop beating, so that the sight of little commonplace objects that happen to have an association with you—things that I don't realize are associated with you at all until they bring up with them a picture that has you in it—make a lump come in my throat! And when you caress me with your hands?"—— He flung out his own with an impulsive gesture that finished the sentence; and then clutched them tightly together, for they were trembling.

Slowly her color mounted until she

felt her whole face burning. "I didn't know," she said. "You shouldn't have let me go on thinking"——

"I didn't know, myself, until today," he interrupted her stormily; "I didn't know I knew, that is. But when I saw you put your hands on that villain Cayley, I wanted to kill him, and in that same flash I knew why I wanted to."

Turning suddenly to look at her he saw that she had buried her face in her hands and was crying forlornly. "Oh, I am a brute," he concluded, "to have told you about it in this way."

"What does the way matter? That's not what makes it hard. It's loving you so much, the way I do, and having to hurt you. It's having to lose my brother—the only brother I ever had."

There was a long, miserable silence after that. Finally he said: "Jeanne, if you do love me as much as that—the way you do, not the way I love you, but love me any way—could you—could you—marry me just the same? I'd never have any thought in the world but of making you happy. And I'd always be there; you could count on me, you know."

"Don't!" she interrupted curtly, "Don't talk like that, Tom." She shivered, and drew away from him with a little movement somewhere near akin to disgust.

He winced at it, and reddened. Then, in a voice that sounded curiously thick to her, curiously unlike his own, he asked a question: "If I had told you all this a month ago—told you how I felt toward you, and asked you, loving me the way you do, to marry me just the same, would you?— Oh, I suppose you would have refused. But would you have shuddered and shrunk away from me—like that?"

"Perhaps not," she answered thoughtfully. "I've changed a good deal in the last month—since we sailed away from San Francisco and left the world behind us—our world—and came out into this great white empty one. I don't know why that is."

"I know." He was speaking with a sort of brutal intensity that startled her. "I know. It's not in the last month you've changed; it's within the last twenty-four hours; its since you saw and fell in love with that murderous, lying brute of a Cayley."

"I don't know," she said very quietly, "whether you're trying to kill the love I have for you—the old love—or not, Tom, but unless you're very careful you'll succeed in doing it. I don't think I want to talk to you any more now, not even sit here beside you. I'm going to take a little walk."

He held himself rigidly still till she had disappeared round the end of the deckhouse. Then he bent over and buried his face in his hands.

What the thing was that roused him to his present surroundings he never knew. He was conscious of no sound, but, suddenly, he sat erect and stared about him in amazement. It had grown quite dark. It must be two or three hours since Jeanne had left the chair beside him and announced that she was going to take a little walk.

He spoke her name, not loudly at first, for he thought she must be close by. But the infinite silence spaces seemed to absorb the sound of his voice. There was no sign that any sentient thing, except his very self, had heard the words he uttered. Then he called louder.

It was not until he raised himself, stiffly and clumsily, from his chair that he realized that it was more than dark; that the atmosphere about him was opaque with fog.

He groped for the heavy walking stick which leaned against the arm of his chair and, with its aid, hobbled slowly along the deck. His damaged ankle was held rigid in a plaster bandage. Though the pain in it was less, he found locomotion difficult.

As he opened the door at the head of the companionway he called the girl's name again; and this time the absence of any answer frightened him a little, though he tried to reason himself out of his fears. She had gone below, no doubt, to her own stateroom, and with the door shut, would hardly hear him. But he had no thought of accepting that explanation without investigating further. Even if she were there and quite safe, he did not want to let another quarter hour go by without finding her and asking her forgiveness.

The steps were rather difficult to negotiate, but by using both hands to supplement his one good foot he succeeded in creeping down them, and then in making his way along the corridor to the girl's door.

He knocked faintly at first; then louder, and finally cried out her name again, this time in genuine alarm. He tried the door, found that it was not locked, and opening it and switching on a light perceived that the stateroom was empty.

Standing there, utterly perplexed, unable either to guess at the girl's possible whereabouts or to construct any plan for finding her, he felt a sudden rush of relief on hearing the soft scrape of a boat against the accommodation ladder outside. It might be Jeanne. If it were not she it was some one from the shore party, in which case a search for her could be begun in earnest by those whose powers of getting about were unimpaired.

He heard footsteps crossing the deck overhead. No, that could not be Jeanne; it was a heavy tread, a curious, shuffling tread.

He closed the door behind him. Then he limped slowly down the corridor toward the foot of the companionway. The heavy tread was already descending the stairs.

He turned the corner, stopped short and gasped. And that was all. There was no time even for a cry. He had caught one glimpse of a monstrous figure clad in skins, huge in bulk; hairy-faced like a gorilla.

And then the man or beast had, with beastlike quickness, lifted his arm and struck. And Tom Fanshaw dropped down at his feet, senseless.

CHAPTER VII.

The Rosewood Box.

ON THE girl Tom Fanshaw's passionate, stormy avowal had the effect of a sort of moral earthquake. It left the ground beneath her feet suddenly unstable and treacherous; it threatened to bring down about her ears the whole structure of her life. The very thing she had relied upon for shelter and security against outside troubles and dangers was, on the instant, fraught with a greater danger than any of them.

Her instinct, when she left him, was simply one of escape. As she had said, the relation between them had always been taken for granted; had always been matter-of-fact. Long before her father's departure on that last voyage of his, ever since she could remember, in fact, she had taken her association with Tom, her affection for him and his for her, completely as a matter of course. They could not have felt any differently toward each other if they had, indeed, been brother and sister.

For the first few moments after his avowal she had felt no motion other than that of astonishment and incredulity. Even when he asked her if she could not marry him, anyway, though the question revolted her, she told the truth in saying that she was not angry.

The anger came later, but it burned into a flame that was all the hotter for its tardiness in kindling. It must have an outlet somewhere, and as such the promenade up and down the other side of the deck was altogether insufficient.

The sight of a small boat at the foot of the accommodation ladder seemed to offer something better. So, pulling on a pair of fur gauntlets, she dropped into it, cast off the painter, shipped the pair of light oars it contained, and rowed away without any thought of her destination—of any destination whatever; without, even, a very clear idea of what she was doing. She must do something, that was all she knew. Certainly she pulled away from the yacht's side with no idea that she was running into any possible danger.

It was half a mile, perhaps, from the yacht to the particular bit of shelving beach toward which she unconsciously propelled the boat. She rowed steadily, without so much as a glance over her shoulder, until she felt the grate of the shingle beneath the bow.

She became aware, not only that she had unconsciously come ashore but also that the yacht was nowhere to be seen. A bank of fog had come rolling in from the eastward, so heavy as to render an object one hundred paces away totally invisible. The clump of empty buildings here on the beach could hardly be half that distance, as she remembered, yet looking round from her seat in the row boat, she could make out no more than their blurred masses against the white ice and sand which surrounded them.

She shivered at first with an instinctive, half formed fear. This was solitude indeed. But she braced herself and dismissed her fear. Solitude was what she had left the yacht for; and, then, it was a condition she could terminate at will. Through the still air and across that quiet water her voice would carry easily to Tom's ears. She had only to hail and she would hear his voice in answer.

For a moment she thought she would do it. Then she decided the other way. If Tom should miss her, he would certainly call aloud, and she could answer, and use his voice to guide her back to the yacht. It was, of course, impracticable to attempt to row back without some such assistance. She had only a vague idea in what quarter the yacht lay, and the chance of missing it and getting really lost indeed was to great to be taken.

She scrambled out of the boat and pulled it high up on the beach. The fog made the air seem cold, though for the arctic it was a mild night. Two of the abandoned buildings on the beach behind her were mere sheds, windowless, absolutely bare, never having served, evidently, any other purpose than that of storage. But the third, and largest, as she remembered it, offered a shelter that was becoming attractive. There were some rude bunks in it where she could rest comfortably enough; and, unless she was mistaken, Scales had left in the hut a half-burned candle which they had used in exploring its dark interior. She had a box of wax vestas in her pocket. She could go in there and make herself at home, and at the same time keep an alert ear for a hail from the yacht.

She found the candle in the place where she remembered Scales had laid it down, struck a light and wedged the candle into a knothole. She turned toward one of the bunks with the idea of stretching out there, and by relaxing her muscles persuade, perhaps, her overstrung nerves to relax too.

She had taken a step toward it, indeed, before she saw, through the murk and candle smoke, the thing that lay right before her eyes—a rather large, brass-bound rosewood box or chest. It had not been here in the afternoon when they had entered the place, for they had searched its bare interior thoroughly in the hope that there might be something which previous investigators had overlooked. This box, six inches high and a foot long, or more, could not have been here then. It was standing now in the most conspicuous place in the room—in the very middle of the bunk.

The sight of it might well have caused astonishment or alarm in the girl's mind. But it was neither alarm nor astonishment that her next act expressed. She dropped down on her knees beside the rude wooden bunk, drew the chest up close in the tight embrace of her young arms, laid her cheek against the cold polished surface of its blackened wood, and cried.

Every question that might have asked itself—how the thing could have come there, and what its coming might portend to herself or to the others of the Aurora's people—was swept away in a sudden rush of filial affection and regret which the sight of it instantly awoke. It had reached her with that sudden poignant stab of memory which inanimate objects, familiar by long association, seem to be more potent to call up than the very persons of the friends with whom they are associated. The sight of her father himself could hardly have had so instantaneous and overwhelming an effect upon her as the sight of this old chest, which was one of the earliest of her associations with him.

It had always stood, until he had taken it with him on that last voyage of his, upon a certain further corner of his desk in the old library. It was one of those objects of a class that children always love—smooth, polished, beautiful; beautiful and, at the same time, defying curiosity.

It was quite a masterpiece of cabinet work. No hinges were visible, and the cover fitted so closely upon the box itself that the line which separated them was hard to discover. And there was no trace of keyhole or lock. To those uninitiated into its secret, it defied every attempt to open it.

She remembered too the day when her father had shown her the mystery, had done it by way of consolation for some terrible childish disappointment she had sustained. He had opened it for her and then had sat watching her efforts to repeat the operation; correcting her mistakes, pointing with a long, bronze letter-opener, but never touching the box itself nor her own clumsy fingers.

Presently she seated herself in the bunk, took the little chest on her knees and set about opening it. Between the cold and her excitement she found this rather a difficult thing to do, though her mind never, never hesitated over the slightest detail of the necessary formula of procedure. She knew in just what order you pressed in the innocent looking little ornamental tacks in the brass binding; remembered the right moment to turn the box up on its end to let the just released steel ball roll down its channel to the pocket, where it must lie before the last pressure upon the last spring would prove effective. She no more faltered over it than she would have faltered over her alphabet.

And at last, when her numbed fingers had completed their task, the counter weighted lid rose slowly by itself, just as it had used to, and revealed to her swimming eyes the contents of the interior.

Up to that moment she had not realized what the finding of the despatch box meant. It had not occurred to her that a full account of her father's expedition, a narrative which would reach, perhaps, to the morning of the last day of all, was lying here, right under her eyes.

But now when the cover was opened she saw beneath it a thick volume, bound in red morocco, she realized that here, under her hand, was the very object in search of which the Aurora had set out upon her perilous voyage.

With the first realization of what the contents of that book must be, a tragedy, and the central figure of it her own father, the man she had loved best in all the world, she found it almost impossible to open the book. She took it out of the despatch box and for a little while sat, dry-eyed, hugging the precious, poignant thing up tight against her breast.

But at last she put the despatch box to one side, brought the candle nearer, so that its light would serve to read by, and began turning the pages of the book.

The first sight of her father's clear, erect, precise handwriting warmed her with a sudden courage. He had not set out upon this voyage of discovery without weighing and expecting the possibilities of failure and death. Well, he had died, but he had not failed. He had added a new coast line to the map of the world. And she knew—knew as clearly as if his own spirit had stood there beside her talking to her in his old, dearly remembered voice, that next to coming home alive, bringing the fruits of his discovery with him, his last wish in the world must have been that that should happen which had happened now—that she, his daughter, should hold that very book in her hands and read the story, and know that he had not died in vain.

Once she had plunged into the fascinating narrative, the whole of the outside world faded away for her. She was oblivious to the fact that the darkness outside was no longer the mere darkness of the fog; oblivious to the rising wind that poured its icy stream through the leaky walls of the hut and made the candle flicker; oblivious, even, to the very sound which she had meant to wait for—the sound of Tom's voice calling out to her from the yacht, and the sound of other more alarming, nearer voices.

They all fell on deaf ears as she turned page after page of that precious record of her father's life. It was written, in the main, in the scientific, observant, unimpassioned temper which she knew so well. He chronicled those days of peril, when their ship, crushed in the ice only kept from sinking by that very ice which had just destroyed her, was drifting along in the pack, to what seemed certain destruction, as quietly and as explicitly as he did the uneventful voyage through Behring Strait. The man's courage was so deeply elemental in him that he could not be self-conscious about it.

He told of the land, the strange, uncharted shore, whose discovery offered them a respite at least from that destruction; told how he got his remaining stores ashore and built the hut, where, in all human probability, he and his companions were to spend the rest of their lives.

Finally she reached the record of the day when he had consigned to the sea the bottle containing the chart of the coast and the account of his plight, together with the course which the relief ship must take, should such a relief ship be sent out, to have any hope at all of reaching them.

At the close of the day's entry was a single line which contracted her heart with a sharp spasm of pain. "This is Jeanne's birthday," it said.

She resumed her reading presently, and came to the point where the Walrus people entered into the narrative; their plight, their rescue and their welcome by the three men, who by now were the only survivers of the original expedition.

She was reading faster now, with none of those little meditative pauses that had marked her progress through the earlier pages of the journal, for the sinister termination of the narrative began to foreshadow itself darkly from the moment—the first moment of the appearance of the Walrus people on the scene. Her father's description of the man Roscoe, of the expression that had been plain to read in his face as he had listened to the account of the gold-bearing ledge across the glacier, gave her a shuddering premonition; apparently, her father had experienced the same feeling himself. Day after day Roscoe's name appeared, always accompanied by some little phrase of misgiving.

It was the next to the last entry in the journal. She turned the page, paled and pressed her lips tight together when the array of blank pages before her told her that she had reached the end. Then she read the last words her father had ever written.

"Took the Walrus people to the ledge to-day. Have no heart to describe the scene that they enacted there. The man Roscoe certainly means to kill me. If it were not for my conviction that the danger from him is largely personal to myself, that he means me and no other, probably, for his victim, I think I should have him shot as a measure of justifiable prevention. He is not a man, but a great sinister brute—literally sinister, for he is left-handed. I shall walk warily, and hope the crisis may soon be over." Evidently that part of his wish had come true.

The book slipped out of the girl's hands, and she sat, with horror-widened eyes, staring at the candle, until it guttered and went out. Slowly, the outside world began to take its place again around her. She knew that she was shivering, half-frozen, that the icy wind was whining through the cracks in her rude shelter.

She thought she heard some one moving about outside, and that thought brought her quickly to her feet. She made her way to the door of the hut, called out; waited a breathless instant—and cried aloud in sudden terror.

CHAPTER VIII.

Apparitions

ROSCOE did not pause to investigate the effect of his blow, nor to waste a second one. If the man who had confronted him there in the companionway were dead, so much the better. If he were only half-dead, the job could be finished at any time. He was out of the way for the present at least. Roscoe hurried on, searching staterooms and passageways and finally the crew's quarters, forward.

When he had satisfied himself that he and his men were in undisputed possession of the yacht, he emerged on deck again by the forward hatchway and found Captain Planck already there. He directed him to go below with Schwartz, who had been engineer aboard the whaler, and get steam up as promptly as possible. He himself remained on deck, directing the unloading and stowage of those precious golden slabs that the rest of the party were bringing out in boats from the shore.

He paced the deck uneasily, for there was a superstitious streak in his otherwise strong composition which caused him, always a feeling of alarm when matters went too well with him; when his plans succeeded beyond his hopes for them. Now that he was in possession of the yacht—now that all the gold, except what three or four more boats would carry was transferred safely to the between-deck space beneath the turtleback—now that the smoke was pouring out of the Aurora's funnels and the steam rising in her pressure gauges, he fell to wondering just what sort of trap the devil was baiting for him, with this unbroken train of successes.

When with the arrival of another boat from the shore, one of the great golden slabs it brought went overboard, as they were lifting it up on deck, he astonished the boat's crew by taking the disaster good-naturedly.

"Never mind, boys," he said; "we've got a plenty without that. Come! Look alive with the rest of it."

For now his mind was at ease again. The "hoodoo," as he would have called it, of a too complete success was broken by this trifling mischance.

He watched, through the fog, the successive arrival of the other boats, bringing the last of the treasure with them.

He looked them over, numbered them as if they had been so many sheep, noted that they were all here, except poor Miguel.

"Stay here till I come back," he commanded. "I'm going below to see that everything's stowed all right. When I come back I want to talk to you."

He disappeared down the after hatchway, switched on a light and indulged in a long, satisfied look at the great masses of precious metal which were stacked, according to his directions, in the strong-room.

His purpose in coming down here was threefold. He meant to see that the gold was stowed correctly and he meant to lock the room up, so that its precious contents would not be tampered with, and bring the key away with him. He was not afraid that any of his crew would try to steal it, but he thought the moral effect of having it locked away where it was inaccessible to them, and of his keeping the key in his own possession, would be a help in maintaining his prestige as commander. They knew the sea better than he did, just as he knew the nature of gold-bearing rock. It was necessary to do something to bolster up his position as chief of the party and keep it above dispute. He did not want to have to kill any of them yet. The Aurora would be short-handed enough as it was.

But there was one more reason for that hurried trip to the strong room. He wanted to be sure that a certain rosewood box had come aboard along with the treasure and what few stores they were taking away with them.

That little box had occupied much of his leisure since the day when he had murdered the owner of it. He had sometimes wished that when it came into his hands that day he had yielded to his first impulse to shatter it, for the thing had always mocked him—coquetted with him.

He had often seen it lying open on Capt. Fielding's table in the tiny walled-off cubby hole of a room they called the Captain's cabin while the Captain himself was writing up his journal or working upon his charts. He had during the first winter frequently thought of trying to open it should the opportunity offer itself.

His interest now, however, in making sure that the box had really been brought aboard the Aurora was wholly practical. They were leaving most of their stores behind them, as there was no time either to transport them to the Aurora or to destroy them. With these stores and with the shelter afforded by the hut and the little clump of surrounding outbuildings it was probable that some members of the Aurora's party at least would survive the winter. If a relief ship should arrive the next summer, or even the summer thereafter, it would probably find some one on this desolate shore who could tell the story of the disappearance of the Aurora and form a more or less definite surmise as to the cause of it. That rosewood box had Capt. Fielding's journal in it—a journal that had been written up to the very morning when Roscoe had murdered him. Its discovery would go a long way toward bridging the gap which Roscoe meant to leave in the departing trail. In short, if that rosewood box were left behind, Roscoe would always feel that he was in more or less danger of detection.

Consequently, when he discovered that the box was not on board, and that his particular injunctions concerning it had been either neglected or disobeyed, he came raging up on deck again, a most formidable figure, which caused his companions, hardened ruffians though they were, to cower and shrink away from him.

In a torrent of furious blasphemy he demanded to know why that box had not been brought aboard; and the concentrated lees of his rage he emptied at last upon the two men whom he had ordered to do it.

"Now," he concluded when the torrent had spent itself, "you go ashore, you two. Yes, you, Carlson—I mean you—and you, Rose; go ashore now and get it."

Then, after a momentary silence, he raged out the command again, amid a foul flood of abuse.

But still they made no move to obey and the big Swede, in evident terror, answered him. "I won't get it, Roscoe. If you want that box, you can get it yourself."

"What in hell do you mean?" the leader stormed. But his voice, even as he spoke, lost its confident tang of authority.

"You tell him," said Carlson, nodding to his companion, Rose. He was a squatly built man with a stubborn jaw, and Planck in the days of his command had always disliked him as that most undesirable pest that can be found in a forecastle—a sea lawyer.

"What did you leave the box in the hut for?" he demanded. "He might not have come back if you had left it in the cave."

"Come back!" echoed Roscoe, with a growl.

"That's what I said. We went to the hut to get it, and there was a light inside, and there he sat, just like he used to. And he had the box open"——

"He! Who do you mean?" There was no trace of truculence in Roscoe's voice now. He spoke as though his throat was dry.

"It was Capt. Fielding; him to the life. And yet it was different from the way he used to be. We couldn't see it very well. Its face was sideways and the light was behind it, and it looked smaller and thinner—more—more like a woman. Anyway, there he sat with the box open beside him, and that red book of his open on his knees. Go back for it! Well, I guess not."

There was a momentary silence after he had finished, and Roscoe could feel, as it stretched itself out to the length of half a minute or so, the chill of their terror enveloping him. To throw it off he blustered, stormed at and abused them for a pack of liars. But in the end he sprang down into one of the boats and said he would fetch the box himself. Whether he believed their story or not it was the only thing for him to do.

As he pulled shoreward he tried hard to convince himself that he did not believe it; that Rose and Carlson had probably forgotten all about the box, and had trumped up the story to avoid the necessity of going back for it.

He beached his boat, scrambled ashore and set out walking doggedly along in the direction of the hut. The fog was still all but impenetrable, even to his practised vision, but he knew the shore like the palm of his hand, and he trudged on without a pause until he was within ten paces, perhaps, of his destination.

But there he faltered and stopped, turned about, under an irresistible impulse of fear, and would have fled had not sheer necessity compelled him to stop again. There was a light, a diffused yellow glow, faint but unmistakable, shining out of the windows of the hut.

He knew he could not go back to the Aurora without that box; it was necessary both to his future safety and his present command of the situation. His one hold upon those sullen followers of his depended upon his being impervious alike to terror and to defeat. Yet, even under that necessity, it was three or four minutes before, at the command of his party will, he began creeping forward on hands and knees toward the lighted window of the hut.

And when he reached a point where he could command its interior, his knees slipped out from under him and he lay prone upon the icy beach, his face buried in his outstretched arms. For those two sailors had told the truth.

Presently he drew himself up and squatted back on his haunches, staring. Human or not, the figure there in the hut seemed unaware of his presence. It was staring at the expiring flame of the candle in profound abstraction. When it stirred, as presently it did, it was with a natural, human motion. And then the candle went out.

In the few seconds of silence which followed, his terror returned upon him with full force. But it went away as suddenly as it had come, and with its recession there surged up in him a wave of brutish anger. It was to ghost that had sat in contemplation over the contents of that box, for it was moving now, with human footsteps—faltering, uncertain footsteps, at that. And when it appeared, for a moment, visible and no more, outside the doorway, it called aloud in a human voice—a woman's voice.

At the sound of it, he drew himself up towering, before her, and, so, became visible to her—a monstrous, blurred, uncertain shape.

And she cried out; this time in terror. Then, before he could spring upon her and kill her with his hands, as his brutish instinct of rage urged him to do, he started back suddenly and himself cried out!

For a faint circle of light, wavering, wandering, unearthly, was shining straight down upon both of them through the fog,—out of the sky itself.

Looking up, he saw overhead a single, great luminous eye, and in the reflection of its own light upon the ice, very faintly, the fabric of outstretched wings.

Then from up there, overhead, he heard a voice,—a quiet voice. "I'm here," it said. "Don't be afraid."

Blindly, Roscoe flung up his hands, whirled around and fell; scrambled to his feet again and fled, like a man hag-ridden, down the shore.

As he did so he heard a ragged volley of shots from the direction of the Aurora. This sound of plain human fighting, which he understood and did not fear, helped restore to equilibrium his mind, which a moment before had been tottering to absolute destruction. Once he could get back to his boat and feel the oars under his hands again—once he found himself pulling out toward the yacht, no matter how desperate the odds awaiting him there might be against him, he would, he felt, be himself once more.

He ran on and on down the beach. He had not passed his boat, he knew; but he finally realized that he had passed the place where he had brought the boat ashore.

(To Be Continued.)

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