

The Captain of the Northern Light

By LLOYD OSBOURNE

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It was a wild March day, and the rising wind sang in the rigging of the ships. The weather horizon, dark and brilliant, in ominous alternations showed a sky of piled-up clouds interspersed with lily patches where squalls were bursting. To leeward the broad lagoon, stretching for a dozen miles to the tree-topped rim of reef, smoked with the haze of an impending gale. Ashore, the palms bent like grass in the succeeding gusts, and the ocean beaches reverberated with a furious surf. The great atoll of Makin, no higher than a man, no wider than a couple of furlongs, but in circumference a slanting giant of 99 miles or more, lay like a snake on the boisterous waters of the equator and defied the sea and storm.

Within the lagoon, and not far off the settlement, two ships rocked at anchor. One, the Northern Light, was a powerful topsail schooner of a hundred tons; straight below, low in the water, built on fine lines and yet spartan for safety, the sort of vessel that does well under plain sail, and when pressed can fly. The other, the Edelweiss, was a miniature fore and aft of about 20 tons, a toy of delicacy and grace, betraying at a glance that she had been designed a yacht, and in spite of fallen fortunes, was still called as one. The man that laid her keel under would get danger as well as speed for his pains, and in time would be likely to satisfy a taste for both by making a swift trip to the bottom.

The deck of the Northern Light was empty save for the single tall figure of Gregory Cole, captain and owner, who was leaning over the rail gazing at the Edelweiss. He was a man of about 30, his tanned, handsome face overcast and somber, his eyes, with their characteristic hunted look, fixed in an uneasy stare on his smaller neighbor.

He had never known how passionately he had loved Madge Blanchard until he had lost her; until after that wild quarrel on Nonotech, when her father had called him a slaver to his face, and they had parted on either side in anger; until he had beaten up from westward to find her the month-old wife of Joe Horble. Somehow, in the course of those long, miserable months, he had never thought of her marrying; he felt so confident of that fierce love she had so often confessed for him; he had come back repentant, ashamed of the burning of fense he had then taken, determined to let bygones be bygones, and to begin, if need be, a new and a more blameless way of life.

He had to see her. He was mad to see her. The thought of her tortured and tempted him without end. Suppose she, too, had learned that love is stronger than oneself; that the mouth can say yes when the heart within is breaking; that she, like himself, had found the time to repent her folly? Was he the man to leave her thus; to acquiesce tamely in a decision that was doubtless already abhorrent to her; to remain with uplifted hands when she might be on fire for the sign to come to him? No, never! He'd beg her forgiveness and offer her the choice. Yes or no! It was for her to choose.

He jumped into the dinghy and pulled over to the schooner. Small at a distance, she seemed to shrink as he drew near her, so that when he stood up he was surprised to find his head above the rail. So this was Horble, this coarse, red-faced trader, with the pug nose, the fat hands, the faded blue eyes that met his own so sourly!

"Capt. Horble?" said Gregory Cole. "Glad to see you aboard," said Horble.

They shook hands and sat side by side on the rail.

"Where's Madge?" said Gregory.

"Mrs. Horble's ashore," said the captain.

"I'm afraid I can never call her anything but Madge," said Gregory, detecting the covert reproach in the other's voice.

Horble was plainly ill at ease. His face turned a deeper red. He was on the edge of blurting out a disagreeable remark, and then hesitated, making an inarticulate sound in his throat. Like everybody else, he was afraid of the labor captain.

"Crew's ashore, too," said Gregory, glancing at the empty deck.

"There ain't no crew," muttered Horble.

"Thunder!" cried Gregory. "Do you do it with electricity, or what?"

"Me and Madge runs her," returned Horble.

"Do you mean to say she pulls your damn ropes?" exclaimed Gregory.

"Yes," said Horble. "What's 20 tons between the two of us?"

"And cooks," said Gregory.

"And cooks," said Horble.

"I know she can sail a boat against anybody," said Gregory, wincing at the remark.

Horble spat in the water and said nothing. His fat, broad back said plainer than words: "You're an intruder! Get out!"

"I believe she's aboard this very minute," said Gregory, with a strange smile.

"She's ashore, I tell you," said Horble, sulkily.

"I'll just run below and make sure," said Gregory.

He slipped down the little companion way, looked about the empty cabin and peered into the semi-darkness of the only stateroom.

her old home in Nonotech. Scattered about here and there were other things that brought her memory painfully back to him; that hurt him with their familiarity; that caused him to lift them up and hold them with a sort of despairing wonder: her guitar, her worn, lock-fast desk, the old gilt photograph album he remembered so well. He sat down at the table and buried his face in his hands. What a fool he had been! What a fool he had been!

He was roused by the sound of Horble's footsteps down the ladder. With his head leaning on his hand, he looked at the big naked feet feeling for the steps, then at the uncouth clothes as they gradually appeared, then at the fat, weak, frightened face of the man himself. He grew sick at the sight of him. Would Horble strike him? Would Horble have the grit to order him off the ship? No; the infernal coward was getting out the gin—a bottle of square-face and two glasses.

"Say when," said Horble.

"When," said Gregory.

Horble tipped the bottle into his own glass. A second mate's grog!

One could see what the fellow drank.

"Here's luck," said Gregory.

"Drink hearty," said Horble.

"Joe Horble," said Gregory, lean-

ing both elbows on the table, "there's something you ought to know; I love Madge, and Madge loves me!"

Horble gasped.

"She's mine!" said Gregory.

Horble helped himself to more gin, and then slowly wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"You're forgetting she's my wife," he said.

"I'll give you a thousand pounds for her, cash and bills," said Gregory.

"You can't sell white women," said Horble. "She ain't labor."

"A thousand pounds!" repeated Gregory.

"I won't sell my wife to no man," said Horble.

The pair looked at each other. Horble's hand felt for the gin again. His speech had grown a little thick. He was angry and flustered, and a dull resentment was mantling his heavy face.

"I'll go the schooner," cried Gregory. "The Northern Light, as she lies there this minute, not a dollar owing on her bottom, with £200 of specie in her safe. Lock, stock and barrel, she's yours!"

Horble shook his head.

"Madge ain't for sale," he said.

"Please yourself," said Gregory.

"You'll end by losing her for nothing."

"Capt. Cole," said Horble, "Madge has told me how near it was a go between you and her, and how, if you hadn't cleared out so sudden the way you did, she would have married you in spite of old Blanchard. But when you went away like that you left her field clear, and you mustn't bear me no malice for having stepped in and taken your leave. What's done's done, and it's a sorry game to come back too late and insult a man who never did you no harm."

"Oh!" said Gregory.

"If you choose," continued Horble in his tone of wounded reasonableness, "you can make a power of mischief between me and Madge. I don't think it comes very well from you to do it; I don't think anything that calls himself a man would do it; least of all a gentleman like yourself, whom we all respect and look up to. Capt. Cole, if you've lost Madge, you know you can only blame yourself."

"I don't call her lost," said Gregory.

"Capt. Cole," said Horble, calmly, but with a quiver of his lip, "we'll take another drink, and then we'll say good-by."

"I'm not going till I see Madge," said Gregory.

"It's for Madge to decide," added Gregory.

"Decide what?" demanded Horble in a husky stammer.

"Between you and me, old fellow," said Gregory.

"And you've the gall to say that on my ship, at my table, about my wife!" exclaimed Horble, punctuating the sentence with the possessive.

"Yes," said Gregory.

Horble sat awhile silent. He was obviously turning the matter over in his head. He said at last he would go on deck and take another look to windward.

"There's a power of dirt to windward!" he said.

Gregory was conscious of a heaving pin being whipped out of sight, and in an instant he was roused and tense, his nostrils vibrating with a sense of danger. The two men stared at each other, and then Horble backed into the stateroom, remarking with furtive insincerity: "There's a power of dirt to windward!" This said, the door shut behind him. Gregory sprang to his feet and burst it open with his powerful shoulders, crushing Horble against the bunk, his pistol in hand, fired at him point blank. The bullet went wide, and there was a sound of shattering glass. Gregory's hands clenched themselves on Horble's, and the revolver twisted this way and that under the double grasp. Horble was panting like a steam engine; his lower jaw hung open, and he cried as he fought, the tears streaking his red face; there was an agonized light in his eyes, for his forefinger was breaking in the trigger guard. A hair's breadth more and he could have

murdered for herself. No, the risk of that appalled him. Besides, whatever happened, he had another reason for keeping the truth from Madge. The fact of Horble's death, even if she thought it accidental, would shock her to the core. It was inconceivable that she would feel anything but horror-stricken, whether she judged her former lover innocent or not. She might even undergo a terrible remorse. At such a moment how little likely she would be to give way to him! Of course she would refuse. Any woman would refuse. Every restraining influence would be massed against him. No, his only hope lay in getting her aboard his schooner and out of the lagoon before the least suspicion could dawn upon her. Once away, and it might be two years before she might even hear of Horble's death. Once away, and the empty seas would keep his secret. Once away—

He studied the weather with a new and consuming anxiety. How could he manage to get out at all, or pick a course through the middle channel! It was thick with coral reefs, and in a day so overcast the keenest eye aloft would be at fault. And outside, what then? Already it was working up a hurricane. To run before it would be courting death.

But to stake Madge's life! Madge, whom he loved so dearly! Madge, for whom he would have died! And yet there was something sublime in the thought of taking her in his arms and driving before the gale, the storm sails treble reefed on the bending yards, the decks awash from end to end, Madge beside him, the pitchy night in front, the engulfing seas behind; to swim or sink, to ride or smother, accepting their fate together, and, if need be, drowning at the last in each other's arms.

He looked toward the settlement and saw a crowd of natives pushing a whaleboat into the water; looked

For a moment they stared at each other speechless. Then he leaped on the house and ran to her, she springing back from him as he tried to take her hands.

"You must not!" she cried, as he would have kissed her. "Greg, you must not! I'm married. It's all different now."

He tried to put his arms around her, but she pushed him fiercely back. Her eyes were flashing and her bosom rose and fell.

"I'm Joe's wife," she said.

Then, from his face, she seemed to divine something.

"What have you done to Joe?" she cried. She would have passed him, but he stopped her.

"No, no!" he protested.

"Let me go, or I shall call him," she broke out. "You shan't insult me! You shan't kiss me!"

He was kissing her even as he held her back, even as she fought and struggled with him—on the lips, on the neck, on her black, loosened hair, now tangling and flying in the wind. He was so weak that she soon got the better of him—so weak and dizzy that he did not guard himself as she struck him on the mouth with her little doubled-up fist.

He put his hand to his lip and found it bleeding. He showed her what she had done. She drew back, and regarded him with mingled pity and exultation.

"Now will you let me go?" she cried.

"Madge," he returned, "Joe's drunk in his berth. I made him drunk, Madge. I had to talk to you, alone, and there was no other way."

She was stung to the quick. Her husband's shame was hers, and it was somehow plain that Horble had been at fault before. She never thought to doubt Greg's word, though his callousness revolted her.

"What is it you want to say?" she said at last in an altered voice.

"To ask you to forgive me."

"For what? For taking advantage of Joe's one falling?"

"No; for leaving you the way I did."

"I'll never do that, Greg—never, never, never!"

"Your father—"

"Don't try to blame my father, Greg."

"I blame only myself."

"Why have you come back to torture me?" she exclaimed. "You said it was forever. You cast me off, when I cried and tried to keep you. You said I'd never see you again."

"I was a fool, Madge."

"Then accept the consequences, and leave me alone."

"And if I can't—"

She looked him squarely in the eyes. "I am Joe's wife," she said.

"Madge," he said, "I am not trying to defend myself. I'm throwing myself on your mercy. I'm begging you, on my knees, for what I threw away. I—"

"You've broken my heart," she said. "Why should I mind if you break yours?"

"Madge," he cried, "in ten minutes we can be aboard the Northern Light and under weigh; in an hour we can be outside the reef; in two, and this cursed island will sink forever behind us, and no one here will ever see us again or know whether we have gone. Let us follow the gale, and push into new seas, among new people—Tahiti, Marquesas, the Pearl Islands—where we shall win back our lost happiness, and find our love only the stronger for what we've suffered."

She pointed to the windward sky. "I think I know the port we'd make."

"Then make it," he cried, "and go down to it in each other's arms."

For a moment she looked at him in a sort of exaltation. She seemed to hesitate no longer. Her hot hands reached for his, and he felt in her quick and tumultuous breath the first token of her surrender. Herself a child of the sea, brought up from infancy among boats and ships, her hand as true on the tiller, her sparkling eyes as keen to watch the luff of a sail as any man's, she knew as well as Gregory the hell that awaited them outside. To accept so terrible an ordeal seemed like a purification of her dishonor. If she died, she would die unstained; if she lived, it would be after such a bridal that would obliterate her tie to the sordid below. Then, on the eve of her giving way, as every line in her body showed her longing, as her head drooped as though to find a resting place on the breast of the man she loved, she suddenly called up all her resolution and tore herself free.

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forestsail. A minute later, hardly knowing why or how, except that he was helping Madge, Gregory, like a man in a dream, was pulling with her on the halyards of both sails. The wind thundered in them as they rose; the main boom jerked violently at the sheet and lashed to and fro the width of the deck; the anchor chain fretted and sawed in the hawse hole.

"Get Into Your Boat."

The whole schooner strained and creaked and shook to the keelson. Gregory, in amazement, asked Madge what she was doing.

"Going to sea, Greg," she said.

"Alone?" he cried. "Alone?"

"Joe and I," she said.

It was on his tongue to tell her Joe was dead; but though he tried, he could not do so. It wasn't in flesh and blood to tell her he had killed her husband. He could only look at her helplessly, and say over and over again, "To sea!"

"Greg," she said, "I mean to leave you while I am brave—while I am yet able to resist—while I can still remember I am Joe's wife!"

"And down," he said.

"What do I care if I do?" she returned. "What do I care for anything?"

"If it's to be one or the other," he said, "I'll go myself. With my big schooner I'd have twice the chance you'd have."

She put her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"You sweet traitor," she said, "you'd play me false!"

He protested vehemently that he would not deceive her.

"Besides," she said, "I could risk myself, but I couldn't bear to risk you, Greg."

He tried a last shot. The words almost strangled in his throat.

"And Joe," he said, "Have you no thought of Joe?"

"Joe loves me," she said—"loves me a thousand times better than you ever did. Joe's man enough to chance death rather than lose his wife."

"But I won't let you go!" said Gregory.

"You can't stop me," she returned.

He caught her round the body and tried to hold her, but she fought herself free. His strength was gone; he was as feeble as a child; in the course of those short hours something seemed to have snapped within him. Even Madge was startled at his weakness.

"Greg, you're ill!" she cried, as he staggered and caught at a backstay to save himself from falling. He sat down on the house and tried to keep back a sob. Madge stooped and looked anxiously into his face. She had known him for two years as a man of unusual sternness and self-control; obstinate, reserved, willful and moody, yet one that gave always the impression of unflinching courage and resolution. It was inexplicable now to see him crying like a woman, his square shoulders bent and heaving, his sinewy hands opening and shutting convulsively.

"You're ill," she repeated. "I'll go down and fetch you something."

This pulled him together. "I'm all right, Madge," he said, faintly. "I suppose it's just a touch of the old fever. See, it's passing already."

She watched him in silence. Then she stepped forward, dropped down the fore-castle hatchway, and reappeared with an ax. While he was wondering what she meant to do, she raised it in the air and crashed it down on the groaning anchor chain. It parted at the first blow, and the Edelweiss, now adrift, blundered broadside on to leeward.

Madge ran aft, brought the schooner up in the wind, and cried out to Gregory to get into his boat.

He said sulkily he wouldn't do anything of the kind.

She lashed the wheel and came up to him.

"I mean it, Greg," she said.

"You are going to your death, Madge," he said.

"Get into your boat!" she repeated.

He rose, and slowly began to obey.

"You may kiss me good-by, Greg," she said.

She put up her face to his; their lips met. Then, with her arm around him, she half forced, half supported him to the port quarter, where his boat was sloping against the side. He wanted to resist; he wanted to cry out and tell her the truth, but a strange, headless powerlessness benumbed him. He got into the dinghy, drew in the dripping painter she cast after him, and watched her ease the sheet and set the vessel scudding for the passage. With her black hair flying in the wind, her bare arms resting lightly on the wheel, her straight, girlish, supple figure bending with the heel of the deck, she never faltered nor looked back as the water whitened and boiled in the schooner's wake.

Gregory came to himself in his own cabin. Cracroft, the mate, was bending over him with a bottle of whiskey. The Malita steward was chafing his naked feet. Overhead the rush and roar of the gale broke pitilessly on his ears.

"The Edelweiss!" he gasped; "the Edelweiss!"

"Went down an hour ago, sir," said Cracroft, grimly.

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