

# The Strumpet Sea

By BEN AMES WILLIAMS

## SYNOPSIS

George McAusland was 38 years old when he sailed from America to undertake his post as a missionary in the Fiji Islands. A crime he had committed in a fit of excitement had shattered all his confidence in himself. He felt forced to avoid pretty Mary Doncaster, who boarded the ship at Honolulu. She was en route to visit her parents, who were missionaries on Gilead Island. Mary was attracted by George's attempts to avoid her. One day George accidentally fell overboard. Mary unhesitatingly dove into the sea to rescue George, who falls in love with her. When the boat approached her home on Gilead Island, they learned that Mary's parents had both died. George volunteered to take charge of the mission and asked Mary to be his wife. She accepted his clumsy proposal, and they left the ship to live in her former home on the island. The scanty dress of the natives shocked George at first, but he soon became reconciled to their customs. Mary discovered that Corkran, a sailor friend of George's, had come there to help George and Mary if they needed him. Their peaceful life was interrupted one day when a ship stopped in the harbor in search of pearls. They saw the steaming divers tacked and their schooner sunk by a pirate ship. The pirates held their boat toward the bay near their village. George sends Mary inland for safety and walks down to the beach alone and defenseless. Natives carry him back to Mary's house later, shot through the shoulder. Natives killed the pirates that night and set their boat afloat. The long-awaited whaler, the Venturer, arrived. Mary told that his captain had died, and that his son, Richard and Peter Corr, were now in charge as captain and first mate. She liked Richard, but was told by Peter that he publicly laughed at her affection. George was a sick man when the Venturer arrived. George agreed to leave the island when he saw that the epidemic among the natives was caused by his consumptive condition. A native gave Mary a small bag of pearls as a farewell present. The attitude of the crew toward Peter bothered Mary, so she decided to find out if he was really responsible for the death of a seaman who had been killed while whaling.

## CHAPTER X—Continued

Richard said grimly: "I've noticed a lot of trouble made, more than once, by trying to be responsible for other people's business."

"Do you seriously mean to bribe your men to obedience by turning them loose like wolves on these helpless girls?" George's eyes were hot. "Playing on their weaknesses, just as you played on my weakness at Gilead, told me I was killing the islanders in order to make me come away."

Richard said after a moment quietly: "Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I'd best have let you stay." He hesitated, said at last curtly: "Mr. McAusland, do as you like; but I'll have to run the ship my way."

He turned away. Peter had joined them in time to hear the last word. "Dick takes his job too hard. He's all blown up with it!"

Mary ignored him, urged: "Perhaps Richard's right, George. And even if he isn't, he must do as he thinks wisest. Come down to the cabin with me."

But George declined to do so. "I'll not shut my eyes," he said. "I'm not a coward."

So they stayed on deck that day while the work of provisioning the ship went forward.

They could not be ready to depart that afternoon; and the boats stayed ashore well into the night. Next morning they made to sea.

Mary hoped that once they were away George would forget his anger at Richard; but he did not, and for days after they left the island, the few minutes they all spent together at the table were made awkward by her husband's wrathful silence, and by Richard's defensive dignity.

The stop for provisions had altered not only the humor of the crew but the very appearance of the Venturer. They had taken on tremendous quantities of fresh fruits. A huge cask lashed to the port rail was full of green coconuts. Bunches of bananas hung under the boat house and wherever else room could be found. The potato room where Tommy Hanline slept was so full of yams and plantains and breadfruit that Tommy had to crawl over them to reach his bunk.

Another change took place in the routine aboard after they left the island. George remembered his calling, and with the air of one expecting a refusal, asked Richard's permission to hold a Sunday morning service on deck. Richard consented, and the thing was done. Mary suspected that Corkran was responsible for the quiet and respectful demeanor of the men when they assembled; but when George began to speak, he held them. George, facing an audience, had a spiritual authority and dignity that were fine to see. She realized, while she listened, that her attitude toward her husband had always been protective; her tenderness a little condescending.

She told him afterward how proud she was, and Richard also spoke to George gratefully and appreciatively. She hoped the constraint between them would be forgotten. But George did not relent at all; and matters were still thus tight and strained in the cabin, on the day when at last they sighted a whale.

A water may kill and save in the course of a voyage two or three dozen whales; and she may kill others and lose them by sinking or in a sudden gale. Most of her captures are routine; but now and then a whale makes trouble. What happened to the Venturer today was one of those extraordinary and isolated phenomena which become legends; and it would take its place in whaling lore.

One of the sailors aloft, a New Bedford man named Gibbons, called down to the after deck:

"Sperm whale on the port quarter, sir, about two miles off."

There was at that a quick and instant stir upon the Venturer. Mat Forbes at a word from Richard ran halfway up the mizzen ratlines and shouted to the men aloft to make haste with the topgallant sails. Richard came to the port rail to look off across the leaden sea. Mat Forbes spoke quietly to Richard on the deck below him.

"Sharks at him, Cap'n Corr." Richard nodded.

"All right. Clear boats and stand by to lower."

Feet moved along the deck to obey. Mat Forbes, descending to the deck, said quietly:

"Whale's moving this way, sir."

Richard looked at the weather to the westward.

He watched the work, watching the Venturer come to and fall off lazily.

The whale drew nearer; and even from the decks they could see now his efforts to beat off his attackers. He surged to and fro, flukes now and then rising ponderously; and as the fight came steadily nearer them, they could hear the thrash of the flukes, the sigh of the spout, the broken water when he drove this way and that. Peter, standing with George and Mary although his men were ready by his boat yonder, moved restlessly.

"There's something wrong with him," he muttered, "or he'd have driven them off by now. Might be he's hurt or sick or something. Maybe he's got an iron in him." He licked his lips in a nervous tremor.

Richard said just behind them: "Weather coming, Peter; but we'll

try for him anyway. Ready to lower?" The Venturer, counter-braced, still made a little way. He called to Mat: "Back the cro-jack yard, Mr. Forbes."

The men leaped at Mat's command.

"Dick, he's a crooked jaw," Peter exclaimed. "He's ugly. He'll be a fighter; and if he busts a boat, the water's full of sharks."

His voice cracked as he spoke, and Richard looked at him briefly. "Mr. Forbes and I will lower," he decided then. "You keep ship, Peter."

Peter cried sharply: "He'll bump us, the way he's headed!"

The Venturer was almost motionless, the whale now close aboard. Mary had been watching Peter, sick and ashamed at what she saw; but at his word she turned to look and saw the whale, close now, rolling blindly on its back to bite; and she saw the thrashing body of a great shark caught in its jaws and cut in two. She cried out in awe and terror at the sight.

CHAPTER XI

The whale righted itself and came quartering toward their bow in a sudden rush. Richard leaped forward into the waist as though with his own hands to fend the creature off; and an instant later it shouldered against the Venturer's side. Mary, looking down, saw the great black bulk in the water, and the slender gray shapes of the sharks in attendance. George clung hard beside her, and Peter gasped:

"Godfrey, Dick! He'll sink us!"

Richard ran aft toward where his boat hung. The whale drew off, circling slowly, lifting his head as though in an effort to locate the ship for a new attack. Richard called briskly:

"Lower away, Mr. Forbes! Peter, get the Brand gun. Sock a bomb into him if he comes near the ship again."

His boat struck the water with a smooth precision. The boats were carried to port, Richard's farthest aft, Mat's forward.

Mary felt young Tommy Hanline hanging to her arm, his small hands tight as a tourniquet. Mat's boat hit the water; but Richard had already darted away from the Venturer's side, the long oars bending as the men put into them every ounce of strength. Mary thought for a moment the boat would meet the whale head on; and she heard a voice scream a warning, and knew it was her own.

Then she saw Richard swing the steering oar in a great sweep, and the whaleboat swerved on a pivot to let the whale slide by; and instantly it darted in again till she thought the bow would ride up on that huge body just awash. Richard's great voice was like a trumpet.

"Sock 'im, Pip!"

She saw Big Pip, knee braced in the clumsy cleat, the heavy harpoon poised, drive it in and down; and instantly, before the boat veered off again, he sank the second iron. Big Pip swept the loose coils of the box warp overboard. He and Richard changed places, scrambling over the oarsmen, who bent low over the thwarts to let them pass. By the time Richard was in the bow and Big Pip at the steering oar, the whale saw the boat riding there, and lunged toward them; and the men swung hard on the oars, and Big Pip dodged out of the whale's path and in again. Mary saw Richard drive home the lance, deep into that black side.

Mary saw only a smother of confusion, action too swift to follow; but the men on the Venturer and in Mat Forbes' boat, watching more wisely, knowing without seeing what went on in that fury of torn water, saw that Richard was as wild with the heat of battle now as was the whale.

For after a desperate minute or two of this in-and-out fighting, he closed with his antagonist. Under his strong commands, the men hauled in on the line till the boat was close against the whale's side. Richard reached far over the bow to grip the line and draw the boat further forward along the whale's body, and while close alongside, Richard drove the lance deep and deep again, searching for that huge reservoir in which the whale stores fresh blood for his long stays under water and which whalemens call the "life."

The whale could not bite them, nor could its flukes strike the boat. But if it rolled toward them, they must be crushed under its body and left helpless in the water. Big Pip bawled:

"Ware roll, Cap'n!"

Richard, braced and firm, as much a part of the boat as though he were nailed to it, drove his lance again. Tommy screamed:

"There he rolls!"

But the whale rolled away from the boat, not toward it; and in so doing, its under parts were for a moment exposed.

The whale rolled over and over in a smother away from them; and suddenly its flukes lifted high and then it was gone, and the tossed water began to quiet where it had disappeared.

"Sounded!" Tommy cried.

Mary could see the line now snaking out over the bow of the whaleboat, the bow sagging downward and then rising with a jerk as Joe Sannet kept a strain on the line around the loggerhead, yielding only when he must. Richard in the bow was leaping forward to look straight down into the water, lance in hand.

The bow of Richard's boat rose suddenly as the strain upon the line was eased. "Haul hard!" Big Pip shouted. Sannet took line over hand. Richard spoke over his shoulder, not turning his head, watching the water under them.

"Ready oars!" he said crisply. Then men poised. Suddenly he cried: "Starn all! Haul astern!"

The oars bent like bows; the boat darted backward like a squid. Then for a moment from where Mary stood on the Venturer's deck, boat and men were alike blotted out of sight, hidden behind a vast black column with a blunt end which rose ponderously out of the water, the white mouth gleaming, the bent jaw opening and closing in a vicious futility.

That black mass that was the whale's head rose and rose, slow and slower till it was above the level of the Venturer's decks, till Mary thought it would never stop ascending. It seemed to poise and hang for a moment, and then ponderously toppled forward, parting the water like a plow; and she saw the boat safe, secure, beyond the flukes.

Then the whale spouted, and its spout now was a thick crimson cloud; and Mary saw Richard strike a sharp blow at the line with a hatchet, saw its free end disappear.

She cried, sick with sudden disappointment: "Oh, he's let it go!"

"It's dying!" Tommy Hanline told her, proud of Richard. "He always cuts before the flurry unless there's another boat that might get fast. He don't take chances when there's no need of it."

The spout was a fountain of blood as the whale again began to move, but there was no long flurry. Too much of the creature's strength was already spent. It surged a little forward, lay still, seemed to turn half on its side, laboriously righted itself.

"Fin out!" said Tommy Hanline, and he looked up at Mary with shining eyes.

She tried to speak and found her throat dry and constricted. She whispered: "Is it dead? Did Richard kill it?"

George, at her tone, looked at her quickly; but Tommy said in high pride: "Yes! That was pretty wonderful, wasn't it?"

"Yes," she said, not seeing her husband's eyes.

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The whale could not bite them, nor could its flukes strike the boat. But if it rolled toward them, they must be crushed under its body and left helpless in the water. Big Pip bawled:

"Ware roll, Cap'n!"

Richard, braced and firm, as much a part of the boat as though he were nailed to it, drove his lance again. Tommy screamed:

"There he rolls!"

But the whale rolled away from the boat, not toward it; and in so doing, its under parts were for a moment exposed.

The whale rolled over and over in a smother away from them; and suddenly its flukes lifted high and then it was gone, and the tossed water began to quiet where it had disappeared.

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The bow of Richard's boat rose suddenly as the strain upon the line was eased. "Haul hard!" Big Pip shouted. Sannet took line over hand. Richard spoke over his shoulder, not turning his head, watching the water under them.

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"Ware roll, Cap'n!"

Richard, braced and firm, as much a part of the boat as though he were nailed to it, drove his lance again. Tommy screamed:

"There he rolls!"

But the whale rolled away from the boat, not toward it; and in so doing, its under parts were for a moment exposed.

The whale rolled over and over in a smother away from them; and suddenly its flukes lifted high and then it was gone, and the tossed water began to quiet where it had disappeared.

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Richard, braced and firm, as much a part of the boat as though he were nailed to it, drove his lance again. Tommy screamed:

"There he rolls!"

But the whale rolled away from the boat, not toward it; and in so doing, its under parts were for a moment exposed.

The whale rolled over and over in a smother away from them; and suddenly its flukes lifted high and then it was gone, and the tossed water began to quiet where it had disappeared.

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She saw Big Pip, knee braced in the clumsy cleat, the heavy harpoon poised, drive it in and down; and instantly, before the boat veered off again, he sank the second iron. Big Pip swept the loose coils of the box warp overboard. He and Richard changed places, scrambling over the oarsmen, who bent low over the thwarts to let them pass. By the time Richard was in the bow and Big Pip at the steering oar, the whale saw the boat riding there, and lunged toward them; and the men swung hard on the oars, and Big Pip dodged out of the whale's path and in again. Mary saw Richard drive home the lance, deep into that black side.

Mary saw only a smother of confusion, action too swift to follow; but the men on the Venturer and in Mat Forbes' boat, watching more wisely, knowing without seeing what went on in that fury of torn water, saw that Richard was as wild with the heat of battle now as was the whale.

For after a desperate minute or two of this in-and-out fighting, he closed with his antagonist. Under his strong commands, the men hauled in on the line till the boat was close against the whale's side. Richard reached far over the bow to grip the line and draw the boat further forward along the whale's body, and while close alongside, Richard drove the lance deep and deep again, searching for that huge reservoir in which the whale stores fresh blood for his long stays under water and which whalemens call the "life."

The whale could not bite them, nor could its flukes strike the boat. But if it rolled toward them, they must be crushed under its body and left helpless in the water. Big Pip bawled:

"Ware roll, Cap'n!"

Richard, braced and firm, as much a part of the boat as though he were nailed to it, drove his lance again. Tommy screamed:

"There he rolls!"

But the whale rolled away from the boat, not toward it; and in so doing, its under parts were for a moment exposed.

The whale rolled over and over in a smother away from them; and suddenly its flukes lifted high and then it was gone, and the tossed water began to quiet where it had disappeared.

"Sounded!" Tommy cried.

Mary could see the line now snaking out over the bow of the whaleboat, the bow sagging downward and then rising with a jerk as Joe Sannet kept a strain on the line around the loggerhead, yielding only when he must. Richard in the bow was leaping forward to look straight down into the water, lance in hand.

The bow of Richard's boat rose suddenly as the strain upon the line was eased. "Haul hard!" Big Pip shouted. Sannet took line over hand. Richard spoke over his shoulder, not turning his head, watching the water under them.

"Ready oars!" he said crisply. Then men poised. Suddenly he cried: "Starn all! Haul astern!"

The oars bent like bows; the boat darted backward like a squid. Then for a moment from where Mary stood on the Venturer's deck, boat and men were alike blotted out of sight, hidden behind a vast black column with a blunt end which rose ponderously out of the water, the white mouth gleaming, the bent jaw opening and closing in a vicious futility.

That black mass that was the whale's head rose and rose, slow and slower till it was above the level of the Venturer's decks, till Mary thought it would never stop ascending. It seemed to poise and hang for a moment, and then ponderously toppled forward, parting the water like a plow; and she saw the boat safe, secure, beyond the flukes.

Then the whale spouted, and its spout now was a thick crimson cloud; and Mary saw Richard strike a sharp blow at the line with a hatchet, saw its free end disappear.

She cried, sick with sudden disappointment: "Oh, he's let it go!"

"It's dying!" Tommy Hanline told her, proud of Richard. "He always cuts before the flurry unless there's another boat that might get fast. He don't take chances when there's no need of it."

The spout was a fountain of blood as the whale again began to move, but there was no long flurry. Too much of the creature's strength was already spent. It surged a little forward, lay still, seemed to turn half on its side, laboriously righted itself.

"Fin out!" said Tommy Hanline, and he looked up at Mary with shining eyes.

She tried to speak and found her throat dry and constricted. She whispered: "Is it dead? Did Richard kill it?"

George, at her tone, looked at her quickly; but Tommy said in high pride: "Yes! That was pretty wonderful, wasn't it?"

"Yes," she said, not seeing her husband's eyes.

Then she saw Richard swing the steering oar in a great sweep, and the whaleboat swerved on a pivot to let the whale slide by; and instantly it darted in again till she thought the bow would ride up on that huge body just awash. Richard's great voice was like a trumpet.

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Mary saw only a smother of confusion, action too swift to follow; but the men on the Venturer and in Mat Forbes' boat, watching more wisely, knowing without seeing what went on in that fury of torn water, saw that Richard was as wild with the heat of battle now as was the whale.

For after a desperate minute or two of this in-and-out fighting, he closed with his antagonist. Under his strong commands, the men hauled in on the line till the boat was close against the whale's side. Richard reached far over the bow to grip the line and draw the boat further forward along the whale's body, and while close alongside, Richard drove the lance deep and deep again, searching for that huge reservoir in which the whale stores fresh blood for his long stays under water and which whalemens call the "life."

The whale could not bite them, nor could its flukes strike the boat. But if it rolled toward them, they must be crushed under its body and left helpless in the water. Big Pip bawled:

"Ware roll, Cap'n!"

Richard, braced and firm, as much a part of the boat as though he were nailed to it, drove his lance again. Tommy screamed:

"There he rolls!"

But the whale rolled away from the boat, not toward it; and in so doing, its under parts were for a moment exposed.

The whale rolled over and over in a smother away from them; and suddenly its flukes lifted high and then it was gone, and the tossed water began to quiet where it had disappeared.

"Sounded!" Tommy cried.

Mary could see the line now snaking out over the bow of the whaleboat, the bow sagging downward and then rising with a jerk as Joe Sannet kept a strain on the line around the loggerhead, yielding only when he must. Richard in the bow was leaping forward to look straight down into the water, lance in hand.

The bow of Richard's boat rose suddenly as the strain upon the line was eased. "Haul hard!" Big Pip shouted. Sannet took line over hand. Richard spoke over his shoulder, not turning his head, watching the water under them.

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The whale could not bite them, nor could its flukes strike the boat. But if it rolled toward them, they must be crushed under its body and left helpless in the water. Big Pip bawled:

"Ware roll, Cap'n!"

Richard, braced and firm, as much a part of the boat as though he were nailed to it, drove his lance again. Tommy screamed:

"There he rolls!"

But the whale rolled away from the boat, not toward it; and in so doing, its under parts were for a moment exposed.

The whale rolled over and over in a smother away from them; and suddenly its flukes lifted high and then it was gone, and the tossed water began to quiet where it had disappeared.

"Sounded!" Tommy cried.

Mary could see the line now snaking out over the bow of the whaleboat, the bow sagging downward and then rising with a jerk as Joe Sannet kept a strain on the line around the loggerhead, yielding only when he must. Richard in the bow was leaping forward to look straight down into the water, lance in hand.

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