The Worth of a Man

by Derien

Summary

Pencroff tries to determine something about Neb.

Notes

I hadn't finished the book when I wrote this, and now it was so long ago that I don't recall if this contradicted anything in the later part of the book, but I don't think it does. However, this is all based on the fact that Verne saw a need to point out where friendships were developing, and form the friendships between people of similar class. I suspect he wanted everyone to be 'equal,' but in his mind some people were just naturally going to have more in common. And also the following quote:

'Neb was ... the very embodiment of courage, zeal, devotion... He shared Pencroff's absolute faith in [Smith], but he displayed it less ebulliently. To every eruption of the sailor's enthusiasm, Neb always seemed to respond, "Nothing could be more natural." He and Pencroff were great friends, and had quickly come to speak together in the most familiar and amicable terms.' --"The Mysterious Island," Jules Verne

ETA: Sandpiper did me the great honor of translating this work into Russian.
http://archiveofourown.org/works/11098101

The sailor loved to tell tales, and would regale Neb with long and intricate descriptions of tricks he and mates had played on each other, or on the landlubbers in a port, and when he'd told a few he'd try to get a something from Neb in return, but Neb was not much of a talker. Neb wasn't sure it
would be possible to make an amusing story out of his own life, even for someone who was good with spinning a yarn. So, when Pencroff would tease at him he would just look down, with a slight smile, and shake his head.

"Oh, come now, lad! You're the man who walked from Massachusetts to Richmond and entered the Confederate held city under their very noses! A Black man, yet! It must be a good tale - that's heroics, that is. You tweaked their tails! You must have had some close shaves?"

Neb shrugged a shoulder diffidently and began rolling the flayed fish in salt. "Some." He was salting the catch from nets which Pencroff was now mending. The other three - Smith, the engineer, Spillett, the reporter, and the boy, Harbert - had gone off to look at the lay of the land with an eye to Smith's next project.

"These are things you'll have to tell your grandchildren," said Pencroff, shaking out the net and shifting it to find the next loose ends, "So they'll know what a hero they have in their family. And you can brush up the tale and get it ready for them by telling it to me. How did you do it, lad?"

"Walked at night, through the woods. Kept my head down and prayed they wouldn't see me."

"Did you try dressing as a woman? That's a classic gambit."

"The Confederate soldiers wouldn't treat a Black woman any better than a man," said Neb. "Sometimes worse."


Neb moved the fillets to the smoking rack and began to fillet the next few fish, and said nothing.

"I passed off the dressing as a woman gambit, once. O' course I was much younger, then. Yep, hard to believe, isn't it? I was young, once, and a not uncomely lad. I was a great hit in women's clothes. It was for the tweaking of our First Mate, and a man with less sense of humor I've never seen. I received a few lashes for that one. How was I to know it was such a serious thing to be caught in women's clothes? I was just a boy. Still, he was royally tweaked, the great lubber. It was worth it," he said, grinning. "The rest of the crew never needed me to be in women's clothes. Ah, but I was the youngest aboard, and every lad takes his turn being the youngest and having the attentions of all the crew."

Neb glanced up at Pencroff, quickly, and then back down at the fish he was filleting. He suspected he knew what Pencroff was saying, but didn't want to jump to conclusions or show undue interest if the sailor wasn't saying what Neb thought he was. But Pencroff met his eye when he glanced up, and when he glanced away the sailor busied himself with his net, again. A silence fell between them, for a while, and Neb focused himself on the repetitive process of rolling fish in salt and spreading them out on the smoking rack.

It was not too long before Pencroff had to break the silence - he was not a man who could be silent forever. He shook out the net to look for more holes, didn't find any, dropped it back to his lap, looked to Neb, and let out a sigh.

"Yes, you're right, my friend. I'm talking about things which are illegal. Every lad who signs up aboard a ship is let to know those things are illegal, so that he knows he has legal recourse if he's badly treated. Yet, still... The months are long, at sea, and men sometimes have urges, even sailors. If there's no willing lad about, well, mates will help each other. It's true that it's said to be against the laws of God and man, but I can't see the harm in it when everyone involved is happy with the situation. And there you have it, lad. If you're disgusted by that, well, so be it, but I thought it best that I be honest with you, as I think of you as a friend."
After this lengthy discourse he looked to his net again, beginning the arcane process which was not quite rolling or folding, yet somehow kept the net from tangling.

Neb had stopped moving at some point while Pencroff spoke, looking down at the fish in the salt, and his own hands, so dark under the white salt that they looked truly black. As the sailor finished his rolling and turned to hang it on the pegs which they had placed high along the wall of the cavern, Neb finally gathered his voice to speak.

"Pencroff."

The sailor halted his movements, his arms stretched up and face to the wall.

"You are a good man," said Neb, "and a good friend. I'm glad that you call me friend."

Pencroff looked back over his shoulder and smiled. "Thank you." He continued his motion to hang the net, and when it was hung he moved back over to stand near Neb, cocking his head to one side and looking into his friend's face.

"There is one thing I wonder. Cyrus Smith made you a free man, and yet you followed him into the Confederate-held territory in order to continue serving him. That was heroic, and obviously inspired by great love. Now, if I overstep my bounds as a friend you're welcome to tell me to shut my chowder hole. Well. Did you attain the goal you had hoped for?"

Neb hung the last fish on the rack while he chose his words.

"I got all I could hope for."

Pencroff weighed this answer before he nodded.

"And Spillett had taken your place?"

Neb brushed the salt off his hands.

"I'm sure Mr. Spillett has a place I never could have had."

"Aye," Pencroff nodded. "Aye, that's the way it is with men like us and men like them. But I tell you, lad - " and now he touched Neb's arm, briefly, with his fingertips, only a light touch, and quickly gone, but it brought Neb's eyes to his as though riveted - "Well," his said, voice suddenly gone gruff, "I just want to say that you have every quality that a man should have. I think you second to none. Although I'll agree with you that Smith is a great man, and able to do anything, in this one point I think he is a fool. There, now." He cleared his throat. "I've said my piece, and I'll stand by it."

He dropped his eyes and made as if he would move away, but Neb seized his hand firmly, regardless of the sticky mess of salt and fish juices still on his own.

"Thank you, Pencroff."

The barking of Top, the dog, could be heard, outside, heralding the return of the others, so Pencroff merely smiled at him, and gripped Neb's shoulder warmly, but briefly, and then they went to wash their hands of the sticky salt.

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