

Chapter XXVII.

Heralded by the increasing fierceness of the squalls, sometimes by a faint flash of lightning like the signal of a lighted torch waved far away behind the clouds, the shift of wind comes at last, the crucial moment of the change from the brooding and veiled violence of the south-west gale to the sparkling, flashing, cutting, clear-eyed anger of the King's north-westerly mood. You behold another phase of his passion, a fury bejewelled with stars, mayhap bearing the crescent of the moon on its brow, shaking the last vestiges of its torn cloud-mantle in inky-black squalls, with hail and sleet descending like showers of crystals and pearls, bounding off the spars, drumming on the sails, pattering on the oilskin coats, whitening the decks of homeward-bound ships. Faint, ruddy flashes of lightning flicker in the starlight upon her mastheads. A chilly blast hums in the taut rigging, causing the ship to tremble to her very keel, and the soaked men on her decks to shiver in their wet clothes to the very marrow of their bones. Before one squall has flown over to sink in the eastern board, the edge of another peeps up already above the western horizon, racing up swift, shapeless, like a black bag full of frozen water ready to burst over your devoted head. The temper of the ruler of the ocean has changed. Each gust of the clouded mood that seemed warmed by the heat of a heart flaming with anger has its counterpart in the chilly blasts that seem blown from a breast turned to ice with a sudden revulsion of feeling. Instead of blinding your eyes and crushing your soul with a terrible apparatus of cloud and mists and seas and rain, the King of the West turns his power to contemptuous pelting of your back with icicles, to making your weary eyes water as if in grief, and your worn-out carcass quake pitifully. But each mood of the great autocrat has its own greatness, and each is hard to bear. Only the north-west phase of that mighty display is not demoralizing to the same extent, because between the hail and sleet squalls of a north-westerly gale one can see a long way ahead.

To see! to see!--this is the craving of the sailor, as of the rest of blind humanity. To have his path made clear for him is the aspiration of every human being in our beclouded and tempestuous existence. I have heard a reserved, silent man, with no nerves to speak of, after three days of hard running in thick south-westerly weather, burst out passionately: "I wish to God we could get sight of something!"

We had just gone down below for a moment to commune in a battened-down cabin, with a large white chart lying limp and damp upon a cold and clammy table under the light of a smoky lamp. Sprawling over that seaman's silent and trusted adviser, with one elbow upon the coast of Africa and the other planted in

the neighbourhood of Cape Hatteras (it was a general track-chart of the North Atlantic), my skipper lifted his rugged, hairy face, and glared at me in a half-exasperated, half-appealing way. We have seen no sun, moon, or stars for something like seven days. By the effect of the West Wind's wrath the celestial bodies had gone into hiding for a week or more, and the last three days had seen the force of a south-west gale grow from fresh, through strong, to heavy, as the entries in my log-book could testify. Then we separated, he to go on deck again, in obedience to that mysterious call that seems to sound for ever in a shipmaster's ears, I to stagger into my cabin with some vague notion of putting down the words "Very heavy weather" in a log-book not quite written up-to-date. But I gave it up, and crawled into my bunk instead, boots and hat on, all standing (it did not matter; everything was soaking wet, a heavy sea having burst the poop skylights the night before), to remain in a nightmarish state between waking and sleeping for a couple of hours of so-called rest.

The south-westerly mood of the West Wind is an enemy of sleep, and even of a recumbent position, in the responsible officers of a ship. After two hours of futile, light-headed, inconsequent thinking upon all things under heaven in that dark, dank, wet and devastated cabin, I arose suddenly and staggered up on deck. The autocrat of the North Atlantic was still oppressing his kingdom and its outlying dependencies, even as far as the Bay of Biscay, in the dismal secrecy of thick, very thick, weather. The force of the wind, though we were running before it at the rate of some ten knots an hour, was so great that it drove me with a steady push to the front of the poop, where my commander was holding on.

"What do you think of it?" he addressed me in an interrogative yell.

What I really thought was that we both had had just about enough of it. The manner in which the great West Wind chooses at times to administer his possessions does not commend itself to a person of peaceful and law-abiding disposition, inclined to draw distinctions between right and wrong in the face of natural forces, whose standard, naturally, is that of might alone. But, of course, I said nothing. For a man caught, as it were, between his skipper and the great West Wind silence is the safest sort of diplomacy. Moreover, I knew my skipper. He did not want to know what I thought. Shipmasters hanging on a breath before the thrones of the winds ruling the seas have their psychology, whose workings are as important to the ship and those on board of her as the changing moods of the weather. The man, as a matter of fact, under no circumstances, ever cared a brass farthing for what I or anybody else in his ship thought. He had had just about enough of it, I guessed, and what he was at really was a process of fishing for a suggestion. It was the pride of his life that he had never wasted a chance, no matter how boisterous, threatening, and dangerous, of a fair wind. Like men racing blindfold for a gap in a hedge, we were finishing a

splendidly quick passage from the Antipodes, with a tremendous rush for the Channel in as thick a weather as any I can remember, but his psychology did not permit him to bring the ship to with a fair wind blowing--at least not on his own initiative. And yet he felt that very soon indeed something would have to be done. He wanted the suggestion to come from me, so that later on, when the trouble was over, he could argue this point with his own uncompromising spirit, laying the blame upon my shoulders. I must render him the justice that this sort of pride was his only weakness.

But he got no suggestion from me. I understood his psychology. Besides, I had my own stock of weaknesses at the time (it is a different one now), and amongst them was the conceit of being remarkably well up in the psychology of the Westerly weather. I believed--not to mince matters--that I had a genius for reading the mind of the great ruler of high latitudes. I fancied I could discern already the coming of a change in his royal mood. And all I said was:

"The weather's bound to clear up with the shift of wind."

"Anybody knows that much!" he snapped at me, at the highest pitch of his voice.

"I mean before dark!" I cried.

This was all the opening he ever got from me. The eagerness with which he seized upon it gave me the measure of the anxiety he had been labouring under.

"Very well," he shouted, with an affectation of impatience, as if giving way to long entreaties. "All right. If we don't get a shift by then we'll take that foresail off her and put her head under her wing for the night."

I was struck by the picturesque character of the phrase as applied to a ship brought-to in order to ride out a gale with wave after wave passing under her breast. I could see her resting in the tumult of the elements like a sea-bird sleeping in wild weather upon the raging waters with its head tucked under its wing. In imaginative precision, in true feeling, this is one of the most expressive sentences I have ever heard on human lips. But as to taking the foresail off that ship before we put her head under her wing, I had my grave doubts. They were justified. That long enduring piece of canvas was confiscated by the arbitrary decree of the West Wind, to whom belong the lives of men and the contrivances of their hands within the limits of his kingdom. With the sound of a faint explosion it vanished into the thick weather bodily, leaving behind of its stout substance not so much as one solitary strip big enough to be picked into a handful of lint for, say, a wounded elephant. Torn out of its bolt-ropes, it faded like a whiff of smoke in the smoky drift of clouds shattered and torn by the shift of wind. For

the shift of wind had come. The unveiled, low sun glared angrily from a chaotic sky upon a confused and tremendous sea dashing itself upon a coast. We recognised the headland, and looked at each other in the silence of dumb wonder. Without knowing it in the least, we had run up alongside the Isle of Wight, and that tower, tinged a faint evening red in the salt wind-haze, was the lighthouse on St. Catherine's Point.

My skipper recovered first from his astonishment. His bulging eyes sank back gradually into their orbits. His psychology, taking it all round, was really very creditable for an average sailor. He had been spared the humiliation of laying his ship to with a fair wind; and at once that man, of an open and truthful nature, spoke up in perfect good faith, rubbing together his brown, hairy hands-- the hands of a master-craftsman upon the sea:

"Humph! that's just about where I reckoned we had got to."

The transparency and ingenuousness, in a way, of that delusion, the airy tone, the hint of already growing pride, were perfectly delicious. But, in truth, this was one of the greatest surprises ever sprung by the clearing up mood of the West Wind upon one of the most accomplished of his courtiers.