

CHAPTER XII

So sailed the Ship of Fools--Michael playing with Scraps, respecting Cocky and by Cocky being bullied and wheedled, singing with Steward and worshipping him; Daughtry drinking his six quarts of beer each day, collecting his wages the first of each month, and admiring Charles Stough Greenleaf as the finest man on board; Kwaque serving and loving his master and thickening and darkening and creasing his brow with the growing leprous infiltration; Ah Moy avoiding the Black Papuan as the very plague, washing himself continuously and boiling his blankets once a week; Captain Doane doing the navigating and worrying about his flat-building in San Francisco; Grimshaw resting his ham-hands on his colossal knees and girding at the pawnbroker to contribute as much to the adventure as he was contributing from his wheat-ranches; Simon Nishikanta wiping his sweaty neck with the greasy silk handkerchief and painting endless water-colours; the mate patiently stealing the ship's latitude and longitude with his duplicate key; and the Ancient Mariner, solacing himself with Scotch highballs, smoking fragrant three-for-a-dollar Havanas that were charged to the adventure, and for ever maundering about the hell of the longboat, the cross-bearings unnamable, and the treasure a fathom under the sand.

Came a stretch of ocean that to Daughtry was like all other stretches of ocean and unidentifiable from them. No land broke the sea-rim. The ship the centre, the horizon was the invariable and eternal circle of the

world. The magnetic needle in the binnacle was the point on which the Mary Turner ever pivoted. The sun rose in the undoubted east and set in the undoubted west, corrected and proved, of course, by declination, deviation, and variation; and the nightly march of the stars and constellations proceeded across the sky.

And in this stretch of ocean, lookouts were mastheaded at day-dawn and kept mastheaded until twilight of evening, when the Mary Turner was hove-to, to hold her position through the night. As time went by, and the scent, according to the Ancient Mariner, grow hotter, all three of the investors in the adventure came to going aloft. Grimshaw contented himself with standing on the main crosstrees. Captain Doane climbed even higher, seating himself on the stump of the foremast with legs a-straddle of the butt of the fore-topmast. And Simon Nishikanta tore himself away from his everlasting painting of all colour-delicacies of sea and sky such as are painted by seminary maidens, to be helped and hoisted up the ratlines of the mizzen rigging, the huge bulk of him, by two grinning, slim-waisted sailors, until they lashed him squarely on the crosstrees and left him to stare with eyes of golden desire, across the sun-washed sea through the finest pair of unredeemed binoculars that had ever been pledged in his pawnshops.

"Strange," the Ancient Mariner would mutter, "strange, and most strange. This is the very place. There can be no mistake. I'd have trusted that youngster of a third officer anywhere. He was only eighteen, but he could navigate better than the captain. Didn't he fetch the atoll after

eighteen days in the longboat? No standard compasses, and you know what a small-boat horizon is, with a big sea, for a sextant. He died, but the dying course he gave me held good, so that I fetched the atoll the very next day after I hove his body overboard."

Captain Doane would shrug his shoulders and defiantly meet the mistrustful eyes of the Armenian Jew.

"It cannot have sunk, surely," the Ancient Mariner would tactfully carry across the forbidding pause. "The island was no mere shoal or reef. The Lion's Head was thirty-eight hundred and thirty-five feet. I saw the captain and the third officer triangulate it."

"I've raked and combed the sea," Captain Doane would then break out, "and the teeth of my comb are not so wide apart as to let slip through a four-thousand-foot peak."

"Strange, strange," the Ancient Mariner would next mutter, half to his cogitating soul, half aloud to the treasure-seekers. Then, with a sudden brightening, he would add:

"But, of course, the variation has changed, Captain Doane. Have you allowed for the change in variation for half a century! That should make a grave difference. Why, as I understand it, who am no navigator, the variation was not so definitely and accurately known in those days as now."

"Latitude was latitude, and longitude was longitude," would be the captain's retort. "Variation and deviation are used in setting courses and estimating dead reckoning."

All of which was Greek to Simon Nishikanta, who would promptly take the Ancient Mariner's side of the discussion.

But the Ancient Mariner was fair-minded. What advantage he gave the Jew one moment, he balanced the next moment with an advantage to the skipper.

"It's a pity," he would suggest to Captain Doane, "that you have only one chronometer. The entire fault may be with the chronometer. Why did you sail with only one chronometer?"

"But I was willing for two," the Jew would defend. "You know that, Grimshaw?"

The wheat-farmer would nod reluctantly and Captain would snap:

"But not for three chronometers."

"But if two was no better than one, as you said so yourself and as Grimshaw will bear witness, then three was no better than two except for an expense."

"But if you only have two chronometers, how can you tell which has gone wrong?" Captain Doane would demand.

"Search me," would come the pawnbroker's retort, accompanied by an incredulous shrug of the shoulders. "If you can't tell which is wrong of two, then how much harder must it be to tell which is wrong of two dozen? With only two, it's a fifty-fifty split that one or the other is wrong."

"But don't you realize--"

"I realize that it's all a great foolishness, all this highbrow stuff about navigation. I've got clerks fourteen years old in my offices that can figure circles all around you and your navigation. Ask them that if two chronometers ain't better than one, then how can two thousand be better than one? And they'd answer quick, snap, like that, that if two dollars ain't any better than one dollar, then two thousand dollars ain't any better than one dollar. That's common sense."

"Just the same, you're wrong on general principle," Grimshaw would oar in. "I said at the time that the only reason we took Captain Doane in with us on the deal was because we needed a navigator and because you and me didn't know the first thing about it. You said, 'Yes, sure'; and right away knew more about it than him when you wouldn't stand for buying three chronometers. What was the matter with you was that the expense hurt you. That's about as big an idea as your mind ever had room for. You go around looking for to dig out ten million dollars with a second-

hand spade you call buy for sixty-eight cents."

Dag Daughtry could not fail to overhear some of these conversations, which were altercations rather than councils. The invariable ending, for Simon Nishikanta, would be what sailors name "the sea-grouch." For hours afterward the sulky Jew would speak to no one nor acknowledge speech from any one. Vainly striving to paint, he would suddenly burst into violent rage, tear up his attempt, stamp it into the deck, then get out his large-calibred automatic rifle, perch himself on the forecastle-head, and try to shoot any stray porpoise, albacore, or dolphin. It seemed to give him great relief to send a bullet home into the body of some surging, gorgeous-hued fish, arrest its glorious flashing motion for ever, and turn it on its side slowly to sink down into the death and depth of the sea.

On occasion, when a school of blackfish disported by, each one of them a whale of respectable size, Nishikanta would be beside himself in the ecstasy of inflicting pain. Out of the school perhaps he would reach a score of the leviathans, his bullets biting into them like whip-lashes, so that each, like a colt surprised by the stock-whip, would leap in the air, or with a flirt of tail dive under the surface, and then charge madly across the ocean and away from sight in a foam-churn of speed.

The Ancient Mariner would shake his head sadly; and Daughtry, who likewise was hurt by the infliction of hurt on unoffending animals, would sympathize with him and fetch him unbidden another of the expensive three-

for-a-dollar cigars so that his feelings might be soothed. Grimshaw would curl his lip in a sneer and mutter: "The cheap skate. The skunk. No man with half the backbone of a man would take it out of the harmless creatures. He's that kind that if he didn't like you, or if you criticised his grammar or arithmetic, he'd kick your dog to get even . . . or poison it. In the good old days up in Colusa we used to hang men like him just to keep the air we breathed clean and wholesome."

But it was Captain Doane who protested outright.

"Look at here, Nishikanta," he would say, his face white and his lips trembling with anger. "That's rough stuff, and all you can get back for it is rough stuff. I know what I'm talking about. You've got no right to risk our lives that way. Wasn't the pilot boat Annie Mine sunk by a whale right in the Golden Gate? Didn't I sail in as a youngster, second mate on the brig Berncastle, into Hakodate, pumping double watches to keep afloat just because a whale took a smash at us? Didn't the full-rigged ship, the whaler Essex, sink off the west coast of South America, twelve hundred miles from the nearest land for the small boats to cover, and all because of a big cow whale that butted her into kindling-wood?"

And Simon Nishikanta, in his grouch, disdainful to reply, would continue to pepper the last whale into flight beyond the circle of the sea their vision commanded.

"I remember the whaleship Essex," the Ancient Mariner told Dag Daughtry. "It was a cow with a calf that did for her. Her barrels were two-thirds full, too. She went down in less than an hour. One of the boats never was heard of."

"And didn't another one of her boats get to Hawaii, sir?" Daughtry queried with all due humility of respect. "Leastwise, thirty years ago, when I was in Honolulu, I met a man, an old geezer, who claimed he'd been a harpooner on a whaleship sunk by a whale off the coast of South America. That was the first and last I heard of it, until right now you speaking of it, sir. It must a-been the same ship, sir, don't you think?"

"Unless two different ships were whale-sunk off the west coast," the Ancient Mariner replied. "And of the one ship, the Essex, there is no discussion. It is historical. The chance is likely, steward, that the man you mentioned was from the Essex."