

CHAPTER II

The Elsinore, fresh-loaded with coal, lay very deep in the water when we came alongside. I knew too little about ships to be capable of admiring her lines, and, besides, I was in no mood for admiration. I was still debating with myself whether or not to chuck the whole thing and return on the tug. From all of which it must not be taken that I am a vacillating type of man. On the contrary.

The trouble was that at no time, from the first thought of it, had I been keen for the voyage. Practically the reason I was taking it was because there was nothing else I was keen on. For some time now life had lost its savour. I was not jaded, nor was I exactly bored. But the zest had gone out of things. I had lost taste for my fellow-men and all their foolish, little, serious endeavours. For a far longer period I had been dissatisfied with women. I had endured them, but I had been too analytic of the faults of their primitiveness, of their almost ferocious devotion to the destiny of sex, to be enchanted with them. And I had come to be oppressed by what seemed to me the futility of art--a pompous legerdemain, a consummate charlatanry that deceived not only its devotees but its practitioners.

In short, I was embarking on the Elsinore because it was easier to than not; yet everything else was as equally and perilously easy. That was the curse of the condition into which I had fallen. That was why, as I

stepped upon the deck of the Elsinore, I was half of a mind to tell them to keep my luggage where it was and bid Captain West and his daughter good-day.

I almost think what decided me was the welcoming, hospitable smile Miss West gave me as she started directly across the deck for the cabin, and the knowledge that it must be quite warm in the cabin.

Mr. Pike, the mate, I had already met, when I visited the ship in Erie Basin. He smiled a stiff, crack-faced smile that I knew must be painful, but did not offer to shake hands, turning immediately to call orders to half-a-dozen frozen-looking youths and aged men who shambled up from somewhere in the waist of the ship. Mr. Pike had been drinking. That was patent. His face was puffed and discoloured, and his large gray eyes were bitter and bloodshot.

I lingered, with a sinking heart watching my belongings come aboard and chiding my weakness of will which prevented me from uttering the few words that would put a stop to it. As for the half-dozen men who were now carrying the luggage aft into the cabin, they were unlike any concept I had ever entertained of sailors. Certainly, on the liners, I had observed nothing that resembled them.

One, a most vivid-faced youth of eighteen, smiled at me from a pair of remarkable Italian eyes. But he was a dwarf. So short was he that he was all sea-boots and sou'wester. And yet he was not entirely Italian.

So certain was I that I asked the mate, who answered morosely:

"Him? Shorty? He's a dago half-breed. The other half's Jap or Malay."

One old man, who I learned was a bosun, was so decrepit that I thought he had been recently injured. His face was stolid and ox-like, and as he shuffled and dragged his brogans over the deck he paused every several steps to place both hands on his abdomen and execute a queer, pressing, lifting movement. Months were to pass, in which I saw him do this thousands of times, ere I learned that there was nothing the matter with him and that his action was purely a habit. His face reminded me of the Man with the Hoe, save that it was unthinkably and abysmally stupider. And his name, as I was to learn, of all names was Sundry Buyers. And he was bosun of the fine American sailing-ship Elsinore--rated one of the finest sailing-ships afloat!

Of this group of aged men and boys that moved the luggage along I saw only one, called Henry, a youth of sixteen, who approximated in the slightest what I had conceived all sailors to be like. He had come off a training ship, the mate told me, and this was his first voyage to sea. His face was keen-cut, alert, as were his bodily movements, and he wore sailor-appearing clothes with sailor-seeming grace. In fact, as I was to learn, he was to be the only sailor-seeming creature fore and aft.

The main crew had not yet come aboard, but was expected at any moment, the mate vouchsafed with a snarl of ominous expectancy. Those already on

board were the miscellaneous ones who had shipped themselves in New York without the mediation of boarding-house masters. And what the crew itself would be like God alone could tell--so said the mate. Shorty, the Japanese (or Malay) and Italian half-caste, the mate told me, was an able seaman, though he had come out of steam and this was his first sailing voyage.

"Ordinary seamen!" Mr. Pike snorted, in reply to a question. "We don't carry Landsmen!--forget it! Every clodhopper an' cow-walloper these days is an able seaman. That's the way they rank and are paid. The merchant service is all shot to hell. There ain't no more sailors. They all died years ago, before you were born even."

I could smell the raw whiskey on the mate's breath. Yet he did not stagger nor show any signs of intoxication. Not until afterward was I to know that his willingness to talk was most unwonted and was where the liquor gave him away.

"It'd a-ben a grace had I died years ago," he said, "rather than to a-lived to see sailors an' ships pass away from the sea."

"But I understand the Elsinore is considered one of the finest," I urged.

"So she is . . . to-day. But what is she?--a damned cargo-carrier. She ain't built for sailin', an' if she was there ain't no sailors left to

sail her. Lord! Lord! The old clippers! When I think of 'em!--The Gamecock, Shootin' Star, Flyin' Fish, Witch o' the Wave, Staghound, Harvey Birch, Canvas-back, Fleetwing, Sea Serpent, Northern Light! An' when I think of the fleets of the tea-clippers that used to load at Hong Kong an' race the Eastern Passages. A fine sight! A fine sight!"

I was interested. Here was a man, a live man. I was in no hurry to go into the cabin, where I knew Wada was unpacking my things, so I paced up and down the deck with the huge Mr. Pike. Huge he was in all conscience, broad-shouldered, heavy-boned, and, despite the profound stoop of his shoulders, fully six feet in height.

"You are a splendid figure of a man," I complimented.

"I was, I was," he muttered sadly, and I caught the whiff of whiskey strong on the air.

I stole a look at his gnarled hands. Any finger would have made three of mine. His wrist would have made three of my wrist.

"How much do you weigh?" I asked.

"Two hundred an' ten. But in my day, at my best, I tipped the scales close to two-forty."

"And the Elsinore can't sail," I said, returning to the subject which had roused him.

"I'll take you even, anything from a pound of tobacco to a month's wages, she won't make it around in a hundred an' fifty days," he answered. "Yet I've come round in the old Flyin' Cloud in eighty-nine days--eighty-nine days, sir, from Sandy Hook to 'Frisco. Sixty men for'ard that was men, an' eight boys, an' drive! drive! drive! Three hundred an' seventy-four miles for a day's run under t'gallantsails, an' in the squalls eighteen knots o' line not enough to time her. Eighty-nine days--never beat, an' tied once by the old Andrew Jackson nine years afterwards. Them was the days!"

"When did the Andrew Jackson tie her?" I asked, because of the growing suspicion that he was "having" me.

"In 1860," was his prompt reply.

"And you sailed in the Flying Cloud nine years before that, and this is 1913--why, that was sixty-two years ago," I charged.

"And I was seven years old," he chuckled. "My mother was stewardess on the Flyin' Cloud. I was born at sea. I was boy when I was twelve, on the Herald o' the Morn, when she made around in ninety-nine days--half the crew in irons most o' the time, five men lost from aloft off the Horn, the points of our sheath-knives broken square off, knuckle-dusters

an' belayin'-pins flyin', three men shot by the officers in one day, the second mate killed dead an' no one to know who done it, an' drive! drive! drive! ninety-nine days from land to land, a run of seventeen thousand miles, an' east to west around Cape Stiff!"

"But that would make you sixty-nine years old," I insisted.

"Which I am," he retorted proudly, "an' a better man at that than the scrubby younglings of these days. A generation of 'em would die under the things I've been through. Did you ever hear of the Sunny South?--she that was sold in Havana to run slaves an' changed her name to Emanuela?"

"And you've sailed the Middle Passage!" I cried, recollecting the old phrase.

"I was on the Emanuela that day in Mozambique Channel when the Brisk caught us with nine hundred slaves between-decks. Only she wouldn't a-caught us except for her having steam."

I continued to stroll up and down beside this massive relic of the past, and to listen to his hints and muttered reminiscences of old man-killing and man-driving days. He was too real to be true, and yet, as I studied his shoulder-stoop and the age-drag of his huge feet, I was convinced that his years were as he asserted. He spoke of a Captain Sonurs.

"He was a great captain," he was saying. "An' in the two years I sailed mate with him there was never a port I didn't jump the ship goin' in an' stay in hiding until I sneaked aboard when she sailed again."

"But why?"

"The men, on account of the men swearin' blood an' vengeance and warrants against me because of my ways of teachin' them to be sailors. Why, the times I was caught, and the fines the skipper paid for me--and yet it was my work that made the ship make money."

He held up his huge paws, and as I stared at the battered, malformed knuckles I understood the nature of his work.

"But all that's stopped now," he lamented. "A sailor's a gentleman these days. You can't raise your voice or your hand to them."

At this moment he was addressed from the poop-rail above by the second mate, a medium-sized, heavily built, clean-shaven, blond man.

"The tug's in sight with the crew, sir," he announced.

The mate grunted an acknowledgment, then added, "Come on down, Mr. Mellaire, and meet our passenger."

I could not help noting the air and carriage with which Mr. Mellaire came

down the poop-ladder and took his part in the introduction. He was courteous in an old-world way, soft-spoken, suave, and unmistakably from south of Mason and Dixon.

"A Southerner," I said.

"Georgia, sir." He bowed and smiled, as only a Southerner can bow and smile.

His features and expression were genial and gentle, and yet his mouth was the cruellest gash I had ever seen in a man's face. It was a gash. There is no other way of describing that harsh, thin-lipped, shapeless mouth that uttered gracious things so graciously. Involuntarily I glanced at his hands. Like the mate's, they were thick-boned, broken-knuckled, and malformed. Back into his blue eyes I looked. On the surface of them was a film of light, a gloss of gentle kindness and cordiality, but behind that gloss I knew resided neither sincerity nor mercy. Behind that gloss was something cold and terrible, that lurked and waited and watched--something catlike, something inimical and deadly. Behind that gloss of soft light and of social sparkle was the live, fearful thing that had shaped that mouth into the gash it was. What I sensed behind in those eyes chilled me with its repulsiveness and strangeness.

As I faced Mr. Mellaire, and talked with him, and smiled, and exchanged amenities, I was aware of the feeling that comes to one in the forest or jungle when he knows unseen wild eyes of hunting animals are spying upon

him. Frankly I was afraid of the thing ambushed behind there in the skull of Mr. Mellaire. One so as a matter of course identifies form and feature with the spirit within. But I could not do this with the second mate. His face and form and manner and suave ease were one thing, inside which he, an entirely different thing, lay hid.

I noticed Wada standing in the cabin door, evidently waiting to ask for instructions. I nodded, and prepared to follow him inside. Mr. Pike looked at me quickly and said:

"Just a moment, Mr. Pathurst."

He gave some orders to the second mate, who turned on his heel and started for'ard. I stood and waited for Mr. Pike's communication, which he did not choose to make until he saw the second mate well out of ear-shot. Then he leaned closely to me and said:

"Don't mention that little matter of my age to anybody. Each year I sign on I sign my age one year younger. I am fifty-four, now, on the articles."

"And you don't look a day older," I answered lightly, though I meant it in all sincerity.

"And I don't feel it. I can outwork and outgame the huskiest of the younglings. And don't let my age get to anybody's ears, Mr. Pathurst.

Skippers are not particular for mates getting around the seventy mark. And owners neither. I've had my hopes for this ship, and I'd a-got her, I think, except for the old man decidin' to go to sea again. As if he needed the money! The old skinflint!"

"Is he well off?" I inquired.

"Well off! If I had a tenth of his money I could retire on a chicken ranch in California and live like a fighting cock--yes, if I had a fiftieth of what he's got salted away. Why, he owns more stock in all the Blackwood ships . . . and they've always been lucky and always earned money. I'm getting old, and it's about time I got a command. But no; the old cuss has to take it into his head to go to sea again just as the berth's ripe for me to fall into."

Again I started to enter the cabin, but was stopped by the mate.

"Mr. Pathurst? You won't mention about my age?"

"No, certainly not, Mr. Pike," I said.