

CHAPTER IV

The contrast, as I entered the cabin, was startling. All contrasts aboard the *Elsinore* promised to be startling. Instead of the cold, hard deck my feet sank into soft carpet. In place of the mean and narrow room, built of naked iron, where I had left the lunatic, I was in a spacious and beautiful apartment. With the bawling of the men's voices still in my ears, and with the pictures of their drink-puffed and filthy faces still vivid under my eyelids, I found myself greeted by a delicate-faced, prettily-gowned woman who sat beside a lacquered oriental table on which rested an exquisite tea-service of Canton china. All was repose and calm. The steward, noiseless-footed, expressionless, was a shadow, scarcely noticed, that drifted into the room on some service and drifted out again.

Not at once could I relax, and Miss West, serving my tea, laughed and said:

"You look as if you had been seeing things. The steward tells me a man has been overboard. I fancy the cold water must have sobered him."

I resented her unconcern.

"The man is a lunatic," I said. "This ship is no place for him. He should be sent ashore to some hospital."

"I am afraid, if we begin that, we'd have to send two-thirds of our complement ashore--one lump?"

"Yes, please," I answered. "But the man has terribly wounded himself. He is liable to bleed to death."

She looked at me for a moment, her gray eyes serious and scrutinizing, as she passed me my cup; then laughter welled up in her eyes, and she shook her head reprovingly.

"Now please don't begin the voyage by being shocked, Mr. Pathurst. Such things are very ordinary occurrences. You'll get used to them. You must remember some queer creatures go down to the sea in ships. The man is safe. Trust Mr. Pike to attend to his wounds. I've never sailed with Mr. Pike, but I've heard enough about him. Mr. Pike is quite a surgeon. Last voyage, they say, he performed a successful amputation, and so elated was he that he turned his attention on the carpenter, who happened to be suffering from some sort of indigestion. Mr. Pike was so convinced of the correctness of his diagnosis that he tried to bribe the carpenter into having his appendix removed." She broke off to laugh heartily, then added: "They say he offered the poor man just pounds and pounds of tobacco to consent to the operation."

"But is it safe . . . for the . . . the working of the ship," I urged, "to take such a lunatic along?"

She shrugged her shoulders, as if not intending to reply, then said:

"This incident is nothing. There are always several lunatics or idiots in every ship's company. And they always come aboard filled with whiskey and raving. I remember, once, when we sailed from Seattle, a long time ago, one such madman. He showed no signs of madness at all; just calmly seized two boarding-house runners and sprang overboard with them. We sailed the same day, before the bodies were recovered."

Again she shrugged her shoulders.

"What would you? The sea is hard, Mr. Pathurst. And for our sailors we get the worst type of men. I sometimes wonder where they find them. And we do our best with them, and somehow manage to make them help us carry on our work in the world. But they are low . . . low."

As I listened, and studied her face, contrasting her woman's sensitivity and her soft pretty dress with the brute faces and rags of the men I had noticed, I could not help being convinced intellectually of the rightness of her position. Nevertheless, I was hurt sentimentally,--chiefly, I do believe, because of the very hardness and unconcern with which she enunciated her view. It was because she was a woman, and so different from the sea-creatures, that I resented her having received such harsh education in the school of the sea.

"I could not help remarking your father's--er, er sang froid during the occurrence." I ventured.

"He never took his hands from his pockets!" she cried.

Her eyes sparkled as I nodded confirmation.

"I knew it! It's his way. I've seen it so often. I remember when I was twelve years old--mother was alone--we were running into San Francisco. It was in the Dixie, a ship almost as big as this. There was a strong fair wind blowing, and father did not take a tug. We sailed right through the Golden Gate and up the San Francisco water-front. There was a swift flood tide, too; and the men, both watches, were taking in sail as fast as they could.

"Now the fault was the steamboat captain's. He miscalculated our speed and tried to cross our bow. Then came the collision, and the Dixie's bow cut through that steamboat, cabin and hull. There were hundreds of passengers, men, women, and children. Father never took his hands from his pockets. He sent the mate for'ard to superintend rescuing the passengers, who were already climbing on to our bowsprit and forecandle-head, and in a voice no different from what he'd use to ask some one to pass the butter he told the second mate to set all sail. And he told him which sails to begin with."

"But why set more sails?" I interrupted.

"Because he could see the situation. Don't you see, the steamboat was cut wide open. All that kept her from sinking instantly was the bow of the Dixie jammed into her side. By setting more sail and keeping before the wind, he continued to keep the bow of the Dixie jammed.

"I was terribly frightened. People who had sprung or fallen overboard were drowning on each side of us, right in my sight, as we sailed along up the water-front. But when I looked at father, there he was, just as I had always known him, hands in pockets, walking slowly up and down, now giving an order to the wheel--you see, he had to direct the Dixie's course through all the shipping--now watching the passengers swarming over our bow and along our deck, now looking ahead to see his way through the ships at anchor. Sometimes he did glance at the poor, drowning ones, but he was not concerned with them.

"Of course, there were numbers drowned, but by keeping his hands in his pockets and his head cool he saved hundreds of lives. Not until the last person was off the steamboat--he sent men aboard to make sure--did he take off the press of sail. And the steamboat sank at once."

She ceased, and looked at me with shining eyes for approbation.

"It was splendid," I acknowledged. "I admire the quiet man of power, though I confess that such quietness under stress seems to me almost unearthly and beyond human. I can't conceive of myself acting that way,

and I am confident that I was suffering more while that poor devil was in the water than all the rest of the onlookers put together."

"Father suffers!" she defended loyally. "Only he does not show it."

I bowed, for I felt she had missed my point.