CHAPTER V

I came out from tea in the cabin to find the tug Britannia in sight. She was the craft that was to tow us down Chesapeake Bay to sea. Strolling for'ard I noted the sailors being routed out of the forecastle by Sundry Buyers, for ever tenderly pressing his abdomen with his hands. Another man was helping Sundry Buyers at routing out the sailors. I asked Mr. Pike who the man was.

"Nancy--my bosun; ain't he a peach?" was the answer I got, and from the mate's manner of enunciation I was quite aware that "Nancy" had been used derisively.

Nancy could not have been more than thirty, though he looked as if he had lived a very long time. He was toothless and sad and weary of movement. His eyes were slate-coloured and muddy, his shaven face was sickly yellow. Narrow-shouldered, sunken-chested, with cheeks cavernously hollow, he looked like a man in the last stages of consumption. Little life as Sundry Buyers showed, Nancy showed even less life. And these were bosuns!--bosuns of the fine American sailing-ship Elsinore! Never had any illusion of mine taken a more distressing cropper.

It was plain to me that the pair of them, spineless and spunkless, were afraid of the men they were supposed to boss. And the men! Dore could never have conjured a more delectable hell's broth. For the first time I

saw them all, and I could not blame the two bosuns for being afraid of them. They did not walk. They slouched and shambled, some even tottered, as from weakness or drink.

But it was their faces. I could not help remembering what Miss West had just told me--that ships always sailed with several lunatics or idiots in their crews. But these looked as if they were all lunatic or feeble-minded. And I, too, wondered where such a mass of human wreckage could have been obtained. There was something wrong with all of them. Their bodies were twisted, their faces distorted, and almost without exception they were under-sized. The several quite fairly large men I marked were vacant-faced. One man, however, large and unmistakably Irish, was also unmistakably mad. He was talking and muttering to himself as he came out. A little, curved, lop-sided man, with his head on one side and with the shrewdest and wickedest of faces and pale blue eyes, addressed an obscene remark to the mad Irishman, calling him O'Sullivan. But O'Sullivan took no notice and muttered on. On the heels of the little lop-sided man appeared an overgrown dolt of a fat youth, followed by another youth so tall and emaciated of body that it seemed a marvel his flesh could hold his frame together.

Next, after this perambulating skeleton, came the weirdest creature I have ever beheld. He was a twisted oaf of a man. Face and body were twisted as with the pain of a thousand years of torture. His was the face of an ill-treated and feeble-minded faun. His large black eyes were bright, eager, and filled with pain; and they flashed questioningly from

face to face and to everything about. They were so pitifully alert, those eyes, as if for ever astrain to catch the clue to some perplexing and threatening enigma. Not until afterwards did I learn the cause of this. He was stone deaf, having had his ear-drums destroyed in the boiler explosion which had wrecked the rest of him.

I noticed the steward, standing at the galley door and watching the men from a distance. His keen, Asiatic face, quick with intelligence, was a relief to the eye, as was the vivid face of Shorty, who came out of the forecastle with a leap and a gurgle of laughter. But there was something wrong with him, too. He was a dwarf, and, as I was to come to know, his high spirits and low mentality united to make him a clown.

Mr. Pike stopped beside me a moment and while he watched the men I watched him. The expression on his face was that of a cattle-buyer, and it was plain that he was disgusted with the quality of cattle delivered.

"Something the matter with the last mother's son of them," he growled.

And still they came: one, pallid, furtive-eyed, that I instantly adjudged a drug fiend; another, a tiny, wizened old man, pinch-faced and wrinkled, with beady, malevolent blue eyes; a third, a small, well-fleshed man, who seemed to my eye the most normal and least unintelligent specimen that had yet appeared. But Mr. Pike's eye was better trained than mine.

"What's the matter with you?" he snarled at the man.

"Nothing, sir," the fellow answered, stopping immediately.

"What's your name?"

Mr. Pike never spoke to a sailor save with a snarl.

"Charles Davis, sir."

"What are you limping about?"

"I ain't limpin', sir," the man answered respectfully, and, at a nod of dismissal from the mate, marched off jauntily along the deck with a heodlum swing to the shoulders.

"He's a sailor all right," the mate grumbled; "but I'll bet you a pound of tobacco or a month's wages there's something wrong with him."

The forecastle now seemed empty, but the mate turned on the bosuns with his customary snarl.

"What in hell are you doing? Sleeping? Think this is a rest cure? Get in there an' rustle 'em out!"

Sundry Buyers pressed his abdomen gingerly and hesitated, while Nancy, his face one dogged, long-suffering bleakness, reluctantly entered the

forecastle. Then, from inside, we heard oaths, vile and filthy, urgings and expostulations on the part of Nancy, meekly and pleadingly uttered.

I noted the grim and savage look that came on Mr. Pike's face, and was prepared for I knew not what awful monstrosities to emerge from the forecastle. Instead, to my surprise, came three fellows who were strikingly superior to the ruck that had preceded them. I looked to see the mate's face soften to some sort of approval. On the contrary, his blue eyes contracted to narrow slits, the snarl of his voice was communicated to his lips, so that he seemed like a dog about to bite.

But the three fellows. They were small men, all; and young men, anywhere between twenty-five and thirty. Though roughly dressed, they were well dressed, and under their clothes their bodily movements showed physical well-being. Their faces were keen cut, intelligent. And though I felt there was something queer about them, I could not divine what it was.

Here were no ill-fed, whiskey-poisoned men, such as the rest of the sailors, who, having drunk up their last pay-days, had starved ashore until they had received and drunk up their advance money for the present voyage. These three, on the other hand were supple and vigorous. Their movements were spontaneously quick and accurate. Perhaps it was the way they looked at me, with incurious yet calculating eyes that nothing escaped. They seemed so worldly wise, so indifferent, so sure of themselves. I was confident they were not sailors. Yet, as shore-dwellers, I could not place them. They were a type I had never

encountered. Possibly I can give a better idea of them by describing what occurred.

As they passed before us they favoured Mr. Pike with the same indifferent, keen glances they gave me.

"What's your name--you?" Mr. Pike barked at the first of the trio, evidently a hybrid Irish-Jew. Jewish his nose unmistakably was. Equally unmistakable was the Irish of his eyes, and jaw, and upper lip.

The three had immediately stopped, and, though they did not look directly at one another, they seemed to be holding a silent conference. Another of the trio, in whose veins ran God alone knows what Semitic, Babylonish and Latin strains, gave a warning signal. Oh, nothing so crass as a wink or a nod. I almost doubted that I had intercepted it, and yet I knew he had communicated a warning to his fellows. More a shade of expression that had crossed his eyes, or a glint in them of sudden light--or whatever it was, it carried the message.

"Murphy," the other answered the mate.

"Sir!" Mr. Pike snarled at him.

Murphy shrugged his shoulders in token that he did not understand. It was the poise of the man, of the three of them, the cool poise that impressed me.

"When you address any officer on this ship you'll say 'sir,'" Mr. Pike explained, his voice as harsh as his face was forbidding. "Did you get that?"

"Yes . . . sir," Murphy drawled with deliberate slowness. "I gotcha."

"Sir!" Mr. Pike roared.

"Sir," Murphy answered, so softly and carelessly that it irritated the mate to further bullyragging.

"Well, Murphy's too long," he announced. "Nosey'll do you aboard this craft. Got that?"

"I gotcha . . . sir," came the reply, insolent in its very softness and unconcern. "Nosey Murphy goes . . . sir."

And then he laughed--the three of them laughed, if laughter it might be called that was laughter without sound or facial movement. The eyes alone laughed, mirthlessly and cold-bloodedly.

Certainly Mr. Pike was not enjoying himself with these baffling personalities. He turned upon the leader, the one who had given the warning and who looked the admixture of all that was Mediterranean and Semitic.

"What's your name?"

"Bert Rhine . . . sir," was the reply, in tones as soft and careless and silkily irritating as the other's.

"And you?"--this to the remaining one, the youngest of the trio, a dark-eyed, olive-skinned fellow with a face most striking in its cameo-like beauty. American-born, I placed him, of immigrants from Southern Italy--from Naples, or even Sicily.

"Twist . . . sir," he answered, precisely in the same manner as the others.

"Too long," the mate sneered. "The Kid'll do you. Got that?"

"I gotcha . . . sir. Kid Twist'll do me . . . sir."

"Kid'll do!"

"Kid . . . sir."

And the three laughed their silent, mirthless laugh. By this time Mr. Pike was beside himself with a rage that could find no excuse for action.

"Now I'm going to tell you something, the bunch of you, for the good of

your health." The mate's voice grated with the rage he was suppressing. "I know your kind. You're dirt. D'ye get that? You're dirt. And on this ship you'll be treated as dirt. You'll do your work like men, or I'll know the reason why. The first time one of you bats an eye, or even looks like batting an eye, he gets his. D'ye get that? Now get out. Get along for'ard to the windlass."

Mr. Pike turned on his heel, and I swung alongside of him as he moved aft.

"What do you make of them?" I queried.

"The limit," he grunted. "I know their kidney. They've done time, the three of them. They're just plain sweepings of hell--"

Here his speech was broken off by the spectacle that greeted him on Number Two hatch. Sprawled out on the hatch were five or six men, among them Larry, the tatterdemalion who had called him "old stiff" earlier in the afternoon. That Larry had not obeyed orders was patent, for he was sitting with his back propped against his sea-bag, which ought to have been in the forecastle. Also, he and the group with him ought to have been for'ard manning the windlass.

The mate stepped upon the hatch and towered over the man.

"Get up," he ordered.

Larry made an effort, groaned, and failed to get up.

"I can't," he said.

"Sir!"

"I can't, sir. I was drunk last night an' slept in Jefferson Market. An' this mornin' I was froze tight, sir. They had to pry me loose."

"Stiff with the cold you were, eh?" the mate grinned.

"It's well ye might say it, sir," Larry answered.

"And you feel like an old stiff, eh?"

Larry blinked with the troubled, querulous eyes of a monkey. He was beginning to apprehend he knew not what, and he knew that bending over him was a man-master.

"Well, I'll just be showin' you what an old stiff feels like, anyways." Mr. Pike mimicked the other's brogue.

And now I shall tell what I saw happen. Please remember what I have said of the huge paws of Mr. Pike, the fingers much longer than mine and twice as thick, the wrists massive-boned, the arm-bones and the shoulder-bones

of the same massive order. With one flip of his right hand, with what I might call an open-handed, lifting, upward slap, save that it was the ends of the fingers only that touched Larry's face, he lifted Larry into the air, sprawling him backward on his back across his sea-bag.

The man alongside of Larry emitted a menacing growl and started to spring belligerently to his feet. But he never reached his feet. Mr. Pike, with the back of same right hand, open, smote the man on the side of the face. The loud smack of the impact was startling. The mate's strength was amazing. The blow looked so easy, so effortless; it had seemed like the lazy stroke of a good-natured bear, but in it was such a weight of bone and muscle that the man went down sidewise and rolled off the hatch on to the deck.

At this moment, lurching aimlessly along, appeared O'Sullivan. A sudden access of muttering, on his part, reached Mr. Pike's ear, and Mr. Pike, instantly keen as a wild animal, his paw in the act of striking O'Sullivan, whipped out like a revolver shot, "What's that?" Then he noted the sense-struck face of O'Sullivan and withheld the blow. "Bug-house," Mr. Pike commented.

Involuntarily I had glanced to see if Captain West was on the poop, and found that we were hidden from the poop by the 'midship house.

Mr. Pike, taking no notice of the man who lay groaning on the deck, stood over Larry, who was likewise groaning. The rest of the sprawling men

were on their feet, subdued and respectful. I, too, was respectful of this terrific, aged figure of a man. The exhibition had quite convinced me of the verity of his earlier driving and killing days.

"Who's the old stiff now?" he demanded.

"'Tis me, sir," Larry moaned contritely.

"Get up!"

Larry got up without any difficulty at all.

"Now get for'ard to the windlass! The rest of you!"

And they went, sullenly, shamblingly, like the cowed brutes they were.