CHAPTER VI

I climbed the ladder on the side of the for'ard house (which house contained, as I discovered, the forecastle, the galley, and the donkey-engine room), and went part way along the bridge to a position by the foremast, where I could observe the crew heaving up anchor. The Britannia was alongside, and we were getting under way.

A considerable body of men was walking around with the windlass or variously engaged on the forecastle-head. Of the crew proper were two watches of fifteen men each. In addition were sailmakers, boys, bosuns, and the carpenter. Nearly forty men were they, but such men! They were sad and lifeless. There was no vim, no go, no activity. Every step and movement was an effort, as if they were dead men raised out of coffins or sick men dragged from hospital beds. Sick they were--whiskey-poisoned. Starved they were, and weak from poor nutrition. And worst of all, they were imbecile and lunatic.

I looked aloft at the intricate ropes, at the steel masts rising and carrying huge yards of steel, rising higher and higher, until steel masts and yards gave way to slender spars of wood, while ropes and stays turned into a delicate tracery of spider-thread against the sky. That such a wretched muck of men should be able to work this magnificent ship through all storm and darkness and peril of the sea was beyond all seeming. I remembered the two mates, the super-efficiency, mental and physical, of

Mr. Mellaire and Mr. Pike--could they make this human wreckage do it? They, at least, evinced no doubts of their ability. The sea? If this feat of mastery were possible, then clear it was that I knew nothing of the sea.

I looked back at the misshapen, starved, sick, stumbling hulks of men who trod the dreary round of the windlass. Mr. Pike was right. These were not the brisk, devilish, able-bodied men who manned the ships of the old clipper-ship days; who fought their officers, who had the points of their sheath-knives broken off, who killed and were killed, but who did their work as men. These men, these shambling carcasses at the windlass--I looked, and looked, and vainly I strove to conjure the vision of them swinging aloft in rack and storm, "clearing the raffle," as Kipling puts it, "with their clasp knives in their teeth." Why didn't they sing a chanty as they hove the anchor up? In the old days, as I had read, the anchor always came up to the rollicking sailor songs of sea-chested men.

I tired of watching the spiritless performance, and went aft on an exploring trip along the slender bridge. It was a beautiful structure, strong yet light, traversing the length of the ship in three aerial leaps. It spanned from the forecastle-head to the forecastle-house, next to the 'midship house, and then to the poop. The poop, which was really the roof or deck over all the cabin space below, and which occupied the whole after-part of the ship, was very large. It was broken only by the half-round and half-covered wheel-house at the very stern and by the chart-house. On either side of the latter two doors opened into a tiny

hallway. This, in turn, gave access to the chart-room and to a stairway that led down into the cabin quarters beneath.

I peeped into the chart-room and was greeted with a smile by Captain West. He was lolling back comfortably in a swing chair, his feet cocked on the desk opposite. On a broad, upholstered couch sat the pilot. Both were smoking cigars; and, lingering for a moment to listen to the conversation, I grasped that the pilot was an ex-sea-captain.

As I descended the stairs, from Miss West's room came a sound of humming and bustling, as she settled her belongings. The energy she displayed, to judge by the cheerful noises of it, was almost perturbing.

Passing by the pantry, I put my head inside the door to greet the steward and courteously let him know that I was aware of his existence. Here, in his little realm, it was plain that efficiency reigned. Everything was spotless and in order, and I could have wished and wished vainly for a more noiseless servant than he ashore. His face, as he regarded me, had as little or as much expression as the Sphinx. But his slant, black eyes were bright, with intelligence.

"What do you think of the crew?" I asked, in order to put words to my invasion of his castle.

"Buggy-house," he answered promptly, with a disgusted shake of the head. "Too much buggy-house. All crazy. You see. No good. Rotten. Down to

hell."

That was all, but it verified my own judgment. While it might be true, as Miss West had said, that every ship's crew contained several lunatics and idiots, it was a foregone conclusion that our crew contained far more than several. In fact, and as it was to turn out, our crew, even in these degenerate sailing days, was an unusual crew in so far as its helplessness and worthlessness were beyond the average.

I found my own room (in reality it was two rooms) delightful. Wada had unpacked and stored away my entire outfit of clothing, and had filled numerous shelves with the library I had brought along. Everything was in order and place, from my shaving outfit in the drawer beside the wash-basin, and my sea-boots and oilskins hung ready to hand, to my writing materials on the desk, before which a swing arm-chair, leather-upholstered and screwed solidly to the floor, invited me. My pyjamas and dressing-gown were out. My slippers, in their accustomed place by the bed, also invited me.

Here, aft, all was fitness, intelligence. On deck it was what I have described--a nightmare spawn of creatures, assumably human, but malformed, mentally and physically, into caricatures of men. Yes, it was an unusual crew; and that Mr. Pike and Mr. Mellaire could whip it into the efficient shape necessary to work this vast and intricate and beautiful fabric of a ship was beyond all seeming of possibility.

Depressed as I was by what I had just witnessed on deck, there came to me, as I leaned back in my chair and opened the second volume of George Moore's Hail and Farewell, a premonition that the voyage was to be disastrous. But then, as I looked about the room, measured its generous space, realized that I was more comfortably situated than I had ever been on any passenger steamer, I dismissed foreboding thoughts and caught a pleasant vision of myself, through weeks and months, catching up with all the necessary reading which I had so long neglected.

Once, I asked Wada if he had seen the crew. No, he hadn't, but the steward had said that in all his years at sea this was the worst crew he had ever seen.

"He say, all crazy, no sailors, rotten," Wada said. "He say all big fools and bime by much trouble. 'You see,' he say all the time. 'You see, You see.' He pretty old man--fifty-five years, he say. Very smart man for Chinaman. Just now, first time for long time, he go to sea. Before, he have big business in San Francisco. Then he get much trouble--police. They say he opium smuggle. Oh, big, big trouble. But he catch good lawyer. He no go to jail. But long time lawyer work, and when trouble all finish lawyer got all his business, all his money, everything. Then he go to sea, like before. He make good money. He get sixty-five dollars a month on this ship. But he don't like. Crew all crazy. When this time finish he leave ship, go back start business in San Francisco."

Later, when I had Wada open one of the ports for ventilation, I could hear the gurgle and swish of water alongside, and I knew the anchor was up and that we were in the grip of the Britannia, towing down the Chesapeake to sea. The idea suggested itself that it was not too late. I could very easily abandon the adventure and return to Baltimore on the Britannia when she cast off the Elsinore. And then I heard a slight tinkling of china from the pantry as the steward proceeded to set the table, and, also, it was so warm and comfortable, and George Moore was so irritatingly fascinating.