CHAPTER VII

In every way dinner proved up beyond my expectations, and I registered a note that the cook, whoever or whatever he might be, was a capable man at his trade. Miss West served, and, though she and the steward were strangers, they worked together splendidly. I should have thought, from the smoothness of the service, that he was an old house servant who for years had known her every way.

The pilot ate in the chart-house, so that at table were the four of us that would always be at table together. Captain West and his daughter faced each other, while I, on the captain's right, faced Mr. Pike. This put Miss West across the corner on my right.

Mr. Pike, his dark sack coat (put on for the meal) bulging and wrinkling over the lumps of muscles that padded his stooped shoulders, had nothing at all to say. But he had eaten too many years at captains' tables not to have proper table manners. At first I thought he was abashed by Miss West's presence. Later, I decided it was due to the presence of the captain. For Captain West had a way with him that I was beginning to learn. Far removed as Mr. Pike and Mr. Mellaire were from the sailors, individuals as they were of an entirely different and superior breed, yet equally as different and far removed from his officers was Captain West. He was a serene and absolute aristocrat. He neither talked "ship" nor anything else to Mr. Pike.

On the other hand, Captain West's attitude toward me was that of a social equal. But then, I was a passenger. Miss West treated me the same way, but unbent more to Mr. Pike. And Mr. Pike, answering her with "Yes, Miss," and "No, Miss," ate good-manneredly and with his shaggy-browed gray eyes studied me across the table. I, too, studied him. Despite his violent past, killer and driver that he was, I could not help liking the man. He was honest, genuine. Almost more than for that, I liked him for the spontaneous boyish laugh he gave on the occasions when I reached the points of several funny stories. No man could laugh like that and be all bad. I was glad that it was he, and not Mr. Mellaire, who was to sit opposite throughout the voyage. And I was very glad that Mr. Mellaire was not to eat with us at all.

I am afraid that Miss West and I did most of the talking. She was breezy, vivacious, tonic, and I noted again that the delicate, almost fragile oval of her face was given the lie by her body. She was a robust, healthy young woman. That was undeniable. Not fat--heaven forbid!--not even plump; yet her lines had that swelling roundness that accompanies long, live muscles. She was full-bodied, vigorous; and yet not so full-bodied as she seemed. I remember with what surprise, when we arose from table, I noted her slender waist. At that moment I got the impression that she was willowy. And willowy she was, with a normal waist and with, in addition, always that informing bodily vigour that made her appear rounder and robuster than she really was.

It was the health of her that interested me. When I studied her face more closely I saw that only the lines of the oval of it were delicate. Delicate it was not, nor fragile. The flesh was firm, and the texture of the skin was firm and fine as it moved over the firm muscles of face and neck. The neck was a beautiful and adequate pillar of white. Its flesh was firm, its skin fine, and it was muscular. The hands, too, attracted me--not small, but well-shaped, fine, white and strong, and well cared for. I could only conclude that she was an unusual captain's daughter, just as her father was an unusual captain and man. And their noses were alike, just the hint-touch of the beak of power and race.

While Miss West was telling of the unexpectedness of the voyage, of how suddenly she had decided to come--she accounted for it as a whim--and while she told of all the complications she had encountered in her haste of preparation, I found myself casting up a tally of the efficient ones on board the Elsinore. They were Captain West and his daughter, the two mates, myself, of course, Wada and the steward, and, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the cook. The dinner vouched for him. Thus I found our total of efficients to be eight. But the cook, the steward, and Wada were servants, not sailors, while Miss West and myself were supernumeraries. Remained to work, direct, do, but three efficients out of a total ship's company of forty-five. I had no doubt that other efficients there were; it seemed impossible that my first impression of the crew should be correct. There was the carpenter. He might, at his trade, be as good as the cook. Then the two sailmakers, whom I had not yet seen, might prove up.

A little later during the meal I ventured to talk about what had interested me and aroused my admiration, namely, the masterfulness with which Mr. Pike and Mr. Mellaire had gripped hold of that woeful, worthless crew. It was all new to me, I explained, but I appreciated the need of it. As I led up to the occurrence on Number Two hatch, when Mr. Pike had lifted up Larry and toppled him back with a mere slap from the ends of his fingers, I saw in Mr. Pike's eyes a warning, almost threatening, expression. Nevertheless, I completed my description of the episode.

When I had quite finished there was a silence. Miss West was busy serving coffee from a copper percolator. Mr. Pike, profoundly occupied with cracking walnuts, could not quite hide the wicked, little, half-humorous, half-revengeful gleam in his eyes. But Captain West looked straight at me, but from oh! such a distance--millions and millions of miles away. His clear blue eyes were as serene as ever, his tones as low and soft.

"It is the one rule I ask to be observed, Mr. Pathurst--we never discuss the sailors."

It was a facer to me, and with quite a pronounced fellow-feeling for Larry I hurriedly added:

"It was not merely the discipline that interested me. It was the feat of

strength."

"Sailors are trouble enough without our hearing about them, Mr. Pathurst," Captain West went on, as evenly and imperturbably as if I had not spoken. "I leave the handling of the sailors to my officers. That's their business, and they are quite aware that I tolerate no undeserved roughness or severity."

Mr. Pike's harsh face carried the faintest shadow of an amused grin as he stolidly regarded the tablecloth. I glanced to Miss West for sympathy. She laughed frankly, and said:

"You see, father never has any sailors. And it's a good plan, too."

"A very good plan," Mr. Pike muttered.

Then Miss West kindly led the talk away from that subject, and soon had us laughing with a spirited recital of a recent encounter of hers with a Boston cab-driver.

Dinner over, I stepped to my room in quest of cigarettes, and incidentally asked Wada about the cook. Wada was always a great gatherer of information.

"His name Louis," he said. "He Chinaman, too. No; only half Chinaman. Other half Englishman. You know one island Napoleon he stop long time

and bime by die that island?"

"St. Helena," I prompted.

"Yes, that place Louis he born. He talk very good English."

At this moment, entering the hall from the deck, Mr. Mellaire, just relieved by the mate, passed me on his way to the big room in the stern where the second table was set. His "Good evening, sir," was as stately and courteous as any southern gentleman of the old days could have uttered it. And yet I could not like the man. His outward seeming was so at variance with the personality that resided within. Even as he spoke and smiled I felt that from inside his skull he was watching me, studying me. And somehow, in a flash of intuition, I knew not why, I was reminded of the three strange young men, routed last from the forecastle, to whom Mr. Pike had read the law. They, too, had given me a similar impression.

Behind Mr. Mellaire slouched a self-conscious, embarrassed individual, with the face of a stupid boy and the body of a giant. His feet were even larger than Mr. Pike's, but the hands--I shot a quick glance to see--were not so large as Mr. Pike's.

As they passed I looked inquiry to Wada.

"He carpenter. He sat second table. His name Sam Lavroff. He come from

New York on ship. Steward say he very young for carpenter, maybe twenty-two, three years old."

As I approached the open port over my desk I again heard the swish and gurgle of water and again realized that we were under way. So steady and noiseless was our progress, that, say seated at table, it never entered one's head that we were moving or were anywhere save on the solid land. I had been used to steamers all my life, and it was difficult immediately to adjust myself to the absence of the propeller-thrust vibration.

"Well, what do you think?" I asked Wada, who, like myself, had never made a sailing-ship voyage.

He smiled politely.

"Very funny ship. Very funny sailors. I don't know. Mebbe all right. We see."

"You think trouble?" I asked pointedly.

"I think sailors very funny," he evaded.