CHAPTER VIII

Having lighted my cigarette, I strolled for'ard along the deck to where work was going on. Above my head dim shapes of canvas showed in the starlight. Sail was being made, and being made slowly, as I might judge, who was only the veriest tyro in such matters. The indistinguishable shapes of men, in long lines, pulled on ropes. They pulled in sick and dogged silence, though Mr. Pike, ubiquitous, snarled out orders and rapped out oaths from every angle upon their miserable heads.

Certainly, from what I had read, no ship of the old days ever proceeded so sadly and blunderingly to sea. Ere long Mr. Mellaire joined Mr. Pike in the struggle of directing the men. It was not yet eight in the evening, and all hands were at work. They did not seem to know the ropes. Time and again, when the half-hearted suggestions of the bosuns had been of no avail, I saw one or the other of the mates leap to the rail and put the right rope in the hands of the men.

These, on the deck, I concluded, were the hopeless ones. Up aloft, from sounds and cries, I knew were other men, undoubtedly those who were at least a little seaman-like, loosing the sails.

But on deck! Twenty or thirty of the poor devils, tailed on a rope that hoisted a yard, would pull without concerted effort and with painfully slow movements. "Walk away with it!" Mr. Pike would yell. And perhaps

for two or three yards they would manage to walk with the rope ere they came to a halt like stalled horses on a hill. And yet, did either of the mates spring in and add his strength, they were able to move right along the deck without stopping. Either of the mates, old men that they were, was muscularly worth half-a-dozen of the wretched creatures.

"This is what sailin's come to," Mr. Pike paused to snort in my ear. "This ain't the place for an officer down here pulling and hauling. But what can you do when the bosuns are worse than the men?"

"I thought sailors sang songs when they pulled," I said.

"Sure they do. Want to hear 'em?"

I knew there was malice of some sort in his voice, but I answered that I'd like to very much.

"Here, you bosun!" Mr. Pike snarled. "Wake up! Start a song! Topsail halyards!"

In the pause that followed I could have sworn that Sundry Buyers was pressing his hands against his abdomen, while Nancy, infinite bleakness freezing upon his face, was wetting his lips to begin.

Nancy it was who began, for from no other man, I was confident, could have issued so sepulchral a plaint. It was unmusical, unbeautiful,

unlively, and indescribably doleful. Yet the words showed that it should have ripped and crackled with high spirits and lawlessness, for the words poor Nancy sang were:

"Away, way, way, yar,
We'll kill Paddy Doyle for bus boots."

"Quit it! Quit it!" Mr. Pike roared. "This ain't a funeral! Ain't there one of you that can sing? Come on, now! It's a topsail-yard--"

He broke off to leap in to the pin-rail and get the wrong ropes out of the men's hands to put into them the right rope.

"Come on, bosun! Break her out!"

Then out of the gloom arose Sundry Buyers' voice, cracked and crazy and even more lugubrious than Nancy's:

"Then up aloft that yard must go,
Whiskey for my Johnny."

The second line was supposed to be the chorus, but not more than two men feebly mumbled it. Sundry Buyers quavered the next line:

"Oh, whiskey killed my sister Sue."

Then Mr. Pike took a hand, seizing the hauling-part next to the pin and lifting his voice with a rare snap and devilishness:

"And whiskey killed the old man, too,
Whiskey for my Johnny."

He sang the devil-may-care lines on and on, lifting the crew to the work and to the chorused emphasis of "Whiskey for my Johnny."

And to his voice they pulled, they moved, they sang, and were alive, until he interrupted the song to cry "Belay!"

And then all the life and lilt went out of them, and they were again maundering and futile things, getting in one another's way, stumbling and shuffling through the darkness, hesitating to grasp ropes, and, when they did take hold, invariably taking hold of the wrong rope first. Skulkers there were among them, too; and once, from for'ard of the 'midship house, I heard smacks, and curses, and groans, and out of the darkness hurriedly emerged two men, on their heels Mr. Pike, who chanted a recital of the distressing things that would befall them if he caught them at such tricks again.

The whole thing was too depressing for me to care to watch further, so I strolled aft and climbed the poop. In the lee of the chart-house Captain West and the pilot were pacing slowly up and down. Passing on aft, I saw steering at the wheel the weazened little old man I had noted earlier in

the day. In the light of the binnacle his small blue eyes looked more malevolent than ever. So weazened and tiny was he, and so large was the brass-studded wheel, that they seemed of a height. His face was withered, scorched, and wrinkled, and in all seeming he was fifty years older than Mr. Pike. He was the most remarkable figure of a burnt-out, aged man one would expect to find able seaman on one of the proudest sailing-ships afloat. Later, through Wada, I was to learn that his name was Andy Fay and that he claimed no more years than sixty-three.

I leaned against the rail in the lee of the wheel-house, and stared up at the lofty spars and myriad ropes that I could guess were there. No, I decided I was not keen on the voyage. The whole atmosphere of it was wrong. There were the cold hours I had waited on the pier-ends. There was Miss West coming along. There was the crew of broken men and lunatics. I wondered if the wounded Greek in the 'midship house still gibbered, and if Mr. Pike had yet sewed him up; and I was quite sure I would not care to witness such a transaction in surgery.

Even Wada, who had never been in a sailing-ship, had his doubts of the voyage. So had the steward, who had spent most of a life-time in sailing-ships. So far as Captain West was concerned, crews did not exist. And as for Miss West, she was so abominably robust that she could not be anything else than an optimist in such matters. She had always lived; her red blood sang to her only that she would always live and that nothing evil would ever happen to her glorious personality.

Oh, trust me, I knew the way of red blood. Such was my condition that the red-blood health of Miss West was virtually an affront to me--for I knew how unthinking and immoderate such blood could be. And for five months at least--there was Mr. Pike's offered wager of a pound of tobacco or a month's wages to that effect--I was to be pent on the same ship with her. As sure as cosmic sap was cosmic sap, just that sure was I that ere the voyage was over I should be pestered by her making love to me. Please do not mistake me. My certainty in this matter was due, not to any exalted sense of my own desirableness to women, but to my anything but exalted concept of women as instinctive huntresses of men. In my experience women hunted men with quite the same blind tropism that marks the pursuit of the sun by the sunflower, the pursuit of attachable surfaces by the tendrils of the grapevine.

Call me blase--I do not mind, if by blase is meant the world-weariness, intellectual, artistic, sensational, which can come to a young man of thirty. For I was thirty, and I was weary of all these things--weary and in doubt. It was because of this state that I was undertaking the voyage. I wanted to get away by myself, to get away from all these things, and, with proper perspective, mull the matter over.

It sometimes seemed to me that the culmination of this world-sickness had been brought about by the success of my play--my first play, as every one knows. But it had been such a success that it raised the doubt in my own mind, just as the success of my several volumes of verse had raised doubts. Was the public right? Were the critics right? Surely the

function of the artist was to voice life, yet what did I know of life?

So you begin to glimpse what I mean by the world-sickness that afflicted me. Really, I had been, and was, very sick. Mad thoughts of isolating myself entirely from the world had hounded me. I had even canvassed the idea of going to Molokai and devoting the rest of my years to the lepers--I, who was thirty years old, and healthy and strong, who had no particular tragedy, who had a bigger income than I knew how to spend, who by my own achievement had put my name on the lips of men and proved myself a power to be reckoned with--I was that mad that I had considered the lazar house for a destiny.

Perhaps it will be suggested that success had turned my head. Very well. Granted. But the turned head remains a fact, an incontrovertible fact--my sickness, if you will, and a real sickness, and a fact. This I knew: I had reached an intellectual and artistic climacteric, a life-climacteric of some sort. And I had diagnosed my own case and prescribed this voyage. And here was the atrociously healthy and profoundly feminine Miss West along--the very last ingredient I would have considered introducing into my prescription.

A woman! Woman! Heaven knows I had been sufficiently tormented by their persecutions to know them. I leave it to you: thirty years of age, not entirely unhandsome, an intellectual and artistic place in the world, and an income most dazzling--why shouldn't women pursue me? They would have

pursued me had I been a hunchback, for the sake of my artistic place alone, for the sake of my income alone.

Yes; and love! Did I not know love--lyric, passionate, mad, romantic love? That, too, was of old time with me. I, too, had throbbed and sung and sobbed and sighed--yes, and known grief, and buried my dead. But it was so long ago. How young I was--turned twenty-four! And after that I had learned the bitter lesson that even deathless grief may die; and I had laughed again and done my share of philandering with the pretty, ferocious moths that fluttered around the light of my fortune and artistry; and after that, in turn, I had retired disgusted from the lists of woman, and gone on long lance-breaking adventures in the realm of mind. And here I was, on board the Elsinore, unhorsed by my encounters with the problems of the ultimate, carried off the field with a broken pate.

As I leaned against the rail, dismissing premonitions of disaster, I could not help thinking of Miss West below, bustling and humming as she made her little nest. And from her my thought drifted on to the everlasting mystery of woman. Yes, I, with all the futuristic contempt for woman, am ever caught up afresh by the mystery of woman.

Oh, no illusions, thank you. Woman, the love-seeker, obsessing and possessing, fragile and fierce, soft and venomous, prouder than Lucifer and as prideless, holds a perpetual, almost morbid, attraction for the thinker. What is this flame of her, blazing through all her

contradictions and ignobilities?--this ruthless passion for life, always for life, more life on the planet? At times it seems to me brazen, and awful, and soulless. At times I am made petulant by it. And at other times I am swayed by the sublimity of it. No; there is no escape from woman. Always, as a savage returns to a dark glen where goblins are and gods may be, so do I return to the contemplation of woman.

Mr. Pike's voice interrupted my musings. From for'ard, on the main deck, I heard him snarl:

"On the main-topsail-yard, there!--if you cut that gasket I'll split your damned skull!"

Again he called, with a marked change of voice, and the Henry he called to I concluded was the training-ship boy.

"You, Henry, main-skysail-yard, there!" he cried. "Don't make those gaskets up! Fetch 'em in along the yard and make fast to the tye!"

Thus routed from my reverie, I decided to go below to bed. As my hand went out to the knob of the chart-house door again the mate's voice rang out:

"Come on, you gentlemen's sons in disguise! Wake up! Lively now!"