

CHAPTER XII

Another morning of overcast sky and leaden sea, and of the Elsinore, under half her canvas, clanging her deck ports, spouting water from her scuppers, and dashing eastward into the heart of the Atlantic. And I have failed to sleep half-an-hour all told. At this rate, in a very short time I shall have consumed all the cream of tartar on the ship. I never have had hives like these before. I can't understand it. So long as I keep my lamp burning and read I am untroubled. The instant I put out the lamp and drowse off the irritation starts and the lumps on my skin begin to form.

Miss West may be sea-sick, but she cannot be comatose, because at frequent intervals she sends the steward to me with more cream of tartar.

I have had a revelation to-day. I have discovered Captain West. He is a Samurai.--You remember the Samurai that H. G. Wells describes in his Modern Utopia--the superior breed of men who know things and are masters of life and of their fellow-men in a super-benevolent, super-wise way? Well, that is what Captain West is. Let me tell it to you.

We had a shift of wind to-day. In the height of a south-west gale the wind shifted, in the instant, eight points, which is equivalent to a quarter of the circle. Imagine it! Imagine a gale howling from out of the south-west. And then imagine the wind, in a heavier and more violent

gale, abruptly smiting you from the north-west. We had been sailing through a circular storm, Captain West vouchsafed to me, before the event, and the wind could be expected to box the compass.

Clad in sea-boots, oilskins and sou'wester, I had for some time been hanging upon the rail at the break of the poop, staring down fascinated at the poor devils of sailors, repeatedly up to their necks in water, or submerged, or dashed like straws about the deck, while they pulled and hauled, stupidly, blindly, and in evident fear, under the orders of Mr. Pike.

Mr. Pike was with them, working them and working with them. He took every chance they took, yet somehow he escaped being washed off his feet, though several times I saw him entirely buried from view. There was more than luck in the matter; for I saw him, twice, at the head of a line of the men, himself next to the pin. And twice, in this position, I saw the North Atlantic curl over the rail and fall upon them. And each time he alone remained, holding the turn of the rope on the pin, while the rest of them were rolled and sprawled helplessly away.

Almost it seemed to me good fun, as at a circus, watching their antics. But I did not apprehend the seriousness of the situation until, the wind screaming higher than ever and the sea a-smoke and white with wrath, two men did not get up from the deck. One was carried away for'ard with a broken leg--it was Iare Jacobson, a dull-witted Scandinavian; and the other, Kid Twist, was carried away, unconscious, with a bleeding scalp.

In the height of the gusts, in my high position, where the seas did not break, I found myself compelled to cling tightly to the rail to escape being blown away. My face was stung to severe pain by the high-driving spindrift, and I had a feeling that the wind was blowing the cobwebs out of my sleep-starved brain.

And all the time, slender, aristocratic, graceful in streaming oilskins, in apparent unconcern, giving no orders, effortlessly accommodating his body to the violent rolling of the *Elsinore*, Captain West strolled up and down.

It was at this stage in the gale that he unbent sufficiently to tell me that we were going through a circular storm and that the wind was boxing the compass. I did notice that he kept his gaze pretty steadily fixed on the overcast, cloud-driven sky. At last, when it seemed the wind could not possibly blow more fiercely, he found in the sky what he sought. It was then that I first heard his voice--a sea-voice, clear as a bell, distinct as silver, and of an ineffable sweetness and volume, as it might be the trump of Gabriel. That voice!--effortless, dominating! The mighty threat of the storm, made articulate by the resistance of the *Elsinore*, shouted in all the stays, bellowed in the shrouds, thrummed the taut ropes against the steel masts, and from the myriad tiny ropes far aloft evoked a devil's chorus of shrill pipings and screechings. And yet, through this bedlam of noise, came Captain West's voice, as of a spirit visitant, distinct, unrelated, mellow as all music and mighty as

an archangel's call to judgment. And it carried understanding and command to the man at the wheel, and to Mr. Pike, waist-deep in the wash of sea below us. And the man at the wheel obeyed, and Mr. Pike obeyed, barking and snarling orders to the poor wallowing devils who wallowed on and obeyed him in turn. And as the voice was the face. This face I had never seen before. It was the face of the spirit visitant, chaste with wisdom, lighted by a splendour of power and calm. Perhaps it was the calm that smote me most of all. It was as the calm of one who had crossed chaos to bless poor sea-worn men with the word that all was well. It was not the face of the fighter. To my thrilled imagination it was the face of one who dwelt beyond all strivings of the elements and broody dissensions of the blood.

The Samurai had arrived, in thunders and lightnings, riding the wings of the storm, directing the gigantic, labouring Elsinore in all her intricate massiveness, commanding the wisps of humans to his will, which was the will of wisdom.

And then, that wonderful Gabriel voice of his, silent (while his creatures laboured his will), unconcerned, detached and casual, more slenderly tall and aristocratic than ever in his streaming oilskins, Captain West touched my shoulder and pointed astern over our weather quarter. I looked, and all that I could see was a vague smoke of sea and air and a cloud-bank of sky that tore at the ocean's breast. And at the same moment the gale from the south-west ceased. There was no gale, no

moving zephyrs, nothing but a vast quietude of air.

"What is it?" I gasped, out of equilibrium from the abrupt cessation of wind.

"The shift," he said. "There she comes."

And it came, from the north-west, a blast of wind, a blow, an atmospheric impact that bewildered and stunned and again made the Elsinore harp protest. It forced me down on the rail. I was like a windle-straw. As I faced this new abruptness of gale it drove the air back into my lungs, so that I suffocated and turned my head aside to breathe in the lee of the draught. The man at the wheel again listened to the Gabriel voice; and Mr. Pike, on the deck below, listened and repeated the will of the voice; and Captain West, in slender and stately balance, leaned into the face of the wind and slowly paced the deck.

It was magnificent. Now, and for the first time, I knew the sea, and the men who overlord the sea. Captain West had vindicated himself, expositied himself. At the height and crisis of storm he had taken charge of the Elsinore, and Mr. Pike had become, what in truth was all he was, the foreman of a gang of men, the slave-driver of slaves, serving the one from beyond--the Samurai.

A minute or so longer Captain West strolled up and down, leaning easily into the face of this new and abominable gale or resting his back against

it, and then he went below, pausing for a moment, his hand on the knob of the chart-room door, to cast a last measuring look at the storm-white sea and wrath-sombre sky he had mastered.

Ten minutes later, below, passing the open cabin door, I glanced in and saw him. Sea-boots and storm-trappings were gone; his feet, in carpet slippers, rested on a hassock; while he lay back in the big leather chair smoking dreamily, his eyes wide open, absorbed, non-seeing--or, if they saw, seeing things beyond the reeling cabin walls and beyond my ken. I have developed an immense respect for Captain West, though now I know him less than the little I thought I knew him before.