

CHAPTER XIII

Small wonder that Miss West remains sea-sick on an ocean like this, which has become a factory where the veering gales manufacture the selectest and most mountainous brands of cross-seas. The way the poor Elsinore pitches, plunges, rolls, and shivers, with all her lofty spars and masts and all her five thousand tons of dead-weight cargo, is astonishing. To me she is the most erratic thing imaginable; yet Mr. Pike, with whom I now pace the poop on occasion, tells me that coal is a good cargo, and that the Elsinore is well-loaded because he saw to it himself.

He will pause abruptly, in the midst of his interminable pacing, in order to watch her in her maddest antics. The sight is very pleasant to him, for his eyes glisten and a faint glow seems to irradiate his face and impart to it a hint of ecstasy. The Elsinore has a snug place in his heart, I am confident. He calls her behaviour admirable, and at such times will repeat to me that it was he who saw to her loading.

It is very curious, the habituation of this man, through a long life on the sea, to the motion of the sea. There is a rhythm to this chaos of crossing, buffeting waves. I sense this rhythm, although I cannot solve it. But Mr. Pike knows it. Again and again, as we paced up and down this afternoon, when to me nothing unusually antic seemed impending, he would seize my arm as I lost balance, and as the Elsinore smashed down on her side and heeled over and over with a colossal roll that seemed

never to end, and that always ended with an abrupt, snap-of-the-whip effect as she began the corresponding roll to windward. In vain I strove to learn how Mr. Pike forecasts these antics, and I am driven to believe that he does not consciously forecast them at all. He feels them; he knows them. They, and the sea, are ingrained in him.

Toward the end of our little promenade I was guilty of impatiently shaking off a sudden seizure of my arm in his big paw. If ever, in an hour, the Elsinore had been less gymnastic than at that moment, I had not noticed it. So I shook off the sustaining clutch, and the next moment the Elsinore had smashed down and buried a couple of hundred feet of her starboard rail beneath the sea, while I had shot down the deck and smashed myself breathless against the wall of the chart-house. My ribs and one shoulder are sore from it yet. Now how did he know?

And he never staggers nor seems in danger of being rolled away. On the contrary, such a surplus of surety of balance has he that time and again he lent his surplus to me. I begin to have more respect, not for the sea, but for the men of the sea, and not for the sweepings of seamen that are as slaves on our decks, but for the real seamen who are their masters--for Captain West, for Mr. Pike, yes, and for Mr. Mellaire, dislike him as I do.

As early as three in the afternoon the wind, still a gale, went back to the south-west. Mr. Mellaire had the deck, and he went below and reported the change to Captain West.

"We'll wear ship at four, Mr. Pathurst," the second mate told me when he came back. "You'll find it an interesting manoeuvre."

"But why wait till four?" I asked.

"The Captain's orders, sir. The watches will be changing, and we'll have the use of both of them, without working a hardship on the watch below by calling it out now."

And when both watches were on deck Captain West, again in oilskins, came out of the chart-house. Mr. Pike, out on the bridge, took charge of the many men who, on deck and on the poop, were to manage the mizzen-braces, while Mr. Mellaire went for'ard with his watch to handle the fore-and-main-braces. It was a pretty manoeuvre, a play of leverages, by which they cased the force of the wind on the after part of the Elsinore and used the force of the wind on the for'ard part.

Captain West gave no orders whatever, and, to all intents, was quite oblivious of what was being done. He was again the favoured passenger, taking a stroll for his health's sake. And yet I knew that both his officers were uncomfortably aware of his presence and were keyed to their finest seamanship. I know, now, Captain West's position on board. He is the brains of the Elsinore. He is the master strategist. There is more in directing a ship on the ocean than in standing watches and ordering men to pull and haul. They are pawns, and the two officers are

pieces, with which Captain West plays the game against sea, and wind, and season, and ocean current. He is the knower. They are his tongue, by which he makes his knowledge articulate.

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A bad night--equally bad for the Elsinore and for me. She is receiving a sharp buffeting at the hands of the wintry North Atlantic. I fell asleep early, exhausted from lack of sleep, and awoke in an hour, frantic with my lumped and burning skin. More cream of tartar, more reading, more vain attempts to sleep, until shortly before five, when the steward brought me my coffee, I wrapped myself in my dressing-gown, and like a being distracted prowled into the cabin. I dozed in a leather chair and was thrown out by a violent roll of the ship. I tried the sofa, sinking to sleep immediately, and immediately thereafter finding myself precipitated to the floor. I am convinced that when Captain West naps on the sofa he is only half asleep. How else can he maintain so precarious a position?--unless, in him, too, the sea and its motion be ingrained.

I wandered into the dining-room, wedged myself into a screwed chair, and fell asleep, my head on my arms, my arms on the table. And at quarter past seven the steward roused me by shaking my shoulders. It was time to set table.

Heavy with the brief heaviness of sleep I had had, I dressed and stumbled up on to the poop in the hope that the wind would clear my brain. Mr.

Pike had the watch, and with sure, age-lagging step he paced the deck. The man is a marvel--sixty-nine years old, a life of hardship, and as sturdy as a lion. Yet of the past night alone his hours had been: four to six in the afternoon on deck; eight to twelve on deck; and four to eight in the morning on deck. In a few minutes he would be relieved, but at midday he would again be on deck.

I leaned on the poop-rail and stared for'ard along the dreary waste of deck. Every port and scupper was working to ease the weight of North Atlantic that perpetually fell on board. Between the rush of the cascades, streaks of rust showed everywhere. Some sort of a wooden pin-rail had carried away on the starboard-rail at the foot of the mizzen-shrouds, and an amazing raffle of ropes and tackles washed about. Here Nancy and half-a-dozen men worked sporadically, and in fear of their lives, to clear the tangle.

The long-suffering bleakness was very pronounced on Nancy's face, and when the walls of water, in impending downfall, reared above the Elsinore's rail, he was always the first to leap for the life-line which had been stretched fore and aft across the wide space of deck.

The rest of the men were scarcely less backward in dropping their work and springing to safety--if safety it might be called, to grip a rope in both hands and have legs sweep out from under, and be wrenched full-length upon the boiling surface of an ice-cold flood. Small wonder they look wretched. Bad as their condition was when they came aboard at

Baltimore, they look far worse now, what of the last several days of wet and freezing hardship.

From time to time, completing his for'ard pace along the poop, Mr. Pike would pause, ere he retraced his steps, and snort sardonic glee at what happened to the poor devils below. The man's heart is callous. A thing of iron, he has endured; and he has no patience nor sympathy with these creatures who lack his own excessive iron.

I noticed the stone-deaf man, the twisted oaf whose face I have described as being that of an ill-treated and feeble-minded faun. His bright, liquid, pain-filled eyes were more filled with pain than ever, his face still more lean and drawn with suffering. And yet his face showed an excess of nervousness, sensitiveness, and a pathetic eagerness to please and do. I could not help observing that, despite his dreadful sense-handicap and his wrecked, frail body, he did the most work, was always the last of the group to spring to the life-line and always the first to loose the life-line and slosh knee-deep or waist-deep through the churning water to attack the immense and depressing tangle of rope and tackle.

I remarked to Mr. Pike that the men seemed thinner and weaker than when they came on board, and he delayed replying for a moment while he stared down at them with that cattle-buyer's eye of his.

"Sure they are," he said disgustedly. "A weak breed, that's what they

are--nothing to build on, no stamina. The least thing drags them down. Why, in my day we grew fat on work like that--only we didn't; we worked so hard there wasn't any chance for fat. We kept in fighting trim, that was all. But as for this scum and slum--say, you remember, Mr. Pathurst, that man I spoke to the first day, who said his name was Charles Davis?"

"The one you thought there was something the matter with?"

"Yes, and there was, too. He's in that 'midship room with the Greek now. He'll never do a tap of work the whole Voyage. He's a hospital case, if there ever was one. Talk about shot to pieces! He's got holes in him I could shove my fist through. I don't know whether they're perforating ulcers, or cancers, or cannon-shot wounds, or what not. And he had the nerve to tell me they showed up after he came on board!"

"And he had them all the time?" I asked.

"All the time! Take my word, Mr. Pathurst, they're years old. But he's a wonder. I watched him those first days, sent him aloft, had him down in the fore-hold trimming a few tons of coal, did everything to him, and he never showed a wince. Being up to the neck in the salt water finally fetched him, and now he's reported off duty--for the voyage. And he'll draw his wages for the whole time, have all night in, and never do a tap. Oh, he's a hot one to have passed over on us, and the Elsinore's another man short."

"Another!" I exclaimed. "Is the Greek going to die?"

"No fear. I'll have him steering in a few days. I refer to the misfits. If we rolled a dozen of them together they wouldn't make one real man. I'm not saying it to alarm you, for there's nothing alarming about it; but we're going to have proper hell this voyage." He broke off to stare reflectively at his broken knuckles, as if estimating how much drive was left in them, then sighed and concluded, "Well, I can see I've got my work cut out for me."

Sympathizing with Mr. Pike is futile; the only effect is to make his mood blacker. I tried it, and he retaliated with:

"You oughta see the bloke with curvature of the spine in Mr. Mellaire's watch. He's a proper hobo, too, and a land lubber, and don't weigh more'n a hundred pounds, and must be fifty years old, and he's got curvature of the spine, and he's able seaman, if you please, on the Elsinore. And worse than all that, he puts it over on you; he's nasty, he's mean, he's a viper, a wasp. He ain't afraid of anything because he knows you dassent hit him for fear of croaking him. Oh, he's a pearl of purest ray serene, if anybody should slide down a backstay and ask you. If you fail to identify him any other way, his name is Mulligan Jacobs."

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After breakfast, again on deck, in Mr. Mellaire's watch, I discovered

another efficient. He was at the wheel, a small, well-knit, muscular man of say forty-five, with black hair graying on the temples, a big eagle-face, swarthy, with keen, intelligent black eyes.

Mr. Mellaire vindicated my judgment by telling me the man was the best sailor in his watch, a proper seaman. When he referred to the man as the Maltese Cockney, and I asked why, he replied:

"First, because he is Maltese, Mr. Pathurst; and next, because he talks Cockney like a native. And depend upon it, he heard Bow Bells before he lisped his first word."

"And has O'Sullivan bought Andy Fay's sea-boots yet?" I queried.

It was at this moment that Miss West emerged upon the poop. She was as rosy and vital as ever, and certainly, if she had been sea-sick, she flew no signals of it. As she came toward me, greeting me, I could not help remarking again the lithe and springy limb-movement with which she walked, and her fine, firm skin. Her neck, free in a sailor collar, with white sweater open at the throat, seemed almost redoubtably strong to my sleepless, jaundiced eyes. Her hair, under a white knitted cap, was smooth and well-groomed. In fact, the totality of impression she conveyed was of a well-groomedness one would not expect of a sea-captain's daughter, much less of a woman who had been sea-sick. Life!--that is the key of her, the essential note of her--life and health. I'll wager she has never entertained a morbid thought in that

practical, balanced, sensible head of hers.

"And how have you been?" she asked, then rattled on with sheer exuberance ere I could answer. "Had a lovely night's sleep. I was really over my sickness yesterday, but I just devoted myself to resting up. I slept ten solid hours--what do you think of that?"

"I wish I could say the same," I replied with appropriate dejection, as I swung in beside her, for she had evinced her intention of promenading.

"Oh, then you've been sick?"

"On the contrary," I answered dryly. "And I wish I had been. I haven't had five hours' sleep all told since I came on board. These pestiferous hives. . . "

I held up a lumpy wrist to show. She took one glance at it, halted abruptly, and, neatly balancing herself to the roll, took my wrist in both her hands and gave it close scrutiny.

"Mercy!" she cried; and then began to laugh.

I was of two minds. Her laughter was delightful to the ear, there was such a mellowness, and healthiness, and frankness about it. On the other hand, that it should be directed at my misfortune was exasperating. I suppose my perplexity showed in my face, for when she had eased her

laughter and looked at me with a sobering countenance, she immediately went off into more peals.

"You poor child," she gurgled at last. "And when I think of all the cream of tartar I made you consume!"

It was rather presumptuous of her to poor-child me, and I resolved to take advantage of the data I already possessed in order to ascertain just how many years she was my junior. She had told me she was twelve years old the time the Dixie collided with the river steamer in San Francisco Bay. Very well, all I had to do was to ascertain the date of that disaster and I had her. But in the meantime she laughed at me and my hives.

"I suppose it is--er--humorous, in some sort of way," I said a bit stiffly, only to find that there was no use in being stiff with Miss West, for it only set her off into more laughter.

"What you needed," she announced, with fresh gurglings, "was an exterior treatment."

"Don't tell me I've got the chicken-pox or the measles," I protested.

"No." She shook her head emphatically while she enjoyed another paroxysm. "What you are suffering from is a severe attack . . ."

She paused deliberately, and looked me straight the eyes.

"Of bedbugs," she concluded. And then, all seriousness and practicality, she went on: "But we'll have that righted in a jiffy. I'll turn the Elsinore's after-quarters upside down, though I know there are none in father's room or mine. And though this is my first voyage with Mr. Pike I know he's too hard-bitten" (here I laughed at her involuntary pun) "an old sailor not to know that his room is clean. Yours" (I was perturbed for fear she was going to say that I had brought them on board) "have most probably drifted in from for'ard. They always have them for'ard.

"And now, Mr. Pathurst, I am going down to attend to your case. You'd better get your Wada to make up a camping kit for you. The next couple of nights you'll spend in the cabin or chart-room. And be sure Wada removes all silver and metallic tarnishable stuff from your rooms. There's going to be all sorts of fumigating, and tearing out of woodwork, and rebuilding. Trust me. I know the vermin."