

CHAPTER XIV

Such a cleaning up and turning over! For two nights, one in the chart-room and one on the cabin sofa, I have soaked myself in sleep, and I am now almost stupid with excess of sleep. The land seems very far away. By some strange quirk, I have an impression that weeks, or months, have passed since I left Baltimore on that bitter March morning. And yet it was March 28, and this is only the first week in April.

I was entirely right in my first estimation of Miss West. She is the most capable, practically masterful woman I have ever encountered. What passed between her and Mr. Pike I do not know; but whatever it was, she was convinced that he was not the erring one. In some strange way, my two rooms are the only ones which have been invaded by this plague of vermin. Under Miss West's instructions bunks, drawers, shelves, and all superficial woodwork have been ripped out. She worked the carpenter from daylight till dark, and then, after a night of fumigation, two of the sailors, with turpentine and white lead, put the finishing touches on the cleansing operations. The carpenter is now busy rebuilding my rooms. Then will come the painting, and in two or three more days I expect to be settled back in my quarters.

Of the men who did the turpentinaing and white-leading there have been four. Two of them were quickly rejected by Miss West as not being up to the work. The first one, Steve Roberts, which he told me was his name,

is an interesting fellow. I talked with him quite a bit ere Miss West sent him packing and told Mr. Pike that she wanted a real sailor.

This is the first time Steve Roberts has ever seen the sea. How he happened to drift from the western cattle-ranges to New York he did not explain, any more than did he explain how he came to ship on the Elsinore. But here he is, not a sailor on horseback, but a cowboy on the sea. He is a small man, but most powerfully built. His shoulders are very broad, and his muscles bulge under his shirt; and yet he is slender-waisted, lean-limbed, and hollow-cheeked. This last, however, is not due to sickness or ill-health. Tyro as he is on the sea, Steve Roberts is keen and intelligent . . . yes, and crooked. He has a way of looking straight at one with utmost frankness while he talks, and yet it is at such moments I get most strongly the impression of crookedness. But he is a man, if trouble should arise, to be reckoned with. In ways he suggests a kinship with the three men Mr. Pike took so instant a prejudice against--Kid Twist, Nosey Murphy, and Bert Rhine. And I have already noticed, in the dog-watches, that it is with this trio that Steve Roberts chums.

The second sailor Miss West rejected, after silently watching him work for five minutes, was Mulligan Jacobs, the wisp of a man with curvature of the spine. But before she sent him packing other things occurred in which I was concerned. I was in the room when Mulligan Jacobs first came in to go to work, and I could not help observing the startled, avid glance he threw at my big shelves of books. He advanced on them in the

way a robber might advance on a secret hoard of gold, and as a miser would fondle gold so Mulligan Jacobs fondled these book-titles with his eyes.

And such eyes! All time bitterness and venom Mr. Pike had told me the man possessed was there in his eyes. They were small, pale-blue, and gimlet-pointed with fire. His eyelids were inflamed, and but served to ensanguine the bitter and cold-blazing intensity of the pupils. The man was constitutionally a hater, and I was not long in learning that he hated all things except books.

"Would you care to read some of them?" I said hospitably.

All the caress in his eyes for the books vanished as he turned his head to look at me, and ere he spoke I knew that I, too, was hated.

"It's hell, ain't it?--you with a strong body and servants to carry for you a weight of books like this, and me with a curved spine that puts the pot-hooks of hell-fire into my brain?"

How can I possibly convey the terrible venomousness with which he uttered these words? I know that Mr. Pike, dragging his feet down the hall past my open door, gave me a very gratifying sense of safety. Being alone in the room with this man seemed much the same as if I were locked in a cage with a tiger-cat. The devilishness, the wickedness, and, above all, the pitch of glaring hatred with which the man eyed me and addressed me, were

most unpleasant. I swear I knew fear--not calculated caution, not timid apprehension, but blind, panic, unreasoned terror. The malignancy of the creature was blood curdling; nor did it require words to convey it: it poured from him, out of his red-rimmed, blazing eyes, out of his withered, twisted, tortured face, out of his broken-nailed, crooked talons of hands. And yet, in that very moment of instinctive startle and repulsion, the thought was in my mind that with one hand I could take the throat of the weazened wisp of a crippled thing and throttle the malformed life out of it.

But there was little encouragement in such thought--no more than a man might feel in a cave of rattlesnakes or a pit of centipedes, for, crush them with his very bulk, nevertheless they would first sink their poison into him. And so with this Mulligan Jacobs. My fear of him was the fear of being infected with his venom. I could not help it; for I caught a quick vision of the black and broken teeth I had seen in his mouth sinking into my flesh, polluting me, eating me with their acid, destroying me.

One thing was very clear. In the creature was no fear. Absolutely, he did not know fear. He was as devoid of it as the fetid slime one treads underfoot in nightmares. Lord, Lord! that is what the thing was, a nightmare.

"You suffer pain often?" I asked, attempting to get myself in hand by the calculated use of sympathy.

"The hooks are in me, in the brain, white-hot hooks that burn an' burn," was his reply. "But by what damnable right do you have all these books, and time to read 'em, an' all night in to read 'em, an' soak in them, when me brain's on fire, and I'm watch and watch, an' me broken spine won't let me carry half a hundredweight of books about with me?"

Another madman, was my conclusion; and yet I was quickly compelled to modify it, for, thinking to play with a rattle-brain, I asked him what were the books up to half a hundredweight he carried, and what were the writers he preferred. His library, he told me, among other things included, first and fore-most, a complete Byron. Next was a complete Shakespeare; also a complete Browning in one volume. A full hall-dozen he had in the fore-castle of Renan, a stray volume of Lecky, Winwood Reade's Martyrdom of Man, several of Carlyle, and eight or ten of Zola. Zola he swore by, though Anatole France was a prime favourite.

He might be mad, was my revised judgment, but he was most differently mad from any madman I had ever encountered. I talked on with him about books and bookmen. He was most universal and particular. He liked O. Henry. George Moore was a cad and a four--flusher. Edgar Saltus' Anatomy of Negation was profounder than Kant. Maeterlinck was a mystic frump. Emerson was a charlatan. Ibsen's Ghosts was the stuff, though Ibsen was a bourgeois lickspittler. Heine was the real goods. He preferred Flaubert to de Maupassant, and Turgenieff to Tolstoy; but Gorky was the best of the Russian boiling. John Masefield knew what he was writing

about, and Joseph Conrad was living too fat to turn out the stuff he first turned out.

And so it went, the most amazing running commentary on literature I had ever heard. I was hugely interested, and I quizzed him on sociology.

Yes, he was a Red, and knew his Kropotkin, but he was no anarchist. On the other hand, political action was a blind-alley leading to reformism and quietism. Political socialism had gone to pot, while industrial unionism was the logical culmination of Marxism. He was a direct actionist. The mass strike was the thing. Sabotage, not merely as a withdrawal of efficiency, but as a keen destruction-of-profits policy, was the weapon. Of course he believed in the propaganda of the deed, but a man was a fool to talk about it. His job was to do it and keep his mouth shut, and the way to do it was to shoot the evidence. Of course, he talked; but what of it? Didn't he have curvature of the spine? He didn't care when he got his, and woe to the man who tried to give it to him.

And while he talked he hated me. He seemed to hate the things he talked about and espoused. I judged him to be of Irish descent, and it was patent that he was self-educated. When I asked him how it was he had come to sea, he replied that the hooks in his brain were as hot one place as another. He unbent enough to tell me that he had been an athlete, when he was a young man, a professional foot-racer in Eastern Canada. And then his disease had come upon him, and for a quarter of a century he had been a common tramp and vagabond, and he bragged of a personal

acquaintance with more city prisons and county jails than any man that ever existed.

It was at this stage in our talk that Mr. Pike thrust his head into the doorway. He did not address me, but he favoured me with a most sour look of disapprobation. Mr. Pike's countenance is almost petrified. Any expression seems to crack it--with the exception of sourness. But when Mr. Pike wants to look sour he has no difficulty at all. His hard-skinned, hard-muscled face just flows to sourness. Evidently he condemned my consuming Mulligan Jacobs's time. To Mulligan Jacobs he said in his customary snarl:

"Go on an' get to your work. Chew the rag in your watch below."

And then I got a sample of Mulligan Jacobs. The venom of hatred I had already seen in his face was as nothing compared with what now was manifested. I had a feeling that, like stroking a cat in cold weather, did I touch his face it would crackle electric sparks.

"Aw, go to hell, you old stiff," said Mulligan Jacobs.

If ever I had seen murder in a man's eyes, I saw it then in the mate's. He lunged into the room, his arm tensed to strike, the hand not open but clenched. One stroke of that bear's paw and Mulligan Jacobs and all the poisonous flame of him would have been quenched in the everlasting darkness. But he was unafraid. Like a cornered rat, like a rattlesnake

on the trail, unflinching, sneering, snarling, he faced the irate giant. More than that. He even thrust his face forward on its twisted neck to meet the blow.

It was too much for Mr. Pike; it was too impossible to strike that frail, crippled, repulsive thing.

"It's me that can call you the stiff," said Mulligan Jacobs. "I ain't no Larry. G'wan an' hit me. Why don't you hit me?"

And Mr. Pike was too appalled to strike the creature. He, whose whole career on the sea had been that of a bucko driver in a shambles, could not strike this fractured splinter of a man. I swear that Mr. Pike actually struggled with himself to strike. I saw it. But he could not.

"Go on to your work," he ordered. "The voyage is young yet, Mulligan. I'll have you eatin' outa my hand before it's over."

And Mulligan Jacobs's face thrust another inch closer on its twisted neck, while all his concentrated rage seemed on the verge of bursting into incandescence. So immense and tremendous was the bitterness that consumed him that he could find no words to clothe it. All he could do was to hawk and guttural deep in his throat until I should not have been surprised had he spat poison in the mate's face.

And Mr. Pike turned on his heel and left the room, beaten, absolutely

beaten.

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I can't get it out of my mind. The picture of the mate and the cripple facing each other keeps leaping up under my eyelids. This is different from the books and from what I know of existence. It is revelation. Life is a profoundly amazing thing. What is this bitter flame that informs Mulligan Jacobs? How dare he--with no hope of any profit, not a hero, not a leader of a forlorn hope nor a martyr to God, but a mere filthy, malignant rat--how dare he, I ask myself, be so defiant, so death-inviting? The spectacle of him makes me doubt all the schools of the metaphysicians and the realists. No philosophy has a leg to stand on that does not account for Mulligan Jacobs. And all the midnight oil of philosophy I have burned does not enable me to account for Mulligan Jacobs . . . unless he be insane. And then I don't know.

Was there ever such a freight of human souls on the sea as these humans with whom I am herded on the Elsinore?

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And now, working in my rooms, white-leading and turpentineing, is another one of them. I have learned his name. It is Arthur Deacon. He is the pallid, furtive-eyed man whom I observed the first day when the men were routed out of the fore-castle to man the windlass--the man I so instantly

adjudged a drug-fiend. He certainly looks it.

I asked Mr. Pike his estimate of the man.

"White slaver," was his answer. "Had to skin outa New York to save his skin. He'll be consorting with those other three larrakins I gave a piece of my mind to."

"And what do you make of them?" I asked.

"A month's wages to a pound of tobacco that a district attorney, or a committee of some sort investigating the New York police is lookin' for 'em right now. I'd like to have the cash somebody's put up in New York to send them on this get-away. Oh, I know the breed."

"Gangsters?" I queried.

"That's what. But I'll trim their dirty hides. I'll trim 'em. Mr. Pathurst, this voyage ain't started yet, and this old stiff's a long way from his last legs. I'll give them a run for their money. Why, I've buried better men than the best of them aboard this craft. And I'll bury some of them that think me an old stiff."

He paused and looked at me solemnly for a full half minute.

"Mr. Pathurst, I've heard you're a writing man. And when they told me at

the agents' you were going along passenger, I made a point of going to see your play. Now I'm not saying anything about that play, one way or the other. But I just want to tell you, that as a writing man you'll get stuff in plenty to write about on this voyage. Hell's going to pop, believe me, and right here before you is the stiff that'll do a lot of the poppin'. Some several and plenty's going to learn who's an old stiff."