

CHAPTER XV

How I have been sleeping! This relief of renewed normality is delicious--thanks to Miss West. Now why did not Captain West, or Mr. Pike, both experienced men, diagnose my trouble for me? And then there was Wada. But no; it required Miss West. Again I contemplate the problem of woman. It is just such an incident among a million others that keeps the thinker's gaze fixed on woman. They truly are the mothers and the conservers of the race.

Rail as I will at Miss West's red-blood complacency of life, yet I must bow my head to her life-giving to me. Practical, sensible, hard-headed, a comfort-maker and a nest-builder, possessing all the distressing attributes of the blind-instinctive race-mother, nevertheless I must confess I am most grateful that she is along. Had she not been on the Elsinore, by this time I should have been so overwrought from lack of sleep that I would be biting my veins and howling--as mad a hatter as any of our cargo of mad hatters. And so we come to it--the everlasting mystery of woman. One may not be able to get along with her; yet is it patent, as of old time, that one cannot get along without her. But, regarding Miss West, I do entertain one fervent hope, namely, that she is not a suffragette. That would be too much.

Captain West may be a Samurai, but he is also human. He was really a bit fluttery this morning, in his reserved, controlled way, when he regretted

the plague of vermin I had encountered in my rooms. It seems he has a keen sense of hospitality, and that he is my host on the Elsinore, and that, although he is oblivious of the existence of the crew, he is not oblivious of my comfort. By his few expressions of regret it appears that he cannot forgive himself for his careless acceptance of the erroneous diagnosis of my affliction. Yes; Captain West is a real human man. Is he not the father of the slender-faced, strapping-bodied Miss West?

"Thank goodness that's settled," was Miss West's exclamation this morning, when we met on the poop and after I had told her how gloriously I had slept.

And then, that nightmare episode dismissed because, forsooth, for all practical purposes--it was settled, she next said:

"Come on and see the chickens."

And I accompanied her along the spidery bridge to the top of the 'midship-house, to look at the one rooster and the four dozen fat hens in the ship's chicken-coop.

As I accompanied her, my eyes dwelling pleasurably on that vital gait of hers as she preceded me, I could not help reflecting that, coming down on the tug from Baltimore, she had promised not to bother me nor require to be entertained.

Come and see the chickens!--Oh, the sheer female possessiveness of that simple invitation! For effrontery of possessiveness is there anything that can exceed the nest-making, planet-populating, female, human woman?--Come and see the chickens! Oh, well, the sailors for'ard may be hard-bitten, but I can promise Miss West that here, aft, is one male passenger, unmarried and never married, who is an equally hard-bitten adventurer on the sea of matrimony. When I go over the census I remember at least several women, superior to Miss West, who trilled their song of sex and failed to shipwreck me.

As I read over what I have written I notice how the terminology of the sea has stolen into my mental processes. Involuntarily I think in terms of the sea. Another thing I notice is my excessive use of superlatives. But then, everything on board the *Elsinore* is superlative. I find myself continually combing my vocabulary in quest of just and adequate words. Yet am I aware of failure. For example, all the words of all the dictionaries would fail to approximate the exceeding terribleness of Mulligan Jacobs.

But to return to the chickens. Despite every precaution, it was evident that they had had a hard time during the past days of storm. It was equally evident that Miss West, even during her sea-sickness, had not neglected them. Under her directions the steward had actually installed a small oil-stove in the big coop, and she now beckoned him up to the top of the house as he was passing for'ard to the galley. It was for the

purpose of instructing him further in the matter of feeding them.

Where were the grits? They needed grits. He didn't know. The sack had been lost among the miscellaneous stores, but Mr. Pike had promised a couple of sailors that afternoon to overhaul the lazarette.

"Plenty of ashes," she told the steward. "Remember. And if a sailor doesn't clean the coop each day, you report to me. And give them only clean food--no spoiled scraps, mind. How many eggs yesterday?"

The steward's eyes glistened with enthusiasm as he said he had got nine the day before and expected fully a dozen to-day.

"The poor things," said Miss West--to me. "You've no idea how bad weather reduces their laying." She turned back upon the steward. "Mind now, you watch and find out which hens don't lay, and kill them first. And you ask me each time before you kill one."

I found myself neglected, out there on top the draughty house, while Miss West talked chickens with the Chinese ex-smuggler. But it gave me opportunity to observe her. It is the length of her eyes that accentuates their steadiness of gaze--helped, of course, by the dark brows and lashes. I noted again the warm gray of her eyes. And I began to identify her, to locate her. She is a physical type of the best of the womanhood of old New England. Nothing spare nor meagre, nor bred out, but generously strong, and yet not quite what one would call robust.

When I said she was strapping-bodied I erred. I must fall back on my other word, which will have to be the last: Miss West is vital-bodied. That is the key-word.

When we had regained the poop, and Miss West had gone below, I ventured my customary pleasantries with Mr. Mellaire of:

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

"Not yet, Mr. Pathurst," was the reply, "though he nearly got them early this morning. Come on along, sir, and I'll show you."

Vouchsafing no further information, the second mate led the way along the bridge, across the 'midship-house and the for'ard-house. From the edge of the latter, looking down on Number One hatch, I saw two Japanese, with sail-needles and twine, sewing up a canvas-swathed bundle that unmistakably contained a human body.

"O'Sullivan used a razor," said Mr. Mellaire.

"And that is Andy Fay?" I cried.

"No, sir, not Andy. That's a Dutchman. Christian Jespersen was his name on the articles. He got in O'Sullivan's way when O'Sullivan went after the boots. That's what saved Andy. Andy was more active. Jespersen couldn't get out of his own way, much less out of O'Sullivan's. There's

Andy sitting over there."

I followed Mr. Mellaire's gaze, and saw the burnt-out, aged little Scotchman squatted on a spare spar and sucking a pipe. One arm was in a sling and his head was bandaged. Beside him squatted Mulligan Jacobs. They were a pair. Both were blue-eyed, and both were malevolent-eyed. And they were equally emaciated. It was easy to see that they had discovered early in the voyage their kinship of bitterness. Andy Fay, I knew, was sixty-three years old, although he looked a hundred; and Mulligan Jacobs, who was only about fifty, made up for the difference by the furnace-heat of hatred that burned in his face and eyes. I wondered if he sat beside the injured bitter one in some sense of sympathy, or if he were there in order to gloat.

Around the corner of the house strolled Shorty, flinging up to me his inevitable clown-grin. One hand was swathed in bandages.

"Must have kept Mr. Pike busy," was my comment to Mr. Mellaire.

"He was sewing up cripples about all his watch from four till eight."

"What?" I asked. "Are there any more?"

"One more, sir, a sheeny. I didn't know his name before, but Mr. Pike got it--Isaac B. Chantz. I never saw in all my life at sea as many sheenies as are on board the Elsinore right now. Sheenies don't take

to the sea as a rule. We've certainly got more than our share of them. Chantz isn't badly hurt, but you ought to hear him whimper."

"Where's O'Sullivan?" I inquired.

"In the 'midship-house with Davis, and without a mark. Mr. Pike got into the rumpus and put him to sleep with one on the jaw. And now he's lashed down and talking in a trance. He's thrown the fear of God into Davis. Davis is sitting up in his bunk with a marlin-spike, threatening to brain O'Sullivan if he starts to break loose, and complaining that it's no way to run a hospital. He'd have padded cells, straitjackets, night and day nurses, and violent wards, I suppose--and a convalescents' home in a Queen Anne cottage on the poop.

"Oh dear, oh dear," Mr. Mellaire sighed. "This is the funniest voyage and the funniest crew I've ever tackled. It's not going to come to a good end. Anybody can see that with half an eye. It'll be dead of winter off the Horn, and a fo'c's'le full of lunatics and cripples to do the work.--Just take a look at that one. Crazy as a bedbug. He's likely to go overboard any time."

I followed his glance and saw Tony the Greek, the one who had sprung overboard the first day. He had just come around the corner of the house, and, beyond one arm in a sling, seemed in good condition. He walked easily and with strength, a testimonial to the virtues of Mr. Pike's rough surgery.

My eyes kept returning to the canvas-covered body of Christian Jespersen, and to the Japanese who sewed with sail-twine his sailor's shroud. One of them had his right hand in a huge wrapping of cotton and bandage.

"Did he get hurt, too?" I asked.

"No, sir. He's the sail-maker. They're both sail-makers. He's a good one, too. Yatsuda is his name. But he's just had blood-poisoning and lain in hospital in New York for eighteen months. He flatly refused to let them amputate. He's all right now, but the hand is dead, all except the thumb and fore-finger, and he's teaching himself to sew with his left hand. He's as clever a sail-maker as you'll find at sea."

"A lunatic and a razor make a cruel combination," I remarked.

"It's put five men out of commission," Mr. Mellaire sighed. "There's O'Sullivan himself, and Christian Jespersen gone, and Andy Fay, and Shorty, and the sheeny. And the voyage not started yet. And there's Lars with the broken leg, and Davis laid off for keeps--why, sir, we'll soon be that weak it'll take both watches to set a staysail."

Nevertheless, while I talked in a matter-of-fact way with Mr. Mellaire, I was shocked--no; not because death was aboard with us. I have stood by my philosophic guns too long to be shocked by death, or by murder. What affected me was the utter, stupid bestiality of the affair. Even

murder--murder for cause--I can understand. It is comprehensible that men should kill one another in the passion of love, of hatred, of patriotism, of religion. But this was different. Here was killing without cause, an orgy of blind-brutishness, a thing monstrously irrational.

Later on, strolling with Possum on the main deck, as I passed the open door of the hospital I heard the muttering chant of O'Sullivan, and peeped in. There he lay, lashed fast on his back in the lower bunk, rolling his eyes and raving. In the top bunk, directly above, lay Charles Davis, calmly smoking a pipe. I looked for the marlin-spike. There it was, ready to hand, on the bedding beside him.

"It's hell, ain't it, sir?" was his greeting. "And how am I goin' to get any sleep with that baboon chattering away there. He never lets up--keeps his chin-music goin' right along when he's asleep, only worse. The way he grits his teeth is something awful. Now I leave it to you, sir, is it right to put a crazy like that in with a sick man? And I am a sick man."

While he talked the massive form of Mr. Pike loomed beside me and halted just out of sight of the man in the bunk. And the man talked on.

"By rights, I oughta have that lower bunk. It hurts me to crawl up here. It's inhumanity, that's what it is, and sailors at sea are better protected by the law than they used to be. And I'll have you for a witness to this before the court when we get to Seattle."

Mr. Pike stepped into the doorway.

"Shut up, you damned sea-lawyer, you," he snarled. "Haven't you played a dirty trick enough comin' on board this ship in your condition? And if I have anything more out of you . . . "

Mr. Pike was so angry that he could not complete the threat. After spluttering for a moment he made a fresh attempt.

"You . . . you . . . well, you annoy me, that's what you do."

"I know the law, sir," Davis answered promptly. "I worked full able seaman on this here ship. All hands can testify to that. I was aloft from the start. Yes, sir, and up to my neck in salt water day and night. And you had me below trimmin' coal. I did full duty and more, until this sickness got me--"

"You were petrified and rotten before you ever saw this ship," Mr. Pike broke in.

"The court'll decide that, sir," replied the imperturbable Davis.

"And if you go to shoutin' off your sea-lawyer mouth," Mr. Pike continued, "I'll jerk you out of that and show you what real work is."

"An' lay the owners open for lovely damages when we get in," Davis sneered.

"Not if I bury you before we get in," was the mate's quick, grim retort. "And let me tell you, Davis, you ain't the first sea-lawyer I've dropped over the side with a sack of coal to his feet."

Mr. Pike turned, with a final "Damned sea-lawyer!" and started along the deck. I was walking behind him when he stopped abruptly.

"Mr. Pathurst."

Not as an officer to a passenger did he thus address me. His tone was imperative, and I gave heed.

"Mr. Pathurst. From now on the less you see aboard this ship the better. That is all."

And again he turned on his heel and went his way.