

CHAPTER XVII

Two weeks out to-day, on a balmy sea, under a cloud-flecked sky, and slipping an easy eight knots through the water to a light easterly wind. Captain West said he was almost convinced that it was the north-east trade. Also, I have learned that the *Elsinore*, in order to avoid being jammed down on Cape San Roque, on the Brazil coast, must first fight eastward almost to the coast of Africa. On occasion, on this traverse, the Cape Verde Islands are raised. No wonder the voyage from Baltimore to Seattle is reckoned at eighteen thousand miles.

I found Tony, the suicidal Greek, steering this morning when I came on deck. He seemed sensible enough, and quite rationally took off his hat when I said good morning to him. The sick men are improving nicely, with the exceptions of Charles Davis and O'Sullivan. The latter still is lashed to his bunk, and Mr. Pike has compelled Davis to attend on him. As a result, Davis moves about the deck, bringing food and water from the galley and grumbling his wrongs to every member of the crew.

Wada told me a strange thing this morning. It seems that he, the steward, and the two sail-makers foregather each evening in the cook's room--all being Asiatics--where they talk over ship's gossip. They seem to miss little, and Wada brings it all to me. The thing Wada told me was the curious conduct of Mr. Mellaire. They have sat in judgment on him and they do not approve of his intimacy with the three gangsters for'ard.

"But, Wada," I said, "he is not that kind of a man. He is very hard and rough with all the sailors. He treats them like dogs. You know that."

"Sure," assented Wada. "Other sailors he do that. But those three very bad men he make good friends. Louis say second mate belong aft like first mate and captain. No good for second mate talk like friend with sailors. No good for ship. Bime by trouble. You see. Louis say Mr. Mellaire crazy do that kind funny business."

All of which, if it were true, and I saw no reason to doubt it, led me to inquire. It seems that the gangsters, Kid Twist, Nosey Murphy, and Bert Rhine, have made themselves cocks of the forecastle. Standing together, they have established a reign of terror and are ruling the forecastle. All their training in New York in ruling the slum brutes and weaklings in their gangs fits them for the part. As near as I could make out from Wada's tale, they first began on the two Italians in their watch, Guido Bombini and Mike Cipriani. By means I cannot guess, they have reduced these two wretches to trembling slaves. As an instance, the other night, according to the ship's gossip, Bert Rhine made Bombini get out of bed and fetch him a drink of water.

Isaac Chantz is likewise under their rule, though he is treated more kindly. Herman Lunkenheimer, a good-natured but simple-minded dolt of a German, received a severe beating from the three because he refused to wash some of Nosey Murphy's dirty garments. The two bosuns are in fear

of their lives with this clique, which is growing; for Steve Roberts, the ex-cowboy, and the white-slaver, Arthur Deacon, have been admitted to it.

I am the only one aft who possesses this information, and I confess I don't know what to do with it. I know that Mr. Pike would tell me to mind my own business. Mr. Mellaire is out of the question. And Captain West hasn't any crew. And I fear Miss West would laugh at me for my pains. Besides, I understand that every fore-castle has its bully, or group of bullies; so this is merely a fore-castle matter and no concern of the after-guard. The ship's work goes on. The only effect I can conjecture is an increase in the woes of the unfortunates who must bow to this petty tyranny for'ard.

--Oh, and another thing Wada told me. The gangster clique has established its privilege of taking first cut of the salt-beef in the meat-kids. After that, the rest take the rejected pieces. But I will say, contrary to my expectations, the Elsinore's fore-castle is well found. The men are not on whack. They have all they want to eat. A barrel of good hardtack stands always open in the fore-castle. Louis bakes fresh bread for the sailors three times a week. The variety of food is excellent, if not the quality. There is no restriction in the amount of water for drinking purposes. And I can only say that in this good weather the men's appearance improves daily.

Possum is very sick. Each day he grows thinner. Scarcely can I call him a perambulating skeleton, because he is too weak to walk. Each day, in

this delightful weather, Wada, under Miss West's instructions, brings him up in his box and places him out of the wind on the awninged poop. She has taken full charge of the puppy, and has him sleep in her room each night. I found her yesterday, in the chart-room, reading up the Elsinore's medical library. Later on she overhauled the medicine-chest. She is essentially the life-giving, life-conserving female of the species. All her ways, for herself and for others, make toward life.

And yet--and this is so curious it gives me pause--she shows no interest in the sick and injured for'ard.

They are to her cattle, or less than cattle. As the life-giver and race-conservator, I should have imagined her a Lady Bountiful, tripping regularly into that ghastly steel-walled hospital room of the midship-house and dispensing gruel, sunshine, and even tracts. On the contrary, as with her father, these wretched humans do not exist.

And still again, when the steward jammed a splinter under his nail, she was greatly concerned, and manipulated the tweezers and pulled it out. The Elsinore reminds me of a slave plantation before the war; and Miss West is the lady of the plantation, interested only in the house-slaves. The field slaves are beyond her ken or consideration, and the sailors are the Elsinore's field slaves. Why, several days back, when Wada suffered from a severe headache, she was quite perturbed, and dosed him with aspirin. Well, I suppose this is all due to her sea-training. She has

been trained hard.

We have the phonograph in the second dog-watch every other evening in this fine weather. On the alternate evenings this period is Mr. Pike's watch on deck. But when it is his evening below, even at dinner, he betrays his anticipation by an eagerness ill suppressed. And yet, on each such occasion, he punctiliously waits until we ask if we are to be favoured with music. Then his hard-bitten face lights up, although the lines remain hard as ever, hiding his ecstasy, and he remarks gruffly, off-handedly, that he guesses he can play over a few records. And so, every other evening, we watch this killer and driver, with lacerated knuckles and gorilla paws, brushing and caressing his beloved discs, ravished with the music of them, and, as he told me early in the voyage, at such moments believing in God.

A strange experience is this life on the *Elsinore*. I confess, while it seems that I have been here for long months, so familiar am I with every detail of the little round of living, that I cannot orient myself. My mind continually strays from things non-understandable to things incomprehensible--from our Samurai captain with the exquisite Gabriel voice that is heard only in the tumult and thunder of storm; on to the ill-treated and feeble-minded faun with the bright, liquid, pain-filled eyes; to the three gangsters who rule the forecastle and seduce the second mate; to the perpetually muttering O'Sullivan in the steel-walled hole and the complaining Davis nursing the marlin-spike in the upper bunk; and to Christian Jespersen somewhere adrift in this vastitude of

ocean with a coal-sack at his feet. At such moments all the life on the Elsinore becomes as unreal as life to the philosopher is unreal.

I am a philosopher. Therefore, it is unreal to me. But is it unreal to Messrs. Pike and Mellaire? to the lunatics and idiots? to the rest of the stupid herd for'ard? I cannot help remembering a remark of De Casseres. It was over the wine in Mouquin's. Said he: "The profoundest instinct in man is to war against the truth; that is, against the Real. He shuns facts from his infancy. His life is a perpetual evasion. Miracle, chimera and to-morrow keep him alive. He lives on fiction and myth. It is the Lie that makes him free. Animals alone are given the privilege of lifting the veil of Isis; men dare not. The animal, awake, has no fictional escape from the Real because he has no imagination. Man, awake, is compelled to seek a perpetual escape into Hope, Belief, Fable, Art, God, Socialism, Immortality, Alcohol, Love. From Medusa-Truth he makes an appeal to Maya-Lie."

Ben will agree that I have quoted him fairly. And so, the thought comes to me, that to all these slaves of the Elsinore the Real is real because they fictionally escape it. One and all they are obsessed with the belief that they are free agents. To me the Real is unreal, because I have torn aside the veils of fiction and myth. My pristine fictional escape from the Real, making me a philosopher, has bound me absolutely to the wheel of the Real. I, the super-realist, am the only unrealist on board the Elsinore. Therefore I, who penetrate it deepest, in the whole phenomena of living on the Elsinore see it only as

phantasmagoria.

Paradoxes? I admit it. All deep thinkers are drowned in the sea of contradictions. But all the others on the *Elsinore*, sheer surface swimmers, keep afloat on this sea--forsooth, because they have never dreamed its depth. And I can easily imagine what Miss West's practical, hard-headed judgment would be on these speculations of mine. After all, words are traps. I don't know what I know, nor what I think I think.

This I do know: I cannot orient myself. I am the maddest and most sea-lost soul on board. Take Miss West. I am beginning to admire her. Why, I know not, unless it be because she is so abominably healthy. And yet, it is this very health of her, the absence of any shred of degenerative genius, that prevents her from being great . . . for instance, in her music.

A number of times, now, I have come in during the day to listen to her playing. The piano is good, and her teaching has evidently been of the best. To my astonishment I learn that she is a graduate of Bryn Mawr, and that her father took a degree from old Bowdoin long ago. And yet she lacks in her music.

Her touch is masterful. She has the firmness and weight (without sharpness or pounding) of a man's playing--the strength and surety that most women lack and that some women know they lack. When she makes a slip she is ruthless with herself, and replays until the difficulty is

overcome. And she is quick to overcome it.

Yes, and there is a sort of temperament in her work, but there is no sentiment, no fire. When she plays Chopin, she interprets his sureness and neatness. She is the master of Chopin's technique, but she never walks where Chopin walks on the heights. Somehow, she stops short of the fulness of music.

I did like her method with Brahms, and she was not unwilling, at my suggestion, to go over and over the Three Rhapsodies. On the Third Intermezzo she was at her best, and a good best it was.

"You were talking of Debussy," she remarked. "I've got some of his stuff here. But I don't get into it. I don't understand it, and there is no use in trying. It doesn't seem altogether like real music to me. It fails to get hold of me, just as I fail to get hold of it."

"Yet you like MacDowell," I challenged.

"Y. . . es," she admitted grudgingly. "His New England Idylls and Fireside Tales. And I like that Finnish man's stuff, Sibelius, too, although it seems to me too soft, too richly soft, too beautiful, if you know what I mean. It seems to cloy."

What a pity, I thought, that with that noble masculine touch of hers she is unaware of the deeps of music. Some day I shall try to get from her

just what Beethoven, say, and Chopin, mean to her. She has not read Shaw's Perfect Wagnerite, nor had she ever heard of Nietzsche's Case of Wagner. She likes Mozart, and old Boccherini, and Leonardo Leo. Likewise she is partial to Schumann, especially Forest Scenes. And she played his Papillons most brilliantly. When I closed my eyes I could have sworn it was a man's fingers on the keys.

And yet, I must say it, in the long run her playing makes me nervous. I am continually led up to false expectations. Always, she seems just on the verge of achieving the big thing, the super-big thing, and always she just misses it by a shade. Just as I am prepared for the culminating flash and illumination, I receive more perfection of technique. She is cold. She must be cold . . . Or else, and the theory is worth considering, she is too healthy.

I shall certainly read to her The Daughters of Herodias.