

CHAPTER XVIII

Was there ever such a voyage! This morning, when I came on deck, I found nobody at the wheel. It was a startling sight--the great Elsinore, by the wind, under an Alpine range of canvas, every sail set from skysails to try-sails and spanker, slipping across the surface of a mild trade-wind sea, and no hand at the wheel to guide her.

No one was on the poop. It was Mr. Pike's watch, and I strolled for'ard along the bridge to find him. He was on Number One hatch giving some instructions to the sail-makers. I awaited my chance, until he glanced up and greeted me.

"Good morning," I answered. "And what man is at the wheel now?"

"That crazy Greek, Tony," he replied.

"A month's wages to a pound of tobacco he isn't," I offered.

Mr. Pike looked at me with quick sharpness.

"Who is at the wheel?"

"Nobody," I replied.

And then he exploded into action. The age-lag left his massive frame, and he bounded aft along the deck at a speed no man on board could have exceeded; and I doubt if very many could have equalled it. He went up the poop-ladder three steps at a time and disappeared in the direction of the wheel behind the chart-house.

Next came a promptitude of bellowed orders, and all the watch was slacking away after braces to starboard and pulling on after braces to port. I had already learned the manoeuvre. Mr. Pike was wearing ship.

As I returned aft along the bridge Mr. Mellaire and the carpenter emerged from the cabin door. They had been interrupted at breakfast, for they were wiping their mouths. Mr. Pike came to the break of the poop, called down instructions to the second mate, who proceeded for'ard, and ordered the carpenter to take the wheel.

As the *Elsinore* swung around on her heel Mr. Pike put her on the back track so as to cover the water she had just crossed over. He lowered the glasses through which he was scanning the sea and pointed down the hatchway that opened into the big after-room beneath. The ladder was gone.

"Must have taken the lazarette ladder with him," said Mr. Pike.

Captain West strolled out of the chart-room. He said good morning in his customary way, courteously to me and formally to the mate, and strolled

on along the poop to the wheel, where he paused to glance into the binnacle. Turning, he went on leisurely to the break of the poop. Again he came back to us. Fully two minutes must have elapsed ere he spoke.

"What is the matter, Mr. Pike? Man overboard?"

"Yes, sir," was the answer.

"And took the lazarette ladder along with him?" Captain West queried.

"Yes, sir. It's the Greek that jumped over at Baltimore."

Evidently the affair was not serious enough for Captain West to be the Samurai. He lighted a cigar and resumed his stroll. And yet he had missed nothing, not even the absence of the ladder.

Mr. Pike sent look-outs aloft to every skysail-yard, and the *Elsinore* slipped along through the smooth sea. Miss West came up and stood beside me, searching the ocean with her eyes while I told her the little I knew. She evidenced no excitement, and reassured me by telling me how difficult it was to lose a man of Tony's suicidal type.

"Their madness always seems to come upon them in fine weather or under safe circumstances," she smiled, "when a boat can be lowered or a tug is alongside. And sometimes they take life--preservers with them, as in this case."

At the end of an hour Mr. Pike wore the Elsinore around, and again retraced the course she must have been sailing when the Greek went over. Captain West still strolled and smoked, and Miss West made a brief trip below to give Wada forgotten instructions about Possum. Andy Pay was called to the wheel, and the carpenter went below to finish his breakfast.

It all seemed rather callous to me. Nobody was much concerned for the man who was overboard somewhere on that lonely ocean. And yet I had to admit that everything possible was being done to find him. I talked a little with Mr. Pike, and he seemed more vexed than anything else. He disliked to have the ship's work interrupted in such fashion.

Mr. Mellaire's attitude was different.

"We are short-handed enough as it is," he told me, when he joined us on the poop. "We can't afford to lose him even if he is crazy. We need him. He's a good sailor most of the time."

The hail came from the mizzen-skysail-yard. The Maltese Cockney it was who first sighted the man and called down the information. The mate, looking to windwards, suddenly lowered his glasses, rubbed his eyes in a puzzled way, and looked again. Then Miss West, using another pair of glasses, cried out in surprise and began to laugh.

"What do you make of it, Miss West?" the mate asked.

"He doesn't seem to be in the water. He's standing up."

Mr. Pike nodded.

"He's on the ladder," he said. "I'd forgotten that. It fooled me at first. I couldn't understand it." He turned to the second mate. "Mr. Mellaire, will you launch the long boat and get some kind of a crew into it while I back the main-yard? I'll go in the boat. Pick men that can pull an oar."

"You go, too," Miss West said to me. "It will be an opportunity to get outside the Elsinore and see her under full sail."

Mr. Pike nodded consent, so I went along, sitting near him in the stern-sheets where he steered, while half a dozen hands rowed us toward the suicide, who stood so weirdly upon the surface of the sea. The Maltese Cockney pulled the stroke oar, and among the other five men was one whose name I had but recently learned--Ditman Olansen, a Norwegian. A good seaman, Mr. Mellaire had told me, in whose watch he was; a good seaman, but "crank-eyed." When pressed for an explanation Mr. Mellaire had said that he was the sort of man who flew into blind rages, and that one never could tell what little thing would produce such a rage. As near as I could grasp it, Ditman Olansen was a Berserker type. Yet, as I watched him pulling in good time at the oar, his large, pale-blue eyes seemed

almost bovine--the last man in the world, in my judgment, to have a Berserker fit.

As we drew close to the Greek he began to scream menacingly at us and to brandish a sheath-knife. His weight sank the ladder until the water washed his knees, and on this submerged support he balanced himself with wild writhing and outflinging of arms. His face, grimacing like a monkey's, was not a pretty thing to look upon. And as he continued to threaten us with the knife I wondered how the problem of rescuing him would be solved.

But I should have trusted Mr. Pike for that. He removed the boat-stretcher from under the Maltese Cockney's feet and laid it close to hand in the stern-sheets. Then he had the men reverse the boat and back it upon the Greek. Dodging a sweep of the knife, Mr. Pike awaited his chance, until a passing wave lifted the boat's stern high, while Tony was sinking toward the trough. This was the moment. Again I was favoured with a sample of the lightning speed with which that aged man of sixty-nine could handle his body. Timed precisely, and delivered in a flash and with weight, the boat-stretcher came down on the Greek's head. The knife fell into the sea, and the demented creature collapsed and followed it, knocked unconscious. Mr. Pike scooped him out, quite effortlessly it seemed to me, and flung him into the boat's bottom at my feet.

The next moment the men were bending to their oars and the mate was steering back to the *Elsinore*. It was a stout rap Mr. Pike had

administered with the boat-stretcher. Thin streaks of blood oozed on the damp, plastered hair from the broken scalp. I could but stare at the lump of unconscious flesh that dripped sea-water at my feet. A man, all life and movement one moment, defying the universe, reduced the next moment to immobility and the blackness and blankness of death, is always a fascinating object for the contemplative eye of the philosopher. And in this case it had been accomplished so simply, by means of a stick of wood brought sharply in contact with his skull.

If Tony the Greek be accounted an appearance, what was he now?--a disappearance? And if so, whither had he disappeared? And whence would he journey back to reoccupy that body when what we call consciousness returned to him? The first word, much less the last, of the phenomena of personality and consciousness yet remains to be uttered by the psychologists.

Pondering thus, I chanced to lift my eyes, and the glorious spectacle of the Elsinore burst upon me. I had been so long on board, and in board of her, that I had forgotten she was a white-painted ship. So low to the water was her hull, so delicate and slender, that the tall, sky-reaching spars and masts and the hugeness of the spread of canvas seemed preposterous and impossible, an insolent derision of the law of gravitation. It required effort to realize that that slim curve of hull inclosed and bore up from the sea's bottom five thousand tons of coal. And again, it seemed a miracle that the mites of men had conceived and constructed so stately and magnificent an element-defying fabric--mites

of men, most woefully like the Greek at my feet, prone to precipitation into the blackness by means of a rap on the head with a piece of wood.

Tony made a struggling noise in his throat, then coughed and groaned. From somewhere he was reappearing. I noticed Mr. Pike look at him quickly, as if apprehending some recrudescence of frenzy that would require more boat-stretcher. But Tony merely fluttered his big black eyes open and stared at me for a long minute of incurious amaze ere he closed them again.

"What are you going to do with him?" I asked the mate.

"Put 'm back to work," was the reply. "It's all he's good for, and he ain't hurt. Somebody's got to work this ship around the Horn."

When we hoisted the boat on board I found Miss West had gone below. In the chart-room Captain West was winding the chronometers. Mr. Mellaire had turned in to catch an hour or two of sleep ere his watch on deck at noon. Mr. Mellaire, by the way, as I have forgotten to state, does not sleep aft. He shares a room in the 'midship-house with Mr. Pike's Nancy.

Nobody showed sympathy for the unfortunate Greek. He was bundled out upon Number Two hatch like so much carrion and left there unattended, to recover consciousness as he might elect. Yes, and so inured have I become that I make free to admit I felt no sympathy for him myself. My eyes were still filled with the beauty of the Elsinore. One does grow

hard at sea.