

CHAPTER XIX

One does not mind the trades. We have held the north-east trade for days now, and the miles roll off behind us as the patent log whirls and tinkles on the taffrail. Yesterday, log and observation approximated a run of two hundred and fifty-two miles; the day before we ran two hundred and forty, and the day before that two hundred and sixty-one. But one does not appreciate the force of the wind. So balmy and exhilarating is it that it is so much atmospheric wine. I delight to open my lungs and my pores to it. Nor does it chill. At any hour of the night, while the cabin lies asleep, I break off from my reading and go up on the poop in the thinnest of tropical pyjamas.

I never knew before what the trade wind was. And now I am infatuated with it. I stroll up and down for an hour at a time, with whichever mate has the watch. Mr. Mellaire is always full-garmented, but Mr. Pike, on these delicious nights, stands his first watch after midnight in his pyjamas. He is a fearfully muscular man. Sixty-nine years seem impossible when I see his single, slimpsy garments pressed like fleshings against his form and bulged by heavy bone and huge muscle. A splendid figure of a man! What he must have been in the hey-day of youth two score years and more ago passes comprehension.

The days, so filled with simple routine, pass as in a dream. Here, where time is rigidly measured and emphasized by the changing of the watches,

where every hour and half-hour is persistently brought to one's notice by the striking of the ship's bells fore and aft, time ceases. Days merge into days, and weeks slip into weeks, and I, for one, can never remember the day of the week or month.

The Elsinore is never totally asleep. Day and night, always, there are the men on watch, the look-out on the forecastle head, the man at the wheel, and the officer of the deck. I lie reading in my bunk, which is on the weather side, and continually over my head during the long night hours impact the footsteps of one mate or the other, pacing up and down, and, as I well know, the man himself is for ever peering for'ard from the break of the poop, or glancing into the binnacle, or feeling and gauging the weight and direction of wind on his cheek, or watching the cloud-stuff in the sky adrift and a-scut across the stars and the moon. Always, always, there are wakeful eyes on the Elsinore.

Last night, or this morning, rather, about two o'clock, as I lay with the printed page swimming drowsily before me, I was aroused by an abrupt outbreak of snarl from Mr. Pike. I located him as at the break of the poop; and the man at whom he snarled was Larry, evidently on the main deck beneath him. Not until Wada brought me breakfast did I learn what had occurred.

Larry, with his funny pug nose, his curiously flat and twisted face, and his querulous, plaintive chimpanzee eyes, had been moved by some unlucky whim to venture an insolent remark under the cover of darkness on the

main deck. But Mr. Pike, from above, at the break of the poop, had picked the offender unerringly. This was when the explosion occurred. Then the unfortunate Larry, truly half-devil and all child, had waxed sullen and retorted still more insolently; and the next he knew, the mate, descending upon him like a hurricane, had handcuffed him to the mizzen fife-rail.

Imagine, on Mr. Pike's part, that this was one for Larry and at least ten for Kid Twist, Nosey Murphy, and Bert Rhine. I'll not be so absurd as to say that the mate is afraid of those gangsters. I doubt if he has ever experienced fear. It is not in him. On the other hand, I am confident that he apprehends trouble from these men, and that it was for their benefit he made this example of Larry.

Larry could stand no more than an hour in irons, at which time his stupid brutishness overcame any fear he might have possessed, because he bellowed out to the poop to come down and loose him for a fair fight. Promptly Mr. Pike was there with the key to the handcuffs. As if Larry had the shred of a chance against that redoubtable aged man! Wada reported that Larry, amongst other things, had lost a couple of front teeth and was laid up in his bunk for the day. When I met Mr. Pike on deck after eight o'clock I glanced at his knuckles. They verified Wada's tale.

I cannot help being amused by the keen interest I take in little events like the foregoing. Not only has time ceased, but the world has ceased.

Strange it is, when I come to think of it, in all these weeks I have received no letter, no telephone call, no telegram, no visitor. I have not been to the play. I have not read a newspaper. So far as I am concerned, there are no plays nor newspapers. All such things have vanished with the vanished world. All that exists is the Elsinore, with her queer human freightage and her cargo of coal, cleaving a rotund of ocean of which the skyline is a dozen miles away.

I am reminded of Captain Scott, frozen on his south-polar venture, who for ten months after his death was believed by the world to be alive. Not until the world learned of his death was he anything but alive to the world. By the same token, was he not alive? And by the same token, here on the Elsinore, has not the land-world ceased? May not the pupil of one's eye be, not merely the centre of the world, but the world itself? Truly, it is tenable that the world exists only in consciousness. "The world is my idea," said Schopenhauer. Said Jules de Gaultier, "The world is my invention." His dogma was that imagination created the Real. Ah, me, I know that the practical Miss West would dub my metaphysics a depressing and unhealthful exercise of my wits.

To-day, in our deck chairs on the poop, I read *The Daughters of Herodias* to Miss West. It was superb in its effect--just what I had expected of her. She hemstitched a fine white linen handkerchief for her father while I read. (She is never idle, being so essentially a nest-maker and comfort-producer and race-conserver; and she has a whole pile of these handkerchiefs for her father.)

She smiled, how shall I say?--oh, incredulously, triumphantly, oh, with all the sure wisdom of all the generations of women in her warm, long gray eyes, when I read:

"But they smile innocently and dance on,
Having no thought but this unslumbering thought:
'Am I not beautiful? Shall I not be loved?'
Be patient, for they will not understand,
Not till the end of time will they put by
The weaving of slow steps about men's hearts."

"But it is well for the world that it is so," was her comment.

Ah, Symons knew women! His perfect knowledge she attested when I read that magnificent passage:

"They do not understand that in the world
There grows between the sunlight and the grass
Anything save themselves desirable.
It seems to them that the swift eyes of men
Are made but to be mirrors, not to see
Far-off, disastrous, unattainable things.
'For are not we,' they say, 'the end of all?
Why should you look beyond us? If you look
Into the night, you will find nothing there:

We also have gazed often at the stars."

"It is true," said Miss West, in the pause I permitted in order to see how she had received the thought. "We also have gazed often at the stars."

It was the very thing I had predicted to her face that she would say.

"But wait," I cried. "Let me read on." And I read:

"We, we alone among all beautiful things,
We only are real: for the rest are dreams.
Why will you follow after wandering dreams
When we await you? And you can but dream
Of us, and in our image fashion them."

"True, most true," she murmured, while all unconsciously pride and power mounted in her eyes.

"A wonderful poem," she conceded--nay, proclaimed--when I had done.

"But do you not see . . ." I began impulsively, then abandoned the attempt. For how could she see, being woman, the "far-off, disastrous, unattainable things," when she, as she so stoutly averred, had gazed often on the stars?

She? What could she see, save what all women see--that they only are real, and that all the rest are dreams.

"I am proud to be a daughter of Herodias," said Miss West.

"Well," I admitted lamely, "we agree. You remember it is what I told you you were."

"I am grateful for the compliment," she said; and in those long gray eyes of hers were limned and coloured all the satisfaction, and self-certitude and answering complacency of power that constitute so large a part of the seductive mystery and mastery that is possessed by woman.