

CHAPTER XX

Heavens!--how I read in this fine weather. I take so little exercise that my sleep need is very small; and there are so few interruptions, such as life teems with on the land, that I read myself almost stupid. Recommend me a sea-voyage any time for a man who is behind in his reading. I am making up years of it. It is an orgy, a debauch; and I am sure the addled sailors adjudge me the queerest creature on board.

At times, so fuzzy do I get from so much reading, that I am glad for any diversion. When we strike the doldrums, which lie between the north-east and the south-east trades, I shall have Wada assemble my little twenty-two automatic rifle and try to learn how to shoot. I used to shoot, when I was a wee lad. I can remember dragging a shot-gun around with me over the hills. Also, I possessed an air-rifle, with which, on great occasion, I was even able to slaughter a robin.

While the poop is quite large for promenading, the available space for deck-chairs is limited to the awnings that stretch across from either side of the chart-house and that are of the width of the chart-house. This space again is restricted to one side or the other according to the slant of the morning and afternoon sun and the freshness of the breeze. Wherefore, Miss West's chair and mine are most frequently side by side. Captain West has a chair, which he infrequently occupies. He has so little to do in the working of the ship, taking his regular observations

and working them up with such celerity, that he is rarely in the chart-room for any length of time. He elects to spend his hours in the main cabin, not reading, not doing anything save dream with eyes wide open in the draught of wind that pours through the open ports and door from out the huge crojack and the jigger staysails.

Miss West is never idle. Below, in the big after-room, she does her own laundering. Nor will she let the steward touch her father's fine linen. In the main cabin she has installed a sewing-machine. All hand-stitching, and embroidering, and fancy work she does in the deck-chair beside me. She avers that she loves the sea and the atmosphere of sea-life, yet, verily, she has brought her home-things and land-things along with her--even to her pretty china for afternoon tea.

Most essentially is she the woman and home-maker. She is a born cook. The steward and Louis prepare dishes extraordinary and de luxe for the cabin table; yet Miss West is able at a moment's notice to improve on these dishes. She never lets any of their dishes come on the table without first planning them or passing on them. She has quick judgment, an unerring taste, and is possessed of the needful steel of decision. It seems she has only to look at a dish, no matter who has cooked it, and immediately divine its lack or its surplusage, and prescribe a treatment that transforms it into something indescribably different and delicious--My, how I do eat! I am quite dumbfounded by the unfailing voracity of my appetite. Already am I quite convinced that I am glad Miss West is making the voyage.

She has sailed "out East," as she quaintly calls it, and has an enormous repertoire of tasty, spicy, Eastern dishes. In the cooking of rice Louis is a master; but in the making of the accompanying curry he fades into a blundering amateur compared with Miss West. In the matter of curry she is a sheer genius. How often one's thoughts dwell upon food when at sea!

So in this trade-wind weather I see a great deal of Miss West. I read all the time, and quite a good part of the time I read aloud to her passages, and even books, with which I am interested in trying her out. Then, too, such reading gives rise to discussions, and she has not yet uttered anything that would lead me to change my first judgment of her. She is a genuine daughter of Herodias.

And yet she is not what one would call a cute girl. She isn't a girl, she is a mature woman with all the freshness of a girl. She has the carriage, the attitude of mind, the aplomb of a woman, and yet she cannot be described as being in the slightest degree stately. She is generous, dependable, sensible--yes, and sensitive; and her superabundant vitality, the vitality that makes her walk so gloriously, discounts the maturity of her. Sometimes she seems all of thirty to me; at other times, when her spirits and risibilities are aroused, she scarcely seems thirteen. I shall make a point of asking Captain West the date of the Dixie's collision with that river steamer in San Francisco Bay. In a word, she is the most normal, the most healthy, natural woman I have ever known.

Yes, and she is feminine, despite, no matter how she does her hair, that it is as invariably smooth and well-groomed as all the rest of her. On the other hand, this perpetual well-groomedness is relieved by the latitude of dress she allows herself. She never fails of being a woman. Her sex, and the lure of it, is ever present. Possibly she may possess high collars, but I have never seen her in one on board. Her blouses are always open at the throat, disclosing one of her choicest assets, the muscular, adequate neck, with its fine-textured garmenture of skin. I embarrass myself by stealing long glances at that bare throat of hers and at the hint of fine, firm-surfaced shoulder.

Visiting the chickens has developed into a regular function. At least once each day we make the journey for'ard along the bridge to the top of the 'midship-house. Possum, who is now convalescent, accompanies us. The steward makes a point of being there so as to receive instructions and report the egg-output and laying conduct of the many hens. At the present time our four dozen hens are laying two dozen eggs a day, with which record Miss West is greatly elated.

Already she has given names to most of them. The cock is Peter, of course. A much-speckled hen is Dolly Varden. A slim, trim thing that dogs Peter's heels she calls Cleopatra. Another hen--the mellowest-voiced one of all--she addresses as Bernhardt. One thing I have noted: whenever she and the steward have passed death sentence on a non-laying hen (which occurs regularly once a week), she takes no part in the eating of the meat, not even when it is metamorphosed into one of her

delectable curries. At such times she has a special curry made for herself of tinned lobster, or shrimp, or tinned chicken.

Ah, I must not forget. I have learned that it was no man-interest (in me, if you please) that brought about her sudden interest to come on the voyage. It was for her father that she came. Something is the matter with Captain West. At rare moments I have observed her gazing at him with a world of solicitude and anxiety in her eyes.

I was telling an amusing story at table yesterday midday, when my glance chanced to rest upon Miss West. She was not listening. Her food on her fork was suspended in the air a sheer instant as she looked at her father with all her eyes. It was a stare of fear. She realized that I was observing, and with superb control, slowly, quite naturally, she lowered the fork and rested it on her plate, retaining her hold on it and retaining her father's face in her look.

But I had seen. Yes; I had seen more than that. I had seen Captain West's face a transparent white, while his eyelids fluttered down and his lips moved noiselessly. Then the eyelids raised, the lips set again with their habitual discipline, and the colour slowly returned to his face. It was as if he had been away for a time and just returned. But I had seen, and guessed her secret.

And yet it was this same Captain West, seven hours later, who chastened

the proud sailor spirit of Mr. Pike. It was in the second dog-watch that evening, a dark night, and the watch was pulling away on the main deck. I had just come out of the chart-house door and seen Captain West pace by me, hands in pockets, toward the break of the poop. Abruptly, from the mizzen-mast, came a snap of breakage and crash of fabric. At the same instant the men fell backward and sprawled over the deck.

A moment of silence followed, and then Captain West's voice went out:

"What carried away, Mr. Pike?"

"The halyards, sir," came the reply out of the darkness.

There was a pause. Again Captain West's voice went out.

"Next time slack away on your sheet first."

Now Mr. Pike is incontestably a splendid seaman. Yet in this instance he had been wrong. I have come to know him, and I can well imagine the hurt to his pride. And more--he has a wicked, resentful, primitive nature, and though he answered respectfully enough, "Yes, sir," I felt safe in predicting to myself that the poor devils under him would receive the weight of his resentment in the later watches of the night.

They evidently did; for this morning I noted a black eye on John Hackey, a San Francisco hoodlum, and Guido Bombini was carrying a freshly and

outrageously swollen jaw. I asked Wada about the matter, and he soon brought me the news. Quite a bit of beating up takes place for'ard of the deck-houses in the night watches while we of the after-guard peacefully slumber.

Even to-day Mr. Pike is going around sullen and morose, snarling at the men more than usual, and barely polite to Miss West and me when we chance to address him. His replies are grunted in monosyllables, and his face is set in superlative sourness. Miss West who is unaware of the occurrence, laughs and calls it a "sea grouch"--a phenomenon with which she claims large experience.

But I know Mr. Pike now--the stubborn, wonderful old sea-dog. It will be three days before he is himself again. He takes a terrible pride in his seamanship, and what hurts him most is the knowledge that he was guilty of the blunder.