

CHAPTER XXI

To-day, twenty-eight days out, in the early morning, while I was drinking my coffee, still carrying the north-east trade, we crossed the line. And Charles Davis signalized the event by murdering O'Sullivan. It was Boney, the lanky splinter of a youth in Mr. Mellaire's watch, who brought the news. The second mate and I had just arrived in the hospital room, when Mr. Pike entered.

O'Sullivan's troubles were over. The man in the upper bunk had completed the mad, sad span of his life with the marlin-spike.

I cannot understand this Charles Davis. He sat up calmly in his bunk, and calmly lighted his pipe ere he replied to Mr. Mellaire. He certainly is not insane. Yet deliberately, in cold blood, he has murdered a helpless man.

"What'd you do it for?" Mr. Mellaire demanded.

"Because, sir," said Charles Davis, applying a second match to his pipe, "because"--puff, puff--"he bothered my sleep." Here he caught Mr. Pike's glowering eye. "Because"--puff, puff--"he annoyed me. The next time"--puff, puff--"I hope better judgment will be shown in what kind of a man is put in with me. Besides"--puff, puff--"this top bunk ain't no place for me. It hurts me to get into it"--puff, puff--"an' I'm gem'

back to that lower bunk as soon as you get O'Sullivan out of it."

"But what'd you do it for?" Mr. Pike snarled.

"I told you, sir, because he annoyed me. I got tired of it, an' so, this morning, I just put him out of his misery. An' what are you goin' to do about it? The man's dead, ain't he? An' I killed 'm in self-defence. I know the law. What right'd you to put a ravin' lunatic in with me, an' me sick an' helpless?"

"By God, Davis!" the mate burst forth. "You'll never draw your pay-day in Seattle. I'll fix you out for this, killing a crazy lashed down in his bunk an' harmless. You'll follow 'm overside, my hearty."

"If I do, you'll hang for it, sir," Davis retorted. He turned his cool eyes on me. "An' I call on you, sir, to witness the threats he's made. An' you'll testify to them, too, in court. An' he'll hang as sure as I go over the side. Oh, I know his record. He's afraid to face a court with it. He's been up too many a time with charges of man-killin' an' brutality on the high seas. An' a man could retire for life an' live off the interest of the fines he's paid, or his owners paid for him--"

"Shut your mouth or I'll knock it out of your face!" Mr. Pike roared, springing toward him with clenched, up-raised fist.

Davis involuntarily shrank away. His flesh was weak, but not so his

spirit. He got himself promptly in hand and struck another match.

"You can't get my goat, sir," he sneered, under the shadow of the impending blow. "I ain't scared to die. A man's got to die once anyway, an' it's none so hard a trick to do when you can't help it. O'Sullivan died so easy it was amazin'. Besides, I ain't goin' to die. I'm goin' to finish this voyage, an' sue the owners when I get to Seattle. I know my rights an' the law. An' I got witnesses."

Truly, I was divided between admiration for the courage of this wretched sailor and sympathy for Mr. Pike thus bearded by a sick man he could not bring himself to strike.

Nevertheless he sprang upon the man with calculated fury, gripped him between the base of the neck and the shoulders with both gnarled paws, and shook him back and forth, violently and frightfully, for a full minute. It was a wonder the man's neck was not dislocated.

"I call on you to witness, sir," Davis gasped at me the instant he was free.

He coughed and strangled, felt his throat, and made wry neck-movements indicative of injury.

"The marks'll begin to show in a few minutes," he murmured complacently as his dizziness left him and his breath came back.

This was too much for Mr. Pike, who turned and left the room, growling and cursing incoherently, deep in his throat. When I made my departure, a moment later, Davis was refilling his pipe and telling Mr. Mellaire that he'd have him up for a witness in Seattle.

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So we have had another burial at sea. Mr. Pike was vexed by it because the *Elsinore*, according to sea tradition, was going too fast through the water for a proper ceremony. Thus a few minutes of the voyage were lost by backing the *Elsinore's* main-topsail and deadening her way while the service was read and O'Sullivan was slid overboard with the inevitable sack of coal at his feet.

"Hope the coal holds out," Mr. Pike grumbled morosely at me five minutes later.

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And we sit on the poop, Miss West and I, tended on by servants, sipping afternoon tea, sewing fancy work, discussing philosophy and art, while a few feet away from us, on this tiny floating world, all the grimy, sordid tragedy of sordid, malformed, brutish life plays itself out. And Captain West, remote, untroubled, sits dreaming in the twilight cabin while the draught of wind from the crojack blows upon him through the open ports.

He has no doubts, no worries. He believes in God. All is settled and clear and well as he nears his far home. His serenity is vast and enviable. But I cannot shake from my eyes that vision of him when life forsook his veins, and his mouth slacked, and his eyelids closed, while his face took on the white transparency of death.

I wonder who will be the next to finish the game and depart with a sack of coal.

"Oh, this is nothing, sir," Mr. Mellaire remarked to me cheerfully as we strolled the poop during the first watch. "I was once on a voyage on a tramp steamer loaded with four hundred Chinks--I beg your pardon, sir--Chinese. They were coolies, contract labourers, coming back from serving their time.

"And the cholera broke out. We hove over three hundred of them overboard, sir, along with both bosuns, most of the Lascar crew, and the captain, the mate, the third mate, and the first and third engineers. The second and one white oiler was all that was left below, and I was in command on deck, when we made port. The doctors wouldn't come aboard. They made me anchor in the outer roads and told me to heave out my dead. There was some tall buryin' about that time, Mr. Pathurst, and they went overboard without canvas, coal, or iron. They had to. I had nobody to help me, and the Chinks below wouldn't lift a hand.

"I had to go down myself, drag the bodies on to the slings, then climb on

deck and heave them up with the donkey. And each trip I took a drink. I was pretty drunk when the job was done."

"And you never caught it yourself?" I queried. Mr. Mellaire held up his left hand. I had often noted that the index finger was missing.

"That's all that happened to me, sir. The old man'd had a fox-terrier like yours. And after the old man passed out the puppy got real, chummy with me. Just as I was making the hoist of the last sling-load, what does the puppy do but jump on my leg and sniff my hand. I turned to pat him, and the next I knew my other hand had slipped into the gears and that finger wasn't there any more.

"Heavens!" I cried. "What abominable luck to come through such a terrible experience like that and then lose your finger!"

"That's what I thought, sir," Mr. Mellaire agreed.

"What did you do?" I asked.

"Oh, just held it up and looked at it, and said 'My goodness gracious!' and took another drink."

"And you didn't get the cholera afterwards?"

"No, sir. I reckon I was so full of alcohol the germs dropped dead

before they could get to me." He considered a moment. "Candidly, Mr. Pathurst, I don't know about that alcohol theory. The old man and the mates died drunk, and so did the third engineer. But the chief was a teetotaller, and he died, too."

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Never again shall I wonder that the sea is hard. I walked apart from the second mate and stared up at the magnificent fabric of the Elsinore sweeping and swaying great blotting curves of darkness across the face of the starry sky.