

CHAPTER XXII

Something has happened. But nobody knows, either fore or aft, except the interested persons, and they will not say anything. Yet the ship is abuzz with rumours and guesses.

This I do know: Mr. Pike has received a fearful blow on the head. At table, yesterday, at midday, I arrived late, and, passing behind his chair, I saw a prodigious lump on top of his head. When I was seated, facing him, I noted that his eyes seemed dazed; yes, and I could see pain in them. He took no part in the conversation, ate perfunctorily, behaved stupidly at times, and it was patent that he was controlling himself with an iron hand.

And nobody dares ask him what has happened. I know I don't dare ask him, and I am a passenger, a privileged person. This redoubtable old sea-relic has inspired me with a respect for him that partakes half of timidity and half of awe.

He acts as if he were suffering from concussion of the brain. His pain is evident, not alone in his eyes and the strained expression of his face, but by his conduct when he thinks he is unobserved. Last night, just for a breath of air and a moment's gaze at the stars, I came out of the cabin door and stood on the main deck under the break of the poop. From directly over my head came a low and persistent groaning. My

curiosity was aroused, and I retreated into the cabin, came out softly on to the poop by way of the chart-house, and strolled noiselessly for'ard in my slippers. It was Mr. Pike. He was leaning collapsed on the rail, his head resting on his arms. He was giving voice in secret to the pain that racked him. A dozen feet away he could not be heard. But, close to his shoulder, I could hear his steady, smothered groaning that seemed to take the form of a chant. Also, at regular intervals, he would mutter:

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear, oh dear, oh dear." Always he repeated the phrase five times, then returned to his groaning. I stole away as silently as I had come.

Yet he resolutely stands his watches and performs all his duties of chief officer. Oh, I forgot. Miss West dared to quiz him, and he replied that he had a toothache, and that if it didn't get better he'd pull it out.

Wada cannot learn what has happened. There were no eye-witnesses. He says that the Asiatic clique, discussing the affair in the cook's room, thinks the three gangsters are responsible. Bert Rhine is carrying a lame shoulder. Nosey Murphy is limping as from some injury in the hips. And Kid Twist has been so badly beaten that he has not left his bunk for two days. And that is all the data to build on. The gangsters are as close-mouthed as Mr. Pike. The Asiatic clique has decided that murder was attempted and that all that saved the mate was his hard skull.

Last evening, in the second dog-watch, I got another proof that Captain

West is not so oblivious of what goes on aboard the *Elsinore* as he seems. I had gone for'ard along the bridge to the mizzen-mast, in the shadow of which I was leaning. From the main deck, in the alley-way between the 'midship-house and the rail, came the voices of Bert Rhine, Nosey Murphy, and Mr. Mellaire. It was not ship's work. They were having a friendly, even sociable chat, for their voices hummed genially, and now and again one or another laughed, and sometimes all laughed.

I remembered Wada's reports on this unseamanlike intimacy of the second mate with the gangsters, and tried to make out the nature of the conversation. But the gangsters were low-voiced, and all I could catch was the tone of friendliness and good-nature.

Suddenly, from the poop, came Captain West's voice. It was the voice, not of the Samurai riding the storm, but of the Samurai calm and cold. It was clear, soft, and mellow as the mellowest bell ever cast by eastern artificers of old time to call worshippers to prayer. I know I slightly chilled to it--it was so exquisitely sweet and yet as passionless as the ring of steel on a frosty night. And I knew the effect on the men beneath me was electrical. I could feel them stiffen and chill to it as I had stiffened and chilled. And yet all he said was:

"Mr. Mellaire."

"Yes, sir," answered Mr. Mellaire, after a moment of tense silence.

"Come aft here," came Captain West's voice.

I heard the second mate move along the deck beneath me and stop at the foot of the poop-ladder.

"Your place is aft on the poop, Mr. Mellaire," said the cold, passionless voice.

"Yes, sir," answered the second mate.

That was all. Not another word was spoken. Captain West resumed his stroll on the weather side of the poop, and Mr. Mellaire, ascending the ladder, went to pacing up and down the lee side.

I continued along the bridge to the forecastle head and purposely remained there half an hour ere I returned to the cabin by way of the main deck. Although I did not analyze my motive, I knew I did not desire any one to know that I had overheard the occurrence.

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I have made a discovery. Ninety per cent. of our crew is brunette. Aft, with the exception of Wada and the steward, who are our servants, we are all blonds. What led me to this discovery was Woodruff's Effects of Tropical Light on White Men, which I am just reading. Major Woodruff's thesis is that the white-skinned, blue-eyed Aryan, born to government and

command, ever leaving his primeval, overcast and foggy home, ever commands and governs the rest of the world and ever perishes because of the too-white light he encounters. It is a very tenable hypothesis, and will bear looking into.

But to return. Every one of us who sits aft in the high place is a blond Aryan. For'ard, leavened with a ten per cent, of degenerate blonds, the remaining ninety per cent, of the slaves that toil for us are brunettes. They will not perish. According to Woodruff, they will inherit the earth, not because of their capacity for mastery and government, but because of their skin-pigmentation which enables their tissues to resist the ravages of the sun.

And I look at the four of us at table--Captain West, his daughter, Mr. Pike, and myself--all fair-skinned, blue-eyed, and perishing, yet mastering and commanding, like our fathers before us, to the end of our type on the earth. Ah, well, ours is a lordly history, and though we may be doomed to pass, in our time we shall have trod on the faces of all peoples, disciplined them to obedience, taught them government, and dwelt in the palaces we have compelled them by the weight of our own right arms to build for us.

The Elsinore depicts this in miniature. The best of the food and all spacious and beautiful accommodation is ours. For'ard is a pig-sty and a slave-pen.

As a king, Captain West sits above all. As a captain of soldiers, Mr. Pike enforces his king's will. Miss West is a princess of the royal house. And I? Am I not an honourable, noble-lineaged pensioner on the deeds and achievements of my father, who, in his day, compelled thousands of the lesser types to the building of the fortune I enjoy?