

CHAPTER XXIV

The voyage is doomed to disaster and death. I know Mr. Pike, now, and if ever he discovers the identity of Mr. Mellaire, murder will be done. Mr. Mellaire is not Mr. Mellaire. He is not from Georgia. He is from Virginia. His name is Waltham--Sidney Waltham. He is one of the Walthams of Virginia, a black sheep, true, but a Waltham. Of this I am convinced, just as utterly as I am convinced that Mr. Pike will kill him if he learns who he is.

Let me tell how I have discovered all this. It was last night, shortly before midnight, when I came up on the poop to enjoy a whiff of the south-east trades in which we are now bowling along, close-hauled in order to weather Cape San Roque. Mr. Pike had the watch, and I paced up and down with him while he told me old pages of his life. He has often done this, when not "sea-grouched," and often he has mentioned with pride--yes, with reverence--a master with whom he sailed five years. "Old Captain Somers," he called him--"the finest, squarest, noblest man I ever sailed under, sir."

Well, last night our talk turned on lugubrious subjects, and Mr. Pike, wicked old man that he is, descanted on the wickedness of the world and on the wickedness of the man who had murdered Captain Somers.

"He was an old man, over seventy years old," Mr. Pike went on. "And they

say he'd got a touch of palsy--I hadn't seen him for years. You see, I'd had to clear out from the coast because of trouble. And that devil of a second mate caught him in bed late at night and beat him to death. It was terrible. They told me about it. Right in San Francisco, on board the Jason Harrison, it happened, eleven years ago.

"And do you know what they did? First, they gave the murderer life, when he should have been hanged. His plea was insanity, from having had his head chopped open a long time before by a crazy sea-cook. And when he'd served seven years the governor pardoned him. He wasn't any good, but his people were a powerful old Virginian family, the Walthams--I guess you've heard of them--and they brought all kinds of pressure to bear. His name was Sidney Waltham."

At this moment the warning bell, a single stroke fifteen minutes before the change of watch, rang out from the wheel and was repeated by the look-out on the fore-castle head. Mr. Pike, under his stress of feeling, had stopped walking, and we stood at the break of the poop. As chance would have it, Mr. Mellaire was a quarter of an hour ahead of time, and he climbed the poop-ladder and stood beside us while the mate concluded his tale.

"I didn't mind it," Mr. Pike continued, "as long as he'd got life and was serving his time. But when they pardoned him out after only seven years I swore I'd get him. And I will. I don't believe in God or devil, and it's a rotten crazy world anyway; but I do believe in hunches. And I

know I'm going to get him."

"What will you do?" I queried.

"Do?" Mr. Pike's voice was fraught with surprise that I should not know.

"Do? Well, what did he do to old Captain Somers? Yet he's disappeared these last three years now. I've heard neither hide nor hair of him. But he's a sailor, and he'll drift back to the sea, and some day . . . "

In the illumination of a match with which the second mate was lighting his pipe I saw Mr. Pike's gorilla arms and huge clenched paws raised to heaven, and his face convulsed and working. Also, in that brief moment of light, I saw that the second mate's hand which held the match was shaking.

"And I ain't never seen even a photo of him," Mr. Pike added. "But I've got a general idea of his looks, and he's got a mark unmistakable. I could know him by it in the dark. All I'd have to do is feel it. Some day I'll stick my fingers into that mark."

"What did you say, sir, was the captain's name?" Mr. Mellaire asked casually.

"Somers--old Captain Somers," Mr. Pike answered.

Mr. Mellaire repeated the name aloud several times, and then hazarded:

"Didn't he command the Lammermoor thirty years ago?"

"That's the man."

"I thought I recognized him. I lay at anchor in a ship next to his in Table Bay that time ago."

"Oh, the wickedness of the world, the wickedness of the world," Mr. Pike muttered as he turned and strode away.

I said good-night to the second mate and had started to go below, when he called to me in a low voice, "Mr. Pathurst!"

I stopped, and then he said, hurriedly and confusedly:

"Never mind, sir . . . I beg your pardon . . . I--I changed my mind."

Below, lying in my bunk, I found myself unable to read. My mind was bent on returning to what had just occurred on deck, and, against my will, the most gruesome speculations kept suggesting themselves.

And then came Mr. Mellaire. He had slipped down the booby hatch into the big after-room and thence through the hallway to my room. He entered noiselessly, on clumsy tiptoes, and pressed his finger warningly to his lips. Not until he was beside my bunk did he speak, and then it was in a

whisper.

"I beg your pardon, sir, Mr. Pathurst . . . I--I beg your pardon; but, you see, sir, I was just passing, and seeing you awake I . . . I thought it would not inconvenience you to . . . you see, I thought I might just as well prefer a small favour . . . seeing that I would not inconvenience you, sir . . . I . . . I . . . "

I waited for him to proceed, and in the pause that ensued, while he licked his dry lips with his tongue, the thing ambushed in his skull peered at me through his eyes and seemed almost on the verge of leaping out and pouncing upon me.

"Well, sir," he began again, this time more coherently, "it's just a little thing--foolish on my part, of course--a whim, so to say--but you will remember, near the beginning of the voyage, I showed you a scar on my head . . . a really small affair, sir, which I contracted in a misadventure. It amounts to a deformity, which it is my fancy to conceal. Not for worlds, sir, would I care to have Miss West, for instance, know that I carried such a deformity. A man is a man, sir--you understand--and you have not spoken of it to her?"

"No," I replied. "It just happens that I have not."

"Nor to anybody else?--to, say, Captain West?--or, say, Mr. Pike?"

"No, I haven't mentioned it to anybody," I averred.

He could not conceal the relief he experienced. The perturbation went out of his face and manner, and the ambushed thing drew back deeper into the recess of his skull.

"The favour, sir, Mr. Pathurst, that I would prefer is that you will not mention that little matter to anybody. I suppose" (he smiled, and his voice was superlatively suave) "it is vanity on my part--you understand, I am sure."

I nodded, and made a restless movement with my book as evidence that I desired to resume my reading.

"I can depend upon you for that, Mr. Pathurst?" His whole voice and manner had changed. It was practically a command, and I could almost see fangs, bared and menacing, sprouting in the jaws of that thing I fancied dwelt behind his eyes.

"Certainly," I answered coldly.

"Thank you, sir--I thank you," he said, and, without more ado, tiptoed from the room.

Of course I did not read. How could I? Nor did I sleep. My mind ran on, and on, and not until the steward brought my coffee, shortly before

five, did I sink into my first doze.

One thing is very evident. Mr. Pike does not dream that the murderer of Captain Somers is on board the Elsinore. He has never glimpsed that prodigious fissure that clefts Mr. Mellaire's, or, rather, Sidney Waltham's, skull. And I, for one, shall never tell Mr. Pike. And I know, now, why from the very first I disliked the second mate. And I understand that live thing, that other thing, that lurks within and peers out through the eyes. I have recognized the same thing in the three gangsters for'ard. Like the second mate, they are prison birds. The restraint, the secrecy, and iron control of prison life has developed in all of them terrible other selves.

Yes, and another thing is very evident. On board this ship, driving now through the South Atlantic for the winter passage of Cape Horn, are all the elements of sea tragedy and horror. We are freighted with human dynamite that is liable at any moment to blow our tiny floating world to fragments.