

CHAPTER XXV

The days slip by. The south-east trade is brisk and small splashes of sea occasionally invade my open ports. Mr. Pike's room was soaked yesterday. This is the most exciting thing that has happened for some time. The gangsters rule in the forecastle. Larry and Shorty have had a harmless fight. The hooks continue to burn in Mulligan Jacobs's brain. Charles Davis resides alone in his little steel room, coming out only to get his food from the galley. Miss West plays and sings, doctors Possum, launders, and is for ever otherwise busy with her fancy work. Mr. Pike runs the phonograph every other evening in the second dog-watch. Mr. Mellaire hides the cleft in his head. I keep his secret. And Captain West, more remote than ever, sits in the draught of wind in the twilight cabin.

We are now thirty-seven days at sea, in which time, until to-day, we have not sighted a vessel. And to-day, at one time, no less than six vessels were visible from the deck. Not until I saw these ships was I able thoroughly to realize how lonely this ocean is.

Mr. Pike tells me we are several hundred miles off the South American coast. And yet, only the other day, it seems, we were scarcely more distant from Africa. A big velvety moth fluttered aboard this morning, and we are filled with conjecture. How possibly could it have come from the South American coast these hundreds of miles in the teeth of the

trades?

The Southern Cross has been visible, of course, for weeks; the North Star has disappeared behind the bulge of the earth; and the Great Bear, at its highest, is very low. Soon it, too, will be gone and we shall be raising the Magellan Clouds.

I remember the fight between Larry and Shorty. Wada reports that Mr. Pike watched it for some time, until, becoming incensed at their awkwardness, he clouted both of them with his open hands and made them stop, announcing that until they could make a better showing he intended doing all the fighting on the Elsinore himself.

It is a feat beyond me to realize that he is sixty-nine years old. And when I look at the tremendous build of him and at his fearful, man-handling hands, I conjure up a vision of him avenging Captain Somers's murder.

Life is cruel. Amongst the Elsinore's five thousand tons of coal are thousands of rats. There is no way for them to get out of their steel-walled prison, for all the ventilators are guarded with stout wire-mesh. On her previous voyage, loaded with barley, they increased and multiplied. Now they are imprisoned in the coal, and cannibalism is what must occur among them. Mr. Pike says that when we reach Seattle there will be a dozen or a score of survivors, huge fellows, the strongest and fiercest. Sometimes, passing the mouth of one ventilator that is in the

after wall of the chart-house, I can hear their plaintive squealing and crying from far beneath in the coal.

Other and luckier rats are in the 'tween decks for'ard, where all the spare suits of sails are stored. They come out and run about the deck at night, steal food from the galley, and lap up the dew. Which reminds me that Mr. Pike will no longer look at Possum. It seems, under his suggestion, that Wada trapped a rat in the donkey-engine room. Wada swears that it was the father of all rats, and that, by actual measurement, it scaled eighteen inches from nose to the tip of tail. Also, it seems that Mr. Pike and Wada, with the door shut in the former's room, pitted the rat against Possum, and that Possum was licked. They were compelled to kill the rat themselves, while Possum, when all was over, lay down and had a fit.

Now Mr. Pike abhors a coward, and his disgust with Possum is profound. He no longer plays with the puppy, nor even speaks to him, and, whenever he passes him on the deck, glowers sourly at him.

I have been reading up the South Atlantic Sailing Directions, and I find that we are now entering the most beautiful sunset region in the world. And this evening we were favoured with a sample. I was in my quarters, overhauling my books, when Miss West called to me from the foot of the chart-house stairs:

"Mr. Pathurst!--Come quick! Oh, do come quick! You can't afford to miss

it!"

Half the sky, from the zenith to the western sea-line, was an astonishing sheet of pure, pale, even gold. And through this sheen, on the horizon, burned the sun, a disc of richer gold. The gold of the sky grew more golden, then tarnished before our eyes and began to glow faintly with red. As the red deepened, a mist spread over the whole sheet of gold and the burning yellow sun. Turner was never guilty of so audacious an orgy in gold-mist.

Presently, along the horizon, entirely completing the circle of sea and sky, the tight-packed shapes of the trade wind clouds began to show through the mist; and as they took form they spilled with rose-colour at their upper edges, while their bases were a pulsing, bluish-white. I say it advisedly. All the colours of this display pulsed.

As the gold-mist continued to clear away, the colours became garish, bold; the turquoises went into greens and the roses turned to the red of blood. And the purple and indigo of the long swells of sea were bronzed with the colour-riot in the sky, while across the water, like gigantic serpents, crawled red and green sky-reflections. And then all the gorgeousness quickly dulled, and the warm, tropic darkness drew about us.