

CHAPTER XXVIII

"I think we are going to have a fine sunset," Captain West remarked last evening.

Miss West and I abandoned our rubber of cribbage and hastened on deck. The sunset had not yet come, but all was preparing. As we gazed we could see the sky gathering the materials, grouping the gray clouds in long lines and towering masses, spreading its palette with slow-growing, glowing tints and sudden blobs of colour.

"It's the Golden Gate!" Miss West cried, indicating the west. "See! We're just inside the harbour. Look to the south there. If that isn't the sky-line of San Francisco! There's the Call Building, and there, far down, the Ferry Tower, and surely that is the Fairmount." Her eyes roved back through the opening between the cloud masses, and she clapped her hands. "It's a sunset within a sunset! See! The Farallones!"--swimming in a miniature orange and red sunset all their own. "Isn't it the Golden Gate, and San Francisco, and the Farallones?" She appealed to Mr. Pike, who, leaning near, on the poop-rail, was divided between gazing sourly at Nancy pottering on the main deck and sourly at Possum, who, on the bridge, crouched with terror each time the crojack flapped empty above him.

The mate turned his head and favoured the sky picture with a solemn

stare.

"Oh, I don't know," he growled. "It may look like the Farallones to you, but to me it looks like a battleship coming right in the Gate with a bone in its teeth at a twenty-knot clip."

Sure enough. The floating Farallones had metamorphosed into a giant warship.

Then came the colour riot, the dominant tone of which was green. It was green, green, green--the blue-green of the springing year, and sere and yellow green and tawny-brown green of autumn. There were orange green, gold green, and a copper green. And all these greens were rich green beyond description; and yet the richness and the greenness passed even as we gazed upon it, going out of the gray clouds and into the sea, which assumed the exquisite golden pink of polished copper, while the hollows of the smooth and silken ripples were touched by a most ethereal pea green.

The gray clouds became a long, low swathe of ruby red, or garnet red--such as one sees in a glass of heavy burgundy when held to the light. There was such depth to this red! And, below it, separated from the main colour-mass by a line of gray-white fog, or line of sea, was another and smaller streak of ruddy-coloured wine.

I strolled across the poop to the port side.

"Oh! Come back! Look! Look!" Miss West cried to me.

"What's the use?" I answered. "I've something just as good over here."

She joined me, and as she did so I noted, a sour grin on Mr. Pike's face.

The eastern heavens were equally spectacular. That quarter of the sky was sheer and delicate shell of blue, the upper portions of which faded, changed, through every harmony, into a pale, yet warm, rose, all trembling, palpitating, with misty blue tinting into pink. The reflection of this coloured sky-shell upon the water made of the sea a glimmering watered silk, all changeable, blue, Nile-green, and salmon-pink. It was silky, silken, a wonderful silk that veneered and flossed the softly moving, wavy water.

And the pale moon looked like a wet pearl gleaming through the tinted mist of the sky-shell.

In the southern quadrant of the sky we discovered an entirely different sunset--what would be accounted a very excellent orange-and-red sunset anywhere, with grey clouds hanging low and lighted and tinted on all their under edges.

"Huh!" Mr. Pike muttered gruffly, while we were exclaiming over our fresh discovery. "Look at the sunset I got here to the north. It ain't doing

so badly now, I leave it to you."

And it wasn't. The northern quadrant was a great fen of colour and cloud, that spread ribs of feathery pink, fleece-frilled, from the horizon to the zenith. It was all amazing. Four sunsets at the one time in the sky! Each quadrant glowed, and burned, and pulsed with a sunset distinctly its own.

And as the colours dulled in the slow twilight, the moon, still misty, wept tears of brilliant, heavy silver into the dim lilac sea. And then came the hush of darkness and the night, and we came to ourselves, out of reverie, sated with beauty, leaning toward each other as we leaned upon the rail side by side.

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I never grow tired of watching Captain West. In a way he bears a sort of resemblance to several of Washington's portraits. He is six feet of aristocratic thinness, and has a very definite, leisurely and stately grace of movement. His thinness is almost ascetic. In appearance and manner he is the perfect old-type New England gentleman.

He has the same gray eyes as his daughter, although his are genial rather than warm; and his eyes have the same trick of smiling. His skin is pinker than hers, and his brows and lashes are fairer. But he seems removed beyond passion, or even simple enthusiasm. Miss West is firm,

like her father; but there is warmth in her firmness. He is clean, he is sweet and courteous; but he is coolly sweet, coolly courteous. With all his certain graciousness, in cabin or on deck, so far as his social equals are concerned, his graciousness is cool, elevated, thin.

He is the perfect master of the art of doing nothing. He never reads, except the Bible; yet he is never bored. Often, I note him in a deck-chair, studying his perfect finger-nails, and, I'll swear, not seeing them at all. Miss West says he loves the sea. And I ask myself a thousand times, "But how?" He shows no interest in any phase of the sea. Although he called our attention to the glorious sunset I have just described, he did not remain on deck to enjoy it. He sat below, in the big leather chair, not reading, not dozing, but merely gazing straight before him at nothing.

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The days pass, and the seasons pass. We left Baltimore at the tail-end of winter, went into spring and on through summer, and now we are in fall weather and urging our way south to the winter of Cape Horn. And as we double the Cape and proceed north, we shall go through spring and summer--a long summer--pursuing the sun north through its declination and arriving at Seattle in summer. And all these seasons have occurred, and will have occurred, in the space of five months.

Our white ducks are gone, and, in south latitude thirty-five, we are

wearing the garments of a temperate clime. I notice that Wada has given me heavier underclothes and heavier pyjamas, and that Possum, of nights, is no longer content with the top of the bed but must crawl underneath the bed-clothes.

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We are now off the Plate, a region notorious for storms, and Mr. Pike is on the lookout for a pampero. Captain West does not seem to be on the lookout for anything; yet I notice that he spends longer hours on deck when the sky and barometer are threatening.

Yesterday we had a hint of Plate weather, and to-day an awesome fiasco of the same. The hint came last evening between the twilight and the dark. There was practically no wind, and the *Elsinore*, just maintaining steerage way by means of intermittent fans of air from the north, floundered exasperatingly in a huge glassy swell that rolled up as an echo from some blown-out storm to the south.

Ahead of us, arising with the swiftness of magic, was a dense slate-blackness. I suppose it was cloud-formation, but it bore no semblance to clouds. It was merely and sheerly a blackness that towered higher and higher until it overhung us, while it spread to right and left, blotting out half the sea.

And still the light puffs from the north filled our sails; and still, as

the Elsinore floundered on the huge, smooth swells and the sails emptied and flapped a hollow thunder, we moved slowly towards that ominous blackness. In the cast, in what was quite distinctly an active thunder cloud, the lightning fairly winked, while the blackness in front of us was rent with blobs and flashes of lightning.

The last puffs left us, and in the hushes, between the rumbles of the nearing thunder, the voices of the men aloft on the yards came to one's ear as if they were right beside one instead of being hundreds of feet away and up in the air. That they were duly impressed by what was impending was patent from the earnestness with which they worked. Both watches toiled under both mates, and Captain West strolled the poop in his usual casual way, and gave no orders at all, save in low conventional tones, when Mr. Pike came upon the poop and conferred with him.

Miss West, having deserted the scene five minutes before, returned, a proper sea-woman, clad in oil-skins, sou'wester, and long sea-boots. She ordered me, quite peremptorily, to do the same. But I could not bring myself to leave the deck for fear of missing something, so I compromised by having Wada bring my storm-gear to me.

And then the wind came, smack out of the blackness, with the abruptness of thunder and accompanied by the most diabolical thunder. And with the rain and thunder came the blackness. It was tangible. It drove past us in the bellowing wind like so much stuff that one could feel. Blackness as well as wind impacted on us. There is no other way to describe it

than by the old, ancient old, way of saying one could not see his hand before his face.

"Isn't it splendid!" Miss West shouted into my ear, close beside me, as we clung to the railing of the break of the poop.

"Superb!" I shouted back, my lips to her ear, so that her hair tickled my face.

And, I know not why--it must have been spontaneous with both of us--in that shouting blackness of wind, as we clung to the rail to avoid being blown away, our hands went out to each other and my hand and hers gripped and pressed and then held mutually to the rail.

"Daughter of Herodias," I commented grimly to myself; but my hand did not leave hers.

"What is happening?" I shouted in her ear.

"We've lost way," came her answer. "I think we're caught aback! The wheel's up, but she could not steer!"

The Gabriel voice of the Samurai rang out. "Hard over?" was his mellow storm-call to the man at the wheel. "Hard over, sir," came the helmsman's reply, vague, cracked with strain, and smothered.

Came the lightning, before us, behind us, on every side, bathing us in flaming minutes at a time. And all the while we were deafened by the unceasing uproar of thunder. It was a weird sight--far aloft the black skeleton of spars and masts from which the sails had been removed; lower down, the sailors clinging like monstrous bugs as they passed the gaskets and furled; beneath them the few set sails, filled backward against the masts, gleaming whitely, wickedly, evilly, in the fearful illumination; and, at the bottom, the deck and bridge and houses of the Elsinore, and a tangled riff-raff of flying ropes, and clumps and bunches of swaying, pulling, hauling, human creatures.

It was a great moment, the master's moment--caught all aback with all our bulk and tonnage and infinitude of gear, and our heaven-aspiring masts two hundred feet above our heads. And our master was there, in sheeting flame, slender, casual, imperturbable, with two men--one of them a murderer--under him to pass on and enforce his will, and with a horde of inefficients and weaklings to obey that will, and pull, and haul, and by the sheer leverages of physics manipulate our floating world so that it would endure this fury of the elements.

What happened next, what was done, I do not know, save that now and again I heard the Gabriel voice; for the darkness came, and the rain in pouring, horizontal sheets. It filled my mouth and strangled my lungs as if I had fallen overboard. It seemed to drive up as well as down, piercing its way under my sou'wester, through my oilskins, down my tight-buttoned collar, and into my sea-boots. I was dizzied, obfuscated, by

all this onslaught of thunder, lightning, wind, blackness, and water. And yet the master, near to me, there on the poop, lived and moved serenely in all, voicing his wisdom and will to the wisps of creatures who obeyed and by their brute, puny strength pulled braces, slacked sheets, dragged courses, swung yards and lowered them, hauled on buntlines and clewlines, smoothed and gasketed the huge spreads of canvas.

How it happened I know not, but Miss West and I crouched together, clinging to the rail and to each other in the shelter of the thrumming weather-cloth. My arm was about her and fast to the railing; her shoulder pressed close against me, and by one hand she held tightly to the lapel of my oilskin.

An hour later we made our way across the poop to the chart-house, helping each other to maintain footing as the *Elsinore* plunged and bucked in the rising sea and was pressed over and down by the weight of wind on her few remaining set sails. The wind, which had lulled after the rain, had risen in recurrent gusts to storm violence. But all was well with the gallant ship. The crisis was past, and the ship lived, and we lived, and with streaming faces and bright eyes we looked at each other and laughed in the bright light of the chart-room.

"Who can blame one for loving the sea?" Miss West cried out exultantly, as she wrung the rain from her ropes of hair which had gone adrift in the turmoil. "And the men of the sea!" she cried. "The masters of the sea! You saw my father . . ."

"He is a king," I said.

"He is a king," she repeated after me.

And the Elsinore lifted on a cresting sea and flung down on her side, so that we were thrown together and brought up breathless against the wall.

I said good-night to her at the foot of the stairs, and as I passed the open door to the cabin I glanced in. There sat Captain West, whom I had thought still on deck. His storm-trappings were removed, his sea-boots replaced by slippers; and he leaned back in the big leather chair, eyes wide open, beholding visions in the curling smoke of a cigar against a background of wildly reeling cabin wall.

It was at eleven this morning that the Plate gave us a fiasco. Last night's was a real pampero--though a mild one. To-day's promised to be a far worse one, and then laughed at us as a proper cosmic joke. The wind, during the night, had so eased that by nine in the morning we had all our topgallant-sails set. By ten we were rolling in a dead calm. By eleven the stuff began making up ominously in the south'ard.

The overcast sky closed down. Our lofty trucks seemed to scrape the cloud-zenith. The horizon drew in on us till it seemed scarcely half a mile away. The Elsinore was embayed in a tiny universe of mist and

sea. The lightning played. Sky and horizon drew so close that the Elsinore seemed on the verge of being absorbed, sucked in by it, sucked up by it.

Then from zenith to horizon the sky was cracked with forked lightning, and the wet atmosphere turned to a horrid green. The rain, beginning gently, in dead calm, grew into a deluge of enormous streaming drops. It grew darker and darker, a green darkness, and in the cabin, although it was midday, Wada and the steward lighted lamps. The lightning came closer and closer, until the ship was enveloped in it. The green darkness was continually a-tremble with flame, through which broke greater illuminations of forked lightning. These became more violent as the rain lessened, and, so absolutely were we centred in this electrical maelstrom, there was no connecting any chain or flash or fork of lightning with any particular thunder-clap. The atmosphere all about us paled and flamed. Such a crashing and smashing! We looked every moment for the Elsinore to be struck. And never had I seen such colours in lightning. Although from moment to moment we were dazzled by the greater bolts, there persisted always a tremulous, pulsing lesser play of light, sometimes softly blue, at other times a thin purple that quivered on into a thousand shades of lavender.

And there was no wind. No wind came. Nothing happened. The Elsinore, naked-sparred, under only lower-topsails, with spanker and crojack furled, was prepared for anything. Her lower-topsails hung in limp emptiness from the yards, heavy with rain and flapping soggily when she

rolled. The cloud mass thinned, the day brightened, the green blackness passed into gray twilight, the lightning eased, the thunder moved along away from us, and there was no wind. In half an hour the sun was shining, the thunder muttered intermittently along the horizon, and the *Elsinore* still rolled in a hush of air.

"You can't tell, sir," Mr. Pike growled to me. "Thirty years ago I was dismasted right here off the Plate in a clap of wind that come on just as that come on."

It was the changing of the watches, and Mr. Mellaire, who had come on the poop to relieve the mate, stood beside me.

"One of the nastiest pieces of water in the world," he concurred.

"Eighteen years ago the Plate gave it to me--lost half our sticks, twenty hours on our beam-ends, cargo shifted, and foundered. I was two days in the boat before an English tramp picked us up. And none of the other boats ever was picked up."

"The *Elsinore* behaved very well last night," I put in cheerily.

"Oh, hell, that wasn't nothing," Mr. Pike grumbled. "Wait till you see a real pampero. It's a dirty stretch hereabouts, and I, for one, 'll be glad when we get across It. I'd sooner have a dozen Cape Horn snorters than one of these. How about you, Mr. Mellaire?"

"Same here, sir," he answered. "Those sou'-westers are honest. You know what to expect. But here you never know. The best of ship-masters can get tripped up off the Plate."

"As I've found out . . .

Beyond a doubt,"

Mr. Pike hummed from Newcomb's Celeste, as he went down the ladder.