

## CHAPTER XXIX

The sunsets grow more bizarre and spectacular off this coast of the Argentine. Last evening we had high clouds, broken white and golden, flung disorderly, generously, over the western half of the sky, while in the east was painted a second sunset--a reflection, perhaps, of the first. At any rate, the eastern sky was a bank of pale clouds that shed soft, spread rays of blue and white upon a blue-grey sea.

And the evening before last we had a gorgeous Arizona riot in the west. Bastioned upon the ocean cloud-tier was piled upon cloud-tier, spacious and lofty, until we gazed upon a Grand Canyon a myriad times vaster and more celestial than that of the Colorado. The clouds took on the same stratified, serrated, rose-rock formation, and all the hollows were filled with the opal blues and purple hazes of the Painted Lands.

The Sailing Directions say that these remarkable sunsets are due to the dust being driven high into the air by the winds that blow across the pampas of the Argentine.

And our sunset to-night--I am writing this at midnight, as I sit propped in my blankets, wedged by pillows, while the Elsinore wallows damnably in a dead calm and a huge swell rolling up from the Cape Horn region, where, it does seem, gales perpetually blow. But our sunset. Turner might have perpetrated it. The west was as if a painter had stood off

and slapped brushfuls of gray at a green canvas. On this green background of sky the clouds spilled and crumpled.

But such a background! Such an orgy of green! No shade of green was missing in the interstices, large and small, between the milky, curdled clouds--Nile-green high up, and then, in order, each with a thousand shades, blue-green, brown-green, grey-green, and a wonderful olive-green that tarnished into a rich bronze-green.

During the display the rest of the horizon glowed with broad bands of pink, and blue, and pale green, and yellow. A little later, when the sun was quite down, in the background of the curdled clouds smouldered a wine-red mass of colour, that faded to bronze and tinged all the fading greens with its sanguinary hue. The clouds themselves flushed to rose of all shades, while a fan of gigantic streamers of pale rose radiated toward the zenith. These deepened rapidly into flaunting rose-flame and burned long in the slow-closing twilight.

And with all this wonder of the beauty of the world still glowing in my brain hours afterward, I hear the snarling of Mr. Pike above my head, and the trample and drag of feet as the men move from rope to rope and pull and haul. More weather is making, and from the way sail is being taken in it cannot be far off.

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Yet at daylight this morning we were still wallowing in the same dead calm and sickly swell. Miss West says the barometer is down, but that the warning has been too long, for the Plate, to amount to anything. Pamperos happen quickly here, and though the Elsinore, under bare poles to her upper-topsails, is prepared for anything, it may well be that they will be crowding on canvas in another hour.

Mr. Pike was so fooled that he actually had set the topgallant-sails, and the gaskets were being taken off the royals, when the Samurai came on deck, strolled back and forth a casual five minutes, then spoke in an undertone to Mr. Pike. Mr. Pike did not like it. To me, a tyro, it was evident that he disagreed with his master. Nevertheless, his voice went out in a snarl aloft to the men on the royal-yards to make all fast again. Then it was clewlines and buntlines and lowering of yards as the topgallant-sails were stripped off. The crojack was taken in, and some of the outer fore-and-aft handsails, whose order of names I can never remember.

A breeze set in from the south-west, blowing briskly under a clear sky. I could see that Mr. Pike was secretly pleased. The Samurai had been mistaken. And each time Mr. Pike glanced aloft at the naked topgallant-and royal-yards, I knew his thought was that they might well be carrying sail. I was quite convinced that the Plate had fooled Captain West. So was Miss West convinced, and, being a favoured person like myself, she frankly told me so.

"Father will be setting sail in half an hour," she prophesied.

What superior weather-sense Captain West possesses I know not, save that it is his by Samurai right. The sky, as I have said, was clear. The air was brittle--sparkling gloriously in the windy sun. And yet, behold, in a brief quarter of an hour, the change that took place. I had just returned from a trip below, and Miss West was venting her scorn on the River Plate and promising to go below to the sewing-machine, when we heard Mr. Pike groan. It was a whimsical groan of disgust, contrition, and acknowledgment of inferiority before the master.

"Here comes the whole River Plate," was what he groaned.

Following his gaze to the south-west, we saw it coming. It was a cloud-mass that blotted out the sunlight and the day. It seemed to swell and belch and roll over and over on itself as it advanced with a rapidity that told of enormous wind behind it and in it. Its speed was headlong, terrific; and, beneath it, covering the sea, advancing with it, was a gray bank of mist.

Captain West spoke to the mate, who bawled the order along, and the watch, reinforced by the watch below, began dewing up the mainsail and foresail and climbing into the rigging.

"Keep off! Put your wheel over! Hard over!" Captain West called gently to the helmsman.

And the big wheel spun around, and the Elsinore's bow fell off so that she might not be caught aback by the onslaught of wind.

Thunder rode in that rushing, rolling blackness of cloud; and it was rent by lightning as it fell upon us.

Then it was rain, wind, obscureness of gloom, and lightning. I caught a glimpse of the men on the lower-yards as they were blotted from view and as the Elsinore heeled over and down. There were fifteen men of them to each yard, and the gaskets were well passed ere we were struck. How they regained the deck I do not know, I never saw; for the Elsinore, under only upper- and lower-topsails, lay down on her side, her port-rail buried in the sea, and did not rise.

There was no maintaining an unsupported upright position on that acute slant of deck. Everybody held on. Mr. Pike frankly gripped the poop-rail with both hands, and Miss West and I made frantic clutches and scrambled for footing. But I noticed that the Samurai, poised lightly, like a bird on the verge of flight, merely rested one hand on the rail. He gave no orders. As I divined, there was nothing to be done. He waited--that was all--in tranquillity and repose. The situation was simple. Either the masts would go, or the Elsinore would rise with her masts intact, or she would never rise again.

In the meantime she lay dead, her lee yardarms almost touching the sea,

the sea creaming solidly to her hatch-combings across the buried, unseen rail.

The minutes were as centuries, until the bow paid off and the Elsinore, turned tail before it, righted to an even keel. Immediately this was accomplished Captain West had her brought back upon the wind. And immediately, thereupon, the big foresail went adrift from its gaskets. The shock, or succession of shocks, to the ship, from the tremendous buffeting that followed, was fearful. It seemed she was being racked to pieces. Master and mate were side by side when this happened, and the expressions on their faces typified them. In neither face was apprehension. Mr. Pike's face bore a sour sneer for the worthless sailors who had botched the job. Captain West's face was serenely considerative.

Still, nothing was to be done, could be done; and for five minutes the Elsinore was shaken as in the maw of some gigantic monster, until the last shreds of the great piece of canvas had been torn away.

"Our foresail has departed for Africa," Miss West laughed in my ear.

She is like her father, unaware of fear.

"And now we may as well go below and be comfortable," she said five minutes later. "The worst is over. It will only be blow, blow, blow, and a big sea making."

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All day it blew. And the big sea that arose made the Elsinore's conduct almost unlivable. My only comfort was achieved by taking to my bunk and wedging myself with pillows buttressed against the bunk's sides by empty soap-boxes which Wada arranged. Mr. Pike, clinging to my door-casing while his legs sprawled adrift in a succession of terrific rolls, paused to tell me that it was a new one on him in the pampero line. It was all wrong from the first. It had not come on right. It had no reason to be.

He paused a little longer, and, in a casual way, that under the circumstances was ridiculously transparent, exposed what was at ferment in his mind.

First of all he was absurd enough to ask if Possum showed symptoms of seasickness. Next, he unburdened his wrath for the inefficient who had lost the foresail, and sympathized with the sail-makers for the extra work thrown upon them. Then he asked permission to borrow one of my books, and, clinging to my bunk, selected Buchner's Force and Matter from my shelf, carefully wedging the empty space with the doubled magazine I use for that purpose.

Still he was loth to depart, and, cudgelling his brains for a pretext, he set up a rambling discourse on River Plate weather. And all the time I

kept wondering what was behind it all. At last it came.

"By the way, Mr. Pathurst," he remarked, "do you happen to remember how many years ago Mr. Mellaire said it was that he was dismasted and foundered off here?"

I caught his drift on the instant.

"Eight years ago, wasn't it?" I lied.

Mr. Pike let this sink in and slowly digested it, while the Elsinore was guilty of three huge rolls down to port and back again.

"Now I wonder what ship was sunk off the Plate eight years ago?" he communed, as if with himself. "I guess I'll have to ask Mr. Mellaire her name. You can search me for all any I can recollect."

He thanked me with unwonted elaborateness for Force and Matter, of which I knew he would never read a line, and felt his way to the door. Here he hung on for a moment, as if struck by a new and most accidental idea.

"Now it wasn't, by any chance, that he said eighteen years ago?" he queried.

I shook my head.



"Eight years ago," I said. "That's the way I remember it, though why I should remember it at all I don't know. But that is what he said," I went on with increasing confidence. "Eight years ago. I am sure of it."

Mr. Pike looked at me ponderingly, and waited until the *Elsinore* had fairly righted for an instant ere he took his departure down the hall.

I think I have followed the working of his mind. I have long since learned that his memory of ships, officers, cargoes, gales, and disasters is remarkable. He is a veritable encyclopaedia of the sea. Also, it is patent that he has equipped himself with Sidney Waltham's history. As yet, he does not dream that Mr. Mellaire is Sidney Waltham, and he is merely wondering if Mr. Mellaire was a ship-mate of Sidney Waltham eighteen years ago in the ship lost off the Plate.

In the meantime, I shall never forgive Mr. Mellaire for this slip he has made. He should have been more careful.