

CHAPTER XXX

An abominable night! A wonderful night! Sleep? I suppose I did sleep, in catnaps, but I swear I heard every bell struck until three-thirty. Then came a change, an easement. No longer was it a stubborn, loggy fight against pressures. The *Elsinore* moved. I could feel her slip, and slide, and send, and soar. Whereas before she had been flung continually down to port, she now rolled as far to one side as to the other.

I knew what had taken place. Instead of remaining hove-to on the *pampero*, Captain West had turned tail and was running before it. This, I understood, meant a really serious storm, for the north-east was the last direction in which Captain West desired to go. But at any rate the movement, though wilder, was easier, and I slept. I was awakened at five by the thunder of seas that fell aboard, rushed down the main deck, and crashed against the cabin wall. Through my open door I could see water swashing up and down the hall, while half a foot of water creamed and curdled from under my bunk across the floor each time the ship rolled to starboard.

The steward brought me my coffee, and, wedged by boxes and pillows, like an equilibrist, I sat up and drank it. Luckily I managed to finish it in time, for a succession of terrific rolls emptied one of my book-shelves. Possum, crawling upward from my feet under the covered way of my bed,

yapped with terror as the seas smashed and thundered and as the avalanche of books descended upon us. And I could not but grin when the Paste Board Crown smote me on the head, while the puppy was knocked gasping with Chesterton's What's Wrong with the World?

"Well, what do you think?" I queried of the steward who was helping to set us and the books to rights.

He shrugged his shoulders, and his bright slant eyes were very bright as he replied:

"Many times I see like this. Me old man. Many times I see more bad. Too much wind, too much work. Rotten dam bad."

I could guess that the scene on deck was a spectacle, and at six o'clock, as gray light showed through my ports in the intervals when they were not submerged, I essayed the side-board of my bunk like a gymnast, captured my careering slippers, and shuddered as I thrust my bare feet into their chill sogginess. I did not wait to dress. Merely in pyjamas I headed for the poop, Possum wailing dismally at my desertion.

It was a feat to travel the narrow halls. Time and again I paused and held on until my finger-tips hurt. In the moments of easement I made progress. Yet I miscalculated. The foot of the broad stairway to the chart-house rested on a cross-hall a dozen feet in length.

Over-confidence and an unusually violent antic of the Elsinore caused

the disaster. She flung down to starboard with such suddenness and at such a pitch that the flooring seemed to go out from under me and I hustled helplessly down the incline. I missed a frantic clutch at the newel-post, flung up my arm in time to save my face, and, most fortunately, whirled half about, and, still falling, impacted with my shoulder muscle-pad on Captain West's door.

Youth will have its way. So will a ship in a sea. And so will a hundred and seventy pounds of a man. The beautiful hardwood door-panel splintered, the latch fetched away, and I broke the nails of the four fingers of my right hand in a futile grab at the flying door, marring the polished surface with four parallel scratches. I kept right on, erupting into Captain West's spacious room with the big brass bed.

Miss West, swathed in a woollen dressing-gown, her eyes heavy still with sleep, her hair glorious and for the once ungroomed, clinging in the doorway that gave entrance on the main cabin, met my startled gaze with an equally startled gaze.

It was no time for apologies. I kept right on my mad way, caught the foot stanchion, and was whipped around in half a circle flat upon Captain West's brass bed.

Miss West was beginning to laugh.

"Come right in," she gurgled.

A score of retorts, all deliciously inadvisable, tickled my tongue, so I said nothing, contenting myself with holding on with my left hand while I nursed my stinging right hand under my arm-pit. Beyond her, across the floor of the main cabin, I saw the steward in pursuit of Captain West's Bible and a sheaf of Miss West's music. And as she gurgled and laughed at me, beholding her in this intimacy of storm, the thought flashed through my brain:

She is a woman. She is desirable.

Now did she sense this fleeting, unuttered flash of mine? I know not, save that her laughter left her, and long conventional training asserted itself as she said:

"I just knew everything was adrift in father's room. He hasn't been in it all night. I could hear things rolling around . . . What is wrong? Are you hurt?"

"Stubbed my fingers, that's all," I answered, looking at my broken nails and standing gingerly upright.

"My, that was a roll," she sympathized.

"Yes; I'd started to go upstairs," I said, "and not to turn into your father's bed. I'm afraid I've ruined the door."

Came another series of great rolls. I sat down on the bed and held on. Miss West, secure in the doorway, began gurgling again, while beyond, across the cabin carpet, the steward shot past, embracing a small writing-desk that had evidently carried away from its fastenings when he seized hold of it for support. More seas smashed and crashed against the for'ard wall of the cabin; and the steward, failing of lodgment, shot back across the carpet, still holding the desk from harm.

Taking advantage of favouring spells, I managed to effect my exit and gain the newel-post ere the next series of rolls came. And as I clung on and waited, I could not forget what I had just seen. Vividly under my eyelids burned the picture of Miss West's sleep-laden eyes, her hair, and all the softness of her. A woman and desirable kept drumming in my brain.

But I forgot all this, when, nearly at the top, I was thrown up the hill of the stairs as if it had suddenly become downhill. My feet flew from stair to stair to escape falling, and I flew, or fell, apparently upward, until, at the top, I hung on for dear life while the stern of the *Elsinore* flung skyward on some mighty surge.

Such antics of so huge a ship! The old stereotyped "toy" describes her; for toy she was, the sheerest splinter of a plaything in the grip of the elements. And yet, despite this overwhelming sensation of microscopic helplessness, I was aware of a sense of surety. There was the Samurai.

Informed with his will and wisdom, the Elsinore was no cat's-paw. Everything was ordered, controlled. She was doing what he ordained her to do, and, no matter what storm-Titans bellowed about her and buffeted her, she would continue to do what he ordained her to do.

I glanced into the chart-room. There he sat, leaned back in a screw-chair, his sea-booted legs, wedged against the settee, holding him in place in the most violent rolls. His black oilskin coat glistened in the lamplight with a myriad drops of ocean that advertised a recent return from deck. His sou'wester, black and glistening, was like the helmet of some legendary hero. He was smoking a cigar, and he smiled and greeted me. But he seemed very tired and very old--old with wisdom, however, not weakness. The flesh of his face, the pink pigment quite washed and worn away, was more transparent than ever; and yet never was he more serene, never more the master absolute of our tiny, fragile world. The age that showed in him was not a matter of terrestrial years. It was ageless, passionless, beyond human. Never had he appeared so great to me, so far remote, so much a spirit visitant.

And he cautioned and advised me, in silver-mellow beneficent voice, as I essayed the venture of opening the chart-house door to gain outside. He knew the moment, although I never could have guessed it for myself, and gave the word that enabled me to win the poop.

Water was everywhere. The Elsinore was rushing through a blurring whirr of water. Seas creamed and licked the poop-deck edge, now to

starboard, now to port. High in the air, over-towering and perilously down-toppling, following-seas pursued our stern. The air was filled with spindrift like a fog or spray. No officer of the watch was in sight. The poop was deserted, save for two helmsmen in streaming oilskins under the half-shelter of the open wheel-house. I nodded good morning to them.

One was Tom Spink, the elderly but keen and dependable English sailor. The other was Bill Quigley, one of a fore-castle group of three that herded uniquely together, though the other two, Frank Fitzgibbon and Richard Oiler, were in the second mate's watch. The three had proved handy with their fists, and clannish; they had fought pitched fore-castle battles with the gangster clique and won a sort of neutrality of independence for themselves. They were not exactly sailors--Mr. Mellaire sneeringly called them the "bricklayers"--but they had successfully refused subservience to the gangster crowd.

To cross the deck from the chart-house to the break of the poop was no slight feat, but I managed it and hung on to the railing while the wind stung my flesh with the flappings of my pyjamas. At this moment, and for the moment, the *Elsinore* righted to an even keel, and dashed along and down the avalanching face of a wave. And as she thus righted her deck was filled with water level from rail to rail. Above this flood, or knee-deep in it, Mr. Pike and half-a-dozen sailors were bunched on the five-rail of the mizzen-mast. The carpenter, too, was there, with a couple of assistants.

The next roll spilled half a thousand tons of water outboard sheer over the starboard-rail, while all the starboard ports opened automatically and gushed huge streams. Then came the opposite roll to port, with a clanging shut of the iron doors; and a hundred tons of sea sloshed outboard across the port-rail, while all the iron doors on that side opened wide and gushed. And all this time, it must not be forgotten, the *Elsinore* was dashing ahead through the sea.

The only sail she carried was three upper-topsails. Not the tiniest triangle of headsail was on her. I had never seen her with so little wind-surface, and the three narrow strips of canvas, bellied to the seemingness of sheet-iron with the pressure of the wind, drove her before the gale at astonishing speed.

As the water on the deck subsided the men on the fife-rail left their refuge. One group, led by the redoubtable Mr. Pike, strove to capture a mass of planks and twisted steel. For the moment I did not recognize what it was. The carpenter, with two men, sprang upon Number Three hatch and worked hurriedly and fearfully. And I knew why Captain West had turned tail to the storm. Number Three hatch was a wreck. Among other things the great timber, called the "strong-back," was broken. He had had to run, or founder. Before our decks were swept again I could make out the carpenter's emergency repairs. With fresh timbers he was bolting, lashing, and wedging Number Three hatch into some sort of tightness.

When the Elsinore dipped her port-rail under and scooped several hundred tons of South Atlantic, and then, immediately rolling her starboard-rail under, had another hundred tons of breaking sea fall in board upon her, all the men forsook everything and scrambled for life upon the five-rail. In the bursting spray they were quite hidden; and then I saw them and counted them all as they emerged into view. Again they waited for the water to subside.

The mass of wreckage pursued by Mr. Pike and his men ground a hundred feet along the deck for'ard, and, as the Elsinore's stern sank down in some abyss, ground back again and smashed up against the cabin wall. I identified this stuff as part of the bridge. That portion which spanned from the mizzen-mast to the 'midship-house was missing, while the starboard boat on the 'midship-house was a splintered mess.

Watching the struggle to capture and subdue the section of bridge, I was reminded of Victor Hugo's splendid description of the sailor's battle with a ship's gun gone adrift in a night of storm. But there was a difference, I found that Hugo's narrative had stirred me more profoundly than was I stirred by this actual struggle before my eyes.

I have repeatedly said that the sea makes one hard. I now realized how hard I had become as I stood there at the break of the poop in my wind-shipped, spray-soaked pyjamas. I felt no solicitude for the forecastle humans who struggled in peril of their lives beneath me. They did not count. Ah--I was even curious to see what might happen, did they get

caught by those crashing avalanches of sea ere they could gain the safety of the fife-rail.

And I saw. Mr. Pike, in the lead, of course, up to his waist in rushing water, dashed in, caught the flying wreckage with a turn of rope, and fetched it up short with a turn around one of the port mizzen-shrouds. The Elsinore flung down to port, and a solid wall of down-toppling green upreared a dozen feet above the rail. The men fled to the fife-rail. But Mr. Pike, holding his turn, held on, looked squarely into the wall of the wave, and received the downfall. He emerged, still holding by the turn the captured bridge.

The feeble-minded faun (the stone-deaf man) led the way to Mr. Pike's assistance, followed by Tony, the suicidal Greek. Paddy was next, and in order came Shorty, Henry the training-ship boy, and Nancy, last, of course, and looking as if he were going to execution.

The deck-water was no more than knee-deep, though rushing with torrential force, when Mr. Pike and the six men lifted the section of bridge and started for'ard with it. They swayed and staggered, but managed to keep going.

The carpenter saw the impending ocean-mountain first. I saw him cry to his own men and then to Mr. Pike ere he fled to the fife-rail. But Mr. Pike's men had no chance. Abreast of the 'midship-house, on the starboard side, fully fifteen feet above the rail and twenty above the

deck, the sea fell on board. The top of the 'midship-house was swept clean of the splintered boat. The water, impacting against the side of the house, spouted skyward as high as the crojack-yard. And all this, in addition to the main bulk of the wave, swept and descended upon Mr. Pike and his men.

They disappeared. The bridge disappeared. The Elsinore rolled to port and dipped her deck full from rail to rail. Next, she plunged down by the head, and all this mass of water surged forward. Through the creaming, foaming surface now and then emerged an arm, or a head, or a back, while cruel edges of jagged plank and twisted steel rods advertised that the bridge was turning over and over. I wondered what men were beneath it and what mauling they were receiving.

And yet these men did not count. I was aware of anxiety only for Mr. Pike. He, in a way, socially, was of my caste and class. He and I belonged aft in the high place; ate at the same table. I was acutely desirous that he should not be hurt or killed. The rest did not matter. They were not of my world. I imagine the old-time skippers, on the middle passage, felt much the same toward their slave-cargoes in the fetid 'tween decks.

The Elsinore's bow tilted skyward while her stern fell into a foaming valley. Not a man had gained his feet. Bridge and men swept back toward me and fetched up against the mizzen-shrouds. And then that prodigious, incredible old man appeared out of the water, on his two legs, upright,

dragging with him, a man in each hand, the helpless forms of Nancy and the Faun. My heart leapt at beholding this mighty figure of a man-killer and slave-driver, it is true, but who sprang first into the teeth of danger so that his slaves might follow, and who emerged with a half-drowned slave in either hand.

I knew augustness and pride as I gazed--pride that my eyes were blue, like his; that my skin was blond, like his; that my place was aft with him, and with the Samurai, in the high place of government and command. I nearly wept with the chill of pride that was akin to awe and that tingled and bristled along my spinal column and in my brain. As for the rest--the weaklings and the rejected, and the dark-pigmented things, the half-castes, the mongrel-bloods, and the dregs of long-conquered races--how could they count? My heels were iron as I gazed on them in their peril and weakness. Lord! Lord! For ten thousand generations and centuries we had stamped upon their faces and enslaved them to the toil of our will.

Again the Elsinore rolled to starboard and to port, while the spume spouted to our lower-yards and a thousand tons of South Atlantic surged across from rail to rail. And again all were down and under, with jagged plank and twisted steel overriding them. And again that amazing blond-skinned giant emerged, on his two legs upstanding, a broken waif like a rat in either hand. He forced his way through rushing, waist-high water, deposited his burdens with the carpenter on the fife-rail, and returned to drag Larry reeling to his feet and help him to the fife-rail. Out of

the wash, Tony, the Greek, crawled on hands and knees and sank down helplessly at the fife-rail. There was nothing suicidal now in his mood. Struggle as he would, he could not lift himself until the mate, gripping his oilskin at the collar, with one hand flung him through the air into the carpenter's arms.

Next came Shorty, his face streaming blood, one arm hanging useless, his sea-boots stripped from him. Mr. Pike pitched him into the fife-rail, and returned for the last man. It was Henry, the training-ship boy. Him I had seen, unstruggling, motionless, show at the surface like a drowned man and sink again as the flood surged aft and smashed him against the cabin. Mr. Pike, shoulder-deep, twice beaten to his knees and under by bursting seas, caught the lad, shouldered him, and carried him away for'ard.

An hour later, in the cabin, I encountered Mr. Pike going into breakfast. He had changed his clothes, and he had shaved! Now how could one treat a hero such as he save as I treated him when I remarked off-handedly that he must have had a lively watch?

"My," he answered, equally off-handedly, "I did get a prime soaking."

That was all. He had had no time to see me at the poop-rail. It was merely the day's work, the ship's work, the MAN'S work--all capitals, if you please, in MAN. I was the only one aft who knew, and I knew because I had chanced to see. Had I not been on the poop at that early hour no

one aft ever would have known those gray, storm-morning deeds of his.

"Anybody hurt?" I asked.

"Oh, some of the men got wet. But no bones broke. Henry'll be laid off for a day. He got turned over in a sea and bashed his head. And Shorty's got a wrenched shoulder, I think.--But, say, we got Davis into the top bunk! The seas filled him full and he had to climb for it. He's all awash and wet now, and you oughta seen me praying for more." He paused and sighed. "I'm getting old, I guess. I oughta wring his neck, but somehow I ain't got the gumption. Just the same, he'll be overside before we get in."

"A month's wages against a pound of tobacco he won't," I challenged.

"No," said Mr. Pike slowly. "But I'll tell you what I will do. I'll bet you a pound of tobacco even, or a month's wages even, that I'll have the pleasure of putting a sack of coal to his feet that never will come off."

"Done," said I.

"Done," said Mr. Pike. "And now I guess I'll get a bite to eat."