

CHAPTER XXXI

The more I see of Miss West the more she pleases me. Explain it in terms of propinquity, or isolation, or whatever you will; I, at least, do not attempt explanation. I know only that she is a woman and desirable. And I am rather proud, in a way, to find that I am just a man like any man. The midnight oil, and the relentless pursuit I have endured in the past from the whole tribe of women, have not, I am glad to say, utterly spoiled me.

I am obsessed by that phrase--a woman and desirable. It beats in my brain, in my thought. I go out of my way to steal a glimpse of Miss West through a cabin door or vista of hall when she does not know I am looking. A woman is a wonderful thing. A woman's hair is wonderful. A woman's softness is a magic.--Oh, I know them for what they are, and yet this very knowledge makes them only the more wonderful. I know--I would stake my soul--that Miss West has considered me as a mate a thousand times to once that I have so considered her. And yet--she is a woman and desirable.

And I find myself continually reminded of Richard Le Gallienne's inimitable quatrain:

"Were I a woman, I would all day long
Sing my own beauty in some holy song,

Bend low before it, hushed and half afraid,
And say 'I am a woman' all day long."

Let me advise all philosophers suffering from world-sickness to take a long sea voyage with a woman like Miss West.

In this narrative I shall call her "Miss West" no more. She has ceased to be Miss West. She is Margaret. I do not think of her as Miss West. I think of her as Margaret. It is a pretty word, a woman-word. What poet must have created it! Margaret! I never tire of it. My tongue is enamoured of it. Margaret West! What a name to conjure with! A name provocative of dreams and mighty connotations. The history of our westward-faring race is written in it. There is pride in it, and dominion, and adventure, and conquest. When I murmur it I see visions of lean, beaked ships, of winged helmets, and heels iron-shod of restless men, royal lovers, royal adventurers, royal fighters. Yes, and even now, in these latter days when the sun consumes us, still we sit in the high seat of government and command.

Oh--and by the way--she is twenty-four years old. I asked Mr. Pike the date of the Dixie's collision with the river steamer in San Francisco Bay. This occurred in 1901. Margaret was twelve years old at the time. This is 1913. Blessings on the head of the man who invented arithmetic! She is twenty-four. Her name is Margaret, and she is desirable.

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There are so many things to tell about. Where and how this mad voyage, with a mad crew, will end is beyond all surmise. But the *Elsinore* drives on, and day by day her history is bloodily written. And while murder is done, and while the whole floating drama moves toward the bleak southern ocean and the icy blasts of Cape Horn, I sit in the high place with the masters, unafraid, I am proud to say, in an ecstasy, I am proud to say, and I murmur over and over to myself--Margaret, a woman; Margaret, and desirable.

But to resume. It is the first day of June. Ten days have passed since the pampero. When the strong back on Number Three hatch was repaired Captain West came back on the wind, hove to, and rode out the gale. Since then, in calm, and fog, and damp, and storm, we have won south until to-day we are almost abreast of the Falklands. The coast of the Argentine lies to the West, below the sea-line, and some time this morning we crossed the fiftieth parallel of south latitude. Here begins the passage of Cape Horn, for so it is reckoned by the navigators--fifty south in the Atlantic to fifty south in the Pacific.

And yet all is well with us in the matter of weather. The *Elsinore* slides along with favouring winds. Daily it grows colder. The great cabin stove roars and is white-hot, and all the connecting doors are open, so that the whole after region of the ship is warm and comfortable. But on the deck the air bites, and Margaret and I wear mittens as we promenade the poop or go for'ard along the repaired bridge to see the

chickens on the 'midship-house. The poor, wretched creatures of instinct and climate! Behold, as they approach the southern mid-winter of the Horn, when they have need of all their feathers, they proceed to moult, because, forsooth, this is the summer time in the land they came from. Or is moulting determined by the time of year they happen to be born? I shall have to look into this. Margaret will know.

Yesterday ominous preparations were made for the passage of the Horn. All the braces were taken from the main deck pin-rails and geared and arranged so that they may be worked from the tops of the houses.

Thus, the fore-braces run to the top of the fore-castle, the main-braces to the top of the 'midship-house, and the mizzen-braces to the poop. It is evident that they expect our main deck frequently to be filled with water. So evident is it that a laden ship when in big seas is like a log awash, that fore and aft, on both sides, along the deck, shoulder-high, life-lines have been rigged. Also, the two iron doors, on port and starboard, that open from the cabin directly upon the main deck, have been barricaded and caulked. Not until we are in the Pacific and flying north will these doors open again.

And while we prepare to battle around the stormiest headland in the world our situation on board grows darker. This morning Petro Marinkovich, a sailor in Mr. Mellaire's watch, was found dead on Number One hatch. The body bore several knife-wounds and the throat was cut. It was palpably done by some one or several of the fore-castle hands; but not a word can

be elicited. Those who are guilty of it are silent, of course; while others who may chance to know are afraid to speak.

Before midday the body was overside with the customary sack of coal. Already the man is a past episode. But the humans for'ard are tense with expectancy of what is to come. I strolled for'ard this afternoon, and noted for the first time a distinct hostility toward me. They recognize that I belong with the after-guard in the high place. Oh, nothing was said; but it was patent by the way almost every man looked at me, or refused to look at me. Only Mulligan Jacobs and Charles Davis were outspoken.

"Good riddance," said Mulligan Jacobs. "The Guinea didn't have the spunk of a louse. And he's better off, ain't he? He lived dirty, an' he died dirty, an' now he's over an' done with the whole dirty game. There's men on board that oughta wish they was as lucky as him. Theirs is still a-coming to 'em."

"You mean . . . ?" I queried.

"Whatever you want to think I mean," the twisted wretch grinned malevolently into my face.

Charles Davis, when I peeped into his iron room, was exuberant.

"A pretty tale for the court in Seattle," he exulted. "It'll only make

my case that much stronger. And wait till the reporters get hold of it!
The hell-ship Elsinore! They'll have pretty pickin's!"

"I haven't seen any hell-ship," I said coldly.

"You've seen my treatment, ain't you?" he retorted. "You've seen the hell I've got, ain't you?"

"I know you for a cold-blooded murderer," I answered.

"The court will determine that, sir. All you'll have to do is to testify to facts."

"I'll testify that had I been in the mate's place I'd have hanged you for murder."

His eyes positively sparkled.

"I'll ask you to remember this conversation when you're under oath, sir," he cried eagerly.

I confess the man aroused in me a reluctant admiration. I looked about his mean, iron-walled room. During the pampero the place had been awash. The white paint was peeling off in huge scabs, and iron-rust was everywhere. The floor was filthy. The place stank with the stench of his sickness. His pannikin and unwashed eating-gear from the last meal

were scattered on the floor: His blankets were wet, his clothing was wet. In a corner was a heterogeneous mass of soggy, dirty garments. He lay in the very bunk in which he had brained O'Sullivan. He had been months in this vile hole. In order to live he would have to remain months more in it. And while his rat-like vitality won my admiration, I loathed and detested him in very nausea.

"Aren't you afraid?" I demanded. "What makes you think you will last the voyage? Don't you know bets are being made that you won't?"

So interested was he that he seemed to prick up his ears as he raised on his elbow.

"I suppose you're too scared to tell me about them bets," he sneered.

"Oh, I've bet you'll last," I assured him.

"That means there's others that bet I won't," he rattled on hastily. "An' that means that there's men aboard the Elsinore right now financially interested in my taking-off."

At this moment the steward, bound aft from the galley, paused in the doorway and listened, grinning. As for Charles Davis, the man had missed his vocation. He should have been a land-lawyer, not a sea-lawyer.

"Very well, sir," he went on. "I'll have you testify to that in Seattle,

unless you're lying to a helpless sick man, or unless you'll perjure yourself under oath."

He got what he was seeking, for he stung me to retort:

"Oh, I'll testify. Though I tell you candidly that I don't think I'll win my bet."

"You loose 'm bet sure," the steward broke in, nodding his head. "That fellow him die damn soon."

"Bet with'm, sir," David challenged me. "It's a straight tip from me, an' a regular cinch."

The whole situation was so gruesome and grotesque, and I had been swept into it so absurdly, that for the moment I did not know what to do or say.

"It's good money," Davis urged. "I ain't goin' to die. Look here, steward, how much you want to bet?"

"Five dollar, ten dollar, twenty dollar," the steward answered, with a shoulder-shrug that meant that the sum was immaterial.

"Very well then, steward. Mr. Pathurst covers your money, say for twenty. Is it a go, sir?"

"Why don't you bet with him yourself?" I demanded.

"Sure I will, sir. Here, you steward, I bet you twenty even I don't die."

The steward shook his head.

"I bet you twenty to ten," the sick man insisted. "What's eatin' you, anyway?"

"You live, me lose, me pay you," the steward explained. "You die, I win, you dead; no pay me."

Still grinning and shaking his head, he went his way.

"Just the same, sir, it'll be rich testimony," David chuckled. "An' can't you see the reporters eatin' it up?"

The Asiatic clique in the cook's room has its suspicions about the death of Marinkovich, but will not voice them. Beyond shakings of heads and dark mutterings, I can get nothing out of Wada or the steward. When I talked with the sail-maker, he complained that his injured hand was hurting him and that he would be glad when he could get to the surgeons in Seattle. As for the murder, when pressed by me, he gave me to understand that it was no affair of the Japanese or Chinese on board, and

that he was a Japanese.

But Louis, the Chinese half-caste with the Oxford accent, was more frank. I caught him aft from the galley on a trip to the lazarette for provisions.

"We are of a different race, sir, from these men," he said; "and our safest policy is to leave them alone. We have talked it over, and we have nothing to say, sir, nothing whatever to say. Consider my position. I work for'ard in the galley; I am in constant contact with the sailors; I even sleep in their section of the ship; and I am one man against many. The only other countryman I have on board is the steward, and he sleeps aft. Your servant and the two sail-makers are Japanese. They are only remotely kin to us, though we've agreed to stand together and apart from whatever happens."

"There is Shorty," I said, remembering Mr. Pike's diagnosis of his mixed nationality.

"But we do not recognize him, sir," Louis answered suavely. "He is Portuguese; he is Malay; he is Japanese, true; but he is a mongrel, sir, a mongrel and a bastard. Also, he is a fool. And please, sir, remember that we are very few, and that our position compels us to neutrality."

"But your outlook is gloomy," I persisted. "How do you think it will end?"

"We shall arrive in Seattle most probably, some of us. But I can tell you this, sir: I have lived a long life on the sea, but I have never seen a crew like this. There are few sailors in it; there are bad men in it; and the rest are fools and worse. You will notice I mention no names, sir; but there are men on board whom I do not care to antagonize. I am just Louis, the cook. I do my work to the best of my ability, and that is all, sir."

"And will Charles Davis arrive in Seattle?" I asked, changing the topic in acknowledgment of his right to be reticent.

"No, I do not think so, sir," he answered, although his eyes thanked me for my courtesy. "The steward tells me you have bet that he will. I think, sir, it is a poor bet. We are about to go around the Horn. I have been around it many times. This is midwinter, and we are going from east to west. Davis' room will be awash for weeks. It will never be dry. A strong healthy man confined in it could well die of the hardship. And Davis is far from well. In short, sir, I know his condition, and he is in a shocking state. Surgeons might prolong his life, but here in a wind-jammer it is shortened very rapidly. I have seen many men die at sea. I know, sir. Thank you, sir."

And the Eurasian Chinese-Englishman bowed himself away.