

## CHAPTER XXXII

Things are worse than I fancied. Here are two episodes within the last seventy-two hours. Mr. Mellaire, for instance, is going to pieces. He cannot stand the strain of being on the same vessel with the man who has sworn to avenge Captain Somers's murder, especially when that man is the redoubtable Mr. Pike.

For several days Margaret and I have been remarking the second mate's bloodshot eyes and pain-lined face and wondering if he were sick. And to-day the secret leaked out. Wada does not like Mr. Mellaire, and this morning, when he brought me breakfast, I saw by the wicked, gleeful gleam in his almond eyes that he was spilling over with some fresh, delectable ship's gossip.

For several days, I learned, he and the steward have been solving a cabin mystery. A gallon can of wood alcohol, standing on a shelf in the after-room, had lost quite a portion of its contents. They compared notes and then made of themselves a Sherlock Holmes and a Doctor Watson. First, they gauged the daily diminution of alcohol. Next they gauged it several times daily, and learned that the diminution, whenever it occurred, was first apparent immediately after meal-time. This focussed their attention on two suspects--the second mate and the carpenter, who alone sat in the after-room. The rest was easy. Whenever Mr. Mellaire arrived ahead of the carpenter more alcohol was missing. When they arrived and

departed together, the alcohol was undisturbed. The carpenter was never alone in the room. The syllogism was complete. And now the steward stores the alcohol under his bunk.

But wood alcohol is deadly poison. What a constitution this man of fifty must have! Small wonder his eyes have been bloodshot. The great wonder is that the stuff did not destroy him.

I have not whispered a word of this to Margaret; nor shall I whisper it. I should like to put Mr. Pike on his guard; and yet I know that the revealing of Mr. Mellaire's identity would precipitate another killing. And still we drive south, close-hauled on the wind, toward the inhospitable tip of the continent. To-day we are south of a line drawn between the Straits of Magellan and the Falklands, and to-morrow, if the breeze holds, we shall pick up the coast of Tierra del Fuego close to the entrance of the Straits of Le Maire, through which Captain West intends to pass if the wind favours.

The other episode occurred last night. Mr. Pike says nothing, yet he knows the crew situation. I have been watching some time now, ever since the death of Marinkovich; and I am certain that Mr. Pike never ventures on the main deck after dark. Yet he holds his tongue, confides in no man, and plays out the bitter perilous game as a commonplace matter of course and all in the day's work.

And now to the episode. Shortly after the close of the second dog-watch

last evening I went for'ard to the chickens on the 'midship-house on an errand for Margaret. I was to make sure that the steward had carried out her orders. The canvas covering to the big chicken coop had to be down, the ventilation insured, and the kerosene stove burning properly. When I had proved to my satisfaction the dependableness of the steward, and just as I was on the verge of returning to the poop, I was drawn aside by the weird crying of penguins in the darkness and by the unmistakable noise of a whale blowing not far away.

I had climbed around the end of the port boat, and was standing there, quite hidden in the darkness, when I heard the unmistakable age-lag step of the mate proceed along the bridge from the poop. It was a dim starry night, and the *Elsinore*, in the calm ocean under the lee of *Tierra del Fuego*, was slipping gently and prettily through the water at an eight-knot clip.

Mr. Pike paused at the for'ard end of the housetop and stood in a listening attitude. From the main deck below, near Number Two hatch, across the mumbling of various voices, I could recognize Kid Twist, Nosey Murphy, and Bert Rhine--the three gangsters. But Steve Roberts, the cowboy, was also there, as was Mr. Mellaire, both of whom belonged in the other watch and should have been turned in; for, at midnight, it would be their watch on deck. Especially wrong was Mr. Mellaire's presence, holding social converse with members of the crew--a breach of ship ethics most grievous.

I have always been cursed with curiosity. Always have I wanted to know; and, on the *Elsinore*, I have already witnessed many a little scene that was a clean-cut dramatic gem. So I did not discover myself, but lurked behind the boat.

Five minutes passed. Ten minutes passed. The men still talked. I was tantalized by the crying of the penguins, and by the whale, evidently playful, which came so close that it spouted and splashed a biscuit-toss away. I saw Mr. Pike's head turn at the sound; he glanced squarely in my direction, but did not see me. Then he returned to listening to the mumble of voices from beneath.

Now whether Mulligan Jacobs just happened along, or whether he was deliberately scouting, I do not know. I tell what occurred. Up-and-down the side of the 'midship-house is a ladder. And up this ladder Mulligan Jacobs climbed so noiselessly that I was not aware of his presence until I heard Mr. Pike snarl:

"What the hell you doin' here?"

Then I saw Mulligan Jacobs in the gloom, within two yards of the mate.

"What's it to you?" Mulligan Jacobs snarled back. The voices below hushed. I knew every man stood there tense and listening. No; the philosophers have not yet explained Mulligan Jacobs. There is something more to him than the last word has said in any book. He stood there in

the darkness, a fragile creature with curvature of the spine, facing alone the first mate, and he was not afraid.

Mr. Pike cursed him with fearful, unrepeatable words, and again demanded what he was doing there.

"I left me plug of tobacco here when I was coiling down last," said the little twisted man--no; he did not say it. He spat it out like so much venom.

"Get off of here, or I'll throw you off, you and your tobacco," raged the mate.

Mulligan Jacobs lurched closer to Mr. Pike, and in the gloom and with the roll of the ship swayed in the other's face.

"By God, Jacobs!" was all the mate could say.

"You old stiff," was all the terrible little cripple could retort.

Mr. Pike gripped him by the collar and swung him in the air.

"Are you goin' down?--or am I goin' to throw you down?" the mate demanded.

I cannot describe their manner of utterance. It was that of wild beasts.

"I ain't ate outa your hand yet, have I?" was the reply.

Mr. Pike tried to say something, still holding the cripple suspended, but he could do no more than strangle in his impotence of rage.

"You're an old stiff, an old stiff, an old stiff," Mulligan Jacobs chanted, equally incoherent and unimaginative with brutish fury.

"Say it again and over you go," the mate managed to enunciate thickly.

"You're an old stiff," gasped Mulligan Jacobs. He was flung. He soared through the air with the might of the fling, and even as he soared and fell through the darkness he reiterated:

"Old stiff! Old stiff!"

He fell among the men on Number Two hatch, and there were confusion and movement below, and groans.

Mr. Pike paced up and down the narrow house and gritted his teeth. Then he paused. He leaned his arms on the bridge-rail, rested his head on his arms for a full minute, then groaned:

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear, oh dear." That was all. Then he went aft, slowly, dragging his feet along the bridge.