

CHAPTER XXXIII

The days grow gray. The sun has lost its warmth, and each noon, at meridian, it is lower in the northern sky. All the old stars have long since gone, and it would seem the sun is following them. The world--the only world I know--has been left behind far there to the north, and the hill of the earth is between it and us. This sad and solitary ocean, gray and cold, is the end of all things, the falling-off place where all things cease. Only it grows colder, and grayer, and penguins cry in the night, and huge amphibians moan and slubber, and great albatrosses, gray with storm-battling of the Horn, wheel and veer.

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"Land ho!" was the cry yesterday morning. I shivered as I gazed at this, the first land since Baltimore a few centuries ago. There was no sun, and the morning was damp and cold with a brisk wind that penetrated any garment. The deck thermometer marked 30--two degrees below freezing-point; and now and then easy squalls of snow swept past.

All of the land that was to be seen was snow. Long, low chains of peaks, snow-covered, arose out of the ocean. As we drew closer, there were no signs of life. It was a sheer, savage, bleak, forsaken land. By eleven, off the entrance of Le Maire Straits, the squalls ceased, the wind steadied, and the tide began to make through in the direction we desired

to go.

Captain West did not hesitate. His orders to Mr. Pike were quick and tranquil. The man at the wheel altered the course, while both watches sprang aloft to shake out royals and skysails. And yet Captain West knew every inch of the risk he took in this graveyard of ships.

When we entered the narrow strait, under full sail and gripped by a tremendous tide, the rugged headlands of Tierra del Fuego dashed by with dizzying swiftness. Close we were to them, and close we were to the jagged coast of Staten Island on the opposite shore. It was here, in a wild bight, between two black and precipitous walls of rock where even the snow could find no lodgment, that Captain West paused in a casual sweep of his glasses and gazed steadily at one place. I picked the spot up with my own glasses and was aware of an instant chill as I saw the four masts of a great ship sticking out of the water. Whatever craft it was, it was as large as the *Elsinore*, and it had been but recently wrecked.

"One of the German nitrate ships," said Mr. Pike. Captain West nodded, still studying the wreck, then said:

"She looks quite deserted. Just the same, Mr. Pike, send several of your best-sighted sailors aloft, and keep a good lookout yourself. There may be some survivors ashore trying to signal us."

But we sailed on, and no signals were seen. Mr. Pike was delighted with our good fortune. He was guilty of walking up and down, rubbing his hands and chuckling to himself. Not since 1888, he told me, had he been through the Straits of Le Maire. Also, he said that he knew of shipmasters who had made forty voyages around the Horn and had never once had the luck to win through the straits. The regular passage is far to the east around Staten Island, which means a loss of westing, and here, at the tip of the world, where the great west wind, unobstructed by any land, sweeps round and around the narrow girth of earth, westing is the thing that has to be fought for mile by mile and inch by inch. The Sailing Directions advise masters on the Horn passage: Make Westing. Whatever you do, make westing.

When we emerged from the straits in the early afternoon the same steady breeze continued, and in the calm water under the lee of Tierra del Fuego, which extends south-westerly to the Horn, we slipped along at an eight-knot clip.

Mr. Pike was beside himself. He could scarcely tear himself from the deck when it was his watch below. He chuckled, rubbed his hands, and incessantly hummed snatches from the Twelfth Mass. Also, he was voluble.

"To-morrow morning we'll be up with the Horn. We'll shave it by a dozen or fifteen miles. Think of it! We'll just steal around! I never had such luck, and never expected to. Old girl Elsinore, you're rotten for'ard, but the hand of God is at your helm."

Once, under the weather cloth, I came upon him talking to himself. It was more a prayer.

"If only she don't pipe up," he kept repeating. "If only she don't pipe up."

Mr. Mellaire was quite different.

"It never happens," he told me. "No ship ever went around like this. You watch her come. She always comes a-smoking out of the sou'west."

"But can't a vessel ever steal around?" I asked.

"The odds are mighty big against it, sir," he answered. "I'll give you a line on them. I'll wager even, sir, just a nominal bet of a pound of tobacco, that inside twenty-four hours we'll be hove to under upper-topsails. I'll wager ten pounds to five that we're not west of the Horn a week from now; and, fifty to fifty being the passage, twenty pounds to five that two weeks from now we're not up with fifty in the Pacific."

As for Captain West, the perils of Le Maire behind, he sat below, his slippered feet stretched before him, smoking a cigar. He had nothing to say whatever, although Margaret and I were jubilant and dared duets through all of the second dog-watch.

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And this morning, in a smooth sea and gentle breeze, the Horn bore almost due north of us not more than six miles away. Here we were, well abreast and reeling off westing.

"What price tobacco this morning?" I quizzed Mr. Mellaire.

"Going up," he came back. "Wish I had a thousand bets like the one with you, sir."

I glanced about at sea and sky and gauged the speed of our way by the foam, but failed to see anything that warranted his remark. It was surely fine weather, and the steward, in token of the same, was trying to catch fluttering Cape pigeons with a bent pin on a piece of thread.

For'ard, on the poop, I encountered Mr. Pike. It was an encounter, for his salutation was a grunt.

"Well, we're going right along," I ventured cheerily.

He made no reply, but turned and stared into the gray south-west with an expression sourer than any I had ever seen on his face. He mumbled something I failed to catch, and, on my asking him to repeat it, he said:

"It's breeding weather. Can't you see it?"

I shook my head.

"What d'ye think we're taking off the kites for?" he growled.

I looked aloft. The skysails were already furled; men were furling the royals; and the topgallant-yards were running down while clewlines and buntlines bagged the canvas. Yet, if anything, our northerly breeze fanned even more gently.

"Bless me if I can see any weather," I said.

"Then go and take a look at the barometer," he grunted, as he turned on his heel and swung away from me.

In the chart-room was Captain West, pulling on his long sea-boots. That would have told me had there been no barometer, though the barometer was eloquent enough of itself. The night before it had stood at 30.10. It was now 28.64. Even in the pampero it had not been so low as that.

"The usual Cape Horn programme," Captain West smiled to me, as he stood up in all his lean and slender gracefulness and reached for his long oilskin coat.

Still I could scarcely believe.

"Is it very far away?" I inquired.

He shook his head, and forebore in the act of speaking to lift his hand for me to listen. The *Elsinore* rolled uneasily, and from without came the soft and hollow thunder of sails emptying themselves against the masts and gear.

We had chatted a bare five minutes, when again he lifted his head. This time the *Elsinore* heeled over slightly and remained heeled over, while the sighing whistle of a rising breeze awoke in the rigging.

"It's beginning to make," he said, in the good old Anglo-Saxon of the sea.

And then I heard Mr. Pike snarling out orders, and in my heart discovered a growing respect for Cape Horn--Cape Stiff, as the sailors call it.

An hour later we were hove to on the port tack under upper-topsails and foresail. The wind had come out of the south-west, and our leeway was setting us down upon the land. Captain West gave orders to the mate to stand by to wear ship. Both watches had been taking in sail, so that both watches were on deck for the manoeuvre.

It was astounding, the big sea that had arisen in so short a time. The wind was blowing a gale that ever, in recurring gusts, increased upon

itself. Nothing was visible a hundred yards away. The day had become black-gray. In the cabin lamps were burning. The view from the poop, along the length of the great labouring ship, was magnificent. Seas burst and surged across her weather-rail and kept her deck half filled, despite the spouting ports and gushing scuppers.

On each of the two houses and on the poop the ship's complement, all in oilskins, was in groups. For'ard, Mr. Mellaire had charge. Mr. Pike took charge of the 'midship-house and the poop. Captain West strolled up and down, saw everything, said nothing; for it was the mate's affair.

When Mr. Pike ordered the wheel hard up, he slacked off all the mizzen-yards, and followed it with a partial slacking of the main-yards, so that the after-pressures were eased. The foresail and fore-lower- and-upper-topsails remained flat in order to pay the head off before the wind. All this took time. The men were slow, not strong, and without snap. They reminded me of dull oxen by the way they moved and pulled. And the gale, ever snorting harder, now snorted diabolically. Only at intervals could I glimpse the group on top the for'ard-house. Again and again, leaning to it and holding their heads down, the men on the 'midship-house were obliterated by the drive of crested seas that burst against the rail, spouted to the lower-yards, and swept in horizontal volumes across to leeward. And Mr. Pike, like an enormous spider in a wind-tossed web, went back and forth along the slender bridge that was itself a shaken thread in the blast of the storm.

So tremendous were the gusts that for the time the Elsinore refused to answer. She lay down to it; she was swept and racked by it; but her head did not pay off before it, and all the while we drove down upon that bitter, iron coast. And the world was black-gray, and violent, and very cold, with the flying spray freezing to ice in every lodgment.

We waited. The groups of men, head down to it, waited. Mr. Pike, restless, angry, his blue eyes as bitter as the cold, his mouth as much a snarl as the snarl of the elements with which he fought, waited. The Samurai waited, tranquil, casual, remote. And Cape Horn waited, there on our lee, for the bones of our ship and us.

And then the Elsinore's bow paid off. The angle of the beat of the gale changed, and soon, with dreadful speed, we were dashing straight before it and straight toward the rocks we could not see. But all doubt was over. The success of the manoeuvre was assured. Mr. Mellaire, informed by messenger along the bridge from Mr. Pike, slacked off the head-yards. Mr. Pike, his eye on the helmsman, his hand signalling the order, had the wheel put over to port to check the Elsinore's rush into the wind as she came up on the starboard tack. All was activity. Main- and mizzen-yards were braced up, and the Elsinore, snugged down and hove to, had a lee of thousands of miles of Southern Ocean.

And all this had been accomplished in the stamping ground of storm, at the end of the world, by a handful of wretched weaklings, under the drive of two strong mates, with behind them the placid will of the Samurai.

It had taken thirty minutes to wear ship, and I had learned how the best of shipmasters can lose their ships without reproach. Suppose the Elsinore had persisted in her refusal to payoff? Suppose anything had carried away? And right here enters Mr. Pike. It is his task ever to see that every rope and block and all the myriad other things in the vast and complicated gear of the Elsinore are in strength not to carry away. Always have the masters of our race required henchmen like Mr. Pike, and it seems the race has well supplied those henchmen.

Ere I went below I heard Captain West tell Mr. Pike that while both watches were on deck it would be just as well to put a reef in the foresail before they furled it. The mainsail and the crojack being off, I could see the men black on the fore-yard. For half-an-hour I lingered, watching them. They seemed to make no progress with the reef. Mr. Mellaire was with them, having direct supervision of the job, while Mr. Pike, on the poop, growled and grumbled and spat endless blasphemies into the flying air.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Two watches on a single yardarm and unable to put a reef in a handkerchief like that!" he snorted. "What'll it be if we're off here a month?"

"A month!" I cried.

"A month isn't anything for Cape Stiff," he said grimly. "I've been off here seven weeks and then turned tail and run around the other way."

"Around the world?" I gasped.

"It was the only way to get to 'Frisco," he answered. "The Horn's the Horn, and there's no summer seas that I've ever noticed in this neighbourhood."

My fingers were numb and I was chilled through when I took a last look at the wretched men on the fore-yard and went below to warm up.

A little later, as I went in to table, through a cabin port I stole a look for'ard between seas and saw the men still struggling on the freezing yard.

The four of us were at table, and it was very comfortable, in spite of the Elsinore's violent antics. The room was warm. The storm-racks on the table kept each dish in its place. The steward served and moved about with ease and apparent unconcern, although I noticed an occasional anxious gleam in his eyes when he poised some dish at a moment when the ship pitched and flung with unusual wildness.

And now and again I thought of the poor devils on the yard. Well, they belonged there by right, just as we belonged here by right in this oasis

of the cabin. I looked at Mr. Pike and waded to myself that half-a-dozen like him could master that stubborn foresail. As for the Samurai, I was convinced that alone, not moving from his seat, by a tranquil exertion of will, he could accomplish the same thing.

The lighted sea-lamps swung and leaped in their gimbals, ever battling with the dancing shadows in the murky gray. The wood-work creaked and groaned. The jiggermast, a huge cylinder of hollow steel that perforated the apartment through deck above and floor beneath, was hideously vocal with the storm. Far above, taut ropes beat against it so that it clanged like a boiler-shop. There was a perpetual thunder of seas falling on our deck and crash of water against our for'ard wall; while the ten thousand ropes and gears aloft bellowed and screamed as the storm smote them.

And yet all this was from without. Here, at this well-appointed table, was no draught nor breath of wind, no drive of spray nor wash of sea. We were in the heart of peace in the midmost centre of the storm. Margaret was in high spirits, and her laughter vied with the clang of the jiggermast. Mr. Pike was gloomy, but I knew him well enough to attribute his gloom, not to the elements, but to the inefficients futilely freezing on the yard. As for me, I looked about at the four of us--blue-eyed, gray-eyed, all fair-skinned and royal blond--and somehow it seemed that I had long since lived this, and that with me and in me were all my ancestors, and that their lives and memories were mine, and that all this vexation of the sea and air and labouring ship was of old time and a thousand times before.