

CHAPTER XXXIV

"How are you for a climb?" Margaret asked me, shortly after we had left the table.

She stood challengingly at my open door, in oilskins, sou'wester, and sea-boots.

"I've never seen you with a foot above the deck since we sailed," she went on. "Have you a good head?"

I marked my book, rolled out of my bunk in which I had been wedged, and clapped my hands for Wada.

"Will you?" she cried eagerly.

"If you let me lead," I answered airily, "and if you will promise to hold on tight. Whither away?"

"Into the top of the jigger. It's the easiest. As for holding on, please remember that I have often done it. It is with you the doubt rests."

"Very well," I retorted; "do you lead then. I shall hold on tight."

"I have seen many a landsman funk it," she teased. "There are no lubber-holes in our tops."

"And most likely I shall," I agreed. "I've never been aloft in my life, and since there is no hole for a lubber."

She looked at me, half believing my confession of weakness, while I extended my arms for the oilskin which Wada struggled on to me.

On the poop it was magnificent, and terrible, and sombre. The universe was very immediately about us. It blanketed us in storming wind and flying spray and grayness. Our main deck was impassable, and the relief of the wheel came aft along the bridge. It was two o'clock, and for over two hours the frozen wretches had laid out upon the fore-yard. They were still there, weak, feeble, hopeless. Captain West, stepping out in the lee of the chart-house, gazed at them for several minutes.

"We'll have to give up that reef," he said to Mr. Pike. "Just make the sail fast. Better put on double gaskets."

And with lagging feet, from time to time pausing and holding on as spray and the tops of waves swept over him, the mate went for'ard along the bridge to vent his scorn on the two watches of a four-masted ship that could not reef a foresail.

It is true. They could not do it, despite their willingness, for this I

have learned: the men do their weak best whenever the order is given to shorten sail. It must be that they are afraid. They lack the iron of Mr. Pike, the wisdom and the iron of Captain West. Always, have I noticed, with all the alacrity of which they are capable, do they respond to any order to shorten down. That is why they are for'ard, in that pigsty of a forecastle, because they lack the iron. Well, I can say only this: If nothing else could have prevented the funk hinted at by Margaret, the sorry spectacle of these ironless, spineless creatures was sufficient safeguard. How could I funk in the face of their weakness--I, who lived aft in the high place?

Margaret did not disdain the aid of my hand as she climbed upon the pin-rail at the foot of the weather jigger-rigging. But it was merely the recognition of a courtesy on her part, for the next moment she released her mittened hand from mine, swung boldly outboard into the face of the gale, and around against the ratlines. Then she began to climb. I followed, almost unaware of the ticklishness of the exploit to a tyro, so buoyed up was I by her example and by my scorn of the weaklings for'ard. Where men could go, I could go. What men could do, I could do. And no daughter of the Samurai could out-game me.

Yet it was slow work. In the windward rolls against the storm-gusts one was pinned helplessly, like a butterfly, against the rigging. At such times, so great was the pressure one could not lift hand nor foot. Also, there was no need for holding on. As I have said, one was pinned against the rigging by the wind.

Through the snow beginning to drive the deck grew small beneath me, until a fall meant a broken back or death, unless one landed in the sea, in which case the result would be frigid drowning. And still Margaret climbed. Without pause she went out under the overhanging platform of the top, shifted her holds to the rigging that went aloft from it, and swung around this rigging, easily, carelessly, timing the action to the roll, and stood safely upon the top.

I followed. I breathed no prayers, knew no qualms, as I presented my back to the deck and climbed out under the overhang, feeling with my hands for holds I could not see. I was in an ecstasy. I could dare anything. Had she sprung into the air, stretched out her arms, and soared away on the breast of the gale, I should have unhesitatingly followed her.

As my head outpassed the edge of the top so that she came into view, I could see she was looking at me with storm-bright eyes. And as I swung around the rigging lightly and joined her, I saw approval in her eyes that was quickly routed by petulance.

"Oh, you've done this sort of thing before," she reproached, calling loudly, so that I might hear, her lips close to my ear.

I shook a denial with my head that brightened her eyes again. She nodded and smiled, and sat down, dangling her sea-boots into snow-swirled space

from the edge of the top. I sat beside her, looking down into the snow that hid the deck while it exaggerated the depth out of which we had climbed.

We were all alone there, a pair of storm petrels perched in mid air on a steel stick that arose out of snow and that vanished above into snow. We had come to the tip of the world, and even that tip had ceased to be. But no. Out of the snow, down wind, with motionless wings, driving fully eighty or ninety miles an hour, appeared a huge albatross. He must have been fifteen feet from wing-tip to wing-tip. He had seen his danger ere we saw him, and, tilting his body on the blast, he carelessly veered clear of collision. His head and neck were rimed with age or frost--we could not tell which--and his bright bead-eye noted us as he passed and whirled away on a great circle into the snow to leeward.

Margaret's hand shot out to mine.

"It alone was worth the climb!" she cried. And then the Elsinore flung down, and Margaret's hand clutched tighter for holding, while from the hidden depths arose the crash and thunder of the great west wind drift upon our decks.

Quickly as the snow-squall had come, it passed with the same sharp quickness, and as in a flash we could see the lean length of the ship beneath us--the main deck full with boiling flood, the forecastle-head buried in a bursting sea, the lookout, stationed for very life back on

top the for'ard-house, hanging on, head down, to the wind-drive of ocean, and, directly under us, the streaming poop and Mr. Mellaire, with a handful of men, rigging relieving tackles on the tiller. And we saw the Samurai emerge in the lee of the chart-house, swaying with casual surety on the mad deck, as he spoke what must have been instructions to Mr. Pike.

The gray circle of the world had removed itself from us for several hundred yards, and we could see the mighty sweep of sea. Shaggy gray-beards, sixty feet from trough to crest, leapt out of the windward murky gray, and in unending procession rushed upon the Elsinore, one moment overtopping her slender frailness, the next moment splashing a hundred tons of water on her deck and flinging her skyward as they passed beneath and foamed and crested from sight in the murky gray to leeward. And the great albatrosses veered and circled about us, beating up into the bitter violence of the gale and sweeping grandly away before it far faster than it blew.

Margaret forbore from looking to challenge me with eloquent, questioning eyes. With numb fingers inside my thick mitten, I drew aside the ear-flap of her sou'wester and shouted:

"It is nothing new. I have been here before. In the lives of all my fathers have I been here. The frost is on my cheek, the salt bites my nostrils, the wind chants in my ears, and it is an old happening. I know, now, that my forbears were Vikings. I was seed of them in their

own day. With them I have raided English coasts, dared the Pillars of Hercules, forayed the Mediterranean, and sat in the high place of government over the soft sun-warm peoples. I am Hengist and Horsa; I am of the ancient heroes, even legendary to them. I have bearded and bitten the frozen seas, and, aforetime of that, ere ever the ice-ages came to be, I have dripped my shoulders in reindeer gore, slain the mastodon and the sabre-tooth, scratched the record of my prowess on the walls of deep-buried caves--ay, and suckled she-wolves side by side with my brother-cubs, the scars of whose fangs are now upon me."

She laughed deliciously, and a snow-squall drove upon us and cut our cheeks, and the Elsinore flung over and down as if she would never rise again, while we held on and swept through the air in a dizzying arc. Margaret released a hand, still laughing, and pressed aside my ear-flap.

"I don't know anything about it," she cried. "It sounds like poetry. But I believe it. It has to be, for it has been. I have heard it aforetime, when skin-clad men sang in fire-circles that pressed back the frost and night."

"And the books?" she queried maliciously, as we prepared to descend.

"They can go hang, along with all the brain-sick, world-sick fools that wrote them," I replied.

Again she laughed deliciously, though the wind tore the sound away as she

swung out into space, muscled herself by her arms while she caught footholds beneath her which she could not see, and passed out of my sight under the perilous overhang of the top.