

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

I wonder. I wonder. Did the Samurai make a mistake? Or was it the darkness of oncoming death that chilled and clouded that star-cool brain of his, and made a mock of all his wisdom? Or was it the blunder that brought death upon him beforehand? I do not know, I shall never know; for it is a matter no one of us dreams of hinting at, much less discussing.

I shall begin at the beginning--yesterday afternoon. For it was yesterday afternoon, five weeks to a day since we emerged from the Straits of Le Maire into this gray storm-ocean, that once again we found ourselves hove to directly off the Horn. At the changing of the watches at four o'clock, Captain West gave the command to Mr. Pike to wear ship. We were on the starboard tack at the time, making leeway off shore. This manoeuvre placed us on the port tack, and the consequent leeway, to me, seemed on shore, though at an acute angle, to be sure.

In the chart-room, glancing curiously at the chart, I measured the distance with my eye and decided that we were in the neighbourhood of fifteen miles off Cape Horn.

"With our drift we'll be close up under the land by morning, won't we?" I ventured tentatively.

"Yes," Captain West nodded; "and if it weren't for the West Wind Drift, and if the land did not trend to the north-east, we'd be ashore by morning. As it is, we'll be well under it at daylight, ready to steal around if there is a change, ready to wear ship if there is no change."

It did not enter my head to question his judgment. What he said had to be. Was he not the Samurai?

And yet, a few minutes later, when he had gone below, I noticed Mr. Pike enter the chart-house. After several paces up and down, and a brief pause to watch Nancy and several men shift the weather cloth from lee to weather, I strolled aft to the chart-house. Prompted by I know not what, I peeped through one of the glass ports.

There stood Mr. Pike, his sou'wester doffed, his oilskins streaming rivulets to the floor, while he, dividers and parallel rulers in hand, bent over the chart. It was the expression of his face that startled me. The habitual sourness had vanished. All that I could see was anxiety and apprehension . . . yes, and age. I had never seen him look so old; for there, at that moment, I beheld the wastage and weariness of all his sixty-nine years of sea-battling and sea-staring.

I slipped away from the port and went along the deck to the break of the poop, where I held on and stood staring through the gray and spray in the conjectural direction of our drift. Somewhere, there, in the north-east

and north, I knew was a broken, iron coast of rocks upon which the graybeards thundered. And there, in the chart-room, a redoubtable sailorman bent anxiously over a chart as he measured and calculated, and measured and calculated again, our position and our drift.

And I knew it could not be. It was not the Samurai but the henchman who was weak and wrong. Age was beginning to tell upon him at last, which could not be otherwise than expected when one considered that no man in ten thousand had weathered age so successfully as he.

I laughed at my moment's qualm of foolishness and went below, well content to meet my loved one and to rest secure in her father's wisdom. Of course he was right. He had proved himself right too often already on the long voyage from Baltimore.

At dinner Mr. Pike was quite distrait. He took no part whatever in the conversation, and seemed always to be listening to something from without--to the vexing clang of taut ropes that came down the hollow jiggermast, to the muffled roar of the gale in the rigging, to the smash and crash of the seas along our decks and against our iron walls.

Again I found myself sharing his apprehension, although I was too discreet to question him then, or afterwards alone, about his trouble. At eight he went on deck again to take the watch till midnight, and as I went to bed I dismissed all forebodings and speculated as to how many more voyages he could last after this sudden onslaught of old age.

I fell asleep quickly, and awoke at midnight, my lamp still burning, Conrad's *Mirror of the Sea* on my breast where it had dropped from my hands. I heard the watches change, and was wide awake and reading when Mr. Pike came below by the booby-hatch and passed down my hail by my open door, on his way to his room.

In the pause I had long since learned so well I knew he was rolling a cigarette. Then I heard him cough, as he always did, when the cigarette was lighted and the first inhalation of smoke flushed his lungs.

At twelve-fifteen, in the midst of Conrad's delightful chapter, "The Weight of the Burden," I heard Mr. Pike come along the hall.

Stealing a glance over the top of my book, I saw him go by, sea-booted, oilskinned, sou'westered. It was his watch below, and his sleep was meagre in this perpetual bad weather, yet he was going on deck.

I read and waited for an hour, but he did not return; and I knew that somewhere up above he was staring into the driving dark. I dressed fully, in all my heavy storm-gear, from sea-boots and sou'-wester to sheepskin under my oilskin coat. At the foot of the stairs I noted along the hall that Margaret's light was burning. I peeped in--she keeps her door open for ventilation--and found her reading.

"Merely not sleepy," she assured me.

Nor in the heart of me do I believe she had any apprehension. She does not know even now, I am confident, the Samurai's blunder--if blunder it was. As she said, she was merely not sleepy, although there is no telling in what occult ways she may have received though not recognized Mr. Pike's anxiety.

At the head of the stairs, passing along the tiny hall to go out the lee door of the chart-house, I glanced into the chart-room. On the couch, lying on his back, his head uncomfortably high, I thought, slept Captain West. The room was warm from the ascending heat of the cabin, so that he lay unblanketed, fully dressed save for oilskins and boots. He breathed easily and steadily, and the lean, ascetic lines of his face seemed softened by the light of the low-turned lamp. And that one glance restored to me all my surety and faith in his wisdom, so that I laughed at myself for having left my warm bed for a freezing trip on deck.

Under the weather cloth at the break of the poop I found Mr. Mellaire. He was wide awake, but under no strain. Evidently it had not entered his mind to consider, much less question, the manoeuvre of wearing ship the previous afternoon.

"The gale is breaking," he told me, waving his mittened hand at a starry segment of sky momentarily exposed by the thinning clouds.

But where was Mr. Pike? Did the second mate know he was on deck? I proceeded to feel Mr. Mellaire out as we worked our way aft, along the mad poop toward the wheel. I talked about the difficulty of sleeping in stormy weather, stated the restlessness and semi-insomnia that the violent motion of the ship caused in me, and raised the query of how bad weather affected the officers.

"I noticed Captain West, in the chart-room, as I came up, sleeping like a baby," I concluded.

We leaned in the lee of the chart-house and went no farther.

"Trust us to sleep just the same way, Mr. Pathurst," the second mate laughed. "The harder the weather the harder the demand on us, and the harder we sleep. I'm dead the moment my head touches the pillow. It takes Mr. Pike longer, because he always finishes his cigarette after he turns in. But he smokes while he's undressing, so that he doesn't require more than a minute to go dead. I'll wager he hasn't moved, right now, since ten minutes after twelve."

So the second mate did not dream the first was even on deck. I went below to make sure. A small sea-lamp was burning in Mr. Pike's room, and I saw his bunk unoccupied. I went in by the big stove in the dining-room and warmed up, then again came on deck. I did not go near the weather cloth, where I was certain Mr. Mellaire was; but, keeping along the lee of the poop, I gained the bridge and started for'ard.

I was in no hurry, so I paused often in that cold, wet journey. The gale was breaking, for again and again the stars glimmered through the thinning storm-clouds. On the 'midship-house was no Mr. Pike. I crossed it, stung by the freezing, flying spray, and carefully reconnoitred the top of the for'ard-house, where, in such bad weather, I knew the lookout was stationed. I was within twenty feet of them, when a wider clearance of starry sky showed me the figures of the lookout, whoever he was, and of Mr. Pike, side by side. Long I watched them, not making my presence known, and I knew that the old mate's eyes were boring like gimlets into the windy darkness that separated the *Elsinore* from the thunder-surfed iron coast he sought to find.

Coming back to the poop I was caught by the surprised Mr. Mellaire.

"Thought you were asleep, sir," he chided.

"I'm too restless," I explained. "I've read until my eyes are tired, and now I'm trying to get chilled so that I can fall asleep while warming up in my blankets."

"I envy you, sir," he answered. "Think of it! So much of all night in that you cannot sleep. Some day, if ever I make a lucky strike, I shall make a voyage like this as a passenger, and have all watches below. Think of it! All blessed watches below! And I shall, like you, sir, bring a Jap servant along, and I'll make him call me at every changing of the

watches, so that, wide awake, I can appreciate my good fortune in the several minutes before I roll over and go to sleep again."

We laughed good night to each other. Another peep into the chart-room showed me Captain West sleeping as before. He had not moved in general, though all his body moved with every roll and fling of the ship. Below, Margaret's light still burned, but a peep showed her asleep, her book fallen from her hands just as was the so frequent case with my books.

And I wondered. Half the souls of us on the *Elsinore* slept. The Samurai slept. Yet the old first mate, who should have slept, kept a bitter watch on the for'ard-house. Was his anxiety right? Could it be right? Or was it the crankiness of ultimate age? Were we drifting and leewaying to destruction? Or was it merely an old man being struck down by senility in the midst of his life-task?

Too wide awake to think of sleeping, I ensconced myself with *The Mirror of the Sea* at the dining-table. Nor did I remove aught of my storm-gear save the soggy mittens, which I wrung out and hung to dry by the stove. Four bells struck, and six bells, and Mr. Pike had not returned below. At eight bells, with the changing of the watches, it came upon me what a night of hardship the old mate was enduring. Eight to twelve had been his own watch on deck. He had now completed the four hours of the second mate's watch and was beginning his own watch, which would last till eight in the morning--twelve consecutive hours in a Cape Horn gale with the mercury at freezing.



Next--for I had dozed--I heard loud cries above my head that were repeated along the poop. I did not know till afterwards that it was Mr. Pike's command to hard-up the helm, passed along from for'ard by the men he had stationed at intervals on the bridge.

All that I knew at this shock of waking was that something was happening above. As I pulled on my steaming mittens and hurried my best up the reeling stairs, I could hear the stamp of men's feet that for once were not lagging. In the chart-house hall I heard Mr. Pike, who had already covered the length of the bridge from the for'ard-house, shouting:

"Mizzen-braces! Slack, damn you! Slack on the run! But hold a turn! Aft, here, all of you! Jump! Lively, if you don't want to swim! Come in, port-braces! Don't let 'm get away! Lee-braces!--if you lose that turn I'll split your skull! Lively! Lively!--Is that helm hard over! Why in hell don't you answer?"

All this I heard as I dashed for the lee door and as I wondered why I did not hear the Samurai's voice.

Then, as I passed the chart-room door, I saw him.

He was sitting on the couch, white-faced, one sea-boot in his hands, and I could have sworn his hands were shaking. That much I saw, and the next moment was out on deck.

At first, just emerged from the light, I could see nothing, although I could hear men at the pin-rails and the mate snarling and shouting commands. But I knew the manoeuvre. With a weak crew, in the big, tail-end sea of a broken gale, breakers and destruction under her lee, the *Elsinore* was being worn around. We had been under lower-topsails and a reefed foresail all night. Mr. Pike's first action, after putting the wheel up, had been to square the mizzen-yards. With the wind-pressure thus eased aft, the stern could more easily swing against the wind while the wind-pressure on the for'ard-sails paid the bow off.

But it takes time to wear a ship, under short canvas, in a big sea. Slowly, very slowly, I could feel the direction of the wind altering against my cheek. The moon, dim at first, showed brighter and brighter as the last shreds of a flying cloud drove away from before it. In vain I looked for any land.

"Main-braces!--all of you!--jump!" Mr. Pike shouted, himself leading the rush along the poop. And the men really rushed. Not in all the months I had observed them had I seen such swiftness of energy.

I made my way to the wheel, where Tom Spink stood. He did not notice me. With one hand holding the idle wheel, he was leaning out to one side, his eyes fixed in a fascinated stare. I followed its direction, on between the chart-house and the port-jigger shrouds, and on across a mountain sea that was very vague in the moonlight. And then I saw it! The

Elsinore's stern was flung skyward, and across that cold ocean I saw land--black rocks and snow-covered slopes and crags. And toward this land the Elsinore, now almost before the wind, was driving.

From the 'midship-house came the snarls of the mate and the cries of the sailors. They were pulling and hauling for very life. Then came Mr. Pike, across the poop, leaping with incredible swiftness, sending his snarl before him.

"Ease that wheel there! What the hell you gawkin' at? Steady her as I tell you. That's all you got to do!"

From for'ard came a cry, and I knew Mr. Mellaire was on top of the for'ard-house and managing the fore-yards.

"Now!"--from Mr. Pike. "More spokes! Steady! Steady! And be ready to check her!"

He bounded away along the poop again, shouting for men for the mizzen-braces. And the men appeared, some of his watch, others of the second mate's watch, routed from sleep--men coatless, and hatless, and bootless; men ghastly-faced with fear but eager for once to spring to the orders of the man who knew and could save their miserable lives from miserable death. Yes--and I noted the delicate-handed cook, and Yatsuda, the sail-maker, pulling with his one unparalysed hand. It was all hands to save ship, and all hands knew it. Even Sundry Buyers, who had drifted aft in

his stupidity instead of being for'ard with his own officer, forebore to stare about and to press his abdomen. For the nonce he pulled like a youngling of twenty.

The moon covered again, and it was in darkness that the *Elsinore* rounded up on the wind on the starboard tack. This, in her case, under lower-topsails only, meant that she lay eight points from the wind, or, in land terms, at right angles to the wind.

Mr. Pike was splendid, marvellous. Even as the *Elsinore* was rounding to on the wind, while the head-yards were still being braced, and even as he was watching the ship's behaviour and the wheel, in between his commands to Tom Spink of "A spoke! A spoke or two! Another! Steady! Hold her! Ease her!" he was ordering the men aloft to loose sail. I had thought, the manoeuvre of wearing achieved, that we were saved, but this setting of all three upper-topsails unconvinced me.

The moon remained hidden, and to leeward nothing could be seen. As each sail was set, the *Elsinore* was pressed farther and farther over, and I realized that there was plenty of wind left, despite the fact that the gale had broken or was breaking. Also, under this additional canvas, I could feel the *Elsinore* moving through the water. Pike now sent the Maltese Cockney to help Tom Spink at the wheel. As for himself, he took his stand beside the booby-hatch, where he could gauge the *Elsinore*, gaze to leeward, and keep his eye on the helmsmen.

"Full and by," was his reiterated command. "Keep her a good full--a rap-full; but don't let her fall away. Hold her to it, and drive her."

He took no notice whatever of me, although I, on my way to the lee of the chart-house, stood at his shoulder a full minute, offering him a chance to speak. He knew I was there, for his big shoulder brushed my arm as he swayed and turned to warn the helmsmen in the one breath to hold her up to it but to keep her full. He had neither time nor courtesy for a passenger in such a moment.

Sheltering by the chart-house, I saw the moon appear. It grew brighter and brighter, and I saw the land, dead to leeward of us, not three hundred yards away. It was a cruel sight--black rock and bitter snow, with cliffs so perpendicular that the *Elsinore* could have laid alongside of them in deep water, with great gashes and fissures, and with great surges thundering and spouting along all the length of it.

Our predicament was now clear to me. We had to weather the bight of land and islands into which we had drifted, and sea and wind worked directly on shore. The only way out was to drive through the water, to drive fast and hard, and this was borne in upon me by Mr. Pike bounding past to the break of the poop, where I heard him shout to Mr. Mellaire to set the mainsail.

Evidently the second mate was dubious, for the next cry of Mr. Pike's was:

"Damn the reef! You'd be in hell first! Full mainsail! All hands to it!"

The difference was appreciable at once when that huge spread of canvas opposed the wind. The *Elsinore* fairly leaped and quivered as she sprang to it, and I could feel her eat to windward as she at the same time drove faster ahead. Also, in the rolls and gusts, she was forced down till her lee-rail buried and the sea foamed level across to her hatches. Mr. Pike watched her like a hawk, and like certain death he watched the Maltese Cockney and Tom Spink at the wheel.

"Land on the lee bow!" came a cry from for'ard, that was carried on from mouth to mouth along the bridge to the poop.

I saw Mr. Pike nod his head grimly and sarcastically. He had already seen it from the lee-poop, and what he had not seen he had guessed. A score of times I saw him test the weight of the gusts on his cheek and with all the brain of him study the *Elsinore's* behaviour. And I knew what was in his mind. Could she carry what she had? Could she carry more?

Small wonder, in this tense passage of time, that I had forgotten the Samurai. Nor did I remember him until the chart-house door swung open and I caught him by the arm. He steadied and swayed beside me, while he watched that cruel picture of rock and snow and spouting surf.

"A good full!" Mr. Pike snarled. "Or I'll eat your heart out. God damn you for the farmer's hound you are, Tom Spink! Ease her! Ease her! Ease her into the big ones, damn you! Don't let her head fall off! Steady! Where in hell did you learn to steer? What cow-farm was you raised on?"

Here he bounded for'ard past us with those incredible leaps of his.

"It would be good to set the mizzen-topgallant," I heard Captain West mutter in a weak, quavery voice. "Mr. Pathurst, will you please tell Mr. Pike to set the mizzen-topgallant?"

And at that very instant Mr. Pike's voice rang out from the break of the poop:

"Mr. Mellaire!--the mizzen-topgallant!"

Captain West's head drooped until his chin rested on his breast, and so low did he mutter that I leaned to hear.

"A very good officer," he said. "An excellent officer. Mr. Pathurst, if you will kindly favour me, I should like to go in. I . . . I haven't got on my boots."

The muscular feat was to open the heavy iron door and hold it open in the rolls and plunges. This I accomplished; but when I had helped Captain

West across the high threshold he thanked me and waived further services. And I did not know even then he was dying.

Never was a Blackwood ship driven as was the Elsinore during the next half-hour. The full-jib was also set, and, as it departed in shreds, the fore-topmast staysail was being hoisted. For'ard of the 'midship-house it was made unlivable by the bursting seas. Mr. Mellaire, with half the crew, clung on somehow on top the 'midship-house, while the rest of the crew was with us in the comparative safety of the poop. Even Charles Davis, drenched and shivering, hung on beside me to the brass ring-handle of the chart-house door.

Such sailing! It was a madness of speed and motion, for the Elsinore drove over and through and under those huge graybeards that thundered shore-ward. There were times, when rolls and gusts worked against her at the same moment, when I could have sworn the ends of her lower-yardarms swept the sea.

It was one chance in ten that we could claw off. All knew it, and all knew there was nothing more to do but await the issue. And we waited in silence. The only voice was that of the mate, intermittently cursing, threatening, and ordering Tom Spink and the Maltese Cockney at the wheel. Between whiles, and all the while, he gauged the gusts, and ever his eyes lifted to the main-topgallant-yard. He wanted to set that one more sail. A dozen times I saw him half-open his mouth to give the order he dared not give. And as I watched him, so all watched him. Hard-bitten, bitter-



natured, sour-featured and snarling-mouthed, he was the one man, the henchman of the race, the master of the moment. "And where," was my thought, "O where was the Samurai?"

One chance in ten? It was one in a hundred as we fought to weather the last bold tooth of rock that gashed into sea and tempest between us and open ocean. So close were we that I looked to see our far-reeling skysail-yards strike the face of the rock. So close were we, no more than a biscuit toss from its iron buttress, that as we sank down into the last great trough between two seas I can swear every one of us held breath and waited for the Elsinore to strike.

Instead we drove free. And as if in very rage at our escape, the storm took that moment to deal us the mightiest buffet of all. The mate felt that monster sea coming, for he sprang to the wheel ere the blow fell. I looked for'ard, and I saw all for'ard blotted out by the mountain of water that fell aboard. The Elsinore righted from the shock and reappeared to the eye, full of water from rail to rail. Then a gust caught her sails and heeled her over, spilling half the enormous burden outboard again.

Along the bridge came the relayed cry of "Man overboard!"

I glanced at the mate, who had just released the wheel to the helmsmen. He shook his head, as if irritated by so trivial a happening, walked to the corner of the half-wheelhouse, and stared at the coast he had

escaped, white and black and cold in the moonlight.

Mr. Mellaire came aft, and they met beside me in the lee of the chart-house.

"All hands, Mr. Mellaire," the mate said, "and get the mainsail off of her. After that, the mizzen-topgallant."

"Yes, sir," said the second.

"Who was it?" the mate asked, as Mr. Mellaire was turning away.

"Boney--he was no good, anyway," came the answer.

That was all. Boney the Splinter was gone, and all hands were answering the command of Mr. Mellaire to take in the mainsail. But they never took it in; for at that moment it started to blow away out of the bolt-ropes, and in but few moments all that was left of it was a few short, slatting ribbons.

"Mizzen-topgallant-sail!" Mr. Pike ordered. Then, and for the first time, he recognized my existence.

"Well rid of it," he growled. "It never did set properly. I was always aching to get my hands on the sail-maker that made it."

On my way below a glance into the chart-room gave me the cue to the Samurai's blunder--if blunder it can be called, for no one will ever know. He lay on the floor in a loose heap, rolling willy-nilly with every roll of the Elsinore.