

CHAPTER XXXIX

There is so much to write about all at once. In the first place, Captain West. Not entirely unexpected was his death. Margaret tells me that she was apprehensive from the start of the voyage--and even before. It was because of her apprehension that she so abruptly changed her plans and accompanied her father.

What really happened we do not know, but the agreed surmise is that it was some stroke of the heart. And yet, after the stroke, did he not come out on deck? Or could the first stroke have been followed by another and fatal one after I had helped him inside through the door? And even so, I have never heard of a heart-stroke being preceded hours before by a weakening of the mind. Captain West's mind seemed quite clear, and must have been quite clear, that last afternoon when he wore the *Elsinore* and started the lee-shore drift. In which case it was a blunder. The *Samurai* blundered, and his heart destroyed him when he became aware of the blunder.

At any rate the thought of blunder never enters Margaret's head. She accepts, as a matter of course, that it was all a part of the oncoming termination of his sickness. And no one will ever undeceive her. Neither Mr. Pike, Mr. Mellaire, nor I, among ourselves, mention a whisper of what so narrowly missed causing disaster. In fact, Mr. Pike does not talk about the matter at all.--And then, again, might it not have been

something different from heart disease? Or heart disease complicated with something else that obscured his mind that afternoon before his death? Well, no one knows, and I, for one, shall not sit, even in secret judgment, on the event.

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At midday of the day we clawed off Tierra Del Fuego the Elsinore was rolling in a dead calm, and all afternoon she rolled, not a score of miles off the land. Captain West was buried at four o'clock, and at eight bells that evening Mr. Pike assumed command and made a few remarks to both watches. They were straight-from-the-shoulder remarks, or, as he called them, they were "brass tacks."

Among other things he told the sailors that they had another boss, and that they would toe the mark as they never had before. Up to this time they had been loafing in an hotel, but from this time on they were going to work.

"On this hooker, from now on," he perorated, "it's going to be like old times, when a man jumped the last day of the voyage as well as the first. And God help the man that don't jump. That's all. Relieve the wheel and lookout."

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And yet the men are in terribly wretched condition. I don't see how they can jump. Another week of westerly gales, alternating with brief periods of calm, has elapsed, making a total of six weeks off the Horn. So weak are the men that they have no spirit left in them--not even the gangsters. And so afraid are they of the mate that they really do their best to jump when he drives them, and he drives them all the time. Mr. Mellaire shakes his head.

"Wait till they get around and up into better weather," he astonished me by telling me the other afternoon. "Wait till they get dried out, and rested up, with more sleep, and their sores healed, and more flesh on their bones, and more spunk in their blood--then they won't stand for this driving. Mr. Pike can't realize that times have changed, sir, and laws have changed, and men have changed. He's an old man, and I know what I am talking about."

"You mean you've been listening to the talk of the men?" I challenged rashly, all my gorge rising at the unofficerlike conduct of this ship's officer.

The shot went home, for, in a flash, that suave and gentle film of light vanished from the surface of the eyes, and the watching, fearful thing that lurked behind inside the skull seemed almost to leap out at me, while the cruel gash of mouth drew thinner and crueller. And at the same time, on my inner sight, was grotesquely limned a picture of a brain pulsing savagely against the veneer of skin that covered that cleft of

skull beneath the dripping sou'-wester. Then he controlled himself, the mouth-gash relaxed, and the suave and gentle film drew again across the eyes.

"I mean, sir," he said softly, "that I am speaking out of a long sea experience. Times have changed. The old driving days are gone. And I trust, Mr. Pathurst, that you will not misunderstand me in the matter, nor misinterpret what I have said."

Although the conversation drifted on to other and calmer topics, I could not ignore the fact that he had not denied listening to the talk of the men. And yet, even as Mr. Pike grudgingly admits, he is a good sailorman and second mate save for his unholy intimacy with the men for'ard--an intimacy which even the Chinese cook and the Chinese steward deplore as unseamanlike and perilous.

Even though men like the gangsters are so worn down by hardship that they have no heart of rebellion, there remain three of the frailest for'ard who will not die, and who are as spunky as ever. They are Andy Fay, Mulligan Jacobs, and Charles Davis. What strange, abysmal vitality informs them is beyond all speculation. Of course, Charles Davis should have been overside with a sack of coal at his feet long ago. And Andy Fay and Mulligan Jacobs are only, and have always been, wrecked and emaciated wisps of men. Yet far stronger men than they have gone over the side, and far stronger men than they are laid up right now in absolute physical helplessness in the soggy forecastle bunks. And these

two bitter flames of shreds of things stand all their watches and answer all calls for both watches.

Yes; and the chickens have something of this same spunk of life in them. Featherless, semi-frozen despite the oil-stove, sprayed dripping on occasion by the frigid seas that pound by sheer weight through canvas tarpaulins, nevertheless not a chicken has died. Is it a matter of selection? Are these the iron-vigoured ones that survived the hardships from Baltimore to the Horn, and are fitted to survive anything? Then for a De Vries to take them, save them, and out of them found the hardest breed of chickens on the planet! And after this I shall always query that phrase, most ancient in our language--"chicken-hearted." Measured by the Elsinore's chickens, it is a misnomer.

Nor are our three Horn Gypsies, the storm-visitors with the dreaming, topaz eyes, spunkless. Held in superstitious abhorrence by the rest of the crew, aliens by lack of any word of common speech, nevertheless they are good sailors and are always first to spring into any enterprise of work or peril. They have gone into Mr. Mellaire's watch, and they are quite apart from the rest of the sailors. And when there is a delay, or wait, with nothing to do for long minutes, they shoulder together, and stand and sway to the heave of deck, and dream far dreams in those pale, topaz eyes, of a country, I am sure, where mothers, with pale, topaz eyes and sandy hair, birth sons and daughters that breed true in terms of topaz eyes and sandy hair.

But the rest of the crew! Take the Maltese Cockney. He is too keenly intelligent, too sharply sensitive, successfully to endure. He is a shadow of his former self. His cheeks have fallen in. Dark circles of suffering are under his eyes, while his eyes, Latin and English intermingled, are cavernously sunken and as bright-burning as if aflame with fever.

Tom Spink, hard-fibred Anglo-Saxon, good seaman that he is, long tried and always proved, is quite wrecked in spirit. He is whining and fearful. So broken is he, though he still does his work, that he is prideless and shameless.

"I'll never ship around the Horn again, sir," he began on me the other day when I greeted him good morning at the wheel. "I've sworn it before, but this time I mean it. Never again, sir. Never again."

"Why did you swear it before?" I queried.

"It was on the Nahoma, sir, four years ago. Two hundred and thirty days from Liverpool to 'Frisco. Think of it, sir. Two hundred and thirty days! And we was loaded with cement and creosote, and the creosote got loose. We buried the captain right here off the Horn. The grub gave out. Most of us nearly died of scurvy. Every man Jack of us was carted to hospital in 'Frisco. It was plain hell, sir, that's what it was, an' two hundred and thirty days of it."

"Yet here you are," I laughed; "signed on another Horn voyage."

And this morning Tom Spink confided the following tome:

"If only we'd lost the carpenter, sir, instead of Boney."

I did not catch his drift for the moment; then I remembered. The carpenter was the Finn, the Jonah, the warlock who played tricks with the winds and despitefully used poor sailormen.

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Yes, and I make free to confess that I have grown well weary of this eternal buffeting by the Great West Wind. Nor are we alone in our travail on this desolate ocean. Never a day does the gray thin, or the snow-squalls cease that we do not sight ships, west-bound like ourselves, hove-to and trying to hold on to the meagre westing they possess. And occasionally, when the gray clears and lifts, we see a lucky ship, bound east, running before it and reeling off the miles. I saw Mr. Pike, yesterday, shaking his fist in a fury of hatred at one such craft that flew insolently past us not a quarter of a mile away.

And the men are jumping. Mr. Pike is driving with those block-square fists of his, as many a man's face attests. So weak are they, and so terrible is he, that I swear he could whip either watch single-handed. I cannot help but note that Mr. Mellaire refuses to take part in this

driving. Yet I know that he is a trained driver, and that he was not averse to driving at the outset of the voyage. But now he seems bent on keeping on good terms with the crew. I should like to know what Mr. Pike thinks of it, for he cannot possibly be blind to what is going on; but I am too well aware of what would happen if I raised the question. He would insult me, snap my head off, and indulge in a three-days' sea-grouch. Things are sad and monotonous enough for Margaret and me in the cabin and at table, without invoking the blight of the mate's displeasure.