

CHAPTER XL

Another brutal sea-superstition vindicated. From now on and for always these imbeciles of ours will believe that Finns are Jonahs. We are west of the Diego de Ramirez Rocks, and we are running west at a twelve-knot clip with an easterly gale at our backs. And the carpenter is gone. His passing, and the coming of the easterly wind, were coincidental.

It was yesterday morning, as he helped me to dress, that I was struck by the solemnity of Wada's face. He shook his head lugubriously as he broke the news. The carpenter was missing. The ship had been searched for him high and low. There just was no carpenter.

"What does the steward think?" I asked. "What does Louis think?--and Yatsuda?"

"The sailors, they kill 'm carpenter sure," was the answer. "Very bad ship this. Very bad hearts. Just the same pig, just the same dog. All the time kill. All the time kill. Bime-by everybody kill. You see."

The old steward, at work in his pantry, grinned at me when I mentioned the matter.

"They make fool with me, I fix 'em," he said vindictively. "Mebbe they kill me, all right; but I kill some, too."

He threw back his coat, and I saw, strapped to the left side of his body, in a canvas sheath, so that the handle was ready to hand, a meat knife of the heavy sort that butchers hack with. He drew it forth--it was fully two feet long--and, to demonstrate its razor-edge, sliced a sheet of newspaper into many ribbons.

"Huh!" he laughed sardonically. "I am Chink, monkey, damn fool, eh?--no good, eh? all rotten damn to hell. I fix 'em, they make fool with me."

And yet there is not the slightest evidence of foul play. Nobody knows what happened to the carpenter. There are no clues, no traces. The night was calm and snowy. No seas broke on board. Without doubt the clumsy, big-footed, over-grown giant of a boy is overside and dead. The question is: did he go over of his own accord, or was he put over?

At eight o'clock Mr. Pike proceeded to interrogate the watches. He stood at the break of the poop, in the high place, leaning on the rail and gazing down at the crew assembled on the main deck beneath him.

Man after man he questioned, and from each man came the one story. They knew no more about it than did we--or so they averred.

"I suppose you'll be chargin' next that I hove that big lummux overboard with me own hands," Mulligan Jacobs snarled, when he was questioned. "An' mebbe I did, bein' that husky an' rampagin' bull-like."

The mate's face grew more forbidding and sour, but without comment he passed on to John Hackey, the San Francisco hoodlum.

It was an unforgettable scene--the mate in the high place, the men, sullen and irresponsive, grouped beneath. A gentle snow drifted straight down through the windless air, while the *Elsinore*, with hollow thunder from her sails, rolled down on the quiet swells so that the ocean lapped the mouths of her scuppers with long-drawn, shuddering sucks and sobs. And all the men swayed in unison to the rolls, their hands in mittens, their feet in sack-wrapped sea-boots, their faces worn and sick. And the three dreamers with the topaz eyes stood and swayed and dreamed together, incurious of setting and situation.

And then it came--the hint of easterly air. The mate noted it first. I saw him start and turn his cheek to the almost imperceptible draught. Then I felt it. A minute longer he waited, until assured, when, the dead carpenter forgotten, he burst out with orders to the wheel and the crew. And the men jumped, though in their weakness the climb aloft was slow and toilsome; and when the gaskets were off the topgallant-sails and the men on deck were hoisting yards and sheeting home, those aloft were loosing the royals.

While this work went on, and while the yards were being braced around, the *Elsinore*, her bow pointing to the west, began moving through the water before the first fair wind in a month and a half.

Slowly that light air fanned to a gentle breeze while all the time the snow fell steadily. The barometer, down to 28.80, continued to fall, and the breeze continued to grow upon itself. Tom Spink, passing by me on the poop to lend a hand at the final finicky trimming of the mizzen-yards, gave me a triumphant look. Superstition was vindicated. Events had proved him right. Fair wind had come with the going of the carpenter, which said warlock had incontestably taken with him overside his bag of wind-tricks.

Mr. Pike strode up and down the poop, rubbing his hands, which he was too disdainfully happy to mitten, chuckling and grinning to himself, glancing at the draw of every sail, stealing adoring looks astern into the gray of snow out of which blew the favouring wind. He even paused beside me to gossip for a moment about the French restaurants of San Francisco and how, therein, the delectable California fashion of cooking wild duck obtained.

"Throw 'em through the fire," he chanted. "That's the way--throw 'em through the fire--a hot oven, sixteen minutes--I take mine fourteen, to the second--an' squeeze the carcasses."

By midday the snow had ceased and we were bowling along before a stiff breeze. At three in the afternoon we were running before a growing gale. It was across a mad ocean we tore, for the mounting sea that made from eastward bucked into the West End Drift and battled and battered down the

huge south-westerly swell. And the big grinning dolt of a Finnish carpenter, already food for fish and bird, was astern there somewhere in the freezing rack and drive.

Make westing! We ripped it off across these narrowing degrees of longitude at the southern tip of the planet where one mile counts for two. And Mr. Pike, staring at his bending topgallant-yards, swore that they could carry away for all he cared ere he eased an inch of canvas. More he did. He set the huge crojack, biggest of all sails, and challenged God or Satan to start a seam of it or all its seams.

He simply could not go below. In such auspicious occasions all watches were his, and he strode the poop perpetually with all age-lag banished from his legs. Margaret and I were with him in the chart-room when he hurrahed the barometer, down to 28.55 and falling. And we were near him, on the poop, when he drove by an east-bound lime-juicer, hove-to under upper-topsails. We were a biscuit-toss away, and he sprang upon the rail at the jigger-shrouds and danced a war-dance and waved his free arm, and yelled his scorn and joy at their discomfiture to the several oilskinned figures on the stranger vessel's poop.

Through the pitch-black night we continued to drive. The crew was sadly frightened, and I sought in vain, in the two dog-watches, for Tom Spink, to ask him if he thought the carpenter, astern, had opened wide the bag-mouth and loosed all his tricks. For the first time I saw the steward apprehensive.

"Too much," he told me, with ominous rolling head. "Too much sail, rotten bad damn all to hell. Bime-by, pretty quick, all finish. You see."

"They talk about running the easting down," Mr. Pike chortled to me, as we clung to the poop-rail to keep from fetching away and breaking ribs and necks. "Well, this is running your westing down if anybody should ride up in a go-devil and ask you."

It was a wretched, glorious night. Sleep was impossible--for me, at any rate. Nor was there even the comfort of warmth. Something had gone wrong with the big cabin stove, due to our wild running, I fancy, and the steward was compelled to let the fire go out. So we are getting a taste of the hardship of the forecastle, though in our case everything is dry instead of soggy or afloat. The kerosene stoves burned in our state room, but so smelly was mine that I preferred the cold.

To sail on one's nerve in an over-canvassed harbour cat-boat is all the excitement any glutton can desire. But to sail, in the same fashion, in a big ship off the Horn, is incredible and terrible. The Great West Wind Drift, setting squarely into the teeth of the easterly gale, kicked up a tideway sea that was monstrous. Two men toiled at the wheel, relieving in pairs every half-hour, and in the face of the cold they streamed with sweat long ere their half-hour shift was up.

Mr. Pike is of the elder race of men. His endurance is prodigious. Watch and watch, and all watches, he held the poop.

"I never dreamed of it," he told me, at midnight, as the great gusts tore by and as we listened for our lighter spars to smash aloft and crash upon the deck. "I thought my last whirling sailing was past. And here we are! Here we are!

"Lord! Lord! I sailed third mate in the little Vampire before you were born. Fifty-six men before the mast, and the last Jack of 'em an able seaman. And there were eight boys, an' bosuns that was bosuns, an' sail-makers an' carpenters an' stewards an' passengers to jam the decks. An' three driving mates of us, an' Captain Brown, the Little Wonder. He didn't weigh a hundredweight, an' he drove us--he drove us, three drivin' mates that learned from him what drivin' was.

"It was knock down and drag out from the start. The first hour of puttin' the men to fair perished our knuckles. I've got the smashed joints yet to show. Every sea-chest broke open, every sea-bag turned out, and whiskey bottles, knuckle-dusters, sling-shots, bowie-knives, an' guns chucked overside by the armful. An' when we chose the watches, each man of fifty-six of 'em laid his knife on the main-hatch an' the carpenter broke the point square off.--Yes, an' the little Vampire only eight hundred tons. The Elsinore could carry her on her deck. But she was ship, all ship, an' them was men's days."

Margaret, save for inability to sleep, did not mind the driving, although Mr. Mellaire, on the other hand, admitted apprehension.

"He's got my goat," he confided to me. "It isn't right to drive a cargo-carrier this way. This isn't a ballasted yacht. It's a coal-hulk. I know what driving was, but it was in ships made to drive. Our iron-work aloft won't stand it. Mr. Pathurst, I tell you frankly that it is criminal, it is sheer murder, to run the Elsinore with that crojack on her. You can see yourself, sir. It's an after-sail. All its tendency is to throw her stern off and her bow up to it. And if it ever happens, sir, if she ever gets away from the wheel for two seconds and broaches to . . . "

"Then what?" I asked, or, rather, shouted; for all conversation had to be shouted close to ear in that blast of gale.

He shrugged his shoulders, and all of him was eloquent with the unuttered, unmistakable word--"finish."

At eight this morning Margaret and I struggled up to the poop. And there was that indomitable, iron old man. He had never left the deck all night. His eyes were bright, and he appeared in the pink of well-being. He rubbed his hands and chuckled greeting to us, and took up his reminiscences.

"In '51, on this same stretch, Miss West, the Flying Cloud, in twenty-

four hours, logged three hundred and seventy-four miles under her topgallant-sails. That was sailing. She broke the record, that day, for sail an' steam."

"And what are we averaging, Mr. Pike?" Margaret queried, while her eyes were fixed on the main deck, where continually one rail and then the other dipped under the ocean and filled across from rail to rail, only to spill out and take in on the next roll.

"Thirteen for a fair average since five o'clock yesterday afternoon," he exulted. "In the squalls she makes all of sixteen, which is going some, for the Elsinore."

"I'd take the crojack off if I had charge," Margaret criticised.

"So would I, so would I, Miss West," he replied; "if we hadn't been six weeks already off the Horn."

She ran her eyes aloft, spar by spar, past the spars of hollow steel to the wooden royals, which bent in the gusts like bows in some invisible archer's hands.

"They're remarkably good sticks of timber," was her comment.

"Well may you say it, Miss West," he agreed. "I'd never a-believed they'd a-stood it myself. But just look at 'm! Just look at 'm!"

There was no breakfast for the men. Three times the galley had been washed out, and the men, in the forecabin awash, contented themselves with hard tack and cold salt horse. Aft, with us, the steward scalded himself twice ere he succeeded in making coffee over a kerosene-burner.

At noon we picked up a ship ahead, a lime-juicer, travelling in the same direction, under lower-topsails and one upper-topsail. The only one of her courses set was the foresail.

"The way that skipper's carryin' on is shocking," Mr. Pike sneered. "He should be more cautious, and remember God, the owners, the underwriters, and the Board of Trade."

Such was our speed that in almost no time we were up with the stranger vessel and passing her. Mr. Pike was like a boy just loosed from school. He altered our course so that we passed her a hundred yards away. She was a gallant sight, but, such was our speed, she appeared standing still. Mr. Pike jumped upon the rail and insulted those on her poop by extending a rope's end in invitation to take a tow.

Margaret shook her head privily to me as she gazed at our bending royal-yards, but was caught in the act by Mr. Pike, who cried out:

"What kites she won't carry she can drag!"

An hour later I caught Tom Spink, just relieved from his shift at the wheel and weak from exhaustion.

"What do you think now of the carpenter and his bag of tricks?" I queried.

"Lord lumme, it should a-ben the mate, sir," was his reply.

By five in the afternoon we had logged 314 miles since five the previous day, which was two over an average of thirteen knots for twenty-four consecutive hours.

"Now take Captain Brown of the little Vampire," Mr. Pike grinned to me, for our sailing made him good-natured. "He never would take in until the kites an' stu'n'sails was about his ears. An' when she was blown' her worst an' we was half-fairly shortened down, he'd turn in for a snooze, an' say to us, 'Call me if she moderates.' Yes, and I'll never forget the night when I called him an' told him that everything on top the houses had gone adrift, an' that two of the boats had been swept aft and was kindling-wood against the break of the cabin. 'Very well, Mr. Pike,' he says, battin' his eyes and turnin' over to go to sleep again. 'Very well, Mr. Pike,' says he. 'Watch her. An' Mr. Pike . . .' 'Yes, sir,' says I. 'Give me a call, Mr. Pike, when the windlass shows signs of comin' aft.' That's what he said, his very words, an' the next moment, damme, he was snorin'."

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It is now midnight, and, cunningly wedged into my bunk, unable to sleep,
I am writing these lines with flying dabs of pencil at my pad. And no
more shall I write, I swear, until this gale is blown out, or we are
blown to Kingdom Come.