

CHAPTER XLVII

Margaret was right. The mutiny is not violating standards and precedents. We have had our hands full for days and nights. Ditman Olansen, the crank-eyed Berserker, has been killed by Wada, and the training-ship boy, the one lone cadet of our breed, has gone overside with the regulation sack of coal at his feet. The poop has been rushed. My illuminating invention has proved a success. The men are getting hungry, and we still sit in command in the high place.

First of all the attack on the poop, two nights ago, in Margaret's watch. No; first, I have made another invention. Assisted by the old steward, who knows, as a Chinese ought, a deal about fireworks, and getting my materials from our signal rockets and Roman candles, I manufactured half a dozen bombs. I don't really think they are very deadly, and I know our extemporized fuses are slower than our voyage is at the present time; but nevertheless the bombs have served the purpose, as you shall see.

And now to the attempt to rush the poop. It was in Margaret's watch, from midnight till four in the morning, when the attack was made. Sleeping on the deck by the cabin skylight, I was very close to her when her revolver went off, and continued to go off.

My first spring was to the tripping-lines on my illuminators. The igniting and releasing devices worked cleverly. I pulled two of the

tripping-lines, and two of the contraptions exploded into light and noise and at the same time ran automatically down the jigger-trysail-stays, and automatically fetched up at the ends of their lines. The illumination was instantaneous and gorgeous. Henry, the two sail-makers, and the steward--at least three of them awakened from sound sleep, I am sure--ran to join us along the break of the poop. All the advantage lay with us, for we were in the dark, while our foes were outlined against the light behind them.

But such light! The powder crackled, fizzed, and spluttered and spilled out the excess of gasolene from the flaming oakum balls so that streams of fire dripped down on the main deck beneath. And the stuff of the signal-flares dripped red light and blue and green.

There was not much of a fight, for the mutineers were shocked by our fireworks. Margaret fired her revolver haphazardly, while I held my rifle for any that gained the poop. But the attack faded away as quickly as it had come. I did see Margaret overshoot some man, scaling the poop from the port-rail, and the next moment I saw Wada, charging like a buffalo, jab him in the chest with the spear he had made and thrust the boarder back and down.

That was all. The rest retreated for'ard on the dead run, while the three trysails, furlled at the foot of the stays next to the mizzen and set on fire by the dripping gasolene, went up in flame and burned entirely away and out without setting the rest of the ship on fire. That

is one of the virtues of a ship steel-masted and steel-stayed.

And on the deck beneath us, crumpled, twisted, face hidden so that we could not identify him, lay the man whom Wada had speared.

And now I come to a phase of adventure that is new to me. I have never found it in the books. In short, it is carelessness coupled with laziness, or vice versa. I had used two of my illuminators. Only one remained. An hour later, convinced of the movement aft of men along the deck, I let go the third and last and with its brightness sent them scurrying for'ard. Whether they were attacking the poop tentatively to learn whether or not I had exhausted my illuminators, or whether or not they were trying to rescue Ditman Olansen, we shall never know. The point is: they did come aft; they were compelled to retreat by my illuminator; and it was my last illuminator. And yet I did not start in, there and then, to manufacture fresh ones. This was carelessness. It was laziness. And I hazarded our lives, perhaps, if you please, on a psychological guess that I had convinced our mutineers that we had an inexhaustible stock of illuminators in reserve.

The rest of Margaret's watch, which I shared with her, was undisturbed. At four I insisted that she go below and turn in, but she compromised by taking my own bed behind the skylight.

At break of day I was able to make out the body, still lying as last I had seen it. At seven o'clock, before breakfast, and while Margaret

still slept, I sent the two boys, Henry and Buckwheat, down to the body. I stood above them, at the rail, rifle in hand and ready. But from for'ard came no signs of life; and the lads, between them, rolled the crank-eyed Norwegian over so that we could recognize him, carried him to the rail, and shoved him stiffly across and into the sea. Wada's spear-thrust had gone clear through him.

But before twenty-four hours were up the mutineers evened the score handsomely. They more than evened it, for we are so few that we cannot so well afford the loss of one as they can. To begin with--and a thing I had anticipated and for which I had prepared my bombs--while Margaret and I ate a deck-breakfast in the shelter of the jiggermast a number of the men sneaked aft and got under the overhang of the poop. Buckwheat saw them coming and yelled the alarm, but it was too late. There was no direct way to get them out. The moment I put my head over the rail to fire at them, I knew they would fire up at me with all the advantage in their favour. They were hidden. I had to expose myself.

Two steel doors, tight-fastened and caulked against the Cape Horn seas, opened under the overhang of the poop from the cabin on to the main deck. These doors the men proceeded to attack with sledge-hammers, while the rest of the gang, sheltered by the 'midship-house, showed that it stood ready for the rush when the doors were battered down.

Inside, the steward guarded one door with his hacking knife, while with his spear Wada guarded the other door. Nor, while I had dispatched them

to this duty, was I idle. Behind the jiggermast I lighted the fuse of one of my extemporized bombs. When it was sputtering nicely I ran across the poop to the break and dropped the bomb to the main deck beneath, at the same time making an effort to toss it in under the overhang where the men battered at the port-door. But this effort was distracted and made futile by a popping of several revolver shots from the gangways amidships. One is jumpy when soft-nosed bullets putt-putt around him. As a result, the bomb rolled about on the open deck.

Nevertheless, the illuminators had earned the respect of the mutineers for my fireworks. The sputtering and fizzling of the fuse were too much for them, and from under the poop they ran for'ard like so many scuttling rabbits. I know I could have got a couple with my rifle had I not been occupied with lighting the fuse of a second bomb. Margaret managed three wild shots with her revolver, and the poop was immediately peppered by a scattering revolver fire from for'ard.

Being provident (and lazy, for I have learned that it takes time and labour to manufacture home-made bombs), I pinched off the live end of the fuse in my hand. But the fuse of the first bomb, rolling about on the main deck, merely fizzled on; and as I waited I resolved to shorten my remaining fuses. Any of the men who fled, had he had the courage, could have pinched off the fuse, or tossed the bomb overboard, or, better yet, he could have tossed it up amongst us on the poop.

It took fully five minutes for that blessed fuse to burn its slow length,

and when the bomb did go off it was a sad disappointment. I swear it could have been sat upon with nothing more than a jar to one's nerves. And yet, in so far as the intimidation goes, it did its work. The men have not since ventured under the overhang of the poop.

That the mutineers were getting short of food was patent. The *Elsinore*, sailless, drifted about that morning, the sport of wind and wave; and the gang put many lines overboard for the catching of mollyhawks and albatrosses. Oh, I worried the hungry fishers with my rifle. No man could show himself for'ard without having a bullet whop against the iron-work perilously near him. And still they caught birds--not, however, without danger to themselves, and not without numerous losses of birds due to my rifle.

Their procedure was to toss their hooks and bait over the rail from shelter and slowly to pay the lines out as the slight windage of the *Elsinore's* hull, spars, and rigging drifted her through the water. When a bird was hooked they hauled in the line, still from shelter, till it was alongside. This was the ticklish moment. The hook, merely a hollow and acute-angled triangle of sheet-copper floating on a piece of board at the end of the line, held the bird by pinching its curved beak into the acute angle. The moment the line slacked the bird was released. So, when alongside, this was the problem: to lift the bird out of the water, straight up the side of the ship, without once jamming and easing and slacking. When they tried to do this from shelter invariably they lost the bird.

They worked out a method. When the bird was alongside the several men with revolvers turned loose on me, while one man, overhauling and keeping the line taut, leaped to the rail and quickly hove the bird up and over and inboard. I know this long-distance revolver fire seriously bothered me. One cannot help jumping when death, in the form of a piece of flying lead, hits the rail beside him, or the mast over his head, or whines away in a ricochet from the steel shrouds. Nevertheless, I managed with my rifle to bother the exposed men on the rail to the extent that they lost one hooked bird out of two. And twenty-six men require a quantity of albatrosses and mollyhawks every twenty-four hours, while they can fish only in the daylight.

As the day wore along I improved on my obstructive tactics. When the *Elsinore* was up in the eye of the wind, and making sternway, I found that by putting the wheel sharply over, one way or the other, I could swing her bow off. Then, when she had paid off till the wind was abeam, by reversing the wheel hard across to the opposite hard-over I could take advantage of her momentum away from the wind and work her off squarely before it. This made all the wood-floated triangles of bird-snares tow aft along her sides.

The first time I was ready for them. With hooks and sinkers on our own lines aft, we tossed out, grappled, captured, and broke off nine of their lines. But the next time, so slow is the movement of so large a ship, the mutineers hauled all their lines safely inboard ere they towed aft

within striking distance of my grapnels.

Still I improved. As long as I kept the Elsinore before the wind they could not fish. I experimented. Once before it, by means of a winged-out spanker coupled with patient and careful steering, I could keep her before it. This I did, hour by hour one of my men relieving another at the wheel. As a result all fishing ceased.

Margaret was holding the first dog-watch, four to six. Henry was at the wheel steering. Wada and Louis were below cooking the evening meal over the big coal-stove and the oil-burners. I had just come up from below and was standing beside the sounding-machine, not half a dozen feet from Henry at the wheel. Some obscure sound from the ventilator must have attracted me, for I was gazing at it when the thing happened.

But first, the ventilator. This is a steel shaft that leads up from the coal-carrying bowels of the ship beneath the lazarette and that wins to the outside-world via the after-wall of the chart-house. In fact, it occupies the hollow inside of the double walls of the afterwall of the chart-house. Its opening, at the height of a man's head, is screened with iron bars so closely set that no mature-bodied rat can squeeze between. Also, this opening commands the wheel, which is a scant fifteen feet away and directly across the booby-hatch. Some mutineer, crawling along the space between the coal and the deck of the lower hold, had climbed the ventilator shaft and was able to take aim through the slits between the bars.

Practically simultaneously, I saw the out-rush of smoke and heard the report. I heard a grunt from Henry, and, turning my head, saw him cling to the spokes and turn the wheel half a revolution as he sank to the deck. It must have been a lucky shot. The boy was perforated through the heart or very near to the heart--we have no time for post-mortems on the Elsinore.

Tom Spink and the second sail-maker, Uchino, sprang to Henry's side. The revolver continued to go off through the ventilator slits, and the bullets thudded into the front of the half wheel-house all about them. Fortunately they were not hit, and they immediately scrambled out of range. The boy quivered for the space of a few seconds, and ceased to move; and one more cadet of the perishing breed perished as he did his day's work at the wheel of the Elsinore off the west coast of South America, bound from Baltimore to Seattle with a cargo of coal.