

## CHAPTER XLVIII

The situation is hopelessly grotesque. We in the high place command the food of the Elsinore, but the mutineers have captured her steering-gear. That is to say, they have captured it without coming into possession of it. They cannot steer, neither can we. The poop, which is the high place, is ours. The wheel is on the poop, yet we cannot touch the wheel. From that slitted opening in the ventilator-shaft they are able to shoot down any man who approaches the wheel. And with that steel wall of the chart-house as a shield they laugh at us as from a conning tower.

I have a plan, but it is not worth while putting into execution unless its need becomes imperative. In the darkness of night it would be an easy trick to disconnect the steering-gear from the short tiller on the rudder-head, and then, by re-rigging the preventer tackles, steer from both sides of the poop well enough for'ard to be out of the range of the ventilator.

In the meantime, in this fine weather, the Elsinore drifts as she lists, or as the windage of her lists and the sea-movement of waves lists. And she can well drift. Let the mutineers starve. They can best be brought to their senses through their stomachs.

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And what are wits for, if not for use? I am breaking the men's hungry hearts. It is great fun in its way. The mollyhawks and albatrosses, after their fashion, have followed the *Elsinore* up out of their own latitudes. This means that there are only so many of them and that their numbers are not recruited. Syllogism: major premise, a definite and limited amount of bird-meat; minor premise, the only food the mutineers now have is bird-meat; conclusion, destroy the available food and the mutineers will be compelled to come back to duty.

I have acted on this bit of logic. I began experimentally by tossing small chunks of fat pork and crusts of stale bread overside. When the birds descended for the feast I shot them. Every carcass thus left floating on the surface of the sea was so much less meat for the mutineers.

But I bettered the method. Yesterday I overhauled the medicine-chest, and I dosed my chunks of fat pork and bread with the contents of every bottle that bore a label of skull and cross-bones. I even added rough-on-rats to the deadliness of the mixture--this on the suggestion of the steward.

And to-day, behold, there is no bird left in the sky. True, while I played my game yesterday, the mutineers hooked a few of the birds; but now the rest are gone, and that is bound to be the last food for the men for'ard until they resume duty.

Yes; it is grotesque. It is a boy's game. It reads like Midshipman Easy, like Frank Mildmay, like Frank Reade, Jr.; and yet, i' faith, life and death's in the issue. I have just gone over the toll of our dead since the voyage began.

First, was Christian Jespersen, killed by O'Sullivan when that maniac aspired to throw overboard Andy Fay's sea-boots; then O'Sullivan, because he interfered with Charles Davis' sleep, brained by that worthy with a steel marlin-spike; next Petro Marinkovich, just ere we began the passage of the Horn, murdered undoubtedly by the gangster clique, his life cut out of him with knives, his carcass left lying on deck to be found by us and be buried by us; and the Samurai, Captain West, a sudden though not a violent death, albeit occurring in the midst of all elemental violence as Mr. Pike clawed the Elsinore off the lee-shore of the Horn; and Boney the Splinter, following, washed overboard to drown as we cleared the sea-gashing rock-tooth where the southern tip of the continent bit into the storm-wrath of the Antarctic; and the big-footed, clumsy youth of a Finnish carpenter, hove overside as a Jonah by his fellows who believed that Finns control the winds; and Mike Cipriani and Bill Quigley, Rome and Ireland, shot down on the poop and flung overboard alive by Mr. Pike, still alive and clinging to the log-line, cut adrift by the steward to be eaten alive by great-beaked albatrosses, mollyhawks, and sooty-plumaged Cape hens; Steve Roberts, one-time cowboy, shot by me as he tried to shoot me; Herman Lunkenheimer, his throat cut before all of us by the hound Bombini as Kid Twist stretched the throat taut from behind; the two

mates, Mr. Pike and Mr. Mellaire, mutually destroying each other in what must have been an unwitnessed epic combat; Ditman Olansen, speared by Wada as he charged Berserk at the head of the mutineers in the attempt to rush the poop; and last, Henry, the cadet of the perishing house, shot at the wheel, from the ventilator-shaft, in the course of his day's work.

No; as I contemplate this roll-call of the dead which I have just made I see that we are not playing a boy's game. Why, we have lost a third of us, and the bloodiest battles of history have rarely achieved such a percentage of mortality. Fourteen of us have gone overside, and who can tell the end?

Nevertheless, here we are, masters of matter, adventurers in the micro-organic, planet-weighers, sun-analysers, star-rovers, god-dreamers, equipped with the human wisdom of all the ages, and yet, quoting Mr. Pike, to come down to brass tacks, we are a lot of primitive beasts, fighting bestially, slaying bestially, pursuing bestially food and water, air for our lungs, a dry space above the deep, and carcasses skin-covered and intact. And over this menagerie of beasts Margaret and I, with our Asiatics under us, rule top-dog. We are all dogs--there is no getting away from it. And we, the fair-pigmented ones, by the seed of our ancestry rulers in the high place, shall remain top-dog over the rest of the dogs. Oh, there is material in plenty for the cogitation of any philosopher on a windjammer in mutiny in this Year of our Lord 1913.

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Henry was the fourteenth of us to go overside into the dark and salty disintegration of the sea. And in one day he has been well avenged; for two of the mutineers have followed him. The steward called my attention to what was taking place. He touched my arm half beyond his servant's self, as he gloated for'ard at the men heaving two corpses overside. Weighted with coal, they sank immediately, so that we could not identify them.

"They have been fighting," I said. "It is good that they should fight among themselves."

But the old Chinese merely grinned and shook his head.

"You don't think they have been fighting?" I queried.

"No fight. They eat'm mollyhawk and albatross; mollyhawk and albatross eat'm fat pork; two men he die, plenty men much sick, you bet, damn to hell me very much glad. I savve."

And I think he was right. While I was busy baiting the sea-birds the mutineers were catching them, and of a surety they must have caught some that had eaten of my various poisons.

The two poisoned ones went over the side yesterday. Since then we have taken the census. Two men only have not appeared, and they are Bob, the

fat and overgrown feebling youth, and, of all creatures, the Faun. It seems my fate that I had to destroy the Faun--the poor, tortured Faun, always willing and eager, ever desirous to please. There is a madness of ill luck in all this. Why couldn't the two dead men have been Charles Davis and Tony the Greek? Or Bert Rhine and Kid Twist? or Bombini and Andy Fay? Yes, and in my heart I know I should have felt better had it been Isaac Chantz and Arthur Deacon, or Nancy and Sundry Buyers, or Shorty and Larry.

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The steward has just tendered me a respectful bit of advice.

"Next time we chuck'm overboard like Henry, much better we use old iron."

"Getting short of coal?" I asked.

He nodded affirmation. We use a great deal of coal in our cooking, and when the present supply gives out we shall have to cut through a bulkhead to get at the cargo.