

## CHAPTER XLIX

The situation grows tense. There are no more sea-birds, and the mutineers are starving. Yesterday I talked with Bert Rhine. To-day I talked with him again, and he will never forget, I am certain, the little talk we had this morning.

To begin with, last evening, at five o'clock, I heard his voice issuing from between the slits of the ventilator in the after-wall of the chart-house. Standing at the corner of the house, quite out of range, I answered him.

"Getting hungry?" I jeered. "Let me tell you what we are going to have for dinner. I have just been down and seen the preparations. Now, listen: first, caviare on toast; then, clam bouillon; and creamed lobster; and tinned lamb chops with French peas--you know, the peas that melt in one's mouth; and California asparagus with mayonnaise; and--oh, I forgot to mention fried potatoes and cold pork and beans; and peach pie; and coffee, real coffee. Doesn't it make you hungry for your East Side? And, say, think of the free lunch going to waste right now in a thousand saloons in good old New York."

I had told him the truth. The dinner I described (principally coming out of tins and bottles, to be sure) was the dinner we were to eat.

"Cut that," he snarled. "I want to talk business with you."

"Right down to brass tacks," I gibed. "Very well, when are you and the rest of your rats going to turn to?"

"Cut that," he reiterated. "I've got you where I want you now. Take it from me, I'm givin' it straight. I'm not tellin' you how, but I've got you under my thumb. When I come down on you, you'll crack."

"Hell is full of cocksure rats like you," I retorted; although I never dreamed how soon he would be writhing in the particular hell preparing for him.

"Forget it," he sneered back. "I've got you where I want you. I'm just tellin' you, that's all."

"Pardon me," I replied, "when I tell you that I'm from Missouri. You'll have to show me."

And as I thus talked the thought went through my mind of how I naturally sought out the phrases of his own vocabulary in order to make myself intelligible to him. The situation was bestial, with sixteen of our complement already gone into the dark; and the terms I employed, perforce, were terms of bestiality. And I thought, also, of I who was thus compelled to dismiss the dreams of the utopians, the visions of the poets, the king-thoughts of the king-thinkers, in a discussion with this

ripened product of the New York City inferno. To him I must talk in the elemental terms of life and death, of food and water, of brutality and cruelty.

"I give you your choice," he went on. "Give in now, an' you won't be hurt, none of you."

"And if we don't?" I dared airily.

"You'll be sorry you was ever born. You ain't a mush-head, you've got a girl there that's stuck on you. It's about time you think of her. You ain't altogether a mutt. You get my drive?"

Ay, I did get it; and somehow, across my brain flashed a vision of all I had ever read and heard of the siege of the Legations at Peking, and of the plans of the white men for their womenkind in the event of the yellow hordes breaking through the last lines of defence. Ay, and the old steward got it; for I saw his black eyes glint murderously in their narrow, tilted slits. He knew the drift of the gangster's meaning.

"You get my drive?" the gangster repeated.

And I knew anger. Not ordinary anger, but cold anger. And I caught a vision of the high place in which we had sat and ruled down the ages in all lands, on all seas. I saw my kind, our women with us, in forlorn hopes and lost endeavours, pent in hill fortresses, rotted in jungle

fastnesses, cut down to the last one on the decks of rocking ships. And always, our women with us, had we ruled the beasts. We might die, our women with us; but, living, we had ruled. It was a royal vision I glimpsed. Ay, and in the purple of it I grasped the ethic, which was the stuff of the fabric of which it was builded. It was the sacred trust of the seed, the bequest of duty handed down from all ancestors.

And I flamed more coldly. It was not red-brute anger. It was intellectual. It was based on concept and history; it was the philosophy of action of the strong and the pride of the strong in their own strength. Now at last I knew Nietzsche. I knew the rightness of the books, the relation of high thinking to high-conduct, the transmutation of midnight thought into action in the high place on the poop of a coal-carrier in the year nineteen-thirteen, my woman beside me, my ancestors behind me, my slant-eyed servitors under me, the beasts beneath me and beneath the heel of me. God! I felt kingly. I knew at last the meaning of kingship.

My anger was white and cold. This subterranean rat of a miserable human, crawling through the bowels of the ship to threaten me and mine! A rat in the shelter of a knot-hole making a noise as beast-like as any rat ever made! And it was in this spirit that I answered the gangster.

"When you crawl on your belly, along the open deck, in the broad light of day, like a yellow cur that has been licked to obedience, and when you show by your every action that you like it and are glad to do it, then,

and not until then, will I talk with you."

Thereafter, for the next ten minutes, he shouted all the Billingsgate of his kind at me through the slits in the ventilator. But I made no reply. I listened, and I listened coldly, and as I listened I knew why the English had blown their mutinous Sepoys from the mouths of cannon in India long years ago.

\* \* \* \* \*

And when, this morning, I saw the steward struggling with a five-gallon carboy of sulphuric acid, I never dreamed the use he intended for it.

In the meantime I was devising another way to overcome that deadly ventilator shaft. The scheme was so simple that I was shamed in that it had not occurred to me at the very beginning. The slitted opening was small. Two sacks of flour, in a wooden frame, suspended by ropes from the edge of the chart-house roof directly above, would effectually cover the opening and block all revolver fire.

No sooner thought than done. Tom Spink and Louis were on top the chart-house with me and preparing to lower the flour, when we heard a voice issuing from the shaft.

"Who's in there now?" I demanded. "Speak up."

"I'm givin' you a last chance," Bert Rhine answered.

And just then, around the corner of the house, stepped the steward. In his hand he carried a large galvanized pail, and my casual thought was that he had come to get rain-water from the barrels. Even as I thought it, he made a sweeping half-circle with the pail and sloshed its contents into the ventilator-opening. And even as the liquid flew through the air I knew it for what it was--undiluted sulphuric acid, two gallons of it from the carboy.

The gangster must have received the liquid fire in the face and eyes. And, in the shock of pain, he must have released all holds and fallen upon the coal at the bottom of the shaft. His cries and shrieks of anguish were terrible, and I was reminded of the starving rats which had squealed up that same shaft during the first months of the voyage. The thing was sickening. I prefer that men be killed cleanly and easily.

The agony of the wretch I did not fully realize until the steward, his bare fore-arms sprayed by the splash from the ventilator slats, suddenly felt the bite of the acid through his tight, whole skin and made a mad rush for the water-barrel at the corner of the house. And Bert Rhine, the silent man of soundless laughter, screaming below there on the coal, was enduring the bite of the acid in his eyes!

We covered the ventilator opening with our flour-device; the screams from below ceased as the victim was evidently dragged for'ard across the coal

by his mates; and yet I confess to a miserable forenoon. As Carlyle has said: "Death is easy; all men must die"; but to receive two gallons of full-strength sulphuric acid full in the face is a vastly different and vastly more horrible thing than merely to die. Fortunately, Margaret was below at the time, and, after a few minutes, in which I recovered my balance, I bullied and swore all our hands into keeping the happening from her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Oh, well, and we have got ours in retaliation. Off and on, through all of yesterday, after the ventilator tragedy, there were noises beneath the cabin floor or deck. We heard them under the dining-table, under the steward's pantry, under Margaret's stateroom.

This deck is overlaid with wood, but under the wood is iron, or steel rather, such as of which the whole Elsinore is builded.

Margaret and I, followed by Louis, Wada, and the steward, walked about from place to place, wherever the sounds arose of tappings and of cold-chisels against iron. The tappings seemed to come from everywhere; but we concluded that the concentration necessary on any spot to make an opening large enough for a man's body would inevitably draw our attention to that spot. And, as Margaret said:

"If they do manage to cut through, they must come up head-first, and, in

such emergence, what chance would they have against us?"

So I relieved Buckwheat from deck duty, placed him on watch over the cabin floor, to be relieved by the steward in Margaret's watches.

In the late afternoon, after prodigious hammerings and clangings in a score of places, all noises ceased. Neither in the first and second dog-watches, nor in the first watch of the night, were the noises resumed. When I took charge of the poop at midnight Buckwheat relieved the steward in the vigil over the cabin floor; and as I leaned on the rail at the break of the poop, while my four hours dragged slowly by, least of all did I apprehend danger from the cabin--especially when I considered the two-gallon pail of raw sulphuric acid ready to hand for the first head that might arise through an opening in the floor not yet made. Our rascals for'ard might scale the poop; or cross aloft from mizzenmast to jigger and descend upon our heads; but how they could invade us through the floor was beyond me.

But they did invade. A modern ship is a complex affair. How was I to guess the manner of the invasion?

It was two in the morning, and for an hour I had been puzzling my head with watching the smoke arise from the after-division of the for'ard-house and with wondering why the mutineers should have up steam in the donkey-engine at such an ungodly hour. Not on the whole voyage had the donkey-engine been used. Four bells had just struck, and I was



leaning on the rail at the break of the poop when I heard a prodigious coughing and choking from aft. Next, Wada ran across the deck to me.

"Big trouble with Buckwheat," he blurted at me. "You go quick."

I shoved him my rifle and left him on guard while I raced around the chart-house. A lighted match, in the hands of Tom Spink, directed me. Between the booby-hatch and the wheel, sitting up and rocking back and forth with wringings of hands and wavings of arms, tears of agony bursting from his eyes, was Buckwheat. My first thought was that in some stupid way he had got the acid into his own eyes. But the terrible fashion in which he coughed and strangled would quickly have undeceived me, had not Louis, bending over the booby-companion, uttered a startled exclamation.

I joined him, and one whiff of the air that came up from below made me catch my breath and gasp. I had inhaled sulphur. On the instant I forgot the *Elsinore*, the mutineers for'ard, everything save one thing.

The next I know, I was down the booby-ladder and reeling dizzily about the big after-room as the sulphur fumes bit my lungs and strangled me. By the dim light of a sea-lantern I saw the old steward, on hands and knees, coughing and gasping, the while he shook awake Yatsuda, the first sail-maker. Uchino, the second sail-maker, still strangled in his sleep.

It struck me that the air might be better nearer the floor, and I proved

it when I dropped on my hands and knees. I rolled Uchino out of his blankets with a quick jerk, wrapped the blankets about my head, face, and mouth, arose to my feet, and dashed for'ard into the hall. After a couple of collisions with the wood-work I again dropped to the floor and rearranged the blankets so that, while my mouth remained covered, I could draw or withdraw, a thickness across my eyes.

The pain of the fumes was bad enough, but the real hardship was the dizziness I suffered. I blundered into the steward's pantry, and out of it, missed the cross-hall, stumbled through the next starboard opening in the long hall, and found myself bent double by violent collision with the dining-room table.

But I had my bearings. Feeling my way around the table and bumping most of the poisoned breath out of me against the rotund-bellied stove, I emerged in the cross-hall and made my way to starboard. Here, at the base of the chart-room stairway, I gained the hall that led aft. By this time my own situation seemed so serious that, careless of any collision, I went aft in long leaps.

Margaret's door was open. I plunged into her room. The moment I drew the blanket-thickness from my eyes I knew blindness and a modicum of what Bert Rhine must have suffered. Oh, the intolerable bite of the sulphur in my lungs, nostrils, eyes, and brain! No light burned in the room. I could only strangle and stumble for'ard to Margaret's bed, upon which I collapsed.

She was not there. I felt about, and I felt only the warm hollow her body had left in the under-sheet. Even in my agony and helplessness the intimacy of that warmth her body had left was very dear to me. Between the lack of oxygen in my lungs (due to the blankets), the pain of the sulphur, and the mortal dizziness in my brain, I felt that I might well cease there where the linen warmed my hand.

Perhaps I should have ceased, had I not heard a terrible coughing from along the hall. It was new life to me. I fell from bed to floor and managed to get upright until I gained the hall, where again I fell. Thereafter I crawled on hands and knees to the foot of the stairway. By means of the newel-post I drew myself upright and listened. Near me something moved and strangled. I fell upon it and found in my arms all the softness of Margaret.

How describe that battle up the stairway? It was a crucifixion of struggle, an age-long nightmare of agony. Time after time, as my consciousness blurred, the temptation was upon me to cease all effort and let myself blur down into the ultimate dark. I fought my way step by step. Margaret was now quite unconscious, and I lifted her body step by step, or dragged it several steps at a time, and fell with it, and back with it, and lost much that had been so hardly gained. And yet out of it all this I remember: that warm soft body of hers was the dearest thing in the world--vastly more dear than the pleasant land I remotely remembered, than all the books and all the humans I had ever known, than the deck

above, with its sweet pure air softly blowing under the cool starry sky.

As I look back upon it I am aware of one thing: the thought of leaving her there and saving myself never crossed my mind. The one place for me was where she was.

Truly, this which I write seems absurd and purple; yet it was not absurd during those long minutes on the chart-room stairway. One must taste death for a few centuries of such agony ere he can receive sanction for purple passages.

And as I fought my screaming flesh, my reeling brain, and climbed that upward way, I prayed one prayer: that the chart-house doors out upon the poop might not be shut. Life and death lay right there in that one point of the issue. Was there any creature of my creatures aft with common sense and anticipation sufficient to make him think to open those doors? How I yearned for one man, for one proved henchman, such as Mr. Pike, to be on the poop! As it was, with the sole exception of Tom Spink and Buckwheat, my men were Asiatics.

I gained the top of the stairway, but was too far gone to rise to my feet. Nor could I rise upright on my knees. I crawled like any four-legged animal--nay, I wormed my way like a snake, prone to the deck. It was a matter of several feet to the doorway. I died a score of times in those several feet; but ever I endured the agony of resurrection and dragged Margaret with me. Sometimes the full strength I could exert did

not move her, and I lay with her and coughed and strangled my way through to another resurrection.

And the door was open. The doors to starboard and to port were both open; and as the *Elsinore* rolled a draught through the chart-house hall my lungs filled with pure, cool air. As I drew myself across the high threshold and pulled Margaret after me, from very far away I heard the cries of men and the reports of rifle and revolver. And, ere I fainted into the blackness, on my side, staring, my pain gone so beyond endurance that it had achieved its own anaesthesia, I glimpsed, dream-like and distant, the sharply silhouetted poop-rail, dark forms that cut and thrust and smote, and, beyond, the mizzen-mast brightly lighted by our illuminators.

\* \* \* \* \*

Well, the mutineers failed to take the poop. My five Asiatics and two white men had held the citadel while Margaret and I lay unconscious side by side.

The whole affair was very simple. Modern maritime quarantine demands that ships shall not carry vermin that are themselves plague-carriers. In the donkey-engine section of the for'ard house is a complete fumigating apparatus. The mutineers had merely to lay and fasten the pipes aft across the coal, to chisel a hole through the double-deck of steel and wood under the cabin, and to connect up and begin to pump. Buckwheat had

fallen asleep and been awakened by the strangling sulphur fumes. We in the high place had been smoked out by our rascals like so many rats.

It was Wada who had opened one of the doors. The old steward had opened the other. Together they had attempted the descent of the stairway and been driven back by the fumes. Then they had engaged in the struggle to repel the rush from for'ard.

Margaret and I are agreed that sulphur, excessively inhaled, leaves the lungs sore. Only now, after a lapse of a dozen hours, can we draw breath in anything that resembles comfort. But still my lungs were not so sore as to prevent my telling her what I had learned she meant to me. And yet she is only a woman--I tell her so; I tell her that there are at least seven hundred and fifty millions of two-legged, long-haired, gentle-voiced, soft-bodied, female humans like her on the planet, and that she is really swamped by the immensity of numbers of her sex and kind. But I tell her something more. I tell her that of all of them she is the only one. And, better yet, to myself and for myself, I believe it. I know it. The last least part of me and all of me proclaims it.

Love is wonderful. It is the everlasting and miraculous amazement. Oh, trust me, I know the old, hard scientific method of weighing and calculating and classifying love. It is a profound foolishness, a cosmic trick and quip, to the contemplative eye of the philosopher--yes, and of the futurist. But when one forsakes such intellectual flesh-pots and becomes mere human and male human, in short, a lover, then all he may do,

and which is what he cannot help doing, is to yield to the compulsions of being and throw both his arms around love and hold it closer to him than is his own heart close to him. This is the summit of his life, and of man's life. Higher than this no man may rise. The philosophers toil and struggle on mole-hill peaks far below. He who has not loved has not tasted the ultimate sweet of living. I know. I love Margaret, a woman. She is desirable.