

CHAPTER V

Seats Secured And Portmanteaus Packed

But thoughts of sextants and quadrants were the least of our cares.

Right from under the very arches of the eyebrows of thirty men-- captain, mates, and crew--a boat was to be abstracted; they knowing nothing of the event, until all knowledge would prove unavailing.

Hark ye:

At sea, the boats of a South Sea-man (generally four in number, spare ones omitted,) are suspended by tackles, hooked above, to curved timbers called "davits," vertically fixed to the ship's sides.

Now, no fair one with golden locks is more assiduously waited upon, or more delicately handled by her tire-women, than the slender whale-boat by her crew. And out of its element, it seems fragile enough to justify the utmost solicitude. For truly, like a fine lady, the fine whale-boat is most delicate when idle, though little coy at a pinch.

Besides the "davits," the following supports are provided Two small cranes are swung under the keel, on which the latter rests, preventing the settling of the boat's middle, while hanging suspended by the bow and stern. A broad, braided, hempen band, usually worked

in a tasteful pattern, is also passed round both gunwales; and secured to the ship's bulwarks, firmly lashes the craft to its place. Being elevated above the ship's rail, the boats are in plain sight from all parts of the deck.

Now, one of these boats was to be made way with. No facile matter, truly. Harder than for any dashing young Janizary to run off with a sultana from the Grand Turk's seraglio. Still, the thing could be done, for, by Jove, it had been.

What say you to slyly loosing every thing by day; and when night comes, cast off the band and swing in the cranes? But how lower the tackles, even in the darkest night, without a creaking more fearful than the death rattle? Easily avoided. Anoint the ropes, and they will travel deftly through the subtle windings of the blocks.

But though I had heard of this plan being pursued, there was a degree of risk in it, after all, which I was far from fancying. Another plan was hit upon; still bolder; and hence more safe. What it was, in the right place will be seen.

In selecting my craft for this good voyage, I would fain have traversed the deck, and eyed the boats like a cornet choosing his steed from out a goodly stud. But this was denied me. And the "bow boat" was, perforce, singled out, as the most remote from the quarter-deck, that region of sharp eyes and relentless purposes.

Then, our larder was to be thought of; also, an abundant supply of water; concerning which last I determined to take good heed. There were but two to be taken care of; but I resolved to lay in sufficient store of both meat and drink for four; at the same time that the supplemental twain thus provided for were but imaginary. And if it came to the last dead pinch, of which we had no fear, however, I was food for no man but Jarl.

Little time was lost in catering for our mess. Biscuit and salt beef were our sole resource; and, thanks to the generosity of the Areturion's owners, our ship's company had a plentiful supply. Casks of both, with heads knocked out, were at the service of all. In bags which we made for the purpose, a sufficiency of the biscuit was readily stored away, and secreted in a corner of easy access. The salt beef was more difficult to obtain; but, little by little, we managed to smuggle out of the cask enough to answer our purpose.

As for water, most luckily a day or two previous several "breakers" of it had been hoisted from below for the present use of the ship's company.

These "breakers" are casks, long and slender, but very strong. Of various diameters, they are made on purpose to stow into spaces intervening between the immense butts in a ship's hold.

The largest we could find was selected, first carefully examining it to detect any leak. On some pretense or other, we then rolled them all over to that side of the vessel where our boat was suspended, the selected breaker being placed in their middle.

Our compendious wardrobes were snugly packed into bundles and laid aside for the present. And at last, by due caution, we had every thing arranged preliminary to the final start. Let me say, though, perhaps to the credit of Jarl, that whenever the most strategy was necessary, he seemed ill at ease, and for the most part left the matter to me. It was well that he did; for as it was, by his untimely straight-forwardness, he once or twice came near spoiling every thing. Indeed, on one occasion he was so unseasonably blunt, that curiously enough, I had almost suspected him of taking that odd sort of interest in one's welfare, which leads a philanthropist, all other methods failing, to frustrate a project deemed bad; by pretending clumsily to favor it. But no inuendoes; Jarl was a Viking, frank as his fathers; though not so much of a bucanier.