

CHAPTER VIII

They Push Off, Velis Et Remis

And now to tell how, tempted by devil or good angel, and a thousand miles from land, we embarked upon this western voyage.

It was midnight, mark you, when our watch began; and my turn at the helm now coming on was of course to be avoided. On some plausible pretense, I induced our solitary watchmate to assume it; thus leaving myself untrammelled, and at the same time satisfactorily disposing of him. For being a rather fat fellow, an enormous consumer of "duff," and with good reason supposed to be the son of a farmer, I made no doubt, he would pursue his old course and fall to nodding over the wheel. As for the leader of the watch--our harpooner--he fell heir to the nest of old jackets, under the lee of the mizzen-mast, left nice and warm by his predecessor.

The night was even blacker than we had anticipated; there was no trace of a moon; and the dark purple haze, sometimes encountered at night near the Line, half shrouded the stars from view.

Waiting about twenty minutes after the last man of the previous watch had gone below, I motioned to Jarl, and we slipped our shoes from our feet. He then descended into the forecastle, and I sauntered aft toward the quarter-deck. All was still. Thrice did I pass my hand

full before the face of the slumbering lubber at the helm, and right between him and the light of the binnacle.

Mark, the harpooneer, was not so easily sounded. I feared to approach him. He lay quietly, though; but asleep or awake, no more delay. Risks must be run, when time presses. And our ears were a pointer's to catch a sound.

To work we went, without hurry, but swiftly and silently. Our various stores were dragged from their lurking-places, and placed in the boat, which hung from the ship's lee side, the side depressed in the water, an indispensable requisite to an attempt at escape. And though at sundown the boat was to windward, yet, as we had foreseen, the vessel having been tacked during the first watch, brought it to leeward.

Endeavoring to manhandle our clumsy breaker, and lift it into the boat, we found, that by reason of the intervention of the shrouds, it could not be done without, risking a jar; besides straining the craft in lowering. An expedient, however, though at the eleventh hour, was hit upon. Fastening a long rope to the breaker, which was perfectly tight, we cautiously dropped it overboard; paying out enough line, to insure its towing astern of the ship, so as not to strike against the copper. The other end of the line we then secured to the boat's stern.

Fortunately, this was the last thing to be done; for the breaker, acting as a clog to the vessel's way in the water, so affected her

steering as to fling her perceptibly into the wind. And by causing the helm to work, this must soon rouse the lubber there stationed, if not already awake. But our dropping overboard the breaker greatly aided us in this respect: it diminished the ship's headway; which owing to the light breeze had not been very great at any time during the night. Had it been so, all hope of escaping without first arresting the vessel's progress, would have been little short of madness. As it was, the sole daring of the deed that night achieved, consisted in our lowering away while the ship yet clove the brine, though but moderately.

All was now ready: the cranes swung in, the lashings adrift, and the boat fairly suspended; when, seizing the ends of the tackle ropes, we silently stepped into it, one at each end. The dead weight of the breaker astern now dragged the craft horizontally through the air, so that her tackle ropes strained hard. She quivered like a dolphin. Nevertheless, had we not feared her loud splash upon striking the wave, we might have quitted the ship almost as silently as the breath the body. But this was out of the question, and our plans were laid accordingly.

"All ready, Jarl?"

"Ready."

"A man overboard!" I shouted at the top of my compass; and like

lightning the cords slid through our blistering hands, and with a tremendous shock the boat bounded on the sea's back. One mad sheer and plunge, one terrible strain on the tackles as we sunk in the trough of the waves, tugged upon by the towing breaker, and our knives severed the tackle ropes--we hazarded not unhooking the blocks--our oars were out, and the good boat headed round, with prow to leeward.

"Man overboard!" was now shouted from stem to stern. And directly we heard the confused tramping and shouting of the sailors, as they rushed from their dreams into the almost inscrutable darkness.

"Man overboard! Man overboard!" My heart smote me as the human cry of horror came out of the black vaulted night.

"Down helm!" was soon heard from the chief mate. "Back the main-yard! Quick to the boats! How's this? One down already? Well done! Hold on, then, those other boats!"

Meanwhile several seamen were shouting as they strained at the braces.

"Cut! cut all! Lower away! lower away!" impatiently cried the sailors, who already had leaped into the boats.

"Heave the ship to, and hold fast every thing," cried the captain, apparently just springing to the deck. "One boat's enough. Steward;

show a light there from the mizzen-top. Boat ahoy!--Have you got that man?"

No reply. The voice came out of a cloud; the ship dimly showing like a ghost. We had desisted from rowing, and hand over hand were now hauling in upon the rope attached to the breaker, which we soon lifted into the boat, instantly resuming our oars.

"Pull! pull, men! and save him!" again shouted the captain.

"Ay, ay, sir," answered Jarl instinctively, "pulling as hard as ever we can, sir."

And pull we did, till nothing could be heard from the ship but a confused tumult; and, ever and anon, the hoarse shout of the captain, too distant to be understood.

We now set our sail to a light air; and right into the darkness, and dead to leeward, we rowed and sailed till morning dawned.