

CHAPTER XXXVI

The Parki Gives Up The Ghost

A long calm in the boat, and now, God help us, another in the brigantine. It was airless and profound.

In that hot calm, we lay fixed and frozen in like Parry at the Pole. The sun played upon the glassy sea like the sun upon the glaciers.

At the end of two days we lifted up our eyes and beheld a low, creeping, hungry cloud expanding like an army, wing and wing, along the eastern horizon. Instantly Jarl bode me take heed.

Here be it said, that though for weeks and weeks reign over the equatorial latitudes of the Pacific, the mildest and sunniest of days; that nevertheless, when storms do come, they come in their strength: spending in a few, brief blasts their concentrated rage. They come like the Mamelukes: they charge, and away.

It wanted full an hour to sunset; but the sun was well nigh obscured. It seemed toiling among bleak Scythian steeps in the hazy background. Above the storm-cloud flitted ominous patches of scud, rapidly advancing and receding: Attila's skirmishers, thrown forward in the van of his Huns. Beneath, a fitful shadow slid along the surface. As we gazed, the cloud came nearer; accelerating its approach.

With all haste we proceeded to furl the sails, which, owing to the calm, had been hanging loose in the brails. And by help of a spare boom, used on the forecastle-deck sit a sweep or great oar, we endeavored to cast the brigantine's head toward the foe.

The storm seemed about to overtake us; but we felt no breeze. The noiseless cloud stole on; its advancing shadow lowering over a distinct and prominent milk-white crest upon the surface of the ocean. But now this line of surging foam came rolling down upon us like a white charge of cavalry: mad Hotspur and plumed Murat at its head; pouring right forward in a continuous frothy cascade, which curled over, and fell upon the glassy sea before it.

Still, no breath of air. But of a sudden, like a blow from a man's hand, and before our canvas could be secured, the stunned craft, giving one lurch to port, was stricken down on her beam-ends; the roaring tide dashed high up against her windward side, and drops of brine fell upon the deck, heavy as drops of gore.

It was all a din and a mist; a crashing of spars and of ropes; a horrible blending of sights and of sounds; as for an instant we seemed in the hot heart of the gale; our cordage, like harp-strings, shrieking above the fury of the blast. The masts rose, and swayed, and dipped their trucks in the sea. And like unto some stricken buffalo brought low to the plain, the brigantine's black hull, shaggy

with sea-weed, lay panting on its flank in the foam.

Frantically we clung to the uppermost bulwarks. And now, loud above the roar of the sea, was suddenly heard a sharp, splintering sound, as of a Norway woodman felling a pine in the forest. It was brave Jarl, who foremost of all had snatched from its rack against the mainmast, the ax, always there kept.

"Cut the lanyards to windward!" he cried; and again buried his ax into the mast. He was quickly obeyed. And upon cutting the third lanyard of the five, he shouted for us to pause. Dropping his ax, he climbed up to windward. As he clutched the rail, the wounded mast snapped in twain with a report like a cannon. A slight smoke was perceptible where it broke. The remaining lanyards parted. From the violent strain upon them, the two shrouds flew madly into the air, and one of the great blocks at their ends, striking Annatoo upon the forehead, she let go her hold upon a stanchion, and sliding across the aslant deck, was swallowed up in the whirlpool under our lee. Samoa shrieked. But there was no time to mourn; no hand could reach to save.

By the connecting stays, the mainmast carried over with it the foremast; when we instantly righted, and for the time were saved; my own royal Viking our saviour.

The first fury of the gale was gone. But far to leeward was seen the

even, white line of its onset, pawing the ocean into foam. All round us, the sea boiled like ten thousand caldrons; and through eddy, wave, and surge, our almost water-logged craft waded heavily; every dead clash ringing hollow against her hull, like blows upon a coffin.

We floated a wreck. With every pitch we lifted our dangling jib-boom into the air; and beating against the side, were the shattered fragments of the masts. From these we made all haste to be free, by cutting the rigging that held them.

Soon, the worst of the gale was blown over. But the sea ran high. Yet the rack and scud of the tempest, its mad, tearing foam, was subdued into immense, long-extended, and long-rolling billows; the white cream on their crests like snow on the Andes. Ever and anon we hung poised on their brows; when the furrowed ocean all round looked like a panorama from Chimborazo.

A few hours more, and the surges went down. There was a moderate sea, a steady breeze, and a clear, starry sky. Such was the storm that came after our calm.