

## CHAPTER XII. THE "NORAH CREINA."

I love to recall the glad monotony of a Pacific voyage, when the trades are not stinted, and the ship, day after day, goes free. The mountain scenery of trade-wind clouds, watched (and in my case painted) under every vicissitude of light--blotting stars, withering in the moon's glory, barring the scarlet eve, lying across the dawn collapsed into the unfeatured morning bank, or at noon raising their snowy summits between the blue roof of heaven and the blue floor of sea; the small, busy, and deliberate world of the schooner, with its unfamiliar scenes, the spearing of dolphin from the bowsprit end, the holy war on sharks, the cook making bread on the main hatch; reefing down before a violent squall, with the men hanging out on the foot-ropes; the squall itself, the catch at the heart, the opened sluices of the sky; and the relief, the renewed loveliness of life, when all is over, the sun forth again, and our out-fought enemy only a blot upon the leeward sea. I love to recall, and would that I could reproduce that life, the unforgettable, the unrememberable. The memory, which shows so wise a backwardness in registering pain, is besides an imperfect recorder of extended pleasures; and a long-continued well-being escapes (as it were, by its mass) our petty methods of commemoration. On a part of our life's map there lies a roseate, undecipherable haze, and that is all.

Of one thing, if I am at all to trust my own annals, I was delightedly conscious. Day after day, in the sun-gilded cabin, the whiskey-dealer's

thermometer stood at 84. Day after day, the air had the same indescribable liveliness and sweetness, soft and nimble, and cool as the cheek of health. Day after day the sun flamed; night after night the moon beamed, or the stars paraded their lustrous regiment. I was aware of a spiritual change, or, perhaps, rather a molecular reconstitution. My bones were sweeter to me. I had come home to my own climate, and looked back with pity on those damp and wintry zones, miscalled the temperate.

"Two years of this, and comfortable quarters to live in, kind of shake the grit out of a man," the captain remarked; "can't make out to be happy anywhere else. A townie of mine was lost down this way, in a coalship that took fire at sea. He struck the beach somewhere in the Navigators; and he wrote to me that when he left the place, it would be feet first. He's well off, too, and his father owns some coasting craft Down East; but Billy prefers the beach, and hot rolls off the bread-fruit trees."

A voice told me I was on the same track as Billy. But when was this? Our outward track in the *Norah Creina* lay well to the northward; and perhaps it is but the impression of a few pet days which I have unconsciously spread longer, or perhaps the feeling grew upon me later, in the run to Honolulu. One thing I am sure: it was before I had ever seen an island worthy of the name that I must date my loyalty to the South Seas. The blank sea itself grew desirable under such skies; and wherever the trade-wind blows, I know no better country than a schooner's deck.

But for the tugging anxiety as to the journey's end, the journey itself must thus have counted for the best of holidays. My physical well-being was over-proof; effects of sea and sky kept me for ever busy with my pencil; and I had no lack of intellectual exercise of a different order in the study of my inconsistent friend, the captain. I call him friend, here on the threshold; but that is to look well ahead. At first, I was too much horrified by what I considered his barbarities, too much puzzled by his shifting humours, and too frequently annoyed by his small vanities, to regard him otherwise than as the cross of my existence. It was only by degrees, in his rare hours of pleasantness, when he forgot (and made me forget) the weaknesses to which he was so prone, that he won me to a kind of unconsenting fondness. Lastly, the faults were all embraced in a more generous view: I saw them in their place, like discords in a musical progression; and accepted them and found them picturesque, as we accept and admire, in the habitable face of nature, the smoky head of the volcano or the pernicious thicket of the swamp.

He was come of good people Down East, and had the beginnings of a thorough education. His temper had been ungovernable from the first; and it is likely the defect was inherited, and the blame of the rupture not entirely his. He ran away at least to sea; suffered horrible maltreatment, which seemed to have rather hardened than enlightened him; ran away again to shore in a South American port; proved his capacity and made money, although still a child; fell among thieves and was robbed; worked back a passage to the States, and knocked one morning

at the door of an old lady whose orchard he had often robbed. The introduction appears insufficient; but Nares knew what he was doing. The sight of her old neighbourly depredator shivering at the door in tatters, the very oddity of his appeal, touched a soft spot in the spinster's heart. "I always had a fancy for the old lady," Nares said, "even when she used to stampede me out of the orchard, and shake her thimble and her old curls at me out of the window as I was going by; I always thought she was a kind of pleasant old girl. Well, when she came to the door that morning, I told her so, and that I was stone-broke; and she took me right in, and fetched out the pie." She clothed him, taught him, and had him to sea again in better shape, welcomed him to her hearth on his return from every cruise, and when she died bequeathed him her possessions. "She was a good old girl," he would say. "I tell you, Mr. Dodd, it was a queer thing to see me and the old lady talking a pasear in the garden, and the old man scowling at us over the pickets. She lived right next door to the old man, and I guess that's just what took me there. I wanted him to know that I was badly beat, you see, and would rather go to the devil than to him. What made the dig harder, he had quarrelled with the old lady about me and the orchard: I guess that made him rage. Yes, I was a beast when I was young. But I was always pretty good to the old lady." Since then he had prospered, not uneventfully, in his profession; the old lady's money had fallen in during the voyage of the Gleaner, and he was now, as soon as the smoke of that engagement cleared away, secure of his ship. I suppose he was about thirty: a powerful, active man, with a blue eye, a thick head of hair, about the colour of oakum and growing low over the brow;

clean-shaved and lean about the jaw; a good singer; a good performer on that sea-instrument, the accordion; a quick observer, a close reasoner; when he pleased, of a really elegant address; and when he chose, the greatest brute upon the seas.

His usage of the men, his hazing, his bullying, his perpetual fault-finding for no cause, his perpetual and brutal sarcasm, might have raised a mutiny in a slave galley. Suppose the steersman's eye to have wandered: "You ----, ----, little, mutton-faced Dutchman," Nares would bawl; "you want a booting to keep you on your course! I know a little city-front slush when I see one. Just you glue your eye to that compass, or I'll show you round the vessel at the butt-end of my boot." Or suppose a hand to linger aft, whither he had perhaps been summoned not a minute before. "Mr. Daniells, will you oblige me by stepping clear of that main-sheet?" the captain might begin, with truculent courtesy. "Thank you. And perhaps you'll be so kind as to tell me what the hell you're doing on my quarter-deck? I want no dirt of your sort here. Is there nothing for you to do? Where's the mate? Don't you set ME to find work for you, or I'll find you some that will keep you on your back a fortnight." Such allocutions, conceived with a perfect knowledge of his audience, so that every insult carried home, were delivered with a mien so menacing, and an eye so fiercely cruel, that his unhappy subordinates shrank and quailed. Too often violence followed; too often I have heard and seen and boiled at the cowardly aggression; and the victim, his hands bound by law, has risen again from deck and crawled forward stupefied--I know not what passion of revenge in his wronged heart.

It seems strange I should have grown to like this tyrant. It may even seem strange that I should have stood by and suffered his excesses to proceed. But I was not quite such a chicken as to interfere in public; for I would rather have a man or two mishandled than one half of us butchered in a mutiny and the rest suffer on the gallows. And in private, I was unceasing in my protests.

"Captain," I once said to him, appealing to his patriotism, which was of a hardy quality, "this is no way to treat American seamen. You don't call it American to treat men like dogs?"

"Americans?" he said grimly. "Do you call these Dutchmen and Scattermouches [1] Americans? I've been fourteen years to sea, all but one trip under American colours, and I've never laid eye on an American foremast hand. There used to be such things in the old days, when thirty-five dollars were the wages out of Boston; and then you could see ships handled and run the way they want to be. But that's all past and gone; and nowadays the only thing that flies in an American ship is a belaying-pin. You don't know; you haven't a guess. How would you like to go on deck for your middle watch, fourteen months on end, with all your duty to do and every one's life depending on you, and expect to get a knife ripped into you as you come out of your stateroom, or be sand-bagged as you pass the boat, or get tripped into the hold, if the hatches are off in fine weather? That kind of shakes the starch out of the brotherly love and New Jerusalem business. You go through the mill,

and you'll have a bigger grudge against every old shellback that dirties his plate in the three oceans, than the Bank of California could settle up. No; it has an ugly look to it, but the only way to run a ship is to make yourself a terror."

[1] In sea-lingo (Pacific) DUTCHMAN includes all Teutons and folk from the basin of the Baltic; SCATTERMOUCH, all Latins and Levantines.

"Come, Captain," said I, "there are degrees in everything. You know American ships have a bad name; you know perfectly well if it wasn't for the high wage and the good food, there's not a man would ship in one if he could help; and even as it is, some prefer a British ship, beastly food and all."

"O, the lime-juicers?" said he. "There's plenty booting in lime-juicers, I guess; though I don't deny but what some of them are soft." And with that he smiled like a man recalling something. "Look here, that brings a yarn in my head," he resumed; "and for the sake of the joke, I'll give myself away. It was in 1874, I shipped mate in the British ship Maria, from 'Frisco for Melbourne. She was the queerest craft in some ways that ever I was aboard of. The food was a caution; there was nothing fit to put your lips to--but the lime-juice, which was from the end bin no doubt: it used to make me sick to see the men's dinners, and sorry to see my own. The old man was good enough, I guess; Green was his name; a mild, fatherly old galoot. But the hands were the lowest gang I ever handled; and whenever I tried to knock a little spirit into them, the

old man took their part! It was Gilbert and Sullivan on the high seas; but you bet I wouldn't let any man dictate to me. 'You give me your orders, Captain Green,' I said, 'and you'll find I'll carry them out; that's all you've got to say. You'll find I do my duty,' I said; 'how I do it is my lookout; and there's no man born that's going to give me lessons.' Well, there was plenty dirt on board that Maria first and last. Of course, the old man put my back up, and, of course, he put up the crew's; and I had to regular fight my way through every watch. The men got to hate me, so's I would hear them grit their teeth when I came up. At last, one day, I saw a big hulking beast of a Dutchman booting the ship's boy. I made one shoot of it off the house and laid that Dutchman out. Up he came, and I laid him out again. 'Now,' I said, 'if there's a kick left in you, just mention it, and I'll stamp your ribs in like a packing-case.' He thought better of it, and never let on; lay there as mild as a deacon at a funeral; and they took him below to reflect on his native Dutchland. One night we got caught in rather a dirty thing about 25 south. I guess we were all asleep; for the first thing I knew there was the fore-royal gone. I ran forward, bawling blue hell; and just as I came by the foremast, something struck me right through the forearm and stuck there. I put my other hand up, and by George! it was the grain; the beasts had speared me like a porpoise. 'Cap'n!' I cried.--'What's wrong?' says he.--'They've grained me,' says I.--'Grained you?' says he. 'Well, I've been looking for that.'----'And by God,' I cried, 'I want to have some of these beasts murdered for it!--'Now, Mr. Nares,' says he, 'you better go below. If I had been one of the men, you'd have got more than this. And I want no more of your



language on deck. You've cost me my fore-royal already,' says he; 'and if you carry on, you'll have the three sticks out of her.' That was old man Green's idea of supporting officers. But you wait a bit; the cream's coming. We made Melbourne right enough, and the old man said: 'Mr. Nares, you and me don't draw together. You're a first-rate seaman, no mistake of that; but you're the most disagreeable man I ever sailed with; and your language and your conduct to the crew I cannot stomach. I guess we'll separate.' I didn't care about the berth, you may be sure; but I felt kind of mean; and if he made one kind of stink, I thought I could make another. So I said I would go ashore and see how things stood; went, found I was all right, and came aboard again on the top rail.--'Are you getting your traps together, Mr. Nares?' says the old man.--'No,' says I, 'I don't know as we'll separate much before 'Frisco; at least,' I said, 'it's a point for your consideration. I'm very willing to say good-by to the Maria, but I don't know whether you'll care to start me out with three months' wages.' He got his money-box right away. 'My son,' says he, 'I think it cheap at the money.' He had me there."

It was a singular tale for a man to tell of himself; above all, in the midst of our discussion; but it was quite in character for Nares. I never made a good hit in our disputes, I never justly resented any act or speech of his, but what I found it long after carefully posted in his day-book and reckoned (here was the man's oddity) to my credit. It was the same with his father, whom he had hated; he would give a sketch of

the old fellow, frank and credible, and yet so honestly touched that it was charming. I have never met a man so strangely constituted: to possess a reason of the most equal justice, to have his nerves at the same time quivering with petty spite, and to act upon the nerves and not the reason.

A kindred wonder in my eyes was the nature of his courage. There was never a braver man: he went out to welcome danger; an emergency (came it never so sudden) strung him like a tonic. And yet, upon the other hand, I have known none so nervous, so oppressed with possibilities, looking upon the world at large, and the life of a sailor in particular, with so constant and haggard a consideration of the ugly chances. All his courage was in blood, not merely cold, but icy with reasoned apprehension. He would lay our little craft rail under, and "hang on" in a squall, until I gave myself up for lost, and the men were rushing to their stations of their own accord. "There," he would say, "I guess there's not a man on board would have hung on as long as I did that time; they'll have to give up thinking me no schooner sailor. I guess I can shave just as near capsizing as any other captain of this vessel, drunk or sober." And then he would fall to repining and wishing himself well out of the enterprise, and dilate on the peril of the seas, the particular dangers of the schooner rig, which he abhorred, the various ways in which we might go to the bottom, and the prodigious fleet of ships that have sailed out in the course of history, dwindled from the eyes of watchers, and returned no more. "Well," he would wind up, "I guess it don't much matter. I can't see what any one wants to live for,

anyway. If I could get into some one else's apple-tree, and be about twelve years old, and just stick the way I was, eating stolen apples, I won't say. But there's no sense in this grown-up business--sailorising, politics, the piety mill, and all the rest of it. Good clean drowning is good enough for me." It is hard to imagine any more depressing talk for a poor landsman on a dirty night; it is hard to imagine anything less sailor-like (as sailors are supposed to be, and generally are) than this persistent harping on the minor.

But I was to see more of the man's gloomy constancy ere the cruise was at an end.

On the morning of the seventeenth day I came on deck, to find the schooner under double reefs, and flying rather wild before a heavy run of sea. Snoring trades and humming sails had been our portion hitherto. We were already nearing the island. My restrained excitement had begun again to overmaster me; and for some time my only book had been the patent log that trailed over the taffrail, and my chief interest the daily observation and our caterpillar progress across the chart. My first glance, which was at the compass, and my second, which was at the log, were all that I could wish. We lay our course; we had been doing over eight since nine the night before; and I drew a heavy breath of satisfaction. And then I know not what odd and wintry appearance of the sea and sky knocked suddenly at my heart. I observed the schooner to look more than usually small, the men silent and studious of the

weather. Nares, in one of his rusty humours, afforded me no shadow of a morning salutation. He, too, seemed to observe the behaviour of the ship with an intent and anxious scrutiny. What I liked still less, Johnson himself was at the wheel, which he span busily, often with a visible effort; and as the seas ranged up behind us, black and imminent, he kept casting behind him eyes of animal swiftness, and drawing in his neck between his shoulders, like a man dodging a blow. From these signs, I gathered that all was not exactly for the best; and I would have given a good handful of dollars for a plain answer to the questions which I dared not put. Had I dared, with the present danger signal in the captain's face, I should only have been reminded of my position as supercargo--an office never touched upon in kindness--and advised, in a very indigestible manner, to go below. There was nothing for it, therefore, but to entertain my vague apprehensions as best I should be able, until it pleased the captain to enlighten me of his own accord. This he did sooner than I had expected; as soon, indeed, as the Chinaman had summoned us to breakfast, and we sat face to face across the narrow board.

"See here, Mr. Dodd," he began, looking at me rather queerly, "here is a business point arisen. This sea's been running up for the last two days, and now it's too high for comfort. The glass is falling, the wind is breezing up, and I won't say but what there's dirt in it. If I lay her to, we may have to ride out a gale of wind and drift God knows where--on these French Frigate Shoals, for instance. If I keep her as she goes, we'll make that island to-morrow afternoon, and have the lee of it to

lie under, if we can't make out to run in. The point you have to figure on, is whether you'll take the big chances of that Captain Trent making the place before you, or take the risk of something happening. I'm to run this ship to your satisfaction," he added, with an ugly sneer. "Well, here's a point for the supercargo."

"Captain," I returned, with my heart in my mouth, "risk is better than certain failure."

"Life is all risk, Mr. Dodd," he remarked. "But there's one thing: it's now or never; in half an hour, Archdeacon Gabriel couldn't lay her to, if he came down stairs on purpose."

"All right," said I. "Let's run."

"Run goes," said he; and with that he fell to breakfast, and passed half an hour in stowing away pie and devoutly wishing himself back in San Francisco.

When we came on deck again, he took the wheel from Johnson--it appears they could trust none among the hands--and I stood close beside him, feeling safe in this proximity, and tasting a fearful joy from our surroundings and the consciousness of my decision. The breeze had already risen, and as it tore over our heads, it uttered at times a long hooting note that sent my heart into my boots. The sea pursued us without remission, leaping to the assault of the low rail. The

quarter-deck was all awash, and we must close the companion doors.

"And all this, if you please, for Mr. Pinkerton's dollars!" the captain suddenly exclaimed. "There's many a fine fellow gone under, Mr. Dodd, because of drivers like your friend. What do they care for a ship or two? Insured, I guess. What do they care for sailors' lives alongside of a few thousand dollars? What they want is speed between ports, and a damned fool of a captain that'll drive a ship under as I'm doing this one. You can put in the morning, asking why I do it."

I sheered off to another part of the vessel as fast as civility permitted. This was not at all the talk that I desired, nor was the train of reflection which it started anyway welcome. Here I was, running some hazard of my life, and perilling the lives of seven others; exactly for what end, I was now at liberty to ask myself. For a very large amount of a very deadly poison, was the obvious answer; and I thought if all tales were true, and I were soon to be subjected to cross-examination at the bar of Eternal Justice, it was one which would not increase my popularity with the court. "Well, never mind, Jim," thought I. "I'm doing it for you."

Before eleven, a third reef was taken in the mainsail; and Johnson filled the cabin with a storm-sail of No. 1 duck and sat cross-legged on the streaming floor, vigorously putting it to rights with a couple of the hands. By dinner I had fled the deck, and sat in the bench corner, giddy, dumb, and stupefied with terror. The frightened leaps of the

poor Norah Creina, spanking like a stag for bare existence, bruised me between the table and the berths. Overhead, the wild huntsman of the storm passed continuously in one blare of mingled noises; screaming wind, straining timber, lashing rope's end, pounding block and bursting sea contributed; and I could have thought there was at times another, a more piercing, a more human note, that dominated all, like the wailing of an angel; I could have thought I knew the angel's name, and that his wings were black. It seemed incredible that any creature of man's art could long endure the barbarous mishandling of the seas, kicked as the schooner was from mountain side to mountain side, beaten and blown upon and wrenched in every joint and sinew, like a child upon the rack. There was not a plank of her that did not cry aloud for mercy; and as she continued to hold together, I became conscious of a growing sympathy with her endeavours, a growing admiration for her gallant staunchness, that amused and at times obliterated my terrors for myself. God bless every man that swung a mallet on that tiny and strong hull! It was not for wages only that he laboured, but to save men's lives.

All the rest of the day, and all the following night, I sat in the corner or lay wakeful in my bunk; and it was only with the return of morning that a new phase of my alarms drove me once more on deck. A gloomier interval I never passed. Johnson and Nares steadily relieved each other at the wheel and came below. The first glance of each was at the glass, which he repeatedly knuckled and frowned upon; for it was sagging lower all the time. Then, if Johnson were the visitor, he would pick a snack out of the cupboard, and stand, braced against the table,

eating it, and perhaps obliging me with a word or two of his hee-haw conversation: how it was "a son of a gun of a cold night on deck, Mr. Dodd" (with a grin); how "it wasn't no night for panjammers, he could tell me": having transacted all which, he would throw himself down in his bunk and sleep his two hours with compunction. But the captain neither ate nor slept. "You there, Mr. Dodd?" he would say, after the obligatory visit to the glass. "Well, my son, we're one hundred and four miles" (or whatever it was) "off the island, and scudding for all we're worth. We'll make it to-morrow about four, or not, as the case may be. That's the news. And now, Mr. Dodd, I've stretched a point for you; you can see I'm dead tired; so just you stretch away back to your bunk again." And with this attempt at geniality, his teeth would settle hard down on his cigar, and he would pass his spell below staring and blinking at the cabin lamp through a cloud of tobacco smoke. He has told me since that he was happy, which I should never have divined. "You see," he said, "the wind we had was never anything out of the way; but the sea was really nasty, the schooner wanted a lot of humouring, and it was clear from the glass that we were close to some dirt. We might be running out of it, or we might be running right crack into it. Well, there's always something sublime about a big deal like that; and it kind of raises a man in his own liking. We're a queer kind of beasts, Mr. Dodd."

The morning broke with sinister brightness; the air alarmingly transparent, the sky pure, the rim of the horizon clear and strong against the heavens. The wind and the wild seas, now vastly swollen,



indefatigably hunted us. I stood on deck, choking with fear; I seemed to lose all power upon my limbs; my knees were as paper when she plunged into the murderous valleys; my heart collapsed when some black mountain fell in avalanche beside her counter, and the water, that was more than spray, swept round my ankles like a torrent. I was conscious of but one strong desire, to bear myself decently in my terrors, and whatever should happen to my life, preserve my character: as the captain said, we are a queer kind of beasts. Breakfast time came, and I made shift to swallow some hot tea. Then I must stagger below to take the time, reading the chronometer with dizzy eyes, and marvelling the while what value there could be in observations taken in a ship launched (as ours then was) like a missile among flying seas. The forenoon dragged on in a grinding monotony of peril; every spoke of the wheel a rash, but an obliged experiment--rash as a forlorn hope, needful as the leap that lands a fireman from a burning staircase. Noon was made; the captain dined on his day's work, and I on watching him; and our place was entered on the chart with a meticulous precision which seemed to me half pitiful and half absurd, since the next eye to behold that sheet of paper might be the eye of an exploring fish. One o'clock came, then two; the captain gloomed and chafed, as he held to the coaming of the house, and if ever I saw dormant murder in man's eye, it was in his. God help the hand that should have disobeyed him.

Of a sudden, he turned towards the mate, who was doing his trick at the wheel.

"Two points on the port bow," I heard him say. And he took the wheel himself.

Johnson nodded, wiped his eyes with the back of his wet hand, watched a chance as the vessel lunged up hill, and got to the main rigging, where he swarmed aloft. Up and up, I watched him go, hanging on at every ugly plunge, gaining with every lull of the schooner's movement, until, clambering into the cross-trees and clinging with one arm around the masts, I could see him take one comprehensive sweep of the southwesterly horizon. The next moment, he had slid down the backstay and stood on deck, with a grin, a nod, and a gesture of the finger that said "yes"; the next again, and he was back sweating and squirming at the wheel, his tired face streaming and smiling, and his hair and the rags and corners of his clothes lashing round him in the wind.

Nares went below, fetched up his binocular, and fell into a silent perusal of the sea-line; I also, with my unaided eyesight. Little by little, in that white waste of water, I began to make out a quarter where the whiteness appeared more condensed: the sky above was whitish likewise, and misty like a squall; and little by little there thrilled upon my ears a note deeper and more terrible than the yelling of the gale--the long, thundering roll of breakers. Nares wiped his night glass on his sleeve and passed it to me, motioning, as he did so, with his hand. An endless wilderness of raging billows came and went and danced in the circle of the glass; now and then a pale corner of sky, or the strong line of the horizon rugged with the heads of waves; and then of

a sudden--come and gone ere I could fix it, with a swallow's  
swiftness--one glimpse of what we had come so far and paid so dear to  
see: the masts and rigging of a brig pencilled on heaven, with an ensign  
streaming at the main, and the ragged ribbons of a topsail thrashing  
from the yard. Again and again, with toilful searching, I recalled that  
apparition. There was no sign of any land; the wreck stood between sea  
and sky, a thing the most isolated I had ever viewed; but as we drew  
nearer, I perceived her to be defended by a line of breakers which drew  
off on either hand, and marked, indeed, the nearest segment of the reef.  
Heavy spray hung over them like a smoke, some hundred feet into the air;  
and the sound of their consecutive explosions rolled like a cannonade.

In half an hour we were close in; for perhaps as long again, we skirted  
that formidable barrier toward its farther side; and presently the sea  
began insensibly to moderate and the ship to go more sweetly. We had  
gained the lee of the island as (for form's sake) I may call that ring  
of foam and haze and thunder; and shaking out a reef, wore ship and  
headed for the passage.