



## JAMES ROBERTSON

*Havanna and the Florida Straits June-July, 1842*

**W**e unmoored and hauled out of Rio next morning with a handsome land breeze and fine, sunny weather: paying out on the riding cable, heaving in on the slack of the other, then tripping, catting and fishing both anchors, to the rousing accompaniment of solos and chanteys—our “Oh, Sally Packet, Hi-oh! *Cheer’ly, man!*” ringing out over the expanse of the harbor. With Howland and Reuben adlibbing new verses in tribute to the ladies of Rio, and the others yo-hoing and way-hey, ha, he, ya-ing as they hoisted and hauled on the halyards and braces, we covered *Charis* in a splendor of canvas; then trimming the yards till the sails strained at their ringbolts, we skimmed grandly out of the harbor, our backs to the bright halls and bold, sweeping hillsides we’d come to call home in the last 19 days.

An hour later we took the sea breeze and stood off to southward, Rio falling astern; at noon raised Raza Island, 10 or 12 miles outside Sugarloaf, where the lighthouse with its world-famed revolving lamp towered 300 feet above us; then, bearing east, squared away for Cape Frio—Sugarloaf, Tijuaca, flat-topped Gavea, even mighty Corcovado, slowly dwindling to gray hills behind us. Setting up rigging with one eye on the coastline, I determinedly sang out with my shipmates, while Melchett paced thoughtfully along the quarterdeck, McCabe and Haskett bellowed his orders, and *Charis* obediently leapt through the waters. As the afternoon waned the mountain-clad vistas, the clusters of palms fanned out on the headlands, the tangy land airs and sweet, fragrant odors which had tantalized us since we’d first

beheld Rio, gradually dwindled to uncertain breezes or ill-defined shapes on the larboard quarter; till at last, as we cleared the decks and knocked off for supper, the only reminders of this benign region were the porpoises which courted our bow spray, and the sight of an albatross asleep on the waves.

So far I'd been caught up in my duties, too busy to contemplate my feelings; but now, as evening came on and shipboard routine was set, and the second dog watch fell to us larbowlines—as I sat down next to Paul with my back to the windlass, and gazed out over the lavender waters—I had the leisure to realize my emotions. These I attempted to sort out as the stars opened up one by one in the heavens, and Paul sat by with the dusk on his features, and the glow of his pipe bowl waxing and waning on the curve of his hand and work-hardened fingers.

As I slowly leafed throughout the impressions within me—shutting out, with an effort, wind, canvas and water, the yarns of my own watch and the yells of the other—I fell upon, first of all, my memories of Corcovado, each oft-thumbed detail of the day before rising up to greet me like the worn lines of a well-loved and well-examined letter. Each leaf and stone heartening me with fresh meaning, I reviewed the day's events from beginning to end as I would an intimate personal message, or the features of a loved one long missed and remembered—my recollections culminating in a warm rush of celebration, yet touching off an inevitable reaction in me of wistful loss and separation.

But penetrating this mingled joy and bereftness—like lines which seep through wet or transparent paper—were all the thoughts of the future I'd consistently postponed on the trek down to Rio; and though I strove to shrug them off once again, they stubbornly thrust themselves into the foreground, and dispelled my reverie of Corcovado. First among the concerns now vying for my attention was the matter of Havana: a destination whose approach I longed for on the one hand, with the hope that I might again be able to snatch a meeting with Melchett, yet whose arrival I dreaded on the other, because it marked the final stage of our journey.

Since by now I knew Melchett's shipboard routine too well to

look for an encounter with him on deck—and since I bore Rio as an example of what could happen between us ashore—there was reason to anticipate Havana, to indulge my fancy by trying to imagine what combination of circumstances might serve to throw us together again; but even at the height of my musing I could not fail to recognize the fact that the flip side of my anticipation was my distress for the voyage's ending—an event whose imminence forced upon me with renewed fervor the question of what to do after Portland.

Though I longed to sail with Melchett again—though I could not imagine not doing so, couldn't conceive of turning away from him any more than an explorer, stumbling upon a new sea lane, could refuse the lure to trace it to its source, or than my kin, happening upon a new road, could resist the impulse to see where it led; though I couldn't believe we'd met in Boston, shipped to Rio despite the odds, and sat together on Corcovado, only now to drift apart, I appreciated only too well the difficulties that stood in my way.

I'd already discovered, on sounding the watch out, that Melchett was due to be land-bound for a while—six months at the least, while he took over his despised duties at the counting house; so there was no hope of my signing on to sail with him soon. If I were to remain in his company, I would have to take up residence in Cape Damaris; and as I'd no money above what I expected to earn now on the passage home, I would be obliged to find work at once—a matter which presented a fresh new set of difficulties. I could apply, it was true, for work in the yard; could begin by sweeping chips, as even Melchett had done; could eventually work my way up to a berth in the sail loft—I'd proven myself with canvas—or in custom work with wood, where I had skills they yet knew nothing of; but—mightn't an application for work, coming from such a vagabond as myself, strike them at best as odd or presumptuous? Didn't they all expect me to move on—if not to desert, as prophesied by Howland, then at least to leave them as mysteriously as I'd come, once we'd run the warp ashore in Portland?

The complications of finding work aside, could they be expected to welcome me in their home port, introduce me to their families, invite me to dinner, to participate in all the downeast activities

I constantly heard tell of, what with my suspicious and unruly background? It was one thing for them to accept me on deck, where things were expected to be rough and tumble; quite another in the fineness of their homes. I tried to imagine myself—unsuccessfully—walking up to the Melchett family mansion, or sitting down to dinner at Ben Melchett's house, or even lobstering with McCabe's kin. Would my presence in Cape Damaris—even if tolerated by some—become a source of contention for those who welcomed me, men like Paul, Ephie and McCabe, who'd already taken some risk to befriend me? And how long, even if I were accepted into their midst without question—even if I were to adopt Cape Damaris as my home port—would I be able to keep my past hidden, a secret from those who, with good intentions or ill, sought to discover more about me?

Nor were these the only—or even the most important—questions which beset me. Overriding them all was the internal debate which raged between my need for independence, and the growing desire I felt to hand myself over to the common efforts of the Melchett alliance, to fall in with their pattern of work in port and at sea as a halyard fits in with the network of rigging, or as a brace functions with the trim of a yard. This conflict was fanned all the higher by my unexpected longing to settle down in one place—to put down roots in Cape Damaris, to establish a center from which to set forth to explore and return again at will, much as the rhumb lines radiate from the figure of a mapmaker's ornate compass rose; and by my new yearning to see the *land* side of Melchett's life, to experience the influences of tide, rock and shore which for years had defined his way of growth.

This unlooked-for allure of Melchett's native place was all the more sharpened by my shipmates' frequent accounts of their haven—their thoughts turning more and more often toward Maine as we began our northward journey, and embellishing the tales which they told round the table or on the planks of the forecabin at nightfall. As they spun their long yarns about downeast places— islands and harbors, fish weirs and shipyards—or related old stories of clambakes and launchings, irresistible visions rose up in me of

the hills and beaches of Cape Damaris: the grey-shingled cottages, smokehouses and wharves, the bare sweep of sea beds unveiled at low tide, the dash of the spindrift against a dark sky. Even now, as their reminiscences unraveled in the fineness of the Brazilian night or punctuated their superstitions and tales of second sight, their yarns of Sargasso ghost ships and phantasm seamen, I felt a tugging at my heart—a yearnsome ache in the depths of my being which before I had only known for the long-ago stories told by my kinfolk around Welsh fires.

Yet every time this longing for Maine got the upper hand and threatened to overcome my instinctive independence, there rose up in me swift doubts and suspicions which questioned the very core of my nature, and called to account—more insistently than ever—my failure to measure up to the standards of my people. I thought of the horror it would cause my father, grandmother and cousins, were I to confess my thoughts to them; thought of their adherence to the unbending tradition which dictated a life without fetters. A profound self-reliance—a refusal to depend upon walls or upon others—was the one mark of my old identity I'd struggled hardest to retain, since we'd parted years ago; if I gave it up now, who would I be?

An unreasoning fear of self-loss and submission took hold of me each time I considered relinquishing myself to the world of Ben Melchett—a fear which made me withhold my final commitment to any contract beyond the one which now bound me to the decks and lives of this vessel; and so tonight, as before, I put down my yearnings, assumed once again my wary distance, and refused to open my heart even to Paul, still smoking and dreaming in silence beside me.

But even the most persistent of my doubts and questions were swallowed up in my preoccupation with Melchett himself; and as that night and the following days slipped by—as we raised and gradually sank Pernambuco, propelled by faithful southeast breezes—my attention, and much of the crew's talk as well, were concentrated on the skipper. Amongst estimations of the profits we stood to clear on the coffee and speculation as to Melchett's share of the takings—a

sum which, together with the mail fees and earnings from wagers, and his regular salary as master and supercargo, reportedly put him well on the way toward re-earning what he had originally invested in *Charis*—was talk of Melchett's increasingly odd behavior, and conjecture about his new disposition.

It was not that he'd relaxed his demanding performance as captain or forsaken the hard-working mode natural to him, as I could plainly see for myself. If I'd ever thought that he would slacken his pace a degree or two, now that the race for Rio had been won, I'd by now found out I was mistaken; for he was a hellbent to get to Cuba as he had been to get to Rio. But even I, with but a voyage's previous experience to judge by, could see the point my shipmates were making: that the skipper's manner, though still driven, was changing—the old restless, gruff, preoccupied air enlivened by a new zestfulness. Perhaps I was just coming to know him better; but as the coast of Brazil slipped by to larboard, it seemed to me that, whether he pursued his everyday duties—stomping to the rail with his watch and sextant, deciding day's work and doling out orders—or engaged in something out of the ordinary, as when he erupted on deck rifle in hand to burst a waterspout in sudden turbulent weather—there was a new sense of delight and pleasure in his tasks, and something more—something almost comically attention-seeking at times, as if he was aware of an audience.

Nor was this change apparent only in his general manner; it appeared in his dealings with others as well. Now, for example, his passionate regard for objects that floated was compounded by a perceptible interest in their pilots, as when he induced a pair of catamarans off Pernambuco to come alongside for a couple of minutes, not just to obtain a closer look at their design, but to exchange a few words with the boatmen; or when he spoke a ship a few days out of Rio, not just to bow to the dictates of custom, but to indulge in the opportunity to greet fellow seamen. Formerly at the cry of "Sail ho!" he'd backed the maintopsail and engaged in conversation only long enough to find out what he wanted—barking out the polite formula which elicited the names of ships, ports and destinations, and tacking on questions about time and position. But

now, as we drew near the equator and spoke a brig New York bound, he stood at the rail and trumpeted questions pertaining to news from home, or the needs and conditions prevailing on board—amenities that raised eyebrows all round—then stood by long enough for my shipmates to scrawl notes for Maine and dispatch them aboard the brig, before squaring off and pressing on at his old pace for the landfall he sought at Barbados.

But above all this change in his manner toward others was manifested in his handling of the crew, and in his attitude toward me. Now—as we bowled along toward the Caribbean—he could be seen spending time with McCabe, not just in official consultation, but in what appeared to be casual conversation; and occasionally as I cast my eye aft, I could catch sight of him slipping in an offhand remark to one of the hands on the way to the helm. It was true that things remained at a stand-off between him and Howland, Reuben and cohorts; reportedly were strained with Haskett as well; but with others, especially with those of my own watch, his heightened regard was apparent to all.

Yet toward no one was he more uncommonly attentive—as I had repeated occasion to notice—than he seemingly was toward me. Not that he favored me over my shipmates; quite the contrary. Provoked by some omission or act of carelessness on my part, he was perfectly capable of taking me to task on the spot, rather than—with his usual meticulous deference to maritime custom—instructing McCabe to pass along his displeasure; and there was no sign of partisanship toward me in his temper. Once when I failed to use proper precautions aloft—in my haste to beat Howland’s time on the mainyard—I was brought up short by “Watch what the hell you’hre doin’, sailoh!” in the unmistakable roar of the skipper; and again later on, as I swung to the deck from my post on the topmast—in response to a dare advanced by my watchmates—I was stopped in my tracks by Melchett’s cry of impatience, “Goddammit, man, this is a ship, not a circus!”—words that might have stung me deeply had it not been for the justice in them, and the involuntary note of concern beneath them.

Nor was his censure of me always limited to speech; for once when I happened to be so unwitting as to curse Howland roundly within Melchett's hearing, he delivered a stinging smack to the seat of my breeches—a wallop which nearly knocked me off balance, and provided no end of entertainment for Howland.

Yet if he was harsher with me at times than with others—if he seemed to expect more, be more demanding—he was nonetheless oftentimes gentler as well, regarding me, as we passed one another, with an honest warmth in his forthright expression, and inquiring after my health and well being with a sympathy which he seldom showed to my shipmates. Contrary to the separation at sea I'd expected—had every reason to look for, given his conduct before Rio—he seemed to be going out of his way now to meet me, crossing paths with me in ways which I frequently suspected were not entirely accidental; and with each fresh encounter we seemed to draw closer, to diminish—as graciously as if there had been no interruptions—the distance which lingered between us.

Cutting out a new sail in the waist one afternoon—Melchett, in one of his eccentric moods to take on the tasks of a common seaman, ensconced at one of the corners, myself, at McCabe's orders, posted at another—we'd fall in with the rhythms of working together, our eyes meeting now and then over the canvas; or bending over some task a couple of days later, I'd be surprised by the sound of his approach—would feel the brush of his hand at my shoulder—its fleeting warmth as he checked my work—then its sudden absence as he drew away. Yet even as these moments seemed to spring from him as involuntarily as his anger, the formality of shipboard discipline created a tension between a more familiar friendship, and the distance required by custom: a tension that, together with my search for future direction, made me prone to despair one moment, and the next, to a nervous hilarity.

Yet if Melchett was changing in his relations with others, he was as unvarying as ever in his shipboard endeavors; and in no way did he exhibit greater constancy than in his role as navigator. Indeed it was in his capacity as direction-finder—in his uncanny sureness as

a dead reckoner, and in his almost maddening skill as a scientist's pilot—that I continued to have the profoundest respect for him: not least because direction-finding had become for me not just an inward battle, but a daily seagoing duty as well. Everyday now as we neared the Windwards I struggled to master this mysterious art, going aft with McCabe and one of Melchett's spare sextants to shoot the sun at various altitudes; straining to keep my wits and my balance; striving to swing the arc, center the sun, establish the perpendicularity of the instrument, and out of it all, obtain several readings—McCabe standing by with Melchett's second best watch, and Melchett all the while with an eagle eye on proceedings.

After days of McCabe's unflagging voice at my side, prodding me on with "That's it, son—stiddy as she goes, now—a little more upright—now you've got it—now move the ahrm—got the sun in the glass?—fine, swing the arc—don't be afraid t' change your position—got her centehred?—fine, move the ahrm more—get the sun right down on the horizon—is she tangent?—first give me a stand-by, then give me a mahk"—after an eternity of alternate and simultaneous readings, till I was ready to pitch the thing in the sea, it was finally possible for me to read the equipment; but there was no chance for me to rest on my laurels, for no sooner had I managed to obtain decent readings, than Melchett insisted I begin measuring the moon, and obtaining back sights in case of fog or haze obscuring the horizon below the body in question.

Nor was that the end of my trials, for the calculations required to ascertain our position—the jumble of angles of ascension, reflection, incidence and inclination, the maze of degrees, minutes and seconds—drove me nearly to desperation. My geometry being almost hopeless—worse by far than any of the others, including such youngsters as Ephie and Roan—and my knowledge of trigonometry nil, computations were difficult even with Bowditch's tables; and I took to reading *The Practical Navigator* during my scanty leisure hours to work out equations on my own, whilst McCabe—unbeknownst to the others—indefatigably tutored me.

Afraid that my watchmates might discover my ignorance—or worse yet, Melchett himself—I anxiously pledged McCabe to

silence, and worked harder than I'd ever worked before to come to terms with a assignment. Nor was my instruction limited to reading the sextant, and obtaining fixes of our position; for Melchett—with his usual passion for thorough training—demanded that McCabe set me, indeed all of us, the task of laying out the day's course, forcing us to comprehend the inter-relatedness of navigational equipment by directing us to utilize it all.

Throwing the log line, which Melchett ordered done very half hour to keep a constant watch on our speed; understanding the workings of a compass; using parallel rulers to chart our position; reading charts and navigation signals, and learning the principles of a telescope; memorizing the habits of 20 or 30 stars, till I knew that Acruz, brightest and most southerly of the Southern Cross, not visible north of 27 N, crossed the celestial meridian during twilight in early June, as well as I knew my own name: all of these operations were thrust on us now or in the burdensome business of direction-finding—for plotting a trail on the featureless sea.

How different it all was from the days of my past—from my people's means of finding direction! Then navigation meant following one's own nose, or reading the pattering strewn by the wayside, the handful of grass or piles of leaves and branches left by my kinfolk to give information—news of who had passed and how they were faring, how many they were and where they were going—to whoever happened to be coming behind; meant sniffing out the portents of the weather for some hint of the shelter needed that evening, or reading the signs of one's own inner needs for the day, much as I now read Melchett's hands, his face, the length of his strides as he came on deck in the morning, for some indication of his thoughts and feelings.

Yet as we made the coast of Barbados 19 days out from Rio—as we ran along its southern shore, passed near Bridgetown and saw the shipping lying in the harbor; as we descried Grenada off to the south with its rolling ridges of blue grey mountains, its lowlands of cinnamon and cocoa; as we beheld the Grenadines, the more than 100 rocks and islands strewn between Grenada and St. Vincent, then

hauled within sight of the latter, an island of rich green mountains and valleys; as we skimmed past the shores skirted by palms tall, limber and shapely, and carpeted with lush, silver green grasses, white horses grazing amongst the tree trunks; as we prepared to enter the St. Vincent passage which beckoned us into the Caribbean—I began to find, in the succession of islands, the next one always in sight of its neighbor, a feeling of kinship between the ways of my past, and the navigational laws I was now learning.

Like patterins set along the wayside, these isles led us on from one place to another; and in the vision of fishing nets swinging from their poles on the village shores of some nameless inlet, their meshes touched saffron by the early morning sun; in the black silhouette of a sloop at twilight, its every rope seen against the gold green of the waters, and the grey green and silver of cloudbanks at sunset; in the flurry of cloud shadows on the expanse of the ocean, leading like flagstones one to another; in all of these, I began to dimly sense a pattern which pointed to a unique site and position—which defined, for one who knew the proper code and its uses, a particular set of coordinates on earth, an unrepeatable meeting place of location.

This new understanding of course and setting deepened as we entered the St. Vincent Passage—as we steered for the clear silhouettes of the Pitons, twin conical peaks at the southwest corner of St. Lucia, and for centuries mariners' landmarks. Now as we made for Petit Piton rising vertically from the depths of the Passage to well over 2,000 feet in height, the seas from which it sprang aquamarine near the shore, indigo in deeper waters; as we swept through the Passage and out onto the Caribbean on the uninterrupted breath of the NE tradewinds, and on the back of the south equatorial current, as we sped on across the Carib waters beneath the darkening dome of the heavens, constellations opening up in the skyways—something mysterious was transpiring in me, gradually crystallizing in me.

Now as I stood the night watch for an hour, looking out from the bow on the starry formations, on the peregrinations of moonglow and starshine, I realized I was developing my own feel for navigation, my own inner instinct for place and direction; understood, as the

splash of a dolphin sent waves outward bound, that navigation was not just reading patterns—the swirl of constellations and cloudheads, the global whirlpool of sea drifts and currents—in the way that I'd once read leaves by the wayside; understood that it was not just the configurations which a mariner transmutes into systems of lines and numbers. More than that:—navigation was perceiving the interconnectedness of all things, not just between vessels and the crews that manned them, but between the winds and the waters and the drifts deep beneath them, between the lanes on the sea and the shapes of land masses, between the splash of a dolphin as it dives for the deep, and the ripple as it laps on a shore oceans distant—was most important of all, comprehending one's place in this concourse, moving, as through the glistening skeins of a meshwork, into the interstices of the future.

So profound was the impact of this revelation that for the time it suffused every plane of my being—pervaded even my anxieties about the future: not altogether nullifying them, but gently easing them into perspective, so that I felt a sudden peace within me, an uncanny sense of orientation, as if some unidentified center within were—like a gyroscope which adapts to the swing of a vessel—inexplicably coming into balance. Even though outside the center I might still be floundering without direction, a part of me seemed to know where I was headed, to plot a trail through this concourse around me, to perceive its elements—the synchronizations which wed the vessel, the attributes of her individual seamen, and the co-ordinates of the winds and the waters—to identify its place in their midst, and move forward with them into the future.

With a rush I wondered if Melchett had ever had this insight; wondered if this grand meshwork of nature was what he saw when he gazed out from the taffrail, drawing thoughtfully on his pipe, or when he charted a course in the calm of his cabin, his blunt fingers tracing a path on the parchment. In the still of the night I felt a strange closeness, an intimacy of mind almost as if we had spoken, and in the days to come I felt more curious about him than ever, gazing at him in quick, stolen glances as he carried out his tasks in the stern: his shirt collar open and blown by the breezes, and his clear

grey eyes far-sighted, honest, harkening me back to the old seamen on Singapore Street—to their deliberate gait and broad, swinging shoulders, to the faraway gaze in their resolute faces.

Now as we clipped along the southern coast of Cuba, the NE trades fresh and strong behind us, and another record run in the offing; as we met a succession of fine, cloudless evenings, I took even keener note of Melchett's passion for well-executed feats of seamanship—observed, with the respect born of my new revelation, his instinctive sense of accord with the weather, the moves of his ship and the acts of his seamen. That he loved the principle maneuvers of sailing—tacking, wearing, reefing topsails, getting underway and coming to anchor—I had long known, from the zeal with which he called all hands to stations, the energy with which he followed procedures, and the relish with which he delivered orders, or directed a maneuver such as tacking: keeping track of each stage of putting the ship about, much as a coachman controls the reins of his horses, or as an orchestra leader directs layers of music.

But now what struck me particularly plainly was not just his skill as a conductor, but his impeccable sense of timing, from the moment he chose for “Ready, about!”—motioning the man at the wheel to put the helm down—to the second he picked for hauling the mainsail, or swinging the head yards with “Let go and haul!” With Walker on the North Atlantic, it had been like waging a war to tack the packet, each swing of the yards a battle against the press of the wind and the ship's own forces; but with Melchett it seemed as if some added instinct enabled him to work with, not against, the dynamics of the wind and the vessel, an instinct which we could feel working for us as soon as we let go of the headsheets.

In the midst of the uproar of action and sound—the subtly-ordered commotion of braces and ropes, booming sails and creaking tackles and masts, the lot syncopated by the unearthly howls of my shipmates, each pulling his own rope with his own indescribable yell at every quarter of the ship—in the midst of this intricate orchestration, Melchett's voice would ring out with its own downeast accent, each broad, clipped command directing our steps as he led

us on with his instinctive timing: the weather and the ship directing him, even as he directed us and the rigging.

Yet if Melchett admired classical sailing he gloried all the more in well-performed short-cuts; and no feat illustrated his instinct for timing better than tacking by “hauling off all”—a maneuver to be attempted only with light winds and a smooth sea, and only by a smart and concordant crew. Though we were far from the most harmonized of crews below deck—though my watch in particular was still riddled with discord—topsides we pulled together with a will, and with a keen sense of pride in our community of effort; and we lacked nothing for strength and economy of motion. Especially since we’d departed from Rio, my own watch had been working with a staunch unanimity on deck—my conflict with Howland being carried out for the most part underground, through a thinly-disguised competition in duty: each of us endeavoring to outdo the other in reefing and furling, steering, knotting and serving, even swabbing the decks and leading the chanteys.

Thus on the eve of our twenty-fifth day out from Rio—another clear, gentle night, with chocolate-hued clouds on a golden horizon—it was a rigorous crew which answered the cry for “All hands!”; and with Melchett holding forth on the quarterdeck, we proceeded to do what I’d never done before on any of my previous deepwater journeys—to tack the ship by hauling off all. With everyone on board—Shad and Haggai included—standing by to man all the braces, we let her come up head to the wind, and fall off on the other tack; then getting the wind about five points on the other bow—at a place for which Melchett had been expectantly waiting—we let go all the braces and bowlines, and swung all 15 yards at once. Like a many-armed juggler with a hundred wood-pins to balance—every line on the ship “up in the air” for a moment—the two dozen of us worked to bring home our rigging; then with the poise of a deer swiftly changing directions, this magnificent creature leaned over on her new tack, kicked up her heels and took to the breezes—the very vision of the symmetry and grace, of the harmony of parts which had taken possession of me that day I’d stood on the docks back in Boston.

Looking back on the days since we'd departed from Rio it struck me that Melchett was especially willing to try such endeavors when Tupper or I were at the helm; and there sprang up in me a swift feeling of pleasure in the quality of my own seamanship—a sense of delight at my participation with my shipmates as I worked at my station on the main brace, or stood my occasional trick at the wheel. As performers on the trapeze synchronize their efforts with the dynamics of the swing and one another's motions, so I timed myself now when tacking the ship, or reefing topsails in a sudden blow; and as we drew nearer Havana I began to perceive new dimensions to the work of the seaman—began to expand the scope of his labors to include, not just the product of seagoing actions, but the pacing of his efforts with the crew and the vessel, and the flux of the breezes and waters around him.

Standing my trick at the helm on our 26th day out from Rio—just prior to entering the Yucatan Channel—I found that I could somehow sense the next move of even an erratic wind; could hear, as if she were instructing me, what responses the vessel needed, her voice the intangible compass within me; could speak, as if my acts were signs or signals—answering the ship as her helm answered me, as naturally and directly as the sails answered the wind, or as the tides ebbed and flowed with the force of the moon; could know, with some inner sense which contacted things' essence, the state of the holds or the seat of the cargo, as I'd known the ship's heart with my first grasp of the wheel's spokes—as I'd plumbed Melchett's eyes with my first gaze in Boston, or fathomed his thoughts from his hush on Corcovado.

That I was not alone in unearthing this secret, I was reasonably certain; for there were small, telling signs that Melchett, at least, shared the gist of its experience with me. Now and then it happened that I was at the helm when he came on deck to observe the sun; and familiar as I was by now with the compound difficulties of maintaining one's stance and obtaining a reading from the sextant, I took to timing the ship's motion to aid him in his efforts—received in exchange his spontaneous look of appreciation, or the tip of his cap as he made for his cabin. It was as if we were unspoken allies; was as if

there was a partnership between us, an allegiance which went beyond the ship's agreement we'd signed to pledge our intention to serve one another—a covenant which incorporated not just ourselves but the vessel, and bound us together even as we raised Havana, glimpsed the flags which decked the Morro, and prepared to enter the harbor.

We dropped anchor on the eve of June 22, having negotiated the narrow entrance between the Punta and the fortifications of the Morro—a tall, stately hill rising straight from the sea and topped by parapets, walls and towers—and having picked our way across the harbor strewn with brigs and sloops and frigates: most ships lying, like ours, head in to the streets which ranged along the edge of the water. As word of our record run—31 days from Rio—made the rounds of the docks and quaysides, we submitted ourselves to the customs procedures—Melchett climbing down with his sheaf of papers to meet the officials reclining beneath the awning in the stern of their longboat—and were besieged on the wharves and at our gangways by the swarms of vendors hawking bananas, oranges, plantains and tobacco, their warring petitions assailing us in barrages of thick and rapid Spanish.

Though late in the afternoon, it was hot and humid, and it being June, the height of the fever season as well, as McCabe had frequently warned us—his lectures on yellow jack, cholera, and intermittent fever having dogged our footsteps since Rio; and indeed the vendors with their ill-fitting shirts, low-quartered slippers and sallow faces all looked as if they were either recovering from, or actively succumbing to illness. As we fell to to work over the next couple of days with the task of discharging the ballast and cargo, we became familiar enough with the hot afternoon winds, the violent night storms and damp morning fogs—the dankness of which seeped in through our portholes—to appreciate Havana's rigors; and as we went about our business we took uncommon care with the food that we ate and the clothes we selected, heeding the advice of the gaunt dockhands around us, and of seasoned travelers like Spooner.

Along the range of piers where we stacked the cargo—there to be

picked up by consignees in the city—ran a long, high roof covering or awning, built not long ago to protect porters and dock hands from the potent rays of the sun; and as I labored beneath this sweltering shelter I snatched frequent glances of Havana. Though our work kept us down in the hold much of the day, I wallowed in the scenes opened up to us topsides: my field of vision embracing the nearby tangle of wharves littered with packing crates, handcarts and hogsheads; the narrow streets banked by one and two story buildings, the unrelenting torrents of traffic; and the incessant onflow of people, the soldiers attired in seersucker suits with wide straw hats and red cockades, the Spanish sailors dressed in loose white coats and pantaloons, with narrow neckties at their collars.

But for all the gaiety of red tile roofs, of blue and white and yellow houses, of bay waters choked with bright flotillas of windships and the coming and going of vessels; for all the clanging of bells and blowing of trumpets, the booming of cannon at sunrise and sunset, the babbling of crowds party-bound at nightfall, and the tolling of church bells to call the faithful to matins next morning—for all of this, there was something oppressive about Havana. It was something which showed in the discontented expressions and the gaunt, sallow feature of workmen and servants—in the absence of women on the streets and in shops, or in the scarcity of dance halls and drinking places; something in the heat itself, bearing down on us as we strained on the dockways, that was echoed in my own sense of frustration, as one torpid day slipped into another without my hoped-for encounter with Melchett.

Discharging the mountains of cargo and ballast and taking on half a shipload of casks and hogsheads—the former tightly packed with molasses, the latter with muscovado or brown sugar—took nearly two weeks of unflagging effort; and in all this time there was no real opportunity for Melchett and I to have a word together, or to cross paths in any but the most superficial way. If I wasn't out on the docks unloading cargo—some hundreds of feet from Melchett's regular beat on the quarterdeck—then I was down in the steaming holds of the ship, working out ballast under McCabe's direction; while Melchett—in common with every other merchant in Havana—was

on 'Change in the city every morning by seven, up and on his way before we'd swabbed the decks, as much of the business carried on in the town was transacted either early in the day, or later on in the evening when the weather was coolest.

Melchett's tasks in Havana being even more demanding than his undertakings in Rio, he was frequently away from the ship the better part of the morning and evening; for not only was he obliged to sell the cargo he'd bought up at the last minute in Rio, arrange for the purchase of muscovado and molasses, and prepare for his brother Tom's scheduled visit in August, but he was forced as well to take on the burden of training his second cousin Reuben: introducing him to Havana merchants, instructing him in his business duties, and advising him of his buying options, as Reuben—by way of preparation for an eventual position in the Melchett counting house in Portland—was due to act as supercargo for Tom Melchett.

By all appearances it was the chore as tutor which Melchett found most profoundly distasteful; for whether leaving with Reuben stuck like a burr to his side in the morning, or returning with him still in tow in the evening, Melchett wore the scowl he usually reserved for the third day of a flat calm on the equator. Indeed it was an occasion for humor to see the two of them off every morning, Melchett in his perpetual shirt sleeves and worn trowsers, and Reuben dressed to the teeth in his own finery, plus attire borrowed from every hand on board—dress pumps, well-tailored dark trowsers and jacket, stylish cravat and foppish tophat—looking, as we jested, like a lordly ship's master, and Melchett for all the world like his servant.

If Melchett was as anxious as I was for an encounter—if a frustration at the obstacles which prevented our contact figured in the character of his ill-humor—there was nothing in his manner to show it; and so we persevered in our duties, he battling his business endeavors, and I the cargo and the heat of the dockways. To make matters more difficult, I began to suspect—around the ninth or tenth day—that I was coming down with an illness, one of Havanna's infamous ailments; for a lightheadedness had begun to plague me, and with it a suggestion of fever which persisted even when the heat had abated.

When the flushed feeling departed a day or two later and did not return or escalate without warning, a relief flooded me that, whatever my problem, at least it was not yellow fever; but the lightheadedness continued and so too did my conviction that something more than the heat was behind my disorder.

A couple of times in the past week we'd conversed briefly on the wharves: once, when he was returning from town with Reuben, and stumbled unexpectedly upon me as I worked—a spontaneous flash of recognition, and an almost mischievous intimation that we were partners in our exasperation with Reuben, lighting his eyes as he passed up the gangway; and again a day later, when I'd leaned my head against the pilings for a moment, overcome by another spell of vertigo, then looked up to find Melchett at my shoulder asking me anxiously about my health. He'd at once given me leave to go below for the day; but as the thought of the suffocating closeness of the forecabin was even worse than that of the open heat of the wharves, I'd respectfully declined, protesting a simple touch of the sun—an excuse which brought on a hard, long look from him, and the assertion that he would direct McCabe to take a look at me that evening. But on neither occasion was it possible to judge whether he, like me, thirsted for an encounter; and so the hot, sultry days slipped by, bringing us closer to embarkation and to my final departure from him.

Because Independence Day fell on a Saturday—and because it was, for reasons which I had only the barest awareness, a primary American holiday—we were allowed to knock off work at noon; and bolting our food with scarcely a look at the table, then summoning Shad and Haggai, McCabe, Haskett and even Melchett, we tumbled up on deck to set the stage for the celebration we'd put together in honor of the occasion.

It was a performance we'd been planning and secretly rehearsing for weeks, since just after we had set sail from Rio; and as each of the two watches was obliged to contribute a variety of numbers and sketches, there had been a good deal of searching for individual talent, early rumor having it that Haskett's watch intended to put on

a sailor's shuffle with the Coombs brothers on fiddles, and my own watch as a result urgently hunting for something outstanding enough to match. When my watchmates understood that I was practiced at juggling and an assortment of gymnastic feats, and would be willing to instruct one or two others in such skills, they had sent up an enthusiastic clamor; and I'd found myself immediately drafted to put together some kind of act.

Choosing Paul to be my partner in juggling and Ephie and Roan—as the most limber and lightest men in the watch—to join me in gymnastics, I'd tutored them all the way across the Caribbean in the space t'ween decks I'd covertly wrangled from Spooner: Ephie and Paul possessing a keen sense of timing, and Roan proving to be a nimble study as I had expected all along he would, his weakness as a seaman on the halyards and captstan more than atoned for by his agility aloft. Though I'd been afire to try something on the trapeze as well—though it was feasible to rig up the fore and main yardarms for swinging—the logistics and time required were formidable; and when our request for permission to try such a feat in Havana was sent aft via McCabe for Melchett's consideration, and came back to us post haste with an appalled denial (“If they want t' break their bloody necks, they'll have t' find some otheh place than the deck of my ship t' do it!”), the trapeze was abandoned altogether, and our act was engineered more or less for the ground.

With Haskett's watch and McCabe ranged before us in the waist, and Melchett himself—arms braced on the rail—looking on from the height of the quarterdeck, we readied ourselves for our share of the program: the four of us barefoot and dressed up in duck trowsers, our pantlegs lashed with pieces of sinnet, and full-cut shirts with makeshift sashes, I myself—considerably more nervous than I ever had been in Bristol—in the added splendor of my father's waistcoat. In a sudden fit of daring which had swept me while dressing, I'd lifted its folds from the depths of my seachest, knowing full well that its embroidered satin would only provoke still further conjecture about the places and means of my past—speculation which had already been aggravated enough by the surprise of my skill at juggling and tumbling; but somehow this hot afternoon in Havana, I couldn't

appear before Melchett without it, and so I had hastily pulled on its brightness.

It was not just that I wanted to show off before him, as a performer might when assured of a spotlight; but after so many years of concealing myself, I suddenly yearned to fling him a hint of what I really was—to invite him to know me at least in part before I passed for all time from his life. Taking the half-dozen pins which Spooner had fashioned, I began to toss first one, then another, feeling the joy of their circular motion as they rose and fell in patterned precision; then with Paul as my partner I flung them to and fro, marveling again at their reciprocal rhythm—at the way, once established, it seemed to persist on its own. Our shipmates' enthusiastic response in my ears, I next undertook, with Ephie and Roan, a series of acrobatic feats, not only the elementary handsprings and and twists which I had originally learned with Djemail, but the more difficult stunts we'd later performed, the three of us intermeshing our efforts to balance and catch and catapult one another: Roan nearly bringing down the house with his final flight into a chair.

Flushed with a genuine pleasure at my shipmates' applause, and with the elation which had sprung up in me under Melchett's steady gaze, I sat down to watch the rest of the program, a feeling of celebration I hadn't known since Rio heightening the displays of fiddling and dancing, singing and acting and reciting: the whole performance topped off by a magnificent dinner, Haggai having outdone himself with his resources of fresh fruit and fish. Nor was that the end of our festivities; for the Coombs brothers, having already managed to secure fireworks when their watch was ashore the previous Sunday, appeared on deck after supper with their arsenal of pinwheels and rockets—Melchett flatly refusing to have them set off on deck, but giving the two of them leave to lower the jolly boat, and let them off in the middle of the harbor. With popular feeling running high against American annexation—with even the dockhands protesting U.S. intervention—there was reason to suppose that they might be halted; but the numerous American ships lying at anchor sent up a cheer at the first burst of rockets, and as the booming and whistling explosions of color, of crimson and

citron patterns of fire spread out in the reaches of the evening sky, one by one other shiphands and longshoremen came to their rails or looked out from their stations—in the end no official interfering with the impromptu show.

For those of us in the larboard watch, the revelry spilled over into the following morning; for Sunday, July 5, was our last liberty day, and dawn found the ten of us heading off down the gangway, while Haskett's watch remained on board, swabbing and holystoning the decks and calling out insults over the bulwarks. So as not to repeat our debacle in Rio, we had already agreed to go our separate ways in Havanna: a decision reached more or less without rancor, as Howland and Reuben—with angry fathers awaiting them a fortnight off in Portland, and with Reuben working side by side with Melchett—had no desire to cross the skipper again; and as, no doubt, they felt they could afford to show a compromising spirit toward me, since in two weeks they expected to be well rid of me. Vowing to meet some of Havanna's ladies, Howland, Reuben, Tupper and Winslow thus set off to make the rounds of the city, the museums and shops, cafes and drinking places—an itinerary not entirely satisfactory to them, since the streets were singularly empty of women, and if there was anything akin to a brothel, no one had the least idea where to find it. The rest of us decided to more or less follow our noses, and perhaps visit the baths or the bowling alleys, the billiards rooms at LeGrand's Hotel, and the evening procession on the Paseo—places the others remembered from former journeys, or had heard about from the porters and dockhands.

I knew myself—from talk overheard between Shad and Haggai—that Melchett had taken the day off as well; that he and McCabe, apparently according to custom, expected to take in some early fishing, then drive out of the city to the sea baths, the Banos de Mar in Calzada de San Lazara—boxes 12' square cut into the rock which formed the shoreline, in which one could safely bathe or swim in the shark-infested waters; but thinking the others might find the suggestion odd, and respecting as well their desire to be unsupervised for awhile, I didn't dare propose we go there. Instead

we made off for breakfast at LeGrand's; and though no man could have asked for better companions—though the city proved to be bustling and full of interest—I was, without Melchett, unbearably lonely, and beset as well by a growing disquiet, an unsettled stir and flurry within me which was matched by the restlessness of the city.

As we ate at LeGrand's with its cool marble floors and its high-ceilinged, painted rafters and walls; as we tried our hand in the bowling alleys with their unceasing clatter of ten pins and balls, or visited the crowded billiards parlors, where the smoky air throbbed with the babble of Creoles; as we passed ornate gates showing glances of courtyards where fruit trees and flowers glistened with moisture, and ladies bent dark, bare heads over their serving; as we whiled away hours and wandered and rambled, this sense of restlessness in me increased, and with it an unreasoning trepidation.

Early evening found us on the Paseo, the fine double carriageway which led out of the city for two or three miles into open country, and ended in a fountain and public garden: the pleasure driving beginning around 5:00, and moving along its tree-lined route while pedestrians strolled along the footpath. Then following the example of many around us, we moved on, around sunset, to the Plaza de Armas, the square in front of the governor's palace, to hear the melodies of the *Retreta*: an hour-long concert of marches and folk songs played by the military band each evening. As the brassy tones swelled on the lingering breezes or soared with the gusts blowing in from the seaside, we wandered beneath the mangoes and palm trees, or idled in the shade of the provendars, mingling with the townsfolk out visiting and walking—the square lined with carriages in which ladies reclined while gentlemen stood by and tendered their greetings. Not far from the roadside we met up with the other half of our watch, somewhat the worse for drink; and as they'd had enough by now of their elusive quest in the city, Winslow and Tupper elected to cast in their lot with us, while Reuben and Howland made off for the barrooms.

It now being hard upon 9:00, and dinner being uppermost in our minds, the rest of us agreed to head for LaDominica—the

great restaurant and clearing house for sweetmeats and preserves in Havanna, and a primary meeting place for foreigners and merchants—in order to celebrate my birthdate; for when, early in the voyage, Winslow had got up a list of all the holidays and anniversaries upcoming, I had volunteered July 5 as mine. It was an assertion reasonably close to the truth, since I had been told that I had been born sometime during the first week of haying, early in July by standard reckoning. Everybody now ready to feast in my honor, we set off through the dense and spirited crowds surging up and down the main roads and byways, past the lamplit corners and open doorways which characterized Havanna in the cool of the evening—all of the tributaries of the city's tumult and sound flowing into our pathway as into a river, as we made our way to LaDominica and dinner.

LaDominca was busy, full of the babble of Spanish and the clinking of china, the restless, intermittent ripples of laughter, and the comings and goings of men and even women, rising from their tables with a scraping of chairs or just sitting down with one another's assistance. Seeking a table in the courtyard near the lanterns and fountain, we threaded our way past sumptuous tables loaded with aromatic dinners—past the Spanish cuisine of of rice and eggs, fried plaintains and sweet potatoes, or past the arrays of sweetmeats for which the establishment was famous, limes, soursops and oranges, coconut, guava jelly and almonds—on our way catching the expression and gestures of a world-wide variety of diners eating and drinking at their leisure.

Here and there amongst the men was the quirk of an eyebrow or an elegant, imperial nod, an averted gaze or an alluring wave or the warmth of a smile beneath dark mustaches; whilst amongst the ladies were the discreet, appraising glances cast from the corners of dark eyes, the toss of gold earrings and the quick shift of gazes to the floor or some other neutral quarter, as we passed beside their tables: gestures and glances alike unhurried and measured, and flowing out as sensually as caresses. About us as I walked I felt the air tingling, as if with the combined hopes and anticipations of the entire company present—felt the room crackling with a sense of expectancy which

gave an impact to even the slightest noises and objects—a vitalization which became even more pronounced as we stepped into the trellised courtyard, and paused for a moment seeking a table.

Here the air was cool, cool at any rate for Havanna, with the sweetness which comes at the end of the day in summer—a sweetness intermingled with the damp tang of the sea; and as we glanced around at the confusion of tables, the canopied leaves of mango and allspice, the climbing tendrils of cape jessamine and the potted banks of lavender-starred fuschias, stirred with a poignant whisper of fragrance. Spotting a table for us near the fountain, we were just making our way past the profusion of faces grouped about services of china and silver—were just drawing up chairs to a broad, well-set table, when we were abruptly stopped in our tracks; for sitting at a table not ten feet away, talking to an American and a couple of Englishmen, was none other than McCabe, and beside him, wearing an expression of exasperated boredom, Ben Melchett.

In the outburst of exclamations which followed Melchett's face flashed to life with an unmistakable gladness—lighted up with the same flush of exultation which simultaneously flamed in my heart, as his searching eyes picked me out in the group; and unceremoniously dumping his companions, he at once crossed over to greet us, pumping hands with the grip of a just-rescued seaman, while McCabe stayed behind to give a word of explanation to the abandoned knot of merchants. Finding out that we hadn't yet had supper—that the celebration was, moreover, in honor of my birthdate—Melchett straightaway offered to foot the bill, a proposition which we accepted gladly, since the place bore signs of being expensive, and energetically hailing McCabe over he cast himself down next to me at the table, the others ranging up and down its length, and McCabe, on arrival, settling just opposite me.

Grateful for the tumult of conversation around us, I gave myself up to a surge of reaction—to a joyfulness and sense of relief that, coming after the tenseness of weeks of waiting, the oppression of illness and Havanna's climate, made me want to sink to my knees, or give way to the sting of tears. So compelling was this force of feeling that I actually feared to meet Melchett's eyes or to hold the menu

upright before me, for concern that my turmoil would be apparent: my hands so telling that I had to keep them on my lap, in an effort to contain them.

Nor was I the only one overcome by emotion; for there was an exuberance about Melchett's face, his wide, honest brow and earnest grey eyes, which seemed to declare that he, too, felt elation at our unexpected encounter. Even our shipmates around the table seemed caught up in our exhilaration, like onlookers fired by some one else's good fortune; for there was a shimmer of gladness running up and down the table, an infectious spirit which welcomed McCabe and even Melchett for once as comrades: the gathering quickly taking on the dimensions of an impulsive celebration, not only of liberty day and our upcoming departure, but of the success of our entire venture from Boston to Rio to Havanna, and above all of our approaching homecoming.

As our drinks arrived with mint-garnished rims on trays of polished brass and silver; as platters of steaming, aromatic food went up and down our laughing table; as everyone else became busy with their own conversations, caught up in their own orbs of talk and awareness; as I began to get my bearings, and ventured to meet Melchett's gaze now and then—it was possible to imagine that we were alone together; and helping myself to this or that platter, scarcely aware of what I was eating, I took him in a bit at a time, with an eagerness which was minute and unhurried.

He was dressed, as usual, in his perpetual trowsers and shirt—the tan trowsers, it was true, of a somewhat better quality than that of the cheap twill which he wore on deck, and his shirt, if not fine, at least clean and mended—but his cravat conspicuously absent, and his jacket thrown carelessly over his chair back. His total obliviousness to convention put the rest of us more at our ease, for, though we were each in jackets—though most of the others, like me, wore neckerchiefs at their throats and their cleanest pairs of white duck trowsers—we could hardly be taken for well-to-do tourists or traders.

But there was more than attire which marked him as informal,

and set him apart from the diners around him; for glancing at his face, I saw that his hair—bleached almost tow from months in the sun—was still damp from the hours of his afternoon swim; saw, looking down, that his broad hands and forearms—furred with a thick crop of light, curling hairs, and bronzed by his daily exposure to weather—protruded from shirt sleeves turned up at the cuffs; saw, gazing lower, that his big, blunt feet—encased as always in worn leather boots—were planted as if on the deck of a ship, in contrast to the decorous postures around him. His whole manner and bearing, the very tones of his being, from the sandy lashes which set off his grey eyes to the browns and tans of his offhand attire, seemed to speak of the earth, sea and sky, as if a cloudy day on the shore had been scooped up and fashioned into a man.

As he bantered now and then with the others—as he toasted what was hailed as my twentieth birthdate, his eyes over his glass giving me the lie of my age—as we drank and shared glances, for the most part in silence, the sea wind stirring now and then in our hair—the company of sights and sounds around us, the trellises with their fragrance of flowers, the swaying lanterns a-flicker with colors, the trickling and bubbling of the little fountain—all increased in their gentle wafting around us, till they cut me with the joy of their beauty—with the melancholy of their sweetness.

In Melchett's eyes I could read what I felt in my heart, that this might be our last night together; and without hurry, without even regret, thankful simply that it existed, we ate and drank and passed one another dishes, our hands brushing by one another lightly, and spoke no more than occasion called for: the quiet words between us coming slowly at first, in awkward, uncertain advances and pauses, as if they rose from depths too untried to be formed without restraint and caution.

For some time I'd been aware that he had been trying to initiate a sustained conversation—that back of his pleasant, clumsy politeness, his flurry of nods and offhand remarks, resided an eager fumbling for an opening wedge: an opportunity which I longed for myself, but which, in my mixture of shy regard and deep feeling, I did little to bring about. But at last—as knives and forks were coming to rest

beside plates, and drinks were being refilled from decanters—he drew a preparatory breath, and made his characteristic plunge.

“That was some show you put on for us, mate,” he said kindly, referring to yesterday’s performance.

“Thank you,” I responded, embarrassed.

“You been juggling like that for long?” he asked, a careful attentiveness lighting his face.

“Ever since I was fourteen or so.”

“That kind of skill had t’ pick up?”

“Not if you have a good teacher, and some kind of knack for it t’ begin with, like Paul did—but then, I never tried t’ learn more than the basics,” I answered, meeting his glance with my own watchful interest.

“What you did yesthday was only ‘the basics?’” he queried, one eyebrow raised in disbelief.

“Aye; even less. I once knew a man who could juggle ten balls while twirling a ring on one arm and one leg, and balancing a plate on his forehead.”

“He the one who taught you what you know?” he put in alertly.

I nodded.

“Was that back in Wales?”

“No; in England,” I offered.

He looked down for a moment, fingering his glass, as if weighing his thoughts before he went on: “And them tumbling stunts you an’ Ephie an’ Roan did—I s’pose you’d call that beginner’s stuff, too?” he asked, looking over at me with a grin.

“It had to be, in the short span of time I had t’ teach them.”

A man bearing trays swept up between us to clear away some of the platters from dinner; and as he began to move off down the table, Melchett resumed with an earnest expression: “An’ whehred’ you boys manage t’ practice?”

“B’tween decks, during the watches we had off duty...It wasn’t easy, with a rolling sea on.”

His appreciative burst of laughter—compounded of genuine amusement, and something like relief at the lessening tension between us—rang out with a frank and full-hearted bellow. “What

would you've done if you'd had mohre time?" he asked.

"Any number of things, if we'd had the equipment... There's all kinds of stunts that can be done on a rope, or a set of parallel bars, if you've got the strength—an' we would've made a fine show on the trapeze," I couldn't resist adding.

"An' how in hell would you've set up a trapeze?" he challenged, the twitch of a smile the only indication that he recognized my reference to his refusal.

"I'd 've rigged up swings on the fore and main yardarms, once we'd hauled into port and dropped anchor... Paul's strong, he'd made a good catcher—Roan's agile enough t' have learned how t' transfer—an' I could've thrown a somersault or two, with Paul catching."

"Without a net?" Melchett bawled. "Think I'd've let you three pull such a stunt, with the bay out one way an' the deck out the otheh?"

"I've swung b'fore without a net—an' I wouldn't've let Paul or Roan take any chances."

His face in the wavering light of the lanterns took on a look of appalled fascination, as if he was torn between an aghast comprehension of what the three of us had intended, and an avid interest in the allusion to my past. "You've done acrobatics on the trapeze b'fohre this?" he asked, his gaze intently searching my features.

"Years ago, when I was in England."

"What sort of stunts could you perform?"

"Nothing spectacular—somersaults, mostly," I answered, dropping my eyes before his intense interest.

"D'ye miss it?" he asked, his voice oddly gentle.

"No," I said firmly, looking down at the table.

I felt that he wanted to pursue the subject—feared that he'd next ask more personal questions; and worried about where the conversation was headed, I lapsed into an uneasy silence, uncertain as to how much or what I should answer. Never having spoken of this chapter of my past to anyone else I'd known before—never having mentioned it even to Paul, who'd refrained, like the others, from asking questions—I

was bewildered to find that, in spite of my caution, I yearned to reveal more of myself to his questions; felt drawn by the sympathy of his regard to confide further hints to his keeping, as I had yesterday with my father's waistcoat. So honest was he, so straightforward and candid despite his reserve, that it was a temptation to burst forth with the truth in his presence, as even Howland and Reuben had shown in forbearing to palm off phony excuses—as even I myself had discovered when up against him in Rio and Boston.

Yet torn between my desire, under his gaze, to yield more freely to his questions, and my instinct, long nurtured, to preserve my past, I confusedly maintained my silence; and as if intuiting my dilemma he too subsided, a genuine sense of decency preventing him from pressing me further. The breaths of the wind adrift in his hair, he took a sip or two of his drink, while I kept my gaze for the most part averted; and when I finally lifted my eyes, a long look passed between us.

He might have been on the verge of speaking—seemed ready to make some point or remark—when an unexpected jest or practical joke brought an explosion of rowdy laughter; and looking up at the sudden commotion—surprised to find the others still at the table—we lost the thread of our talk for the moment. Not till the laughter had dwindled away did Melchett turn back to me with decision, his brows still drawn at the intrusion; and seizing the initiative again, he picked up the conversation, this time taking a new tack.

“So what've you boys been up to all day?” he asked briskly, as if nothing untoward had passed between us.

“A little of this an' a little of that,” I answered, the warmth in my middle and the flush on my cheeks deepening beneath the gleam of his interest. “We drove out t' LeGrand's first thing for breakfast—tried our hand in the bowling alleys—visited the baths an' got cleaned up for dinner—then wound up on the Paseo listening to the Retreta, b'fore headin' over here for supper.”

“Howland an' Reuben 're off drinkin', I take it?”

I gave him a nod.

“Not b'cause there's been any more hahd words b'tween ye, I hope,” he said quickly, his look partly amused, partly stern and

anxious.

“No; nothing like that,” I told him. “We’d agreed t’ go our separate ways t’ begin with.”

He paused for a moment as if hunting for words, the wind in the unruly hairs at his temples. “You’ve done a fine job of keepin’ youhr head, mate,” he at length got out gruffly, though with a kindly light on his face. “You just keep youhr wits about ye, an’ don’t let eitheh one of ‘em get youhr goat.” Then abruptly changing the subject, he blurted: “Now, how’s youhr health?”

In a flurry at his rare words of praise—so seldom heard by anyone from Melchett—and at the sudden switching of topics, I managed to scramble out with, “Better, lately...Don’t know what came over me the other day—just a spell in the heat, I reckon.”

It was a half-truth at best and his eyes let me know it, meeting me with frank reproof; but when he spoke to me he said only, “We’ll be out o’ hehre in a couple of days—till then, you stick t’ tea an’ hahd tack an’ salt pork, n’ stay out of the sun when youh’re not on duty.”

I checked a look of admission that he had read me correctly by averting my gaze and taking a sip of my drink—a maneuver that was not lost on his either; and he fell quiet himself for a moment, reaching into his pocket for his pipe and tobacco and striking up a light from the spiller. In the silence that accompanied his actions, I felt an urge to ask him my own questions, to learn what I could of him in the short time remaining; and I hastily cast about for a subject which could provide the opening I looked for. Though it had been possible to forget we were commander and seaman—though there had not been the faintest suggestion of condescension on his part—I nonetheless felt a diffidence about addressing him freely, a constraint which was compounded by my respect and deep feeling; and it was no easy task to come up with a way to approach him. The only subject I could latch onto was his swim outside town earlier in the evening; but grateful for any opening wedge, I hastened to use this one while I had the occasion.

“McCabe mentioned you an’ he went for a swim,” I began, looking up at him over the rim of my glass.

“That’s right—at the sea baths in Calzada de San Lazara: place

wehre him an' me always go, when we can't stand the heat an' the town any longeh."

"And people swim there in something like boxes?"

"In arears about twelve feet square an' three or four feet deep, cahved out of the rock along the shoreline," he answered. "It ain't the same as the open sea, a' course; but it's the only way t' avoid the dangeh of shahks—an' cramped or not, it's still the best dip I've had since we left home."

"You swim there too?" I asked, my eagerness for news of his home life getting the better of my shyness.

"At Cape Damaris? You bet. The season's shohrt, but in July or August, with a good surf on, you couldn't ask for a betteh dunk."

"Is there a beach near town?" I prodded, thinking again how different we were, he who had spent his entire life in and on the water, and I who had scarcely wet my toes in a puddle till I'd taken to the sea at fifteen.

"All along the shore from the breakwaduh east to the cliffs that mark the Point an' the lighthouse—includin' just b'low my house," he responded, his grey eyes alight with recollection.

"You live by the sea?" I asked him, though I had long known that he did.

"On a sandy bluff not fah from the light—an' old place with steps runnin' down to the beach. The sea's shallow thehre for a good thirty yahds, with a gentle incline an' a fine sandy bottom.. I taught my oldest boy t' swim thehre last yeah, figure this summer t' teach my oldest girl... D'ye swim much youhrself?"

"I never learned," I admitted, aware of the kind of response my confession would trigger—every other man on board either having known how to swim since boyhood, or having been required to learn prior to signing the ship's Articles.

His mouth agape for the second time that evening, he put down his pipe and looked at me, appalled. "Christ, man, that won't do at all!" he cried out in honest distress. "If thehe was time, I'd see to it you learned right hehre an' now... What were ye thinkin' of, shipping without knowin' how t' swim?"

"I figured I knew my business aloft," I countered, unthinkingly

meeting him head on.

Rather than pursuing the matter he looked almost as if he regretted his bluntness, taking up his pipe with a good-natured chuckle which helped to smooth the moment over; and seeing that he'd dropped the issue, I waited a bit for calmer waters, then cautiously ventured another question.

"B'sides swimmin' this evenin', what else did you do?" I asked, with a sidelong look at his face in the lamplight.

"Not much: took a walk up an' down the shore fo' a while, lookin' for shells."

"Find any?" I inquired with interest.

"Not the sort I pahticularly wanted...I've got samples of the most common to West Indies waduhs, chitons an' tooth shells an' limpets an' conches; but I've been huntin' for yeahs for one or two othehs—shells native t' these shores but ha'hd t' discoveh."

"You collect them?" I asked, a surge of excitement running through me at this unexpected bit of information.

"Eveh since I was a boy," he nodded, a youthful enthusiasm springing out from behind his weathered and determined features.

"From any place special?"

"From every shore I've touched—an' that's plenty—as well as from places visited by Pa and my uncles. When I was a boy, I used t' admire my grandfatheh's collection, set in a glass cabinet in the pahrlah—used t' stand before it an' dream of faraway places; an' seein' my interest, Pa and the othehs took t' bringin' back whatever they could find for me."

"Tell me what you've collected so far," I encouraged, my eyes on the eagerness of his expression.

As this big man of ships and oaks, seas and winds and broad horizons, responded with tales of tiny univalves, of whorls and spires and muted colors; as he described, with ever-increasing excitement, left-handed whelks and scallops and cowries, nautilus shells striped like tiger skins, and tree snails tropical orange and amber; as he detailed, in answer to my questions, the early morning expeditions—the meticulous cleaning operations—and the painstaking processes of

identification; as he placed his finds one by one on display, a hush fell over my heart and spirit, an awe like that which befalls a viewer when he lifts the lid on a plain pine trunk to reveal the nested coils of a treasure.

So intent was I on his expression and gestures, on the images which his words called forth—so transfixed by the face emerging from behind the determined lines of command—so caught up in the transfiguration taking place before me, the face I now looked on youthful and glowing, suffused with the freshness and softness of wonder—that I was scarcely aware of my own questions, scarcely aware that I'd paused some time ago with my drink held absently in mid-air, till he suddenly stopped in his narration and plunged a hand into his pocket.

“I did stumble on this little jewel t’night, though,” I heard him saying, as he drew something forth between his fingers; and as he opened out his hand to me, I saw, lying in the cup of his palm, a small white convoluted shell. Its beauty alone was magnificent—its white whorls and contours, its heart-catching symmetry, its perfection and precision of spirals and chambers, all the more majestic for its diminutive size; but it was the sight of its frailty against Melchett’s big, work-hardened palm, and of the eager, waiting eyes above it, which smote me in the chest with a swift, searing pain, and wrenched me at once to hot, stinging tears.

In the suddenly charged atmosphere between us, there was such an intimacy of worship that a hush fell over our prostrate spirits, as if we two were at an altar; and overcome as much by the intensity of my reaction as by Melchett’s generous, unselfish disclosure, I struggled to choke back a storm surge of feeling. Without looking up from the shell held before me, I endeavored to express my admiration—tried to at least say “It’s beautiful”; by my voice was so hoarse that I could only continue to look on in silence. Casting at me one of his quick, searching glances, Melchett took in my distress in a moment, with a look which gauged my threatened constraint; and—his sympathetic warmth, his gratitude for my response, his spontaneous grasp of my dilemma all apparent to me in his tactful restraint—he swiftly closed his hand on his treasure, and hastily put it back in his pocket.

Conversation utterly impossible to me in the throbbing aftermath of my feeling, I sat beside him silent, gradually regaining my composure; but, though subdued without, I felt profoundly aware—as if my inner wits had been sharpened—of all that was going on around me, not only of Melchett's quiet nearness, but also my shipmates' boisterous presence; suddenly perceived, with a comprehensive clearness, all the nuances of their expressions, the details and textures of their attire, even the pattern on Winslow's cravat. Receiving the final moments of the evening—watching Melchett down the last of his drink, tap his pipe, and put it away in the folds of his jacket—wordlessly passing him the ashtray or decanter, or waiting while he poured me a fresh glass of water—I continued to sit beside him in silence, the complete contentment I had felt in his presence now swelling and rending the bounds of my being, as if it, and the stress of my pain at our imminent separation, had together reached an uncontainable proportion.

Our preparations for leaving the table beginning to rise to an inevitable crescendo, I thus drank in what I yet could: his slightest gestures rippling through me like the breath of the wind through the web of the rigging. As I had known on the Caribbean when the porpoise had leapt and dived in the waters, that the outspreading ripples would one day quiver on the farflung beachheads and shores of Japan, so I now knew, with a majestic quiet, that even if I parted from him tonight, his stirrings would touch the ends of my life; and carrying this conviction with me without words, I rose with the others from the table and wrenched myself from the courtyard and the fountain.

Out in the night with the cool air around us, we walked back to the ship more or less in a body—Winslow and a couple of others ranging out ahead in the darkness, McCabe and most of the remainder bantering not far behind them, and Melchett and I, side by side, bringing up the rear wrapped in silence. To our right the shadowy bulk of the city, threaded with its tangle of byways, towered above our shadows vaguely; but off to our left, as we came up to the harbor and prepared to pace on along the wharves which bounded the water, there rose

a sudden spectacular sight—a shimmering expanse of lights and darkness as the whole of the Bay lay bathed in phosphorescence.

Walking out to the end of the pier, we gazed across the glimmering waters—saw the cable chains of ships moored in the basin glowing with their fiery coating, silver threads leading down to anchors in the depths; beheld the skeins of fishnets glistening as they hung from the sterns of incoming trawlers—watched the incandescence drip from the bulwarks, and the luminous wakes fan out on the harbor; observed the moonpath and lighthouse flareway sweeping and criss-crossing the waters, adding their glances to the network of trails blazened across the dark, oily surface; saw the waters flash silver at the splash of a fish as it soared and dove again into the shimmering deeps.

For a while we stood with our hands in our pockets, with our heads bowed or fixed on the basin before us, scattered shapes in the shadowy dusk of the pier; then at last we turned and, subdued and silent, resumed our journey back down the dockway, the bowsprits of a multitude of vessels arching with a dim grace and grandeur above us, as our footsteps died away on the planking.

We set sail from Havana on the hottest day yet, a good gusting wind tautly filling the canvas, but a furnace-fierce humidity bearing down on our decks, and blurring the horizons with haze: Melchett swinging *Charis* out of her berth and through the crowded channels of the harbor with his habitual flair in spite of the heat, disdaining a tug and employing instead a well-thought out system of warps, lines and sails. Nor was he lacking in energy in the blaze of the Gulf; for no sooner had we left the Morro astern and set a course for the Florida Straits, than he plunged all hands back into the business of cleaning and tidying up the ship, trimming her with an eye to her triumphant return to Portland—a process which we had begun on the Caribbean, and which we now had less than two weeks to finish.

With the thermometer on deck well up in the nineties and the pitiless sun beating down on our backs, we painstakingly picked up from where we'd left off, commencing jobs that would last till we raised the Maine coast: setting up and tarring the rigging, scraping

and varnishing the decks, staying the masts, rattling up the lower and topmast rigging, and touching up the paint where needed. Characteristically scrupulous as to details, Melchett had us at work on the fine points as well, everything from blackening the anchors and ringbolts with coal tar to polishing the brass of the wheel; whilst down in the sweltering heat of the cabin, Shad and Haggai scrubbed and painted the pantry, and meticulously stowed everything away.

As if all this activity in the heat wasn't enough, the crew were busy as well in their leisure— in their excitement about nearing home seemingly uninclined to rest: sunset on our first night out finding most of my watch sprawled out on the forecastle, putting the finishing touches on ditty boxes, whittlings and carvings for sisters or sweethearts, and ships-in-bottles or shadow boxes.

In the midst of this morass of hard work and heat and the pressure of difficult navigation as we neared the Straits, my feelings of light-headedness and malaise—forgotten in the exhilaration of dinner in Havanna—unexpectedly returned in force, and with them the indisputable signs of fever: though so intense was the sun the first day or two out that at times I was at a loss to distinguish between my inner and outer heat. Desperately as I now needed rest—some respite from the rounds of physical exertion and increasing ill-health in the relentless climate, and from the burden of decision about the future—I almost welcomed the nights when I was slated to work two watches instead of one; for the forecastle with its stiffling closeness, its dizzying fumes of paint, pitch and tar mingled with the stale odors of lingering sweat, and the vapors of bilge water sloshing below, made even the shortest rest intolerable.

As I lay in my berth our first night at sea, struggling against my untimely weakness and panting for an unpolluted air, the shapes of the mess table, benches and bunks almost seemed to be wavering and steaming before me; and no breath of the fitful winds blowing on deck swept in through the open hatchway or portholes to dispel the trickery of my vision, or cool the rising heat of my brow. Nor were matters much improved by day; for working eighty feet or so aloft in the rigging, a brush in one hand and a tarbucket at my elbow, the reek of the hot, pungent fumes rising to meet me, and the

swaying of the ship from one beam to the other, combined to render me seasick for the first time in years: even the elementary tea and hardtack which now comprised my entire diet threatening to revolt in my stomach.

Yet distressing as my physical discomfort was—debilitating as the climate which undermined my condition—they were as nothing compared to the turmoil which burned within me: my reaction to my dinner with Melchett, and the crisis I now faced with regard to my future, piercing even my restless snatches of sleep, and at last forcing me to the point of decision.

I could not part ways with Melchett unless, due to a lack of work at the shipyard or an outright rejection of my application, there was no other course left open to me: even in the haze of my fever, I could see that plainly now. Any doubts I had had since we'd shipped from Boston—any struggles with personal pride and freedom, a wayfaring versus a rooted existence—had irrevocably been resolved by the dinner I had just spent with him: my independence, even the customs of my tradition, seeming a petty matter now in the face of the intolerable sense of loss which swept over me at the very thought of leaving him.

Not even the shame-filled concern I felt that my ill-health might be about to make me a temporary liability—that it might force me to bargain for work from a position of weakness—not even this had the power to sway me from the course of my decision. Even if working with any other outfit but Melchett's could bring me the same fulfillment of vision, I could no more imagine now being at sea without him—could no more conceive of foregoing the sight of Cape Damaris, the vistas of his home life and children, or the view of another shell in his hand—than I could imagine refusing the chance of food and drink, or of some great, elemental experience in life.

Now at last, as we beat against a rising head sea off the shoal-riddled shores of the Florida Keys, I had come to my decision; and even as I lay tossing in my berth or tarring stays aloft on a bosun's chair, I readied myself to approach Paul or McCabe, seeking the words which I might employ in asking about the possibility of work.

Anxious to find the proper time for my petition in the midst of all the repairs going forward — fearful always of a rejection—and doubly confused as no one, not even Paul, had so far approached *me* to ask my intentions, I kept a weather eye cocked for an opening, eager to somehow bring off the interview before I should lose the strength of my nerve, or succumb to the vagaries of my fever.

I had determined that I should submit my inquiry to McCabe—that he in turn should refer me to Melchett, or advise me of particulars as he saw fit; but before I could find an opportunity to do so, there came an unexpected change in the weather. For the better part of our second day from Havanna, the sultry oppressiveness had persisted, with a molten sun riding a hot, hazy blue sky, and a brassy sea running in from the southeast. But now on the eve of our second day out, as we began to beat through the Straits—as we labored through the hot marl waters which bounded the mangrove-green islands in sight, seas swirled and banded with every shade from turquoise to moss to milky jade—the skies began to take on an odd mawkish and unearthly hue, and the waves to assume that unsettled appearance indicative of an approaching disturbance, throwing off bits and flutters of spray in the fitful, erratic gusts of the wind.

Nor was this change apparent only in the elements; for over the countenances of my shipmates, as if they reflected the mood of the heavens, there gathered an uneasy disquiet—a consternation which was perceptibly heightened as the sun went down in an uncanny glimmer, and word went around the glass was falling. Even the pigs and fowls in their pens manifested apprehensive behavior, leaving their food and acting anxious, as if they too sensed a looming disorder. To make matters even more unnerving *Charis* was making but tedious progress, what with the divergent seas and winds at her bows, and the temperamental muscavado in her holds; hence whatever was coming was all the tardier in appearing for the deliberateness of our pace.

If I'd had any doubts as to what portended after my reading of the weather, my shipmates' and the livestock's behavior, I had only to look at Melchett's face to be persuaded; for there was a tenseness to his features and manner which hadn't been present in the gales

off Hatteras—where he had had an abundance of sea room—but which, now he was pinned between the Keys and Cuba, and bearing down on the Bahamas in a seaway that required seamanship of the highest order—informed me of his silent foreboding. As we battled on through the darkening channel on the formidable back of the Florida current, there was a man posted at the bow at all times, looking out for cross-currents and eddies; and as night came on and the cloudless gloom deepened, overtaking the moon in its wide, diffuse circle, I could hear Melchett's insistent pacing, even in the half-dream of my fever: a pacing that was stilled only by his brief halts at the rail, or during his sporadic dozes in the chair he'd earlier lashed on the deck.

Turning in at midnight all-standing, removing only our belts and sheath-knives for comfort, we gave ourselves up to a half-conscious slumber, prepared to take to the decks at a moment's notice; but no call came, only a confused awareness of a relentless rise in the wind, an increase in its droning and moaning, and—interspersed with the slamming of waves at the bow—the hollers and thuds of Haskett's watch, shortening sail and answering orders. On the deck again for the morning watch, we found the seas whipped up and foaming, and Melchett exactly where we had left him, pacing the quarterdeck or gazing over the taffrail; and foregoing our usual morning procedures, we sprang to complete the storm preparations, scrambling aloft to get extra gaskets on the sails and making the decks as secure as possible, while dawn broke by degrees with a fiery haze beneath a wider pall of cloud.

With the wind continuing to heighten, we took breakfast by the watch, even the tea and bit of hardtack I swallowed touching off a protest within, what with the nausea of my fever, and the inexpressible flutter of nerves in my midriff; then—all hands ordered on deck for the day—we put another reef in the topsails, Tupper and Howland easily outstripping me in the race to take the posts at the yardarms. By now—with *Charis* reduced to two close-reefed topsails and two storm staysails at the mainmast and mizzen—the sky had assumed an indescribable color, a yellowish-green which tinted the

cloud mass, while lightning glimmered on the eastern horizon, and the wind blew erratically in strong gusts veering continually back and forth over a quarter of the compass. In the midst of all the noise and commotion—as I helped hoist the quarterboat to the highest notch of its crane—I could catch glimpses of Melchett nearby me, his face strained and tired, but still and composed, with an unearthly calm overriding his features: the concentration of a chess player awaiting a move apparent in every glance and expression.

What was going on in his mind between the dozens of factors which pressed him—between alternatives in the sail plan and rigging, speculation as to our headway and driftage, the possibility of a shift in the cargo if the seas continued to worsen, not to mention the responsibility he carried for every living soul on board—I could not begin to imagine. But I had understood enough from the talk of the others and from the instructions of McCabe, who'd called us together before dawn to explain what was required of us, to know at least what he intended: that he aimed to beat through the narrowest section of the Straits before the full force of the storm burst upon us—that at all costs he must attempt to do so, since heaving to now with so little seaway risked putting us ashore on the Florida coast, and seeking haven was out of the question. With the tide steadily rising, the crests of the waves inexorably also, and a storm surge all but inevitable, Melchett wanted to be nowhere near land; wanted nothing to do with riding at anchor in a bay about to engulf its shore.

Nor did he any longer hope to keep to his plotted course of direction—to skirt the Florida Reef and Double-headed Shot Key, and thread his way through the Little Isaacs, thence into the North Atlantic the quickest way possible from the Gulf of Mexico, through the NW channel of Providence—cutting through the Bahamas NE of Nassau at Hole-in-the-Wall; for if we could manage to keep on course through the Straits until the storm reached its height—if we could contrive to keep off Bimini, the Bahamas and the Berry Islands, that would be enough for the present—at any rate, enough for me. How Melchett intended to utilize the winds, if at all — whether he would attempt to let the gales whirl him back out, as he had once before, should this prove a hurricane—and whether or when we

should heave to and surrender, I could neither guess nor determine; but so much faith did I have in his skill and judgment that I was content to wholly rely on his guidance.

With the seas now rolling under us in great, dark green heights, their banks densely streaked with ribbons of foam along the direction of the wind, and the air so filled with driven rain and spray that it was impossible to distinguish between them, I was called aft for my trick at the wheel; and keeping my head down and my route in toward the masts, I made my way with difficulty to the quarterdeck. Our time at the helm had been reduced to an hour; and as soon as I took the wheel I knew why—for *Charis* was bucking like an unbroken stallion, coming up to the wind and falling off several points, her sleek, slender hull and massive tophammer—so ideal in light airs or moderate breezes—ill-suited to such heavy weather; while the erratic winds were impossible to second-guess, catching me off guard every other moment so that I too put in a poor performance. Discovering that it required every ounce of attention to keep her on anything like her course, to watch out for her sails and prevent her from shipping any heavy water, I was soon drained in mind and body; was before long barely conscious even of Melchett laboring to and fro to windward—his yellow-slickered form with its lashed-on sou'wester entering my awareness as he came closer, and leaving it as he dwindled in the rain, spray and dimness.

Once—after an immeasurable time at the wheel—I saw McCabe cross over to him; saw them standing together as if debating, braced against the poop companionway, McCabe's hand on Melchett's arm; saw McCabe motion as if asking a question, and Melchett respond with a futile gesture, dashing a hand across his brow under the brim of his sou'wester in such a dazed, uncertain manner, that even in my fatigue and illness, my heart went out to him in his burden. Yet so spent was I now that even my compassion could no longer keep him in my attention; and pinning my mind to the binnacle before me, I persevered alone with my duty, until the sudden appearance of Winslow, who stepped to my lee and lent his strength to the wheel. For an unknown time we struggled together, the wind still steadily and rapidly rising, and the seas peaking higher and higher up the

foremast—each rise and fall exacerbating the nagging nausea of my fever.

As if aware of my exhaustion and seeking to encourage me, Winslow turned his mouth to my ear and yelled, “Only anotheh five or ten minutes!”—though how he’d kept track of the time, I’d no notion; yet here, close as I was to release from my duty, I could stave off my illness no longer. Feeling nausea about to overtake me, I hailed to McCabe to relieve me for a moment; and making my way at once to the rail, I was briefly, violently sick, the frenzy of the spray over the sea stinging my face like wind-driven sand or hail on the winter North Atlantic. Before I could gather up strength to return to the helm, Melchett himself was beside me, one big hand insistently on my shoulder as he shouted over the roar of the wind: “Get below!” Distressed as I was, I tried to dissuade him, protesting a spell of seasickness; but refusing to hear me out, he bawled—in words torn impatiently off by the wind: “Seasick, hell!—Get below!”—calling back over his shoulder as he turned away, “We’hre in for one hell of a ride—strap youhrself in!”

Furious with myself for my weakness—and for the untimeliness of my illness—I reluctantly obeyed, while Melchett stood the rest of my trick with Winslow, and McCabe clambered down to the waist behind me to ferret out a hand to replace me. Knowing the forehatch was battened down for the storm, I stumbled below through the t’ween decks companionway, groping my way down the dim, pitching passage meticulously packed with fine cargo, past the uninhabited, clattering galley and into the deserted forecandle, where—gloomy and wet as my surroundings—I shrugged off my oilskins and soaked outer clothing, and clumsily climbed into my berth.

Quaking with cold even in the closeness, I’d given myself up to a half-wretched slumber when I found McCabe unannounced at my elbow, propping my head up and forcing on me a mugful of water and a small white pill; and reviving enough to resist his intentions, I turned my head at once toward the planking—a maneuver which triggered an even tighter grip on my shoulders, and prompted a half-firm, half-humorous rejoinder: “Take it, man; if you don’t, Melchett’ll

break both our necks!” Then seeing to it I was securely strapped in, he was gone; and I was left alone in my berth, conscious only of the thunderous tumult around me—the howl of the wind and the halloos of my shipmates, the drumming of torrents of rain on the deck planks, and the resounding blows of the waves on the hull—a cacophony of noise which gradually dulled into a singled-sounded clamor.

When I woke an indeterminate time later, it was to the sudden, shock-like pitching of *Charis*—to a renewal of sound which blasted my ears like nothing I had ever heard before—and to the shouts of my shipmates directly above me, their words impossible to discern in the tumult, but shot through with such a shaken alarm or panic, that—half-dazed as I was from my abrupt waking—a like thrill raced through me from the pit of my stomach. Propping myself up one one of my elbows, I strained my ears to make out the racket—distinguished, amidst all the creaking and groaning, indisputable evidence that the topsails were coming in; and sped on by an urgent feeling I was wanted on deck, I freed myself with hands that were shaking, and jumped down to don the first clothes I discovered.

Stopping only long enough to snatch a bite from the galley—to gnaw off a bit of hardtack amidst the crashing of tinware, and gulp down a half a mug of water—I hastened back down the passage between decks, more than once losing my balance, then up to the top of the companionway, where I struggled to slide open the scuttle: a task I mightn’t have accomplished but for the aid of Haggai, who must have been sheltering on the other side, for it was either battened down or pressured shut by the force of the wind. As soon as I stumbled out on deck—the scuttle nearly coming off in the gale, and it taking the two of us to secure it—I was astonished by the change that had taken place in my absence; for mountainous clouds were now plain in the chaos of the heavens, their edges fringed with a muddy violet, and their centers rent with a frenzy of lightning, while rushes of torn and ragged cloud went hurtling by just above the mastheads, and the blast of the wind assaulted me with such power that it knocked the breath from me like a blow.

Though thunder must have been booming with incessant fury,

no sound of its crashing came to my ears; for no other din could make itself heard in the deafening, all-encompassing wind. Instinctively clutching the rail by the hatchway, I stood a speechless vigil near Haggai, while masses of driven spray and water—torn from the top of the sea by the tempest—went flying over the length of the vessel in continuous, torrential sheets, and the waves rolled by completely white with boiling foam. What time it now was, I could not imagine, so numbed was I by storm, sleep and fever; but a lurid glare low in the horizon, marking the spot where the sun or the moon rode, provided enough of a glimmer to see by; and peering forward I could make out lifelines stretched along the bows, and both watches aloft fighting the foretopsail, the main—like every other square foot of canvas except a single, stabilizing staysail—having long ago been furled.

In the dim and the spray I watched as my shipmates, laying out on the pitching yardarm, struggled to lash the last of the gaskets; looked on as, their ordeal finally over, they made their painful way down from the cross-trees, and took shelter here and there in the waist: no one noticing me in the turmoil, or caring to raise the point if they did. Now virtually hove to, and lying over at a distressing angle—her decks sloping off fully 40 degrees, and her boats, already hoisted to the topmost notch of the cranes, threatening to dip under with every lee lurch—*Charis* drifted on the wind-blasted surges, while splinters of wood and unidentified wreckage went hurtling past our faces and shoulders, and fragments of glass from the coachhouse windows—blown out by virtue of the low pressure—exploded outward in all directions. Where we were or where we were headed, if Melchett knew, the rest of us didn't; but thankful enough to be done with the topsails, we stationed ourselves along walls and hatches, straining our ears for the braying of orders, and bracing ourselves for the next move of the battle.

After a time that might have been minutes or hours, the blast, without warning, suddenly faltered, then all at once dropped to a calm; and—like climbers who unexpectedly top a mountain and thus reach an abrupt end to their labors—we emerged surprised from the

thunderous tumult into an equally unnerving quiet, the night skies too clearing except for a remnant of madly careening and twirling cloud. Relieved that we could now hear one another, we exchanged a swift volley of orders and answers; but almost immediately a new threat arose: for with the force of the gale suddenly withdrawn, the seas—which till now had not been vicious or irregular—erupted into a frenzied disorder: phenomenal towers of water hurtled together in the wildest turbulence and confusion, smashing one another in cascades of foam, as if—the heavens having spent themselves in their fury—it was the sea’s turn to abandon itself to upheaval.

This, then, was the “wild ride” Melchett had looked for—the vessel tossed to and fro with such violence, and so overswept with the surges of water which tumbled aboard at all points, that it was almost impossible to relinquish one’s hold or attempt to repair the increasing damage without running the risk of being dashed to the deck. Yet in spite of the difficulty of carrying out orders there came a relentless barrage from Melchett—those at each pertinent spot or location struggling to sound the wells, check the masts, and secure the rampaging barrels and coops, whilst someone—probably Melchett himself—oversaw the demands of the quarterdeck, even hammering up bits and pieces of wreckage to cover the blown-out coachhouse windows.

Out of the whirling cloud shreds overhead the moon appeared a few degrees from the zenith, sending down—through a rift in the muted, glowing tatters—a sudden flood of dazzling light; and looking down into the illumined waves—pausing for a moment in my painstaking efforts to lash a runaway cask of water—I all at once seemed to see the storm for the first time; saw it, as if a cloud cover of my own had been parted, as a power altogether grand and spectacular; and suddenly lifted completely outside of myself, I felt afire with unspoken praise and jubilation—felt incredibly safe! with a thrill which trusted the ship, and the ocean.

As if I had reached a calm of my own, everything seemed to stop for a moment; and gazing down into the waves’ glowing color—into their unearthly jade green and silver—I saw flashes of crystal in their depths; then, in an instant, saw their translucent clearness—saw

their troughs yawning open, inviting me down, ever downward. For a moment I felt I could see all the way to the bottom—felt I could see the hulls of vessels, the ribs of foundered ships and galleons, and the tangled skulls and bones of sailors—could see the treasures encrusted in holds, the chests of bullion, orbs of gold and silver—could see the dark channels and fissures of rock, and the sand-rippled ocean shelves and floors. Then—like a curtain drawn across a window—the waves rolled by and drowned the vision; and I found myself looking down at my knotting, while the night clouds spun silver and green in the vortex, and the seas swept on with a strange muted shimmer, as if their light came from far below, and was hidden.

With a roar the blast returned from the opposite quarter, catching everyone off guard; and at the same instant McCabe's voice rang out from the mainmast, urgently summoning Melchett forward. In the chaos of the recurring gale I had no idea what had happened; but as we scrambled to finish our respective repairs—as *Charis* bowed down to the rage of the wind, her staysail blown out with a boom of thunder—Melchett made his determined way down from the quarterdeck: on his face the calm light of will and decision battling with the strain of fatigue and worry. As he toiled along past where I was working, half-bent before the renewed force of the rain, he suddenly spotted me for the first time since I'd come on deck; and his face taking on a furious scowl—a glower whose lines fairly barked irritation—he paused long enough to hurl back over his shoulder: “God damn you, man, get below!”

My two feet planted firmly on deck—as if to draw support from the planks—I shouted “Not until this blow is over!”; and stopping summarily in his tracks, he swung around and—his scowl, if possible, even blacker—bawled,

“You son of a bitch, get below! That's an ordeh!”

Making no move to obey him, I merely stared at him, mutely resistant, while over his face spread a dumbfounded amazement—the only look of surprise I'd seen on his features since our bout with the storm had begun—as if he had never before in his life encountered disobedience. What he might have done next in his anger—his

expression threatening physical action—I was never to discover; for before he could reply or act, a rush of events broke in upon us. With a note that pierced the howl of the wind, a cry from amidships claimed our attention; and giving me a final glare which left me no doubt he'd deal with me later, Melchett immediately worked his way to the capstan, where two men were hanging on, one supporting the other.

In the hurtling sheets of rain and spray, I could make out Howland—his sou'wester blown off—with his arms about someone I took to be Roan, whose thigh flowed with blood which ran off on the deck; while Melchett—who'd long ago thrown his oilskins to the wind—directly ripped off his shirt, then hurriedly knelt to tie up the wound. For a brief moment in the fury of the storm I had the sight of his great, matted chest and broad, rain-drenched back as he got Roan down on deck, and his leg up and braced on the bars of the capstan; then leaving Howland to aid him, he struck out for his original goal at the mainmast, where someone still urgently beckoned and waited.

He was about halfway there—in the long, open space between the five rail and capstan—when another cry rang out with indescribable panic, “Hang on, boys! hang on for youhr lives!”; and looking up I was in time to see, looming up out of the spray-riddled turmoil, a stupendous tower of water, a wall which hung poised at the height of the lower yards, then abruptly broke and cascaded downward, thundering inboard over the larboard side of the forecabin. In the instant before it swept the decks I saw exactly what I had to do, as if—my mind lifted free from fatigue and illness—some gift of vision were mine for the moment; and lunging for the place where Melchett stood exposed—carrying with me my bight of cable, its end already secured to the deck, via ringbolts—I threw both my arms and the line about him, even as hundreds of tons of water swept over the ship from stem to stern.

Hurled to the deck, then carried a distance, slammed together into something solid, the line hauling taut while the force of the surge threatened to drag us apart, we lay buried beneath a mass of water; and hanging onto Melchett with my remaining strength, I bent my whole will to holding my breath. When at last we rolled free and I

could gasp deeply—when the flood washed away, and I knew that I'd held him—an unspeakable joy and relief swelled inside me; and finding myself utterly emptied of strength, I opened my eyes long enough to perceive the rise and fall of his breathing, and the forms of two or three of the others making their way anxiously toward us, before I gratefully surrendered to blankness.