

**WILLIAM
WYMARK
JACOBS**

THE LADY OF THE BARGE
AND OTHERS, ENTIRE
COLLECTION

William Wymark Jacobs

**The Lady of the Barge and
Others, Entire Collection**

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The Lady of the Barge and Others, Entire Collection

THE LADY OF THE BARGE

The master of the barge Arabella sat in the stern of his craft with his right arm leaning on the tiller. A desultory conversation with the mate of a schooner, who was hanging over the side of his craft a few yards off, had come to a conclusion owing to a difference of opinion on the subject of religion. The skipper had argued so warmly that he almost fancied he must have inherited the tenets of the Seventh-day Baptists from his mother while the mate had surprised himself by the warmth of his advocacy of a form of Wesleyanism which would have made the members of that sect open their eyes with horror. He had, moreover, confirmed the skipper in the error of his ways by calling him a bargee, the ranks of the Baptists receiving a defender if not a recruit from that hour.

With the influence of the religious argument still upon him, the skipper, as the long summer's day gave place to night, fell to wondering where his own mate, who was also his brother-in-law, had got to. Lights which had been struggling with the twilight now burnt bright and strong, and the skipper, moving from the shadow to where a band of light fell across the deck, took out a worn silver watch and saw that it was ten o'clock.

Almost at the same moment a dark figure appeared on the jetty above and began to descend the ladder, and a strongly built young man of twenty-two sprang nimbly to the deck.

"Ten o'clock, Ted," said the skipper, slowly. "It'll be eleven in an hour's time," said the mate, calmly.

"That'll do," said the skipper, in a somewhat loud voice, as he noticed that his late adversary still occupied his favourite strained position, and a fortuitous expression of his mother's occurred to him: "Don't talk to me; I've been arguing with a son of Belial for the last half-hour."

"Bargee," said the son of Belial, in a dispassionate voice.

"Don't take no notice of him, Ted," said the skipper, pityingly.

"He wasn't talking to me," said Ted. "But never mind about him; I want to speak to you in private."

"Fire away, my lad," said the other, in a patronizing voice.

"Speak up," said the voice from the schooner, encouragingly. "I'm listening."

There was no reply from the bargee. The master led the way to the cabin, and lighting a lamp, which appealed to more senses than one, took a seat on a locker, and again requested the other to fire away.

"Well, you see, it's this way," began the mate, with a preliminary wriggle: "there's a certain young woman—"

"A certain young what?" shouted the master of the Arabella.

"Woman," repeated the mate, snappishly; "you've heard of a woman afore, haven't you? Well, there's a certain young woman I'm walking out with I—"

"Walking out?" gasped the skipper. "Why, I never 'eard o' such a thing."

"You would ha' done if you'd been better looking, p'raps," retorted the other. "Well, I've offered this young woman to come for a trip with us."

"Oh, you have, 'ave you!" said the skipper, sharply. "And what do you think Louisa will say to it?"

“That’s your look out,” said Louisa’s brother, cheerfully. “I’ll make her up a bed for’ard, and we’ll all be as happy as you please.”

He started suddenly. The mate of the schooner was indulging in a series of whistles of the most amatory description.

“There she is,” he said. “I told her to wait outside.”

He ran upon deck, and his perturbed brother-in-law, following at his leisure, was just in time to see him descending the ladder with a young woman and a small handbag.

“This is my brother-in-law, Cap’n Gibbs,” said Ted, introducing the new arrival; “smartest man at a barge on the river.”

The girl extended a neatly gloved hand, shook the skipper’s affably, and looked wonderingly about her.

“It’s very close to the water, Ted,” she said, dubiously.

The skipper coughed. “We don’t take passengers as a rule,” he said, awkwardly; “we ‘ain’t got much convenience for them.”

“Never mind,” said the girl, kindly; “I sha’nt expect too much.”

She turned away, and following the mate down to the cabin, went into ecstasies over the space-saving contrivances she found there. The drawers fitted in the skipper’s bunk were a source of particular interest, and the owner watched with strong disapprobation through the skylight her efforts to make him an apple-pie bed with the limited means at her disposal. He went down below at once as a wet blanket.

“I was just shaking your bed up a bit,” said Miss Harris, reddening.

“I see you was,” said the skipper, briefly.

He tried to pluck up courage to tell her that he couldn’t take her, but only succeeded in giving vent to an inhospitable cough.

“I’ll get the supper,” said the mate, suddenly; “you sit down, old man, and talk to Lucy.”

In honour of the visitor he spread a small cloth, and then proceeded to produce cold beef, pickles, and accessories in a manner which reminded Miss Harris of white rabbits from a conjurer’s hat. Captain Gibbs, accepting the inevitable, ate his supper in silence and left them to their glances.

“We must make you up a bed, for’ard, Lucy,” said the mate, when they had finished.

Miss Harris started. “Where’s that?” she inquired.

“Other end o’ the boat,” replied the mate, gathering up some bedding under his arm. “You might bring a lantern, John.”

The skipper, who was feeling more sociable after a couple of glasses of beer, complied, and accompanied the couple to the tiny forecabin. A smell compounded of bilge, tar, paint, and other healthy disinfectants emerged as the scuttle was pushed back. The skipper dangled the lantern down and almost smiled.

“I can’t sleep there,” said the girl, with decision. “I shall die o’ fright.”

“You’ll get used to it,” said Ted, encouragingly, as he helped her down; “it’s quite dry and comfortable.”

He put his arm round her waist and squeezed her hand, and aided by this moral support, Miss Harris not only consented to remain, but found various advantages in the forecabin over the cabin, which had escaped the notice of previous voyagers.

“I’ll leave you the lantern,” said the mate, making it fast, “and we shall be on deck most o’ the night. We get under way at two.”

He quitted the forecabin, followed by the skipper, after a polite but futile attempt to give him precedence, and made his way to the cabin for two or three hours’ sleep.

“There’ll be a row at the other end, Ted,” said the skipper, nervously, as he got into his bunk. “Louisa’s sure to blame me for letting you keep company with a gal like this. We was talking about you only the other day, and she said if you was married five years from now, it ‘ud be quite soon enough.”

“Let Loo mind her own business,” said the mate, sharply; “she’s not going to nag me. She’s not my wife, thank goodness!”

He turned over and fell fast asleep, waking up fresh and bright three hours later, to commence what he fondly thought would be the pleasantest voyage of his life.

The Arabella dropped slowly down with the tide, the wind being so light that she was becalmed by every tall warehouse on the way. Off Greenwich, however, the breeze freshened somewhat, and a little later Miss Harris, looking somewhat pale as to complexion and untidy as to hair, came slowly on deck.

“Where’s the looking-glass?” she asked, as Ted hastened to greet her. “How does my hair look?”

“All wavy,” said the infatuated young man; “all little curls and squiggles. Come down in the cabin; there’s a glass there.”

Miss Harris, with a light nod to the skipper as he sat at the tiller, followed the mate below, and giving vent to a little cry of indignation as she saw herself in the glass, waved the amorous Ted on deck, and started work on her disarranged hair.

At breakfast-time a little friction was caused by what the mate bitterly termed the narrow-minded, old-fashioned ways of the skipper. He had arranged that the skipper should steer while he and Miss Harris breakfasted, but the coffee was no sooner on the table than the skipper called him, and relinquishing the helm in his favour, went below to do the honours. The mate protested.

“It’s not proper,” said the skipper. “Me and ‘er will ‘ave our meals together, and then you must have yours. She’s under my care.”

Miss Harris assented blithely, and talk and laughter greeted the ears of the indignant mate as he steered. He went down at last to cold coffee and lukewarm herrings, returning to the deck after a hurried meal to find the skipper narrating some of his choicest experiences to an audience which hung on his lightest word.

The disregard they showed for his feelings was maddening, and for the first time in his life he became a prey to jealousy in its worst form. It was quite clear to him that the girl had become desperately enamoured of the skipper, and he racked his brain in a wild effort to discover the reason.

With an idea of reminding his brother-in-law of his position, he alluded two or three times in a casual fashion to his wife. The skipper hardly listened to him, and patting Miss Harris’s cheek in a fatherly manner, regaled her with an anecdote of the mate’s boyhood which the latter had spent a goodly portion of his life in denying. He denied it again, hotly, and Miss Harris, conquering for a time her laughter, reprimanded him severely for contradicting.

By the time dinner was ready he was in a state of sullen apathy, and when the meal was over and the couple came on deck again, so far forgot himself as to compliment Miss Harris upon her appetite.

“I’m ashamed of you, Ted,” said the skipper, with severity.

“I’m glad you know what shame is,” retorted the mate.

“If you can’t be’ave yourself, you’d better keep a bit for’ard till you get in a better temper,” continued the skipper.

“I’ll be pleased to,” said the smarting mate. “I wish the barge was longer.”

“It couldn’t be too long for me,” said Miss Harris, tossing her head.

“Be’aving like a schoolboy,” murmured the skipper.

“I know how to behave my-self,” said the mate, as he disappeared below. His head suddenly appeared again over the companion. “If some people don’t,” he added, and disappeared again.

He was pleased to notice as he ate his dinner that the giddy prattle above had ceased, and with his back turned toward the couple when he appeared on deck again, he lounged slowly forward until the skipper called him back again.

“Wot was them words you said just now, Ted?” he inquired.

The mate repeated them with gusto.

“Very good,” said the skipper, sharply; “very good.”

“Don’t you ever speak to me again,” said Miss Harris, with a stately air, “because I won’t answer you if you do.”

The mate displayed more of his schoolboy nature. “Wait till you’re spoken to,” he said, rudely. “This is your gratefulness, I suppose?”

“Gratefulness?” said Miss Harris, with her chin in the air. “What for?”

“For bringing you for a trip,” replied the mate, sternly.

“You bringing me for a trip!” said Miss Harris, scornfully. “Captain Gibbs is the master here, I suppose. He is giving me the trip. You’re only the mate.”

“Just so,” said the mate, with a grin at his brother-in-law, which made that worthy shift uneasily. “I wonder what Loo will say when she sees you with a lady aboard?”

“She came to please you,” said Captain Gibbs, with haste.

“Ho! she did, did she?” jeered the mate. “Prove it; only don’t look to me to back you, that’s all.”

The other eyed him in consternation, and his manner changed.

“Don’t play the fool, Ted,” he said, not unkindly; “you know what Loo is.”

“Well, I’m reckoning on that,” said the mate, deliberately. “I’m going for’ard; don’t let me interrupt you two. So long.”

He went slowly forward, and lighting his pipe, sprawled carelessly on the deck, and renounced the entire sex forthwith. At teatime the skipper attempted to reverse the procedure at the other meals; but as Miss Harris steadfastly declined to sit at the same table as the mate, his good intentions came to naught.

He made an appeal to what he termed the mate’s better nature, after Miss Harris had retired to the seclusion of her bed-chamber, but in vain.

“She’s nothing to do with me,” declared the mate, majestically. “I wash my hands of her. She’s a flirt. I’m like Louisa, I can’t bear flirts.”

The skipper said no more, but his face was so worn that Miss Harris, when she came on deck in the early morning and found the barge gliding gently between the grassy banks of a river, attributed it to the difficulty of navigating so large a craft on so small and winding a stream.

“We shall be alongside in ‘arf an hour,” said the skipper, eyeing her.

Miss Harris expressed her gratification.

“P’raps you wouldn’t mind going down the fo’c’sle and staying there till we’ve made fast,” said the other. “I’d take it as a favour. My owners don’t like me to carry passengers.”

Miss Harris, who understood perfectly, said, “Certainly,” and with a cold stare at the mate, who was at no pains to conceal his amusement, went below at once, thoughtfully closing the scuttle after her.

“There’s no call to make mischief, Ted,” said the skipper, somewhat anxiously, as they swept round the last bend and came into view of Coalsham.

The mate said nothing, but stood by to take in sail as they ran swiftly toward the little quay. The pace slackened, and the Arabella, as though conscious of the contraband in her fore-castle, crept slowly to where a stout, middle-aged woman, who bore a strong likeness to the mate, stood upon the quay.

“There’s poor Loo,” said the mate, with a sigh.

The skipper made no reply to this infernal insinuation. The barge ran alongside the quay and made fast.

“I thought you’d be up,” said Mrs. Gibbs to her husband. “Now come along to breakfast; Ted’ll follow on.”

Captain Gibbs, dived down below for his coat, and slipping ashore, thankfully prepared to move off with his wife.

“Come on as soon as you can, Ted,” said the latter. “Why, what on earth is he making that face for?”

She turned in amazement as her brother, making a pretence of catching her husband's eye, screwed his face up into a note of interrogation and gave a slight jerk with his thumb.

"Come along," said Captain Gibbs, taking her arm with much affection.

"But what's Ted looking like that for?" demanded his wife, as she easily intercepted another choice facial expression of the mate's.

"Oh, it's his fun," replied her husband, walking on.

"Fun?" repeated Mrs. Gibbs, sharply. "What's the matter, Ted."

"Nothing," replied the mate.

"Touch o' toothache," said the skipper. "Come along, Loo; I can just do with one o' your breakfasts."

Mrs. Gibbs suffered herself to be led on, and had got at least five yards on the way home, when she turned and looked back. The mate had still got the toothache, and was at that moment in all the agonies of a phenomenal twinge.

"There's something wrong here," said Mrs. Gibbs as she retraced her steps. "Ted, what are you making that face for?"

"It's my own face," said the mate, evasively.

Mrs. Gibbs conceded the point, and added bitterly that it couldn't be helped. All the same she wanted to know what he meant by it.

"Ask John," said the vindictive mate.

Mrs. Gibbs asked. Her husband said he didn't know, and added that Ted had been like it before, but he had not told her for fear of frightening her. Then he tried to induce her to go with him to the chemist's to get something for it.

Mrs. Gibbs shook her head firmly, and boarding the barge, took a seat on the hatch and proceeded to catechise her brother as to his symptoms. He denied that there was anything the matter with him, while his eyes openly sought those of Captain Gibbs as though asking for instruction.

"You come home, Ted," she said at length.

"I can't," said the mate. "I can't leave the ship."

"Why not?" demanded his sister.

"Ask John," said the mate again.

At this Mrs. Gibbs's temper, which had been rising, gave way altogether, and she stamped fiercely upon the deck. A stamp of the foot has been for all time a rough-and-ready means of signalling; the fore-scuttle was drawn back, and the face of a young and pretty girl appeared framed in the opening. The mate raised his eyebrows with a helpless gesture, and as for the unfortunate skipper, any jury would have found him guilty without leaving the box. The wife of his bosom, with a flaming visage, turned and regarded him.

"You villain!" she said, in a choking voice.

Captain Gibbs caught his breath and looked appealingly at the mate.

"It's a little surprise for you, my dear," he faltered, "it's Ted's young lady."

"Nothing of the kind," said the mate, sharply.

"It's not? How dare you say such a thing?" demanded Miss Harris, stepping on to the deck.

"Well, you brought her aboard, Ted, you know you did," pleaded the unhappy skipper.

The mate did not deny it, but his face was so full of grief and surprise that the other's heart sank within him.

"All right," said the mate at last; "have it your own way."

"Hold your tongue, Ted," shouted Mrs. Gibbs; "you're trying to shield him."

"I tell you Ted brought her aboard, and they had a lover's quarrel," said her unhappy spouse. "It's nothing to do with me at all."

“And that’s why you told me Ted had got the toothache, and tried to get me off to the chemist’s, I s’pose,” retorted his wife, with virulence. “Do you think I’m a fool? How dare you ask a young woman on this barge? How dare you?”

“I didn’t ask her,” said her husband.

“I s’pose she came without being asked,” sneered his wife, turning her regards to the passenger; “she looks the sort that might. You brazen-faced girl!”

“Here, go easy, Loo,” interrupted the mate, flushing as he saw the girl’s pale face.

“Mind your own business,” said his sister, violently.

“It is my business,” said the repentant mate. “I brought her aboard, and then we quarrelled.”

“I’ve no doubt,” said his sister, bitterly; “it’s very pretty, but it won’t do.”

“I swear it’s the truth,” said the mate.

“Why did John keep it so quiet and hide her for, then?” demanded his sister.

“I came down for the trip,” said Miss Harris; “that is all about it. There is nothing to make a fuss about. How much is it, Captain Gibbs?”

She produced a little purse from her pocket, but before the embarrassed skipper could reply, his infuriated wife struck it out of her hand. The mate sprang instinctively forward, but too late, and the purse fell with a splash into the water. The girl gave a faint cry and clasped her hands.

“How am I to get back?” she gasped.

“I’ll see to that, Lucy,” said the mate. “I’m very sorry—I’ve been a brute.”

“You?” said the indignant girl. “I would sooner drown myself than be beholden to you.”

“I’m very sorry,” repeated the mate, humbly.

“There’s enough of this play-acting,” interposed Mrs. Gibbs. “Get off this barge.”

“You stay where you are,” said the mate, authoritatively.

“Send that girl off this barge,” screamed Mrs. Gibbs to her husband.

Captain Gibbs smiled in a silly fashion and scratched his head. “Where is she to go?” he asked feebly.

“Wh’at does it matter to you where she goes?” cried his wife, fiercely. “Send her off.”

The girl eyed her haughtily, and repulsing the mate as he strove to detain her, stepped to the side. Then she paused as he suddenly threw off his coat, and sitting down on the hatch, hastily removed his boots. The skipper, divining his intentions, seized him by the arm.

“Don’t be a fool, Ted,” he gasped; “you’ll get under the barge.”

The mate shook him off, and went in with a splash which half drowned his adviser. Miss Harris, clasping her hands, ran to the side and gazed fearfully at the spot where he had disappeared, while his sister in a terrible voice seized the opportunity to point out to her husband the probably fatal results of his ill-doing. There was an anxious interval, and then the mate’s head appeared above the water, and after a breathing-space disappeared again. The skipper, watching uneasily, stood by with a lifebelt.

“Come out, Ted,” screamed his sister as he came up for breath again.

The mate disappeared once more, but coming up for the third time, hung on to the side of the barge to recover a bit. A clothed man in the water savours of disaster and looks alarming. Miss Harris began to cry.

“You’ll be drowned,” she whimpered.

“Come out,” said Mrs. Gibbs, in a raspy voice. She knelt on the deck and twined her fingers in his hair. The mate addressed her in terms rendered brotherly by pain.

“Never mind about the purse,” sobbed Miss Harris; “it doesn’t matter.”

“Will you make it up if I come out, then,” demanded the diver.

“No; I’ll never speak to you again as long as I live,” said the girl, passionately.

The mate disappeared again. This time he was out of sight longer than usual, and when he came up merely tossed his arms weakly and went down again. There was a scream from the women, and a mighty splash as the skipper went overboard with a life-belt. The mate’s head, black and shining,

showed for a moment; the skipper grabbed him by the hair and towed him to the barge's side, and in the midst of a considerable hubbub both men were drawn from the water.

The skipper shook himself like a dog, but the mate lay on the deck inert in a puddle of water. Mrs. Gibbs frantically slapped his hands; and Miss Harris, bending over him, rendered first aid by kissing him wildly.

Captain Gibbs pushed her away. "He won't come round while you're a-kissing of him," he cried, roughly.

To his indignant surprise the drowned man opened one eye and winked acquiescence. The skipper dropped his arms by his side and stared at him stupidly.

"I saw his eyelid twitch," cried Mrs. Gibbs, joyfully.

"He's all right," said her indignant husband; "'e ain't born to be drowned, 'e ain't. I've spoilt a good suit of clothes for nothing."

To his wife's amazement, he actually walked away from the insensible man, and with a boathook reached for his hat, which was floating by. Mrs. Gibbs, still gazing in blank astonishment, caught a seraphic smile on the face of her brother as Miss Harris continued her ministrations, and in a pardonable fit of temper the overwrought woman gave him a box on the ear, which brought him round at once.

"Where am I?" he inquired, artlessly.

Mrs. Gibbs told him. She also told him her opinion of him, and without plagiarizing her husband's words, came to the same conclusion as to his ultimate fate.

"You come along home with me," she said, turning in a friendly fashion to the bewildered girl. "They deserve what they've got—both of 'em. I only hope that they'll both get such awful colds that they won't find their voices for a twelvemonth."

She took the girl by the arm and helped her ashore. They turned their heads once in the direction of the barge, and saw the justly incensed skipper keeping the mate's explanations and apologies at bay with a boat-hook. Then they went in to breakfast.

THE MONKEY'S PAW

I

Without, the night was cold and wet, but in the small parlour of Laburnam Villa the blinds were drawn and the fire burned brightly. Father and son were at chess, the former, who possessed ideas about the game involving radical changes, putting his king into such sharp and unnecessary perils that it even provoked comment from the white-haired old lady knitting placidly by the fire.

"Hark at the wind," said Mr. White, who, having seen a fatal mistake after it was too late, was amiably desirous of preventing his son from seeing it.

"I'm listening," said the latter, grimly surveying the board as he stretched out his hand. "Check."

"I should hardly think that he'd come to-night," said his father, with his hand poised over the board.

"Mate," replied the son.

"That's the worst of living so far out," bawled Mr. White, with sudden and unlooked-for violence; "of all the beastly, slushy, out-of-the-way places to live in, this is the worst. Pathway's a bog, and the road's a torrent. I don't know what people are thinking about. I suppose because only two houses in the road are let, they think it doesn't matter."

"Never mind, dear," said his wife, soothingly; "perhaps you'll win the next one."

Mr. White looked up sharply, just in time to intercept a knowing glance between mother and son. The words died away on his lips, and he hid a guilty grin in his thin grey beard.

"There he is," said Herbert White, as the gate banged to loudly and heavy footsteps came toward the door.

The old man rose with hospitable haste, and opening the door, was heard condoling with the new arrival. The new arrival also condoled with himself, so that Mrs. White said, "Tut, tut!" and coughed gently as her husband entered the room, followed by a tall, burly man, beady of eye and rubicund of visage.

"Sergeant-Major Morris," he said, introducing him.

The sergeant-major shook hands, and taking the proffered seat by the fire, watched contentedly while his host got out whiskey and tumblers and stood a small copper kettle on the fire.

At the third glass his eyes got brighter, and he began to talk, the little family circle regarding with eager interest this visitor from distant parts, as he squared his broad shoulders in the chair and spoke of wild scenes and doughty deeds; of wars and plagues and strange peoples.

"Twenty-one years of it," said Mr. White, nodding at his wife and son. "When he went away he was a slip of a youth in the warehouse. Now look at him."

"He don't look to have taken much harm," said Mrs. White, politely.

"I'd like to go to India myself," said the old man, "just to look round a bit, you know."

"Better where you are," said the sergeant-major, shaking his head. He put down the empty glass, and sighing softly, shook it again.

"I should like to see those old temples and fakirs and jugglers," said the old man. "What was that you started telling me the other day about a monkey's paw or something, Morris?"

"Nothing," said the soldier, hastily. "Leastways nothing worth hearing."

"Monkey's paw?" said Mrs. White, curiously.

"Well, it's just a bit of what you might call magic, perhaps," said the sergeant-major, offhandedly.

His three listeners leaned forward eagerly. The visitor absent-mindedly put his empty glass to his lips and then set it down again. His host filled it for him.

“To look at,” said the sergeant-major, fumbling in his pocket, “it’s just an ordinary little paw, dried to a mummy.”

He took something out of his pocket and proffered it. Mrs. White drew back with a grimace, but her son, taking it, examined it curiously.

“And what is there special about it?” inquired Mr. White as he took it from his son, and having examined it, placed it upon the table.

“It had a spell put on it by an old fakir,” said the sergeant-major, “a very holy man. He wanted to show that fate ruled people’s lives, and that those who interfered with it did so to their sorrow. He put a spell on it so that three separate men could each have three wishes from it.”

His manner was so impressive that his hearers were conscious that their light laughter jarred somewhat.

“Well, why don’t you have three, sir?” said Herbert White, cleverly.

The soldier regarded him in the way that middle age is wont to regard presumptuous youth. “I have,” he said, quietly, and his blotchy face whitened.

“And did you really have the three wishes granted?” asked Mrs. White.

“I did,” said the sergeant-major, and his glass tapped against his strong teeth.

“And has anybody else wished?” persisted the old lady.

“The first man had his three wishes. Yes,” was the reply; “I don’t know what the first two were, but the third was for death. That’s how I got the paw.”

His tones were so grave that a hush fell upon the group.

“If you’ve had your three wishes, it’s no good to you now, then, Morris,” said the old man at last. “What do you keep it for?”

The soldier shook his head. “Fancy, I suppose,” he said, slowly. “I did have some idea of selling it, but I don’t think I will. It has caused enough mischief already. Besides, people won’t buy. They think it’s a fairy tale; some of them, and those who do think anything of it want to try it first and pay me afterward.”

“If you could have another three wishes,” said the old man, eyeing him keenly, “would you have them?”

“I don’t know,” said the other. “I don’t know.”

He took the paw, and dangling it between his forefinger and thumb, suddenly threw it upon the fire. White, with a slight cry, stooped down and snatched it off.

“Better let it burn,” said the soldier, solemnly.

“If you don’t want it, Morris,” said the other, “give it to me.”

“I won’t,” said his friend, doggedly. “I threw it on the fire. If you keep it, don’t blame me for what happens. Pitch it on the fire again like a sensible man.”

The other shook his head and examined his new possession closely. “How do you do it?” he inquired.

“Hold it up in your right hand and wish aloud,” said the sergeant-major, “but I warn you of the consequences.”

“Sounds like the Arabian Nights,” said Mrs. White, as she rose and began to set the supper. “Don’t you think you might wish for four pairs of hands for me?”

Her husband drew the talisman from pocket, and then all three burst into laughter as the sergeant-major, with a look of alarm on his face, caught him by the arm.

“If you must wish,” he said, gruffly, “wish for something sensible.”

Mr. White dropped it back in his pocket, and placing chairs, motioned his friend to the table. In the business of supper the talisman was partly forgotten, and afterward the three sat listening in an enthralled fashion to a second instalment of the soldier’s adventures in India.

“If the tale about the monkey’s paw is not more truthful than those he has been telling us,” said Herbert, as the door closed behind their guest, just in time for him to catch the last train, “we sha’nt make much out of it.”

“Did you give him anything for it, father?” inquired Mrs. White, regarding her husband closely.

“A trifle,” said he, colouring slightly. “He didn’t want it, but I made him take it. And he pressed me again to throw it away.”

“Likely,” said Herbert, with pretended horror. “Why, we’re going to be rich, and famous and happy. Wish to be an emperor, father, to begin with; then you can’t be henpecked.”

He darted round the table, pursued by the maligned Mrs. White armed with an antimacassar.

Mr. White took the paw from his pocket and eyed it dubiously. “I don’t know what to wish for, and that’s a fact,” he said, slowly. “It seems to me I’ve got all I want.”

“If you only cleared the house, you’d be quite happy, wouldn’t you?” said Herbert, with his hand on his shoulder. “Well, wish for two hundred pounds, then; that’ll just do it.”

His father, smiling shamefacedly at his own credulity, held up the talisman, as his son, with a solemn face, somewhat marred by a wink at his mother, sat down at the piano and struck a few impressive chords.

“I wish for two hundred pounds,” said the old man distinctly.

A fine crash from the piano greeted the words, interrupted by a shuddering cry from the old man. His wife and son ran toward him.

“It moved,” he cried, with a glance of disgust at the object as it lay on the floor.

“As I wished, it twisted in my hand like a snake.”

“Well, I don’t see the money,” said his son as he picked it up and placed it on the table, “and I bet I never shall.”

“It must have been your fancy, father,” said his wife, regarding him anxiously.

He shook his head. “Never mind, though; there’s no harm done, but it gave me a shock all the same.”

They sat down by the fire again while the two men finished their pipes. Outside, the wind was higher than ever, and the old man started nervously at the sound of a door banging upstairs. A silence unusual and depressing settled upon all three, which lasted until the old couple rose to retire for the night.

“I expect you’ll find the cash tied up in a big bag in the middle of your bed,” said Herbert, as he bade them good-night, “and something horrible squatting up on top of the wardrobe watching you as you pocket your ill-gotten gains.”

He sat alone in the darkness, gazing at the dying fire, and seeing faces in it. The last face was so horrible and so simian that he gazed at it in amazement. It got so vivid that, with a little uneasy laugh, he felt on the table for a glass containing a little water to throw over it. His hand grasped the monkey’s paw, and with a little shiver he wiped his hand on his coat and went up to bed.

II

In the brightness of the wintry sun next morning as it streamed over the breakfast table he laughed at his fears. There was an air of prosaic wholesomeness about the room which it had lacked on the previous night, and the dirty, shrivelled little paw was pitched on the sideboard with a carelessness which betokened no great belief in its virtues.

“I suppose all old soldiers are the same,” said Mrs. White. “The idea of our listening to such nonsense! How could wishes be granted in these days? And if they could, how could two hundred pounds hurt you, father?”

“Might drop on his head from the sky,” said the frivolous Herbert.

“Morris said the things happened so naturally,” said his father, “that you might if you so wished attribute it to coincidence.”

“Well, don’t break into the money before I come back,” said Herbert as he rose from the table. “I’m afraid it’ll turn you into a mean, avaricious man, and we shall have to disown you.”

His mother laughed, and following him to the door, watched him down the road; and returning to the breakfast table, was very happy at the expense of her husband’s credulity. All of which did not prevent her from scurrying to the door at the postman’s knock, nor prevent her from referring somewhat shortly to retired sergeant-majors of bibulous habits when she found that the post brought a tailor’s bill.

“Herbert will have some more of his funny remarks, I expect, when he comes home,” she said, as they sat at dinner.

“I dare say,” said Mr. White, pouring himself out some beer; “but for all that, the thing moved in my hand; that I’ll swear to.”

“You thought it did,” said the old lady soothingly.

“I say it did,” replied the other. “There was no thought about it; I had just— What’s the matter?”

His wife made no reply. She was watching the mysterious movements of a man outside, who, peering in an undecided fashion at the house, appeared to be trying to make up his mind to enter. In mental connection with the two hundred pounds, she noticed that the stranger was well dressed, and wore a silk hat of glossy newness. Three times he paused at the gate, and then walked on again. The fourth time he stood with his hand upon it, and then with sudden resolution flung it open and walked up the path. Mrs. White at the same moment placed her hands behind her, and hurriedly unfastening the strings of her apron, put that useful article of apparel beneath the cushion of her chair.

She brought the stranger, who seemed ill at ease, into the room. He gazed at her furtively, and listened in a preoccupied fashion as the old lady apologized for the appearance of the room, and her husband’s coat, a garment which he usually reserved for the garden. She then waited as patiently as her sex would permit, for him to broach his business, but he was at first strangely silent.

“I—was asked to call,” he said at last, and stooped and picked a piece of cotton from his trousers. “I come from ‘Maw and Muggins.’”

The old lady started. “Is anything the matter?” she asked, breathlessly. “Has anything happened to Herbert? What is it? What is it?”

Her husband interposed. “There, there, mother,” he said, hastily. “Sit down, and don’t jump to conclusions. You’ve not brought bad news, I’m sure, sir;” and he eyed the other wistfully.

“I’m sorry—” began the visitor.

“Is he hurt?” demanded the mother, wildly.

The visitor bowed in assent. “Badly hurt,” he said, quietly, “but he is not in any pain.”

“Oh, thank God!” said the old woman, clasping her hands. “Thank God for that! Thank—”

She broke off suddenly as the sinister meaning of the assurance dawned upon her and she saw the awful confirmation of her fears in the other's averted face. She caught her breath, and turning to her slower-witted husband, laid her trembling old hand upon his. There was a long silence.

"He was caught in the machinery," said the visitor at length in a low voice.

"Caught in the machinery," repeated Mr. White, in a dazed fashion, "yes."

He sat staring blankly out at the window, and taking his wife's hand between his own, pressed it as he had been wont to do in their old courting-days nearly forty years before.

"He was the only one left to us," he said, turning gently to the visitor. "It is hard."

The other coughed, and rising, walked slowly to the window. "The firm wished me to convey their sincere sympathy with you in your great loss," he said, without looking round. "I beg that you will understand I am only their servant and merely obeying orders."

There was no reply; the old woman's face was white, her eyes staring, and her breath inaudible; on the husband's face was a look such as his friend the sergeant might have carried into his first action.

"I was to say that 'Maw and Meggins' disclaim all responsibility," continued the other. "They admit no liability at all, but in consideration of your son's services, they wish to present you with a certain sum as compensation."

Mr. White dropped his wife's hand, and rising to his feet, gazed with a look of horror at his visitor. His dry lips shaped the words, "How much?"

"Two hundred pounds," was the answer.

Unconscious of his wife's shriek, the old man smiled faintly, put out his hands like a sightless man, and dropped, a senseless heap, to the floor.

III

In the huge new cemetery, some two miles distant, the old people buried their dead, and came back to a house steeped in shadow and silence. It was all over so quickly that at first they could hardly realize it, and remained in a state of expectation as though of something else to happen—something else which was to lighten this load, too heavy for old hearts to bear.

But the days passed, and expectation gave place to resignation—the hopeless resignation of the old, sometimes miscalled, apathy. Sometimes they hardly exchanged a word, for now they had nothing to talk about, and their days were long to weariness.

It was about a week after that the old man, waking suddenly in the night, stretched out his hand and found himself alone. The room was in darkness, and the sound of subdued weeping came from the window. He raised himself in bed and listened.

“Come back,” he said, tenderly. “You will be cold.”

“It is colder for my son,” said the old woman, and wept afresh.

The sound of her sobs died away on his ears. The bed was warm, and his eyes heavy with sleep. He dozed fitfully, and then slept until a sudden wild cry from his wife awoke him with a start.

“The paw!” she cried wildly. “The monkey’s paw!”

He started up in alarm. “Where? Where is it? What’s the matter?”

She came stumbling across the room toward him. “I want it,” she said, quietly. “You’ve not destroyed it?”

“It’s in the parlour, on the bracket,” he replied, marvelling. “Why?”

She cried and laughed together, and bending over, kissed his cheek.

“I only just thought of it,” she said, hysterically. “Why didn’t I think of it before? Why didn’t you think of it?”

“Think of what?” he questioned.

“The other two wishes,” she replied, rapidly. “We’ve only had one.”

“Was not that enough?” he demanded, fiercely.

“No,” she cried, triumphantly; “we’ll have one more. Go down and get it quickly, and wish our boy alive again.”

The man sat up in bed and flung the bedclothes from his quaking limbs. “Good God, you are mad!” he cried, aghast.

“Get it,” she panted; “get it quickly, and wish—Oh, my boy, my boy!”

Her husband struck a match and lit the candle. “Get back to bed,” he said, unsteadily. “You don’t know what you are saying.”

“We had the first wish granted,” said the old woman, feverishly; “why not the second?”

“A coincidence,” stammered the old man.

“Go and get it and wish,” cried his wife, quivering with excitement.

The old man turned and regarded her, and his voice shook. “He has been dead ten days, and besides he—I would not tell you else, but—I could only recognize him by his clothing. If he was too terrible for you to see then, how now?”

“Bring him back,” cried the old woman, and dragged him toward the door. “Do you think I fear the child I have nursed?”

He went down in the darkness, and felt his way to the parlour, and then to the mantelpiece. The talisman was in its place, and a horrible fear that the unspoken wish might bring his mutilated son before him ere he could escape from the room seized upon him, and he caught his breath as he found that he had lost the direction of the door. His brow cold with sweat, he felt his way round the table, and groped along the wall until he found himself in the small passage with the unwholesome thing in his hand.

Even his wife's face seemed changed as he entered the room. It was white and expectant, and to his fears seemed to have an unnatural look upon it. He was afraid of her.

"Wish!" she cried, in a strong voice.

"It is foolish and wicked," he faltered.

"Wish!" repeated his wife.

He raised his hand. "I wish my son alive again."

The talisman fell to the floor, and he regarded it fearfully. Then he sank trembling into a chair as the old woman, with burning eyes, walked to the window and raised the blind.

He sat until he was chilled with the cold, glancing occasionally at the figure of the old woman peering through the window. The candle-end, which had burned below the rim of the china candlestick, was throwing pulsating shadows on the ceiling and walls, until, with a flicker larger than the rest, it expired. The old man, with an unspeakable sense of relief at the failure of the talisman, crept back to his bed, and a minute or two afterward the old woman came silently and apathetically beside him.

Neither spoke, but lay silently listening to the ticking of the clock. A stair creaked, and a squeaky mouse scurried noisily through the wall. The darkness was oppressive, and after lying for some time screwing up his courage, he took the box of matches, and striking one, went downstairs for a candle.

At the foot of the stairs the match went out, and he paused to strike another; and at the same moment a knock, so quiet and stealthy as to be scarcely audible, sounded on the front door.

The matches fell from his hand and spilled in the passage. He stood motionless, his breath suspended until the knock was repeated. Then he turned and fled swiftly back to his room, and closed the door behind him. A third knock sounded through the house.

"What's that?" cried the old woman, starting up.

"A rat," said the old man in shaking tones—"a rat. It passed me on the stairs."

His wife sat up in bed listening. A loud knock resounded through the house.

"It's Herbert!" she screamed. "It's Herbert!"

She ran to the door, but her husband was before her, and catching her by the arm, held her tightly.

"What are you going to do?" he whispered hoarsely.

"It's my boy; it's Herbert!" she cried, struggling mechanically. "I forgot it was two miles away. What are you holding me for? Let go. I must open the door."

"For God's sake don't let it in," cried the old man, trembling.

"You're afraid of your own son," she cried, struggling. "Let me go. I'm coming, Herbert; I'm coming."

There was another knock, and another. The old woman with a sudden wrench broke free and ran from the room. Her husband followed to the landing, and called after her appealingly as she hurried downstairs. He heard the chain rattle back and the bottom bolt drawn slowly and stiffly from the socket. Then the old woman's voice, strained and panting.

"The bolt," she cried, loudly. "Come down. I can't reach it."

But her husband was on his hands and knees groping wildly on the floor in search of the paw. If he could only find it before the thing outside got in. A perfect fusillade of knocks reverberated through the house, and he heard the scraping of a chair as his wife put it down in the passage against the door. He heard the creaking of the bolt as it came slowly back, and at the same moment he found the monkey's paw, and frantically breathed his third and last wish.

The knocking ceased suddenly, although the echoes of it were still in the house. He heard the chair drawn back, and the door opened. A cold wind rushed up the staircase, and a long loud wail of disappointment and misery from his wife gave him courage to run down to her side, and then to the gate beyond. The street lamp flickering opposite shone on a quiet and deserted road.

BILL'S PAPER CHASE

Sailormen 'ave their faults, said the night watchman, frankly. I'm not denying of it. I used to 'ave myself when I was at sea, but being close with their money is a fault as can seldom be brought ag'in 'em.

I saved some money once—two golden sovereigns, owing to a 'ole in my pocket. Before I got another ship I slept two nights on a doorstep and 'ad nothing to eat, and I found them two sovereigns in the lining o' my coat when I was over two thousand miles away from the nearest pub.

I on'y knew one miser all the years I was at sea. Thomas Geary 'is name was, and we was shipmates aboard the barque Grenada, homeward bound from Sydney to London.

Thomas was a man that was getting into years; sixty, I think 'e was, and old enough to know better. 'E'd been saving 'ard for over forty years, and as near as we could make out 'e was worth a matter o' six 'undered pounds. He used to be fond o' talking about it, and letting us know how much better off 'e was than any of the rest of us.

We was about a month out from Sydney when old Thomas took sick. Bill Hicks said that it was owing to a ha'penny he couldn't account for; but Walter Jones, whose family was always ill, and thought 'e knew a lot about it, said that 'e knew wot it was, but 'e couldn't remember the name of it, and that when we got to London and Thomas saw a doctor, we should see as 'ow 'e was right.

Whatever it was the old man got worse and worse. The skipper came down and gave 'im some physic and looked at 'is tongue, and then 'e looked at our tongues to see wot the difference was. Then 'e left the cook in charge of 'im and went off.

The next day Thomas was worse, and it was soon clear to everybody but 'im that 'e was slipping 'is cable. He wouldn't believe it at first, though the cook told 'im, Bill Hicks told him, and Walter Jones 'ad a grandfather that went off in just the same way.

"I'm not going to die," says Thomas "How can I die and leave all that money?"

"It'll be good for your relations, Thomas," says Walter Jones.

"I ain't got any," says the old man.

"Well, your friends, then, Thomas," says Walter, soft-like.

"Ain't got any," says the old man ag'in.

"Yes, you 'ave, Thomas," says Walter, with a kind smile; "I could tell you one you've got."

Thomas shut his eyes at 'im and began to talk pitiful about 'is money and the 'ard work 'e'd 'ad saving of it. And by-and-by 'e got worse, and didn't reckernise us, but thought we was a pack o' greedy, drunken sailormen. He thought Walter Jones was a shark, and told 'im so, and, try all 'e could, Walter couldn't persuade 'im different.

He died the day arter. In the morning 'e was whimpering about 'is money ag'in, and angry with Bill when 'e reminded 'im that 'e couldn't take it with 'im, and 'e made Bill promise that 'e should be buried just as 'e was. Bill tucked him up arter that, and when 'e felt a canvas belt tied round the old man's waist 'e began to see wot 'e was driving at.

The weather was dirty that day and there was a bit o' sea running, consequently all 'ands was on deck, and a boy about sixteen wot used to 'elp the steward down aft was lookin' arter Thomas. Me and Bill just run down to give a look at the old man in time.

"I am going to take it with me, Bill," says the old man.

"That's right," says Bill.

"My mind's—easy now," says Thomas. "I gave it to Jimmy—to—to—throw overboard for me."

"Wot?" says Bill, staring.

"That's right, Bill," says the boy. "He told me to. It was a little packet o' banknotes. He gave me tuppence for doing it."

Old Thomas seemed to be listening. 'Is eyes was open, and 'e looked artful at Bill to think what a clever thing 'e'd done.

"Nobody's goin'-to spend-my money," 'e says. "Nobody's"

We drew back from 'is bunk and stood staring at 'im. Then Bill turned to the boy.

"Go and tell the skipper 'e's gone," 'e says, "and mind, for your own sake, don't tell the skipper or anybody else that you've thrown all that money overboard."

"Why not?" says Jimmy.

"Becos you'll be locked up for it," says Bill; "you'd no business to do it. You've been and broke the law. It ought to ha' been left to somebody."

Jimmy looked scared, and arter 'e was gone I turned to Bill, and I looks at 'im and I says "What's the little game, Bill?"

"Game?" said Bill, snorting at me. "I don't want the pore boy to get into trouble, do I? Pore little chap. You was young yourself once."

"Yes," I says; "but I'm a bit older now, Bill, and unless you tell me what your little game is, I shall tell the skipper myself, and the chaps too. Pore old Thomas told 'im to do it, so where's the boy to blame?"

"Do you think Jimmy did?" says Bill, screwing up his nose at me. "That little varmint is walking about worth six 'undered quid. Now you keep your mouth shut and I'll make it worth your while."

Then I see Bill's game. "All right, I'll keep quiet for the sake of my half," I says, looking at 'im.

I thought he'd ha' choked, and the langwidge 'e see fit to use was a'most as much as I could answer.

"Very well, then," 'e says, at last, "halves it is. It ain't robbery becos it belongs to nobody, and it ain't the boy's becos 'e was told to throw it overboard."

They buried pore old Thomas next morning, and arter it was all over Bill put 'is 'and on the boy's shoulder as they walked for'ard and 'e says, "Poor old Thomas 'as gone to look for 'is money," he says; "wonder whether 'e'll find it! Was it a big bundle, Jimmy?"

"No," says the boy, shaking 'is 'ead. "They was six 'undered pound notes and two sovereigns, and I wrapped the sovereigns up in the notes to make 'em sink. Fancy throwing money away like that, Bill: seems a sin, don't it?"

Bill didn't answer 'im, and that afternoon the other chaps below being asleep we searched 'is bunk through and through without any luck, and at last Bill sat down and swore 'e must ha' got it about 'im.

We waited till night, and when everybody was snoring 'ard we went over to the boy's bunk and went all through 'is pockets and felt the linings, and then we went back to our side and Bill said wot 'e thought about Jimmy in whispers.

"He must ha' got it tied round 'is waist next to 'is skin, like Thomas 'ad," I says.

We stood there in the dark whispering, and then Bill couldn't stand it any longer, and 'e went over on tiptoe to the bunk ag'in. He was tremblin' with excitement and I wasn't much better, when all of a sudden the cook sat up in 'is bunk with a dreadful laughing scream and called out that somebody was ticklin' 'im.

I got into my bunk and Bill got into 'is, and we lay there listening while the cook, who was a terrible ticklish man, leaned out of 'is bunk and said wot 'e'd do if it 'appened ag'in.

"Go to sleep," says Walter Jones; "you're dreamin'. Who d'you think would want to tickle you?"

"I tell you," says the cook, "somebody come over and tickled me with a 'and the size of a leg o' mutton. I feel creepy all over."

Bill gave it up for that night, but the next day 'e pretended to think Jimmy was gettin' fat an' 'e caught 'old of 'im and prodded 'im all over. He thought 'e felt something round 'is waist, but 'e couldn't be sure, and Jimmy made such a noise that the other chaps interfered and told Bill to leave 'im alone. For a whole week we tried to find that money, and couldn't, and Bill said it was a suspicious thing

that Jimmy kept aft a good deal more than 'e used to, and 'e got an idea that the boy might ha' 'idden it somewhere there. At the end of that time, 'owever, owing to our being short-'anded, Jimmy was sent for'ard to work as ordinary seaman, and it began to be quite noticeable the way 'e avoided Bill.

At last one day we got 'im alone down the fo'c'sle, and Bill put 'is arm round 'im and got im on the locker and asked 'im straight out where the money was.

"Why, I chucked it overboard," he says. "I told you so afore. What a memory you've got, Bill!"

Bill picked 'im up and laid 'im on the locker, and we searched 'im thoroughly. We even took 'is boots off, and then we 'ad another look in 'is bunk while 'e was putting 'em on ag'in.

"If you're innercent," says Bill, "why don't you call out?—eh?"

"Because you told me not to say anything about it, Bill," says the boy. "But I will next time. Loud, I will."

"Look 'ere," says Bill, "you tell us where it is, and the three of us'll go shares in it. That'll be two 'undered pounds each, and we'll tell you 'ow to get yours changed without getting caught. We're cleverer than you are, you know."

"I know that, Bill," says the boy; "but it's no good me telling you lies. I chucked it overboard."

"Very good, then," says Bill, getting up. "I'm going to tell the skipper."

"Tell 'im," says Jimmy. "I don't care."

"Then you'll be searched arter you've stepped ashore," says Bill, "and you won't be allowed on the ship ag'in. You'll lose it all by being greedy, whereas if you go shares with us you'll 'ave two 'undered pounds."

I could see as 'ow the boy 'adn't thought o' that, and try as 'e would 'e couldn't 'ide 'is feelin's. He called Bill a red-nosed shark, and 'e called me somethin' I've forgotten now.

"Think it over," says Bill; "mind, you'll be collared as soon as you've left the gangway and searched by the police."

"And will they tickle the cook too, I wonder?" says Jimmy, savagely.

"And if they find it you'll go to prison," says Bill, giving 'im a clump o' the side o' the 'ead, "and you won't like that, I can tell you."

"Why, ain't it nice, Bill?" says Jimmy, holding 'is ear.

Bill looked at 'im and then 'e steps to the ladder. "I'm not going to talk to you any more, my lad," 'e says. "I'm going to tell the skipper."

He went up slowly, and just as 'e reached the deck Jimmy started up and called 'im. Bill pretended not to 'ear, and the boy ran up on deck and follered 'im; and arter a little while they both came down again together.

"Did you wish to speak to me, my lad?" says Bill, 'olding 'is 'ead up.

"Yes," says the boy, fiddling with 'is fingers; "if you keep your ugly mouth shut, we'll go shares."

"Ho!" says Bill, "I thought you throwed it overboard!"

"I thought so, too, Bill," says Jimmy, very softly, "and when I came below ag'in I found it in my trousers pocket."

"Where is it now?" says Bill.

"Never mind where it is," says the boy; "you couldn't get it if I was to tell you. It'll take me all my time to do it myself."

"Where is it?" says Bill, ag'in. "I'm goin' to take care of it. I won't trust you."

"And I can't trust you," says Jimmy.

"If you don't tell me where it is this minute," says Bill, moving to the ladder ag'in, "I'm off to tell the skipper. I want it in my 'ands, or at any rate my share of it. Why not share it out now?"

"Because I 'aven't got it," says Jimmy, stamping 'is foot, "that's why, and it's all your silly fault. Arter you came pawing through my pockets when you thought I was asleep I got frightened and 'id it."

"Where?" says Bill.

“In the second mate’s mattress,” says Jimmy. “I was tidying up down aft and I found a ‘ole in the underneath side of ‘is mattress and I shoved it in there, and poked it in with a bit o’ stick.”

“And ‘ow are you going to get it?” says Bill, scratching ‘is ‘ead.

“That’s wot I don’t know, seeing that I’m not allowed aft now,” says Jimmy. “One of us’ll ‘ave to make a dash for it when we get to London. And mind if there’s any ‘ankypanky on your part, Bill, I’ll give the show away myself.”

The cook came down just then and we ‘ad to leave off talking, and I could see that Bill was so pleased at finding that the money ‘adn’t been thrown overboard that ‘e was losing sight o’ the difficulty o’ getting at it. In a day or two, ‘owever, ‘e see it as plain as me and Jimmy did, and, as time went by, he got desprit, and frightened us both by ‘anging about aft every chance ‘e got.

The companion-way faced the wheel, and there was about as much chance o’ getting down there without being seen as there would be o’ taking a man’s false teeth out of ‘is mouth without ‘is knowing it. Jimmy went down one day while Bill was at the wheel to look for ‘is knife, wot ‘e thought ‘e’d left down there, and ‘ed ‘ardly got down afore Bill saw ‘im come up ag’in, ‘olding on to the top of a mop which the steward was using.

We couldn’t figure it out nohow, and to think o’ the second mate, a little man with a large fam’ly, who never ‘ad a penny in ‘is pocket, sleeping every night on a six ‘undered pound mattress, sent us pretty near crazy. We used to talk it over whenever we got a chance, and Bill and Jimmy could scarcely be civil to each other. The boy said it was Bill’s fault, and ‘e said it was the boy’s.

“The on’y thing I can see,” says the boy, one day, “is for Bill to ‘ave a touch of sunstroke as ‘e’s leaving the wheel one day, tumble ‘ead-first down the companion-way, and injure ‘isself so severely that ‘e can’t be moved. Then they’ll put ‘im in a cabin down aft, and p’raps I’ll ‘ave to go and nurse ‘im. Anyway, he’ll be down there.”

“It’s a very good idea, Bill,” I says.

“Ho,” says Bill, looking at me as if ‘e would eat me. “Why don’t you do it, then?”

“I’d sooner you did it, Bill,” says the boy; “still, I don’t mind which it is. Why not toss up for it?”

“Get away,” says Bill. “Get away afore I do something you won’t like, you blood-thirsty little murderer.”

“I’ve got a plan myself,” he says, in a low voice, after the boy ‘ad ‘opped off, “and if I can’t think of nothing better I’ll try it, and mind, not a word to the boy.”

He didn’t think o’ nothing better, and one night just as we was making the Channel ‘e tried ‘is plan. He was in the second mate’s watch, and by-and-by ‘e leans over the wheel and says to ‘im in a low voice, “This is my last v’y’ge, sir.”

“Oh,” says the second mate, who was a man as didn’t mind talking to a man before the mast. “How’s that?”

“I’ve got a berth ashore, sir,” says Bill, “and I wanted to ask a favour, sir.”

The second mate growled and walked off a pace or two.

“I’ve never been so ‘appy as I’ve been on this ship,” says Bill; “none of us ‘ave. We was saying so the other night, and everybody agreed as it was owing to you, sir, and your kindness to all of us.”

The second mate coughed, but Bill could see as ‘e was a bit pleased.

“The feeling came over me,” says Bill, “that when I leave the sea for good I’d like to ‘ave something o’ yours to remember you by, sir. And it seemed to me that if I ‘ad your—mattress I should think of you ev’ry night o’ my life.”

“My wot?” says the second mate, staring at ‘im. “Your mattress, sir,” says Bill. “If I might make so bold as to offer a pound for it, sir. I want something wot’s been used by you, and I’ve got a fancy for that as a keepsake.” The second mate shook ‘is ‘ead. “I’m sorry, Bill,” ‘e says, gently, “but I couldn’t let it go at that.”

“I’d sooner pay thirty shillin’s than not ‘ave it, sir,” says Bill, ‘umbly.

“I gave a lot of money for that mattress,” says the mate, ag’in. “I forgit ‘ow much, but a lot. You don’t know ‘ow valuable that mattress is.”

“I know it’s a good one, sir, else you wouldn’t ‘ave it,” says Bill. “Would a couple o’ pounds buy it, sir?”

The second mate hum’d and ha’d, but Bill was afeard to go any ‘igher. So far as ‘e could make out from Jimmy, the mattress was worth about eighteen pence—to anybody who wasn’t pertiklar.

“I’ve slept on that mattress for years,” says the second mate, looking at ‘im from the corner of ‘is eye. “I don’t believe I could sleep on another. Still, to oblige you, Bill, you shall ‘ave it at that if you don’t want it till we go ashore?”

“Thankee, sir,” says Bill, ‘ardly able to keep from dancing, “and I’ll ‘and over the two pounds when we’re paid off. I shall keep it all my life, sir, in memory of you and your kindness.”

“And mind you keep quiet about it,” says the second mate, who didn’t want the skipper to know wot ‘e’d been doing, “because I don’t want to be bothered by other men wanting to buy things as keepsakes.”

Bill promised ‘im like a shot, and when ‘e told me about it ‘e was nearly crying with joy.

“And mind,” ‘e says, “I’ve bought that mattress, bought it as it stands, and it’s got nothing to do with Jimmy. We’ll each pay a pound and halve wot’s in it.”

He persuaded me at last, but that boy watched us like a cat watching a couple of canaries, and I could see we should ‘ave all we could do to deceive ‘im. He seemed more suspicious o’ Bill than me, and ‘e kep’ worrying us nearly every day to know what we were going to do.

We beat about in the channel with a strong ‘ead-wind for four days, and then a tug picked us up and towed us to London.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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