WILLIAM WYMARK JACOBS

AT SUNWICH PORT, COMPLETE

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Jacobs W.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

The ancient port of Sunwich was basking in the sunshine of a July afternoon. A rattle of cranes and winches sounded from the shipping in the harbour, but the town itself was half asleep. Somnolent shopkeepers in dim back parlours coyly veiled their faces in red handkerchiefs from the too ardent flies, while small boys left in charge noticed listlessly the slow passing of time as recorded by the church clock.

It is a fine church, and Sunwich is proud of it. The tall grey tower is a landmark at sea, but from the narrow streets of the little town itself it has a disquieting appearance of rising suddenly above the roofs huddled beneath it for the purpose of displaying a black-faced clock with gilt numerals whose mellow chimes have recorded the passing hours for many generations of Sunwich men.

Regardless of the heat, which indeed was mild compared with that which raged in his own bosom, Captain Nugent, fresh from the inquiry of the collision of his ship *Conqueror* with the German barque *Hans Muller*, strode rapidly up the High Street in the direction of home. An honest seafaring smell, compounded of tar, rope, and fish, known to the educated of Sunwich as ozone, set his thoughts upon the sea. He longed to be aboard ship again, with the Court of Inquiry to form part of his crew. In all his fifty years of life he had never met such a collection of fools. His hard blue eyes blazed as he thought of them, and the mouth hidden by his well-kept beard was set with anger.

Mr. Samson Wilks, his steward, who had been with him to London to give evidence, had had a time upon which he looked back in later years with much satisfaction at his powers of endurance. He was with the captain, and yet not with him. When they got out of the train at Sunwich he hesitated as to whether he should follow the captain or leave him. His excuse for following was the bag, his reason for leaving the volcanic condition of its owner's temper, coupled with the fact that he appeared to be sublimely ignorant that the most devoted steward in the world was tagging faithfully along a yard or two in the rear.

The few passers-by glanced at the couple with interest. Mr. Wilks had what is called an expressive face, and he had worked his sandy eyebrows, his weak blue eyes, and large, tremulous mouth into such an expression of surprise at the finding of the Court, that he had all the appearance of a beholder of visions. He changed the bag to his other hand as they left the town behind them, and regarded with gratitude the approaching end of his labours.

At the garden-gate of a fair-sized house some half-mile along the road the captain stopped, and after an impatient fumbling at the latch strode up the path, followed by Mr. Wilks, and knocked at the door. As he paused on the step he half turned, and for the first time noticed the facial expression of his faithful follower.

"What the dickens are you looking like that for?" he demanded.

"I've been surprised, sir," conceded Mr. Wilks; "surprised and astonished."

Wrath blazed again in the captain's eyes and set lines in his forehead. He was being pitied by a steward!

"You've been drinking," he said, crisply; "put that bag down."

"Arsking your pardon, sir," said the steward, twisting his unusually dry lips into a smile, "but I've 'ad no opportunity, sir—I've been follerin' you all day, sir."

A servant opened the door. "You've been soaking in it for a month," declared the captain as he entered the hall. "Why the blazes don't you bring that bag in? Are you so drunk you don't know what you are doing?"

Mr. Wilks picked the bag up and followed humbly into the house. Then he lost his head altogether, and gave some colour to his superior officer's charges by first cannoning into the servant and then wedging the captain firmly in the doorway of the sitting-room with the bag.

"Steward!" rasped the captain.

"Yessir," said the unhappy Mr. Wilks.

"Go and sit down in the kitchen, and don't leave this house till you're sober."

Mr. Wilks disappeared. He was not in his first lustre, but he was an ardent admirer of the sex, and in an absent-minded way he passed his arm round the handmaiden's waist, and sustained a buffet which made his head ring.

"A man o' your age, and drunk, too," explained the damsel.

Mr. Wilks denied both charges. It appeared that he was much younger than he looked, while, as for drink, he had forgotten the taste of it. A question as to the reception Ann would have accorded a boyish teetotaler remained unanswered.

In the sitting-room Mrs. Kingdom, the captain's widowed sister, put down her crochet-work as her brother entered, and turned to him expectantly. There was an expression of loving sympathy on her mild and rather foolish face, and the captain stiffened at once.

"I was in the wrong," he said, harshly, as he dropped into a chair; "my certificate has been suspended for six months, and my first officer has been commended."

"Suspended?" gasped Mrs. Kingdom, pushing back the white streamer to the cap which she wore in memory of the late Mr. Kingdom, and sitting upright. "You?"

"I think that's what I said," replied her brother.

Mrs. Kingdom gazed at him mournfully, and, putting her hand behind her, began a wriggling search in her pocket for a handkerchief, with the idea of paying a wholesome tribute of tears. She was a past-master in the art of grief, and, pending its extraction, a docile tear hung on her eyelid and waited. The captain eyed her preparations with silent anger.

"I am not surprised," said Mrs. Kingdom, dabbing her eyes; "I expected it somehow. I seemed to have a warning of it. Something seemed to tell me; I couldn't explain, but I seemed to know."

She sniffed gently, and, wiping one eye at a time, kept the disengaged one charged with sisterly solicitude upon her brother. The captain, with steadily rising anger, endured this game of one-eyed bo-peep for five minutes; then he rose and, muttering strange things in his beard, stalked upstairs to his room.

Mrs. Kingdom, thus forsaken, dried her eyes and resumed her work. The remainder of the family were in the kitchen ministering to the wants of a misunderstood steward, and, in return, extracting information which should render them independent of the captain's version.

"Was it very solemn, Sam?" inquired Miss Nugent, aged nine, who was sitting on the kitchen table.

Mr. Wilks used his hands and eyebrows to indicate the solemnity of the occasion.

"They even made the cap'n leave off speaking," he said, in an awed voice.

"I should have liked to have been there," said Master Nugent, dutifully.

"Ann," said Miss Nugent, "go and draw Sam a jug of beer."

"Beer, Miss?" said Ann.

"A jug of beer," repeated Miss Nugent, peremptorily.

Ann took a jug from the dresser, and Mr. Wilks, who was watching her, coughed helplessly. His perturbation attracted the attention of his hostess, and, looking round for the cause, she was just in time to see Ann disappearing into the larder with a cream jug.

"The big jug, Ann," she said, impatiently; "you ought to know Sam would like a big one."

Ann changed the jugs, and, ignoring a mild triumph in Mr. Wilks's eye, returned to the larder, whence ensued a musical trickling. Then Miss Nugent, raising the jug with some difficulty, poured out a tumbler for the steward with her own fair hands.

"Sam likes beer," she said, speaking generally.

"I knew that the first time I see him, Miss," remarked the vindictive Ann.

Mr. Wilks drained his glass and set it down on the table again, making a feeble gesture of repulse as Miss Nugent refilled it.

"Go on, Sam," she said, with kindly encouragement; "how much does this jug hold, Jack?"

"Quart," replied her brother.

"How many quarts are there in a gallon?"

"Four."

Miss Nugent looked troubled. "I heard father say he drinks gallons a day," she remarked; "you'd better fill all the jugs, Ann."

"It was only 'is way o' speaking," said Mr. Wilks, hurriedly; "the cap'n is like that sometimes."

"I knew a man once, Miss," said Ann, "as used to prefer to 'ave it in a wash-hand basin. Odd, ugly-looking man 'e was; like Mr. Wilks in the face, only better-looking."

Mr. Wilks sat upright and, in the mental struggle involved in taking in this insult in all its ramifications, did not notice until too late that Miss Nugent had filled his glass again.

"It must ha' been nice for the captain to 'ave you with 'im to-day," remarked Ann, carelessly.

"It was," said Mr. Wilks, pausing with the glass at his lips and eyeing her sternly. "Eighteen years I've bin with 'im—ever since 'e 'ad a ship. 'E took a fancy to me the fust time 'e set eyes on me."

"Were you better-looking then, Sam?" inquired Miss Nugent, shuffling closer to him on the table and regarding him affectionately.

"Much as I am now, Miss," replied Mr. Wilks, setting down his glass and regarding Ann's giggles with a cold eye.

Miss Nugent sighed. "I love you, Sam," she said, simply. "Will you have some more beer?"

Mr. Wilks declined gracefully. "Eighteen years I've bin with the cap'n," he remarked, softly; "through calms and storms, fair weather and foul, Samson Wilks 'as been by 'is side, always ready in a quiet and 'umble way to do 'is best for 'im, and now—now that 'e is on his beam-ends and lost 'is ship, Samson Wilks'll sit down and starve ashore till he gets another."

At these touching words Miss Nugent was undisguisedly affected, and wiping her bright eyes with her pinafore, gave her small, well-shaped nose a slight touch *en passant* with the same useful garment, and squeezed his arm affectionately.

"It's a lively look-out for me if father is going to be at home for long," remarked Master Nugent. "Who'll get his ship, Sam?"

"Shouldn't wonder if the fust officer, Mr. Hardy, got it," replied the steward. "He was going dead-slow in the fog afore he sent down to rouse your father, and as soon as your father came on deck 'e went at 'arfspeed. Mr. Hardy was commended, and your father's certifikit was suspended for six months."

Master Nugent whistled thoughtfully, and quitting the kitchen proceeded upstairs to his room, and first washing himself with unusual care for a boy of thirteen, put on a clean collar and brushed his hair. He was not going to provide a suspended master-mariner with any obvious reasons for fault-finding. While he was thus occupied the sitting-room bell rang, and Ann, answering it, left Mr. Wilks in the kitchen listening with some trepidation to the conversation.

"Is that steward of mine still in the kitchen?" demanded the captain, gruffly.

"Yessir," said Ann.

"What's he doing?"

Mr. Wilks's ears quivered anxiously, and he eyed with unwonted disfavour the evidences of his late debauch.

"Sitting down, sir," replied Ann.

"Give him a glass of ale and send him off," commanded the captain; "and if that was Miss Kate I heard talking, send her in to me."

Ann took the message back to the kitchen and, with the air of a martyr engaged upon an unpleasant task, drew Mr. Wilks another glass of ale and stood over him with well-affected wonder while he drank it. Miss Nugent walked into the sitting-room, and listening in a perfunctory fashion to a shipmaster's platitude on kitchen-company, took a seat on his knee and kissed his ear.

CHAPTER II

The downfall of Captain Nugent was for some time a welcome subject of conversation in marine circles at Sunwich. At The Goblets, a rambling old inn with paved courtyard and wooden galleries, which almost backed on to the churchyard, brother-captains attributed it to an error of judgment; at the Two Schooners on the quay the profanest of sailormen readily attributed it to an all-seeing Providence with a dislike of over-bearing ship-masters.

The captain's cup was filled to the brim by the promotion of his first officer to the command of the *Conqueror*. It was by far the largest craft which sailed from the port of Sunwich, and its master held a corresponding dignity amongst the captains of lesser vessels. Their allegiance was now transferred to Captain Hardy, and the master of a brig which was in the last stages of senile decay, meeting Nugent in The Goblets, actually showed him by means of two lucifer matches how the collision might have been avoided.

A touching feature in the business, and a source of much gratification to Mr. Wilks by the sentimental applause evoked by it, was his renunciation of the post of steward on the ss. *Conqueror*. Sunwich buzzed with the tidings that after eighteen years' service with Captain Nugent he preferred starvation ashore to serving under another master. Although comfortable in pocket and known to be living with his mother, who kept a small general shop, he was regarded as a man on the brink of starvation. Pints were thrust upon him, and the tale of his nobility increased with much narration. It was considered that the whole race of stewards had acquired fresh lustre from his action.

His only unfavourable critic was the erring captain himself. He sent a peremptory summons to Mr. Wilks to attend at Equator Lodge, and the moment he set eyes upon that piece of probity embarked upon such a vilification of his personal defects and character as Mr. Wilks had never even dreamt of. He wound up by ordering him to rejoin the ship forthwith.

"Arsking your pardon, sir," said Mr. Wilks, with tender reproach, "but I couldn't."

"Are you going to live on your mother, you hulking rascal?" quoth the incensed captain.

"No, sir," said Mr. Wilks. "I've got a little money, sir; enough for my few wants till we sail again."

"When I sail again you won't come with me," said the captain, grimly. "I suppose you want an excuse for a soak ashore for six months!"

Mr. Wilks twiddled his cap in his hands and smiled weakly.

"I thought p'r'aps as you'd like me to come round and wait at table, and help with the knives and boots and such-like," he said, softly. "Ann is agreeable."

"Get out of the house," said the captain in quiet, measured tones.

Mr. Wilks went, but on his way to the gate he picked up three pieces of paper which had blown into the garden, weeded two pieces of grass from the path, and carefully removed a dead branch from a laurel facing the window. He would have done more but for an imperative knocking on the glass, and he left the premises sadly, putting his collection of rubbish over the next garden fence as he passed it.

But the next day the captain's boots bore such a polish that he was able to view his own startled face in them, and at dinner-time the brightness of the knives was so conspicuous that Mrs. Kingdom called Ann in for the purpose of asking her why she didn't always do them like that. Her brother ate his meal in silence, and going to his room afterwards discovered every pair of boots he possessed, headed by the tall sea-boots, standing in a nicely graduated line by the wall, and all shining their hardest.

For two days did Mr. Wilks do good by stealth, leaving Ann to blush to find it fame; but on the third day at dinner, as the captain took up his knife and fork to carve, he became aware of a shadow standing behind his chair. A shadow in a blue coat with metal buttons, which, whipping up the first plate carved, carried it to Mrs. Kingdom, and then leaned against her with the vegetable dishes.

The dishes clattered a little on his arm as he helped the captain, but the latter, after an impressive pause and a vain attempt to catch the eye of Mr. Wilks, which was intent upon things afar off, took up the spoon and helped himself. From the unwonted silence of Miss Nugent in the presence of anything unusual it was clear to him that the whole thing had been carefully arranged. He ate in silence, and a resolution to kick Mr. Wilks off the premises vanished before the comfort, to say nothing of the dignity, afforded by his presence. Mr. Wilks, somewhat reassured, favoured Miss Nugent with a wink to which, although she had devoted much time in trying to acquire the art, she endeavoured in vain to respond.

It was on the day following this that Jack Nugent, at his sister's instigation, made an attempt to avenge the family honour. Miss Nugent, although she treated him with scant courtesy herself, had a touching faith in his prowess, a faith partly due to her brother occasionally showing her his bicep muscles in moments of exaltation.

"There's that horrid Jem Hardy," she said, suddenly, as they walked along the road.

"So it is," said Master Nugent, but without any display of enthusiasm.

"Halloa, Jack," shouted Master Hardy across the road.

"The suspense became painful."

"Halloa," responded the other.

"He's going to fight you," shrilled Miss Nugent, who thought these amenities ill-timed; "he said so."

Master Hardy crossed the road. "What for?" he demanded, with surprise.

"Because you're a nasty, horrid boy," replied Miss Nugent, drawing herself up.

"Oh," said Master Hardy, blankly.

The two gentlemen stood regarding each other with uneasy grins; the lady stood by in breathless expectation. The suspense became painful.

"Who are you staring at?" demanded Master Nugent, at last.

"You," replied the other; "who are you staring at?"

"You," said Master Nugent, defiantly.

There was a long interval, both gentlemen experiencing some difficulty in working up sufficient heat for the engagement.

"You hit me and see what you'll get," said Master Hardy, at length.

"You hit me," said the other.

"Cowardy, cowardy custard," chanted the well-bred Miss Nugent, "ate his mother's mustard. Cowardy, cowardy cus—"

"Why don't you send that kid home?" demanded Master Hardy, eyeing the fair songstress with strong disfavour.

"You leave my sister alone," said the other, giving him a light tap on the shoulder. "There's your coward's blow."

Master Hardy made a ceremonious return. "There's yours," he said. "Let's go behind the church."

His foe assented, and they proceeded in grave silence to a piece of grass screened by trees, which stood between the church and the beach. Here they removed their coats and rolled up their shirt-sleeves. Things look different out of doors, and to Miss Nugent the arms of both gentlemen seemed somewhat stick-like in their proportions.

The preliminaries were awful, both combatants prancing round each other with their faces just peering above their bent right arms, while their trusty lefts dealt vicious blows at the air. Miss Nugent turned pale and caught her breath at each blow, then she suddenly reddened with wrath as James Philip Hardy, having paid his tribute to science, began to hammer John Augustus Nugent about the face in a most painful and workmanlike fashion.

She hid her face for a moment, and when she looked again Jack was on the ground, and Master Hardy just rising from his prostrate body. Then Jack rose slowly and, crossing over to her, borrowed her handkerchief and applied it with great tenderness to his nose.

"Does it hurt, Jack?" she inquired, anxiously. "No," growled her brother.

He threw down the handkerchief and turned to his opponent again; Miss Nugent, who was careful about her property, stooped to recover it, and immediately found herself involved in a twisting tangle of legs, from which she escaped by a miracle to see Master Hardy cuddling her brother round the neck with one hand and punching him as hard and as fast as he could with the other. The unfairness of it maddened her, and the next moment Master Hardy's head was drawn forcibly backwards by the hair. The pain was so excruciating that he released his victim at once, and Miss Nugent, emitting a series of terrified yelps, dashed off in the direction of home, her hair bobbing up and down on her shoulders, and her small black legs in an ecstasy of motion.

Master Hardy, with no very well-defined ideas of what he was going to do if he caught her, started in pursuit. His scalp was still smarting and his eyes watering with the pain as he pounded behind her. Panting wildly she heard him coming closer and closer, and she was just about to give up when, to her joy, she saw her father coming towards them.

Master Hardy, intent on his quarry, saw him just in time, and, swerving into the road, passed in safety as Miss Nugent flung herself with some violence at her father's waistcoat and, clinging to him convulsively, fought for breath. It was some time before she could furnish the astonished captain with full details, and she was pleased to find that his indignation led him to ignore the hair-grabbing episode, on which, to do her justice, she touched but lightly.

That evening, for the first time in his life, Captain Nugent, after some deliberation, called upon his late mate. The old servant who, since Mrs. Hardy's death the year before, had looked after the house, was out, and Hardy, unaware of the honour intended him, was scandalized by the manner in which his son received the visitor. The door opened, there was an involuntary grunt from Master Hardy, and the next moment he sped along the narrow passage and darted upstairs. His father, after waiting in vain for his return, went to the door himself.

"Good evening, cap'n," he said, in surprise.

Nugent responded gruffly, and followed him into the sitting-room. To an invitation to sit, he responded more gruffly still that he preferred to stand. He then demanded instant and sufficient punishment of Master Hardy for frightening his daughter.

Even as he spoke he noticed with strong disfavour the change which had taken place in his late first officer. The change which takes place when a man is promoted from that rank to that of master is subtle, but unmistakable—sometimes, as in the present instance, more unmistakable than subtle. Captain Hardy coiled his long, sinewy form in an arm-chair and, eyeing him calmly, lit his pipe before replying.

"Boys will fight," he said, briefly.

"I'm speaking of his running after my daughter," said Nugent, sternly.

Hardy's eyes twinkled. "Young dog," he said, genially; "at his age, too."

Captain Nugent's face was suffused with wrath at the pleasantry, and he regarded him with a fixed stare. On board the *Conqueror* there was a witchery in that glance more potent than the spoken word, but in his own parlour the new captain met it calmly.

"I didn't come here to listen to your foolery," said Nugent; "I came to tell you to punish that boy of yours."

"And I sha'n't do it," replied the other. "I have got something better to do than interfere in children's quarrels. I haven't got your spare time, you know."

Captain Nugent turned purple. Such language from his late first officer was a revelation to him.

"I also came to warn you," he said, furiously, "that I shall take the law into my own hands if you refuse."

"Aye, aye," said Hardy, with careless contempt; "I'll tell him to keep out of your way. But I should advise you to wait until I have sailed."

Captain Nugent, who was moving towards the door, swung round and confronted him savagely.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"What I say," retorted Captain Hardy. "I don't want to indulge Sunwich with the spectacle of two middle-aged ship-masters at fisticuffs, but that's what'll happen if you touch my boy. It would probably please the spectators more than it would us."

"I'll cane him the first time I lay hands on him," roared Captain Nugent.

Captain Hardy's stock of patience was at an end, and there was, moreover, a long and undischarged account between himself and his late skipper. He rose and crossed to the door.

"Jem," he cried, "come downstairs and show Captain Nugent out."

There was a breathless pause. Captain Nugent ground his teeth with fury as he saw the challenge, and realized the ridiculous position into which his temper had led him; and the other, who was also careful of appearances, repented the order the moment he had given it. Matters had now, however, passed out of their hands, and both men cast appraising glances at each other's form. The only one who kept his head was Master Hardy, and it was a source of considerable relief to both of them when, from the top of the stairs, the voice of that youthful Solomon was heard declining in the most positive terms to do anything of the kind.

Captain Hardy repeated his command. The only reply was the violent closing of a door at the top of the house, and after waiting a short time he led the way to the front door himself.

"You will regret your insolence before I have done with you," said his visitor, as he paused on the step. "It's the old story of a beggar on horseback."

"It's a good story," said Captain Hardy, "but to my mind it doesn't come up to the one about Humpty-Dumpty. Good-night."

CHAPTER III

If anything was wanted to convince Captain Nugent that his action had been foolish and his language intemperate it was borne in upon him by the subsequent behaviour of Master Hardy. Generosity is seldom an attribute of youth, while egotism, on the other hand, is seldom absent. So far from realizing that the captain would have scorned such lowly game, Master Hardy believed that he lived for little else, and his Jack-in-the-box ubiquity was a constant marvel and discomfort to that irritable mariner. Did he approach a seat on the beach, it was Master Hardy who rose (at the last moment) to make room for him. Did he stroll down to the harbour, it was in the wake of a small boy looking coyly at him over his shoulder. Every small alley as he passed seemed to contain a Jem Hardy, who whizzed out like a human firework in front of him, and then followed dancing on his toes a pace or two in his rear.

This was on week-days; on the Sabbath Master Hardy's daring ingenuity led him to still further flights. All the seats at the parish church were free, but Captain Nugent, whose admirable practice it was to take his entire family to church, never thoroughly realized how free they were until Master Hardy squeezed his way in and, taking a seat next to him, prayed with unwonted fervour into the interior of a new hat, and then sitting back watched with polite composure the efforts of Miss Nugent's family to restrain her growing excitement.

Charmed with the experiment, he repeated it the following Sunday. This time he boarded the seat from the other end, and seeing no place by the captain, took one, or more correctly speaking made one, between Miss Nugent and Jack, and despite the former's elbow began to feel almost like one of the family. Hostile feelings vanished, and with an amiable smile at the half-frantic Miss Nugent he placed a "bull's-eye" of great strength in his cheek, and leaning forward for a hymn-book left one on the ledge in front of Jack. A double-distilled perfume at once assailed the atmosphere.

Miss Nugent sat dazed at his impudence, and for the first time in her life doubts as to her father's capacity stirred within her. She attempted the poor consolation of an "acid tablet," and it was at once impounded by the watchful Mrs. Kingdom. Mean-time the reek of "bull's-eyes" was insufferable.

The service seemed interminable, and all that time the indignant damsel, wedged in between her aunt and the openly exultant enemy of her House, was compelled to endure in silence. She did indeed attempt one remark, and Master Hardy, with a horrified expression of outraged piety, said "H'sh," and shook his head at her. It was almost more than flesh and blood could bear, and when the unobservant Mrs. Kingdom asked her for the text on the way home her reply nearly cost her the loss of her dinner.

The *Conqueror,* under its new commander, sailed on the day following. Mr. Wilks watched it from the quay, and the new steward observing him came to the side, and holding aloft an old pantry-cloth between his finger and thumb until he had attracted his attention, dropped it overboard with every circumstance of exaggerated horror. By the time a suitable retort had occurred to the ex-steward the steamer was half a mile distant, and the extraordinary and unnatural pantomime in which he indulged on the edge of the quay was grievously misinterpreted by a nervous man in a sailing boat.

Master Hardy had also seen the ship out, and, perched on the extreme end of the breakwater, he remained watching until she was hull down on the horizon. Then he made his way back to the town and the nearest confectioner, and started for home just as Miss Nugent, who was about to pay a call with her aunt, waited, beautifully dressed, in the front garden while that lady completed her preparations.

Feeling very spic and span, and still a trifle uncomfortable from the vigorous attentions of Ann, who cleansed her as though she had been a doorstep, she paced slowly up and down the path. Upon these occasions of high dress a spirit of Sabbath calm was wont to descend upon her and save her from escapades to which in a less severe garb she was somewhat prone.

She stopped at the gate and looked up the road. Then her face flushed, and she cast her eyes behind her to make sure that the hall-door stood open. The hated scion of the house of Hardy was coming down the road, and, in view of that fact, she forgot all else—even her manners.

The boy, still fresh from the loss of his natural protector, kept a wary eye on the house as he approached. Then all expression died out of his face, and he passed the gate, blankly ignoring the small girl who was leaning over it and apparently suffering from elephantiasis of the tongue. He went by quietly, and Miss Nugent, raging inwardly that she had misbehaved to no purpose, withdrew her tongue for more legitimate uses.

"Boo," she cried; "who had his hair pulled?"

Master Hardy pursued the even tenor of his way.

"Who's afraid to answer me for fear my father will thrash him?" cried the disappointed lady, raising her voice.

This was too much. The enemy retraced his steps and came up to the gate.

"You're a rude little girl," he said, with an insufferably grown-up air.

"Who had his hair pulled?" demanded Miss Nugent, capering wildly; "who had his hair pulled?"

"Don't be silly," said Master Hardy. "Here." He put his hand in his pocket, and producing some nuts offered them over the gate. At this Miss Nugent ceased her capering, and wrath possessed her that the enemy should thus misunderstand the gravity of the situation.

"Well, give 'em to Jack, then," pursued the boy; "he won't say no."

This was a distinct reflection on Jack's loyalty, and her indignation was not lessened by the fact that she knew it was true.

"Go away from our gate," she stormed. "If my father catches you, you'll suffer."

"Pooh!" said the dare-devil. He looked up at the house and then, opening the gate, strode boldly into the front garden. Before this intrusion Miss Nugent retreated in alarm, and gaining the door-step gazed at him in dismay. Then her face cleared suddenly, and Master Hardy looking over his shoulder saw that his retreat was cut off by Mr. Wilks.

"Don't let him hurt me, Sam," entreated Miss Nugent, piteously.

Mr. Wilks came into the garden and closed the gate behind him.

"I wasn't going to hurt her," cried Master Hardy, anxiously; "as if I should hurt a girl!

"Wot are you doing in our front garden, then?" demanded Mr. Wilks.

He sprang forward suddenly and, catching the boy by the collar with one huge hand, dragged him, struggling violently, down the side-entrance into the back garden. Miss Nugent, following close behind, sought to improve the occasion.

"See what you get by coming into our garden," she said.

The victim made no reply. He was writhing strenuously in order to frustrate Mr. Wilks's evident desire to arrange him comfortably for the administration of the stick he was carrying. Satisfied at last, the ex-steward raised his weapon, and for some seconds plied it briskly. Miss Nugent trembled, but sternly repressing sympathy for the sufferer, was pleased that the long arm of justice had at last over-taken him.

"Let him go now, Sam," she said; "he's crying."

"I'm not," yelled Master Hardy, frantically.

"I can see the tears," declared Miss Nugent, bending.

Mr. Wilks plied the rod again until his victim, with a sudden turn, fetched him a violent kick on the shin and broke loose. The ex-steward set off in pursuit, somewhat handicapped by the fact that he dare not go over flower-beds, whilst Master Hardy was singularly free from such prejudices. Miss Nugent ran to the side-entrance to cut off his retreat. She was willing for him to be released, but not to escape, and so it fell out that the boy, dodging beneath Mr. Wilks's outspread arms, charged blindly up the side-entrance and bowled the young lady over.

There was a shrill squeal, a flutter of white, and a neat pair of button boots waving in the air. Then Miss Nugent, sobbing piteously, rose from the puddle into which she had fallen and surveyed her garments. Mr. Wilks surveyed them, too, and a very cursory glance was sufficient to show him that the case was beyond his powers. He took the outraged damsel by the hand, and led her, howling lustily, in to the horrified Ann.

"My word," said she, gasping. "Look at your gloves! Look at your frock!"

But Miss Nugent was looking at her knees. There was only a slight redness about the left, but from the right a piece of skin was indubitably missing. This knee she gave Ann instructions to foment with fair water of a comfortable temperature, indulging in satisfied prognostications as to the fate of Master Hardy when her father should see the damage.

The news, when the captain came home, was broken to him by degrees. He was first shown the flower-beds by Ann, then Mrs. Kingdom brought in various soiled garments, and at the psychological moment his daughter bared her knees.

"What will you do to him, father?" she inquired.

The captain ignored the question in favour of a few remarks on the subject of his daughter's behaviour, coupled with stern inquiries as to where she learnt such tricks. In reply Miss Nugent sheltered herself behind a list which contained the names of all the young gentlemen who attended her kindergarten class and many of the young ladies, and again inquired as to the fate of her assailant.

Jack came in soon after, and the indefatigable Miss Nugent produced her knees again. She had to describe the injury to the left, but the right spoke for itself. Jack gazed at it with indignation, and then, without waiting for his tea, put on his cap and sallied out again.

He returned an hour later, and instead of entering the sitting-room went straight upstairs to bed, from whence he sent down word by the sympathetic Ann that he was suffering from a bad headache, which he proposed to treat with raw meat applied to the left eye. His nose, which was apparently suffering from sympathetic inflammation, he left to take care of itself, that organ bitterly resenting any treatment whatsoever.

He described the battle to Kate and Ann the next day, darkly ascribing his defeat to a mysterious compound which Jem Hardy was believed to rub into his arms; to a foolish error of judgment at the beginning of the fray, and to the sun which shone persistently in his eyes all the time. His audience received the explanations in chilly silence.

"And he said it was an accident he knocked you down," he concluded; "he said he hoped you weren't hurt, and he gave me some toffee for you."

"What did you do with it?" demanded Miss Nugent.

"I knew you wouldn't have it," replied her brother, inconsequently, "and there wasn't much of it."

His sister regarded him sharply.

"You don't mean to say you ate it?" she screamed.

"Why not?" demanded her brother. "I wanted comforting, I can tell you."

"I wonder you were not too—too proud," said Miss Nugent, bitterly.

"I'm never too proud to eat toffee," retorted Jack, simply.

He stalked off in dudgeon at the lack of sympathy displayed by his audience, and being still in need of comforting sought it amid the raspberry-canes.

His father noted his son's honourable scars, but made no comment. As to any action on his own part, he realized to the full the impotence of a law-abiding and dignified citizen when confronted by lawless youth. But Master Hardy came to church no more. Indeed, the following Sunday he was fully occupied on the beach, enacting the part of David, after first impressing the raving Mr. Wilks into that of Goliath.

CHAPTER IV

For the next month or two Master Hardy's existence was brightened by the efforts of an elderly steward who made no secret of his intentions of putting an end to it. Mr. Wilks at first placed great reliance on the saw that "it is the early bird that catches the worm," but lost faith in it when he found that it made no provision for cases in which the worm leaning from its bedroom window addressed spirited remonstrances to the bird on the subject of its personal appearance.

To the anxious inquiries of Miss Nugent, Mr. Wilks replied that he was biding his time. Every delay, he hinted, made it worse for Master Hardy when the day of retribution should dawn, and although she pleaded earnestly for a little on account he was unable to meet her wishes. Before that day came, however, Captain Nugent heard of the proceedings, and after a painful interview with the steward, during which the latter's failings by no means escaped attention, confined him to the house.

An excellent reason for absenting himself from school was thus denied to Master Hardy; but it has been well said that when one door closes another opens, and to his great satisfaction the old servant, who had been in poor health for some time, suddenly took to her bed and required his undivided attention.

He treated her at first with patent medicines purchased at the chemist's, a doctor being regarded by both of them as a piece of unnecessary extravagance; but in spite of four infallible remedies she got steadily worse. Then a doctor was called in, and by the time Captain Hardy returned home she had made a partial recovery, but was clearly incapable of further work. She left in a cab to accept a home with a niece, leaving the captain confronted with a problem which he had seen growing for some time past.

"I can't make up my mind what to do with you," he observed, regarding his son.

"I'm very comfortable," was the reply.

"You're too comfortable," said his father.

"You're running wild. It's just as well poor old Martha has gone; it has brought things to a head."

"We could have somebody else," suggested his son.

The captain shook his head. "I'll give up the house and send you to London to your Aunt Mary," he said, slowly; "she doesn't know you, and once I'm at sea and the house given up, she won't be able to send you back."

Master Hardy, who was much averse to leaving Sunwich and had heard accounts of the lady in question which referred principally to her strength of mind, made tender inquiries concerning his father's comfort while ashore.

"I'll take rooms," was the reply, "and I shall spend as much time as I can with you in London. You want looking after, my son; I've heard all about you."

His son, without inquiring as to the nature of the information, denied it at once upon principle; he also alluded darkly to his education, and shook his head over the effects of a change at such a critical period of his existence.

"And you talk too much for your age," was his father's comment when he had finished. "A year or two with your aunt ought to make a nice boy of you; there's plenty of room for improvement."

He put his plans in hand at once, and a week before he sailed again had disposed of the house. Some of the furniture he kept for himself; but the bulk of it went to his sister as conscience-money.

Master Hardy, in very low spirits, watched it taken away. Big men in hob-nailed boots ran noisily up the bare stairs, and came down slowly, steering large pieces of furniture through narrow passages, and using much vain repetition when they found their hands acting as fenders. The wardrobe, a piece of furniture which had been built for larger premises, was a particularly hard nut to crack, but they succeeded at last—in three places.

A few of his intimates came down to see the last of him, and Miss Nugent, who in some feminine fashion regarded the move as a triumph for her family, passed by several times. It might have been chance, it might have been design, but the boy could not help noticing that when the piano, the wardrobe, and other fine pieces were being placed in the van, she was at the other end of the road a position from which such curios as a broken washstand or a two-legged chair never failed to entice her.

It was over at last. The second van had disappeared, and nothing was left but a litter of straw and paper. The front door stood open and revealed desolation. Miss Nugent came to the gate and stared in superciliously.

"I'm glad you're going," she said, frankly.

Master Hardy scarcely noticed her. One of his friends who concealed strong business instincts beneath a sentimental exterior had suggested souvenirs and given him a spectacle-glass said to have belonged to Henry VIII., and he was busy searching his pockets for an adequate return. Then Captain Hardy came up, and first going over the empty house, came out and bade his son accompany him to the station. A minute or two later and they were out of sight; the sentimentalist stood on the curb gloating over a newly acquired penknife, and Miss Nugent, after being strongly reproved by him for curiosity, paced slowly home with her head in the air.

Sunwich made no stir over the departure of one of its youthful citizens. Indeed, it lacked not those who would have cheerfully parted with two or three hundred more. The boy was quite chilled by the tameness of his exit, and for years afterwards the desolate appearance of the platform as the train steamed out occurred to him with an odd sense of discomfort. In all Sunwich there was only one person who grieved over his departure, and he, after keeping his memory green for two years, wrote off fivepence as a bad debt and dismissed him from his thoughts.

Two months after the *Conqueror* had sailed again Captain Nugent obtained command of a steamer sailing between London and the Chinese ports. From the gratified lips of Mr. Wilks, Sunwich heard of this new craft, the particular glory of which appeared to be the luxurious appointments of the steward's quarters. Language indeed failed Mr. Wilks in describing it, and, pressed for details, he could only murmur disjointedly of satin-wood, polished brass, and crimson velvet.

Jack Nugent hailed his father's departure with joy. They had seen a great deal of each other during the latter's prolonged stay ashore, and neither had risen in the other's estimation in consequence. He became enthusiastic over the sea as a profession for fathers, and gave himself some airs over acquaintances less fortunately placed. In the first flush of liberty he took to staying away from school, the education thus lost being only partially atoned for by a grown-up style of composition engendered by dictating excuses to the easy-going Mrs. Kingdom.

At seventeen he learnt, somewhat to his surprise, that his education was finished. His father provided the information and, simply as a matter of form, consulted him as to his views for the future. It was an important thing to decide upon at short notice, but he was equal to it, and, having suggested gold-digging as the only profession he cared for, was promptly provided by the incensed captain with a stool in the local bank.

He occupied it for three weeks, a period of time which coincided to a day with his father's leave ashore. He left behind him his initials cut deeply in the lid of his desk, a miscellaneous collection of cheap fiction, and a few experiments in book-keeping which the manager ultimately solved with red ink and a ruler.

A slight uneasiness as to the wisdom of his proceedings occurred to him just before his father's return, but he comforted himself and Kate with the undeniable truth that after all the captain couldn't eat him. He was afraid, however, that the latter would be displeased, and, with a constitutional objection to unpleasantness, he contrived to be out when he returned, leaving to Mrs. Kingdom the task of breaking the news.

The captain's reply was brief and to the point. He asked his son whether he would like to go to sea, and upon receiving a decided answer in the negative, at once took steps to send him there. In two days he had procured him an outfit, and within a week Jack Nugent, greatly to his own surprise, was on the way to Melbourne as apprentice on the barque *Silver Stream*.

He liked it even less than the bank. The monotony of the sea was appalling to a youth of his tastes, and the fact that the skipper, a man who never spoke except to find fault, was almost loquacious with him failed to afford him any satisfaction. He liked the mates no better than the skipper, and having said as much one day to the second officer, had no reason afterwards to modify his opinions. He lived a life apart, and except for the cook, another martyr to fault-finding, had no society.

In these uncongenial circumstances the new apprentice worked for four months as he had never believed it possible he could work. He was annoyed both at the extent and the variety of his tasks, the work of an A.B. being gratuitously included in his curriculum. The end of the voyage found him desperate, and after a hasty consultation with the cook they deserted together and went up-country.

Letters, dealing mainly with the ideas and adventures of the cook, reached Sunwich at irregular intervals, and were eagerly perused by Mrs. Kingdom and Kate, but the captain forbade all mention of him. Then they ceased altogether, and after a year or two of unbroken silence Mrs. Kingdom asserted herself, and a photograph in her possession, the only one extant, exposing the missing Jack in petticoats and sash, suddenly appeared on the drawing-room mantelpiece.

The captain stared, but made no comment. Disappointed in his son, he turned for consolation to his daughter, noting with some concern the unaccountable changes which that young lady underwent during his absences. He noticed a difference after every voyage. He left behind him on one occasion a nice trim little girl, and returned to find a creature all legs and arms. He returned again and found the arms less obnoxious and the legs hidden by a long skirt; and as he complained in secret astonishment to his sister, she had developed a motherly manner in her dealings with him which was almost unbearable.

"She'll grow out of it soon," said Mrs. Kingdom; "you wait and see."

The captain growled and waited, and found his sister's prognostications partly fulfilled. The exuberance of Miss Nugent's manner was certainly modified by time, but she developed instead a quiet, unassuming habit of authority which he liked as little.

"She gets made such a fuss of, it's no wonder," said Mrs. Kingdom, with a satisfied smile. "I never heard of a girl getting as much attention as she does; it's a wonder her head isn't turned."

"Eh!" said the startled captain; "she'd better not let me see anything of it."

"Just so," said Mrs. Kingdom.

The captain dwelt on these words and kept his eyes open, and, owing to his daughter's benevolent efforts on his behalf, had them fully occupied. He went to sea firmly convinced that she would do something foolish in the matrimonial line, the glowing terms in which he had overheard her describing the charms of the new postman to Mrs. Kingdom filling him with the direst forebodings.

It was his last voyage. An unexpected windfall from an almost forgotten uncle and his own investments had placed him in a position of modest comfort, and just before Miss Nugent reached her twentieth birthday he resolved to spend his declining days ashore and give her those advantages of parental attention from which she had been so long debarred.

Mr. Wilks, to the inconsolable grief of his ship-mates, left with him. He had been for nearly a couple of years in receipt of an annuity purchased for him under the will of his mother, and his defection left a gap never to be filled among comrades who had for some time regarded him in the light of an improved drinking fountain.

CHAPTER V

On a fine afternoon, some two months after his release from the toils of the sea, Captain Nugent sat in the special parlour of The Goblets. The old inn offers hospitality to all, but one parlour has by ancient tradition and the exercise of self-restraint and proper feeling been from time immemorial reserved for the elite of the town.

The captain, confident in the security of these unwritten regulations, conversed freely with his peers. He had been moved to speech by the utter absence of discipline ashore, and from that had wandered to the growing evil of revolutionary ideas at sea. His remarks were much applauded, and two brother-captains listened with grave respect to a disquisition on the wrongs of shipmasters ensuing on the fancied rights of sailor men, the only discordant note being struck by the harbour-master, a man whose ideas had probably been insidiously sapped by a long residence ashore.

"A man before the mast," said the latter, fortifying his moral courage with whisky, "is a human being."

"Nobody denies it," said Captain Nugent, looking round.

One captain agreed with him.

"Why don't they act like it, then?" demanded the other.

Nugent and the first captain, struck by the remark, thought they had perhaps been too hasty in their admission, and waited for number two to continue. They eyed him with silent encouragement.

"Why don't they act like it, then?" repeated number two, who, being a man of few ideas, was not disposed to waste them.

Captain Nugent and his friend turned to the harbour-master to see how he would meet this poser.

"They mostly do," he replied, sturdily. "Treat a seaman well, and he'll treat you well."

This was rank heresy, and moreover seemed to imply something. Captain Nugent wondered dismally whether life ashore would infect him with the same opinions.

"What about that man of mine who threw a belaying-pin at me?"

The harbour-master quailed at the challenge. The obvious retort was offensive.

"I shall carry the mark with me to my grave," added the captain, as a further inducement to him to reply.

"I hope that you'll carry it a long time," said the harbour-master, gracefully.

"Here, look here, Hall!" expostulated captain number two, starting up.

"It's all right, Cooper," said Nugent.

"It's all right," said captain number one, and in a rash moment undertook to explain. In five minutes he had clouded Captain Cooper's intellect for the afternoon.

He was still busy with his self-imposed task when a diversion was created by the entrance of a new arrival. A short, stout man stood for a moment with the handle of the door in his hand, and then came in, carefully bearing before him a glass of gin and water. It was the first time that he had set foot there, and all understood that by this intrusion Mr. Daniel Kybird sought to place sea-captains and other dignitaries on a footing with the keepers of slop-shops and dealers in old clothes. In the midst of an impressive silence he set his glass upon the table and, taking a chair, drew a small clay pipe from his pocket.

Aghast at the intrusion, the quartette conferred with their eyes, a language which is perhaps only successful in love. Captain Cooper, who was usually moved to speech by externals, was the first to speak.

"You've got a sty coming on your eye, Hall," he remarked.

"I daresay."

"If anybody's got a needle," said the captain, who loved minor operations.

Nobody heeded him except the harbour-master, and he muttered something about beams and motes, which the captain failed to understand. The others were glaring darkly at Mr. Kybird, who had taken up a newspaper and was busy perusing it.

"Are you looking for anybody?" demanded Captain Nugent, at last.

"No," said Mr. Kybird, looking at him over the top of his paper.

"What have you come here for, then?" inquired the captain.

"I come 'ere to drink two o' gin cold," returned Mr. Kybird, with a dignity befitting the occupation.

"Well, suppose you drink it somewhere else," suggested the captain.

Mr. Kybird had another supposition to offer. "Suppose I don't?" he remarked. "I'm a respectable British tradesman, and my money is as good as yours. I've as much right to be here as you 'ave. I've never done anything I'm ashamed of!"

"And you never will," said Captain Cooper's friend, grimly, "not if you live to be a hundred."

Mr. Kybird looked surprised at the tribute. "Thankee," he said, gratefully.

"Well, we don't want you here," said Captain Nugent. "We prefer your room to your company."

Mr. Kybird leaned back in his chair and twisted his blunt features into an expression of withering contempt. Then he took up a glass and drank, and discovered too late that in the excitement of the moment he had made free with the speaker's whisky.

"Don't apologize," interrupted the captain; "it's soon remedied."

He took the glass up gingerly and flung it with a crash into the fireplace. Then he rang the bell.

"I've smashed a dirty glass," he said, as the bar-man entered. "How much?"

The man told him, and the captain, after a few stern remarks about privacy and harpies, left the room with his friends, leaving the speechless Mr. Kybird gazing at the broken glass and returning evasive replies to the inquiries of the curious Charles.

He finished his gin and water slowly. For months he had been screwing up his courage to carry that room by assault, and this was the result. He had been insulted almost in the very face of Charles, a youth whose reputation as a gossip was second to none in Sunwich.

"Do you know what I should do if I was you?" said that worthy, as he entered the room again and swept up the broken glass.

"I do not," said Mr. Kybird, with lofty indifference.

"I shouldn't come 'ere again, that's what I should do," said Charles, frankly. "Next time he'll throw you in the fireplace."

"Ho," said the heated Mr. Kybird. "Ho, will he? I'd like to see 'im. I'll make 'im sorry for this afore I've done with 'im. I'll learn 'im to insult a respectable British tradesman. I'll show him who's who."

"What'll you do?" inquired the other.

"Never you mind," said Mr. Kybird, who was not in a position to satisfy his curiosity—"never you mind. You go and get on with your work, Charles, and p'r'aps by the time your moustache 'as grown big enough to be seen, you'll 'ear something."

"I 'eard something the other day," said the bar-man, musingly; "about you it was, but I wouldn't believe it."

"Wot was it?" demanded the other.

"Nothing much," replied Charles, standing with his hand on the door-knob, "but I wouldn't believe it of you; I said I couldn't."

"Wot—was—it?" insisted Mr. Kybird.

"Why, they said you once gave a man a fair price for a pair of trousers," said the barman, indignantly.

He closed the door behind him softly, and Mr. Kybird, after a brief pause, opened it again and, more softly still, quitted the precincts of The Goblets, and stepped across the road to his emporium.

Captain Nugent, in happy ignorance of the dark designs of the wardrobe dealer, had also gone home. He was only just beginning to realize the comparative unimportance of a retired shipmaster, and the knowledge was a source of considerable annoyance to him. No deferential mates listened respectfully to his instructions, no sturdy seaman ran to execute his commands or trembled mutinously at his wrath. The only person in the wide world who stood in awe of him was the general servant Bella, and she made no attempt to conceal her satisfaction at the attention excited by her shortcomings.

He paused a moment at the gate and then, walking slowly up to the door, gave it the knock of a master. A full minute passing, he knocked again, remembering with some misgivings his stern instructions of the day before that the door was to be attended by the servant and by nobody else. He had seen Miss Nugent sitting at the window as he passed it, but in the circumstances the fact gave him no comfort. A third knock was followed by a fourth, and then a distressed voice upstairs was heard calling wildly upon the name of Bella.

At the fifth knock the house shook, and a red-faced maid with her shoulders veiled in a large damp towel passed hastily down the staircase and, slipping the catch, passed more hastily still upstairs again, affording the indignant captain a glimpse of a short striped skirt as it turned the landing.

"Is there any management at all in this house?" he inquired, as he entered the room.

"Bella was dressing," said Miss Nugent, calmly, "and you gave orders yesterday that nobody else was to open the door."

"Nobody else when she's available," qualified her father, eyeing her sharply. "When I give orders I expect people to use their common sense. Why isn't my tea ready? It's five o'clock."

"The clock's twenty minutes fast," said Kate. "Who's been meddling with it?" demanded her father, verifying the fact by his watch.

Miss Nugent shook her head. "It's gained that since you regulated it last night," she said, with a smile.

The captain threw himself into an easy-chair, and with one eye on the clock, waited until, at five minutes to the hour by the right time, a clatter of crockery sounded from the kitchen, and Bella, still damp, came in with the tray. Her eye was also on the clock, and she smirked weakly in the captain's direction as she saw that she was at least two minutes ahead of time. At a minute to the hour the teapot itself was on the tray, and the heavy breathing of the handmaiden in the kitchen was audible to all.

"Punctual to the minute, John," said Mrs. Kingdom, as she took her seat at the tray. "It's wonderful how that girl has improved since you've been at home. She isn't like the same girl."

She raised the teapot and, after pouring out a little of the contents, put it down again and gave it another two minutes. At the end of that time, the colour being of the same unsatisfactory paleness, she set the pot down and was about to raise the lid when an avalanche burst into the room and, emptying some tea into the pot from a canister-lid, beat a hasty retreat.

"Good tea and well-trained servants," muttered the captain to his plate. "What more can a man want?"

Mrs. Kingdom coughed and passed his cup; Miss Nugent, who possessed a healthy appetite, serenely attacked her bread and butter; conversation languished.

"I suppose you've heard the news, John?" said his sister.

"I daresay I have," was the reply.

"Strange he should come back after all these years," said Mrs. Kingdom; "though, to be sure, I don't know why he shouldn't. It's his native place, and his father lives here."

"Who are you talking about?" inquired the captain.

"Why, James Hardy," replied his sister. "I thought you said you had heard. He's coming back to Sunwich and going into partnership with old Swann, the shipbroker. A very good thing for him, I should think."

"I'm not interested in the doings of the Hardys," said the captain, gruffly.

"I'm sure I'm not," said his sister, defensively.

Captain Nugent proceeded with his meal in silence. His hatred of Hardy had not been lessened by the success which had attended that gentleman's career, and was not likely to be improved by the well-being of Hardy junior. He passed his cup for some more tea, and, with a furtive glance at the photograph on the mantelpiece, wondered what had happened to his own son.

"I don't suppose I should know him if I saw him," continued Mrs. Kingdom, addressing a respectable old arm-chair; "London is sure to have changed him."

"Is this water-cress?" inquired the captain, looking up from his plate.

"Yes. Why?" said Mrs. Kingdom.

"I only wanted information," said her brother, as he deposited the salad in question in the slop-basin.

Mrs. Kingdom, with a resigned expression, tried to catch her niece's eye and caught the captain's instead. Miss Nugent happening to glance up saw her fascinated by the basilisk glare of the master of the house.

"Some more tea, please," she said.

Her aunt took her cup, and in gratitude for the diversion picked out the largest lumps of sugar in the basin.

"London changes so many people," mused the persevering lady, stirring her tea. "I've noticed it before. Why it is I can't say, but the fact remains. It seems to improve them altogether. I dare say that young Hardy—"

"Will you understand that I won't have the Hardys mentiond in my house?" said the captain, looking up. "I'm not interested in their business, and I will not have it discussed here."

"As you please, John," said his sister, drawing herself up. "It's your house and you are master here. I'm sure I don't want to discuss them. Nothing was farther from my thoughts. You understand what your father says, Kate?"

"Perfectly," said Miss Nugent. "When the desire to talk about the Hardys becomes irresistible we must go for a walk."

The captain turned in his chair and regarded his daughter steadily. She met his gaze with calm affection.

"I wish you were a boy," he growled.

"You're the only man in Sunwich who wishes that," said Miss Nugent, complacently, "and I don't believe you mean it. If you'll come a little closer I'll put my head on your shoulder and convert you."

"Kate!" said Mrs. Kingdom, reprovingly.

"And, talking about heads," said Miss Nugent, briskly, "reminds me that I want a new hat. You needn't look like that; good-looking daughters always come expensive."

She moved her chair a couple of inches in his direction and smiled alluringly. The captain shifted uneasily; prudence counselled flight, but dignity forbade it. He stared hard at Mrs. Kingdom, and a smile of rare appreciation on that lady's face endeavoured to fade slowly and naturally into another expression. The chair came nearer.

"Don't be foolish," said the captain, gruffly.

The chair came still nearer until at last it touched his, and then Miss Nugent, with a sigh of exaggerated content, allowed her head to sink gracefully on his shoulder.

"Most comfortable shoulder in Sunwich," she murmured; "come and try the other, aunt, and perhaps you'll get a new bonnet."

Mrs. Kingdom hastened to reassure her brother. She would almost as soon have thought of putting her head on the block. At the same time it was quite evident that she was taking a mild joy in his discomfiture and eagerly awaiting further developments.

"When you are tired of this childish behaviour, miss," said the captain, stiffly–

There was a pause. "Kate!" said Mrs. Kingdom, in tones of mild reproof, "how can you?"

"Very good," said the captain, we'll see who gets tired of it first. "I'm in no hurry."
A delicate but unmistakable snore rose from his shoulder in reply.

CHAPTER VI

For the first few days after his return Sunwich was full of surprises to Jem Hardy. The town itself had changed but little, and the older inhabitants were for the most part easily recognisable, but time had wrought wonders among the younger members of the population: small boys had attained to whiskered manhood, and small girls passing into well-grown young women had in some cases even changed their names.

The most astounding and gratifying instance of the wonders effected by time was that of Miss Nugent. He saw her first at the window, and with a ready recognition of the enchantment lent by distance took the first possible opportunity of a closer observation. He then realized the enchantment afforded by proximity. The second opportunity led him impetuously into a draper's shop, where a magnificent shop-walker, after first ceremoniously handing him a high cane chair, passed on his order for pins in a deep and thrilling baritone, and retired in good order.

By the end of a week his observations were completed, and Kate Nugent, securely enthroned in his mind as the incarnation of feminine grace and beauty, left but little room for other matters. On his second Sunday at home, to his father's great surprise, he attended church, and after contemplating Miss Nugent's back hair for an hour and a half came home and spoke eloquently and nobly on "burying hatchets," "healing old sores," "letting bygones be bygones," and kindred topics.

"I never take much notice of sermons myself," said the captain, misunderstanding.

"Sermon?" said his son. "I wasn't thinking of the sermon, but I saw Captain Nugent there, and I remembered the stupid quarrel between you. It's absurd that it should go on indefinitely."

"Why, what does it matter?" inquired the other, staring. "Why shouldn't it? Perhaps it's the music that's affected you; some of those old hymns—"

"It wasn't the sermon and it wasn't the hymns," said his son, disdainfully; "it's just common sense. It seems to me that the enmity between you has lasted long enough."

"I don't see that it matters," said the captain; "it doesn't hurt me. Nugent goes his way and I go mine, but if I ever get a chance at the old man, he'd better look out. He wants a little of the starch taken out of him."

"Mere mannerism," said his son.

"He's as proud as Lucifer, and his girl takes after him," said the innocent captain. "By the way, she's grown up a very good-looking girl. You take a look at her the next time you see her."

His son stared at him.

"She'll get married soon, I should think," continued the other. "Young Murchison, the new doctor here, seems to be the favourite. Nugent is backing him, so they say; I wish him joy of his father-in-law."

Jem Hardy took his pipe into the garden, and, pacing slowly up and down the narrow paths, determined, at any costs, to save Dr. Murchison from such a father-in-law and Kate Nugent from any husband except of his choosing. He took a seat under an old apple tree, and, musing in the twilight, tried in vain to think of ways and means of making her acquaintance.

Meantime they passed each other as strangers, and the difficulty of approaching her only made the task more alluring. In the second week he reckoned up that he had seen her nine times. It was a satisfactory total, but at the same time he could not shut his eyes to the fact that five times out of that number he had seen Dr. Murchison as well, and neither of them appeared to have seen him.

He sat thinking it over in the office one hot afternoon. Mr. Adolphus Swann, his partner, had just returned from lunch, and for about the fifth time that day was arranging his white hair and short, neatly pointed beard in a small looking-glass. Over the top of it he glanced at Hardy, who, leaning back in his chair, bit his pen and stared hard at a paper before him.

"Is that the manifest of the North Star?" he inquired.

"No," was the reply.

Mr. Swann put his looking-glass away and watched the other as he crossed over to the window and gazed through the small, dirty panes at the bustling life of the harbour below. For a short time Hardy stood gazing in silence, and then, suddenly crossing the room, took his hat from a peg and went out.

"Restless," said the senior partner, wiping his folders with great care and putting them on. "Wonder where he's put that manifest."

He went over to the other's desk and opened a drawer to search for it. Just inside was a sheet of foolscap, and Mr. Swann with growing astonishment slowly mastered the contents.

"See her as often as possible."

"Get to know some of her friends."

"Try and get hold of the old lady."

"Find out her tastes and ideas."

"Show my hand before Murchison has it all his own way."

"It seems to me," said the bewildered shipbroker, carefully replacing the paper, "that my young friend is looking out for another partner. He hasn't lost much time."

He went back to his seat and resumed his work. It occurred to him that he ought to let his partner know what he had seen, and when Hardy returned he had barely seated himself before Mr. Swann with a mysterious smile crossed over to him, bearing a sheet of foolscap.

"Try and dress as well as my partner," read the astonished Hardy. "What's the matter with my clothes? What do you mean?"

Mr. Swann, in place of answering, returned to his desk and, taking up another sheet of foolscap, began to write again, holding up his hand for silence as Hardy repeated his question. When he had finished his task he brought it over and placed it in the other's hand.

"Take her little brother out for walks."

Hardy crumpled the paper up and flung it aside. Then, with his face crimson, he stared wrathfully at the benevolent Swann.

"It's the safest card in the pack," said the latter. "You please everybody; especially the little brother. You should always hold his hand—it looks well for one thing, and if you shut your eyes—"

"I don't want any of your nonsense," said the maddened Jem. "What do you mean by reading my private papers?"

"I came over to look for the manifest," said Mr. Swann, "and I read it before I could make out what it was. You must admit it's a bit cryptic. I thought it was a new game at first. Getting hold of the old lady sounds like a sort of blind-man's buff. But why not get hold of the young one? Why waste time over—"

"Go to the devil," said the junior partner.

"Any more suggestions I can give you, you are heartily welcome to," said Mr. Swann, going back to his seat. "All my vast experience is at your service, and the best and sweetest and prettiest girls in Sunwich regard me as a sort of second father."

"What's a second father?" inquired Jim, looking up—"a grandfather?"

"Go your own way," said the other; "I wash my hands of you. You're not in earnest, or you'd clutch at any straw. But let me give you one word of advice. Be careful how you get hold of the old lady; let her understand from the commencement that it isn't her."

Mr. Hardy went on with his work. There was a pile of it in front of him and an accumulation in his drawers. For some time he wrote assiduously, but work was dry after the subject they had been discussing. He looked over at his partner and, seeing that that gentleman was gravely busy, reopened the matter with a jeer.

"Old maids always know most about rearing children," he remarked; "so I suppose old bachelors, looking down on life from the top shelf, think they know most about marriage."

"I wash my hands of you," repeated the senior, placidly. "I am not to be taunted into rendering first aid to the wounded."

The conscience-stricken junior lost his presence of mind. "Who's trying to taunt you?" he demanded, hotly. "Why, you'd do more harm than good."

"Put a bandage round the head instead of the heart, I expect," assented the chuckling Swann. "Top shelf, I think you said; well, I climbed there for safety."

"You must have been much run after," said his partner.

"I was," said the other. "I suppose that's why it is I am always so interested in these affairs. I have helped to marry so many people in this place, that I'm almost afraid to stir out after dark."

Hardy's reply was interrupted by the entrance of Mr. Edward Silk, a young man of forlorn aspect, who combined in his person the offices of messenger, cleaner, and office-boy to the firm. He brought in some letters, and placing them on Mr. Swann's desk retired.

"There's another," said the latter, as the door closed. "His complaint is Amelia Kybird, and he's got it badly. She's big enough to eat him, but I believe that they are engaged. Perseverance has done it in his case. He used to go about like a blighted flower—"

"I am rather busy," his partner reminded him.

Mr. Swann sighed and resumed his own labours. For some time both men wrote in silence. Then the elder suddenly put his pen down and hit his desk a noisy thump with his fist.

"I've got it," he said, briskly; "apologize humbly for all your candour, and I will give you a piece of information which shall brighten your dull eyes, raise the corners of your drooping mouth, and renew once more the pink and cream in your youthful cheeks."

"Look here—" said the overwrought Hardy.

"Samson Wilks," interrupted Mr. Swann, "number three, Fullalove Alley, at home Fridays, seven to nine, to the daughter of his late skipper, who always visits him on that day. Don't thank me, Hardy, in case you break down. She's a very nice girl, and if she had been born twenty years earlier, or I had been born twenty years later, or you hadn't been born at all, there's no saying what might not have happened."

"When I want you to interfere in my business," said Hardy, working sedulously, "I'll let you know."

"Very good," replied Swann; "still, remember Thursdays, seven to nine."

"Thursdays," said Hardy, incautiously; "why, you said Fridays just now."

Mr. Swann made no reply. His nose was immersed in the folds of a large handkerchief, and his eyes watered profusely behind his glasses. It was some minutes before he had regained his normal composure, and even then the sensitive nerves of his partner were offended by an occasional belated chuckle.

Although by dint of casual and cautious inquiries Mr. Hardy found that his partner's information was correct, he was by no means guilty of any feelings of gratitude towards him; and he only glared scornfully when that excellent but frivolous man mounted a chair on Friday afternoon, and putting the clock on a couple of hours or so, urged him to be in time.

The evening, however, found him starting slowly in the direction of Fullalove Alley. His father had gone to sea again, and the house was very dull; moreover, he felt a mild curiosity to see the changes wrought by time in Mr. Wilks. He walked along by the sea, and as the church clock struck the three-quarters turned into the alley and looked eagerly round for the old steward.

The labours of the day were over, and the inhabitants were for the most part out of doors taking the air. Shirt-sleeved householders, leaning against their door-posts smoking, exchanged ideas across the narrow space paved with cobble-stones which separated their small and ancient houses, while the matrons, more gregariously inclined, bunched in little groups and discussed subjects which in higher circles would have inundated the land with libel actions. Up and down the alley a tiny boy all

ready for bed, with the exception of his nightgown, mechanically avoided friendly palms as he sought anxiously for his mother.

The object of Mr. Hardy's search sat at the door of his front room, which opened on to the alley, smoking an evening pipe, and noting with an interested eye the doings of his neighbours. He was just preparing to draw himself up in his chair as the intruder passed, when to his utter astonishment that gentleman stopped in front of him, and taking possession of his hand shook it fervently.

"How do you do?" he said, smiling.

Mr. Wilks eyed him stupidly and, releasing his hand, coyly placed it in his trouser-pocket and breathed hard.

"I meant to come before," said Hardy, "but I've been so busy. How are you?"

Mr. Wilks, still dazed, muttered that he was very well. Then he sat bolt upright in his chair and eyed his visitor suspiciously.

"I've been longing for a chat with you about old times," said Hardy; "of all my old friends you seem to have changed the least. You don't look a day older."

"I'm getting on," said Mr. Wilks, trying to speak coldly, but observing with some gratification the effect produced upon his neighbours by the appearance of this well-dressed acquaintance.

"I wanted to ask your advice," said the unscrupulous Hardy, speaking in low tones. "I daresay you know I've just gone into partnership in Sunwich, and I'm told there's no man knows more about the business and the ins and outs of this town than you do."

Mr. Wilks thawed despite himself. His face glistened and his huge mouth broke into tremulous smiles. For a moment he hesitated, and then noticing that a little group near them had suspended their conversation to listen to his he drew his chair back and, in a kind voice, invited the searcher after wisdom to step inside.

Hardy thanked him, and, following him in, took a chair behind the door, and with an air of youthful deference bent his ear to catch the pearls which fell from the lips of his host. Since he was a babe on his mother's knee sixty years before Mr. Wilks had never had such an attentive and admiring listener. Hardy sat as though glued to his chair, one eye on Mr. Wilks and the other on the clock, and it was not until that ancient timepiece struck the hour that the ex-steward suddenly realized the awkward state of affairs.

"Any more 'elp I can give you I shall always be pleased to," he said, looking at the clock.

Hardy thanked him at great length, wondering, as he spoke, whether Miss Nugent was of punctual habits. He leaned back in his chair and, folding his arms, gazed thoughtfully at the perturbed Mr. Wilks.

"You must come round and smoke a pipe with me sometimes," he said, casually.

Mr. Wilks flushed with gratified pride. He had a vision of himself walking up to the front door of the Hardys, smoking a pipe in a well-appointed room, and telling an incredulous and envious Fullalove Alley about it afterwards.

"I shall be very pleased, sir," he said, impressively.

"Come round on Tuesday," said his visitor. "I shall be at home then."

Mr. Wilks thanked him and, spurred on to hospitality, murmured something about a glass of ale, and retired to the back to draw it. He came back with a jug and a couple of glasses, and draining his own at a draught, hoped that the example would not be lost upon his visitor. That astute person, however, after a modest draught, sat still, anchored to the half-empty glass.

"I'm expecting somebody tonight," said the ex-steward, at last.

"No doubt you have a lot of visitors," said the other, admiringly.

Mr. Wilks did not deny it. He eyed his guest's glass and fidgeted.

"Miss Nugent is coming," he said.

Instead of any signs of disorder and preparations for rapid flight, Mr. Wilks saw that the other was quite composed. He began to entertain a poor idea of Mr. Hardy's memory.

"She generally comes for a little quiet chat," he said.

"Indeed!"

"Just between the two of us," said the other.

His visitor said "Indeed," and, as though some chord of memory had been touched, sat gazing dreamily at Mr. Wilks's horticultural collection in the window. Then he changed colour a little as a smart hat and a pretty face crossed the tiny panes. Mr. Wilks changed colour too, and in an awkward fashion rose to receive Miss Nugent.

"Late as usual, Sam," said the girl, sinking into a chair. Then she caught sight of Hardy, who was standing by the door.

"It's a long time since you and I met, Miss Nugent," he said, bowing.

"Mr. Hardy?" said the girl, doubtfully.

"Yes, miss," interposed Mr. Wilks, anxious to explain his position. "He called in to see me; quite a surprise to me it was. I 'ardly knowed him."

"The last time we three met," said Hardy, who to his host's discomfort had resumed his chair, "Wilks was thrashing me and you were urging him on."

Kate Nugent eyed him carefully. It was preposterous that this young man should take advantage of a boy and girl acquaintance of eleven years before—and such an acquaintance!—in this manner. Her eyes expressed a little surprise, not unmixed with hauteur, but Hardy was too pleased to have them turned in his direction at all to quarrel with their expression.

"You were a bit of a trial in them days," said Mr. Wilks, shaking his head. "If I live to be ninety I shall never forget seeing Miss Kate capsized the way she was. The way she–"

"How is your cold?" inquired Miss Nugent, hastily.

"Better, miss, thankee," said Mr. Wilks.

"Miss Nugent has forgotten and forgiven all that long ago," said Hardy.

"Quite," assented the girl, coldly; "one cannot remember all the boys and girls one knew as a child."

"Certainly not," said Hardy. "I find that many have slipped from my own memory, but I have a most vivid recollection of you."

Miss Nugent looked at him again, and an idea, strange and incredible, dawned slowly upon her. Childish impressions are lasting, and Jem Hardy had remained in her mind as a sort of youthful ogre. He sat before her now a frank, determined-looking young Englishman, in whose honest eyes admiration of herself could not be concealed. Indignation and surprise struggled for supremacy.

"It's odd," remarked Mr. Wilks, who had a happy knack at times of saying the wrong thing, "it's odd you should 'ave 'appened to come just at the same time as Miss Kate did."

"It's my good fortune," said Hardy, with a slight bow. Then he cocked a malignant eye at the innocent Mr. Wilks, and wondered at what age men discarded the useless habit of blushing. Opposite him sat Miss Nugent, calmly observant, the slightest suggestion of disdain in her expression. Framed in the queer, high-backed old chair which had belonged to Mr. Wilks's grandfather, she made a picture at which Jem Hardy continued to gaze with respectful ardour. A hopeless sense of self-depreciation possessed him, but the idea that Murchison should aspire to so much goodness and beauty made him almost despair of his sex. His reverie was broken by the voice of Mr. Wilks.

"A quarter to eight?" said that gentleman in-credulously; "it can't be."

"I thought it was later than that," said Hardy, simply.

Mr. Wilks gasped, and with a faint shake of his head at the floor abandoned the thankless task of giving hints to a young man who was too obtuse to see them; and it was not until some time later that Mr. Hardy, sorely against his inclinations, gave his host a hearty handshake and, with a respectful bow to Miss Nugent, took his departure.

"Fine young man he's growed," said Mr. Wilks, deferentially, turning to his remaining visitor; "greatly improved, I think."

Miss Nugent looked him over critically before replying. “He seems to have taken a great fancy to you,” she remarked.

Mr. Wilks smiled a satisfied smile. “He came to ask my advice about business,” he said, softly. “He’s ‘eard two or three speak o’ me as knowing a thing or two, and being young, and just starting, ‘e came to talk it over with me. I never see a young man so pleased and ready to take advice as wot he is.”

“He is coming again for more, I suppose?” said Miss Nugent, carelessly.

Mr. Wilks acquiesced. “And he asked me to go over to his ‘ouse to smoke a pipe with ‘im on Tuesday,” he added, in the casual manner in which men allude to their aristocratic connections. “He’s a bit lonely, all by himself.”

Miss Nugent said, “Indeed,” and then, lapsing into silence, gave little occasional side-glances at Mr. Wilks, as though in search of any hidden charms about him which might hitherto have escaped her.

At the same time Mr. James Hardy, walking slowly home by the edge of the sea, pondered on further ways and means of ensnaring the affection of the ex-steward.

CHAPTER VII

The anticipations of Mr. Wilks were more than realized on the following Tuesday. From the time a trim maid showed him into the smoking-room until late at night, when he left, a feted and honoured guest, with one of his host's best cigars between his teeth, nothing that could yield him any comfort was left undone. In the easiest of easy chairs he sat in the garden beneath the leafy branches of apple trees, and undiluted wisdom and advice flowed from his lips in a stream as he beamed delightedly upon his entertainer.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.