WILLIAM WYMARK JACOBS

SALTHAVEN

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

MR. JOHN VYNER, ship-owner, pushed his chair back from his writing-table and gazed with kindly condescension at the chief clerk as he stood before it with a handful of papers.

"We shall be able to relieve you of some of your work soon, Hartley," he said, slowly. "Mr. Robert will come into the firm next week." The chief clerk bowed.

"Three years at Cambridge," resumed Mr. Vyner, meditatively, "and two years spent up and down the world studying the business methods of other nations ought to render him invaluable to us."

"No doubt, sir," said Hartley. "It is an excellent training."

"For a time," said the ship-owner, leaning back and placing the tips of his fingers together, "for a time I am afraid that he will have to have your room. Later on—ha—if a room should—ha—fall vacant in the building, we might consider taking it."

"Yes, sir," said the other.

"And, of course," resumed Mr. Vyner, "there is one great advantage in your being in the general office which must not be overlooked; you can keep an eye on the juniors better."

"It is cheerful, too, sir," suggested the chief clerk; "the only thing—"

"Yes?" said Mr. Vyner, somewhat loudly.

Mr. Hartley shrank a little. "I was going to say that it is rather a small room for Mr. Robert," he said, quickly.

"It will do for a time," said the other.

"And—and I think I told you, sir, that there is an unpleasant sm—odour."

Mr. Vyner knitted his brows. "I offered to have that seen to, but you said that you didn't mind it," he remarked.

"Just so, sir," said Hartley; "but I was thinking of Mr. Robert. He might not like it; it's very strong at times—very strong indeed."

"You ought to have had it attended to before," said Mr. Vyner, with some severity. "You had better call at Gillows' on your way home and ask them to send a man up first thing to-morrow morning."

He drew his chair to the table again, and Hartley, after lingering a moment, withdrew to his own room.

Ten out of his thirty-five years of service had been passed there, and he stifled a sigh as he looked at the neat array of drawers and pigeon-holes, the window overlooking the bridge and harbour, and the stationer's almanac which hung over the fireplace. The japanned letter-rack and the gum-bottle on the small mantelpiece were old friends.

The day's work completed, he walked home in sober thought.

It was a pleasant afternoon in May, but he was too preoccupied to pay any heed to the weather, and, after informing a man who stopped him to tell him that he had lost a wife, six children, and a right leg, that it was just five minutes past six, resumed his way with a hazy idea of having been useful to a fellow-creature.

He brightened a little as he left the bustle of the town behind, and from sheer force of habit glanced at the trim front-gardens as he passed. The cloud lifted still more as he reached his own garden and mentally compared his flowers with those he had just passed.

His daughter was out, and tea for one was laid in the front room. He drew his chair to the table, and taking up the tea-pot, which the maid had just brought in, poured himself out a cup of tea.

He looked round the comfortable room with pleasure. After all, nobody could take that from him. He stirred his tea and had just raised the cup to his lips when he set it down untasted and sat staring blankly before him. A low rumble of voices from the kitchen fell unpleasantly on his ear; and his daughter Joan had left instructions too specific to be misunderstood as to his behaviour in the event of Rosa entertaining male company during her absence. He coughed twice, loudly, and was glad to note the disappearance of the rumble. Pleased with his success he coughed a third time, a sonorous cough charged with importance. A whispered rumble, possibly a suggestion of withdrawal, came from the kitchen.

"Only his tea gone the wrong way," he heard, reassuringly, from Rosa.

The rumble, thus encouraged, deepened again. It became confident and was heard to laugh. Mr. Hartley rose and, standing on the hearthrug with legs apart, resolved to play the man. He leaned over and rang the bell. The voices stopped. Then he heard Rosa say, "Not him! you stay where you are."

She came slowly in response to the bell, and thrusting a yellow head in at the door gazed at him inquiringly.

"I—I want a little more hot water," said her master, mildly.

"More?" repeated Rosa. "Why, I brought you over a pint."

"I want some more," said Mr. Hartley. Then a bright thought struck him. "I am expecting Miss Joan home every minute," he added, significantly.

Rosa tossed her head. "She ain't coming home till nine," she remarked, "so if it's only for her you want the hot water, you won't want it."

"I—I thought I heard a man's voice," he said at last.

"Very good," said her master, with an attempt at dignity; "you can go."

Rosa went, whistling. Mr. Hartley, feeling that he had done all that could be expected of a man, sat down and resumed his tea. The rumbling from the kitchen, as though in an endeavour to make up for lost time, became continuous. It also became louder and more hilarious. Pale and determined Mr. Hartley rose a second time and, seizing the bell-pull, rang violently.

"Does anybody want to see me?" he inquired, as Rosa's head appeared.

"You? No," was the reply.

"I thought," said her master, gazing steadily at the window, "I thought somebody was inquiring for me."

"Well, there hasn't been," said Rosa.

Mr. Hartley, with a magisterial knitting of the brows, which had occasionally been found effective with junior clerks, affected to ponder.

"I—I thought I heard a man's voice," he said at last.

"Nobody's been inquiring for you," said Rosa calmly. "If they did I should come in and let you know. Nobody's been for you that I've heard of, and I don't see how they could come without me knowing it."

"Just so," said Mr. Hartley. "Just so."

He turned to the mantelpiece for his tobacco-jar, and Rosa, after standing for some time at the "ready" with a hostile stare, cleared her throat noisily and withdrew. The voices in the kitchen broke out with renewed vehemence; Mr. Hartley coughed again —a cough lacking in spirit—and, going out at the front door, passed through the side-entrance to the garden and tended his plants with his back to the kitchen window.

Hard at work at the healthful pastime of weeding, his troubles slipped from him. The path became littered with little tufts of grass, and he was just considering the possibility of outflanking the birch-broom, which had taken up an advantageous position

by the kitchen window, when a young man came down the side-entrance and greeted him with respectful enthusiasm.

"I brought you these," he said, opening a brown leather bag and extracting a few dried roots. "I saw an advertisement. I forget the name of them, but they have beautiful trumpet-shaped flowers. They are free growers, and grow yards and yards the first year."

"And miles and miles the second," said Mr. Hartley, regarding them with extraordinary ferocity. "Bindweed is the name, and once get it in your garden and you'll never get rid of it."

"That wasn't the name in the advertisement," said the other, dubiously.

"I don't suppose it was," said Hartley. "You've got a lot to learn in gardening yet, Saunders."

"Yes, sir," said the other; "I've got a good teacher, though."

Mr. Hartley almost blushed. "And how is your garden getting on?" he inquired.

"It's—it's getting on," said Mr. Saunders, vaguely.

"I must come and have a look at it," said Hartley.

"Not yet," said the young man, hastily. "Not yet. I shouldn't like you to see it just yet. Is Miss Hartley well?"

Mr. Hartley said she was, and, in an abstracted fashion, led the way down the garden to where an enormous patch of land —or so it seemed to Mr. Saunders—awaited digging. The latter removed his coat and, hanging it with great care on an apple tree, turned back his cuffs and seized the fork.

"It's grand exercise," said Mr. Hartley, after watching him for some time.

"Grand," said Mr. Saunders, briefly.

"As a young man I couldn't dig enough," continued the other, "but nowadays it gives me a crick in the back."

"Always?" inquired Mr. Saunders, with a slight huskiness.

"Always," said Mr. Hartley. "But I never do it now; Joan won't let me."

Mr. Saunders sighed at the name and resumed his digging. "Miss Hartley out?" he asked presently, in a casual voice.

"Yes; she won't be home till late," said the other. "We can have a fine evening's work free of interruptions. I'll go and get on with my weeding."

He moved off and resumed his task; Mr. Saunders, with a suppressed groan, went on with his digging. The ground got harder and harder and his back seemed almost at breaking-point. At intervals he had what gardeners term a "straight-up," and with his face turned toward the house listened intently for any sounds that might indicate the return of its mistress.

"Half-past eight," said Hartley at last; "time to knock off. I've put a few small plants in your bag for you; better put them in in the morning before you start off."

Mr. Saunders thanked him, and reaching down his coat put it on and followed Mr. Hartley to the house. The latter, steering him round by the side-entrance, accompanied him to the front gate.

"If you would like to borrow my roller or lawn-mower at any time," he said, cordially, "I should be very pleased to lend them to you. It isn't very far."

Mr. Saunders, who would sooner have died than have been seen dragging a roller through the streets, thanked him warmly. With an idea of prolonging his stay, he suggested looking at them.

"They're locked up now," said Mr. Hartley. "See them another time. Good-night."

"Good-night," said Mr. Saunders. "I'll look in to-morrow evening, if I may."

"No use to-morrow," Mr. Hartley called after him; "there will be nobody at home but Joan."

CHAPTER II

MR. ROBERT VYNER entered upon his new duties with enthusiasm. The second day he was at the office half an hour before anybody else; on the third day the staff competed among themselves for the honour of arriving first, and greeted him as respectfully as their feelings would permit when he strolled in at a quarter to eleven. The arrival of the senior partner on the day following at a phenomenally early hour, for the sake of setting an example to the junior, filled them with despair. Their spirits did not revive until Mr. John had given up the task as inconvenient and useless.

A slight fillip was given to Robert's waning enthusiasm by the arrival of new furniture for his room. A large mahogany writing-table, full of drawers and pigeon-holes, gave him a pleasant sense of importance, and the revolving chair which went with it afforded a welcome relief to a young and ardent nature. Twice the office-boy had caught the junior partner, with his legs tucked up to avoid collisions, whirling wildly around, and had waited respectfully at the door for the conclusion of the performance.

"It goes a bit stiff, Bassett," said the junior partner.

"Yessir," said Bassett.

"I'm trying to ease it a bit," explained Mr. Robert.

"Yessir," said Bassett again.

Mr. Robert regarded him closely. An undersized boy in

spectacles, with a large head and an air of gravity and old age on his young features, which the junior thought somewhat ill-placed for such an occasion.

"I suppose you never twizzle round on your chair, Bassett?" he said, slowly.

Bassett shivered at the idea. "No, sir," he said, solemnly; "I've got my work to do."

Mr. Robert sought for other explanations. "And, of course, you have a stool," he remarked; "you couldn't swing round on that."

"Not even if I wanted to, sir," said the unbending Bassett.

Mr. Robert nodded, and taking some papers from his table held them before his face and surveyed the youth over the top. Bassett stood patiently to attention.

"That's all right," said the other; "thank you."

"Thank you, sir," said Bassett, turning to the door.

"By the way," said Mr. Robert, eying him curiously as he turned the handle, "what exercise do you take?"

"Exercise, sir?" said Bassett.

Mr. Robert nodded. "What do you do of an evening for amusement after the arduous toils of the day are past? Marbles?"

"No, sir," said the outraged one. "If I have any time to spare I amuse myself with a little shorthand."

"Amuse!" exclaimed the other. He threw himself back in his chair and, sternly checking its inclination to twirl again, sought for a flaw in the armour of this paragon. "And what else do you

do in the way of recreation?"

"I've got a vivarium, sir."

Mr. Robert hesitated, but curiosity got the better of his dignity. "What's that?" he inquired.

"A thing I keep frogs and toads in, sir," was the reply.

Mr. Robert, staring hard at him, did his honest best to check the next question, but it came despite himself. "Are you—are you married, Bassett?" he inquired.

Bassett regarded him calmly. "No, sir," he said, with perfect gravity. "I live at home with my mother."

The junior partner gave him a nod of dismissal, and for some time sat gazing round the somewhat severely furnished office, wondering with some uneasiness what effect such surroundings might have on a noble but impressionable temperament. He brought round a few sketches the next day to brighten the walls, and replaced the gum-bottle and other useful ornaments by some German beer-mugs.

Even with these aids to industry he found the confinement of office somewhat irksome, and, taking a broad view of his duties, gradually relieved Bassett of his errands to the docks. It was necessary, he told himself, to get a thorough grasp of the whole business of ship-owning. In the stokeholds of Vyner and Son's' steamships he talked learnedly on coal with the firemen, and, quite unaided, hit on several schemes for the saving of coal —all admirable except for the fact: that several knots per hour would be lost.

"The thing is to take an all-round view," he said to Captain Trimblett, of the SS. Indian Chief, as he strolled back with that elderly mariner from the ship to the office one day.

"That's it, sir," said the captain.

"Don't waste, and, at the same time, don't pinch," continued Mr. Robert, oracularly.

"That's business in a nutshell," commented the captain. "Don't spoil the ship for a ha'porth of tar, and, on the other hand, don't get leaving the tar about for other people to sit on."

"But you got it off," said Robert, flushing. "You told me you had."

"As far as tar ever can be got off," asserted the captain, gloomily. "Yes. Why I put my best trousers on this morning," he continued, in a tone of vague wonder, "I'm sure I don't know. It was meant to be, I suppose; it's all for some wise purpose: that we don't know of."

"Wise fiddlesticks!" exclaimed Robert, shortly—"Your particular brand of fatalism is the most extraordinary nonsense I ever heard of. What it means: is that thousands of years ago, or millions, perhaps, was decided that I should be born on purpose to tar your blessed trousers."

"That and other things," said the immovable captain. "It's all laid down for us, everything we do, and we can't help doing it. When I put on those trousers this morning—"

"Oh, hang your trousers," said Robert. "You said it didn't matter, and you've been talking about nothing else ever since."

"I won't say another word about it," said the captain. "I remember the last pair I had done; a pair o' white ducks. My steward it was; one o' those silly, fat-headed, staring-eyed, garping—"

"Go on," said the other, grimly.

"Nice, bright young fellows," concluded the captain, hastily; "he got on very well, I believe."

"After he left you, I suppose?" said Mr. Vyner, smoothly.

"Yes," said the innocent captain. He caught a glance of the other's face and ruminated. "After I had broken him of his silly habits," he added.

He walked along smiling, and, raising his cap with a flourish, beamed in a fatherly manner on a girl who was just passing. Robert replaced his hat and glanced over his left shoulder.

"Who is that?" he inquired. "I saw her the other day; her face seems familiar to me."

"Joan Hartley," replied the captain. "Nathaniel Hartley's daughter. To my mind, the best and prettiest girl in Salthaven."

"Eh?" said the other, staring. "Hartley's daughter? Why, I should have thought—"

The best and prettiest girl in Salthaven

"Yes, sir?" said Captain Trimblett, after a pause.

"Nothing," concluded Robert, lamely. "She doesn't look like it; that's all."

"She's got his nose," maintained the captain, with the obstinate air of a man prepared to go to the stake for his opinions.

"Like as two peas their noses are; you'd know them for father and daughter anywhere by that alone."

Mr. Vyner assented absently. He was wondering where the daughter of the chief clerk got her high looks from.

"Very clever girl," continued the captain. "She got a scholarship and went to college, and then, when her poor mother died, Hartley was so lonely that she gave it all up and came home to keep house for him."

"Quite a blue-stocking," suggested Robert.

"There's nothing of the blue-stocking about her," said the captain, warmly. "In fact, I shouldn't be surprised if she became engaged soon."

Mr. Vyner became interested. "Oh!" he said, with an instinctive glance over his left shoulder.

Captain Trimblett nodded sagely. "Young fellow of the name of Saunders," he said slowly.

"Oh!" said the other again.

"You might have seen him at Wilson's, the ship-broker's," pursued the captain. "Bert Saunders his name is. Rather a dressy youngster, perhaps. Generally wears a pink shirt and a very high stand-up collar—one o' those collars that you have to get used to."

Mr. Vyner nodded.

"He's not good enough for her," said the captain, shaking his head. "But then, nobody is. Looked at that way it's all right."

"You seem to take a great interest in it," said Robert.

"He came to me with his troubles," said Captain Trimblett, bunching up his gray beard in his hand reflectively. "Leastways, he made a remark or two which I took up. Acting under my advice he is taking up gardening."

Mr. Vyner glanced at him in mystification.

"Hartley is a great gardener," explained the other with a satisfied smile. "What is the result? He can go there when he likes, so to speak. No awkwardness or anything of that sort. He can turn up there bold as brass to borrow a trowel, and take three or four hours doing it."

"You're a danger to society," said Robert, shaking his head.

"People ought to marry while they're young," said the captain. "If they don't, like as not they're crazy to marry in their old age. There's my landlord here at Tranquil Vale, fifty-two next birthday, and over his ears in love. He has got it about as bad as a man can have it."

"And the lady?" inquired Robert.

"She's all right," said the captain. He lowered his voice confidentially. "It's Peter's sister, that's the trouble. He's afraid to let her know. All we can do is to drop a little hint here and a little hint there, so as to prepare her for the news when it's broken to her."

"Is she married?" inquired Robert, pausing as they reached the office.

"No," said Captain Trimblett; "widow."

Mr. Vyner gave a low whistle. "When do you sail, cap'n?" he

inquired, in a voice oily with solicitude.

"Soon as my engine-room repairs are finished, I suppose," said the other, staring.

"And you—you are giving her hints about courtship and marriage?" inquired Mr. Vyner, in tones of carefully-modulated surprise.

"She's a sensible woman," said the captain, reddening, "and she's no more likely to marry again than I am."

"Just what I was thinking," said Mr. Vyner.

He shook his head, and, apparently deep in thought, turned and walked slowly up the stairs. He was pleased to notice as he reached the first landing that the captain was still standing where he had left him, staring up the stairs.

CHAPTER III

IN a somewhat ruffled state of mind Captain Trimblett pursued his way toward Tranquil Vale, a row of neat cottages situated about a mile and a half from the town, and inhabited principally by retired mariners. The gardens, which ran down to the river, boasted a particularly fine strain of flag-staffs; battered figure-heads in swan-like attitudes lent a pleasing touch of colour, and old boats sawn in halves made convenient arbours in which to sit and watch the passing pageant of the sea.

At No. 5 the captain paused to pass a perfectly dry boot over a scraper of huge dimensions which guarded the entrance, and, opening the door, finished off on the mat. Mrs. Susanna Chinnery, who was setting tea, looked up at his entrance, and then looked at the clock.

"Kettle's just on the boil," she remarked.

"Your kettle always is," said the captain, taking a chair —"when it's time for it to be, I mean," he added, hastily, as Mrs. Chinnery showed signs of correcting him.

"It's as easy to be punctual as otherwise," said Mrs. Chinnery; "easier, if people did but know it."

"So it is," murmured the captain, and sat gazing, with a sudden wooden expression, at a picture opposite of the eruption of Vesuvius.

"Peter's late again," said Mrs. Chinnery, in tones of hopeless

resignation.

"Business, perhaps," suggested Captain Trimblett, still intent on Vesuvius.

"For years and years you could have set the clock by him," continued Mrs. Chinnery, bustling out to the kitchen and bustling back again with the kettle; "now I never know when to expect him. He was late yesterday."

Captain Trimblett cleared his throat. "He saw a man nearly run over," he reminded her.

"Yes; but how long would that take him?" retorted Mrs. Chinnery. "If the man had been run over I could have understood it."

The captain murmured something about shock.

"On Friday he was thirty-three minutes late," continued the other.

"Friday," said the faithful captain. "Friday he stopped to listen to a man playing the bagpipes—a Scotchman."

"That was Thursday," said Mrs. Chinnery.

The captain affected to ponder. "So it was," he said, heartily. "What a memory you have got! Of course, Friday he walked back to the office for his pipe."

"Well, we won't wait for him," said Mrs. Chinnery, taking the head of the table and making the tea. "If he can't come in to time he must put up with his tea being cold. That's the way we were brought up."

"A very good way, too," said the captain. He put a radish into

his mouth and, munching slowly, fell to gazing at Vesuvius again. It was not until he had passed his cup up for the second time that a short, red-faced man came quickly into the room and, taking a chair from its place against the wall, brought it to the table and took a seat opposite the captain.

"Late again, Peter," said his sister.

"Been listening to a man playing the cornet," said Mr. Truefitt, briefly.

Captain Trimblett, taking the largest radish he could find, pushed it into his mouth and sat gazing at him in consternation. He had used up two musical instruments in less than a week.

"You're getting fond of music in your old age," said Mrs. Chinnery, tartly. "But you always are late nowadays. When it isn't music it's something else. What's come over you lately I can't think."

Mr. Truefitt cleared his throat for speech, and then, thinking better of it, helped himself to some bread and butter and went on with his meal. His eyes met those of Captain Trimblett and then wandered away to the window. The captain sprang into the breach.

"He wants a wife to keep him in order," he said, with a boldness that took Mr. Truefitt's breath away.

"Wife!" exclaimed Mrs. Chinnery. "Peter!"

She put down her cup and laughed—a laugh so free from disquietude that Mr. Truefitt groaned in spirit.

"He'll go off one of these days." said the captain with affected

joviality. "You see if he don't."

Mrs. Chinnery laughed again. "He's a born bachelor," she declared. "Why, he'd sooner walk a mile out of his way any day than meet a woman. He's been like it ever since he was a boy. When I was a girl and brought friends of mine home to tea, Peter would sit like a stuffed dummy and never say a word."

"I've known older bachelors than him to get married," said the captain. "I've known 'em down with it as sudden as heart disease. In a way, it is heart disease, I suppose."

"Peter's heart's all right," said Mrs. Chinnery.

"He might drop down any moment," declared the captain.

Mr. Truefitt, painfully conscious of their regards, passed his cup up for some more tea and made a noble effort to appear amused, as the captain cited instance after instance of confirmed bachelors being led to the altar.

"I broke the ice for you to-day," he said, as they sat after tea in the little summer-house at the bottom of the garden, smoking.

Mr. Truefitt's gaze wandered across the river. "Yes," he said, slowly, "yes."

"I was surprised at myself," said the captain.

"I was surprised at you," said Mr. Truefitt, with some energy. "So far as I can see, you made it worse."

The captain started. "I did it for the best, my lad," he said, reproachfully. "She has got to know some day. You can't be made late by cornets and bagpipes every day."

Mr. Truefitt rumpled his short gray hair. "You see, I promised

her," he said, suddenly.

"I know," said the captain, nodding. "And now you've promised Miss Willett."

"When they brought him home dead," said Mr. Truefitt, blowing out a cloud of smoke, "she was just twenty-five. Pretty she was then, cap'n, as pretty a maid as you'd wish to see. As long as I live, Susanna, and have a home, you shall share it; that's what I said to her."

The captain nodded again.

"And she's kept house for me for twenty-five years," continued Mr. Truefitt; "and the surprising thing to me is the way the years have gone. I didn't realize it until I found an old photograph of hers the other day taken when she was twenty. Men don't change much."

The captain looked at him—at the close-clipped gray whiskers, the bluish lips, and the wrinkles round the eyes. "No," he said, stoutly. "But she could live with you just the same."

The other shook his head. "Susanna would never stand another woman in the house," he said, slowly. "She would go out and earn her own living; that's her pride. And she wouldn't take anything from me. It's turning her out of house and home."

"She'd be turning herself out," said the captain.

"Of course, there is the chance she might marry again," said the other, slowly. "She's had several chances, but she refused 'em all."

"From what she said one day," said the captain, "I got the idea

that she has kept from marrying all these years for your sake."

Mr. Truefitt put his pipe down on the table and stared blankly before him. "That's the worst of it," he said, forlornly; "but something will have to be done. I've been engaged three weeks now, and every time I spend a few minutes with Cecilia—Miss Willett—I have to tell a lie about it."

"You do it very well," said his friend. "Very well indeed."

"And Susanna regards me as the most truthful man that ever breathed," continued Mr. Truefitt.

"You've got a truthful look about you," said the captain. "If I didn't know you so well I should have thought the same."

Unconscious of Mr. Truefitt's regards he rose and, leaning his arm on the fence at the bottom of the garden, watched the river.

"Miss Willett thinks she might marry again," said Mr. Truefitt, picking up his pipe and joining him. "She'd make an excellent wife for anybody—anybody."

The captain assented with a nod.

"Nobody could have a better wife," said Mr. Truefitt.

The captain, who was watching an outward-bound barque, nodded again, absently.

"She's affectionate," pursued Mr. Truefitt, "a wonderful housekeeper, a good conversationalist, a good cook, always punctual, always at home, always—"

The captain, surprised at a fluency so unusual, turned and eyed him in surprise. Mr. Truefitt broke off abruptly, and, somewhat red in the face, expressed his fear that the barque would take the

mud if she were not careful. Captain Trimblett agreed and, to his friend's relief, turned his back on him to watch her more closely. It was a comfortable position, with his arms on the fence, and he retained it until Mr. Truefitt had returned to the summer-house.

CHAPTER IV

MR. ROBERT VYNER had been busy all the afternoon, and the clock still indicated fifteen minutes short of the time at which he had intended to leave. He leaned back in his chair, and, yielding to the slight rotatory movement of that active piece of furniture, indulged in the first twirl for three days. Bassett or no Bassett, it was exhilarating, and, having gone to the limit in one direction, he obtained impetus by a clutch at the table and whirled back again. A smothered exclamation from the door arrested his attention, and putting on the break with some suddenness he found himself looking into the pretty, astonished eyes of Joan Hartley.

"I beg your pardon," she said, in confusion. "I thought it was my father."

"It—it got stuck," said Mr. Vyner, springing up and regarding the chair with great disfavour. "I was trying to loosen it. I shall have to send it back, I'm afraid; it's badly made. There's no cabinet-making nowadays."

Miss Hartley retreated to the doorway.

"I am sorry; I expected to find my father here," she said. "It used to be his room."

"Yes, it was his room," said the young man. "If you will come in and sit down I will send for him."

"It doesn't matter, thank you," said Joan, still standing by the

door. "If you will tell me where his room is now, I will go to him."

"He—he is in the general office," said Robert Vyner, slowly.

Miss Hartley bit her lip and her eyes grew sombre.

"Don't go," said Mr. Vyner, eagerly. "I'll go and fetch him. He is expecting you."

"Expecting me?" said the girl. "Why, he didn't know I was coming."

"Perhaps I misunderstood him," murmured Mr. Vyner. "Pressure of business," he said, vaguely, indicating a pile of papers on his table. "Hardly know what people do say to me."

He pushed a comfortable easy-chair to the window, and the girl, after a moment's hesitation, seated herself and became interested in the life outside. Robert Vyner, resuming his seat, leaned back and gazed at her in frank admiration.

"Nice view down the harbour, isn't it?" he said, after a long pause.

Miss Hartley agreed—and sat admiring it.

"Salthaven is a pretty place altogether, I think," continued Robert. "I was quite glad to come back to it. I like the town and I like the people. Except for holidays I haven't been in the place since I was ten."

Miss Hartley, feeling that some comment was expected, said, "Indeed!"

"You have lived here all your life, I suppose?" said the persevering Robert.

"Practically," said Miss Hartley.

Mr. Vyner stole a look at her as she sat sideways by the window. Conscience and his visitor's manner told him that he ought to go for her father; personal inclination told him that there was no hurry. For the first time in his experience the office became most desirable place in the world. He wanted to sit still and look at her, and for some time, despite her restlessness, obeyed his inclinations. She turned at last to ask for her father, and in the fraction of a second he was immersed in a bundle of papers. Knitted brows and pursed lips testified to his absorption. He seized a pen and made an endorsement; looked at it with his head on one side and struck it out again.

"My father?" said Miss Hartley, in a small but determined voice.

Mr. Vyner gazed at her in a preoccupied fashion. Suddenly his face changed.

"Good gracious! yes," he said, springing up and going to the door. "How stupid of me!"

He stepped into the corridor and stood reflecting. In some circumstances he could be business-like enough. After reflecting for three minutes he came back into the room.

"He will be in soon," he said, resuming his seat. Inwardly he resolved to go and fetch him later on—when the conversation flagged, for instance. Meantime he took up his papers and shook his head over them.

"I wish I had got your father's head for business," he said, ruefully.

Miss Hartley turned on him a face from which all primness had vanished. The corners of her mouth broke and her eyes grew soft. She smiled at Mr. Vyner, and Mr. Vyner, pluming himself upon his address, smiled back.

"If I knew half as much as he does," he continued, "I'd—I'd–"

Miss Hartley waited, her eyes bright with expectation.

"I'd," repeated Mr. Vyner, who had rashly embarked on a sentence before he had seen the end of it, "have a jolly easy time of it," he concluded, breathlessly.

Miss Hartley surveyed him in pained surprise. "I thought my father worked very hard," she said, with a little reproach in her voice.

"So he does," said the young man, hastily, "but he wouldn't if he only had my work to do; that's what I meant. As far as he is concerned he works far too hard. He sets an example that is a trouble to all of us except the office-boy. Do you know Bassett?"

Miss Hartley smiled. "My father tells me he is a very good boy," she said.

"A treasure!" said Robert. "'Good' doesn't describe Bassett. He is the sort of boy who would get off a 'bus after paying his fare to kick a piece of orange peel off the pavement. He has been nourished on copy-book headings and 'Sanford and Merton.' Ever read 'Sanford and Merton'?"

"I—I tried to once," said Joan.

"There was no 'trying' with Bassett," said Mr. Vyner, rather severely. "He took to it as a duck takes to water. By modelling

his life on its teaching he won a silver medal for never missing an attendance at school."

"Father has seen it," said Joan, with a smile.

"Even the measles failed to stop him," continued Robert. "Day by day, a little more flushed than usual, perhaps, he sat in his accustomed place until the whole school was down with it and had to be closed in consequence. Then, and not till then, did Bassett feel that he had saved the situation."

"I don't suppose he knew it, poor boy," said Joan.

"Anyway, he got the medal," said Robert, "and he has a row of prizes for good conduct. I never had one; not even a little one. I suppose you had a lot?"

Miss Hartley maintained a discreet silence.

"Nobody ever seemed to notice my good conduct," continued Mr. Vyner, still bent on making conversation. "They always seemed to notice the other kind fast enough; but the 'good' seemed to escape them."

He sighed faintly, and glancing at the girl, who was looking out of the window again, took up his pen and signed his blotting-paper.

"I suppose you know the view from that window pretty well?" he said, putting the paper aside with great care.

"Ever since I was a small girl," said Joan, looking round. "I used to come here sometimes and wait for father. Not so much lately; and now, of course—"

Mr. Vyner looked uncomfortable. "I hope you will come to

this room whenever you want to see him," he said, earnestly. "He—he seemed to prefer being in the general office."

Miss Hartley busied herself with the window again. "Seemed to prefer," she said, impatiently, under her breath. "Yes."

There was a long silence, which Mr. Vyner, gazing in mute consternation at the vision of indignant prettiness by the window, felt quite unable to break. He felt that the time had at last arrived at which he might safely fetch Mr. Hartley without any self-upbraidings later on, and was just about to rise when the faint tap at the door by which Bassett always justified his entrance stopped him, and Bassett entered the room with some cheques for signature. Despite his habits, the youth started slightly as he saw the visitor, and then, placing the cheques before Mr. Vyner, stood patiently by the table while he signed them.

"That will do," said the latter, as he finished. "Thank you."

"Thank you, sir," said Bassett. He gave a slow glance at the window, and, arranging the cheques neatly, turned toward the door.

"Will Mr. Hartley be long?" inquired Joan, turning round.

"Mr. Hartley, miss?" said Bassett, pausing, with his hand on the knob. "Mr. Hartley left half an hour ago."

Mr. Vyner, who felt the eyes of Miss Hartley fixed upon him, resisted by a supreme effort the impulse to look at her in return.

"Bassett!" he said, sharply.

"Sir?" said the other.. "Didn't you," said Mr. Vyner, with a fine and growing note of indignation in his voice—"didn't you

tell Mr. Hartley that Miss Hartley was here waiting for him?"

"No, sir," said Bassett, gazing at certain mysterious workings of the junior partner's face with undisguised amazement. "I—"

"Do you mean to tell me," demanded Mr. Vyner, looking at him with great significance, "that you forgot?"

"No, sir," said Bassett; "I didn't—"

"That will do," broke in Mr. Vyner, imperiously. "That will do. You can go."

"But," said the amazed youth, "how could I tell—"

"That—will—do," said Mr. Vyner, very distinctly.

"I don't want any excuses. You can go at once. And the next time you are told to deliver a message, please don't forget. Now go."

With a fine show of indignation he thrust the gasping Bassett from the room.

He rose from his chair and, with a fine show of indignation, thrust the gasping Bassett from the room, and then turned to face the girl.

"I am so sorry," he began. "That stupid boy—you see how stupid he is—"

"It doesn't matter, thank you," said Joan. "It—it wasn't very important."

"He doesn't usually forget things," murmured Mr. Vyner. "I wish now," he added, truthfully, "that I had told Mr. Hartley myself."

He held the door open for her, and, still expressing his

regret, accompanied her down-stairs to the door. Miss Hartley, somewhat embarrassed, and a prey to suspicions which maidenly modesty forbade her to voice, listened in silence.

"Next time you come," said Mr. Vyner, pausing just outside the door, "I hope—"

Something dropped between them, and fell with a little tinkling crash on to the pavement. Mr. Vyner stooped, and, picking up a pair of clumsily fashioned spectacles, looked swiftly up at the office window.

"Bassett," he said, involuntarily.

He stood looking at the girl, and trying in vain to think of something to say. Miss Hartley, with somewhat more colour than usual, gave him a little bow and hurried off.

CHAPTER V

SMILING despite herself as she thought over the events of the afternoon, Joan Hartley walked thoughtfully homeward. Indignation at Mr. Vyner's presumption was mingled with regret that a young man of undeniably good looks and somewhat engaging manners should stoop to deceit. The fact that people are considered innocent until proved guilty did not concern her. With scarcely any hesitation she summed up against him, the only thing that troubled her being what sentence to inflict, and how to inflict it. She wondered what excuse he could make for such behaviour, and then blushed hotly as she thought of the one he would probably advance. Confused at her own thoughts, she quickened her pace, in happy ignorance of the fact that fifty yards behind her Captain Trimblett and her father, who had witnessed with great surprise her leave-taking of Mr. Vyner, were regulating their pace by hers.

"She's a fine girl," said the captain, after a silence that had endured long enough to be almost embarrassing. "A fine girl, but —"

He broke off, and completed his sentence by a shake of the head.

"She must have come for me," said Hartley, "and he happened to be standing there and told her I had gone."

"No doubt," said the captain, dryly. "That's why she went

scurrying off as though she had got a train to catch, and he stood there all that time looking after her. And, besides, every time he sees me, in some odd fashion your name crops up."

"My name?" said the other, in surprise.

"Your name," repeated the captain, firmly, "Same as Joan's, ain't it? The after-part of it, anyway. That's the attraction. Talk all round you—and I talk all round you, too. Nobody'd dream you'd got a daughter to hear the two of us talk—sometimes. Other times, if I bring her name in, they'd think you'd got nothing else."

Mr. Hartley glanced at him uneasily. "Perhaps—" he began.

"There's no 'perhaps' about it," said the masterful captain. "If you're not very careful there'll be trouble. You know what Mr. John is—he's got big ideas, and the youngster is as obstinate as a mule."

"It's all very well," said Hartley, "but how can I be careful? What can I do? Besides, I dare say you are making mountains of mole-heaps; she probably hurried off thinking to catch me up."

Captain Trimblett gave a little dry cough. "Ask her," he said, impressively.

"I'm not going to put any such ideas into her head," said his friend.

"Sound her, then," said the captain. "This is the way I look at it. We all think he is a very nice fellow, don't we?"

"He is," said Hartley, decidedly.

"And we all think she's a splendid girl, don't we?" continued the other.

"Something of the sort," said Hartley, smiling.

"There you are, then," said the captain, triumphantly. "What is more likely than that they should think the same of each other? Besides, I know what he thinks; I can read him like a book."

"You can't read Joan, though," said the other. "Why, she often puzzles me."

"I can try," said the captain. "I haven't known her all these years for nothing. Now, don't tell her we saw her. You leave her to me—and listen."

"Better leave her alone," said Hartley.

The captain, who was deep in thought, waved the suggestion aside. He walked the remainder of the way in silence, and even after they were in the house was so absorbed in his self-appointed task, and so vague in his replies, that Joan, after offering him the proverbial penny for his thoughts, suggested to her father in a loud whisper that he had got something in mind.

"Thinking of the ships he has lost," she said, in a still louder whisper.

The captain smiled and shook his head at her.

"Couldn't lose a ship if I tried," he said, nudging Hartley to call his attention to what was to follow. "I was saying so to Mr. Robert only yesterday!"

His voice was so deliberate, and his manner so significant, that Miss Hartley looked up in surprise. Then she coloured furiously as she saw both gentlemen eying her with the air of physicians on the lookout for unfavourable symptoms. Anger only deepened

her colour, and an unladylike and unfilial yearning to bang their two foolish heads together possessed her. Explanations were impossible, and despite her annoyance she almost smiled as she saw the concern in the eye the captain turned on her father.

"Saying so only yesterday," repeated the former, "to Mr. Robert."

"I saw him this afternoon," said Joan, with forced composure. "I went up to father's room and found him there. Why didn't you tell me you had given up your room, father?"

Mr. Hartley pleaded in excuse that he thought he had told her, and was surprised at the vehemence of her denial. With a slightly offended air he pointed out that it was a very small matter after all.

"There is nothing to be annoyed about," he said.

"You went there to see me, and, not finding me there, came down again."

"Ye-es," said Joan, thoughtfully.

"Just put her head in at the door and fled," explained the captain, still watching her closely.

Miss Hartley appeared not to have heard him.

"Came down three stairs at a time," he continued, with a poor attempt at a chuckle.

"I was there about half an hour waiting for father," said Joan, eying him very steadily. "I thought that he was in the other office. Is there anything else I can tell you?"

The captain collapsed suddenly, and, turning a red face upon

Hartley, appealed to him mutely for succour.

"Me?" he spluttered, feebly. "I—I don't want to know anything. Your father thought—"

"I didn't think anything," said Hartley, with some haste.

The captain eyed him reproachfully. "I thought your father thought—" he began, and, drawing out a large handkerchief, blew his nose violently.

"Yes?" said Joan, still very erect.

"That is all," said the captain, with an air of dignity.

He brushed some imaginary atoms from his beard, and, finding the girl's gaze still somewhat embarrassing, sought to relieve the tension.

"I've known you since you were five," he said, with inconsequent pathos.

"I know," said Joan, smiling, and putting her hand on his broad shoulder. "You're a dear old stupid; that is all."

"Always was," said the relieved captain, "from a child."

He began, with a cheerful countenance, to narrate anecdotes of his stupidity until, being interrupted by Hartley with one or two choice examples that he had forgotten, he rose and muttered something about seeing the garden. His progress was stayed by a knock at the front door and an intimation from Rosa that he was wanted.

"My bo'sun," he said, reentering the room with a letter. "Excuse me."

He broke the seal, and turned to Hartley with a short laugh.

"Peter Truefitt," he said, "wants me to meet him at nine o'clock and go home together, pretending that he has been here with me. Peter is improving."

"But he can't go on like this forever," said his scandalized friend.

"He's all right," said the captain, with a satisfied wink. "I'm looking after him. I'm stage-manager. I'll see–"

His voice faltered, and then died away as he caught Miss Hartley's eye and noticed the air of artless astonishment with which she was regarding him.

"Always was from a child," she quoted.

The captain ignored her.

"I'll just give Walters a note," he said, turning to Hartley with some dignity. "You don't mind his waiting?"

He turned to a small writing-table, and with an air of preoccupation, assumed for Miss Hartley's benefit, began to try a pen on his thumb-nail. Hartley, going to the door, sent the boatswain off to the kitchen for a glass of ale.

"Or perhaps you prefer tea?" he added, thoughtfully.

"Ale will do, sir," said Mr. Walters, humbly.

He walked to the kitchen, and, pushing the door open softly, went in. Rosa Jelks, who was sitting down reading, put aside her book and smiled welcome.

"Sit down," she said, patronizingly; "sit down."

"I was going to," said Mr. Walters. "I'm to 'ave a glass of ale."

"Say 'please,'" said Rosa, shaking her yellow locks at him, and

rising to take a glass from the dresser.

She walked into the scullery humming a tune, and the pleasant sound of beer falling into a glass fell on the boatswain's ears. He stroked his small black moustache and smiled.

"Would you like me to take a sip at the glass first?" inquired Rosa, coming back carefully with a brimming glass, "just to give it a flavour?"

Mr. Walters stared at her in honest amazement. After a moment he remarked gruffly that the flavour of the ale itself was good enough for him. Rosa's eyes sparkled.

"Just a sip," she pleaded.

"Go on, then," said Mr. Walters, grudgingly.

"Chin, chin!" said Rosa.

The boatswain's face relaxed. Then it hardened suddenly and a dazed look crept into his eyes as Rosa, drinking about two-thirds of the ale, handed him the remainder.

"That's for your impudence," she said, sharply. "I don't like beer."

Mr. Walters, still dazed, finished the beer without a word and placed the glass on the table. A faint sigh escaped him, but that was all.

"Bear!" said Rosa, making a face at him.

She looked at his strong, lean face and powerful figure approvingly, but the bereaved boatswain took no notice.

"Bear!" said Rosa again.

She patted her hair into place, and, in adjusting a hair-pin,

permitted a long, thick tress to escape to her shoulder. She uttered a little squeal of dismay.

"False, ain't it?" inquired Mr. Walters, regarding her antics with some amazement.

"False!" exclaimed Rosa. "Certainly not. Here! Tug!"

She presented her shoulder to the boatswain, and he, nothing loath, gave a tug, animated by the loss of two-thirds of a glass of beer. The next instant a loud slap rang through the kitchen.

"And I'd do it again for two pins," said the outraged damsel, as she regarded him with watering eyes. "Brute!"

She turned away, and, pink with annoyance, proceeded to arrange her hair in a small cracked glass that hung by the mantelpiece.

"I 'ad a cousin once," said Mr. Walters, thoughtfully, "that used to let her 'air down and sit on it. Tall gal, too, she was."

"So can I," snapped Rosa, rolling the tress up on her finger, holding it in place, and transfixing it with a hair-pin.

"H'm," said the boatswain.

"What d'ye mean by that?" demanded Rosa, sharply. "Do you mean to say I can't?"

"You might if you cut it off first," conceded Mr. Walters.

"Cut it off?" said Rosa, scornfully. "Here! Look here!"

She dragged out her hair-pins and with a toss of her head sent the coarse yellow locks flying. Then, straightening them slightly, she pulled out a chair and confronted him triumphantly. And at that moment the front-room bell rang.

"That's for you," said Mr. Walters, pointedly.

Rosa, who was already back at the glass, working with feverish haste, made no reply. The bell rang again, and a third time, Rosa finally answering it in a coiffure that looked like a hastily constructed bird's nest.

"There's your letter," she said, returning with a face still flushed. "Take it and go."

"Thankee," said the boatswain. "Was they very frightened?"

"Take it and go," repeated Rosa, with cold dignity. "Your young woman might be expecting you; pity to keep her waiting."

"I ain't got a young woman," said Mr. Walters, slowly.

"You surprise me!" said Rosa, with false astonishment.

"I never would 'ave one," said the boatswain, rising, and placing the letter in his breast-pocket. "I've got along all right for thirty years without 'em, and I ain't going to begin now."

"You must have broke a lot of hearts with disappointment," said Rosa.

"I never could see anything in young wimmen," said the boatswain, musingly. "Silly things, most of 'em. Always thinking about their looks; especially them as haven't got none."

He took up the empty glass and toyed with it thoughtfully.

"It's no good waiting," said Rosa; "you won't get no more beer; not if you stay here all night."

"So long!" said the boatswain, still playing with the glass. "So long! I know one or two that'll 'ave a fit pretty near when I tell 'em about you sitting on your 'air."

He put up his left arm instinctively, but Miss Jelks by a supreme effort maintained her calmness. Her eyes and colour were beyond her control, but her voice remained steady.

"So long!" she said, quietly. She took the glass from him and smiled. "If you like to wait a moment, I'll get you a little drop more," she said, graciously.

"Here's luck!" said Mr. Walters, as she returned with the glass. He drank it slowly and then, wiping his lips with the back of his hand, stood regarding her critically.

"Well, so long!" he said again, and, before the astonished maiden could resist, placed a huge arm about her neck and kissed her.

"You do that again, if you dare!" she gasped, indignantly, as she broke loose and confronted him. "The idea!"

"I don't want to do it agin," said the boatswain. "I've 'ad a glass of ale, and you've 'ad a kiss. Now we're quits."

He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand again and walked off with the air of a man who has just discharged an obligation. He went out the back way, and Rosa, to whom this sort of man was an absolutely new experience, stood gazing after him dumbly. Recovering herself, she followed him to the gate, and, with a countenance on which amazement still lingered, stood watching his tall figure up the road.

CHAPTER VI

WORK!" said Mr. Robert Vyner, severely, as he reclined in a deck-chair on the poop of the Indian Chief and surveyed his surroundings through half-closed eyes. "Work! It's no good sitting here idling while the world's work awaits my attention."

Captain Trimblett, who was in a similar posture a yard away, assented. He also added that there was "nothing like it."

"There's no play without work," continued Mr. Vyner, in a spirit of self-admonition.

The captain assented again. "You said something about work half an hour ago," he remarked.

"And I meant it," said Mr. Vyner; "only in unconscious imitation I dozed off. What I really want is for somebody to take my legs, somebody else my shoulders, and waft me gently ashore."

"I had a cook o' mine put ashore like that once," said Captain Trimblett, in a reminiscent voice; "only I don't know that I would have called it 'wafting,' and, so far as my memory goes, he didn't either. He had a lot to say about it, too."

Mr. Vyner, with a noisy yawn, struggled out of his chair and stood adjusting his collar and waistcoat.

"If I couldn't be a chrysalis," he said, slowly, as he looked down at the recumbent figure of the captain, "do you know what I would like to be?"

"I've had a very hard day's work," said the other, defensively, as he struggled into a sitting posture—"very hard. And I was awake half the night with the toothache."

"That isn't an answer to my question," said Mr. Vyner, gently. "But never mind; try and get a little sleep now; try and check that feverish desire for work, which is slowly, very, very slowly, wearing you to skin and bone. Think how grieved the firm would be if the toothache carried you off one night. Why not go below and turn in now? It's nearly five o'clock."

"Couldn't sleep if I did," replied the captain, gravely. "Besides, I've got somebody coming aboard to have tea with me this afternoon."

"All right, I'm going," said Robert, reassuringly. "Nobody I know, I suppose?"

"No," said the captain. "Not exactly," he added, with a desire of being strictly accurate.

Mr. Vyner became thoughtful. The captain's reticence, coupled with the fact that he had made two or three attempts to get rid of him that afternoon, was suspicious. He wondered whether Joan Hartley was the expected guest; the captain's unwillingness to talk whenever her name came up having by no means escaped him. And once or twice the captain had, with unmistakable meaning, dropped hints as to the progress made by Mr. Saunders in horticulture and other pursuits. At the idea of this elderly mariner indulging in matrimonial schemes with which he had no sympathy, he became possessed with a spirit of

vindictive emulation.

"It seems like a riddle; you've excited my curiosity," he said, as he threw himself back in the chair again and looked at the gulls wheeling lazily overhead. "Let me see whether I can guess —I'll go as soon as I have."

"'Tisn't worth guessing," said Captain Trimblett, with a touch of brusqueness.

"Don't make it too easy," pleaded Mr. Vyner. "Guess number one: a lady?"

The captain grunted.

"A widow," continued Mr. Vyner, in the slow, rapt tones of a clairvoyant. "The widow!"

"What do you mean by the widow?" demanded the aroused captain.

"The one you are always talking about," replied Mr. Vyner, winking at the sky.

"Me!" said the captain, purpling. "I don't talk about her. You don't hear me talk about her. I'm not always talking about anybody. I might just have mentioned her name when talking about Truefitt's troubles; that's all."

"That's what I meant," said Robert Vyner, with an air of mild surprise.

"Well, it's not her," said the captain, shortly.

"Somebody I know, but not exactly," mused Robert. "Somebody I know, but—Let me think."

He closed his eyes in an effort of memory, and kept them

shut so long that the captain, anxious to get him away before his visitor's arrival, indulged in a loud and painful fit of coughing. Mr. Vyner's eyes remained closed.

"Any more guesses?" inquired the captain, loudly.

Mr. Vyner, slept on. Gulls mewed overhead; a rattle of cranes sounded from the quays, and a conversation—mostly in hoarse roars—took place between the boatswain in the bows and an elderly man ashore, but he remained undisturbed. Then he sprang up so suddenly that he nearly knocked his chair over, and the captain, turning his head after him in amaze, saw Joan Hartley standing at the edge of the quay.

Before he could interfere Mr. Vyner, holding her hand with anxious solicitude, was helping her aboard. Poised for a moment on the side of the ship, she sprang lightly to the deck, and the young man, relinquishing her hand with some reluctance, followed her slowly toward the captain.

Ten minutes later, by far the calmest of the three, he sat at tea in the small but comfortable saloon. How he got there Captain Trimblett could not exactly remember. Mr. Vyner had murmured something about a slight headache, due in his opinion to the want of a cup of tea, and, even while talking about going home to get it, had in an abstracted fashion drifted down the companion-way.

"I feel better already," he remarked, as he passed his cup up to Miss Hartley to be refilled. "It's wonderful what a cup of tea will do."

"It has its uses," said the captain, darkly.

He took another cup himself and sat silent and watchful, listening to the conversation of his guests. A slight appearance of reserve on Miss Hartley's part, assumed to remind Mr. Vyner of his bad behaviour on the occasion of their last meeting, was dispelled almost immediately. Modesty, tinged with respectful admiration, was in every glance and every note of his voice. When she discovered that a man who had asked for his tea without sugar had drunk without remark a cup containing three lumps, she became thoughtful.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asked, in concern.

Modesty and Mr. Vyner—never boon companions—parted company.

"I thought you had given me the wrong cup," he said, simply.

The explanation seemed to Captain Trimblett quite inadequate. He sat turning it over in his mind, and even the rising colour in Miss Hartley's cheek did not serve to enlighten him. But he was glad to notice that she was becoming reserved again. Mr. Vyner noticed it, too, and, raging inwardly against a tongue which was always striving after his undoing, began with a chastened air to criticise the architecture of the new chapel in Porter Street. Architecture being a subject of which the captain knew nothing, he discussed it at great length, somewhat pleased to find that both his listeners were giving him their undivided attention.

He was glad to notice, when they went up on deck again, that his guests had but little to say to each other, and, with a view to keeping them apart as much as possible, made no attempt to

detain her when Joan rose and said that she must be going. She shook hands and then turned to Mr. Vyner.

"Oh, I must be going, too," said that gentleman.

He helped her ashore and, with a wave of his hand to Captain Trimblett, set off by her side. At the bridge, where their ways homeward diverged, Joan half stopped, but Mr. Vyner, gazing straight ahead, kept on.

"Fine chap, Captain Trimblett," he said, suddenly.

"He is the kindest man I know," said Joan, warmly.

Mr. Vyner sang his praises for three hundred yards, secretly conscious that his companion was thinking of ways and means of getting rid of him. The window of a confectioner's shop at last furnished the necessary excuse.

"I have got a little shopping to do," she said, diving in suddenly. "Good-by."

"The 'good-by' was so faint that it was apparent to her as she stood in the shop and gave a modest order for chocolates that he had not heard it. She bit her lip, and after a glance at the figure outside, added to her order a large one for buns. She came out of the shop with a bag overflowing with them.

"Let me," said Mr. Vyner, hastily.

Miss Hartley handed them over at once, and, walking by his side, strove hard to repress malicious smiles. She walked slowly and gave appraising glances at shop windows, pausing finally at a greengrocer's to purchase some bananas. Mr. Vyner, with the buns held in the hollow of his arm, watched her anxiously, and

his face fell as she agreed with the greengrocer as to the pity of spoiling a noble bunch he was displaying. Insufficiently draped in a brown-paper bag, it took Mr. Vyner's other arm.

"You are quite useful," said Miss Hartley, with a bright smile.

Mr. Vyner returned the smile, and in bowing to an acquaintance nearly lost a bun. He saved it by sheer sleight of hand, and noting that his companion was still intent on the shops, wondered darkly what further burdens were in store for him. He tried to quicken the pace, but Miss Hartley was not to be hurried.

"I must go in here, I think," she said, stopping in front of a draper's. "I sha'n't be long."

Mr. Vyner took his stand by the window with his back to the passers-by, and waited. At the expiration of ten minutes he peeped in at the door, and saw Miss Hartley at the extreme end of the shop thoughtfully fingering bales of cloth. He sighed, and, catching sight of a small boy regarding him, had a sudden inspiration.

"Here! Would you like some buns, old chap?" he cried.

The child's eyes glistened.

"Take 'em," said Mr. Vyner, thankfully. "Don't drop 'em."

He handed them over and stood smiling benevolently as the small boy, with both arms clasped round the bag, went off hugging it to his bosom. Another urchin, who had been regarding the transaction with speechless envy, caught his eye. He beckoned him to him and, with a few kind words and a fatherly admonition not to make himself ill, presented him

with the bananas. Then he drew a deep breath, and with a few kind words he presented him with the bananas assuming an expression of gravity befitting the occasion, braced himself for the inevitable encounter.

Five minutes later Miss Hartley, bearing a large and badly-tied parcel, came smiling out to him. The smile faded suddenly, and she stood regarding him in consternation.

"Why—!" she began. "Where—?"

Mr. Vyner eyed her carefully. "I gave 'em away," he said, slowly. "Two poor, hungry little chaps stood looking at me. I am awfully fond of children, and before I knew what I was doing—"

"I've no doubt," said Joan, bitterly, as she realized her defeat. "I've no doubt."

Mr. Vyner leaned toward the parcel. "Allow me," he murmured, politely.

"Thank you, Til carry it myself," said Joan, sharply.

Her taste for shopping had evaporated, and clutching her parcel she walked rapidly homeward. An occasional glance at her companion did not quite satisfy her that he was keeping his sense of humour under proper control. There was a twitching of his lips which might, she felt, in a little time become contagious. She averted her head.

"That's all right," said Mr. Vyner, with a sigh of relief. "I was half afraid that I had offended you."

CHAPTER VII

TO the great relief of Mr. Truefitt's imagination, his sister suddenly ceased from all comment upon the irregularity of his hours. Unprepared, by the suddenness of the change, he recited mechanically, for the first day or two, the reasons he had invented for his lateness, but their reception was of so chilling a nature that his voice was scarcely audible at the finish. Indeed, when he came home one evening with a perfectly true story of a seaman stabbed down by the harbour, Mrs. Chinnery yawned three times during the narration, and Captain Trimblett shook his head at him.

"True or not," said the latter, after Mrs. Chinnery had left the room, "it doesn't matter. It isn't worth while explaining when explanations are not asked for."

"Do you think she knows?" inquired Mr. Truefitt, with bated voice.

"She knows something," replied the captain. "I believe she knows all about it, else she wouldn't keep so quiet. Why not tell her straight out? Tell her when she comes in, and get it over. She's got to know some day."

"Poor Susan!" said Mr. Truefitt, with feeling. "I'm afraid she'll feel it. It's not nice to have to leave home to make room for somebody else. And she won't stay in it with another woman, I'm certain."

"Here she comes," said the captain, getting up. "I'll go out for a little stroll, and when I come back I shall expect to find you've made a clean breast of it."

Mr. Truefitt put out a hand as though to detain him, and then, thinking better of it, nodded at him with an air of great resolution, and puffed furiously at his pipe. Under cover of clouds of smoke he prepared for the encounter.

Closing the door gently behind him, the captain, after a moment's indecision, drifted down the road. A shower of rain had brought out sweet odours from the hedgerow opposite, and a touch of salt freshened the breeze that blew up the river. Most of the inhabitants of the Vale were in bed, and the wet road was lonely under the stars. He walked as far as a little bridge spanning a brook that ran into the river, and seating himself on the low parapet smoked thoughtfully. His mind went back to his own marriage many years before, and to his children, whom he had placed, on his wife's death, with a second cousin in London. An unusual feeling of loneliness possessed him. He smoked a second pipe and then, knocking the ashes out on the bridge, walked slowly homeward.

Mr. Truefitt, who was sitting alone, looked up as he entered and smiled vaguely.

"All right?" queried the captain, closing the door and crossing to a chair.

"Right as ninepence," said Mr. Truefitt. "I've been worrying myself all this time for nothing. Judging by her manner, she

seemed to think it was the most natural and proper thing in the world."

"So it is," said the captain, warmly.

"She talked about it as calmly as though she had a brother married every week," continued Mr. Truefitt. "I don't suppose she has quite realized it yet."

"I don't know that I have," said the captain. "This has been the only home I've had for the last ten years; and I feel leaving it, what must it be for her?"

Mr. Truefitt shook his head.

"I'm beginning to feel old," said the captain, "old and lonely. Changes like this bring it home to one."

He took out his pouch, and shaking his head solemnly began to fill his pipe again.

"You ought to follow my example," said Mr. Truefitt, eagerly.

"Too old," said the captain.

"Nonsense!" said the other. "And the older you get, the lonelier you'll feel. Mind that!"

"I shall go and live with my boys and girls when I leave the sea," said the captain.

"They'll probably be married themselves by that time," said his comforter.

He rose, and, going to an old corner cupboard, took out a bottle of whiskey and a couple of glasses and put them on the table. The captain, helping himself liberally, emptied his glass to Miss Willett.

"She's coming to tea on Friday, with her mother," said Mr. Truefitt.

Captain Trimblett took some more whiskey and solemnly toasted Mrs. Willett. He put his glass down, and lighting his pipe, which had gone out, beamed over at his friend.

"Are there any more in the family?" he inquired.

"There's an uncle," said Mr. Truefitt, slowly, "and–"

"One at a time," said the captain, stopping him with one hand raised, while he helped himself to some more whiskey with the other. "The uncle!"

He drank the third glass slowly, and, sinking back in his chair, turned to his friend with a countenance somewhat flushed and wreathed in smiles.

"Who else?" he inquired.

"No more to-night," said Mr. Truefitt, firmly, as he got up and put the bottle back in the cupboard. He came back slowly, and, resuming his seat, gazed in a meditative fashion at his friend.

"Talking about your loneliness—" he began.

"My loneliness?" repeated the captain, staring at "You were talking about feeling lonely," Mr. Truett reminded him.

He proceeded with almost equal care to assist her mother

"So I was," said the captain. "So I was. You're quite right; but it's all gone now. It's wonderful what a little whiskey will do."

"Wonderful what a lot will do," said Mr. Truefitt, with sudden asperity. "You were talking about your loneliness, and I was advising you to get married."

"So you were," said the captain, nodding at him. "Good-night."

He went off to bed with a suddenness that was almost disconcerting. Thus deserted, Mr. Truefitt finished his whiskey and water and, his head full of plans for the betterment of everybody connected with him, blew out the lamp and went upstairs.

Owing possibly to his efforts in this direction Captain Trimblett and Mrs. Chinnery scarcely saw him until Friday afternoon, when he drove up in a fly, and, after handing out Miss Willett with great tenderness, proceeded with almost equal care to assist her mother. The latter, a fragile little old lady, was at once conducted to a chair and, having been comfortably seated was introduced to Mrs. Chinnery.

"It's a long way," she said, as her daughter divested her of her bonnet and shawl, "but Cissie would insist on my coming, and I suppose, after all, it's only right I should."

"Of course, mother," said Miss Willett, hurriedly.

"Right is right," continued the old lady, "after all is said and done. And I'm sure Mr. Truefitt has been to ours often enough."

Mr. Truefitt coughed, and the captain—a loyal friend—assisted him.

"Night after night," said the old lady, during a brief interval.

Mr. Truefitt, still coughing slightly, began to place chairs at a table on which, as the captain presently-proved to his own dissatisfaction, there was not even; room for a pair of elbows.

At the last moment the seating arrangements had to be altered owing to a leg of the table which got in the way of Mrs. Willett's. The captain, in his anxiety to be of service, lowered a leaf of the table too far, and an avalanche of food descended to the floor.

"It don't matter," said Mrs. Chinnery, in a voice that belied her words. "Captain Trimblett is always doing something like that. The last time we had visitors he—"

"Kept on eating the cake after she had shaken her head at me," interrupted the captain, who was busy picking up the provisions.

"Nothing of the kind," cried Mrs. Chinnery, who was in no mood for frivolity. "I shouldn't think of doing such a thing," she added, turning to Mrs. Willett, as the lady allowed herself to be placed in a more convenient position. "It's all Captain Trimblett's nonsense."

Mrs. Willett listened politely, "It is annoying, though," she remarked.

"He might eat all the cake in the house for what I care," said Mrs. Chinnery, turning very red, and raising her voice a little.

"As a matter of fact I don't like cake," said the captain, who was becoming uncomfortable.

"Perhaps it was something else," said the excellent Mrs. Willett, with the air of one assisting to unravel a mystery.

Mrs. Chinnery, who was pouring out tea, glared at her in silence. She also spared a glance for Captain Trimblett, which made that gentleman seriously uneasy. With an idea of turning the conversation into safer and more agreeable channels, he

called the old lady's attention to a pencil drawing of a ruined castle which adorned the opposite wall. Mrs. Willett's first remark was that it had no roof.

"It's a ruin," said the captain; "done by Mrs. Chinnery."

The faded blue eyes behind the gold-rimmed spectacles inspected it carefully. "Done when she was a child—of course?" said Mrs. Willett.

"Eighteen," said Mrs. Chinnery, in a deep voice.

"I'm no judge of such things," said the old lady, shaking her head. "I only know what I like; but I dare say it's very clever."

She turned to help herself from a plate that the captain was offering her, and, finding that it contained cake, said that she would prefer bread and butter.

"Not that I don't like cake," she said. "As a rule I am rather partial to it."

"Well, have some now," said the unfortunate captain, trying to avoid Mrs. Chinnery's eye.

"Bread and butter, please," said Mrs. Willett, with quiet decision.

The captain passed it, and after a hopeless glance at Mr. Truefitt and Miss Willett, who were deep in the enjoyment of each other's society, returned to the subject of art.

"If I could draw like that, ma'am," he said, with a jerk of his head toward the ruined castle, "I should give up the sea."

Mrs. Willett inspected it again, even going to the length of taking off her glasses and polishing them, with a view to doing

perfect justice to the subject. "Would you really?" she said, when she had finished.

The captain made no reply. He sat appalled at the way in which the old lady was using him to pay off some of the debt that she fancied was due to Mrs. Chinnery.

"You must see some of my daughter's pictures," she said, turning to him. "Fruit and birds mostly, in oil colours. But then, of course, she had good masters. There's one picture—let me see!"

She sat considering, and began to reel off the items on her fingers as she enumerated them. "There's a plate of oranges, with a knife and fork, a glass, a bottle, two and a half walnuts and bits of shell, three-quarters of an apple, a pipe, a cigar, a bunch of grapes, and a green parrot looking at it all with his head on one side."

"And very natural of him, too," murmured Mrs. Chinnery.

"It's coming here," interposed Mr. Truefitt, suddenly. "It belongs to Mrs. Willett, but she has given it to us. I wonder which will be the best place for it?"

The old lady looked round the room. "It will have to hang there," she said, pointing to the "Eruption of Vesuvius," "where that beehive is."

"Bee—!" exclaimed the startled captain. He bent toward her and explained.

"Oh, well, it don't matter," said the old lady. "I thought it was a beehive—it looks like one; and I can't see what's written under

it from here. But that's where Cecilia's picture must go."

She made one or two other suggestions with regard to the rearrangement of the pictures, and then, having put her hand to the plough, proceeded to refurnish the room. And for her own private purposes she affected to think that Mr. Truefitt's taste was responsible for the window-curtains.

"Mother has got wonderful taste," said Miss Willett, looking round. "All over Salthaven her taste has become a—a—"

"Byword," suggested Mrs. Chinnery.

"Proverb," said Miss Willett. "Are you feeling too warm, mother?" she asked, eying the old lady with sudden concern.

"A little," said Mrs. Willett. "I suppose it's being used to big rooms. I always was one for plenty of space. It doesn't matter—don't trouble."

"It's no trouble," said Captain Trimblett, who was struggling with the window. "How is that?" he inquired, opening it a little at the top and returning to his seat.

"There is a draught down the back of my neck," said Mrs. Willett; "but don't trouble about me if the others like it. If I get a stiff neck Cecilia can rub it for me when I get home with a little oil of camphor."

"Yes, mother," said Miss Willett.

"I once had a stiff neck for three weeks," said Mrs. Willett.

The captain rose again and, with a compassionate glance at Mr. Truefitt, closed the window.

"One can't have everything in this world," said the old lady;

"it ought to be a very cosey room in winter, You can't get too far away from the fire, I mean."

"It has done for us for a good many years now," said Mrs. Chinnery. "I've never heard Peter complain."

"He'd never complain," said Mrs. Willett, with a fond smile at her prospective son-in-law. "Why, he wouldn't know he was uncomfortable unless somebody told him."

Mrs. Chinnery pushed back her chair with a grating noise, strangely in harmony with her feelings, and, after a moment's pause to control her voice, suggested that the gentlemen should take the visitors round the garden while she cleared away—a proposal accepted by all but Mrs. Willett.

"I'll stay here and watch you," she said.

Captain Trimblett accompanied Mr. Truefitt and Miss Willett into the garden, and after pointing out the missing beauties of a figure-head in the next garden but one, and calling attention to the geraniums next door, left the couple to themselves. Side by side in the little arbour they sat gazing on to the river and conversing in low tones of their future happiness.

For some time the captain idled about the garden, keeping as far away from the arbour as possible, and doing his best to suppress a decayed but lively mariner named Captain Sellers, who lived two doors off. Among other infirmities the latter was nearly stone-deaf, and, after giving up as hopeless the attempt to make him understand that Mr. Truefitt and Miss Willett were not, the captain at last sought shelter in the house.

He found the table clear and a bowl of flowers placed in the exact centre. On opposite sides of the room, each with her hands folded in her lap, and both sitting bolt upright, Mrs. Willett and Mrs. Chinnery confronted each other. With a muttered reference to his ship, the captain took up his stick and fled.

He spent the evening in the billiard-room of the Golden Fleece, and did not return until late. A light in the room up-stairs and a shadow on the blind informed him that Mrs. Chinnery had retired. He stepped in quietly, and closed the door behind him. Mr. Truefitt, a picture of woe, was sitting in his usual place at the corner of the stove, and a supper-table, loaded with food, was untouched.

"Gone?" inquired the captain, scenting disaster.

"Some time ago," said Mr. Truefitt. "They wouldn't stay to supper. I wish you had been here to persuade them."

"I wish I had," said the captain, untruthfully.

He gave utterance to a faint sigh in token of sympathy with Mr. Truefitt's evident distress, and drew a chair to the table. He shook his head, and with marvellous accuracy, considering that his gaze was fastened on a piece of cold beef, helped himself to a wedge of steak-pie. He ate with an appetite, and after pouring out and drinking a glass of ale gazed again at the forlorn figure of Mr. Truefitt.

"Words?" he breathed, in a conspirator's whisper.

The other shook his head. "No; they were very polite," he replied, slowly.

The captain nearly emitted a groan. He checked it with two square inches of pie-crust.

"A misunderstanding," said Mr. Truefitt.

The captain said "Ah!" It was all he could say for the moment.

"A misunderstanding," said the other. "I misled Mrs. Willett," he added, in a tense whisper.

"Good heavens!" said the captain.

"She had always understood—from me," continued Mr. Truefitt, "that when I married Susanna would go. I always thought she would. Anybody who knew Susanna would have thought so. You would—wouldn't you?"

"In the ordinary way—yes," said the captain; "but circumstances alter cases."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.