WILLIAM WYMARK JACOBS

LIGHT FREIGHTS

William Wymark Jacobs

Light Freights

Jacobs W.

Light Freights / W. Jacobs — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

W. W. Jacobs
Light Freights

AN ODD FREAK

Speaking o' money," said the night-watchman thoughtfully, as he selected an empty soapbox on the wharf for a seat, "the whole world would be different if we all 'ad more of it. It would be a brighter and a 'appier place for everybody."

He broke off to open a small brass tobacco-box and place a little quid of tobacco tenderly into a pouch in his left cheek, critically observing at the same time the efforts of a somewhat large steamer to get alongside the next wharf without blocking up more than three parts of the river. He watched it as though the entire operation depended upon his attention, and, the steamer fast, he turned his eyes back again and resumed his theme.

"Of course it's the being short that sharpens people," he admitted thoughtfully; "the sharpest man I ever knew never 'ad a ha'penny in 'is pocket, and the ways 'e had o' getting other chaps to pay for 'is beer would ha' made 'is fortin at the law if 'e'd only 'ad the eddication. Playful little chap 'e was. I've seen men wot didn't know 'im stand 'im a pot o' beer and then foller 'im up the road to see 'im knock down a policeman as 'e'd promised. They'd foller 'im to the fust policeman 'e met, an' then 'e'd point them out and say they were goin' to half kill 'im, an' the policeman 'ud just stroll up an' ask 'em wot they were 'anging about for, but I never 'eard of a chap telling 'im. They used to go away struck all of a 'eap. He died in the accident ward of the London Horse-pittle, poor chap."

He shook his head thoughtfully, and ignoring the statement of a watchman at the next wharf that it was a fine evening, shifted his quid and laughed rumblingly.

"The funniest way o' raising the wind I ever 'eard of," he said in explanation, "was one that 'appened about fifteen years ago. I'd just taken my discharge as A.B. from the North Star, trading between here and the Australian ports, and the men wot the thing 'appened to was shipmates o' mine, although on'y firemen.

"I knows it's a true story, becos I was in it a little bit myself, and the other part I 'ad from all of 'em, and besides, they didn't see anything funny in it at all, or anything out of the way. It seemed to them quite a easy way o' making money, and I dessay if it 'ad come off all right I should have thought so too.

"In about a week arter we was paid off at the Albert Docks these chaps was all cleaned out, and they was all in despair, with a thirst wot wasn't half quenched and a spree wot was on'y in a manner o' speaking just begun, and at the end of that time they came round to a room wot I 'ad, to see wot could be done. There was four of 'em in all: old Sam Small, Ginger Dick, Peter Russet, and a orphan nevy of Sam's whose father and mother was dead. The mother 'ad been 'alf nigger an' 'alf Malay when she was living, and Sam was always pertickler careful to point out that his nevy took arter 'er. It was enough to make the pore woman turn in 'er grave to say so, but Sam used to say that 'e owed it to 'is brother to explain.

"'Wot's to be done?' ses Peter Russet, arter they'd all said wot miserable chaps they was, an' 'ow badly sailor-men was paid. 'We're all going to sign on in the Land's End, but she doesn't sail for a fortnight; wot's to be done in the meantime for to live?'

"'There's your watch, Peter,' ses old Sam, dreamy-like, 'and there's Ginger's ring. It's a good job you kep' that ring, Ginger. We're all in the same boat, mates, an' I on'y wish as I'd got something for the general good. It's 'aving an orphan nevy wot's kep' me pore.'

"'Stow it,' ses the nevy, short-like.

"'Everything's agin us,' ses old Sam. There's them four green parrots I brought from Brazil, all dead.'

"'So are my two monkeys,' ses Peter Russet, shaking 'is 'ead; 'they used to sleep with me, too.'

"They all shook their 'eads then, and Russet took Sam up very sharp for saying that p'r'aps if he 'adn't slep' with the monkeys they wouldn't ha' died. He said if Sam knew more about monkeys than wot 'e did, why didn't 'e put 'is money in them instead o' green parrots wot pulled their feathers out and died of cold.

"'Talking about monkeys,' ses Ginger Dick, interrupting old Sam suddenly, 'wot about young Beauty here?'

"'Well, wot about him?' ses the nevy, in a nasty sort o' way.

"'W'y, 'e's worth forty monkeys an' millions o' green parrots,' ses Ginger, starting up; 'an' here 'e is a-wasting of 'is opportunities, going about dressed like a Christian. Open your mouth, Beauty, and stick your tongue out and roll your eyes a bit.'

"'W'y not leave well alone, Ginger?' ses Russet; and I thought so too. Young Beauty was quite enough for me without that.

"'Ter 'blige me,' ses Ginger, anxiously, 'just make yourself as ugly as wot you can, Beauty.'

"'Leave 'im alone,' ses old Sam, as his nevy snarled at 'em. 'You ain't everybody's money yourself, Ginger.'

"'I tell you, mates,' ses Ginger, speaking very slow and solemn, 'there's a fortin in 'im. I was lookin' at 'im just now, trying to think who 'e reminded me of. At fust I thought it was that big stuffed monkey we saw at Melbourne, then I suddenly remembered it was a wild man of Borneo I see when I was a kid up in Sunderland. When I say 'e was a 'andsome, good-'arted looking gentleman alongside o' you, Beauty, do you begin to get my meaning?'

"'Wot's the idea, Ginger?' ses Sam, getting up to lend me and Russet a 'and with 'is nevy.

"'My idea is this,' ses Ginger; 'take 'is cloes off 'im and dress 'im up in that there winder-blind, or something o' the kind; tie 'im up with a bit o' line, and take 'im round to Ted Reddish in the 'Ighway and sell 'im for a 'undered quid as a wild man of Borneo.'

"'Wot?' screams Beauty, in an awful voice. 'Let go, Peter; let go, d'ye hear?'

"''Old your noise, Beauty, while your elders is speaking,' ses 'is uncle, and I could see 'e was struck with the idea.

"'You jest try dressing me up in a winder-blind,' ses his nevy, half-crying with rage.

"Listen to reason, Beauty,' ses Ginger; 'you'll 'ave your share of the tin; it'll only be for a day or two, and then when we've cleared out you can make your escape, and there'll be twenty-five pounds for each of us.'

"''Ow do you make that out, Ginger?' ses Sam, in a cold voice.

"'Fours into a 'undered,' ses Ginger.

"'Ho,' ses Sam. 'Ho, indeed. I wasn't aweer that 'e was your nevy, Ginger.'

"'Share and share alike.' ses Russet. 'It's a very good plan o' yours, Ginger.'

"Ginger holds 'is 'ead up and looks at 'im 'ard.

"'I thought o' the plan,' 'e ses, speaking very slow and deliberate. 'Sam's 'is uncle, and 'e's the wild man. Threes into a 'undered go—'

"'You needn't bother your fat 'ead adding up sums, Ginger,' ses Russet, very polite. 'I'm going to 'ave my share; else I'll split to Ted Reddish.'

"None of 'em said a word about me: two of 'em was sitting on my bed; Ginger was using a 'ankerchief o' mine wot 'e found in the fireplace, and Peter Russet 'ad 'ad a drink out o' the jug on my washstand, and yet they never even mentioned me. That's firemen all over, and that's 'ow it is they get themselves so disliked.

"It took 'em best part of an 'our to talk round young Beauty, an' the langwidge they see fit to use made me thankful to think that the parrots didn't live to larn it.

"You never saw anything like Beauty when they 'ad finished with 'im. If 'e was bad in 'is cloes, 'e was a perfeck horror without 'em. Ginger Dick faked 'im up beautiful, but there was no pleasing 'im. Fust he found fault with the winder-blind, which 'e said didn't fit; then 'e grumbled about going bare-foot, then 'e wanted somethink to 'ide 'is legs, which was natural considering the shape of 'em. Ginger Dick nearly lost 'is temper with 'im, and it was all old Sam could do to stop himself from casting 'im off forever. He was finished at last, and arter Peter Russet 'ad slipped downstairs and found a bit o' broken clothes-prop in the yard, and 'e'd been shown 'ow to lean on it and make a noise, Ginger said as 'ow if Ted Reddish got 'im for a 'undered pounds 'e'd get 'im a bargain.

"'We must 'ave a cab,' ses old Sam.

"'Cab?' ses Ginger. 'What for?'

"'We should 'ave half Wapping following us,' ses Sam. 'Go out and put your ring up, Ginger, and fetch a cab.'

"Ginger started grumbling, but he went, and presently came back with the cab and the money, and they all went downstairs leading the wild man by a bit o' line. They only met one party coming up, and 'e seemed to remember somethink 'e'd forgotten wot ought to be fetched at once.

"Ginger went out fust and opened the cab-door, and then stood there waiting becos at the last moment the wild man said the winder-blind was slipping down. They got 'im out at last, but before 'e could get in the cab was going up the road at ten miles an hour, with Ginger 'anging on to the door calling to it to stop.

"It came back at about a mile an' a 'alf an hour, an' the remarks of the cabman was eggstrordinary. Even when he got back 'e wouldn't start till 'e'd got double fare paid in advance; but they got in at last and drove off.

"There was a fine scene at Ted Reddish's door. Ginger said that if there was a bit of a struggle it would be a good advertisement for Ted Reddish, and they might p'r'aps get more than a 'undered, and all the three of 'em could do, they couldn't get the wild man out o' that cab, and the cabman was hopping about 'arf crazy. Every now and then they'd get the wild man 'arf out, and then he'd get in agin and snarl. 'E didn't seem to know when to leave off, and Ginger and the others got almost as sick of it as the cabman. It must ha' taken two years' wear out o' that cab, but they got 'im out at last, and Reddish's door being open to see what the row was about, they went straight in.

"'Wot's all this?' ses Reddish, who was a tall, thin man, with a dark moustache.

"It's a wild man o' Borneo,' ses Ginger, panting; 'we caught 'im in a forest in Brazil, an' we've come 'ere to give you the fust offer.'

"Ted Reddish was so surprised 'e couldn't speak at fust. The wild man seemed to take 'is breath away, and 'e looked in a 'elpless kind o' way at 'is wife, who'd just come down. She was a nice-lookin' woman, fat, with a lot o' yaller hair, and she smiled at 'em as though she'd known 'em all their lives.

"'Come into the parlour,' she ses, kindly, just as Ted was beginning to get 'is breath.

"They followed 'em in, and the wild man was just going to make hisself comfortable in a easy-chair, when Ginger give 'im a look, an' 'e curled up on the 'earthrug instead.

"''E ain't a very fine specimen,' ses Ted Reddish, at last.

"'It's the red side-whiskers I don't like,' ses his wife. 'Besides, who ever 'eard of a wild man in a collar an' necktie?'

"'You've got hold o' the wrong one,' ses Ted Reddish, afore Ginger Dick could speak up for hisself.

"'Oh, I beg your pardin,' ses Mrs. Reddish to Ginger, very polite. 'I thought it was funny a wild man should be wearing a collar. It's my mistake. That's the wild man, I s'pose, on the 'earthrug?'

"That's 'im, mum,' ses old Sam, very short.

"'He don't look wild enough,' ses Reddish.

"'No; 'e's much too tame,' ses 'is wife, shaking her yaller curls.

"The chaps all looked at each other then, and the wild man began to think it was time he did somethink; and the nearest thing 'andy being Ginger's leg, 'e put 'is teeth into it. Anybody might ha' thought Ginger was the wild man then, the way 'e went on, and Mrs. Reddish said that even if he so far forgot hisself as to use sich langwidge afore 'er, 'e oughtn't to before a poor 'eathen animal.

"'How much do you want for 'im?' ses Ted Reddish, arter Ginger 'ad got 'is leg away, and taken it to the winder to look at it.

"'One 'undered pounds,' ses old Sam.

"Ted Reddish looked at 'is wife, and they both larfed as though they'd never leave orf.

"'Why, the market price o' the best wild men is only thirty shillings,' ses Reddish, wiping 'is eyes. 'I'll give you a pound for 'im.'

"Old Sam looked at Russet, and Russet looked at Ginger, and then they all larfed.

"'Well, there's no getting over you, I can see that,' ses Reddish, at last. 'Is he strong?'

"'Strong? Strong ain't the word for it,' ses Sam.

"'Bring 'im to the back and let 'im 'ave a wrestle with one o' the brown bears, Ted,' ses 'is wife.

"''E'd kill it,' ses old Sam, hastily.

"'Never mind,' ses Reddish, getting up; 'brown bears is cheap enough.'

"They all got up then, none of 'em knowing wot to do, except the wild man, that is, and he got 'is arms tight round the leg o' the table.

"'Well,' ses Ginger, 'we'll be pleased for 'im to wrestle with the bear, but we must 'ave the 'undered quid fust, in case 'e injures 'isself a little.'

"Ted Reddish looked 'ard at 'im, and then he looked at 'is wife agin.

"I'll just go outside and talk it over with the missus,' he ses, at last, and they both got up and went out.

"'It's all right,' ses old Sam, winking at Ginger.

"'Fair cop,' ses Ginger, who was still rubbing his leg. 'I told you it would be, but there's no need for Beauty to overdo it. He nearly 'ad a bit out o' my leg.'

"'A'right,' ses the wild man, shifting along the 'earthrug to where Peter was sitting; 'but it don't do for me to be too tame. You 'eard wot she said.'

"'How are you feeling, old man?' ses Peter, in a kind voice, as 'e tucked 'is legs away under 'is chair.

"'Gurr,' ses the wild man, going on all fours to the back of the chair, 'gur—wug—wug–'

"'Don't play the fool, Beauty,' ses Peter, with a uneasy smile, as he twisted 'is 'ead round. 'Call 'im off, Sam.'

"'Gurr,' ses the wild man, sniffing at 'is legs; 'gurr.'

"'Easy on, Beauty, it's no good biting 'im till they come back,' ses old Sam.

"'I won't be bit at all,' ses Russet, very sharp, 'mind that, Sam. It's my belief Beauty's gone mad.'

"'Hush,' ses Ginger, and they 'eard Ted Reddish and 'is wife coming back. They came in, sat down agin, and after Ted 'ad 'ad another good look at the wild man and prodded 'im all over an' looked at 'is teeth, he spoke up and said they'd decided to give a 'undered pun for 'im at the end o' three days if 'e suited.

"'I s'pose,' ses Sam, looking at the others, 'that we could 'ave a bit of it now to go on with?'

"'It's agin our way of doing business,' ses Ted Reddish. 'If it 'ud been a lion or a tiger we could, but wild men we never do.'

"'The thing is,' ses Mrs. Reddish, as the wild man started on Russet's leg and was pulled off by Sam and Ginger, 'where to put 'im.'

"'Why not put 'im in with the black leopard?' ses her 'usband.

"'There's plenty o' room in his cage,' says 'is wife thoughtfully, 'and it 'ud be company for 'im too.'

"'I don't think the wild man 'ud like that,' ses Ginger.

"'I'm sartain sure 'e wouldn't,' says old Sam, shaking 'is 'ead.

"'Well, we must put 'im in a cage by hisself, I s'pose,' ses Reddish, 'but we can't be put to much expense. I'm sure the money we spent in cat's meat for the last wild man we 'ad was awful.'

"'Don't you spend too much money on cat's meat for 'im,' ses Sam, ''e'd very likely leave it. Bringing 'im 'ome, we used to give 'im the same as we 'ad ourselves, and he got on all right.'

"'It's a wonder you didn't kill 'im,' ses Reddish, severely. 'He'll be fed very different 'ere, I can tell you. You won't know 'im at the end o' three days.'

"'Don't change 'im too sudden,' ses Ginger, keeping 'is 'ead turned away from the wild man, wot wos trying to catch 'is eye. 'Cook 'is food at fust, 'cos 'e's been used to it.'

"'I know wot to give 'im,' ses Reddish, offhandedly. 'I ain't been in the line twenty-seven years for nothink. Bring 'im out to the back, an' I'll put 'im in 'is new 'ome.'

"They all got up and, taking no notice of the wild man's whispers, follered Ted Reddish and 'is wife out to the back, where all the wild beasts in the world seemed to 'ave collected to roar out to each other what a beastly place it was.

"'I'm going to put 'im in "'Appy Cottage" for a time,' says Reddish; 'lend a hand 'ere, William,' he says, beckoning to one of 'is men.

"'Is that "'Appy Cottage"?' ses old Sam, sniffing, as they got up to a nasty, empty cage with a chain and staple in the wall.

"Ted Reddish said it was.

"'Wot makes you call it that?' ses Sam.

"Reddish didn't seem to 'ear 'im, and it took all Ginger's coaxing to get Beauty to go in.

"'It's on'y for a day or two,' he whispers.

"'But 'ow am I to escape when you've got the brass?' ses the wild man.

"'We'll look arter that,' ses Ginger, who 'adn't got the least idea.

"The wild man 'ad a little show for the last time, jist to impress Ted Reddish, an' it was pretty to see the way William 'andled 'im. The look on the wild man's face showed as 'ow it was a revelashun to 'im. Then 'is three mates took a last look at 'im and went off.

"For the fust day Sam felt uneasy about 'im, and used to tell us tales about 'is dead brother which made us think Beauty was lucky to take arter 'is mother; but it wore off, and the next night, in the Admiral Cochrane, 'e put 'is 'ead on Ginger's shoulder, and wep' for 'appiness as 'e spoke of 'is nevy's home at ''Appy Cottage.'

"On the third day Sam was for going round in the morning for the money, but Ginger said it wasn't advisable to show any 'aste; so they left it to the evening, and Peter Russet wrote Sam a letter signed 'Barnum,' offering 'im two 'undered for the wild man, in case Ted Reddish should want to beat 'em down. They all 'ad a drink before they went in, and was smiling with good temper to sich an extent that they 'ad to wait a minute to get their faces straight afore going in.

"'Come in,' ses Reddish, and they follered 'im into the parler, where Mrs. Reddish was sitting in a armchair shaking 'er' ead and looking at the carpet very sorrowful.

"'I was afraid you'd come,' she ses, in a low voice.

"'So was I,' ses Reddish.

"'What for?' ses old Sam. It didn't look much like money, and 'e felt cross.

"'We've 'ad a loss,' ses Mrs. Reddish. She touched 'erself, and then they see she was all in black, and that Ted Reddish was wearing a black tie and a bit o' crape round 'is arm.

"'Sorry to 'ear it, mum,' ses old Sam.

"'It was very sudden, too,' ses Mrs. Reddish, wiping 'er eyes.

"'That's better than laying long,' ses Peter Russet, comforting like.

"Ginger Dick gives a cough. 'Twenty-five pounds was wot 'e'd come for; not to 'ear this sort o' talk.'

"'We've been in the wild-beast line seven-an'-twenty years,' ses Mrs. Reddish, 'and it's the fust time anythink of this sort 'as 'appened.'

"'Ealthy family, I s'pose,' ses Sam, staring.

"Tell 'im, Ted,' ses Mrs. Reddish, in a 'usky whisper.

"'No, you,' ses Ted.

"'It's your place,' ses Mrs. Reddish.

"'A woman can break it better,' ses 'er 'usband.

"'Tell us wot?' ses Ginger, very snappish.

"Ted Reddish cleared 'is throat.

"'It wasn't our fault,' he ses, slowly, while Mrs. Reddish began to cry agin; 'gin'rally speak-in', animals is afraid o' wild men, and night before last, as the wild man wot you left on approval didn't seem to like "'Appy Cottage," we took 'im out an' put 'im in with the tiger.'

"'Put him in with the WOT?' ses the unfort'nit man's uncle, jumping off 'is chair.

"'The tiger,' ses Reddish. 'We 'eard something in the night, but we thought they was only 'aving a little bit of a tiff, like. In the morning I went down with a bit o' cold meat for the wild man, and I thought at first he'd escaped; but looking a little bit closer—'

"'Don't, Ted,' ses 'is wife. 'I can't bear it.'

"'Do you mean to tell me that the tiger 'as eat 'im?' screams old Sam.

"'Most of 'im,' ses Ted Reddish; 'but 'e couldn't ha' been much of a wild man to let a tiger get the better of 'im. I must say I was surprised.'

"'We both was,' ses Mrs. Reddish, wiping 'er eyes.

"You might ha' 'eard a pin drop; old Sam's eyes was large and staring, Peter Russet was sucking 'is teeth, an' Ginger was wondering wot the law would say to it—if it 'eard of it.

"'It's an unfortunit thing for all parties,' ses Ted Reddish at last, getting up and standing on the 'earthrug.

"'Orrible,' ses Sam, 'uskily. 'You ought to ha' known better than to put 'im in with a tiger. Wot could you expect? W'y, it was a mad thing to do.'

"'Crool thing,' ses Peter Russet.

"'You don't know the bisness properly,' ses Ginger, 'that's about wot it is. 'You should ha' known better than that.'

"'Well, it's no good making a fuss about it,' ses Reddish. It was only a wild man arter all, and he'd ha' died anyway, cos 'e wouldn't eat the raw meat we gave 'im, and 'is pan o' water was scarcely touched. He'd ha' starved himself anyhow. I'm sorry, as I said before, but I must be off; I've got an appointment down at the docks.'

"He moved towards the door; Ginger Dick gave Russet a nudge and whispered something and Russet passed it on to Sam.

"What about the 'undered quid?' ses pore Beauty's uncle, catching 'old o' Reddish as 'e passed 'im.

"'Eh?' ses Reddish, surprised—'Oh, that's off.'

"'Ho!' says Sam. 'Ho! is it? We want a 'undered quid off of you; an' wot's more, we mean to 'ave it.'

"'But the tiger's ate 'im,' says Mrs. Reddish, explaining.

"'I know that,' ses Sam, sharply. 'But 'e was our wild man, and we want to be paid for 'im. You should ha' been more careful. We'll give you five minutes; and if the money ain't paid by that time we'll go straight off to the police-station.'

"'Well, go,' ses Ted Reddish.

"Sam got up, very stern, and looked at Ginger.

"'You'll be ruined if we do,' ses Ginger.

"'All right,' ses Ted Reddish, comfortably.

"I'm not sure they can't 'ang you,' ses Russet.

"'I ain't sure either,' says Reddish; 'and I'd like to know 'ow the law stands, in case it 'appens agin.'

"'Come on, Sam,' ses Ginger; 'come straight to the police-station.'

"He got up, and moved towards the door. Ted Reddish didn't move a muscle, but Mrs. Reddish flopped on her knees and caught old Sam round the legs, and 'eld him so's 'e couldn't move.

"'Spare 'im,' she ses, crying.

"'Lea' go o' my legs, mum,' ses Sam.

"'Come on, Sam,' ses Ginger; 'come to the police.'

"Old Sam made a desperit effort, and Mrs. Reddish called 'im a crool monster, and let go and 'id 'er face on 'er husband's shoulder as they all moved out of the parlour, larfing like a mad thing with hysterics.

"They moved off slowly, not knowing wot to do, as, of course, they knew they daren't go to the police about it. Ginger Dick's temper was awful; but Peter Russet said they mustn't give up all 'ope—he'd write to Ted Reddish and tell 'im as a friend wot a danger 'e was in. Old Sam didn't say anything, the loss of his nevy and twenty-five pounds at the same time being almost more than 'is 'art could bear, and in a slow, melancholy fashion they walked back to old Sam's lodgings.

"'Well, what the blazes is up now?' ses Ginger Dick, as they turned the corner.

"There was three or four 'undered people standing in front of the 'ouse, and women's 'eads out of all the winders screaming their 'ardest for the police, and as they got closer they 'eard a incessant knocking. It took 'em nearly five minutes to force their way through the crowd, and then they nearly went crazy as they saw the wild man with 'alf the winder-blind missing, but otherwise well and 'arty, standing on the step and giving rat-a-tat-tats at the door for all 'e was worth.

"They never got to know the rights of it, Beauty getting so excited every time they asked 'im 'ow he got on that they 'ad to give it up. But they began to 'ave a sort of idea at last that Ted Reddish 'ad been 'aving a game with 'em, and that Mrs. Reddish was worse than wot 'e was."

A GARDEN PLOT

The able-bodied men of the village were at work, the children were at school singing the multiplication-table lullaby, while the wives and mothers at home nursed the baby with one hand and did the housework with the other. At the end of the village an old man past work sat at a rough deal table under the creaking signboard of the Cauliflower, gratefully drinking from a mug of ale supplied by a chance traveller who sat opposite him.

The shade of the elms was pleasant and the ale good. The traveller filled his pipe and, glancing at the dusty hedges and the white road baking in the sun, called for the mugs to be refilled, and pushed his pouch towards his companion. After which he paid a compliment to the appearance of the village.

"It ain't what it was when I was a boy," quavered the old man, filling his pipe with trembling fingers. "I mind when the grindstone was stuck just outside the winder o' the forge instead o' being one side as it now is; and as for the shop winder—it's twice the size it was when I was a young 'un."

He lit his pipe with the scientific accuracy of a smoker of sixty years' standing, and shook his head solemnly as he regarded his altered birthplace. Then his colour heightened and his dim eye flashed.

"It's the people about 'ere 'as changed more than the place 'as," he said, with sudden fierceness; "there's a set o' men about here nowadays as are no good to anybody; reg'lar raskels. And if you've the mind to listen I can tell you of one or two as couldn't be beat in London itself.

"There's Tom Adams for one. He went and started wot 'e called a Benevolent Club. Threepence a week each we paid agin sickness or accident, and Tom was secretary. Three weeks arter the club was started he caught a chill and was laid up for a month. He got back to work a week, and then 'e sprained something in 'is leg; and arter that was well 'is inside went wrong. We didn't think much of it at first, not understanding figures; but at the end o' six months the club hadn't got a farthing, and they was in Tom's debt one pound seventeen-and-six.

"He isn't the only one o' that sort in the place, either. There was Herbert Richardson. He went to town, and came back with the idea of a Goose Club for Christmas. We paid twopence a week into that for pretty near ten months, and then Herbert went back to town agin, and all we 'ear of 'im, through his sister, is that he's still there and doing well, and don't know when he'll be back.

"But the artfullest and worst man in this place—and that's saying a good deal, mind you—is Bob Pretty. Deep is no word for 'im. There's no way of being up to 'im. It's through 'im that we lost our Flower Show; and, if you'd like to 'ear the rights o' that, I don't suppose there's anybody in this place as knows as much about it as I do—barring Bob hisself that is, but 'e wouldn't tell it to you as plain as I can.

"We'd only 'ad the Flower Show one year, and little anybody thought that the next one was to be the last. The first year you might smell the place a mile off in the summer, and on the day of the show people came from a long way round, and brought money to spend at the Cauliflower and other places.

"It was started just after we got our new parson, and Mrs. Pawlett, the parson's wife, 'is name being Pawlett, thought as she'd encourage men to love their 'omes and be better 'usbands by giving a prize every year for the best cottage garden. Three pounds was the prize, and a metal tea-pot with writing on it.

"As I said, we only 'ad it two years. The fust year the garden as got it was a picter, and Bill Chambers, 'im as won the prize, used to say as 'e was out o' pocket by it, taking 'is time and the money 'e spent on flowers. Not as we believed that, you understand, 'specially as Bill did 'is very best to get it the next year, too. 'E didn't get it, and though p'r'aps most of us was glad 'e didn't, we was all very surprised at the way it turned out in the end.

"The Flower Show was to be 'eld on the 5th o' July, just as a'most everything about here was at its best. On the 15th of June Bill Chambers's garden seemed to be leading, but Peter Smith and Joe

Gubbins and Sam Jones and Henery Walker was almost as good, and it was understood that more than one of 'em had got a surprise which they'd produce at the last moment, too late for the others to copy. We used to sit up here of an evening at this Cauliflower public-house and put money on it. I put mine on Henery Walker, and the time I spent in 'is garden 'elping 'im is a sin and a shame to think of.

"Of course some of 'em used to make fun of it, and Bob Pretty was the worst of 'em all. He was always a lazy, good-for-nothing man, and 'is garden was a disgrace. He'd chuck down any rubbish in it: old bones, old tins, bits of an old bucket, anything to make it untidy. He used to larf at 'em awful about their gardens and about being took up by the parson's wife. Nobody ever see 'im do any work, real 'ard work, but the smell from 'is place at dinner-time was always nice, and I believe that he knew more about game than the parson hisself did.

"It was the day arter this one I'm speaking about, the 16th o' June, that the trouble all began, and it came about in a very eggstrordinary way. George English, a quiet man getting into years, who used when 'e was younger to foller the sea, and whose only misfortin was that 'e was a brother-in-law o' Bob Pretty's, his sister marrying Bob while 'e was at sea and knowing nothing about it, 'ad a letter come from a mate of his who 'ad gone to Australia to live. He'd 'ad letters from Australia before, as we all knew from Miss Wicks at the post-office, but this one upset him altogether. He didn't seem like to know what to do about it.

"While he was wondering Bill Chambers passed. He always did pass George's 'ouse about that time in the evening, it being on 'is way 'ome, and he saw George standing at 'is gate with a letter in 'is 'and looking very puzzled.

"'Evenin', George,' ses Bill.

"'Evenin',' ses George.

"'Not bad news, I 'ope?' ses Bill, noticing 'is manner, and thinking it was strange.

"'No,' ses George. 'I've just 'ad a very eggstrordinary letter from Australia,' he ses, 'that's all.'

"Bill Chambers was always a very inquisitive sort o' man, and he stayed and talked to George until George, arter fust making him swear oaths that 'e wouldn't tell a soul, took 'im inside and showed 'im the letter.

"It was more like a story-book than a letter. George's mate, John Biggs by name, wrote to say that an uncle of his who had just died, on 'is deathbed told him that thirty years ago he 'ad been in this very village, staying at this 'ere very Cauliflower, whose beer we're drinking now. In the night, when everybody was asleep, he got up and went quiet-like and buried a bag of five hundred and seventeen sovereigns and one half-sovereign in one of the cottage gardens till 'e could come for it agin. He didn't say 'ow he come by the money, and, when Bill spoke about that, George English said that, knowing the man, he was afraid 'e 'adn't come by it honest, but anyway his friend John Biggs wanted it, and, wot was more, 'ad asked 'im in the letter to get it for 'im.

"'And wot I'm to do about it, Bill,' he ses, I don't know. All the directions he gives is, that 'e thinks it was the tenth cottage on the right-'and side of the road, coming down from the Cauliflower. He thinks it's the tenth, but 'e's not quite sure. Do you think I'd better make it known and offer a reward of ten shillings, say, to any one who finds it?'

"'No,' ses Bill, shaking 'is 'ead. 'I should hold on a bit if I was you, and think it over. I shouldn't tell another single soul, if I was you.'

"'I be'leeve you're right,' ses George. 'John Biggs would never forgive me if I lost that money for 'im. You'll remember about keeping it secret, Bill?'

"Bill swore he wouldn't tell a soul, and 'e went off 'ome and 'ad his supper, and then 'e walked up the road to the Cauliflower and back, and then up and back again, thinking over what George 'ad been telling 'im, and noticing, what 'e 'd never taken the trouble to notice before, that 'is very house was the tenth one from the Cauliflower.

"Mrs. Chambers woke up at two o'clock next morning and told Bill to get up further, and then found 'e wasn't there. She was rather surprised at first, but she didn't think much of it, and thought,

what happened to be true, that ‘e was busy in the garden, it being a light night. She turned over and went to sleep again, and at five when she woke up she could distinctly ‘ear Bill working ‘is ‘ardest. Then she went to the winder and nearly dropped as she saw Bill in his shirt and trousers digging away like mad. A quarter of the garden was all dug up, and she shoved open the winder and screamed out to know what ‘e was doing.

“Bill stood up straight and wiped ‘is face with his shirt-sleeve and started digging again, and then his wife just put something on and rushed downstairs as fast as she could go.

“‘What on earth are you a-doing of, Bill?’ she screams.

“‘Go indoors,’ ses Bill, still digging.

“‘Have you gone mad?’ she ses, half-crying.

“Bill just stopped to throw a lump of mould at her, and then went on digging till Henery Walker, who also thought ‘e ‘ad gone mad, and didn’t want to stop ‘im too soon, put ‘is ‘ead over the ‘edge and asked ‘im the same thing.

“‘Ask no questions and you’ll ‘ear no lies, and keep your ugly face your own side of the ‘edge,’ ses Bill. ‘Take it indoors and frighten the children with,’ he ses. ‘I don’t want it staring at me.’

“Henery walked off offended, and Bill went on with his digging. He wouldn’t go to work, and ‘e ‘ad his breakfast in the garden, and his wife spent all the morning in the front answering the neighbours’ questions and begging of ‘em to go in and say something to Bill. One of ‘em did go, and came back a’most directly and stood there for hours telling diff’rent people wot Bill ‘ad said to ‘er, and asking whether ‘e couldn’t be locked up for it.

“By tea-time Bill was dead-beat, and that stiff he could ‘ardly raise ‘is bread and butter to his mouth. Several o’ the chaps looked in in the evening, but all they could get out of ‘im was, that it was a new way o’ cultivating ‘is garden ‘e ‘ad just ‘eard of, and that those who lived the longest would see the most. By night-time ‘e’d nearly finished the job, and ‘is garden was just ruined.

“Afore people ‘ad done talking about Bill, I’m blest if Peter Smith didn’t go and cultivate ‘is garden in exactly the same way. The parson and ‘is wife was away on their ‘oliday, and nobody could say a word. The curate who ‘ad come over to take ‘is place for a time, and who took the names of people for the Flower Show, did point out to ‘im that he was spoiling ‘is chances, but Peter was so rude to ‘im that he didn’t stay long enough to say much.

“When Joe Gubbins started digging up ‘is garden people began to think they were all bewitched, and I went round to see Henery Walker to tell ‘im wot a fine chance ‘e’d got, and to remind ‘im that I’d put another ninepence on ‘im the night before. All ‘e said was, ‘More fool you,’ and went on digging a ‘ole in his garden big enough to put a ‘ouse in.

“In a fortnight’s time there wasn’t a garden worth looking at in the place, and it was quite clear there’d be no Flower Show that year, and of all the silly, bad-tempered men in the place them as ‘ad dug up their pretty gardens was the wust.

“It was just a few days before the day fixed for the Flower Show, and I was walking up the road when I see Joe and Henery Walker and one or two more leaning over Bob Pretty’s fence and talking to ‘im. I stopped, too, to see what they were looking at, and found they was watching Bob’s two boys a-weeding of ‘is garden. It was a disgraceful, untidy sort of place, as I said before, with a few marigolds and nasturtiums, and sich-like put in anywhere, and Bob was walking up and down smoking of ‘is pipe and watching ‘is wife hoe atween the plants and cut off dead marigold blooms.

“‘That’s a pretty garden you’ve got there, Bob,’ ses Joe, grinning.

“I’ve seen wuss,’ ses Bob.

“‘Going in for the Flower Show, Bob?’ ses Henery, with a wink at us.

“‘O’ course I am,’ ses Bob ‘olding ‘is’ ead up; ‘my marigolds ought to pull me through,’ he ses.

“Henery wouldn’t believe it at first, but when he saw Bob show ‘is missus ‘ow to pat the path down with the back o’ the spade and hold the nails for ‘er while she nailed a climbing nasturtium to

the fence, he went off and fetched Bill Chambers and one or two others, and they all leaned over the fence breathing their 'ardest and a-saying of all the nasty things to Bob they could think of.

"'It's the best-kep' garden in the place,' ses Bob. 'I ain't afraid o' your new way o' cultivating flowers, Bill Chambers. Old-fashioned ways suit me best; I learnt 'ow to grow flowers from my father.'

"'You ain't 'ad the cheek to give your name in, Bob?' ses Sam Jones, staring.

"Bob didn't answer 'im. Tick those bits o' grass out o' the path, old gal,' he ses to 'is wife; 'they look untidy, and untidiness I can't abear.'

"He walked up and down smoking 'is pipe and pretending not to notice Henery Walker, wot 'ad moved farther along the fence, and was staring at some drabble-tailed-looking geraniums as if 'e'd seen 'em afore but wasn't quite sure where.

"'Admiring my geraniums, Henery?' ses Bob at last.

"'Where'd you get 'em?' ses Henery, 'ardly able to speak.

"'My florist's,' ses Bob, in a off-hand manner.

"'Your wot? asks Henery.

"'My florist,' ses Bob.

"'And who might 'e be when 'e's at home?' asked Henery.

"''Tain't so likely I'm going to tell you that,' ses Bob. 'Be reasonable, Henery, and ask yourself whether it's likely I should tell you 'is name. Why, I've never seen sich fine geraniums afore. I've been nursing 'em inside all the summer, and just planted 'em out.'

"'About two days arter I threw mine over my back fence,' ses Henery Walker, speaking very slowly.

"'Ho,' ses Bob, surprised. 'I didn't know you 'ad any geraniums, Henery. I thought you was digging for gravel this year.'

"Henery didn't answer 'im. Not because 'e didn't want to, mind you, but because he couldn't.

"'That one,' ses Bob, pointing at a broken geranium with the stem of 'is pipe, 'is a "Dook o' Wellington," and that white one there is wot I'm going to call "Pretty's Pride." That fine marigold over there, wot looks like a sunflower, is called "Golden Dreams."'

"'Come along, Henery,' ses Bill Chambers, bursting, 'come and get something to take the taste out of your mouth.'

"'I'm sorry I can't offer you a flower for your button-'ole,' ses Bob, perlitely, 'but it's getting so near the Flower Show now I can't afford it. If you chaps only knew wot pleasure was to be 'ad sitting among your innercent flowers, you wouldn't want to go to the public-house so often.'

"He shook 'is 'ead at 'em, and telling his wife to give the 'Dook o' Wellington' a mug of water, sat down in the chair agin and wiped the sweat off 'is brow.

"Bill Chambers did a bit o' thinking as they walked up the road, and by and by 'e turns to Joe Gubbins and 'e ses:

"'Seen anything o' George English lately, Joe?'

"'Yes,' ses Joe.

"'Seems to me we all 'ave,' ses Sam Jones.

"None of 'em liked to say wot was in their minds, 'aving all seen George English and swore pretty strong not to tell his secret, and none of 'em liking to own up that they'd been digging up their gardens to get money as 'e'd told 'em about. But presently Bill Chambers ses:

"'Without telling no secrets or breaking no promises, Joe, supposing a certain 'ouse was mentioned in a certain letter from forrin parts, wot 'ouse was it?'

"'Supposing it was so,' ses Joe, careful too; 'the second 'ouse counting from the Cauliflower.'

"'The ninth 'ouse, you mean,' ses Henery Walker, sharply.

"'Second 'ouse in Mill Lane, you mean,' ses Sam Jones, wot lived there.

"Then they all see 'ow they'd been done, and that they wasn't, in a manner o' speaking, referring to the same letter. They came up and sat 'ere where we're sitting now, all dazed-like. It wasn't only

the chance o' losing the prize that upset 'em, but they'd wasted their time and ruined their gardens and got called mad by the other folks. Henery Walker's state o' mind was dreadful for to see, and he kep' thinking of 'orrible things to say to George English, and then being afraid they wasn't strong enough.

"While they was talking who should come along but George English hisself! He came right up to the table, and they all sat back on the bench and stared at 'im fierce, and Henery Walker crinkled 'is nose at him.

"'Evening,' he ses, but none of 'em answered im; they all looked at Henery to see wot 'e was going to say.

"'Wot's up?' ses George, in surprise.

"'Gardens,' ses Henery.

"'So I've 'eard,' ses George.

"He shook 'is 'ead and looked at them sorrowful and severe at the same time.

"'So I 'eard, and I couldn't believe my ears till I went and looked for myself,' he ses, 'and wot I want to say is this: you know wot I'm referring to. If any man 'as found wot don't belong to him 'e knows who to give it to. It ain't wot I should 'ave expected of men wot's lived in the same place as me for years. Talk about honesty,' 'e ses, shaking 'is 'ead agin, 'I should like to see a little of it.'

"Peter Smith opened his mouth to speak, and 'ardly knowing wot 'e was doing took a pull at 'is beer at the same time, and if Sam Jones 'adn't been by to thump 'im on the back I b'lieve he'd ha' died there and then.

"'Mark my words,' ses George English, speaking very slow and solemn, 'there'll be no blessing on it. Whoever's made 'is fortune by getting up and digging 'is garden over won't get no real benefit from it. He may wear a black coat and new trousers on Sunday, but 'e won't be 'appy. I'll go and get my little taste o' beer somewhere else,' 'e ses. 'I can't breathe here.'

"He walked off before any one could say a word; Bill Chambers dropped 'is pipe and smashed it, Henery Walker sat staring after 'im with 'is mouth wide open, and Sam Jones, who was always one to take advantage, drank 'is own beer under the firm belief that it was Joe's.

"'I shall take care that Mrs. Pawlett 'ears o' this,' ses Henery, at last.

"'And be asked wot you dug your garden up for,' ses Joe, 'and 'ave to explain that you broke your promise to George. Why, she'd talk at us for years and years.'

"'And parson 'ud preach a sermon about it,' ses Sam; 'where's your sense, Henery?'

"'We should be the larfing-stock for miles round,' ses Bill Chambers. 'If anybody wants to know, I dug my garden up to enrich the soil for next year, and also to give some other chap a chance of the prize.'

"Peter Smith 'as always been a unfortunit man; he's got the name for it. He was just 'aving another drink as Bill said that, and this time we all thought 'e'd gorn. He did hisself.

"Mrs. Pawlett and the parson came 'ome next day, an' 'er voice got that squeaky with surprise it was painful to listen to her. All the chaps stuck to the tale that they'd dug their garden up to give the others a chance, and Henery Walker, 'e went further and said it was owing to a sermon on unselfishness wot the curate 'ad preached three weeks afore. He 'ad a nice little red-covered 'ymn-book the next day with 'From a friend' wrote in it.

"All things considered, Mrs. Pawlett was for doing away with the Flower Show that year and giving two prizes next year instead, but one or two other chaps, encouraged by Bob's example, 'ad given in their names too, and they said it wouldn't be fair to their wives. All the gardens but one was worse than Bob's, they not having started till later than wot 'e did, and not being able to get their geraniums from 'is florist. The only better garden was Ralph Thomson's, who lived next door to 'im, but two nights afore the Flower Show 'is pig got walking in its sleep. Ralph said it was a mystery to 'im 'ow the pig could ha' got out; it must ha' put its foot through a hole too small for it, and turned the button of its door, and then climbed over a four-foot fence. He told Bob 'e wished the pig could

speak, but Bob said that that was sinful and unchristian of ‘im, and that most likely if it could, it would only call ‘im a lot o’ bad names, and ask ‘im why he didn’t feed it properly.

“There was quite a crowd on Flower Show day following the judges. First of all, to Bill Chambers’s astonishment and surprise, they went to ‘is place and stood on the ‘eaps in ‘is garden judging ‘em, while Bill peeped at ‘em through the kitchen winder ‘arf-crazy. They went to every garden in the place, until one of the young ladies got tired of it, and asked Mrs. Pawlett whether they was there to judge cottage gardens or earthquakes.

“Everybody ‘eld their breaths that evening in the school room when Mrs. Pawlett got up on the platform and took a slip of paper from one of the judges. She stood a moment waiting for silence, and then ‘eld up her ‘and to stop what she thought was clapping at the back, but which was two or three wimmen who ‘ad ‘ad to take their crying babies out trying to quiet ‘em in the porch. Then Mrs. Pawlett put ‘er glasses on her nose and just read out, short and sweet, that the prize of three sovereigns and a metal teapot for the best-kept cottage garden ‘ad been won by Mr. Robert Pretty.

“One or two people patted Bob on the back as ‘e walked up the middle to take the prize; then one or two more did, and Bill Chambers’s pat was the ‘eartiest of ‘em all. Bob stopped and spoke to ‘im about it.

“You would ‘ardly think that Bob ‘ud have the cheek to stand up there and make a speech, but ‘e did. He said it gave ‘im great pleasure to take the teapot and the money, and the more pleasure because ‘e felt that ‘e had earned ‘em. He said that if ‘e told ‘em all ‘e’d done to make sure o’ the prize they’d be surprised. He said that ‘e’d been like Ralph Thomson’s pig, up early and late.

“He stood up there talking as though ‘e was never going to leave off, and said that ‘e hoped as ‘is example would be of benefit to ‘is neighbours. Some of ‘em seemed to think that digging was everything, but ‘e could say with pride that ‘e ‘adn’t put a spade to ‘is garden for three years until a week ago, and then not much.

“He finished ‘is remarks by saying that ‘e was going to give a tea-party up at the Cauliflower to christen the teapot, where ‘e’d be pleased to welcome all friends. Quite a crowd got up and followed ‘im out then, instead o’ waiting for the dissolving views, and came back ‘arf an hour arterwards, saying that until they’d got as far as the Cauliflower they’d no idea as Bob was so per-tikler who ‘e mixed with.

“That was the last Flower Show we ever ‘ad in Claybury, Mrs. Pawlett and the judges meeting the tea-party coming ‘ome, and ‘aving to get over a gate into a field to let it pass. What with that and Mrs. Pawlett tumbling over something further up the road, which turned out to be the teapot, smelling strong of beer, the Flower Show was given up, and the parson preached three Sundays running on the sin of beer-drinking to children who’d never ‘ad any and wimmen who couldn’t get it.”

PRIVATE CLOTHES

At half-past nine the crew of the Merman were buried in slumber, at nine thirty-two three of the members were awake with heads protruding out of their bunks, trying to peer through the gloom, while the fourth dreamt that a tea-tray was falling down a never-ending staircase. On the floor of the forecastle something was cursing prettily and rubbing itself.

"Did you 'ear anything, Ted?" inquired a voice in an interval of silence.

"Who is it?" demanded Ted, ignoring the question. "Wot d'yer want?"

"I'll let you know who I am," said a thick and angry voice. "I've broke my blarsted back."

"Light the lamp, Bill," said Ted.

Bill struck a tandsticker match, and carefully nursing the tiny sulphurous flame with his hand, saw dimly some high-coloured object on the floor.

He got out of his bunk and lit the lamp, and an angry and very drunken member of Her Majesty's foot forces became visible.

"Wot are you doin' 'ere?" inquired Ted, sharply, "this ain't the guard-room."

"Who knocked me over?" demanded the soldier sternly; "take your co—coat off lik' a man."

He rose to his feet and swayed unsteadily to and fro.

"If you keep your li'l' 'eads still," he said gravely, to Bill, "I'll punch 'em."

By a stroke of good fortune he selected the real head, and gave it a blow which sent it crashing against the woodwork. For a moment the seaman stood gathering his scattered senses, then with an oath he sprang forward, and in the lightest of fighting trim waited until his adversary, who was by this time on the floor again, should have regained his feet.

"He's drunk, Bill," said another voice, "don't 'urt 'im. He's a chap wot said 'e was coming aboard to see me—I met 'im in the Green Man this evening. You was coming to see me, mate, wasn't you?"

The soldier looked up stupidly, and gripping hold of the injured Bill by the shirt, staggered to his feet again, and advancing towards the last speaker let fly suddenly in his face.

"Sort man I am," he said, autobiographically. "Feel my arm."

The indignant Bill took him by both, and throwing himself upon him suddenly fell with him to the floor. The intruder's head met the boards with a loud crash, and then there was silence.

"You ain't killed 'im, Bill?" said an old seaman, stooping over him anxiously.

"Course not," was the reply; "give us some water."

He threw some in the soldier's face, and then poured some down his neck, but with no result. Then he stood upright, and exchanged glances of consternation with his friends.

"I don't like the way he's breathing," he said, in a trembling voice.

"You always was pertikler, Bill," said the cook, who had thankfully got to the bottom of his staircase. "If I was you—"

He was not allowed to proceed any further; footsteps and a voice were heard above, and as old Thomas hastily extinguished the lamp, the mate's head was thrust down the scuttle, and the mate's voice sounded a profane reveillé.

"Wot are we goin' to do with it?" inquired Ted, as the mate walked away.

"I'm, Ted," said Bill, nervously. "He's alive all right."

"If we put 'im ashore an' 'e's dead," said old Thomas, "there'll be trouble for somebody. Better let 'im be, and if 'e's dead, why we don't none of us know nothing about it."

The men ran up on deck, and Bill, being the last to leave, put a boot under the soldier's head before he left. Ten minutes later they were under way, and standing about the deck, discussed the situation in thrilling whispers as opportunity offered.

At breakfast, by which time they were in a dirty tumbling sea, with the Nore lightship, a brown, forlorn-looking object on their beam, the soldier, who had been breathing stertorously, raised his

heavy head from the boot, and with glassy eyes and tightly compressed lips gazed wonderingly about him.

"Wot cheer, mate?" said the delighted Bill. "'Ow goes it?"

"Where am I?" inquired Private Harry Bliss, in a weak voice.

"Brig Merman," said Bill; "bound for Byster-mouth."

"Well, I'm damned," said Private Bliss; "it's a blooming miracle. Open the winder, it's a bit stuffy down here. Who—who brought me here?"

"You come to see me last night," said Bob, "an' fell down, I s'pose; then you punched Bill 'ere in the eye and me in the jor."

Mr. Bliss, still feeling very sick and faint, turned to Bill, and after critically glancing at the eye turned on him for inspection, transferred his regards to the other man's jaw.

"I'm a devil when I'm boozed," he said, in a satisfied voice. "Well, I must get ashore; I shall get cells for this, I expect."

He staggered to the ladder, and with unsteady haste gained the deck and made for the side. The heaving waters made him giddy to look at, and he gazed for preference at a thin line of coast stretching away in the distance.

The startled mate, who was steering, gave him a hail, but he made no reply. A little fishing-boat was jumping about in a way to make a sea-sick man crazy, and he closed his eyes with a groan.

Then the skipper, aroused by the mate's hail, came up from below, and walking up to him put a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"What are you doing aboard this ship?" he demanded, austerely.

"Go away," said Private Bliss, faintly; "take your paw off my tunic; you'll spoil it."

He clung miserably to the side, leaving the incensed skipper to demand explanations from the crew. The crew knew nothing about him, and said that he must have stowed himself away in an empty bunk; the skipper pointed out coarsely that there were no empty bunks, whereupon Bill said that he had not occupied his the previous evening, but had fallen asleep sitting on the locker, and had injured his eye against the corner of a bunk in consequence. In proof whereof he produced the eye.

"Look here, old man," said Private Bliss, who suddenly felt better. He turned and patted the skipper on the back. "You just turn to the left a bit and put me ashore, will you?"

"I'll put you ashore at Bystermouth," said the skipper, with a grin. "You're a deserter, that's what you are, and I'll take care you're took care of."

"You put me ashore!" roared Private Bliss, with a very fine imitation of the sergeant-major's parade voice.

"Get out and walk," said the skipper contemptuously, over his shoulder, as he walked off.

"Here," said Mr. Bliss, unbuckling his belt, "hold my tunic one of you. I'll learn 'im."

Before the paralysed crew could prevent him he had flung his coat into Bill's arms and followed the master of the Merman aft. As a light-weight he was rather fancied at the gymnasium, and in the all too brief exhibition which followed he displayed fine form and a knowledge of anatomy which even the skipper's tailor was powerless to frustrate.

The frenzy of the skipper as Ted assisted him to his feet and he saw his antagonist struggling in the arms of the crew was terrible to behold. Strong men shivered at his words, but Mr. Bliss, addressing him as "Whiskers," told him to call his crew off and to come on, and shaping as well as two pairs of brawny arms round his middle would permit, endeavoured in vain to reach him.

"This," said the skipper, bitterly, as he turned to the mate, "is what you an' me have to pay to keep up. I wouldn't let you go now, my lad, not for a fi' pun' note. Deserter, that's what you are!"

He turned and went below, and Private Bliss, after an insulting address to the mate, was hauled forward, struggling fiercely, and seated on the deck to recover. The excitement passed, he lost his colour again, and struggling into his tunic, went and brooded over the side.

By dinner-time his faintness had passed, and he sniffed with relish at the smell from the galley. The cook emerged bearing dinner to the cabin, then he returned and took a fine smoking piece of boiled beef flanked with carrots down to the forecastle. Private Bliss eyed him wistfully and his mouth watered.

For a time pride struggled with hunger, then pride won a partial victory and he descended carelessly to the forecastle.

"Can any o' you chaps lend me a pipe o' baccy?" he asked, cheerfully.

Bill rummaged in his pocket and found a little tobacco in a twist of paper.

"Bad thing to smoke on a empty stomach," he said, with his mouth full.

"'Tain't my fault it's empty," said Private Bliss, pathetically.

"Tain't mine," said Bill.

"I've 'eard," said the cook, who was a tenderhearted man, "as 'ow it's a good thing to go for a day or so without food sometimes."

"Who said so?" inquired Private Bliss, hotly.

"Diff'rent people," replied the cook.

"You can tell 'em from me they're blamed fools," said Mr. Bliss.

There was an uncomfortable silence; Mr. Bliss lit his pipe, but it did not seem to draw well.

"Did you like that pot o' six-half I stood you last night?" he inquired somewhat pointedly of Bob.

Bob hesitated and looked at his plate.

"No, it was a bit flat," he said at length.

"Well, I won't stop you chaps at your grub," said Private Bliss, bitterly, as he turned to depart.

"You're not stopping us," said Ted, cheerfully. "I'd offer you a bit, only—"

"Only what?" demanded the other.

"Skipper's orders," said Ted. "He ses we're not to. He ses if we do it's helping a deserter, and we'll all get six months."

"But you're helping me by having me on board," said Private Bliss; "besides, I don't want to desert."

"We couldn't 'elp you coming aboard," said Bill, "that's wot the old man said, but 'e ses we can 'elp giving of him vittles, he ses."

"Well, have I got to starve?" demanded the horror-stricken Mr. Bliss.

"Look 'ere," said Bill, frankly, "go and speak to the old man. It's no good talking to us. Go and have it out with him."

Private Bliss thanked him and went on deck. Old Thomas was at the wheel, and a pleasant clatter of knives and forks came up through the open skylight of the cabin. Ignoring the old man, who waved him away, he raised the open skylight still higher, and thrust his head in.

"Go away," bawled the skipper, pausing with his knife in his fist as he caught sight of him.

"I want to know where I'm to have my dinner," bawled back the thoroughly roused Mr. Bliss.

"Your dinner!" said the skipper, with an air of surprise; "why, I didn't know you 'ad any."

Private Bliss took his head away, and holding it very erect, took in his belt a little and walked slowly up and down the deck. Then he went to the water-cask and took a long drink, and an hour later a generous message was received from the skipper that he might have as many biscuits as he liked.

On this plain fare Private Bliss lived the whole of that day and the next, snatching a few hours' troubled sleep on the locker at nights. His peace of mind was by no means increased by the information of Ted that Bystermouth was a garrison town, and feeling that in spite of any explanation he would be treated as a deserter, he resolved to desert in good earnest at the first opportunity that offered.

By the third day nobody took any notice of him, and his presence on board was almost forgotten, until Bob, going down to the forecastle, created a stir by asking somewhat excitedly what had become of him.

"He's on deck, I s'pose," said the cook, who was having a pipe.

"He's not," said Bob, solemnly.

"He's not gone overboard, I s'pose?" said Bill, starting up.

Touched by this morbid suggestion they went up on deck and looked round; Private Bliss was nowhere to be seen, and Ted, who was steering, Had heard no splash. He seemed to have disappeared by magic, and the cook, after a hurried search, ventured aft, and, descending to the cabin, mentioned his fears to the skipper.

"Nonsense!" said that gentleman, sharply, "I'll lay I'll find him."

He came on deck and looked round, followed at a respectful distance by the crew, but there was no sign of Mr. Bliss.

Then an idea, a horrid idea, occurred to the cook. The colour left his cheeks and he gazed helplessly at the skipper.

"What is it?" bawled the latter.

The cook, incapable of speech, raised a trembling hand and pointed to the galley. The skipper started, and, rushing to the door, drew it hastily back.

Mr. Bliss had apparently finished, though he still toyed languidly with his knife and fork as though loath to put them down. A half-emptied saucepan of potatoes stood on the floor by his side, and a bone, with a small fragment of meat adhering, was between his legs on a saucepan lid which served as a dish.

"Rather underdone, cook," he said, severely, as he met that worthy's horror-stricken gaze.

"Is that the cabin's or the men's he's eaten?" vociferated the skipper.

"Cabin's," replied Mr. Bliss, before the cook could speak; "it looked the best. Now, has anybody got a nice see-gar?"

He drew back the door the other side of the galley as he spoke, and went out that way. A move was made towards him, but he backed, and picking up a handspike swung it round his head.

"Let him be," said the skipper in a choking voice, "let him be. He'll have to answer for stealing my dinner when I get 'im ashore. Cook, take the men's dinner down into the cabin. I'll talk to you by and by."

He walked aft and disappeared below, while Private Bliss, still fondling the handspike, listened unmoved to a lengthy vituperation which Bill called a plain and honest opinion of his behaviour.

"It's the last dinner you'll 'ave for some time," he concluded, spitefully; "it'll be skilly for you when you get ashore."

Mr. Bliss smiled, and, fidgeting with his tongue, asked him for the loan of his toothpick.

"You won't be using it yourself," he urged. "Now you go below all of you and start on the biscuits, there's good men. It's no use standing there saying a lot o' bad words what I left off when I was four years old."

He filled his pipe with some tobacco he had thoughtfully borrowed from the cook before dinner, and dropping into a negligent attitude on the deck, smoked placidly with his eyes half-closed. The brig was fairly steady and the air hot and slumberous, and with an easy assurance that nobody would hit him while in that position, he allowed his head to fall on his chest and dropped off into a light sleep.

It became evident to him the following afternoon that they were nearing Bystermouth. The skipper contented himself with eyeing him with an air of malicious satisfaction, but the crew gratified themselves by painting the horrors of his position in strong colors. Private Bliss affected indifference, but listened eagerly to all they had to say, with the air of a general considering his enemy's plans.

It was a source of disappointment to the crew that they did not arrive until after nightfall, and the tide was already too low for them to enter the harbour. They anchored outside, and Private Bliss, despite his position, felt glad as he smelt the land again, and saw the twinkling lights and houses ashore. He could even hear the clatter of a belated vehicle driving along the seafront. Lights on the summits of the heights in the background, indicated, so Bill said, the position of the fort.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.