WILLIAM WYMARK JACOBS

MORE CARGOES

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Содержание

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SMOKED SKIPPER

"Wapping Old Stairs?" said the rough individual, shouldering the brand-new sea-chest, and starting off at a trot with it; "yus, I know the place, captin. Fust v'y'ge, sir?"

"Ay, ay, my hearty," replied the owner of the chest, a small, ill-looking lad of fourteen. "Not so fast with those timbers of yours. D'ye hear?"

"All right, sir," said the man, and, slackening his pace, twisted his head round to take stock of his companion.

"This ain't your fust v'y'ge, captin," he said admiringly; "don't tell me. I could twig that directly I see you. Ho, what's the use o' trying to come it over a poor'ard-working man like that?"

"I don't think there's much about the sea I don't know," said the boy in a satisfied voice. "Starboard, starboard your helium a bit."

The man obeying promptly, they went the remainder of the distance in this fashion, to the great inconvenience of people coming from the other direction.

"And a cheap 'arf-crown's worth, too, captin," said the man, as he thoughtfully put the chest down at the head of the stairs and

sat on it pending payment.

"I want to go off to the *Susan Jane*," said the boy, turning to a waterman who was sitting in his boat, holding on to the side of the steps with his hand.

"All right," said the man, "give us a hold o' your box."

"Put it aboard," said the boy to the other man.

"A' right, captin," said the man, with a cheerful smile, "but I'll 'ave my 'arf-crown fust if you don't mind."

"But you said sixpence at the station," said the boy.

"*Two* an' sixpence, captin," said the man, still smiling, "but I'm a bit 'usky, an' p'raps you didn't hear the two 'arf a crown's the regler price. We ain't allowed to do it under."

"Well, I won't tell anybody," said the boy.

"Give the man 'is 'arf-crown," said the waterman, with sudden heat; "that's 'is price, and my fare's eighteen pence."

"All right," said the boy readily; "cheap too. I didn't know the price, that's all. But I can't pay either of you till I get aboard. I've only got sixpence. I'll tell the captain to give you the rest."

"Tell 'oo," demanded the light porter, with some violence.

"The captain," said the boy.

"Look 'ere, you give me that 'arf-crown," said the other, "else I'll chuck your box overboard, an' you after it."

"Wait a minute, then," said the boy, darting away up the narrow alley which led to the stairs, "I'll go and get change."

"'E's goin' to change 'arf a suvren, or p'raps a suvren," said the waterman; "you'd better make it five bob, matey."

"Ah, an' you make yours more," said the light-porter cordially. "Well, I'm– Well of all the–"

"Get off that box," said the big policeman who had come back with the boy. "Take your sixpence an' go. If I catch you down this way again–"

He finished the sentence by taking the fellow by the scruff of the neck and giving him a violent push as he passed him.

"Waterman's fare is threepence," he said to the boy, as the man in the boat, with an utterly expressionless face, took the chest from him. "I'll stay here till he has put you aboard."

The boy took his seat, and the waterman, breathing hard, pulled out towards the vessels in the tier. He looked at the boy and then at the figure on the steps, and, apparently suppressing a strong inclination to speak, spat violently over the side.

"Fine big chap, ain't he?" said the boy.

The waterman, affecting not to hear, looked over his shoulder, and pulled strongly with his left towards a small schooner, from the deck of which a couple of men were watching the small figure in the boat.

"That's the boy I was going to tell you about," said the skipper, "and remember this 'ere ship's a pirate."

"It's got a lot o' pirates aboard of it," said the mate fiercely, as he turned and regarded the crew, "a set o' lazy, loafing, idle, worthless–"

"It's for the boy's sake," interrupted the skipper.

"Where'd you pick him up?" inquired the other.

"He's the son of a friend o' mine what I've brought aboard to oblige," replied the skipper. "He's got a fancy for being a pirate, so just to oblige his father I told him we was a pirate. He wouldn't have come if I hadn't."

"I'll pirate him," said the mate, rubbing his hands.

"He's a dreadful 'andful by all accounts," continued the other; "got his 'ed stuffed full 'o these 'ere penny dreadfuls till they've turned his brain almost. He started by being an Indian, and goin off on 'is own with two other kids. When he wanted to turn cannibal the other two objected and gave 'im in charge. After that he did a bit 'o burgling, and it cost 'is old man no end o' money to hush it up."

"Well, what did *you* want him for?" grumbled the mate.

"I'm goin' to knock the nonsense out of him," said the skipper softly, as the boat grazed the side. "Just step for'ard and let the hands know what's expected of 'em. When we get to sea it won't matter."

The mate moved off grumbling, as the small fare stood on the thwarts and scrambled up over the side. The waterman passed up the chest and, dropping the coppers into his pocket, pushed off again without a word.

"Well, you've got here all right, Ralph?" said the skipper. "What do you think of her?"

"She's a rakish-looking craft," said the boy, looking round the dingy old tub with much satisfaction; "but where's your arms?"

"Hush!" said the skipper, and laid his finger on his nose.

"Oh, all right," said the youth testily, "but you might tell *me*."

"You shall know all in good time," said the skipper patiently, turning to the crew, who came shuffling up, masking broad grins with dirty palms.

"Here's a new shipmate for you, my lads. He's small, but he's the right stuff." The newcomer drew himself up, and regarded the crew with some dissatisfaction. For desperadoes they looked far too good-tempered and prone to levity.

"What's the matter with you, Jem Smithers?" inquired the skipper, scowling at a huge fair-haired man, who was laughing discordantly.

"I was thinkin' o' the last party I killed, sir," said Jem, with sudden gravity. "I allers laugh when I think 'ow he squealed."

"You laugh too much," said the other sternly, as he laid a hand on Ralph's shoulder. "Take a lesson from this fine fellow; he don't laugh. He acts. Take 'im down below an' show him 'is bunk."

"Will you please to follow me, sir?" said Smithers, leading the way below. "I dessay you'll find it a bit stuffy, but that's owing to Bill Dobbs. A regler old sea-dog is Bill, always sleeps in 'is clothes and never washes."

"I don't think the worse of him for that," said Ralph, regarding the fermenting Dobbs kindly.

"You'd best keep a civil tongue in your 'ed, my lad," said Dobbs shortly.

"Never mind 'im," said Smithers cheerfully; "nobody takes any notice o' old Dobbs. You can 'it 'im if you like. I won't let

him hurt you."

"I don't want to start by quarreling," said Ralph seriously.

"You're afraid," said Jem tauntingly; "you'll never make one of us. 'It 'im; I won't let him hurt you."

Thus aroused, the boy, first directing Dobbs' attention to his stomach by a curious duck of his head, much admired as a feint in his neighborhood, struck him in the face. The next moment the forecastle was in an uproar and Ralph prostrate on Dobbs' knees, frantically reminding Jem of his promise.

"All right, I won't let him 'urt you," said Jem consolingly.

"But he *is* hurting me," yelled the boy. "He's hurting me *now*."

"Well, wait till I get 'im ashore," said Jem, "his old woman won't know him when I've done with him."

The boy's reply to this was a torrent of shrill abuse, principally directed to Jem's facial short-comings.

"Now don't get rude," said the seaman, grinning.

"Squint eyes," cried Ralph fiercely.

"When you've done with that 'ere young gentleman, Dobbs," said Jem, with exquisite politeness. "I should like to 'ave 'im for a little bit to teach 'im manners."

"'E don't want to go," said Dobbs, grinning as Ralph clung to him. "He knows who's kind to him."

"Wait till I get a chance at you," sobbed Ralph, as Jem took him away from Dobbs.

"Lord lumme," said Jem, regarding him in astonishment. "Why, he's actooaly cryin'. I've seen a good many pirates in my

time, Bill, but this is a new sort."

"Leave the boy alone," said the cook, a fat, good-natured man. "Here, come 'ere, old man. They don't mean no 'arm."

Glad to escape, Ralph made his way over to the cook, grinding his teeth with shame as that worthy took him between his knees and mopped his eyes with something which he called a handkerchief.

"You'll be all right," he said kindly. "You'll be as good a pirate as any of us before you've finished."

"Wait till the first engagement, that's all," sobbed the boy. "If somebody don't get shot in the back it won't be my fault."

The two seamen looked at each other. "That's wot hurt my 'and then," said Dobbs slowly. "I thought it was a jack-knife."

He reached over, and unceremoniously grabbing the boy by the collar, pulled him towards him, and drew a small, cheap revolver from his pocket. "Look at that, Jem."

"Take your fingers orf the blessed trigger and then I will," said the other, somewhat sourly.

"I'll pitch it overboard," said Dobbs.

"Don't be a fool, Bill," said Smithers, pocketing it, "that's worth a few pints o' anybody's money. Stand out o' the way, Bill, the Pirit King wants to go on deck."

Bill moved aside as the boy went to the ladder, and, allowing him to get up four or five steps, did the rest for him with his shoulder. The boy reached the deck on all fours, and, regaining a more dignified position as soon as possible, went and leaned

over the side, regarding with lofty contempt the busy drudges on wharf and river.

They sailed at midnight and brought up in the early dawn in Longreach, where a lighter loaded with barrels came alongside, and the boy smelt romance and mystery when he learnt that they contained powder. They took in ten tons, the lighter drifted away, the hatches were put on, and they started once more.

It was his first voyage, and he regarded with eager interest the craft passing up and down. He had made his peace with the seamen, and they regaled him with blood-curdling stories of their adventures in the vain hope of horrifying him.

"'E's a beastly little rascal, that's wot 'e is," said the indignant Bill, who had surprised himself by his powers of narration; "fancy larfin' when I told 'im of pitchin' the baby to the sharks."

"'E's all right, Bill," said the cook softly. "Wait till you've got seven of 'em."

"What are you doing here, boy?" demanded the skipper, as Ralph, finding the seamen's yarns somewhat lacking in interest, strolled aft with his hands in his pockets.

"Nothing," said the boy, staring.

"Keep the other end o' the ship," said the skipper sharply, "an' go an' 'elp the cook with the taters."

Ralph hesitated, but a grin on the mate's face decided him.

"I didn't come here to peel potatoes," he said, loftily.

"Oh, indeed," said the skipper politely; "an' wot might you 'ave come for, if it ain't being too inquisitive?"

"To fight the enemy," said Ralph shortly.

"Come 'ere," said the skipper.

The boy came slowly towards him.

"Now look 'ere," said the skipper, "I'm going to try and knock a little sense into that stupid 'ed o' yours. I've 'eard all about your silly little games ashore. Your father said he couldn't manage you, so I'm goin' to have a try, and you'll find I'm a very different sort o' man to deal with to wot 'e is. The idea o' thinking this ship was a pirate. Why, a boy your age ought to know there ain't such things nowadays."

"You told me you was," said the boy hotly, "else I wouldn't have come."

"That's just why I told you," said the skipper.

"But I didn't think you'd be such a fool as to believe it. Pirates, indeed! Do we look like pirates?"

"You don't," said the boy with a sneer; "you look more like–"

"Like wot?" asked the skipper, edging closer to him. "Eh, like wot?"

"I forget the word," said Ralph, with strong good sense.

"Don't tell any lies now," said the skipper, flushing, as he heard a chuckle from the mate. "Go on, out with it. Ill give you just two minutes."

"I forget it," persisted Ralph.

"Dustman?" suggested the mate, coming to his assistance. "Coster, chimbley-sweep, mudlark, pickpocket, convict washer-wom–"

"If you'll look after your dooty, George, instead o' interferin' in matters that don't concern you," said the skipper in a choking voice, "I shall be obliged. Now, then, you boy, what were you going to say I was like?"

"Like the mate," said Ralph slowly.

"Don't tell lies," said the skipper furiously; "you couldn't 'ave forgot that word."

"I didn't forget it," said Ralph, "but I didn't know how you'd like it."

The skipper looked at him dubiously, and pushing his cap from his brow scratched his head.

"And I didn't know how the mate 'ud like it, either," continued the boy.

He relieved the skipper from an awkward dilemma by walking off to the galley and starting on a bowl of potatoes. The master of the *Susan Jane* watched him blankly for some time and then looked round at the mate.

"You won't get much change out of 'im," said the latter, with a nod; "insultin' little devil."

The other made no reply, but as soon as the potatoes were finished set his young friend to clean brass work, and after that to tidy the cabin up and help the cook clean his pots and pans. Meantime the mate went below and overhauled his chest.

"This is where he gets all them ideas from," he said, coming aft with a big bundle of penny papers. "Look at the titles of 'em—'The Lion of the Pacific,' 'The One-armed Buccaneer,'

'Captain Kidd's Last Voyage.'"

He sat down on the cabin skylight and began turning them over, and, picking out certain gems of phraseology, read them aloud to the skipper. The latter listened at first with scorn and then with impatience.

"I can't make head or tail out of what you're reading, George," he said snappishly. "Who was Rudolph? Read straight ahead."

Thus urged, the mate, leaning forward so that his listener might hear better, read steadily through a serial in the first three numbers. The third instalment left Rudolph swimming in a race with three sharks and a boat-load of cannibals; and the joint efforts of both men failed to discover the other numbers.

"Just wot I should 'ave expected of 'im," said the skipper, as the mate returned from a fruitless search in the boy's chest. "I'll make him a bit more orderly on this ship. Go an' lock them other things up in your drawer, George. He's not to 'ave 'em again."

The schooner was getting into open water now, and began to feel it. In front of them was the blue sea, dotted with white sails and funnels belching smoke, speeding from England to worlds of romance and adventure. Something of the kind the cook said to Ralph, and urged him to get up and look for himself. He also, with the best intentions, discussed the restorative properties of fat pork from a medical point of view.

The next few days the boy divided between seasickness and work, the latter being the skipper's great remedy for piratical yearnings. Three or four times he received a mild drubbing, and

what was worse than the drubbing, had to give an answer in the affirmative to the skipper's inquiry as to whether he felt in a more wholesome frame of mind. On the fifth morning they stood in towards Fairhaven, and to his great joy he saw treess and houses again.

They stayed at Fairhaven just long enough to put out a small portion of their cargo. Ralph, stripped to his shirt and trousers, having to work in the hold with the rest, and proceeded to Lowport, a little place some thirty miles distant, to put out their powder.

It was evening before they arrived, and, the tide being out, anchored in the mouth of the river on which the town stands.

"Git in about four o'clock," said the skipper to the mate, as he looked over the side towards the little cluster of houses on the shore. "Do you feel better now I've knocked some o' that nonsense out o' you, boy?"

"Much better, sir," said Ralph respectfully.

"Be a good boy," said the skipper, pausing on the companion-ladder, "and you can stay with us if you like. Better turn in now, as you'll have to make yourself useful again in the morning working out the cargo."

He went below, leaving the boy on deck. The crew were in the forecastle smoking, with the exception of the cook, who was in the galley over a little private business of his own.

An hour later the cook went below to prepare for sleep. The other two men were already in bed, and he was about to get into

his when he noticed that Ralph's bunk, which was under his own, was empty. He went upon deck and looked round, and returning below, scratched his nose in thought.

"Where's the boy?" he demanded, taking Jem by the arm and shaking him.

"Eh?" said Jem, rousing, "Whose boy?"

"Our boy, Ralph," said the cook. "I can't see 'im nowhere, I 'ope 'e ain't gone overboard, poor little chap."

Jem refusing to discuss the matter, the cook awoke Dobbs. Dobbs swore at him peacefully, and resumed his slumbers. The cook went up again and prowled round the deck, looking in all sorts of unlikely places for the boy. He even climbed a little way into the rigging, and, finding no traces of him, was reluctantly forced to the conclusion that he had gone overboard.

"Pore little chap," he said solemnly, looking over the ship's side at the still waters.

He walked slowly aft, shaking his head, and looking over the stern, brought up suddenly with a cry of dismay and rubbed his eyes. The ship's boat had also disappeared.

"Wot?" said the two seamen as he ran below and communicated the news. "Well, if it's gorn, it's gorn."

"Hadn't I better go an' tell the skipper?" said the cook.

"Let 'im find it out 'isself," said Jem purring contentedly in the blankets, "It's 'is boat. Go'night."

"Time we 'ad a noo 'un too," said Dobbs, yawning. "Don't you worry your 'ed, cook, about what don't consarn you."

The cook took the advice, and, having made his few simple preparations for the night, blew out the lamp and sprang into his bunk. Then he uttered a sharp exclamation, and getting out again fumbled for the matches and relit the lamp. A minute later he awoke his exasperated friends for the third time.

"S'elp me, cook," began Jem fiercely.

"If you don't I will," said Dobbs, sitting up and trying to reach the cook with his clenched fist.

"It's a letter pinned to my pillow," said the cook in trembling tones, as he held it to the lamp.

"Well, we don't want to 'ear it," said Jem. "Shut up, d'ye hear?"

But there was that in the cook's manner which awed him.

"Dear cook," he read feverishly, "I have made an infernal machine with clock-work, and hid it in the hold near the gunpowder when we were at Fairhaven. I think it will go off between ten and eleven to-night, but I am not quite sure about the time. Don't tell those other beasts, but jump overboard and swim ashore. I have taken the boat. I would have taken you too, but you told me you swam seven miles once, so you can eas–"

The reading came to an abrupt termination as his listeners sprang out of their bunks, and bolting on deck, burst wildly into the cabin, and breathlessly reeled off the heads of the letter to its astonished occupants.

"Stuck a wot in the hold?" gasped the skipper.

"Infernal machine," said the mate; "one of them things wot you blow up the 'Ouses of Parliament with."

"Wot's the time now?" interrogated Jem anxiously.

"'Bout ha'-past ten," said the cook trembling. "Let's give 'em a hail ashore."

They leaned over the side, and sent a mighty shout across the water. Most of Lowport had gone to bed, but the windows in the inn were bright, and lights showed in the upper windows of two or three of the cottages.

Again they shouted in deafening chorus, casting fearful looks behind them, and in the silence a faint answering hail came from the shore. They shouted again like madmen, and then listening intently heard a boat's keel grate on the beach, and then the welcome click of oars in the rowlocks.

"Make haste," bawled Dobbs vociferously, as the boat came creeping out of the darkness. "W'y don't you make 'aste?"

"Wot's the row?" cried a voice from the boat.

"Gunpowder!" yelled the cook frantically: "there's ten tons of it aboard just going to explode. Hurry up."

The sound of the oars ceased and a startled murmur was heard from the boat; then an oar was pulled jerkily.

"They're putting back," said Jem suddenly. "I'm going to swim for it. Stand by to pick me up, mates," he shouted, and lowering himself with a splash into the water struck out strongly towards them. Dobbs, a poor swimmer, after a moment's hesitation, followed his example.

"I can't swim a stroke," cried the cook, his teeth chattering.

The others, who were in the same predicament, leaned over

the side, listening. The swimmers were invisible in the darkness, but their progress was easily followed by the noise they made. Jem was the first to be hauled on board, and a minute or two later the listeners on the schooner heard him assisting Dobbs. Then the sounds of strife, of thumps, and wicked words broke on their delighted ears.

"They're coming back for us," said the mate, taking a deep breath. "Well done, Jem."

The boat came towards them, impelled by powerful strokes, and was soon alongside. The three men tumbled in hurriedly, their fall being modified by the original crew, who were lying crouched up in the bottom of the boat. Jem and Dobbs gave way with hearty goodwill, and the doomed ship receded into the darkness. A little knot of people had gathered on the shore, and, receiving the tidings, became anxious for the safety of their town. It was felt that the windows, at least, were in imminent peril, and messengers were hastily sent round to have them opened.

Still the deserted *Susan Jane* made no sign. Twelve o'clock struck from the little church at the back of the town, and she was still intact.

"Something's gone wrong," said an old fisherman with a bad way of putting things. "Now's the time for somebody to go and tow her out to sea."

There was no response.

"To save Lowport," said the speaker feelingly. "If I was only twenty years younger–"

"It's old men's work," said a voice.

The skipper, straining his eyes through the gloom in the direction of his craft, said nothing. He began to think that she had escaped after all.

Two o'clock struck and the crowd began to disperse. Some of the bolder inhabitants who were fidgety about draughts closed their windows, and children who had been routed out of their beds to take a nocturnal walk inland were led slowly back, By three o'clock the danger was felt to be over, and day broke and revealed the forlorn *Susan Jane* still riding at anchor.

"I'm going aboard," said the skipper suddenly; "who's coming with me?"

Jem and the mate and the town-policeman volunteered, and, borrowing the boat which had served them before, pulled swiftly out to their vessel and, taking the hatches off with unusual gentleness, commenced their search. It was nervous work at first, but they became inured to it, and, moreover, a certain suspicion, slight at first, but increasing in intensity as the search proceeded, gave them some sense of security. Later still they began to eye each other shamefacedly.

"I don't believe there's anything there," said the policeman, sitting down and laughing boisterously: "that boy's been making a fool of you."

"That's about the size of it," groaned the mate. "We'll be the laughing-stock o' the town."

The skipper, who was standing with his back towards him,

said nothing; but, peering about, stooped suddenly, and, with a sharp exclamation, picked up something from behind a damaged case.

"I've got it," he yelled suddenly; "stand clear!"

He scrambled hastily on deck, and, holding his find at arm's length, with his head averted, flung it far into the water. A loud cheer from a couple of boats which were watching greeted his action, and a distant response came from the shore.

"Was that a infernal machine?" whispered the bewildered Jem to the mate. "Why, it looked to me just like one o' them tins o' corned beef."

The mate shook his head at him and glanced at the constable, who was gazing longingly over the side. "Well, I've 'eard of people being killed by *them* sometimes," he said with a grin.

A SAFETY MATCH

Mr. Boom, late of the mercantile marine, had the last word, but only by the cowardly expedient of getting out of earshot of his daughter first, and then hurling it at her with a voice trained to compete with hurricanes. Miss Boom avoided a complete defeat by leaning forward with her head on one side in the attitude of an eager but unsuccessful listener, a pose which she abandoned for one of innocent joy when her sire, having been deluded into twice repeating his remarks, was fain to relieve his overstrained muscles by a fit of violent coughing.

"I b'lieve she heard it all along," said Mr. Boom sourly, as he continued his way down the winding lane to the little harbour below. "The only way to live at peace with wimmen is to always be at sea; then they make a fuss of you when you come home—if you don't stay too long, that is."

He reached the quay, with its few tiny cottages and brown nets spread about to dry in the sun, and walking up and down, grumbling, regarded with a jaundiced eye a few small smacks, which lay in the harbour, and two or three crusted amphibians lounging aimlessly about.

"Mornin', Mr. Boom," said a stalwart youth in sea-boots, appearing suddenly over the edge of the quay from his boat.

"Mornin', Dick," said Mr. Boom affably; "just goin' off?"

"'Bout an hour's time," said the other; "Miss Boom well, sir?"

"She's a' right," said Mr. Boom; "me an' her 've just had a few words. She picked up something off the floor what she said was a cake o' mud off my heel. Said she wouldn't have it," continued Mr. Boom, his voice rising. "My own floor too. Swep' it up off the floor with a dustpan and brush, and held it in front of me to look at."

Dick Tarrell gave a grunt which might mean anything—Mr. Boom took it for sympathy.

"I called her old maid," he said with gusto; "'you're a fidgety old maid,' I said. You should ha' seen her look. Do you know what I think, Dick?"

"Not exactly," said Tarrell cautiously.

"I b'leeve she's that savage that she'd take the first man that asked her," said the other triumphantly; "she's sitting up there at the door of the cottage, all by herself."

Tarrell sighed.

"With not a soul to speak to," said Mr. Boom pointedly.

The other kicked at a small crab which was passing, and returned it to its native element in sections.

"I'll walk up there with you if you're going that way," he said at length.

"No, I'm just having a look round," said Mr. Boom, "but there's nothing to hinder you going, Dick, if you've a mind to."

"There's no little thing you want, as I'm going there, I s'pose?" suggested Tarrell. "It's awkward when you go there and say, 'Good morning,' and the girl says, 'Good morning,' and then you

don't say any more and she don't say any more. If there was anything you wanted that I could help her look for, it 'ud make talk easier."

"Well—go for my baccy pouch," said Mr. Boom, after a minute's thought, "it'll take you a long time to find that."

"Why?" inquired the other.

"'Cos I've got it here," said the unscrupulous Mr. Boom, producing it, and placidly filling his pipe. "You might spend—ah—the best part of an hour looking for that."

He turned away with a nod, and Tarrell, after looking about him in a hesitating fashion to make sure that his movements were not attracting the attention his conscience told him they deserved, set off in the hang-dog fashion peculiar to nervous lovers up the road to the cottage. Kate Boom was sitting at the door as her father had described, and, in apparent unconsciousness of his approach, did not raise her eyes from her book.

"Good morning," said Tarrell, in a husky voice.

Miss Boom returned the salutation, and, marking the place in her book with her forefinger, looked over the hedge on the other side of the road to the sea beyond.

"Your father has left his pouch behind, and being as I was coming this way, asked me to call for it," faltered the young man.

Miss Boom turned her head, and, regarding him steadily, noted the rising colour and the shuffling feet.

"Did he say where he had left it?" she inquired.

"No," said the other.

"Well, my time's too valuable to waste looking for pouches," said Kate, bending down to her book again, "but if you like to go in and look for it, you may!"

She moved aside to let him pass, and sat listening with a slight smile as she heard him moving about the room.

"I can't find it," he said, after a pretended search.

"Better try the kitchen now then," said Miss Boom, without looking up, "and then the scullery. It might be in the woodshed or even down the garden. You haven't half looked."

She heard the kitchen door close behind him, and then, taking her book with her, went upstairs to her room. The conscientious Tarrell, having duly searched all the above-mentioned places, returned to the parlour and waited. He waited a quarter of an hour, and then going out by the front door stood irresolute.

"I can't find it," he said at length, addressing himself to the bedroom window.

"No. I was coming down to tell you," said Miss Boom, glancing sedately at him from over the geraniums. "I remember seeing father take it out with him this morning."

Tarrell affected a clumsy surprise. "It doesn't matter," he said. "How nice your geraniums are."

"Yes, they're all right," said Miss Boom briefly.

"I can't think how you keep 'em so nice," said Tarrell.

"Well, don't try," said Miss Boom kindly. "You'd better go back and tell father about the pouch. Perhaps he's waiting for a smoke all this time."

"There's no hurry," said the young man; "perhaps he's found it."

"Well, I can't stop to talk," said the girl; "I'm busy reading."

With these heartless words, she withdrew into the room, and the discomfited swain, only too conscious of the sorry figure he cut, went slowly back to the harbour, to be met by Mr. Boom with a wink of aggravating and portentous dimensions.

"You've took a long time," he said slyly, "There's nothing like a little scheming in these things."

"It didn't lead to much," said the discomfited Tarrell.

"Don't be in a hurry, my lad," said the elder man, after listening to his experiences. "I've been thinking over this little affair for some time now, an' I think I've got a plan."

"If it's anything about baccy pouches–" began the young man ungratefully.

"It ain't," interrupted Mr. Boom, "it's quite diff'rent. Now, you'd best get aboard your craft and do your duty. There's more young men won girls' 'arts while doing of their duty than—than—if they warn't doing their duty. Do you understand me?"

It is inadvisable to quarrel with a prospective father-in-law, so that Tarrell said he did, and with a moody nod tumbled into his boat and put off to the smack. Mr. Boom having walked up and down a bit, and exchanged a few greetings, bent his steps in the direction of the "Jolly Sailor," and, ordering two mugs of ale, set them down on a small bench opposite his old friend Raggett.

"I see young Tarrell go off grumpy-like," said Raggett,

drawing a mug towards him and gazing at the fast-receding boats.

"Aye, we'll have to do what we talked about," said Boom slowly. "It's opposition what that gal wants. She simply sits and mopes for the want of somebody to contradict her."

"Well, why don't you do it?" said Raggett, "That ain't much for a father to do surely."

"I hev," said the other slowly, "more than once. O' course, when I insist upon a thing, it's done; but a woman's a delikit creetur, Raggett, and the last row we had she got that ill that she couldn't get up to get my breakfast ready, no, nor my dinner either. It made us both ill, that did."

"Are you going to tell Tarrell?" inquired Raggett.

"No," said his friend. "Like as not he'd tell her just to curry favour with her. I'm going to tell him he's not to come to the house no more. That'll make her want him to come, if anything will. Now there's no use wasting time. You begin to-day."

"I don't know what to say," murmured Rag-gett, nodding to him as he raised the beer to his lips.

"Just go now and call in—you might take her a nosegay."

"I won't do nothing so darned silly," said Raggett shortly.

"We'll, go without 'em," said Boom impatiently; "just go and get yourselves talked about, that's all—have everybody making game of both of you. Talking about a good-looking young girl being sweethearted by an old chap with one foot in the grave and a face like a dried herring. That's what I want."

Mr. Raggett, who was just about to drink, put his mug down

again and regarded his friend fixedly.

"Might I ask who you're alloodin' too?" he inquired somewhat shortly.

Mr. Boom, brought up in mid-career, shuffled a little and laughed uneasily. "Them ain't my words, old chap," he said; "it was the way she was speaking of you the other day."

"Well, I won't have nothin' to do with it," said Raggett rising.

"Well, nobody needn't know anything about it," said Boom, pulling him down to his seat again. "She won't tell, I'm sure—she wouldn't like the disgrace of it."

"Look here," said Raggett getting up again.

"I mean from her point of view," said Mr. Boom querulously; "you're very 'asty, Raggett."

"Well, I don't care about it," said Raggett slowly; "it seemed all right when we was talking about it; but s'pose I have all my trouble for nothing, and she don't take Dick after all? What then?"

"Well, then there's no harm done," said his friend, "and it'll be a bit o' sport for both of us. You go up and start, an' I'll have another pint of beer and a clean pipe waiting for you against you come back."

Sorely against his better sense Mr. Raggett rose and went off, grumbling. It was fatiguing work on a hot day, climbing the road up the cliff, but he took it quietly, and having gained the top, moved slowly towards the cottage.

"Morning, Mr. Raggett," said Kate cheerily, as he entered the

cottage. “Dear, dear, the idea of an old man like you climbing about! It’s wonderful.”

“I’m sixty-seven,” said Mr. Raggett viciously, “and I feel as young as ever I did.”

“To be sure,” said Kate soothingly; “and look as young as ever you did. Come in and sit down a bit.”

Mr. Raggett with some trepidation complied, and sitting in a very upright position, wondered how he should begin. “I am just sixty-seven,” he said slowly. “I’m not old and I’m not young, but I’m just old enough to begin to want somebody to look after me a bit.”

“I shouldn’t while I could get about if I were you,” said the innocent Kate. “Why not wait until you’re bed-ridden?”

“I don’t mean that at all,” said Mr. Raggett snappishly. “I mean I’m thinking of getting married.”

“Good—gracious!” said Kate open-mouthed.

“I may have one foot in the grave, and resemble a dried herring in the face,” pursued Mr. Raggett with bitter sarcasm, “but–”

“You can’t help that,” said Kate gently.

“But I’m going to get married,” said Raggett savagely.

“Well, don’t get in a way about it,” said the girl. “Of course, if you want to, and—and—you can find somebody else who wants to, there’s no reason why you shouldn’t! Have you told father about it?”

“I have,” said Mr. Raggett, “and he has given his consent.”

He put such meaning into this remark and so much more in

the contortion of visage which accompanied it, that the girl stood regarding him in blank astonishment.

"His consent?" she said in a strange voice.

Mr. Raggett nodded.

"I went to him first," he said, trying to speak confidently. "Now I've come to you—I want you to marry me!"

"Don't you be a silly old man, Mr. Raggett," said Kate, recovering her composure. "And as for my father, you go back and tell him I want to see him."

She drew aside and pointed to the door, and Mr. Raggett, thinking that he had done quite enough for one day, passed out and retraced his steps to the "Jolly Sailor." Mr. Boom met him half-way, and having received his message, spent the rest of the morning In fortifying himself for the reception which awaited him.

It would be difficult to say which of the two young people was the more astonished at this sudden change of affairs. Miss Boom, affecting to think that her parent's reason was affected treated him accordingly, a state of affairs not without its drawbacks, as Mr. Boom found out. Tarrell, on the other hand, attributed it to greed, and being forbidden the house, spent all his time ashore on a stile nearly opposite, and sullenly watched events.

For three weeks Mr. Raggett called daily, and after staying to tea, usually wound up the evening by formally proposing for Kate's hand. Both conspirators were surprised and disappointed at the quietness with which Miss Boom received these attacks;

Mr. Raggett meeting with a politeness which was a source of much wonder to both of them.

His courting came to an end suddenly. He paused one evening with his hand on the door, and having proposed in the usual manner was going out, when Miss Boom called him back.

"Sit down, Mr. Raggett," she said calmly. Mr. Raggett, wondering inwardly, resumed his seat.

"You have asked me a good many times to marry you," said Kate.

"I have," said Mr. Raggett, nodding.

"And I'm sure it's very kind of you," continued the girl, "and if I've hurt your feelings by refusing you, it is only because I have thought perhaps I was not good enough for you."

In the silence which followed this unexpected and undeserved tribute to Mr. Raggett's worth, the two old men eyed each other in silent consternation.

"Still, if you've made up your mind," continued the girl, "I don't know that it's for me to object. You're not much to look at, but you've got the loveliest chest of drawers and the best furniture all round in Mastleigh. And I suppose you've got a little money?"

Mr. Raggett shook his head, and in a broken voice was understood to say: "A very little."

"I don't want any fuss or anything of that kind," said Miss Boom calmly. "No bridesmaids or anything of that sort; it wouldn't be suitable at your age."

Mr. Raggett withdrew his pipe, and holding it an inch or two

from his mouth, listened like one in a dream.

"Just a few old friends, and a bit of cake," continued Miss Boom musingly. "And instead of spending a lot of money in foolish waste, well have three weeks in London."

Mr. Raggett made a gurgling noise in his throat, and suddenly remembering himself, pretended to think that it was something wrong with his pipe, and removing it blew noisily through the mouthpiece.

"Perhaps," he said, in a trembling voice—"perhaps you'd better take a little longer to consider, my dear."

Kate shook her head. "I've quite made up my mind," she said, "quite. And now I want to marry you just as much as you want to marry me. Good-night, Father; good-night—George."

Mr. Raggett started violently, and collapsed in his chair.

"Raggett," said Mr. Boom huskily.

"Don't talk to me," said the other, "I can't bear it."

Mr. Boom, respecting his friend's trouble, relapsed into silence again, and for a long time not a word was spoken.

"My 'ed's in a whirl," said Mr. Raggett at length.

"It 'ud be a wonder if it wasn't," said Mr. Boom sympathetically.

"To think," continued the other miserably, "how I've been let in for this. The plots an' the plans and the artfulness what's been goin' on round me, an' I've never seen it."

"What d'ye mean?" demanded Mr. Boom, with sudden violence.

"I know what I mean," said Mr. Raggett darkly.

"P'r'aps you'll tell me, then," said the other.

"Who thought of it first?" demanded Mr. Raggett ferociously. "Who came to me and asked me to court his slip of a girl?"

"Don't you be a' old fool," said Mr. Boom heatedly. "It's done now, and what's done can't be undone. I never thought to have a son-in-law seven or eight years older than what I am, and what's more, I don't want it."

"Said I wasn't much to look at, but she liked my chest o' drawers," repeated Raggett mechanically.

"Don't ask me where she gets her natur' from, cos I couldn't tell you," said the unhappy parent; "she don't get it from me."

Mr. Raggett allowed this reflection upon the late Mrs. Boom to pass unnoticed, and taking his hat from the table, fixed it firmly upon his head, and gazing with scornful indignation upon his host, stepped slowly out of the door without going through the formality of bidding him good-night.

"George," said a voice from above him.

Mr. Raggett started, and glanced up at somebody leaning from the window.

"Come in to tea to-morrow early," said the voice pressingly; "good-night, dear."

Mr. Raggett turned and fled into the night, dimly conscious that a dark figure had detached itself from the stile opposite, and was walking beside him.

"That you, Dick?" he inquired nervously, after an oppressive

silence.

"That's me," said Dick. "I heard her call you 'dear.'" Mr. Raggett, his face suffused with blushes, hung his head.

"Called you 'dear,'" repeated Dick; "I heard her say it. I'm going to pitch you into the harbour. I'll learn you to go courting a young girl. What are you stopping for?"

Mr. Raggett delicately intimated that he was stopping because he preferred, all things considered, to be alone. Finding the young man, however, bent upon accompanying him, he divulged the plot of which he had been the victim, and bitterly lamented his share in it.

"You don't want to marry her, then," said the astonished Dick.

"Course I don't," snarled Mr. Raggett; "I can't afford it. I'm too old; besides which, she'll turn my little place topsy-turvy. Look here, Dick, I done this all for you. Now, it's evident she only wants my furniture: if I give all the best of it to you, she'll take you instead."

"No, she won't," said Dick grimly; "I wouldn't have her now not if she asked me on her bended knee."

"Why not?" said Raggett.

"I don't want to marry that sort o' girl," said the other scornfully; "it's cured me."

"What about me, then?" said the unfortunate Raggett.

"Well, so far as I can see, it serves you right for mixing in other people's business," said Dick shortly. "Well, good-night, and good luck to you."

To Mr. Raggett's sore disappointment, he kept to his resolution, and being approached by Mr. Boom on his elderly friend's behalf, was rudely frank to him.

"I'm a free man again," he said blithely, "and I feel better than I've felt for ever so long. More manly."

"You ought to think of other people," said Mr. Boom severely; "think of poor old Raggett."

"Well, he's got a young wife out of it," said Dick. "I dare say he'll be happy enough. He wants somebody to help him spend his money."

In this happy frame of mind he resumed his ordinary life, and when he encountered his former idol, met her with a heartiness and unconcern which the lady regarded with secret disapproval. He was now so sure of himself that, despite a suspicion of ulterior design on the part of Miss Boom, he even accepted an invitation to tea.

The presence of Mr. Raggett made it a slow and solemn function. Nobody with any feelings could eat with any appetite with that afflicted man at the table, and the meal passed almost in silence. Kate cleared the meal away, and the men sat at the open door with their pipes while she washed up in the kitchen.

"Me an' Raggett thought o' stepping down to the 'Sailor's'" said Mr. Boom, after a third application of his friend's elbow.

"I'll come with you," said Dick.

"Well, we've got a little business to talk about," said Boom confidentially; "but we shan't be long. If you wait here, Dick,

we'll see you when we come back."

"All right," said Tarrell.

He watched the two old men down the road, and then, moving his chair back into the room, silently regarded the busy Kate.

"Make yourself useful," said she brightly; "shake the tablecloth."

Tarrell took it to the door, and having shaken it, folded it with much gravity, and handed it back.

"Not so bad for a beginner," said Kate, taking it and putting it in a drawer. She took some needlework from another drawer, and, sitting down, began busily stitching.

"Wedding-dress?" inquired Tarrell, with an assumption of great ease.

"No, tablecloth!" said the girl, with a laugh. "You'll want to know a little more before you get married."

"Plenty o' time for me," said Tarrell; "I'm in no hurry."

The girl put her work down and looked up at him.

"That's right," she said steadily. "I suppose you were rather surprised to hear I was going to get married?"

"A little." said Tarrell; "there's been so many after old Raggett, I didn't think he'd ever be caught."

"Oh!" said Kate.

"I daresay he'll make a very good husband," said Tarrell patronisingly. "I think you'll make a nice couple. He's got a nice home."

"That's why I'm going to marry him," said Kate. "Do you think

it's wrong to marry a man for that?"

"That's your business," said Tarrell coldly; "speaking for myself, and not wishing to hurt your feelings, *I* shouldn't like to marry a girl like that."

"You mean you wouldn't like to marry me?" said Kate softly.

She leaned forward as she spoke, until her breath fanned his face.

"That's what I do mean," said Tarrell, with a suspicion of doggedness in his voice.

"Not even if I asked you on my bended knees?" said Kate. "Aren't you glad you're cured?"

"Yes," said Tarrell manfully.

"So am I," said the girl; "and now that you are happy, just go down to the 'Jolly Sailor's,' and make poor old Raggett happy too."

"How?" ask Tarrell.

"Tell him that I have only been having a joke with him," said Kate, surveying him with a steady smile. "Tell him that I overheard him and father talking one night, and that I resolved to give them both a lesson. And tell them that I didn't think anybody could have been so stupid as they have been to believe in it."

She leaned back in her chair, and, regarding the dumfounded Tarrell with a smile of wicked triumph, waited for him to speak, "Raggett, indeed!" she said disdainfully.

"I suppose," said Tarrell at length, speaking very slowly, "my being stupid was no surprise to you?"

"Not a bit," said the girl cheerfully.

"I'll ask you to tell Raggett yourself," said Tarrell, rising and moving towards the door. "I sha'n't see him. Good-night."

"Good-night," said she. "Where are you going, then?"

There was no reply.

"Where are you going?" she repeated. Then a suspicion of his purpose flashed across her. "You're not foolish enough to be going away?" she cried in dismay.

"Why not?" said Tarrell slowly.

"Because," said Kate, looking down—"oh, because—well, it's ridiculous. I'd sooner have you stay here and feel what a stupid you've been making of yourself. I want to remind you of it sometimes."

"I don't want reminding," said Tarrell, taking Raggett's chair; "I know it now."

A RASH EXPERIMENT

The hands on the wharf had been working all Saturday night and well into the Sunday morning to finish the *Foam*, and now, at ten o'clock, with hatches down and freshly-scrubbed decks, the skipper and mate stood watching the tide as it rose slowly over the smooth Thames mud.

"What time's she coming?" inquired the skipper, turning a lazy eye up at the wharf.

"About ha'-past ten, she said," replied the mate. "It's very good o' you to turn out and let her have your state-room."

"Don't say another word about that," said the skipper impressively. "I've met your wife once or twice, George, an' I must say that a nicer spoken woman, an' a more well-be'aved one, I've seldom seen."

"Same to you," said the mate; "your wife I mean."

"Any man," continued the skipper, "'s would lay in a comfortable state-room, George, and leave a lady a-trying to turn and to dress and ondress herself in a pokey little locker ought to be ashamed of himself."

"You see, it's the luggage they bring," said the mate, slowly refilling his pipe. "What they want with it all I can't think. As soon as my old woman makes up her mind to come for a trip, tomorrow being Bank Holiday, an' she being in the mind for a outing, what does she do? Goes down Commercial Road and

buys a bonnet far beyond her station."

"They're all like it," said the skipper; "mine's just as bad. What does that boy want?"

The boy approached the edge of the jetty, and, peering down at them, answered for himself.

"Who's Captain Bunnett?" he demanded, shrilly.

"That's me, my lad," said the skipper, looking up.

"I've got a letter for yer," said the boy, holding it out.

The skipper held out his hands and caught it; and, after reading the contents, felt his beard and looked at the mate.

"It never rains but it pours," he said figuratively.

"What's up?" inquired the other.

"Ere's my old woman coming now," said the skipper. "Sent a note to say she's getting ready as fast as she can, an' I'm not to sail on any account till she comes."

"That's awkward," said the mate, who felt that he was expected to say something.

"It never struck me to tell her your wife was coming," said the skipper. "Where we're to put 'em both I don't know. I s'pose it's quite certain your wife'll come?"

"Certain," said the mate.

"No chance of 'er changing 'er mind?" suggested the skipper, looking away from him.

"Not now she's got that bonnet," replied the mate. "I s'pose there's no chance of your wife changing hers?"

The skipper shook his head. "There's one thing," he said

hopefully, "they'll be nice company for each other. They'll have to 'ave the state-room between 'em. It's a good job my wife ain't as big as yours."

"We'll be able to play four 'anded wist sometimes," said the mate, as he followed the skipper below to see what further room could be made.

"Crowded but jolly," said the other.

The two cabs drove up almost at the same moment while they were below, and Mrs. Bunnett's cabman had no sooner staggered on to the jetty with her luggage than Mrs. Fillson's arrived with hers. The two ladies, who were entire strangers, stood regarding each other curiously as they looked down at the bare deck of the *Foam*.

"George!" cried Mrs. Fillson, who was a fine woman, raising her voice almost to a scream in the effort to make herself heard above the winch of a neighbouring steamer.

It was unfortunate perhaps that both officers of the schooner bore the same highly-respectable Christian name.

"*George!*" cried Mrs. Bunnett, glancing indignantly at the other lady.

"*Ge-orge!*" cried Mrs. Fillson, returning her looks with interest.

"Hussey," said Mrs. Bunnett under her breath, but not very much under.

"George!"

There was no response.

"*George!*" cried both ladies together.

Still no response, and they made a louder effort.

There was yet another George on board, in the fo'c'sle, and, in response to pushes from curious friends below, he came up, and regarded the fair duettists open-mouthed.

"What d'yer want?" he said, at length sheepishly.

"Will you tell Captain Bunnett that his wife, Mrs. Bunnett, is here?" said that lady, a thin, little woman with bright black eyes.

"Yes, mum," said the seaman, and was hurrying off when Mrs. Fillson called him back.

"Will you tell Mr. Fillson that his wife, Mrs. Fillson, is up here?" she said politely.

"All right, mum," said the other, and went be-low to communicate the pleasing tidings. Both husbands came up on deck hastily, and a glance served to show them how their wives stood.

"How do you do, Cap'n Bunnett," said Mrs. Fillson, with a fascinating smile.

"Good-morning, marm," said the skipper, trying to avoid his wife's eyes; "that's my wife, Mrs. Bunnett."

"Good-morning, ma'am," said Mrs. Fillson, adjusting the new bonnet with the tips of her fingers.

"Good-morning to you," said Mrs. Bunnett in a cold voice, but patronising. "You have come to bring your husband some of his things, I suppose?"

"She's coming with us," said the skipper, in a hurry to have it

over. “Wait half a moment, and I’ll help you down.”

He got up on to the side and helped them both to the deck, and, with a great attempt at cheery conversation, led the way below, where, in the midst of an impressive silence, he explained that the ladies would have to share the state-room between them.

“That’s the only way out of it,” said the mate, after waiting in vain for them to say something.

“It’s a fairish size when you come to look at it,” said the skipper, putting his head on one side to see whether the bunk looked larger that way.

“Pack three in there at a pinch,” said the mate hardily.

Still the ladies said nothing, but there was a storm-signal hoisted in Mrs. Bunnett’s cheek, which boded no good to her husband. There was room only for one trunk in the state-room, and by prompt generalship Mrs. Fillson got hers in first. Having seen it safe she went up on deck for a look round.

“George,” said Mrs. Bunnett fiercely, as soon as they were alone.

“Yes, my dear,” said her husband.

“Pack that woman off home,” said Mrs. Bunnett sharply.

“I couldn’t do that,” said the skipper firmly. “It’s your own fault; you should have said you was coming.”

“Oh, I know you didn’t want me to come,” said Mrs. Bunnett, the roses on her bonnet trembling. “The mate can think of a little pleasure for *his* wife, but I can stay at home and do your mending and keep the house clean. Oh, I know; don’t tell me.”

"Well, it's too late to alter it," said her husband. "I must get up above now; you'd better come too."

Mrs. Bunnett followed him on deck, and, getting as far from the mate's wife as possible, watched with a superior air of part ownership the movements of the seamen as they got under way. A favorable westerly breeze was blowing, and the canvas once set she stood by her husband as he pointed out the various objects of interest on the banks of the river.

They were still in the thick of the traffic at dinner time, so that the skipper was able, to his secret relief, to send the mate below to do the honours of the table. He came up from it pale and scared, and, catching the skipper's eye, hunched his shoulders significantly.

"No words?" inquired the latter anxiously, in a half-whisper.

"Not exactly words," replied the mate. "What you might call snacks."

"I know," said the other with a groan.

"If you don't now," said the mate, "you will at tea time. I'm not going to sit down there with them again alone. You needn't think it. If you was to ask me what I've been eating I couldn't tell you."

He moved off a bit as his table companions came up on deck, and the master of the *Foam* deciding to take the bull by the horns, called both of them to him, and pointed out the beauties of the various passing craft. In the midst of his dis-course his wife moved off, leaving the unhappy man conversing alone with Mrs. Fillson, her face containing an expression such as is seen in

the prints of the very best of martyrs as she watched them.

At tea time the men sat in misery, Mrs. Bunnett passed Mrs. Fillson her tea without looking at her, an example which Mrs. Fillson followed in handing her the cut bread and butter. When she took the plate back it was empty, and Mrs. Bunnett, convulsed with rage, was picking the slices out of her lap.

"Oh, I *am* sorry," said Mrs. Fillson.

"You're not, ma'am," said Mrs. Bunnett fiercely. "You did it a purpose."

"There, there!" said both men feebly.

"Of course my husband'll sit quite calm and see me insulted," said Mrs. Bunnett, rising angrily from her seat.

"And my husband'll sit still drinking tea while I'm given the lie," said Mrs. Fillson, bending an indignant look upon the mate.

"If you think I'm going to share the state-room with that woman, George, you're mistaken," said Mrs. Bunnett in a terrible voice. "I'd sooner sleep on a doorstep."

"And I'd sooner sleep on the scraper," said Mrs. Fillson, regarding her foe's scanty proportions.

"Very well, me an' the mate'll sleep there," said the skipper wearily. "You can have the mate's bunk and Mrs. Fillson can have the locker. You don't mind, George?"

"Oh, George don't mind," said Mrs. Bunnett mimickingly; "anything'll do for George. If you'd got the spirit of a man, you wouldn't let me be insulted like this."

"And if you'd got the spirit of a man," said Mrs. Fillson,

turning on her husband, “you wouldn’t let them talk to me like this. You never stick up for me.”

She flounced up on deck where Mrs. Bunnett, after a vain attempt to finish her tea, shortly followed her. The two men continued their meal for some time in silence.

“We’ll have to ‘ave a quarrel just to oblige them, George,” said the skipper at length, as he put down his cup. “Nothing else’ll satisfy ‘em.”

“It couldn’t be done,” said the mate, reaching over and clapping him on the back.

“Just pretend, I mean,” said the other.

“It couldn’t be done proper,” said the mate; “they’d see through it. We’ve sailed together five years now, an’ never ‘ad what I could call a really nasty word.”

“Well, if you can think o’ anything,” said the skipper, “say so. This sort o’ thing is worrying.”

“See how we get on at breakfast,” said the mate, as he lit his pipe. “If that’s as bad as this, we’ll have a bit of a row to please ‘em.”

Breakfast next morning was, if anything, worse, each lady directly inciting her lord to acts of open hostility. In this they were unsuccessful, but in the course of the morning the husbands arranged matters to their own satisfaction, and at the next meal the storm broke with violence.

“I don’t wish to complain or hurt anybody’s feelings,” said the skipper, after a side-wink at the mate, “but if you could eat your

wittles with a little less noise, George, I'd take it as a favour."

"Would you?" said the mate, as his wife stiffened suddenly in her seat. "Oh!"

Both belligerents, eyeing each other ferociously, tried hard to think of further insults.

"Like a pig," continued the skipper grumblingly.

The mate hesitated so long for a crushing rejoinder that his wife lost all patience and rose to her feet crimson with wrath.

"How dare you talk to my husband like that?" she demanded fiercely. "George, come up on deck this instant!"

"I don't mind what he says," said the mate, who had only just begun his dinner.

"You come away at once," said his wife, pushing his plate from him.

The mate got up with a sigh, and, meeting the look of horror-stricken commiseration in his captain's eye, returned it with one of impotent rage.

"Use a larger knife, cap'n," he said savagely, "You'll swallow that little 'un one of these days."

The skipper, with the weapon in question gripped in his fist, turned round and stared at him in petrified amazement.

"If I wasn't the cap'n o' this ship, George," he said huskily, "an' bound to set a good example to the men, I'd whop you for them words."

"It's all for your good, Captain Bunnett," said Mrs. Fillson mincingly. "There was a poor old workhouse man I used to give

a penny to some times, who would eat with his knife, and he choked himself with it."

"Ay, he did that, and he hadn't got a mouth half the size o' yours," said the mate warningly.

"Cap'n or no cap'n, crew or no crew," said the skipper in a suffocating voice, "I can't stand this. Come up on deck, George, and repeat them words."

"Before the mate could accept the invitation, he was dragged back by his wife, while at the same time Mrs. Bunnett, with a frantic scream, threw her arms round her husband's neck, and dared him to move.

"You wait till I get you ashore, my lad," said the skipper threateningly.

"I'll have to bring the ship home after I've done with you," retorted the mate as he passed up on deck with his wife.

During the afternoon the couples exchanged not a word, though the two husbands exchanged glances of fiery import, and later on, their spouses being below, gradually drew near to each other. The mate, however, had been thinking, and as they came together met his foe with a pleasant smile.

"Bravo, old man," he said heartily.

"What d'yer mean?" demanded the skipper in gruff astonishment.

"I mean the way you pretended to row me," said the mate. "Splendid you did it. I tried to back you up, but lor! I wasn't in it with you."

"What, d'yer mean to say you didn't mean what you said?" inquired the other.

"Why, o' course," said the mate with an appearance of great surprise. "You didn't, did you?"

"No," said the skipper, swallowing something in his throat. "No, o' course not. But you did it well too, George. Uncommon well, you did."

"Not half so well as you did," said the mate. "Well, I s'pose we've got to keep it up now."

"I s'pose so," said the skipper; "but we mustn't keep it up on the same things, George. Swallerin' knives an' that sort o' thing, I mean."

"No, no," said the mate hastily.

"An' if you could get your missus to go home by train from Summercove, George, we might have a little peace and quietness," added the other.

"She'd never forgive me if I asked her," said the mate: "you'll have to order it, cap'n."

"I won't do that, George," said the skipper firmly. "I'd never treat a lady like that aboard my ship. I 'ope I know 'ow to behave myself if I do eat with my knife."

"Stow that," said the mate, reddening. "We'll wait an' see what turns up," he added hopefully.

For the next three days nothing fresh transpired, and the bickering between the couples, assumed on the part of the men and virulent on the part of their wives, went from bad to worse.

It was evident that the ladies preferred it to any other amusement life on ship-board could offer, and, after a combined burst of hysterics on their part, in which the whole ship's company took a strong interest, the husbands met to discuss heroic remedies.

"It's getting worse and worse," said the skipper ruefully. "We'll be the laughing stock o' the crew even afore they're done with us. There's another day afore we reach Summercove, there's five or six days there, an' at least five back again."

"There'll be murder afore then," said the mate, shaking his head.

"If we could only pack 'em *both* 'ome by train," continued the skipper.

"That's an expense," said the mate.

"It 'ud be worth it," said the other.

"An' they wouldn't do it," said the mate, "neither of 'em."

"I've seen women having rows afore," said the skipper, "but then they could get away from each other. It's being boxed up in this little craft as does the mischief."

"S'pose we pretend the ship's not seaworthy," said the mate.

"Then they'd stand by us," said the skipper, "closer than ever."

"I b'leeve they would," said the mate. "They'd go fast enough if we'd got a case o' small-pox or anything like that aboard, though."

The skipper grunted assent.

"It 'ud be worth trying," said the mate. "We've pretended to

have a quarrel. Now just as we're going into port let one of the hands, the boy if you like, pretend he's sickening for small-pox."

"How's he going to do it?" inquired the skipper derisively.

"You leave it to me," replied the other. "I've got an idea how it's to be done."

Against his better judgment the skipper, after some demur, consented, and the following day, when the passengers were on deck gazing at the small port of Summercove as they slowly approached it, the cook came up excitedly and made a communication to the skipper.

"What?" cried the latter. "Nonsense."

"What's the matter?" demanded Mrs. Bunnett, turning round.

"Cook, here, has got it into his head that the boy's got the smallpox," said the skipper.

Both women gave a faint scream.

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Bunnett, with a pale face.

"Rubbish," said Mrs. Fillson, clasping her hands nervously.

"Very good, mum," said the cook calmly. "You know best, o' course, but I was on a barque once what got it aboard bad, and I think I *ought* to know it when I see it."

"Yes; and now you think everything's the small-pox," said Mrs. Bunnett uneasily.

"Very well, mum," said the cook, spreading out his hands. "Will you come down an' 'ave a *look* at'im?"

"No," snapped Mrs. Bunnett, retreating a pace or two.

"Will you come down an' 'ave a look at 'im, sir," inquired the

cook.

"You stay where you are, George," said Mrs. Bunnett shrilly, as her husband moved forward. "Go farther off, cook."

"And keep your tongue still when we get to port," said the mate. "Don't go blabbing it all over the place, mind, or we sha'n't get nobody to work us out."

"Ay, ay," said the cook, moving off. "I ain't afraid of it—I've given it to people, but I've never took it myself yet."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.