WILLIAM WYMARK JACOBS

A MASTER OF CRAFT

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

A pretty girl stood alone on the jetty of an old-fashioned wharf at Wapping, looking down upon the silent deck of a schooner below. No smoke issued from the soot-stained cowl of the galley, and the fore-scuttle and the companion were both inhospitably closed. The quiet of evening was over everything, broken only by the whirr of the paddles of a passenger steamer as it passed carefully up the centre of the river, or the plash of a lighterman's huge sweep as he piloted his unwieldy craft down on the last remnant of the ebb-tide. In shore, various craft sat lightly on the soft Thames mud: some sheeting a rigid uprightness, others with their decks at various angles of discomfort.

The girl stood a minute or two in thought, and put her small foot out tentatively towards the rigging some few feet distant. It was an awkward jump, and she was still considering it, when she heard footsteps behind, and a young man, increasing his pace as he saw her, came rapidly on to the jetty.

"This is the Foam, isn't it?" enquired the girl, as he stood expectantly. "I want to see Captain Flower."

"He went ashore about half an hour ago," said the other.

The girl tapped impatiently with her foot. “You don’t know what time he’ll be back, I suppose?” she enquired.

He shook his head. “I think he’s gone for the evening,” he said, pondering; “he was very careful about his dress.”

The ghost of a smile trembled on the girl’s lips. “He has gone to call for me,” she said. “I must have missed him. I wonder what I’d better do.”

“Wait here till he comes back,” said the man, without hesitation.

The girl wavered. “I suppose, he’ll guess I’ve come here,” she said, thoughtfully.

“Sure to,” said the other promptly.

“It’s a long way to Poplar,” she said, reflectively. “You’re Mr. Fraser, the mate, I suppose? Captain Flower has spoken to me about you.”

“That’s my name,” said the other.

“My name’s Tyrell,” said the girl, smiling. “I daresay you’ve heard Captain Flower mention it?”

“Must have done,” said Fraser, slowly. He stood looking at the girl before him, at her dark hair and shining dark eyes, inwardly wondering why the captain, a fervid admirer of the sex, had not mentioned her.

“Will you come on board and wait?” he asked. “I’ll bring a chair up on deck for you if you will.”

The girl stood a moment in consideration, and then, with another faint reference to the distance of Poplar from Wapping,

assented. The mate sprang nimbly into the ratlins, and then, extending a hand, helped her carefully to the deck.

"How nice it feels to be on a ship again!" said the girl, looking contentedly about her, as the mate brought up a canvas chair from below. "I used to go with my father sometimes when he was alive, but I haven't been on a ship now for two years or more."

The mate, who was watching her closely, made no reply. He was thinking that a straw hat with scarlet flowers went remarkably well with the dark eyes and hair beneath it, and also that the deck of the schooner had never before seemed such an inviting place as it was at this moment.

"Captain Flower keeps his ship in good condition," said the visitor, somewhat embarrassed by his gaze.

"He takes a pride in her," said Fraser; "and it's his uncle's craft, so there's no stint. She never wants for paint or repairs, and Flower's as nice a man to sail under as one could wish. We've had the same crew for years."

"He's very kind and jolly," said the girl.

"He's one of the best fellows breathing," said the mate, warmly; "he saved my life once—went overboard after me when we were doing over ten knots an hour, and was nearly drowned himself."

"That was fine of him," said Miss Tyrell, eagerly. "He never told me anything about it, and I think that's rather fine too. I like brave men. Have you ever been overboard after anybody?"

Fraser shook his head somewhat despondently. "I'm not much

of a swimmer," said he.

"But you'd go in for anybody if you saw them drowning?" persisted Miss Tyrell, in a surprised voice.

"I don't know, i'm sure," said Fraser. "I hope I should."

"Do you mean to say," said Miss Tyrell, severely, "that if I fell into the river here, for instance, you wouldn't jump in and try to save me?"

"Of course I should." said Fraser, hotly. "I should jump in after you if I couldn't swim a stroke."

Miss Tyrell, somewhat taken aback, murmured her gratification.

"I should go in after you," continued the mate who was loath to depart from the subject, "if it was blowing a gale, and the sea full of sharks."

"What a blessing it is there are no sharks round our coast," said Miss Tyrell, in somewhat of a hurry to get away from the mate's heroism. "Have you ever seen one?"

"Saw them in the Indian Ocean when I was an apprentice," replied Fraser.

"You've been on foreign-going ships then?" said the girl. "I wonder you gave it up for this."

"This suits me better," said Fraser; "my father's an old man, and he wanted me home. I shall have a little steamer he's got an interest in as soon as her present skipper goes, so it's just as well for me to know these waters."

In this wise they sat talking until evening gave way to night,

and the deck of the Foam was obscured in shadow. Lamps were lit on the wharves, and passing craft hung out their side-lights. The girl rose to her feet.

"I won't wait any longer; I must be going," she said.

"He may be back at any moment," urged the mate.

"No, I'd better go, thank you," replied the girl; "it's getting late. I don't like going home alone."

"I'll come with you, if you'll let me," said the mate, eagerly.

"All the way?" said Miss Tyrell, with the air of one bargaining.

"Of course," said Fraser.

"Well, I'll give him another half-hour, then," said the girl, calmly. "Shall we go down to the cabin? It's rather chilly up here now."

The mate showed her below, and, lighting the lamp, took a seat opposite and told her a few tales of the sea, culled when he was an apprentice, and credulous of ear. Miss Tyrell retaliated with some told her by her father, from which Fraser was able to form his own opinion of that estimable mariner. The last story was of a humourous nature, and the laughter which ensued grated oddly on the ear of the sturdy, good-looking seaman who had just come on board. He stopped at the companion for a moment listening in amazement, and then, hastily descending, entered the cabin.

"Poppy!" he cried. "Why, I've been waiting up at the Wheelers' for you for nearly a couple of hours."

"I must have missed you," said Miss Tyrell, serenely. "Annoying, isn't it?"

The master of the Foam said it was, and seemed from his manner to be anxious to do more justice to the subject than that.

"I didn't dream you'd come down here," he said, at length.

"No, you never invited me, so I came without," said the girl softly; "it's a dear little schooner, and I like it very much. I shall come often."

A slight shade passed over Captain Flower's face, but he said nothing.

"You must take me back now," said Miss Tyrell. "Good-bye, Mr. Fraser."

She held out her hand to the mate, and giving a friendly pressure, left the cabin, followed by Flower.

The mate let them get clear of the ship, and then, clambering on to the jetty, watched them off the wharf, and, plunging his hands into his pockets, whistled softly.

"Poppy Tyrell," he said to himself, slowly. "Poppy Tyrell! I wonder why the skipper has never mentioned her. I wonder why she took his arm. I wonder whether she knows that he's engaged to be married."

Deep in thought he paced slowly up and down the wharf, and then wandered listlessly round the piled-up empties and bags of sugar in the open floor beneath the warehouse. A glance through the windows of the office showed him the watchman slumbering peacefully by the light of a solitary gas-jet, and he went back to the schooner and gazed at the dark water and the dim shapes of the neighbouring craft in a vein of gentle melancholy. He walked

to the place where her chair had been, and tried to conjure up the scene again; then, becoming uncertain as to the exact spot, went down to the cabin, where, the locker being immovable, no such difficulty presented itself. He gazed his fill, and then, smoking a meditative pipe, turned in and fell fast asleep.

He was awakened suddenly from a dream of rescuing a small shark surrounded by a horde of hungry Poppies, by the hurried and dramatic entrance of Captain Fred Flower. The captain's eyes were wild and his face harassed, and he unlocked the door of his state-room and stood with the handle of it in his hand before he paused to answer the question in the mate's sleepy eyes.

"It's all right, Jack," he said, breathlessly.

"I'm glad of that," said the mate, calmly.

"I hurried a bit," said the skipper.

"Anxious to see me again, I suppose," said the mate; "what are you listening for?"

"Thought I heard somebody in the water as I came aboard," said Flower glibly.

"What have you been up to?" enquired the other, quickly.

Captain Flower turned and regarded him with a look of offended dignity.

"Good heavens! don't look like that," said the mate, misreading it. "You haven't chucked anybody overboard, have you?"

"If anybody should happen to come aboard this vessel," said Flower, without deigning to reply to the question, "and ask

questions about the master of it, he's as unlike me, Jack, as any two people in this world can be. D'ye understand?"

"You'd better tell me what you've been up to," urged the mate.

"As for your inquisitiveness, Jack, it don't become you," said Flower, with severity; "but I don't suppose it'll be necessary to trouble you at all."

He walked out of the cabin and stood listening at the foot of the companion-ladder, and the mate heard him walk a little way up. When he reentered the cabin his face had cleared, and he smiled comfortably.

"I shall just turn in for an hour," he said, amiably; "good-night, Jack."

"Good-night," said the curious mate. "I say–" he sat up suddenly in his bunk and looked seriously at the skipper.

"Well?" said the other.

"I suppose," said the mate, with a slight cough—"I suppose it's nothing about that girl that was down here?"

"Certainly not," said Flower, violently. He extinguished the lamp, and, entering his state-room, closed the door and locked it, and the mate, after lying a little while drowsily wondering what it all meant, fell asleep again.

CHAPTER II

WHILE the skipper and mate slumbered peacefully below, the watchman sat on a post at the extreme end of the jetty, yearning for human society and gazing fearfully behind him at the silent, dimly-lit wharf. The two gas-lamps high up on the walls gave but a faint light, and in no way dispelled the deep shadows thrown by the cranes and the piled-up empties which littered the place. He gazed intently at the dark opening of the floor beneath the warehouse, half fancying that he could again discern the veiled apparition which had looked in at him through the office window, and had finally vanished before his horror-struck eyes in a corner the only outlet to which was a grating. Albeit a careful man and tender, the watchman pinched himself. He was awake, and, rubbing the injured part, swore softly.

"If I go down and tell 'em," he murmured softly, in allusion to the crew, "what'll they do? Laugh at me."

He glanced behind him again, and, rising hastily to his feet, nearly fell on to the deck below as a dark figure appeared for a moment at the opening and then vanished again. With more alacrity than might have been expected of a man of his figure, he dropped into the rigging and lowered himself on to the schooner.

The scuttle was open, and the seamen's lusty snores fell upon his ears like sweet music. He backed down the ladder, and groped in the darkness towards the bunks with outstretched hand. One

snore stopped instantly.

"Eh!" said a sleepy voice. "Wot! 'Ere, what the blazes are you up to?"

"A' right, Joe," said the watchman, cheerfully.

"But it ain't all right," said the seaman, sharply, "comin' down in the dark an' ketchin' 'old o' people's noses. Give me quite a start, you did."

"It's nothing to the start I've 'ad," said the other, pathetically; "there's a ghost on the wharf, Joe. I want you to come up with me and see what it is.

"Yes, I'm sure to do that," said Joe, turning over in his bunk till it creaked with his weight. "Go away, and let me get to sleep again. I don't get a night's rest like you do, you know."

"What's the matter?" enquired a sleepy voice.

"Old George 'ere ses there's a ghost on the wharf," said Joe.

"I've seen it three times," said the watchman, eager for sympathy.

"I expect it's a death-warning for you, George," said the voice, solemnly. "The last watchman died sudden, you remember."

"So he did," said Joe.

"His 'art was wrong," said George, curtly; "'ad been for years."

"Well, we can't do nothin' for you, George," said Joe, kindly; "it's no good us going up. We sha'n't see it. It isn't meant for us."

"'Ow d'yer know it's a ghost," said a third voice, impatiently; "very likely while you're all jawing about it down 'ere it's a-burglin' the offis."

Joe gave a startled grunt, and, rolling out of his bunk, grabbed his trousers, and began to dress. Three other shadowy forms followed suit, and, hastily dressing, followed the watchman on deck and gained the wharf. They went through the gloomy ground floor in a body, yawning sleepily.

"I shouldn't like to be a watchman," said a young ordinary seaman named Tim, with a shiver; "a ghost might easy do anything with you while you was all alone. P'r'aps it walks up an' down behind you, George, makin' faces. We shall be gorn in another hour, George."

The office, when they reached it, was undisturbed, and, staying only long enough to drink the watchman's coffee, which was heating on a gas-jet, they left it and began to search the wharf, Joe leading with a small lantern.

"Are we all 'ere?" demanded Tim, suddenly.

"I am," said the cook, emphatically.

"'Cos I see su'thing right behind them bags o' sugar," said the youth, clutching hold of the cook on one side and the watchman on the other. "Spread out a bit, chaps."

Joe dashed boldly round with the lantern. There was a faint scream and an exclamation of triumph from the seaman. "I've got it!" he shouted.

The others followed hastily, and saw the fearless Joe firmly gripping the apparition. At the sight the cook furtively combed his hair with his fingers, while Tim modestly buttoned up his jacket.

"Take this lantern, so's I can hold her better," said Joe, extending it.

The cook took it from him, and holding it up, revealed the face of a tall, good-looking woman of some seven or eight and twenty.

"What are you doin' here?" demanded the watchman, with official austerity.

"I'm waiting for a friend of mine," said the visitor, struggling with Joe. "Make this man leave go of me, please."

"Joe," said the watchman, with severity. "I'm ashamed of you. Who is your friend, miss?"

"His name is Robinson," said the lady. "He came on here about an hour ago. I'm waiting for him."

"There's nobody here," said the watchman, shaking his head.

"I'm not sure he didn't go on that little ship," said the lady; "but if he has, I suppose I can wait here till he comes off. I'm not doing any harm."

"The ship'll sail in about an hour's time, miss," said Tim, regretfully, "but there ain't nobody o' the name of Robinson aboard her. All the crew's 'ere, and there's only the skipper and mate on her besides."

"You can't deceive me, young man, so don't try it," said the lady, sharply. "I followed him on here, and he hasn't gone off, because the gate has been locked since."

"I can't think who the lady means," said Joe.

"I ain't seen nobody come aboard. If he did, he's down the

cabin."

"Well, I'll go down there," said the lady, promptly.

"Well, miss, it's nothing to do with us," said Joe, "but it's my opinion you'll find the skipper and mate has turned in."

"Well, I'm going down," said the lady, gripping her parasol firmly by the middle; "they can't eat me."

She walked towards the Foam, followed by the perplexed crew, and with the able assistance of five pairs of hands reached the deck. The companion was open, and at Joe's whispered instructions she turned and descended the steps backwards.

It was at first quite dark in the cabin, but as the visitor's eyes became accustomed to it, she could just discern the outlines of a small table, while a steady breathing assured her that somebody was sleeping close by. Feeling her way to the table she discovered, a locker, and, taking a seat, coughed gently. The breathing continuing quite undisturbed, she coughed again, twice.

The breathing stopped suddenly. "Who the devil's that coughing?" asked a surprised voice.

"I beg pardon, I'm sure," said the visitor, "but is there a Mr. Robinson down here?"

The reply was so faint and smothered that she could not hear it. It was evident that the speaker, a modest man, was now speaking from beneath the bedclothes.

"Is Mr. Robinson here?" she repeated loudly.

"Never heard of him," said the smothered voice.

"It's my opinion," said the visitor, hotly, "that you're trying to deceive me. Have you got a match?"

The owner of the voice said that he had not, and with chilly propriety added that he wouldn't give it to her if he had. Whereupon the lady rose, and, fumbling on the little mantel-piece, found a box and struck one. There was a lamp nailed to the bulkhead over the mantel-piece, and calmly removing the chimney, she lit it.

A red, excited face, with the bedclothes fast about its neck, appeared in a small bunk and stared at her in speechless amaze. The visitor returned his gaze calmly, and then looked carefully round the cabin.

"Where does that lead to?" she asked, pointing to the door of the state-room.

The mate, remembering in time the mysterious behaviour of Flower, considered the situation. "That's the pantry," he said, untruthfully.

The visitor rose and tried the handle. The door was locked, and she looked doubtfully at the mate. "I suppose that's a leg of mutton I can hear asleep in there," she said, with acerbity.

"You can suppose what you like," said the mate, testily; "why don't you go away? I'm surprised at you."

"You'll be more surprised before I've done with you," said the lady, with emotion. "My Fred's in there, and you know it."

"Your Fred!" said Fraser, in great surprise.

"Mr. Robinson," said the visitor, correcting herself.

"I tell you there's nobody in there except the skipper," said the mate.

"You said it was the pantry just now," exclaimed the other, sharply.

"The skipper sleeps in the pantry so's he can keep his eye on the meat," explained Fraser.

The visitor looked at him angrily. "What sort of a man is he?" she enquired, suddenly.

"You'll soon know if he comes out," said the mate. "He's the worst-tempered man afloat, I should think. If he comes out and finds you here, I don't know what he'll do."

"I'm not afraid of him," said the other, with spirit. "What do you call him? Skipper?"

The mate nodded, and the visitor tapped loudly at the door. "Skipper!" she cried, "Skipper!"

No answer being vouchsafed, she repeated her cry in a voice louder than before.

"He's a heavy sleeper," said the perturbed Fraser; "better go away, there's a good girl."

The lady, scornfully ignoring him, rapped on the door and again called upon its occupant. Then, despite her assurance, she sprang back with a scream as a reply burst through the door with the suddenness and fury of a thunder-clap.

"Halloa!" it said.

"My goodness," said the visitor, aghast. "What a voice! What a terrible voice!"

She recovered herself and again approached the door.

"Is there a gentleman named Robinson in there?" she asked, timidly.

"Gentleman named who?" came the thunderclap again.

"Robinson," said the lady, faintly.

"No! No!" said the thunder-clap. Then—"Go away," it rumbled. "Go away."

The reverberation of that mighty voice rolled and shook through the cabin. It even affected the mate, for the visitor, glancing towards him, saw that he had nervously concealed himself beneath the bedclothes, and was shaking with fright.

"I daresay his bark is worse than his bite," said the visitor, trembling; "anyway, I'm going to stay here. I saw Mr. Robinson come here, and I believe he's got him in there. Killing him, perhaps. Oh! Oh!"

To the mate's consternation she began to laugh, and then changed to a piercing scream, and, unused to the sex as he was, he realised that this was the much-dreaded hysteria of which he had often heard, and he faced her with a face as pallid as her own.

"Chuck some water over yourself," he said, hastily, nodding at a jug which stood on the table. "I can't very well get up to do it myself."

The lady ignored this advice, and by dint of much strength of mind regained her self-control. She sat down on the locker again, and folding her arms showed clearly her intention to remain.

Half an hour passed; the visitor still sat grimly upright. Twice

she sniffed slightly, and, with a delicate handkerchief, pushed up her veil and wiped away the faint beginnings of a tear.

"I suppose you think I'm acting strangely?" she said, catching the mate's eye after one of these episodes.

"Oh, don't mind me," said the mate, with studied politeness; "don't mind hurting my feelings or taking my character away."

"Pooh! you're a man," said the visitor, scornfully; "but character or no character, I'm going to see into that room before I go away, if I sit here for three weeks."

"How're you going to manage about eating and drinking all that time?" enquired Fraser.

"How are you?" said the visitor; "you can't get up while I'm here, you know."

"Well, we'll see," said the mate, vaguely.

"I'm sure I don't want to annoy anybody," said the visitor, softly, "but I've had a lot of trouble, young man, and what's worse, I've been made a fool of. This day three weeks ago I ought to have been married."

"I'm sure you ought," murmured the other.

The lady ignored the interruption.

"Travelling under Government on secret service, he said he was," she continued; "always away: here to-day, China to-morrow, and America the day after."

"Flying?" queried the interested mate.

"I daresay," snapped the visitor; "anything to tell me, I suppose. We were to be married by special license. I'd even got

my trousseau ready."

"Got your what ready?" enquired the mate, to whom the word was new, leaning out of his bunk.

"Everything to wear," explained the visitor. "All my relations bought new clothes, too; leastways, those that could afford it did. He even went and helped me choose the cake."

"Well, is that wrong?" asked the puzzled mate.

"He didn't buy it, he only chose it," said the other, having recourse to her handkerchief again. "He went outside the shop to see whether there was one he would like better, and when I came out he had disappeared."

"He must have met with an accident," said the mate, politely.

"I saw him to-night," said the lady, tersely.

"Once or twice he had mentioned Wapping in conversation, and then seemed to check himself. That was my clue. I've been round this dismal heathenish place for a fortnight. To-night I saw him; he came on this wharf, and he has not gone off.... It's my belief he's in that room."

Before the mate could reply the hoarse voice of the watchman came down the company-way. "Ha' past eleven, sir; tide's just on the turn."

"Aye, aye," said the mate. He turned imploringly to the visitor.

"Would you do me the favour just to step on deck a minute?"

"What for?" enquired the visitor, shortly.

"Because I want to get up," said the mate.

"I sha'n't move," said the lady.

"But I've got to get up, I tell you," said the mate; "we're getting under way in ten minutes."

"And what might that be?" asked the lady.

"Why, we make a start. You'd better go ashore unless you want to be carried off."

"I sha'n't move," repeated the visitor.

"Well, I'm sorry to be rude," said the mate. "George."

"Sir," said the watchman from above.

"Bring down a couple o' men and take this lady ashore," said the mate sternly.

"I'll send a couple down, sir," said the watchman, and moved off to make a selection.

"I shall scream 'murder and thieves,'" said the lady, her eyes gleaming. "I'll bring the police up and cause a scandal. Then perhaps I shall see into that room."

In the face of determination like this the mate's courage gave way, and in a voice of much anxiety he called upon his captain for instruction.

"Cast off," bellowed the mighty voice. "If your sweetheart won't go ashore she must come, too. You must pay her passage."

"Well, of all the damned impudence," muttered the incensed mate. "Well, if you're bent on coming," he said, hotly, to the visitor, "just go on deck while I dress."

The lady hesitated a moment and then withdrew. On deck the men eyed her curiously, but made no attempt to interfere with her, and in a couple of minutes the mate came running up to take

charge.

"Where are we going?" enquired the lady with a trace of anxiety in her voice.

"France," said Fraser, turning away.

The visitor looked nervously round. At the adjoining wharf a sailing barge was also getting under way, and a large steamer was slowly turning in the middle of the river. She took a pace or two towards the side.

"Cast off," said Fraser, impatiently, to the watchman.

"Wait a minute," said the visitor, hastily, "I want to think."

"Cast off," repeated the mate.

The watchman obeyed, and the schooner's side moved slowly from the wharf. At the sight the visitor's nerve forsook her, and with a frantic cry she ran to the side and, catching the watchman's outstretched hand, sprang ashore.

"Good-bye," sang out the mate; "sorry you wouldn't come to France with us. The lady was afraid of the foreigners, George. If it had been England she wouldn't have minded."

"Aye, aye," said the watchman, significantly, and, as the schooner showed her stern, turned to answer, with such lies as he thought the occasion demanded, the eager questions of his fair companion.

CHAPTER III

Captain Flower, learning through the medium of Tim that the coast was clear, came on deck at Limehouse, and took charge of his ship with a stateliness significant of an uneasy conscience. He noticed with growing indignation that the mate's attitude was rather that of an accomplice than a subordinate, and that the crew looked his way far oftener than was necessary or desirable.

"I told her we were going to France," said the mate, in an impressive whisper.

"Her?" said Flower, curtly. "Who?"

"The lady you didn't want to see," said Fraser, restlessly.

"You let your ideas run away with you, Jack," said Flower, yawning. "It wasn't likely I was going to turn out and dress to see any girl you liked to invite aboard."

"Or even to bawl at them through the speaking-trumpet," said Fraser, looking at him steadily.

"What sort o'looking girl was she?" enquired Flower, craning his neck to see what was in front of him.

"Looked like a girl who meant to find the man she wanted, if she spent ten years over it," said the mate grimly. "I'll bet you an even five shillings, cap'n, that she finds this Mr. Robinson before six weeks are out—whatever his other name is."

"Maybe," said Flower, carelessly.

"It's her first visit to the Foam, but not the last, you mark

my words," said Fraser, solemnly. "If she wants this rascal Robinson–"

"What?" interrupted Flower, sharply.

"I say if she wants this rascal Robinson," repeated the mate, with relish, "she'll naturally come where she saw the last trace of him."

Captain Flower grunted.

"Women never think," continued Fraser, judicially, "or else she'd be glad to get rid of such a confounded scoundrel."

"What do you know about him?" demanded Flower.

"I know what she told me," said Fraser; "the idea of a man leaving a poor girl in a cake-shop and doing a bolt. He'll be punished for it, I know. He's a thoughtless, inconsiderate fellow, but one of the best-hearted chaps in the world, and I guess I'll do the best I can for him."

Flower grinned safely in the darkness. "And any little help I can give you, Jack, I'll give freely," he said, softly. "We'll talk it over at breakfast."

The mate took the hint, and, moving off, folded his arms on the taffrail, and, looking idly astern, fell into a reverie. Like the Pharisee, he felt thankful that he was not as other men, and dimly pitied the skipper and his prosaic entanglements, as he thought of Poppy. He looked behind at the dark and silent city, and felt a new affection for it, as he reflected that she was sleeping there.

The two men commenced their breakfast in silence, the skipper eating with a zest which caused the mate to allude

impatiently to the last breakfasts of condemned men.

"Shut the skylight, Jack," said the skipper, at length, as he poured out his third cup of coffee.

Fraser complied, and resuming his seat gazed at him with almost indecent expectancy. The skipper dropped some sugar into his coffee, and stirring it in a meditative fashion, sighed gently.

"I've been making a fool of myself, Jack," he said, at length. "I was always one to be fond of a little bit of adventure, but this goes a little too far, even for me."

"But what did you get engaged to her for?" enquired Fraser.

Flower shook his head. "She fell violently in love with me," he said, mournfully. "She keeps the Blue Posts up at Chelsea. Her father left it to her. She manages her step-mother and her brother and everybody else. I was just a child in her hands. You know my easy-going nature."

"But you made love to her," expostulated the mate.

"In a way, I suppose I did," admitted the other. "I don't know now whether she could have me up for breach of promise, because when I asked her I did it this way. I said, 'Will you be Mrs. Robinson?' What do you think?"

"I should think it would make it harder for you," said Fraser. "But didn't you remember Miss Banks while all this was going on?"

"In a way," said Flower, "yes—in a way. But after a man's been engaged to a woman nine years, it's very easy to forget, and

every year makes it easier. Besides, I was only a boy when I was engaged to her."

"Twenty-eight," said Fraser.

"Anyway, I wasn't old enough to know my own mind," said Flower, "and my uncle and old Mrs. Banks made it up between them. They arranged everything, and I can't afford to offend the old man. If I married Miss Tipping—that's the Blue Posts girl—he'd leave his money away from me; and if I marry Elizabeth, Miss Tipping'll have me up for breach of promise—if she finds me."

"If you're not very careful," said Fraser, impressively, "you'll lose both of 'em."

The skipper leaned over the table, and glanced carefully round. "Just what I want to do," he said, in a low voice. "I'm engaged to another girl."

"What?" cried the mate, raising his voice. "Three?"

"Three," repeated the skipper. "Only three," he added, hastily, as he saw a question trembling on the other's lips.

"I'm ashamed of you," said the latter, severely; "you ought to know better."

"I don't want any of your preaching, Jack," said the skipper, briskly; "and, what's more, I won't have it. I deserve more pity than blame."

"You'll want all you can get," said Fraser, ominously. "And does the other girl know of any of the others?"

"Of either of the others—no," corrected Flower. "Of course,

none of them know. You don't think I'm a fool, do you?"

"Who is number three?" enquired the mate suddenly.

"Poppy Tyrell," replied the other.

"Oh," said Fraser, trying to speak unconcernedly; "the girl who came here last evening."

Flower nodded. "She's the one I'm going to marry," he said, colouring. "I'd sooner marry her than command a liner. I'll marry her if I lose every penny I'm going to have, but I'm not going to lose the money if I can help it. I want both."

The mate baled out his cup with a spoon and put the contents into the saucer.

"I'm a sort of guardian to her," said Flower. "Her father, Captain Tyrell, died about a year ago, and I promised him I'd look after her and marry her. It's a sacred promise."

"Besides, you want to," said Fraser, by no means in the mood to allow his superior any credit in the matter, "else you wouldn't do it."

"You don't know me, Jack," said the skipper, more in sorrow than in anger.

"No, I didn't think you were quite so bad," said the mate, slowly. "Is—Miss Tyrell—fond of you?"

"Of course she is," said Flower, indignantly; "they all are, that's the worst of it. You were never much of a favourite with the sex, Jack, were you?"

Fraser shook his head, and, the saucer being full, spooned the contents slowly back into the cup again.

"Captain Tyrell leave any money?" he enquired.

"Other way about," replied Flower. "I lent him, altogether, close on a hundred pounds. He was a man of very good position, but he took to drink and lost his ship and his self-respect, and all he left behind was his debts and his daughter."

"Well, you're in a tight place," said Fraser, "and I don't see how you're going to get out of it. Miss Tipping's got a bit of a clue to you now, and if she once discovers you, you're done. Besides, suppose Miss Tyrell finds anything out?"

"It's all excitement," said Flower, cheerfully. "I've been in worse scrapes than this and always got out of 'em. I don't like a quiet life. I never worry about things, Jack, because I've noticed that the things people worry about never happen."

"Well, if I were you, then," said the other, emphasizing his point with the spoon, "I should just worry as much as I could about it. I'd get up worrying and I'd go to bed worrying. I'd worry about it in my sleep."

"I shall come out of it all right," said Flower. "I rather enjoy it. There's Gibson would marry Elizabeth like a shot if she'd have him; but, of course, she won't look at him while I'm above ground. I have thought of getting somebody to tell Elizabeth a lot of lies about me."

"Why, wouldn't the truth do?" enquired the mate, artlessly.

The skipper turned a deaf ear. "But she wouldn't believe a word against me," he said, with mournful pride, as he rose and went on deck. "She trusts me too much."

From his knitted brows, as he steered, it was evident, despite his confidence, that this amiable weakness on the part of Miss Banks was causing him some anxiety, a condition which was not lessened by the considerate behaviour of the mate, who, when any fresh complication suggested itself to him, dutifully submitted it to his commander.

"I shall be all right," said Flower, confidently, as they entered the river the following afternoon and sailed slowly along the narrow channel which wound its sluggish way through an expanse of mud-banks to Seabridge.

The mate, who was suffering from symptoms hitherto unknown to him, made no reply. His gaze wandered idly from the sloping uplands, stretching away into the dim country on the starboard side, to the little church-crowned town ahead, with its out-lying malt houses and neglected, grass-grown quay, A couple of moribund ship's boats lay rotting in the mud, and the skeleton of a fishing-boat completed the picture. For the first time perhaps in his life, the landscape struck him as dull and dreary.

Two men of soft and restful movements appeared on the quay as they approached, and with the slowness characteristic of the best work, helped to make them fast in front of the red-tiled barn which served as a warehouse. Then Captain Flower, after descending to the cabin to make the brief shore-going toilet necessary for Seabridge society, turned to give a last word to the mate.

"I'm not one to care much what's said about me, Jack," he began, by way of preface.

"That's a good job for you," said Fraser, slowly.

"Same time let the hands know I wish 'em to keep their mouths shut," pursued the skipper; "just tell them it was a girl that you knew, and I don't want it talked about for fear of getting you into trouble. Keep me out of it; that's all I ask."

"If cheek will pull you through," said Fraser, with a slight display of emotion, "you'll do. Perhaps I'd better say that Miss Tyrell came to see me, too. How would you like that?"

"Ah, it would be as well," said Flower, heartily. "I never thought of it."

He stepped ashore, and at an easy pace walked along the steep road which led to the houses above. The afternoon was merging into evening, and a pleasant stillness was in the air. Menfolk working in their cottage gardens saluted him as he passed, and the occasional whiteness of a face at the back of a window indicated an interest in his affairs on the part of the fairer citizens of Seabridge. At the gate of the first of an ancient row of cottages, conveniently situated within hail of The Grapes, The Thorn, and The Swan, he paused, and walking up the trim-kept garden path, knocked at the door.

It was opened by a stranger—a woman of early middle age, dressed in a style to which the inhabitants of the row had long been unaccustomed. The practised eye of the skipper at once classed her as "rather good-looking."

"Captain Barber's in the garden," she said, smiling. "He wasn't expecting you'd be up just yet."

The skipper followed her in silence, and, after shaking hands with the short, red-faced man with the grey beard and shaven lip, who sat with a paper on his knee, stood watching in blank astonishment as the stranger carefully filled the old man's pipe and gave him a light. Their eyes meeting, the uncle winked solemnly at the nephew.

"This is Mrs. Church," he said, slowly; "this is my nevy, Cap'n Fred Flower."

"I should have known him anywhere," declared Mrs. Church; "the likeness is wonderful."

Captain Barber chuckled—loudly enough for them to hear.

"Me and Mrs. Church have been watering the flowers," he said. "Give 'em a good watering, we have."

"I never really knew before what a lot there was in watering," admitted Mrs. Church.

"There's a right way and a wrong in doing everything," said Captain Barber, severely; "most people chooses the wrong. If it wasn't so, those of us who have got on, wouldn't have got on."

"That's very true," said Mrs. Church, shaking her head.

"And them as haven't got on would have got on," said the philosopher, following up his train of thought. "If you would just go out and get them things I spoke to you about, Mrs. Church, we shall be all right."

"Who is it?" enquired the nephew, as soon as she had gone.

Captain Barber looked stealthily round, and, for the second time that evening, winked at his nephew.

"A visitor?" said Flower.

Captain Barber winked again, and then laughed into his pipe until it gurgled.

"It's a little plan o' mine." he said, when he had become a little more composed. "She's my housekeeper."

"Housekeeper?" repeated the astonished Flower.

"Bein' all alone here," said Uncle Barber, "I think a lot. I sit an' think until I get an idea. It comes quite sudden like, and I wonder I never thought of it before."

"But what did you want a housekeeper for?" enquired his nephew. "Where's Lizzie?"

"I got rid of her," said Captain Barber. "I got a housekeeper because I thought it was time you got married. Now do you see?"

"No," said Flower, shortly.

Captain Barber laughed softly and, relighting his pipe which had gone out, leaned back in his chair and again winked at his indignant nephew.

"Mrs. Banks," he said, suggestively.

His nephew gazed at him blankly.

Captain Barber, sighing good-naturedly at his dulness, turned his chair a bit and explained the situation.

"Mrs. Banks won't let you and Elizabeth marry till she's gone," said he.

His nephew nodded.

"I've been at her ever so long," said the other, "but she's firm. Now I'm trying artfulness. I've got a good-looking housekeeper—she's the pick o' seventeen what all come here Wednesday morning—and I'm making love to her."

"Making love to her," shouted his nephew, gazing wildly at the venerable bald head with the smoking-cap resting on one huge ear.

"Making love to her," repeated Captain Barber, with a satisfied air. "What'll happen? Mrs. Banks, to prevent me getting married, as she thinks, will give her consent to you an' Elizabeth getting tied up."

"Haven't you ever heard of breach of promise cases?" asked his nephew, aghast.

"There's no fear o' that," said Captain Barber, confidently. "It's all right with Mrs. Church she's a widder. A widder ain't like a young girl she knows you don't mean anything."

It was useless to argue with such stupendous folly; Captain Flower tried another tack.

"And suppose Mrs. Church gets fond of you," he said, gravely. "It doesn't seem right to trifle with a woman's affections like that."

"I won't go too far," said the lady-killer in the smoking-cap, reassuringly.

"Elizabeth and her mother are still away, I suppose?" said Flower, after a pause.

His uncle nodded.

"So, of course, you needn't do much love-making till they come back," said his nephew; "it's waste of time, isn't it?"

"I'll just keep my hand in," said Captain Barber, thoughtfully. "I can't say as I find it disagreeable. I was always one to take a little notice of the sects."

He got up to go indoors. "Never mind about them," he said, as his nephew was about to follow with the chair and his tobacco-jar; "Mrs. Church likes to do that herself, and she'd be disappointed if anybody else did it."

His nephew followed him to the house in silence, listening later on with a gloomy feeling of alarm to the conversation at the supper-table. The rôle of gooseberry was new to him, and when Mrs. Church got up from the table for the sole purpose of proving her contention that Captain Barber looked better in his black velvet smoking-cap than the one he was wearing he was almost on the point of exceeding his duties.

He took the mate into his confidence the next day, and asked him what he thought of it. Fraser said that it was evidently in the blood, and, being pressed with some heat for an explanation, said that he meant Captain Barber's blood.

"It's bad, any way I look at it," said Flower; "it may bring matters between me and Elizabeth to a head, or it may end in my uncle marrying the woman."

"Very likely both," said Fraser, cheerfully. "Is this Mrs. Church good-looking?"

"I can hardly say," said Flower, pondering.

"Well, good-looking enough for you to feel inclined to take any notice of her?" asked the mate.

"When you can talk seriously," said the skipper, in great wrath, "I'll be pleased to answer you. Just at present I don't feel in the sort of temper to be made fun of."

He walked off in dudgeon, and, until they were on their way to London again, treated the mate with marked coldness. Then the necessity of talking to somebody about his own troubles and his uncle's idiocy put the two men on their old footing. In the quietness of the cabin, over a satisfying pipe, he planned out in a kindly and generous spirit careers for both the ladies he was not going to marry. The only thing that was wanted to complete their happiness, and his, was that they should fall in with the measures proposed.

CHAPTER IV

At No. 5 Liston Street, Poppy Tyrell sat at the open window of her room reading. The outside air was pleasant, despite the fact that Poplar is a somewhat crowded neighbourhood, and it was rendered more pleasant by comparison with the atmosphere inside, which, from a warm, soft smell not to be described by comparison, suggested washing. In the stone-paved yard beneath the window, a small daughter of the house hung out garments of various hues and shapes, while inside, in the scullery, the master of the house was doing the family washing with all the secrecy and trepidation of one engaged in an unlawful task. The Wheeler family was a large one, and the wash heavy, and besides misadventures to one or two garments, sorted out for further consideration, the small girl was severely critical about the colour, averring sharply that she was almost ashamed to put them on the line.

"They'll dry clean," said her father, wiping his brow with the upper part of his arm, the only part which was dry; "and if they don't we must tell your mother that the line came down. I'll show these to her now."

He took up the wet clothes and, cautiously leaving the scullery, crossed the passage to the parlour, where Mrs. Wheeler, a confirmed invalid, was lying on a ramshackle sofa, darning socks. Mr. Wheeler coughed to attract her attention, and with an

apologetic expression of visage held up a small, pink garment of the knickerbocker species, and prepared for the worst.

"They've never shrunk like that?" said Mrs. Wheeler, starting up.

"They have," said her husband, "all by itself," he added, in hasty self-defence.

"You've had it in the soda," said Mrs. Wheeler, disregarding.

"I've not," said Mr. Wheeler, vehemently. "I've got the two tubs there, flannels in one without soda, the other things in the other with soda. It's bad stuff, that's what it is. I thought I'd show you."

"It's management they want," said Mrs. Wheeler, wearily; "it's the touch you have to give 'em. I can't explain, but I know they wouldn't have gone like that if I'd done 'em. What's that you're hiding behind you?"

Thus attacked, Mr. Wheeler produced his other hand, and shaking out a blue and white shirt, showed how the blue had been wandering over the white territory, and how the white had apparently accepted a permanent occupation.

"What do you say to that?" he enquired, desperately.

"You'd better ask Bob what he says," said his wife, aghast; "you know how pertickler he is, too. I told you as plain as a woman could speak, not to boil that shirt."

"Well, it can't be helped," said Mr. Wheeler, with a philosophy he hoped his son would imitate. "I wasn't brought up to the washing, Polly."

"It's a sin to spoil good things like that," said Mrs. Wheeler, fretfully. "Bob's quite the gentleman—he will buy such expensive shirts. Take it away, I can't bear to look at it."

Mr. Wheeler, considerably crestfallen, was about to obey, when he was startled by a knock at the door.

"That's Captain Flower, I expect," said his wife, hastily; "he's going to take Poppy and Emma to a theatre to-night. Don't let him see you in that state, Peter."

But Mr. Wheeler was already fumbling at the strings of his apron, and, despairing of undoing it, broke the string, and pitched it with the other clothes under the sofa and hastily donned his coat.

"Good-evening," said Flower, as Mr. Wheeler opened the door; "this is my mate."

"Glad to see you, sir," said Mr. Wheeler.

The mate made his acknowledgments, and having shaken hands, carefully wiped his down the leg of his trousers.

"Moist hand you've got, Wheeler," said Flower, who had been doing the same thing.

"Got some dye on 'em at the docks," said Wheeler, glibly. "I've 'ad 'em in soak."

Flower nodded, and after a brief exchange of courtesies with Mrs. Wheeler as he passed the door, led the way up the narrow staircase to Miss Tyrell's room.

"I've brought him with me, so that he'll be company for Emma Wheeler," said the skipper, as Fraser shook hands with her, "and

you must look sharp if you want to get good seats.

"I'm ready all but my hat and jacket," said Poppy, "and Emma's in her room getting ready, too. All the children are up there helping her."

Fraser opened his eyes at such a toilet, and began secretly to wish that he had paid more attention to his own.

"I hope you're not shy?" said Miss Tyrell, who found his steadfast gaze somewhat embarrassing.

Fraser shook his head. "No, I'm not shy," he said, quietly.

"Because Emma didn't know you were coming," continued Miss Tyrell, "and she's always shy. So you must be bold, you know."

The mate nodded as confidently as he could. "Shyness has never been one of my failings," he said, nervously.

Further conversation was rendered difficult, if not impossible, by one which now took place outside. It was conducted between a small Wheeler on the top of the stairs and Mrs. Wheeler in the parlour below. The subject was hairpins, an article in which it appeared Miss Wheeler was lamentably deficient, owing, it was suggested, to a weakness of Mrs. Wheeler's for picking up stray ones and putting them in her hair. The conversation ended in Mrs. Wheeler, whose thin voice was heard hotly combating these charges, parting with six, without prejudice; and a few minutes later Miss Wheeler, somewhat flushed, entered the room and was introduced to the mate.

"All ready?" enquired Flower, as Miss Tyrell drew on her

gloves.

They went downstairs in single file, the builder of the house having left no option in the matter, while the small Wheelers, breathing hard with excitement, watched them over the balusters. Outside the house the two ladies paired off, leaving the two men to follow behind.

The mate noticed, with a strong sense of his own unworthiness, that the two ladies seemed thoroughly engrossed in each other's company, and oblivious to all else. A suggestion from Flower that he should close up and take off Miss Wheeler, seemed to him to border upon audacity, but he meekly followed Flower as that bold mariner ranged himself alongside the girls, and taking two steps on the curb and three in the gutter, walked along for some time trying to think of something to say.

"There ain't room for four abreast," said Flower, who had been scraping against the wall. "We'd better split up into twos."

At the suggestion the ladies drifted apart, and Flower, taking Miss Tyrell's arm, left the mate behind with Miss Wheeler, nervously wondering whether he ought to do the same.

"I hope it won't rain," he said, at last.

"I hope not," said Miss Wheeler, glancing up at a sky which was absolutely cloudless.

"So bad for ladies' dresses," continued the mate.

"What is?" enquired Miss Wheeler, who had covered some distance since the last remark.

"Rain," said the mate, quite freshly. "I don't think we shall

have any, though."

Miss Wheeler whose life had been passed in a neighbourhood in which there was only one explanation for such conduct, concluded that he had been drinking, and, closing her lips tightly, said no more until they reached the theatre.

"Oh, they're going in," she said, quickly; "we shall get a bad seat."

"Hurry up," cried Flower, beckoning.

"I'll pay," whispered the mate.

"No, I will," said Flower. "Well, you pay for one and I'll pay for one, then."

He pushed his way to the window and bought a couple of pit-stalls; the mate, who had not consulted him, bought upper-circles, and, with a glance at the ladies, pushed open the swing-doors.

"Come on," he said, excitedly; and seeing several people racing up the broad stone stairs, he and Miss Tyrell raced with them.

"Round this side," he cried, hastily, as he gave up the tickets, and, followed by Miss Tyrell, quickly secured a couple of seats at the end of the front row.

"Best seats in the house almost," said Poppy, cheerfully.

"Where are the others?" said Fraser, looking round.

"Coming on behind, I suppose," said Poppy glancing over her shoulder.

"I'll change places when they arrive," said the other,

apologetically; “something’s detained them, I should think. I hope they’re not waiting for us.”

He stood looking about him uneasily as the seats behind rapidly filled, and closely scanned their occupants, and then, leaving his hat on the seat, walked back in perplexity to the door.

“Never mind,” said Miss Tyrell, quietly, as he came back. “I daresay they’ll find us.”

Fraser bought a programme and sat down, the brim of Miss Tyrell’s hat touching his face as she bent to peruse it. With her small gloved finger she pointed out the leading characters, and taking no notice of his restlessness, began to chat gaily about the plays she had seen, until a tuning of violins from the orchestra caused her to lean forward, her lips parted and her eyes beaming with anticipation.

“I do hope the others have got good seats,” she said, softly, as the overture finished; “that’s everything, isn’t it?”

“I hope so,” said Fraser.

He leaned forward, excitedly. Not because the curtain was rising, but because he had just caught sight of a figure standing up in the centre of the pit-stalls. He had just time to call his companion’s attention to it when the figure, in deference to the threats and entreaties of the people behind, sat down and was lost in the crowd.

“They have got good seats,” said Miss Tyrell. “I’m so glad. What a beautiful scene.”

The mate, stifling his misgivings, gave himself up to the

enjoyment of the situation, which included answering the breathless whispers of his neighbour when she missed a sentence, and helping her to discover the identity of the characters from the programme as they appeared.

"I should like it all over again," said Miss Tyrell, sitting back in her seat, as the curtain fell on the first act.

Fraser agreed with her. He was closely watching the pit-stalls. In the general movement on the part of the audience which followed the lowering of the curtain, the master of the Foam was the first on his feet.

"I'll go down and send him up," said Fraser, rising.

Miss Tyrell demurred, and revealed an unsuspected timidity of character. "I don't like being left here all alone," she remarked. "Wait till they see us."

She spoke in the plural, for Miss Wheeler, who found the skipper exceedingly bad company, had also risen, and was scrutinising the house with a gaze hardly less eager than his own. A suggestion of the mate that he should wave his handkerchief was promptly negatived by Miss Tyrell, on the ground that it would not be the correct thing to do in the upper-circle, and they were still undiscovered when the curtain went up for the second act, and strong and willing hands from behind thrust the skipper back into his seat.

"I expect you'll catch it," said Miss Tyrell, softly, as the performance came to an end; "we'd better go down and wait for them outside. I never enjoyed a piece so much."

The mate rose and mingled with the crowd, conscious of a little occasional clutch at his sleeve whenever other people threatened to come between them. Outside the crowd dispersed slowly, and it was some minutes before they discovered a small but compact knot of two waiting for them.

"Where the—" began Flower.

"I hope you enjoyed the performance, Captain Flower," said Miss Tyrell, drawing herself up with some dignity. "I didn't know that I was supposed to look out for myself all the evening. If it hadn't been for Mr. Fraser I should have been all alone."

She looked hard at Miss Wheeler as she spoke, and the couple from the pit-stalls reddened with indignation at being so misunderstood.

"I'm sure I didn't want him," said Miss Wheeler, hastily. "Two or three times I thought there would have been a fight with the people behind."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," said Miss Tyrell, composedly. "Well, it's no good standing here. We'd better get home."

She walked off with the mate, leaving the couple behind, who realised that appearances were against them, to follow at their leisure. Conversation was mostly on her side, the mate being too much occupied with his defence to make any very long or very coherent replies.

They reached Liston Street at last, and separated at the door, Miss Tyrell shaking hands with the skipper in a way which conveyed in the fullest possible manner her opinion of his

behaviour that evening. A bright smile and a genial hand-shake were reserved for the mate.

"And now," said the incensed skipper, breathing deeply as the door closed and they walked up Liston Street, "what the deuce do you mean by it?"

"Mean by what?" demanded the mate, who, after much thought, had decided to take a leaf out of Miss Tyrell's book.

"Mean by leaving me in another part of the house with that Wheeler girl while you and my intended went off together?" growled Flower ferociously.

"Well, I could only think you wanted it," said Fraser, in a firm voice.

"What?" demanded the other, hardly able to believe his ears

"I thought you wanted Miss Wheeler for number four," said the mate, calmly. "You know what a chap you are, cap'n."

His companion stopped and regarded him in speechless amaze, then realising a vocabulary to which Miss Wheeler had acted as a safety-valve all the evening, he turned up a side street and stamped his way back to the Foam alone.

CHAPTER V

THE same day that Flower and his friends visited the theatre, Captain Barber gave a small and select tea-party. The astonished Mrs. Banks had returned home with her daughter the day before to find the air full of rumours about Captain Barber and his new housekeeper. They had been watched for hours at a time from upper back windows of houses in the same row, and the professional opinion of the entire female element was that Mrs. Church could land her fish at any time she thought fit.

"Old fools are the worst of fools," said Mrs. Banks, tersely, as she tied her bonnet strings; "the idea of Captain Barber thinking of marrying at his time of life."

"Why shouldn't he?" enquired her daughter.

"Why because he's promised to leave his property to Fred and you, of course," snapped the old lady; "if he marries that hussy it's precious little you and Fred will get."

"I expect it's mostly talk," said her daughter calmly, as she closed the street door behind her indignant parent. "People used to talk about you and old Mr. Wilders, and there was nothing in it. He only used to come for a glass of your ale."

This reference to an admirer who had consumed several barrels of the liquor in question without losing his head, put the finishing touch to the elder lady's wrath, and she walked the rest of the way in ominous silence.

Captain Barber received them in the elaborate velvet smoking-cap with the gold tassel which had evoked such strong encomiums from Mrs. Church, and in a few well-chosen words—carefully rehearsed that afternoon—presented his housekeeper.

"Will you come up to my room and take your things off?" enquired Mrs. Church, returning the old lady's hostile stare with interest.

"I'll take mine off down here, if Captain Barber doesn't mind," said the latter, subsiding into a chair with a gasp. "Him and me's very old friends."

She unfastened the strings of her bonnet, and, taking off that article of attire, placed it in her lap while she unfastened her shawl. She then held both out to Mrs. Church, briefly exhorting her to be careful.

"Oh, what a lovely bonnet," said that lady, in false ecstasy. "What a perfect beauty! I've never seen anything like it before. Never!"

Captain Barber, smiling at the politeness of his housekeeper, was alarmed and perplexed at the generous colour which suddenly filled the old lady's cheeks.

"Mrs. Banks made it herself," he said, "she's very clever at that sort of thing."

"There, do you know I guessed as much," said Mrs. Church, beaming; "directly I saw it, I said to myself: 'That was never made by a milliner. There's too much taste in the way the flowers are arranged.'"

Mrs. Banks looked at her daughter, in a mute appeal for help.

"I'll take yours up, too, shall I?" said the amiable housekeeper, as Mrs. Banks, with an air of defying criticism, drew a cap from a paper-bag and put it on.

"I'll take mine myself, please," said Miss Banks, with coldness.

"Oh, well, you may as well take them all then," said Mrs. Church, putting the mother's bonnet and shawl in her arms. "I'll go and see that the kettle boils," she said, briskly.

She returned a minute or two later with the teapot, and setting chairs, took the head of the table.

"And how's the leg?" enquired Captain Barber, misinterpreting Mrs. Banks' screwed-up face.

"Which one?" asked Mrs. Banks, shortly.

"The bad 'un," said the captain.

"They're both bad," said Mrs. Banks more shortly than before, as she noticed that Mrs. Church had got real lace in her cuffs and was pouring out the tea in full consciousness of the fact.

"Dear, dear," said the Captain sympathetically.

"Swollen?" enquired Mrs. Church, anxiously.

"Swelled right out of shape," exclaimed Captain Barber, impressively; "like pillars almost they are."

"Poor thing," said Mrs. Church, in a voice which made Mrs. Banks itch to slap her. "I knew a lady once just the same, but she was a drinking woman."

Again Mrs. Banks at a loss for words, looked at her daughter

for assistance.

"Dear me, how dreadful it must be to know such people," said Mrs. Banks, shivering.

"Yes," sighed the other. "It used to make me feel sorry for her —they were utterly shapeless, you know. Horrid!"

"That's how Mrs. Banks' are," said the Captain, nodding sagely. "You look 'ot, Mrs. Banks. Shall I open the winder a bit?"

"I'll thank you not to talk about me like that, Captain Barber," said Mrs. Banks, the flowers on her hat trembling.

"As you please, ma'am," said Captain Barber, with a stateliness which deserved a better subject. "I was only repeating what Dr. Hodder told me in your presence."

Mrs. Banks made no reply, but created a diversion by passing her cup up for more tea; her feelings, when Mrs. Church took off the lid of the teapot and poured in about a pint of water before helping her, belonging to that kind known as in-describable.

"Water bewitched, and tea begrudged," she said, trying to speak jocularly.

"Well, the fourth cup never is very good, is it," said Mrs. Church, apologetically. "I'll put some more tea in, so that your next cup'll be better."

As a matter of fact it was Mrs. Banks' third cup, and she said so, Mrs. Church receiving the correction with a polite smile, more than tinged with incredulity.

"It's wonderful what a lot of tea is drunk," said Captain Barber, impressively, looking round the table.

"I've heard say it's like spirit drinking," said Mrs. Church; "they say it gets such a hold of people that they can't give it up. They're just slaves to it, and they like it brown and strong like brandy."

Mrs. Banks, who had been making noble efforts, could contain herself no longer. She put down the harmless beverage which had just been handed to her, and pushed her chair back from the table.

"Are you speaking of me, young woman?" she asked, tremulous with indignation.

"Oh, no, certainly not," said Mrs. Church, in great distress. "I never thought of such a thing. I was alluding to the people Captain Barber was talking of—regular tea-drinkers, you know."

"I know what you mean, ma'am," said Mrs. Banks fiercely.

"There, there," said Captain Barber, ill-advisedly.

"Don't you say 'there, there,' to me, Captain Barber, because I won't have it," said the old lady, speaking with great rapidity; "if you think that I'm going to sit here and be insulted by—by that woman, you're mistaken."

"You're quite mistook, Mrs. Banks," said the Captain, slowly. "I've heard everything she said, and, where the insult comes in, I'm sure I don't know. I don't think I'm wanting in common sense, ma'am."

He patted the housekeeper's hand kindly, and, in full view of the indignant Mrs. Banks, she squeezed his in return and gazed at him affectionately. There is nothing humourous to the ordinary

person in a teacup, but Mrs. Banks, looking straight into hers, broke into a short, derisive laugh.

"Anything the matter, ma'am?" enquired Captain Barber, regarding her somewhat severely.

Mrs. Banks shook her head. "Only thoughts," she said, mysteriously.

It is difficult for a man to object to his visitors finding amusement in their thoughts, or even to enquire too closely into the nature of them. Mrs. Banks, apparently realising this, laughed again with increased acridity, and finally became so very amused that she shook in her chair.

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself, ma'am," said Captain Barber, loftily.

With a view, perhaps, of giving his guest further amusement he patted the housekeeper's hand again, whereupon Mrs. Banks' laughter ceased, and she sat regarding Mrs. Church with a petrified stare, met by that lady with a glance of haughty disdain.

"S'pose we go into the garden a bit?" suggested Barber, uneasily. The two ladies had eyed each other for three minutes without blinking, and his own eyes were watering in sympathy.

Mrs. Banks, secretly glad of the interruption, made one or two vague remarks about going home, but after much persuasion, allowed him to lead her into the garden, the solemn Elizabeth bringing up in the rear with a hassock and a couple of cushions.

"It's a new thing for you having a housekeeper," observed Mrs. Banks, after her daughter had returned to the house to assist in

washing up.

"Yes, I wonder I never thought of it before," said the artful Barber; "you wouldn't believe how comfortable it is."

"I daresay," said Mrs. Banks, grimly.

"It's nice to have a woman about the house," continued Captain Barber, slowly, "it makes it more homelike. A slip of a servant-gal ain't no good at all."

"How does Fred like it?" enquired Mrs. Banks.

"My ideas are Fred's ideas," said Uncle Barber, somewhat sharply. "What I like he has to like, naturally."

"I was thinking of my darter," said Mrs. Banks, smoothing down her apron majestically. "The arrangement was, I think, that when they were, married they was to live with you?"

Captain Barber nodded acquiescence.

"Elizabeth would never live in a house with that woman, or any other woman, as housekeeper in it," said the mother.

"Well, she won't have to," said the old man; "when they marry and Elizabeth comes here, I sha'n't want a housekeeper—I shall get rid of her."

Mrs. Banks shifted in her chair, and gazed thoughtfully down the garden. "Of course my idea was for them to wait till I was gone," she said at length.

"Just so," replied the other, "and more's the pity."

"But Elizabeth's getting on and I don't seem to go," continued the old lady, as though mildly surprised at Providence for its unaccountable delay; "and there's Fred, he ain't getting younger."

Captain Barber puffed at his pipe. “None of us are,” he said profoundly.

“And Fred might get tired of waiting,” said Mrs. Banks, ruminating.

“He’d better let me hear him,” said the uncle, fiercely; “leastways, o’ course, he’s tired o’ waiting in a sense. He’d like to be married.”

“There’s young Gibson,” said Mrs. Banks in a thrilling whisper.

“What about him?” enquired Barber, surprised at her manner.

“Comes round after Elizabeth,” said Mrs. Banks.

“No!” said Captain Barber, blankly.

Mrs. Banks pursed up her lips and nodded darkly.

“Pretends to come and see me,” said Mrs. Banks; “always coming in bringing something new for my legs. The worst of it is he ain’t always careful what he brings. He brought some new-fangled stuff in a bottle last week, and the agonies I suffered after rubbing it in wouldn’t be believed.”

“It’s like his impudence,” said the Captain.

“I’ve been thinking,” said Mrs. Banks, nodding her head with some animation, “of giving Fred a little surprise. What do you think he’d do if I said they might marry this autumn?”

“Jump out of his skin with joy,” said Captain Barber, with conviction. “Mrs. Banks, the pleasure you’ve given me this day is more than I can say.”

“And they’ll live with you just the same?” said Mrs. Banks.

"Certainly," said the Captain.

"They'll only be a few doors off then," said Mrs. Banks, "and it'll be nice for you to have a woman in the house to look after you."

Captain. Barber nodded softly. "It's what I've been wanting for years," he said, heartily.

"And that huss—husskeeper," said Mrs. Banks, correcting herself—"will go?"

"O' course," said Captain Barber. "I sha'n't want no housekeeper with my nevy's wife in the house. You've told Elizabeth, I s'pose?"

"Not yet," said Mrs. Banks, who as a matter of fact had been influenced by the proceedings of that afternoon to bring to a head a step she had hitherto only vaguely contemplated.

Elizabeth, who came down the garden again, a little later, accompanied by Mrs. Church, received the news stolidly. A feeling of regret, that the attention of the devoted Gibson must now cease, certainly occurred to her, but she never thought of contesting the arrangements made for her, and accepted the situation with a placidity which the more ardent Barber was utterly unable to understand.

"Fred'll stand on his.'ed with joy," the unsophisticated mariner declared, with enthusiasm.

"He'll go singing about the house," declared Mrs. Church.

Mrs. Banks regarded her unfavourably.

"He's never said much," continued Uncle Barber, in an exalted

strain; “that ain’t Fred’s way. He takes arter me; he’s one o’ the quiet ones, one o’ the still deep waters what always feels the most. When I tell ‘im his face’ll just light up with joy.”

“It’ll be nice for you, too,” said Mrs. Banks, with a side glance at the housekeeper; “you’ll have somebody to look after you and take an interest in you, and strangers can’t be expected to do that even if they’re nice.”

“We shall have him standing on his head, too,” said Mrs. Church, with a bright smile; “you’re turning everything upside down, Mrs. Banks.”

“There’s things as wants altering,” said the old lady, with emphasis. “There’s few things as I don’t see, ma’am.”

“I hope you’ll live to see a lot more,” said Mrs. Church, piously.

“She’ll live to be ninety,” said Captain Barber, heartily.

“Oh, easily,” said Mrs. Church.

Captain Barber regarding his old friend saw her face suffused with a wrath for which he was utterly unable to account. With a hazy idea that something had passed which he had not heard, he caused a diversion by sending Mrs. Church indoors for a pack of cards, and solemnly celebrated the occasion with a game of whist, at which Mrs. Church, in partnership with Mrs. Banks, either through sheer wilfulness or absence of mind, contrived to lose every game.

CHAPTER VI

As a result of the mate's ill-behaviour at the theatre, Captain Fred Flower treated him with an air of chilly disdain, ignoring, as far as circumstances would permit, the fact that such a person existed. So far as the social side went the mate made no demur, but it was a different matter when the skipper acted as though he were not present at the breakfast table, and being chary of interfering with the other's self-imposed vow of silence, he rescued a couple of rashers from his plate and put them on his own. Also, in order to put matters on a more equal footing, he drank three cups of coffee in rapid succession, leaving the skipper to his own reflections and an empty coffee-pot. In this sociable fashion they got through most of the day, the skipper refraining from speech until late in the afternoon, when, both being at work in the hold, the mate let a heavy case fall on his foot.

"I thought you'd get it," he said, calmly, as Flower paused to take breath; "it wasn't my fault."

"Whose was it, then?" roared Flower, who had got his boot off and was trying various tender experiments with his toe to see whether it was broken or not.

"If you hadn't been holding your head in the air and pretending that I wasn't here, it wouldn't have happened," said Fraser, with some heat.

The skipper turned his back on him, and meeting a look of enquiring solicitude from Joe, applied to him for advice.

"What had I better do with it?" he asked.

"Well, if it was my toe, sir," said Joe regarding it respectfully, "I should stick it in a basin o' boiling water and keep it there as long as I could bear it."

"You're a fool," said the skipper, briefly. "What do you think of it, Ben? I don't think it's broken."

The old seaman scratched his head. "Well, if it belonged to me," he said, slowly, "there's some ointment down the fo'c's'le which the cook 'ad for sore eyes. I should just put some o' that on. It looks good stuff."

The skipper, summarising the chief points in Ben's character, which, owing principally to the poverty of the English language, bore a remarkable likeness to Joe's and the mate's, took his sock and boot in his hand, and gaining the deck limped painfully to the cabin.

The foot was so painful after tea that he could hardly bear his slipper on, and he went ashore in his working clothes to the chemist's, preparatory to fitting himself out for Liston Street. The chemist, leaning over the counter, was inclined to take a serious view of it, and shaking his head with much solemnity, prepared a bottle of medicine, a bottle of lotion and a box of ointment.

"Let me see it again as soon as you've finished the medicine," he said, as he handed the articles over the counter.

Flower promised, and hobbling towards the door turned into the street. Then the amiable air which he had worn in the shop gave way to one of unseemly hauteur as he saw Fraser hurrying towards him.

"Look out," cried the latter, warningly.

The skipper favoured him with a baleful stare.

"All right," said the mate, angrily, "go your own way, then. Don't come to me when you get into trouble, that's all."

Flower passed on his way in silence. Then a thought struck him and he stopped suddenly.

"You wish to speak to me?" he asked, stiffly.

"No, I'm damned if I do," said the mate, sticking his hands into his pockets.

"If you wish to speak to me," said the other, trying in vain to conceal a trace of anxiety in his voice, "it's my duty to listen. What were you going to say just now?"

The mate eyed him wrathfully, but as the pathetic figure with its wounded toe and cargo of remedies stood there waiting for him to speak, he suddenly softened.

"Don't go back, old man," he said, kindly, "she's aboard."

Eighteen pennyworth of mixture, to be taken thrice daily from tablespoons, spilled over the curb, and the skipper, thrusting the other packets mechanically into his pockets, disappeared hurriedly around the corner.

"It's no use finding fault with me," said Fraser, quickly, as he stepped along beside him, "so don't try it. They came down into

the cabin before I knew they were aboard, even."

"They?" repeated the distressed Flower. "Who's they?"

"The young woman that came before and a stout woman with a little dark moustache and earrings. They're going to wait until you come back to ask you a few questions about Mr. Robinson. They've been asking me a few. I've locked the door of your state-room and here's the key."

Flower pocketed it and, after a little deliberation thanked him.

"I did the best I could for you," said the other, with a touch of severity. "If I'd treated you as some men would have done, I should have just let you walk straight into the trap."

Flower gave an apologetic cough. "I've had a lot of worry lately, Jack," he said, humbly; "come in and have something. Perhaps it will clear my head a bit."

"I told 'em you wouldn't be back till twelve at least," said the mate, as Flower rapidly diagnosed his complaint and ordered whisky, "perhaps not then, and that when you did turn up you'd sure to be the worse for liquor. The old lady said she'd wait all night for the pleasure of seeing your bonny face, and as for you being drunk, she said she don't suppose there's a woman in London that has had more experience with drunken men than she has."

"Let this be a warning to you, Jack," said the skipper, solemnly, as he drained his glass and put it thoughtfully on the counter.

"Don't you trouble about me," said Fraser; "you've got all

you can do to look after yourself. I've come out to look for a policeman; at least, that's what I told them."

"All the police in the world couldn't do me any good," sighed Flower. "Poppy's got tickets for a concert to-night, and I was going with her. I can't go like this."

"Well, what are you going to do?" enquired the other.

Flower shook his head and pondered. "You go back and get rid of them the best way you can," he said, at length, "but whatever you do, don't have a scene. I'll stay here till you come and tell me the coast is clear."

"And suppose it don't clear?" said Fraser.

"Then I'll pick you up at Greenwich in the morning," said Flower.

"And suppose they're still aboard?" said Fraser.

"I won't suppose any such thing," said the other, hotly; "if you can't get rid of two women between now and three in the morning, you're not much of a mate. If they catch me I'm ruined, and you'll be responsible for it."

The mate, staring at him blankly, opened his mouth to reply, but being utterly unable to think of anything adequate to the occasion, took up his glass instead, and, drinking off the contents, turned to the door. He stood for a moment at the threshold gazing at Flower as though he had just discovered points about him which had hitherto escaped his notice, and then made his way back to the wharf.

"They're still down below, sir," said Joe, softly, as he stepped

aboard, “and making as free and as comfortable as though they’re going to stay a month.”

Fraser shrugged his shoulders and went below. The appearance of the ladies amply confirmed Joe’s remark.

“Never can find one when you want him, can you?” said the elder lady, in playful allusion to the police.

“Well, I altered my mind,” said Fraser, amiably, “I don’t like treating ladies roughly, but if the cap’n comes on board and finds you here it’ll be bad for me, that’s all.”

“What time do you expect him?” enquired Miss Tipping.

“Not before we sail at three in the morning.” said the mate, glibly; “perhaps not then. I often have to take the ship out without him. He’s been away six weeks at a stretch before now.”

“Well, we’ll stay here till he does come,” said the elder lady. “I’ll have his cabin, and my step-daughter’ll have to put up with your bed.”

“If you’re not gone by the time we start, I shall have to have you put off,” said Fraser.

“Those of us who live longest’ll see the most,” said Mrs. Tipping, calmly.

An hour or two passed, the mate sitting smoking with a philosophy which he hoped the waiting mariner at the “Admiral Cochrane” would be able to imitate. He lit the lamp at last, and going on deck, ordered the cook to prepare supper.

Mother and daughter, with feelings of gratitude, against which they fought strongly, noticed that the table was laid for three, and

a little later, in a somewhat awkward fashion, they all sat down to the meal together.

"Very good beef," said Mrs. Tipping, politely.

"Very nice," said her daughter, who was ex-changing glances with the mate. "I suppose you're very comfortable here, Mr. Fraser?"

The mate sighed. "It's all right when the old man's away," he said, deceitfully. "He's got a dreadful temper."

"I hope you didn't get into trouble through my coming aboard the other night," said Miss Tipping, softly.

"Don't say anything about it," replied the mate, eyeing her admiringly. "I'd do more than that for you, if I could."

Miss Tipping, catching her mother's eye, bestowed upon her a glance of complacent triumph.

"You don't mind us coming down here, do you?" she said, languishingly.

"I wish you'd live here," said the unscrupulous Fraser; "but of course I know you only come here to try and see that fellow Robinson," he added, gloomily.

"I like to see you, too," was the reply. "I like you very much, as a friend."

The mate in a melancholy voice thanked her, and to the great annoyance of the cook, who had received strict orders from the forecastle to listen as much as he could, sat in silence while the table was cleared.

"What do you say to a hand at cards?" he said, after the cook

had finally left the cabin.

"Three-handed cribbage," said Mrs. Tipping, quickly; "it's the only game worth playing."

No objection being raised, the masterful lady drew closer to the table, and concentrating energies of no mean order on the game, successfully played hands of unvarying goodness, aided by a method of pegging which might perhaps be best described as dot and carry one.

"You haven't seen anything of this Mr. Robinson since you were here last, I suppose?" said Fraser, noting with satisfaction that both ladies gave occasional uneasy glances at the clock.

"No, an' not likely to," said Mrs. Tipping; "fifteen two, fifteen four, fifteen six, and a pair's eight."

"Where's the fifteen six?" enquired Fraser, glancing over.

"Eight and seven," said the lady, pitching the cards with the others and beginning to shuffle for the next deal.

"It's very strange behaviour," said the mate; "Robinson, I mean. Do you think he's dead?"

"No, I don't," said Mrs. Tipping, briefly. "Where's that captain of yours?"

Fraser, whose anxiety was becoming too much for his play, leaned over the table as though about to speak, and then, apparently thinking better of it, went on with the game.

"Eh?" said Mrs. Tipping, putting her cards face downwards on the table and catching his eye. "Where?"

"O, nowhere," said Fraser, awkwardly. "I don't want to be

dragged into this, you know. It isn't my business."

"If you know where he is, why can't you tell us?" asked Mrs. Tipping, softly. "There's no harm in that."

"What's the good?" enquired Fraser, in a low voice; "when you've seen the old man you won't be any forwarder—he wouldn't tell you anything even if he knew it."

"Well, we'd like to see him," said Mrs. Tipping, after a pause.

"You see, you put me in a difficulty," said Fraser; "if the skipper doesn't come aboard, you're going with us, I understand?"

Mrs. Tipping nodded. "Exactly," she said, sharply.

"That'll get me into trouble, if anything will," said the mate, gloomily. "On the other hand, if I tell you where he is now, that'll get me into trouble, too."

He sat back and drummed on the table with his fingers. "Well, I'll risk it," he said, at length; "you'll find him at 17, Beaufort Street, Bow."

The younger woman sprang excitedly to her feet, but Mrs. Tipping, eyeing the young man with a pair of shrewd, small eyes, kept her seat.

"And while we're going, how do we know the capt'n won't come back and go off with the ship?" she enquired.

Fraser hesitated. "Well, I'll come with you, if you like," he said, slowly.

"And suppose they go away and leave you, behind?" objected Mrs. Tipping.

"Oh, well, you'd better stay then," said the mate, wearily, "unless we take a couple of the hands with us. How would that suit you? They can't sail with half a crew."

Mrs. Tipping, who was by no means as anxious for a sea voyage as she tried to make out, carefully pondered the situation. "I'm going to take an arm of each of 'em and Matilda'll take yours," she said, at length.

"As you please," said Fraser, and in this way the procession actually started up the wharf, and looking back indignantly over its shoulder saw the watchman and Ben giving way to the most unseemly mirth, while the cook capered joyously behind them. A belated cab was passing the gate as they reached it, and in response to the mate's hail pulled sharply up.

Mrs. Tipping, pushing her captives in first, stepped heavily into the cab followed by her daughter, while the mate, after a brief discussion, clambered onto the box.

"Go on," he said, nodding.

"Wot, ain't the rest of you comin'?" enquired the cabman, eyeing the crowd at the gate, in pained surprise.

"No. 17, Beaufort Street, Bow," said Mrs. Tipping, distinctly, as she put her head out of the window.

"You could sit on 'er lap," continued the cabman, appealingly.

No reply being vouchsafed to this suggestion, he wrapped himself up in various rugs and then sat down suddenly before they could unwind themselves. Then, with a compassionate "click" to his horse, started up the road. Except for a few chance wayfarers

and an occasional coffee-stall, the main streets were deserted, but they were noisy compared with Beaufort Street. Every house was in absolute darkness as the cab, with instinctive deference to slumber, crawled slowly up and down looking for No. 17.

It stopped at last, and the mate, springing down, opened the door, and handing out the ladies, led the way up a flight of steps to the street door.

"Perhaps you won't mind knocking," he said to Mrs. Tipping, "and don't forget to tell the cap'n I've done this to oblige you because you insisted upon it."

Mrs. Tipping, seizing the knocker, knocked loud and long, and after a short interval repeated the performance. Somebody was heard stirring upstairs, and a deep voice cried out that it was coming, and peremptorily requested them to cease knocking.

"That's not Flower's voice," said Fraser.

"Not loud enough," said Miss Tipping.

The bolts were drawn back loudly and the chain grated; then the door was flung open, and a big, red-whiskered man, blinking behind a candle, gruffly enquired what they meant by it.

"Come inside," said Mrs. Tipping to her following.

"Ain't you come to the wrong house?" demanded the red-whiskered man, borne slowly back by numbers.

"I don't think so," said Mrs. Tipping, suavely; "I want to see Captain Flower."

"Well, you've come to the wrong house," said the red-whiskered man, shortly, "there's no such name here."

"Think," said Mrs. Tipping.

The red-whiskered man waved the candle to and fro until the passage was flecked with tallow.

"Go away directly," he roared; "how dare you come disturbing people like this?"

"You may just as well be pleasant over it," said Mrs. Tipping, severely; "because we sha'n't go away until we have seen him. After all, it's got nothing to do with you."

"We don't want anything to say to you," affirmed her daughter.

"Will—you—get—out—of—my—house?" demanded the owner, wildly.

"When we've seen Capt'n Flower," said Mrs. Tipping, calmly, "and not a moment before. We don't mind your getting in a temper, not a bit. You can't frighten us."

The frenzied and reckless reply of the red-whiskered man was drowned in the violent slamming of the street-door, and he found himself alone with the ladies. There was a yell of triumph outside, and the sounds of a hurried scramble down the steps. Mrs. Tipping, fumbling wildly at the catch of the door, opened it just in time to see the cabman, in reply to the urgent entreaties of the mate, frantically lashing his horse up the road.

"So far, so good," murmured the mate, as he glanced over his shoulder at the little group posing on the steps. "I've done the best I could, but I suppose there'll be a row."

The watchman, with the remainder of the crew, in various attitudes of expectant curiosity, were waiting to receive them at

the wharf. A curiosity which increased in intensity as the mate, slamming the gate, put the big bar across and turned to the watchman.

"Don't open that to anybody till we're off," he said, sharply. "Cap'n Flower has not turned up yet, I suppose?"

"No, sir," said Ben.

They went aboard the schooner again, and the mate, remaining on deck, listened anxiously for the return of the redoubtable Mrs. Tipping, occasionally glancing over the side in expectation of being boarded from the neighbouring stairs; but with the exception of a false alarm caused by two maddened seamen unable to obtain admittance, and preferring insulting charges of somnolency against the watchman, the time passed quietly until high water. With the schooner in midstream slowly picking her way through the traffic, any twinges of remorse that he might have had for the way he had treated two helpless women left him, and he began to feel with his absent commander some of the charm which springs from successful wrong-doing.

CHAPTER VII

He brought up off Greenwich in the cold grey of the breaking day. Craft of all shapes and sizes were passing up and down, but he looked in vain for any sign of the skipper. It was galling to him as a seaman to stay there with the wind blowing freshly down the river; but over an hour elapsed before a yell from Tim, who was leaning over the bows, called his attention to a waterman's skiff, in the stern of which sat a passenger of somewhat dejected appearance. He had the air of a man who had been up all night, and in place of returning the hearty and significant greeting of the mate, sat down in an exhausted fashion on the cabin skylight, and eyed him in stony silence until they were under way again.

"Well," he said at length, ungraciously.

Chilled by his manner, Fraser, in place of the dramatic fashion in which he had intended to relate the events of the preceding night, told him in a few curt sentences what had occurred. "And you can finish this business for yourself," he concluded, warmly; "I've had enough of it."

"You've made a pretty mess of it," groaned the other; "there'll be a fine set-out now. Why couldn't you coax 'em away? That's what I wanted you to do. That's what I told you to do."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.