WILLIAM WYMARK JACOBS

MANY CARGOES

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Содержание

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A CHANGE OF TREATMENT

Yes, I've sailed under some 'cute skippers in my time," said the night-watchman; "them that go down in big ships see the wonders o' the deep, you know," he added with a sudden chuckle, "but the one I'm going to tell you about ought never to have been trusted out without 'is ma. A good many o' my skippers had fads, but this one was the worst I ever sailed under.

"It's some few years ago now; I'd shipped on his barque, the John Elliott, as slow-going an old tub as ever I was aboard of, when I wasn't in quite a fit an' proper state to know what I was doing, an' I hadn't been in her two days afore I found out his 'obby through overhearing a few remarks made by the second mate, who came up from dinner in a hurry to make 'em. 'I don't mind saws an' knives hung round the cabin,' he ses to the fust mate, 'but when a chap has a 'uman 'and alongside 'is plate, studying it while folks is at their food, it's more than a Christian man can stand.'

"'That's nothing,' ses the fust mate, who had sailed with the barque afore. 'He's half crazy on doctoring. We nearly had a mutiny aboard once owing to his wanting to hold a post-mortem

on a man what fell from the mast-head. Wanted to see what the poor feller died of.'

"'I call it unwholesome,' ses the second mate very savage.' He offered me a pill at breakfast the size of a small marble; quite put me off my feed, it did.'

"Of course, the skipper's fad soon got known for'ard. But I didn't think much about it, till one day I seed old Dan'l Dennis sitting on a locker reading. Every now and then he'd shut the book, an' look up, closing 'is eyes, an' moving his lips like a hen drinking, an' then look down at the book again.

"'Why, Dan,' I ses, 'what's up? you ain't larning lessons at your time o' life?'

"'Yes, I am,' ses Dan very soft. 'You might hear me say it, it's this one about heart disease.'

"He hands over the book, which was stuck full o' all kinds o' diseases, and winks at me 'ard.

"'Picked it up on a book-stall,' he ses; then he shut 'is eyes an' said his piece wonderful. It made me quite queer to listen to 'im. 'That's how I feel,' ses he, when he'd finished. 'Just strength enough to get to bed. Lend a hand, Bill, an' go an' fetch the doctor.'

"Then I see his little game, but I wasn't going to run any risks, so I just mentioned, permiscous like, to the cook as old Dan seemed rather queer, an' went back an' tried to borrer the book, being always fond of reading. Old Dan pretended he was too ill to hear what I was saying, an' afore I could take it away from

him, the skipper comes hurrying down with a bag in his 'and.

"'What's the matter, my man?' ses he, 'what's the matter?'

"'I'm all right, sir,' ses old Dan, 'cept that I've been swooning away a little.'

"'Tell me exactly how you feel,' ses the skipper, feeling his pulse.

"Then old Dan said his piece over to him, an' the skipper shook his head an' looked very solemn.

"'How long have you been like this?' he ses.

"'Four or five years, sir,' ses Dan. 'It ain't nothing serious, sir, is it?'

"'You lie quite still,' ses the skipper, putting a little trumpet thing to his chest an' then listening. 'Um! there's serious mischief here I'm afraid, the prognotice is very bad.'

"'Prog what, sir?' ses Dan, staring.

"'Prognotice,' ses the skipper, at least I think that's the word he said. 'You keep perfectly still, an' I'll go an' mix you up a draught, and tell the cook to get some strong beef-tea on.'

"Well, the skipper 'ad no sooner gone, than Cornish Harry, a great big lumbering chap o' six feet two, goes up to old Dan, an' he ses, 'Gimme that book.'

"'Go away,' says Dan, 'don't come worrying 'ere; you 'eard the skipper say how bad my prognotice was.'

"'You lend me the book,' ses Harry, ketching hold of him, 'or else I'll bang you first, and split to the skipper arterwards. I believe I'm a bit consumptive. Anyway, I'm going to see.'

"He dragged the book away from the old man, and began to study. There was so many complaints in it he was almost tempted to have something else instead of consumption, but he decided on that at last, an' he got a cough what worried the fo'c'sle all night long, an' the next day, when the skipper came down to see Dan, he could 'ardly 'ear hisself speak.

"'That's a nasty cough you've got, my man,' ses he, looking at Harry.

"'Oh, it's nothing, sir,' ses Harry, careless like. 'I've 'ad it for months now off and on. I think it's perspiring so of a night does it."

"'What?' ses the skipper. 'Do you perspire of a night?'

"'Dredful,' ses Harry. 'You could wring the clo'es out. I s'pose it's healthy for me, ain't it, sir?'

"'Undo your shirt,' ses the skipper, going over to him, an' sticking the trumpet agin him. 'Now take a deep breath. Don't cough.'

"'I can't help it, sir,' ses Harry, 'it will come. Seems to tear me to pieces.'

"'You get to bed at once," says the skipper, taking away the trumpet, an' shaking his 'ed. 'It's a fortunate thing for you, my lad, you're in skilled hands. With care, I believe I can pull you round. How does that medicine suit you, Dan?'

"'Beautiful, sir,' says Dan. 'It's wonderful soothing, I slep' like a new-born babe arter it.'

"'I'll send you some more,' ses the skipper. 'You're not to get

up mind, either of you.'

"'All right, sir,' ses the two in very faint voices, an' the skipper went away arter telling us to be careful not to make a noise.

"We all thought it a fine joke at first, but the airs them two chaps give themselves was something sickening. Being in bed all day, they was naturally wakeful of a night, and they used to call across the fo'c'sle inquiring arter each other's healths, an' waking us other chaps up. An' they'd swop beef-tea an' jellies with each other, an' Dan 'ud try an' coax a little port wine out o' Harry, which he 'ad to make blood with, but Harry 'ud say he hadn't made enough that day, an' he'd drink to the better health of old Dan's prognotice, an' smack his lips until it drove us a'most crazy to 'ear him.

"Arter these chaps had been ill two days, the other fellers began to put their heads together, being maddened by the smell o' beef-tea an' the like, an' said they was going to be ill too, and both the invalids got into a fearful state of excitement.

"'You'll only spoil it for all of us,' ses Harry, 'and you don't know what to have without the book.'

"'It's all very well doing your work as well as our own,' ses one of the men. 'It's our turn now. It's time you two got well.'

"'WELL? ses Harry, 'well? Why you silly iggernerant chaps, we shan't never get well, people with our complaints never do. You ought to know that.'

"'Well, I shall split, 'ses one of them. "'You do!' ses Harry, 'you do, an' I'll put a 'ed on you that all the port wine and jellies in the

world wouldn't cure. 'Sides, don't you think the skipper knows what's the matter with us?'

"'Afore the other chap could reply, the skipper hisself comes down, accompanied by the fust mate, with a look on his face which made Harry give the deepest and hollowest cough he'd ever done.

"'What they reely want,' ses the skipper, turning to the mate, 'is keerful nussing.'

"'I wish you'd let me nuss 'em,' ses the fust mate, 'only ten minutes—I'd put 'em both on their legs, an' running for their lives into the bargain, in ten minutes.'

"'Hold your tongue, sir,' ses the skipper; 'what you say is unfeeling, besides being an insult to me. Do you think I studied medicine all these years without knowing when a man's ill?'

"The fust mate growled something and went on deck, and the skipper started examining of 'em again. He said they was wonderfully patient lying in bed so long, an' he had 'em wrapped up in bedclo'es and carried on deck, so as the pure air could have a go at 'em. WE had to do the carrying, an' there they sat, breathing the pure air, and looking at the fust mate out of the corners of their eyes. If they wanted anything from below one of us had to go an' fetch it, an' by the time they was taken down to bed again, we all resolved to be took ill too.

"Only two of 'em did it though, for Harry, who was a powerful, ugly-tempered chap, swore he'd do all sorts o' dreadful things to us if we didn't keep well and hearty, an' all 'cept these two

did. One of 'em, Mike Rafferty, laid up with a swelling on his ribs, which I knew myself he 'ad 'ad for fifteen years, and the other chap had paralysis. I never saw a man so reely happy as the skipper was. He was up an down with his medicines and his instruments all day long, and used to make notes of the cases in a big pocket-book, and read 'em to the second mate at mealtimes.

"The fo'c'sle had been turned into hospital about a week, an' I was on deck doing some odd job or the other, when the cook comes up to me pulling a face as long as a fiddle.

"'Nother invalid,' ses he; 'fust mate's gone stark, staring mad!'

"'Mad?' ses I.

"'Yes,' ses he. 'He's got a big basin in the galley, an' he's laughing like a hyener an' mixing bilge-water an' ink, an' paraffin an' butter an' soap an' all sorts o' things up together. The smell's enough to kill a man; I've had to come away.'

"Curious-like, I jest walked up to the galley an' puts my 'ed in, an' there was the mate as the cook said, smiling all over his face, and ladling some thick sticky stuff into a stone bottle.

"'How's the pore sufferers, sir?' ses he, stepping out of the galley jest as the skipper was going by.

"'They're very bad; but I hope for the best," ses the skipper, looking at him hard. 'I'm glad to see you've turned a bit more feeling.'

"'Yes, sir,' ses the mate. 'I didn't think so at fust, but I can see now them chaps is all very ill. You'll s'cuse me saying it, but I don't quite approve of your treatment.'

"I thought the skipper would ha' bust.

"'My treatment?' ses he. 'My treatment? What do you know about it?'

"'You're treating 'em wrong, sir,' ses the mate. 'I have here' (patting the jar) 'a remedy which 'ud cure them all if you'd only let me try it.'

"'Pooh!' ses the skipper. 'One medicine cure all diseases! The old story. What is it? Where'd you get it from?' ses he.

"'I brought the ingredients aboard with me,' ses the mate. 'It's a wonderful medicine discovered by my grandmother, an' if I might only try it I'd thoroughly cure them pore chaps.'

"'Rubbish!' ses the skipper.

"'Very well, sir,' ses the mate, shrugging his shoulders. 'O' course, if you won't let me you won't. Still I tell you, if you'd let me try I'd cure 'em all in two days. That's a fair challenge.'

"Well, they talked, and talked, and talked, until at last the skipper give way and went down below with the mate, and told the chaps they was to take the new medicine for two days, jest to prove the mate was wrong.

"'Let pore old Dan try it first, sir,' ses Harry, starting up, an' sniffing as the mate took the cork out; 'he's been awful bad since you've been away.'

"'Harry's worse than I am, sir,' ses Dan; 'it's only his kind heart that makes him say that.'

"'It don't matter which is fust,' ses the mate, filling a tablespoon with it, 'there's plenty for all. Now, Harry.'

"'Take it,' ses the skipper.

"Harry took it, an' the fuss he made you'd ha' thought he was swallering a football. It stuck all round his mouth, and he carried on so dredful that the other invalids was half sick afore it came to them.

"By the time the other three 'ad 'ad theirs it was as good as a pantermime, an' the mate corked the bottle up, and went an' sat down on a locker while they tried to rinse their mouths out with the luxuries which had been given 'em.

"'How do you feel?' ses the skipper.

"'I'm dying,' ses Dan.

"'So'm I,' ses Harry; 'I b'leeve the mate's pisoned us."

"The skipper looks over at the mate very stern an' shakes his 'ed slowly.

"'It's all right,' ses the mate. 'It's always like that the first dozen or so doses.'

"'Dozen or so doses!' ses old Dan, in a far-away voice.

"'It has to be taken every twenty minutes,' ses the mate, pulling out his pipe and lighting it; an' the four men groaned all together.

"'I can't allow it,' ses the skipper, 'I can't allow it. Men's lives mustn't be sacrificed for an experiment.'

""T ain't a experiment,' ses the mate very indignant, 'it's an old family medicine.'

"'Well, they shan't have any more,' ses the skipper firmly.

"'Look here,' ses the mate. 'If I kill any one o' these men I'll give you twenty pound. Honour bright, I will.'

"'Make it twenty-five,' ses the skipper, considering.

"'Very good,' ses the mate. 'Twenty-five; I can't say no fairer than that, can I? It's about time for another dose now.'

"He gave 'em another tablespoonful all round as the skipper left, an' the chaps what wasn't invalids nearly bust with joy. He wouldn't let 'em have anything to take the taste out, 'cos he said it didn't give the medicine a chance, an' he told us other chaps to remove the temptation, an' you bet we did.

"After the fifth dose, the invalids began to get desperate, an' when they heard they'd got to be woke up every twenty minutes through the night to take the stuff, they sort o' give up. Old Dan said he felt a gentle glow stealing over him and strengthening him, and Harry said that it felt like a healing balm to his lungs. All of 'em agreed it was a wonderful sort o' medicine, an' arter the sixth dose the man with paralysis dashed up on deck, and ran up the rigging like a cat. He sat there for hours spitting, an' swore he'd brain anybody who interrupted him, an' arter a little while Mike Rafferty went up and j'ined him, an' it the fust mate's ears didn't burn by reason of the things them two pore sufferers said about 'im, they ought to.

"They was all doing full work next day, an' though, o'course, the skipper saw how he'd been done, he didn't allude to it. Not in words, that is; but when a man tries to make four chaps do the work of eight, an' hits 'em when they don't, it's a easy job to see where the shoe pinches."

A LOVE PASSAGE

The mate was leaning against the side of the schooner, idly watching a few red-coated linesmen lounging on the Tower Quay. Careful mariners were getting out their side-lights, and careless lightermen were progressing by easy bumps from craft to craft on their way up the river. A tug, half burying itself in its own swell, rushed panting by, and a faint scream came from aboard an approaching skiff as it tossed in the wash.

"JESSICA ahoy!" bawled a voice from the skiff as she came rapidly alongside.

The mate, roused from his reverie, mechanically caught the line and made it fast, moving with alacrity as he saw that the captain's daughter was one of the occupants. Before he had got over his surprise she was on deck with her boxes, and the captain was paying off the watermen.

"You've seen my daughter Hetty afore, haven't you?" said the skipper. "She's coming with us this trip. You'd better go down and make up her bed, Jack, in that spare bunk."

"Ay, ay," said the mate dutifully, moving off.

"Thank you, I'll do it myself," said the scandalised Hetty, stepping forward hastily.

"As you please," said the skipper, leading the way below. "Let's have a light on, Jack."

The mate struck a match on his boot, and lit the lamp.

"There's a few things in there'll want moving," said the skipper, as he opened the door. "I don't know where we're to keep the onions now, Jack."

"We'll find a place for 'em," said the mate confidently, as he drew out a sack and placed it on the table.

"I'm not going to sleep in there," said the visitor decidedly, as she peered in. "Ugh! there's a beetle. Ugh!"

"It's quite dead," said the mate reassuringly. "I've never seen a live beetle on this ship."

"I want to go home," said the girl. "You've no business to make me come when I don't want to."

"You should behave yourself then," said her father magisterially. "What about sheets, Jack; and pillers?"

The mate sat on the table, and, grasping his chin, pondered. Then as his gaze fell upon the pretty, indignant face of the passenger, he lost the thread of his ideas.

"She'll have to have some o' my things for the present," said the skipper.

"Why not," said the mate, looking up again—"why not let her have your state-room?"

"'Cos I want it myself," replied the other calmly.

The mate blushed for him, and, the girl leaving them to arrange matters as they pleased, the two men, by borrowing here and contriving there, made up the bunk. The girl was standing by the galley when they went on deck again, an object of curious and respectful admiration to the crew, who had come on board

in the meantime. She stayed on deck until the air began to blow fresher in the wider reaches, and then, with a brief good-night to her father, retired below.

"She made up her mind to come with us rather suddenly, didn't she?" inquired the mate after she had gone.

"She didn't make up her mind at all," said the skipper; "we did it for her, me an' the missus. It's a plan on our part."

"Wants strengthening?" said the mate suggestively.

"Well, the fact is," said the skipper, "it's like this, Jack; there's a friend o' mine, a provision dealer in a large way o' business, wants to marry my girl, and me an' the missus want him to marry her, so, o' course, she wants to marry someone else. Me an' 'er mother we put our 'eads together and decided for her to come away. When she's at 'ome, instead o' being out with Towson, direckly her mother's back's turned she's out with that young sprig of a clerk."

"Nice-looking young feller, I s'pose?" said the mate somewhat anxiously.

"Not a bit of it," said the other firmly. "Looks as though he had never had a good meal in his life. Now my friend Towson, he's all right; he's a man of about my own figger."

"She'll marry the clerk," said the mate, with conviction.

"I'll bet you she don't," said the skipper. "I'm an artful man, Jack, an' I, generally speaking, get my own way. I couldn't live with my missus peaceable if it wasn't for management."

The mate smiled safely in the darkness, the skipper's

management consisting chiefly of slavish obedience.

"I've got a cabinet fortygraph of him for the cabin mantel-piece, Jack," continued the wily father. "He gave it to me o' purpose. She'll see that when she won't see the clerk, an' by-and-bye she'll fall into our way of thinking. Anyway, she's going to stay here till she does."

"You know your way about, cap'n," said the mate, in pretended admiration.

The skipper laid his finger on his nose, and winked at the mainmast. "There's few can show me the way, Jack," he answered softly; "very few. Now I want you to help me too; I want you to talk to her a great deal."

"Ay, ay," said the mate, winking at the mast in his turn.

"Admire the fortygraph on the mantel-piece," said the skipper.

"I will," said the other.

"Tell her about a lot o' young girls you know as married young middle-aged men, an' loved 'em more an' more every day of their lives," continued the skipper.

"Not another word," said the mate. "I know just what you want. She shan't marry the clerk if I can help it."

The other turned and gripped him warmly by the hand. "If ever you are a father your elf, Jack," he said with emotion, "I hope as how somebody'll stand by you as you're standing by me."

The mate was relieved the next day when he saw the portrait of Towson. He stroked his moustache, and felt that he gained in

good looks every time he glanced at it.

Breakfast finished, the skipper, who had been on deck all night, retired to his bunk. The mate went on deck and took charge, watching with great interest the movements of the passenger as she peered into the galley and hotly assailed the cook's method of washing up.

"Don't you like the sea?" he inquired politely, as she came and sat on the cabin skylight.

Miss Alsen shook her head dismally. "I've got to it," she remarked.

"Your father was saying something to me about it," said the mate guardedly.

"Did he tell the cook and the cabin boy too?" inquired Miss Alsen, flushing somewhat. "What did he tell you?"

"Told me about a man named Towson," said the mate, becoming intent on the sails, "and—another fellow."

"I took a little notice of HIM just to spoil the other," said the girl, "not that I cared for him. I can't understand a girl caring for any man. Great, clumsy, ugly things."

"You don't like him then?" said the mate.

"Of course not," said the girl, tossing her head.

"And yet they 've sent you to sea to get out of his way," said the mate meditatively. "Well, the best thing you can do"—His hardihood failed him at the pitch.

"Go on," said the girl.

"Well, it's this way," said the mate, coughing; "they've sent

you to sea to get you out of this fellow's way, so if you fall in love with somebody on the ship they'll send you home again."

"So they will," said the girl eagerly. "I'll pretend to fall in love with that nice-looking sailor you call Harry. What a lark!"

"I shouldn't do that," said the mate gravely.

"Why not?" said the girl.

"'Tisn't discipline," said the mate very firmly; "it wouldn't do at all. He's before the mast."

"Oh, I see," remarked Miss Alsen, smiling scornfully.

"I only mean pretend, of course," said the mate, colouring. "Just to oblige you."

"Of course," said the girl calmly. "Well, how are we to be in love?"

The mate flushed darkly. "I don't know much about such things," he said at length; "but we'll have to look at each other, and all that sort of thing, you know."

"I don't mind that," said the girl.

"Then we'll get on by degrees," said the other. "I expect we shall both find it come easier after a time."

"Anything to get home again," said the girl, rising and walking slowly away.

The mate began his part of the love-making at once, and, fixing a gaze of concentrated love on the object of his regard, nearly ran down a smack. As he had prognosticated, it came easy to him, and other well-marked symptoms, such as loss of appetite and a partiality for bright colours, developed during the

day. Between breakfast and tea he washed five times, and raised the ire of the skipper to a dangerous pitch by using the ship's butter to remove tar from his fingers.

By ten o'clock that night he was far advanced in a profound melancholy. All the looking had been on his side, and, as he stood at the wheel keeping the schooner to her course, he felt a fellow-feeling for the hapless Towson, His meditations were interrupted by a slight figure which emerged from the companion, and, after a moment's hesitation, came and took its old seat on the skylight.

"Calm and peaceful up here, isn't it?" said he, after waiting some time for her to speak. "Stars are very bright to-night."

"Don't talk to me," said Miss Alsen snappishly.

"Why doesn't this nasty little ship keep still? I believe it's you making her jump about like this."

"Me?" said the mate in amazement.

"Yes, with that wheel."

"I can assure you "—began the mate.

"Yes, I knew you'd say so," said the girl.

"Come and steer yourself," said the mate; "then you'll see."

Much to his surprise she came, and, leaning limply against the wheel, put her little hands on the spokes, while the mate explained the mysteries of the compass. As he warmed with his subject he ventured to put his hands on the same spokes, and, gradually becoming more venturesome, boldly supported her with his arm every time the schooner gave a lurch.

"Thank you," said Miss Alsen, coldly extricating herself, as

the male fancied another lurch was coming. “Good-night.”

She retired to the cabin as a dark figure, which was manfully knuckling the last remnant of sleep from its eyelids, stood before the mate, chuckling softly.

“Clear night,” said the seaman, as he took the wheel in his great paws.

“Beastly,” said the mate absently, and, stifling a sigh, went below and turned in.

He lay awake for a few minutes, and then, well satisfied with the day’s proceedings, turned over and fell asleep. He was pleased to discover, when he awoke, that the slight roll of the night before had disappeared, and that there was hardly any motion on the schooner. The passenger herself was already at the breakfast-table.

“Cap’n’s on deck, I s’pose?” said the mate, preparing to resume negotiations where they were broken off the night before. “I hope you feel better than you did last night.”

“Yes, thank you,” said she.

“You’ll make a good sailor in time,” said the mate.

“I hope not,” said Miss Alsen, who thought it time to quell a gleam of peculiar tenderness plainly apparent in the mate’s eyes. “I shouldn’t like to be a sailor even if I were a man.”

“Why not?” inquired the other.

“I don’t know,” said the girl meditatively; “but sailors are generally such scrubby little men, aren’t they?”

“SCUBBY?” repeated the mate, in a dazed voice.

"I'd sooner be a soldier," she continued; "I like soldiers—they're so manly. I wish there was one here now."

"What for?" inquired the mate, in the manner of a sulky schoolboy.

"If there was a man like that here now," said Miss Alsen thoughtfully, "I'd dare him to mustard old Towson's nose."

"Do what?" inquired the astonished mate.

"Mustard old Towson's nose," said Miss Alsen, glancing lightly from the cruet-stand to the portrait.

The infatuated man hesitated a moment, and then, reaching over to the cruet, took out the spoon, and with a pale, determined face, indignantly daubed the classic features of the provision dealer. His indignation was not lessened by the behaviour of the temptress, who, instead of fawning upon him for his bravery, crammed her handkerchief to her mouth and giggled foolishly.

"Where's father," she said suddenly, as a step sounded above. "Oh, you will get it!"

She rose from her seat, and, standing aside to let her father pass, went on deck. The skipper sank on to a locker, and, raising the tea-pot, poured himself out a cup of tea, which he afterwards decanted into a saucer. He had just raised it to his lips, when he saw something over the rim of it which made him put it down again untasted, and stare blankly at the mantel-piece.

"Who the—what the—who the devil's done this?" he inquired in a strangulated voice, as he rose and regarded the portrait.

"I did," said the mate.

"You did?" roared the other. "You? What for?"

"I don't know," said the mate awkwardly. "Something seemed to come over me all of a sudden, and I felt as though I MUST do it."

"But what for? Where's the sense of it?" said the skipper.

The mate shook his head sheepishly.

"But what did you want to do such a monkey-trick FOR?" roared the skipper.

"I don't know," said the mate doggedly; "but it's done, ain't it? and it's no good talking about it."

The skipper looked at him in wrathful perplexity. "You'd better have advice when we get to port, Jack," he said at length; "the last few weeks I've noticed you've been a bit strange in your manner. You go an' show that 'ed of yours to a doctor."

The mate grunted, and went on deck for sympathy, but, finding Miss Alsen in a mood far removed from sentiment, and not at all grateful, drew off whistling. Matters were in this state when the skipper appeared, wiping his mouth.

"I've put another portrait on the mantel-piece, Jack," he said menacingly; "it's the only other one I've got, an' I wish you to understand that if that only smells mustard, there'll be such a row in this 'ere ship that you won't be able to 'ear yourself speak for the noise."

He moved off with dignity as his daughter, who had overheard the remark, came sidling up to the mate and smiled on him agreeably.

"He's put another portrait there," she said softly.

"You'll find the mustard-pot in the cruet," said the mate coldly.

Miss Alsen turned and watched her father as he went forward, and then, to the mate's surprise, went below without another word. A prey to curiosity, but too proud to make any overture, he compromised matters by going and standing near the companion.

"Mate!" said a stealthy whisper at the foot of the ladder.

The mate gazed calmly out to sea.

"Jack!" said the girl again, in a lower whisper than before.

The mate went hot all over, and at once descended. He found Miss Alsen, her eyes sparkling, with the mustard-pot in her left hand and the spoon in her right, executing a war-dance in front of the second portrait.

"Don't do it," said the mate, in alarm.

"Why not?" she inquired, going within an inch of it.

"He'll think it's me," said the mate.

"That's why I called you down here," said she; "you don't think I wanted you, do you?"

"You put that spoon down," said the mate, who was by no means desirous of another interview with the skipper.

"Shan't!" said Miss Alsen.

The mate sprang at her, but she dodged round the table. He leaned over, and, catching her by the left arm, drew her towards him; then, with her flushed, laughing face close to his, he forgot everything else, and kissed her.

"Oh!" said Hetty indignantly.

"Will you give it to me now?" said the mate, trembling at his boldness.

"Take it," said she. She leaned across the table, and, as the mate advanced, dabbed viciously at him with the spoon. Then she suddenly dropped both articles on the table and moved away, as the mate, startled by a footstep at the door, turned a flushed visage, ornamented with three streaks of mustard, on to the dumbfounded skipper.

"Sakes alive!" said that astonished mariner, as soon as he could speak; "if he ain't a-mustarding his own face now—I never 'card of such a thing in all my life. Don't go near 'im, Hetty. Jack!"

"Well," said the mate, wiping his smarting face with his handkerchief.

"You've never been took like this before?" queried the skipper anxiously.

"O'course not," said the mortified mate.

"Don't you say o'course not to me," said the other warmly, "after behaving like this. A straight weskit's what you want. I'll go an' see old Ben about it. He's got an uncle in a 'sylum. You come up too, my girl."

He went in search of Ben, oblivious of the fact that his daughter, instead of following him, came no farther than the door, where she stood and regarded her victim compassionately.

"I'm so sorry," she said "Does it smart?"

"A little," said the mate; "don't you trouble about me."

"You see what you get for behaving badly," said Miss Alsen judicially.

"It's worth it," said the mate, brightening.

"I'm afraid it'll blister," said she. She crossed over to him, and putting her head on one side, eyed the traces wisely. "Three marks," she said.

"I only had one," suggested the mate.

"One what?" enquired Hetty.

"Those," said the mate.

In full view of the horrified skipper, who was cautiously peeping at the supposed lunatic through the skylight, he kissed her again.

"You can go away, Ben," said the skipper huskily to the expert. "D'ye hear, you can go AWAY, and not a word about this, mind."

The expert went away grumbling, and the father, after another glance, which showed him his daughter nestling comfortably on the mate's right shoulder, stole away and brooded darkly over this crowning complication. An ordinary man would have run down and interrupted them; the master of the Jessica thought he could attain his ends more certainly by diplomacy, and so careful was his demeanour that the couple in the cabin had no idea that they had been observed—the mate listening calmly to a lecture on incipient idiocy which the skipper thought it advisable to bestow.

Until the mid-day meal on the day following he made no sign. If anything he was even more affable than usual, though his wrath

rose at the glances which were being exchanged across the table.

"By the way, Jack," he said at length, "what's become of Kitty Loney?"

"Who?" inquired the mate. "Who's Kitty Loney?"

It was now the skipper's turn to stare, and he did it admirably.

"Kitty Loney," he said in surprise, "the little girl you are going to marry."

"Who are you getting at?" said the mate, going scarlet as he met the gaze opposite.

"I don't know what you mean," said the skipper with dignity. "I'm allooding to Kitty Loney, the little girl in the red hat and white feathers you introduced to me as your future."

The mate sank back in his seat, and regarded him with open-mouthed, horrified astonishment.

"You don't mean to say you've chucked 'er," pursued the heartless skipper, "after getting an advance from me to buy the ring with, too? Didn't you buy the ring with the money?"

"No," said the mate, "I—oh, no—of course—what on earth are you talking about?"

The skipper rose from his seat and regarded him sorrowfully but severely. "I'm sorry, Jack," he said stiffly, "if I've said anything to annoy you, or anyway hurt your feelings. O' course it's your business, not mine. P'raps you'll say you never heard o' Kitty Loney?"

"I do say so," said the bewildered mate; "I do say so."

The skipper eyed him sternly, and without another word left

the cabin. “If she’s like her mother,” he said to himself, chuckling as he went up the companion-ladder, “I think that’ll do.”

There was an awkward pause after his departure. “I’m sure I don’t know what you must think of me,” said the mate at length, “but I don’t know what your father’s talking about.”

“I don’t think anything,” said Hetty calmly. “Pass the potatoes, please.”

“I suppose it’s a joke of his,” said the mate, complying.

“And the salt,” said she; “thank you.”

“But you don’t believe it?” said the mate pathetically.

“Oh, don’t be silly,” said the girl calmly. “What does it matter whether I do or not?”

“It matters a great deal,” said the mate gloomily. “It’s life or death to me.”

“Oh, nonsense,” said Hetty. “She won’t know of your foolishness. I won’t tell her.”

“I tell you,” said the mate desperately, “there never was a Kitty Loney. What do you think of that?”

“I think you are very mean,” said the girl scornfully; “don’t talk to me any more, please.”

“Just as you like,” said the mate, beginning to lose his temper.

He pushed his plate from him and departed, while the girl, angry and resentful, put the potatoes back as being too floury for consumption in the circumstances.

For the remainder of the passage she treated him with a politeness and good humour through which he strove in vain

to break. To her surprise her father made no objection, at the end of the voyage, when she coaxingly suggested going back by train; and the mate, as they sat at dummy-whist on the evening before her departure, tried in vain to discuss the journey in an unconcerned fashion.

"It'll be a long journey," said Hetty, who still liked him well enough to make him smart a bit, "What's trumps?"

"You'll be all right," said her father. "Spades."

He won for the third time that evening, and, feeling wonderfully well satisfied with the way in which he had played his cards generally, could not resist another gibe at the crestfallen mate.

"You'll have to give up playing cards and all that sort o' thing when you're married, Jack," said he.

"Ay, ay," said the mate recklessly, "Kitty don't like cards."

"I thought there was no Kitty," said the girl, looking up, scornfully.

"She don't like cards," repeated the mate. "Lord, what a spree we had. Cap'n, when we went to the Crystal Palace with her that night."

"Ay, that we did," said the skipper.

"Remember the roundabouts?" said the mate.

"I do," said the skipper merrily. "I'll never forget 'em."

"You and that friend of hers, Bessie Watson, lord how you did go on!" continued the mate, in a sort of ecstasy. The skipper stiffened suddenly in his chair. "What on earth are you talking

about?" he inquired gruffly.

"Bessie Watson," said the mate, in tones of innocent surprise. "Little girl in a blue hat with white feathers, and a blue frock, that came with us."

"You're drunk," said the skipper, grinding his teeth, as he saw the trap into which he had walked.

"Don't you remember when you two got lost, an' me and Kitty were looking all over the place for you?" demanded the mate, still in the same tones of pleasant reminiscence.

He caught Hetty's eye, and noticed with a thrill that it beamed with soft and respectful admiration.

"You've been drinking," repeated the skipper, breathing hard. "How dare you talk like that afore my daughter?"

"It's only right I should know," said Hetty, drawing herself up. "I wonder what mother'll say to it all?"

"You say anything to your mother if you dare," said the now maddened skipper. "You know what she is. It's all the mate's nonsense."

"I'm very sorry, cap'n," said the mate, "if I've said anything to annoy you, or anyway hurt your feelings. O' course it's your business, not mine. Perhaps you'll say you never heard o' Bessie Watson?"

"Mother shall hear of her," said Hetty, while her helpless sire was struggling for breath.

"Perhaps you'll tell us who this Bessie Watson is, and where she lives?" he said at length.

"She lives with Kitty Loney," said the mate simply.

The skipper rose, and his demeanour was so alarming that Hetty shrank instinctively to the mate for protection. In full view of his captain, the mate placed his arm about her waist, and in this position they confronted each other for some time in silence. Then Hetty looked up and spoke.

"I'm going home by water," she said briefly.

THE CAPTAIN'S EXPLOIT

It was a wet, dreary night in that cheerless part of the great metropolis known as Wapping. The rain, which had been falling heavily for hours, still fell steadily on to the sloppy pavements and roads, and joining forces in the gutter, rushed impetuously to the nearest sewer. The two or three streets which had wedged themselves in between the docks and the river, and which, as a matter of fact, really comprise the beginning and end of Wapping, were deserted, except for a belated van crashing over the granite roads, or the chance form of a dock-labourer plodding doggedly along, with head bent in distaste for the rain, and hands sunk in trouser-pockets.

"Beastly night," said Captain Bing, as he rolled out of the private bar of the "Sailor's Friend," and, ignoring the presence of the step, took a little hurried run across the pavement. "Not fit for a dog to be out in."

He kicked, as he spoke, at a shivering cur which was looking in at the crack of the bar-door, with a hazy view of calling its attention to the matter, and then, pulling up the collar of his rough pea-jacket, stepped boldly out into the rain. Three or four minutes' walk, or rather roll, brought him to a dark narrow passage, which ran between two houses to the water-side. By a slight tack to starboard at a critical moment he struck the channel safely, and followed it until it ended in a flight of old stone steps,

half of which were under water.

"Where for?" inquired a man, starting up from a small penthouse formed of rough pieces of board.

"Schooner in the tier, Smiling Jane," said the captain gruffly, as he stumbled clumsily into a boat and sat down in the stern. "Why don't you have better seats in this 'ere boat?"

"They're there, if you'll look for them," said the waterman; "and you'll find 'em easier sitting than that bucket."

"Why don't you put 'em where a man can see 'em?" inquired the captain, raising his voice a little.

The other opened his mouth to reply, but realising that it would lead to a long and utterly futile argument, contented himself with asking his fare to trim the boat better; and, pushing off from the steps, pulled strongly through the dark lumpy water. The tide was strong, so that they made but slow progress.

"When I was a young man," said the fare with severity, "I'd ha' pulled this boat across and back afore now."

"When you was a young man," said the man at the oars, who had a local reputation as a wit, "there wasn't no boats; they was all Noah's arks then."

"Stow your gab," said the captain, after a pause of deep thought.

The other, whose besetting sin was certainly not loquacity, ejected a thin stream of tobacco-juice over the side, spat on his hands, and continued his laborious work until a crowd of dark shapes, surmounted by a network of rigging, loomed up before

them.

"Now, which is your little barge?" he inquired, tugging strongly to maintain his position against the fast-flowing tide.

"Smiling Jane" said his fare.

"Ah," said the waterman, "Smiling Jane, is it? You sit there, cap'n, an' I'll row round all their sterns while you strike matches and look at the names. We'll have quite a nice little evening."

"There she is," cried the captain, who was too muddled to notice the sarcasm; "there's the little beauty. Steady, my lad."

He reached out his hand as he spoke, and as the boat jarred violently against a small schooner, seized a rope which hung over the side, and, swaying to and fro, fumbled in his pocket for the fare.

"Steady, old boy," said the waterman affectionately. He had just received twopence-halfpenny and a shilling by mistake for threepence. "Easy up the side. You ain't such a pretty figger as you was when your old woman made such a bad bargain."

The captain paused in his climb, and poising himself on one foot, gingerly felt for his tormentor's head with the other Not finding it, he flung his leg over the bulwark, and gained the deck of the vessel as the boat swung round with the tide and disappeared in the darkness.

"All turned in," said the captain, gazing owlishly at the deserted deck. "Well, there's a good hour an' a half afore we start; I'll turn in too."

He walked slowly aft, and sliding back the companion-hatch,

descended into a small evil-smelling cabin, and stood feeling in the darkness for the matches. They were not to be found, and, growling profanely, he felt his way to the state-room, and turned in all standing.

It was still dark when he awoke, and hanging over the edge of the bunk, cautiously felt for the floor with his feet, and having found it, stood thoughtfully scratching his head, which seemed to have swollen to abnormal proportions.

"Time they were getting under weigh," he said at length, and groping his way to the foot of the steps, he opened the door of what looked like a small pantry, but which was really the mate's boudoir.

"Jem," said the captain gruffly.

There was no reply, and jumping to the conclusion that he was above, the captain tumbled up the steps and gained the deck, which, as far as he could see, was in the same deserted condition as when he left it. Anxious to get some idea of the time, he staggered to the side and looked over. The tide was almost at the turn, and the steady clank, clank of neighbouring windlasses showed that other craft were just getting under weigh. A barge, its red light turning the water to blood, with a huge wall of dark sail, passed noiselessly by, the indistinct figure of a man leaning skilfully upon the tiller.

As these various signs of life and activity obtruded themselves upon the skipper of the Smiling Jane, his wrath rose higher and higher as he looked around the wet, deserted deck of his own

little craft. Then he walked forward and thrust his head down the forecastle hatchway.

As he expected, there was a complete sleeping chorus below; the deep satisfied snoring of half-a-dozen seamen, who, regardless of the tide and their captain's feelings, were slumbering sweetly, in blissful ignorance of all that the Lancet might say upon the twin subjects of overcrowding and ventilation.

"Below there, you lazy thieves!" roared the captain; "tumble up, tumble up!"

The snores stopped. "Ay, ay!" said a sleepy voice. "What's the matter, master?"

"Matter!" repeated the other, choking violently. "Ain't you going to sail to-night?"

"To-night!" said another voice, in surprise. "Why, I thought we wasn't going to sail till Wen'sday."

Not trusting himself to reply, so careful was he of the morals of his men, the skipper went and leaned over the side and communed with the silent water. In an incredibly short space of time five or six dusky figures pattered up on to the deck, and a minute or two later the harsh clank of the windlass echoed far and wide.

The captain took the wheel. A fat and very sleepy seaman put up the side-lights, and the little schooner, detaching itself by the aid of boat-hooks and fenders from the neighbouring craft, moved slowly down with the tide. The men, in response to the captain's fervent orders, climbed aloft, and sail after sail was

spread to the gentle breeze.

"Hi! you there," cried the captain to one of the men who stood near him, coiling up some loose line.

"Sir?" said the man.

"Where is the mate?" inquired the captain.

"Man with red whiskers and pimply nose?" said the man interrogatively.

"That's him to a hair," answered the other.

"Ain't seen him since he took me on at eleven," said the man. "How many new hands are there?"

"I b'leeve we're all fresh," was the reply. "I don't believe some of 'em have ever smelt salt water afore."

"The mate's been at it again," said the captain warmly, "that's what he has. He's done it afore and got left behind. Them what can't stand drink, my man, shouldn't take it, remember that."

"He said we wasn't going to sail till Wen'sday," remarked the man, who found the captain's attitude rather trying.

"He'll get sacked, that's what he'll get," said the captain warmly. "I shall report him as soon as I get ashore."

The subject exhausted, the seaman returned to his work, and the captain continued steering in moody silence.

Slowly, slowly darkness gave way to light. The different portions of the craft, instead of all being blurred into one, took upon themselves shape, and stood out wet and distinct in the cold grey of the breaking day. But the lighter it became, the harder the skipper stared and rubbed his eyes, and looked from the deck to

the flat marshy shore, and from the shore back to the deck again.

"Here, come here," he cried, beckoning to one of the crew.

"Yessir," said the man, advancing.

"There's something in one of my eyes," faltered the skipper. "I can't see straight; everything seems mixed up. Now, speaking deliberate and without any hurry, which side o' the ship do you say the cook's galley's on?"

"Starboard," said the man promptly, eyeing him with astonishment.

"Starboard," repeated the other softly. "He says starboard, and that's what it seems to me. My lad, yesterday morning it was on the port side."

The seaman received this astounding communication with calmness, but, as a slight concession to appearances, said "Lor!"

"And the water-cask," said the skipper; "what colour is it?"

"Green," said the man.

"Not white?" inquired the skipper, leaning heavily upon the wheel.

"Whitish-green," said the man, who always believed in keeping in with his superior officers.

The captain swore at him.

By this time two or three of the crew who had over-heard part of the conversation had collected aft, and now stood in a small wondering knot before their strange captain.

"My lads," said the latter, moistening his dry lips with his tongue, "I name no names—I don't know 'em yet—and I cast no

suspicions, but somebody has been painting up and altering this 'ere craft, and twisting things about until a man 'ud hardly know her. Now what's the little game?"

There was no answer, and the captain, who was seeing things clearer and clearer in the growing light, got paler and paler.

"I must be going crazy," he muttered. "Is this the SMILING JANE, or am I dreaming?"

"It ain't the SMILING JANE," said one of the seamen; "leastways," he added cautiously, "it wasn't when I came aboard."

"Not the SMILING JANE!" roared the skipper; "what is it, then?"

"Why, the MARY ANN," chorused the astonished crew.

"My lads," faltered the agonised captain after a long pause. "My lads—" He stopped and swallowed something in his throat. "I've been and brought away the wrong ship," he continued with an effort; "that's what I've done. I must have been bewitched."

"Well, who's having the little game now?" inquired a voice.

"Somebody else'll be sacked as well as the mate," said another.

"We must take her back," said the captain, raising his voice to drown these mutterings. "Stand by there!"

The bewildered crew went to their posts, the captain gave his orders in a voice which had never been so subdued and mellow since it broke at the age of fourteen, and the Mary Ann took in sail, and, dropping her anchor, waited patiently for the turning of the tide.

• The church bells in Wapping and Rotherhithe were just

striking the hour of mid-day, though they were heard by few above the noisy din of workers on wharves and ships, as a short stout captain, and a mate with red whiskers and a pimply nose, stood up in a waterman's boat in the centre of the river, and gazed at each other in blank astonishment.

"She's gone, clean gone!" murmured the bewildered captain.

"Clean as a whistle," said the mate. "The new hands must ha' run away with her."

Then the bereaved captain raised his voice, and pronounced a pathetic and beautiful eulogy upon the departed vessel, somewhat marred by an appendix in which he consigned the new hands, their heirs, and descendants, to everlasting perdition.

"Ahoy!" said the waterman, who was getting tired of the business, addressing a grimy-looking seaman hanging meditatively over the side of a schooner. "Where's the Mary Ann?"

"Went away at half-past one this morning," was the reply.

"'Cos here's the cap'n an' the mate," said the waterman, indicating the forlorn couple with a bob of his head.

"My eyes!" said the man, "I s'pose the cook's in charge then. We was to have gone too, but our old man hasn't turned up."

Quickly the news spread amongst the craft in the tier, and many and various were the suggestions shouted to the bewildered couple from the different decks. At last, just as the captain had ordered the waterman to return to the shore, he was startled by a loud cry from the mate.

"Look there!" he shouted.

The captain looked. Fifty or sixty yards away, a small shamefaced-looking schooner, so it appeared to his excited imagination, was slowly approaching them. A minute later a shout went up from the other craft as she took in sail and bore slowly down upon them. Then a small boat put off to the buoy, and the Mary Ann was slowly warped into the place she had left ten hours before.

But while all this was going on, she was boarded by her captain and mate. They were met by Captain Bing, supported by his mate, who had hastily pushed off from the Smiling Jane to the assistance of his chief. In the two leading features before mentioned he was not unlike the mate of the Mary Ann, and much stress was laid upon this fact by the unfortunate Bing in his explanation. So much so, in fact, that both the mates got restless; the skipper, who was a plain man, and given to calling a spade a spade, using the word "pimply" with what seemed to them unnecessary iteration.

It is possible that the interview might have lasted for hours had not Bing suddenly changed his tactics and begun to throw out dark hints about standing a dinner ashore, and settling it over a friendly glass. The face of the Mary Ann's captain began to clear, and, as Bing proceeded from generalities to details, a soft smile played over his expressive features. It was reflected in the faces of the mates, who by these means showed clearly that they understood the table was to be laid for four.

At this happy turn of affairs Bing himself smiled, and a little while later a ship's boat containing four boon companions put off from the Mary Ann and made for the shore. Of what afterwards ensued there is no distinct record, beyond what may be gleaned from the fact that the quartette turned up at midnight arm-in-arm, and affectionately refused to be separated—even to enter the ship's boat, which was waiting for them. The sailors were at first rather nonplussed, but by dint of much coaxing and argument broke up the party, and rowing them to their respective vessels, put them carefully to bed.

CONTRABAND OF WAR

A small but strong lamp was burning in the fo'c'sle of the schooner Greyhound, by the light of which a middle-aged seaman of sedate appearance sat crocheting an antimacassar. Two other men were snoring with deep content in their bunks, while a small, bright-eyed boy sat up in his, reading adventurous fiction.

"Here comes old Dan," said the man with the anti-macassar warningly, as a pair of sea boots appeared at the top of the companion-ladder; "better not let him see you with that paper, Billee."

The boy thrust it beneath his blankets, and, lying down, closed his eyes as the new-comer stepped on to the floor.

"All asleep?" inquired the latter.

The other man nodded, and Dan, without any further parley, crossed over to the sleepers and shook them roughly.

"Eh! wha's matter?" inquired the sleepers plaintively.

"Git up," said Dan impressively, "I want to speak to you. Something important."

With sundry growls the men complied, and, thrusting their legs out of their bunks, rolled on to the locker, and sat crossly waiting for information.

"I want to do a pore chap a good turn," said Dan, watching them narrowly out of his little black eyes, "an' I want you to

help me; an' the boy too. It's never too young to do good to your fellow-creatures, Billy."

"I know it ain't," said Billy, taking this as permission to join the group; "I helped a drunken man home once when I was only ten years old, an' when I was only—"

The speaker stopped, not because he had come to the end of his remarks, but because one of the seamen had passed his arm around his neck and was choking him.

"Go on," said the man calmly; "I've got him. Spit it out, Dan, and none of your sermonising."

"Well, it's like this, Joe," said the old man; "here's a pore chap, a young sojer from the depot here, an' he's cut an' run. He's been in hiding in a cottage up the road two days, and he wants to git to London, and git honest work and employment, not shooting, an' stabbing, an' bayoneting—"

"Stow it," said Joe impatiently.

"He daren't go to the railway station, and he dursen't go outside in his uniform," continued Dan. "My 'art bled for the pore young feller, an' I've promised to give 'im a little trip to London with us. The people he's staying with won't have him no longer. They've only got one bed, and directly he sees any sojers coming he goes an' gits into it, whether he's got his boots on or not."

"Have you told the skipper?" inquired Joe sardonically.

"I won't deceive you, Joe, I 'ave not," replied the old man. "He'll have to stay down here of a daytime, an' only come on deck of a night when it's our watch. I told 'im what a lot of good-'arted

chaps you was, and how—"

"How much is he going to give you?" inquired Joe impatiently.

"It's only fit and proper he should pay a little for the passage," said Dan.

"How MUCH?" demanded Joe, banging the little triangular table with his fist, and thereby causing the man with the antimacassar to drop a couple of stitches.

"Twenty-five shillings," said old Dan reluctantly; "an' I'll spend the odd five shillings on you chaps when we git to Limehouse."

"I don't want your money," said Joe; "there's a empty bunk he can have; and mind, you take all the responsibility—I won't have nothing to do with it."

"Thanks, Joe," said the old man, with a sigh of relief; "he's a nice young chap, you're sure to take to him. I'll go and give him the tip to come aboard at once."

He ran up on deck again and whistled softly, and a figure, which had been hiding behind a pile of empties, came out, and, after looking cautiously around, dropped noiselessly on to the schooner's deck, and followed its protector below.

"Good evening, mates," said the linesman, gazing curiously and anxiously round him as he deposited a bundle on the table, and laid his swagger cane beside it.

"What's your height?" inquired Joe abruptly. "Seven foot?"

"No, only six foot four," said the new arrival, modestly. "I'm not proud of it. It's much easier for a small man to slip off than

a big one."

"It licks me," said Joe thoughtfully, "what they want 'em back for—I should think they'd be glad to git rid o' such"—he paused a moment while politeness struggled with feeling, and added, "skunks."

"P'raps I've a reason for being a skunk, p'raps I haven't," retorted Private Smith, as his face fell.

"This'll be your bunk," interposed Dan hastily; "put your things in there, and when you are in yourself you'll be as comfortable as a oyster in its shell."

The visitor complied, and, first extracting from the bundle some tins of meat and a bottle of whiskey, which he placed upon the table, nervously requested the honour of the present company to supper. With the exception of Joe, who churlishly climbed back into his bunk, the men complied, all agreeing that boys of Billy's age should be reared on strong teetotal principles.

Supper over, Private Smith and his protectors retired to their couches, where the former lay in much anxiety until two in the morning, when they got under way.

"It's all right, my lad," said Dan, after the watch had been set, as he came and stood by the deserter's bunk; "I 've saved you—I've saved you for twenty-five shillings."

"I wish it was more," said Private Smith politely.

The old man sighed—and waited.

"I'm quite cleaned out, though," continued the deserter, "except fi'pence ha'penny. I shall have to risk going home in my

uniform as it is."

"Ah, you'll get there all right," said Dan cheerfully; "and when you get home no doubt you 've got friends, and if it seems to you as you 'd like to give a little more to them as assisted you in the hour of need, you won't be ungrateful, my lad, I know. You ain't the sort."

With these words old Dan, patting him affectionately, retired, and the soldier lay trying to sleep in his narrow quarters until he was aroused by a grip on his arm.

"If you want a mouthful of fresh air you 'd better come on deck now," said the voice of Joe; "it's my watch. You can get all the sleep you want in the daytime."

Glad to escape from such stuffy quarters, Private Smith clambered out of his bunk and followed the other on deck. It was a fine clear night, and the schooner was going along under a light breeze; the seaman took the wheel, and, turning to his companion, abruptly inquired what he meant by deserting and worrying them with six foot four of underdone lobster.

"It's all through my girl," said Private Smith meekly; "first she jilted me, and made me join the army; now she's chucked the other fellow, and wrote to me to go back."

"An' now I s'pose the other chap'll take your place in the army," said Joe. "Why, a gal like that could fill a regiment, if she liked. Pah! They'll nab you too, in that uniform, and you'll get six months, and have to finish your time as well."

"It's more than likely," said the soldier gloomily. "I've got to

tramp to Manchester in these clothes, as far as I can see."

"What did you give old Dan all your money for?" inquired Joe.

"I was only thinking of getting away at first," said Smith, "and I had to take what was offered."

"Well, I'll do what I can for you," said the seaman. "If you're in love, you ain't responsible for your actions. I remember the first time I got the chuck. I went into a public-house bar, and smashed all the glass and bottles I could get at. I felt as though I must do something. If you were only shorter, I'd lend you some clothes."

"You're a brick," said the soldier gratefully.

"I haven't got any money I could lend you either," said Joe. "I never do have any, somehow. But clothes you must have."

He fell into deep thought, and cocked his eye aloft as though contemplating a cutting-out expedition on the sails, while the soldier, sitting on the side of the ship, waited hopefully for a miracle.

"You'd better get below again," said Joe presently.

"There seems to be somebody moving below; and if the skipper sees you, you're done. He's a regular Tartar, and he's got a brother what's a sergeant-major in the army. He'd give you up d'rectly if he spotted you."

"I'm off," said Smith; and with long, cat-like strides he disappeared swiftly below.

For two days all went well, and Dan was beginning to congratulate himself upon his little venture, when his peace of mind was rudely disturbed. The crew were down below, having

their tea, when Billy, who had been to the galley for hot water, came down, white and scared.

"Look here," he said nervously, "I've not had anything to do with this chap being aboard, have I?"

"What's the matter?" inquired Dan quickly.

"It's all found out," said Billy.

"WHAT!" cried the crew simultaneously.

"Leastways, it will be," said the youth, correcting himself. "You'd better chuck him overboard while you've got time. I heard the cap'n tell the mate as he was coming down in the fo'c'sle to-morrow morning to look round. He's going to have it painted."

"This," said Dan, in the midst of a painful pause, "this is what comes of helping a fellow-creature. What's to be done?"

"Tell the skipper the fo'c'sle don't want painting," suggested Billy.

The agonised old seaman, carefully putting down his saucer of tea, cuffed his head spitefully.

"It's a smooth sea," said he, looking at the perturbed countenance of Private Smith, "'an there's a lot of shipping about. If I was a deserter, sooner than be caught, I would slip overboard to-night with a lifebelt and take my chance."

"I wouldn't," said Mr. Smith, with much decision.

"You wouldn't? Not if you was quite near another ship?" cooed Dan.

"Not if I was near fifty blooming ships, all trying to see which could pick me up first," replied Mr. Smith, with some heat.

"Then we shall have to leave you to your fate," said Dan solemnly. "If a man's unreasonable, his best friends can do nothing for him."

"Chuck all his clothes overboard, anyway," said Billy.

"That's a good idea o' the boy's. You leave his ears alone," said Joe, stopping the ready hand of the exasperated Dan. "He's got more sense than any of us. Can you think of anything else, Billy? What shall we do then?"

The eyes of all were turned upon their youthful deliverer, those of Mr. Smith being painfully prominent. It was a proud moment for Billy, and he sat silent for some time, with a look of ineffable wisdom and thought upon his face. At length he spoke.

"Let somebody else have a turn," he said generously.

The voice of the antimacassar worker broke the silence.

"Paint him all over with stripes of different-coloured paint, and let him pretend he's mad, and didn't know how he got here," he said, with an uncontrollable ring of pride at the idea, which was very coldly received, Private Smith being noticeably hard on it.

"I know," said Billy shrilly, clapping his hands. "I've got it, I 've got it. After he's chucked his clothes overboard to-night, let him go overboard too, with a line."

"And tow him the rest o' the way, and chuck biscuits to him, I suppose," snarled Dan.

"No," said the youthful genius scornfully; "pretend he's been upset from a boat, and has been swimming about, and we heard

him cry out for help and rescued him."

"It's about the best way out of it," said Joe, after some deliberation; "it's warm weather, and you won't take no harm, mate. Do it in my watch, and I'll pull you out directly."

"Wouldn't it do if you just chucked a bucket of water over me and SAID you'd pulled me out," suggested the victim. "The other thing seems a downright LIE."

"No," said Billy authoritatively, "you've got to look half-drowned, and swallow a lot of water, and your eyes be all bloodshot."

Everybody being eager for the adventure, except Private Smith, the arrangements were at once concluded, and the approach of night impatiently awaited. It was just before midnight when Smith, who had forgotten for the time his troubles in sleep, was shaken into wakefulness.

"Cold water, sir?" said Billy gleefully.

In no mood for frivolity, Private Smith rose and followed the youth on deck. The air struck him as chill as he stood there; but, for all that, it was with a sense of relief that he saw Her Majesty's uniform go over the side and sink into the dark water.

"He don't look much with his padding off, does he?" said Billy, who had been eyeing him critically.

"You go below," said Dan sharply.

"Garn," said Billy indignantly; "I want to see the fun as well as you do. I thought of it."

"Fun?" said the old man severely. "Fun? To see a feller

creature suffering, and perhaps drowned—"

"I don't think I had better go," said the victim; "it seems rather underhand."

"Yes, you will," said Joe. "Wind this line round an' round your arm, and just swim about gently till I pull you in."

Sorely against his inclination Private Smith took hold of the line, and, hanging over the side of the schooner, felt the temperature with his foot, and, slowly and tenderly, with many little gasps, committed his body to the deep. Joe paid out the line and waited, letting out more line, when the man in the water, who was getting anxious, started to come in hand over hand.

"That'll do," said Dan at length.

"I think it will," said Joe, and, putting his hand to his mouth, gave a mighty shout. It was answered almost directly by startled roars from the cabin, and the skipper and mate came rushing hastily upon deck, to see the crew, in their sleeping gear, forming an excited group round Joe, and peering eagerly over the side.

"What's the matter?" demanded the skipper.

"Somebody in the water, sir," said Joe, relinquishing the wheel to one of the other seamen, and hauling in the line. "I heard a cry from the water and threw a line, and, by gum, I've hooked it!"

He hauled in, lustily aided by the skipper, until the long white body of Private Smith, blanched with the cold, came bumping against the schooner's side.

"It's a mermaid," said the mate, who was inclined to be superstitious, as he peered doubtfully down at it. "Let it go, Joe."

"Haul it in, boys," said the skipper impatiently; and two of the men clambered over the side and, stooping down, raised it from the water.

In the midst of a puddle, which he brought with him, Private Smith was laid on the deck, and, waving his arms about, fought wildly for his breath.

"Fetch one of them empties," said the skipper quickly, as he pointed to some barrels ranged along the side.

The men rolled one over, and then aided the skipper in placing the long fair form of their visitor across it, and to trundle it lustily up and down the deck, his legs forming convenient handles for the energetic operators.

"He's coming round," said the mate, checking them; "he's speaking. How do you feel, my poor fellow?"

He put his ear down, but the action was unnecessary. Private Smith felt bad, and, in the plainest English he could think of at the moment, said so distinctly.

"He's swearing," said the mate. "He ought to be ashamed of himself."

"Yes," said the skipper austerely; "and him so near death too. How did you get in the water?"

"Went for a—swim," panted Smith surlily.

"SWIM?" echoed the skipper. "Why, we're ten miles from land!"

"His mind's wandering, pore feller," interrupted Joe hurriedly. "What boat did you fall out of, matey?"

"A row-boat," said Smith, trying to roll out of reach of the skipper, who was down on his knees flaying him alive with a roller-towel. "I had to undress in the water to keep afloat. I've lost all my clothes."

"Pore feller," said Dan.

"A gold watch and chain, my purse, and three of the nicest fellers that ever breathed," continued Smith, who was now entering into the spirit of the thing.

"Poor chaps," said the skipper solemnly. "Any of 'em leave any family?"

"Four," said Smith sadly.

"Children?" queried the mate.

"Families," said Smith.

"Look here," said the mate, but the watchful Joe interrupted him.

"His mind's wandering," said he hastily. "He can't count, pore chap. We 'd better git him to bed."

"Ah, do," said the skipper, and, assisted by his friends, the rescued man was half led, half carried below and put between the blankets, where he lay luxuriously sipping a glass of brandy and water, sent from the cabin.

"How'd I do it?" he inquired, with a satisfied air.

"There was no need to tell all them lies about it," said Dan sharply; "instead of one little lie you told half-a-dozen. I don't want nothing more to do with you. You start afresh now, like a new-born babe."

"All right," said Smith shortly; and, being very much fatigued with his exertions, and much refreshed by the brandy, fell into a deep and peaceful sleep.

The morning was well advanced when he awoke, and the fo'c'sle empty except for the faithful Joe, who was standing by his side, with a heap of clothing under his arm.

"Try these on," said he, as Smith stared at him half awake; "they'll be better than nothing, at any rate."

The soldier leaped from his bunk and gratefully proceeded to dress himself, Joe eyeing him critically as the trousers climbed up his long legs, and the sleeves of the jacket did their best to conceal his elbows.

"What do I look like?" he inquired anxiously, as he finished.

"Six foot an' a half o' misery," piped the shrill voice of Billy promptly, as he thrust his head in at the fo'c'sle. "You can't go to church in those clothes."

"Well, they'll do for the ship, but you can't go ashore in 'em," said Joe, as he edged towards the ladder, and suddenly sprang up a step or two to let fly at the boy, "The old man wants to see you; be careful what you say to him."

With a very unsuccessful attempt to appear unconscious of the figure he cut, Smith went up on deck for the interview.

"We can't do anything until we get to London," said the skipper, as he made copious notes of Smith's adventures. "As soon as we get there, I'll lend you the money to telegraph to your friends to tell 'em you're safe and to send you some clothes, and

of course you'll have free board and lodging till it comes, and I'll write out an account of it for the newspapers."

"You're very good," said Smith blankly.

"And I don't know what you are," said the skipper, interrogatively; "but you ought to go in for swimming as a profession—six hours' swimming about like that is wonderful."

"You don't know what you can do till you have to," said Smith modestly, as he backed slowly away; "but I never want to see the water again as long as I live."

The two remaining days of their passage passed all too quickly for the men, who were casting about for some way out of the difficulty which they foresaw would arise when they reached London.

"If you'd only got decent clothes," said Joe, as they passed Gravesend, "you could go off and send a telegram, and not come back; but you couldn't go five yards in them things without having a crowd after you."

"I shall have to be taken I s'pose," said Smith moodily.

"An' poor old Dan'll get six months hard for helping you off," said Joe sympathetically, as a bright idea occurred to him.

"Rubbish!" said Dan uneasily. "He can stick to his tale of being upset; anyway, the skipper saw him pulled out of the water. He's too honest a chap to get an old man into trouble for trying to help him."

"He must have a new rig out, Dan," said Joe softly. "You an' me'll go an' buy 'em. I'll do the choosing, and you'll do the paying.

Why, it'll be a reg'lar treat for you to lay out a little money, Dan. We'll have quite an evening's shopping, everything of the best."

The infuriated Dan gasped for breath, and looked helplessly at the grinning crew.

"I'll see him—overboard first," he said furiously.

"Please yourself," said Joe shortly, "If he's caught you'll get six months. As it is, you've got a chance of doing a nice, kind little Christian act, becos, o' course, that twenty-five bob you got out of him won't anything like pay for his toggery."

Almost beside himself with indignation, the old man moved off, and said not another word until they were made fast to the wharf at Limehouse. He did not even break silence when Joe, taking him affectionately by the arm, led him aft to the skipper.

"Me an' Dan, sir," said Joe very respectfully, "would like to go ashore for a little shopping. Dan has very kindly offered to lend that pore chap the money for some clothes, and he wants me to go with him to help carry them."

"Ay, ay," said the skipper, with a benevolent smile at the aged philanthropist. "You'd better go at once, afore the shops shut."

"We'll run, sir," said Joe, and taking Dan by the arm, dragged him into the street at a trot.

Nearly a couple of hours passed before they returned, and no child watched with greater eagerness the opening of a birthday present than Smith watched the undoing of the numerous parcels with which they were laden.

"He's a reg'lar fairy godmother, ain't he?" said Joe, as Smith

joyously dressed himself in a very presentable tweed suit, serviceable boots, and a bowler hat. “We had a dreadful job to get a suit big enough, an’ the only one we could get was rather more money than we wanted to give, wasn’t it, Dan?”

The fairy godmother strove manfully with his feelings.

“You’ll do now,” said Joe. “I ain’t got much, but what I have you’re welcome to.” He put his hand into his pocket and pulled out some loose coin. “What have you got, mates?”

With decent good will the other men turned out their pockets, and, adding to the store, heartily pressed it upon the reluctant Smith, who, after shaking hands gratefully, followed Joe on deck.

“You’ve got enough to pay your fare,” said the latter; “an’ I’ve told the skipper you are going ashore to send off telegrams. If you send the money back to Dan, I’ll never forgive you.”

“I won’t, then,” said Smith firmly; “but I’ll send theirs back to the other chaps. Good-bye.”

Joe shook him by the hand again, and bade him go while the coast was clear, advice which Smith hastened to follow, though he turned and looked back to wave his hand to the crew, who had come up on deck silently to see him off; all but the philanthropist, who was down below with a stump of lead-pencil and a piece of paper doing sums.

A BLACK AFFAIR

I didn't want to bring it," said Captain Gubson, regarding somewhat unfavourably a grey parrot whose cage was hanging against the mainmast, "but my old uncle was so set on it I had to. He said a sea-voyage would set its 'elth up."

"It seems to be all right at present," said the mate, who was tenderly sucking his forefinger; "best of spirits, I should say."

"It's playful," assented the skipper. "The old man thinks a rare lot of it. I think I shall have a little bit in that quarter, so keep your eye on the beggar."

"Scratch Poll!" said the parrot, giving its bill a preliminary strop on its perch. "Scratch poor Polly!"

It bent its head against the bars, and waited patiently to play off what it had always regarded as the most consummate practical joke in existence. The first doubt it had ever had about it occurred when the mate came forward and obligingly scratched it with the stem of his pipe. It was a wholly unforeseen development, and the parrot, ruffling its feathers, edged along its perch and brooded darkly at the other end of it.

Opinion before the mast was also against the new arrival, the general view being that the wild jealousy which raged in the bosom of the ship's cat would sooner or later lead to mischief.

"Old Satan don't like it," said the cook, shaking his head. "The blessed bird hadn't been aboard ten minutes before Satan was

prowling around. The blooming image waited till he was about a foot off the cage, and then he did the perlite and asked him whether he'd like a glass o' beer. I never see a cat so took aback in all my life. Never."

"There'll be trouble between 'em," said old Sam, who was the cat's special protector, "mark my words."

"I'd put my money on the parrot," said one of the men confidently. "It's 'ad a crool bit out of the mate's finger. Where 'ud the cat be agin that beak?"

"Well, you'd lose your money," said Sam. "If you want to do the cat a kindness, every time you see him near that cage cuff his 'ed."

The crew being much attached to the cat, which had been presented to them when a kitten by the mate's wife, acted upon the advice with so much zest that for the next two days the indignant animal was like to have been killed with kindness. On the third day, however, the parrot's cage being on the cabin table, the cat stole furtively down, and, at the pressing request of the occupant itself, scratched its head for it.

The skipper was the first to discover the mischief, and he came on deck and published the news in a voice which struck a chill to all hearts.

"Where's that black devil got to?" he yelled.

"Anything wrong, sir?" asked Sam anxiously.

"Come and look here," said the skipper. He led the way to the cabin, where the mate and one of the crew were already standing,

shaking their heads over the parrot.

"What do you make of that?" demanded the skipper fiercely.

"Too much dry food, sir," said Sam, after due deliberation.

"Too much what?" bellowed the skipper.

"Too much dry food," repeated Sam firmly. "A parrot—a grey parrot—wants plenty o' sop. If it don't get it, it moults."

"It's had too much CAT" said the skipper fiercely, "and you know it, and overboard it goes."

"I don't believe it was the cat, sir," interposed the other man; "it's too soft-hearted to do a thing like that."

"You can shut your jaw," said the skipper, reddening. "Who asked you to come down here at all?"

"Nobody saw the cat do it," urged the mate.

The skipper said nothing, but, stooping down, picked up a tail feather from the floor, and laid it on the table. He then went on deck, followed by the others, and began calling, in seductive tones, for the cat. No reply forth coming from the sagacious animal, which had gone into hiding, he turned to Sam, and bade him call it.

"No, sir, I won't 'ave no 'and in it," said the old man. "Putting aside my liking for the animal, I'M not going to 'ave anything to do with the killing of a black cat."

"Rubbish!" said the skipper.

"Very good, sir," said Sam, shrugging his shoulders, "you know best, o' course. You're eddicated and I'm not, an' p'raps you can afford to make a laugh o' such things. I knew one man

who killed a black cat an' he went mad. There's something very pecooliar about that cat o' ours."

"It knows more than we do," said one of the crew, shaking his head. "That time you—I mean we—ran the smack down, that cat was expecting of it 'ours before. It was like a wild thing."

"Look at the weather we've 'ad—look at the trips we've made since he's been aboard," said the old man. "Tell me it's chance if you like, but I KNOW better."

The skipper hesitated. He was a superstitious man even for a sailor, and his weakness was so well known that he had become a sympathetic receptacle for every ghost story which, by reason of its crudeness or lack of corroboration, had been rejected by other experts. He was a perfect reference library for omens, and his interpretations of dreams had gained for him a widespread reputation.

"That's all nonsense," he said, pausing uneasily; "still, I only want to be just. There's nothing vindictive about me, and I'll have no hand in it myself. Joe, just tie a lump of coal to that cat and heave it overboard."

"Not me," said the cook, following Sam's lead, and working up a shudder. "Not for fifty pun in gold. I don't want to be haunted."

"The parrot's a little better now, sir," said one of the men, taking advantage of his hesitation, "he's opened one eye."

"Well, I only want to be just," repeated the skipper. "I won't do anything in a hurry, but, mark my words, if the parrot dies that cat goes overboard."

Contrary to expectations, the bird was still alive when London was reached, though the cook, who from his connection with the cabin had suddenly reached a position of unusual importance, reported great loss of strength and irritability of temper. It was still alive, but failing fast on the day they were to put to sea again; and the fo'c'sle, in preparation for the worst, stowed their pet away in the paint-locker, and discussed the situation.

Their council was interrupted by the mysterious behaviour of the cook, who, having gone out to lay in a stock of bread, suddenly broke in upon them more in the manner of a member of a secret society than a humble but useful unit of a ship's company.

"Where's the cap'n?" he asked in a hoarse whisper, as he took a seat on the locker with the sack of bread between his knees.

"In the cabin," said Sam, regarding his antics with some disfavour. "What's wrong, cookie?"

"What d' yer think I've got in here?" asked the cook, patting the bag.

The obvious reply to this question was, of course, bread; but as it was known that the cook had departed specially to buy some, and that he could hardly ask a question involving such a simple answer, nobody gave it.

"It come to me all of a sudden," said the cook, in a thrilling whisper. "I'd just bought the bread and left the shop, when I see a big black cat, the very image of ours, sitting on a doorstep. I just stooped down to stroke its 'ed, when it come to me."

"They will sometimes," said one of the seamen.

"I don't mean that," said the cook, with the contempt of genius. "I mean the idea did. Ses I to myself, 'You might be old Satan's brother by the look of you; an' if the cap'n wants to kill a cat, let it be you,' I ses. And with that, before it could say Jack Robinson, I picked it up by the scruff o' the neck and shoved it in the bag."

"What, all in along of our bread?" said the previous interrupter, in a pained voice.

"Some of yer are 'ard ter please," said the cook, deeply offended.

"Don't mind him, cook," said the admiring Sam. "You're a masterpiece, that's what you are."

"Of course, if any of you've got a better plan"—said the cook generously.

"Don't talk rubbish, cook," said Sam; "fetch the two cats out and put 'em together."

"Don't mix 'em," said the cook warningly; "for you'll never know which is which agin if you do."

He cautiously opened the top of the sack and produced his captive, and Satan, having been relieved from his prison, the two animals were carefully compared.

"They're as like as two lumps o' coal," said Sam slowly. "Lord, what a joke on the old man. I must tell the mate o' this; he'll enjoy it."

"It'll be all right if the parrot don't die," said the dainty

pessimist, still harping on his pet theme. “All that bread spoilt, and two cats aboard.”

“Don’t mind what he ses,” said Sam; “you’re a brick, that’s what you are. I’ll just make a few holes in the lid o’ the boy’s chest, and pop old Satan in. You don’t mind, do you, Billy?”

“Of course he don’t,” said the other men indignantly.

Matters being thus agreeably arranged, Sam got a gimlet, and prepared the chest for the reception of its tenant, who, convinced that he was being put out of the way to make room for a rival, made a frantic fight for freedom.

“Now get something ‘eavy and put on the top of it,” said Sam, having convinced himself that the lock was broken; “and, Billy, put the noo cat in the paint-locker till we start; it’s home-sick.”

The boy obeyed, and the understudy was kept in durance vile until they were off Limehouse, when he came on deck and nearly ended his career there and then by attempting to jump over the bulwark into the next garden. For some time he paced the deck in a perturbed fashion, and then, leaping on the stern, mewed plaintively as his native city receded farther and farther from his view.

“What’s the matter with old Satan?” said the mate, who had been let into the secret. “He seems to have something on his mind.”

“He’ll have something round his neck presently,” said the skipper grimly.

The prophecy was fulfilled some three hours later, when he

came up on deck ruefully regarding the remains of a bird whose vocabulary had once been the pride of its native town. He threw it overboard without a word, and then, seizing the innocent cat, who had followed him under the impression that it was about to lunch, produced half a brick attached to a string, and tied it round his neck. The crew, who were enjoying the joke immensely, raised a howl of protest.

"The Skylark'll never have another like it, sir," said Sam solemnly. "That cat was the luck of the ship."

"I don't want any of your old woman's yarns," said the skipper brutally. "If you want the cat, go and fetch it."

He stepped aft as he spoke, and sent the gentle stranger hurtling through the air. There was a "plomp" as it reached the water, a bubble or two came to the surface, and all was over.

"That's the last o' that," he said, turning away.

The old man shook his head. "You can't kill a black cat for nothing," said he, "mark my words!"

The skipper, who was in a temper at the time, thought little of them, but they recurred to him vividly the next day. The wind had freshened during the night, and rain was falling heavily. On deck the crew stood about in oilskins, while below, the boy, in his new capacity of gaoler, was ministering to the wants of an ungrateful prisoner, when the cook, happening to glance that way, was horrified to see the animal emerge from the fo'c'sle. It eluded easily the frantic clutch of the boy as he sprang up the ladder after it, and walked leisurely along the deck in the

direction of the cabin. Just as the crew had given it up for lost it encountered Sam, and the next moment, despite its cries, was caught up and huddled away beneath his stiff clammy oilskins. At the noise the skipper, who was talking to the mate, turned as though he had been shot, and gazed wildly round him.

"Dick," said he, "can you hear a cat?"

"Cat!" said the mate, in accents of great astonishment.

"I thought I heard it," said the puzzled skipper.

"Fancy, sir," said Dick firmly, as a mewing, appalling in its wrath, came from beneath Sam's coat.

"Did you hear it, Sam?" called the skipper, as the old man was moving off.

"Hear what, sir?" inquired Sam respectfully, without turning round.

"Nothing," said the skipper, collecting himself. "Nothing. All right."

The old man, hardly able to believe in his good fortune, made his way forward, and, seizing a favourable opportunity, handed his ungrateful burden back to the boy.

"Fancy you heard a cat just now?" inquired the mate casually.

"Well, between you an' me, Dick," said the skipper, in a mysterious voice, "I did, and it wasn't fancy neither. I heard that cat as plain as if it was alive."

"Well, I've heard of such things," said the other, "but I don't believe 'em. What a lark if the old cat comes back climbing up over the side out of the sea to-night, with the brick hanging round

its neck."

The skipper stared at him for some time without speaking. "If that's your idea of a lark," he said at length, in a voice which betrayed traces of some emotion, "it ain't mine."

"Well, if you hear it again," said the mate cordially, "you might let me know. I'm rather interested in such things."

The skipper, hearing no more of it that day, tried hard to persuade himself that he was the victim of imagination, but, in spite of this, he was pleased at night, as he stood at the wheel, to reflect on the sense of companionship afforded by the look-out in the bows. On his part the look-out was quite charmed with the unwonted affability of the skipper, as he yelled out to him two or three times on matters only faintly connected with the progress of the schooner.

The night, which had been dirty, cleared somewhat, and the bright crescent of the moon appeared above a heavy bank of clouds, as the cat, which had by dint of using its back as a lever at length got free from that cursed chest, licked its shapely limbs, and came up on deck. After its stifling prison, the air was simply delicious.

"Bob!" yelled the skipper suddenly.

"Ay, ay, sir!" said the look-out, in a startled voice.

"Did you mew?" inquired the skipper.

"Did I WOT, sir?" cried the astonished Bob.

"Mew," said the skipper sharply, "like a cat?"

"No, sir," said the offended seaman. "What 'ud I want to do

that for?"

"I don't know what you want to for," said the skipper, looking round him uneasily. "There's some more rain coming, Bob."

"Ay, ay, sir," said Bob.

"Lot o' rain we've had this summer," said the skipper, in a meditative bawl.

"Ay, ay, sir," said Bob. "Sailing-ship on the port bow, sir."

The conversation dropped, the skipper, anxious to divert his thoughts, watching the dark mass of sail as it came plunging out of the darkness into the moonlight until it was abreast of his own craft. His eyes followed it as it passed his quarter, so that he saw not the stealthy approach of the cat which came from behind the companion, and sat down close by him. For over thirty hours the animal had been subjected to the grossest indignities at the hands of every man on board the ship except one. That one was the skipper, and there is no doubt but that its subsequent behaviour was a direct recognition of that fact. It rose to its feet, and crossing over to the unconscious skipper, rubbed its head affectionately and vigorously against his leg.

From simple causes great events do spring. The skipper sprang four yards, and let off a screech which was the subject of much comment on the barque which had just passed. When Bob, who came shuffling up at the double, reached him he was leaning against the side, incapable of speech, and shaking all over.

"Anything wrong, sir?" inquired the seaman anxiously, as he ran to the wheel.

The skipper pulled himself together a bit, and got closer to his companion.

"Believe me or not, Bob," he said at length, in trembling accents, "just as you please, but the ghost of that—cat, I mean the ghost of that poor affectionate animal which I drowned, and which I wish I hadn't, came and rubbed itself up against my leg."

"Which leg?" inquired Bob, who was ever careful about details.

"What the blazes does it matter which leg?" demanded the skipper, whose nerves were in a terrible state. "Ah, look—look there!"

The seaman followed his outstretched finger, and his heart failed him as he saw the cat, with its back arched, gingerly picking its way along the side of the vessel.

"I can't see nothing," he said doggedly.

"I don't suppose you can, Bob," said the skipper in a melancholy voice, as the cat vanished in the bows; "it's evidently only meant for me to see. What it means I don't know. I'm going down to turn in. I ain't fit for duty. You don't mind being left alone till the mate comes up, do you?"

"I ain't afraid," said Bob.

His superior officer disappeared below, and, shaking the sleepy mate, who protested strongly against the proceedings, narrated in trembling tones his horrible experiences.

"If I were you "—said the mate.

"Yes?" said the skipper, waiting a bit. Then he shook him

again, roughly.

"What were you going to say?" he inquired.

"Say?" said the mate, rubbing his eyes. "Nothing."

"About the cat?" suggested the skipper.

"Cat?" said the mate, nestling lovingly down in the blankets again. "Wha' ca'—goo' ni'"—

Then the skipper drew the blankets from the mate's sleepy clutches, and, rolling him backwards and forwards in the bunk, patiently explained to him that he was very unwell, that he was going to have a drop of whiskey neat, and turn in, and that he, the mate, was to take the watch. From this moment the joke lost much of its savour for the mate.

"You can have a nip too, Dick," said the skipper, proffering him the whiskey, as the other sullenly dressed himself.

"It's all rot," said the mate, tossing the spirits down his throat, "and it's no use either; you can't run away from a ghost; it's just as likely to be in your bed as anywhere else. Good-night."

He left the skipper pondering over his last words, and dubiously eyeing the piece of furniture in question. Nor did he retire until he had subjected it to an analysis of the most searching description, and then, leaving the lamp burning, he sprang hastily in, and forgot his troubles in sleep.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.