

At Sunwich Port, Part 3.

Contents: Chapters 11-15

W.W. Jacobs

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AT SUNWICH PORT

BY

W. W. JACOBS

Part 3.

ILLUSTRATIONS

From Drawings by Will Owen

CHAPTER XI

Jack Nugent's first idea on seeing a letter from his father asking him to meet him at Samson Wilks's was to send as impolite a refusal as a strong sense of undutifulness and a not inapt pen could arrange, but the united

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remonstrances of the Kybird family made him waver.

"You go," said Mr. Kybird, solemnly; "take the advice of a man wot's seen life, and go. Who knows but wot he's a thinking of doing something for you?"

"Startin' of you in business or somethin'," said Mrs. Kybird. "But if 'e tries to break it off between you and 'Melia I hope you know what to say."

"He won't do that," said her husband.

"If he wants to see me," said Mr. Nugent, "let him come here."

"I wouldn't 'ave 'im in my house," retorted Mr. Kybird, quickly. "An Englishman's 'ouse is his castle, and I won't 'ave him in mine."

"Why not, Dan'l," asked his wife, "if the two families is to be connected?"

Mr. Kybird shook his head, and, catching her eye, winked at her with much significance.

"'Ave it your own way," said Mrs. Kybird, who was always inclined to make concessions in minor matters. "'Ave it your own way, but don't blame me, that's all I ask."

Urged on by his friends Mr. Nugent at last consented, and, in a reply to his father, agreed to meet him at the house of Mr. Wilks on Thursday evening. He was not free him-self from a slight curiosity as to the reasons which had made the captain unbend in so unusual a fashion.

Mr. Nathan Smith put in an appearance at six o'clock on the fatal evening. He was a short, slight man, with a clean-shaven face mapped with tiny wrinkles, and a pair of colourless eyes the blankness of whose expression defied research. In conversation, especially conversation of a diplomatic nature, Mr. Smith seemed to be looking through his opponent at something beyond, an uncomfortable habit which was a source of much discomfort to his victims.

"Here we are, then, Mr. Wilks," he said, putting his head in the door and smiling at the agitated steward.

"Come in," said Mr. Wilks, shortly.

Mr. Smith obliged. "Nice night outside," he said, taking a chair; "clear over'ead. Wot a morning it 'ud be for a sail if we was only young enough. Is that terbacker in that canister there?"

The other pushed it towards him.

"If I was only young enough--and silly enough," said the boarding-house master, producing a pipe with an unusually large bowl and slowly filling it, "there's nothing I should enjoy more than a three years' cruise. Nothing to do and everything of the best."

"'Ave you made all the arrangements?" inquired Mr. Wilks, in a tone of cold superiority.

Mr. Smith glanced affectionately at a fish-bag of bulky appearance which stood on the floor between his feet. "All ready," he said, cheerfully,

an' if you'd like a v'y'ge yourself I can manage it for you in two twos. You've on'y got to say the word."

"I don't want one," said the steward, fiercely; "don't you try none o' your larks on me, Nathan Smith, cos I won't have it."

[Illustration: "Mr. Nathan Smith."]

"Lord love your 'art," said the boarding-master, "I wouldn't 'urt you. I'm on'y acting under your orders now; yours and the captin's. It ain't in my reg'lar way o' business at all, but I'm so good-natured I can't say 'no.'"

"Can't say 'no' to five pounds, you mean," retorted Mr. Wilks, who by no means relished these remarks.

"If I was getting as much out of it as you are I'd be a 'appy man," sighed Mr. Smith.

"Me!" cried the other; do you think I'd take money for this--why, I'd sooner starve, I'd sooner. Wot are you a-tapping your nose for?"

"Was I tapping it?" demanded Mr. Smith, in surprise. "Well, I didn't know it. I'm glad you told me."

"You're quite welcome," said the steward, sharply. "Crimping ain't in my line; I'd sooner sweep the roads."

"Ear, 'ear," exclaimed Mr. Smith, approvingly. "Ah! wot a thing it is to come acrost an honest man. Wot a good thing it is for the eyesight."

He stared stonily somewhere in the direction of Mr. Wilks, and then blinking rapidly shielded his eyes with his hand as though overcome by the sight of so much goodness. The steward's wrath rose at the performance, and he glowered back at him until his eyes watered.

"Twenty past six," said Mr. Smith, suddenly, as he fumbled in his waistcoat-pocket and drew out a small folded paper. "It's time I made a start. I s'pose you've got some salt in the house?"

"Plenty," said Mr. Wilks.

"And beer?" inquired the other.

"Yes, there is some beer," said the steward.

"Bring me a quart of it," said the boarding-master, slowly and impressively. "I want it drawed in a china mug, with a nice foaming 'ead on it."

"Wot do you want it for?" inquired Mr. Wilks, eyeing him very closely.

"Bisness purposes," said Mr. Smith. "If you're very good you shall see 'ow I do it."

Still the steward made no move. "I thought you brought the stuff with you," he remarked.

Mr. Smith looked at him with mild reproach. "Are you managing this affair or am I?" he inquired.

The steward went out reluctantly, and drawing a quart mug of beer set it down on the table and stood watching his visitor.

"And now I want a spoonful o' sugar, a spoonful o' salt, and a spoonful o' vinegar," said Mr. Smith. "Make haste afore the 'ead goes off of it."

Mr. Wilks withdrew grumbling, and came back in a wonderfully short space of time considering, with the articles required.

"Thankee," said the other; "you 'ave been quick. I wish I could move as quick as you do. But you can take 'em back now, I find I can do without 'em."

"Where's the beer?" demanded the incensed Mr. Wilks; where's the beer, you underhanded swab?"

"I altered my mind," said Mr. Smith, "and not liking waste, and seeing by your manner that you've 'ad more than enough already to-night, I drunk it. There isn't another man in Sunwich I could ha' played that trick on, no, nor a boy neither."

Mr. Wilks was about to speak, but, thinking better of it, threw the three spoons in the kitchen, and resuming his seat by the fire sat with his back half turned to his visitor.

"Bright, cheerful young chap, 'e is," said Mr. Smith; "you've knowed 'im ever since he was a baby, haven't you?"

Mr. Wilks made no reply.

"The Conqueror's sailing to-morrow morning, too," continued his tormentor; "his father's old ship. 'Ow strange it'll seem to 'im following it out aboard a whaler. Life is full o' surprises, Mr. Wilks, and wot a big surprise it would be to you if you could 'ear wot he says about you when he comes to 'is senses."

"I'm obeying orders," growled the other.

"Quite right," said Mr. Smith, approvingly, as he drew a bottle of whisky from his bag and placed it on the table. "Two glasses and there we are. We don't want any salt and vinegar this time."

Mr. Wilks turned a deaf ear. "But 'ow are you going to manage so as to make one silly and not the other?" he inquired.

"It's a trade secret," said the other; "but I don't mind telling you I sent the cap'n something to take afore he comes, and I shall be in your kitchen looking arter things."

"I s'pose you know wot you're about?" said Mr. Wilks, doubtfully.

"I s'pose so," rejoined the other. "Young Nu-gent trusts you, and, of course, he'll take anything from your 'ouse. That's the beauty of 'aving a character, Mr. Wilks; a good character and a face like a baby with grey whiskers."

Mr. Wilks bent down and, taking up a small brush, carefully tidied up the hearth.

"Like as not, if my part in it gets to be known," pursued Mr. Smith, mournfully, "I'll 'ave that gal of Kybird's scratching my eyes out or

p'r'aps sticking a hat-pin into me. I had that once; the longest hat-pin that ever was made, I should think."

He shook his head over the perils of his calling, and then, after another glance at the clock, withdrew to the kitchen with his bag, leaving Mr. Wilks waiting in a state of intense nervousness for the arrival of the others.

Captain Nugent was the first to put in an appearance, and by way of setting a good example poured a little of the whisky in his glass and sat there waiting. Then Jack Nugent came in, fresh and glowing, and Mr. Wilks, after standing about helplessly for a few moments, obeyed the captain's significant nod and joined Mr. Smith in the kitchen.

"You'd better go for a walk," said that gentle-man, regarding him kindly; "that's wot the cap'n thought."

Mr. Wilks acquiesced eagerly, and tapping at the door passed through the room again into the street. A glance as he went through showed him that Jack Nugent was drinking, and he set off in a panic to get away from the scene which he had contrived.

He slackened after a time and began to pace the streets at a rate which was less noticeable. As he passed the Kybirds' he shivered, and it was not until he had consumed a pint or two of the strongest brew procurable at the _Two Schooners_ that he began to regain some of his old self-esteem. He felt almost maudlin at the sacrifice of character he was enduring for the sake of his old master, and the fact that he could not narrate it to sympathetic friends was not the least of his troubles.

[Illustration: "It was not until he had consumed a pint or two of the strongest brew that he began to regain some of his old self-esteem."]

The shops had closed by the time he got into the street again, and he walked down and watched with much solemnity the reflection of the quay lamps in the dark water of the harbour. The air was keen and the various craft distinct in the starlight. Perfect quiet reigned aboard the Seabird, and after a vain attempt to screw up his courage to see the victim taken aboard he gave it up and walked back along the beach.

By the time he turned his steps homewards it was nearly eleven o'clock. Fullalove Alley was quiet, and after listening for some time at his window he turned the handle of the door and passed in. The nearly empty bottle stood on the table, and an over-turned tumbler accounted for a large, dark patch on the table-cloth. As he entered the room the kitchen door opened and Mr. Nathan Smith, with a broad smile on his face, stepped briskly in.

"All over," he said, rubbing his hands; "he went off like a lamb, no trouble nor fighting. He was a example to all of us."

"Did the cap'n see 'im aboard?" inquired Mr. Wilks.

"Certainly not," said the other. "As a matter o' fact the cap'n took a little more than I told 'im to take, and I 'ad to help 'im up to your bed. Accidents will 'appen, but he'll be all right in the morning if nobody goes near 'im. Leave 'im perfectly quiet, and when 'e comes downstairs give 'im a strong cup o' tea."

"In my bed?" repeated the staring Mr. Wilks.

"He's as right as rain," said the boarding master. "I brought down a pillow and blankets for you and put 'em in the kitchen. And now I'll take the other two pound ten and be getting off 'ome. It ought to be ten pounds really with the trouble I've 'ad."

Mr. Wilks laid the desired amount on the table, and Mr. Nathan Smith placing it in his pocket rose to go.

"Don't disturb 'im till he's 'ad 'is sleep out, mind," he said, pausing at the door, "else I can't answer for the consequences. If 'e should get up in the night and come down raving mad, try and soothe 'im. Good-night and pleasant dreams."

He closed the door after him quietly, and the horrified steward, after fetching the bed-clothes on tiptoe from the kitchen, locked the door which led to the staircase, and after making up a bed on the floor lay down in his clothes and tried to get to sleep.

He dozed off at last, but woke up several times during the night with the cold. The lamp burnt itself out, and in the dark he listened intently for any sounds of life in the room above. Then he fell asleep again, until at about half-past seven in the morning a loud crash overhead awoke him with a start.

In a moment he was sitting up with every faculty on the alert. Footsteps blundered about in the room above, and a large and rapidly widening patch of damp showed on the ceiling. It was evident that the sleeper, in his haste to quench an abnormal thirst, had broken the water jug.

Mr. Wilks, shivering with dread, sprang to his feet and stood irresolute. Judging by the noise, the captain was evidently in a fine temper, and Mr. Smith's remarks about insanity occurred to him with redoubled interest. Then he heard a hoarse shout, the latch of the bedroom door clicked, and the prisoner stumbled heavily downstairs and began to fumble at the handle of the door at the bottom. Trembling with excitement Mr. Wilks dashed forward and turned the key, and then retreating to the street door prepared for instant flight.

He opened the door so suddenly that the man on the other side, with a sudden cry, fell on all fours into the room, and raising his face stared stupidly at the steward. Mr. Wilks's hands dropped to his sides and his tongue refused its office, for in some strange fashion, quite in keeping with the lawless proceedings of the previous night, Captain Nugent had changed into a most excellent likeness of his own son.

[Illustration: "The man on the other side fell on all fours into the room."]

CHAPTER XII

For some time Mr. Wilks stood gazing at this unexpected apparition and trying to collect his scattered senses. Its face was pale and flabby, while its glassy eyes, set in rims of red eyelids, were beginning to express unmistakable signs of suspicion and wrath. The shock was so sudden that the steward could not even think coherently. Was the captain upstairs? And if so, what was his condition? Where was Nathan Smith? And where was the five pounds?

A voice, a husky and discordant voice, broke in upon his meditations; Jack Nugent was also curious.

"What does all this mean?" he demanded, angrily. "How did I get here?"

"You--you came downstairs," stammered Mr. Wilks, still racking his brains in the vain effort to discover how matters stood.

Mr. Nugent was about to speak, but, thinking better of it, turned and blundered into the kitchen. Sounds of splashing and puffing ensued, and the steward going to the door saw him with his head under the tap. He followed him in and at the right time handed him a towel. Despite the disordered appearance of his hair the improvement in Mr. Nugent's condition was so manifest that the steward, hoping for similar results, turned the tap on again and followed his example.

"Your head wants cooling, I should think," said the young man, returning him the towel. "What's it all about?"

Mr. Wilks hesitated; a bright thought occurred to him, and murmuring something about a dry towel he sped up the narrow stairs to his bedroom. The captain was not there. He pushed open the small lattice window and peered out into the alley; no sign of either the captain or the ingenious Mr. Nathan Smith. With a heavy heart he descended the stairs again.

[Illustration: "He pushed open the small lattice window and peered out into the alley."]

"Now," said Mr. Nugent, who was sitting down with his hands in his pockets, "perhaps you'll be good enough to explain what all this means."

"You were 'ere last night," said Mr. Wilks, "you and the cap'n."

"I know that," said Nugent. "How is it I didn't go home? I didn't understand that it was an all-night invitation. Where is my father?"

The steward shook his head helplessly. "He was 'ere when I went out last night," he said, slowly. "When I came back the room was empty and I was told as 'e was upstairs in my bed."

"Told he was in your bed?" repeated the other. "Who told you?"

He pushed open the small lattice window and peered out into the alley.

Mr. Wilks caught his breath. "I mean I told myself 'e was in my bed," he stammered, "because when I came in I see these bed-clothes on the floor, an' I thought as the cap'n 'ad put them there for me and taken my bed 'imself."

Mr. Nugent regarded the litter of bed-clothes as though hoping that they would throw a little light on the affair, and then shot a puzzled glance at Mr. Wilks.

"Why should you think my father wanted your bed?" he inquired.

"I don't know," was the reply. "I thought p'r'aps 'e'd maybe taken a little more than 'e ought to have taken. But it's all a myst'ry to me. I'm more astonished than wot you are."

"Well, I can't make head or tail of it," said Nugent, rising and pacing the room. "I came here to meet my father. So far as I remember I had

one drink of whisky--your whisky--and then I woke up in your bedroom with a splitting headache and a tongue like a piece of leather. Can you account for it?"

Mr. Wilks shook his head again. "I wasn't here," he said, plucking up courage. "Why not go an' see your father? Seems to me 'e is the one that would know most about it."

Mr. Nugent stood for a minute considering, and then raising the latch of the door opened it slowly and inhaled the cold morning air. A subtle and delicate aroma of coffee and herrings which had escaped from neighbouring breakfast-tables invaded the room and reminded him of an appetite. He turned to go, but had barely quitted the step before he saw Mrs. Kingdom and his sister enter the alley.

Mr. Wilks saw them too, and, turning if anything a shade paler, supported himself by the door-pest. Kate Nugent quickened her pace as she saw them, and, after a surprised greeting to her brother, breathlessly informed him that the captain was missing.

"Hasn't been home all night," panted Mrs. Kingdom, joining them. "I don't know what to think."

They formed an excited little group round the steward's door, and Mr. Wilks, with an instinctive feeling that the matter was one to be discussed in private, led the way indoors. He began to apologize for the disordered condition of the room, but Jack Nugent, interrupting him brusquely, began to relate his own adventures of the past few hours.

Mrs. Kingdom listened to the narrative with unexpected calmness. She knew the cause of her nephew's discomfiture. It was the glass of whisky acting on a system unaccustomed to alcohol, and she gave a vivid and moving account of the effects of a stiff glass of hot rum which she had once taken for a cold. It was quite clear to her that the captain had put his son to bed; the thing to discover now was where he had put himself.

"Sam knows something about it," said her nephew, darkly; "there's something wrong."

"I know no more than a babe unborn," declared Mr. Wilks. "The last I see of the cap'n 'e was a-sitting at this table opposite you."

"Sam wouldn't hurt a fly," said Miss Nugent, with a kind glance at her favourite.

"Well, where is the governor, then?" inquired her brother. "Why didn't he go home last night? He has never stayed out before."

"Yes, he has," said Mrs. Kingdom, folding her hands in her lap. "When you were children. He came home at half-past eleven next morning, and when I asked him where he'd been he nearly bit my head off. I'd been walking the floor all night, and I shall never forget his remarks when he opened the door to the police, who'd come to say they couldn't find him. Never."

A ghostly grin flitted across the features of Mr. Wilks, but he passed the back of his hand across his mouth and became serious again as he thought of his position. He was almost dancing with anxiety to get away to Mr. Nathan Smith and ask for an explanation of the proceedings of the night before.

"I'll go and have a look round for the cap'n," he said, eagerly; "he can't be far."

"I'll come with you," said Nugent. "I should like to see him too. There are one or two little things that want explaining. You take aunt home, Kate, and I'll follow on as soon as there is any news."

As he spoke the door opened a little way and a head appeared, only to be instantly withdrawn at the sight of so many people. Mr. Wilks stepped forward hastily, and throwing the door wide open revealed the interesting features of Mr. Nathan Smith.

"How do you do, Mr. Wilks?" said that gentleman, softly. "I just walked round to see whether you was in. I've got a message for you. I didn't know you'd got company."

He stepped into the room and, tapping the steward on the chest with a confidential finger, backed him into a corner, and having got him there gave an expressive wink with one eye and gazed into space with the other.

[Illustration: "Tapping the steward on the chest with a confidential finger, he backed him into a corner."]

"I thought you'd be alone," he said, looking round, "but p'r'aps it's just as well as it is. They've got to know, so they may as well know now as later on."

"Know what?" inquired Jack Nugent, abruptly. "What are you making that face for, Sam?"

Mr. Wilks mumbled something about a decayed tooth, and to give colour to the statement continued a series of contortions which made his face ache.

"You should take something for that tooth," said the boarding-master, with great solicitude. "Wot do you say to a glass o' whisky?"

He motioned to the fatal bottle, which still stood on the table; the steward caught his breath, and then, rising to the occasion, said that he had already had a couple of glasses, and they had done no good.

"What's your message?" inquired Jack Nugent, impatiently.

"I'm just going to tell you," said Mr. Smith. "I was out early this morning, strolling down by the harbour to get a little appetite for breakfast, when who should I see coming along, looking as though 'e 'ad just come from a funeral, but Cap'n Nugent! I was going to pass 'im, but he stopped me and asked me to take a message from 'im to 'is old and faithful steward, Mr. Wilks."

"Why, has he gone away?" exclaimed Mrs. Kingdom.

"His old and faithful steward," repeated Mr. Smith, motioning her to silence. "'Tell 'im,' he says, 'that I am heartily ashamed of myself for wot took place last night--and him, too. Tell 'im that, after my father's 'art proved too much for me, I walked the streets all night, and now I can't face my injured son and family yet awhile, and I'm off to London till it has blown over.'"

"But what's it all about?" demanded Nugent. "Why don't you get to the point?"

"So far as I could make out," replied Mr. Smith, with the studious care of one who desires to give exact information, "Cap'n Nugent and Mr. Wilks 'ad a little plan for giving you a sea blow."

"Me?" interrupted the unfortunate steward. "Now, look 'ere, Nathan Smith----

"Them was the cap'n's words," said the boarding-master, giving him a glance of great significance; "are you going to take away or add to wot the cap'n says?"

Mr. Wilks collapsed, and avoiding the indignant eyes of the Nugent family tried to think out his position.

"It seems from wot the cap'n told me," continued Mr. Smith, "that there was some objection to your marrying old--Mr. Kybird's gal, so 'e and Mr. Wilks, after putting their 'eads together, decided to get you 'ere and after giving you a little whisky that Mr. Wilks knows the trick of--"

"Me?" interrupted the unfortunate steward, again.

"Them was the cap'n's words," said Mr. Smith, coldly. "After you'd 'ad it they was going to stow you away in the Seabird, which sailed this morning. However, when the cap'n see you overcome, his 'art melted, and instead o' putting you aboard the whaler he took your feet and Mr. Wilks your 'ead, and after a great deal o' trouble got you upstairs and put you to bed."

"You miserable scoundrel," said the astonished Mr. Nugent, addressing the shrinking steward; "you infernal old reprobate--you--you--I didn't think you'd got it in you."

"So far as I could make out," said Mr. Smith, kindly, "Mr. Wilks was only obeying orders. It was the cap'n's plan, and Mr. Wilks was aboard ship with 'im for a very long time. O' course, he oughtn't to ha' done it, but the cap'n's a masterful man, an' I can quite understand Mr. Wilks givin' way; I dessay I should myself if I'd been in 'is place--he's all 'art, is Mr. Wilks--no 'ead."

"It's a good job for you you're an old man, Sam," said Mr. Nugent.

"I can hardly believe it of you, Sam," said Miss Nugent. "I can hardly think you could have been so deceitful. Why, we've trusted you all our lives."

The unfortunate steward quailed beneath the severity of her glance. Even if he gave a full account of the affair it would not make his position better. It was he who had made all the arrangements with Mr. Smith, and after an indignant glance at that gentleman he lowered his gaze and remained silent.

"It is rather odd that my father should take you into his confidence," said Miss Nugent, turning to the boarding-master.

"Just wot I thought, miss," said the complaisant Mr. Smith; "but I s'pose there was nobody else, and he wanted 'is message to go for fear you should get worrying the police about 'im or something. He wants it kep' quiet, and 'is last words to me as 'e left me was, 'If this affair gets known I shall never come back. Tell 'em to keep it quiet.'"

"I don't think anybody will want to go bragging about it," said Jack Nugent, rising, "unless it is Sam Wilks. Come along, Kate."

Miss Nugent followed him obediently, only pausing at the door to give a last glance of mingled surprise and reproach at Mr. Wilks. Then they were outside and the door closed behind them.

"Well, that's all right," said Mr. Smith, easily.

"All right!" vociferated the steward. "Wot did you put it all on to me for? Why didn't you tell 'em your part in it?"

"Wouldn't ha' done any good," said Mr. Smith; "wouldn't ha' done you any good. Besides, I did just wot the cap'n told me."

"When's he coming back?" inquired the steward.

Mr. Smith shook his head. "Couldn't say," he returned. "He couldn't say 'imself. Between you an' me, I expect 'e's gone up to have a reg'lar fair spree."

"Why did you tell me last night he was up-stairs?" inquired the other.

"Cap'n's orders," repeated Mr. Smith, with relish. "Ask 'im, not me. As a matter o' fact, he spent the night at my place and went off this morning."

"An' wot about the five pounds?" inquired Mr. Wilks, spitefully. "You ain't earned it."

"I know I ain't," said Mr. Smith, mournfully. "That's wot's worrying me. It's like a gnawing pain in my side. D'you think it's conscience biting of me? I never felt it before. Or d'ye think it's sorrow to think that I've done the whole job too cheap. You think it out and let me know later on. So long."

He waved his hand cheerily to the steward and departed. Mr. Wilks threw himself into a chair and, ignoring the cold and the general air of desolation of his best room, gave way to a fit of melancholy which would have made Mr. Edward Silk green with envy.

CHAPTER XIII

Days passed, but no word came from the missing captain, and only the determined opposition of Kate Nugent kept her aunt from advertising in the "Agony" columns of the London Press. Miss Nugent was quite as desirous of secrecy in the affair as her father, and it was a source of great annoyance to her when, in some mysterious manner, it leaked out. In a very short time the news was common property, and Mr. Wilks, appearing to his neighbours in an entirely new character, was besieged for information.

His own friends were the most tiresome, their open admiration of his lawlessness and their readiness to trace other mysterious disappearances to his agency being particularly galling to a man whose respectability formed his most cherished possession. Other people regarded the affair as a joke, and he sat gazing round-eyed one evening at the Two Schooners at the insensible figures of three men who had each had a modest

half-pint at his expense. It was a pretty conceit and well played, but the steward, owing to the frenzied efforts of one of the sleeper whom he had awakened with a quart pot, did not stay to admire it. He finished up the evening at the Chequers, and after getting wet through on the way home fell asleep in his wet clothes before the dying fire.

[Illustration: "He finished up the evening at the Chequers."]

He awoke with a bad cold and pains in the limbs. A headache was not unexpected, but the other symptoms were. With trembling hands he managed to light a fire and prepare a breakfast, which he left untouched. This last symptom was the most alarming of all, and going to the door he bribed a small boy with a penny to go for Dr. Murchison, and sat cowering over the fire until he came.

"Well, you've got a bad cold," said the doctor, after examining him. "You'd better get to bed for the present. You'll be safe there."

"Is it dangerous?" faltered the steward.

"And keep yourself warm," said the doctor, who was not in the habit of taking his patients into his confidence. "I'll send round some medicine."

"I should like Miss Nugent to know I'm bad," said Mr. Wilks, in a weak voice.

"She knows that," replied Murchison. "She was telling me about you the other day."

He put his hand up to his neat black moustache to hide a smile, and met the steward's indignant gaze without flinching.

"I mean ill," said the latter, sharply.

"Oh, yes," said the other. "Well, you get to bed now. Good morning."

He took up his hat and stick and departed. Mr. Wilks sat for a little while over the fire, and then, rising, hobbled slowly upstairs to bed and forgot his troubles in sleep.

He slept until the afternoon, and then, raising himself in bed, listened to the sounds of stealthy sweeping in the room below. Chairs were being moved about, and the tinkle of ornaments on the mantelpiece announced that dusting operations were in progress. He lay down again with a satisfied smile; it was like a tale in a story-book: the faithful old servant and his master's daughter. He closed his eyes as he heard her coming upstairs.

"Ah, pore dear," said a voice.

Mr. Wilks opened his eyes sharply and beheld the meagre figure of Mrs. Silk. In one hand she held a medicine-bottle and a glass and in the other paper and firewood.

[Illustration: "The meagre figure of Mrs. Silk."]

"I only 'eard of it half an hour ago," she said, reproachfully. "I saw the doctor's boy, and I left my work and came over at once. Why didn't you let me know?"

Mr. Wilks muttered that he didn't know, and lay crossly regarding his attentive neighbour as she knelt down and daintily lit the fire. This task finished, she proceeded to make the room tidy, and then set about making beef-tea in a little saucepan.

"You lay still and get well," she remarked, with tender playfulness. "That's all you've got to do. Me and Teddy'll look after you."

"I couldn't think of troubling you," said the steward, earnestly.

"It's no trouble," was the reply. "You don't think I'd leave you here alone helpless, do you?"

"I was going to send for old Mrs. Jackson if I didn't get well to-day," said Mr. Wilks.

Mrs. Silk shook her head at him, and, after punching up his pillow, took an easy chair by the fire and sat there musing. Mr. Edward Silk came in to tea, and, after remarking that Mr. Wilks was very flushed and had got a nasty look about the eyes and a cough which he didn't like, fell to discoursing on death-beds.

"Good nursing is the principal thing," said his mother. "I nursed my pore dear 'usband all through his last illness. He couldn't bear me to be out of the room. I nursed my mother right up to the last, and your pore Aunt Jane went off in my arms."

Mr. Wilks raised himself on his elbow and his eyes shone feverishly in the lamplight. "I think I'll get a 'ospital nurse to-morrow," he said, decidedly.

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Silk. "It's no trouble to me at all. I like nursing; always did."

Mr. Wilks lay back again and, closing his eyes, determined to ask the doctor to provide a duly qualified nurse on the morrow. To his disappointment, however, the doctor failed to come, and although he felt much better Mrs. Silk sternly negatived a desire on his part to get up.

"Not till the doctor's been," she said, firmly. "I couldn't think of it."

"I don't believe there's anything the matter with me now," he declared.

"'Ow odd--'ow very odd that you should say that!" said Mrs. Silk, clasping her hands.

"Odd!" repeated the steward, somewhat crustily. "How do you mean--odd?"

"They was the very last words my Uncle Benjamin ever uttered in this life," said Mrs. Silk, with dramatic impressiveness.

The steward was silent, then, with the ominous precedent of Uncle Benjamin before him, he began to talk until scores of words stood between himself and a similar ending.

"Teddy asked to be remembered to you as 'e went off this morning," said Mrs. Silk, pausing in her labours at the grate.

"I'm much obliged," muttered the invalid.

"He didn't 'ave time to come in," pursued the widow. "You can 'ardly believe what a lot 'e thinks of you, Mr. Wilks. The last words he said to me was, 'Let me know at once if there's any change.'"

Mr. Wilks distinctly felt a cold, clammy sensation down his spine and little quivering thrills ran up and down his legs. He glared indignantly at the back of the industrious Mrs. Silk.

"Teddy's very fond of you," continued the unconscious woman. "I s'pose it's not 'aving a father, but he seems to me to think more of you than any-body else in the wide, wide world. I get quite jealous sometimes. Only the other day I said to 'im, joking like, 'Well, you'd better go and live with 'im if you're so fond of 'im,' I said."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Mr. Wilks, uneasily.

"You'll never guess what 'e said then," said Mrs. Silk dropping her dustpan and brush and gazing at the hearth.

"Said 'e couldn't leave you, I s'pose," guessed the steward, gruffly.

"Well, now," exclaimed Mrs. Silk, clapping her hands, "if you 'aven't nearly guessed it. Well, there! I never did! I wouldn't 'ave told you for anything if you 'adn't said that. The exact words what 'e did say was, 'Not without you, mother.'"

Mr. Wilks closed his eyes with a snap and his heart turned to water. He held his breath and ran-sacked his brain in vain for a reply which should ignore the inner meaning of the fatal words. Something careless and jocular he wanted, combined with a voice which should be perfectly under control. Failing these things, he kept his eyes closed, and, very wide-awake indeed, feigned sleep. He slept straight away from eleven o'clock in the morning until Edward Silk came in at seven o'clock in the evening.

"I feel like a new man," he said, rubbing his eyes and yawning.

"I don't see no change in your appearance," said the comforting youth.

"E's much better," declared his mother. "That's what comes o' good nursing; some nurses would 'ave woke 'im up to take food, but I just let 'im sleep on. People don't feel hunger while they're asleep."

She busied herself over the preparation of a basin of arrowroot, and the steward, despite his distaste for this dish, devoured it in a twinkling. Beef-tea and a glass of milk in addition failed to take more than the edge off his appetite.

"We shall pull 'im through," said Mrs. Silk, smiling, as she put down the empty glass. "In a fortnight he'll be on 'is feet."

It is a matter of history that Mr. Wilks was on his feet at five o'clock the next morning, and not only on his feet but dressed and ready for a journey after such a breakfast as he had not made for many a day. The discourtesy involved in the disregard of the doctor's instructions did not trouble him, and he smirked with some satisfaction as he noiselessly closed his door behind him and looked at the drawn blinds opposite. The stars were paling as he quitted the alley and made his way to the railway station. A note on his tumbled pillow, after thanking Mrs. Silk for her care of him, informed her that he was quite well and had gone to London in search of the missing captain.

Hardy, who had heard from Edward Silk of the steward's indisposition and had been intending to pay him a visit, learnt of his departure later on in the morning, and, being ignorant of the particulars, discoursed somewhat eloquently to his partner on the old man's devotion.

"H'm, may be," said Swann, taking off his glasses and looking at him. "But you don't think Captain Nugent is in London, do you?"

"Why not?" inquired Hardy, somewhat startled. "If what Wilks told you is true, Nathan Smith knows," said the other. "I'll ask him."

"You don't expect to get the truth out of him, do you?" inquired Hardy, superciliously.

"I do," said his partner, serenely; "and when I've got it I shall go and tell them at Equator Lodge. It will be doing those two poor ladies a service to let them know what has really happened to the captain."

"I'll walk round to Nathan Smith's with you," said Hardy. "I should like to hear what the fellow has to say."

"No, I'll go alone," said his partner; "Smith's a very shy man--painfully shy. I've run across him once or twice before. He's almost as bashful and retiring as you are."

Hardy grunted. "If the captain isn't in London, where is he?" he inquired.

The other shook his head. "I've got an idea," he replied, "but I want to make sure. Kybird and Smith are old friends, as Nugent might have known, only he was always too high and mighty to take any interest in his inferiors. There's something for you to go on."

He bent over his desk again and worked steadily until one o'clock--his hour for lunching. Then he put on his hat and coat, and after a comfortable meal sallied out in search of Mr. Smith.

[Illustration: "In search of Mr. Smith."]

The boarding-house, an old and dilapidated building, was in a bystreet convenient to the harbour. The front door stood open, and a couple of seamen lounging on the broken steps made way for him civilly as he entered and rapped on the bare boards with his stick. Mr. Smith, clattering down the stairs in response, had some difficulty in concealing his surprise at the visit, but entered genially into a conversation about the weather, a subject in which he was much interested. When the ship-broker began to discuss the object of his visit he led him to a small sitting-room at the back of the house and repeated the information he had given to Mr. Wilks.

"That's all there is to tell," he concluded, artlessly; "the cap'n was that ashamed of himself, he's laying low for a bit. We all make mistakes sometimes; I do myself."

"I am much obliged to you," said Mr. Swann, gratefully.

"You're quite welcome, sir," said the boarding-master.

"And now," said the visitor, musingly--"now for the police."

"Police!" repeated Mr. Smith, almost hastily. "What for?"

"Why, to find the captain," said Mr. Swann, in a surprised voice.

Mr. Smith shook his head. "You'll offend the cap'n bitter if you go to the police about 'im, sir," he declared. "His last words to me was, 'Smith, 'ave this kept quiet.'"

"It'll be a little job for the police," urged the shipbroker. "They don't have much to do down here; they'll be as pleased as possible."

"They'll worry your life out of you, sir," said the other. "You don't know what they are."

"I like a little excitement," returned Mr. Swann. "I don't suppose they'll trouble me much, but they'll turn your place topsy-turvy, I expect. Still, that can't be helped. You know what fools the police are; they'll think you've murdered the captain and hidden his body under the boards. They'll have all the floors up. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Aving floors up don't seem to me to be so amusing as wot it does to you," remarked Mr. Smith, coldly.

"They may find all sorts of treasure for you," continued his visitor. "It's a very old house, Smith, and there may be bags of guineas hidden away under the flooring. You may be able to retire."

"You're a gentleman as is fond of his joke, Mr. Swann," returned the boarding-master, lugubriously. "I wish I'd got that 'appy way of looking at things you 'ave."

"I'm not joking, Smith," said the other, quietly.

Mr. Smith pondered and, stealing a side-glance at him, stood scraping his foot along the floor.

"There ain't nothing much to tell," he grumbled, "and, mind, the worst favour you could do to the cap'n would be to put it about how he was done. He's gone for a little trip instead of 'is son, that's all."

"Little trip!" repeated the other; "you call a whaling cruise a little trip?"

"No, no, sir," said Mr. Smith, in a shocked voice, "I ain't so bad as that; I've got some 'art, I hope. He's just gone for a little trip with 'is old pal Hardy on the _Conqueror_. Kybird's idea it was."

"Don't you know it's punishable?" demanded the shipbroker, recovering.

Mr. Smith shook his head and became serious. "The cap'n fell into 'is own trap," he said, slowly. "There's no lor for 'im! He'd only get laughed at. The idea of trying to get me to put little Amelia Kybird's young man away. Why, I was 'er god-father."

Mr. Swann stared at him, and then with a friendly "good morning" departed. Half-way along the passage he stopped, and retracing his steps produced his cigar-case and offered the astonished boarding-master a cigar.

"I s'pose," said that gentleman as he watched the other's retreating figure and dubiously smelt the cigar; "I s'pose it's all right; but he's

a larky sort, and I 'ave heard of 'em exploding. I'll give it to Kybird, in case."

[Illustration: "I 'ave heard of 'em exploding."]

To Mr. Smith's great surprise his visitor sat down suddenly and began to laugh. Tears of honest mirth suffused his eyes and dimmed his glasses. Mr. Smith, regarding him with an air of kindly interest, began to laugh to keep him company.

CHAPTER XIV

Captain Nugent awoke the morning after his attempt to crimp his son with a bad headache. Not an ordinary headache, to disappear with a little cold water and fresh air; but a splitting, racking affair, which made him feel all head and dulness. Weights pressed upon his eye-lids and the back of his head seemed glued to his pillow.

He groaned faintly and, raising himself upon his elbow, opened his eyes and sat up with a sharp exclamation. His bed was higher from the floor than usual and, moreover, the floor was different. In the dim light he distinctly saw a ship's fore-castle, untidy bunks with frouzy bedclothes, and shiny oil-skins hanging from the bulkhead.

For a few moments he stared about in mystification; he was certainly ill, and no doubt the fore-castle was an hallucination. It was a strange symptom, and the odd part of it was that everything was so distinct. Even the smell. He stared harder, in the hope that his surroundings would give place to the usual ones, and, leaning a little bit more on his elbow, nearly rolled out of the bunk. Resolved to probe this mystery to the bottom he lowered himself to the floor and felt distinctly the motion of a ship at sea.

There was no doubt about it. He staggered to the door and, holding by the side, looked on to the deck. The steamer was rolling in a fresh sea and a sweet strong wind blew refreshingly into his face. Funnels, bridge, and masts swung with a rhythmical motion; loose gear rattled, and every now and then a distant tinkle sounded faintly from the steward's pantry.

He stood bewildered, trying to piece together the events of the preceding night, and to try and understand by what miracle he was back on board his old ship the Conqueror. There was no doubt as to her identity. He knew every inch of her, and any further confirmation that might be required was fully supplied by the appearance of the long, lean figure of Captain Hardy on the bridge.

Captain Nugent took his breath sharply and began to realize the situation. He stepped to the side and looked over; the harbour was only a little way astern, and Sunwich itself, looking cold and cheerless beyond the dirty, tumbling seas, little more than a mile distant.

At the sight his spirits revived, and with a hoarse cry he ran shouting towards the bridge. Captain Hardy turned sharply at the noise, and recognizing the intruder stood peering down at him in undisguised amazement.

[Illustration: "He stepped to the side and looked over."]

"Put back," cried Nugent, waving up at him. "Put back."

"What on earth are you doing on my ship?" inquired the astonished Hardy.

"Put me ashore," cried Nugent, imperiously; "don't waste time talking. D'ye hear? Put me ashore."

The amazement died out of Hardy's face and gave way to an expression of anger. For a time he regarded the red and threatening visage of Captain Nugent in silence, then he turned to the second officer.

"This man is not one of the crew, Mr. Prowle?" he said, in a puzzled voice.

"No, sir," said Mr. Prowle.

"How did he get aboard here?"

Captain Nugent answered the question himself. "I was crimped by you and your drunken bullies," he said, sternly.

"How did this man get aboard here?" repeated Captain Hardy, ignoring him.

"He must have concealed 'imself somewhere, sir," said the mate; "this is the first I've seen of him."

"A stowaway?" said the captain, bending his brows. "He must have got some of the crew to hide him aboard. You'd better make a clean breast of it, my lad. Who are your confederates?"

Captain Nugent shook with fury. The second mate had turned away, with his hand over his mouth and a suspicious hunching of his shoulders, while the steward, who had been standing by, beat a hasty retreat and collapsed behind the chart-room.

"If you don't put me ashore," said Nugent, restraining his passion by a strong effort, "I'll take proceedings against you for crimping me, the moment I reach port. Get a boat out and put me aboard that smack."

He pointed as he spoke to a smack which was just on their beam, making slowly for the harbour.

"When you've done issuing orders," said the captain, in an indifferent voice, "perhaps you'll explain what you are doing aboard my crag."

Captain Nugent gazed at the stern of the fast-receding smack; Sunwich was getting dim in the distance and there was no other sail near. He began to realize that he was in for a long voyage.

"I awoke this morning and found myself in a bunk in vow fo'c's'le," he said, regarding Hardy steadily. "However I got there is probably best known to yourself. I hold you responsible for the affair."

"Look here my lad," said Captain Hardy, in patronizing tones, "I don't know how you got aboard my ship and I don't care. I am willing to believe that it was not intentional on your part, but either the outcome of a drunken freak or else a means of escaping from some scrape you have got into ashore. That being so, I shall take a merciful view of it, and if you behave yourself and make yourself useful you will not hear anything more of it. He has something the look of a seafaring man, Mr.

Prowle. See what you can make of him."

"Come along with me, my lad," said the grinning Mr. Prowle, tapping him on the shoulder.

The captain turned with a snarl, and, clenching his huge, horny fist, let drive full in the other's face and knocked him off his feet.

"Take that man for'ard," cried Captain Hardy, sharply. "Take him for'ard."

Half-a-dozen willing men sprang forward. Captain Nugent's views concerning sailormen were well known in Sunwich, and two of the men present had served under him. He went forward, the centre of an attentive and rotating circle, and, sadly out of breath, was bestowed in the forecastle and urged to listen to reason.

For the remainder of the morning he made no sign. The land was almost out of sight, and he sat down quietly to consider his course of action for the next few weeks. Dinner-time found him still engrossed in thought, and the way in which he received an intimation from a good-natured seaman that his dinner was getting cold showed that his spirits were still unquelled.

By the time afternoon came he was faint with hunger, and, having determined upon his course of action, he sent a fairly polite message to Captain Hardy and asked for an interview.

The captain, who was resting from his labours in the chart-room, received him with the same air of cold severity which had so endeared Captain Nugent himself to his subordinates.

"You have come to explain your extraordinary behaviour of this morning, I suppose?" he said, curtly.

"I have come to secure a berth aft," said Captain Nugent. "I will pay a small deposit now, and you will, of course, have the balance as soon as we get back. This is without prejudice to any action I may bring against you later on."

"Oh, indeed," said the other, raising his eyebrows. "We don't take passengers."

"I am here against my will," said Captain Nugent, "and I demand the treatment due to my position."

"If I had treated you properly," said Captain Hardy, "I should have put you in irons for knocking down my second officer. I know nothing about you or your position. You're a stowaway, and you must do the best you can in the circumstances."

"Are you going to give me a cabin?" demanded the other, menacingly.

"Certainly not," said Captain Hardy. "I have been making inquiries, and I find that you have only yourself to thank for the position in which you find yourself. I am sorry to be harsh with you."

"Harsh?" repeated the other, hardly able to believe his ears. "You--harsh to me?"

"But it is for your own good," pursued Captain Hardy; "it is no pleasure

to me to punish you. I shall keep an eye on you while you're aboard, and if I see that your conduct is improving you will find that I am not a hard man to get on with."

Captain Nugent stared at him with his lips parted. Three times he essayed to speak and failed; then he turned sharply and, gaining the open air, stood for some time trying to regain his composure before going forward again. The first mate, who was on the bridge, regarded him curiously, and then, with an insufferable air of authority, ordered him away.

The captain obeyed mechanically and, turning a deaf ear to the inquiries of the men, prepared to make the best of an intolerable situation, and began to cleanse his bunk. First of all he took out the bedding and shook it thoroughly, and then, procuring soap and a bucket of water, began to scrub with a will. Hostile comments followed the action.

"We ain't clean enough for 'im," said one voice.

"Partikler old party, ain't he, Bill?" said another.

"You leave 'im alone," said the man addressed, surveying the captain's efforts with a smile of approval. "You keep on, Nugent, don't you mind 'im. There's a little bit there you ain't done."

[Illustration: "You keep on, Nugent, don't you mind 'im."]

"Keep your head out of the way, unless you want it knocked off," said the incensed captain.

"Ho!" said the aggrieved Bill. "Ho, indeed! D'ye 'ear that, mates? A man musn't look at 'is own bunk now."

The captain turned as though he had been stung. "This is my bunk," he said, sharply.

"Ho, is it?" said Bill. "Beggin' of your pardon, an' apologizing for a-contradictin' of you, but it's mine. You haven't got no bunk."

"I slept in it last night," said the captain, conclusively.

"I know you did," said Bill, "but that was all my kind-'artedness."

"And 'arf a quid, Bill," a voice reminded him.

"And 'arf a quid," assented Bill, graciously, "and I'm very much obliged to you, mate, for the careful and tidy way in which you've cleaned up arter your-self."

The captain eyed him. Many years of command at sea had given him a fine manner, and force of habit was for a moment almost too much for Bill and his friends. But only for a moment.

"I'm going to keep this bunk," said the captain, deliberately.

"No, you ain't, mate," said Bill, shaking his head, "don't you believe it. You're nobody down here; not even a ordinary seaman. I'm afraid you'll 'ave to clean a place for yourself on the carpet. There's a nice corner over there."

"When I get back," said the furious captain, "some of you will go to gaol

for last night's work."

"Don't be hard on us," said a mocking voice, "we did our best. It ain't our fault that you look so ridikerlously young, that we took you for your own son."

"And you was in that state that you couldn't contradict us," said another man.

"If it is your bunk," said the captain, sternly, "I suppose you have a right to it. But perhaps you'll sell it to me? How much?"

"Now you're talking bisness," said the highly gratified Bill, turning with a threatening gesture upon a speculator opposite. "Wot do you say to a couple o' pounds?"

The captain nodded.

"Couple o' pounds, money down," said Bill, holding out his hand.

The captain examined the contents of his pocket, and after considerable friction bought the bunk for a pound cash and an I O U for the balance.

A more humane man would have shown a little concern as to his benefactor's sleeping-place; but the captain never gave the matter a thought. In fact, it was not until three days later that he discovered there was a spare bunk in the forecastle, and that the unscrupulous seaman was occupying it.

It was only one of many annoyances, but the captain realizing his impotence made no sign. From certain remarks let fall in his hearing he had no difficulty in connecting Mr. Kybird with his discomfiture and, of his own desire, he freely included the unfortunate Mr. Wilks.

He passed his time in devising schemes of vengeance, and when Captain Hardy, relenting, offered him a cabin aft, he sent back such a message of refusal that the steward spent half an hour preparing a paraphrase. The offer was not repeated, and the captain, despite the strong representations of Bill and his friends, continued to eat the bread of idleness before the mast.

CHAPTER XV

Mr. Adolphus Swann spent a very agreeable afternoon after his interview with Nathan Smith in refusing to satisfy what he termed the idle curiosity of his partner. The secret of Captain Nugent's whereabouts, he declared, was not to be told to everybody, but was to be confided by a man of insinuating address and appearance--here he looked at himself in a hand-glass--to Miss Nugent. To be broken to her by a man with no ulterior motives for his visit; a man in the prime of life, but not too old for a little tender sympathy.

"I had hoped to have gone this afternoon," he said, with a glance at the clock; "but I'm afraid I can't get away. Have you got much to do, Hardy?"

"No," said his partner, briskly. "I've finished."

"Then perhaps you wouldn't mind doing my work for me, so that I can go?" said Mr. Swann, mildly.

Hardy played with his pen. The senior partner had been amusing himself at his expense for some time, and in the hope of a favour at his hands he had endured it with unusual patience.

"Four o'clock," murmured the senior partner; "hadn't you better see about making yourself presentable, Hardy?"

[Illustration: "Hadn't you better see about making yourself presentable, Hardy?"]

"Thanks," said the other, with alacrity, as he took off his coat and crossed over to the little washstand. In five minutes he had finished his toilet and, giving his partner a little friendly pat on the shoulder, locked up his desk.

"Well?" he said, at last.

"Well?" repeated Mr. Swann, with a little surprise.

"What am I to tell them?" inquired Hardy, struggling to keep his temper.

"Tell them?" repeated the innocent Swann. "Lor' bless my soul, how you do jump at conclusions, Hardy. I only asked you to tidy yourself for my sake. I have an artistic eye. I thought you had done it to please me."

"When you're tired of this nonsense," said the indignant Hardy, "I shall be glad."

Mr. Swann looked him over carefully and, coming to the conclusion that his patience was exhausted, told him the result of his inquiries. His immediate reward was the utter incredulity of Mr. Hardy, together with some pungent criticisms of his veracity. When the young man did realize at last that he was speaking the truth he fell to wondering blankly what was happening aboard the Conqueror.

"Never mind about that," said the older man. "For a few weeks you have got a clear field. It is quite a bond between you: both your fathers on the same ship. But whatever you do, don't remind her of the fate of the Kilkenny cats. Draw a fancy picture of the two fathers sitting with their arms about each other's waists and wondering whether their children----"

Hardy left hurriedly, in fear that his indignation at such frivolity should overcome his gratitude, and he regretted as he walked briskly along that the diffidence peculiar to young men in his circumstances had prevented him from acquainting his father with the state of his feelings towards Kate Nugent.

The idea of taking advantage of the captain's enforced absence had occurred to other people besides Mr. James Hardy. Dr. Murchison, who had found the captain, despite his bias in his favour, a particularly tiresome third, was taking the fullest advantage of it; and Mrs. Kybird had also judged it an admirable opportunity for paying a first call. Mr. Kybird, who had not taken her into his confidence in the affair, protested in vain; the lady was determined, and, moreover, had the warm support of her daughter.

"I know what I'm doing, Dan'l," she said to her husband.

Mr. Kybird doubted it, but held his peace; and the objections of Jack Nugent, who found to his dismay that he was to be of the party, were deemed too trivial to be worthy of serious consideration.

They started shortly after Jem Hardy had left his office, despite the fact that Mrs. Kybird, who was troubled with asthma, was suffering untold agonies in a black satin dress which had been originally made for a much smaller woman, and had come into her husband's hands in the way of business. It got into hers in what the defrauded Mr. Kybird considered an extremely unbusinesslike manner, and it was not without a certain amount of satisfaction that he regarded her discomfiture as the party sallied out.

[Illustration: "It was not without a certain amount of satisfaction that he regarded her discomfiture."]

Mr. Nugent was not happy. Mrs. Kybird in the snug seclusion of the back parlour was one thing; Mrs. Kybird in black satin at its utmost tension and a circular hat set with sable ostrich plumes nodding in the breeze was another. He felt that the public eye was upon them and that it twinkled. His gaze wandered from mother to daughter.

"What are you staring at?" demanded Miss Kybird, pertly.

"I was thinking how well you are looking," was the reply.

Miss Kybird smiled. She had hoisted some daring colours, but she was of a bold type and carried them fairly well.

"If I 'ad the woman what made this dress 'ere," gasped Mrs. Kybird, as she stopped with her hand on her side, "I'd give her a bit o' my mind."

"I never saw you look so well in anything before, ma," said her daughter.

Mrs. Kybird smiled faintly and continued her pilgrimage. Jem Hardy coming up rapidly behind composed his amused features and stepped into the road to pass.

"Halloa, Hardy," said Nugent. "Going home?"

"I am calling on your sister," said Hardy, bowing.

"By Jove, so are we," said Nugent, relieved to find this friend in need.

"We'll go together. You know Mrs. Kybird and Miss Kybird? That is Mrs. Kybird."

Mrs. Kybird bade him "Go along, do," and acknowledged the introduction with as stately a bow as the black satin would permit, and before the dazed Jem quite knew how it all happened he was leading the way with Mrs. Kybird, while the young people, as she called them, followed behind.

"We ain't looking at you," she said, playfully, over her shoulder.

"And we're trying to shut our eyes to your goings on," retorted Nugent.

Mrs. Kybird stopped and, with a half-turn, play-fully reached for him with her umbrella. The exertion and the joke combined took the remnant of her breath away, and she stood still, panting.

"You had better take Hardy's arm, I think," said Nugent, with affected

solicitude.

"It's my breath," explained Mrs. Kybird, turning to the fuming young man by her side. "I can 'ardly get along for it--I'm much obliged to you, I'm sure."

Mr. Hardy, with a vain attempt to catch Jack Nugent's eye, resigned himself to his fate, and with his fair burden on his arm walked with painful slowness towards Equator Lodge. A ribald voice from the other side of the road, addressing his companion as "Mother Kybird," told her not to hug the man, and a small boy whom they met loudly asseverated his firm intention of going straight off to tell Mr. Kybird.

[Illustration: "Mr. Hardy resigned himself to his fate."]

By the time they reached the house Mr. Hardy entertained views on homicide which would have appeared impossible to him half an hour before. He flushed crimson as he saw the astonished face of Kate Nugent at the window, and, pausing at the gate to wait for the others, discovered that they had disappeared. A rooted dislike to scenes of any kind, together with a keen eye for the ludicrous, had prompted Jack Nugent to suggest a pleasant stroll to Amelia and put in an appearance later on.

"We won't wait for 'im," said Mrs. Kybird, with decision; "if I don't get a sit down soon I shall drop."

Still clinging to the reluctant Hardy she walked up the path; farther back in the darkness of the room the unfortunate young gentleman saw the faces of Dr. Murchison and Mrs. Kingdom.

"And 'ow are you, Bella?" inquired Mrs. Kybird with kindly condescension. "Is Mrs. Kingdom at 'ome?"

She pushed her way past the astonished Bella and, followed by Mr. Hardy, entered the room. Mrs. Kingdom, with a red spot on each cheek, rose to receive them.

"I ought to 'ave come before," said Mrs. Kybird, subsiding thankfully into a chair, "but I'm such a bad walker. I 'ope I see you well."

"We are very well, thank you," said Mrs. Kingdom, stiffly.

"That's right," said her visitor, cordially; "what a blessing 'ealth is. What should we do without it, I wonder?"

She leaned back in her chair and shook her head at the prospect. There was an awkward lull, and in the offended gaze of Miss Nugent Mr. Hardy saw only too plainly that he was held responsible for the appearance of the unwelcome visitor.

"I was coming to see you," he said, leaving his chair and taking one near her, "I met your brother coming along, and he introduced me to Mrs. Kybird and her daughter and suggested we should come together."

Miss Nugent received the information with a civil bow, and renewed her conversation with Dr. Murchison, whose face showed such a keen appreciation of the situation that Hardy had some difficulty in masking his feelings.

"They're a long time a-coming," said Mrs. Kybird, smiling archly; "but there, when young people are keeping company they forget everything and

everybody. They didn't trouble about me; if it 'adn't been for Mr. 'Ardy giving me 'is arm I should never 'ave got here."

There was a prolonged silence. Dr. Murchison gave a whimsical glance at Miss Nugent, and meeting no response in that lady's indignant eyes, stroked his moustache and awaited events.

"It looks as though your brother is not coming," said Hardy to Miss Nugent.

"He'll turn up by-and-by," interposed Mrs. Kybird, looking somewhat morosely at the company. "They don't notice 'ow the time flies, that's all."

"Time does go," murmured Mrs. Kingdom, with a glance at the clock.

Mrs. Kybird started. "Ah, and we notice it too, ma'am, at our age," she said, sweetly, as she settled herself in her chair and clasped her hands in her lap "I can't 'elp looking at you, my dear," she continued, looking over at Miss Nugent. "There's such a wonderful likeness between Jack and you. Don't you think so, ma'am?"

Mrs. Kingdom in a freezing voice said that she had not noticed it.

"Of course," said Mrs. Kybird, glancing at her from the corner of her eye, "Jack has 'ad to rough it, pore feller, and that's left its mark on 'im. I'm sure, when we took 'im in, he was quite done up, so to speak. He'd only got what 'e stood up in, and the only pair of socks he'd got to his feet was in such a state of 'oles that they had to be throwed away. I throwed 'em away myself."

"Dear me," said Mrs. Kingdom.

"He don't look like the same feller now," continued the amiable Mrs. Kybird; "good living and good clothes 'ave worked wonders in 'im. I'm sure if he'd been my own son I couldn't 'ave done more for 'im, and, as for Kybird, he's like a father to him."

"Dear me," said Mrs. Kingdom, again.

Mrs. Kybird looked at her. It was on the tip of her tongue to call her a poll parrot. She was a free-spoken woman as a rule, and it was terrible to have to sit still and waste all the good things she could have said to her in favour of unsatisfying pin-pricks. She sat smouldering.

"I s'pose you miss the capt'in very much?" she said, at last.

"Very much," was the reply.

"And I should think 'e misses you," retorted Mrs. Kybird, unable to restrain herself; "'e must miss your conversation and what I might call your liveliness."

Mrs. Kingdom turned and regarded her, and the red stole back to her cheeks again. She smoothed down her dress and her hands trembled. Both ladies were now regarding each other in a fashion which caused serious apprehension to the rest of the company.

"I am not a great talker, but I am very careful whom I converse with," said Mrs. Kingdom, in her most stately manner.

"I knew a lady like that once," said Mrs. Kybird; "leastways, she wasn't a lady," she added, meditatively.

Mrs. Kingdom fidgeted, and looked over piteously at her niece; Mrs. Kybird, with a satisfied sniff, sat bolt upright and meditated further assaults. There were at least a score of things she could have said about her adversary's cap alone: plain, straightforward remarks which would have torn it to shreds. The cap fascinated her, and her fingers itched as she gazed at it. In more congenial surroundings she might have snatched at it, but, being a woman of strong character, she suppressed her natural instincts, and confined herself to more polite methods of attack.

"Your nephew don't seem to be in no hurry," she remarked, at length; "but, there, direckly 'e gets along o' my daughter 'e forgits everything and everybody."

"I really don't think he is coming," said Hardy, moved to speech by the glances of Miss Nugent.

"I shall give him a little longer," said Mrs. Kybird. "I only came 'ere to please 'im, and to get 'ome alone is more than I can do."

Miss Nugent looked at Mr. Hardy, and her eyes were soft and expressive. As plainly as eyes could speak they asked him to take Mrs. Kybird home, lest worse things should happen.

"Would it be far out of your way?" she asked, in a low voice.

"Quite the opposite direction," returned Mr. Hardy, firmly.

"How I got 'ere I don't know," said Mrs. Kybird, addressing the room in general; "it's a wonder to me. Well, once is enough in a lifetime."

"Mr. Hardy," said Kate Nugent, again, in a low voice, "I should be so much obliged if you would take Mrs. Kybird away. She seems bent on quarrelling with my aunt. It is very awkward."

It was difficult to resist the entreaty, but Mr. Hardy had a very fair idea of the duration of Miss Nugent's gratitude; and, besides that, Murchison was only too plainly enjoying his discomfiture.

"She can get home alone all right," he whispered.

Miss Nugent drew herself up disdainfully; Dr. Murchison, looking scandalized at his brusqueness, hastened to the rescue.

"As a medical man," he said, with a considerable appearance of gravity, "I don't think that Mrs. Kybird ought to go home alone."

"Think not?" inquired Hardy, grimly.

"Certain of it," breathed the doctor.

"Well, why don't you take her?" retorted Hardy; "it's all on your way. I have some news for Miss Nugent."

Miss Nugent looked from one to the other, and mischievous lights appeared in her eyes as she gazed at the carefully groomed and fastidious Murchison. From them she looked to the other side of the room, where Mrs. Kybird was stolidly eyeing Mrs. Kingdom, who was trying in vain to

appear ignorant of the fact.

[Illustration: "The carefully groomed and fastidious Murchison."]

"Thank you very much," said Miss Nugent, turning to the doctor.

"I'm sorry," began Murchison, with an indignant glance at his rival.

"Oh, as you please," said the girl, coldly. "Pray forgive me for asking you."

"If you really wish it," said the doctor, rising. Miss Nugent smiled upon him, and Hardy also gave him a smile of kindly encouragement, but this he ignored. He crossed the room and bade Mrs. Kingdom good-bye; and then in a few disjointed words asked Mrs. Kybird whether he could be of any assistance in seeing her home.

"I'm sure I'm much obliged to you," said that lady, as she rose. "It don't seem much use for me waiting for my future son-in-law. I wish you good afternoon, ma'am. I can understand now why Jack didn't come."

With this parting shot she quitted the room and, leaning on the doctor's arm, sailed majestically down the path to the gate, every feather on her hat trembling in response to the excitement below.

"Good-natured of him," said Hardy, glancing from the window, with a triumphant smile.

"Very," said Miss Nugent, coldly, as she took a seat by her aunt. "What is the news to which you referred just now? Is it about my father?"

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