Dialstone Lane, Part 3.

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DIALSTONE LANE

By W.W. Jacobs

Part III.

CHAPTER IX

The church bells were ringing for morning service as Mr. Vickers, who had been for a stroll with Mr. William Russell and a couple of ferrets, returned home to breakfast. Contrary to custom, the small front room and the kitchen were both empty, and breakfast, with the exception of a cold herring and the bitter remains of a pot of tea, had been cleared away.

[Illustration: "Mr. Vickers had been for a stroll with Mr. William Russell."]

"I've known men afore now," murmured Mr. Vickers, eyeing the herring disdainfully, "as would take it by the tail and smack'em acrost the face with it."

He cut himself a slice of bread, and, pouring out a cup of cold tea, began his meal, ever and anon stopping to listen, with a puzzled face, to a continuous squeaking overhead. It sounded like several pairs of new boots all squeaking at once, but Mr. Vickers, who was a reasonable man and past the age of self-deception, sought for a more probable cause.

A particularly aggressive squeak detached itself from the others and sounded on the stairs. The resemblance to the noise made by new boots was stronger than ever. It was new boots. The door opened, and Mr. Vickers, with a slice of bread arrested half-way to his mouth, sat gazing in astonishment at Charles Vickers, clad for the first time in his life in new raiment from top to toe. Ere he could voice inquiries, an avalanche of squeaks descended the stairs, and the rest of the children, all smartly clad, with Selina bringing up the rear, burst into the room.

"What is it?" demanded Mr. Vickers, in a voice husky with astonishment; "a bean-feast?"

Miss Vickers, who was doing up a glove which possessed more buttons than his own waistcoat, looked up and eyed him calmly. "New clothes--and not before they wanted'em," she replied, tartly.

"New clothes?" repeated her father, in a scandalized voice. "Where'd they get'em?"

"Shop," said his daughter, briefly.

Mr. Vickers rose and, approaching his offspring, inspected them with the same interest that he would have bestowed upon a wax-works. A certain stiffness of pose combined with the glassy stare which met his gaze helped to favour the illusion.

"For once in their lives they're respectable," said Selina, regarding them with moist eyes. "Soap and water they've always had, bless'em, but you've never seen'em dressed like this before."

Before Mr. Vickers could frame a reply a squeaking which put all the others in the shade sounded from above. It crossed the floor on hurried excursions to different parts of the room, and then, hesitating for a moment at the head of the stairs, came slowly and ponderously down until Mrs. Vickers, looking somewhat nervous, stood revealed before her expectant husband. In scornful surprise he gazed at a blue cloth dress, a black velvet cape trimmed with bugles, and a bonnet so aggressively new that it had not yet accommodated itself to Mrs. Vickers's style of hair-dressing.

"Go on!" he breathed. "Go on! Don't mind me. What, you--you--you're not going to church?"

Mrs. Vickers glanced at the books in her hand--also new--and trembled.

"And why not?" demanded Selina. "Why shouldn't we?"

Mr. Vickers took another amazed glance round and his brow darkened.

"Where did you get the money?" he inquired.

"Saved it," said his daughter, reddening despite herself.

"Saved it?" repeated the justly-astonished Mr. Vickers. "Saved it? Ah! out of my money; out of the money I toil and moil for--out of the money that ought to be spent on food. No wonder you're always complaining that it ain't enough. I won't 'ave it, d'ye hear? I'll have my rights; I'll----"

"Don't make so much noise," said his daughter, who was stooping down to ease one of Mrs. Vickers's boots. "You would have fours, mother, and I told you what it would be."

"He said that I ought to wear threes by rights," said Mrs. Vickers;

"I used to."

"And I s'pose," said Mr. Vickers, who had been listening to these remarks with considerable impatience–"I s'pose there's a bran' new suit o' clothes, and a pair o' boots, and 'arf-a-dozen shirts, and a new hat hid upstairs for me?"

"Yes, they're hid all right," retorted the dutiful Miss Vickers. "You go upstairs and amuse yourself looking for'em. Go and have a game of 'hot boiled beans' all by yourself."

"Why, you must have been stinting me for years," continued Mr. Vickers, examining the various costumes in detail. "This is what comes o' keeping quiet and trusting you–not but what I've 'ad my suspicions. My own kids taking the bread out o' my mouth and buying boots with it; my own wife going about in a bonnet that's took me weeks and weeks to earn."

[Illustration:"'Why, you must have been stinting me for years,' continued Mr. Vickers."]

His words fell on deaf ears. No adjutant getting his regiment ready for a march-past could have taken more trouble than Miss Vickers was taking at this moment over her small company. Caps were set straight and sleeves pulled down. Her face shone with pride and her eyes glistened as the small fry, discoursing in excited whispers, filed stiffly out.

A sudden cessation of gossip in neighbouring doorways testified to the impression made by their appearance. Past little startled groups the procession picked its way in squeaking pride, with Mrs. Vickers and Selina bringing up the rear. The children went by with little set, important faces; but Miss Vickers's little bows and pleased smiles of recognition to acquaintances were so lady-like that several untidy matrons retired inside their houses to wrestle grimly with feelings too strong for outside display.

"Pack o' prancing peacocks," said the unnatural Mr. Vickers, as the procession wound round the corner.

He stood looking vacantly up the street until the gathering excitement of his neighbours aroused new feelings. Vanity stirred within him, and leaning casually against the door-post he yawned and looked at the chimney-pots opposite. A neighbour in a pair of corduroy trousers, supported by one brace worn diagonally, shambled across the road.

"What's up?" he inquired, with a jerk of the thumb in the direction of Mr. Vickers's vanished family.

"Up?" repeated Mr. Vickers, with an air of languid surprise.

"Somebody died and left you a fortin?" inquired the other.

"Not as I knows of," replied Mr. Vickers, staring. "Why?"

"Why?" exclaimed the other. "Why, new clothes all over. I never see such a turn-out."

Mr. Vickers regarded him with an air of lofty disdain. "Kids must 'ave new clothes sometimes, I s'pose?" he said, slowly. "You wouldn't 'ave'em going about of a Sunday in a ragged shirt and a pair of trowsis, would you?"

The shaft passed harmlessly. "Why not?" said the other. "They gin'rally do."

Mr. Vickers's denial died away on his lips. In twos and threes his

neighbours had drawn gradually near and now stood by listening expectantly. The idea of a fortune was common to all of them, and they were anxious for particulars.

[Illustration: "They were anxious for particulars."]

"Some people have all the luck," said a stout matron. "I've 'ad thirteen and buried seven, and never 'ad so much as a chiney tea-pot left me. One thing is, I never could make up to people for the sake of what I could get out of them. I couldn't not if I tried. I must speak my mind free and independent."

"Ah! that's how you get yourself disliked," said another lady, shaking her head sympathetically.

"Disliked?" said the stout matron, turning on her fiercely. "What d'ye mean? You don't know what you're talking about. Who's getting themselves disliked?"

"A lot o' good a chiney tea-pot would be to you," said the other, with a ready change of front, "or any other kind o' tea-pot."

Surprise and indignation deprived the stout matron of utterance.

"Or a milk-jug either," pursued her opponent, following up her advantage. "Or a coffee-pot, or--"

The stout matron advanced upon her, and her mien was so terrible that the other, retreating to her house, slammed the door behind her and continued the discussion from a first-floor window. Mint Street, with the conviction that Mr. Vickers's tidings could wait, swarmed across the road to listen.

Mr. Vickers himself listened for a little while to such fragments as came his way, and then, going indoors, sat down amid the remains of his breakfast to endeavour to solve the mystery of the new clothes.

He took a short clay pipe from his pocket, and, igniting a little piece of tobacco which remained in the bowl, endeavoured to form an estimate of the cost of each person's wardrobe. The sum soon becoming too large to work in his head, he had recourse to pencil and paper, and after five minutes' hard labour sat gazing at a total which made his brain reel. The fact that immediately afterwards he was unable to find even a few grains of tobacco at the bottom of his box furnished a contrast which almost made him maudlin.

He sat sucking at his cold pipe and indulging in hopeless conjectures as to the source of so much wealth, and, with a sudden quickening of the pulse, wondered whether it had all been spent. His mind wandered from Selina to Mr. Joseph Tasker, and almost imperceptibly the absurdities of which young men in love could be capable occurred to him. He remembered the extravagances of his own youth, and bethinking himself of the sums he had squandered on the future Mrs. Vickers--sums which increased with the compound interest of repetition--came to the conclusion that Mr. Tasker had been more foolish still.

It seemed the only possible explanation. His eye brightened, and, knocking the ashes out of his pipe, he crossed to the tap and washed his face.

"If he can't lend a trifle to the man what's going to be his father-in-law," he said, cheerfully, as he polished his face on a roller-towel, "I shall tell 'im he can't have Selina, that's all. I'll go and see 'im afore she gets any more out of him."

He walked blithely up the road, and, after shaking off one or two inquirers whose curiosity was almost proof against insult, made his way to Dialstone Lane. In an unobtrusive fashion he glided round to the back, and, opening the kitchen door, bestowed a beaming smile upon the startled Joseph.

"Busy, my lad?" he inquired.

"What d'ye want?" asked Mr. Tasker, whose face was flushed with cooking.

Mr. Vickers opened the door a little wider, and, stepping inside, closed it softly behind him and dropped into a chair.

"Don't be alarmed, my lad," he said, benevolently. "Selina's all right."

"What d'ye want?" repeated Mr. Tasker. "Who told you to come round here?"

Mr. Vickers looked at him in reproachful surprise.

"I suppose a father can come round to see his future son-in-law?" he said, with some dignity. "I don't want to do no interrupting of your work, Joseph, but I couldn't 'elp just stepping round to tell you how nice they all looked. Where you got the money from I can't think."

"Have you gone dotty, or what?" demanded Mr. Tasker, who was busy wiping out a saucepan. "Who looked nice?"

Mr. Vickers shook his head at him and smiled waggishly.

"Ah! who?" he said, with much enjoyment. "I tell you it did my father's 'art good to see 'em all dressed up like that; and when I thought of its all being owing to you, sit down at home in comfort with a pipe instead of coming to thank you for it I could not. Not if you was to have paid me I couldn't."

"Look 'ere," said Mr. Tasker, putting the saucepan down with a bang, "if you can't talk plain, common English you'd better get out. I don't want you 'ere at all as a matter o' fact, but to have you sitting there shaking your silly 'ead and talking a pack o' nonsense is more than I can stand."

Mr. Vickers gazed at him in perplexity. "Do you mean to tell me you haven't been giving my Selina money to buy new clothes for the young'uns?" he demanded, sharply. "Do you mean to tell me that Selina didn't get money out of you to buy herself and 'er mother and all of 'em--except me--a new rig-out from top to toe?"

"D'ye think I've gone mad, or what?" inquired the amazed Mr. Tasker. "What d'ye think I should want to buy clothes for your young'uns for? That's your duty. And Selina, too; I haven't given 'er anything except a ring, and she lent me the money for that. D'ye think I'm made o' money?"

"All right, Joseph," said Mr. Vickers, secretly incensed at this unforeseen display of caution on Mr. Tasker's part. "I s'pose the fairies come and put'em on while they was asleep. But it's dry work walking; 'ave you got such a thing as a glass o' water you could give me?"

The other took a glass from the dresser and, ignoring the eye of his prospective father-in-law, which was glued to a comfortable-looking barrel in the corner, filled it to the brim with fair water and handed it to him. Mr. Vickers, giving him a surly nod, took a couple of dainty sips and placed it on the table.

"It's very nice water," he said, sarcastically.

"Is it?" said Mr. Tasker. "We don't drink it ourselves, except in tea or coffee; the cap'n says it ain't safe."

Mr. Vickers brought his eye from the barrel and glared at him.

"I s'pose, Joseph," he said, after a long pause, during which Mr. Tasker was busy making up the fire--"I s'pose Selina didn't tell you you wasn't to tell me about the money?"

"I don't know what you're driving at," said the other, confronting him angrily. "I haven't got no money."

Mr. Vickers coughed. "Don't say that, Joseph," he urged, softly; "don't say that, my lad. As a matter o' fact, I come round to you, interrupting of you in your work, and I'm sorry for it--knowing how fond of it you are--to see whether I couldn't borrow a trifle for a day or two."

"Ho, did you?" commented Mr. Tasker, who had opened the oven door and was using his hand as a thermometer.

His visitor hesitated. It was no use asking for too much; on the other hand, to ask for less than he could get would be unpardonable folly.

"If I could lay my hand on a couple o' quid," he said, in a mysterious whisper, "I could make it five in a week."

"Well, why don't you?" inquired Mr. Tasker, who was tenderly sucking the bulb of the thermometer after contact with the side of the oven.

"It's the two quid that's the trouble, Joseph," replied Mr. Vickers, keeping his temper with difficulty. "A little thing like that wouldn't be much trouble to you, I know, but to a pore man with a large family like me it's a'most impossible."

Mr. Tasker went outside to the larder, and returning with a small joint knelt down and thrust it carefully into the oven.

"A'most impossible," repeated Mr. Vickers, with a sigh.

"What is?" inquired the other, who had not been listening.

The half-choking Mr. Vickers explained.

"Yes, o' course it is," assented Mr. Tasker.

"People what's got money," said the offended Mr. Vickers, regarding him fiercely, "stick to it like leeches. Now, suppose I was a young man keeping company with a gal and her father wanted to borrow a couple o' quid--a paltry couple o' thick'uns--what d'ye think I should do?"

"If you was a young man--keeping company with a gal--and 'er father wanted--to borrow a couple of quid off o' you--what would you do?" repeated Mr. Tasker, mechanically, as he bustled to and fro.

Mr. Vickers nodded and smiled. "What should I do?" he inquired again, hopefully.

"I don't know, I'm sure," said the other, opening the oven door and peering in. "How should I?"

At the imminent risk of something inside giving way under the strain, Mr. Vickers restrained himself. He breathed hard, and glancing out of window sought to regain his equilibrium by becoming interested in a blackbird

outside.

"What I mean to say is," he said at length, in a trembling voice--"what I mean to say is, without no round-aboutedness, will you lend a 'ard-working man, what's going to be your future father-in-law, a couple o' pounds?"

Mr. Tasker laughed. It was not a loud laugh, nor yet a musical one. It was merely a laugh designed to convey to the incensed Mr. Vickers a strong sense of the absurdity of his request.

"I asked you a question," said the latter gentleman, glaring at him.

"I haven't got a couple o' pounds," replied Mr. Tasker; "and if I 'ad, there's nine hundred and ninety-nine things I would sooner do with it than lend it to you."

Mr. Vickers rose and stood regarding the ignoble creature with profound contempt. His features worked and a host of adjectives crowded to his lips.

[Illustration: "Mr. Vickers rose and stood regarding the ignoble creature with profound contempt."]

"Is that your last word, Joseph?" he inquired, with solemn dignity.

"I'll say it all over again if you like," said the obliging Mr. Tasker. "If you want money, go and earn it, same as I have to; don't come round 'ere cadging on me, because it's no good."

Mr. Vickers laughed; a dry, contemptuous laugh, terrible to hear.

"And that's the man that's going to marry my daughter," he said, slowly; "that's the man that's going to marry into my family. Don't you expect me to take you up and point you out as my son-in-law, cos I won't do it. If there's anything I can't abide it's stinginess. And there's my gal --my pore gal don't know your real character. Wait till I've told 'er about this morning and opened 'er eyes! Wait till--"

He stopped abruptly as the door leading to the front room opened and revealed the inquiring face of Captain Bowers.

"What's all this noise about, Joseph?" demanded the captain, harshly.

Mr. Tasker attempted to explain, but his explanation involving a character for Mr. Vickers which that gentleman declined to accept on any terms, he broke in and began to give his own version of the affair. Much to Joseph's surprise the captain listened patiently.

"Did you buy all those things, Joseph?" he inquired, carelessly, as Mr. Vickers paused for breath.

"Cert'nly not, sir," replied Mr. Tasker. "Where should I get the money from?"

The captain eyed him without replying, and a sudden suspicion occurred to him. The strange disappearance of the map, followed by the sudden cessation of Mr. Chalk's visits, began to link themselves to this tale of unexpected wealth. He bestowed another searching glance upon the agitated Mr. Tasker.

"You haven't sold anything lately, have you?" he inquired, with startling gruffness.

"I haven't 'ad nothing to sell, sir," replied the other, in astonishment. "And I dare say Mr. Vickers here saw a new pair o' boots on one o' the

young'uns and dreamt all the rest."

Mr. Vickers intervened with passion.

"That'll do," said the captain, sharply. "How dare you make that noise in my house? I think that the tale about the clothes is all right," he added, turning to Joseph. "I saw them go into church looking very smart. And you know nothing about it?"

Mr. Tasker's astonishment was too genuine to be mistaken, and the captain, watching him closely, transferred his suspicions to a more deserving object. Mr. Vickers caught his eye and essayed a smile.

"Dry work talking, sir," he said, gently.

Captain Bowers eyed him steadily. "Have we got any beer, Joseph?" he inquired.

"Plenty in the cask, sir," said Mr. Tasker, reluctantly.

"Well, keep your eye on it," said the captain. "Good morning, Mr. Vickers."

But disappointment and indignation got the better of Mr. Vickers's politeness.

CHAPTER X

"Penny for your thoughts, uncle," said Miss Drewitt, as they sat at dinner an hour or two after the departure of Mr. Vickers.

"_H'm?_" said the captain, with a guilty start. "You've been scowling and smiling by turns for the last five minutes," said his niece.

"I was thinking about that man that was here this morning," said the captain, slowly; "trying to figure it out. If I thought that that girl Selina----"

He took a draught of ale and shook his head solemnly.

"You know my ideas about that," said Prudence.

"Your poor mother was obstinate," commented the captain, regarding her tolerantly. "Once she got an idea into her head it stuck there, and nothing made her more angry than proving to her that she was wrong. Trying to prove to her, I should have said."

Miss Drewitt smiled amiably. "Well, you've earned half the sum," she said. "Now, what were you smiling about?"

"Didn't know I was smiling," declared the captain.

With marvellous tact he turned the conversation to lighthouses, a subject upon which he discoursed with considerable fluency until the meal was finished. Miss Drewitt, who had a long memory and at least her fair share of curiosity, returned to the charge as he smoked half a pipe preparatory to accompanying her for a walk.

"You're looking very cheerful," she remarked.

The captain's face fell several points. "Am I?" he said, ruefully. "I didn't mean to."

"Why not?" inquired his niece.

"I mean I didn't know I was," he replied, "more than usual, I mean. I always do look fairly cheerful--at least, I hope I do. There's nothing to make me look the opposite."

Miss Drewitt eyed him carefully and then passed upstairs to put on her hat. Relieved of her presence the captain walked to the small glass over the mantelpiece and, regarding his tell-tale features with gloomy dissatisfaction, acquired, after one or two attempts, an expression which he flattered himself defied analysis.

He tapped the barometer which hung by the door as they went out, and, checking a remark which rose to his lips, stole a satisfied glance at the face by his side.

"Clark's farm by the footpaths would be a nice walk," said Miss Drewitt, as they reached the end of the lane.

The captain started. "I was thinking of Dutton Priors," he said, slowly. "We could go there by Hanger's Lane and home by the road."

"The footpaths would be nice to-day," urged his niece.

"You try my way," said the captain, jovially.

"Have you got any particular reason for wanting to go to Dutton Priors this afternoon?" inquired the girl.

"Reason?" said the captain. "Good gracious, no. What reason should I have? My leg is a trifle stiff to-day for stiles, but still--"

Miss Drewitt gave way at once, and, taking his arm, begged him to lean on her, questioning him anxiously as to his fitness for a walk in any direction.

"Walking'll do it good," was the reply, as they proceeded slowly down the High Street.

He took his watch from his pocket, and, after comparing it with the town clock, peered furtively right and left, gradually slackening his pace until Miss Drewitt's fears for his leg became almost contagious. At the old stone bridge, spanning the river at the bottom of the High Street, he paused, and, resting his arms on the parapet, became intent on a derelict punt. On the subject of sitting in a craft of that description in mid-stream catching fish he discoursed at such length that the girl eyed him in amazement.

[Illustration: "He became intent on a derelict punt."]

"Shall we go on?" she said, at length.

The captain turned and, merely pausing to point out the difference between the lines of a punt and a dinghy, with a digression to sampans which included a criticism of the Chinese as boat-builders, prepared to depart. He cast a swift glance up the road as he did so, and Miss Drewitt's cheek flamed with sudden wrath as she saw Mr. Edward Tredgold hastening towards them. In a somewhat pointed manner she called her uncle's attention to the fact.

"Lor' bless my soul," said that startled mariner, "so it is. Well! well!"

If Mr. Tredgold had been advancing on his head he could not have

exhibited more surprise.

"I'm afraid I'm late," said Tredgold, as he came up and shook hands. "I hope you haven't been waiting long."

The hapless captain coughed loud and long. He emerged from a large red pocket-handkerchief to find the eye of Miss Drewitt seeking his.

"That's all right, my lad," he said, huskily. "I'd forgotten about our arrangement. Did I say this Sunday or next?"

"This," said Mr. Tredgold, bluntly.

The captain coughed again, and with some pathos referred to the tricks which old age plays with memory. As they walked on he regaled them with selected instances.

"Don't forget your leg, uncle," said Miss Drewitt, softly.

Captain Bowers gazed at her suspiciously.

"Don't forget that it's stiff and put too much strain on it," explained his niece.

The captain eyed her uneasily, but she was talking and laughing with Edward Tredgold in a most reassuring fashion. A choice portion of his programme, which, owing to the events of the afternoon, he had almost resolved to omit, clamoured for production. He stole another glance at his niece and resolved to risk it.

"Hah!" he said, suddenly, stopping short and feeling in his pockets. "There's my memory again. Well, of all the--"

"What's the matter, uncle?" inquired Miss Drewitt.

"I've left my pipe at home," said the captain, in a desperate voice.

"I've got some cigars," suggested Tredgold.

The captain shook his head. "No, I must have my pipe," he said, decidedly. "If you two will walk on slowly, I'll soon catch you up."

"You're not going all the way back for it?" exclaimed Miss Drewitt.

"Let me go," said Tredgold.

The captain favoured him with an inscrutable glance. "I'll go," he said, firmly. "I'm not quite sure where I left it. You go by Hanger's Lane; I'll soon catch you up."

He set off at a pace which rendered protest unavailing. Mr. Tredgold turned, and, making a mental note of the fact that Miss Drewitt had suddenly added inches to her stature, walked on by her side.

"Captain Bowers is very fond of his pipe," he said, after they had walked a little way in silence.

Miss Drewitt assented. "Nasty things," she said, calmly.

"So they are," said Mr. Tredgold.

"But you smoke," said the girl.

Mr. Tredgold sighed. "I have often thought of giving it up," he said, softly, "and then I was afraid that it would look rather presumptuous."

"Presumptuous?" repeated Miss Drewitt.

"So many better and wiser men than myself smoke," exclaimed Mr. Tredgold, "including even bishops. If it is good enough for them, it ought to be good enough for me; that's the way I look at it. Who am I that I should be too proud to smoke? Who am I that I should try and set my poor ideas above those of my superiors? Do you see my point of view?"

Miss Drewitt made no reply.

"Of course, it is a thing that grows on one," continued Mr. Tredgold, with the air of making a concession. "It is the first smoke that does the mischief; it is a fatal precedent. Unless, perhaps--How pretty that field is over there."

Miss Drewitt looked in the direction indicated. "Very nice," she said, briefly. "But what were you going to say?"

Mr. Tredgold made an elaborate attempt to appear confused. "I was going to say," he murmured, gently, "unless, perhaps, one begins on coarse-cut Cavendish rolled in a piece of the margin of the Sunday newspaper."

Miss Drewitt suppressed an exclamation. "I wanted to see where the fascination was," she indignantly.

"And did you?" inquired Mr. Tredgold, smoothly.

The girl turned her head and looked at him. "I have no doubt my uncle gave you full particulars," she said, bitterly. "It seems to me that men can gossip as much as women."

"I tried to stop him," said the virtuous Mr. Tredgold.

"You need not have troubled," said Miss Drewitt, loftily. "It is not a matter of any consequence. I am surprised that my uncle should have thought it worth mentioning."

She walked on slowly with head erect, pausing occasionally to look round for the captain. Edward Tredgold looked too, and a feeling of annoyance at the childish stratagems of his well-meaning friend began to possess him.

"We had better hurry a little, I think," he said, glancing at the sky. "The sooner we get to Dutton Priors the better."

"Why?" inquired his companion.

"Rain," said the other, briefly.

"It won't rain before evening," said Miss Drewitt, confidently; "uncle said so."

"Perhaps we had better walk faster, though," urged Mr. Tredgold.

Miss Drewitt slackened her pace deliberately. "There is no fear of its raining," she declared. "And uncle will not catch us up if we walk fast."

A sudden glimpse into the immediate future was vouchsafed to Mr. Tredgold; for a fraction of a second the veil was lifted. "Don't blame me if you get wet through," he said, with some anxiety.

They walked on at a pace which gave the captain every opportunity of overtaking them. The feat would not have been beyond the powers of an

athletic tortoise, but the most careful scrutiny failed to reveal any signs of him.

"I'm afraid that he is not well," said Miss Drewitt, after a long, searching glance along the way they had come. "Perhaps we had better go back. It does begin to look rather dark."

"Just as you please," said Edward Tredgold, with unwonted caution; "but the nearest shelter is Dutton Priors."

He pointed to a lurid, ragged cloud right ahead of them. As if in response, a low, growling rumble sounded overhead.

"Was–was that thunder?" said Miss Drewitt, drawing a little nearer to him.

"Sounded something like it," was the reply.

A flash of lightning and a crashing peal that rent the skies put the matter beyond a doubt. Miss Drewitt, turning very pale, began to walk at a rapid pace in the direction of the village.

The other looked round in search of some nearer shelter. Already the pattering of heavy drops sounded in the lane, and before they had gone a dozen paces the rain came down in torrents. Two or three fields away a small shed offered the only shelter. Mr. Tredgold, taking his companion by the arm, started to run towards it.

Before they had gone a hundred yards they were wet through, but Miss Drewitt, holding her skirts in one hand and shivering at every flash, ran until they brought up at a tall gate, ornamented with barbed wire, behind which stood the shed.

The gate was locked, and the wire had been put on by a farmer who combined with great ingenuity a fervent hatred of his fellow-men. To Miss Drewitt it seemed insurmountable, but, aided by Mr. Tredgold and a peal of thunder which came to his assistance at a critical moment, she managed to clamber over and reach the shed. Mr. Tredgold followed at his leisure with a strip of braid torn from the bottom of her dress.

[Illustration: "Aided by Mr. Tredgold and a peal of thunder, she managed to clamber over."]

The roof leaked in twenty places and the floor was a puddle, but it had certain redeeming features in Mr. Tredgold's eyes of which the girl knew nothing. He stood at the doorway watching the rain.

"Come inside," said Miss Drewitt, in a trembling voice. "You might be struck."

Mr. Tredgold experienced a sudden sense of solemn pleasure in this unexpected concern for his safety. He turned and eyed her.

"I'm not afraid," he said, with great gentleness.

"No, but I am," said Miss Drewitt, petulantly, "and I can never get over that gate alone."

Mr. Tredgold came inside, and for some time neither of them spoke. The rattle of rain on the roof became less deafening and began to drip through instead of forming little jets. A patch of blue sky showed.

"It isn't much," said Tredgold, going to the door again.

Miss Drewitt, checking a sharp retort, returned to the door and looked

out. The patch of blue increased in size; the rain ceased and the sun came out; birds exchanged congratulations from every tree. The girl, gathering up her wet skirts, walked to the gate, leaving her companion to follow.

Approached calmly and under a fair sky the climb was much easier.

"I believe that I could have got over by myself after all," said Miss Drewitt, as she stood on the other side. "I suppose that you were in too much of a hurry the last time. My dress is ruined."

She spoke calmly, but her face was clouded. From her manner during the rapid walk home Mr. Tredgold was enabled to see clearly that she was holding him responsible for the captain's awkward behaviour; the rain; her spoiled clothes; and a severe cold in the immediate future. He glanced at her ruined hat and the wet, straight locks of hair hanging about her face, and held his peace.

Never before on a Sunday afternoon had Miss Drewitt known the streets of Binchester to be so full of people. She hurried on with bent head, looking straight before her, trying to imagine what she looked like. There was no sign of the captain, but as they turned into Dialstone Lane they both saw a huge, shaggy, grey head protruding from the small window of his bedroom. It disappeared with a suddenness almost startling.

"Thank you," said Miss Drewitt, holding out her hand as she reached the door. "Good-bye."

Mr. Tredgold said "Good-bye," and with a furtive glance at the window above departed. Miss Drewitt, opening the door, looked round an empty room. Then the kitchen door opened and the face of Mr. Tasker, full of concern, appeared.

"Did you get wet, miss?" he inquired.

Miss Drewitt ignored the question. "Where is Captain Bowers?" she asked, in a clear, penetrating voice.

The face of Mr. Tasker fell. "He's gone to bed with a headache, miss," he replied.

"Headache?" repeated the astonished Miss Drewitt. "When did he go?"

"About 'arf an hour ago," said Mr. Tasker; "just after the storm. I suppose that's what caused it, though it seems funny, considering what a lot he must ha' seen at sea. He said he'd go straight to bed and try and sleep it off. And I was to ask you to please not to make a noise."

Miss Drewitt swept past him and mounted the stairs. At the captain's door she paused, but the loud snoring of a determined man made her resolve to postpone her demands for an explanation to a more fitting opportunity. Tired, wet, and angry she gained her own room, and threw herself thoughtlessly into that famous old Chippendale chair which, in accordance with Mr. Tredgold's instructions, had been placed against the wall.

The captain started in his sleep.

[Illustration: "She threw herself thoughtlessly into that famous old Chippendale chair."]

CHAPTER XI

Mr. Chalk's anxiety during the negotiations for the purchase of the _Fair Emily_ kept him oscillating between Tredgold and Stobell until those gentlemen fled at his approach and instructed their retainers to make untruthful statements as to their whereabouts. Daily letters from Captain Brisket stated that he was still haggling with Mr. Todd over the price, and Mr. Chalk quailed as he tried to picture the scene with that doughty champion.

[Illustration: "Instructed their retainers to make untruthful statements as to their whereabouts."]

Three times at the earnest instigation of his friends, who pointed out the necessity of keeping up appearances, had he set out to pay a visit to Dialstone Lane, and three times had he turned back half-way as he realized the difficult nature of his task. As well ask a poacher to call on a gamekeeper the morning after a raid.

Captain Bowers, anxious to see him and sound him with a few carefully-prepared questions, noted his continued absence with regret. Despairing at last of a visit from Mr. Chalk, he resolved to pay one himself.

Mr. Chalk, who was listening to his wife, rose hastily at his entrance, and in great confusion invited him to a chair which was already occupied by Mrs. Chalk's work-basket. The captain took another and, after listening to an incoherent statement about the weather, shook his head reproachfully at Mr. Chalk.

"I thought something must have happened to you," he said. "Why, it must be weeks since I've seen you."

"Weeks?" said Mrs. Chalk, suddenly alert.

"Why, he went out the day before yesterday to call on you."

"Yes," said Mr. Chalk, with an effort, "so I did, but half-way to yours I got a nail in my shoe and had to come home."

"Home!" exclaimed his wife. "Why, you were gone two hours and thirty-five minutes."

"It was very painful," said Mr. Chalk, as the captain stared in open-eyed astonishment at this exact time-keeping. "One time I thought that I should hardly have got back."

"But you didn't say anything about it," persisted his wife.

"I didn't want to alarm you, my dear," said Mr. Chalk.

Mrs. Chalk looked at him, but, except for a long, shivering sigh which the visitor took for sympathy, made no comment.

"I often think that I must have missed a great deal by keeping single," said the latter. "It must be very pleasant when you're away to know that there is somebody at home counting the minutes until your return."

Mr. Chalk permitted himself one brief wondering glance in the speaker's direction, and then gazed out of window.

"There's no companion like a wife," continued the captain. "Nobody else can quite share your joys and sorrows as she can. I've often thought how pleasant it must be to come home from a journey and tell your wife all about it: where you've been, what you've done, and what you're going to do."

Mr. Chalk stole another look at him; Mrs. Chalk, somewhat suspicious, followed his example.

"It's a pity you never married, Captain Bowers," she said, at length; "most men seem to do all they can to keep things from their wives. But one of these days–---"

She finished the sentence by an expressive glance at her husband. Captain Bowers, suddenly enlightened, hastened to change the subject.

"I haven't seen Tredgold or Stobell either," he said, gazing fixedly at Mr. Chalk.

"They--they were talking about you only the other day," said that gentleman, nervously. "Is Miss Drewitt well?"

"Quite well," said the captain, briefly. "I was beginning to think you had all left Binchester," he continued; "gone for a sea voyage or something."

Mr. Chalk laughed uneasily. "I thought that Joseph wasn't looking very well the last time I saw you," he said, with an imploring glance at the captain to remind him of the presence of Mrs. Chalk.

"Joseph's all right," replied the other, "so is the parrot."

Mr. Chalk started and said that he was glad to hear it, and sat trying to think of a safe subject for conversation.

"Joseph's a nice parrot," he said at last. "The parrot's a nice lad, I mean."

"Thomas!" said Mrs. Chalk.

"Joseph-is-a-nice-lad," said Mr. Chalk, recovering himself. "I have often thought----"

The sentence was never completed, being interrupted by a thundering rat-tat-tat at the front door, followed by a pealing at the bell, which indicated that the visitor was manfully following the printed injunction to "Ring also." The door was opened and a man's voice was heard in the hall-a loud, confident voice, at the sound of which Mr. Chalk, with one horrified glance in the direction of Captain Bowers, sank back in his chair and held his breath.

"Captain Brisket," said the maid, opening the door.

The captain came in with a light, bustling step, and, having shaken Mr. Chalk's hand with great fervour and acknowledged the presence of Captain Bowers and Mrs. Chalk by two spasmodic jerks of the head, sat bolt-upright on the edge of a chair and beamed brightly upon the horrified Chalk.

"I've got news," he said, hoarsely.

"News?" said the unfortunate Mr. Chalk, faintly.

"Ah!" said Brisket, nodding. "News! I've got her at last."

Mrs. Chalk started.

"I've got her," continued Captain Brisket, with an air of great enjoyment; "and a fine job I had of it, I can tell you. Old Todd said he couldn't bear parting with her. Once or twice I thought he meant it."

Mr. Chalk made a desperate effort to catch his eye, but in vain. It was fixed in reminiscent joy on the ceiling.

"We haggled about her for days," continued Brisket; "but at last I won. The _Fair Emily_ is yours, sir."

"The fair who?" cried Mrs. Chalk, in a terrible voice. "Emily who? Emily what?"

Captain Brisket turned and regarded her in amazement.

"Emily who?" repeated Mrs. Chalk.

"Why, it's--" began Brisket.

"H'sh!" said Mr. Chalk, desperately. "It's a secret."

"It's a secret," said Captain Brisket, nodding calmly at Mrs. Chalk.

Wrath and astonishment held her for the moment breathless. Mr. Chalk, caught between his wife and Captain Bowers, fortified himself with memories of the early martyrs and gave another warning glance at Brisket. For nearly two minutes that undaunted mariner met the gaze of Mrs. Chalk without flinching.

"A--a secret?" gasped the indignant woman at last, as she turned to her husband. "You sit there and dare to tell me that?"

"It isn't my secret," said Mr. Chalk, "else I should tell you at once."

"It isn't his secret," said the complaisant Brisket.

Mrs. Chalk controlled herself by a great effort and, turning to Captain Brisket, addressed him almost calmly. "Was it Emily that came whistling over the garden-wall the other night?" she inquired.

"Whis---?" said the hapless Brisket, making a noble effort. He finished the word with a cough and gazed with protruding eyes at Mr. Chalk. The appearance of that gentleman sobered him at once.

"No," he said, slowly.

"How do you know?" inquired Mrs. Chalk.

"Because she can't whistle," replied Captain Brisket, feeling his way carefully. "And what's more, she wouldn't if she could. She's been too well brought up for that."

He gave a cunning smile at Mr. Chalk, to which that gentleman, having decided at all hazards to keep the secret from Captain Bowers, made a ghastly response, and nodded to him to proceed.

"What's she got to do with my husband?" demanded Mrs. Chalk, her voice rising despite herself.

"I'm coming to that," said Brisket, thoughtfully, as he gazed at the floor in all the agonies of composition; "Mr. Chalk is trying to get her a new place."

"New place?" said Mrs. Chalk, in a choking voice.

Captain Brisket nodded. "She ain't happy where she is," he explained, "and Mr. Chalk--out o' pure good-nature and kindness of heart--is trying to get her another, and I honour him for it."

He looked round triumphantly. Mr. Chalk, sitting open-mouthed, was regarding him with the fascinated gaze of a rabbit before a boa-constrictor. Captain Bowers was listening with an appearance of interest which in more favourable circumstances would have been very flattering.

"You said," cried Mrs. Chalk--"you said to my husband: 'The fair Emily is yours.'"

[Illustration: "You said to my husband:'The fair Emily is yours.'"]

"So I did," said Brisket, anxiously--"so I did. And what I say I stick to. When I said that the--that Emily was his, I meant it. I don't say things I don't mean. That isn't Bill Brisket's way."

"And you said just now that he was getting her a place," Mrs. Chalk reminded him, grimly.

"Mr. Chalk understands what I mean," said Captain Brisket, with dignity. "When I said 'She is yours,' I meant that she is coming here."

"O-oh!" said Mrs. Chalk, breathlessly. "Oh, indeed! Oh, is she?"

"That is, if her mother'll let her come," pursued the enterprising Brisket, with a look of great artfulness at Mr. Chalk, to call his attention to the bridge he was building for him; "but the old woman's been laid up lately and talks about not being able to spare her."

Mrs. Chalk sat back helplessly in her chair and gazed from her husband to Captain Brisket, and from Captain Brisket back to her husband. Captain Brisket, red-faced and confident, sat upright on the edge of his chair as though inviting inspection; Mr. Chalk plucked nervously at his fingers. Captain Bowers suddenly broke silence.

"What's her tonnage?" he inquired abruptly, turning to Brisket.

"Two hundred and for----"

Captain Brisket stopped dead and, rubbing his nose hard with his forefinger, gazed thoughtfully at Captain Bowers.

"The _Fair Emily_ is a ship," said the latter to Mrs. Chalk.

"A ship!" cried the bewildered woman. "A ship living with her invalid mother and coming to my husband to get her a place! Are you trying to screen him, too?"

"It's a ship," repeated Captain Bowers, sternly, as he sought in vain to meet the eye of Mr. Chalk; "a craft of two hundred and something tons. For some reason--best known to himself--Mr. Chalk wants the matter kept secret."

"It--it isn't my secret," faltered Mr. Chalk.

"Where's she lying?" said Captain Bowers.

Mr. Chalk hesitated. "Biddlecombe," he said, at last.

Captain Brisket laughed noisily and, smacking his leg with his open hand, smiled broadly upon the company. No response being forthcoming, he laughed again for his own edification, and sat good-humouredly waiting events.

"Is this true, Thomas?" demanded Mrs. Chalk.

"Yes, my dear," was the reply.

"Then why didn't you tell me, instead of sitting there listening to a string of falsehoods?"

"I--I wanted to give you a surprise--a pleasant little surprise," said Mr. Chalk, with a timid glance at Captain Bowers. "I have bought a share in a schooner, to go for a little cruise. Just a jaunt for pleasure."

"Tredgold, Stobell, and Chalk," said Captain Bowers, very distinctly.

"I wanted to keep it secret until it had been repainted and done up," continued Mr. Chalk, watching his wife's face anxiously, "and then Captain Brisket came in and spoilt it."

"That's me, ma'am," said the gentleman mentioned, shaking his head despairingly. "That's Bill Brisket all over. I come blundering in, and the first thing I do is to blurt out secrets; then, when I try to smooth it over----"

Mrs. Chalk paid no heed. Alluding to the schooner as "our yacht," she at once began to discuss the subject of the voyage, the dresses she would require, and the rival merits of shutting the house up or putting the servants on board wages. Under her skilful hands, aided by a few suggestions of Captain Brisket's, the _Fair Emily_ was in the short space of twenty minutes transformed into one of the most luxurious yachts that ever sailed the seas. Mr. Chalk's heart failed him as he listened. His thoughts were with his partners in the enterprise, and he trembled as he thought of their comments.

"It will do Mrs. Stobell a lot of good," said his wife, suddenly.

Mr. Chalk, about to speak, checked himself and blew his nose instead. The romance of the affair was beginning to evaporate. He sat in a state of great dejection, until Captain Bowers, having learned far more than he had anticipated, shook hands with impressive gravity and took his departure.

The captain walked home deep in thought, with a prolonged stare at the windows of Tredgold's office as he passed. The present whereabouts of the map was now quite clear, and at the top of Dialstone Lane he stopped and put his hand to his brow in consternation, as he thought of the elaborate expedition that was being fitted out for the recovery of the treasure.

[Illustration: "The captain walked home deep in thought."]

Prudence, who was sitting in the window reading, looked up at his entrance and smiled.

"Edward Tredgold has been in to see you," she remarked.

The captain nodded. "Couldn't he stop?" he inquired.

"I don't know," said his niece; "I didn't see him. I was upstairs when he came."

Captain Bowers looked perturbed. "Didn't you come down?" he inquired.

"I sent down word that I had a headache," said Miss Drewitt, carelessly.

Despite his sixty odd years the captain turned a little bit pink.
"I hope you are better now," he said, at last.

"Oh, yes," said his niece; "it wasn't very bad. It's strange that I

should have a headache so soon after you; looks as though they're in the family, doesn't it?"

Somewhat to the captain's relief she took up her book again without waiting for a reply, and sat reading until Mr. Tasker brought in the tea. The captain, who was in a very thoughtful mood, drank cup after cup in silence, and it was not until the meal was cleared away and he had had a few soothing whiffs at his pipe that he narrated the events of the afternoon.

"There!" said Prudence, her eyes sparkling with indignation. "What did I say? Didn't I tell you that those three people would be taking a holiday soon? The idea of Mr. Tredgold venturing to come round here this afternoon!"

"He knows nothing about it," protested the captain.

Miss Drewitt shook her head obstinately. "We shall see," she remarked. "The idea of those men going after your treasure after you had said it wasn't to be touched! Why, it's perfectly dishonest!"

The captain blew a cloud of smoke from his mouth and watched it disperse. "Perhaps they won't find it," he murmured.

"They'll find it," said his niece, confidently. "Why shouldn't they? This Captain Brisket will find the island, and the rest will be easy."

"They might not find the island," said the captain, blowing a cloud so dense that his face was almost hidden. "Some of these little islands have been known to disappear quite suddenly. Volcanic action, you know. What are you smiling at?" he added, sharply.

"Thoughts," said Miss Drewitt, clasping her hands round her knee and smiling again. "I was thinking how odd it would be if the island sank just as they landed upon it."

CHAPTER XII

Mr. Chalk, when half-awake next morning, tried to remember Mr. Stobell's remarks of the night before; fully awake, he tried to forget them. He remembered, too, with a pang that Tredgold had been content to enact the part of a listener, and had made no attempt to check the somewhat unusual fluency of the aggrieved Mr. Stobell. The latter's last instructions were that Mrs. Chalk was to be told, without loss of time, that her presence on the schooner was not to be thought of.

With all this on his mind Mr. Chalk made but a poor breakfast, and his appetite was not improved by his wife's enthusiastic remarks concerning the voyage. Breakfast over, she dispatched a note to Mrs. Stobell by the housemaid, with instructions to wait for a reply. Altogether six notes passed during the morning, and Mr. Chalk, who hazarded a fair notion as to their contents, became correspondingly gloomy.

"We're to go up there at five," said his wife, after reading the last note. "Mr. Stobell will be at tea at that time, and we're to drop in as though by accident."

"What for?" inquired Mr. Chalk, affecting surprise. "Go up where?"

"To talk to Mr. Stobell," said his wife, grimly. "Fancy, poor Mrs. Stobell says that she is sure he won't let her come. I wish he was my husband, that's all."

Mr. Chalk muttered something about "doing a little gardening."

"You can do that another time," said Mrs. Chalk, coldly. "I've noticed you've been very fond of gardening lately."

The allusion was too indirect to contest, but Mr. Chalk reddened despite himself, and his wife, after regarding his confusion with a questioning eye, left him to his own devices and his conscience.

Mr. Stobell and his wife had just sat down to tea when they arrived, and Mrs. Stobell, rising from behind a huge tea-pot, gave a little cry of surprise as her friend entered the room, and kissed her affectionately.

[Illustration: "Mrs. Stobell."]

"Well, who would have thought of seeing you?" she cried. "Sit down."

Mrs. Chalk sat down at the large table opposite Mr. Stobell; Mr. Chalk, without glancing in his wife's direction, seated himself by that gentleman's side.

"Well, weren't you surprised?" inquired Mrs. Chalk, loudly, as her hostess passed her a cup of tea.

"Surprised?" said Mrs. Stobell, curiously.

"Why, hasn't Mr. Stobell told you?" exclaimed Mrs. Chalk.

"Told me?" repeated Mrs. Stobell, glancing indignantly at the wide-open eyes of Mr. Chalk. "Told me what?"

It was now Mrs. Chalk's turn to appear surprised, and she did it so well that Mr. Chalk choked in his tea-cup. "About the yachting trip," she said, with a glance at her husband that made his choking take on a ventriloquial effect of distance.

"He--he didn't say anything to me about it," said Mrs. Stobell, timidly.

She glanced at her husband, but Mr. Stobell, taking an enormous bite out of a slice of bread and butter, made no sign.

"It'll do you a world of good," said Mrs. Chalk, affectionately. "It'll put a little colour in your cheeks."

Mrs. Stobell flushed. She was a faded little woman; faded eyes, faded hair, faded cheeks. It was even whispered that her love for Mr. Stobell was beginning to fade.

"And I don't suppose you'll mind the seasickness after you get used to it," said the considerate Mr. Chalk, "and the storms, and the cyclones, and fogs, and collisions, and all that sort of thing."

"If you can stand it, she can," said his wife, angrily.

"But I don't understand," said Mrs. Stobell, appealingly. "What yachting trip?"

Mrs. Chalk began to explain; Mr. Stobell helped himself to another slice, and, except for a single glance under his heavy brows at Mr. Chalk, appeared to be oblivious of his surroundings.

"It sounds very nice," said Mrs. Stobell, after her friend had finished her explanation. "Perhaps it might do me good. I have tried a great many things."

"Mr. Stobell ought to have taken you for a voyage long before," said Mrs. Chalk, with conviction. "Still, better late than never."

"The only thing is," said Mr. Chalk, speaking with an air of great benevolence, "that if the sea didn't suit Mrs. Stobell, she would be unable to get away from it. And, of course, it might upset her very much."

Mr. Stobell wiped some crumbs from his moustache and looked up.

"No, it won't," he said, briefly.

"Is she a good sailor?" queried Mr. Chalk, somewhat astonished at such a remark from that quarter.

"Don't know," said Mr. Stobell, passing his cup up. "But this trip won't upset her--she ain't going."

Mrs. Chalk exclaimed loudly and exchanged glances of consternation with Mrs. Stobell; Mr. Stobell, having explained the position, took some more bread and butter and munched placidly.

"Don't you think it would do her good?" said Mrs. Chalk, at last.

"Might," said Mr. Stobell, slowly, "and then, again, it mightn't."

"But there's no harm in trying," persisted Mrs. Chalk.

Mr. Stobell made no reply. Having reached his fifth slice he was now encouraging his appetite with apricot jam.

"And it's so cheap," continued Mrs. Chalk.

"That's the way I look at it. If she shuts up the house and gets rid of the servants, same as I am going to do, it will save a lot of money."

She glanced at Mr. Stobell, whose slowly working jaws and knitted brows appeared to indicate deep thought, and then gave a slight triumphant nod at his wife.

"Servants are so expensive," she murmured. "Really, I shouldn't be surprised if we saved money on the whole affair. And then think of her health. She has never quite recovered from that attack of bronchitis. She has never looked the same woman since. Think of your feelings if anything happened to her. Nothing would bring her back to you if once she went."

"Went where?" inquired Mr. Stobell, who was not attending very much.

"If she died, I mean," said Mrs. Chalk, shortly.

"We've all got to die some day," said the philosophic Mr. Stobell. "She's forty-six."

Mrs. Stobell interposed. "Not till September, Robert," she said, almost firmly.

"It wouldn't be nice to be buried at sea," remarked Mr. Chalk, contributing his mite to the discussion. "Of course, it's very impressive; but to be left down there all alone while the ship sails on must be very hard."

[Illustration: "'It wouldn't be nice to be buried at sea,' remarked Mr. Chalk."]

Mrs. Stobell's eyes began to get large. "I'm feeling quite well," she gasped.

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Chalk, with a threatening glance at her husband. "Of course, we know that. But a voyage would do you good. You can't deny that."

Mrs. Stobell, fumbling for her handkerchief, said in a tremulous voice that she had no wish to deny it. Mr. Stobell, appealed to by the energetic Mrs. Chalk, admitted at once that it might do his wife good, but that it wouldn't him.

"We're going to be three jolly bachelors," he declared, and, first nudging Mr. Chalk to attract his attention, deliberately winked at him.

"Oh, indeed!" exclaimed Mrs. Chalk, drawing herself up; "but you forget that I am coming."

"Two jolly bachelors, then," said the undaunted Stobell.

"No," said Mrs. Chalk, shaking her head, "I am not going alone; if Mrs. Stobell can't come I would sooner stay at home."

Mr. Stobell's face cleared; his mouth relaxed and his dull eyes got almost kindly. With the idea of calling the attention of Mr. Chalk to the pleasing results of a little firmness he placed his foot upon that gentleman's toe and bore heavily.

"Best place for you," he said to Mrs. Chalk. "There's no place like home for ladies. You can have each other to tea every day if you like. In fact, there's no reason–---" he paused and looked at his wife, half doubtful that he was conceding too much--"there's no reason why you shouldn't sleep at each other's sometimes."

He helped himself to some cake and, rendered polite by good-nature, offered some to Mrs. Chalk.

"Mind, I shall not go unless Mrs. Stobell goes," said the latter, waving the plate away impatiently; "that I am determined upon."

Mr. Chalk, feeling that appearances required it, ventured on a mild--a very mild--remonstrance.

"And he," continued Mrs. Chalk, sternly, indicating her husband with a nod, "doesn't go without me--not a single step, not an inch of the way."

Mr. Chalk collapsed and sat staring at her in dismay. Mr. Stobell, placing both hands on the table, pushed his chair back and eyed her disagreeably.

"It seems to me----" he began.

"I know," said Mrs. Chalk, speaking with some rapidity--"I know just how it seems to you. But that's how it is. If you want my husband to go you have got to have me too, and if you have me you have got to have your wife, and if----"

"What, is there any more of you coming?" demanded Mr. Stobell, with great bitterness.

Mrs. Chalk ignored the question. "_My_ husband wouldn't be happy without _me,_" she said, primly. "Would you, Thomas?"

"No," said Mr. Chalk, with a gulp.

"We--we're going a long way," said Mr. Stobell, after a long pause.

"Longer the better," retorted Mrs. Chalk.

"We're going among savages," continued Mr. Stobell, casting about for arguments; "cannibal savages."

"They won't eat her," said Mrs. Chalk, with a passing glance at the scanty proportions of her friend, "not while you're about."

"I don't like to take my wife into danger," said Mr. Stobell, with surly bashfulness; "I'm--I'm too fond of her for that. And she don't want to come. Do you, Alice?"

"No," said Mrs. Stobell, dutifully, "but I want to share your dangers, Robert."

"Say 'yes' or 'no' without any trimmings," commanded her husband, as he intercepted a look passing between her and Mrs. Chalk. "Do-you-want-to-come?"

Mrs. Stobell trembled. "I don't want to prevent Mr. Chalk from going," she murmured.

"Never mind about him," said Mr. Stobell.

"_Do--you--want--to--come_.

"Yes," said Mrs. Stobell.

Her husband, hardly able to believe his ears, gazed at her in bewilderment. "Very well, then," he said, in a voice that made the tea-cups rattle. "COME!"

He sat with bent brows gazing at the table as Mrs. Chalk, her face wreathed in triumphant smiles, began to discuss yachting costumes and other necessities of ocean travel with the quivering Mrs. Stobell. Unable to endure it any longer he rose and, in a voice by no means alluring, invited Mr. Chalk into the garden to smoke a pipe; Mr. Chalk, helping himself to two pieces of cake as evidence, said that he had not yet finished his tea. Owing partly to lack of appetite and partly to the face which Mr. Stobell pressed to the window every other minute to entice him out, he made but slow progress.

The matter was discussed next day as they journeyed down to Biddlecombe with Mr. Tredgold to complete the purchase of the schooner, the views of the latter gentleman coinciding so exactly with those of Mr. Stobell that Mr. Chalk was compelled to listen to the same lecture twice.

Under this infliction his spirits began to droop, nor did they revive until, from the ferry-boat, his eyes fell upon the masts of the _Fair Emily,_ and the trim figure of Captain Brisket standing at the foot of the steps awaiting their arrival.

"We've had a stroke of good luck, gentlemen," said Brisket, in a husky whisper, as they followed him up the steps. "See that man?"

He pointed to a thin, dismal-looking man, standing a yard or two away, who was trying to appear unconscious of their scrutiny.

[Illustration: "He pointed to a thin, dismal-looking man."]

"Peter Duckett," said Brisket, in the same satisfied whisper.

Mr. Stobell, ever willing for a free show, stared at the dismal man and groped in the recesses of his memory. The name seemed familiar.

"The man who ate three dozen hard-boiled eggs in four minutes?" he asked, with a little excitement natural in the circumstances.

Captain Brisket stared at him. "No; Peter Duckett, the finest mate that ever sailed," he said, with a flourish. "We're lucky to have the chance of getting him, I can tell you. To see him handle sailormen is a revelation; to see him handle a ship----"

He broke off and shook his head with the air of a man who despaired of doing justice to his subject. "These are the gentlemen, Peter," he said, introducing them with a wave of his hand.

Mr. Duckett raised his cap, and tugging at a small patch of reddish-brown hair strangely resembling a door-mat in texture, which grew at the base of his chin, cleared his throat and said it was a fine morning.

"Not much of a talker is Peter," said the genial Brisket. "He's a doer; that's what he is-a doer. Now, if you're willing--and I hope you are--he'll come aboard with us and talk the matter over."

This proposition being assented to after a little delay on the part of Mr. Stobell, who appeared to think Mr. Duckett's lack of connection with the hard-boiled eggs somewhat suspicious, they proceeded to Todd's Wharf and made a thorough inspection of the schooner. Mr. Chalk's eyes grew bright and his step elastic. He roamed from forecastle to cabin and from cabin to galley, and, his practice with the crow's-nest in Dialstone Lane standing him in good stead, wound up by ascending to the masthead and waving to his astonished friends below.

Mr. Todd came on board as he regained the deck, and, stroking his white beard, regarded him with an air of benevolent interest.

"There's no ill-feeling," he said, as Mr. Chalk eyed his outstretched hand somewhat dubiously. "You're a hard nut, that's what you are, and I pity anybody that has the cracking of you. A man that could come and offer me seventy pounds for a craft like this--seventy pounds, mind you," he added, with a rising colour, as he turned to the others "seventy pounds, and a face like a baby. Why, when I think of it, DAMME IF I DON'T----"

Captain Brisket laid his hand on his arm and with soothing words led him below. His voice was heard booming in the cabin until at length it ended in a roar of laughter, and Captain Brisket, appearing at the companion, beckoned them below, with a whispered injunction to Mr. Chalk to keep as much in the background as possible.

The business was soon concluded, and Mr. Chalk's eye brightened again as he looked on his new property. Captain Brisket, in high good-humour, began to talk of accommodation, and, among other things, suggested a scheme of cutting through the bulkhead at the foot of the companion-ladder and building a commodious cabin with three berths in the hold.

"There are two ladies coming," said Mr. Chalk.

Captain Brisket rubbed his chin. "I'd forgotten that," he said, slowly. "Two, did you say?"

"It doesn't matter," said Mr. Stobell, fixing him with his left eye and slowly veiling the right. "You go on with them alterations. One of the ladies can have your state-room and the other the mate's bunk."

"Where are Captain Brisket and the mate to sleep?" inquired Mr. Chalk.

"Anywhere," replied Mr. Stobell. "With the crew if they like."

Captain Brisket, looking suddenly very solemn, shook his head and said that it was impossible. He spoke in moving terms of the danger to discipline, and called upon Mr. Duckett to confirm his fears. Meantime, Mr. Stobell, opening his right eye slowly, winked with the left.

"You go on with them alterations," he repeated.

Captain Brisket started and reflected. A nod from Mr. Tredgold and a significant gesture in the direction of the unconscious Mr. Chalk decided him. "Very good, gentlemen," he said, cheerfully. "I'm in your hands, and Peter Ducket'll do what I do. It's settled he's coming, I suppose?"

Mr. Tredgold, after a long look at the anxious face of Mr. Duckett, said "Yes," and then at Captain Brisket's suggestion the party adjourned to the Jack Ashore, where in a little room upstairs, not much larger than the schooner's cabin, the preparations for the voyage were discussed in detail.

"And mind, Peter," said Captain Brisket to his friend, as the pair strolled along by the harbour after their principals had departed, "the less you say about this the better. We don't want any Biddlecombe men in it."

"Why not?" inquired the other.

"Because," replied Brisket, lowering his voice, "there's more in this than meets the eye. They're not the sort to go on a cruise to the islands for pleasure--except Chalk, that is. I've been keeping my ears open, and there's something afoot. D'ye take me?"

[Illustration: "There's more in this than meets the eye."]

Mr. Duckett nodded shrewdly.

"I'll pick a crew for 'em," said Brisket. "A man here and a man there. Biddlecombe men ain't tough enough. And now, what about that whisky you've been talking so much about?"

CHAPTER XIII

Further secrecy as to the projected trip being now useless, Mr. Tredgold made the best of the situation and talked freely concerning it. To the astonished Edward he spoke feelingly of seeing the world before the insidious encroachments of age should render it impossible; to Captain Bowers, whom he met in the High Street, he discussed destinations with the air of a man whose mind was singularly open on the subject. If he had any choice it appeared that it was in the direction of North America.

"You might do worse," said the captain, grimly.

"Chalk," said Mr. Tredgold, meditatively "Chalk favours the South. I think that he got rather excited by your description of the islands there. He is a very--"

"If you are going to try and find that island I spoke about," interrupted the captain, impatiently, "I warn you solemnly that you are wasting both your time and your money. If I had known of this voyage I would have told you so before. If you take my advice you'll sell your schooner and stick to business you understand."

Mr. Tredgold laughed easily. "We may look for it if we go that way," he said. "I believe that Chalk has bought a trowel, in case we run up against it. He has got a romantic belief in coincidences, you know."

"Very good," said the captain, turning away. "Only don't blame me, whatever happens. You can't say I have not warned you."

He clutched his stick by the middle and strode off down the road. Mr. Tredgold, gazing after his retreating figure with a tolerant smile, wondered whether he would take his share of the treasure when it was offered to him.

The anxiety of Miss Vickers at this period was intense. Particulars of the purchase of the schooner were conveyed to her by letter, but the feminine desire of talking the matter over with somebody became too strong to be denied. She even waylaid Mr. Stobell one evening, and, despite every discouragement, insisted upon walking part of the way home with him. He sat for hours afterwards recalling the tit-bits of a summary of his personal charms with which she had supplied him.

Mr. Chalk spent the time in preparations for the voyage, purchasing, among other necessaries, a stock of firearms of all shapes and sizes, with which he practised in the garden. Most marksmen diminish gradually the size of their target; but Mr. Chalk, after starting with a medicine-bottle at a hundred yards, wound up with the greenhouse at fifteen. Mrs. Chalk, who was inside at the time tending an invalid geranium, acted as marker, and, although Mr. Chalk proved by actual measurement that the bullet had not gone within six inches of her, the range was closed.

[Illustration: "Purchasing firearms, with which he practised in the garden."]

By the time the alterations on the _Fair Emily_ were finished the summer was nearly at an end, and it was not until the 20th of August that the travellers met on Binchester platform. Mrs. Chalk, in a smart yachting costume, with a white-peaked cap, stood by a pile of luggage discoursing to an admiring circle of friends who had come to see her off. She had shut up her house and paid off her servants, and her pity for Mrs. Stobell, whose husband had forbidden such a course in her case, provided a suitable and agreeable subject for conversation. Mrs. Stobell had economised in quite a different direction, and Mrs. Chalk gazed in indignant pity at the one small box and the Gladstone bag which contained her wardrobe.

[Illustration: "Mrs. Chalk stood by a pile of luggage, discoursing to an admiring circle of friends."]

"She don't want to dress up on shipboard," said Mr. Stobell.

Mrs. Chalk turned and eyed her friend's costume--a plain tweed coat and skirt, in which she had first appeared the spring before last.

"If we're away a year," she said, decidedly, "she'll be in rags before we get back."

Mr. Stobell said that fortunately they would be in a warm climate, and turned to greet the Tredgolds, who had just arrived. Then the train came in, and Mr. Chalk, appearing suddenly from behind the luggage, where he had been standing since he had first caught sight of the small, anxious face of Selina Vickers on the platform, entered the carriage and waved cheery adieus to Binchester.

To the eyes of Mr. Chalk and his wife Biddlecombe appeared to have put on

holiday attire for the occasion. With smiling satisfaction they led the way to the ferry, Mrs. Chalk's costume exciting so much attention that the remainder of the party hung behind to watch Edward Tredgold fasten his bootlace. It took two boats to convey the luggage to the schooner, and the cargo of the smaller craft shifting in mid-stream, the boatman pulled the remainder of the way with a large portion of it in his lap. Unfortunately, his mouth was free.

Mr. Chalk could not restrain a cry of admiration as he clambered on board the _Fair Emily_. The deck was as white as that of a man-of-war, and her brass-work twinkled in the sun. White paint work and the honest and healthy smell of tar completed his satisfaction. His chest expanded as he sniffed the breeze, and with a slight nautical roll paced up and down the spotless deck.

[Illustration: "A slight nautical roll."]

"And now," said Captain Brisket, after a couple of sturdy seamen had placed the men's luggage in the new cabin, "which of you ladies is going to have my state-room, and which the mate's bunk?"

Mrs. Chalk started; she had taken it for granted that she was to have the state-room. She turned and eyed her friend anxiously.

"The bunk seems to get the most air," said Mrs. Stobell. "And it's nearer the ladder in case of emergencies."

"You have it, dear," said Mrs. Chalk, tenderly. "I'm not nervous."

"But you are so fond of fresh air," said Mrs. Stobell, with a longing glance at the state-room. "I don't like to be selfish."

"You're not," said Mrs. Chalk, with conviction.

"Chalk and I will toss for it," said Mr. Stobell, who had been listening with some impatience. He spun a coin in the air, and Mr. Chalk, winning the bunk for his indignant wife, was at some pains to dilate upon its manifold advantages. Mrs. Stobell, with a protesting smile, had her things carried into the state-room, while Mrs. Chalk stood by listening coldly to plans for putting her heavy luggage in the hold.

"What time do we start?" inquired Tredgold senior, moving towards the companion-ladder.

"Four o'clock, sir," replied Brisket.

Mr. Stobell, his heavy features half-lit by an unwonted smile, turned and surveyed his friends. "I've ordered a little feed at the King of Hanover at half-past one," he said, awkwardly. "We'll be back on board by half-past three, captain."

Captain Brisket bowed, and the party were making preparations for departure when a hitch was caused by the behaviour of Mrs. Chalk, who was still brooding over the affair of the state-room. In the plainest of plain terms she declared that she did not want any luncheon and preferred to stay on board. Her gloom seemed to infect the whole party, Mr. Stobell in particular being so dejected that his wife eyed him in amazement.

"It'll spoil it for all of us if you don't come," he said, with bashful surliness. "Why, I arranged the lunch more for you than anybody. It'll be our last meal on shore."

Mrs. Chalk said that she had had so many meals on shore that she could afford to miss one, and Mr. Stobell, after eyeing her for some time in a

manner strangely at variance with his words, drew his wife to one side and whispered fiercely in her ear.

"Well, I sha'n't go without her," said Mrs. Stobell, rejoining the group. "What with losing that nice, airy bunk and getting that nasty, stuffy stateroom, I don't feel like eating."

Mrs. Chalk's countenance cleared. "Don't you like it, dear?" she said, affectionately. "Change, by all means, if you don't. Never mind about their stupid tossing."

Mrs. Stobell changed, and Mr. Tredgold senior, after waiting a decent interval for the sake of appearances, entreated both ladies to partake of the luncheon. Unable to resist any longer, Mrs. Chalk gave way, and in the ship's boat, propelled by the brawny arms of two of the crew, went ashore with the others.

Luncheon was waiting for them in the coffee-room of the inn, and the table was brave with flowers and bottles of champagne. Impressed by the occasion George the waiter attended upon them with unusual decorum, and the landlady herself entered the room two or three times to see that things were proceeding properly.

"Here's to our next meal on shore," said Mr. Chalk, raising his glass and nodding solemnly at Edward.

"That will be tea for me," said the latter. "I shall come back here, I expect, and take a solitary cup to your memory. Let me have a word as soon as you can."

"You ought to get a cable from Sydney in about six or seven months," said his father.

His son nodded. "Don't trouble about any expressions of affection," he urged; "they'd come expensive. If you find me dead of overwork when you come back----"

"I shall contest the certificate," said his father, with unwonted frivolity.

"I wonder how we shall sleep to-night?" said Mrs. Stobell, with a little shiver. "Fancy, only a few planks between us and the water!"

"That won't keep me awake," said Mrs. Chalk, decidedly; "but I shouldn't sleep a wink if I had left my girls in the house, the same as you have. I should lie awake all night wondering what tricks they'd be up to."

"But you've left your house unprotected," said Mrs. Stobell.

"The house won't run away," retorted her friend, "and I've sent all my valuables to the bank and to friends to take care of, and had all my carpets taken up and beaten and warehoused. I can't imagine what Mr. Stobell was thinking of not to let you do the same."

"There's a lot as would like to know what I'm thinking of sometimes," remarked Mr. Stobell, with a satisfied air.

Mrs. Chalk glanced at him superciliously, but, remembering that he was her host, refrained from the only comments she felt to be suitable to the occasion. Under the tactful guidance of Edward Tredgold the conversation was led to shipwrecks, fires at sea, and other subjects of the kind comforting to the landsman, Mr. Chalk favouring them with a tale of a giant octopus, culled from Captain Bowers's collection, which made Mrs. Stobell's eyes dilate with horror.

"You won't see any octopuses," said her husband. "You needn't worry about them."

He got up from the table, and crossing to the window stood with his hands behind his back, smoking one of the "King of Hanover's" cigars.

"Very good smoke this," he said, taking the cigar from his mouth and inspecting it critically. "I think I'll take a box or two with me."

"Just what I was thinking," said Mr. Jasper Tredgold. "Let's go down and see the landlord."

Mr. Stobell followed him slowly from the room, leaving Mr. Chalk and Edward to entertain the ladies. The former gentleman, clad in a neat serge suit, an open collar, and a knotted necktie, leaned back in his chair, puffing contentedly at one of the cigars which had excited the encomiums of his friends. He was just about to help himself to a little, more champagne when Mr. Stobell, reappearing at the door, requested him to come and give them the benefit of his opinion in the matter of cigars.

"They don't seem up to sample," he said, with a growl; "and you're a good judge of a cigar."

Mr. Chalk rose and followed him downstairs, where, to his great astonishment, he was at once seized by Mr. Tredgold and led outside.

"Anything wrong?" he demanded.

"We must get to the ship at once," said Tredgold, in an excited whisper. "_The men!_"

Mr. Chalk, much startled, clapped his hands to his head and spoke of going back for his hat.

"Never mind about your hat," said Stobell, impatiently; "we haven't got ours either."

He took Mr. Chalk's other arm and started off at a rapid pace.

"What is the matter?" inquired Mr. Chalk, looking from one to the other.

"Message from Captain Brisket to go on board at once, or he won't be answerable for the consequences," replied Tredgold, in a thrilling whisper; "and, above all, to bring Mr. Chalk to quiet the men."

Mr. Chalk turned a ghastly white. "Is it mutiny?" he faltered. "Already?"

[Illustration: "'Is it mutiny?' he faltered."]

"Something o' the sort," said Stobell.

Despite his friend's great strength, Mr. Chalk for one moment almost brought him to a standstill. Then, in a tremulous voice, he spoke of going to the police.

"We don't want the police," said Tredgold, sharply. "If you're afraid, Chalk, you'd better go back and stay with the ladies while we settle the affair."

Mr. Chalk flushed, and holding his head erect said no more. Mr. Duckett and a waterman were waiting for them at the stairs, and, barely giving them time to jump in, pushed off and pulled with rapid strokes to the schooner. Mr. Chalk's heart failed him as they drew near and he saw men moving rapidly about her deck. His last thoughts as he clambered over

the side were of his wife.

In blissful ignorance of his proceedings, Mrs. Chalk, having adjusted her cap in the glass and drawn on her gloves, sat patiently awaiting his return. She even drew a good-natured comparison between the time spent on choosing cigars and bonnets.

"There's plenty of time," she said, in reply to an uneasy remark of Mrs. Stobell's. "It's only just three, and we don't sail until four. What is that horrid, clanking noise?"

"Some craft getting up her anchor," said Edward, going to the window and leaning out. "WHY! HALLOA!"

"What's the matter?" said both ladies.

Edward drew in his head and regarded them with an expression of some bewilderment.

"It's the _Fair Emily,_" he said, slowly, "and she's hoisting her sails."

"Just trying the machinery to see that it's all right, I suppose," said Mrs. Chalk. "My husband said that Captain Brisket is a very careful man."

Edward Tredgold made no reply. He glanced first at three hats standing in a row on the sideboard, and then at the ladies as they came to the window, and gazed with innocent curiosity at the schooner. Even as they looked she drew slowly ahead, and a boat piled up with luggage, which had been lying the other side of her, became visible. Mrs. Chalk gazed at it in stupefaction.

"It can't be ours," she gasped. "They--they'd never dare! They--they--"

She stood for a moment staring at the hats on the sideboard, and then, followed by the others, ran hastily downstairs. There was a hurried questioning of the astonished landlady, and then, Mrs. Chalk leading, they made their way to the stairs at a pace remarkable in a woman of her age and figure. Mrs. Stobell, assisted by Edward Tredgold, did her best to keep up with her, but she reached the goal some distance ahead, and, jumping heavily into a boat, pointed to the fast-receding schooner and bade the boatman overtake it.

"Can't be done, ma'am," said the man, staring, "not without wings."

"Row hard," said Mrs. Chalk, in a voice of sharp encouragement.

The boatman, a man of few words, jerked his thumb in the direction of the _Fair Emily,_ which was already responding to the motion of the sea outside.

"You run up the road on to them cliffs and wave to'em," he said, slowly. "Wave 'ard."

Mrs. Chalk hesitated, and then, stepping out of the boat, resumed the pursuit by land. Ten minutes' hurried walking brought them to the cliffs, and standing boldly on the verge she enacted, to the great admiration of a small crowd, the part of a human semaphore.

[Illustration: "She enacted, to the great admiration of a small crowd, the part of a human semaphore."]

The schooner, her bows pointing gradually seawards, for some time made no sign. Then a little group clustered at the stern and waved farewells.

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