

Dialstone Lane, Part 2. eBook

Dialstone Lane, Part 2. by W. W. Jacobs

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CHAPTER V

Mr. Chalk's expedition to the Southern Seas became a standing joke with the captain, and he waylaid him on several occasions to inquire into the progress he was making, and to give him advice suitable for all known emergencies at sea, together with a few that are unknown. Even Mr. Chalk began to tire of his pleasantries, and, after listening to a surprising account of a Scotch vessel which always sailed backwards when the men whistled on Sundays, signified his displeasure by staying away from Dialstone Lane for some time.

[Illustration: "He waylaid him on several occasions to inquire into the progress he was making."]

Deprived of his society the captain consoled himself with that of Edward Tredgold, a young man for whom he was beginning to entertain a strong partiality, and whose observations of Binchester folk, flavoured with a touch of good-natured malice, were a source of never-failing interest.

"He is very wide-awake," he said to his niece. "There isn't much that escapes him."

Miss Drewitt, gazing idly out of window, said that she had not noticed it.

"Very clever at his business, I understand," said the captain.

His niece said that he had always appeared to her—when she had happened to give the matter a thought—as a picture of indolence.

"Ah! that's only his manner," replied the other, warmly. "He's a young man that's going to get on; he's going to make his mark. His father's got money, and he'll make more of it."

Something in the tone of his voice attracted his niece's attention, and she looked at him sharply as an almost incredible suspicion as to the motive of this conversation flashed on her.

"I don't like to see young men too fond of money," she observed, sedately.

"I didn't say that," said the captain, eagerly. "If anything, he is too open-handed. What I meant was that he isn't lazy."

"He seems to be very fond of coming to see you," said Prudence, by way of encouragement.

"Ah!" said the captain, "and——"

He stopped abruptly as the girl faced round. "And?" she prompted.

"And the crow's-nest," concluded the captain, somewhat lamely.

There was no longer room for doubt. Scarce two months ashore and he was trying his hand at matchmaking. Fresh from a world of obedient satellites, and ships responding to the lightest touch of the helm, he was venturing with all the confidence of ignorance upon the most delicate of human undertakings. Miss Drewitt, eyeing him with perfect comprehension and some little severity, sat aghast at his hardihood.

"He's very fond of going up there," said Captain Bowers, somewhat discomfited.

"Yes, he and Joseph have much in common," remarked Miss Drewitt, casually. "They're some what alike, too, I always fancy."

"Alike!" exclaimed the astonished captain.

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"Edward Tredgold like Joseph? Why, you must be dreaming."

"Perhaps it's only my fancy," conceded Miss Drewitt, "but I always think that I can see a likeness."

"There isn't the slightest resemblance in the world," said the captain. "There isn't a single feature alike. Besides, haven't you ever noticed what a stupid expression Joseph has got?"

"Yes," said Miss Drewitt.

The captain scratched his ear and regarded her closely, but Miss Drewitt's face was statuesque in its repose.

"There—there's nothing wrong with your eyes, my dear?" he ventured, anxiously—"short sight or anything of that sort?"

"I don't think so," said his niece, gravely.

Captain Bowers shifted in his chair and, convinced that such a superficial observer must have overlooked many things, pointed out several admirable qualities in Edward Tredgold which he felt sure must have escaped her notice. The surprise with which Miss Drewitt greeted them all confirmed him in this opinion, and he was glad to think that he had called her attention to them ere it was too late.

"He's very popular in Binchester," he said, impressively. "Chalk told me that he is surprised he has not been married before now, seeing the way that he is run after."

"Dear me!" said his niece, with suppressed viciousness.

The captain smiled. He resolved to stand out for a long engagement when Mr. Tredgold came to him, and to stipulate also that they should not leave Binchester. An admirer in London to whom his niece had once or twice alluded—forgetting to mention that he was only ten—began to fade into what the captain considered proper obscurity.

Mr. Edward Tredgold reaped some of the benefits of this conversation when he called a day or two afterwards. The captain was out, but, encouraged by Mr. Tasker, who represented that his return might be looked for at any moment, he waited for over an hour, and was on the point of departure when Miss Drewitt entered.

"I should think that you must be tired of waiting?" she said, when he had explained.

"I was just going," said Mr. Tredgold, as he resumed his seat. "If you had been five minutes later you would have found an empty chair. I suppose Captain Bowers won't be long now?"



"He might be," said the girl.

"I'll give him a little while longer if I may," said Mr. Tredgold. "I'm very glad now that I waited—very glad indeed."

There was so much meaning in his voice that Miss Drewitt felt compelled to ask the reason.

"Because I was tired when I came in and the rest has done me good," explained Mr. Tredgold, with much simplicity. "Do you know that I sometimes think I work too hard?"

Miss Drewitt raised her eyebrows slightly and said, "Indeed!—I am very glad that you are rested," she added, after a pause.

"Thank you," said Mr. Tredgold, gratefully. "I came to see the captain about a card-table I've discovered for him. It's a Queen Anne, I believe; one of the best things I've ever seen. It's poked away in the back room of a cottage, and I only discovered it by accident."

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"It's very kind of you," said Miss Drewitt, coldly, "but I don't think that my uncle wants any more furniture; the room is pretty full now."

"I was thinking of it for your room," said Mr. Tredgold.

"Thank you, but my room is full," said the girl, sharply.

"It would go in that odd little recess by the fireplace," continued the unmoved Mr. Tredgold. "We tried to get a small table for it before you came, but we couldn't see anything we fancied. I promised the captain I'd keep my eyes open for something."

Miss Drewitt looked at him with growing indignation, and wondered whether Mr. Chalk had added her to his list of the victims of Mr. Tredgold's blandishments.

"Why not buy it for yourself?" she demanded.

"No money," said Mr. Tredgold, shaking his head. "You forget that I lost two pounds to Chalk the other day, owing to your efforts."

"Well, I don't wish for it," said Miss Drewitt, firmly. "Please don't say anything to my uncle about it."

Mr. Tredgold looked disappointed. "As you please, of course," he remarked.

"Old things always seem a little bit musty," said the girl, softening a little. "I, should think that I saw the ghosts of dead and gone players sitting round the table. I remember reading a story about that once."

"Well, what about the other things?" said Mr. Tredgold. "Look at those old chairs, full of ghosts sitting piled up in each other's laps—there's no reason why you should only see one sitter at a time. Think of that beautifully-carved four-poster."

"My uncle bought that," said Miss Drewitt, somewhat irrelevantly.

"Yes, but I got it for him," said Mr. Tredgold. "You can't pick up a thing like that at a moment's notice—I had my eye on it for years; all the time old Brown was bedridden, in fact. I used to go and see him and take him tobacco, and he promised me that I should have it when he had done with it."

"Done with it?" repeated the girl, in a startled voice. "Did—did he get another one, then?"

[Illustration: "'Done with it?' repeated the girl, in a startled voice."]

Mr. Tredgold, roused from the pleasurable reminiscences of a collector, remembered himself suddenly. "Oh, yes, he got another one," he said, soothingly.

"Is—is he bedridden now?" inquired the girl.

"I haven't seen him for some time," said Mr. Tredgold, truthfully. "He gave up smoking and—and then I didn't go to see him, you know."

"He's dead," said Miss Drewitt, shivering. "He died in—— Oh, you are horrible!"

"That carving—" began Mr. Tredgold.

"Don't talk about it, please," said the indignant Miss Drewitt. "I can't understand why my uncle should have listened to your advice at all; you must have forced it on him. I'm sure he didn't know how you got it."

"Yes, he did," said the other. "In fact, it was intended for his room at first. He was quite pleased with it."

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"Why did he alter his mind, then?" inquired the girl.

Mr. Tredgold looked suddenly at the opposite wall, but his lips quivered and his eyes watered. Miss Drewitt, reading these signs aright, was justly incensed.

"I don't believe it," she cried.

"He said that you didn't know and he did," said Mr. Tredgold, apologetically. "I talk too much. I'd no business to let out about old Brown, but I forgot for the moment—sailors are always prone to childish superstitions."

"Are you talking about my uncle?" inquired Miss Drewitt, with ominous calm.

"They were his own words," said the other.

Miss Drewitt, feeling herself baffled, sat for some time wondering how to find fault politely with the young man before her. Her mind was full of subject-matter, but the politeness easily eluded her. She threw out after a time the suggestion that his presence at the bedside of sick people was not likely to add to their comfort.

Captain Bowers entered before the aggrieved Mr. Tredgold could think of a fitting reply, and after a hasty greeting insisted upon his staying for a cup of tea. By a glance in the visitor's direction and a faint smile Miss Drewitt was understood to endorse the invitation.

The captain's satisfaction at finding them together was complete, but a little misunderstanding was caused all round, when Mr. Tasker came in with the tea, by the series of nods and blinks by which the captain strove to call his niece's attention to various facial and other differences between his servant and their visitor. Mr. Tredgold, after standing it for some time, created a little consternation by inquiring whether he had got a smut on his nose.

The captain was practically the only talker at tea, but the presence of two attentive listeners prevented him from discovering the fact. He described his afternoon's ramble at such length that it was getting late by the time they had finished.

"Stay and smoke a pipe," he said, as he sought his accustomed chair.

Mr. Tredgold assented in the usual manner by saying that he ought to be going, and instead of one pipe smoked three or four. The light failed and the lamp was lit, but he still stayed on until the sound of subdued but argumentative voices beyond the drawn blind apprised them of other visitors. The thin tones of Mr. Chalk came through the open window, apparently engaged in argument with a bear. A faint sound of hustling and growling, followed by a gentle bumping against the door, seemed to indicate that he—or perhaps the bear—was having recourse to physical force.

“Come in,” cried the captain.

The door opened and Mr. Chalk, somewhat flushed, entered, leading Mr. Stobell. The latter gentleman seemed in a surly and reluctant frame of mind, and having exchanged greetings subsided silently into a chair and sat eyeing Mr. Chalk, who, somewhat nervous as to his reception after so long an absence, plunged at once into conversation.

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[Illustration: "Mr. Chalk entered, leading Mr. Stobell."]

"I thought I should find you here," he said, pleasantly, to Edward Tredgold.

"Why?" demanded Mr. Tredgold, with what Mr. Chalk thought unnecessary abruptness.

"Well—well, because you generally are here, I suppose," he said, somewhat taken aback.

Mr. Tredgold favoured him with a scowl, and a somewhat uncomfortable silence ensued.

"Stobell wanted to see you again," said Mr. Chalk, turning to the captain. "He's done nothing but talk about you ever since he was here last."

Captain Bowers said he was glad to see him; Mr. Stobell returned the courtesy with an odd noise in his throat and a strange glare at Mr. Chalk.

"I met him to-night," continued that gentleman, "and nothing would do for him but to come on here."

It was evident from the laboured respiration of the ardent Mr. Stobell, coupled with a word or two which had filtered through the window, that the ingenious Mr. Chalk was using him as a stalking-horse. From the fact that Mr. Stobell made no denial it was none the less evident, despite the growing blackness of his appearance, that he was a party to the arrangement. The captain began to see the reason.

"It's all about that island," explained Mr. Chalk; "he can talk of nothing else."

The captain suppressed a groan, and Mr. Tredgold endeavoured, but without success, to exchange smiles with Miss Drewitt.

"Aye, aye," said the captain, desperately.

"He's as eager as a child that's going to its first pantomime," continued Mr. Chalk.

Mr. Stobell's appearance was so alarming that he broke off and eyed him with growing uneasiness.

"You were talking about a pantomime," said Mr. Tredgold, after a long pause.

Mr. Chalk cast an imploring glance at Mr. Stobell to remind him of their compact, and resumed.

"Talks of nothing else," he said, watching his friend, "and can't sleep for thinking of it."

"That's bad," said Mr. Tredgold, sympathetically. "Has he tried shutting his eyes and counting sheep jumping over a stile?"

"No, he ain't," said Mr. Stobell, exploding suddenly, and turning a threatening glance on the speaker. "And what's more," he added, in more ordinary tones, "he ain't going to."

"We—we've been thinking of that trip again," interposed Mr. Chalk, hurriedly. "The more Stobell thinks of it the more he likes it. You know what you said the last time we were here?"

The captain wrinkled his brows and looked at him inquiringly.

"Told us to go and find the island," Mr. Chalk reminded him. "You said, 'I've shown you a map of the island; now go and find it.'"

"Oh, aye," said the captain, with a laugh, "so I did."

"Stobell was wondering," continued Mr. Chalk, "whether you couldn't give us just a little bit more of a hint, without breaking your word, of course."

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"I don't see how it could be done," replied the captain, pondering; "a promise is a promise."

Mr. Chalk's face fell. He moved his chair aside mechanically to make room for Mr. Tasker, who had entered with a tray and glasses, and sat staring at the floor. Then he raised his eyes and met a significant glance from Mr. Stobell.

"I suppose we may have another look at the map?" he said, softly; "just a glance to freshen our memories."

The captain, who had drawn his chair to the table to preside over the tray, looked up impatiently.

"No," he said, brusquely.

Mr. Chalk looked hurt. "I'm very sorry," he said, in surprise at the captain's tone. "You showed it to us the other day, and I didn't think—"

"The fact is," said the captain, in a more gentle voice—"the fact is, I can't."

"Can't?" repeated the other.

"It is not very pleasant to keep on refusing friends," said the captain, making amends for his harshness by pouring a serious overdose of whisky into Mr. Chalk's glass, "and it's only natural for you to be anxious about it, so I removed the temptation out of my way."

"Removed the temptation?" repeated Mr. Chalk.

"I burnt the map," said the captain, with a smile.

"Burnt it?" gasped Mr. Chalk. "*Burnt* it?"

"Burnt it to ashes," said the captain, jovially.

"It's a load off my mind. I ought to have done it before. In fact, I never ought to have made the map at all."

Mr. Chalk stared at him in speechless dismay.

"Try that," said the captain, handing Mr. Stobell his glass.

Mr. Stobell took it from mere force of habit, and sat holding it in his hand as though he had forgotten what to do with it.

"I did it yesterday morning," said the captain, noticing their consternation. "I had just lit my pipe after breakfast, and I suppose the match put me in mind of it. I took out the

map and set light to it at Cape Silvio. The flame ran half-way round the coast and then popped through the middle of the paper and converted Mount Lonesome into a volcano."

He gave a boisterous laugh and, raising his glass, nodded to Mr. Stobell. Mr. Stobell, who was just about to drink, lowered his glass again and frowned.

"I don't see anything to laugh at," he said, deliberately.

"He can't have been listening," said Mr. Tredgold, in a low voice, to Miss Drewitt.

"Well, it's done now," said the captain, genially. "You—you're not going?"

"Yes, I am," said Mr. Stobell.

He bade them good-night, and then pausing at the door stood and surveyed them; even Mr. Tasker, who was gliding in unobtrusively with a jug of water, shared in his regards.

"When I think of the orphans and widows," he said, bitterly, "I——"

He opened the door suddenly and, closing it behind him, breathed the rest to Dialstone Lane. An aged woman sitting in a doorway said, "*Hush!*"

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CHAPTER VI

Miss Drewitt sat for some time in her room after the visitors had departed, eyeing with some disfavour the genuine antiques which she owed to the enterprise, not to say officiousness, of Edward Tredgold. That they were in excellent taste was undeniable, but there was a flavour of age and a suspicion of decay about them which did not make for cheerfulness.

She rose at last, and taking off her watch went through the nightly task of wondering where she had put the key after using it last. It was not until she had twice made a fruitless tour of the room with the candle that she remembered that she had left it on the mantelpiece downstairs.

The captain was still below, and after a moment's hesitation she opened her door and went softly down the steep winding stairs.

The door at the foot stood open, and revealed the captain standing by the table. There was an air of perplexity and anxiety about him such as she had never seen before, and as she waited he crossed to the bureau, which stood open, and searched feverishly among the papers which littered it. Apparently dissatisfied with the result, he moved it out bodily and looked behind and beneath it. Coming to an erect position again he suddenly became aware of the presence of his niece.

[Illustration: "He moved it out bodily and looked behind and beneath it."]

"It's gone," he said, in an amazed voice.

"Gone?" repeated Prudence. "What has gone?"

"The map," said the captain, tumbling his beard. "I put it in this end pigeon-hole the other night after showing it and I haven't touched it since; and it's gone."

"But you burnt it!" said Prudence, with an astonished laugh.

The captain started. "No; I was going to," he said, eyeing her in manifest confusion.

"But you said that you had," persisted his niece.

"Yes," stammered the captain, "I know I did, but I hadn't. I was just looking ahead a bit, that was all. I went to the bureau just now to do it."

Miss Drewitt eyed him with mild reproach. "You even described how you did it," she said, slowly. "You said that Mount Lonesome turned into a volcano. Wasn't it true?"

“Figure o’ speech, my dear,” said the unhappy captain; “I’ve got a talent for description that runs away with me at times.”

His niece gazed at him in perplexity.

“You know what Chalk is,” said Captain Bowers, appealingly. “I was going to do it yesterday, only I forgot it, and he would have gone down on his knees for another sight of it. I don’t like to seem disobliging to friends, and it seemed to me a good way out of it. Chalk is so eager— it’s like refusing a child, and I hurt his feelings only the other day.”

“Perhaps you burnt it after all and forgot it?” said Prudence.

For the first time in her knowledge of him the captain got irritable with her. “I’ve not burnt it,” he said, sharply. “Where’s that Joseph? He must know something about it!”

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He moved to the foot of the staircase, but Miss Drewitt laid a detaining hand on his arm.

“Joseph was in the room when you said that you had burnt it,” she exclaimed. “You can’t contradict yourself like that before him. Besides, I’m sure he has had nothing to do with it.”

“Somebody’s got it,” grumbled her uncle, pausing.

He dropped into his chair and looked at her in consternation. “Good heavens! Suppose they go after it,” he said, in a choking voice.

“Well, it won’t be your fault,” said Prudence. “You haven’t broken your word intentionally.”

But the captain paid no heed. He was staring wild-eyed into vacancy and rumpling his grey hair until it stood at all angles. His face reflected varying emotions.

“Somebody has got it,” he said again.

“Whoever it is will get no good by it,” said Miss Drewitt, who had had a pious upbringing.

“And if they’ve got the map they’ll go after the island,” said the captain, pursuing his train of thought.

“Perhaps they won’t find it after all,” said Prudence.

“Perhaps they won’t,” said the captain, gruffly.

He got up and paced the room restlessly. Prudence, watching him with much sympathy, had a sudden idea.

“Edward Tredgold was in here alone this afternoon,” she said, significantly.

“No, no,” said the captain, warmly. “Whoever has got it, it isn’t Edward Tredgold. I expect the talk about it has leaked out and somebody has slipped in and taken it. I ought to have been more careful.”

“He started when you said that you had burnt it,” persisted Miss Drewitt, unwilling to give up a theory so much to her liking. “You mark my words if his father and Mr. Chalk and that Mr. Stobell don’t go away for a holiday soon. Good-night.”

She kissed him affectionately under the left eye—a place overlooked by his beard—and went upstairs again. The captain filled his pipe and, resuming his chair, sat in a brown study until the clock of the neighbouring church struck two.

It was about the same time that Mr. Chalk fell asleep, thoroughly worn out by the events of the evening and a conversation with Mr. Stobell and Mr. Tredgold, whom he had met on the way home waiting for him.

The opinion of Mr. Tredgold senior, an opinion in which Mr. Stobell fully acquiesced, was that Mr. Chalk had ruined everything by displaying all along a youthful impetuosity sadly out of place in one of his years and standing. The offender's plea that he had thought it best to strike while the iron was hot only exposed him to further contumely.

"Well, it's no good talking about it," said Mr. Tredgold, impatiently. "It's all over now and done with."

"Half a million clean chucked away," said Mr. Stobell.

Mr. Chalk shook his head and, finding that his friends had by no means exhausted the subject, suddenly bethought himself of an engagement and left them.

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Miss Vickers, who heard the news from Mr. Joseph Tasker, received it with an amount of amazement highly gratifying to his powers as a narrator. Her strongly expressed opinion afterwards that he had misunderstood what he had heard was not so agreeable.

"I suppose I can believe my own ears?" he said, in an injured voice.

"He must have been making fun of them all," said Selina. "He couldn't have burnt it—he couldn't."

"Why not?" inquired the other, surprised at her vehemence.

Miss Vickers hesitated. "Because it would be such a silly thing to do," she said, at last. "Now, tell me what you heard all over again—slow."

Mr. Tasker complied.

"I can't make head or tail of it," said Miss Vickers when he had finished.

"Seems simple enough to me," said Joseph, staring at her.

"All things seem simple when you don't know them," said Miss Vickers, vaguely.

She walked home in a thoughtful mood, and for a day or two went about the house with an air of preoccupation which was a source of much speculation to the family. George Vickers, aged six, was driven to the verge of madness by being washed. Three times in succession one morning; a gag of well-soaped flannel being applied with mechanical regularity each time that he strove to point out the unwashed condition of Martha and Charles. His turn came when the exultant couple, charged with having made themselves dirty in the shortest time on record, were deprived of their breakfast. Mr. Vickers, having committed one or two minor misdemeanours unchallenged, attributed his daughter's condition to love, and began to speak of that passion with more indulgence than he had done since his marriage.

Miss Vickers's abstraction, however, lasted but three days. On the fourth she was herself again, and, having spent the day in hard work, dressed herself with unusual care in the evening and went out.

The evening was fine and the air, to one who had been at work indoors all day, delightful. Miss Vickers walked briskly along with the smile of a person who has solved a difficult problem, but as she drew near the Horse and Groom, a hostelry of retiring habits, standing well back from the road, the smile faded and she stood face to face with the stern realities of life.

[Illustration: "She stood face to face with the stern realities of life."]

A few yards from the side-door Mr. Vickers stood smoking a contemplative pipe; the side-door itself had just closed behind a tall man in corduroys, who bore in his right hand a large mug made of pewter.

“Ho!” said Selina, “so this is how you go on the moment my back is turned, is it?”

“What d’ye mean?” demanded Mr. Vickers, blustering.

“You know what I mean,” said his daughter, “standing outside and sending Bill Russell in to get you beer. That’s what I mean.”

Mr. Vickers turned, and with a little dramatic start intimated that he had caught sight of Mr. Russell for the first time that evening. Mr. Russell himself sought to improve the occasion.

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"Wish I may die—" he began, solemnly.

"Like a policeman," continued Selina, regarding her father indignantly.

"I wish I was a policeman," muttered Mr. Vickers. "I'd show some of you."

"What have you got to say for yourself?" demanded Miss Vickers, shortly.

"Nothing," said the culprit. "I s'pose I can stand where I like? There's no law agin it."

"Do you mean to say that you didn't send Bill in to get you some beer?" said his daughter.

"Certainly not," said Mr. Vickers, with great indignation. "I shouldn't think of such a thing."

"I shouldn't get it if 'e did," said Mr. Russell, virtuously.

"Whose beer is it, then?" said Selina.

"Why, Bill's, I s'pose; how should I know?" replied Mr. Vickers.

"Yes, it's mine," said Mr. Russell.

"Drink it up, then," commanded Miss Vickers, sternly.

Both men started, and then Mr. Russell, bestowing a look of infinite compassion upon his unfortunate friend, raised the mug obediently to his sensitive lips. Always a kind-hearted man, he was glad when the gradual tilting necessary to the occasion had blotted out the picture of indignation which raged helplessly before him.

"I 'ope you're satisfied now," he said severely to the girl, as he turned a triumphant glance on Mr. Vickers, which that gentleman met with a cold stare.

Miss Vickers paid no heed. "You get off home," she said to her father; "I'll see to the Horse and Groom to-morrow."

Mr. Vickers muttered something under his breath, and then, with a forlorn attempt at dignity, departed.

Miss Vickers, ignoring the remarks of one or two fathers of families who were volunteering information as to what they would do if she were their daughter, watched him out of sight and resumed her walk. She turned once or twice as though to make sure that she was not observed, and then, making her way in the direction of Mr. Chalk's house, approached it cautiously from the back.

Mr. Chalk, who was in the garden engaged in the useful and healthful occupation of digging, became aware after a time of a low whistle proceeding from the farther end. He glanced almost mechanically in that direction, and then nearly dropped his spade as he made out a girl's head surmounted by a large hat. The light was getting dim, but the hat had an odd appearance of familiarity. A stealthy glance in the other direction showed him the figure of Mrs. Chalk standing to attention just inside the open French windows of the drawing-room.

[Illustration: "He made out a girl's head surmounted by a large hat."]

The whistle came again, slightly increased in volume. Mr. Chalk, pausing merely to wipe his brow, which had suddenly become very damp, bent to his work with renewed vigour. It is an old idea that whistling aids manual labour; Mr. Chalk, moistening his lips with a tongue grown all too feverish for the task, began to whistle a popular air with much liveliness.

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The idea was ingenious, but hopeless from the start. The whistle at the end of the garden became piercing in its endeavour to attract attention, and, what was worse, developed an odd note of entreaty. Mr. Chalk, pale with apprehension, could bear no more.

"Well, I think I've done enough for one night," he observed, cheerfully and loudly, as he thrust his spade into the ground and took his coat from a neighbouring bush.

He turned to go indoors and, knowing his wife's objection to dirty boots, made for the door near the kitchen. As he passed the drawing-room window, however, a low but imperative voice pronounced his name.

"Yes, my dear," said Mr. Chalk.

"There's a friend of yours whistling for you," said his wife, with forced calmness.

"Whistling?" said Mr. Chalk, with as much surprise as a man could assume in face of the noise from the bottom of the garden.

"Do you mean to tell me you can't hear it?" demanded his wife, in a choking voice.

Mr. Chalk lost his presence of mind. "I thought it was a bird," he said, assuming a listening attitude.

"*Bird?*" gasped the indignant Mrs. Chalk. "Look down there. Do you call that a bird?"

Mr. Chalk looked and uttered a little cry of astonishment.

"I suppose she wants to see one of the servants," he said, at last; "but why doesn't she go round to the side entrance? I shall have to speak to them about it."

Mrs. Chalk drew herself up and eyed him with superb disdain.

"Go down and speak to her," she commanded. "Certainly not," said Mr. Chalk, braving her, although his voice trembled.

"Why not?"

"Because if I did you would ask me what she said, and when I told you you wouldn't believe me," said Mr. Chalk.

"You—you decline to go down?" said his wife, in a voice shaking with emotion.

"I do," said Mr. Chalk, firmly. "Why don't you go yourself?"

Mrs. Chalk eyed him for a moment in scornful silence, and then stepped to the window and sailed majestically down the garden. Mr. Chalk watched her, with parted lips, and then he began to breathe more freely as the whistle ceased and the head suddenly disappeared. Still a little nervous, he watched his wife to the end of the garden and saw her crane her head over the fence. By the time she returned he was sitting in an attitude of careless ease, with his back to the window.

“Well?” he said, with assurance.

Mrs. Chalk stood stock-still, and the intensity of her gaze drew Mr. Chalk’s eyes to her face despite his will. For a few seconds she gazed at him in silence, and then, drawing her skirts together, swept violently out of the room.

CHAPTER VII

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Mr. Chalk made but a poor breakfast next morning, the effort to display a feeling of proper sympathy with Mrs. Chalk, who was presiding in gloomy silence at the coffee-pot, and at the same time to maintain an air of cheerful innocence as to the cause of her behaviour, being almost beyond his powers. He chipped his egg with a painstaking attempt to avoid noise, and swallowed each mouthful with a feeble pretence of not knowing that she was watching him as he ate. Her glance conveyed a scornful reproach that he could eat at all in such circumstances, and, that there might be no mistake as to her own feelings, she ostentatiously pushed the toast-rack and egg-stand away from her.

“You—you’re not eating, my dear,” said Mr. Chalk.

“If I ate anything it would choke me,” was the reply.

Mr. Chalk affected surprise, but his voice quavered. To cover his discomfiture he passed his cup up for more coffee, shivering despite himself, as he noticed the elaborate care which Mrs. Chalk displayed in rinsing out the cup and filling it to the very brim. Beyond raising her eyes to the ceiling when he took another piece of toast, she made no sign.

[Illustration: “He passed his cup up for more coffee.”]

“You’re not looking yourself,” ventured Mr. Chalk, after a time.

His wife received the information silence.

“I’ve noticed it for some time,” said the thoughtful husband, making another effort. “It’s worried me.”

“I’m not getting younger, I know,” assented Mrs. Chalk. “But if you think that that’s any excuse for your goings on, you’re mistaken.”

Mr. Chalk murmured something to the effect that he did not understand her.

“You understand well enough,” was the reply. “When that girl came whistling over the fence last night you said you thought it was a bird.”

“I did,” said Mr. Chalk, hastily taking a spoonful of egg.

Mrs. Chalk’s face flamed. “What sort of bird?” she demanded.

“Singin’ bird,” replied her husband, with nervous glibness.

Mrs. Chalk left the room.

Mr. Chalk finished his breakfast with an effort, and then, moving to the window, lit his pipe and sat for some time in moody thought. A little natural curiosity as to the identity of the fair whistler would, however, not be denied, and the names of Binchester's fairest daughters passed in review before him. Almost unconsciously he got up and surveyed himself in the glass.

"There's no accounting for tastes," he said to himself, in modest explanation.

His mind still dwelt on the subject as he stood in the hall later on in the morning, brushing his hat, preparatory to taking his usual walk. Mrs. Chalk, upstairs listening, thought that he would never have finished, and drew her own conclusions.

With the air of a man whose time hangs upon his hands Mr. Chalk sauntered slowly through the narrow by-ways of Binchester. He read all the notices pasted on the door of the Town Hall and bought some stamps at the post-office, but the morning dragged slowly, and he bent his steps at last in the direction of Tredgold's office, in the faint hope of a little conversation.

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To his surprise, Mr. Tredgold senior was in an unusually affable mood. He pushed his papers aside at once, and, motioning his visitor to a chair, greeted him with much heartiness.

“Just the man I wanted to see,” he said, cheerfully. “I want you to come round to my place at eight o’clock to-night. I’ve just seen Stobell, and he’s coming too.”

“I will if I can,” said Mr. Chalk.

“You must come,” said the other, seriously. “It’s business.”

“Business!” said Mr. Chalk. “I don’t see—”

“You will to-night,” said Mr. Tredgold, with a mysterious smile. “I’ve sent Edward off to town on business, and we sha’n’t be interrupted. Goodbye. I’m busy.”

He shook hands with his visitor and led him to the door; Chalk, after a vain attempt to obtain particulars, walked slowly home.

Despite his curiosity it was nearly half-past eight when he arrived at Mr. Tredgold’s that evening, and was admitted by his host. The latter, with a somewhat trite remark about the virtues of punctuality, led the way upstairs and threw open the door of his study.

“Here he is,” he announced.

A slender figure sitting bolt upright in a large grandfather-chair turned at their entrance, and revealed to the astonished Mr. Chalk the expressive features of Miss Selina Vickers; facing her at the opposite side of the room Mr. Stobell, palpably ruffled, eyed her balefully.

“This is a new client of mine,” said Tredgold, indicating Miss Vickers.

[Illustration: “‘This is a new client of mine,’ said Tredgold.”]

Mr. Chalk said “Good evening.”

“I tried to get a word with you last night,” said Miss Vickers. “I was down at the bottom of your garden whistling for over ten minutes as hard as I could whistle. I wonder you didn’t hear me.”

“Hear you!” cried Mr. Chalk, guiltily conscious of a feeling of disappointment quite beyond his control. “What do you mean by coming and whistling for me, eh? What do you mean by it?”

"I wanted to see you private," said Miss Vickers, calmly, "but it's just as well. I went and saw Mr. Tredgold this morning instead."

"On a matter of business," said Mr. Tredgold, looking at her. "She came to me, as one of the ordinary public, about some—ha—land she's interested in."

"An island," corroborated Miss Vickers.

Mr. Chalk took a chair and looked round in amazement. "What, another?" he said, faintly.

Mr. Tredgold coughed. "My client is not a rich woman," he began.

"Chalk knows that," interrupted Mr. Stobell. "The airs and graces that girl will give herself if you go on like that——"

"But she has some property there which she is anxious to obtain," continued Mr. Tredgold, with a warning glance at the speaker. "That being so——"

"Make him wish he may die first," interposed Miss Vickers, briskly.

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"Yes, yes; that's all right," said Tredgold, meeting Mr. Chalk's startled gaze.

"It will be when he's done it," retorted the determined Miss Vickers.

"It's a secret," explained Mr. Tredgold, addressing his staring friend. "And you must swear to keep it if it's told you. That's what she means. I've had to and so has Stobell."

A fierce grunt from Mr. Stobell, who was still suffering from the remembrance of an indignity against which he had protested in vain, came as confirmation. Then the marvelling Mr. Chalk rose, and instructed by Miss Vickers took an oath, the efficacy of which consisted in a fervent hope that he might die if he broke it.

"But what's it all about?" he inquired, plaintively.

Mr. Tredgold conferred with Miss Vickers, and that lady, after a moment's hesitation, drew a folded paper from her bosom and beckoned to Mr. Chalk. With a cry of amazement he recognised the identical map of Bowers's Island, which he had last seen in the hands of its namesake. It was impossible to mistake it, although an attempt to take it in his hand was promptly frustrated by the owner.

"But Captain Bowers said that he had burnt it," he cried.

Mr. Tredgold eyed him coldly. "Burnt what?" he inquired.

"The map," was the reply.

"Just so," said Tredgold. "You told me he had burnt a map."

"Is this another, then?" inquired Mr. Chalk.

"P'r'aps," said Miss Vickers, briefly.

"As the captain said he had burnt his, this must be another," said Tredgold.

"Didn't he burn it, then?" inquired Mr. Chalk.

"I should be sorry to disbelieve Captain Bowers," said Tredgold.

"Couldn't be done," said the brooding Stobell, "not if you tried."

Mr. Chalk sat still and eyed them in perplexity.

"There is no doubt that this map refers to the same treasure as the one Captain Bowers had," said Tredgold, with the air of one making a generous admission. "My client has not volunteered any statement as to how it came into her possession—"

“And she’s not going to,” put in Miss Vickers, dispassionately.

“It is enough for me that we have got it,” resumed Mr. Tredgold. “Now, we want you to join us in fitting out a ship and recovering the treasure. Equal expenses; equal shares.”

“What about Captain Bowers?” inquired Mr. Chalk.

“He is to have an equal share without any of the expense,” said Tredgold. “You know he gave us permission to find it if we could, so we are not injuring anybody.”

“He told us to go and find it, if you remember,” said Stobell, “and we’re going to.”

“He’ll have a fortune handed to him without any trouble or being responsible in any way,” said Tredgold, impressively. “I should like to think there was somebody working to put a fortune like that into my lap. We shall have a fifth each.”

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"That'll be five-thousand-pounds for you, Selina," said Mr. Stobell, with a would-be benevolent smile.

Miss Vickers turned a composed little face upon him and languidly closed one eye.

"I had two prizes for arithmetic when I was at school," she remarked; "and don't you call me Selina, unless you want to be called Bobbie."

A sharp exclamation from Mr. Tredgold stopped all but the first three words of Mr. Stobell's retort, but he said the rest under his breath with considerable relish.

"Don't mind him," said Miss Vickers. "I'm half sorry I let him join, now. A man that used to work for him once told me that he was only half a gentleman, but he'd never seen that half."

Mr. Stobell, afraid to trust himself, got up and leaned out of the window.

"Well, we're all agreed, then," said Tredgold, looking round.

"Half a second," said Miss Vickers. "Before I part with this map you've all got to sign a paper promising me my proper share, and to give me twenty pounds down."

Mr. Tredgold hesitated and looked serious. Mr. Chalk, somewhat dazed by the events of the evening, blinked at him solemnly. Mr. Stobell withdrew his head from the window and spoke.

"*Twenty-pounds!*" he growled.

"Twenty pounds," repeated Miss Vickers, "or four hundred shillings, if you like it better. If you wait a moment I'll make it pennies."

She leaned back in her chair and, screwing her eyes tight, began the calculation. "Twelve noughts are nought," she said, in a gabbling whisper; "twelve noughts are nought, twelve fours are forty—"

"All right," said Mr. Tredgold, who had been regarding this performance with astonished disapproval. "You shall have the twenty pounds, but there is no necessity for us to sign any paper."

"No, there's no necessity," said Miss Vickers, opening her small, sharp eyes again, "only, if you don't do it, I'll find somebody that will."

Mr. Tredgold argued with her, but in vain; Mr. Chalk, taking up the argument and expanding it, fared no better; and Mr. Stobell, opening his mouth to contribute his mite, was quelled before he could get a word out.

“Them’s my terms,” said Miss Vickers; “take’em or leave’em, just as you please. I give you five minutes by the clock to make up your minds; Mr. Stobell can have six, because thinking takes him longer. And if you agree to do what’s right—and I’m letting you off easy—Mr. Tredgold is to keep the map and never to let it go out of his sight for a single instant.”

She put her head round the side of the chair to make a note of the time, and then, sitting upright with her arms folded, awaited their decision. Before the time was up the terms were accepted, and Mr. Tredgold, drawing his chair to the table, prepared to draw up the required agreement.

[Illustration: “Mr. Tredgold prepared to draw up the required agreement.”]

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He composed several, but none which seemed to give general satisfaction. At the seventh attempt, however, he produced an agreement which, alluding in vague terms to a treasure quest in the Southern Seas on the strength of a map provided by Miss Vickers, promised one-fifth of the sum recovered to that lady, and was considered to meet the exigencies of the case. Miss Vickers herself, without being enthusiastic, said that she supposed it would have to do.

Another copy was avoided, but only with great difficulty, owing to her criticism of Mr. Stobell's signature. It took the united and verbose efforts of Messrs. Chalk and Tredgold to assure her that it was in his usual style, and rather a good signature for him than otherwise. Miss Vickers, viewing it with her head on one side, asked whether he couldn't make his mark instead; a question which Mr. Stobell, at the pressing instance of his friends, left unanswered. Then Tredgold left the room to pay a visit to his safe, and, the other two gentlemen turning out their pockets, the required sum was made up, and with the agreement handed to Miss Vickers in exchange for the map.

She bade them good-night, and then, opening the door, paused with her hand on the knob and stood irresolute.

"I hope I've done right," she said, somewhat nervously. "It was no good to anybody laying idle and being wasted. I haven't stolen anything."

"No, no," said Tredgold, hastily.

"It seems ridiculous for all that money to be wasted," continued Miss Vickers, musingly. "It doesn't belong to anybody, so nobody can be hurt by our taking it, and we can do a lot of good with it, if we like. I shall give some of mine away to the poor. We all will. I'll have it put in this paper."

She fumbled in her bodice for the document, and walked towards them.

"We can't alter it now," said Mr. Tredgold, decidedly.

"We'll do what's right," said Mr. Chalk, reassuringly.

Miss Vickers smiled at him. "Yes, I know you will," she said, graciously, "and I think Mr. Tredgold will, but—"

"You're leaving that door open," said Mr. Stobell, coldly, "and the draught's blowing my head off, pretty near."

Miss Vickers eyed him scornfully, but in the absence of a crushing reply disdained one at all. She contented herself instead by going outside and closing the door after her with a sharpness which stirred every hair on his head.

"It's a most extraordinary thing," said Mr. Chalk, as the three bent exultingly over the map. "I could ha' sworn to this map in a court of justice."

"Don't you worry your head about it," advised Mr. Stobell.

"You've got your way at last," said Tredgold, with some severity. "We're going for a cruise with you, and here you are raising objections."

"Not objections," remonstrated the other; "and, talking about the voyage, what about Mrs. Chalk? She'll want to come."

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“So will Mrs. Stobell,” said that lady’s proprietor, “but she won’t.”

“She mustn’t hear of it till the last moment,” said Tredgold, dictatorially; “the quieter we keep the whole thing the better. You’re not to divulge a word of the cruise to anybody. When it does leak out it must be understood we are just going for a little pleasure jaunt. Mind, you’ve sworn to keep the whole affair secret.”

Mr. Chalk screwed up his features in anxious perplexity, but made no comment.

“The weather’s fine,” continued Tredgold, “and there’s nothing gained by delay. On Wednesday we’ll take the train to Biddlecombe and have a look round. My idea is to buy a small, stout sailing-craft second-hand; ship a crew ostensibly for a pleasure trip, and sail as soon as possible.”

Mr. Chalk’s face brightened. “And we’ll take some beads, and guns, and looking-glasses, and trade with the natives in the different islands we pass,” he said, cheerfully. “We may as well see something of the world while we’re about it.”

Mr. Tredgold smiled indulgently and said they would see. Messrs. Stobell and Chalk, after a final glance at the map and a final perusal of the instructions at the back, took their departure.

“It’s like a dream,” said the latter gentleman, as they walked down the High Street.

“That Vickers girl ud like more dreams o’ the same sort,” said Mr. Stobell, as he thrust his hand in his empty pocket.

“It’s all very well for you,” continued Mr. Chalk, uneasily. “But my wife is sure to insist upon coming.”

Mr. Stobell sniffed. “I’ve got a wife too,” he remarked.

“Yes,” said Mr. Chalk, in a burst of unwonted frankness, “but it ain’t quite the same thing. I’ve got a wife and Mrs. Stobell has got a husband—that’s the difference.”

Mr. Stobell pondered this remark for the rest of the way home. He came to the conclusion that the events of the evening had made Mr. Chalk a little light-headed.

CHAPTER VIII

Until he stood on the platform on Wednesday morning with his brother adventurers Mr. Chalk passed the time in a state of nervous excitement, which only tended to confirm his wife in her suspicions of his behaviour. Without any preliminaries he would burst out suddenly into snatches of sea-songs, the “Bay of Biscay” being an especial favourite,

until Mrs. Chalk thought fit to observe that, “if the thunder did roar like that she should not be afraid of it.” Ever sensitive to a fault, Mr. Chalk fell back upon “Tom Bowling,” which he thought free from openings of that sort, until Mrs. Chalk, after commenting upon the inability of the late Mr. Bowling to hear the tempest’s howling, indulged in idle speculations as to what he would have thought of Mr. Chalk’s. Tredgold and Stobell bought papers on the station, but Mr. Chalk was in too exalted a mood for reading. The bustle and life as the train became due were admirably attuned to his feelings, and when it drew up and they embarked, to the clatter of milk-cans and the rumbling of trolleys, he was beaming with satisfaction.

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"I feel that I can smell the sea already," he remarked.

Mr. Stobell put down his paper and sniffed; then he resumed it again and, meeting Mr. Tredgold's eye over the top of it, sniffed more loudly than before.

"Have you told Edward that you are going to sea?" inquired Mr. Chalk, leaning over to Tredgold.

"Certainly not," was the reply; "I don't want anybody to know till the last possible moment. You haven't given your wife any hint as to why you are going to Biddlecombe to-day, have you?"

Mr. Chalk shook his head. "I told her that you had got business there, and that I was going with you just for the outing," he said. "What she'll say when she finds out—"

His imagination failed him and, a prey to forebodings, he tried to divert his mind by looking out of window. His countenance cleared as they neared Biddlecombe, and, the line running for some distance by the side of the river, he amused himself by gazing at various small craft left high and dry by the tide.

A short walk from the station brought them to the mouth of the river which constitutes the harbour of Biddlecombe. For a small port there was a goodly array of shipping, and Mr. Chalk's pulse beat faster as his gaze wandered impartially from a stately barque in all the pride of fresh paint to dingy, sea-worn ketches and tiny yachts.

Uncertain how to commence operations, they walked thoughtfully up and down the quay. If any of the craft were for sale there was nothing to announce the fact, and the various suggestions which Mr. Chalk threw off from time to time as to the course they should pursue were hardly noticed.

"One o'clock," said Mr. Stobell, extracting a huge silver timepiece from his pocket, after a couple of wasted hours.

"Let's have something to eat before we do any more," said Mr. Tredgold. "After that we'll ferry over and look at the other side."

They made their way to the "King of Hanover," an old inn, perched on the side of the harbour, and, mounting the stairs, entered the coffee-room, where Mr. Stobell, after hesitating for some time between the rival claims of roast beef and grilled chops, solved the difficulty by ordering both.

The only other occupant of the room, a short, wiry man, with a close-shaven, hard-bitten face, sat smoking, with a glass of whisky before him, in a bay window at the end of the room, which looked out on the harbour. There was a maritime flavour about him which

at once enlisted Mr. Chalk's sympathies and made him overlook the small, steely-grey eyes and large and somewhat brutal mouth.

"Fine day, gentlemen," said the stranger, nodding affably to Mr. Chalk as he raised his glass. Mr. Chalk assented, and began a somewhat minute discussion upon the weather, which lasted until the waiter appeared with the lunch.

[Illustration: "'Fine day, gentlemen,' said the stranger, as he raised his glass."]

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"Bring me another drop o' whisky, George," said the stranger, as the latter was about to leave the room, "and a little stronger, d'ye hear? A man might drink this and still be in the Band of Hope."

"We thought it wouldn't do for you to get the chuck out of it after all these years, Cap'n Brisket," said George, calmly. "It's a whisky that's kept special for teetotalers like you."

Captain Brisket gave a hoarse laugh and winked at Mr. Stobell; that gentleman, merely pausing to empty his mouth and drink half a glass of beer, winked back.

"Been here before, sir?" inquired the captain.

Mr. Stobell, who was busy again, left the reply to Mr. Chalk.

"Several times," said the latter. "I'm very fond of the sea."

Captain Brisket nodded, and, taking up his glass, moved to the end of their table, with the air of a man disposed to conversation.

"There's not much doing in Biddlecombe nowadays," he remarked, shaking his head. "Trade ain't what it used to be; ships are more than half their time looking for freights. And even when they get them they're hardly worth having."

Mr. Chalk started and, leaning over, whispered to Mr. Tredgold.

"No harm in it," said the latter. "Better leave it to me. Shipping's dull, then?" he inquired, turning to Captain Brisket.

"Dull?" was the reply. "Dull ain't no name for it."

Mr. Tredgold played with a salt-spoon and frowned thoughtfully.

"We've been looking round for a ship this morning," he said, slowly.

"As passengers?" inquired the captain, staring.

"As owners," put in Mr. Chalk.

Captain Brisket, greatly interested, drew first his glass and then his chair a yard nearer. "Do you mean that you want to buy one?" he inquired.

"Well, we might if we could get one cheap," admitted Tredgold, cautiously. "We had some sort of an idea of a cruise to the South Pacific; pleasure, with perhaps a little trading mixed up with it. I suppose some of these old schooners can be picked up for the price of an old song?"

The captain, grating his chair along the floor, came nearer still; so near that Mr. Stobell instinctively put out his right elbow.

“You’ve met just the right man,” said Captain Brisket, with a boisterous laugh. “I know a schooner, two hundred and forty tons, that is just the identical article you’re looking for, good as new and sound as a bell. Are you going to sail her yourself?”

“No,” said Mr. Stobell, without looking up, “he ain’t.”

“Got a master?” demanded Captain Brisket, with growing excitement. “Don’t tell me you’ve got a master.”

“Why not?” growled Mr. Stobell, who, having by this time arrived at the cheese, felt that he had more leisure for conversation.

“Because,” shouted the other, hitting the table a thump with his fist that upset half his whisky—“because if you haven’t Bill Brisket’s your man.”

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The three gentlemen received this startling intelligence with such a lack of enthusiasm that Captain Brisket was fain to cover what in any other man might have been regarded as confusion by ringing the bell for George and inquiring with great sternness of manner why he had not brought him a full glass.

"We can't do things in five minutes," said Mr. Tredgold, after a long and somewhat trying pause. "First of all we've got to get a ship."

"The craft you want is over the other side of the harbour waiting for you," said the captain, confidently. "We'll ferry over now if you like, or, if you prefer to go by yourselves, do; Bill Brisket is not the man to stand in anyone's way, whether he gets anything out of it or not."

"Hold hard," said Mr. Stobell, putting up his hand.

Captain Brisket regarded him with a beaming smile; Mr. Stobell's two friends waited patiently.

"What ud a schooner like that fetch?" inquired Mr. Stobell.

"It all depends," said Brisket. "Of course, if I buy—"

Mr. Stobell held up his hand again. "All depends whether you buy it for us or sell it for the man it belongs to, I s'pose?" he said, slowly.

Captain Brisket jumped up, and to Mr. Chalk's horror smote the speaker heavily on the back. Mr. Stobell, clenching a fist the size of a leg of mutton, pushed his chair back and prepared to rise.

"You're a trump," said Captain Brisket, in tones of unmistakable respect, "that's what you are. Lord, if I'd got the head for business you have I should be a man of fortune by now."

Mr. Stobell, who had half risen, sat down again, and, for the first time since his last contract but one, a smile played lightly about the corners of his mouth. He took another drink and, shaking his head slightly as he put the glass down, smiled again with the air of a man who has been reproached for making a pun.

"Let me do it for you," said Captain Brisket, impressively. "I'll tell you where to go without being seen in the matter or letting old Todd know that I'm in it. Ask him a price and bate him down; when you've got his lowest, come to me and give me one pound in every ten I save you."

Mr. Tredgold looked at his friends. "If we do that," he said, turning to the captain, "it would be to your interest to buy the ship in any case. How are we to be sure she is seaworthy?"

"Ah, there you are!" said Brisket, with an expansive smile. "You let me buy for you and promise me the master's berth, provided you are satisfied with my credentials. Common sense'll tell you I wouldn't risk my own carcass in a rotten ship."

Mr. Stobell nodded approval and, Captain Brisket with unexpected delicacy withdrawing to the window and becoming interested in the harbour, conferred for some time with his friends. The captain's offer being accepted, subject to certain conditions, they settled their bill and made their way to the ferry.

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"There's the schooner," said the captain, pointing, as they neared the opposite shore; "the *Fair Emily*, and the place she is lying at is called Todd's Wharf. Ask for Mr. Todd, or, better still, walk straight on to the wharf and have a look at her. The old man'll see you fast enough."

He sprang nimbly ashore as the boat's head touched the stairs, and after extending a hand to Mr. Chalk, which was coldly ignored, led the way up the steps to the quay.

"There's the wharf just along there," he said, pointing up the road. "I'll wait for you at the Jack Ashore here. Don't offer him too much to begin with."

"I thought of offering a hundred pounds," said Mr. Tredgold. "If the ship's sound we can't be very much out over that sum."

Captain Brisket stared at him. "No; don't do that," he said, recovering, and speaking with great gravity. "Offer him seventy. Good luck."

He watched them up the road and then, with a mysterious grin, turned into the Jack Ashore, and taking a seat in the bar waited patiently for their return.

Half an hour passed. The captain had smoked one pipe and was half through another. He glanced at the clock over the bar and fidgeted as an unpleasant idea that the bargain, despite Mr. Tredgold's ideas as to the value of schooners, might have been completed without his assistance occurred to him. He took a sip from his glass, and then his face softened as the faint sounds of a distant uproar broke upon his ear.

"What's that?" said a customer.

The landlord, who was glancing at the paper, put it down and listened. "Sounds like old Todd at it again," he said, coming round to the front of the bar.

The noise came closer. "It is old Todd," said another customer, and hastily finishing his beer moved with the others to the door. Captain Brisket, with a fine air of indifference, lounged after them, and peering over their shoulders obtained a good view of the approaching disturbance.

His three patrons, with a hopeless attempt to appear unconcerned, were coming down the road, while close behind a respectable-looking old gentleman with a long, white beard and a voice like a foghorn almost danced with excitement. They quickened their pace as they neared the inn, and Mr. Chalk, throwing appearances to the winds, almost dived through the group at the door. He was at once followed by Mr. Tredgold, but Mr. Stobell, black with wrath, paused in the doorway.

[Illustration: "His three patrons, with a hopeless attempt to appear unconcerned, were coming down the road"]

“FETCH’EM *out*,” vociferated the old gentleman as the landlord barred the doorway with his arms. “Fetch that red-whiskered one out and I’ll eat him.”

“What’s the matter, Mr. Todd?” inquired the landlord, with a glance at his friends.
“What’s he done?”

“*Done?*” repeated the excitable Mr. Todd.

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"Done? They come walking on to my wharf as if the place—*fetch him out*," he bawled, breaking off suddenly. "Fetch him out and I'll skin him alive."

Captain Brisket took Mr. Stobell by the cuff and after a slight altercation drew him inside.

"Tell that red-whiskered man to come outside," bawled Mr. Todd. "What's he afraid of?"

"What have you been doing to him?" inquired Captain Brisket, turning to the pallid Mr. Chalk.

"Nothing," was the reply.

"Is he coming out?" demanded the terrible voice, "or have I got to wait here all night? Why don't he come outside, and I'll break every bone in his body."

Mr. Stobell scratched his head in gloomy perplexity; then, as his gaze fell upon the smiling countenances of Mr. Todd's fellow-townsmen, his face cleared.

"He's an old man," he said, slowly, "but if any of you would like to step outside with me for five minutes, you've only got to say the word, you know."

Nobody manifesting any signs of accepting this offer, he turned away and took a seat by the side of the indignant Tredgold. Mr. Todd, after a final outburst, began to feel exhausted, and forsaking his prey with much reluctance allowed himself to be led away. Snatches of a strong and copious benediction, only partly mellowed by distance, fell upon the ears of the listeners.

"Did you offer him the seventy?" inquired Captain Brisket, turning to Mr. Tredgold.

"I did," said Mr. Chalk, plaintively.

"Ah," said the captain, regarding him thoughtfully; "perhaps you ought to ha' made it eighty. He's asking eight hundred for it, I understand."

Mr. Tredgold turned sharply. "Eight hundred?" he gasped.

The captain nodded. "And I'm not saying it's not worth it," he said, "but I might be able to get it for you for six. You'd better leave it to me now."

[Illustration: "Captain Brisket waving farewells from the quay as they embarked."]

Mr. Tredgold at first said he would have nothing more to do with it, but under the softening influence of a pipe and a glass was induced to reconsider his decision. Captain Brisket, waving farewells from the quay as they embarked on the ferryboat later on in the afternoon, bore in his pocket the cards of all three gentlemen, together with a

commission entrusting him with the preliminary negotiations for the purchase of the Fair Emily.