

Dialstone Lane, Part 4. eBook

Dialstone Lane, Part 4. by W. W. Jacobs

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CHAPTER XIV

Mrs. Chalk watched the schooner until it was a mere white speck on the horizon, a faint idea that it might yet see the error of its ways and return for her chaining her to the spot. Compelled at last to recognise the inevitable, she rose from the turf on which she had been sitting and, her face crimson with wrath, denounced husbands in general and her own in particular.

"It's my husband's doing, I'm sure," said Mrs. Stobell, with a side glance at her friend's attire, not entirely devoid of self-congratulation. "That's why he wouldn't let me have a yachting costume. I can see it now."

Mrs. Chalk turned and eyed her with angry disdain.

"And that's why he wouldn't let me bring more than one box," continued Mrs. Stobell, with the air of one to whom all things had been suddenly revealed; "and why he wouldn't shut the house up. Oh, just fancy what a pickle I should have been in if I had! I must say it was thoughtful of him."

"*Thoughtful!*" exclaimed Mrs. Chalk, in a choking voice.

"And I ought to have suspected something," continued Mrs. Stobell, "because he kissed me this morning. I can see now that he meant it for goodbye! Well, I can't say I'm surprised. Robert always does get his own way."

"If you hadn't persuaded me to come ashore for that wretched luncheon," said Mrs. Chalk, in a deep voice, "we should have been all right."

"I'm sure I wasn't to know," said her friend, "although I certainly thought it odd when Robert said that he had got it principally for you. I could see you were a little bit flattered."

Mrs. Chalk, trembling with anger, sought in vain for a retort.

"Well, it's no good staying here," said Mrs. Stobell, philosophically. "We had better get home."

"*Home!*" cried Mrs. Chalk, as a vision of her bare floors and dismantled walls rose before her. "When I think of the deceitfulness of those men, giving us champagne and talking about the long evenings on board, I don't know what to do with myself. And your father was one of them," she added, turning suddenly upon Edward.

Mr. Tredgold disowned his erring parent with some haste, and, being by this time rather tired of the proceedings, suggested that they should return to the inn and look up trains



—a proposal to which Mrs. Chalk, after a final glance seawards, silently assented. With head erect she led the way down to the town again, her bearing being so impressive that George the waiter, who had been watching for them, after handing her a letter which had been entrusted to him, beat a precipitate retreat.

The letter, which was from Mr. Stobell, was short and to the point. It narrated the artifice by which Mr. Chalk had been lured away, and concluded with a general statement that women were out of place on shipboard. This, Mrs. Stobell declared, after perusing the letter, was intended for an apology.

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Mrs. Chalk received the information in stony silence, and, declining tea, made her way to the station and mounted guard over her boxes until the train was due. With the exception of saying "Indeed!" on three or four occasions she kept silent all the way to Binchester, and, arrived there, departed for home in a cab, in spite of a most pressing invitation from Mrs. Stobell to stay with her until her own house was habitable.

Mr. Tredgold parted from them both with relief. The voyage had been a source of wonder to him from its first inception, and the day's proceedings had only served to increase the mystery. He made a light supper and, the house being too quiet for his taste, went for a meditative stroll. The shops were closed and the small thoroughfares almost deserted. He wondered whether it was too late to call and talk over the affair with Captain Bowers, and, still wondering, found himself in Dialstone Lane.

Two or three of the houses were in darkness, but there was a cheerful light behind the drawn blind of the captain's sitting-room. He hesitated a moment and then rapped lightly on the door, and no answer being forthcoming rapped again. The door opened and revealed the amiable features of Mr. Tasker.

"Captain Bowers has gone to London, sir," he said.

Mr. Tredgold drew his right foot back three inches, and at the same time tried to peer into the room.

"We're expecting him back every moment," said Mr. Tasker, encouragingly.

Mr. Tredgold moved his foot forward again and pondered. "It's very late, but I wanted to see him rather particularly," he murmured, as he stepped into the room.

"Miss Drewitt's in the garden," said Joseph.

Mr. Tredgold started and eyed him suspiciously. Mr. Tasker's face, however, preserving its usual appearance of stolid simplicity, his features relaxed and he became thoughtful again.

"Perhaps I might go into the garden," he suggested.

"I should if I was you, sir," said Joseph, preceding him and throwing open the back door. "It's fresher out there."

Mr. Tredgold stepped into the garden and stood blinking in the sudden darkness. There was no moon and the night was cloudy, a fact which accounted for his unusual politeness towards a cypress of somewhat stately bearing which stood at one corner of the small lawn. He replaced his hat hastily, and an apologetic remark concerning the lateness of his visit was never finished. A trifle confused, he walked down the garden, peering right and left as he went, but without finding the object of his search. Twice he

paced the garden from end to end, and he had just arrived at the conclusion that Mr. Tasker had made a mistake when a faint sound high above his head apprised him of the true state of affairs.

He stood listening in amazement, but the sound was not repeated. Ordinary prudence and a sense of the fitness of things suggested that he should go home; inclination suggested that he should seat himself in the deck-chair at the foot of the crow's-nest and await events. He sat down to consider the matter.

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Sprawling comfortably in the chair he lit his pipe, his ear on the alert to catch the slightest sound of the captive in the cask above. The warm air was laden with the scent of flowers, and nothing stirred with the exception of Mr. Tasker's shadow on the blind of the kitchen window. The clock in the neighbouring church chimed the three-quarters, and in due time boomed out the hour of ten. Mr. Tredgold knocked the ashes from his pipe and began seriously to consider his position. Lights went out in the next house. Huge shadows appeared on the kitchen blind and the light gradually faded, to reappear triumphantly in the room above. Anon the shadow of Mr. Tasker's head was seen wrestling fiercely with its back collar-stud.

"Mr. Tredgold!" said a sharp voice from above.

[Illustration: "'Mr. Tredgold!' said a sharp voice from above."]

Mr. Tredgold sprang to his feet, overturning the chair in his haste, and gazed aloft.

"Miss Drewitt!" he cried, in accents of intense surprise.

"I am coming down," said the voice.

"Pray be careful," said Mr. Tredgold, anxiously; "it is very dark. Can I help you?"

"Yes—you can go indoors," said Miss Drewitt.

Her tone was so decided and so bitter that Mr. Tredgold, merely staying long enough to urge extreme carefulness in the descent, did as he was desired. He went into the sitting-room and, standing uneasily by the fireplace, tried to think out his line of action. He was still floundering when he heard swift footsteps coming up the garden, and Miss Drewitt, very upright and somewhat flushed of face, confronted him.

"I—I called to see the captain," he said, hastily, "and Joseph told me you were in the garden. I couldn't see you anywhere, so I took the liberty of sitting out there to wait for the captain's return."

Miss Drewitt listened impatiently. "Did you know that I was up in the crow's-nest?" she demanded.

"Joseph never said a word about it," said Mr. Tredgold, with an air of great frankness. "He merely said that you were in the garden, and, not being able to find you, I thought that he was mistaken."

"Did you know that I was up in the crow's-nest?" repeated Miss Drewitt, with ominous persistency.



“A—a sort of idea that you might be there did occur to me after a time,” admitted the other.

“Did you know that I was there?”

Mr. Tredgold gazed at her in feeble indignation, but the uselessness of denial made truth easier. “Yes,” he said, slowly.

“Thank you,” said the girl, scornfully. “You thought that I shouldn’t like to be caught up there, and that it would be an amusing and gentlemanly thing to do to keep me a prisoner. I quite understand. My estimate of you has turned out to be correct.”

“It was quite an accident,” urged Mr. Tredgold, humbly. “I’ve had a very worrying day seeing them off at Biddlecombe, and when I heard you up in the nest I succumbed to sudden temptation. If I had stopped to think—if I had had the faintest idea that you would catechise me in the way you have done—I shouldn’t have dreamt of doing such a thing.”

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Miss Drewitt, who was standing with her hand on the latch of the door leading upstairs, as a hint that the interview was at an end, could not restrain her indignation.

"Your father and his friends have gone off to secure my uncle's treasure, and you come straight on here," she cried, hotly. "Do you think that there is no end to his good-nature?"

"Treasure?" said the other, with a laugh. "Why, that idea was knocked on the head when the map was burnt. Even Chalk wouldn't go on a roving commission to dig over all the islands in the South Pacific."

"I don't see anything to laugh at," said the girl; "my uncle fully intended to burn it. He was terribly upset when he found that it had disappeared."

"Disappeared?" cried Mr. Tredgold, in accents of unmistakable amazement. "Why, wasn't it burnt after all? The captain said it was."

"He was going to burn it," repeated the girl, watching him; "but somebody took it from the bureau."

"Took it? When?" inquired the other, as the business of the yachting cruise began to appear before him in its true colours.

"The afternoon you were here waiting for him," said Miss Drewitt.

"Afternoon?" repeated Mr. Tredgold, blankly. "The afternoon I was——" He drew himself up and eyed her angrily. "Do you mean to say that you think I took the thing?"

"It doesn't matter what I think," said the girl. "I suppose you won't deny that your friends have got it?"

"Yes; but you said that it was the afternoon I was here," persisted the other.

Miss Drewitt eyed him indignantly. The conscience-stricken culprit of a few minutes before had disappeared, leaving in his stead an arrogant young man, demanding explanations in a voice of almost unbecoming loudness.

"You are shouting at me," she said, stiffly.

Mr. Tredgold apologised, but returned to the charge. "I answered your question a little while ago," he said, in more moderate tones; "now, please, answer mine. Do you think that I took the map?"

"I am not to be commanded to speak by you," said Miss Drewitt, standing very erect.



“Fair-play is a jewel,” said the other. “Question for question. Do you?”

Miss Drewitt looked at him and hesitated. “No,” she said, at last, with obvious reluctance.

Mr. Tredgold’s countenance cleared and his eyes softened.

“I suppose you admit that your father has got it?” said the girl, noting these signs with some disapproval. “How did he get it?”

Mr. Tredgold shook his head. “If those three overgrown babes find that treasure,” he said, impressively, “I’ll doom myself to perpetual bachelorhood.”

“I answered your question just now,” said the girl, very quietly, “because I wanted to ask you one. Do you believe my uncle’s story about the buried treasure?”

Mr. Tredgold eyed her uneasily. “I never attached much importance to it,” he replied. “It seemed rather romantic.”

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"Do you believe it?"

"No," said the other, doggedly.

The girl drew a long breath and favoured him with a look in which triumph and anger were strangely mingled.

"I wonder you can visit him after thinking him capable of such a falsehood," she said, at last. "You certainly won't be able to after I have told him."

"I told you in confidence," was the reply. "I have regarded it all along as a story told to amuse Chalk; that is all. I shall be very sorry if you say anything that might cause unpleasantness between myself and Captain Bowers."

"I shall tell him as soon as he comes in," said Miss Drewitt. "It is only right that he should know your opinion of him. Good-night."

Mr. Tredgold said "good-night," and, walking to the door, stood for a moment regarding her thoughtfully. It was quite clear that in her present state of mind any appeal to her better nature would be worse than useless. He resolved to try the effect of a little humility.

"I am very sorry for my behaviour in the garden," he said, sorrowfully.

"It doesn't matter," said the girl; "I wasn't at all surprised."

Mr. Tredgold recognised the failure of the new treatment at once. "Of course, when I went into the garden I hadn't any idea that you would be in such an unlikely place," he said, with a kindly smile. "Let us hope that you won't go there again."

Miss Drewitt, hardly able to believe her ears, let him go without a word, and in a dazed fashion stood at the door and watched him up the lane. When the captain came in a little later she was sitting in a stiff and uncomfortable attitude by the window, still thinking.

He was so tired after a long day in town that the girl, at considerable personal inconvenience, allowed him to finish his supper before recounting the manifold misdeeds of Mr. Tredgold. She waited until he had pushed his chair back and lit a pipe, and then without any preface plunged into the subject with an enthusiasm which she endeavoured in vain to make contagious. The captain listened in silence and turned a somewhat worried face in her direction when she had finished.

"We can't all think alike," he said, feebly, as she waited with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes for the verdict. "I told you he hadn't taken the map. As for those three idiots and their harebrained voyage—"

“But Mr. Tredgold said that he didn’t believe in the treasure,” said the wrathful Prudence. “One thing is, he can never come here again; I think that I made him understand that. The idea of thinking that you could tell a falsehood!”

The captain bent down and, picking a used match from the hearthrug, threw it carefully under the grate. Miss Drewitt watched him expectantly.

“We mustn’t quarrel with people’s opinions,” he said, at last. “It’s a free country, and people can believe what they like. Look at Protestants and Catholics, for instance; their belief isn’t the same, and yet I’ve known ’em to be staunch friends.”

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Miss Drewitt shook her head. "He can never come here again," she said, with great determination. "He has insulted you, and if you were not the best-natured man in the world you would be as angry about it as I am."

The captain smoked in silence.

"And his father and those other two men will come back with your treasure," continued Prudence, after waiting for some time for him to speak. "And, so far as I can see, you won't even be able to prosecute them for it."

"I sha'n't do anything," said Captain Bowers, impatiently, as he rose and knocked out his half-smoked pipe, "and I never want to hear another word about that treasure as long as I live. I'm tired of it. It has caused more mischief and unpleasantness than—than it is worth. They are welcome to it for me."

[Illustration: "'I never want to hear another word about that treasure as long as I live.'"]

CHAPTER XV

Mr. Chalk's foot had scarcely touched the deck of the schooner when Mr. Tredgold seized him by the arm and, whispering indistinctly in his ear, hurried him below.

"Get your arms out of the cabin as quick as you can," he said, sharply. "Then follow me up on deck."

Mr. Chalk, trembling violently, tried to speak, but in vain. A horrid clanking noise sounded overhead, and with the desperation of terror he turned into the new cabin and, collecting his weapons, began with frantic haste to load them. Then he dropped his rifle and sprang forward with a loud cry as he heard the door close smartly and the key turn in the lock.

He stood gazing stupidly at the door and listening to the noise overhead. The clanking ceased, and was succeeded by a rush of heavy feet, above which he heard Captain Brisket shouting hoarsely. He threw a despairing glance around his prison, and then looked up at the skylight. It was not big enough to crawl through, but he saw that by standing on the table he could get his head out. No less clearly he saw how easy it would be for a mutineer to hit it.

Huddled up in a corner of the cabin he tried to think. Tredgold and Stobell were strangely silent, and even the voice of Brisket had ceased. The suspense became unbearable. Then suddenly a faint creaking and straining of timbers apprised him of the fact that the Fair Emily was under way.

He sprang to his feet and beat heavily upon the door, but it was of stout wood and opened inwards. Then a bright idea, the result of reading sensational fiction, occurred to him, and raising his rifle to his shoulder he aimed at the lock and pulled the trigger.

The noise of the explosion in the small cabin was deafening, but, loud as it was, it failed to drown a cry of alarm outside. The sound of heavy feet and of two or three bodies struggling for precedence up the companion-ladder followed, and Mr. Chalk, still holding his smoking rifle and regarding a splintered hole in the centre of the panel, wondered whether he had hit anybody. He slipped in a fresh cartridge and, becoming conscious of a partial darkening of the skylight, aimed hastily at a face which appeared there. The face, which bore a strong resemblance to that of Mr. Stobell, disappeared with great suddenness.

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[Illustration: "He aimed hastily at a face which appeared there."]

"He's gone clean off his head," said Captain Brisket, as Mr. Stobell staggered back.

"Mad as a March hare," said Mr. Tredgold, shivering; "it's a wonder he didn't have one of us just now. Call down to him that it's all right, Stobell."

"Call yourself," said that gentleman, shortly.

"Get a stick and raise the skylight," said Tredgold.

A loud report sounded from below. Mr. Chalk had fired a second and successful shot at the lock. "What's he doing?" inquired Stobell, blankly.

A sharp exclamation from Captain Brisket was the only reply, and he turned just as Mr. Chalk, with a rifle in one hand and a revolver in the other, appeared on deck. The captain's cry was echoed forward, and three of the crew dived with marvellous skill into the forecabin. The boy and two others dashed into the galley so hurriedly that the cook, who was peeping out, was borne backwards on to the stove and kept there, the things he said in the heat of the moment being attributed to excitement and attracting no attention. Tredgold, Brisket, and Stobell dodged behind the galley, and Mr. Chalk was left to gaze in open-mouthed wonder at the shrinking figure of Mr. Duckett at the wheel. They regarded each other in silence, until a stealthy step behind Mr. Chalk made him turn round smartly. Mr. Stobell, who was stealing up to secure him, dodged hastily behind the mainmast.

"Stobell!" cried Mr. Chalk, faintly.

"It's all right," said the other.

Mr. Chalk regarded his proceedings in amazement. "What are you hiding behind the mast for?" he inquired, stepping towards him.

Mr. Stobell made no reply, but with an agility hardly to be expected of one of his bulk dashed behind the galley again.

A sense of mystery and unreality stole over Mr. Chalk. He began to think that he must be dreaming. He turned and looked at Mr. Duckett, and Mr. Duckett, trying to smile at him, contorted his face so horribly that he shrank back appalled. He looked about him and saw that they were now in open water and drawing gradually away from the land. The stillness and mystery became unbearable, and with an air of resolution he cocked his rifle and proceeded with infinite caution to stalk the galley. As he weathered it, with his finger on the trigger, Stobell and the others stole round the other side and, making a mad break aft, stumbled down the companion-ladder and secured themselves below.

“Has everybody gone mad?” inquired Mr. Chalk, approaching the mate again.

“Everybody except you, sir,” said Mr. Duckett, with great politeness.

Mr. Chalk looked forward again and nearly dropped his rifle as he saw three or four tousled heads protruding from the galley. Instinctively he took a step towards Mr. Duckett, and instinctively that much-enduring man threw up his hands and cried to him not to shoot. Mr. Chalk, pale of face and trembling of limb, strove to reassure him.

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"But it's pointing towards me," said the mate, "and you've got your finger on the trigger."

[Illustration: "'It's pointing towards me,' said the mate."]

Mr. Chalk apologized.

"What did Tredgold and Stobell run away for?" he demanded.

Mr. Duckett said that perhaps they were—like himself—nervous of firearms. He also, in reply to further questions, assured him that the mutiny was an affair of the past, and, gaining confidence, begged him to hold the wheel steady for a moment. Mr. Chalk, still clinging to his weapons, laid hold of it, and the mate, running to the companion, called to those below. Led by Mr. Stobell they came on deck.

"It's all over now," said Tredgold, soothingly.

"As peaceable as lambs," said Captain Brisket, taking a gentle hold of the rifle, while Stobell took the revolver.

Mr. Chalk smiled faintly, and then looked round in trepidation as the inmates of the galley drew near and scowled at him curiously.

"Get for'ard!" cried Brisket, turning on them sharply. "Keep your own end o' the ship. D'ye hear?"

The men shuffled off slowly, keeping a wary eye on Mr. Chalk as they went, the knowledge of the tempting mark offered by their backs to an eager sportsman being apparent to all.

"It's all over," said Brisket, taking the wheel from the mate and motioning to him to go away, "and after your determination, sir, there'll be no more of it, I'm sure."

"But what was it?" demanded Mr. Chalk. "Mutiny?"

"Not exactly what you could call mutiny," replied the captain, in a low voice. "A little mistake o' Duckett's. He's a nervous man, and perhaps he exaggerated a little. But don't allude to it again, for the sake of his feelings."

"But somebody locked me in the cabin," persisted Mr. Chalk, looking from one to the other.

Captain Brisket hesitated. "Did they?" he said, with a smile of perplexity. "Did they? I gave orders that that door was to be kept locked when there was nobody in there, and I expect the cook did it by mistake as he passed. It's been a chapter of accidents all through, but I must say, sir, that the determined way you came on deck was wonderful."

“Extraordinary!” murmured Mr. Tredgold.

“I didn’t know him,” attested Mr. Stobell, continuing to regard Mr. Chalk with much interest.

“I can’t make head or tail of it,” complained Mr. Chalk. “What about the ladies?”

Captain Brisket shook his head dismally and pointed ashore, and Mr. Chalk, following the direction of his finger, gazed spellbound at a figure which was signalling wildly from the highest point. Tredgold and Stobell, approaching the side, waved their handkerchiefs in response.

“We must go back for them,” said Mr. Chalk, firmly.

“What! in this wind, sir?” inquired Brisket, with an indulgent laugh. “You’re too much of a sailor to think that’s possible, I’m sure; and it’s going to last.”

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"We must put up with the disappointment and do without'em," said Stobell.

Mr. Chalk gazed helplessly ashore. "But we've got their luggage," he cried.

"Duckett sent it ashore," said Brisket. "Thinking that there was men's work ahead, and that the ladies might be in the way, he put it over the side and sent it back. And mind, believing what he did, I'm not saying he wasn't in the right."

Mr. Chalk again professed his inability to make head or tail of the proceedings. Ultimately—due time having been given for Captain Brisket's invention to get under way—he learned that a dyspeptic seaman, mistaking the mate's back for that of the cook, had first knocked his cap over his eyes and then pushed him over. "And that, of course," concluded the captain, "couldn't be allowed anyway, but, seeing that it was a mistake, we let the chap off."

"There's one thing about it," said Tredgold, as Chalk was about to speak; "it's shown us the stuff you're made of, Chalk."

"He frightened me," said Brisket, solemnly. "I own it. When I saw him come up like that I lost my nerve."

Mr. Chalk cast a final glance at the dwindling figure on the cliff, and then went silently below and stood in a pleasant reverie before the smashed door. He came to the same conclusion regarding the desperate nature of his character as the others; and the nervous curiosity of the men, who took sly peeps at him, and the fact that the cook dropped the soup-tureen that evening when he turned and found Mr. Chalk at his elbow, only added to his satisfaction.

He felt less heroic next morning. The wind had freshened during the night, and the floor of the cabin heaved in a sickening fashion beneath his feet as he washed himself. The atmosphere was stifling; timbers creaked and strained, and boots and other articles rolled playfully about the floor.

[Illustration: "He felt less heroic next morning."]

The strong, sweet air above revived him, but the deck was wet and cheerless and the air chill. Land had disappeared, and a tumbling waste of grey seas and a leaden sky was all that met his gaze. Nevertheless, he spoke warmly of the view to Captain Brisket, rather than miss which he preferred to miss his breakfast, contenting himself with half a biscuit and a small cup of tea on deck. The smell of fried bacon and the clatter of cups and saucers came up from below.

The heavy clouds disappeared and the sun came out. The sea changed from grey to blue, and Tredgold and Stobell, coming on deck after a good breakfast, arranged a couple of chairs and sat down to admire the scene. Aloft the new sails shone white in

the sun, and spars and rigging creaked musically. A little spray came flying at intervals over the bows as the schooner met the seas.

“Lovely morning, sir,” said Captain Brisket, who had been for some time exchanging glances with Stobell and Tredgold; “so calm and peaceful.”

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"Bu'ful," said Mr. Chalk, shortly. He was gazing in much distaste at a brig to starboard, which was magically drawn up to the skies one moment and blotted from view the next.

"Nice fresh smell," said Tredgold, sniffing. "Have a cigar, Chalk?"

Mr. Chalk shook his head, and his friend, selecting one from his case, lit it with a fusee that poisoned the atmosphere.

"None of us seem to be sea-sick," he remarked.

"Sea-sickness, sir," said Captain Brisket—"seasickness is mostly imagination. People think they're going to be bad, and they are. But there's one certain cure for it."

"Cure?" said Mr. Chalk, turning a glazing eye upon him.

"Yes, sir," said Brisket, with a warning glance at Mr. Stobell, who was grinning broadly. "It's old-fashioned and I've heard it laughed at, but it's a regular good old remedy. Mr. Stobell's laughing at it," he continued, as a gasping noise from that gentleman called for explanation, "but it's true all the same."

"What is it?" inquired Mr. Chalk, with feeble impatience.

"Pork," replied Captain Brisket, with impressive earnestness. "All that anybody's got to do is to get a bit o' pork-fat pork, mind you—and get the cook to stick a fork into it and frizzle it, all bubbling and spluttering, over the galley fire. Better still, do it yourself; the smell o' the cooking being part of——"

Mr. Chalk arose and, keeping his legs with difficulty, steadied himself for a moment with his hands on the companion, and disappeared below.

"There's nothing like it," said Brisket, turning with a satisfied smile to Mr. Stobell, who was sitting with his hands on his knees and rumbling with suppressed mirth. "It's an odd thing, but, if a man's disposed to be queer, you've only got to talk about that to finish him. Why talking about fried bacon should be so bad for 'em I don't know."

"Imagination," said Tredgold, smoking away placidly.

Brisket smiled and then, nursing his knee, scowled fiercely at the helmsman, who was also on the broad grin.

"Of course, it wants proper telling," he continued, turning to Stobell. "Did you notice his eyes when I spoke of it bubbling and spluttering over the galley fire?"

"I did," replied Mr. Stobell, laying his pipe carefully on the deck.

“Some people tell you to tie the pork to a bit o’ string after frying it,” said Brisket, “but that’s what I call overdoing it. I think it’s quite enough to describe its cooking, don’t you?”

“Plenty,” said Stobell. “Have one o’ my matches,” he said, proffering his box to Tredgold, who was about to relight his cigar with a fusee.

“Thanks, I prefer this,” said Tredgold.

Mr. Stobell put his box in his pocket again and, sitting lumpily in his chair, gazed in a brooding fashion at the side.

“Talking about pork,” began Brisket, “reminds me—”

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"What! ain't you got over that joke yet?" inquired Mr. Stobell, glaring at him. "Poor Chalk can't help his feelings."

"No, no," said the captain, staring back.

"People can't help being sea-sick," said Stobell, fiercely.

"Certainly not, sir," agreed the captain.

"There's no disgrace in it," continued Mr. Stobell, with unusual fluency, "and nothing funny about it that I can see."

"Certainly not, sir," said the perplexed captain again. "I was just going to point out to you how, talking about pork—"

"I know you was," stormed Mr. Stobell, rising from his chair and lurching forward heavily. "D'ye think I couldn't hear you? Prating, and prating, and pra——"

He disappeared below, and the captain, after exchanging a significant grin with Mr. Tredgold, put his hands behind his back and began to pace the deck, musing solemnly on the folly of trusting to appearances.

Sea-sickness wore off after a day or two, and was succeeded by the monotony of life on board a small ship. Week after week they saw nothing but sea and sky, and Mr. Chalk, thirsting for change, thought with wistful eagerness of the palm-girt islands of the Fijian Archipelago to which Captain Brisket had been bidden to steer. In the privacy of their own cabin the captain and Mr. Duckett discussed with great earnestness the nature of the secret which they felt certain was responsible for the voyage.

[Illustration: "The captain and Mr. Duckett discussed with great earnestness the nature of the secret."]

CHAPTER XVI

It is an article of belief with some old-fashioned people that children should have no secrets from their parents, and, though not a model father in every way, Mr. Vickers felt keenly the fact that his daughter was keeping something from him. On two or three occasions since the date of sailing of the *Fair Emily* she had relieved her mind by throwing out dark hints of future prosperity, and there was no doubt that, somewhere in the house, she had a hidden store of gold. With his left foot glued to the floor he had helped her look for a sovereign one day which had rolled from her purse, and twice she had taken her mother on expensive journeys to Tollminster.

Brooding over the lack of confidence displayed by Selina, he sat on the side of her bed one afternoon glancing thoughtfully round the room. He was alone in the house, and now, or never, was his opportunity. After an hour's arduous toil he had earned tenpence-halfpenny, and, rightly considering that the sum was unworthy of the risk, put it back where he had found it, and sat down gloomily to peruse a paper which he had found secreted at the bottom of her box.

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Mr. Vickers was but a poor scholar, and the handwriting was deplorable. Undotted “i’s” travelled incognito through the scrawl, and uncrossed “t’s” passed themselves off unblushingly as “l’s.” After half an hour’s steady work, his imagination excited by one or two words which he had managed to decipher, he abandoned the task in despair, and stood moodily looking out of the window. His gaze fell upon Mr. William Russell, standing on the curb nearly opposite, with his hands thrust deep in his trouser-pockets, and, after a slight hesitation, he pushed open the small casement and beckoned him in.

“You’re a bit of a scholar, ain’t you, Bill?” he inquired.

Mr. Russell said modestly that he had got the name for it.

Again Mr. Vickers hesitated, but he had no choice, and his curiosity would brook no delay. With a strong caution as to secrecy, he handed the paper over to his friend.

Mr. Russell, his brow corrugated with thought, began to read slowly to himself. The writing was certainly difficult, but the watching Mr. Vickers saw by the way his friend’s finger moved along the lines that he was conquering it. By the slow but steady dilation of Mr. Russell’s eyes and the gradual opening of his mouth, he also saw that the contents were occasioning him considerable surprise.

“What does it say?” he demanded, anxiously.

Mr. Russell paid no heed. He gave vent to a little gurgle of astonishment and went on. Then he stopped and looked up blankly.

“Well, I’m d——d!” he said.

“What is it?” cried Mr. Vickers.

Mr. Russell read on, and such exclamations as “Well, I’m jiggered!” “Well, I’m blest!” and others of a more complicated nature continued to issue from his lips.

“What’s it all about?” shouted the excited Mr. Vickers.

Mr. Russell looked up and blinked at him. “I can’t believe it,” he murmured. “It’s like a fairy tale, ain’t it? What do you think of it?”

The exasperated Mr. Vickers, thrusting him back in his chair, shouted insults in his ear until his friend, awaking to the true position of affairs, turned to the beginning again and proceeded with much unction to read aloud the document that Mr. Tredgold had given to Selina some months before. Mr. Vickers listened in a state of amazement which surpassed his friend’s, and, the reading finished, besought him to go over it again. Mr. Russell complied, and having got to the end put the paper down and gazed enviously at his friend.

“You won’t have to do no more work,” he said, wistfully.

“Not if I ’ad my rights,” said Mr. Vickers. “It’s like a dream, ain’t it?”

“They bought a ship, so I ’eard,” murmured the other; “they’ve got eight or nine men aboard, and they’ll be away pretty near a year. Why, Selina’ll ’ave a fortune.”

Mr. Vickers, sitting with his legs stretched out stiffly before him, tried to think. “A lot o’ good it’ll do me,” he said, bitterly. “It’s young Joseph Tasker that’ll get the benefit of it.”

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Mr. Russell whistled. "I'd forgot him," he exclaimed, "but I expect she only took him becoss she couldn't get anybody else."

Mr. Vickers eyed him sternly, but, reflecting that Selina was well able to fight her own battles, forbore to reply.

"She must ha' told him," pursued Mr. Russell, following up a train of thought. "Nobody in their senses would want to marry Selina for anything else."

"Ho! indeed," said Mr. Vickers, coldly.

"Unless they was mad," admitted the other. "What are you going to do about it?" he inquired, suddenly.

"I shall think it over," said Mr. Vickers, with dignity. "As soon as you've gone I shall sit down with a quiet pipe and see what's best to be done."

Mr. Russell nodded approval. "First thing you do, you put the paper back where you got it from," he said, warningly.

"I know what I'm about," said Mr. Vickers. "I shall think it over when you're gone and make up my mind what to do."

"Don't you do nothing in a hurry," advised Mr. Russell, earnestly. "I'm going to think it, over, too."

Mr. Vickers stared at him in surprise. "You?" he said, disagreeably.

"Yes, me," replied the other. "After all, what's looks? Looks ain't everything."

His friend looked bewildered, and then started furiously as the meaning of Mr. Russell's remark dawned upon him. He began to feel like a miser beset by thieves.

"What age do you reckon you are, Bill?" he inquired, after a long pause.

"I'm as old as I look," replied Mr. Russell, simply, "and I've got a young face. I'd sooner it was anybody else than Selina; but, still, you can't 'ave everything. If she don't take me sooner than young Joseph I shall be surprised."

Mr. Vickers regarded him with undisguised astonishment.

"I might ha' married scores o' times if I'd liked," said Mr. Russell, with a satisfied air.



"Don't you go doing nothing silly," said Mr. Vickers, uneasily. "Selina can't abear you. You drink too much. Why, she's talking about making young Joseph sign the pledge, to keep'im steady."

Mr. Russell waved his objections aside. "I can get round her," he said, with cheery confidence. "I ain't kept ferrets all these years for nothing. I'm not going to let all that money slip through my fingers for want of a little trying."

He began his courtship a few days afterwards in a fashion which rendered Mr. Vickers almost helpless with indignation. In full view of Selina, who happened to be standing by the door, he brought her unfortunate father along Mint Street, holding him by the arm and addressing him in fond but severe tones on the surpassing merits of total abstinence and the folly of wasting his children's money on beer.

"I found 'im inside the 'Horse and Groom,'" he said to the astonished Selina; "they've got a new barmaid there, and the pore gal wasn't in the house 'arf an hour afore she was serving him with beer. A pot, mind you."

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[Illustration: “I found ‘im inside the Horse and Groom,’ he said.”]

He shook his head in great regret at the speechless Mr. Vickers, and, pushing him inside the house, followed close behind.

“Look here, Bill Russell, I don’t want any of your larks,” said Miss Vickers, recovering herself.

“Larks?” repeated Mr. Russell, with an injured air. “I’m a teetotaler, and it’s my duty to look after brothers that go astray.”

He produced a pledge-card from his waistcoat-pocket and, smoothing it out on the table, pointed with great pride to his signature. The date of the document lay under the ban of his little finger.

“I’d just left the Temperance Hall,” continued the zealot. “I’ve been to three meetings in two days; they’d been talking about the new barmaid, and I guessed at once what brother Vickers would do, an’ I rushed off, just in the middle of brother Humphrey’s experiences—and very interesting they was, too—to save him. He was just starting his second pot, and singing in between, when I rushed in and took the beer away from him and threw it on the floor.”

“I wasn’t singing,” snarled Mr. Vickers, endeavouring to avoid his daughter’s eye.

“Oh, my dear friend!” said Mr. Russell, who had made extraordinary progress in temperance rhetoric in a very limited time, “that’s what comes o’ the drink; it steals away your memory.”

Miss Vickers trembled with wrath. “How dare you go into public-houses after I told you not to?” she demanded, stamping her foot.

“We must ‘ave patience,” said Mr. Russell, gently. “We must show the backslider ‘ow much happier he would be without it. I’ll ‘elp you watch him.”

“When I want your assistance I’ll ask you for it,” said Miss Vickers, tartly. “What do you mean by shoving your nose into other people’s affairs?”

“It’s—it’s my duty to look after fallen brothers,” said Mr. Russell, somewhat taken aback.

“What d’ye mean by fallen?” snapped Miss Vickers, confronting him fiercely.

“Fallen into a pub,” explained Mr. Russell, hastily; “anybody might fall through them swing-doors; they’re made like that o’ purpose.”

“You’ve fell through a good many in your time,” interposed Mr. Vickers, with great bitterness.

“I know I ’ave,” said the other, sadly; “but never no more. Oh, my friend, if you only knew how ’appy I feel since I’ve give up the drink! If you only knew what it was to ’ave your own self-respeck! Think of standing up on the platform and giving of your experiences! But I don’t despair, brother; I’ll have you afore I’ve done with you.”

Mr. Vickers, unable to contain himself, got up and walked about the room. Mr. Russell, with a smile charged with brotherly love, drew a blank pledge-card from his pocket and, detaining him as he passed, besought him to sign it.

“He’ll do it in time,” he said in a loud whisper to Selina, as his victim broke loose. “I’ll come in of an evening and talk to him till he does sign.”

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Miss Vickers hesitated, but, observing the striking improvement in the visitor's attire effected by temperance, allowed a curt refusal to remain unspoken. Mr. Vickers protested hotly.

"That'll do," said his daughter, indecision vanishing at sight of her father's opposition; "if Bill Russell likes to come in and try and do you good, he can."

Mr. Vickers said that he wouldn't have him, but under compulsion stayed indoors the following evening, while Mr. Russell, by means of coloured diagrams, cheerfully lent by his new friends, tried to show him the inroads made by drink upon the human frame. He sat, as Miss Vickers remarked, like a wooden image, and was only moved to animation by a picture of cirrhosis of the liver, which he described as being very pretty.

At the end of a week Mr. Vickers's principles remained unshaken, and so far Mr. Russell had made not the slightest progress in his designs upon the affections of Selina. That lady, indeed, treated him with but scant courtesy, and on two occasions had left him to visit Mr. Tasker; Mr. Vickers's undisguised amusement at such times being hard to bear.

"Don't give up, Bill," he said, encouragingly, as Mr. Russell sat glum and silent; "read over them beautiful 'Verses to a Tea-pot' agin, and try and read them as if you 'adn't got your mouth full o' fish-bait. You're wasting time."

"I don't want none o' your talk," said his disappointed friend. "If you ain't careful I'll tell Selina about you going up to her papers."

The smile faded from Mr. Vickers's face. "Don't make mischief, Bill," he said, uneasily.

"Well, don't you try and make fun o' me," said Mr. Russell, ferociously. "Taking the pledge is 'ard enough to bear without having remarks from you."

"I didn't mean them to be remarks, Bill," said the other, mildly. "But if you tell about me, you know, Selina'll see through your little game."

"I'm about sick o' the whole thing," said Mr. Russell, desperately. "I ain't 'ad a drink outside o' my own house for pretty near a fortnight. I shall ask Selina to-morrow night, and settle it."

"Ask her?" said the amazed Mr. Vickers. "Ask 'er what?"

"Ask 'er to marry me," said the other, doggedly.

Mr. Vickers, thoroughly alarmed, argued with him in vain, the utmost concession he could wring from the determined Mr. Russell being a promise to give him a hint to get out of the way.

“I’ll do that for my own sake,” he said, frankly. “I can do it better alone, and if your old woman is in you get her out too. Ask ’er to go for a walk; that’ll please Selina. I don’t know what the gal does want. I thought turning teetotaler and setting a good example to you would do the trick, if anything would.”

Mrs. Vickers’s utter astonishment next evening, when her husband asked her to go for a walk, irritated that gentleman almost beyond endurance. Convinced at last that he was not joking, she went upstairs and put on her bonnet, and then stood waiting for the reluctant Mr. Vickers with an air of almost bashful diffidence.

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“Joseph is coming in soon,” said Selina, as her parents moved to the door. “I’m expecting him every minute.”

“I’ll stop and see ’im,” said Mr. Russell. “There’s something I want to speak to him about partikler.”

Mr. Vickers gave a warning glance at him as he went out, and trembled as he noted his determined aspect. In a state of considerable agitation he took hold of his wife by the elbow and propelled her along.

It was a cold night, and a strong easterly wind had driven nearly everybody else indoors. Mr. Vickers shivered, and, moving at a good pace, muttered something to his astonished wife about “a good country walk.” They quitted the streets and plunged into dark lanes until, in Mr. Vickers’s judgment, sufficient time having elapsed for the worst to have happened, they turned and made their way to the town again.

“There’s somebody outside our house,” said Mrs. Vickers, who had been in a state of amazed discomfort the whole time.

Mr. Vickers approached warily. Two people were on the doorstep in the attitude of listeners, while a third was making strenuous attempts to peep through at the side of the window-blind. From inside came the sound of voices raised in dispute, that of Selina’s being easily distinguishable.

“What—what’s all this?” demanded Mr. Vickers, in trembling tones, as he followed his wife inside and closed the door.

He glanced from Selina, who was standing in front of Mr. Tasker in the manner of a small hen defending an overgrown chicken, to Mr. Russell, who was towering above them and trying to reach him.

[Illustration: “Selina was standing in front of Mr. Tasker in the manner of a small hen defending an overgrown chicken.”]

“What’s all this?” he repeated, with an attempt at pomposity.

The disputants all spoke at once: Mr. Russell with an air of jocular ferocity, Miss Vickers in a voice that trembled with passion, and Mr. Tasker speaking as a man with a grievance. Despite the confusion, Mr. Vickers soon learned that it was a case of “two’s company and three’s none,” and that Mr. Russell, after turning a deaf ear to hints to retire which had gradually increased in bluntness, had suddenly turned restive and called Mr. Tasker a “mouldy image,” a “wall-eyed rabbit,” and divers other obscure and contradictory things. Not content with that, he had, without any warning, kissed Miss Vickers, and when Mr. Tasker, obeying that infuriated damsel’s commands, tried to show

him the door, had facetiously offered to show that gentleman the wall and taken him up, and bumped him against it until they were both tired.

“Anybody would ha’ thought I was hurting ’im by the noise he made,” said the impenitent Mr. Russell.

“I—I’m surprised at you, Bill,” said Mr. Vickers, nervously.

“Put him outside,” cried Selina, stamping her foot.

“You’d better get off ’ome, Bill,” said Mr. Vickers, with a persuasive wink.

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"While you're safe," added his daughter, with a threatening gesture.

"Go and get yourself 'arf a pint o' warm lemonade," chimed in the voice of the daring Joseph.

Mr. Russell stepped towards him, but Mr. Vickers, seizing him by the coat, held him back and implored him to remember where he was.

"I'd bump the lot of you for two pins," said the disappointed Mr. Russell, longingly. "And it'd do you good; you'd all be the better for it. You'd know 'ow to behave to people when they come in to see you, then. As for Selina, I wouldn't marry her now for all her money."

"Money?" said the irate Selina, scornfully. "What money?"

"The money in the paper," said Mr. Russell, with a diabolical leer in the direction of the unfortunate Mr. Vickers. "The paper what your father found in your box. Didn't he tell you?"

He kicked over a chair which stood in his way and, with a reckless swagger, strode to the door. At the "Horse and Groom," where he spent the remainder of the evening, he was so original in his remarks upon women that two unmarried men offered to fight him, and were only appeased by hearing a full and true account of the circumstances responsible for so much bitterness.

CHAPTER XVII

"*Tried!*" said Captain Bowers, indignantly. "I have tried, over and over again, but it's no use."

"Have you tried the right way?" suggested Edward Tredgold.

"I've tried every way," replied Captain Bowers, impatiently.

"We must think of another, then," said the imperturbable Edward. "Have some more beef?" The captain passed his plate up. "You should have seen her when I said that I was coming to supper with you this evening," he said, impressively. Mr. Tredgold laid down the carving knife and fork. "What did she say?" he inquired, eagerly. "Grunted," said the captain. "Nonsense," said the other, sharply.

"I tell you she did," retorted the captain. "She didn't say a word; just grunted."

"I know what you mean," said Mr. Tredgold; "only you are not using the right word."

"All right," said the captain, resignedly; "I don't know a grunt when I hear it, then; that's all. She generally does grunt if I happen to mention your name."

Mr. Tredgold resumed his meal and sat eating in silence. The captain, who was waiting for more beef, became restless.

"I hope my plate isn't in your way," he said, at last.

"Not at all," said the other, absently.

"Perhaps you'll pass it back to me, then," said the captain.

Mr. Tredgold, still deep in thought, complied. "I wish I could persuade you to have a little more," he said, in tones of polite regret. "I've often noticed that big men are small eaters. I wonder why it is?"

"Sometimes it is because they can't get it, I expect," said the indignant captain.

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Mr. Tredgold said that no doubt that was the case sometimes, and was only recalled to the true position of affairs by the hungry captain marching up to the beef and carving for himself.

"I'm sorry," he said, with a laugh. "I was thinking of something else. I wonder whether you would let me use the crow's-nest for a day or two? There's a place we have got on our hands, a mile or two out, and I want to keep my eye on it."

The captain, his good humour quite restored, preserved his gravity with an effort. "I don't see that she could object to that," he said, slowly. "It's a matter of business, as you might say."

"Of course, I could go straight round to the back without troubling you," resumed Mr. Tredgold. "It's so awkward not to be able to see you when I want to."

Captain Bowers ventured a sympathetic wink. "It's awkward not to be able to see anybody when you want to," he said, softly.

Two days later Miss Drewitt, peeping cautiously from her bedroom window, saw Mr. Tredgold perched up in the crow's-nest with the telescope. It was a cold, frosty day in January, and she smiled agreeably as she hurried downstairs to the fire and tried to imagine the temperature up aloft.

Stern in his attention to duty, Mr. Tredgold climbed day after day to his post of observation and kept a bored but whimsical eye on a deserted cowhouse three miles off. On the fourth day the captain was out, and Miss Drewitt, after a casual peep from the kitchen window, shrugged her shoulders and returned to the sitting-room.

"Mr. Tredgold must be very cold up there, Miss," said Mr. Tasker, respectfully, as he brought in the tea. "He keeps slapping his chest and blowing on his fingers to keep 'imself warm."

Miss Drewitt said "Oh!" and, drawing the little table up to her easy-chair, put down her book and poured herself out a cup of tea. She had just arranged it to her taste—two lumps of sugar and a liberal allowance of cream—when a faint rap sounded on the front door.

"Come in!" she said, taking her feet from the fender and facing about.

The door opened and revealed to her indignant gaze the figure of Mr. Tredgold. His ears and nose were of a brilliant red and his eyes were watering with the cold. She eyed him inquiringly.

"Good afternoon," he said, bowing.

Miss Drewitt returned the greeting.

“Isn’t Captain Bowers in?” said Mr. Tredgold, with a shade of disappointment in his voice as he glanced around.

“No,” said the girl.

Mr. Tredgold hesitated. “I was going to ask him to give me a cup of tea,” he said, with a shiver. “I’m half frozen, and I’m afraid that I have taken a chill.”

[Illustration: “I was going to ask him to give me a cup of tea,’ he said.”]

Miss Drewitt nearly dropped her tea-cup in surprise at his audacity. He was certainly very cold, and she noticed a little blue mixed with the red of his nose. She looked round the cosy room and then at the open door, which was causing a bitter draught.

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"He is not in," she repeated.

"Thank you," said Mr. Tredgold, patiently. "Good afternoon."

He was so humble that the girl began to feel uncomfortable. His gratitude for nothing reminded her of a disappointed tramp; moreover, the draught from the door was abominable.

"I can give you a cup of tea, if you wish," she said, shivering. "But please make haste and shut that door."

Mr. Tredgold stepped inside and closed it with alacrity, his back being turned just long enough to permit a congratulatory wink at the unconscious oak. He took a chair the other side of the fire, and, extending his numbed fingers to the blaze, thanked her warmly.

"It is very kind of you," he said, as he took his cup from her. "I was half frozen."

"I should have thought that a brisk walk home would have been better for you," said the girl, coldly.

Mr. Tredgold shook his head dolefully. "I should probably only have had lukewarm tea when I got there," he replied. "Nobody looks after me properly."

He passed his cup up and began to talk of skating and other seasonable topics. As he got warmer and his features regained their normal colouring and his face its usual expression of cheerfulness, Miss Drewitt's pity began to evaporate.

"Are you feeling better?" she inquired, pointedly.

"A little," was the cautious reply. His face took on an expression of anxiety and he spoke of a twinge, lightly tapping his left lung by way of emphasis.

"I hope that I shall not be taken ill here," he said, gravely.

Miss Drewitt sat up with a start. "I should hope not," she said, sharply.

"So inconvenient," he murmured.

"Quite impossible," said Miss Drewitt, whose experience led her to believe him capable of anything.

"I should never forgive myself," he said, gently.

Miss Drewitt regarded him in alarm, and of her own accord gave him a third cup of tea and told him that he might smoke. She felt safer when she saw him light a cigarette, and, for fear that a worse thing might befall her, entered amiably into conversation. She even found herself, somewhat to her surprise, discussing the voyage and sympathising with Mr. Tredgold in his anxiety concerning his father's safety.

"Mrs. Chalk and Mrs. Stobell are very anxious, too," he said. "It is a long way for a small craft like that."

"And then to find no treasure at the end of it," said Miss Drewitt, with feminine sweetness.

Mr. Tredgold stole a look at her. "I did not mean to say that the captain had no treasure," he said, quietly.

"You believe in it now?" said the girl, triumphantly.

"I believe that the captain has a treasure," admitted the other, "certainly."

"Worth half a million?" persisted Miss Drewitt.

"Worth more than that," said Mr. Tredgold, gazing steadily into the fire.

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The girl looked puzzled. "More?" she said, in surprise.

"Much more," said the other, still contemplating the fire. "It is priceless."

Miss Drewitt sat up suddenly and then let herself back slowly into the depths of the chair. Her face turned scarlet and she hoped fervently that if Mr. Tredgold looked at her the earth might open and swallow him up. She began to realize dimly that in the absence of an obliging miracle of that kind there would never be any getting rid of him.

"Priceless," repeated Mr. Tredgold, in challenging tones.

Miss Drewitt made no reply. Rejoinder was dangerous and silence difficult. In a state of nervous indignation she rang for Mr. Tasker and instructed him to take away the tea-things; to sweep the hearth; and to alter the position of two pictures. By the time all this was accomplished she had regained her wonted calm and was airing some rather strong views on the subject of two little boys who lived with a catapult next door but one.