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At Sunwich Port, Part 4. by W. W. Jacobs

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At Sunwich Port, Part 4.

CHAPTER XVI

The two ladies received Mr. Hardy's information with something akin to consternation, the idea of the autocrat of Equator Lodge as a stowaway on board the ship of his ancient enemy proving too serious for ordinary comment. Mrs. Kingdom's usual expressions of surprise, "Well, I never did!" and "Good gracious alive!" died on her lips, and she sat gazing helpless and round-eyed at her niece.

"I wonder what he said," she gasped, at last.

Miss Nugent, who was trying to imagine her father in his new role aboard the Conqueror, paid no heed. It was not a pleasant idea, and her eyes flashed with temper as she thought of it. Sooner or later the whole affair would be public property.

"I had an idea all along that he wasn't in London," murmured Mrs. Kingdom. "Fancy that Nathan Smith standing in Sam's room telling us falsehoods like that! He never even blushed."

"But you said that you kept picturing father walking about the streets of London, wrestling with his pride and trying to make up his mind to come home again," said her niece, maliciously.

Mrs. Kingdom fidgeted, but before she could think of a satisfactory reply Bella came to the door and asked to speak to her for a moment. Profiting by her absence, Mr. Hardy leaned towards Miss Nugent, and in a low voice expressed his sorrow at the mishap to her father and his firm conviction that everything that could be thought of for that unfortunate mariner's comfort would be done. "Our fathers will probably come back good friends," he concluded. "There is nothing would give me more pleasure than that, and I think that we had better begin and set them a good example."

"It is no good setting an example to people who are hundreds of miles away," said the matter-of-fact Miss Nugent. "Besides, if they have made friends, they don't want an example set them."

"But in that case they have set us an example which we ought to follow," urged Hardy.

Miss Nugent raised her eyes to his. "Why do you wish to be on friendly terms?" she asked, with disconcerting composure.

[Illustration: "'Why do you wish to be on friendly terms?' she asked."]

"I should like to know your father," returned Hardy, with perfect gravity; "and Mrs. Kingdom---and you."

He eyed her steadily as he spoke, and Miss Nugent, despite her utmost efforts, realized with some indignation that a faint tinge of colour was creeping into her cheeks. She remembered his covert challenge at their last interview at Mr. Wilks's, and the necessity of reading this persistent young man a stern lesson came to her with all the force of a public duty.

"Why?" she inquired, softly, as she lowered her eyes and assumed a pensive expression.

"I admire him, for one thing, as a fine seaman," said Hardy.

"Yes," said Miss Nugent, "and---"

"And I've always had a great liking for Mrs. Kingdom," he continued; "she was very good-natured to me when I was a very small boy, I remember. She is very kind and amiable."

The baffled Miss Nugent stole a glance at him. "And---" she said again, very softly.

"And very motherly," said Hardy, without moving a muscle.

Miss Nugent pondered and stole another glance at him. The expression of his face was ingenuous, not to say simple. She resolved to risk it. So far he had always won in their brief encounters, and monotony was always distasteful to her, especially monotony of that kind.

"And what about me?" she said, with a friendly smile.

"You," said Hardy, with a gravity of voice belied by the amusement in his eye; "you are the daughter of the fine seaman and the niece of the good-natured and motherly Mrs. Kingdom."

Miss Nugent looked down again hastily, and all the shrew within her clamoured for vengeance. It was the same masterful Jem Hardy that had forced his way into their seat at church as a boy. If he went on in this way he would become unbearable; she resolved, at the cost of much personal inconvenience, to give him a much-needed fall. But she realized quite clearly that it would be a matter of time.

"Of course, you and Jack are already good friends?" she said, softly.

"Very," assented Hardy. "Such good friends that I have been devoting a lot of time lately to considering ways and means of getting him out of the snares of the Kybirds."

"I should have thought that that was his affair," said Miss Nugent, haughtily.

"Mine, too," said Hardy. "I don't want him to marry Miss Kybird."

For the first time since the engagement Miss Nugent almost approved of it. "Why not let him know your wishes?" she said, gently. "Surely that would be sufficient."

"But you don't want them to marry?" said Hardy, ignoring the remark.

"I don't want my brother to do anything shabby," replied the girl; "but I shouldn't be sorry, of course, if they did not."

"Very good," said Hardy. "Armed with your consent I shall leave no stone unturned. Nugent was let in for this, and I am going to get him out if I can. All's fair in love and war. You don't mind my doing anything shabby?"

"Not in the least," replied Miss Nugent, promptly.

The reappearance of Mrs. Kingdom at this moment saved Mr. Hardy the necessity of a reply.

Conversation reverted to the missing captain, and Hardy and Mrs. Kingdom together drew such a picture of the two captains fraternizing that Miss Nugent felt that the millennium itself could have no surprises for her.

"He has improved very much," said Mrs. Kingdom, after the door had closed behind their visitor; "so thoughtful."

"He's thoughtful enough," agreed her niece.

"He is what I call extremely considerate," pursued the elder lady, "but I'm afraid he is weak; anybody could turn him round their little finger."

"I believe they could," said Miss Nugent, gazing at her with admiration, "if he wanted to be turned."

The ice thus broken, Mr. Hardy spent the following day or two in devising plausible reasons for another visit. He found one in the person of Mr. Wilks, who, having been unsuccessful in finding his beloved master at a small tavern down by the London docks, had returned to Sunwich, by no means benefited by his change of air, to learn the terrible truth as to his disappearance from Hardy.

"I wish they'd Shanghaid me instead," he said to that sympathetic listener, "or Mrs. Silk."

"Eh?" said the other, staring.

"Wot'll be the end of it I don't know," said Mr. Wilks, laying a hand, which still trembled, on the other's knee. "It's got about that she saved my life by 'er careful nussing, and the way she shakes 'er 'ead at me for risking my valuable life, as she calls it, going up to London, gives me the shivers."

"Nonsense," said Hardy; "she can't marry you against your will. Just be distantly civil to her."

"Ow can you be distantly civil when she lives just opposite?" inquired the steward, querulously. "She sent Teddy over at ten o'clock last night to rub my chest with a bottle o' liniment, and it's no good me saying I'm all right when she's been spending eighteen-pence o' good money over the stuff."

"She can't marry you unless you ask her," said the comforter.

Mr. Wilks shook his head. "People in the alley are beginning to talk," he said, dolefully. "Just as I came in this afternoon old George Lee screwed up one eye at two or three women wot was gossiping near, and when I asked 'im wot 'e'd got to wink about he said that a bit o' wedding-cake 'ad blowed in his eye as I passed. It sent them silly creeturs into fits a'most."

[Illustration: "He said that a bit o' wedding-cake 'ad blowed in his eye."]

"They'll soon get tired of it," said Hardy.

Mr. Wilks, still gloomy, ventured to doubt it, but cheered up and became almost bright when his visitor announced his intention of trying to smooth over matters for him at Equator Lodge. He became quite voluble in his defence, and attached much importance to the fact that he had nursed Miss Nugent when she was in long clothes and had taught her to whistle like an angel at the age of five.

"I've felt being cut adrift by her more than anything," he said, brokenly. "Nine-an'-twenty years I sailed with the cap'n and served 'im faithful, and this is my reward."

Hardy pleaded his case next day. Miss Nugent was alone when he called, and, moved by the vivid picture he drew of the old man's loneliness, accorded her full forgiveness, and decided to pay him a visit at once. The fact that Hardy had not been in the house five minutes she appeared to have overlooked.

"I'll go upstairs and put my hat and jacket on and go now," she said, brightly.

"That's very kind of you," said Hardy. His voice expressed admiring gratitude; but he made no sign of leaving his seat.

"You don't mind?" said Miss Nugent, pausing in front of him and slightly extending her hand.

"Not in the least," was the reply; "but I want to see Wilks myself. Perhaps you'll let me walk down with you?"

The request was so unexpected that the girl had no refusal ready. She hesitated and was lost. Finally, she expressed a fear that she might keep him waiting too long while she got ready--a fear which he politely declined to consider.

"Well, we'll see," said the marvelling Miss Nugent to herself as she went slowly upstairs. "He's got impudence enough for forty."

She commenced her preparations for seeing Mr. Wilks by wrapping a shawl round her shoulders and reclining in an easy-chair with a novel. It was a good story, but the room was very cold, and even the pleasure of snubbing an intrusive young man did not make amends for the lack of warmth. She read and shivered for an hour, and then with chilled fingers lit the gas and proceeded to array herself for the journey.

Her temper was not improved by seeing Mr. Hardy sitting in the dark over a good fire when she got downstairs.

"I'm afraid I've kept you waiting," she said, crisply.

"Not at all," said Hardy. "I've been very comfortable."

Miss Nugent repressed a shiver and, crossing to the fire, thoughtlessly extended her fingers over the blaze.

"I'm afraid you're cold," said Hardy.

The girl looked round sharply. His face, or as much of it as she could see in the firelight, bore a look of honest concern somewhat at variance with the quality of his voice. If it had not been for the absurdity of altering her plans on his account she would have postponed her visit to the steward until another day.

The walk to Fullalove Alley was all too short for Jem Hardy. Miss Nugent stepped along with the air of a martyr anxious to get to the stake and have it over, and she answered in monosyllables when her companion pointed out the beauties of the night.

A bitter east wind blew up the road and set her yearning for the joys of Mr. Wilks's best room. "It's very cold," she said, shivering.

Hardy assented, and reluctantly quickened his pace to keep step with hers. Miss Nugent with her chin sunk in a fur boa looked neither to the right nor the left, and turning briskly into the alley, turned the handle of Mr. Wilks's door and walked in, leaving her companion to follow.

The steward, who was smoking a long pipe over the fire, looked round in alarm. Then his expression changed, and he rose and stammered out a welcome. Two minutes later Miss Nugent, enthroned in the best chair with her toes on the fender, gave her faithful subject a free pardon and full permission to make hot coffee.

"And don't you ever try and deceive me again, Sam," she said, as she sipped the comforting beverage.

"No, miss," said the steward, humbly. "I've 'ad a lesson. I'll never try and Shanghai anybody else agin as long as I live."

After this virtuous sentiment he sat and smoked placidly, with occasional curious glances divided between his two visitors. An idle and ridiculous idea, which occurred to him in connection with them, was dismissed at once as too preposterous for a sensible steward to entertain.

"Mrs. Kingdom well?" he inquired.

"Quite well," said the girl. "If you take me home, Sam, you shall see her, and be forgiven by her, too."

"Thankee, miss," said the gratified steward.

"And what about your foot, Wilks?" said Hardy, somewhat taken aback by this arrangement.

"Foot, sir?" said the unconscious Mr. Wilks; "wot foot?"

"Why, the bad one," said Hardy, with a significant glance.

"Ho, that one?" said Mr. Wilks, beating time and waiting further revelations.

"Do you think you ought to use it much?" inquired Hardy.

Mr. Wilks looked at it, or, to be more exact, looked at both of them, and smiled weakly. His previous idea recurred to him with renewed force now, and several things in the young man's behaviour, hitherto disregarded, became suddenly charged with significance. Miss Nugent looked on with an air of cynical interest.

"Better not run any risk," said Hardy, gravely. "I shall be very pleased to see Miss Nugent home, if she will allow me."

"What is the matter with it?" inquired Miss Nugent, looking him full in the face.

Hardy hesitated. Diplomacy, he told himself, was one thing; lying another. He passed the question on to the rather badly used Mr. Wilks.

"Matter with it?" repeated that gentleman, glaring at him reproachfully. "It's got shootin' pains right up it. I suppose it was walking miles and miles every day in London, looking for the cap'n, was too much for it."

"Is it too bad for you to take me home, Sam?" inquired Miss Nugent, softly.

The perturbed Mr. Wilks looked from one to the other. As a sportsman his sympathies were with Hardy, but his duty lay with the girl.

"I'll do my best, miss," he said; and got up and limped, very well indeed for a first attempt, round the room.

Then Miss Nugent did a thing which was a puzzle to herself for some time afterwards. Having won the victory she deliberately threw away the fruits of it, and declining to allow the steward to run any risks, accepted Hardy's escort home. Mr. Wilks watched them from the door, and with his head in a whirl caused by the night's proceedings mixed himself a stiff glass of grog to set it right, and drank to the health of both of them.

[Illustration: "Mr. Wilks drank to the health of both of them."]

The wind had abated somewhat in violence as they walked home, and, moreover, they had their backs to it. The walk was slower and more enjoyable in many respects than the walk out. In an unusually soft mood she replied to his remarks and stole little critical glances up at him. When they reached the house she stood a little while at the gate gazing at the starry sky and listening to the crash of the sea on the beach.

"It is a fine night," she said, as she shook hands.

"The best I have ever known," said Hardy. "Good-bye."

CHAPTER XVII

The weeks passed all too quickly for James Hardy. He saw Kate Nugent at her own home; met her, thanks to the able and hearty assistance of Mr. Wilks, at Fullalove Alley, and on several occasions had the agreeable task of escorting her back home.

He cabled to his father for news of the illustrious stowaway immediately the *Conqueror* was notified as having reached Port Elizabeth. The reply---"Left ship"---confirmed his worst fears, but he cheerfully accepted Mrs. Kingdom's view that the captain, in order to relieve the natural anxiety of his family, had secured a passage on the first vessel homeward bound.

Captain Hardy was the first to reach home. In the early hours of a fine April morning the *Conqueror* steamed slowly into Sunwich Harbour, and in a very short time the town was revelling in a description of Captain Nugent's first voyage before the mast from lips which were never tired of repeating it. Down by the waterside Mr. Nathan Smith found that he had suddenly attained the rank of a popular hero, and his modesty took alarm at the publicity afforded to his action. It was extremely distasteful to a man who ran a quiet business on old-fashioned lines and disbelieved in advertisement. He lost three lodgers the same day.

[Illustration: "A popular hero."]

Jem Hardy was one of the few people in Sunwich for whom the joke had no charms, and he betrayed such an utter lack of sympathy with his father's recital that the latter accused him at last of wanting a sense of humour.

"I don't see anything amusing in it," said his son, stiffly.

Captain Hardy recapitulated one or two choice points, and was even at some pains to explain them.

"I can't see any fun in it," repeated his son. "Your behaviour seems to me to have been deplorable."

"What?" shouted the captain, hardly able to believe his ears.

"Captain Nugent was your guest," pursued the other; "he got on your ship by accident, and he should have been treated decently as a saloon passenger."

"And been apologized to for coming on board, I suppose?" suggested the captain.

"It wouldn't have been amiss," was the reply.

The captain leaned back in his chair and regarded him thoughtfully. "I can't think what's the matter with you, Jem," he said.

"Ordinary decent ideas, that's all," said his son, scathingly.

"There's something more in it than that," said the other, positively. "I don't like to see this love-your-enemy business with you, Jem; it ain't natural to you. Has your health been all right while I've been away?"

"Of course it has," said his son, curtly. "If you didn't want Captain Nugent aboard with you why didn't you put him ashore? It wouldn't have delayed you long. Think of the worry and anxiety you've caused poor Mrs. Kingdom."

"A holiday for her," growled the captain.

"It has affected her health," continued his son; "and besides, think of his daughter. She's a high-spirited girl, and all Sunwich is laughing over her father's mishap."

"Nugent fell into his own trap," exclaimed the captain, impatiently. "And it won't do that girl of his any harm to be taken down a peg or two. Do her good. Knock some of the nonsense out of her."

"That's not the way to speak of a lady," said Jem, hotly.

The offended captain regarded him somewhat sourly; then his face changed, and he got up from his chair and stood before his son with consternation depicted on every feature.

"You don't mean to tell me," he said, slowly; "you don't mean to tell me that you're thinking anything of Kate Nugent?"

"Why not?" demanded the other, defiantly; "why shouldn't I?"

Captain Hardy, whistling softly, made no reply, but still stood eyeing him.

"I thought there was some other reason for your consideration besides 'ordinary decent ideas,'" he said, at last. "When did it come on? How long have you had it?"

Mr. Hardy, jun., in a studiously unfilial speech, intimated that these pleasantries were not to his taste.

"No, of course not," said the captain, resuming his seat. "Well, I'm sorry if it's serious, Jem, but I never dreamt you had any ideas in that quarter. If I had I'd have given old Nugent the best bunk on the ship and sung him to sleep myself. Has she given you any encouragement?"

"Don't know," said Jem, who found the conversation awkward.

"Extraordinary thing," said the captain, shaking his head, "extraordinary. Like a play."

"Play?" said his son, sharply.

"Play," repeated his father, firmly. "What is the name of it? I saw it once at Newcastle. The lovers take poison and die across each other's chests because their people won't let 'em marry. And that reminds me. I saw some phosphor-paste in the kitchen, Jem. Whose is it?"

"I'm glad to be the means of affording you amusement," said Jem, grinding his teeth.

Captain Hardy regarded him affectionately. "Go easy, my lad," he said, equably; "go easy. If I'd known it before, things would have been different; as I didn't, we must make the best of it. She's a pretty girl, and a good one, too, for all her airs, but I'm afraid she's too fond of her father to overlook this."

"That's where you've made such a mess of things," broke in his son. "Why on earth you two old men couldn't---"

"Easy," said the startled captain. "When you are in the early fifties, my lad, your ideas about age will be more accurate. Besides, Nugent is seven or eight years older than I am."

"What became of him?" inquired Jem.

"He was off the moment we berthed," said his father, suppressing a smile. "I don't mean that he bolted---he'd got enough starch left in him not to do that---but he didn't trespass on our hospitality a moment longer than was necessary. I heard that he got a passage home on the Columbus. He knew the master. She sailed some time before us for London. I thought he'd have been home by this."

It was not until two days later, however, that the gossip in Sunwich received a pleasant fillip by the arrival of the injured captain. He came down from London by the midday train, and, disdaining the privacy of a cab, prepared to run the gauntlet of his fellow-townsmen.

A weaker man would have made a detour, but he held a direct course, and with a curt nod to acquaintances who would have stopped him walked swiftly in the direction of home. Tradesmen ran to their shop-doors to see him, and smoking amphibians lounging at street corners broke out into sunny smiles as he passed. He met these annoyances with a set face and a cold eye, but his views concerning children were not improved by the crowd of small creatures which fluttered along the road ahead of him and, hopeful of developments, clustered round the gate as he passed in.

[Illustration: "He met these annoyances with a set face."]

It is the pride and privilege of most returned wanderers to hold forth at great length concerning their adventures, but Captain Nugent was commendably brief. At first he could hardly be induced to speak of them at all, but the necessity of contradicting stories which Bella had gleaned for Mrs. Kingdom from friends in town proved too strong for him. He ground his teeth with suppressed fury as he listened to some of them. The truth was bad enough, and his daughter, sitting by his side with her hand in his, was trembling with indignation.

"Poor father," she said, tenderly; "what a time you must have had." "It won't bear thinking of," said Mrs. Kingdom, not to be outdone in sympathy.

"He met these annoyances with a set face."

"Well, don't think of it," said the captain, shortly.

Mrs. Kingdom sighed as though to indicate that her feelings were not to be suppressed in that simple fashion.

"The anxiety has been very great," she said, shaking her head, "but everybody's been very kind. I'm sure all our friends have been most sympathetic. I couldn't go outside the house without somebody stopping me and asking whether there was any news of you. I'd no idea you were so popular; even the milkman-----"

"I'd like some tea," interrupted the captain, roughly; "that is, when you have finished your very interesting information."

Mrs. Kingdom pursed her lips together to suppress the words she was afraid to utter, and rang the bell.

"Your master would like some tea," she said, primly, as Bella appeared. "He has had a long journey." The captain started and eyed her fiercely; Mrs. Kingdom, her good temper quite restored by this little retort, folded her hands in her lap and gazed at him with renewed sympathy.

"We all missed you very much," said Kate, softly. "But we had no fears once we knew that you were at sea."

"And I suppose some of the sailors were kind to you?" suggested the unfortunate Mrs. Kingdom. "They are rough fellows, but I suppose some of them have got their hearts in the right place. I daresay they were sorry to see you in such a position."

The captain's reply was of a nature known to Mrs. Kingdom and her circle as "snapping one's head off." He drew his chair to the table as Bella brought in the tray and, accepting a cup of tea, began to discuss with his daughter the events which had transpired in his absence.

"There is no news," interposed Mrs. Kingdom, during an interval. Mr. Hall's aunt died the other day."

"Never heard of her," said the captain. "Neither had I, till then," said his sister. "What a lot of people there are one never hears of, John." The captain stared at her offensively and went on with his meal. A long silence ensued.

"I suppose you didn't get to hear of the cable that was sent?" said Mrs. Kingdom, making another effort to arouse interest.

"What cable?" inquired her brother.

"The one Mr. Hardy sent to his father about you," replied Mrs. Kingdom.

The captain pushed his chair back and stared her full in the face. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

His sister explained.

"Do you mean to tell me that you've been speaking to young Hardy?" exclaimed the captain.

"I could hardly help doing so, when he came here," returned his sister, with dignity. "He has been very anxious about you."

Captain Nugent rose and strode up and down the room. Then he stopped and glanced sharply at his daughter.

"Were you here when he called?" he demanded.

"Yes," was the reply.

"And you---you spoke to him?" roared the captain.

"I had to be civil," said Miss Nugent, calmly; "I'm not a sea-captain."

Her father walked up and down the room again. Mrs. Kingdom, terrified at the storm she had evoked, gazed helplessly at her niece.

"What did he come here for?" said the captain.

Miss Nugent glanced down at her plate. "I can't imagine," she said, demurely. "The first time he came to tell us what had become of you."

The captain stopped in his walk and eyed her sternly. "I am very fortunate in my children," he said, slowly. "One is engaged to marry the daughter of the shadiest rascal in Sunwich, and the other---"

"And the other?" said his daughter, proudly, as he paused.

"The other," said the captain, as he came round the table and put his hand on her shoulder, "is my dear and obedient daughter."

"Yes," said Miss Nugent; "but that isn't what you were going to say. You need not worry about me; I shall not do anything that would displease you."

CHAPTER XVIII

With a view to avoiding the awkwardness of a chance meeting with any member of the Nugent family Hardy took the sea road on his way to the office the morning after the captain's return. Common sense told him to leave matters for the present to the healing hand of Time, and to cultivate habits of self-effacement by no means agreeable to one of his temperament.

Despite himself his spirits rose as he walked. It was an ideal spring morning, cool and sunny. The short turf by the side of the road was fragrant under his heel, and a light wind stirred the blueness of the sea. On the beach below two grizzled men of restful habit were endeavouring to make an old boat waterproof with red and green paint.

A long figure approaching slowly from the opposite direction broke into a pleasant smile as he drew near and quickened his pace to meet him.

"You're out early," said Hardy, as the old man stopped and turned with him.

"'Ave to be, sir," said Mr. Wilks, darkly; "out early and 'ome late, and more often than not getting my dinner out. That's my life nowadays."

"Can't you let her see that her attentions are undesirable?" inquired Hardy, gravely.

"Can't you let her see that her attentions are undesirable?"

[Illustration: "Can't you let her see that her attentions are undesirable?"]

"I can't be rude to a woman," said the steward, with a melancholy smile; "if I could, my life would ha' been very different. She's always stepping across to ask my advice about Teddy, or something o' that sort. All last week she kept borrowing my frying-pan, so at last by way of letting 'er see I didn't like it I went out and bought 'er one for herself. What's the result? Instead o' being offended she went out and bought me a couple o' neck-ties. When I didn't wear 'em she pretended it was because I didn't like the colour, and she went and bought two more. I'm wearing one now."

He shook his head ruefully, and Hardy glanced at a tie which would have paled the glories of a rainbow. For some time they walked along in silence.

"I'm going to pay my respects to Cap'n Nugent this afternoon," said Mr. Wilks, suddenly.

"Ah," said the other.

"I knew what it 'ud be with them two on the same ship," continued Mr. Wilks. "I didn't say nothing when you was talking to Miss Kate, but I knew well enough."

"Ah," said Hardy again. There was no mistaking the significance of the steward's remarks, and he found them somewhat galling. It was all very well to make use of his humble friend, but he had no desire to discuss his matrimonial projects with him.

"It's a great pity," pursued the unconscious Mr. Wilks, "just as everything seemed to be going on smoothly; but while there's life there's 'ope."

"That's a smart barge over there," said Hardy, pointing it out.

Mr. Wilks nodded. "I shall keep my eyes open this afternoon," he said reassuringly. "And if I get a chance of putting in a word it'll be put in. Twenty-nine years I sailed with the cap'n, and if there's anybody knows his weak spots it's me."

He stopped as they reached the town and said "good-bye." He pressed the young man's hand sympathetically, and a wink of intense artfulness gave point to his last remark.

"There's always Sam Wilks's cottage," he said, in a husky whisper; "and if two of 'is friends *should* 'appen to meet there, who'd be the wiser?"

He gazed benevolently after the young man's retreating figure and continued his stroll, his own troubles partly forgotten in the desire to assist his friends. It would be a notable feat for the humble steward to be the means of bringing the young people together and thereby bringing to an end the feud of a dozen years. He pictured himself eventually as the trusted friend and adviser of both families, and in one daring flight of fancy saw himself hobnobbing with the two captains over pipes and whisky.

Neatly dressed and carrying a small offering of wallflowers, he set out that afternoon to call on his old master, giving, as he walked, the last touches to a little speech of welcome which he had prepared during dinner. It was a happy effort, albeit a trifle laboured, but Captain Nugent's speech, the inspiration of the moment, gave it no chance.

He started the moment the bowing Mr. Wilks entered the room, his voice rising gradually from low, bitter tones to a hurricane note which Bella. could hear in the kitchen without even leaving her chair. Mr. Wilks stood dazed and speechless before him, holding the wallflowers in one hand and his cap in the other. In this attitude he listened to a description of his character drawn with the loving skill of an artist whose whole heart was in his work, and who seemed never tired of filling in details.

"If you ever have the hardihood to come to my house again," he concluded, "I'll break every bone in your misshapen body. Get!"

Mr. Wilks turned and groped his way to the door. Then he went a little way back with some idea of defending himself, but the door of the room was slammed in his face. He walked slowly down the path to the road and stood there for some time in helpless bewilderment. In all his sixty years of life his feelings had never been so outraged. His cap was still in his hand, and, with a helpless gesture, he put it on and scattered his floral offering in the road. Then he made a bee-line for the Two Schooners.

Though convivial by nature and ever free with his money, he sat there drinking alone in silent misery. Men came and went, but he still sat there noting with mournful pride the attention caused by his unusual bearing. To casual inquiries he shook his head; to more direct ones he only sighed heavily and applied himself to his liquor. Curiosity increased with numbers as the day wore on, and the steward, determined to be miserable, fought manfully against an ever-increasing cheerfulness due to the warming properties of the ale within.

"I 'lope you ain't lost nobody, Sam?" said a discomfited inquirer at last.

Mr. Wilks shook his head.

"You look as though you'd lost a shilling and found a ha'penny," pursued the other.

"Found a what?" inquired Mr. Wilks, wrinkling his forehead.

"A ha'penny," said his friend.

"Who did?" said Mr. Wilks.

The other attempted to explain and was ably assisted by two friends, but without avail; the impression left on Mr. Wilks's mind being that somebody had got a shilling of his. He waxed exceeding bitter, and said that he had been missing shillings for a long time.

"You're labourin' under a mistake, Sam," said the first speaker.

Mr. Wilks laughed scornfully and essayed a sneer, while his friends, regarding his contortions with some anxiety, expressed a fear that he was not quite himself. To this suggestion the steward deigned no reply, and turning to the landlord bade him replenish his mug.

"You've 'ad enough, Mr. Wilks," said that gentleman, who had been watching him for some time.

Mr. Wilks, gazing at him mistily, did not at first understand the full purport of this remark; but when he did, his wrath was so majestic and his remarks about the quality of the brew so libellous that the landlord lost all patience.

"You get off home," he said, sharply.

"Listen t' me," said Mr. Wilks, impressively.

"I don't want no words with you," said the land-lord. "You get off home while you can."

"That's right, Sam," said one of the company, putting his hand on the steward's arm. "You take his advice."

Mr. Wilks shook the hand off and eyed his adviser ferociously. Then he took a glass from the counter and smashed it on the floor. The next moment the bar was in a ferment, and the landlord, gripping Mr. Wilks round the middle, skilfully piloted him to the door and thrust him into the road.

[Illustration: "He took a glass from the counter and smashed it on the floor."]

The strong air blowing from the sea disordered the steward's faculties still further. His treatment inside was forgotten, and, leaning against the front of the tavern, he stood open-mouthed, gazing at marvels. Ships in the harbour suddenly quitted their native element and were drawn up into the firmament; nobody passed but twins.

"Evening, Mr. Wilks," said a voice.

The steward peered down at the voice. At first he thought it was another case of twins, but looking close he saw that it was Mr. Edward Silk alone. He saluted him graciously, and then, with a wave of his hand toward the sky, sought to attract his attention to the ships there.

"Yes," said the unconscious Mr. Silk, sign of a fine day to-morrow. "Are you going my way?"

Mr. Wilks smiled, and detaching himself from the tavern with some difficulty just saved Mr. Silk from a terrible fall by clutching him forcibly round the neck. The ingratitude of Mr. Silk was a rebuff to a nature which was at that moment overflowing with good will. For a moment the steward was half inclined to let him go home alone, but the reflection that he would never get there softened him.

"Pull yourself t'gether," he said, gravely, "Now, 'old on me."

The road, as they walked, rose up in imitation of the shipping, but Mr. Wilks knew now the explanation: Teddy Silk was intoxicated. Very gently he leaned towards the erring youth and wagged his head at him.

"Are you going to hold up or aren't you?" demanded Mr. Silk, shortly.

The steward waived the question; he knew from experience the futility of arguing with men in drink. The great thing was to get Teddy Silk home, not to argue with him. He smiled good-temperedly to himself, and with a sudden movement pinned him up against the wall in time to arrest another fall.

[Illustration: "The great thing was to get Teddy Silk home."]

With frequent halts by the way, during which the shortness of Mr. Silk's temper furnished Mr. Wilks with the texts of several sermons, none of which he finished, they at last reached Fullalove Alley, and the steward, with a brief exhortation to his charge to hold his head up, bore down on Mrs. Silk, who was sitting in her doorway.

"I've brought 'im 'ome," he said, steadying himself against the doorpost; "brought 'im 'ome."

"Brought 'im 'ome?" said the bewildered Mrs. Silk.

"Don' say anything to 'im," entreated Mr. Wilks, "my sake. Thing might 'appen anybody."

"He's been like that all the way," said Mr. Silk, regarding the steward with much disfavour. "I don't know why I troubled about him, I'm sure."

"Crowd roun 'im," pursued the imaginative Mr. Wilks. "'Old up, Teddy."

"I'm sure it's very kind of you, Mr. Wilks," said the widow, as she glanced at a little knot of neighbours standing near. "Will you come inside for a minute or two?"

She moved the chair to let him pass, and Mr. Wilks, still keeping the restraining hand of age on the shoulder of intemperate youth, passed in and stood, smiling amiably, while Mrs. Silk lit the lamp and placed it in the centre of the table, which was laid for supper. The light shone on a knuckle of boiled pork, a home-made loaf, and a fresh-cut wedge of cheese.

"I suppose you won't stay and pick a bit o' sup-per with us?" said Mrs. Silk.

"Why not?" inquired Mr. Wilks.

"I'm sure, if I had known," said Mrs. Silk, as she piloted him to a seat, "I'd 'ave 'ad something nice. There, now! If I 'aven't been and forgot the beer."

She left the table and went into the kitchen, and Mr. Wilks's eyes glistened as she returned with a large brown jug full of foaming ale and filled his glass.

"Teddy mustn't 'ave any," he said, sharply, as she prepared to fill that gentleman's glass.

"Just 'alf a glass," she said, winsomely.

"Not a drop," said Mr. Wilks, firmly.

Mrs. Silk hesitated, and screwing up her forehead glanced significantly at her son. "'Ave some by-and-by," she whispered.

"Give me the jug," said Mr. Silk, indignantly. "What are you listening to 'im for? Can't you see what's the matter with 'im?"

"Not to 'ave it," said Mr. Wilks; "put it 'ere."

He thumped the table emphatically with his hand, and before her indignant son could interfere Mrs. Silk had obeyed. It was the last straw. Mr. Edward Silk rose to his feet with tremendous effect and, first thrusting his plate violently away from him, went out into the night, slamming the door behind him with such violence that the startled Mr. Wilks was nearly blown out of his chair.

"He don't mean nothing," said Mrs. Silk, turning a rather scared face to the steward. "'E's a bit jealous of you, I s'pose."

Mr. Wilks shook his head. Truth to tell, he was rather at a loss to know exactly what had happened.

"And then there's 'is love affair," sighed Mrs. Silk. "He'll never get over the loss of Amelia Kybird. I always know when 'e 'as seen her, he's that miserable there's no getting a word out of 'im."

Mr. Wilks smiled vaguely and went on with his supper, and, the meal finished, allowed himself to be installed in an easy-chair, while his hostess cleared the table. He sat and smoked in high good humour with himself, the occasional remarks he made being received with an enthusiasm which they seldom provoked elsewhere.

"I should like t' sit 'ere all night," he said, at last.

"I don't believe it," said Mrs. Silk, playfully.

"Like t' sit 'ere all night," repeated Mr. Wilks, somewhat sternly. "All nex' day, all day after, day after that, day-----"

Mrs. Silk eyed him softly. "Why would you like to sit here all that time?" she inquired, in a low voice.

"'B'cause," said Mr. Wilks, simply, "'b'cause I don't feel's if I can stand. Goo'-night."

He closed his eyes on the indignant Mrs. Silk and fell fast asleep. It was a sound sleep and dreamless, and only troubled by the occasional ineffectual attempts of his hostess to arouse him. She gave up the attempt at last, and taking up a pair of socks sat working thoughtfully the other side of the fire-place.

The steward awoke an hour or two later, and after what seemed a terrible struggle found himself standing at the open door with the cold night air blowing in his face, and a voice which by an effort of memory he identified as that of Edward Silk inviting him "to go home and lose no time about it." Then the door slammed behind him and he stood balancing himself with some difficulty on the step, wondering what had happened. By the time he had walked up and down the deserted alley three or four times light was vouchsafed to him and, shivering slightly, he found his own door and went to bed.

CHAPTER XIX

Any hopes which Hardy might have entertained as to the attitude of Miss Nugent were dispelled the first time he saw her, that dutiful daughter of a strong-willed sire favouring him with a bow which was exactly half an inch in depth and then promptly bestowing her gaze elsewhere. He passed Captain Nugent next day, and for a week afterwards he had only to close his eyes to see in all its appalling virulence the glare with which that gentleman had acknowledged his attempt at recognition.

[Illustration: "Captain Nugent."]

He fared no better in Fullalove Alley, a visit to Mr. Wilks eliciting the fact that that delectable thoroughfare had been put out of bounds for Miss Nugent. Moreover, Mr. Wilks was full of his own troubles and anxious for any comfort and advice that could be given to him. All the alley knew that Mrs. Silk had quarrelled with her son over the steward, and, without knowing the facts, spoke their mind with painful freedom concerning them.

"She and Teddy don't speak to each other now," said Mr. Wilks, gloomily, "and to 'ear people talk you'd think it was my fault."

Hardy gave him what comfort he could. He even went the length of saying that Mrs. Silk was a fine woman.

"She acts like a suffering martyr," exclaimed Mr. Wilks. "She comes over 'ere dropping hints that people are talking about us, and that they ask 'er awkward questions. Pretending to misunderstand 'er every time is enough to send me crazy; and she's so sudden in what she says there's no being up to 'er. On'y this morning she asked me if I should be sorry if she died."

"What did you say?" inquired his listener.

"I said 'yes,'" admitted Mr. Wilks, reluctantly. "I couldn't say anything else; but I said that she wasn't to let my feelings interfere with 'er in any way."

Hardy's father sailed a day or two later, and after that nothing happened. Equator Lodge was an impregnable fortress, and the only member of the garrison he saw in a fortnight was Bella.

His depression did not escape the notice of his partner, who, after first advising love-philtres and then a visit to a well-known specialist for diseases of the heart, finally recommended more work, and put a generous portion of his own on to the young man's desk. Hardy, who was in an evil temper, pitched it on to the floor and, with a few incisive remarks on levity unbecoming to age, pursued his duties in gloomy silence.

A short time afterwards, however, he had to grapple with his partner's work in real earnest. For the first time in his life the genial shipbroker was laid up with a rather serious illness. A chill caught while bathing was going the round of certain unsuspected weak spots, and the patient, who was of an inquiring turn of mind, was taking a greater interest in medical works than his doctor deemed advisable.

"Most interesting study," he said, faintly, to Hardy, as the latter sat by his bedside one evening and tried to cheer him in the usual way by telling him that there was nothing the matter with him. "There are dozens of different forms of liver complaint alone, and I've got 'em all."

"Liver isn't much," said his visitor, with the confidence of youth.

"Mine is," retorted the invalid; "it's twice its proper size and still growing. Base of the left lung is solidifying, or I'm much mistaken; the heart, instead of waltzing as is suitable to my time of life, is doing a galop, and everything else is as wrong as it can be."

"When are you coming back?" inquired the other.

"Back?" repeated Swann. "Back? You haven't been listening. I'm a wreck. All through violating man's primeval instinct by messing about in cold water. What is the news?"

Hardy pondered and shook his head. "Nugent is going to be married in July," he said, at last.

"He'd better have had that trip on the whaler," commented Mr. Swann; "but that is not news. Nathan Smith told it me this morning."

"Nathan Smith?" repeated the other, in surprise.

"I've done him a little service," said the invalid. "Got him out of a mess with Garth and Co. He's been here two or three times, and I must confess I find him a most alluring rascal."

"Birds of a feather---" began Hardy, superciliously.

"Don't flatter me," said Swann, putting his hand out of the bed-clothes with a deprecatory gesture.

"I am not worthy to sit at his feet. He is the most amusing knave on the coast. He is like a sunbeam in a sick room when you can once get him to talk of his experiences. Have you seen young Nugent lately? Does he seem cheerful?"

"Yes, but he is not," was the reply.

"Well, it's natural for the young to marry," said the other, gravely. "Murchison will be the next to go, I expect."

"Possibly," returned Hardy, with affected calmness.

"Blaikie was saying something about it this morning," resumed Swann, regarding him from half-closed lids, "but he was punching and tapping me all about the ribs while he was talking, and I didn't catch all he said, but I think it's all arranged. Murchison is there nearly every day, I understand; I suppose you meet him there?"

Mr. Hardy, whistling softly, rose and walked round the room, uncorking medicine bottles and sniffing at their contents. A smile of unaffected pleasure lit up his features as he removed the stopper from one particularly pungent mixture.

[Illustration: "Sniffing at their contents."]

"Two tablespoonfuls three times a day," he read, slowly. "When did you have the last, Swann? Shall I ring for the nurse?"

The invalid shook his head impatiently. "You're an ungrateful dog," he muttered, "or you would tell me how your affair is going. Have you got any chance?"

"You're getting light-headed now," said Hardy, calmly. "I'd better go."

"All right, go then," responded the invalid; "but if you lose that girl just for the want of a little skilled advice from an expert, you'll never forgive yourself--I'm serious."

"Well, you must be ill then," said the younger man, with anxiety.

"Twice," said Mr. Swann, lying on his back and apparently addressing the ceiling, "twice I have given this young man invaluable assistance, and each time he has bungled."

Hardy laughed and, the nurse returning to the room, bade him "good-bye" and departed. After the close atmosphere of the sick room the air was delicious, and he walked along slowly, deep in thought. From Nathan Smith his thoughts wandered to Jack Nugent and his unfortunate engagement, and from that to Kate Nugent. For months he had been revolving impossible schemes in his mind to earn her gratitude, and possibly that of the captain, by extricating Jack. In the latter connection he was also reminded of that unhappy victim of unrequited affection, Edward Silk.

It was early to go indoors, and the house was dull. He turned and retraced his steps, and, his thoughts reverting to his sick partner, smiled as he remembered remarks which that irresponsible person had made at various times concerning the making of his last will and testament. Then he came to a sudden standstill as a wild, forlorn-hope kind of idea suddenly occurred to him. He stood for some time thinking, then walked a little way, and then stopped again as various difficulties presented themselves for solution. Finally, despite the lateness of the hour, he walked back in some excitement to the house he had quitted over half an hour before with the intention of speaking to the invalid concerning a duty peculiarly incumbent upon elderly men of means.

The nurse, who came out of the sick room, gently closing the door after her, demurred a little to this second visit, but, receiving a promise from the visitor not to excite the invalid, left them together. The odour of the abominable physic was upon the air.

"Well?" said the invalid.

"I have been thinking that I was rather uncivil a little while ago," said Hardy.

"Ah!" said the other. "What do you want?"

"A little of that skilled assistance you were speaking of."

Mr. Swann made an alarming noise in his throat. Hardy sprang forward in alarm, but he motioned him back.

"I was only laughing," he explained.

Hardy repressed his annoyance by an effort, and endeavoured, but with scant success, to return the other's smile.

"Go on," said the shipbroker, presently.

"I have thought of a scheme for upsetting Nugent's marriage," said Hardy, slowly.

"It is just a forlorn hope which depends for its success on you and Nathan Smith."

"He's a friend of Kybird's," said the other, drily.

"That is the most important thing of all," rejoined Hardy. "That is, next to your shrewdness and tact; everything depends upon you, really, and whether you can fool Smith. It is a great thing in our favour that you have been taking him up lately."

"Are you coming to the point or are you not?" demanded the shipbroker.

Hardy looked cautiously round the room, and then, drawing his chair close to the bed, leaned over the prostrate man and spoke rapidly into his ear.

"What?" cried the astounded Mr. Swann, suddenly sitting up in his bed. "You---you scoundrel!"

"It's to be done," said Hardy.

"You ghoul!" said the invalid, glaring at him. "Is that the way to talk to a sick man? You unscrupulous rascal!"

"It'll be amusement for you," pleaded the other, "and if we are successful it will be the best thing in the end for everybody. Think of the good you'll do."

"Where you get such rascally ideas from, I can't think," mused the invalid. "Your father is a straightforward, honest man, and your partner's uprightness is the talk of Sunwich."

"It doesn't take much to make Sunwich talk," retorted Hardy.

"A preposterous suggestion to make to a man of my standing," said the shipbroker, ignoring the remark. "If the affair ever leaked out I should never hear the end of it."

"It can't leak out," said Hardy, "and if it does there is no direct evidence. They will never really know until you die; they can only suspect."

"Very well," said the shipbroker, with a half-indulgent, half-humorous glance. "Anything to get rid of you. It's a crack-brained scheme, and could only originate with a young man whose affections have weakened his head---I consent."

"Bravo!" said Hardy and patted him on the back; Mr. Swann referred to the base of his left lung, and he apologized.

"I'll have to fix it up with Blaikie," said the invalid, lying down again. "Murchison got two of his best patients last week, so that it ought to be easy. And besides, he is fond of innocent amusement."

"I'm awfully obliged to you," said Hardy.

"It might be as well if we pretended to quarrel," said the invalid, reflectively, "especially as you are known to be a friend of Nugent's. We'll have a few words---before my housekeeper if possible, to insure publicity---and then you had better not come again. Send Silk instead with messages."

Hardy thanked him and whispered a caution as a footstep was heard on the landing. The door opened and the nurse, followed by the housekeeper bearing a tray, entered the room.

"And I can't be worried about these things," said Swann, in an acrimonious voice, as they entered. "If you are not capable of settling a simple question like that yourself, ask the office-boy to instruct you."

"It's your work," retorted Hardy, "and a nice mess it's in."

"H'sh!" said the nurse, coming forward hastily. "You must leave the room, sir. I can't have you exciting my patient."

Hardy bestowed an indignant glance at the invalid.

"Get out!" said that gentleman, with extraordinary fierceness for one in his weak condition. "In future, nurse, I won't have this person admitted to my room."

"Yes, yes; certainly," said the nurse. "You must go, sir; at once, please."

"I'm going," said Hardy, almost losing his gravity at the piteous spectacle afforded by the house-keeper as she stood, still holding the tray and staring open-mouthed at the combatants. "When you're tired of skulking in bed, perhaps you'll come

and do your share of the work."

Mr. Swann rose to a sitting position, and his demeanour was so alarming that the nurse, hastening over to him, entreated him to lie down, and waved Hardy peremptorily from the room.

"Puppy!" said the invalid, with great relish. "Blockhead!"

[Illustration: "'Puppy!' said the invalid."]

He gazed fixedly at the young man as he departed and then, catching sight in his turn of the housekeeper's perplexity, laid himself down and buried his face in the bed-clothes. The nurse crossed over to her assistant and, taking the tray from her, told her in a sharp whisper that if she ever admitted Mr. Hardy again she would not be answerable for the consequences.

CHAPTER XX

Charmed at the ease with which he had demolished the objections of Mr. Adolphus Swann and won that suffering gentleman over to his plans, Hardy began to cast longing glances at Equator Lodge. He reminded himself that the labourer was worthy of his hire, and it seemed moreover an extremely desirable thing that Captain Nugent should know that he was labouring in his vineyard with the full expectation of a bounteous harvest. He resolved to call.

Kate Nugent, who heard the gate swing behind him as he entered the front garden, looked up and stood spellbound at his audacity. As a fairly courageous young person she was naturally an admirer of boldness in others, but this seemed sheer recklessness. Moreover, it was recklessness in which, if she stayed where she was, she would have to bear a part or be guilty of rudeness, of which she felt incapable. She took a third course, and, raising her eyebrows at the unnecessarily loud knocking with which the young man announced his arrival, retreated in good order into the garden, where her father, in a somewhat heated condition, was laboriously planting geraniums. She had barely reached him when Bella, in a state of fearsome glee, came down the garden to tell the captain of his visitor.

[Illustration: "Bella, in a state of fearsome glee, came down the garden to tell the captain of his visitor."]

"Who?" said the latter, sharply, as he straightened his aching back.

"Young Mr. Hardy," said Bella, impressively. "I showed 'im in; I didn't ask 'im to take a chair, but he took one."

"Young Hardy to see me!" said the captain to his daughter, after Bella had returned to the house. "How dare he come to my house? Infernal impudence! I won't see him."

"Shall I go in and see him for you?" inquired Kate, with affected artlessness.

"You stay where you are, miss," said her father. "I won't have him speak to you; I won't have him look at you. I'll-----"

He beat his dirty hands together and strode off towards the house. Jem Hardy rose from his chair as the captain entered the room and, ignoring a look of black inquiry, bade him "Good afternoon."

"What do you want?" asked the captain, gruffly, as he stared him straight in the eye.

"I came to see you about your son's marriage," said the other. "Are you still desirous of preventing it?"

"I'm sorry you've had the trouble," said the captain, in a voice of suppressed anger; "and now may I ask you to get out of my house?"

Hardy bowed. "I am sorry I have troubled you," he said, calmly, "but I have a plan which I think would get your son out of this affair, and, as a business man, I wanted to make something out of it."

The captain eyed him scornfully, but he was glad to see this well-looking, successful son of his old enemy tainted with such sordid views. Instead of turning him out he spoke to him almost fairly.

"How much do you want?" he inquired.

"All things considered, I am asking a good deal," was the reply.

"How much?" repeated the captain, impatiently.

Hardy hesitated. "In exchange for the service I want permission to visit here when I choose," he said, at length; "say twice a week."

Words failed the captain; none with which he was acquainted seemed forcible enough for the occasion. He faced his visitor stuttering with rage, and pointed to the door.

"Get out of my house," he roared.

[Illustration: "Get out of my house," he roared.]

"I'm sorry to have intruded," said Hardy, as he crossed the room and paused at the door; "it is none of my business, of course. I thought that I saw an opportunity of doing your son a good turn---he is a friend of mine---and at the same time paying off old scores against Kybird and Nathan Smith. I thought that on that account it might suit you. Good afternoon."

He walked out into the hall, and reaching the front door fumbled clumsily with the catch. The captain watching his efforts in grim silence began to experience the twin promptings of curiosity and temptation.

"What is this wonderful plan of yours?" he demanded, with a sneer.

"Just at present that must remain a secret," said the other. He came from the door and, unbidden, followed the captain into the room again.

"What do you want to visit at my house for?" inquired the latter, in a forbidding voice.

"To see your daughter," said Hardy.

The captain had a relapse. He had not expected a truthful answer, and, when it came, in the most matter-of-fact tone, it found him quite unprepared. His first idea was to sacrifice his dignity and forcibly eject his visitor, but more sensible thoughts prevailed.

"You are quite sure, I suppose, that your visits would be agreeable to my daughter?" he said, contemptuously.

Hardy shook his head. "I should come ostensibly to see you," he said, cheerfully; "to smoke a pipe with you."

"Smoke!" stuttered the captain, explosively; "smoke a pipe with *me*?"

"Why not?" said the other. "I am offering you my services, and anything that is worth having is worth paying for. I suppose we could both smoke pipes under pleasanter conditions. What have you got against me? It isn't my fault that you and my father have quarrelled."

"I don't want anything more to say to you," said the captain, sternly. "I've shown you the door once. Am I to take forcible measures?"

Hardy shrugged his broad shoulders. "I am sorry," he said, moving to the door again.

"So am I," said the other.

"It's a pity," said Hardy, regretfully. "It's the chance of a lifetime. I had set my heart on fooling Kybird and Smith, and now all my trouble is wasted. Nathan Smith would be all the better for a fall."

The captain hesitated. His visitor seemed to be confident, and he would have given a great deal to prevent his son's marriage and a great deal to repay some portion of his debt to the ingenious Mr. Smith. Moreover, there seemed to be an excellent opportunity of punishing the presumption of his visitor by taking him at his word.

"I don't think you'd enjoy your smoking here much," he said, curtly.

"I'll take my chance of that," said the other. "It will only be a matter of a few weeks, and then, if I am unsuccessful, my visits cease."

"And if you're successful, am I to have the pleasure of your company for the rest of my life?" demanded the captain.

"That will be for you to decide," was the reply. "Is it a bargain?"

The captain looked at him and deliberated. "All right. Mondays and Thursdays," he said, laconically.

Hardy saw through the ruse, and countered.

"Now Swann is ill I can't always get away when I wish," he said, easily. "I'll just drop in when I can. Good day."

He opened the door and, fearful lest the other should alter his mind at the last moment, walked briskly down the path to the gate. The captain stood for some time after his departure deep in thought, and then returned to the garden to be skilfully catechized by Miss Nugent.

"And when my young friend comes with his pipe you'll be in another room," he concluded, warningly.

Miss Nugent looked up and patted his cheek tenderly. "What a talent for organization you have," she remarked, softly. "A place for everything and everything in its place. The idea of his taking such a fancy to you!"

The captain coughed and eyed her suspiciously. He had been careful not to tell her Hardy's reasons for coming, but he had a shrewd idea that his caution was wasted.

"Today is Thursday," said Kate, slowly; "he will be here to-morrow and Saturday. What shall I wear?"

The captain resumed his gardening operations by no means perturbed at the prophecy. Much as he disliked the young man he gave him credit for a certain amount of decency, and his indignation was proportionately great the following evening when Bella announced Mr. Hardy. He made a genial remark about Shylock and a pound of flesh, but finding that it was only an excellent conversational opening, the subject of Shakespeare's plays lapsed into silence.

It was an absurd situation, but he was host and Hardy allowed him to see pretty plainly that he was a guest. He answered the latter's remarks with a very ill grace, and took covert stock of him as one of a species he had not encountered before. One result of his stock-taking was that he was spared any feeling of surprise when his visitor came the following evening.

"It's the thin end of the wedge," said Miss Nugent, who came into the room after Hardy had departed; "you don't know him as well as I do."

"Eh?" said her father, sharply.

"I mean that you are not such a judge of character as I am," said Kate; "and besides, I have made a special study of young men. The only thing that puzzles me is why you should have such an extraordinary fascination for him."

"You talk too much, miss," said the captain, drawing the tobacco jar towards him and slowly filling his pipe.

Miss Nugent sighed, and after striking a match for him took a seat on the arm of his chair and placed her hand on his shoulder. "I can quite understand him liking you," she said, slowly.

The captain grunted.

"And if he is like other sensible people," continued Miss Nugent, in a coaxing voice, "the more he sees of you the more he'll like you. I do hope he has not come to take you away from me."

[Illustration: "I do hope he has not come to take you away from me."]

The indignant captain edged her off the side of his chair; Miss Nugent, quite undisturbed, got on again and sat tapping the floor with her foot. Her arm stole round his neck and she laid her cheek against his head and smiled wickedly.

"Nice-looking, isn't he?" she said, in a careless voice.

"I don't know anything about his looks," growled her father.

Miss Nugent gave a little exclamation of surprise. "First thing I noticed," she said, with commendable gravity. "He's very good-looking and very determined. What are you going to give him if he gets poor Jack out of this miserable business?"

"Give him?" said her father, staring.

"I met Jack yesterday," said Kate, "and I can see that he is as wretched as he can be. He wouldn't say so, of course. If Mr. Hardy is successful you ought to recognize it. I should suggest one of your new photos in an eighteenpenny frame."

She slipped off the chair and quitted the room before her father could think of a suitable retort, and he sat smoking silently until the entrance of Mrs. Kingdom a few minutes later gave him an opportunity of working off a little accumulated gall.

While the junior partner was thus trying to obtain a footing at Equator Lodge the gravest rumours of the senior partner's health were prevalent in the town. Nathan Smith, who had been to see him again, ostensibly to thank him for his efforts on his behalf, was of opinion that he was breaking up, and in conversation with Mr. Kybird shook his head over the idea that there would soon be one open-handed gentleman the less in a world which was none too full of them.

"We've all got to go some day," observed Mr. Kybird, philosophically. "'Ow's that cough o' yours getting on, Nat?"

Mr. Smith met the pleasantry coldly; the ailment referred to was one of some standing and had been a continual source of expense in the way of balsams and other remedies.

"He's worried about 'is money," he said, referring to Mr. Swann.

"Ah, we sha'n't 'ave that worry," said Mr. Kybird.

"Nobody to leave it to," continued Mr. Smith. "Seems a bit 'ard, don't it?"

"P'r'aps if 'e 'ad 'ad somebody to leave it to 'e wouldn't 'ave 'ad so much to leave," observed Mr. Kybird, sagely; "it's a rum world."

He shook his head over it and went on with the uncongenial task of marking down wares which had suffered by being exposed outside too long. Mr. Smith, who always took an interest in the welfare of his friends, made suggestions.

"I shouldn't put a ticket marked 'Look at this!' on that coat," he said, severely. "It oughtn't to be looked at."

"It's the best out o' three all 'anging together," said Mr. Kybird, evenly.

"And look 'ere," said Mr. Smith. "Look what an out-o'-the-way place you've put this ticket. Why not put it higher up on the coat?"

"Becos the moth-hole ain't there," said Mr. Kybird.

Mr. Smith apologized and watched his friend without further criticism.

"Gettin' ready for the wedding, I s'pose?" he said, presently.

Mr. Kybird assented, and his brow darkened as he spoke of surreptitious raids on his stores made by Mrs. Kybird and daughter.

"Their idea of a wedding," he said, bitterly, "is to dress up and make a show; my idea is a few real good old pals and plenty of licker."

"You'll 'ave to 'ave both," observed Nathan Smith, whose knowledge of the sex was pretty accurate.

Mr. Kybird nodded gloomily. "Melia and Jack don't seem to 'ave been 'itting it off partikler well lately," he said, slowly. "He's getting more uppish than wot 'e was when 'e come here first. But I got 'im to promise that he'd settle any money that 'e might ever get left him on 'Melia."

Mr. Smith's inscrutable eyes glistened into something as nearly approaching a twinkle as they were capable. "That'll settle the five 'undred," he said, warmly. "Are you goin' to send Cap'n Nugent an invite for the wedding?"

[Illustration: "Are you goin' to send Cap'n Nugent an invite for the wedding?"]

"They'll 'ave to be asked, o' course," said Mr. Kybird, with an attempt at dignity, rendered necessary by a certain lightness in his friend's manner. "The old woman don't like the Nugent lot, but she'll do the proper thing."

"O' course she will," said Mr. Smith, soothingly. "Come over and 'ave a drink with me, Dan'l it's your turn to stand."