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At Sunwich Port, Part 5. by W. W. Jacobs

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At Sunwich Port, Part 5.

CHAPTER XXI

Gossip from one or two quarters, which reached Captain Nugent's ears through the medium of his sister, concerning the preparations for his son's marriage, prevented him from altering his mind with regard to the visits of Jem Hardy and showing that painstaking young man the door. Indeed, the nearness of the approaching nuptials bade fair to eclipse, for the time being, all other grievances, and when Hardy paid his third visit he made a determined but ineffectual attempt to obtain from him some information as to the methods by which he hoped to attain his ends. His failure made him suspicious, and he hinted pretty plainly that he had no guarantee that his visitor was not obtaining admittance under false pretences.

"Well, I'm not getting much out of it," returned Hardy, frankly.

"I wonder you come," said his hospitable host.

"I want you to get used to me," said the other.

The captain started and eyed him uneasily; the remark seemed fraught with hidden meaning. "And then?" he inquired, raising his bushy eyebrows.

"Then perhaps I can come oftener."

The captain gave him up. He sank back in his chair and crossing his legs smoked, with his eyes fixed on the ceiling. It was difficult to know what to do with a young man who was apparently destitute of any feelings of shame or embarrassment. He bestowed a puzzled glance in his direction and saw that he was lolling in the chair with an appearance of the greatest ease and enjoyment. Following the direction of his eyes, he saw that he was gazing with much satisfaction at a photograph of Miss Nugent which graced the mantelpiece. With an odd sensation the captain suddenly identified it as one which usually stood on the chest of drawers in his bedroom, and he wondered darkly whether charity or mischief was responsible for its appearance there.

In any case, it disappeared before the occasion of Hardy's next visit, and the visitor sat with his eyes unoccupied, endeavouring to make conversation with a host who was if anything more discourteous than usual. It was uphill work, but he persevered, and in fifteen minutes had ranged unchecked from North Pole explorations to poultry farming. It was a relief to both of them when the door opened and Bella ushered in Dr. Murchison.

The captain received the new arrival with marked cordiality, and giving him a chair near his own observed with some interest the curt greeting of the young men. The doctor's manner indicated polite surprise at seeing the other there, then he turned to the captain and began to talk to him.

For some time they chatted without interruption, and the captain's replies, when Hardy at last made an attempt to make the conversation general, enabled the doctor to see, without much difficulty, that the latter was an unwelcome guest. Charmed with the discovery he followed his host's lead, and, with a languid air, replied to his rival in monosyllables. The captain watched with quiet satisfaction, and at each rebuff his opinion of Murchison improved. It was gratifying to find that the interloper had met his match.

Hardy sat patient. "I am glad to have met you to-night," he said, after a long pause, during which the other two were discussing a former surgical experience of the captain's on one of his crew.

"Yes?" said Murchison.

"You are just the man I wanted to see."

"Yes?" said the doctor, again.

"Yes," said the other, nodding. "I've been very busy of late owing to my partner's illness, and you are attending several people I want to hear about."

"Indeed," said Murchison, with a half-turn towards him.

"How is Mrs. Paul?" inquired Hardy.

"Dead!" replied the other, briefly.

"Dead!" repeated Mr. Hardy. "Good Heavens! I didn't know that there was much the matter with her."

"There was no hope for her from the first," said Murchison, somewhat sharply. "It was merely a question of prolonging her life a little while. She lived longer than I deemed possible. She surprised everybody by her vitality."

"Poor thing," said Hardy. "How is Joe Banks?"

"Dead," said Murchison again, biting his lip and eyeing him furiously.

"Dear me," said Hardy, shaking his head; "I met him not a month ago. He was on his way to see you then."

"The poor fellow had been an invalid nearly all his life," said Murchison, to the captain, casually. "Aye, I remember him," was the reply.

"I am almost afraid to ask you," continued Hardy, "but shut up all day I hear so little. How is old Miss Ritherdon?"

Murchison reddened with helpless rage; Captain Nugent, gazing at the questioner with something almost approaching respect, waited breathlessly for the invariable answer.

"She died three weeks ago; I'm surprised that you have not heard of it," said the doctor, pointedly.

"Of course she was old," said Hardy, with the air of one advancing extenuating circumstances.

"Very old," replied the doctor, who knew that the other was now at the end of his obituary list.

"Are there any other of my patients you are anxious to hear about?"

[Illustration: "Are there any other of my patients you are anxious to hear about?"]

"No, thank you," returned Hardy, with some haste.

The doctor turned to his host again, but the charm was broken. His talk was disconnected, owing probably to the fact that he was racking his brain for facts relative to the seamy side of shipbroking. And Hardy, without any encouragement whatever, was interrupting with puerile anecdotes concerning the late lamented Joe Banks. The captain came to the rescue.

"The ladies are in the garden," he said to the doctor; "perhaps you'd like to join them."

He looked coldly over at Hardy as he spoke to see the effect of his words. Their eyes met, and the young man was on his feet as soon as his rival.

"Thanks," he said, coolly; "it is a trifle close indoors."

Before the dismayed captain could think of any dignified pretext to stay him he was out of the room. The doctor followed and the perturbed captain, left alone, stared blankly at the door and thought of his daughter's words concerning the thin end of the wedge.

He was a proud man and loth to show discomfiture, so that it was not until a quarter of an hour later that he followed his guests to the garden. The four people were in couples, the paths favouring that formation, although the doctor, to the detriment of the border, had made two or three determined attempts to march in fours. With a feeling akin to scorn the captain saw that he was walking with Mrs. Kingdom, while some distance in the rear Jem Hardy followed with Kate.

He stood at the back door for a little while watching; Hardy, upright and elate, was listening with profound attention to Miss Nugent; the doctor, sauntering along beside Mrs. Kingdom, was listening with a languid air to an account of her celebrated escape from measles some forty-three years before. As a professional man he would have died rather than have owed his life to the specific she advocated.

Kate Nugent, catching sight of her father, turned, and as he came slowly towards them, linked her arm, in his. Her face was slightly flushed and her eyes sparkled.

"I was just coming in to fetch you," she observed; "it is so pleasant out here now."

"Delightful," said Hardy.

"We had to drop behind a little," said Miss Nugent, raising her voice. "Aunt and Dr. Murchison *will* talk about their complaints to each other! They have been exchanging prescriptions."

The captain grunted and eyed her keenly.

"I want you to come in and give us a little music," he said, shortly.

Kate nodded. "What is your favourite music, Mr. Hardy?" she inquired, with a smile.

"Unfortunately, Mr. Hardy can't stay," said the captain, in a voice which there was no mistaking.

Hardy pulled out his watch. "No; I must be off," he said, with a well-affected start. "Thank you for reminding me, Captain Nugent."

"I am glad to have been of service," said the other, looking his grimmest.

He acknowledged the young man's farewell with a short nod and, forgetting his sudden desire for music, continued to pace up and down with his daughter.

"What have you been saying to that---that fellow?" he demanded, turning to her, suddenly.

Miss Nugent reflected. "I said it was a fine evening," she replied, at last.

"No doubt," said her father. "What else?"

"I think I asked him whether he was fond of gardening," said Miss Nugent, slowly. "Yes, I'm sure I did."

"You had no business to speak to him at all," said the fuming captain.

"I don't quite see how I could help doing so," said his daughter. "You surely don't expect me to be rude to your visitors? Besides, I feel rather sorry for him."

"Sorry?" repeated the captain, sharply. "What for?"

"Because he hasn't got a nice, kind, soft-spoken father," said Miss Nugent, squeezing his arm affectionately.

The appearance of the other couple at the head of the path saved the captain the necessity of a retort. They stood in a little knot talking, but Miss Nugent, contrary to her usual habit, said but little. She was holding her father's arm and gazing absently at the dim fields stretching away beyond the garden.

At the same time Mr. James Hardy, feeling, despite his bold front, somewhat badly snubbed, was sitting on the beach thinking over the situation. After a quarter of an hour in the company of Kate Nugent all else seemed sordid and prosaic; his own conduct in his attempt to save her brother from the consequences of his folly most sordid of all. He wondered, gloomily, what she would think when she heard of it.

[Illustration: "He wondered, gloomily, what she would think when she heard of it."]

He rose at last and in the pale light of the new moon walked slowly along towards the town. In his present state of mind he wanted to talk about Kate Nugent, and the only person who could be depended upon for doing that was Samson Wilks. It was a never-tiring subject of the steward's, and since his discovery of the state of Hardy's feelings in that quarter the slightest allusion was sufficient to let loose a flood of reminiscences.

It was dark by the time Hardy reached the alley, and in most of the houses the lamps were lit behind drawn blinds. The steward's house, however, was in darkness and there was no response when he tapped. He turned the handle of the door and looked in. A dim figure rose with a start from a chair.

"I hope you were not asleep?" said Hardy.

"No, sir," said the steward, in a relieved voice. "I thought it was somebody else."

He placed a chair for his visitor and, having lit the lamp, slowly lowered the blind and took a seat opposite.

"I've been sitting in the dark to make a certain party think I was out," he said, slowly. "She keeps making a excuse about Teddy to come over and see me. Last night 'e talked about making a 'ole in the water to celebrate 'Melia Kybird's

wedding, and she came over and sat in that chair and cried as if 'er 'art would break. After she'd gone Teddy comes over, fierce as a eagle, and wants to know wot I've been saying to 'is mother to make 'er cry. Between the two of 'em I 'ave a nice life of it."

"He is still faithful to Miss Kybird, then?" said Hardy, with a sudden sense of relief.

"Faithful?" said Mr. Wilks. "Faithful ain't no word for it. He's a sticker, that's wot 'e is, and it's my misfortune that 'is mother takes after 'im. I 'ave to go out afore breakfast and stay out till late at night, and even then like as not she catches me on the doorstep."

"Well, perhaps she will make a hole in the water," suggested Hardy.

Mr. Wilks smiled, but almost instantly became grave again. "She's not that sort," he said, bitterly, and went into the kitchen to draw some beer.

He drank his in a manner which betokened that the occupation afforded him no enjoyment, and, full of his own troubles, was in no mood to discuss anything else. He gave a short biography of Mrs. Silk which would have furnished abundant material for half-a-dozen libel actions, and alluding to the demise of the late Mr. Silk, spoke of it as though it were the supreme act of artfulness in a somewhat adventurous career.

Hardy walked home with a mind more at ease than it had been at any time since his overtures to Mr. Swann. The only scruple that had troubled him was now removed, and in place of it he felt that he was acting the part of a guardian angel to Mr. Edward Silk.

CHAPTER XXII

Mr. Nathan Smith, usually one of the most matter-of-fact men in the world, came out of Mr. Swann's house in a semi-dazed condition, and for some time after the front door had closed behind him stood gaping on the narrow pavement.

He looked up and down the quiet little street and shook his head sadly. It was a street of staid and substantial old houses; houses which had mellowed and blackened with age, but whose quaint windows and chance-opened doors afforded glimpses of comfort attesting to the prosperity of those within. In the usual way Mr. Nathan Smith was of too philosophical a temperament to experience the pangs of envy, but to-day these things affected him, and he experienced a strange feeling of discontent with his lot in life.

"Some people 'ave all the luck," he muttered, and walked slowly down the road.

[Illustration: "'Some people 'ave all the luck,' he muttered."]

He continued his reflections as he walked through the somewhat squalid streets of his own quarter. The afternoon was wet and the houses looked dingier than usual; dirty, inconvenient little places most of them, with a few cheap gimcracks making a brave show as near the window as possible. Mr. Smith observed them with newly opened eyes, and, for perhaps the first time in his life, thought of the draw-backs and struggles of the poor.

In his own untidy little den at the back of the house he sat for some time deep in thought over the events of the afternoon. He had been permitted a peep at wealth; at wealth, too, which was changing hands, but was not coming his way. He lit his pipe and, producing a bottle of rum from a cupboard, helped himself liberally. The potent fluid softened

him somewhat, and a half-formed intention to keep the news from Mr. Kybird melted away beneath its benign influence.

"After all, we've been pals for pretty near thirty years," said Mr. Smith to himself.

He took another draught. "Thirty years is a long time," he mused.

He finished the glass. "And if 'e don't give me something out of it I'll do 'im as much 'arm as I can," he continued; and, buttoning up his coat, he rose and set out in the direction of the High Street.

The rain had ceased and the sun was making faint efforts to break through watery clouds. Things seemed brighter, and Mr. Smith's heart beat in response. He was going to play the part of a benefactor to Mr. Kybird; to offer him access, at any rate, to such wealth as he had never dreamed of. He paused at the shop window, and, observing through a gap in the merchandise that Mr. Kybird was behind the counter, walked in and saluted him.

"I've got news for you," he said, slowly; "big news."

"Oh," said Mr. Kybird, with indifference.

"Big news," repeated Mr. Smith, sinking thoughtlessly into the broken cane-chair and slowly extricating himself. "Something that'll make your eyes start out of your 'ed."

The small black eyes in question were turned shrewdly in his direction. "I've 'ad news of you afore, Nat," remarked Mr. Kybird, with simple severity.

The philanthropist was chilled; he fixed his eyes in a stony stare on the opposite wall. Mr. Kybird, who had ever a wholesome dread of falling a victim to his friend's cuteness, regarded him with some uncertainty, and reminded him of one or two pieces of information which had seriously depleted his till.

"Banns up yet for the wedding?" inquired Mr. Smith, still gazing in front of him with fathomless eyes.

"They'll be put up next week," said Mr. Kybird.

"Ah!" said his friend, with great emphasis. "Well, well!"

"Wot d'ye mean by 'well, well'?" demanded the other, with some heat.

"I was on'y thinking," replied Mr. Smith, mildly. "P'r'aps it's all for the best, and I'd better 'old my tongue. True love is better than money. After all it ain't my bisness, and I shouldn't get much out of it."

"Out of wot, Nat?" inquired Mr. Kybird, uneasily.

Mr. Smith, still gazing musingly before him, appeared not to hear the question. "Nice after the rain, ain't it?" he said, slowly.

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

"Everything smells so fresh and sweet," continued his nature-loving friend; "all the little dickey-birds was a-singing as if their little 'arts would break as I come along."

"I don't wonder at it," said the offended Mr. Kybird.

"And the banns go up next week," murmured the boarding-master to himself. "Well, well."

"Ave you got anything to say agin it?" demanded Mr. Kybird.

"Cert'nly not," replied the other. "On'y don't blame me when it's too late; that's all."

Mr. Kybird, staring at him wrathfully, turned this dark saying over in his mind. "Too late for wot?" he inquired.

"Ah!" said Nathan Smith, slowly. "Nice and fresh after the rain, ain't it? As I come along all the little dickey-birds---"

"Drat the little dickey-birds," interrupted Mr. Kybird, with sudden violence. "If you've got anything to say, why don't you say it like a man?"

[Illustration: "If you've got anything to say, why don't you say it like a man?"]

The parlour door opened suddenly before the other could reply, and revealed the face of Mrs. Kybird. "Wot are you two a-quarrelling about?" she demanded. "Why don't you come inside and sit down for a bit?"

Mr. Smith accepted the invitation, and following her into the room found Miss Kybird busy stitching in the midst of a bewildering assortment of brown paper patterns and pieces of cloth. Mrs. Kybird gave him a chair, and, having overheard a portion of his conversation with her husband, made one or two casual inquiries.

"I've been spending a hour or two at Mr. Swann's," said Mr. Smith.

"And 'ow is 'e?" inquired his hostess, with an appearance of amiable interest.

The boarding-master shook his head. "'E's slipping 'is cable," he said, slowly. "'E's been making 'is will, and I was one o' the witnesses."

Something in Mr. Smith's manner as he uttered this simple statement made his listeners anxious to hear more. Mr. Kybird, who had just entered the room and was standing with his back to the door holding the handle, regarded him expectantly.

"It's been worrying 'im some time," pursued Mr. Smith. "'E 'asn't got nobody belonging to 'im, and for a long time 'e couldn't think 'ow to leave it. Wot with 'ouse property and other things it's a matter of over ten thousand pounds."

"Good 'eavens!" said Mr. Kybird, who felt that he was expected to say something.

"Dr. Blaikie was the other witness," continued Mr. Smith, disregarding the interruption; "and Mr. Swann made us both promise to keep it a dead secret till 'e's gone, but out o' friendship to you I thought I'd step round and let you know."

The emphasis on the words was unmistakable; Mrs. Kybird dropped her work and sat staring at him, while her husband wriggled with excitement.

"'E ain't left it to me, I s'pose?" he said, with a feeble attempt at jocularity.

"Not a brass farden," replied his friend, cheerfully. "Not to none of you. Why should 'e?"

"He ain't left it to Jack, I s'pose?" said Miss Kybird, who had suspended her work to listen.

"No, my dear," replied the boarding-master. "E's made 'is will all ship-shape and proper, and 'e's left everything---all that 'ouse property and other things, amounting to over ten thousand pounds---to a young man becos 'e was jilt---crossed in love a few months ago, and becos 'e's been a good and faithful servant to 'im for years."

"Don't tell me," said Mr. Kybird, desperately; "don't tell me that 'e's been and left all that money to young Teddy Silk."

"Well, I won't if you don't want me to," said the accommodating Mr. Smith, "but, mind, it's a dead secret."

Mr. Kybird wiped his brow, and red patches, due to excitement, lent a little variety to an otherwise commonplace face; Mrs. Kybird's dazed inquiry. "Wot are we a-coming to?" fell on deaf ears; while Miss Kybird, leaning forward with lips parted, fixed her eyes intently on Mr. Smith's face.

"It's a pity 'e didn't leave it to young Nugent," said that gentleman, noting with much pleasure the effect of his announcement, "but 'e can't stand 'in: at no price; 'e told me so 'imself. I s'pose young Teddy'll be quite the gentleman now, and 'e'll be able to marry who 'e likes."

Mr. Kybird thrust his handkerchief into his tail-pocket, and all the father awoke within him. "Ho, will 'e?" he said, with fierce sarcasm. "Ho, indeed! And wot about my daughter? I 'ave 'eard of such things as breach o' promise. Before Mr. Teddy gets married 'e's got to 'ave a few words with me."

"'E's behaved very bad," said Mrs. Kybird, nodding.

"'E come 'ere night after night," said Mr. Kybird, working himself up into a fury; "'e walked out with my gal for months and months, and then 'e takes 'imself off as if we wasn't good enough for'im."

"The suppers 'e's 'ad 'ere you wouldn't believe," said Mrs. Kybird, addressing the visitor.

"Takes 'imself off," repeated her husband; "takes 'imself off as if we was dirt beneath 'is feet, and never been back to give a explanation from that day to this."

"I'm not easy surprised," said Mrs. Kybird, "I never was from a gal, but I must say Teddy's been a surprise to me. If anybody 'ad told me 'e'd ha' behaved like that I wouldn't ha' believed it; I couldn't. I've never said much about it, becos my pride wouldn't let me. We all 'ave our faults, and mine is pride."

"I shall bring a breach o' promise action agin 'im for five thousand pounds," said Mr. Kybird, with decision.

"Talk sense," said Nathan Smith, shortly.

"Sense!" cried Mr. Kybird. "Is my gal to be played fast and loose with like that? Is my gal to be pitched over when 'e likes? Is my gal---"

"Wot's the good o' talking like that to me?" said the indignant Mr. Smith. "The best thing you can do is to get 'er married to Teddy at once, afore 'e knows of 'is luck."

"And when'll that be?" inquired his friend, in a calmer voice.

"Any time," said the boarding-master, shrugging his shoulders. "The old gentleman might go out to-night, or again 'e might live on for a week or more. 'E was so weak 'e couldn't 'ardly sign 'is name."

"I 'ope 'e 'as signed it all right," said Mr. Kybird, starting.

"Safe as 'ouses," said his friend.

"Well, why not wait till Teddy 'as got the money?" suggested Mrs. Kybird, with a knowing shake of her head.

"Becos," said Mr. Smith, in a grating voice, "be-cos for one thing 'e'd be a rich man then and could 'ave 'is pick. Teddy Silk on a pound or thereabouts a week and Teddy Silk with ten thousand pounds 'ud be two different people. Besides that 'e'd think she was marrying 'im for 'is money."

"If 'e thought that," said Mrs. Kybird, firmly, "I'd never forgive 'im."

"My advice to you," said Nathan Smith, shaking his forefinger impressively, "is to get 'em married on the quiet and as soon as possible. Once they're tied up Teddy can't 'elp 'imself."

"Why on the quiet?" demanded Mr. Kybird, sharply.

The boarding-master uttered an impatient exclamation. "Becos if Mr. Swann got to 'ear of it he'd guess I'd been blabbing, for one thing," he said, sharply, "and for another, 'e left it to 'im partly to make up for 'is disappointment---he'd been disappointed 'imself in 'is younger days, so 'e told me."

"Suppose 'e managed to get enough strength to alter 'is will?"

Mr. Kybird shivered. "It takes time to get married, though," he objected.

"Yes," said Mr. Smith, ironically, "it does. Get round young Teddy, and then put the banns up. Take your time about it, and be sure and let Mr. Swann know. D'ye think 'e wouldn't understand wot it meant, and spoil it, to say nothing of Teddy seeing through it?"

"Well, wot's to be done, then?" inquired the staring Mr. Kybird.

"Send 'em up to London and 'ave 'em married by special license," said Mr. Smith, speaking rapidly---"to-morrow, if possible; if not, the day after. Go and pitch a tale to Teddy to-night, and make 'im understand it's to be done on the strict q.t."

"Special licenses cost money," said Mr. Kybird. "I 'ave 'eard it's a matter o' thirty pounds or thereabouts."

Mr. Nathan Smith rose, and his eyes were almost expressive. He nodded good-night to the ladies and crossed to the door. Mrs. Kybird suddenly seized him by the coat and held him.

[Illustration: "Mrs. Kybird suddenly seized him by the coat."]

"Don't be in a 'urry, Nat," she pleaded. "We ain't all as clever as you are."

"Talk about looking a gift-'orse in the mouth---" began the indignant Mr. Smith.

"Sit down," urged Mr. Kybird. "You can't expect us to be as quick in seeing things as wot you are."

He pushed his partly mollified friend into his chair again, and taking a seat next him began to view the affair with enthusiasm. "'Melia shall turn young Nugent off to-night," he said, firmly.

"That's right," said the other; "go and do a few more silly things like that and we shall be 'appy. If you'd got a 'ead instead of wot you 'ave got, you wouldn't talk of giving the show away like that. Nobody must know or guess about anything until young Teddy is married to 'Melia and got the money."

"It seems something like deceitfulness," said Miss Kybird, who had been listening to the plans for her future with admirable composure.

"It's for Teddy's own sake," said Nathan Smith. "Everybody knows 'e's half crazy after you."

"I don't know that I don't like 'im best, even without the money," said Miss Kybird, calmly. "Nobody could 'ave been more attentive than 'im. I believe that 'e'd marry me if 'e 'ad a hundred thousand, but it looks better your way."

"Better all round," said Nathan Smith, with an approving nod. "Now, Dan'l, 'op round to Teddy and whistle 'im back, and mind 'e's to keep it a dead secret on account o' trouble with young Nugent. D'ye twig?"

The admiring Mr. Kybird said that he was a wonder, and, in the discussion on ways and means which followed, sat listening with growing respect to the managing abilities both of his friend and his wife. Difficulties were only mentioned for the purpose of being satisfactorily solved, and he noticed with keen appreciation that the prospect of a ten thousand pound son-in-law was already adding to that lady's dignity. She sniffed haughtily as she spoke of "that Nugent lot"; and the manner in which she promised Mr. Smith that he should not lose by his services would have graced a duchess.

"I didn't expect to lose by it," said the boarding-master, pointedly. "Come over and 'ave a glass at the Chequers, Dan, and then you can go along and see Teddy."

CHAPTER XXIII

The summer evening was well advanced when Mr. Kybird and his old friend parted. The former gentleman was in almost a sentimental mood, and the boarding-master, satisfied that his pupil was in a particularly appropriate frame of mind for the object of his visit, renewed his instructions about binding Mr. Silk to secrecy, and departed on business of his own.

[Illustration: "Mr. Kybird and his old friend parted."]

Mr. Kybird walked slowly towards Fullalove Alley with his head sunk in meditation. He was anxious to find Mr. Silk alone, as otherwise the difficulty of his errand would be considerably increased, Mrs. Silk's intelligence being by no means obscured by any ungovernable affection for the Kybird family. If she was at home she would have to invent some pretext for luring Teddy into the privacy of the open air.

The lamp was lit in the front room by the time he reached the house, and the shadows of geraniums which had won through several winters formed a straggling pattern on the holland blind. Mr. Kybird, first making an unsuccessful attempt to peep round the edges of this decoration, tapped gently on the door, and in response to a command to "Come

in," turned the handle and looked into the room. To his relief, he saw that Mr. Silk was alone.

"Good evening, Teddy," he said, with a genial smile, as he entered slowly and closed the door behind him. "I 'ope I see you well?"

"I'm quite well," returned Mr. Silk, gazing at him with unconcealed surprise.

"I'm glad to 'ear it," said Mr. Kybird, in a somewhat reproachful voice, "for your sake; for every-body's sake, though, p'r'aps, I did expect to find you looking a little bit down. Ah! it's the wimmen that 'ave the 'arts after all."

Mr. Silk coughed. "What d'ye mean?" he inquired, somewhat puzzled.

"I came to see you, Teddy, on a very delikit business," said Mr. Kybird, taking a seat and gazing diffidently at his hat as he swung it between his hands; "though, as man to man, I'm on'y doing of my dooty. But if you don't want to 'ear wot I've got to say, say so, and Dan'l Kybird'll darken your door no more."

"How can I know whether I want to 'ear it or not when I don't know wot it is?" said Mr. Silk, judiciously.

Mr. Kybird sat biting his thumb-nail, then he looked up suddenly. "Melia," he said, with an outburst of desperate frankness, "Melia is crying 'er eyes out."

Mr. Silk, with a smothered exclamation, started up from his chair and regarded him eagerly.

"If she knew I'd been 'ere," pursued Mr. Kybird, "she'd I don't know wot she wouldn't do. That's 'er pride; but I've got my pride too; the pride of a father's 'art."

"What---what's she crying about?" inquired Mr. Silk, in an unsteady voice.

"She's been looking poorly for some time," continued the veracious Mr. Kybird, "and crying. When I tell you that part o' the wedding-dress wot she was making 'ad to be taken away from 'er because o' the tears she dropped on it, you may 'ave some idea of wot things are like. She's never forgot you, Teddy, and it was on'y your quick temper that day that made 'er take on with young Nugent. She's got a temper, too, but she give 'er love once, and, being my daughter, she couldn't give it agin."

He stole a glance at his listener. Mr. Silk, very pale and upright, was standing on the hearthrug, shaking all over with nervous excitement. Twice he tried to speak and failed.

"That's 'ow it is, Teddy," sighed Mr. Kybird, rising as though to depart. "I've done my dooty. It was a 'ard thing to do, but I've done it."

"Do you mean," said Mr. Silk, recovering his voice at last, "do you mean that Amelia would marry me after all?"

"Do I mean?" repeated Mr. Kybird, naturally indignant that his very plain speaking should be deemed capable of any misconstruction. "Am I speaking to a stock or a stone, Teddy?"

Mr. Silk took a deep breath, and buttoned up his coat, as though preparing to meet Mr. Nugent there and then in deadly encounter for the person of Miss Kybird. The colour was back in his cheeks by this time, and his eyes were unusually bright. He took a step towards Mr. Kybird and, pressing his hand warmly, pushed him back into his seat again.

"There's 'er pride to consider, Teddy," said the latter gentleman, with the whisper of a conspirator.

"She can't stand being talked about all over the town and pointed at."

"Let me see anybody a-pointing at 'er," said the truculent Mr. Silk; "let me see 'em, that's all."

"That's the way to talk, Teddy," said Mr. Kybird, gazing at him with admiration.

"Talk!" said the heroic Mr. Silk. "I'll do more than talk." He clenched his fists and paced boldly up and down the hearthrug.

"You leave things to me," said Mr. Kybird, with a confidential wink. "I'll see that it's all right. All I ask of you is to keep it a dead secret; even your mother mustn't know."

"I'll be as secret as the grave," said the overjoyed Mr. Silk.

"There's lots o' things to be taken into consideration," said Mr. Kybird, truthfully; "it might be as well for you to be married immediate."

"Immediate?" said the astonished Mr. Silk.

"She 'asn't got the nerve to send young Nugent about 'is business," explained Mr. Kybird; "she feels sorry for 'im, pore fellow; but 'e's got a loving and affectionate 'art, and she can't bear 'im making love to 'er. You can understand what it is, can't you?"

"I can imagine it," said Mr. Silk, gloomily, and he flushed crimson as the possibilities suggested by the remark occurred to him.

"I've been thinking it over for some time," resumed Mr. Kybird; "twisting it and turning it all ways, and the only thing I can see for it is for you to be married on the strict q.t. Of course, if you don't like---"

"Like!" repeated the transported Mr. Silk.

"I'll go and be married now, if you like."

Mr. Kybird shook his head at such haste, and then softening a little observed that it did him credit. He proceeded to improve the occasion by anecdotes of his own courting some thirty years before, and was in the middle of a thrilling account of the manner in which he had bearded the whose of his future wife's family, when a quick step outside, which paused at the door, brought him to a sudden halt.

"Mother," announced Mr. Silk, in a whisper.

Mr. Kybird nodded, and the heroic appearance of visage which had accompanied his tale gave way to an expression of some uneasiness. He coughed behind his hand, and sat gazing before him as Mrs. Silk entered the room and gave vent to an exclamation of astonishment as she saw the visitor. She gazed sharply from him to her son. Mr. Kybird's expression was now normal, but despite his utmost efforts Mr. Silk could not entirely banish the smile which trembled on his lips.

"Me and Teddy," said Mr. Kybird, turning to her with a little bob, which served him for a bow, "'ave just been having a little talk about old times."

"He was just passing," said Mr. Silk.

"Just passing, and thought I'd look in," said Mr. Kybird, with a careless little laugh; "the door was open a bit."

"Wide open," corroborated Mr. Silk.

"So I just came in to say "Ow d'ye do?" said Mr. Kybird.

Mrs. Silk's sharp, white face turned from one to the other. "Ave you said it?" she inquired, blandly.

"I 'ave," said Mr. Kybird, restraining Mr. Silk's evident intention of hot speech by a warning glance; "and now I'll just toddle off 'ome."

"I'll go a bit o' the way with you," said Edward Silk. "I feel as if a bit of a walk would do me good."

Left alone, the astonished Mrs. Silk took the visitor's vacated chair and, with wrinkled brow, sat putting two and two together until the sum got beyond her powers of calculation. Mr. Kybird's affability and Teddy's cheerfulness were alike incomprehensible. She mended a hole in her pocket and darned a pair of socks, and at last, anxious for advice, or at least a confidant, resolved to see Mr. Wilks.

She opened the door and looked across the alley, and saw with some satisfaction that his blind was illuminated. She closed the door behind her sharply, and then stood gasping on the doorstep. So simultaneous were the two happenings that it actually appeared as though the closing of the door had blown Mr. Wilks's lamp out. It was a night of surprises, but after a moment's hesitation she stepped over and tried his door. It was fast, and there was no answer to her knocking. She knocked louder and listened. A door slammed violently at the back of the house, a distant clatter of what sounded like saucepans came from beyond, and above it all a tremulous but harsh voice bellowed industriously through an interminable chant. By the time the third verse was reached Mr. Wilks's neighbours on both sides were beating madly upon their walls and blood-curdling threats strained through the plaster.

She stayed no longer, but regaining her own door sat down again to await the return of her son. Mr. Silk was long in coming, and she tried in vain to occupy herself with various small jobs as she speculated in vain on the meaning of the events of the night. She got up and stood by the open door, and as she waited the clock in the church-tower, which rose over the roofs hard by, slowly boomed out the hour of eleven. As the echoes of the last stroke died away the figure of Mr. Silk turned into the alley.

"You must 'ave 'ad quite a nice walk," said his mother, as she drew back into the room and noted the brightness of his eye.

"Yes," was the reply.

"I s'pose 'e's been and asked you to the wedding?" said the sarcastic Mrs. Silk.

Her son started and, turning his back on her, wound up the clock. "Yes, 'e has," he said, with a sly grin.

Mrs. Silk's eyes snapped. "Well, of all the impudence," she said, breathlessly.

"Well, 'e has," said her son, hugging himself over the joke. "And, what's more, I'm going."

He composed his face sufficiently to bid her "good-night," and, turning a deaf ear to her remonstrances and inquiries, took up a candle and were off whistling.

[Illustration: "He took up his candle and went off whistling."]

CHAPTER XXIV

The idea in the mind of Mr. James Hardy when he concocted his infamous plot was that Jack Nugent would be summarily dismissed on some pretext by Miss Kybird, and that steps would at once be taken by her family to publish her banns together with those of Mr. Silk. In thinking thus he had made no allowance for the workings and fears of such a capable mind as Nathan Smith's, and as days passed and nothing happened he became a prey to despair.

He watched Mr. Silk keenly, but that gentleman went about his work in his usual quiet and gloomy fashion, and, after a day's leave for the purpose of arranging the affairs of a sick aunt in Camberwell, came back only a little less gloomy than before. It was also clear that Mr. Swann's complaisance was nearly at an end, and a letter, couched in vigorous, not to say regrettable, terms for a moribund man, expressed such a desire for fresh air and exercise that Hardy was prepared to see him at any moment.

It was the more unfortunate as he thought that he had of late detected a slight softening in Captain Nugent's manner towards him. On two occasions the captain, who was out when he called, had made no comment to find upon his return that the visitor was being entertained by his daughter, going so far, indeed, as to permit the conversation to gain vastly in interest by that young person remaining in the room. In face of this improvement he thought with dismay of having to confess failure in a scheme which apart from success was inexcusable.

The captain had also unbent in another direction, and Mr. Wilks, to his great satisfaction, was allowed to renew his visits to Equator Lodge and assist his old master in the garden. Here at least the steward was safe from the designs of Mrs. Silk and the innuendoes of Fullalove Alley.

It was at this time, too, that the widow stood in most need of his advice, the behaviour of Edward Silk being of a nature to cause misgivings in any mother's heart. A strange restlessness possessed him, varied with occasional outbursts of hilarity and good nature. Dark hints emanated from him at these times concerning a surprise in store for her at no distant date, hints which were at once explained away in a most unsatisfactory manner when she became too pressing in her inquiries. He haunted the High Street, and when the suspicious Mrs. Silk spoke of Amelia he only laughed and waxed humorous over such unlikely subjects as broken hearts and broken vows.

It was a week after Mr. Kybird's visit to the alley that he went, as usual, for a stroll up and down the High Street. The evening was deepening, and some of the shops had already lit up, as Mr. Silk, with his face against the window-pane, tried in vain to penetrate the obscurity of Mr. Kybird's shop. He could just make out a dim figure behind the counter, which he believed to be Amelia, when a match was struck and a gas jet threw a sudden light in the shop and revealed Mr. Jack Nugent standing behind the counter with his hand on the lady's shoulder.

[Illustration: "He could just make out a dim figure behind the counter."]

One glance was sufficient. The next moment there was a sharp cry from Miss Kybird and a bewildered stare from Nugent as something, only comparable to a human cracker, bounced into the shop and commenced to explode before them.

"Take your 'and off," raved Mr. Silk. "Leave 'er alone. 'Ow dare you? D'ye hear me? 'Melia, I won't 'ave it! I won't 'ave it!"

"Don't be silly, Teddy," remonstrated Mr. Nugent, following up Miss Kybird, as she edged away from him.

"Leave 'er alone, d'ye 'ear?" yelled Mr. Silk, thumping the counter with his small fist. "She's my *wife!*"

"Teddy's mad," said Mr. Nugent, calmly, "stark, staring, raving mad. Poor Teddy."

He shook his head sadly, and had just begun to recommend a few remedies when the parlour door opened and the figure of Mr. Kybird, with his wife standing close behind him, appeared in the doorway.

"Who's making all this noise?" demanded the former, looking from one to the other.

"I am," said Mr. Silk, fiercely. "It's no use your winking at me; I'm not going to 'ave any more of this nonsense. 'Melia, you go and get your 'at on and come straight off 'ome with me."

Mr. Kybird gave a warning cough. "Go easy, Teddy," he murmured.

"And don't you cough at me," said the irritated Mr. Silk, "because it won't do no good."

Mr. Kybird subsided. He was not going to quarrel with a son-in-law who might at any moment be worth ten thousand pounds.

"Isn't he mad?" inquired the amazed Mr. Nugent.

"Cert'nly not," replied Mr. Kybird, moving aside to let his daughter pass; "no madder than you are. Wot d'ye mean, mad?"

Mr. Nugent looked round in perplexity. "Do you mean to tell me that Teddy and Amelia are married?" he said, in a voice trembling with eagerness.

"I do," said Mr. Kybird. "It seems they've been fond of one another all along, and they went up all unbeknown last Friday and got a license and got married."

"And if I see you putting your 'and on 'er shoulder ag'in" said Mr. Silk, with alarming vagueness.

"But suppose she asks me to?" said the delighted Mr. Nugent, with much gravity.

[Illustration: "'But suppose she asks me to?' said the delighted Mr. Nugent, with much gravity."]

"Look 'ere, we don't want none o' your non-sense," broke in the irate Mrs. Kybird, pushing her way past her husband and confronting the speaker.

"I've been deceived," said Mr. Nugent in a thrilling voice; "you've all been deceiving me. Kybird, I blush for you (that will save you a lot of trouble). Teddy, I wouldn't have believed it of you. I can't stay here; my heart is broken."

"Well we don't want you to," retorted the aggressive Mrs. Kybird. "You can take yourself off as soon as ever you like. You can't be too quick to please me."

Mr. Nugent bowed and walked past the counter. "And not even a bit of wedding-cake for me," he said, shaking a reproachful head at the heated Mr. Silk. "Why, I'd put you down first on my list."

He paused at the door, and after a brief intimation that he would send for his effects on the following day, provided that his broken heart had not proved fatal in the meantime, waved his hand to the company and departed. Mr. Kybird followed him to the door as though to see him off the premises, and gazing after the receding figure swelled with indignation as he noticed that he favoured a mode of progression which was something between a walk and a hornpipe.

Mr. Nugent had not been in such spirits since his return to Sunwich, and, hardly able to believe in his good fortune, he walked on in a state of growing excitement until he was clear of the town. Then he stopped to consider his next move, and after a little deliberation resolved to pay a visit to Jem Hardy and acquaint him with the joyful tidings.

That gentleman, however, was out, and Mr. Nugent, somewhat irritated at such thoughtlessness, stood in the road wondering where to go next. It was absolutely impossible for him to sleep that night without telling the good news to somebody, and after some thought he selected Mr. Wilks. It was true that relations had been somewhat strained between them since the latter's attempt at crimping him, but he was never one to bear malice, and to-night he was full of the kindest thoughts to all mankind.

He burst into Mr. Wilks's front room suddenly and then pulled up short. The steward, with a pitiable look of anxiety on his pallid features, was leaning awkwardly against the mantelpiece, and opposite him Mrs. Silk sat in an easy-chair, dissolved in tears.

"Busy, Sam?" inquired Mr. Nugent, who had heard of the steward's difficulties from Hardy.

"No, sir," said Mr. Wilks, hastily; "sit down, sir."

He pushed forward a chair and, almost pulling his visitor into it, stood over him attentively and took his hat.

"Are you quite sure I'm not interrupting you?" inquired the thoughtful Mr. Nugent.

"Certain sure, sir," said Mr. Wilks, eagerly. "I was just 'aving a bit of a chat with my neighbour, Mrs. Silk, 'ere, that's all."

The lady in question removed her handkerchief from her eyes and gazed at him with reproachful tenderness. Mr. Wilks plunged hastily into conversation.

"She came over 'ere to tell me a bit o' news," he said, eyeing the young man doubtfully. "It seems that Teddy-----"

Mr. Nugent fetched a mighty sigh and shook his head; Mrs. Silk gazed at him earnestly.

"Life is full of surprises, sir," she remarked.

"And sadness," added Mr. Nugent. "I hope that they will be happy."

"It struck me all of a 'eap," said Mrs. Silk, rolling her handkerchief into a ball and placing it in her lap. "I was doing a bit of ironing when in walks Teddy with Amelia Kybird, and says they was married last Friday. I was that shaken I didn't know what I did or what I said. Then I came over as soon as I could, because I thought Mr. Wilks ought to know about it."

Mr. Wilks cleared his throat and turned an agonized eye on Mr. Nugent. He would have liked to have asked why Mrs. Silk should think it necessary to inform him, but the fear of precipitating a crisis stayed his tongue.

"What I'm to do, I don't know," continued Mrs. Silk, feebly. "You can't 'ave two queens in one 'ouse, so to speak."

"But she was walking out with Teddy long ago," urged Mr. Wilks. "It's no worse now than then."

"But I wouldn't be married by license," said Mrs. Silk, deftly ignoring the remark. "If I can't be asked in church in the proper way I won't be married at all."

"Quite right," said Mr. Nugent; "there's something so sudden about a license," he added, with feeling.

"Me and Mr. Wilks was talking about marriage only the other day," pursued Mrs. Silk, with a bashfulness which set every nerve in the steward's body quivering, "and we both agreed that banns was the proper way.

"You was talking about it," corrected Mr. Wilks, in a hoarse voice. "You brought up the subject and I agreed with you---not that it matters to me 'ow people get married. That's their affair. Banns or license, it's all one to me."

"I won't be married by license," said Mrs. Silk, with sudden petulance; "leastways, I'd rather not be," she added, softening.

Mr. Wilks took his handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose violently. Mrs. Silk's methods of attack left him little opportunity for the plain speaking which was necessary to dispel illusions. He turned a watery, appealing eye on to Mr. Nugent, and saw to his surprise that that gentleman was winking at him with great significance and persistence. It would have needed a heart of stone to have been unaffected by such misery, and to-night Mr. Nugent, thankful for his own escape, was in a singularly merciful mood.

"All this sounds as though you are going to be married," he said, turning to Mrs. Silk with a polite smile.

The widow simpered and looked down, thereby affording Mr. Nugent an opportunity of another signal to the perturbed steward, who sat with such a look of anxiety on his face lest he should miss his cue that the young man's composure was tried to the utmost.

"It's been a understood thing for a long time," she said, slowly, "but I couldn't leave my son while 'e was single and nobody to look after 'im. A good mother makes a good wife, so they say. A woman can't always 'ave 'er own way in everything, and if it's not to be by banns, then by license it must be, I suppose."

"Well, he'll be a fortunate man, whoever he is," said Mr. Nugent, with another warning glance at Mr. Wilks; "and I only hope that he'll make a better husband than you do, Sam," he added, in a low but severe voice.

Mrs. Silk gave a violent start. "Better husband than 'e does?" she cried, sharply. "Mr. Wilks ain't married."

Mr. Nugent's baseless charge took the steward all aback. He stiffened in his chair, a picture of consternation, and guilt appeared stamped on every feature; but he had the presence of mind to look to Mr. Nugent's eye for guidance and sufficient strength of character to accept this last bid for liberty.

"That's my business, sir," he quavered, in offended tones.

"But you ain't *married*?" screamed Mrs. Silk.

"Never mind," said Nugent, pacifically. "Perhaps I ought not to have mentioned it; it's a sore subject with Sam. And I daresay there were faults on both sides. Weren't there, Sam?"

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Wilks, in a voice which he strove hard to make distinct; "especially 'ers."

"You---you never told me you were married," said Mrs. Silk, breathlessly.

"I never said I wasn't," retorted the culprit, defiantly. "If people liked to think I was a single man, I don't care; it's got nothing to do with them. Besides, she lives at Stepney, and I don't 'ear from 'er once in six months; she don't interfere with me and I don't interfere with her."

Mrs. Silk got up from her chair and stood confronting him with her hand grasping the back of it. Her cold eyes gleamed and her face worked with spite as she tried in vain to catch his eye. Of Mr. Nugent and his ingenuous surprise at her behaviour she took no notice at all.

"You're a deceiver," she gasped; "you've been behaving like a single man and everybody thought you was a single man."

[Illustration: "'You're a deceiver,' she gasped."]

"I hope you haven't been paying attentions to anybody, Sam," said Mr. Nugent in a shocked voice.

"A-ah," said Mrs. Silk, shivering with anger. "Ask 'im; the deceiving villain. Ask anybody, and see what they'll tell you. Oh, you wicked man, I wonder you can look me in the face!"

Truth to tell, Mr. Wilks was looking in any direction but hers. His eyes met Nugent's, but there was a look of such stern disdain on that gentleman's face that he was fain to look away again.

"Was it a friend of yours?" inquired the artless Mr. Nugent.

"Never mind," said Mrs. Silk, recovering herself. "Never mind who it was. You wait till I go and tell Teddy," she continued, turning to the trembling Mr. Wilks. "If 'e's got the 'art of a man in 'im you'll see."

With this dire threat, and turning occasionally to bestow another fierce glance upon the steward, she walked to the door and, opening it to its full extent, closed it behind her with a crash and darted across the alley to her own house. The two men gazed at each other without speaking, and then Mr. Wilks, stepping over to the door, turned the key in the lock.

"You're not afraid of Teddy?" said the staring Nugent.

"Teddy!" said Mr. Wilks, snapping his huge fingers. "I'm not afraid o' fifty Teddies; but she might come back with 'im. If it 'adn't ha' been for you, sir, I don't know wot wouldn't 'ave happened."

"Go and draw some beer and get me a clean pipe," said Nugent, dropping into a chair. "We've both been mercifully preserved, Sam, and the best thing we can do is to drink to our noble selves and be more careful for the future."

Mr. Wilks obeyed, and again thanking him warmly for his invaluable services sat down to compile a few facts about his newly acquired wife, warranted to stand the severest cross-examination which might be brought to bear upon them, a task interspersed with malicious reminiscences of Mrs. Silk's attacks on his liberty. He also insisted on giving up his bed to Nugent for the night.

"I suppose," he said later on, as Mr. Nugent, after a faint objection or two, took his candle---"I suppose this yarn about my being married will get about?"

"I suppose so," said Nugent, yawning, as he paused with his foot on the stair. "What about it?"

"Nothing," said Mr. Wilks, in a somewhat dissatisfied voice. "Nothing."

"What about it?" repeated Mr. Nugent, sternly.

"Nothing, sir," said Mr. Wilks, with an insufferable simper. "Nothing, only it'll make things a little hit slow for me, that's all."

Mr. Nugent eyed him for a space in speechless amazement, and then, with a few strong remarks on ingratitude and senile vanity, mounted the winding little stairs and went to bed.

CHAPTER XXV

The day after Mr. Silk's sudden and unexpected assertion of his marital rights Mr. Kybird stood in the doorway of his shop, basking in the sun. The High Street was in a state of post-prandial repose, and there was no likelihood of a customer to interfere with his confidential chat with Mr. Nathan Smith, who was listening with an aspect of great severity to his explanations.

"It ought not to 'ave happened," he said, sharply. "It was Teddy done it," said Mr. Kybird, humbly.

[Illustration: "'It was Teddy done it,' said Mr. Kybird, humbly."]

Mr. Smith shrugged his shoulders. "It wouldn't 'ave happened if I'd been there," he observed, arrogantly.

"I don't see 'ow" began Mr. Kybird.

"No, o' course you don't," said his friend. "Still, it's no use making a fuss now. The thing is done. One thing is, I don't suppose it'll make any diff-----"

"Difference," suggested Mr. Kybird, after waiting for him to finish.

"Difference," said Mr. Smith, with an obvious effort. His face had lost its scornful expression and given way to one almost sheepish in its mildness. Mr. Kybird, staring at him in some surprise, even thought that he detected a faint shade of pink.

"We ain't all as clever as wot you are, Nat," he said, somewhat taken aback at this phenomenon. "It wouldn't do."

Mr. Smith made a strange noise in his throat and turned on him sharply. Mr. Kybird, still staring in surprise at his unwonted behaviour, drew back a little, and then his lips parted and his eyes grew round as he saw the cause of his friend's concern. An elderly gentleman with a neatly trimmed white beard and a yellow rose in his button-hole was just passing on the other side of the road. His tread was elastic, his figure as upright as a boy's, and he swung a light cane in his hand as he walked. As Mr. Kybird gazed he bestowed a brisk nod upon the bewildered Mr. Smith, and crossed the road with the evident intention of speaking to him.

"How do, Smith?" he said, in a kindly voice.

The boarding-master leaned against the shop-window and regarded him dumbly. There was a twinkle in the shipbroker's eyes which irritated him almost beyond endurance, and in the doorway Mr. Kybird---his face mottled with the intensity of his emotions---stood an unwelcome and frantic witness of his shame.

"You're not well, Smith?" said Mr. Swann, shaking his head at him gently. "You look like a man who has been doing too much brain-work lately. You've been getting the better of some-body, I know."

Mr. Smith gasped and, eyeing him wickedly, strove hard to recover his self-possession.

"I'm all right, sir," he said, in a thin voice. "I'm glad to see you're looking a trifle better, sir."

"Oh, I'm quite right, now," said the other, with a genial smile at the fermenting Mr. Kybird. "I'm as well as ever I was. Illness is a serious thing, Smith, but it is not without its little amusements."

Mr. Smith, scratching his smooth-shaven chin and staring blankly in front of him, said that he was glad to hear it.

"I've had a long bout of it," continued the ship-broker, "longer than I intended at first. By the way, Smith, you've never spoken to anybody of that business, of course?"

"Of course not, sir," said the boarding-master, grinding his teeth.

"One has fancies when one is ill," said Mr. Swann, in low tones, as his eye dwelt with pleasure on the strained features of Mr. Kybird. "I burnt the document five minutes after you had gone."

"Did you, reely?" said Mr. Smith, mechanically.

"I'm glad it was only you and the doctor that saw my foolishness," continued the other, still in a low voice. "Other people might have talked, but I knew that you were a reliable man, Smith. And you won't talk about it in the future, I'm quite certain of that. Good afternoon."

Mr. Smith managed to say, "Good afternoon," and stood watching the receding figure as though it belonged to a species hitherto unknown to him. Then he turned, in obedience to a passionate tug at his coat sleeve from Mr. Kybird.

"Wot 'ave you got to say for yourself?" demanded that injured person, in tones of suppressed passion. "Wot do you mean by it? You've made a pretty mess of it with your cleverness."

"Wonderful old gentleman, ain't he?" said the discomfited Mr. Smith. "Fancy 'im getting the better o' me. Fancy me being 'ad. I took it all in as innercent as you please."

"Ah, you're a clever fellow, you are," said Mr. Kybird, bitterly. "'Ere's Amelia lost young Nugent and 'is five 'undred all through you. It's a got-up thing between old Swann and the Nugent lot, that's wot it is."

"Looks like it," admitted Mr. Smith; "but fancy 'is picking me out for 'is games. That's wot gets over me."

"Wot about all that money I paid for the license?" demanded Mr. Kybird, in a threatening manner. "Wot are you going to do about it?"

"You shall 'ave it," said the boarding-master, with sudden blandness, "and 'Melia shall 'ave 'er five 'undred."

"Ow?" inquired the other, staring.

"It's as easy as easy," said Mr. Smith, who had been greatly galled by his friend's manner. "I'll leave it in my will. That's the cheapest way o' giving money I know of. And while I'm about it I'll leave you a decent pair o' trousers and a shirt with your own name on it."

While an ancient friendship was thus being dissolved, Mr. Adolphus Swann was on the way to his office. He could never remember such a pleasant air from the water and such a vivid enjoyment in the sight of the workaday world. He gazed with delight at the crowd of miscellaneous shipping in the harbour and the bustling figures on the quay, only pausing occasionally to answer anxious inquiries concerning his health from seafaring men in tarry trousers, who had waylaid him with great pains from a distance.

He reached his office at last, and, having acknowledged the respectful greetings of Mr. Silk, passed into the private room, and celebrated his return to work by at once arranging with his partner for a substantial rise in the wages of that useful individual.

"My conscience is troubling me," he declared, as he hung up his hat and gazed round the room with much relish.

"Silk is happy enough," said Hardy. "It is the best thing that could have happened to him."

"I should like to raise everybody's wages," said the benevolent Mr. Swann, as he seated himself at his desk. "Everything is like a holiday to me after being cooped up in that bedroom; but the rest has done me a lot of good, so Blaikie says. And now what is going to happen to you?"

[Illustration: "Pausing occasionally to answer anxious inquiries."]

Hardy shook his head.

"Strike while the iron is hot," said the ship-broker. "Go and see Captain Nugent before he has got used to the situation. And you can give him to understand, if you like (only be careful how you do it), that I have got something in view which may suit his son. If you fail in this affair after all I've done for you, I'll enter the lists myself."

The advice was good, but unnecessary, Mr. Hardy having already fixed on that evening as a suitable opportunity to disclose to the captain the nature of the efforts he had been making on his behalf. The success which had attended them had put him into a highly optimistic mood, and he set off for Equator Lodge with the confident feeling that he had, to say the least of it, improved his footing there.

Captain Nugent, called away from his labours in the garden, greeted his visitor in his customary short manner as he entered the room. "If you've come to tell me about this marriage, I've heard of it," he said, bluntly. "Murchison told me this afternoon."

"He didn't tell you how it was brought about, I suppose?" said Hardy.

The captain shook his head. "I didn't ask him," he said, with affected indifference, and sat gazing out at the window as Hardy began his narration. Two or three times he thought he saw signs of appreciation in his listener's face, but the mouth under the heavy moustache was firm and the eyes steady. Only when he related Swann's interview with Nathan Smith and Kybird did the captain's features relax. He gave a chuckling cough and, feeling for his handkerchief, blew his nose violently. Then, with a strange gleam in his eye, he turned to the young man opposite.

"Very smart," he said, shortly.

"It was successful," said the other, modestly.

"Very," said the captain, as he rose and confronted him. "I am much obliged, of course, for the trouble you have taken in the affairs of my family. And now I will remind you of our agreement."

"Agreement?" repeated the other.

The captain nodded. "Your visits to me were to cease when this marriage happened, if I wished it," he said, slowly.

"That was the arrangement," said the dumb-founded Hardy, "but I had hoped----. Besides, it has all taken place much sooner than I had anticipated."

"That was the bargain," said the captain, stiffly. "And now I'll bid you good-day."

"I am sorry that my presence should be so distasteful to you," said the mortified Hardy.

"Distasteful, sir?" said the captain, sternly. "You have forced yourself on me for twice a week for some time past. You have insisted upon talking on every subject under the sun, whether I liked it or not. You have taken every opportunity of evading my wishes that you should not see my daughter, and you wonder that I object to you. For absolute brazenness you beat anything I have ever encountered."

"I am sorry," said Hardy, again.

"Good evening," said the captain

"Good evening."

Crestfallen and angry Hardy moved to the door, pausing with his hand on it as the captain spoke again.

"One word more," said the older man, gazing at him oddly as he stroked his grey beard; "if ever you try to come bothering me with your talk again I'll forbid you the house."

"Forbid me the house?" repeated the astonished Hardy.

"That's what I said," replied the other; "that's plain English, isn't it?"

Hardy looked at him in bewilderment; then, as the captain's meaning dawned upon him, he stepped forward impulsively and, seizing his hand, began to stammer out incoherent thanks.

"You'd better clear before I alter my mind," said Captain Nugent, roughly. "I've had more than enough of you. Try the garden, if you like."

He took up a paper from the table and resumed his seat, not without a grim smile at the promptitude with which the other obeyed his instructions.

Miss Nugent, reclining in a deck-chair at the bottom of the garden, looked up as she heard Hardy's footstep on the gravel. It was a surprising thing to see him walking down the garden; it was still more surprising to observe the brightness of his eye and the easy confidence of his bearing. It was evident that he was highly pleased with himself, and she was not satisfied until she had ascertained the reason. Then she sat silent, reflecting bitterly on the clumsy frankness of the male sex in general and fathers in particular. A recent conversation with the captain, in which she had put in a casual word or two in Hardy's favour, was suddenly invested with a new significance.

"I shall never be able to repay your father for his kindness," said Hardy, meaningly, as he took a chair near her.

"I expect he was pleased at this marriage," said Miss Nugent, coldly. "How did it happen?"

Mr. Hardy shifted uneasily in his chair. "There isn't much to tell," he said, reluctantly; "and you---you might not approve of the means by which the end was gained."

"Still, I want to hear about it," said Miss Nugent.

For the second time that evening Hardy told his story. It seemed more discreditable each time he told it, and he scanned the girl's face anxiously as he proceeded, but, like her father, she sat still and made no comment until he had finished. Then she expressed a strong feeling of gratitude that the Nugent family had not been mixed up in it.

"Why?" inquired Hardy, bluntly.

"I don't think it was a very nice thing to do," said Miss Nugent, with a superior air.

"It wouldn't have been a very nice thing for you if your brother had married Miss Kybird," said the indignant Jem. "And you said, if you remember, that you didn't mind what I did."

"I don't," said Miss Nugent, noticing with pleasure that the confident air of a few minutes ago had quite disappeared.

"You think I have been behaving badly?" pursued Hardy.

"I would rather not say what I think," replied Miss Nugent, loftily. "I have no doubt you meant well, and I should be sorry to hurt your feelings."

"Thank you," said Hardy, and sat gloomily gazing about him. For some time neither of them spoke.

"Where is Jack now?" inquired the girl, at last. "He is staying with me for a few days," said Hardy. "I sincerely hope that the association will not be injurious to him."

"Are you trying to be rude to me?" inquired Miss Nugent, raising her clear eyes to his.

"I am sorry," said Hardy, hastily. "You are quite right, of course. It was not a nice thing to do, but I would do a thousand times worse to please you."

Miss Nugent thanked him warmly; he seemed to understand her so well, she said.

"I mean," said Hardy, leaning forward and speaking with a vehemence which made the girl instinctively avert her head---"I mean that to please you would be the greatest happiness I could know. I love you."

Miss Nugent sat silent, and a strong sense of the monstrous unfairness of such a sudden attack possessed her. Such a declaration she felt ought to have been led up to by numerous delicate gradations of speech, each a little more daring than the last, but none so daring that they could not have been checked at any time by the exercise of a little firmness.

"If you would do anything to please me," she said at length in a low voice, and without turning her head, "would you promise never to try and see me or speak to me again if I asked you?"

"No," said Hardy, promptly.

Miss Nugent sat silent again. She knew that a good woman should be sorry for a man in such extremity, and should endeavour to spare his feelings by softening her refusal as much as possible, little as he might deserve such consideration. But man is impatient and jumps at conclusions. Before she was half-way through the first sentence he leaned forward and took her hand.

"Oh, good-bye," she said, turning to him, with a pleasant smile.

"I am not going," said Hardy, quietly; "I am never going," he added, as he took her other hand.

Captain Nugent, anxious for his supper, found them there still debating the point some two hours later. Kate Nugent, relieved at the appearance of her natural protector, clung to him with unusual warmth. Then, in a kindly, hospitable fashion, she placed her other arm in that of Hardy, and they walked in grave silence to the house.

[Illustration: "She placed her other arm in that of Hardy."]

THE END