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Captains All by W. W. Jacobs

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Captains All

CAPTAINS ALL

[Illustration: "Captains All."]

Every sailorman grumbles about the sea, said the night-watchman, thoughtfully. It's human nature to grumble, and I s'pose they keep on grumbling and sticking to it because there ain't much else they can do. There's not many shore-going berths that a sailorman is fit for, and those that they are---such as a night-watchman's, for instance---wants such a good character that there's few as are to equal it.

Sometimes they get things to do ashore. I knew one man that took up butchering, and 'e did very well at it till the police took him up. Another man I knew gave up the sea to marry a washerwoman, and they hadn't been married six months afore she died, and back he 'ad to go to sea agin, pore chap.

A man who used to grumble awful about the sea was old Sam Small---a man I've spoke of to you before. To hear 'im go on about the sea, arter he 'ad spent four or five months' money in a fortnight, was 'artbreaking. He used to ask us wot was going to happen to 'im in his old age, and when we pointed out that he wouldn't be likely to 'ave any old age if he wasn't more careful of 'imself he used to fly into a temper and call us everything 'e could lay his tongue to.

One time when 'e was ashore with Peter Russet and Ginger Dick he seemed to 'ave got it on the brain. He started being careful of 'is money instead o' spending it, and three mornings running he bought a newspaper and read the advertisements, to see whether there was any comfortable berth for a strong, good-'arted man wot didn't like work.

He actually went arter one situation, and, if it hadn't ha' been for seventy-nine other men, he said he believed he'd ha' had a good chance of getting it. As it was, all 'e got was a black eye for shoving another man, and for a day or two he was so down-'arted that 'e was no company at all for the other two.

For three or four days 'e went out by 'imself, and then, all of a sudden, Ginger Dick and Peter began to notice a great change in him. He seemed to 'ave got quite cheerful and 'appy. He answered 'em back pleasant when they spoke to 'im, and one night he lay in 'is bed whistling comic songs until Ginger and Peter Russet 'ad to get out o' bed to him. When he bought a new necktie and a smart cap and washed 'imself twice in one day they fust began to ask each other wot was up, and then they asked him.

"Up?" ses Sam; "nothing."

"He's in love," ses Peter Russet.

"You're a liar," ses Sam, without turning round.

"He'll 'ave it bad at 'is age," ses Ginger.

Sam didn't say nothing, but he kept fidgeting about as though 'e'd got something on his mind. Fust he looked out o' the winder, then he 'ummed a tune, and at last, looking at 'em very fierce, he took a tooth-brush wrapped in paper out of 'is pocket and began to clean 'is teeth.

"He is in love," ses Ginger, as soon as he could speak.

"Or else 'e's gorn mad," ses Peter, watching 'im. "Which is it, Sam?"

Sam made believe that he couldn't answer 'im because o' the tooth-brush, and arter he'd finished he 'ad such a raging toothache that 'e sat in a corner holding 'is face and looking the pictur' o' misery. They couldn't get a word out of him till they asked 'im to go out with them, and then he said 'e was going to bed. Twenty minutes arterwards, when Ginger Dick stepped back for 'is pipe, he found he 'ad gorn.

He tried the same game next night, but the other two wouldn't 'ave it, and they stayed in so long that at last 'e lost 'is temper, and, arter wondering wot Ginger's father and mother could ha' been a-thinking about, and saying that he believed Peter Russet 'ad been changed at birth for a sea-sick monkey, he put on 'is cap and went out. Both of 'em follered 'im sharp, but when he led 'em to a mission-hall, and actually went inside, they left 'im and went off on their own.

They talked it over that night between themselves, and next evening they went out fust and hid themselves round the corner. Ten minutes arterwards old Sam came out, walking as though 'e was going to catch a train; and smiling to think 'ow he 'ad shaken them off. At the corner of Commercial Road he stopped and bought 'imself a button-hole for 'is coat, and Ginger was so surprised that 'e pinched Peter Russet to make sure that he wasn't dreaming.

Old Sam walked straight on whistling, and every now and then looking down at 'is button-hole, until by-and-by he turned down a street on the right and went into a little shop. Ginger Dick and Peter waited for 'im at the corner, but he was inside for so long that at last they got tired o' waiting and crept up and peeped through the winder.

It was a little tobacconist's shop, with newspapers and penny toys and such-like; but, as far as Ginger could see through two rows o' pipes and the *Police News*, it was empty. They stood there with their noses pressed against the glass for some time, wondering wot had 'appened to Sam, but by-and-by a little boy went in and then they began to 'ave an idea wot Sam's little game was.

As the shop-bell went the door of a little parlour at the back of the shop opened, and a stout and uncommon good-looking woman of about forty came out. Her 'ead pushed the *Police News* out o' the way and her 'and came groping into the winder arter a toy.

Ginger 'ad a good look at 'er out o' the corner of one eye, while he pretended to be looking at a tobacco-jar with the other. As the little boy came out 'im and Peter Russet went in.

"I want a pipe, please," he ses, smiling at 'er; "a clay pipe---one o' your best." The woman handed 'im down a box to choose from, and just then Peter, wot 'ad been staring in at the arf-open door at a boot wot wanted lacing up, gave a big start and ses, "Why! Halloa!"

"Wot's the matter?" ses the woman, looking at 'im.

"I'd know that foot anywhere," ses Peter, still staring at it; and the words was hardly out of 'is mouth afore the foot 'ad moved itself away and tucked itself under its chair. "Why, that's my dear old friend Sam Small, ain't it?"

"Do you know the captin?" ses the woman, smiling at 'im.

"Cap----?" ses Peter. "Cap----? Oh, yes; why, he's the biggest friend I've got." "'Ow strange!" ses the woman.

"We've been wanting to see 'im for some time," ses Ginger. "He was kind enough to lend me arf a crown the other day, and I've been wanting to pay 'im."

"Captin Small," ses the woman, pushing open the door, "here's some old friends o' yours."

Old Sam turned 'is face round and looked at 'em, and if looks could ha' killed, as the saying is, they'd ha' been dead men there and then.

"Oh, yes," he ses, in a choking voice; "'ow are you?"

"Pretty well, thank you, captin," ses Ginger, grinning at 'im; "and 'ow's yourself arter all this long time?"

He held out 'is hand and Sam shook it, and then shook 'ands with Peter Russet, who was grinning so 'ard that he couldn't speak.

"These are two old friends o' mine, Mrs. Finch," ses old Sam, giving 'em a warning look; "Captin Dick and Captin Russet, two o' the oldest and best friends a man ever 'ad."

"Captin Dick 'as got arf a crown for you," ses Peter Russet, still grinning.

"There now," ses Ginger, looking vexed, "if I ain't been and forgot it; I've on'y got arf a sovereign."

"I can give you change, sir," ses Mrs. Finch. "P'r'aps you'd like to sit down for five minutes?"

Ginger thanked 'er, and 'im and Peter Russet took a chair apiece in front o' the fire and began asking old Sam about 'is 'ealth, and wot he'd been doing since they saw 'im last.

"Fancy your reckernizing his foot," ses Mrs. Finch, coming in with the change.

"I'd know it anywhere," ses Peter, who was watching Ginger pretending to give Sam Small the 'arf-dollar, and Sam pretending in a most lifelike manner to take it.

Ginger Dick looked round the room. It was a comfortable little place, with pictures on the walls and antimacassars on all the chairs, and a row of pink vases on the mantelpiece. Then 'e looked at Mrs. Finch, and thought wot a nice-looking woman she was.

"This is nicer than being aboard ship with a crew o' nasty, troublesome sailormen to look arter, Captin Small," he ses.

"It's wonderful the way he manages 'em," ses Peter Russet to Mrs. Finch. "Like a lion he is."

"A roaring lion," ses Ginger, looking at Sam. "He don't know wot fear is."

Sam began to smile, and Mrs. Finch looked at 'im so pleased that Peter Russet, who 'ad been looking at 'er and the room, and thinking much the same way as Ginger, began to think that they was on the wrong tack.

"Afore 'e got stout and old," he ses, shaking his 'ead, "there wasn't a smarter skipper afloat."

"We all 'ave our day," ses Ginger, shaking his 'ead too.

"I dessay he's good for another year or two afloat, yet," ses Peter Russet, considering. "With care," ses Ginger.

Old Sam was going to say something, but 'e stopped himself just in time. "They will 'ave their joke," he ses, turning to Mrs. Finch and trying to smile. "I feel as young as ever I did."

Mrs. Finch said that anybody with arf an eye could see that, and then she looked at a kettle that was singing on the 'ob.

"I s'pose you gentlemen wouldn't care for a cup o' cocoa?" she ses, turning to them.

Ginger Dick and Peter both said that they liked it better than anything else, and, arter she 'ad got out the cups and saucers and a tin o' cocoa, Ginger held the kettle and poured the water in the cups while she stirred them, and old Sam sat looking on 'elpless.

"It does seem funny to see you drinking cocoa, captin," ses Ginger, as old Sam took his cup.

"Ho!" ses Sam, firing up; "and why, if I might make so bold as to ask?"

"Cos I've generally seen you drinking something out of a bottle," ses Ginger.

"Now, look 'ere," ses Sam, starting up and spilling some of the hot cocoa over 'is lap.

"A ginger-beer bottle," ses Peter Russet, making faces at Ginger to keep quiet.

"Yes, o' course, that's wot I meant," ses Ginger.

Old Sam wiped the cocoa off 'is knees without saying a word, but his weskit kept going up and down till Peter Russet felt quite sorry for 'im.

"There's nothing like it," he ses to Mrs. Finch. "It was by sticking to ginger-beer and milk and such-like that Captain Small 'ad command of a ship afore 'e was twenty-five."

"Lor'!" ses Mrs. Finch.

She smiled at old Sam till Peter got uneasy agin, and began to think p'r'aps 'e'd been praising 'im too much.

"Of course, I'm speaking of long ago now," he ses.

"Years and years afore you was born, ma'am," ses Ginger.

Old Sam was going to say something, but Mrs. Finch looked so pleased that 'e thought better of it. Some o' the cocoa 'e was drinking went the wrong way, and then Ginger patted 'im on the back and told 'im to be careful not to bring on 'is brownchitis agin. Wot with temper and being afraid to speak for fear they should let Mrs. Finch know that 'e wasn't a captin, he could 'ardly bear 'imself, but he very near broke out when Peter Russet advised 'im to 'ave his weskit lined with red flannel. They all stayed on till closing time, and by the time they left they 'ad made themselves so pleasant that Mrs. Finch said she'd be pleased to see them any time they liked to look in.

Sam Small waited till they 'ad turned the corner, and then he broke out so alarming that they could 'ardly do anything with 'im. Twice policemen spoke to 'im and advised 'im to go home afore they altered their minds; and he 'ad to hold 'imself in and keep quiet while Ginger and Peter Russet took 'is arms and said they were seeing him 'ome.

He started the row agin when they got in-doors, and sat up in 'is bed smacking 'is lips over the things he'd like to 'ave done to them if he could. And then, arter saying 'ow he'd like to see Ginger boiled alive like a lobster, he said he knew that 'e was a noble-'arted feller who wouldn't try and cut an old pal out, and that it was a case of love at first sight on top of a tram-car.

"She's too young for you," ses Ginger; "and too good-looking besides."

"It's the nice little bisness he's fallen in love with, Ginger," ses Peter Russet. "I'll toss you who 'as it."

Ginger, who was siting on the foot o' Sam's bed, said "no" at fust, but arter a time he pulled out arf a dollar and spun it in the air.

That was the last 'e see of it, although he 'ad Sam out o' bed and all the clothes stripped off of it twice. He spent over arf an hour on his 'ands and knees looking for it, and Sam said when he was tired of playing bears p'r'aps he'd go to bed and get to sleep like a Christian.

They 'ad it all over agin next morning, and at last, as nobody would agree to keep quiet and let the others 'ave a fair chance, they made up their minds to let the best man win. Ginger Dick bought a necktie that took all the colour out o' Sam's, and Peter Russet went in for a collar so big that 'e was lost in it.

They all strolled into the widow's shop separate that night. Ginger Dick 'ad smashed his pipe and wanted another; Peter Russet wanted some tobacco; and old Sam Small walked in smiling, with a little silver brooch for 'er, that he said 'e had picked up.

It was a very nice brooch, and Mrs. Finch was so pleased with it that Ginger and Peter sat there as mad as they could be because they 'adn't thought of the same thing.

"Captain Small is very lucky at finding things," ses Ginger, at last.

"He's got the name for it," ses Peter Russet.

"It's a handy 'abit," ses Ginger; "it saves spending money. Who did you give that gold bracelet to you picked up the other night, captin?" he ses, turning to Sam.

"Gold bracelet?" ses Sam. "I didn't pick up no gold bracelet. Wot are you talking about?"

"All right, captin; no offence," ses Ginger, holding up his 'and. "I dreamt I saw one on your mantelpiece, I s'pose. P'r'aps I oughtn't to ha' said anything about it."

Old Sam looked as though he'd like to eat 'im, especially as he noticed Mrs. Finch listening and pretending not to. "Oh! that one," he ses, arter a bit o' hard thinking. "Oh! I found out who it belonged to. You wouldn't believe 'ow pleased they was at getting it back agin."

Ginger Dick coughed and began to think as 'ow old Sam was sharper than he 'ad given 'im credit for, but afore he could think of anything else to say Mrs. Finch looked at old Sam and began to talk about 'is ship, and to say 'ow much she should like to see over it.

"I wish I could take you," ses Sam, looking at the other two out o' the corner of his eye, "but my ship's over at Dunkirk, in France. I've just run over to London for a week or two to look round."

"And mine's there too," ses Peter Russet, speaking a'most afore old Sam 'ad finished; "side by side they lay in the harbour."

"Oh, dear," ses Mrs. Finch, folding her 'ands and shaking her 'cad. "I should like to go over a ship one arternoon. I'd quite made up my mind to it, knowing three captins."

She smiled and looked at Ginger; and Sam and Peter looked at 'im too, wondering whether he was going to berth his ship at Dunkirk alongside o' theirs.

"Ah, I wish I 'ad met you a fortnight ago," ses Ginger, very sad. "I gave up my ship, the High flyer, then, and I'm waiting for one my owners are 'aving built for me at New-castle. They said the High flyer wasn't big enough for me. She was a nice little ship, though. I believe I've got 'er picture somewhere about me!"

He felt in 'is pocket and pulled out a little, crumpled-up photograph of a ship he'd been fireman aboard of some years afore, and showed it to 'er.

"That's me standing on the bridge," he ses, pointing out a little dot with the stem of 'is pipe.

"It's your figger," ses Mrs. Finch, straining her eyes. "I should know it anywhere."

"You've got wonderful eyes, ma'am," ses old Sam, choking with 'is pipe.

"Anybody can see that," ses Ginger. "They're the largest and the bluest I've ever seen."

Mrs. Finch told 'im not to talk nonsense, but both Sam and Peter Russet could see 'ow pleased she was.

"Truth is truth," ses Ginger. "I'm a plain man, and I speak my mind."

"Blue is my fav'rit' colour," ses old Sam, in a tender voice. "True blue."

Peter Russet began to feel out of it. "I thought brown was," he ses.

"Ho!" ses Sam, turning on 'im; "and why?"

"I 'ad my reasons," ses Peter, nodding, and shutting 'is mouth very firm.

"I thought brown was 'is fav'rit' colour too," ses Ginger. "I don't know why. It's no use asking me; because if you did I couldn't tell you."

"Brown's a very nice colour," ses Mrs. Finch, wondering wot was the matter with old Sam.

"Blue," ses Ginger; "big blue eyes---they're the ones for me. Other people may 'ave their blacks and their browns," he ses, looking at Sam and Peter Russet, "but give me blue."

They went on like that all the evening, and every time the shop-bell went and the widow 'ad to go out to serve a customer they said in w'ispers wot they thought of each other; and once when she came back rather sudden Ginger 'ad to explain to 'er that 'e was showing Peter Russet a scratch on his knuckle.

Ginger Dick was the fust there next night, and took 'er a little chiney teapot he 'ad picked up dirt cheap because it was cracked right acrost the middle; but, as he explained that he 'ad dropped it in hurrying to see 'er, she was just as pleased. She stuck it up on the mantelpiece, and the things she said about Ginger's kindness and generosity made Peter Russet spend good money that he wanted for 'imself on a painted flower-pot next evening.

With three men all courting 'er at the same time Mrs. Finch had 'er hands full, but she took to it wonderful considering. She was so nice and kind to 'em all that even arter a week's 'ard work none of 'em was really certain which she liked best.

They took to going in at odd times o' the day for tobacco and such-like. They used to go alone then, but they all met and did the polite to each other there of an evening, and then quarrelled all the way 'ome.

Then all of a sudden, without any warning, Ginger Dick and Peter Russet left off going there. The fust evening Sam sat expecting them every minute, and was so surprised that he couldn't take any advantage of it; but on the second, beginning by squeezing Mrs. Finch's 'and at ha'-past seven, he 'ad got best part of his arm round 'er waist by a quarter to ten. He didn't do more that night because she told him to be'ave 'imself, and threatened to scream if he didn't leave off.

He was arf-way home afore 'e thought of the reason for Ginger Dick and Peter Russet giving up, and then he went along smiling to 'imself to such an extent that people thought 'e was mad. He went off to sleep with the smile still on 'is lips, and when Peter and Ginger came in soon arter closing time and 'e woke up and asked them where they'd been, 'e was still smiling.

"I didn't 'ave the pleasure o' seeing you at Mrs. Finch's to-night," he ses.

"No," ses Ginger, very short. "We got tired of it."

"So un'healthy sitting in that stuffy little room every evening," ses Peter.

Old Sam put his 'ead under the bedclothes and laughed till the bed shook; and every now and then he'd put his 'ead out and look at Peter and Ginger and laugh agin till he choked.

"I see 'ow it is," he ses, sitting up and wiping his eyes on the sheet. "Well, we cant all win."

"Wot d'ye mean?" ses Ginger, very disagreeable.

"She wouldn't 'ave you, Sam, thats wot I mean. And I don't wonder at it. I wouldn't 'ave you if I was a gal."

"You're dreaming, ses Peter Russet, sneering at 'im.

"That flower-pot o' yours'll come in handy," ses Sam, thinking 'ow he 'ad put 'is arm round the widow's waist; "and I thank you kindly for the teapot, Ginger.

"You don't mean to say as you've asked 'er to marry you?" ses Ginger, looking at Peter Russet.

"Not quite; but I'm going to," ses Sam, "and I'll bet you even arf-crowns she ses 'yes.'"

Ginger wouldn't take 'im, and no more would Peter, not even when he raised it to five shillings; and the vain way old Sam lay there boasting and talking about 'is way with the gals made 'em both feel ill.

"I wouldn't 'ave her if she asked me on 'er bended knees," ses Ginger, holding up his 'ead.

"Nor me," ses Peter. "You're welcome to 'er, Sam. When I think of the evenings I've wasted over a fat old woman I feel-----"

"That'll do," ses old Sam, very sharp; "that ain't the way to speak of a lady, even if she 'as said 'no.'"

"All right, Sam," ses Ginger. "You go in and win if you think you're so precious clever."

Old Sam said that that was wot 'e was going to do, and he spent so much time next morning making 'imself look pretty that the other two could 'ardly be civil to him.

He went off a'most direckly arter breakfast, and they didn't see 'im agin till twelve o'clock that night. He 'ad brought a bottle o' whisky in with 'im, and he was so 'appy that they see plain wot had 'appened.

"She said 'yes' at two o'clock in the arternoon," ses old Sam, smiling, arter they had 'ad a glass apiece. "I'd nearly done the trick at one o'clock, and then the shop-bell went, and I 'ad to begin all over agin. Still, it wasn't unpleasant."

"Do you mean to tell us you've asked 'er to marry you?" ses Ginger, 'olding out 'is glass to be filled agin.

"I do," ses Sam; "but I 'ope there's no ill-feeling. You never 'ad a chance, neither of you; she told me so."

Ginger Dick and Peter Russet stared at each other.

"She said she 'ad been in love with me all along," ses Sam, filling their glasses agin to cheer 'em up. "We went out arter tea and bought the engagement-ring, and then she got somebody to mind the shop and we went to the Pagoda music-'all."

"I 'ope you didn't pay much for the ring, Sam," ses Ginger, who always got very kind-'arted arter two or three glasses o' whisky. "If I'd known you was going to be in such a hurry I might ha' told you before."

"We ought to ha' done," ses Peter, shaking his 'ead.

"Told me?" ses Sam, staring at 'em. "Told me wot?"

"Why me and Peter gave it up," ses Ginger; "but, o' course, p'r'aps you don't mind."

"Mind wot?" ses Sam.

"It's wonderful 'ow quiet she kept it," ses Peter.

Old Sam stared at 'em agin, and then he asked 'em to speak in plain English wot they'd got to say, and not to go taking away the character of a woman wot wasn't there to speak up for herself.

"It's nothing agin 'er character," ses Ginger. "It's a credit to her, looked at properly," ses Peter Russet.

"And Sam'll 'ave the pleasure of bringing of 'em up," ses Ginger.

"Bringing of 'em up?" ses Sam, in a trembling voice and turning pale; "bringing who up?"

"Why, 'er children," ses Ginger. "Didn't she tell you? She's got nine of 'em."

Sam pretended not to believe 'em at fust, and said they was jealous; but next day he crept down to the greengrocer's shop in the same street, where Ginger had 'appened to buy some oranges one day, and found that it was only too true. Nine children, the eldest of 'em only fifteen, was staying with diff'rent relations owing to scarlet-fever next door.

Old Sam crept back 'ome like a man in a dream, with a bag of oranges he didn't want, and, arter making a present of the engagement-ring to Ginger--if 'e could get it---he took the fust train to Tilbury and signed on for a v'y'ge to China.