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The Boatswain's Mate by W. W. Jacobs

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The Boatswain's Mate

THE BOATSWAIN'S MATE

[Illustration: "The Boatswain's Mate"]

Mr. George Benn, retired boat-swain, sighed noisily, and with a despondent gesture, turned to the door and stood with the handle in his hand; Mrs. Waters, sitting behind the tiny bar in a tall Windsor-chair, eyed him with some heat.

"My feelings'll never change," said the boatswain.

"Nor mine either," said the landlady, sharply. "It's a strange thing, Mr. Benn, but you always ask me to marry you after the third mug."

"It's only to get my courage up," pleaded the boatswain. "Next time I'll do it afore I 'ave a drop; that'll prove to you I'm in earnest."

He stepped outside and closed the door before the landlady could make a selection from the many retorts that crowded to her lips.

After the cool bar, with its smell of damp saw-dust, the road seemed hot and dusty; but the boatswain, a prey to gloom natural to a man whose hand has been refused five times in a fortnight, walked on unheeding. His steps lagged, but his brain was active.

He walked for two miles deep in thought, and then coming to a shady bank took a seat upon an inviting piece of turf and lit his pipe. The heat and the drowsy hum of bees made him nod; his pipe hung from the corner of his mouth, and his eyes closed.

He opened them at the sound of approaching footsteps, and, feeling in his pocket for matches, gazed lazily at the intruder. He saw a tall man carrying a small bundle over his shoulder, and in the erect carriage, the keen eyes, and bronzed face had little difficulty in detecting the old soldier.

The stranger stopped as he reached the seated boatswain and eyed him pleasantly.

"Got a pipe o' baccy, mate?" he inquired.

The boatswain handed him the small metal box in which he kept that luxury.

"Lobster, ain't you?" he said, affably.

The tall man nodded. "Was," he replied. "Now I'm my own commander-in-chief."

"Padding it?" suggested the boatswain, taking the box from him and refilling his pipe.

The other nodded, and with the air of one disposed to conversation dropped his bundle in the ditch and took a seat beside him. "I've got plenty of time," he remarked.

Mr. Benn nodded, and for a while smoked on in silence. A dim idea which had been in his mind for some time began to clarify. He stole a glance at his companion--a man of about thirty-eight, clear eyes, with humorous wrinkles at the corners, a heavy moustache, and a cheerful expression more than tinged with recklessness.

"Ain't over and above fond o' work?" suggested the boatswain, when he had finished his inspection.

"I love it," said the other, blowing a cloud of smoke in the air, "but we can't have all we want in this world; it wouldn't be good for us."

The boatswain thought of Mrs. Waters, and sighed. Then he rattled his pocket.

"Would arf a quid be any good to you?" he inquired.

"Look here," began the soldier; "just because I asked you for a pipe o' baccy--"

"No offence," said the other, quickly. "I mean if you earned it?"

The soldier nodded and took his pipe from his mouth. "Gardening and windows?" he hazarded, with a shrug of his shoulders.

The boatswain shook his head.

"Scrubbing, p'r'aps?" said the soldier, with a sigh of resignation. "Last house I scrubbed out I did it so thoroughly they accused me of pouching the soap. Hang 'em!"

"And you didn't?" queried the boatswain, eyeing him keenly.

The soldier rose and, knocking the ashes out of his pipe, gazed at him darkly. "I can't give it back to you," he said, slowly, "because I've smoked some of it, and I can't pay you for it because I've only got twopence, and that I want for myself. So long, matey, and next time a poor wretch asks you for a pipe, be civil."

"I never see such a man for taking offence in all my born days," expostulated the boat-swain. "I 'ad my reasons for that remark, mate. Good reasons they was."

The soldier grunted and, stooping, picked up his bundle.

"I spoke of arf a sovereign just now," continued the boatswain, impressively, "and when I tell you that I offer it to you to do a bit o' burgling, you'll see 'ow necessary it is for me to be certain of your honesty."

"*Burgling?*" gasped the astonished soldier. "*Honesty?* 'Struth; are you drunk or am I?"

"Meaning," said the boatswain, waving the imputation away with his hand, "for you to pretend to be a burglar."

"We're both drunk, that's what it is," said the other, resignedly.

The boatswain fidgeted. "If you don't agree, mum's the word and no 'arm done," he said, holding out his hand.

"Mum's the word," said the soldier, taking it. "My name's Ned Travers, and, barring cells for a spree now and again, there's nothing against it. Mind that."

"Might 'appen to anybody," said Mr. Benn, soothingly. "You fill your pipe and don't go chucking good tobacco away agin."

Mr. Travers took the offered box and, with economy born of adversity, stooped and filled up first with the plug he had thrown away. Then he resumed his seat and, leaning back luxuriously, bade the other "fire away."

"I ain't got it all ship-shape and proper yet," said Mr. Benn, slowly, "but it's in my mind's eye. It's been there off and on like for some time."

He lit his pipe again and gazed fixedly at the opposite hedge. "Two miles from here, where I live," he said, after several vigorous puffs, "there's a little public-'ouse called the Beehive, kept by a lady wot I've got my eye on."

The soldier sat up.

"She won't 'ave me," said the boatswain, with an air of mild surprise.

The soldier leaned back again.

"She's a lone widder," continued Mr. Benn, shaking his head, "and the Beehive is in a lonely place. It's right through the village, and the nearest house is arf a mile off."

"Silly place for a pub," commented Mr. Travers.

"I've been telling her 'ow unsafe it is," said the boatswain. "I've been telling her that she wants a man to protect her, and she only laughs at me. She don't believe it; d'ye see? Likewise I'm a small man---small, but stiff. She likes tall men."

"Most women do," said Mr. Travers, sitting upright and instinctively twisting his moustache. "When I was in the ranks---"

"My idea is," continued the boatswain, slightly raising his voice, "to kill two birds with one stone---prove to her that she does want being protected, and that I'm the man to protect her. D'ye take my meaning, mate?"

The soldier reached out a hand and felt the other's biceps. "Like a lump o' wood," he said, approvingly.

"My opinion is," said the boatswain, with a faint smirk, "that she loves me without knowing it."

"They often do," said Mr. Travers, with a grave shake of his head.

"Consequently I don't want 'er to be disappointed," said the other.

"It does you credit," remarked Mr. Travers.

"I've got a good head," said Mr. Benn, "else I shouldn't 'ave got my rating as boatswain as soon as I did; and I've been turning it over in my mind, over and over agin, till my brain-pan fair aches with it. Now, if you do what I want you to to-night and it comes off all right, damme I'll make it a quid."

"Go on, Vanderbilt," said Mr. Travers; "I'm listening."

The boatswain gazed at him fixedly. "You meet me 'ere in this spot at eleven o'clock to-night," he said, solemnly; "and I'll take you to her 'ouse and put you through a little winder I know of. You goes upstairs and alarms her, and she screams for help. I'm watching the house, faithful-like, and hear 'er scream. I dashes in at the winder, knocks you down, and rescues her. D'ye see?"

"I hear," corrected Mr. Travers, coldly.

"She clings to me," continued the boat-swain, with a rapt expression of face, "in her gratitude, and, proud of my strength and pluck, she marries me."

"An' I get a five years' honeymoon," said the soldier.

The boatswain shook his head and patted the other's shoulder. "In the excitement of the moment you spring up and escape," he said, with a kindly smile. "I've thought it all out. You can run much faster than I can; any-ways, you will. The nearest 'ouse is arf a mile off, as I said, and her servant is staying till to-morrow at 'er mother's, ten miles away."

Mr. Travers rose to his feet and stretched himself. "Time I was toddling," he said, with a yawn. "Thanks for amusing me, mate."

"You won't do it?" said the boatswain, eyeing him with much concern.

"I'm hanged if I do," said the soldier, emphatically. "Accidents will happen, and then where should I be?"

"If they did," said the boatswain, "I'd own up and clear you."

"You might," said Mr. Travers, "and then again you mightn't. So long, mate."

"I--I'll make it two quid," said the boat-swain, trembling with eagerness. "I've took a fancy to you; you're just the man for the job."

The soldier, adjusting his bundle, glanced at him over his shoulder. "Thankee," he said, with mock gratitude.

"Look 'ere," said the boatswain, springing up and catching him by the sleeve; "I'll give it to you in writing. Come, you ain't faint-hearted? Why, a bluejacket 'ud do it for the fun o' the thing. If I give it to you in writing, and there should be an accident, it's worse for me than it is for you, ain't it?"

Mr. Travers hesitated and, pushing his cap back, scratched his head.

"I gives you the two quid afore you go into the house," continued the boatswain, hastily following up the impression he had made. "I'd give 'em to you now if I'd got 'em with me. That's my confidence in you; I likes the look of you. Soldier or sailor, when there is a man's work to be done, give 'em to me afore anybody."

[Illustration: "I gives you the two quid afore you go into the house," continued the boatswain.]

The soldier seated himself again and let his bundle fall to the ground. "Go on," he said, slowly. "Write it out fair and square and sign it, and I'm your man."

The boatswain clapped him on the shoulder and produced a bundle of papers from his pocket. "There's letters there with my name and address on 'em," he said. "It's all fair, square, and above-board. When you've cast your eyes over them I'll give you the writing."

Mr. Travers took them and, re-lighting his pipe, smoked in silence, with various side glances at his companion as that enthusiast sucked his pencil and sat twisting in the agonies of composition. The document finished---after several failures had been retrieved and burnt by the careful Mr. Travers---the boat-swain heaved a sigh of relief, and handing it over to him, leaned back with a complacent air while he read it.

"Seems all right," said the soldier, folding it up and putting it in his waistcoat-pocket. "I'll be here at eleven to-night."

"Eleven it is," said the boatswain, briskly, "and, between pals---here's arf a dollar to go on with."

He patted him on the shoulder again, and with a caution to keep out of sight as much as possible till night walked slowly home. His step was light, but he carried a face in which care and exultation were strangely mingled.

By ten o'clock that night care was in the ascendant, and by eleven, when he discerned the red glow of Mr. Travers's pipe set as a beacon against a dark background of hedge, the boatswain was ready to curse his inventive powers. Mr. Travers greeted him cheerily and, honestly attributing the fact to good food and a couple of pints of beer he had had since the boatswain left him, said that he was ready for anything.

Mr. Benn grunted and led the way in silence. There was no moon, but the night was clear, and Mr. Travers, after one or two light-hearted attempts at conversation, abandoned the effort and fell to whistling softly instead.

Except for one lighted window the village slept in darkness, but the boatswain, who had been walking with the stealth of a Red Indian on the war-path, breathed more freely after they had left it behind. A renewal of his antics a little farther on apprised Mr. Travers that they were approaching their destination, and a minute or two later they came to a small inn standing just off the road. "All shut up and Mrs. Waters abed, bless her," whispered the boatswain, after walking care-fully round the house. "How do you feel?"

"I'm all right," said Mr. Travers. "I feel as if I'd been burgling all my life. How do you feel?"

"Narvous," said Mr. Benn, pausing under a small window at the rear of the house. "This is the one."

Mr. Travers stepped back a few paces and gazed up at the house. All was still. For a few moments he stood listening and then re-joined the boatswain.

"Good-bye, mate," he said, hoisting himself on to the sill. "Death or victory."

The boatswain whispered and thrust a couple of sovereigns into his hand. "Take your time; there's no hurry," he muttered. "I want to pull myself together. Frighten 'er enough, but not too much. When she screams I'll come in."

Mr. Travers slipped inside and then thrust his head out of the window. "Won't she think it funny you should be so handy?" he inquired.

"No; it's my faithful 'art," said the boat-swain, "keeping watch over her every night, that's the ticket. She won't know no better."

Mr. Travers grinned, and removing his boots passed them out to the other. "We don't want her to hear me till I'm upstairs," he whispered. "Put 'em outside, handy for me to pick up."

The boatswain obeyed, and Mr. Travers---who was by no means a good hand at darning socks---shivered as he trod lightly over a stone floor. Then, following the instructions of Mr. Benn, he made his way to the stairs and mounted noiselessly.

But for a slight stumble half-way up his progress was very creditable for an amateur. He paused and listened and, all being silent, made his way to the landing and stopped out-side a door. Despite himself his heart was beating faster than usual.

He pushed the door open slowly and started as it creaked. Nothing happening he pushed again, and standing just inside saw, by a small ewer silhouetted against the casement, that he was in a bedroom. He listened for the sound of breathing, but in vain.

"Quiet sleeper," he reflected; "or perhaps it is an empty room. Now, I wonder whether---"

The sound of an opening door made him start violently, and he stood still, scarcely breathing, with his ears on the alert. A light shone on the landing, and peeping round the door he saw a woman coming along the corridor---a younger and better-looking woman than he had expected to see. In one hand she held aloft a candle, in the other she bore a double-barrelled gun. Mr. Travers withdrew into the room and, as the light came nearer, slipped into a big cupboard by the side of the fireplace and, standing bolt upright, waited. The light came into the room.

"Must have been my fancy," said a pleasant voice.

"Bless her," smiled Mr. Travers.

His trained ear recognized the sound of cocking triggers. The next moment a heavy body bumped against the door of the cupboard and the key turned in the lock.

"Got you!" said the voice, triumphantly. "Keep still; if you try and break out I shall shoot you."

"All right," said Mr. Travers, hastily; "I won't move."

"Better not," said the voice. "Mind, I've got a gun pointing straight at you."

"Point it downwards, there's a good girl," said Mr. Travers, earnestly; "and take your finger off the trigger. If anything happened to me you'd never forgive yourself."

"It's all right so long as you don't move," said the voice; "and I'm not a girl," it added, sternly.

"Yes, you are," said the prisoner. "I saw you. I thought it was an angel at first. I saw your little bare feet and---"

A faint scream interrupted him.

"You'll catch cold," urged Mr. Travers.

"Don't you trouble about me," said the voice, tartly.

"I won't give any trouble," said Mr. Travers, who began to think it was time for the boatswain to appear on the scene. "Why don't you call for help? I'll go like a lamb."

"I don't want your advice," was the reply. "I know what to do. Now, don't you try and break out. I'm going to fire one barrel out of the window, but I've got the other one for you if you move."

"My dear girl," protested the horrified Mr. Travers, "you'll alarm the neighbourhood."

"Just what I want to do," said the voice. "Keep still, mind."

Mr. Travers hesitated. The game was up, and it was clear that in any case the stratagem of the ingenious Mr. Benn would have to be disclosed.

"Stop!" he said, earnestly. "Don't do anything rash. I'm not a burglar; I'm doing this for a friend of yours---Mr. Benn."

"What?" said an amazed voice.

"True as I stand here," asseverated Mr. Travers. "Here, here's my instructions. I'll put 'em under the door, and if you go to the back window you'll see him in the garden waiting."

He rustled the paper under the door, and it was at once snatched from his fingers. He regained an upright position and stood listening to the startled and indignant exclamations of his gaoler as she read the boatswain's permit:

"This is to give notice that I, George Benn, being of sound mind and body, have told Ned Travers to pretend to be a burglar at Mrs. Waters's. He ain't a burglar, and I shall be outside all the time. It's all above-board and ship-shape.

"(Signed) George Benn"

"Sound mind---above-board---ship-shape," repeated a dazed voice. "Where is he?"

"Out at the back," replied Mr. Travers. "If you go to the window you can see him. Now, do put something round your shoulders, there's a good girl."

There was no reply, but a board creaked. He waited for what seemed a long time, and then the board creaked again.

"Did you see him?" he inquired.

"I did," was the sharp reply. "You both ought to be ashamed of yourselves. You ought to be punished."

"There is a clothes-peg sticking into the back of my head," remarked Mr. Travers. "What are you going to do?"

There was no reply.

"What are you going to do?" repeated Mr. Travers, somewhat uneasily. "You look too nice to do anything hard; leastways, so far as I can judge through this crack."

There was a smothered exclamation, and then sounds of somebody moving hastily about the room and the swish of clothing hastily donned.

"You ought to have done it before," commented the thoughtful Mr. Travers. "It's enough to give you your death of cold."

"Mind your business," said the voice, sharply. "Now, if I let you out, will you promise to do exactly as I tell you?"

"Honour bright," said Mr. Travers, fervently.

"I'm going to give Mr. Benn a lesson he won't forget," proceeded the other, grimly. "I'm going to fire off this gun, and then run down and tell him I've killed you."

"Eh?" said the amazed Mr. Travers. "Oh, Lord!"

"H'sh! Stop that laughing," commanded the voice. "He'll hear you. Be quiet!"

The key turned in the lock, and Mr. Travers, stepping forth, clapped his hand over his mouth and endeavoured to obey. Mrs. Waters, stepping back with the gun ready, scrutinized him closely.

"Come on to the landing," said Mr. Travers, eagerly. "We don't want anybody else to hear. Fire into this."

He snatched a patchwork rug from the floor and stuck it up against the balusters. "You stay here," said Mrs. Waters. He nodded.

She pointed the gun at the hearth-rug, the walls shook with the explosion, and, with a shriek that set Mr. Travers's teeth on edge, she rushed downstairs and, drawing back the bolts of the back door, tottered outside and into the arms of the agitated boatswain.

"Oh! oh! oh!" she cried.

"What---what's the matter?" gasped the boatswain.

The widow struggled in his arms. "A burglar," she said, in a tense whisper. "But it's all right; I've killed him."

"Kill---" stuttered the other. "Kill----*Killed him?*"

Mrs. Waters nodded and released herself, "First shot," she said, with a satisfied air.

The boatswain wrung his hands. "Good heavens!" he said, moving slowly towards the door. "Poor fellow!"

"Come back," said the widow, tugging at his coat.

"I was---was going to see---whether I could do anything for 'im," quavered the boatswain. "Poor fellow!"

"You stay where you are," commanded Mrs. Waters. "I don't want any witnesses. I don't want this house to have a bad name. I'm going to keep it quiet."

"Quiet?" said the shaking boatswain. "How?"

"First thing to do," said the widow, thoughtfully, "is to get rid of the body. I'll bury him in the garden, I think. There's a very good bit of ground behind those potatoes. You'll find the spade in the tool-house."

The horrified Mr. Benn stood stock-still regarding her.

"While you're digging the grave," continued Mrs. Waters, calmly, "I'll go in and clean up the mess."

The boatswain reeled and then fumbled with trembling fingers at his collar.

Like a man in a dream he stood watching as she ran to the tool-house and returned with a spade and pick; like a man in a dream he followed her on to the garden.

"Be careful," she said, sharply; "you're treading down my potatoes."

The boatswain stopped dead and stared at her. Apparently unconscious of his gaze, she began to pace out the measurements and then, placing the tools in his hands, urged him to lose no time.

"I'll bring him down when you're gone," she said, looking towards the house.

The boatswain wiped his damp brow with the back of his hand. "How are you going to get it downstairs?" he breathed.

"Drag it," said Mrs. Waters, briefly.

"Suppose he isn't dead?" said the boat-swain, with a gleam of hope.

"Fiddlesticks!" said Mrs. Waters. "Do you think I don't know? Now, don't waste time talking; and mind you dig it deep. I'll put a few cabbages on top afterwards--I've got more than I want."

She re-entered the house and ran lightly upstairs. The candle was still alight and the gun was leaning against the bed-post; but the visitor had disappeared. Conscious of an odd feeling of disappointment, she looked round the empty room.

"Come and look at him," entreated a voice, and she turned and beheld the amused countenance of her late prisoner at the door.

"I've been watching from the back window," he said, nodding. "You're a wonder; that's what you are. Come and look at him."

Mrs. Waters followed, and leaning out of the window watched with simple pleasure the efforts of the amateur sexton. Mr. Benn was digging like one possessed, only pausing at intervals to straighten his back and to cast a fearsome glance around him. The only thing that marred her pleasure was the behaviour of Mr. Travers, who was struggling for a place with all the fervour of a citizen at the Lord Mayor's show.

"Get back," she said, in a fierce whisper. "He'll see you."

Mr. Travers with obvious reluctance obeyed, just as the victim looked up.

"Is that you, Mrs. Waters?" inquired the boatswain, fearfully.

"Yes, of course it is," snapped the widow. "Who else should it be, do you think? Go on! What are you stopping for?"

Mr. Benn's breathing as he bent to his task again was distinctly audible. The head of Mr. Travers ranged itself once more alongside the widow's. For a long time they watched in silence.

"Won't you come down here, Mrs. Waters?" called the boatswain, looking up so suddenly that Mr. Travers's head bumped painfully against the side of the window. "It's a bit creepy, all alone."

"I'm all right," said Mrs. Waters.

"I keep fancying there's something dodging behind them currant bushes," pursued the unfortunate Mr. Benn, hoarsely. "How you can stay there alone I can't think. I thought I saw something looking over your shoulder just now. Fancy if it came creeping up behind and caught hold of you! The widow gave a sudden faint scream.

"If you do that again" she said, turning fiercely on Mr. Travers.

"He put it into my head," said the culprit, humbly; "I should never have thought of such a thing by myself. I'm one of the quietest and best-behaved-----"

"Make haste, Mr. Benn," said the widow, turning to the window again; "I've got a lot to do when you've finished."

The boatswain groaned and fell to digging again, and Mrs. Waters, after watching a little while longer, gave Mr. Travers some pointed instructions about the window and went down to the garden again.

"That will do, I think," she said, stepping into the hole and regarding it critically. "Now you'd better go straight off home, and, mind, not a word to a soul about this."

She put her hand on his shoulder, and noticing with pleasure that he shuddered at her touch led the way to the gate. The boat-swain paused for a moment, as though about to speak, and then, apparently thinking better of it, bade her good-bye in a hoarse voice and walked feebly up the road. Mrs. Waters stood watching until his steps died away in the distance, and then, returning to the garden, took up the spade and stood regarding with some dismay the mountainous result of his industry. Mr. Travers, who was standing just inside the back door, joined her.

"Let me," he said, gallantly.

The day was breaking as he finished his task. The clean, sweet air and the exercise had given him an appetite to which the smell of cooking bacon and hot coffee that proceeded from the house had set a sharper edge. He took his coat from a bush and put it on. Mrs. Waters appeared at the door.

"You had better come in and have some breakfast before you go," she said, brusquely; "there's no more sleep for me now."

Mr. Travers obeyed with alacrity, and after a satisfying wash in the scullery came into the big kitchen with his face shining and took a seat at the table. The cloth was neatly laid, and Mrs. Waters, fresh and cool, with a smile upon her pleasant face, sat behind the tray. She looked at her guest curiously, Mr. Travers's spirits being somewhat higher than the state of his wardrobe appeared to justify.

"Why don't you get some settled work?" she inquired, with gentle severity, as he imparted snatches of his history between bites.

"Easier said than done," said Mr. Travers, serenely. "But don't you run away with the idea that I'm a beggar, because I'm not. I pay my way, such as it is. And, by-the-bye, I s'pose I haven't earned that two pounds Benn gave me?"

His face lengthened, and he felt uneasily in his pocket.

"I'll give them to him when I'm tired of the joke," said the widow, holding out her hand and watching him closely.

Mr. Travers passed the coins over to her. "Soft hand you've got," he said, musingly. "I don't wonder Benn was desperate. I dare say I should have done the same in his place."

Mrs. Waters bit her lip and looked out at the window; Mr. Travers resumed his breakfast.

"There's only one job that I'm really fit for, now that I'm too old for the Army," he said, confidentially, as, breakfast finished, he stood at the door ready to depart.

"Playing at burglars?" hazarded Mrs. Waters.

"Landlord of a little country public-house," said Mr. Travers, simply.

Mrs. Waters fell back and regarded him with open-eyed amazement.

"Good morning," she said, as soon as she could trust her voice.

"Good-bye," said Mr. Travers, reluctantly. "I should like to hear how old Benn takes this joke, though."

Mrs. Waters retreated into the house and stood regarding him. "If you're passing this way again and like to look in--I'll tell you," she said, after a long pause. "Good-bye."

"I'll look in in a week's time," said Mr. Travers.

He took the proffered hand and shook it warmly. "It would be the best joke of all," he said, turning away.

"What would?"

The soldier confronted her again.

"For old Benn to come round here one evening and find me landlord. Think it over."

Mrs. Waters met his gaze soberly. "I'll think it over when you have gone," she said, softly. "Now go."