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Bill's Paper Chase by W. W. Jacobs

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Bill's Paper Chase

BILL'S PAPER CHASE

Sailormen 'ave their faults, said the night watchman, frankly. I'm not denying of it. I used to 'ave myself when I was at sea, but being close with their money is a fault as can seldom be brought ag'in 'em.

I saved some money once---two golden sovereigns, owing to a 'ole in my pocket. Before I got another ship I slept two nights on a doorstep and 'ad nothing to eat, and I found them two sovereigns in the lining o' my coat when I was over two thousand miles away from the nearest pub.

I on'y knew one miser all the years I was at sea. Thomas Geary 'is name was, and we was shipmates aboard the barque *Grenada*, homeward bound from Sydney to London.

Thomas was a man that was getting into years; sixty, I think 'e was, and old enough to know better. 'E'd been saving 'ard for over forty years, and as near as we could make out 'e was worth a matter o' six 'undered pounds. He used to be fond o' talking about it, and letting us know how much better off 'e was than any of the rest of us.

We was about a month out from Sydney when old Thomas took sick. Bill Hicks said that it was owing to a ha'penny he couldn't account for; but Walter Jones, whose family was always ill, and thought 'e knew a lot about it, said that 'e knew wot it was, but 'e couldn't remember the name of it, and that when we got to London and Thomas saw a doctor, we should see as 'ow 'e was right.

Whatever it was the old man got worse and worse. The skipper came down and gave 'im some physic and looked at 'is tongue, and then 'e looked at our tongues to see wot the difference was. Then 'e left the cook in charge of 'im and went off.

The next day Thomas was worse, and it was soon clear to everybody but 'im that 'e was slipping 'is cable. He wouldn't believe it at first, though the cook told 'im, Bill Hicks told him, and Walter Jones 'ad a grandfather that went off in just the same way.

"I'm not going to die," says Thomas "How can I die and leave all that money?"

"It'll be good for your relations, Thomas," says Walter Jones.

"I ain't got any," says the old man.

"Well, your friends, then, Thomas," says Walter, soft-like.

"Ain't got any," says the old man ag'in.

"Yes, you 'ave, Thomas," says Walter, with a kind smile; "I could tell you one you've got."

Thomas shut his eyes at 'im and began to talk pitiful about 'is money and the 'ard work 'e'd 'ad saving of it. And by-and-by 'e got worse, and didn't reckernise us, but thought we was a pack o' greedy, drunken sailormen. He thought Walter Jones was a shark, and told 'im so, and, try all 'e could, Walter couldn't persuade 'im different.

He died the day arter. In the morning 'e was whimpering about 'is money ag'in, and angry with Bill when 'e reminded 'im that 'e couldn't take it with 'im, and 'e made Bill promise that 'e should be buried just as 'e was. Bill tucked him up arter that, and when 'e felt a canvas belt tied round the old man's waist 'e began to see wot 'e was driving at.

The weather was dirty that day and there was a bit o' sea running, consequently all 'ands was on deck, and a boy about sixteen wot used to 'elp the steward down aft was lookin' arter Thomas. Me and Bill just run down to give a look at the old man in time.

"I am going to take it with me, Bill," says the old man.

"That's right," says Bill.

"My mind's---easy now," says Thomas. "I gave it to Jimmy---to---to---throw overboard for me."

"Wot?" says Bill, staring.

"That's right, Bill," says the boy. "He told me to. It was a little packet o' banknotes. He gave me tuppence for doing it."

Old Thomas seemed to be listening. 'Is eyes was open, and 'e looked artful at Bill to think what a clever thing 'e'd done.

"Nobody's goin'-to spend-my money," 'e says. "Nobody's"

We drew back from 'is bunk and stood staring at 'im. Then Bill turned to the boy.

"Go and tell the skipper 'e's gone," 'e says, "and mind, for your own sake, don't tell the skipper or anybody else that you've thrown all that money overboard."

"Why not?" says Jimmy.

"Becos you'll be locked up for it," says Bill; "you'd no business to do it. You've been and broke the law. It ought to ha' been left to somebody."

Jimmy looked scared, and arter 'e was gone I turned to Bill, and I looks at 'im and I says "What's the little game, Bill?"

"*Game?*" said Bill, snorting at me. "I don't want the pore boy to get into trouble, do I? Pore little chap. You was young yourself once."

"Yes," I says; "but I'm a bit older now, Bill, and unless you tell me what your little game is, I shall tell the skipper myself, and the chaps too. Pore old Thomas told 'im to do it, so where's the boy to blame?"

"Do you think Jimmy did?" says Bill, screwing up his nose at me. "That little varmint is walking about worth six 'undered quid. Now you keep your mouth shut and I'll make it worth your while."

Then I see Bill's game. "All right, I'll keep quiet for the sake of my half," I says, looking at 'im.

I thought he'd ha' choked, and the langwidge 'e see fit to use was a'most as much as I could answer.

"Very well, then," 'e says, at last, "halves it is. It ain't robbery becous it belongs to nobody, and it ain't the boy's becous 'e was told to throw it overboard."

They buried pore old Thomas next morning, and arter it was all over Bill put 'is 'and on the boy's shoulder as they walked for'ard and 'e says, "Poor old Thomas 'as gone to look for 'is money," he says; "wonder whether 'e'll find it! Was it a big bundle, Jimmy?"

"No," says the boy, shaking 'is 'ead. "They was six 'undered pound notes and two sovereigns, and I wrapped the sovereigns up in the notes to make 'em sink. Fancy throwing money away like that, Bill: seems a sin, don't it?"

Bill didn't answer 'im, and that afternoon the other chaps below being asleep we searched 'is bunk through and through without any luck, and at last Bill sat down and swore 'e must ha' got it about 'im.

We waited till night, and when everybody was snoring 'ard we went over to the boy's bunk and went all through 'is pockets and felt the linings, and then we went back to our side and Bill said wot 'e thought about Jimmy in whispers.

"He must ha' got it tied round 'is waist next to 'is skin, like Thomas 'ad," I says.

We stood there in the dark whispering, and then Bill couldn't stand it any longer, and 'e went over on tiptoe to the bunk ag'in. He was tremblin' with excitement and I wasn't much better, when all of a sudden the cook sat up in 'is bunk with a dreadful laughing scream and called out that somebody was ticklin' 'im.

I got into my bunk and Bill got into 'is, and we lay there listening while the cook, who was a terrible ticklish man, leaned out of 'is bunk and said wot 'e'd do if it 'appened ag'in.

"Go to sleep," says Walter Jones; "you're dreamin'. Who d'you think would want to tickle you?"

"I tell you," says the cook, "somebody come over and tickled me with a 'and the size of a leg o' mutton. I feel creepy all over."

Bill gave it up for that night, but the next day 'e pretended to think Jimmy was gettin' fat an' 'e caught 'old of 'im and prodded 'im all over. He thought 'e felt something round 'is waist, but 'e couldn't be sure, and Jimmy made such a noise that the other chaps interfered and told Bill to leave 'im alone. For a whole week we tried to find that money, and couldn't, and Bill said it was a suspicious thing that Jimmy kept aft a good deal more than 'e used to, and 'e got an idea that the boy might ha' 'idden it somewhere there. At the end of that time, 'owever, owing to our being short-'anded, Jimmy was sent for'ard to work as ordinary seaman, and it began to be quite noticeable the way 'e avoided Bill.

At last one day we got 'im alone down the fo'c'sle, and Bill put 'is arm round 'im and got im on the locker and asked 'im straight out where the money was.

"Why, I chucked it overboard," he says. "I told you so afore. What a memory you've got, Bill!"

Bill picked 'im up and laid 'im on the locker, and we searched 'im thoroughly. We even took 'is boots off, and then we 'ad another look in 'is bunk while 'e was putting 'em on ag'in.

"If you're innercent," says Bill, "why don't you call out?---eh?"

"Because you told me not to say anything about it, Bill," says the boy. "But I will next time. Loud, I will."

"Look 'ere," says Bill, "you tell us where it is, and the three of us'll go shares in it. That'll be two 'undered pounds each, and we'll tell you 'ow to get yours changed without getting caught. We're cleverer than you are, you know."

"I know that, Bill," says the boy; "but it's no good me telling you lies. I chucked it overboard."

"Very good, then," says Bill, getting up. "I'm going to tell the skipper."

"Tell 'im," says Jimmy. "I don't care."

"Then you'll be searched arter you've stepped ashore," says Bill, "and you won't be allowed on the ship ag'in. You'll lose it all by being greedy, whereas if you go shares with us you'll 'ave two 'undered pounds."

I could see as 'ow the boy 'adn't thought o' that, and try as 'e would 'e couldn't 'ide 'is feelin's. He called Bill a red-nosed shark, and 'e called me somethin' I've forgotten now.

"Think it over," says Bill; "mind, you'll be collared as soon as you've left the gangway and searched by the police."

"And will they tickle the cook too, I wonder?" says Jimmy, savagely.

"And if they find it you'll go to prison," says Bill, giving 'im a clump o' the side o' the 'ead, "and you won't like that, I can tell you."

"Why, ain't it nice, Bill?" says Jimmy, holding 'is ear.

Bill looked at 'im and then 'e steps to the ladder. "I'm not going to talk to you any more, my lad," 'e says. "I'm going to tell the skipper."

He went up slowly, and just as 'e reached the deck Jimmy started up and called 'im. Bill pretended not to 'ear, and the boy ran up on deck and follered 'im; and arter a little while they both came down again together.

"Did you wish to speak to me, my lad?" says Bill, 'olding 'is 'ead up.

"Yes," says the boy, fiddling with 'is fingers; "if you keep your ugly mouth shut, we'll go shares."

"Ho!" says Bill, "I thought you throwed it overboard!"

"I thought so, too, Bill," says Jimmy, very softly, "and when I came below ag'in I found it in my trousers pocket."

"Where is it now?" says Bill.

"Never mind where it is," says the boy; "you couldn't get it if I was to tell you. It'll take me all my time to do it myself."

"Where is it?" says Bill, ag'in. "I'm goin' to take care of it. I won't trust you."

"And I can't trust you," says Jimmy.

"If you don't tell me where it is this minute," says Bill, moving to the ladder ag'in, "I'm off to tell the skipper. I want it in my 'ands, or at any rate my share of it. Why not share it out now?"

"Because I 'aven't got it," says Jimmy, stamping 'is foot, "that's why, and it's all your silly fault. Arter you came pawing through my pockets when you thought I was asleep I got frightened and 'id it."

"Where?" says Bill.

"In the second mate's mattress," says Jimmy. "I was tidying up down aft and I found a 'ole in the underneath side of 'is mattress and I shoved it in there, and poked it in with a bit o' stick."

"And 'ow are you going to get it?" says Bill, scratching 'is 'ead.

"That's wot I don't know, seeing that I'm not allowed aft now," says Jimmy. "One of us'll 'ave to make a dash for it when we get to London. And mind if there's any 'ankypanky on your part, Bill, I'll give the show away myself."

The cook came down just then and we 'ad to leave off talking, and I could see that Bill was so pleased at finding that the money 'adn't been thrown overboard that 'e was losing sight o' the difficulty o' getting at it. In a day or two, 'owever, 'e see it as plain as me and Jimmy did, and, as time went by, he got desprit, and frightened us both by 'anging about aft every chance 'e got.

The companion-way faced the wheel, and there was about as much chance o' getting down there without being seen as there would be o' taking a man's false teeth out of 'is mouth without 'is knowing it. Jimmy went down one day while Bill was at the wheel to look for 'is knife, wot 'e thought 'e'd left down there, and 'ed 'ardly got down afore Bill saw 'im come up ag'in, 'olding on to the top of a mop which the steward was using.

We couldn't figure it out nohow, and to think o' the second mate, a little man with a large fam'ly, who never 'ad a penny in 'is pocket, sleeping every night on a six 'undered pound mattress, sent us pretty near crazy. We used to talk it over whenever we got a chance, and Bill and Jimmy could scarcely be civil to each other. The boy said it was Bill's fault, and 'e said it was the boy's.

"The on'y thing I can see," says the boy, one day, "is for Bill to 'ave a touch of sunstroke as 'e's leaving the wheel one day, tumble 'ead-first down the companion-way, and injure 'isself so severely that 'e can't be moved. Then they'll put 'im in a cabin down aft, and p'raps I'll 'ave to go and nurse 'im. Anyway, he'll be down there."

"It's a very good idea, Bill," I says.

"Ho," says Bill, looking at me as if 'e would eat me. "Why don't you do it, then?"

"I'd sooner you did it, Bill," says the boy; "still, I don't mind which it is. Why not toss up for it?"

"Get away," says Bill. "Get away afore I do something you won't like, you blood-thirsty little murderer."

"I've got a plan myself," he says, in a low voice, after the boy 'ad 'opped off, "and if I can't think of nothing better I'll try it, and mind, not a word to the boy."

He didn't think o' nothing better, and one night just as we was making the Channel 'e tried 'is plan. He was in the second mate's watch, and by-and-by 'e leans over the wheel and says to 'im in a low voice, "This is my last v'y'ge, sir."

"Oh," says the second mate, who was a man as didn't mind talking to a man before the mast. "How's that?"

"I've got a berth ashore, sir," says Bill, "and I wanted to ask a favour, sir."

The second mate growled and walked off a pace or two.

"I've never been so 'appy as I've been on this ship," says Bill; "none of us 'ave. We was saying so the other night, and everybody agreed as it was owing to you, sir, and your kindness to all of us."

The second mate coughed, but Bill could see as 'e was a bit pleased.

"The feeling came over me," says Bill, "that when I leave the sea for good I'd like to 'ave something o' yours to remember you by, sir. And it seemed to me that if I 'ad your---mattress I should think of you ev'ry night o' my life."

"My wot?" says the second mate, staring at 'im. "Your mattress, sir," says Bill. "If I might make so bold as to offer a pound for it, sir. I want something wot's been used by you, and I've got a fancy for that as a keepsake." The second mate shook 'is 'ead. "I'm sorry, Bill," 'e says, gently, "but I couldn't let it go at that."

"I'd sooner pay thirty shillin's than not 'ave it, sir," says Bill, 'umbly.

"I gave a lot of money for that mattress," says the mate, ag'in. "I forgit 'ow much, but a lot. You don't know 'ow valuable that mattress is."

"I know it's a good one, sir, else you wouldn't 'ave it," says Bill. "Would a couple o' pounds buy it, sir?"

The second mate hum'd and ha'd, but Bill was afeard to go any 'igher. So far as 'e could make out from Jimmy, the mattress was worth about eighteen pence---to anybody who wasn't pertiklar.

"I've slept on that mattress for years," says the second mate, looking at 'im from the corner of 'is eye. "I don't believe I could sleep on another. Still, to oblige you, Bill, you shall 'ave it at that if you don't want it till we go ashore?"

"Thankee, sir," says Bill, 'ardly able to keep from dancing, "and I'll 'and over the two pounds when we're paid off. I shall keep it all my life, sir, in memory of you and your kindness."

"And mind you keep quiet about it," says the second mate, who didn't want the skipper to know wot 'e'd been doing, "because I don't want to be bothered by other men wanting to buy things as keepsakes."

Bill promised 'im like a shot, and when 'e told me about it 'e was nearly crying with joy.

"And mind," 'e says, "I've bought that mattress, bought it as it stands, and it's got nothing to do with Jimmy. We'll each pay a pound and halve wot's in it."

He persuaded me at last, but that boy watched us like a cat watching a couple of canaries, and I could see we should 'ave all we could do to deceive 'im. He seemed more suspicious o' Bill than me, and 'e kep' worrying us nearly every day to know what we were going to do.

We beat about in the channel with a strong 'ead-wind for four days, and then a tug picked us up and towed us to London.

The excitement of that last little bit was 'orrible. Fust of all we 'ad got to get the mattress, and then in some way we 'ad got to get rid o' Jimmy. Bill's idea was for me to take 'im ashore with me and tell 'im that Bill would join us arterwards,

and then lose 'im; but I said that till I'd got my share I couldn't bear to lose sight o' Bill's honest face for 'alf a second.

And, besides, Jimmy wouldn't 'ave gone.

All the way up the river 'e stuck to Bill, and kept asking 'im wot we were to do. 'E was 'alf crying, and so excited that Bill was afraid the other chaps would notice it.

We got to our berth in the East India Docks at last, and arter we were made fast we went below to 'ave a wash and change into our shoregoing togs. Jimmy watched us all the time, and then 'e comes up to Bill biting 'is nails, and says:

"How's it to be done, Bill?"

"Hang about arter the rest 'ave gone ashore, and trust to luck," says Bill, looking at me. "We'll see 'ow the land lays when we draw our advance."

We went down aft to draw ten shillings each to go ashore with. Bill and me got ours fust, and then the second mate who 'ad tipped 'im the wink followed us out unconcerned-like and 'anded Bill the mattress rolled up in a sack.

"'Ere you are, Bill," 'e says.

"Much obliged, sir," says Bill, and 'is 'ands trembled so as 'e could 'ardly 'old it, and 'e made to go off afore Jimmy come on deck.

Then that fool of a mate kept us there while 'e made a little speech. Twice Bill made to go off, but 'e put 'is 'and on 'is arm and kept 'im there while 'e told 'im 'ow he'd always tried to be liked by the men, and 'ad generally succeeded, and in the middle of it up popped Master Jimmy.

He gave a start as he saw the bag, and 'is eyes opened wide, and then as we walked forward 'e put 'is arm through Bill's and called 'im all the names 'e could think of.

"You'd steal the milk out of a cat's saucer," 'e says; "but mind, you don't leave this ship till I've got my share."

"I meant it for a pleasant surprise for you, Jimmy," says Bill, trying to smile.

"I don't like your surprises, Bill, so I don't deceive you," says the boy. "Where are you going to open it?"

"I was thinking of opening it in my bunk," says Bill. "The perlice might want to examine it if we took it through the dock. Come on, Jimmy, old man."

"Yes; all right," says the boy, nodding 'is 'ead at 'im. "I'll stay up 'ere. You might forget yourself, Bill, if I trusted myself down there with you alone. You can throw my share up to me, and then you'll leave the ship afore I do. See?"

"Go to blazes," says Bill; and then, seeing that the last chance 'ad gone, we went below, and 'e chucked the bundle in 'is bunk. There was only one chap down there, and arter spending best part o' ten minutes doing 'is hair 'e nodded to us and went off.

Half a minute later Bill cut open the mattress and began to search through the stuffing, while I struck matches and watched 'im. It wasn't a big mattress and there wasn't much stuffing, but we couldn't seem to see that money. Bill went

all over it ag'in and ag'in, and then 'e stood up and looked at me and caught 'is breath painful.

"Do you think the mate found it?" 'e says, in a 'usky voice.

We went through it ag'in, and then Bill went half-way up the fo'c's'le ladder and called softly for Jimmy. He called three times, and then, with a sinking sensation in 'is stummick, 'e went up on deck and I follered 'im. The boy was nowhere to be seen. All we saw was the ship's cat 'aving a wash and brush-up afore going ashore, and the skipper standing aft talking to the owner.

We never saw that boy ag'in. He never turned up for 'is box, and 'e didn't show up to draw 'is pay. Everybody else was there, of course, and arter I'd got mine and come outside I see pore Bill with 'is back up ag'in a wall, staring 'ard at the second mate, who was looking at 'im with a kind smile, and asking 'im 'ow he'd slept. The last thing I saw of Bill, the pore chap 'ad got 'is 'ands in 'is trousers pockets, and was trying 'is hardest to smile back.