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Admiral Peters by W. W. Jacobs

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Admiral Peters

ADMIRAL PETERS

Mr. George Burton, naval pensioner, sat at the door of his lodgings gazing in placid content at the sea. It was early summer, and the air was heavy with the scent of flowers; Mr. Burton's pipe was cold and empty, and his pouch upstairs. He shook his head gently as he realised this, and, yielding to the drowsy quiet of his surroundings, laid aside the useless pipe and fell into a doze.

[Illustration: "Sat at the door of his lodgings gazing in placid content at the sea."]

He was awakened half an hour later by the sound of footsteps. A tall, strongly built man was approaching from the direction of the town, and Mr. Burton, as he gazed at him sleepily, began to wonder where he had seen him before. Even when the stranger stopped and stood smiling down at him his memory proved unequal to the occasion, and he sat staring at the handsome, shaven face, with its little fringe of grey whisker, waiting for enlightenment.

"George, my buck," said the stranger, giving him a hearty slap on the shoulder, "how goes it?" "D---- *Bless* my eyes, I mean," said Mr. Burton, correcting himself, "if it ain't Joe Stiles. I didn't know you without your beard."

"That's me," said the other. "It's quite by accident I heard where you were living, George; I offered to go and sling my hammock with old Dingle for a week or two, and he told me. Nice quiet little place, Seacombe. Ah, you were lucky to get your pension, George."

"I deserved it," said Mr. Burton, sharply, as he fancied he detected something ambiguous in his friend's remark.

"Of course you did," said Mr. Stiles; "so did I, but I didn't get it. Well, it's a poor heart that never rejoices. What about that drink you were speaking of, George?"

"I hardly ever touch anything now," replied his friend.

"I was thinking about myself," said Mr. Stiles. "I can't bear the stuff, but the doctor says I must have it. You know what doctors are, George!"

Mr. Burton did not deign to reply, but led the way indoors.

"Very comfortable quarters, George," remarked Mr. Stiles, gazing round the room approvingly; "ship-shape and tidy. I'm glad I met old Dingle. Why, I might never ha' seen you again; and us such pals, too."

His host grunted, and from the back of a small cupboard, produced a bottle of whisky and a glass, and set them on the table. After a momentary hesitation he found another glass.

"Our noble selves," said Mr. Stiles, with a tinge of reproach in his tones, "and may we never forget old friendships."

Mr. Burton drank the toast. "I hardly know what it's like now, Joe," he said, slowly. "You wouldn't believe how soon you can lose the taste for it."

Mr. Stiles said he would take his word for it. "You've got some nice little public-houses about here, too," he remarked. "There's one I passed called the Cock and Flowerpot; nice cosy little place it would be to spend the evening in."

"I never go there," said Mr. Burton, hastily. "I---a friend o' mine here doesn't approve o' public-'ouses."

"What's the matter with him?" inquired his friend, anxiously.

"It's---it's a 'er," said Mr. Burton, in some confusion.

Mr. Stiles threw himself back in his chair and eyed him with amazement. Then, recovering his presence of mind, he reached out his hand for the bottle.

"We'll drink her health," he said, in a deep voice. "What's her name?"

"Mrs. Dutton," was the reply.

Mr. Stiles, with one hand on his heart, toasted her feelingly; then, filling up again, he drank to the "happy couple."

"She's very strict about drink," said Mr. Burton, eyeing these proceedings with some severity.

"Any---dibs?" inquired Mr. Stiles, slapping a pocket which failed to ring in response.

"She's comfortable," replied the other, awkwardly. "Got a little stationer's shop in the town; steady, old-fashioned business. She's chapel, and very strict."

"Just what you want," remarked Mr. Stiles, placing his glass on the table. "What d'ye say to a stroll?"

Mr. Burton assented, and, having replaced the black bottle in the cupboard, led the way along the cliffs toward the town some half-mile distant, Mr. Stiles beguiling the way by narrating his adventures since they had last met. A certain swagger and richness of deportment were explained by his statement that he had been on the stage.

"Only walking on," he said, with a shake of his head. "The only speaking part I ever had was a cough. You ought to ha' heard that cough, George!"

Mr. Burton politely voiced his regrets and watched him anxiously. Mr. Stiles, shaking his head over a somewhat unsuccessful career, was making a bee-line for the Cock and Flowerpot.

"Just for a small soda," he explained, and, once inside, changed his mind and had whisky instead. Mr. Burton, sacrificing principle to friendship, had one with him. The bar more than fulfilled Mr. Stiles's ideas as to its cosiness, and within the space of ten minutes he was on excellent terms with the regular clients. Into the little, old-world bar, with its loud-ticking clock, its Windsor-chairs, and its cracked jug full of roses, he brought a breath of the bustle of the great city and tales of the great cities beyond the seas. Refreshment was forced upon him, and Mr. Burton, pleased at his friend's success, shared mildly in his reception. It was nine o'clock before they departed, and then they only left to please the landlord.

"Nice lot o' chaps," said Mr. Stiles, as he stumbled out into the sweet, cool air. "Catch hold---o' my---arm, George. Brace me---up a bit."

Mr. Burton complied, and his friend, reassured as to his footing, burst into song. In a stentorian voice he sang the latest song from comic opera, and then with an adjuration to Mr. Burton to see what he was about, and not to let him trip, he began, in a lumbering fashion, to dance.

Mr. Burton, still propping him up, trod a measure with fewer steps, and cast uneasy glances up the lonely road. On their left the sea broke quietly on the beach below; on their right were one or two scattered cottages, at the doors of which an occasional figure appeared to gaze in mute astonishment at the proceedings.

"Dance, George," said Mr. Stiles, who found his friend rather an encumbrance.

"Hs'h! Stop!" cried the frantic Mr. Burton, as he caught sight of a woman's figure bidding farewell in a lighted doorway.

Mr. Stiles replied with a stentorian roar, and Mr. Burton, clinging despairingly to his jiggling friend lest a worse thing should happen, cast an imploring glance at Mrs. Dutton as they danced by. The evening was still light enough for him to see her face, and he piloted the corybantic Mr. Stiles the rest of the way home in a mood which accorded but ill with his steps.

His manner at breakfast next morning was so offensive that Mr. Stiles, who had risen fresh as a daisy and been out to inhale the air on the cliffs, was somewhat offended.

"You go down and see her," he said, anxiously. "Don't lose a moment; and explain to her that it was the sea-air acting on an old sunstroke."

"She ain't a fool," said Mr. Burton, gloomily.

He finished his breakfast in silence, and, leaving the repentant Mr. Stiles sitting in the doorway with a pipe, went down to the widow's to make the best explanation he could think of on the way. Mrs. Dutton's fresh-coloured face changed as he entered the shop, and her still good eyes regarded him with scornful interrogation.

"I---saw you last night," began Mr. Burton, timidly.

"I saw you, too," said Mrs. Dutton. "I couldn't believe my eyesight at first."

"It was an old shipmate of mine," said Mr. Burton. "He hadn't seen me for years, and I suppose the sight of me upset 'im."

"I dare say," replied the widow; "that and the Cock and Flowerpot, too. I heard about it."

"He would go," said the unfortunate.

"You needn't have gone," was the reply.

"I 'ad to," said Mr. Burton, with a gulp; "he---he's an old officer o' mine, and it wouldn't ha' been discipline for me to refuse."

"Officer?" repeated Mrs. Dutton.

"My old admiral," said Mr. Burton, with a gulp that nearly choked him. "You've heard me speak of Admiral Peters?"

"Admiral?" gasped the astonished widow.

"What, a-carrying on like that?"

"He's a reg'lar old sea-dog," said Mr. Burton. "He's staying with me, but of course 'e don't want it known who he is. I couldn't refuse to 'ave a drink with 'im. I was under orders, so to speak."

"No, I suppose not," said Mrs. Dutton, softening. "Fancy him staying with you!"

"He just run down for the night, but I expect he'll be going 'ome in an hour or two," said Mr. Burton, who saw an excellent reason now for hastening his guest's departure.

Mrs. Dutton's face fell. "Dear me," she murmured, "I should have liked to have seen him; you have told me so much about him. If he doesn't go quite so soon, and you would like to bring him here when you come to-night, I'm sure I should be very pleased."

"I'll mention it to 'im," said Mr. Burton, marvelling at the change in her manner.

"Didn't you say once that he was uncle to Lord Buckfast?" inquired Mrs. Dutton, casually.

"Yes," said Mr. Burton, with unnecessary doggedness; "I did."

"The idea of an admiral staying with you!" said Mrs. Dutton.

"Reg'lar old sea-dog," said Mr. Burton again; "and, besides, he don't want it known. It's a secret between us three, Mrs. Dutton."

"To be sure," said the widow. "You can tell the admiral that I shall not mention it to a soul," she added, mincingly.

Mr. Burton thanked her and withdrew, lest Mr. Stiles should follow him up before apprised of his sudden promotion. He found that gentleman, however, still sitting at the front door, smoking serenely.

"I'll stay with you for a week or two," said Mr. Stiles, briskly, as soon as the other had told his story. "It'll do you a world o' good to be seen on friendly terms with an admiral, and I'll put in a good word for you."

Mr. Burton shook his head. "No, she might find out," he said, slowly. "I think that the best thing is for you to go home after dinner, Joe, and just give 'er a look in on the way, p'r'aps. You could say a lot o' things about me in 'arf an hour."

"No, George," said Mr. Stiles, beaming on him kindly; "when I put my hand to the plough I don't draw back. It's a good speaking part, too, an admiral's. I wonder whether I might use old Peters's language."

"Certainly not," said Mr. Burton, in alarm.

"You don't know how particular she is."

Mr. Stiles sighed, and said that he would do the best he could without it. He spent most of the day on the beach smoking, and when evening came shaved himself with extreme care and brushed his serge suit with great perseverance in preparation for his visit.

Mr. Burton performed the ceremony of introduction with some awkwardness; Mr. Stiles was affecting a stateliness of manner which was not without distinction; and Mrs. Dutton, in a black silk dress and the cameo brooch which had belonged to her mother, was no less important. Mr. Burton had an odd feeling of inferiority.

[Illustration: "Mr. Stiles was affecting a stateliness of manner which was not without distinction."]

"It's a very small place to ask you to, Admiral Peters," said the widow, offering him a chair.

"It's comfortable, ma'am," said Mr. Stiles, looking round approvingly. "Ah, you should see some of the palaces I've been in abroad; all show and no comfort. Not a decent chair in the place. And, as for the antimacassars-----"

"Are you making a long stay, Admiral Peters?" inquired the delighted widow.

"It depends," was the reply. "My intention was just to pay a flying visit to my honest old friend Burton here---best man in my squadron---but he is so hospitable, he's been pressing me to stay for a few weeks."

"But the admiral says he must get back to-morrow morning," interposed Mr. Burton, firmly.

"Unless I have a letter at breakfast-time, Burton," said Mr. Stiles, serenely.

Mr. Burton favoured him with a mutinous scowl.

"Oh, I do hope you will," said Mrs. Dutton.

"I have a feeling that I shall," said Mr. Stiles, crossing glances with his friend. "The only thing is my people; they want me to join them at Lord Tufton's place."

Mrs. Dutton trembled with delight at being in the company of a man with such friends. "What a change shore-life must be to you after the perils of the sea!" she murmured.

"Ah!" said Mr. Stiles. "True! True!"

"The dreadful fighting," said Mrs. Dutton, closing her eyes and shuddering.

"You get used to it," said the hero, simply. "Hottest time I had I think was at the bombardment of Alexandria. I stood alone. All the men who hadn't been shot down had fled, and the shells were bursting round me like---like fireworks."

The widow clasped her hands and shuddered again.

"I was standing just behind 'im, waiting any orders he might give," said Mr. Burton.

"Were you?" said Mr. Stiles, sharply---"were you? I don't remember it, Burton."

"Why," said Mr. Burton, with a faint laugh, "I was just behind you, sir. If you remember, sir, I said to you that it was pretty hot work."

Mr. Stiles affected to consider. "No, Burton," he said, bluffly---"no; so far as my memory goes I was the only man there."

"A bit of a shell knocked my cap off, sir," persisted Mr. Burton, making laudable efforts to keep his temper.

"That'll do, my man," said the other, sharply; "not another word. You forget yourself."

He turned to the widow and began to chat about "his people" again to divert her attention from Mr. Burton, who seemed likely to cause unpleasantness by either bursting a blood-vessel or falling into a fit.

"My people have heard of Burton," he said, with a slight glance to see how that injured gentleman was progressing. "He has often shared my dangers. We have been in many tight places together. Do you remember those two nights when we were hidden in the chimney at the palace of the Sultan of Zanzibar, Burton?"

"I should think I do," said Mr. Burton, recovering somewhat.

"Stuck so tight we could hardly breathe," continued the other.

"I shall never forget it as long as I live," said Mr. Burton, who thought that the other was trying to make amends for his recent indiscretion.

"Oh, do tell me about it, Admiral Peters," cried Mrs. Dutton.

"Surely Burton has told you that?" said Mr. Stiles.

"Never breathed a word of it," said the widow, gazing somewhat reproachfully at the discomfited Mr. Burton.

"Well, tell it now, Burton," said Mr. Stiles.

"You tell it better than I do, sir," said the other.

"No, no," said Mr. Stiles, whose powers of invention were not always to be relied upon. "You tell it; it's your story."

The widow looked from one to the other. "It's your story, sir," said Mr. Burton.

"No, I won't tell it," said Mr. Stiles. "It wouldn't be fair to you, Burton. I'd forgotten that when I spoke. Of course, you were young at the time, still-----"

"I done nothing that I'm ashamed of, sir," said Mr. Burton, trembling with passion.

"I think it's very hard if I'm not to hear it," said Mrs. Dutton, with her most fascinating air.

Mr. Stiles gave her a significant glance, and screwing up his lips nodded in the direction of Mr. Burton.

"At any rate, you were in the chimney with me, sir," said that unfortunate.

"Ah!" said the other, severely. "But what was I there for, my man?"

Mr. Burton could not tell him; he could only stare at him in a frenzy of passion and dismay.

"What were you there for, Admiral Peters?" inquired Mrs. Dutton.

"I was there, ma'am," said the unspeakable Mr. Stiles, slowly---"I was there to save the life of Burton. I never deserted my men---never. Whatever scrapes they got into I always did my best to get them out. News was brought to me that Burton was suffocating in the chimney of the Sultan's favourite wife, and I----"

"Sultan's favourite wife!" gasped Mrs. Dutton, staring hard at Mr. Burton, who had collapsed in his chair and was regarding the ingenious Mr. Stiles with open-mouthed stupefaction. "Good gracious! I---I never heard of such a thing. I am surprised!"

"So am I," said Mr. Burton, thickly. "I---I----"

"How did you escape, Admiral Peters?" inquired the widow, turning from the flighty Burton in indignation.

Mr. Stiles shook his head. "To tell you that would be to bring the French Consul into it," he said, gently. "I oughtn't to have mentioned the subject at all. Burton had the good sense not to."

The widow murmured acquiescence, and stole a look at the prosaic figure of the latter gentleman which was full of scornful curiosity. With some diffidence she invited the admiral to stay to supper, and was obviously delighted when he accepted.

In the character of admiral Mr. Stiles enjoyed himself amazingly, his one regret being that no discriminating theatrical manager was present to witness his performance. His dignity increased as the evening wore on, and from good-natured patronage of the unfortunate Burton he progressed gradually until he was shouting at him. Once, when he had occasion to ask Mr. Burton if he intended to contradict him, his appearance was so terrible that his hostess turned pale and trembled with excitement.

Mr. Burton adopted the air for his own use as soon as they were clear of Mrs. Dutton's doorstep, and in good round terms demanded of Mr. Stiles what he meant by it.

"It was a difficult part to play, George," responded his friend. "We ought to have rehearsed it a bit. I did the best I could."

"Best you could?" stormed Mr. Burton. "Telling lies and ordering me about?"

"I had to play the part without any preparation, George," said the other, firmly. "You got yourself into the difficulty by saying that I was the admiral in the first place. I'll do better next time we go."

Mr. Burton, with a nasty scowl, said that there was not going to be any next time, but Mr. Stiles smiled as one having superior information. Deaf first to hints and then to requests to seek his pleasure elsewhere, he stayed on, and Mr. Burton was soon brought to realise the difficulties which beset the path of the untruthful.

The very next visit introduced a fresh complication, it being evident to the most indifferent spectator that Mr. Stiles and the widow were getting on very friendly terms. Glances of unmistakable tenderness passed between them, and on the occasion of the third visit Mr. Burton sat an amazed and scandalised spectator of a flirtation of the most pronounced description. A despairing attempt on his part to lead the conversation into safer and, to his mind, more becoming channels only increased his discomfiture. Neither of them took any notice of it, and a minute later Mr. Stiles called the widow a "saucy little baggage," and said that she reminded him of the Duchess of Marford.

[Illustration: "Mr. Stiles called the widow a 'saucy little baggage.'"]

"I used to think she was the most charming woman in England," he said, meaningly.

Mrs. Dutton simpered and looked down; Mr. Stiles moved his chair a little closer to her, and then glanced thoughtfully at his friend.

"Burton," he said.

"Sir," snapped the other.

"Run back and fetch my pipe for me," said Mr. Stiles. "I left it on the mantelpiece."

Mr. Burton hesitated, and, the widow happening to look away, shook his fist at his superior officer.

"Look sharp," said Mr. Stiles, in a peremptory voice.

"I'm very sorry, sir," said Mr. Burton, whose wits were being sharpened by misfortune, "but I broke it."

"Broke it?" repeated the other.

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Burton. "I knocked it on the floor and trod on it by accident; smashed it to powder."

Mr. Stiles rated him roundly for his carelessness, and asked him whether he knew that it was a present from the Italian Ambassador.

"Burton was always a clumsy man," he said, turning to the widow. "He had the name for it when he was on the *Destruction* with me; 'Bungling Burton' they called him."

He divided the rest of the evening between flirting and recounting various anecdotes of Mr. Burton, none of which were at all flattering either to his intelligence or to his sobriety, and the victim, after one or two futile attempts at contradiction, sat in helpless wrath as he saw the infatuation of the widow. They were barely clear of the house before his pent-up emotions fell in an avalanche of words on the faithless Mr. Stiles.

"I can't help being good-looking," said the latter, with a smirk.

"Your good looks wouldn't hurt anybody," said Mr. Burton, in a grating voice; "it's the admiral business that fetches her. It's turned 'er head."

Mr. Stiles smiled. "She'll say 'snap' to my 'snip' any time," he remarked. "And remember, George, there'll always be a knife and fork laid for you when you like to come."

"I dessay," retorted Mr. Burton, with a dreadful sneer. "Only as it happens I'm going to tell 'er the truth about you first thing to-morrow morning. If I can't have 'er you sha'n't."

"That'll spoil your chance, too," said Mr. Stiles. "She'd never forgive you for fooling her like that. It seems a pity neither of us should get her."

"You're a sarpent," exclaimed Mr. Burton, savagely---"a sarpent that I've warmed in my bosom and-----"

"There's no call to be indelicate, George," said Mr. Stiles, reprovingly, as he paused at the door of the house. "Let's sit down and talk it over quietly."

Mr. Burton followed him into the room and, taking a chair, waited.

"It's evident she's struck with me," said Mr. Stiles, slowly; "it's also evident that if you tell her the truth it might spoil my chances. I don't say it would, but it might. That being so, I'm agreeable to going back without seeing her again by the six-forty train to-morrow morning if it's made worth my while."

"Made worth your while?" repeated the other.

"Certainly," said the unblushing Mr. Stiles. "She's not a bad-looking woman---for her age---and it's a snug little business."

Mr. Burton, suppressing his choler, affected to ponder. "If 'arf a sovereign---" he said, at last.

"Half a fiddlestick!" said the other, impatiently. "I want ten pounds. You've just drawn your pension, and, besides, you've been a saving man all your life."

"Ten pounds?" gasped the other. "D'ye think I've got a gold-mine in the back garden?"

Mr. Stiles leaned back in his chair and crossed his feet. "I don't go for a penny less," he said, firmly. "Ten pounds and my ticket back. If you call me any more o' those names I'll make it twelve."

"And what am I to explain to Mrs. Dutton?" demanded Mr. Burton, after a quarter of an hour's altercation.

"Anything you like," said his generous friend. "Tell her I'm engaged to my cousin, and our marriage keeps being put off and off on account of my eccentric behaviour. And you can say that that was caused by a splinter of a shell striking my head. Tell any lies you like; I shall never turn up again to contradict them. If she tries to find out things about the admiral, remind her that she promised to keep his visit here secret."

For over an hour Mr. Burton sat weighing the advantages and disadvantages of this proposal, and then---Mr. Stiles refusing to seal the bargain without---shook hands upon it and went off to bed in a state of mind hovering between homicide and lunacy.

He was up in good time next morning, and, returning the shortest possible answers to the remarks of Mr. Stiles, who was in excellent feather, went with him to the railway station to be certain of his departure.

It was a delightful morning, cool and bright, and, despite his misfortunes. Mr. Burton's spirits began to rise as he thought of his approaching deliverance. Gloom again overtook him at the booking-office, where the unconscionable Mr. Stiles insisted firmly upon a first-class ticket.

"Who ever heard of an admiral riding third?" he demanded, indignantly.

"But they don't know you're an admiral," urged Mr. Burton, trying to humour him.

"No; but I feel like one," said Mr. Stiles, slapping his pocket. "I've always felt curious to see what it feels like travelling first-class; besides, you can tell Mrs. Dutton."

"I could tell 'er that in any case," returned Mr. Burton.

Mr. Stiles looked shocked, and, time pressing, Mr. Burton, breathing so hard that it impeded his utterance, purchased a first-class ticket and conducted him to the carriage. Mr. Stiles took a seat by the window and lolling back put his foot up on the cushions opposite. A large bell rang and the carriage-doors were slammed.

"Good-bye, George," said the traveller, putting his head to the window. "I've enjoyed my visit very much."

"Good riddance," said Mr. Burton, savagely.

[Illustration: "'Good riddance,' said Mr. Burton, savagely."]

Mr. Stiles shook his head. "I'm letting you off easy," he said, slowly. "If it hadn't ha' been for one little thing I'd have had the widow myself."

"What little thing?" demanded the other, as the train began to glide slowly out.

"My wife," said Mr. Stiles, as a huge smile spread slowly over his face. "Good-bye, George, and don't forget to give my love when you go round."