

# THE MIDDLE WATCH

A Romance of the Navy

Ian Hay  
and  
Stephen King-Hall

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# THE MIDDLE WATCH

## *A ROMANCE OF THE NAVY*

Being a more detailed narrative of the unusual events depicted in the play of the same name, with much interesting matter here revealed for the first time.

BY  
IAN HAY  
AND  
STEPHEN KING-HALL

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TO  
OLIVE BLAKENEY  
WITH OUR THANKS

## CONTENTS

CHAP.

- I. SAILORS DO CARE
- II. UNFORTUNATELY CHAPERONS DO NOT
- III. THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF
- IV. "A MR. WILKINSON, A MIDSHIPMAN"
- V. KING'S REGULATIONS
- VI. QUIS CUSTODIET?
- VII. THE MIDDLE WATCH
- VIII. S.O.S.
- IX. SAILING ORDERS

- X. [THE TRANSIT OF VENUS](#)
- XI. [NOCTURNE](#)
- XII. [CRASH](#)
- XIII. [HANK](#)
- XIV. [APPLIED SCIENCE](#)
- XV. [QUITE!](#)
- XVI. [THE TANGLED WEB](#)
- XVII. [SEEING THINGS](#)
- XVIII. [A CHINESE CRACKER](#)
- XIX. [EX MACHINA](#)
- XX. [FULL CIRCLE](#)

## CHAP. I.

## SAILORS DO CARE

### I

His Majesty's cruiser *Falcon*, surrounded by sundry big and little sisters, lay moored in the famous Sparrow Inlet, the principal harbour of Fan Yan Island, on the North China coast. Her hundred and seventy-five feet of pearl-white length was reflected in the glassy blue water; a pale wisp of smoke floated delicately above her after-funnel. From her quarter-deck proceeded sounds of music—or rather, of modern jazz.

Four cables to the northward of the *Falcon's* billet, in silent austerity, lay the Flagship, H.M.S. *Vengeance*; the flag of Admiral Sir Hercules Hewitt hung in folds of red and white from her truck. Further northward a great liner, the *President*

*Hoover*, lay at single anchor. She had arrived the day before, packed with citizens from the Middle West, who were circumnavigating the globe upon inclusive terms, acquiring uplift and hotel labels.

Not far from the liner lay a small steam-yacht, the *Nestor*, the property of Sir George Thrump, the well-known financier and philanthropist. Sir George himself was not on board: he was staying at his holiday home in Wei-Hai-Wei, and had sent the yacht south for the wife and daughter of his exalted friend the Admiral, who were due for a week-end visit.

Amid all these varied and aristocratic examples of marine architecture there flitted, like sparrows at a Royal Garden Party, a miscellaneous and impudent collection of Chinese sampans, propelled by smiling, splendidly muscular Shang-tung boatmen—thriftily collecting the boxes, the bits of bread, the paper, the cabbage-stalks, the eggshells, and other redeemable litter which the great ships had cast away. It was noticeable that the sampans were beginning to concentrate in the vicinity of the *Falcon*. The hour was 6.30 p.m., a moment which can be fixed with exactitude because it was that at which Marine Ogg invariably laid out his master's mess dress, and defeated Marine Price in the nightly battle for the bath in the upper bathroom.

Marine Ogg was the outstanding personality of the Royal Marine Detachment in H.M.S. *Falcon*—and in making this statement the claims of Sergeant-Major Boshier have not been forgotten. Ogg was not only a character of distinction, but he was Captain Randall's servant, a position which he had steadily retained since the day when, as a raw recruit, he and a

bewildered public-school boy dressed as a subaltern of Marines had shared a shell-hole in Gallipoli for eleven interminable hours.

"We started together on that there Gaily Polly," was one of Ogg's favourite statements, "and 'e's been with me ever since."

On this particular afternoon Ogg was finding it exceedingly hard to keep to schedule. Indeed, the whole of the clockwork routine of the *Falcon* had been seriously disturbed. Her quarter-deck was covered by a red-and-white striped awning, and the steel awning stanchions were concealed by bunting of the same colours. The severe khaki-brown of her teak decks was overlaid with white powder. A band designed both by nature and upbringing to render Hymns Ancient and Modern upon instruments of brass was endeavouring to play American jazz on wood and strings. Finally, as Ogg bitterly remarked, "the whole packet was alive with skirts." Short skirts, most of them; but it was impossible to deny them their title.

In other words, Captain Maitland and the Wardroom and Gunroom Officers of H.M.S. *Falcon* were At Home. Dancing 4 to 7 p.m.

The *Falcon* had been lying off Fan Yan Island for nearly two months, during which time her officers had danced three times a week at the Grand Hotel with the daughters and wives of the business men of Shanghai and Hong Kong. Towards the end of the hot season all the English-speaking world of the China coast—the British Fleet, the American tourists, the feminine belongings of the aforementioned business men—everybody, in fact, except the business men themselves, who

abide at their urban desks in the Concessions with an air of tempered resignation—are accustomed to migrate to Fan Yan Island. And who shall blame them? In this delectable spot you may find a Sports Club (owned by the Navy), a super hotel (owned by an American syndicate), a surprisingly adequate sanitary system installed by the British Government at the eleventh hour, just before China went in for self-determination, a Golf Course, a Polo Ground, an abundance of perfect bathing beaches, and a daily sea-breeze. In fact, every requisite considered necessary by the Anglo-Saxon race to a period of meditation and repose.

At a massed committee meeting of the *Falcon's* officers it had been unanimously decided that the moment had arrived to return hospitality. The only cleavage of opinion arose over the question of procedure. The younger men of the mess favoured a prolonged and expensive ball, "with bubbly on tap." But the Engineer-Commander, the Paymaster-Commander, and the Surgeon-Commander, in whose minds the occupants of certain small houses in distant Hampshire, together with the quarterly rents and school bills associated therewith, bulked larger than did the charms of social life in the Far East, were in instant opposition.

They found a powerful, but not unexpected, ally in Captain Maitland himself.

"I admit," said the great man, when the Commander bearded him, "that the ship will have to return recent hospitality; and to that extent I am willing to sanction a kick-up of some kind. But there are conditions.



"In the first place, it is my opinion—always has been and always will be—that women on a warship are a damned nuisance. They invariably require my bathroom as a *vestiaire*, and they leave the place littered with hairpins and reeking of scent."

"So far as my observation goes, sir," remarked the more experienced Commander, "very few of the women whom it is proposed to invite to this ball will be wearing hairpins."

"In that case," retorted the Captain, "they will not be women, as I understand the term. In the second place, a ball means that my quarters will be full up with people until God knows what hour of the morning. If you say two a.m. they always stay till four. And even if you chase them off the deck, there is no guarantee that they will go ashore. Do you know what happened on my last ship? I let them give a ball, and at half-past five next morning—*half-past five!*—I found two of my Midshipmen entertaining some fuzzy-headed brats to devilled bones in the gunroom, just under my sleeping-cabin, with a gramophone going—*a gramophone!*"

The Commander made a sympathetic noise, and the Captain resumed, about an octave lower:—

"Besides, the Commander-in-Chief's efficiency test is coming on. I intend the *Falcon* to be top ship of the squadron. That means work—hard work—all the time!" He smacked his lips. "Preparations for a ball will require at least twelve hours, involving the loss of a full working day, so that settles the matter. Tell them they can have their party, but it must be an afternoon show. Fix it up when you like, but let me know the

date."

"Personally, I should like it to be as soon as possible, sir," said the Commander.

"Why?"

"My *fiancée* and her mother are going off to visit the Thrumps at Wei-Hai-Wei next week; and I fancy Nancy—Miss Hewitt—will be disappointed if she misses——"

"All right! Have it when you like, and get it over. But mind you notify me. I'm going to be confined to my cabin with toothache that day."

"Supposing the Admiral comes himself, sir," suggested the Commander; "won't you have to entertain him?"

"The Admiral's views on modern dancing and dancers," replied the Captain acidly, "correspond with my own. I don't think there is the slightest fear of his coming. Go ahead with this horrible affair, Commander; but remember, you do the honours!"

The Captain's ultimatum having settled the dispute in the wardroom, arrangements for a *Thé Dansant* were inaugurated forthwith, and duties allotted.

The Navigating Officer made himself responsible for the invitations. He fulfilled this office by proceeding to the gunroom and interviewing the Sub-Lieutenant. That oppressor of Midshipmen promptly detailed six scribes, who were bidden to wash hands and copy out invitations until instructed to

desist. This they did, with a wealth of *sotto-voce* objurgation regrettable even in this precocious age.

The Gunnery-Lieutenant took charge of the catering arrangements. This, too, was a simple task, consisting as it did in summoning Ah Ling, the fat, smiling Chinese messman, and commanding him to provide Chow of Number One Quality for six hundred persons, at a total outlay of six hundred dollars Mexican—Ah Ling's frantic protests to the effect that it could not be done at the price being met by a stern injunction to get out and get on with it.

## II

On the day appointed the two picquet boats of the *Falcon*, each in charge of a white-gloved, round-jacketed, bedirked Midshipman, made endless trips to Hwai Fong pier, returning to the cruiser laden with guests. At the bottom of the gangway another Midshipman handed out the ladies, whilst on top of the ladder the Officer of the Watch, frock-coated, with canvas-covered telescope under the left arm and ceremonial sword-belt round the waist, bowed like a trained mannequin. He was supported by:—

- (1) A Midshipman of the Watch,
- (2) The Quartermaster,
- (3) A Marine Corporal of the Gangway,

(4) A Side-Boy,

(5) A Signal-Boy,

and a Boat-Boy and two Messengers, each in his place and on his toes.

After this unaffected and informal welcome, the slightly dazed visitors found themselves in the presence of Commander Robert Baddeley, who greeted them with a rigid smile and the following unvarying recitative:—

"So sorry Captain Maitland is not well bad toothache ladies to the right gentleman's cloakroom to the left the black arrows sir ladies follow the *red* arrows so glad you could come."

Then, in an undertone to the Officer of the Watch:—

"What the hell is that second picquet boat doing lying off, instead of going back to the pier at once?"

Behind the Commander was ranged a group of wardroom cynics, pessimistically appraising the guests as they arrived. Behind these stood the young gentlemen of the gunroom—Voluntary Section. Behind the volunteers cowered the pressed men, driven up by threats and blows from the dark recesses of the after-flat, and condemned to spend the afternoon enacting the *rôle* of gigolo to unwieldy but ambitious matrons.

Presently the band burst into syncopated cacophony, and maintained the same with the briefest intervals for close on three hours. The Commander led off with his *fiancée*, Nancy Hewitt, only child of the Commander-in-Chief, a damsel of

distracting prettiness and imperious will. The Wardroom, by a deft cutting-out operation, appropriated the other pretty girls, while the conscripted gigolos, heavy-hearted and left-footed, took the three-deckers in tow. The revels had begun.

"I'm sorry your mother couldn't come with you, dear," murmured the Commander, untruthfully, into his *fiancée's* ear, as he slid her carefully round the chalk-covered quarter-deck.

"All right: there's no need to lie about it, darling," replied the Admiral's daughter. "But don't be downhearted: she's coming on board later, to collect me for the yacht. We're off to Wei-Hai-Wei at six. She'll probably collect Dad too, and put him back in the Flagship before she leaves. Who is that girl dancing with the Surgeon-Commander? She looks like an American, with those legs."

"I don't know," replied the Commander, after conscientiously surveying the limbs in question over his partner's shoulder. "But I'll find out presently," he added.

"Would you like to find out now, dear?" inquired Miss Hewitt. "Or could you manage to wait until the end of the dance?"

The Commander, who had been engaged to the Hewitt family for nearly six months and knew his place, apologized; and presently Nancy condescended to continue the conversation.

"What have you done with Dad?"

"I wished him on the Owner—that is, I left him with the

Captain. I expect they're splitting a pink cocktail by this time. It was very considerate of him to come on board in mufti."

"I told him to. I said people wanted to enjoy themselves this afternoon, and not go round attitudinizing to him. Who's that girl slinking off with Captain Randall?"

The Commander had a glimpse of a slim figure in a skimpy shell-pink dance frock, surmounted by a blonde shingle, disappearing discreetly down a ladder too precipitous to be attempted by any chaperon.

"That's Fay Eaton," he said. "Randall has crashed for her."

"Who is she? Something else out of an American tourist liner?"

"Oh, no—she's English. Staying at the Grand Hotel, with a chaperon of sorts. An orphan and an heiress, and what not."

"You seem to know all about her, dearest."

"Randall told me. He's in the state where he simply has to overflow to somebody."

"How sloppy sailors can be!" remarked Miss Hewitt scornfully.

"Only Marines, dear," amended the Commander respectfully.

Meanwhile, Captain Randall and Fay Eaton had sunk below the horizon of the quarter-deck.

## CHAP. II.

### UNFORTUNATELY CHAPERONS DO NOT

Mention of the Marines reminds us that we have been neglecting somebody. Therefore, with this brief description of the genesis and operation of the *Thé Dansant*, let us return to Marine Ogg, whom we left at the hour of 6.30 pressing his master's mess trousers in sturdy adherence to routine duty.

Ebenezer Ogg had spent a thoroughly uncongenial afternoon—except for the gloomy satisfaction which the righteous appear to derive from contemplating the goings-on of the dissipated. He was a teetotaller, a non-smoker, the father of eight children, and a member of what Sergeant-Major Boshier on Sunday mornings was in the habit of describing as "one of the fancy religions." To his intense annoyance, he had been detailed to bear a hand in the wardroom—the resort on such occasions as this of thirsty misogynists—to assist the Chinese Wine Steward and his Number One Boy in coping with the rush of alcoholic traffic.

It was to the guests that Ogg objected chiefly. The ship's officers and their deplorable habits were part of his daily and official burden; but this pernicious collection of riff-raff from the shore, with their unquenchable thirsts and their hoary stories, breaking into his Dog Watch stand-easy and compelling him to perspire behind a bar in company with two disreputable Chinks, were an offence both to his vision and his principles. He did his best to relieve his outraged feelings in

two ways:—

- (a) By keeping his thumb well inside the measure while pouring out whiskies,
- (b) By communicating his sentiments, as pungently as discipline permitted, to his immediate superior, Corporal Bunnett.

But alas! the guests only asked for twice as many whiskies; while the Corporal, a man of coarse fibre and unfettered tongue, bade him, after an oblique reference to pot-bellied scroungers, to get on with his job and no back answers.

At 6.25 human endurance had reached its limit, and Ogg, countering the Corporal's protests with a muttered reference to Captain Randall's mess trousers, abandoned the *rôle* of Ganymede and betook himself to the after-flat.

Having to some extent relieved his feelings by throwing out of the bath in the upper bathroom the sponge with which Marine Price, the Engineer-Commander's attendant sprite, had endeavoured to establish a prior claim, Ogg set out for his master's cabin. On his way he encountered Ah Fong, the Captain's Number One Boy, carrying two cherry-hearted cocktails on a salver.

"Who's them two small poisons for, Ah Fong?" he enquired.

"For Captain and Admilal," replied Ah Fong, with a polite smile. "In Captain's day-cabin."

Ogg shook his head gloomily:



"Dancing, drink, and women in every 'ole and corner of the ship!" he commented. "I suppose"—surveying the cocktails—"that them things are all right for officers' stomachs. I know what they'd do for mine."

"Allee light for every belly," Ah Fong assured him. "Me savvy!" and he went gliding away.

"So the Admiral's on board," said Ogg to himself. "Thank 'evins ee ain't being official or we'd 'ave 'ad a guard and band to say 'ow do you do to 'im."

These musings brought him to the door of Captain Randall's cabin. It stood open, but the interior of the cabin was hidden from view by the usual brown curtain.

Ogg cleared his throat mechanically, and tapped on the panel. He was answered by a muffled exclamation from within. Presently the face of Captain Randall, even pinker than usual, was thrust out from behind the curtain.

"Oh! Is that you, Ogg?" its owner enquired—rather superfluously, for it was quite impossible to mistake Ogg's moonlike countenance and globular figure for any one else's.

"Yes, sir. Your evening kit, sir."

"All right. Bring it in."

Ogg entered the cabin. Miss Fay Eaton was sitting very upright in Captain Randall's only armchair, adjusting a permanent wave which appeared to have been ruffled by a passing breeze. Ogg deposited his master's garments on the

bunk; and then, breathing heavily and virtuously, proceeded to tidy up the cabin, amid a strained silence.

"Oh, get out, Ogg!" said Randall suddenly.

"Very good, sir," replied Ogg, and went. His footsteps died ostentatiously away.

Randall readjusted the curtain across the doorway, and then resumed his seat upon the arm of the chair.

"I think I'm almost due for another, dear," he said, a trifle huskily. He had been engaged for exactly five minutes, and had not yet settled down to his new bearings.

Fay took his hand, lifted her face, and complied with his suggestion. After which they sat gazing raptly at one another for perhaps two minutes; then Randall spoke again.

"Fay?"

"Yes, Bobo?"

"Isn't it a marvellous feeling?"

"It's so marvellous that I can hardly bear it. Shall we feel like this all our lives now?"

"Of course we shall."

"Darling!"

"Angel!"

Outside the door something trumpeted like a wounded elephant. Fay started to her feet.

"What's that?" she cried, seizing her beloved by the hand.

"Nothing serious, dear," said Randall, putting a protecting arm round her waist. "Only two G's."

"Only two what, sweetheart?"

"Only a man trotting round with a foghorn as a signal that a boat's going ashore."

"Is the party over, then?"

Randall glanced at his watch, and nodded his head regretfully.

"Looks like it," he said. "We've been here longer than I thought."

"I suppose," continued Fay, without much conviction, "that I ought to be finding Cousin Charlotte."

"And go ashore?"

"Yes."

Randall became suddenly possessive.

"Darlingest," he announced, "you will do no such thing. You will stay on board and dine with me."

Fay, who belonged to that fast-vanishing species of her sex which delights in clinging to and being dominated by a male, was all acquiescence at once.

"Bobo, you're *marvellous!*" she exclaimed. "You think of the loveliest things! But what about Charlotte?"

"We'll invite Charlotte too. That will make everything quite all right."

"Quite all wrong!"

"What do you mean?"

"She won't accept. She'll make me go ashore, for a certainty."

"Why?"

"She once told me that one can never *really* believe anything that sailors say after six o'clock in the evening."

"That doesn't apply to Marines, dear."

"She has never said anything about Marines," admitted Fay hopefully. "But if we do stay, how are we going to get ashore?"

"There is a routine boat for the beach at ten. You can go by that. It's the picquet boat."

A fresh doubt assailed the punctilious Miss Eaton.

"But what about the Captain? Won't you have to get his permission? Isn't he a bachelor and a woman-hater? And won't he be terribly peeved, anyway, when he finds that I've stolen his Bobo?"

"We needn't trouble him with that bit of news at present," replied the stolen one uneasily. "The Commander's our man."

"Aren't the Captain and Commander the same thing?"

"No, dear; they are two different people."

"Oh! What do they find to do all the time?"

"The Captain commands the ship; the Commander runs it."

"I should have thought the Commander would have commanded it, darling. Aren't he and the Captain just a tiny bit jealous of each other?"

Fortunately Captain Randall was too deeply in love to regard these comments as anything but delightfully original.

"You'll understand things some day," he replied, with blind optimism. "Meanwhile, the Commander is our man. I'll just mention to him that you are dining on board. He'll be all right: he's in the same boat—he's engaged to the Admiral's daughter."

"Who is she?"

"Nancy Hewitt. Did you notice them dancing together on deck?"

Fay puckered her smooth forehead.

"Let me see," she asked thoughtfully; "is she a girl about my height, in pink georgette, with fairish hair, and blue eyes, and a short upper lip, and just the wrong stockings, and a huge engagement ring?"

"Yes."

"No; I didn't particularly notice her. What is she like, dear?"

Captain Randall considered.

"I shouldn't like to be engaged to her much," he replied at last.

"Why not?"

"Rumour hath it that she taketh after her mother."

"What is the matter with her mother?"

"She's queer."

"Delicate?"

"Delicate? She's a human Dreadnought—a female Mussolini! She watches the poor old Admiral like a—like a ——" Bobo hesitated for a suitable simile. "What is that animal called that watches people? Something to do with a golf-course."

"A caddie," suggested Fay helpfully.

"No, dear, not quite that. Wait a minute! I know! A lynx! That's it—a lynx! I knew you would be able to help me."

A voice was heard outside the door—the imperious voice of Miss Nancy Hewitt.

"I must collect Dad, Bob. Where is he?"

"Nancy and the Commander!" whispered Randall. "Now's our chance." The pair emerged into the alleyway.

"I fancy he's with the Captain, dear," the Commander was saying.

"All right. You dig him out, and I'll get my things from your cabin. Hallo, Captain Randall!"

Captain Randall saluted.

"Dafternoon, Miss Hewitt," he said throatily. "'Mintroduce Miss Eaton."

The two young ladies, who had obviously taken a dislike to one another on sight, shook hands warmly, and Nancy said:—

"I mustn't keep Mother waiting, Bob, or there'll be a solo. Good-bye, everybody." And she raced away, the just wrong stockings flashing attractively under the electric light.

"'Mintroduce Commander Baddeley," continued Captain Randall. "Miss Eaton."

"How do you do, Miss Eaton?" said the Commander, visibly

rocking under Fay's devastating baby-stare. "But we've met already—at the gangway."

"Of course—you must have," said Randall. "The Commander is in charge of the revels this afternoon," he explained to Fay.

"And don't I know it!" said the Commander, with humorous resignation. "Of course there are compensations," he added, in response to a soft handshake, and with an involuntary glance over his left shoulder in the direction of his departing *fiancée*.

"Has the Captain shown up at all?" asked Randall.

"No; he hasn't stirred out of his cabin. You know his views on poodle-fak—social functions."

"By the way, sir," said Randall, following up this skilful opening, "will it be all right if Miss Eaton and her chaperon stay on board and dine with me? They can go off by the picquet boat at ten."

"Oh, rather! I only wish I could join your party—with Nancy, of course. But she and her mother are booked for a yachting excursion up Sing Foo Estuary this evening."

"In the old *Nestor*?"

"Yes. She may or may not go to the bottom; but they'll have quite a good dinner if she floats long enough. That reminds me. I must find the Admiral for them. Good afternoon, Miss Eaton; have a pleasant evening!" And the Commander, recalled to duty by the voice of conscience, hurried away.



"We're over that hurdle, anyhow," said Randall, with satisfaction.

"What did he mean about the *Nestor*?" asked Fay. "Is she really going to the bottom? Hadn't you better tell the Admiral's wife?"

"A joke, dear," said Randall soothingly. "The old *Nestor's* perfectly sound, but her steering-gear has been known to jam. Now, hey for Charlotte!"

"I wonder where she is," said Fay, as they set out along the alleyway. "Where did you last see her?"

"Treading on the feet of the Navigator about an hour ago. She will probably be somewhere on the quarter-deck."

He was right. The quarter-deck was almost deserted, for the band had ceased to play. A few enthusiastic couples were still one-stepping to the music of an elderly gramophone produced from somebody's cabin, while others leaned over the rail, contemplating the horizon and making future appointments. On a deck-chair in a distant corner, where she had been marooned half an hour previously by the limping Navigating Officer, sat Charlotte Hopkinson—an authoritative lady of middle age, in tussore silk and a hat like Britannia's helmet—holding over her head a white cotton umbrella.

She rose menacingly to her feet as the truants approached.

"Charlotte, darling," cried Fay readily, "we have been looking for you everywhere. You've met Captain Randall, of course."

"I have had few opportunities," replied Charlotte candidly, "since we arrived in this port, of meeting anybody else."

"What do you think, dear?" continued Fay, not in the least discouraged by this reception. "Captain Randall has just given us a perfectly lovely invitation. He wants us to stay and dine with him on board." She signalled to Randall for support, which was immediately forthcoming.

"I do hope you can stay, Miss Hopkinson. I have arranged everything with the Commander. You can go ashore by the routine boat. You'll be in bed by eleven—snug as a bu—by eleven!"

"Shall I?" replied Miss Hopkinson coldly.

"That is, if you want to be, of course."

"I have every intention of being in bed long before then."

"Then you shall be," said Randall heartily. "Well, that's all settled."

"It is indeed. We are not going to dine in this or any other ship-of-war."

"Oh, Charlotte, *darling!*" exclaimed Fay. "Why?"

"Experience has taught me that ships-of-war are easier to get into than out of."

And having delivered herself of this memorable dictum, Miss Hopkinson furled her umbrella and prepared to descend

the ladder leading to the deck below. But Fay, who for gentle tenacity could have given points to any of the barnacles at present adhering to the *Falcon's* keel, slipped an arm into hers, with eyes full of sweet wonder.

"What *do* you mean, dear? *Please* tell us!"

Miss Hopkinson drew a full breath. Evidently she was about to embark upon a deliverance of some length and importance.

"Twenty-three years ago," she began, "when I was staying with my aunt at Devonport, I consented to accompany a rather flighty girl friend of mine on board a ship-of-war." She turned to Captain Randall. "A destroyer, it was called; and it was well named!—to take tea with a Lieutenant-Commander who was in charge of it. He too pressed us to stay to dinner; he too made the suggestion that you have just made, Captain Randall, about going ashore in that last routine boat. Instinct warned me to decline, and I did. But Agatha—the other girl—stayed. What happened?"

"Her steering-gear jammed?" suggested Randall.

"A violent storm arose. No last boat could be sent ashore; and that girl had to spend the whole night on board that destroyer, entirely surrounded by sailors!"

"Marvellous!" murmured Fay.

"But I suppose she married one of them in the morning," said Captain Randall.

Miss Hopkinson drew herself up, looking more like

Britannia than ever.

"She did not. She was already engaged to some one else. In due course she married him—though I hope she told him first about that night on a destroyer. It was her plain duty. Now, Fay, we must be going."

Fay administered a despairing nudge to her beloved, who made a final effort.

"But, Miss Hopkinson—really—the *Falcon* isn't a destroyer, you know. I mean—the picquet boat of a big ship like this can go ashore in any weather. It always goes. You'll be perfectly all right."

But Britannia was implacable.

"Captain Randall," she announced, grasping her umbrella as if it had been a trident, "at my age one trusts to experience rather than to assurances. You may have one more dance, Fay"—the gramophone had just wheezed into raucous life again—"then meet me at the Way Out—if there is such a thing on this ship!"

And with these final and irrevocable words, Miss Hopkinson disappeared down the ladder.

"Friends," observed Captain Randall mournfully, "are requested to accept this, the only intimation and invitation."

## I

Admiral Sir Hercules Hewitt, K.C.B., emerged from the Captain's day-cabin and, genially declining his host's offer of escort, ambled off in search of his daughter Nancy. The habitual severity of his expression had been slightly mitigated by the pink cocktail administered to him by that admirable dispenser Ah Fong, and he accompanied his own progress by humming to himself a not entirely unrecognizable version of the air which was being played by the ship's band upon the quarter-deck. The name of the ditty in question was:—

*"Say, Mr.,  
Did you Kiss my Little Sr?"*

—but the Admiral, of course, did not know this. If he had, he would not have hummed it. His outstanding characteristic, apart from his intense and justifiable pride in his profession, was a stern sense of propriety.

The afternoon was waning, but the dancers were still hard at work, and departures so far had been few. The Admiral, who, although he had been married to Lady Hewitt for more than twenty years, was not by any means insensible to youth and beauty, decided to visit the quarter-deck and hold an unofficial inspection of the revels. His exalted presence need not embarrass the dancers, for he was in mufti—white flannels, a blue reefer jacket, and a panama hat. Altogether a very trim little figure.

It was the brim of the panama hat, perhaps, which prevented him from looking upwards as he mounted the ladder leading to the quarter-deck. But for this he would have observed that his path was already blocked by a descending pair of legs—legs already alluded to in this narrative—legs surmounting a very slim pair of feet, encased in very high-heeled shoes of grey suede, cautiously feeling their way down the slippery brass-bound steps. At any rate the heels were within two inches of the Admiral's nose before they were observed.

The Admiral gave a startled exclamation. There was an answering cry higher up the ladder, the unstable feet slipped down three steps at once, and next moment Sir Hercules found himself back on the half-deck, struggling to retain his balance while clasping to his bosom an attractive and well-grown young lady.

However, no disaster ensued. A man who has been preserving his equilibrium upon the heaving deck of a warship for forty years is always equal to an emergency of this kind.

Bracing himself firmly on both feet, the Admiral gently detached his fair incubus and set it upright. It turned round, and presented a pair of large brown eyes and a wide but attractive mouth. The mouth opened.

"Oh, my," it said, "you're strong!"

The Admiral cleared his throat self-consciously.

"One tries to keep physically fit, and so forth," he replied. "You are not hurt, I hope?"

"No—thanks to you! If you hadn't caught me, I guess I'd have ruined my only neck. I skidded on those darned brass steps. Come on, let's park ourselves!"

The young lady turned with characteristic readiness, and led the way to a couple of chairs set invitingly in a corner of the half-deck. Then she sat down, looked up with a dazzling smile, and enquired:—

"You got a cigarette, Big Boy?"

"I am afraid," replied the Admiral, more indulgently than might have been expected, "that I am a non-smoker. But I will send a hand to fetch some."

The young lady opened her eyes to their full extent, in mingled admiration and alarm.

"You've got your nerve with you," she gasped. "You mean that you'd give an order in this ship?"

"I might risk it!" replied the Admiral, with a gracious smile. He half rose, but was promptly pulled down.

"Well, you won't! You'll sit right here by me, and we'll take care of each other. This place scares the life out of me. It's like being in Sing Sing—bars, and chains, and iron doors, and everything. *And* the rules, *and* the regulations—and the ceremony! Listen. I saw two officers up there telling each other the time just now. Believe me, they had to salute each other four times before they could spill it! Can you tie that? No, we'll take no chances handing out orders to any person around here. They'd put us in the Death House, most likely. Oh, why did I

come?"

The Admiral's paternal instincts were aroused.

"I fear you are not enjoying yourself," he said.

"Enjoy? I haven't enjoyed myself so much since I was six years old and fell off an apple-tree on to a beehive."

"Where was that?" asked the Admiral; but his polite query was ignored.

"I'm so scared, I could stand up and yell; I'm so lonesome, I could sit down and cry."

The Admiral glanced upwards in the direction of the teeming quarter-deck.

"But haven't you any friends on board?" he asked. "Aren't you with a party of any kind?"

His companion rolled up her eyes pathetically.

"Yeah. And some party! A bunch of stiffs from the hotel. I tagged along with them just for fun. I don't think they like the look of me, though: anyway, I haven't seen them since I came on board." She chuckled engagingly.

"But this is most inhospitable," exclaimed the Admiral. "What are the ship's officers thinking of? Haven't you had a dance with anybody?"

"Thank you, I just finished one! With a blue-eyed child in



long pants and a short jacket—a Midshipman, I think he said he was."

"They might have given you some one better than a Midshipman. Was he entertaining at all?"

"Entertaining? After ten minutes with him I knew what the British mean when they talk about their Silent Navy! Luckily, just as I was trying to make up my mind whether to give him a push over the side or to throw myself over instead, something else caught his eye—something in a shorter skirt than mine. Right there he shook me."

"The young blackguard! Why?"

"I mean he gave me the air—the gate! He passed me up—threw me down! So I crept away to hide my shame. And right here my luck turned: I fell into your arms, Honey Pop!"

The Admiral sat up, and pointed a triumphant finger.

"You're an American," he said.

The detected one maintained her gravity.

"And you're English," she replied.

"One—er—hopes so," replied the Admiral, with simple dignity.

"You see," said the girl, "I'm as good a guesser as you are. My name's Mary Carlton: I'm in the show business. Now tell me yours."

The Admiral pondered. He was a kindly man at heart, and he had no desire to embarrass this simple child of nature by the revelation of his official magnificence. It might blind her.

"My full name," he said cautiously, "is Hercules Herbert Hewitt."

"Isn't that too bad?" said Miss Carlton gravely. "And what are you doing on board this floating safe-deposit, Herc? Are you from one of the hotels too?"

"No," snapped the Admiral, "I am not." He realized that his consideration had been thrown away. "I am living—er—on board a ship. Not this one, of course."

"I should say not," said Miss Carlton, smiling upon the almost rustic little figure beside her. "I guess you're located on one of those hick tourist liners out in the Bay. Well"—the music had started again, and she was on her feet before the Admiral could correct this last outrageous suggestion—"I'm pleased to have met you." She offered a friendly little hand. "You've cheered me up quite a little: I think I can face that quarter-deck some more. Anyway, I've a blind date there round about now."

"A what?"

"A blind date. That's good American for a date with a person who you don't know who they are going to be. What I mean is, one of your officers said he'd find a partner for me for this dance. I don't know who the partner is going to be, so that's a blind date. Do you get me?"

The Admiral nodded abstractedly: he was trying to make up his mind whether to reveal his identity or not. Suddenly Mary Carlton slipped her arm into his.

"Pop," she said, "I suppose you wouldn't care to give a poor girl a whirl around? I wouldn't ask, only they might give me another Midshipman."

The friendly pressure of her arm had a twofold effect upon the Admiral: it aroused in him a sense of pleasant youthfulness; at the same moment it awoke a conscience which had been dormant too long. He suddenly remembered all about his wife and Nancy and the picquet boat.

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure," he replied; "but I am just leaving the ship."

Miss Carlton surveyed him thoughtfully, and nodded.

"I guess you got the right idea," she said. "You don't look like you belong here, any more than I do. Well, so long—and thanks for the buggy ride!"

"Miss Carlton," interposed the Admiral suddenly, "I should like to explain to you that I am, in point of fact——"

But already Mary was half-way up the ladder.

*"Bertie!"*

The Admiral whirled round, to find himself confronted by the majestic form of his lawful wife—looking alarmingly like the female Mussolini of Captain Randall's description—and

the unconcealed amusement of an undutiful daughter. In the background, smirking discreetly, stood Commander Baddeley.

"Hallo, dear!" said the Admiral lamely. "Really, there was no need for you to come on board."

Lady Hewitt ignored this well-meant but rather unfortunate suggestion.

"Who was that, Bertie?" she asked.

"That—oh, that! I have no idea, dear. One of the guests, I imagine. I found her here, rather stranded, and tried to offer her a little civility. I suppose you and Nancy are ready to go ashore? Is my barge here, Bob?"

"She's lying off, sir," said the Commander, coming forward. "I'll get her alongside."

"Can't I stay a little longer, Mother?" interposed Nancy.

"No, dear. We can't keep the yacht waiting."

"But I've hardly seen Bob all the afternoon."

Lady Hewitt turned carefully two points to starboard, as if to bring her broadside to bear upon her prospective son-in-law.

"And why have you not seen him? Has he been neglecting you?"

"He's been enjoying himself with little bits from the shore most of the afternoon. Haven't you, darling?" said Nancy

affectionately.

The Commander mumbled something apologetic about duty dances.

"I have often noticed, Bob," observed Lady Hewitt, "that with you duty and inclination seem to go together."

"Did you manage to get off with that American girl, Bob?" pursued Nancy.

"*That* American girl?" exclaimed the Admiral incautiously.

Lady Hewitt turned majestically to port.

"Why *that* American girl, Bertie? Have you been dancing with one?"

The Admiral, conscious of his own virtue, laughed lightly.

"Dance, dear—at my time of life? I haven't even been on the quarter-deck. I spent the afternoon with Captain Maitland." Then he turned, rather basely, upon the Commander.

"Bob, my boy, have you been dancing with American girls all afternoon? Was that right? Was it fair to Nancy?"

"Couldn't you have waited until I was safely off the ship, darling?" enquired Nancy, who, as already noted, took after her mother.

"I say, don't go putting me in the wrong like that, Nancy," urged the unfortunate Commander.

"Such a proceeding," announced Lady Hewitt, "would be entirely superfluous. Nancy, dear, we had better be going."

The Commander made a despairing gesture. Nancy repented at once.

"It was only a leg-haul, darling," she said. "Dry those tears, and come along to the gangway with me."

"Bless you!" murmured Baddeley, leading her away.

"*Bertie!*" said Lady Hewitt, for the second time in five minutes.

The Admiral, who had been gazing furtively up the ladder leading to the quarter-deck, hurriedly collected himself, and fell into line at the tail of the procession.

## II

Meanwhile Mary Carlton, mystified but intrigued, was sitting on Randall's bunk between Fay and Randall himself. All three were smoking cigarettes with a conspiratorial air. The curtain across the doorway was closely drawn.

"But what's the big idea?" asked Mary. "Tell me some more, Fay." She and Fay had crossed the Pacific in the same liner, and had been lifelong friends for three weeks.

"You tell her, Bobo," said Fay.

"Miss Carlton," announced Randall with military directness, "Miss Eaton and I have just got engaged."

Miss Carlton impetuously kissed them both, and after a short interval for reciprocation, Bobo resumed.

"You've got to stay on board and dine in this cabin to-night. Chaperon, and what not!"

"It would be a tremendous favour if you would," seconded Fay. "Will you?"

Miss Carlton considered. Then:—

"Is a poor foreigner allowed to ask a few questions first?" she asked.

"Heave ahead!" said Randall genially.

"Well, how do we get home from here? Do we swim?"

"Oh, *no*, dear!" Fay hastened to reassure her. "We go in a boat."

"The routine boat, about ten," confirmed Bobo. "That's all arranged already. Now, what is the next question?"

Mary Carlton smiled.

"That's all," she said. "There isn't any more. I just wanted to know the answer to that one. You see," she added cryptically, "I didn't have my roller-skates with me. That's an American crack. Don't let it worry you."

"Then you'll stay?" cried Fay, grasping the essential point.

"Sure."

"It's a bet?" said Bobo.

Miss Carlton promptly slid off the bunk on to the floor of the cabin.

"It's a certainty," she replied. "When do we eat?"

"In about an hour."

"Fine!"

"But what are we going to do about Charlotte?" asked Fay. "She'll search the ship for me."

"Let her search!" said Randall. "When she can't find you anywhere, she'll go ashore."

"But suppose she does find me, angel?"

"She won't find you. We'll stay here."

"But supposing she comes here? She's sure to ask somebody to show her your cabin."

"Ogg!" bellowed Captain Randall.

Ogg's face promptly appeared round the side of the curtain.

"Sir?" it enquired.



"If a lady comes along here and asks if you have seen me, or Miss Eaton—you haven't seen us."

"Yes, sir."

"And if she asks where my cabin is—you don't know. And if she tries to come in here—don't let her. You understand?"

"No, sir."

"Never mind. The lady mustn't find us; that's the point. She enters this cabin across your dead body. Do you get that?"

"Yes, sir," replied Ogg, and withdrew. Exactly half a second later he was back again.

"Begging your pardon, sir," he announced; "but a lady has just hove in sight right at the for'ard end of the passage-way, under escort of Corporal Bunnett."

"Good Lord! Well, get out of here, and use your brains!"

Ogg disappeared, and the conspirators sat quaking. Presently footsteps were heard approaching—the footsteps of two persons. They stopped outside the cabin, and the voice of Corporal Bunnett announced briskly:—

"This is the cabin, Mum. And now I'll arst you to excuse me: I 'ave to pop off on urgent duties." His footsteps died away.

The voice of Charlotte Hopkinson was audible, lifted high on a hot scent.

"Sailor!"

"Royal Marine, Mum," replied the voice of Ogg reprovingly.

"Have you seen Miss Eaton anywhere?"

"Miss who, Mum?"

"Miss Eaton."

"Well, Mum, I may 'ave and I may 'aven't. You see, the ship's full of young ladies this afternoon, and I can't tell one bit of sk—one of them from the other. What with faces all the same pink, and mouths all the same red, and 'air——"

"Some staller!" murmured Mary approvingly.

But Charlotte was in no mood to endure chatty irrelevance.

"Miss Eaton," she said firmly, "was with Captain Randall. Do you know Captain Randall?"

"Do I know Captain Randall?" exclaimed Ogg, provided now with a topic upon which he could discourse for practically any length of time without using his brains. "Now, that I can tell you. I'm his servant, Mum—his valley, as you might say. Every morning, for the last eight year——"

("Good!" whispered Randall to the girls. "He's warming up to it!")

"He's getting into high," confirmed Mary.)

"—for the last eight year," continued Ogg, "I have took into 'is cabin a large cup of tea, with one lump, and another in the saucer——"

("Splendid!" murmured Randall.)

"—*and* a glass of 'ot water, with a spoonful of Eno alongside."

("Overdoing it!")

"Why, I suppose I know more about 'im than what 'e does about 'imself."

"Then where," enquired Charlotte, with the air of one making an unanswerable point, "is he now?"

"Ah!" countered Ogg, "there you're asking something more difficult. I couldn't tell you that, Mum."

"Why not?"

The trio behind the curtain held their breath.

"Because—well, because—begging your pardon, Mum—I'm not allowed by King's Regulations to indicate the whereabouts of officers to unauthorized ladies."

("He's a crackerjack!")

"Oh!" Charlotte was plainly nonplussed. "Well, I warn you I shall not leave until I have found Miss Eaton. If necessary, I shall search the ship from top to bottom."

"It would take you some time, Mum. At our last inspection it took the Commander-in-Chief six hours, and he knew his way about."

"That," announced Charlotte firmly, "is impertinence! I shall report you to the Captain. Take me to him."

"I'm afraid I'm not allowed to leave this part of the ship, Mum. You see, I'm—I'm on sentry duty here."

("He shall have five shillings for that!")

"Oh! Where is the Captain's cabin?"

"Along there, Mum. But you won't get in: there's a sentry specially detailed——"

"I will force my way past him!" trumpeted Charlotte, and departed with resolute tread. At the same moment bugles began to sound and bosuns' pipes to wail from stem to stern of the ship. Charlotte was heard returning.

"Sentinel?"

"Sentry, Mum!"

"What are all those noises about?"

"That's the Sunset bugle, Mum. Hauling down the colours. We're closing up for the night. It's now or never for you—if you want to get ashore!"

With a baffled cry Charlotte hurried away, and the listeners

behind the curtain indulged in a rough approximation to the first steps of the Highland Schottische.

## CHAP. IV.

### "A MR. WILKINSON, A MIDSHIPMAN"

#### I

It was not until after eight o'clock that the last survivors of the *Thé Dansant* were shepherded upon the quarter-deck and packed into a waiting picquet boat.

The Commander, standing at the top of the gangway, looked gloomily down upon that overladen craft. Her cabin and stern-sheets were crowded with guests; half a dozen young ladies were actually sitting cross-legged upon the cabin roof.

"That's the best-looking one, sir," remarked the Officer of the Watch, indicating a red-haired damsel who was perched almost on top of the Midshipman of the boat, a proximity which that young gentleman had already decided would be more enjoyable once they got away from the gangway.

"Yes," admitted the Commander. Then he added, with bitterness: "I do wish these people would realize that four till six does not mean three till eight. Tell this boat to wait in for the postman, and leave the shore at nine; and warn the Midshipman to go along carefully, with all that mob on board."

The Officer of the Watch passed these instructions to the young gentleman indicated—a Mr. Wilkinson—and told him to carry on.

Four tinkles on a bell, and the boat began to move; then two more, and her stern sank into a white furrow of churned-up sea.

Mr. Wilkinson, standing forward of the cabin, his hands gripping the spokes of the wheel, was acutely conscious of the auburn-haired young lady's presence. It was disturbing to have her so close and yet so unapproachable. But, with true British determination, he concentrated on his job.

It was dark, and in the distance a maze of lights indicated Hwai Fong pier. The brass funnel of the picquet boat caught stray reflections therefrom, and an occasional flicker of flame shot up above the bell-top opening, then sank back into the belly of the boiler.

Suddenly Mr. Wilkinson took note of a strange phenomenon. The wheel was moving in his hands. He looked down. A pair of slim feet, encased in lizard-skin shoes, had appeared from out of the darkness behind him, one under each of his arms, and had come delicately to rest upon two spokes of his wheel, one on each side. Mr. Wilkinson was only eighteen, and he accepted the situation. Very gently he laid his left hand upon one silken instep, and his right upon the other. When he needed starboard helm, he pressed down the left instep; when he needed port helm, he allowed his right hand the same pleasurable exercise. The insteps offered no objection.

All went well until the picquet boat arrived within measurable distance of Hwai Fong pier. Here Mr. Wilkinson, if he had been a prudent sea officer, would have banished romance and taken the job of laying his craft alongside into his own unaided hands. Instead, he put the helm vigorously at starboard. Down went one fair foot, up went the other, high into the air. The owner of the feet did the only thing possible to restore her equilibrium: she kicked hard in the opposite direction. There was a sudden lurch, and the stern of the picquet boat swung inward instead of outward. A hideous grinding sound followed, as the phosphor-bronze propeller bit into the concrete ledge of the pier. Simultaneously Mr. Wilkinson was transformed into a lifelong misogynist.

The guests were safely landed, and disappeared amid a haze of good-nights. It was small consolation to Mr. Wilkinson that the owner of the feet squeezed his hand and gave him an attractive but utterly useless invitation to accompany her back to dinner at the hotel. He suspected—and much probing with a boat-hook confirmed his suspicions—that whereas he had left for the shore with a three-bladed propeller under the stern of his boat, he was now three miles from the *Falcon* with a propeller which had, at the most, one blade, and not much of a blade at that.

"This means three weeks' leave jambed for me!" he muttered to his sympathetic coxswain, Petty Officer Jones.

"How did it happen, sir?"

"Ask me another! Something took the wheel right out of my control for the moment."

"A bit of an under-tow, sir, perhaps," suggested Jones tactfully.

## II

The Corporal of the Watch looked at the clock over the Quartermaster's desk at the head of the quarter-deck. The time was exactly 9.45. The Corporal nudged the Quartermaster, one Petty Officer Miller, and remarked:—

"Coming forward, Dusty?"

'Dusty' Miller—all Millers in the Navy are 'Dusty,' all Clarkes are 'Nobbies,' and all Smiths are 'Gingers'—thrust his *Football News* into the capacious side-pocket of his greatcoat, glanced at the Officer of the Watch, who was slowly pacing the quarter-deck beneath the striped awning, and followed the Corporal to the boat-deck.

Four bells rang out in the still night air, and their tones were still floating across the water as Petty Officer Miller applied his bosun's pipe to his lips. The shrill wail of the pipe, and the cry "Pipe down," announced to the world at large and to the starry sky that officially H.M.S. *Falcon* had gone to bed.

The Quartermaster returned to the quarter-deck, to be met by the Officer of the Watch, who expressed his concern at the non-appearance of the second picquet boat.

"She should have been back by nine-thirty," he said. "It's



after ten now, and there's no sign of her. Mr. Wilkinson is in charge, isn't he?"

"Yes, sir. That might be her—that light in the distance."

Twenty minutes later the Bridge reported that the light was indeed that of the belated picquet boat. Further, that she appeared to be steaming about one knot instead of her customary ten.

At 10.45 the picquet boat crawled alongside.

"What the devil is the matter?" remarked the Officer of the Watch.

"Lost my propeller, sir," replied a hollow voice in the darkness.

The leading Torpedo Man of the Watch was summoned, and ordered to produce a yard-arm group. Under the flood of light projected by this piece of apparatus, the full extent of the damage was revealed. The propeller was practically non-existent: it looked rather like a crumpled acorn.

### III

In his cabin, stretched on a sofa, Commander Baddeley reviewed the events of the day. He had just signed his night-order book, an unpleasant little volume in which he daily directed himself to be called at six o'clock next morning. The

*Thé Dansant* had left him limp, and it was good to have a moment of peace. He knew it would be a brief moment, for experience had taught him that Commanders of His Majesty's ships enjoy very little tranquillity, and that if they find themselves sitting with nothing to do, it usually means that something distasteful is just going to happen.

Through his closed door came faint sounds of shouting and cheers from the direction of the wardroom. Probably the First Lieutenant was giving some of his famous and impertinent impersonations of living Admirals. The Commander smiled whimsically, as it floated through his mind that possibly one day he might become the subject of an impersonation himself. He and Nancy would be an old married couple by that time ... Nancy! She had been very sweet that afternoon. She had a quick tongue, and a critical disposition, but she had her own endearing way of making up for everything five minutes later. Bless her! She was now, he calculated, rounding Sing Foo Promontory on board the *Nestor*. The weather report was not too good, but Nancy was a capital sailor, whereas her mother was not. The Commander heaved a sigh of twofold satisfaction...

The *Thé Dansant* had been a bore, but it was safely over—and there had been compensations. That saucer-eyed little baggage of Randall's was distinctly attractive. The Commander wondered idly what she saw in Randall. And that American girl...

A knock at his door jerked his mind back from past and future to the present. The door opened, and the Officer of the Watch, the Engineer-Commander, and Senior Engineer filed

solemnly in. Before the door had closed behind them, the Commander had a suspicion of the nature of their news—a suspicion heightened by a glimpse of a miserable-looking Midshipman in the flat outside.

The Officer of the Watch told his story. A technical diagnosis followed from the Engineer-Commander, confirmed by a detailed expert opinion from the Senior Engineer. The Commander rose from the sofa, uttered the comments inevitable and excusable in the circumstances, and issued the necessary orders.

#### IV

Meanwhile, down in Captain Randall's cabin in the after-flat, Marine Ogg, in obedience to his master's command, was entertaining the dinner-party with a detailed narration, slightly tinged with justifiable pride, of his adventures in the company of Charlotte Hopkinson.

"We proceeded, sir and young ladies," he recited, "to the fore-castle and down the foremost 'atch, past the bosun's store and down three decks to the paint shop. Then we comes up to the platform-deck and proceeds to Number One dynamo-room, where we observes two stokers wot was doing a bit of dobeying and was 'ighly scantily clad. She read 'em a lecture on decency wot nearly gives 'em a stroke. Then we comes up to the fore lower mess-deck and 'as a look down the battery-room; then the starboard generator-room; and so to Number

Three central store, where we 'eard 'er views on card-playing, seeing as 'ow we sighted a game o' nap. We comes by easy stages to the fore submerged flat, and blimey if she don't go down the vertical ladder, and stick 'arf-way in the armoured 'atch man-'ole escape!

"'Avin' disengaged 'er from 'ere, we visits Number One boiler-room and the starboard engine-room. (Luckily she didn't savvy there was three other boiler-rooms.) And so, after inspecting the canvas store, the searchlight store, Number Two refrigerator compartment, the lower E.A.'s workshop, Number Three hydraulic-room and the lay-apart store, and finally a dozen warrant officers' cabins, we comes, after an 'our and a 'arf of 'ard going, to the Captain's lobby. And then, seeing Marine Price on sentry duty there, and feeling sure that the lady was now in capable 'ands, and that in any case she would only get into the Captain's cabin over Marine Price's dead body, as you would say, sir, I took the liberty of withdrawing."

"But what did Marine Price do with her?" asked Fay.

"I 'aven't 'ad the opportunity of asking 'im yet, Miss; but I fancy 'e must 'ave shipped 'er ashore in the last boat. Any'ow, she's not on board now, or we should 'ave 'eard of it."

"Well, go and find Price and make certain," said Randall.

"Very good, sir," replied Ogg; and had turned on his heel to go, when suddenly the tranquillity of the after-flat was shattered by the bugle call of "Both Watches for Exercise." Ropes and blocks were lumped about above their heads, and the electric lights flickered as another dynamo was started up

to give the power to work the main derrick.

Excusing himself to his two guests, Captain Randall proceeded on deck to investigate. Here he encountered Lieutenant-Commander Patchett, who was hurrying forward with two small flags in his hands and his pyjamas half concealed by a hastily-donned monkey-jacket and trousers.

"What's the flap?" enquired Randall.

"We've got to hoist in the second picquet boat. Fine state of affairs to have to turn out the troops an hour after they have turned in. The other boat is boiler-cleaning, so we've got to get this one ready for duty again by O-six-double-O." In the Navy O-six-double-O means six o'clock to-morrow morning.

"You mean," said Randall, "there will be no boat for the shore to-night at ten?"

"I'll inform the world that there will not!" replied Patchett, and hurried on his way.

Randall whistled softly through his teeth; then he turned and found himself face to face with the Commander.

## **CHAP. V.**

## **KING'S REGULATIONS**

Captain Maitland, his official attack of toothache now happily alleviated, reclined in an armchair in his day-cabin,

opposite the open doorway which led to his own private and particular stern-walk, contemplating the starry firmament and contentedly sipping a whisky-and-soda which the ever-ready Ah Fong had just compounded for him.

From the doorway of the cabin came the sound of a nervous cough. The Captain swung lazily round.

"Come in, Commander," he said. "I'm just having a nightcap: you'd better join me."

"Thank you, sir."

"Ah Fong!" shouted the Captain, and almost simultaneously a white-clothed figure glided into the cabin bearing a sizzling tumbler on a salver. The Commander took it, and began to drift uneasily about the cabin. Ah Fong disappeared as suddenly as he had come.

"Sit down, won't you?" said the Captain.

"Thank you, sir," replied the Commander, and continued to stand.

"You must be all in, after poodle-faking for a whole afternoon."

"Yes, sir." The Commander coughed again. "I have to report that the second picquet boat is out of action. The Midshipman in charge has just bumped the propeller up against Hwai Fong pier."

"Who?"

"Wilkinson, sir."

"Taking guests ashore?"

"Yes, sir."

"I suppose some girl was steering!" said the Captain, less sarcastically than he imagined. "All right. No doubt you'll attend to him to-morrow. We shall have to carry on with the other boat, that's all."

"The other boat is inboard already, sir, for boiler-cleaning."

"That is not so good. I meant to have a slap at the local duck in the morning. What have the engineers got to say about it all?"

"To-morrow will be all right, sir. They have a party working on the second boat now. They hope to have a spare propeller fitted by O-six-double-O. It's to-night I'm thinking of."

The Captain glanced up at the clock: it marked a quarter to eleven.

"You've got all your liberty men off, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then there's no need to send ashore again to-night. Why worry? Sit down, and take a cigar."

But the Commander remained anchored in the middle of the carpet.

"The fact is, sir——"

The Captain looked up sharply.

"Commander, you seem to have something on your mind."

"Yes, sir. The fact is"—the Commander fortified himself with a gulp of whisky-and-soda—"two ladies have been left over."

"Left over what?"

"From the party, sir. They are still on board! Two ladies, sir; two—er—women."

The Captain rose to his feet.

"Two females?"

The Commander, who had just over-estimated the cubic capacity of his mouth, merely nodded. In a moment the Captain was transformed from an indulgent host to a frowning despot.

"I will not have my ship turned into a damned harem!" he announced, in his quarter-deck voice. "They must be landed forthwith. Lower a pulling boat, and pack them ashore in that."

The Commander shook his head respectfully.

"It can't be done, sir. It's nearly three miles to Hwai Fong pier, and there's a four-knot tide sluicing down the harbour."



"What a curse women are!" said the Captain, who was a bachelor of forty-five, and intended his condition to be permanent. He lit his pipe irritably. "Who is responsible for this pot-mess?"

"They are Captain Randall's guests, sir."

"It would be one of my wardroom officers! Why the devil can't these fellows entertain their lady friends ashore? They have the entire continent of Asia at their disposal, haven't they?"

The Commander tactfully assented to this rather wide generalization, and added:—

"Women get a bit of a thrill out of being on board a ship, sir, I fancy."

"Well, you know more about these things than I do. What are these persons like? The usual modern type, I suppose? Flat chests—no hips—no hair—no stays?"

The Commander considered, then:—

"I can't be positive on all points, sir," he replied gently.

"But have you *seen* them?"

"Oh, yes, sir, I've seen them. In fact"—he coughed again—"I was to a certain extent responsible for sanctioning their staying on board. You see," he added, as the Captain's eyebrows went up, "I didn't know that anything was going to happen to the picquet boat."

"Do not let us waste time over footling regrets, Commander. What do these women look like? Are they presentable?"

"Oh, quite presentable, sir. Most, in fact."

"They are ladies, I suppose?"

"Emphatically."

The Captain grunted again.

"I'm glad they're emphatic about it. But what are we going to do with them?"

The Commander, realizing that the omens were growing a little more favourable, became practical.

"They can go ashore in the milk trip at O-six-double-O, sir. Meanwhile, we must find beds for them."

"Of course we must find beds for them! But which beds? Whose beds? Let us think! Let us get down to first principles!" The Captain was getting practical too. He began to stride about the cabin, in the fashion usually adopted by him when discussing a tactical exercise with his officers.

"Randall," he continued, "must of course give up his cabin to one of them. They can't double up, worse luck: it's impossible in a service bunk. The other one must take the cabin next door. To whom does it belong? Now what's the matter?"

The Commander was shaking his head again.

"I don't think those cabins would be very suitable. They are in the after-flat, and it's fearfully stuffy. Besides, all the Midshipmen dress down there."

The Captain turned and shot a glance of sudden suspicion at his subordinate.

"Commander," he said, "this newly-discovered sense of propriety of yours is really most——" He pointed a sudden and accusing finger. "Have you been got at, by any chance? What are you trying to suggest?"

The Commander mechanically inverted his empty glass over his face, and held it there for a long moment. Then, having gone through the motions of swallowing nothing at all, he suggested huskily:—

"One in your sleeping-cabin, sir; and the other in your spare cabin."

"You *have* been got at!" said the Captain, and sat down. "It's only a detail," he added acidly, relighting his pipe, "but would you mind telling me where *I* am going to sleep?"

"We—I—thought you wouldn't mind having a camp-bed made up in here, sir."

"But I should mind!" said the Captain. "Hang it all, Commander—me in here, and two females in there!" He pointed through the open door into the lobby. "What would the ship's company say? Think of the yarns that would go floating round the mess deck!"

"You might put a sentry on their cabin, sir," suggested the Commander.

"I should hope so!" The Captain rose and went to his desk, where he took up the telephone. "Give me the Captain of Marines' cabin," he growled.

"Another advantage, sir," continued the Commander smoothly, "would be that they could use the bathroom between the two cabins."

The Captain stared at him.

"You are developing an almost morbid passion for domestic detail, Commander. Please refrain from giving rein to it until you find yourself safely married." Then into the telephone, in a very icy voice indeed:—

"Is that you, Randall? Just come up to my cabin."

He restored the telephone to its place, and then wandered out on to the stern-walk, where he stood brooding over the waters of Fan Yan Harbour. The Commander sat watching his broad back, and felt sorry for Randall.

Presently the Captain turned, and enquired solemnly:—

"What are they going to sleep in?"

"In, sir?"

"Yes, yes, yes—*in!* We can't let them doss down in their chemises—if they wear them nowadays."

"I'm not sure, sir."

"Since we've got to have them here," continued the Captain, who was plainly warming to his work, "we may as well make them feel at home. What?"

"Quite, sir, quite! We must fit them out with pyjamas. In fact, I have already told the Officer of the Day to go along to the wardroom and borrow all he can, and have them sent to my cabin for me to make a selection. The two ladies are—er—er—quite stock size."

This last intriguing item was entirely thrown away on the Captain, who was immersed in further thought.

"They will have to be silk, of course," he said, frowning. "I don't want them to go ashore and say things that will reflect on the ship's reputation."

"I will see to that, sir," the Commander assured him.

"Thank you, I will see to it myself!" snapped the Captain. "Have the pyjamas brought here."

"Very good, sir."

The Commander, having achieved his purpose with fewer casualties than he had expected, rose to go. But the Captain, who was an officer of extreme thoroughness, waved him back to his seat, and took up from the table a copy of a weekly society journal, newly out from home.

"I see by the leg papers," he remarked, "that nightgowns are

still occasionally worn. Take a look at that." He held up the periodical in question, and indicated an illustration displayed in one of the advertisement pages. "I've got some silk shirts somewhere. We could cut a V-shaped depression in the neck, hack the sleeves off, and what not."

"Would shirts be long enough, sir?" asked the Commander.

"That," replied the Captain primly, "is not our business."

There was a pause; then the Commander, fired possibly by his senior's example, enquired:—

"What about hot-water bottles, sir?"

"Women don't use them now," replied the Captain in a superior tone.

"But I assure you, sir, they do—at least, so my *fiancée* tells me."

"Well, have you got any?"

"Yes, sir—in the sick bay. They're service store articles: 'Containers—water—hot—officers for the use of.' I'll have a couple sent aft."

"All right; if you think they're so necessary." Plainly the Captain regarded the Commander as a mere plagiarist. Perhaps the Commander was conscious of this and resented it, for as he left the cabin he paused at the door to enquire, with a certain formality:—

"By the way, sir, do you wish me to make a signal to the Flagship about this?"

"Certainly."

"What sort of signal do you suggest, sir?"

"Oh, well, surely it's hardly necessary to ask me to dictate the exact wording. *Request permission to accommodate two females on board till dawn*—something of that kind."

This time it was the turn of the Commander's eyebrows to go up.

"The Commander-in-Chief would have a fit, sir! He'd probably come straight here himself, to see what it was all about."

The Captain nodded thoughtfully. "I believe he might. He's always ready to pounce on irregularities, except when he commits them on his own—— Hallo, Randall, is that you?"

Captain Randall, in mess kit, stood saluting in the doorway. The Commander promptly returned to the sofa, and prepared to enjoy the coming sacrifice. The Captain sat down at his desk, and surveyed his flinching Marine Officer in grim silence. Then:—

"Well, Randall," he began, "this is a nice mess you've landed us in."

"I'm very sorry, sir. The picquet boat——"

"The picquet boat didn't invite these guests of yours to stay to dinner. Are they—intimate friends?"

"One of them is, sir."

"A relative, perhaps?"

A slight quiver passed over Randall's hitherto rigid features.

"Not yet, sir."

The Captain's expression also relaxed a little.

"Oh!" he said. "It's like that, is it?"

"Yes, sir."

"And the other one?"

"The other one, sir, is—a sort of chaperon."

"At least you seem to have observed the proprieties. Still, we can't have ladies promenading about the officers' quarters all night. Send them up here. Your prospective relative can have my spare cabin, and we will put the chaperon in my sleeping-cabin. I'll have a camp-bed in here."

Randall could hardly believe his ears.

"Thank you, sir!" he stammered. "Really, I'm most grateful. I——"

The Captain cut him short.



"All right! Now I want you to detail a really reliable Marine sentry."

"A sentry, sir?"

"Yes, a *sentry*!" Captain Maitland's voice had risen again. "Have you any objection?"

"Oh, no, sir! Where is the sentry to be posted?"

"Over the two sleeping-cabins, of course! I want a really staid man. Have you got one?"

Captain Randall pondered. Then:—

"May I talk it over with the Sergeant-Major, sir? He's sure to know of a man with a real flair for—this sort of thing. Some one who has been on a Royal Cruise——"

The Captain decided that his Marine Officer's *moral* was being restored a little too rapidly.

"Captain Randall," he said brusquely, "there is a suspicion of levity in your present attitude which I don't like. Understand that this is a Service matter, and has got to be governed throughout by King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions. And, I may add, the custom of the Service. Commander!"

The Commander, who had been enjoying himself on the sofa, rose to his feet.

"Sir?"

"The fact that these ladies have slept on board is to be reported on a reference sheet, in triplicate, to the Commander-in-Chief——"

"Yes, sir."

"——accompanied, of course, by a brief explanation of the circumstances."

"Yes, sir."

"And see that their presence is logged."

"Yes, sir."

"Now bring up the ladies, please."

"Very good, sir." The Commander picked up his cap and was gone.

The Captain looked round his cabin. Few women had entered its precincts during the term of his office. Was it smart enough? Was it tidy enough? Not that it mattered, only women were so infernally observant. Anyhow, there were flowers on the table.

Suddenly his eye encountered the figure of Captain Randall, standing immovable by the door.

"All right, Randall!" he said impatiently. "You can go."

But Captain Randall did not go. Instead, he produced a regulation note-book from his breast pocket.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said. "May I have precise instructions regarding this sentry? I don't want him to misunderstand his duties."

The Captain gave him a suspicious glance, but all he saw was the face of a conscientious subordinate anxious to please.

"It will not be his duty," he replied testily, "to take them tea in the morning, or brush their hair, or tuck them up in bed, or do anything to them at all. It *will* be his duty to prevent all unauthorized persons from approaching or having access to their cabins; also to take note of any requirements or wishes expressed by the ladies. I think that will cover it."

Randall was busy with his pencil.

"Thank you, sir. I'll draft out orders on those lines." He looked up respectfully. "Who will be on the authorized list, sir?"

"What the devil are you talking about now, Randall?"

"It is laid down in O.U. 3001—*Instructions for Posting Sentries*—that the names of any persons authorized to pass the sentry shall be specified in his orders," quoted the conscientious Bobo. "I suppose I had better put down you, sir, the Commander, myself——"

"No one is authorized! If the ladies should require anything during the night, *I* am to be informed. Now get out of here!"

"Very good, sir," replied Randall, and vanished.

Left alone, the Captain began to tidy things up. He began with his own hair, which was black, shot with grey; then rearranged some lilies in a bowl on the round table which stood in the middle of the cabin. Presently he was conscious of a discreet presence in the doorway.

"Is that you, Ah Fong?"

"Yes, master."

The Captain cleared his throat, self-consciously.

"Listen! Two piecee ladies sleep topsides my cabins to-night. Make both bunks up."

"Me savvy!" replied Ah Fong affably. "Can make both beds one minute. Which cabin master sleep?"

"You infernal old idiot! I shall sleep on a camp-bed in here."

"Me makee one piecee mistake," said Ah Fong apologetically. "Allee same," he added in extenuation, "my master Jones, one night Hong Kong——"

"Stop these disgusting reminiscences, and get out!"

"Yes, master." Ah Fong departed, quite unruffled, to reappear a moment later.

"Two piecee missee," he announced ceremoniously.

Mary Carlton and Fay Eaton entered the cabin, escorted by the Commander.

## CHAP. VI.

## QUIS CUSTODIET?

### I

They were still wearing their afternoon party frocks, which, however, in the present phase of feminine fashions, were quite suitable for evening wear. Something pink and something pale grey: this much the Captain had time to observe while the solicitous Commander was handing the ladies over the coaming of the doorway.

The pink was introduced first.

"Captain Maitland; Miss Eaton."

This was Randall's one, the Captain decided, as he shook a clinging hand.

"Captain Maitland; Miss Carlton."

The Captain found himself shaking a very different hand—slim and vigorous—and looking into smiling brown eyes. He blinked; then asked:—

"Which is the chaperon?"

"I am," replied the grey, with a friendly smile. "Why?"

"I just wanted to be sure." The Captain smiled back. Too

late, he remembered that he had intended to scowl. "Can you—I mean, will you—sit down?" he continued, indicating the sofa.

The two intruders subsided side by side, and furtively joined hands under the cover of Mary's skirt, which was slightly more adequate to the purpose than Fay's. They squeezed fingers ecstatically. This was lots of fun, especially as their custodians were plainly quite at sea as to how to set about their duties.

The Captain gazed appealingly at the Commander, as if asking what the next move was to be.

"Cigarettes!" suggested that resourceful officer, out of the corner of his mouth.

"Of course, of course!" The Captain bustled to the desk, and took up a silver box.

"Do you smoke?" he asked Fay.

"No, thank you," said Fay, who as a prospective wife and matron had embarked that afternoon upon an inclusive course of all the domestic virtues.

"Miss Carlton? Only gaspers, I'm afraid."

"I smoke everything that burns, thank you," said Miss Carlton, smiling and helping herself.

The Captain returned the smile, again without meaning to, and went in search of matches. When he returned Miss Carlton was lighting her cigarette at the Commander's patent lighter. The Captain felt vaguely annoyed, and determined not to be

caught that way again.

"What shall we do next?" he enquired, with great heartiness.

The ladies offered no suggestion. They still continued to sit side by side, quivering under the influence of some mysterious and unexplained emotion. But the officious Commander was once more to the fore.

"Perhaps, sir, on this special occasion—a small spot?"

"Capital!" said the Captain, wishing that he had thought of this himself. "Ah Fong!"

"Yes, master," replied a bland voice, and Ah Fong entered the cabin, tottering under a mountain of silk pyjamas. These he laid at the Captain's feet, and looked up with an air of pleased expectancy, like a terrier who has retrieved a walking-stick and expects to be commended for it.

"Pyjama!" he announced, and smiled upon Mary and Fay, who giggled helplessly.

"Sentry," continued Ah Fong chattily, "he talkee me. He say Commander he talkee officers—catchee plenty piecee number one pyjama——"

The embarrassed Captain cut him short.

"Really, I'm so sorry," he said to the girls. "Pick those things up, Ah Fong, and bring them back when I send for them. And catchee large bottle of champagne—and some sandwiches," he added, by a brilliant inspiration of his own.

"Velly good, master." Ah Fong floated away with a valedictory smile.

The Captain, who, like all middle-aged bachelors, was a person of extreme delicacy of feeling where young females were concerned, turned awkwardly to Fay.

"Those were for you to make a selection from," he explained. "The Commander said you were both stock—I mean, I hope you'll find something that will fit."

"They all look lovely," said Fay.

"We are terribly grateful," added Mary. Then, tactfully, she rose and looked about her. "Captain, you've got the cutest apartment back here."

"Oh, not too bad, I hope," said the Captain modestly.

"It's much bigger than poor Bobo's," remarked a plaintive voice. It came from Fay Eaton, sitting forlornly on the edge of the sofa, her heart in the after-flat.

"Bobo?" repeated the Captain, puzzled.

"Captain Randall. Don't you call him Bobo?"

"Not as a rule. Hallo!"—as Ah Fong entered, fully laden—"here is what the doctor ordered."

During the trifling banquet which followed Fay remained sitting upon the sofa, where she entertained the Captain of the *Falcon* with an adverse and almost tearful report upon the



living conditions which prevailed in the officers' quarters of his own vessel. The Commander on his part seized the opportunity to conduct Miss Carlton out on to the stern-walk, to enjoy the cool night air.

"I suppose poor Bobo's busy just now," concluded Fay, coming to the point at last.

The Captain met her more than half-way.

"Would you like to see him?" he asked.

Fay was all smiles again.

"Could I, just for a—just to say good-night? You're sure it would be all right? Isn't he on duty? Doesn't he have to go round his men's bedrooms, or anything?"

"The Commander shall find him for you," replied the Captain cheerily. He raised his voice: "Bob, old man." The Commander appeared in the doorway leading out on to the stern-walk. "Take Miss Eaton along and find Randall for her, will you? I will endeavour to entertain Miss Carlton in your absence."

An order is an order, even during champagne and sandwiches.

"I shall be delighted," said the Commander coldly. "Come along, Miss Eaton. Au revoir, Miss Carlton!" Then he turned in the doorway and announced, with what the police call 'intent':

---

"I'll see about that signal to the Flagship at once, sir."

The Captain, who was filling up Miss Carlton's glass, looked round sharply, and replied:—

"Hold it up for the time being. I must consider the exact wording of the message. Say when, Miss Carlton!"

## II

"Well, here's to the Midshipman who busted that picquet-boat propeller!" said Miss Carlton, raising her glass.

"Carried unanimously!" replied the Captain, with a cordiality which would have surprised Mr. Wilkinson considerably, had he been present.

They were sitting on the sofa together, and the Captain had just succeeded, in the absence of outside competition, in lighting a cigarette for Miss Carlton.

"So you like my quarters?" he said.

"They're too lovely! And your ship's lovely. And the boys are lovely too."

"The boys?"

"Sure. The boys we met down in that wardrobe."

"Wardroom, I think."

"Have it your own way. But aren't they lovely boys?"

Swiftly the Captain passed in mental review the personal appearance of his principal wardroom officers. Some of these were no longer in their first youth, and none of them was remarkable for symmetry of feature; but he was in an optimistic mood, and he acquiesced in Mary's opinion with quite unjustifiable enthusiasm.

"I guess you throw a lot of parties for them up here," continued his guest.

The Captain became formal again.

"Er, no. By the custom of our Service, the Captain of a ship lives alone. He keeps rather to himself, in fact."

The round eyes of that gregarious child of nature, Mary Carlton, grew rounder still.

"For heaven's sake! What for?"

"The custom of the Service. Discipline, and so forth."

"Can you imagine that?" demanded Mary, frankly astonished. "You sitting here all dressed up, right by yourself—and the 'keep-out' sign on that door all of the time! Aren't you lonesome?"

"Terribly, sometimes," said the Captain in a low voice.

Miss Carlton, who knew much more about men than the Captain knew about women, recognized the symptoms at once. She rose, and began to rearrange the lilies in the blue bowl on the table.

"Did you fix these flowers yourself?" she asked.

"Yes."

"It's easy to see you're a bachelor, and a lonesome one—so long as you stay afloat, anyway. But I guess you step on the gas when you hit the shore."

"Step on what?"

"I mean, you make up for lost time when you get among the boy friends."

"I have very few friends," replied the Captain, shaking his head sadly; and he honestly believed he was speaking the truth.

Mary looked at him curiously.

"Is that the custom of the Service, too?" she asked, smiling to herself.

"No. It only means that I don't form friendships very readily."

"Why not? What's the matter with you? Are you deaf and dumb—or just one of those Englishmen?"

"I mean," explained the Captain with dignity, "that I can't

slip into easy friendships."

"Not a hundred-per-cent. mixer—is that it? Well, you seem to be mixing with me all right."

The Captain rose from the sofa, and joined his guest at the table.

"You are different," he said, with a solemnity of manner which plainly implied that he was saying something entirely new and original. "I have never met any one quite like you in all my life before."

Mary Carlton looked up at him, with a smile of simple gratification.

"Hand out some more of that talk," she said; "and if I cry for help, take no notice!"

"I think," continued the Captain, warming to his work, "that you are an exceptionally wonderful person."

"That's great! Continue."

The Captain came a step nearer.

"May I call you Mary?"

"Sure!"

"I wouldn't ask, of course," continued the foolish man, unable to let well alone; "only I'm nearly old enough to be your \_\_\_\_\_"

Mary looked up at him, and shook her head.

"That's not so good," she said. "An old one. Don't pull the Daddy stuff; it's not your style. Let's forget it." She smiled forgivingly. "Now, tell me your own name."

"Aylwin."

Mary's response to this was to sit down on the nearest chair, with a crow of laughter.

"You appear to be amused," said the Captain, a little hurt.

"No, oh no! I was just reminded of somebody I met this afternoon. He had a nifty name too. It sure is a great Navy." She looked up at him with a smile of genuine friendliness. "Let me try it out. Aylwin!"

"Mary!"

"Master!"

Ah Fong was standing in the doorway, proudly embracing two indiarubber hot-water bottles encased in red-flannel waistcoats.

"Go away!" shouted the Captain.

"Yes, master."

Once more the pair were alone; but the spell was broken. Evidently Mary realized this, for she rose to her feet.

"Well," she said, "I guess it's about time Fay was through with telling her Bobo good-night. I'm ready for my share of the hay, anyway. Where do I park the sleepy head?"

"In my cabin, just out here."

The Captain led the way out of the day-cabin into his own private lobby. Here three doors stood side by side.

"That's your cabin, on the right," he said. "Bathroom in the middle. Ah Fong must show you how to work the hot water; it's tricky. Miss Eaton is to have my spare cabin, on the left \_\_\_\_\_"

"But where are you going to sleep?" asked Mary, in genuine concern.

"Oh, I'll have a shakedown in my day-cabin."

Mary offered an impulsive hand.

"Aylwin," she announced, with genuine conviction, "you're the sweetest thing! Hello, here are Fay and the Commander!" She turned to greet the search-party, who had entered through the iron doorway at the other end of the lobby. "Did you locate your Bobo, Fay?"

"No," said Fay disconsolately.

"Never mind. He'll be around with the dawn. I'll say so! Good-night, Commander! Good-night—you Aylwin!"

The curtains swung to, and the Captain, with a curious

sensation of walking upon a pneumatic carpet instead of a steel deck, led the way back into his day-cabin. Here the indefatigable Ah Fong was waiting behind a rampart of gents' haberdashery.

"Master pickee two nicee piecee pyjama?" he suggested.

"Good Lord! I'd forgotten," said the Captain, and began to burrow into the heap. "Let me see; these will do for Miss Eaton." He selected a confection of pink silk. "Now for Miss Carlton. Most of these are awful.... That's a little better.... Well, I suppose these will have to do." He extracted a tasteful creation in mauve and white, the property, incidentally, of Mr. Wilkinson, and reverently smoothed and folded it. Ah Fong stood by, impassive, but doubtless thinking his own ribald Oriental thoughts.

Meanwhile a signalman had entered the cabin, cap in hand, and handed a written message to the Commander. That officer read it, and smiled.

"All right," he said. "You can go." The man disappeared, and the Commander turned to the Captain.

"We need not have troubled after all, sir," he said. "Everything is all right."

"What's that?" asked the preoccupied Maitland.

"Here is a signal to me from the Commander of the Flagship, sir. Shall I read it to you?"

"If you like."



The Commander read the signal, not without a certain discreet unction:—

*"I notice your picquet boat has been hoisted inboard. Would it be any convenience if the Flagship's last boat were to call alongside you on her way ashore?"*

The Captain turned slowly round, and stood staring.

"Bob, you didn't send a message to the Flagship, about—your guests?"

"No, sir," replied the Commander, generously ignoring the unsportsmanlike innuendo. "This offer of the Flagship's picquet boat is just a stroke of luck. Shall I accept it?"

"Accept it?" The Captain was speaking quite earnestly now. "Don't be silly, old man! Send this reply: *Thank you, we have nothing to send ashore till to-morrow morning.* Ah Fong, take these to Miss Eaton—and Miss Carlton."

Ah Fong withdrew from the cabin. The Captain stood glaring defiantly at his smirking subordinate.

## CHAP. VII.

## THE MIDDLE WATCH

Eight bells had just sounded, and all was quiet on board H.M.S. *Falcon*.

Not really quiet, for a ship-of-war never sleeps. It dozes uneasily, ready to spring to life at the shortest possible notice.

Whilst six hundred officers and men reposed in hammocks and on bunks in cabins, at least thirty souls who had been keeping the First Watch, from 8 p.m. until midnight, began to go to bed, whilst another thirty began the Middle Watch, which, with the solaces of frequent cups of ship's cocoa, would keep them awake until 4 a.m. There was also on the boat-deck a special party of ten men who had not yet been to bed at all, and who had little hope of sleeping before the rising sun tinged the mountains and announced the dawn of another working day. We will return to this blaspheming band in a moment, for it is worth while to make a brief tour of inspection and see what the Middle Watch men were doing.

On the forebridge two signalmen paced up and down, one eye on the Flagship's masthead flashing lamp. In Number Two dynamo-room a stoker, dripping with perspiration, watched a seven-hundred ampere armature humming round in its endless task of supplying electric power for the *Falcon's* complicated equipment. In Number Three boiler-room three stokers attended the oil sprayers and feed pumps of two boilers, which supplied the steam for a variety of purposes, ranging from dynamo engines to the hot water in the officers' bathrooms.

At the main switchboard a leading torpedo-man, glistening in a temperature of one hundred and twenty-eight degrees Fahrenheit, carried on a desultory conversation through a voice-pipe with the main telephone exchange operator situated on the other side of the bulkhead. In the main wireless office the Petty Officer telegraphist dozed in a chair, and the ordinary

telegraphist sweated in a silent cabinet while he took in the Press News on the shortwave transmission from England. Later on the message would have to be typed out. Fourteen copies: one for the Captain with his morning tea, one for the Commander, one for the Signal Officer, one for the wardroom, one for the gunroom, one for the Warrant Officers' mess, and seven for the ship's company. One copy spare. The Royal Navy is a methodical organization.

The Seaman Torpedoman of the Watch slowly wandered round the ship between decks, inspecting and oiling ventilating fans—popping up on deck for a quick cigarette when things seemed quiet.

In the engine-room half a dozen men under the Warrant Officer of the Watch attended the auxiliary machine, the brine pumps, the oil-fuel pumps, and the bilge pumps.

On the quarter-deck the Officer of the Watch walked up and down, thinking of England, of a girl at the dance that afternoon, and whether or not the Australians would get back the Ashes.

The Quartermaster and Corporal of the Watch also drifted about the quarter-deck; and from time to time the Officer of the Watch, preceded by the Corporal carrying a candle-lantern, 'went rounds'—a weary journey up and down ladders, in and out of compartments, examining magazines and visiting sentries.

The sentry in the cell flat, for instance.

"Two prisoners: all correct, sir."

Next, the sentry on the half-deck.

"All correct, sir."

Presently there would be the special sentry to visit, on the Captain's cabins.

What of the ten eloquent mariners whom we left upon the boat-deck?

These were stokers and engine-room artificers, who, under the direction of Engineer-Lieutenant Macadam, were working furiously to get the second picquet boat ready for the milk trip at 0600.

They sweated and toiled by the light of arc lamps—hacking, cutting, chipping, and filing as they struggled to detach the crinkled propeller from the shaft. Mr. Wilkinson sat gloomily surveying the scene, which would have delighted the heart of an artist, but depressed Mr. Wilkinson. The fact that he had been officially recommended to stay up and watch "how the engineers did it" by no means convinced him that this would be the last he would hear of the matter.

At 1 a.m. Stoker James severely cut his finger. The sick-berth steward was aroused. Not liking the look of it, he called the Surgeon-Commander. This officer sent a message to the Surgeon-Lieutenant. The messenger mistook the cabin, and called the Gunnery Officer. Altogether the night started stickily.

Bang! Bang! Crash! Bang! The propeller nut was now being attacked with a sledge.

The Captain woke up. He pressed a bell—two bells. Solicitous persons came running, and were received with marked discourtesy and vitriolic enquiries. Explanations followed, which entirely failed to give satisfaction. A message was sent to the Officer of the Watch, who passed it on, with relish, to Engineer-Lieutenant Macadam, who sarcastically suggested that the Officer of the Watch should come and bite the nut off with his teeth. Or perhaps the ladies would like to come up and help.

However, in due course the refractory nut was removed, and the work proceeded in comparative quiet. Below deck, the night's slumber was resumed.

The Commander, conscious of a recent delicate situation handled (by him) in masterly style, was by this time asleep and dreaming. No doubt he was dreaming of Nancy. Captain Maitland, stretched upon a camp-bed in his day-cabin, was resolutely making the worst of what he foresaw was going to be a thoroughly restless night.

In the Captain's spare cabin, Fay, completely enveloped in the pink-silk pyjamas, was already sleeping like the healthy infant that she was—surrounded by bath-sponges, bath-salts, ivory-backed hair-brushes, toilet soaps of various brands, and bottles of assorted essences and extracts, ranging from Scrubbs' Ammonia to Honey and Flowers, all collected and contributed by the assiduous Bobo.

Mary Carlton, lying on top of her bunk in the other cabin beyond the intervening bathroom, was wide awake. She was a light-hearted enough child of nature, and a daughter of the

most ebullient nation on earth, but she was conscious to-night of a certain gravity of spirit.

She was a century older than Fay—she was nearly twenty-eight—and had seen more of the world—much more. She understood men, and felt like the mother of most of them. There had been something almost moving about the demeanour of these large, self-conscious, heavy-handed hosts of hers—something that rather made her want to cry. They had been so anxious to put her at her ease; so solidly British in their sense of propriety; so systematically futile in their contributions to her comfort, from the heavy, odoriferous goatskin rug on her bed to the enormous pair of felt slippers on the floor. Even a rather battered golliwog—a relic of some long-forgotten revel—had been exhumed from somewhere and hung up in her cabin, apparently as a standard boudoir adjunct. She was wearing a spare greatcoat of the Captain's, with four gold bars on each shoulder-strap. Under her head a large silk handkerchief was spread, tacked there to soften any possible asperity in her service pillow.

She lay on her back, staring up at the white-painted steel deck-beams, dimly visible in the light which filtered through her open, curtained doorway from the lobby outside, and thinking of all her hosts. They were a great bunch, especially Captain Maitland.

How still everything was—kind of soothing! Just a slight oscillation of the *Falcon's* hull and a few distant noises. The operations upon the picquet-boat's propeller were mercifully concluded, but there still remained the perpetual metallic clangs and echoes which characterize a stationary ship.

Nothing else could be heard, except the periodical tang of a bell. She lay listening. Presumably her neighbours, Fay and the Captain, were asleep by now.... Fay was a sweet kid, if dumb, and Bobo was the cutest little fellow.... The Captain, again—that camp-bed of his? She hoped he was comfortable.... Too bad to turn him out of his own cabin....

Suddenly the silence was broken by the sound of marching feet—the tramp of two pairs of regulation boots approaching the lobby from the alleyway leading forward. The tramping grew louder: the whole ship seemed to reverberate. Then, just outside her cabin door, a sharp voice gave an order.

"Alt! Right turn! Stand at—ease!"

Two pairs of heels came sharply down on the deck, and there was silence, broken only by the stertorous breathing of a heavy body disinclined, apparently, for exercise. Then the voice of Corporal Bunnett was uplifted in stately declamation.

*"Orders for Sentry in Captain's lobby—Para One. His post extends from bulkhead one-eight-six to bulkhead two-o-one. He shall walk his post in a soldier-like manner, and not leave same under any pretext whatsoever unless authorized to do so. Look to your front!"*

"All right, Corporal!" said a slightly injured voice.

"*Para Two,*" continued the Corporal, majestically articulating every syllable. "*His duties shall consist in preventing access to all cabins on his post, of all unauthorized persons.*"

*"Para Three. He is to place himself at the disposal of the occupants of said cabins as may be requisite and necessary. Signed, E. Randall, Captain Marines. Understand your orders?"*

"I think so, Corporal," replied the injured voice. Mary recognized it now: it was the voice of Marine Ogg, the man who had waited upon them at dinner in Bobo's cabin—a regular feller!

But Corporal Bunnett was not of Mary's opinion.

"What do you mean—think so?" he barked. "Don't you know what you're 'ere for? There's a couple of bits in them cabins."

"Oh?" Ogg sounded more interested now. "Friends of the Skipper's?"

"Look to your front; and never mind whose friends they is! It ain't for the likes of you and me to worry about that. What you got to do is to carry out your blinking orders, what I just read to you."

"Very good, Corporal."

"And when you walks your post," pursued the Corporal, "try not to breathe too 'eavy or squeak your boots—see? I don't suppose these two 'ave got the 'abit of sleeping under a sentry."

There was a pause: evidently Ogg was cogitating.

"Still," he said presently, "I've got to walk me post. Look; it



says so in Para One."

The Corporal uttered a deep groan.

"My lad," he announced, "it's brains like yours what lowers the whole standard of the Royal Marine Corpse. It don't say as 'ow you've to keep your boots *on*—do it, you fat'ead?"

"Still," persisted the dubious Ogg, "I ain't never 'eard of a sentry without boots. Besides, I've got a big 'ole in me sock."

"Do you suppose these two ladies is going to come out and inspect your perishing feet, at this time of night?" enquired the little Corporal sarcastically.

This seemed to convince Ogg, for he merely replied:—

"Ave it your own way, Corporal." He moved away a few paces, and Mary heard him sit heavily down upon the deck. Presumably he was taking his boots off. But he was not yet happy, for presently his voice was heard again.

"I say, Corporal."

"Well, what is it now?"

"I don't quite get the 'ang of Para Three."

"What do you mean? It's plain enough, ain't it?"

"It says," announced Ogg, indicating the text of the orders: "*Place 'imself at the disposal of the occupants.*" Now, as man to man, what does that mean?"

There was silence: plainly Ogg was not alone in his difficulties. But, true to the traditions of his office, the Corporal merely raised his voice from *forte* to *fortissimo*, and announced:—

"It means what it says, of course. You've passed the 'Igher Educational Standard for Promotion, ain't you?"

"Yes; but——"

"Well, any'ow, I didn't draft the orders. If an emergency arises"—the Corporal had evidently decided to stifle all further protestations in a blanket of words—"you'll 'ave to show reesource, and act according to the dictates of the military situation, same as what it teaches you in your Manual of Infantry Training. So long!"

His footsteps were heard retreating. But Ogg was not yet done with.

"Corporal"—he was almost bleating now—"I don't like it! I'm a married man——"

The Corporal turned, and fired his parting shot:—

"That's why you was picked for this job, my lad! A chaperoney, that's all you are!" And his footsteps died away.

Ogg uttered a deep sigh, and struggled to his feet. Mary, peeping by this time through the curtain, saw him put his boots tidily away under the projecting ledge which accommodated the ship's log, and then begin to parade the deck between the prescribed bulkheads—in other words, the steel partitions

which separated the Captain's day-cabin from the lobby on the one side, and the lobby from the alleyway on the other. He walked delicately: obviously he was testing the surface of the deck for stray tin-tacks and other painful impediments. Occasionally he muttered to himself: once Mary heard him say:—

"Another blinking Middle Watch!"

Here, plainly, was a fellow-creature dissatisfied with life, one who would probably welcome human society and a few words of human comfort. Mary, buttoning the Captain's greatcoat more securely over her pyjamas, thrust aside the brown curtain and stepped out into the lobby.

"I just can't sleep," she announced, in a cheerful voice.

Marine Ogg, whose back was turned at the time, jumped several inches into the air.

When he came down again, he whirled round, palpitating gently.

"Ooh! Lord, Miss, 'ow you startled me!"

"I'm sorry," said Mary. She advanced upon him, and, much to Ogg's embarrassment, shook hands warmly.

"You took care of us at dinner," she said. "You are Mr.— I didn't get your name."

"Hogg, Miss."

"Sure! Mr. Hogg."

"Not 'Ogg, Miss—Hogg."

"I said Hogg."

"I know, Miss, but—it's the other one!"

Mary nodded politely.

"I get you, Mr. Ogg," she said. "Forgive a poor foreigner."

"That's quite all right, Miss," replied Ogg, not to be outdone in international courtesy.

Mary, who was perennially in a mood for conversation, looked round for some place to sit. During the afternoon the lobby had been filled with deck-chairs and improvised sitting-out places—"ugging 'utches," the crew called them—but now everything had been cleared away, except the ship's rum-tub, a majestic brass-bound cask of polished oak, with a gilded legend running round its exterior—*Fear God, Honour the King*. She perched herself upon this, and continued:—

"And here you are again, working as hard as ever."

"The Royal Marines, Miss," explained Ogg, "never sleeps. Like the"—here he decided that a little patriotic propaganda might not be amiss—"like the sun what never sets on our British Empire."

Mary nodded gravely.

"And what are you doing right now, Mr. Ogg?"

Ogg came automatically to attention, closed his eyes, and concentrated upon a visualization of his typewritten orders.

"I am preventing any unauthorized person," he recited, "from 'aving access to your cabin; and I'm 'ere, 'andy like, in case you or the other one wants anything. I'm at your entire disposal, you may say, Miss. Para Three."

"Is that so?"

"Them's my orders."

"The British Navy thinks of everything," said Mary.

"Well, you see, Miss," replied Ogg reprovingly, "we don't want to 'ave no blinking scandal on board this ship."

"Why not?"

Ogg looked thoroughly shocked; then hastened to improve the occasion.

"Well, Miss, you, being a foreigner, may not understand; but we're a respectable nation, and we 'as our reputations to consider."

"I see," said Mary gravely. "And of course you have your own reputation to consider, Mr. Ogg."

"Not 'alf I don't 'ave to, Miss," replied the paragon. "And 'ere's my reasons."

He removed his round cap and produced from its interior a battered photograph, of the picture post-card variety. This he handed to Mary.

"Nine of 'em," he said modestly, "including the wife. That's 'er"—he pointed with a thumb about the size of a banana—"in the middle, 'olding on to the twins."

"Your reputation ought to be safe with a family like that, Mr. Ogg," said Mary, after examining the group in detail.

Ogg nodded.

"It ought to be," he agreed. "But you never know, in this world. I likes to be on the safe side myself; so whenever I feels inclined—which of course ain't often—to stray from my duty in any direction, I just outs with this, and takes a slant at it." He restored the post-card carefully to its permanent habitation. "And talking of women and children generally, 'ow's the other young lady getting on—Captain Randall's bit of—Miss Heaton, Miss?"

"She's fine. She has been the life of the party since we shed Miss Hopkinson. By the way, what did you do with Miss Hopkinson?"

"I brought 'er into this very lobby, Miss, and then abandoned ship, as I was telling you all in Captain Randall's cabin. If Marine Price 'andled 'er as I expect 'e would, she's right home on the beach now, and no back answers!"

Mary gazed down from her perch, almost reverently.

"Mr. Ogg," she said, "you're all the loveliest men. Always at our disposal. Para Three."

"I wish there was a Para Four, Miss!" said Ogg, greatly to his own surprise. He removed his cap guiltily, and surveyed its steadying contents. At the same moment a light flickered in the alleyway outside, and the sound of tramping feet became audible.

"Look out, Miss!" he whispered. "'Ere's the Officer of the Watch going 'is rounds. Get inside your cabin, do!"

He hurried to Mary's cabin door and held back the curtain for her. Mary hopped nimbly off the rum-tub.

"Ask him to put in a Para Four," she said.

"*Ush, Miss!*"

A moment later Captain Randall entered the lobby, followed by Corporal Bunnett, bearing a lighted candle-lantern. He found Ogg standing rigidly beside Mary's door, the picture of vigilant efficiency.

"All correct, sentry?" asked the Corporal.

"All correct, sir," replied Ogg, addressing himself to Captain Randall, as in duty bound.

"Anything to report?" continued the Corporal, in accordance with routine.

"Yes, sir," replied Ogg unexpectedly. "One of the ladies

can't sleep."

Captain Randall became tensely interested at once.

"Can't sleep? How the devil do you know?"

"She said so, sir."

Randall advanced a couple of paces, almost threateningly.

"Have you been in their cabins?" he demanded of Ogg.

"*Me, sir?*" gasped that blameless man.

"You must warn 'im, sir," breathed the Corporal into Randall's right ear, "that anythink he says now may be used in evidence against 'im."

Suddenly Mary's curtain was drawn aside, and she reappeared.

"Why, hello, Captain Randall!" she exclaimed. "I thought I recognized your voice."

"Good-evening, Miss Carlton," said Randall formally. "Is everything all right?"

"Everything's dandy."

"Hallo, Bobo!"

It was Fay this time, emerging from the other door, in a Jaeger dressing-gown which trailed on the deck behind her.



The infatuated gentleman thus addressed spun round on his toes, and with a joyful exclamation started in Fay's direction. Then, suddenly conscious of the protruding eyeballs and wide-open mouth of Marine Ogg, and the exaggerated aloofness of Corporal Bunnett, he stopped short; then dashed into the bathroom, followed by the disappointed gaze of Miss Eaton.

"Bobo, darling, what's the matter?"

She was answered by a roar of escaping steam, from a cloud of which her beloved presently emerged, closing the bathroom door behind him.

"As I expected!" he said. "There's no water on this bathroom. Corporal, jump forward to the engineers' office, and tell them about it."

"Very good, sir," replied the Corporal, and vanished like a tactful sprite.

"And you, Ogg," continued Randall, "can go—go—to the engine-room, in case the Engineer Officer of the Watch is down there."

"Yessir." And Ogg padded gravely away in his stockinged soles.

Randall turned self-consciously to the two girls.

"Service bathrooms are always like that," he explained. "Either you get a torrent of water and no heat, or live steam and no water." Then, indicating the retreating form of Ogg:—

"Is that fellow behaving himself?"

"Mr. Ogg?" said Mary warmly. "He's the ace of British propriety."

"And are you both quite comfortable?" continued Randall tenderly, turning to Fay.

"I'm fine," said Mary, addressing the back of his tunic. "I can't sleep, and I want to smoke, and I just turned a jet of live steam on myself. But otherwise everything's——"

Realizing that she had failed to secure Captain Randall's undivided attention, she concluded:—

"Well, so long, children! Your chaperon knows her job!"

She disappeared into her cabin, and Randall and Fay proceeded to bid one another a proper good evening. This ceremony was still in progress when Ogg and the Corporal returned. The latter was equal to the occasion. He placed his lips to Ogg's left ear.

"Alt! About turn! Quick march!" he whispered; and the pair withdrew, in unbroken formation, entirely unnoticed.

"I hear you were looking for me, sweetheart," said Randall, relaxing his hold at last.

"Yes, the Commander took me. I don't think he looked very hard, though."

"Didn't he? I shall have to report him to Nancy," said

Randall humorously. Then, with satisfaction:—

"I see you've got my dressing-gown on."

"Yes, darling. It's lovely."

"But"—Bobo's brow furled, and his voice grew cold and stern—"why are you wearing somebody else's pyjamas? And whose are they?"

"I'm so sorry, angel. The Captain chose them for me. I don't know who they belong to."

"If it's a Snotty——!" said Randall grimly.

He drew his beloved towards him, thrust her shingled head forwards and downwards, and examined the tab sewn into the back of her collar.

"That little swine!" he remarked. He restored Fay's head to its proper position. "He sells them to me to-morrow!"

"Sweetness!"

"Rosebud!"

Ogg and the Corporal, patiently waiting in the shadows beyond, groaned in unison.

"Are you sure you've got everything else you want?" resumed Bobo presently. "Did you get the bath-sponge, and so forth?"

"Yes. Ah Fong laid everything out for me. He simply wouldn't go away. At one time I thought he was going to give me a bath himself!"

"Sweetheart, what marvellous things you say!"

"Do I really?"

"Do you? Everything about you is simply too——"

"Come on!" hissed the Corporal desperately. "By your left!"

Portentous tramping in the alleyway announced to the lovers that their tryst was terminated. One final embrace, and they broke. Fay offered a formal hand.

"Good-night, Captain Randall," she said, in a high voice. "Must you really go?"

"I'm afraid so; I have my rounds to do. Good-night, Miss Eaton. Corporal!"

"Say good-night to Mary," suggested Fay, as she disappeared into her cabin.

"Righto!"

Randall banged cheerfully upon the door-frame of Mary's cabin. Then he turned, to find himself face to face with a tousled figure in pyjamas—the figure of Captain Maitland, who had just emerged from his day-cabin.

Randall came mechanically to attention, and saluted.

"Good evening, sir," he faltered.

The Captain surveyed the dimly lit lobby, empty save for Randall and the two Marines; then glanced up at the illuminated clock over the log-book.

"Captain Randall," he enquired in a voice of thunder, "may I ask what all this uproar means outside my cabin at this hour of the—— Oh, my Lord!"

With one frenzied bound the Captain of the *Falcon* disappeared backwards into his day-cabin. Randall turned round. Mary Carlton had reappeared, and was standing in her doorway.

"Who was that?" she asked.

"The Captain."

"Oh! I didn't like his pyjamas as much as mine."

"Well, I wouldn't tell him so, if I were you. This is serious— for all of us."

He came to attention again. The Captain had reappeared, wearing a blue raincoat over his night attire. He bowed formally to the smiling Mary, and turned upon his Marine Officer.

"Captain Randall!"

"Sir?"

"What is the meaning of this disturbance?"

"Nothing, sir."

"*Nothing?*" The Captain had assumed his normal quarter-deck voice. "I am awakened by a babel of conversation; and so also apparently is my guest, Miss Carlton"—he bowed deferentially in Mary's direction—"and you say it is nothing! Who is responsible? You or the sentry??"

This was almost too much for Ogg, but a gesture from the Corporal stopped him in time.

"It's all my fault, Captain," said Mary cheerfully. "I just couldn't sleep."

"I'm not surprised to hear that, Miss Carlton. However, I promise you shall not be disturbed again. Good-night. Captain Randall, I shall go into the matter in the morning—thoroughly! Meanwhile, absolute silence for the rest of the night!"

A moment later the Captain's lobby was a solitude once more. Profound silence reigned throughout the after-flat, broken only by the periodical clang of the ship's bell and the pad-padding of Marine Ogg's large flat feet.

Whilst Marine Ogg, a prey to perplexing reflections, kept watch and ward over the persons of two lovely females in H.M.S. *Falcon*, another man of the sea was grappling with a situation which, awkward at any time, was rendered disastrous by the presence of two more of the species.

Captain MacWhirtle had been unfortunate in his career at sea. We need not here dwell upon the details of the professional mishaps which had rendered him only too glad to accept the command of the *Nestor* at a time of life when his contemporaries were lording it upon the bridges of ocean greyhounds. The *Nestor* was old and slow, uncertain and unsafe, but she was a command which carried a salary of three hundred dollars Mexican per month.

When Sir George Thrump hired the *Nestor* at Nagasaki, on time charter, all found, for six months, her owners had promised to provide him with a reliable captain. They had discovered Captain MacWhirtle more or less on his beam ends, and had installed him in command, with instructions to take the yacht across to China and report to Sir George. That eminent financier had preceded the *Nestor* in a Canadian Pacific liner, and whilst awaiting the arrival of "my little yacht" had made friends with the naval Commander-in-Chief and Lady Hewitt.

The yacht duly reached Fan Yan Island—to the relief of Captain MacWhirtle and, it must be added, the pained surprise of her Japanese owners, who had been completely confident that she was quite incapable of crossing the Yellow Sea, and had insured her on terms proportionate to their belief. They had not reckoned with Captain MacWhirtle—drunkard once a

quarter, shaky on the theoretical aspects of navigation by the observed altitudes of astronomical bodies, but heavy of hand, quick of boot, and as dour a Scot as ever walked down the middle of Sauchihall Street on a Saturday night looking for trouble.

Within twenty-four hours of leaving Nagasaki MacWhirtle had quelled a mutiny of his mixed crew, by the simple process of laying out the ringleader with a spanner; and by the time that the *Nestor* reached Fan Yan her discipline was worthy of the Fleet Flagship. Immediately after the mutiny MacWhirtle had thrown six bottles of whisky overboard. He knew his limitations.

Sir George decided to celebrate the arrival of his new toy by giving a yachting party up the Sing Foo Estuary. This beauty spot of the China coast, with its hundred-and-one islands, each with its pagoda, lies north of Fan Yan Island. Once a vessel has threaded her way between the bamboo-wooded cliffs which mark the narrow entrance, she is land-locked; but between that entrance and the summer anchorage of the British Fleet stretch sixty miles of open sea.

Sir George and Lady Thrump, the Misses Thrump, and party, had, with two exceptions, decided to proceed to the estuary by land, and join the yacht when she had dropped anchor in its reassuringly placid waters. The two exceptions were Lady Hewitt and Miss Nancy. Nancy had flatly refused to miss the *Thé Dansant* in the *Falcon*, and openly rejoiced in the prospect of an open-sea trip. Her mother, who had old-fashioned ideas, decided that she must accompany her daughter.



Thus it came about that when the *Nestor's* main engines stopped abruptly at midnight, with the vessel equidistant from her ports of departure and destination, Captain MacWhirtle's technical difficulties were complicated by the presence on board of two lady passengers. That presence was almost immediately felt.

As soon as the engines stopped, without explanation or apology to the bridge, MacWhirtle proceeded to the engine-room skylight and addressed the Latin-American engineer.

"Be-low there! Ye dirrty wee Dago! What the——?" He proceeded to put a string of leading questions, to which an apologetic Latin-American voice returned voluble and contradictory answers from the depths below. The answers proving unsatisfactory, the Captain had just embarked upon a full-blooded catalogue of the things which would happen to the engineer if the main engines were not functioning again in two minutes, when a high, well-bred voice from the door of the deck-cabin enquired:—

"Is that the Captain?"

"It is, your Ledyship."

"What has happened?"

"I'm just ascertaining, your Ledyship. You son of Satan ——!"

He resumed his consultation with his invisible colleague, and presently elicited the mysterious information that the weed-trap was choked, and that the circulating water inlet

"maka feeneesh."

"Clean it, you dog!" commanded the Captain.

"*Impossibilimente!*" wailed the engineer.

"Then wait you there, while I come down to you," roared the Captain, a trifle optimistically. He made for the engine-room hatch, but was brought up all standing by actual contact with Lady Hewitt, that female Mussolini, superb in nightgown, pigtails, and befrilled dressing-gown. An electric torch suddenly illuminated the Captain's red nose and watery eyes.

"The ship has stopped, and is rolling most unpleasantly," announced Lady Hewitt. She was right in both particulars, for the *Nestor*, having lost steerage way, had fallen into the trough of a ground swell, and was wallowing from side to side with slow, sickening monotony.

"I doubt you are right, your Luddyship."

"There is no doubt about it at all," replied Lady Hewitt, who was unfamiliar with Scottish idiom.

"What's gone wrong with the works, Captain MacWhirtle?" enquired a fresh voice, as Nancy emerged from her cabin. "Hallo, Mother; you up as well? All hands on deck—what? Are we booked for the bottom?"

Lady Hewitt turned the torch on her daughter, and discovered a neat figure in *crêpe-de-chine* pyjamas. A protesting sound escaped her lips, which was intensified when the *Nestor* rolled playfully to port.

"Put on a dressing-gown at once," she said faintly. "Don't you realize that the Captain is here?"

"Sorry if I've shocked you, Captain, but safety first!" explained the practical Nancy. "Up she goes!" This in response to a heavy roll on the part of the yacht.

"*Don't*, Nancy!" moaned Lady Hewitt. "Captain, how long will it be before we start again?"

"It all depends, your Lddyship, on when yon—yon—yon"—he sought desperately for some sufficiently polite description of the engineer—"yon heathen body gets back his vacuum."

"Poor fellow! has he lost it?" commented Nancy.

Lady Hewitt, mastering an almost hundred-per-cent. physical disability by a superb effort of will, rounded majestically upon her daughter.

"Nancy, go to your cabin," she said, "and fetch my medicine chest." Then, turning to the bewildered MacWhirtle: "Captain, do not hesitate to give me details. I am a mother."

A battle of conversational cross-purposes now ensued between the Captain and Lady Hewitt, in the course of which her bemused ladyship was given to understand that the Latin-American engineer:—

(1) Had choked his weed-trap.

(2) Gotten a pressure in his condenser.

(3) Was threatened with a deposit on his tubes.

It was only when Nancy returned, minus the medicine chest and smoking a nauseating cigarette, and joined the fray in the *role* of self-appointed interpreter, that it was brought home to Lady Hewitt that the alarming symptoms enumerated by the Captain were the misfortune of the yacht, and not of her engineer.

"How long will it take to repair all these things?" she asked, clinging grimly to a reeling stanchion.

The Captain considered.

"If yon felly doon there were a Scotsman," he replied at length, "and a qualified Marine engineer, instead of a coffee-coloured son of a——"

"How *long*?" repeated Lady Hewitt.

"Press the accelerator, Captain!" urged Miss Hewitt.

"I doubt his ability to do anything at all before he gets some daylight doon there," was the depressing reply.

"You mean to say—oh, why can't it stop rolling?—that we shall have to stay here until to-morrow morning?"

"Here or hereabout. There's a three-knot tide, you'll understand, and rocks on our lee; but it's to be hoped——"

"How long before we can get *on*?" cried Lady Hewitt, making a final effort to pin this discursive mariner down to a

definite statement.

"Ca' it eight hours."

Lady Hewitt abandoned her hold of the stanchion, and tottered to the door of her deck cabin. Here she turned.

"I am going to lie down again," she said—"possibly to die. Send a message to my husband at once."

"To the Admiral, your Leddyship—at this time of night?" Apparently Captain MacWhirtle had had previous experience of awakening irascible superiors at untimely hours.

"Yes, at once! Tell him—tell him to send something for us at once!" Lady Hewitt fell rather than walked through the curtained doorway of her cabin.

"And tell him to make it snappy, Captain," said Nancy.

## II

Leading-Telegraphist Bloggs, on duty in the silent cabinet of the main wireless office of the Flagship, paused at the end of the seventh page of his letter to Miss Parkington of South-sea, seized a signal pad, adjusted the head-phones over his ears, listened intently, then started the motor generator and pressed a key. He listened again, then wrote rapidly upon the pad.

The message completed, he detached the top sheet of the pad, folded it into a small packet, placed it in a cylinder, dropped this container into a small hole, then turned a lever which started an air pump. The container was sucked along a tube which threaded its way through many bulkheads, and after a journey of about one hundred and fifty yards arrived with an unnerving plop in front of the Yeoman of Signals on the forebridge.

This gentleman opened the container, unfolded the message, read it, whistled, sucked his teeth, and with a warning to the Signalmen of the Watch to look after the bridge, proceeded with haste to the bedside of the Flag-Lieutenant, the Honourable Maurice Lashwood. That sleepy youth read the message, raised his aristocratic eyebrows, donned his trousers, a monkey-jacket, and a white silk scarf, assured himself that his hair was still waved, placed a telescope under his arm and a cap on his head, and proceeded to the Commander-in-Chief's sleeping-cabin.

In this precise manner, thanks to the miracle of science and unsleeping vigilance of the British Navy, the news was conveyed to Admiral Sir Hercules Hewitt that the yacht *Nestor*, in which was embarked all that he loved and feared most in the world, was lying disabled half-way between Fan Yan Island and the Sing Foo Estuary.

"Damn!" exclaimed the great man, blinking over the message—"and damn again! What are we going to do about it?"

"Send a ship, sir?" suggested Flagg.

"Of course we must send a ship," said the Admiral testily.  
"Of course! Even I had thought of that, Lashwood. But which?  
Who's got the guard?"

"The *Falcon*, sir."

"Very well. Tell her to raise steam for fifteen knots with all  
despatch, and report when ready to proceed."

"Yes, sir."

"What's the glass doing?"

"I haven't noticed, sir—lately."

"Find out!"

"Yes, sir."

"And bring me a chart."

"Yes, sir. Is that all?"

"No! Put out that damned light! It's hitting me in the face."

"Yes, sir."

The cabin returned to darkness, and the Commander-in-Chief sank back, a prey to perplexing thoughts. Really, it was intolerable that this should happen—in the middle of the night, of all times. Of course the damned yacht was quite safe. Quite. Still, what had the message said? Something about "*main engines disabled*." Um! Might be anything, or nothing. Then

that bit, "*Message sent at Lady Hewitt's request.*" What did that mean? Not anything or nothing this time, he feared. Lady Hewitt's messages to him nearly always meant something—something sinister and compulsory. She evidently proposed to hold him responsible for whatever was now happening to her; and the voice of experience told the Admiral that that responsibility would be magnified in direct proportion to the time occupied in effecting a rescue. Yet what could he do, beyond sending a ship out?

This question was immediately answered by another voice, the voice of conscience:—

*"You can accompany the rescue-party yourself. What do you think of that, my lad?"*

A brief and one-sided argument now took place. The Admiral pointed out, with truth, that his presence on board the *Falcon* would be both embarrassing and unnecessary, and would merely add to the general upheaval. He added, rather superfluously, that he had the utmost confidence in the ability of Captain Maitland and his officers. He concluded by mentioning, *ad misericordiam*, that it was a damned cold night.

Conscience said no more, but merely called upon Experience to offer a few observations. After listening to these, the Admiral realized that the game was up, and began to grope for the light-switch.

There was a knock at the door. It was the Flag-Lieutenant.

"What is the glass doing?" asked the Admiral anxiously.



"Falling, sir. Rather fast."

"Hell!" said the Admiral heartily. Then he rose to his feet and resumed his official manner.

"Have my barge alongside in ten minutes, Lashwood. Send the Captain of the *Falcon* a signal, explaining the situation, and add that I shall accompany him to sea."

"*You*, sir?"

"Yes. And you too!"

## CHAP. IX.

## SAILING ORDERS

It was two o'clock in the morning, and Marine Ogg, thoroughly perturbed by the night's events and apprehensive of the morrow's consequences, still maintained his mournful vigil.

A shingled head appeared round the edge of Mary's cabin curtain, and a cheerful voice enquired:—

"Are you still there, Casabianca?"

Ogg turned, and flapped his large hands frantically.

"Ssh! For Gawd's sake, Miss!"

"Why the agitation?" Mary was strolling airily about the

lobby again.

Ogg pointed a trembling finger in the direction of the day-cabin.

"'Im! The Owner! 'E'll 'ear us! 'E says 'e wants absolute silence; and what 'e wants in this ship 'e gets. Oh, you may laugh, Miss; but you've never seen 'im stripped for action, and I 'ave. He can be a terror when 'e likes. You should 'ear 'im on general drill days!"

"I should like to," said Mary sincerely. "Who's that coming along now?"

Ogg peered through the iron doorway which led forward.

"'Strewth, it's the Commander! You'd better pop back into your downy, Miss. 'E mustn't find us together 'ere, like this."

Mary gave him a whimsical glance.

"I believe you're afraid of being compromised, Mr. Ogg," she said.

"I should jolly well think I was!" replied Ogg frankly. "Alone with you in your kiss-me-quicks, in the Middle Watch! 'Op it, *please!*"

Once more he bundled the irrepressible Miss Carlton into her cabin, and stood virtuously to attention as the Commander hurried in. The Commander was wearing a coat and trousers over his pyjamas; his feet were bare, and he carried a signal-pad in his hand.

"The Captain's sleeping in there, isn't he?" he said to Ogg, indicating the day-cabin.

"I 'aven't seen 'im go into no other cabin, sir," replied Ogg reassuringly.

But the testimonial went unheeded, for by this time the Commander was banging on his superior's door.

"Captain—sir!"

There was no reply. Evidently the camp-bed had proved less uncomfortable than might have been expected. The Commander renewed his efforts.

"Captain—*sir!*"

This time there was a muffled reply.

"Hallo! Who is that?"

"Commander, sir."

"All right! Come in!"

The Commander entered the day-cabin, and turned on the light. The Captain sat up, wide awake at once, as is the way of most sailors.

"Well, what is it?"

"The signal bridge has just sent down a couple of urgent signals, sir. The ship is under sailing orders."

The Captain sprang to his feet.

"Sailing orders?"

"Yes, sir." The Commander offered the pad. The Captain took it, and read mechanically:—

*From Flag to Falcon. Falcon is to raise steam for fifteen knots with all despatch, and proceed to Sing Foo Estuary, where Steam Yacht Nestor is reported to be making signals of distress.*

He looked up.

"Well, of course this *had* to happen!"

"You haven't read the second signal yet, sir," said the Commander gently.

The Captain turned over a leaf:—

*Commander-in-Chief to Captain. Personal. As my wife and daughter are in the Nestor, I propose accompanying you. I shall be coming over now with my Flag-Lieutenant and shall require temporary accommodation.*

The Captain turned a stricken gaze upon his subordinate.

"Holy Moses! He'll want my sleeping-cabin! Where the hell are my trousers? We must do something about this. How much time have we?"

For answer, the Commander went to the door.

"Sentry!"

"Sir!"

"Nip up to the Officer of the Watch and tell him I want to know immediately the Admiral's barge is seen leaving the Flagship."

"Very good, sir." The efficient Ogg doubled gracefully out of sight—and ear-shot.

The Commander returned to the Captain, who was now dressed in coat, trousers, rubber boots, and a muffler.

"There is only one thing to do, sir, I think. We must make a clean breast of things to the Admiral."

The Captain, who was brushing his hair, looked round with a resentful glare.

"What do you mean, clean breast of things? These ladies are on board this ship quite innocently."

"Yes, sir, of course," rejoined the Commander smoothly. "All we have to do is to explain that to the Admiral. Then everything will be all right."

"Of course."

"Of course, sir."

"After all," pursued the Captain resolutely, "the whole thing was unavoidable. The picquet boat broke down—there was no

other means of getting them ashore."

"Except the boat from the Flagship, sir. It was offered, and we said—well, you know what we said."

Captain Maitland sat down heavily on his camp-bed.

"Oh, my Lord, so we did! And we haven't reported their presence on board either. Bob, we're for it! You know what the old man's like where the proprieties are concerned. He simply mustn't see them, or we're scuppered. What are we going to do about it? Make a suggestion, for heaven's sake!"

The Commander was equal to the occasion.

"The first thing to do is to wake those girls up and yank them out of their cabins," he said. "They mustn't be found anywhere round here."

"They mustn't be found anywhere at all!"

"But where are we going to put them?"

"Never mind that, for the moment. We must see first of all about getting the ship ready for sea. Then we can tackle this other damned business."

"That's all in hand, sir. We're getting both watches fallen in now. The Engineer-Commander and the Senior Engineer have been told. We ought to be ready for sea in an hour. There they go!"

A distant bugle rang out; then another, in a different part of

the ship. There followed the shrill call of bosuns' pipes. Hoarse voices began to cry:—

"Bo-o-o-oth watches for exercise, fall in! 'Eave out! 'Eave out! Show a leg! 'Eave out!" Then more bugles, more pipes. Then the sound of men running. The *Falcon* was awake—and wide awake.

So were Mesdames Carlton and Eaton. As the Captain and Commander emerged from the day-cabin into the lobby, two young faces, rosily flushed with sleep, appeared round the edges of the two cabin curtains.

"What is all that noise, Captain Maitland?" asked Fay. "What's the matter? Please tell us. Is it a shipwreck?"

"Or have you declared war on China?" suggested Mary.

The Captain assumed his most parental manner.

"My dear girls," he began, "be calm! Compose yourselves, if you *please*——!"

"We are all composed," Mary assured him. And she looked it. "Spill the bad news. We can bear it."

"A very serious situation has arisen," said the Captain. "We are ordered off to sea at once."

"Right out to sea," said Mary breathlessly—"in the middle of the night?"

"Precisely."

Mary turned to Fay.

"The fun sailors have!" she said.

"My dear, how perfectly divine!" echoed Fay, by no means undismayed by the prospect of a prolonged sea-voyage with her Bobo.

Mary turned to the Captain.

"Say," she asked, "where is the serious situation?"

"The Commander-in-Chief is coming on board himself—to go to sea with us."

If Captain Maitland meant to be impressive, he entirely failed. Mary clapped her hands.

"The Admiral?" she cried. "The Admiral himself!"

"The Admiral himself."

Mary turned impulsively to Fay.

"Isn't that grand?" she cried. "I'm plumb crazy to see an Admiral!"

"And I can faithfully promise you," retorted the Captain savagely, "that the Admiral will be plumb crazy if he sees you." Then, abandoning his official manner: "Mary—Fay—don't you understand? You're in this ship without permission, without notification. If the Admiral sees you, what do you think will happen to the Commander and myself?"



"Don't tell me you'll get fired?" said Mary, with consternation in her eyes.

The Captain drew himself up, and replied stiffly:—

"There may be a Court of Enquiry——"

"If the Commander-in-Chief makes a Service matter of it," added the Commander.

Mary's demeanour changed at once. From a joyous schoolgirl she became the mother of all living.

"Oh, isn't that too bad? Isn't that too bad, Fay? You poor boys"—she took an arm of each of the young gentlemen indicated—"we can't have you fired! Don't you worry! I don't want to see an Admiral. What's an Admiral, anyway? Do you want to see an Admiral, Fay?"

"No," said Fay, backing her up. "I've seen one," she added, in explanation.

Mary patted the Captain's arm reassuringly.

"Then that's all washed up, Aylwin dear. We two girls will stay right here in our two little cabins, and never let out a peep. We'll stay for a week, if you like. Won't we, Fay?"

"I suppose you'll send us some food," stipulated Miss Eaton, who, for all her ethereal appearance, loved the fleshpots.

"Some nice——"

"You tell 'em, Bob!" said the Captain despairingly, and

handed the two ladies over to the Commander.

That diplomat took charge readily enough, and placed an explanatory arm round the waist of each.

"Miss Carlton—Miss Eaton," he said, "the Admiral will be on board in about five minutes, and he will want to occupy your quarters."

The situation was clear at last. Mary nodded her head soberly, and observed:—

"Well, what do you know about that? What do *you* know about that, Fay?"

But Fay did not hear her. Captain Randall had appeared from somewhere, and was saluting the Commander.

"Both watches for exercise fallen in, sir," he announced, heroically ignoring the fact that something was gazing affectionately up at him from the neighbourhood of his breastbone.

The Commander waved him away impatiently.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, carry on; and tell the Officer of the Day to secure the ship for sea! Can't you see I'm busy here? Starboard Watch close doors; Port Watch secure upper deck." Then, abandoning formality, he drew Randall aside.

"Any sign of the Commander-in-Chief yet?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Very well. Carry on."

Randall hastened away, followed by a heart-rending wail from Fay. Mary addressed the Captain:—

"Listen, Aylwin! We got you into this jam, and we're going to see you through. Do what you like with us. Put us in the coal-hole—refrigerator—any old place. We won't squeal, will we, Fay?"

"Rather not!" said Fay, mastering her grief.

"You're both dears," said the Captain, "but we can't do that. And of course there will be no need. Bob, you had better take them along to your cabin, for the time being."

"I can hardly do that just now, sir. The mess deck is full of naked sailors."

"Well, we've got to do something," said the Captain desperately, "and do it quick. Let us think. Let us get down to \_\_\_\_\_"

But before anybody could get down to anything, there came a sound like the approach of a short-winded cyclone, and Marine Ogg, wheezing violently, shot into the lobby and stood rocking.

"Admiral's barge almost alongside, sir!" he announced to the Commander.

"You infernal idiot! Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I did me best, sir; but I was looking over the starboard side, and the Admiral's barge it went and come along to the port gangway, sir."

"Oh, Lord! All right," said the Commander, and Ogg, with an aggrieved sigh, came heavily to anchor against bulkhead 186. The Commander turned to the Captain, and said, in a low voice:—

"You had better go up and receive the Admiral, sir."

"All right. But what are we going to do with the girls?"

"Shove them into one cabin, and the Admiral in the other one. It will be a tight fit for the girls, but they're game to help us. Keep that old—keep the Commander-in-Chief talking on the quarter-deck as long as possible, while we get their gear shifted."

"Very well," said the Captain resignedly. "It seems the only thing to do." Then he turned to Mary and Fay.

"Good-bye, and do exactly what the Commander tells you."

"Aye, aye, sir!" said Mary, and hitched up her trousers in true nautical fashion. Mary was enjoying herself.

The Commander now took brisk charge.

"Come along, you two! Smack it about! Which cabin do you prefer?"

"One good thing," observed Mary; "we haven't any steamer

trunks to shift. I'll come in alongside of you, Fay."

"But, darling, that would be a lot of bother for you. I'll come in by you."

"Angel child! But it's no trouble. I'll come to you."

"No, I'll come to you. I've got nothing but——"

The two ladies settled down to a prolonged and affectionate argument. It was the Commander who cut the Gordian knot.

"Sentry," he barked, "take Miss Eaton's bedding out of her cabin and put it into Miss Carlton's. I'll get some more for the Admiral. Get a move on, girls!" And he hurried away.

"Sure!" said Mary. "Isn't this lots of fun? Come on, Fay."

They frolicked joyously into Fay's cabin, to reappear in a few moments with sundry feminine mysteries, from which Ogg averted his gaze.

"Just see if I've left anything behind me, Mr. Ogg," said Fay, smiling over her shoulder as she followed Mary into the other cabin—"there's a dear!"

Putting duty before decency, like the gentleman in *Midshipman Easy*, Ogg proceeded reluctantly into the empty cabin, to emerge with a large bath-sponge and a shell-pink silk undervest. He walked straight into the arms of Corporal Bunnett, now upon his second round of inspection.

"All correct, sentry?" enquired the Corporal, wondering why

Ogg was holding his hands behind his back.

"All correct, Corporal."

"Anything to report?"

The conscientious Ogg considered.

"Well, I don't rightly know—" he began.

The Corporal, who had just caught a glimpse of pink, drew a full, comfortable breath, and was about to discharge it again in a series of chosen periods, when the Commander hurried into the lobby, followed by a sailor carrying sheets and blankets.

"Here, Corporal, get out of this!" he said. The fewer accomplices the better, he wisely decided.

The Corporal saluted and withdrew, a frustrated and deeply suspicious man. Meanwhile Ogg had succeeded in passing his guilty burden through the curtain of the other cabin.

"Go in there," instructed the Commander, pointing to Fay's late sleeping place, "and square up the bed for the Admiral."

The sailor with the bedding disappeared, and the Commander, stepping delicately over to the cabin which now contained the two girls, tapped upon the door-frame.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

The excited gabble on the other side of the curtain ceased, and Mary's voice replied:—

"We're fine! We've moved right in, and we're going to bed. Has your star boarder arrived?"

"He's just coming down. Good-night. I mustn't be found in the Captain's lobby with the ship preparing for sea. You'll be quite safe now. By the way, the door leading from your cabin to the bathroom? Is that locked?"

"I'll see." (Rattle, rattle.) "Yes, it's locked."

"Is the key there?"

"I don't see one. I guess it's on the other side of the door."

"Wait a minute!" The Commander hurried into the bathroom from the lobby, and reappeared, key in hand.

"Here you are," he said. "It *was* on the other side of the door. Take it."

A bare arm came through the curtain, and a voice observed:

---

"They certainly think of everything in the British Navy. Good-night."

"Good-night," said the Commander again, and hurried away up the companion ladder which led to the quarter-deck, just outside the door of the day-cabin. At the same moment the sailor who had been squaring up the Admiral's bed emerged from the other cabin, and with a friendly but insulting gesture in the direction of Ogg—which that respectable Marine very properly ignored—pattered out of sight.

For the first time in half an hour profound peace reigned in the Captain's lobby.

But not for long. Presently voices were heard approaching along the alleyway—the clear, pleasant voice of Captain Maitland, uplifted in slightly feverish conversation, and the grumpy, *staccato* responses of his exalted guest.

Ogg tapped deferentially on the door-frame behind him, and announced:—

"They're coming, ladies! 'Old the fort!"

## CHAP. X.

## THE TRANSIT OF VENUS

### I

The Captain's task of keeping the Admiral on deck as long as possible was not unattended with difficulty. The Admiral was sleepy, and inclined to be peevish. For all his reputation as a disciplinary dragon, Sir Hercules Hewitt, as already recorded, was as putty in the hands of his wife and only child—not by any means enthusiastic putty, but putty for all that. The prospect of a fortnight's reversion to bachelorhood had been accepted by him with an equanimity which amounted almost to enthusiasm. And now, upon the very first night of his freedom, he had been roused from his beauty sleep to head a rescue expedition which would merely replace his shackles. But



having already described his ineffectual struggles, we need not waste time in describing his resultant frame of mind.

Not that he expressed his thoughts aloud. On the contrary, in his capacity of shining exemplar to his bachelor subordinate, he improved the occasion.

"Of course I felt bound to come myself," he said. "There is no danger, but one can hardly leave one's wife and daughter to be rescued from uncomfortable surroundings by a third party. It's the little attentions that women appreciate: you'll find that out for yourself some day, Maitland, I expect—hope! It's infernally cold up here. Let's go below."

"They're getting a cabin ready for you, sir. It ought to be all in order in a few minutes."

"I can't get into it too soon," said the Admiral—untruthfully, had he but known it. "Have you raised steam yet?"

"Yes, sir. The Engineer-Commander has just reported. We've got the hands on the foc'sle. Weigh as soon as you like."

"Smart work! Well, we have time for at least six hours of shut-eye. Where are you going to put this young fellow?" The Admiral indicated his Flag-Lieutenant, who was standing like a rigid shadow behind him.

"They're fixing up one of the sea-cabins under the bridge for him, sir."

"Good! You can go, Lashwood. Good-night." The Flag-Lieutenant saluted, and disappeared. "And now, Maitland,

what have you got for me?"

"Come this way, sir, and I'll show you."

To the Captain's intense relief, all was quiet in the lobby. Evidently the stowaways had been successfully bedded down for the night. With the exception of the long-suffering Ogg, brooding heavily before the bathroom door, no human presence was discernible.

"You are putting me in one of these cabins, I suppose?" said the Admiral.

"Yes, sir."

"Good! Which?"

*Which?* Merciful heavens! which? The Captain's blood turned to ice. This whole delicate operation carried out without a hitch, and he did not know which cabin the girls were in! Where was the Commander? On the bridge probably, neglecting his duty. *Que faire?* He shot an interrogative glance at Ogg, but Ogg merely favoured him with a brief, respectful leer. Evidently he was quite unconscious of the present dilemma.

"Is it this one?" asked the Admiral, advancing towards the spare cabin, which, as it happened, was empty and waiting for him.

"One moment, sir. I must see the Commander."

"The Commander? What has the Commander got to do with

it? Have you appointed him Groom of the Bedchamber, or something?"

The Captain laughed heartily at the Admiral's little jest.

"I only meant, sir," he said, "that I thought you might like the Commander to report to you before you turned in."

"My dear fellow, don't bother about that. If he has anything to report he can report to you, and you can pass it on to me. Now, where do I sleep?"

The Captain made another effort.

"You'll come to my day-cabin, sir, for a whisky-and-soda, won't you? Just five minutes, while I——"

"At this time of night? No, thank you! I shouldn't sleep a wink. My doctor——"

"Well"—desperately—"a cigarette, sir?"

"Cigarettes? I hate the very smell of the damned things, and you know it. That is"—the Admiral made a conscientious effort to be gracious—"I appreciate your hospitable intentions; but really, all I want at the present moment is a warm bed."

"Quite, sir, quite!" panted the Captain, swiftly inserting himself between the oncoming Admiral and the door of the spare cabin. "That is your bathroom, of course." He pointed to the centre door.

"So I imagine. But where do I *sleep*?"

"Speaking of bathrooms, sir," continued the Captain, now improvising blindly, "I badly want to consult you about the Midshipmen's bathroom. In fact, the truth is—the situation is this. Some months ago we sent in a report regarding its inadequate ventilation, and so forth, especially in the tropics \_\_\_\_\_"

"Yes, yes; I seem to remember something about it. But where do I——?"

"We simply can't get any satisfaction out of the Dockyard people, sir. But of course you know what Dockyard people are!" (Where the devil was that fool of a Commander?) "I wonder if you would care to come and have a look at it now. It's only a few——"

The Admiral exploded at last.

"The Midshipmen's bathroom? At this time of night? Damn it all, Maitland, do I look as if I wanted to look at a bathroom—a Midshipmen's bathroom, or a bathroom of any kind? I want a bed, man—a bed!" And turning on his heel, the Admiral headed for the other cabin, only to collide with the immovable mass of Marine Ogg, who by a dexterous shuffle to port had interposed himself between the stowaways and their doom.

The Admiral rebounded a couple of paces, and proceeded to wither the faithful sentinel with a glare which began with his glistening forehead and gradually descended to his stockinged feet, even unto the protruding toe. Here it came to a halt. The Admiral's eyes began to protrude too. He pointed dumbly,

fighting for breath. The flinching Ogg doubled up the offending toe, and stood on it. But this praise-worthy gymnastic feat availed him nothing.

The Admiral found his voice.

"Where are your boots, damn it?" he bellowed. "Where are your boots, my man? Haven't you got any boots?"

Ogg released his toe, took a step forward, and clicked his ankle-bones together.

"Yes, sir," he said.

"But you're not wearing them."

Ogg looked down at his feet, as if for confirmation of this report; then looked up, apparently in mild surprise.

"No, sir."

The Admiral turned upon the Captain.

"Maitland, this man is half-naked."

Here was a diversion which might profitably be exploited for at least five minutes. The Captain sprang to his opportunity.

"We must go into this, sir," he said briskly. He whirled upon the wretched Ogg.

"Why have you no boots on?"

The bootless one took another step forward, and came to attention.

"I was told to take them off, sir."

"Indeed? And by whom?"

"By the Corporal, sir." There was just a tinge of satisfaction in this reply.

"Why?"

"They squeak, sir."

The Admiral made a noise like a Ford car changing gear.

"Squeak? Heavens above! Why should that matter? What is this—a nursing-home? Or is it one of His Majesty's cruisers? Which? Eh?"

Ogg pondered. Finally:—

"I couldn't say, sir, I'm sure," he said, smiling weakly.

The Admiral's appearance became really alarming.

"I'm afraid this man has lost his head, sir," said the Captain.

"Lost his head?" croaked the Admiral. "He's lost his wits! He's an imbecile! He ought to be under restraint. Where are your boots, man?" Ogg pointed silently. "Well, go and put them on! And now, Maitland, which of these cabins is mine?"

The question was answered—oh, incredible joy!—by the voice of the Commander himself, who had just hurried into the lobby, followed by a sailor carrying a suitcase.

"Put the Admiral's gear in there," he said, pointing to the curtain of the empty cabin. The man obeyed, emerged, and doubled away.

"I expect you'd like to turn in at once, sir," said the Captain to the Admiral, with the air of one offering an original and happy suggestion. "You must be——"

The Admiral smiled, for the first time for some minutes.

"I seem to cherish a faint recollection, Maitland, of having told you that, myself, not less than seven times."

"I'm so sorry, sir; but we were waiting for the suitcase. Everything is ship-shape now." The Captain bustled with ready hospitality towards the spare cabin, and drew back the curtain. "Can I send you anything?" he asked.

"No, thank you," said the Admiral, entering. "You're in that cabin on the other side of the bathroom, I suppose?"

"Er—no, sir. I 'have a camp-bed rigged up in my day-cabin."

The Admiral turned in the doorway. Mellowing rapidly, he was conscious for the first time of the obligations of a guest.

"My dear fellow," he said, reaching up and laying a friendly hand on the tall Captain's shoulder, "I'm afraid you've been putting yourself out on my account."

"Not on your account, sir—really! I mean"—as the listening Commander emitted a slight choking noise—"it's cooler in the day-cabin."

"Admirals arriving in the middle of the night are a confounded nuisance, aren't they?" The hand patted the Captain's shoulder. "Well, good-night. You'll be getting under weigh at once, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. There go the special sea-duty men now." Bugles, bosuns' pipes, and hoarse cries were again audible throughout the ship. "I must get up on the bridge. Come along, Commander! Good-night, sir. Good-night."

"Good-night, both of you."

"Good-night, sir."

The brown curtain fell, and the Admiral was safely docked. The Captain and Commander of the *Falcon* passed out of sight, engaged in *sotto voce* recrimination. The deeply wronged Ogg finished lacing his boots and resumed his vigil. All was silence, save for the rumbling of the propellers, as the *Falcon* left her anchorage and headed for the open sea.

## II

A whole half-hour elapsed before Ogg was disturbed again. This time it was by the Navyphone fixed to the bulkhead above the log-table, and furnished with two mighty brass earpieces.



Through these a hoarse and blasphemous voice from the forebridge demanded to be told forthwith what was the matter with the gyroscopic compass.

Only the face of this complicated apparatus is exposed upon the forebridge of His Majesty's ships-of-war; its extremely delicate internal organs are buried deep below-decks—in point of fact, below the deck of the Captain's lobby, where they can be visited, by people sufficiently interested and adequately authorized, through a small covered hatch.

At present the hatch, being a water-tight door, and the ship being at sea, was battened down; and Marine Ogg, in announcing the fact, was able to add that the same had been under his personal supervision all night, and that no one had opened or otherwise tampered with it since he came on.

This reply gave no satisfaction to the complainant on the forebridge, who stated, with much picturesque detail, that the gyro compass was wandering unaccountably to port.

Ogg, after expressing polite commiseration, rang off, and was about to prop himself against bulkhead 201, in the hope of a catnap, when he became conscious of a faint rattling sound.

His first glance was towards the hatch, which stood right in the middle of the lobby-deck. Perhaps there was some truth in the forebridge's asseverations, after all. He leaned over it, and listened. No, all was quiet down there: the disturbance came from somewhere else. He changed position, and listened again; then started violently. The rattle was coming from the bathroom, and it was growing louder.

Ogg had no sooner made this discovery than the curtain of the Captain's sleeping-cabin was swung aside, and two agitated figures in pyjamas leaped forth.

"Mr. Ogg," whispered Mary, "the Admiral's in the bathroom!"

"'E can't be going to 'ave a bath in the middle of the night, Miss, surely?"

"No; he's trying to get through into our cabin."

"You must be dreaming, Miss," said Ogg severely.

"No, we're not." Fay was speaking this time. "He's rattling away at the handle of our bathroom door."

"But what for, ladies?"

"You can search me!" replied Mary. "I've never met one of your British Admirals before. Anyhow, we want you to go in and call him down, Mr. Ogg."

"Call 'im what, Miss?"

"Bawl him out."

"Give him a good telling off," said Fay, translating.

"*Im? Me?* And get ninety days?" gasped Ogg.

But time means nothing to women.

"Ah, go on!" said Mary coaxingly.

"Be a sportsman!" urged Fay.

"Show your British pluck!" Mary added.

Rattle, rattle, rattle, said the door. The Admiral was still at work. Each lady slipped a beseeching arm into one of Ogg's. That philogynist, realizing the odds against him, capitulated.

"All right, ladies," he said—"for your sakes only." He turned towards the bathroom. "But I'd sooner 'andle a couple of drunks, any day," he added gloomily. "I wish that Corporal was 'ere. By rights it's his—— Thank 'eaven you've arrived, sir!"

The Commander had entered the lobby, and was standing within a few feet of him.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

Ogg came to attention.

"The Admiral is trying to get to the ladies, sir," he reported formally.

"Good gracious!"

"I shall tell Bobo about him," said Fay ferociously.

"But what on earth——?" began the bewildered Commander.

"Look out, sir! That door's opening," whispered Ogg, springing back several feet and coming to attention again. Simultaneously the girls dived back into their own cabin.

The handle of the bathroom door turned slowly; then the door opened, and the figure of Admiral Sir Hercules Hewitt, K.C.B., emerged. He was clothed in pyjamas of red and white; his somewhat scanty hair had worked itself up into a waving pinnacle on the top of his head. He gazed sleepily at Ogg, then at Baddeley.

"Ah, Commander!" he said with satisfaction. "Just the man!"

"Sir?"

"I want to change cabins."

"Change c-cabins, sir?"

"Yes. The bunk in my present cabin is athwartships, and I don't like it. So far as I recollect, in ships of this type the bunk in the other cabin is fore and aft."

"Yes, sir; I believe it is."

"Well, I can't get the door from the bathroom open."

"I expect it's locked, sir."

"*Locked?*" The Admiral's temper was rising again. "Of course it's locked! And I can't unlock it! I'm using the key from the other door, and I can't get it in. There seems to be a key there already, on the other side. Let's go in and look." And the

Admiral laid an impatient hand upon the brown curtain which screened the guilty secret—or secrets—of H.M.S. *Falcon*.

"I'll look, sir," said the Commander hastily. "You try from your side again." He almost pushed the Admiral back into the bathroom; then softly locked the door upon him, and tiptoed to the door of the girls' cabin. They met him on the threshold.

"Now what?" whispered Mary.

"You must shift billets—quick! Bring your clothes, and for the Lord's sake don't forget anything!"

"But where——?"

Rattle, rattle, rattle.

"All right, sir; I'm coming," panted the Commander, dashing into the cabin as the obedient ladies dashed out, with their clothing in their arms. "One moment, sir. There's some bedding in the way here." Pillows and blankets cascaded out of the cabin door into the lobby. These were retrieved by Ogg, who had gloomily decided that he might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb. "Yes, sir, I thought as much. There *is* a key here, stuck in the lock. I'll pull it clear in a moment."

"Well, for heaven's sake hurry up!" said a muffled voice. "I'm freezing in this place."

"I'll get the sentry's bayonet, sir, to use as a lever." The Commander emerged from the cabin. "Sentry, give me your bayonet," he said loudly. Then, in a whisper to the girls:—

"Now, you two, bolt into the spare cabin, and lock yourselves in. Both doors!"

"What the devil are you doing, Commander?" roared an exasperated voice.

Once more the Commander dived into the sleeping-cabin door, like a harlequin through a trap.

"Here I am, sir. I've got the bayonet. You pull, and I'll push."

Rattle, rattle, rattle.

"The damned thing won't move!"

"It's coming, sir. Now then. One, two, three——!"

In the turmoil of the tug-of-war which now ensued Ogg was able to escort his two overwrought charges to their new quarters. Having there possessed himself of the Admiral's clothing and suitcase, he carried these into the other cabin, where the Commander was still going through the motions of wrestling with the door into the bathroom. On his way he noticed a silk stocking lying on the deck. He had just time to pick it up and place it inside his cap, to share the company of Mrs. Ogg and the eight little Oggs, when the Admiral, assisted—or rather, impeded—by the Commander, broke through from the bathroom and entered his new resting-place.

"Here we are, sir," said the Commander cheerfully, returning Ogg's bayonet. "And here is your gear. This man will make up your bed for you."

"I'll make it up for myself in half the time," replied the Admiral, probably with truth. "I want to get to sleep."

"You are sure you have left nothing in the other cabin, sir?" asked the Commander, with genuine anxiety.

"I don't think so. But you had better go and look."

The Commander hurried across the lobby to the other door. It was open, but the curtain was in place, and darkness reigned within.

"Have you locked your own door into the bathroom?" he hissed.

"You bet!"

"Has he left anything in your——?"

"He has."

A hand emerged from behind the curtain. It held a glass of fair cold water, in which reposed the Admiral's upper dentures.

Five minutes later perfect silence reigned once more in the Captain's lobby, broken only by the rumbling of the ship's propellers and the sound of steady snoring from the cabin now occupied, *non sine pulvere*, by the Commander-in-Chief.

## I

Captain Maitland descended from the bridge, which he had visited to satisfy himself that the *Falcon* was duly set on her course for Sing Foo Promontory, and proceeded aft in a gentle muse.

He was conscious within himself of an entire and most unusual lack of interest in his professional duties. His ship had been his sole preoccupation ever since the proud day, more than two years ago, when he had first stepped upon her quarter-deck. Now he was aware of a certain sense of diversion of interest. Something seemed to have gone wrong, as it were, with his gyroscopic compass. Instead of remaining upon the bridge to supervise the efforts of his officers upon this somewhat unusual occasion, here he was drifting back towards his own quarters.

However, he was not perturbed by the circumstance. He was in that state of mind, not unknown to the strongest of us, in which a man is content to float along in a gentle haze of sentiment, and let the world go by. Aylwin Maitland was over forty, and he had never been in love before. Who are we, who fell before we were twenty-one, to be facetious at his expense?

He entered the lobby, and having relieved himself of the presence of that most unsentimental object, Marine Ogg, by despatching him with an entirely unnecessary message to the



Torpedo-Lieutenant, perched himself upon the rum-cask, which was the only seating accommodation available, and gazed affectionately at the curtain behind which, he was thrilled to think, the fairest of her sex was now peacefully slumbering.

But this agreeable exercise was rudely interrupted. From behind the curtain there suddenly issued a prolonged trumpeting sound—in other words, a snore of quite incredible volume and vulgarity.

The Captain felt surprised at Fay: of course it could not be Mary. (Poor old Bobo, though!) Still, if this uproar continued, it might wake the old man up; and then——

Another fanfare rent the silence of the night, more piercing and more prolonged than the first. Something must be done, and done quickly. The Captain slid off the rum-cask and walked across to the cabin door; then tapped gently on the frame. The noise ceased.

"Mary," he whispered, "tell Fay to go easy. She'll wake the Admiral."

"A gruff, sleepy, and entirely masculine voice made answer:  
—

"Eh? Who's that?"

The Captain rocked on his feet.

"Who is in there with you?" he gasped.

"What?" asked the sleepy voice again.

*"Who is in there?"*

There was no sleepiness about the voice this time.

*"I am the Commander-in-Chief. Who are you?"*

"The—the Captain, sir."

"Oh! Got some news for me?"

"No, sir. We're clear of our anchorage. I was coming down to turn in, when I heard you—cry out."

"Cry out? Nonsense! I've been asleep, man."

"Perhaps you were dreaming, sir."

"Well, if I was, I don't want to be wakened up and told so."

"I'm sorry, sir. Good-night."

"Good-night," said the Admiral grumpily, and the Captain heard him roll over and settle down again. He turned from the cabin door, to find Mary Carlton standing within a yard of him, brimming over with inappropriate and unseemly mirth.

"You?" he whispered.

"K-k-k-k!" replied Mary.

"Ssh! Where have you come from?"

Mary pointed to the other cabin.

"But"—the Captain took her arm and led her to the end of the lobby, as far as possible from the Admiral's door—"how did the old man get into your cabin?"

Mary brimmed over again.

"He just busted in."

"Busted in?"

"Yeah—through the bathroom. He got a notion to move house in the middle of the night."

"Oh, Lord! And he found you?"

"No. We busted out, and moved into his little house, by the overland route. Your Commander fixed it all. He's a smooth worker, that boy. I guess he must have had experience."

"And how is Miss Eaton?"

"She's unconscious. Dreaming about her Bobo, I'll say. I was lying beside her, feeling kind of superfluous, when I heard the Admiral and you doing your sister act out there. It cheered me up quite a little."

"I was sailing a bit too close to the wind for my comfort," said the Captain, with a grimace.

"You made up your little piece very well," replied Mary reassuringly, "and you spoke it fine. Is everything all over for

the night now?"

She was answered by a reassuring salvo from the Admiral's cabin. She promptly produced a cigarette-case from the pocket of her borrowed greatcoat.

"Do you think it would outrage all the customs of the Service if I were to smoke a cigarette out here?" she asked.

"That's the one thing that would wake him," said the Captain, shaking his head. "He hates the very smell of them. But"—with a bright smile—"why shouldn't we have one in my day-cabin? Come along!"

Miss Carlton stood fast.

"No," she said; "cigarettes are out. We stay here. I guess my chaperon, Mr. Ogg, would prefer it," she added tactfully.

The Captain nodded.

"Perhaps you're right," he said. "Let's sit down for a moment. We'll enthrone you on the rum-cask."

"Fine!" said Mary. "Give me a boost."

"Half a minute!" The Captain picked up a pillow which was lying outside the bathroom door—probably dropped by Marine Ogg on one of the removals. "We might as well be comfortable," he said. He laid the pillow on top of the rum-cask, and, picking Mary up in his arms, deposited her on top of the pillow.

"I guess my Mr. Ogg couldn't object to this," said Mary, clasping her arms round her knees, and balancing herself happily. "This is lots of fun. I'll say so. Listen, Aylwin!"

The Captain promptly came a step nearer.

"Mary!"

"Gee, what a name!" Mary gave a clear little laugh. The Captain glanced nervously towards the Admiral's door. "I'm sorry! But listen! I'm just crazy to know what you have back of you that can fit in with a name like that. It suggests moated granges and knights in armour and things like that to me. Tell me the story of your life, please."

The Captain came nearer still.

"Tell me yours," he said.

Mary shook her head.

"No, you first. Then me, maybe. Let me see, what do I know about you? You're not married, that I do know. A blind baby in a dark room would know. Have you a home, or folks, or anything?"

Her questions transported the Captain's thoughts some ten thousand miles—to the house in which he had been born, to a little manor in Sussex, tucked away in a fold of the South Downs, between Midhurst and Petworth. It was his own property now, and was standing empty, waiting, as it had been accustomed to wait many a time during the past two centuries, for its master to come home from the sea. He had hardly been

there since his boyhood, and he described it to Mary after the fashion of a boy. He told her about the trout in the stream, and the rabbits in the wood, and the flagstaff on the lawn, from which the Union Jack flew upon the anniversary of certain Naval occasions.

"When I give up the Service," he said, "I shall go there, and plant myself, and try to get my roots into the soil."

"And when will that be?"

He shook his head ruefully.

"Pretty soon, I'm very much afraid."

Mary scrutinized his troubled face.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked. "You seem to have your health. Are you fading away inside, or something?"

"I'm not; but the Navy is—on the outside, anyhow."

"I don't get you."

The Captain seemed to be talking to himself now rather than to her.

"It had to happen," he said. "In the present clamour for disarmament I suppose it ought to happen. International peace and goodwill, and what not. Still, it hurts a bit to see the thing that has been one's father and mother for thirty years being whittled down and down.... Of course, if one really believed that this present spell of mutual brotherly love was going to

last, one might not mind so much. But one day there will be a sudden upheaval in some hitherto inoffensive portion of the globe; then a scare about our overseas possessions and our lines of communication, and we shall find ourselves frantically building again to replace the tonnage we have scrapped, and enrolling recruits to replace the men we have thrown away. But by that time I fancy I shall have taken root in Sussex, an obsolete old gentleman of fifty or so. And I shan't be the only one. For every Captain to-day who lives to fly his flag at sea as an Admiral, about five of us have got to go to the beach. It's a game of musical chairs, with six players and one chair."

Mary listened to this little soliloquy with silent interest. She was beginning to understand this man, and to like him more and more. That was why she was letting him talk. Presently she said:—

"Meanwhile, I guess you all have to watch your step."

Maitland nodded grimly.

"I should think so! One side-slip, and you're out."

He swung away, and, after the restless fashion of sailors, took a short turn along the deck and back again.

Mary slipped off the rum-cask, came close, and looked up at him.

"Would it be counted as a side-slip," she asked, "if you were to be found here with me, at two o'clock in the morning?"

"It wouldn't be a side-slip, my dear: it would be a crash."

They both laughed at that, and Mary said:—

"In that case, we'll take no more chances on your future. I'm going to eliminate myself right now, till further notice. I won't let you crash. I like you." She held out her hand. The Captain took it, with both of his.

"Mary," he said suddenly, "I don't care who finds us! Stay here for another five minutes. I want to know about—about yourself. You promised."

She shook her head.

"I said 'maybe.' And now, here is Mr. Ogg again"—as that dispirited janissary entered the lobby. She shook hands formally. "Good-night, Captain Maitland. I suppose you are going to bed now?"

"I must go up on the bridge first, and have a look round."

"The bridge? Where's that?"

The Captain pointed.

"That way. Right forward."

"I see. Good-night."

"Good-night, Miss Carlton." And the Captain hurried away, avoiding Ogg's eye.

Mary followed him to the door of the lobby, and stood gazing thoughtfully after his retreating figure. Ogg, with a



reproving air, retrieved the pillow from the top of the rum-cask, and having patted it into shape, placed it carefully outside the Admiral's door. Further he had no desire to go with it. Then, proceeding to the door of Mary's cabin, he drew back the curtain and remarked, pointedly:—

"Good-night, Miss."

Mary turned. In her hand was a cigarette-case.

"Mr. Ogg," she said, "if I don't have one little smoke, I shall pass right out."

"Not down 'ere, Miss—*please!*" protested Ogg. "It would wake *'im!*"

"All right," said Mary accommodatingly. "I'll go up on the roof." She moved towards the steep stairway which led to the quarter-deck.

"The roof, Miss?"

"Sure. The piazza—the back porch." Mary was half-way up the ladder by this time.

"That's the quarter-deck, Miss."

"You know best. So long!" And she was gone, leaving the frustrated Ogg to whisper vain expostulations at the foot of the ladder.

"'Ere, Miss—*Miss!* You can't go sculling about up there. You'll get copped, for a cert! ... Oh, Lord! And I can't leave me

post to chase 'er down, neither.... And 'ere's the Corporal!  
That's finished it! Oh, crumbs!"

A lantern flickered in the alleyway, and that persistent sleuth, Corporal Bunnett, was once more present, complete with catechism.

"Anything to report?"

"Nothing to report."

"All correct?"

"All correct, Corporal." Despite himself, Ogg cast a furtive glance up the ladder. The Corporal's beady eye followed.

"All correct, eh?" he said. "What was you looking up that ladder for, when I come in just now? Doing a bit of star-gazing, eh?"

"Yes, Corporal."

Without a word, the Corporal walked across Ogg's feet and up the ladder. A moment later his voice was audible from the top.

"Did you say there was nothing to report, my lad?"

"Nothing that I knows of, Corporal."

"*Nothing?* Are you aware that one of them there skirts has fetched up on the quarter-deck? She's 'anging over the guard-rail now, smoking a fag. You're a perishing fine sentry! Why

did you let 'er?"

"It don't say nothink in my orders," replied Ogg primly, "about man-'andling them."

"Well, you've got to come and man-'andle 'er now, before it's too late. 'Op up 'ere! What do you think the troops are going to say"—as the stout Marine emerged upon the quarter-deck—"when they comes aft to scrub the quarter-deck, eh?"

"P'raps they'll think she's an angel."

"Angels don't wear officers' pyjamas, you fool! Come along and ketch 'old of 'er. She's alongside that—— Lumme! She's *gone!*"

"What—overboard? In the ditch?" panted Ogg excitedly.

"No. She must 'ave popped down one of the midship ladders. She'll be on the mess-deck in a minute; and then the cat will be among the canaries! Double forward along the port side, and 'ead 'er off. I'll take the starboard."

Two pairs of heavy boots clattered along the deck, and died away.

## II

Meanwhile Mary Carlton, with the privileged curiosity of her sex, was taking full advantage of this, her first opportunity

since she came on board, of making a thorough exploration of that complex and fascinating piece of King George's property, the light cruiser *Falcon*.

Her immediate objective was the bridge, or at least some point of vantage from which she could contemplate Aylwin thereon. He would look great, she decided, shouting orders and telling everybody where they got off. But for a moment or two she stood leaning over the guard-rail, watching the twinkling lights of Fan Yan Harbour recede in the far distance.

It was at this juncture that Corporal Bunnett observed her. If he had advanced boldly to the attack instead of stopping to scarify Ogg, Mary would have been rounded up and returned to her cabin within two minutes, and the course of this narrative would have taken an entirely different turn. By the time the Corporal and Ogg had both reached the deck Mary was gone. In fact, she was half-way forward, battling with a stiff night breeze and wishing her pyjamas were lined with fur.

Presently she came to another opening in the deck, with a ladder leading down. She decided to avail herself of this. It would be warmer on the next floor, and she might be able to find some one who knew where the bridge was.

She accordingly descended—and promptly lost herself. There was very little illumination, and her course, by reason of the objects which she had to surmount and circumvent, was complicated and confusing. But she remembered afterwards passing a box-like contraption which emitted a dull roar—it was the casing of a thirty-six inch fan—and turning down a narrow alleyway which forked at the end into two passages.

The left-hand passage was partly occupied by a gentleman on his back clad in the lower half of a blue overall and a vest. His pillow was a pair of boots, and an electric-light bulb shone straight in his face. He was sound asleep.

Mary turned right-handed, and worked her way round a seemingly endless expanse of white-enamelled armour plate—one of the turret trunks—only to find that her passage was barred by an immense steel door. However, a short ladder led downwards into a compartment filled with shining and silent machinery. Three brown canvas sausages in the far corner hanging from the ceiling she rightly guessed to be hammocks. She bent down, passed underneath them, came to another ladder, went up it, found another door with a small hole in it, negotiated this obstacle and, somewhat to her relief, saw the Captain's lobby in the distance.

She recognized it immediately. There was the closed grey-painted hatch in the middle of the deck. There was the rum-cask. There were the keys of the magazine, hanging over the log-book on its projecting ledge. There were the mysterious little illuminated discs in the indicator on the bulkhead. There, finally, was the pillow upon which she had recently been sitting, now removed to the outside of a cabin door—by Ogg, presumably.

It was the sight of the pillow which decided her. She was dead sleepy, and her passion for exploration was sated. Maybe Aylwin would not be visible on the bridge, anyway. She would call it a day, and rejoin Fay. Absently she picked up the pillow, and entered the cabin.

"Move over, honey," she said, groping in the dark.

Next moment, with a piercing shriek, she was out in the lobby again.

She was followed by an elderly gentleman in red-and-white pyjamas, diving into a reefer jacket. The veins stood out upon his forehead, and his straggling grey hair appeared to be standing straight up on his head.

## CHAP. XII.

## CRASH

### I

Mary Carlton was the first to recover her composure.

"Why," she exclaimed, with a smile of pleased recognition, "it's Honey Pop!" Then, as the Admiral's eyes showed no signs of receding into their sockets:—

"Don't you know me?"

"I recognize you now," replied the Admiral, panting. He had succeeded at last in getting into his jacket, and was feeling more capable of official action.

"To think that you were the Admiral all the time, this afternoon!" continued Mary affably. "And I never guessed!" She held out her hand. "I'm pleased to know you."

The Admiral decided to put an immediate stop to these social exchanges.

"If it is not an impertinence," he said, "may I ask, Madam, what you are doing—or rather, still doing—on board this ship, in that attire, at this time of night; and in the Captain's quarters?"

A sudden chill took possession of Mary's spine. This might be lots of fun for her, but what was it going to mean to Aylwin? "It wouldn't be a side-slip, my dear: it would be a crash." Well, the crash had come—or would come, unless she could avert it. How could she avert it? What possible improvisation on her part would regularize the situation? She could only think of one.

"Would you kindly answer my question?" pursued the Admiral—"if there is an answer?"

"Sure there's an answer," said Mary. "I'm the Captain's wife. That'll hold you," she added to herself.

It did more than hold the Admiral: it nearly choked him.

"His wife?"

"Yes, sir."

"But—Maitland—married? The thing's perfectly absurd! Why didn't he tell me?"

"I guess he hasn't had time," said Mary. "It was pretty recent."

"How recent?"

Mary considered; then:—

"This morning," she said.

There was a long and strained silence, while the possibilities of the situation unfolded themselves to the Admiral's comprehension. There were a good many of these, and so completely did they engross his attention that Corporal Bunnett and Marine Ogg, who were just entering the lobby hot on Mary's trail, were able to turn about and tiptoe out again without being noticed.

Presently the Admiral adjusted his bearings. He addressed Mary again, this time with a certain ironical formality.

"Of course you are aware, Mrs. Maitland, that it is contrary to King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions for the Captain of one of His Majesty's ships to be accompanied on board by his wife?"

"No; I guess that's a new one on me," replied Mary, a little disconcerted. Maybe she hadn't helped Aylwin so much, after all.

The Admiral continued:—

"And where is your husband at this moment?"

"On the bridge, or some place."

"I see. And—forgive me, but one more question. Why did



you come into my cabin?"

"Because it's my cabin. At least it was, until somebody put you into it."

The Admiral's demeanour underwent a marked change. To take stern official action over a breach of regulations is one thing; to turn a defenceless woman out of her bedroom in the middle of the night is another. Mary had cut the ground from beneath his not unchivalrous feet.

"My dear Mrs. Maitland," he exclaimed apologetically, "a thousand pardons! I had no idea. I'll turn out at once!"

He dived into the cabin, and reappeared with his trousers over his arm, carrying a suitcase.

"You will find nothing disturbed," he said: "I was merely lying on the top of the bed."

"But where are you going to sleep?" asked Mary, suddenly apprehensive.

"Oh, I am quite able to look after myself. I know my way about this ship." The Admiral held back the curtain, with great stateliness. "Now, please resume possession of your quarters."

"Thank you, sir." Mary paused on the threshold. It might be wise to press home her present small advantage. "I—I hope I haven't offended you," she said. "I should hate to feel that I had made you angry with me, or with Captain Maitland." There were tears in her eyes, not all of them artificial.

The Admiral was visibly softened.

"There can never be any question of anger between you and me, Mrs. Maitland—in the petty sense of the word. Of course, the matter will have to be investigated officially in the morning. But I do not see that any blame lies with you. Your husband should have warned you of the breach of regulations involved by your presence on board. No doubt the circumstances of the case—— However, do not distress yourself. Good-night!"

He dropped the curtain, picked up his belongings, and walked majestically into the cabin occupied by Miss Fay Eaton.

## II

The Captain, returning along the alleyway on his way to bed, was suddenly and agonizingly conscious that all was not well in his lobby. Three figures were visible, framed in the rectangle of the iron doorway. The nearest was that of Fay Eaton, attired in a suit of pyjamas much too large for her, and engaged in a shouting competition with an uncanny, barefooted apparition in a reefer jacket and red-and-white striped trousers. Heavens! It couldn't be—yes, it *was*—the Admiral!

In the background, dodging about like the referee of a boxing match, was Mary.

The Captain set his teeth, and strode into the lobby. If this was to be the knock-out blow, he would take it with his chin up.

The Admiral turned to him.

"Am I absolutely mad, Maitland," he began, "or are you the most accomplished bigamist afloat?"

"If you will come into my day-cabin, sir," said the Captain quickly, signalling to the two girls to efface themselves forthwith, "I can explain everything, in about two——"

"I only require you to explain one thing," said the Admiral precisely, "in one sentence. Which of these two ladies are you really married to, and is the other one aware of the fact?"

The Captain reeled. He had been prepared for much in the way of disaster, but not this. Then he pulled himself together.

"Married, sir?" he said, with an unsuccessful smile. "I'm not married to either of them."

"Then, why," boomed the Admiral, turning on Fay, "did you tell me you were?"

Fay replied, with spirit:—

"Well you came into my cabin in the middle of the night and very nearly frightened me to death and then you asked me whose wife I was and you evidently expected me to be somebody's so I said the Captain's I don't see whose else I could have been and anyhow I shall tell Bobo about your

coming into——"

The Admiral hurriedly drew out of range, and turned his guns upon Mary.

"And why did *you* tell me you were?"

Mary was quite ready for him

"I said it," she replied sweetly, "to soothe your British sense of propriety. I guessed you would sleep better, being made the way you are, if you thought things were official. And there's another reason." She stepped boldly to Maitland, and took his arm. "I like the Captain. He's a good scout. I'd got him in a jam, and I wanted to help him out."

The Admiral exploded at last.

"Help him out? Help him out? My dear Madam, I can assure you you have had your wish! You *have* helped him out—out of the Navy! You've entirely ruined his hopes of future employment. He'll be fortunate if he's not dismissed his ship!"

Mary and the Captain stood silent. They knew there was nothing to say. But Fay laboured under no such handicap.

"What a shame!" she cried. "I'll tell Bobo, and he'll tell—— Why, here he is! No, it's that nice Commander."

She ran to greet Baddeley, who, unconscious of the tempest raging below him, was descending the ladder from the quarter-deck, and took his arm affectionately.

"You can help, Commander dear," she said. "Come and talk to the old Admiral for us."

The Commander, surveying the scene and taking in the situation, responded to this request by turning a delicate green; then stood to attention. In a flash the Admiral was upon him.

"Commander, are you by any chance responsible for the presence of either of these ladies on board? Is this young person"—he indicated Fay, who was still clinging affectionately to the helpless young man's arm—"your guest, by any chance? Are you the fourth member of this scandalous *partie carrée*?"

It was an awkward question for a prospective son-in-law to answer.

"Me, sir? Oh, no!" The Commander made an unsuccessful attempt to unravel himself from Fay. "Is it likely? I mean—after all, I *am* engaged to your daughter."

The Admiral stepped deliberately across the deck, and glared up into his face.

"Are you? *Are* you? Let me tell you something, Baddeley. You have about as much chance of marrying my daughter as Captain Maitland has of retaining his command!"

And with this final and devastating broadside, the Admiral turned away and picked up his suitcase, which was lying outside Fay's cabin door.

"That is all I have to say for the present moment," he added.

"Meanwhile, I am going to bed, in this cabin." He stumped across the lobby. "There is some clothing of mine in the other one, which perhaps you will kindly see is returned to me, Captain Maitland. Good-night."

He disappeared. The Captain and Commander silently handed the two girls into the other cabin, then went on deck together. The *partie carrée* was demobilised—for good.

At the same moment Ogg, who had been lurking in the shadows further forward, returned to the lobby and resumed his solitary vigil.

"Well, thank Gawd nothing more can 'appen!" he murmured.

He was wrong.

## CHAP. XIII.

## HANK

Ah Fong, whose sole virtue lay in the fact that he accepted the eccentricities of all 'foreign devils' with complete equanimity, arrived in the Captain's lobby at seven o'clock next morning. He had not been called upon to participate in the complicated operations of the previous night.

The situation revealed to him during his round of the cabins put his Oriental impassivity to a searching test.

The Captain's sleeping-cabin, where he had left Miss Mary

Carlton, he now found to be occupied by an irascible old gentleman in striped pyjamas, who told him most explicitly what to do with his proffered cup of tea, and demanded a hot bath forthwith. The cabin contained no traces of its original occupant, so Ah Fong withdrew, with a regretful smile, and proceeded to the spare cabin.

Here he found two rather fretful young ladies squeezed into a single service bunk, likewise clamouring for a bath. They, however, accepted the tea gratefully.

"I suppose there will be some real breakfast later on, Ah Fong," said Fay—"sausages, or eggs, or something? And jam."

"Can do," replied Ah Fong graciously.

"But first of all," interposed Mary, "we want you to fill the bath-tub."

"Chop chop!" replied Ah Fong, and withdrew.

"Just what did that last Chinese crack refer to?" enquired Mary. "Breakfast or bath?"

"Breakfast, I hope," said that healthy seraph, Fay Eaton.

As a matter of fact Ah Fong had merely been expressing his intention to prepare the bath with all speed. But now an unexpected obstacle presented itself. Upon trying the door of the bathroom he found it locked, apparently from the inside. Presumably the old foreign devil in the striped pyjamas had taken possession. In that case he could not be in his sleeping-cabin: Ah Fong would seize the opportunity to make the bed.

But no, the sleeping-cabin was still occupied; and Ah Fong, rashly intruding a second time, received even more emphatic instructions than before as to what to do with his cups of tea.

He tried the bathroom door once again; rattled it. This time he was answered by a low, vibrant, feminine voice:—

"Go away! Go away at once! How dare you?"

Ah Fong recoiled a step; then, with a cryptic smile and a twitch of his disreputable eyebrows, departed to attend to his regular master, the Captain of the *Falcon*. The Chinese are an unhurried race: he would investigate this interesting mystery later.

He found his employer already dressed, and exceedingly short in his manner. Having partially placated him with tea, he departed, in obedience to a curt order, to obtain breakfast for the ladies. This done, he returned to the day-cabin, laden with dishes.

"Blacon egg, master?" he suggested, sweeping off a cover.

"Take the damned thing away," said the Captain.

"No can do?" enquired Ah Fong, sympathetically.

"No."

"Master belong allee light soon again," said Ah Fong, with a kindly smile.

"Get some more tea," replied the Captain, handing him the



empty teapot.

"Yes, master." Ah Fong started to the doorway; then turned, and remarked chattily:

"My master Jones, Hong Kong, he talkee me one time. He say coffee more better tea, next morning."

"Will—you—get—out?"

"Yes, master. Commander, master."

The Commander entered, with his cap in his hand and his telescope under his arm, fresh from the bridge.

"Good-morning, sir," he said formally.

"Good-morning, Commander."

"I came to report that the *Nestor* has been sighted. Her funnel and masts are just visible beyond Sing Foo Promontory: she appears to have anchored. We shall be in visual touch shortly. What message shall we make?"

"I will ask the Commander-in-Chief. I—er—have not seen him this morning."

The indefatigable Ah Fong now reappeared with the teapot.

"Allee hot," he announced. Then, catching the eye of the Commander, he continued:—

"Two pretty missee velly well this morning," and departed,

beaming.

The two officers gazed blankly after him, then at one another.

"There is a note of congratulation about Ah Fong's conversation this morning," observed the Captain, "which I find extremely trying."

"The Chinese take so much for granted, sir."

"And not merely the Chinese!" added the Captain bitterly. Then, abandoning his official attitude, he emitted a hollow groan. "Damn it all, Bob, old man," he said, "what are we to do? Sit down!"

The Commander obeyed.

"I'm blessed if I know," he said. "If only people would refrain from—from—— What on *earth* induced Miss Carlton to say that she was your wife?"

"She gave her reasons," replied the Captain, with a touch of asperity. "You heard her." Then he added, softly: "Bless her heart!"

The Commander laid down his cap and telescope with a certain emphasis, and gazed at his superior.

"Bless her *heart*?" His voice cracked with surprise.

But the Captain did not appear to be listening. He continued to talk, apparently to himself:—

"What sportsmanship! What loyalty! Gallant little angel!"

The Commander made an odd gurgling sound. Apparently the Captain heard this, for he emerged from his reverie and assumed a more normal tone.

"Still, I'm sorry you've got mixed up in this, Bob." He gave a dismal chuckle. "You certainly timed your entrance rottenly last night."

Baddeley nodded.

"Yes; and I expect Nancy will time a first-class exit for me as soon as she hears about it. Not to mention Nancy's lady mother. Curse that little Eaton baggage—hanging round my neck in the presence of the old—of my future father-in-law!"

The Captain nodded judicially.

"It certainly looks," he agreed, "as if you were going to lose your girl and I my ship. I seem to be booked for the beach even sooner than I expected."

The Commander, still brooding over last night's *contretemps*, rose absent-mindedly to his feet and made for the door.

"I must get back to the bridge," he said. Then, explosively: "What a curse women are!"

The Captain rose too. He was plainly shocked.

"Bob," he announced firmly, "that is a most unwarrantable

thing to say. There are women—and women."

"Yes, sir," replied the Commander respectfully, glancing through the open door. "Here are two now. One of each, so to speak."

Mary and Fay were standing upon the threshold. Both still wore their borrowed plumage, and both looked as pretty as paint. Even the Commander softened at the spectacle. As for the Captain, he was at Mary's side in a moment. Taking her hand in both of his, he led her to the sofa, where he embarked upon a prolonged series of tender enquiries, to which she replied chiefly by smiles and nods. This left Fay and the Commander together.

"Are you all right, Miss Eaton?" enquired that young man, with inconsistent solicitude. "You certainly look all right, you know. Delightful, in fact! Lovely!"

"You are a lamb!" replied Fay, who loved homage of this kind as a kitten loves cream. "But there's one thing."

"What?"

"We can't get a bath."

"I suppose the geyser has chucked its hand in, as usual? We'll soon attend to that."

"It isn't the geyser. We can't get into the bathroom."

"Why?"

"The Admiral's there," said Fay, in an awestruck voice. "He's been there all morning. He won't come out. We've rattled and banged, but he takes no notice."

The Commander scratched his nose, and grinned.

"Well, I'm afraid none of us is exactly in a position to go in and throw him out," he said. "We had better let him soak: it may get the poison out of his system. I hope Ah Fong brought you hot water, though?"

"Oh, yes. We have had breakfast, too. I suppose we had better give up the idea of a bath, and dress now. Mary!"

But only Miss Carlton's back was visible. She and the Captain had strolled out on to the stern-walk, and were now leaning over the rail, with their heads close together. Fay surveyed them for a moment, and the spectacle seemed to awaken in her some dormant sorrow. She turned piteously to the Commander: her large blue eyes were beginning to fill with tears.

"I'll find Bobo for you, Miss Eaton," said that thought-reader hurriedly. "Go and dress, and I'll send him aft."

"Oh, thank you!" murmured Fay.

They left the cabin together. Meanwhile the Captain and Mary continued to lean over the rail, silently contemplating the wake of the ship. So absorbed were they that Ah Fong was able to enter the cabin and re-lay the table for the Admiral's breakfast without attracting anybody's attention. On his part he observed that the Captain was helping Mary to light a cigarette,

an operation which involved the complicated cupping of two pairs of hands. With great discretion he left the cabin, unnoticed.

It was a glorious morning, with a bright sun and a sparkling sea. Mary, in her mauve-and-white pyjamas, high-heeled suede slippers, and big naval greatcoat, made an arresting picture. So thought the Captain; so thought Ah Fong; and so no doubt would the honest crew of the *Falcon* have thought, if they had taken the trouble to look over the after-rail of the quarter-deck. Fortunately they did not.

Mary took a whiff from her newly lighted cigarette, then turned suddenly to her companion.

"Aylwin," she said.

"Mary!" replied the Captain, lingeringly.

"I have a proposition to make to you."

The Captain glanced over his shoulder.

"One minute," he said, and strode into the cabin, from which a white-clad figure had barely retired.

"Ah Fong!"

"Yes, master."

"Let me know when the Admiral is ready for breakfast—before he comes in here. Savvy?"

"Yes, master." Ah Fong's almond eyes slid round towards the stern-walk. "Me savvy."

He vanished, and the Captain rejoined Mary.

"Now we're safe from interruption," he said.

"For how long?"

"Ten minutes, anyhow."

"I should say that was about a record for this ship," observed Miss Carlton with feeling. "But before I speak my little piece, may I ask a favour? It's rather a big one."

"It can't be too big for me," said the Captain.

"Sure?"

"Certain. Heave ahead."

"Very well, then. Do you mind if I keep Aylwin for Sundays and July Fourth, and call you something else the rest of the time?"

Maitland laughed.

"Rather! What is the alternative suggestion?"

"What would you say," asked Mary, addressing herself to the distant horizon, "if I were to call you Hank?"

"Hank?"

"Just that."

"Is one permitted to ask why?"

"Sure. Hank was the name I used to call my husband."

There was a very long pause. At last the Captain said:—

"I hadn't quite realized that you were married."

"I'm not."

"Then you're a widow? Or perhaps——"

"Or perhaps nothing. I'm a widow." Mary resumed her cigarette. "Well, I've told you now. I'm glad. It's been on my mind."

"Have you been a widow long?"

"Just ten years."

Maitland turned and gazed at her—at her slim figure, her childish profile, her long lashes.

"You must have married young," he said.

"I'll say I was young. Just eighteen! I had come over to play in the chorus of an American musical show in London. Business was not so good: neither was the show, for that matter. We had settled to fold up and call it a season after the August Bank Holiday, and then go home, maybe. But we didn't. Now you ask me why."



"Why?"

"Because that Bank Holiday was the day the War started. Where were you at the breathless moment?"

"With the Grand Fleet in the North Sea—mobilised, and waiting at Scapa Flow."

"I see. I was on Shaftesbury Avenue—demobilised and running around in circles, wondering how I was going to get back to those United States. Everybody said that all the theatres would close for the duration of the War, of course. But they didn't. Presently things settled down, and the show business had the boom of its life. Our little old musical tragedy shot up to capacity, and stayed that way for fifteen months. Every night it was the same. London was packed with people—soldiers training, or soldiers on leave, and their folks with them, all come up to London to stay by them for as long as they could have them. They were wonderful days, in a way. Everybody writes and talks about them now as if they were a kind of black nightmare; but that's not my recollection. Life was just one big thrill after another. Of course there were sour spots—air raids, and casualty lists, and food shortage, and things like that—but my impression is that most people got a real kick out of the War, especially for the first year or two.

"Anyhow, every night our theatre was full—full of boys like my Hank—all young, and all just crazy with the excitement of everything. I met Hank at a back-stage party. He was a Second Lieutenant, just out of the egg. I had feathers sticking all over me too. We fell for one another. Everybody was doing the same thing all round us: it was a kind of law of nature at that

time, I guess. 'Do it to-day: likely there won't be any to-morrow!' Anyhow, we crashed; and when we came out of the chloroform we found ourselves married. Just a pair of newly-weds, without a wisdom tooth between us."

She broke off, with a queer little sigh. Maitland nodded gravely.

"And his name was Hank?"

"Why, no, his name was Reginald—the Honourable Reginald. But we don't have any Reginalds where I was raised, and I'll admit I was shy of a name like that. Kind of ashamed to use it before folks. So I called him Hank. It made him so mad!"

"It wouldn't have made me mad," said the Captain.

Mary smiled, and shook her head.

"It would if you had been his age."

"I was forgetting that."

Again came the little sigh.

"Oh, gosh, how young he was! And me too! And how we quarrelled! Pretty soon we realized what we had done. It was lots of fun at first, of course; but war has this effect, that it speeds everything up for you too much: you live a whole life in a month or two. Before we knew where we were, we were fighting like an old married couple. Presently Hank was sent to a training camp, some place in the country. I went back to the show, and he came to me for week-ends. Then one week-end

he didn't come. At least, he didn't come to me. Then another week-end. Then another. Then a girl-friend told me something, and next Sunday night I went to the Savoy. There I saw my handsome husband, on the ballroom floor, stepping out with a blonde."

"Young cad!" murmured the Captain.

Mary shook her head again.

"No," she said gently. "Just young. That covers most faults."

"How wise you are, Mary—and how tolerant! What did you do?"

"What did you think I'd do? Go home and cry? No, sir! I waited till they came off that floor, and then I went right up to him—and to her—and made a noise like a wife for fifteen minutes. And then I took the remains home. I don't know what became of the blonde: she just kind of faded out, before I was half through. Maybe she went to look for some quiet place to lie down and die.

"Hank was terribly ashamed of himself, and I forgave him. I'm glad I forgave him, because just seven days later he was sent out to the Western Front, in charge of a regimental draft; and——"

The glowing cigarette-end dropped from Mary's slim fingers, and was swallowed up in the swirling wake of the ship.

"The First Battle of the Somme," she continued presently.

"He was just twenty-one. He was Mentioned in Dispatches, though. I'm glad he was Mentioned in Dispatches: it seemed somehow to make it all just a little bit more worth while. And—that was ten years ago." She turned on the Captain, almost defiantly. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this. I hadn't figured on telling you when I started. I guess I'd better get on with my proposition now. It's this. Will you——"

Maitland interrupted her.

"Mary," he said, "what made you want to call me Hank?"

Miss Carlton considered.

"Hank's just a name," she said at last, "that I keep for all helpless things."

"Helpless? Me?" exclaimed the Captain of the *Falcon*, reasonably annoyed.

"Sure." Mary was her cheerful self again. "You're just a kid, you know. A nice kid, but a helpless kid. I'll say so!"

"Kid?"

"Yes. Who but a kid would have jumped with both feet into the crazy mess we are all in right now—and liked it?" Mary slipped her arm into the Captain's. "You do like it, don't you?"

The Captain looked down into her smiling, mischievous face, and chuckled.

"Yes," he said. "I do."

Mary nodded triumphantly.

"There!" she said.

"But only because you are in it too."

Mary made a grimace.

"You can bet I'm in it too! And it's up to me, having started the trouble, to get you out of it. Hank"—she squeezed his arm, eagerly and ingratiatingly, like a child, and almost dragged him back into the cabin—"listen! Will you give me five minutes alone, right here, with old Honey Pop? Let me take one chance—one little chance—on him!"

The Captain's eyes twinkled.

"Mary, dear," he said gravely, "if your tactics last night were a fair sample, is it quite wise to try again?"

"But I'll work a new routine—from a fresh angle," pleaded Mary. "Please—Hank!"

The Captain shook his head.

"That all sounds very scientific and infallible," he said, "but the Admiral won't listen. He's the most straight-laced old gentleman—with the possible exception of Marine Ogg—in the whole British Navy. He'll only make quarter-deck noises at you. And that reminds me, he'll be here at any moment for his breakfast. You had better skedaddle and dress, and leave me to toe the line alone. I know how to handle the old man better than you do. That's a good girl."

"Just as you say," replied Mary, turning away submissively.

"Whatever happens," added Maitland, going to the doorway and drawing back the curtain for her, "your name is going to be kept out of this pot-mess. If I have to go and take root in Sussex to-morrow, it'll be kept out!"

Mary turned to him.

"You would do that for me?" she said.

"Naturally."

She came closer, and looked straight up into his face.

"Hank," she asked, in a very low voice indeed, "what sort of a place is this Sussex—to live in?" She caught his startled gaze, and held it, deliberately.

"That," replied Maitland unsteadily, "depends entirely on what company one is in, like everything else in life." Then he added:— "Mary, will you take a chance—one little chance—on Sussex—with me?"

Mary smiled.

"Maybe!" she said, and gave him her hands.

The Captain declined the offer, and took her in his arms instead.

Meanwhile, in the Captain's sleeping-cabin clouds were blowing up for another prolonged spell of dirty weather.

The Admiral, having shaved, attempted to enter the bathroom—an enterprise in which it will be remembered Ah Fong had already signally failed. He tried both doors, and was repelled from each by emphatic feminine protests from within.

To pass the time until Miss Carlton (or Miss Eaton) should be pleased to make way for him, he perused the ship's Signal log, which, in response to his request, had just been delivered at his cabin by an orderly, and discovered for the first time the full extent of the Captain's iniquity. The log made no reference whatsoever to the circumstances in which the two ladies now in the spare cabin had been left on board: indeed, it made no reference to them of any kind whatsoever. It merely stated, quite explicitly, that the Captain had nothing to send ashore until next morning.

On the stroke of eight-thirty, having failed to dislodge Miss Eaton (or possibly Miss Carlton) from the bathroom—at his third attempt a frenzied voice had told him to go away and bring the Captain at once—the Admiral removed the lather from his face with a small, damp, gritty towel, struggled furiously into his uniform, and emerged from his cabin determined to make an example of somebody.

He stumped fiercely into the day-cabin, and received yet

another shock. The Captain of the *Falcon*, who in common decency should have been awaiting him in a white sheet, was executing a spirited *pas seul* all by himself in the middle of the floor. His back was turned to the door, and he continued his reprehensible antics for some time before becoming aware of the fact that he was not alone. When he finally turned round, in an unsuccessful attempt to pirouette *à la Russe*, his face grew as red as the Admiral's.

There was a brief, electric pause, and then both officers, having decided independently that no kind of explanation could meet the exigencies of the situation, and that therefore it would be useless either to offer or demand one, exchanged a brief and formal good-morning.

The Admiral sat down at the table, with his back to the Captain.

"I'm sorry to be late, Maitland," he said; "but your two guests have occupied my bathroom, singly or in company, since dawn. They are still there, which accounts for my present filthy appearance.

"I'm very sorry, sir," said the Captain, "I'm sure. But—I was given to understand that things were the other way round."

"The other way round?"

"Yes. The ladies assured me that you had been occupying the bathroom all—for a considerable period."

The Admiral snorted delicately.



"In that case, Maitland, there is no more to be said. Naturally, the assurances of such ladies, especially since you have taken the precaution of providing yourself with two of them, must outweigh the unsupported word of a mere Commander-in-Chief." He bumped a lump of sugar into his teacup, which promptly bounced out again. "Damn the thing!"

"Breakfast for Admiral!" announced a placid voice, and Ah Fong entered with a covered dish, upon which he proceeded to display a slice of bacon and a poached egg, suspiciously like those recently spurned by the Captain.

"All right! Put it down," snapped the Admiral.

"You can go, Ah Fong," added the Captain. With a sympathetic and understanding smile at his master, Ah Fong removed himself, and the Admiral began his breakfast.

"The *Nestor* has been sighted, sir," announced the Captain presently.

"The *Nestor*?" The Admiral paused thoughtfully, with his fork in mid air. "Damn it all, I'd forgotten about the *Nestor*! Well, what news have you?"

"She is only just showing in sight beyond Sing Foo Promontory. We shall be in visual touch shortly. What message would you like me to make, sir?"

The Admiral carefully laid down his fork.

"Ascertain the nature and extent of the damage," he said, "and enquire if Lady Hewitt and my daughter can safely be—"

um—left on board."

"I will attend to it at once, sir," said the Captain, going to the door.

"And as soon as you are free," rasped the Admiral, without turning round, "I would like to see you—here!"

"Very good, sir."

Left alone, the Admiral continued his breakfast, munching savagely. He would have to do something pretty drastic about Maitland. The fellow appeared to be quite insensible either to the seriousness of his offence or the gravity of his position. Dancing—actually dancing! What a ship! Women in every cabin, and the officers all dancing—dancing the cachuca, alone, after breakfast! Well, he would deal with the situation promptly and, he flattered himself, conclusively.

In the first place, those two impudent hussies must be put into close confinement until the ship reached port—in other words, kept out of sight. It would be highly demoralising for the crew to see them posturing all over the ship in pyjamas. One thing was quite certain: his wife and daughter must not be shocked by the revelation of the presence of such persons on board one of the ships of the Fleet. It would be wisest, kindest, to leave Agatha and Nancy in the *Nestor*, until——

"Good-morning, sir," said a low voice just behind him.

The Admiral started, choked into his teacup, recovered himself, and rose impressively to his feet. Mary Carlton was standing before him, with bent head. She was still in pyjamas

and greatcoat.

"Good-morning," he said coldly. "May I ask the reason for this intrusion?"

"Isn't Captain Maitland here?" enquired Mary, who had seen the Captain pass her cabin on his way forward exactly three minutes ago.

"Captain Maitland is not here. He happens to be attending to his duties—for once. I should advise you to retire to your cabin and put on some clothes-if you possess any."

"But I've just *got* to see the Captain," insisted Mary—"or somebody like that."

"Why?"

"Well, I've not been feeling too good. I guess it's foolish of me, but I've gone kind of faint. I've felt badly ever since I got up. May I sit down?" And without waiting for permission, Mary collapsed on to the sofa, and closed her eyes.

"I guess I'm going to faint," she said, apologetically.

"*Faint?*" exclaimed the Admiral, genuinely frightened. "You can't faint here!"

Mary responded by slumping right down upon the cushions, with her chin in her chest.

The panic-stricken Admiral flapped his hands like a seal, and gazed helplessly about him. What on earth was he to do?

Supposing some one were to come in—that obscene Chinaman, for instance? With an Englishman's passion for privacy upon trying occasions, he hastily closed the cabin door. Then he fanned Mary with his handkerchief. She merely opened her eyes for a moment, then closed them and moaned.

The wretched man looked round for any medical comforts that might be available. His eyes fell upon the breakfast table. In a moment he had emptied the sugar basin and filled it to the brim with a tepid concoction of stewed tea and tinned milk. With this he advanced upon the sofa, and sitting down beside the inanimate form of Miss Carlton, held it to her lips.

"Drink this!" he commanded.

Mary made no attempt to comply, but with her left hand she gripped his right, which was resting on the sofa beside her. The Admiral noted that the clutch of fainting people is curiously firm and tenacious.

"I can't," she said faintly.

"Oh, come, come! Make an effort." He gazed solicitously down upon the flushed face and parted lips of the sufferer. She was certainly very pretty. Again he held the sugar basin to her lips. This time she raised her right hand to steady it, twining her fingers round his left.

"Thank you," she murmured: "you're very sweet. Don't let go!" she added hurriedly, as the Admiral tried to relinquish the sugar basin; "I haven't the strength to hold this." She bubbled into the tea, still holding the Admiral firmly with either hand. Then, with a little sigh, she pushed the basin away, and smiled

faintly.

"Are you feeling better?" asked the Admiral, with another furtive glance towards the door.

"Very little."

"You've had no breakfast, I suppose?"

"And no sleep, either." The afflicted one gave a slight sob, followed by a sudden shudder, or convulsion; and about half-a-pint of tea promptly emptied itself down the front of her greatcoat.

"I beg your pardon!" exclaimed the contrite Admiral. "I'm afraid I'm terribly clumsy."

"It is my fault, sir. Have you a handkerchief?"

"Yes, yes, yes—of course!" The Admiral made another attempt, entirely fruitless, to release his right hand. Finally he deposited the sugar basin on the floor of the cabin and proceeded to mop Mary up left-handed with his handkerchief. Once or twice she wriggled delicately under his ministrations; and each time, impelled by an ingrained sense of propriety, the Admiral apologised.

"I wouldn't worry," said Mary when he had finished, "but it isn't my greatcoat." She sat up, and looked vaguely about her.

"Now we're all right again," said the Admiral hopefully, rising to his feet and getting his right hand free by a dexterous wrench. "If you won't have any more tea, I'll put this thing

away." He returned the sugar basin to the table, confident that the worst was now over.

"You are very generous, sir," said Mary in a low voice, "to be so kind to me—after——"

"Even an Admiral," announced Sir Hercules with simple dignity, "is not entirely destitute of common humanity."

"I just can't tell you," continued Mary, in tones of poignant suffering, "how badly I feel about what happened last night. If you will let me explain——"

The Admiral interrupted her, suddenly suspicious:—

"Madam, I am afraid I cannot discuss Service matters with you. Now, if you are ready——"

"But I could get everything straight in five minutes," said Mary desperately—"on the level, I could!" She was fighting to a finish now: she had forgotten all about her fainting fit. So had the Admiral.

"No explanation that you could possibly devise," he said, "could palliate the events of last night."

"But Fay and I just *couldn't* get ashore. We *had* to stay! That old picquet boat, or something——"

The Admiral interrupted her again—this time with the devastating preciousness of a judge summing up:—

"The Captain had ample opportunity to inform the Flagship

of your presence on board, and so make arrangements for your immediate removal. But in the signal which he made last night, and which I have seen with my own eyes in the signal log of this ship, he denied, by implication, that you were here at all."

"Is that so?" said Mary, frankly interested. "Just what did he say?"

"He said that he had nothing to send ashore until this morning. Now, Madam, I think this interview had better terminate."

"He said that?" cried Mary.

"He did."

"Atta boy!"

The Admiral, to whom this expression was unfamiliar, but intriguing, turned quickly round. Mary was once more prostrate among the cushions. But his suspicions were definitely awake by this time.

"I must decline," he said coldly, "to go into the details of this deplorable business any further. Do you feel sufficiently recovered to retire to your cabin?"

Mary looked up at him piteously.

"No, sir," she said. "But I'll try, since you order me. Will you give me your arm, please?"

The Admiral, at the back of whose mind lurked an uneasy

feeling that he had been behaving like an unutterable cad for ten minutes, seized this opportunity of tempering duty with indulgence.

"Certainly, my dear, certainly!" he said, and proffered his right arm.

Mary took it, and raised herself laboriously to her feet. Next moment her hands were firmly locked behind the Admiral's neck, and her face was six inches from his. It was her final assault from 'the fresh angle.'

"Then you won't listen to me, sir?" she said.

"I cannot discuss a matter which is *sub judice*," stammered the Admiral. He retreated several steps: naturally, he took Mary with him. "Really, this is all very irregular"—as Mary, employing her last weapon, burst into tears. "This is frightful!"—as Mary deposited her head on his shoulder and held it there. "Compose yourself, *please!*"

"Supposing," sobbed Mary, without altering her position, "that you had got caught in a jam through no fault of your own, with appearances all against *you*? Wouldn't you expect to be even listened to? Won't you give me the same chance as you'd give yourself?"

"The question does not arise," said the Admiral, struggling. "I could never be caught in a jam, as you express it, of a nature comparable with—— Oh, my God!"

The cabin door had opened silently, and the Captain was standing three yards away, with the face of a graven image.



With a final effort the unfortunate Admiral tore himself free from Mary's embrace, and stood glaring defiantly.

"I am glad to see that you have been entertaining one another, sir," said the Captain.

"We are *not* entertaining one another! Miss Carlton was feeling suddenly faint, and I was helping her to her cabin."

The Captain was at Mary's side in a moment, all genuine concern.

"I am so sorry," he said. "Take my arm, Miss Carlton."

"Thank you, Captain," replied Mary, smiling gratefully. "I'm feeling better now. The Admiral has been very, very sweet to me."

"No, I have *not*!" bawled that misjudged man. "I merely \_\_\_\_\_"

To his intense relief, the Commander now appeared at the cabin door.

"We have been in communication with the *Nestor*, sir," he reported to the Captain. "The trouble was due to a choked circulating-water inlet. The weed-trap has now been cleared, and the yacht is capable of returning to port under her own steam." He proceeded to give further technical details, incomprehensible to Mary, but tending to restore normality of atmosphere.

"What instructions shall I send back, sir?" he asked, when he

had finished.

The Captain turned politely to the Admiral, who was furtively brushing powder from his shoulder.

"What message would you like sent, sir?"

"Suggest to the Captain that he had better follow us—at a safe distance. Ask him what speed he would like us to go."

"Very good, sir." The Captain turned to the Commander, and nodded corroboration. The Commander hesitated.

"There is another signal from the yacht, sir—personal to the Commander-in-Chief. It rather complicates matters."

"What do you mean—complicates matters?" asked the Admiral quickly.

"Lady Hewitt has indicated that she would prefer to travel back in this ship, sir—with you."

There was a pregnant silence. Then:—

"Oh, has she?" growled the Admiral. "Well, you had better signal——"

But he was interrupted by Mary Carlton.

"*Lady Hewitt?* Listen, Admiral. Are you a married man?"

The Admiral turned and stared at her, in frank amazement.

"Yes, Madam," he said stiffly, "I am. Of course I am!"

Miss Carlton turned upon him the eyes of a wounded gazelle.

"And you said those things to me!" she said, in a low, trembling voice.

"What things?" The Admiral started back, and looked guiltily over Mary's shoulder towards the Captain and Commander. "What do you mean? What are you talking about? I never said—— Tell me what you mean?"

But Mary told him nothing. Instead, she turned and tottered out of the cabin. Her head was bowed, and her shoulders were heaving, as if with some uncontrollable emotion.

## CHAP. XV.

## QUITE!

That innocent victim of appearances, Admiral Sir Hercules Hewitt, sat down heavily in his chair, beside his half-eaten breakfast, and gazed dumbly up into the faces of the Captain and Commander. Both officers looked silently before them, with expressionless eyes, the embodiment of cold, impartial justice. How were the mighty fallen! By a sudden and unmerited freak of fortune the Admiral had been reduced to the dock and his guilty subordinates elevated to the bench, from which eminence they were now obviously waiting for the

prisoner to state his case.

The Admiral coughed nervously.

"What on earth was that girl talking about?" he asked. "I said nothing to her at all—except that I could not discuss official matters. Of course one has to be—a little abrupt, shall we say?—on these occasions. But I said nothing—absolutely *nothing*—that could possibly be construed into—that is——"

Growing more and more self-conscious and confused under the dispassionate contemplation of his two judges, the fallen despot tailed off into inarticulate mumblings.

"What was it made her faint, sir?" asked the Captain gravely.

"I don't know. How *could* I know? How *should* I know? Damn it all——!"

"*Did* she faint, sir?" enquired the Commander of the Captain, in a tone of deep concern.

"Yes. At least," explained the Captain, with meticulous impartiality, "when I entered the cabin just now the Commander-in-Chief was finding it necessary to support her in his arms. It is a fortunate thing that you happened to be here, sir," he concluded deferentially.

"Most fortunate!" echoed the Commander, who was now settling comfortably down to his *r*◊*le* of Greek Chorus. Then, with neatly calculated irrelevance: "Shall I send a cutter over for Lady Hewitt and Miss Hewitt, sir?"

"Yes, I suppose so," said the Admiral reluctantly.

"Naturally," continued the Captain, "you must be anxious to see Lady Hewitt again."

"Yes, yes—quite!"

"And of course she will be anxious to see you, sir. She will want to reassure herself that you have passed a comfortable night in her absence——"

The Captain shot a quick glance in the direction of the Commander, indicating that this was a Chorus cue. The Commander did not fail him.

"—knowing how very limited our spare sleeping accommodation is, sir," he said, addressing himself to the bowed back of the Commander-in-Chief, who was helplessly sipping a cup of quite cold tea. "Only two spare beds—for everybody! I will send the message at once. Good-morning, sir."

He turned briskly towards the door. But a voice called him back—the voice of a man with a white flag, prepared to welcome terms of any kind.

"Commander, wait a moment."

The Commander came smartly round.

"Yes, sir?"

The Admiral moistened his utterance with a further draught

of undrinkable tea, and began:—

"I hardly think it will be necessary to bring Lady Hewitt on board for so short a trip."

"As you wish, sir."

The Admiral looked up, almost timidly, at the Captain.

"I appreciate what you have said, Maitland, about your shortage of accommodation, and so forth; and I think that if we can arrange for my wife and daughter to remain where they are, until—for the present—we shall all be very much more comfortable."

"Quite, sir," said the Commander.

"Quite," said the Admiral. He rose to his feet. "Then that is settled. But before you leave us, Commander, there is one other matter which had better be adjusted now. I am referring to the—the unfortunate occurrences of last night. Now"—by a supreme effort of will the Admiral twisted his features into a jaunty smile—"you are both old friends of mine. Maitland, I have—and always have had—a very high opinion of your capabilities and character. Some day I hope to see you flying your own flag as an Admiral. For you, Baddeley"—he turned to the Commander, who squinted modestly down his nose—"I entertain a deep affection, for more reasons than one. In particular I should be most distressed to see any cloud obscure the present happy and—er—entirely trustful relations which exist between my dear daughter and yourself."

"Thank you, sir."

"Not at all. I mean——" The Admiral took another breath and started again: "In these circumstances, then, I have decided to overlook your remissness in not officially reporting and recording the irregular, even if unavoidable, presence of—h'm—those two young ladies on board this ship. You will hear no more of the matter from me."

"Thank you, sir," exclaimed both officers, stepping forward together.

After a moment of natural hesitation, the Admiral offered his hand, which Solo and Chorus shook respectfully in turn. All three gentlemen then sat down and breathed again, comfortably conscious of a delicate situation sympathetically handled, and a dangerous menace averted at the eleventh hour.

The Admiral, as soon as he began to breathe quite regularly, addressed the Commander.

"It is mainly out of consideration for you, my boy," he said, shaking his finger playfully, "that I am refraining from inviting my wife and—er—poor Nancy on board, to meet your little friends. Pretty sporting of me, I think—eh, Maitland?"

"Quite, sir," assented the Captain basely.

"Quite. Of course"—the Admiral leaned back comfortably and crossed his little legs: he was growing more expansive with relief every moment—"these harmless deceptions are almost inevitable sometimes. A man—a man of the world like myself—can usually be trusted to take the broad view. But women are different. You'll find that out for yourselves some day, both of you. Women have an unfortunate, and

occasionally most unfair propensity for believing the worst on these occasions. They call it Instinct."

"Quite, sir."

"Quite. On this occasion, for instance, I have a feeling that it would be wise to leave those Instincts—er—dormant. Let us forget that the incident has occurred."

"By all means, sir," said the Captain heartily.

"Thank you most awfully, sir," said the Commander.

"That is quite all right," said the Admiral affably. "Don't do it again, that's all." He rose to his feet. "And now I must go on deck and have a look at the *Nestor*, to make sure that she is not coming dangerously close to us. Safety *first*—eh, Bob?" He chuckled rakishly, and practically winked at his future son-in-law.

"May I make one further suggestion, sir, before you go?" interposed Maitland, who had been thinking.

"By all means, my boy. What?"

"It seems to me that it would be a gracious act on your part, sir—and I know it would be enormously appreciated—if you were to send for the two young ladies who have been the subject of our conversation, and inform them that they are officially exonerated, so to speak."

"Why not?" replied the Admiral. "Nobody has ever accused me of running away from a pretty girl. Why should I run away



from two of them, eh? Trot them along, by all means!"

The Captain rang the bell, and Ah Fong appeared, with his usual uncanny suddenness. He glanced enquiringly round the room, as if to test the general atmosphere, and noted the smiling faces of his three superiors with obvious gratification.

"Yes, master?"

"Ah Fong," commanded the Captain, "fetch two piecee missee, chop chop!"

"Yes, master," replied Ah Fong, beaming. "And catchee big bottle champagne?"

"Good idea! Go ahead! Five glasses!"

Ah Fong went out. The Admiral turned to the Captain, with a most unconvincing expression of concern on his face.

"My dear fellow," he remonstrated: "champagne at this hour of the morning?"

"I think Ah Fong is right, sir, in the circumstances. After all, we have had a rather disturbed night. Something tells me that a small glass all round will enable us to get our bearings again, so to speak. Don't you think so?"

"I am your guest," replied the Admiral genially, "and guests must obey orders. Don't go, Bob"—to the Commander, who had taken up his cap.

"Wait and have a spot, Commander," said the Captain.

"I must see about that signal to the yacht, sir. I'll come back, if I may."

"Righto!"

The Commander left the cabin, and the Admiral and Captain sat down to wait for the ladies.

"On reflection, Maitland," remarked the Admiral, "I think this is a wise move of yours. Not the champagne—the formal exoneration. It is just as well that these two young ladies should leave your ship in a thoroughly placated frame of mind. Otherwise, they might feel disposed, upon getting ashore, to talk rather—indiscreetly."

"Quite, sir."

"Quite. Are they nice girls? They are certainly very attractive to the eye."

"They are exceptionally nice girls, sir. One of them I have not seen much of—she has been entirely monopolised by my Marine Officer, for the best of all reasons—but I have had exceptional opportunity for studying the character of the other, Miss Carlton; and, I will go so far as to say——"

"Two piecee missee!" announced a smooth voice from the door, and Mary and Fay appeared. Fay was wearing her pink afternoon frock again, but Mary was still in nautico-nocturnal attire. Following sheepishly behind, obviously somewhat uncertain of his reception, came Captain Randall.

"Come in," said the Captain rising, and, nodding

reassuringly to Mary.

"I've brought Bobo with me," said Fay. "Does it matter? Is it all right?"

"Come along in, Randall," said the Captain resignedly. "This is practically anybody's cabin this morning."

He proceeded to some formal and highly superfluous introductions.

"Let me see, sir," he said to the Admiral, "Miss Carlton you already know. This is Miss Eaton. She has just become engaged to Captain Randall, here——"

"Congratulations——congratulations to you both!" said the Admiral affably, shaking hands with each. The lovers, speechless with astonishment, returned inarticulate thanks, and drifted unnoticed into a corner of the cabin, where doubtless they found the world well lost.

The Admiral turned to Mary, and shook hands cordially.

"Miss Carlton," he said, "I trust you have recovered."

"I'm feeling swell," said Mary. "Say"—as Ah Fong blew a champagne cork just behind her—"is this a party?"

"Yes," said the Captain. "The Commander-in-Chief wishes to drink your health before you go ashore."

"Then the shooting's all over?"

"All over. Have a cup of kindness with us."

Mary waved the champagne away.

"Just a minute," she said firmly. "I must go and get my only frock on. I can't attend a Naval Disarmament Conference in pyjamas."

"Of course you can," said the Captain.

"You look perfectly stunning as you are," said the Admiral. "I order you to remain here," he added playfully; then raised his glass. "Your very good health, Miss Carlton!"

"Well," said Mary, raising hers and shaking her head philosophically, "I guess I shall wake up presently."

"The Admiral has something particular to say to you," mentioned the Captain.

"This is *where* we wake up!" said Mary. Then, turning politely to the Admiral:—

"The floor is yours, sir. Do not hesitate to shoot."

The Admiral, a little taken aback, but not entirely displeased, patted her affectionately on the arm and led her to the sofa; then cleared his throat and glanced towards Fay Eaton, who was still occupied with Randall in her corner. At her swain's whispered suggestion, that young lady hastened to join Mary.

"Miss Carlton—Miss Eaton—young ladies," began the

Admiral, *ore rotundo*, "I have just concluded a prolonged and most thorough discussion with the Captain and Commander of this ship regarding—er—certain recent most irregular occurrences. Last night, I admit, I was annoyed; but my annoyance was, I feel, justified. It was due, of course, not to any personal indignity to which I had been subjected—I hope I am a bigger man than that—but partly to my extreme jealousy for the reputation of the China Squadron in particular and of the Service as a whole, and partly to my natural solicitude for the happiness of my innocent and only child. I have sent for you here to inform you that I have now accepted the assurances and explanations of these two officers, and the incident, so far as I am concerned, may be regarded as closed." He raised his glass, conscious of an oration perfectly phrased and impressively delivered. "In this we bury all unkindness."

To his extreme embarrassment, he was immediately aware, for the second time that morning, of Mary's arms round his neck. In addition, he was conscious that he was kissed on the left cheek.

"You great big wonderful scout!" cried Mary. "Fay, this is where we offer a vote of thanks. Come right over here and second the motion."

Fay hastened to comply, and attached herself glutinously to the Admiral's unoccupied cheek. The two girls make a striking and memorable picture, twined about the venerable figure of the happily blushing old sea-dog.

"Really, ladies, you overwhelm me, quite," he said, disengaging himself at last, and rearranging his tie.

"Another glass, sir?" suggested the Captain, coming to the rescue.

"Thank you, thank you," cried the Admiral recklessly. "Half a dozen if you like," he added, going suddenly mad. He had not been kissed by a pretty girl, except his own daughter, for twenty-one years. He held out his glass, which the Captain filled to the brim. "Now, boys and girls, listen to me," he continued. "We are going to enjoy ourselves. We are going to make—what is that delightful native expression of yours, Miss Carlton?"

"Whoopee!" screamed Mary. "Fay, switch on that gramophone over there."

Fay obeyed, and the orgy reached its peak.

"And here," shouted the Admiral, with his glass aloft, "is to our next merry meeting Hip—hip——"

He drew a full breath for the final bellow—and then noticed that the Commander was standing rigidly in the doorway.

"Come along, Bob, my boy," he cried boisterously. "You're just in time."

But the Commander did not move. Instead, he gaped like a freshly-landed fish, and gurgled:—

"Lady Hewitt, sir, and Nancy! They're alongside!"

I

Upon the scene which followed it were kinder not to dwell. The history of the Royal Navy is happily and almost entirely free from instances of sudden and overwhelming panic; but there must be exceptions to every rule. For the next two or three minutes stark demoralisation reigned in the Captain's cabin. Fay clung to Bobo; Mary clung to the Captain; the Admiral very nearly clung to the Commander.

The Captain found his voice first.

"*Alongside?* How did they get there?"

"They came over in the yacht's motor sampan, sir, without sending a signal. The thing has a canopy over it, and the Officer of the Watch had no idea who was underneath it until they were quite close. Flags took charge when they came on board. They are on their way to this cabin now."

There was a strangled cry from the Admiral.

"Damn it all, they *mustn't* find us here—like this! Look at you!" He pointed frantically to Mary's pyjamas; then whirled round on Fay. "Turn off that filthy machine!"

The gramophone stopped, and an unnerving silence followed. Then the Captain took masterful charge. He had done well at Jutland.

"Girls," he said briskly, "get back to your cabin—and stay there! It will only be for an hour or two."

"Sure!" said Mary. "We're right with you, boys. Come on, Fay, honey."

"It's no use," groaned the Commander: "it can't be done! Look!" He stepped outside the open door, followed by the Captain, and pointed along the white-painted alleyway which led forward. At the end of the vista could be seen two female figures, advancing delicately (for the ship was rolling a little) under the escort of the Flag-Lieutenant.

"We appear to be too late," said the Captain.

"What's that? Too late? Oh, my Lord!" The Admiral had joined the group; or rather, was peering furtively round the jamb of the door. The Captain took him by the arm.

"It is up to you to go and stop Lady Hewitt, sir," he said.

"Me? Stop her? Heavens above, do you imagine anybody on earth can stop her? A sixteen-inch gun couldn't!"

"Well heave her to for a couple of minutes, anyhow," urged the Captain, "and give me a chance to work out a tactical plan. Quick." And bundling his revered chief out of the cabin, he despatched him at full speed across the lobby, where he disappeared through the iron doorway with the dismal wail of a train entering a long, dark tunnel.

"You go too, Commander," said the Captain, "and back him up. Keep Nancy in check."



"Righto!" said the Commander, and hurried after the Admiral. The Captain reentered the cabin, and addressed his Marine Officer:—

"Now, Bobo—damn it all, I mean Captain Randall!—you started all this trouble, and you have got to get us out."

"Aye aye, sir!" said Randall, releasing Fay's waist and becoming the resourceful Royal Marine again. "What shall I do?"

"I shall put these ladies out on to the stern-walk," said the Captain concisely. "You will get out of here, and nip up to the quarter-deck, and rig up some kind of tackle—a bosun's chair, or a jumping ladder, or a bowline with a handy billy, or *something*—and hoist them up. It's only a few feet. Do it as quietly as possible; then take them to your cabin and make them comfortable. Then report to me. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Carry on, then. Come along, girls, get a move on!"

He hurried to the door leading to the stern-walk, and threw it open. Bobo had already disappeared forward, followed by the usual farmyard noises from Fay.

"Through here, Mary," he said. "Come along, Miss Eaton: never mind your Bobo just now. No, don't talk, either of you: just wait out there until the tackle is lowered. You'll be quite safe. Keep away from this door, because the upper half has glass panels in it. *Au revoir! Ora pro nobis!*"

He thrust his fair guests out on to the narrow iron gallery, and banged the door; then turned and swiftly surveyed the cabin. Did it look all right? Was everything——?

"This way, my dear," said an affectionate voice from the lobby. "You'll soon be able to sit down and rest now. The Captain is waiting in here, to offer you all the hospitality in his power."

The eye of the hospitable gentleman referred to fell suddenly upon the empty champagne bottle, glistening obscenely in the middle of the table. With one frantic movement he seized it and hurled it behind the sofa. Almost simultaneously Lady Hewitt tottered into the cabin.

With a reassuring nod to the Admiral, whose anxious face and bulging eyes were afflictingly conspicuous over his wife's left shoulder, the Captain strode cheerfully forward, the hearty host.

"Good morning, Lady Hewitt," he said, shaking hands. "I'm so sorry for not being on deck to receive you, but I never dreamed you would come over in a sampan. I was just going to make a signal to you, offering a cutter. Wasn't I, sir?"

"Yes, yes," said the Admiral readily.

"Anyhow," continued the Captain, "it was charming of you to come over in this informal way. A delightful surprise at this hour! I hope you haven't breakfasted: I am just having the table laid."

"Breakfast?" replied Lady Hewitt faintly. "Do not mention

that word to me!" She lowered herself, with the assistance of the two accomplices, on to the sofa, and closed her eyes. Plainly she was not her usual commanding self: her hat was awry; her face was a pale orange, and her nose a light violet colour.

"Oh, what a night!" she groaned. "That beastly little yacht! Rolling about, hour after hour, with rocks dashing towards us like—like torpedoes. What a nightmare!" She opened one eye, to discover the twitching features of her husband some fifteen inches away. "I'm not sure that it's over yet."

"And that half-witted Captain," she continued presently—"MacSquintle, or MacSquirtle! I shall tell Sir George to discharge him: he is quite unfit to be in charge of anything at all. At one time I gave up all hope. Don't stand there *goggling*, Bertie!"

"No, dear," said the Admiral, removing his face. "Can I get you anything?"

"Yes. A bath! For the love of Heaven, a bath! I haven't washed for twelve hours."

"You appear remarkably clean, darling."

The look with which Lady Hewitt rewarded this well-meant assurance was so terrible that the Captain decided to intervene.

"You would like some food, of course," he suggested brightly.

Lady Hewitt closed her eyes again.

"Captain Maitland," she said in a hollow voice, "I have asked you once already not to mention food in my presence. Get me something to drink. Coffee!"

"Coffee? Of course; that's the stuff," said the Captain. He went to the door. "Ah Fong!"

"Yes, master?"

"Hot coffee, for Admiral's lady."

"Yes master."

"And see that it *is* hot!" added a sepulchral but menacing voice from the sofa.

"And run my bath," added the Captain—"chop chop!"

An unprecedented thing happened: Ah Fong made difficulties.

"Master," he murmured confidentially, "me velly solly——"

The Commander and Nancy, the latter in high spirits and healthily thrilled by her night's adventure, appeared in the lobby.

Nancy shook hands with the Captain, and took his arm in hers, in friendly fashion.

"Good morning, Captain Maitland," she said. "Are the parent birds within?"

"Yes—both," said the Captain.

"Well, I've come to have breakfast with you all. Come, and we will break the glad news to them. Go and get me a *lot* of something, Ah Fong, dear."

She pranced into the cabin, followed by the Captain and the Commander. Ah Fong folded his hands resignedly, and departed.

"Well, here I am!" announced Nancy, quite superfluously. She kissed her father on the top of the head.

"You look wonderfully fresh, child," said the Admiral, rather enviously.

"I'm a bit grubby," replied Nancy, inspecting her small nose in a mirror on the wall; "but I loved every minute of it. Is sustenance coming?"

"There will be some coffee in a moment," said the Captain, "and I have no doubt Ah Fong will produce a double ration of bacon and eggs for you later. You are one of his pets."

"Have I clicked with Ah Fong? How perfectly divine!" The gratified clicker turned to the Commander, and rattled on. "Are you jealous, dear?" She took his arm. "Let's go out on the stern-walk and have a bite of fresh air until the feast is served."

She dragged her affianced towards the glass door. But the Captain was there before her, with his back against it, smiling resolutely.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but it's not safe out there."

"What's the trouble?"

"It's all open. The gratings are up—in case of bad weather." Behind Nancy's back, he directed a hideous grimace at the Commander.

Light broke upon the Admiral. So that was where they were! He decided to do his bit.

"The gratings up?" he exclaimed, rising to his feet. "Good gracious! Is that door locked, Maitland?"

"I'm not sure, sir."

"Well, it ought to be." The Admiral advanced to the door and tried the lock; then looked up severely. "It is not locked. Some one might walk straight out there; and then what would happen? I—I tremble to think."

"What a silly fuss about nothing!" remarked the unfilial Nancy. "Bob, take me up on the quarter-deck instead."

"I'm afraid I must go and get on with my job," replied the Commander, not altogether reluctantly. "Defaulters. I'll see you in half an hour."

"Righto!" Nancy accompanied Bob to the door, presented him with a peck on the left ear, and then rejoined the group in the cabin. Her eyes fell upon the recumbent form of Lady Hewitt, now occupying the whole of the sofa.

"Cheer up, Mother!" she chirruped, sitting violently down upon the sofa-back, and patting her protesting parent playfully on the forehead. At the same moment her foot came into contact with a hard cylindrical object, lying on the floor at the back of the sofa. The motion of the ship had rolled it towards her. Nancy looked down at it, then stooped and picked it up. Then, with the face and in the voice of an accusing angel, she enquired:—

"Captain Maitland, what time in the morning do you start drinking champagne?"

Lady Hewitt sat straight up on the sofa.

"Champagne?" she said. Her lack-lustre eyes wandered round the cabin, and finally settled upon the flinching Admiral. "Bertie, have you been drinking champagne—after what the doctor said?"

The Admiral coughed.

"The Captain very kindly offered me a glass, dear," he replied. "You see, we had had a rather anxious night, on account of your——"

"I strongly object to being made an excuse for a glass—not to say a bottle!" announced Lady Hewitt, who held extreme views on temperance. "Did you drink the whole of this one between you?"

"Oh, dear, no!"

"The bottle in question," announced Nancy, dangling it an

inch in front of her mother's nose, "is empty all right, all right!"

"Don't do that, Nancy!" moaned Lady Hewitt.

"Sorry, Mother! But somebody really has emptied it. The moot point is, who? '*Who, who, who stole my quart away?*'" she carolled.

The light-hearted inquisitress paused for a reply, but there was none. Instead, the end of a heavy rope-ladder dropped with an audible thud upon the stern-walk outside, exactly opposite the glass door. Captain Randall, though a stout soldier and a gallant lover, was somewhat lacking in the finer shades of human intelligence.

The Admiral broke into a gentle perspiration, but Lady Hewitt and Nancy, immersed in their verbal engagement, made no comment. They probably regarded the incident as part of the routine of the ship.

Presently Nancy, having silenced her crippled opponent's guns without much difficulty, started upon a tour of inspection round the cabin. The watchful Captain remarked to himself that there was blood in her eye.

It was not long before the lovable child made a further discovery.

"One, two, three, four, *five* glasses!" she announced triumphantly, collecting the same and depositing them upon the table one by one. "I thought so—a binge! Who else was here, Dad?"



Forcing a careless smile, the Admiral turned to the Captain.

"Let me see," he said; "who were your other guests, Maitland? I remember one—that young fellow—your Marine Officer. What was his name?"

"Randall, sir."

"To be sure. Captain Randall, my dear."

"Did he have an anxious night too?" asked Nancy. "I wasn't aware that he was equipped with a wife and family."

This witticism was greeted by the Admiral and the Captain with a hilarity quite out of proportion to its merits.

"As a matter of fact," said the Admiral, with a shrinking glance towards the rope ladder, "Randall looked in to report about half an hour ago, and Captain Maitland invited him to join us."

"And the other two?"

"Who were those two youngsters, Maitland?" asked the Admiral despairingly. His powers of invention were rapidly becoming exhausted. "Sub-lieutenants of some kind, I rather think. What did you call them?"

"Oh, those, sir? Er—let me see—Arlton and Keaton. They have only recently joined the ship; in fact, I doubt if——"

"When did they join?" enquired Nancy relentlessly.

"Coffee, master!" Ah Fong entered with a tray, just in time to avert—or at least postpone—a Naval disaster of the first magnitude. Having laid down the coffee, he removed the bottle and glasses with a pensive smile, and disappeared.

Lady Hewitt, who for the last five minutes had been lying on the sofa in a state of semi-coma, now sat up.

"Coffee at last! Thank Heaven!" she remarked, rising and going to the table. "Sit down, Nancy, and don't chatter. Bertie, you had better have some coffee too: it may save you from a headache."

"Yes, Agatha." The Admiral, who had seen the ladder quiver ominously, did not immediately comply. Instead, he strolled to the stern-walk door and leaned carelessly against it, obscuring as much of the glass panelling as possible.

Nancy sat down opposite to her mother and, with the gay abandon of youth, began to splash coffee and milk into the cups, much as a bar-tender splashes gin and vermouth into a cocktail shaker.

"You'd better have some too, Captain Maitland," she said. "You will need a steady hand, bringing the ship safe back to the old moorings after the night before. What?"

But the Captain decided that he had done his bit.

"I'm afraid I haven't time, Nancy," he said. "I am due up on the bridge now. The Admiral will entertain you, I know." He caught the protesting eye of that hapless husband and father, and added, meaningly:—

"I'll report to you as soon as landing arrangements are safely concluded, sir. *Au revoir*, Lady Hewitt."

"Hot milk," said Lady Hewitt.

The Captain, with a little sigh of relief, slipped from the cabin, and his voice was heard uplifted in the alleyway outside:  
—

"Corporal of the Watch!"

"Sir?"

"See that nobody is allowed on the quarter-deck for the next half-hour."

"Aye, aye, sir!"

## II

Mary and Fay sat side by side upon the stern-walk of the *Falcon*, their enjoyment of the fresh morning breeze being somewhat mitigated by the fact that they were wearing, the one a georgette afternoon frock, the other the Navigating Officer's most diaphanous slumber-wear.

Mary was the luckier of the two, inasmuch as she was in possession of the Captain's greatcoat. Characteristically, she was sharing this with Fay. Its rightful owner being a man of exceptional physique, both girls were able to pack together

inside, and even fasten one of the buttons. With their backs to the outer wall of the Captain's cabin, and their toes dangling over the China Sea, they sat forlornly waiting for succour. They were in absolute solitude, for the quarter-deck above their heads had, as we know, been cleared by the Captain's thoughtful command. No sound could be heard save the rumbling of the propellers and the bubbling of the ship's wake. What was happening on the other side of the cabin wall was a mere matter of uneasy conjecture.

"Well, if this is what they call the Freedom of the Seas," remarked Mary at last, "give me a nice comfortable cell in some good old prison on land!"

"Bobo will be here in a minute," said Fay confidently. "He'll help us out. He's too marv——"

"Here he is now," said Mary, "and how!"—as the end of the rope-ladder, already described, crashed heavily upon the stern-walk, just missing her head.

The girls looked up. Two anxious faces were peering down upon them from the quarter-deck, some nine feet above their heads. One was Bobo's; the other—the composite countenance of all the conscientious objectors in the world—was Ogg's. Captain Randall, wisely deciding that the fewer accomplices he accumulated the better, had once more conscripted Ogg's reluctant services.

Randall, after some quite inaudible whispering and a good deal of utterly unintelligible pantomime, contrived to intimate to the ladies that they were to take hold of the lower end of the

ladder and secure it, by a short length of rope which he threw down, to the bottom rail of the stern-walk. But this was beyond the capacity of their numbed and unskilful fingers.

"Ogg," said Randall at last, "shin over the rail and lower yourself on to that stern-walk, and lend the ladies a hand."

"I daren't do it, sir," said Ogg piteously. "I might be caught sight of by the parties inside—through one of them port-'oles."

"Then slide down where there aren't any port-holes!"

"But if the ship was to give a roll, sir, I might swing over, like; and then where should I be?"

"Get a move on!"

With infinite care, and an expression of quite unfeigned suffering, the stout Marine climbed the rail and lowered himself, inch by inch, down between two of the cabin port-holes until, puce and panting, he reached the stern-walk.

He was greeted by Mary as a long-lost friend.

"If it isn't Mr. Ogg!" she said. "I thought I recognized you as you came down. Your girlish figure, I guess. Now what do we do? How do we get out of this place?"

"You've got to climb up this 'ere ladder, Miss," said Ogg. "I'm detailed to 'ang on to the lower end, and keep it taut for you. Be as quick as you can, *please!* If I'm copped 'ere——"

He lowered his bulk carefully down upon the stern-walk;

wedged himself between the rail and the outer wall of the cabin; gathered the bottom of the rope-ladder into his two enormous hands; then leaned back and threw his weight on it.

"Now, ladies," he whispered hoarsely—"up you go! Captain Randall will ketch hold of you at the top."

"You first, Mary," said Fay.

"Not on your life, honey! If I were to get to the top of this ladder before you, your Bobo would pick me off and throw me right into the ocean, I guess. Come along! I'll give you a boost. Watch your step on those rungs: they look slippery."

Fay threw an upward, questioning glance to her beloved, who waved encouragement. Then, having tucked her skirt as high as it would go—an enterprise in which she succeeded to a gratifying degree—she began to ascend the ladder; what time that modest Englishman, Ebenezer Ogg, studiously contemplated the distant horizon.

## **CHAP. XVII.**

## **SEEING THINGS**

The Hewitt family were alone together. Nancy was whistling through her teeth and smoking a cigarette simultaneously. Lady Hewitt, her eyes still partially closed, was sipping coffee and slowly resuming her grip on the universe. The Admiral continued to posture, in an attitude

suggestive of the Russian Ballet, in front of the stern-walk door.

Suddenly Lady Hewitt looked up, and noticed him.

"Don't stand there with your back to the wall, like a forlorn hope, Bertie!" she said. "Come and sit down, and drink your coffee."

"Tee yourself up on this chair, Dad," suggested Nancy.

The Admiral obeyed. To resist would have been to court suspicion.

Lady Hewitt continued:—

"Captain Maitland seems very strange in his manner this morning."

"Blotto, if you ask me," remarked her worldly-wise daughter.

"You are sure he only had one glass?" continued Lady Hewitt.

"Yes, dear," mumbled the Admiral into his coffee-cup —"quite sure."

"Well, it may only be my imagination," said Lady Hewitt charitably. "After last night's experiences, I still seem to be living through a bad dream. If a sea-serpent were to crawl in through that glass door this moment, I shouldn't be in the least surprised."

The Admiral, devoutly wishing that the sea-serpent would be so accommodating, swallowed some scalding coffee.

"When do we get back to harbour, Dad?" asked Nancy.

Here was an opportunity to initiate a prolonged and valuable diversion. The Admiral set to work at once.

"Well, my dear, let me think. We are getting under weigh now. The wind is light, south-east by south, and there is no sea to speak of. We have steam for fifteen knots. That should bring us back"—he went through the motions of intense mental calculation—"back to the Flagship in time for luncheon. It all depends, really, on whether the *Nestor* is in a sufficiently seaworthy condition to follow us, at her ordinary——"

"Bertie!" said a faint voice.

The Admiral turned hurriedly in his wife's direction. He was sitting with his back to the stern-walk door; but from the fact that Lady Hewitt, who was opposite to him, was staring fixedly over his shoulder, he feared the worst.

"Ye—yes, my dear?"

"I wonder if they have any aspirin on board."

The Admiral was all conjugal solicitude at once. He rose, and hurried fussily to his wife's side.

"I'm sure they have, my dear. I will send for some at once. Is your head getting worse?"



"No; it is getting better. But something seems to have gone wrong with my eyesight now. I have just had an extraordinary hallucination. It was most distinct."

"A very common symptom of exhaustion," said the Admiral readily. "What sort of hallucination was it, dear?"

"I thought I saw a pair of legs dangling outside that door over there."

The Admiral whirled round, with a sinking heart. His hour seemed to have struck at last. But no—the ladder was still there, swaying slightly. Nothing more.

Nancy, who had also been sitting with her back to the stern-walk door, turned and made a momentary inspection.

"There's nothing there," she announced. "Take a pull at yourself, Mother."

"What sort of legs were they, Agatha?" resumed the Admiral tenderly.

"They were a woman's legs. In pink silk stockings."

"A woman—on board a ship of war? What a droll idea!" The Admiral laughed boisterously. Then, realizing that this was the wrong note, he changed down hurriedly to one of profound concern. "You are plainly suffering from some physical defect of the vision," he said. "Overstrain, of course. What a pity you ever went on that trip! Never mind: we'll soon have you all right again. Give me your arm, and I'll take you to my sleeping-cabin. Nancy, come and help your mother."

"I am perfectly capable of helping myself, thank you," said Lady Hewitt, with dignity. She rose, a little top-heavily, and started towards the lobby. "But I will lie down for half an hour in your sleeping-cabin, Bertie. You can bring me the aspirin there, when you have——*A-a-a-a-ah! Look! It's in pyjamas this time!*"

She was pointing a frenzied finger towards the glass door, through which, all too plainly, the mauve-and-white striped trouser-legs of Mary Carlton were visible, kicking wildly in mid air.

Fay was safe on the quarter-deck; her progress thither has just been described. But, as a profound thinker once pointed out, you cannot fool all the people all the time, or get away with murder twice. Mary had followed her promptly, and was half-way up the ladder—indeed she had just grasped the friendly hands of Bobo, extended from above—when the *Falcon* gave a sudden lurch. The ovate and unstable Ogg promptly heeled over three or four points, taking the foot of the ladder with him and pulling it out of the perpendicular. Mary's feet slipped upon the smooth rungs, and next moment she was suspended, like Mahomet's coffin, between heaven and earth, with nothing between her and the vasty deep but the strong arms of Bobo Randall, who fortunately had firm hold of both of her wrists.

In the circumstances there was nothing for a self-respecting woman to do but kick; and kick Mary did. As an acrobatic exhibition the merit of her performance was beyond criticism. Certainly it occupied the breathless attention of the entire audience in the day-cabin.

Lady Hewitt was the first to speak.

"A woman's legs again!" she whispered. "Look at her shoes!"

"I assure you, darling, there is nobody there," said the Admiral earnestly. "Nobody at all! Come and lie down: it will soon pass off."

But Nancy was not subject to hallucinations.

"Don't be a drivelling idiot, Dad!" she said.

Running swiftly to the glass door, she unlocked it and threw it open. She was just in time. Bobo Randall, by a superhuman effort, had at that moment succeeded in hoisting Mary level with the quarter-deck rail; and all that was now visible of her was one foot and a dangling, high-heeled slipper of grey suede. Nancy reached up and snatched the slipper just as the foot went skyward; then turned triumphantly to the occupants of the cabin, waving her trophy in the air.

"There!" she cried. "There's no imagination about that! And the first one must have been real as well—the one in the pink silk stockings."

"Bertie," remarked the Voice of Doom, from the sofa, "there are two women on board this ship!"

"There may be hundreds," said Nancy. "I'll have a look."

She ran out on to the stern-walk, but this time she was just too late. A moment earlier, and she would have been edified by

the spectacle of the demoralised rear-guard of this mismanaged Expeditionary Relief Force in full retreat over the horizon of the quarter-deck. Even the ladder was gone.

Nancy returned to the cabin, slipper in hand, and noted with satisfaction, but without surprise, that her mother was now restored to her normal appearance of health and vigour. Her distinguished father was sitting apprehensively upon the edge of a chair, dodging a hail of questions.

"But who are they, Bertie?" Lady Hewitt was asking.

"Yes; out with it, Dad! Dish the dirt! Who?" added the Junior Counsel.

A true sailor may be down, but he is never out. The Admiral took a fresh breath, and, rising to his feet with all the dignity—and it was considerable—at his command, addressed his daughter.

"I do not know, my child," he said.

"Are you sure?" enquired his daughter, who was not in the least susceptible to impressive demeanour.

"If you do know, Bertie," announced the Voice of Doom, "Nancy and I return to England to-morrow."

The Admiral turned to the sofa.

"I repeat, my dear, I do *not* know. But—I intend to find out!" His voice rose. "I intend to probe this reprehensible business—this breach of discipline—this outrage upon the

traditions of the Service—to its remotest source!" He began to edge towards the lobby, still emitting a smoke-screen of resolute words. "I will find Captain Maitland at once: he shall hold an investigation here and now. I'll teach these young gunroom officers to smuggle their lady friends on board His Majesty's ships!" He was almost out of the cabin now. "I'll show them——"

"Wait a minute, Dad," said the calm, clear voice of the Admiral's only child, who had been devoting the time during which she should have been digesting her parent's admirable homily to a careful examination of the captured shoe. "Look at this! It was bought at Pinet's, in the Rue de la Paix. Five hundred francs a pair, I should say. Why drag in the poor but honest gunroom? What about the idle rich higher up?"

"What about Captain Maitland himself?" said Lady Hewitt suddenly. "This is his cabin: that is his stern-walk. I never did trust middle-aged bachelors, anyhow."

"But there are two ladies, Mum," interposed Nancy. "Of course the Captain may be a polygamist, or a Mormon, or something; but—— Wait a minute!" A smile of rapturous anticipation illuminated Nancy's angelic features, and the light of battle appeared in her lovely, trustful eyes. "What about Bob? Where does he come in in this bottle-and-pyjama party? And where does he get off? Well, I can tell him that. Dad, send for Bob at once. I want him."

"Here I am, Nancy," said a meek voice behind her.

The Commander was standing in the doorway, with the

Captain by his side.

## CHAP. XVIII.

## A CHINESE CRACKER

### I

Captain Bobo Randall, having deposited Mary and Fay in his cabin, and 'made them comfortable,' as ordered, with the inevitable assistance of the incompetent Ogg, repaired to the forebridge and made his report to the Captain. As in duty bound, he mentioned the regrettable incident of Mary's involuntary trapeze act, and the crowning disaster of the captured shoe.

"All right, Randall," said the Captain; "you can go."

"Miss Carlton is very anxious to dress herself, sir," continued Randall; "and her clothes are still in the cabin where she slept last night. Shall I take her there, or bring her things to her in my cabin?"

"Take her along to her own. We must get her out of the after-flat. And Miss Eaton goes too—mind that!"

"Yes, sir."

"After all, it doesn't matter whether Lady Hewitt sees them again, now. It's the first time that counts. We're in the soup anyhow. That's all: go ahead!"

"Very good, sir."

Randall departed, and the Captain turned to the Commander.

"There's nothing else for it, Bob," he said; "we must go and tell them the whole story—the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. We ought to have done it long ago. It'll mean the order of the bowler hat for me, I'm afraid; but you ought to be able to straighten things out with Nancy. She *must* forgive you!"

"She'll forgive me all right," replied the Commander gloomily; "but I can see her telling our grandchildren about it."

The doomed pair walked silently aft. On their way they overtook Captain Randall, proceeding with his convoy in the direction of the lobby—a progress attended by the breathless interest of such members of the ship's company as happened to witness it.

Mary slipped to the Captain's side, and her hand touched his. He smiled down on her.

"It looks as if I were for it at last," he said.

"You?" said Mary, looking up at him. "There are others, believe me! Have you stopped to think what is happening to that poor old goof in the day-cabin, right now? Can you see him explaining my legs away? Can you imagine what those two won't do to him? By comparison you're sitting pretty, Aylwin dear!"

"I had overlooked the Admiral's position for the moment," confessed the Captain.

"Well, you go right into that day-cabin now," commanded Mary, "and see if they'll let you have the body back. I have to get into my frock, or I'd come and be a pall-bearer."

And with these prescient words Mary disappeared into her sleeping-cabin, followed by Fay.

"You stay out here, Randall," said the Captain to Bobo. "You are almost certain to be subpoenaed, so lie handy. Come along, Bob."

The condemned men then walked with firm step into the day-cabin, just in time, as already indicated, to anticipate Nancy's express demand for their presence.

Upon hearing the Commander's voice, Admiral Hewitt, who was standing in the middle of the cabin, examining a grey suede slipper through his pince-nez, whirled suddenly round.

"Ah, gentlemen!" he exclaimed loudly. "So here you are! I am glad to see you—I repeat, extremely glad! You have saved me the trouble of sending for you." He advanced threateningly upon his two officers, who retreated a step, completely taken aback. This was not the crushed worm whom they had been expecting to see.

"*Leave this to me!*" mouthed the Admiral, as soon as he came within whispering distance. Then, raising his voice to hurricane pitch, and waving the slipper aloft, he resumed:—

"Can you explain this, gentlemen? A lady's shoe—a dancing-shoe—worth five hundred pounds!"



"Francs," said Nancy gently.

"Francs. My daughter has just dragged it from the foot of its owner—or at least, its wearer—whom I saw with my own eyes dangling from a rope-ladder outside that door, apparently in a misguided attempt to effect a clandestine escape from your stern-walk, Captain Maitland, to the quarter-deck. Can you offer me an explanation in any way compatible with these almost incredible occurrences?" He turned to Baddeley. "Can you, Commander?"

"Certainly, sir," replied the Commander suavely. "That is what we are here for."

"We have come, sir," added the Captain, "to relieve your perfectly natural concern over this rather ridiculous situation. The facts are——"

The Voice of Doom interposed, from the sofa.

"Where are they?"

"The two ladies?" said the Captain politely. "I imagine they are in their sleeping-cabin."

"You mean *your* sleeping-cabin?"

"As a rule, yes."

"Then they spent the night on board this ship?"

"Yes, they did!"

The Captain was speaking defiantly now. His mind was made up: if he was to be sunk without trace he would at least go down with the flag flying and the band playing. Of course he was prepared to act to a certain extent as scapegoat to the Admiral, whose position, if his bluff were called, would be too horrible to contemplate; but this truculent female must keep her tongue off Mary. So he smiled politely at Lady Hewitt, and stood up to her.

A new and sudden thought occurred to her ladyship. Without warning, she wheeled round in the direction of her husband, who, under the totally mistaken impression that he had weathered the storm, was now edging furtively back to his seat.

"Bertie, where did *you* sleep last night?"

"On the bridge, darling," replied the Admiral, promptly—too promptly.

"Don't talk nonsense, Bertie! People can't sleep on bridges."

"What I meant," explained the Admiral, with a touch of reproach, "was that, owing to my anxiety on your account, I spent most of the night on the bridge—but not, of course, asleep. How could I be? I was looking out for you: I was perfectly frantic with anxiety. I think I may say, without fear of contradiction, that I have not had such a night since Jutland. The fact is——"

Lady Hewitt interrupted him. She was on her feet, restored to the perpendicular and her old self again.

"I will examine them myself," she announced.

"The—the ladies, dear?"

"Yes. Send for them."

The Admiral nodded resignedly to the Captain, who made a sign to the Commander, who was engaged in a sotto voce and most uncomfortable interview with his *fiancée* in the corner of the cabin.

"Ask the ladies if they will be kind enough to come here for a moment, Commander," he said.

"And give one of them this," added Lady Hewitt, plucking Mary's shoe from the nerveless hand of the Admiral and passing it to the Commander; "and tell her to dress herself *completely* before she comes in here."

The Commander left the cabin, and a deathly silence reigned. Even Nancy had no comment to offer. Presently the Captain spoke, in the even tones of a man who is perfectly willing to lay all his cards on the table.

"Lady Hewitt, I am anxious that these two ladies, who are my guests on board this ship quite involuntarily, should be spared as much embarrassment as possible in this matter. The circumstances are perfectly regular and innocent: they arose from an accident to the picquet boat last night——"

Lady Hewitt cut him short.

"Captain Maitland, I prefer to go elsewhere for my

evidence."

"As you wish, Lady Hewitt." It was war to the knife now, and a silent truce reigned until the sound of cheerful voices was heard in the lobby outside, and Mary and Fay entered, followed by the Commander.

Both girls were now wearing their afternoon party frocks; and considering the purely masculine character of the instruments of titivation at their disposal, had contrived to make themselves astonishingly trim. Their cheeks were pink; not a hair of their shingled heads was out of place. In fact, they made the worst possible impression upon Nancy, who shot a swift glance at the Commander. That unfortunate young man promptly turned crimson: innocence so often goes about this world in unconvincing guise.

The Captain spoke.

"May I introduce Miss Carlton and Miss Eaton?" he said formally. "Lady Hewitt. Miss Hewitt."

The four ladies exchanged a smile, a friendly nod, an interested scrutiny, and a withering glare respectively.

"Pleased to meet you," said Mary.

Lady Hewitt sat down behind the table, with the air of a hanging judge taking his seat upon the bench at the Old Bailey.

"Which is the one," she enquired in a deep voice, "who was wearing pyjamas—out there?" She indicated the vista of sea and sky astern.

"Me," said Mary promptly. "I've been trying to change them all morning," she continued cheerfully; "but this is such a busy ship. I guess you found that out too, Lady Hewitt."

Her ladyship ignored this conversational opening.

"Where did you sleep last night?" she asked.

Mary gazed at her in childlike wonder.

"Sleep? Last night? In this ship?" She shook her head. "We had no more chance to sleep than an electric hare. We were hunted——"

But hanging judges are not so easily diverted from their prey.

"Do not prevaricate!" said Lady Hewitt. "What cabin did you occupy?"

Mary considered.

"Well, that's something else again," she remarked: "I guess you've handed me another cross-word puzzle. You see, Fay and I started the night in separate places——"

The Captain stepped to Mary's side.

"Lady Hewitt," he said, "it may save a good deal of rather superfluous cross-examination if I tell you, firstly that these two ladies occupied my spare cabin last night, at my invitation——"

"That I had already realized," said Lady Hewitt frigidly.

"And secondly"—the Captain slipped his arm into Mary's, and gave it a warm squeeze—"that Miss Carlton and I are engaged to be married."

"What?" exclaimed every other woman in the cabin. The Captain had created a real sensation this time. Lady Hewitt, hit between wind and water, reeled slightly, then turned a gaze of astonished enquiry upon her daughter. The Admiral sidled up to the Captain.

"Well done, old man!" he murmured, behind his hand.

Meanwhile the female contingent of the Hewitt family had held a telepathic conference, and arrived at a lightning conclusion.

"I don't believe a word of it!" announced Lady Hewitt.

"Are *you* engaged to anybody, Miss Eaton?" asked Nancy, with a persuasive smile.

"Oh, yes, of course!" Fay seemed genuinely surprised that the whole world was not aware of the great news.

"To Commander Baddeley?"

"Oh, gracious, no! To Bobo."

"How perfectly divine! Who is Bobo?"

"Captain Randall."

Nancy turned impatiently to her mother.

"They're making all this up as they go along," she said. "And if I couldn't invent a better yarn than the one you people have been handing out to us," she added to the accused generally, "I'd tell the truth, and chance it!"

"But it is the truth!" cried Fay, stung to unusual animation. "Don't you see, that's why all this happened? Bobo and I have just got engaged, and I stayed on board last night after the party to dine with him. The Commander said we could. I tried to get Charlotte to stay and chaperon me——"

"Who is Charlotte?"

"My cousin. I'm travelling with her. She wouldn't stay. She said—anyhow, she wouldn't stay. So Miss Carlton stayed instead. If you don't believe me, ask Charlotte."

"Where is Charlotte?" asked Lady Hewitt.

"She's on shore. But she'll tell you the same thing as soon as we land."

Nancy looked keenly at Fay, then at Mary, then at the Commander. She was a shrewd young person, and in her heart she was not averse to a reconciliation with her attractive, affectionate, and in the main reliable Bob.

"Is this true?" she said to the Commander. "On your word, I mean?"

"Word of honour, Nancy!" said the Commander earnestly;

and Nancy believed him. She turned to Lady Hewitt.

"Look here, Mother," she said, "I think we're making rather mutts of ourselves. I have a hunch——"

But Lady Hewitt was in no mood for compromise.

"I don't believe a single word that anybody has been saying," she said. "Why were they climbing up and down ropes in pyjamas? Why were they drinking champagne at nine o'clock in the morning? How do we know that they haven't been drinking champagne all night? How do I know that this absurd person—what's her name? Charlotte—exists? Bertie"—the Admiral started, and realized that if he had weathered one storm another was brewing—"you must hold an official enquiry at once."

The Admiral rose to his feet, resignedly. "Certainly, my dear—certainly! Your—er—request is perfectly justified. In fact, if you had not suggested it I should have acted on my own initiative. These two officers must prove their story to my complete satisfaction"—he turned to the Captain and Commander, and gave them a look which endeavoured, unsuccessfully, to convey menace and reassurance simultaneously—"or else—or else—— What the devil does that man want, Maitland?"

Ah Fong had made one of his wraith-like appearances, and was now addressing the Captain in a deferential undertone.

The Captain turned to the Admiral. He seemed genuinely puzzled.



"It is something about my bathroom, sir," he said. "I gave orders half an hour ago to have a hot bath prepared for Lady Hewitt; but Ah Fong appears to have encountered some unexpected obstacle."

The Admiral addressed himself testily to Ah Fong.

"Come, come! What is the difficulty, my man? Out with it!"

"Bathroom," replied Ah Fong simply. He pointed in the direction of the lobby, and shook his head. "No can do. Admilal's piecee missee no come out yet. In there allee night."

## CHAP. XIX.

## EX MACHINA

### I

Experts in such matters inform us that the full force of a mortal blow is not instantly realised. The blow falls; a sense of shock is experienced; stars are occasionally seen; then a merciful oblivion descends. It is not until the victim regains consciousness—if he does regain it—that he begins to suffer in earnest.

During the next two minutes—or it may have been hours—the sensations of the Admiral followed a normal course. At Ah Fong's shattering announcement something hard seemed to hit him on the top of the head. He reeled slightly, sank down on to

the sofa, and closed his eyes. A grey mist, bespangled with bright constellations, descended upon his intellect and blotted out his faculties. He decided that he was dying, if not already dead—and felt glad.

At last—it seemed like some years later—the mist cleared and the last star twinkled itself out. The Admiral opened his eyes. Before him stood his wife, towering over Ah Fong, whose head was bent and whose arms rested inside his sleeves, a picture of Oriental deference. The Captain was there too, with Mary. Further away the Commander, Fay, and Nancy were discernible. Apparently Herbert Hercules Hewitt had not yet reached the next world.

"*Admiral's piecee missee?*" Lady Hewitt was saying. "What do you mean, man? I give you fair warning, you shall not leave this cabin until you have told me everything."

Cold terror clutched the Admiral's heart. The fact that he was as innocent as a child—that he had not the slightest idea who the lady in the bathroom was—that he had not even been aware that there was a lady in the bathroom—would avail him nothing now. He had been married to Agatha for twenty-one years, and he knew. Exemplary in the main though his conjugal record had been, there had been one lapse. Years ago, in Bermuda, there had been an incident—the episode of the somewhat possessive wife of a Chicago millionaire tourist. It was nothing, really—the merest sitting out of a dance or two too many at a Government House ball—but what had happened then furnished the Admiral with exact information as to what was going to happen to him now. *Admiral's piecee missee!* He shrank down into the depths of the sofa.

Then he became aware that his wife had turned from Ah Fong to himself.

"What does this man mean, Bertie?"

With a despairing effort the Admiral found his voice.

"I don't know what the fool's talking about, dear," he croaked—"on my honour!" He turned, almost beseechingly, to Ah Fong. "What do you mean, confound you—my piecee missee?"

Ah Fong smiled patiently. He must make himself clear to these obtuse foreigners. He removed his right hand from his left sleeve, then turned and pointed straight at Mary Carlton.

"Captain's piecee missee——" he began, with the air of one giving a simple object-lesson to an infant class.

The Captain and Mary merely smiled at one another. In their present state, they had not the slightest objection to being classed as such exhibits. Ah Fong turned another half-circle, and pointed at Fay.

"Commander's piecee missee," he continued.

Fay uttered a faint exclamation. The Commander grinned sheepishly at Nancy.

Finally Ah Fong turned to the door, and pointed out into the lobby, where the bathroom door, tightly closed, was visible to all.

"Admiral's piecee missee!" he announced, and shuffled out.

## II

"Then *that's* who has been in the bathroom all morning," said Fay, with the pleased air of one clearing up a mystery. "Mary and I thought it was you, Admiral; and I suppose you thought it was us all the time. Isn't that too sweet?"

But the Admiral did not hear her. In obedience to an awe-inspiring gesture, he was tottering out on the stern-walk, where it was obvious that he was about to be put through what is known in American police circles as the Third Degree—or probably the Fourth, if there was such a thing.

In the doorway he stopped—in the last ditch, as it were.

"My dear," he said to the thundercloud which accompanied him, "I did not even know there was a third woman on board!"

"Then you knew all the time that these other two were?"

"Er—yes, dear, I suppose so."

"Then why did you deny it?"

The Admiral raised despairing hands to Heaven.

"My darling, please listen to me. Miss Carlton, you ask her to listen to me!"

Mary surveyed the fallen tyrant, and shook her head gravely.

"It's not easy, sir," she said, "to get people to listen who don't feel like it. Do you remember, I asked you to listen to me, in this very cabin, not an hour ago—and you wouldn't? I guess Lady Hewitt feels just the same way as you did."

"*Bertie!*" said a warning voice. A moment later prisoner and executioner had disappeared on to the stern-walk. The glass door closed behind them.

### III

Freed from the constraining presence of Lady Hewitt, the company relaxed, audibly and visibly. They made cheerful noises; they rose and stretched themselves, like an American baseball crowd after the seventh innings.

"Well," said Mary, accepting a pacific cigarette from Nancy, "I guess the sooner Fay and I are thrown out of here, and a consignment of poison-ivy is shipped on board in our place, the more happy and comfortable everybody will be. We two sweet young things certainly have started something. First of all, we get Bobo into a jam with the Captain. The kind Captain takes us over from Bobo, in the name of charity, and that gets him in Dutch with the Admiral. Now the Admiral is out there on the stern-walk, with the Lady Admiral, praying for death. All that in twelve hours! I guess it's part of what folks call the Whirligig of Life. The only thing that worries me now is, whose turn will it be next?"

"I think we've all been through it by this time," said the Captain—"from Ogg upwards. Just about full circle, in fact."

"Talking of that lovely man," said Mary, "couldn't he throw some light on the mystery of the bathroom? He seemed to me to be spending quite a lot of his time in your lobby last night, Aylwin."

"The mystery of the bathroom?" said the Captain. "I'd forgotten all about that. Other things on my mind, I suppose," he added, with an understanding smile at Mary, which Mary returned. "I'll send for Ogg, and we'll enquire."

#### IV

Five minutes later that long-suffering man Ebenezer Ogg, under the saturnine escort of Corporal Bunnett, found himself in the day-cabin, in the presence of the Captain, the Commander, and, it seemed to his embarrassed vision, about a million bits of skirt.

The Corporal made his report first.

"I was proceeding on my rounds last night, sir," he began briskly, "in the ordinary course of duty; and at the hour of oh-three-double-oh prompt I entered the Captain's lobby. The accused was there, on sentry——"

"Nobody is being accused of anything, Corporal," said the Captain gently. "This is not a court-martial; merely an

unofficial enquiry. Tell your story in quite ordinary language."

This was a poser for the Corporal, as it would have been for anybody. Corporals speak only two languages—one, the severe and classical English of the drill-book and orderly-room; the other, the richly—too richly—garnished vernacular of the N.C.O.'s canteen. It is difficult, impromptu, to strike a happy mean between these two. However, the Corporal did his best.

"I found this fat perisher—I mean, Marine Ogg, sir—standing outside the door of the bathroom in your lobby. He was acting peculiar and suspicious, though seemingly sober. I put a certain question to him, and he answered me with a lot of back-cha—in an insubordinate manner, sir. I cautioned him. I then repeated the question. The accu—the person, sir—then \_\_\_\_\_"

"Get on with it, Corporal," said the Captain. "What question did you ask him?"

"I asked him if he had anything to report, sir. He replied that there wasn't no manner of use in him telling me, because I wouldn't believe it if he did, and nobody would. He then removed his cap, and a lady's silk stocking fell off the top of his nut—head, sir."

There was a strained and awful silence. The Captain and Commander controlled their facial muscles nobly, but Mary groped for Fay's hand. Nancy turned her face to the wall, and held it there.

"Thank you, Corporal," said the Captain gravely, and turned

to Ogg.

"Now, my man, I want you to tell me in your own words exactly what happened in the lobby last night after the Commander-in-Chief had gone to bed."

"You mean, sir, after he had gone to bed for the last time?"

"Precisely. I know about the other part. Go ahead."

Ogg took a deep breath, and began his recital, choosing his words carefully. He was prepared to tell the truth, but he was determined that whoever else suffered, no moral stigma should fall upon that sealed pattern to humanity, Marine Ogg.

But he had a small matter of a personal explanation to attend to first.

"Before getting under way, sir," he said, "I should like to be permitted to explain the question of that there stocking. The truth is, one of these young ladies"—he turned to Mary and Fay, with a smile of friendly recognition—"dropped it out of a bundle of other bits of muslin when they was shifting billets at the double from your spare cabin to your sleeping-cabin, sir; and thinking it an unsuitable object to be left lying about on the 'alf-deck, with young sailors about, I took the liberty of picking it up and popping into it my cap until a suitable occasion should arise for to——"

"All right. You emerge from the episode without a stain on your character, Ogg. Now get on with your story."

Ogg obeyed.



"Shortly before the hour of oh-three-double-oh, sir, after 'is Nib—after the Admiral had popped into his down—settled down for the night, sir—and all was quiet, I was called up on the navy-phone from the forebridge, for the third time in the course of three hours. The Officer of the Watch up there complained that the gyro-compass was acting very peculiar. He enquired if anybody had been muckin' the blasted thing about—tampering with the mechanism, sir. I assured 'im that the 'atch was closed, and that nobody had been down into the gyro-compass room since *I* come on duty, nor would be let. Naturally, sir, feeling my responsibilities like I do, I was——"

"Yes, I know. What happened next?"

"I 'ad just rung off, sir, when, to my surprise, I was aware of a peculiar tapping noise."

"A tapping noise?"

"Yes, sir. A sort of scratching, rattling noise. At first I thought it was going to be another spot of bother with the old—— I thought the Admiral might have got restless again, sir. Then I listened more carefully like, and I ascertained where the noise was coming from. It was from under the 'atch leading down to the gyro-compass room. There was somebody down there, after all."

"So I have gathered. Who was it?"

But amateur orators are incapable of cutting off corners.

"After a reasonable amount of thought, sir, I decided to take upon myself the responsibility of opening the 'atch. I therefore

knelt down on the deck and carefully unscrewed the bolts, the noise noted meanwhile increasing in audibility. Having released all bolts, I then raised the 'atch-cover and 'ooked it back."

"And who was there?"

"She didn't give me 'er name, sir."

"*She?*" There were exclamations from all round the cabin.  
"A lady?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who was she?" asked Fay eagerly. "Was it——"

Ogg turned a perfectly expressionless face upon her.

"I couldn't say, Miss, I'm sure. She was an entire stranger to me. But I seem to remember 'aving caught sight of 'er once or twice in the course of the afternoon's festivities."

"How was she dressed?" asked the Captain.

"'Er dress was considerably messed up, sir, on account of the gyro-compass room not being the Hotel Ritz. 'Er 'at was on one side, and 'er face was shiny, and 'er 'air was coming down. But she still 'ad 'er umberella with 'er." ('Still' was a bad slip, but nobody noticed it.)

"Charlotte!" exclaimed Fay, turning to Mary.

"The one and only," agreed Mary.

"But what have you done with her?" asked the Captain.

Ogg continued, without haste or heat:—

"I enquired of 'er, respectfully, what she was doing down there in a private part of the ship, at that hour of the night. She replied: 'Do not speak to me I am a desperate woman.' To which I replied—quite within my rights, I think, sir—'Desperate woman and what do you think I am? What 'ave you been doing to that there gyro-compass 'itting it about with a broolly?'"

There came a faint sound of regurgitation from the corner in which the three ladies were grouped, but the Captain kept a straight face.

"A very proper question, Ogg. What answer did you get?"

"She replied, sir, 'That thing down there? It made a maddening purring noise so I jabbed it till it stopped.' Which accounted for the language of the Officer of the Watch on the forebridge, sir," added Ogg in parenthesis. "I then felt it my duty to point out to 'er the serious nature of 'er offence, explaining that them things cost twenty thousand pounds of Government money and I was responsible. She merely replied, 'I decline to bandy words with you and find me a nice bedroom at once.'"

"A bedroom?"

"Yes, sir. I felt at liberty to come back at 'er over that. I told 'er she would be lucky if she didn't get a cell. I then confined 'er in your bathroom, sir, wishing to do everything for the best,

and feeling that we 'ad all 'ad sufficient disturbance for one night. I didn't consider it necessary to remove 'er boots, but I gave 'er a couple of blankets to doss in, sir. I 'ad just completed the operation, the prisoner resisting violently, when the Corporal arrived on 'is rounds and asked if there was anything to report. Considering that certain matters that 'appened in the Captain's lobby ought to be respected as private, I gave the reply already reported, sir. That's all, sir, and I thank you."

"Thank you," said the Captain. "I think you showed great resource, Ogg. Take him away, Corporal, and lose him."

"About turn!" barked the Corporal. "Quick march!"

The pair clumped out. Mary and Fay waved their hands to Ogg as he passed, but that example to husbands ignored them severely. He had had his escape, and his lesson. Never again would a lady's stocking share the interior of Ogg's cap with Mrs. Ogg and the eight little Oggs.

## V

Ogg and the Corporal had hardly passed out of the Captain's Lobby on their way forward when a Reception Committee of six—it is perhaps superfluous to mention that by this time Bobo had reattached himself to Fay—headed by the Captain in person, assembled outside the bathroom door and tapped.

"Go away, and fetch the Captain!" commanded a deep voice from inside.

"I am the Captain."

"Oh!"

There came the sound of a turning key; then the door swung open, and Charlotte Hopkinson appeared. She had repaired the ravages to her dress described by Ogg, and except for a lean and hungry look, appeared to be her normal self. Britannia's helmet sat firmly on her head, and she still grasped her umbrella.

"Charlotte!" cried Fay, running and embracing her.  
"Charlotte! Sent from Heaven!"

"Quite the reverse!" replied Charlotte coldly, pointing with her umbrella to the hatch, which lay open at her feet.

"But what are you still doing on board, dear?" asked Fay, putting an affectionate arm round her chaperon.

"Introduce me!" replied Charlotte, with a hostile glare at the group before her.

"This is my cousin, Charlotte Hopkinson," explained Fay—"my chaperon. We all thought she had gone ashore: that is why Mary stayed." She turned to Charlotte again, still puzzled.

"Why *didn't* you go ashore, dear?"

"And leave you alone in this ship with that young man?" asked Charlotte, indicating the blushing Bobo with her umbrella. "Never!"

"There!" said Fay triumphantly, turning to Nancy.  
"Charlotte darling, tell us; am I engaged to Bobo Randall, or am I not?"

"If you are not," said Charlotte grimly, "you ought to be!"

"Angel!" cried Fay, embracing her. "You see, Miss Hewitt?"

The Commander deftly followed up the attack.

"You see, Nancy?" he said, slipping an arm into hers.

"All right," said Nancy. "I'm sorry. It was that old-fashioned mother of mine really," she added, rather meanly.

"Come back into the day-cabin, everybody," said the Captain, "and we'll try to make Miss Hopkinson comfortable. We owe you a profound apology," he added to that lady. "But how on earth did you get down that hatch?" he asked as they passed into the cabin.

"Are you the Captain of this ship?" enquired Charlotte.

"Yes."

"Then I will tell you why I went down there. I was looking for you."

"I'm so sorry. As you see, my quarters are a little more accessible. What did you want me for?"

"I wished to enlist your assistance in finding Miss Eaton and Captain Randall, who were deliberately hiding from me."

"This is a very serious charge," said the Captain, with a severe look at Fay and Bobo. "But how did you get so far?"

"I was brought here, after a most circuitous journey, by a fat man. I think he said he was a Marine. He was reluctant to take me anywhere, but I insisted. Finally we got as far as that lobby place outside. There was another Marine there—a red-headed man with a most sinister expression, and a wart on his——" In a few searing sentences Charlotte completed an admirable description of Ogg's friend and rival, Marine Price. "Finding that my own guide was not only thoroughly obstinate, but apparently half-witted, I addressed myself to this other man. He at once informed me in a loud voice that he was not allowed to speak to anybody for the next six hours, and turned away to write something in a large book on a ledge. Looking round, I discovered that the fat man had taken the opportunity to give me the slip."

"What did you do then?" asked the Captain, biting his lips.

"I was more determined than ever to find you, and report to you this conspiracy of silence among your own crew. Looking down, I saw a little staircase, or ladder, at my very feet, which I had not previously noted. Observing that the red-headed man was still writing in his book, I descended quietly, thinking that I might find your cabin at the bottom of the ladder. I had hardly reached it, and was trying to accustom my sight to the semi-darkness, when the lid at the top was closed with a loud clang, and I found myself a prisoner."

"What time was this, Miss Hopkinson? About sunset?"

"What does that matter?"

"The hatch in question is closed at sunset in the ordinary course of ship's routine. You were imprisoned quite inadvertently: the sentry, of course, could not know that you were down in the gyroscopic-compass room. He probably thought you had gone forward again with the other Marine. Now sit down, and we'll give you some breakfast: you must be ravenous. We are just entering Fan Yan Harbour: you'll be ashore in an hour or two. We shall have to make a signal to the Flagship soon, Commander. I wonder where the Admiral is, by the way."

The question answered itself. The door of the stern-walk opened, and Lady Hewitt entered, drawn to her full height. She was followed by what had once been a Commander-in-Chief.

"Nancy," she announced, "you and I are sailing for England to-morrow." She stalked majestically towards the cabin door; then stopped short, and stiffened. An equally majestic figure had risen from the sofa, as if to bar her path.

"Charlotte Hopkinson!" gasped Lady Hewitt.

"Agatha Bentley!" said Charlotte calmly.



Everybody sat up suddenly: the atmosphere of the day-cabin became tense and electric.

A remarkable change had taken place in Lady Hewitt's appearance and demeanour: she seemed in the space of five seconds to have shrunk from what Messrs. Swan and Edgar would describe as an out-size to a medium lady's. Charlotte, on the other hand, had swelled visibly. She now stood regarding the Admiral's wife with a certain deliberate, almost lazy, insolence of expression. One might almost call it a gloat. She nodded her head slowly.

"Agatha Bentley," she remarked again.

The Admiral, grasping at the smallest opportunity of diverting public attention from recent events, timidly intervened.

"Agatha Bentley that *was*," he said, with what was meant to be a smile of proprietary gratification and pride. "Agatha Bentley no longer. Agatha Hewitt now, my dear wife. We have been happily married for more than twenty years. Haven't we, d-darling?"

"Yes," said Lady Hewitt, with totally unexpected mildness; and hope, almost dead, suddenly revived in her husband's breast.

"If the truth were known, Agatha," continued Charlotte Hopkinson, after a brief, appraising glance at the Admiral, "you were lucky to get anybody at all."

All gasped, and waited. Surely a champion of Lady Hewitt's

calibre and fighting-weight would not take a body-blow like this without retaliation. But Lady Hewitt said nothing; so utterly demoralized was she that she actually allowed her husband to answer for her.

"My dear lady," said the Admiral, "what on earth are you referring to?"

Charlotte took not the slightest notice: she merely continued to fix her flinching opponent with the eye of an experienced python awaiting a suitable opportunity to strike. Presently she continued:—

"You and I seem fated to meet in warships, Agatha."

"Warships?" twittered the Admiral. He turned fussily to his wife. "Are you two old friends, my dear—old shipmates?"

"I don't know what she's talking about, darling," quavered Lady Hewitt, and sank into a chair by the table.

"Then I will tell you," said Charlotte calmly. "I will tell everybody."

Bringing her umbrella to the ready, she advanced a few steps across the cabin, and then turned to face the company, who had automatically formed themselves into an expectant group behind the sofa.

"Twenty-three years ago," she recited, in the manner of one covering familiar ground, "when I was staying with my aunt at Devonport, I consented to accompany a rather flighty girl-friend of mine to tea on board a ship of war. A destroyer, it

was called—and it was well named. The name of the girl was Agatha Bentley."

"This," murmured Mary to the Captain, "is going to be good."

"The officer in charge of the destroyer," continued Charlotte—"a Lieutenant-Commander, whom my friend had met only the day before—pressed us to stay to dinner. I declined. Tea," I said, "is one thing, and dinner is another."

"How very, very true!" said Nancy.

"Agatha Bentley, however, remained on board." Charlotte ported her umbrella. "What happened?"

"The picquet boat busted?" suggested Mary.

"A violent storm arose. No last boat could be sent ashore; and Agatha Bentley spent the whole of that night on board that destroyer—alone with ninety-five sailors! I have never set eyes on her again until this day."

And with this devastating climax, Charlotte Hopkinson brought her umbrella smartly to the slope, and strode back to the sofa, where grateful hands placed no less than four cushions at her back.

There was complete and stunning silence for the space of perhaps five seconds. Then, suddenly, a voice rang out like a trumpet. The small creeping object which had trailed into the cabin in the wake of Lady Hewitt not five minutes before had mysteriously disappeared, and in its place towered the majestic

and terrifying figures of an outraged husband and a full-throated Admiral and Commander-in-Chief, all rolled into one. In other words, Hercules Herbert Hewitt was himself again.

"Why," he demanded, gazing sternly down upon the quivering form of the recent female counterpart of Mussolini—"why was I never told about this?"

"Bertie! Bertie!" whimpered Lady Hewitt. "It was all perfectly innocent, really. They put a sentry over me, and everything! And I was sea-sick most of the time, darling!"

She looked up, and extended a beseeching hand to her husband. But that miraculously restored potentate stood aloof, with bent brows and folded arms, the picture of stern inflexibility.

Mary and the Captain exchanged glances, then a whisper. The Captain touched the Admiral on the shoulder.

"Go on, sir!" he murmured. "It's now or never!"

"Go to it, you big sap!" added Miss Carlton. "This lets us *all* out!"

The Admiral hesitated, then threw out both arms with a sublime gesture of magnanimity.

"Agatha!" he said.

"Bertie!" cried Lady Hewitt, and fell into them.

"Cheers!" said the Commander.

"Whoops, dearie!" said Nancy.

"Angel!" said Fay.

"Darlingest!" said Bobo.

"Bleakfast," announced Ah Fong, entering, "for Admilal's piecee——"

Mary took the Captain's arm, and together they slipped out on to the stern-walk.

"Hank!" said Mary.

"Sussex!" said the Captain.

THE END

\* \* \* \* \*

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