

**WILLIAM
WYMARK
JACOBS**

DIALSTONE LANE, PART 5

William Wymark Jacobs

Dialstone Lane, Part 5

«Public Domain»

Jacobs W.

Dialstone Lane, Part 5 / W. Jacobs — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER XVIII	5
CHAPTER XIX	10
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	11

W. W. Jacobs

Dialstone Lane, Part 5

CHAPTER XVIII

Month by month the *Fair Emily* crept down south. The Great Bear and other constellations gave way to the stars of the southern skies, and Mr. Chalk tried hard not to feel disappointed with the arrangement of those in the Southern Cross. Pressed by the triumphant Brisket, to whom he voiced his views, he had to admit that it was at least as much like a cross as the other was a bear.

As they got farther south he had doffed his jersey and sea boots in favour of a drill suit and bare feet. In this costume, surmounted by a Panama hat, he was the only thing aboard that afforded the slightest amusement to Mr. Stobell, whose temper was suffering severely under a long spell of monotonous idleness, and whose remarks concerning the sea and everything in connection with it were so strangely out of keeping with the idea of a pleasure cruise that Mr. Tredgold lectured him severely on his indiscretion.

"Stobell is no more doing this for pleasure than I am," said Captain Brisket to Mr. Duckett. "It's something big that's brought him all this way, you mark my words."

The mate nodded acquiescence. "What about Mr. Chalk?" he said, in a low voice. "Can't you get it out of him?"

"Shuts up like an oyster directly I get anywhere near it," replied the captain; "sticks to it that it is a yachting trip and that Tredgold is studying the formations of islands. Says he has got a list of them he is going to visit."

"Mr. Tredgold was talking the same way to me," said the mate. "He says he's going to write a book about them when he goes back. He asked me what I thought'ud be a good title."

"I know what would be a good title for him," growled Brisket, as Mr. Stobell came on deck and gazed despondently over the side. "We're getting towards the end of our journey, sir."

"End?" said Mr. Stobell. "End? I don't believe there is an end. I believe you've lost your way and we shall go sailing on and on for ever."

He walked aft and, placing himself in a deckchair, gazed listlessly at the stolid figure of the helmsman. The heat was intense, and both Tredgold and Chalk had declined to proceed with a conversation limited almost entirely on his side to personal abuse. He tried the helmsman, and made that unfortunate thirsty for a week by discussing the rival merits of bitter ale in a pewter and stout in a china mug. The helmsman, a man of liberal ideas, said, with some emotion, that he could drink either of them out of a flower-pot.

Mr. Chalk became strangely restless as they neared their goal. He had come thousands of miles and had seen nothing fresh with the exception of a few flying-fish, an albatross, and a whale blowing in the distance. Pacing the deck late one night with Captain Brisket he expressed mild yearnings for a little excitement.

"You want adventure," said the captain, shaking his head at him. "I know you. Ah, what a sailorman you'd ha' made. With a crew o' six like yourself I'd take this little craft anywhere. The way you pick up seamanship is astonishing. Peter Duckett swears you must ha' been at sea as a boy, and all I can do I can't persuade him otherwise."

"I always had a feeling that I should like it," said Mr. Chalk, modestly.

"Like it!" repeated the captain. "O' course you do; you've got the salt in your blood, but this peaceful cruising is beginning to tell on you. There's a touch o' wildness in you, sir, that's always struggling to come to the front. Peter Duckett was saying the same thing only the other day. He's very uneasy about it."

"Uneasy!" repeated Mr. Chalk.

"Aye," said the captain, drawing a deep breath. "And if I tell you that I am too, it wouldn't be outside the truth."

"But why?" inquired Mr. Chalk, after they had paced once up and down the deck in silence.

"It's the mystery we don't like," said Brisket, at last. "How are we to know what desperate venture you are going to let us in for? Follow you faithful we will, but we don't like going in the dark; it ain't quite fair to us."

"There's not the slightest danger in the world," said Mr. Chalk, with impressive earnestness.

"But there's a mystery; you can't deny that," said the captain.

Mr. Chalk cleared his throat. "It's a secret," he said, slowly.

"From me?" inquired the captain, in reproachful accents.

"It isn't my secret," said Mr. Chalk. "So far as I'm concerned I'd tell you with pleasure."

The captain slowly withdrew his arm from Mr. Chalk's, and moving to the side leaned over it with his shoulders hunched. Somewhat moved by this display of feeling, Mr. Chalk for some time hesitated to disturb him, and when at last he did steal up and lay a friendly hand on the captain's shoulder it was gently shaken off.

"Secrets!" said Brisket, in a hollow voice. "From me! I ain't to be trusted?"

"It isn't my doing," said Mr. Chalk.

"Well, well, it don't matter, sir," said the captain. "Bill Brisket must put up with it. It's the first time in his life he's been suspected, and it's doubly hard coming from you. You've hurt me, sir, and there's no other man living could do that."

Mr. Chalk stood by in sorrowful perplexity.

"And I put my life in your hands," continued the captain, with a low, hard laugh. "You're the, only man in the world that knows who killed Smiling Peter in San Francisco, and I told you. Well, well!"

"But you did it in self-defence," said the other, eagerly.

"What does that matter?" said the captain, turning and walking forward, followed by the anxious Mr. Chalk. "I've got no proof of it. Open your mouth—once—and I swing for it. That's the extent of my trust in you."

Mr. Chalk, much affected, swore a few sailorly oaths as to what he wished might happen to him if he ever betrayed the other's confidence.

"Yes," said the captain, mournfully, "that's all very well; but you can't trust me in a smaller matter, however much I swear to keep it secret. And it's weighing on me in another way: I believe the crew have got an inkling of something, and here am I, master of the ship, responsible for all your lives, kept in ignorance."

"The crew!" ejaculated the startled Mr. Chalk.

Captain Brisket hesitated and lowered his voice. "The other night I came on deck for a look round and saw one of them peeping down through your skylight," he said, slowly. "I sent him below, and after he'd gone I looked down and saw you and Mr. Tredgold and Stobell all bending over a paper."

Mr. Chalk, deep in thought, paced up and down in silence.

"That's a secret," said Brisket. "I don't want them to think that I was spying. I told you because you understand. A shipmaster has to keep his eyes open, for everybody's sake."

"It's your duty," said Mr. Chalk, firmly.

Captain Brisket, with a little display of emotion, thanked him, and, leaning against the side, drew his attention to the beauty of the stars and sea. Impelled by the occasion and the charm of the night he waxed sentimental, and with a strange mixture of bluntness and shyness spoke of his aged mother, of the loneliness of a seafarer's life, and the inestimable boon of real friendship. He bared his inmost soul to his sympathetic listener, and then, affecting to think from a remark of Mr. Chalk's

that he was going to relate the secret of the voyage, declined to hear it on the ground that he was only a rough sailorman and not to be trusted. Mr. Chalk, contesting this hotly, convinced him at last that he was in error, and then found that, bewildered by the argument, the captain had consented to be informed of a secret which he had not intended to impart.

"But, mind," said Brisket, holding up a warning finger, "I'm not going to tell Peter Duckett. There's no need for him to know."

Mr. Chalk said "Certainly not," and, seeing no way for escape, led the reluctant man as far from the helmsman as possible and whispered the information. By the time they parted for the night Captain Brisket knew as much as the members of the expedition themselves, and, with a rare thoughtfulness, quieted Mr. Chalk's conscience by telling him that he had practically guessed the whole affair from the beginning.

He listened with great interest a few days later when Mr. Tredgold, after considering audibly which island he should visit first, gave him the position of Bowers's Island and began to discuss coral reefs and volcanic action. They were now well in among the islands. Two they passed at a distance, and went so close to a third—a mere reef with a few palms upon it—that Mr. Chalk, after a lengthy inspection through his binoculars, was able to declare it uninhabited.

A fourth came into sight a couple of days later: a small grey bank on the starboard bow. Captain Brisket, who had been regarding it for some time with great care, closed his glass with a bang and stepped up to Mr. Tredgold.

"There she is, sir," he said, in satisfied tones.

Mr. Tredgold, who was drinking tea, put down his cup, and rose with an appearance of mild interest. Mr. Stobell followed suit, and both gazed in strong indignation at the undisguised excitement of Mr. Chalk as he raced up the rigging for a better view. Tredgold with the captain's glass, and Stobell with an old pair of field-glasses in which he had great faith, gazed from the deck. Tredgold was the first to speak.

"Are you sure this is the one, Brisket?" he inquired, carelessly.

"Certainly, sir," said the captain, in some surprise. "At least, it's the one you told me to steer for."

"Don't look much like the map," said Stobell, in a low aside. "Where's the mountain?"

Tredgold looked again. "I fancy it's a bit higher towards the middle," he said, after a prolonged inspection; "and, besides, it's 'mount,' not 'mountain.'"

Captain Brisket, who had with great delicacy drawn a little apart in recognition of their whispers, stepped towards them again.

"I don't know that I've ever seen this particular island before," he said, frankly; "likely not; but it's the one you told me to find. There's over a couple of hundred of them, large and small, knocking about. If you think you've made a mistake we might try some of the others."

"No," said Tredgold, after a pause and a prolonged inspection; "this must be right."

Mr. Chalk came down from aloft, his eyes shining with pure joy, and joined them.

"How long before we're alongside?" he inquired.

"Two hours," replied the captain; "perhaps three," he added, considering.

Mr. Chalk glanced aloft and, after a knowing question or two as to the wind, began in a low voice to converse with his friends. Mr. Tredgold's misgivings as to the identity of the island he dismissed at once as baseless. The mount satisfied him, and when, as they approached nearer, discrepancies in shape between the island and the map were pointed out to him he easily explained them by speaking of the difficulties of cartography to an amateur.

"There's our point," he said, indicating it with a forefinger, which the incensed Stobell at once struck down. "We couldn't have managed it better so far as time is concerned. We'll sleep ashore tonight in the tent and start the search at daybreak."

Captain Brisket approached the island cautiously. To the eyes of the voyagers it seemed to change shape as they neared it, until finally, the *Fair Emily* anchoring off the reef which guarded it, it revealed itself as a small island about three-quarters of a mile long and two or three hundred yards wide. A beach of coral sand shelved steeply to the sea, and a background of cocoa-nut trees and other vegetation completed a picture on which Mr. Chalk gazed with the rapture of a devotee at a shrine.

He went below as the anchor ran out, and after a short absence reappeared on deck bedizened with weapons. A small tent, with blankets and provisions, and a long deal box containing a couple of spades and a pick, were put into one of the boats, and the three friends, after giving minute instructions to the captain, followed. Mr. Duckett took the helm, and after a short pull along the edge of the reef discovered an opening which gave access to the smooth water inside.

"A pretty spot, gentlemen," he said, scanning the island closely. "I don't think that there is anybody on it."

"We'll go over it first and make sure," said Stobell, as the boat's nose ran into the beach. "Come along, Chalk."

He sprang out and, taking one of the guns, led the way along the beach, followed by Mr. Chalk. The men looked after them longingly, and then, in obedience to the mate, took the stores out of the boat and pitched the tent. By the time Chalk and Stobell returned they were seated in the boat and ready to depart.

A feeling of loneliness came over Mr. Chalk as he watched the receding boat. The schooner, riding at anchor half a mile outside the reef, had taken in her sails and presented a singularly naked and desolate appearance. He wondered how long it would take the devoted Brisket to send assistance in case of need, and blamed himself severely for not having brought some rockets for signalling purposes. Long before night came the prospect of sleeping ashore had lost all its charm.

"One of us ought to keep watch," he said, as Stobell, after a heavy supper followed by a satisfying pipe, rolled himself in a blanket and composed himself for slumber.

Mr. Stobell grunted, and in a few minutes was fast asleep. Mr. Tredgold, first blowing out the candle, followed suit, while Mr. Chalk, a prey to vague fears, sat up nursing a huge revolver.

The novelty of the position, the melancholy beat of the surge on the farther beach, and faint, uncertain noises all around kept him awake. He fancied that he heard stealthy footsteps on the beach, and low, guttural voices calling among the palms. Twice he aroused his friends and twice they sat up and reviled him.

"If you put your bony finger into my ribs again," growled Mr. Stobell, tenderly rubbing the afflicted part, "you and me won't talk alike. Like a bar of iron it was."

"I thought I heard something," said Mr. Chalk. "I should have fired, only I was afraid of scaring you."

"*Fired?*" repeated Mr. Stobell, thoughtfully. "*Fired?* Was it the barrel of that infernal pistol you shoved into my ribs just now?"

"I just touched you with it," admitted the other. "I'm sorry if I hurt you."

Mr. Stobell, feeling in his pocket, struck a match and held it up. "Full cock," he said, in a broken voice; "and he stirred me up with it. And then *he* talks of savages!"

He struck another match and lit the candle, and then, before Mr. Chalk could guess his intentions, pressed him backwards and took the pistol away. He raised the canvas and threw it out into the night, and then, remembering the guns, threw them after it. This done he blew out the candle, and in two minutes was fast asleep again.

An hour passed and Mr. Chalk, despite his fears, began to nod. Half asleep, he lay down and drew his blanket about him, and then he sat up suddenly wide awake as an unmistakable footstep sounded outside.

For a few seconds he sat unable to move; then he stretched out his hand and began to shake Stobell. He could have sworn that hands were fumbling at the tent.

"Eh?" said Stobell, sleepily.

Chalk shook him again. Stobell sat up angrily, but before he could speak a wild yell rent the air, the tent collapsed suddenly, and they struggled half suffocated in the folds of the canvas.

CHAPTER XIX

Mr. Stobell was the first to emerge, and, seizing the canvas, dragged it free of the writhing bodies of his companions. Mr. Chalk gained his feet and, catching sight of some dim figures standing a few yards away on the beach, gave a frantic shout and plunged into the interior, followed by the others. A shower of pieces of coral whizzing by their heads and another terrible yell accelerated their flight.

Mr. Chalk gained the farther beach unmolested and, half crazy with fear, ran along blindly. Footsteps, which he hoped were those of his friends, pounded away behind him, and presently Stobell, panting heavily, called to him to stop. Mr. Chalk, looking over his shoulder, slackened his pace and allowed him to overtake him.

"Wait—for—Tredgold," said Stobell, breathlessly, as he laid a heavy hand on his shoulder.

Mr. Chalk struggled to free himself. "Where is he?" He gasped.

Stobell, still holding him, stood trying to regain his breath. "They—they must—have got him," he said, at last. "Have you got any of your pistols on you?"

"You threw them all away," quavered Mr. Chalk. "I've only got a knife."

He fumbled with trembling fingers at his belt; Stobell brushing his hand aside drew a sailor's knife from its sheath, and started to run back in the direction of the tent. Mr. Chalk, after a moment's hesitation, followed a little way behind.

"Look out!" he screamed, and stopped suddenly, as a figure burst out of the trees on to the beach a score of yards ahead. Stobell, with a hoarse cry, raised his hand and dashed at it.

"Stobell!" cried a voice.

"It's Tredgold," cried Stobell. He waited for him to reach them, and then, turning, all three ran stumbling along the beach.

They ran in silence until they reached the other end of the island. So far there were no signs of pursuit, and Stobell, breathing hard from his unwonted exercise, collected a few lumps of coral and piled them on the beach.

"They had me over—twice," said Tredgold, jerkily; "they tore the clothes from my back. How I got away I don't know. I fought—kicked—then suddenly I broke loose and ran."

He threw himself on the beach and drew his breath in long, sobbing gasps. Stobell, going a few paces forward, peered into the darkness and listened intently.

"I suppose they're waiting for daylight," he said at last.

He sat down on the beach and, after making a few disparaging remarks about coral as a weapon, lapsed into silence.

To Mr. Chalk it seemed as though the night would never end. A dozen times he sprang to his feet and gazed fearfully into the darkness, and a dozen times at least he reminded the silent Stobell of the folly of throwing other people's guns away. Day broke at last and showed him Tredgold in a tattered shirt and a pair of trousers, and Stobell sitting close by sound asleep.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.