ROBERT MICHAEL BALLANTYNE

THE YOUNG TRAWLER

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Содержание

R. M. Ballantyne
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Chapter One.
Introduces Deep-Sea Fishermen And their Families

On a certain breezy morning in October—not many years ago—a wilderness of foam rioted wildly over those dangerous sands which lie off the port of Yarmouth, where the *Evening Star*, fishing-smack, was getting ready for sea.

In one of the narrow lanes or "Rows" peculiar to that town, the skipper of the smack stood at his own door, grumbling. He was a broad burly man, a little past the prime of life, but prematurely aged by hard work and hard living.

"He's always out o' the way when he's wanted, an' always in the way when he's not wanted," said the skipper angrily to his wife, of whom he was at the moment taking, as one of his mates remarked, a tender farewell.

"Don't be hard on him, David," pleaded the wife, tearfully, as she looked up in her husband's face.

"He's only a bit thoughtless; and I shouldn't wonder if he was already down at the smack."

"If he's not," returned the fisherman with a frown, as he clenched his huge right hand—and a hard and horny hand it was, from constant grappling with ropes, oars, hand-spikes, and the like—"if he's not, I'll—"

He stopped abruptly, as he looked down at his wife's eyes, and the frown faded. No wonder, for that wife's eyes were soft and gentle, and her face was fair and very attractive as well as refined in expression, though not particularly pretty.

"Well, old girl, come, I won't be hard on 'im. Now I'm off,—good-day." And with that the fisherman stooped to kiss his wife, who returned the salute with interest. At the same time she thrust a packet into his hand.

"What's this, Nell?"

"A Testament, David—from me. It will do your soul good if you will read it. And the tract wrapped round it is from a lady."

The frown returned to the man's face as he growled— "What lady?"

"The lady with the curious name, who was down here last summer for sea-bathing; don't you remember Miss Ruth Dotropy? It is a temperance tract."

David Bright made a motion as though he were about to fling the parcel away, but he thought better of it, and thrust it into the capacious pocket of his rough coat. The brow cleared again as he left his wife, who called after him, "Don't be hard on Billy, David; remember he's our only one—and he's not bad, just a little thoughtless."

"Never fear, Nell, I'll make a man of him."

Lighting a large pipe as he spoke, the skipper of the *Evening Star* nodded farewell, and sauntered away.

In another of the narrow lanes of Yarmouth another fisherman stood at his own door, also taking leave of his wife. This man was the mate—just engaged—of David Bright's vessel, and very different in some respects from the skipper, being tall, handsome, fresh and young—not more than twenty-four—as well as powerful of build. His wife, a good-looking young woman, with their first-born in her arms, had bidden him good-bye.

We will not trouble the reader with more of their parting conversation than the last few words.

"Now, Maggie, dear, whatever you do, take care o' that blessed babby."

"Trust me for that, Joe," said Maggie, imprinting a kiss of considerable violence and fervour on the said baby, which gazed at its mother—as it gazed at everything—in blank amazement.

"An' don't forget to see Miss Ruth, if you can, or send a message to her, about that matter."

"I'll not forget, Joe."

The mate of the *Evening Star* bestowed a parting kiss of extreme gentleness on the wondering infant, and hastened away.

He had not proceeded far when he encountered a creature which filled his heart with laughter. Indeed Joe Davidson's heart was easily filled with emotions of every kind, for he was an

unusually sympathetic fellow, and rather fond of a joke.

The creature referred to was a small boy of thirteen years of age or thereabouts, with a pretty little face, a Grecian little nose, a rose-bud of a mouth, curly fair hair, bright blue eyes, and a light handsome frame, which, however, was a smart, active, and wiry frame. He was made to look as large and solid as possible by means of the rough costume of a fisherman, and there was a bold look in the blue eyes which told of a strong will. What amused Joe Davidson most, however, was the tremendous swagger in the creature's gait and the imperturbable gravity with which he smoked a cigar! The little fellow was so deeply absorbed in thought as he passed the mate that he did not raise his eyes from the ground. An irresistible impulse seized on Joe. He stooped, and gently plucked the cigar from the boy's mouth.

Instantly the creature doubled his little fists, and, without taking the trouble to look so high as his adversary's face, rushed at his legs, which he began to kick and pommel furiously.

As the legs were cased in heavy sea-boots he failed to make any impression on them, and, after a few moments of exhausting effort, he stepped back so as to get a full look at his foe.

"What d'ee mean by that, Joe Davidson, you fathom of impudence?" he demanded, with flushed face and flashing eyes.

"Only that I wants a light," answered the mate, pulling out his pipe, and applying the cigar to it.

"Humph!" returned the boy, mollified, and at the same time tickled, by the obvious pretence; "you might have axed leave first,

I think."

"So I might. I ax parding *now*," returned Joe, handing back the cigar; "good-day, Billy."

The little boy, gazed after the fisherman in speechless admiration, for the cool quiet manner in which the thing had been done had, as he said, taken the wind completely out of his sails, and prevented his usually ready reply.

Replacing the cigar in the rose-bud, he went puffing along till he reached the house of David Bright, which he entered.

"Your father's gone, Billy," said Mrs Bright. "Haste ye after him, else you'll catch it. Oh! do give up smokin', dear boy. Good-bye. God keep you, my darling."

She caught the little fellow in a hasty embrace.

"Hold on, mother, you'll bust me!" cried Billy, returning the embrace, however, with affectionate vigour. "An' if I'm late, daddy will sail without me. Let go!"

He shouted the last words as if the reference had been to the anchor of the *Evening Star*. His mother laughed as she released him, and he ran down to the quay with none of his late dignity remaining. He knew his father's temper well, and was fearful of being left behind.

He was just in time. The little smack was almost under weigh as he tumbled, rather than jumped, on board. Ere long she was out beyond the breakers that marked the shoals, and running to the eastward under a stiff breeze.

This was little Billy's first trip to sea in his father's fishing-

smack, and he went not as a passenger but as a "hand." It is probable that there never sailed out of Yarmouth a lad who was prouder of his position than little Billy of the *Evening Star*. He was rigged from top to toe in a brand-new suit of what we may style nautical garments. His thin little body was made to appear of twice its natural bulk by a broad-shouldered pilot-cloth coat, under which was a thick guernsey. He was almost extinguished by a large yellow sou'-wester, and all but swallowed up by a pair of sea-boots that reached to his hips. These boots, indeed, seemed so capacious as to induce the belief that if he did not take care the part of his body that still remained outside of them might fall inside and disappear.

Altogether—what between pride of position, vanity in regard to the new suit, glee at being fairly at sea and doing for himself, and a certain humorous perception that he was ridiculously small—little Billy presented a very remarkable appearance as he stood that day on the deck of his father's vessel, with his little legs straddling wide apart, after the fashion of nautical men, and his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his sea-going coat.

For some time he was so engrossed with the novelty of his situation, and the roll of the crested waves, that his eyes did not rise much higher than the legs of his comparatively gigantic associates; but when curiosity at last prompted him to scan their faces, great was his surprise to observe among them Joe Davidson, the young man who had plucked the cigar from his lips in Yarmouth.

"What! are *you* one o' the hands, Joe?" he asked, going towards the man with an abortive attempt to walk steadily on the pitching deck.

"Ay, lad, I'm your father's mate," replied Joe. "But surely *you* are not goin' as a hand?"

"That's just what I am," returned Billy, with a look of dignity which was somewhat marred by a heavy lurch causing him to stagger. "I'm part owner, d'ee see, an' ready to take command when the old man retires, so you'd better mind your helm, young man, an' steer clear of impudence in future, if you don't want to lead the life of a dog aboard of this here smack."

"I'll try, sir," said Joe Davidson, touching his forelock, while a humorous twinkle lit up his bright eyes.

"Hallo! Billy!" shouted the skipper, who was steering; "come here, boy. You didn't come aboard to idle, you know; I've let you have a good look at the sea all for nothin'. It's time now that you went to work to larn your duties. Zulu!"

The last word caused a woolly head to protrude from the after hatchway, revealing a youth about twice the size of Billy. Having some drops of black blood in him this lad had been styled Zulu —and, being a handy fellow, had been made cook.

"Here, take this boy below," said the skipper, "and teach him something—anything you like, so long as you keep him at work. No idlers allowed on board, you know."

"Yes, sar," said Zulu.

Billy was delighted to obey. He was naturally a smart, active

fellow, and not only willing, but proud, to submit to discipline. He descended a short ladder into the little cabin with which he had become acquainted, as a visitor, when the smack was in port on former occasions. With Zulu he was also acquainted, that youth having been for some time in his father's service.

"Kin you do cookin'?" asked Zulu with a grin that revealed an unusually large cavern full of glistening teeth, mingled with more than an average allowance of tongue and gums.

"Oh! I say," remonstrated Billy, "it's growed bigger than ever!"

Zulu expanded his mouth to its utmost, and shut his eyes in enjoyment of the complimentary joke.

"Oh course it hab," he said on recovering; "I's 'bliged to eat so much at sea dat de mout gits wider ebery trip. Dat leetle hole what you've got in your face 'll git so big as mine fore long, Billy. Den you be like some ob de leetle fishes we catch—all mout and no body worth mentioning. But you no tell me yit: Kin you do cookin'?"

"Oh yes, I can manage a Yarmouth bloater," replied Billy.

"But," said Zulu, "kin you cook a 'tater widout makin' him's outside all of a mush, an' him's inside same so as a stone?"

Instead of answering, Billy sat down on the settle which ran round the cabin and looked up at his dark friend very solemnly.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Zulu.

"There—there's something wrong wi' me," said Billy, with a faint attempt to smile as he became rather pale.

Seeing this, his friend quietly put a bucket beside him.

"I say, Zulu," observed the poor boy with a desperate attempt at pleasantry, "I wonder what's up."

"Des nuffin' up yit but he won't be long," replied the young cook with a look full of sympathy.

It would be unjust to our little hero to proceed further. This being, as we have said, his first trip to sea, he naturally found himself, after an hour or two, stretched out in one of the bunks which surrounded the little cabin. There he was permitted to lie and think longingly of his mother, surrounded by dense tobacco smoke, hot vapours, and greasy fumes, until he blushed to find himself wishing, with all his heart, that he had never left home!

There we will leave him to meditate and form useless resolves, which he never carried out, while we introduce to the reader some of the other actors in our tale.

Chapter Two.
A Contrast to Chapter I

From that heaving grey wilderness of water called the North Sea we pass now to that lively wilderness of bricks and mortar called London.

West-end mansions are not naturally picturesque or interesting subjects either for the brush or the pen, and we would not willingly drag our readers into one of them, did not circumstances—over which we have not a shadow of control—compel us to do so.

The particular mansion to which we now direct attention belonged to a certain Mrs Dotropy, whose husband's ancestors, by the way, were said to have come over with the Conqueror—whether in his own ship or in one of the bumboats that followed is not certain. They were De Tropys at that time, but, having sunk in the social scale in the course of centuries, and then risen again in succeeding centuries through the medium of trade, they reappeared on the surface with their patronymic transformed as now presented.

"Mother," said Ruth Dotropy to a magnificent duchess-like woman, "I've come to ask you about the poor—"

"Ruth, dear," interrupted the mother, "I wish you would not worry me about the poor! They're a troublesome, ill-doing set;

always grumbling, dirty, ill-natured, suspicious, and envious of the rich—as if it was our fault that we are rich! I don't want to hear anything more about the poor."

Ruth, who was a soft-cheeked, soft-handed, and soft-hearted girl of eighteen, stood, hat in hand, before her mother with a slight smile on her rosy lips.

"You are not quite just to the poor, mother," returned Ruth, scarce able to restrain a laugh at her parent's vehemence. "Some of them are all that you say, no doubt, but there are many, even among the poorest of the poor, who are good-natured, well-doing, unsuspicious, and respectful, not only to the rich but also to each other and to everybody. There is Mrs Wolsey, for instance, she—"

"Oh! but she's an exception, you know," said Mrs Dotropy, "there are not many like Mrs Wolsey."

"And there is Mrs Gladman," continued Ruth.

"Yes, but she's another exception."

"And Mrs Robbie."

"Why, Ruth, what's the use of picking out all the exceptions to prove your point? Of course the exception proves the rule—at least so the proverb says—but a great many exceptions prove nothing that I know of, except—that is—but what's the use of arguing, child, you'll never be convinced. Come, how much do you want me to give?"

Easy-going Mrs Dotropy's mind, we need scarcely point out, was of a confused type, and she "hated argument." Perhaps, on

the whole, it was to the advantage of her friends and kindred that she did so.

"I only want you to give a little time, mother," replied Ruth, swinging her hat to and fro, while she looked archly into Mrs Dotropy's large, dignified, and sternly-kind countenance, if we may venture on such an expression,– "I want you to go with me and see—"

"Yes, yes, I know what you're going to say, child, you want me to go and 'see for myself,' which means that I'm to soil my boots in filthy places, subject my ears to profanity, my eyes to horrible sights, and my nose to intolerable smells. No, Ruth, I cannot oblige you. Of what use would it be? If my doing this would relieve the miseries of the poor, you might reasonably ask me to go among them, but it would not. I give them as much money as I can afford to give, and, as far as I can see, it does them no good. They never seem better off, and they always want more. They are not even grateful for it. Just look at Lady Openhand. What good does she accomplish by her liberality, and her tearful eyes, and sympathetic heart, even though her feelings are undoubtedly genuine? Only the other day I chanced to walk behind her along several streets and saw her stop and give money to seven or eight beggars who accosted her. She never *can* refuse any one who asks with a pitiful look and a pathetic cock-and-bull story. Several of them were young and strong, and quite undeserving of charity. Three, I observed, went straight to a public-house with what she had given them, and the last, a small street boy, went into fits

of suppressed laughter after she had passed, and made faces at her—finishing off by putting the thumb of his left hand to his nose, and spreading out his fingers as wide as possible. I do not understand the exact significance of that action, but there is something in it so intensely insolent that it is quite incompatible with the idea of gratitude."

"Yes, mother, I saw him too," said Ruth, with a demure look; "it curiously enough happened that I was following you at the time. You afterwards passed the same boy with a refusal, I suppose?"

"Yes, child, of course—and a reproof."

"I thought so. Well, after you had passed, he not only applied his left thumb to his nose and spread his fingers, but also put the thumb of his right hand against the little finger of his left, and spread out the other five fingers at *you*. So, whatever he meant Lady Openhand to receive, he meant you to have twice as much. But Lady Openhand makes a mistake, I think, she does not *consider* the poor; she only feels deeply for them and gives to them."

"*Only* feels and gives!" repeated Mrs Dotropy, with a look of solemn amazement.

Being quite incapable of disentangling or expressing the flood of ideas that overwhelmed her, the good lady relieved herself after a few broken sentences, with the assertion that it was of no use arguing with Ruth, for Ruth would never be convinced.

She was so far right, in that her daughter could not change her

mind on the strength of mere dogmatic assertion, even although she was a pliant and teachable little creature. So, at least, Mr Lewis, her pastor, had found her when he tried to impress on her a few important lessons—such as, that it is better to give than to receive; that man *is* his brother's keeper; that we are commanded to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, who came to save the lost, to rescue the perishing, and who fed the hungry.

"But, mother," resumed Ruth, "I want you to go with me to-day to visit some poor people who are *not* troublesome, who are perfectly clean, are never ill-natured, suspect nothing, and envy nobody."

"They must indeed be wonderful people," said Mrs Dotropy, with a laugh at Ruth's enthusiasm, "quite angelic."

"They are as nearly so as mortals ever become, I think," returned Ruth, putting on her hat; "won't you come, mother?"

Now, Mrs Dotropy had the faculty of giving in gracefully, although she could not argue. Rising with an amused smile, she kissed Ruth's forehead and went to prepare for a visit to the poor.

Let us now turn to a small street scarcely ten minutes' walk from the mansion where the above conversation took place.

It was what may be styled a Lilliputian street. Almost everything in it was small. The houses were small; the shops were small; the rents—well, they were certainly not so small as they should have been, the doors and windows were small; and the very children that played in the gutter, with an exceedingly small amount of clothing on them, were rather diminutive. Some of

the doors stood open, revealing the fact that it had been thought wise by the builders of the houses to waste no space in lobbies or entrance halls. One or two, however, displayed entries, or passages—dark and narrow—the doors to which were blistered and severely battered, because, being the public property of several families, they had no particular owner to protect them.

There was a small flat over a green-grocer's shop to which one of the cleanest of those entries led. It consisted of two rooms, a light-closet and a kitchen, and was low-ceilinged and poorly furnished, but there was a distinct air of cleanliness about it, with a consequent tendency to comfort. The carpet of the chief room was very old, but it had been miraculously darned and patched. The table was little larger than that of a gigantic doll's-house, but it was covered with a clean, though threadbare, cloth, that had seen better days, and on it lay several old and well-thumbed books, besides two work-baskets.

In an old—a very old—easy-chair at one side of the fire sat a lady rather beyond middle age, with her hands clasped on her lap, and her eyes gazing dreamily at the fire. Perhaps she was speculating on the question how long two small lumps of coal and a little dross would last. The grate in which that amount of fuel burned was a miniature specimen of simplicity,—a mere hollow in the wall with two bars across. The fire itself was so small that nothing but constant solicitude saved it from extinction.

There was much of grey mingled with the fair tresses of the lady, and the remains of beauty were very distinct on a

countenance, the lines of which suggested suffering, gentleness, submission, and humility. Perchance the little sigh that escaped her as she gazed at the preposterously small fire had reference to days gone by when health revelled in her veins; when wealth was lavished in her father's house; when food and fun were plentiful; when grief and care were scarce. Whatever her thoughts might have been, they were interrupted by the entrance of another lady, who sat down beside her, laid a penny on the table, and looked at the lady in the easy-chair with a peculiar, half-comical expression.

"It is our *last*, Jessie," she said, and as she said it the expression intensified, yet it seemed a little forced.

There needed no magician to tell that these two were sisters. The indescribable similarity was strong, yet the difference was great. Jessie was evidently, though not much, the elder.

"It's almost absurd, Kate," she said, "to think that we should actually have—come—at last—to—"

She stopped, and Kate looked earnestly at her. There was a tremulous motion about the corners of both their mouths. Jessie laid her head on Kate's shoulder, and both wept—gently. They did not "burst into tears," for they were not by nature demonstrative. Their position made it easy to slide down on their knees and bury their heads side by side in the great old easy-chair that had been carefully kept when all the rest was sold, because it had belonged to their father.

We may not record the scarce audible prayer. Those who have

suffered know what it was. Those who have not suffered could not understand it. After the prayer they sat down in a somewhat tranquil mood to "talk it over." Poor things—they had often talked it over, without much result, except that blessed one of evolving mutual sympathy.

"If I were only a little younger and stronger," said Kate, who had been, and still was of a lively disposition, "I would offer myself as a housemaid, but that is out of the question now; besides, I could not leave you, Jessie, the invalid of the family —that once was."

"Come, Kate, let us have no reference to the invalid of the family any more. I am getting quite strong. Do you know I do believe that poverty is doing my health good; my appetite is improving. I really feel quite hungry now."

"We will have tea, then," said Kate, getting up briskly; "the things that we got will make one good meal, at all events, though the cost of them has reduced our funds to the low ebb of one penny; so, let us enjoy ourselves while it lasts!"

Kate seized the poker as she spoke, and gave the fire a thrust that almost extinguished it. Then she heaped on a few ounces of coal with reckless indifference to the future, and put on a little kettle to boil. Soon the small table was spread with a white cloth, a silver teapot, and two beautiful cups that had been allowed them out of the family wreck; a loaf of bread, a very small quantity of brown sugar, a smaller quantity of skim-milk, and the smallest conceivable pat of salt butter.

"And this took all the money except one penny?" asked Jessie, regarding the table with a look of mingled sadness and amazement.

"All—every farthing," replied Kate, "and I consider the result a triumph of domestic economy."

The sisters were about to sit down to enjoy their triumph when a bounding step was heard on the stair.

"That's Ruth," exclaimed Kate, rising and hurrying to the door; "quick, get out the other cup, Jessie. Oh! Ruth, darling, this is good of you. We were sure you would come this week, as—"

She stopped abruptly, for a large presence loomed on the stair behind Ruth.

"I have brought mamma to see you, Kate—the Misses Seaward, mamma; you have often heard me speak of them."

"Yes, dear, and I have much pleasure in making the Misses Seaward's acquaintance. My daughter is very fond of you, ladies, I know, and the little puss has brought me here by way of a surprise, I suppose, for we came out to pay a very different kind of visit. She—"

"Oh! but mamma," hastily exclaimed Ruth, who saw that her mother, whom she had hitherto kept in ignorance of the circumstances of the poor ladies, was approaching dangerous ground, "our visit here *has* to do with—with the people we were speaking about. I have come," she added, turning quickly to Miss Jessie, "to transact a little business with you—about those poor people, you remember, whom you were so sorry for. Mamma

will be glad to hear what we have to say about them. Won't you, mamma?"

"Of course, of course, dear," replied Mrs Dotropy, who, however, experienced a slight feeling of annoyance at being thus dragged into a preliminary consideration of the affairs of poor people before paying a personal visit to them. Being good-natured, however, and kind, she submitted gracefully and took note, while chairs were placed round the table for this amateur Board, that ladies with moderate means—obviously *very* moderate—appeared to enjoy their afternoon tea quite as much as rich people. You see, it never entered into Mrs Dotropy's mind—how could it?—that what she imagined to be "afternoon tea" was dinner, tea, and supper combined in one meal, beyond which there lay no prospective meal, except what one penny might purchase.

With a mysterious look, and a gleam of delight in her eyes, Ruth drew forth a well-filled purse, the contents of which, in shillings, sixpences, and coppers, she poured out upon the tea-table.

"There," she said triumphantly, "I have collected all that myself, and I've come to consult you how much of it should be given to each, and how we are to get them to take it."

"How kind of you, Ruth!" exclaimed Kate and Jessie Seaward, gazing on the coin with intense, almost miserly satisfaction.

"Nonsense! it's not kind a bit," responded Ruth; "if you knew the pleasure I've had in gathering it, and telling the sad story of

the poor people; and then, the thought of the comfort it will bring to them, though it *is* so little after all."

"It won't appear little in their eyes, Ruth," said Kate, "for you can't think how badly off some of them are. I assure you when Jessie and I think of it, as we often do, it makes us quite miserable."

Poor Misses Seaward! In their sympathy with the distress of others they had quite forgotten, for the moment, their own extreme poverty. They had even failed to observe that their own last penny had been inadvertently but hopelessly mingled with the coin which Ruth had so triumphantly showered upon the table.

"I've got a paper here with the name of each," continued the excited girl, "so that we may divide the money in the proportions you think best. That, however, will be easy, but I confess I have puzzled my brain in vain to hit on a way to get poor Bella Tilly to accept charity."

"That will be no difficulty," said Jessie, "because we won't offer her charity. She has been knitting socks for sale lately, so we can buy these."

"Oh! how stupid I am," cried Ruth, "the idea of buying something from her never once occurred to me. We'll buy all her socks—yes, and put our own price on them too; capital!"

"Who is Bella Tilly?" asked Mrs Dotropy.

"A young governess," replied Jessie, "whose health has given way. She is an orphan—has not, I believe, a relative in the whole world—and has been obliged to give up her last situation, not

only because of her health, but because she was badly treated."

"But how about poor Mr Garnet the musician?" resumed Ruth, "has *he* anything to sell?"

"I think not," answered Kate; "the sweet sounds in which he deals can now be no longer made since the paralytic stroke rendered his left arm powerless. His flute was the last thing he had to sell, and he did not part with it until hunger compelled him; and even then only after the doctors had told him that recovery was impossible. But I daresay we shall find some means of overcoming his scruples. He has relatives, but they are all either poor or heartless, and between the two he is starving."

Thus, one by one, the cases of those poor ones were considered until all Ruth's money was apportioned, and Mrs Dotropy had become so much interested, that she added a sovereign to the fund, for the express benefit of Bella Tilly. Thereafter, Ruth and her mother departed, leaving the list and the pile of money on the table, for the sisters had undertaken to distribute the fund. Before leaving, however, Ruth placed a letter in Kate's hand, saying that it had reference to an institution which would interest them.

"Now isn't that nice?" said Kate, sitting down with a beaming smile, when their visitors had gone, "so like Ruth. Ah! if she only knew how much we need a little of that money. Well, well, we—"

"The tea is quite cold," interrupted Jessie, "and the fire has gone out!"

"Jessie!" exclaimed Kate with a sudden look of solemnity

—"the *penny*!"

Jessie looked blankly at the table, and said— "Gone!"

"No, it is *there*," said Kate.

"Yes, but Ruth, you know, didn't count the money till she came here, and so did not detect the extra penny, and we forgot it. Every farthing there has been apportioned on that list and must be accounted for. I couldn't bear to take a penny out of the sum, and have to tell Ruth that we kept it off because it was ours. It would seem so mean, for she cannot know how much we need it. Besides, from which of the poor people's little stores could we deduct it?"

This last argument had more weight with Kate than the others, so, with a little sigh, she proceeded to open Ruth's letter, while Jessie poured out a cup of cold tea, gazing pathetically the while at the pile of money which still lay glittering on the table.

Ruth's letter contained two 5 pounds Bank of England notes, and ran as follows:—

> "***Dearest Jessie and Kate***,—I sent your screen to the institution for the sale of needlework, where it was greatly admired. One gentleman said it was quite a work of genius! a lady, who seemed to estimate genius more highly than the gentleman, bought it for 10 pounds, which I now enclose. In my opinion it was worth far more. However, it is gratifying that your first attempt in this way has been successful.
>
> "***Your loving Ruth***."

"Loving indeed!" exclaimed Kate in a tremulous voice.

Jessie appeared to have choked on the cold tea, for, after some ineffectual attempts at speech, she retired to the window and coughed.

The first act of the sisters, on recovering, was to double the amount on Ruth's list of poor people, and to work out another sum in short division on the back of an old letter.

"Why did you deceive me, dear?" said Mrs Dotropy, on reaching the street after her visit. "You said you were going with me to see poor people, in place of which you have taken me to hear a consultation *about* poor people with two ladies, and now you propose to return home."

"The two ladies are themselves *very* poor."

"No doubt they are, child, but you cannot for a moment class them with those whom we usually style 'the poor.'"

"No, mother, I cannot, for they are far worse off than these. Having been reared in affluence, with tenderer feelings and weaker muscles, as well as more delicate health, they are much less able to fight the battle of adversity than the lower poor, and I happen to know that the dear Misses Seaward are reduced just now to the very last extreme of poverty. But you have relieved them, mother."

"I, child! How?"

"The nursery screen that you bought yesterday by my advice was decorated by Jessie and Kate Seaward, so I thought it would be nice to let you see for yourself how sweet and 'deserving' are the poor people whom you have befriended!"

Chapter Three.
Introduces Consternation to A Delicate Household

The day following that on which Mrs Dotropy and Ruth had gone out to visit "the poor," Jessie and Kate Seaward received a visit from a man who caused them no little anxiety—we might almost say alarm. He was a sea-captain of the name of Bream.

As this gentleman was rather eccentric, it may interest the reader to follow him from the commencement of the day on which we introduce him.

But first let it be stated that Captain Bream was a fine-looking man, though large and rugged. His upper lip and chin were bare, for he was in the habit of mowing those regions every morning with a blunt razor. To see Captain Bream go through this operation of mowing when at sea in a gale of wind was a sight that might have charmed the humorous, and horrified the nervous. The captain's shoulders were broad, and his bones big; his waistcoat, also, was large, his height six feet two, his voice a profound bass, and his manner boisterous but hearty. He was apt to roar in conversation, but it was in a gale of wind that you should have heard him! In such circumstances, the celebrated bull of Bashan would have been constrained to retire from his presence with its tail between its legs. When we say that Captain Bream's

eyes were kind eyes, and that the smile of his large mouth was a winning smile, we have sketched a full-length portrait of him,—or, as painters might put it, an "extra-full-length."

Well, when Captain Bream, having mown his chin, presented himself in public, on the morning of the particular day of which we write, he appeared to be in a meditative mood, and sauntered slowly, with the professional gait of a sailor, through several narrow streets near London Bridge. His hands were thrust into his coat-pockets, and a half humorous, half perplexed expression rested on his face. Evidently something troubled him, and he gave vent to a little of that something in deep tones, being apt to think aloud as he went along in disjointed sentences.

"Very odd," he murmured, "but that girl is always after some queer—well, no matter. It's my business to—but it does puzzle me to guess why she should want me to live in such an out-o'-the-way—however, I suppose *she* knows, and that's enough for me."

"Shine yer boots, sir?" said a small voice cutting short these broken remarks.

"What?"

"Shine yer boots, sir, an' p'raps I can 'elp yer to clear up yer mind w'en I'm a doin' of it."

It was the voice of a small shoeblack, whose eyes looked wistful.

The captain glanced at his boots; they wanted "shining" sadly, for the nautical valet who should have attended to such matters had neglected his duty that morning.

"Where d'ee live, my lad?" asked the captain, who, being large-hearted and having spent most of his life at sea, felt unusual interest in all things terrestrial when he chanced to be on shore.

"I live nowheres in par-tickler," answered the boy.

"But where d'ee sleep of a night?"

"Vell, that depends. Mostly anywheres."

"Got any father?"

"No, sir, I hain't; nor yet no mother—never had no fathers nor mothers, as I knows on, an' wot's more, I don't want any. They're a chancey lot, is fathers an' mothers—most of 'em. Better without 'em altogether, to my mind. Tother foot, sir."

Looking down with a benignant smile at this independent specimen of humanity, the captain obeyed orders.

"D'ee make much at this work now, my lad?" asked the captain.

"Not wery much, sir. Just about enough to keep soul an' body together, an' not always that. It was on'y last veek as I was starvin' to that extent that my soul very nigh broke out an' made his escape, but the doctor he got 'old of it by the tail an' 'eld on till 'e indooced it to stay on a bit longer. There you are, sir; might shave in 'em!"

"How much to pay?"

"Vell, gen'lemen usually gives me a penny, but that's in or'nary cases. Ven I has to shine boots like a pair o' ships' boats I looks for suthin' hextra—though I don't always get it!"

"There you are, my lad," said the captain, giving the boy

something "hextra," which appeared to satisfy him. Thereafter he proceeded to the Bridge, and, embarking on one of the river steamers, was soon deposited at Pimlico. Thence, traversing St. George's Square, he soon found himself in the little street in which dwelt the Misses Seaward. He looked about him for some minutes and then entered a green-grocer's shop, crushing his hat against the top of the door-way.

Wishing the green-grocer good-morning he asked if lodgings were to be had in that neighbourhood.

"Well, yes, sir," he replied, "but I fear that you'd find most of 'em rather small for a man of your size."

"No fear o' that," replied the captain with a loud guffaw, which roused the grocer's cat a little, "I'm used to small cabins, an' smaller bunks, d'ee see, an' can stow myself away easy in any sort of hole. Why, I've managed to snooze in a bunk only five foot four, by clewin' up my legs—though it wasn't comfortable. But it's not the size I care about so much as the character o' the landlady. I like tidy respectable people, you see—havin' bin always used to a well-kept ship."

"Ah! I know one who'll just suit you. Up at the other end o' the street. Two rooms kept by a young widow who—"

"Hold hard there," interrupted the captain; "none o' your young widows for me. They're dangerous. Besides, big as I am, I don't want *two* rooms to sleep in. If you know of any old maid, now, with *one* room—that's what would suit me to a tee; an easy-going sort o' woman, who—"

"I know of two elderly *ladies*," interrupted the green-grocer, thoughtfully; "they're sisters, and have got a small room to let; but—but—they're delicate sort o' creeters, you know; have seen better days, an' are raither timid, an' might want a female lodger, or a man who—who—"

"Out with it," interrupted the captain, "a man who is soft-spoken and well-mannered—not a big noisy old sea-horse like me! Is that what you would say?"

"Just so," answered the green-grocer with an amiable nod.

"What's the name of the sisters?"

"Seaward."

"Seaward! eh!" exclaimed the captain in surprise. "That's odd, now, that a seafarin' man should be sent to seaward for his lodgin's, even when he gets on shore. Ha! ha! I've always had a leanin' to seaward. I'll try the sisters. They can only tell me to 'bout ship, you know, and be off on the other tack."

And again the captain gave such boisterous vent to his mirth that the green-grocer's cat got up and walked indignantly away, for, albeit well used to the assaults of small boys, it apparently could not stand the noise of this new and bass disturber of the peace.

Having ascertained that the Misses Seaward dwelt above the shop in which he stood, Captain Bream went straight up-stairs and rapped heavily at their door.

Now, although the sisters had been gradually reduced to the extreme of poverty, they had hitherto struggled successfully

against the necessity of performing what is known as the "dirty work" of a house. By stinting themselves in food, working hard at anything they succeeded in getting to do, and mending and re-mending their garments until it became miraculous, even to themselves, how these managed to hang together, they had, up to that period in their history, managed to pay to a slender little girl, out of their slender means, a still more slender salary for coming night and morning to clean their grate, light their fire, carry out their ashes, brush their boots, wash their door-steps, and otherwise perform work for which the sisters were peculiarly unfitted by age, training, and taste. This girl's name was Liffie Lee. She was good as far as she went but she did not go far. Her goodness was not the result of principle. She had no principle; did not know what the word meant, but she had a nature, and that nature was soft, unselfish, self-oblivious,—the last a blessing of incalculable price!

It was Liffie Lee who responded to Captain Bream's knock. She was at the time about to leave the house in undisturbed possession of its owners—or rather, occupiers.

"Does a Miss Seaward live here?"

It was a dark passage, and Liffie Lee almost quaked at the depth and metallic solemnity of the voice, as she glanced up at the spot where it appeared to come from.

"Yes, sir."

"May I see her?"

"I—I'll see, sir, if you'll wait outside, sir."

She gently yet quickly shut the door in the captain's face, and next moment appeared in the little parlour with a flushed face and widely open eyes.

The biggest man she had ever seen, or *heard*, she said, wanted to see Miss Seaward.

Why did he want to see her and what was his name?

She didn't know, and had omitted to ask his name, having been so frightened that she had left him at the door, which she had shut against him.

"An', please, Miss," continued Liffie, in a tone of suppressed eagerness, "if I was you I'd lock the parlour door in case he bu'sts in the outer one. You might open the winder an' screech for the pleece."

"Oh! Liffie, what a frightened thing you are," remonstrated Jessie, "go and show the man in at once."

"Oh! no, Miss," pleaded Liffie, "you'd better 'ave 'im took up at once. You've no notion what dreadful men that sort are. *I* know 'em well. We've got some of 'em where *we* live, and—and they're *awful*!"

Another knock at this point cut the conversation short, and Kate herself went to open the door.

"May I have a word with Miss Seaward?" asked the captain respectfully.

"Ye'es, certainly," answered Kate, with some hesitation, for, although reassured by the visitor's manner, his appearance and voice alarmed her too. She ushered him into the parlour,

however, which was suddenly reduced to a mere bandbox by contrast with him.

Being politely asked to take a chair, he bowed and took hold of one, but on regarding its very slender proportions—it was a cane chair—he smiled and shook his head. The smile did much for him.

"Pray take this one," said Jessie, pointing to the old arm-chair, which was strong enough even for him, "our visitors are not usually such—such—"

"Thumping walruses! out with it, Miss Seaward," said the captain, seating himself—gently, for he had suffered in this matter more than once during his life—"I'm used to being found fault with for my size."

"Pray do not imagine," said Jessie, hastening to exculpate herself, "that I could be so very impolite as—as to—"

"Yes, yes, I know that," interrupted the captain, blowing his nose—and the familiar operation was in itself something awful in such a small room—"and I *am* too big, there's no doubt about that however, it can't be helped. I must just grin and bear it. But I came here on business, so we'll have business first, and pleasure, if you like, afterwards."

"You may go now," said Kate at this point to Liffie Lee, who was still standing transfixed in open-mouthed amazement gazing at the visitor.

With native obedience and humility the child left the room, though anxious to see and hear more.

"You have a furnished room to let I believe, ladies," said the captain, coming at once to the point.

Jessie and Kate glanced at each other. The latter felt a strong tendency to laugh, and the former replied:—

"We have, indeed, one small room—a very small room, in fact a mere closet with a window in the roof,—which we are very anxious to let if possible to a lady—a—female. It is very poorly furnished, but it is comfortable, and we would make it very cheap. Is it about the hiring of such a room that you come?"

"Yes, madam, it is," said the captain, decisively.

"But is the lady for whom you act," said Jessie, "prepared for a particularly small room, and *very* poorly furnished?"

"Yes, she is," replied the captain with a loud guffaw that made the very windows vibrate; "in fact *I* am the lady who wants the room. It's true I'm not very lady-like, but I can say for myself that I'll give you less trouble than many a lady would, an' I don't mind the cost."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Miss Seaward with a mingled look of amusement and perplexity which she did not attempt to conceal, while Kate laughed outright; "why, sir, the room is not much, if at all, longer than yourself."

"No matter," returned the captain, "I'm nowise particular, an' I've been recommended to come to you; so here I am, ready to strike a bargain if you're agreeable."

"Pray, may I ask who recommended you?" said Jessie.

The seaman looked perplexed for a moment.

"Well, I didn't observe his name over the door," he said, "but the man in the shop below recommended me."

"Oh? the green-grocer!" exclaimed both ladies together, but they did not add what they thought, namely, that the green-grocer was a very impertinent fellow to play off upon them what looked very much like a practical joke.

"Perhaps the best way to settle the matter," said Kate, "will be to show the gentleman our room. He will then understand the impossibility."

"That's right," exclaimed the captain; rising—and in doing so he seemed about to damage the ceiling—"let's go below, by all means, and see the cabin."

"It is not down-stairs," remarked Jessie, leading the way; "we are at the top of the house here, and the room is on a level with this one."

"So much the better. I like a deck-cabin. In fact I've bin used to it aboard my last ship."

On being ushered into the room which he wished to hire, the sailor found himself in an apartment so very unsuited to his size and character that even he felt slightly troubled.

"It's not so much the size that bothers me," he said, stroking his chin gently, "as the fittings."

There was some ground for the seaman's perplexity, for the closet in which he stood, apart from the fact of its being only ten feet long by six broad, had been arranged by the tasteful sisters after the manner of a lady's boudoir, with a view to

captivate some poor sister of very limited means, or, perhaps, some humble-minded and possibly undersized young clerk from the country. The bed, besides being rather small, and covered with a snow-white counterpane, was canopied with white muslin curtains lined with pink calico. The wash-hand stand was low, fragile, and diminutive. The little deal table, which occupied an inconveniently large proportion of the space, was clothed in a garment similar to that of the bed. The one solitary chair was of that cheap construction which is meant to creak warningly when sat upon by light people, and to resolve itself into match-wood when the desecrator is heavy. Two pictures graced the walls—one the infant Samuel in a rosewood frame, the other an oil painting—of probably the first century, for its subject was quite undistinguishable—in a gold slip. The latter was a relic of better days—a spared relic, which the public had refused to buy at any price, though the auctioneer had described it as a rare specimen of one of the old—the very old—masters, with Rembrandtesque proclivities. No chest of drawers obtruded itself in that small chamber, but instead thereof the economical yet provident sisters, foreseeing the importance of a retreat for garments, had supplied a deal box, of which they stuffed the lid and then covered the whole with green baize, thus causing it to serve the double purpose of a wardrobe and a small sofa.

"However," said Captain Bream, after a brief but careful look round, "it'll do. With a little cuttin' and carvin' here an' there, we'll manage to squeeze in, for you must know, ladies, that we

sea-farin' men have a wonderful knack o' stuffin' a good deal into small space."

The sisters made no reply. Indeed they were speechless, and horrified at the bare idea of the entrance of so huge a lodger into their quiet home.

"Look ye here, now," he continued in a comfortable, self-satisfied tone, as he expanded his great arms along the length of the bed to measure it, "the bunk's about five foot eight inches long. Well, I'm about six foot two in my socks—six inches short; that's a difficulty no doubt, but it's get-over-able this way, we'll splice the green box to it."

He grasped the sofa-wardrobe as he spoke, and placed it to the foot of the bed, then embracing the entire mass of mattresses and bedding at the lower end, raised it up, thrust the green box under with his foot, and laid the bedding down on it—thus adding about eighteen inches to the length.

"There you are, d'ee see—quite long enough, an' a foot to spare."

"But it does not fit," urged Kate, who, becoming desperate, resolved to throw every possible obstruction in the way.

"That's true, madam," returned the captain with an approving nod. "I see you've got a mechanical eye—there's a difference of elevation 'tween the box and the bed of three inches or more, but bless you, that's nothin' to speak of. If you'd ever been in a gale o' wind at sea you'd know that we seadogs are used to considerable difference of elevation between our heads an' feet. My top-coat

stuffed in'll put that to rights. But you'll have to furl the flummery tops'ls—to lower 'em altogether would be safer."

He took hold of the muslin curtains with great tenderness as he spoke, fearing, apparently, to damage them.

"You see," he continued, apologetically, "I'm not used to this sort o' thing. Moreover, I've a tendency to nightmare. Don't alarm yourselves, ladies, I never do anything worse to disturb folk than give a shout or a yell or two, but occasionally I do let fly with a leg or an arm when the fit's on me, an' if I should get entangled with this flummery, you know I'd be apt to damage it. Yes, the safest way will be to douse the tops'ls altogether. As to the chair—well, I'll supply a noo one that'll stand rough weather. If you'll also clear away the petticoats from the table it'll do well enough. In regard to the lookin'-glass, I know pretty well what I'm like, an' don't have any desire to study my portrait. As for shavin', I've got a bull's-eye sort of glass in the lid o' my soap-box that serves all my purpose, and I shave wi' cold water, so I won't be botherin' you in the mornin's for hot. I've got a paintin' of my last ship—the Daisy—done in water-colours—it's a pretty big 'un, but by hangin' Samuel on the other bulk-head, an' stickin' that black thing over the door, we can make room for it."

As Captain Bream ran on in this fashion, smoothing down all difficulties, and making everything comfortable, the poor sisters grew more and more desperate, and Kate felt a tendency to recklessness coming on. Suddenly a happy thought occurred to her.

"But sir," she interposed with much firmness of tone and manner, "there is one great difficulty in the way of our letting the room to you which I fear cannot be overcome."

The captain looked at her inquiringly, and Jessie regarded her with admiration and wonder, for she could not conceive what this insurmountable difficulty could be.

"My sister and I," continued Kate, "have both an *unconquerable* dislike to tobacco—"

"Oh! *that's* no objection," cried the captain with a light laugh —which in him, however, was an ear-splitting guffaw—"for I don't smoke!"

"Don't smoke?" repeated both sisters in tones of incredulity, for in their imagination a seaman who did not smoke seemed as great an impossibility as a street boy who did not whistle.

"An' what's more," continued the captain, "I don't drink. I'm a tee-total abstainer. I leave smokin' to steam-funnels, an' drinkin' to the fish."

"But," persisted Kate, on whom another happy thought had descended, "my sister and I keep very early hours, and a latch-key we could never—"

"Pooh! that's no difficulty," again interrupted this unconquerable man of the sea; "I hate late hours myself, when I'm ashore, havin' more than enough of 'em when afloat. I'll go to bed regularly at nine o'clock, an' won't want a latch-key."

The idea of such a man going to bed at all was awesome enough, but the notion of his doing so in that small room, and

in that delicately arranged little bed under that roof-tree, was so perplexing, that the sisters anxiously rummaged their minds for a new objection, but could find none until their visitor asked the rent of the room. Then Kate was assailed by another happy thought, and promptly named double the amount which she and Jessie had previously fixed as its value—which amount she felt sure would prove prohibitory.

Her dismay, then, may be imagined when the captain exclaimed with a sigh—perhaps it were better to say a breeze—of relief:—

"Well, then, that's all comfortably settled. I consider the rent quite moderate. I'll send up my chest to-morrow mornin', an' will turn up myself in the evenin'. I'll bid ye good-day now, ladies, an' beg your pardon for keepin' you so long about this little matter."

He held out his hand. One after another the crushed sisters put their delicate little hands into the seaman's enormous paw, and meekly bade him good-bye, after which the nautical giant strode noisily out of the house, shut the door with an inadvertent bang, stumbled heavily down the dark stair and passage, and finally vanished from the scene.

Then Jessie and Kate Seaward returned to their little parlour, sat down at opposite sides of the miniature grate, and gazed at each other for some minutes in solemn silence—both strongly impressed with the feeling that they had passed through a tremendous storm, and got suddenly into a profoundly dead calm.

Chapter Four.
Billy Bright the Fisher-Boy visits London—has a Fight—enlarges his Mind, and undertakes Business

We must now return to the *Evening Star* fishing-smack, but only for a few minutes at present. Later on we shall have occasion to visit her under stirring circumstances. We saw her last heading eastward to her fishing-ground in the North Sea. We present her now, after a two months' trip, sailing to the west, homeward bound.

Eight weeks at sea; nine days on shore, is the unvarying routine of the North Sea smacksman's life, summer and winter, all the year round. Two months of toil and exposure of the severest kind, fair-weather or foul, and little more than one week of repose in the bosom of his family—varied by visits more or less frequent to the tap-room of the public-house. It is a rugged life to body and soul. Severest toil and little rest for the one; strong temptation and little refreshment to the other.

"Strong temptation!" you exclaim, "what! out on the heaving billows and among the howling gales of winter on the North Sea?"

Ay, stronger temptation than you might suppose, as, in the

sequel, you shall see.

But we are homeward bound just now. One of the gales above referred to is blowing itself out and the *Evening Star* is threading her way among the shoals to her brief repose in Yarmouth.

The crew are standing about the deck looking eagerly towards the land, and little Billy is steering. (See Frontispiece.)

Yes, that ridiculous atom of humanity, with a rope, or "steering lanyard," round the tiller to prevent its knocking him down or sweeping him overboard, stands there guiding the plunging smack on her course through the dangerous shoals. Of course Billy's father has an eye on him, but he does not require to say more than an occasional word at long intervals.

Need we observe that our little hero is no longer subject to the demon which felled him at starting, and made his rosy face so pale? One glance at the healthy brown cheeks will settle that question. Another glance at his costume will suffice to explain, without words, much of Billy's life during the past eight weeks. The sou'-wester is crushed and soiled, the coat is limp, rent, mended, button-bereaved more or less, and bespattered, and the boots wear the aspect of having seen service. The little hands too, which even while ashore were not particularly white, now bear traces of having had much to do with tar, and grease, and fishy substances, besides being red with cold, swelled with sundry bruises, and seamed with several scars—for Billy is reckless by nature, and it takes time and much experience of suffering to teach a man how to take care of his hands in the fisheries of the

North Sea!

An hour or two more sufficed to carry our smack into port, and then the various members of the crew hurried home.

Billy swaggered beside his father and tried to look manly until he reached his own door, where all thought of personal appearance suddenly vanished, and he leaped with an unmanly squeal of delight into his mother's arms. You may be sure that those arms did not spare him!

"You'll not go down to-night, David?" said Mrs Bright, when, having half choked her son, she turned to her husband.

"No, lass,—I won't," said the skipper in a tone of decision.

Mrs Bright was much gratified by the promise, for well did she know, from bitter experience, that if her David went down to meet his comrades at the public-house on his arrival, his brief holidays would probably be spent in a state of semi-intoxication. Indeed, even with this promise she knew that much of his time and a good deal of his hardly earned money would be devoted to the publican.

"We'll not have much of Billy's company this week, I fear," said Mrs Bright, with a glance of pride at her son, who returned it with a look of surprise.

"Why so, Nell?" asked her husband.

"Because he has got to go to London."

"To Lun'on!" exclaimed the father.

"Lun'on!" echoed the son.

"Yes; it seems that Miss Ruth—that dear young lady, Miss

Ruth Dotropy—you remember her, Billy?"

"Remember her! I should think I does," said the boy, emphatically, "if I was to live as long as Meethusilim I'd never forget Miss Dotropy."

"Well," continued Mrs Bright, "she wrote and asked Joe Davidson's wife to send her a fisher-boy to London for a day or two, and she'd pay his railway fare up an' back, and all his expenses. What ever Miss Ruth wants to do with him I don't know, nor any one else. Mrs Davidson couldn't find a boy that was fit to send, so she said she'd wait till you came back, Billy, and send *you* up."

"Well, wonders ain't a-goin' to cease yet a while," exclaimed Billy, with a look of gratified pride. "Hows'ever, I'm game for anythink—from pitch an' toss up'ards. When am I to start, mother?"

"To-morrow, by the first train."

"All right—an' what sort o' rig? I couldn't go in them 'ere slops, you know. It wouldn't give 'em a k'rect idear o' Yarmouth boys, would it?"

"Of course not sonny, an I've got ready your old Sunday coat, it ain't too small for you yet—an' some other things."

Accordingly, rigged out, as he expressed it, in a well-mended and brushed pilot-cloth coat; a round blue-cloth cap; a pair of trousers to match, and a pair of new shoes, Billy found himself speeding towards the great city with what he styled "a stiff breakfast under hatches, four or five shillings in the locker, an' a

bu'stin' heart beneath his veskit."

In a few hours he found himself in the bewildering streets, inquiring his way to the great square in the West End where Mrs Dotropy dwelt.

The first person of whom he made inquiry was a street boy, and while he was speaking the city Arab regarded the provincial boy's innocent face—for it was a peculiarly innocent face when in repose—with a look of mingled curiosity and cunning.

"Now look 'ee here, young 'un," said the Arab, "I don't know nothink about the Vest End squares, an' what's more I don't want to, but I do know a lot about the East End streets, an' if you'll come with me, I'll—"

"Thank 'ee, no," interrupted Billy, with unlooked-for decision, "I've got business to look arter at the *West* End."

"Yell, cooriously enough," returned the Arab, "I've got business at the *East* End. By the vay, you don't 'appen to 'ave any browns—any coppers—about you—eh?"

"Of course I has. You don't suppose a man goes cruisin' about Lun'on without any shot in the locker, do you?"

"To be sure not," responded the street boy; "I might 'ave know'd that a man like you wouldn't, anyhow. Now, it so 'appens that I'm wery much in want o' change. You couldn't give me browns for a sixpence, could you?"

The Arab said this so earnestly—at the same time producing a sixpence, or something that looked like one, from his pockets—that the provincial boy's rising suspicions were quite disarmed.

"Let me see," he said, plunging his hand into his trousers pocket—"one, two, three—no, I've only got fourpence, but—"

He was cut short by the Arab making a sudden grasp at the coins, which sent most of them spinning on the pavement.

Like lightning little Billy sprang forward and planted his right fist on the point of the Arab's nose with such vigour that the blow caused him to stagger backwards. Before he could recover Billy followed him up with a left-hander on the forehead and a right-hander on the chest, which last sent him over on his back. So sudden was the onset that the passers-by scarcely understood what was occurring before it was all over. A grave policeman stepped forward at the moment. The Arab rose, glided into a whirl of wheels and horses' legs, and disappeared, while Billy stood still with doubled fists glaring defiance.

"Now then, my boy, what's all this about?" said the man in blue, placing a large hand gently on the small shoulder.

"He's bin and knocked my coppers about," said our little hero indignantly, as he looked up, but the stern yet kindly smile on the policeman's face restored him, and he condescended on a fuller explanation as he proceeded to pick up his pence.

Having been cautioned about the danger of entering into conversation with strangers in London—especially with street boys—Billy was directed to a Pimlico omnibus, and deposited not far from his destination. Inquiring his way thereafter of several policemen—who were, as he afterwards related to admiring friends, as thick in London as bloaters in Yarmouth—

he found himself in front of the Dotropy residence.

"Yes, my little man," said the footman who opened the door of the West End mansion, "Miss Ruth is at 'ome, and 'as been expecting you. Come this way."

That footman lost ground in Billy's estimation because of using the word *little*. If he had said "my boy," it would have been all right; "my man" would have been gratifying; but "my little man" was repulsive. A smart servant girl who chanced to see him on his way to the library also caused him much pain by whispering to her fellow something about a sweet innocent-faced darling, and he put on a savage frown, as he was ushered into the room, by way of counteracting the sweet innocence. A glass opposite suddenly revealed to its owner the smooth rosy-brown visage, screwed up in a compound expression. That expression changed so swiftly to sheer surprise that a burst of involuntary laughter was the result. A deep flush, and silence, followed, as the urchin looked with some confusion round the room to see if he had been observed or overheard, and a sense of relief came as he found that he was alone. No one had seen or heard him except some of the Dotropy ancestors who had "come over" with the Conqueror, and who gazed sternly from the walls. For, you see, being a family of note, the dining-room could not hold all the ancestors, so that some of them had to be accommodated in the library.

That glance round had a powerful effect on the mind of the fisher-boy, so powerful indeed that all thought of self vanished,

for he found himself for the first time in a room the like of which he had never seen, or heard, or dreamed of.

He knew, of course, that there were libraries in Yarmouth, and was aware that they had something to do with books, but he had never seen a collection on a large scale, and, up to that time, had no particular curiosity about books.

Indeed, if truth must be told, Billy hated books, because the only point in regard to which he and his mother had ever differed was a book! A tattered, ragged, much-soiled book it was, with big letters at the beginning, simple arrangements of letters in the middle, and maddening compounds of them towards the end. Earnestly, patiently, lovingly, yet perseveringly, had Mrs Bright tried to drill the contents of that book into Billy's unwilling brain, but with little success, for, albeit a willing and obliging child, there was a limit to his powers of comprehension, and a tendency in his young mind to hold in contempt what he did not understand.

One day a somewhat pedantic visitor told Billy that he would never be a great man if he did not try to understand the book in question—to thoroughly digest it.

"You hear what the gentleman says, Billy, you dirty little gurnet," said David Bright on that occasion, "you've got to di-gest it, my lad, to di-gest it."

"Yes, father," said Billy, with a finger in his mouth and his eyes on the visitor.

The boy's mind was inquisitive and ingenious. He pestered his

father, after the visitor had gone, for an explanation as to what he meant by digesting the book.

"Why, sonny," returned David, knitting his brows very hard, for the question was somewhat of a puzzler, "he means that you've got to stow away in your brain the knowledge that's in the book, an' work away at it—di-gest it, d'ee see—same as you stow grub into yer stummick an' digest that."

Billy pondered this a long time till a happy thought occurred to him.

"*I'll* digest it," said he, slapping his thigh one day when he was left alone in the house. "We'll all di-gest it together!"

He jumped up, took the lid off a pot of pea-soup that was boiling on the fire, and dropped the hated book into it.

"What's this i' the soup, Nell?" said David that day at dinner, as he fished a mass of curious substance out of the pot. "Many a queer thing have I fished up i' the trawl from the bottom o' the North Sea, but ne'er afore did I make such a haul as this in a pot o' pea-soup. What is't?"

"Why, David," replied the wife, examining the substance with a puzzled expression, "I do believe it's the primer!"

They both turned their eyes inquiringly on the boy, who sat gravely watching them.

"All right, father," he said, "I put 'im in. We're a-goin' to di-gest it, you know."

"Dirty boy!" exclaimed his mother, flinging the remains of the boiled book under the grate. "You've ruined the soup."

"Never a bit, Nell," said the skipper, who was in no wise particular as to his food, "clean paper an' print can't do no damage to the soup. An' after all, I don't see why a man shouldn't take in knowledge as well through the stummick as through the brain. It don't matter a roker's tail whether you ship cargo through the main-hatch or through the fore-hatch, so long as it gits inside somehow. Come, let's have a bowl of it. I never was good at letters myself, an' I'll be bound to say that Billy and I will di-gest the book better this way than the right way."

Thus was the finishing touch put to Billy Bright's education at that time, and we have described the incident in order that the reader may fully understand the condition of the boy's mind as he stood gazing round the library of the West End mansion.

"Books!" exclaimed Billy, afterwards, when questioned by a Yarmouth friend, "I should just think there *was* books. Oh! it's o' no manner o' use tryin' to tell 'ee about it. There was books from the floor to the ceilin' all round the room—books in red covers, an' blue covers, an' green, an' yellow, an' pink, an' white—all the colours in the rainbow, and all of 'em more or less kivered wi' gold—w'y—I don't know what their insides was worth, but sartin sure am I that they couldn't come up to their outsides. Mints of money must 'ave bin spent in kiverin' of 'em. An' there was ladders to git at 'em—a short un to git at the books below, an' a long un to go aloft for 'em in the top rows. What people finds to write about beats me to understand; but who ever buys and reads it all beats me wuss."

While new and puzzling thoughts were thus chasing each other through the fisher-boy's brain Ruth Dotropy entered.

"What! Billy Bright," she exclaimed in a tone of great satisfaction, hurrying forward and holding out her hand. "I'm so glad they have sent *you*. I would have asked them to send you, when I wrote, but thought you were at sea."

"Yes, Miss, but I've got back again," said Billy, grasping the offered hand timidly, fearing to soil it.

For the same reason he sat down carefully on the edge of a chair, when Ruth said heartily, "Come, sit down and let's have a talk together," for, you see, he had become so accustomed to fishy clothes and tarred hands that he had a tendency to forget that he was now "clean" and "in a split-new rig."

Ruth's manner and reception put the poor boy at once at his ease. For some time she plied him with questions about the fisher-folk of Yarmouth and Gorleston, in whom she had taken great interest during a summer spent at the former town, —at which time she had made the acquaintance of little Billy. Then she began to talk of the sea and the fishery, and the smacks with their crews. Of course the boy was in his element on these subjects, and not only answered his fair questioner fully, but volunteered a number of anecdotes, and a vast amount of interesting information about fishing, which quite charmed Ruth, inducing her to encourage him to go on.

"Oh! yes, Miss," he said, "it's quite true what you've bin told. There's hundreds and hundreds of smacks a-fishin' out there on

the North Sea all the year round, summer an' winter. In course I can't say whether there's a popilation, as you calls it, of over twelve thousand, always afloat, never havin' counted 'em myself, but I know there must be a-many thousand men an' boys there."

"Billy was right. There is really a population of over 12,000 men and boys afloat all the year round on the North Sea, engaged in the arduous work of daily supplying the London and other markets with fresh fish."

"And what port do they run for when a storm comes on?" asked Ruth.

"What port, Miss? why, they don't run for no port at all, cos why? there's no port near enough to run for."

"Do you mean to say, that they remain at sea during all the storms—even the worst?"

"That's just what we does, Miss. Blow high, blow low, it's all the same; we must weather it the best way we can. An' you should see how it blows in winter! That's the time we catches it wust. It's so cold too! I've not bin out in winter yet myself, but father says it's cold enough to freeze the nose off your face, an' it blows 'ard enough a'most to blow you inside out. You wouldn't like to face that sort o' thing—would you, Miss?"

With a light laugh Ruth admitted that she disliked the idea of such North Sea experiences.

"Oh! you've no idea, Miss, how it do blow sometimes," continued Billy, who was a naturally communicative boy, and felt that he had got hold of a sympathetic ear. "Have you ever heard

of the gale that blew so 'ard that they had to station two men an' a boy to hold on to the captain's hair for fear it should be blowed right off his 'ead?"

"Yes," answered Ruth, with a silvery laugh. "I've heard of that gale."

"Have you, Miss?" said Billy with a slightly surprised look. "That's queer, now. I thought nobody know'd o' that gale 'cept us o' the North Sea, an', p'raps, some o' the people o' Yarmouth an' Gorleston."

"I rather think that I must have read of it somewhere," said Ruth. Billy glanced reproachfully at the surrounding books, under the impression that it must have been one of these which had taken the wind out of his sails.

"Well, Miss," he continued, "I don't mean for to say I ever was in a gale that obliged us to be careful of the skipper's hair, but I do say that father's seed somethink like it, for many a time our smack has bin blowed over on her beam-ends—that means laid a'most flat, Miss, with 'er sails on the sea. One night father's smack was sailin' along close-hauled when a heavy sea struck 'er abaft the channels, and filled the bag o' the mains'l. She was just risin' to clear herself when another sea follared, filled the mains'l again, an' sent 'er on 'er beam-ends. The sea was makin' a clean breach over 'er from stem to stern, an' cleared the deck o' the boat an' gear an' everythink. Down went all hands below an' shut the companion, to prevent 'er being swamped. Meanwhile the weight o' water bu'st the mains'l, so that the vessel partly righted,

an' let the hands come on deck agin. Then, after the gale had eased a bit, two or three o' their comrades bore down on 'em and towed 'em round, so as the wind got under 'er an' lifted 'er a bit, but the ballast had bin shot from the bilge into the side, so they couldn't right her altogether, but had to tow 'er into port that way —over two hundred miles—the snow an' hail blowin', too, like one o'clock!"

"Really, they must have had a terrible time of it," returned Ruth, "though I don't know exactly how dreadful 'one o'clock' may be. But tell me, Billy, do the fishermen like the worsted mitts and helmets and comforters that were sent to them from this house last year?"

"Oh! don't they, just! I've heard them blessin' the ladies as sent 'em, many a time. You see, Miss, the oil-skins chafe our wrists most awful when we're workin' of the gear—"

"What is the gear, Billy?"

"The nets, Miss, an' all the tackle as belongs to 'em. An' then the salt water makes the sores wuss—it used to be quite awful, but the cuffs keeps us all right. An' the books an' tracts, too, Miss —the hands are wery fond o' them, an'—"

"We will talk about the books and tracts another time," said Ruth, interrupting, "but just now we must proceed to business. Of course you understand that I must have some object in view in sending for a fisher-boy from Yarmouth."

"Well, Miss, it did occur to me that I wasn't axed to come here for nuffin'."

"Just so, my boy. Now I want your help, so I will explain. We are to have what is called a drawing-room meeting here in a few days, in behalf of the Mission to Deep-Sea Fishermen, and one of your fisher captains is to be present to give an account of the work carried on among the men of the fleet by the mission vessels. So I want you to be there as one of the boys—"

"Not to speak to 'em, Miss, I hope?" said Billy, with a look of affected modesty.

"No, not to speak," replied Ruth, laughing, "only to represent the boys of the fleet. But that's not the main thing I want you for. It is this, and remember, Billy, that I am now taking you into my confidence, so you must not tell what I shall speak to you about to any living soul."

"Not even to mother?" asked the boy.

"No, not even—well, you *may* tell it to your mother, for boys ought to have no secrets from their mothers; besides, *your* mother is a discreet woman, and lives a long way off from London. You must know, then, Billy, that I have two very dear friends—two ladies—who are in deep poverty, and I want to give them money —"

"Well, why don't you give it 'em, Miss?" said Billy, seeing that Ruth hesitated. "You must have lots of it to give away," he added, looking contemplatively round.

"Yes, thank God, who gave it to me, I have, as you say, lots of it, but I cannot give it to the dear ladies I speak of because —because—"

"They're too proud to take it, p'raps," suggested Billy.

"No; they are not proud—very far from it; but they are sensitive."

"What's that, Miss?"

Ruth was puzzled for a reply.

"It—it means," she said, "that they have delicate feelings, which cannot bear the idea of accepting money without working for it, when there are so many millions of poor people without money who *cannot* work for it. They once said to me, indeed, that if they were to accept money in charity they would feel as if they were robbing the really poor."

"Why don't they work, then?" asked Billy in some surprise. "Why don't they go to sea as stooardesses or somethink o' that sort?"

"Because they have never been trained to such work, or, indeed, to any particular work," returned Ruth; "moreover, they are in rather delicate health, and are not young. Their father was rich, and meant to leave them plenty to live on, but he failed, and left them in broken health without a penny. Wasn't it sad?"

"Indeed it was, Miss," replied the boy, whose ready sympathy was easily enlisted.

"Well, now, Billy, I want you to go to see these ladies. Tell them that you are a fisher-boy belonging to the North sea trawling fleet, and that you have called from a house which wants a job undertaken. You will then explain about the fishery, and how the wrists of the men are chafed, and break out into

painful sores, and how worsted mitts serve the purpose at once of prevention and cure. Say that the house by which you have been sent has many hands at work—and so I have, Billy, for many ladies send the cuffs and things made by them for the fleet to *me* to be forwarded, only they work gratuitously, and I want the work done by my two friends to be paid for, you understand? Tell them that still more hands are wanted, and ask them if they are open to an engagement. You must be very matter-of-fact, grave, and businesslike, you know. Ask them how many pairs they think they will be able to make in a week, and say that the price to be paid will be fixed on receipt of the first sample. But, remember, on no account are you to mention the name of the house that sent you; you will also leave with them this bag of worsted. Now, do you fully understand?"

Billy replied by a decided wink, coupled with an intelligent nod.

After a good deal of further advice and explanation, Ruth gave Billy the name and address of her friends, and sent him forth on his mission.

Chapter Five.
How Billy Conducts the Business —How Captain Bream Overcomes the Sisters, and how Jessie Seaward Sees Mystery in Everything

"I wonder," said Billy to himself on reaching the street as he looked down at the legs of his trousers, "I wonder if they're any shorter. Yes, they don't seem to be quite so far down on the shoes as when I left Yarmouth. I *must* have grow'd an inch or two since I came up to Lun'on!"

Under this gratifying impression the fisher-boy drew himself up to his full height, his little chest swelling with new sensations, and his whole body rolling along with a nautical swagger that drew on him the admiration of some, the contempt of others, and caused several street boys to ask "if his mother knowed 'e was hout," and other insolent questions.

But Billy cared for none of these things. The provincial boy was quite equal to the occasion, though his return "chaff" smacked much of salt water.

Arrived at the poverty-stricken street in which the Misses Seaward dwelt, Billy mounted the narrow staircase and knocked at the door. It was opened by Liffie Lee, who had remained on

that day to accomplish some extra work.

"Is your missis at home, my dear?"

"There ain't no missis here, an' I ain't *your* dear," was the prompt reply.

Billy was taken aback. He had not anticipated so ready and caustic a response, in one so small and child-like.

"Come now—no offence meant," he said, "but you're not a-goin' to deny that the Miss Seawards does live here."

"I ain't a-goin' to deny nothink," replied Liffie, a little softened by the boy's apologetic tone, "only when I'm expected to give a civil answer, I expects a civil question."

"That's all fair an' aboveboard. Now, will you tell the Miss Seawards I wants to see 'em, on a matter of business—of importance."

Another minute and Billy stood in the presence of the ladies he wished to see. Prepared beforehand to like them, his affections were at once fixed for ever by the first glimpse of their kindly faces.

With a matter-of-fact gravity, that greatly amused the sisters—though they carefully concealed their feelings—little Billy stated his business, and, in so doing, threw his auditors into a flutter of hope and gratitude, surprise and perplexity.

"But what is the name of the house that sends you?" asked Miss Jessie.

"That I am not allowed for to tell," said the boy-of-business, firmly.

"A mercantile house in the city, I suppose," said Kate.

"What sort o' house it may be is more than a sea-farin' man like me knows, an' of course it's in the city. You wouldn't expect a business-house to be in the country, would you? all I know is that they want mitts made—hundreds of 'em—no end o' mitts—an' they hain't got hands enough to make 'em, so they sent me to ask if you'll undertake to help in the work, or if they're to git some one else to do it. Now, will you, or will you not? that's the pint."

"Of course we shall be only too happy," answered Jessie, "though the application is strange. How did you come to know that we were in want of—that is, who sent you to us?"

"The house sent me, as I said afore, Miss."

"Yes, but how did the house come to know of our existence, and how is it that a house of any sort should send a sailor-boy as its messenger?"

"How the house came to know of you is more than I can say. They don't tell me all the outs-an'-ins of their affairs, you know. As to a house sendin' a sailor-boy as its messenger—did you ever hear of the great house of Messrs Hewett and Company, what supplies Billin'sgate with fish?"

"I'm not sure—well, yes, I think I have heard of that house," said Kate, "though we are not in the way of hearing much about the commercial houses of London."

"Well," continued Billy, "that house sends hundreds of fisher-boys as messengers. It sends 'em to the deep-sea with a message

to the fish, an the message is—'come out o' the water you skulkin' critters, an' be sent up to Billin'sgate to be sold an' eaten!' The fish don't come willin'ly, I'm bound for to say that, but we make 'em come all the same, willin' or not, for we've wonderful powers o' persuasion. So you see, houses *do* send fisher-boys as messengers sometimes; now, what am I to say to the partikler house as sends *me*? will you go in for mitts? you may take comforters if you prefer it, or helmets."

"What do you mean by helmets, my boy?"

"Worsted ones, of course. Things made to kiver up a man's head and neck and come down to his shoulders, with a hole in front just big enough to let his eyes, nose, and cheek-bones come through. With a sou'-wester on top, and a comforter round the neck, they're not so bad in a stiff nor'-wester in Janoowairy. Now's your chance, ladies, now, or niver!"

There was something so ludicrous in the manly tone and decided manner of the smooth-faced little creature before them, that the sisters burst into a hearty fit of laughter.

"Forgive us, dear boy, but the idea of our being asked in this sudden way to make innumerable mitts and comforters and worsted helmets seems so odd that we can't help laughing. What is your name? That is not a secret, I hope?"

"By no means. My name is Billy Bright. If you're very partikler, you may call me Willum."

"I prefer Billy," said Kate. "Now, Billy, it is near our dinner hour. Will you stay and dine with us? If you do, you'll meet such

a nice man—such a big man too—and somewhat in your own line of life; a sea-captain. We expect him every—"

"No, thank 'ee, Miss," interrupted the boy, rising abruptly. "I sees more than enough o' big sea-captings when I'm afloat. Besides, I've got more business on hand, so I'll bid 'ee good-day."

Pulling his forelock he left the room.

"The ladies has undertook some work for me, my dear," said Billy to Liffie Lee, as he stood at the door buttoning up his little coat, "so p'raps I may see you again."

"It won't break my 'art if you don't," replied Liffie; "no, nor yet yours."

"Speak for yourself, young 'ooman. You don't know nothing about *my* 'art."

As he spoke, a heavy foot was heard at the bottom of the stair.

"That's our lodger," said Liffie; "no foot but his can bang the stair or make it creak like that."

"Well, I'm off," cried Billy, descending two steps at a time.

Half-way down he encountered what seemed to him a giant with a chest on his shoulder. It was the darkest part of the stair where they met.

"Look out ahead! Hard a starboard!" growled Captain Bream, who seemed to be heavily weighted.

"Ay, ay, sir!" cried Billy, as he brushed past, bounded into the street, and swaggered away.

"What boy was that, Liffie?" asked the captain, letting down the chest he carried with a shock that caused the frail tenement

to quiver from cellar to roof-tree.

"I don't know, sir."

"He must be a sailor-boy, from his answer," rejoined the captain. "Open the door o' my cabin, lass, and I'll carry it right in. It's somewhat heavy."

He lifted the chest, which was within an eighth of an inch of being too large to pass through the little door-way, and put it in a corner, after which he entered the parlour, and sat down in a solid wooden chair which he had supplied to the establishment for his own special use.

"You see," he had said, on the day when he introduced it, "I've come to grief so often in the matter of chairs that I've become chary as to how I use 'em. If all the chairs that I've had go crash under me was put together they'd furnish a good-sized house. Look before you leap is a well-known proverb, but look before you sit down has become a more familiar experience to me through life. It's an awkward thing bein' so heavy, and I hope you'll never know what it is, ladies."

Judging from their appearance just then there did not seem much prospect of that!

"Now," continued the captain, rubbing his hands and looking benignantly at Jessie, "I have settled the matter at last; fairly said good-bye to old Ocean, an' fixed to cast anchor for good on the land."

"Have you indeed, captain?" said Jessie, "I should fancy that you must feel rather sorry to bid farewell to so old a friend."

"That's true, Miss Seaward. An old and good friend the sea has been to me, thank God. But I'm gettin' too old myself to be much of a friend to *it*, so I've fixed to say good-bye. And the question is, Am I to stop on here, or am I to look out for another lodgin'? You see I've been a good many weeks with you now, an' you've had a fair taste of me, so to speak. I know I'm a rough sort o' fish for the like o' you to have to do with, and, like some o' the hermit crabs, rather too big for my shell, so if you find me awkward or uncomfortable don't hesitate to say so. I won't be surprised, though I confess I should be sorry to leave you."

"Well, Captain Bream," said Kate, who was generally the speaker when delicate, difficult or unpleasant subjects had to be dealt with, "since you have been so candid with us we will be equally candid with you. When you first came to us, I confess that we were much alarmed; you seemed—so very big," (the captain tried to shrink a little—without success—and smiled in a deprecating manner), "and our rooms and furniture seemed so very small and delicate, so to speak; and then your voice was so fearfully deep and gruff," (the captain cleared his throat softly—in B natural of the bass clef—and smiled again), "that we were almost frightened to receive you; but, now that we have had experience of you, we are quite willing that you should continue with us—on one condition, however."

"And that is?" asked the captain anxiously.

"That you pay us a lower rent."

"A—a higher rent you mean, I suppose?"

"No; I mean a lower."

Captain Bream's benign visage became grave and elongated.

"You see, captain," continued Kate, flushing a little, "when you first came, we tried—excuse me—to get rid of you, to shake you off, and we almost doubled the rent of our little room, hoping that—"

"Quite right, quite right," interrupted the captain, "and according to strict justice, for ain't I almost double the size of or'nary men, an' don't I give more than double the trouble?"

"Not so," returned Kate, firmly, "you don't give half the trouble that other men do."

"Excuse me, Miss Kate," said the captain with a twinkle in his grey eye, "you told me I was your first lodger, so how can you know how much trouble other men would give?"

"No matter," persisted Kate, a little confused, "you don't give *half* the trouble that other lodgers would have given if we had had them."

"Ah! h'm—well," returned the captain softly, in the profoundest possible bass, "looking at the matter in that light, perhaps you are not far wrong. But, go on."

"Well, I have only to add," continued Kate, "that you have been so kind to us, and so considerate, and have given us so little —so *very* little trouble, that it will give us both great pleasure to have you continue to lodge with us if you agree to the reduction of the rent."

"Very well," said Captain Bream, pulling out an immense gold

chronometer—the gift, in days gone by, of a band of highly grateful and appreciative passengers. "I've got business in the city an hour hence. We shall have dinner first. Two hours afterwards I will return with a cab and take away my boxes. That will give you plenty of time to make out your little bill and—"

"What *do* you mean, captain?" interrupted Kate, in much surprise.

"I mean, dear ladies, that you and I entered into an agreement to rent your little cabin for so much. Now it has been my rule in life to stick to agreements, and I mean to stick to this one or throw up my situation. Besides, I'm not goin' to submit to have the half of my rent cut off. I can't stand it. Like old Shylock, I mean to stick to the letter of the bond. Now, *is* it 'to be, or not to be?' as Hamlet said to the ass."

"I was not aware that Hamlet said that to an ass," remarked Jessie, with a little laugh.

"Oh yes! he did," returned the captain quite confidently; "he said it to himself, you know, an' that was the same thing. But what about the agreement?"

"Well, since you are so determined, I suppose we must give in," said Kate.

"We can't resist you, captain," said Jessie, "but there is one thing that we must positively insist on, namely, that you come and sit in this room of an evening. I suppose you read or write a great deal, for we see your light burning very late sometimes, and as you have no fire you must often feel very cold."

"Cold!" shouted the captain, with a laugh that caused the very window-frames to vibrate. "My dear ladies, I'm never cold. Got so used to it, I suppose, that it has no power over me. Why, when a man o' my size gets heated right through, it takes three or four hours to cool him even a little. Besides, if it do come a very sharp frost, I've got a bear-skin coat that our ship-carpenter made for me one voyage in the arctic regions. It is hot enough inside almost to cook you. Did I ever show it you? I'll fetch it."

Captain Bream rose with such energy that he unintentionally spurned his chair—his own solid peculiar chair—and caused it to pirouette on one leg before tumbling backward with a crash. Next minute he returned enveloped from head to foot in what might be termed a white-bear ulster, with an enormous hood at the back of his neck.

Accustomed as the sisters were to their lodger's bulk, they were not prepared for the marvellous increase caused by the monstrous hairy garment.

"It would puzzle the cold to get at me through this, wouldn't it?" said its owner, surveying it with complacency. "It was my own invention too—at least the carpenter and I concocted it between us.

"The sleeves are closed up at the ends, you see, and a thumb attached to each, so as to make sleeves and mittens all of a piece, with a slit near the wrists to let you shove your hands out when you want to use them naked, an' a flap to cover the slit and keep the wind out when you don't want to shove out your hands. Then

the hood, you see, is large and easy, so that it can be pulled well for'ard—so—and this broad band behind it unbuttons and comes round in front of the face and buttons, so—to keep all snug when you lay down to sleep."

"Wonderful!" exclaimed the sisters as the captain stood before them like a great pillar of white fur, with nothing of him visible save the eyes and feet.

"But that's not all," continued the ancient mariner, turning his back to the sisters. "You see that great flap hooked up behind?"

"Yes," answered Jessie and Kate in the same breath.

"Well, then, notice what I do."

He sat down on the floor, and unhooking the flap, drew it round in front, where he re-hooked it to another row of eyes in such a manner that it completely covered his feet and lower limbs.

"There, you see, I'm in a regular fur-bag now, all ready for a night in the snow."

By way of illustration he extended himself on the floor at full-length, and, by reason of that length being so great, and the room so narrow, his feet went into the window-recess while his head lay near the door.

All ignorant of this illustration of arctic life going on, Liffie Lee, intent on dinner purposes, opened the door and drove it violently against the captain's head.

"Avast there!" he shouted, rising promptly. "Come in, lass. Come in—no damage done."

"Oh! sir," exclaimed the horrified Liffie, "I ax your parding."

"Don't put yourself about my girl. I'm used to collisions, and it's not in the power o' your small carcass to do me damage."

Disrobing himself as he spoke, the lodger retired to his cabin to lay aside his curious garment, and Liffie, assisted by Kate, took advantage of his absence to spread their little board.

"I never saw such a man," said Kate in a low voice as she bustled about.

"Saw!" exclaimed Jessie under her breath, "I never even conceived of such a man. He is so violent in his actions that I constantly feel as if I should be run over and killed. It feels like living in the same house with a runaway mail coach. How fortunate that his spirit is so gentle and kind!"

A tremendous crash at that moment caused Jessie to stop with a gasp.

"Hallo! fetch a swab—a dish-clout or somethin', Liffie," came thundering from the captain's room. "Don't be alarmed, ladies, it's only the wash-hand basin. Knocked it over in hangin' up the coat. Nothin' smashed. It's a tin basin, you know. Look alive, lass, else the water'll git down below, for the caulkin' of these planks ain't much to boast of, an' you'll have the green-grocer up in a towering rage!"

A few minutes later this curious trio sat down to dinner, and the captain, according to a custom established from the commencement of his sojourn, asked a blessing on the meat in few words, but with a deeply reverent manner, his great hands being clasped before him, and with his eyes shut like a little child.

"Well now, before beginning," he said, looking up, "let me understand; is this matter of the lodging and rent settled?"

"Yes, it is settled," answered Jessie. "We've got used to you, captain, and should be very, very sorry to lose you."

"Come, that's all right. Let's shake hands on it over the leg of mutton."

He extended his long arm over the small table, and spread out his enormous palm in front of Jessie Seaward. With an amused laugh she laid her little hand in it—to grasp it was out of the question—and the mighty palm closed for a moment with an affectionate squeeze. The same ceremony having been gone through with Kate, he proceeded to carve.

And what a difference between the dinners that once graced—perhaps we should say disgraced—that board, and those that smoked upon it now! Then, tea and toast, with sometimes an egg, and occasionally a bit of bacon, were the light viands; now, beef, mutton, peas, greens, potatoes, and other things, constituted the heavy fare.

The sisters had already begun to get stronger on it. The captain would have got stronger, no doubt, had that been possible.

And what a satisfactory thing it was to watch Captain Bream at his meals! There was something grand—absolutely majestic—in his action. Being a profoundly modest and unselfish man it was not possible to associate the idea of gluttony with him, though he possessed the digestion of an ostrich, and the appetite of a shark. There was nothing hurried, or eager, or careless, in his

mode of eating. His motions were rather slow than otherwise; his proceedings deliberate. He would even at times check a tempting morsel on its way to his mouth that he might more thoroughly understand and appreciate something that Jessie or Kate chanced to be telling him. Yet with all that, he compelled you, while looking at him, to whisper to yourself—"how he does shovel it in!"

"I declare to you, Kate," said Jessie, on one occasion after the captain had left the room, "I saw him take one bite to-day which ought to have choked him, but it didn't. He stuck his fork into a piece of mutton as big—oh! I'm afraid to say how big; it really seemed to me the size of your hand, and he piled quite a little mound of green peas on it, with a great mass of broken fragments and gravy, and put it all into his mouth at once, though that mouth was already pretty well-filled with the larger half of an enormous potato. I thought he would never get it in, but something you said caused him to laugh at the time, and before the laugh was over the bite had disappeared. Before it was properly swallowed he was helping himself to another slice from the leg of mutton! I declare to you, Kate, that many a time I have dined altogether on less than that one bite!"

Poor Miss Seaward had stated a simple truth in regard to herself, but that truth was founded on want of food, not on want of appetite or capacity for more.

At first it had been arranged that an account-book should be kept, and that the captain should pay for one-third of the food that

was consumed in the house, but he had consumed so much, and the sisters so ridiculously little, that he refused to fall in with such an arrangement and insisted on paying for all the food consumed, with the exception of the cup of coffee, cream, and sugar, with which he regaled himself every day after dinner. Of course they had had a battle over this matter also, but the captain had carried the day, as he usually did, for he had marvellous powers of suasion. He had indeed so argued, and talked, and bamboozled the meek sisters—sometimes seriously, oftener jocularly,—that they had almost been brought to the belief that somehow or other their lodger was only doing what was just! After all, they were not so far wrong, for all that they ate of the captain's provisions amounted to a mere drop in the bucket, while the intellectual food with which they plied their lodger in return, and the wealth of sympathy with which they surrounded him, was far beyond the power of gold to purchase.

"No," said Captain Bream, sipping his coffee and shaking his head, when Jessie again pressed on him the propriety of sitting in the parlour of an evening, "I can't do it. The fact is that I'm studying—though you may think I'm rather an oldish student—and I can't study except when I'm alone."

"What are you studying?" asked Kate, and then, observing that the captain looked slightly confused, and feeling that she ought not to have put the question, she quickly changed the subject by adding—"for whatever it is, you will be quite free from interruption here. My sister and I often sit for hours without

talking, and—"

"No, no, dear Miss Kate. Say no more," interrupted the captain; "I must stick to my own cabin except at meal-times, and, of course, when we want a bit of a talk together. There is one thing, however, that I would like. I know you have family worship with your little lass. May I join you?"

"Oh! it would give us such pleasure," exclaimed Kate, eagerly, "if you would come and conduct worship for us."

The captain protested that he would not do that, but finally gave in, and afterwards acted the part of chaplain in the family.

"By the way," he said, when about to quit the parlour, "I've brought another chest to the house."

"Yes," said Kate, "we felt the shock when you put it down."

"Well, it is a bit heavy. I've fairly given up my connection with my last ship, and as the new commander took possession this morning I was obliged to bring away my last box. Now, I don't want Liffie to move it about when putting things to rights, or to meddle with it in any way. When we want to sweep behind or under it I'll shift it myself. But, after all, you're safe not to move it, for the three of you together couldn't if you were to try ever so much. So, good-day. I'll be back to tea."

"Kate," said Jessie, after he was gone, "I am quite sure that there is some mystery connected with that box."

"Of course you are," replied Kate, with a laugh, "you always see mystery in things that you don't understand! You saw mystery too, didn't you, in the late sitting up and studies of Captain

Bream."

"Indeed I did, and I am quite sure that there *is* some mystery about that, too."

"Just so, and I have no doubt that you observe mystery of some sort," added Kate, with a humorous glance, "in the order for worsted work that we have just received."

"Undoubtedly I do," replied Jessie, with decision. "The whole affair is mysterious—ridiculously so. In truth it seems to me that we are surrounded by mystery."

"Well, well, sister mine," said the matter-of-fact Kate, going to a small cupboard and producing an ample work-box that served for both, "whatever mysteries may surround us, it is our business to fulfil our engagements, so we will at once begin our knitting of cuffs and comforters for the fishermen of the North Sea."

Chapter Six.
The Curse of the North Sea; and the Trawls at Work

There are few objects in nature, we think, more soothing to the feelings and at the same time more heart-stirring to the soul than the wide ocean in a profound calm, when sky and temperature, health, hour, and other surrounding conditions combine to produce unison of the entire being.

Such were the conditions, one lovely morning about the end of summer, which gladdened the heart of little Billy Bright as he leaned over the side of the *Evening Star*, and made faces at his own reflected image in the sea, while he softly whistled a slow melody to which the gentle swell beat time.

The *Evening Star* was at that time the centre of a constellation —if we may so call it—of fishing-smacks, which floated in hundreds around her. It was the "Short Blue" fleet of deep-sea trawlers; so named because of the short square flag of blue by which it was distinguished from other deep-sea fleets—such as the Grimsby fleet, the Columbia fleet, the Great Northern, Yarmouth, Red Cross, and other fleets—which do our fishing business from year's end to year's end on the North Sea.

But Billy was thoughtless and apt to enjoy what was agreeable, without reference to its being profitable. Some of the conditions

which rejoiced his heart had the reverse effect on his father. That gruff-spirited fisherman did not want oily seas, or serene blue skies, or reflected clouds and sunshine—no, what he wanted was fish, and before the *Evening Star* could drag her ponderous "gear" along the bottom of the sea, so as to capture fish, it was necessary that a stiffish breeze should not only ruffle but rouse the billows of the North Sea—all the better if it should fringe their crests with foam.

"My usual luck," growled David Bright, as he came on deck after a hearty breakfast, and sat down on the bulwarks to fill his pipe and do what in him lay to spoil his digestion—though, to do David justice, his powers in that line were so strong that he appeared to be invulnerable to tobacco and spirits. We use the word "appeared" advisedly, for in reality the undermining process was going on surely, though in his case slowly.

His "hands," having enjoyed an equally good breakfast, were moving quietly about, paying similar attention to their digestions!

There was our tall friend Joe Davidson, the mate; and Ned Spivin, a man of enormous chest and shoulders, though short in the legs; and Luke Trevor, a handsome young fellow of middle size, but great strength and activity, and John Gunter, a big sour-faced man with a low brow, rough black hair, and a surly spirit. Billy was supposed to be minding the tiller, but, in the circumstances, the tiller was left to mind itself. Zulu was the only active member on board, to judge from the clatter of his pots and pans below.

"My usual luck," said the skipper a second time in a deeper growl.

"Seems to me," said Gunter, in a growl that was even more deep and discontented than that of the skipper, "that luck is always down on us."

"'Tis the same luck that the rest o' the fleet has got, anyhow," observed Joe Davidson, who was the most cheerful spirit in the smack; but, indeed, all on board, with the exception of the skipper and Gunter, were men of a hearty, honest, cheerful nature, more or less careless about life and limb.

To the mate's remark the skipper said "humph," and Gunter said that he was the unluckiest fellow that ever went to sea.

"You're always growling, Jack," said Ned Spivin, who was fond of chaffing his mates; "they should have named you Grunter when they were at it."

"I only wish the Coper was alon'side," said the skipper, "but she's always out of the way when she's wanted. Who saw her last?"

"I did," said Luke Trevor, "just after we had crossed the Silver Pits; and I wish we might never see her again."

"Why so, mate?" asked Gunter.

"Because she's the greatest curse that floats on the North Sea," returned Luke in a tone of indignation.

"Ah!—you hate her because you've jined the teetotallers," returned Gunter with something of a sneer.

"No, mate, I don't hate her because I've jined the teetotallers,

but I've jined the teetotallers because I hate her."

"Pretty much the same thing, ain't it?"

"No more the same thing," retorted Luke, "than it is the same thing to put the cart before the horse or the horse before the cart. It wasn't total-abstainin' that made me hate the Coper, but it was hatred of the Coper that made me take to total-abstainin'—don't you see?"

"Not he," said Billy Bright, who had joined the group; "Gunter never sees nothing unless you stick it on to the end of his nose, an' even then you've got to tear his eyes open an' force him to look."

Gunter seized a rope's-end and made a demonstration of an intention to apply it, but Billy was too active; he leaped aside with a laugh, and then, getting behind the mast, invited the man to come on "an' do his wust."

Gunter laid down the rope's-end with a grim smile and turned to Luke Trevor.

"But I'm sure you've got no occasion," he said, "to blackguard the Coper, for you haven't bin to visit her much."

"No, thank God, I have not," said Luke earnestly, "yet I've bin aboard often enough to wish I had never bin there at all. It's not that, mates, that makes me so hard on the Coper, but it was through the accursed drink got aboard o' that floatin' grog-shop that I lost my best friend."

"How was that, Luke? we never heerd on it."

The young fisherman paused a few moments as if unwilling to talk on a distasteful subject.

"Well, it ain't surprisin' you didn't hear of it," he said, "because I was in the Morgan fleet at the time, an' it's more than a year past. The way of it was this. We was all becalmed, on a mornin' much like this, not far off the Borkum Reef, when our skipper jumped into the boat, ordered my friend Sterlin' an' me into it, an' went off cruisin'. We visited one or two smacks, the skippers o' which were great chums of our skipper, an' he got drunk there. Soon after, a stiff breeze sprang up, an' the admiral signalled to bear away to the nor'-west'ard. We bundled into our boat an' made for our smack, but by ill luck we had to pass the Coper, an' nothin' would please the skipper but to go aboard and have a glass. Sterlin' tried to prevent him, but he grew savage an' told him to mind his own business. Well, he had more than one glass, and by that time it was blowin' so 'ard we began to think we'd have some trouble to get back again. At last he consented to leave, an' a difficult job it was to get him into the boat wi' the sea that was runnin'. When we got alongside of our smack, he laid hold of Sterlin's oar an' told him to throw the painter aboard. My friend jumped up an' threw the end o' the painter to one of the hands. He was just about to lay hold o' the side an' spring over when the skipper stumbled against him, caused him to miss his grip, an' sent him clean overboard. Poor Sterlin' had on his long boots an' a heavy jacket. He went down like a stone. We never saw him again."

"Did none o' you try to save him?" asked Joe quickly.

"We couldn't," replied Luke. "I made a dash at him, but he was

out o' sight by that time. He went down so quick that I can't help thinkin' he must have struck his head on the side in goin' over."

Luke Trevor did not say, as he might have truly said, that he dived after his friend, being himself a good swimmer, and nearly lost his own life in the attempt to save that of Sterling.

"D'ye think the skipper did it a' purpose, mate?" asked David.

"Sartinly not," answered Luke. "The skipper had no ill-will at him, but he was so drunk he couldn't take care of himself, an' didn't know what he was about."

"That wasn't the fault o' the Coper," growled Gunter. "You say he got half-screwed afore he went there, an' he might have got dead-drunk without goin' aboard of her at all."

"So he might," retorted Luke; "nevertheless it *was* the Coper that finished him off at that time—as it has finished off many a man before, and will, no doubt, be the death o' many more in time to come."

The Copers, which Luke Trevor complained of so bitterly, are Dutch vessels which provide spirits and tobacco, the former of a cheap, bad, and peculiarly fiery nature. They follow the fleets everywhere, and are a continual source of mischief to the fishermen, many of whom, like men on shore, find it hard to resist a temptation which is continually presented to them.

"There goes the admiral," sang out little Billy, who, while listening to the conversation, had kept his sharp little eyes moving about.

The admiral of the fleet, among North Sea fishermen, is a

very important personage. There is an "admiral" to each fleet, though we write just now about the admiral of the "Short Blue." He is chosen for steadiness and capacity, and has to direct the whole fleet as to the course it shall steer, the letting down of its "gear" or trawls, etcetera, and his orders are obeyed by all. One powerful reason for such obedience is that if they do not follow the admiral they will find themselves at last far away from the steamers which come out from the Thames daily to receive the fish; for it is a rule that those steamers make straight for the admiral's vessel. By day the admiral is distinguished by a flag half way up the maintop-mast stay. By night signals are made with rockets.

While the crew of the *Evening Star* were thus conversing, a slight breeze had sprung up, and Billy had observed that the admiral's smack was heading to windward in an easterly direction. As the breeze came down on the various vessels of the fleet, they all steered the same course, so that in a few minutes nearly two hundred smacks were following him like a shoal of herring. The glassy surface of the sea was effectually broken, and a field of rippling indigo took the place of the ethereal sheet of blue.

Thus the whole fleet passed steadily to windward, the object being to get to such a position on the "fishing-grounds" before night-fall, that they could put about and sail before the wind during the night, dragging their ponderous trawls over the banks where fish were known to lie.

Night is considered the best time to fish, though they also fish by day, the reason being, it is conjectured, that the fish do not see the net so well at night; it may be, also, that they are addicted to slumber at that period! Be the reason what it may, the fact is well-known. Accordingly, about ten o'clock the admiral hove-to for a few minutes. So did the fleet. On board the *Evening Star* they took soundings, and found twenty-five fathoms. Then the admiral called attention by showing a "flare."

"Look out now, Billy," said David Bright to his son, who was standing close by the capstan.

Billy needed no caution. His sharp eyes were already on the watch.

"A green rocket! There she goes, father."

The green rocket signified that the gear was to be put down on the starboard side, and the fleet to steer to the southward.

Bustling activity and tremendous vigour now characterised the crew of the *Evening Star* as they proceeded to obey the order. A clear starry sky and a bright moon enabled them to see clearly what they were about, and they were further enlightened by a lantern in the rigging.

The trawl which they had to put down was, as we have said, a huge and ponderous affair, and could only be moved by means of powerful blocks and tackle aided by the capstan. It consisted of a thick spar called the "beam", about forty-eight feet long, and nearly a foot thick, supported on a massive iron hoop, or runner, at each end. These irons were meant to drag over the

bottom of the sea and keep the beam from touching it. Attached to this beam was the bag-net—a very powerful one, as may be supposed, with a small mesh. It was seventy feet long, and about sixteen feet of the outermost end was much stronger than the rest, and formed the bag, named the cod-end, in which the fish were ultimately collected. Besides being stronger, the cod-end was covered by flounces of old netting to prevent the rough bottom from chafing it too much. The cost of such a net alone is about 7 pounds. To the beam, attached at the two ends, was a very powerful rope called the bridle. It was twenty fathoms long. To this was fastened the warp—a rope made of best manilla and hemp, always of great strength. The amount of this paid out depended much on the weather; if very rough it might be about 40 fathoms, if moderate about 100. Sometimes such net and gear is carried away, and this involves a loss of about 60 pounds sterling. We may dismiss these statistics by saying that a good night's fishing may be worth from 10 pounds to 27 pounds, and a good trip—of eight weeks—may produce from 200 to 280 pounds.

Soon the gear was down in the twenty-five fathom water, and the trawl-warp became as rigid almost as an iron bar, while the speed of the smack through the water was greatly reduced—perhaps to three miles an hour—by the heavy drag behind her, a drag that ever increased as fish of all sorts and sizes were scraped into the net. Why the fish are such idiots as to remain in the net when they could swim out of it at the rate of thirty miles an hour

is best known to themselves.

Besides the luminaries which glittered in the sky that night the sea was alive with the mast-head lights of the fishing smacks, but these lower lights, unlike the serenely steady lights above, were ever changing in position, as well as dancing on the crested waves, giving life to the dark waters, and creating, at least in the little breast of Billy Bright, a feeling of companionship which was highly gratifying.

"Now, lad, go below and see if Zulu has got something for us to eat," said David to his son. "Here, Luke Trevor, mind the helm."

The young fisherman, who had been labouring with the others at the gear like a Hercules, stepped forward and took the tiller, while the skipper and his son descended to the cabin, where the rest of the men were already assembled in anticipation of supper. The cabin was remarkably snug, but it was also pre-eminently simple. So, also, was the meal. The arts of upholstery and cookery had not been brought to bear in either case. The apartment was about twelve feet long by ten broad, and barely high enough to let Joe Davidson stand upright. Two wooden lockers ran along either side of it. Behind these were the bunks of the men. At the inner end were some more lockers, and aft, there was an open stove, or fireplace, alongside of the companion-ladder. A clock and a barometer were the chief ornaments of the place. The atmosphere of it was not fresh by any means, and volumes of tobacco smoke rendered it hazy.

But what cared these heavy-booted, rough-handed, big-framed, iron-sinewed, strong-hearted men for fresh air? They got enough of that, during their long hours on deck, to counteract the stifling odours of the regions below!

"Now, then, boys, dar you is," said Zulu, placing a huge pot on the floor, containing some sort of nautical soup. "I's cook you soup an' tea, an' dar's sugar an' butter, an' lots o' fish and biskit, so you fire away till you bu'st yourselves."

The jovial Zulu bestowed on the company a broad and genial grin as he set the example by filling a bowl with the soup. The others did not require a second bidding. What they lacked in quality was more than made up in quantity, and rendered delicious by appetite.

Conversation flagged, of course, while these hardy sons of toil were busy with their teeth, balancing themselves and their cups and bowls carefully while the little vessel rolled heavily over the heaving waves. By degrees the teeth became less active and the tongues began to wag.

"I wish that feller would knock off psalm-singin'," said Gunter with an oath, as he laid down his knife and wiped his mouth.

He referred to Luke Trevor, who possessed a sweet mellow voice, and was cheering himself as he stood at the helm by humming a hymn, or something like one, for the words were not distinguishable in the cabin.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.