Fenn George Manville

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Содержание

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Chapter One.
How We Got There

"But what are we going for?"

If he had not been so much of a gentleman, I should have said that the half-closing of his left eye and its rapid reopening had been a wink; as it was, we will say it was not. The next moment, he had thrown himself back in his chair, smiled, and said, quietly. "Not yet, captain – not yet. I'll tell you by-and-by. At present it is my secret. Waiter, fill these glasses again!"

"But look here," I said, as soon as the waiter had done his duty, "you can't sail right up into the Arctic circle without a crew."

"No," he said, shaking his head; "but *you* will go?"

"Well – yes," I said; "I don't mind. She's a smart steamer, and well found. I'll take her."

He rose solemnly from his chair, crossed to my side, and shook hands, before wabbling back and sitting down, filling the old-fashioned Windsor armchair so very full, that I wondered it didn't come to pieces.

I don't want to be personal, but he certainly was the fattest

man I ever saw, and the most active. The Claimant was nothing to him. He looked perfectly stupid, as he sat there with a great wattle under his chin, which came all over his white neckerchief and clean-frilled shirt; and as he talked to you, he kept spinning round the great bunch of gold seals at the end of a watered silk ribbon, that hung over his glossy black trousers, while the huge flaps of his black bob-tail coat hung over the sides of the chair.

"You'll be my captain, then?" he said.

"Yes, sir, I'm ready," I replied; "but about the crew. Their first question will be, 'is it whale or seal?'"

"Tell them – tell them," he said, musing, – "tell them *seal*, and we'll do a bit of sealing on the voyage; but, my dear Captain Cookson, the real object of our trip is at present *under* seal. You understand?"

I nodded.

"Then get a good staunch, picked crew, and don't spare for expense. You'll want good first and second mates. Shall I engage them?"

"Oh, no, thanky, sir," I said hastily; "I – "

"Captain Cookson here?" said a voice I knew, and Abram Bostock thrust his head just inside the door. "Oh, beg pardon, sir!"

"Come in, Abram!" I said, eagerly.

"Begging the gentleman's pardon," he said, wiping a little brown juice out of each corner of his mouth; "I only wanted a word with you, skipper. Binny Scudds is outside."

"Bring him in, then!" I said, quickly.

Abram looked from one to the other, rubbed his hollow, sallow cheeks, upon which there was not a particle of hair, and then his body swayed about as if, being so thin, the draught of the door was blowing him, – "Bring him in?" he said.

"To be sure!" I exclaimed.

Tall, thin, Abram Bostock stared at my companion for a moment, and then backed out, to return directly with my old bos'en, Abinadab Scudds, half leading, half dragging him; and no sooner was the mahogany-faced old salt inside the door, and caught sight of the stranger, than he slewed round, and was half outside before Abram growled out, "Avast there!" collared him, and bringing him back, closed the door; when Scudds growled out something that seemed to come from somewhere below his waistband, and then, thoroughly captured, he stood, rolling his one eye from one to the other, and began to rub his shaggy head, ending by an old habit of his – namely, taking out a piece of rope, and beginning to unlay it.

"Begging the gentleman's pardon," said Abram, as he feasted on his goodly proportions, "I come to tell you, skipper, as they wants a cap'n and mates for the Gladiator."

"But you have not engaged?" I said, anxiously.

Scudds growled, bear-fashion, and shook his head.

"Because here's a chance for you, my lads!" I said. "I have engaged with Doctor – Doctor – "

"Curley," said my stout friend.

"With Doctor Curley, to command that smart steamer lying in the Greenland Dock, and we go up north. Will you come?"

"What arter?" growled Scudds, tearing at his piece of rope.

"Seal," I said, with a look at the doctor. "What do you say, Bostock?"

"Oh, I'm game, if you're going, skipper!" he said, staring at the doctor.

"And you, Scudds?"

"Same as Abram," growled Abinadab – Binny we called him, for short.

"This is lucky, doctor!" I said; "for our two friends here will soon get a good crew together. Plenty of men will be glad to join the vessel they sail in!"

"Don't you believe him, sir!" said Abram, polishing away at his cheek. "It's acause the skipper there, Capen Cookson's going, as they'd come!"

"Ah! Well, never mind about that," said the doctor, smiling. "So long as I've a good crew going with me, I don't care what induces them."

"But you ain't a-going, sir?" says Abram, looking harder than ever at our owner.

"Indeed, but I am, my man!" replied the doctor. "Why not?"

"Oh, nothing, sir!" says Abram, looking as confused as a great girl, while he stared harder than ever at the doctor.

"Now, what on earth are you thinking about?" said the doctor, making an effort to cross his legs, but failing, on account of the

tight fit in the chair.

"Well, sir," says Abram Bostock, slowly, "meaning no offence, I was a-wishing I were as fat as you are!"

"Oh, lor'!" groaned Scudds. And his one eye rolled tremendously.

"My good friend," exclaimed the doctor, starting up a little way, but subsiding again, for he had raised the chair with him, as if he had been a hermit-crab and it was his shell, – "my good friend, I'd give five thousand pounds to be as thin as you!"

"Hor – hor – hor – hor!" roared Scudds, bursting into a tremendous laugh. "I say, skipper, what a wunner he'd be if we took to the boats!"

"Hush!" I exclaimed.

"What does he mean?" cried the doctor; "that I should sink the boat?"

"No," growled Scudds. "Long pork!"

"Long pork!" said the doctor.

And Abram clapped his hands over his mouth, to stay his laughter.

"Yes," growled Scudds, grinning, and showing a wonderfully white set of teeth; "long pork – long pig – human! Don't you see? You'd keep a boat's crew for a fortnit, if they were hard up and starvin'. Hor – hor – hor – hor!"

"My good man," cried the doctor, shuddering, "that's a very good joke, no doubt, and very funny, only don't make it about me again; try it on somebody else! Such a dreadfully

anthropophagistic idea!"

"Which?" growled Scudds.

"Well, then, cannibal idea," said the doctor, shuddering again.

"Lor', sir, I meant no harm," said Scudds holding out his great, heavy paw, which the doctor shook. "I've often made it about long, thin, Abram Borstick, there; only when I makes it about him, I allers puts it t'other way, and says he'd *starve* a boat's crew for a fortnit. Don't you see?"

"Oh, yes, I see!" said the doctor, nodding.

"And it's the only joke he ever does make, sir," says Abram.

"Right," growled Scudds.

"I didn't mean no offence, sir, about your going, neither," said Abram, respectfully. "Of course it'll be a great advantage to have a doctor on board. You air a doctor, sir?"

"Yes," said our stout employer, laughing till his cheeks wabbled. "I can cure anything from a frost-bite to a flea-bite; but I'm not an M.D."

"No; of course not, sir," says Abram, nodding his head sagely.

"I mean, sir, not a doctor of medicine."

"Good job, too," growled Scudds. "Yah! I hates physic!" and he looked about for somewhere to spit, ending by opening the room door, and disposing of his tobacco-juice on the mat.

"Well, then, sir," I said, rising, "here are our first and second mates, and I'll get together a crew of sixteen men in a few days, and meet you every morning on board."

"My sarvice to you, sir," said Abram, touching his forehead.

"And mine," growled Scudds.

I was close beside the doctor now, and held the chair as he rose, otherwise he would have lifted it with him. Then we took our leave, and I walked down Hull Street with my two old shipmates.

"Where did you pick up the skipper?" growled Scudds.

"Well," I said, "he's been dodging me about for a week, and been mighty civil, so much so, that I thought he wanted to try the confidence dodge on me, of trusting one another with money; but it's all right, my lads, we've found a good ship and owner, and the pay's good, so we'll sign the articles to-morrow, and get to work."

I needn't tell you all that took place during the next mouth; how we got coal on board, and stores, and casks for oil, or whatever we might get; had her cabins lined to keep them warm; fitted up stoves; had plenty of extra canvas and spars, ice-anchors, a couple of sledges; plenty of ammunition, and provisions enough for two years. Last of all came on board a whole lot of strange-looking mahogany cases, which the doctor had brought very carefully under his own superintendence, and then, one fine morning in June, we steamed out of the Humber, and away we went to the North, with the doctor going about the deck like an active tub, rubbing his hands, and smiling at every body.

Everything was soon ship-shape; boats ready for work, fur coats and boots served out to the men against they were wanted, and I was very busy one morning getting some of the tackle

a little better stowed, when the doctor waddled up to me, and tapped me on the shoulder.

I turned round, and he led the way into the cabin, sat down, and pointed to a seat.

"Now, Captain Cookson," he said, "I think it's time to tell you about my plans."

"If you please, sir," I said, "that is if it suits you."

"Well," he said, "you are now sailing to the North."

"Yes, sir, according to your orders, right away for Spitzbergen."

"And do you know what for?"

"Discovery of some kind, sir, I suppose."

"You are right, Captain; I mean to discover the North Pole."

"With all my heart, sir," I said.

"At least," he said, "I mean to try. If I fail, I shall still be able to make a good many scientific discoveries, so that the voyage won't be for nothing."

"No, sir," I said.

"It has been one of the dreams of my life to go upon a scientific voyage up in the North; but the Admiralty wouldn't listen to me. They had the notion that I was not a suitable man for the expedition; when all the while Nature has expressly designed me for the purpose. See how she has clothed me with adipose tissue."

"With what, sir?"

"Fat, man – fat! like she does the bears, and whales, and

Eskimo. While you men will be shivering in your fur coats, I shall be quite warm without. Well, what we have to do is to take advantage of every open channel when we reach the ice, and push forward due North. If the men get discontented, we will keep promising them extra pay, and – What's the matter?"

"Skipper, sir!" growled Scudds, who had just thrust his head in at the cabin door. "Wanted on deck, sir – reg'lar mutinee. Tom Brown's come up from below, and says as there's a ghost in the hold!"

"Where – where?" cried the doctor, excitedly, as he waddled out of the cabin, thoroughly earning the nickname the men had bestowed upon him of The Penguin. "Captain, get one of the casks ready for a specimen. I have never seen a ghost!"

"Ain't he a rum beggar, skipper?" whispered Scudds, as we followed him on deck, where a knot of the crew were standing round one of the foremast-men, Tom Brown, whose face was covered with perspiration, his hair being plastered down upon his forehead.

"Well, where's the ghost, my man?" said the doctor.

"Down in the hold, sir. You can hear him a-groaning!"

The doctor led the way down the open hatch; and I followed, to give him a push down, if he stuck fast, finding that there was something in the man's alarm, for from out of the darkness came, every now and then, a deep, sighing groan.

"Why, there's some one there!" cried the doctor.

"Here, quick, half a dozen of you!" I shouted, for an idea had

just struck me; and, getting a lantern, I crept over some of the stores to where stood a row of casks, to one of which I traced the voice.

"Hallo!" I cried, tapping the cask; when there came a rustling noise from inside, and a tap or two seemed given by a hand.

"Found anything?" said the doctor, who had stuck fast between the stores and the deck.

"It's a stowaway, I think," I answered; and, creeping back, with the groans becoming more frequent, I gave orders, had some of the hatches taken off farther along the deck, and just over where the cask lay; and then, by means of some strong tackle, we hauled the cask out on deck, to find it only partly headed, and from out of it half slipped, half crawled, a pale, thin, ghastly looking young fellow, of about four or five-and-twenty.

"Why, it's Smith!" exclaimed the doctor.

"Water – food!" gasped the poor wretch, lying prostrate on his side.

These were given him, and the doctor added some spirit, with the effect that the poor fellow began to revive, and at last sat up on the deck.

"And how did you get here?" I said.

"Got on board at night!" he gasped. "Crept into the cask – meant to get out – but packed in!"

"Did I not refuse you permission to come, sir?" cried the doctor, shaking his fist.

"Yes, uncle!" gasped the stowaway; "but Fanny said, if I didn't

come and take care of you, she – she would never – speak to me – any more! Oh, dear! please stop the ship! I feel so poorly!"

"It's a wonder you were not starved to death," said the doctor.

"Or smothered," I said.

"Ye-yes," stammered the poor fellow. "I was all right till they packed things all round me, and then I couldn't get out!"

"Shall we put the ghost specimen in the spirit cask, doctor?" I said.

"Well, no," he replied. "I think we'll let him go down to the cabin. But you'd no business to come, Alfred, for you'll only be in the way."

"Oh, no, uncle," he said, rapidly getting better, between the qualms produced by the rolling of the steamer; "I shall be a great help to you, uncle. I've brought my Alpenstock, a two-jointed one like a fishing-rod; and – and my ice-boots that I wore in Switzerland."

"Bah!" said the doctor.

"And a climbing-rope."

"Pish!" exclaimed the doctor again.

"And – a pair of snow-shoes."

"Did you bring your skates, sir?"

"No, uncle; Fanny wanted me to, because she said I skated so beautifully; but I knew you had come on business, so I left them behind."

The doctor gave me a fat smile, and I turned round to check Scudds, for fear he should laugh outright; and lucky I did, for

he was just getting ready for a tremendous roar, while Abram Bostock held his hands over his mouth.

"Well, get below," said the doctor; "and the sooner you find your sea-legs the better."

So our new member of the exploring expedition crawled below, and we set to and trimmed sails, for the weather was changing, steam being reserved till we wanted it to go through the ice.

We did not get along very fast, for the doctor was always stopping the vessel for something, and the men soon fell in with his whims, and began to enjoy helping him. One day, they would be busy bucketing up water, for him to fill bottles with specimens of whales' food; another time, we tried after a whale with a small gun and a harpoon fired from it, to the great delight of the men. Then we came in sight of the first iceberg, slowly sailing south, like a fairy castle on a fairy rock, that had broken away from its land in the North, and taken to the sea. The sun was shining upon it, and it was like one grand mass of turrets and spires, glistening with silver, gold, and gems of every colour. Here and there, it was split into great openings, with arches over them like bridges; and near the sea were more archways, leading like into caves, and all these places were of the most deep sapphire blue. All was so beautiful, that even the old salts like Abram and Scudds said they had never seen anything like it up North.

Of course, the doctor couldn't pass it without landing; and as there were some seals and a few birds sitting on the farther

side, I ran the steamer close in, till, in the still water on the lee, we were able to bring her close alongside of what was just like a natural wharf of ice; when Scudds and four more got on the berg, a couple of ice-anchors were passed over to them, and soon after we were made fast, and the doctor took a gun, his nephew followed, and we had a good climb along the wonderful sides of the iceberg.

"If we could only get on the top I wouldn't mind," said the doctor, after making half a dozen tries; but every one was a failure, for it was for all the world like climbing the side of a slippery board.

"Suppose you did get up, sir – what then?" I said.

"What then, Captain Cookson? Why, I could take observations; notice the structure of the ice; chip off specimens; but I suppose I must be disappointed."

But he was not, for when toward evening we were sitting on deck, I said to him, "I suppose we may cast loose now, doctor, and get on?" there suddenly came a strange scraping noise, and a peculiar motion of the ship.

"Cut away those ice-cables!" I roared, running to get an axe, for I scented the danger.

But I was too late, and stopped paralysed, holding on by one of the shrouds! for I suddenly woke to the fact that in going close in to the visible part of the iceberg, we had sailed in over a part of it that was under water, and now the huge mass of ice having grown top-heavy, it was slowly rolling over, but fortunately away

from us, though the result seemed to threaten destruction.

Almost before I knew where I was, the steamer began to sway over to starboard; then I saw that we were lifted out of the water; and as the men gave a cry of horror, we rose higher, and higher, and higher, as the great berg rolled slowly over till we were quite a couple of hundred feet in the air, perched on almost an even keel in a narrow V-marked valley, with the ice rising as high as the main yard on either side, and the little valley we were in running steeply down to the sea.

We all remained speechless, clinging to that which was nearest, and the motion made the doctor's nephew exceedingly ill; but as for the doctor, he was standing note-book in hand, exclaiming, "Wonderful! Magnificent! Captain, I would not have missed such a phenomenon for the world!"

"Other world, you mean, sir!" I said, with a gasp of horror. "We shall never reach home again!"

"Nonsense, man," he said. "Why, this ice will melt in less than a month, and let us down."

"Or turn over the other way, and finish us off, sir!" I said, gloomily.

"Meanwhile, captain, I am up on the top of the iceberg, and can make my meteorological observations. Alfred, bring me the glaceoscope. Hang the fellow, he's always poorly when I want him. Captain, will you oblige?"

I stood staring at him for a few moments, astonished at his coolness.

"The long brass instrument," he said, "out of the case numbered four, in the cabin."

I went and fetched the instrument, the men looking as much astounded as I was myself to see the doctor going coolly to work examining the structure of the ice, with its curious water-worn face. Then he seemed to be making measurements, and he ended by coming to us, rubbing his hands.

"Curious position, isn't it!" he said, laughing. "By the way, captain, I should cast off those ice-anchors, in case the iceberg should make another turn. They might be the cause of mischief."

"Cause of mischief! Hark at him!" said Abram. "When we're perched two hundred foot up here in the air! Come on, lads."

The ice-anchors were taken out of the holes that had been cut for them, and were got on board as we settled down for the night, no man feeling disposed to sleep; and all this while we were drifting slowly with the stream farther and farther south.

This went on for four days, and then, one night, I remember thinking, as I lay on deck, that could we be sure of the ice melting slowly at the top, and letting us down, we should be safe; but I knew that the bottom melted faster in the warm water, then the top grew heavier, and over it went again.

I tried very hard to keep awake in case of danger; but it was of no use, for I was worn out with watching, and at last I went off soundly to sleep, dreaming that I was drowned, and living in an ice cave, fish fashion, at the bottom of the sea, when I was awakened by Scudds, who shook me, crying, "Wake up, skipper!

she's a-going to launch herself!"

I jumped to my feet, to find the doctor on deck, lecturing his nephew about the launching of ships, and pointing out the gradual slope down of the ice valley in which we lay.

"She's shifted two foot!" said Scudds. "I felt her move!"

"Batten down the hatches!" I roared, seeing what was coming; and as soon as this was done, and the ship made water-tight, I gave fresh orders for every man to lash himself fast to the shrouds and belaying-pins, while I myself secured the doctor and his nephew, neither of them seeing the slightest danger in what was to come.

Hardly had I done this, than there was a strange creaking, scratching noise, as of iron passing over ice; and then we felt that the vessel was in motion, gilding down the horrible precipice toward the sea.

At first she moved very slowly, but gathering speed, she glided faster and faster, till, with a rush like an avalanche, she darted down the great ice slide, stem first, till, at the bottom, where the iceberg ended abruptly in a precipice forty or fifty feet high, she shot right off, plunging her bowsprit the next instant in the water, and then all was darkness.

The sensation of the slide down was not unpleasant; the rush through the air was even agreeable; but to dart down into the depths of the ocean like some mighty whale, was awful. There was a strange roaring and singing in the ears; a feeling of oppression, as if miles of water were over one's head; a sense of

going down, down, down into the depths that were like ink; and then, by degrees, all grew lighter and lighter, till, with a dart like a diving-bird, the stout iron steamer sprang to the surface, rolled for a minute or two with the water streaming from her scuppers, and then floated easily on the sea, with the iceberg half a mile astern.

"Bravo! – bravo, captain! Capitally done!" cried the doctor. "As fine a bit of seamanship as ever I saw; but you need not have made us so wet!"

"Thanky, sir!" I said, for I was so taken aback and surprised that I didn't know what to say, the more so that Abram Bostock, Scudds, and the rest of them took their tone from the doctor, nodded their heads, and said, "Very well done, indeed!"

I didn't believe it at first, till I had had the pump well sounded; but the ship was quite right, and as sound as ever, so that half an hour after we had made sail, and were leaving the iceberg far behind.

It was some time before I could feel sure that it wasn't all a dream; but the cool way in which the doctor took it all served to satisfy me, and I soon had enough to take up my attention in the management of the ship.

For the next fortnight we were sailing or steaming on past floating ice, with the greatest care needed to avoid collision or being run down. Then we had foul weather, rain, and fog, and snowstorm, and the season seeming to get colder and colder for quite another fortnight, when it suddenly changed, and we had

bright skies, constant sunshine night and day, and steamed slowly on through the pack ice.

The doctor grew more confidential as we got on, telling me of the jealousy with which he had watched the discoveries of other men, and how, for years, he had determined that Curley and Pole should be linked together. He said that there was no doubt about the open Polar Sea, and that if we could once get through the pack ice into it, the rest of the task was easy.

"But suppose, when we've got up there, we get frozen in, doctor?" I said.

"Well, what then?" he answered. "We can wait, till we are thawed out."

"Perhaps all dead," I said.

"Pooh, my dear sir! No such thing. Freezing merely means a suspension of the faculties. I will give you an example soon."

"Well, Binny," said Abram slowly, after overhearing these words, "I don't want my faculties suspended; that's all I've got to say!"

The next day we were working our way through great canals of clear water, that meandered among the pack ice. There were great headlands on each side, covered with ice and snow, and the solitude seemed to grow awful, but the doctor kept us all busy. Now it was a seal hunt; then we were all off after a bear. Once or twice we had a reindeer hunt, and supplied the ship with fresh meat. Bird shooting, too, and fishing had their turn, so that it was quite a pleasure trip when the difficulties of the navigation left

us free.

Eighty degrees had long been passed, and still our progress was not stayed. We often had a bit of a nip from the ice closing in, and over and over again we had to turn back; but we soon found open water again, after steaming gently along the edge of the track, and thence northward once more, till one day the doctor and I took observations, and we found that we were eighty-five degrees north, somewhere about a hundred miles farther than any one had been before.

"We shall do it, Cookson!" cried the doctor, rubbing his hands. "Only five more degrees, my lad, and we have made our fame! Cookson, my boy, you'll be knighted!"

"I hope not, sir!" I said, shuddering, as I thought of the City aldermen. "I would rather be mourned!"

"That's a bad habit, trying to make jokes," he said, gravely. "Fancy, my good fellow, making a pun in eighty-five degrees north latitude! but I'm not surprised. There is no latitude observed now, since burlesques have come into fashion. Where are you going, Cookson!"

"Up in the crow's-nest, sir," I said. "I don't like the look of the hummocky ice out nor'ard."

I climbed up, spy-glass in hand, when, to my horror, the doctor began to follow me.

"That there crow's-nest won't abear you, sir!" cried Scudds, coming to the rescue.

"Think not, my man?" said the doctor.

"Sure on't!" said Scudds.

"Ah, well, I'm with you in spirit, Cookson!" he exclaimed.

And I finished my climb, and well swept the horizon line with my glass.

There was no mistaking it: ice, ice, ice on every side. The little canal through which we were steaming came to an end a mile farther on; and that night we were frozen in fast, and knew that there was not a chance of being set free till the next year.

The crew was divided into two parties at once, and without loss of time I got one set at work lowering yards, striking masts, and covering in the ship, while the others were busied with the preparation of the sledges.

Two days after, a party of ten of us, with plenty of provisions on our sledge, and a tent, started under the doctor's guidance for the Pole.

It was very cold, but the sun shone brightly, and we trudged on, the doctor showing the value of his natural covering, though he was less coated with furs than we were.

He pointed out to me the shape of the land, and which was frozen sea; and at the end of two days, when we were in a wild place, all mighty masses of ice, he declared his conviction that there was, after all, no open Polar sea, only ice to the end.

We had had a bitter cold night, and had risen the next morning cold and cheerless; but a good hot cup of coffee set us right, and we were thinking of starting, when Scudds, who was with us, Abram being left in command, kicked at a piece of ice, saying,

"That's rum-looking stuff!"

"There's something in it," said the doctor's nephew, who was always in the way.

"Let me see," said the doctor, putting on his spectacles. "To be sure – yes! Axes, quick!"

He took one himself, gave the block of ice a sharp blow, split it in halves, and, to our utter astonishment, a strange-looking animal like a woolly dog lay before us, frozen, of course, perfectly hard.

"A prize!" said the doctor; and we, under his orders, made a good-sized fire, laid the perfectly preserved animal by it, and at the end of a couple of hours had the satisfaction of seeing it move one leg, then another, and, at last, it rose slowly on all fours, raised one of its hind legs, scratched itself in the most natural way in the world, and then seemed to sink down all of a heap, and melt quite away, leaving some loose wool on the snow.

"Well," said Scudds, rolling his one eye, "if I hadn't ha' seen that 'ere, I wouldn't ha' believed it!"

"Only a case of suspended animation, my man," said the doctor, calmly. "We shall make more discoveries yet."

The doctor was right; for this set all the men hunting about, he giving them every encouragement, so that at the end of an hour we had found another dog; but in dislodging the block of ice in which it was frozen, the head was broken off, so that the only good to be obtained by thawing it was the rough wool and some of the teeth, which the doctor carefully preserved.

"Isn't it much colder here, doctor?" I said, for the wind seemed to go through me like a knife.

"Hush!" he whispered; "don't let the men hear, or they'll be discouraged. It's perfectly frightful; the thermometers are stopped!"

"Stopped?" I said.

"Yes; the cold's far below anything they can show. They are perfectly useless now. Let's get on?"

I stood staring at him, feeling a strange stupor coming over me. It was not unpleasant, being something like the minutes before one goes to sleep; but I was startled into life by the doctor flying at me, and hitting me right in my chest. The next moment he had a man on each side pumping my arms up and down, as they forced me to run for quite a quarter of an hour, when I stopped, panting, and the doctor laid his hand upon my heart.

"He'll do now!" he said, quietly. "Don't you get trying any of those games again, captain."

"What games?" I said, indignantly.

"Getting yourself frozen. Now, then, get on, my lads – we must go ahead!"

For the next nine days we trudged on, dragging our sledge through the wonderful wilderness of ice and snow. At night we camped in the broad sunshine, and somehow the air seemed to be much warmer. But on the tenth day, when we had reached the edge of a great, crater-like depression in the ice, which seemed to extend as far as the eye could reach, the intensity of the cold

was frightful, and I spoke of it to the doctor, as soon as we had set up our little canvas and skin tent.

"Yes, it is cold!" he said. "I'd give something to know how low it is! But let's make our observations."

We did, and the doctor triumphantly announced that we were within one degree of the Pole.

We were interrupted by an outcry among the men, and, on going to the tent, it was to find them staring at the spirit-lamp, over which we heated our coffee. The flame, instead of fluttering about, and sending out warmth, had turned quite solid, and was like a great tongue of bright, bluish-yellow metal, which rang like a bell, on being touched with a spoon.

"Never mind, my men!" says the doctor coolly. "It is only one of the phenomena of the place. Captain, give the men a piece of brandy each."

"A little brandy apiece, you mean, sir."

"No," he said coolly; "I mean a piece of brandy each."

He was quite right: the brandy was one solid mass, like a great cairngorm pebble, and we had to break it with an axe; and very delicious the bits were to suck, but as to strength, it seemed to have none.

We had an accident that evening, and broke one of the doctor's thermometers, the ball of quicksilver falling heavily on the ice, and, when I picked it up, it was like a leaden bullet, quite hard, so that we fired it at a bear, which came near us; but it only quickened his steps.

In spite of the tremendous cold, we none of us seemed much the worse, and joined the doctor in his hunt for curiosities. There was land here as well as ice, although it was covered; for there was on one side of the hollow quite a hill, and the doctor pointed out to me the trace of what he said had been a river, evidently emptying itself into the great crater; but when he pulled out the compass to see in which direction the river must have run, the needle pointed all sorts of ways, ending by dipping down, and remaining motionless.

We were not long in finding that animal life had at one time existed here; for, on hunting among the blocks of ice, we found several in which we could trace curious-looking beasts, frozen in like fossils.

We had set up our tent under the lee of a great rock of ice, on the edge of the crater, which looked so smooth and so easy of ascent, that it was with the greatest difficulty that we could keep the doctor's nephew from trying a slide down. He had, in fact, got hold of a smooth piece of ice to use as a sledge, when the doctor stopped him, and put an end to his enthusiasm by pointing down and asking him what was below in the distance, where the hollow grew deep and dark, and a strange mist hung over it like a cloud.

"If you go down, Alfred, my boy, you will never get back. Think of my misery in such a case, knowing that you have, perhaps, penetrated the mystery of the North Pole, and that it will never be known!"

The young fellow sighed at this arrest of his project.

Just then we were roused by a shout from Scudds, whom we could see in the distance, standing like a bear on its hind legs, and moving his hands.

We all set off to him, under the impression that he had found the Pole; but he was only standing pointing to a great slab of transparent ice, out of which stuck about ten inches of the tail of something, the ice having melted from it; while, on closer examination, we could see, farther in through the clear, glassy ice, the hind-quarters of some mighty beast.

"A mammoth —*Elephas Primigenius*!" cried the doctor, excitedly. "We must have him out."

We stared at one another, while the doctor wabbled round to the other side of the great mass, where he set up a shout; and, on going to him, there he was, pointing to what looked like a couple of pegs about seven feet apart, sticking out of the face of the ice.

"What's them, sir?" says one of the men.

"Tusks!" cried the doctor, delightedly. "My men, this is as good as discovering the North Pole. If we could get that huge beast out, and restore his animation, what a triumph. Why, he must have been," he said, pacing the length of the block, and calculating its height, "at least – dear me, yes – forty feet long, and twenty feet high."

"What a whopper!" growled Scudds. "Well, I found him."

"We must have him out, my men," said the doctor again, but he said it dubiously, for it seemed a task beyond us, for fire would not burn, and there was no means of getting heat to melt the vast

mass; so at last we returned to the camp, and made ourselves snug for the night.

In the morning, the doctor had another inspection of the mammoth, and left it with a sigh; but in the course of the day we found traces of dozens of the great beasts, besides the remains of other great creatures that must have been frozen-in hundreds or thousands of years before; and the place being so wonderfully interesting, the doctor determined to stay there for a few days.

The first thing, under the circumstances, was to clear the snow away, bank it up round us, and set up the tent in the clear place under the shelter of the big mammoth block.

We all went at it heartily, and as we scraped the snow off, it was to find the ice beneath as clear as glass.

"Ah!" said the doctor, sitting down and looking on, after feeling the mammoth's tail, knife in hand, as if longing to cut it off, "it's a wonderful privilege, my lads, to come up here into a part of the earth where the foot of man has never trod before! – Eh! what is it?" he cried, for his nephew suddenly gave a howl of dread, dropped the scraper he had been using, jumped over the snow heap, and ran off.

"What's he found?" said Scudds, crossing to the place where the young man had been busy scraping, and staring down into the ice. "Any one would think – Oh, lor'!"

He jumped up, and ran away, too, and so did another sailor; when the doctor and I went up to the spot, looked down, and were very nearly following the example set us, for there, only a

few inches from us, as if lying in a glass coffin, was a man on his back, with every feature perfect, and eyes wide open, staring straight at us!

"Wonderful!" exclaimed the doctor.

"Then some one has been here before?" I said.

"The ice must have drifted up," said the doctor. "We are the only men who have penetrated so far. Quick, my lads; we must have him out!"

The boys didn't like the task, and Scudds was almost mutinous; but the doctor soon had us at work, cutting a groove all round the figure; and, after about five hours' chipping, we got out the great block with the figure inside perfect, and laid it down in the sun, which now exercised such power in the middle of the day that the ice began to thaw, just as we awoke to the fact that the cold was nothing like so intense, for the spirit-lamp on being tried burned freely, and the brandy, instead of being like rock, showed signs of melting.

At first the men held aloof from the operation; but after a few words from the doctor, Scudds suddenly exclaimed, "No one shall say as I'm afraid of him!" – and he rolled his eye wonderfully as he helped to pour hot water over the figure, which, far from being ghastly as the ice grew thinner, looked for all the world like one of our own men lying down.

In about twelve hours we had got all the ice clear away, and the fur clothes in which the body was wrapped were quite soft. We were then so tired, that, it being night, the doctor had the

figure well wrapped up in a couple of buffalo robes, and, in spite of a good deal of opposition, placed beside him in the tent, and we lay down to rest.

I don't know how long we'd been asleep, for, with the sun shining night and day, it bothers you, but I was awoke by somebody sneezing.

"Uncle's got a fine cold!" said young Smith, who was next to me.

"So it seems!" I said; and then there was another sneeze, and another, and another; and when I looked, there was the doctor, sitting up and staring at the figure by his side, which kept on sneezing again and again. Then, to our horror, it sat up and yawned, and threw its arms about.

Every fellow in the little tent was about to get up and run away, when the frozen sailor said, in a sleepy fashion, "Why, it's as cold as ever!"

I tried to speak, but couldn't. The doctor answered him, though, by saying, "How did you get here?"

"Well," said the figure, drowsily, "that means a yarn; and if I warn't so plaguey sleepy, I'd – Heigho! – ha! – hum! – Well, here goes!"

We sat quite awe-stricken, not a man stirring more than to put a bit of pigtail in his mouth, while the English sailor thus spun his yarn: —

Chapter Two.
The English Sailor's Yarn

You see, I haven't the trick of putting it together, or else, I dare say, I could spin you no end of a yarn out of many a queer thing I've come across, and many a queer thing that's happened to me up and down.

Well, yes, I've been wrecked three times, and I've been aboard when a fire's broken out, and I've seen some fighting – close work some of it, and precious hot; and I was once among savages, and there was one that was a kind of a princess among 'em – But there, that's no story, and might happen to any man.

If I were Atlantic Jones now, I could tell you a story worth listening to. Atlantic Jones was made of just the kind of stuff they make heroes out of for story books. He *was* a rum 'un was J. If I could spin a yarn about anything, it ought to be about him, now. I only wish I could.

Why was he called Atlantic? I can't rightly say. I don't think he was christened so. I think it was a name he took himself. It was to pass off the Jones, which was not particularly imposing without the first part for the trade he belonged to. He was a play-actor.

I don't think he had ever done any very great things at it before I met with him; anyhow, he was rather down on his luck just then, and shabby – well, anything nearer rags, and yet making believe

to have an air of gentility about it, I never came across. I don't remember ever having a boot-heel brought so directly under my observation which was so wonderfully trodden down on one side. In a moment of confidence, too, he showed me a hole in the right boot-sole that he had worn benefit cards over, on the inside – some of the unsold ones remaining from his last ticket night.

I was confoundedly hard up myself about that time, having just come ashore from a trip in one of those coffin-ships, as they call them now. "Run" they wanted to make out, but it wasn't much of a run, either. The craft was so rotten, there were hardly two planks sticking properly together, and the last man had scarcely got his last leg into the boat, when the whole ricketty rabbit-hutch went down, and only as many bubbles as you could fill a soup-plate with stayed a-top to mark the whereabouts. But the owners wanted to press the charge, and for a while I wanted to lie close, and that's why I came to London, which is a big bag, as it were, where one pea's like another when they're well shaken up in it.

You'll say it was rather like those birds who, when they hear the sportsman coming, dive their heads into the sand, and leave the other three-quarters of them in full view to be shot at, thinking no one else can see it, because they don't happen to be able to see it themselves. You'll say it was like one of them, for me, a sailor, wanting to keep dark from the police, to go skulking about in waterside taverns and coffee-houses Wapping and Rotherhithe way; well, perhaps it was.

It was at a coffee-house in Wapping I met Atlantic Jones, and he scared me a bit the first time I met him. It wasn't a pretty kind of coffee-house, not one of those you read about in that rare old book, the *Spectator*, where the fops, and dandies, and bloods, "most did congregate," where they "quaffed" and "toasted" in the good old style, which, by the way, must have been somewhat of an expensive old style, and, thank goodness, even some of us third or fourth-raters, nowadays, can spend an odd half-hour or so from time to time very much as the biggest nobs would spend it, though we have but a few silver pieces in our pocket.

To the good old style of coffee-house my fine gentleman, with the brocaded coat-tails, dainty lace ruffles, and big, powdered periwig, would be borne, smoothly (with an occasional jolt or two that went for nothing) in a sedan chair; and on his arrival there, if it were night-time, would call for his wine, his long pipe, his newspaper, and his wax-candles, and sit solemnly enjoying himself, while humbler folks blinked in the dim obscurity surrounding him, for most likely it was not everybody frequenting the place who could afford to be thus illuminated.

No; this was one of the most ordinary, common, and objectionable kind of coffee-shops, where the most frequent order was for "half a pint and slices;" where the half-pint was something thick and slab, which analytical research might have proved to be artfully compounded of parched peas and chicory, with a slight flavouring of burnt treacle; while the

slices were good old, solemn, stale bread, with an oleaginous superficial surface, applied by a skilled hand, spreading over broader surfaces than scarcely would have seemed credible; so that regular customers, when they wanted to have their joke, would pick up a a slice, and turn it about, and hold it up to the light and put a penny in their right eye, making believe they had got an eye-glass there, and say, "Look here, guv'nor! which side is it? I'm only a arskin' fear it should fall on my Sunday go-to-meeting suit, and grease it."

Rashers of quite unbelievable rancidness, and "nice eggs," in boiling which poultry, in its early promise, was not unfrequently made an untimely end of, were the chief articles of consumption. The newspapers and periodicals – which, somehow, always appeared to be a week old – were marked by innumerable rings, where the customers had stood their coffee-cups upon them, and there were thousands of brisk and lively flies forever buzzing round about the customers' heads and settling on their noses; and thousands more of sleepy flies, stationary on the walls and ceiling, and thickly studding the show rasher in the window; and thousands and thousands more dead flies, lying about everywhere, and turning up as little surprises in the milk jug and the coffee-grounds, on the butter, or under the bacon, when you turned it over.

Not in the eggs, by-the-bye. You were pretty safe from them there – the embryo chick was the worst thing that could happen to you.

Not altogether a nice kind of place to pass one's evenings in, you are thinking. Well, no; but it was uncommonly quiet and snug, and uncommonly cheap, which was rather a point with me. I was, in truth, so hard up that night that I had stood outside the window a good twenty minutes, balancing my last coin – a fourpenny-bit – in my hand, and tossing up, mentally, to decide whether I should spend it in a bed or a supper. I decided on the latter, and entered the coffee-house, where I hoped, after I had eaten, to be able to sleep away an hour or two in peace, if I could get a snug corner to myself.

Several other people, however, seemed to have gone there with something of the same idea, and snored up and down, with their heads comfortably pillowed among the dirty plates and tea-things, while others carried on low, muttered conversations, and one woman was telling an interminable tale, breaking off now and then to whimper.

There was one empty box, in a darkish corner, and I made for that, and ordered my meal – thanking my stars that I had been so lucky as to find such a good place. But I was not left long in undisputed possession of it.

While I was disposing of the very first mouthful the shop-door opened, and a blue-cheeked, anxious-looking man peeped in, as though he were frightened – or, perhaps, ashamed – and glanced eagerly round. Then, as it seemed, finding nothing of a very alarming character, he came a step further in, and stopped again, to have another look, and his eyes fell upon me, and he

stared very hard indeed, and came straight to my box, and sat down opposite to me.

I can't say this made me feel particularly comfortable, for, you see, for some days past I had spent the greater part of my time slipping stealthily round corners, and dodging up and down the sneakiest courts and alleys I could come across, with an idea that every lamp-post was a policeman in disguise that had got his eye on me.

I can't say I felt much more comfortable at this stranger's behaviour, when he had taken his seat and ordered a cup of coffee and a round of toast, in a low, confidential tone of voice, just, as it struck me, as a detective might have done who had the coffee-shop keeper in his pay. Then he pulled a very mysterious little brown paper-covered book from his pocket, consisting of some twenty pieces of manuscript, and he attentively read in it, and then fixed his eyes upon the ceiling and mumbled.

Said I to myself, "Perhaps this is some poor parson chap, learning up his sermon for next Sunday."

But then this was only Monday night; it could hardly be that.

Presently, too, I noticed that he was secretly taking stock of me round the side of the book. What, after all, if the written sheets of paper contained a minute description of myself and the other runaways who were "wanted?"

He now certainly seemed to be making a comparison between me and something he was reading – summing me up, as it were – and I felt precious uncomfortable, I can tell you.

All at once he spoke.

"It's a chilly evening, sir."

"Yes," I said.

"A sailor, I think?"

There was no good denying that. A sailor looks like a sailor, and nothing else.

"Yes," I said, slowly.

"A fine profession, sir!" said he; "a noble profession. Shiver my timbers!"

Now, you know, we don't shiver our timbers in reality; and if we did, we shouldn't shiver them in the tone of voice the blue-cheeked man shivered his, and I couldn't resist a broad grin, though I still felt uncomfortable.

"I've no objection, I'm sure," said I, "if *you* have none."

He was silent for a while, and seemed to be thinking it over, then went on reading and mumbling. Evidently he was a detective. I had met one before once, dressed as a countryman, and talking Brummagem Yorkshire. A detective wanting to get into conversation with a sailor was just likely, I fancied, to start with an out-of-the-way thing like "shiver my timbers." I made my mind up I wouldn't be pumped very dry.

"Been about the world a good deal, sir, I suppose?" he said, returning to the charge after a brief pause. "Been wrecked, I dare say – often?"

"Pretty often – often enough."

"Have you, now?" he said, laying down his book, and leaning

back, to have a good look at me as he drew a long breath. "A-h!"

I went on with my meal, putting the best face I could on it, and pretending not to notice him; but it was not very easy to do this naturally, and at last I dropped my bread and butter, and fixed him, in my turn.

"You ought to know me in time," said I.

"I should be proud to!" he answered, readily. "I should take it as a favour if you'd allow me to make your acquaintance – to become friendly with you!"

"Well," said I, still with the detective idea strong on me, "you see, I like to know whom it is I'm making friends with. What port do you hail from, pray?"

The strange man made a plunge at me, and shook my hand heartily, shaking also the slice of bread and butter I was holding in it.

"Did you take me for a seafaring man?" he asked, in a joyful voice. "You really don't mean that? That's capital!"

"Well," said I, "aren't you?"

"No," he answered, in great excitement; "of course not. I'm going to be very shortly, if I've any luck, but I've not taken to the line yet. See here, sir, that's who I am."

And, so saying, he produced a large illustrated play-bill from his pocket, such as you may find stuck about the walls at the East-end, or on the Surrey side, and on which I read, "The Death Struggle. Enormous success!" in large letters.

"Oh!" I said; "that's you, is it?"

I thought he was, probably, rather cracked.

But he tapped his finger-end emphatically upon one particular spot, and indicated half a line of very small type, and stooping my head so as to bring my eyes down close to it I made out, "Count Randolph, a gambler and a roué, Mr Jones."

When I had read it, he appeared to look at me, expecting that I should say something appropriate, or, at any rate, look awe-stricken. But it was very funny to look at this long-faced, hungry-looking fellow, pitching into his buttered toast, and associate him with the wickedness set down to his account, so "Bless me!" was as much as I could possibly manage.

"Yes, it is," said he; "but that's nothing. It's a dirty shame of them to put a fellow in that type, and leave his initial out, too! But that's all jealousy, you know. That's Barkins, that is! It's Barkins's house, and Barkins's bill, and, hang it! it's all Barkins's!"

On referring a second time to the picture-bill, there, sure enough, I found the name of Barkins flourishing in all sorts of type and in all manner of places.

"Ah!" cried Mr Jones, finishing his coffee with one gulp, "it won't always be so, that's one comfort! I've a chance here, sir, – one of a thousand; and you'll see then whether I'm equal to it or not!"

"I'm sure you will be," I replied, not exactly knowing what else to say. "You find your business rather hard work sometimes, don't you? and the pay sometimes a little doubtful?" I added, after a pause.

"I wish it was *only* a little," Mr Jones replied, with a woeful grin; "but I get along, somehow – I keep alive, somehow; and it won't always be so – not when I get my chance, you know!"

I really thought I ought to say something now, so I asked when he expected the chance, and what it was.

"Ah, that's it!" said he. "Do you know you could be a good deal of service to me, if you'd the time?"

"I've more time than money, worse luck!" I said. "I should be glad to earn a trifle anyhow, and should be much obliged if you could point out the how; but as to being of service to you, I'd gladly be that for nothing."

You see, I had taken a good look at Mr Jones's ragged edges and glazed elbows by this time, and had come to the conclusion that, even gambler and roué as he was, he must have had about as much as he could do to look after himself.

I was mistaken. Mr Jones had influence, though he might be short of cash.

"If you're really hard up," he said, "I can put you onto a kind of job – if you like it. They are doing 'The Battle of Blenheim' at our place. It'll be eighteenpence a night. You'll have to double the armies, and be shot down at the end of every act. But it's all easy enough."

I thought this would suit me very well for the time, and most likely shooting down wasn't permanently injurious to the system any more than being a gambler and a roué; so I thanked him very much.

"But how can I help you in return?" I asked.

"Well, it's to that chance I spoke of," he said, confidentially. "Look here – I've an engagement for a tour down to the Midland counties. The pay isn't very wonderful, to start with; but I'm to have more if we do good business, you know; and I've stipulated that we do a nautical drama, and I play *Jack Brine*– that's the sailor hero, you know – myself."

"What makes you want to play a sailor? I suppose you've done it before, and made a hit?"

"Well – no; I can't say I've ever tried it. But nautical pieces used to be a tremendous go once, and are so still down in some parts of the country, and – There! *I've got it in me*, I'm certain – I feel it here!"

And he tapped the breast of a dilapidated sham sealskin waistcoat as he spoke, and knit his brows with determination.

"But you haven't told me yet how I can be of service to you," said I.

"Well," he said, "look here! This is one of the acts of the piece I'm going to do. I've done it myself – faked it up, you know, pulling in the best bits from one or two others; but that's nothing – and it'll go immense! It's cram-full of business, and the situations are tremendous!"

"It ought to go, if that's the case."

"It's a certainty, dear boy! It can't help it! But there's just one thing about it, do you know, that makes me uncomfortable, and that's where you can help me."

"And that is – "

"You see, I'm not a nautical man myself. It was very odd of you to take me for one right off! Of course, I can put it on pretty well when I like; but if you want the real honest truth, I never even saw the sea in all my life – never been nearer to it than Rosherville; and as I don't happen to be personally acquainted with any nautical men, the fact is I'm not quite certain there is not a screw loose up and down in the words. Of course I'm all right in the shiver my timbers and douse my pig-tails parts; but it's when you get reefing your jib-boom and hugging the shore with your lee-scupper that you don't feel altogether as if you'd got your sea-legs on. Look here, I'd like to go through the thing with you quietly, and you can tell me where it isn't quite right."

I gladly agreed to render him all the assistance in my power. I thought if there was very much more of the same style he had been quoting there ought to have been a shipwreck or two up and down in that piece of his, and that I should be something like a Captain Boyton's swimming-dress to this poor struggling author over head and ears in a tempestuous ocean of his own manufacture.

I met him by appointment, therefore, next day at the stage-door of the theatre where he was acting, and where he had promised to procure me an opening as extra or supernumerary. He got me on easily enough, and my duties, though they made me precious hot, did not require very much genius. I was on my mettle, and wanted to reflect as much credit as possible upon my

new friend for the introduction, so I fought away and took forlorn hopes like one o'clock; and the prompter was good enough to say that I evidently had something in me, and would do better presently, if I stuck to it.

After a night or two they found I was an active kind of fellow, and had the full use of my arms and legs, so they introduced a bit of rope climbing on my account, and worked in another bit specially, where I was shot down from among the rigging, with a round of applause every night.

In the daytime, Mr Jones and I talked the nautical drama, and I set his "lee-scuppers" right for him, and got him to make things generally a little bit more like the right thing.

At the end of a fortnight, however, I was able to get at my friends, and through them to stop the mouths of the angry coffin-ship owners; and so I had no more occasion to fight shy of the seaports, and resolved to go to sea again.

If it had not been for that, Mr Jones would have tried to get me into the company he was just then joining, and I should have figured in one or two small parts in the great drama.

However, instead of that, I bid him good-by, and thanked him, and wished him every success, and went my way, leaving him to go his.

I only went for a short cruise round the coast of Spain, but I met with the pleasantest mates – bar present company, of course – I ever remember sailing with. We all of us got to be like brothers before the ship touched land again in England, and as

another vessel was in want of hands, and about to sail in two or three days for the China Sea, I and five others agreed to stick together and join. I took two days just to drop down and see my friends, and the next day we met together and had a bit of a spree, agreeing to spend our last night at the play. I had told my messmates about Jones, and how I had been on the stage myself, so they looked up to me as rather an authority, as you may suppose, and passing me over the play-bill the waiter had brought us, asked if I knew anything of the piece they were playing.

Know anything, indeed!

Ha! ha! That was not bad.

Why, it was Jones's piece, and Atlantic Jones, in great letters, was to appear in his great character of *Jack Brine*, the Bo's'en of the Bay of Biscay.

Of course we went. We were there for that matter a good hour before there was any absolute necessity, and stood waiting at the doors. There weren't many other people waiting there, by the way. There was one small boy, if I remember right. Not another soul; and at first we weren't quite sure we had not mistaken the night. However, that was not so. The doors did open a few minutes late, and then we made a rush in all at once, paying a shilling and sixpence each all round for seats in the dress circle.

After we'd been there some little time, and the small boy had been the same time in the last seat in the pit, from which he stared up at us with his eyes and mouth wide open, we caught sight of some one peeping in a frightened kind of way round the curtain.

It was Jones, and we all gave him a cheer to encourage him, and let him know we had rallied round.

He didn't seem encouraged, but ran away again; and the money-taker, having plenty of spare time on his hands, as it seemed, came and told us to keep steady if we wanted to stop where we were.

My mates were, some of them, inclined to run rusty at the advice, for we'd done no more than make things look a bit cheerful under rather depressing circumstances, only we would not have a row with him, for Jones's sake. After a while, one or two more people dropped in, up and down, and we were, maybe, thirty in all, when the curtain went up at last, and business began in earnest.

I've spent a good many roughish nights, and suffered a tidy lot in 'em, but I wouldn't engage under a trifle for another such night as that was. I pitied poor Jones from the bottom of my heart.

You see, he was a well-meaning kind of fellow, but there wasn't a great deal of him, and he hadn't all the voice he might have had: and when he sang out as loud as he could, but rather squeaky, "Avast there, you land-lubbers, or I'll let daylight into you!" someone said, "Don't hurt 'em, sir; they mightn't like it!"

About the end of the second act he began to show signs of being dead beat, and I sent him round a pot of stout to help him on, for I regularly felt for him. We applauded all we could, too. The pit ceiling was a sufferer that night, so I don't deceive you; but it was no good. No one else applauded a bit. Some of them

hissed. Indeed, if it had not been for my mates being my mates, and sticking to me and Jones, as in duty bound, I believe they'd have hissed, too. As it was, when the act-drop fell, and we all went out for a liquor, they weren't over-anxious to come back again, only they did, of course.

The last act was very cruel. I think the stout had got into Jones's head, and into his legs, too; for he was all over the stage, and, we fancied, half his time, didn't know what he was up to. Then came the great situation, where he was to board the pirate schooner single-handed, and rescue his lady-love – and, in the name of everything that is awfully dreadful, what do you think happened to Jones then?

It might have been something wrong in the scenery, or it might have been something wrong with Jones, but he appeared on the upper deck of the pirate boat, and was going to jump down on the lower deck, flourishing a cutlass, when he somehow slipped, and caught behind.

I shall never forget it. He caught somehow by the trousers, and hung there, dangling like an old coat on a peg. Then he tore himself loose with a great wrench, while every one in the house was screaming with laughter, and rushed off the stage.

We took poor Jones away that night, and we liquored him up a lot, and he wept as he told us what he had gone through, and somehow we couldn't, laugh much as we listened to him.

I don't know how it happened. I think he said he would go on board with us, and have a final glass, and he was to come back

in a boat that had taken some goods on board from the shore. I don't know how it was, I say; but six hours after we had got fairly out to sea, some one found a pair of legs sticking out from behind something, and at the end of these legs were Jones's head and body.

When we had shaken him out of a dead sleep, he asked to be put on shore at once, and talked wildly of bringing an action against the skipper. But the skipper put it to Jones in a jocular kind of way, that the general practice was to keel-haul stowaways, when you felt inclined to treat them kindly, or heave them overboard with a shot tied to their heels, if you didn't; so Jones calmed down after a while, and made up his mind to go to China with us quietly, and make no more fuss about it.

I don't think a man on board wanted to act unkindly to poor Jones; and, 'pon my soul, I'd not have sat by quietly and seen it. But Jones tempted Providence, as it were, and was the unluckiest beggar alive.

To begin with, I never knew a man so sea-sick that it didn't kill right off. I never knew a man with more unreliable legs on him; so that there was no saying where he'd be to a dozen yards or so when he once started. And he fell overboard twice. So all this made him rather a laughingstock among the regular hands. But he was so good-natured, and stood the chaff so good-humouredly, that we got all of us to take a mighty fancy to his company.

Poking fun upon one subject only he did not take to kindly,

and that was the famous *Jack Brine* impersonation, which we presently found out, very much to our surprise, he looked upon as little short of perfection.

"I don't regret this affair altogether," said he, one day. "You see, all I want is actual experience of the perils of the ocean."

Before long he had them, too.

The reason why we had been required to join in such a hurry was that several of the foreign sailors had run at the last moment, and there was a great difficulty in obtaining any Englishmen willing to sail with them. With the exception of the skipper, we six sailors, and Atlantic Jones, the rest were all Lascars – savage, sneaking, bloodthirsty wretches, that there was no trusting a moment out of your sight. I had never before made a voyage with that kind of company, and, if I can help it, never will again. However, we felt no particular uneasiness about them. Any one of us, we simply consoled ourselves by reflecting, could quite easily thrash half a dozen of the foreign beggars in a fair fight. The worst of it was, though, when the fight did come, it was not a fair one.

I began by telling you that I was a bad storyteller; I must finish by telling you so again. And after all, what story have I left to tell, which would not be to you, sailors like myself, a thrice-told tale? It came about, in the usual way, with a night surprise. I woke up with a man's hand tightening on my throat, with a gleaming knife before my eyes. Then – thud! thud! – it came down on me, through the thick blankets I had twisted round me. Lucky for me

they were so thick!

This was all I saw; then the light was knocked out, and I heard the black wretch's naked feet pattering on the steps, as he went up swiftly to the deck above, then a deep groan from the bunk of one of my old messmates – it was one called Adams.

I was horribly cut about, and bleeding fast; but I managed to creep out, and feel through the darkness. I came, just within a few feet, upon a man's body, stretched out, lying on its face. Though it was dark as pitch, I had no need to touch it twice to know that it was a dead body. Then I got to Adams, and called him by name.

He answered faintly, "Yes!"

I asked him where the crew were, and whether he knew what had happened.

They were all killed, he thought, and the Lascars had got the vessel in their hands.

We were doubtless supposed to be murdered, too. It must have all been done very quickly. Adams had heard no sound from the deck above, and I had heard none.

The crippled condition in which we were, and the darkness, rendered us almost entirely helpless; but I managed somehow – partly on my feet, partly on my hands and knees – to crawl up the ladder. The hatchway was closed above me. We were prisoners.

I could from this place make out that a wild debauch was going on on the after-deck, and I heard one of the scoundrels shrieking out a song, in a wild, discordant voice. They had broken open the stores, and were getting mad drunk with rum.

I crawled back to tell the news, and to think what could be done.

Adams was almost fainting from loss of blood. For myself, I was scarcely good for anything – not for a struggle, that was certain. I might defend myself for a time. I would try, anyhow. I could only die.

All at once we heard the hatchway opening stealthily.

"Whist!" said Jones's voice. "Who's alive down there?"

"Two!" I answered. "Adams and I – Tom Watson. We are both badly wounded."

"Thank heaven you are not dead!" he said. "You can save yourselves, if you've strength enough to lower yourselves into a boat. I've got it down into the water. Will you try?"

We went at once, and gained the deck. Only one of the villains was on the watch forward. We could see the dark figures of the rest sprawling about in the semi-darkness far aft, and we went down on our hands and knees, and crawled in the shadow to the side. But just as we reached it, the moon came out from behind a cloud, and the man fired, and shouted loudly.

Adams went down, and we two only were left.

"Save yourself! Jump!" cried Jones. "I'll keep 'em back! Avast there, you black-hearted swabs, or I'll chop you to pieces!" And as five of them, the soberest of the lot, came rushing on us in a body, he laid about him right and left with a large cutlass, much heavier than I should have believed he could use, and the beggars rolled over, slashed and mangled beneath his strokes.

I never before or since have seen a man fight like Atlantic Jones did then. Stripped to the waist, his long hair flying in the wind, his hands red with blood, his body bespattered, too, he looked more like a fiend than a human being, much less a very bad play-actor; but all the while he fought he never once ceased yelling out the silly gibberish he thought was sailors' talk.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.