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Chance

By

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CHANCE--A TALE IN TWO PARTS

Those that hold that all things are governed by Fortune had not erred, had they not persisted there

SIR THOMAS BROWNE

TO SIR HUGH CLIFFORD, K.C.M.G. WHO STEADFAST FRIENDSHIP IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE EXISTENCE OF THESE PAGES

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PART I--THE DAMSEL

CHAPTER ONE--YOUNG POWELL AND HIS CHANCE

I believe he had seen us out of the window coming off to dine in the dinghy of a fourteen-ton yawl belonging to Marlow my host and skipper. We helped the boy we had with us to haul the boat up on the landing-stage before we went up to the riverside inn, where we found our new acquaintance eating his dinner in dignified loneliness at the head of a long table, white and inhospitable like a snow bank.

The red tint of his clear-cut face with trim short black whiskers under a cap of curly iron-grey hair was the only warm spot in the dinginess of that room cooled by the cheerless tablecloth. We knew him already by sight as the owner of a little five-ton cutter, which he sailed alone apparently, a fellow yachtsman in the unpretending band of fanatics who cruise at the mouth of the Thames. But the first time he addressed the waiter sharply as 'steward' we knew him at once for a sailor as well as a yachtsman.

Presently he had occasion to reprove that same waiter for the slovenly manner in which the dinner was served. He did it with considerable energy and then turned to us.

"If we at sea," he declared, "went about our work as people ashore high and low go about theirs we should never make a living. No one would employ us. And moreover no ship navigated and sailed in the happy-go-lucky manner people conduct their business on shore would ever arrive into port."

Since he had retired from the sea he had been astonished to discover that the educated people were not much better than the others. No one seemed to take any proper pride in his work: from plumbers who were simply thieves to, say, newspaper men (he seemed to think them a specially intellectual class) who never by any chance gave a correct version of the simplest affair. This universal inefficiency of what he called "the shore gang" he ascribed in general to the want of responsibility and to a sense of security.

"They see," he went on, "that no matter what they do this tight little island won't turn turtle with them or spring a leak and go to the bottom with their wives and children."

From this point the conversation took a special turn relating exclusively to sea-