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-

life. On that subject he got quickly in touch with Marlow who in his time had followed the sea. They kept up a lively exchange of reminiscences while I listened. They agreed that the happiest time in their lives was as youngsters in good ships, with no care in the world but not to lose a watch below when at sea and not a moment's time in going ashore after work hours when in harbour. They agreed also as to the proudest moment they had known in that calling which is never embraced on rational and practical grounds, because of the glamour of its romantic associations. It was the moment when they had passed successfully their first examination and left the seamanship Examiner with the little precious slip of blue paper in their hands.

"That day I wouldn't have called the Queen my cousin," declared our new acquaintance enthusiastically.

At that time the Marine Board examinations took place at the St. Katherine's Dock House on Tower Hill, and he informed us that he had a special affection for the view of that historic locality, with the Gardens to the left, the front of the Mint to the right, the miserable tumble-down little houses farther away, a cabstand, boot-blacks squatting on the edge of the pavement and a pair of big policemen gazing with an air of superiority at the doors of the Black Horse public-house across the road. This was the part of the world, he said, his eyes first took notice of, on the finest day of his life. He had emerged from the main entrance of St. Katherine's Dock House a full-fledged second mate after the hottest time of his life with Captain R-, the most dreaded of the three seamanship Examiners who at the time were responsible for the merchant service officers qualifying in the Port of London.

"We all who were preparing to pass," he said, "used to shake in our shoes at the idea of going before him. He kept me for an hour and a half in the torture chamber and behaved as though he hated me. He kept his eyes shaded with one of his hands. Suddenly he let it drop saying, "You will do!" Before I realised what he meant he was pushing the blue slip across the table. I jumped up as if my chair had caught fire.

"Thank you, sir," says I, grabbing the paper.

"Good morning, good luck to you," he growls at me.

"The old doorkeeper fussed out of the cloak-room with my hat. They always do. But he looked very hard at me before he ventured to ask in a sort of timid whisper: "Got through all right, sir?" For all answer I dropped a half-crown into his soft broad palm. "Well," says he with a sudden grin from ear to ear, "I never knew him keep any of you gentlemen so long. He failed two second mates this

morning before your turn came. Less than twenty minutes each: that's about his usual time."

"I found myself downstairs without being aware of the steps as if I had floated down the staircase. The finest day in my life. The day you get your first command is nothing to it. For one thing a man is not so young then and for another with us, you know, there is nothing much more to expect. Yes, the finest day of one's life, no doubt, but then it is just a day and no more. What comes after is about the most unpleasant time for a youngster, the trying to get an officer's berth with nothing much to show but a brand-new certificate. It is surprising how useless you find that piece of ass's skin that you have been putting yourself in such a state about. It didn't strike me at the time that a Board of Trade certificate does not make an officer, not by a long long way. But the slippers of the ships I was haunting with demands for a job knew that very well. I don't wonder at them now, and I don't blame them either. But this 'trying to get a ship' is pretty hard on a youngster all the same . . . "

He went on then to tell us how tired he was and how discouraged by this lesson of disillusion following swiftly upon the finest day of his life. He told us how he went the round of all the ship-owners' offices in the City where some junior clerk would furnish him with printed forms of application which he took home to fill up in the evening. He used to run out just before midnight to post them in the nearest pillar-box. And that was all that ever came of it. In his own words: he might just as well have dropped them all properly addressed and stamped into the sewer grating.

Then one day, as he was wending his weary way to the docks, he met a friend and former shipmate a little older than himself outside the Fenchurch Street Railway Station.

He craved for sympathy but his friend had just "got a ship" that very morning and was hurrying home in a state of outward joy and inward uneasiness usual to a sailor who after many days of waiting suddenly gets a berth. This friend had the time to condole with him but briefly. He must be moving. Then as he was running off, over his shoulder as it were, he suggested: "Why don't you go and speak to Mr. Powell in the Shipping Office." Our friend objected that he did not know Mr. Powell from Adam. And the other already pretty near round the corner shouted back advice: "Go to the private door of the Shipping Office and walk right up to him. His desk is by the window. Go up boldly and say I sent you."

Our new acquaintance looking from one to the other of us declared: "Upon my word, I had grown so desperate that I'd have gone boldly up to the devil himself on the mere hint that he had a second mate's job to give away."

It was at this point that interrupting his flow of talk to light his pipe but holding us with his eye he inquired whether we had known Powell. Marlow with a slight reminiscent smile murmured that he "remembered him very well."

Then there was a pause. Our new acquaintance had become involved in a vexatious difficulty with his pipe which had suddenly betrayed his trust and disappointed his anticipation of self-indulgence. To keep the ball rolling I asked Marlow if this Powell was remarkable in any way.

"He was not exactly remarkable," Marlow answered with his usual nonchalance. "In a general way it's very difficult for one to become remarkable. People won't take sufficient notice of one, don't you know. I remember Powell so well simply because as one of the Shipping Masters in the Port of London he dispatched me to sea on several long stages of my sailor's pilgrimage. He resembled Socrates. I mean he resembled him genuinely: that is in the face. A philosophical mind is but an accident. He reproduced exactly the familiar bust of the immortal sage, if you will imagine the bust with a high top hat riding far on the back of the head, and a black coat over the shoulders. As I never saw him except from the other side of the long official counter bearing the five writing desks of the five Shipping Masters, Mr. Powell has remained a bust to me."

Our new acquaintance advanced now from the mantelpiece with his pipe in good working order.

"What was the most remarkable about Powell," he enunciated dogmatically with his head in a cloud of smoke, "is that he should have had just that name. You see, my name happens to be Powell too."

It was clear that this intelligence was not imparted to us for social purposes. It required no acknowledgment. We continued to gaze at him with expectant eyes.

He gave himself up to the vigorous enjoyment of his pipe for a silent minute or two. Then picking up the thread of his story he told us how he had started hot foot for Tower Hill. He had not been that way since the day of his examination--the finest day of his life--the day of his overweening pride. It was very different now. He would not have called the Queen his cousin, still, but this time it was from a sense of profound abasement. He didn't think himself good enough for anybody's kinship. He envied the purple-nosed old cab-drivers on the stand, the boot-black boys at the edge of the pavement, the two large bobbies pacing slowly along the Tower Gardens railings in the consciousness of their infallible might, and the bright scarlet sentries walking smartly to and fro before the Mint. He envied them their places in the scheme of world's labour. And he envied also the

miserable sallow, thin-faced loafers blinking their obscene eyes and rubbing their greasy shoulders against the door-jambs of the Black Horse pub, because they were too far gone to feel their degradation.

I must render the man the justice that he conveyed very well to us the sense of his youthful hopelessness surprised at not finding its place in the sun and no recognition of its right to live.

He went up the outer steps of St. Katherine's Dock House, the very steps from which he had some six weeks before surveyed the cabstand, the buildings, the policemen, the boot-blacks, the paint, gilt, and plateglass of the Black Horse, with the eye of a Conqueror. At the time he had been at the bottom of his heart surprised that all this had not greeted him with songs and incense, but now (he made no secret of it) he made his entry in a slinking fashion past the doorkeeper's glass box. "I hadn't any half-crowns to spare for tips," he remarked grimly. The man, however, ran out after him asking: "What do you require?" but with a grateful glance up at the first floor in remembrance of Captain R-'s examination room (how easy and delightful all that had been) he bolted down a flight leading to the basement and found himself in a place of dusk and mystery and many doors. He had been afraid of being stopped by some rule of no-admittance. However he was not pursued.

The basement of St. Katherine's Dock House is vast in extent and confusing in its plan. Pale shafts of light slant from above into the gloom of its chilly passages. Powell wandered up and down there like an early Christian refugee in the catacombs; but what little faith he had in the success of his enterprise was oozing out at his finger-tips. At a dark turn under a gas bracket whose flame was half turned down his self- confidence abandoned him altogether.

"I stood there to think a little," he said. "A foolish thing to do because of course I got scared. What could you expect? It takes some nerve to tackle a stranger with a request for a favour. I wished my namesake Powell had been the devil himself. I felt somehow it would have been an easier job. You see, I never believed in the devil enough to be scared of him; but a man can make himself very unpleasant. I looked at a lot of doors, all shut tight, with a growing conviction that I would never have the pluck to open one of them. Thinking's no good for one's nerve. I concluded I would give up the whole business. But I didn't give up in the end, and I'll tell you what stopped me. It was the recollection of that confounded doorkeeper who had called after me. I felt sure the fellow would be on the look-out at the head of the stairs. If he asked me what I had been after, as he had the right to do, I wouldn't know what to answer that wouldn't make me look silly if no worse. I got very hot. There was no chance of slinking out of this business.

"I had lost my bearings somehow down there. Of the many doors of various sizes, right and left, a good few had glazed lights above; some however must have led merely into lumber rooms or such like, because when I brought myself to try one or two I was disconcerted to find that they were locked. I stood there irresolute and uneasy like a baffled thief. The confounded basement was as still as a grave and I became aware of my heart beats. Very uncomfortable sensation. Never happened to me before or since. A bigger door to the left of me, with a large brass handle looked as if it might lead into the Shipping Office. I tried it, setting my teeth. "Here goes!"

"It came open quite easily. And lo! the place it opened into was hardly any bigger than a cupboard. Anyhow it wasn't more than ten feet by twelve; and as I in a way expected to see the big shadowy cellar-like extent of the Shipping Office where I had been once or twice before, I was extremely startled. A gas bracket hung from the middle of the ceiling over a dark, shabby writing-desk covered with a litter of yellowish dusty documents. Under the flame of the single burner which made the place ablaze with light, a plump, little man was writing hard, his nose very near the desk. His head was perfectly bald and about the same drab tint as the papers. He appeared pretty dusty too.

"I didn't notice whether there were any cobwebs on him, but I shouldn't wonder if there were because he looked as though he had been imprisoned for years in that little hole. The way he dropped his pen and sat blinking my way upset me very much. And his dungeon was hot and musty; it smelt of gas and mushrooms, and seemed to be somewhere 120 feet below the ground. Solid, heavy stacks of paper filled all the corners half-way up to the ceiling. And when the thought flashed upon me that these were the premises of the Marine Board and that this fellow must be connected in some way with ships and sailors and the sea, my astonishment took my breath away. One couldn't imagine why the Marine Board should keep that bald, fat creature slaving down there. For some reason or other I felt sorry and ashamed to have found him out in his wretched captivity. I asked gently and sorrowfully: "The Shipping Office, please."

He piped up in a contemptuous squeaky voice which made me start: "Not here. Try the passage on the other side. Street side. This is the Dock side. You've lost your way . . . "

He spoke in such a spiteful tone that I thought he was going to round off with the words: "You fool" . . . and perhaps he meant to. But what he finished sharply with was: "Shut the door quietly after you."

And I did shut it quietly--you bet. Quick and quiet. The indomitable spirit of that chap impressed me. I wonder sometimes whether he has succeeded in

writing himself into liberty and a pension at last, or had to go out of his gas-lighted grave straight into that other dark one where nobody would want to intrude. My humanity was pleased to discover he had so much kick left in him, but I was not comforted in the least. It occurred to me that if Mr. Powell had the same sort of temper . . . However, I didn't give myself time to think and scuttled across the space at the foot of the stairs into the passage where I'd been told to try. And I tried the first door I came to, right away, without any hanging back, because coming loudly from the hall above an amazed and scandalized voice wanted to know what sort of game I was up to down there. "Don't you know there's no admittance that way?" it roared. But if there was anything more I shut it out of my hearing by means of a door marked Private on the outside. It let me into a six-feet wide strip between a long counter and the wall, taken off a spacious, vaulted room with a grated window and a glazed door giving daylight to the further end. The first thing I saw right in front of me were three middle-aged men having a sort of romp together round about another fellow with a thin, long neck and sloping shoulders who stood up at a desk writing on a large sheet of paper and taking no notice except that he grinned quietly to himself. They turned very sour at once when they saw me. I heard one of them mutter 'Hullo! What have we here?'

"'I want to see Mr. Powell, please,' I said, very civil but firm; I would let nothing scare me away now. This was the Shipping Office right enough. It was after 3 o'clock and the business seemed over for the day with them. The long-necked fellow went on with his writing steadily. I observed that he was no longer grinning. The three others tossed their heads all together towards the far end of the room where a fifth man had been looking on at their antics from a high stool. I walked up to him as boldly as if he had been the devil himself. With one foot raised up and resting on the cross-bar of his seat he never stopped swinging the other which was well clear of the stone floor. He had unbuttoned the top of his waistcoat and he wore his tall hat very far at the back of his head. He had a full unwrinkled face and such clear-shining eyes that his grey beard looked quite false on him, stuck on for a disguise. You said just now he resembled Socrates--didn't you? I don't know about that. This Socrates was a wise man, I believe?"

"He was," assented Marlow. "And a true friend of youth. He lectured them in a peculiarly exasperating manner. It was a way he had."

"Then give me Powell every time," declared our new acquaintance sturdily. "He didn't lecture me in any way. Not he. He said: 'How do you do?' quite kindly to my mumble. Then says he looking very hard at me: 'I don't think I know you--do I?'

"No, sir," I said and down went my heart sliding into my boots, just as the time

had come to summon up all my cheek. There's nothing meaner in the world than a piece of impudence that isn't carried off well. For fear of appearing shamefaced I started about it so free and easy as almost to frighten myself. He listened for a while looking at my face with surprise and curiosity and then held up his hand. I was glad enough to shut up, I can tell you.

"Well, you are a cool hand," says he. "And that friend of yours too. He pestered me coming here every day for a fortnight till a captain I'm acquainted with was good enough to give him a berth. And no sooner he's provided for than he turns you on. You youngsters don't seem to mind whom you get into trouble."

"It was my turn now to stare with surprise and curiosity. He hadn't been talking loud but he lowered his voice still more.

"Don't you know it's illegal?"

"I wondered what he was driving at till I remembered that procuring a berth for a sailor is a penal offence under the Act. That clause was directed of course against the swindling practices of the boarding-house crimps. It had never struck me it would apply to everybody alike no matter what the motive, because I believed then that people on shore did their work with care and foresight.

"I was confounded at the idea, but Mr. Powell made me soon see that an Act of Parliament hasn't any sense of its own. It has only the sense that's put into it; and that's precious little sometimes. He didn't mind helping a young man to a ship now and then, he said, but if we kept on coming constantly it would soon get about that he was doing it for money.

"A pretty thing that would be: the Senior Shipping-Master of the Port of London hauled up in a police court and fined fifty pounds," says he. "I've another four years to serve to get my pension. It could be made to look very black against me and don't you make any mistake about it," he says.

"And all the time with one knee well up he went on swinging his other leg like a boy on a gate and looking at me very straight with his shining eyes. I was confounded I tell you. It made me sick to hear him imply that somebody would make a report against him.

"Oh!" I asked shocked, "who would think of such a scurvy trick, sir?" I was half disgusted with him for having the mere notion of it.

"Who?" says he, speaking very low. "Anybody. One of the office messengers maybe. I've risen to be the Senior of this office and we are all very good friends

here, but don't you think that my colleague that sits next to me wouldn't like to go up to this desk by the window four years in advance of the regulation time? Or even one year for that matter. It's human nature."

"I could not help turning my head. The three fellows who had been skylarking when I came in were now talking together very soberly, and the long-necked chap was going on with his writing still. He seemed to me the most dangerous of the lot. I saw him sideface and his lips were set very tight. I had never looked at mankind in that light before. When one's young human nature shocks one. But what startled me most was to see the door I had come through open slowly and give passage to a head in a uniform cap with a Board of Trade badge. It was that blamed old doorkeeper from the hall. He had run me to earth and meant to dig me out too. He walked up the office smirking craftily, cap in hand.

"What is it, Symons?" asked Mr. Powell.

"I was only wondering where this 'ere gentleman 'ad gone to, sir. He slipped past me upstairs, sir."

I felt mighty uncomfortable.

"That's all right, Symons. I know the gentleman," says Mr. Powell as serious as a judge.

"Very well, sir. Of course, sir. I saw the gentleman running races all by 'isself down 'ere, so I . . ."

"It's all right I tell you," Mr. Powell cut him short with a wave of his hand; and, as the old fraud walked off at last, he raised his eyes to me. I did not know what to do: stay there, or clear out, or say that I was sorry.

"Let's see," says he, "what did you tell me your name was?"

"Now, observe, I hadn't given him my name at all and his question embarrassed me a bit. Somehow or other it didn't seem proper for me to fling his own name at him as it were. So I merely pulled out my new certificate from my pocket and put it into his hand unfolded, so that he could read Charles Powell written very plain on the parchment.

"He dropped his eyes on to it and after a while laid it quietly on the desk by his side. I didn't know whether he meant to make any remark on this coincidence. Before he had time to say anything the glass door came open with a bang and a tall, active man rushed in with great strides. His face looked very red below his

high silk hat. You could see at once he was the skipper of a big ship.

"Mr. Powell after telling me in an undertone to wait a little addressed him in a friendly way.

"I've been expecting you in every moment to fetch away your Articles, Captain. Here they are all ready for you." And turning to a pile of agreements lying at his elbow he took up the topmost of them. From where I stood I could read the words: "Ship Ferndale" written in a large round hand on the first page.

"No, Mr. Powell, they aren't ready, worse luck," says that skipper. "I've got to ask you to strike out my second officer." He seemed excited and bothered. He explained that his second mate had been working on board all the morning. At one o'clock he went out to get a bit of dinner and didn't turn up at two as he ought to have done. Instead there came a messenger from the hospital with a note signed by a doctor. Collar bone and one arm broken. Let himself be knocked down by a pair horse van while crossing the road outside the dock gate, as if he had neither eyes nor ears. And the ship ready to leave the dock at six o'clock to-morrow morning!

"Mr. Powell dipped his pen and began to turn the leaves of the agreement over. "We must then take his name off," he says in a kind of unconcerned sing-song.

"What am I to do?" burst out the skipper. "This office closes at four o'clock. I can't find a man in half an hour."

"This office closes at four," repeats Mr. Powell glancing up and down the pages and touching up a letter here and there with perfect indifference.

"Even if I managed to lay hold some time to-day of a man ready to go at such short notice I couldn't ship him regularly here--could I?"

"Mr. Powell was busy drawing his pen through the entries relating to that unlucky second mate and making a note in the margin.

"You could sign him on yourself on board," says he without looking up. "But I don't think you'll find easily an officer for such a pier-head jump."

"Upon this the fine-looking skipper gave signs of distress. The ship mustn't miss the next morning's tide. He had to take on board forty tons of dynamite and a hundred and twenty tons of gunpowder at a place down the river before proceeding to sea. It was all arranged for next day. There would be no end of fuss and complications if the ship didn't turn up in time . . . I couldn't help hearing all

this, while wishing him to take himself off, because I wanted to know why Mr. Powell had told me to wait. After what he had been saying there didn't seem any object in my hanging about. If I had had my certificate in my pocket I should have tried to slip away quietly; but Mr. Powell had turned about into the same position I found him in at first and was again swinging his leg. My certificate open on the desk was under his left elbow and I couldn't very well go up and jerk it away.

"I don't know," says he carelessly, addressing the helpless captain but looking fixedly at me with an expression as if I hadn't been there. "I don't know whether I ought to tell you that I know of a disengaged second mate at hand."

"Do you mean you've got him here?" shouts the other looking all over the empty public part of the office as if he were ready to fling himself bodily upon anything resembling a second mate. He had been so full of his difficulty that I verify believe he had never noticed me. Or perhaps seeing me inside he may have thought I was some understrapper belonging to the place. But when Mr. Powell nodded in my direction he became very quiet and gave me a long stare. Then he stooped to Mr. Powell's ear--I suppose he imagined he was whispering, but I heard him well enough.

"Looks very respectable."

"Certainly," says the shipping-master quite calm and staring all the time at me. "His name's Powell."

"Oh, I see!" says the skipper as if struck all of a heap. "But is he ready to join at once?"

"I had a sort of vision of my lodgings--in the North of London, too, beyond Dalston, away to the devil--and all my gear scattered about, and my empty sea-chest somewhere in an outhouse the good people I was staying with had at the end of their sooty strip of garden. I heard the Shipping Master say in the coolest sort of way:

"He'll sleep on board to-night."

"He had better," says the Captain of the Ferndale very businesslike, as if the whole thing were settled. I can't say I was dumb for joy as you may suppose. It wasn't exactly that. I was more by way of being out of breath with the quickness of it. It didn't seem possible that this was happening to me. But the skipper, after he had talked for a while with Mr. Powell, too low for me to hear became visibly perplexed.

"I suppose he had heard I was freshly passed and without experience as an officer, because he turned about and looked me over as if I had been exposed for sale.

"He's young," he mutters. "Looks smart, though . . . You're smart and willing (this to me very sudden and loud) and all that, aren't you?"

"I just managed to open and shut my mouth, no more, being taken unawares. But it was enough for him. He made as if I had deafened him with protestations of my smartness and willingness.

"Of course, of course. All right." And then turning to the Shipping Master who sat there swinging his leg, he said that he certainly couldn't go to sea without a second officer. I stood by as if all these things were happening to some other chap whom I was seeing through with it. Mr. Powell stared at me with those shining eyes of his. But that bothered skipper turns upon me again as though he wanted to snap my head off.

"You aren't too big to be told how to do things--are you? You've a lot to learn yet though you mayn't think so."

"I had half a mind to save my dignity by telling him that if it was my seamanship he was alluding to I wanted him to understand that a fellow who had survived being turned inside out for an hour and a half by Captain R- was equal to any demand his old ship was likely to make on his competence. However he didn't give me a chance to make that sort of fool of myself because before I could open my mouth he had gone round on another tack and was addressing himself affably to Mr. Powell who swinging his leg never took his eyes off me.

"I'll take your young friend willingly, Mr. Powell. If you let him sign on as second-mate at once I'll take the Articles away with me now."

"It suddenly dawned upon me that the innocent skipper of the Ferndale had taken it for granted that I was a relative of the Shipping Master! I was quite astonished at this discovery, though indeed the mistake was natural enough under the circumstances. What I ought to have admired was the reticence with which this misunderstanding had been established and acted upon. But I was too stupid then to admire anything. All my anxiety was that this should be cleared up. I was ass enough to wonder exceedingly at Mr. Powell failing to notice the misapprehension. I saw a slight twitch come and go on his face; but instead of setting right that mistake the Shipping Master swung round on his stool and addressed me as 'Charles.' He did. And I detected him taking a hasty squint at

my certificate just before, because clearly till he did so he was not sure of my christian name. "Now then come round in front of the desk, Charles," says he in a loud voice.

"Charles! At first, I declare to you, it didn't seem possible that he was addressing himself to me. I even looked round for that Charles but there was nobody behind me except the thin-necked chap still hard at his writing, and the other three Shipping Masters who were changing their coats and reaching for their hats, making ready to go home. It was the industrious thin-necked man who without laying down his pen lifted with his left hand a flap near his desk and said kindly:

"Pass this way."

I walked through in a trance, faced Mr. Powell, from whom I learned that we were bound to Port Elizabeth first, and signed my name on the Articles of the ship Ferndale as second mate--the voyage not to exceed two years.

"You won't fail to join--eh?" says the captain anxiously. "It would cause no end of trouble and expense if you did. You've got a good six hours to get your gear together, and then you'll have time to snatch a sleep on board before the crew joins in the morning."

"It was easy enough for him to talk of getting ready in six hours for a voyage that was not to exceed two years. He hadn't to do that trick himself, and with his sea-chest locked up in an outhouse the key of which had been mislaid for a week as I remembered. But neither was I much concerned. The idea that I was absolutely going to sea at six o'clock next morning hadn't got quite into my head yet. It had been too sudden.

"Mr. Powell, slipping the Articles into a long envelope, spoke up with a sort of cold half-laugh without looking at either of us.

"Mind you don't disgrace the name, Charles."

"And the skipper chimes in very kindly:

"He'll do well enough I dare say. I'll look after him a bit."

"Upon this he grabs the Articles, says something about trying to run in for a minute to see that poor devil in the hospital, and off he goes with his heavy swinging step after telling me sternly: "Don't you go like that poor fellow and get yourself run over by a cart as if you hadn't either eyes or ears."

"Mr. Powell," says I timidly (there was by then only the thin-necked man left in the office with us and he was already by the door, standing on one leg to turn the bottom of his trousers up before going away). "Mr. Powell," says I, "I believe the Captain of the Ferndale was thinking all the time that I was a relation of yours."

"I was rather concerned about the propriety of it, you know, but Mr. Powell didn't seem to be in the least.

"Did he?" says he. "That's funny, because it seems to me too that I've been a sort of good uncle to several of you young fellows lately. Don't you think so yourself? However, if you don't like it you may put him right--when you get out to sea." At this I felt a bit queer. Mr. Powell had rendered me a very good service:- because it's a fact that with us merchant sailors the first voyage as officer is the real start in life. He had given me no less than that. I told him warmly that he had done for me more that day than all my relations put together ever did.

"Oh, no, no," says he. "I guess it's that shipment of explosives waiting down the river which has done most for you. Forty tons of dynamite have been your best friend to-day, young man."

"That was true too, perhaps. Anyway I saw clearly enough that I had nothing to thank myself for. But as I tried to thank him, he checked my stammering.

"Don't be in a hurry to thank me," says he. "The voyage isn't finished yet."

Our new acquaintance paused, then added meditatively: "Queer man. As if it made any difference. Queer man."

"It's certainly unwise to admit any sort of responsibility for our actions, whose consequences we are never able to foresee," remarked Marlow by way of assent.

"The consequence of his action was that I got a ship," said the other. "That could not do much harm," he added with a laugh which argued a probably unconscious contempt of general ideas.

But Marlow was not put off. He was patient and reflective. He had been at sea many years and I verily believe he liked sea-life because upon the whole it is favourable to reflection. I am speaking of the now nearly vanished sea-life under sail. To those who may be surprised at the statement I will point out that this life secured for the mind of him who embraced it the inestimable advantages of solitude and silence. Marlow had the habit of pursuing general ideas in a peculiar manner, between jest and earnest.

"Oh, I wouldn't suggest," he said, "that your namesake Mr. Powell, the Shipping Master, had done you much harm. Such was hardly his intention. And even if it had been he would not have had the power. He was but a man, and the incapacity to achieve anything distinctly good or evil is inherent in our earthly condition. Mediocrity is our mark. And perhaps it's just as well, since, for the most part, we cannot be certain of the effect of our actions."

"I don't know about the effect," the other stood up to Marlow manfully. "What effect did you expect anyhow? I tell you he did something uncommonly kind."

"He did what he could," Marlow retorted gently, "and on his own showing that was not a very great deal. I cannot help thinking that there was some malice in the way he seized the opportunity to serve you. He managed to make you uncomfortable. You wanted to go to sea, but he jumped at the chance of accommodating your desire with a vengeance. I am inclined to think your cheek alarmed him. And this was an excellent occasion to suppress you altogether. For if you accepted he was relieved of you with every appearance of humanity, and if you made objections (after requesting his assistance, mind you) it was open to him to drop you as a sort of impostor. You might have had to decline that berth for some very valid reason. From sheer necessity perhaps. The notice was too uncommonly short. But under the circumstances you'd have covered yourself with ignominy."

Our new friend knocked the ashes out of his pipe.

"Quite a mistake," he said. "I am not of the declining sort, though I'll admit it was something like telling a man that you would like a bath and in consequence being instantly knocked overboard to sink or swim with your clothes on. However, I didn't feel as if I were in deep water at first. I left the shipping office quietly and for a time strolled along the street as easy as if I had a week before me to fit myself out. But by and by I reflected that the notice was even shorter than it looked. The afternoon was well advanced; I had some things to get, a lot of small matters to attend to, one or two persons to see. One of them was an aunt of mine, my only relation, who quarrelled with poor father as long as he lived about some silly matter that had neither right nor wrong to it. She left her money to me when she died. I used always to go and see her for decency's sake. I had so much to do before night that I didn't know where to begin. I felt inclined to sit down on the kerb and hold my head in my hands. It was as if an engine had been started going under my skull. Finally I sat down in the first cab that came along and it was a hard matter to keep on sitting there I can tell you, while we rolled up and down the streets, pulling up here and there, the parcels accumulating round me and the engine in my head gathering more way every minute. The composure of the people on the pavements was provoking to a

degree, and as to the people in shops, they were benumbed, more than half frozen--imbecile. Funny how it affects you to be in a peculiar state of mind: everybody that does not act up to your excitement seems so confoundedly unfriendly. And my state of mind what with the hurry, the worry and a growing exultation was peculiar enough. That engine in my head went round at its top speed hour after hour till eleven at about at night it let up on me suddenly at the entrance to the Dock before large iron gates in a dead wall."

* * * * *

These gates were closed and locked. The cabby, after shooting his things off the roof of his machine into young Powell's arms, drove away leaving him alone with his sea-chest, a sail cloth bag and a few parcels on the pavement about his feet. It was a dark, narrow thoroughfare he told us. A mean row of houses on the other side looked empty: there wasn't the smallest gleam of light in them. The white-hot glare of a gin palace a good way off made the intervening piece of the street pitch black. Some human shapes appearing mysteriously, as if they had sprung up from the dark ground, shunned the edge of the faint light thrown down by the gateway lamps. These figures were wary in their movements and perfectly silent of foot, like beasts of prey slinking about a camp fire. Powell gathered up his belongings and hovered over them like a hen over her brood. A gruffly insinuating voice said:

"Let's carry your things in, Capt'in! I've got my pal 'ere."

He was a tall, bony, grey-haired ruffian with a bulldog jaw, in a torn cotton shirt and moleskin trousers. The shadow of his hobnailed boots was enormous and coffinlike. His pal, who didn't come up much higher than his elbow, stepping forward exhibited a pale face with a long drooping nose and no chin to speak of. He seemed to have just scrambled out of a dust-bin in a tam-o'shanter cap and a tattered soldier's coat much too long for him. Being so deadly white he looked like a horrible dirty invalid in a ragged dressing gown. The coat flapped open in front and the rest of his apparel consisted of one brace which crossed his naked, bony chest, and a pair of trousers. He blinked rapidly as if dazed by the faint light, while his patron, the old bandit, glowered at young Powell from under his beetling brow.

"Say the word, Capt'in. The bobby'll let us in all right. 'E knows both of us."

"I didn't answer him," continued Mr. Powell. "I was listening to footsteps on the other side of the gate, echoing between the walls of the warehouses as if in an uninhabited town of very high buildings dark from basement to roof. You could never have guessed that within a stone's throw there was an open sheet of water

and big ships lying afloat. The few gas lamps showing up a bit of brick work here and there, appeared in the blackness like penny dips in a range of cellars--and the solitary footsteps came on, tramp, tramp. A dock policeman strode into the light on the other side of the gate, very broad-chested and stern.

"Hallo! What's up here?"

"He was really surprised, but after some palaver he let me in together with the two loafers carrying my luggage. He grumbled at them however and slammed the gate violently with a loud clang. I was startled to discover how many night prowlers had collected in the darkness of the street in such a short time and without my being aware of it. Directly we were through they came surging against the bars, silent, like a mob of ugly spectres. But suddenly, up the street somewhere, perhaps near that public-house, a row started as if Bedlam had broken loose: shouts, yells, an awful shrill shriek--and at that noise all these heads vanished from behind the bars.

"Look at this," marvelled the constable. "It's a wonder to me they didn't make off with your things while you were waiting."

"I would have taken good care of that," I said defiantly. But the constable wasn't impressed.

"Much you would have done. The bag going off round one dark corner; the chest round another. Would you have run two ways at once? And anyhow you'd have been tripped up and jumped upon before you had run three yards. I tell you you've had a most extraordinary chance that there wasn't one of them regular boys about to-night, in the High Street, to twig your loaded cab go by. Ted here is honest . . . You are on the honest lay, Ted, ain't you?"

"Always was, orficer," said the big ruffian with feeling. The other frail creature seemed dumb and only hopped about with the edge of its soldier coat touching the ground.

"Oh yes, I dare say," said the constable. "Now then, forward, march . . . He's that because he ain't game for the other thing," he confided to me. "He hasn't got the nerve for it. However, I ain't going to lose sight of them two till they go out through the gate. That little chap's a devil. He's got the nerve for anything, only he hasn't got the muscle. Well! Well! You've had a chance to get in with a whole skin and with all your things."

"I was incredulous a little. It seemed impossible that after getting ready with so much hurry and inconvenience I should have lost my chance of a start in life

from such a cause. I asked:

"Does that sort of thing happen often so near the dock gates?"

"Often! No! Of course not often. But it ain't often either that a man comes along with a cabload of things to join a ship at this time of night. I've been in the dock police thirteen years and haven't seen it done once."

"Meantime we followed my sea-chest which was being carried down a sort of deep narrow lane, separating two high warehouses, between honest Ted and his little devil of a pal who had to keep up a trot to the other's stride. The skirt of his soldier's coat floating behind him nearly swept the ground so that he seemed to be running on castors. At the corner of the gloomy passage a rigged jib boom with a dolphin-striker ending in an arrow-head stuck out of the night close to a cast iron lamp-post. It was the quay side. They set down their load in the light and honest Ted asked hoarsely:

"Where's your ship, guv'nor?"

"I didn't know. The constable was interested at my ignorance.

"Don't know where your ship is?" he asked with curiosity. "And you the second officer! Haven't you been working on board of her?"

"I couldn't explain that the only work connected with my appointment was the work of chance. I told him briefly that I didn't know her at all. At this he remarked:

"So I see. Here she is, right before you. That's her."

"At once the head-gear in the gas light inspired me with interest and respect; the spars were big, the chains and ropes stout and the whole thing looked powerful and trustworthy. Barely touched by the light her bows rose faintly alongside the narrow strip of the quay; the rest of her was a black smudge in the darkness. Here I was face to face with my start in life. We walked in a body a few steps on a greasy pavement between her side and the towering wall of a warehouse and I hit my shins cruelly against the end of the gangway. The constable hailed her quietly in a bass undertone 'Ferndale there!' A feeble and dismal sound, something in the nature of a buzzing groan, answered from behind the bulwarks.

"I distinguished vaguely an irregular round knob, of wood, perhaps, resting on the rail. It did not move in the least; but as another broken- down buzz like a still fainter echo of the first dismal sound proceeded from it I concluded it must

be the head of the ship-keeper. The stalwart constable jeered in a mock-official manner.

"Second officer coming to join. Move yourself a bit."

"The truth of the statement touched me in the pit of the stomach (you know that's the spot where emotion gets home on a man) for it was borne upon me that really and truly I was nothing but a second officer of a ship just like any other second officer, to that constable. I was moved by this solid evidence of my new dignity. Only his tone offended me. Nevertheless I gave him the tip he was looking for. Thereupon he lost all interest in me, humorous or otherwise, and walked away driving sternly before him the honest Ted, who went off grumbling to himself like a hungry ogre, and his horrible dumb little pal in the soldier's coat, who, from first to last, never emitted the slightest sound.

"It was very dark on the quarter deck of the Ferndale between the deep bulwarks overshadowed by the break of the poop and frowned upon by the front of the warehouse. I plumped down on to my chest near the after hatch as if my legs had been jerked from under me. I felt suddenly very tired and languid. The ship-keeper, whom I could hardly make out hung over the capstan in a fit of weak pitiful coughing. He gasped out very low 'Oh! dear! Oh! dear!' and struggled for breath so long that I got up alarmed and irresolute.

"I've been took like this since last Christmas twelvemonth. It ain't nothing."

"He seemed a hundred years old at least. I never saw him properly because he was gone ashore and out of sight when I came on deck in the morning; but he gave me the notion of the feeblest creature that ever breathed. His voice was thin like the buzzing of a mosquito. As it would have been cruel to demand assistance from such a shadowy wreck I went to work myself, dragging my chest along a pitch-black passage under the poop deck, while he sighed and moaned around me as if my exertions were more than his weakness could stand. At last as I banged pretty heavily against the bulkheads he warned me in his faint breathless wheeze to be more careful.

"What's the matter?" I asked rather roughly, not relishing to be admonished by this forlorn broken-down ghost.

"Nothing! Nothing, sir," he protested so hastily that he lost his poor breath again and I felt sorry for him. "Only the captain and his missus are sleeping on board. She's a lady that mustn't be disturbed. They came about half-past eight, and we had a permit to have lights in the cabin till ten to-night."

"This struck me as a considerable piece of news. I had never been in a ship where the captain had his wife with him. I'd heard fellows say that captains' wives could work a lot of mischief on board ship if they happened to take a dislike to anyone; especially the new wives if young and pretty. The old and experienced wives on the other hand fancied they knew more about the ship than the skipper himself and had an eye like a hawk's for what went on. They were like an extra chief mate of a particularly sharp and unfeeling sort who made his report in the evening. The best of them were a nuisance. In the general opinion a skipper with his wife on board was more difficult to please; but whether to show off his authority before an admiring female or from loving anxiety for her safety or simply from irritation at her presence--nobody I ever heard on the subject could tell for certain.

"After I had bundled in my things somehow I struck a match and had a dazzling glimpse of my berth; then I pitched the roll of my bedding into the bunk but took no trouble to spread it out. I wasn't sleepy now, neither was I tired. And the thought that I was done with the earth for many many months to come made me feel very quiet and self-contained as it were. Sailors will understand what I mean."

Marlow nodded. "It is a strictly professional feeling," he commented. "But other professions or trades know nothing of it. It is only this calling whose primary appeal lies in the suggestion of restless adventure which holds out that deep sensation to those who embrace it. It is difficult to define, I admit."

"I should call it the peace of the sea," said Mr. Charles Powell in an earnest tone but looking at us as though he expected to be met by a laugh of derision and were half prepared to salve his reputation for common sense by joining in it. But neither of us laughed at Mr. Charles Powell in whose start in life we had been called to take a part. He was lucky in his audience.

"A very good name," said Marlow looking at him approvingly. "A sailor finds a deep feeling of security in the exercise of his calling. The exacting life of the sea has this advantage over the life of the earth that its claims are simple and cannot be evaded."

"Gospel truth," assented Mr. Powell. "No! they cannot be evaded."

That an excellent understanding should have established itself between my old friend and our new acquaintance was remarkable enough. For they were exactly dissimilar--one individuality projecting itself in length and the other in breadth, which is already a sufficient ground for irreconcilable difference. Marlow who was lanky, loose, quietly composed in varied shades of brown robbed of every

vestige of gloss, had a narrow, veiled glance, the neutral bearing and the secret irritability which go together with a predisposition to congestion of the liver. The other, compact, broad and sturdy of limb, seemed extremely full of sound organs functioning vigorously all the time in order to keep up the brilliance of his colouring, the light curl of his coal-black hair and the lustre of his eyes, which asserted themselves roundly in an open, manly face. Between two such organisms one would not have expected to find the slightest temperamental accord. But I have observed that profane men living in ships like the holy men gathered together in monasteries develop traits of profound resemblance. This must be because the service of the sea and the service of a temple are both detached from the vanities and errors of a world which follows no severe rule. The men of the sea understand each other very well in their view of earthly things, for simplicity is a good counsellor and isolation not a bad educator. A turn of mind composed of innocence and scepticism is common to them all, with the addition of an unexpected insight into motives, as of disinterested lookers-on at a game. Mr. Powell took me aside to say,

"I like the things he says."

"You understand each other pretty well," I observed.

"I know his sort," said Powell, going to the window to look at his cutter still riding to the flood. "He's the sort that's always chasing some notion or other round and round his head just for the fun of the thing."

"Keeps them in good condition," I said.

"Lively enough I dare say," he admitted.

"Would you like better a man who let his notions lie curled up?"

"That I wouldn't," answered our new acquaintance. Clearly he was not difficult to get on with. "I like him, very well," he continued, "though it isn't easy to make him out. He seems to be up to a thing or two. What's he doing?"

I informed him that our friend Marlow had retired from the sea in a sort of half-hearted fashion some years ago.

Mr. Powell's comment was: "Fancied had enough of it?"

"Fancied's the very word to use in this connection," I observed, remembering the subtly provisional character of Marlow's long sojourn amongst us. From year to year he dwelt on land as a bird rests on the branch of a tree, so tense with the

power of brusque flight into its true element that it is incomprehensible why it should sit still minute after minute. The sea is the sailor's true element, and Marlow, lingering on shore, was to me an object of incredulous commiseration like a bird, which, secretly, should have lost its faith in the high virtue of flying.