

## MISSING AT EIGHT BELLS.

I.

We never knew what his baptismal name was. He invariably answered to his professional appellation of "Jimmy Ducks" on board the St. Vincent, and never volunteered any information regarding the nomenclature used at the font by his god fathers and god-mothers.

It may be necessary to state at this point for the enlightenment of the unnautical reader that every deep water ship carries a sort of male "general slave," to employ a favourite term of boarding-school autocrats,—whose business it is to attend to the feeding, etc., of the pigs, sheep and ducks, which form part of the vessel's provisions for the voyage. Hence he is known officially by officers and men alike as "Jimmy Ducks," just as the carpenter is always "chips," and the cook, "doctor."

The St. Vincent was an Australian clipper of one thousand tons register, trading between London and Melbourne. It was in November, 1882, when seamen in the latter port were demanding £12 and £14 per month for the run home, that we shipped the particular "Jimmy," on whose behalf I have turned author. The number of desertions at that period was enormous, despite the most determined efforts of the Water Police to stop them, and it was almost impossible to get sailors at liberty to sign articles for the return voyage. Several ships lay off Western Point for months, unable to sail for lack of hands.

Our skipper, Captain Bowslaugh, did not suffer as severely in this respect as many others. He was an exceedingly acute, active man, and a stern disciplinarian, and he took every possible precaution to prevent his crew from giving him the slip. Nevertheless, a few men managed to elude his vigilance, and when we had loaded our cargo of wool, and the St. Vincent was ready to sail, she was rather under-manned for a vessel of her burden. The captain, however, decided to start with a reduced crew, instead of endeavouring to replace the missing men, and possibly losing money and more men in port.

It was on the day that we were advertised to sail that a queer looking creature stepped up the gangway and leaned over the side as he made the enquiry: "Is the 'old man' aboard?"

"You'll find him aft," said the bo'sun in charge of the gangway, eyeing him with suspicion as he passed him.

He shambled along with his hands thrust deep into his trousers' pockets, until he reached the poop ladder. Captain Bowslaugh stood leaning over the break of the poop, smoking a cigar, and watching the men for'ard. The stranger pushed his broad-brimmed wide-awake to the back of his head, and shading his eyes from the glare of the sun, looked up and said in quiet, drawing tones: "You're the boss?" The skipper raised his eyes as if he wanted to know the man's business, and then nodded affirmatively.

"You want a hand?"

"Yes; have you got a discharge?"

"No, guess not. I'm an American, and I've been kinder knocking around the world on my means." The skipper glanced at his outer man, and pulled an appreciative cloud of smoke. It reminded him forcibly of his own comfortable position in life and he felt more satisfaction than if the witticism had emanated from himself. This absorbent faculty is the compensation of the wealthy and respectable who do not possess wit.

"No, boss," continued the man, in the same low, painful key, "I'm no sailor, but I can work. I want you to give me a job; I don't care what it is. The fact is, I'm down on my luck. I've tramped from the Silverton mines, about four hundred miles over yonder," roughly indicating their situation with a jerk of his head, "and I need a good square meal badly. I guess your *chef* is about as good as another, eh? I'm not an epicure, at all."

The man was evidently not an ordinary vagabond, although there was no attempt in his manner or speech to impress the skipper in his favour. His very pose was indifference. He did not make a pretense of respectful deference or affected humility. He spoke with a kind of reckless despair. It seemed, indeed, as if he really took a sad pleasure in turning into ridicule his own abject misery, and that he looked upon this application as a finality, after which there was a choice of two alternatives—the river, or a prison. His face was greatly emaciated, but expressed neither hope nor doubt. He apparently entertained no thought of obtaining the employment he sought. This cynical indifference that appears on the surface is the peculiar expression of the last few shreds of self-respect and manhood to which a mind of somewhat finer fibre than the general ruck of men in the lower strata of society still clings, no matter to what depths of degradation its possessor may have fallen. It may be a morbidly egotistical, ineffective plaint against the world—the defiance of a cripple who has, himself, thrown away his crutches—but what a pitiable suggestion of dead aspirations and murdered hopes it contains for the charitable citizen of the world!

The appearance of the applicant was not at all prepossessing. It certainly endorsed his confession of poverty and hunger, but did not, so to speak, second and carry his motion for relief by an overwhelming majority. There was something repellent in his attitude and mien. He was tall, with long, lank limbs, which he did not appear to have strength enough to control; for, in spite of the heat, he was racked with an occasional and violent tremor. His clothes were torn and frayed, and no two articles were similar in texture or pattern. Indeed, so patched and discoloured were they, that it would have been a difficult matter to decide what had been the original design or

material of any one particular garment; and to complete his toilet and, as it were, put the last touch thereto requisite to make it quite unique, he wore a dilapidated riding-boot with a cream-colored top on one foot, and a low patent-leather walking shoe on the other. His face was bronzed by exposure to the scorching sun, and his once evidently very handsome features had become so sharpened and drawn by the privations of the bush, despair and disappointment, or dissipation, or, possibly, all three combined, that they were positively painful to look upon. He was about thirty years of age, but his dark hair, long and unkempt, was thickly interspersed with streaks of gray, and he looked considerably older. The one redeeming feature about the man's personality was the flash of intelligence in his dark eyes when he suddenly lifted them up and shot a quick glance into those of his interlocutor. They were deep sunken eyes, and slightly bloodshot, but there was an unmistakable look of calm resignation to the inevitable, mingled with a something of defiant bitterness and nonchalance in them. The skipper was not a victim of sentiment, but he prided himself upon his shrewdness as a judge of character and his extensive knowledge of human nature. The man's eyes arrested his attention; there was some grit in him after all.

"I suppose you can't go before the mast," said Captain Bowslaugh, opinionatively, "but I'll take you as a deck-hand at £2 a month. Will that suit you?"

The man raised his eyes with a quick motion of surprise and acceptance, and then slowly withdrew his hands from his pockets as if he were detaching them from his corporate system. It immediately dawned upon him that now he was a man of affairs, and not an irrelevancy in nature; his hands had no business in pockets.

"Thank you, sir," he muttered almost incoherently as a lump rose in his throat. He hesitated, and seemed to be trying to overcome his sudden access of nervousness, and express his gratitude more fully. The sun, however, was in his eyes, his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, and he stood bereft of all his despairing debonaire—a new man, aware of the true extent of his weakness and misery for the first time.

"All right," said the captain, "go for'ard now. You can sign the register this evening."

The new hand still hesitated and changed his position awkwardly; but, although his eyes were moist, he could not utter a word. Then he shuffled forward.

Captain Bowslaugh appreciated the man's silence more than the most voluble thanks. The skipper really was a student of human nature. He paced up and down the deck once or twice, and then, throwing the remnant of his cigar over the taffrail, descended to his cabin. He felt that inward sense of satisfaction that comes to the least selfish of us all when we know we have performed a worthy action. "I am glad I took that poor devil," he confided his reflection in a mirror as he settled the position of his neck-cloth; "I think he'll be a man I can depend upon."

"At 'eight bells,' as the crew were gathered round the huge 'kid' containing their midday rations of stewed mutton and potatoes in the fo'castle, the bo'sun, who was considered the scholar and oracle of the circle, introduced the latest recruit to his future messmates. He made it the occasion of a neat little speech of which the following, robbed of a few superfluous superlatives, with which the actor usually garnished his discourse, is the sum and substance:

"Boys, allow me to introduce to your notice our new 'Jimmy.' He's one o' them darned shirkers wot won't work ashore 'cause of a cussed born tiredness of disposition, which 'bliges 'em to loaf and sponge on their pals. 'Uman nature's a conundrum, as I remember 'earing a lecturer chap say in Liverpool, and though I 'ave been a round this ere world a-many times I 'ave allus found it beyond me. 'Cause why? These same loafers are the very fellows wot goes off ter sea at wages they would turn their noses up at a shore, a-crowding us gen-u-ine shell-backs, as don't ship from a pure love o' fresh air, out o' the per-feshion."

These sentiments met with the hearty approval of the sailors, and some personal remarks of that kind peculiar to a ship's fo'castle were directed at the new comer. Jimmy, however, did not heed, and continued his meal in silence. This evidence of a disagreeable, taciturn disposition provoked one of the men to express his contempt for him in such vigorous Anglo-Saxon that "Jimmy" raised his head for a moment and said, with intense calmness: "Well, boys, we must all live. If any of you object to my earning a good square meal, please state your reasons, and I will try to convince you that I have a right to sell my labour for what price I choose."

A fight probably would have ensued from this challenge, but the bo'sun, with one of those sudden and inconsequent changes of opinion frequent among sailors, recognized a kindred spirit in the man he had abused a few minutes previously and applauded the speech in a very hearty manner. The crew were silent.

The bo'sun was one of those peculiar, briny old fossils, only to be met with in a ship's fo'castle. He had spent the greater part of his life before the mast, and his ignorance of the world was only equalled by his own firm conviction that he was a hardened old reprobate, too well versed in the world's wicked ways to be deceived or contradicted on any point by any one. In this opinion he was supported by the crew. He often held forth by the hour together on Sunday afternoons, in fine weather upon the superlative qualities of former ships in which he had sailed. It was his one source of inspiration, and he made continual com-

parisons between the comfort then enjoyed and the accommodation provided in the present ship; it is needless to say that these comparisons were invariably to the disadvantage of the latter. He grumbled at the new hands on principle, and for the first few days out at sea he swore at the crew on all occasions, whether they acted rightly or wrongly, so as to get them accustomed to his mode of command. But after all he was not an unkindly man at heart, and would never permit his bullying prerogative to be shared by anybody else for'ard.

That evening our new hand signed the register as a member of the ship's company. He wrote in a clear, distinct and rapid hand, "James Smith, New York," upon the sheet, and the words stood out in curious contrast to crabbled and distorted characters of the other signatures. The skipper knew that this was only a formality, and that "Jimmy's" real name was something altogether different. He was not particular, however, about trifles as long as his men proved themselves capable.

II.

The St. Vincent sailed with the next tide.

To the surprise of his messmate, "Jimmy" did not suffer in the least with sea-sickness. He was very reticent as to his antecedents, but when questioned upon his immunity from the *mal de mer*, he explained it by saying that although he had never shipped as a "deck hand" before in his life, he had circumnavigated the globe several times. The fact was stated with all due modesty, and was made patent by the dexterous way in which he handled the ropes, when his occasional assistance was required. All sorts of stories circulated about the ship as to his former position in life, and in spite of his quiet, unassuming manners and dispassionate tone at all times, he was looked upon as something of an aristocrat, and a feeling of dislike grew up against him among the men. The life of a deck-hand at sea is not a bed of roses, and the new hand evidently found his duties distasteful, but still he never shirked his work. The bo'sun was absolutely satisfied with him. He would use some of his strangest and strongest oaths in commendation of his willingness, quickness and other good qualities, and generally made no secret of his liking for him. This, of course, had the effect of increasing the ill-will borne him by the rest of the crew.

During the next few weeks we experienced very heavy weather without intermission, and made but slow progress. The men were discontented on account of not having succeeded in obtaining the high wages ruling in Melbourne, and the continual demand made upon their patience and the loss of sleep and rest entailed by the variable winds, did not tend to lessen the bad feeling already existing between the men and their officers. It must be confessed, too, that there was considerable disposition upon the part of Captain Bowslaugh to "haze" the men, and there was nothing but dirty weather and black looks from one week's end to the other.

To make matters worse, one of the best seamen on board, an old Norwegian named Christiansen, fell ill. He kept up as long as he possibly could, poor fellow, because sailors hate to have a sick man aboard, and partly because they believe sickness brings bad luck at sea, and partly because he cannot perform his share of the duties, and it devolves upon the rest.

One night, in the middle watch, Christiansen was at the wheel. He was standing under the weather-cloth, the wind being a little abaft the beam, with a heavy sea on. Mr. Gates, the first mate, who was in charge of the watch, suddenly noticed the ship fly up in the wind at the same moment that a mountainous sea struck her, flinging all the sails aback.

With an oath he sprang to the wheel and put the helm hard up.

"What the devil is the matter, Christiansen!" he cried angrily to the man who lay prone on the deck at his feet.

"I couldn't help it, sir; I'm sorry, but I can stand it no longer. I've been ailing since a few days after we sailed. I fear I'm a diving man."

The mate blew his whistle, and the bo'sun came aft in response.

"Here, bo'sun, help this man for'ard; he's sick. Then tell Elgerson to come aft and relieve me of the wheel. And, Dick,"—as the bo'sun was about to lift up the sick man and go—"git the old man to have a look at Christiansen. A little hot brandy might pull him together."

The bo'sun half supported, half dragged the unfortunate man for'ard. Jimmy was lying awake in his bunk smoking a pipe, as they appeared at the top of the companion.

"Is that you, Jimmy?" cried the bo'sun.

"Yah."

"Here, help us to get this man into his bunk. He's sick."

Jimmy sprang out of his bunk in an instant, and assisted the bo'sun with his burden down the ladder, and after a good many efforts, on account of the violent motion of the vessel, they succeeded in getting the man between his blankets.

When the bo'sun had gone on deck again, one of the watch below, lying in an opposite bunk, turned and, shading his eyes from the light of the lamp, looked across at the sick man.

"Oh, it's you, ye darned Dutchman,"—every man on board ship who is not English or American, is called a Dutchman—"and you're going to shirk, eh? As if we hain't got enough to put up with on this durned ship, 'sides a working for loafers."

(To be continued.)