

THE SKIPPER'S MASQUERADE

A Warm-Weather Story, Not Strong in the Plot, But Very Amusing in Character and Situation

By ATHOL FORBES

"THERE'S just time to do it, George," said Captain Cutting, emerging from the hoodway of his cabin, and buttoning up his coat to protect a bare chest.

"You're not going ashore now?" queried the perspiring mate, busy with the work of getting the brig ready for sea. The tide will turn in 'arf an hour or so and we must sail on the flood."

"I'll be back in 'arf an hour, George."

"Yes: I know wot your 'arf hours are when you get ashore. I think a mug of 'ot coffee 'll do more good than grog after last night's tea party at the Anchor," he counselled with some heat.

"George, George," said his chief, reproachfully, "all I propose to do—"

"You might spend a little time on board the ship, and what you propose to do don't concern me, it's wot you does do. It was nearly three when you come on board this mornin' wakenin' up everybody."

The skipper looked pained. He took in his belt another hole, and fastened another button of his coat. "You go too far, sometimes, George; I did get on the razzle-dazzle a bit last night, that's why I was thinkin' a dip in the briny would blow away the cobwebs, and brace me up a bit."

"A good sluice with a bucket or two o' salt water would do you just as much good," was the reply.

"But nothink will do you no good till you takes the pledge," he added, with a mournful glance at the seaman, who was letting out the square canvas on the fore top mast, and at the same time taking a sympathetic and intense interest in the conversation.

The skipper hitched up his trousers thoughtfully.

"Public 'ouses will be your ruin," continued the mate.

"I tell you it's a swim I want," cried the exasperated captain.

"Yes, yes, you'll be found drowned one day, but it won't be with good honest salt water, more's the pity." The mate broke off his remarks suddenly and took a flying leap into the chain plates, from which he scrambled up the rigging.

The skipper raised his voice and delivered a touching tribute to former mates, who had served under him, and he pronounced a pathetic eulogy on some who had "gone aloft."

The mate grinned from the security of the cross trees, and thanked the captain for his kind words, who now carefully explained that he was referring to those who had died. An appendix delivered in strong language, dealt with the place of his present subordinate in the next world, consigning him to perdition.

Very much ruffled, he made his way ashore, with one searching glance at the brig for any sign of further insubordination. He called at the Anchor Inn, where he partook of rum and milk, then he made his way to a secluded part of the beach. It was early in October, a cool and lovely morning, and being the finest month in the year on the East Coast, Gorleston was deserted by visitors, so Captain Cutting was able to undress unobserved by strangers. He shed his clothes quietly and began a quick amble to the water. Instinct should have told him that the tide was coming in, but his brooding thoughts were with the mate, and his mind was on quite a number of things which he wished he had said before leaving. He swam out to sea with sturdy strokes, for he was hale and hearty, the salt water gurgled about him like a fond mother embracing a child.

NOW, the tide at Gorleston runs in quickly over a gradually shelving beach. It out-flanked the heap of clothes, cut off its retreat, and then a far-reaching wave carried the bundle out to sea. The trousers gave up the struggle to float after a half-hearted attempt, the skipper's monkey jacket made a brave effort to save itself, but it was heavily handicapped by a tobacco box, a jack knife, and a bottle of rum. The sou'ester being specially constructed for the sea in all weathers, floated gaily over the surface of the water, heading east. Its yellow dome caught the eye of the swimmer, who followed with easy strokes to see what it was. A close examination did not in any way associate it with himself, but the fact of it floating out to sea told him the tide had turned, and he swam for the shore. He looked round for his clothes; there was no sign of them. At first he imagined some thief had taken them, and seeing a man in the distance walking towards Lowes-foot, he gave chase. It took some time to catch him up, and more time to convince Cutting that he was innocent. There was a keen, cold wind, which made the want of clothing felt. A cry from the cliffs emphasized the want. He looked round, there was an elderly woman making frantic gestures with her

umbrella. Cutting, in his Eden-like innocence, imagined she was willing to lend it to him. He started towards her, when she fled with piercing shrieks; he sought refuge beneath the cliffs.

Meanwhile the brig, attended by a panting tug from which came mournful whistles, was ready for sea.

"Step across to the Anchor, Nat," ordered the mate, "and bring the Captain along."

A grimy old seaman started with more agility than would seem possible in so old a man, but duty can be a pleasure at times. He returned after a lapse of twenty minutes to report that the skipper had left there over an hour and a half ago.

"I don't believe it," said the mate, promptly, "for

looked like a tragedy, and the mate went to the post office to telegraph to the owners, who lived in Yarmouth.

The news had spread, many were the questions addressed to Nat and Charlie as they made their way to the sands. There was a stern look on the face of the older man, who was genuinely attached to the skipper, though he would never have confessed it to any one. They tramped along the beach in silence.

Suddenly the boy set up a yell of terror!

"Wot is it?" asked Nat, shaking the youth.

"Yonder's the 'ead of the skipper lying in the sands! I know it by the whiskers," he gasped. "Someone 'as cut it off."

Now, Cutting, to shield himself from the curiosity of passers by, had dug a hole in the sand, where he lay snug, and waited for the search party from the ship, which he knew must come, and the only part visible to Nat and Charlie was his head and part of his shoulders.

"Why, the 'ead is talking now!" cried the terrified Charlie. "'ere I'm off!"

BUT Nat had started to run in the direction of the head, when the cook, feeling ashamed of deserting his comrade, went after his ship-mate.

"Nice time you've been in comin' for me," began the skipper. "Where 'ave you been these three hours? Precious lot you are! I might 'ave been dead and drowned and buried by now, you swabs! Where's your duty to your captain? Where's your common sense?"

"Where's your clothes?" cried the astonished seaman, helping his chief out of the hole in the sand.

"Someone stole them when I was bathin'."

"You manage to get into some nice holes, of one kind and another. Why, the mate 'as gone to the cemetery to arrange about a tombstone, and the owners 'as been sent for!"

"Wot the blazes for?" thundered Cutting.

"Joss Bull brought in your sou'ester found floating in the North Sea, and reported you are drowned!"

"Well 'e reported a lie," said Cutting. "Get back to the ship and bring me a suit o' clothes."

"The Customs officers were comin' on board when I left, and they will 'ave taken possession of them by now."

"Well, lend me your trousers, Nat."

"And get locked up for indelicacy! Not me!" said that worthy.

"Take off your trousers!" thundered Cutting. "I must get back to the ship and get away this tide, or the owners may sack me; time is everthink just at the present moment."

"My reputation is everything to me," said Nat. "I 'ave 'ad a narrow shave o' police proceedings for the same thing, another charge would get me sent to quod. Here, cookie, run up to Fatty's house and get me a suit o' clothes, anything to cover the skipper with, and look lively. I'll stay and keep guard."

The youth started off at the double. He found the door of Fatty's house open, but no one at home. He searched for men's clothing and found none, for the simple reason the storekeeper had only one suit, and that he was wearing. Behind a bedroom door was a dress and a stylish hat of the beehive order. They comprised Mrs. Fatty's Sunday clothes. There was nothing else. Charlie seized them and bundled them into a pillow-case, the hat he carried under his arm.

"He's got 'em," remarked Nat, making a telescope of his hands. "He's carryin' a big bundle, 'ere 'e comes!"

THE skipper breathed a prayer of thankfulness, as up came the breathless Charlie. He put down the pillow-case, pulled out the contents, and gazed at the skipper expectantly.

"I couldn't get nothing else," he cried, as he sprang out of the way of the Captain's fist.

"There's no time to lose," said Nat, ignoring the outburst from his chief. "These are not the things I should wear for choice, but it's these or nothink. Besides, it looks to me like a new hat!"

Cutting, biting his lips in fury, examined the articles of clothing and kicked the hat out of his way.

"Just about your size," said the seaman, soothingly. "Come on, skipper, on with them. It's only a step to the ship; the morning's still young, we don't see a soul. Once on board the ship you have your own clothes. Here, put this on, you'll get sunstroke."

He clapped the hat on the skipper's head, and over that picture the man shed tears.

Fortunately, his chief could not see his emotions, for the hat covered his eyes. Indeed, only his beard and mouth were visible.

The skipper, with a hopeless gesture, signified submission, and they began to dress him, not without

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"Seemed to find something strangely exhilarating in the spectacle."

it ain't more than an hour and a 'alf since he left the ship, and no one's going to make me believe that he called at the Anchor and didn't spend no time there. They'll say he 'ad nothink to drink there next!"

The master of the tug interrupted the conversation by calling attention to a shrimp, which seemed determined to run the brig down.

"Where are you walking to, in your sleep?" enquired the mate.

"We 'ave got your skipper's sou'ester; picked up at sea," was the reply.

"Lord! He's been bathing after all," said the mate, who had regarded this proposed exploit of his chief, as merely an excuse to go ashore. There was genuine grief in his face, as he mournfully examined the sou'ester and read the name "George Cutting."

Instinct gathers people together, and draws them in the direction of bad news.

"It looks like a case o' suicide," said the policeman, solemnly. "Why should the best o' skippers go and do that?"

"Sailor men don't do that sort of thing," said the indignant mate, "only lazy land loafers."

"No offence, Mr. Murray, I don't say it comes within the meaning of the act," apologized the policeman.

"Nat, you take the cook and go down on the sands; we must do something," said the mate. "It's terrible sudden, but we must hope for the best. I will wire the owners for orders."

"Ay! Ay! Sir," responded Nat. "Come on, Cookie."

They left for the beach to search the scene of what