

GAP 'N' ERI

By JOSEPH C. LINCOLN

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(Continued.)

"Captain Eri came to the door in response to his knock and grinned appreciatively at his caller's look of wonder. "I don't wonder you're 'spriced," he said, with a chuckle. "I ain't begun to get over it yet myself, and Lorenzo's so shook up he ain't been in the house since breakfast time. He's out in the barn keepin' Dan's company and waitin' for the end of the world to strike, I calculate."

Ralph laughed. "Mrs. Snow?" he inquired. "Mrs. Snow," answered the captain. "It beats all what a woman can do when she's that kind of a woman. She's done more swabbin' decks and overhaulin' runnin' riggin' than a new unte on a clipper. The place is so all-fired clean that I feel like brushin' myself every time I go to set down."

"How's Captain Baxter?" asked Hazeline. "Seems to be some better. He come to a little this mornin' and seemed to know some of us, but he ain't seemed where he is yet, nor I don't believe he will for a spell. Set down and keep me company. It's my watch jest now. Perez, he's over to Barry's, Jerry's up to the schoolhouse, and Mrs. Snow's run up to the postoffice to mail a letter. John's asleep, so I can stay downstairs a little while, long's the door's open. What's the news upstair? Web changed his mind agin' 'bout the fire?"

It appeared that Mr. Saunders had not changed his mind, at least so current gossip reported. And it may be remarked here that, curiously enough, the opinion that the fire "caught itself" came at last to be generally accepted in the village. For some weeks Captain Eri was troubled with thoughts concerning the missing coat, but as time passed and the accusing garment did not turn up he came to believe that some boy must have found it and that it had in all probability been destroyed. There were of course some persons who still suspected John Baxter as the incendiary, but the old man's gentleness and respect for his former standing in the community kept these few silent. The Baxter house had been locked up, and the captain had the key.

Hazeline and his host chatted for a few minutes on various topics. The

next moment he realized that he had said what of all things was the most impolitic. It was nothing less than a bid for a "canvass," and he fully expected to be confronted with the necessary order "thanks without delay."

But, strangely enough, the book lady made no such move. She looked at him, it is true, with an expression of surprise and what seemed to be amusement on her face. He was certain that her lips twitched as she said calmly: "Did you? I am glad to hear it."

This dispassionate remark was entirely unexpected, and the electrician, as Captain Eri would have said, "lost his bearings" completely.

"Yes—er—yes," he stammered. "Very interesting indeed. I—I suppose you must take a good many orders in the course of a week."

"A good many orders?" "Why, yes. Orders for the books, I mean. The books—the 'Great Naval Lives'—these looks here."

"I beg your pardon, but who do you think I am?" "It was then that the perception of some tremendous blunder began to seize upon Mr. Hazeline. He had been read before. Now he felt the redness creeping over his scalp under his hair.

"Why—why—Miss Black, I suppose—that is, I—"

Just here the door opened and Captain Eri came in. He took off his cap and then, seeking the visitor, standing apparently waiting for an introduction. But the young lady did not keep him waiting long.

"Are you Captain Eri Hedge?" she asked. "Yes," answered the captain. "Oh, I'm so glad. Your letter came this mornin', and I hurried down on the first train. I'm Elizabeth Preston."

CHAPTER IX. PERHAPS, on the whole, it is not surprising that Captain Eri didn't grasp the situation.

Neither his two partners nor himself had given much thought to the granddaughter of the sick man in the upper room. The captain knew that there was a granddaughter, hence his letter. But he had heard John Baxter speak of her as being in school somewhere in Boston and had all along conceived of her as a miss of sixteen or thereabout. No wonder that at first he looked at the stylishly gowned young woman, who stood before him with one gloved hand extended, in a puzzled, uncomprehending way.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he said slowly, mechanically swallowing up the proffered hand in his own manumot hand, "but I don't know's I jest caught the name. Would you mind sayin' it agin'?"

"Elizabeth Preston," repeated the visitor. "Captain Baxter's granddaughter. You wrote me that he was ill, you know, and I—"

"What?" roared the captain, delighted amazement lighting up his face like a sunrise. "You don't mean to tell me you're 'Lizbeth Baxter's gal Elsie? Well, well, I want to know! If this don't beat all! Set down! Take your things right off! I'm mighty glad to see you!"

Obviously it was Miss Black. She stood on the mica slab that formed the step and looked up at him as he swung the door open. She had a small leather bag in her hand, just as the captain had said she would have, but it flashed across Mr. Hazeline's mind that the rest of the description was not a fair

have been noticed that she glanced at them when she had done so, as if to make sure that the original shape remained. "Thank you, Captain Hedge," she said. "And now please tell me about grandfather. How is he? May I see him?"

"The captain's expression changed to one of concern. "Why, now, Miss Preston," he said, "your grandpa is pretty sick. Oh, I don't mean he's goin' to die right off or anything like that," he added hastily. "I mean he's had a stroke of palsy or somethin', and he ain't got so vit that he senses much of what goes on. Now, I don't want to frighten you, you know, but really there's a chance, a little mite of a chance—that he won't know you. Don't feel bad if he don't, now will you?"

"I knew he must be very ill from your letter," said the girl simply. "I was afraid that he might not be bring when I reached here. They told me at the station that he was at your house, and so I came. He has been very good to me, and I—"

Her voice broke a little, and she hesitated. "Yes, yes, I know," he said better. "Don't you worry now. He's the best doctor today, didn't he, Mr. Hazeline? Why, what do I think of it? Let me see, you know to Mr. Hazeline, next door neighbor of ours, right across the road." And he waved toward the bay.

Ralph and Miss Preston shook hands. The electrician managed to utter some sort of formality, but he couldn't have told what it was. He was glad when the captain announced that if Mr. Hazeline would excuse them he guessed Miss Preston and he would step once more to the electrician's house. The young lady took off her hat and jacket, and Captain Eri lighted a lamp, for it was almost dark by this time. As its light shone upon the visitor's face and laid the crimson flush before mentioned circumstances upon her cheek, she seemed to receive a finishing blow. That any man supposed to possess two fairly good eyes and a workable brain could have mistaken her for an Orphan Neck book agent by the name of "Miss Black" or "Miss Hazeline" was a mystery indeed.

"I'll be down in a few minutes, Mr. Hazeline," said the captain. "Set still, won't you?"

But Mr. Hazeline wouldn't sit still. He announced that it was late and he must be going. And he did in spite of his host's protestations.

"Look out for the stairs," cautioned the captain, leading the way with the lamp. "The feller that built 'em must have believed that savin' distance lengthens out life. Come to think of it, I wouldn't wonder if them stairs was the reason why me and Jerry and Perez took this house. They reminded us so of the shrouds on a three master."

Elsie Preston did her best to smile as her companion rattled on in this fashion, but both the smile and the captain's cheerfulness were too plainly assumed to be convincing, and they passed down the hall in silence. At the open door of the sickroom Captain Eri paused.

"He's asleep," he whispered, "and, remember, if he wakes up and doesn't know our names he'll feel that way."

Elsie slipped by him and knelt by the bed, looking into the white, old face on the pillow. Somehow the harsh lines had faded out of it, and it looked only old and pitiful.

The captain unlocked the tabernacle for a moment and then tipped into the room and placed the lamp on the bureau.

"Now, I think likely," he said in a rather husky whisper, "that you'd like to stay with your grandpa for a little while, so I'll go downstairs and see about supper. No, no, no," he added, holding up his hand as the girl spoke some words of protest, "you ain't goin' nowhere to supper. You're goin' to stay right here. If you want me, jest call my name."

And he hurried downstairs and into the kitchen, clearing his throat with vigor and making a great to do over the scratching of a match.

Mrs. Snow returned a few minutes later, and to her the news of the arrival was told. It was also told to Jerry when they came to the kitchen. Mrs. Snow took charge of the supper arrangements. When the meal was ready she said to Captain Eri:

"Now I'll go upstairs and tell her to come down. I'll stay with Captain Eri, and she'll be with me. I'll prap if one of you'll take my place I'll eat my supper and wash the dishes. You needn't come up now. I'll introduce myself."

Some few minutes passed before she came down. Her eyes were wet, but her manner was cheerful, and the unaffected way in which she greeted Captain Perez and Captain Jerry when these two rather bashful mariners were introduced to her, won them at once.

The supper was a great success. The captain had long ago given up the beloved dish because, although each had tried his hand at preparing it, none had wholly succeeded, and the caustic criticisms of the other two had prevented further trials. But Mrs. Snow's baked beans were a triumph. So also was the brown bread.

As they rose from the table the young lady asked a question concerning the location of the hotel. The captain made no answer at the time, but after a short consultation with the remainder of the triumvirate he came to her as she stood by the window and, laying his hand on her shoulder, said:

"Now, Elsie—I hope you don't mind my callin' you Elsie, but I've been chums with your grandpa so long since you must be a sort of relation of mine—Elsie, you ain't goin' to no hotel—that is, unless you're real set on it. Your grandpa here, and we're here, and there's room enough. I don't want to say too much, but I'd like to have you. I believe that me and Perez and Jerry want you to stay right in this house jest as long's you stop in Orisham. Now you will, won't you?"

(To be continued.)

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