

PRIVATE CLOTHES

AT half-past nine the crew of the *Merman* were buried in slumber, at nine thirty-two three of the members were awake with heads protruding out of their bunks, trying to peer through the gloom, while the fourth dreamt that a tea-tray was falling down a never-ending staircase. On the floor of the fore-castle something was cursing prettily and rubbing itself.

"Did you 'ear anything, Ted?" inquired a voice in an interval of silence.

"Who is it?" demanded Ted, ignoring the question. "Wot d'yer want?"

"I'll let you know who I am," said a thick and angry voice. "I've broke my blarsted back."

"Light the lamp, Bill," said Ted.

Bill struck a tandsticker match, and carefully nursing the tiny sulphurous flame with his hand, saw dimly some high-coloured object on the floor. He got out of his bunk and lit the lamp, and an angry and very drunken member of His Majesty's foot forces became visible.

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"Wot are you doin' 'ere?" inquired Ted, sharply, "this ain't the guard-room."

"Who knocked me over?" demanded the soldier, sternly; "take your co—coat off lik' a man."

He rose to his feet and swayed unsteadily to and fro.

"If you keep your li'l' 'eads still," he said gravely, to Bill, "I'll punch 'em."

By a stroke of good fortune he selected the real head, and gave it a blow which sent it crashing against the woodwork. For a moment the seaman stood gathering his scattered senses, then with an oath he sprang forward, and in the lightest of fighting trim waited until his adversary, who was by this time on the floor again, should have regained his feet.

"He's drunk, Bill," said another voice, "don't 'urt 'im. He's a chap wot said 'e was coming aboard to see me—I met 'im in the 'Green Man' this evening. You was coming to see me, mate, wasn't you?"

The soldier looked up stupidly, and gripping hold of the injured Bill by the shirt, staggered to his feet again, and advancing towards the last speaker let fly suddenly in his face.

"Sort man I am," he said, autobiographically "Feel my arm."

The indignant Bill took him by both, and throwing himself upon him suddenly fell with him to the floor. The intruder's head met the boards with a loud crash, and then there was silence.

"You ain't killed 'im, Bill?" said an old seaman, stooping over him anxiously.

"Course not," was the reply; "give us some water."

He threw some in the soldier's face, and then poured some down his neck, but with no result. Then he stood upright, and exchanged glances of consternation with his friends.

"I don't like the way he's breathing," he said, in a trembling voice.

"You always was pertickler, Bill," said the cook, who had thankfully got to the bottom of his staircase. "If I was you——"

He was not allowed to proceed any further; footsteps and a voice were heard above, and as old Thomas hastily extinguished the lamp, the mate's head was thrust down the scuttle, and the mate's voice sounded a profane *reveille*.

"Wot are we goin' to do with it?" inquired Ted, as the mate walked away.

"'Im, Ted," said Bill, nervously. "He's alive all right."

"If we put 'im ashore an' 'e's dead," said old

Thomas, "there'll be trouble for somebody. Better let 'im be, and if 'e's dead, why we don't none of us know nothing about it."

The men ran up on deck, and Bill, being the last to leave, put a boot under the soldier's head before he left. Ten minutes later they were under way, and standing about the deck, discussed the situation in thrilling whispers as opportunity offered.

At breakfast, by which time they were in a dirty tumbling sea, with the *Nore* lightship, a brown forlorn-looking object, on their beam, the soldier, who had been breathing stertorously, raised his heavy head from the boot, and with glassy eyes and tightly compressed lips gazed wonderingly about him.

"Wot cheer, mate?" said the delighted Bill. "'Ow goes it?"

"Where am I?" inquired Private Harry Bliss, in a weak voice.

"Brig *Merman*," said Bill; "bound for Byster-mouth."

"Well, I'm damned," said Private Bliss; "it's a blooming miracle. Open the winder, it's a bit stuffy down here. Who—who brought me here?"

"You come to see me last night," said Bob, "an' fell down, I s'pose; then you punched Bill 'ere in the eye and me in the jor."

Mr. Bliss, still feeling very sick and faint, turned to Bill, and after critically glancing at the eye turned on him for inspection, transferred his regards to the other man's jaw.

"I'm a devil when I'm boozed," he said, in a satisfied voice. "Well, I must get ashore; I shall get cells for this, I expect."

He staggered to the ladder, and with unsteady haste gained the deck and made for the side. The heaving waters made him giddy to look at, and he gazed for preference at a thin line of coast stretching away in the distance.

The startled mate, who was steering, gave him a hail, but he made no reply. A little fishing-boat was jumping about in a way to make a sea-sick man crazy, and he closed his eyes with a groan. Then the skipper, aroused by the mate's hail, came up from below, and walking up to him put a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"What are you doing aboard this ship?" he demanded, austerely.

"Go away," said Private Bliss, faintly; "take your paw off my tunic; you'll spoil it."

He clung miserably to the side, leaving the incensed skipper to demand explanations from the crew. The crew knew nothing about him, and said that he must have stowed himself away in an empty bunk; the skipper pointed out

coarsely that there were no empty bunks, whereupon Bill said that he had not occupied his the previous evening, but had fallen asleep sitting on the locker, and had injured his eye against the corner of a bunk in consequence. In proof whereof he produced the eye.

"Look here, old man," said Private Bliss, who suddenly felt better. He turned and patted the skipper on the back. "You just turn to the left a bit and put me ashore, will you?"

"I'll put you ashore at Bystermouth," said the skipper, with a grin. "You're a deserter, that's what you are, and I'll take care you're took care of."

"You put me ashore now!" roared Private Bliss, with a very fine imitation of the sergeant-major's parade voice.

"Get out and walk," said the skipper contemptuously, over his shoulder, as he walked off.

"Here," said Mr. Bliss, unbuckling his belt, "hold my tunic one of you. I'll learn 'im."

Before the paralysed crew could prevent him he had flung his coat into Bill's arms and followed the master of the *Merman* aft. As a light-weight he was rather fancied at the gymnasium, and in the all too brief exhibition which followed he displayed fine form and a knowledge of anatomy which even the skipper's tailor was powerless to frustrate.

The frenzy of the skipper as Ted assisted him to his feet and he saw his antagonist struggling in the arms of the crew was terrible to behold. Strong men shivered at his words, but Mr. Bliss, addressing him as "Whiskers," told him to call his crew off and to come on, and shaping as well as two pairs of brawny arms round his middle would permit, endeavoured in vain to reach him.

"This," said the skipper, bitterly, as he turned to the mate, "is what you an' me have to pay to keep up. I wouldn't let you go now, my lad, not for a fi'pun' note. Deserter, that's what you are!"

He turned and went below, and Private Bliss, after an insulting address to the mate, was hauled forward, struggling fiercely, and seated on the deck to recover. The excitement passed, he lost his colour again, and struggling into his tunic, went and brooded over the side.

By dinner-time his faintness had passed, and he sniffed with relish at the smell from the galley. The cook emerged bearing dinner to the cabin, then he returned and took a fine smoking piece of boiled beef flanked with carrots down to the forecastle. Private Bliss eyed him wistfully and his mouth watered.

For a time pride struggled with hunger, then

pride won a partial victory and he descended carelessly to the forecastle.

"Can any o' you chaps lend me a pipe o' baccy?" he asked, cheerfully.

Bill rummaged in his pocket and found a little tobacco in a twist of paper.

"Bad thing to smoke on a empty stomach," he said, with his mouth full.

"Tain't my fault it's empty," said Private Bliss, pathetically.

"Tain't mine," said Bill.

"I've 'eard," said the cook, who was a tender-hearted man, "as 'ow it's a good thing to go for a day or so without food sometimes."

"Who said so?" inquired Private Bliss, hotly.

"Diffrent people," replied the cook.

"You can tell 'em from me they're blamed fools," said Mr. Bliss.

There was an uncomfortable silence; Mr. Bliss lit his pipe, but it did not seem to draw well.

"Did you like that pot o' six-half I stood you last night?" he inquired somewhat pointedly of Bob.

Bob hesitated, and looked at his plate.

"No, it was a bit flat," he said, at length.

"Well, I won't stop you chaps at your grub," said Private Bliss, bitterly, as he turned to depart.

"You're not stopping us," said Ted, cheerfully. "I'd offer you a bit, only——"

"Only what?" demanded the other.

"Skipper's orders," said Ted. "He ses we're not to. He ses if we do it's helping a deserter, and we'll all get six months."

"But you're helping me by having me on board," said Private Bliss; "besides, I don't want to desert."

"We couldn't 'elp you coming aboard," said Bill, "that's wot the old man said, but 'e ses we can 'elp giving of him vittles, he ses."

"Well, have I got to starve?" demanded the horror-stricken Mr. Bliss.

"Look 'ere," said Bill, frankly, "go and speak to the old man. It's no good talking to us. Go and have it out with him."

Private Bliss thanked him and went on deck. Old Thomas was at the wheel, and a pleasant clatter of knives and forks came up through the open skylight of the cabin. Ignoring the old man, who waved him away, he raised the open skylight still higher, and thrust his head in.

"Go away," bawled the skipper, pausing with his knife in his fist, as he caught sight of him.

"I want to know where I'm to have my dinner," bawled back the thoroughly roused Mr. Bliss.

"Your *dinner!*" said the skipper, with an air of surprise; "why, I didn't know you 'ad any."

Private Bliss took his head away, and holding it very erect, took in his belt a little and walked slowly up and down the deck. Then he went to the water-cask and took a long drink, and an hour later a generous message was received from the skipper that he might have as many biscuits as he liked.

On this plain fare Private Bliss lived the whole of that day and the next, snatching a few hours' troubled sleep on the locker at nights. His peace of mind was by no means increased by the information of Ted that Bystermouth was a garrison town, and feeling that in spite of any explanation he would be treated as a deserter, he resolved to desert in good earnest at the first opportunity that offered.

By the third day nobody took any notice of him, and his presence on board was almost forgotten, until Bob, going down to the fore-castle, created a stir by asking somewhat excitedly what had become of him.

"He's on deck, I s'pose," said the cook, who was having a pipe.

"He's not," said Bob, solemnly.

"He's not gone overboard, I s'pose?" said Bill, starting up.

Touched by this morbid suggestion they went up on deck and looked round; Private Bliss was nowhere to be seen, and Ted, who was steering, had heard no splash. He seemed to have disappeared by magic, and the cook, after a hurried search, ventured aft, and, descending to the cabin, mentioned his fears to the skipper.

"Nonsense!" said that gentleman, sharply. "I'll lay I'll find him."

He came on deck and looked round, followed at a respectful distance by the crew, but there was no sign of Mr. Bliss. Then an idea, a horrid idea, occurred to the cook. The colour left his cheeks and he gazed helplessly at the skipper.

"What is it?" bawled the latter.

The cook, incapable of speech, raised a trembling hand and pointed to the galley. The skipper started, and, rushing to the door, drew it hastily back.

Mr. Bliss had apparently finished, though he still toyed languidly with his knife and fork as though loth to put them down. A half-emptied saucepan of potatoes stood on the floor by his side, and a bone, with a small fragment of meat adhering, was between his legs on a saucepan lid which served as a dish.

"Rather underdone, cook," he said, severely, as he met that worthy's horror-stricken gaze.

"Is that the cabin's or the men's he's eaten?" vociferated the skipper.

"Cabin's," replied Mr. Bliss, before the cook could speak; "it looked the best. Now has anybody got a nice see-gar?"

He drew back the door the other side of the galley as he spoke, and went out that way. A move was made towards him, but he backed, and picking up a handspike swung it round his head.

"Let him be," said the skipper in a choking voice, "let him be. He'll have to answer for stealing my dinner when I get 'im ashore. Cook, take the men's dinner down into the cabin. I'll talk to you by and by."

He walked aft and disappeared below, while Private Bliss, still fondling the handspike, listened unmoved to a lengthy vituperation which Bill called a plain and honest opinion of his behaviour.

"It's the last dinner you'll 'ave for some time," he concluded, spitefully; "it'll be skilly for you when you get ashore."

Mr. Bliss smiled, and, fidgeting with his tongue, asked him for the loan of his toothpick.

"You won't be using it yourself," he urged. "Now you go below all of you and start on the biscuits, there's good men. It's no use standing

there saying a lot o' bad words what I left off when I was four years old."

He filled his pipe with some tobacco he had thoughtfully borrowed from the cook before dinner, and dropping into a negligent attitude on the deck, smoked placidly with his eyes half closed. The brig was fairly steady and the air hot and slumberous, and with an easy assurance that nobody would hit him while in that position, he allowed his head to fall on his chest and dropped off into a light sleep.

It became evident to him the following afternoon that they were nearing Bystermouth. The skipper contented himself with eyeing him with an air of malicious satisfaction, but the crew gratified themselves by painting the horrors of his position in strong colours. Private Bliss affected indifference, but listened eagerly to all they had to say, with the air of a general considering his enemy's plans.

It was a source of disappointment to the crew that they did not arrive until after nightfall, and the tide was already too low for them to enter the harbour. They anchored outside, and Private Bliss, despite his position, felt glad as he smelt the land again, and saw the twinkling lights and houses ashore. He could even hear the clatter of a belated vehicle driving along the seafront.

Lights on the summits of the heights in the background indicated, so Bill said, the position of the fort.

To the joy of the men he partly broke down in the forecastle that night; and, in tropical language, severally blamed his parents, the School Board, and the Army for not having taught him to swim. The last thing that Bill heard, ere sleep closed his lids, was a pious resolution on the part of Mr. Bliss to the effect that all his children should be taught the art of natation as soon as they were born.

Bill woke up just before six; and, hearing a complaining voice, thought at first that his military friend was still speaking. The voice got more and more querulous with occasional excursions into the profane, and the seaman, rubbing his eyes, turned his head, and saw old Thomas groping about the forecastle.

"Wot's the matter with you, old 'un?" he demanded.

"I can't find my trousis," grumbled the old man.

"Did you 'ave 'em on larst night?" inquired Bill, who was still half asleep.

"Course I did, you fool," said the other, snappishly.

"Be civil," said Bill, calmly, "be civil. Are you sure you haven't got 'em on now?"

The old man greeted this helpful suggestion with such a volley of abuse that Bill lost his temper.

"P'r'aps somebody's got 'em on their bed, thinking they was a patchwork quilt," he said, coldly; "it's a mistake anybody might make. Have you got the jacket?"

"I ain't got nothing," replied the bewildered old man, "'cept wot I stand up in."

"That ain't much," said Bill, frankly. "Where's that blooming sojer?" he demanded, suddenly.

"I don't know where 'e is, and I don't care," replied the old man. "On deck, I s'pose."

"P'r'aps 'e's got 'em on," said the unforgiving Bill; "'e didn't seem a very pertickler sort of chap."

The old man started, and hurriedly ascended to the deck. He was absent two or three minutes, and, when he returned, consternation was writ large upon his face.

"He's gone," he spluttered; "there ain't a sign of 'im about, and the life-belt wot hangs on the galley 'as gone too. Wot am I to do?"

"Well, they was very old cloes," said Bill, soothingly, "an' you ain't a bad figger, not for your time o' life, Thomas."

"There's many a wooden-legged man 'ud be glad to change with you," affirmed Ted, who had

been roused by the noise. "You'll soon get over the feeling o' shyness, Thomas."

The fore-castle laughed encouragingly, until Thomas, who had begun to realise the position, joined in. He laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks, and his excitement began to alarm his friends.

"Don't be a fool, Thomas," said Bob, anxiously.

"I can't help it," said the old man, struggling hysterically; "it's the best joke I've heard."

"He's gone dotty," said Ted, solemnly. "I never 'eard of a man larfing like that a 'cos he'd lost 'is cloes."

"I'm not larfing at that," said Thomas, regaining his composure by a great effort. "I'm larfing at a joke wot you don't know of yet."

A deadly chill struck at the hearts of the listeners at these words, then Bill, after a glance at the foot of his bunk, where he usually kept his clothes, sprang out and began a hopeless search. The other men followed suit, and the air rang with lamentations and profanity. Even the spare suits in the men's chests had gone; and Bill, a prey to acute despair, sat down, and in a striking passage consigned the entire British Army to perdition.

"'E's taken one suit and chucked the rest over-board, I expect, so as we shan't be able to go

arter 'im," said Thomas. "I expect he could swim arter all, Bill."

Bill, still busy with the British Army, paid no heed.

"We must go an' tell the old man," said Ted.

"Better be careful," cautioned the cook. "'Im an' the mate 'ad a go at the whisky last night, an' you know wot 'e is next morning."

The men went up slowly on deck. The morning was fine, but the air, chill with a breeze from the land, had them at a disadvantage. Ashore, a few people were early astir.

"You go down, Thomas, you're the oldest," said Bill.

"I was thinking o' Ted going," said Thomas, "'e's the youngest."

Ted snorted derisively. "Oh, was you?" he remarked, helpfully.

"Or Bob," said the old man, "don't matter which."

"Toss up for it," said the cook.

Bill, who was keeping his money in his hand as the only safe place left to him, produced a penny and spun it in the air.

"Wait a bit," said Ted, earnestly. "Wot time was you to call the old man?" he asked, turning to the cook.

"Toss up for it," repeated that worthy, hurriedly.

"Six o'clock," said Bob, speaking for him; "it's that now, cookie. Better go an' call 'im at once."

"I dassent go like this," said the trembling cook.

"Well, you'll 'ave to," said Bill. "If the old man misses the tide, you know wot you've got to expect."

"Let's follow 'im down," said Ted. "Come along, cookie, we'll see you righted."

The cook thanked him, and, followed by the others, led the way down to interview the skipper. The clock ticked on the mantelpiece, and heavy snoring proceeded both from the mate's bunk and the state-room. On the door of the latter the cook knocked gently; then he turned the handle and peeped in.

The skipper, raising a heavy head, set in matted hair and disordered whiskers, glared at him fiercely.

"What d'ye want?" he roared.

"If you please, sir——" began the cook.

He opened the door as he spoke, and disclosed the lightly-clad crowd behind. The skipper's eyes grew large and his jaw dropped, while inarticulate words came from his parched and astonished throat; and the mate, who was by

this time awake, sat up in his bunk and cursed them roundly for their indelicacy.

"Get out," roared the skipper, recovering his voice.

"We came to tell you," interposed Bill, "as 'ow——"

"Get out," roared the skipper again. "How dare you come to my state-room, and like this, too."

"All our clothes 'ave gone and so 'as the sojer chap," said Bill.

"Serve you damned well right for letting him go," cried the skipper, angrily. "Hurry up, George, and get alongside," he called to the mate, "we'll catch him yet. Clear out, you—you—ballet girls."

The indignant seamen withdrew slowly, and, reaching the foot of the companion, stood there in mutinous indecision. Then, as the cook placed his foot on the step, the skipper was heard calling to the mate again.

"George?" he said, in an odd voice.

"Well?" was the reply.

"I hope you're not forgetting yourself and playing larks," said the skipper, with severity.

"Larks?" repeated the mate, as the alarmed crew fled silently on deck and stood listening open-mouthed at the companion. "Of course I ain't. You don't mean to tell me——"

"All my clothes have gone, every stitch I've got," replied the skipper, desperately, as the mate sprang out. "I shall have to borrow some of yours. If I catch that infernal——"

"You're quite welcome," said the mate, bitterly, "only somebody has borrowed 'em already. That's what comes of sleeping too heavy."

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The *Merman* sailed bashfully into harbour half an hour later, the uniforms of its crew evoking severe comment from the people on the quay. At the same time, Mr. Harry Bliss, walking along the road some ten miles distant, was trying to decide upon his future career, his present calling of "shipwrecked sailor" being somewhat too hazardous even for his bold spirit.