**"Choice Spirits"**

**by W. W. Jacobs**

The day was fine, and the breeze so light that the old patched sails were taking the schooner along at a gentle three knots per hour. A sail or two shone like snow in the offing, and a gull hovered in the air astern. From the cabin to the galley, and from the galley to the untidy tangle in the bows, there was no sign of anybody to benefit by the conversation of the skipper and mate as they discussed a wicked and mutinous spirit which had become observable in the crew.

"It's sheer rank wickedness, that's what it is," said the skipper, a small elderly man, with grizzled beard and light blue eyes.

"Rank," agreed the mate, whose temperament was laconic.

"Why, when I was a boy you wouldn't believe what I had to eat," said the skipper; "not if I took my Bible oath on it, you wouldn't."

"They're dainty," said the mate.

"Dainty!" said the other indignantly. "What right have hungry sailormen to be dainty? Don't I give them enough to eat? Look! Look there!"

He drew back, choking, and pointed with his forefinger as Bill Smith, A.B., came on deck with a plate held at arm's length, and a nose disdainfully elevated. He affected not to see the skipper, and, walking in a mincing fashion to the side, raked the food from the plate into the sea with his fingers. He was followed by George Simpson, A.B., who in the same objectionable fashion wasted food which the skipper had intended should nourish his frame.

"I'll pay 'em for this!" murmured the skipper.

"There's some more," said the mate.

Two more men came on deck, grinning consciously, and disposed of their dinners. Then there was an interval--an interval in which everybody, fore and aft, appeared to be waiting for something; the something being at that precise moment standing at the foot of the foc'sle ladder, trying to screw its courage up.

"If the boy comes," said the skipper in a strained, unnatural voice, "I'll flay him alive."

"You'd better get your knife out then," said the mate.

The boy appeared on deck, very white about the gills, and looking piteously at the crew for support. He became conscious from their scowls that he had forgotten something, and remembering himself, stretched out his skinny arms to their full extent, and, crinkling his nose, walked with great trepidation to the side.

"Boy!" vociferated the skipper suddenly.

"Yessir," said the urchin hastily.

"Comm'ere," said the skipper sternly.

"Shove your dinner over first," said four low, menacing voices.

The boy hesitated, then walked slowly towards the skipper.

"What are you going to do with that dinner?" demanded the latter grimly.

"Eat it," said the youth modestly.

"What d'yer bring it on deck for, then?" inquired the other, bending his brows on him.

"I thought it would taste better on deck, sir," said the boy.

"Taste better!" growled the skipper ferociously. "Ain't it good?"

"Yessir," said the boy.

"Speak louder," said the skipper sternly. "Is it very good?"

"Beautiful," said the boy in a shrill falsetto.

"Did you ever taste better wittles than you get aboard this ship?" demanded the skipper, setting him a fine example in loud speaking.

"Never," yelled the boy, following it.

"Everything as it should be?" roared the skipper.

"Better than it should be," shrilled the craven.

"Sit down and eat it," commanded the other.

The boy sat on the cabin skylight, and, taking out his pocket-knife, began his meal with every appearance of enjoyment, the skipper, with his elbows on the side, and his legs crossed, regarding him serenely.

"I suppose," he said loudly, after watching the boy for some time, "I s'pose the men threw theirs overboard becos they hadn't been used to such good food?"

"Yessir," said the boy.

"Did they say so?" bawled the other.

The boy hesitated, and glanced nervously forward. "Yessir," he said at length, and shuddered as a low, ominous growl came from the crew. Despite his slowness, the meal came to an end at last, and, in obedience to orders, he rose, and taking his plate forward, looked entreatingly at the crew as he passed them.

"Come down below," said Bill; "we want to have a talk with you."

"Can't," said the boy. "I've got my work to do. I haven't got time to talk."

He stayed up on deck until evening, and then, the men's anger having evaporated somewhat, crept softly below, and climbed into his bunk. Simpson leaned over and made a clutch at him, but Bill pushed him aside.

"Leave him alone," said he quietly; "we'll take it out of him to-morrow."

For some time Tommy lay worrying over the fate in store for him, and then, yielding to fatigue, turned over and slept soundly until he was awakened some three hours later by the men's voices, and, looking out, saw that the lamp was alight and the crew at supper, listening quietly to Bill, who was speaking.

"I've a good mind to strike, that's what I've a good mind to do," he said savagely, as, after an attempt at the butter, he put it aside and ate dry biscuit.

"An' get six months," said old Ned. "That won't do, Bill."

"Are we to go a matter of six or seven days on dry biscuit and rotten taters?" demanded the other fiercely. "Why, it's slow sooicide."

"I wish one of you would commit sooicide," said Ned, looking wistfully round at the faces, "that 'ud frighten the old man, and bring him round a bit."

"Well, you're the eldest," said Bill pointedly.

"Drowning's a easy death too," said Simpson persuasively. "You can't have much enjoyment in life at your age, Ned?"

"And you might leave a letter behind to the skipper, saying as 'ow you was drove to it by bad food," said the cook, who was getting excited.

"Talk sense!" said the old man very shortly.

"Look here," said Bill suddenly. "I tell you what we can do: let one of us pretend to commit suicide, and write a letter as Slushy here ses, saying as 'ow we're gone overboard sooner than be starved to death. It 'ud scare the old man proper; and p'raps he'd let us start on the other meat without eating up this rotten stuff first."

"How's it to be done?" asked Simpson, staring.

"Go an' 'ide down the fore 'old," said Bill. "There's not much stuff down there. We'll take off the hatch when one of us is on watch to-night, and--whoever wants to--can go and hide down there till the old man's come to his senses. What do you think of it, mates?"

"It's all right as an idea," said Ned slowly, "but who's going?"

"Tommy," replied Bill simply.

"Blest if I ever thought of him," said Ned admiringly; "did you, cookie?"

"Never crossed my mind," said the cook.

"You see the best o' Tommy's going," said Bill, "is that the old man 'ud only give him a flogging if he found it out. We wouldn't split as to who put the hatch on over him. He can be there as comfortable as you please, do nothing, and sleep all day if he likes. O' course we don't know anything about it, we miss Tommy, and find the letter wrote on this table."

The cook leaned forward and regarded his colleague favourably; then he pursed his lips, and nodded significantly at an upper bunk from which the face of Tommy, pale and scared, looked anxiously down.

"Halloa!" said Bill, "have you heard what we've been saying?"

"I heard you say something about going to drown old Ned," said Tommy guardedly.

"He's heard all about it," said the cook severely. "Do you know where little boys who tell lies go to, Tommy?"

"I'd sooner go there than down the fore 'old," said Tommy, beginning to knuckle his eyes. "I won't go. I'll tell the skipper."

"No you won't," said Bill sternly. "This is your punishment for them lies you told about us to-day, an' very cheap you've got off too. Now, get out o' that bunk. Come on afore I pull you out."

With a miserable whimper the youth dived beneath his blankets, and, clinging frantically to the edge of his berth, kicked convulsively as he was lifted down, blankets and all, and accommodated with a seat at the table.

"Pen and ink and paper, Ned," said Bill.

The old man produced them, and Bill, first wiping off with his coat-sleeve a piece of butter which the paper had obtained from the table, spread it before the victim.

"I can't write," said Tommy suddenly.

The men looked at each other in dismay.

"It's a lie," said the cook.

"I tell you I can't," said the urchin, becoming hopeful; "that's why they sent me to sea, becos I couldn't read or write."

"Pull his ear, Bill," said Ned, annoyed at these aspersions upon an honourable profession.

"It don't matter," said Bill calmly. "I'll write it for 'im; the old man don't know my fist."

He sat down at the table, and, squaring his shoulders, took a noisy dip of ink, and scratching his head, looked pensively at the paper.

"Better spell it bad, Bill," suggested Ned.

"Ay, ay," said the other. "'Ow do you think a boy would spell 'sooicide,' Ned?"

The old man pondered. "S-o-o-e-y-s-i-d-e," he said slowly.

"Why, that's the right way, ain't it?" inquired the cook, looking from one to the other.

"We mustn't spell it right," said Bill, with his pen hovering over the paper. "Be careful, Ned."

"We'll say 'killed myself instead,'" said the old man. "A boy wouldn't use such a big word as that p'raps."

Bill bent over his work, and, apparently paying great attention to his friends' entreaties not to write it too well, slowly wrote the letter.

"How's this?" he inquired, sitting back in his seat.

"'Deer captin i take my pen in hand for the larst time to innform you that i am no more suner than heat the 'orrible stuff what you kail meet i have drownded miself it is a moor easy death than starvin' i 'ave left my clasp nife to bill an' my silver wotch to it is 'ard too dee so young tommie brown.'"

"Splendid!" said Ned, as the reader finished and looked inquiringly round.

"I put in that bit about the knife and the watch to make it seem real," said Bill, with modest pride; "but, if you like, I'll leave 'em to you instead, Ned."

"I don't want 'em," said the old man generously.

"Put your cloes on," said Bill, turning to the whimpering Tommy.

"I'm \_not\_ going down that fore 'old," said Tommy desperately. "You may as well know now as later on--I won't go."

"Cookie," said Bill calmly, "just 'and me them cloes, will you? Now, Tommy."

"I tell you I'm not going to," said Tommy.

"An' that little bit o' rope, cookie," said Bill; "it's just down by your 'and. Now, Tommy."

The youngest member of the crew looked from his clothes to the rope, and from the rope back to his clothes again.

"How 'm I goin' to be fed?" he demanded sullenly, as he began to dress.

"You'll have a stone bottle o' water to take down with you an' some biskits," replied Bill, "an' of a night-time we'll hand you down some o' that meat you're so fond of. Hide 'em behind the cargo, an' if you hear anybody take the hatch off in the daytime, nip behind it yourself."

"An' what about fresh air?" demanded the sacrifice.

"You'll 'ave fresh air of a night when the hatch is took off," said Bill. "Don't you worry, I've thought of everything."

The arrangements being concluded, they waited until Simpson relieved the mate at the helm, and then trooped up on deck, half pushing and half leading their reluctant victim.

"It's just as if he was going on a picnic," said old Ned, as the boy stood unwillingly on the deck, with a stone bottle in one hand and some biscuits wrapped up in an old newspaper in the other.

"Lend a 'and, Bill. Easy does it."

Noiselessly the two seamen took off the hatch, and, as Tommy declined to help in the proceedings at all, Ned clambered down first to receive him. Bill took him by the scruff of the neck and lowered him, kicking strongly, into the hold.

"Have you got him?" he inquired.

"Yes," said Ned in a smothered voice, and, depositing the boy in the hold, hastily clambered up again, wiping his mouth.

"Been having a swig at the bottle?" inquired Bill.

"Boy's heel," said Ned very shortly. "Get the hatch on."

The hatch was replaced, and Bill and his fellow conspirator, treading quietly and not without some apprehension for the morrow, went below and turned in. Tommy, who had been at sea long enough to take things as he found them, curled up in the corner of the hold, and with his bottle as a pillow fell asleep.

It was not until eight o'clock next morning that the master of the \_Sunbeam\_ discovered that he was a boy short. He questioned the cook as he sat at breakfast The cook, who was a very nervous man, turned pale, set the coffee-pot down with a thump which upset some of the liquor, and bolted up on deck. The skipper, after shouting for him in some of the most alluring swear words known on the high seas, went raging up on deck, where he found the men standing in a little knot, looking very ill at ease.

"Bill," said the skipper uneasily, "what's the matter with that damned cook?"

"'E's 'ad a shock, sir," said Bill, shaking his head; "we've all 'ad a shock."

"You'll have another in a minute," said the skipper emotionally. "Where's the boy?"

For a moment Bill's hardihood forsook him, and he looked helplessly at his mates. In their anxiety to avoid his gaze they looked over the side, and a horrible fear came over the skipper. He looked at Bill mutely, and Bill held out a dirty piece of paper.

The skipper read it through in a state of stupefaction, then he handed it to the mate, who had followed him on deck. The mate read it and handed it back.

"It's yours," he said shortly.

"I don't understand it," said the skipper, shaking his head. "Why, only yesterday he was up on deck here eating his dinner, and saying it was the best meat he ever tasted. You heard him, Bob?"

"I \_heard\_ him, pore little devil!" said the mate.

"You all heard him," said the skipper. "Well, there's five witnesses I've got. He must have been mad. Didn't nobody hear him go overboard?"

"I 'eard a splash, sir, in my watch," said Bill.

"Why didn't you run and see what it was?" demanded the other.

"I thought it was one of the chaps come up to throw his supper overboard," said Bill simply.

"Ah!" said the skipper, biting his lip, "did you? You're always going on about the grub. What's the matter with it?"

"It's pizon, sir," said Ned, shaking his head. "The meat's awful."

"It's as sweet as nuts," said the skipper. "Well, you can have it out of the other tank if you like. Will that satisfy you?"

The men brightened up a little and nudged each other.

"The butter's bad too, sir," said Bill.

"Butter bad!" said the skipper, frowning. "How's that, cook?"

"I ain't done nothing to it, sir," said the cook helplessly.

"Give 'em butter out o' the firkin in the cabin," growled the skipper. "It's my firm belief you'd been ill-using that boy; the food was delicious."

He walked off, taking the letter with him, and, propping it up against the sugar-basin, made but a poor breakfast.

For that day the men lived, as Ned put it, on the fat of the land, in addition to the other luxuries. Figgy duff, a luxury hitherto reserved for Sundays, being also served out to them. Bill was regarded as a big-brained benefactor of the human race; joy reigned in the foc'sle, and at night the hatch was taken off and the prisoner regaled with a portion which had been saved for him. He ate it ungratefully, and put churlish and inconvenient questions as to what was to happen at the end of the voyage.

"Well smuggle you ashore all right," said Bill; "none of us are going to sign back in this old tub. I'll take you aboard some ship with me--Eh?"

"I didn't say anything," said Tommy untruthfully.

To the wrath and confusion of the crew, next day their commanding officer put them back on the old diet again. The old meat was again served out, and the grass-fed luxury from the cabin stopped. Bill shared the fate of all leaders when things go wrong, and, from being the idol of his fellows, became a butt for their gibes.

"What about your little idea now?" grunted old Ned, scornfully, that evening as he broke his biscuit roughly with his teeth, and dropped it into his basin of tea.

"You ain't as clever as you thought you was, Bill," said the cook with the air of a discoverer.

"And there's that pore dear boy shut up in the dark for nothing," said Simpson, with somewhat belated thoughtfulness. "An' cookie doing his work."

"I'm not going to be beat," said Bill blackly; "the old man was badly scared yesterday. We must have another sooicide, that's all."

"Let Tommy do it again," suggested the cook flippantly, and they all laughed.

"Two on one trip 'll about do the old man up," said Bill, regarding the interruption unfavourably. "Now, who's going to be the next?"

"We've had enough o' this game," said Simpson, shrugging his shoulders; "you've gone cranky, Bill."

"No I ain't," said Bill; "I'm not going to be beat, that's all. Whoever goes down, they'll have a nice, easy, lazy time. Sleep all day if he likes, and nothing to do. \_You\_ ain't been looking very well lately, Ned."

"Oh?" said the old man coldly.

"Well, settle it between you," said Bill carelessly; "it's all one to me, which of you goes."

"Ho, an' what about you?" demanded Simpson.

"Me?" inquired Bill in astonishment. "Why, I've got to stay up here and manage it."

"Well, we'll stay up and help you," said Simpson derisively.

Ned and the cook laughed, Simpson joined in. Bill rose, and, going to his bunk, fished out a pack of greasy cards from beneath his bedding.

"Larst cut, sooicide," he said briefly, "I'm in it."

He held the pack before the cook. The cook hesitated, and looked at the other two.

"Don't be a fool, Bill," said Simpson.

"Why, do you funk it?" sneered Bill.

"It's a fool's game, I tell you," said Simpson.

"Well, you 'elped me start it," said the other. "You're afraid, that's what you are,--afraid. You can let the boy go down there, but when it comes to yourselves you turn chicken-'arted."

"All right," said Simpson recklessly, "let Bill 'ave 'is way; cut, cookie."

Sorely against his will the cook complied, and drew a ten; Ned, after much argument, cut and drew seven; Simpson, with a king in his fist, leaned back on the locker and fingered his beard nonchalantly. "Go on, Bill," he said; "see what you can do."

Bill took the pack and shuffled it "I orter be able to beat seven," he said slowly. He handed the pack to Ned, drew a card, and the other three sat back and laughed boisterously.

"Three!" said Simpson. "Bravo, Bill! I'll write your letter for you; he'd know your writing. What shall I say?"

"Say what you like," retorted Bill, breathing hard as he thought of the hold.

He sat back sneering disdainfully, as the other three merrily sat down to compose his letter, replying only by a contemptuous silence when Simpson asked him whether he wanted any kisses put in. When the letter was handed over for his inspection he only made one remark.

"I thought you could write better than that, George," he said haughtily.

"I'm writing it for you," said Simpson.

Bill's hauteur vanished and he became his old self again. "If you want a plug in the eye, George," he said feelingly, "you've only got to say so, you know."

His temper was so unpleasant that half the pleasure of the evening was spoiled, and instead of being conducted to his hiding-place with quips and light laughter, the proceedings were more like a funeral than anything else. The crowning touch to his ill-nature was furnished by Tommy, who upon coming up and learning that Bill was to be his room-mate, gave way to a fit of the most unfeigned horror.

"There's another letter for you this morning," said the mate, as the skipper came out of his stateroom buttoning up his waistcoat.

"Another what?" demanded the other, turning pale.

The mate jerked his thumb upwards. "Old Ned has got it," he continued. "I can't think what's come over the men."

The skipper dashed up on deck, and mechanically took the letter from Ned and read it through. He stood for some time like a man in a dream, and then stumbled down the forecastle, and looked in all the bunks and even under the table; then he came up and stood by the hold, with his head on one side. The men held their breath.

"What's the meaning of all this?" he demanded at length, sitting limply on the hatch, with his eyes down.

"Bad grub, sir," said Simpson, gaining courage from his manner; "that's what we'll have to say when we get ashore."

"You're not to say a word about it!" said the other, firing up.

"It's our dooty, sir," said Ned impressively.

"Look here now," said the skipper, and he looked at the remaining members of the crew entreatingly. "Don't let's have no more suicides. The old meat's gone now, and you can start the other, and when we get to port I'll ship in some fresh butter and vegetables. But I don't want you to say anything about the food being bad, or about these letters, when we get to port I shall simply say the two of 'em disappeared, an' I want you to say the same."

"It can't be done, sir," said Simpson firmly.

The skipper rose and walked to the side. "Would a fi'pun note make any difference?" he asked in a low voice.

"It 'ud make a little difference," said Ned cautiously.

The skipper looked up at Simpson. On the face of Simpson was an expression of virtuous arithmetical determination.

The skipper looked down again. "Or a fi'pun note each?" he said, in a low voice. "I can't go beyond that."

"Call it twenty pun and it's a bargain, ain't it, mates?" said Simpson.

Ned said it was, and even the cook forgot his nervousness, and said it was evident the skipper meant to do the generous thing, and they'd stand by him.

"Where's the money coming from?" inquired the mate, as the skipper went down to breakfast, and discussed the matter with him. "They wouldn't get nothing out of me!"

The skylight was open; the skipper with a glance at it bent forward and whispered in his ear.

"Wot!" said the mate. He endeavoured to suppress his laughter with hot coffee and bacon, with the result that he had to rise from his seat and stand patiently while the skipper dealt him some hearty thumps on the back.

With the prospect of riches before them the men cheerfully faced the extra work; the cook did the boy's, while Ned and Simpson did Bill's between them. When night came they removed the hatch again, and with a little curiosity waited to hear how their victims were progressing.

"Where's my dinner?" growled Bill hungrily, as he drew himself up on deck.

"Dinner!" said Ned, in surprise; "why, you ain't got none."

"\_Wot?\_" said Bill ferociously.

"You see the skipper only serves out for three now," said the cook.

"Well, why didn't you save us some?" demanded the other.

"There ain't enough of it, Bill, there ain't indeed," said Ned. "We have to do more work now, and there ain't enough even for us. You've got biscuit and water, haven't you?"

Bill swore at him.

"I've 'ad enough o' this," he said fiercely. "I'm coming up, let the old man do what he likes. I don't care."

"Don't do that, Bill," said the old man persuasively. "Everything's going beautiful. You was quite right what you said about the old man. We was wrong. He's skeered fearful, and he's going to give us twenty pun to say nothing about it when we get ashore."

"I'm going to have ten out o' that," said Bill, brightening a little, "and it's worth it too. I get the 'orrors shut up down there all day."

"Ay, ay," said Ned, with a side kick at the cook, who was about to question Bill's method of division.

"The old man sucked it all in beautiful," said the cook. "He's in a dreadful way. He's got all your clothes and things, and the boy's, and he's going to 'and 'em over to your friends. It's the best joke I ever heard."

"You're a fool!" said Bill shortly, and lighting his pipe went and squatted in the bows to wrestle grimly with a naturally bad temper.

For the ensuing four days things went on smoothly enough. The weather being fair, the watch at night was kept by the men, and regularly they had to go through the unpleasant Jack-in-the-box experience of taking the lid off Bill. The sudden way he used to pop out and rate them about his sufferings and their callousness was extremely trying, and it was only by much persuasion and reminders of his share of the hush-money that they could persuade him to return again to his lair at daybreak.

Still undisturbed they rounded the Land's End. The day had been close and muggy, but towards night the wind freshened, and the schooner began to slip at a good pace through the water. The two prisoners, glad to escape from the stifling atmosphere of the hold, sat in the bows with an appetite which the air made only too keen for the preparations made to satisfy it.

Ned was steering, and the other two men having gone below and turned in, there were no listeners to their low complaints about the food.

"It's a fool's game, Tommy," said Bill, shaking his head.

"\_Game?\_" said Tommy, sniffing. "'Ow are we going to get away when we get to Northsea?"

"You leave that to me," said Bill. "Old Ned seems to ha' got a bad cough," he added.

"He's choking, I should think," said Tommy, leaning forward. "Look! he's waving his hand at us."

Both sprang up hastily, but ere they could make any attempt to escape the skipper and mate emerged from the companion and walked towards them.

"Look here," said the skipper, turning to the mate, and indicating the culprits with his hand; "perhaps you'll disbelieve in dreams now."

"'Straordinary!" said the mate, rubbing his eyes, as Bill stood sullenly waiting events, while the miserable Tommy skulked behind him.

"I've heard o' such things," continued the skipper, in impressive tones, "but I never expected to see it You can't say you haven't seen a ghost now, Bob."

"'Straordinary!" said the mate, shaking his head again. "Lifelike!"

"The ship's haunted, Ned," cried the skipper in hollow tones. "Here's the sperrits o' Bill and the boy standing agin the windlass."

The bewildered old seaman made no reply; the smaller spirit sniffed and wiped his nose on his cuff, and the larger one began to whistle softly.

"Poor things!" said the skipper, after they had discussed these extraordinary apparitions for some time. "Can you see the windlass through the boy, Bob?"

"I can see through both of 'em," said the mate slyly.

They stayed on deck a little longer, and then coming to the conclusion that their presence on deck could do no good, and indeed seemed only to embarrass their visitors, went below again, leaving all hands a prey to the wildest astonishment.

"Wot's 'is little game?" asked Simpson, coming cautiously up on deck.

"Damned if I know," said Bill savagely.

"He don't really think you're ghosts?" suggested the cook feebly.

"O' course not," said Bill scornfully. "He's got some little game on. Well, I'm going to my bunk. You'd better come too, Tommy. We'll find out what it all means to-morrer, I've no doubt."

On the morrow they received a little enlightenment, for after breakfast the cook came forward nervously to break the news that meat and vegetables had only been served out for three. Consternation fell upon all.

"I'll go an' see 'im," said Bill ravenously.

He found the skipper laughing heartily over something with the mate. At the seaman's approach he stepped back and eyed him coolly.

"Mornin', sir," said Bill, shuffling up. "We'd like to know, sir, me an' Tommy, whether we can have our rations for dinner served out now same as before?"

"\_Dinner?\_" said the skipper in surprise. "What do you want dinner for?"

"Eat," said Bill, eyeing him reproachfully.

"Eat?" said the skipper. "What's the good o' giving dinner to a ghost? Why you've got nowhere to put it."

By dint of great self-control Bill smiled in a ghastly fashion, and patted his stomach.

"All air," said the skipper turning away.

"Can we have our clothes and things then?" said Bill grinding his teeth. "Ned says as how you've got 'em."

"Certainly not," said the skipper. "I take 'em home and give 'em to your next o' kin. That's the law, ain't it, Bob?"

"It is," said the mate.

"They'll 'ave your effects and your pay up to the night you committed suicide," said the skipper.

"We didn't commit sooicide," said Bill; "how could we when we're standing here?"

"Oh, yes, you did," said the other. "I've got your letters in my pocket to prove it; besides, if you didn't I should give you in charge for desertion directly we get to port."

He exchanged glances with the mate, and Bill, after standing first on one leg and then on the other, walked slowly away. For the rest of the morning he stayed below setting the smaller ghost a bad example in the way of language, and threatening his fellows with all sorts of fearful punishments.

Until dinner-time the skipper heard no more of them, but he had just finished that meal and lit his pipe when he heard footsteps on the deck, and the next moment old Ned, hot and angry, burst into the cabin.

"Bill's stole our dinner, sir," he panted unceremoniously.

"Who?" inquired the skipper coldly.

"Bill, sir, Bill Smith," replied Ned.

"\_Who?\_" inquired the skipper more coldly than before.

"The ghost o' Bill Smith," growled Ned, correcting himself savagely, "has took our dinner away, an' him an' the ghost o' Tommy Brown is a sitting down and boltin' of it as fast as they can bolt."

"Well, I don't see what I can do," said the skipper lazily. "What 'd you let 'em for?"

"You know what Bill is, sir," said Ned. "I'm an old man, cook's no good, and unless Simpson has a bit o' raw beef for his eyes, he won't be able to see for a week."

"Rubbish!" said the skipper jocularly. "Don't tell me, three men all afraid o' one ghost. I shan't interfere. Don't you know what to do?"

"No, sir," said Ned eagerly.

"Go up and read the Prayer-book to him, and he'll vanish in a cloud of smoke," said the skipper.

Ned gazed at him for a moment speechlessly, and then going up on deck leaned over the side and swore himself faint. The cook and Simpson came up and listened respectfully, contenting themselves with an occasional suggestion when the old man's memory momentarily failed him.

For the rest of the voyage the two culprits suffered all the inconvenience peculiar to a loss of citizenship. The skipper blandly ignored them, and on two or three occasions gave great offence by attempting to walk through Bill as he stood on the deck. Speculation was rife in the forecastle as to what would happen when they got ashore, and it was not until Northsea was sighted that the skipper showed his hand. Then he appeared on deck with their effects done up neatly in two bundles, and pitched them on the hatches. The crew stood and eyed him expectantly.

"Ned," said the skipper sharply.

"Sir," said the old man.

"As soon as we're made fast," said the other, "I want you to go ashore for me and fetch an undertaker and a policeman. I can't quite make up my mind which we want."

"Ay, ay, sir," murmured the old man.

The skipper turned away, and seizing the helm from the mate took his ship in. He was so intent upon this business that he appeared not to notice the movements of Bill and Tommy as they edged nervously towards their bundles, and waited impatiently for the schooner to get alongside the quay. Then he turned to the mate and burst into a loud laugh as the couple, bending suddenly, snatched up their bundles, and, clambering up the side ashore and took to their heels. The mate too, and a faint but mirthless echo came from the other end of the schooner.

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