

A Love Passage

by W. W. Jacobs

The mate was leaning against the side of the schooner, idly watching a few red-coated linesmen lounging on the Tower Quay. Careful mariners were getting out their side-lights, and careless lightermen were progressing by easy bumps from craft to craft on their way up the river. A tug, half burying itself in its own swell, rushed panting by, and a faint scream came from aboard an approaching skiff as it tossed in the wash.

"JESSICA ahoy!" bawled a voice from the skiff as she came rapidly alongside.

The mate, roused from his reverie, mechanically caught the line and made it fast, moving with alacrity as he saw that the captain's daughter was one of the occupants. Before he had got over his surprise she was on deck with her boxes, and the captain was paying off the watermen.

"You've seen my daughter Hetty afore, haven't you?" said the skipper. "She's coming with us this trip. You'd better go down and make up her bed, Jack, in that spare bunk."

"Ay, ay," said the mate dutifully, moving off.

"Thank you, I'll do it myself," said the scandalised Hetty, stepping forward hastily.

"As you please," said the skipper, leading the way below. "Let's have a light on, Jack."

The mate struck a match on his boot, and lit the lamp.

"There's a few things in there'll want moving," said the skipper, as he opened the door. "I don't know where we're to keep the onions now, Jack."

"We'll find a place for 'em," said the mate confidently, as he drew out a sack and placed it on the table.

"I'm not going to sleep in there," said the visitor decidedly, as she peered in. "Ugh! there's a beetle. Ugh!"

"It's quite dead," said the mate reassuringly. "I've never seen a live beetle on this ship."

"I want to go home," said the girl. "You've no business to make me come when I don't want to."

"You should behave yourself then," said her father magisterially. "What about sheets, Jack; and pillers?"

The mate sat on the table, and, grasping his chin, pondered. Then as his gaze fell upon the pretty, indignant face of the passenger, he lost the thread of his ideas.

"She'll have to have some o' my things for the present," said the skipper.

"Why not," said the mate, looking up again--"why not let her have your state-room?"

"Cos I want it myself," replied the other calmly.

The mate blushed for him, and, the girl leaving them to arrange matters as they pleased, the two men, by borrowing here and contriving there, made up the bunk. The girl was standing by the galley when they went on deck again, an object of curious and respectful admiration to the crew, who had come on board in the meantime. She stayed on deck until the air began to blow fresher in the wider reaches, and then, with a brief good-night to her father, retired below.

"She made up her mind to come with us rather suddenly, didn't she?" inquired the mate after she had gone.

"She didn't make up her mind at all," said the skipper; "we did it for her, me an' the missus. It's a plan on our part."

"Wants strengthening?" said the mate suggestively.

"Well, the fact is," said the skipper, "it's like this, Jack; there's a friend o' mine, a provision dealer in a large way o' business, wants to marry my girl, and me an' the missus want him to marry her, so, o' course, she wants to marry someone else. Me an' 'er mother we put our 'eads together and decided for her to come away. When she's at 'ome, instead o' being out with Towson, direckly her mother's back's turned she's out with that young sprig of a clerk."

"Nice-looking young feller, I s'pose?" said the mate somewhat anxiously.

"Not a bit of it," said the other firmly. "Looks as though he had never had a good meal in his life. Now my friend Towson, he's all right; he's a man of about my own figger."

"She'll marry the clerk," said the mate, with conviction.

"I'll bet you she don't," said the skipper. "I'm an artful man, Jack, an' I, generally speaking, get my own way. I couldn't live with my missus peaceable if it wasn't for management."

The mate smiled safely in the darkness, the skipper's management consisting chiefly of slavish obedience.

"I've got a cabinet fortygraph of him for the cabin mantel-piece, Jack," continued the wily father. "He gave it to me o' purpose. She'll see that when she won't see the clerk, an' by-and-bye she'll fall into our way of thinking. Anyway, she's going to stay here till she does."

"You know your way about, cap'n," said the mate, in pretended admiration.

The skipper laid his finger on his nose, and winked at the mainmast. "There's few can show me the way, Jack," he answered softly; "very few. Now I want you to help me too; I want you to talk to her a great deal."

"Ay, ay," said the mate, winking at the mast in his turn.

"Admire the fortygraph on the mantel-piece," said the skipper.

"I will," said the other.

"Tell her about a lot o' young girls you know as married young middle- aged men, an' loved 'em more an' more every day of their lives," continued the skipper.

"Not another word," said the mate. "I know just what you want. She shan't marry the clerk if I can help it."

The other turned and gripped him warmly by the hand. "If ever you are a father your elf, Jack," he said with emotion, "I hope as how somebody'll stand by you as you're standing by me."

The mate was relieved the next day when he saw the portrait of Towson. He stroked his moustache, and felt that he gained in good looks every time he glanced at it.

Breakfast finished, the skipper, who had been on deck all night, retired to his bunk. The mate went on deck and took charge, watching with great interest the movements of the passenger as she peered into the galley and hotly assailed the cook's method of washing up.

"Don't you like the sea?" he inquired politely, as she came and sat on the cabin skylight.

Miss Alsen shook her head dismally. "I've got to it," she remarked.

"Your father was saying something to me about it," said the mate guardedly.

"Did he tell the cook and the cabin boy too?" inquired Miss Alsen, flushing somewhat. "What did he tell you?"

"Told me about a man named Towson," said the mate, becoming intent on the sails, "and-- another fellow."

"I took a little notice of HIM just to spoil the other," said the girl, "not that I cared for him. I can't understand a girl caring for any man. Great, clumsy, ugly things."

"You don't like him then?" said the mate.

"Of course not," said the girl, tossing her head.

"And yet they 've sent you to sea to get out of his way," said the mate meditatively. "Well, the best thing you can do"--His hardihood failed him at the pitch.

"Go on," said the girl.

"Well, it's this way," said the mate, coughing; "they've sent you to sea to get you out of this fellow's way, so if you fall in love with somebody on the ship they'll send you home again."

"So they will," said the girl eagerly. "I'll pretend to fall in love with that nice-looking sailor you call Harry. What a lark!"

"I shouldn't do that," said the mate gravely.

"Why not?" said the girl.

"Tisn't discipline," said the mate very firmly; "it wouldn't do at all. He's before the mast."

"Oh, I see," remarked Miss Alsen, smiling scornfully.

"I only mean pretend, of course," said the mate, colouring. "Just to oblige you."

"Of course," said the girl calmly. "Well, how are we to be in love?"

The mate flushed darkly. "I don't know much about such things," he said at length; "but we'll have to look at each other, and all that sort of thing, you know."

"I don't mind that," said the girl.

"Then we'll get on by degrees," said the other. "I expect we shall both find it come easier after a time."

"Anything to get home again," said the girl, rising and walking slowly away.

The mate began his part of the love-making at once, and, fixing a gaze of concentrated love on the object of his regard, nearly ran down a smack. As he had prognosticated, it came easy to him, and other well- marked symptoms, such as loss of appetite and a partiality for bright colours, developed during the day. Between breakfast and tea he washed five times, and raised the ire of the skipper to a dangerous pitch by using the ship's butter to remove tar from his fingers.

By ten o'clock that night he was far advanced in a profound melancholy. All the looking had been on his side, and, as he stood at the wheel keeping the schooner to her course, he felt a fellow-feeling for the hapless Towson, His meditations were interrupted by a slight figure which emerged from the companion, and, after a moment's hesitation, came and took its old seat on the skylight.

"Calm and peaceful up here, isn't it?" said he, after waiting some time for her to speak. "Stars are very bright to-night."

"Don't talk to me," said Miss Alsen snappishly.

"Why doesn't this nasty little ship keep still? I believe it's you making her jump about like this."

"Me?" said the mate in amazement.

"Yes, with that wheel."

"I can assure you "--began the mate.

"Yes, I knew you'd say so," said the girl.

"Come and steer yourself," said the mate; "then you'll see."

Much to his surprise she came, and, leaning limply against the wheel, put her little hands on the spokes, while the mate explained the mysteries of the compass. As he warmed with his subject he ventured to put his hands on the same spokes, and, gradually becoming more venturesome, boldly supported her with his arm every time the schooner gave a lurch.

"Thank you," said Miss Alsen, coldly extricating herself, as the mate fancied another lurch was coming. "Good-night."

She retired to the cabin as a dark figure, which was manfully knuckling the last remnant of sleep from its eyelids, stood before the mate, chuckling softly.

"Clear night," said the seaman, as he took the wheel in his great paws.

"Beastly," said the mate absently, and, stifling a sigh, went below and turned in.

He lay awake for a few minutes, and then, well satisfied with the day's proceedings, turned over and fell asleep. He was pleased to discover, when he awoke, that the slight roll of the night before had disappeared, and that there was hardly any motion on the schooner. The passenger herself was already at the breakfast-table.

"Cap'n's on deck, I s'pose?" said the mate, preparing to resume negotiations where they were broken off the night before. "I hope you feel better than you did last night."

"Yes, thank you," said she.

"You'll make a good sailor in time," said the mate.

"I hope not," said Miss Alsen, who thought it time to quell a gleam of peculiar tenderness plainly apparent in the mate's eyes. "I shouldn't like to be a sailor even if I were a man."

"Why not?" inquired the other.

"I don't know," said the girl meditatively; "but sailors are generally such scrubby little men, aren't they?"

"SCUBBY?" repeated the mate, in a dazed voice.

"I'd sooner be a soldier," she continued; "I like soldiers--they're so manly. I wish there was one here now."

"What for?" inquired the mate, in the manner of a sulky schoolboy.

"If there was a man like that here now," said Miss Alsen thoughtfully, "I'd dare him to mustard old Towson's nose."

"Do what?" inquired the astonished mate.

"Mustard old Towson's nose," said Miss Alsen, glancing lightly from the cruet-stand to the portrait.

The infatuated man hesitated a moment, and then, reaching over to the cruet, took out the spoon, and with a pale, determined face, indignantly daubed the classic features of the provision dealer. His indignation was not lessened by the behaviour of the temptress, who, instead of fawning upon him for his bravery, crammed her handkerchief to her mouth and giggled foolishly.

"Where's father," she said suddenly, as a step sounded above. "Oh, you will get it!"

She rose from her seat, and, standing aside to let her father pass, went on deck. The skipper sank on to a locker, and, raising the tea-pot, poured himself out a cup of tea, which he afterwards decanted into a saucer. He had just raised it to his lips, when he saw something over the rim of it which made him put it down again untasted, and stare blankly at the mantel-piece.

"Who the--what the--who the devil's done this?" he inquired in a strangled voice, as he rose and regarded the portrait,

"I did," said the mate.

"You did?" roared the other. "You? What for?"

"I don't know," said the mate awkwardly. "Something seemed to come over me all of a sudden, and I felt as though I MUST do it."

"But what for? Where's the sense of it?" said the skipper.

The mate shook his head sheepishly.

"But what did you want to do such a monkey-trick FOR?" roared the skipper.

"I don't know," said the mate doggedly; "but it's done, ain't it? and it's no good talking about it."

The skipper looked at him in wrathful perplexity. "You'd better have advice when we get to port, Jack," he said at length; "the last few weeks I've noticed you've been a bit strange in your manner. You go an' show that 'ed of yours to a doctor."

The mate grunted, and went on deck for sympathy, but, finding Miss Alsen in a mood far removed from sentiment, and not at all grateful, drew off whistling. Matters were in this state when the skipper appeared, wiping his mouth.

"I've put another portrait on the mantel-piece, Jack," he said menacingly; "it's the only other one I've got, an' I wish you to understand that if that only smells mustard, there'll be such a row in this 'ere ship that you won't be able to 'ear yourself speak for the noise."

He moved off with dignity as his daughter, who had overheard the remark, came sidling up to the mate and smiled on him agreeably.

"He's put another portrait there," she said softly.

"You'll find the mustard-pot in the cruet," said the mate coldly.

Miss Alsen turned and watched her father as he went forward, and then, to the mate's surprise, went below without another word. A prey to curiosity, but too proud to make any overture, he compromised matters by going and standing near the companion.

"Mate!" said a stealthy whisper at the foot of the ladder.

The mate gazed calmly out to sea.

"Jack!" said the girl again, in a lower whisper than before.

The mate went hot all over, and at once descended. He found Miss Alsen, her eyes sparkling, with the mustard-pot in her left hand and the spoon in her right, executing a war-dance in front of the second portrait.

"Don't do it," said the mate, in alarm.

"Why not?" she inquired, going within an inch of it.

"He'll think it's me," said the mate.

"That's why I called you down here," said she; "you don't think I wanted you, do you?"

"You put that spoon down," said the mate, who was by no means desirous of another interview with the skipper.

"Shan't!" said Miss Alsen.

The mate sprang at her, but she dodged round the table. He leaned over, and, catching her by the left arm, drew her towards him; then, with her flushed, laughing face close to his, he forgot everything else, and kissed her.

"Oh!" said Hetty indignantly.

"Will you give it to me now?" said the mate, trembling at his boldness.

"Take it," said she. She leaned across the table, and, as the mate advanced, dabbed viciously at him with the spoon. Then she suddenly dropped both articles on the table and moved away, as the mate, startled by a footstep at the door, turned a flushed visage, ornamented with three streaks of mustard, on to the dumbfounded skipper.

"Sakes alive!" said that astonished mariner, as soon as he could speak; "if he ain't a-mustarding his own face now--I never 'card of such a thing in all my life. Don't go near 'im, Hetty. Jack!"

"Well," said the mate, wiping his smarting face with his handkerchief.

"You've never been took like this before?" queried the skipper anxiously.

"O'course not," said the mortified mate.

"Don't you say o'course not to me," said the other warmly, "after behaving like this. A straight weskit's what you want. I'll go an' see old Ben about it. He's got an uncle in a 'sylum. You come up too, my girl."

He went in search of Ben, oblivious of the fact that his daughter, instead of following him, came no farther than the door, where she stood and regarded her victim compassionately.

"I'm so sorry," she said "Does it smart?"

"A little," said the mate; "don't you trouble about me."

"You see what you get for behaving badly," said Miss Alsen judicially.

"It's worth it," said the mate, brightening.

"I'm afraid it'll blister," said she. She crossed over to him, and putting her head on one side, eyed the traces wisely. "Three marks," she said.

"I only had one," suggested the mate.

"One what?" enquired Hetty.

"Those," said the mate.

In full view of the horrified skipper, who was cautiously peeping at the supposed lunatic through the skylight, he kissed her again.

"You can go away, Ben," said the skipper huskily to the expert. "D'ye hear, you can go AWAY, and not a word about this, mind."

The expert went away grumbling, and the father, after another glance, which showed him his daughter nestling comfortably on the mate's right shoulder, stole away and brooded darkly over this crowning complication. An ordinary man would have run down and interrupted them; the master of the Jessica thought he could attain his ends more certainly by diplomacy, and so careful was his demeanour that the couple in the cabin had no idea that they had been observed--the mate listening calmly to a lecture on incipient idiocy which the skipper thought it advisable to bestow.

Until the mid-day meal on the day following he made no sign. If anything he was even more affable than usual, though his wrath rose at the glances which were being exchanged across the table.

"By the way, Jack," he said at length, "what's become of Kitty Loney?"

"Who?" inquired the mate. "Who's Kitty Loney?"

It was now the skipper's turn to stare, and he did it admirably.

"Kitty Loney," he said in surprise, "the little girl you are going to marry."

"Who are you getting at?" said the mate, going scarlet as he met the gaze opposite.

"I don't know what you mean," said the skipper with dignity. "I'm alluding to Kitty Loney, the little girl in the red hat and white feathers you introduced to me as your future."

The mate sank back in his seat, and regarded him with open-mouthed, horrified astonishment.

"You don't mean to say you've chucked 'er," pursued the heartless skipper, "after getting an advance from me to buy the ring with, too? Didn't you buy the ring with the money?"

"No," said the mate, "I--oh, no--of course--what on earth are you talking about?"

The skipper rose from his seat and regarded him sorrowfully but severely. "I'm sorry, Jack," he said stiffly, "if I've said anything to annoy you, or anyway hurt your feelings. O' course it's your business, not mine. P'raps you'll say you never heard o' Kitty Loney?"

"I do say so," said the bewildered mate; "I do say so."

The skipper eyed him sternly, and without another word left the cabin. "If she's like her mother," he said to himself, chuckling as he went up the companion-ladder, "I think that'll do."

There was an awkward pause after his departure. "I'm sure I don't know what you must think of me," said the mate at length, "but I don't know what your father's talking about."

"I don't think anything," said Hetty calmly. "Pass the potatoes, please."

"I suppose it's a joke of his," said the mate, complying.

"And the salt," said she; "thank you."

"But you don't believe it?" said the mate pathetically.

"Oh, don't be silly," said the girl calmly. "What does it matter whether I do or not?"

"It matters a great deal," said the mate gloomily. "It's life or death to me."

"Oh, nonsense," said Hetty. "She won't know of your foolishness. I won't tell her."

"I tell you," said the mate desperately, "there never was a Kitty Loney. What do you think of that?"

"I think you are very mean," said the girl scornfully; "don't talk to me any more, please."

"Just as you like," said the mate, beginning to lose his temper.

He pushed his plate from him and departed, while the girl, angry and resentful, put the potatoes back as being too floury for consumption in the circumstances.

For the remainder of the passage she treated him with a politeness and good humour through which he strove in vain to break. To her surprise her father made no objection, at the end of the voyage, when she coaxingly suggested going back by train; and the mate, as they sat at dummy-whist on the evening before her departure, tried in vain to discuss the journey in an unconcerned fashion.

"It'll be a long journey," said Hetty, who still liked him well enough to make him smart a bit, "What's trumps?"

"You'll be all right," said her father. "Spades."

He won for the third time that evening, and, feeling wonderfully well satisfied with the way in which he had played his cards generally, could not resist another gibe at the crestfallen mate.

"You'll have to give up playing cards and all that sort o' thing when you're married, Jack," said he.

"Ay, ay," said the mate recklessly, "Kitty don't like cards."

"I thought there was no Kitty," said the girl, looking up, scornfully.

"She don't like cards," repeated the mate. "Lord, what a spree we had. Cap'n, when we went to the Crystal Palace with her that night."

"Ay, that we did," said the skipper.

"Remember the roundabouts?" said the mate.

"I do," said the skipper merrily. "I'll never forget 'em."

"You and that friend of hers, Bessie Watson, lord how you did go on!" continued the mate, in a sort of ecstasy. The skipper stiffened suddenly in his chair. "What on earth are you talking about?" he inquired gruffly.

"Bessie Watson," said the mate, in tones of innocent surprise. "Little girl in a blue hat with white feathers, and a blue frock, that came with us."

"You're drunk," said the skipper, grinding his teeth, as he saw the trap into which he had walked.

"Don't you remember when you two got lost, an' me and Kitty were looking all over the place for you?" demanded the mate, still in the same tones of pleasant reminiscence.

He caught Hetty's eye, and noticed with a thrill that it beamed with soft and respectful admiration.

"You've been drinking," repeated the skipper, breathing hard. "How dare you talk like that afore my daughter?"

"It's only right I should know," said Hetty, drawing herself up. "I wonder what mother'll say to it all?"

"You say anything to your mother if you dare," said the now maddened skipper. "You know what she is. It's all the mate's nonsense."

"I'm very sorry, cap'n," said the mate, "if I've said anything to annoy you, or anyway hurt your feelings. O' course it's your business, not mine. Perhaps you'll say you never heard o' Bessie Watson?"

"Mother shall hear of her," said Hetty, while her helpless sire was struggling for breath.

"Perhaps you'll tell us who this Bessie Watson is, and where she lives?" he said at length.

"She lives with Kitty Loney," said the mate simply.

The skipper rose, and his demeanour was so alarming that Hetty shrank instinctively to the mate for protection. In full view of his captain, the mate placed his arm about her waist, and in this position they confronted each other for some time in silence. Then Hetty looked up and spoke.

"I'm going home by water," she said briefly.

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