

A Safety Match.

BY W. W. JACOBS.



MR. BOOM, late of the mercantile marine, had the last word, but only by the cowardly expedient of getting out of earshot of his daughter first, and then hurling it at her with a voice trained to compete with hurricanes. Miss Boom avoided a complete defeat by leaning forward with her head on one side in the attitude of an eager but unsuccessful listener, a pose which she abandoned for one of innocent joy when her sire, having been deluded into twice repeating his remarks, was fain to relieve his overstrained muscles by a fit of violent coughing.

"I b'leve she heard it all along," said Mr. Boom, sourly, as he continued his way down the winding lane to the little harbour below. "The only way to live at peace with wimmen is to always be at sea; then they make a fuss of you when you come home—if you don't stay too long, that is."

He reached the quay, with its few tiny cottages and brown nets spread about to dry in the sun, and walking up and down, grumbling, regarded with a jaundiced eye a few small smacks which lay in the harbour and two or three crusted amphibians lounging aimlessly about.

"Mornin', Mr. Boom," said a stalwart youth in sea-boots, appearing suddenly over the edge of the quay from his boat.

"Mornin', Dick," said Mr. Boom, affably; "just goin' off?"

"'Bout an hour's time," said the other; "Miss Boom well, sir?"

"She's a' right," said Mr. Boom; "me an' her've just had a few words. She picked up something off the floor what she said was a cake o' mud off my heel. Said she wouldn't have it," continued Mr. Boom, his voice rising. "My own floor, too. Swep' it up off the floor with a dustpan and brush, and held it in front of me to look at."

Dick Tarrell gave a grunt which might mean anything—Mr. Boom took it for sympathy.

"I called her old maid," he said, with gusto; "'you're a fidgety old maid,' I said.

Vol. xv.—26.

You should ha' seen her look. Do you know what I think, Dick?"

"Not exactly," said Tarrell, cautiously.

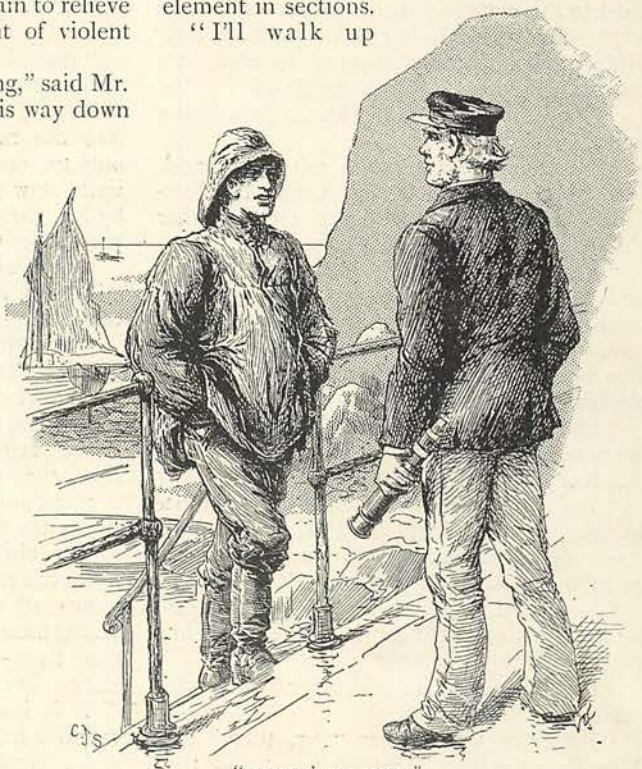
"I b'leve she's that savage that she'd take the first man that asked her," said the other, triumphantly; "she's sitting up there at the door of the cottage, all by herself."

Tarrell sighed.

"With not a soul to speak to," said Mr. Boom, pointedly.

The other kicked at a small crab which was passing, and returned it to its native element in sections.

"I'll walk up



"MORNIN', MR. BOOM."

there with you if you're going that way," he said, at length.

"No, I'm just having a look round," said Mr. Boom, "but there's nothing to hinder you going, Dick, if you've a mind to."

"There's no little thing you want, as I'm going there, I s'pose?" suggested Tarrell. "It's awkward when you go there and say, 'Good morning,' and the girl says, 'Good morning,' and then you don't say any more and she don't say any more. If there was anything you wanted that I could help her look for, it 'ud make talk easier."

"Well—go for my baccy pouch," said Mr. Boom, after a minute's thought, "it'll take you a long time to find that."

"Why?" inquired the other.

"'Cos I've got it here," said the unscrupulous Mr. Boom, producing it, and placidly filling his pipe. "You might spend—ah—the best part of an hour looking for that."

He turned away with a nod, and Tarrell, after looking about him in a hesitating fashion to make sure that his movements were not attracting the attention his conscience told him they deserved, set off in the hang-dog fashion peculiar to nervous lovers up the road to the cottage. Kate Boom was sitting at the door as her father had described, and, in apparent unconsciousness of his approach, did not raise her eyes from her book.

"Good morning," said Tarrell, in a husky voice.

Miss Boom returned the salutation, and, marking the place in her book with her forefinger, looked over the hedge on the other side of the road to the sea beyond.

"Your father has left his pouch behind, and being as I was coming this way, asked me to call for it," faltered the young man.

Miss Boom turned her head, and, regarding him steadily, noted the rising colour and the shuffling feet.

"Did he say where he had left it?" she inquired.

"No," said the other.

"Well, my time's too valuable to waste looking for pouches," said Kate, bending down to her book again, "but if you like to go in and look for it, you may!"

She moved aside to let him pass, and sat listening with a slight smile as she heard him moving about the room.

"I can't find it," he said, after a pretended search.

"Better try the kitchen now, then," said Miss Boom, without looking up, "and then the scullery. It might be in the woodshed or even down the garden. You haven't half looked."

She heard the kitchen door close behind him, and then, taking her book with her, went upstairs to her room. The conscientious Tarrell, having duly searched all the above-mentioned places, returned to the parlour and waited. He waited a quarter of an hour, and then going out by the front door stood irresolute.

"I can't find it," he said, at length, addressing himself to the bedroom window.

"No. I was coming down to tell you,"

said Miss Boom, glancing sedately at him from over the geraniums. "I remember seeing father take it out with him this morning."

Tarrell affected a clumsy surprise. "It doesn't matter," he said. "How nice your geraniums are."

"Yes, they're all right," said Miss Boom, briefly.

"I can't think how you keep 'em so nice," said Tarrell.

"Well, don't try," said Miss Boom, kindly. "You'd better go back and tell father about the pouch. Perhaps he's waiting for a smoke all this time."

"There's no hurry," said the young man; "perhaps he's found it."

"Well, I can't stop to talk," said the girl; "I'm busy reading."

With these heartless words she withdrew into the room, and the discomfited swain, only too conscious of the sorry figure he cut, went slowly back to the harbour, to be met by Mr. Boom, with a wink of aggravating and portentous dimensions.

"You've took a long time," he said, slyly. "There's nothing like a little scheming in these things."

"It didn't lead to much," said the discomfited Tarrell.

"Don't be in a hurry, my lad," said the elder man, after listening to his experiences. "I've been thinking over this little affair for some time now, an' I think I've got a plan."

"If it's anything about baccy pouches——" began the young man, ungratefully.

"It ain't," interrupted Mr. Boom, "it's quite different. Now, you'd best get aboard your craft and do your duty. There's more young men won girls' 'arts while doing of their duty than—than—if they wasn't doing their duty. Do you understand me?"

It is inadvisable to quarrel with a prospective father-in-law, so that Tarrell said he did, and with a moody nod tumbled into his boat and put off to the smack. Mr. Boom having walked up and down a bit, and exchanged a few greetings, bent his steps in the direction of the "Jolly Sailor," and, ordering two mugs of ale, set them down on a small bench opposite his old friend Raggett.

"I see young Tarrell go off grumpy-like," said Raggett, drawing a mug towards him, and gazing at the fast-receding boats.

"Aye, we'll have to do what we talked about," said Boom, slowly. "It's opposition what that gal wants. She simply sits and mopes for the want of somebody to contradict her."

"Well, why don't you do it?" said Raggett. "That ain't much for a father to do, surely."

"I hev," said the other, slowly, "more than once. O' course, when I insist upon a thing,

put his mug down again and regarded his friend fixedly. "Might I ask who you're alloodin' too?" he inquired, somewhat shortly.

Mr. Boom brought up in mid-career, shuffled a little and laughed uneasily. "Them ain't my words, old chap," he said; "it was the way she was speaking of you the other day."

"Well, I won't 'ave nothin' to do with it," said Raggett, rising.

"Well, nobody needn't know anything about it," said Boom, pulling him down to his seat again. "She won't tell, I'm sure — she wouldn't like the disgrace of it."

"Look here," said Raggett, getting up again.

"I mean from her point of view," said Mr. Boom, querulously; "you're very 'asty, Raggett."

"Well, I don't care about it," said Raggett, slowly; "it seemed all right when we was talking about it; but s'pose I have all my trouble for nothing, and she don't take Dick after all? What then?"

"Well, then there's no harm done," said his friend, "and it'll be a bit o' sport for both of us. You go up and start, an' I'll have another pint of beer and a clean pipe waiting for you against you come back."

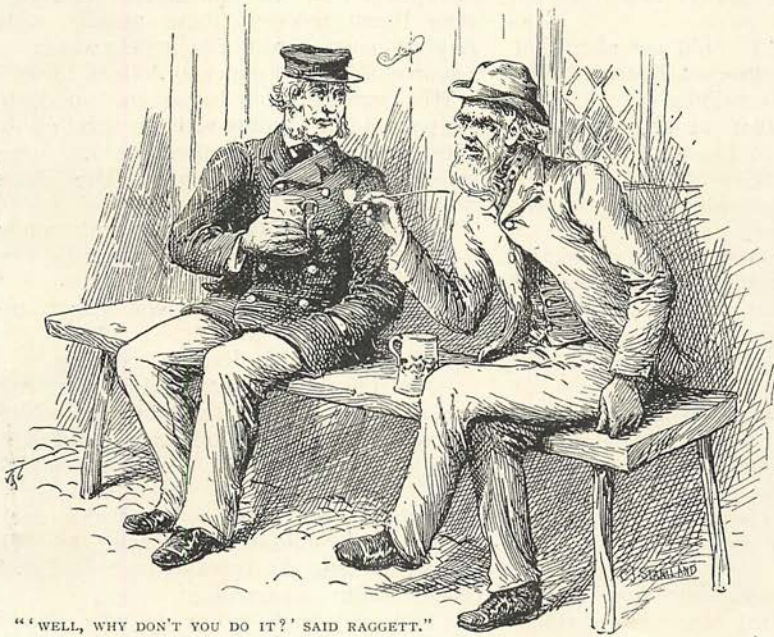
Sorely against his better sense, Mr. Raggett rose and went off, grumbling. It was fatiguing work on a hot day climbing the road up the cliff, but he took it quietly, and having gained the top, moved slowly towards the cottage.

"Morning, Mr. Raggett," said Kate, cheerily, as he entered the cottage. "Dear, dear, the idea of an old man like you climbing about, it's wonderful."

"I'm sixty-seven," said Mr. Raggett, viciously, "and I feel as young as ever I did."

"To be sure," said Kate, soothingly; "and look as young as ever you did. Come in and sit down a bit."

Mr. Raggett with some trepidation com-



"WELL, WHY DON'T YOU DO IT?" SAID RAGGETT.

it's done, but a woman's a delikit creeter, Raggett, and the last row we had she got that ill that she couldn't get up to get my breakfast ready, no, nor my dinner either. It made us both ill, that did."

"Are you going to tell Tarrell?" inquired Raggett.

"No," said his friend. "Like as not he'd tell her just to curry favour with her. I'm going to tell him he's not to come to the house no more. That'll make her want him to come, if anything will. Now, there's no use wasting time. You begin to-day."

"I don't know what to say," murmured Raggett, nodding to him as he raised the beer to his lips.

"Just go now and call in—you might take her a nosegay."

"I won't do nothing so darned silly," said Raggett, shortly.

"Well, go without 'em," said Boom, impatiently; "just go, and get yourselves talked about, that's all—have everybody making game of both of you. Talking about a good-looking young girl being sweethearted by an old chap with one foot in the grave and a face like a dried herring. That's what I want."

Mr. Raggett, who was just about to drink,

plied, and, sitting in a very upright position, wondered how he should begin. "I'm just sixty-seven," he said, slowly. "I'm not old and I'm not young, but I'm just old enough to begin to want somebody to look after me a bit."

"I shouldn't while I could get about if I were you," said the innocent Kate. "Why not wait until you're bed-ridden?"

"I don't mean that at all," said Mr. Raggett, snappishly. "I mean I'm thinking of getting married."

"Good—gracious!" said Kate, open-mouthed.

"I may have one foot in the grave and resemble a dried herring in the face," pursued Mr. Raggett, with bitter sarcasm, "but——"

"You can't help that," said Kate, gently.

"But I'm going to get married," said Raggett, savagely.

"Well, don't get in a way about it," said the girl. "Of course, if you want to, and—and—you can find somebody else who wants to, there's no reason why you shouldn't! Have you told father about it?"

"I have," said Mr. Raggett, "and he has given his consent."

He put such meaning into this remark, and so much more in the contortion of visage which accompanied it, that the girl stood regarding him in blank astonishment.

"His consent?" she said, in a strange voice.

Mr. Raggett nodded.

"I went to him first," he said, trying to speak confidently. "Now I've come to you—I want you to marry me!"

"Don't you be a silly old man, Mr. Raggett," said Kate, recovering her composure. "And as for my father, you go back and tell him I want to see him."

She drew aside and pointed to the door, and Mr. Raggett, thinking that he had done quite enough for one day, passed out and retraced his steps to the "Jolly Sailor." Mr. Boom met him half-way, and, having received his message, spent the rest of the morning in fortifying himself for the reception which awaited him.

It would be difficult to say which of the two young people was the more astonished at this sudden change of affairs. Miss Boom, affecting to think that her parent's reason was affected, treated him accordingly, a state of affairs not without its drawbacks, as Mr. Boom found out. Tarrell, on the other hand, attributed it to greed, and being forbidden the house, spent all his time ashore on a stile nearly opposite, and sullenly watched events.

For three weeks Mr. Raggett called daily, and after staying to tea, usually wound up the evening by formally proposing for Kate's hand. Both conspirators were surprised and disappointed at the quietness with which Miss Boom received these attacks; Mr. Raggett meeting with a politeness which was a source of much wonder to both of them.

His courting came to an end suddenly. He paused one evening with his hand on the door, and having proposed in the usual manner, was going out, when Miss Boom called him back.

"Sit down, Mr. Raggett," she said, calmly.

Mr. Raggett, wondering inwardly, resumed his seat.

"You have asked me a good many times to marry you," said Kate.

"I have," said Mr. Raggett, nodding.

"And I'm sure it's very kind of you," continued the girl, "and if I've hurt your feelings by refusing you, it is only because I have thought perhaps I was not good enough for you."

In the silence which followed this unexpected and undeserved tribute to Mr. Raggett's worth, the two old men eyed each other in silent consternation.

"Still, if you've made up your mind," continued the girl, "I don't know that it's for me to object. You're not much to look at, but you've got the loveliest chest of drawers and the best furniture all round in Mastleigh. And I suppose you've got a little money?"

Mr. Raggett shook his head, and in a broken voice was understood to say: "A very little."

"I don't want any fuss or anything of that kind," said Miss Boom, calmly. "No bridesmaids or anything of that sort; it wouldn't be suitable at your age."

Mr. Raggett withdrew his pipe, and, holding it an inch or two from his mouth, listened like one in a dream.

"Just a few old friends, and a bit of cake," continued Miss Boom, musingly. "And instead of spending a lot of money in foolish waste, we'll have three weeks in London."

Mr. Raggett made a gurgling noise in his throat, and suddenly remembering himself, pretended to think that it was something wrong with his pipe, and removing it blew noisily through the mouthpiece.

"Perhaps," he said, in a trembling voice—"perhaps you'd better take a little longer to consider, my dear."

Kate shook her head. "I've quite made up my mind," she said, "quite. And now I



"I'VE QUITE MADE UP MY MIND,"
SHE SAID."

want to marry you just as much as you want to marry me. Good-night, father; good-night—George."

Mr. Raggett started violently, and collapsed in his chair.

"Raggett," said Mr. Boom, huskily.

"Don't talk to me," said the other, "I can't bear it."

Mr. Boom, respecting his friend's trouble, relapsed into silence again, and for a long time not a word was spoken.

"My 'ed's in a whirl," said Mr. Raggett, at length.

"It 'ud be a wonder if it wasn't," said Mr. Boom, sympathetically.

"To think," continued the other, miserably, "how I've been let in for this. The plots an' the plans and the artfulness what's been goin' on round me, an' I've never seen it."

"What d'ye mean?" demanded Mr. Boom, with sudden violence.

"I know what I mean," said Mr. Raggett, darkly.

"P'raps you'll tell me, then," said the other.

"Who thought of it first?" demanded Mr. Raggett, ferociously. "Who came to me and asked me to court his slip of a girl?"

"Don't you be a' old fool," said Mr. Boom, heatedly. "It's done now, and what's done can't be undone. I never thought to have a son-in-law seven or eight years older than

what I am, and what's more, I don't want it."

"Said I wasn't much to look at, but she liked my chest o' drawers," repeated Raggett, mechanically.

"Don't ask me where she gets her natur' from, cos I couldn't tell you," said the unhappy parent; "she don't get it from me."

Mr. Raggett allowed this reflection upon the late Mrs. Boom to pass unnoticed, and taking his hat from the table fixed it firmly upon his head, and gazing with scornful indignation upon his host, stepped slowly out of the door without going through the formality of bidding him good-night.

"George," said a voice from above him.

Mr. Raggett started, and glanced up at somebody leaning from the window.

"Come in to tea to-morrow, early," said the voice, pressingly; "good-night, dear."

Mr. Raggett turned and fled into the night, dimly conscious that a dark figure had detached itself from the stile opposite, and was walking beside him.

"That you, Dick?" he inquired, nervously, after an oppressive silence.

"That's me," said Dick. "I heard her call you 'dear.'"

Mr. Raggett, his face suffused with blushes, hung his head.

"Called you 'dear,'" repeated Dick; "I heard her say it. I'm going to pitch you in the harbour. I'll learn you to go courting a young girl. What are you stopping for?"

Mr. Raggett delicately intimated that he was stopping because he preferred, all things considered, to be alone. Finding the young man, however, bent upon accompanying him, he divulged the plot of which he had been the victim, and bitterly lamented his share in it.

"You don't want to marry her, then?" said the astonished Dick.

"Course I don't," snarled Mr. Raggett; "I can't afford it. I'm too old; besides which, she'll turn my little place topsy-turvy. Look here, Dick, I done this all for you. Now, it's

evident she only wants my furniture: if I give all the best of it to you, she'll take you instead."

"No, she won't," said Dick, grimly; "I wouldn't have her now not if she asked me on her bended knee."

"Why not?" said Raggett.

"I don't want to marry that sort o' girl," said the other, scornfully; "it's cured me."

"What about me, then?" said the unfortunate Raggett.

"Well, so far as I can see, it serves you right for mixing in other people's business," said Dick, shortly. "Well, good-night, and good luck to you."

To Mr. Raggett's sore disappointment, he kept to his resolution, and being approached by Mr. Boom on his elderly friend's behalf, was rudely frank to him.

"I'm a free man, again," he said, blithely, "and I feel better than I've felt for ever so long. More manly."

"You ought to think of other people," said Mr. Boom, severely; "think of poor old Raggett."

"Well, he's got a young wife out of it," said Dick. "I daresay he'll be happy enough. He wants somebody to help him spend his money."

In this happy frame of mind he resumed his ordinary life, and when he encountered his former idol, met her with a heartiness and unconcern which the lady regarded with secret disapproval. He was now so sure of himself that, despite a suspicion of ulterior designs on the part of Miss Boom, he even accepted an invitation to tea.

The presence of Mr. Raggett made it a slow and solemn function. Nobody with any feelings could eat with any appetite with that afflicted man at the table, and the meal passed almost in silence. Kate cleared the meal away, and the men sat at the open door

with their pipes while she washed up in the kitchen.

"Me an' Raggett thought o' stepping down to the 'Sailor's,'" said Mr. Boom, after a third application of his friend's elbow.

"I'll come with you," said Dick.

"Well, we've got a little business to talk about," said Boom, confidentially, "but we sha'n't be long. If you wait here, Dick, we'll see you when we come back."

"All right," said Tarrell.

He watched the two old men down the road, and then, moving his chair back into the room, silently regarded the busy Kate.

"Make yourself useful," said she, brightly; "shake the tablecloth."

Tarrell took it to the door, and having shaken it, folded it, with much gravity, and handed it back.

"Not so bad for a beginner," said Kate, taking it and putting it in a drawer. She took some needlework from another drawer, and, sitting down, began busily stitching.

"Wedding-dress?" inquired Tarrell, with an assumption of great ease.

"No, tablecloth!" said the girl, with a laugh. "You'll want to know a little more before you get married."

"Plenty o' time for me," said Tarrell; "I'm in no hurry."

The girl put her work down and looked



"NOT SO BAD FOR A BEGINNER," SAID KATE."

up at him. "That's right," she said, staidly. "I suppose you were rather surprised to hear I was going to get married?"

"A little," said Tarrell; "there's been so many after old Raggett, I didn't think he'd ever be caught."

"Oh!" said Kate.

"I daresay he'll make a very good husband," said Tarrell, patronizingly. "I think you'll make a nice couple. He's got a nice home."

"That's why I'm going to marry him," said Kate. "Do you think it's wrong to marry a man for that?"

"That's your business," said Tarrell, coldly; "speaking for myself, and not wishing to hurt your feelings, I shouldn't like to marry a girl like that."

"You mean you wouldn't like to marry me?" said Kate, softly.

She leaned forward as she spoke, until her breath fanned his face.

"That's what I do mean," said Tarrell, with a suspicion of doggedness in his voice.

"Not even if I asked you on my bended knees?" said Kate. "Aren't you glad you're cured?"

"Yes," said Tarrell, manfully.

"So am I," said the girl; "and now that you are happy, just go down to the 'Jolly Sailor's,' and make poor old Raggett happy, too."

"How?" asked Tarrell.

"Tell him that I have only been having a joke with him," said Kate, surveying him with a steady smile. "Tell him that I overheard him and father talking one night, and that I resolved to give them both a lesson. And tell them that I didn't think anybody could have been so stupid as they have been to believe in it."

She leaned back in her chair, and, regarding the dumfounded Tarrell with a smile of wicked triumph, waited for him to speak. "Raggett, indeed!" she said, disdainfully.

"I suppose," said Tarrell, at length, speaking very slowly, "my being stupid was no surprise to you?"

"Not a bit," said the girl, cheerfully.

"I'll ask you to tell Raggett yourself," said Tarrell, rising and moving towards the door. "I sha'n't see him. Good-night."

"Good-night," said she. "Where are you going, then?"

There was no reply.

"Where are you going?" she repeated. Then a suspicion of his purpose flashed across her. "You're not foolish enough to be going away?" she cried, in dismay.

"Why not?" said Tarrell, slowly.

"Because," said Kate, looking down—"oh, because—well, it's ridiculous. I'd



"I'D SOONER HAVE YOU STAY HERE."

sooner have you stay here and feel what a stupid you've been making of yourself. I want to remind you of it sometimes."

"I don't want reminding," said Tarrell, taking Raggett's chair; "I know it now."