

Smoked Skipper.

By W. W. JACOBS.

WAPPING Old Stairs?" said the rough individual, shouldering the bran-new sea-chest, and starting off at a trot with it; "yus, I know the place, captin. Fust v'y'ge, sir?"

"Ay, ay, my hearty," replied the owner of the chest, a small, ill-looking lad of fourteen. "Not so fast with those timbers of yours. D'ye hear?"

"All right, sir," said the man, and, slackening his pace, twisted his head round to take stock of his companion.

"This ain't your fust v'y'ge, captin," he said, admiringly; "don't tell me. I could twig that directly I see you. Ho, what's the use o' trying to come it over a poor 'ard-working man like that?"

"I don't think there's much about the sea I don't know," said the boy in a satisfied voice. "Starboard, starboard your hellum a bit."

The man obeying promptly, they went the remainder of the distance in this fashion, to the great inconvenience of people coming from the other direction.

"And a cheap 'arf-crown's worth, too, captin," said the man, as he thoughtfully put the chest down at the head of the stairs and sat on it pending payment.

"I want to go off to the *Susan Jane*," said the boy, turning to a waterman who was sitting in his boat, holding on to the side of the steps with his hand.

"All right," said the man, "give us a hold o' your box."

"Put it aboard," said the boy to the other man.

"A' right, captin," said the man, with a cheerful smile, "but I'll 'ave my 'arf-crown fust if you don't mind."

"But you said sixpence at the station," said the boy.

"Two an' sixpence, captin," said the man, still smiling, "but I'm a bit 'usky, an' p'raps you didn't 'ear the two—'arf a crown's the regler price. We ain't allowed to do it under."

"Well, I won't tell anybody," said the boy.

"Give the man 'is 'arf-crown," said the waterman, with sudden heat; "that's 'is price, an' my fare's eigh-teen pence."

"All right," said the boy, readily; "cheap, too. I didn't know the price, that's all. But I can't pay either of you till I get aboard. I've only got sixpence. I'll tell the captain to give you the rest."

"Tell 'oo?" demanded the light porter, with some violence.

"The captain," said the boy.

"Look 'ere, you give me that 'arf-crown," said the other, "else I'll chuck your box overboard, an' you after it."

"Wait a minute, then," said the boy, darting away up the narrow alley which led to the stairs, "I'll go and get change."

"'Es goin' to change 'arf a suvren, or p'raps a suvren," said the waterman; "you'd better make it five bob, matey."

"Ah, an' you make yours more," said the light porter, cordially. "Well I'm——. Well, of all the——"

"Get off that box," said the big policeman who had come back with the boy. "Take your sixpence an' go. If I catch you down this way again——"

He finished the sentence by taking the fellow by the scruff of the neck and giving him a violent push as he passed him.

"Waterman's fare is threepence," he said to the boy, as the man in the boat, with an utterly expressionless face, took the chest from him. "I'll stay here till he has put you aboard."

The boy took his seat, and the waterman, breathing hard, pulled out towards the vessels in the tier. He looked at the boy and then at the figure on the steps, and, apparently suppressing a strong inclination to speak, spat violently over the side.

"Fine big chap, ain't he?" said the boy.

The waterman, affecting not to hear, looked over his shoulder, and pulled strongly with his left towards a small schooner, from the deck of which a couple of men were watching the small figure in the boat.

"That's the boy I was going to tell you about," said the skipper, "and remember this 'ere ship's a pirate."

"It's got a lot o' pirates aboard of it," said the mate, fiercely, as he turned and regarded the crew, "a set o' lazy, loafing, idle, worthless——"

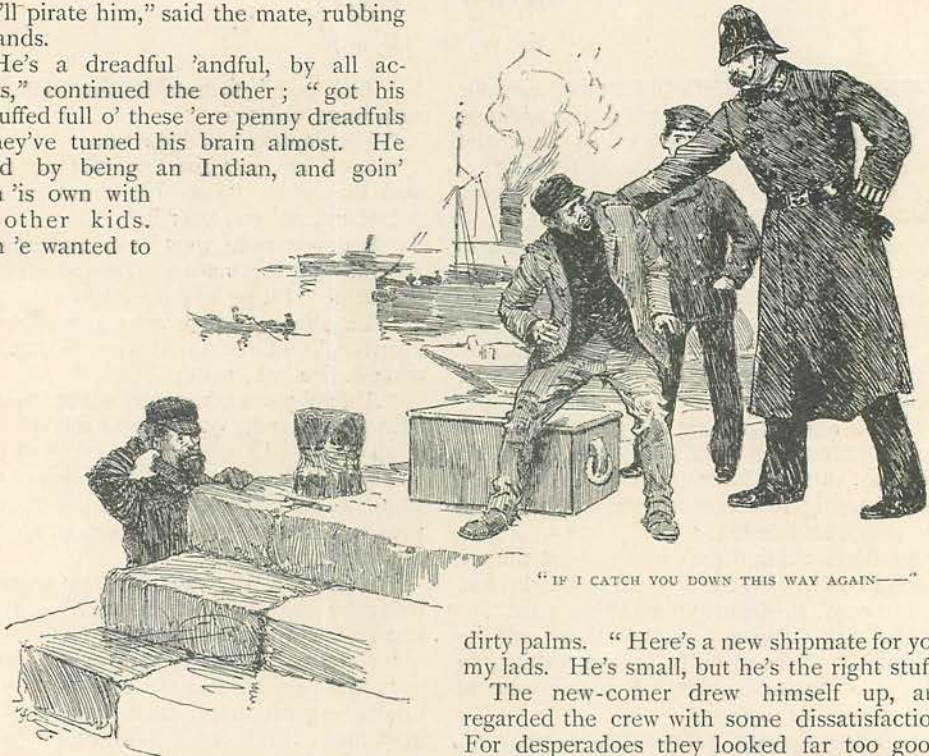
"It's for the boy's sake," interrupted the skipper.

"Where'd you pick him up?" inquired the other.

"He's the son of a friend o' mine what I've brought aboard to oblige," replied the skipper. "He's got a fancy for being a pirate, so just to oblige his father I told him we was a pirate. He wouldn't have come if I hadn't."

"I'll pirate him," said the mate, rubbing his hands.

"He's a dreadful 'andful, by all accounts," continued the other; "got his 'ed stuffed full o' these 'ere penny dreadfuls till they've turned his brain almost. He started by being an Indian, and goin' off on 'is own with two other kids. When 'e wanted to



"IF I CATCH YOU DOWN THIS WAY AGAIN—"

turn cannibal the other two objected, and gave 'im in charge. After that 'e did a bit o' burgling, and it cost 'is old man no end o' money to hush it up."

"Well, what did *you* want him for?" grumbled the mate.

"I'm goin' to knock the nonsense out of him," said the skipper, softly, as the boat grazed the side. "Just step for'ard and let the hands know what's expected of 'em. When we get to sea it won't matter."

The mate moved off grumbling, as the small fare stood on the thwarts and scrambled up over the side. The waterman passed up the chest and, dropping the coppers into his pocket, pushed off again without a word.

"Well, you've got here all right, Ralph?" said the skipper. "What do you think of her?"

"She's a rakish-looking craft," said the boy, looking round the dingy old tub with much satisfaction; "but where's your arms?"

"Hush!" said the skipper, and laid his finger on his nose.

"Oh, all right," said the youth, testily, "but you might tell *me*."

"You shall know all in good time," said the skipper, patiently, turning to the crew, who came shuffling up, masking broad grins with

dirty palms. "Here's a new shipmate for you, my lads. He's small, but he's the right stuff."

The new-comer drew himself up, and regarded the crew with some dissatisfaction. For desperadoes they looked far too good-tempered and prone to levity.

"What's the matter with you, Jem Smithers?" inquired the skipper, scowling at a huge fair-haired man, who was laughing discordantly.

"I was thinkin' o' the last party I killed, sir," said Jem, with sudden gravity. "I allers laugh when I think 'ow he squealed."

"You laugh too much," said the other, sternly, as he laid a hand on Ralph's shoulder. "Take a lesson from this fine feller; he don't laugh. He acts. Take 'im down below an' show him 'is bunk."

"Will you please to follow me, sir?" said Smithers, leading the way below. "I dessay you'll find it a 'bit stuffy, but that's owing to Bill Dobbs. A regler old sea-dog is Bill, always sleeps in 'is clothes and never washes."

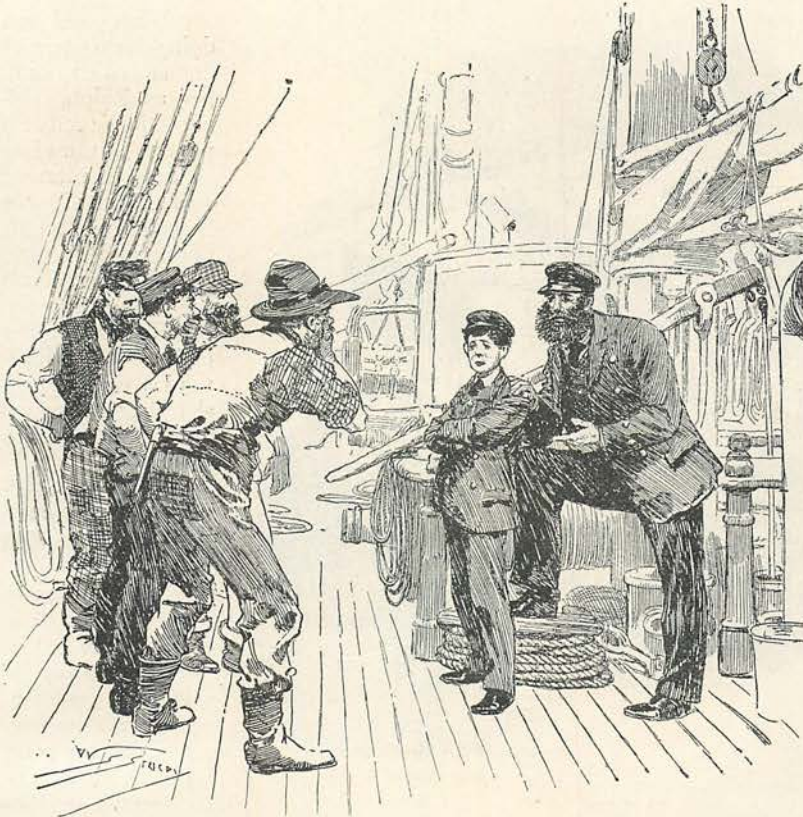
"I don't think the worse of him for that," said Ralph, regarding the fermenting Dobbs kindly.

"You'd best keep a civil tongue in your 'ed, my lad," said Dobbs, shortly.

"Never mind 'im," said Smithers, cheerfully; "nobody takes any notice o' old Dobbs. You can 'it 'im if you like. I won't let him hurt you."

"I don't want to start by quarrelling," said Ralph, seriously.

"You're afraid," said Jem, tauntingly;



"I ALLERS LAUGH WHEN I THINK HOW HE SQUEALED."

"you'll never make one of us. 'Tis 'im; I won't let him hurt you."

Thus aroused, the boy, first directing Dobbs's attention to his stomach by a curious duck of his head, much admired as a feint in his neighbourhood, struck him in the face. The next moment the forecastle was in an uproar and Ralph prostrate on Dobbs's knees, frantically reminding Jem of his promise.

"All right, I won't let him 'urt you," said Jem, consolingly.

"But he *is* hurting me," yelled the boy. "He's hurting me *now*."

"Well, wait till I get 'im ashore," said Jem, "his old woman won't know him when I've done with him."

The boy's reply to this was a torrent of shrill abuse, principally directed to Jem's facial shortcomings.

"Now don't get rude," said the seaman, grinning.

"Squint eyes," cried Ralph, fiercely.

"When you've done with that 'ere young gentleman, Dobbs," said Jem, with exquisite politeness, "I should like to 'ave 'im for a little bit to teach 'im manners."

"'E don't want to go," said Dobbs, grinning, as Ralph clung to him. "He knows who's kind to him."

"Wait till I get a chance at you," sobbed Ralph, as Jem took him away from Dobbs.

"Lord lumme," said Jem, regarding him in astonishment. "Why, he's actooaly cryin'. I've seen a good many pirates in my time, Bill, but this is a new sort."

"Leave the boy alone," said the cook, a fat, good-natured man. "Here, come 'ere, old man. They don't mean no 'arm."

Glad to escape, Ralph made his

way over to the cook, grinding his teeth with shame as that worthy took him between his knees and mopped his eyes with something which he called a handkerchief.

"You'll be all right," he said, kindly. "You'll be as good a pirate as any of us before you've finished."

"Wait till the first engagement, that's all," sobbed the boy. "If somebody don't get shot in the back it won't be my fault."

The two seamen looked at each other. "That's wot hurt my 'and then," said Dobbs, slowly. "I thought it was a jack-knife."

He reached over, and unceremoniously grabbing the boy by the collar, pulled him towards him, and drew a small, cheap revolver from his pocket. "Look at that, Jem."

"Take your fingers orf the blessed trigger and then I will," said the other, somewhat sourly.

"I'll pitch it overboard," said Dobbs.

"Don't be a fool, Bill," said Smithers, pocketing it, "that's worth a few pints o' anybody's money. Stand out o' the way, Bill, the Pirit King wants to go on deck."



"LOOK AT THAT, JEM."

Bill moved aside as the boy went to the ladder, and allowing him to get up four or five steps, did the rest for him with his shoulder. The boy reached the deck on all fours, and, regaining a more dignified position as soon as possible, went and leaned over the side, regarding with lofty contempt the busy drudges on wharf and river.

They sailed at midnight and brought up in the early dawn in Longreach, where a lighter loaded with barrels came alongside, and the boy smelt romance and mystery when he learnt that they contained powder. They took in ten tons, the lighter drifted away, the hatches were put on, and they started once more.

It was his first voyage, and he regarded with eager interest the craft passing up and down. He had made his peace with the seamen, and they regaled him with blood-curdling stories of their adventures in the vain hope of horrifying him.

"'E's a beastly little rascal, that's wot 'e is," said the indignant Bill, who had surprised himself by his powers of narration; "fancy larfin' when I told 'im of pitchin' the baby to the sharks."

"'E's all right, Bill," said the cook, softly. "Wait till you've got seven of 'em."

"What are you doing here, boy?" demanded the skipper, as Ralph, finding the seaman's yarns somewhat lacking in interest, strolled aft with his hands in his pockets.

"Nothing," said the boy, staring.

"Keep the other end o' the ship," said the skipper, sharply, "an' go an' 'elp the cook with the taters."

Ralph hesitated, but a grin on the mate's face decided him.

"I didn't come here to peel potatoes," he said, loftily.

"Oh, indeed," said the skipper, politely; "an' wot might you 'ave come for, if it ain't being too inquisitive?"

"To fight the enemy," said Ralph, shortly.

"Come 'ere," said the skipper.

The boy came slowly towards him.

"Now look 'ere," said the skipper, "I'm going to try and knock a little sense into that stupid 'ed o' yours. I've 'eard all about your silly little games ashore. Your father said he couldn't manage you, so I'm goin' to have a try, and you'll find I'm a very different sort o' man to deal with to wot 'e is. The idea o' thinking this ship was a pirate. Why, a boy your age ought to know there ain't such things nowadays."

"You told me you was," said the boy, hotly, "else I wouldn't have come."

"That's just why I told you," said the skipper. "But I didn't think you'd be such a fool as to believe it. Pirates, indeed! Do we look like pirates?"

"You don't," said the boy, with a sneer; "you look more like——"

"Like wot?" asked the skipper, edging closer to him. "Eh, like wot?"

"I forget the word," said Ralph, with strong good sense.

"Don't tell any lies now," said the skipper, flushing, as he heard a chuckle from the mate.

"Go on, out with it. I'll give you just two minutes."

"I forget it," persisted Ralph.

"Dustman?" suggested the mate, coming to his assistance. "Coster, chimbley-sweep, mudlark, pick-pocket, convict, washer-wom—"

"If you'll look after your dooty, George, instead o' interferin' in matters that don't concern you," said the skipper, in a choking voice, "I shall be obliged. Now, then, you boy, what were you going to say I was like?"

"Like the mate," said Ralph, slowly.

"Don't tell lies," said the skipper, furiously; "you couldn't 'ave forgot that word."

"I didn't forget it," said Ralph, "but I didn't know how you'd like it."

The skipper looked at him dubiously, and pushing his cap from his brow scratched his head.

"And I didn't know how the mate 'ud like it, either," continued the boy.

He relieved the skipper from an awkward dilemma by walking off to the galley and starting on a bowl of potatoes. The master of the *Susan*

Jane watched him blankly for some time and then looked round at the mate.

"You won't get much change out of 'im," said the latter, with a nod; "insultin' little devil."

The other made no reply, but as soon as the potatoes were finished set his young friend to clean brass work, and after that to tidy the cabin up and help the cook clean his pots and pans. Meantime the mate went below and overhauled his chest.

"This is where he gets all them ideas from," he said, coming aft with a big bundle of penny papers. "Look at the titles of 'em—'The Lion of the Pacific,' 'The One-armed Buccaneer,' 'Captain Kidd's Last Voyage.'"

He sat down on the cabin skylight and began turning them over, and, picking out certain gems of phraseology, read them aloud

to the skipper. The latter listened at first with scorn and then with impatience.

"I can't make head or tail out of what you're reading, George," he said, snappishly. "Who was Rudolph? Read straight ahead."

Thus urged, the mate, leaning forward so that his listener might hear better, read steadily through a serial in the first three numbers. The third instalment left Rudolph



"COSTER, CHIMBLEY-SWEEP, MUDLARK."

swimming in a race with three sharks and a boat-load of cannibals, and the joint efforts of both men failed to discover the other numbers.

"Just wot I should 'ave expected of 'im," said the skipper, as the mate returned from a fruitless search in the boy's chest. "I'll make him a bit more orderly on this ship. Go an' lock them other things up in your drawer, George. He's not to 'ave 'em again."

The schooner was getting into open water now, and began to feel it. In front of them was the blue sea, dotted with white sails and funnels belching smoke, speeding from England to worlds of romance and adventure. Something of the kind the cook said to Ralph, and urged him to get up and look for himself. He also, with the best intentions, discussed the restorative properties of fat pork from a medical point of view.

The next few days the boy divided between sea-sickness and work, the latter being the skipper's great remedy for piratical yearnings. Three or four times he received a mild drubbing, and, what was worse than the drubbing, had to give an answer in the affirmative to the skipper's inquiry as to whether he felt in a more wholesome frame of mind. On the fifth morning they stood in towards Fairhaven, and to his great joy he saw trees and houses again.

They stayed at Fairhaven just long enough to put out a small portion of their cargo, Ralph, stripped to his shirt and trousers, having to work in the hold with the rest, and proceeded to Lowport, a little place some thirty miles distant, to put out their powder. It was evening before they arrived, and, the tide being out, anchored in the mouth of the river on which the town stands.

"Git in about four o'clock," said the skipper to the mate, as he looked over the side towards the little cluster of houses on the shore. "Do you feel better now I've knocked some o' that nonsense out o' you, boy?"

"Much better, sir," said Ralph, respectfully.

"Be a good boy," said the skipper, pausing on the companion-ladder, "and you can stay with us if you like. Better turn in now, as you'll have to make yourself useful again in the morning working out the cargo."

He went below, leaving the boy on deck. The crew were in the fore-castle smoking, with the exception of the cook, who was in the galley over a little private business of his own.

An hour later the cook went below to prepare for sleep. The other two men were already in bed, and he was about to get into his when he noticed that Ralph's bunk, which was under his own, was empty. He went up on deck and looked round, and, returning below, scratched his nose in thought.

"Where's the boy?" he demanded, taking Jem by the arm and shaking him.

"Eh?" said Jem, rousing. "Whose boy?"

"Our boy, Ralph," said the cook. "I can't see 'im nowhere. I 'ope 'e ain't gone overboard, poor little chap."

Jem refusing to discuss the matter, the cook awoke Dobbs. Dobbs swore at him peacefully, and resumed his slumbers. The cook went up again and prowled round the deck, looking in all sorts of unlikely places for the boy. He even climbed a little way into the rigging, and, finding no traces of him, was reluctantly forced to the conclusion that he had gone overboard.

"Pore little chap," he said, solemnly, looking over the ship's side at the still water.

He walked slowly aft, shaking his head, and looking over the stern, brought up suddenly with a cry of dismay and rubbed his eyes. The ship's boat had also disappeared.

"Wot?" said the two seamen as he ran below and communicated the news. "Well, if it's gorn, it's gorn."

"Hadn't I better go an' tell the skipper?" said the cook.

"Let 'im find it out 'isself," said Jem, purring contentedly in the blankets. "It's 'is boat. Go' night."

"Time we 'ad a noo 'un, too," said Dobbs, yawning. "Don't you worry your 'ed, cook, about what don't consarn you."

The cook took the advice, and, having made his few simple preparations for the night, blew out the lamp and sprang into his bunk. Then he uttered a sharp exclamation, and getting out again fumbled for the matches and relit the lamp. A minute later he awoke his exasperated friends for the third time.

"S'elp me, cook," began Jem, fiercely.

"If you don't I will," said Dobbs, sitting up and trying to reach the cook with his clenched fist.

"It's a letter pinned to my pillow," said the cook, in trembling tones, as he held it to the lamp.

"Well, we don't want to 'ear it," said Jem. "Shut up, d'ye hear?"

But there was that in the cook's manner which awed him.

"Dear cook," he read, feverishly, "I have made an infernal machine with clock-work, and hid it in the hold near the gunpowder when we were at Fairhaven. I think it will go off between ten and eleven to-night, but I am not quite sure about the time. Don't tell those other beasts, but jump overboard and swim ashore. I have taken the boat. I would have taken you too, but you told me you swam seven miles once, so you can easy——"

The reading came to an abrupt termination as his listeners sprang out of their bunks, and, bolting on deck, burst wildly into the cabin, and breathlessly reeled off the heads of the letter to its astonished occupants.

"Stuck a wot in the hold?" gasped the skipper.

"Infernal machine," said the mate; "one of them things wot you blow up the 'Ouses of Parliament with."

"Wot's the time now?" interrogated Jem, anxiously.

"'Bout ha'-past ten," said the cook, trembling. "Let's give 'em a hail ashore."

They leaned over the side, and sent a mighty shout across the water. Most of Lowport had gone to bed, but the windows

"I'm going to swim for it. Stand by to pick me up, mates," he shouted, and lowering himself with a splash into the water struck out strongly towards them. Dobbs, a poor swimmer, after a moment's hesitation, followed his example.

"I can't swim a stroke," cried the cook, his teeth chattering.

The others, who were in the same



"THEY BURST WILDLY INTO THE CABIN."

in the inn were bright, and lights showed in the upper windows of two or three of the cottages.

Again they shouted in deafening chorus, casting fearful looks behind them, and in the silence a faint answering hail came from the shore. They shouted again like madmen, and then listening intently heard a boat's keel grate on the beach, and then the welcome click of oars in the rowlocks.

"Make haste," bawled Dobbs, vociferously, as the boat came creeping out of the darkness. "W'y don't you make 'aste?"

"Wot's the row?" cried a voice from the boat.

"Gunpowder!" yelled the cook, frantically; "there's ten tons of it aboard just going to explode. Hurry up."

The sound of the oars ceased and a startled murmur was heard from the boat; then an oar was pulled jerkily.

"They're putting back," said Jem, suddenly.

predicament, leaned over the side, listening. The swimmers were invisible in the darkness, but their progress was easily followed by the noise they made. Jem was the first to be hauled on board, and a minute or two later the listeners on the schooner heard him

assisting Dobbs. Then the sounds of strife, of thumps, and wicked words broke on their delighted ears.

"They're coming back for us," said the mate, taking a deep breath. "Well done, Jem."

The boat came towards them, impelled by powerful strokes, and was soon alongside. The three men tumbled in hurriedly, their fall being modified by the original crew, who were lying crouched up in the bottom of the boat. Jem and Dobbs gave way with hearty goodwill, and the doomed ship receded into the darkness. A little knot of people had gathered on the shore, and, receiving the tidings, became anxious for the safety of their town. It was felt that the windows, at least, were in imminent peril, and messengers were hastily sent round to have them opened.

Still the deserted *Susan Jane* made no sign. Twelve o'clock struck from the little church at the back of the town, and she was still intact.

"Something's gone wrong," said an old fisherman with a bad way of putting things. "Now's the time for somebody to go and tow her out to sea."

There was no response.

"To save Lowport," said the speaker, feelingly. "If I was only twenty years younger——"

"It's old men's work," said a voice.

The skipper, straining his eyes through the gloom in the direction of his craft, said nothing. He began to think that she had escaped after all.

Two o'clock struck and the crowd began to disperse. Some of the bolder inhabitants who were fidgety about draughts closed their windows, and children who had been routed out of their beds to take a nocturnal walk inland were led slowly back. By three o'clock the danger was felt to be over, and day broke and revealed the forlorn *Susan Jane* still riding at anchor.

"I'm going aboard," said the skipper, suddenly; "who's coming with me?"

Jem and the mate and the town-policeman volunteered, and, borrowing the boat which had served them before, pulled swiftly out to their vessel, and, taking the hatches off with unusual gentleness, commenced their search. It was nervous work at first, but they became inured to it, and, moreover, a certain suspicion, slight at

first, but increasing in intensity as the search proceeded, gave them some sense of security. Later still, they began to eye each other shamefacedly.

"I don't believe there's anything there," said the policeman, sitting down and laughing boisterously; "that boy's been making a fool of you."

"That's about the size of it," groaned the mate. "We'll be the laughing-stock o' the town."

The skipper, who was standing with his back towards him, said nothing; but, peering about, stooped suddenly, and, with a sharp exclamation, picked up something from behind a damaged case.

"I've got it," he yelled, suddenly; "stand clear!"

He scrambled hastily on deck, and, holding his find at arm's length, with his head averted flung it far into the water. A loud cheer from a couple of boats which were watching greeted his action, and a distant response came from the shore.

"Was that a infernal machine?" whispered the bewildered Jem to the mate. "Why, it looked to me just like one o' them tins o' corned beef."

The mate shook his head at him and glanced at the constable, who was gazing longingly over the side. "Well, I've 'eard of people being killed by *them* sometimes," he said with a grin.

