

A QUESTION OF HABIT

BY
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WIMMIN aboard ship I don't 'old with, said the night-watchman, severely. They'll ask you all sorts o' silly questions, an' complain to the skipper if you don't treat 'em civil in answering 'em. If you do treat 'em civil, what's the result? Is it a bit o' bacca, or a shilling, or anything like that? Not a bit of it; just a "thank you," an' said in a way as though they've been giving you a perfect treat by talking to you.

They're a contrary sects too. Ask a girl civil-like to stand off a line you want to coil up, and she'll get off an' look at you as though you ought to have waited until she 'ad offered to shift. Pull on it without asking her to step off fust, an' the ship won't 'old her 'ardly. A man I knew once—he's dead now, poor chap, and three widders mourning for 'im—said that with all 'is experience wimmin was as much a riddle to 'im as when he fust married.

O' course, sometimes you get a gal down the fo'c's'le pretending to be a man, shipping

as ordinary seaman or boy, and nobody not a penny the wiser. It's happened before, an' I've no doubt it will again.

We 'ad a queer case once on a barque I was on as steward, called the *Tower of London*, bound from the Albert Docks to Melbourne with a general cargo. We shipped a new boy just after we started as was entered in the ship's books as 'Enery Mallow, an' the first thing we noticed about 'Enery was as 'e had a great dislike to work and was terrible sea-sick. Every time there was a job as wanted to be done, that lad 'ud go and be took bad quite independent of the weather.

Then Bill Dowsett adopted 'im, and said he'd make a sailor of 'im. I believe if 'Enery could 'ave chose 'is father, he'd sooner 'ad any man than Bill, and I would sooner have been a orphan than a son to any of 'em. Bill relied on his langwidge mostly, but when that failed he'd just fetch 'im a cuff. Nothing more than was good for a boy wot 'ad got 'is living to earn, but 'Enery used to cry until we was all ashamed of 'im.

Bill got almost to be afraid of 'itting 'im at last, and used to try wot being sarcastic would do. Then we found as 'Enery was ten times as sarcastic as Bill—'e'd talk all round 'im so to speak, an' even take the words out of Bill's mouth to use agin 'im. Then Bill would turn to 'is great natural gifts, and the end of it was when we was about a fortnight out that the boy ran up on deck and went aft to the skipper and complained of Bill's langwidge.

"Langwidge," ses the old man, glaring at 'im as if 'ed eat 'im—"what sort o' langwidge?"

"Bad langwidge, sir," ses 'Enery.

"Repeat it," ses the skipper.

'Enery gives a little shiver. "I couldn't do it, sir," he ses, very solemn; "it's like—like you was talking to the bo'sen yesterday."

"Go to your duties," roars the skipper; "go to your duties at once, and don't let me 'ear any more of it. Why, you ought to be at a young ladies' school."

"I know I ought, sir," 'Enery ses, with a w'imper, "but I never thought it'd be like this."

The old man stares at him, and then he rubs his eyes and stares ag'in. 'Enery wiped his eyes and stood looking down at the deck.

"'Eavens above," ses the old man, in a dazed voice, "don't tell me you're a gal!"

"I won't if you don't want me to," ses 'Enery, wiping his eyes ag'in.

"What's your name?" ses the old man at last.

"Mary Mallow, sir," ses 'Enery, very soft.

"What made you do it?" ses the skipper, at last.

"My father wanted me to marry a man I didn't want to," ses Miss Mallow. "He used to admire my hair very much, so I cut it off. Then I got frightened at what I'd done, and as I looked like a boy I thought I'd go to sea."

"Well, it's a nice responsibility for me," ses the skipper, and he called the mate who 'ad just come on deck, and asked his advice. The mate was a very strait-laced man—for a mate—and at fust he was so shocked 'e couldn't speak.

"She'll have to come aft," he ses, at last.

"O' course she will," ses the skipper, and he called me up and told me to clear a spare cabin out for her—we carried a passenger or two sometimes—and to fetch her chest up.

"I s'pose you've got some clothes in it?" he ses, anxious-like.

"Only these sort o' things," ses Miss Mallow, bashfully.

"And send Dowsett to me," ses the skipper, turning to me ag'in.

We 'ad to shove pore Bill up on deck a'most, and the way the skipper went on at 'im, you'd thought 'e was the greatest rascal unhung. He begged the young lady's pardon over and over ag'in, and when 'e come back to us 'e was that upset that 'e didn't know what 'e was saying, and begged an ordinary seaman's pardon for treading on 'is toe.

Then the skipper took Miss Mallow below to her new quarters, and to 'is great surprise caught the third officer, who was fond of female society, doing a step-dance in the saloon all on 'is own.

That evening the skipper and the mate

formed themselves into a committee to decide what was to be done. Everything the mate suggested the skipper wouldn't have, and when the skipper thought of anything, the mate said it was impossible. After the committee 'ad been sitting for three hours it began to abuse each other; leastaways, the skipper abused the mate, and the mate kep' on saying if it wasn't for discipline he knew somebody as would tell the skipper a thing or two it would do 'im good to hear.

"She must have a dress, I tell you, or a frock at any rate," ses the skipper, very mad.

"What's the difference between a dress and a frock?" ses the mate.

"There is a difference," ses the skipper.

"Well, what is it?" ses the mate.

"It wouldn't be any good if I was to explain to you," ses the skipper; "some people's heads are too thick."

"I know they are," ses the mate.

The committee broke up after that, but it got amiable ag'in over breakfast next morning, and made quite a fuss over Miss Mallow. It was wonderful what a difference a night aft had made in that gal. She'd washed herself beautiful, and had just frizzed 'er 'air, which was rather long, over 'er forehead, and the committee kept pursing its lips up and looking at each other as Mr. Fisher talked to 'er and kep' on piling 'er plate up.

She went up on deck after breakfast and stood leaning against the side talking to Mr. Fisher. Pretty laugh she'd got, too, though I never noticed it when she was in the fo'c's'le. Perhaps she hadn't got much to laugh about then, and while she was up there enjoying 'erself watching us chaps work, the committee was down below laying its 'eds together ag'in.

When I went down to the cabin ag'in it was like a dressmaker's shop. There was silk handkerchiefs and all sorts o' things on the table, an' the skipper was hovering about with a big pair of scissors in his hands, wondering how to begin.

"I sha'n't attempt anything very grand," he ses at last; "just something to slip over them boy's clothes she's wearing."

The mate didn't say anything. He was busy drawing frocks on a little piece of paper, and looking at 'em with his head on one side to see whether they looked better that way.

"By Jove! I've got it," ses the old man, suddenly. "Where's that dressing-gown your wife gave you?"

The mate looked up. "I don't know," he ses, slowly. "I've mislaid it."

"Well, it can't be far," ses the skipper. "It's just the thing to make a frock of."

"I don't think so," ses the mate. "It wouldn't hang properly. Do you know what I was thinking of?"

"Well," ses the skipper.

"Three o' them new flannel shirts o' yours," ses the mate. "They're very dark, an' they'd hang beautiful."

"Let's try the dressing-gown first," ses the skipper, hearty-like. "That's easier. I'll help you look for it."

"I can't think what I've done with it," ses the mate.

"Well, let's try your cabin," ses the old man.

They went to the mate's cabin and, to his great surprise, there it was hanging just behind the door. It was a beautiful dressing-gown—soft, warm cloth trimmed with braid—and the skipper took up his scissors ag'in, and fairly gloated over it. Then he slowly cut off the top part with the two arms 'anging to it, and passed it over to the mate.

"I sha'n't want that, Mr. Jackson," he ses, slowly. "I daresay you'll find it come in useful."

"While you're doing that, s'pose I get on with them three shirts," ses Mr. Jackson.

"What three shirts?" ses the skipper, who was busy cutting buttons off.

"Why, yours," ses Mr. Jackson. "Let's see who can make the best frock."

"No, Mr. Jackson," ses the old man. "I'm sure you couldn't make anything o' them shirts. You're not at all gifted that way. Besides, I want 'em."

"Well, I wanted my dressing-gown, if you come to that," ses the mate, in a sulky voice.

"Well, what on earth did you give it to me for?" ses the skipper. "I do wish you'd know your own mind, Mr. Jackson."

The mate didn't say any more. He sat and watched the old man, as he threaded his needle and stitched the dressing-gown together down the front. It really didn't look half bad when he'd finished it, and it was easy to see how pleased Miss Mallow was. She really looked quite fine in it, and with the blue guernsey she was wearing and a band made o' silk handkerchiefs round her waist, I saw at once it was a case with the third officer.

"Now you look a bit more like the gal your father used to know," ses the skipper.

"My finger's a bit sore just at present, but by-and-by I'll make you a bonnet."

"I'd like to see it," ses the mate.

"It's quite easy," ses the skipper. "I've seen my wife do 'em. She calls 'em tokes. You make the hull' out o' cardboard and spread your canvas on that."

That dress made a wonderful difference in the gal. Wonderful! She seemed to change all at once and become the lady altogether. She just 'ad that cabin at her beck and call; and as for me, she seemed to think I was there a puppose to wait on'er.

I must say she 'ad a good time of it. We was having splendid weather, and there wasn't much work for anybody; consequently, when she wasn't receiving good advice from the skipper and the mate, she was receiving attention from both the second and third officers. Mr. Scott, the second, didn't seem to take much notice of her for a day or two, and the first I saw of his being in love was 'is being very rude to Mr. Fisher and giving up bad language, so sudden it's a wonder it didn't do 'im a injury.



"I SHA'N'T WANT THAT, MR. JACKSON."



"NOW YOU LOOK MORE LIKE THE GAL YOUR FATHER USED TO KNOW."

I think the gal rather enjoyed their attentions at first, but arter a time she got fairly tired of it. She never 'ad no rest, pore thing. If she was up on deck looking over the side the third officer would come up and talk romantic to 'er about the sea and the lonely lives of sailor men, and I acturally 'eard Mr. Scott repeating poetry to her. The skipper 'eard it too, and being suspicious o' poetry, and not having heard clearly, called him up to 'im and made 'im say it all over ag'in to 'im. 'E didn't seem quite to know wot to make of it, so 'e calls up the mate for 'im to hear it. The mate said it was rubbish, and the skipper told Mr. Scott that if ever he was taken that way ag'in 'ed 'ear more of it.

There was no doubt about them two young fellers being genuine. She 'appened to say one day that she could never, never care for a man who drank and smoked, and I'm blest if both of em didn't take to water and give 'er their pipes to chuck overboard, and the agony those two chaps used to suffer when they saw other people smoking was pitiful to witness.

It got to such a pitch at last that the mate, who, as I said afore, was a very particular man, called another committee meeting. It was a very solemn affair, and 'e made a long speech in which he said he was the father of

a family, and that the second and third officers was far too attentive to Miss Mallow, and 'e asked the skipper to stop it.

"How?" ses the skipper.

"Stop the draught-playing and the card-playing and the poetry," ses the mate; "the gal's getting too much attention; she'll have 'er 'ead turned. Put your foot down, sir, and stop it."

The skipper was so struck by what he said, that he not only did that, but he went and forbid them two young men to speak to the gal except at meal times, or when the conversation was general. None of 'em liked it, though the gal pretended to, and for the matter of a week things was very quiet in the cabin, not to say sulky.

Things got back to their old style ag'in in a very curious way. I'd just set the tea in the cabin one afternoon, and 'ad stopped at the foot of the companion-ladder to let the skipper and Mr. Fisher come down, when we suddenly 'eard a loud box on the ear. We all rushed into the cabin at once, and there was the mate looking fairly thunder-struck, with his hand to his face, and Miss Mallow glaring at 'im.

"Mr. Jackson," ses the skipper, in a awful voice, "what's this?"

"Ask her," shouts the mate. "I think she's gone mad or something."

"What does this mean, Miss Mallow?" ses the skipper.

"Ask him," ses Miss Mallow, breathing very 'ard.

"Mr. Jackson," ses the skipper, very severe, "what have you been doing?"

"Nothing," roars the mate.

"Was that a box on the ear, I 'eard?" ses the skipper.

"It was," says the mate, grinding his teeth.

"Your ear?" ses the skipper.

"Yes. She's mad, I tell you," ses the mate. "I was sitting here quite quiet and peaceable, when she came alongside me and slapped my face."

"Why did you box his ear?" ses the skipper to the girl again.

"Because he deserved it," ses Miss Mallow.

The skipper shook his 'ead and looked at the mate so sorrowful that he began to stamp up and down the cabin and bang the table with his fist.

"If I hadn't heard it myself, I couldn't have believed it," ses the skipper; "and you the father of a family, too. Nice example for the young men, I must say."

"Please don't say anything more about it," ses Miss Mallow; "I'm sure he's very sorry."

"Very good," ses the skipper; "but you understand, Mr. Jackson, that if I overlook your conduct, you're not to speak to this young lady ag'in. Also, you must consider yourself as removed from the committee."

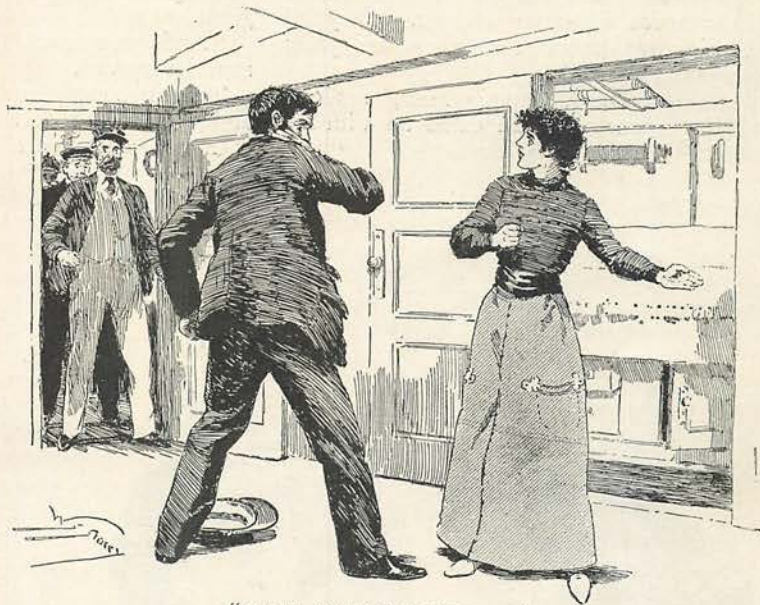
"Curse the committee," screamed the mate. "Curse——"

He looked all round, with his eyes starting out of 'is 'ead, and then suddenly shut his mouth with a snap and went up on deck. He never allooded to the affair again, and in fact for the rest of the voyage 'e hardly spoke to a soul. The young people got to their cards and draughts ag'in, but he took no notice, and 'e never spoke to the skipper unless he spoke to 'im fust.

We got to Melbourne at last, and the fust

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thing the skipper did was to give our young lady some money to go ashore and buy clothes with. He did it in a very delikit way by giving her the pay as boy, and I don't think I ever see anybody look so pleased and surprised as she did. The



"WE ALL RUSHED INTO THE CABIN."

skipper went ashore with her, as she looked rather a odd figure to be going about, and comes back about a hour later without 'er.

"I thought perhaps she'd have come aboard," he ses to Mr. Fisher. "I managed to miss her somehow while I was waiting outside a shop."

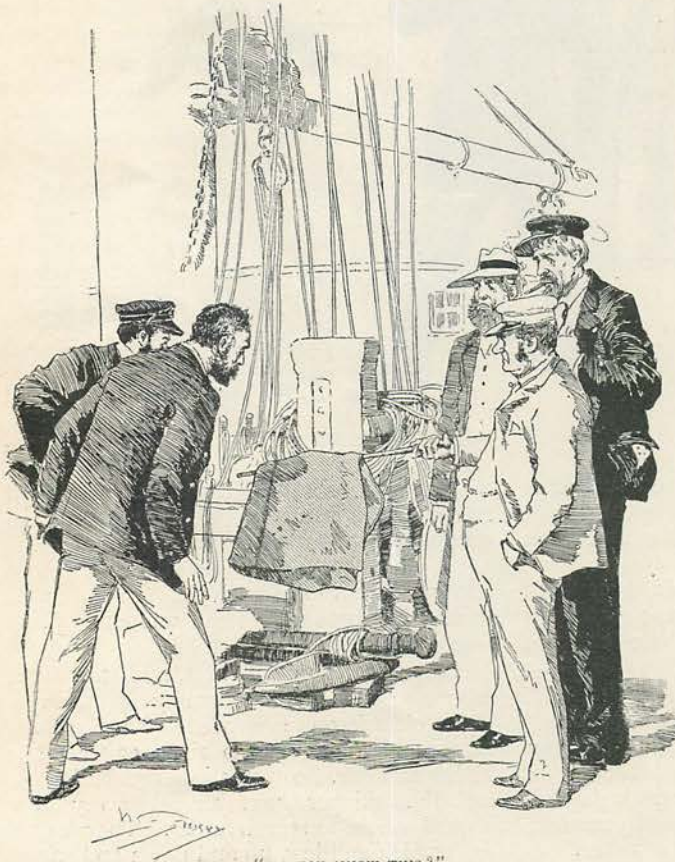
They fidgeted about a bit, and then went ashore to look for 'er, turning up again at eight o'clock quite worried. Nine o'clock came, and there was no signs of 'er. Mr. Fisher and Mr. Scott was in a dreadful state, and the skipper sent almost every man aboard ashore to search for 'er. They 'unted for 'er high and low, up and down and round about, and turned up at midnight so done up that they could 'ardly stand without holding on to somethink, and so upset that they couldn't speak. None of the officers got any sleep that night except Mr. Jackson, and the fust thing in the morning they was ashore ag'in looking for her.

She'd disappeared as completely as if she'd gone overboard, and more than one of the chaps looked over the side half expecting to see 'er come floating by. By twelve o'clock most of us was convinced that she'd been

made away with, and Mr. Fisher made some remarks about the police of Melbourne as would 'a done them good to hear.

I was just going to see about dinner when we got the first news of her. Three of the most miserable and solemn-looking captains I've ever seen came alongside and asked for a few words with our skipper. They all stood in a row looking as if they was going to cry.

"Good morning, Captain Hart," ses one of 'em, as our old man came up with the mate.



"DO YOU KNOW THIS?"

"Good morning," ses he.

"Do you know this?" ses one of 'em suddenly, holding out Miss Mallow's dressing-gown on a walking-stick.

"Good 'eavens," ses the skipper, "I hope nothing's happened to that pore gal."

The three captains shook their heads all together.

"She is no more," ses another of 'em.

"How did it happen?" ses the skipper, in a low voice.

"She took this off," ses the first captain, shaking his head and pointing to the dressing-gown.

"And took a chill?" ses the skipper, staring very 'ard.

The three captains shook their 'eads ag'in, and I noticed that they seemed to watch each other and do it all together.

"I don't understand," ses the skipper.

"I was afraid you wouldn't," ses the first captain; "she took this off."

"So you said before," ses the skipper, rather short.

"And became a boy ag'in," ses the other; "the wickedest and most artful young rascal that ever signed on with me."

He looked round at the others, and they all broke out into a perfect roar of laughter, and jumped up and down and slapped each other on the back, as if they was all mad. Then they asked which was the one wot had 'is ears boxed, and which was Mr. Fisher and which was Mr. Scott, and told our skipper wot a nice fatherly man he was. Quite a crowd got round, an' wouldn't go away for all we could do to 'em in the shape o' buckets o' water and lumps o' coal. We was the laughing-stock o' the place, and the way they

carried on when the steamer passed us two days later with the first captain on the bridge, pretending not to see that imp of a boy standing in the bows blowing us kisses and dropping curtsies, nearly put the skipper out of 'is mind.