



By W. W. JACOBS.

IT was getting late in the afternoon as Master Jones, in a somewhat famished condition, strolled up Aldgate, with a keen eye on the gutter, in search of anything that would serve him for his tea. Too late he wished that he had saved some of the stale bread and damaged fruit which had constituted his dinner.

Aldgate proving barren, he turned up into the quieter Minories, skilfully dodging the mechanical cuff of the constable at the corner as he passed, and watching with some interest the efforts of a stray mongrel to get itself adopted. Its victim had sworn at it, cut at it with his stick, and even made little runs at it—all to no purpose. Finally, being a soft-hearted man, he was weak enough to pat the cowering schemer on the head, and, being frantically licked by the homeless one, took it up in his arms and walked off with it.

Billy Jones watched the proceedings with interest, not untempered by envy. If he had only been a dog! The dog passed in the man's arms, and, with a whine of ecstasy, insisted upon licking his ear. They went on

their way, the dog wondering between licks what sort of table the man kept, and the man speculating idly as to a descent which appeared to have included, among other things, an ant-eater.

"'E's all right," said the orphan, wistfully; "no coppers to chivvy 'im about, and as much grub as he wants. Wish I'd been a dog."

He tied up his breeches with a piece of string which was lying on the pavement, and, his hands being now free, placed them in a couple of rents which served as pockets, and began to whistle. He was not a proud boy, and was quite willing to take a lesson even from the humblest. Surely he was as useful as a dog!

The thought struck him just as a stout, kindly-looking seaman passed with a couple of shipmates. It was a good-natured face, and the figure was that of a man who lived well. A moment's hesitation, and Master Jones, with a courage born of despair, ran after him and tugged him by the sleeve.

"Halloa!" said Mr. Samuel Brown, looking round. "What do you want?"

"Want you, father," said Master Jones.

The jolly seaman's face broke into a smile.

So also did the faces of the jolly seaman's friends.

"I'm not your father, matey," he said, good-naturedly.

"Yes, you are," said the desperate Billy; "you know you are."

"You've made a mistake, my lad," said Mr. Brown, still smiling. "Here, run away."

He felt in his trouser-pocket and produced a penny. It was a gift, not a bribe, but it had by no means the effect its donor intended. Master Jones, now quite certain that he had made a wise choice of a father, trotted along a yard or two in the rear.

"Look here, my lad," exclaimed Mr. Brown, goaded into action by intercepting a smile with which Mr. Charles Legge had favoured Mr. Harry Green, "you run off home."

"Where do you live now?" inquired Billy, anxiously.

Mr. Green, disdaining concealment, slapped Mr. Legge on the back and, laughing uproariously, regarded Master Jones with much kindness.

"You mustn't follow me," said Sam, severely; "d'ye hear?"

"All right, father," said the boy, dutifully.

"And don't call me father," vociferated Mr. Brown.

"Why not?" inquired the youth, artlessly.

Mr. Legge stopped suddenly and, putting his hand on Mr. Green's shoulder, gaspingly expressed his inability to go any farther. Mr. Green, patting his back, said he knew how he felt, because he felt the same, and, turning to Sam, told him he'd be the death of him if he wasn't more careful.

"If you don't run away," said Mr. Brown, harshly, as he turned to the boy, "I shall give you a hiding."

"Where am I to run to?" whimpered Master Jones, dodging off and on.

"Run 'ome," said Sam.

"That's where I'm going," said Master Jones, following.

"Better try and give 'im the slip, Sam," said Mr. Legge, in a confidential whisper; "though it seems an unnatural thing to do."

"Unnatural? What d'ye mean?" demanded his unfortunate friend. "Wot d'ye mean by unnatural?"

"Oh, if you're going to talk like that, Sam," said Mr. Legge, shortly, "it's no good giving you advice. As you've made your bed, you must lay on it."

"How long is it since you saw 'im last, matey?" inquired Mr. Green.

"I dunno; not very long," replied the boy, cautiously.

"Has he altered at all since you see 'im last?" inquired the counsel for the defence, motioning the fermenting Mr. Brown to keep still.

"No," said Billy, firmly; "not a bit."

"Wot's your name?"

"Billy," was the reply.

"Billy wot?"

"Billy Jones."

Mr. Green's face cleared, and he turned to his friends with a smile of joyous triumph. Sam's face reflected his own, but Charlie Legge's was still overcast.

"It ain't likely," he said, impressively; "it ain't likely as Sam would go and get married twice in the same name, is it? Put it to yourself, 'Arry—would you?"

"Look 'ere," exclaimed the infuriated Mr. Brown, "don't you interfere in my business. You're a crocodile, that's wot you are. As for you, you little varmint, you run off, d'ye hear?"

He moved on swiftly, accompanied by the other two, and set an example of looking straight ahead of him, which was, however, lost upon his friends.

"E's still following of you, Sam," said the crocodile, in by no means disappointed tones.

"Sticking like a leech," confirmed Mr. Green. "'E's a pretty little chap, rather."

"Takes arter 'is mother," said the vengeful Mr. Legge.

The unfortunate Sam said nothing, but strode a haunted man down Nightingale Lane into Wapping High Street, and so to the ketch *Nancy Bell*, which was lying at Shrimpett's Wharf. He stepped on board without a word, and only when he turned to descend the fore-castle-ladder did his gaze rest for a moment on the small, forlorn piece of humanity standing on the wharf.

"Halloa, boy, what do you want?" cried the skipper, catching sight of him.

"Want my father, sir—Sam," replied the youth, who had kept his ears open.

The skipper got up from his seat and eyed him curiously; Messrs. Legge and Green, drawing near, explained the situation. Now the skipper was a worldly man; and Samuel Brown, A.B., when at home, played a brass instrument in the Salvation Army band. He regarded the boy kindly and spoke him fair.

"Don't run away," he said, anxiously.

"I'm not going to, sir," said Master Jones, charmed with his manner, and he watched breathlessly as the skipper stepped forward and, peering down the forecastle, called loudly for Sam.

"Yes, sir," said a worried voice.

"Your boy's asking after you," said the skipper, grinning madly.

"He's not my boy, sir," replied Mr. Brown, through his clenched teeth.

"Well, you'd better come up and see him," said the other. "Are you sure he isn't, Sam?"

Mr. Brown made no reply, but coming on deck met Master Jones's smile of greeting with

"You hear what your father says," said the skipper— ("Hold your tongue, Sam.) Where's your mother, boy?"

"Dead, sir," whined Master Jones. "I've on'y got 'im now."

The skipper was a kind-hearted man, and he looked pityingly at the forlorn little figure by his side. And Sam was the good man of the ship and a leading light at Dimport.

"How would you like to come to sea with your father?" he inquired.

The grin of delight with which Master Jones received this proposal was sufficient reply.

"I wouldn't do it for everybody," pursued



"YOU'D BETTER COME UP AND SEE HIM."

an icy stare, and started convulsively as the skipper beckoned him aboard.

"He's been rather neglected, Sam," said the skipper, shaking his head.

"Wot's it got to do with me?" said Sam, violently. "I tell you I've never seen 'im afore this artemoon."

the skipper, glancing severely at the mate, who was behaving foolishly, "but I don't mind obliging you, Sam. He can come."

"Obliging?" repeated Mr. Brown, hardly able to get the words out. "Obliging me? I don't want to be obliged."

"There, there," interrupted the skipper. "I don't want any thanks. Take him forrard and give him something to eat—he looks half-starved, poor little chap."

He turned away and went down to the cabin, while the cook, whom Mr. Brown had publicly rebuked for his sins the day before, led the boy to the galley and gave him a good meal. After that was done Charlie washed him, and Harry, going ashore, begged a much-worn suit of boy's clothes from a foreman of his acquaintance. He also brought back a message from the foreman to Mr. Brown to the effect that he was surprised at him.

The conversation that evening after Master Jones was asleep turned on bigamy, but Mr. Brown snored through it all, though Mr. Legge's remark that the revelations of that afternoon had thrown a light upon many little things in his behaviour which had hitherto baffled him came perilously near to awaking him.

At six in the morning they got under way, the boy going nearly frantic with delight as sail after sail was set, and the ketch, with a stiff breeze, rapidly left London behind her. Mr. Brown studiously ignored him, but the other men pampered him to his heart's content, and even the cabin was good enough to manifest a little concern in his welfare, the skipper calling Mr. Brown up no fewer than five times that day to complain about his son's behaviour.

"I can't have somersaults on this 'ere ship, Sam," he remarked, shaking his head; "it ain't the place for 'em."

"I wonder at you teaching 'im such things," said the mate, in grave disapprobation.

"Me?" said the hapless Sam, trembling with passion.

"He must 'ave seen you do it," said the mate, letting his eye rove casually over Sam's ample proportions. "You must ha' been leading a double life altogether, Sam."

"That's nothing to do with us," interrupted the skipper, impatiently. "I don't mind Sam turning cart-wheels all day if it amuses him, but they mustn't do it here, that's all. It's no good standing there sulking, Sam; I can't have it."

He turned away, and Mr. Brown, unable to decide whether he was mad or drunk, or both, walked back, and, squeezing himself up in the bows, looked miserably over the sea. Behind him the men disported themselves with Master Jones, and once, looking

over his shoulder, he actually saw the skipper giving him a lesson in steering.

By the following afternoon he was in such a state of collapse that, when they put in at the small port of Withersea to discharge a portion of their cargo, he obtained permission to stay below in his bunk. Work proceeded without him, and at nine o'clock in the evening they sailed again, and it was not until they were a couple of miles on their way to Dimport that Mr. Legge rushed aft with the announcement that he was missing.

"Don't talk nonsense," said the skipper, as he came up from below in response to a hail from the mate.

"It's a fact, sir," said Mr. Legge, shaking his head.

"What's to be done with the boy?" demanded the mate, blankly.

"Sam's a unsteady, unreliable, tricky old man," exclaimed the skipper, hotly; "the idea of going and leaving a boy on our hands like that. I'm surprised at him. I'm disappointed in Sam—deserting!"

"I expect 'e's larfing like anything, sir," remarked Mr. Legge.

"Get forrard," said the skipper, sharply; "get forrard at once, d'ye hear?"

"But what's to be done with the boy?—that's what I want to know," said the mate.

"What d'ye think's to be done with him?" bawled the skipper. "We can't chuck him overboard, can we?"

"I mean when we get to Dimport?" growled the mate.

"Well, the men'll talk," said the skipper, calming down a little, "and perhaps Sam's wife'll come and take him. If not, I suppose he'll have to go to the workhouse. Anyway, it's got nothing to do with me. I wash my hands of it altogether."

He went below again, leaving the mate at the wheel. A murmur of voices came from the fore-castle, where the crew were discussing the behaviour of their late colleague. The bereaved Master Jones, whose face was streaky with the tears of disappointment, looked on from his bunk.

"What are you going to do, Billy?" inquired the cook.

"I dunno," said the boy, miserably.

He sat up in his bunk in a brown study, ever and anon turning his sharp little eyes from one to another of the men. Then, with a final sniff to the memory of his departed parent, he composed himself to sleep.

With the buoyancy of childhood he had

forgotten his trouble by the morning, and ran idly about the ship as before, until in the afternoon they came in sight of Dimport. Mr. Legge, who had a considerable respect for the brain hidden in that small head,

He took the wheel from Harry; the little town came closer; the houses separated and disclosed roads, and the boy discovered to his disappointment that the church stood on ground of its own, and not on the roof of a



“‘DON'T TALK NONSENSE,’ SAID THE SKIPPER.”

pointed it out to him, and with some curiosity waited for his remarks.

“I can see it,” said Master Jones, briefly.

“That’s where Sam lives,” said his friend, pointedly.

“Yes,” said the boy, nodding, “all of you live there, don’t you?”

It was an innocent enough remark in all conscience, but there was that in Master Jones’s eye which caused Mr. Legge to move away hastily and glance at him in some disquietude from the other side of the deck. The boy, unconscious of the interest excited by his movements, walked restlessly up and down.

“Boy’s worried,” said the skipper, aside, to the mate; “cheer up, sonny.”

Billy looked up and smiled, and the cloud which had sat on his brow when he thought of the cold-blooded desertion of Mr. Brown gave way to an expression of serene content.

“Well, what’s he going to do?” inquired the mate, in a low voice.

“That needn’t worry us,” said the skipper. “Let things take their course; that’s my motto.”

large red house as he had supposed. He ran forward as they got closer, and, perching up in the bows until they were fast to the quay, looked round searchingly for any signs of Sam.

The skipper locked up the cabin, and then calling on one of the shore-hands to keep an eye on the forecastle, left it open for the convenience of the small passenger. Harry, Charlie, and the cook stepped ashore. The skipper and mate followed, and the latter, looking back from some distance, called his attention to the desolate little figure sitting on the hatch.

“I s’pose he’ll be all right,” said the skipper, uneasily; “there’s food and a bed down the fo’c’s’le. You might just look round to-night and see he’s safe. I expect we’ll have to take him back to London with us.”

They turned up a small road in the direction of home and walked on in silence, until the mate, glancing behind at an acquaintance who had just passed, uttered a sharp exclamation. The skipper turned, and a small figure which had just shot round the corner

stopped in mid-career and eyed them warily. The men exchanged uneasy glances.

"Father," cried a small voice.

"He—he's adopted you now," said the skipper, huskily.

"Or you," said the mate. "I never took much notice of him."

He looked round again. Master Jones was following, briskly, about ten yards in the rear, and twenty yards behind him came the crew, who, having seen him quit the ship, had followed with the evident intention of being in at the death.

"Father," cried the boy again, "wait for me."

One or two passers-by stared in astonishment, and the mate began to be uneasy as to the company he was keeping.

"Let's separate," he growled, "and see who he's calling after."

The skipper caught him by the arm. "Shout out to him to go back," he cried.

"It's you he's after, I tell you," said the mate. "Who do you want, Billy?"

"I want my father," cried the youth, and,

whether it would be better to wipe Master Jones off the face of the earth or to pursue his way in all the strength of conscious innocence. He chose the latter course, and, a shade more erect than usual, walked on until he came in sight of his house and his wife, who was standing at the door.

"You come along o' me, Jem, and explain," he whispered to the mate. Then he turned about and hailed the crew. The crew, flattered at being offered front seats in the affair, came forward eagerly.

"What's the matter?" inquired Mrs. Hunt, eyeing the crowd in amazement as it grouped itself in anticipation.

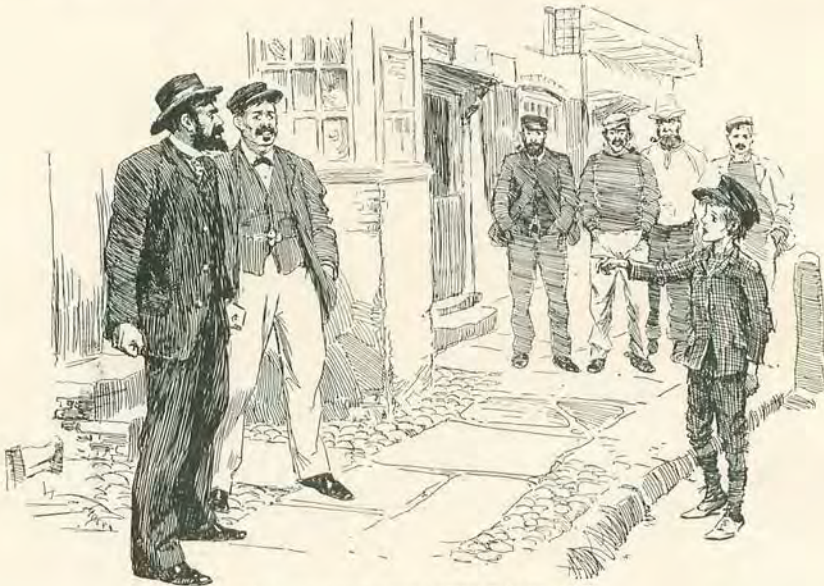
"Nothing," said her husband, off-handedly.

"Who's that boy?" cried the innocent woman.

"It's a poor little mad boy," began the skipper; "he came aboard——"

"I'm not mad, father," interrupted Master Jones.

"A poor little mad boy," continued the skipper, hastily, "who came aboard in London and said poor old Sam Brown was his father."



"I WANT MY FATHER," CRIED THE YOUTH."

to prevent any mistake, indicated the raging skipper with his finger.

"Who do you want?" bellowed the latter, in a frightful voice.

"Want you, father," chirruped Master Jones.

Wrath and dismay struggled for supremacy in the skipper's face, and he paused to decide

"No—you, father," cried the boy, shrilly.

"He calls everybody his father," said the skipper, with a smile of anguish; "that's the form his madness takes. He called Jem here his father."

"No, he didn't," said the mate, bluntly.

"And then he thought Charlie was his father."

"No, sir," said Mr. Legge, with respectful firmness.

"Well, he said Sam Brown was," said the skipper.

"Yes, that's right, sir," said the crew.

"Where is Sam?" inquired Mrs. Hunt, looking round expectantly.

"He deserted the ship at Withersea," said her husband.

"I see," said Mrs. Hunt, with a bitter smile, "and these men have all come up prepared to swear that the boy said Sam was his father. Haven't you?"

"Yes, mum," chorused the crew, delighted at being understood so easily.

Mrs. Hunt looked across the road to the fields stretching beyond. Then she suddenly brought her gaze back and, looking full at her husband, uttered just two words:—

"Oh, Joe!"

"Ask the mate," cried the frantic skipper.

"Yes, I know what the mate'll say," said Mrs. Hunt. "I've no need to ask him."

"Charlie and Harry were with Sam when the boy came up to them," protested the skipper.

"I've no doubt," said his wife. "Oh, Joe! Joe! Joe!"

There was an uncomfortable silence, during which the crew, standing for the most part on one leg in sympathy with their chief's embarrassment, nudged each other to say something to clear the character of a man whom all esteemed.

"You ungrateful little demon," burst out Mr. Legge, at length; "arter the kind way the skipper treated you, too."

"Did he treat him kindly?" inquired the captain's wife, in conversational tones.

"Like a fa—like a uncle, mum," said the thoughtless Mr. Legge. "Gave 'im a passage on the ship and fairly spoilt 'im. We was all surprised at the fuss 'e made of 'im; wasn't we, Harry?"

He turned to his friend, but on Mr. Green's face there was an expression of such utter scorn and contempt that his own fell. He glanced at the skipper, and was almost frightened at his appearance.

The situation was ended by Mrs. Hunt entering the house and closing the door with an ominous bang. The men slunk off, headed by Mr. Legge; and the mate, after a few murmured words of encouragement to the skipper, also departed. Captain Hunt looked first at the small cause of his trouble, who had drawn off to some distance, and

then at the house. Then, with a determined gesture, he turned the handle of the door and walked in. His wife, who was sitting in an arm-chair, with her eyes on the floor, remained motionless.

"Look here, Polly—," he began.

"Don't talk to me," was the reply. "I wonder you can look me in the face."

The skipper ground his teeth, and strove to maintain an air of judicial calm.

"If you'll only be reasonable—," he remarked, severely.

"I thought there was something secret going on," said Mrs. Hunt. "I've often looked at you when you've been sitting in that chair, with a worried look on your face, and wondered what it was. But I never thought it was so bad as this. I'll do you the credit to say that I never thought of such a thing as this. . . . What did you say? . . . What?"

"I said 'd——!'" said the skipper, explosively.

"Yes, I've no doubt," said his wife, fiercely. "You think you're going to carry it off with a high hand and bluster; but you won't bluster me, my man. I'm not one of your meek and mild women who'll put up with anything. I'm not one of your—"

"I tell you," said the skipper, "that the boy calls everybody his father. I daresay he's claimed another by this time."

Even as he spoke the handle turned, and the door opening a few inches disclosed the anxious face of Master Jones. Mrs. Hunt, catching the skipper's eye, pointed to it in an ecstasy of silent wrath. There was a breathless pause, broken at last by the boy.

"Mother!" he said, softly.

Mrs. Hunt stiffened in her chair and her arms fell by her side as she gazed in speechless amazement. Master Jones, opening the door a little wider, gently insinuated his small figure into the room. The skipper gave one glance at his wife and then, turning hastily away, put his hand over his mouth and, with protruding eyes, gazed out of the window.

"Mother, can I come in?" said the boy.

"Oh, Polly!" sighed the skipper. Mrs. Hunt strove to regain the utterance of which astonishment had deprived her.

"I . . . what . . . Joe . . . don't be a fool!"

"Yes, I've no doubt," said the skipper, theatrically. "Oh, Polly! Polly! Polly!"

He put his hand over his mouth again



"WHAT DID YOU SAY?"

and laughed silently, until his wife, coming behind him, took him by the shoulders and shook him violently.

"This," said the skipper, choking; "this is what . . . you've been worried about. . . . This is the secret what's——"

He broke off suddenly as his wife thrust him by main force into a chair, and standing over him with a fiery face dared him to say another word. Then she turned to the boy.

"What do you mean by calling me 'mother'?" she demanded. "I'm not your mother."

"Yes, you are," said Master Jones.

Mrs. Hunt eyed him in bewilderment, and then, roused to a sense of her position by a

renewed gurgling from the skipper's chair, set to work to try and thump that misguided man into a more serious frame of mind. Failing in this, she sat down and, after a futile struggle, began to laugh herself, and that so heartily that Master Jones, smiling sympathetically, closed the door, and came boldly into the room.

The statement, generally believed, that Captain Hunt and his wife adopted him, is incorrect, the skipper accounting for his continued presence in the house by the simple explanation that he had adopted them. An explanation which Mr. Samuel Brown, for one, finds quite easy of acceptance.