

THE TEST



PEBBLESEA was dull, and Mr. Frederick Dix, mate of the ketch *Starfish*, after a long and unsuccessful quest for amusement, returned to the harbour with an idea of forgetting his disappointment in sleep. The few shops in the High Street were closed, and the only entertainment offered at the taverns was contained in glass and pewter. The attitude of the landlord of the Pilots' Hope, where Mr. Dix had sought to enliven the proceedings by a song and dance, still rankled in his memory.

The skipper and the hands were still ashore and the ketch looked so lonely that the mate, thinking better of his idea of retiring, thrust his hands deep in his pockets and sauntered round the harbour. It was nearly dark, and the only other man visible stood at the edge of the quay gazing at the water. He stood for so long that the mate's easily aroused curiosity awoke, and, after twice passing, he edged up to him and ventured a remark on the fineness of the night.

"The night's all right," said the young man, gloomily.

"You're rather near the edge," said the mate, after a pause.

"I like being near the edge," was the reply.

Mr. Dix whistled softly and, glancing up at

the tall, white-faced young man before him, pushed his cap back and scratched his head.

"Ain't got anything on your mind, have you?" he inquired.

The young man groaned and turned away, and the mate, scenting a little excitement, took him gently by the coat-sleeve and led him from the brink. Sympathy begets confidence, and, within the next ten minutes, he had learned that Arthur Heard, rejected by Emma Smith, was contemplating the awful crime of self-destruction.

"Why, I've known 'er for seven years," said Mr. Heard; "seven years, and this is the end of it."

The mate shook his head.

"I told 'er I was coming straight away to drownd myself," pursued Mr. Heard. "My last words to 'er was, 'When you see my bloated corpse you'll be sorry.'"

"I expect she'll cry and carry on like anything," said the mate, politely.

The other turned and regarded him. "Why, you don't think I'm going to, do you?" he inquired, sharply. "Why, I wouldn't drownd myself for fifty blooming gells."

"But what did you tell her you were going to for, then?" demanded the puzzled mate.

"'Cos I thought it would upset 'er and make 'er give way," said the other, bitterly; "and all it done was to make 'er laugh as though she'd 'ave a fit."

"It would serve her jolly well right if you

did drown yourself," said Mr. Dix, judiciously. "It 'ud spoil her life for her."

"Ah, and it wouldn't spoil mine, I 'spose?" rejoined Mr. Heard, with ferocious sarcasm.

"How she will laugh when she sees you to-morrow," mused the mate. "Is she the sort of girl that would spread it about?"

Mr. Heard said that she was, and, forgetting for a moment his great love, referred to her partiality for gossip in the most scathing terms he could muster. The mate, averse to such a tame ending to a promising adventure, eyed him thoughtfully.

"Why not just go in and out again," he said, seductively, "and run to her house all dripping wet?"

"That would be clever, wouldn't it?" said the ungracious Mr. Heard. "Starting to commit suicide, and then thinking better of it. Why, I should be a bigger laughing-stock than ever."

"But suppose I saved you against your will?" breathed the tempter; "how would that be?"



"HERE! LET GO O' ME, D'YE HEAR? LET GO!"

"It would be all right if I cared to run the risk," said the other, "but I don't. I should look well struggling in the water while you was diving in the wrong places for me, shouldn't I?"

"I wasn't thinking of such a thing," said Mr. Dix, hastily; "twenty strokes is about my mark—with my clothes off. My idea was to pull you out."

Mr. Heard glanced at the black water a

dozen feet below. "How?" he inquired, shortly.

"Not here," said the mate. "Come to the end of the quay where the ground slopes to the water. It's shallow there, and you can tell her that you jumped in off here. She won't know the difference."

With an enthusiasm which Mr. Heard made no attempt to share, he led the way to the place indicated, and dilating upon its manifold advantages, urged him to go in at once and get it over.

"You couldn't have a better night for it," he said, briskly. "Why, it makes me feel like a dip myself to look at it."

Mr. Heard gave a surly grunt, and after testing the temperature of the water with his hand, slowly and reluctantly immersed one foot. Then, with sudden resolution, he waded in and, ducking his head, stood up gasping.

"Give yourself a good soaking while you're about it," said the delighted mate.

Mr. Heard ducked again, and once more emerging stumbled towards the bank.

"Pull me out," he cried, sharply.

Mr. Dix, smiling indulgently, extended his hands, which Mr. Heard seized with the proverbial grasp of a drowning man.

"All right, take it easy, don't get excited," said the smiling mate, "four foot of water won't hurt anyone. If— Here! Let go o' me, d'ye hear? Let go! If you don't let go I'll punch your head."

"You couldn't save me against my will without coming in," said Mr. Heard. "Now we can tell 'er you dived in off the quay and got me just as I was sinking for the last time. You'll be a hero."

The mate's remarks about heroes were mercifully cut short. He was three stone lighter than Mr. Heard, and standing on shelving ground. The latter's victory was so sudden that he overbalanced, and only a

commotion at the surface of the water showed where they had disappeared. Mr. Heard was first up and out, but almost immediately the figure of the mate, who had gone under with his mouth open, emerged from the water and crawled ashore.

"You—wait—till I—get my breath back," he gasped.

"There's no ill-feeling, I 'ope?" said Mr. Heard, anxiously. "I'll tell everybody of your bravery. Don't spoil everything for the sake of a little temper."

Mr. Dix stood up and clenched his fists, but at the spectacle of the dripping, forlorn figure before him his wrath vanished and he broke into a hearty laugh.

"Come on, mate," he said, clapping him on the back, "now let's go and find Emma. If she don't fall in love with you now she never will. My eye! you are a picture!"

He began to walk towards the town, and Mr. Heard, with his legs wide apart and his arms held stiffly from his body, waddled along beside him. Two little streamlets followed.

They walked along the quay in silence, and had nearly reached the end of it, when the figure of a man turned the corner of the houses and advanced at a shambling trot towards them.

"Old Smith!" said Mr. Heard, in a hasty whisper. "Now, be careful. Hold me tight."

The new-comer thankfully dropped into a walk as he saw them, and came to a standstill with a cry of astonishment as the light of a neighbouring lamp revealed their miserable condition.

"Wot, Arthur!" he exclaimed.

"Halloa," said Mr. Heard, drearly.

"The idea o' your being so sinful," said Mr. Smith, severely. "Emma told me wot you said, but I never thought as you'd got the pluck to go and do it. I'm surprised at you."

"I ain't done

it," said Mr. Heard, in a sullen voice; "nobody can drown themselves in comfort with a lot of interfering people about."

Mr. Smith turned and gazed at the mate, and a broad beam of admiration shone in his face as he grasped that gentleman's hand.

"Come into the 'ouse both of you and get some dry clothes," he said, warmly.

He thrust his strong, thick-set figure between them, and with a hand on each coat-collar propelled them in the direction of home. The mate muttered something about going back to his ship, but Mr. Smith refused to listen, and stopping at the door of a neat cottage, turned the handle and thrust his dripping charges over the threshold of a comfortable sitting-room.

A pleasant-faced woman of middle age and a pretty girl of twenty rose at their entrance, and a faint scream fell pleasantly upon the ears of Mr. Heard.

"Here he is," bawled Mr. Smith; "just saved at the last moment."

"What, two of them?" exclaimed Miss Smith, with a faint note of gratification in her voice. Her gaze fell on the mate, and she smiled approvingly.

"No; this one jumped in and saved 'im," said her father.

"Oh, Arthur!" said Miss Smith. "How could you be so wicked! I never dreamt you'd go and do such a thing—never! I didn't think you'd got it in you."



Mr. Heard grinned sheepishly. "I told you I would," he muttered.

"Don't stand talking here," said Mrs. Smith, gazing at the puddle which was growing in the centre of the carpet; "they'll catch cold. Take 'em upstairs and give 'em some dry clothes. And I'll bring some hot whisky and water up to 'em."

"Rum is best," said Mr. Smith, herding his charges and driving them up the small staircase. "Send young Joe for some. Send up three glasses."

They disappeared upstairs, and Joe appearing at that moment from the kitchen, was hastily sent off to the Blue Jay for the rum. A couple of curious neighbours helped him to carry it back, and, standing modestly just inside the door, ventured on a few skilled directions as to its preparation. After which, with an eye on Miss Smith, they stood and conversed, mostly in headshakes.

Stimulated by the rum and the energetic Mr. Smith, the men were not long in changing. Preceded by their host, they came down to the sitting-room again; Mr. Heard with as desperate and unrepentant an air as he could assume, and Mr. Dix trying to conceal his uneasiness by taking great interest in a suit of clothes three sizes too large for him.

"They was both as near drowned as could be," said Mr. Smith, looking round; "he ses Arthur fought like a madman to prevent 'imself from being saved."

"It was nothing, really," said the mate, in an almost inaudible voice, as he met Miss Smith's admiring gaze.

"Listen to 'im," said the delighted Mr. Smith; "all brave men are like that. That's wot's made us Englishmen wot we are."

"I don't suppose he knew who it was he was saving," said a voice from the door.

"I didn't want to be saved," said Mr. Heard, defiantly.

"Well, you can easy do it again, Arthur," said the same voice; "the dock won't run away."

Mr. Heard started and eyed the speaker with some malevolence.

"Tell us all about it," said Miss Smith, gazing at the mate, with her hands clasped. "Did you see him jump in?"

Mr. Dix shook his head and looked at Mr. Heard for guidance. "N—not exactly," he stammered; "I was just taking a stroll round the harbour before turning in, when all of a sudden I heard a cry for help——"

"No you didn't," broke in Mr. Heard, fiercely.

"Well, it sounded like it," said the mate, somewhat taken aback.

"I don't care what it sounded like," said the other. "I didn't say it. It was the last thing I should 'ave called out. I didn't want to be saved."

"P'raps it was Emma," said the voice from the door.

"Might ha' been," admitted the mate. "Well, when I heard it I ran to the edge and looked down at the water, and at first I couldn't see anything. Then I saw what I took to be a dog, but, knowing that dogs can't cry 'help!'——"

"Emma," corrected Mr. Heard.

"Emma," said the mate, "I just put my hands up and dived in. When I came to the surface I struck out for him and tried to seize him from behind, but before I could do so he put his arms round my neck like—like——"

"Like as if it was Emma's," suggested the voice by the door.

Miss Smith rose with majestic dignity and surveyed the speaker. "And who asked you in here, George Harris?" she inquired, coldly.

"I see the door open," stammered Mr. Harris—"I see the door open and I thought——"

"If you look again you'll see the handle," said Miss Smith.

Mr. Harris looked, and, opening the door with extreme care, melted slowly from a gaze too terrible for human endurance.

"We went down like a stone," continued the mate, as Miss Smith resumed her seat and smiled at him. "When we came up he tried to get away again. I think we went down again a few more times, but I ain't sure. Then we crawled out; leastways I did, and pulled him after me."

"He might have drowned you," said Miss Smith, with a severe glance at her unfortunate admirer. "And it's my belief that he tumbled in after all, and when you thought he was struggling to get away he was struggling to be saved. That's more like him."

"Well, they're all right now," said Mr. Smith, as Mr. Heard broke in with some vehemence. "And this chap's going to 'ave the Royal Society's medal for it, or I'll know the reason why."

"No, no," said the mate, hurriedly; "I wouldn't take it, I couldn't think of it."

"Take it or leave it," said Mr. Smith; "but I'm going to the police to try and get it for you. I know the inspector a bit."

"I can't take it," said the horrified mate; "it—it—besides, don't you see, if this isn't

kept quiet Mr. Heard will be locked up for trying to commit suicide."

"So he would be," said the other man from his post by the door; "he's quite right."

"And I'd sooner lose fifty medals," said Mr. Dix. "What's the good of me saving him for that?"

A murmur of admiration at the mate's extraordinary nobility of character jarred harshly on the ears of Mr. Heard. Most persistent of all was the voice of Miss Smith, and hardly able to endure things quietly, he sat and watched the tender glances which passed between her and Mr. Dix. Miss Smith, conscious at last of his regards, turned and looked at him.

"You could say you tumbled in, Arthur, and then he would get the medal," she said, softly.

"Say!" shouted the overwrought Mr. Heard. "Say I tum——"

Words failed him. He stood swaying and regarding the company for a moment, and then, flinging open the door, closed it behind him with a bang that made the house tremble.

The mate followed half an hour later, escorted to the ship by the entire Smith family. Fortified by the presence of Miss Smith, he pointed out the exact scene of the rescue without a tremor, and, when her father narrated the affair to the skipper, whom they found sitting on deck smoking a last pipe, listened undismayed to that astonished mariner's comments.

News of the mate's heroic conduct became general the next day, and work on the ketch was somewhat impeded in consequence. It became a point of honour with Mr. Heard's fellow-townsmen to allude to the affair as an accident, but the romantic nature of the transaction was well understood, and full credit given to Mr. Dix

for his self-denial in the matter of the medal. Small boys followed him in the street, and half Pebblesea knew when he paid a visit to the Smiths', and discussed his chances. Two nights afterwards, when he and Miss Smith went for a walk in the loneliest spot they could find, conversation turned almost entirely upon the overcrowded condition of the British Isles.

The *Starfish* was away for three weeks, but the little town no longer looked dull to the mate as she entered the harbour one evening and glided slowly towards her old berth. Emma Smith was waiting to see the ship come in, and his taste for all other amusements had temporarily disappeared.

For two or three days the course of true love ran perfectly smooth; then, like a dark shadow, the figure of Arthur Heard was thrown across its path. It haunted the quay, hung about the house, and cropped up unexpectedly in the most distant solitudes. It came up behind the mate one evening just as he left the ship and walked beside him in silence.

"Halloa," said the mate, at last.

"Halloa," said Mr. Heard. "Going to see Emma?"

"I'm going to see Miss Smith," said the mate.

Mr. Heard laughed; a forced, mirthless laugh.

"And we don't want you following us



about," said Mr. Dix, sharply. "If it'll ease your mind, and do you any good to know, you never had a chance. She told me so."

"I sha'n't follow you," said Mr. Heard; "it's your last evening, so you'd better make the most of it."

He turned on his heel, and the mate, pondering on his last words, went thoughtfully on to the house. Amid the distraction of pleasant society and a long walk, the matter passed from his mind, and he only remembered it at nine o'clock that evening as a knock sounded on the door and the sallow face of Mr. Heard was thrust into the room.

"Good evening all," said the intruder.

"Evening, Arthur," said Mr. Smith, affably.

Mr. Heard with a melancholy countenance entered the room and closed the door gently behind him. Then he coughed slightly and shook his head.

"Anything the matter, Arthur?" inquired Mr. Smith, somewhat disturbed by these manifestations.

"I've got something on my mind," said Mr. Heard, with a diabolical glance at the mate—"something wot's been worrying me for a long time. I've been deceiving you."

"That was always your failing, Arthur—deceitfulness," said Mrs. Smith. "I remember——"

"We've both been deceiving you," interrupted Mr. Heard, loudly. "I didn't jump into the harbour the other night, and I didn't tumble in, and Mr. Fred Dix didn't jump in after me; we just went to the end of the harbour and walked in and wetted ourselves."

There was a moment's intense silence and all eyes turned on the mate. The latter met them boldly.

"It's a habit o' mine to walk into the water and spoil my clothes for the sake of people I've never met before," he said, with a laugh.

"For shame, Arthur!" said Mr. Smith, with a huge sigh of relief.

"'Ow can you?" said Mrs. Smith.

"Arthur's been asleep since then," said the mate, still smiling. "All the same, the next time he jumps in he can get out by himself."

Mr. Heard, raising his voice, entered into a minute description of the affair, but in vain. Mr. Smith, rising to his feet, denounced his ingratitude in language which was seldom allowed to pass unchallenged in the presence of his wife, while that lady contributed examples of deceitfulness in the past of Mr. Heard, which he strove in vain to refute. Meanwhile, her daughter patted the mate's hand.

"It's a bit too thin, Arthur," said the latter, with a mocking smile; "try something better next time."

"Very well," said Mr. Heard, in quieter tones; "I dare you to come along to the harbour and jump in, just as you are, where you said you jumped in after me. They'll soon see who's telling the truth."

"He'll do that," said Mr. Smith, with conviction.

For a fraction of a second Mr. Dix hesitated, then, with a steady glance at Miss Smith, he sprang to his feet and accepted the challenge. Mrs. Smith besought him not to be foolish, and, with an idea of dissuading him, told him a slanderous anecdote concerning Mr. Heard's aunt. Her daughter gazed at the mate with proud confidence, and, taking his arm, bade her mother to get some dry clothes ready and led the way to the harbour.

The night was fine but dark, and a chill breeze blew up from the sea. Twice the hapless mate thought of backing out, but a glance at Miss Smith's profile and the tender pressure of her arm deterred him. The tide was running out, and he had a faint hope that he might keep afloat long enough to be washed ashore alive. He talked rapidly, and his laugh rang across the water. Arrived at the spot they stopped, and Miss Smith looking down into the darkness was unable to repress a shiver.

"Be careful, Fred," she said, laying her hand upon his arm.

The mate looked at her oddly. "All right," he said, gaily, "I'll be out almost before I'm in. You run back to the house and help your mother get the dry clothes ready for me."

His tones were so confident, and his laugh so buoyant, that Mr. Heard, who had been fully expecting him to withdraw from the affair, began to feel that he had under-rated his swimming powers. "Just jumping in and swimming out again is not quite the same as saving a drowning man," he said, with a sneer.

In a flash the mate saw a chance of escape. "Why, there's no satisfying you," he said, slowly. "If I do go in I can see that you won't own up that you've been lying."

"He'll 'ave to," said Mr. Smith, who, having made up his mind for a little excitement, was in no mind to lose it.

"I don't believe he would," said the mate. "Look here!" he said, suddenly, as he laid an affectionate arm on the old man's shoulder. "I know what we'll do."

"Well?" said Mr. Smith.

"I'll save *you*," said the mate, with a smile of great relief.

"Save *me*?" said the puzzled Mr. Smith, as his daughter uttered a faint cry.

"Just as I saved him," said the other, nodding. "You jump in, and after you've sunk twice—same as he did—I'll dive in and save you. At any rate I'll do my best; I promise you I won't come ashore without you."

Mr. Smith hastily flung off the encircling arm and retired a few paces inland. "'Ave you—ever been—in a lunatic asylum at any time?" he inquired, as soon as he could speak.

"No," said the mate, gravely.

"Neither 'ave I," said Mr. Smith; "and, what's more, I'm not going."

"He couldn't speak fairer than that, Arthur," said Mr. Smith, dispassionately, as he came forward again.

"But I tell you he can't swim," protested Mr. Heard, "not properly. He didn't swim last time; I told you so."

"Never mind; we know what you said," retorted the mate. "All you've got to do is to jump in and I'll follow and save you—same as I did the other night."

"Go on, Arthur," said Mr. Smith, encouragingly.

"I tell you he can't swim," repeated Mr. Heard, passionately. "I should be drowned before your eyes."

"Rubbish," said Mr. Smith. "Why, I believe you're afraid."

"I should be drowned, I tell you," said



"'I TELL YOU HE CAN'T SWIM,' REPEATED MR. HEARD, PASSIONATELY."

He took a deep breath and stood simmering. Miss Smith came forward and, with a smothered giggle, took the mate's arm and squeezed it.

"It'll have to be Arthur again, then," said the latter, in a resigned voice.

"*Me*?" cried Mr. Heard, with a start.

"Yes, you!" said the mate, in a decided voice. "After what you said just now I'm not going in without saving somebody. It would be no good. Come on, in you go."

Mr. Heard. "He wouldn't come in after me."

"Yes, he would," said Mr. Smith, passing a muscular arm round the mate's waist; "'cos the moment you're overboard I'll drop 'im in. Are you ready?"

He stood embracing the mate and waiting, but Mr. Heard, with an infuriated exclamation, walked away. A parting glance showed him that the old man had released the mate, and that the latter was now embracing Miss Smith.