

THE Boatwain's Mate

By W. W. JACOBS

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MR. GEORGE BENN, retired boatwain, sighed noisily, and with a despondent gesture turned to the door and stood with the handle in his hand; Mrs. Waters, sitting behind the tiny bar in a tall Windsor chair, eyed him with some heat.

"My feelings 'll never change," said the boatwain.

"Nor mine either," said the landlady sharply. "It's a strange thing, Mr. Benn, but you always ask me to marry you after the third mug."

"It's only to get my courage up," pleaded the boatwain. "Next time I'll do it afore I have a drop; that'll prove to you I'm in earnest."

He stopped outside and closed the door before the landlady could make a selection from the many retorts that crowded to her lips. After the cool bar, with its smell of damp sawdust, the road seemed hot and dusty, but the boatwain, a prey to gloom natural to a man whose hand has been refused five times in a fortnight, walked on unheeding. His steps lagged, but his brain was active.

He walked for two miles deep in thought, and then coming to a shady bank took a seat upon an inviting piece of turf and lit his pipe. The heat and the drowsy hum of bees made him nod. His pipe hung from the corner of his mouth, and his eyes closed.

He opened them at the sound of approaching footsteps, and, feeling in his pocket for matches, gazed lazily at the intruder. He saw a tall man carrying a small bundle over his shoulder, and in the erect carriage, the keen eyes and bronzed face had little difficulty in detecting the old soldier.

The stranger stopped as he reached the seated boatwain and eyed him pleasantly.

"Got a pipe o' baccy, mate?" he inquired.

The boatwain handed him the small metal box in which he kept that luxury.

"Lobster, ain't you?" he said affably. The tall man nodded. "Was," he replied. "Now I'm my own commander in chief."

"Pading?" suggested the boatwain, taking the box from him and refilling his pipe.

The other nodded, and with the air of one disposed to conversation dropped his bundle in the ditch and took a seat beside him. "I've got plenty of time," he remarked.

Mr. Benn nodded, and for awhile smoked on in silence. A dim idea which had been in his mind for some time began to clarify. He stole a glance at his companion—a man of about thirty-eight, clear eyes, with humorous wrinkles at the corners, a heavy mustache and a cheerful expression more than tinged with recklessness.

"Ain't over and above fond o' work?" suggested the boatwain, when he had finished his inspection.

"I love it," said the other, blowing a cloud of smoke in the air, "but we can't have all we want in this world; it wouldn't be good for us."

The boatwain thought of Mrs. Waters and sighed. Then he rattled his pocket.

"Would art a quid be any good to you?" he inquired.

"Look here," began the soldier, "just because I asked you for a pipe o' baccy—"

"No offense," said the other quickly. "I mean if you earned it."

The soldier nodded and took his pipe from his mouth. "Gardening and windows?" he hazarded, with a shrug of his shoulders.

The boatwain shook his head.

"Scrubbing, p'raps?" said the soldier, with a sigh of resignation. "Last house I scrubbed out I did it so thoroughly they accused me of pouching the soap. Hang 'em!"

"And you didn't?" queried the boatwain, eying him keenly.

The soldier rose and, knocking the ashes out of his pipe, gazed at him dazedly. "I can't give it back to you," he said slowly, "because I've smoked some of it, and I can't pay you for it because I've only got twopence, and that I want for myself. So long, mate, and next time a poor wretch asks you for a pipe be civil."

"I never see such a man for taking offense in all my born days," expostulated the boatwain. "I 'ad my reasons for that remark, mate. Good reasons they was."

The soldier grunted and, stooping, picked up his bundle.

"I spoke of art a sovereign just now," continued the boatwain, impressively, "and when I tell you that I offer it to you to do a bit o' burgling you'll see 'ow necessary it is for me to be certain of your honesty."

"Burgling?" gasped the astonished soldier. "Honesty? 'Struth, are you drunk or am I?"

"Meaning," said the boatwain, waving the imputation away with his hand, "for you to pretend to be a burglar."

"We're both drunk, that's what it is," said the other resignedly.

The boatwain flinched. "If you don't agree, mum's the word an' no 'arm done," he said, holding out his hand.

"Mum's the word," said the soldier, taking it. "My name's Ned Travers, and, barring cells for a spree now and

again, there's nothing against it. Mind that."

"Might 'appen to anybody," said Mr. Benn soothingly. "You fill your pipe and don't go chucking good tobacco away ag'in."

Mr. Travers took the offered box and, with economy born of adversity, stooped and filled up first with the plug he had thrown away. Then he resumed his seat and, leaning back luxuriously, bade the other "fire away."

"I ain't got it all shipshape and proper yet," said Mr. Benn slowly, "but it's in my mind's eye. It's been there off and on like for some time."

He lit his pipe again and gazed fixedly at the opposite hedge. "Two miles from here, where I live," he said, after several vigorous puffs, "there's a little public 'ouse called the Beehive, kept by a lady wot I've got my eye on."

The soldier sat up.

"She won't 'ave me," said the boatwain with an air of mild surprise.

The soldier leaned back again.

"She's a lone widder," continued Mr. Benn, shaking his head, "and the Beehive is in a lonely place. It's right through the village, and the nearest house is art a mile off."

"Silly place for a pub," commented Mr. Travers.

"I've been telling her 'ow unsafe it is," said the boatwain. "I've been telling her that she wants a man to protect her, and she only laughs at me. She don't believe it, d'ye see? Likewise I'm a small man—small, but stiff. She likes tall men."

"Most women do," said Mr. Travers, sitting upright and instinctively twisting his mustache. "When I was in the ranks—"

"My idea is," continued the boatwain, slightly raising his voice, "to kill two birds with one stone—prove to her that she does want being protected and that I'm the man to protect her. D'ye take my meaning, mate?"

The soldier reached out a hand and felt the other's biceps. "Like a lump o' wood," he said approvingly.

"My opinion is," said the boatwain with a faint smirk, "that she loves me without knowing it."

"They often do," said Mr. Travers, with a grave shake of his head.

"Consequently I don't want 'er to be disappointed," said the other.

"It does you credit," remarked Mr. Travers.

"I've got a good head," said Mr. Benn, "else I shouldn't 'ave got my rating as boatwain as soon as I did, and I've been turning it over in my mind over and over ag'in till my brain pan fair aches with it. Now if you do what I want you to tonight and it comes off all right, I'll make it a quid."

"Go on, Vanderbilt," said Mr. Travers. "I'm listening."

The boatwain gazed at him fixedly. "You meet me 'ere in this spot at 11 o'clock tonight," he said solemnly, "and I'll take you to her 'ouse and put you through a little winder I know of. You goes upstairs and alarms her and she screams for help. I'm watching the house faithful-like and hear 'er scream. I dashes in at the winder, knocks you down and rescues her. D'ye see?"

"I hear," corrected Mr. Travers coldly.

"She elines to me," continued the boatwain with a rapt expression of face, "in her gratitude, and, proud of my strength and pluck, she marries me."

"An' I get a five years' honeymoon," said the soldier.

The boatwain shook his head and patted the other's shoulder. "In the excitement of the moment you spring up and escape," he said with a kindly smile. "I've thought it all out. You can run much faster than I can. Anyways, you will. The nearest 'ouse is art a mile off, as I said, and her servant is staying till tomorrow at 'er mother's, ten miles away."

Mr. Travers rose to his feet and stretched himself. "Time I was todding," he said with a yawn. "Thanks for amusing me, mate."

"You won't do it?" said the boatwain, eying him with much concern.

"I'm hanged if I do," said the soldier emphatically. "Accidents will happen and then where should I be?"

"If they did," said the boatwain, "I'd own up and clear you."

"You might," said Mr. Travers, "and then again you mightn't. So long, mate."

"I'll make it two quid," said the boatwain, trembling with eagerness. "I've took a fancy to you. You're the man for the job."

The soldier, adjusting his bundle, glanced at him over his shoulder.

"Thankee," he said with mock gratitude.

"Look 'ere," said the boatwain,

springing up and catching him by the sleeve, "I'll give it to you in writing. Come, you ain't faint-hearted? Why, a bluejacket 'ud do it for the fun o' the thing. If I give it to you in writing and there should be an accident, it's worse for me than it is for you, ain't it?"

Mr. Travers hesitated and, pushing his cap back, scratched his head.

"I gives you the two quid afore you go into the 'ouse," continued the boatwain, hastily following up the impression he had made. "I'd give 'em to you now if I'd got 'em with me. That's my confidence in you. I like the look of you. Soldier or sailor; when there is a man's work to be done give 'em to me afore anybody."

The soldier seated himself again and let his bundle fall to the ground. "Go on," he said slowly. "Write it out fair and square and sign it and I'm your man."

The boatwain clapped him on the shoulder and produced a bundle of papers from his pocket. "There's letters there with my name and address o' 'em," he said. "It's all fair, square and aboveboard. When you've cast your eyes over them, I'll give you the writing."

Mr. Travers took them and, relighting his pipe, smoked in silence, with various side glances at his companion as that enthusiast sucked his pencil and sat twisting in the agonies of composition. The document finished—after several failures had been retrieved and burnt by the careful Mr. Travers—the boatwain heaved a sigh of relief and, handing it over to him, leaned back with a complacent air while he read it.

"Seems all right," said the soldier, folding it up and putting it in his waistcoat pocket. "I'll be here at 11 tonight."

"Eleven it is," said the boatwain briskly. "And, between pals, here's art a dollar to go on with."

He patted him on the shoulder again, and with a caution to keep out of sight as much as possible till night walked slowly home. His step was light, but he carried a face in which care and exultation were strangely mingled.

By 10 o'clock that night care was in the ascendant, and by 11, when he discerned the red glow of Mr. Travers' pipe set as a beacon against a dark background of hedge, the boatwain was ready to curse his inventive powers. Mr. Travers greeted him cheerily and, honestly attributing the fact to good food and a couple of pints of beer he had had since the boatwain left him, said that he was ready for anything.

Mr. Benn grunted and led the way in silence. There was no moon, but the night was clear, and Mr. Travers, after one or two light-hearted attempts at conversation, abandoned the effort and fell to whistling softly instead.

Except for one lighted window the village slept in darkness, but the boatwain, who had been walking with the stealth of a red Indian on the warpath, breathed more freely after they had left it behind. A renewal of his antics a little farther on apprised Mr. Travers that they were approaching their destination, and a minute or two later they came to a small inn standing just off the road. "All shut up and Mrs. Waters abed, bless her," whispered the boatwain after walking carefully round the house. "How do you feel?"

"I'm all right," said Mr. Travers. "I feel as if I'd been burgling all my life. How do you feel?"

"Nervous," said Mr. Benn, pausing under a small window at the rear of the house. "This is the one."

Mr. Travers stepped back a few paces and gazed up at the house. All was still. For a few moments he stood listening and then rejoined the boatwain.

"Goodby, mate," he said, hoisting himself on to the sill. "Death or victory."

The boatwain whispered and thrust a couple of sovereigns into his hand. "Take your time; there's no hurry," he muttered. "I want to put myself together. Frighten 'er enough, but not too much. When she screams I'll come in."

Mr. Travers slipped inside and then thrust his head out of the window. "Won't she think it funny you should be so handy?" he inquired.

"No; it's my faithful 'art," said the boatwain, "keeping watch over her every night; that's the ticket. She won't know no better."

Mr. Travers grinned and removing his boots handed them out to the other. "We don't want her to hear me till I'm upstairs," he whispered. "Put 'em outside, handy for me to pick up."

The boatwain obeyed, and Mr. Travers, who was by no means a good hand at darning socks, slithered as he trod lightly over a stone floor. Then, following the instructions of Mr. Benn, he made his way to the stairs and mounted noiselessly.

But for a slight stumble halfway up his progress was very creditable for an amateur. He paused and listened and, all being silent, made his way to the landing and stopped outside a door. Despite himself his heart was beating faster than usual.

He pushed the door open slowly and started as it creaked. Nothing happening, he pushed again and, standing just inside, saw by a small ever silhouetted against the casement that he was in a bedroom. He listened for the sound of breathing, but in vain.

"Quiet sleeper," he reflected, "or perhaps it is an empty room. Now, I wonder whether—"

The sound of an opening door made him start violently, and he stood still, scarcely breathing, with his ears on the alert. A light shone on the landing, and, peeping around the door, he saw a woman coming along the corridor—

younger and better looking woman than he had expected to see. In one hand she held aloft a candle, in the other she bore a double-barreled gun. Mr. Travers withdrew into the room and, as the light came nearer, slipped into a big cupboard by the side of the fireplace and, standing bolt upright, waited. The light came into the room. "Must have been my fancy," said a pleasant voice.

"Bless her!" smiled Mr. Travers. His trained ear recognized the sound of creaking triggers. The next moment a heavy body bumped against the door of the cupboard and the key turned in the lock.

"Got you!" said the voice triumphantly. "Keep still. If you try and break out I shall shoot you."

"All right," said Mr. Travers hastily. "I won't move."

"Better not," said the voice. "Mind, I've got a gun pointing straight at you."

"Point it downward, there's a good girl," said Mr. Travers earnestly, "and take your finger off the trigger. If anything happened to me you'd never forgive yourself."

"It's all right so long as you don't move," said the voice, "and I'm not a girl." It added sternly.

"Yes, you are," said the prisoner. "I saw you. I thought it was an angel at first. I saw your little bare feet and—"

A faint scream interrupted him.

"You'll catch cold," urged Mr. Travers.

"Don't you trouble about me," said the voice tartly.

"I won't give any trouble," said Mr. Travers, who began to think it was time for the boatwain to appear on the scene. "Why don't you call for help? I'll go like a lamb."

"I don't want your advice," was the reply. "I know what to do. Now, don't you try and break out. I'm going to fire one barrel out of the window, but I've got the other one for you if you move."

"My dear girl," protested the horrified Mr. Travers, "you'll alarm the neighborhood."

"Just what I want to do," said the voice. "Keep still, mind."

Mr. Travers hesitated. The game was up, and it was clear that in any case the stratagem of the ingenious Mr. Benn would have to be disclosed.

"Stop!" he said earnestly. "Don't do anything rash. I'm not a burglar; I'm doing this for a friend of yours—Mr. Benn."

"What?" said an amazed voice.

"True as I stand here," asserted Mr. Travers. "Here, here's my instructions. I'll put 'em under the door, and if you go to the back window you'll see him in the garden waiting."

He rustled the paper under the door, and it was at once snatched from his fingers. He regained an upright position and stood listening to the startled and indignant exclamations of his jailer as she read the boatwain's permit.

This is to give notice that I, George Benn, being of sound mind and body, have told Ned Travers to pretend to be a burglar at Mrs. Waters'. He ain't a burglar, and I shall be outside all the time. It's all aboveboard and shipshape. (Signed) GEORGE BENN.

"Sound mind—aboveboard—shipshape," repeated a dazed voice. "Where is he?"

"Out at the back," replied Mr. Travers. "If you go to the window you can see him. Now, do put something round your shoulders, there's a good girl."

There was no reply, but a board creaked. He waited for what seemed a long time, and then the board creaked again.

"Did you see him?" he inquired.

"I did," was the sharp reply. "You both ought to be ashamed of yourselves. You ought to be punished."

"There is a clothes peg sticking into the back of my head," remarked Mr. Travers. "What are you going to do?"

"There was no reply."

"What are you going to do?" repeated Mr. Travers somewhat uneasily. "You look too nice to do anything hard—leastways so far as I can judge through this crack."

There was a smothered exclamation and then sounds of somebody moving hastily about the room and the swish of clothing hastily donned.

"You ought to have done it before," commented the thoughtful Mr. Travers. "It's enough to give you your death of cold."

"Mind your business!" said the voice sharply. "Now, if I let you out will you promise to do exactly as I tell you?"

"Honor bright!" said Mr. Travers fervently.

"I'm going to give Mr. Benn a lesson he won't forget," proceeded the other grimly. "I'm going to fire off this gun and then run down and tell him I've killed you."

"Eh?" said the amazed Mr. Travers.

"Oh, Lord!"

"Hush! Stop that laughing," commanded the voice. "He'll hear you. Be quiet!"

The key turned in the lock, and Mr. Travers, stepping forth, clasped his hand over his mouth and endeavored to obey. Mrs. Waters, stepping back with the gun ready, scrutinized him closely.

"Come on to the landing," said Mr. Travers eagerly. "We don't want anybody else to hear. Fire into this!"

He snatched a patchwork rug from the floor and stuck it up against the balusters.

"You stay here," said Mrs. Waters. He nodded.

She pointed the gun at the hearth rug, the walls shook with the explosion, and, with a shriek that set Mr. Travers' teeth on edge, she rushed downstairs and, drawing back the bolts of the back door, tottered outside and into the arms of the agitated balusters.

"Oh, oh, oh!" she cried.

"What—what's the matter?" gasped the boatwain.

The widow struggled in his arms. "A burglar," she said in a rearse whisper. "But it's all right. I've killed him."

"Kill!"—stuttered the other. "Kill—Killed him?"

Mrs. Waters nodded and released herself. "First shot," she said, with a satisfied air.

The boatwain wrung his hands. "Good heavens!" he said, moving slowly toward the door. "Poor fellow!"

"Come back," said the widow, tugging at his coat.

"I was—was going to see—whether I could do anything for 'im," quavered the boatwain. "Poor fellow?"

"You stay where you are," commanded Mrs. Waters. "I don't want any witnesses. I don't want this house to have a bad name. I'm going to keep it quiet."

"Quiet?" said the shaking boatwain. "How?"

"First thing to do," said the widow thoughtfully, "is to get rid of the body. I'll bury him in the garden, I think. There's a very good bit of ground behind those potatoes. You'll find the spade in the tool house."

The horrified Mr. Benn stood stock still regarding her.

"While you're digging the grave," continued Mrs. Waters calmly, "I'll go in and clean up the mess."

The boatwain reeled and then fumbled with trembling fingers at his collar.

Like a man in a dream he stood watching as she ran to the tool house and returned with a spade and pick; like a man in a dream he followed her on to the garden.

"Be careful," she said sharply; "you're treading down my potatoes."

The boatwain stopped dead and stared at her. Apparently unconscious of his gaze, she began to pace out the measurements and then, placing the tools in his hands, urged him to lose no time.

"I'll bring him down when you're gone," she said, looking toward the house.

The boatwain wiped his damp brow with the back of his hand. "How are you going to get it downstairs?" he breathed.

"Drag it!" said Mrs. Waters briefly. "Suppose he ain't dead?" said the boatwain, with a gleam of hope.

"Fiddlesticks!" said Mrs. Waters. "Do you think I don't know? Now, don't waste time talking, and mind you dig it deep. I'll put a few cabbagees on top afterward. I've got more than I want."

She re-entered the house and ran lightly upstairs. The candle was still alight, and the gun was leaning against the bedpost, but the visitor had disappeared. Conscious of an odd feeling of disappointment, she looked round the empty room.

"Come and look at him," entreated a voice, and she turned and beheld the amused countenance of her late prisoner at the door.

"I've been watching from the back window," he said, nodding. "You're a wonder; that's what you are. Come and look at him."

Mrs. Waters followed and, leaning out of the window, watched with simple pleasure the efforts of the amateur sexton. Mr. Benn was digging like one possessed, only pausing at intervals to straighten his back and to cast a fateful glance around him. The only thing that marred her pleasure was the behavior of Mr. Travers, who was struggling for a place with all the fervor of a citizen at the lord mayor's show.

"Get back!" she said in a fierce whisper. "He'll see you!"

Mr. Travers with obvious reluctance obeyed just as the victim looked up. "Is that you, Mrs. Waters?" inquired the boatwain fearfully.

"Yes, of course it is," snapped the widow. "Who else should it be, do you think? Go on! What are you stopping for?"

Mr. Benn's breathing as he bent to his task again was distinctly audible. The head of Mr. Travers raised itself once more alongside the widow's. For a long time they watched in silence.

"Won't you come down here, Mrs. Waters?" called the boatwain, looking up so suddenly that Mr. Travers' head bumped painfully against the side of the window. "It's a bit creepy all alone."

"I'm all right," said Mrs. Waters. "I keep fancying there's something dodging behind them currant bushes," pursued the unfortunate Mr. Benn hoarsely. "How you can stay there alone I can't think. I thought I saw something looking over your shoulder just now. Fancy if it came creeping up behind and caught hold of you!"

The widow gave a sudden faint scream.

"If you do that again!"—she said, turning fiercely on Mr. Travers. "He put it into my head," said the culprit humbly. "I should never have thought of such a thing by myself. I'm one of the quietest and best behaved."

"Make haste, Mr. Benn," said the widow, turning to the window again. "I've got a lot to do when you've finished."

The boatwain groaned and fell to digging again, and Mrs. Waters, after watching a little while longer, gave Mr. Travers some pointed instructions about the window and went down to the garden again.

"That'll do, I think," she said, stepping into the hole and regarding it critically. "Now you'd better go straight off home, and mind, not a word to a soul about this."

She put her hand on his shoulder and, noticing with pleasure that he shuddered at her touch, led the way to the gate. The boatwain paused for a moment, as though about to

speak, and then, apparently thinking better of it, bade her goodbye in a hoarse voice and walked feebly up the road. Mrs. Waters stood watching until his steps died away in the distance and then, returning to the garden, took up the spade and stood regarding with some dismay the mountainous result of his industry. Mr. Travers, who was standing just inside the back door, joined her.

"Let me," he said gallantly.

"The day was breaking as he finished his task. The clean, sweet air and the exercise had given him an appetite to which the smell of cooking bacon and hot coffee that proceeded from the house had set a sharper edge. He took his coat from a bush and put it on. Mrs. Waters appeared at the door.

"You had better come in and have some breakfast before you go," she said brusquely; "there's no more sleep for me now."

Mr. Travers obeyed with alacrity and after a satisfying wash in the

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