

**THE SKIPPER'S WOOING:
AND THE BROWN MAN'S
SERVANT. PP.7-186**

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CHAPTER I.

THE schooner *Seamew*, of London, Captain Wilson master and owner, had just finished loading at Northfleet with cement for Brittlesea. Every inch of space was packed. Cement, exuded from the cracks, imparted to the hairy faces of honest seamen a ghastly appearance sadly out of keeping with their characters, and even took its place, disguised as thickening, among the multiple ingredients of a sea-pie that was cooking for dinner.

It was not until the decks were washed and the little schooner was once more presentable that the mate gave a thought to his own toilet. It was a fine, warm morning in May, and some of the cargo had got into his hair and settled in streaks on his hot, good-humored face. The boy had brought aft a wooden bucket filled with fair water, and placed upon the hatch by its side a piece of yellow soap and a towel. Upon these preparations the mate smiled pleasantly, and throwing off his shirt and

girding his loins with his braces, he bent over and with much zestful splashing began his ablutions.

Twice did the ministering angel, who was not of an age to be in any great concern about his own toilet, change the water before the mate was satisfied; after which the latter, his face and neck aglow with friction, descended to the cabin for a change of raiment.

He did not appear on deck again until after dinner, which, in the absence of the skipper, he ate alone. The men, who had also dined, were lounging forward, smoking, and the mate, having filled his own pipe, sat down by himself and smoked in silence.

"I'm keeping the skipper's dinner 'ot in a small sorsepan, sir," said the cook, thrusting his head out of the galley.

"All right," said the mate.

"It's a funny thing where the skipper gets to these times," said the cook, addressing nobody in particular, but regarding the mate out of the corner of his eye.

"Very rum," said the mate, who was affably inclined just then.

The cook came out of the galley, and, wiping his wet hands on his dirty canvas trousers, drew near and gazed in a troubled fashion ashore.

"'E's the best cap'n I ever sailed under," he said slowly. "Ain't it struck you, sir, he's been worried like these 'ere last few trips? I told 'im as 'e was goin' ashore as there was sea-pie for dinner, and 'e

ses, 'All right, Joe,' 'e ses, just as if I'd said boiled beef and taters, or fine mornin', sir, or anythink like that!"

The mate shook his head, blew out a cloud of smoke and watched it lazily as it disappeared.

"It strikes me as 'ow 'e's arter fresh cargo or somethin'," said a stout old seaman who had joined the cook. "Look 'ow 'e's dressing nowadays! Why, the cap'n of a steamer ain't smarter!"

"Not so smart, Sam," said the remaining seaman, who, encouraged by the peaceful aspect of the mate had also drawn near. "I don't think it's cargo he's after, though—cement pays all right."

"It *ain't* cargo," said a small but confident voice.

"You clear out!" said old Sam. "A boy o' your age shovin' his spoke in when 'is elders is talkin'! What next, I wonder!"

"Where am I to clear to? I'm my own end of the ship anyway," said the youth vindictively.

The men started to move, but it was too late. The mate's latent sense of discipline was roused and he jumped up in a fury.

"My——!" he said, "if there ain't the whole blasted ship's company aft—every man Jack of 'em! Come down in the cabin, gentlemen, come down and have a drop of Hollands and a cigar apiece. All the riffraff o' the foc'sle sitting aft and prattling about the skipper like a parcel o' washerwomen. And smoking, by——! *smoking!* Well, when the skipper comes aboard he'll have to get a fresh crew or a fresh mate. I'm sick of it. Why, it might be a

barge for all the discipline that's kept! The boy's the only sailor among you."

He strode furiously up and down the deck; the cook disappeared into the galley, and the two seamen began to bustle about forward. The small expert who had raised the storm, by no means desirous of being caught in the tail of it, put his pipe in his pocket and looked round for a job.

"Come here!" said the mate sternly.

The boy came towards him.

"What was that you were saying about the skipper?" demanded the other.

"I said it wasn't cargo he was after," said Henry.

"Oh, a lot you know about it!" said the mate.

Henry scratched his leg, but said nothing.

"A lot you know about it!" repeated the mate in rather a disappointed tone.

Henry scratched the other leg.

"Don't let me hear you talking about your superior officer's affairs again," said the mate sharply. "Mind that!"

"No, sir," said the boy humbly. "It ain't my business, o' course."

"What isn't your business?" said the mate carelessly. "His," said Henry.

The mate turned away seething, and hearing a chuckle from the galley, went over there and stared at the cook—a wretched being with no control at all over his feelings—for quite five minutes. In that short space of time he discovered that the galley was the dirtiest hole under the sun and the cook the

uncleanest person that ever handled food. He imparted his discoveries to the cook, and after reducing him to a state of perspiring imbecility, turned round and rated the men again. Having charged them with insolence when they replied, and with sulkiness when they kept silent, he went below, having secured a complete victory, and the incensed seamen, after making sure that he had no intention of returning, went towards Henry to find fault with *him*.

"If you was my boy," said Sam, breathing heavily, "I'd thrash you to within a inch of your life."

"If I was your boy I should drown myself," said Henry very positively.

Henry's father had frequently had occasion to remark that his son favored his mother, and his mother possessed a tongue which was famed throughout Wapping, and obtained honorable mention in distant Limehouse.

"You can't expect discipline aboard a ship where the skipper won't let you 'it the boy," said Dick moodily. "It's bad for 'im too."

"Don't you worry about me, my lads," said Henry with offensive patronage. "I can take care of myself all right. You ain't seen *me* come aboard so drunk that I've tried to get down the foc'sle without shoving the scuttle back. You never knew *me* to buy a bundle o' forged pawn-tickets. You never——"

"Listen to 'im," said Sam, growing purple. "I'll be 'ung for 'im yet."

"If you ain't, I will," growled Dick, with whom the matter of the pawn-tickets was a sore subject.