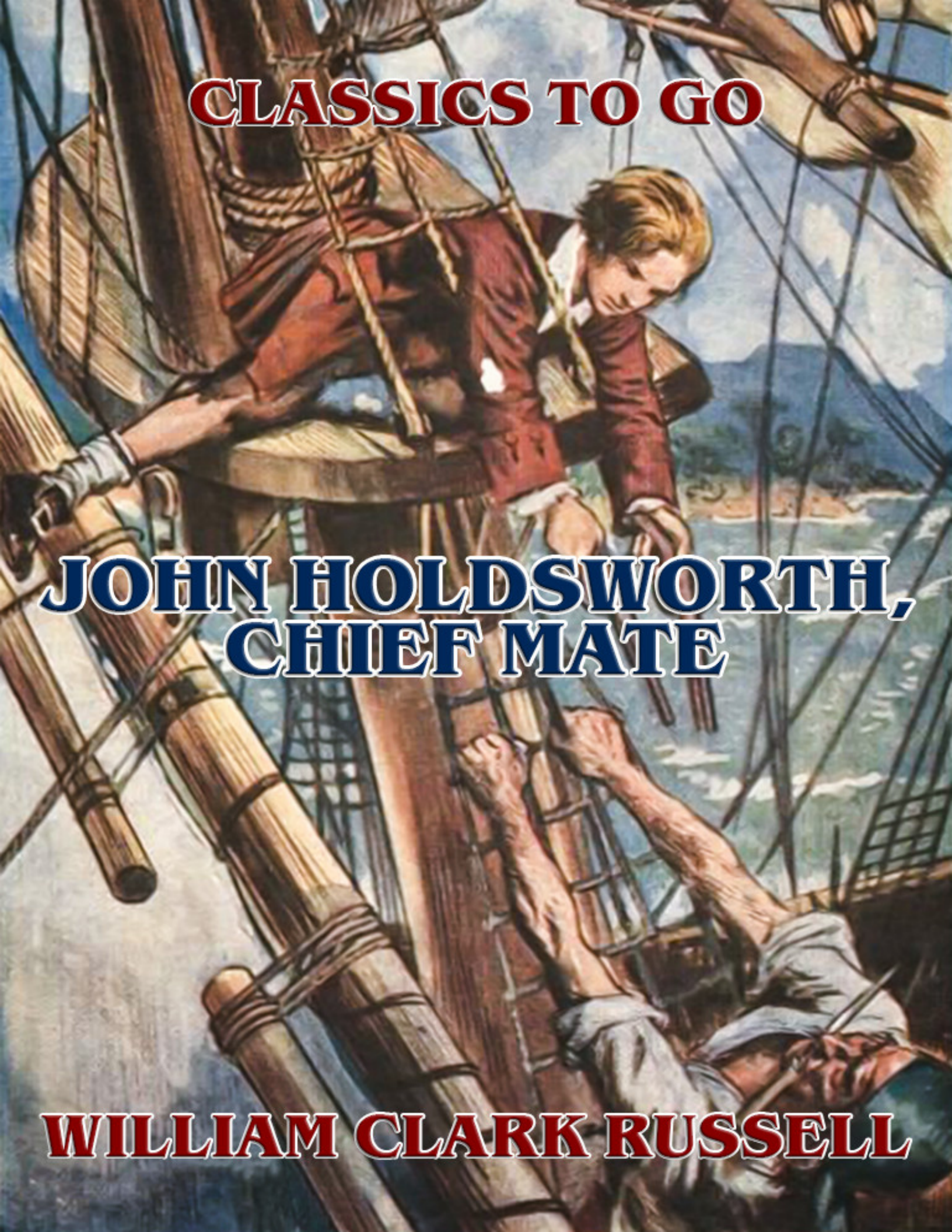


An illustration of a man with blonde hair, wearing a red jacket and white shirt, climbing or working on the rigging of a sailing ship. The ship's masts and ropes are prominent, and the sea is visible in the background. The text is overlaid on the image.

CLASSICS TO GO

**JOHN HOLDSWORTH,
CHIEF MATE**

WILLIAM CLARK RUSSELL

JOHN HOLDSWORTH, CHIEF MATE

William Clark Russell

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CHAPTER I. SOUTHBOURNE.

In a period of English history which graybeards call the good old times—the fine old times; that is to say, when Parliament was horribly corrupt, and the Poor Laws as barbarous as the Inquisition; when it took fifteen hours to go from London to Dover; and when at least one-half of the conveniences which we now very reasonably call the necessities of life had no existence—Southbourne was a small straggling village, and, by reason of the quaint and primitive aspect of its houses, something, even in those good old times, like an anachronism on the face of the land. What is now a well-looking street, fairly paved, and decorated with a number of showy shop-windows, was then an uneven road, with great spaces of grassy land, dusty and closely nibbled by goats, between the houses; whilst the houses themselves were mostly gable-roofed, with latticed windows, which served excellently to exclude the light, and which gave a blank and lack-lustre look to the edifices, as though they were weary to death of the view over the way.

Yet, in spite of its architectural deformities, Southbourne was such a place as would weave its homely interests about a man's heart, and be present to his mind when gay and splendid scenes were forgotten. At the very entrance of the village, as you went into the street out of the dusty London Road, stood the King's Arms Inn, a long, low-built, white-faced tavern, with a great sign-board hung flagwise over the doorway, which, when the wind was fresh, would swing with hoarse outcries, as though urging the distant wayfarer to make haste and enjoy the welcome that was to be obtained,

for a few pence, from the stout, well-fed host who presided within. Opposite this tavern stood a decent farmhouse, its thatched roof black with time, begirt with walls and palings, within which, when the harvest moon was high, great stacks of hay would rear their gold-coloured sides, and make the air as sweet as the smell of new milk. And all about this pleasant farmhouse were apple and cherry trees, under whose shadows a vast family of cocks and hens held the day eternally busy with their voices; while pigs in unseen sties grunted their hungry discord, and did their lazy best to drown the mournful cooing of doves in wicker cages, and the cheerful notes of the birds, who were attracted in countless numbers to the farmyard.

Between these two houses ran what the villagers called the High Street; and the eye followed the road, patched here and there with dark-coloured grass, for nearly a third of a mile, noting the gable-roofed houses that looked at each other from either side; the blacksmith's shed, where the bellows were always roaring; the flat-roofed baker's shop, standing importunately forwards, away from the little house in which the baker lived; the butcher's hard by; the apothecary's next to that; and the linendraper's shop, which had absorbed the frontage of no less than two solemn-looking houses—noting these and other details contributing to the carnal or frivolous interests of the place, until it settled upon a small building, which, standing in the centre of the road, narrowed it into a large and a small lane, and thus marked the extent and importance of the High Street.

Our story opens on a summer's evening. The daylight is still abroad upon the distant hill-tops, but the twilight has fallen like an inaudible hush upon Southbourne, and the farmyards are tranquil, save when, now and again, some uncomfortable hen seeking a resting-place near to her sovereign cock hops for his perch, but in hopping falls and awakens the sleepers with her fluttering scrambles and

keen notes of distress, echoed by a hundred wondering throats.

The evening is warm, and many of the house doors are open; and at these open doors sit, here and there, men in their shirt-sleeves, or in homely smocks, smoking long pipes, and addressing each other from across the road with voices bespeaking laborious thought, which demands many reflective puffs to clarify and adjust. Now the apothecary's boy comes out and lights the coloured lamp over the door, while the apothecary within sets two wax candles against his brilliant globes of lustrous dyes and illuminates the darksome roadway with a crimson and a yellow gleam. Now the linendraper's assistant steps forth and puts up the shutters to his master's windows, whilst the master himself struts along the floor, flapping his counter with a dust-brush, and inhaling the appetising perfume which streams from an inner room, and which is the best assurance he could demand that his supper is preparing. Anon comes a lame man, armed with a ladder, a lanthorn, and a can of oil at his girdle; he sets the ladder against a lamp-post, and in five minutes' time succeeds in kindling a faint uncertain light in the darkling air. Thrice does he perform this laborious duty, and then, lo! the High Street is illuminated.

These lights seem to act as signals for sundry groups of gossips, standing here and there along the dusty road, to disperse. The small cackle of talk, like the click of wheels driven against springs, ceases; the old hobble towards the houses, the young follow yet more leisurely; the gloom deepens; one by one the doors are closed and little yellow lights twinkle mistily upon the latticed windows. And now, though the clock of St. George's Church has not yet tolled the half-hour past eight, one may easily see that the good village of Southbourne, with one eye upon the candles, costly at sixteenpence the pound, and another eye upon the early hour that is to expel it from its slumbers into the fields

and the workshops, is making what haste it can to creep with heavy eyelids into bed.

In the house that looks askant down the road and breaks the thoroughfare into lanes, there is a sorrow at work that should seem absolutely inconsistent with the serenity and peace of the summer evening outside.

Three persons are seated in a cosy room; a tall lamp on a table sheds a soft light upon the walls; the window is open, and the large tremulous stars look in through the branches of the elms which front the little building. How sweet is the smell of the clematis about the window! and see, a great black moth whirrs towards the lamp and occupies the silence with its vigorous slaps against the ceiling.

The old woman in the high-backed chair, looking down upon her placid hands, is a perfect picture of handsome old age: hair white as snow; a sunken cheek touched with a hectic that passes well for, if indeed it be not, the bloom of health; a garrulous under lip; a mild and benevolent expression. She is dressed in an antique satin gown, and a fine red silk handkerchief, as large as a shawl, is pinned about her shoulders.

Facing her sits a young man, broad-shouldered and bronzed, with large lustrous black eyes and dark wavy hair. He wears a pilot cloth coat and black trousers, bell-mouthed at the feet, and a plain silver ring upon his left hand.

Close beside him, on a low chair, sits a young girl, with a sweet and modest face, and bright yellow hair which shines in the lamplight like gold, and blue eyes filled now with tears.

So they sit, so they have sat, for many minutes in silence, and nothing is heard but the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece, or the awkward moth that hits the ceiling, or now and again the melancholy plaint of some dreaming or belated bird from the dark country that stretches outside like a vision under the throbbing starlight.

Presently the old lady, lifting her head, says:

"I don't think it pleases God that people's hearts should be sorrowful. Nothing should grieve us but the fear of His anger; and if there be truth in religion, and any wisdom in human experience, there is nothing in this world that should make us sad."

The girl presses her hand to her eyes, and answers in a broken voice:

"John and I have never really been parted before."

"We never can be parted, Dolly, my sweet little wife," says the young man. "There was a fear of parting before, but none now, dear one. I am only leaving you for awhile—and that is not parting, is it, grandmother? Parting is separation, and those whom God has joined cannot be parted, cannot be parted, my Dolly!"

"Ay, that is right!" exclaims the old lady. "John is only leaving you for awhile—you cannot be parted—remember that."

"But it is to be a long while, and my heart will be so lonely without him, granny."

The old lady gives her head a dispirited shake.

"It is all going and coming in this world," says she. "To-day here, to-morrow there: 'tis like breathing on a mirror."

"No, no!" cries the young fellow, "that is a melancholy simile. Life is something more than a breath. I would be

content to know nothing but its sorrows, rather than think it the hollow illusion people call it. Oh, Dolly, you must cheer up and help to give me heart. I want all the courage I can get. After this voyage we needn't be separated any more. Remember, next year I shall be skipper, and then I can take you to sea with me."

"If next year had only come!" the poor little girl sobs, and lets her face fall upon her husband's hand.

"Nay, nay," the old lady chides, gently, "'tis thy business to help and support thy husband, Dolly. Will tears help him? Resolution is softened by them, and made weak and womanish. Your mother before you, my child, knew what it was to part from your father. He once went to Spain, and for many months we knew not whether he was living or dead. You were a little child then. What came to her, came to me, and must come to you as it comes to all women who will needs transplant their own hearts into men's. Know this, Dolly, that no love is purely sweet that has not known trials and afflictions."

"Hear that, my little one," says the young husband, stooping his head until his lips touch his wife's ears. "Let us seek a blessing in our grief, and we shall find one. It teaches me to know my love for you—our love for each other. Is not such knowledge blessed?"

"See here, Dolly," continued the grandmother, battling with the tears provoked by the influx of hurrying memories which followed her reference to her own child, Dolly's mother. "When John is gone, we will put up a calendar against the wall in your bedroom; and every night, after we have worshipped God, we will prick off a day, and you shall see how quickly the calendar grows small under our hands. I am seventy years old, and it was but the other day that I was dancing your mother in my arms, and I was a young woman, and your grandfather a hearty man, with brown hair under

his wig, and bright big eyes like yours. Why, that was fifty years ago, and it seems but yesterday! Many's the bitter tear I have shed, and the grief I have borne; but the times / mourn cannot come back to me, they are gone for ever—my life is but an empty chamber now; there is no fire in the grate, and the chairs are vacant, and I feel so lonely that I sometimes wish I was dead. But what is your grief? It is but a few months' separation, and every day that dies will give you happiness. It is not so with others, nor with me—no! no!”

As the old grandmother spoke, with some perception, perhaps, of that rather discreditable characteristic of human nature which finds the best solace for its own trouble in the consolation that is wrought out of the griefs of others, the girl gradually raised her head and fixed her eyes wistfully on her husband's, then laid her cheek against his shoulder, as a child would whom its tears have worn out.

“Grandmother,” said the young man, “I leave my Dolly to your care, and I know you will love and cherish her as though you were sure that any ill that came to her would break my heart.”

“She cannot be dearer to me than she always was,” answered the old lady, solemnly; “but be sure, John, that I'll take extra care of her, since her preciousness is doubled by being dear to you and having your life bound up in hers.”

“And you will keep her heart up with happy thoughts of me, grandmother,” continued the young fellow, his dark eyes made infinitely tender by the shadow of tears, “and bid her remember that when the wind blows here it may be a summer calm where I am, and blue sky when there are thunderstorms here. You'll remember this, Dolly?”

“Yes, John.”

“The calendar is a good thought of grandmother’s. Or you may watch the flowers, Dolly; you’ll see them fade away and leave the ground bare. By-and-by they’ll spring up again, and they will be a promise that I am coming back to you—coming quickly—quick as the wind will blow me—back to my little wife, to my sweet wife, Dolly.”

She sobbed quickly with renewed passion, and clasped his hand.

There was a childlike beauty in her face that made her sorrow infinitely touching for him, who loved her with all the strength of his great heart, to behold. He looked wistfully at the old grandmother; but she, more powerless than he, was brooding over the to-morrows which were to come when he should have gone away and left her alone with Dolly’s grief.

“I have a mind,” she said at last, “to send for Mr. Newcome, the rector. He should be able to point out to Dolly better than either of us can, that there is something unrighteous in suffering our hearts to be overcome by any dispensations God in His wise providence may choose to ordain.”

“No, I don’t want Mr. Newcome,” sobbed Dolly. “I must cry, granny. When John is gone, I’ll dry my eyes, and think of nothing but the time when he is to come back to me. But whilst I see him, and know that this time to-morrow he will be gone, I can’t help crying, indeed I can’t, granny.”

“Ay, my dear, but if your tears could bind him to you, and take the place of his duties which summon him away, they would be very well. But it is your place to help him in his troubles, as it is his to help you in yours; and see what a lonesome air his face has as he watches you, because he feels himself away from you by your refusing to listen to the words he tries to comfort you with.”

“I would give my right hand to save Dolly from these tears, grandmother,” said John, “but it is her love that frets. By-

and-by her eyes will grow bright, for she will know that every hour which passes after I have left her is bringing us nearer to next summer, when we shall be together again."

"But a year is such a long time," wailed Dolly. "It is four times over again the months we have been together, and it seems ages ago since you came home, John. And granny doesn't know the dangers of the sea. You have never talked to her as you have to me. Haven't you told me of shipwrecks, and how men fall overboard, and how some ships catch fire and not a creature saved of all a great ship's crew?"

"Yes, Dolly," he answered, smoothing her bright hair; "but I have always said that the sea isn't more dangerous than the land. There's danger everywhere for the matter of that, isn't there, grandmother?"

"Oh dear yes," groaned the old lady; "there are deaths going on all about us, on the dry land, quick as our pulses beat."

"Ay, true enough, grandmother," rejoined John; "more deaths are going on ashore than are going on at sea. But why do we talk of death? People part and meet again—why shouldn't we? There is no end to trouble if once we begin to think of what *may* happen. A man should put his trust in God"—

"Yes, that first, that chiefly," interrupted the grandmother.

"And fight his way onward with as much courage and hope and resolution to win as though there were no such thing as death in the world at all. When I bid you good-bye, Dolly, I shan't say good-bye, *perhaps for ever*; no! no! I will say good-bye till next summer. Summer is sure to come, and why shouldn't it bring me back?"

"We will pray God that it will," exclaimed the grandmother.

Thus these honest hearts talked and hoped; but, in truth, the parting was more bitter than Dolly could bear.

On this, the eve of her husband's leaving her, she could see no promise in time, no sunshine in the long and dismal blank that stretched before her. She was quite a young bride, had been married only three months; but his presence had already become a habit to her, a portion of her life, a condition of her happiness.

She had engaged herself to him eighteen months since, not many weeks before he sailed on his last voyage; but though she had learnt to love him tenderly as her sweetheart, his going did not then afflict her as it now did. He was only her lover then, but now he was her husband. She was ardent when she became his wife, flushed with the sweet and gracious emotions of her new state, and because the thought of the approaching time threw a shadow upon her happiness, she drove it deep down in her heart, out of sight almost, and so unfitted herself for bravely encountering the certain trouble that was to come.

It had come now; its full weight was upon her; she thought it must break her heart.

When we found them, they had not long returned from the last walk they were to take together for many a weary month; and it was so bitterly sad to them both, that no words can express its pathos. They were surrounded by familiar and beloved objects; and every detail that had heretofore made up the colour and life of their married love now came, each with its special pang of sorrow, to tell them that their dream was dissolved, and that their embraces, their whispers—indeed their very hopes—must be postponed until a period so far off, that it seemed as if no time would ever bring it to them. The poor fellow did his

utmost to inspire her; all the unsubstantial comfort he strove to lay to his own heart he gave to her; but his broken voice made his cheery assurances more sad even than her tears; and down by the little river, when the evening had gathered, and the soft stars were looking upon them, he had given way to his grief, and wept over her as if the form he pressed to him were lifeless.

The story of his courtship and marriage was as simple as the pastoral life of the village in which it occurred.

He had been called to Southbourne by his aunt, who lived there, and who felt herself dying. He had then just returned from a ten months' voyage. He was fond of his aunt, as the only living relative he had, and came to her at once. At her house—indeed, by her bedside—he met Mrs. Flemming, Dolly's grandmother. Mrs. Flemming took a fancy to him, admired his handsome face, his honest character, the cordial tenderness of his nature, which he illustrated by his devotion to his sick aunt, and asked him to her house, where he met Dolly.

He fell in love with her; and then, but not till then, he found that Southbourne was an infinitely better place to live in than the neighbourhood of the West India Docks.

Dolly was an innocent little creature, and hardly knew at first what to make of the love she had inspired in her grandmother's young friend; but by degrees the old story was read through between them, and the last chapter found them betrothed with Mrs. Flemming's full consent.

Meanwhile the aunt had died and left her little savings to her nephew, who gave the money to Mrs. Flemming to take care of for him until he came home. He was then chief mate, aged twenty-eight. When thirty he was to command a ship, his employers promised. So when he returned, twenty-nine years old, with only another year before him to serve out as

a subordinate, he claimed Mrs. Flemming's leave to marry Dolly; and within three weeks from the time of his arrival they were man and wife.

There could be no hitch: there was nobody's leave but Mrs. Flemming's to get. He and Dolly were both of them orphans. Her parents had died when she was a little girl; his, some years before this story begins. His father had been skipper in the service John belonged to, and the shipowners' favourite captain. Indeed, Captain Holdsworth had served his employers well, and as a token of their gratitude, they kept their eyes on his son; which meant that he was appointed the moment he had passed his examination as first mate, and was to be skipper at an age when a good many in the service were just entering upon their duties as second in command. But this only really argued that the owners knew a smart seaman when they saw him. Young Holdsworth was that; and critical as was the jealousy his quick promotion excited, there was not a man who could be got to say that Jack Holdsworth wasn't as good a sailor as ever trod upon shipboard.

The first thing he did, when he had the banns put up at St. George's, was to rent the little house that turned its shoulder upon the Southbourne main road, and furnish it with the money his aunt had left him. That was to be Dolly's and grandmother's home. Old Mrs. Flemming had some furniture of her own and an annuity; this last she was to club with John's pay, which Dolly was to draw every month, and so they would have money enough to keep them as ladies. But the old grandmother's furniture was very crazy: she of course thought it beautiful and elegant; but this did not prevent the chairs from breaking when John sat on them, nor the legs of the tables from coming off when they were handed through the doors. Such of these relics as did not go to pieces were put into her bedroom, at her particular request, because they enabled her to realise old times; the

rest vanished in a cloud of dust into a distant auction-room, and were never heard of more.

The young people's life was an idyl until the time approached for Holdsworth to sail. They went away for a week after they were married, and Dolly saw life: that is, she saw London, which frightened her, and she was very glad to get home. They had pretty nearly three months before them, and that seemed to give them plenty of time to enjoy themselves in. To be sure, the little cloud upon the horizon grew bigger and bigger every day, and Dolly saw it, and knew that in three months' time it would have overspread the heavens, and filled the earth with its leaden shadow; but she shrank from looking in that direction, and fixed her eyes on the blue sky overhead, and was as gay under its brightness as if it were never to know an eclipse.

Mrs. Flemming and Dolly had several friends in Southbourne, and during these months tea-parties were pretty frequent. Even the rector asked them to tea, and went to drink tea at their house; and this occasion was a celebrated one, for the rector was a kind, whimsical old gentleman, and insisted on a game of forfeits being played. There were three girls besides Dolly present, so kissing was practicable; and loud was the laughter when it fell to the rector's lot to kiss Mrs. Flemming, which he did with such a courtier-like air, that, under its influence, the grandmother's memory unfolded itself; and she instructed the company, in a tremulous voice, and with a lean, underscoring forefinger, in the behaviour of the men of *her* day, when men *were* men, etc. etc. Hunt the slipper followed the forfeits, and the evening was closed with port-negus, October ale, and dishes of fruit, sandwiches, and sweetmeats.

Hours so spent would make just such a memory as would keep a man's heart warm in his bosom under any skies, in any climes, in calm or in storm. Years after the very

inscriptions on the tombs of the rector and Mrs. Flemming were scarcely to be read amid the encrusting moss and the toothmarks of time, John Holdsworth remembered that evening: how, flushed as the two Miss Lavernes were into positive prettiness by laughter and Mr. Jackson the curate's discreet kisses, Dolly looked a queen to them; how her sweet eyes had peeped at him over the rector's shoulder, as the worthy clergyman claimed his forfeit; how she hung about him and sported, as any infant might, at his side, with her laughter never so ringing and melodious as when her hand was in his. How the kindly grandmother had hobbled about the room, with rusty squeaks of laughter in her mouth, to elude the rector's reluctant pursuit; how Miss Nelly Laverne blushed, and giggled, and tossed her head about when Mr. Jackson kissed her....

The curtain was falling, the lights were dimming, and now tears and sighs and heartrending yearnings were making a cruel ending of the pleasant summer holiday.

CHAPTER II. TO THE DOWNS.

The "Meteor" was a full-rigged ship of eleven hundred tons, with painted ports and a somewhat low freeboard, which gave her a rakish look. Her figure-head represented a woman, naked to the waist, emerging from a cloud, and was really a sweet piece of carving. She was a ship of the old school, with big stern windows, and a quaint cuddy front and heavy spars. Yet, built after the old-fashioned model, her lines were as clean as those of an Aberdeen clipper.

She made a glorious picture, as she lay off Gravesend, the clear summer sky tinting the water of the river a pale blue, and converting it into a mirror for an ideal representation of the graceful vessel. Many boats were clustered about her side, and up and down her canvased gangway went hurrying figures. The ensign was at the peak, and at the fore floated the blue-peter, signal to those who took concern in her that she would be soon under weigh.

She was bound to New York, whence she was to carry another cargo south, ultimately touching at Callao before she spread her wings for the old country.

There were a few first-class passengers on board, and some of them stood near the gangway in low and earnest talk with friends, while others were on the poop, gazing at the shore with wistful eyes. One of these was a widow, whose husband had been buried a few weeks before in the churchyard of a little Kentish town. She was taking her boy back with her to New York, where her friends were; and there they stood, hand in hand, the child with wondering

eyes everywhere, the mother with a fixed gaze upon the land which was consecrated for ever to her heart by the beloved form it held.

The river was brilliant and busy with vessels at anchor or passing to and fro, with boats pulling from shore to shore, with the gay sunshine deepening and brightening the colours of flags, or flashing white upon the outstretched canvas, and trembling in silver flakes upon the water. Sailors hung over the forecastle of the "Meteor," bandying jokes full of pathos, or exchanging farewells with wives and sweethearts, or male friends in boats grouped, with outstretched oars, around the bows of the ship. Some of the hands were aloft casting off the yard-arm gaskets, ready to sheet home when the boatswain's pipe should sound. The wind—a light breeze—was north, a soldier's wind that would take them clear of the river, and make a fair passage for them down Channel; and now they were only waiting for the captain to come on board with the pilot to start.

By eleven o'clock the ship was to be under weigh; and even as the clear chimes of the clock striking the hour floated across the river from the land, a boat pulled by three men swept alongside, and the captain, followed by the pilot, sprang up the ladder.

A tall, broad-shouldered young man stood at the gangway to receive them, and touched his cap as the captain came on board.

"All ready, Mr. Holdsworth?"

"All ready, sir."

"Man the windlass then."

"Ay, ay, sir."

He was on the forecastle in a jiffy, and the thunder of his voice went along the deck and brought all hands to the

windlass as if a line had pulled each man to his place. The boatswain's pipe shrilled, the pilot's face, coloured like mahogany, took an anxious expression; and then clank! clank! went the windlass, followed in a moment by a hoarse song, which at regular intervals burst into a chorus:—

“And when you come to the dockyard gates,
 Yo, boys, yo!
You'll find that Sal for her true love waits,
 Heave, my bully-boys, heave!
Then, heave my boys, oh, heave together!
 Yo, boys, yo!
And get her out o' the stormy weather!
 Heave, my bully-boys, heave!”

Then came such cries as these:—

“Sheer off you boats there!”

“Get the gangway ladder in-board.”

“Loose the inner jib, one of you!”

“A hand aft to the wheel!”

To see young Holdsworth now was to see a sailor, with a voice like a gale of wind, the whole great ship and her thousand complications of spars, ropes, sails, packed, so to speak, like a toy in the palm of his hand.

The skipper was below; the pilot was lord and master now, and Holdsworth watched his face for orders.

Soon the cable was up and down, the anchor lifted, and some hands left the windlass to make sail. The tide had got the ship, and she was floating almost imperceptibly past a large American vessel that had brought-up the evening before. A few boats followed; some turned and made for

Gravesend, the inmates standing up and waving their hats and handkerchiefs.

By this time the anchor was catted, and all hands quitted the forecastle to make sail. Then you might hear cries of "Sheet home!" from the air; down fell great spaces of canvas like avalanches of snow; chains rattled through blocks; fore and aft songs and choruses were raised and continued until silenced by the order "Belay!" The yards rose slowly up the polished masts and stretched the canvas tight as drum-skins. The men on board the Yankee crowded her forecastle and gave the Britisher a cheer as she passed. Amid the songs of the men, the piping of the boatswain and his mates, and the noisy commands of the pilot, the "Meteor" burst into a cloud of canvas, chipped a white wave out of the blue river, and went ahead like a yacht in a racing match.

The breeze freshened as the river widened. The decks were quiet now, the ropes coiled down clear for running, and everything hauled taut and snug. At two o'clock she was foaming along under royals and flying-jib, whisking past colliers dragging their main channels through the water as if they were drowning flies struggling for the land; overhauling smart schooners and ships as big as herself, and making the land on either side of her dwindle down and down into flat marshy country.

The pilot, pompous to the last extremity, with bow legs and moist eyes, strutted fore and aft the poop, sometimes calling an order to the man at the wheel, and constantly looking aloft, ahead, and around him. The passengers lounged about the deck or hung over the side, watching the foaming water rush past them, and almost losing—those of them, at least, who were leaving their homes—their sadness in the sense of exhilaration begotten by the swift speeding

of the vessel through the glory and freshness of the summer afternoon.

Forward, the men were industrious in the forecastle, rigging up their hammocks, or preparing their bunks for the night, or overhauling their sea-chests, or the canvas bags which, among seamen, often answer the purpose of sea-chests. It was a queer sight to see their busy figures in the twilight of the forecastle—here the black face of a negro; there the broad features of a Dutchman; here a mulatto; there a lantern-jawed Yankee, peak-bearded and narrow-hipped—a world in miniature, something after the nature of a menagerie, all talking in English, with accents which made the effect indescribable gibberish to the unaccustomed ear. They were most of them friends already; some had sailed in company before; and now they would suspend their work to offer one another a chew of tobacco, to beg the loan of a “draw,” meaning a pipe; while the air grew insufferable to all but a seaman’s digestion, with the smell of black cavendish and the inexpressible odour of bilge-water, tar, hemp, and the ship’s cargo generally, which rose, directly through the fore-hatch, and was blown into the forecastle by the draught under the foresail.

At eight o’clock the “Meteor” was off Margate, all sails but royals set; one of the noblest spectacles of beauty, grace, and majesty the world has to offer—a full-rigged ship—a leaning mountain of canvas rushing under the sky, with a whirl of foam bursting like two gigantic white arms from her sides.

But the North Foreland brings you to a sharp turn, and the wind had drawn three or four points to the west, and was blowing fresh in Mid Channel as the pilot saw by the distant

Goodwin Sands on the port bow, which lay, upon the horizon in a long streak of foam, like the Milky-way in the sky.

This was a pity, because, unless they were disposed to stand for the French shore, and so make Folkestone by a long board, they would have to bring-up in the Downs.

However, there was no help for it; for, though the vessel's yards were braced hard up against the lee rigging, she continued to fall off half a point by half a point, and, by the time she was off Ramsgate, her head was south. But the "Meteor" could sail to windward like a yacht. They furled the mainsail, took a single reef in the topsails, and then all hands stood by to put the ship about. Standing-by is sailors' English for being ready. The men went forward, and the ship, with two hands at the wheel, made straight for the South Sand Head—the southernmost portion of the formidable Goodwin Sands.

The Channel was a glorious scene. The sun had sunk behind the land, bequeathing a broad red glare to the heavens, over which some great clouds were unfurling themselves—livid promontories with flaring crimson headlands. Astern rose the solid white cliffs, looking phantasmal upon the dark-coloured water. On the right the land swept into a bay, hugging the water flatly as far as Deal, then rising into a great front of frowning cliffs, which stood black against the background of the red sky. The gloom of the gathering evening had paled the outlines of the houses into the shadowy land; but here and there you could see small vessels riding close in shore, or smacks with red sails creeping round the various points, whilst all between was the quick-running sea, coloured by the different depths of sand into an aspect of wild and multiform beauty. Away on the left the water, quivering with hurrying waves polished like oil, stretched to a dim and desolate horizon. Here and there a brig, or a barque, ploughed laboriously for the

Downs, shipping seas like columns of snow and lurching like a drunkard that must presently fall. The “Meteor” overtook and passed many of these vessels as if they were buoys, sometimes running so close alongside as to take the wind out of their sails and set them upright on an even keel. It was strange to look down upon their decks, lying close to the water, and see the steersmen gazing upwards, the masters walking to and fro and not deigning to notice anything but their own ships, a head or two peering over the bulwarks; to hear the groaning and grunting of the timbers, the yelling of the wind in the masts; and then, in a moment, to see them pitching and tumbling astern, dwindling into toys and scarcely perceptible among the lead-coloured waves.

But now the crimson had faded out from over the land, and where it had vanished burned a strong and steady light, topping the summit of the highest and outermost cliff. The night fell, and all about the expanse of water innumerable lights started into life: lanterns of vessels in the Downs, of passing ships, of the Goodwin beacons. The clouds which had looked slate-coloured against the sunset were now white, and rolled like great volumes of steam across the stars. Then right ahead of the ship rose a pale white line—a quick, spectral play of froth, and a great, red star shining like an arrested meteor, and which a few minutes before seemed to be many miles distant, grew big and lurid and dangerous.

A deep voice sounded along the “Meteor”—“All hands about ship!”

A rush of feet and then a silence; round flew the wheel like a firework; the red light ahead swept away giddily to the left.

“Helm’s alee!”

The canvas shook like thunder, and the passengers crowded aft, wondering to find the ship upright.

“Mainsail haul!”

And at this signal forth burst a loud chorus; the released braces allowed the yards to fly round, the decks echoed to the tramping of feet and to the cries of men; the vessel lay over as though she must capsize; there was a rush of inexperienced passengers to windward; another hoarse command; round flew the foreyards, and in a few minutes the “Meteor” was darting through the water with her head for Deal, and the pale phosphorescent gleam of the Goodwin Sands dying out upon the sea on her weather quarter.

The ship tacked three times during the next hour; and at half-past nine the wind lulled, and the moon came out of the sea, a broad, yellow shield. There was something indescribably solemn in the rising of this orb as she climbed in a haze over the edge of the horizon, and flashed a wedge of quivering light into the tumbling waters. The sails of the “Meteor” caught the radiance presently, and her long wake glittered in the light like a trail of silver spangles.

She was in the Downs now, and in a dead calm, and within half-an-hour she was riding at anchor, everything furled aloft, and taut and snug as a man-of-war, with many ships about her, resting like phantom vessels on the surface of the water.

An anchor-watch was set, and the crew after smoking, and yarning and lounging about the forecastle, went below, and a deep repose fell upon the erewhile busy labouring ship. The silence was unbroken, save by the murmur of some of the passengers talking in a group around the cuddy skylight, or by the sound of a fiddle played in some one of the nearer-

lying vessels, or by the faint, melodious murmur of the breakers boiling upon the pebbly strand of Deal.

A breathless summer night! with big shooting-stars chasing the heavens, and a moon growing smaller and brighter each moment, and the dim tracery of the tapering masts and rigging of the "Meteor" pointing from the deep and vanishing in the gloom. Away on the left, for the tide had swung the ship round and pointed her bowsprit up Channel, glittered the lights of Deal, suggestions of home life which riveted many eyes and made many hearts thoughtful and sad—none more so than Holdsworth's, whose watch it was, and who, now that his active duties were over, could surrender himself to the bitter luxury of thought.

He paced to and fro athwart the poop, his heart far away in the little village he had quitted. The face of his child-wife rose before him, and he lived again in the hard parting that had wrenched his heart and sent him sobbing from his home. He felt her clinging arms about his neck; he looked down into her swollen eyes; he repeated again and again, in broken tones, his fond and last entreaty that she would keep her heart up, pray for him, and think only of the joyous summer that would come to bless and bring them together once more.

The music ceased in the distance; the tinkling of bells, announcing the half-hour past ten, came stealing across the water, and was echoed by five ringing strokes upon the bell on the "Meteor's" quarter-deck.

Half-past ten! Was Dolly sleeping now? Had her grief and her tears wearied her into repose? How long, how very long, it seemed since he saw her last! The time was to be counted in hours, but it appeared days and weeks to him.

He leaned with his arms upon the poop rails, and stood lost in thought. A question asked in a soft voice made him turn.

“Do all those lights there belong to ships?”

The speaker was the widow to whom Holdsworth’s attention had been several times attracted during the day by the air of sadness her face wore, and her devotion to her bright-haired little boy, whose sweet wondering eyes, as he cast them round, had reminded him of Dolly’s, and drawn his heart to him.

“Yes, they belong to ships at anchor like ours.”

“How beautiful is this night! I have left my boy asleep and stolen from the cabin to breathe the fresh air.”

“I daresay the dear little fellow sleeps well after the excitement he has gone through. I noticed that his wondering eyes were very busy when we were in the river.”

Hearing this, she grew frank and cordial at once. Her woman’s heart was as sure of him as if she had known him all his life.

“Did you notice my child? I should have thought you were too much occupied. He was tired out, God bless him! when I put him to bed; too tired even to say his prayers. He has no father now to love him, so I must give him a double share of my love.”

“Ah, you will not find that hard. He is a manly little fellow, and he and I will become great friends, I hope.”

“I trust you will.... You are Mr. Holdsworth? I heard the captain call you by that name. And you are the chief mate?”

“Yes, madam.”

“I admire your profession, Mr. Holdsworth, and have a good excuse for doing so, for both my father and brother were sailors. But I don’t think I could ever let my boy go to sea; I could never bear to part with him. And I sometimes wonder

how the wives of sailors can endure to be separated from their husbands.”

“That is the hardest part of our profession,” answered Holdsworth quickly. “I never understood it before this voyage. I have had to leave my young wife; may God protect her until I come back.”

“Is she very young?”

“Nineteen.”

“Poor girl!” exclaimed the widow, with deep sympathy in her voice. She added, cheerfully, “But this separation will only make you dearer to each other. You are sure to meet again. Time flies quickly, and all these weary days will seem no more than a dream to you when you are together.”

She sighed and glanced down at the deep crape on her dress. The moonlight enabled Holdsworth to notice the glance, and the pathos of it silenced him. In the presence of such an experience as *her* parting was—he knew whom she had lost by her reference to her fatherless boy—his own sorrow appeared light.

“There is always hope, there is always the promise of happiness in store while there is life,” she continued gently. “Do not be down-hearted, Mr. Holdsworth. This parting is but a temporary interruption of your happiness. Be sure that God will protect your young wife while you are away, and do not doubt that He will lead you back to her.” She smiled softly at him, and adding, “I must go to my little one now,” bowed cordially and went away.

He could have blessed her for an assurance which, having no better foundation than a woman’s sympathy, cheered him as no thoughts of his own could have done. “That is a true heart,” he said to himself, and resumed his walk, repeating her words over and over again, and drawing a