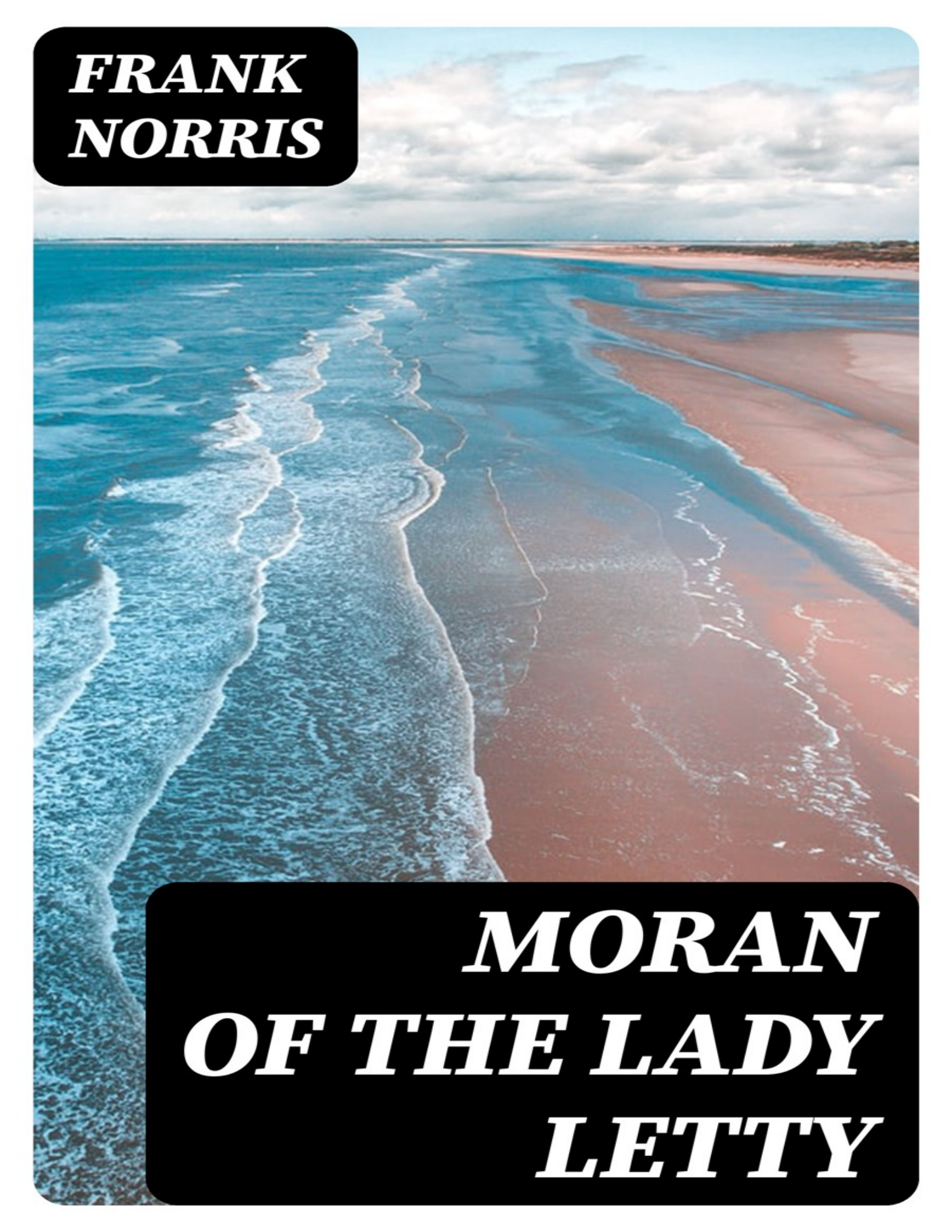




***FRANK
NORRIS***

***MORAN
OF THE LADY
LETTY***

Frank Norris

Moran of the Lady Letty

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I. SHANGHAIED

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This is to be a story of a battle, at least one murder, and several sudden deaths. For that reason it begins with a pink tea and among the mingled odors of many delicate perfumes and the hale, frank smell of Caroline Testout roses.

There had been a great number of debutantes “coming out” that season in San Francisco by means of afternoon teas, pink, lavender, and otherwise. This particular tea was intended to celebrate the fact that Josie Herrick had arrived at that time of her life when she was to wear her hair high and her gowns long, and to have a “day” of her own quite distinct from that of her mother.

Ross Wilbur presented himself at the Herrick house on Pacific Avenue much too early upon the afternoon of Miss Herrick's tea. As he made, his way up the canvased stairs he was aware of a terrifying array of millinery and a disquieting staccato chatter of feminine voices in the parlors and reception-rooms on either side of the hallway. A single high hat in the room that had been set apart for the men's use confirmed him in his suspicions.

“Might have known it would be a hen party till six, anyhow,” he muttered, swinging out of his overcoat. “Bet I don't know one girl in twenty down there now—all mamma's friends at this hour, and papa's maiden sisters, and Jo's school-teachers and governesses and music-teachers, and I don't know what all.”

When he went down he found it precisely as he expected. He went up to Miss Herrick, where she stood

receiving with her mother and two of the other girls, and allowed them to chaff him on his forlornness.

"Maybe I seem at my ease," said Ross Wilbur to them, "but really I am very much frightened. I'm going to run away as soon as it is decently possible, even before, unless you feed me."

"I believe you had luncheon not two hours ago," said Miss Herrick. "Come along, though, and I'll give you some chocolate, and perhaps, if you're good, a stuffed olive. I got them just because I knew you liked them. I ought to stay here and receive, so I can't look after you for long."

The two fought their way through the crowded rooms to the luncheon-table, and Miss Herrick got Wilbur his chocolate and his stuffed olives. They sat down and talked in a window recess for a moment, Wilbur toeing-in in absurd fashion as he tried to make a lap for his plate.

"I thought," said Miss Herrick, "that you were going on the Ridgeways' yachting party this afternoon. Mrs. Ridgeway said she was counting on you. They are going out with the 'Petrel.'"

"She didn't count above a hundred, though," answered Wilbur. "I got your bid first, so I regretted the yachting party; and I guess I'd have regretted it anyhow," and he grinned at her over his cup.

"Nice man," she said—adding on the instant, "I must go now, Ross."

"Wait till I eat the sugar out of my cup," complained Wilbur. "Tell me," he added, scraping vigorously at the bottom of the cup with the inadequate spoon; "tell me, you're going to the hoe-down to-night?"

"If you mean the Assembly, yes, I am."

"Will you give me the first and last?"

"I'll give you the first, and you can ask for the last then."

"Let's put it down; I know you'll forget it." Wilbur drew a couple of cards from his case.

"Programmes are not good form any more," said Miss Herrick.

"Forgetting a dance is worse."

He made out the cards, writing on the one he kept for himself, "First waltz—Jo."

"I must go back now," said Miss Herrick, getting up.

"In that case I shall run—I'm afraid of girls."

"It's a pity about you."

"I am; one girl, I don't say, but girl in the aggregate like this," and he pointed his chin toward the thronged parlors.

"It un-mans me."

"Good-by, then."

"Good-by, until to-night, about—?"

"About nine."

"About nine, then."

Ross Wilbur made his adieu to Mrs. Herrick and the girls who were receiving, and took himself away. As he came out of the house and stood for a moment on the steps, settling his hat gingerly upon his hair so as not to disturb the parting, he was not by any means an ill-looking chap. His good height was helped out by his long coat and his high silk hat, and there was plenty of jaw in the lower part of his face. Nor was his tailor altogether answerable for his shoulders. Three years before this time Ross Wilbur had

pulled at No. 5 in his varsity boat in an Eastern college that was not accustomed to athletic discomfiture.

"I wonder what I'm going to do with myself until supper time," he muttered, as he came down the steps, feeling for the middle of his stick. He found no immediate answer to his question. But the afternoon was fine, and he set off to walk in the direction of the town, with a half-formed idea of looking in at his club.

At his club he found a letter in his box from his particular chum, who had been spending the month shooting elk in Oregon.

"Dear Old Man," it said, "will be back on the afternoon you receive this. Will hit the town on the three o'clock boat. Get seats for the best show going—my treat—and arrange to assimilate

nutriment at the Poodle Dog—also mine. I've got miles of talk in

me that I've got to reel off before midnight. Yours.

"JERRY."

"I've got a stand of horns for you, Ross, that are Glory Hallelujah."

"Well, I can't go," murmured Wilbur, as he remembered the Assembly that was to come off that night and his engaged dance with Jo Herrick. He decided that it would be best to meet Jerry as he came off the boat and tell him how matters stood. Then he resolved, since no one that he knew was in the club, and the instalment of the Paris weeklies had not arrived, that it would be amusing to go down to the water-front and loaf among the shipping until it was time for Jerry's boat.

Wilbur spent an hour along the wharves, watching the great grain ships consigned to “Cork for orders” slowly gorging themselves with whole harvests of wheat from the San Joaquin Valley; lumber vessels for Durban and South African ports settling lower and lower to the water's level as forests of pine and redwood stratified themselves along their decks and in their holds; coal barges discharging from Nanaimo; busy little tugs coughing and nuzzling at the flanks of the deep-sea tramps, while hay barges and Italian whitehalls came and went at every turn. A Stockton River boat went by, her stern wheel churning along behind, like a huge net-reel; a tiny maelstrom of activity centred about an Alaska Commercial Company's steamboat that would clear for Dawson in the morning.

No quarter of one of the most picturesque cities in the world had more interest for Wilbur than the water-front. In the mile or so of shipping that stretched from the docks where the China steamships landed, down past the ferry slips and on to Meiggs's Wharf, every maritime nation in the world was represented. More than once Wilbur had talked to the loungers of the wharves, stevedores out of work, sailors between voyages, caulkers and ship chandlers' men looking—not too earnestly—for jobs; so that on this occasion, when a little, undersized fellow in dirty brown sweater and clothes of Barbary coast cut asked him for a match to light his pipe, Wilbur offered a cigar and passed the time of day with him. Wilbur had not forgotten that he himself was dressed for an afternoon function. But the incongruity of the business was precisely what most amused him.

After a time the fellow suggested drinks. Wilbur hesitated for a moment. It would be something to tell about, however, so, "All right, I'll drink with you," he said.

The brown sweater led the way to a sailors' boarding-house hard by. The rear of the place was built upon piles over the water. But in front, on the ground floor, was a barroom.

"Rum an' gum," announced the brown sweater, as the two came in and took their places at the bar.

"Rum an' gum, Tuck; wattle you have, sir?"

"Oh—I don't know," hesitated Wilbur; "give me a mild Manhattan."

While the drinks were being mixed the brown sweater called Wilbur's attention to a fighting head-dress from the Marquesas that was hung on the wall over the free-lunch counter and opposite the bar. Wilbur turned about to look at it, and remained so, his back to the barkeeper, till the latter told them their drinks were ready.

"Well, mate, here's big blocks an' taut hawse-pipes," said the brown sweater cordially.

"Your very good health," returned Wilbur.

The brown sweater wiped a thin mustache in the hollow of his palm, and wiped that palm upon his trouser leg.

"Yessir," he continued, once more facing the Marquesas head-dress. "Yessir, they're queer game down there."

"In the Marquesas Islands, you mean?" said Wilbur.

"Yessir, they're queer game. When they ain't tattoin' themselves with Scripture tex's they git from the missionaries, they're pullin' out the hairs all over their bodies with two clam-shells. Hair by hair, y' understan'?"

"Pull'n out 'er hair?" said Wilbur, wondering what was the matter with his tongue.

"They think it's clever—think the women folk like it."

Wilbur had fancied that the little man had worn a brown sweater when they first met. But now, strangely enough, he was not in the least surprised to see it iridescent like a pigeon's breast.

"Y' ever been down that way?" inquired the little man next.

Wilbur heard the words distinctly enough, but somehow they refused to fit into the right places in his brain. He pulled himself together, frowning heavily.

"What—did—you—say?" he asked with great deliberation, biting off his words. Then he noticed that he and his companion were no longer in the barroom, but in a little room back of it. His personality divided itself. There was one Ross Wilbur—who could not make his hands go where he wanted them, who said one word when he thought another, and whose legs below the knee were made of solid lead. Then there was another Ross Wilbur—Ross Wilbur, the alert, who was perfectly clear-headed, and who stood off to one side and watched his twin brother making a monkey of himself, without power and without even the desire of helping him.

This latter Wilbur heard the iridescent sweater say:

"Bust me, if y' a'n't squiffy, old man. Stand by a bit an' we'll have a ball."

"Can't have got—return—exceptionally—and the round table—pull out hairs wi' tu clamsh'ls," gabbled Wilbur's stupefied double; and Wilbur the alert said to himself:

"You're not drunk, Ross Wilbur, that's certain; what could they have put in your cocktail?"

The iridescent sweater stamped twice upon the floor and a trap-door fell away beneath Wilbur's feet like the drop of a gallows. With the eyes of his undrugged self Wilbur had a glimpse of water below. His elbow struck the floor as he went down, and he fell feet first into a Whitehall boat. He had time to observe two men at the oars and to look between the piles that supported the house above him and catch a glimpse of the bay and a glint of the Contra Costa shore. He was not in the least surprised at what had happened, and made up his mind that it would be a good idea to lie down in the boat and go to sleep.

Suddenly—but how long after his advent into the boat he could not tell—his wits began to return and settle themselves, like wild birds flocking again after a scare. Swiftly he took in the scene. The blue waters of the bay around him, the deck of a schooner on which he stood, the Whitehall boat alongside, and an enormous man with a face like a setting moon wrangling with his friend in the sweater—no longer iridescent.

"What do you call it?" shouted the red man. "I want able seamen—I don't figger on working this boat with dancing masters, do I? We ain't exactly doing quadrilles on my quarterdeck. If we don't look out we'll step on this thing and break it. It ain't ought to be let around loose without its ma."

"Rot that," vociferated the brown sweater. "I tell you he's one of the best sailor men on the front. If he ain't we'll forfeit the money. Come on, Captain Kitchell, we made show enough gettin' away as it was, and this daytime business

ain't our line. D'you sign or not? Here's the advance note. I got to duck my nut or I'll have the patrol boat after me."

"I'll sign this once," growled the other, scrawling his name on the note; "but if this swab ain't up to sample, he'll come back by freight, an' I'll drop in on mee dear friend Jim when we come back and give him a reel nice time, an' you can lay to that, Billy Trim." The brown sweater pocketed the note, went over the side, and rowed off.

Wilbur stood in the waist of a schooner anchored in the stream well off Fisherman's wharf. In the forward part of the schooner a Chinaman in brown duck was mixing paint. Wilbur was conscious that he still wore his high hat and long coat, but his stick was gone and one gray glove was slit to the button. In front of him towered the enormous red-faced man. A pungent reek of some kind of rancid fat or oil assailed his nostrils. Over by Alcatraz a ferry-boat whistled for its slip as it elbowed its way through the water.

Wilbur had himself fairly in hand by now. His wits were all about him; but the situation was beyond him as yet.

"Git for'd," commanded the big man.

Wilbur drew himself up, angry in an instant. "Look here," he began, "what's the meaning of this business? I know I've been drugged and mishandled. I demand to be put ashore. Do you understand that?"

"Angel child," whimpered the big man. "Oh, you lilee of the vallee, you bright an' mornin' star. I'm reely pained y'know, that your vally can't come along, but we'll have your piano set up in the lazarette. It gives me genuine grief, it do, to see you bein' obliged to put your lilee white feet on this here vulgar an' dirtee deck. We'll have the Wilton carpet

down by to-morrer, so we will, my dear. Yah-h!" he suddenly broke out, as his rage boiled over. "Git for'd, d'ye hear! I'm captain of this here bathtub, an' that's all you need to know for a good while to come. I ain't generally got to tell that to a man but once; but I'll stretch the point just for love of you, angel child. Now, then, move!"

Wilbur stood motionless—puzzled beyond expression. No experience he had ever been through helped in this situation.

"Look here," he began, "I—"

The captain knocked him down with a blow of one enormous fist upon the mouth, and while he was yet stretched upon the deck kicked him savagely in the stomach. Then he allowed him to rise, caught him by the neck and the slack of his overcoat, and ran him forward to where a hatchway, not two feet across, opened in the deck. Without ado, he flung him down into the darkness below; and while Wilbur, dizzied by the fall, sat on the floor at the foot of the vertical companion-ladder, gazing about him with distended eyes, there rained down upon his head, first an oilskin coat, then a sou'wester, a pair of oilskin breeches, woolen socks, and a plug of tobacco. Above him, down the contracted square of the hatch, came the bellowing of the Captain's voice:

"There's your fit-out, Mister Lilee of the Vallee, which the same our dear friend Jim makes a present of and no charge, because he loves you so. You're allowed two minutes to change, an' it is to be hoped as how you won't force me to come for to assist."

It would have been interesting to have followed, step by step, the mental process that now took place in Ross Wilbur's brain. The Captain had given him two minutes in which to change. The time was short enough, but even at that Wilbur changed more than his clothes during the two minutes he was left to himself in the reekind dark of the schooner's fo'castle. It was more than a change—it was a revolution. What he made up his mind to do—precisely what mental attitude he decided to adopt, just what new niche he elected wherein to set his feet, it is difficult to say. Only by results could the change be guessed at. He went down the forward hatch at the toe of Kitchell's boot—silk-hatted, melton-overcoated, patent-booted, and gloved in suedes. Two minutes later there emerged upon the deck a figure in oilskins and a sou'wester. There was blood upon the face of him and the grime of an unclean ship upon his bare hands. It was Wilbur, and yet not Wilbur. In two minutes he had been, in a way, born again. The only traces of his former self were the patent-leather boots, still persistent in their gloss and shine, that showed grim incongruity below the vast compass of the oilskin breeches.

As Wilbur came on deck he saw the crew of the schooner hurrying forward, six of them, Chinamen every one, in brown jeans and black felt hats. On the quarterdeck stood the Captain, barking his orders.

“Consider the Lilee of the Vallee,” bellowed the latter, as his eye fell upon Wilbur the Transformed. “Clap on to that starboard windlass brake, sonny.”

Wilbur saw the Chinamen ranging themselves about what he guessed was the windlass in the schooner's bow.

He followed and took his place among them, grasping one of the bars.

“Break down!” came the next order. Wilbur and the Chinamen obeyed, bearing up and down upon the bars till the slack of the anchor-chain came home and stretched taut and dripping from the hawse-holes.

“‘Vast heavin’!”

And then as Wilbur released the brake and turned about for the next order, he cast his glance out upon the bay, and there, not a hundred and fifty yards away, her spotless sails tense, her cordage humming, her immaculate flanks slipping easily through the waves, the water hissing and churning under her forefoot, clean, gleaming, dainty, and aristocratic, the Ridgeways' yacht “Petrel” passed like a thing of life. Wilbur saw Nat Ridgeway himself at the wheel. Girls in smart gowns and young fellows in white ducks and yachting caps—all friends of his—crowded the decks. A little orchestra of musicians were reeling off a quickstep.

The popping of a cork and a gale of talk and laughter came to his ears. Wilbur stared at the picture, his face devoid of expression. The “Petrel” came on—drew nearer—was not a hundred feet away from the schooner's stern. A strong swimmer, such as Wilbur, could cover the distance in a few strides. Two minutes ago Wilbur might have—

“Set your mains'l,” came the bellow of Captain Kitchell. “Clap on to your throat and peak halyards.”

The Chinamen hurried aft.

Wilbur followed.

II. A NAUTICAL EDUCATION.

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In the course of the next few moments, while the little vessel was being got under way, and while the Ridgeways' "Petrel" gleamed off into the blue distance, Wilbur made certain observations.

The name of the boat on which he found himself was the "Bertha Millner." She was a two-topmast, 28-ton keel schooner, 40 feet long, carrying a large spread of sail—mainsail, foresail, jib, flying-jib, two gaff-topsails, and a staysail. She was very dirty and smelt abominably of some kind of rancid oil. Her crew were Chinamen; there was no mate. But the cook—himself a Chinaman—who appeared from time to time at the door of the galley, a potato-masher in his hand, seemed to have some sort of authority over the hands. He acted in a manner as a go-between for the Captain and the crew, sometimes interpreting the former's orders, and occasionally giving one of his own.

Wilbur heard the Captain address him as Charlie. He spoke pigeon English fairly. Of the balance of the crew—the five Chinamen—Wilbur could make nothing. They never spoke, neither to Captain Kitchell, to Charlie, nor to each other; and for all the notice they took of Wilbur he might easily have been a sack of sand. Wilbur felt that his advent on the "Bertha Millner" was by its very nature an extraordinary event; but the absolute indifference of these brown-suited Mongols, the blankness of their flat, fat faces,