The Bride's Name;

Or, The Adventures of Captain Fraser

CHAPTER VIII.—(Cont'd).

"The next thing is to slip ashore at Wapping, Jack," he said, after he had finished his meal; "the wharf 'll be closed by the time we get there."

"The watchman's nearly sure to be asleep," said Fraser, "and you can easily climb the gate. If he's not, I must try and get him out of the way somehow."

The skipper's forebodings proved to be correct. It was past twelve by the time they reached Wapping, but the watchman was wide awake and, with much bustle, helped them to berth their craft. He received the news of the skipper's untimely end with well-bred sorrow, and at once excited the wrath of the sensitive Joe by saying that he was not surprised.

"I 'ad a warning," he said, solemnly, in reply to the indignant seaman. "Larst night exactly as Big Ben struck ten o'clock the gate-bell was pulled three times."

"I've pulled it fifty times myself before now," said Joe, scathingly, 'and then had to climb over the gate and wake you up.' '

"I went to the gate at once," continued George, addressing himself to the cook; "sometimes when I'm shifting a barge, or doing any little job o' that sort, I do 'ave to keep a man waiting, and, if he's drunk, two minutes seems like ages to 'im."

"You ought to know wot it seems like," muttered Joe.

"When I got to the gate an' opened it there was nobody there," continued the watchman, impressively, "and while I was standing there I saw the bell-pull go up an' down without 'ands and the bell rung again three times."

The cook shivered. "Wasn't you frightened, George?" he asked, sympathetically.

"I knew it was a warning," continued the veracious George. "W'y 'e should come to me I don't know. One thing is I think 'e always 'ad a bit of a fancy for me."

"He 'ad," said Joe; "everybody wot sees you loves you, George. They can't help theirselves."

"And I 'ave 'ad them two ladies down again asking for Mr. Robinson, and also for poor Cap'n Flower," said the watchman; "they asked me some questions about 'im, and I told 'em the lies wot you told me to tell 'em, Joe; p'r'aps that's w'y I 'ad the warning."

Joe turned away with a growl and went below, and Tim and the cook, after greedily waiting for some time to give the watchman's imagination a further chance, followed his example. George, left to himself, took his old seat on the post at the end of the jetty, being, if the truth must be told, somewhat alarmed by his own fertile inventions.

Three times did the mate, in response to the frenzied commands of the skipper, come stealthily up the companion-way and look at him. Time was passing and action of some kind was imperative.

"George," he whispered, suddenly.

"Sir," said the watchman.

"I want to speak to you," said Fraser, mysteriously; "come down here."

George rose carefully from his seat, and lowering himself gingerly on board, crept on tiptoe to the gallery after the mate.

"Wait in here till I come back," said the latter, in a thrilling whisper; "I've got something to show you. Don't move, whatever happens."

His tones were so fearful, and he put so much emphasis on the last sentence, that the watchman burst hurriedly out of the galley.

"I don't like these mysteries," he said, plainly.

"There's no mystery," said the mate, pushing him back again; "something I don't want the crew to see, that's all. You're the only man I can trust." He closed the door and coughed, and a figure, which had been lurking on the companion-ladder, slipped hastily on deck and clambered noiselessly on to the jetty. The mate clambered up beside it, and hurrying with it to the gate helped it over, and with much satisfaction heard it alight on the other side.

"Good-night, Jack," said Flower. "Don't forget to look after Poppy."

"Good-night," said the mate. "Write as soon as you're fixed."

He walked back leisurely to the schooner and stood in some perplexity, eyeing the galley which contained the devoted George. He stood for so long that his victim lost all patience, and, sliding back the door, peered out and discovered him.

"Have you got it?" he asked, softly.

"No," replied Fraser; "there isn't anything. I was only making a fool of you, George. Good-night!" He walked aft, and stood at the companion watching the outraged George as he came slowly out of the galley and stared about him.

"Good-night, George," he repeated.

The watchman made no reply to the greeting, but, breathing heavily, resumed his old seat on the post and, folding his arms across his panting bosom, looked down with majestic scorn upon the schooner and all its contents. Long after the satisfied mate had forgotten the incident in sleep, he sat there striving to digest the insult of which he had been the victim, and to consider a painful and fitting retribution.

CHAPTER IX.

The mate awoke next morning to a full sense of the unpleasant task before him, and, after irritably giving orders for the removal of the tarpaulin from the skylight a substitution of the ingenious cook's for the drawn blinds ashore, sat down to a solitary breakfast and the composition of a telegram to Captain Barber. The first, a beautiful piece of prose, of which the key-note was resignation, contained two shillings' worth of sympathy and fourpence-halfpenny worth of religion. It was too expensive as it stood, and boiled down, he was surprised to find that it became unfeeling to the verge of flippancy. Ultimately he embodied it in a letter, which he preceded by a telegram, breaking the sad news in as gentle a form as could be managed for one-and-three.

The best part of the day was spent in relating the sad end of Captain Fred Flower to various inquirers. The deceased gentleman was a popular favorite, and clerks from the office and brother skippers came down in little knots to learn the full particulars, and to compare the accident with others in their experience. It reminded one skipper, who invariably took to drink when his feelings were touched, of the death of a little nephew from whooping-cough, and he was so moved over a picture he drew of the meeting of the two, that it took four men to get him off the schooner without violence.

The mate sat for some time after tea striving to summon up sufficient courage for his journey to Poplar, and wondering whether it wouldn't perhaps be better to communicate the news by letter. He even went so far as to get the writing materials ready, and then, remembering his promise to the skipper, put them away again and prepared for his visit.. The crew, who were on deck, eyed him stolidly as he departed, and Joe made a remark to the cook, which that worthy drowned in a loud and troublesome cough.

The Wheeler family were at home when he arrived, and recieved him with some surprise. Mrs. Wheeler, who was in her usual place on the sofa, shook hands with him in a genteel fashion, and calling his attention to a somewhat loudly attired young man of unpleasant appearance, who was making a late tea, introduced him as her son Bob.

"Is Miss Tyrell in?" inquired Fraser, shaking his head as Mr. Wheeler dusted a small Wheeler off a chair and offered it to him.

"She's upstairs," said Emma Wheeler; "shall I go up and fetch her?"

"No, I'll go up to her," said the mate, quietly "I think I'd better see her alone. I've got rather bad news for her."

"About the captain?" inquired Mrs. Wheeler, sharply.

"Yes," said Fraser, turning somewhat red. "Very bad news."

He fixed his eyes on the ground, and, in a spasmodic fashion, made perfect by practice, recited the disaster.

"Pore feller," said Mrs. Wheeler, when he had finished' "Pore feller, and cut down suddenly like that. I s'pose he 'adn't made any preparation for it?"

"Not a bit," said the mate, starting, "quite unprepared."

"You didn't jump over after him?" suggested Miss Wheeler, softly.

"I did not," said the mate, firmly; whereupon Miss Wheeler, who was fond of penny romancism, sighed and shook her head.

"There's that pore gal upstairs," said Mrs. Wheeler, sorrowfully, "all innocent and happy, probably expecting him to come to-night and take her out. Emma 'd better go up and break it to 'er."

"I will," said Fraser, shortly.

"Better to let a woman do it," said Mrs. Wheeler. "When our little Jemmy smashed his finger we sent Emma down to break it to his father and bring 'im 'ome. It was ever so long before she let you know the truth, wasn't it, father?"

"Made me think all sorts of things with her mysteries," said the dutiful Mr. Wheeler, in triumphant corroboration. "First of all she made me think you was dead; then I thought you was all dead—give me such a turn they 'ad to give me brandy to bring me round. When I found out it was only Jemmy's finger, I was nearly off my 'ed with joy."

"I'll go and tell her," interrupted Mr. Bob Wheeler, delicately, using the inside edge of the table-cloth as a serviette. 'I can do it better than Emma can. What she wants is comforting; Emma would go and snivel all over her."

Mrs. Wheeler, raising her head from the sofa, regarded the speaker with looks of tender admiration, and the young man, after a lengthy glance in the small pier-glass ornamented with colored paper, which stood on the mantelpiece, walked to the door.

"You needn't trouble," said Fraser, slowly; "I'm going to tell her."

Mrs. Wheeler's dull eyes snapped sharply. "She's our lodger," she said, aggressively.

"Yes, but I'm going to tell her," rejoined the mate; "the skipper told me to."

(To be continued).