

GOODMAN'S FORTE.

Story of an Astute Sea Captain and an Innocent Looking Passenger.

By T. JENKINS HAINS.

Author of "The Wind Jammers," "Mr. Tammol," "Capt. Gray," Etc.

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Captain Breeze was of a suspicious nature. He was more, he was both truculent and suspicious, and because of the latter quality he was much given to indulging himself in the former. It was said that he had trusted not only his own eyes, but also those of his ward, Mr. Enlis, his first mate, gave it as his private opinion that, although Jimmy Breeze had been through many tight places and indulged in many a dangerous fracas on his ship's main deck, his courage was not "gilt-edged."

Just what he based this conclusion upon he did not say. A former second officer, one Garnett—a thoroughly disreputable sailor, who feared neither God, man nor devil—had tried to explain this matter to the captain on the watch, who, of course, in duty bound, said that the said attempted explanation was duly carried up to the captain. This led to some bickering and eventually to a vacancy in the second officer's cabin.

Since then the meaning of Mr. Enlis' enigma was left to work itself out among those who were unfortunate enough to have heard it.

"I don't want no more deadbeats with twisted ideas and a few second-hand ship's mates," said Captain Breeze the morning after the Northern Light had finished loading and was about to pull out of the river Plate.

"Aye, aye, sir," said Mr. Enlis, who sat at the end of the table.

"An' I don't want no remarks made forwards concernin' the running of this vessel, neither," continued the captain. "If I hear any more concernin' me or my affairs, I'll be some whangin' a-takin' a flog. D'ye take me for a fool, Mr. Enlis?"

"No, sir; you ain't no fool, an' that's a fact," said the mate.

"D'ye think I can't size up a man-or woman, either, for that matter—because I've trusted in one or two mate or female rascals, hey?"

"I never could say any such thing, cap'n," replied the mate penitently.

"I didn't ask you what ye did say," roared Jimmy Breeze, "I'm talkin' of what ye might say—if ye do—here he looked straight at Mr. Enlis and set his wide jaw tight until his large mouth drew into a line. Mr. Enlis looked meekly at the salt junk on his plate and said nothing. There was very little left to be said and he was satisfied to leave that little where it was.

"I'll have a second mate aboard before noon that'll be a credit to this here ship," continued the skipper, "so you'll be on the watch for him. He's a gentleman, that's what he is, an' a man I ain't ashamed of at the table—like some I know—or on the poop. An' besides that he don't talk too much. I got him up at Jackson's an' he's been captain o' one o' them bone vessels before."

"I once went out in a bone vessel," said Enlis by way of turning the subject, "an' I call to mind how the scorpions and centipedes took charge. There was more'n a million in the bones, an' everyone was bit. He'll be all right if he ever sailed in a bone ship, I reckon."

"You reckon he will do, hey?"

"Well, you've got another reckon. Reckon again. Don't go taking anything for granted aboard here, see?"

"If you mean for me to take him in hand, say so."

"I mean to have you do yer duty or whang yer hide loose. That's what," said Jimmy Breeze. As Mr. Enlis' duty was perfectly plain there was nothing more worth discussing. The meal ended in silence.

At four bells in the morning the crew had all been mustered and the new second mate had arrived. He was a tall man, thin and gaunt. His face was smooth shaven and the lack of beard disclosed a strangely angular jaw with many lines and creases about the mouth. His eyes looked out from straight brows and had a peculiar shifting quality, focusing for a moment upon the skipper and drawing to small glinting points, to instantly shift again and resume their apparent rest-less search for something. His voice had a harsh drawl, but he evidently had it well in hand, for, in spite of the grating sound, the words were gentle and the tone conciliatory.

"My forte is the running of a ship the way she should go," said Jimmy Breeze, after meeting him at the gangway. "If you know your business you'll be a credit to this here ship. My forte is running a ship without any extra advice from forwards, see? I know a thing or two about men when I see them an' I'll just make it known now that I'm the whole thing aboard here. This is Mr. Enlis, my first mate. There's a few more on the watch you get down on that main deck the better. You say you haven't any paper, or a discharge?"

The newcomer looked sharply at him with his glinting eyes, shifting them from mate to skipper while the new second mate spoke. "No, I haven't no mates' certificate, nor discharge. I'll have to go on tick, or be drawn slowly. When you get tired of me, put me ashore, hey? Ain't that it? Any passengers?"

"Well, I'll trust you. I know something about handling men, an' I reckon I know a good one when I see him. There's some passengers coming along, an' the rules is, politeness at all times. They ain't enemies of the company, an' they ain't no enemies treated that way, see?"

The new mate glanced quickly aft, but seeing no one on deck, he nodded to the skipper and declared that was the way he liked to hear a captain talk.

"An' now," said the skipper, "you turn to an' get to work bendin' them royals fore an' aft. We'll get to sea before night. My forte is getting away while the breeze holds, an' on time. A good start's a quick passage, see?"

By noon the royals were sent up and bent and the passengers all aboard. There were several of them. Three were coast traders bound to Rio, the bark's destination, and they were of the nondescript dago type, small, wiry men, dark hair, dark eyes, and having the cigarette habit while chattering noisily in bad Spanish. The other two were stout florid men with a clean-shaven, clerical face and his wife. They were evidently either English or American by their speech and general appearance, but long residence in South America had given both the air and accent of lassitude to their talk. The man had a way of looking benignly upon any one through gold-rimmed spectacles and kept this little dicker among ourselves. My forte is running a ship an' I don't want no owners a mixin' in the affairs of the cabin. You get your passage reduced one-half, see?"

"Of course," said Mr. Goodman, beaming upon him. "I never interfere with those in charge."

It is very unfortunate," said Mr. Goodman, "that I forgot to get money changed before coming aboard. I fear I shall have to buy a hundred worth of ships from you to start with." And he handed the captain a new note.

Jimmy Breeze held himself well in hand. He studied the note with care and passed it to his passenger.

"How many for 'em?" he asked Mr. Silveo.

"O, fifty is all I play," said that gentleman, passing his note and taking the change in the skipper's dirty bills.

"And you two?" he added to Hernandez and the second mate. They both took the same amount.

"If there's any one got any objection to my dealing let him speak out," growled Breeze, shuffling the cards and glancing in a menacing way around the table. No one spoke. He tossed off the pastebards and the game began in perfect silence.

"I guess I'll stand pat," said Mr. Goodman.

The second mate tossed off three cards and was followed by the dagoes, all making good.

Mr. Goodman smiled and moistened his lips.

"I suppose it would be wrong for me not to go to the limit," said he, passing the chips out. Jimmy Breeze raised him. The rest dropped out.

"Well, captain," said Mr. Goodman, "I don't want to rob you, but I can play this hand to heat. You better drop out. I've got you."

If there was one thing Jimmy Breeze hated it was instructions at cards.

"I don't want no information. Play cards," said he roughly.

"Will you drop the limit?" asked his passenger, beaming upon him over the rim of his glasses.

"Sure," growled Breeze. He had felt the pin hole distinctly, and knew his opponent held four kings.

"In that case I'll make it \$500 to play," said Mr. Goodman.

"An' I call at that," said Breeze, completely taken aback at the figure. He was not rich.

Mr. Goodman laid down his four kings and was about to take in the pot, when a hoarse guffaw from the skipper made him desist.

Jimmy Breeze laid down a straight flush.

"I declare, that's too bad," said Mr. Goodman, sadly, pulling out his purse and producing five bills of \$100 each. "That comes from playing careless at the beginning."

The game continued, but there was no more plunging. Nothing the skipper could do would draw his passenger into another wild play.

When the steward came in to fix the table for the evening meal the skipper had five \$100 bills to put away. To offset this, his second mate had \$150 in about \$9 notes, and Mr. Goodman had about \$30 in cash. The dagoes were slightly losers. The skipper was easily \$200 ahead of the game.

In the evening they went about the deck watching the dirty green of the shore water and the loom of the distant land to the westward. Mr. Hildebrand stood his watch out on the poop, quietly attending to the ship, and Jimmy Breeze had no fault to find.

The second and third day passed without extraordinary events, the game in the cabin being indulged in lightly between watches. Jimmy Breeze did not want to strike too soon.

The fourth day the land was made with a gentle breeze from the southward and the skipper knew he would make harbor before daylight failed. He played with such discretion that three more bills of \$100 each remained to his credit. Mr. Goodman had lost heavily and had apparently only about a hundred in small bills, formerly owned by the skipper. The second mate was equally unfortunate and retained only what small notes Mr. Hernandez had lost in the game.

"I want to say," said Captain Breeze, as the game ended, "that you fellows have played a mighty good game of cards. You, Mr. Goodman, plays like a man who knows the game. You must have played often before."

"Yes," smiled the penton passenger, "I've played a game or two in my time. Playing used to be my forte."

"I'm glad to hear ye say so," roared the skipper. "Sink me, if I don't, an' I'm glad to hear ye say ye were used to the game when ye lost so unfortunately. Blast me if I wouldn't rather give them notes back than hear ye say ye gave me none."

Mr. Goodman had a way of looking benignly upon any one through gold-rimmed spectacles and kept this little dicker among ourselves. My forte is running a ship an' I don't want no owners a mixin' in the affairs of the cabin. You get your passage reduced one-half, see?"

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came on deck and took his place in the stern sheets with the passengers, while two stowaways hid in the rigging.

The boat then started for the landing, and Mr. Enlis set all hands to work rolling up the canvas. Night fell and Captain Breeze came on deck and peered through the gloom for his boat.

"He ain't here," roared the skipper, "an' he ain't here," and the lights that had flickered along the water-front of the city began to disappear. Finally the sound of oars was heard approaching and the boat came alongside. It contained only the two sailors.

"Where's the second mate?" demanded Jimmy Breeze.

"Come up town, an' said not to wait. He's not comin' aboard again tonight," answered one of the men.

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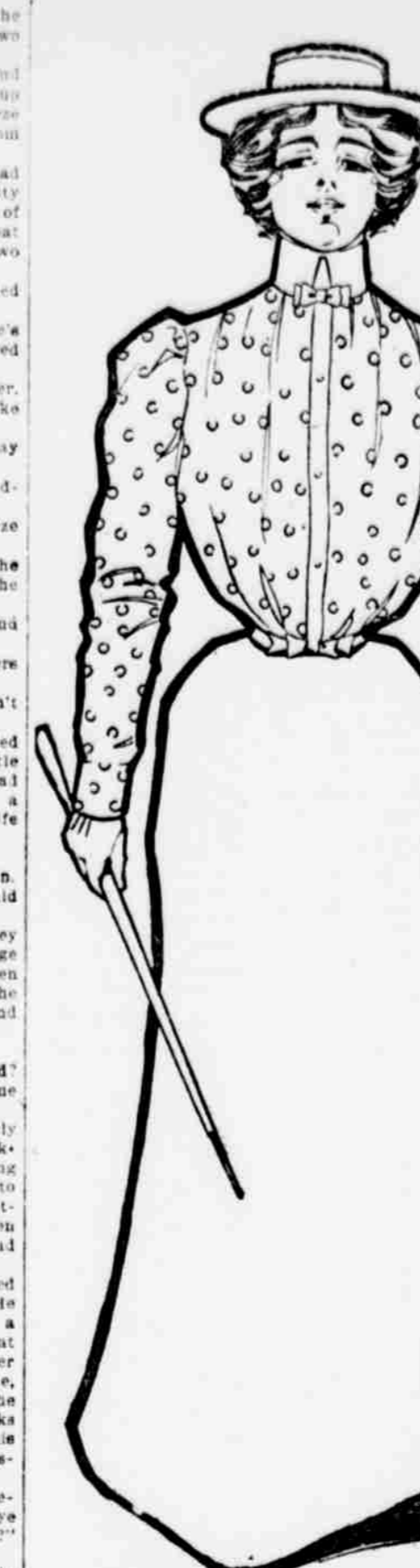
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