

... jelly-fish organism of great size glimmered up from the depths and softly exploded into lambent flame just under the surface. Even in so slight a swell, Shelton knew that the stern would be churning deep glories of slow-swirling light around the rudder, and he strolled aft to look. Rounding the sharp curve of the wheelhouse, he almost collided with the second mate, leaning over the rail. There was no mistaking the slumberous breath that issued from the lungs of that hawk-faced, slant-jawed inefficient. He was frankly, blatantly, unblushingly asleep.

Shelton backed out cautiously, not wishing to attract any attention from the man at the wheel. Going below, he wondered if he ought to say anything to the master. "No!" he decided. "Not in this weather, any how. . . . Besides, it's none of my business, and I guess my friend the skipper would n't thank me for showing him his."

So, wisely or unwisely, he had held his peace, and now thought he glimpsed his reward, or his vindication, whichever way he chose to regard it.

The wind briskened for an hour, and fell at sunset. The sun, a molten, seething ball, dropped below the horizon in a blaze of copper-red, leaving a ruddy glory on the purple, silken swell of an easing sea.

"Too bad, too bad!" the skipper murmured. "But mebbe I can carry out my

program tonight, and that'll be some consolation. — Now, Shelton," he said smilingly, "y'know you're signed on as third mate, and I ain't had no call to make use of your services up to now; but mebbe I can this very night."

With a careless glance around, to make sure they were not observed, he bent slightly toward his passenger and went on:

"This crowd's ben runnin' things pretty much to suit themselves in this here calm weather, as you've prob'ly noticed, an' I've got a scheme in my head that'll make the whole bunch of 'm that sick they won't want to shut their eyes again for the rest of the voyage. It'll wound their feelin's some, though," he pronounced quaintly. "Now, listen."

And here he unfolded a plan for the undoing as well as the disciplining of crew and officers, Shelton the while laughing under his breath as he nodded comprehension to each item of his instruction.

"An' of it wa'n't f'r that open-front wheelhouse we could n't do it," the captain concluded. "First time I ever see any good in it."

Thereafter, during supper and the period afterward on deck, the master manifested a blandness that went down the throats of all except his accomplice in the disgruntling fate that was to overtake them.

At eight o'clock Shelton gaped cavernously and declared it his intention to turn in.

"Reckon it's the best thing a man can do," approved the captain, likewise yawning, and shortly followed below. Putting his head in at Shelton's open doorway, he whispered:

"I think eleven o'clock will be about right. If everything's as I reckon it'll be, I'll rout you out, an' you go get the carpenter, you know. An' keep him quiet, mind; he's a mouthy critter, an' we must look out he don't spoil our fun."

Shelton dozed between the half-hour bells of the chart-room clock, which were repeated with exasperating fidelity by steersman and lookout. "Of all nights," he sweated, when six bells (eleven o'clock) had been faithfully rendered fore and aft. He dropped off again, and the next he knew was the striking of two bells from the wheelhouse.

"One o'clock—if it is n't five. Which is it?" He sat up to identify the dawn-seeming light that showed through the port-hole beside his bunk. It came from a dim moon behind an overcast sky. "It's one, all right," he thought, and waited on elbow for the bell from the fore-castle-head. None sounded. "Deado," he concluded; "but somebody's awake, else where's the old man?"

It was three o'clock when, after an-

other series of drowsings, he roused to a hand on his shoulder. Without a word he swung over the high bunk-side to the floor; then, in obedience to a beckoning gesture, slipped after the captain's flitting pajamas as far as the cabin, where he was halted.

"Safest to fetch him here, I think," the other directed. "He's stupid as a sheep, an' I may have a peck o' bother gettin' it through his head."

Four minutes later, Shelton piloted the bewildered worker in wood aft along the sleeping deck, and the captain explained, unmistakably, in reiterated words of one syllable, what was required. As the idea dawned in the carpenter's bucolic, infantile face, his mouth began to open for the guffaw his superiors dreaded. The captain's hand went over the gaping pit, and with a sharp whisper, "Shut up, now! Not a sound out o' you," shoved the subdued youth to the companionway.

Everything worked beautifully. The carpenter with his wrench turned the brass nut soundlessly, removed the massive tank wheel from under the nose of the sleeping steersman, and carried it to the rear of the wheelhouse. The captain showed Shelton where the mate sat, on the top trend of the poop-ladder, head drooped on slow-heaving chest. Then the captain took the grinning carpenter by the shoulders and started him forward on the narrow bridge with a last low-breathed order. A moment later, from the fore-castle-head, his wild yell broke upon the still air:

"HARD DOWN!! BREAKERS AHEAD!!!"

"Hard down! Breakers ahead!" shrieked the terrified voice of the awakened lookout.

"HARD DOWN!!!" bellowed the mate to the helmsman, springing on the poop with one bound.

From the main deck arose a confused babel of noise. The captain had disappeared. Shelton flattened himself against the chart-house, convulsed with suppressed laughter at a dazed and horrified Swede floundering midway across the greasy shaft, blindly pawing for the missing wheel, while stupidly he panted over and over: "Hard down, sir! Ay, sir! Hard down, sir!"

"Oh, criminy!" gasped a weak voice behind Shelton, as the captain lunged out of the chart-house and against the wall beside him, limp with mirth. "Oh, hear them—hear them!" he expired, as the hubbub of orders and their repetitions came from forward. "It could n't a ben better. Look at the fool," indicating the soul-sick creature in the wheelhouse, who had regained his feet and stood scratching his muddled head at the devastated steering apparatus. "Get into the chart-house, quick!" The captain pulled Shelton backward over the threshold. "Here comes the mate."

They glued their greedy eyes to the port-holes in the after-wall, and strained their delighted ears.

"What in thunder's happened here!" the furious officer barked. "What do you mean by this measly mess? You worthless son of a seacock!" He almost wept in impotent rage, growing more and more incensed as the real inwardness of the situation began to dawn upon him, and making the ill-starred sailor the scapegoat of his wrath.

"I don't know, sir," stammered the helpless steersman, cowering under the huge fist of the mate, who snarled: "I'll show—"

But a cool voice from the chart-house port-hole restrained him in mid-blow:

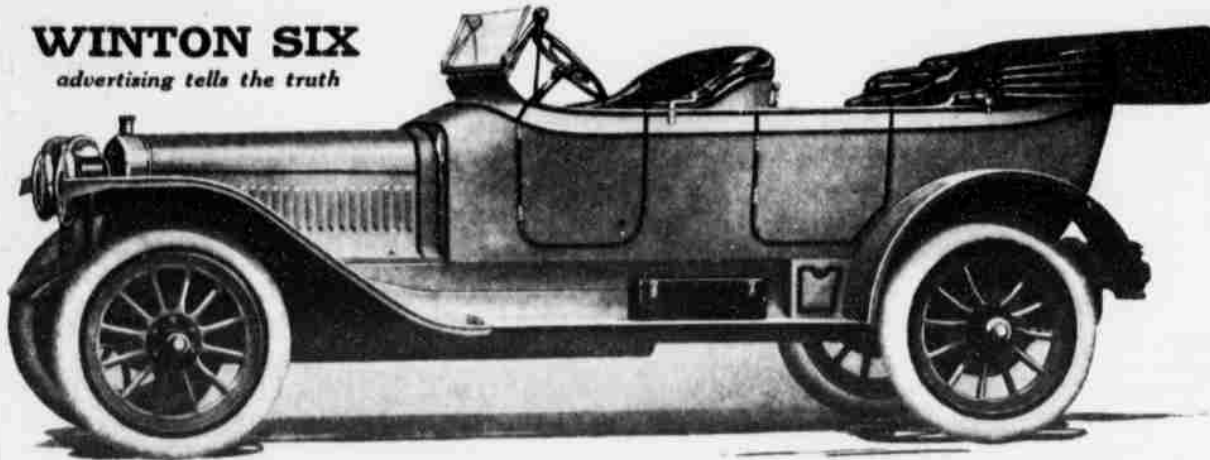
"It might do to look behind the wheelhouse for that there wheel, Mr. Wharton," the master advised; and taking Shelton by the arm, started him down the companionway. On the table in the middle of the roomy cabin showed a bottle that Shelton was at no trouble to recognize even in the dim light, and beside it two long glasses and a water pitcher. He turned up the lamp.

"I got it all ready," the captain said, drawing the cork. "Tw'd a-ben a shame to rub it in by stayin' any longer. . . . Say when!"

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