

Cap'n Warren's Wards

B. JOSEPH C. LINCOLN

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CHAPTER III—Continued.

"So? Want to know. Your husband dead, ma'am?"

"Yes," she answered shortly. "It looks as if it might know, doesn't it?" she said, changing the subject. "I shouldn't wonder. Have you any children, ma'am?"

"One—a son." The widow's tone was frigid.

"So? He must be a comfort to you. I suppose likely he's a friend of my nephew and niece too."

"Certainly!"

There came the sound of laughter from the passage outside. The hall door opened. A moment later Caroline, followed by her brother and young Dunn, entered the library.

"Oh, Mrs. Dunn!" Caroline cried. "I'm so glad I accepted your—"



"Well, well!" he exclaimed admiringly. "Bij's girl!"

colina's invitation. We had a glorious ride!"

"She stopped short. Captain Warren had risen from his chair and was facing her. Mrs. Dunn also rose.

"Caroline," she said nervously, "this—"

—pausing on the word—"gentleman is here to see me," she says to him.

The captain interrupted her. Stepping forward, he seized his niece's hands in his. "Well, well!" he exclaimed admiringly. "Bij's girl!"

He had seen since you was a little girl, of a baby! Caroline, I'm your Uncle Elsie!"

"Good Lord!" groaned Stephen Warren.

CHAPTER IV.

A Little Business Talk.

THE captain heard Stephen's fervent exclamation he paid no attention to it. Dropping his niece's hands, he extended his own toward his nephew.

"And this is Stephen?" he said. "Well, Steve, you and me have never met afore, I believe. But that's our misfortune, not our fault, hey? How are you—pretty smart?"

Caroline's face was flaming. He humbled something to the effect that he was all right enough and turned away without accepting the proffered hand.

Caroline glanced quickly at him, then at this sister.

"Well, Caroline," he said pleasantly, "I suppose you've been expectin' me. Mr. Graves told you I was comin', didn't he?"

Miss Warren also was flushed with embarrassment and mortified surprise.

"No," she stammered. "He has been ill."

"So, you don't say! So you didn't know I was comin' at all?"

"No. We—we have not heard from you since he returned."

"That's too bad. I hope I shan't put you out any, droppin' in on you this way. You mustn't treat me as company, you know. If I don't convenient, I'll get my spare room ain't ready so soon after movin', or anything of that kind. I can go to a hotel somewhere for a day or so. Hadn't I better, don't you think?"

Caroline hesitated. If only they might have been spared this public humiliation! If the Dunns had not been there! It was bad enough to have this dreadful country uncle come at all, but to have him come now, before they were prepared, before any explanations had been made! What should she do?

Her brother, gliding at her elbow, not daring to look at Malcolm Dunn, who he knew was thoroughly enjoying the scene, could stand it no longer.

"Caro," he snapped, "what are you waiting for? Don't you know that the reins are not ready? Of course they're not! We're sorry and all that, but Graves didn't tell us, and we aren't prepared. Certainly he'll have to go to the hotel for the present, but he'll be returned to raise his eyes and glare indignantly at the captain. Finding the latter looking intently at him he dropped them again and jammed his clenched fist into his pockets."

CAP'N WARREN GETS A COLD RECEPTION AT THE HANDS OF HIS YOUNG WARDS

Atrood Graves, New York lawyer, goes to South Denboro, Cape Cod, to see Captain Elsie Warren. Caught in a terrific storm while on the way, he meets Cap'n Warren by accident and goes with the latter to his home. The lawyer informs Cap'n Warren that his brother, whom he had not seen for eighteen years, had died and named him as guardian of his two children, Caroline and Stephen, aged twenty and nineteen. The captain tells Graves he will go to New York and look over the situation before deciding whether he will accept the trust. The captain's arrival in New York causes consternation among his wards and their aristocratic friends.

Captain Elsie pulled thoughtfully at his beard.

"Humph!" he grunted. "Humph! Then I calculate maybe I took a step toward the door, stopped, turned back and said with calm decision: 'I guess I'd better stay. You won't mind me, Caroline, you and Stephen. You mustn't.' As I said, I ain't a coward."

"One of the family, your pa's brother, and I've come some considerable ways to see you two young folks and talk with you. I've come because I've asked me to. You need to roughen it, been to see a good many 'rags, and if a feather-bed ain't handy I can get my forty winks on the floor. So that's settled, and you mustn't have no say in it. That's sense, ain't it, Mrs. Dunn?"

Mrs. Corcoran Dunn did not deign a reply. Caroline answered for her.

"Very well," she said, smiling. Stepping to the desk she rang a bell. The butler appeared in the doorway.

"Edwards," said Miss Warren, "this gentleman," indicating the captain, "is to be our guest for the present. You must show him to the room—the blue room, I think. If it is not ready see that it is made so."

"Yes, Miss Caroline," replied Edwards. Redirecting the hall, he returned with the suit case.

"Will you wish to go to your room at once, sir?" he asked.

"Why, I guess I might as well, commode," answered Captain Elsie, smiling. "Little son of a gun, he ain't go no harm. Fact is, I feel it 'twas a prescription to be recommended. You needn't take that value, though."

He added, "I've heard of you, and so far already seem I got off the car that I feel kind of lonesome without it."

The butler, not knowing exactly how to answer, turned sheepishly. Captain Elsie turned to Mrs. Dunn and said:

"Well, good afternoon, ma'am," he said. "I'm real glad to have made your acquaintance. Yours, too, sir, with a nod toward Malcolm."

He told me who a friend of the young folks you was and, as I'm sort of a collector for 'em just now, in a way of speakin', any friend of theirs ought to be a friend of mine. Hope to see you often, Mr. Dunn."

The young man addressed smiled, with amusement not at all concealed, and languidly admitted that he was "charmed."

When the captain finally departed, preceded by Edwards and the suit case, Stephen Warren threw himself violently into a chair by the window. Young Dunn laughed aloud. Elsie, who had dashed an impatient glance at him and then hurried to Caroline.

"You poor dear!" she exclaimed, putting an arm about the girl's shoulder. "Don't mind his glances, don't! Malcolm and I understand—that is, we know how you feel and that."

"Oh, but you don't know, Mrs. Dunn," cried Caroline, almost in tears. "You don't understand. It's so much worse than you think. I—I— Oh, why did father do it? How could he be so inconsiderate?"

"There, there!" purred the friend of the family. "You mustn't you know. You really mustn't! Who is this man?"

"This uncle? Where does he come from? Why does he force himself upon you in this way? I didn't know your poor father had a brother."

"Neither did we," growled Stephen savagely. Malcolm laughed aloud.

"What does it all mean, dear?"

"Don't mind his glances, don't! Malcolm and I understand—that is, we know how you feel and that."

"I'm sure," she said. "He has come to see us on a matter of business. I believe. I am sure of it. Malcolm and I suppose Mr. Graves will see us soon, and then everything will be arranged. Thank you for calling, Mrs. Dunn, and for the ride."

"Of course you plan him, but Mrs. Dunn did not choose to understand it as such."

"You're sure you hadn't better tell me the whole story, dear?" she urged.

"I am old enough almost to be your

mother, and perhaps my advice might—"

"No? Very well. You know best, but I understand that it is something about that mere curiosity which leads me to ask."

"Of course, I understand," said the girl hastily. "Thank you very much. I'll be glad to tell you all."

"I'm glad. But we must see Mr. Graves first. I—oh, don't ask me more now, Mrs. Dunn."

The widow of so astute a politician as Mike Dunn had been in his day and she had scarcely failed to profit by his teachings. Moreover, she possessed talent of her own. With a final pat and a kiss she prepared for departure.

After the pair had been shown to the Edwades, on the way home in the car Mrs. Corcoran Dunn lectured her son severely.

"Have you no common sense?" she asked. "Couldn't you see that the girl would have told you everything if you hadn't laughed like an idiot?"

The young man laughed again. "By Jove!" he exclaimed. "It was so funny to make a wooden Indian laugh. The old lady with the barnacles telling us about the advantages of a sailor's life. And Steve's face! Ho, ho!"

His mother scolded dispassionately. "Was it necessary to insult him the first time you and he exchanged a word?"

"Insult him? Him? Ha, ha! Do you imagine that a bayonet, like that would be as insulting as that?"

"You don't want water putting him on your calling list, do you?"

"I intend cultivating him for the present."

"Cultivating him?"

"Yes—for the present. He is Rodgers Warren's brother. That lawyer, Graves, traveled miles to see him. What does that mean? That in some important way he is connected with the estate and those two children. If the estate is worth anything, and we have reason to believe it is, you and I must know it. It isn't it is even more important that we should know before we waste more time. If Caroline is an heiress, if she inherits even a moderate fortune—"

He suggested her shoulders by way of finishing the sentence.

When Captain Elsie emerged from his room after a wash and change of linen, he found the library unoccupied. He looked about his hands behind him, inspecting the pictures with critical interest. Caroline dressed for dinner, found him thus engaged. He turned at the sound of her step.

"What's that?" he cried, with hearty enthusiasm. "All rigged up for inspection, ain't you?"

"Inspection?"

"Oh, that's just sailor's lingo. Means 'you've got your Sunday uniform on. That's all, my M!' How nice new you look! But ain't black pretty old for such a young girl?"

"I am in mourning," replied his niece coldly.

"There, there! Of course you are. Tut, tut! How could I forget it. You see, I've been so many years feelin' as if I didn't have a brother that I've sort of got used to his bel's gone."

"I have not." Her eyes glided at she said it. The captain was greatly moved.

"I'm a blunderin' old fool, my dear," he said. "I'm your uncle. Do try to forgive me, won't you? And, perhaps—perhaps I can make up your loss to you just a little mite. I'd like to. I'll try to it."

He leaped a hand on her shoulder. She avoided him, and moving away, seated herself in a chair at the opposite side of the desk. The avoidance was so obvious as to be almost brutal. Captain Elsie looked very grave for an instant. Then he changed the subject.

After some further conversation, during which Caroline was plainly ill at ease, dinner was announced. When the captain in his quaint way described to Caroline and Steve how he found his way in New York Caroline was bored, and Steve was almost brutal with his sister. "For the hundredth time Caroline asked Steve what had prompted her father to make the captain their guardian."

After breakfast the next morning came the "business talk." It was a brief one. Captain Elsie said she discovered that his brother's children knew very little concerning their father's affairs. They had always plenty of money had been indulged in practically every wish and had never had to think or plan for themselves. As to the size of the estate, they knew nothing. He hoped that Mr. Graves had told them, which was that, instead of the several millions which rumor had credited to the estate.

He added that his former home and moved to the apartment.

"I don't know," said the captain; "I see Mr. Graves didn't know about your movin', then? You did it on your own hook, so to speak?"

Stephen answered proudly.

"Of course you did," he declared. "Why not?"

"No reason in the world. A good sensible thing to do, I should say. Didn't anybody advise you where to go?"

"Why should we need advice?" Again

it was Stephen who replied: "We aren't kids. We're old enough to decide some things for ourselves, I should think."

"Yes; sartin. That's right. But I didn't know but praps some of your friends might have helped along. This Mrs. Dunn now, she kind of hinted to me that she'd—well, done what she could to make you comfortable."

"She has," avowed Caroline warmly. "Mrs. Dunn and Malcolm have proved their friendship in a thousand ways. We never can repay them, Stephen and I, never."

"No. There's some things you can't ever say. I know that. Mrs. Dunn found this nice place for you, did she?"

"Why, yes. Mrs. Dunn knew that we had decided to move, and she has a cousin who is interested in New York property. She asked him, and he mentioned this apartment."

"One of his own, was it?"

"I believe so. Why are you so particular? Don't you like it?"

"Isn't it as good as those in—what do you call it—South Denboro?" Stephen asked maliciously.

Captain Elsie laughed heartily. "Pretty much as good," he said. "I didn't notice any better on the way to the depot as I drove up. What's the rent? You'll excuse my askin', things bein' as they are."

"Twenty-two hundred a year," answered his niece coldly.

The captain looked at her, whistled, broke off the whistle in the middle and did a little mental arithmetic.

"Twenty-two hundred a year!" he repeated. "That's one hundred and eighty odd a month. Say, that cousin of Mrs. Dunn's must want to get his investment back. You must for just these ten rooms!"

Stephen laughed scornfully. "Our guardian has been counting, Caro?" he remarked.

"Yes. Yes. I counted this mornin' when I got up. I was interested naturally."

"Sure! Naturally, of course," sneered the boy. "Did you think the twenty-two hundred was the rent of the entire building?"

"Well, I didn't know. I—"

"The rent," interrupted Caroline with dignity, "was twenty-four hundred, but thanks to Mrs. Dunn, who explained to her cousin that we were friends of hers, it was reduced."

"We being in reduced circumstances," observed her brother's supposititious guest. "Pity the poor orphans! By gosh!"

"That was real nice of Mrs. Dunn," declared Captain Elsie heartily. "About how much is the rent, do you think?"

"I don't know. I never inquired."

"No. Well, down our way," said a chuckle, "we don't have to inquire. Ask 'em, and they'll tell you."

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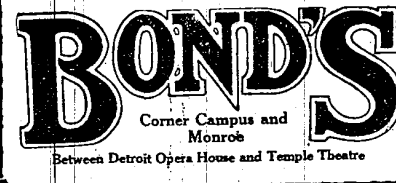
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