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**THE NEAREST THING.**

[Gilbert Dale, in London M. A. P.]  
On the white buildings that constituted the quarters of the Universe Telegraph company's station at the corner of the tropical sun was blazing down. It was called Marenzo, though as a matter of fact a distance of three miles separated it from the little Portuguese town inland, from which the station took its name.  
In the dim light of the living room were two young men. One was stretched full length on a sofa; his eyes were closed. The other reclined in a basket chair, his feet propped up on a stool. A bottle of spirits stood on a table close by. He stretched forward a trembling hand and poured out half a brickenden, the man on the sofa, opened his eyes. He shivered slightly. "Thank heaven, I'm through with this week's dose," he exclaimed. "What a first-class all-around joy is intermittent fever!" Then his eyes fell on his companion, who was sitting at the table with his glass to his lips. "Here, go easy, Stavvy," he cried. "That's the third since lunch, and it don't do in a sweet, lovable climate like this! You'll have to stop it, old son, else—well, it is equivalent to going out by your own hand, that's all."  
Stavvy gulped down half the brandy. He was a young man of about 23, with strikingly handsome features. Fever and hard drinking, however, had taken their toll, and his eyes were sunken and red rimmed, the cheeks hollowed, the face haggard and worn.  
"There doesn't seem to be any particular drawback to going out by my own hand at present," he remarked. "No, I'm durned if there does!" he added thoughtfully.  
Brickenden raised himself on the sofa and looked across at his friend.  
"I admit Marenzo is a bit 'nervy' at times, and about the worst of the station," he said slowly. "But it wouldn't tot up to your present condition, all by its sweet self." He paused. "I suppose there are a few other things, among them the usual thing. And the bits didn't fit in nicely, eh?"  
Stavvy tossed down the remaining brandy.  
"It was impossible in any case," he said jerkily. Then he broke into a harsh laugh. "I've never told you my habit of doing it, you know."  
He got up from his seat shakily, and leaned against the edge of the sofa. Brickenden watched him from the corner of his eye, but said nothing.  
"It's quite like a two-penny novelty," began Stavvy, rolling a cigarette meditatively. "My mother made a run-away match with a poor devil of an artist. She was a woman of title, and belonged to a noble family, who promptly disowned her for daring to marry the man she loved. She was absolutely cut off; her name was never to be mentioned again in the family. The artist, my father, worked hard, and managed to keep her in modest but comfortable circumstances. They loved one another and I don't think she ever regretted the step she had taken." Stavvy paused.  
"Then when I was about fifteen, I found myself an orphan, with an odd hand, had been the navy, and a friend wrote to my uncle, who was a lord of the manor, to know if he would help me. The dear gentleman replied that, as he refused to recognize his sister, so he must refuse to recognize her son. The U. T. C. service, and put me in the way of going through the course."  
"But," interposed Brickenden, "what about the impossible thing—the incident which has caused you to adopt drinking brandy neat as your favorite recreation?"  
Stavvy wetted his dry lips.  
"After putting in my five years at Calcut Point, I went home. I was a pretty good time knocking around. In the midst of it, I went to Cowes for the regatta week. I ran against some decent people who invited me on their yacht."  
"It was my father's case over again, but without his means to carry it to an issue. She was clean above me, and I loved her. It was a mad time." He sighed softly at the recollection. Then he jerked his head back and laughed bitterly.  
"And as I was getting \$2 a month for working a cable end in a foreign hole, and not good for anything else—good as it was utterly impossible—so I just her what had to be, and went. They appointed me to Marenzo, and here I've been for six months, cursing my luck every minute, she is in my thoughts. I can't have her, I never can! So that's why I don't particularly care whether I go out or not!" he finished abruptly.  
Brickenden had risen from his seat, and crushed a wide straw hat on his head. He made no comment on the story, but merely glanced at his watch.  
"My turn on; so long, old son!" he said laconically, as he strode away.  
Outside, however, his expression changed.  
"Poor old Stavvy!" he murmured. "He's Jumpy! A little more thinking about that girl, and he'll come one of the nastiest kinds of croppers. I must do something to help him."  
Presently Rennieck, the senior, poked his head into the room in which Stavvy was sitting.  
"The turbulent has just anchored off the point!" he announced. "And I've signaled 'em to come up. So we'll be having a bit of spree tonight! I'm off to stir up that black-faced, loathsome devil of a cook!" And he vanished.  
Another couple of hours and a batch of the youngest officers of H. M. S. Turbulent invaded the quarters. They had been there before, and their arrival was always welcomed by the U. T. C. men, as the night drew on they gathered around the tinkly station piano and made merry over songs that were comic in name and noisy in chorus.  
Quietly in the evening Stavvy had made a discovery. There was a newcomer, a lieutenant who had lately joined the ship. The midshipman referred to him as the "Onorable 'Erbert." His proper name was the Hon. Herbert Haylesden, and he was a grave-looking young man with a somewhat pompous manner. Stavvy had never "met" before, he at once recognized him. The "Onorable 'Erbert" glanced curiously at him; they shook hands rather stiffly and turned away. After this incident Stavvy resumed his drinking, and attempted, in vain, to succeed, to throw himself into the gaiety of the evening. Presently he rose from his seat. It was time for him to go on duty. He said good night to the party at the piano.  
"See you tomorrow, old chap!" they chorused. "You're coming on board, you know!"  
He made his way out into the night. The red eyes gleamed with a sudden passion.  
"He knew me! My own cousin, yet I'm only the 'U. T. C. man' to him, a casual acquaintance he can't escape from meeting. Curse him!"  
He stumbled along the little path that led to the operating room and relieved Brickenden, who had been eagerly waiting for him.  
For the first hour he was kept pretty busy at the instrument. There had been a block on one of the southern cables, and Port John messages were coming over their line. With his head burning, his throat parched, he worked mechanically. He was transmitting a message when a knock in it caused him to start. It was to a firm of Port John lawyers, and it ran: "Inform Lieutenant Haylesden sudden death of father; must return home immediately."  
He sent the message along, then sank back in his chair, his brain a-whirl. Lord Haylesden was dead, and his only son, now smoking placidly in the quarters not a hundred yards away, would reign in his stead. Stavvy ground his teeth. "I think that this man should have everything, while he—And now he came to think of it, this young lieutenant was the only man between him and the title. If he had died, Dick Stavvy, the telegraph operator, would have stepped into it all—would have been able to marry the one woman who—! He pressed his hand, his face flushed. His head was throbbing violently, the blood that coursed through his veins seemed to be on fire. If he had died—if he died now! The mad idea flashed upon him. He turned away with a shudder and tried to forget it.  
A relieved him. Pale and disheveled, his eyes burning like hot coal, Stavvy staggered back to the quarters. Once in his room, he pulled a big leather trunk from its corner, and rummaged feverishly around its contents. Finally he pulled out a tiny glass bottle. In it was about a teaspoonful of colorless liquid. He held it up and gazed at it with a wild look.  
"It would be safe—absolutely safe!" he muttered hoarsely.  
The turbulent, resplendent in her white awnings and gleaming decks, was lying motionless on the calm sea. In the smoking room a small group of officers were chatting and laughing. Together, on one side of the table, sat Brickenden and Stavvy—the latter opposite Lieutenant Haylesden, who at that moment was sipping a glass of whisky.  
"The gig's coming in!" cried one of the officers, glancing out of the port-hole. Haylesden put down his whisky and jumped up.  
"Start in a minute," he said, hurrying away on deck. Then one of the officers noted something curious about the boat and commented on it. They all stood up and crowded around the port-hole, Brickenden with them.  
"Stavvy did not move. He shot a glance at their backs. A look of cunning glittered. The next moment his hand had slipped to his pocket and withdrawn something. With his eye still on the back of the hand he held steadily, he poured into it. Then his hand went back to his pocket, and he rose to his feet, and watched with the others. His hands were clenched so that the nails dug into the flesh.  
They resumed themselves and resumed their talk. Stavvy felt his eyes drawn irresistibly to the deadly glass in front of him. He shuddered convulsively. With a superhuman effort he turned away and joined in the conversation, talking in a high-pitched tone and laughing. Brickenden gazed at him in wonder.  
There was a sudden crash on the deck above their heads, followed by a cry. Some of the officers jumped to their feet.  
Then a midshipman came clattering down to them. He thrust a white face into the smoking room.  
"An accident," he gasped. "They had swung the gig in, when the tackle gave way, and she fell from the bow; the back of the head—killed him!" finished the youngster, in a tone of awe. The officers raised away. The two U. T. C. men remained alone.  
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