

Chance - A Tale in Two Parts

by

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I.1. Young Powell And His Chance	3
I.2. The Fynes And The Girl-Friend	22
I.3. Thrift--And The Child.....	41
I.4. The Governess	58
I.5. The Tea-Party	78
I.6 Flora.....	96
I.7. On The Pavement.....	115
II.1. The Ferndale	150
II.2. Young Powell Sees And Hears.....	159
II.3. Devoted Servants--And The Light Of A Flare	172
II.4. Anthony And Flora	189
II.5. The Great De Barral	203
II.6. A Moonless Night, Thick With Stars Above, Very Dark On The Water	235

I.1. Young Powell And His Chance

PART I--The Damsel

I believe he had seen us out of the window coming off to dine in the dinghy of a fourteen-ton yawl belonging to Marlow my host and skipper. We helped the boy we had with us to haul the boat up on the landing-stage before we went up to the riverside inn, where we found our new acquaintance eating his dinner in dignified loneliness at the head of a long table, white and inhospitable like a snow bank.

The red tint of his clear-cut face with trim short black whiskers under a cap of curly iron-grey hair was the only warm spot in the dinginess of that room cooled by the cheerless tablecloth. We knew him already by sight as the owner of a little five-ton cutter, which he sailed alone apparently, a fellow yachtsman in the unpretending band of fanatics who cruise at the mouth of the Thames. But the first time he addressed the waiter sharply as 'steward' we knew him at once for a sailor as well as a yachtsman.

Presently he had occasion to reprove that same waiter for the slovenly manner in which the dinner was served. He did it with considerable energy and then turned to us.

"If we at sea," he declared, "went about our work as people ashore high and low go about theirs we should never make a living. No one would employ us. And moreover no ship navigated and sailed in the happy-go-lucky manner people conduct their business on shore would ever arrive into port."

Since he had retired from the sea he had been astonished to discover that the educated people were not much better than the others. No one seemed to take any proper pride in his work: from plumbers who were simply thieves to, say, newspaper men (he seemed to think them a specially intellectual class) who never by any chance gave a correct version of the simplest affair. This universal inefficiency of what he called "the shore gang" he ascribed in general to the want of responsibility and to a sense of security.

"They see," he went on, "that no matter what they do this tight little island won't turn turtle with them or spring a leak and go to the bottom with their wives and children."

From this point the conversation took a special turn relating exclusively to sea-life. On that subject he got quickly in touch with Marlow who in his time had followed the sea. They kept up a lively exchange of reminiscences while I listened. They agreed that the happiest time in their lives was as youngsters in good ships, with no care in the world but not to lose a watch below when at sea and not a moment's time in going ashore after work hours when in harbour. They agreed also as to the proudest moment they had known in that calling which is never embraced on rational and practical grounds, because of the glamour of its romantic associations. It was the moment when they had

passed successfully their first examination and left the seamanship Examiner with the little precious slip of blue paper in their hands.

"That day I wouldn't have called the Queen my cousin," declared our new acquaintance enthusiastically.

At that time the Marine Board examinations took place at the St. Katherine's Dock House on Tower Hill, and he informed us that he had a special affection for the view of that historic locality, with the Gardens to the left, the front of the Mint to the right, the miserable tumble-down little houses farther away, a cabstand, boot-blacks squatting on the edge of the pavement and a pair of big policemen gazing with an air of superiority at the doors of the Black Horse public-house across the road. This was the part of the world, he said, his eyes first took notice of, on the finest day of his life. He had emerged from the main entrance of St. Katherine's Dock House a full-fledged second mate after the hottest time of his life with Captain R-, the most dreaded of the three seamanship Examiners who at the time were responsible for the merchant service officers qualifying in the Port of London.

"We all who were preparing to pass," he said, "used to shake in our shoes at the idea of going before him. He kept me for an hour and a half in the torture chamber and behaved as though he hated me. He kept his eyes shaded with one of his hands. Suddenly he let it drop saying, "You will do!" Before I realised what he meant he was pushing the blue slip across the table. I jumped up as if my chair had caught fire.

"Thank you, sir," says I, grabbing the paper.

"Good morning, good luck to you," he growls at me.

"The old doorkeeper fussed out of the cloak-room with my hat. They always do. But he looked very hard at me before he ventured to ask in a sort of timid whisper: "Got through all right, sir?" For all answer I dropped a half-crown into his soft broad palm. "Well," says he with a sudden grin from ear to ear, "I never knew him keep any of you gentlemen so long. He failed two second mates this morning before your turn came. Less than twenty minutes each: that's about his usual time."

"I found myself downstairs without being aware of the steps as if I had floated down the staircase. The finest day in my life. The day you get your first command is nothing to it. For one thing a man is not so young then and for another with us, you know, there is nothing much more to expect. Yes, the finest day of one's life, no doubt, but then it is just a day and no more. What comes after is about the most unpleasant time for a youngster, the trying to get an officer's berth with nothing much to show but a brand-new certificate. It is surprising how useless you find that piece of ass's skin that you have been putting yourself in such a state about. It didn't strike me at the time that a Board of Trade certificate does not make an officer, not by a long long way. But the slippers of the ships I was haunting with demands for a job knew that very well. I don't

wonder at them now, and I don't blame them either. But this 'trying to get a ship' is pretty hard on a youngster all the same . . . "

He went on then to tell us how tired he was and how discouraged by this lesson of disillusion following swiftly upon the finest day of his life. He told us how he went the round of all the ship-owners' offices in the City where some junior clerk would furnish him with printed forms of application which he took home to fill up in the evening. He used to run out just before midnight to post them in the nearest pillar-box. And that was all that ever came of it. In his own words: he might just as well have dropped them all properly addressed and stamped into the sewer grating.

Then one day, as he was wending his weary way to the docks, he met a friend and former shipmate a little older than himself outside the Fenchurch Street Railway Station.

He craved for sympathy but his friend had just "got a ship" that very morning and was hurrying home in a state of outward joy and inward uneasiness usual to a sailor who after many days of waiting suddenly gets a berth. This friend had the time to condole with him but briefly. He must be moving. Then as he was running off, over his shoulder as it were, he suggested: "Why don't you go and speak to Mr. Powell in the Shipping Office." Our friend objected that he did not know Mr. Powell from Adam. And the other already pretty near round the corner shouted back advice: "Go to the private door of the Shipping Office and walk right up to him. His desk is by the window. Go up boldly and say I sent you."

Our new acquaintance looking from one to the other of us declared: "Upon my word, I had grown so desperate that I'd have gone boldly up to the devil himself on the mere hint that he had a second mate's job to give away."

It was at this point that interrupting his flow of talk to light his pipe but holding us with his eye he inquired whether we had known Powell. Marlow with a slight reminiscent smile murmured that he "remembered him very well."

Then there was a pause. Our new acquaintance had become involved in a vexatious difficulty with his pipe which had suddenly betrayed his trust and disappointed his anticipation of self-indulgence. To keep the ball rolling I asked Marlow if this Powell was remarkable in any way.

"He was not exactly remarkable," Marlow answered with his usual nonchalance. "In a general way it's very difficult for one to become remarkable. People won't take sufficient notice of one, don't you know. I remember Powell so well simply because as one of the Shipping Masters in the Port of London he dispatched me to sea on several long stages of my sailor's pilgrimage. He resembled Socrates. I mean he resembled him genuinely: that is in the face. A philosophical mind is but an accident. He reproduced exactly the familiar bust of the immortal sage, if you will imagine the bust with a high top hat riding far on the back of the head, and a black coat over the shoulders. As I never saw him

except from the other side of the long official counter bearing the five writing desks of the five Shipping Masters, Mr. Powell has remained a bust to me."

Our new acquaintance advanced now from the mantelpiece with his pipe in good working order.

"What was the most remarkable about Powell," he enunciated dogmatically with his head in a cloud of smoke, "is that he should have had just that name. You see, my name happens to be Powell too."

It was clear that this intelligence was not imparted to us for social purposes. It required no acknowledgment. We continued to gaze at him with expectant eyes.

He gave himself up to the vigorous enjoyment of his pipe for a silent minute or two. Then picking up the thread of his story he told us how he had started hot foot for Tower Hill. He had not been that way since the day of his examination--the finest day of his life--the day of his overweening pride. It was very different now. He would not have called the Queen his cousin, still, but this time it was from a sense of profound abasement. He didn't think himself good enough for anybody's kinship. He envied the purple-nosed old cab-drivers on the stand, the boot-black boys at the edge of the pavement, the two large bobbies pacing slowly along the Tower Gardens railings in the consciousness of their infallible might, and the bright scarlet sentries walking smartly to and fro before the Mint. He envied them their places in the scheme of world's labour. And he envied also the miserable sallow, thin-faced loafers blinking their obscene eyes and rubbing their greasy shoulders against the door-jambes of the Black Horse pub, because they were too far gone to feel their degradation.

I must render the man the justice that he conveyed very well to us the sense of his youthful hopelessness surprised at not finding its place in the sun and no recognition of its right to live.

He went up the outer steps of St. Katherine's Dock House, the very steps from which he had some six weeks before surveyed the cabstand, the buildings, the policemen, the boot-blacks, the paint, gilt, and plateglass of the Black Horse, with the eye of a Conqueror. At the time he had been at the bottom of his heart surprised that all this had not greeted him with songs and incense, but now (he made no secret of it) he made his entry in a slinking fashion past the doorkeeper's glass box. "I hadn't any half-crowns to spare for tips," he remarked grimly. The man, however, ran out after him asking: "What do you require?" but with a grateful glance up at the first floor in remembrance of Captain R-'s examination room (how easy and delightful all that had been) he bolted down a flight leading to the basement and found himself in a place of dusk and mystery and many doors. He had been afraid of being stopped by some rule of no-admittance. However he was not pursued.

The basement of St. Katherine's Dock House is vast in extent and confusing in its plan. Pale shafts of light slant from above into the gloom of its chilly passages. Powell

wandered up and down there like an early Christian refugee in the catacombs; but what little faith he had in the success of his enterprise was oozing out at his finger-tips. At a dark turn under a gas bracket whose flame was half turned down his self-confidence abandoned him altogether.

"I stood there to think a little," he said. "A foolish thing to do because of course I got scared. What could you expect? It takes some nerve to tackle a stranger with a request for a favour. I wished my namesake Powell had been the devil himself. I felt somehow it would have been an easier job. You see, I never believed in the devil enough to be scared of him; but a man can make himself very unpleasant. I looked at a lot of doors, all shut tight, with a growing conviction that I would never have the pluck to open one of them. Thinking's no good for one's nerve. I concluded I would give up the whole business. But I didn't give up in the end, and I'll tell you what stopped me. It was the recollection of that confounded doorkeeper who had called after me. I felt sure the fellow would be on the look-out at the head of the stairs. If he asked me what I had been after, as he had the right to do, I wouldn't know what to answer that wouldn't make me look silly if no worse. I got very hot. There was no chance of slinking out of this business.

"I had lost my bearings somehow down there. Of the many doors of various sizes, right and left, a good few had glazed lights above; some however must have led merely into lumber rooms or such like, because when I brought myself to try one or two I was disconcerted to find that they were locked. I stood there irresolute and uneasy like a baffled thief. The confounded basement was as still as a grave and I became aware of my heart beats. Very uncomfortable sensation. Never happened to me before or since. A bigger door to the left of me, with a large brass handle looked as if it might lead into the Shipping Office. I tried it, setting my teeth. "Here goes!"

"It came open quite easily. And lo! the place it opened into was hardly any bigger than a cupboard. Anyhow it wasn't more than ten feet by twelve; and as I in a way expected to see the big shadowy cellar-like extent of the Shipping Office where I had been once or twice before, I was extremely startled. A gas bracket hung from the middle of the ceiling over a dark, shabby writing-desk covered with a litter of yellowish dusty documents. Under the flame of the single burner which made the place ablaze with light, a plump, little man was writing hard, his nose very near the desk. His head was perfectly bald and about the same drab tint as the papers. He appeared pretty dusty too.

"I didn't notice whether there were any cobwebs on him, but I shouldn't wonder if there were because he looked as though he had been imprisoned for years in that little hole. The way he dropped his pen and sat blinking my way upset me very much. And his dungeon was hot and musty; it smelt of gas and mushrooms, and seemed to be somewhere 120 feet below the ground. Solid, heavy stacks of paper filled all the corners half-way up to the ceiling. And when the thought flashed upon me that these were the premises of the Marine Board and that this fellow must be connected in some way with ships and sailors and the sea, my astonishment took my breath away. One couldn't imagine why the Marine Board should keep that bald, fat creature slaving down there.

For some reason or other I felt sorry and ashamed to have found him out in his wretched captivity. I asked gently and sorrowfully: "The Shipping Office, please."

He piped up in a contemptuous squeaky voice which made me start: "Not here. Try the passage on the other side. Street side. This is the Dock side. You've lost your way . . . "

He spoke in such a spiteful tone that I thought he was going to round off with the words: "You fool" . . . and perhaps he meant to. But what he finished sharply with was: "Shut the door quietly after you."

And I did shut it quietly--you bet. Quick and quiet. The indomitable spirit of that chap impressed me. I wonder sometimes whether he has succeeded in writing himself into liberty and a pension at last, or had to go out of his gas-lighted grave straight into that other dark one where nobody would want to intrude. My humanity was pleased to discover he had so much kick left in him, but I was not comforted in the least. It occurred to me that if Mr. Powell had the same sort of temper . . . However, I didn't give myself time to think and scuttled across the space at the foot of the stairs into the passage where I'd been told to try. And I tried the first door I came to, right away, without any hanging back, because coming loudly from the hall above an amazed and scandalized voice wanted to know what sort of game I was up to down there. "Don't you know there's no admittance that way?" it roared. But if there was anything more I shut it out of my hearing by means of a door marked PRIVATE on the outside. It let me into a six-foot wide strip between a long counter and the wall, taken off a spacious, vaulted room with a grated window and a glazed door giving daylight to the further end. The first thing I saw right in front of me were three middle-aged men having a sort of romp together round about another fellow with a thin, long neck and sloping shoulders who stood up at a desk writing on a large sheet of paper and taking no notice except that he grinned quietly to himself. They turned very sour at once when they saw me. I heard one of them mutter 'Hullo! What have we here?'

"I want to see Mr. Powell, please," I said, very civil but firm; I would let nothing scare me away now. This was the Shipping Office right enough. It was after 3 o'clock and the business seemed over for the day with them. The long-necked fellow went on with his writing steadily. I observed that he was no longer grinning. The three others tossed their heads all together towards the far end of the room where a fifth man had been looking on at their antics from a high stool. I walked up to him as boldly as if he had been the devil himself. With one foot raised up and resting on the cross-bar of his seat he never stopped swinging the other which was well clear of the stone floor. He had unbuttoned the top of his waistcoat and he wore his tall hat very far at the back of his head. He had a full unwrinkled face and such clear-shining eyes that his grey beard looked quite false on him, stuck on for a disguise. You said just now he resembled Socrates--didn't you? I don't know about that. This Socrates was a wise man, I believe?"

"He was," assented Marlow. "And a true friend of youth. He lectured them in a peculiarly exasperating manner. It was a way he had."

"Then give me Powell every time," declared our new acquaintance sturdily. "He didn't lecture me in any way. Not he. He said: 'How do you do?' quite kindly to my mumble. Then says he looking very hard at me: 'I don't think I know you--do I?'"

"No, sir," I said and down went my heart sliding into my boots, just as the time had come to summon up all my cheek. There's nothing meaner in the world than a piece of impudence that isn't carried off well. For fear of appearing shamefaced I started about it so free and easy as almost to frighten myself. He listened for a while looking at my face with surprise and curiosity and then held up his hand. I was glad enough to shut up, I can tell you.

"Well, you are a cool hand," says he. "And that friend of yours too. He pestered me coming here every day for a fortnight till a captain I'm acquainted with was good enough to give him a berth. And no sooner he's provided for than he turns you on. You youngsters don't seem to mind whom you get into trouble."

"It was my turn now to stare with surprise and curiosity. He hadn't been talking loud but he lowered his voice still more.

"Don't you know it's illegal?"

"I wondered what he was driving at till I remembered that procuring a berth for a sailor is a penal offence under the Act. That clause was directed of course against the swindling practices of the boarding-house crimps. It had never struck me it would apply to everybody alike no matter what the motive, because I believed then that people on shore did their work with care and foresight.

"I was confounded at the idea, but Mr. Powell made me soon see that an Act of Parliament hasn't any sense of its own. It has only the sense that's put into it; and that's precious little sometimes. He didn't mind helping a young man to a ship now and then, he said, but if we kept on coming constantly it would soon get about that he was doing it for money.

"A pretty thing that would be: the Senior Shipping-Master of the Port of London hauled up in a police court and fined fifty pounds," says he. "I've another four years to serve to get my pension. It could be made to look very black against me and don't you make any mistake about it," he says.

"And all the time with one knee well up he went on swinging his other leg like a boy on a gate and looking at me very straight with his shining eyes. I was confounded I tell you. It made me sick to hear him imply that somebody would make a report against him.

"Oh!" I asked shocked, "who would think of such a scurvy trick, sir?" I was half disgusted with him for having the mere notion of it.

"Who?" says he, speaking very low. "Anybody. One of the office messengers maybe. I've risen to be the Senior of this office and we are all very good friends here, but don't you think that my colleague that sits next to me wouldn't like to go up to this desk by the window four years in advance of the regulation time? Or even one year for that matter. It's human nature."

"I could not help turning my head. The three fellows who had been skylarking when I came in were now talking together very soberly, and the long-necked chap was going on with his writing still. He seemed to me the most dangerous of the lot. I saw him sideface and his lips were set very tight. I had never looked at mankind in that light before. When one's young human nature shocks one. But what startled me most was to see the door I had come through open slowly and give passage to a head in a uniform cap with a Board of Trade badge. It was that blamed old doorkeeper from the hall. He had run me to earth and meant to dig me out too. He walked up the office smirking craftily, cap in hand.

"What is it, Symons?" asked Mr. Powell.

"I was only wondering where this 'ere gentleman 'ad gone to, sir. He slipped past me upstairs, sir."

I felt mighty uncomfortable.

"That's all right, Symons. I know the gentleman," says Mr. Powell as serious as a judge.

"Very well, sir. Of course, sir. I saw the gentleman running races all by 'isself down 'ere, so I . . ."

"It's all right I tell you," Mr. Powell cut him short with a wave of his hand; and, as the old fraud walked off at last, he raised his eyes to me. I did not know what to do: stay there, or clear out, or say that I was sorry.

"Let's see," says he, "what did you tell me your name was?"

"Now, observe, I hadn't given him my name at all and his question embarrassed me a bit. Somehow or other it didn't seem proper for me to fling his own name at him as it were. So I merely pulled out my new certificate from my pocket and put it into his hand unfolded, so that he could read CHARLES POWELL written very plain on the parchment.

"He dropped his eyes on to it and after a while laid it quietly on the desk by his side. I didn't know whether he meant to make any remark on this coincidence. Before he had time to say anything the glass door came open with a bang and a tall, active man rushed in with great strides. His face looked very red below his high silk hat. You could see at once he was the skipper of a big ship.

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