Mr. Keegan's Elopement

BY

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I

THE northeast wind was very fresh that morning, and drove the seas before it briskly; but the *Denver* went at each of them in her bulldog fashion, and buried her white nose in them, and showered the crests of those which were specially boisterous in glistening spray over her forecastle. In the east the October sun was just beginning to peep over the sea-line, while to the northward lay the great mountain island of Madeira, already changing, by the magic touch of the light, from a phantom grey to that living green so dear to the eyes of a seaman. Soon signs of life began to appear; a village could be made out nestling in each of the valleys which furrowed the mountain-side, while yellow villas dotted its wooded slopes. In a bight at the south base, white in the morning sunlight, lay the town of Funchal, in front of which, like a huge sentinel, knee-deep, stood a towering rock crowned with a fort, reminding one of a castle on a chess-board.

Mr. Keegan, chief boatswain's mate of the *Denver*, and his friend, Jimmy Legs,[1] the master-at-arms, sat on the weather side of the forecastle, under the forward eight-inch turret, with the collars of their pea-coats turned well up over their ears, taking a morning smoke. Mr. Keegan had a keen eye for the beautiful, and it was his wont on such occasions to sit in silence for as much as an hour at a time. The master-at-arms, being a 'tween-decks man, delighted in watching the seas break over the bows, although this amusement not infrequently cost him a wetting and a pipeful of tobacco.

Mr. Keegan was a young man with reddish hair and small, expressionless blue eyes, and his Christian name was Dennis. He had a round, full face, abnormally so on one side because of the large piece of navy plug which invariably distended it. I have said that he was chief boatswain's mate of the *Denver*, for the reason that he was so known at the department, and drew his pay as such. But, as a matter of fact, Mr. Keegan's status, and the scope of his influence on board that ship, would be as hard to define as the duties of the captain set forth in the new regulations. His friend the master-at-arms consulted him on all matters of importance; the junior officers of the ship never interfered with anything he might be doing; and the seniors showed unwonted deference to his opinions.

As the *Denver* drew more and more under the lee of the land the whitecaps subsided into lateral swells, and the wind was no longer felt. On board active preparations were being made for coming to anchor, but with that noticeable absence of noise and bustle which is so characteristic of a modern man-of-war. Boat crews were clearing their boats for hoisting out, the lashings were being taken off the gangways, and the booms were ready to drop with the

anchor. The master-at-arms shook the ashes out of his pipe, and broke the silence.

“I hate to see that young feller go, Dennis,” he said.

Mr. Keegan evidently understood clearly who the young person alluded to in this somewhat indefinite regret was, for he answered:—

“He’s the finest young fellow in the navy, Chimmy; you can put that down.”

“I hear the navigator say,” the master-at-arms went on, “there ain’t no doubt but what he gets his orders for home when we strikes in here.”

Mr. Keegan fell into reminiscence.

“There’s two cadet cruises I took with him,—him and Mr. Morgan,—and wild cruises they was, too. There ain’t much I wouldn’t do for both of them young fellers; they’re two of a kind, and then they ain’t.” But before Mr. Keegan could explain this apparent contradiction he was called upon to pipe all hands to breakfast. He watched the men reflectively as they filed below.

“Do you mind that English young lady as Mr. Pennington was consortin’ with when we was here before, Chimmy, in the spring?”

The master-at-arms recalled her well.

“Mark my words, Chimmy,” said Mr. Keegan, impressively, as he went down the hatch, “he’ll be takin’ her home with him.”

Now the master-at-arms was inclined to doubt this. He was a personal friend of the senhora who did the cooking at the villa

where the young lady lived, and the senhora had told him a great deal about the affair in question. How Mr. Pennington and Mr. Morgan were in the habit of going to the villa almost every evening, and how Mr. Morgan talked to the young lady's father on the veranda, while Mr. Pennington and the young lady spent their time in the garden below or in the summer-house; and finally, a day or so before the ship sailed, how Mr. Pennington had asked her father a question (the character of which the senhora could only conjecture), and then had left the villa in haste. She had afterward overheard the young lady's father express himself on the subject of naval officers, against whom he seemed to be particularly prejudiced. All of this the master-at-arms had confided to Mr. Keegan at the time; but nevertheless, Mr. Keegan had predicted trouble.

"He ain't goin' to heave to for the old one's blessin'," that worthy had said contemptuously; "not if I know Mr. Pennington, he ain't. He'll go back and get her when he gets a chance." At that time the people of the *Denver* had not expected the ship to be ordered back to Madeira.

Afternoon found Mr. Keegan and the master-at-arms going ashore in a surf-boat. They both sat in the stern, and the buttons on their new mustering-clothes shone like bright-work. Mr. Keegan was more than usually silent and preoccupied, and when they arrived at the pier, instead of having his customary argument with the boatman over the fare, Mr. Keegan gave the man a dollar, greatly to the astonishment and indignation of his side partner, the master-at-arms. Mr. Keegan paid no attention whatever to his friend's protestations, but climbed the stone steps, and led the way up the main street to the Plaza, where he turned into a wine-shop, and sat down at one of the tables.

“We’re not drinking to-day, you Dago,” he said, in response to the smiling inquiry of the proprietor. “Porto some cigarettos!” Thus having aired his Portuguese, and obtained the desired articles, Mr. Keegan produced a roll of bills from his pocket, which he had just received from the paymaster, and proceeded to count them over carefully.

“There, Chimmy,” he remarked, rolling his tobacco from one cheek to the other, as he laid the pile on the table; “I don’t get full this time, nor you don’t; what’s more, I don’t lend none of the bullies money. But if this here seventy-three dollars can help Mr. Pennington to get that there English young lady, and take her off in the packet to-night, he’s welcome to it; that’s all.” This was a very long speech for Mr. Keegan to make.

“Is he going to try it, Dennis?” asked the master-at-arms, incredulously.

“Is he goin’ to try it?” Mr. Keegan repeated witheringly. “Ain’t you ashamed, what’s been three years with him, for that there remark?”

The master-at-arms puffed at his cigarette in silence, and evidently felt the force of the rebuke.

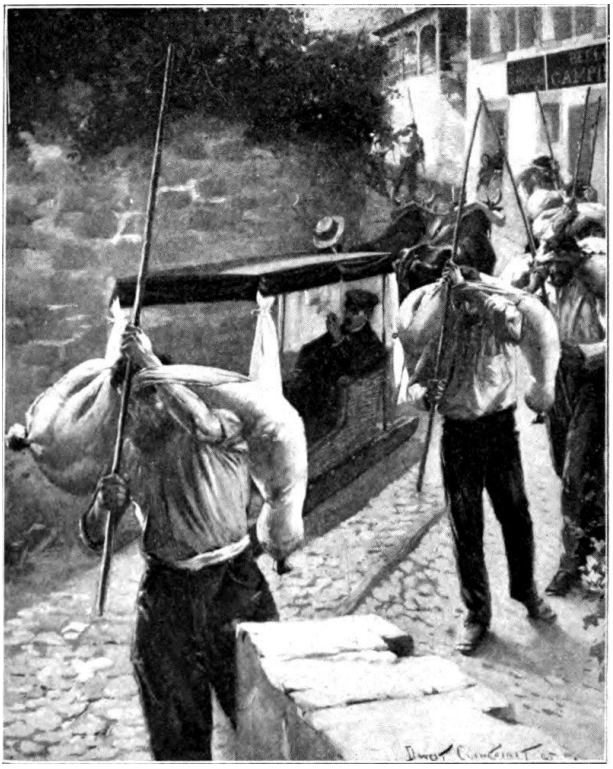
“Yes, Chimmy,” Mr. Keegan went on in a milder tone, “he is going to try it;” and then he added, with an air of great secrecy, “He is leavin’ a good deal of the particulars to you and me.”

Whereupon he unfolded a plan to the master-at-arms, who could not but wonder at its wisdom and completeness. It would almost seem as if Mr. Keegan had conducted a similar elopement on his own account. Mr. Keegan’s powers of locution were not great, but

he had a remarkable knack of conveying his meaning, the more remarkable because his face was absolutely without expression, and he never used any gestures. Perhaps one of the secrets of his ability to express himself lay in the fact that he alternated in his methods of explanation, now putting his hearers to shame at their stupidity, now leaving out a palpable conclusion, that they might give themselves credit for unusual perception. In any case, he never said any more than he had to.

"Now," he concluded, when he had gone into every detail, "you have got your sailin' orders, Chimmy. Get your friend, the senhora, to tell the young lady what I told you. We can't take no big trunks—nothin' but a small kit. I'll be makin' sure of a boat and a sky-pilot, and be here at two bells."

The master-at-arms went out into the Plaza, and hired a *bulla-carta*. A bulla-carta is in reality a covered sled, provided with curtains, and drawn by two oxen. For the proper management of these vehicles, according to Portuguese ideas, two men are necessary. One goes ahead, in order to check any ambitious intentions on the part of the oxen, and apparently does the guiding. The duties of the other are harder to define: he receives the fare incidentally, and urges on the oxen in those plaintive, wailing tones which he who has been to Madeira can never forget, and which incline him to believe that the Portuguese language is one of lamentation. As Mr. Keegan tersely remarked, everything is "on skates" in Madeira. The streets of Funchal are paved with small lava blocks, set on end, and polished to a degree that makes walking dangerous to people who wear the shoes of civilisation. Hence the owners of the bulla-cartas do a thriving business with foreigners, especially up the slope, where a false step is fraught with no inconsiderable consequences.



"HE SAT BACK BEHIND THE CURTAINS OF HIS 'BULLA-CARTA.'"

It was up the hillside, or rather up the first slopes of the mountain, that the villa to which the master-at-arms was going was situated. Few visit Madeira who do not take that delightful ride up the mountain on horseback, and experience the delirium of the coast down, over the polished stones, in a wicker sled. Ascending, the traveller looks from his saddle over the high yellow walls on each hand into inviting gardens of tropical luxuriance, their shade trees often completely arching the way over his head. But the master-at-

arms cared nothing about looking into the gardens, and had a sailor's prejudice against horses; he discreetly preferred the bulla-carta. Even the picturesque procession of wine-growers which he met coming down the mountain, with skins slung over their shoulders, made no more of an impression on him than if they had been a draft of new hands. He sat back behind the curtains of his bulla-carta, and smoked brown-paper cigarettes, and meditated on the gravity of his mission; and he wondered whether the senhora would look with favour on the plan. Only once, when he had to turn out for a fat ecclesiastic from the convent above, was he aroused from these reflections. The priest was descending at a pace which would have defied a trolley-car, but sat in his sled with as much equanimity as if he were pronouncing a benediction, his guide deftly balanced on the runners behind.

"He's sure swift for a holy father!" the master-at-arms exclaimed aloud, lifting the curtains in order to obtain a better view of the vanishing figure; "but Dennis ain't hirin' him for the ceremony—you can't trust them Dagos even for splicin'."

It was almost dusk when the master-at-arms recognised the back gate of Mr. Inglefield's villa, and directed the gentleman at the side to draw up, which he accomplished with a great deal of unnecessary noise. Thereupon the master-at-arms alighted, and designated a point a little higher up for the men to wait for him. Then he opened the gate, and cautiously entered the garden. He sat down under a banana tree to hit upon some method of attracting the senhora's attention; for the hour was unusual for a call, and the senhora was undoubtedly engaged in the kitchen. As the villa was on a rather steep portion of the slope, the house was considerably higher than the garden, its broad piazza being among the tree-tops. Here was a predicament! If he waited until the senhora finished

cooking the dinner, put on her evening gown, and came down to the little porch where she received her callers, all would be lost. Bearing in mind the sentiments concerning his profession which the owner of the villa had expressed at various times, it was out of the question for him to go to the senhora, as he would undoubtedly be seen by Mr. Inglefield from the veranda. While he was vainly trying to hit upon an expedient, wishing ardently the while that Mr. Keegan might have undertaken this matter himself, he heard the rustle of a woman's skirts coming down the path. His first impulse was to climb the tree, but on second thought he decided to sit still; it was getting dark, and he might not be seen where he was.

He had barely reached this decision when there appeared in the path, directly before him, a young girl. She was tall and fair, with that wealth of colour peculiar to English women; and as she stood there in the twilight, shading her eyes with her hand, the master-at-arms was transported with admiration. From where she stood one could look through an opening in the trees far out into the harbour, and he had no doubt that fortune had thrown him in the way of Miss Inglefield herself, and that she was looking at the *Denver*. He rose, took off his cap, and coughed slightly to attract her attention. At the sound the girl dropped her hand quickly, and turned toward him, without, however, betraying the least alarm; her manner was a mixture of surprise and self-possession. The master-at-arms was anything but self-possessed; he was, on the contrary, very much disconcerted. Miss Inglefield, for it was she, waited for him to speak; but at length, despairing of this, she spoke herself:—

"Did you wish to see any one?"

The voice was softer than any the master-at-arms had ever heard, and its tones were so kind that he took heart.

“Yes, miss,” he answered; “I guess it’s you I want to see.”

“Me?” she exclaimed, in evident wonder.

“I’m from the *Denver*, miss,” he explained.

The master-at-arms watched the girl keenly to see what effect this announcement would have, but if her colour deepened it was too dark to notice it.

“So you are from the *Denver*, and wish to see me,” she answered. “If that is the case, I think it would be well, for many reasons, to retire to the summer-house.”

She picked up her white skirts, and led the way down a secluded path lined with vines to a little arbour in the corner of the garden. The master-at-arms followed, not without misgivings concerning his ability to handle a mission of such delicacy as this promised to be. The ease and dignity of her bearing, and the simplicity of her speech, completely mystified him; he had expected any reception but this. When they reached the summer-house, she motioned him toward a wicker bench, and sat down beside him.

“I think we shall be safe from interruption here,” she said, with a smile of encouragement; and then she added, “Did any one send you?”

Although the master-at-arms thought the question a trifle strange, he could not but admit that it was pertinent.

“Dennis Keegan sent me, miss,” he replied.

“Dennis Keegan! And you wish to see me—are you sure?”

There was such an evident note of disappointment in this that the master-at-arms was more puzzled than ever. Was it possible that Mr. Pennington had not told her about Dennis?

“Dennis is the man who is actin’ for Mr. Pennington, you know, miss—sorter under his orders.”

But Miss Inglefield, greatly to his discomfiture, did not seem to grasp the situation in the least.

“Who are you?” she demanded, with a touch of impatience.

“I’m the master-at-arms of the *Denver*, miss,” he answered, in a tone of injured dignity.

“But the orders you speak of, what are they? I do not quite understand.”

What were the orders? There began to dawn on the master-at-arms, from various things he had noticed in Miss Inglefield’s conversation and manner, a suspicion that she had had no previous intimation of the communication he was about to impart. This was a point which had not been touched upon by Mr. Keegan. He was in a quandary. To withdraw now might injure Mr. Pennington’s honour, and, besides, make things exceedingly unpleasant for him, the master-at-arms. But if Mr. Keegan had by any chance made a mistake, to go on would involve Mr. Pennington in a difficulty the gravity of which the master-at-arms had not before considered. But his faith in Mr. Keegan, and the fear of his displeasure, finally predominated.

“You see, miss,” he began, “the reason I come up here, and not Dennis, was this: I happen to be acquainted with the seenora as

does the cookin' for you, and Dennis he said for me to tell this here to the seenora, and the seenora—"

"Has Mr. Pennington sent a note?" Miss Inglefield broke in, in despair.

"A note!" the master-at-arms repeated deprecatingly; "he never insulted me or Dennis with a note yet, miss."

"Please go on, then, quickly," she said; "I may be called at any minute."

"There ain't nothin' to it exceptin' this, miss," he began, in no wise to be hurried, however: "Mr. Pennington's time's up on the ship to-day, and he has bought tickets for *two*"—the master-at-arms thought the inference a very happy one, and emphasised the numeral—"on the steamer what leaves to-night. Then he goes to Dennis Keegan, who's been on many a cruise with him in's younger days, and in many a tight place, too, and he says, 'Keegan, there's a young lady what lives up here on the hill behind Funchal—' 'What you'd like to take off with you this evenin', Mr. Pennington,' Dennis puts in, 'but there be cert'in reasons again' your goin' up and gettin' her yourself.' Mr. Pennington looked sorter surprised, but, Lord! miss, he ought to know there ain't much goin' on what Dennis ain't on to. 'Well, sir,' Dennis went on, without givin' him a show to speak, 'all you got to do is to leave this here business to me and Chimmy'—that's me, miss,—'and if that there young lady ain't ready to go with you at whatever time you say, it won't be our fault, sir.'"

The master-at-arms paused, and wiped the perspiration from his face with his red handkerchief, watching Miss Inglefield anxiously the while. She had sat quietly by during this recital, but he could

see that she was agitated now by her breathing, which came and went quickly, and his confidence in Mr. Keegan's judgment redoubled. Evidently, if the young lady in the case was as much in love as she appeared from these symptoms, the course he was taking was most justifiable. The master-at-arms had always deemed a little prevarication in a good cause no harm. There was, apparently, quite a mental struggle going on within Miss Inglefield. Once or twice she seemed about to speak, and then to change her mind. It was at this point that a hearty masculine voice was heard calling loudly from the garden above:—

"Eleanor!"

Miss Inglefield rose.

"Coming, papa," she answered; but to the astonishment of the master-at-arms, she did not betray the slightest alarm. She walked slowly toward the step, her head bent downward in thought; then she suddenly drew herself up to the full height of her commanding figure, and faced him.

"At what time will Mr. Pennington be here?" she demanded.

"At half-past eleven, at the back gate, miss," he answered, doubting if he heard aright.

"Tell him I shall be ready," she said; and before he could reply she had vanished among the vines.

The master-at-arms stood looking after her for a moment, and then made his way out of the garden, keeping a bright lookout for Mr. Inglefield. He found his bulla-carta, after some trouble, in front of a stray wine-shop which was built in the wall, and into which he dived precipitately in search of his Jehus. It is to be doubted if

either of them understood the choice maritime invectives that he heaped upon them impartially for hiding themselves; but they motioned him into the vehicle with soothing urbanity, and started for the convent above, blissfully oblivious to the occasional mutterings from within.

Upon his arrival at the convent, the master-at-arms proceeded, by a judicious use of Mr. Keegan's funds, to make arrangements with the sled-owners, by which every sled was to be ready for descent at eleven o'clock. He impressed upon them that a large party of gentlemen of his acquaintance wished to make the descent by moonlight. One and all promised that it should be as the senhor wished, although each had his private doubts about the moonlight. This done, the master-at-arms descended to Funchal, where he found Mr. Keegan awaiting him in the wine-shop, engaged in making life unbearable for the Portuguese occupants. On the entrance of the master-at-arms he desisted abruptly from this pastime, and drew him into a corner.

"Well, Chimmy, is it a go?" he asked.

The master-at-arms regarded him in a way that plainly signified his approbation of such an arch-diplomatist, and then launched into a glowing description of his share of the transaction, interspersed with frequent reproaches for not informing him beforehand of the true state of affairs. Mr. Keegan listened with evident satisfaction.

"She ain't goin' to take no trunks, is she?" he inquired, with some apprehension.

The master-at-arms confessed he had forgotten to caution the young lady on this point.

“Women, Chimmy,” said Mr. Keegan, profoundly, “will never leave any spare riggin’ behind if they ain’t made to.”

[1] The name given to the master-at-arms aboard ship.