

Captain Butts

by Howard Pyle

On the evening of the next day a number of boys were gathered at the end of the wharf in front of Hezekiah Tipton's warehouses. They were throwing stones into the water. Jack went out along the wharf to where they were. They were all of them boys younger than himself.

"Well, if that's all the better you can throw," said Jack, "to be sure you can't throw well. Just you watch me hit yon anchor-buoy out there with this pebble."

A brig had come into the harbor during the day, and now lay at anchor some distance off from the shore. The sails were half reefed and hung limp from the yards. The men were washing down the decks, and from the shore you could see them busy about the decks, and every now and then a gush of dirty water as it ran through the scupper-holes. A boat was just about putting off from the brig. Presently some one climbed down over the side of the vessel and into the boat, and then it was pushed off. Jack stopped throwing stones and stood looking. The boat came rowing straight toward the wharf where he and the other boys stood. It pulled in around the back of a sloop that lay fast to the end of the wharf, and was hidden from sight. Jack jumped down from the wharf to the deck of the sloop, and went across to see who was in the boat. It had come in under the side of the sloop, and two of the men were holding it to its place, grasping the chains. They looked up at Jack and the other boys as they came to the rail of the sloop and looked down at them. There were two men in the stern of the boat. One was just about to climb aboard the sloop, the other sat still. He who still sat in his place had a knit cap pulled down half over his ears. He held a pipe in his mouth and he had gold ear-rings in his ears. The other, who was about to climb aboard the sloop, was plainly the captain of the brig. He was short and thick-set. He wore a rough sea coat with great flapped pockets and brass buttons. One of the pockets bulged out with a short pistol, the brass butt of which stuck out from under the flap. He wore canvas petticoat-breeches strapped to his waist by a broad leather belt with a big flat brass buckle. His face and as much of the short bull-neck as Jack could see were tanned red-brown like russet leather, and his cheeks and chin were covered with an unshaven beard of two or three days' growth. He stood up in the boat, with his hand resting on the rail of the sloop.

"Do you know where Master Hezekiah Tipton lives?" he asked in a hoarse, rattling voice.

"Why, yes, I do," said Jack. "This is his wharf, and I'm his nephew."

"Well, then," said the man, "I wish you'd show me to him."

As Jack accompanied the other up the stony street to his uncle's house, he turned to look at his companion every now and then.

"Where do you hail from, captain?" said he.

"I hail from the land where every man minds his own business," said the other in his rattling voice. "Where do you hail from, my hearty?"

Jack did not know just what to reply at first. "Oh, well," he said, "if you don't choose to give me a civil answer, why, then you needn't."

After that they walked in silence till they reached the house. Jack looked into the office, but Hezekiah was not there. "If you'll come into the parlor," said he, "I'll go and tell him you're here, only I don't know who you are, to be sure." He opened the door of the room as he spoke, and showed the captain into the darkened parlor. It always smelled damp and musty and unused, and the fireplace had a cold, dark look as though no comforting fire had ever burned there.

"Tell Master Tipton 'tis Captain Butts of the *Arundel* wants to see him," said the stranger, laying aside his hat with its tarnished gilt lace and wiping his partly bald head with the corner of his red neckerchief. All the time he was looking strangely about him at his unfamiliar surroundings.

There was the sound of a knife and fork rattling against a plate in the distance, and Jack, following the sound, went along the passage to the room beyond, where he knew Hezekiah was sitting at supper.

"There's a man in the parlor," said Jack, "would like to see you. He says his name's Captain Butts of the *Arundel*."

Hezekiah was looking at Jack as he spoke. He laid down his knife and fork immediately, and pushed back his chair and arose. Jack followed him back to the parlor. He stood outside of the door, looking in. The stranger arose as Master Tipton came in, holding out to the old America merchant a big, brown, hairy hand with a hard, horny-looking palm.

"How d'ye do, Master Tipton?" said he in his rattling voice. "I be mightily glad to see you."

"Well, then, Master Captain Butts," said Hezekiah, giving him a limp, reluctant hand, "I be mightily glad to see you, too,—more glad than you are to see me, like enough, for I've been looking for you these three days past, and wondering where was the *Arundel*. There be them nineteen servants down at the 'Duck and Doe' that should have been took away yesterday morning. Their lodging at the inn is a matter of ten pence a day each. Now, who do you think's to pay for that there?"

"Well, well, Master," said the other, "'tweren't no fault of mine that I weren't here yesterday. Wind and tide be to blame, so whatever ye lose ye may just charge up ag'in' them. We can't sail without wind, can we? and we can't sail ag'in' the tide, can we? As for the men, why, the sooner I get my clearance papers and the men aboard the better 'twill suit me. The tide turns at eight o'clock, and if the wind comes up, as 'tis like to do, why, I'll drop out and away with the turn o' the water."

Master Hezekiah looked around. Jack was still standing in the doorway. "You go in and get your supper, Jacky," said he, and then he got up and closed the door, and Jack went back into the supper-room.

All the time that Jack sat at his meal old Deborah scolded him ceaselessly for being so late.

"'Tis always so," said she, her voice growing shriller and shriller. "You be always late, and think of nobody but your own self."

"No, I'm not always late, neither," said Jack; "I wasn't late to breakfast, or to supper either, yesterday."

“But you didn’t come home to dinner at all,” said old Deborah, “and I kept it for you, and I kept it for you, and the ’taties all like wax in the oven, and not fit to eat.”

“I didn’t want any dinner,” said Jack. “I had something to eat down at the wharf.”

“Well,” said old Deborah, “you might just as well have been late as not to come at all, for I kept a-waiting and a-waiting for you till it was all dried up and wasted—aye, all wasted, and it what many a pore body ’u’d’a’ been glad enough to ’a’ had, too.”

In the interval of her scolding Jack could occasionally hear the distant rumbling of Captain Butts’s voice in the office.

It grew darker and darker in the twilight gloom of the kitchen, until Jack could hardly see the food upon his plate.

“I wish you’d bring a candle, Deborah,” said he, “I can’t see to find the way to my own mouth.”

“A candle!” said Deborah; “if you’d come to your supper in time you’d not need a candle to see. Now you may just go without.”

“Very well,” said Jack, “I don’t care, for I’m done.”

“Then, if you’re done, you may go down to the pump and fetch back some water.”

Jack took the pail and went off with it. He was gone a long time, and the night was fairly settled when he came stumbling back into the kitchen, slopping the water upon the steps and the floor.

“Why,” said Deborah, “I thought you was never coming. Your uncle’s asking for you. He’s over in the office now, and he wants to see you there.”

“Very well,” said Jack, “if I’d known that, may be I’d hurried and may be I wouldn’t.”

In the office he found Captain Butts seated at the tall desk, with a bottle of Hezekiah’s old Jamaica rum before him. They had been looking over some papers, and the Captain had evidently been helping himself very freely to the rum. He smelt strong of the liquor. He was leaning over the desk, his chin resting upon his fists. He looked up at Jack with his keen gray eyes from under his bushy eyebrows. “Is this the boy?” said he. Hezekiah, who sat opposite to his visitor, nodded without speaking.

“Come hither, my hearty,” said Captain Butts, beckoning to Jack. Jack came forward slowly. “And so ye’re a hard one to manage, be ye? By blood! if I had ye aboard the *Arundel* for a few days, I’d manage ye.”

“Who says I’m hard to manage?” demanded Jack, indignantly.

“That does your good uncle,” said the Captain. As he spoke he reached out suddenly, and catching Jack by the arm held him tight, feeling up and down the length of his arm. “Ye be well put together, my hearty,” said he; “ye’d make a valuable servant in the tobacco-fields,” and he winked tipsily as he spoke. “Now, being as ye’re so hard to manage, how’d you like it if you was to take a

cruise to the Americas with old Benny Butts?"

Jack could smell the rum heavy upon the captain's breath, and he saw that he was a little tipsy. He jerked his arm away from the other's grasp.

"I am well enough off here as I am, thank you, Master Captain," said he, "and I don't choose to go to the Americas at all."

The Captain burst out laughing. He fetched a thump upon the desk before him that made the bottle of rum and the tumbler hop and jingle. "Harkee to that, now!" said he, "he don't choose to go to the Americas," and he gave another roar of laughter.

Master Hezekiah sat looking on at the two, resting his forehead upon his lean fingers, his hand shading his eyes from the light of the candle. Suddenly he cut into the talk. "Come, come, Captain Butts!" said he tartly, "let there be an end to this! Sure you forget what you're saying. Come hither," said he to Jack. Jack came around to him, and the old man lifted the lid of the desk and brought out a bundle of papers and a little bag of money. He counted out a few coins, which he made into a little pile. Then he untied the tape and chose a paper from among the others. Jack stood watching him. "Here be a list of the America servants down at the Golden Fish," said Hezekiah, "and this"—here he chinked the money between his fingers as he gave it to Jack—"is fifteen shillings ten-pence. I want you to do something for me, Jacky. I want you to go down to the Golden Fish and pay Landlord Evans his account, and then give this release to Dockray, who hath the America men in charge. After that I want you to take them down to the wharf and deliver them over to Captain Butts, and get his receipt. D'ye understand?"

"Why, yes, I do," said Jack; "but why do you want me to do this when the crimp can serve you so much better than I?" He could not understand why his uncle, who had never before made any demands upon him should suddenly prefer such a request as this.

"Why," said Hezekiah, "you ask me for money t'other day, didn't ye? Well, then, if you want money you must begin to do something for to earn it. What I want you to do now is to take these servants down and deliver them over to Captain Butts."

"Oh, well," said Jack, "I'm willing enough, but I don't see why you should choose me to do it. What am I to do with them? Tell me again."

"You're to take them down to the wharf, d'ye understand? Then Captain Butts will give you a receipt for 'em. Then you'll have nothing more to do with the business."

"Very well," said Jack; "methinks I understand. And now if the Captain is ready to go, why, I am, too."

As he and Captain Butts walked together down the street in the darkness, Jack said again: "I don't see why he wants me to take his servants down to the wharf. He never asked such a thing of me before."

Captain Butts, for reply, burst out laughing, and fetched him a clap on the shoulder that jarred him through and through. "Well, I do suppose you'll find out some day why he sends you on his errands," he said.

Source:

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