# Captain Eli's Best Ear

Frank Stockton

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The little seaside village of Sponkannis lies so quietly upon a protected spot on our Atlantic coast that it makes no more stir in the world than would a pebble which, held between one's finger and thumb, should be dipped below the surface of a millpond and then dropped. About the post−office and the store both under the same roof the greater number of the houses cluster, as if they had come for their week's groceries, or were waiting for the mail, while toward the west the dwellings become fewer and fewer, until at last the village blends into a long stretch of sandy coast and scrubby pine−woods. Eastward the village ends abruptly at the foot of a windswept bluff, on which no one cares to build.

Among the last houses in the western end of the village stood two neat, substantial dwellings, one belonging to Captain Eli Bunker, and the other to Captain Cephas Dyer. These householders were two very respectable retired mariners, the first a widower about fifty, and the other a bachelor of perhaps the same age, a few years more or less making but little difference in this region of weather−beaten youth and seasoned age.

Each of these good captains lived alone, and each took entire charge of his own domestic affairs, not because he was poor, but because it pleased him to do so. When Captain Eli retired from the sea he was the owner of a good vessel, which he sold at a fair profit; and Captain Cephas had made money in many a voyage before he built his house in Sponkannis and settled there.

When Captain Eli's wife was living she was his household manager. But Captain Cephas had never had a woman in his house, except during the first few months of his occupancy, when certain female neighbors came in occasionally to attend to little matters of cleaning which, according to popular notions, properly belong to the sphere of woman.

But Captain Cephas soon put an end to this sort of thing. He did not like a woman's ways, especially her ways of attending to domestic affairs. He liked to live in sailor fashion, and to keep house in sailor fashion. In his establishment everything was shipshape, and everything which could be stowed away was stowed away, and, if possible, in a bunker. The floors were holystoned nearly every day, and the whole house was repainted about twice a year, a little at a time, when the weather was suitable for this marine recreation. Things not in frequent use were lashed securely to the walls, or perhaps put out of the way by being hauled up to the ceiling by means of blocks and tackle. His cooking was done sailor fashion, like everything else, and he never failed to have plum−duff on Sunday. His well was near his house, and every morning he dropped into it a lead and line, and noted down the depth of water. Three times a day he entered in a little note−book the state of the weather, the height of the mercury in barometer and thermometer, the direction of the wind, and special weather points when necessary.

Captain Eli managed his domestic affairs in an entirely different way. He kept house woman fashion not, however, in the manner of an ordinary woman, but after the manner of his late wife, Miranda Bunker, now dead some seven years. Like his friend, Captain Cephas, he had had the assistance of his female neighbors during the earlier days of his widowerhood. But he soon found that these women did not do things as Miranda used to do them, and, although he frequently suggested that they should endeavor to imitate the methods of his late consort, they did not even try to do things as she used to do them, preferring their own ways. Therefore it was that Captain

Eli determined to keep house by himself, and to do it, as nearly as his nature would allow, as Miranda used to do it. He swept his doors and he shook his door−mats; he washed his paint with soap and hot water; he dusted his furniture with a soft cloth, which he afterwards stuck behind a chest of drawers. He made his bed very neatly, turning down the sheet at the top, and setting the pillow upon edge, smoothing it carefully after he had done so. His cooking was based on the methods of the late Miranda. He had never been able to make bread rise properly, but he had always liked ship− biscuit, and he now greatly preferred them to the risen bread made by his neighbors. And as to coffee and the plainer articles of food with which he furnished his table, even Miranda herself would not have objected to them had she been alive and very hungry.

The houses of the two captains were not very far apart, and they were good neighbors, often smoking their pipes together and talking of the sea. But this was always on the little porch in front of Captain Cephas's house, or by his kitchen fire in the winter. Captain Eli did not like the smell of tobacco smoke in his house, or even in front of it in summer−time, when the doors were open. He had no objection himself to the odor of tobacco, but it was contrary to the principles of woman housekeeping that rooms should smell of it, and he was always true to those principles.

It was late in a certain December, and through the village there was a pleasant little flutter of Christmas preparations. Captain Eli had been up to the store, and he had stayed there a good while, warming himself by the stove, and watching the women coming in to buy things for Christmas. It was strange how many things they bought for presents or for holiday use fancy soap and candy, handkerchiefs and little woollen shawls for old people, and a lot of pretty little things which he knew the use of, but which Captain Cephas would never have understood at all had he been there.

As Captain Eli came out of the store he saw a cart in which were two good−sized Christmas trees, which had been cut in the woods, and were going, one to Captain Holmes's house, and the other to Mother Nelson's. Captain Holmes had grandchildren, and Mother Nelson, with never a child of her own, good old soul, had three little orphan nieces who never wanted for anything needful at Christmas−time or any other time.

Captain Eli walked home very slowly, taking observations in his mind. It was more than seven years since he had had anything to do with Christmas, except that on that day he had always made himself a mince−pie, the construction and the consumption of which were equally difficult. It is true that neighbors had invited him, and they had invited Captain Cephas, to their Christmas dinners, but neither of these worthy seamen had ever accepted any of these invitations. Even holiday food, when not cooked in sailor fashion, did not agree with Captain Cephas, and it would have pained the good heart of Captain Eli if he had been forced to make believe to enjoy a Christmas dinner so very inferior to those which Miranda used to set before him.

But now the heart of Captain Eli was gently moved by a Christmas flutter. It had been foolish, perhaps, for him to go up to the store at such a time as this, but the mischief had been done. Old feelings had come back to him, and he would be glad to celebrate Christmas this year if he could think of any good way to do it. And the result of his mental observations was that he went over to Captain Cephas's house to talk to him about it.

Captain Cephas was in his kitchen, smoking his third morning pipe. Captain Eli filled his pipe, lighted it, and sat down by the fire.

"Cap'n," said he, "what do you say to our keepin Christmas this year? A Christmas dinner is no good if it's got to be eat alone, and you and me might eat ourn together. It might be in my house, or it might be in your house it won't make no great difference to me which. Of course, I like woman housekeepin', as is laid down in the rules of service fer my house. But next best to that I like sailor housekeepin', so I don't mind which house the dinner is in, Cap'n Cephas, so it suits you."

Captain Cephas took his pipe from his mouth. "You're pretty late thinkin' about it," said he, "fer day after to−morrow's Christmas."

"That don't make no difference," said Captain Eli. "What things we want that are not in my house or your house we can easily get either up at the store or else in the woods."

"In the woods!" exclaimed Captain Cephas. "What in the name of thunder do you expect to get in the woods for Christmas?"

"A Christmas tree," said Captain Eli. "I thought it might be a nice thing to have a Christmas tree fer Christmas. Cap'n Holmes has got one, and Mother Nelson's got another. I guess nearly everybody's got one. It won't cost anything I can go and cut it."

Captain Cephas grinned a grin, as if a great leak had been sprung in the side of a vessel, stretching nearly from stem to stern.

"A Christmas tree!" he exclaimed. "Well, I am blessed! But look here, Cap'n Eli. You don't know what a Christmas tree's fer. It's fer children, and not fer grown−ups. Nobody ever does have a Christmas tree in any house where there ain't no children."

Captain Eli rose and stood with his back to the fire. "I didn't think of that," he said, "but I guess it's so. And when I come to think of it, a Christmas isn't much of a Christmas, anyway, without children."

"You never had none," said Captain Cephas, "and you've kept Christmas."

"Yes," replied Captain Eli, reflectively, "we did do it, but there was always a lackment Miranda has said so, and I have said so."

"You didn't have no Christmas tree," said Captain Cephas.

"No, we didn't. But I don't think that folks was as much set on Christmas trees then as they 'pear to be now. I wonder," he continued, thoughtfully gazing at the ceiling, "if we was to fix up a Christmas tree and you and me's got a lot of pretty things that we've picked up all over the world, that would go miles ahead of anything that could be bought at the store fer Christmas trees if we was to fix up a tree real nice, if we couldn't get some child or other that wasn't likely to have a tree to come in and look at it, and stay awhile, and make Christmas more like Christmas. And then, when it went away, it could take along the things that was hangin' on the tree, and keep 'em fer its own."

"That wouldn't work," said Captain Cephas. "If you get a child into this business, you must let it hang up its stockin' before it goes to bed, and find it full in the mornin', and then tell it an all−fired lie about Santa Claus if it asks any questions. Most children think more of stockin's than they do of trees so I've heard, at least."

"I've got no objections to stockin's," said Captain Eli. "If it wanted to hang one up, it could hang one up either here or in my house, wherever we kept Christmas."

"You couldn't keep a child all night," sardonically remarked Captain Cephas, "and no more could I. Fer if it was to get up a croup in the night, it would be as if we was on a lee shore with anchors draggin' and a gale a−blowin'."

"That's so," said Captain Eli. "You've put it fair. I suppose if we did keep a child all night, we'd have to have some sort of a woman within hail in case of a sudden blow."

Captain Cephas sniffed. "What's the good of talkin'?" said he. "There ain't no child, and there ain't no woman that you could hire to sit all night on my front step or on your front step, a−waitin' to be piped on deck in case of croup."

"No," said Captain Eli. "I don't suppose there's any child in this village that ain't goin' to be provided with a Christmas tree or a Christmas stockin', or perhaps both except, now I come to think of it, that little gal that was brought down here with her mother last summer, and has been kept by Mrs. Crumley sence her mother died."

"And won't be kept much longer," said Captain Cephas, "fer I've hearn Mrs. Crumley say she couldn't afford it."

"That's so," said Captain Eli. "If she can't afford to keep the little gal, she can't afford to give no Christmas trees nor stockin's, and so it seems to me, cap'n, that that little gal would be a pretty good child to help us keep Christmas."

"You're all the time forgettin'," said the other, "that nuther of us can keep a child all night."

Captain Eli seated himself, and looked ponderingly into the fire. "You're right, cap'n," said he. "We'd have to ship some woman to take care of her. Of course, it wouldn't be no use to ask Mrs. Crumley?"

Captain Cephas laughed. "I should say not."

"And there doesn't seem to be anybody else," said his companion. "Can you think of anybody, cap'n?"

"There ain't anybody to think of," replied Captain Cephas, "unless it might be Eliza Trimmer. She's generally ready enough to do anything that turns up. But she wouldn't be no good her house is too far away for either you or me to hail her in case a croup came up suddint."

"That's so," said Captain Eli. "She does live a long way off."

"So that settles the whole business," said Captain Cephas. "She's too far away to come if wanted, and nuther of us couldn't keep no child without somebody to come if they was wanted, and it's no use to have a Christmas tree without a child. A Christmas without a Christmas tree don't seem agreeable to you, cap'n, so I guess we'd better get along just the same as we've been in the habit of doin', and eat our Christmas dinner, as we do our other meals in our own houses."

Captain Eli looked into the fire. "I don't like to give up things if I can help it. That was always my way. If wind and tide's ag'in' me, I can wait till one or the other, or both of them, serve."

"Yes," said Captain Cephas, "you was always that kind of a man."

"That's so. But it does 'pear to me as if I'd have to give up this time, though it's a pity to do it, on account of the little gal, fer she ain't likely to have any Christmas this year.

She's a nice little gal, and takes as natural to navigation as if she'd been born at sea. I've given her two or three things because she's so pretty, but there's nothing she likes so much as a little ship I gave her."

"Perhaps she was born at sea," remarked Captain Cephas.

"Perhaps she was," said the other; "and that makes it the bigger pity."

For a few moments nothing was said. Then Captain Eli suddenly exclaimed, "I'll tell you what we might do, cap'n! We might ask Mrs. Trimmer to lend a hand in givin' the little gal a Christmas. She ain't got nobody in her house but herself, and I guess she'd be glad enough to help give that little gal a regular Christmas. She could go and get the child, and bring her to your house or to my house, or wherever we're goin' to keep Christmas, and "

"Well," said Captain Cephas, with an air of scrutinizing inquiry, "what?"

"Well," replied the other, a little hesitatingly, "so far as I'm concerned, that is, I don't mind one way or the other, she might take her Christmas dinner along with us and the little gal, and then she could fix her stockin' to be hung up, and help with the Christmas tree, and "

"Well," demanded Captain Cephas, "what?"

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"Well," demanded Captain Cephas, "what?"

"Well," said Captain Eli, "she could—that is, it doesn't make any difference to me one way or the other—she might stay all night at whatever house we kept Christmas in, and then you and me might spend the night in the other house, and then she could be ready there to help the child in the mornin', when she came to look at her stockin'."

Captain Cephas fixed upon his friend an earnest glare. "That's pretty considerable of an idea to come upon you so suddint," said he. "But I can tell you one thing: there ain't a− goin' to be any such doin's in my house. If you choose to come over here to sleep, and give up your house to any woman you can find to take care of the little gal, all right. But the thing can't be done here."

There was a certain severity in these remarks, but they appeared to affect Captain Eli very pleasantly.

"Well," said he, "if you're satisfied, I am. I'll agree to any plan you choose to make. It doesn't matter to me which house it's in, and if you say my house, I say my house. All I want is to make the business agreeable to all concerned. Now it's time fer me to go to my dinner, and this afternoon we'd better go and try to get things straightened out, because the little gal, and whatever woman comes with her, ought to be at my house to−morrow before dark. S'posin' we divide up this business: I'll go and see Mrs. Crumley about the little gal, and you can go and see Mrs. Trimmer."

"No, sir," promptly replied Captain Cephas, "I don't go to see no Mrs. Trimmer. You can see both of them just the same as you can see one—they're all along the same way. I'll go cut the Christmas tree."

"All right," said Captain Eli. "It don't make no difference to me which does which. But if I was you, cap'n, I'd cut a good big tree, because we might as well have a good one while we're about it."

When he had eaten his dinner, and washed up his dishes, and had put everything away in neat, housewifely order, Captain Eli went to Mrs. Crumley's house, and very soon finished his business there. Mrs. Crumley kept the only house which might be considered a boarding−house in the village of Sponkannis; and when she had consented to take charge of the little girl who had been left on her hands she had hoped it would not be very long

before she would hear from some of her relatives in regard to her maintenance. But she had heard nothing, and had now ceased to expect to hear anything, and in consequence had frequently remarked that she must dispose of the child some way or other, for she couldn't afford to keep her any longer. Even an absence of a day or two at the house of the good captain would be some relief, and Mrs. Crumley readily consented to the Christmas scheme. As to the little girl, she was delighted. She already looked upon Captain Eli as her best friend in the world.

It was not so easy to go to Mrs. Trimmer's house and put the business before her. "It ought to be plain sailin' enough," Captain Eli said to himself, over and over again, "but, fer all that, it don't seem to be plain sailin'."

But he was not a man to be deterred by difficult navigation, and he walked straight to Eliza Trimmer's house.

Mrs. Trimmer was a comely woman about thirty−five, who had come to the village a year before, and had maintained herself, or at least had tried to, by dressmaking and plain sewing. She had lived at Stetford, a seaport about twenty miles away, and from there, three years before, her husband, Captain Trimmer, had sailed away in a good−sized schooner, and had never returned. She had come to Sponkannis because she thought that there she could live cheaper and get more work than in her former home. She had found the first quite possible, but her success in regard to the work had not been very great.

When Captain Eli entered Mrs. Trimmer's little room, he found her busy mending a sail. Here fortune favored him. "You turn your hand to 'most anything, Mrs. Trimmer," said he, after he had greeted her.

"Oh, yes," she answered, with a smile, "I am obliged to do that. Mending sails is pretty heavy work, but it's better than nothing."

"I had a notion," said he, "that you was ready to turn your hand to any good kind of business, so I thought I would step in and ask you if you'd turn your hand to a little bit of business I've got on the stocks."

She stopped sewing on the sail, and listened while Captain Eli laid his plan before her. "It's very kind in you and Captain Cephas to think of all that," said she. "I have often noticed that poor little girl, and pitied her. Certainly I'll come, and you needn't say anything about paying me for it. I wouldn't think of asking to be paid for doing a thing like that. And besides,"—she smiled again as she spoke,—"if you are going to give me a Christmas dinner, as you say, that will make things more than square."

Captain Eli did not exactly agree with her, but he was in very good humor, and she was in good humor, and the matter was soon settled, and Mrs. Trimmer promised to come to the captain's house in the morning and help about the Christmas tree, and in the afternoon to go to get the little girl from Mrs. Crumley's and bring her to the house.

Captain Eli was delighted with the arrangements. "Things now seem to be goin' along before a spankin' breeze,"said he. "But I don't know about the dinner. I guess you will have to leave that to me. I don't believe Captain Cephas could eat a woman− cooked dinner. He's accustomed to livin sailor fashion, you know, and he has declared over and over again to me that woman− cookin' doesn't agree with him."

"But I can cook sailor fashion," said Mrs. Trimmer,—"just as much sailor fashion as you or Captain Cephas, and if he don't believe it, I'll prove it to him; so you needn't worry about that."

When the captain had gone, Mrs. Trimmer gayly put away the sail. There was no need to finish it in a hurry, and no knowing when she would get her money for it when it was done. No one had asked her to a Christmas dinner that year, and she had expected to have a lonely time of it. But it would be very pleasant to spend Christmas with the little girl and the two good captains. Instead of sewing any more on the sail, she got out some of her own clothes to see if they needed anything done to them.

The next morning Mrs. Trimmer went to Captain Eli's house, and finding Captain Cephas there, they all set to work at the Christmas tree, which was a very fine one, and had been planted in a box. Captain Cephas had brought over a bundle of things from his house, and Captain Eli kept running here and there, bringing, each time that he returned, some new object, wonderful or pretty, which he had brought from China or Japan or Corea, or some spicy island of the Eastern seas; and nearly every time he came with these treasures Mrs. Trimmer declared that such things were too good to put upon a Christmas tree, even for such a nice little girl as the one for which that tree was intended. The presents which Captain Cephas brought were much more suitable for the purpose; they were odd and funny, and some of them pretty, but not expensive, as were the fans and bits of shellwork and carved ivories which Captain Eli wished to tie upon the twigs of the tree.

There was a good deal of talk about all this, but Captain Eli had his own way.

"I don't suppose, after all," said he, "that the little gal ought to have all the things. This is such a big tree that

it's more like a family tree. Cap'n Cephas can take some of my things, and I can take some of his things, and, Mrs. Trimmer, if there's anything you like, you can call it your present and take it for your own, so that will be fair and comfortable all round. What I want is to make everybody satisfied."

"I'm sure I think they ought to be," said Mrs. Trimmer, looking very kindly at Captain Eli.

Mrs. Trimmer went home to her own house to dinner, and in the afternoon she brought the little girl. She had said there ought to be an early supper, so that the child would have time to enjoy the Christmas tree before she became sleepy.

This meal was prepared entirely by Captain Eli, and in sailor fashion, not woman fashion, so that Captain Cephas could make no excuse for eating his supper at home. Of course they all ought to be together the whole of that Christmas eve. As for the big dinner on the morrow, that was another affair, for Mrs. Trimmer undertook to make Captain Cephas understand that she had always cooked for Captain Trimmer in sailor fashion, and if he objected to her plum−duff, or if anybody else objected to her mince−pie, she was going to be very much surprised.

Captain Cephas ate his supper with a good relish, and was still eating when the rest had finished. As to the Christmas tree, it was the most valuable, if not the most beautiful, that had ever been set up in that region. It had no candles upon it, but was lighted by three lamps and a ship's lantern placed in the four corners of the room, and the little girl was as happy as if the tree were decorated with little dolls and glass balls. Mrs. Trimmer was intensely pleased and interested to see the child so happy, and Captain Eli was much pleased and interested to see the child and Mrs. Trimmer so happy, and Captain Cephas was interested, and perhaps a little amused in a superior fashion, to see Captain Eli and Mrs. Trimmer and the little child so happy.

Then the distribution of the presents began. Captain Eli asked Captain Cephas if he might have the wooden pipe that the latter had brought for his present. Captain Cephas said he might take it, for all he cared, and be welcome to it. Then Captain Eli gave Captain Cephas a red bandanna handkerchief of a very curious pattern, and Captain Cephas thanked him kindly. After which Captain Eli bestowed upon Mrs. Trimmer a most beautiful tortoise−shell comb, carved and cut and polished in a wonderful way, and with it he gave a tortoise−shell fan, carved in the same fashion, because he said the two things seemed to belong to each other and ought to go together; and he would not listen to one word of what Mrs. Trimmer said about the gifts being too good for her, and that she was not likely ever to use them.

"It seems to me," said Captain Cephas, "that you might be giving something to the little gal."

Then Captain Eli remembered that the child ought not to be forgotten, and her soul was lifted into ecstasy by many gifts, some of which Mrs. Trimmer declared were too good for any child in this wide, wide world. But Captain Eli answered that they could be taken care of by somebody until the little girl was old enough to know their value.

Then it was discovered that, unbeknown to anybody else, Mrs. Trimmer had put some presents on the tree, which were things which had been brought by Captain Trimmer from somewhere in the far East or the distant West. These she bestowed upon Captain Cephas and Captain Eli. And the end of all this was that in the whole of Sponkannis, from the foot of the bluff to the east, to the very last house on the shore to the west, there was not one Christmas eve party so happy as this one.

Captain Cephas was not quite so happy as the three others were, but he was very much interested. About nine o'clock the party broke up, and the two captains put on their caps and buttoned up their pea−jackets, and started for Captain Cephas's house, but not before Captain Eli had carefully fastened every window and every door except the front door, and had told Mrs. Trimmer how to fasten that when they had gone, and had given her a boatswain's whistle, which she might blow out of the window if there should be a sudden croup and it should be necessary for any one to go anywhere. He was sure he could hear it, for the wind was exactly right for him to hear a whistle from his house. When they had gone Mrs. Trimmer put the little girl to bed, and was delighted to find in what a wonderfully neat and womanlike fashion that house was kept.

It was nearly twelve o'clock that night when Captain Eli, sleeping in his bunk opposite that of Captain Cephas, was aroused by hearing a sound. He had been lying with his best ear uppermost, so that he should hear anything if there happened to be anything to hear. He did hear something, but it was not a boatswain's whistle; it was a prolonged cry, and it seemed to come from the sea.

In a moment Captain Eli was sitting on the side of his bunk, listening intently. Again came the cry. The

window toward the sea was slightly open, and he heard it plainly.

"Cap'n! " said he, and at the word Captain Cephas was sitting on the side of his bunk, listening. He knew from his companion's attitude, plainly visible in the light of a lantern which hung on a hook at the other end of the room, that he had been awakened to listen. Again came the cry.

"That's distress at sea," said Captain Cephas. "Harken!"

They listened again for nearly a minute, when the cry was repeated.

"Bounce on deck, boys!" said Captain Cephas, getting out on the floor. "There's some one in distress off shore."

Captain Eli jumped to the floor, and began to dress quickly.

"It couldn't be a call from land?" he asked hurriedly. "It don't sound a bit to you like a boatswain's whistle, does it?"

"No," said Captain Cephas, disdainfully. "It's a call from sea." Then, seizing a lantern, he rushed down the companionway.

As soon as he was convinced that it was a call from sea, Captain Eli was one in feeling and action with Captain Cephas. The latter hastily opened the draughts of the kitchen stove, and put on some wood, and by the time this was done Captain Eli had the kettle filled and on the stove. Then they clapped on their caps and their pea−jackets, each took an oar from a corner in the back hall, and together they ran down to the beach.

The night was dark, but not very cold, and Captain Cephas had been to the store that morning in his boat.

Whenever he went to the store, and the weather permitted, he rowed there in his boat rather than walk. At the bow of the boat, which was now drawn up on the sand, the two men stood and listened. Again came the cry from the sea.

"It's something ashore on the Turtle−back Shoal," said Captain Cephas.

"Yes," said Captain Eli, "and it's some small craft, fer that cry is down pretty nigh to the water."

"Yes," said Captain Cephas. "And there's only one man aboard, or else they'd take turns a−hollerin'."

"He's a stranger," said Captain Eli, "or he wouldn't have tried, even with a cat−boat, to get in over that shoal on ebb− tide."

As they spoke they ran the boat out into the water and jumped in, each with an oar. Then they pulled for the Turtle−back Shoal.

Although these two captains were men of fifty or thereabout, they were as strong and tough as any young fellows in the village, and they pulled with steady strokes, and sent the heavy boat skimming over the water, not in a straight line toward the Turtle−back Shoal, but now a few points in the darkness this way, and now a few points in the darkness that way, then with a great curve to the south through the dark night, keeping always near the middle of the only good channel out of the bay when the tide was ebbing.

Now the cries from seaward had ceased, but the two captains were not discouraged.

"He's heard the thumpin' of our oars," said Captain Cephas.

"He's listenin', and he'll sing out again if he thinks we're goin' wrong," said Captain Eli. "Of course he doesn't know anything about that."

And so when they made the sweep to the south the cry came again, and Captain Eli grinned. "We needn't to spend no breath hollerin'," said he. "He'll hear us makin' fer him in a minute."

When they came to head for the shoal they lay on their oars for a moment, while Captain Cephas turned the lantern in the bow, so that its light shone out ahead. He had not wanted the shipwrecked person to see the light when it would seem as if the boat were rowing away from him. He had heard of castaway people who became so wild when they imagined that a ship or boat was going away from them that they jumped overboard.

When the two captains reached the shoal, they found there a cat−boat aground, with one man aboard. His tale was quickly told. He had expected to run into the little bay that afternoon, but the wind had fallen, and in trying to get in after dark, and being a stranger, he had run aground. If he had not been so cold, he said, he would have been willing to stay there till the tide rose; but he was getting chilled, and seeing a light not far away, he concluded to call for help as long as his voice held out.

The two captains did not ask many questions. They helped anchor the cat−boat, and then they took the man on their boat and rowed him to shore. He was getting chilled sitting out there doing nothing, and so when they reached the house they made him some hot grog, and promised in the morning, when the tide rose, they would go

out and help him bring his boat in. Then Captain Cephas showed the stranger to a bunk, and they all went to bed. Such experiences had not enough of novelty to the good captains to keep them awake five minutes.

In the morning they were all up very early, and the stranger, who proved to be a seafaring man with bright blue eyes, said that, as his cat−boat seemed to be riding all right at its anchorage, he did not care to go out after her just yet. Any time during flood−tide would do for him, and he had some business that he wanted to attend to as soon as possible.

This suited the two captains very well, for they wished to be on hand when the little girl discovered her stocking.

"Can you tell me," said the stranger, as he put on his cap, "where I can find a Mrs. Trimmer, who lives in this village?"

At these words all the sturdy stiffness which, from his youth up, had characterized the legs of Captain Eli entirely went out of them, and he sat suddenly upon a bench. For a few moments there was silence.

Then Captain Cephas, who thought some answer should be made to the question, nodded his head.

"I want to see her as soon as I can," said the stranger. "I have come to see her on particular business that will be a surprise to her. I wanted to be here before Christmas began, and that's the reason I took that cat−boat from Stetford, because I thought I'd come quicker that way than by land. But the wind fell, as I told you. If either one of you would be good enough to pilot me to where Mrs. Trimmer lives, or to any point where I can get a sight of the place, I'd be obliged."

Captain Eli rose and with hurried but unsteady steps went into the house (for they had been upon the little piazza), and beckoned to his friend to follow. The two men stood in the kitchen and looked at each other. The face of Captain Eli was of the hue of a clam−shell.

"Go with him, cap'n," he said in a hoarse whisper. "I can't do it."

"To your house?" inquired the other.

"Of course. Take him to my house. There ain't no other place where she is. Take him along."

Captain Cephas's countenance wore an air of the deepest concern, but he thought that the best thing to do was to get the stranger away.

As they walked rapidly toward Captain Eli's house there was very little said by either Captain Cephas or the stranger. The latter seemed anxious to give Mrs. Trimmer a surprise, and not to say anything which might enable another person to interfere with his project.

The two men had scarcely stepped upon the piazza when Mrs. Trimmer, who had been expecting early visitors, opened the door. She was about to call out "Merry Christmas!" but, her eyes falling upon a stranger, the words stopped at her lips. First she turned red, then she turned pale, and Captain Cephas thought she was about to fall. But before she could do this the stranger had her in his arms. She opened her eyes, which for a moment she had closed, and, gazing into his face, she put her arms around his neck. Then Captain Cephas came away, without thinking of the little girl and the pleasure she would have in discovering her Christmas stocking.

When he had been left alone, Captain Eli sat down near the kitchen stove, close to the very kettle which he had filled with water to heat for the benefit of the man he had helped bring in from the sea, and, with his elbows on his knees and his fingers in his hair, he darkly pondered.

"If I'd only slept with my hard−o'−hearin' ear up," he said to himself, "I'd never have heard it."

In a few moments his better nature condemned this thought.

"That's next to murder," he muttered, "fer he couldn't have kept himself from fallin' asleep out there in the cold, and when the tide riz held have been blowed out to sea with this wind. If I hadn't heard him, Captain Cephas never would, fer he wasn't primed up to wake, as I was."

But, notwithstanding his better nature, Captain Eli was again saying to himself, when his friend returned, "If I'd only slept with my other ear up!"

Like the honest, straightforward mariner he was, Captain Cephas made an exact report of the facts. "They was huggin' when I left them," he said, "and I expect they went indoors pretty soon, fer it was too cold outside. It's an all−fired shame she happened to be in your house, cap'n, that's all I've got to say about it. It's a thunderin' shame."

Captain Eli made no answer. He still sat with his elbows on his knees and his hands in his hair.

"A better course than you laid down fer these Christmas times was never dotted on a chart," continued Captain Cephas. "From port of sailin' to port of entry you laid it down clear and fine. But it seems there was rocks that

wasn't marked on the chart."

"Yes," groaned Captain Eli, "there was rocks."

Captain Cephas made no attempt to comfort his friend, but went to work to get breakfast.

When that meal—a rather silent one—was over, Captain Eli felt better. "There was rocks," he said, "and not a breaker to show where they lay, and I struck 'em bow on. So that's the end of that voyage. But I've tuk to my boats, cap'n, I've tuk to my boats."

"I'm glad to hear you've tuk to your boats," said Captain Cephas, with an approving glance upon his friend.

About ten minutes afterwards Captain Eli said, "I'm goin' up to my house."

"By yourself?" said the other.

"Yes, by myself. I'd rather go alone. I don't intend to mind anything, and I'm goin' to tell her that she can stay there and spend Christmas,—the place she lives in ain't no place to spend Christmas,—and she can make the little gal have a good time, and go 'long just as we intended to go 'long—plum−duff and mince−pie all the same. I can stay here, and you and me can have our Christmas dinner together, if we choose to give it that name.

And if she ain't ready to go to−morrow, she can stay a day or two longer. It's all the same to me, if it's the same to you, cap'n."

Captain Cephas having said that it was the same to him, Captain Eli put on his cap and buttoned up his pea−jacket, declaring that the sooner he got to his house the better, as she might be thinking that she would have to move out of it now that things were different.

Before Captain Eli reached his house he saw something which pleased him. He saw the sea−going stranger, with his back toward him, walking rapidly in the direction of the village store.

Captain Eli quickly entered his house, and in the doorway of the room where the tree was he met Mrs. Trimmer, beaming brighter than any morning sun that ever rose.

"Merry Christmas!" she exclaimed, holding out both her hands. "I've been wondering and wondering when you'd come to bid me `Merry Christmas'—the merriest Christmas I've ever had."

Captain Eli took her hands and bid her "Merry Christmas" very gravely.

She looked a little surprised. "What's the matter, Captain Eli?" she exclaimed. "You don't seem to say that as if you meant it."

"Oh, yes, I do," he answered. "This must be an all−fired—I mean a thunderin' happy Christmas fer you, Mrs. Trimmer."

"Yes," said she, her face beaming again. "And to think that it should happen on Christmas day—that this blessed morning, before anything else happened, my Bob, my only brother, should—"

"Your what!" roared Captain Eli, as if he had been shouting orders in a raging storm.

Mrs. Trimmer stepped back almost frightened. "My brother," said she. "Didn't he tell you he was my brother—my brother Bob, who sailed away a year before I was married, and who has been in Africa and China and I don't know where? It's so long since I heard that he'd gone into trading at Singapore that I'd given him up as married and settled in foreign parts. And here he has come to me as if he'd tumbled from the sky on this blessed Christmas morning."

Captain Eli made a step forward, his face very much flushed.

"Your brother, Mrs. Trimmer—did you really say it was your brother?"

"Of course it is," said she. "Who else could it be?" Then she paused for a moment and looked steadfastly at the captain.

"You don't mean to say, Captain Eli," she asked, "that you thought it was—"

"Yes, I did," said Captain Eli, promptly.

Mrs. Trimmer looked straight in the captain's eyes, then she looked on the ground. Then she changed color and changed back again.

"I don't understand," she said hesitatingly, "why—I mean what difference it made."

"Difference!" exclaimed Captain Eli. "It was all the difference between a man on deck and a man overboard—that's the difference it was to me. I didn't expect to be talkin' to you so early this Christmas mornin', but things has been sprung on me, and I can't help it I just want to ask you one thing: Did you think I was gettin' up this Christmas tree and the Christmas dinner and the whole business fer the good of the little gal, and fer the good of you, and fer the good of Captain Cephas?"

Mrs. Trimmer had now recovered a very fair possession of herself. "Of course I did," she answered, looking up at him as she spoke. "Who else could it have been for!"

"Well," said he, "you were mistaken. It wasn't fer any one of you. It was all fer me—fer my own self."

"You yourself?" said she. "I don't see how."

"But I see how," he answered. "It's been a long time since I wanted to speak my mind to you, Mrs. Trimmer, but I didn't ever have no chance. And all these Christmas doin's was got up to give me the chance not only of speakin' to you, but of showin' my colors better than I could show them in any other way. Everything went on a−skimmin' till this mornin', when that stranger that we brought in from the shoal piped up and asked fer you. Then I went overboard—at least, I thought I did—and sunk down, down, clean out of soundin's."

"That was too bad, captain," said she, speaking very gently, "after all your trouble and kindness."

"But I don't know now," he continued, "whether I went overboard or whether I am on deck. Can you tell me, Mrs. Trimmer?"

She looked up at him. Her eyes were very soft, and her lips trembled just a little. "It seems to me, captain," she said, "that you are on deck—if you want to be."

The captain stepped closer to her. "Mrs. Trimmer," said he, "is that brother of yours comin' back?"

"Yes," she answered, surprised at the sudden question. "He's just gone up to the store to buy a shirt and some things. He got himself splashed trying to push his boat off last night."

"Well, then," said Captain Eli, "would you mind tellin' him when he comes back that you and me's engaged to be married? I don't know whether I've made a mistake in the lights or not, but would you mind tellin' him that?"

Mrs. Trimmer looked at him. Her eyes were not so soft as they had been, but they were brighter. "I'd rather you'd tell him that yourself," said she.

The little girl sat on the floor near the Christmas tree, just finishing a large piece of red−and−white candy which she had taken out of her stocking. "People do hug a lot at Christmas− time," said she to herself. Then she drew out a piece of blue− and−white candy and began on that.

Captain Cephas waited a long time for his friend to return, and at last he thought it would be well to go and look for him. When he entered the house he found Mrs. Trimmer sitting on the sofa in the parlor, with Captain Eli on one side of her and her brother on the other, and each of them holding one of her hands.

"It looks as if I was in port, don't it?" said Captain Eli to his astonished friend. "Well, here I am, and here's my fust mate," inclining his head toward Mrs. Trimmer. "And she's in port too, safe and sound. And that strange captain on the other side of her, he's her brother Bob, who's been away for years and years, and is just home from Madagascar."

"Singapore," amended Brother Bob.

Captain Cephas looked from one to the other of the three occupants of the sofa, but made no immediate remark. Presently a smile of genial maliciousness stole over his face, and he asked, "How about the poor little gal? Have you sent her back to Mrs. Crumley's?"

The little girl came out from behind the Christmas tree, her stocking, now but half filled, in her hand. "Here I am," she said. "Don't you want to give me a Christmas hug, Captain Cephas? You and me's the only ones that hasn't had any."

The Christmas dinner was as truly and perfectly a sailor− cooked meal as ever was served on board a ship or off it. Captain Cephas had said that, and when he had so spoken there was no need of further words.

It was nearly dark that afternoon, and they were all sitting around the kitchen fire, the three seafaring men smoking, and Mrs. Trimmer greatly enjoying it. There could be no objection to the smell of tobacco in this house so long as its future mistress enjoyed it. The little girl sat on the floor nursing a Chinese idol which had been one of her presents.

"After all," said Captain Eli, meditatively, "this whole business come out of my sleepin' with my best ear up. Fer if I'd slept with my hard−o'−hearin' ear up—" Mrs. Trimmer put one finger on his lips. "All right," said Captain Eli, "I won't say no more. But it would have been different."

Even now, several years after that Christmas, when there is no Mrs. Trimmer, and the little girl, who has been regularly adopted by Captain Eli and his wife, is studying geography, and knows more about latitude and longitude than her teacher at school, Captain Eli has still a slight superstitious dread of sleeping with his best ear uppermost.

"Of course it's the most all−fired nonsense," he says to himself over and over again. Nevertheless, he feels safer when it is his "hard−o'−hearin' ear" that is not upon the pillow.