



Kitchen Company

William Wymark Jacobs (1863-1943) wrote funny, good-natured¹ stories about the seamen and ship's captains who took cargo² and passengers from port to port around the coast of Britain. Jacobs knew them well, because he was the son of a London port manager.

One of the people in this story is a domestic servant. Many middle-class homes still had a domestic servant (a 'housemaid'). She had to wake up early every morning, light a coal fire and make breakfast for the family. With no electric cooker, refrigeration, washing machine, vacuum cleaner or central heating, she spent all day cooking, shopping, cleaning, washing clothes, making tea and putting coal on fires.

However, she could still have her own life, interests and personality!

The young and well-dressed Mr Leonard Scott was visiting the young and charming Miss Edith Brampton at her home. They were having tea with her mother, Mrs Brampton, who sat by the window so as to have a good view of the street.

Practice makes perfect:³ A moment after Mrs Brampton said that she could see the Captain⁴ walking up the street, Mr Scott kissed Miss Brampton and walked

¹ **good-natured**: Tolerant, kind and easy to be with. A good-natured person likes the people they meet, and wants them to be happy. **Natured** is pronounced NAYCHəD.

ə is the schwa sound. There is a schwa in most longer English words: **father, other, butter; often, listen; machine, police; America, Europe; apartment, away; animal, photograph.**

² **cargo**: The things a ship carries, except for passengers. Coal, wood, food, machinery, etc.

³ **practice makes perfect**: This is a common expression. 'To practice' (US and UK) or 'to practise' (older UK) is to repeat one small action such as a golf swing, or a tennis serve, or part of a song until you can do it well.

⁴ **Captain**: Mr Brampton had been the captain of a small ship.

out to make his usual dignified exit¹ via the kitchen.² To leave by the back door was the best way to avoid trouble³ with a man who was always trying to start it. Clara, the Bramptons' young housemaid, was busy in the kitchen. She smiled at Mr Scott as he went past. He nodded at her⁴ and, with one hand on the back door, he waited to hear the Captain enter the house by the front door.

"One of these days," began Clara, who loved to read sensational⁵ stories in the newspapers, "he'll come ..."

She stopped talking⁶ and listened intently.

"He's coming!" she said, in a thrilling⁷ whisper.⁸ "He's coming the back way!"⁹

Mr Scott started,¹⁰ hesitated, and was lost.

"Quick, run!" exclaimed Clara, pointing by accident to the ceiling.

The young man scowled¹ at her. Before he had time to alter his expression, he found himself face to face with Captain Brampton, who was a large,² muscular man with a very red face.

¹ **dignified:** A person is dignified if they are impressive, serious, quiet and at least 40 years old. Here it's ironic; it means the opposite of what it says. It's not dignified for a young man to escape through the kitchen when his girlfriend's father appears.

² **via the kitchen:** The word **via** is about routes, ways and topological maps. You can go from London to Lisbon **via** Paris, or you can go direct.

³ **trouble:** Conflict. Trouble usually means *problems*. It can also mean extra work, effort or conflict. Here it probably means a loud, angry argument, ending with the Captain saying '*...and don't come back!*' Trouble is pronounced TRUBBL.

⁴ **noded at her:** He moved his head up and down. A nod usually means 'yes'. It can mean 'hello' but it isn't very friendly: Leonard wants to show Clara that he is her social superior.

⁵ **sensational:** Exciting.

⁶ **she stopped talking:** Compare 'she stopped talking' (she was talking, then she stopped talking) and 'she stopped to talk' (she stopped working because she wanted to talk).

⁷ **thrilling:** Very exciting.

⁸ **whisper:** A whisper is the quietest way to talk.

⁹ **the back way:** By the back door, not the front door.

¹⁰ **Mr Scott started ... Clara started ... Mr Hopkins started:** 'To start' can mean to jump a little because of a surprise.

"Well?" barked³ the latter. "What are you doing in my kitchen? Eh? What have you got to say for yourself?"

Mr Scott coughed⁴ and tried to think what to say. In the front room, Mrs Brampton and her daughter looked at each other silently. Mrs Brampton heard her lord and master⁵ roar her name from the kitchen.⁶ She stood up and walked along the hall,⁷ trembling.⁸ Miss Brampton followed her.

"What does this mean?" the Captain growled⁹ as she entered the kitchen.

His wife stood looking helplessly from one to the other, and, instead of answering the question, she passed it on.

"What does this mean, Clara?" she demanded.

"Eh?" said that astonished young woman. "What does what mean?"

"This," said the Captain sternly,¹⁰ with a jerk¹¹ of his head towards Mr Scott. "Did you invite him here?"

¹ **scowled**: A scowl is the opposite of a smile. It's an unfriendly or angry facial expression.

² **large**: Big. (Large is a 'false friend' in some languages. It does not mean 'big in the side-to-side dimension'; that is *wide* or *broad*. Large is simply big. It's big in all dimensions.)

³ **barked**: Barking is the noise a dog makes if it's excited or angry. *Woof, woof...*

⁴ **coughed**: Made a noise from his chest. If you have a cold, you do a lot of sneezing and coughing. Cough is pronounced KOFF.

⁵ **lord and master**: A husband is sometimes called the 'lord and master' of his wife and children, but it's usually ironic (it means the opposite of what it says).

⁶ **roar**: Roaring is a loud, angry sound; lions roar.

⁷ **hall**: In a normal house, the hall is the room just inside the front door. It has doors to the other rooms, and the stairs go up from the hall.

⁸ **trembling**: Our hands tremble (they make constant small movements) if we feel strong emotion. This happens if you get a lot of adrenaline in your blood but you don't run or fight.

⁹ **growled**: The noise a dog makes before it attacks. *Grrrrrrrrrrrr...*

¹⁰ **sternly**: Somebody is stern if they look serious and dominant. For example, a police officer talking to a young criminal.

¹¹ **jerk**: A movement that starts or stops with a quick shock. '*The train started with a jerk*'. '*She suddenly jerked the door open*'. '*He jerked his head to indicate the door on the right*'.

Clara started, but not as much as Mr Scott did. She looked down modestly at a hole in the kitchen carpet, and Mrs Brampton and her daughter looked at her, wondering what she was going to say.

"I didn't exactly invite him," replied Clara, "but I can't stop him coming here."

"Hmm. Perhaps you didn't try," said the Captain with unexpected mildness.¹

"How long have you known him?"

"Some time, sir," said Clara vaguely.

"Does he want to marry you?"

Clara looked at Miss Brampton, but the latter was engaged in an eye-to-eye duel² with Mr Scott, who was obviously finding it difficult to stay silent. An expression of great and unusual benevolence³ slowly appeared on the Captain's face, like the sun rising on a summer morning.

"Well, well," he said slowly. "We were all young once. He's not much to look at,⁴ but he looks clean and respectable.⁵ When do you think of getting married?"

"That's for him to say, sir," said the modest Clara.

¹ **mildness**: The Captain is not angry. (Mild means gentle and pleasant, not extreme or severe. Weather and illness can be extreme or severe, but they can also be **mild**. A mild day in winter is one that is not very cold or windy. A mild illness is one that doesn't make you feel very bad. Mild is pronounced like *child* or *wild*.)

² **an eye-to-eye duel**: A silent argument. In England, the last real **duel** (a formal fight between two people, usually with pistols or swords) was nearly a hundred years before our story.

³ **benevolence**: Generosity, goodwill, kindness.

⁴ **...not much to look at**: A common expression. The Captain is saying that Leonard isn't impressive or handsome.

⁵ **respectable**: Conventional, clean, quiet, polite and honest.

"Well, there's no hurry,"¹ said the Captain, "no hurry. He can come round once a week for you on your evening off,"² but no other time, mind."³

"Thank you, sir," said Clara, who was beginning to enjoy herself. "It's my evening off to-night, sir. He's going to take me to the movies."⁴

A suppressed exclamation came from where Mr Scott was standing, which the Captain chose to interpret as an expression of gratitude. He told Clara to give her admirer⁵ some bread and cheese and one glass of beer, and then left the kitchen with his wife and daughter. Clara began to lay the table⁶ for lunch, humming a popular tune as she did so.⁷

"What the devil⁸ did you say I was going to take you to the movies for?" demanded the ungrateful Mr Scott.⁹

"Because I want to go," said his hostess¹⁰ calmly.

¹ **well:** In conversation, the word 'well' at the start of a sentence is like 'so...' or 'hmm...' or 'oh...' or 'now...'. It doesn't have much meaning.

² **...your evening off:** The evening when you don't have to work. Domestic servants like Clara had to work 14 hours a day, 6 days per week.

³ **mind:** If you say 'mind' or 'mind you' after giving an instruction or information, it means '*and make you sure you remember this!*'

⁴ **to the movies:** To the cinema (UK) or movie theater (US), to watch films (movies). It's pronounced MOOVIZ.

⁵ **her admirer:** An older word for her boyfriend, or a man who wants to be her boyfriend

⁶ **to lay the table:** To put a tablecloth on the dinner table, and then table-mats, cutlery, plates and glasses.

⁷ **humming a ... tune:** She's making a musical noise with her mouth shut.

⁸ **What the devil...?:** This is the start of an angry or impatient question. We're more likely to say '*What the hell...?*' or '*What on earth...?*'

⁹ **demand:** To demand is to insist; to ask in an angry way. If you demand something, you want it, you want it now, and you are not very interested in hearing what the other person has to say.

¹⁰ **his hostess.** A person who invites you to a party, a dinner or to stay for the weekend is your **host** or **hostess**, and you are their **guest**. In the kitchen, Clara is the boss. Leonard can stay there only with her permission, as her guest.

Mr Scott regarded her coldly. "I will walk with you as far as the corner of this road," he said with an air of finality.

"We'll go to the best seats, and I'll have a box of chocolates," said Clara. "Do you like chocolates?"

"No," said the other sternly.

"Oh good!" said the girl. "My other young man... "

Mr Scott coughed violently.

"All right,"¹ said the girl, "don't get excited. He's away on a job for a week or two, or I wouldn't dare to be seen with you. While the cat's away, the mice will play."²

The young man looked at her in amazement. This was a new Clara. His lips trembled and his eyes watered.³ He picked up⁴ his glass of beer and nodded.

"Oh, well, all right!" he agreed.

He smoked a cigarette while the girl went upstairs to dress, and a little later, watched by three pairs of eyes from the front window, he walked down the street with her arm-in-arm.

"She's too good for him," said the Captain, with decision.

¹ **All right:** Relax, calm down. Also spelled 'alright'.

² **While the cat's away, (the mice will play):** Another common expression.

³ **His lips trembled and his eyes watered:** It was important to him to be Clara's social superior - but it was very difficult for him not to laugh at what she said.

⁴ **picked up:** Lift, collect, take, acquire. It's a phrasal verb. If you drop your pen on the ground, you **pick it up**. You can **pick up** a parcel from the Post Office, or pick up a friend from the railway station. When you're in the countryside, you can **pick** apples.