

William Tyrwhitt's "Copy"

By Bernard Capes

This is the story of William Tyrwhitt, who went to King's Cobb for rest and change, and, with the latter, at least, was so far accommodated as for a time to get beyond himself and into regions foreign to his experiences or his desires. And for this condition of his I hold myself something responsible, inasmuch as it was my inquisitiveness was the means of inducing him to an exploration, of which the result, with its measure of weirdness, was for him alone. But, it seems, I was appointed an agent of the unexplainable without my knowledge, and it was simply my misfortune to find my first unwitting commission in the selling of a friend.

I was for a few days, about the end of a particular July, lodged in that little old seaboard town of Dorset that is called King's Cobb. Thither there came to me one morning a letter from William Tyrwhitt, the polemical journalist (a queer fish, like the cuttle, with an ink-bag for the confusion of enemies), complaining that he was fagged and used up, and desiring me to say that nowhere could complete rest be obtained as in King's Cobb.

I wrote and assured him on this point. The town, I said, lay wrapped in the hills as in blankets, its head only, winking a sleepy eye, projecting from the top of the broad steep gully in which it was stretched at ease. Thither few came to the droning coast; and such as did, looked up at the High Street baking in the sun, and, thinking of Jacob's ladder, composed them to slumber upon the sand and left the climbing to the angels. Here, I said, the air and the sea were so still that one could hear the oysters snoring in their beds; and the little frizzle of surf on the beach was like to the sound to dreaming ears of bacon frying in the kitchens of the blest.

William Tyrwhitt came, and I met him at the station, six or seven miles away. He was all strained and springless, like a broken child's toy—"not like that William who, with lance in rest, shot through the lists in Fleet Street." A disputative galley-puller could have triumphed over him morally; a child physically.

The drive in the inn brake, by undulating roads and scented valleys, shamed his cheek to a little flush of self-assertion.

"I will sleep under the vines," he said, "and the grapes shall drop into my mouth."

"Beware," I answered, "lest in King's Cobb your repose should be everlasting. The air of that hamlet has matured like old port in the bin of its hills, till to drink of it is to swoon."

We alighted at the crown of the High Street, purposing to descend on foot the remaining distance to the shore.

"Behold," I exclaimed, "how the gulls float in the shimmer, like ashes tossed aloft by the white draught of a fire! Behold these ancient buildings nodding to the everlasting lullaby of the bay waters! The cliffs are black with the heat apoplexy; the lobster is drawn scarlet to the surface. You shall be like an addled egg put into an incubator."

"So," he said, "I shall rest and not hatch. The very thought is like sweet oil on a burn."

He stayed with me a week, and his body waxed wondrous round and rosy, while his eye acquired a foolish and vacant expression. So it was with me. We rolled together, by shore and by road of this sluggard place, like spent billiard balls; and if by chance we cannoned, we swerved sleepily apart, until, perhaps, one would fall into a pocket of the sand, and the other bring up against a cushion of sea-wall.

Yet, for all its enervating atmosphere, King's Cobb has its fine traditions of a sturdy independence, and a slashing history withal; and its aspect is as picturesque as that of an opera bouffe fishing-harbour. Then, too, its High Street, as well as its meandering rivulets of low streets, is rich in buildings, venerable and antique.

We took an irresponsible, smiling pleasure in noting these advantages—particularly after lunch; and sometimes, where an old house was empty, we would go over it, and stare at beams and chimney-pieces and hear the haunted tale of its fortunes, with a faint half-memory in our breasts of that one-time bugbear we had known as “copy.” But though more than once a flaccid instinct would move us to have out our pencils, we would only end by bugging our foolish mouths with them, as if they were cigarettes, and then vaguely wondering at them for that, being pencils, they would not draw.

By then we were so sinewless and demoralized that we could hear in the distant strains of the European Concert nothing but an orchestra of sweet sounds, and would have given ourselves away in any situation with a pound of tea. Therefore, perhaps, it was well for us that, a peremptory summons to town reaching me after seven days of comradeship with William, I must make shift to collect my faculties with my effects, and return to the more bracing climate of Fleet Street.

And here, you will note, begins the story of William Tyrwhitt, who would linger yet a few days in that hanging garden of the south coast, and who would pull himself together and collect matter for “copy.”

He found a very good subject that first evening of his solitude.

I was to leave in the afternoon, and the morning we spent in aimlessly rambling about the town. Towards mid-day, a slight shower drove us to shelter under the green verandah of a house, standing up from the lower fall of the High Street, that we had often observed in our wanderings. This house—or rather houses, for it was a block of two—was very tall and odd-looking, being all built of clean squares of a whitish granite; and the double porch in the middle base—led up to by side-going steps behind thin iron railings—roofed with green-painted zinc. In some of the windows were jalousies, but the general aspect of the exterior was gaunt and rigid; and the whole block bore a dismal, deserted look, as if it had not been lived in for years.

Now we had taken refuge in the porch of that half that lay uppermost on the slope; and here we noticed that, at a late date, the building was seemingly in process of repair, painters' pots and brushes lying on a window-sill, and a pair of steps showing within through the glass.

“They have gone to dinner,” said I. “Supposing we seize the opportunity to explore?”

We pushed at the door; it yielded. We entered, shut ourselves in, and paused to the sound of our own footsteps echoing and laughing from corners and high places. On the ground floor were two or three good-sized rooms with modern grates, but cornices, chimney-pieces, embrasures finely Jacobean. There were innumerable under-stair and over-head cupboards, too, and pantries, and closets, and passages going off darkly into the unknown.

We clomb the stairway—to the first floor—to the second. Here was all pure Jacobean; but the walls were crumbling, the paper peeling, the windows dim and foul with dirt.

I have never known a place with such echoes. They shook from a footstep like nuts rattling out of a bag; a mouse behind the skirting led a whole camp-following of them; to ask a question was, as in that other House, to awaken the derisive shouts of an Opposition. Yet, in the intervals of silence, there fell a deadliness of quiet that was quite appalling by force of contrast.

“Let us go down,” I said. “I am feeling creepy.”

“Pooh!” said William Tyrwhitt; “I could take up my abode here with a feather bed.”

We descended, nevertheless. Arrived at the ground floor, "I am going to the back," said William.

I followed him—a little reluctantly, I confess. Gloom and shadow had fallen upon the town, and this old deserted hulk of an abode was ghostly to a degree. There was no film of dust on its every shelf or sill that did not seem to me to bear the impress of some phantom finger feeling its way along. A glint of stealthy eyes would look from dark uncertain corners; a thin evil vapour appear to rise through the cracks of the boards from the unvisited cellars in the basement.

And here, too, we came suddenly upon an eccentricity of out-building that wrought upon our souls with wonder. For, penetrating to the rear through what might have been a cloak-closet or butler's pantry, we found a supplementary wing, or rather tail of rooms, loosely knocked together, to proceed from the back, forming a sort of skilling to the main building. These rooms led direct into one another, and, consisting of little more than timber and plaster, were in a woeful state of dilapidation. Everywhere the laths grinned through torn gaps in the ceilings and walls; everywhere the latter were blotched and mildewed with damp, and the floor-boards rotting in their tracks. Fallen mortar, rusty tins, yellow teeth of glass, whitened soot—all the decay and rubbish of a generation of neglect littered the place and filled it with an acrid odour. From one of the rooms we looked forth through a little discoloured window upon a patch of forlorn weedy garden, where the very cats glowered in a depression that no surfeit of mice could assuage.

We went on, our nervous feet apologetic to the grit they crunched; and, when we were come to near the end of this dreary annexe, turned off to the left into a short gloom of passage that led to a closed door.

Pushing this open, we found a drop of some half-dozen steps, and, going gingerly down these, stopped with a common exclamation of surprise on our lips.

Perhaps our wonder was justified, for we were in the stern cabin of an ancient West Indiaman.

Some twenty feet long by twelve wide—there it all was, from the deck transoms above, to the side lockers and great curved window, sloping outwards to the floor and glazed with little panes in galleries, that filled the whole end of the room. Thereout we looked, over the degraded garden, to the lower quarters of the town—as if, indeed, we were perched high up on waves—and even to a segment of the broad bay that swept by them.

But the room itself! What phantasy of old sea-dog or master-mariner had conceived it? What palsied spirit, condemned to rust in inactivity, had found solace in this burlesque of shipcraft? To renew the past in such a fixture, to work oneself up to the old glow of flight and action, and then, while one stamped and rocked maniacally, to feel the refusal of so much as a timber to respond to one's fervour of animation! It was a grotesque picture.

Now, this cherished chamber had shared the fate of the rest. The paint and gilding were all cracked and blistered away; much of the glass of the stern-frame was gone or hung loose in its sashes; the elaborately carved lockers mouldered on the walls.

These were but dummies when we came to examine them—mere slabs attached to the brick-work, and decaying with it.

"There should be a case-bottle and rummers in one, at least," said William Tyrwhitt.

"There are, sir, at your service," said a voice behind us.

We started and turned.

It had been such a little strained voice that it was with something like astonishment I looked upon the speaker. Whence he had issued I could not guess; but there he stood behind us, nodding and smiling—a squab, thick-set old fellow with a great bald head, and, for all the hair on his face, a tuft like a teasel sprouting from his under lip.

He was in his shirt-sleeves, without coat or vest; and I noticed that his dirty lawn was oddly plaited in front, and that about his ample paunch was buckled a broad belt of leather. Greased hip-boots encased his lower limbs, and the heels of these were drawn together as he bowed.

William Tyrwhitt—a master of nervous English—muttered “Great Scott!” under his breath.

“Permit me,” said the stranger—and he held out to us a tin pannikin (produced from Heaven knows where) that swam with fragrance.

I shook my head. William Tyrwhitt, that fated man, did otherwise. He accepted the vessel and drained it.

“It smacks of all Castille,” he said, handing it back with a sigh of ecstasy. “Who the devil are you, sir?”

The stranger gave a little crow.

“Peregrine Iron, sir, at your service—Captain Peregrine Iron, of the *Raven* sloop amongst others. You are very welcome to the run of my poor abode.”

“Yours?” I murmured in confusion. “We owe you a thousand apologies.”

“Not at all,” he said, addressing all his courtesy to William. Me, since my rejection of his beaker, he took pains to ignore.

“Not at all,” he said. “Your intrusion was quite natural under the circumstances. I take a pleasure in being your cicerone. This cabin (he waved his hand pompously)—a fancy of mine, sir, a fancy of mine. The actual material of the latest of my commands brought hither and adapted to the exigencies of shore life. It enables me to live eternally in the past—a most satisfying illusion. Come to-night and have a pipe and a glass with me.”

I thought William Tyrwhitt mad.

“I will come, by all means,” he said. The stranger bowed us out of the room. “That is right,” he exclaimed. “You will find me here. Good-bye for the present.”

As we plunged like dazed men into the street, now grown sunny, I turned on my friend.

“William,” I said, “did you happen to look back as we left the cabin?”

“I did.”

“Well?”

“There was no stranger there at all. The place was empty.”

“Well?”

“You will not go to-night?”

“You bet I do.”

I shrugged my shoulders. We walked on a little way in silence. Suddenly my companion turned on me, a most truculent expression on his face.

“For an independent thinker,” he said, “you are rather a pusillanimous jackass. A man of your convictions to shy at a shadow! Fie, sir, fie! What if the room *were* empty? The place was full enough of traps to permit of Captain Iron’s immediate withdrawal.”

Much may be expressed in a sniff. I sniffed.

That afternoon I went back to town, and left the offensive William to his fate.

It found him at once.

The very day following that of my retreat, I was polishing phrases by gaslight in the dull sitting-room of my lodgings in the Lambeth Road, when he staggered in upon me. His face was like a sheep’s, white and vacant; his hands had caught a trick of groping blindly along the backs of chairs.

“You have obtained your ‘copy’?” I said.

I made him out to murmur “yes” in a shaking under-voice. He was so patently nervous that I put him in a chair and poured him out a wine-glassful of London brandy. This generally is a powerful emetic, but it had no more effect upon him than water. Then I was about to lower the gas, to save his eyes, but he stopped me with a thin shriek.

“Light, light!” he whispered. “It cannot be too light for me!”

“Now, William Tyrwhitt,” I said, by-and-by, watchful of him, and marking a faint effusion of colour soak to his cheek, “you would not accept my warning, and you were extremely rude to me. Therefore you have had an experience—”

“An awful one,” he murmured.

“An awful one, no doubt; and to obtain surcease of the haunting memory of it, you must confide its processes to me. But, first, I must put it to you, which is the more pusillanimous—to refuse to submit one’s manliness to the tyranny of the unlawful, or to rush into situations you have not the nerve to adapt yourself to?”

“I could not foresee, I could not foresee.”

“Neither could I. And that was my very reason for declining the invitation. Now proceed.”

It was long before he could. But presently he essayed, and gathered voice with the advance of his narrative, and even unconsciously threw it into something the form of “copy.” And here it is as he murmured it, but with a gasp for every full-stop.

“I confess I was so far moved by the tone of your protest as, after your departure, to make some cautious inquiries about the house we had visited. I could discover nothing to satisfy my curiosity. It was known to have been untenanted for a great number of years; but as to who was the landlord, whether Captain Iron or another, no one could inform me; and the agent for the property was of the adjacent town where you met me. I was not fortunate, indeed, in finding that any one even knew of the oddly appointed room; but considering that, owing to the time the house had remained vacant, the existence of this eccentricity could be a tradition only with some casual few, my failure did not strike me as being at all bodeful. On the contrary, it only whetted my desire to investigate further in person, and penetrate to the heart of a very captivating little mystery. But probably, I thought, it is quite simple of solution, and the fact of the repairers and the landlord being in evidence at one time, a natural coincidence.

“I dined well, and sallied forth about nine o’clock. It was a night pregnant with possibilities. The lower strata of air were calm, but overhead the wind went down the sea with a noise of baggage-wagons, and there was an ominous hurrying and gathering together of forces under the bellying standards of the clouds.

“As I went up the steps of the lonely building, the High Street seemed to turn all its staring eyes of lamps in my direction. ‘What a droll fellow!’ they appeared to be saying; ‘and how will he look when he reissues?’

“ ‘There ain’t nubbudy in that house,’ croaked a small boy, who had paused below, squinting up at me.

“ ‘How do you know?’ said I. ‘Move on, my little man.’

“He went; and at once it occurred to me that, as no notice was taken of my repeated knockings, I might as well try the handle. I did, found the door unlatched, as it had been in the morning, pushed it open, entered, and swung it to behind me.

“I found myself in the most profound darkness—that darkness, if I may use the paradox, of a peopled desolation that men of but little nerve or resolution find insupportable. To me, trained to a serenity of stoicism, it could make no demoralizing appeal. I had out my matchbox, opened it at leisure, and, while the whole vaulting blackness seemed to tick and rustle with secret

movement, took a half-dozen vestas into my hand, struck one alight, and, by its dim radiance, made my way through the building by the passages we had penetrated in the morning. If at all I shrank or perspired on my spectral journey, I swear I was not conscious of doing so.

“I came to the door of the cabin. All was black and silent.

“ ‘Ah!’ I thought, ‘the rogue has played me false.’

“Not to subscribe to an uncertainty, I pushed at the door, saw only swimming dead vacancy before me, and tripping at the instant on the sill, stumbled crashing into the room below and slid my length on the floor.

“Now, I must tell you, it was here my heart gave its first somersault. I had fallen, as I say, into a black vault of emptiness; yet, as I rose, bruised and dazed, to my feet, there was the cabin all alight from a great lanthorn that swung from the ceiling, and our friend of the morning seated at a table, with a case-bottle of rum and glasses before him.

“I stared incredulous. Yes, there could be no doubt it was he, and pretty flushed with drink, too, by his appearance.

“ ‘Incandescent light in a West Indiaman!’ I muttered; for not otherwise could I account for the sudden illumination. ‘What the deuce!’

“ ‘Belay that!’ he growled. He seemed to observe me for the first time.

“ ‘A handsome manner of boarding a craft you’ve got, sir,’ said he, glooming at me.

“I was hastening to apologize, but he stopped me coarsely.

“ ‘Oh, curse the long jaw of him! Fill your cheek with that, you Barbary ape, and wag your tail if you can, but burn your tongue.’

“He pointed to the case-bottle with a forefinger that was like a dirty parsnip. What induced me to swallow the insult, and even some of the pungent liquor of his rude offering? The itch for ‘copy’ was, no doubt, at the bottom of it.

“I sat down opposite my host, filled and drained a bumper. The fire ran to my brain, so that the whole room seemed to pitch and courtesy.

“ ‘This is an odd fancy of yours,’ I said.

“ ‘What is?’ said he.

“ ‘This,’ I answered, waving my hand around—‘this freak of turning a back room into a cabin.’

“He stared at me, and then burst into a malevolent laugh.

“ ‘Back room, by thunder!’ said he. ‘Why, of course—just a step into the garden where the roses and the buttercups be agrowing.’

“Now I pricked my ears.

“ ‘Has the night turned foul?’ I muttered. ‘What a noise the rain makes beating on the window!’

“ ‘It’s like to be a foul one for you, at least,’ said he. ‘But, as for the rain, it’s blazing moonlight.’

“I turned to the broad casement in astonishment. My God! what did I see? Oh, my friend, my friend! will you believe me? By the melancholy glow that spread therethrough I saw that the whole room was rising and sinking in rhythmical motion; that the lights of King’s Cobb had disappeared, and that in their place was revealed a world of pale and tossing water, the pursuing waves of which leapt and clutched at the glass with innocuous fingers.

“I started to my feet, mad in an instant.

“ ‘Look, look!’ I shrieked. ‘They follow us—they struggle to get at you, you bloody murderer!’

“They came rising on the crests of the billows; they hurried fast in our wake, tumbling and swaying, their stretched, drowned faces now lifted to the moonlight, now over-washed in the

long trenches of water. They were rolled against the galleries of glass, on which their hair slapped like ribbons of seaweed—a score of ghastly white corpses, with strained black eyes and pointed stiff elbows crookt up in vain for air.

“I was mad, but I knew it all now. This was no house, but the good, ill-fated vessel *Rayo*, once bound for Jamaica, but on the voyage fallen into the hands of the bloody buccaneer, Paul Hardman, and her crew made to walk the plank, and most of her passengers. I knew that the dark scoundrel had boarded and mastered her, and—having first fired and sunk his own sloop—had steered her straight for the Cuban coast, making disposition of what remained of the passengers on the way, and I knew that my great-grandfather had been one of these doomed survivors, and that he had been shot and murdered under orders of the ruffian that now sat before me. All this, as retailed by one who sailed for a season under Hardman to save his skin, is matter of old private history; and of common report was it that the monster buccaneer, after years of successful trading in the ship he had stolen, went into secret and prosperous retirement under an assumed name, and was never heard of more on the high seas. But, it seemed, it was for the great-grandson of one of his victims to play yet a sympathetic part in the grey old tragedy.

“How did this come to me in a moment—or, rather, what was that dream buzzing in my brain of ‘proof’ and ‘copy’ and all the tame stagnation of a long delirium of order? I had nothing in common with the latter. In some telepathic way—influenced by these past-dated surroundings—dropped into the very den of this Procrustes of the seas, I was there to re-enact the fearful scene that had found its climax in the brain of my ancestor.

“I rushed to the window, thence back to within a yard of the glowering buccaneer, before whom I stood, with tost arms, wild and menacing.

“ ‘They follow you!’ I screamed. ‘Passive, relentless, and deadly, they follow in your wake and will not be denied. The strong, the helpless, the coarse and the beautiful—all you have killed and mutilated in your wanton devilry—they are on your heels like a pack of spectre-hounds, and sooner or later they will have you in their cold arms and hale you down to the secret places of terror. Look at Beston, who leads, with a fearful smile on his mouth! Look at that pale girl you tortured, whose hair writhes and lengthens—a swarm of snakes nosing the hull for some open port-hole to enter by! Dog and devil, you are betrayed by your own hideous cruelty!’

“He rose and struck at me blindly; staggered, and found his filthy voice in a shriek of rage.

“ ‘Jorinder! make hell of the galley-fire! heat some irons red and fetch out a bucket of pitch. We’ll learn this dandy galloot his manners!’

“Wrought to the snapping-point of desperation, I sprang at and closed with him; and we went down on the floor together with a heavy crash. I was weaponless, but I would choke and strangle him with my hands. I had him under, my fingers crookt in his throat. His eyeballs slipped forward, like banana ends squeezed from their skins; he could not speak or cry, but he put up one feeble hand and flapped it aimlessly. At that, in the midst of my fury, I glanced above me, and saw a press of dim faces crowding a dusk hatch; and from them a shadowy arm came through, pointing a weapon; and all my soul reeled sick, and I only longed to be left time to destroy the venomous horror beneath me before I passed.

“It was not to be. Something, a physical sensation like the jerk of a hiccup, shook my frame; and immediately the waters of being seemed to burst their dam and flow out peaceably into a valley of rest.”

William Tyrwhitt paused, and “Well?” said I.

“You see me here,” he said. “I woke this morning, and found myself lying on the floor of that shattered and battered closet, and a starved demon of a cat licking up something from the boards. When I drove her away; there was a patch there like ancient dried blood.”

“And how about your head?”

“My head? Why, the bullet seemed stuck in it between the temples; and there I am afraid it is still.”

“Just so. Now, William Tyrwhitt, you must take a Turkish bath and some cooling salts, and then come and tell me all about it again.”

“Ah! you don’t believe me, I see. I never supposed you would. Good-night!”

But, when he was gone, I sat ruminating.

“That Captain Iron,” I thought, “walked over the great rent in the floor without falling through. Well, well!”