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WYMARK
JACOBS**

FOR BETTER OR WORSE

William Wymark Jacobs

For Better or Worse

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W. W. Jacobs

For Better or Worse / Ship's Company, Part 10

FOR BETTER OR WORSE

Mr. George Wotton, gently pushing the swing doors of the public bar of the "King's Head" an inch apart, applied an eye to the aperture, in the hope of discovering a moneyed friend. His gaze fell on the only man in the bar a greybeard of sixty whose weather-beaten face and rough clothing spoke of the sea. With a faint sigh he widened the opening and passed through.

"Mornin', Ben," he said, with an attempt at cheerfulness.

"Have a drop with me," said the other, heartily. "Got any money about you?"

Mr. Wotton shook his head and his face fell, clearing somewhat as the other handed him his mug. "Drink it all up, George," he said.

His friend complied. A more tactful man might have taken longer over the job, but Mr. Benjamin Davis, who appeared to be labouring under some strong excitement, took no notice.

"I've had a shock, George," he said, regarding the other steadily. "I've heard news of my old woman."

"Didn't know you 'ad one," said Mr. Wotton calmly. "Wot's she done?"

"She left me," said Mr. Davis, solemnly—"she left me thirty-five years ago. I went off to sea one fine morning, and that was the last I ever see of er.

"Why, did she bolt?" inquired Mr. Wotton, with mild interest.

"No," said his friend, "but I did. We'd been married three years—three long years—and I had 'ad enough of it. Awful temper she had. The last words I ever heard 'er say was: 'Take that!'"

Mr. Wotton took up the mug and, after satisfying himself as to the absence of contents, put it down again and yawned.

"I shouldn't worry about it if I was you," he remarked. "She's hardly likely to find you now. And if she does she won't get much."

Mr. Davis gave vent to a contemptuous laugh. "Get much!" he repeated. "It's her what's got it. I met a old shipmate of mine this morning what I 'adn't seen for ten years, and he told me he run acrost 'er only a month ago. After she left me—"

"But you said you left her!" exclaimed his listening friend.

"Same thing," said Mr. Davis, impatiently. "After she left me to work myself to death at sea, running here and there at the orders of a pack o'lazy scuts aft, she went into service and stayed in one place for fifteen years. Then 'er missis died and left her all 'er money. For twenty years, while I've been working myself to skin and bone, she's been living in comfort and idleness."

"'Ard lines," said Mr. Wotton, shaking his head. "It don't bear thinking of."

"Why didn't she advertise for me?" said Mr. Davis, raising his voice. "That's what I want to know. Advertisements is cheap enough; why didn't she advertise? I should 'ave come at once if she'd said anything about money."

Mr. Wotton shook his head again. "P'r'aps she didn't want you," he said, slowly.

"What's that got to do with it?" demanded the other. "It was 'er dooty. She'd got money, and I ought to have 'ad my 'arf of it. Nothing can make up for that wasted twenty years—nothing."

"P'r'aps she'll take you back," said Mr. Wotton.

"Take me back?" repeated Mr. Davis. "O' course she'll take me back. She'll have to. There's a law in the land, ain't there? What I'm thinking of is: Can I get back my share what I ought to have 'ad for the last twenty years?"

"Get 'er to take you back first," counselled his friend. "Thirty-five years is along time, and p'r'aps she has lost 'er love for you. Was you good-looking in those days?"

"Yes," snapped Mr. Davis; "I ain't altered much—. 'Sides, what about her?"

"That ain't the question," said the other. "She's got a home and money. It don't matter about looks; and, wot's more, she ain't bound to keep you. If you take my advice, you won't dream of letting her know you run away from her. Say you was cast away at sea, and when you came back years afterwards you couldn't find her."

Mr. Davis pondered for some time in sulky silence.

"P'r'aps it would be as well," he said at last; "but I sha'n't stand no nonsense, mind."

"If you like I'll come with you," said Mr. Wotton. "I ain't got nothing to do. I could tell 'er I was cast away with you if you liked. Anything to help a pal."

Mr. Davis took two inches of soiled clay pipe from his pocket and puffed thoughtfully.

"You can come," he said at last. "If you'd only got a copper or two we could ride; it's down Clapham way."

Mr. Wotton smiled feebly, and after going carefully through his pockets shook his head and followed his friend outside.

"I wonder whether she'll be pleased?" he remarked, as they walked slowly along. "She might be—women are funny creatures—so faithful. I knew one whose husband used to knock 'er about dreadful, and after he died she was so true to his memory she wouldn't marry again."

Mr. Davis grunted, and, with a longing eye at the omnibuses passing over London Bridge, asked a policeman the distance to Clapham.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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