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JACOBS**

THE BOATSWAIN'S MATE

William Wymark Jacobs

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W. W. Jacobs

The Boatswain's Mate / Captains All, Book 2

THE BOATSWAIN'S MATE

Mr. George Benn, retired boat-swain, sighed noisily, and with a despondent gesture, turned to the door and stood with the handle in his hand; Mrs. Waters, sitting behind the tiny bar in a tall Windsor-chair, eyed him with some heat.

"My feelings'll never change," said the boatswain.

"Nor mine either," said the landlady, sharply. "It's a strange thing, Mr. Benn, but you always ask me to marry you after the third mug."

"It's only to get my courage up," pleaded the boatswain. "Next time I'll do it afore I 'ave a drop; that'll prove to you I'm in earnest."

He stepped outside and closed the door before the landlady could make a selection from the many retorts that crowded to her lips.

After the cool bar, with its smell of damp saw-dust, the road seemed hot and dusty; but the boatswain, a prey to gloom natural to a man whose hand has been refused five times in a fortnight, walked on unheeding. His steps lagged, but his brain was active.

He walked for two miles deep in thought, and then coming to a shady bank took a seat upon an inviting piece of turf and lit his pipe. The heat and the drowsy hum of bees made him nod; his pipe hung from the corner of his mouth, and his eyes closed.

He opened them at the sound of approaching footsteps, and, feeling in his pocket for matches, gazed lazily at the intruder. He saw a tall man carrying a small bundle over his shoulder, and in the erect carriage, the keen eyes, and bronzed face had little difficulty in detecting the old soldier.

The stranger stopped as he reached the seated boatswain and eyed him pleasantly.

"Got a pipe o' baccy, mate?" he inquired.

The boatswain handed him the small metal box in which he kept that luxury.

"Lobster, ain't you?" he said, affably.

The tall man nodded. "Was," he replied. "Now I'm my own commander-in- chief."

"Padding it?" suggested the boatswain, taking the box from him and refilling his pipe.

The other nodded, and with the air of one disposed to conversation dropped his bundle in the ditch and took a seat beside him. "I've got plenty of time," he remarked.

Mr. Benn nodded, and for a while smoked on in silence. A dim idea which had been in his mind for some time began to clarify. He stole a glance at his companion—a man of about thirty-eight, clear eyes, with humorous wrinkles at the corners, a heavy moustache, and a cheerful expression more than tinged with recklessness.

"Ain't over and above fond o' work?" suggested the boatswain, when he had finished his inspection.

"I love it," said the other, blowing a cloud of smoke in the air, "but we can't have all we want in this world; it wouldn't be good for us."

The boatswain thought of Mrs. Waters, and sighed. Then he rattled his pocket.

"Would arf a quid be any good to you?" he inquired.

"Look here," began the soldier; "just because I asked you for a pipe o' baccy—"

"No offence," said the other, quickly. "I mean if you earned it?"

The soldier nodded and took his pipe from his mouth. "Gardening and windows?" he hazarded, with a shrug of his shoulders.

The boatswain shook his head.

"Scrubbing, p'r'aps?" said the soldier, with a sigh of resignation. "Last house I scrubbed out I did it so thoroughly they accused me of pouching the soap. Hang 'em!"

"And you didn't?" queried the boatswain, eyeing him keenly.

The soldier rose and, knocking the ashes out of his pipe, gazed at him darkly. "I can't give it back to you," he said, slowly, "because I've smoked some of it, and I can't pay you for it because I've only got twopence, and that I want for myself. So long, matey, and next time a poor wretch asks you for a pipe, be civil."

"I never see such a man for taking offence in all my born days," expostulated the boat-swain. "I 'ad my reasons for that remark, mate. Good reasons they was."

The soldier grunted and, stooping, picked up his bundle.

"I spoke of arf a sovereign just now," continued the boatswain, impressively, "and when I tell you that I offer it to you to do a bit o' burgling, you'll see 'ow necessary it is for me to be certain of your honesty."

"*Burgling?*" gasped the astonished soldier. "*Honesty?* 'Struth; are you drunk or am I?"

"Meaning," said the boatswain, waving the imputation away with his hand, "for you to pretend to be a burglar."

"We're both drunk, that's what it is," said the other, resignedly.

The boatswain fidgeted. "If you don't agree, mum's the word and no 'arm done," he said, holding out his hand.

"Mum's the word," said the soldier, taking it. "My name's Ned Travers, and, barring cells for a spree now and again, there's nothing against it. Mind that."

"Might 'appen to anybody," said Mr. Benn, soothingly. "You fill your pipe and don't go chucking good tobacco away agin."

Mr. Travers took the offered box and, with economy born of adversity, stooped and filled up first with the plug he had thrown away. Then he resumed his seat and, leaning back luxuriously, bade the other "fire away."

"I ain't got it all ship-shape and proper yet," said Mr. Benn, slowly, "but it's in my mind's eye. It's been there off and on like for some time."

He lit his pipe again and gazed fixedly at the opposite hedge. "Two miles from here, where I live," he said, after several vigorous puffs, "there's a little public-'ouse called the Beehive, kept by a lady wot I've got my eye on."

The soldier sat up.

"She won't 'ave me," said the boatswain, with an air of mild surprise.

The soldier leaned back again.

"She's a lone widdler," continued Mr. Benn, shaking his head, "and the Beehive is in a lonely place. It's right through the village, and the nearest house is arf a mile off."

"Silly place for a pub," commented Mr. Travers.

"I've been telling her 'ow unsafe it is," said the boatswain. "I've been telling her that she wants a man to protect her, and she only laughs at me. She don't believe it; d'ye see? Likewise I'm a small man—small, but stiff. She likes tall men."

"Most women do," said Mr. Travers, sitting upright and instinctively twisting his moustache. "When I was in the ranks—"

"My idea is," continued the boatswain, slightly raising his voice, "to kill two birds with one stone—prove to her that she does want being protected, and that I'm the man to protect her. D'ye take my meaning, mate?"

The soldier reached out a hand and felt the other's biceps. "Like a lump o' wood," he said, approvingly.

"My opinion is," said the boatswain, with a faint smirk, "that she loves me without knowing it."

"They often do," said Mr. Travers, with a grave shake of his head.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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