

WILLIAM WYMARK JACOBS

MATRIMONIAL OPENINGS

William Wymark Jacobs
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Mr. Dowson sat by the kitchen fire smoking and turning a docile and well- trained ear to the heated words which fell from his wife's lips.

"She'll go and do the same as her sister Jenny done," said Mrs. Dowson, with a side glance at her daughter Flora; "marry a man and then 'ave to work and slave herself to skin and bone to keep him."

"I see Jenny yesterday," said her husband, nodding. "Getting quite fat, she is."

"That's right," said Mrs. Dowson, violently, "that's right! The moment I say something you go and try and upset it."

"Un'ealthy fat, p'r'aps," said Mr. Dowson, hurriedly; "don't get enough exercise, I s'pose."

"Anybody who didn't know you, Joe Dowson," said his wife, fiercely, "would think you was doing it a purpose."

"Doing wot?" inquired Mr. Dowson, removing his pipe and regarding her open-mouthed. "I only said—"

"I know what you said," retorted his wife. "Here I do my best from morning to night to make everybody 'appy and comfortable; and what happens?"

"Nothing," said the sympathetic Mr. Dowson, shaking his head. "Nothing."

"Anyway, Jenny ain't married a fool," said Mrs. Dowson, hotly; "she's got that consolation."

"That's right, mother," said the innocent Mr. Dowson, "look on the bright side o' things a bit. If Jenny 'ad married a better chap I don't suppose we should see half as much of her as wot we do."

"I'm talking of Flora," said his wife, restraining herself by an effort. "One unfortunate marriage in the family is enough; and here, instead o' walking out with young Ben Lippet, who'll be 'is own master when his father dies, she's gadding about with that good-for-nothing Charlie Foss."

Mr. Dowson shook his head. "He's so good-looking, is Charlie," he said, slowly; "that's the worst of it. Wot with 'is dark eyes and his curly 'air—"

"Go on!" said his wife, passionately, "go on!"

Mr. Dowson, dimly conscious that something was wrong, stopped and puffed hard at his pipe. Through the cover of the smoke he bestowed a sympathetic wink upon his daughter.

"You needn't go on too fast," said the latter, turning to her mother. "I haven't made up my mind yet. Charlie's looks are all right, but he ain't over and above steady, and Ben is steady, but

he ain't much to look at."

"What does your 'art say?" inquired the sentimental Mr. Dowson.

Neither lady took the slightest notice.

"Charlie Foss is too larky," said Mrs. Dowson, solemnly; "it's easy come and easy go with 'im. He's just such another as your father's cousin Bill—and look what 'appened to him!"

Miss Dowson shrugged her shoulders and subsiding in her chair, went on with her book, until a loud knock at the door and a cheerful, but peculiarly shrill, whistle sounded outside.

"There is my lord," exclaimed Mrs. Dowson, waspishly; "anybody might think the 'ouse belonged to him. And now he's dancing on my clean doorstep."

"Might be only knocking the mud off afore coming in," said Mr. Dowson, as he rose to open the door. "I've noticed he's very careful."

"I just came in to tell you a joke," said Mr. Foss, as he followed his host into the kitchen and gazed tenderly at Miss Dowson—"best joke I ever had in my life; I've 'ad my fortune told—guess what it was! I've been laughing to myself ever since."

"Who told it?" inquired Mrs. Dowson, after a somewhat awkward silence.

"Old gypsy woman in Peter Street," replied Mr. Foss. "I gave 'er a wrong name and address, just in case she might ha' heard about me, and she did make a mess of it; upon my word she did."

"Wot did she say?" inquired Mr. Dowson.

Mr. Foss laughed. "Said I was a wrong 'un," he said, cheerfully, "and would bring my mother's gray hairs to the grave with sorrow. I'm to 'ave bad companions and take to drink; I'm to steal money to gamble with, and after all that I'm to 'ave five years for bigamy. I told her I was disappointed I wasn't to be hung, and she said it would be a disappointment to a lot of other people too. Laugh! I thought I should 'ave killed myself."

"I don't see nothing to laugh at," said Mrs. Dowson, coldly.

"I shouldn't tell anybody else, Charlie," said her husband. "Keep it a secret, my boy."

"But you—you don't believe it?" stammered the crestfallen Mr. Foss.

Mrs. Dowson cast a stealthy glance at her daughter. "Its wonderful 'ow some o' those fortune-tellers can see into the future," she said, shaking her head.

"Ah!" said her husband, with a confirmatory nod. "Wonderful is no name for it. I 'ad my fortune told once when I was a boy, and she told me I should marry the prettiest, and the nicest, and the sweetest-tempered gal in Poplar."

Mr. Foss, with a triumphant smile, barely waited for him to finish. "There you—" he began, and stopped suddenly.

"What was you about to remark?" inquired Mrs. Dowson, icily.

"I was going to say," replied Mr. Foss—"I was going to say—I 'ad just got it on the tip o' my tongue to say, 'There you—you—you 'ad all the luck, Mr. Dowson.'"

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