

**WILLIAM
WYMARK
JACOBS**

THE OLD MAN OF THE
SEA

William Wymark Jacobs
The Old Man of the Sea

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Содержание

THE OLD MAN OF THE SEA	5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	7

W. W. Jacobs

The Old Man of the Sea / Ship's Company, Part 11

THE OLD MAN OF THE SEA

"What I want you to do," said Mr. George Wright, as he leaned towards the old sailor, "is to be an uncle to me."

"Aye, aye," said the mystified Mr. Kemp, pausing with a mug of beer midway to his lips.

"A rich uncle," continued the young man, lowering his voice to prevent any keen ears in the next bar from acquiring useless knowledge. "An uncle from New Zealand, who is going to leave me all 'is money."

"Where's it coming from?" demanded Mr. Kemp, with a little excitement.

"It ain't coming," was the reply. "You've only got to say you've got it. Fact of the matter is, I've got my eye on a young lady; there's another chap after 'er too, and if she thought I'd got a rich uncle it might make all the difference. She knows I 'ad an uncle that went to New Zealand and was never heard of since. That's what made me think of it."

Mr. Kemp drank his beer in thoughtful silence. "How can I be a rich uncle without any brass?" he inquired at length.

"I should 'ave to lend you some—a little," said Mr. Wright.

The old man pondered. "I've had money lent me before," he said, candidly, "but I can't call to mind ever paying it back. I always meant to, but that's as far as it got."

"It don't matter," said the other. "It'll only be for a little while, and then you'll 'ave a letter calling you back to New Zealand. See? And you'll go back, promising to come home in a year's time, after you've wound up your business, and leave us all your money. See?"

Mr. Kemp scratched the back of his neck. "But she's sure to find it out in time," he objected.

"P'r'aps," said Mr. Wright. "And p'r'aps not. There'll be plenty of time for me to get married before she does, and you could write back and say you had got married yourself, or given your money to a hospital."

He ordered some more beer for Mr. Kemp, and in a low voice gave him as much of the family history as he considered necessary.

"I've only known you for about ten days," he concluded, "but I'd sooner trust you than people I've known for years."

"I took a fancy to you the moment I set eyes on you," rejoined Mr. Kemp. "You're the living image of a young fellow that lent me five pounds once, and was drowned afore my eyes the week after. He 'ad a bit of a squint, and I s'pose that's how he came to fall overboard."

He emptied his mug, and then, accompanied by Mr. Wright, fetched his sea-chest from the boarding-house where he was staying, and took it to the young man's lodgings. Fortunately for the latter's pocket the chest contained a good best suit and boots, and the only expenses incurred were for a large, soft felt hat and a gilded watch and chain. Dressed in his best, with a bulging pocket-book in his breast-pocket, he set out with Mr. Wright on the following evening to make his first call.

Mr. Wright, who was also in his best clothes, led the way to a small tobacconist's in a side street off the Mile End Road, and, raising his hat with some ceremony, shook hands with a good-looking young woman who stood behind the counter: Mr. Kemp, adopting an air of scornful dignity intended to indicate the possession of great wealth, waited.

"This is my uncle," said Mr. Wright, speaking rapidly, "from New Zealand, the one I spoke to you about. He turned up last night, and you might have knocked me down with a feather. The last person in the world I expected to see."

Mr. Kemp, in a good rolling voice, said, "Good evening, miss; I hope you are well," and, subsiding into a chair, asked for a cigar. His surprise when he found that the best cigar they stocked only cost sixpence almost assumed the dimensions of a grievance.

"It'll do to go on with," he said, smelling it suspiciously. "Have you got change for a fifty-pound note?"

Miss Bradshaw, concealing her surprise by an effort, said that she would see, and was scanning the contents of a drawer, when Mr. Kemp in some haste discovered a few odd sovereigns in his waistcoat-pocket. Five minutes later he was sitting in the little room behind the shop, holding forth to an admiring audience.

"So far as I know," he said, in reply to a question of Mrs. Bradshaw's, "George is the only relation I've got. Him and me are quite alone, and I can tell you I was glad to find him."

Mrs. Bradshaw sighed. "It's a pity you are so far apart," she said.

"It's not for long," said Mr. Kemp. "I'm just going back for about a year to wind up things out there, and then I'm coming back to leave my old bones over here. George has very kindly offered to let me live with him."

"He won't suffer for it, I'll be bound," said Mrs. Bradshaw, archly.

"So far as money goes he won't," said the old man. "Not that that would make any difference to George."

"It would be the same to me if you hadn't got a farthing," said Mr. Wright, promptly.

Mr. Kemp, somewhat affected, shook hands with him, and leaning back in the most comfortable chair in the room, described his life and struggles in New Zealand. Hard work, teetotalism, and the simple life combined appeared to be responsible for a fortune which he affected to be too old to enjoy. Misunderstandings of a painful nature were avoided by a timely admission that under medical advice he was now taking a fair amount of stimulant.

"Mind," he said, as he walked home with the elated George, "it's your game, not mine, and it's sure to come a bit expensive. I can't be a rich uncle without spending a bit. 'Ow much did you say you'd got in the bank?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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