

**WILLIAM
WYMARK
JACOBS**

THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY

William Wymark Jacobs

The Head of the Family

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W. W. Jacobs

The Head of the Family / Sailor's Knots, Part 9

THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY

Mr. Letts had left his ship by mutual arrangement, and the whole of the crew had mustered to see him off and to express their sense of relief at his departure. After some years spent in long voyages, he had fancied a trip on a coaster as a change, and, the schooner Curlew having no use for a ship's carpenter, had shipped as cook. He had done his best, and the unpleasant epithets that followed him along the quay at Dunchurch as he followed in the wake of his sea-chest were the result. Master and mate nodded in grim appreciation of the crew's efforts.

He put his chest up at a seamen's lodging-house, and, by no means perturbed at this sudden change in his fortunes, sat on a seat overlooking the sea, with a cigarette between his lips, forming plans for his future. His eyes closed, and he opened them with a start to find that a middle-aged woman of pleasant but careworn appearance had taken the other end of the bench.

"Fine day," said Mr. Letts, lighting another cigarette.

The woman assented and sat looking over the sea.

"Ever done any cooking?" asked Mr. Letts, presently.

"Plenty," was the surprised reply. "Why?"

"I just wanted to ask you how long you would boil a bit o' beef," said Mr. Letts. "Only from curiosity; I should never ship as cook again."

He narrated his experience of the last few days, and, finding the listener sympathetic, talked at some length about himself and his voyages; also of his plans for the future.

"I lost my son at sea," said the woman, with a sigh. "You favor him rather."

Mr. Letts's face softened. "Sorry," he said. "Sorry you lost him, I mean."

"At least, I suppose he would have been like you," said the other; "but it's nine years ago now. He was just sixteen."

Mr. Letts—after a calculation—nodded. "Just my age," he said. "I was twenty-five last March."

"Sailed for Melbourne," said the woman. "My only boy."

Mr. Letts cleared his throat, sympathetically.

"His father died a week after he sailed," continued the other, "and three months afterwards my boy's ship went down. Two years ago, like a fool, I married again. I don't know why I'm talking to you like this. I suppose it is because you remind me of him."

"You talk away as much as you like," said Mr. Letts, kindly. "I've got nothing to do."

He lit another cigarette, and, sitting in an attitude of attention, listened to a recital of domestic trouble that made him congratulate himself upon remaining single.

"Since I married Mr. Green I can't call my soul my own," said the victim of matrimony as she rose to depart. "If my poor boy had lived things would have been different. His father left the house and furniture to him, and that's all my second married me for, I'm sure. That and the bit o' money that was left to me. He's selling some of my boy's furniture at this very moment. That's why I came out; I couldn't bear it."

"P'r'aps he'll turn up after all," said Mr. Letts. "Never say die."

Mrs. Green shook her head.

"I s'pose," said Mr. Letts, regarding her—"I s'pose you don't let lodgings for a night or two?" Mrs. Green shook her head again.

"It don't matter," said the young man. "Only I would sooner stay with you than at a lodging-house. I've taken a fancy to you. I say, it would be a lark if you did, and I went there and your husband thought I was your son, wouldn't it?"

Mrs. Green caught her breath, and sitting down again took his arm in her trembling fingers.

"Suppose," she said, unsteadily—"suppose you came round and pretended to be my son—pretended to be my son, and stood up for me?"

Mr. Letts stared at her in amazement, and then began to laugh.

"Nobody would know," continued the other, quickly. "We only came to this place just before he sailed, and his sister was only ten at the time. She wouldn't remember."

Mr. Letts said he couldn't think of it, and sat staring, with an air of great determination, at the sea. Arguments and entreaties left him unmoved, and he was just about to express his sorrow for her troubles and leave, when she gave a sudden start and put her arm through his.

"Here comes your sister!" she exclaimed.

Mr. Letts started in his turn.

"She has seen me holding your arm," continued Mrs. Green, in a tense whisper. "It's the only way I can explain it. Mind, your name is Jack Foster and hers is Betty."

Mr. Letts gazed at her in consternation, and then, raising his eyes, regarded with much approval the girl who was approaching. It seemed impossible that she could be Mrs. Green's daughter, and in the excitement of the moment he nearly said so.

"Betty," said Mrs. Green, in a voice to which nervousness had imparted almost the correct note—"Betty, this is your brother Jack!"

Mr. Letts rose sheepishly, and then to his great amazement a pair of strong young arms were flung round his neck, and a pair of warm lips—after but slight trouble—found his. Then and there Mr. Letts's mind was made up.

"Oh, Jack!" said Miss Foster, and began to cry softly.

"Oh, Jack!" said Mrs. Green, and, moved by thoughts, perhaps, of what might have been, began to cry too.

"There, there!" said Mr. Letts.

He drew Miss Foster to the seat, and, sitting between them, sat with an arm round each. There was nothing in sight but a sail or two in the far distance, and he allowed Miss Foster's head to lie upon his shoulder undisturbed. An only child, and an orphan, he felt for the first time the blessing of a sister's love.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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