

**WILLIAM
WYMARK
JACOBS**

THE BEQUEST

William Wymark Jacobs

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W. W. Jacobs

The Bequest / Ship's Company, Part 6

THE BEQUEST

R. Robert Clarkson sat by his fire, smoking thoughtfully. His lifelong neighbour and successful rival in love had passed away a few days before, and Mr. Clarkson, fresh from the obsequies, sat musing on the fragility of man and the inconvenience that sometimes attended his departure.

His meditations were disturbed by a low knocking on the front door, which opened on to the street. In response to his invitation it opened slowly, and a small middle-aged man of doleful aspect entered softly and closed it behind him.

"Evening, Bob," he said, in stricken accents. "I thought I'd just step round to see how you was bearing up. Fancy pore old Phipps! Why, I'd a'most as soon it had been me. A'most."

Mr. Clarkson nodded.

"Here to-day and gone to-morrow," continued Mr. Smithson, taking a seat. "Well, well! So you'll have her at last-pore thing."

"That was his wish," said Mr. Clarkson, in a dull voice.

"And very generous of him too," said Mr. Smithson. "Everybody is saying so. Certainly he couldn't take her away with him. How long is it since you was both of you courting her?"

"Thirty years come June," replied the other.

"Shows what waiting does, and patience," commented Mr. Smithson. "If you'd been like some chaps and gone abroad, where would you have been now? Where would have been the reward of your faithful heart?"

Mr. Clarkson, whose pipe had gone out, took a coal from the fire and lit it again.

"I can't understand him dying at his age," he said, darkly. "He ought to have lived to ninety if he'd been taken care of."

"Well, he's gone, pore chap," said his friend. "What a blessing it must ha' been to him in his last moments to think that he had made provision for his wife."

"Provision!" exclaimed Mr. Clarkson. "Why he's left her nothing but the furniture and fifty pounds insurance money—nothing in the world."

Mr. Smithson fidgeted. "I mean you," he said, staring.

"Oh!" said the other. "Oh, yes—yes, of course."

"And he doesn't want you to eat your heart out in waiting," said Mr. Smithson. "'Never mind about me,' he said to her; 'you go and make Bob happy.' Wonderful pretty girl she used to be, didn't she?" Mr. Clarkson assented.

"And I've no doubt she looks the same to you as ever she did," pursued the sentimental Mr. Smithson. "That's the extraordinary part of it."

Mr. Clarkson turned and eyed him; removed the pipe from his mouth, and, after hesitating a moment, replaced it with a jerk.

"She says she'd rather be faithful to his memory," continued the persevering Mr. Smithson, "but his wishes are her law. She said so to my missis only yesterday."

"Still, she ought to be considered," said Mr. Clarkson, shaking his head. "I think that somebody ought to put it to her. She has got her feelings, poor thing, and, if she would rather not marry again, she oughtn't to be compelled to."

"Just what my missis did say to her," said the other; "but she didn't pay much attention. She said it was Henry's wish and she didn't care what happened to her now he's gone. Besides, if you come to think of it, what else is she to do? Don't you worry, Bob; you won't lose her again."

Mr. Clarkson, staring at the fire, mused darkly. For thirty years he had played the congenial part of the disappointed admirer but faithful friend. He had intended to play it for at least fifty or sixty. He wished that he had had the strength of mind to refuse the bequest when the late Mr. Phipps first mentioned it, or taken a firmer line over the congratulations of his friends. As it was, Little Molton quite understood that after thirty years' waiting the faithful heart was to be rewarded at last. Public opinion seemed to be that the late Mr. Phipps had behaved with extraordinary generosity.

"It's rather late in life for me to begin," said Mr. Clarkson at last.

"Better late than never," said the cheerful Mr. Smithson.

"And something seems to tell me that I ain't long for this world," continued Mr. Clarkson, eyeing him with some disfavour.

"Stuff and nonsense," said Mr. Smithson. "You'll lose all them ideas as soon as you're married. You'll have somebody to look after you and help you spend your money."

Mr. Clarkson emitted a dismal groan, and clapping his hand over his mouth strove to make it pass muster as a yawn. It was evident that the malicious Mr. Smithson was deriving considerable pleasure from his discomfiture—the pleasure natural to the father of seven over the troubles of a comfortable bachelor. Mr. Clarkson, anxious to share his troubles with somebody, came to a sudden and malicious determination to share them with Mr. Smithson.

"I don't want anybody to help me spend my money," he said, slowly. "First and last I've saved a tidy bit. I've got this house, those three cottages in Turner's Lane, and pretty near six hundred pounds in the bank."

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