

**WILLIAM
WYMARK
JACOBS**

THE SUBSTITUTE

William Wymark Jacobs
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W. W. Jacobs

The Substitute / Deep Waters, Part 9

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The night watchman had just returned to the office fire after leaving it to attend a ring at the wharf bell. He sat for some time puffing fiercely at his pipe and breathing heavily.

"Boys!" he said, at last. "That's the third time this week, and yet if I was to catch one and skin 'im alive I suppose I should get into trouble over it. Even 'is own father and mother would make a fuss, most like. Some people have boys, and other people 'ave the trouble of 'em. Our street's full of 'em, and the way they carry on would make a monkey-'ouse ashamed of itself. The man next door to me's got seven of 'em, and when I spoke to 'im friendly about it over a pint one night, he put the blame on 'is wife.

"The worst boy I ever knew used to be office-boy in this 'ere office, and I can't understand now why I wasn't 'ung for him. Undersized little chap he was, with a face the colour o' bad pie-crust, and two little black eyes like shoe-buttons. To see 'im with his little white cuffs, and a stand-up collar, and a little black bow, and a little bowler-'at, was enough to make a cat laugh. I told 'im

so one day, and arter that we knew where we was. Both of us.

"By rights he ought to 'ave left the office at six—just my time for coming on. As it was, he used to stay late, purtending to work 'ard so as to get a rise. Arter all the clerks 'ad gorn 'ome he used to sit perched up on a stool yards too 'igh for him, with one eye on the ledger and the other looking through the winder at me. I remember once going off for 'arf a pint, and when I come back I found 'im with a policeman, two carmen, and all the hands off of the Maid Marian, standing on the edge of the jetty, waiting for me to come up. He said that, not finding me on the wharf, 'e made sure that I must 'ave tumbled overboard, as he felt certain that I wouldn't neglect my dooty while there was breath in my body; but 'e was sorry to find 'e was mistook. He stood there talking like a little clergyman, until one of the carmen knocked his 'at over 'is eyes, and then he forgot 'imself for a bit.

"Arter that I used to wait until he 'ad gorn afore I 'ad my arf-pint. I didn't want my good name taken away, and I had to be careful, and many's the good arf-pint I 'ad to refuse because that little imitation monkey was sitting in the office drawing faces on 'is blotting-paper. But sometimes it don't matter 'ow careful you are, you make a mistake.

"There was a little steamer, called the Eastern Monarch, used to come up here in them days, once a week. Fat little tub she was, with a crew o' fattish old men, and a skipper that I didn't like. He'd been in the coasting trade all 'is life, while I've knocked about all over the world, but to hear 'im talk you'd think he knew

more about things than I did.

"Eddication, Bill,' he ses one evening, 'that's the thing! You can't argufy without it; you only talk foolish, like you are doing now.'

""There's eddication and there's common sense,' I ses. 'Some people 'as one and some people 'as the other. Give me common sense.'

""That's wot you want,' he ses, nodding.

""And, o' course,' I ses, looking at 'im, 'there's some people 'asn't got either one or the other.'

"The office-boy came out of the office afore he could think of an answer, and the pair of 'em stood there talking to show off their cleverness, till their tongues ached. I took up my broom and went on sweeping, and they was so busy talking long words they didn't know the meaning of to each other that they was arf choked with dust afore they noticed it. When they did notice it they left off using long words, and the skipper tried to hurt my feelings with a few short ones 'e knew.

""It's no good wasting your breath on 'im,' ses the boy. 'You might as well talk to a beer-barrel.'

"He went off, dusting 'imself down with his little pocket-'ankercher, and arter the skipper 'ad told me wot he'd like to do, only he was too sorry for me to do it, 'e went back to the ship to put on a clean collar, and went off for the evening.

"He always used to go off by hissself of a evening, and I used to wonder 'ow he passed the time. Then one night I found out.

"I had just come out of the Bear's Head, and stopped to look round afore going back to the wharf, when I see a couple o' people standing on the swing-bridge saying 'Good-bye' to each other. One of 'em was a man and the other wasn't.

"'Evening, cap'n,' I ses, as he came towards me, and gave a little start. 'I didn't know you 'ad brought your missis up with you this trip.'

"'Evening, Bill,' he ses, very peaceful. 'Wot a lovely evening!'

"'Bee-utiful!' I ses.

"'So fresh,' ses the skipper, sniffing in some of the air.

"'Makes you feel quite young agin,' I ses.

"He didn't say nothing to that, except to look at me out of the corner of 'is eye; and stepping on to the wharf had another look at the sky to admire it, and then went aboard his ship. If he 'ad only stood me a pint, and trusted me, things might ha' turned out different.

"Quite by chance I happened to be in the Bear's Head a week arterwards, and, quite by chance, as I came out I saw the skipper saying 'Good-bye' on the bridge agin. He seemed to be put out about something, and when I said 'Wot a lovely evening it would be if only it wasn't raining 'ard!' he said something about knocking my 'ead off.

"'And you keep your nose out o' my bisness,' he ses, very fierce.

"'Your bisness!' I ses. 'Wot bisness?'

"'There's some people as might like to know that you leave

the wharf to look arter itself while you're sitting in a pub swilling gallons and gallons o' beer,' he ses, in a nasty sort o' way. 'Live and let live, that's my motter.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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