

**WILLIAM
WYMARK
JACOBS**

THE UNKNOWN

William Wymark Jacobs

The Unknown

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W. W. Jacobs

The Unknown / Night Watches, Part 7

THE UNKNOWN

"Handsome is as 'andsome does," said the night-watchman. It's an old saying, but it's true. Give a chap good looks, and it's precious little else that is given to 'im. He's lucky when 'is good looks 'ave gorn—or partly gorn—to get a berth as night-watchman or some other hard and bad-paid job.

One drawback to a good-looking man is that he generally marries young; not because 'e wants to, but because somebody else wants 'im to. And that ain't the worst of it: the handsomest chap I ever knew married five times, and got seven years for it. It wasn't his fault, pore chap; he simply couldn't say No.

One o' the best-looking men I ever knew was Cap'n Bill Smithers, wot used to come up here once a week with a schooner called the Wild Rose. Funny thing about 'im was he didn't seem to know about 'is good looks, and he was one o' the quietest, best-behaved men that ever came up the London river. Considering that he was mistook for me more than once, it was just as well.

He didn't marry until 'e was close on forty; and then 'e made the mistake of marrying a widdier-woman. She was like all the rest of 'em—only worse. Afore she was married butter wouldn't melt in 'er mouth, but as soon as she 'ad got her "lines" safe she began to make up for it.

For the fust month or two 'e didn't mind it, 'e rather liked being fussed arter, but when he found that he couldn't go out for arf an hour without having 'er with 'im he began to get tired of it. Her idea was that 'e was too handsome to be trusted out alone; and every trip he made 'e had to write up in a book, day by day, wot 'e did with himself. Even then she wasn't satisfied, and, arter saying that a wife's place was by the side of 'er husband, she took to sailing with 'im every v'y'ge.

Wot he could ha' seen in 'er I don't know. I asked 'im one evening—in a roundabout way—and he answered in such a long, roundabout way that I didn't know wot to make of it till I see that she was standing just behind me, listening. Arter that I heard 'er asking questions about me, but I didn't 'ave to listen: I could hear 'er twenty yards away, and singing to myself at the same time.

Arter that she treated me as if I was the dirt beneath 'er feet. She never spoke to me, but used to speak against me to other people. She was always talking to them about the "sleeping-sickness" and things o' that kind. She said night-watchmen always made 'er think of it somehow, but she didn't know why, and she couldn't tell you if you was to ask her. The only thing I was thankful for was that I wasn't 'er husband. She stuck to 'im like his shadow, and I began to think at last it was a pity she 'adn't got some thing to be jealous about and something to occupy her mind with instead o' me.

"She ought to 'ave a lesson," I ses to the skipper one evening. "Are you going to be follored about like this all your life? If she was made to see the foolishness of 'er ways she might get sick of it."

My idea was to send her on a wild-goose chase, and while the Wild Rose was away I thought it out. I wrote a love-letter to the skipper signed with the name of "Dorothy," and asked 'im to meet me at Cleopatra's Needle on the Embankment at eight o'clock on Wednesday. I told 'im to look out for a tall girl (Mrs. Smithers was as short as they make 'em) with mischievous brown eyes, in a blue 'at with red roses on it.

I read it over careful, and arter marking it "Private," twice in front and once on the back, I stuck it down so that it could be blown open a'most, and waited for the schooner to come back. Then I gave a van-boy twopence to 'and it to Mrs. Smithers, wot was sitting on the deck alone, and tell 'er it was a letter for Captain Smithers.

I was busy with a barge wot happened to be handy at the time, but I 'eard her say that she would take it and give it to 'im. When I peeped round she 'ad got the letter open and was leaning over the

side to wind'ard trying to get 'er breath. Every now and then she'd give another look at the letter and open 'er mouth and gasp; but by and by she got calmer, and, arter putting it back in the envelope, she gave it a lick as though she was going to bite it, and stuck it down agin. Then she went off the wharf, and I'm blest if, five minutes arterwards, a young fellow didn't come down to the ship with the same letter and ask for the skipper.

"Who gave it you?" ses the skipper, as soon as 'e could speak.

"A lady," ses the young fellow.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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