

**WILLIAM
WYMARK
JACOBS**

DIRTY WORK

William Wymark Jacobs

Dirty Work

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W. W. Jacobs

Dirty Work / Deep Waters, Part 11

DIRTY WORK

It was nearly high-water, and the night-watchman, who had stepped aboard a lighter lying alongside the wharf to smoke a pipe, sat with half-closed eyes enjoying the summer evening. The bustle of the day was over, the wharves were deserted, and hardly a craft moved on the river. Perfumed clouds of shag, hovering for a time over the lighter, floated lazily towards the Surrey shore.

"There's one thing about my job," said the night-watchman, slowly, "it's done all alone by yourself. There's no foreman a-hollering at you and offering you a penny for your thoughts, and no mates to run into you from behind with a loaded truck and then ask you why you didn't look where you're going to. From six o'clock in the evening to six o'clock next morning I'm my own master."

He rammed down the tobacco with an experienced forefinger and puffed contentedly.

People like you 'ud find it lonely (he continued, after a pause); I did at fust. I used to let people come and sit 'ere with me of an evening talking, but I got tired of it arter a time, and when one chap fell overboard while 'e was showing me 'ow he put his wife's mother in 'er place, I gave it up altogether. There was three foot o' mud in the dock at the time, and arter I 'ad got 'im out, he fainted in my arms.

Arter that I kept myself to myself. Say wot you like, a man's best friend is 'imself. There's nobody else'll do as much for 'im, or let 'im off easier when he makes a mistake. If I felt a bit lonely I used to open the wicket in the gate and sit there watching the road, and p'r'aps pass a word or two with the policeman. Then something 'appened one night that made me take quite a dislike to it for a time.

I was sitting there with my feet outside, smoking a quiet pipe, when I 'eard a bit of a noise in the distance. Then I 'eard people running and shouts of "Stop, thief!" A man came along round the corner full pelt, and, just as I got up, dashed through the wicket and ran on to the wharf. I was arter 'im like a shot and got up to 'im just in time to see him throw something into the dock. And at the same moment I 'eard the other people run past the gate.

"Wot's up?" I ses, collaring 'im.

"Nothing," he ses, breathing 'ard and struggling. "Let me go."

He was a little wisp of a man, and I shook 'im like a dog shakes a rat. I remembered my own pocket being picked, and I nearly shook the breath out of 'im.

"And now I'm going to give you in charge," I ses, pushing 'im along towards the gate.

"Wot for?" he ses, purtending to be surprised.

"Stealing," I ses.

"You've made a mistake," he ses; "you can search me if you like."

"More use to search the dock," I ses. "I see you throw it in. Now you keep quiet, else you'll get 'urt. If you get five years I shall be all the more pleased."

I don't know 'ow he did it, but 'e did. He seemed to sink away between my legs, and afore I knew wot was 'appening, I was standing upside down with all the blood rushing to my 'ead. As I rolled over he bolted through the wicket, and was off like a flash of lightning.

A couple o' minutes arterwards the people wot I 'ad 'eard run past came back agin. There was a big fat policeman with 'em—a man I'd seen afore on the beat—and, when they 'ad gorn on, he stopped to 'ave a word with me.

"'Ot work," he ses, taking off his 'elmet and wiping his bald 'ead with a large red handkerchief. "I've lost all my puff."

"Been running?" I ses, very perlite.

"Arter a pickpocket," he ses. "He snatched a lady's purse just as she was stepping aboard the French boat with her 'usband. 'Twelve pounds in it in gold, two peppermint lozenges, and a postage stamp."

He shook his 'ead, and put his 'elmet on agin.

"Holding it in her little 'and as usual," he ses. "Asking for trouble, I call it. I believe if a woman 'ad one hand off and only a finger and thumb left on the other, she'd carry 'er purse in it."

He knew a'most as much about wimmen as I do. When 'is fust wife died, she said 'er only wish was that she could take 'im with her, and she made 'im promise her faithful that 'e'd never marry agin. His second wife, arter a long illness, passed away while he was playing hymns on the concertina to her, and 'er mother, arter looking at 'er very hard, went to the doctor and said she wanted an inquest.

He went on talking for a long time, but I was busy doing a bit of 'ead- work and didn't pay much attention to 'im. I was thinking o' twelve pounds, two lozenges, and a postage stamp laying in the mud at the bottom of my dock, and arter a time 'e said 'e see as 'ow I was waiting to get back to my night's rest, and went off—stamping.

I locked the wicket when he 'ad gorn away, and then I went to the edge of the dock and stood looking down at the spot where the purse 'ad been chucked in. The tide was on the ebb, but there was still a foot or two of water atop of the mud. I walked up and down, thinking.

I thought for a long time, and then I made up my mind. If I got the purse and took it to the police-station, the police would share the money out between 'em, and tell me they 'ad given it back to the lady. If I found it and put a notice in the newspaper—which would cost money—very likely a dozen or two ladies would come and see me and say it was theirs. Then if I gave it to the best-looking one and the one it belonged to turned up, there'd be trouble. My idea was to keep it—for a time—and then if the lady who lost it came to me and asked me for it I would give it to 'er.

Once I had made up my mind to do wot was right I felt quite 'appy, and arter a look up and down, I stepped round to the Bear's Head and 'ad a couple o' goes o' rum to keep the cold out. There was nobody in there but the landlord, and 'e started at once talking about the thief, and 'ow he 'ad run arter him in 'is shirt-sleeves.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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