

WILLIAM WYMARK JACOBS

BILL'S PAPER CHASE

William Wymark Jacobs
Bill's Paper Chase

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Bill's Paper Chase / Lady of the Barge and Others, Part 3.:*

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BILL'S PAPER CHASE

Sailormen 'ave their faults, said the night watchman, frankly. I'm not denying of it. I used to 'ave myself when I was at sea, but being close with their money is a fault as can seldom be brought ag'in 'em.

I saved some money once—two golden sovereigns, owing to a 'ole in my pocket. Before I got another ship I slept two nights on a doorstep and 'ad nothing to eat, and I found them two sovereigns in the lining o' my coat when I was over two thousand miles away from the nearest pub.

I on'y knew one miser all the years I was at sea. Thomas Geary 'is name was, and we was shipmates aboard the barque *Grenada*, homeward bound from Sydney to London.

Thomas was a man that was getting into years; sixty, I think 'e was, and old enough to know better. 'E'd been saving 'ard for over forty years, and as near as we could make out 'e was worth a matter o' six 'undered pounds. He used to be fond o' talking about it, and letting us know how much better off 'e was than

any of the rest of us.

We was about a month out from Sydney when old Thomas took sick. Bill Hicks said that it was owing to a ha'penny he couldn't account for; but Walter Jones, whose family was always ill, and thought 'e knew a lot about it, said that 'e knew wot it was, but 'e couldn't remember the name of it, and that when we got to London and Thomas saw a doctor, we should see as 'ow 'e was right.

Whatever it was the old man got worse and worse. The skipper came down and gave 'im some physic and looked at 'is tongue, and then 'e looked at our tongues to see wot the difference was. Then 'e left the cook in charge of 'im and went off.

The next day Thomas was worse, and it was soon clear to everybody but 'im that 'e was slipping 'is cable. He wouldn't believe it at first, though the cook told 'im, Bill Hicks told him, and Walter Jones 'ad a grandfather that went off in just the same way.

"I'm not going to die," says Thomas "How can I die and leave all that money?"

"It'll be good for your relations, Thomas," says Walter Jones.

"I ain't got any," says the old man.

"Well, your friends, then, Thomas," says Walter, soft-like.

"Ain't got any," says the old man ag'in.

"Yes, you 'ave, Thomas," says Walter, with a kind smile; "I could tell you one you've got."

Thomas shut his eyes at 'im and began to talk pitiful about 'is

money and the 'ard work 'e'd 'ad saving of it. And by-and-by 'e got worse, and didn't reckernise us, but thought we was a pack o' greedy, drunken sailormen. He thought Walter Jones was a shark, and told 'im so, and, try all 'e could, Walter couldn't persuade 'im different.

He died the day arter. In the morning 'e was whimpering about 'is money ag'in, and angry with Bill when 'e reminded 'im that 'e couldn't take it with 'im, and 'e made Bill promise that 'e should be buried just as 'e was. Bill tucked him up arter that, and when 'e felt a canvas belt tied round the old man's waist 'e began to see wot 'e was driving at.

The weather was dirty that day and there was a bit o' sea running, consequently all 'ands was on deck, and a boy about sixteen wot used to 'elp the steward down aft was lookin' arter Thomas. Me and Bill just run down to give a look at the old man in time.

"I am going to take it with me, Bill," says the old man.

"That's right," says Bill.

"My mind's—easy now," says Thomas. "I gave it to Jimmy—to—to—throw overboard for me."

"Wot?" says Bill, staring.

"That's right, Bill," says the boy. "He told me to. It was a little packet o' banknotes. He gave me tuppence for doing it."

Old Thomas seemed to be listening. 'Is eyes was open, and 'e looked artful at Bill to think what a clever thing 'e'd done.

"Nobody's goin'-to spend-my money," 'e says. "Nobody's"

We drew back from 'is bunk and stood staring at 'im. Then Bill turned to the boy.

"Go and tell the skipper 'e's gone," 'e says, "and mind, for your own sake, don't tell the skipper or anybody else that you've thrown all that money overboard."

"Why not?" says Jimmy.

"Becos you'll be locked up for it," says Bill; "you'd no business to do it. You've been and broke the law. It ought to ha' been left to somebody."

Jimmy looked scared, and arter 'e was gone I turned to Bill, and I looks at 'im and I says "What's the little game, Bill?"

"*Game?*" said Bill, snorting at me. "I don't want the pore boy to get into trouble, do I? Pore little chap. You was young yourself once."

"Yes," I says; "but I'm a bit older now, Bill, and unless you tell me what your little game is, I shall tell the skipper myself, and the chaps too. Pore old Thomas told 'im to do it, so where's the boy to blame?"

"Do you think Jimmy did?" says Bill, screwing up his nose at me. "That little varmint is walking about worth six 'undered quid. Now you keep your mouth shut and I'll make it worth your while."

Then I see Bill's game. "All right, I'll keep quiet for the sake of my half," I says, looking at 'im.

I thought he'd ha' choked, and the langwidge 'e see fit to use was a'most as much as I could answer.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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