

WILLIAM WYMARK JACOBS

AT SUNWICH PORT, PART 5

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CHAPTER XXI

Gossip from one or two quarters, which reached Captain Nugent's ears through the medium of his sister, concerning the preparations for his son's marriage, prevented him from altering his mind with regard to the visits of Jem Hardy and showing that painstaking young man the door. Indeed, the nearness of the approaching nuptials bade fair to eclipse, for the time being, all other grievances, and when Hardy paid his third visit he made a determined but ineffectual attempt to obtain from him some information as to the methods by which he hoped to attain his ends. His failure made him suspicious, and he hinted pretty plainly that he had no guarantee that his visitor was not obtaining admittance under false pretences.

"Well, I'm not getting much out of it," returned Hardy, frankly.

"I wonder you come," said his hospitable host.

"I want you to get used to me," said the other.

The captain started and eyed him uneasily; the remark seemed fraught with hidden meaning. "And then?" he inquired, raising his bushy eyebrows.

"Then perhaps I can come oftener."

The captain gave him up. He sank back in his chair and crossing his legs smoked, with his eyes fixed on the ceiling. It was difficult to know what to do with a young man who was apparently destitute of any feelings of shame or embarrassment. He bestowed a puzzled glance in his direction and saw that he was lolling in the chair with an appearance of the greatest ease and enjoyment. Following the direction of his eyes, he saw that he was gazing with much satisfaction at a photograph of Miss Nugent which graced the mantelpiece. With an odd sensation the captain suddenly identified it as one which usually stood on the chest of drawers in his bedroom, and he wondered darkly whether charity or mischief was responsible for its appearance there.

In any case, it disappeared before the occasion of Hardy's next visit, and the visitor sat with his eyes unoccupied, endeavouring to make conversation with a host who was if anything more discourteous than usual. It was uphill work, but he persevered, and in fifteen minutes had ranged unchecked from North Pole explorations to poultry farming. It was a relief to both of them when the door opened and Bella ushered in Dr. Murchison.

The captain received the new arrival with marked cordiality, and giving him a chair near his own observed with some interest the curt greeting of the young men. The doctor's manner indicated polite surprise at seeing the other there, then he turned to the captain and began to talk to him.

For some time they chatted without interruption, and the captain's replies, when Hardy at last made an attempt to make the conversation general, enabled the doctor to see, without much difficulty, that the latter was an unwelcome guest. Charmed with the discovery he followed his host's lead, and, with a languid air, replied to his rival in monosyllables. The captain watched with quiet satisfaction, and at each rebuff his opinion of Murchison improved. It was gratifying to find that the interloper had met his match.

Hardy sat patient. "I am glad to have met you to-night," he said, after a long pause, during which the other two were discussing a former surgical experience of the captain's on one of his crew.

"Yes?" said Murchison.

"You are just the man I wanted to see."

"Yes?" said the doctor, again.

"Yes," said the other, nodding. "I've been very busy of late owing to my partner's illness, and you are attending several people I want to hear about."

"Indeed," said Murchison, with a half-turn towards him.

"How is Mrs. Paul?" inquired Hardy.

"Dead!" replied the other, briefly.

"Dead!" repeated Mr. Hardy. "Good Heavens! I didn't know that there was much the matter with her."

"There was no hope for her from the first," said Murchison, somewhat sharply. It was merely a question of prolonging her life a little while. She lived longer than I deemed possible. She surprised everybody by her vitality."

"Poor thing," said Hardy. "How is Joe Banks?"

"Dead," said Murchison again, biting his lip and eyeing him furiously.

"Dear me," said Hardy, shaking his head; "I met him not a month ago. He was on his way to see you then."

"The poor fellow had been an invalid nearly all his life," said Murchison, to the captain, casually. "Aye, I remember him," was the reply.

"I am almost afraid to ask you," continued Hardy, "but shut up all day I hear so little. How is old Miss Ritherdon?"

Murchison reddened with helpless rage; Captain Nugent, gazing at the questioner with something almost approaching respect, waited breathlessly for the invariable answer.

"She died three weeks ago; I'm surprised that you have not heard of it," said the doctor, pointedly.

"Of course she was old," said Hardy, with the air of one advancing extenuating circumstances.

"Very old," replied the doctor, who knew that the other was now at the end of his obituary list.

"Are there any other of my patients you are anxious to hear about?"

"No, thank you," returned Hardy, with some haste.

The doctor turned to his host again, but the charm was broken. His talk was disconnected, owing probably to the fact that he was racking his brain for facts relative to the seamy side of shipbroking. And Hardy, without any encouragement whatever, was interrupting with puerile anecdotes concerning the late lamented Joe Banks. The captain came to the rescue.

"The ladies are in the garden," he said to the doctor; "perhaps you'd like to join them."

He looked coldly over at Hardy as he spoke to see the effect of his words. Their eyes met, and the young man was on his feet as soon as his rival.

"Thanks," he said, coolly; "it is a trifle close indoors."

Before the dismayed captain could think of any dignified pretext to stay him he was out of the room. The doctor followed and the perturbed captain, left alone, stared blankly at the door and thought of his daughter's words concerning the thin end of the wedge.

He was a proud man and loth to show discomfiture, so that it was not until a quarter of an hour later that he followed his guests to the garden. The four people were in couples, the paths favouring that formation, although the doctor, to the detriment of the border, had made two or three determined attempts to march in fours. With a feeling akin to scorn the captain saw that he was walking with Mrs. Kingdom, while some distance in the rear Jem Hardy followed with Kate.

He stood at the back door for a little while watching; Hardy, upright and elate, was listening with profound attention to Miss Nugent; the doctor, sauntering along beside Mrs. Kingdom, was listening with a languid air to an account of her celebrated escape from measles some forty-three years before. As a professional man he would have died rather than have owed his life to the specific she advocated.

Kate Nugent, catching sight of her father, turned, and as he came slowly towards them, linked her arm, in his. Her face was slightly flushed and her eyes sparkled.

"I was just coming in to fetch you," she observed; "it is so pleasant out here now."

"Delightful," said Hardy.

"We had to drop behind a little," said Miss Nugent, raising her voice. "Aunt and Dr. Murchison *will* talk about their complaints to each other! They have been exchanging prescriptions."

The captain grunted and eyed her keenly.

"I want you to come in and give us a little music," he said, shortly.

Kate nodded. "What is your favourite music, Mr. Hardy?" she inquired, with a smile.

"Unfortunately, Mr. Hardy can't stay," said the captain, in a voice which there was no mistaking.

Hardy pulled out his watch. "No; I must be off," he said, with a well-affected start. "Thank you for reminding me, Captain Nugent."

"I am glad to have been of service," said the other, looking his grimmest.

He acknowledged the young man's farewell with a short nod and, forgetting his sudden desire for music, continued to pace up and down with his daughter.

"What have you been saying to that—that fellow?" he demanded, turning to her, suddenly.

Miss Nugent reflected. "I said it was a fine evening," she replied, at last.

"No doubt," said her father. "What else?"

"I think I asked him whether he was fond of gardening," said Miss Nugent, slowly. "Yes, I'm sure I did."

"You had no business to speak to him at all," said the fuming captain.

"I don't quite see how I could help doing so," said his daughter. "You surely don't expect me to be rude to your visitors? Besides, I feel rather sorry for him."

"Sorry?" repeated the captain, sharply. "What for?"

"Because he hasn't got a nice, kind, soft-spoken father," said Miss Nugent, squeezing his arm affectionately.

The appearance of the other couple at the head of the path saved the captain the necessity of a retort. They stood in a little knot talking, but Miss Nugent, contrary to her usual habit, said but little. She was holding her father's arm and gazing absently at the dim fields stretching away beyond the garden.

At the same time Mr. James Hardy, feeling, despite his bold front, somewhat badly snubbed, was sitting on the beach thinking over the situation. After a quarter of an hour in the company of Kate Nugent all else seemed sordid and prosaic; his own conduct in his attempt to save her brother from the consequences of his folly most sordid of all. He wondered, gloomily, what she would think when she heard of it.

He rose at last and in the pale light of the new moon walked slowly along towards the town. In his present state of mind he wanted to talk about Kate Nugent, and the only person who could be depended upon for doing that was Samson Wilks. It was a never-tiring subject of the steward's, and since his discovery of the state of Hardy's feelings in that quarter the slightest allusion was sufficient to let loose a flood of reminiscences.

It was dark by the time Hardy reached the alley, and in most of the houses the lamps were lit behind drawn blinds. The steward's house, however, was in darkness and there was no response when he tapped. He turned the handle of the door and looked in. A dim figure rose with a start from a chair.

"I hope you were not asleep?" said Hardy.

"No, sir," said the steward, in a relieved voice. "I thought it was somebody else."

He placed a chair for his visitor and, having lit the lamp, slowly lowered the blind and took a seat opposite.

"I've been sitting in the dark to make a certain party think I was out," he said, slowly. "She keeps making an excuse about Teddy to come over and see me. Last night 'e talked about making a 'ole in the water to celebrate 'Melia Kybird's wedding, and she came over and sat in that chair and cried

as if 'er 'art would break. After she'd gone Teddy comes over, fierce as a eagle, and wants to know wot I've been saying to 'is mother to make 'er cry. Between the two of 'em I 'ave a nice life of it."

"He is still faithful to Miss Kybird, then?" said Hardy, with a sudden sense of relief.

"Faithful?" said Mr. Wilks. "Faithful ain't no word for it. He's a sticker, that's wot 'e is, and it's my misfortune that 'is mother takes after 'im. I 'ave to go out afore breakfast and stay out till late at night, and even then like as not she catches me on the doorstep."

"Well, perhaps she will make a hole in the water," suggested Hardy.

Mr. Wilks smiled, but almost instantly became grave again. "She's not that sort," he said, bitterly, and went into the kitchen to draw some beer.

He drank his in a manner which betokened that the occupation afforded him no enjoyment, and, full of his own troubles, was in no mood to discuss anything else. He gave a short biography of Mrs. Silk which would have furnished abundant material for half-a-dozen libel actions, and alluding to the demise of the late Mr. Silk, spoke of it as though it were the supreme act of artfulness in a somewhat adventurous career.

Hardy walked home with a mind more at ease than it had been at any time since his overtures to Mr. Swann. The only scruple that had troubled him was now removed, and in place of it he felt that he was acting the part of a guardian angel to Mr. Edward Silk.

CHAPTER XXII

Mr. Nathan Smith, usually one of the most matter-of-fact men in the world, came out of Mr. Swann's house in a semi-dazed condition, and for some time after the front door had closed behind him stood gaping on the narrow pavement.

He looked up and down the quiet little street and shook his head sadly. It was a street of staid and substantial old houses; houses which had mellowed and blackened with age, but whose quaint windows and chance-opened doors afforded glimpses of comfort attesting to the prosperity of those within. In the usual way Mr. Nathan Smith was of too philosophical a temperament to experience the pangs of envy, but to-day these things affected him, and he experienced a strange feeling of discontent with his lot in life.

"Some people 'ave all the luck," he muttered, and walked slowly down the road.

He continued his reflections as he walked through the somewhat squalid streets of his own quarter. The afternoon was wet and the houses looked dingier than usual; dirty, inconvenient little places most of them, with a few cheap gimcracks making a brave show as near the window as possible. Mr. Smith observed them with newly opened eyes, and, for perhaps the first time in his life, thought of the draw-backs and struggles of the poor.

In his own untidy little den at the back of the house he sat for some time deep in thought over the events of the afternoon. He had been permitted a peep at wealth; at wealth, too, which was changing hands, but was not coming his way. He lit his pipe and, producing a bottle of rum from a cupboard, helped himself liberally. The potent fluid softened him somewhat, and a half-formed intention to keep the news from Mr. Kybird melted away beneath its benign influence.

"After all, we've been pals for pretty near thirty years," said Mr. Smith to himself.

He took another draught. "Thirty years is a long time," he mused.

He finished the glass. "And if 'e don't give me something out of it I'll do 'im as much 'arm as I can," he continued; and, buttoning up his coat, he rose and set out in the direction of the High Street.

The rain had ceased and the sun was making faint efforts to break through watery clouds. Things seemed brighter, and Mr. Smith's heart beat in response. He was going to play the part of a benefactor to Mr. Kybird; to offer him access, at any rate, to such wealth as he had never dreamed of. He paused at the shop window, and, observing through a gap in the merchandise that Mr. Kybird was be-hind the counter, walked in and saluted him.

"I've got news for you," he said, slowly; "big news."

"Oh," said Mr. Kybird, with indifference.

"Big news," repeated Mr. Smith, sinking thoughtlessly into the broken cane-chair and slowly extricating himself. "Something that'll make your eyes start out of your 'ed."

The small black eyes in question were turned shrewdly in his direction. "I've 'ad news of you afore, Nat," remarked Mr. Kybird, with simple severity.

The philanthropist was chilled; he fixed his eyes in a stony stare on the opposite wall. Mr. Kybird, who had ever a wholesome dread of falling a victim to his friend's cuteness, regarded him with some uncertainty, and reminded him of one or two pieces of information which had seriously depleted his till.

"Banns up yet for the wedding?" inquired Mr. Smith, still gazing in front of him with fathomless eyes.

"They'll be put up next week," said Mr. Kybird.

"Ah!" said his friend, with great emphasis. "Well, well!"

"Wot d'ye mean by 'well, well'?" demanded the other, with some heat.

"I was on'y thinking," replied Mr. Smith, mildly. "P'r'aps it's all for the best, and I'd better 'old my tongue. True love is better than money. After all it ain't my bisness, and I shouldn't get much out of it."

"Out of wot, Nat?" inquired Mr. Kybird, uneasily.

Mr. Smith, still gazing musingly before him, appeared not to hear the question. "Nice after the rain, ain't it?" he said, slowly.

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