

WILLIAM WYMARK JACOBS

AT SUNWICH PORT, PART 2

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CHAPTER VI

For the first few days after his return Sunwich was full of surprises to Jem Hardy. The town itself had changed but little, and the older inhabitants were for the most part easily recognisable, but time had wrought wonders among the younger members of the population: small boys had attained to whiskered manhood, and small girls passing into well-grown young women had in some cases even changed their names.

The most astounding and gratifying instance of the wonders effected by time was that of Miss Nugent. He saw her first at the window, and with a ready recognition of the enchantment lent by distance took the first possible opportunity of a closer observation. He then realized the enchantment afforded by proximity. The second opportunity led him impetuously into a draper's shop, where a magnificent shop-walker, after first ceremoniously handing him a high cane chair, passed on his order for pins in a deep and thrilling baritone, and retired in good order.

By the end of a week his observations were completed, and Kate Nugent, securely enthroned in his mind as the incarnation of feminine grace and beauty, left but little room for other matters. On his second Sunday at home, to his father's great surprise, he attended church, and after contemplating Miss Nugent's back hair for an hour and a half came home and spoke eloquently and nobly on "burying hatchets," "healing old sores," "letting bygones be bygones," and kindred topics.

"I never take much notice of sermons myself," said the captain, misunderstanding.

"Sermon?" said his son. "I wasn't thinking of the sermon, but I saw Captain Nugent there, and I remembered the stupid quarrel between you. It's absurd that it should go on indefinitely."

"Why, what does it matter?" inquired the other, staring. "Why shouldn't it? Perhaps it's the music that's affected you; some of those old hymns—"

"It wasn't the sermon and it wasn't the hymns," said his son, disdainfully; "it's just common sense. It seems to me that the enmity between you has lasted long enough."

"I don't see that it matters," said the captain; "it doesn't hurt me. Nugent goes his way and I go mine, but if I ever get a chance at the old man, he'd better look out. He wants a little of the starch taken out of him."

"Mere mannerism," said his son.

"He's as proud as Lucifer, and his girl takes after him," said the innocent captain. "By the way, she's grown up a very good-

looking girl. You take a look at her the next time you see her."

His son stared at him.

"She'll get married soon, I should think," continued the other. "Young Murchison, the new doctor here, seems to be the favourite. Nugent is backing him, so they say; I wish him joy of his father-in-law."

Jem Hardy took his pipe into the garden, and, pacing slowly up and down the narrow paths, determined, at any costs, to save Dr. Murchison from such a father-in-law and Kate Nugent from any husband except of his choosing. He took a seat under an old apple tree, and, musing in the twilight, tried in vain to think of ways and means of making her acquaintance.

Meantime they passed each other as strangers, and the difficulty of approaching her only made the task more alluring. In the second week he reckoned up that he had seen her nine times. It was a satisfactory total, but at the same time he could not shut his eyes to the fact that five times out of that number he had seen Dr. Murchison as well, and neither of them appeared to have seen him.

He sat thinking it over in the office one hot afternoon. Mr. Adolphus Swann, his partner, had just returned from lunch, and for about the fifth time that day was arranging his white hair and short, neatly pointed beard in a small looking-glass. Over the top of it he glanced at Hardy, who, leaning back in his chair, bit his pen and stared hard at a paper before him.

"Is that the manifest of the North Star?" he inquired.

"No," was the reply.

Mr. Swann put his looking-glass away and watched the other as he crossed over to the window and gazed through the small, dirty panes at the bustling life of the harbour below. For a short time Hardy stood gazing in silence, and then, suddenly crossing the room, took his hat from a peg and went out.

"Restless," said the senior partner, wiping his folders with great care and putting them on. "Wonder where he's put that manifest."

He went over to the other's desk and opened a drawer to search for it. Just inside was a sheet of foolscap, and Mr. Swann with growing astonishment slowly mastered the contents.

"See her as often as possible."

"Get to know some of her friends."

"Try and get hold of the old lady."

"Find out her tastes and ideas."

"Show my hand before Murchison has it all his own way."

"It seems to me," said the bewildered shipbroker, carefully replacing the paper, "that my young friend is looking out for another partner. He hasn't lost much time."

He went back to his seat and resumed his work. It occurred to him that he ought to let his partner know what he had seen, and when Hardy returned he had barely seated himself before Mr. Swann with a mysterious smile crossed over to him, bearing a sheet of foolscap.

"Try and dress as well as my partner," read the astonished

Hardy. "What's the matter with my clothes? What do you mean?"

Mr. Swann, in place of answering, returned to his desk and, taking up another sheet of foolscap, began to write again, holding up his hand for silence as Hardy repeated his question. When he had finished his task he brought it over and placed it in the other's hand.

"Take her little brother out for walks."

Hardy crumpled the paper up and flung it aside. Then, with his face crimson, he stared wrathfully at the benevolent Swann.

"It's the safest card in the pack," said the latter. "You please everybody; especially the little brother. You should always hold his hand—it looks well for one thing, and if you shut your eyes —"

"I don't want any of your nonsense," said the maddened Jem. "What do you mean by reading my private papers?"

"I came over to look for the manifest," said Mr. Swann, "and I read it before I could make out what it was. You must admit it's a bit cryptic. I thought it was a new game at first. Getting hold of the old lady sounds like a sort of blind-man's buff. But why not get hold of the young one? Why waste time over—"

"Go to the devil," said the junior partner.

"Any more suggestions I can give you, you are heartily welcome to," said Mr. Swann, going back to his seat. "All my vast experience is at your service, and the best and sweetest and prettiest girls in Sunwich regard me as a sort of second father."

"What's a second father?" inquired Jim, looking up—"a

grandfather?"

"Go your own way," said the other; "I wash my hands of you. You're not in earnest, or you'd clutch at any straw. But let me give you one word of advice. Be careful how you get hold of the old lady; let her understand from the commencement that it isn't her."

Mr. Hardy went on with his work. There was a pile of it in front of him and an accumulation in his drawers. For some time he wrote assiduously, but work was dry after the subject they had been discussing. He looked over at his partner and, seeing that that gentleman was gravely busy, reopened the matter with a jeer.

"Old maids always know most about rearing children," he remarked; "so I suppose old bachelors, looking down on life from the top shelf, think they know most about marriage."

"I wash my hands of you," repeated the senior, placidly. "I am not to be taunted into rendering first aid to the wounded."

The conscience-stricken junior lost his presence of mind. "Who's trying to taunt you?" he demanded, hotly. "Why, you'd do more harm than good."

"Put a bandage round the head instead of the heart, I expect," assented the chuckling Swann. "Top shelf, I think you said; well, I climbed there for safety."

"You must have been much run after," said his partner.

"I was," said the other. "I suppose that's why it is I am always so interested in these affairs. I have helped to marry so many people in this place, that I'm almost afraid to stir out after dark."

Hardy's reply was interrupted by the entrance of Mr. Edward Silk, a young man of forlorn aspect, who combined in his person the offices of messenger, cleaner, and office-boy to the firm. He brought in some letters, and placing them on Mr. Swann's desk retired.

"There's another," said the latter, as the door closed. "His complaint is Amelia Kybird, and he's got it badly. She's big enough to eat him, but I believe that they are engaged. Perseverance has done it in his case. He used to go about like a blighted flower—"

"I am rather busy," his partner reminded him.

Mr. Swann sighed and resumed his own labours. For some time both men wrote in silence. Then the elder suddenly put his pen down and hit his desk a noisy thump with his fist.

"I've got it," he said, briskly; "apologize humbly for all your candour, and I will give you a piece of information which shall brighten your dull eyes, raise the corners of your drooping mouth, and renew once more the pink and cream in your youthful cheeks."

"Look here—" said the overwrought Hardy.

"Samson Wilks," interrupted Mr. Swann, "number three, Fullalove Alley, at home Fridays, seven to nine, to the daughter of his late skipper, who always visits him on that day. Don't thank me, Hardy, in case you break down. She's a very nice girl, and if she had been born twenty years earlier, or I had been born twenty years later, or you hadn't been born at all, there's no saying what

might not have happened."

"When I want you to interfere in my business," said Hardy, working sedulously, "I'll let you know."

"Very good," replied Swann; "still, remember Thursdays, seven to nine."

"Thursdays," said Hardy, incautiously; "why, you said Fridays just now."

Mr. Swann made no reply. His nose was immersed in the folds of a large handkerchief, and his eyes watered profusely behind his glasses. It was some minutes before he had regained his normal composure, and even then the sensitive nerves of his partner were offended by an occasional belated chuckle.

Although by dint of casual and cautious inquiries Mr. Hardy found that his partner's information was correct, he was by no means guilty of any feelings of gratitude towards him; and he only glared scornfully when that excellent but frivolous man mounted a chair on Friday afternoon, and putting the clock on a couple of hours or so, urged him to be in time.

The evening, however, found him starting slowly in the direction of Fullalove Alley. His father had gone to sea again, and the house was very dull; moreover, he felt a mild curiosity to see the changes wrought by time in Mr. Wilks. He walked along by the sea, and as the church clock struck the three-quarters turned into the alley and looked eagerly round for the old steward.

The labours of the day were over, and the inhabitants were for the most part out of doors taking the air. Shirt-

sleeved householders, leaning against their door-posts smoking, exchanged ideas across the narrow space paved with cobblestones which separated their small and ancient houses, while the matrons, more gregariously inclined, bunched in little groups and discussed subjects which in higher circles would have inundated the land with libel actions. Up and down the alley a tiny boy all ready for bed, with the exception of his nightgown, mechanically avoided friendly palms as he sought anxiously for his mother.

The object of Mr. Hardy's search sat at the door of his front room, which opened on to the alley, smoking an evening pipe, and noting with an interested eye the doings of his neighbours. He was just preparing to draw himself up in his chair as the intruder passed, when to his utter astonishment that gentleman stopped in front of him, and taking possession of his hand shook it fervently.

"How do you do?" he said, smiling.

Mr. Wilks eyed him stupidly and, releasing his hand, coyly placed it in his trouser-pocket and breathed hard.

"I meant to come before," said Hardy, "but I've been so busy. How are you?"

Mr. Wilks, still dazed, muttered that he was very well. Then he sat bolt upright in his chair and eyed his visitor suspiciously.

"I've been longing for a chat with you about old times," said Hardy; "of all my old friends you seem to have changed the least. You don't look a day older."

"I'm getting on," said Mr. Wilks, trying to speak coldly, but

observing with some gratification the effect produced upon his neighbours by the appearance of this well-dressed acquaintance.

"I wanted to ask your advice," said the unscrupulous Hardy, speaking in low tones. "I daresay you know I've just gone into partnership in Sunwich, and I'm told there's no man knows more about the business and the ins and outs of this town than you do."

Mr. Wilks thawed despite himself. His face glistened and his huge mouth broke into tremulous smiles. For a moment he hesitated, and then noticing that a little group near them had suspended their conversation to listen to his he drew his chair back and, in a kind voice, invited the searcher after wisdom to step inside.

Hardy thanked him, and, following him in, took a chair behind the door, and with an air of youthful deference bent his ear to catch the pearls which fell from the lips of his host. Since he was a babe on his mother's knee sixty years before Mr. Wilks had never had such an attentive and admiring listener. Hardy sat as though glued to his chair, one eye on Mr. Wilks and the other on the clock, and it was not until that ancient timepiece struck the hour that the ex-steward suddenly realized the awkward state of affairs.

"Any more 'elp I can give you I shall always be pleased to," he said, looking at the clock.

Hardy thanked him at great length, wondering, as he spoke, whether Miss Nugent was of punctual habits. He leaned back in his chair and, folding his arms, gazed thoughtfully at the

perturbed Mr. Wilks.

"You must come round and smoke a pipe with me sometimes," he said, casually.

Mr. Wilks flushed with gratified pride. He had a vision of himself walking up to the front door of the Hardys, smoking a pipe in a well-appointed room, and telling an incredulous and envious Fullalove Alley about it afterwards.

"I shall be very pleased, sir," he said, impressively.

"Come round on Tuesday," said his visitor. "I shall be at home then."

Mr. Wilks thanked him and, spurred on to hospitality, murmured something about a glass of ale, and retired to the back to draw it. He came back with a jug and a couple of glasses, and draining his own at a draught, hoped that the example would not be lost upon his visitor. That astute person, however, after a modest draught, sat still, anchored to the half-empty glass.

"I'm expecting somebody to-night," said the ex-steward, at last.

"No doubt you have a lot of visitors," said the other, admiringly.

Mr. Wilks did not deny it. He eyed his guest's glass and fidgeted.

"Miss Nugent is coming," he said.

Instead of any signs of disorder and preparations for rapid flight, Mr. Wilks saw that the other was quite composed. He began to entertain a poor idea of Mr. Hardy's memory.

"She generally comes for a little quiet chat," he said.

"Indeed!"

"Just between the two of us," said the other.

His visitor said "Indeed," and, as though some chord of memory had been touched, sat gazing dreamily at Mr. Wilks's horticultural collection in the window. Then he changed colour a little as a smart hat and a pretty face crossed the tiny panes. Mr. Wilks changed colour too, and in an awkward fashion rose to receive Miss Nugent.

"Late as usual, Sam," said the girl, sinking into a chair. Then she caught sight of Hardy, who was standing by the door.

"It's a long time since you and I met, Miss Nugent," he said, bowing.

"Mr. Hardy?" said the girl, doubtfully.

"Yes, miss," interposed Mr. Wilks, anxious to explain his position. "He called in to see me; quite a surprise to me it was. I 'ardly knowed him."

"The last time we three met," said Hardy, who to his host's discomfort had resumed his chair, "Wilks was thrashing me and you were urging him on."

Kate Nugent eyed him carefully. It was preposterous that this young man should take advantage of a boy and girl acquaintance of eleven years before—and such an acquaintance!—in this manner. Her eyes expressed a little surprise, not unmixed with hauteur, but Hardy was too pleased to have them turned in his direction at all to quarrel with their expression.

"You were a bit of a trial in them days," said Mr. Wilks, shaking his head. "If I live to be ninety I shall never forget seeing Miss Kate capsized the way she was. The way she—"

"How is your cold?" inquired Miss Nugent, hastily.

"Better, miss, thankee," said Mr. Wilks.

"Miss Nugent has forgotten and forgiven all that long ago," said Hardy.

"Quite," assented the girl, coldly; "one cannot remember all the boys and girls one knew as a child."

"Certainly not," said Hardy. "I find that many have slipped from my own memory, but I have a most vivid recollection of you."

Miss Nugent looked at him again, and an idea, strange and incredible, dawned slowly upon her. Childish impressions are lasting, and Jem Hardy had remained in her mind as a sort of youthful ogre. He sat before her now a frank, determined-looking young Englishman, in whose honest eyes admiration of herself could not be concealed. Indignation and surprise struggled for supremacy.

"It's odd," remarked Mr. Wilks, who had a happy knack at times of saying the wrong thing, "it's odd you should 'ave 'appened to come just at the same time as Miss Kate did."

"It's my good fortune," said Hardy, with a slight bow. Then he cocked a malignant eye at the innocent Mr. Wilks, and wondered at what age men discarded the useless habit of blushing. Opposite him sat Miss Nugent, calmly observant, the slightest suggestion

of disdain in her expression. Framed in the queer, high-backed old chair which had belonged to Mr. Wilks's grandfather, she made a picture at which Jem Hardy continued to gaze with respectful ardour. A hopeless sense of self-depreciation possessed him, but the idea that Murchison should aspire to so much goodness and beauty made him almost despair of his sex. His reverie was broken by the voice of Mr. Wilks.

"A quarter to eight?" said that gentleman incredulously; "it can't be."

"I thought it was later than that," said Hardy, simply.

Mr. Wilks gasped, and with a faint shake of his head at the floor abandoned the thankless task of giving hints to a young man who was too obtuse to see them; and it was not until some time later that Mr. Hardy, sorely against his inclinations, gave his host a hearty handshake and, with a respectful bow to Miss Nugent, took his departure.

"Fine young man he's growed," said Mr. Wilks, deferentially, turning to his remaining visitor; "greatly improved, I think."

Miss Nugent looked him over critically before replying. "He seems to have taken a great fancy to you," she remarked.

Mr. Wilks smiled a satisfied smile. "He came to ask my advice about business," he said, softly. "He's 'eard two or three speak o' me as knowing a thing or two, and being young, and just starting, 'e came to talk it over with me. I never see a young man so pleased and ready to take advice as wot he is."

"He is coming again for more, I suppose?" said Miss Nugent,

carelessly.

Mr. Wilks acquiesced. "And he asked me to go over to his 'ouse to smoke a pipe with 'im on Tuesday," he added, in the casual manner in which men allude to their aristocratic connections. "He's a bit lonely, all by himself."

Miss Nugent said, "Indeed," and then, lapsing into silence, gave little occasional side-glances at Mr. Wilks, as though in search of any hidden charms about him which might hitherto have escaped her.

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