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PRIZE MONEY

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Prize Money / Sailor's Knots, Part 10.:

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W. W. Jacobs

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PRIZE MONEY

The old man stood by the window, gazing at the frozen fields beyond. The sign of the Cauliflower was stiff with snow, and the breath of a pair of waiting horses in a wagon beneath ascended in clouds of steam.

"Amusements" he said slowly, as he came back with a shiver and, resuming his seat by the tap-room fire, looked at the wayfarer who had been idly questioning him. "Claybury men don't have much time for amusements. The last one I can call to mind was Bill Chambers being nailed up in a pig-sty he was cleaning out, but there was such a fuss made over that —by Bill—that it sort o' disheartened people."

He got up again restlessly, and, walking round the table, gazed long and hard into three or four mugs.

"Sometimes a little gets left in them," he explained, meeting the stranger's inquiring glance. The latter started, and, knocking on the table with the handle of his knife, explained that he had been informed by a man outside that his companion was the

bitterest teetotaller in Claybury.

"That's one o' Bob Pretty's larks," said the old man, flushing. "I see you talking to 'im, and I thought as 'ow he warn't up to no good. Biggest rascal in Claybury, he is. I've said so afore, and I'll say so agin."

He bowed to the donor and buried his old face in the mug.

"A poacher!" he said, taking breath. "A thief!" he continued, after another draught. "I wonder whether Smith spilt any of this a-carrying of it in?"

He put down the empty mug and made a careful examination of the floor, until a musical rapping on the table brought the landlord into the room again.

"My best respects," he said, gratefully, as he placed the mug on the settle by his side and slowly filled a long clay pipe. Next time you see Bob Pretty ask 'im wot happened to the prize hamper. He's done a good many things has Bob, but it'll be a long time afore Claybury men'll look over that.

It was Henery Walker's idea. Henery 'ad been away to see an uncle of 'is wife's wot had money and nobody to leave it to—leastways, so Henery thought when he wasted his money going over to see 'im—and he came back full of the idea, which he 'ad picked up from the old man.

"We each pay twopence a week till Christmas," he ses, "and we buy a hamper with a goose or a turkey in it, and bottles o' rum and whiskey and gin, as far as the money'll go, and then we all draw lots for it, and the one that wins has it."

It took a lot of explaining to some of 'em, but Smith, the landlord, helped Henery, and in less than four days twenty-three men had paid their tuppences to Henery, who 'ad been made the seckitary, and told him to hand them over to Smith in case he lost his memory.

Bob Pretty joined one arternoon on the quiet, and more than one of 'em talked of 'aving their money back, but, arter Smith 'ad explained as 'ow he would see fair play, they thought better of it.

"He'll 'ave the same chance as all of you," he ses. "No more and no less."

"I'd feel more easy in my mind, though, if'e wasn't in it," ses Bill Chambers, staring at Bob. "I never knew 'im to lose anything yet."

"You don't know everything, Bill," ses Bob, shaking his 'ead. "You don't know me; else you wouldn't talk like that. I've never been caught doing wrong yet, and I 'ope I never shall."

"It's all right, Bill," ses George Kettle. "Mr. Smith'll see fair, and I'd sooner win Bob Pretty's money than anybody's."

"I 'ope you will, mate," ses Bob; "that's what I joined for."

"Bob's money is as good as anybody else's," ses George Kettle, looking round at the others. "It don't signify to me where he got it from."

"Ah, I don't like to hear you talk like that George," ses Bob Pretty. "I've thought more than once that you 'ad them ideas."

He drank up his beer and went off 'ome, shaking his 'cad, and, arter three or four of 'em 'ad explained to George Kettle wot he

meant, George went off 'ome, too.

The week afore Christmas, Smith, the landlord, said as 'ow he 'ad got enough money, and three days arter we all came up 'ere to see the prize drawn. It was one o' the biggest hampers Smith could get; and there was a fine, large turkey in it, a large goose, three pounds o' pork sausages, a bottle o' whiskey, a bottle o' rum, a bottle o' brandy, a bottle o' gin, and two bottles o' wine. The hamper was all decorated with holly, and a little flag was stuck in the top.

On'y men as belonged was allowed to feel the turkey and the goose, and arter a time Smith said as 'ow p'r'aps they'd better leave off, and 'e put all the things back in the hamper and fastened up the lid.

"How are we going to draw the lottery?" ses John Biggs, the blacksmith.

"There'll be twenty-three bits o' paper," ses Smith, "and they'll be numbered from one to twenty-three. Then they'll be twisted up all the same shape and put in this 'ere paper bag, which I shall 'old as each man draws. The chap that draws the paper with the figger on it wins."

He tore up twenty-three bits o' paper all about the same size, and then with a black-lead pencil 'e put the numbers on, while everybody leaned over 'im to see fair play. Then he twisted every bit o' paper up and held them in his 'and.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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