

**WILLIAM
WYMARK
JACOBS**

THE NEST EGG

William Wymark Jacobs
The Nest Egg

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The Nest Egg / Captains All, Book 3.:*

Содержание

THE NEST EGG

4

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

8

W. W. Jacobs

The Nest Egg /

Captains All, Book 3

THE NEST EGG

"Artfulness," said the night-watch-man, smoking placidly, "is a gift; but it don't pay always. I've met some artful ones in my time—plenty of 'em; but I can't truthfully say as 'ow any of them was the better for meeting me."

He rose slowly from the packing-case on which he had been sitting and, stamping down the point of a rusty nail with his heel, resumed his seat, remarking that he had endured it for some time under the impression that it was only a splinter.

"I've surprised more than one in my time," he continued, slowly. "When I met one of these 'ere artful ones I used fust of all to pretend to be more stupid than wot I really am."

He stopped and stared fixedly.

"More stupid than I looked," he said. He stopped again.

"More stupid than wot they thought I looked," he said, speaking with marked deliberation. And I'd let 'em go on and on until I thought I had 'ad about enough, and then turn round on 'em. Nobody ever got the better o' me except my wife, and

that was only before we was married. Two nights arterwards she found a fish-hook in my trouser-pocket, and arter that I could ha' left untold gold there—if I'd ha' had it. It spoilt wot some people call the honey-moon, but it paid in the long run.

One o' the worst things a man can do is to take up artfulness all of a sudden. I never knew it to answer yet, and I can tell you of a case that'll prove my words true.

It's some years ago now, and the chap it 'appened to was a young man, a shipmate o' mine, named Charlie Tagg. Very steady young chap he was, too steady for most of 'em. That's 'ow it was me and 'im got to be such pals.

He'd been saving up for years to get married, and all the advice we could give 'im didn't 'ave any effect. He saved up nearly every penny of 'is money and gave it to his gal to keep for 'im, and the time I'm speaking of she'd got seventy-two pounds of 'is and seventeen-and-six of 'er own to set up house-keeping with.

Then a thing happened that I've known to 'appen to sailormen afore. At Sydney 'e got silly on another gal, and started walking out with her, and afore he knew wot he was about he'd promised to marry 'er too.

Sydney and London being a long way from each other was in 'is favour, but the thing that troubled 'im was 'ow to get that seventy-two pounds out of Emma Cook, 'is London gal, so as he could marry the other with it. It worried 'im all the way home, and by the time we got into the London river 'is head was all in a maze with it. Emma Cook 'ad got it all saved up in the bank,

to take a little shop with when they got spliced, and 'ow to get it he could not think.

He went straight off to Poplar, where she lived, as soon as the ship was berthed. He walked all the way so as to 'ave more time for thinking, but wot with bumping into two old gentlemen with bad tempers, and being nearly run over by a cabman with a white 'orse and red whiskers, he got to the house without 'aving thought of anything.

They was just finishing their tea as 'e got there, and they all seemed so pleased to see 'im that it made it worse than ever for 'im. Mrs. Cook, who 'ad pretty near finished, gave 'im her own cup to drink out of, and said that she 'ad dreamt of 'im the night afore last, and old Cook said that he 'ad got so good-looking 'e shouldn't 'ave known him.

"I should 'ave passed 'im in the street," he ses. "I never see such an alteration."

"They'll be a nice-looking couple," ses his wife, looking at a young chap, named George Smith, that 'ad been sitting next to Emma.

Charlie Tagg filled 'is mouth with bread and butter, and wondered 'ow he was to begin. He squeezed Emma's 'and just for the sake of keeping up appearances, and all the time 'e was thinking of the other gal waiting for 'im thousands o' miles away.

"You've come 'ome just in the nick o' time," ses old Cook; "if you'd done it o' purpose you couldn't 'ave arranged it better."

"Somebody's birthday?" ses Charlie, trying to smile.

Old Cook shook his 'ead. "Though mine is next Wednesday," he ses, "and thank you for thinking of it. No; you're just in time for the biggest bargain in the chandlery line that anybody ever 'ad a chance of. If you 'adn't ha' come back we should have 'ad to ha' done it without you."

"Eighty pounds," ses Mrs. Cook, smiling at Charlie. "With the money Emma's got saved and your wages this trip you'll 'ave plenty. You must come round arter tea and 'ave a look at it."

"Little place not arf a mile from 'ere," ses old Cook. "Properly worked up, the way Emma'll do it, it'll be a little fortune. I wish I'd had a chance like it in my young time."

He sat shaking his 'ead to think wot he'd lost, and Charlie Tagg sat staring at 'im and wondering wot he was to do.

"My idea is for Charlie to go for a few more v'y'ges arter they're married while Emma works up the business," ses Mrs. Cook; "she'll be all right with young Bill and Sarah Ann to 'elp her and keep 'er company while he's away."

"We'll see as she ain't lonely," ses George Smith, turning to Charlie.

Charlie Tagg gave a bit of a cough and said it wanted considering. He said it was no good doing things in a 'urry and then repenting of 'em all the rest of your life. And 'e said he'd been given to understand that chandlery wasn't wot it 'ad been, and some of the cleverest people 'e knew thought that it would be worse before it was better. By the time he'd finished they was all looking at 'im as though they couldn't believe their ears.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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