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ADMIRAL PETERS

William Wymark Jacobs

Admiral Peters

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Содержание

ADMIRAL PETERS	5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	7

W. W. Jacobs

Admiral Peters / Odd Craft, Part 14

ADMIRAL PETERS

Mr. George Burton, naval pensioner, sat at the door of his lodgings gazing in placid content at the sea. It was early summer, and the air was heavy with the scent of flowers; Mr. Burton's pipe was cold and empty, and his pouch upstairs. He shook his head gently as he realised this, and, yielding to the drowsy quiet of his surroundings, laid aside the useless pipe and fell into a doze.

He was awakened half an hour later by the sound of footsteps. A tall, strongly built man was approaching from the direction of the town, and Mr. Burton, as he gazed at him sleepily, began to wonder where he had seen him before. Even when the stranger stopped and stood smiling down at him his memory proved unequal to the occasion, and he sat staring at the handsome, shaven face, with its little fringe of grey whisker, waiting for enlightenment.

"George, my buck," said the stranger, giving him a hearty slap on the shoulder, "how goes it?" "D— *Bless* my eyes, I mean," said Mr. Burton, correcting himself, "if it ain't Joe Stiles. I didn't know you without your beard."

"That's me," said the other. "It's quite by accident I heard where you were living, George; I offered to go and sling my hammock with old Dingle for a week or two, and he told me. Nice quiet little place, Seacombe. Ah, you were lucky to get your pension, George."

"I deserved it," said Mr. Burton, sharply, as he fancied he detected something ambiguous in his friend's remark.

"Of course you did," said Mr. Stiles; "so did I, but I didn't get it. Well, it's a poor heart that never rejoices. What about that drink you were speaking of, George?"

"I hardly ever touch anything now," replied his friend.

"I was thinking about myself," said Mr. Stiles. "I can't bear the stuff, but the doctor says I must have it. You know what doctors are, George!"

Mr. Burton did not deign to reply, but led the way indoors.

"Very comfortable quarters, George," remarked Mr. Stiles, gazing round the room approvingly; "ship-shape and tidy. I'm glad I met old Dingle. Why, I might never ha' seen you again; and us such pals, too."

His host grunted, and from the back of a small cupboard, produced a bottle of whisky and a glass, and set them on the table. After a momentary hesitation he found another glass.

"Our noble selves," said Mr. Stiles, with a tinge of reproach in his tones, "and may we never forget old friendships."

Mr. Burton drank the toast. "I hardly know what it's like now, Joe," he said, slowly. "You wouldn't believe how soon you can lose the taste for it."

Mr. Stiles said he would take his word for it. "You've got some nice little public-houses about here, too," he remarked. "There's one I passed called the Cock and Flowerpot; nice cosy little place it would be to spend the evening in."

"I never go there," said Mr. Burton, hastily. "I—a friend o' mine here doesn't approve o' public-'ouses."

"What's the matter with him?" inquired his friend, anxiously.

"It's—it's a 'er," said Mr. Burton, in some confusion.

Mr. Stiles threw himself back in his chair and eyed him with amazement. Then, recovering his presence of mind, he reached out his hand for the bottle.

"We'll drink her health," he said, in a deep voice. "What's her name?"

"Mrs. Dutton," was the reply.

Mr. Stiles, with one hand on his heart, toasted her feelingly; then, filling up again, he drank to the "happy couple."

"She's very strict about drink," said Mr. Burton, eyeing these proceedings with some severity.

"Any—dibs?" inquired Mr. Stiles, slapping a pocket which failed to ring in response.

"She's comfortable," replied the other, awkwardly. "Got a little stationer's shop in the town; steady, old-fashioned business. She's chapel, and very strict."

"Just what you want," remarked Mr. Stiles, placing his glass on the table. "What d'ye say to a stroll?"

Mr. Burton assented, and, having replaced the black bottle in the cupboard, led the way along the cliffs toward the town some half-mile distant, Mr. Stiles beguiling the way by narrating his adventures since they had last met. A certain swagger and richness of deportment were explained by his statement that he had been on the stage.

"Only walking on," he said, with a shake of his head. "The only speaking part I ever had was a cough. You ought to ha' heard that cough, George!"

Mr. Burton politely voiced his regrets and watched him anxiously. Mr. Stiles, shaking his head over a somewhat unsuccessful career, was making a bee-line for the Cock and Flowerpot.

"Just for a small soda," he explained, and, once inside, changed his mind and had whisky instead. Mr. Burton, sacrificing principle to friendship, had one with him. The bar more than fulfilled Mr. Stiles's ideas as to its cosiness, and within the space of ten minutes he was on excellent terms with the regular clients. Into the little, old-world bar, with its loud-ticking clock, its Windsor-chairs, and its cracked jug full of roses, he brought a breath of the bustle of the great city and tales of the great cities beyond the seas. Refreshment was forced upon him, and Mr. Burton, pleased at his friend's success, shared mildly in his reception. It was nine o'clock before they departed, and then they only left to please the landlord.

"Nice lot o' chaps," said Mr. Stiles, as he stumbled out into the sweet, cool air. "Catch hold—o' my—arm, George. Brace me—up a bit."

Mr. Burton complied, and his friend, reassured as to his footing, burst into song. In a stentorian voice he sang the latest song from comic opera, and then with an adjuration to Mr. Burton to see what he was about, and not to let him trip, he began, in a lumbering fashion, to dance.

Mr. Burton, still propping him up, trod a measure with fewer steps, and cast uneasy glances up the lonely road. On their left the sea broke quietly on the beach below; on their right were one or two scattered cottages, at the doors of which an occasional figure appeared to gaze in mute astonishment at the proceedings.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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