

**WILLIAM
WYMARK
JACOBS**

DUAL CONTROL

William Wymark Jacobs

Dual Control

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Dual Control / Ship's Company, Part 8

DUAL CONTROL

"Never say 'die,' Bert," said Mr. Culpepper, kindly; "I like you, and so do most other people who know what's good for 'em; and if Florrie don't like you she can keep single till she does."

Mr. Albert Sharp thanked him.

"Come in more oftener," said Mr. Culpepper. "If she don't know a steady young man when she sees him, it's her mistake."

"Nobody could be steadier than what I am," sighed Mr. Sharp.

Mr. Culpepper nodded. "The worst of it is, girls don't like steady young men," he said, rumpling his thin grey hair; "that's the silly part of it."

"But you was always steady, and Mrs. Culpepper married you," said the young man.

Mr. Culpepper nodded again. "She thought I was, and that came to the same thing," he said, composedly. "And it ain't for me to say, but she had an idea that I was very good-looking in them days. I had chestnutty hair. She burnt a piece of it only the other day she'd kept for thirty years."

"Burnt it? What for?" inquired Mr. Sharp.

"Words," said the other, lowering his voice. "When I want one thing nowadays she generally wants another; and the things she wants ain't the things I want."

Mr. Sharp shook his head and sighed again.

"You ain't talkative enough for Florrie, you know," said Mr. Culpepper, regarding him.

"I can talk all right as a rule," retorted Mr. Sharp. "You ought to hear me at the debating society; but you can't talk to a girl who doesn't talk back."

"You're far too humble," continued the other. "You should cheek her a bit now and then. Let 'er see you've got some spirit. Chaff 'er."

"That's no good," said the young man, restlessly. "I've tried it. Only the other day I called her 'a saucy little kipper,' and the way she went on, anybody would have thought I'd insulted her. Can't see a joke, I s'pose. Where is she now?"

"Upstairs," was the reply.

"That's because I'm here," said Mr. Sharp. "If it had been Jack Butler she'd have been down fast enough."

"It couldn't be him," said Mr. Culpepper, "because I won't have 'im in the house. I've told him so; I've told her so, and I've told 'er aunt so. And if she marries without my leave afore she's thirty she loses the seven hundred pounds 'er father left her. You've got plenty of time—ten years."

Mr. Sharp, sitting with his hands between his knees, gazed despondently at the floor. "There's a lot o' girls would jump at me," he remarked. "I've only got to hold up my little finger and they'd jump."

"That's because they've got sense," said Mr. Culpepper. "They've got the sense to prefer steadiness and humdrumness to good looks and dash. A young fellow like you earning thirty-two-and-six a week can do without good looks, and if I've told Florrie so once I have told her fifty times."

"Looks are a matter of taste," said Mr. Sharp, morosely. "Some of them girls I was speaking about just now—"

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Culpepper, hastily. "Now, look here; you go on a different tack. Take a glass of ale like a man or a couple o' glasses; smoke a cigarette or a pipe. Be like other young men. Cut a dash, and don't be a namby-pamby. After you're married you can be as miserable as you like."

Mr. Sharp, after a somewhat lengthy interval, thanked him.

"It's my birthday next Wednesday," continued Mr. Culpepper, regarding him benevolently; "come round about seven, and I'll ask you to stay to supper. That'll give you a chance. Anybody's allowed to step a bit over the mark on birthdays, and you might take a glass or two and make a speech, and be so happy and bright that they'd 'ardly know you. If you want an excuse for calling, you could bring me a box of cigars for my birthday."

"Or come in to wish you 'Many Happy Returns of the Day,'" said the thrifty Mr. Sharp.

"And don't forget to get above yourself," said Mr. Culpepper, regarding him sternly; "in a gentlemanly way, of course. Have as many glasses as you like—there's no stint about me."

"If it ever comes off," said Mr. Sharp, rising—"if I get her through you, you shan't have reason to repent it. I'll look after that."

Mr. Culpepper, whose feelings were a trifle ruffled, said that he would "look after it too." He had a faint idea that, even from his own point of view, he might have made a better selection for his niece's hand.

Mr. Sharp smoked his first cigarette the following morning, and, encouraged by the entire absence of any after-effects, purchased a pipe, which was taken up by a policeman the same evening for obstructing the public footpath in company with a metal tobacco-box three parts full.

In the matter of ale he found less difficulty. Certainly the taste was unpleasant, but, treated as medicine and gulped down quickly, it was endurable. After a day or two he even began to be critical, and on Monday evening went so far as to complain of its flatness to the wide-eyed landlord of the "Royal George."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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