

**WILLIAM
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JACOBS**

THE UNDERSTUDY

William Wymark Jacobs

The Understudy

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Содержание

THE UNDERSTUDY	5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	7

W. W. Jacobs

The Understudy / Night Watches, Part 3

THE UNDERSTUDY

"Dogs on board ship is a nuisance," said the night-watchman, gazing fiercely at the vociferous mongrel that had chased him from the deck of the Henry William; "the skipper asks me to keep an eye on the ship, and then leaves a thing like that down in the cabin."

He leaned against a pile of empty casks to recover his breath, shook his fist at the dog, and said, slowly—

Some people can't make too much of 'em. They talk about a dog's honest eyes and his faithful 'art. I 'ad a dog once, and I never saw his eyes look so honest as they did one day when 'e was sitting on a pound o' beefsteak we was 'unting high and low for.

I've known dogs to cause a lot of trouble in my time. A man as used to live in my street told me he 'ad been in jail three times because dogs follered him 'ome and wouldn't go away when he told 'em to. He said that some men would ha' kicked 'em out into the street, but he thought their little lives was far too valuable to risk in that way.

Some people used to wink when 'e talked like that, but I didn't: I remembered a dog that took a fancy to old Sam Small and Ginger Dick and Peter Russet once in just the same way.

It was one night in a little public-'ouse down Commercial Road way. They 'ad on'y been ashore a week, and, 'aving been turned out of a music-'all the night afore because a man Ginger Dick had punched in the jaw wouldn't behave 'imself, they said they'd spend the rest o' their money on beer instead. There was just the three of 'em sitting by themselves in a cosy little bar, when the door was pushed open and a big black dog came in.

He came straight up to Sam and licked his 'and. Sam was eating a arrowroot biscuit with a bit o' cheese on it at the time. He wasn't wot you'd call a partickler sort o' man, but, seeing as 'ow the dog was so careless that 'e licked the biscuit a'most as much as he did his 'and, he gave it to 'im. The dog took it in one gulp, and then he jumped up on Sam's lap and wagged his tail in 'is face for joy and thankfulness.

"He's took a fancy to you, Sam," ses Ginger.

Sam pushed the dog off on to the floor and wiped his face.

"He's a good dog, by the look of 'im," ses Peter Russet, who was country bred.

He bought a sausage-roll, and him and the dog ate it between 'em. Then Ginger Dick bought one and gave it to 'im, and by the time it was finished the dog didn't seem to know which one of 'em he loved the most.

"Wonder who he belongs to?" ses Ginger. "Is there any name on the collar, Peter?"

Peter shook his 'ead. "It's a good collar, though," he ses. "I wonder whether he's been and lost 'imself?"

Old Sam, wot was always on the look-out for money, put his beer down and wiped 'is mouth. "There might be a reward out for 'im," he ses. "I think I'll take care of 'im for a day or two, in case."

"We'll all take care of 'im," ses Ginger; "and if there's a reward we'll go shares. Mind that!"

"I found 'im," ses Sam, very disagreeable. "He came up to me as if he'd known me all 'is life."

"No," ses Ginger. "Don't you flatter yourself. He came up to you because he didn't know you, Sam."

"If he 'ad, he'd ha' bit your 'and," ses Peter Russet.

"Instead o' washing it," ses Ginger.

"Go on!" ses Sam, 'olding his breath with passion. "Go on!"

Peter opened 'is mouth, but just then another man came into the bar, and, arter ordering 'is drink, turned round and patted the dog's 'ead.

"That's a good dog; 'ow old is he?" he ses to Ginger.

"Two years last April," ses Ginger, without moving a eyelid.

"Fifth of April," ses old Sam, very quick and fierce.

"At two o'clock in the morning," ses Peter.

The man took up 'is beer and looked at 'em; then 'e took a drink and looked at 'em again. Arter which he 'ad another look at the dog.

"I could see 'e was very valuable," he ses. "I see that the moment I set eyes on 'im. Mind you don't get 'im stole."

He finished up 'is beer and went out; and he 'ad 'ardly gone afore Ginger took a piece o' thick string out of 'is pocket and fastened it to the dog's collar.

"Make yourself at 'ome, Ginger," ses Sam, very nasty.

"I'm going to," ses Ginger. "That chap knows something about dogs, and, if we can't get a reward for 'im, p'r'aps we can sell 'im."

They 'ad another arf-pint each, and then, Ginger taking 'old of the string, they went out into the street.

"Nine o'clock," ses Peter. "It's no good going 'ome yet, Ginger."

"We can 'ave a glass or two on the way," ses Ginger; "but I sha'n't feel comfortable in my mind till we've got the dog safe 'ome. P'r'aps the people wot 'ave lost it are looking for it now."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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