

**WILLIAM
WYMARK
JACOBS**

STEPPING BACKWARDS

William Wymark Jacobs
Stepping Backwards

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Stepping Backwards / Night Watches, Part 5.:*

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W. W. Jacobs

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STEPPING BACKWARDS

"Wonderful improvement," said Mr. Jack Mills. "Show 'em to me again."

Mr. Simpson took his pipe from his mouth and, parting his lips, revealed his new teeth.

"And you talk better," said Mr. Mills, taking his glass from the counter and emptying it; "you ain't got that silly lisp you used to have. What does your missis think of 'em?"

"She hasn't seen 'em yet," said the other. "I had 'em put in at dinner- time. I ate my dinner with 'em."

Mr. Mills expressed his admiration. "If it wasn't for your white hair and whiskers you'd look thirty again," he said, slowly. "How old are you?"

"Fifty-three," said his friend. "If it wasn't for being laughed at I've often thought of having my whiskers shaved off and my hair dyed black. People think I'm sixty."

"Or seventy," continued Mr. Mills. "What does it matter, people laughing? You've got a splendid head of 'air, and it would

dye beautiful."

Mr. Simpson shook his head and, ordering a couple of glasses of bitter, attacked his in silence.

"It might be done gradual," he said, after a long interval. "It don't do anybody good at the warehouse to look old."

"Make a clean job of it," counselled Mr. Mills, who was very fond of a little cheap excitement. "Get it over and done with. You've got good features, and you'd look splendid clean-shaved." Mr. Simpson smiled faintly. "Only on Wednesday the barmaid here was asking after you," pursued Mr. Mills. Mr. Simpson smiled again. "She says to me, 'Where's Gran'pa?' she says, and when I says, haughty like, 'Who do you mean?' she says, 'Father Christmas!' If you was to tell her that you are only fifty-three, she'd laugh in your face."

"Let her laugh," said the other, sourly.

"Come out and get it off," said Mr. Mills, earnestly. "There's a barber's in Bird Street; you could go in the little back room, where he charges a penny more, and get it done without anybody being a bit the wiser."

He put his hand on Mr. Simpson's shoulder, and that gentleman, with a glare in the direction of the fair but unconscious offender, rose in a hypnotized fashion and followed him out. Twice on the way to Bird Street Mr. Simpson paused and said he had altered his mind, and twice did the propulsion of Mr. Mills's right hand, and his flattering argument, make him alter it again.

It was a matter of relief to Mr. Simpson that the barber took his instructions without any show of surprise. It appeared, indeed, that an elderly man of seventy-eight had enlisted his services for a similar purpose not two months before, and had got married six weeks afterwards. Age of the bride given as twenty-four, but said to have looked older.

A snip of the scissors, and six inches of white beard fell to the floor. For the first time in thirty years Mr. Simpson felt a razor on his face. Then his hair was cut and shampooed; and an hour later he sat gazing at a dark-haired, clean-shaven man in the glass who gazed back at him with wondering eyes—a lean-jawed, good-looking man, who, in a favourable light, might pass for forty. He turned and met the admiring eyes of Mr. Mills.

"What did I tell you?" inquired the latter. "You look young enough to be your own son."

"Or grandson," said the barber, with professional pride.

Mr. Simpson got up slowly from the chair and, accompanied by the admiring Mr. Mills, passed out into the street. The evening was young, and, at his friend's suggestion, they returned to the Plume of Feathers.

"You give the order," said Mr. Mills, "and see whether she recognizes you."

Mr. Simpson obeyed.

"Don't you know him?" inquired Mr. Mills, as the barmaid turned away.

"I don't think I have that pleasure," said the girl, simpering.

"Gran'pa's eldest boy," said Mr. Mills.

"Oh!" said the girl. "Well, I hope he's a better man than his father, then?"

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Mr. Simpson, painfully conscious of his friend's regards.

"Nothing," said the girl, "nothing. Only we can all be better, can't we? He's a nice old gentleman; so simple."

"Don't know you from Adam," said Mr. Mills, as she turned away. "Now, if you ask me, I don't believe as your own missis will recognize you."

"Rubbish," said Mr. Simpson. "My wife would know me anywhere. We've been married over thirty years. Thirty years of sunshine and shadow together. You're a single man, and don't understand these things."

"P'r'aps you're right," said his friend. "But it'll be a bit of a shock to her, anyway. What do you say to me stepping round and breaking the news to her? It's a bit sudden, you know. She's expecting a white-haired old gentleman, not a black-haired boy."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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