WILLIAM WYMARK JACOBS

NIGHT WATCHES

William Wymark Jacobs
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Night Watches / Complete Series:

Содержание

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BACK TO BACK

Mrs. Scutts, concealed behind the curtain, gazed at the cab in uneasy amazement. The cabman clambered down from the box and, opening the door, stood by with his hands extended ready for any help that might be needed. A stranger was the first to alight, and, with his back towards Mrs. Scutts, seemed to be struggling with something in the cab. He placed a dangling hand about his neck and, staggering under the weight, reeled backwards supporting Mr. Scutts, whose other arm was round the neck of a third man. In a flash Mrs. Scutts was at the door.

Mr. Scutts raised his head sharply and his lips parted; then his head sank again, and he became a dead weight in the grasp of his assistants.

"He's all right," said one of them, turning to Mrs. Scutts.

A deep groan from Mr. Scutts confirmed the statement.

"What is it?" inquired his wife, anxiously.

"Just a little bit of a railway accident," said one of the strangers. "Train ran into some empty trucks. Nobody hurt—

seriously," he added, in response to a terrible and annoyed groan from Mr. Scutts.

With his feet dragging helplessly, Mr. Scutts was conveyed over his own doorstep and placed on the sofa.

"All the others went off home on their own legs," said one of the strangers, reproachfully. "He said he couldn't walk, and he wouldn't go to a hospital."

"Wanted to die at home," declared the sufferer. "I ain't going to be cut about at no 'ospitals."

The two strangers stood by watching him; then they looked at each other.

"I don't want—no—'ospitals," gasped Mr. Scutts, "I'm going to have my own doctor."

"Of course the company will pay the doctor's bill," said one of the strangers to Mrs. Scutts, "or they'll send their own doctor. I expect he'll be all right to-morrow."

"I 'ope so," said Mr. Scutts, "but I don't think it. Thank you for bringing of me 'ome."

He closed his eyes languidly, and kept them closed until the men had departed.

"Can't you walk, Bill?" inquired the tearful Mrs. Scutts.

Her husband shook his head. "You go and fetch the doctor," he said, slowly. "That new one round the corner."

"He looks such a boy," objected Mrs. Scutts.

"You go and fetch 'im," said Mr. Scutts, raising his voice. "D'ye hear!"

"But—" began his wife.

"If I get up to you, my gal," said the forgetful Mr. Scutts, "you'll know it."

"Why, I thought—" said his wife, in surprise.

Mr. Scutts raised himself on the sofa and shook his fist at her. Then, as a tribute to appearances, he sank back and groaned again. Mrs. Scutts, looking somewhat relieved, took her bonnet from a nail and departed.

The examination was long and tedious, but Mr. Scutts, beyond remarking that he felt chilly, made no complaint. He endeavoured, but in vain, to perform the tests suggested, and even did his best to stand, supported by his medical attendant. Self-preservation is the law of Nature, and when Mr. Scutts's legs and back gave way he saw to it that the doctor was underneath.

"We'll have to get you up to bed," said the latter, rising slowly and dusting himself.

Mr. Scutts, who was lying full length on the floor, acquiesced, and sent his wife for some neighbours. One of them was a professional furniture-remover, and, half-way up the narrow stairs, the unfortunate had to remind him that he was dealing with a British working man, and not a piano. Four pairs of hands deposited Mr. Scutts with mathematical precision in the centre of the bed and then proceeded to tuck him in, while Mrs. Scutts drew the sheet in a straight line under his chin.

"Don't look much the matter with 'im," said one of the assistants.

"You can't tell with a face like that," said the furniture-remover. "It's wot you might call a 'appy face. Why, he was 'arf smiling as we, carried 'im up the stairs."

"You're a liar," said Mr. Scutts, opening his eyes.

"All right, mate," said the furniture-remover; "all right. There's no call to get annoyed about it. Good old English pluck, I call it. Where d'you feel the pain?"

"All over," said Mr. Scutts, briefly.

His neighbours regarded him with sympathetic eyes, and then, led by the furniture-remover, filed out of the room on tip-toe. The doctor, with a few parting instructions, also took his departure.

"If you're not better by the morning," he said, pausing at the door, "you must send for your club doctor."

Mr. Scutts, in a feeble voice, thanked him, and lay with a twisted smile on his face listening to his wife's vivid narrative to the little crowd which had collected at the front door. She came back, followed by the next-door neighbour, Mr. James Flynn, whose offers of assistance ranged from carrying Mr. Scutts out pick-a-back when he wanted to take the air, to filling his pipe for him and fetching his beer.

"But I dare say you'll be up and about in a couple o' days," he concluded. "You wouldn't look so well if you'd got anything serious the matter; rosy, fat cheeks and–"

"That'll do," said the indignant invalid. "It's my back that's hurt, not my face."

"I know," said Mr. Flynn, nodding sagely; "but if it was hurt bad your face would be as white as that sheet-whiter."

"The doctor said as he was to be kep' quiet," remarked Mrs. Scutts, sharply.

"Right-o," said Mr. Flynn. "Ta-ta, old pal. Keep your pecker up, and if you want your back rubbed with turps, or anything of that sort, just knock on the wall."

He went, before Mr. Scutts could think of a reply suitable for an invalid and, at the same time, bristling with virility. A sinful and foolish desire to leap out of bed and help Mr. Flynn downstairs made him more rubicund than ever.

He sent for the club doctor next morning, and, pending his arrival, partook of a basin of arrowroot and drank a little beef-tea. A bottle of castor-oil and an empty pill-box on the table by the bedside added a little local colour to the scene.

"Any pain?" inquired the doctor, after an examination in which bony and very cold fingers had played a prominent part.

"Not much pain," said Mr. Scutts. "Don't seem to have no strength in my back."

"Ah!" said the doctor.

"I tried to get up this morning to go to my work," said Mr. Scutts, "but I can't stand! couldn't get out of bed."

"Fearfully upset, he was, pore dear," testified Mrs. Scutts. "He can't bear losing a day. I s'pose—I s'pose the railway company will 'ave to do something if it's serious, won't they, sir?"

"Nothing to do with me," said the doctor. "I'll put him on the

club for a few days; I expect he will be all right soon. He's got a healthy colour—a very healthy colour."

Mr. Scutts waited until he had left the house and then made a few remarks on the colour question that for impurity of English and strength of diction have probably never been surpassed.

A second visitor that day came after dinner—a tall man in a frock-coat, bearing in his hand a silk hat, which, after a careful survey of the room, he hung on a knob of the bedpost.

"Mr. Scutts?" he inquired, bowing.

"That's me," said Mr. Scutts, in a feeble voice.

"I've called from the railway company," said the stranger. "We have seen now all those who left their names and addresses on Monday afternoon, and I am glad to say that nobody was really hurt. Nobody."

Mr. Scutts, in a faint voice, said he was glad to hear it.

"Been a wonder if they had," said the other, cheerfully. "Why, even the paint wasn't knocked off the engine. The most serious damage appears to be two top-hats crushed and an umbrella broken."

He leaned over the bed-rail and laughed joyously. Mr. Scutts, through half-closed eyes, gazed at him in silent reproach.

"I don't say that one or two people didn't receive a little bit of a shock to their nerves," said the visitor, thoughtfully. "One lady even stayed in bed next day. However, I made it all right with them. The company is very generous, and although of course there is no legal obligation, they made several of them a present

of a few pounds, so that they could go away for a little change, or anything of that sort, to quiet their nerves."

Mr. Scutts, who had been listening with closed eyes, opened them languidly and said, "Oh."

"I gave one gentleman twen-ty pounds!" said the visitor, jingling some coins in his trouser-pocket. "I never saw a man so pleased and grateful in my life. When he signed the receipt for it—I always get them to sign a receipt, so that the company can see that I haven't kept the money for myself—he nearly wept with joy."

"I should think he would," said Mr. Scutts, slowly—"if he wasn't hurt."

"You're the last on my list," said the other, hastily. He produced a slip of paper from his pocket-book and placed it on the small table, with a fountain pen. Then, with a smile that was both tender and playful, he plunged his hand in his pocket and poured a stream of gold on the table.

"What do you say to thir-ty pounds?" he said, in a hushed voice. "Thirty golden goblins?"

"What for?" inquired Mr. Scutts, with a notable lack of interest.

"For—well, to go away for a day or two," said the visitor. "I find you in bed; it may be a cold or a bilious attack; or perhaps you had a little upset of the nerves when the trains kissed each other."

"I'm in bed—because—I can't walk-or stand," said Mr.

Scutts, speaking very distinctly. “I’m on my club, and if as ‘ow I get well in a day or two, there’s no reason why the company should give me any money. I’m pore, but I’m honest.”

“Take my advice as a friend,” said the other; “take the money while you can get it.”

He nodded significantly at Mr. Scutts and closed one eye. Mr. Scutts closed both of his.

“I ‘ad my back hurt in the collision,” he said, after a long pause. “I ‘ad to be helped ‘ome. So far it seems to get worse, but I ‘ope for the best.”

“Dear me,” said the visitor; “how sad! I suppose it has been coming on for a long time. Most of these back cases do. At least all the doctors say so.”

“It was done in the collision,” said Mr. Scutts, mildly but firmly. “I was as right as rain before then.”

The visitor shook his head and smiled. “Ah! you would have great difficulty in proving that,” he said, softly; “in fact, speaking as man to man, I don’t mind telling you it would be impossible. I’m afraid I’m exceeding my duty, but, as you’re the last on my list, suppose—suppose we say forty pounds. Forty! A small fortune.”

He added some more gold to the pile on the table, and gently tapped Mr. Scutts’s arm with the end of the pen.

“Good afternoon,” said the invalid.

The visitor, justly concerned at his lack of intelligence, took a seat on the edge of the bed and spoke to him as a friend and a

brother, but in vain. Mr. Scutts reminded him at last that it was medicine-time, after which, pain and weakness permitting, he was going to try to get a little sleep.

"Forty pounds!" he said to his wife, after the official had departed. "Why didn't 'e offer me a bag o' sweets?"

"It's a lot o' money," said Mrs. Scutts, wistfully.

"So's a thousand," said her husband. "I ain't going to 'ave my back broke for nothing, I can tell you. Now, you keep that mouth o' yours shut, and if I get it, you shall 'ave a new pair o' boots."

"A thousand!" exclaimed the startled Mrs. Scutts. "Have you took leave of your senses, or what?"

"I read a case in the paper where a man got it," said Mr. Scutts. "He 'ad his back 'urt too, pore chap. How would you like to lay on your back all your life for a thousand pounds?"

"Will you 'ave to lay abed all your life?" inquired his wife, staring.

"Wait till I get the money," said Mr. Scutts; "then I might be able to tell you better."

He gazed wistfully at the window. It was late October, but the sun shone and the air was clear. The sound of traffic and cheerful voices ascended from the little street. To Mr. Scutts it all seemed to be a part of a distant past.

"If that chap comes round to-morrow and offers me five hundred," he said, slowly, "I don't know as I won't take it. I'm sick of this mouldy bed."

He waited expectantly next day, but nothing happened, and

after a week of bed he began to realize that the job might be a long one. The monotony, to a man of his active habits, became almost intolerable, and the narrated adventures of Mr. James Flynn, his only caller, filled him with an uncontrollable longing to be up and doing.

The fine weather went, and Mr. Scutts, in his tumbled bed, lay watching the rain beating softly on the window-panes. Then one morning he awoke to the darkness of a London fog.

"It gets worse and worse," said Mrs. Scutts, as she returned home in the afternoon with a relish for his tea. "Can't see your 'and before your face."

Mr. Scutts looked thoughtful. He ate his tea in silence, and after he had finished lit his pipe and sat up in bed smoking.

"Penny for your thoughts," said his wife.

"I'm going out," said Mr. Scutts, in a voice that defied opposition. "I'm going to 'ave a walk, and when I'm far enough away I'm going to 'ave one or two drinks. I believe this fog is sent a-purpose to save my life."

Mrs. Scutts remonstrated, but in vain, and at half-past six the invalid, with his cap over his eyes and a large scarf tied round the lower part of his face, listened for a moment at his front door and then disappeared in the fog.

Left to herself, Mrs. Scutts returned to the bedroom and, poking the tiny fire into a blaze, sat and pondered over the willfulness of men.

She was awakened from a doze by a knocking at the street-

door. It was just eight o'clock, and, inwardly congratulating her husband on his return to common sense and home, she went down and opened it. Two tall men in silk hats entered the room.

"Mrs. Scutts?" said one of them.

Mrs. Scutts, in a dazed fashion, nodded.

"We have come to see your husband," said the intruder. "I am a doctor."

The panic-stricken Mrs. Scutts tried in vain to think.

"He-he's asleep," she said, at last.

"Doesn't matter," said the doctor.

"Not a bit," said his companion.

"You—you can't see him," protested Mrs. Scutts. "He ain't to be seen."

"He'd be sorry to miss me," said the doctor, eyeing her keenly as she stood on guard by the inner door. "I suppose he's at home?"

"Of course," said Mrs. Scutts, stammering and flushing. "Why, the pore man can't stir from his bed."

"Well, I'll just peep in at the door, then," said the doctor. "I won't wake him. You can't object to that. If you do—"

Mrs. Scutts's head began to swim. "I'll go up and see whether he's awake," she said.

She closed the door on them and stood with her hand to her throat, thinking. Then, instead of going upstairs, she passed into the yard and, stepping over the fence, opened Mr. Flynn's back door.

"Halloa!" said that gentleman, who was standing in the

scullery removing mud from his boots. “What’s up?”

In a frenzied gabble Mrs. Scutts told him. “You must be ‘im,” she said, clutching him by the coat and dragging him towards the door. “They’ve never seen ‘im, and they won’t know the difference.”

“But—” exclaimed the astonished James.

“Quick!” she said, sharply. “Go into the back room and undress, then nip into his room and get into bed. And mind, be fast asleep all the time.”

Still holding the bewildered Mr. Flynn by the coat, she led him into the house and waved him upstairs, and stood below listening until a slight creaking of the bed announced that he had obeyed orders. Then she entered the parlour.

“He’s fast asleep,” she said, softly; “and mind, I won’t ‘ave him disturbed. It’s the first real sleep he’s ‘ad for nearly a week. If you promise not to wake ‘im you may just have a peep.”

“We won’t disturb him,” said the doctor, and, followed by his companion, noiselessly ascended the stairs and peeped into the room. Mr. Flynn was fast asleep, and not a muscle moved as the two men approached the bed on tip-toe and stood looking at him. The doctor turned after a minute and led the way out of the room.

“We’ll call again,” he said, softly.

“Yes, sir,” said Mrs. Scutts. “When?”

The doctor and his companion exchanged glances. “I’m very busy just at present,” he said, slowly. “We’ll look in some time and take our chance of catching him awake.”

Mrs. Scutts bowed them out, and in some perplexity returned to Mr. Flynn. "I don't like the look of 'em," she said, shaking her head. "You'd better stay in bed till Bill comes 'ome in case they come back."

"Right-o," said the obliging Mr. Flynn. "Just step in and tell my landlady I'm 'aving a chat with Bill."

He lit his pipe and sat up in bed smoking until a knock at the front door at half-past eleven sent him off to sleep again. Mrs. Scutts, who was sitting downstairs, opened it and admitted her husband.

"All serene?" he inquired. "What are you looking like that for? What's up?"

He sat quivering with alarm and rage as she told him, and then, mounting the stairs with a heavy tread, stood gazing in helpless fury at the slumbering form of Mr. James Flynn.

"Get out o' my bed," he said at last, in a choking voice.

"What, Bill!" said Mr. Flynn, opening his eyes.

"Get out o' my bed," repeated the other. "You've made a nice mess of it between you. It's a fine thing if a man can't go out for 'arf a pint without coming home and finding all the riffraff of the neighbourhood in 'is bed."

"'Ow's the pore back, Bill?" inquired Mr. Flynn, with tenderness.

Mr. Scutts gurgled at him. "Outside!" he said as soon as he could get his breath.

"Bill," said the voice of Mrs. Scutts, outside the door.

"Halloa," growled her husband.

"He mustn't go," said Mrs. Scutts. "Those gentlemen are coming again, and they think he is you."

"WHAT!" roared the infuriated Mr. Scutts.

"Don't you see? It's me what's got the pore back now, Bill," said Mr. Flynn. "You can't pass yourself off as me, Bill; you ain't good-looking enough."

Mr. Scutts, past speech, raised his clenched fists to the ceiling.

"He'll 'ave to stay in your bed," continued the voice of Mrs. Scutts. "He's got a good 'art, and I know he'll do it; won't you, Jim?"

Mr. Flynn pondered. "Tell my landlady in the morning that I've took your back room," he said. "What a fortunit thing it is I'm out o' work. What are you walking up and down like that for, Bill? Back coming on agin?"

"Then o' course," pursued the voice of Mrs. Scutts, in meditative accents, "there's the club doctor and the other gentleman that knows Bill. They might come at any moment. There's got to be two Bills in bed, so that if one party comes one Bill can nip into the back room, and if the other Bill—party, I mean—comes, the other Bill—you know what I mean!"

Mr. Scutts swore himself faint.

"That's 'ow it is, mate," said Mr. Flynn. "It's no good standing there saying your little piece of poetry to yourself. Take off your clo'es and get to bed like a little man. Now! now! Naughty! Naughty!"

"P'r'aps I oughtn't to 'ave let 'em up, Bill," said his wife; "but I was afraid they'd smell a rat if I didn't. Besides, I was took by surprise."

"You get off to bed," said Mr. Scutts. "Get off to bed while you're safe."

"And get a good night's rest," added the thoughtful Mr. Flynn. "If Bill's back is took bad in the night I'll look after it."

Mr. Scutts turned a threatening face on him. "For two pins —" he began.

"For two pins I'll go back 'ome and stay there," said Mr. Flynn.

He put one muscular leg out of bed, and then, at the earnest request of Mr. Scutts, put it back again. In a few simple, manly words the latter apologized, by putting all the blame on Mrs. Scutts, and, removing his clothes, got into bed.

Wrapped in bedclothes, they passed the following day listening for knocks at the door and playing cards. By evening both men were weary, and Mr. Scutts made a few pointed remarks concerning dodging doctors and deceitful visitors to which Mr. Flynn listened in silent approval.

"They mightn't come for a week," he said, dismally. "It's all right for you, but where do I come in? Halves?"

Mr. Scutts had a rush of blood to the head.

"You leave it to me, mate," he said, controlling himself by an effort. "If I get ten quid, say, you shall have 'arf."

"And suppose you get more?" demanded the other.

"We'll see," said Mr. Scutts, vaguely.

Mr. Flynn returned to the charge next day, but got no satisfaction. Mr. Scutts preferred to talk instead of the free board and lodging his friend was getting. On the subject of such pay for such work he was almost eloquent.

"I'll bide my time," said Mr. Flynn, darkly. "Treat me fair and I'll treat you fair."

His imprisonment came to an end on the fourth day. There was a knock at the door, and the sound of men's voices, followed by the hurried appearance of Mrs. Scutts.

"It's Jim's lot," she said, in a hurried whisper. "I've just come up to get the room ready."

Mr. Scutts took his friend by the hand, and after warmly urging him not to forget the expert instructions he had received concerning his back, slipped into the back room, and, a prey to forebodings, awaited the result.

"Well, he looks better," said the doctor, regarding Mr. Flynn.

"Much better," said his companion.

Mrs. Scutts shook her head. "His pore back don't seem no better, sir," she said in a low voice. "Can't you do something for it?"

"Let me have a look at it," said the doctor. "Undo your shirt."

Mr. Flynn, with slow fingers, fumbled with the button at his neck and looked hard at Mrs. Scutts.

"She can't bear to see me suffer," he said, in a feeble voice, as she left the room.

He bore the examination with the fortitude of an early

Christian martyr. In response to inquiries he said he felt as though the mainspring of his back had gone.

"How long since you walked?" inquired the doctor.

"Not since the accident," said Mr. Flynn, firmly.

"Try now," said the doctor.

Mr. Flynn smiled at him reproachfully.

"You can't walk because you think you can't," said the doctor; "that is all. You'll have to be encouraged the same way that a child is. I should like to cure you, and I think I can."

He took a small canvas bag from the other man and opened it. "Forty pounds," he said. "Would you like to count it?"

Mr. Flynn's eyes shone.

"It is all yours," said the doctor, "if you can walk across the room and take it from that gentleman's hand."

"Honour bright?" asked Mr. Flynn, in tremulous tones, as the other man held up the bag and gave him an encouraging smile.

"Honour bright," said the doctor.

With a spring that nearly broke the bed, Mr. Flynn quitted it and snatched the bag, and at the same moment Mrs. Scutts, impelled by a maddened arm, burst into the room.

"Your back!" she moaned. "It'll kill you Get back to bed."

"I'm cured, lovey," said Mr. Flynn, simply.

"His back is as strong as ever," said the doctor, giving it a thump.

Mr. Flynn, who had taken his clothes from a chair and was hastily dressing himself, assented.

"But if you'll wait 'arf a tick I'll walk as far as the corner with you," he said, quickly. "I'd like to make sure it's all right."

He paused at the foot of the stairs and, glancing up at the palid and murderous face of Mr. Scutts, which protruded from the back bedroom, smiled at him rapturously. Then, with a lordly air, he tossed him five pieces of gold.

KEEPING WATCH

Human natur'!" said the night-watchman, gazing fixedly at a pretty girl in a passing waterman's skiff. "Human natur'!"

He sighed, and, striking a match, applied it to his pipe and sat smoking thoughtfully.

"The young fellow is pretending that his arm is at the back of her by accident," he continued; "and she's pretending not to know that it's there. When he's allowed to put it round 'er waist whenever he wishes, he won't want to do it. She's artful enough to know that, and that's why they are all so stand-offish until the thing is settled. She'll move forward 'arf an inch presently, and 'arf a minute arterwards she'll lean back agin without thinking. She's a nice-looking gal, and what she can see in a tailor's dummy like that, I can't think."

He leaned back on his box and, folding his arms, emitted a cloud of smoke.

"Human natur's a funny thing. I've seen a lot of it in my time, and if I was to 'ave my life all over agin I expect I should be just as silly as them two in the skiff. I've known the time when I would spend money as free over a gal as I would over myself. I on'y wish I'd got all the money now that I've spent on peppermint lozenges.

"That gal in the boat reminds me o' one I used to know a few years ago. Just the same innercent baby look—a look as if butter wouldn't melt in 'er mouth—and a artful disposition that made

me sorry for 'er sects.

"She used to come up to this wharf once a week in a schooner called the Belle. Her father, Cap'n Butt, was a widow-man, and 'e used to bring her with 'im, partly for company and partly because 'e could keep 'is eye on her. Nasty eye it, was, too, when he 'appened to be out o' temper.

"I'd often took a bit o' notice o' the gal; just giving 'er a kind smile now and then as she sat on deck, and sometimes—when 'er father wasn't looking—she'd smile back. Once, when 'e was down below, she laughed right out. She was afraid of 'im, and by and by I noticed that she daren't even get off the ship and walk up and down the wharf without asking 'im. When she went out 'e was with 'er, and, from one or two nasty little snacks I 'appened to overhear when the skipper thought I was too far away, I began to see that something was up.

"It all came out one evening, and it only came out because the skipper wanted my help. I was standing leaning on my broom to get my breath back arter a bit o' sweeping, when he came up to me, and I knew at once, by the nice way 'e spoke, that he wanted me to do something for 'im.

"'Come and 'ave a pint, Bill,' he ses.

"I put my broom agin the wall, and we walked round to the Bull's Head like a couple o' brothers. We 'ad two pints apiece, and then he put his 'and on my shoulder and talked as man to man.

"'I'm in a little bit o' difficulty about that gal o' mine,' he ses, passing me his baccy-box. 'Six months ago she dropped a letter

out of 'er pocket, and I'm blest if it wasn't from a young man. A young man!'

"'You sur-prise me,' I ses, meaning to be sarcastic.

"'I surprised her,' he ses, looking very fierce. 'I went to 'er box and I found a pile of 'em-a pile of 'em-tied up with a piece o' pink ribbon. And a photygraph of my lord. And of all the narrer-chested, weak-eyed, slack-baked, spindly-legged sons of a gun you ever saw in your life, he is the worst. If I on'y get my 'ands on him I'll choke 'im with his own feet.'

"He washed 'is mouth out with a drop o' beer and stood scowling at the floor.

"'Arter I've choked 'im I'll twist his neck,' he ses. 'If he 'ad on'y put his address on 'is letters, I'd go round and do it now. And my daughter, my only daughter, won't tell me where he lives.'

"'She ought to know better,' I ses.

"He took hold o' my 'and and shook it. 'You've got more sense than one 'ud think to look at you, Bill,' he ses, not thinking wot he was saying. 'You see wot a mess I'm in.'

"'Yes,' I ses.

"'I'm a nurse, that's wot I am,' he ses, very savage. 'Just a nursemaid. I can't move 'and or foot without that gal. 'Ow'd you like it, yourself, Bill?'

"'It must be very orkard for you,' I ses. 'Very orkard indeed.'

"'Orkard!' he ses; 'it's no name for it, Bill. I might as well be a Sunday-school teacher, and ha' done with it. I never 'ad such a dull time in all my life. Never. And the worst of it is, it's spiling

my temper. And all because o' that narrer-eyed, red-chested—you know wot I mean!'

"He took another mouthful o' beer, and then he took 'old of my arm. 'Bill,' he ses, very earnest, 'I want you to do me a favour.'

"'Go ahead,' I ses.

"'I've got to meet a pal at Charing Cross at ha'-past seven,' he ses; 'and we're going to make a night of it. I've left Winnie in charge o' the cook, and I've told 'im plain that, if she ain't there when I come back, I'll skin 'im alive. Now, I want you to watch 'er, too. Keep the gate locked, and don't let anybody in you don't know. Especially that monkey-faced imitation of a man. Here 'e is. That's his likeness.'

"He pulled a photygraph out of 'is coatpocket and 'anded it to me.

"'That's 'im,' he ses. 'Fancy a gal getting love-letters from a thing like that! And she was on'y twenty last birthday. Keep your eye on 'er, Bill, and don't let 'er out of your sight. You're worth two o' the cook.'

"He finished 'is beer, and, cuddling my arm, stepped back to the wharf. Miss Butt was sitting on the cabin skylight reading a book, and old Joe, the cook, was standing near 'er pretending to swab the decks with a mop.

"'I've got to go out for a little while—on business,' ses the skipper. 'I don't s'pose I shall be long, and, while I'm away, Bill and the cook will look arter you.'

"Miss Butt wrinkled up 'er shoulders.

"'The gate'll be locked, and you're not to leave the wharf. D'ye 'ear?'

"The gal wriggled 'er shoulders agin and went on reading, but she gave the cook a look out of 'er innercent baby eyes that nearly made 'im drop the mop.

"'Them's my orders,' ses the skipper, swelling his chest and looking round, 'to everybody. You know wot'll 'appen to you, Joe, if things ain't right when I come back. Come along, Bill, and lock the gate arter me. An' mind, for your own sake, don't let anything 'appen to that gal while I'm away.'

"'Wot time'll you be back?' I ses, as 'e stepped through the wicket.

"'Not afore twelve, and p'r'aps a good bit later,' he ses, smiling all over with 'appiness. 'But young slab-chest don't know I'm out, and Winnie thinks I'm just going out for 'arf an hour, so it'll be all right. So long.'

"I watched 'im up the road, and I must say I began to wish I 'adn't taken the job on. Arter all, I 'ad on'y had two pints and a bit o' flattery, and I knew wot 'ud 'appen if anything went wrong. Built like a bull he was, and fond o' using his strength. I locked the wicket careful, and, putting the key in my pocket, began to walk up and down the wharf.

"For about ten minutes the gal went on reading and didn't look up once. Then, as I passed, she gave me a nice smile and shook 'er little fist at the cook, wot 'ad got 'is back towards 'er. I smiled back, o' course, and by and by she put her book down

and climbed on to the side o' the ship and held out her 'and for me to 'elp her ashore.

"'I'm so tired of the ship,' she ses, in a soft voice; 'it's like a prison. Don't you get, tired of the wharf?'

"'Sometimes,' I ses; 'but it's my dooty.'

"'Yes,' she ses. 'Yes, of course. But you're a big, strong man, and you can put up with things better.'

"She gave a little sigh, and we walked up and down for a time without saying anything.

"'And it's all father's foolishness,' she ses, at last; 'that's wot makes it so tiresome. I can't help a pack of silly young men writing to me, can I?'

"'No, I s'pose not,' I ses.

"'Thank you,' she ses, putting 'er little 'and on my arm. 'I knew that you were sensible. I've often watched you when I've been sitting alone on the schooner, longing for somebody to speak to. And I'm a good judge of character. I can read you like a book.'

"She turned and looked up at me. Beautiful blue eyes she'd got, with long, curling lashes, and teeth like pearls.

"'Father is so silly,' she ses, shaking her 'ead and looking down; 'and it's so unreasonable, because, as a matter of fact, I don't like young men. Oh, I beg your pardon, I didn't mean that. I didn't mean to be rude.'

"'Rude?' I ses, staring at her.

"'Of course it was a rude thing for me to say,' she ses, smiling; 'because you are still a young man yourself.'

"I shook my 'ead. 'Youngish,' I ses.

"'Young!' she ses, stamping 'er little foot.

"She gave me another look, and this time 'er blue eyes seemed large and solemn. She walked along like one in a dream, and twice she tripped over the planks and would 'ave fallen if I hadn't caught 'er round the waist.

"'Thank you,' she ses. 'I'm very clumsy. How strong your arm is!'

"We walked up and down agin, and every time we went near the edge of the jetty she 'eld on to my arm for fear of stumbling agin. And there was that silly cook standing about on the schooner on tip-toe and twisting his silly old neck till I wonder it didn't twist off.

"'Wot a beautiful evening it is!' she ses, at last, in a low voice. 'I 'ope father isn't coming back early. Do you know wot time he is coming home?'

"'About twelve,' I ses; 'but don't tell 'im I told you so.'

"'O' course not,' she ses, squeezing my arm. 'Poor father! I hope he is enjoying himself as much as I am.'

"We walked down to the jetty agin arter that, and sat side by side looking acrost the river. And she began to talk about Life, and wot a strange thing it was; and 'ow the river would go on flowing down to the sea thousands and thousands o' years arter we was both dead and forgotten. If it hadn't ha' been for her little 'ead leaning agin my shoulder I should have 'ad the creeps.

"'Let's go down into the cabin,' she ses, at last, with a little

shiver; 'it makes me melancholy sitting here and thinking of the "might-have-beens."'

"I got up first and 'elped her up, and, arter both staring hard at the cook, wot didn't seem to know 'is place, we went down into the cabin. It was a comfortable little place, and arter she 'ad poured me out a glass of 'er father's whisky, and filled my pipe for me, I wouldn't ha' changed places with a king. Even when the pipe wouldn't draw I didn't mind.

"'May I write a letter?' she ses, at last.

"'Sartainly,' I ses.

"She got out her pen and ink and paper, and wrote. 'I sha'n't be long,' she ses, looking up and nibbling 'er pen. 'It's a letter to my dressmaker; she promised my dress by six o'clock this afternoon, and I am just writing to tell her that if I don't have it by ten in the morning she can keep it.'

"'Quite right,' I ses; 'it's the on'y way to get things done.'

"'It's my way,' she ses, sticking the letter in an envelope and licking it down. 'Nice name, isn't it?'

"She passed it over to me, and I read the name and address: 'Miss Minnie Miller, 17, John Street, Mile End Road.'

"'That'll wake her up,' She ses, smiling. 'Will you ask Joe to take it for me?'

"'He—he's on guard,' I ses, smiling back at 'er and shaking my 'ead.

"'I know,' she ses, in a low voice. 'But I don't want any guard —only you. I don't like guards that peep down skylights.'

"I looked up just in time to see Joe's 'ead disappear. Then I nipped up, and arter I 'ad told 'im part of wot I thought about 'im I gave 'im the letter and told 'im to sheer off.

"'The skipper told me to stay 'ere,' he ses, looking obstinate.

"'You do as you're told,' I ses. 'I'm in charge, and I take full responsibility. I shall lock the gate arter you. Wot are you worrying about?'

"'And here's a shilling, Joe, for a bus fare,' ses the gal, smiling. 'You can keep the change.'

"Joe took off 'is cap and scratched 'is silly bald 'ead.

"'Come on,' I ses; 'it's a letter to a dressmaker. A letter that must go to-night.'

"'Else it's no use,' ses the gal. 'You don't know 'ow important it is.'

"'All right,' ses Joe. ''Ave it your own way. So long as you don't tell the skipper I don't mind. If anything 'appens you'll catch it too, Bill.'

"He climbed ashore, and I follered 'im to the gate and unlocked it. He was screwing up 'is eye ready for a wink, but I give 'im such a look that he thought better of it, and, arter rubbing his eye with 'is finger as though he 'ad got a bit o' dust in it, he went off.

"I locked the gate and went back to the cabin, and for some time we sat talking about fathers and the foolish ideas they got into their 'eads, and things o' that sort. So far as I remember, I 'ad two more goes o' whisky and one o' the skipper's cigars, and

I was just thinking wot a beautiful thing it was to be alive and 'ealthy and in good spirits, talking to a nice gal that understood wot you said a'most afore you said it, when I 'eard three blows on a whistle.

"'Wot's that?' I ses, starting up. 'Police whistle?'

"'I don't think so,' ses Miss Butt, putting her 'and on my shoulder. 'Sit down and stay where you are. I don't want you to get hurt, if it is. Let somebody I don't like go.'

"I sat down agin and listened, but there was no more whistling.

"'Boy in the street, I expect,' ses the gal, going into the state-room. 'Oh, I've got something to show you. Wait a minute.'

"I 'eard her moving about, and then she comes back into the cabin.

"'I can't find the key of my box,' she ses, 'and it's in there. I wonder whether you've got a key that would open it. It's a padlock.'

"I put my 'and in my pocket and pulled out my keys. 'Shall I come and try?' I ses.

"'No, thank you,' she ses, taking the keys. 'This looks about the size. What key is it?'

"'It's the key of the gate,' I ses, 'but I don't suppose it'll fit.'

"She went back into the state-room agin, and I 'eard her fumbling at a lock. Then she came back into the cabin, breathing rather hard, and stood thinking.

"'I've just remembered,' she ses, pinching her chin. 'Yes!'

"She stepped to the door and went up the companion-ladder,

and the next moment I 'eard a sliding noise and a key turn in a lock. I jumped to the foot of the ladder and, 'ardly able to believe my senses, saw that the hatch was closed. When I found that it was locked too, you might ha' knocked me down with a feather.

"I went down to the cabin agin, and, standing on the locker, pushed the skylight up with my 'ead and tried to lookout. I couldn't see the gate, but I 'eard voices and footsteps, and a little while arterwards I see that gal coming along the wharf arm in arm with the young man she 'ad told me she didn't like, and dancing for joy. They climbed on to the schooner, and then they both stooped down with their hands on their knees and looked at me.

"'Wot is it?' ses the young man, grinning.

"'It's a watchman,' ses the gal. 'It's here to take charge of the wharf, you know, and see that nobody comes on.'

"'We ought to ha' brought some buns for it,' ses the young man; 'look at it opening its mouth.'

"They both laughed fit to kill themselves, but I didn't move a muscle.

"'You open the companion,' I ses, 'or it'll be the worse for you. D'ye hear? Open it!'

"'Oh, Alfred,' ses the gal, 'he's losing 'is temper. Wotever shall we do?'

"'I don't want no more nonsense,' I ses, trying to fix 'er with my eye. 'If you don't let me out it'll be the worse for you.'

"'Don't you talk to my young lady like that,' ses the young man.

"'Your young lady?' I ses. 'H'mm! You should ha' seen 'er 'arf

an hour ago.'

"The gal looked at me steady for a moment.

"'He put 'is nasty fat arm round my waist, Alfred,' she ses.

"'Wot!' ses the young man, squeaking. 'WOT!'

"He snatched up the mop wot that nasty, untidy cook 'ad left leaning agin the side, and afore I 'ad any idea of wot 'e was up to he shoved the beastly thing straight in my face.

"'Next time,' he ses, 'I'll tear you limb from limb!'

"I couldn't speak for a time, and when I could 'e stopped me with the mop agin. It was like a chained lion being tormented by a monkey. I stepped down on to the cabin floor, and then I told 'em both wot I thought of 'em.

"'Come along, Alfred,' ses the gal, 'else the cook'll be back before we start.'

"'He's all right,' ses the young man. 'Minnie's looking arter him. When I left he'd got 'arf a bottle of whisky in front of 'im.'

"'Still, we may as well go,' ses Miss Butt. 'It seems a shame to keep the cab waiting.'

"'All right,' he ses. 'I just want to give this old chump one more lick with the mop and then we'll go.'

"He peeped down the skylight and waited, but I kept quite quiet, with my back towards 'im.

"'Come along,' ses Miss Butt.

"'I'm coming,' he ses. 'Hi! You down there! When the cap'n comes back tell 'im that I'm taking Miss Butt to an aunt o' mine in the country. And tell'im that in a week or two he'll 'ave the

largest and nicest piece of wedding-cake he ‘as ever ‘ad in his life. So long!’

“‘Good-bye, watchman,’ ses the gal.

“They moved off without another word—from them, I mean. I heard the wicket slam and then I ‘eard a cab drive off over the stones. I couldn’t believe it at first. I couldn’t believe a gal with such beautiful blue eyes could be so hard-’earted, and for a long time I stood listening and hoping to ‘ear the cab come back. Then I stepped up to the companion and tried to shift it with my shoulders.

“I went back to the cabin at last, and arter lighting the lamp I ‘ad another sup o’ the skipper’s whisky to clear my ‘ead, and sat down to try and think wot tale I was to tell ‘im. I sat for pretty near three hours without thinking of one, and then I ‘eard the crew come on to the wharf.

“They was a bit startled when they saw my ‘ead at the skylight, and then they all started at the same time asking me wot I was doing. I told ‘em to let me out fust and then I’d tell ‘em, and one of ‘em ‘ad just stepped round to the companion when the skipper come on to the wharf and stepped aboard. He stooped down and peeped at me through the skylight as though he couldn’t believe ‘is eyesight, and then, arter sending the hands for’ard and telling ‘em to stay there, wotever ‘appened, he unlocked the companion and came down.”

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."

They 'ad another drink farther on, and a man in the bar took such a fancy to the dog that 'e offered Ginger five shillings for it and drinks round.

"That shows 'ow valuable it is," ses Peter Russet when they got outside. "Hold that string tight, Ginger. Wot's the matter?"

"He won't come," ses Ginger, tugging at the string. "Come on, old chap! Good dog! Come on!"

He stood there pulling at the dog, wot was sitting down and being dragged along on its stummick. He didn't know its name, but 'e called it a few things that seemed to ease 'is mind, and then he 'anded over the string to Sam, wot 'ad been asking for it, and told 'im to see wot he could do.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.