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FRIENDS IN NEED

William Wymark Jacobs

Friends in Need

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W. W. Jacobs

Friends in Need / Ship's Company, Part 2

FRIENDS IN NEED

R. Joseph Gibbs finished his half-pint in the private bar of the Red Lion with the slowness of a man unable to see where the next was coming from, and, placing the mug on the counter, filled his pipe from a small paper of tobacco and shook his head slowly at his companions.

"First I've 'ad since ten o'clock this morning," he said, in a hard voice.

"Cheer up," said Mr. George Brown.

"It can't go on for ever," said Bob Kidd, encouragingly.

"All I ask for—is work," said Mr. Gibbs, impressively. "Not slavery, mind yer, but work."

"It's rather difficult to distinguish," said Mr. Brown.

"Specially for some people," added Mr. Kidd.

"Go on," said Mr. Gibbs, gloomily. "Go on. Stand a man 'arf a pint, and then go and hurt 'is feelings. Twice yesterday I wondered to myself what it would feel like to make a hole in the water."

"Lots o' chaps do do it," said Mr. Brown, musingly.

"And leave their wives and families to starve," said Mr. Gibbs, icily.

"Very often the wife is better off," said his friend. "It's one mouth less for her to feed. Besides, she gen'rally gets something. When pore old Bill went they 'ad a Friendly Lead at the 'King's Head' and got his missis pretty nearly seventeen pounds."

"And I believe we'd get more than that for your old woman," said Mr. Kidd. "There's no kids, and she could keep 'erself easy. Not that I want to encourage you to make away with yourself."

Mr. Gibbs scowled and, tilting his mug, peered gloomily into the interior.

"Joe won't make no 'ole in the water," said Mr. Brown, wagging his head. "If it was beer, now—"

Mr. Gibbs turned and, drawing himself up to five feet three, surveyed the speaker with an offensive stare.

"I don't see why he need make a 'ole in anything," said Mr. Kidd, slowly. "It 'ud do just as well if we said he 'ad. Then we could pass the hat round and share it."

"Divide it into three halves and each 'ave one," said Mr. Brown, nodding; "but 'ow is it to be done?"

"'Ave some more beer and think it over," said Mr. Kidd, pale with excitement. "Three pints, please."

He and Mr. Brown took up their pints, and nodded at each other. Mr. Gibbs, toying idly with the handle of his, eyed them carefully. "Mind, I'm not promising anything," he said, slowly. "Understand, I ain't a-committing of myself by drinking this 'ere pint."

"You leave it to me, Joe," said Mr. Kidd.

Mr. Gibbs left it to him after a discussion in which pints played a persuasive part; with the result that Mr. Brown, sitting in the same bar the next evening with two or three friends, was rudely disturbed by the cyclonic entrance of Mr. Kidd, who, dripping with water, sank on a bench and breathed heavily.

"What's up? What's the matter?" demanded several voices.

"It's Joe—poor Joe Gibbs," said Mr. Kidd. "I was on Smith's wharf shifting that lighter to the next berth, and, o' course Joe must come aboard to help. He was shoving her off with 'is foot when—"

He broke off and shuddered and, accepting a mug of beer, pending the arrival of some brandy that a sympathizer had ordered, drank it slowly.

"It all 'appened in a flash," he said, looking round. "By the time I 'ad run round to his end he was just going down for the third time. I hung over the side and grabbed at 'im, and his collar and tie came off in my hand. Nearly went in, I did."

He held out the collar and tie; and approving notice was taken of the fact that he was soaking wet from the top of his head to the middle button of his waistcoat.

"Pore chap!" said the landlord, leaning over the bar. "He was in 'ere only 'arf an hour ago, standing in this very bar."

"Well, he's 'ad his last drop o' beer," said a carman in a chastened voice.

"That's more than anybody can say," said the landlord, sharply. "I never heard anything against the man; he's led a good life so far as I know, and 'ow can we tell that he won't 'ave beer?"

He made Mr. Kidd a present of another small glass of brandy.

"He didn't leave any family, did he?" he inquired, as he passed it over.

"Only a wife," said Mr. Kidd; "and who's to tell that pore soul I don't know. She fair doated on 'im. 'Ow she's to live I don't know. I shall do what I can for 'er."

"Same 'ere," said Mr. Brown, in a deep voice.

"Something ought to be done for 'er," said the carman, as he went out.

"First thing is to tell the police," said the landlord. "They ought to know; then p'r'aps one of them'll tell her. It's what they're paid for."

"It's so awfully sudden. I don't know where I am 'ardly," said Mr. Kidd. "I don't believe she's got a penny-piece in the 'ouse. Pore Joe 'ad a lot o' pals. I wonder whether we could'nt get up something for her."

"Go round and tell the police first," said the landlord, pursing up his lips thoughtfully. "We can talk about that later on."

Mr. Kidd thanked him warmly and withdrew, accompanied by Mr. Brown. Twenty minutes later they left the station, considerably relieved at the matter-of-fact way in which the police had received the tidings, and, hurrying across London Bridge, made their way towards a small figure supporting its back against a post in the Borough market.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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