

**WILLIAM
WYMARK
JACOBS**

KEEPING WATCH

William Wymark Jacobs
Keeping Watch

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W. W. Jacobs

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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!'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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