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THE VIGIL

William Wymark Jacobs

The Vigil

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W. W. Jacobs

The Vigil / Night Watches, Part 8

THE VIGIL

"I'm the happiest man in the world," said Mr. Farrer, in accents of dreamy tenderness.

Miss Ward sighed. "Wait till father comes in," she said.

Mr. Farrer peered through the plants which formed a welcome screen to the window and listened with some uneasiness. He was waiting for the firm, springy step that should herald the approach of ex-Sergeant-Major Ward. A squeeze of Miss Ward's hand renewed his courage.

"Perhaps I had better light the lamp," said the girl, after a long pause. "I wonder where mother's got to?"

"She's on my side, at any rate," said Mr. Farrer.

"Poor mother!" said the girl. "She daren't call her soul her own. I expect she's sitting in her bedroom with the door shut. She hates unpleasantness. And there's sure to be some."

"So do I," said the young man, with a slight shiver. "But why should there be any? He doesn't want you to keep single all your life, does he?"

"He'd like me to marry a soldier," said Miss Ward. "He says that the young men of the present day are too soft. The only thing he thinks about is courage and strength."

She rose and, placing the lamp on the table, removed the chimney, and then sought round the room for the matches. Mr. Farrer, who had two boxes in his pocket, helped her.

They found a box at last on the mantelpiece, and Mr. Farrer steadied her by placing one arm round her waist while she lit the lamp. A sudden exclamation from outside reminded them that the blind was not yet drawn, and they sprang apart in dismay as a grizzled and upright old warrior burst into the room and confronted them.

"Pull that blind down!" he roared. "Not you," he continued, as Mr. Farrer hastened to help. "What do you mean by touching my blind? What do you mean by embracing my daughter? Eh? Why don't you answer?"

"We—we are going to be married," said Mr. Farrer, trying to speak boldly.

The sergeant-major drew himself up, and the young man gazed in dismay at a chest which seemed as though it would never cease expanding.

"Married!" exclaimed the sergeant-major, with a grim laugh. "Married to a little tame bunny-rabbit! Not if I know it. Where's your mother?" he demanded, turning to the girl.

"Upstairs," was the reply.

Her father raised his voice, and a nervous reply came from above. A minute later Mrs. Ward, pale of cheek, entered the room.

"Here's fine goings-on!" said the sergeant major, sharply. "I go for a little walk, and when I come back this—this infernal cockroach has got its arm round my daughter's waist. Why don't you look after her? Do you know anything about it?"

His wife shook her head.

"Five feet four and about thirty round the chest, and wants to marry my daughter!" said the sergeant-major, with a sneer. "Eh? What's that? What did you say? What?"

"I said that's a pretty good size for a cockroach," murmured Mr. Farrer, defiantly. "Besides, size isn't everything. If it was, you'd be a general instead of only a sergeant-major."

"You get out of my house," said the other, as soon as he could get his breath. "Go on Sharp with it."

"I'm going," said the mortified Mr. Farrer. "I'm sorry if I was rude. I came on purpose to see you to-night. Bertha—Miss Ward, I mean—told me your ideas, but I couldn't believe her. I said you'd got more common sense than to object to a man just because he wasn't a soldier."

"I want a man for a son-in-law," said the other. "I don't say he's got to be a soldier."

"Just so," said Mr. Farrer. "You're a man, ain't you? Well, I'll do anything that you'll do."

"Pph!" said the sergeant-major. "I've done my little lot. I've been in action four times, and wounded in three places. That's my tally."

"The colonel said once that my husband doesn't know what fear is," said Mrs. Ward, timidly. "He's afraid of nothing."

"Except ghosts," remarked her daughter, softly.

"Hold your tongue, miss," said her father, twisting his moustache. "No sensible man is afraid of what doesn't exist."

"A lot of people believe they do, though," said Mr. Farrer, breaking in. "I heard the other night that old Smith's ghost has been seen again swinging from the apple tree. Three people have seen it."

"Rubbish!" said the sergeant-major.

"Maybe," said the young man; "but I'll bet you, Mr. Ward, for all your courage, that you won't go up there alone at twelve o'clock one night to see."

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