

**WILLIAM
WYMARK
JACOBS**

AT SUNWICH PORT, PART 1

William Wymark Jacobs
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Contents: Chapters 1-5

CHAPTER I

The ancient port of Sunwich was basking in the sunshine of a July afternoon. A rattle of cranes and winches sounded from the shipping in the harbour, but the town itself was half asleep. Somnolent shopkeepers in dim back parlours coyly veiled their faces in red handkerchiefs from the too ardent flies, while small boys left in charge noticed listlessly the slow passing of time as recorded by the church clock.

It is a fine church, and Sunwich is proud of it. The tall grey tower is a landmark at sea, but from the narrow streets of the little town itself it has a disquieting appearance of rising suddenly above the roofs huddled beneath it for the purpose of displaying a black-faced clock with gilt numerals whose mellow chimes have recorded the passing hours for many generations of Sunwich men.

Regardless of the heat, which indeed was mild compared with that which raged in his own bosom, Captain Nugent, fresh from the inquiry of the collision of his ship *Conqueror* with the

German barque *Hans Muller*, strode rapidly up the High Street in the direction of home. An honest seafaring smell, compounded of tar, rope, and fish, known to the educated of Sunwich as ozone, set his thoughts upon the sea. He longed to be aboard ship again, with the Court of Inquiry to form part of his crew. In all his fifty years of life he had never met such a collection of fools. His hard blue eyes blazed as he thought of them, and the mouth hidden by his well-kept beard was set with anger.

Mr. Samson Wilks, his steward, who had been with him to London to give evidence, had had a time upon which he looked back in later years with much satisfaction at his powers of endurance. He was with the captain, and yet not with him. When they got out of the train at Sunwich he hesitated as to whether he should follow the captain or leave him. His excuse for following was the bag, his reason for leaving the volcanic condition of its owner's temper, coupled with the fact that he appeared to be sublimely ignorant that the most devoted steward in the world was tagging faithfully along a yard or two in the rear.

The few passers-by glanced at the couple with interest. Mr. Wilks had what is called an expressive face, and he had worked his sandy eyebrows, his weak blue eyes, and large, tremulous mouth into such an expression of surprise at the finding of the Court, that he had all the appearance of a beholder of visions. He changed the bag to his other hand as they left the town behind them, and regarded with gratitude the approaching end of his labours.

At the garden-gate of a fair-sized house some half-mile along the road the captain stopped, and after an impatient fumbling at the latch strode up the path, followed by Mr. Wilks, and knocked at the door. As he paused on the step he half turned, and for the first time noticed the facial expression of his faithful follower.

"What the dickens are you looking like that for?" he demanded.

"I've been surprised, sir," conceded Mr. Wilks; "surprised and astonished."

Wrath blazed again in the captain's eyes and set lines in his forehead. He was being pitied by a steward!

"You've been drinking," he said, crisply; "put that bag down."

"Arsking your pardon, sir," said the steward, twisting his unusually dry lips into a smile, "but I've 'ad no opportunity, sir—I've been follerin' you all day, sir."

A servant opened the door. "You've been soaking in it for a month," declared the captain as he entered the hall. "Why the blazes don't you bring that bag in? Are you so drunk you don't know what you are doing?"

Mr. Wilks picked the bag up and followed humbly into the house. Then he lost his head altogether, and gave some colour to his superior officer's charges by first cannoning into the servant and then wedging the captain firmly in the doorway of the sitting-room with the bag.

"Steward!" rasped the captain.

"Yessir," said the unhappy Mr. Wilks.

"Go and sit down in the kitchen, and don't leave this house till you're sober."

Mr. Wilks disappeared. He was not in his first lustre, but he was an ardent admirer of the sex, and in an absent-minded way he passed his arm round the handmaiden's waist, and sustained a buffet which made his head ring.

"A man o' your age, and drunk, too," explained the damsel.

Mr. Wilks denied both charges. It appeared that he was much younger than he looked, while, as for drink, he had forgotten the taste of it. A question as to the reception Ann would have accorded a boyish teetotaler remained unanswered.

In the sitting-room Mrs. Kingdom, the captain's widowed sister, put down her crochet-work as her brother entered, and turned to him expectantly. There was an expression of loving sympathy on her mild and rather foolish face, and the captain stiffened at once.

"I was in the wrong," he said, harshly, as he dropped into a chair; "my certificate has been suspended for six months, and my first officer has been commended."

"Suspended?" gasped Mrs. Kingdom, pushing back the white streamer to the cap which she wore in memory of the late Mr. Kingdom, and sitting upright. "You?"

"I think that's what I said," replied her brother.

Mrs. Kingdom gazed at him mournfully, and, putting her hand behind her, began a wriggling search in her pocket for a handkerchief, with the idea of paying a wholesome tribute of

tears. She was a past-master in the art of grief, and, pending its extraction, a docile tear hung on her eyelid and waited. The captain eyed her preparations with silent anger.

"I am not surprised," said Mrs. Kingdom, dabbing her eyes; "I expected it somehow. I seemed to have a warning of it. Something seemed to tell me; I couldn't explain, but I seemed to know."

She sniffed gently, and, wiping one eye at a time, kept the disengaged one charged with sisterly solicitude upon her brother. The captain, with steadily rising anger, endured this game of one-eyed bo-peep for five minutes; then he rose and, muttering strange things in his beard, stalked upstairs to his room.

Mrs. Kingdom, thus forsaken, dried her eyes and resumed her work. The remainder of the family were in the kitchen ministering to the wants of a misunderstood steward, and, in return, extracting information which should render them independent of the captain's version.

"Was it very solemn, Sam?" inquired Miss Nugent, aged nine, who was sitting on the kitchen table.

Mr. Wilks used his hands and eyebrows to indicate the solemnity of the occasion.

"They even made the cap'n leave off speaking," he said, in an awed voice.

"I should have liked to have been there," said Master Nugent, dutifully.

"Ann," said Miss Nugent, "go and draw Sam a jug of beer."

"Beer, Miss?" said Ann.

"A jug of beer," repeated Miss Nugent, peremptorily.

Ann took a jug from the dresser, and Mr. Wilks, who was watching her, coughed helplessly. His perturbation attracted the attention of his hostess, and, looking round for the cause, she was just in time to see Ann disappearing into the larder with a cream jug.

"The big jug, Ann," she said, impatiently; "you ought to know Sam would like a big one."

Ann changed the jugs, and, ignoring a mild triumph in Mr. Wilks's eye, returned to the larder, whence ensued a musical trickling. Then Miss Nugent, raising the jug with some difficulty, poured out a tumbler for the steward with her own fair hands.

"Sam likes beer," she said, speaking generally.

"I knew that the first time I see him, Miss," re-marked the vindictive Ann.

Mr. Wilks drained his glass and set it down on the table again, making a feeble gesture of repulse as Miss Nugent refilled it.

"Go on, Sam," she said, with kindly encouragement; "how much does this jug hold, Jack?"

"Quart," replied her brother.

"How many quarts are there in a gallon?"

"Four."

Miss Nugent looked troubled. "I heard father say he drinks gallons a day," she remarked; "you'd better fill all the jugs, Ann."

"It was only 'is way o' speaking," said Mr. Wilks, hurriedly;

"the cap'n is like that sometimes."

"I knew a man once, Miss," said Ann, "as used to prefer to 'ave it in a wash-hand basin. Odd, ugly-looking man 'e was; like Mr. Wilks in the face, only better-looking."

Mr. Wilks sat upright and, in the mental struggle involved in taking in this insult in all its ramifications, did not notice until too late that Miss Nugent had filled his glass again.

"It must ha' been nice for the captain to 'ave you with 'im to-day," remarked Ann, carelessly.

"It was," said Mr. Wilks, pausing with the glass at his lips and eyeing her sternly. "Eighteen years I've bin with 'im—ever since 'e 'ad a ship. 'E took a fancy to me the fust time 'e set eyes on me."

"Were you better-looking then, Sam?" inquired Miss Nugent, shuffling closer to him on the table and regarding him affectionately.

"Much as I am now, Miss," replied Mr. Wilks, setting down his glass and regarding Ann's giggles with a cold eye.

Miss Nugent sighed. "I love you, Sam," she said, simply. "Will you have some more beer?"

Mr. Wilks declined gracefully. "Eighteen years I've bin with the cap'n," he remarked, softly; "through calms and storms, fair weather and foul, Samson Wilks 'as been by 'is side, always ready in a quiet and 'umble way to do 'is best for 'im, and now—now that 'e is on his beam-ends and lost 'is ship, Samson Wilks'll sit down and starve ashore till he gets another."

At these touching words Miss Nugent was undisguisedly

affected, and wiping her bright eyes with her pinafore, gave her small, well-shaped nose a slight touch *en passant* with the same useful garment, and squeezed his arm affectionately.

"It's a lively look-out for me if father is going to be at home for long," remarked Master Nugent. "Who'll get his ship, Sam?"

"Shouldn't wonder if the fust officer, Mr. Hardy, got it," replied the steward. "He was going dead-slow in the fog afore he sent down to rouse your father, and as soon as your father came on deck 'e went at 'arfspeed. Mr. Hardy was commended, and your father's certifikit was suspended for six months."

Master Nugent whistled thoughtfully, and quitting the kitchen proceeded upstairs to his room, and first washing himself with unusual care for a boy of thirteen, put on a clean collar and brushed his hair. He was not going to provide a suspended master-mariner with any obvious reasons for fault-finding. While he was thus occupied the sitting-room bell rang, and Ann, answering it, left Mr. Wilks in the kitchen listening with some trepidation to the conversation.

"Is that steward of mine still in the kitchen?" demanded the captain, gruffly.

"Yessir," said Ann.

"What's he doing?"

Mr. Wilks's ears quivered anxiously, and he eyed with unwonted disfavour the evidences of his late debauch.

"Sitting down, sir," replied Ann.

"Give him a glass of ale and send him off," commanded the

captain; "and if that was Miss Kate I heard talking, send her in to me."

Ann took the message back to the kitchen and, with the air of a martyr engaged upon an unpleasant task, drew Mr. Wilks another glass of ale and stood over him with well-affected wonder while he drank it. Miss Nugent walked into the sitting-room, and listening in a perfunctory fashion to a shipmaster's platitude on kitchen-company, took a seat on his knee and kissed his ear.

CHAPTER II

The downfall of Captain Nugent was for some time a welcome subject of conversation in marine circles at Sunwich. At The Goblets, a rambling old inn with paved courtyard and wooden galleries, which almost backed on to the churchyard, brother-captains attributed it to an error of judgment; at the Two Schooners on the quay the profanest of sailormen readily attributed it to an all-seeing Providence with a dislike of over-bearing ship-masters.

The captain's cup was filled to the brim by the promotion of his first officer to the command of the *Conqueror*. It was by far the largest craft which sailed from the port of Sunwich, and its master held a corresponding dignity amongst the captains of lesser vessels. Their allegiance was now transferred to Captain Hardy, and the master of a brig which was in the last stages of senile decay, meeting Nugent in The Goblets, actually showed him by means of two lucifer matches how the collision might have been avoided.

A touching feature in the business, and a source of much gratification to Mr. Wilks by the sentimental applause evoked by it, was his renunciation of the post of steward on the ss. *Conqueror*. Sunwich buzzed with the tidings that after eighteen years' service with Captain Nugent he preferred starvation ashore to serving under another master. Although comfortable in pocket

and known to be living with his mother, who kept a small general shop, he was regarded as a man on the brink of starvation. Pints were thrust upon him, and the tale of his nobility increased with much narration. It was considered that the whole race of stewards had acquired fresh lustre from his action.

His only unfavourable critic was the erring captain himself. He sent a peremptory summons to Mr. Wilks to attend at Equator Lodge, and the moment he set eyes upon that piece of probity embarked upon such a vilification of his personal defects and character as Mr. Wilks had never even dreamt of. He wound up by ordering him to rejoin the ship forthwith.

"Arsking your pardon, sir," said Mr. Wilks, with tender reproach, "but I couldn't."

"Are you going to live on your mother, you hulking rascal?" quoth the incensed captain.

"No, sir," said Mr. Wilks. "I've got a little money, sir; enough for my few wants till we sail again."

"When I sail again you won't come with me," said the captain, grimly. "I suppose you want an excuse for a soak ashore for six months!"

Mr. Wilks twiddled his cap in his hands and smiled weakly.

"I thought p'r'aps as you'd like me to come round and wait at table, and help with the knives and boots and such-like," he said, softly. "Ann is agreeable."

"Get out of the house," said the captain in quiet, measured tones.

Mr. Wilks went, but on his way to the gate he picked up three pieces of paper which had blown into the garden, weeded two pieces of grass from the path, and carefully removed a dead branch from a laurel facing the window. He would have done more but for an imperative knocking on the glass, and he left the premises sadly, putting his collection of rubbish over the next garden fence as he passed it.

But the next day the captain's boots bore such a polish that he was able to view his own startled face in them, and at dinner-time the brightness of the knives was so conspicuous that Mrs. Kingdom called Ann in for the purpose of asking her why she didn't always do them like that. Her brother ate his meal in silence, and going to his room afterwards discovered every pair of boots he possessed, headed by the tall sea-boots, standing in a nicely graduated line by the wall, and all shining their hardest.

For two days did Mr. Wilks do good by stealth, leaving Ann to blush to find it fame; but on the third day at dinner, as the captain took up his knife and fork to carve, he became aware of a shadow standing behind his chair. A shadow in a blue coat with metal buttons, which, whipping up the first plate carved, carried it to Mrs. Kingdom, and then leaned against her with the vegetable dishes.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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