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WYMARK
JACOBS**

THE WEAKER VESSEL

William Wymark Jacobs

The Weaker Vessel

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W. W. Jacobs

The Weaker Vessel / Night Watches, Part 4

THE WEAKER VESSEL

Mr. Gribble sat in his small front parlour in a state of angry amazement. It was half-past six and there was no Mrs. Gribble; worse still, there was no tea. It was a state of things that had only happened once before. That was three weeks after marriage, and on that occasion Mr. Gribble had put his foot down with a bang that had echoed down the corridors of thirty years.

The fire in the little kitchen was out, and the untidy remains of Mrs. Gribble's midday meal still disgraced the table. More and more dazed, the indignant husband could only come to the conclusion that she had gone out and been run over. Other things might possibly account for her behaviour; that was the only one that would excuse it.

His meditations were interrupted by the sound of a key in the front door, and a second later a small, anxious figure entered the room and, leaning against the table, strove to get its breath. The process was not helped by the alarming distension of Mr. Gribble's figure.

"I—I got home—quick as I could—Henry," said Mrs. Gribble, panting.

"Where is my tea?" demanded her husband. "What do you mean by it? The fire's out and the kitchen is just as you left it."

"I—I've been to a lawyer's, Henry," said Mrs. Gribble, "and I had to wait."

"Lawyer's?" repeated her husband.

"I got a letter this afternoon telling me to call. Poor Uncle George, that went to America, is gone."

"That is no excuse for neglecting me," said Mr. Gribble. "Of course people die when they are old. Is that the one that got on and made money?"

His wife, apparently struggling to repress a little excitement, nodded. "He—he's left me two hundred pounds a year for life, Henry," she said, dabbing at her pale blue eyes with a handkerchief. "They're going to pay it monthly; sixteen pounds thirteen shillings and fourpence a month. That's how he left it."

"Two hund—" began Mr. Gribble, forgetting himself. "Two hun—Go and get my tea! If you think you're going to give yourself airs because your uncle's left you money, you won't do it in my house."

He took a chair by the window, and, while his wife busied herself in the kitchen, sat gazing in blank delight at the little street. Two hundred a year! It was all he could do to resume his wonted expression as his wife re-entered the room and began to lay the table. His manner, however, when she let a cup and saucer slip from her trembling fingers to smash on the floor left nothing to be desired.

"It's nice to have money come to us in our old age," said Mrs. Gribble, timidly, as they sat at tea. "It takes a load off my mind."

"Old age!" said her husband, disagreeably. "What d'ye mean by old age? I'm fifty-two, and feel as young as ever I did."

"You look as young as ever you did," said the docile Mrs. Gribble. "I can't see no change in you. At least, not to speak of."

"Not so much talk," said her husband. "When I want your opinion of my looks I'll ask you for it. When do you start getting this money?"

"Tuesday week; first of May," replied his wife. "The lawyers are going to send it by registered letter."

Mr. Gribble grunted.

"I shall be sorry to leave the house for some things," said his wife, looking round. "We've been here a good many years now, Henry."

"Leave the house!" repeated Mr. Gribble, putting down his tea-cup and staring at her.

"Leave the house! What are you talking about?"

"But we can't stay here, Henry," faltered Mrs. Gribble. "Not with all that money. They are building some beautiful houses in Charlton Grove now—bathroom, tiled hearths, and beautiful stained glass in the front door; and all for twenty-eight pounds a year."

"Wonderful!" said the other, with a mocking glint in his eye.

"And iron palings to the front garden, painted chocolate-colour picked out with blue," continued his wife, eyeing him wistfully.

Mr. Gribble struck the table a blow with his fist. "This house is good enough for me," he roared; "and what's good enough for me is good enough for you. You want to waste money on show; that's what you want. Stained glass and bow-windows! You want a bow-window to loll about in, do you? Shouldn't wonder if you don't want a servant-gal to do the work."

Mrs. Gribble flushed guiltily, and caught her breath.

"We're going to live as we've always lived," pursued Mr. Gribble. "Money ain't going to spoil me. I ain't going to put on no side just because I've come in for a little bit. If you had your way we should end up in the workhouse."

He filled his pipe and smoked thoughtfully, while Mrs. Gribble cleared away the tea-things and washed up. Pictures, good to look upon, formed in the smoke-pictures of a hale, hearty man walking along the primrose path arm-in-arm with two hundred a year; of the mahogany and plush of the saloon bar at the Grafton Arms; of Sunday jaunts, and the Oval on summer afternoons.

He ate his breakfast slowly on the first of the month, and, the meal finished, took a seat in the window with his pipe and waited for the postman. Mrs. Gribble's timid reminders concerning the flight of time and consequent fines for lateness at work fell on deaf ears. He jumped up suddenly and met the postman at the door.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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