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CUPBOARD LOVE

William Wymark Jacobs

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Содержание

CUPBOARD LOVE	5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	7

W. W. Jacobs

Cupboard Love / The Lady of the Barge and Others, Part 5

CUPBOARD LOVE

In the comfortable living-room at Negget's farm, half parlour and half kitchen, three people sat at tea in the waning light of a November afternoon. Conversation, which had been brisk, had languished somewhat, owing to Mrs. Negget glancing at frequent intervals toward the door, behind which she was convinced the servant was listening, and checking the finest periods and the most startling suggestions with a warning *'ssh!*

"Go on, uncle," she said, after one of these interruptions.

"I forget where I was," said Mr. Martin Bodfish, shortly.

"Under our bed," Mr. Negget reminded him.

"Yes, watching," said Mrs. Negget, eagerly.

It was an odd place for an ex-policeman, especially as a small legacy added to his pension had considerably improved his social position, but Mr. Bodfish had himself suggested it in the professional hope that the person who had taken Mrs. Negget's gold brooch might try for further loot. He had, indeed, suggested baiting the dressing-table with the farmer's watch, an idea which Mr. Negget had promptly vetoed.

"I can't help thinking that Mrs. Pottle knows something about it," said Mrs. Negget, with an indignant glance at her husband.

"Mrs. Pottle," said the farmer, rising slowly and taking a seat on the oak settle built in the fireplace, "has been away from the village for near a fortnit."

"I didn't say she took it," snapped his wife. "I said I believe she knows something about it, and so I do. She's a horrid woman. Look at the way she encouraged her girl Looey to run after that young traveller from Smithson's. The whole fact of the matter is, it isn't your brooch, so you don't care."

"I said—" began Mr. Negget.

"I know what you said," retorted his wife, sharply, "and I wish you'd be quiet and not interrupt uncle. Here's my uncle been in the police twenty-five years, and you won't let him put a word in edgeways."

"My way o' looking at it," said the ex-policeman, slowly, "is different to that o' the law; my idea is, an' always has been, that everybody is guilty until they've proved their innocence."

"It's a wonderful thing to me," said Mr. Negget in a low voice to his pipe, "as they should come to a house with a retired policeman living in it. Looks to me like somebody that ain't got much respect for the police."

The ex-policeman got up from the table, and taking a seat on the settle opposite the speaker, slowly filled a long clay and took a spill from the fireplace. His pipe lit, he turned to his niece, and slowly bade her go over the account of her loss once more.

"I missed it this morning," said Mrs. Negget, rapidly, "at ten minutes past twelve o'clock by the clock, and half-past five by my watch which wants looking to. I'd just put the batch of bread into the oven, and gone upstairs and opened the box that stands on my drawers to get a lozenge, and I missed the brooch."

"Do you keep it in that box?" asked the ex-policeman, slowly.

"Always," replied his niece. "I at once came down stairs and told Emma that the brooch had been stolen. I said that I named no names, and didn't wish to think bad of anybody, and that if I found the brooch back in the box when I went up stairs again, I should forgive whoever took it."

"And what did Emma say?" inquired Mr. Bodfish.

"Emma said a lot o' things," replied Mrs. Negget, angrily. "I'm sure by the lot she had to say you'd ha' thought she was the missis and me the servant. I gave her a month's notice at once, and she went straight up stairs and sat on her box and cried."

"Sat on her box?" repeated the ex-constable, impressively. "Oh!"

"That's what I thought," said his niece, "but it wasn't, because I got her off at last and searched it through and through. I never saw anything like her clothes in all my life. There was hardly a button or a tape on; and as for her stockings—"

"She don't get much time," said Mr. Negget, slowly.

"That's right; I thought you'd speak up for her," cried his wife, shrilly.

"Look here—" began Mr. Negget, laying his pipe on the seat by his side and rising slowly.

"Keep to the case in hand," said the ex-constable, waving him back to his seat again. "Now, Lizzie."

"I searched her box through and through," said his niece, "but it wasn't there; then I came down again and had a rare good cry all to myself."

"That's the best way for you to have it," remarked Mr. Negget, feelingly.

Mrs. Negget's uncle instinctively motioned his niece to silence, and holding his chin in his hand, scowled frightfully in the intensity of thought.

"See a cloo?" inquired Mr. Negget, affably.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, George," said his wife, angrily; "speaking to uncle when he's looking like that."

Mr. Bodfish said nothing; it is doubtful whether he even heard these remarks; but he drew a huge notebook from his pocket, and after vainly trying to point his pencil by suction, took a knife from the table and hastily sharpened it.

"Was the brooch there last night?" he inquired.

"It were," said Mr. Negget, promptly. "Lizzie made me get up just as the owd clock were striking twelve to get her a lozenge."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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