

His Other Self - Night Watches, Part 10.

W.W. Jacobs

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NIGHT WATCHES

by W.W. Jacobs

HIS OTHER SELF

"They're as like as two peas, him and 'is brother," said the night-watchman, gazing blandly at the indignant face of the lighterman on the barge below; "and the on'y way I know this one is Sam is because Bill don't use bad langwidge. Twins they are, but the likeness is only outside; Bill's 'art is as white as snow."

He cut off a plug of tobacco, and, placing it in his cheek, waited expectantly.

"White as snow," he repeated.

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"That's me," said the lighterman, as he pushed his unwieldy craft from the jetty. "I'll tell Sam your opinion of 'im. So long."

The watchman went a shade redder than usual. That's twins all over, he said, sourly, always deceiving people. It's Bill arter all, and, instead of hurting 'is feelings, I've just been flattering of 'im up.

It ain't the fust time I've 'ad trouble over a likeness. I've been a twin myself in a manner o' speaking. It didn't last long, but it lasted long enough for me to always be sorry for twins, and to make a lot of allowance for them. It must be very 'ard to have another man going about with your face on 'is shoulders, and getting it into trouble.

It was a year or two ago now. I was sitting one evening at the gate, smoking a pipe and looking at a newspaper I 'ad found in the office, when I see a gentleman coming along from the swing-bridge. Well-dressed, clean-shaved chap 'e was, smoking a cigarette. He was walking slow and looking about 'im casual-like, until his eyes fell on me, when he gave a perfect jump of surprise, and, arter looking at me very 'ard, walked on a little way and then turned back. He did it twice, and I was just going to say something to 'im, something that I 'ad been getting ready for 'im, when he spoke to me.

"Good evening," he ses.

"Good evening," I ses, folding the paper over and looking at 'im rather severe.

"I hope you'll excuse me staring," he ses, very perlit; "but I've never seen such a face and figger as yours in all my life--never."

"Ah, you ought to ha' seen me a few years ago," I ses. "I'm like everybody else--I'm getting on."

"Rubbish!" he ses. "You couldn't be better if you tried. It's marvellous! Wonderful! It's the very thing I've been looking for. Why, if you'd been made to order you couldn't ha' been better."

I thought at fust he was by way of trying to get a drink out o' me--I've been played that game afore--but instead o' that he asked me whether I'd do 'im the pleasure of 'aving one with 'im.

We went over to the Albion, and I believe I could have 'ad it in a pail if I'd on'y liked to say the word. And all the time I was drinking he was looking me up and down, till I didn't know where to look, as the saying is.

"I came down 'ere to look for somebody like you," he ses, "but I never dreamt I should have such luck as this. I'm an actor, and I've got to play the part of a sailor, and I've been worried some time 'ow to make up for the part. D'ye understand?"

"No," I ses, looking at 'im.

"I want to look the real thing," he ses, speaking low so the landlord shouldn't hear. "I want to make myself the living image of you. If that don't fetch 'em I'll give up the stage and grow cabbages."

"Make yourself like me?" I ses. "Why, you're no more like me than I'm

like a sea-sick monkey."

"Not so much," he ses. "That's where the art comes in."

He stood me another drink, and then, taking my arm in a cuddling sort o' way, and calling me "Dear boy," 'e led me back to the wharf and explained. He said 'e would come round next evening with wot 'e called his make-up box, and paint 'is face and make 'imself up till people wouldn't know one from the other.

"And wot about your figger?" I ses, looking at 'im.

"A cushion," he ses, winking, "or maybe a couple. And what about clothes? You'll 'ave to sell me those you've got on. Hat and all. And boots."

I put a price on 'em that I thought would 'ave finished 'im then and there, but it didn't. And at last, arter paying me so many more compliments that they began to get into my 'ead, he fixed up a meeting for the next night and went off.

"And mind," he ses, coming back, "not a word to a living soul!"

He went off agin, and, arter going to the Bull's Head and 'aving a pint to clear my 'ead, I went and sat down in the office and thought it over. It seemed all right to me as far as I could see; but p'r'aps the pint didn't clear my 'ead enough--p'r'aps I ought to 'ave 'ad two pints.

I lay awake best part of next day thinking it over, and when I got up I 'ad made up my mind. I put my clothes in a sack, and then I put on some others as much like 'em as possible, on'y p'r'aps a bit older, in case the missis should get asking questions; and then I sat wondering 'ow to get out with the sack without 'er noticing it. She's got a very inquiring mind, and I wasn't going to tell her any lies about it. Besides which I couldn't think of one.

I got out at last by playing a game on her. I pertended to drop 'arf a dollar in the washus, and while she was busy on 'er hands and knees I went off as comfortable as you please.

I got into the office with it all right, and, just as it was getting dark, a cab drove up to the wharf and the actor-chap jumped out with a big leather bag. I took 'im into the private office, and 'e was so ready with 'is money for the clothes that I offered to throw the sack in.

He changed into my clothes fust of all, and then, asking me to sit down in front of 'im, he took a looking-glass and a box out of 'is bag and began to alter 'is face. Wot with sticks of coloured paint, and false eyebrows, and a beard stuck on with gum and trimmed with a pair o' scissors, it was more like a conjuring trick than anything else. Then 'e took a wig out of 'is bag and pressed it on his 'ead, put on the cap, put some black stuff on 'is teeth, and there he was. We both looked into the glass together while 'e gave the finishing touches, and then he clapped me on the back and said I was the handsomest sailorman in England.

"I shall have to make up a bit 'eavier when I'm behind the floats," he

ses; "but this is enough for 'ere. Wot do you think of the imitation of your voice? I think I've got it exact."

"If you ask me," I ses, "it sounds like a poll-parrot with a cold in the 'ead."

"And now for your walk," he ses, looking as pleased as if I'd said something else. "Come to the door and see me go up the wharf."

I didn't like to hurt 'is feelings, but I thought I should ha' bust. He walked up that wharf like a dancing-bear in a pair of trousers too tight for it, but 'e was so pleased with 'imself that I didn't like to tell 'im so. He went up and down two or three times, and I never saw anything so ridikerlous in my life.

"That's all very well for us," he ses; "but wot about other people? That's wot I want to know. I'll go and 'ave a drink, and see whether anybody spots me."

Afore I could stop 'im he started off to the Bull's Head and went in, while I stood outside and watched 'im.

"'Arf a pint o' four ale," he ses, smacking down a penny.

I see the landlord draw the beer and give it to 'im, but 'e didn't seem to take no notice of 'im. Then, just to open 'is eyes a bit, I walked in and put down a penny and asked for a 'arf-pint.

The landlord was just wiping down the counter at the time, and when I gave my order he looked up and stood staring at me with the wet cloth 'eld up in the air. He didn't say a word--not a single word. He stood there for a moment smiling at us foolish-like, and then 'e let go o' the beer-injin, wot 'e was 'olding in 'is left hand, and sat down heavy on the bar floor. We both put our 'eads over the counter to see wot had 'appened to 'im, and 'e started making the most 'orrible noise I 'ave ever heard in my life. I wonder it didn't bring the fire-injins. The actor-chap bolted out as if he'd been shot, and I was just thinking of follering 'im when the landlord's wife and 'is two daughters came rushing out and asking me wot I 'ad done to him.

"There--there--was two of 'im !" ses the landlord, trembling and holding on to 'is wife's arm, as they helped 'im up and got 'im in the chair. "Two of 'im!"

"Two of wot?" ses his wife.

"Two--two watchmen," ses the landlord; "both exac'ly alike and both asking for 'arf a pint o' four ale."

"Yes, yes," ses 'is wife.

"You come and lay down, pa," ses the gals. "I tell you there was," ses the landlord, getting 'is colour back, with temper.

"Yes, yes; I know all about it," ses 'is wife. "You come inside for a bit; and, Gertie, you bring your father in a soda--a large soda."

They got 'im in arter a lot o' trouble; but three times 'e came back as far as the door, 'olding on to them, and taking a little peep at me.

The last time he shook his 'ead at me, and said if I did it agin I could go and get my 'arf-pints somewhere else.

I finished the beer wot the actor 'ad left, and, arter telling the landlord I 'oped his eyesight 'ud be better in the morning, I went outside, and arter a careful look round walked back to the wharf.

I pushed the wicket open a little way and peeped in. The actor was standing just by the fust crane talking to two of the hands off of the Saltram. He'd got 'is back to the light, but 'ow it was they didn't twig his voice I can't think.

They was so busy talking that I crept along by the side of the wall and got to the office without their seeing me. I went into the private office and turned out the gas there, and sat down to wait for 'im. Then I 'eard a noise outside that took me to the door agin and kept me there, 'olding on to the door-post and gasping for my breath. The cook of the Saltram was sitting on a paraffin-cask playing the mouth-organ, and the actor, with 'is arms folded across his stummick, was dancing a horn-pipe as if he'd gorn mad.

I never saw anything so ridikerlous in my life, and when I recollected that they thought it was me, I thought I should ha' dropped.

A night-watchman can't be too careful, and I knew that it 'ud be all over Wapping next morning that I 'ad been dancing to a tuppenny-ha'penny mouth-organ played by a ship's cook. A man that does 'is dooty always has a lot of people ready to believe the worst of 'im.

I went back into the dark office and waited, and by and by I 'eard them coming along to the gate and patting 'im on the back and saying he ought to be in a pantermime instead o' wasting 'is time night-watching. He left 'em at the gate, and then 'e came into the office smiling as if he'd done something clever.

"Wot d'ye think of me for a understudy?" he ses, laughing. "They all thought it was you. There wasn't one of 'em 'ad the slightest suspicion --not one."

"And wot about my character?" I ses, folding my arms acrost my chest and looking at him.

"Character?" he ses, staring. "Why, there's no 'arm in dancing; it's a innercent enjoyment."

"It ain't one o' my innercent enjoyments," I ses, "and I don't want to get the credit of it. If they hadn't been sitting in a pub all the evening they'd 'ave spotted you at once."

"Oh!" he ses, very huffy. "How?"

"Your voice," I ses. "You try and mimic a poll-parrot, and think it's like me. And, for another thing, you walk about as though you're stuffed with sawdust."

"I beg your pardon," he ses; "the voice and the walk are exact. Exact."

"Wot?" I ses, looking 'im up and down. "You stand there and 'ave the impudence to tell me that my voice is like that?"

"I do," he ses.

"Then I'm sorry for you," I ses. "I thought you'd got more sense."

He stood looking at me and gnawing 'is finger, and by and by he ses, "Are you married?" he ses.

"I am," I ses, very short.

"Where do you live?" he ses.

I told 'im.

"Very good," he ses; "p'r'aps I'll be able to convince you arter all. By the way, wot do you call your wife? Missis?"

"Yes," I ses, staring at him. "But wot's it got to do with you?"

"Nothing," he ses. "Nothing. Only I'm going to try the poll-parrot voice and the sawdust walk on her, that's all. If I can deceive 'er that'll settle it."

"Deceive her?" I ses. "Do you think I'm going to let you go round to my 'ouse and get me into trouble with the missis like that? Why, you must be crazy; that dancing must 'ave got into your 'ead."

"Where's the 'arm?" he ses, very sulky.

"Arm?" I ses. "I won't 'ave it, that's all; and if you knew my missis you'd know without any telling."

"I'll bet you a pound to a sixpence she wouldn't know me," he ses, very earnest.

"She won't 'ave the chance," I ses, "so that's all about it."

He stood there argufying for about ten minutes; but I was as firm as a rock. I wouldn't move an inch, and at last, arter we was both on the point of losing our tempers, he picked up his bag and said as 'ow he must be getting off 'ome.

"But ain't you going to take those things off fust?" I ses.

"No," he ses, smiling. "I'll wait till I get 'ome. Ta-ta."

He put 'is bag on 'is shoulder and walked to the gate, with me follering of 'im.

"I expect I shall see a cab soon," he ses. "Good-bye."

"Wot are you laughing at?" I ses.

"On'y thoughts," he ses.

"'Ave you got far to go?' I ses.

"No; just about the same distance as you 'ave," he ses, and he went off spluttering like a soda-water bottle.

I took the broom and 'ad a good sweep-up arter he 'ad gorn, and I was just in the middle of it when the cook and the other two chaps from the Saltram came back, with three other sailormen and a brewer's drayman they 'ad brought to see me DANCE!

"Same as you did a little while ago, Bill," ses the cook, taking out 'is beastly mouth-organ and wiping it on 'is sleeve. "Wot toon would you like?"

I couldn't get away from 'em, and when I told them I 'ad never danced in my life the cook asked me where I expected to go to. He told the drayman that I'd been dancing like a fairy in sea-boots, and they all got in front of me and wouldn't let me pass. I lost my temper at last, and, arter they 'ad taken the broom away from me and the drayman and one o' the sailormen 'ad said wot they'd do to me if I was on'y fifty years younger, they sheered off.

I locked the gate arter 'em and went back to the office, and I 'adn't been there above 'arf an hour when somebody started ringing the gate-bell as if they was mad. I thought it was the cook's lot come back at fust, so I opened the wicket just a trifle and peeped out. There was a 'ansom-cab standing outside, and I 'ad hardly got my nose to the crack when the actor-chap, still in my clothes, pushed the door open and nipped in.

"You've lost," he ses, pushing the door to and smiling all over. "Where's your sixpence?"

"Lost?" I ses, hardly able to speak. "D'ye mean to tell me you've been to my wife arter all--arter all I said to you?"

"I do," he ses, nodding, and smiling agin. "They were both deceived as easy as easy."

"Both?" I ses, staring at 'im. "Both wot? 'Ow many wives d'ye think I've got? Wot d'ye mean by it?"

"Arter I left you," he ses, giving me a little poke in the ribs, "I picked up a cab and, fust leaving my bag at Aldgate, I drove on to your 'ouse and knocked at the door. I knocked twice, and then an angry-looking woman opened it and asked me wot I wanted.

"'It's all right, missis,' I ses. 'I've got 'arf an hour off, and I've come to take you out for a walk.'

"'Wot?' she ses, drawing back with a start.

"'Just a little turn round to see the shops,' I ses; 'and if there's anything particler you'd like and it don't cost too much, you shall 'ave it.'

"I thought at fust, from the way she took it, she wasn't used to you giving 'er things.

"'Ow dare you!' she ses. 'I'll 'ave you locked up. 'Ow dare you insult a respectable married woman! You wait till my 'usband comes 'ome.'

"'But I am your 'usband,' I ses. 'Don't you know me, my pretty? Don't

you know your pet sailor-boy?'

"She gave a screech like a steam-injin, and then she went next door and began knocking away like mad. Then I see that I 'ad gorn to number twelve instead of number fourteen. Your wife, your real wife, came out of number fourteen--and she was worse than the other. But they both thought it was you--there's no doubt of that. They chased me all the way up the road, and if it 'adn't ha' been for this cab that was just passing I don't know wot would 'ave 'appened to me."

He shook his 'ead and smiled agin, and, arter opening the wicket a trifle and telling the cabman he shouldn't be long, he turned to me and asked me for the sixpence, to wear on his watch-chain.

"Sixpence!" I ses. "SIXPENGE!" Wot do you think is going to 'appen to me when I go 'ome?"

"Oh, I 'adn't thought o' that," he ses. "Yes, o' course."

"Wot about my wife's jealousy?" I ses. "Wot about the other, and her 'usband, a cooper as big as a 'ouse?"

"Well, well," he ses, "one can't think of everything. It'll be all the same a hundred years hence."

"Look 'ere," I ses, taking 'is shoulder in a grip of iron. "You come back with me now in that cab and explain. D'ye see? That's wot you've got to do."

"All right," he ses; "certainly. Is--is the husband bad-tempered?"

"You'll see," I ses; "but that's your business. Come along."

"With pleasure," he ses, 'elping me in. "'Arf a mo' while I tell the cabby where to drive to."

He went to the back o' the cab, and afore I knew wot had 'appened the 'orse had got a flick over the head with the whip and was going along at a gallop. I kept putting the little flap up and telling the cabby to stop, but he didn't take the slightest notice. Arter I'd done it three times he kept it down so as I couldn't open it.

There was a crowd round my door when the cab drove up, and in the middle of it was my missis, the woman next door, and 'er husband, wot 'ad just come 'ome. 'Arf a dozen of 'em helped me out, and afore I could say a word the cabman drove off and left me there.

I dream of it now sometimes: standing there explaining and explaining, until, just as I feel I can't bear it any longer, two policemen come up and 'elp me indoors. If they had 'elped my missis outside it would be a easier dream to have.

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