

The Understudy eBook

The Understudy by W. W. Jacobs

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THE UNDERSTUDY

The Understudy

"Dogs on board ship is a nuisance," said the night-watchman, gazing fiercely at the vociferous mongrel that had chased him from the deck of the Henry William; "the skipper asks me to keep an eye on the ship, and then leaves a thing like that down in the cabin."

He leaned against a pile of empty casks to recover his breath, shook his fist at the dog, and said, slowly—

Some people can't make too much of 'em. They talk about a dog's honest eyes and his faithful 'art. I 'ad a dog once, and I never saw his eyes look so honest as they did one day when 'e was sitting on a pound o' beefsteak we was 'unting high and low for.

I've known dogs to cause a lot of trouble in my time. A man as used to live in my street told me he 'ad been in jail three times because dogs follered him 'ome and wouldn't go away when he told 'em to. He said that some men would ha' kicked 'em out into the street, but he thought their little lives was far too valuable to risk in that way.

Some people used to wink when 'e talked like that, but I didn't: I remembered a dog that took a fancy to old Sam Small and Ginger Dick and Peter Russet once in just the same way.

It was one night in a little public-'ouse down Commercial Road way. They 'ad on'y been ashore a week, and, 'aving been turned out of a music-'all the night afore because a man Ginger Dick had punched in the jaw wouldn't behave 'imself, they said they'd spend the rest o' their money on beer instead. There was just the three of 'em sitting by themselves in a cosy little bar, when the door was pushed open and a big black dog came in.

He came straight up to Sam and licked his 'and. Sam was eating a arrowroot biscuit with a bit o' cheese on it at the time. He wasn't wot you'd call a partickler sort o' man, but, seeing as 'ow the dog was so careless that 'e licked the biscuit a'most as much as he did his 'and, he gave it to 'im. The dog took it in one gulp, and then he jumped up on Sam's lap and wagged his tail in 'is face for joy and thankfulness.

"He's took a fancy to you, Sam," ses Ginger.

Sam pushed the dog off on to the floor and wiped his face.

"He's a good dog, by the look of 'im," ses Peter Russet, who was country bred.

He bought a sausage-roll, and him and the dog ate it between 'em. Then Ginger Dick bought one and gave it to 'im, and by the time it was finished the dog didn't seem to know which one of 'em he loved the most.

"Wonder who he belongs to?" ses Ginger. "Is there any name on the collar, Peter?"

Peter shook his 'ead. "It's a good collar, though," he ses. "I wonder whether he's been and lost 'imself?"

Old Sam, wot was always on the look-out for money, put his beer down and wiped 'is mouth. "There might be a reward out for 'im," he ses. "I think I'll take care of 'im for a day or two, in case."

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"We'll all take care of 'im," ses Ginger; "and if there's a reward we'll go shares. Mind that!"

"I found 'im," ses Sam, very disagreeable. "He came up to me as if he'd known me all 'is life."

"No," ses Ginger. "Don't you flatter yourself. He came up to you because he didn't know you, Sam."

"If he 'ad, he'd ha' bit your 'and," ses Peter Russet.

"Instead o' washing it," ses Ginger.

"Go on!" ses Sam, 'olding his breath with passion. "Go on!"

Peter opened 'is mouth, but just then another man came into the bar, and, arter ordering 'is drink, turned round and patted the dog's 'ead.

"That's a good dog; 'ow old is he?" he ses to Ginger.

"Two years last April," ses Ginger, without moving a eyelid.

"Fifth of April," ses old Sam, very quick and fierce.

"At two o'clock in the morning," ses Peter.

The man took up 'is beer and looked at 'em; then 'e took a drink and looked at 'em again. Arter which he 'ad another look at the dog.

"I could see 'e was very valuable," he ses. "I see that the moment I set eyes on 'im. Mind you don't get 'im stole."

He finished up 'is beer and went out; and he 'ad 'ardly gone afore Ginger took a piece o' thick string out of 'is pocket and fastened it to the dog's collar.

"Make yourself at 'ome, Ginger," ses Sam, very nasty.

"I'm going to," ses Ginger. "That chap knows something about dogs, and, if we can't get a reward for 'im, p'r'aps we can sell 'im."

They 'ad another arf-pint each, and then, Ginger taking 'old of the string, they went out into the street.

"Nine o'clock," ses Peter. "It's no good going 'ome yet, Ginger."

"We can 'ave a glass or two on the way," ses Ginger; "but I sha'n't feel comfortable in my mind till we've got the dog safe 'ome. P'r'aps the people wot 'ave lost it are looking for it now."

They 'ad another drink farther on, and a man in the bar took such a fancy to the dog that 'e offered Ginger five shillings for it and drinks round.

"That shows 'ow valuable it is," ses Peter Russet when they got outside. "Hold that string tight, Ginger. Wot's the matter?"

"He won't come," ses Ginger, tugging at the string. "Come on, old chap! Good dog! Come on!"

He stood there pulling at the dog, wot was sitting down and being dragged along on its stummick. He didn't know its name, but 'e called it a few things that seemed to ease 'is mind, and then he 'anded over the string to Sam, wot 'ad been asking for it, and told 'im to see wot he could do.

"We shall 'ave a crowd round us in a minute," ses Peter. "Mind you don't bust a blood-vessel, Sam."

"And be locked up for stealing it, p'r'aps," ses Ginger. "Better let it go, Sam."

"Wot, arter refusing five bob for it?" ses Sam. "Talk sense, Ginger, and give it a shove be'ind."

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Ginger gave it a shove, but it was no good. There was three or four people coming along the road, and Sam made up 'is mind in an instant, and 'eld up his 'and to a cab that was passing.

It took the three of 'em to get the dog into the cab, and as soon as it was in the cabman told 'em to take it out agin. They argufied with 'im till their tongues ached, and at last, arter paying 'im four shillings and sixpence afore they started, he climbed up on the box and drove off.

The door was open when they got to their lodgings, but they 'ad to be careful because o' the landlady. It took the three of 'em to pull and push that dog upstairs, and Ginger took a dislike to dogs that 'e never really got over. They got 'im in the bedroom at last, and, arter they 'ad given 'im a drink o' water out o' the wash-hand basin, Ginger and Peter started to find fault with Sam Small.

"I know wot I'm about," ses Sam; "but, o' course, if you don't want your share, say so. Wot?"

"Talk sense!" ses Ginger. "We paid our share o' the cab, didn't we? And more fools us."

"There won't be no share," ses Peter Russet; "but if there is, we're going to'ave it."

They undressed themselves and got into bed, and Ginger 'adn't been in his five minutes afore the dog started to get in with 'im. When Ginger pushed 'im off 'e seemed to think he was having a game with 'im, and, arter pretending to bite 'im in play, he took the end of the counterpane in 'is mouth and tried to drag it off.

"Why don't you get to sleep, Ginger?" ses Sam, who was just dropping off. "'Ave a game with 'im in the morning."

Ginger gave the dog a punch in the chest, and, arter saying a few o' the things he'd like to do to Sam Small, he cuddled down in 'is bed and they all went off to sleep. All but the dog, that is. He seemed uneasy in 'is mind, and if 'e woke 'em up once by standing on his 'ind-legs and putting his fore-paws on their chest to see if they was still alive, he did arf-a-dozen times.

He dropped off to sleep at last, scratching 'imself, but about three o'clock in the morning Ginger woke up with a 'orrible start and sat up in bed shivering. Sam and Peter woke up, too, and, raising themselves in bed, looked at the dog, wot was sitting on its tail, with its 'ead back, moaning fit to break its 'art.

"Wot's the matter?" ses old Sam, in a shaky voice. "Stop it! Stop it, d'ye hear!"

"P'r'aps it's dying," ses Ginger, as the dog let off a 'owl like a steamer coming up the river. "Stop it, you brute!"



“He’ll wake the ’ouse up in a minute,” ses Peter. “Take ’im downstairs and kick ’im into the street, Sam.”

“Take ’im yourself,” ses Sam. “Hsh! Somebody’s coming upstairs. Poor old doggie. Come along, then. Come along.”

The dog left off his ’owling, and went over and licked ’im just as the landlady and one or two more came to the door and called out to know wot they meant by it.

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"It's all right, missis," ses Sam. "It's on'y pore Ginger. You keep quiet," he ses in a whisper, turning to Ginger.

"Wot's he making that row about?" ses the landlady. "He made my blood run cold."

"He's got a touch o' toothache," ses Sam. "Never mind, Ginger," 'e ses in a hurry, as the dog let off another 'owl; "try and bear it."

"He's a coward, that's wot 'e is," ses the landlady, very fierce. "Why, a child o' five wouldn't make such a fuss."

"Sounds more like a dog than a 'uman being," ses another voice. "You come outside, Ginger, and I'll give you something to cry for."

They waited a minute or two, and then, everything being quiet, they went back to bed, while old Sam talked to Ginger about wot 'e called 'is "presence o' mind," and Ginger talked to 'im about wot he'd do to 'im if 'e wasn't a fat old man with one foot in the grave.

They was all in a better temper when they woke up in the morning, and while Sam was washing they talked about wot they was to do with the dog.

"We can't lead 'im about all day," ses Ginger; "and if we let 'im off the string he'll go off 'ome."

"He don't know where his 'ome is," ses Sam, very severe; "but he might run away, and then the pore thing might be starved or else ill-treated. I 'ave 'eard o' boys tying tin cans to their tails."

"I've done it myself," ses Ginger, nodding. "Consequently it's our dooty to look arter 'im," ses Sam.

"I'll go down to the front door," ses Peter, "and when I whistle, bring him down."

Ginger stuck his 'ead out o' the window, and by and by, when Peter whistled, him and Sam took the dog downstairs and out into the street.

"So far so good," ses Sam; "now, wot about brekfuss?"

They 'ad their brekfuss in their usual coffeeshop, and the dog took bits from all of them. Unfortunately, 'e wasn't used to haddick bones, and arter two of the customers 'ad gorn out and two more 'ad complained to the landlord, they 'ad to leave their brekfusses and take 'im outside for a breath o' fresh air.

"Now, wot are we going to do?" ses Ginger. "I'm beginning to be sick of the sight of 'im. 'Ave we got to lead 'im about all day on a bit o' string?"

“Let’s take ’im round the corner and lose ’im,” ses Peter Russet.

“You give me ‘old o’ that string,” ses Sam. “If you don’t want shares, that’s all right. If I’m going to look arter ’im I’ll ‘ave it all.”

That made Ginger and Peter look at each other. Direckly Sam began to talk about money they began to think they might be losing something.

“And wot about ‘aving ’im in our bedroom and keeping us awake all night?” ses Peter.

“And putting it on to me with the toothache,” ses Ginger. “No; you can look arter ’im, Sam, while me and Peter goes off and enjoys ourselves; and if you get anything we go shares, mind.”

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"All right," ses Sam, turning away with the dog.

"And suppose Sam gets a reward or sells it, and then tells us that it ran away and 'e lost it?" ses Peter.

"O' course; I never thought o' that," ses Ginger. "You've got your 'ead on straight, Peter."

"I see 'im smile, that's why," ses Peter Russet.

"You're a liar," ses Sam.

"We'll stick together," ses Ginger. "Leastways, one of us'll keep with you, Sam."

They settled it that way at last, and while Ginger went for a walk down round about where they 'ad found the dog, Sam Small and Peter waited for him in a little public-'ouse down Limehouse way. Their idea was that there would be bills up, and when Ginger came back and said there wasn't, they 'ad a lot to say about people wot wasn't fit to 'ave dogs because they didn't love 'em.

They 'ad a miserable day. When the dog got sick o' sitting in a pub 'e made such a noise they 'ad to take 'im out; and when 'e got tired o' walking about he sat down on the pavement and they 'ad to drag 'im along to the nearest pub agin. At five o'clock in the arternoon Ginger Dick was talking about two-penn'orth o' rat-poison.

"Wot are we to do with 'im till twelve o'clock to-night?" ses Peter.

"And s'pose we can't smuggle 'im into the 'ouse agin?" ses Ginger. "Or suppose he makes that noise agin in the night?"

They 'ad a pint each to 'elp them to think wot was to be done. And, arter a lot o' talking and quarrelling, they did wot a lot of other people 'ave done when they got into trouble: they came to me.

I 'ad on'y been on dooty about arf an hour when the three of 'em turned up at the wharf with the dog, and, arter saying 'ow well I looked and that I seemed to get younger every time they saw me, they asked me to take charge of the dog for 'em.

"It'll be company for you," ses old Sam. "It must be very lonely 'ere of a night. I've often thought of it."

"And of a day-time you could take it 'ome and tie it up in your back-yard," ses Ginger.



I wouldn't 'ave anything to do with it at fust, but at last I gave way. They offered me fourpence a day for its keep, and, as I didn't want to run any risk, I made 'em give me a couple o' bob to go on with.

They went off as though they'd left a load o' care be'ind 'em, and arter tying the dog up to a crane I went on with my work. They 'adn't told me wot the game was, but, from one or two things they'd let drop, I'd got a pretty good idea.

The dog 'owled a bit at fust, but he quieted down arter a bit. He was a nice-looking animal, but one dog is much the same as another to me, and if I 'ad one ten years I don't suppose I could pick it out from two or three others.

I took it off 'ome with me when I left at six o'clock next morning, and tied it up in my yard. My missis 'ad words about it, o' course—that's wot people get married for—but when she found it woke me up three times she quieted down and said wot a nice coat it 'ad got.

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The three of 'em came round next evening to see it, and they was so afraid of its being lost that when they stood me a pint at the Bull's Head we 'ad to take it with us. Ginger was going to buy a sausage-roll for it, but, arter Sam 'ad pointed out that they was paying me fourpence a day for its keep, he didn't. And Sam 'ad the cheek to tell me that it liked a nice bit o' fried steak as well as anything.

A lot o' people admired that dog. I remember, on the fourth night I think it was, the barge Dauntless came alongside, and arter she was made fast the skipper came ashore and took a little notice of it.

"Where did you get 'im?" he ses.

I told 'im 'ow it was, and he stood there for some time patting the dog on the 'ead and whistling under 'is breath.

"It's much the same size as my dog," he ses; "that's a black retriever, too."

I ses "Oh!"

"I'm afraid I shall 'ave to get rid of it," he ses. "It's on the barge now. My missis won't 'ave it in the 'ouse any more cos it bit the baby. And o' course it was no good p'inting out to 'er that it was its first bite. Even the law allows one bite, but it's no good talking about the law to wimmen."

"Except when it's on their side," I ses.

He patted the dog's 'ead agin and whistled, and a big black dog came up out of the cabin and sprang ashore. It went up and put its nose to Sam's dog, and they both growled like thunderstorms.

"Might be brothers," ses the skipper, "on'y your dog's got a better 'eead and a better coat. It's a good dog."

"They're all alike to me," I ses. "I couldn't tell 'em apart, not if you paid me."

The skipper stood there a moment, and then he ses: "I wish you'd let me see 'ow my dog looks in your dog's collar," he ses.

"Whaffor?" I ses.

"On'y fancy," he ses. "Oh, Bill!"

"Yes," I ses.



"It ain't Christmas," he ses, taking my arm and walking up and down a bit, "but it will be soon, and then I mightn't see you. You've done me one or two good turns, and I should like to make you a Christmas-box of three 'arf-dollars."

I let 'im give 'em to me, and then, just to please 'im, I let 'im try the collar on 'is dog, while I swept up a bit.

"It looked beautiful on 'im," he ses, when I'd finished; "but I've put it back agin. Come on, Bruno. Good-night, Bill."

He got 'is dog on the barge agin arter a bit o' trouble, and arter making sure 'that my dog 'ad got its own collar on I went on with my work.

The dog didn't seem to be quite 'imself next day, and he was so fierce in the yard that my missis was afraid to go near 'im. I was going to ask the skipper about it, as 'e seemed to know more about dogs than I did, but when I got to the wharf the barge had sailed.

It was just getting dark when there came a ring at the gate-bell, and afore I could answer it arf-a-dozen more, as fast as the bell could go. And when I opened the wicket Sam Small and Ginger and Peter Russet all tried to get in at once.

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"Where's the dog?" ses Sam.

"Tied up," I ses. "Wot's the matter? 'Ave you all gorn mad?"

They didn't answer me. They ran on to the jetty, and afore I could turn round a'most they 'ad got the dog loose and was dragging it towards me, smiling all over their faces.

"Reward," ses Ginger, as I caught 'old of 'im by the coat. "Five pounds —landlord of a pub—at Bow—come on, Sam!"

"Why don't you keep your mouth shut, Ginger?" ses Sam.

"Five pounds!" I ses. "Five pounds! Hurrah!"

"Wot are you hurraying about?" ses Sam, very short.

"Why," I ses, "I s'pose——Here, arf a moment!"

"Can't stop," ses Sam, going arter the others.

I watched 'em up the road, and then I locked the gate and walked up and down the wharf thinking wot a funny thing money is, and 'ow it alters people's natures. And arter all, I thought that three arf-dollars earned honest was better than a reward for hiding another man's dog.

I finished tidying up, and at nine o'clock I went into the office for a quiet smoke. I couldn't 'elp wondering 'ow them three 'ad got on, and just as I was thinking about it there came the worst ringing at the gate-bell I 'ave ever 'eard in my life, and the noise of heavy boots kicking the gate. It was so violent I 'ardly liked to go at fust, thinking it might be bad news, but I opened it at last, and in bust Sam Small, with Ginger and Peter.

For five minutes they all talked at once, with their nasty fists 'eld under my nose. I couldn't make lead or tail of it at fust, and then I found as 'ow they 'ad got the dog back with them, and that the landlord 'ad said 'e wasn't the one.

"But 'e said as he thought the collar was his," ses Sam. "'Ow do you account for that?"

"P'r'aps he made a mistake," I ses; "or p'r'aps he thought you'd turn the dog adrift and he'd get it back for nothing. You know wot landlords are. Try 'im agin."

"I'd pretty well swear he ain't the same dog," ses Peter Russet, looking in a puzzled way at Sam and Ginger.

“You take 'im back to-morrow night,” I ses. “It’s a nice walk to Bow. And then come back and beg my pardon. I want to 'ave a word with this policeman here. Goodnight.”