

A Wild Night

By Shirley Young

(A story of loyalty and faithfulness)



Jack Parsons briskly rubbed his stiff old hands together as he sat huddled over his fire. Outside his small whitewashed cottage the wind howled and slung handfuls of hail at the windows. He could hear the sound of the sea pounding on the shore and the grating noise made by the pebbles as they rattled back and forth under the onslaught of the waves.

"It's going to be a wild one tonight, Jessie," he said to the old dog that was sprawled on the hearthrug at his feet. "It's on nights like this that I'm reminded of what happened on that other wild night many years ago. And if it hadn't been for you old girl," he added in a low voice to the dog, "I wouldn't be alive today!"

Jack bent down and patted the dog's head. Jessie opened one eye, grunted, and then tried to wriggle even closer to the fire.

Jack glanced across at the silver trophy that stood proudly on his sideboard. It had been presented to Jessie as a fitting tribute to a very faithful and brave dog. He stared down into the flames of the fire and his mind went back to the events of that previous 'Wild Night'

Jack had served for many years in the Merchant Navy, but now worked as a night watchman for a small maritime museum that stood high up on a cliff top just a short walk from his home. The museum attracted many visitors each year and housed some valuable exhibits, which Jack delighted in polishing and cleaning during his night watch hours.

On this particular night, the wind was roaring and the rain was driving in almost horizontally from the sea. Jack pulled on his oilskin coat and hat, took his flask of coffee, and picked up a powerful torch. "Come on Jessie," he said to his dog, "let's put on your little oilskin coat and go to work."

Jessie was a handsome Alsatian and still young at this time. She obediently followed her master out into the stormy night, even though she really would have preferred to stay indoors beside the fire!

As Jack set out along the small row of whitewashed cottages that faced onto the beach, he rapped lightly at one of the lighted windows he passed by on his way to the cliff path. It was the window of the cottage that belonged to his sister Edith and her husband, Bert. Jack routinely did this every night to let them know that he was on his way to work.

When they reached the cliff path, the wind had grown so strong that it almost knocked Jack and Jessie off their feet. It was a dangerous night to be out and they toiled slowly - and carefully - up the steep path to the museum.

The precious maritime artefacts were housed in a stout three-storey stone building. It was square and solid, and had an immovable look about it. It faced outwards across the cliff top to the sea, as if to say it could take anything the weather was likely to fling at it. Jack hurried around to the back of the building and unlocked a small door.

"Come on Jessie. Let's get inside in the warm," he said. The dog pushed past him as Jack closed the door against the gale and checked that the burglar alarms were turned on. Jessie rushed through to a small room that was specially kept for Jack and his cleaning equipment, and flung herself down next to a warm heater. Jack turned on the lights, took off his coat, and then flipped the switch on his radio, which often kept him company through the long nights. The voice of the weather forecaster came clearly across the room.

".....severe weather warnings in force. There will be severe, even storm force winds tonight gusting up to 90 m.p.h. in exposed places. Structural damage is highly possible."

Jack switched the radio off and poured himself a cup of hot coffee from his flask. "Looks as if we're in for a bad one tonight, Jessie," he said. "I pity any sailors out there on the sea on a night like this."

As he sipped his coffee, Jack took a small Bible from the drawer of the table and began to read the account of when Christ's disciples were in a storm on the Sea of Galilee. They had been very frightened until the Lord commanded the wind and the waves to be still.

"I know exactly how they felt!" Jack murmured to himself. "Many's the time I've felt my last hour had come in the storms out there in the Bay of Biscay." He finished his coffee and thoughtfully returned the Bible to the drawer.

"Well, come on Jessie. No good sitting here. We've got work to do." The dog, who was now warm and comfortable, looked at him with reproachful eyes but nevertheless got up and obediently followed Jack out into the hall.

Jack quickly crossed the hall and switched on the brilliant overhead lights that illuminated the main exhibition room just off the hall. It was a large room with a highly polished wood floor. The walls were wood panelled and curved in slightly to give the impression of being on the deck of a great ship. High up in the vaulted roof, sails had been rigged to give the feeling of a sailing ship.

There were many glass cases and exhibits around the room. Against the far wall a number of ancient and valuable maps were laid out under glass for view. Around the other walls were framed drawings and painting of ships down through the ages, right up to the latest British nuclear submarine.

Precious treasures recovered from sunken ships were also on view - including some Spanish gold coins. In the far corner stood a very life-like tailor's dummy wearing the uniform of a ship's Captain from the 18th century.

Then surprisingly, in the opposite corner stood a large perch on which was fixed a colourful, stuffed parrot, who still looked very lifelike. He had been called Pedro and was reputed to have made over fifty journeys back and forth to India in a fast tea clipper.

"Evening, Pedro," said Jack with a grin. "Terrible night out there on the water. You're better off in here." He then chuckled to himself for his own silliness in talking to a stuffed parrot. But Jessie growled low in her throat. She didn't like the parrot and always told it so!

Jack continued his slow walk around the large room noting whether every object was in position and what needed cleaning. He tut-tutted to himself as he saw finger marks on some of the big brass ship's bells. The visitors were asked not to touch anything, but they often did. Jack made a mental note to give the bells another polish.

He then turned to ascend a broad oak staircase that led up to the next floor. Halfway up on a wide landing stood a huge painted figurehead of a woman, which had come from the bow of an ancient ship. It had been well carved, and her hair and blue gown seemed as if they were blowing out behind her in a strong wind.

Jack stood for a moment looking up at the figure admiringly and then quite suddenly felt himself becoming hot and dizzy. The stairs seemed to spin around him. He collapsed and passed out, and then rolled limply down the stairs, landing in a heap on the ground floor. At the same moment a vivid fork of lightning slashed across the sky, followed by an immediate crash of thunder. All the lights went out! The power had been cut off.

Jessie froze stiff with fear. She didn't like thunder and she also wondered what had happened to her master. As her eyes adjusted to the

darkness, she ran back down the stairs. She began whining and pushing at Jack's hand with her wet nose as he lay sprawled on the floor. She then tried licking his face, but there was no response.

Jessie didn't like to leave her master because she was a faithful dog, but she knew something was wrong and that she must get help - and get it quickly! So she dashed off to the small back door through which they had entered the museum. Fortunately the door had a long, iron latch-like handle, and as Jessie was used to doing, she stood up on her back legs and put her front paws and weight onto the handle, pulling it downwards. The door swung open and she raced out into the night, the wind almost hurling her off the cliff top.

Jessie crouched for a moment beneath a small stone wall, gained her breath and then in a low, slinking kind of run she hurried from wall to bush to tree, keeping sheltered from the worst of the wind as she made her way down the steep cliff path.

Eventually she came out onto the small promenade where the cottages were. It was now high tide and the sea boomed and roared as it hit the rocks and beach. Jessie was drenched in the white spray that fell across the road. Due to the power cut, it was pitch black and no lights showed anywhere.

Jessie was a very intelligent dog and she knew that it was no good going to her own home as her master wasn't there, but lying on the floor back up at the museum. So she quickly ran to Bert and Edith's house, stood up on her back legs and pushed her nose into the polished brass letterbox. She then let it fall back with a BANG. This she did again and again . . . BANG, BANG.....until at last she heard the noise of someone moving inside the house. Eventually faint torchlight showed in the hall and then the front door opened a small gap.

"Who is it?" enquired Bert anxiously. He wondered who could be knocking at his door in such weather and at this late hour. Jessie was never

one to miss an opportunity and squeezed through the narrow gap, brushing past Bert's legs into the hall.

"What's wrong? Who is it?" enquired Edith as she came sleepily down the stairs in her dressing gown.

"It's Jessie, Jack's dog," replied her husband in a puzzled voice. "But Jack doesn't seem to be with her and there's no one outside."

Edith immediately clapped her hand to her mouth in a somewhat dramatic gesture. "Oh no!" she gasped. "Do you think Jack has fallen down on the slippery cliff path and hurt himself?"

"Could be," Bert agreed slowly. "The dog seems to be trying to tell us something."

Jessie ran back to the front door and waited for Bert to follow her. "All right, Jessie," Bert said. "Just wait till I get my raincoat and boots and then I'll come with you."

He quickly put on his raincoat and pulled on his boots. Then he picked up a powerful torch and followed Jessie out into the storm and up to the museum.

The small back door that Jessie had left open now banged to and fro on its hinges in the tearing wind. Bert hurried inside and followed Jessie through to the main exhibition room. And there, in the beam of light from his torch, he saw the sprawled body of his brother-in-law lying on the floor.

After reassuring himself that Jack was still breathing freely and had a pulse in his wrist, Bert covered him with his coat and then hurried to the phone. Thankfully the phone lines were still operational. He dialled 999 for an ambulance.

Jack was taken to the hospital, where the doctors soon discovered that he had suffered a heart attack. He recovered after several months of

rest and treatment, and was told that he could go back to work. However, Jack decided to retire early from his job as night watchman at the museum. He wanted to take things much more easily from now on.

The story of Jessie, the large brave dog who had rescued her master on such a stormy night, was written up and printed in the local newspaper - a real 'scoop' for such a small paper. The story was then picked up and carried by many of the daily tabloids that were always on the lookout for a human interest story. As a consequence, Jessie's photograph was soon splashed over all of the national newspapers and she was heralded as a hero!

It was because of this publicity that she won the 'Dog of Courage' Award. This was the silver trophy that now stood proudly on Jack's sideboard.

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As Jack sat beside his fireplace listening to rain and gale blowing outside, letting his mind drift slowly back over all the events of that other 'wild night' so many years ago, he felt a rush of gratefulness to his dog for saving his life.

"Ah, you're a good dog, Jessie," he murmured, patting her head. "If only we humans were as faithful to our Master, the good Lord, as you are to me, the world would be a much better place!"

Jessie opened an eye, grunted and then returned to her dream of chasing the neighbour's cat!

The End



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