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THE MADNESS OF MR.
LISTER

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The Madness of Mr. Lister

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W. W. Jacobs

The Madness of Mr. Lister / Captains All, Book 9

THE MADNESS OF MR. LISTER

Old Jem Lister, of the *Susannah*, was possessed of two devils—the love of strong drink and avarice—and the only thing the twain had in common was to get a drink without paying for it. When Mr. Lister paid for a drink, the demon of avarice masquerading as conscience preached a teetotal lecture, and when he showed signs of profiting by it, the demon of drink would send him hanging round public-house doors cadging for drinks in a way which his shipmates regarded as a slur upon the entire ship's company. Many a healthy thirst reared on salt beef and tickled with strong tobacco had been spoiled by the sight of Mr. Lister standing by the entrance, with a propitiatory smile, waiting to be invited in to share it, and on one occasion they had even seen him (him, Jem Lister, A.B.) holding a horse's head, with ulterior motives.

It was pointed out to Mr. Lister at last that his conduct was reflecting discredit upon men who were fully able to look after themselves in that direction, without having any additional burden thrust upon them. Bill Henshaw was the spokesman, and on the score of violence (miscalled firmness) his remarks left little to be desired. On the score of profanity, Bill might recall with pride that in the opinion of his fellows he had left nothing unsaid.

"You ought to ha' been a member o' Parliament, Bill," said Harry Lea, when he had finished.

"It wants money," said Henshaw, shaking his head.

Mr. Lister laughed, a senile laugh, but not lacking in venom.

"That's what we've got to say," said Henshaw, turning upon him suddenly. "If there's anything I hate in this world, it's a drinking miser. You know our opinion, and the best thing you can do is to turn over a new leaf now."

"Take us all in to the Goat and Compasses," urged Lea; "bring out some o' those sovrins you've been hoarding."

Mr. Lister gazed at him with frigid scorn, and finding that the conversation still seemed to centre round his unworthy person, went up on deck and sat glowering over the insults which had been heaped upon him. His futile wrath when Bill dogged his footsteps ashore next day and revealed his character to a bibulous individual whom he had almost persuaded to be a Christian—from his point of view—bordered upon the maudlin, and he wandered back to the ship, wild-eyed and dry of throat.

For the next two months it was safe to say that every drink he had he paid for. His eyes got brighter and his complexion clearer, nor was he as pleased as one of the other sex might have been when the self-satisfied Henshaw pointed out these improvements to his companions, and claimed entire responsibility for them. It is probable that Mr. Lister, under these circumstances, might in time have lived down his taste for strong drink, but that at just that time they shipped a new cook.

He was a big, cadaverous young fellow, who looked too closely after his own interests to be much of a favourite with the other men forward. On the score of thrift, it was soon discovered that he and Mr. Lister had much in common, and the latter, pleased to find a congenial spirit, was disposed to make the most of him, and spent, despite the heat, much of his spare time in the galley.

"You keep to it," said the greybeard impressively; "money was made to be took care of; if you don't spend your money you've always got it. I've always been a saving man—what's the result?"

The cook, waiting some time in patience to be told, gently inquired what it was.

"Ere am I," said Mr. Lister, good-naturedly helping him to cut a cabbage, "at the age of sixty-two with a bank-book down below in my chest, with one hundred an' ninety pounds odd in it."

"One 'undered and ninety pounds!" repeated the cook, with awe.

"To say nothing of other things," continued Mr. Lister, with joyful appreciation of the effect he was producing. "Altogether I've got a little over four 'undered pounds."

The cook gasped, and with gentle firmness took the cabbage from him as being unfit work for a man of such wealth.

"It's very nice," he said, slowly. "It's very nice. You'll be able to live on it in your old age."

Mr. Lister shook his head mournfully, and his eyes became humid.

"There's no old age for me," he said, sadly; "but you needn't tell them," and he jerked his thumb towards the fore-castle.

"No, no," said the cook.

"I've never been one to talk over my affairs," said Mr. Lister, in a low voice. "I've never yet took fancy enough to anybody so to do. No, my lad, I'm saving up for somebody else."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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