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The Madness of Mr. Lister by W. W. Jacobs

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The Madness of Mr. Lister

THE MADNESS OF MR. LISTER

[Illustration: "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 forecandle.

"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."

"What are you going to live on when you're past work then?" demanded the other.

Mr. Lister took him gently by the sleeve, and his voice sank with the solemnity of his subject: "I'm not going to have no old age," he said, resignedly.

"Not going to live!" repeated the cook, gazing uneasily at a knife by his side. "How do you know?"

"I went to a orsepittle in London," said Mr. Lister. "I've been to two or three altogether, while the money I've spent on doctors is more than I like to think of, and they're all surprised to think that I've lived so long. I'm so chock-full o' complaints, that they tell me I can't live more than two years, and I might go off at any moment."

"Well, you've got money," said the cook, "why don't you knock off work now and spend the evenin' of your life ashore? Why should you save up for your relatives?"

"I've got no relatives," said Mr. Lister; "I'm all alone. I 'spose I shall leave my money to some nice young feller, and I hope it'll do 'im good."

With the dazzling thoughts which flashed through the cook's brain the cabbage dropped violently into the saucepan, and a shower of cooling drops fell on both men.

"I 'spose you take medicine?" he said, at length.

"A little rum," said Mr. Lister, faintly; "the doctors tell me that it is the only thing that keeps me up---o' course, the chaps down there "---he indicated the fore-castle again with a jerk of his head---"accuse me o' taking too much."

"What do ye take any notice of 'em for?" inquired the other, indignantly.

"I 'spose it is foolish," admitted Mr. Lister; "but I don't like being misunderstood. I keep my troubles to myself as a rule, cook. I don't know what's made me talk to you like this. I 'eard the other day you was keeping company with a young woman."

"Well, I won't say as I ain't," replied the other, busying himself over the fire.

"An' the best thing, too, my lad," said the old man, warmly. "It keeps you stiddy, keeps you out of public-'ouses; not as they ain't good in moderation---I 'ope you'll be 'appy."

A friendship sprang up between the two men which puzzled the remainder of the crew not a little.

The cook thanked him, and noticed that Mr. Lister was fidgeting with a piece of paper.

"A little something I wrote the other day," said the old man, catching his eye. "If I let you see it, will you promise not to tell a soul about it, and not to give me no thanks?"

The wondering cook promised, and, the old man being somewhat emphatic on the subject, backed his promise with a home made affidavit of singular power and profanity.

"Here it is, then," said Mr. Lister.

The cook took the paper, and as he read the letters danced before him. He blinked his eyes and started again, slowly. In plain black and white and nondescript-coloured finger-marks, Mr. Lister, after a general statement as to his bodily and mental health, left the whole of his estate to the cook. The will was properly dated and witnessed, and the cook's voice shook with excitement and emotion as he offered to hand it back.

"I don't know what I've done for you to do this," he said.

Mr. Lister waved it away again. "Keep it," he said, simply; "while you've got it on you, you'll know it's safe."

From this moment a friendship sprang up between the two men which puzzled the remainder of the crew not a little. The attitude of the cook was as that of a son to a father: the benignancy of Mr. Lister beautiful to behold. It was noticed, too, that he had abandoned the reprehensible practice of hanging round tavern doors in favour of going inside and drinking the cook's health.

[Illustration: "A friendship sprang up between the two men which puzzled the remainder of the crew not a little."]

For about six months the cook, although always in somewhat straitened circumstances, was well content with the tacit bargain, and then, bit by bit, the character of Mr. Lister was revealed to him. It was not a nice character, but subtle; and when he made the startling discovery that a will could be rendered invalid by the simple process of making another one the next day, he became as a man possessed. When he ascertained that Mr. Lister when at home had free quarters at the house of a married niece, he used to sit about alone, and try and think of ways and means of securing capital sunk in a concern which seemed to show no signs of being wound-up.

"I've got a touch of the 'art again, lad," said the elderly invalid, as they sat alone in the fore-castle one night at Seacole.

"You move about too much," said the cook. "Why not turn in and rest?"

Mr. Lister, who had not expected this, fidgeted. "I think I'll go ashore a bit and try the air," he said, suggestively. "I'll just go as far as the Black Horse and back. You won't have me long now, my lad."

"No, I know," said the cook; "that's what's worrying me a bit." "Don't worry about me," said the old man, pausing with his hand on the other's shoulder; "I'm not worth it. Don't look so glum, lad."

"I've got something on my mind, Jem," said the cook, staring straight in front of him.

"What is it?" inquired Mr. Lister.

"You know what you told me about those pains in your inside?" said the cook, without looking at him.

Jem groaned and felt his side.

"And what you said about its being a relief to die," continued the other, "only you was afraid to commit suicide?"

"Well?" said Mr. Lister.

"It used to worry me," continued the cook, earnestly. "I used to say to myself, 'Poor old Jem,' I ses, 'why should 'e suffer like this when he wants to die? It seemed 'ard.'"

"It is 'ard," said Mr. Lister, "but what about it?"

The other made no reply, but looking at him for the first time, surveyed him with a troubled expression.

"What about it?" repeated Mr. Lister, with some emphasis.

"You did say you wanted to die, didn't you?" said the cook. "Now suppose suppose-----"

"Suppose what?" inquired the old man, sharply. "Why don't you say what you're agoing to say?"

"Suppose," said the cook, "some one what liked you, Jem---what liked you, mind---'eard you say this over and over again, an' see you sufferin' and 'eard you groanin' and not able to do nothin' for you except lend you a few shillings here and there for medicine, or stand you a few glasses o' rum; suppose they knew a chap in a chemist's shop?"

"Suppose they did?" said the other, turning pale.

"A chap what knows all about p'isons," continued the cook, "p'isons what a man can take without knowing it in 'is grub. Would it be wrong, do you think, if that friend I was speaking about put it in your food to put you out of your misery?"

"Wrong," said Mr. Lister, with glassy eyes. "Wrong. Look 'ere, cook---"

"I don't mean anything to give him pain," said the other, waving his hand; "you ain't felt no pain lately, 'ave you, Jem?"

"Do you mean to say" shouted Mr. Lister.

"I don't mean to say anything," said the cook. "Answer my question. You ain't felt no pain lately, 'ave you?"

"Have---you---been---putting---p'ison---in---my---wittles?" demanded Mr. Lister, in trembling accents.

"If I 'ad, Jem, supposin' that I 'ad," said the cook, in accents of reproachful surprise, "do you mean to say that you'd mind?"

"*Mind*," said Mr. Lister, with fervour. "I'd 'ave you 'ung!"

"But you said you wanted to die," said the surprised cook.

Mr. Lister swore at him with startling vigour. "I'll 'ave you 'ung," he repeated, wildly.

"Me," said the cook, artlessly. "What for?"

"For giving me p'ison," said Mr. Lister, frantically. "Do you think you can deceive me by your roundabouts? Do you think I can't see through you?"

The other with a sphinx-like smile sat unmoved. "Prove it," he said, darkly. "But supposin' if anybody 'ad been givin' you p'ison, would you like to take something to prevent its acting?"

"I'd take gallons of it," said Mr. Lister, feverishly.

The other sat pondering, while the old man watched him anxiously. "It's a pity you don't know your own mind, Jem," he said, at length; "still, you know your own business best. But it's very expensive stuff."

"How much?" inquired the other.

"Well, they won't sell more than two shillings-worth at a time," said the cook, trying to speak carelessly, "but if you like to let me 'ave the money, I'll go ashore to the chemist's and get the first lot now."

Mr. Lister's face was a study in emotions, which the other tried in vain to decipher.

Then he slowly extracted the amount from his trousers-pocket, and handed it over with-out a word.

"I'll go at once," said the cook, with a little feeling, "and I'll never take a man at his word again, Jem."

He ran blithely up on deck, and stepping ashore, spat on the coins for luck and dropped them in his pocket. Down below, Mr. Lister, with his chin in his hand, sat in a state of mind pretty evenly divided between rage and fear.

The cook, who was in no mood for company, missed the rest of the crew by two public-houses, and having purchased a baby's teething powder and removed the label, had a congratulatory drink or two before going on board again. A chatter of voices from the fore-castle warned him that the crew had returned, but the tongues ceased abruptly as he descended, and three pairs of eyes surveyed him in grim silence.

"What's up?" he demanded.

"Wot 'ave you been doin' to poor old Jem?" demanded Henshaw, sternly.

"Nothin'," said the other, shortly.

"You ain't been p'isoning 'im?" demanded Henshaw.

"Certainly not," said the cook, emphatically.

"He ses you told 'im you p'isoned 'im," said Henshaw, solemnly, "and 'e give you two shillings to get something to cure 'im. It's too late now."

"What?" stammered the bewildered cook. He looked round anxiously at the men.

They were all very grave, and the silence became oppressive.

"Where is he?" he demanded.

Henshaw and the others exchanged glances. "He's gone mad," said he, slowly.

"Mad?" repeated the horrified cook, and, seeing the aversion of the crew, in a broken voice he narrated the way in which he had been victimized.

"Well, you've done it now," said Henshaw, when he had finished. "He's gone right orf 'is 'ed."

"Where is he?" inquired the cook.

"Where you can't follow him," said the other, slowly.

"Heaven?" hazarded the unfortunate cook. "No; skipper's bunk," said Lea.

"Oh, can't I foller 'im?" said the cook, starting up. "I'll soon 'ave 'im out o' that."

"Better leave 'im alone," said Henshaw. "He was that wild we couldn't do nothing with 'im, singing an' larfin' and crying all together---I certainly thought he was p'isoned."

"I'll swear I ain't touched him," said the cook.

"Well, you've upset his reason," said Henshaw; "there'll be an awful row when the skipper comes aboard and finds 'im in 'is bed.

"Well, come an' 'elp me to get 'im out," said the cook.

"I ain't going to be mixed up in it," said Henshaw, shaking his head.

"Don't you, Bill," said the other two.

"Wot the skipper'll say I don't know," said Henshaw; "anyway, it'll be said to you, not-----"

"I'll go and get 'im out if 'e was five madmen," said the cook, compressing his lips.

"You'll have to carry 'im out, then," said Henshaw. "I don't wish you no 'arm, cook, and perhaps it would be as well to get 'im out afore the skipper or mate comes aboard. If it was me, I know what I should do."

"What?" inquired the cook, breathlessly.

"Draw a sack over his head," said Henshaw, impressively; "he'll scream like blazes as soon as you touch him, and rouse the folks ashore if you don't. Besides that, if you draw it well down it'll keep his arms fast."

The cook thanked him fervently, and routing out a sack, rushed hastily on deck, his departure being the signal for Mr. Henshaw and his friends to make preparations for retiring for the night so hastily as almost to savour of panic.

The cook, after a hasty glance ashore, went softly below with the sack over his arm and felt his way in the darkness to the skipper's bunk. The sound of deep and regular breathing reassured him, and without undue haste he opened the mouth of the sack and gently raised the sleeper's head.

"Eh? Wha-----" began a sleepy voice.

The next moment the cook had bagged him, and gripping him tightly round the middle, turned a deaf ear to the smothered cries of his victim as he strove to lift him out of the bunk. In the exciting time which followed, he had more than one reason for thinking that he had caught a centipede.

"Now, you keep still," he cried, breathlessly. "I'm not going to hurt you."

He got his burden out of bed at last, and staggered to the foot of the companion-ladder with it. Then there was a halt, two legs sticking obstinately across the narrow way and refusing to be moved, while a furious humming proceeded from the other end of the sack.

Four times did the exhausted cook get his shoulder under his burden and try and push it up the ladder, and four times did it wriggle and fight its way down again. Half crazy with fear and rage, he essayed it for the fifth time, and had got it half-way up when there was a sudden exclamation of surprise from above, and the voice of the mate sharply demanding an explanation.

"What the blazes are you up to?" he cried.

"It's all right, sir," said the panting cook; "old Jem's had a drop too much and got down aft, and I'm getting 'im for'ard again."

"Jem?" said the astonished mate. "Why, he's sitting up here on the fore-hatch. He came aboard with me."

"Sitting," began the horrified cook; "sit---oh, lor!"

He stood with his writhing burden wedged between his body and the ladder, and looked up despairingly at the mate.

"I'm afraid I've made a mistake," he said in a trembling voice.

The mate struck a match and looked down.

"Take that sack off," he demanded, sternly.

The cook placed his burden upon its feet, and running up the ladder stood by the mate shivering. The latter struck another match, and the twain watched in breathless silence the writhings of the strange creature below as the covering worked slowly upwards. In the fourth match it got free, and revealed the empurpled visage of the master of the *Susannah*. For the fraction of a second the cook gazed at him in speechless horror, and then, with a hopeless cry, sprang ashore and ran for it, hotly pursued by his enraged victim. At the time of sailing he was still absent, and the skipper, loth to part two such friends, sent Mr. James Lister, at the urgent request of the anxious crew, to look for him.