

The Somnambulist.

By Jack Loudon



A SMALL Lake Hudson potato-schooner lay at a dock in Godrich, and on her handbox of a cabin sat a big, fat man, with a red and good-natured face, puffing a pipe. The pipe and the posture indicated his position. None but the captain may sit on the cabin and smoke. Another big man, but with a solemn and sorrowful face, strolled down the dock and climbed aboard.

"Have ye all hands, sir?" he asked. "Want a mate," said the captain, peering at the man between puffs. "You sail mate?"

"Been mate. Salt-water mon." "So'm I. What'd ye sail out of?"

"Lunnon an' Leeverpool."

"Scotchman, ain't you?"

"Yes." "I'm not, thank God. 'You'll get a dollar a day here. Go for your clothes."

"What do I sign as, capt'n?" asked the applicant. "For a dollar a day?" "Mate."

"Mates get mair money. Ye're quotin' sailors' pay."

"Sailors get fifty cents a day here. Rather ship sailor? I want a man."

"Na, na, capt'n. I'll sign on mate. But I'd know ye for a salt-water mon. It's deep-water wages ye pay."

"Yes; but as mate you'll have salt-water privileges, which ye won't in other lake vessels. Ye'll ship the crew yourself, and discharge him; and he'll say 'sir' to ye, and call ye mister, same as I will. What's your name?"

"Mister Macpherson's my name, sir. How many men d'ye carry?"

"One, Mr. Macpherson. He sleeps forrard. You'll sleep aft."

"One mon forrard for this big craft?" said Mr. Macpherson, glancing around the cockle-shell. "Well, be sure, capt'n, that ye grant me all the preeveleges, for na doot I'll have work to do to airn my dollar. What did ye sail out of, sir? Salt water?"

"London and Liverpool."

"I may be mistaken, capt'n, but—What am I to call ye, sir?"

"Billings—Captain Billings."

"I may be mistaken, Capt'n Billings, but are ye no the mon that slugged me grievously in the nose twenty years gone, in Fat Anna's bardin'-hoose in Bombay?"

There was a barely perceptible twinkle in Captain Billings' eye at this but he promptly denied the allegation, and Mr. Macpherson went ashore for his dunnage. When he returned, the pipe was out and Captain Billings had waddled amidships.

"There's your room in the cabin," he said, pointing aft. "The cook there—a colored brother was smiling out the forward cabin door—will show you. He sleeps forrard, but the galley's aft. Now, one thing I must tell you, Mr. Macpherson, I'm a somnambulist."

"A what, sir?" inquired the mate, dumping his bag on deck.

"A sleep-walker. I'm a bad case. I'm under the doctor's care for it. I'm liable to get up from my bunk at any time."

"Aye, sir. Ye walk 'round decks sound asleep. I've heard o' such things."

"Worse. I'm another man, o' rather the same man younger. I'm a sailor 'fore the mast again. I—I don't know any more than I did twenty years ago."

"When ye slugged me, sir?"

"I never slugged you. Get that out of your head, particularly because you've got to remember that I'm the captain in case I wake up a sailor."

"Aye, sir. I'll remember that."

"All right. Now I'm going ashore for the night. Be down in time for the morning breeze. Ship a man, and have the canvas loosed by daylight."

"Aye, sir, I will." Then, looking

suspiciously after the big, waddling figure, he added, "Aye, I'll remember—that ye're the captain; also that ye're a deceivin' liar, unwillin' to own up to a youthful transgression. Lord forgive ye, Jock Billings."

He spent the rest of the day nosing around, getting the location of things, and in getting acquainted with the cook, who, having shipped but a few hours before him, could tell him nothing about the captain, his habits or his past.

As no sailors came along to be shipped, he turned in just after supper, resolved to rise early, go ashore, and get one before the captain appeared in the morning. And to this end he was up before daylight, and just about to step over the side, when up the dock he saw the bulky, waddling figure of the captain heaving along toward the schooner. He waited at the rail, explanations all ready.

"Mornin', cappen," said the big, fat skipper, smiling rather vacantly in the mornin' light. "Got all hands?"

"Mornin', capt'n," repeated Mr. Macpherson. "There's nane came 'long, sir, an' I was aboot to go ashore for a mon."

"Well, I'm lookin' for a berth, sir," said the captain. "Rather early in the mornin', I know, but it's a strange town. Must 'a been on a bat. I quit an English bark at Cape Town the other day. What town is this, sir, anyhow?"

Mr. Macpherson's jaw dropped in sheer amazement; then he comprehended. "What's your name?" he demanded.

"Jock Billings, sir; able seaman. Here's my discharges." He reached into his pocket then withdrew his hand, with a blank face. "Must 'a lost 'em, sir. But I'm an A. B."

"Na doot, na doot. Lookin' for a berth?"

Billings nodded.

"Come aboard. Fifteen dollars a month."

Billings smiled and came aboard.

"By the way—this to make sure—where's your dunnage, mon?"

Billings did not know; neither did he seem to care. Macpherson led him forward, and pointed down a black, square hole in the deck.

"There's the fore-castle," he said sternly. "That's where ye'll sleep."

"O' course, sir," assented Billings; "an' eat, too."

Mr. Macpherson eyed him suspiciously, yet hungrily. "Ever been on the lakes—the American lakes?"

"No, sir. But I've heard about them, sir. I've heard that sailors eat in the cabin up there, but I never believed that."

"Na, na. The crew eats in the fore-castle—same as in this craft." Mr. Macpherson's eyes shone with unholy joy, but, being Scotch, he could not smile. "Ye're o'er fat for a sailor-mon," he added, scanning the huge proportions of the new crew.

"Where'd ye git it?"

Billings looked puzzled. "Must 'a been the beer I drank, sir. It's fattenin', I hear." He looked down, and patted himself complacently.

"Ye'll be a good mon on a rope," grunted the mate, "but a bad one aloft, if I'm a judge. Stand here till I call ye."

He went aft, ruthlessly searched the captain's desk, and found the articles, signed by the cook, and dated the day before, for the trip ahead. It was to Duluth, light, for a cargo. He signed his own name as first mate at thirty dollars a month.

"Come aft here an' seen articles," he bawled from the cabin door, and Billings obediently came, and signed as able seaman, at fifteen dollars a month.

In five minutes from the time Mr. Macpherson started for the rail, the nefarious job was complete—he had shipped and signed as sailor the captain who had signed him as mate.

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