

**ECCENTRIC MR.  
CLARK:  
STORIES IN PROSE**

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Eccentric Mr. Clark: Stories in Prose by James Whitcomb Riley

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# Eccentric Mr. Clark

STORIES IN PROSE

By  
JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY

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## ECCENTRIC MR. CLARK

ALL who knew Mr. Clark intimately, casually, or by sight alone, smiled always, meeting him, and thought, "What an odd man he is!" Not that there was anything extremely or ridiculously obtrusive in Mr. Clark's peculiarities, either of feature, dress, or deportment, by which a graded estimate of his really quaint character might be aptly defined; but rather, perhaps, it was the curious combination of all these things that had gained for Mr. Clark the transient celebrity of being a very eccentric man.

And Mr. Clark, of all the odd inhabitants of the busy metropolis in which he lived, seemed least conscious of the fact of his local prominence. True it was that when familiarly addressed as "Clark, old boy," by sportive individuals he never recollected having seen before, he would oftentimes stare blankly in return, and with evident embarrassment; but as these actions may have been attributable to weak eyes, or to the confusion consequent upon being publicly recognized by the quondam associates of bacchanalian hours, the sug-

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gestive facts only served to throw his eccentricities in new relief.

And, in the minds of many, that Mr. Clark was somewhat given to dissipation, there was but little doubt; for, although in no way, and at no time, derelict in the rigid duties imposed upon him as an accountant in a wholesale liquor house on South John Street, a grand majority of friends had long ago conceded that a certain puffiness of flesh and a soiled-like pallor of complexion were in no wise the legitimate result of over-application simply in the counting-room of the establishment in which he found employment; but as to the complicity of Mr. Clark's direct associates in this belief, it is only justice to the gentleman to state that by them he was exonerated beyond all such suspicion, from the gray-haired senior of the firm, down to the pink-nosed porter of the warerooms, who, upon every available occasion, would point out the eccentric Mr. Clark as "the on'y man in the biznez 'at never sunk a 'thief' er drunk a drop o' 'goods' o' any kind, under no consideration!"

And Mr. Clark himself, when playfully approached upon the subject, would quietly assert that never, under any circumstances, had the taste of intoxicating liquors passed his lips, though at such asseverations it was a noticeable fact that Mr. Clark's complexion invariably grew more sul-



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try than its wont, and that his eyes, forever moist, grew dewier, and that his lips and tongue would seem covertly entering upon some lush conspiracy, which in its incipiency he would be forced to smother with his hastily drawn handkerchief. Then the eccentric Mr. Clark would laugh nervously, and, pouncing on some subject so vividly unlike the one just previous as to daze the listener, he would ripple ahead with a tide of eloquence that positively overflowed and washed away all remembrance of the opening topic.

In point of age Mr. Clark might have been thirty, thirty-five, or even forty years, were one to venture an opinion solely guided by outward appearances and under certain circumstances and surroundings. As, for example, when, a dozen years ago, the writer of this sketch rode twenty miles in a freight-caboose with Mr. Clark as the only other passenger, he seemed in age at first not less than thirty-five; but upon opening a conversation with him, in which he joined with wonderful vivacity, a nearer view, and a prolonged and studious one as well, revealed the rather curious fact that, at the very limit of all allowable supposition, his age could not possibly have exceeded twenty-five. What it was in the man that struck me as eccentric at that time I have never been wholly able to define, but I recall accurately the

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most trivial occurrences of our meeting and the very subject-matter of our conversation. I even remember the very words in which he declined a drink from my travelling-flask—for "It's a raw day," I said, by way of gratuitous excuse for offering it. "Yes," he said, smilingly motioning the temptation aside; "it is a raw day; but you're rather young in years to be doctoring the weather—at least you'd better change the treatment—they'll all be raw days for you after a while!" I confess that I even felt an inward pity for the man as I laughingly drained his health and returned the flask to my valise. But when I asked him, ten minutes later, the nature of the business in which he was engaged, and he handed me, in response and without comment, the card of a wholesale liquor house, with his own name in crimson letters struck diagonally across the surface, I winked naively to myself and thought "Ah-ha!" And, as if reading my very musings, he said: "Why, certainly, I carry a full line of samples; but, my dear young friend, don't imagine for a minute that I refuse your brand on that account. You can rest assured that I have nothing better in my cases. Whiskey is whiskey wherever it is found, and there is no 'best' whiskey—not in all the world!"

Truly, I thought, this is an odd source for the emanation of temperance sentiments—then said

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aloud: "And yet you engage in a business you dislike! Traffic in an article that you yourself condemn! Do I understand you?"

"Might there not be such a thing," he said, quietly, "as inheriting a business—the same as inheriting an appetite? However, one advances by gradations: I shall *sell* no more. This is my last trip on the road in that capacity: I am coming in now to take charge of the firm's books. Would be glad to have you call on me any time you're in the city. Good-bye." And, as he swung off the slowly moving train, now entering the city, and I stood watching him from the open door of the caboose as he rapidly walked down a suburban street, I was positive his gait was anything but steady—that the step—the figure—the whole air of the man was that of one then laboring under the effects of partial intoxication.

I have always liked peculiar people; no matter where I met them, no matter who they were; if once impressed with an eccentricity of character which I have reason to believe purely unaffected, I never quite forget the person, name or place of our first meeting, or where the interesting party may be found again. And so it was in the customary order of things that, during hasty visits to the city, I often called on the eccentric Mr. Clark, and, as he had promised upon our first acquaint-