

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19799-1 - Youth, Heart of Darkness, the End of the Tether

Joseph Conrad

Excerpt

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YOUTH
HEART OF DARKNESS
THE END OF THE TETHER

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TO

MY WIFE

“ . . . But the Dwarf answered:
‘No, something human is dearer to me
than the wealth of the world.’ ”

GRIMM'S *TALES*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE THREE STORIES in this volume lay no claim to unity of artistic purpose. The only bond between them is that of the time in which they were written. They belong to the period immediately following the publication of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* 5 and preceding the first conception of *Nostromo*, two books which it seems to me, stand apart and by themselves in the body of my work. It is also the period during which I contributed to "Maga"; a period dominated by *Lord Jim* and associated in my grateful memory with the late Mr William Blackwood's encouraging and helpful 10 kindness.

"Youth" was not my first contribution to "Maga." It was the second. But that story marks the first appearance in the world of the man Marlow, with whom my relations have grown very intimate in the course of years. The origins of that gentleman (nobody so far as I know had ever hinted that he was anything but that) – his 15 origins have been the subject of some literary speculation of, I am glad to say, a friendly nature.

One would think that I am the proper person to throw a light on the matter; but in truth I find that it isn't so easy. It is pleasant to 20 remember that nobody had charged him with fraudulent purposes or looked down on him as a charlatan; but apart from that he was supposed to be all sorts of things: a clever screen, a mere device, "a personator," a familiar spirit, a whispering "dæmon." I myself have been suspected of a meditated plan for his capture. 25

That is not so. I made no plans. The man Marlow and I came together in the casual manner of those health-resort acquaintances which sometimes ripen into friendships. This one has ripened. For all his assertiveness in matters of opinion he is not an intrusive person. He haunts my hours of solitude, when, in silence, 30 we lay our heads together in great comfort and harmony; but as we part at the end of a tale I am never sure that it may not be for the last time. Yet I don't think that either of us would care much to survive the other. In his case, at any rate, his occupation would be

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gone and he would suffer from that extinction, because I suspect him of some vanity. I don't mean vanity in the Solomonian sense. Of all my people he's the one that has never been a vexation to my spirit. A most discreet, understanding man. . . .

5 Even before appearing in book-form "Youth" was very well received. It lies on me to confess at last, and this is as good a place for it as another, that I have been all my life – all my two lives – the spoiled adopted child of Great Britain and even of the Empire; for it was Australia that gave me my first command. I
10 break out into this declaration not because of a lurking tendency to megalomania, but, on the contrary, as a man who has no very notable illusions about himself. I follow the instincts of vain-glory and humility natural to all mankind. For it can hardly be denied that it is not their own deserts that men are most proud of, but
15 rather of their prodigious luck, of their marvellous fortune: of that in their lives for which thanks and sacrifices must be offered on the altars of the inscrutable gods.

"Heart of Darkness" also received a certain amount of notice from the first; and of its origins this much may be said: it is well
20 known that curious men go prying into all sorts of places (where they have no business) and come out of them with all kinds of spoil. This story, and one other, not in this volume, are all the spoil I brought out from the centre of Africa, where, really, I had no sort of business. More ambitious in its scope and longer in the
25 telling, "Heart of Darkness" is quite as authentic in fundamentals as "Youth." It is, obviously, written in another mood. I won't characterise the mood precisely, but anybody can see that it is anything but the mood of wistful regret, of reminiscent tenderness.

One more remark may be added. "Youth" is a feat of memory.
30 It is a record of experience; but that experience, in its facts, in its inwardness and in its outward colouring, begins and ends in myself. "Heart of Darkness" is experience too; but it is experience pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case for the perfectly legitimate, I believe, purpose of bringing it
35 home to the minds and bosoms of the readers. There it was no longer a matter of sincere colouring. It was like another art altogether. That sombre theme had to be given a sinister resonance, a tonality of its own, a continued vibration that, I hoped, would hang in the air and dwell on the ear after the last note had been
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After saying so much there remains the last tale of the book, still untouched. "The End of the Tether" is a story of sea-life in a rather special way; and the most intimate thing I can say of it is this: that having lived that life fully, amongst its men, its thoughts and sensations, I have found it possible, without the slightest mis- 5 giving, in all sincerity of heart and peace of conscience, to conceive the existence of Captain Whalley's personality and to relate the manner of his end. This statement acquires some force from the circumstance that the pages of that story – a fair half of the book – are also the product of experience. That experience 10 belongs (like "Youth"'s) to the time before I ever thought of putting pen to paper. As to its "reality," that is for the readers to determine. One had to pick up one's facts here and there. More skill would have made them more real and the whole composition more interesting. But here we are approaching the veiled 15 region of artistic values which it would be improper and indeed dangerous for me to enter. I have looked over the proofs, have corrected a misprint or two, have changed a word or two – and that's all. It is not very likely that I shall ever read "The End of the Tether" again. No more need be said. It accords best with my 20 feelings to part from Captain Whalley in affectionate silence.

1917.

J. C.

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THIS COULD HAVE OCCURRED nowhere but in England, where men and sea interpenetrate, so to speak – the sea entering into the life of most men, and the men knowing something or everything about the sea, in the way of amusement, of travel or of bread-winning. 5

We were sitting round a mahogany table that reflected the bottle, the claret-glasses and our faces as we leaned on our elbows. There was a director of companies, an accountant, a lawyer, Marlow and myself. The director had been a *Conway* boy, the accountant had served four years at sea, the lawyer – a fine crusted Tory, High Churchman, the best of old fellows, the soul of honour – had been chief officer in the P. & O. service in the good old days when mailboats were square rigged at least on two masts and used to come down the China Sea before a fair monsoon with stun'-sails set aloft and aloft. We all began life in the merchant service. And between the five of us there was the strong bond of the sea, and also the fellowship of the craft, which no amount of enthusiasm for yachting, cruising and so on can give, since one is only the amusement of life and the other is life itself. 10 15 20

Marlow (at least I think that is how he spelt his name) told the story, or rather the chronicle of a voyage:–

“Yes, I have seen a little of the Eastern seas; but what I remember best is my first voyage there. You fellows know there are those voyages that seem ordered for the illustration of life, that might stand for a symbol of existence. You fight, work, sweat, nearly kill yourself, sometimes do kill yourself, trying to accomplish something – and you can't. Not from any fault of yours. You simply can do nothing, neither great nor little – not a thing in the world – not even marry an old maid or get a wretched 600-ton cargo of coal to its port of destination. 25 30

It was altogether a memorable affair. It was my first voyage to the East, and my first voyage as second mate; it was also my skipper's first command. You'll admit it was time. He was sixty if a day; a little

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man, with a broad, not very straight back, with bowed shoulders and one leg more bandy than the other, he had that queer twisted about appearance you see so often in men who work in the fields. He had a nut-cracker face – chin and nose trying to come together
5 over a sunken mouth – and it was framed in iron grey fluffy hair, that looked like a chin-strap of cotton wool sprinkled with coal dust. And he had blue eyes in that old face of his, which were amazingly like a boy's, with that candid expression some quite common men preserve to the end of their days by a rare internal
10 gift of simplicity of heart and rectitude of soul. What induced him to accept me was a wonder. I had come out of a crack Australian clipper, where I had been third officer, and he seemed to have a prejudice against crack clippers as aristocratic and high toned. He said to me 'You know, in this ship you will have to work.' I said
15 I had to work in every ship I had ever been in. 'Ah, but this is different, and you gentlemen out of them big ships . . . but there! I daresay you will do. Join to-morrow.'

I joined to-morrow. It was twenty-two years ago; and I was just twenty. How time passes! It was one of the happiest days of my life.
20 Fancy! Second mate for the first time – a really responsible officer! I wouldn't have thrown up my new billet for a fortune. The mate looked me over carefully. He was also an old chap but of another stamp. He had a Roman nose, a snow white, long beard, and his name was Mahon, but he insisted that it should be pronounced
25 Mann. He was well connected; yet there was something wrong with his luck, and he had never got on.

As to the captain, he had been for years in coasters, then in the Mediterranean and last in the West Indian trade. He had never
30 been round the Capes. He could just write a kind of sketchy hand and didn't care for writing at all. Both thorough good seamen of course, and between those two old chaps I felt like a small boy between two grandfathers.

The ship also was old. Her name was the *Judea*. Queer name, isn't it? She belonged to a man Wilmer, Wilcox – some name
35 like that; but he has been bankrupt and dead these twenty years or more, and his name don't matter. She had been laid up in Shadwell basin for ever so long. You may imagine her state. She was all rust, dust, grime – soot aloft, dirt on deck. To me it was like coming out of a palace into a ruined cottage. She was about
40 400 tons, had a primitive windlass, wooden latches to the doors,

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not a bit of brass about her and a big square stern. There was on it, below her name in big letters, a lot of scroll work, with the gilt off, and some sort of a coat of arms, with the motto 'Do or Die' underneath. I remember it took my fancy immensely. There was a touch of romance in it, something that made me love the old thing – something that appealed to my youth!

We left London in ballast – sand ballast – to load a cargo of coal in a northern port for Bankok. Bankok! I thrilled. I had been six years at sea but had only seen Melbourne and Sydney, very good places, charming places in their way – but Bankok!

We worked out of the Thames under canvas, with a North Sea pilot on board. His name was Jermyn, and he dodged all day long about the galley drying his handkerchief before the stove. Apparently he never slept. He was a dismal man, with a perpetual tear sparkling at the end of his nose, who either had been in trouble or was in trouble, or expected to be in trouble – couldn't be happy unless something went wrong. He mistrusted my youth, my common-sense and my seamanship, and made a point of showing it in a hundred little ways. I daresay he was right. It seems to me I knew very little then, and I know not much more now; but I cherish a hate for that Jermyn to this day.

We were a week working up as far as Yarmouth Roads, and then we got into a gale – the famous October gale of twenty-two years ago. It was wind, lightning, sleet, snow and a terrific sea. We were flying light, and you may imagine how bad it was when I tell you we had smashed bulwarks and a flooded deck. On the second night she shifted her ballast into the lee bow, and by that time we had been blown off somewhere on the Dogger Bank. There was nothing for it but go below with shovels and try to right her. And there we were in that vast hold, gloomy like a cavern, the tallow dips stuck and flickering on the beams, the gale howling above, the ship tossing about like mad on her side; there we all were, Jermyn, the captain, everyone, hardly able to keep our feet, engaged on that gravedigger's work and trying to toss shovelfuls of wet sand up to windward. At every tumble of the ship you could see vaguely in the dim light men falling down with a great flourish of shovels. One of the ship's boys (we had two), impressed by the weirdness of the scene, wept as if his heart would break. We could hear him blubbering somewhere in the shadows.

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On the third day the gale died out, and by and bye a north-country tug picked us up. We took sixteen days in all to get from London to the Tyne! When we got into dock we had lost our turn for loading, and they hauled us off to a tier where we remained for
5 a month. Mrs Beard (the captain's name was Beard) came from Colchester to see the old man. She lived on board. The crew of runners had left, and there remained only the officers, one boy and the steward, a mulatto who answered to the name of Abraham. Mrs Beard was an old woman, with a face all wrinkled and ruddy
10 like a winter apple and the figure of a young girl. She caught sight of me once, sewing on a button, and insisted on having my shirts to repair. This was something different from the captains' wives I had known on board crack clippers. When I brought her the shirts, she said: 'And the socks? They want mending, I am sure, and
15 John's – Captain Beard's – things are all in order now. I would be glad of something to do.' Bless the old woman. She overhauled my outfit for me, and meantime I read for the first time *Sartor Resartus* and Burnaby's *Ride to Khiva*. I didn't understand much of the first then; but I remember I preferred the soldier to the philosopher
20 at the time, a preference which life has only confirmed. One was a man, and the other was either more – or less. However, they are both dead, and Mrs Beard is dead, and youth, strength, genius, thoughts, achievements, simple hearts – all dies. . . . No matter.

They loaded us at last. We shipped a crew. Eight able seamen and
25 two boys. We hauled off one evening to the buoys at the dock gates, ready to go out, and with a fair prospect of beginning the voyage next day. Mrs Beard was to start for home by a late train. When the ship was fast we went to tea. We sat rather silent through the meal – Mahon, the old couple and I. I finished first and slipped
30 away for a smoke, my cabin being in a deck-house just against the poop. It was high water, blowing fresh with a drizzle; the double dock gates were opened, and the steam-colliers were going in and out in the darkness with their lights burning bright, a great plashing of propellers, rattling of winches and a lot of hailing
35 on the pier-heads. I watched the procession of headlights gliding high and of green lights gliding low in the night, when suddenly a red gleam flashed at me, vanished, came into view again, and remained. The fore-end of a steamer loomed up close. I shouted down the cabin, 'Come up, quick!' and then heard a startled voice
40 saying afar in the dark 'Stop her, sir.' A bell jingled. Another voice