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THE *NELLIE*,¹ A CRUISING YAWL, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide.

The sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway. In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint, and in the luminous space the tanned sails of the barges drifting up with the tide seemed to stand still in red clusters of canvas sharply peaked, with gleams of varnished sprits. A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness. The air was dark above Gravesend,² and further back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth.³

The Director of Companies was our captain and our host. We four⁴ affectionately watched his back as he stood in the bows looking to seaward. On the whole river there was nothing that looked half so nautical. He resembled a pilot which to a seaman is trustworthiness personified. It was difficult to realize his work was not out there in the luminous estuary but behind him, within the brooding gloom.

Between us there was, as I have already said somewhere,⁵ the bond of the sea. Besides holding our hearts together through long periods of separation it had the effect of making us tolerant of each other's yarns – and even convictions. The Lawyer – the best of old fellows – had, because of his many years and many virtues, the only cushion on deck and was lying on the only rug. The Accountant had brought out already a box of dominoes and was toying architecturally with the bones.⁶ Marlow sat crosslegged right aft, leaning against the mizzen mast. He had sunken cheeks, a yellow complexion, a straight back, an ascetic aspect, and with his arms dropped, the palms of hands outwards, resembled an idol.⁷ The Director, satisfied the anchor had good hold, made his way aft and sat down amongst us. We exchanged a few words

lazily. Afterwards there was silence on board the yacht. For some reason or other we did not begin that game of dominoes. We felt meditative and fit for nothing but placid staring. The day was ending in a serenity of still and exquisite brilliance. The water shone pacifically, the sky without a speck was a benign immensity of unstained light, the very mist on the Essex marshes was like a gauzy and radiant fabric hung from the wooded rises inland and draping the low shores in diaphanous folds. Only the gloom to the west brooding over the upper reaches became more sombre every minute as if angered by the approach of the sun.

And at last in its curved and imperceptible fall the sun sank low, and from glowing white changed to a dull red without rays and without heat, as if about to go out suddenly, stricken to death⁸ by the touch of that gloom brooding over a crowd of men.

Forthwith a change came over the waters and the serenity became less brilliant but more profound. The old river in its broad reach rested unruffled at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks, spread out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth. We looked at the venerable stream not in the vivid flush of a short day that comes and departs for ever, but in the august light of abiding memories. And indeed nothing is easier for a man who has, as the phrase goes, “followed the sea” with reverence and affection, than to evoke the great spirit of the past upon the lower reaches of the Thames. The tidal current runs to and fro in its unceasing service crowded with memories of men and ships it had borne to the rest of home or to the battles of the sea. It had known and served all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake⁹ to Sir John Franklin,¹⁰ knights all, titled and untitled: the great knights errant of the sea. It had borne all the ships whose names are like jewels flashing in the night of time, from the *Golden Hind* returning with her round flanks full of treasure, to be visited by the Queen’s Highness and thus pass out of the gigantic tale, to the *Erebus* and *Terror*, bound on other conquests – and that never returned. It had known the ships and the men. They sailed from Deptford, from Greenwich, from Erith,¹¹ the adventurers and the settlers; Kings’ ships and the ships of men on ‘Change;¹² captains, admirals, the dark “interlopers” of the Eastern trade and the commissioned “generals”¹³ of East India fleets. Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land,

bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth! . . . The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires.

The sun set; the dusk fell on the stream and lights began to appear along the shore. The Chapman lighthouse,¹⁴ a three legged thing erect on a mudflat, shone strongly. Lights of ships moved in the fairway; a great stir of lights going up and going down. And further west on the upper reaches the place of the monstrous town was still marked ominously on the sky, a brooding gloom in sunshine, a lurid glare under the stars.

“And this also,” said Marlow suddenly, “has been one of the dark places of the earth.”¹⁵

He was the only man of us who still “followed the sea.” The worst that could be said of him was that he did not represent his class. He was a seaman but he was a wanderer too, while most seamen lead, if one may so express it, a sedentary life. Their minds are of the stay-at-home order, and their home is always with them – the ship – and so is their country – the sea. One ship is very much like another and the sea is always the same. In the immutability of their surroundings the foreign shores, the foreign faces, the changing immensity of life, glide past, veiled not by a sense of mystery but by a slightly disdainful ignorance; for there is nothing mysterious to a seaman unless it be the sea itself which is the mistress of his existence and as inscrutable as Destiny. For the rest, after his hours of work a casual stroll or a casual spree on shore suffices to unfold for him the secret of a whole continent, and generally he finds the secret not worth knowing. The yarns of seamen have an effective simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But, as has been said, Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted) and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.

His remark did not seem at all surprising. It was just like Marlow. It was accepted in silence. No one took the trouble to grunt even; and presently he said very slow –

“I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here,¹⁶ nineteen hundred years ago – the other day. . . . Light came out of this river since – you say Knights? Yes, but it is like a running

blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker – may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday. Imagine the feelings of say a commander of a fine – what d’ye call ’em – trireme in the Mediterranean, ordered suddenly to the north; run overland across the Gauls¹⁷ in a hurry; put in charge of one of these craft the legionaries – a wonderful lot of handy men they must’ve been too – used to build, apparently by the hundred, in a month or two, if we may believe what we read.¹⁸ Imagine him here – the very end of the world, a sea the colour of lead, a sky the colour of smoke, a kind of ship about as rigid as a concertina – and going up this river with stores, or orders – or what you like. Sandbanks, marshes, forests, savages, precious little to eat fit for a civilized man, nothing but Thames water to drink. No Falernian wine¹⁹ here, no going ashore. Here and there a military camp lost in a wilderness like a needle in a bundle of hay – cold, fog, tempests, disease, exile and death – death skulking in the air, in the water, in the bush. They must have been dying like flies here. Oh yes – he did it. Did it very well too, no doubt, and without thinking much about it either, except afterwards to brag of what he had gone through in his time, perhaps. They were men enough to face the darkness. And perhaps he was cheered by keeping his eye on a chance of promotion to the fleet at Ravenna,²⁰ by and bye, if he had good friends in Rome and survived the awful climate. Or think of a decent young citizen in a toga – perhaps too much dice, you know – coming out here in the train of some prefect,²¹ or tax-gatherer, or trader even – to mend his fortunes. Land in a swamp, march through the woods, and in some inland post feel the savagery, the utter savagery had closed round him, all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forests, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men. There’s no initiation either into such mysteries. He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible which is also detestable. And it has a fascination too, that goes to work upon him. The fascination of the abomination – you know. Imagine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender – the hate.”

He paused.

“Mind,” he began again, lifting one arm from the elbow, the palm of the hand outwards, so that with his legs folded before him he had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus flower – “Mind, none of us would feel exactly like this. What saves us is efficiency – the devotion to efficiency. But these chaps were not much account really. They were no colonists, their administration was

merely a squeeze, and nothing more I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force – nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get and for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind – as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea – something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to.” . . .

He broke off. Flames glided on the river, small green flames, red flames, white flames pursuing, overtaking, joining, crossing each other – then separating slowly or hastily. The traffic of the great City went on in the deepening night upon the sleepless river. We looked on, waiting patiently; there was nothing else to do till the end of the flood; but it was only after a long silence, when he said in a hesitating voice – “I suppose you fellows remember I did once turn fresh-water sailor for a bit,” that we knew we were fated, before the ebb began to run, to hear about one of Marlow’s inconclusive experiences.

“I don’t want to bother you much with what happened to me personally,” he began, showing in this remark the weakness of many tellers of tales who seem so often unaware of what their audience would best like to hear, “yet to understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap. It was the furthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me – and into my thoughts. It was sombre enough too – and pitiful – not extraordinary in any way – not very clear either. No. Not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light.

I had then, as you remember, just returned to London after a lot of Indian Ocean, Pacific, China Seas – a regular dose of the East – six years or so, and I was loafing about hindering you fellows in your work and invading your homes – just as though I had got a heavenly mission to civilize you. It was very fine for a time but after a bit I did get tired of resting. Then I began to look for a ship – I should think the hardest

work on earth. But the ships wouldn't even look at me. And I got tired of that game too.

Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps.²² I would look for hours at South America, or Africa or Australia and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say: When I grow up I will go there. The North Pole was one of these places I remember. Well, I haven't been there yet and shall not try now. The glamour's off. Other places were scattered about the Equator and in every sort of latitude all over the two hemispheres. I had been in some of them and . . . well, we won't talk about that. But there was one yet – the biggest – the most blank so to speak – that I had a hankering after.

True, by this time it was not a blank space any more. It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery – a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness. But there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country and its tail lost in the depths of the land. And as I looked at the map of it in a shop window it fascinated me like a snake would a bird – a silly little bird. Then I remembered there was a big concern, a Company²³ for trade on that river. Dash it all, I thought to myself, they can't trade without using some kind of craft on that lot of fresh water – steamboats! Why shouldn't I try to get charge of one. I went on along Fleet Street²⁴ but could not shake off the idea. The snake had charmed me. You understand it was a Continental concern, that Trading society;²⁵ but I have a lot of relations living on the Continent because it's cheap and not so nasty as it looks – they say.

I am sorry to own I began to worry them. This was already a fresh departure for me. I was not used to get things that way – you know. I always went my own road and on my own legs where I had a mind to go. I wouldn't have believed it of myself but, then – you see – I felt somehow I must get there by hook or by crook. So I worried them. The men said 'My dear fellow' and did nothing. Then – would you believe it – I tried the women. I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work – to get a job! Heavens! Well, you see, the notion drove me. I had an aunt,²⁶ a dear enthusiastic soul. She wrote: 'It will be delightful.

I am ready to do anything, anything for you. It is a glorious idea. I know the wife of a very high personage in the Administration and also a man who has lots of influence²⁷ with, etc. etc. She was determined to make no end of fuss to get me appointed skipper of a river steam-boat, if such was my fancy.

I got my appointment – of course; and I got it very quick. It appears the Company had received news that one of their captains had been killed in a scuffle with the natives. This was my chance and it made me the more anxious to go. It was only months and months afterwards, when I made the attempt to recover what was left of the body, that I heard the original quarrel arose from a misunderstanding about some hens. Yes, two black hens. Fresleven²⁸ – that was the fellow's name, a Dane – thought himself wronged somehow in the bargain so he went ashore and started to hammer the chief of the village with a stick. Oh, it didn't surprise me in the least to hear this and at the same time to be told that Fresleven was the gentlest, quietest creature that ever walked on two legs. No doubt he was, but he had been a couple of years already out there engaged in the noble cause, you know, and he probably felt the need at last of asserting his self-respect in some way. Therefore he whacked the old nigger mercilessly while a big crowd of his people watched him, thunderstruck, till some man – I was told the chief's son – in desperation at hearing the old chap yell, made a tentative jab with a spear at the white man – and of course it went quite easy between the shoulder-blades. Then the whole population cleared into the forest expecting all kinds of calamities to happen, while, on the other hand, the steamer Fresleven commanded left also in a bad panic in charge of the engineer, I believe. Afterwards nobody seemed to trouble much about Fresleven's remains till I got out and stepped into his shoes. I couldn't let it rest though, but when an opportunity offered at last to meet my predecessor, the grass growing through his ribs was tall enough to hide his bones. They were all there. The supernatural being had not been touched after he fell. And the village was deserted, the huts gaped black, rotting, all askew within the fallen enclosures. A calamity had come to it sure enough. The people had vanished. Mad terror had scattered them, men, women and children, through the bush and they had never returned. What became of the hens I don't know either. I should think the cause of progress got them anyhow. However, through this glorious affair I got my appointment before I had fairly begun to hope for it.

I flew around like mad to get ready and before forty-eight hours I was crossing the Channel to show myself to my employers²⁹ and sign the contract. In a very few hours I arrived in a city that always makes me think of a whited sepulchre.³⁰ Prejudice no doubt. I had no difficulty in finding the Company's offices.³¹ It was the biggest thing in the town and everybody I met was full of it. They were going to run an oversea empire and make no end of coin by trade.

A narrow and deserted street in deep shadow, high houses, innumerable windows with venetian blinds, a dead silence, grass sprouting between the stones, imposing carriage archways right and left, immense double doors standing ponderously ajar. I slipped through one of these cracks, went up a swept and ungarnished staircase,³² as arid as a desert, and opened the first door I came to. Two women, one fat and the other slim, sat on straw-bottomed chairs knitting black wool.³³ The slim one got up and walked straight at me – still knitting with downcast eyes – and only just as I began to think of getting out of her way, as you would for a somnambulist, stood still and looked up. Her dress was as plain as an umbrella cover and she turned round without a word and preceded me into a waiting room. I gave my name and looked about. Deal table in the middle, plain chairs all round the walls, on one end a large shining map marked with all the colours of a rainbow.³⁴ There was a vast amount of red – good to see at any time because one knows that some real work is done in there, a deuce of a lot of blue, a little green, smears of orange, and, on the East Coast, a purple patch to show where the jolly pioneers of progress drink the jolly lager-beer. However, I wasn't going into any of these. I was going into the yellow. Dead in the centre. And the river was there – fascinating – deadly – like a snake. Ough! A door opened, a white-haired secretarial head, but wearing a compassionate expression, appeared, and a skinny forefinger beckoned me into the sanctuary. Its light was dim and a heavy writing desk squatted in the middle. From behind that structure came out an impression of pale plumpness in a frock-coat. The great man³⁵ himself. He was five feet six I should judge, and had his grip on the handle end of ever so many millions. He shook hands I fancy, murmured vaguely, was satisfied with my French. *Bon voyage*.

In about forty-five seconds I found myself again in the waiting room with the compassionate secretary who full of desolation³⁶ and sympathy made me sign some document. I believe I undertook amongst other things not to disclose any trade secrets. Well, I am not going to.