

THE SEA AND THE JUNGLE

BY H. M. TOMLINSON

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
CHRISTOPHER MORLEY

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INTRODUCTION

It was the Putney bus that did it. Mr. Tomlinson admits it himself. There he was, a newspaper man, in his middle thirties, with a family, taking the 8.35 to town every morning, "dutifully and busily climbing the revolving wheel." He looked up from his desk and the Skipper was grinning at him.

They went out on Fleet Street—to the Rainbow, I dare say. Or perhaps, since he mentions Ludgate Circus, it was Shireff's wine cellar, down among the foundations of the railway bridge. The Skipper told the astonishing tale of the voyage the *Capella* was going to make—across the Atlantic to Pará, and then 2,000 miles inland. An Inland Voyage indeed: few of us would have guessed that an ocean-going tramp, 300 feet long and drawing 23 feet, could navigate two-thirds of the way across South America, almost to the Bolivian border and the shadow of the Andes.

But Tomlinson tells you the story. The Skipper said, "Why not come along? Of course there were plenty of reasons against it. But the Skipper, touched by some premonitory vision (whose wisdom makes you now the richer, as you will know when you read this book) put it to the spin of chance. He pointed to the Putney bus. "If that bus takes up two more passengers before it passes here, you've got to come." Only one man got on, the bus neared, and Tommy breathed freely. He was safe

in his revolving wheel. Then the Skipper ran to meet the thing and jumped aboard himself.

The Skipper, as is shipmasters' habit, was evidently more jocund of demeanour ashore than abroad. For in the course of the voyage we find him less frolicsome. And no wonder: for the conning of ocean craft up jungle rivers, where the very foliage rustles along your gear and great tree trunks come bumping downstream at five knots, must seem blasphemy to the seaman.

The excellent Bates, so Tomlinson tells us, crossed from England to the Amazon in thirty-eight words. Thank heaven that H. M. T. did not, for in the sea passage of the *Capella* we have surely one of the great achievements of maritime narrative. There need be no fatuous comparisons. Sometimes they are useful, as a label for the instruction of those who must have things expressed in terms of what they know already. But in speaking of this book, that has earned its right to stand among the most thoughtful of our time, we can be absolute. The author's own casual phrase will serve. "This is a travel book for honest men." Beneath the sheer beauty of the writing you will find that plain virtue, that honesty, that fidelity to the ungainly fact. The *Capella*, heavy-laden sea-wagon (with her load line lifted) was a wet ship. Two hatches were stove; Henry James was no good for reading; there were cockroaches. So the *Capella*, and those of her company, come alive. You can see the Chief's cabin as though you had sailed in her: the crumbled tobacco on the logbook, the wicker chair, the carafe, the photographs, the bottle of gin in the bunk. Is there any steamship in print that one knows better? Mr. Tomlinson will think, perhaps, that it's none of our business, but I wish he had included a

photo of her. In my copy of the First Edition, which I haven't seen for years (I lent it to someone) I seem to remember a drawing, done by the author himself, showing her distantly in the great perspective of the Madeira River and the forest. But I would have liked a closer look.

So this is the kind of book you hand, without too much comment, to the right kind of reader—the reader capable of slow, watchful, consecutive enjoyment. For this is a strange book. It has lived through difficult times. Thunders and stinks and many queer doings have been upon the earth since it was first published: surely enough to have silenced any of the voices that spoke aforetime. And here is a story of things very remote. The 5,200 tons of Welsh coal were cinders long ago, the men who laid rails through the Madeira jungle are dead of fever or otherwise, Tinker, the dog, chews no more saloon mats, the *Capella* herself, stout sea-wagon, is vanished from Lloyd's Register. (She was torpedoed during the War.) Yet this story of one voyage still holds and reaffirms, its tenure in print. There must be some reason; and you will guess part of it as you read.

I say it is a strange book: for the terror and indolence of the sea, followed by the amazements of the Brazilian forests, suggested many queer thoughts to Mr. Tomlinson. He has a way of putting down, just as though there were no harm in it, some of the beautiful and dangerous things men think. Told with such gracious directness and simplicity, told with such sincerity and shrewdness and (every now and then) with a good man's almost angry pride in the beauty of the world. His favourite theme (he has used it elsewhere too) is of

the man who escapes from an office somewhere east of St. Paul's and gets aboard ship and goes to a jungle. But he is candid enough to admit that it's not all pie. The dragons of the fairy tales, he says somewhere, were nothing compared to tropic mosquitoes. There are hot nights of horror, and rancid butter that has to be dipped with a spoon. But there are anxieties even more curious. There are the ponderings of those who have seen for themselves how broad the world's great shoulder is, how vast and imperturbed her scheme of things. The sauba ant of Brazil carries a banner just as briskly as any of us and seems to know what he is doing quite as well as we do. And "there did not appear to be any ant favoured by the god of ants. You have to cut your own leaf and get along with it, if you are a sauba."

One reason, I think, for this book's enormous appeal to the reflective reader—and one reason why the hastier sort, who like their print well methyated with plot, will never abide it—is its feeling of scrupulous truth. Although it is a book of escape, it is not a book of flight from reality. Heavens, no! There is not a page in it that does not exhale the strangest flavour of veracity—fidelity to that queer inward truth we all recognise. "Faith is not blind, but critical, yet instantly transcends to knowledge at the faintest glimmer of authentic light." So you will find him thinking, perched on a rock in High Brazil; and behind and below him "a monstrous cesspool," fluttered over by hundreds of jewelled butterflies. It would be absurd to quote favourite passages, for here is the book in your hands and you will choose your own. But what a tapestry of pictures and episodes, each one authentic to our secret instinct that life is like that. The rebellious black heifer; the Brazilian girl lying dead on the hand-car with her little

booted feet jolting over the rough way; Old Man Jim and the dynamite; Biddell, the engineer who died and left his butterfly net hanging on the post; the young doctor of the construction camp with his two cherished bottles of ginger ale; the group of sea-stained men on deck, when they got back to Barbados, taking turns with the glasses to stare again at civilisation's women on the deck of the mail-boat . . . one could go on indefinitely. For here is richness, here is the scrutiny of a wise and grave and tender mind, swift to every movement of pity and loveliness. If you relish ironies, consider (when you have finished this book) that the man who wrote it was destined, not long later, to be reporting the Western Front.

And what comment on this book would be complete without allusion to the three or four interpolated yarns, plummed in with such startling effect—yarns brilliant enough to make the reputation of any fictioneer. Each has its own co-efficient of truth, which you can gauge for yourself, and you'll come upon them unexpectedly and thereafter read them aloud when fit company is gathered. Sandy's tale of Handsome Jack, for instance; the story of the Steam Shovel; the fable of the Tiger in Hampshire; Captain Davis's Head. But I think the account of Old Man Jim's fishing trip with the dynamite will stay with you as long as any.

When you go to the icebox late at night to forage (there was no ice in the icebox, hot nights on the *Capella*) you will sometimes be uncertain what's in the milk-jug, milk or cream. There's no way to tell except by tilting it up and looking at the edge of the liquid. If it looks a bit thin and pale, then it's not cream. The same thing applies to books. There are a great many that look all right in the jug, but tilt them up a bit, look

through the edge of the stuff, it's pretty meagre. This one is genuine cream. It's Grade A. Turn to it where you like, you will find it rich, nourishing, full of brave doctrine. I hope you don't mind my very humble simile. For this fine book takes us a long way apart from literary palaver. There is in it the strict, proud and humble sincerity of a brave man talking of great things. It takes us a long way from every kind of smallness.

It was not until long after I had first read it that one day it occurred to me to look up the Madeira River on a map of South America. I had a real thrill, for there, far over at one side of the great green area of Brazil, was a little wavy red line. The railroad that the *Capella* took the coal for! The little jungle track where they sweated on that hand-car for fear the ship would sail back before they got there—and the light they thought meant collision, was a firefly. Yes, there it was, actually in the atlas, copyright by the geographer. That bridge across the Jaci River, I wonder if it's built yet?

But all these matters, and the pale brown-eyed girl in the suburban train, with the china knob on her umbrella, I leave to yourself. The joke of it is that she probably never heard of this book which, as Tommy says with grave humour, was written for her. But it was written for you too.

CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

DECEMBER, 1927.

THE SEA AND THE JUNGLE

I

THOUGH it is easier, and perhaps far better, not to begin at all, yet if a beginning is made it is there that most care is needed. Everything is inherent in the genesis. So I have to record the simple genesis of this affair as a winter morning after rain. There was more rain to come. The sky was waterlogged and the grey ceiling, overstrained, had sagged and dropped to the level of the chimneys. If one of them had pierced it! The danger was imminent.

That day was but a thin solution of night. You know those November mornings with a low, corpse-white east where the sunrise should be, as though the day were still-born. Looking to the dayspring, there is what we have waited for, there the end of our hope, prone and shrouded. This morning of mine was such a morning. The world was very quiet, as though it were exhausted after tears. Beneath a broken gutter-spout the rain (all the night had I listened to its monody) had discovered a nest of pebbles in the path of my garden in a London suburb. It occurs to you at once that a London garden, especially in winter, should have no place in a narrative which tells of the sea and the jungle. But it has much to do with it. It is part of the heredity of this book. It is the essence of this adventure of mine that it began on the kind of day

which so commonly occurs for both of us in the year's assortment of days. My garden, on such a morning, is a necessary feature of the narrative, and much as I should like to skip it and get to sea, yet things must be taken in the proper order, and the garden comes first. There it was: the blackened dahlias, the last to fall, prone in the field where death had got all things under his feet. My pleasure was a dark area of soddened relics; the battalions of June were slain, and their bodies in the mud. That was the prospect in life I had. How was I to know the Skipper had returned from the tropics? Standing in the central mud, which also was black, surveying that forlorn end to devoted human effort, what was there to tell me the Skipper had brought back his tramp steamer from the lands under the sun? I knew nothing to look forward to but December, with January to follow. What should you and I expect after November, but the next month of winter? Should the cultivators of London backs look for adventures, even though they had read old Hakluyt? What are the Americas to us, the Amazon and the Orinoco, Barbadoes and Panama, and Port Royal, but tales that are told? We have never been nearer to them, and now know we shall never be nearer to them, than that hill in our neighbourhood which gives us a broad prospect of the sunset. There is as near as we can approach. Thither we go and ascend of an evening, like Moses, except for our pipe. It is all the escape vouchsafed us. Did we ever know the chain to give? The chain has a certain length—we know it to a link—to that ultimate link, the possibilities of which we never strain. The mean range of our chain, the office and the polling booth. What a radius! Yet

it cannot prevent us ascending that hill which looks, with uplifted and shining brow, to the far vague country whence comes the last of the light, at dayfall.

It is necessary for you to learn that on my way to catch the 8.35 that morning—it is always the 8.35—there came to me no premonition of change. No portent was in the sky but the grey wrack. I saw the hale and dominant gentleman, as usual, who arrives at the station in a brougham drawn by two grey horses. He looked as proud and arrogant as ever, for his face is as a bull's. He had the usual bunch of scarlet geraniums in his coat, and the stationmaster assisted him into an apartment, and his footman handed him a rug; a routine as stable as the hills, this. If only the solemn footman would, one morning, as solemnly as ever, hurl that rug at his master, with the umbrella to crash after it! One could begin to hope then. There was the pale girl in black who never, between our suburb and the city, lifts her shy brown eyes, benedictory as they are at such a time, from the soiled book of the local public library, and whose umbrella has lost half its handle, a china nob. (I think I will write this book for her.) And there were all the others who catch that train, except the young fellow with the cough. Now and then he does miss it, using for the purpose, I have no doubt, that only form of rebellion against its accursed tyranny which we have yet learned, physical inability to catch it. Where that morning train starts from is a mystery; but it never fails to come for us, and it never takes us beyond the city, I well know.

I have a clear memory of the newspapers as they were that morning. I had a sheaf of them, for it is

my melancholy business to know what each is saying. I learned there were dark and portentous matters, not actually with us, but looming, each already rather larger than a man's hand. If certain things happened, said one half the papers, ruin stared us in the face. If those things did not happen, said the other half, ruin stared us in the face. No way appeared out of it. You paid your half-penny and were damned either way. If you paid a penny you got more for your money. Boding gloom, full-orbed, could be had for that. There was your extra value for you. I looked round at my fellow passengers, all reading the same papers, and all, it could be reasonably presumed, with foreknowledge of catastrophe. They were indifferent, every one of them. I suppose we have learned, with some bitterness, that nothing ever happens but private failure and tragedy, unregarded by our fellows except with pity. The blare of the political megaphones, and the sustained panic of the party tom-toms, have a message for us, we may suppose. We may be sure the noise means something. So does the butcher's boy when the sheep want to go up a side turning. He makes a noise. He means something, with his warning cries. The driving uproar has a purpose. But we have found out (not they who would break up side turnings, but the people in the second class carriages of the morning train) that now, though our first instinct is to start in a panic, when we hear another sudden warning shout, there is no need to do so. And perhaps, having attained to that more callous mind which allows us to stare dully from the carriage window though with that urgent din in our ears, a reasonable explanation of the increasing excitement and flushed anxiety of the great Statesmen and

their fuglemen may occur to us, in a generation or two. Give us time! But how they wish they were out of it, they who need no more time, but understand.

I put down the papers with their calls to social righteousness pitched in the upper register of the teatray, their bright and instructive interviews with flat earthers, and with the veteran who is topically interesting because, having served one master fifty years, and reared thirteen children on fifteen shillings a week, he has just begun to draw his old age pension. (There's industry, thrift, and success, my little dears!) One paper had a column account of the youngest child actress in London, her toys and her philosophy, initialled by one of our younger brilliant journalists. All had a society divorce case, with sanitary elisions. Another contained an amusing account of a man working his way round the world with a barrel on his head. Again, the young prince, we were credibly informed in all the papers of that morning, did stop to look in at a toyshop window in Regent Street the previous afternoon. So like a boy, you know, and yet he is a prince of course. The matter could not be doubted. The report was carefully illustrated. The prince stood on his feet outside the toy shop, and looked in.

To think of the future as a modestly long series of such prone mornings, dawns unlit by heaven's light, new days to which we should be awakened always by these clamant cockcrows bringing to our notice what the busy-ness of our fellows had accomplished in nests of intelligent and fruitful china eggs, was enough to make one stand up in the carriage, horrified, and pull the communication cord. So I put down the papers and turned to the landscape. Had I known the Skip-

per was back from below the horizon—but I did not know. So I must go on to explain that that morning train did stop, with its unfailing regularity, and not the least hint of reprieve, at the place appointed in the Schedule. Soon I was at work, showing, I hope, the right eager and concentrated eye, dutifully and busily climbing the revolving wheel like the squirrel; except, unluckier than that wild thing so far as I know, I was clearly conscious, whatever the speed, the wheel remained forever in the same place. Looking up to sigh through the bars after a long spin there was the Skipper smiling at me.

I saw an open door. I got out. It was as though the world had been suddenly lighted, and I could see a great distance.

We stood in Fleet Street later, interrupting the tide. The noise of the traffic came to me from afar, for the sailor was telling me he was sailing soon, and that he was taking his vessel an experimental voyage through the tropical forests of the Amazon. He was going to Para, and thence up the main stream as far as Manaos, and would then attempt to reach a point on the Madeira river near Bolivia, 800 miles above its junction with the greater river. It would be a noble journey. They would see Obydos and Santarem, and the foliage would brush their rigging at times, so narrow would be the way, and where they anchored at night the jaguars would come to drink. This to me, and I have read Humboldt, and Bates, and Spruce, and Wallace. As I listened my pipe went out.

It was when we were parting that the sailor, who is used to far horizons and habitually deals with affairs in a large way because his standards in his own business

are the skyline and the meridian, put to me the most searching question I have had to answer since the city first caught and caged me. He put it casually when he was striking a match for a cigar, so little did he himself think of it.

"Then why," said he, "don't you chuck it?"

What, escape? I had never thought of that. It is the last solution which would have occurred to me concerning the problem of captivity. It is a credit to you and to me that we do not think of our chains so disrespectfully as to regard them as anything but necessary and indispensable, though sometimes, sore and irritated, we may bite at them. As if servitude fell to our portion like squints, parents poor in spirit, green fly, reverence for our social superiors, and the other consignments from the stars. How should we live if not in bonds? I have never tried. I do not remember, in all the even and respectable history of my family, that it has ever been tried. The habit of obedience, like our family habit of noses, is bred in the bone. The most we have ever done is to shake our fists at destiny; and I have done most of that.

"Give it up," said the Skipper, "and come with me."

With a sad smile I lifted my foot heavily and showed him what had me round the ankle. "Poo," he said. "You could berth with the second mate. There's room there. I could sign you on as purser. You come."

I stared at him. The fellow meant it. I laughed at him.

"What," I asked conclusively, "shall I do about all this?" I waved my arm round Fleet Street, source of all the light I know, giver of my gift of income tax, limit of my perspective. How should I live when with-

drawn from the smell of its ink, the urge of its machinery?

"*That*," he said. "Oh, damn that!"

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It was his light tone which staggered me and not what he said. The sailor's manner was that of one who would be annoyed if I treated him like a practical man, arranging miles of petty considerations and exceptions before him, arguing for hours along rows of trifles, and hoping the harvest of difficulties of no consequence at the end of the argument would convince him. Indeed I know he is always impatient for the next step in any business, and not, like most of us, for more careful consideration. "Look here," said the sailor, pointing to Ludgate Circus, "see that Putney 'bus? If it takes up two more passengers before it passes this spot then you've got to come."

That made the difficulty much clearer. I agreed. The 'bus struggled off, and a man with a bag ran at it and boarded it. One! Then it had a clear run—it almost reached us—in another two seconds!—I began to breathe more easily; the danger of liberty was almost gone. Then the sailor jumped for the 'bus before it was quite level, and as he mounted the steps, turned, and held up two fingers with a grin.

Thus was a voyage of great moment and adventure settled for me.

When I got home that night I referred to the authorities for the way to begin an enterprise on the deep. What said Hakluyt? According to him it is as easy as this: "Master John Hawkins, with the *Jesus* of Lubeck, a ship of 700 tunnes, and the *Solomon*, a ship of seven score, the *Tiger*, a barke of 50 and the *Swallow*