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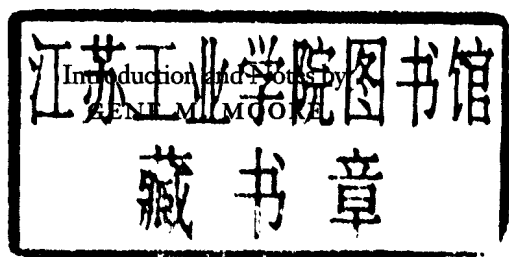
JOSEPH CONRAD



SELECTED STORIES

HEART
DARKNESS
and other stories

Joseph Conrad



WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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First published, in 1995, by Wordsworth Editions Limited
8B East Street, Ware, Hertfordshire SG12 9ET
New introduction and notes added in 1999

ISBN 978-1-85326-240-1

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Introduction and notes © Wordsworth Editions 1999

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Typeset by Antony Gray
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write broad-ranging, jargon-free Introductions and to provide Notes that would assist the understanding of our readers, rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

KEITH CARABINE
General Advisor

INTRODUCTION

As Joseph Conrad wrote in his Author's Note to this volume, 'it is well 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'.¹ These stories tell of men who go beyond the normal routine of ordinary life to test themselves where they have no business, whether from curiosity or from necessity, and of the illegitimate and deplorable kinds of 'spoil' that result from such encounters. Conrad tells us not only of the spoil brought back, but also of the spoils left by the wayside; and prying into these stories can spoil us too, by denying us the comfort of our unthinking pride in the virtues of our 'civilisation'. As Marlow says, '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.'

¹ *Youth - Heart of Darkness - The End of the Tether: Three Stories by Joseph Conrad* (J. M. Dent and Sons, London 1946), pp. vi-vii

Like all great stories, they deserve to be read more than once. The first reading is like a voyage into the unknown, without a map or a guidebook beyond the suggestion of the title: the freshness of 'Youth', the gloom of *Heart of Darkness*, the weariness of "The End of the Tether". Conrad involves us in the story so that we share the feelings of the characters, their curiosity and perplexity, their hopes and disappointments, as if they were our own. His prose easily dissolves before our eyes, and we are transported into the world of the story, so that we are likely to forget Marlow's presence at the mahogany table, or on board the *Nellie*, and even forget our own presence as we read. We are allowed to pry into the affairs of Marlow or Kurtz or Captain Whalley (where we have no business) and we are free to return with such spoil as we can find. Only on a second or third or fourth reading do we become more aware of the hypnotic process set in motion by the words on the page, and begin to appreciate the consummate artistry of Conrad's prose. In what follows, I shall assume that you have already journeyed through these stories at least once. Let us return to them to examine some of the more curious features of the spoil they contain.

For example, let us consider the very first word of 'Youth'. What does the narrator of the story mean when he begins by saying that '*This* could have occurred nowhere but in England'? We are taught that demonstrative pronouns like 'this' always require antecedents, but what is the antecedent of 'this'? We assume that 'this' stands for the story we are about to hear, but it could stand just as well for something like the 'strong bond of the sea' that unites Marlow and his sailing friends around bottles of claret, where they tell stories about the glorious days of sailing ships. Of course England has no monopoly on love of the sea, or on storytelling, or claret; so the question remains: why could the story happen only in England (when in fact most of it occurs not in England at all, but at sea), and why is this important? Is Conrad, who became a naturalised British citizen in 1886, using Marlow to 'naturalise' his story by claiming the right to speak for traditional English values? Or is it possible that the narrator who gives us Marlow's story may in fact misunderstand it? Doesn't the narrator know that stories of trial by water and by fire are universal, and as least as old as the Bible? Marlow even gives the plot away at the beginning, when he announces that the story of his first real voyage to the East will end in failure: life is such that one can't even do a little thing like 'get a wretched 600-ton cargo of coal to its port of destination'. But such is the enthusiasm of youth that we are likely to forget this warning as we read on, and share fully in Marlow's efforts to help keep the *Judea* afloat.

The disasters that befall the *Judea* are almost too numerous to be believed, and yet the story closely follows Conrad's own experiences as second mate in the wooden barque *Palestine*, which sank off the coast of Sumatra in 1883. Conrad altered the name of the ship slightly, but he kept the name of the first mate, Mahon. He also kept the ancient-sounding surname of Captain Beard, but the first name of the master of the *Palestine* was apparently too good to be true: he was not John but *Elijah* Beard. Conrad tempts us to believe that the 'youth' of the title can only be Marlow, but Marlow's youth, like that of his listeners, is only a memory by the time he tells his story. The one character in the story who seems to possess the secret of eternal youth is the bandy-legged captain with the clear blue eyes of a boy, who at the age of at least sixty has at last been given command of his own ship. The story is filled with subtle paradoxes: Marlow also receives his own 'first command' – but in the form of a rowboat that he is reluctant to bring to shore; while the same captain who insists on staying with his ship to the bitter end is capable, in an earlier incident, of abandoning ship altogether in order to rescue his wife. The story is always more than meets the eye.

When this collection of stories was first published in 1902 as *Youth: A Narrative, and Two Other Stories*, reviewers were prompt with praise of 'Youth', and one or two liked 'The End of the Tether' best of all, but few spoke up for *Heart of Darkness*. 'Youth' had the additional advantage of seeming to fit into the familiar Victorian genre of boys' adventure stories. But into what tradition does *Heart of Darkness* fit? As Conrad says in the Author's Note, the mood of the story, unlike that of 'Youth', is 'anything but the mood of wistful regret, of reminiscent tenderness'. And while 'Youth' shows Marlow encountering an East that remains strange, expressing passive and silent 'unconcern' for the crew of the *Judea*, in *Heart of Darkness* Marlow discovers something far worse than unconcern, and finds it not in others halfway round the world, but in the heart of his own civilisation.

'And this also . . . has been one of the dark places of the earth.' Marlow begins his narrative in *Heart of Darkness* by reminding us that England has been as dark and savage to the first Roman colonists as the blank spaces of central Africa to more recent 'emissaries of light'. Marlow says not *was* but *has been*, using the perfect tense to show that the darkness in question still shadows and impinges on the present, like the dark clouds looming over London. And once again Marlow gives the whole plot of his story away right at the beginning, by evoking the isolation and madness that confronted the Roman citizen on the

primeval shores of the Thames in terms that could be applied with equal justice to Kurtz.

In the last year of his life, Conrad described African colonialism as 'the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration'.² Isolated in an alien land, without regular reminders of civilisation in the form of the local butcher and policeman, Marlow becomes convinced that anyone can be made to confront the horror at the heart of darkness. It is surely no accident that Marlow chooses the butcher and the policeman to represent the values of 'civilisation', to remind us that even though the Congo is filled with policemen and butchers, their work has little to do with restraint or civilisation. In an earlier story ironically entitled 'An Outpost of Progress' Conrad described with relentless sarcasm the fatal imbecility of two average traders abandoned in the bush; in *Heart of Darkness* he raises the stakes to the level of a remarkable man of genius, an orator, a visionary, an extremist. The only remedy for horror, as Marlow suggests, lies in the idolatrous worship of a powerful idea: 'something you can set up, and bow down to, and offer a sacrifice to'. Shocked by the corruption and brutality of the Congo, Marlow hopes to learn something of this redemptive 'idea' from the remarkable Mr Kurtz, but he finds instead that Kurtz has himself become an ivory-pated idol whose methods are 'unsound'. Sitting like a statue of Buddha, Marlow tells finally how the horror of Kurtz followed him back to the door of Kurtz's Intended in the 'sepulchral city' where she keeps her own sentimental - but no less idolatrous - cult of the memory of her betrothed.

This death-ridden story is based on Conrad's own journey to the Congo in 1890, which shattered his health and left him thoroughly demoralised. He had experienced colonialism as a child in Russian Poland, and had seen Dutch, English and Arab traders scrambling for advantage in the Malay Archipelago, so why would he have wanted to go and work in Africa? Wasn't he aware of its dreadful reputation for corruption and brutality? As it happens, thanks to King Leopold's skilful management of what we would today call public relations, the first protests against the actual conditions in the Congo were not circulated until *after* Conrad's visit. Sir Henry Morton Stanley had established the first trading stations on the Congo only ten years earlier, and Leopold's right to develop the Congo had been officially recognised only in 1885, just five years before Conrad's journey. The

² Conrad, 'Geography and Some Explorers,' *Last Essays* (J. M. Dent and Sons, London 1955), p. 17

first denunciation of the brutality of the ivory-grabbing pilgrims was not written until Conrad was already there, and it was not published until shortly after Conrad had returned to Europe.³

By the time Conrad wrote the story, in the autumn of 1898, news of the murderous practices of the 'pilgrims' was leaking out; but by then Conrad had seen the situation with his own eyes. In his *Congo Diary*, for example, Conrad recorded the immediate sense of unease he felt the moment he arrived at Matadi (the Company Station): 'Feel considerably in doubt about the future. Think just now that my life amongst the people (white) around here cannot be very comfortable. Intend avoid acquaintances as much as possible.'⁴ The only bright spot was his meeting with Roger Casement, an intrepid Irish Protestant who would later be knighted for his efforts to expose the dark heart of King Leopold's private colony (and, later still, would be stripped of his knighthood and hanged for treason for helping to prepare the Irish Easter Rebellion of 1916). In the diary he kept of his month-long trek from the Company Station at Matadi to the Central Station at Stanley Pool, Conrad recorded seeing two dead bodies along the trail and a skeleton tied to a post, and was asked to give first aid to a boy about thirteen years old with a gunshot wound in the head.

Marlow basically retraces Conrad's footsteps, although Conrad was never in command of a steamer (except for a period of ten days on the return journey when he replaced the regular captain, who was sick). Conrad also changed certain things for literary effect: as against Marlow's slow movement upriver, Conrad made the thousand-mile journey upstream in less than a month. The river may well have seemed vast and lonely to Conrad, but it was not totally isolated, since by 1890 some eleven steamers were operating on the Congo along a stretch of water roughly equivalent to the length of the Mississippi River. When Conrad arrived at his destination he found not just a hacked-out clearing but a small permanent settlement with offices, warehouses, workers' quarters, vegetable plantations, a jail and a hospital. Among the people Conrad may have encountered on his journey was a trader

3 The historian George Washington Williams (1849-91) visited the Congo to explore the possibility of recruiting other African Americans to return and work in the new colony, and travelled inland from the coast with a caravan just ahead of Conrad. His open letters to King Leopold and to US President Benjamin Harrison were published as pamphlets in the autumn of 1890. Thereafter, most criticism from within the Congo came from missionaries who were not dependent on King Leopold or his trading concessions for their livelihoods.

4 Conrad, *Congo Diary and Other Uncollected Pieces* (edited by Zdzislaw Najder, Doubleday, Garden City 1978), p. 7

called Léon Rom, who was later named chief of the Stanley Falls (Kurtz's Inner) Station. In 1895 a British traveller reported that Rom had decorated his flower-bed with the skulls of some twenty-one victims of his displeasure, including women and children. At Stanley Falls, Conrad's steamship took on board a trader named Klein (whose name means 'small' in German, similar to Kurtz, derived from *kurz*, 'short') who was ill, and died on the voyage downstream.⁵

Why does Marlow become so fascinated with Kurtz? Although Marlow does not hear of Kurtz until he arrives at the Company Station, he identifies with him more intensely as he moves upriver, until, like another Stanley in search of Livingstone, the only reason for his journey is to find Kurtz and to hear his voice. Restoring contact with Kurtz is apparently the official reason for Marlow's journey as well, but a close (re)reading of the scenes at the Central Station suggests that Marlow is actually caught up in a local plot designed to delay the relief of Kurtz until it is too late, so that others can lay claim to the ivory Kurtz has collected.⁶ We are told that Kurtz 'presented himself as a voice', and as the darkness falls on the Thames, Marlow also becomes for his listeners 'very little more than a voice'. Yet when Marlow finally reaches Kurtz, he finds not a voice but an open and voracious mouth, like the gaping maw of Hell in medieval sculptures. Most of what we learn about Kurtz's last days comes to us at second hand, from his last disciple, the cosmopolitan Russian 'harlequin'.

As news of Congolese atrocities began to spread after the turn of the century, readers came increasingly to recognise the importance of Conrad's story. It inspired T. S. Eliot's poem 'The Hollow Men', which took 'Mistah Kurtz - he dead' for an epigraph. Since that time, *Heart of Darkness* has come to be seen as one of the fundamental documents of literary modernism, and the title has become a media byword to describe the horrors of famine or war. This fame is surely deserved, but the canonical standing of the story has meant that it is

5 The story of Léon Rom appears in Adam Hochschild's vivid and appalling history of the Congo Free State, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Houghton Mifflin, Boston and New York 1998), p. 145. Information about Klein is presented in Norman Sherry's *Conrad's Western World* (Cambridge University Press, 1971), which remains the most detailed account of Conrad's voyage to the Congo. Sherry's evidence suggests that the main purpose of Conrad's journey upriver was not to rescue Klein but to repair a large troop-carrying steamer disabled by a snag.

6 This 'covert plot' is discussed by Cedric Watts in *Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness': A Critical and Contextual Discussion* (Mursia, Milan 1977), pp. 82-92. See also Todd Gray Willy's 'The "Shamefully Abandoned" Kurtz: A Rhetorical Context for *Heart of Darkness*' (*Conradiana*, 10:2, 1978, pp. 99-112)

often read as a timeless and universal classic without a basis in specific historical circumstances. Kurtz's 'horror' has also proved highly adaptable to other horrors, as when Orson Welles compared Kurtz with Adolf Hitler in two half-hour radio adaptations of the story (in which nearly all the parts are spoken in Welles's magnificent voice). Welles also planned to adapt the story as his first Hollywood film, but faced the classic problem of how to film a first-person narrative. His radically innovative solution involved turning Marlow into a 'subjective camera', so that the viewer would witness all the events as if through Marlow's eyes. This was of course easier said than done. When the project ran over budget and was cancelled, Welles made *Citizen Kane* instead, and much of the macabre majesty of Kurtz seems to have passed into the personality of Charles Foster Kane. Forty years later, film director Francis Ford Coppola transplanted *Heart of Darkness* from Africa to Vietnam in *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and turned Marlow's rescue effort into a mission to 'terminate' Kurtz 'with extreme prejudice'. Coppola, with the help of actor Marlon Brando, had to invent extra lines for Kurtz to speak, to give a voice to the man whose voice in Conrad's story is celebrated but rarely heard. A documentary about the making of Coppola's film, *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* (1991), chronicles these difficulties and also includes excerpts from Welles's radio broadcasts. Nicolas Roeg's version of *Heart of Darkness* (released on videotape in 1994) follows Conrad's story more closely, but again faces the difficulty of finding words worthy of Kurtz (played by John Malkovich).

In the hundred years since the story first appeared, the shifting attentions of literary critics have swung like a pendulum from text to context and back again, from studies that explore the formal or inherent features of the text to studies claiming that its meaning depends primarily on its place in human culture or history. Marlow's insistence that the 'horror' is not limited to Africa has had the effect of encouraging many critics to dismiss the specific circumstances of the Congo and see Kurtz's situation as emblematic of the alienation of modern man, or the meaninglessness of supposedly civilised life. Marlow thus journeys not into Africa but into the self, from the control of the cultivated superego to the barbarism of the id, or from the surface of civilisation down into a classical underworld, to confront Kurtz as a second self in the guise of Lucifer or Faust. Claude Lévi-Strauss has claimed that for Amazon tribes 'a frog is good to think', because its amphibious shape can assume a variety of totemic meanings. In a similar fashion, the ambiguous 'horror' of Kurtz's last breath has been good for Conrad scholars to think, and has provided a rich

field for speculation about the return to the womb, the fall from grace, or the aporias of language. Readers who first encounter the story in school are likely to recognise the experience of Adam Hochschild, whose lecture notebooks were 'filled with scribbles about Freudian overtones, mythic echoes, and inward vision'.⁷ Angered by the cultural solipsism of such abstractions, the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe launched an unrestrained attack on *Heart of Darkness* in 1975, claiming that it was the work of a 'bloody racist' who showed too little sympathy for the oppressed to warrant his high standing in the canon of Western literature. Achebe argues that in human and historical terms, Marlow's discomfort at having to lie for Kurtz does not count for much when measured against the very real sufferings of Africans in places like the 'grove of death'. His diatribe has provoked many spirited responses, and the continuing interest generated by the 'Achebe controversy' serves to confirm the relevance of the story in discussions of multiculturalism or postcolonial discourse.⁸ In the wake of Achebe's attack, feminist and gender critics have read the story as one that denigrates and 'silences' not only black Africans but also women.⁹

The narrator tells us that the meaning of Marlow's tale is not explicit or obvious, but emerges 'only as a glow brings out a haze'. This vaporous quality has sometimes been seen as a sign of failure on Marlow's (or Conrad's) part, but it has been hailed more often as a subtly evocative technique reflecting the general inadequacy of language to express truth. In 1948 F. R. Leavis elevated Conrad to the ranks of the 'great tradition' of English novelists, but complained of his 'adjectival insistence', his obsessive overuse of negative modifiers like 'implacable' or 'inscrutable' or 'unspeakable' which deny the possibility of a more precise meaning. Later critics have viewed this lack of precision as a positive strength for its power to evoke and maintain a dreamlike atmosphere, in which Marlow's journey upriver to confront his *alter ego* in Kurtz is also a struggle with the limits of language. Ian Watt has shown how Conrad's impressionistic method involves a local process of

7 Hochschild, p. 3

8 Achebe's 'An Image of Africa' first appeared in the *Massachusetts Review*, 18, 1977, pp. 782-94. Replies include those by Cedric Watts in 'A Bloody Racist': About Achebe's View of Conrad', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 13, 1983, pp. 196-209; Ian Watt in 'Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the Critics', *North Dakota Quarterly*, 57:3, Summer 1989, pp. 5-15; and David Denby in 'Jungle Fever', *The New Yorker*, 6 November 1995, pp. 118-29.

9 See, for example, Johanna M. Smith, "'Too Beautiful Altogether': Patriarchal Ideology in *Heart of Darkness*", in Ross C. Murfin (ed.), *Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness: A Case Study in Contemporary Criticism* (Bedford Books, Boston 1989), pp. 179-95; Nina Pelikan Straus, 'The Exclusion of the Intended from Secret Sharing', in Elaine Jordan (ed.), *Joseph Conrad* (St Martin's, New York 1996), pp. 48-66

'delayed decoding' in which the reader shares in Marlow's momentary inability to grasp what is happening (as when the 'little sticks' flying about the boat turn out to be arrows, or the decorative knobs on the posts at Kurtz's station turn out to be skulls). The more general sense in which Kurtz provides an absent or 'hollow' centre for the story's meaning has been explored by Tzvetan Todorov, while Peter Brooks has examined the ways in which Marlow's narrative is an 'unreadable' report.¹⁰

The final story in this volume, 'The End of the Tether', is a classic example of a tale that needs to be read more than once. The first-time reader shares in the crew's puzzlement at the strange behaviour of Captain Whalley; and only on a second or later reading can one begin to enjoy Conrad's ironic play with the notions of blindness and insight. Like the two previous stories, this also is a tale of disillusionment. Captain Whalley, a former 'dare-devil' skipper in the bygone days of sailing ships, cannot admit that he has grown too old to be of use to his distant daughter. For her sake he becomes less than honest, hiding his precarious financial situation from Captain Eliott and selling his services to grotesque scoundrels like Mr Massy and Mr Sterne. As Conrad explained, 'A character like Whalley's cannot cease to be frank with impunity.'¹¹ He ceases to be frank *before* his eyesight fails, when we are still able to see the bustling development of a colonial city through his eyes and understand the social and cultural changes that have led to his secret humiliation. When it turns out that he is fatally caught in a trap of his own devising, Conrad does not treat him sentimentally, but strikes a delicate balance between pathos and black humour.

Captain Whalley's long walk may leave first-time readers wondering why so much attention is devoted to the details of an uneventful stroll through a city that is never named. The city in question is clearly Singapore, and Norman Sherry has shown that Conrad's use of the local topography is not only accurate but highly symbolic.¹² In a

¹⁰ Leavis in *The Great Tradition* (Chatto & Windus, London 1948); Watt in *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (University of California Press, Berkeley 1979), pp. 169-80; Todorov (English version) in 'Knowledge in the Void: *Heart of Darkness*', *Conradiana*, 21:3, 1989, pp. 161-72; Brooks in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Vintage, New York 1985), pp. 238-63

¹¹ letter to David Meldrum of 1902, in Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies, (eds), *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 441

¹² In *Conrad's Eastern World* (Cambridge University Press, 1966), Sherry includes a map of 'Captain Whalley's walk', and discusses Conrad's use of the same topography in other fictional works. Gavin Young's *In Search of Conrad* (Hutchinson, London 1991) is a lively account of the author's quest for what survives of the settings of 'Youth' and 'The End of the Tether'.

subsequent essay, J. H. Stape has demonstrated that the use of local detail is also deeply ironic in ways that Captain Whalley cannot see: "The counterpointing of insight and blindness is revealed in the very structure of Singapore as a city divided into two non-communicating parts."¹³ For example, the native quarters swarm with human traffic, while the official avenues are 'vast and empty', which not only suggests the 'hollowness' of colonialism but also parallels the situation on board the *Sofala*, where the normal behaviour of the Serang and the native passengers stands in sharp contrast to the obsessive vacuity of Massy's blinding greed, Sterne's blind ambition and the visionary drunkenness of the second engineer Jack. The captain's secret blindness is symbolic of the larger cultural and historical circumstances of which he is a part. The ending of the story can also be seen as a counterpart to Marlow's famous 'lie' to the Intended: when Captain Whalley's last letter finally reaches his daughter, she lies to herself by insisting that what she felt for her absent and forgotten father was love.

These three stories are classics in the sense that no one has yet been able to say exactly what they mean, or to discover the limits of their power to trouble and 'spoil' their readers. They tell of a time when the glorious adventure of exploration was passing from the earth, and of the heavy human cost of what passes for glory. They tell of men who fail to realise their dreams, yet remind us that such dreams are necessary and sometimes almost justifiable.

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13 J. H. Stape, 'Conrad's "Unreal City": Singapore in "The End of the Tether"', in Gene M. Moore (ed.), *Conrad's Cities: Essays for Hans van Marle* (Rodopi, Amsterdam - Atlanta, Georgia 1992), pp. 85-96

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YOUTH: A NARRATIVE

Youth

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.

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,¹ 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.² service in the good old days when mail-boats were square-rigged at least on two masts, and used to come down the China Sea before a fair monsoon with stun'-sails set alow and aloft. We all began life in the merchant service. 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.

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.

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 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 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