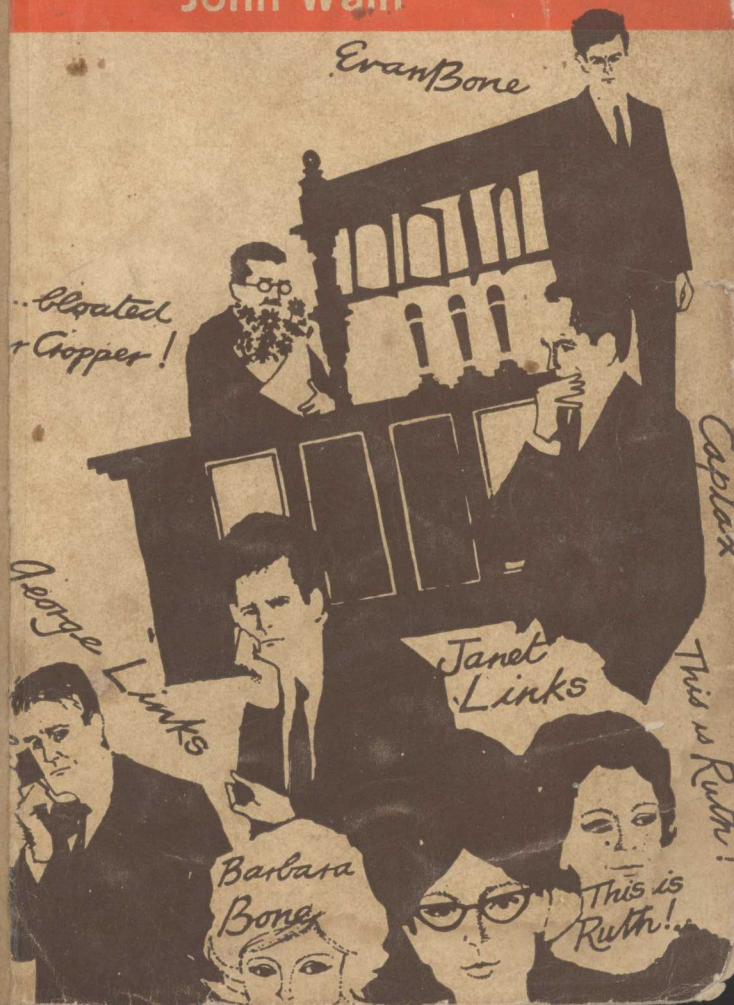


a Penguin Book

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A Travelling Woman

John Wain



PENGUIN BOOKS

1930

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JOHN WAIN



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JOHN WAIN

PENGUIN BOOKS

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ARTHUR'S

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*I'm not good-looking
And I don't dress fine
But I'm a travelling woman
With a travelling mind.*

Traditional, *apud* Bessie Smith

U.S.

I

'WELL, as I keep saying,' said Janet Links, 'I think ^{1947/89} psychoanalysis would help you.'

George Links stared at his wife with his habitual listless moodiness. He was trying to remember why he had married her in the first place. It was only four years ago, but he found he could not remember.

'The name itself is an ^{ignorant} coinage,' he remarked in his thin, scholarly voice. 'I'd like to know where they think that "O" comes in. It should really be "psychanalysis" - either that or -'

Janet Links did not wait to hear the rest of the sentence before beginning to shuttle the tea-things about, preparatory to taking them into the scullery for washing. They were sitting in the kitchen of their cottage in a small Oxfordshire country town. It was a pleasant cottage, the town itself was reasonably attractive, and George Links, who at twenty-eight was a junior partner in an old-established firm of country solicitors, could not be said to be doing badly. Nevertheless, he did not feel happy, and made no secret of the fact. It was now autumn, and the previous summer, ^{alleging} to himself the boredom of country life as his motive, he had become entangled with the wife of one of his senior partners, a Mrs Elsi Cropper. His wife, discovering at once what he was doing, had broken up the idyll by threatening to bring it to Mr Cropper's notice, ignoring George Links's protest that if she did he would be sacked and they would both starve together. They had no children, largely because George Links was unable to see himself in the role of parent, and she preferred the prospect of starvation to the present reality of sharing her husband with Mrs Cropper, a red-haired woman fifteen years younger than Mr Cropper and twenty-one months older than George Links.

As it happened, Mrs Cropper was not really George Links's type, and not even the highest concentration of self-deception could make him think, except for a few minutes at a time, that Janet had robbed him of something valuable by breaking up the *liaison*. What he really needed, and needed quite consciously, was something to grumble about; and he had, over tea, been explaining how much he needed it, while Janet half listened and half merely waited for him to finish, so as to bring up her own invariable suggestion: that he should seek the help of a psycho-analyst.

'... to anchor this floating body of resentment to some fixed point outside myself,' George Links had finished, stabbing the air with his tea-spoon. He did this as if aware that the teaspoon was silver and dated from the eighteenth century. He had no money to speak of, and neither had any member of his family for several generations back, but the Linkses had faint but unmistakable pretensions to gentility; a few pieces of Georgian silver, a family portrait or two, and the odd item of Sheraton or Chippendale furniture were jealously husbanded, bequeathed, and shared out among them as important emblems of Links taste, traditional Links discrimination. George's contribution to the family continuum of *bon ton* was his pedantry. He spent some time each day in reading the more stylish newspapers with an eye open for split infinitives, imprecise uses of metaphor, and ignorance-revealing mistakes in spelling, such as 'rhodomontade'. To ferret out such a mistake, and gravely indicate its presence by a deliberate pecking movement of the hand holding a Georgian tea-spoon, could usually be counted on to make his day. He was thin and rather stooping, with sandy hair; except when he was being pedantic, he could not be called bad-looking, in the desiccated way that some men affect until it becomes their nature; but he was being pedantic a good deal of the time.

Janet, too, was not bad-looking, except when she was wearing her glasses, which had large and ornate rims and went up to a point at the corners. They looked like carnival glasses, de-

liberately assumed as part of a silly disguise. The best feature of her face was her high cheek-bones, and the spectacles ruined the effect of these. George Links, had he ever looked at her closely enough, might have noticed this, but he was given to saying that women resented any interference by their men-folk in the all-important mysteries of dress and appearance. In the first months of their marriage Janet had sometimes asked him 'How do I look?', and he had broken her of the habit by answering each time: 'You must know already that you look all right, or else you wouldn't bring your appearance to my attention.'

So, this Sunday afternoon in November, he had ridden the hobby-horse of his dissatisfaction up and down the length of Janet's patience, which was considerable; leaving her, as she cleared the tea-things away, to make her usual exit-line.

'I think psycho-analysis would help you.'

She was already moving away into the kitchen, certain in advance that George Links would receive the suggestion with a moody silence. But this afternoon was the memorable one, the point where it all began. For her husband, speaking with theatrical quietness, pulled her up short half-way to the scullery door with: 'You may very well be right.'

Janet kept very still, with her weight distributed equally on both feet. To move might be to spoil everything.

'I might very well be what?'

'Right.'

She moved a few more paces, disappeared through the scullery door, and could be heard setting the dishes down on the table before she came back and confronted him.

'George.'

'Yes.'

'You say I'm right? You *do* think an analyst could help you?' 分析家

'I think a psycho-analyst could help me.'

Impulsively she knelt by his chair, so that their faces were level.

‘Darling – and you’ll find one and go to him?’

‘I *have* found one.’

She ~~seemed ready~~ to faint with delight, as if he had won a football pool without telling her and now revealed that he had spent the money on a mink coat, a Rolls-Royce, and a staff of household servants who were at that moment waiting outside the back door, ready to enter and begin work immediately by washing the tea-things.

‘You’ve *found* one? Already . . . ? But who –’

‘Captax put me on to one.’

For an instant she looked troubled; Fredric Captax was an old friend of George Links’s whom she had never met, and for this quite sufficient reason she distrusted him.

‘Are you sure Captax is reliable? It’s so important to get a good –’

‘Captax is a medical man. He has a wide acquaintance among doctors of all kinds.’

‘Including abortionists.’ (This was true, and George Links had once been unwise enough to pass on to his wife an anecdote about Captax and an abortionist friend of his.)

Aware of having missed a trick, George Links said stiffly, ‘To be sure. Doctors and medical men of all kinds. Some of them are abortionists. Others specialize in removing portions of people’s spinal vertebrae and replacing them with ball-bearings made of plastic. Others again spend their time giving nervous breakdowns to dogs by setting them tasks beyond their comprehension. There’s probably no category of doctors in which he hasn’t got a few acquaintances. So when I happened to mention to him that you thought I should consult a psychotherapist, he immediately –’

‘Oh, darling! Did you *really*?’

‘. . . And now I’ve told you, I’m going to go ahead and make an appointment for a preliminary –’

‘Oh, George, *darling* . . . Will you *really*?’

‘A man named Volumis.’

George Links was, in all this, blamelessly telling the truth. He had genuinely consulted Captax, over lunch on his last visit to London. Captax was not strictly a doctor; he was a research worker in pathology, with a reputation for competence which gave him the *entrée* to most quarters of the medical world. George Links's story departed from the truth by falling short of, rather than overshooting, the limits of complete frankness.

'And now, damn it,' he had said to Captax petulantly, as they ate *scampi*, 'she's taken it into her head that I'm not good enough as I stand: she wants to have me altered.'

'Altered?'

'Messed about with mentally. Wants me to have psycho-analysis.'

Captax looked thoughtful for a moment, fingering a piece of toast. A pyknic type, with a potato-face and domed forehead, he easily looked thoughtful. Then, a gleam in his deep-set eyes, he looked up.

'And of course you're going to do it.'

'Of course I'm *not* going to do it. As if I hadn't got enough to bother about . . . it's nothing short of -'

'*Don't be an ass.*'

George Links fell silent, and Captax, after repeating solemnly, 'Don't be an ass,' went on, prodding the air above his plate with a blunt finger:

'There aren't any psycho-analysts in the country, where you live. So you'll have to come up to town, and fairly frequently too. Advantage number one: frequent visits to town on your Tod Sloan - no need to account for your doings. Leave her to keep the home fires burning.'

'Yes, that's all very well, but -'

'Just what all you married men are always scheming and plotting to engineer - and here it is dumped in your lap. Advantage number two: it goes on for years. You'll have time to settle in to all your old routines - become a familiar figure again in the old spots.'

'Sounds all right in theory, but I don't know when you expect me to fit it all in. I'll be dashing for trains half the time.'

Beaming, Captax stabbed the air even more vigorously. 'Advantage number *three*! To do any good, you'll have to see the man several times a week. And so as not to break the current, it would obviously be best for you to stay at least one night in town.'

At the prospect of several years of licensed overnight visits to London, George Links began to brighten. Turning with renewed appetite to his *scampi*, he looked up only to say eagerly: 'You're right, Fredric. Fix it for me, will you? Find me a cheap one.'

Affably, then, the November sun shone on George Links as he stepped out of the cottage door one afternoon a week or so after the conversation with his wife. Wrapped in an agreeable stillness, with the brown leaves curled and comfortable on their twigs as if no end-of-the-year gale would ever come to tear them down, the countryside seemed a stage set, gay and warmly lit, through which he might dance, to the music of a hidden orchestra, towards the yellow brick tower of the railway station. Something of the affability of the sun got into the kiss he gave his wife, the wave he gave her, with his free hand, from the corner of the road, and the spring of his step on the dry ground; something of it stayed with him in the drumming and puffing of the train, in the controlled clamour and suppressed excitement of Paddington Station, in the smooth, patient stopping and starting of the bus – and the last drops of it had scarcely evaporated when he found himself on the doorstep of a house in a quiet street, staring, with gathering anxiety, at the plain metal plate: 'Mr C. Volumis.'

THE saloon bar was very full, and at first George Links did not see Captax, who was in a corner with his back to the room, talking to a very pretty girl and a fair-haired, willowy young man. But by the time he had bought himself a drink and raised it to his lips, Captax had turned, seen him, and was beckoning.

'Well, how did it go?' he asked in a jovial, half-rallying tone.

'All right,' said George Links non-committally; he was not eager to begin discussing his analysis, a topic on which he felt sensitive, in front of strangers.

'Just preliminaries this time, I expect,' Captax went on, nodding his head.

'Introduce me.'

'Well, it's a long way round to get to a simple point, but it ought to -'

'Introduce me.'

The girl laughed across at George Links - rather invitingly, he thought - and, without waiting for Captax, mentioned her name and that of her husband. George Links nodded stiffly; he was annoyed that the willowy youth should be married to the girl. But he tucked her name away in his memory: *Barbara Bone*. He surmised that her maiden name had been something more elegant than Bone; something, at any rate, that did not alliterate with 'Barbara'.

'George has been seeing his analyst,' said Captax grandly, as if proud to be associated with a man who had an analyst.

'Really, have you?' said Barbara Bone, leaning forward slightly. 'Does he do you good? Do you go often? Very often, I suppose. Does he makes you do free association? I expect you lie on a couch, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'What d'you mean, yes?'

'Yes I have, and he does do me good, and I do go often, and I do go very often, and he does make me do free association, and I do lie on a couch.' George Links smiled as he reached the end of his sentence, to blunt any possibly wounding effect. He was aiming at a tone of light badinage, not discouraging sarcasm.

Barbara Bone's husband said: 'A head-shrinker. Your head doesn't look as if it's shrunk.'

'How long have you been going to him?' asked Barbara Bone.

George Links felt unwilling to admit, after all this, that he had only just been for the first time and had not even lain on the couch yet. So he said: 'Oh, ages. It's a long business, you know.'

Captax had been over at the bar, asking for cigarettes, during this exchange; he now came back and said: 'Well, the next thing we must do for George, having found him an analyst, is to fix him up with some digs. Then he can really get started.'

Barbara Bone's pretty, oval little face looked from one to the other, puzzled.

'Get started? I thought -'

'He's just kicked off this evening, haven't you, George?'

'Yes,' said George Links between his teeth.

'But you said -' Mrs Bone began. Then she broke off, shot a sympathetic look at George Links, and, probably to cover up the awkward moment, bent her head and began to rummage in her handbag. Obviously she now thought of him as a mental cripple, a pathological liar who was doing the only possible thing, for the sake of himself and society, by seeking psycho-analytical treatment.

George Links looked coldly at Captax, who merely said, 'We'd better start thinking at once. Where does the man hang out, George? Has he got a consulting-room, or d'you go to his house?'

'I go to his house. It's near Swiss Cottage.'

'Swiss Cottage, eh?' said Captax musingly. 'Now who do we know who lives that way? Can't you two think of anybody who might find George a corner to sleep in, once a week?'

Barbara Bone's husband put his glass down carefully, evidently so as not to spill his drink, and then began writhing and jerking with laughter.

'What is it, Evan?' she asked him.

Evan! George Links thought.

'You know what it is,' he said, between curiously well-controlled gusts of laughter. 'You know who lives out there.'

'You mean -'

'Of course!' shouted Captax, beginning to dance up and down. '*Ruth!*'

'But yes!'

'Just exactly what he's -'

'*RUTH!*'

They all laughed for a long time. George Links did his best, meanwhile, to conceal the pain he was feeling. Some fundamental insecurity in his nature made it particularly abhorrent to him to feel left out. He stood quite still, holding his glass in his rigid right hand, waiting for them to let him in on their laughter as tensely as one waits for the dentist to stop drilling.

Instead of entering on any explanation, however, Captax, once the first frenzy of his laughter had spent itself, simply grabbed George Links by the elbow and said, 'This way. Quick now - no time to waste.'

'Where are we going?'

'To the telephone, of course.'

They went down some steps. The instrument awaited them. Captax began to search his pockets for pennies.

'What exactly are you up to, Fredric?'

'You'll see. Right, that's three. I want one more. Come on, surely you've -'

'Yes, yes, I dare say I've got a penny, but first I want to have some idea of -'

'Ah, here's one. Right, I shan't need yours.' George Links noticed that Captax dialled the number from memory. 'Hullo, is that you, Ruth? Yes, Fredric. Fine, thanks. Listen, Ruth, get ready to be asked a favour. Are you ready? I'll tell you what kind. No, don't be alarmed. It's simply that there's this fellow, this friend of mine, George Links his name is, who needs a room one night a week in your district. Yes, only one. It's his analyst. His analyst lives there. Well, look, I thought it wouldn't be too difficult for you to ...'

A week later, George Links, carrying a small suitcase, walked down the calm tree-lined street looking at the numbers, found the right one, unlatched the gate, walked up to the door, and rang. While waiting for an answer he looked round the garden; it bore witness to a love of growing plants which extended to many types commonly regarded as weeds. Whoever tended it had scattered mixed flower-seeds lavishly and allowed the results, if any, to compete as best they could with the hardier sowings of nature and chance. Nature and chance, at the present moment, were making the better showing.

He rang again. The afternoon quiet was more intense than it would have been in his own village. Were they out? But this Ruth had told Captax, telephoning from the pub, that she would be in to receive him and to discuss the terms on which he might rent an attic room in her house for one night a week. He rang again.

A tall man in a dark-blue jersey and flannel trousers came round the side of the house. He was large-limbed and walked as if put together rather loosely, with plenty of play at the joints.

'I thought I heard the bell,' he said. 'I was in the garden. Would you be Mr Links?'

'Yes.'

'I'm Edward Cowley.'

He seemed to bring out the name with a slight, barely perceptible effort, as a man does who knows that his name will