

1

The *Nellie*¹, a cruising yawl, swung and was at rest². The wind was nearly calm. The only thing for it was to wait for the turn of the tide.

The sea-reach³ of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway. Here the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint. In the luminous space the tanned sails of the barges were drifting up with the tide. They stood still in red clusters of canvas, with gleams of varnished sprits. A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea. The air was dark above Gravesend. Farther back, it condensed into a mournful gloom. It was brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth.

The Director of Companies was our captain and our host. We were four. We affectionately watched his back. He stood in the bows. He was looking to seaward. On the whole river there was nothing that looked half so nautical. He resembled a pilot. A seaman may trust a pilot, of course. It was difficult to realize that his work was not out there in the luminous estuary, but behind him. His work was within the brooding gloom.

Between us there was the bond of the sea. Besides our connection through long periods of separation, we were tolerant of each other's stories — and even convictions. The Lawyer — the best of old fellows — had many years and many virtues. And he had the only cushion on deck. So he was lying on the only rug.

¹ **The Nellie** — «Нелли», название яхты

² **was at rest** — застыла

³ **sea-reach** — устье

The Accountant brought a box of dominoes, and was toying with the bones. Marlow sat cross-legged¹ right aft. He was leaning against the mizzen-mast². He had sunken cheeks, a yellow complexion, a straight back, and an ascetic aspect. With his arms dropped, the palms of hands outwards, he resembled an idol. The director was satisfied with the anchor and sat down amongst us. We exchanged a few words lazily.

Afterwards there was silence on board the yacht. For some reason we did not begin that game of dominoes. We felt meditative. We were just 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 mist on the Essex marsh was like a gauzy and radiant fabric. It hung from the wooded rises inland. It was draping the low shores in diaphanous folds. Only the gloom to the west became more sombre every minute.

At last, the sun sank low in its curved and imperceptible fall. From glowing white it changed to a dull red without rays and without heat. The gloom was brooding over a crowd of men.

Forthwith a change came over the waters. 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. We looked at the venerable stream in the august light of memories. And indeed nothing is easier for a man who, as the phrase goes, “follows the sea” with reverence and affection, than to evoke the great spirit of the past upon the lower reaches of the Thames.

¹ **sat cross-legged** — сидел скрестив ноги

² **mizzen-mast** — бизань-мачта

The tidal current runs to and fro¹. It is crowded with memories of men and ships. It knew and served all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin, the great titled and untitled knights of the sea. It bore all the ships whose names were like jewels in the night, from the *Golden Hind* to the *Erebus* and *Terror*. Yes, it knew the ships and the men. They sailed from Deptford, from Greenwich, from Erith — the adventurers and the settlers; kings' ships and the ships of captains, admirals, the dark "interlopers" of the Eastern trade, and the "generals" of East India fleets, hunters for gold or pursuers of fame. The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires!

The sun set. The dusk fell on the stream. Lights began to appear along the shore. The Chapman light-house² shone strongly. Lights of ships moved in the fairway. And farther west on the upper the place of the monstrous town was marked ominously on the sky. It was a brooding gloom in sunshine, a lurid glare under the stars.

"And this is also," said Marlow suddenly, "one of the dark places of the earth."

He was the only man of us who still "followed the sea." The worst thing was that he did not represent his class. He was a seaman, but he was a wanderer, too, while most seamen lead a sedentary life. Their home is always with them — the ship. So is their country — the sea. One ship is very much like another. The sea is always the same. In the immutability of their surroundings the foreign shores, the foreign faces, the immensity of

¹ **to and fro** — туда-сюда

² **Chapman light-house** — маяк Чепмен

life, glide past. There is nothing mysterious to a seaman but the sea itself. The sea is the mistress of his existence and as inscrutable as Destiny.

2

After his hours of work, a casual stroll or a casual spree on shore unfolds for him the secret of a whole continent. Generally he finds no secrets there. The stories of seamen have a direct simplicity. The whole meaning of it lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical. To him the meaning of an episode was not inside like but outside.

His remark did not seem surprising. It was just like Marlow. It was accepted in silence. No one grunted. Presently he said, very slow,

“I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago — the other day... Light came out of this river since — you say Knights? Yes; but it is like a blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker. And the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday. Imagine the feelings of a commander of a fine trireme in the Mediterranean. He received the order to go north. To run overland across the Gauls in a hurry. They were wonderful men, indeed! If we may believe what we read, of course. Imagine him here — the very end of the world. Sand-banks, marshes, forests, savages, nothing to eat, nothing but Thames water to drink. No wine here. Only a military camp in a wilderness, like a needle in a bundle of hay — cold, fog, tempests, disease, exile, and death. Death in the air, in the water, in the bush. The people were dying like flies here. Oh, yes, they were brave men. Brave enough to face the darkness. Think of a young citizen

in a toga. He is a tax-gatherer, or a trader. There's no initiation into such mysteries. He lived in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable. And it has a fascination, too. The fascination of the abomination — you know, imagine the regrets, the wish to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate.”

He paused.

“Listen,” he began again.

He lifted one arm from the elbow, the palm of the hand outwards. So had the pose of a Buddha in European clothes and without a lotus-flower.

“Listen, none of us can feel exactly like this. What saves us is efficiency — the devotion to efficiency. But these chaps were no colonists. Their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors. For that you want only brute force. You can't boast of it, when you have it. Your strength is just an accident, it arises from the weakness of others. They grab what they can get. It was just robbery with violence, just murder. The conquest of the earth... They just take it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea. An unselfish belief in the idea is something you can bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to...”

He stopped. Flames glided in the river, small green flames, red flames, white flames. They were pursuing, overtaking, joining, crossing each other — then separating slowly or hastily. The traffic of the great city went on in the night upon the sleepless river. We looked on. We were waiting patiently.

After a long silence, he said,

“I suppose you fellows remember I once became a fresh-water sailor. I don't want to bother you much

with what happened to me personally. But you must understand the effect of it on me. You must 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 farthest point of navigation. It was the culminating point of my experience. It threw some light on everything about me — and into my thoughts. It was sombre enough, too — and pitiful — not extraordinary — not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it threw some light.

As you remember, I returned to London after a lot of Indian Ocean, Pacific, China Seas. I spent six years or so in the East. I was loafing about. I was hindering you in your work and invading your homes. Then I began to look for a ship. It was the hardest work on earth. But the ships didn't even look at me. And I got tired of that game.

When I was a little chap I liked maps. I could 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. When I saw one that looked particularly interesting on a map I liked to 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 did not visit it. And I shall not try now. Other places were scattered about the hemispheres. I was in some of them, and... well, we won't talk about that. But there was one yet — the biggest, the most blank.

By this time it was not a blank space anymore. It is filled with rivers and lakes and names. It ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery. It became a place of darkness. But there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river. You can see it on the map. It

resembles an immense snake, with its head in the sea, its body over a vast country, and its tail in the depths of the land. And as I looked at the map of it in a shop-window, it fascinated me. I was a silly little bird. Then I remembered there was a big concern, a Company for trade on that river. Dash it all!¹ I thought to myself, they can't trade without steamboats! Why not try to get charge of one?² I went on along Fleet Street, but could not shake off the idea. The snake was charming me.

You understand it was a Continental concern, that Trading society. I have a lot of relations on the Continent, because it's cheap and not nasty, they say.

I began to worry them. The men said 'My dear fellow,' and did nothing. Then — do you believe it? — I tried the women. I, Charlie Marlow! Heavens! Well, you see, the notion drove me. I had an aunt, 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 influence with,' etc. She decided to get me appointed skipper of a river steamboat.

3

I got my appointment — of course. I got it very quick. One of the captains was killed in a scuffle with the natives. This was my chance. It was only months and months afterwards, when I recovered his body. The original quarrel arose from a misunderstanding about some hens. Yes, two black hens. Fresleven —

¹ **Dash it all!** — Чёрт возьми!

² **to get charge of one** — добиться командования одним из них

that was the fellow's name, a Dane — thought himself wronged somehow in the bargain¹. He went ashore and started to hammer the chief of the village with a stick. Oh, it didn't surprise me to hear this, although Fresleven was the gentlest, quietest creature that ever walked on two legs. No doubt he was. But, you know, he probably wanted to assert his self-respect in some way. Therefore he whacked the old negro mercilessly. A big crowd of his people watched him, thunderstruck. And some man made jab with a spear at the white man. Of course it went quite easy between the shoulder-blades. Then the whole population cleared into the forest. They were expecting all kinds of calamities.

On the other hand, the steamer left also in a bad panic, in charge of the engineer, I believe. Afterwards nobody troubled much about Fresleven's remains, till I appeared. When I met my predecessor, the grass through his ribs was tall enough to hide his bones. They were all there. Nobody touched the supernatural creature after he fell. And the village was deserted, the huts were rotting. A calamity came to it. The people vanished. Mad terror scattered them, men, women, and children, through the bush, and they never returned. What became of the hens I don't know either. However, through this glorious affair I got my appointment.

I ran like mad. Before forty-eight hours I was crossing the Channel to show myself to my employers, and sign the contract. In a very few hours I arrived in a city that always makes me think of a sepulchre. Prejudice no doubt. I found the Company's offices

¹ **thought himself wronged somehow in the bargain** — вообразил, что его обсчитали

easily. It was the biggest thing in the town, and everybody I knew it. The Company wanted to grab the over-sea empire.

4

A narrow and deserted street in deep shadow, high houses, innumerable windows with venetian blinds, a dead silence, grass between the stones, carriage archways right and left, immense double doors. I slipped through one of these cracks, went up a swept and ungarnished staircase and opened the first door. Two women, one fat and the other slim, sat on straw-bottomed chairs. They were knitting black wool. The slim one got up and walked straight at me. She was still knitting with downcast eyes. Then she stood still, and looked up. Her dress was as plain as an umbrella-cover. 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. There was a vast amount of red and blue, a little green, smears of orange, and, on the East Coast, a purple patch. 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 appeared. A skinny forefinger beckoned me into the sanctuary. Its light was dim. 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 man himself. He was five feet six¹,

¹ **five feet six** — пять футов шесть дюймов (рост)

I think. He shook hands, I fancy, murmured vaguely, was satisfied with my French. *Bon voyage*¹.

5

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

I began to feel slightly uneasy. You know I am not used to such ceremonies. There was something ominous in the atmosphere. I don't know — I felt that something was not quite right. I was glad to get out. In the outer room the two women knitted black wool feverishly. People were arriving. The younger woman was walking back and forth with them. The old woman sat on her chair. Her flat cloth slippers were propped up on a foot-warmer². A cat reposed on her lap. She wore a starched white affair on her head. She had a wart on one cheek, and silver-rimmed spectacles on the tip of her nose. She glanced at me above the glasses. The swift and indifferent placidity of that look troubled me.

Two youths with foolish and cheery countenances arrived. She threw at them the same quick glance of wisdom. She seemed to know all about them and about me, too. An eerie feeling came over me. She seemed uncanny and fateful. Often far away there I thought of these two women. They were guarding the door of Darkness. They were knitting black wool as for a warm

¹ **Bon voyage.** — Счастливого пути. (*франц.*)

² **foot-warmer** — ножная грелка

pall. The first woman was introducing continuously to the unknown, the other woman was scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. Ave! Old knitter of black wool. Morituri te salutant¹. Not many saw her again.

There was yet a visit to the doctor. 'A simple formality,' assured me the secretary. Soon a young chap with his hat over the left eyebrow — some clerk I suppose — came from somewhere upstairs, and led me forth. He was shabby and careless. He had inkstains on the sleeves of his jacket. His cravat was large and billowy. Under a chin it shaped like the toe of an old boot. It was a little too early for the doctor, so I proposed a drink.

As we sat over our vermouths he glorified the Company's business. By and by² I expressed casually my surprise,

"Aren't you going there?" I asked.

He became very cool and collected all at once.

"I am not such a fool as I look, said Plato to his disciples," he said sententiously.

Then he emptied his glass with great resolution, and we rose.

The old doctor felt my pulse.

"Good, good for there," he mumbled.

Then with certain eagerness he asked me to let him measure my head. Rather surprised, I said "Yes". He produced a thing like calipers and got the dimensions back and front and every way. He was taking notes carefully. He was an unshaven little man in

¹ **Morituri te salutant.** — Идущие на смерть приветствуют тебя. (*лат.*)

² **by and by** — постепенно

a threadbare coat like a gaberdine, with his feet in slippers. I thought he was a harmless fool.

“I always want, in the interests of science, to measure the crania of those who are going out there,” he said.

“And when they come back, too?” I asked.

“Oh, I never see them,” he remarked; “and, moreover, the changes take place inside, you know.”

He smiled, as if at some quiet joke.

“So you are going out there. Famous. Interesting, too.”

He gave me a serious glance, and made another note.

“Any madness in your family?” he asked.

I felt very annoyed.

“Is that question in the interests of science, too?”

“It will be,” he said, “interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals, on the spot, but...”

“Are you an alienist?” I interrupted.

“Every doctor must be — a little,” answered he imperturbably. “I have a little theory which you gentlemen who go out there must help me to prove. This is my share in the advantages my country shall reap from the possession of such a magnificent dependency. The mere wealth I leave to others. Pardon my questions, but you are the first Englishman under my observation...”

I hastened to assure him I was not in the least typical.

“Really?” said I. “But I talk to you.”

“What you say is rather profound, and probably erroneous,” he said, with a laugh. “Avoid irritation more than exposure to the sun. Adieu. How do you

English say, eh? Good-bye. Ah! Good-bye. Adieu.
In the tropics one must keep calm.”

He lifted a warning forefinger,
“Keep calm, keep calm.”

6

One thing more remained to do — to say good-bye to my excellent aunt. I found her triumphant. I had a cup of tea — the last decent cup of tea for many days. In a room, we had a long quiet chat by the fireside. In the course of these confidences it became quite plain to me one thing. I was represented to the wife of the high dignitary. Goodness knows to how many more people besides. They recommended me as an exceptional and gifted creature — a piece of good fortune for the Company. Good heavens! I was going to take charge of a cheap river-steamboat with a cheap whistle!

It appeared, however, I was also one of the Workers, with a capital¹ — you know. Something like an emissary of light, something like an apostle. The excellent woman talked about ‘weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways,’ till she made me quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit².

“You forget, dear Charlie, that the labourer is worthy of his hire,” she said, brightly.

It’s queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own.

After this she told me to wear flannel, be sure to write often, and so on — and I left. In the street —

¹ **with a capital** — с прописной буквы

² **was run for profit** — поставила себе целью собирать барыши