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BOOKS

TRAVEL AND ADVENTURE

THE SEA AND THE JUNGLE

TRAVEL AND ADVENTURE

H. M. TOMLINSON

COMPLETE



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H. M. TOMLINSON

The Sea and the Jungle

Being the narrative of the voyage
of the tramp steamer *Capella* from Swansea
to Santa Maria de Belem do Grão Pará
in the Brazils, and thence 2,000 miles
along the forests of the Amazon and
Madeira rivers to the San Antonio Falls;
afterwards returning to Barbados for
orders, and going by way of Jamaica
to Tampa in Florida, where
she loaded for home.

Done in the years

1909 and

1910

PENGUIN BOOKS

MELBOURNE · LONDON · BALTIMORE

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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 stillborn. 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 pleasaunce 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 of 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 have read old Hakluyt? What are the Americas to us, the Amazon and the Orinoco, Barbados 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 knob. (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 halfpenny 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 tea-tray, 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, stopped to look in at a toy-shop 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 cock-crows 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 Skipper 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, that the wheel remained for ever in the same place. I looked up to sigh through the bars after a long spin; and 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 Manaus, 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 Obidos 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 while 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. 'Pooh,' 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 withdrawn from the smell of its ink, the urge of its machinery?

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

* * *

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

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