

THE FORESHORE OF LONDON

By H. M. TOMLINSON

IT begins on the north side of the City, at Poverty Corner. It begins imperceptibly, and very likely is no more than what a native knows is there. It does not look like a foreshore. It looks like another of the byways of the capital. There is nothing to distinguish it from the rest of Fenchurch Street. You will not find it in the directory, for its name is only a familiar bearing used by seamen among themselves. If a wayfarer came upon it from the west, he might stop to light a pipe (as well there as anywhere) and pass on, guessing nothing of what it is and of its memories. And why should he? London is built of such old shadows; and while we are here casting our own there is not much time to turn and question what they fall upon. Yet if some unreasonable doubt, a suspicion that he was being watched, made a stranger hesitate at that corner, he might begin to feel that London there was as different from Bayswater and Clapham as though deep water intervened. In a sense deep water does; and not only the sea, but legends of ships that have gone, and of the men who knew them, and traditions of a service older than anything Whitehall knows, though still as lively as enterprise itself, and as recent as the ships which moved on to-day's high water.

In a frame outside one of its shops hangs a photograph of a sailing ship. The portrait is so large and the beauty of the subject so evident that it might have been the cause of the stranger stopping there to fill his pipe. Yet how could he know that to those groups of men loitering about the name of that ship is as familiar as Suez or Rio, even though they have never seen her? They know her as well as they know their business. They know her house-flag—it is indistinguishable in the picture—and her master, and it is possible the oldest of them remembers the Clippers of that fleet of which she alone now carries the emblem; for this is not only another year, but another era. But they do not look at her portrait. They spit into the road, or stare across it, and rarely move from where they stand, except to pace up and down as though keeping a watch. At one time, perhaps thirty years ago, it was usual to see gold rings in their ears. It is said that if you wanted a bunch of men to run a little river steamer, with a freeboard of six inches, out to Delagoa Bay, you could engage them all at this corner, or at the taverns just up the turning. The suggestion of such a voyage, in such a ship, would turn us to look on these men in wonder, for it is the way of all but the wise to expect appearance to betray admirable qualities. These fellows, though, are not significant, except that you might think of some of them that their ease and indifference

were assumed, and that, when trying not to look so, they were very conscious of the haste and importance of this great city into which that corner jutted far enough for them. They have just landed or they are about to sail again, and they might be standing on the shore eyeing the town beyond, in which the fate of ships is known by those they never see, but who are inimical to them, and whose ways are inscrutable.

If there are any inland shops which can hold one longer than the place where that ship's portrait hangs, then I do not know them. That comes from no more, of course, than the usual fault of an early impression. That fault gives a mould to the mind, and our latest thoughts, which we try to make reasonable, betray that accidental shape. It may be said that I looked into this window while still soft. The consequence, everybody knows, would be incurable in a boy who saw sextants for the first time, compasses, patent logs, sounding-machines, signalling-gear, and the other secrets of navigators. Not only those things, either. There was a section given to books, with classics like Stevens on *Stowage*, and Norie's *Navigation*, volumes never seen west of Gracechurch Street. The books were all for the eyes of sailors, and were sorted by chance. *Knots and Splices*, *Typee*, *Know Your Own Ship*, the *South Pacific Directory*, and *Castaway on the Auckland Islands*. There were many of them, and they were in that fortuitous and attractive order. The back of every volume had to be read, though the light was bad. On one wall between the windows a specimen chart was framed. Maps are good; but how much better are charts, especially when you cannot read them except by guessing at their cryptic lettering! About the coast line the fathom marks cluster thickly, and venture to sea in lines which attenuate, or become sparse clusters, till the chart is blank, being beyond soundings. At the Capes are red dots, with arcs on the seaward side to show at what distance mariners pick up the real lights at night. Through such windows, boys with bills of lading and mates' receipts in their pockets, being on errands to ship-owners, look outward, and only seem to look inward. Where are the confines of London?

Opposite Poverty Corner there is, or there used to be, an archway into a courtyard where in one old office the walls were hung with half-models of sailing ships. I remember the name of one, the *Winifred*. Deed-boxes stood on shelves, with the name of a ship on each. There was a mahogany counter, an encrusted pewter inkstand, desks made secret with high screens, and a silence that might have been the reproof to intruders of a repute remembered in silence and dignity behind the screens by those who kept waiting so unimportant a visitor as a boy. On the counter was a stand displaying sailing cards, announcing, among other events in London river, "the fine ship *Blackadder* for immediate dispatch, having most of her cargo engaged, to Brisbane." And in those days, just round the corner in Billiter Street, one of the East India Company's warehouses still remained, a sombre relic among the new limestone and red granite offices, a massive archway in its centre

leading, it could be believed, to an enclosure of night left by the eighteenth century and forgotten. I never saw anybody go into it, nor come out. How could they? It was of another time and place. The familiar Tower, the Guildhall that we knew nearly as well, the Cathedral which certainly existed, for it could often be seen in the distance, and the Abbey that was little more than something we had heard named, they were but the scenery close to the 'buses. Yet London was more wonderful than anything they could make it appear. About Fenchurch Street and Leadenhall Street waggons could be seen going east, bearing bales and cases, and the packages were portmarked for Sourabaya, Para, Ilo-Ilo, and Santos—names like those. They had to be seen to be believed. One could stand there, forced to think that the sun never did more than make the floor of asphalted streets glow like polished brass, and that the evening light was full of glittering motes and smelt of dust, and that life worked itself out with ink in cupboards made of glass and mahogany; and suddenly you learned, while smelling the dust, that Acapulco was more than a portent in a book and held only by an act of faith. Yet that astonishing revelation, enough to make any youthful messenger forget where he himself was bound, through turning to follow with his eyes so casual an acceptance by a carrier's cart of the verity of a fable, is nowhere mentioned, I have found since, in any guide to our capital, though you may learn how Cornhill got its name.

For though Londoners understand the Guildhall pigeons have as much right to the place as the Aldermen, they look upon the seabirds by London Bridge as vagrant strangers. They do not know where their city ends on the east side. Their river descends from Oxford in more than one sense, and ceases to lose their respect in the neighbourhood of Westminster. It has little history worth mentioning below that. To the poets the river fails them, it becomes flat and songless where at Richmond the sea's remote influence just moves it; and there they leave it. The Thames goes down then to a wide grey vacuity, a featureless monotony where men but toil, where life becomes silent in effort, and goes out through fogs to nowhere in particular. But there is a hilltop at Woolwich from which, better than from Richmond, our river, the burden-bearer, the road which joins us to New York and Sydney, can be seen for what it is, plainly related to a vaster world, with the ships upon its bright path moving through the smoke and buildings of the City. And surely some surmise of what our river is comes to a few of that multitude which crosses London Bridge every day? They favour the east side of it, I have noticed, and they cannot always resist a pause to stare overside to the Pool. Why do they? Ships are there, it is true, but only insignificant traders, diminished by sombre cliffs up which their cargo is hauled piecemeal to vanish instantly into mid-air caverns; London absorbs all they have as morsels. Anyhow, it is the business of ships. The people on the bridge watch another life below, with its strange cries and mysterious movements. A leisurely wisp of steam rises from a steamer's

funnel. She is alive and breathing, though motionless. The walls enclosing the Pool are spectral in a winter light, and might be no more than the almost forgotten memory of a dark past. Looking at them intently, to give them a name, the wayfarer on the bridge could imagine they were maintained there only by the frail effort of his will. Once they were, but now, in some moods, they are merely remembered. Only the men busy on the deck of the ship below are real. Through an arch beneath the feet a barge shoots out noiselessly on the ebb, and staring down at its sudden apparition you feel dizzily that it has the bridge in tow and that all you people there are being drawn down resistlessly into that lower world of shades. You release yourself from this spell with an effort and look at the faces of those who are beside you at the parapet. What are their thoughts? Do they know? Have they also seen the ghosts? Have they felt stirring a secret and forgotten desire, old memories, and tales that were told? They move away and go to their desks, or to their homes in the suburbs. A vessel that has hauled into the fairway calls for the Tower Bridge gates to be opened for her. She is going. We watch the eastern mists which take her from us. For we never are so passive and well disciplined to the routine of the things which compel us, but rebellion comes at times—misgiving that there is a world beyond the one we know, regret that we never ventured and made no discovery, and that our time has been saved and not spent. The bascules descend again.

There, where that ship vanished, is the highway which brought those unknown folk whose need created London out of reeds and mere. It is our oldest road, and now has many by-paths. Near Poverty Corner is a building which recently was dismissed with a brief humorous reference in a new guide to our City—a cobbled forecourt, tame pigeons, cabs, a brick-front topped by a clock-face: Fenchurch Street Station. Beyond its dingy platforms, the metal track which contracts into the murk is the road to China, though that is, perhaps, the last place you would guess to be at the end of it. The train runs over a wilderness of tiles, a grey plateau of bare slate and rock, its expanse cracked and scored as though by a withering heat. Nothing grows there; nothing could live there. Smoke still pours from it, as though it were volcanic, from numberless vents. The region is without sap. Above its plains project superior fumaroles, their drifting vapours dissolving great areas. When the train descends slightly, then holes appear in that cliff which runs parallel with your track. The desert is actually burrowed, and every hole in the plateau is a habitation. Something does live there. That region of burnt and fissured rock is tunnelled and inhabited; the unlikely serrations and ridges with the smoke moving over them are porous, and a fluid life ranges beneath unseen. It is the beginning of Dockland. That the life is in upright beings, each with independent volition and a soul; that it is not an amorphous movement, flowing in bulk through buried pipes, incapable of the idea of height, of rising, is difficult to believe. It has not been believed.

If life, you protest, is really there, has any sense which is better than that of extending worm-like through the underground, then why, at intervals, is there not an upheaval, a geyser-like burst, a plain hint from a power usually pent, but liable to go skywards? But that is for the desert to answer. As by mocking chance the desert itself almost instantly shows what possibilities are hidden within it. The train roars unexpectedly over a viaduct, and below is a deep hollow filled with light, with a floor of water, and a surprise of ships. How did that white schooner get into such an enclosure? Is freedom nearer here than we thought?

The crust of roofs ends abruptly in a country which is a complexity of gasometers, canals, railway junctions, between which the long spokes of cabbage-fields radiate from the train and revolve, and what is the grotesque suggestion of many ships in the distance, for through gaps in a nondescript horizon masts appear in a kaleidoscopic way. The journey ends, usually in the rain, among iron sheds that are topped on the far side by the rigging and smoke-stacks of great liners. There is no doubt about it now. At the corner of one shed, sheltering from the weather, is a group of brown men in coloured rags, first seen in the gloom because of the whites of their eyes. What we remember of such a day is that it was half of night, and the wind played castanets with the sheet iron, hummed in the cordage, and swayed wildly the loose gear aloft. Towering hulls were ranged down each side of a lagoon that ended in vacancy. The rigging and funnels of the fleet were unrelated; those ships were phantom and monstrous. They seemed on too great a scale to be within human control. We felt diminished and a little fearful, as among the looming urgencies of a dream. The forms were gigantic but vague, and they were seen in a smother of the elements; and their sounds, sonorous, melancholy, and prolonged, were like the warning of something alien, yet without form, which we knew was adverse, but could not recall when awake again. We remember, that day, a few watchers insecure on an exposed dockhead that projected into a sullen dreariness of river and mud which could have been the finish of the land. At the end of a creaking hawser was a steamer canting as she backed to head down stream—she was obviously exposed now to a great adventure—the tide, rapid and noisy on her plates, the reek from her funnel sinking over the water. And from the dockhead, in the fuddle of a rain-squall, we were waving a handkerchief, probably to the wrong man, till the vessel went out where all was one, rain, river, mud, and sky, and the future.

It is afterwards that so strange an ending to a brief journey from a city station is seen to have had more in it than the time-table, hurriedly scanned, gave away. Or it would be remembered as strange, if the one who had to make that journey so much as thought of it again; for perhaps to a stranger occupied with more important matters it was passed as being quite relevant to the occasion, ordinary and rather dismal, the usual boredom of a duty. Its strangeness depends, very likely, as much on an idle and squandering

mind as on the ships, the river, and the gasometers. Yet suppose you first saw the river from Blackwall Stairs, in the days when the windows of the Artichoke Tavern, an ancient weather-boarded house with benches outside, still looked towards the ships coming in ! And how if then, one evening, you had seen a Blackwall liner haul out for the Antipodes while her crew sang a chanty ! It might put another light on the river ; but a light, I will admit, which others should not be expected to see, and if they looked for it now might not discover, for it is possible that it has vanished, like the old tavern. It is easy to persuade ourselves that a matter is made plain by the light in which we prefer to see it, for it is our light. One day, I remember, a boy had to take a sheaf of documents to a vessel loading in the London Dock. She was sailing that tide. It was a hot July noon. It is unlucky to send a boy, who is marked by all the omens for a city prisoner, to that dock, for it is one of the best of its kind. He had not been there before. There was an astonishing vista, once inside the gates, of sherry butts and port casks. On the flagstones were pools of wine lees. There was an unforgettable smell. It was of wine, spices, oakum, wool, and hides. The sun made it worse, but the boy, I think, preferred it strong. After wandering along many old quays, and through dark sheds with wide doors that, on such a sunny day, were stored with cool night and cubes and planks of gold, he found his ship, the *Mulatto Girl*. She was for the Brazils. Now it is clear that one even wiser in shipping affairs than a boy would have expected to see a craft that was haughty and portentous when bound for the Brazils, a ship that looked equal to making a coast of that kind. There she was, her flush deck well below the quay wall. A ladder went down to her, for she was no more than a schooner of a little over 100 tons. If that did not look like the beginning of one of those voyages that are reputed to have ended with the Elizabethans, then I am trying to convey a wrong impression. On the deck of the *Mulatto Girl* was her master, in shirt and trousers and a remarkable straw hat more like a canopy, bending over to discharge some weighty words into the hatch. He rose and looked up at the boy on the quay, showing then a taut black beard and formidable eyes. With his hands on his hips, he surveyed for a few seconds the messenger above without speaking. Then he talked business, and more than legitimate business. " Do you want to come ? " he asked, and smiled. " Eh ? " He stroked his beard. The Brazils and all ! A ship like that ! " There's a berth for you. Come along, my son." And observe what we may lose through that habit of ours of uncritical obedience to duty ; see what may leave us for ever in that fatal pause, caused by the surprise of the challenge to our narrow experience and knowledge, the pause in which we miserably allow habit to overcome adventurous instinct ! I never heard again of the *Mulatto Girl*. I could not expect to. Something, though, was gained that day. It cannot be named. It is of no value. It is, you may have guessed, that very light which it has been admitted may since have gone out.

Well, nobody who has ever surprised that light in Dockland will be persuaded that it is not there still, and will remain. What the foreshore of London is to some of us, and what those lights are which we see as reflections coming down the waters from a far adventure, to others would be what they are. The foreshore to them is the unending monotony of grey streets, sometimes grim, often decayed, and always reticent and sullen, that might never have seen the stars or heard of good luck ; and the light would be, when closely looked at, merely a high gas bracket on a dank brick wall in solitude, its glass broken, and the flame within it fluttering to extinction like an imprisoned and crippled moth trying to evade the squeeze of giant darkness and the wind. The narrow and forbidden by-way under that glim, a path intermittent, and depending on the weight of the night which is trying to blot it out altogether, goes to Wapping Old Stairs. Prince Rupert once went that way. The ketch *Nonsuch*, Captain Zachary Gillam, was then lying just off, about to make the voyage which established the Hudson's Bay Company.

It is a path, like all those stairs and ways that go down to the river, which began when human footsteps first originated London with rough tracks. It is a path by which the successors of those primitives went out of London, when projecting the original enterprise of their ancestors from Wapping to the Guinea Coast and Manitoba. Why should we believe it is different to-day ? The sea does not change, and seamen are what they were, if their ships are not those we admired many years ago in the India Docks. It is impossible for those who know them to see those moody streets of Dockland, indeterminate, for they follow the river, which run from Tooley Street by the Hole-in-the-Wall to the Deptford Docks, and from Tower Hill along Wapping High Street to Limehouse and the Isle of Dogs, as strangers would see them. What could they be to strangers ? Mud, taverns, pawnshops, neglected and obscure churches, and houses that might know nothing but ill-fortune.

So they are ; but those ways hold more than the visible shades. The warehouses of that meandering chasm which is Wapping High Street are like weathered and unequal cliffs. It is hard to believe sunlight ever falls there. It could not get down. It is not easy to believe the river is near. It seldom shows. You think at times you hear the distant call of a ship. But what would that be ? Something in the mind. It happened long ago. You, too, are a ghost left by the vanished past. There is a man above at a high loop-hole, the topmost cave of a warehouse which you can see has been exposed to commerce and the elements for ages ; he pulls in a bale pendulous from the cable of a derrick. Below him one of the horses of a van tosses its nose-bag. There is no other movement. A carman leans against an iron post, and cuts bread and cheese with a clasp knife. It was curious to hear that steamer call, but we know what it was. It was from a ship that went down, we have lately heard, in the war, and her spectre reminds us, from a voyage

which is over, of men who have gone. But the call comes again just where the Stairs, like a shining wedge of day, holds the black warehouses asunder, and shows the light of the river and a release to the outer world. And there, moving swiftly across the brightness, goes a steamer outward bound.

That was what we wanted to know. She confirms it, and her signal, to whomever it was made, carries farther than she would guess. It is understood. The past for some of us now is our only populous and habitable world, invisible to others, but alive with whispers for us. Yet the sea still moves daily along the old foreshore, and ships still go and come, and do not, like us, run aground on what now is not there.