

The Fog

By H. M. Tomlinson

WE were homeward bound, four days in front of Christmas, over a flat sea blinding with reflected sunshine, congratulating ourselves on a record winter passage into London. There is but one aphorism at sea which comfortably fits most circumstances: "One never knows."

It might have been June. The pallid blue overhead was hung with flimsy white tapestries, suspended in set loops and folds, too thin to veil the sun, whose track over the sea, down which we were bowling at eleven knots, was incandescent silver. A shade had to be erected over the binnacle for the wheelsman. A few sailing vessels were idling about the bright plain, their canvas hanging like table-cloths. The steamer went over a level keel, with no movement but the tremor of the engines, and our wash astern ran in two straight white lines out of sight. The day had been made for us; we could be home before midnight, for we should just catch the tide at the Shipwash light and go up on top of it towards Billingsgate.

It was the strange sunset which gave us the first warning. A vague silver flare fell obliquely down behind the thin clouds, and when near the plane gradually formed into a pulsing ruby ball. At sunset, the entire western sea was darkened by the shadow of a low boundary cloud of smoky crimson, as though it were a wall which had been burnt red hot by the sun, and left glowing and smouldering. "I don't like the look of that," said the skipper. "We ought to be at the wharf by midnight, and could, but I'll eat my certificate if we are."

The sea was empty of all traffic. We had the North Channel, one of the busiest routes in the world, entirely to ourselves.

"It looks as though London had been wiped out since we left it," said the skipper.

The Maplin watched us pass in the dusk with its one red eye. We raised all the lights clear and bright. The run was still straight and free. Later, we were sitting round the saloon table, calculating whether she would catch the last train for us, when

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everybody jumped at the unexpected clang of the engine-room bell. "Stop her," we heard the man cry, at the telegraph below. We crowded the companion in an effort to reach deck together, and the bell rang often enough, while we were arriving, to drive the staff below distracted.

I got to the side in time to see a huge liner's dim shape slide by like a street at night; she would have been invisible but for her row of lights. We could have reached her on a gangway. The man at our wheel was spinning his spokes desperately to avoid banging into vessels we could not see, but whose bells were ringing everywhere about us. We had run full tilt into a fog bank apparently packed with ships, and were saving ourselves and them by guesswork while stopping the way on our boat. The veiled moon was looking over the wall of the fog, and the stars above our deck were bright. But our hull was shoving into a murk which was as opaque as cheese, and had the same flavour. From all directions came the quick ringing of the bells of frightened vessels. Twice across our bows appeared perilous shadows, sprinkled with dim stars, and then high walls went slowly by us. I don't know how long it was before our boat came to a stand, but it was long enough for us. You imagined the presence in the dark of impending bodies, and straining over-side to see them, listening to the sucking of the invisible water, nervously fanned the fog in a ridiculous effort to clear it.

Down our anchor dropped at last, and our own bell then rang as a sign to the invisible flock that we too were harmless. As soon as our unseen neighbours heard our exhaust humming, their continued frantic ringing subsided, and only occasionally they gave a shaking to hear if we answered from the same spot; until at last there was absolute silence, as though all had crept silently away, and left us alone there. So we waited with our riding lights. Our usual lights were only shrouded, for we were fully confident there would be a clearance presently. But the rampart of the fog built itself up, covered the moon, and finally robbed us of the overhead stars. Imprisoned by the thick walls we lay till morning, listening to the doleful tolling of the Mucking bell.

Next morning showed but a weak diffusion of day through a yellow screen. It required a prolonged look to mark even the dead water over-side. Fog is the most doleful of all sea weirds. For nearly a fortnight we had been without rest. We had become used to a little house which was always unstable, and sometimes riotous, between a flying floor and sky. And I was now reeling giddily on a motionlessly dead-level, with soundless unseen waters

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below, and a blind dumb world all round. We watched impatiently the slow drift of the fog motes for a change of wind. But the rigging was hoary with frost and the deck was glazed with ice. There was but small hope it would lift. We were interned. Overdue already; within eight miles of a station from which we could be home in thirty minutes; and next week might find us still fretting in our prison.

Sometimes the fog would seem to rise a few feet. The brutal deception was played on us many times, and found us willing victims. A dark cork drifting by some distance out made a focal point in the general yellow and gave an appearance of clearance. Once, parading the deck prison as the man on watch—there was nothing to do but to keep a good look-out and ring the bell at intervals—I made sure I should be the har-binger of good tidings to those below playing cards. A dim line appeared to starboard, and gradually became definite, like a coast showing through a thinning haze. They all came up to watch it. The coast got higher and darker; and then suddenly changed into a long wide trail of floating cinders. The fog curtains moved closer than ever again. We were the centre of a dead world, and our own place a quiet and narrow tomb. Our scared neighbours of the night before seemed to have gone. But presently an invisible boat near us, hilariously lachrymose, produced in a series of horrible moans from her steam tooter the tunes of “Auld Lang Syne” and “Home, Sweet Home.” A hidden river audience shouted with cheerful laughter. It quite brightened us to hear the prisoners jolly in the next cell. But for the rest of the day the place was mute, the fog deepened to ochre at evening, then became black, excepting where the riding lights made circles of luminous gauze. Every miserable watcher who came down that night, muffled and frost-sparkled, for a drink of hot coffee, just drank it and went on deck again without a word. There was no need to ask him anything.

The next morning came suffused through the same dense cloud, which still drifted by on a light air, interminable. Our prison seemed shorter than ever. Once only that day a fancied clearance showed our skipper a lane on the water. He up-anchored and moved on a hundred yards. The mute river rang immediately with a tumult of bells.

We had a perishable cargo, we were ready to take any chance sooner than stay where we were, so when a deck hand on the third morning came down with the thawing fog dripping from his moustache, and told the skipper it was clearing a little, everybody tumbled up to station at once.

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I saw from the *Speedwell* as rare and unearthly a picture as will ever fall to my lot. The bluish twilight of dawn seemed to radiate from our vessel's sides, revealing, through the thinning veil, a vague, still world without floor, ceiling or walls. There was no water, except a small oval on which the *Speedwell* sat like a show model on glass; no sky, and no horizon.

The cosmos was grouped about our centre, inert, voiceless, full of unawakened surprising shapes, such as we could not have dreamed of; those near to us more approaching our former experiences, those on the increasing outer radii diminishing in the opaque dawn to grotesque indeterminate things, beyond all remembrance and recognition. We only were substantial and definite. But placed about us, suspended in translucent night, were the vertical shadows of what once were ships, but were steamers and sailers without substance now, shrouded spectres that had left the wrecks of their old hulls below, their voyages finished, and had been raised to our level in a new place boundless and serene, with the inconceivable profundities beneath; and there we kept them suspended on one plane by superior gravity and body, as though we were the sun of this new system in the heavens. Above them was void, and beyond were the blind distances of the outer world, and below the abyss of space still. Their lights reached out and gathered to our centre, an incoming of shining ropes, the spiritual mooring lines.

Our cable, crawling upwards through the hawse pipe, shattered the spell; and when our hooter warned that we were moving, a wild pealing commenced which continued all the long slow drift down to Gravesend. Eight miles of ships, and no doubt we commenced far from the end of the procession. Barges, colliers, liners, clippers, ghost after ghost shaped ahead and glided astern. Several times the fog thickened again, but the skipper never took way off her while he could make a course with the sight of a ship ahead, for our cargo could not be trifled with, our vessel was small, and our captian had nerves of iron. We drifted stern first on the flood, with half turns of the propeller for steering purchase, till a boatman told us we were off Gravesend. I took no more risks. That boat was exactly what I was longing for.

It was something to have the steady paving-stones under one's feet again. You would never imagine how lovely are naphtha flares in the fog, and the dingy people in the muddy ways, and the houses which are always in the same place. It was substance at last, and security.