

All in a Night

H.M. Tomlinson

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It was whispered to me that the gaffer, who had just gone to sit over in that corner, was in his ninety-fifth year. He composed himself in a chair with decision and suppleness. That made me look again. I had seen the little old fellow enter, and he had come into the room down the three steps trippingly. His cheerful eye took us all in at once, as he nodded, and his skin was clear and pink. He began to attend to our talk, while sucking a clay pipe the pipe was even an indecent antiquity shyly, or slyly, but closely. The much younger men gave him little attention, but they were kind to granddad. Now and then they patronized him with a word or two, but direct sympathetic attention appeared to embarrass him. He might not have wanted our sympathy, but only his beer and a smoke.

A hydroplane had just passed over the house, from the sea. We were talking of flying. There had been a bad accident, and the evening paper, pink upon the table, was full of the explanations and reassurances of the experts. The gaffer was told about it, and he nodded with a show of bright understanding. We must expect accidents, we said, when doing what men had never done before. He smiled and approved. The man next to me grinned, and lowered his voice at my ear.

"He doesn't get it. The old un was in the Crimean War."

Why, that was in the youth of railways! Battleships then were the same as Nelson's, though some of them had an engine like a coffee-grinder. No Suez Canal. No telephones. Two months to get to India. I looked at the gaffer, not across a century, but across a change of mind. Time and space had altered. Something was said about a man who had flown to India, and back, in a few days. The gaffer twinkled and nodded. He knew. He had seen us flying.

And the great speed of these bird-men! That evening, traces remained with us of the ecstasy over the races for a Schneider Cup. "Dad," called out one of us across the table "did you notice the speed of one British flyer?" Dad took his pipe out of his mouth, and waited.

"Three hundred and thirty miles an hour!"

The young schoolmaster considered this. "Terrific," he said. "Let's see. Now that would get a man to the moon in about a month."

"Hear that, Dad? To the moon in a month."

The pipe was removed again hesitatingly. "The moon? he quavered.

"That's right, the moon."

"What for?" the old man asked.

There were some chuckles. The idea was too much for him. "Well, that's how things go, Grandpa."

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The gaffer's head nodded, or wobbled, but he smiled brightly. We disregarded him, while debating close estimates of the greater expedition with which work nowadays could be done. Now look here! Could you beat this? And when I started my job, one man demonstrated, and that's not so long ago, if I had to go to London, it was all day. All day. Wait for a train, then three hours, stopping everywhere of course, wait for a train again, everything messed up. Late at night. But only yesterday in my car I wiped it all up and was back home again early afternoon. The motorist made a helpless movement with his hands to express the indescribable difference we had advanced in the years since he started his job. You can go anywhere now, almost, breakfast in London, lunch in Paris, supper at home. Constantinople. Australia in a fortnight. What about it? We thought about it all, in an interval while some more full pots were being put on the table.

The refilling of the pots and some newcomers caused us to sort ourselves anew. I found myself next to the gaffer. He did not look at me, but grated his chair on the flags a little, to make room. The young barmaid, by invitation, contemptuously switched on the loudspeaker, and then the electric light as a vicious afterthought, and went so brusquely, in spite of a friendly arm to stay her, that she might have despised the lot of us. An instant metallic braying from above would have drowned the conversation but that our voices were raised to resist it. What was coming through? I was handed the *Radio Times*. A symphony was coming through, "Le printemps," by a new composer, from a concert of modern music in London. Spring was coming through, interpreted by the music of the day, and it was spring as we know it, April of the latest, though the flowers were all behind this year, a blare of northeasterly brass, interjectory flicks of cold mud, an earache of discordant blasts, an April symphony of squalls, hail, and unemployment . . .

"Switch off that bloody row!"

A man moved quickly. Silence fell. Our own voices began again, dropped to quiet speech. Some of this wireless music was funny, we suggested, but you could always switch it off. There was a man broadcasting the other night, and he said, Bunk. Best I've heard. All rot. What, with only two valves? Don't you believe it. You're wrong. Get Berlin easy. Only cost seven and six. Heard it myself. Young Pepsy, he told me. You can't teach him anything about wireless. That kid, he picked up a man in New Zealand the other night. Heard him plain. Get out. New Zealand, I tell you. Heard every word he said.

The gaffer nudged me eagerly. "What did he say?"

"He heard a man speaking in New Zealand, Dad."

"Ah!" The gaffer fumbled back his pipe, but did not seem satisfied.

I was not quite sure about the old man's monosyllable. A little baffled by his blue eyes, which blinked too intelligently for senility, I took a glance at him sideways. But he met my look with his own. His thin outstanding red ears, with purple threads in them, seemed pricked up, as though alert. He held his pot on his knee. His boots were as rough and solid as lumps of grey rock. Maybe he had worn them as long as his feet. His brass watch chain was bought at a sheep-fair when Delhi was besieged, very likely. Yes, all very well to see him so, with his clothes hanging on him like an old drab skin he could no longer fill. His mouth was senile, or else his pipe made it weakly droop; but he had the eye of a bird ancient in all but its puckish stare, and his ears were pricked and on the alert. Was he a clod or did he once play on oaten pipes? A queer grin he had, for his age. He did not appear to mind my innocent filial condescension. I do not think he noticed it. He was an outworn labourer, content with what he was, and he had no envy.

His feet were far from three hundred and thirty miles an hour, going forward, but he could travel backward on a road a long distance in no time. He had that little advantage. He contemplated me aloofly, or else absent-mindedly, showing a yellow tusk, and for so long that I began to feel a little nervous; was I only just coming through to his cynical apprehension from the past? Hadn't he really noticed me substantially before? "He,

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he!" he snickered, "only to think of it. They do get about, so I've heard." He gave a semicircular flourish with his pewter pot, then brought it to his mouth in slow reverence. Perhaps none of the young men there had ever witnessed that ancient way with the pewter. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "They do gad about." He shook with inward mirth. "Time was and they had six bathing-machines at this place; now they've got flying-boats, lots o' them. It do seem mazy." He was mirthful.

The cheerful indifference to us of this ancient made me suspect, most unreasonably, that perhaps life could be good, even when not assisted by appliances. It struck me that I might not have got that suggestion while watching a champion steering a craft roaring through mid-air like a comet, though such a transit is the nearest we have yet got to the Sun God with his chariot, if we except that minor competition of Shakespeare's. I tried to beguile from him some peeps into the past, and he was not unreluctant. It amused him. But they did not belong to us, those peeps, for they were mostly bucolic; there were fragments of a harvest-home of long ago, that hinted at bacchanalian joys. That gave my thoughts another turn. Had things improved, did he think, since his young days? "Yes, yes," he nodded. "Yes, yes, I suppose so, things be restless out of count. But I don't see we be any happier," he waved his pipe "if you look 'ere, and you look there. Yes, they've improved." His mouth took a twist, but if he cackled I did not hear it.

Not any the happier for it? The queer old fellow, who certainly was happy in his own way, would be unable to understand what is plain enough to us; we do not look for happiness; we only wish to keep busy. He would not understand that impulse. It made the young men laugh, that chance question of his about a swift lunar trip. What for!

The loudspeaker was started again, and a firm voice began to advise us on the right way to cook potatoes. I left the tavern, and went along the quay to my lodgings, and began to read an account from the Dutch of a seventeenth-century voyage to the East. It translated me from that village of the English Channel into some distant seas which I knew slightly, and, while reading, the inconsequential notion came that I had met the gaffer before. The idea made me frown at it. What had he to do with this voyage? A stuffed fish in a case stared into futurity with a glass eye. There was a call in the dark without, from across the water, and the creaking of a ship's boom. Why should the gaffer reappear, as it were, in the midst of a Dutch navigator's yarn? Somehow I felt the old fellow was in accord. If I had met him before, where could it have been?

A chart in the book, which I was idly scanning, while thinking of another matter, gave me the clue. Pulo Kerchil was the place, though perhaps not the same Pulo mentioned by the seventeenth-century Dutchman. Somewhere about there, though. There are many tiny islands in those seas, and all are much alike. It was an old fellow I had met out there, years ago. He had pawky eyes. He had a local reputation as a *pawang*, a wizard. He could, as a *pawang* should when he so desires, change his shape. You never could be sure that he was not lurking near. He was very old, I was told. He was alive during the great earthquake not the other earthquake, forty years ago, when the village was shaken, and some fishing boats were lost, but the great one, when the sun went out, when the sea came in, and many died. What year was that? Tuan, who would know? It was the year of the great earthquake.

That was near enough. I had gone then to the *Directions for Pilots* in those seas, a book which offers only ascertained facts, and I had learned that the *pawang* must be one hundred and ten years old. The *Directions* informed me that the great earthquake was in 1813. No doubt then about it. He must be a *pawang*.

I was on the island a week before I met him, for though the island was small, it had no facilities for travellers. It was not easy to get away from the village and the plantations. Behind us and around were swamps, and steep and wooded fastnesses, where reasonable men could have no business whatever. There were two tracks, and one ended by a ravine, apparently bottomless, on the side of a mountain, and another lost itself in a mangrove swamp. Nobody had shown an interest in Pulo Kerchil since a Dutchman landed there three centuries ago. For a week time stood still for me; it might have been a week of the year in which the Dutchman discovered Pulo Kerchil.

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Nothing had happened since, nothing to show the lapse of only a few centuries. The sky, the sea, the forest, the swamps, even the bamboo houses of the village and the fishing-boats and their men, could have been either in this age, or in that.

One afternoon, when the village was abandoned to the heat, and the beach to its sleeping palms, I found another track up the mountain. After climbing for an hour through the woods, I saw a slender bamboo with a white rag attached to it, like a pennant. That was odd a taboo sign? A warning?

The track continued up. But was it a track, or a natural feature? There was not much light in the forest, and strange motionless shapes were posed about in the quiet. Sometimes, looking back and down, through a break in the trees, the sea was an illusion of sapphire, a lower sky. Yes, it was a track. It enlarged me presently into an area of full day, a cleared space with high foliage about it. There I rested, and watched one of the great bird-winged butterflies, a fellow in green and gold, making the only movement in a universe enchanted to an everlasting afternoon.

I was watching a butterfly. But something was watching me. How did I know? I didn't, but I could feel it. There was nothing alive in sight but the butterfly. At last there was no doubt about it, and I rose to descend, to leave that still open space. There behind me was an old Malay. How had he got so close without a sound? The brown mummy wore only a sarong, and his ribs and arms were skeletal. He was observing me in cheerful amusement, and for several reasons which instantly occurred I knew who he was. A nice place to meet a wizard.

I sat down again, and he squatted beside me. We did not speak, and I propitiated him with some tobacco. He examined the pouch closely, but said nothing. It was impossible not to be surprised that his shrivelled brown skin contained life as manifestly as bones, till I saw his beady eyes watching me sideways, shyly, or slyly; they were the same as the sunlight and the butterfly. They always had been there.

He pointed seawards, and spoke. We made each other out with fair ease. He spoke simply, slowly, and with gravity. He knew I was on the island. He, from there, had seen my steamer depart. He was curious about that ship, the *kapal api*, the fire ship; and the country from which she had come, and the wonders of the world.

We knew, I told him, on that ship, that there was trouble in Mecca between kings, and how much was being paid in London for copra. Yet how explain radiograms to him? Tuan, he said, it is true we sometimes know what passes between men, though they cannot see each other, and nothing is said. Now I, Tuan, have often . . .

I nodded. I told him, too, that men now were flying from the cities of the west to Java. They came from far beyond Mecca. He considered this. It was well known, he said at length, that evil had wings, and could come through the air in a day and a night. But, he added, happiness was to be found in one place. Also, a man's own place was quiet.