

THREE MEN IN A BOAT

This is not one of those Great Travel books: it does not describe sailing across the world's dangerous seas or a brave journey up the Amazon river. It is only a small journey, in a small boat. But it is still an adventure – an adventure that you or I or anyone could experience . . . and tell stories about afterwards.

Who are the heroes of this journey? They are George, Harris, and 'J' (and of course, Montmorency the dog): three young men that we could meet anywhere, in any century. They fall in the river and lose things, they argue and laugh, and tell each other stories. They are full of exciting plans and enthusiasm, but they can't get out of bed in the morning. They want to be great adventurers, but actually, when it rains, they would prefer to be in comfortable chairs in front of a warm fire.

Do our heroes enjoy their adventures on the river? Do they ever learn to cook eggs over a camp fire, or to open a tin without a tin-opener? But this is their story: the story of three men – and the dog – in a boat.



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Three Men in a Boat

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Three Men in a Boat

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Chapter 1

We decide to go on holiday

There were four of us – George, and William Samuel Harris, and myself, and Montmorency. We were sitting in my room, and we were smoking and talking about how bad we were – ill, I mean, of course.

We were all feeling in poor health, and we were getting quite worried about it. Harris said that he felt really bad sometimes, and he did not know what he was doing. And then George said that he felt bad, too, and that he did not know what he was doing either. With me it was my heart. I knew it was my heart because I had read something in a magazine about the symptoms of a bad heart. I had all of them.

It is a most extraordinary thing, but every time I read about an illness, I realize that I have it too – and that my symptoms are very bad! In fact, my health has always been a worry, I remember . . .

One day I had a little health problem, and I went to the British Museum Library to read about it. I took the book off the library shelf, and I began to read. After some time, I turned over the page and I began to read about another illness. I don't remember the name of the illness, but I know it was something really terrible.

I read about half a page – and then I knew that I had that disease too.

I sat there for a time, cold with horror. Slowly, I began to turn over more pages. I came to a disease which was worse than the last one. I began to read about it and, as I expected, I had that disease too. Then I began to get really interested in myself, so I went back to the beginning of the book. I started with the letter 'a' and I read from 'a' to 'z'. I found that there was only one disease which I did not have. This made me a little unhappy. Why didn't I have that disease too?

When I walked into that reading-room, I was a happy, healthy young man. When I left I was a very sick man, close to death . . .

But I was talking about my heart – nobody understood how ill I really was. I had this bad heart when I was a boy. It was with me all the time. I knew that it was my heart because I had all the symptoms of a bad heart. The main symptom was that I did not want to work. Of course, nobody understood that the problem was my heart. Doctors were not so clever then. They just thought that I was lazy!

'Why, you lazy boy, you,' they used to say. 'Get up and do some work for once in your life!' They did not understand that I was ill.

And they did not give me medicine for this illness – they hit me on the side of the head. It is very strange, but those blows on my head often made the illness go away for a time. Sometimes just one blow made the

sickness disappear and made me want to start work immediately . . .

Anyway, that evening, George and William Harris and I sat there for half an hour, and described our illnesses to each other. I explained to George and William Harris how I felt when I got up in the morning. William Harris told us how he felt when he went to bed. Then George stood in front of the fire, and, with great feeling, he showed us how he felt in the night.

George always thinks he is ill, but really, there is never anything the matter with him, you know.

At that moment Mrs Poppets, my housekeeper, knocked on the door. She wanted to know if we were ready to have supper.

We smiled sadly at each other, and then we said that perhaps we should try to eat something. Harris said that a little food helped to prevent illness. So Mrs Poppets brought the supper in. We sat down at the table, and for half an hour we managed to play with some steak and chips – and with a large cake that Mrs Poppets had made.

When we had made ourselves eat something, we filled our glasses, and we lit our pipes. Then we began to talk about our health again. We were not quite sure what was the matter with us. However, we were all quite certain of one thing – we had been doing too much work.

‘We need a rest,’ Harris said.

‘A rest and a change,’ George added.

I agreed with George, and I said that perhaps we could go

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Then George, with great feeling, showed us how he felt in the night.

to the country. We could find a nice, quiet place and we could sit in the warm summer sun. We could go somewhere peaceful, far away from other people.

Harris said that he thought that would be awful. He added that he had been to a place like that once. Everyone went to bed at eight o'clock, and he had to walk for an hour to buy cigarettes and a newspaper.

'No,' Harris said. 'If you want a rest and a change, then the sea is best.'

I said that this was a terrible idea. A sea trip is fine if you are going for a month or two – but not for a week. I know what it is like . . .

You start out on Monday and you think that you are going to enjoy yourself. You wave goodbye happily to your friends. You walk up and down on the ship, like Captain Cook, Sir Francis Drake or Christopher Columbus. On Tuesday you wish that you had not come. On Wednesday, Thursday and Friday you wish that you were dead. On Saturday you are able to drink something. You begin to smile a little at the kind people who ask you how you are. On Sunday you start to walk again, and you eat a little. And on Monday morning, as you stand and wait to get off the ship – you begin to enjoy yourself.

I remember that a friend of mine once took a short sea trip from London to Liverpool for his health. He bought a return ticket, but, when he got to Liverpool, he sold it and he came back by train . . .

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So I was against the sea trip – not for myself, you understand. I am never seasick. But I was afraid for George. George said he would be fine. In fact, he said he would quite like it, but he thought that Harris and I would both be ill. Harris said he was never seasick. In fact, he had often tried to be ill, but he had not succeeded. It is very strange, but, when you are on land, you never meet anybody who has ever been seasick!

So George said, ‘Well, let’s go up the river, then.’ He added, ‘We’ll have fresh air on the river. The hard work on the boat will make us hungry, so we’ll enjoy our food. We’ll sleep well, too.’

Harris replied, ‘Well, you never have any trouble sleeping, anyway. In fact, you’re always going to sleep!’

But, in the end, Harris agreed that it was a good idea. I thought that it was a good idea, too. The only one who did not like the idea was Montmorency.

‘It’s different for me,’ his face said. ‘You like it, but I don’t! There’s nothing for me to do. I don’t smoke. I don’t like looking at the trees and the flowers, and when I’m asleep you’ll play about with the boat and I’ll fall over the side!’

Montmorency’s idea of a good time is to collect together all the most awful dogs he can find and then go round the town, looking for other awful dogs to fight.

But we were three to one, so we decided to go anyway.

Chapter 2

We start to make plans

We pulled out the maps and we discussed plans.

We decided to start on the following Saturday. Harris and I would go down to Kingston in the morning and take the boat up to Chertsey, but George could not leave the City until the afternoon. (George goes to sleep at a bank from ten o'clock until four o'clock from Monday to Friday. On Saturday they wake him up and put him out onto the street at two o'clock.) So George was going to meet us at Chertsey.

The next question was where to sleep at night.

George and I did not want to sleep in hotels at night. We wanted to sleep outside. 'How beautiful,' we said, 'in the country, by the river, with the birds, the flowers and the trees all around us!'

I can imagine it easily . . .

At the end of the day, night comes and the world is peaceful and calm. Our little boat moves silently into some quiet little corner on the river. There we put up our tent, and we cook and eat our simple supper. Then we fill our pipes and we sit and talk quietly. Sometimes we stop for a moment or two and we listen to the water as it plays gently against the boat. The silver moon shines down on us and our heads are full of

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beautiful thoughts. We sit in silence for a time. We do not want to speak. Then we laugh quietly, put away our pipes, say 'Goodnight' and go to bed. The peaceful sound of the water against the boat sends us to sleep – and we dream. We dream that the world is young again . . .

'And what about when it rains?' Harris said.

He was right. When it rains, you do not enjoy living in tents.

I thought about it again . . .

It is evening. You are very wet. There is a lot of water in the boat and everything in it is wet, too. You find a place on the river bank which is not as wet as other places. You get out of the boat, pull out the tent, and two of you try to put it up. Because it is wet, it is very heavy. And then it falls on top of you. You cannot get it off your head, and you get angry. All the time it is raining heavily. It is difficult to put up a tent in good weather. In wet weather it is almost impossible. The other man does not help you. He starts to play about. You get your side of the tent up and begin to tie the ropes to the ground. Just then he pulls the tent from his side, and he destroys all your hard work.

'Here! What do you think you're doing?' you call out.

'What are you doing, you mean,' he answers angrily.

'Don't pull it! You've got it all wrong, you stupid man!' you cry.

'No, I haven't!' he shouts. 'Let your side go!'

'I tell you, you're wrong!' you scream, and you wish

We start to make plans



It is almost impossible to put up a tent in wet weather.

you could get to him to hit him. You pull your side of the tent hard – and pull out all the ropes on *his* side.

‘Ah! The stupid fool!’ you hear him say to himself. And then, suddenly, he gives a violent pull – and your side comes out, too. Slowly, you start to go round to his side to tell him what you think of him. At the same time, he begins to come round the other way, to tell you what he feels. And you follow each other round and round, and you shout at each other – until the tent falls down. And there you are! You stand and look at each other across the tent. At the same time, you both call out, ‘There you are! What did I tell you?’

Meanwhile, the third man has been trying to get the water out of the boat. The water has run up his arms, and he is wet and angry. Suddenly, he wants to know what you are doing, and why the tent is not up yet.

When, at last, the tent is up, you carry the things out of the boat. Supper is mostly rainwater – rainwater bread, rainwater soup. Happily, you have something strong to drink. This brings back your interest in life until it is time to go to bed.

There you dream that a very large animal has suddenly sat down on you. You wake up and you understand that something terrible has happened. At first, you think that the world has ended. Then you think that this cannot be true. So it must be thieves, or murderers, or fire. No help comes, and all you know is that thousands of people are kicking you, and you cannot breathe.

Somebody else is in trouble, too. You can hear his cries. They are coming from under your bed.

You decide to fight, and you hit out, left and right, with your arms and your legs. You are shouting all the time. At last you find your head in the fresh air. Near you, you see a half-dressed murderer. He is waiting to kill you. You are just going to start fighting him when you see that it is Jim.

At the same moment, he sees that it is you.

'Oh, it's you, is it?' he says.

'Yes,' you answer. 'What's happened?'

'The tent has blown down, I think,' he says. 'Where's Bill?'

Then you both shout for Bill. The ground underneath you moves, and a voice says, 'Get off my head!'

The next day you have no voices because you have all caught colds, and all day you argue with each other in angry whispers . . .

We therefore decided that we would sleep out in tents on fine nights, and in hotels when it rained.

Montmorency was very pleased about this. He does not like peace and quiet. He prefers noise. But he looks so good, so well-behaved. When old ladies and gentlemen look at him, tears come into their eyes.

When he first came to live with me, I thought, 'This dog will not be with me long. He is too good for this world.' But, by the end of the year, he had killed twelve chickens, which I had to pay for . . . I had pulled him out of a hundred and

fourteen street fights . . . A woman had brought me a dead cat and had called me a murderer. Then I changed my ideas about Montmorency.

We had decided where to sleep, so now we had to discuss what to take with us. We began to argue about this, so we agreed that we had done enough for one night.

Chapter 3

We decide what to take

The following evening, we discussed what we wanted to take with us. Harris said, 'Now get me a piece of paper, J., and write everything down. George, you get a pencil, and I'll make the list.'

That's Harris – he tells everybody what to do, and they do all the work. I remember that my Uncle Podger was like Harris . . .

Everybody in the house had to help when Uncle Podger did a job. When they bought a picture once, Aunt Podger asked, 'Now, where shall we put this?'

'Oh, I'll do it. Don't worry about it. I'll do it all myself,' he said. And then he took off his coat to begin. He sent one of the girls out to buy some nails, and then he sent one of the boys to tell her how big