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THREE MEN IN A BOAT

TO SAY NOTHING OF THE DOG



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THREE MEN IN A BOAT - TO SAY NOTHING OF THE DOG

written by

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Synopsis

An adaptation of Jerome K. Jerome's delightful (and true) story of how he and his Victorian friends convince themselves they are ill and deserve several days on the Thames. The adventure, of course, turns into more of an adventure than their dreams foretold.

Cast of Characters

J.	
HARRIS	
GEORGE	a fat man
MRS. POPPETS	a housemaid
GIRL 1	
GIRL 2	
GIRL 3	
BARMAID OR BARMAN	

Props

Scene 1

Two sofas (easily moved) set at a gentle angle

An armchair (ditto)

A large toy dog placed on the chair

Three old-fashioned canoe paddles concealed behind the sofa

Boating clothes, or perhaps just sweaters and boaters, also concealed behind the sofa

A 19th-century newspaper (perhaps an authentic front page of *The Times*, available on the internet, attached to a modern newspaper)

Pipes to smoke

Paintings on the side walls and small items of furniture including a table

A hand-written doctor's prescription, folded in an envelope. The envelope is on a side table

A waste-paper bin somewhere apparent

A duster loaded with dust

Scene 2

The sofas and chairs as for scene one, but now pushed together to represent a boat

Three blankets

A large notebook to act as a diary

A cooking stove, a pan, a fork

Milk

Burnt scrambled egg

A book to read

Three dainty umbrellas

A sweater of violent and undefinable colour

Scene 3

A bar with counter and bottles – enough to suggest an inn

Three stools in front of the bar

Three pint glasses half full of beer

ACT I

Scene 1

Setting: The curtain is drawn.

At Rise: The stage is empty.

J.

(recorded and invisible, before curtain opens)

Good evening, and welcome. My name is Jerome K. Jerome. Jerome Klapka Jerome, as the charge sheets usually say. We've never met because I was born in 1859. As I've explained before, the events you'll see portrayed before you really happened. Or mostly. All that has been done is to add extra colour, and for this, there is no extra charge. George and Harris and Montmorency – Montmorency is our especially vicious dog - are not poetic ideals, but things of flesh and blood - especially George, who weighs about twelve stone. Join us, please, in my rooms in London, one afternoon in 1889.

(The curtain opens to reveal a gentleman's room of the late 1800s. An air of contented boredom prevails. HARRIS is reading a paper. Some or all are smoking pipes. A few seconds of silence. See props list for stage setting.)

GEORGE

(rustling his paper in interest)

Grace again.

HARRIS

(thinking himself witty)

No need, George. Already said, dear boy. Luncheon, remember? Mrs Poppets brought it. Pigeon pie, if I remember.

J.

I do wish you'd take your nose out of that bally paper, George. Nothing unsettles a man so much as seeing someone taking an interest in the world.

GEORGE

(taking no notice)

W. G. Grace. Hundred against...

(He peers myopically at the paper.)

...Nottingham, I think it says. Somebody, anyway. Hard for a man to read his paper when he's so devilishly tired.

(The others look up in dismissive surprise.)

J.

Devilishly tired? You? George, old chap, I know of nobody less qualified to be devilishly tired than you are. You go to the City every morning, to that bank or wherever it is you go, and you doze away at your desk all day until they push you out at four.

HARRIS

Except Saturdays, J. Then they wake him up and shove him back on the street at two. I'm surprised they even know you're there, George.

(GEORGE mumbles and boredom returns for a moment.)

J.

You know, maybe George does have a point, though. Perhaps we are tired.

(GEORGE looks up, surprised that anyone agrees with him.)

GEORGE

And ill, quite probably. Says in here somewhere...

(He looks again at the paper.)

...we're all - all of us – we're all in a dreadful state, unimaginably ill, yet we don't know it.

(reading triumphantly)

'We are each one of us victim of medical ignorance and neglect.' Says so in the paper.

(The others nod in sad agreement. A slight pause.)

J.

You're right, of course. Went to the doctor's the other week, don't you know? Bally man found nothing wrong with me. Quite unsettling to a man to go to his doctor and find there's nothing wrong with him. It's not what he expects for a guinea.

HARRIS

Well, there isn't anything wrong with you, J. I've never known a man so fast to down a quart of porter and a plate of...whatever that is you eat.

J.

But there was something wrong with me, dammit. And I have the proof, don't you see?

GEORGE

Oh?

J.

The proof! Clearly that doctor should never have been allowed into a medical school let alone out of it, so I went to the British Museum.

GEORGE

British Museum?

J.

Yes, George, British Museum. Big place, full of statues and bits of old stones that people left around behind them. You'd know about it if you'd only take your nose out of the cricket scores. Anyway, I went along and I demanded the best medical dictionary they had.

HARRIS

And there was nothing wrong with you, no doubt...

J.

To the contrary, Harris. I started with A and I went right through to Z. And you know what I found?

HARRIS

No, but you're going to tell us, I suspect.

J.

Quite so. The more I turned the pages, the iller I became. Every illness I considered, I had clearly caught. Typhoid fever, I saw, I must have had for months without knowing it. I turned up St Vitus' Dance. Much as I expected, I had that, too. I started going alphabetically. I read up about ague. I was sickening for it. The acute stage would come in a fortnight.

GEORGE

Anything, er, else?

J.

Yes, but it wasn't all bad news. Take Bright's Disease: I had that only in modified form. I might live for years. But cholera, well, I had that with severe complications. And, as for diphtheria, I seem to have been born with it. Gout had seized me without my being aware of it.

(slight pause)

The only thing I didn't have was housewife's knee.

(The others laugh.)

HARRIS

Well, you're safe from that, old man. Admit it, nobody's a greater stranger to housework than you. But, listen old chap, what happened next?

J.

Well, I went in hoping to find what was making me unwell and I came out aggrieved that I didn't have housewife's knee.

J. (CONT)

Why not? I felt hurt. It seemed a sort of slight. Why hadn't I got it?

GEORGE

See your point, old man. So what then?

J.

Well, I'm a fair and reasonable man, George, as you know.

(The others glance at each other with a mocking smile.)

J.

And so, after a while, I grew less selfish. I resolved to cope without housewife's knee.

GEORGE AND HARRIS *(together)*

Poor man.

J.

And zymosis, I had evidently been born with. Been suffering since childhood.

(slight pause)

Anyway, there weren't any more diseases after zymosis, so I concluded there was nothing else wrong with me.

GEORGE

(half serious, half mocking)

You should go round the medical schools, J. Save them a fortune. Interesting case like yours, real acquisition to a class, I'd say. You wouldn't need to have students walking round the bally wards, peering at people and mumbling words that nobody understands...

HARRIS

Poor show, that, when you're lying there ill and you're expecting sympathy and they won't even let you have your baccy.

GEORGE

You'd be a hospital in yourself, J. All they'd need to do was walk round you and after that they could take their diploma. You'd have a statue somewhere. 'His illness saved a nation.' I see it now.

(They fall silent and look at their shoes.)

HARRIS

Me, I'd have gone back to my doctor and told him what's what.

J.

I did. 'I will not take up your time telling you what is the matter with me,' I told him. 'Life is brief and you might pass away before I've finished. But I will tell you what is not wrong with me. I do not have housewife's knee.' He looked at me and hit me on the chest when I wasn't expecting it and then butted me on the side of my head. And then he wrote out a prescription and gave it to me.

(He gets up, walks to the side table and returns with the envelope.)

J.

Took it to the chemist and he laughed. 'I don't keep it,' he told me. I protested. 'But you are a chemist?' 'I am a chemist,' he said. 'If were a grocer, I might be able to oblige you. But only being a chemist hampers me.'

(J. hands the envelope to GEORGE, who reads the prescription myopically.)

HARRIS

George?

GEORGE

(struggling to read it)

It says: one pound of beefsteak with one pint of bitter beer, every six hours...

(HARRIS takes the prescription.)

HARRIS

'One ten-mile walk every morning; one bed at eleven sharp every night'.

GEORGE

And then he's written: 'And don't stuff you head with things you don't understand.'

(GEORGE and HARRIS look at each other and laugh.)

GEORGE

Let me look at that.

(He turns the prescription over.)

You've seen what he's written on the back, I suppose?

HARRIS

(taking the prescription)

It says: 'I, the undersigned, declare the diagnosis to be a general disinclination to work.'

GEORGE

But we are ill! It is perfectly shameful for the medical profession to say that we aren't. I know myself that I feel quite unwell when I go to bed.

(The others look unconvinced and each insists he is worse than the others. They ad-lib.)

J.

For me, the worst is when I get up in the morning.

GEORGE

Oh but that's nothing. I feel bad in the morning and it just gets worse. You fellows can't imagine just how ill I am.

(MRS. POPPETS enters. She has a duster in her hand.)

MRS. POPPETS *(hesitantly)*

I was wondering if the young gentlemen will be taking tea this evening.

(They clutch their stomachs and groan and roll slightly from side to side.)

HARRIS

(as if a martyr)

I suppose one could try.

GEORGE

Not for us, dear Mrs. Poppets.

MRS. POPPETS

So, will you or wontcha?

(HARRIS groans lightly.)

J.

I fear we are far too ill to eat this evening, Mrs. Poppets.

HARRIS

We may not get through the night.

MRS. POPPETS

(loudly to herself)

The drink, I shouldn't fancy.

(The others look at her but decide they are too ill to respond.)

MRS. POPPETS

Then you won't mind if I clear up.

(She finds the fallen prescription, looks at it briefly, scoffs and tears it up.)

MRS. POPPETS

(loudly to herself)

If they were just half less untidy, my work would be twice less difficult. And me, as ill as I am, for heaven's sake.

(She drops the torn prescription into the bin and walks off with a flounce.)

HARRIS

What we need is rest.

GEORGE *(grandly)*

I agree. Rest and a complete change.

HARRIS

The strain on our brains has produced a general depression throughout the system. Change of scene and absence of necessity for thought will restore the equilibrium.

J.

We could seek out some retired and old-world spot, far from the madding crowd.

GEORGE

We could dream away a sunny week among drowsy lanes where the surging waves of the nineteenth century would sound far away and faint.

HARRIS

Sounds awful, sounds like a place I went to once. France somewhere, it was. Had a name like that dog.

GEORGE

What? Montmorency-sur-Mer?

HARRIS

No, Montaigu-de-Quercy [CHANGE TO SUIT AUDIENCE]. Dreadful place. Couldn't get decent baccy and everyone went to bed at eight. No, if you want rest and change, you can't beat a sea trip.

GEORGE

Have I ever told you...

J.

No! A sea trip for a couple of months, that does you good. But a week, it's awful. The first day you swagger about like Captain Cook, Drake and Columbus all rolled into one. On Tuesday, you wish you hadn't come. Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, you wish you were dead. On Saturday you manage a wan smile. On Sunday, you begin to walk again. On Monday you begin to like it. By which time you have to go home. But it's George, I'm thinking of. He has that weak constitution of his.

GEORGE *(sarcastically)*

Your concern for me does you credit, J. My fear is that it'll be you who's ill. I must have told you of the day I crossed the Channel in the worst weather that Dover had ever known?

HARRIS AND J.

(together and wearily)

Yes, George. Many times.

GEORGE

1887 was it? Yes, I'm sure it must. Grace made twenty-four first-class appearances that year.

HARRIS AND J.

(together and sarcastically)

Oh, really?

GEORGE

Yes, ’87, that’s when it was. Anyway, I thought the sea air would work me a charm. And a chap has to go to France at least once in his life.

HARRIS

You never thought of staying there, I suppose?

GEORGE

And you know what? We’d barely left land and passengers had to be tied to their berths. I don’t like to boast, of course, but it was only me and the captain who weren’t ill.

HARRIS

It was you and the bosun last time. Do get it straight, old man.

(There is a pause.)

GEORGE

I know, let’s go up the river! Fresh air, exercise and quiet. The changing scenery will occupy our minds – or what’s left of Harris’s, anyway – and the hard work will give us a good appetite and make us sleep well.

J. *(poetically)*

I see it now. Dim woods on either bank. Night’s ghostly army, the grey shadows creep out with noiseless tread. We run our little boat into a quiet nook and fill our pipes and...

HARRIS

Oh, do stop talking such rot, J. We have things to plan.

(The three huddle together and mumble between themselves. Words like Kingston, oars, camping out, frying pan, Montmorency, pretty girls. All three turn the settees to face each other to create a boat. MRS. POPPETS appears.)

MRS. POPPETS

(waving her duster in farewell)

Be brave my boys, be brave! We are a proud seafaring nation.

(and then contemptuously)

But don’t come back crying to me when you sink.

(She stalks off.)

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for the preview.

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Scene 3

Setting: a country bar

At Rise: The three enter, shaking umbrellas, wet and discontent. They sit at the bar. The BARMAN serves three beers. The three take them.

HARRIS

I blame the Liberals.

GEORGE

What for this time, Harris? Anglo-Heligoland Treaty, perhaps? Completion of the Manchester ship canal got your goat?

HARRIS

No, for building rivers so far from pubs. What sort of government puts rivers way out in the countryside and demands you walk across fields for an hour for half a pint of ale? In the rain! It's that sort of thing that brings on socialism.

BARMAID OR BARMAN

Been on the river, have we, gents?

J.

Been starving on the river, more like.

BARMAID OR BARMAN

Starving?

GEORGE

Montmorency got more to eat than we did.

BARMAID OR BARMAN

Montmorency?

HARRIS

Our dog. Looks the image of peace and kindness. Don't be misled. Sulked the first day because he couldn't round up all the other dogs in the neighbourhood and get into a good fight. Didn't take to the river until he found he could be out rattin' every night.

J.

Then he was in his element.

GEORGE

Barking when we were trying to sleep. When it wasn't him dropping wet rats into the boat, it was Harris snoring.

HARRIS

Let us sail with nothing but the simplicity of life, he said.

(He points at J.)

Let us forget the valueless excess of the nineteenth century, he said. Let's leave at home all we don't need. Let simplicity and clean living be our guide.

GEORGE

And what we left at home was the tin opener. Which we didn't realise until we were upstream with tins of food to feed an army and no way of getting at it. We had to live off Harris's scrambled eggs for a week.

HARRIS

Egg-bound, we are.

J.

And then the rain.

HARRIS

Endless rain. And when there was sunshine, we were mocked by three young girls who laughed and refused to do our cooking.

BARMAID OR BARMAN

Rain looks set in for the rest of the week, I'm afraid, gents.

HARRIS

What we need is an alcohol rub. Nothing to beat it for aching muscles.

GEORGE

(taking a drink)

Alcohol rub from the inside, more like. Muscles still hurt, J.?

J.

Like the devil, old boy. Tired before we left, exhausted now it's over.

HARRIS

Me, I've never felt so unwell. Could I be sickening for ague, do you think? You can get that off the river, you know.

GEORGE

For me it's more...well, I don't rightly know what it is but I shall certainly see the doctor when I get home. Lumbago, I thought, or maybe Bright's Disease.

J.

I never thought I'd say this but, speaking for myself, I'll be glad to get back to work.

(They fall silent for a moment, checking their brows for fever, feeling their pulse etc.)

BARMAID OR BARMAN

You could stay the night here, of course. If you can't face another night on the river, that is. Comfortable beds, clean sheets, breakfast in the morning...

(The three look at each other.)

ALL

Yes.

(They raise their glasses.)

J.

To three men out of a boat!

ALL

To three men out of their boat!

BARMAID OR BARMAN

Then that's done, then. I'll get my daughters to show you to your rooms. Girls! Girls!

(The three girls appear and each suggestively takes a character by the arm.)

J.

Now this is more like it!

(The girls lead the three off the stage, giggling as they go.)

HARRIS

(from off-stage)

Listen girls, did I ever tell you about...

J. AND GEORGE *(together)*

Not now, Harris, not now!

(Curtain)



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