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A Set of Six

By

Joseph Conrad

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Les petites marionnettes Font, font, font, Trois petits tours Et puis s'en vont. --
NURSERY RHYME

TO MISS M. H. M. CAPES

Contents

AUTHOR'S NOTE.....	4
GASPAR RUIZ.....	7
I	7
II	10
III	14
IV	17
V	20
VIII	30
IX	36
XI	46
XII	55
AN IRONIC TALE	59
THE INFORMER	59
AN INDIGNANT TALE	79
THE BRUTE	79
A DESPERATE TALE.....	97
AN ANARCHIST	97
A MILITARY TALE	116
THE DUEL.....	116
I	116
II	134
III	148
IV	163
A PATHETIC TALE.....	185
IL CONDE	185

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE six stories in this volume are the result of some three or four years of occasional work. The dates of their writing are far apart, their origins are various. None of them are connected directly with personal experiences. In all of them the facts are inherently true, by which I mean that they are not only possible but that they have actually happened. For instance, the last story in the volume, the one I call Pathetic, whose first title is Il Conde (misspelt by-the-by) is an almost verbatim transcript of the tale told me by a very charming old gentleman whom I met in Italy. I don't mean to say it is only that. Anybody can see that it is something more than a verbatim report, but where he left off and where I began must be left to the acute discrimination of the reader who may be interested in the problem. I don't mean to say that the problem is worth the trouble. What I am certain of, however, is that it is not to be solved, for I am not at all clear about it myself by this time. All I can say is that the personality of the narrator was extremely suggestive quite apart from the story he was telling me. I heard a few years ago that he had died far away from his beloved Naples where that "abominable adventure" did really happen to him.

Thus the genealogy of Il Conde is simple. It is not the case with the other stories. Various strains contributed to their composition, and the nature of many of those I have forgotten, not having the habit of making notes either before or after the fact. I mean the fact of writing a story. What I remember best about Gaspar Ruiz is that it was written, or at any rate begun, within a month of finishing Nostromo; but apart from the locality, and that a pretty wide one (all the South American Continent), the novel and the story have nothing in common, neither mood, nor intention and, certainly, not the style. The manner for the most part is that of General Santierra, and that old warrior, I note with satisfaction, is very true to himself all through. Looking now dispassionately at the various ways in which this story could have been presented I can't honestly think the General superfluous. It is he, an old man talking of the days of his youth, who characterizes the whole narrative and gives it an air of actuality which I doubt whether I could have achieved without his help. In the mere writing his existence of course was of no help at all, because the whole thing had to be carefully kept within the frame of his simple mind. But all this is but a laborious searching of memories. My present feeling is that the story could not have been told otherwise. The hint for Gaspar Ruiz the man I found in a book by Captain Basil Hall, R.N., who was for some time, between the years 1824 and 1828, senior officer of a small British Squadron on the West Coast of South America. His book published in the thirties obtained a certain celebrity and I suppose is to be found still in some libraries. The curious who may be mistrusting my imagination are referred

to that printed document, Vol. II, I forget the page, but it is somewhere not far from the end. Another document connected with this story is a letter of a biting and ironic kind from a friend then in Burma, passing certain strictures upon "the gentleman with the gun on his back" which I do not intend to make accessible to the public. Yet the gun episode did really happen, or at least I am bound to believe it because I remember it, described in an extremely matter-of-fact tone, in some book I read in my boyhood; and I am not going to discard the beliefs of my boyhood for anybody on earth.

The Brute, which is the only sea-story in the volume, is, like *Il Conde*, associated with a direct narrative and based on a suggestion gathered on warm human lips. I will not disclose the real name of the criminal ship but the first I heard of her homicidal habits was from the late Captain Blake, commanding a London ship in which I served in 1884 as Second Officer. Captain Blake was, of all my commanders, the one I remember with the greatest affection. I have sketched in his personality, without however mentioning his name, in the first paper of *The Mirror of the Sea*. In his young days he had had a personal experience of the brute and it is perhaps for that reason that I have put the story into the mouth of a young man and made of it what the reader will see. The existence of the brute was a fact. The end of the brute as related in the story is also a fact, well-known at the time though it really happened to another ship, of great beauty of form and of blameless character, which certainly deserved a better fate. I have unscrupulously adapted it to the needs of my story thinking that I had there something in the nature of poetical justice. I hope that little villainy will not cast a shadow upon the general honesty of my proceedings as a writer of tales.

Of *The Informer* and *An Anarchist* I will say next to nothing. The pedigree of these tales is hopelessly complicated and not worth disentangling at this distance of time. I found them and here they are. The discriminating reader will guess that I have found them within my mind; but how they or their elements came in there I have forgotten for the most part; and for the rest I really don't see why I should give myself away more than I have done already.

It remains for me only now to mention *The Duel*, the longest story in the book. That story attained the dignity of publication all by itself in a small illustrated volume, under the title, "*The Point of Honour*." That was many years ago. It has been since reinstated in its proper place, which is the place it occupies in this volume, in all the subsequent editions of my work. Its pedigree is extremely simple. It springs from a ten-line paragraph in a small provincial paper published in the South of France. That paragraph, occasioned by a duel with a fatal ending between two well-known Parisian personalities, referred for some reason or other to the "well-known fact" of two officers in Napoleon's Grand Army having fought a series of duels in the midst of great wars and on some futile pretext. The pretext

was never disclosed. I had therefore to invent it; and I think that, given the character of the two officers which I had to invent, too, I have made it sufficiently convincing by the mere force of its absurdity. The truth is that in my mind the story is nothing but a serious and even earnest attempt at a bit of historical fiction. I had heard in my boyhood a good deal of the great Napoleonic legend. I had a genuine feeling that I would find myself at home in it, and *The Duel* is the result of that feeling, or, if the reader prefers, of that presumption. Personally I have no qualms of conscience about this piece of work. The story might have been better told of course. All one's work might have been better done; but this is the sort of reflection a worker must put aside courageously if he doesn't mean every one of his conceptions to remain for ever a private vision, an evanescent reverie. How many of those visions have I seen vanish in my time! This one, however, has remained, a testimony, if you like, to my courage or a proof of my rashness. What I care to remember best is the testimony of some French readers who volunteered the opinion that in those hundred pages or so I had managed to render "wonderfully" the spirit of the whole epoch. Exaggeration of kindness no doubt; but even so I hug it still to my breast, because in truth that is exactly what I was trying to capture in my small net: the Spirit of the Epoch--never purely militarist in the long clash of arms, youthful, almost childlike in its exaltation of sentiment--naively heroic in its faith.

1920. J. C.