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The Arrow of Gold

By

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THE ARROW OF GOLD

A STORY BETWEEN TWO NOTES

BY JOSEPH CONRAD

Celui qui n'a connu que des homes polis et raisonnables, ou ne connait pas l'homme, ou ne le connait qu'a demi.

CARACTERES.

TO RICHARD CURLE

* * * * *

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FIRST NOTE

The pages which follow have been extracted from a pile of manuscript which was apparently meant for the eye of one woman only. She seems to have been the writer's childhood's friend. They had parted as children, or very little more than children. Years passed. Then something recalled to the woman the companion of her young days and she wrote to him: "I have been hearing of you lately. I know where life has brought you. You certainly selected your own road. But to us, left behind, it always looked as if you had struck out into a pathless desert. We always regarded you as a person that must be given up for lost. But you have turned up again; and though we may never see each other, my memory welcomes you and I confess to you I should like to know the incidents on the road which has led you to where you are now."

And he answers her: "I believe you are the only one now alive who remembers me as a child. I have heard of you from time to time, but I wonder what sort of person you are now. Perhaps if I did know I wouldn't dare put pen to paper. But I don't know. I only remember that we were great chums. In fact, I chummed with you even more than with your brothers. But I am like the pigeon that went away in the fable of the Two Pigeons. If I once start to tell you I would want you to feel that you have been there yourself. I may overtax your patience with the story of my life so different from yours, not only in all the facts but altogether in spirit. You may not understand. You may even be shocked. I say all this to myself; but I know I shall succumb! I have a distinct recollection that in the old days, when you were about fifteen, you always could make me do whatever you liked."

He succumbed. He begins his story for her with the minute narration of this adventure which took about twelve months to develop. In the form in which it is presented here it has been pruned of all allusions to their common past, of all asides, disquisitions, and explanations addressed directly to the friend of his childhood. And even as it is the whole thing is of considerable length. It seems that he had not only a memory but that he also knew how to remember. But as to that opinions may differ.

This, his first great adventure, as he calls it, begins in Marseilles. It ends there, too. Yet it might have happened anywhere. This does not mean that the people concerned could have come together in pure space. The locality had a definite importance. As to the time, it is easily fixed by the events at about the middle years of the seventies, when Don Carlos de Bourbon, encouraged by the general reaction of all Europe against the excesses of communistic Republicanism, made

his attempt for the throne of Spain, arms in hand, amongst the hills and gorges of Guipuzcoa. It is perhaps the last instance of a Pretender's adventure for a Crown that History will have to record with the usual grave moral disapproval tinged by a shamefaced regret for the departing romance. Historians are very much like other people.

However, History has nothing to do with this tale. Neither is the moral justification or condemnation of conduct aimed at here. If anything it is perhaps a little sympathy that the writer expects for his buried youth, as he lives it over again at the end of his insignificant course on this earth. Strange person—yet perhaps not so very different from ourselves.

A few words as to certain facts may be added.

It may seem that he was plunged very abruptly into this long adventure. But from certain passages (suppressed here because mixed up with irrelevant matter) it appears clearly that at the time of the meeting in the café, Mills had already gathered, in various quarters, a definite view of the eager youth who had been introduced to him in that ultra-legitimist salon. What Mills had learned represented him as a young gentleman who had arrived furnished with proper credentials and who apparently was doing his best to waste his life in an eccentric fashion, with a bohemian set (one poet, at least, emerged out of it later) on one side, and on the other making friends with the people of the Old Town, pilots, coasters, sailors, workers of all sorts. He pretended rather absurdly to be a seaman himself and was already credited with an ill-defined and vaguely illegal enterprise in the Gulf of Mexico. At once it occurred to Mills that this eccentric youngster was the very person for what the legitimist sympathizers had very much at heart just then: to organize a supply by sea of arms and ammunition to the Carlist detachments in the South. It was precisely to confer on that matter with Doña Rita that Captain Blunt had been despatched from Headquarters.

Mills got in touch with Blunt at once and put the suggestion before him. The Captain thought this the very thing. As a matter of fact, on that evening of Carnival, those two, Mills and Blunt, had been actually looking everywhere for our man. They had decided that he should be drawn into the affair if it could be done. Blunt naturally wanted to see him first. He must have estimated him a promising person, but, from another point of view, not dangerous. Thus lightly was the notorious (and at the same time mysterious) Monsieur George brought into the world; out of the contact of two minds which did not give a single thought to his flesh and blood.

Their purpose explains the intimate tone given to their first conversation and the sudden introduction of Doña Rita's history. Mills, of course, wanted to hear all

about it. As to Captain Blunt—I suspect that, at the time, he was thinking of nothing else. In addition it was Doña Rita who would have to do the persuading; for, after all, such an enterprise with its ugly and desperate risks was not a trifle to put before a man—however young.

It cannot be denied that Mills seems to have acted somewhat unscrupulously. He himself appears to have had some doubt about it, at a given moment, as they were driving to the Prado. But perhaps Mills, with his penetration, understood very well the nature he was dealing with. He might even have envied it. But it's not my business to excuse Mills. As to him whom we may regard as Mills' victim it is obvious that he has never harboured a single reproachful thought. For him Mills is not to be criticized. A remarkable instance of the great power of mere individuality over the young.