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The Rescue

By

Joseph Conrad

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'Allas!' quod she, 'that ever this sholde happel! For wende I never, by possibilitee,
That swich a monstre or merveille mighte be!'"--THE FRANKELEYN'S TALE

TO FREDERIC COURTLAND PENFIELD LAST AMBASSADOR OF THE UNITED
STATES OF AMERICA TO THE LATE AUSTRIAN EMPIRE, THIS OLD TIME TALE
IS GRATEFULLY INSCRIBED IN MEMORY OF THE RESCUE OF CERTAIN
DISTRESSED TRAVELLERS EFFECTED BY HIM IN THE WORLD'S GREAT
STORM OF THE YEAR 1914

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Of the three long novels of mine which suffered an interruption, "The Rescue" was the one that had to wait the longest for the good pleasure of the Fates. I am betraying no secret when I state here that it had to wait precisely for twenty years. I laid it aside at the end of the summer of 1898 and it was about the end of the summer of 1918 that I took it up again with the firm determination to see the end of it and helped by the sudden feeling that I might be equal to the task.

This does not mean that I turned to it with elation. I was well aware and perhaps even too much aware of the dangers of such an adventure. The amazingly sympathetic kindness which men of various temperaments, diverse views and different literary tastes have been for years displaying towards my work has done much for me, has done all--except giving me that over-weening self-confidence which may assist an adventurer sometimes but in the long run ends by leading him to the gallows.

As the characteristic I want most to impress upon these short Author's Notes prepared for my first Collected Edition is that of absolute frankness, I hasten to declare that I founded my hopes not on my supposed merits but on the continued goodwill of my readers. I may say at once that my hopes have been justified out of all proportion to my deserts. I met with the most considerate, most delicately expressed criticism free from all antagonism and in its conclusions showing an insight which in itself could not fail to move me deeply, but was associated also with enough commendation to make me feel rich beyond the dreams of avarice--I mean an artist's avarice which seeks its treasure in the hearts of men and women.

No! Whatever the preliminary anxieties might have been this adventure was not to end in sorrow. Once more Fortune favoured audacity; and yet I have never forgotten the jocular translation of *Audaces fortuna juvat* offered to me by my tutor when I was a small boy: "The Audacious get bitten." However he took care to mention that there were various kinds of audacity. Oh, there are, there are! . . . There is, for instance, the kind of audacity almost indistinguishable from impudence. . . . I must believe that in this case I have not been impudent for I am not conscious of having been bitten.

The truth is that when "The Rescue" was laid aside it was not laid aside in despair. Several reasons contributed to this abandonment and, no doubt, the first of them was the growing sense of general difficulty in the handling of the subject. The contents and the course of the story I had clearly in my mind. But as to the

way of presenting the facts, and perhaps in a certain measure as to the nature of the facts themselves, I had many doubts. I mean the telling, representative facts, helpful to carry on the idea, and, at the same time, of such a nature as not to demand an elaborate creation of the atmosphere to the detriment of the action. I did not see how I could avoid becoming wearisome in the presentation of detail and in the pursuit of clearness. I saw the action plainly enough. What I had lost for the moment was the sense of the proper formula of expression, the only formula that would suit. This, of course, weakened my confidence in the intrinsic worth and in the possible interest of the story--that is in my invention. But I suspect that all the trouble was, in reality, the doubt of my prose, the doubt of its adequacy, of its power to master both the colours and the shades.

It is difficult to describe, exactly as I remember it, the complex state of my feelings; but those of my readers who take an interest in artistic perplexities will understand me best when I point out that I dropped "The Rescue" not to give myself up to idleness, regrets, or dreaming, but to begin "The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'" and to go on with it without hesitation and without a pause. A comparison of any page of "The Rescue" with any page of "The Nigger" will furnish an ocular demonstration of the nature and the inward meaning of this first crisis of my writing life. For it was a crisis undoubtedly. The laying aside of a work so far advanced was a very awful decision to take. It was wrung from me by a sudden conviction that there only was the road of salvation, the clear way out for an uneasy conscience. The finishing of "The Nigger" brought to my troubled mind the comforting sense of an accomplished task, and the first consciousness of a certain sort of mastery which could accomplish something with the aid of propitious stars. Why I did not return to "The Rescue" at once then, was not for the reason that I had grown afraid of it. Being able now to assume a firm attitude I said to myself deliberately: "That thing can wait." At the same time I was just as certain in my mind that "Youth," a story which I had then, so to speak, on the tip of my pen, could not wait. Neither could "Heart of Darkness" be put off; for the practical reason that Mr. Wm. Blackwood having requested me to write something for the No. M of his magazine I had to stir up at once the subject of that tale which had been long lying quiescent in my mind, because, obviously, the venerable Maga at her patriarchal age of 1000 numbers could not be kept waiting. Then "Lord Jim," with about seventeen pages already written at odd times, put in his claim which was irresistible. Thus every stroke of the pen was taking me further away from the abandoned "Rescue," not without some compunction on my part but with a gradually diminishing resistance; till at last I let myself go as if recognising a superior influence against which it was useless to contend.

The years passed and the pages grew in number, and the long reveries of which they were the outcome stretched wide between me and the deserted "Rescue" like

the smooth hazy spaces of a dreamy sea. Yet I never actually lost sight of that dark speck in the misty distance. It had grown very small but it asserted itself with the appeal of old associations. It seemed to me that it would be a base thing for me to slip out of the world leaving it out there all alone, waiting for its fate-- that would never come?

Sentiment, pure sentiment as you see, prompted me in the last instance to face the pains and hazards of that return. As I moved slowly towards the abandoned body of the tale it loomed up big amongst the glittering shallows of the coast, lonely but not forbidding. There was nothing about it of a grim derelict. It had an air of expectant life. One after another I made out the familiar faces watching my approach with faint smiles of amused recognition. They had known well enough that I was bound to come back to them. But their eyes met mine seriously as was only to be expected since I, myself, felt very serious as I stood amongst them again after years of absence. At once, without wasting words, we went to work together on our renewed life; and every moment I felt more strongly that They Who had Waited bore no grudge to the man who however widely he may have wandered at times had played truant only once in his life.

1920. J. C.