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Joseph Conrad
Excerpt
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SUSPENSE

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PART I

I

A DEEP RED GLOW flushed the fronts of marble palaces piled
up on the slope of an arid mountain whose barren ridge 5
traced high on the darkening sky a ghostly and glimmering out-
line. The winter sun was setting over the Gulf of Genoa. Behind
the massive shore the sky to the east was like darkening glass. The
open water too had a glassy look with a purple sheen in which 10
the evening light lingered as if clinging to the water. The sails
of a few becalmed feluccas looked rosy and cheerful, motionless
in the gathering gloom. Their heads were all pointing towards
the superb city. Within the long jetty with the squat round tower
at the end, the water of the harbour had turned black. A bigger 15
vessel with square sails, issuing from it and arrested by the sudden
descent of the calm, faced the red disc of the sun. Her ensign hung
down and its colours were not to be made out; but a lank man
in a shabby sailor's jacket and wearing a strange cap with a tassel,
who lounged with both his arms thrown over the black breech of 20
an enormous piece of ordnance that with three of its monstrous
fellows squatted on the platform of the tower, seemed to have no
doubt of her nationality; for to the question of a young civilian in
a long coat and hessian boots and with an ingenuous young coun-
tenance above the folds of a white neckcloth he answered curtly, 25
taking a short pipe out of his mouth but not turning his head.
"She's Elban."

He replaced his pipe and preserved an unsociable air. The ele-
gant young man with the pleasant countenance who was Cosmo
(the son of Sir Charles Latham of Latham Hall, Yorkshire)
repeated under his breath, "Elban" and remained wrapped up 30
in still contemplation of the becalmed ship with her undistin-
guishable flag.

It was not till the sun had sunk beneath the waters of the Mediterranean and the undistinguishable flag had been hauled down on board the motionless ship that he stirred and turned his eyes towards the harbour. The nearest prominent object in it
 5 was the imposing shape of an English line-of-battle ship moored on the west side not far from the quay. Her tall spars overtopped the roofs of the houses and the English ensign at her flagstaff had been just hauled down and replaced by a lantern that looked strange in the clear twilight. The forms of shipping
 10 crowded towards the head of the harbour were merging into one another. Cosmo let his eyes wander over the circular platform of the tower. The man leaning over the gun went on smoking with indifference.

"Are you the guardian of this tower?" asked the young man.
 15 The other gave him a sidelong glance and made answer without changing his attitude and more as if speaking to himself:

"This is now an unguarded spot. The wars are over."

"Do they close the door at the bottom of this tower at night?" inquired Cosmo.

20 "That is a matter worth consideration especially for those like you, for instance, who have a soft bed to go to for the night."

The young man put his head on one side and looked at his interlocutor with a faint smile.

"You don't seem to care," he said. "So I conclude I need not. As
 25 long as you are content to stay here I am safe enough. I followed you up the stairs, you know."

The man with the pipe stood up abruptly. "You followed me here? Why did you do that in the name of all the saints?"

The young man laughed as if at a good joke. "Because you were
 30 walking in front of me. There was nobody else in view near the Mole. Suddenly you disappeared. Then I saw that the door at the bottom of the tower was open and I walked up the stairs on to this platform. And I would have been very surprised if I hadn't found you here."

35 The man in the strange cap ornamented with a tassel had taken his pipe out of his mouth to listen. "That was all?"

"Yes, that was all."

"Nobody but an Englishman would behave like that," commented the other to himself, a slight appearance of apprehension
 40 passing over his features. "You are an eccentric people."

"I don't see anything eccentric in what I've done. I simply wanted to walk out of the town. The Mole was as good as any other part. It is very pleasant here."

A slight breeze touched the two men's faces, while they stood silent, looking at each other. "I am but an idle traveller," said Cosmo easily. "I arrived this morning by land. I am glad I had the idea to come out here to behold your town glowing in the sunset and to get a sight of a vessel belonging to Elba. There can't be very many of them. But you, my friend . . ."

"I have as much right to idle away my time here as any English traveller," interrupted the man hastily.

"It is very pleasant here," repeated the young traveller staring into the dusk which had invaded the platform of the tower.

"Pleasant?" said the other. "Yes, perhaps. The last time I was on this platform I was only ten years old. A solid round shot was spinning and rattling all over the stone floor. It made a wondrous disturbance and seemed a living thing full of fury."

"A solid shot," exclaimed Cosmo, looking all over the smooth flagstones as if expecting to see the traces of that visitation. "Where did it come from?"

"It came from an English brig belonging to Milord Keith's Squadron. She stood in quite close and opened fire on us . . . Heaven only knows why. The audacity of your people! A single shot from one of those big fellows," he continued, slapping the enormous bulging breech of the gun by his side, "would have been enough to sink her like a stone."

"I can well believe it. But the fearlessness of our seamen has ceased to astonish the world long ago," murmured the young traveller.

"There are plenty of fearless people in the world but luck is even better than courage. The brig sailed away unscathed. Yes, luck is better than courage. Surer than wisdom and stronger than justice. Luck is a great thing. It is the only thing worth having on one's side. And you people have always had it. Yes, Signore, you belong to a lucky nation or else you would not be standing here on this platform looking across the water in the direction of that crumb of land that is the last refuge of your greatest enemy."

Cosmo leaned over the stone parapet near the embrasure of the gun on the other side of which the man with the short pipe in his hand made a vaguely emphatic gesture: "I wonder what thoughts

pass through your head," he went on in a quiet detached tone. "Or perhaps you are too young yet to have many thoughts in your head. Excuse my liberty, but I have always heard that one may be frank in speech with an Englishman; and by your speech there
 5 can be no doubt of you being of that nation."

"I can assure you I have no thoughts of hatred... Look, the Elban ship is getting further away. Or is it only the darkness that makes her seem so."

10 "The night air is heavy. There is more wind on the water than up here, where we stand; but I don't think she has moved away. You are interested in that Elba ship, Signore."

"There is a fascination now about everything connected with that island," confessed the ingenuous traveller. "You have just said that I was too young to think. You don't seem so very much
 15 older than myself. I wonder what thoughts you may have."

"The thoughts of a common man, thoughts that could be of no interest to an English milord," answered the other in a grimly deprecatory tone.

20 "Do you think that all Englishmen are lords?" asked Cosmo with a laugh.

"I didn't think. I went by your appearance. I remember hearing an old man once say that you were a lordly nation."

"Really!" exclaimed the young man and laughed again in a low, pleasant note. "I remember hearing of an old man who called us
 25 a nation of traders."

"*Nazione di mercanti*," repeated the man slowly. "Well, that may be true too. Different men different wisdoms."

"This didn't occur to me," said Cosmo, seating himself with a little spring on the stone parapet of the tower. He rested one foot
 30 on the massive gun-carriage and fixed his clear eyes on the dark red streak on the western sky left by the retreating sun like a long gash inflicted on the suffering body of the universe... "Different men, different wisdoms," he repeated, musingly. "I suppose it must be. People's lives are so very different... And of what kind was the
 35 wisdom of your old man?"

"The wisdom of a great plain as level almost as the sea," said the other gravely. "His voice was as unexpected when I heard it as your own, Signore. The evening shadows had closed about me just after I had seen to the west, on the edge of the world as it were, a
 40 lion miss his spring on a bounding deer. They went away right into

the glow and vanished. It was as though I had dreamed. When I turned round there was the old man behind me no further away than half the width of this platform. He only smiled at my startled looks. His long silver locks stirred in the breeze. He had been watching me, it seems, from folds of ground and from amongst reed beds for nearly half a day wondering what I might be at. I had come ashore to wander on the plain. I like to be alone sometimes. My ship was anchored in a bight of this deserted coast a good many miles away, too many to walk back in the dark for a stranger like me. So I spent the night in that old man's ranch, a hut of grass and reeds, near a little piece of water peopled by a multitude of birds. He treated me as if I had been his son. We talked till dawn and when the sun rose I did not go back to my ship. What I had on board of my own was not of much value, and there was certainly no one there to address me as 'my son' in that particular tone – you know what I mean, Signore.”

“I don't know – but I think I can guess,” was the answer whose lighthearted yet earnest frankness was particularly boyish and provoked a smile on the part of the older man. In repose his face was grave. His English interlocutor went on after a pause. “You deserted from your ship to join a hermit in a wilderness simply because the tone of his voice appealed to your heart. Is that your meaning?”

“You have guessed it, Signorino. Perhaps there was more in it than that. There is no doubt about it that I did desert from my ship.”

“And where was that?”

“On the coast of South America,” answered the man from the other side of the big gun with sudden curttness. “And now it is time for us to part.”

But neither of them stirred and for some time they remained silent, growing shadowy to each other on the massive tower which itself, in the advancing night, was but a grey shadow above the dark and motionless sea.

“How long did you stay with that hermit in the desert?” asked Cosmo. “And how did you leave him?”

“Signore, it was he who left me. After I had buried his body I had nothing more to do there. I had learned much during that year.”

“What is it you learned, my friend? I should like to know.”

“Signore, his wisdom was not like that of other men and it would be too long to explain to you here on this tower and at this late hour of the day. I learned many things. How to be patient, for instance . . . Don’t you think, Signore, that your friends or the servants at the inn may become uneasy at your long absence?”

“I tell you I haven’t been much more than two hours in this town and I have spoken to nobody in it till I came upon you; except of course to the people at the inn.”

“They may start looking for you.”

“Why should they trouble their heads? It isn’t late yet. Why should they notice my absence?”

“Why? . . . Simply because your supper may be ready by this time,” retorted the man impatiently.

“It may be, but I am not hungry yet,” said the young man casually.

“Let them search for me all over the town if they like.” Then in a tone of interest, “Do you think they would think of looking for me here?” he asked.

“No. This is the last spot anybody would think of,” muttered the other as if to himself. He raised his voice markedly, “We must part indeed. Good-night, Signore.”

“Good-night.”

The man in the seaman’s jacket stared for a moment, then with a brusque movement cocked his cap with the strange tassel more on the side of his head. “I am not going away from this spot,” he said.

“I thought you were. Why did you wish me good-night, then?”

“Because we must part.”

“I suppose we must some time or other,” agreed Cosmo in a friendly voice. “I should like to meet you again.”

“We must part at once, this moment, on this tower.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to be left alone,” answered the other after the slightest of pauses.

“Oh, come! Why on earth do you want to be left alone? What is it you could do here?” protested the other with great good humour. Then as if struck by an amusing notion, “Unless indeed you want to practise incantations,” he continued lightly, “and perhaps call the Evil One to your side.” He paused. “There are people, you know, that think it can be done,” he added in a mocking tone.

“They are not far wrong,” was the other’s ominous reply. “Each man has a devil not very far from his elbow. Don’t, Signore, don’t

call him up in me! You had better say no more and go in peace from here.”

The young traveller did not change his careless attitude. The man in the cap heard him say quietly, almost in a tone of self-communion:

“I prefer to stay in peace here.”

It was indeed a wonderful peace. The sound of their quiet voices did not seem to affect it in the least. It had an enormous and overpowering amplitude which seemed rather to the man in the cap to take the part of the Englishman’s calm obstinacy against his growing anger. He couldn’t repress an impulsively threatening movement in the direction of his inconvenient companion but it died out in perplexity. He pushed his cap still more on one side and simply scratched his head.

“You are one of those people that are accustomed to have their own way. Well, you can’t have your way this time. I have asked you quietly to leave me alone on this tower. I asked you as man to man. But if you won’t listen to reason I . . .”

Cosmo, putting the palms of his hands against the edge of the parapet, sprang lightly nearly to the middle of the platform and landed without a stagger. His voice was perfectly even.

“Reason is my only guide,” he declared. “But your request looks like mere caprice. For what can you possibly have to do here. The sea-birds are gone to sleep and I have as much right to the air up here as you. Therefore . . .”

A thought seemed to strike him. “Surely this can’t be your trysting place,” he commented in a changed tone through which pierced a certain sympathy.

A short scornful laugh from the other checked him and he muttered to himself soberly, “No. Altogether unfit . . . amongst those grim old guns.” He raised his voice. “All I can do is to give you all the room.” He backed away from the centre of the platform and perched himself this time on the massive breech of a sixty-pounder. “Go on with your incantations,” he said then to the tall and dim figure whose immobility appeared helpless for a moment. It broke the short period of silence saying deliberately:

“I suppose you are aware that at any time since we have begun to talk together it was open to me to fling myself upon you unawares as you sat on the parapet and knock you over to the bottom of this tower?” He waited a moment then in a deeper tone, “Will you deny it?” he said.

"No, I won't deny it," was the careless answer. "I hadn't thought to be on my guard. But I can swim."

"Don't you know there is a border of big blocks of stone there? It would have been a horrible death . . . And now, will the Signore
 5 do what I ask him and return to his inn which is a much safer place than this platform?"

"Safety is not a great inducement; and I don't believe for a moment you ever thought of attacking me in a treacherous manner."

10 "Well," the tall shadowy figure crowned by the shape of the strange cap admitted reluctantly, "Well, since you put it in those words, Signore, I did not."

"You see! I believe you are a fine fellow. But as it is I am under no sort of obligation to listen to you."

15 "You are crafty," burst out the other violently. "It's in the blood. How is one to deal with people like you?"

"You could try to drive me off," suggested the other.

There was no answer for a time, then the tall figure muttered reflectively to itself,

20 "After all, – he's an Englishman."

"I don't think myself invincible on that account," observed Cosmo calmly.

"I know. I have fought against English soldiers in Buenos Ayres. I was only thinking that, to give the devil his due, men of your
 25 nation don't consort with spies or love tyranny either . . . Tell me, is it true that you have only been two hours in this town?"

"Perfectly true."

"And yet all the tyrants of the world are your allies," the shadowy man pursued his train of thought half aloud.

30 The no less shadowy traveller remarked quietly into the gathering night:

"You don't know who my friends are."

"I don't, but I think you are not likely to go with a tale to the Austrian spies or consort with the Piedmontese sbirri. As to the
 35 priests who are poking their noses everywhere, I . . ."

"I don't know a single soul in Italy," interrupted the other.

"But you will soon. People like you make acquaintances everywhere. But it's idle talk with strangers that I fear. Can I trust you as an Englishman not to talk of what you may see?"

40 "You may. I can't imagine what unlawful thing you are about to commit here. I am dying from curiosity. Can it be that you are

really some sort of sorcerer? Go on! Trace your magic circle if that is your business and call up the spirits of the dead.”

A low grunt was the only answer to this speech uttered in a tone between jest and earnest. Cosmo watched from the breach of his gun with intense interest the movements of the man who objected so strongly to his presence but who now seemed to pay no attention to him at all. They were not the movements of a magician in so far that they certainly had nothing to do with the tracing of circles. The figure had stepped over to the seaward face of the tower and seemed to be pulling endless things out of the breast-pocket of his jacket. The young Englishman got down from the breach of the gun, without ceasing to peer in a fascinated way, and moved closer step by step till he threw himself back with an exclamation of astonishment. “By heavens! The fellow is going to fish.”... Cosmo remained mute with surprise for a good many seconds and then burst out loudly:

“Is this what you displayed all this secrecy for? This is the worst hoax I ever...”

“Come nearer, Signore, but take care not to tangle all my twine with your feet... Do you see this box?”

The heads of the two men had come together confidentially and the young traveller made out a cylindrical object which was in fact a round tin box. His companion thrust it into his hand with the request, “Hold it for me a moment, Signore,” and then Cosmo had the opportunity to ascertain that the lid of it was hermetically sealed. The man in the strange cap dived into the pocket of his breeches for flint and steel. The Englishman beheld with surprise his lately inimical companion squeeze himself between the massive tube of the piece of ordnance and the wall of stone and wriggle outwards into the depth of the thick embrasure till nothing of him remained visible but his black stockings and the soles of his heavy shoes. After a time his voice came deadened along the thickness of the wall.

“Will you hand me the box now, Signore?”

Cosmo enlisted in these mysterious proceedings, the nature of which was becoming clear enough to him, obeyed at once and approaching the embrasure thrust the box in at the full length of his arm till it came in contact with the ready hand of the man who was lying flat on his stomach with his head projecting beyond the wall of the tower. His groping hand found and snatched away