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Joseph Conrad
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VICTORY AN ISLAND TALE

Calling shapes and beckoning shadows dire
And airy tongues that syllable men's names
On sands and shores and desert wildernesses.

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TO
PERCEVAL AND MAISIE GIBBON

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NOTE TO THE FIRST
EDITION

THE LAST WORD of this novel was written on the 29th of May 1914. And that last word was the single word of the title. 5

Those were the times of peace. Now that the moment of publication approaches I have been considering the discretion of altering the title page. The word Victory, the shining and tragic goal of noble effort, appeared too great, too august to stand at the head of a mere novel. There was also the possibility of falling under the suspicion of commercial astuteness deceiving the public into the belief that the book had something to do with war. 10

Of that however I was not afraid very much. What influenced my decision most were the obscure promptings of that pagan residuum of awe and wonder which lurks still at the bottom of our old humanity. Victory was the last word I had written in peace time. It was the last literary thought which had occurred to me before the doors of the Temple of Janus flying open with a crash shook the minds, the hearts, the consciences of men all over the world. Such coincidence could not be treated lightly. And I made up my mind to let the word stand in the same hopeful spirit in which some simple citizen of Old Rome would have "accepted the omen." 20

The second point on which I wish to offer a remark is the existence (in the novel) of a person named Schomberg. That I believe him to be true goes without saying. I am not likely to offer pinchbeck wares to my public consciously. Schomberg is an old member of my company. A very subordinate personage in *Lord Jim* as far back as the year 1899, he became notably active in a certain short story of mine published in 1902. Here he appears in a still larger part, true to life (I hope) but also true to himself. Only, in this instance, his deeper passions come into play and thus his grotesque psychology is completed at last. 30

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NOTE TO THE FIRST EDITION

I don't pretend to say that this is the entire Teutonic psychology but it is indubitably the psychology of a Teuton. My object in mentioning him here is to bring out the fact that, far from being the incarnation of recent animosities, he is the creature of my
5 old, deep-seated and, as it were, impartial conviction.

J. C.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

ON APPROACHING the task of writing this Note for “Victory” the first thing I am conscious of is the actual nearness of the book, its nearness to me personally, to the vanished mood in which it was written and to the mixed feelings aroused by the critical notices the book obtained when first published almost exactly a year after the beginning of the great war. The writing of it was finished in 1914 not long before the murder of an Austrian Archduke sounded the first note of warning for a world already full of doubts and fears.

The contemporaneous very short Author’s Note which is preserved in this edition bears sufficient witness to the feelings with which I consented to the publication of the book. The fact of the book having been published in the United States early in the year made it difficult to delay its appearance in England any longer. It came out in the thirteenth month of the War, and my conscience was troubled by the awful incongruity of throwing this bit of imagined drama into the welter of reality, tragic enough in all conscience but even more cruel than tragic and more inspiring than cruel. It seemed awfully presumptuous to think there would be eyes to spare for those pages in a community which in the crash of the big guns and in the din of brave words expressing the truth of an indomitable faith could not but feel the edge of a sharp knife at its throat.

The unchanging Man of history is wonderfully adaptable both by his power of endurance and in his capacity for detachment. The fact seems to be that the play of his destiny is too great for his fears and too mysterious for his understanding. Were the trump of the Last Judgment to sound suddenly on a working day the musician at his piano would go on with his performance of Beethoven’s Sonata and the cobbler at his stall stick to his last in undisturbed confidence in the virtues of the leather. And with perfect propriety. For what are we to let ourselves be disturbed by an angel’s vengeful music too mighty for our ears and too awful for our

terrors? Thus it happens that we are struck suddenly by the lightning of wrath. The reader will go on reading if the book pleases him and the critic will go on criticizing with that faculty of detachment born perhaps from a sense of infinite littleness and which is
 5 yet the only faculty that seems to assimilate man to the immortal gods.

It is only when the catastrophe matches the natural obscurity of our fate that even the best representative of the race is liable to lose his detachment. It is very obvious that on the arrival of the
 10 gentlemanly Mr Jones, the single-minded Ricardo and the faithful Pedro, Heyst, the man of universal detachment, loses his mental self-possession, that fine attitude before the universally irremediable which wears the name of stoicism. It is all a matter of proportion. There should have been a remedy for that sort of thing. And
 15 yet there is no remedy. Behind this minute instance of life's hazards Heyst sees the power of blind destiny. Besides, Heyst in his fine detachment had lost the habit of asserting himself. I don't mean the courage of self-assertion, either moral or physical, but the mere way of it, the trick of the thing, the readiness of mind and
 20 the turn of the hand that come without reflection and lead the man to excellence in life, in art, in crime, in virtue and for the matter of that, even in love. Thinking is the great enemy of perfection. The habit of profound reflection, I am compelled to say, is the most pernicious of all the habits formed by the civilized
 25 man.

But I wouldn't be suspected even remotely of making fun of Axel Heyst. I have always liked him. The flesh and blood individual who stands behind the infinitely more familiar figure of the book I remember as a mysterious Swede right enough. Whether he was a
 30 baron, too, I am not so certain. He himself never laid a claim to that distinction. His detachment was too great to make any claims big or small on one's credulity. I will not say where I met him because I fear to give my readers a wrong impression, since a marked incongruity between a man and his surroundings is
 35 often a very misleading circumstance. We became very friendly for a time and I would not like to expose him to unpleasant suspicions though, personally, I am sure he would have been indifferent to suspicions as he was indifferent to all the other disadvantages of life. He was not the whole Heyst of course; he is
 40 only the physical and moral foundation of my Heyst laid on the

AUTHOR’S NOTE 9

ground of a short acquaintance. That it was short is certainly not my fault for he had charmed me, indeed, by the mere amenity of his detachment which, in this case, I cannot help thinking he had carried to excess. He went away from his rooms without leaving a trace. I wondered where he had gone to – but now I know. He vanished from my ken only to drift into this adventure that, unavoidable, waited for him in a world which he persisted in looking upon as a malevolent shadow spinning in the sunlight. Often in the course of years an expressed sentiment, the particular sense of a phrase heard casually, would recall him to my mind so that I have fastened on to him many words heard on other men’s lips and belonging to other men’s less perfect, less pathetic moods.

The same observation will apply *mutatis mutandis* to Mr Jones, who is built on a much slenderer connection. Mr Jones (or whatever his name was) did not drift away from me. He turned his back on me and walked out of the room. It was in a little hotel in the Island of St. Thomas in the West Indies (in the year ’75) where we found him one hot afternoon extended on three chairs, all alone in the loud buzzing of a cloud of flies to which his immobility and his cadaverous aspect gave a most gruesome significance. Our invasion must have displeased him because he got off the chairs brusquely and walked out leaving with me an indelibly weird impression of his thin shanks. One of the men with me said that the fellow was the most desperate gambler he had ever come across. I said: “A professional sharper?” and got for answer: “He’s a terror; but I must say that up to a certain point he will play fair . . .” I wonder what the point was. I never saw him again because he went straight on board a mail-boat which left within the hour for other ports of call in the direction of Aspinwall. Mr Jones’s characteristic insolence belongs to another man of a quite different type. I will say nothing as to the origins of his mentality because I don’t intend to make any damaging admissions.

It so happened that the very same year Ricardo – the physical Ricardo – was a fellow passenger of mine on board an extremely small and extremely dirty little schooner, during a four days’ passage between two places in the Gulf of Mexico whose names don’t matter. For the most part he lay on deck aft as it were at my feet, and raising himself from time to time on his elbow would talk

about himself and go on talking, not exactly to me or even at me (he would never look up but kept his eyes fixed on the deck) but more as if communing in a low voice with his familiar devil. Now and then he would give me a glance and make the hairs of his stiff
 5 little moustache stir quaintly. His eyes were green and to this day every cat I see reminds me of the exact contour of his face. What he was travelling for or what was his business in life he never confided to me. Truth to say the only passenger on board that schooner who could have talked openly about his activities and purposes was a
 10 very snuffy and conversationally delightful friar, the Superior of a convent, attended by a very young lay brother, of a particularly ferocious countenance. We had with us also, lying prostrate in the dark and unspeakable cuddy of that schooner, an old Spanish gentleman, owner of much luggage and, as Ricardo assured me,
 15 very ill indeed. Ricardo seemed to be either a servant or the confidant of that aged and distinguished-looking invalid, who early on the passage held a long murmured conversation with the friar, and after that did nothing but groan feebly, smoke cigarettes and now and then call for Martin in a voice full of
 20 pain. Then he who had become Ricardo in the book would go below into that beastly and noisome hole, remain there mysteriously, and coming up on deck again with a face on which nothing could be read, would as likely as not resume for my edification the exposition of his moral attitude toward life illustrated by striking
 25 particular instances of the most atrocious complexion. Did he mean to frighten me? Or seduce me? Or astonish me? Or arouse my admiration? All he did was to arouse my amused incredulity. As scoundrels go he was far from being a bore. For the rest my innocence was so great then that I could not take his philosophy
 30 seriously. All the time he kept one ear turned to the cuddy in the manner of a devoted servant, but I had the idea that in some way or other he had imposed the connection on the invalid for some end of his own. The reader therefore won't be surprised to hear that one morning I was told without any particular emotion by the
 35 *padrone* of the schooner that the "rich man" down there was dead: He had died in the night. I don't remember ever being so moved by the desolate end of a complete stranger. I looked down the skylight, and there was the devoted Martin busy cording cowhide trunks belonging to the deceased whose white beard and hooked