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978-1-107-14902-1 — The Rover

Joseph Conrad , Edited by Alexandre Fachard , J. H. Stape

Excerpt

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## THE ROVER

Sleep after toyle, port after stormie seas,  
Ease after warre, death after life, does greatly please.

SPENSER

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TO G. JEAN-AUBRY  
IN FRIENDSHIP  
THIS TALE OF THE LAST DAYS OF A  
FRENCH BROTHER OF THE COAST

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## THE ROVER

### I

AFTER ENTERING AT break of day the inner roadstead of the port of Toulon, exchanging several loud hails with one of the guard boats of the Fleet, which directed him where he was to take up his berth, Master-Gunner Peyrol let go the anchor of the seaworn and battered ship in his charge, between the arsenal and the town, in full view of the principal quay. The course of his life, which in the opinion of any ordinary person might have been regarded as full of marvellous incidents (only he himself had never marvelled at them), had rendered him undemonstrative to such a degree that he did not even let out a sigh of relief at the rumble of the cable. And yet it ended a most anxious six months of knocking about at sea with valuable merchandise in a damaged hull, most of the time on short rations, always on the look-out for English cruisers, once or twice on the verge of shipwreck and more than once on the verge of capture. But as to that, old Peyrol had made up his mind from the first to blow up his valuable charge – unemotionally, for such was his character formed under the sun of the Indian Seas in lawless contests with his kind for a little loot that vanished as soon as grasped, but mainly for bare life almost as precarious to hold through its ups and downs, and which now had lasted for fifty-eight years.

While his crew of half-starved scarecrows, hard as nails and ravenous as so many wolves for the delights of the shore, swarmed aloft to furl the sails, nearly as thin and as patched as the grimy shirts on their backs, Peyrol took a survey of the quay. Groups were forming along its whole stretch to gaze at the new arrival. Peyrol noted particularly a good many men in red caps and said to himself: “Here they are.” Amongst the crews of ships that had brought the tricolour into the seas of the East there were hundreds professing *sans-culotte* principles; boastful and declamatory beggars he had thought them. But now he was beholding the shore breed. Those who had made the Revolution safe. The real thing. Peyrol, after taking a good,

long look went below into his cabin to make himself ready to go ashore.

He shaved his big cheeks with a real English razor looted years ago from an officer's cabin in an English East India-man captured  
5 by a ship he was serving in then. He put on a white shirt, a short blue jacket with metal buttons and a high roll-collar, a pair of white trousers which he fastened with a red bandana handkerchief by way of a belt. With a black, shiny low crowned hat on his head he made a very creditable prize master. He beckoned from the poop  
10 to a boatman and got himself rowed to the quay.

By that time the crowd had grown to a large size. Peyrol's eyes ranged over it with no great apparent interest, though it was a fact that he had never in all his man's life seen so many idle white people massed together to stare at a sailor. He had been a rover of the outer  
15 seas; he had grown into a stranger to his native country. During the few minutes it took the boatman to row him to the steps he felt like a navigator about to land on a newly discovered shore.

On putting his foot on it he was mobbed. The arrival of a prize made by a Squadron of the Republic in distant seas was not an  
20 everyday occurrence in Toulon. The wildest rumours had been already set flying. Peyrol elbowed himself through the crowd somehow, but it continued to move after him. A voice cried out: "Where do you come from, *citoyen?*" – "From the other side of the world," Peyrol boomed out.

He did not get rid of his followers till the door of the Port office.  
25 There he reported himself to the proper officials as master of a prize taken off the Cape by Citoyen Renaud, commander in chief of the Republican Squadron in the Indian Seas. He had been ordered to make for Dunquerque but, said he, having been  
30 chased by the *sacrés Anglais* three times in a fortnight between Cape Verde and Cape Spartel he had made up his mind to run into the Mediterranean where, he had understood from a Danish brig he had met at sea, there were no English men of war just then. And here he was; and there were his ship's papers and his own  
35 papers and everything in order. He mentioned also that he was tired of rolling about the seas and that he longed for a period of repose on shore. But till all the legal business was settled he remained in Toulon roaming about the streets at a deliberate gait, enjoying general consideration as Citizen Peyrol and looking  
40 everybody coldly in the eye.

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His reticence about his past was of that kind which starts a lot of mysterious stories about a man. No doubt the maritime authorities of Toulon had a less cloudy idea of Peyrol's past, though it need not necessarily have been more exact. In the various offices connected with the sea where his duties took him, the wretched scribes, and even some of the chiefs, looked very hard at him as he went in and out, dressed very neatly and always with his cudgel, which he used to leave outside the door of private offices when called in for an interview with one or another of the gold-laced lot. Having however cut off his queue and got in touch with some prominent patriots of the Jacobin type, Peyrol cared little for people's stares and whispers. The person that came nearest to trying his composure was a certain naval captain with a patch over one eye and a very threadbare uniform coat who was doing some administrative work at the Port-office. That officer looking up from some papers remarked brusquely: "As a matter of fact you have been the best part of your life skimming the seas if the truth were known. You must have been a deserter from the Navy at one time, whatever you may call yourself now."

There was not a quiver on the large cheeks of the gunner Peyrol.

"If there was anything of the sort it was in the time of kings and aristocrats," he said steadily. "And now I have brought in a prize, and a service letter from Citizen Renaud, commanding in the Indian Seas. I can also give you the names of good republicans in this town who know my sentiments. Nobody can say I was ever anti-revolutionary in my life. I knocked about the Eastern seas for forty-five years – that's true. But let me observe that it was the seamen who stayed at home that let the English into the Port of Toulon." He paused for a moment and then added: "When one thinks of that, *citoyen commandant*, any little slips I and fellows of my kind may have made five thousand leagues from here and twenty years ago can not have much importance in these times of equality and fraternity."

"As to fraternity," remarked the post-captain in the shabby coat, "the only one you are familiar with is the brotherhood of the coast, I should say."

"Everybody in the Indian Ocean except milksops and youngsters had to be," said the untroubled Citizen Peyrol. "And we practised republican principles long before a republic was

thought of; for the Brothers of the Coast were all equal and elected their own chiefs.”

“They were an abominable lot of lawless ruffians,” remarked the officer venomously, leaning back in his chair. “You will not dare to deny that.”

5 Citizen Peyrol refused to take up a defensive attitude. He merely mentioned in a neutral tone that he had delivered his trust to the Port Office all right and as to his character he had a certificate of civism from his section. He was a patriot and entitled to his  
10 discharge. After being dismissed by a nod he took up his cudgel outside the door and walked out of the building with the calmness of rectitude. His large face of the Roman type betrayed nothing to the wretched quill-drivers who whispered on his passage. As he went along the streets he looked as usual everybody in the eye, but  
15 that very same evening he vanished from Toulon. It wasn’t that he was afraid of anything. His mind was as calm as the natural set of his florid face. Nobody could know what his forty years or more of sea life had been unless he told them himself. And of that he didn’t mean to tell more than what he had told the inquisitive  
20 captain with the patch over one eye. But he didn’t want any bother for certain other reasons; and more than anything else he didn’t want to be sent perhaps to serve in the fleet now fitting out in Toulon. So at dusk he passed through the gate on the road to Fréjus in a high two-wheeled cart belonging to a well-known  
25 farmer whose habitation lay that way. His personal belongings were brought down and piled up on the tailboard of the cart by some ragamuffin patriots whom he engaged in the street for that purpose. The only indiscretion he committed was to pay them for their trouble with a large handful of *assignats*. From such  
30 a prosperous seaman, however, this generosity was not so very compromising. He himself got into the cart over the wheel with such slow and ponderous movements that the friendly farmer felt called upon to remark: “Ah, we are not so young as we used to be – you and I.” – “I have also an awkward wound,” said Citizen Peyrol  
35 sitting down heavily.

And so from farmer’s cart to farmer’s cart, getting lifts all along, jogging in a cloud of dust between stone walls and through little villages well known to him from his boyhood’s days in a landscape of stony hills, pale rocks, and the dusty green of olive trees, Citizen  
40 Peyrol went on unmolested till he got down clumsily in the yard of



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an inn on the outskirts of the town of Hyères. The sun was setting to his right. Near a clump of dark pines with blood red trunks in the sunset, Peyrol perceived a rutty track branching off in the direction of the sea.

At that spot Citizen Peyrol had made up his mind to leave the high road. Every feature of the country with the darkly wooded rises, the barren flat expanse of stones and sombre bushes to his left, appealed to him with a sort of strange familiarity because they had remained unchanged since the days of his boyhood. The very cartwheel tracks scored deep into the stony ground had kept their physiognomy; and far away, like a blue thread, there was the sea of the Hyères roadstead with a lumpy indigo swelling still beyond – which was the island of Porquerolles. He had an idea that he had been born on Porquerolles but he really did not know. The notion of a father was absent from his mentality. What he remembered of his parents was a tall, lean, brown woman in rags, who was his mother. But then they were working together at a farm which was on the mainland. He had fragmentary memories of her shaking down olives, picking stones out of a field, or handling a manure fork like a man, tireless and fierce, with wisps of greyish hair flying about her bony face; and of himself running barefooted in connection with a flock of turkeys, with hardly any clothes on his back. At night by the farmer's favour they were permitted to sleep in a sort of ruinous byre built of stones and with only half a roof on it, lying side by side on some old straw on the ground. And it was on a bundle of straw that his mother had tossed ill for two days and had died in the night. In the darkness her silence, her cold face had given him an awful scare. He supposed they had buried her, but he didn't know, because he had rushed out terror-struck and never stopped till he got as far as a little place by the sea called Almanarre where he hid himself on board a tartane that was lying there with no one on board. He went into the hold because he was afraid of some dogs on shore. He found down there a heap of empty sacks, which made a luxurious couch, and being exhausted went to sleep like a stone. Some time during the night the crew came on board and the tartane sailed for Marseilles. That was another awful scare, being hauled out by the scruff of the neck on the deck and being asked who the devil he was and what he was doing there. Only from that one he could not run away. There was water all around him, and the whole world including the coast not

very far away wobbled in a most alarming manner. Three bearded men stood about him and he tried to explain to them that he had been working at Peyrol's. Peyrol was the farmer's name. The boy didn't know that he had one of his own. Moreover he didn't know  
 5 very well how to talk to people and they must have misunderstood him. Thus the name of Peyrol stuck to him for life.

There the memories of his native country stopped, overlaid by other memories with a multitude of impressions of endless oceans, of the Mozambique Channel, of Arabs and negroes, of  
 10 Madagascar, of the coast of India, of islands and channels and reefs, of fights at sea, rows on shore, desperate slaughter and desperate thirst, of all sorts of ships one after another, of merchant ships and frigates and privateers, of reckless men and enormous  
 15 sprees. In the course of years he had learned to speak intelligibly and think connectedly and even to read and write after a fashion. The name of the farmer Peyrol, attached to his person on account of his inability to give a clear account of himself, acquired a sort of reputation both, openly, in the ports of the East and, secretly,  
 20 amongst the Brothers of the Coast, that strange fraternity with something masonic and not a little piratical in its constitution. Round the Cape of Storms, which is also the Cape of Good Hope, the words Republic, Nation, Tyranny, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity and the cult of the Supreme Being came floating on  
 board ships from home, new cries and new ideas which did not  
 25 upset the slowly developed intelligence of the gunner Peyrol. They seemed the invention of landsmen, of whom the seaman Peyrol knew very little – nothing, so to speak. Now after nearly fifty years of lawful and lawless sea-life Citizen Peyrol at the yard gate of the roadside inn looked at the late scene of his childhood. He looked  
 30 at it without any animosity but a little puzzled as to his bearings amongst the features of the land. "Yes, it must be somewhere in that direction," he thought vaguely. Decidedly he would go no further along the high road . . . A few yards away the woman of the inn stood looking at him, impressed by the good clothes, the great  
 35 shaven cheeks, the well-to-do air of that seaman; and suddenly Peyrol noticed her. With her anxious brown face, her grey locks and her rustic appearance she might have been his mother, as he remembered her, only she wasn't in rags.

"*Hé! La mère,*" hailed Peyrol. "Have you got a man to lend a hand  
 40 with my chest into the house?"

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He looked so prosperous and so authoritative that she piped without hesitation in a thin voice, "*Mais oui, citoyen*. He will be here in a moment."

In the dusk the clump of pines across the road looked very black against the quiet clear sky; and Citizen Peyrol gazed at the scene of his young misery with the greatest possible placidity. Here he was after nearly fifty years, and to look at things it seemed like yesterday. He felt for all this neither love nor resentment. He felt a little funny as it were and the funniest thing was the thought which crossed his mind that he could indulge his fancy (if he had a mind to it) to buy up all this land to the furthestmost field, away over there where the track lost itself sinking into the flats bordering the sea, where the small rise at the end of the Giens peninsula had assumed the appearance of a black cloud.

"Tell me, my friend," he said in his magisterial way to the farmhand with a tousled head of hair who was awaiting his good pleasure, "doesn't this track lead to Almanarre?"

"Yes," said the labourer, and Peyrol nodded. The man continued mouthing his words slowly as if unused to speech. "To Almanarre and further too, beyond the great pond right out to the end of the land, to Cape Estérel."

Peyrol was lending his big flat hairy ear. "If I had stayed in this country," he thought, "I would be talking like this fellow." And aloud he asked:

"Are there any houses there, at the end of the land?"

"Why, a hamlet, a hole, just a few houses round a church and a farm where at one time they would give you a glass of wine."