

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-06094-3 - Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance

Ford Madox Ford

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART I

*“ C’EST TOI QUI DORS DANS L’OMBRE
O SACRÉ SOUVENIR ”*

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Dear Ford
 Since you wish to quote I have expanded
 a little the passage in my letter. Of course you
 will use what you think fit

~~I don't think your memory renders me justice as to my attitude to the early E.R. The early E. R. is the only literary business that, in ~~Conrad's phraseology~~, "came home to my bosom".~~ The mere fact that it was the occasion of your putting on me that gentle but persistent pressure which extracted from the depths of my then despondency the stuff of the "Personal Record" would be enough to make its memory dear. Do you care to be reminded that the editing of the first number was finished in that farmhouse we occupied near Luton. You arrived ~~one~~ evening with your amiable myrmidons and parcels of copy. I shall never forget the cold of that night, the black grates, the guttering candles, the dimmed lamps—and the desperate stillness of that house, where women and children were innocently sleeping, when you sought me out at 2 a.m. in my dismal study to make me concentrate suddenly on a two-page notice of the "Ile des Pingvins". A marvellously successful instance of editorial tyranny! I suppose you were justified. The ~~Number one~~ of the E. R. could not have come out with two blank pages in it. It would have been too sensational. I have forgiven you long ago.

My only grievance against the early E. R. is that it didn't last long enough. If I say that I am curious to see what you will make of this venture it isn't because I have the slightest doubts of your consistency. You have a perfect right to say that you are "rather unchangeable". Unlike the Serpent (which is wise) you will die in your original skin. So I have no doubt that the Review will be truly Fordian -- at all costs. But ~~for~~ one of your early men it will be interesting to see what men you will find now and what you will get out of them in these changed times.

I am afraid the source of the Personal Record further is dried ~~the~~ up. No longer the same man. Thanks for your proposal I'd like to do something for the sake of old times — but I daresay I ~~shall~~ work with having none. I'll drop you a line in a day or two. My mind is a blank at this moment.
 Yours J. Conrad.

FACSIMILE OF A LETTER FROM JOSEPH CONRAD TO THE AUTHOR.

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PART I

"C'EST TOI QUI DORS DANS L'OMBRE"

I

HE was small rather than large in height ; very broad in the shoulder and long in the arm ; dark in complexion with black hair and a clipped black beard. He had the gestures of a Frenchman who shrugs his shoulders frequently. When you had really secured his attention he would insert a monocle into his right eye and scrutinise your face from very near as a watchmaker looks into the works of a watch. He entered a room with his head held high, rather stiffly and with a haughty manner, moving his head once semi-circularly. In this one movement he had expressed to himself the room and its contents ; his haughtiness was due to his determination to master that room, not to dominate its occupants, his chief passion being the realisation of aspects to himself.

In the Pent Farm, beneath the South Downs, there was a great kitchen with a wavy brick floor. On this floor sat a great many cats : they were needed to keep down rats and they got some milk of a morning. Every morning a wild robin with a red breast and greenish-khaki body would hop, not fly, across the floor of the kitchen between the waiting cats. The cats would avert

their glances, pulsing their sheathed claws in and out. The robin would hop through the inner doorway of the kitchen, across an angle of the low dining-room and so up the bed-room stairs. When the maid with the morning letters and the tea-tray opened the bed-room door the robin would fly through the low, dark room and perch on a comb, stuck into a brush on the dressing-table, against the long, low, leaded windows. It awaited crumbs of bread and tiny morsels of lump sugar from the tea-tray. It had never been taught to go on these adventures. This robin attended at the opening of the first letter that, more than a quarter of a century ago, the writer received from Joseph Conrad. The robin watched with its beady eyes the sheet of blue-grey paper with the large rather ornamental handwriting. . . . It was afterwards drowned in a cream-jug which took away from its aspect of a supernatural visitant.

Above the large kitchen was the large Men's Room where the hinds of the farm had been used to sleep. It was entered by a ladder which was removed at night so that the hinds should not murder the farmer or do worse to the farmer's wife. The low windows of this low room were leaded in diamond shapes, the glass frosted with the green of great age. One of these windows had inscribed upon it, no doubt by a diamond, the name *John Kemp* and the date 1822. Conrad always objected to *John Kemp* as a name not

A PERSONAL REMEMBRANCE 13

sufficiently aristocratic for the hero of *Romance* who was the grandson of an earl, but the writer liked it and it remained so in the book.

Years before that, looking through the pages of Dickens's *All the Year Round* for woodcuts contributed by Ford Madox Brown upon whose biography he had been engaged, the writer had come upon a short rendering of the official account of the trial of Aaron Smith. This had been the last trial for piracy that had ever been held at the Old Bailey and the prisoner was acquitted. The story told by him in the dock was sufficiently that of *Romance*, as it now stands. It struck the writer at once after the reading of the first few paragraphs—that here indeed was what we used to call a *subject*, with a tone of voice as if the word had been italicised. For certain subjects will grip you with a force almost supernatural, as if something came from behind the printed, the written or the spoken word, or from within the aura of the observed incident in actual life, and caught you by the throat, really saying: *Treat me*. So in the dusky air of the British Museum Reading Room whilst that first perusal was being made it was almost as if the genie of the place exclaimed: *Treat this subject*. If you do it will mean fortune; if not, lifelong ill-luck. It brought fortune.

The first treatment of that story by the writer was of an incredible thinness. It was like the

whisper of a nonagenarian and the writer had tried to make it like the whisper of a nonagenarian. It was finished just before, in 1898 or so, Conrad first came to see the writer at Limpsfield. . . . Why the writer should ever have thought of writing of pirates, heaven knows, or why, having determined to write of pirates, it should have been his ambition to treat them as if in terms of a very faded manuscript of a Greek play! But that was certainly his ambition and, as it proved, his ambition was certainly granted to him to achieve. Every sentence had a dying fall and every paragraph faded out. The last sentences of that original draft ran: *Above our heads a nightingale* (did something: *poured out its soul*, as like as not, or *poured out its melody on the summer air*, the cadence calling there for eleven syllables). *As it was June it sang a trifle hoarsely*. . . . The reader will observe that the writer had then already read his *Trois Contes*, just as the first words of Conrad's first book were pencilled on the fly-leaves and margins of *Madame Bovary*. The last cadences, then, of Herodias run: "Et tous trois, ayant pris la tête de Jokanaan s'en allaient vers Galilé. Comme elle était très lourde, ils la portaient alternativement." . . . As cadence the later sentences are an exact pastiche of the former. In each the first contains nineteen syllables; the concluding one commences with *As it was*, and is distinguished by the *u* sounds of '*June*' and '*lourd*' and the *or* sounds of '*hoarse*' and '*portaient*.' It was in that way

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A PERSONAL REMEMBRANCE 15

that, before the writer and Conrad met, they had studied their Flaubert. . . .

Conrad came round the corner of the house carrying a small child ; that did not impede his slightly stiff gait and the semi-circular motion of his head as he took in the odd residence, the lettuces protected by wire-netting from the rabbits, or the immense view that lay before the cottage. He was conducted by Mr. Edward Garnett. In those days the writer had been overcome by one of those fits of agricultural enthusiasm that have overwhelmed him every few years, so that such descriptive writers as have attended to him have given you his picture in a startling alternation as a Piccadilly dude in top-hat, morning coat and spats, and as an extremely dirty agricultural labourer. Mr. Garnett lived an acre or so up the hill ; Mr. Conrad and his family were staying on Limpsfield Chart. It was in those days Mr. Garnett's ambition to appear what the French call *lézardé* : he might have been a very, a very long lizard, indistinguishable, save for his spectacles, from the monstrous stones of his cavernous and troglodytic residence. From his mansion the writer's two-roomed cottage might have been a volcanic fragment, thrown off. Mr. Garnett frequently reproved the writer for wearing dark-grey frieze. It caused, he said, a blot on the Limpsfield hillside into whose tones one should sink. The writer was engrossed in carrying out experiments, suggested by Professor

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Gressent of the Sorbonne in Paris. He was trying to make ten lettuces grow where before had been ten thousand nettles and was writing articles for the *Outlook* on the usage of the potato as an extirpator of thistles, in sand. That is accepted as good farming now.

Upon the writer Conrad made no impression at all. Mr. Conrad was the author of *Almayer's Folly*, a great book of a romantic fashion, but written too much in the style of Alphonse Daudet, whom the writer had outgrown at school, knowing the *Lettres de Mon Moulin* at eighteen by heart. A great, new writer then. But as to great writers or artists this writer even then *en avait soupé*, cradled in the proof-sheets of Rossetti, with Swinburne, Watts-Dunton, Hall Caine (Sir Something Hall Caine) and all the Pre-Raphaelites for the commonest objects of his landscape. And Mr. Garnett used to lead the great New, one by one, to poke up the writer as if he had been a mangy lion. The writer no doubt roared. In that way Mr. Garnett led up Stephen Crane, Conrad, Lord Ollivier, now H.B.M. Minister for India, the wife of the Secretary of the Fabian Society, the Secretary of the Fabian Society. . . . A whole procession: precisely as if one had been a mangy lion in a travelling menagerie. Or perhaps a man at the zoo! And Mr. Garnett would do the poking up, telling the distinguished that the writer was possessed of too much individuality ever to find readers.

A PERSONAL REMEMBRANCE 17

. . . It was the most depressing period of a life not lacking in depressing periods.

The writer perhaps roared. Obviously the writer roared on that occasion, but he certainly rather disliked Conrad as you dislike those who pass before your cage and get you poked up. We went afterwards with several children up to the sloping lawn of Mr. Garnett's residence. It is at that point that a real remembrance of this beautiful genius comes to the writer. . . . One of the children crawled over the sloping grass as weak new-born kittens crawl; another on the other hand, with an engrossed face, a little older, whilst Conrad stuck his eyeglass into his eye, progressed for all the world like a *cul de jatte* of our Paris streets. Two fists stuck into the ground, one short leg projected, the other curled underneath, blonde and determined, it levered itself over the grass with its hands and between its arms. And Conrad threw back his head and laughed; his eyeglass fell out; he stuck it in his eye again and gazed at the child; threw back his head and roared, and uttered odd words in Marseilles French. . . . Immediately afterwards Mr. Garnett assured Mr. Conrad for the third time that the writer was too individual ever to have a public for his writings. It was of course high praise. . . .

So the writer left Limpsfield and returned to the Pent Farm. A complete veil dropped

between himself and Conrad. And then suddenly came the letter at whose reading the robin attended. The writer had indeed roared at Limpsfield. Obviously he had told Conrad the story of John-Kemp-Aaron-Smith, for Conrad asked him to consider the idea of a collaboration over that story—which Mr. Garnett had told him was too individual ever to find even a publisher. It would otherwise have been an impertinence on the part of Conrad. And Conrad was never impertinent. His politeness even to his grocer was always Oriental.

The writer's answer was the obvious one that Conrad had better come and see for himself what he had let himself in for. And Conrad came. But that time *Conrad* came. . . . He was like the Sultan of the True Believers walking into a slave market. And for the writer that he remained until his lamentable death. He was a gentleman adventurer who had sailed with Drake. Elizabethan: it was that that he was. He has been called Slav; he has been called Oriental; he has been called a Romantic. He was none of these except on the surface, to his grocer; a man has to have a surface to present to his grocer or to afternoon callers. He himself was just Man: *homo europeaus sapiens*, attuned to the late sixteenth century. In all the world he would have loved nothing better than to singe the king of Spain's beard if it had not been to write a good book. Well, he outwitted the Dutch