



A SMILE OF FORTUNE

JOSEPH CONRAD

Global Grey ebooks

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**BY
JOSEPH CONRAD**

1911

A Smile of Fortune by Joseph Conrad.

This edition was created and published by Global Grey

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out: “No — you don’t!” as if she were my mortal enemy. On her part not a word was said. Putting her hands against my chest, she pushed with all her might without succeeding to break the circle of my arms. Except that she seemed thoroughly awake now, her eyes gave me no clue whatever. To meet her black stare was like looking into a deep well, and I was totally unprepared for her change of tactics. Instead of trying to tear my hands apart, she flung herself upon my breast and with a downward, undulating, serpentine motion, a quick sliding dive, she got away from me smoothly. It was all very swift; I saw her pick up the tail of her wrapper and run for the door at the end of the verandah not very gracefully. She appeared to be limping a little — and then she vanished; the door swung behind her so noiselessly that I could not believe it was completely closed. I had a distinct suspicion of her black eye being at the crack to watch what I would do. I could not make up my mind whether to shake my fist in that direction or blow a kiss.

CHAPTER 6

Either would have been perfectly consistent with my feelings. I gazed at the door, hesitating, but in the end I did neither. The monition of some sixth sense — the sense of guilt, maybe, that sense which always acts too late, alas! — warned me to look round; and at once I became aware that the conclusion of this tumultuous episode was likely to be a matter of lively anxiety. Jacobus was standing in the doorway of the dining-room. How long he had been there it was impossible to guess; and remembering my struggle with the girl I thought he must have been its mute witness from beginning to end. But this supposition seemed almost incredible. Perhaps that impenetrable girl had heard him come in and had got away in time.

He stepped on to the verandah in his usual manner, heavy-eyed, with glued lips. I marvelled at the girl's resemblance to this man. Those long, Egyptian eyes, that low forehead of a stupid goddess, she had found in the sawdust of the circus; but all the rest of the face, the design and the modelling, the rounded chin, the very lips — all that was Jacobus, fined down, more finished, more expressive.

His thick hand fell on and grasped with force the back of a light chair (there were several standing about) and I perceived the chance of a broken head at the end of all this — most likely. My mortification was extreme. The scandal would be horrible; that was unavoidable. But how to act so as to satisfy myself I did not know. I stood on my guard and at any rate faced him. There was nothing else for it. Of one thing I was certain, that, however brazen my attitude, it could never equal the characteristic Jacobus impudence.

He gave me his melancholy, glued smile and sat down. I own I was relieved. The perspective of passing from kisses to blows had nothing particularly attractive in it. Perhaps — perhaps he had seen nothing? He behaved as usual, but he had never before found me alone on the verandah. If he had alluded to it, if he had asked: "Where's Alice?" or something of the sort, I would have been able to judge from the tone. He would give me no opportunity. The striking peculiarity was that he had never looked up at me

yet. "He knows," I said to myself confidently. And my contempt for him relieved my disgust with myself.

"You are early home," I remarked.

"Things are very quiet; nothing doing at the store to-day," he explained with a cast-down air.

"Oh, well, you know, I am off," I said, feeling that this, perhaps, was the best thing to do.

"Yes," he breathed out. "Day after to-morrow."

This was not what I had meant; but as he gazed persistently on the floor, I followed the direction of his glance. In the absolute stillness of the house we stared at the high-heeled slipper the girl had lost in her flight. We stared. It lay overturned.

After what seemed a very long time to me, Jacobus hitched his chair forward, stooped with extended arm and picked it up. It looked a slender thing in his big, thick hands. It was not really a slipper, but a low shoe of blue, glazed kid, rubbed and shabby. It had straps to go over the instep, but the girl only thrust her feet in, after her slovenly manner. Jacobus raised his eyes from the shoe to look at me.

"Sit down, Captain," he said at last, in his subdued tone.

As if the sight of that shoe had renewed the spell, I gave up suddenly the idea of leaving the house there and then. It had become impossible. I sat down, keeping my eyes on the fascinating object. Jacobus turned his daughter's shoe over and over in his cushioned paws as if studying the way the thing was made. He contemplated the thin sole for a time; then glancing inside with an absorbed air:

"I am glad I found you here, Captain."

I answered this by some sort of grunt, watching him covertly. Then I added: "You won't have much more of me now."

He was still deep in the interior of that shoe on which my eyes too were resting.

“Have you thought any more of this deal in potatoes I spoke to you about the other day?”

“No, I haven’t,” I answered curtly. He checked my movement to rise by an austere, commanding gesture of the hand holding that fatal shoe. I remained seated and glared at him. “You know I don’t trade.”

“You ought to, Captain. You ought to.”

I reflected. If I left that house now I would never see the girl again. And I felt I must see her once more, if only for an instant. It was a need, not to be reasoned with, not to be disregarded. No, I did not want to go away. I wanted to stay for one more experience of that strange provoking sensation and of indefinite desire, the habit of which had made me — me of all people! — dread the prospect of going to sea.

“Mr. Jacobus,” I pronounced slowly. “Do you really think that upon the whole and taking various’ matters into consideration — I mean everything, do you understand? — it would be a good thing for me to trade, let us say, with you?”

I waited for a while. He went on looking at the shoe which he held now crushed in the middle, the worn point of the toe and the high heel protruding on each side of his heavy fist.

“That will be all right,” he said, facing me squarely at last.

“Are you sure?”

“You’ll find it quite correct, Captain.” He had uttered his habitual phrases in his usual placid, breath-saving voice and stood my hard, inquisitive stare sleepily without as much as a wink.

“Then let us trade,” I said, turning my shoulder to him. “I see you are bent on it.”

I did not want an open scandal, but I thought that outward decency may be bought too dearly at times. I included Jacobus, myself, the whole population of the island, in the same contemptuous disgust as though we had been partners in an ignoble transaction. And the remembered vision at sea,

diaphanous and blue, of the Pearl of the Ocean at sixty miles off; the unsubstantial, clear marvel of it as if evoked by the art of a beautiful and pure magic, turned into a thing of horrors too. Was this the fortune this vaporous and rare apparition had held for me in its hard heart, hidden within the shape as of fair dreams and mist? Was this my luck?

“I think” — Jacobus became suddenly audible after what seemed the silence of vile meditation — “that you might conveniently take some thirty tons. That would be about the lot, Captain.”

“Would it? The lot! I dare say it would be convenient, but I haven’t got enough money for that.”

I had never seen him so animated.

“No!” he exclaimed with what I took for the accent of grim menace. “That’s a pity.” He paused, then, unrelenting: “How much money have you got, Captain?” he inquired with awful directness.

It was my turn to face him squarely. I did so and mentioned the amount I could dispose of. And I perceived that he was disappointed. He thought it over, his calculating gaze lost in mine, for quite a long time before he came out in a thoughtful tone with the rapacious suggestion:

“You could draw some more from your charterers. That would be quite easy, Captain.”

“No, I couldn’t,” I retorted brusquely. “I’ve drawn my salary up to date, and besides, the ship’s accounts are closed.”

I was growing furious. I pursued: “And I’ll tell you what: if I could do it I wouldn’t.” Then throwing off all restraint, I added: “You are a bit too much of a Jacobus, Mr. Jacobus.”

The tone alone was insulting enough, but he remained tranquil, only a little puzzled, till something seemed to dawn upon him; but the unwonted light in his eyes died out instantly. As a Jacobus on his native heath, what a mere skipper chose to say could not touch him, outcast as he was. As a ship-chandler he could stand anything. All I caught of his mumble was a vague — “quite correct,” than which nothing could have been more egregiously false

at bottom — to my view, at least. But I remembered — I had never forgotten — that I must see the girl. I did not mean to go. I meant to stay in the house till I had seen her once more.

“Look here!” I said finally. “I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ll take as many of your confounded potatoes as my money will buy, on condition that you go off at once down to the wharf to see them loaded in the lighter and sent alongside the ship straight away. Take the invoice and a signed receipt with you. Here’s the key of my desk. Give it to Burns. He will pay you.

He got up from his chair before I had finished speaking, but he refused to take the key. Burns would never do it. He wouldn’t like to ask him even.

“Well, then,” I said, eyeing him slightly, “there’s nothing for it, Mr. Jacobus, but you must wait on board till I come off to settle with you.”

“That will be all right, Captain. I will go at once.”

He seemed at a loss what to do with the girl’s shoe he was still holding in his fist. Finally, looking dully at me, he put it down on the chair from which he had risen.

“And you, Captain? Won’t you come along, too, just to see — ”

“Don’t bother about me. I’ll take care of myself.”

He remained perplexed for a moment, as if trying to understand; and then his weighty: “Certainly, certainly, Captain,” seemed to be the outcome of some sudden thought. His big chest heaved. Was it a sigh? As he went out to hurry off those potatoes he never looked back at me.

I waited till the noise of his footsteps had died out of the dining-room, and I waited a little longer. Then turning towards the distant door I raised my voice along the verandah:

“Alice!”

Nothing answered me, not even a stir behind the door. Jacobus’s house might have been made empty for me to make myself at home in. I did not call again. I had become aware of a great discouragement. I was mentally

jaded, morally dejected. I turned to the garden again, sitting down with my elbows spread on the low balustrade, and took my head in my hands.

The evening closed upon me. The shadows lengthened, deepened, mingled together into a pool of twilight in which the flower-beds glowed like coloured embers; whiffs of heavy scent came to me as if the dusk of this hemisphere were but the dimness of a temple and the garden an enormous censer swinging before the altar of the stars. The colours of the blossoms deepened, losing their glow one by one.

The girl, when I turned my head at a slight noise, appeared to me very tall and slender, advancing with a swaying limp, a floating and uneven motion which ended in the sinking of her shadowy form into the deep low chair. And I don't know why or whence I received the impression that she had come too late. She ought to have appeared at my call. She ought to have . . . It was as if a supreme opportunity had been missed.

I rose and took a seat close to her, nearly opposite her arm-chair. Her ever discontented voice addressed me at once, contemptuously:

“You are still here.”

I pitched mine low.

“You have come out at last.”

“I came to look for my shoe — before they bring in the lights.”

It was her harsh, enticing whisper, subdued, not very steady, but its low tremulousness gave me no thrill now. I could only make out the oval of her face, her uncovered throat, the long, white gleam of her eyes. She was mysterious enough. Her hands were resting on the arms of the chair. But where was the mysterious and provoking sensation which was like the perfume of her flower-like youth? I said quietly:

“I have got your shoe here.” She made no sound and I continued: “You had better give me your foot and I will put it on for you.”

She made no movement. I bent low down and groped for her foot under the flounces of the wrapper. She did not withdraw it and I put on the shoe,

“Everything that is in it,” he repeated angrily. “I’ve never heard anybody talk like this. And to tell you the truth, sir, all the time we have been together I’ve never quite made you out. What’s one ocean more than another? Charm, indeed!”

He was really devoted to me, I believe. But he cheered up when I told him that I had recommended him for my successor.

“Anyhow,” he remarked, “let people say what they like, this Jacobus has served your turn. I must admit that this potato business has paid extremely well. Of course, if only you had — ”

“Yes, Mr. Burns,” I interrupted. “Quite a smile of fortune.”

But I could not tell him that it was driving me out of the ship I had learned to love. And as I sat heavy-hearted at that parting, seeing all my plans destroyed, my modest future endangered — for this command was like a foot in the stirrup for a young man — he gave up completely for the first time his critical attitude.

“A wonderful piece of luck!” he said.
