

# THE SISTERS

Joseph Conrad

# TIGER, TIGER

Ford Madox Ford

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# THE SISTERS

By Joseph Conrad

*("The Sisters" is one of the two unfinished stories found among Conrad's papers after his death, the other being "Suspense", published two years ago. He had begun "The Sisters" in 1896, but put it aside, in accordance with his custom of postponing a piece of writing when another presented itself with more urgent appeal, or when need for money demanded his writing something that would bring immediate reward. Conrad turned from "The Sisters" to "The Nigger of the Narcissus", fully intending to finish the first but never doing so. During those years Conrad was closely associated with Ford Madox Ford, his friend and collaborator. Mr. Ford has written for THE BOOKMAN a commentary on "The Sisters" and his recollection of Conrad's account of the problem he had set himself in the story. [Mr. Ford's article immediately follows "The Sisters".](#))*

For many years Stephen had wandered amongst the cities of Western Europe. If he came from the East—if he possessed the inborn wisdom of the East—yet it must be said he was only a lonely and inarticulate Mage, without a star and without

companions. He set off on his search for a creed—and found only an infinity of formulas. No angel's voice spoke from above to him. Instead, he heard, right and left, the vociferations of idle fanatics extolling this path or that with earthly and hoarse voices that rang out, untrustworthy, in empty darkness. And he heard also the soft murmur of lazy babblers whispering deferential promises of greatness in exchange for the generous hospitality of that Russian painter who had roubles. From Berlin to Dresden, from Dresden to Vienna, to many other places, then to cities of Italy, at last back to Munich he travelled on, trying to read a meaning into all the forms of beauty that solicited his admiration. He thought he understood the language of perfection. Did it not uplift his thoughts like the wind of heaven that sends sunward in a soaring cloud, the dust of the arid earth? But like the wind the meaning seemed to be elusive and formless. The sweetness of the voice intoxicated him with pure delight, but the message sounded as if delivered in declaration of incomprehensible things, with a reserve of final clearness, with an incompleteness of emotion that made him doubt the heavenly origin of that voice. The prodigies of chisel and brush transported him at first with the hope of a persuasion, of an unveiled religion of art—and then plunged him into despair by refusing to say the last word. He turned to men—to all kinds of men—and it seemed to him that similar to the angels and the devils of mediaeval cathedrals they were all carved of the same stone, that they were enigmatical, hard and without heart. Neither the dead nor the living would speak intelligibly to him. At times he mourned over his own want of intelligence. He believed that in the world of art, amongst so many forms of created beauty there could be found the secret of genius. All those brains that had produced so many masterpieces had left amongst them, hidden from the crowd,

but visible to the elect, the expression of their creed: the one, the final, the appeasing. He looked for it; he looked for the magic sign in all the galleries—in all the cathedrals from Rome to Cologne. In many towns he lingered, sometimes alone, sometimes in the midst of other seekers whom he loved for the sake of their quest and whom he despised a little, because it seemed to him dishonest to accept—as they did—the disconnected mutterings of common men as the voice of inspired prophets. He despised those believers only a little and that not always. He had doubts. Instead of deceiving themselves to make life easy had they not perchance obtained that message which, year after year, eluded his longing? Who knows! He began to doubt his own aspirations. They presented themselves sometimes to him as a plot of the powers of darkness for the destruction of his soul. Then he would rush out of himself into the world. The western life captivated him by the amplitude of its complicated surface, horrified him by the interior jumble of its variegated littleness. It was full of endeavour, of feverish effort, of endless theories, of preconceived hates, of misplaced loves. It was all limited, hard, sharp in outline, unlovely in form. And so were the men. They boasted of the crystalline purity of their horizon. He saw that it was pure as crystal and as impenetrable; that under its dome there was nothing great because all was very finite, definite, bound to the earth, imprisoned within those so pellucid and so infamous walls on the other side of which there was the august world of the infinite, the Eternal; that other world always invoked by these men yet never desired, falsely extolled, worshipped, invoked by the lips—and always hopelessly remote from those unquiet hearts in which its mystery could awake nothing but secret fear, or more secret scorn.

But mostly he sought refuge from the reproach of his impotence in ardent work. This, consolatory in its assertion of what he could do, had its periods of discouragement too—by placing face to face with his limitations that man who strove after the illimitable. He would look to no one as teacher. He stood aloof from the world. But he took his stand in it. He had need of it. He had need to see the hollow enthusiasms and to hear the ring of empty words round him if for nothing else but to steady this wavering trust in his own convictions. Associating with many he communed with none. He was generally taciturn. People asked: "Who's that fellow? He does nothing. He does not even talk". Rarely they heard him and then answered their own question by the easy solution of an epithet: "Madman or humbug". The few who had seen his work assured the others that he was perfectly "impossible". Some said: "He is too rich to ever be anything". A few murmured the damning word of "Dreamer". Nobody quite said: "Fool". Almost all lived with him on terms of current friendship. The fellow had money and would never be dangerous; he had no talent. A verdict deadly and final like the knife of a guillotine. Only a small band of the good and the smart hated him. It is hard to say why, exactly. Either because he would not talk to them the jargon of the craft, or, more probably, a correct instinct of his value had been vouchsafed to them as a reward of so much smartness and so much virtue. Doubtless they would not have been so bitter and would have condescended at last to break his sumptuous bread had they known then how short his life, how faint his trace on the earth, was fated to be.

Far away beyond many great rivers in wood-built and dusty cities of the steppe, Stephen's father and mother waited for his

letters. These came regularly four times a year. And for many days the father would carry the last missive in his bosom, somewhere inside his shirt, like a scapulary, because it was from his eldest son, from that son who had been destined in his thoughts to attain the rank of a general. The mother would weep silently with no other trouble but that of his absence. They were two peasants. She was the daughter of a Village Elder, from the banks of the Dnieper. He was a liberated man born in the neighborhood who had wandered away, shrewd and restless, from his hamlet and became afterwards, from very small beginnings, a merchant of the first guild—a very rich man. But however rich he always remained a peasant, a man with a beard. He was cunning, naïve, unscrupulous, believing and tender-hearted. He gave largely in charity and would sometimes stand on the steps of the church chatting with a beggar and calling him "Brother" without the slightest affectation, as a matter of course. All men are brothers. When reproving his two pale and scrofulous clerks (that was the extent of his establishment; he did almost everything himself) he prefaced his remarks by the exclamation: "Thou! son of a dog", without the faintest spark of animosity in his heart. He feared God, venerated the saints, bowed at every opportunity to holy images, crossed himself rapidly, with three bunched fingers, an incalculable number of times, on fitting occasions—and would perjure his soul for three roubles with an innocent smile, like a little child fibbing before an indulgent father. He obtained government contracts. He amassed money. He became known in the government offices—even in the capital—where he could be seen standing at the doors, cap in hand, with a propitiatory face. Bull-necked officials in tight green uniforms addressed him—from armchairs—with caressing condescension as: "Thou little thief! O! thou perfect liar". He

was not spoiled by the commendation of the great. He gave bribes. He was greatly esteemed. He became necessary to many. He remained unassuming—the peasant of old days.

Theirs had been a love-match. She was the beauty of the village, daughter of a rich man; he was looked upon as a wandering ne'er-do-well of colossal presumption. They fell in love violently with each other. They ran away. They never regretted it. In the early days (when the passions are strong) he beat her a little once or twice, just to place firmly the fact of his affection beyond the possibility of even the most fleeting doubt. Ever after, he treated her in a grave contained manner, with a patriarchal superiority of indulgence. She thought of him as the greatest of men and of herself as the happiest of women. They passed through some hard times. The father-in-law, almost unforgiving, would do nothing for the vagabond beyond giving him an old wooden cart and a pair of shaggy and diminutive horses. In that equipage they hawked from town to town the watermelons of central Russia. The first child—the son Stephen—was born in the casual shelter of a roadside hut; and before he was a fortnight old they were again on the road. The woman sat, on some rotten mats, perched high in the sunlight on top of the pile of fruit. The man trudged with silent footsteps in bark shoes, by the drooping heads of his horses, and glanced over his shoulder at the mother from time to time. Sometimes the great weariness of the limitless expanse of the plain would penetrate his very soul. Then he would turn half round—not stopping—and shout cheerily: "How is our Kossak, Malanya; our brave boy?" And she would answer, from above the cloud of dust, in a high pitched—not yet a very strong voice: "He is getting on beautifully, Sydor!"

At night they often camped outside a village. With the mats and the cart, Sydor would make a shelter for his wife. If the night was fine they sat through the evening in the open. Long before its lips could shape a word the baby's eyes had been turned, untrammelled, towards the great heaven. The father and the mother, sitting by a small fire conversed in murmurs. On a thin sheet of coarse linen, spread over the scanty grass of the roadside, lay the child—open-eyed and quiet. Peasants' children seldom cry. They seem to be born with a prescience of the inutility of lament. With a child's fearless stare Stephen's eyes exchanged placid and profound glances with the inscrutable stars. Ignorant and undismayed he stretched his unsteady little hands towards the universe in a desire to play with that brilliant dust which streams through infinite space into an infinity of time. The glory of heaven is very near a child's soul, as the memory of his land is near the heart of an exile at the beginning of his pilgrimage. Afterwards the withering wisdom of the earth destroys the dreamy memories and longings in the awakening of a peal of laughter or a sigh of pain.

Stephen, unwinking, looked on—smiled at Immensity. In the day-time, from his mother's arms, he scrutinized with inarticulate comprehension the vast expanse of the limitless and fertile black-lands nursing life in their undulating bosom under the warm caress of sunshine. In the shallow folds of the plain dammed streams overflowed into an unruffled glimmer of small lakes, placid, as though soothed by the whispering tenderness of encircling reeds. On their banks dark willows and slim, unsteady birches stirred in the gentle and powerful breath of the indolent steppe. Here and there a clump of low oaks looked sombre and stolid, planted firmly above the dark

patch of its own shade. On the slope hung a village, scattered white huts, with high, ragged, thatched roofs under which small unequal windows twinkled, like small eyes of a band of deformed and humorous dwarfs winking under high caps cavalierly aslant. Amongst them the green cupola of a village church, held up on high against the sky the gleam of a gilt cross. The cart would run down the declivity, dash through a troop of dogs barking about the wheels, rumble with loose traces over the dam—and go on slowly, with patient straining of the shaggy horses to climb the rise on the other side. As it laboriously topped the ridge the wide plains would open out again with the overpowering suddenness of a revelation. The uniform level of ripe wheat stretched out into unbounded distances, immensely great, filled by the hum of invisible life of the infinitely little: one unbroken murmuring field, as big as a world, spread out under the unclouded silence of the sky. Far off on the line of horizon, another village showed above the monotony of yellow corn, the green path of its few trees, and lay lone, minute and brilliant, like an emerald negligently dropped on the sands of a limitless and deserted shore.

## II

The fabulous vastness of the country repeated itself day after day with the persistence of eternal truth—sank into the child's unconsciousness, coloured his childish thoughts, his young feelings, carried persuasion into his ignorance—irresistible like an unceasing whisper of a voice from Heaven. The father's prosperity grew apace—quicker than the child. There are such

fortunate hazards! They ceased to wander and the boy lived with his Ukrainian mother in riverside towns while the father travelled about, busy with his wheat transport contracts, watching, highbooted in the mire of banks, his blunt-nosed scows afloat on the muddy streams of interminable waterways. In the desolation of the antechambers of government offices he found a new ambition for his son. He saw him uniformed, embroidered, bemedalled, autocratic, called Excellency. Everything is possible in Russia; and, as the proverb says: anything may be done—only cautiously! When the boy was eight years old he put him to school in a provincial town. From there Stephen went to the capital. The elder man could not understand the ambition of the youth.... Paint! Why paint? Paint what? Where? What's the good of it? Generals don't paint; nor do Councillors—even the writers in chancelleries don't paint. As to the General-Governors they would not even speak to a painter; they would not hear him if he presumed to.... The old man was afraid of such an incomprehensible form of madness. The son took his stand on the autocracy of vocation and argued his point in strange words, with bewildering arguments. The father saw only the fixedness of resolve and—in his fear of losing the favourite for ever—pleaded timidly.... All the painters of which his son spoke—he understood—were dead. Well! Poor folk. God rest their souls. What's the good then of going abroad if there was no one there to tell the secrets of the trade. They had left works? Maybe, maybe. He felt certain Stephen could paint much better than those dead fellows. Then, why go so far to look at what they left—if there was anything left to look at? He doubted it. Such a long time—long time. Things get rotten and crumble—houses and bridges—let alone paintings. And they were foreigners too! Why go so far—amongst Germans and such

like? Was Russia not big enough to paint in—if he must! ... He bowed his head at last. Heaven willed it. For his sins! For his sins! ... "And do you write to us—we are old people," he said to his son. Then added with a tremulous sense of his own cunning, "Write to us. You will be here and there—God knows! Write so that we know where to send money after you. Those foreigners are great cheats and you are young—young. Well, it's time. Then, go with God ... and come back soon". They embraced. The son drove off, the big collar of his cloak up, without turning his head once. In the house the mother had thrown her print skirt over her head and wept in the profound darkness of her grief. The father stood at the gate and threw a rapid sign of the cross after the vanished longings of his simple heart.

For years, under the gilded domes of splendid cathedrals, in the imposing gloom of holy monasteries, or in humble village churches the bereaved father sought in vain the help of renowned saints who answered his trustful prayers by the meaningless stare of naïve art. Evidently he did not deserve the mercy of the blessed. This thought dawned upon him at last, and he ceased to make himself obtrusive by his prayers but still haunted assiduously the sacred edifices in an indistinct but tenacious hope that the sight of his mute distress would, in time, move some attendant at the footstool of the Most High to a compassionate intercession. With both elbows on the little wooden table of "Traktirs" frequented by men of his class he often told his friends, while they sipped their tea, the story of his great sorrow—ending it solemnly with the words: "Our son is under the visitation of God", and with a deep sigh. He cursed the impious Frenchmen who had, by their black arts, bewitched the boy. After consulting his wife he made a solemn

vow to build a church in which the misguided son could have his peace with God by painting, on a gold background, a gorgeous altar-piece. Let him only return! The money was ready! But Providence, unlike the powers of this earth, was impervious to the offer of a splendid bribe. He did not see his son again. Reaching home, after one of his business journeys, he was seized by some violent internal disorder. He had just time in the last return of consciousness to assure his distracted wife of his belief that the Jews had poisoned all the wells in the province—and expired in her arms with the resignation of indifference. She followed him quickly. During the last months of her life she seemed to have forgotten her eldest boy in an impatient longing to rejoin the man who had charmed her youth.

Stephen grieved, and carried his grief, contained and profound, through every second of the first few weeks. In the sifted light coming with pearly purity through the white clouds of lofty skylights he wandered with slow steps in the long galleries between the masterpieces of line and colour. The atmosphere of these places was full of the heartless serenity of perfection. The other people in them looked to him very small, distinct and—no matter how numerous—exceedingly lonely, like men and women lost in a strange world. Their irresolute footsteps rang, sharp but ineffectual, in the significant silence of glorious memories. Stephen wandered about. His powerful and clumsy frame clad in black attracted attention, eluded it by its restlessness. He flitted in the doorways, crossed the narrow end of long perspectives, was seen, thrown in abandoned postures, on circular couches, only to get up again and pace forward stiffly with fixed and unseeing eyes. The whispers of amused remarks did not disturb him—were not heard by him.

The first appeal of death vivifies the past, evokes a great clearness of distinct memories out of the crash of destroyed hopes. Stephen remembered, could see, the pathetic faces of the dead who—he imagined—had died with his name on their lips. The armour of his art, the armour polished, impenetrable, unstained and harder than steel, seemed to be stripped off him by a mighty hand, to fall with an ominous clatter at his feet. Defenceless, he was pierced by the venomous sharpness of remorse. He had abandoned those two loving hearts for the promise of unattainable things, for alluring lies, for beautiful illusions. He wanted to shout at immortal achievements: "You have no heart". To his lofty aspirations he said: "You have no conscience",—To Beauty: "Thou art a lie!" To Inspiration: "Go! Depart with the last word unspoken—for I have no more sacrifices to offer". In the haste of his regrets he dispersed with frenzied renunciation the band of charming phantoms that had for so many years surrounded his life—and remained alone, humbled and appalled by the reality of his loss.

This state of agonizing self-reproach did not last long—no longer than with other men. Stephen's brother wrote him letters where filial sorrow was mingled with judicious concern about their affairs. That young man was cheery, practical and brotherly. He had taken over the business. He was also modern and irreverent. He spoke with strange levity of the Governor of the Province saying that the fellow had priest's eyes—that see everything—and a wolf's maw—that would swallow everything. "But"—he added—"I have the wherewithal to stuff his maw and have obtained the lease of government mills. We shall make a good thing of it. And next year I go to the Caucasus—provisioning the troops—when we shall dwell in a town, Brother, in a big town! You come and live with us. You

shall paint those Tcherkesses and the Georgian women, and make money by it—if you like. There's a fellow here—went to Turkestan; painted those savages there on small bits of canvas, and even paper—and everybody in Petersburg is running to see. It's true! I have seen myself people fight at the doors. There's many mad folks in our country. Why shouldn't you get some of their roubles? But there is plenty of money already. Half of it is yours. I understand affairs. Come and live with us. My wife asks after you often and your nephew is beginning to run about. There's no country in the world like our country. Come!"

### III

Stephen, letter in hand, looked across space and time at the land of his birth. From afar it loomed up immense, mysterious—and mute. He was afraid of it. He was afraid of the silent dawn of life, he who sought amongst the most perfect expressions of matured thought the word that would fling open the doors of beyond. Not there! Not there! ... He wrote to his brother: "I cannot return. You would not understand if I tried to explain. But, believe me, to return now they are dead would be worse than suicide which is the unpardonable crime. I want to know ... don't ask what—what some others knew and died without telling. Till I know I cannot come back. I think I dare to hope that when the word is spoken, I shall understand. Do not wonder at what I say. It is useless. You are right. There is no country like our country and no people like us—peasants. We are God's children. Little children yet. If we were like the

men are around me now I could not speak to you as I am speaking. We are Brothers. We are different, but we love without understanding one another—and we trust. Do not be angry. If there is money tell me how much there is for me for I must arrange my life. I could also earn it—but then I would have to give up my hope. Many men had to do it. It wouldn't matter—but still I am anxious to know. Cherish our land—preserve in your heart the simplicity God's mercy has put there—think of me often".

The brother returned a puzzled but a resigned answer. Into business matters he went thoroughly with great clearness and Stephen found himself almost rich or, at any rate, in very comfortable circumstances. He had recovered somewhat from the terrible shock of his loss. The black violence of grief faded after a time into a cold greyness: the pale and unwilling dawn of another short day of uncertain respites. In that ashy light in which at that time he lived Stephen saw his phantom companions return, beckon, smile, point onwards with shadowy arms; and he heard the ghostly whisper of alluring words shaped by their beautiful and unreal lips. He must go! He had paid an enormous price for the privilege of a hopeless strife! Was it hopeless? ... As he lay on a couch, with half-closed eyes, in the silence of his studio, the shadows of the evening closed round him. The day was attuning itself slowly to the sorrowful note of his heart. He got up, walked irresolutely about. The big room was under the roof which, over a part of it, came low down, with glazed openings that resembled slanting and luminous trap-doors. He walked there bending low and put his head out of the window by the simple process of standing up again. He saw the blurred waste of jumbled roofs and, further on, the rectilinear contours of a

distant building shamming under a clouded sky the dignity of some Greek temple. Just beyond, the rounded masses of clumps of trees in the park with here and there a poplar shooting up like a spire, seemed to protest emotionally, with an indignant tremble of all their curves, against the rigid purity of that lie. Round his head, innumerable sparrows twittered aggressively, hopping amongst chimney-stacks. The world appeared ugly, colourless and filled with the impertinent, personal chatter of small impudences. He drew back abruptly as if to avoid a damaging contact. For a long time he meditated, sometimes striding slowly, at times standing motionless amongst canvasses where the advancing night had erased the vestiges of his persevering attempts to disclose his soul to himself and to others. He thought: It is dark now but tomorrow is another day. I have found no living teacher—and the dead will not speak. Why? ... I have offered to them the awful sacrifice of two human hearts. Is it not enough? Am I unworthy? Who knows? And yet, and yet I feel.... "Very well," he muttered with a wave of his hand towards the sham temple where immortal masterpieces kept their secret, unmoved before the insincere ecstasies of the blind. "Very well. Be mute. Yours would have been, after all, but a human voice. I will go to the source from which you spring—to the origin of all Inspiration...." After a while he murmured indistinctly: "Nature", as if he had been ashamed of using the profaned word—the word bedraggled on so many lips—to clothe the august form of the terrible, of the immense and tormenting Idea.

He left suddenly, without seeing anybody, without making even an attempt to shake the ever-ready hands of casual companions; whereby he caused his departure to be much

discussed and the qualification of "a beastly plutocrat" added to every mention of his name, for about a week or so—in fact till he became utterly forgotten. He was not a man to leave a mark on the minds of his contemporaries; for he, strange monster, had not been provided with that touch of commonplace which makes us all brothers—and some of us illustrious. His work lay yet in the future, his lips were mute—and he pushed his aimless way through youthful crowds leaving no trail: unless a faint sense of hostility, awakened in some well ordered minds, may be put down to his account for a memorable distinction.

Again he travelled south. But this time he left the towns aside and looked at the uncovered face of the world. From the windows of commodious hotels he looked at the mountains and loathed them. They repelled him. They seemed to him senseless and wicked like magnificent monuments erected to the frenzied violences of some dark and terrible past. In the valleys he could not breathe and the sunrises seen from lofty summits he had climbed in his search disclosed to his sight only a disorderly mob of peaks whose shapes were as fantastic and aimless as a fevered dream. The Creator had tossed and jumbled that tormented bit of universe with an angry hand into a hopeless wilderness: forbidding and dumb.

Stephen left the mountains and sought Nature in other aspects. And he saw her washed, brushed, fenced in, tricked out; artificially harmonious or artificially dishevelled, such as a super-civilized actress personating a gypsy, with the scent of manufactured perfumes lingering under the dainty and picturesque rags. Even in the most remote and wildest places where he set up his easel, the hand of man seemed to raise an

unscalable wall between him and his Maker. He was discouraged. At last he turned his face to the west, towards the sea.

There, the opening of a wide horizon touched him as an opening of loving arms in a welcoming embrace touches a wayworn and discouraged traveller. For many succeeding days he dwelt on the shore drinking in the infinitely varied monotony of greatness. He was moved by the thought that there, at last, he stood on the threshold of the dwelling place of sublime ideas. He made his own the fleeting beauties of sunrises and sunsets with the avidity of a thief, with the determination of a buccaneer. He thought nobody could see in them what he saw and the snatching before the eyes of men of profound impressions had for him all the harsh joy of unlawful conquest. On hazy evenings after watching the last vestige of a rayless fire sink in the violet distances of the sea he would remain, listening anxiously, through gathering darkness, to the measured clamour of the surf. He believed that in that presence the word would come, the word desired, prayed for, invoked; the word that would give life, that would give shape, to the unborn longings of his heart. But the weeks passed wearing out the poignant delight of his hope. The great, the unreserved, the illimitable had a reserve and a limit for him; and after speaking for a while in tones of thunder fell into an austere and impenetrable silence. He waited patiently, humbly. At last with a sigh of: "Not here! Not here!" he turned his back upon the capricious sea.

He felt sad, cast down, unsecure; as a man betrayed by the most loved of friends would feel. He began to mistrust the whole creation—and naturally he thought of the undesirable

security of perfect solitude. He dreamed of vast deserts, but—apart from the difficulty of living there—he had a fear of their deception. They also would speak in glorious promises only to cast him down at last from the pinnacle of his expectations. He would not expose himself again to a trial almost too heavy to be borne, to a disappointment that would, perhaps, forever rob him of the last vestiges of his faith. Cold silence, absolute silence, is better than the unfinished melodies of deceived hopes. He resolved to return to the cities, amongst men; not because of what the poet said about solitude in a crowd; but from an inward sense of his difference from the majority of mankind. He would withdraw into the repugnance he inspired to men and live there unembittered and pacific. He liked them well enough. Many of them he liked very much but he never felt the sense of his own quality (whatever it might be—he did not in any way think himself superior—only different) as when in contact with the latent hostility of his kind. He made up his mind to try Paris—and started at once.

#### IV

He had visited that town before, in the second year of his travels, and then had, for some months, camped in the land of Bohemia; in that strange holy land of art abandoned by its High Priests; in the land of true faith and sincere blasphemies; where, in the midst of strife for immortal truth, hollow idols sit in imbecile and hieratic poses looking with approving eyes and their tongues in their cheeks at the agitated crowds of neophytes bringing fuel to the undying blaze of the sacred fire.

It is a land of dazzling clearness and of distorted shadows; a country loud with the brazen trumpeting of assertion, and eloquent with the whisper of honest hopes and high endeavours;—with the sighs of the, not less noble, failures; of not ignoble discouragements. Over it, the neophitic smoke of the sacred fire hangs thick; and the outer world looks with disapproval at the black and repulsive pall hiding the light, the faith, the sacrifices: sacrifices of youth, of burnt hearts, of many bright futures—of not a few convictions!

Stephen would not cross again the frontier of Bohemia. Not having been able to find in achievement the justification of his nebulous desires, he thought himself in all innocence unworthy to associate intimately with those men of so much more distinct aspirations. He had no friends there; did not care to try for friendships; feared to recommence again the weary round of misunderstandings ending in distastes. If any came to him they would be welcome. Meantime he would remain outside and wait. Nobody came. For months he lived alone; working a little, trying to find form before he had mastered the idea, listening to inward voices. A life ineffectual, joyless and tranquil.

He had found on the outskirts of Passy an almost ideal retreat. It was a pavilion in the court of a modern house that brought its shabby façade into line with the sordid range of the street. The pavilion, a much older structure, probably a remnant of a much more dignified building, had a ground floor and only one floor above. On the ground floor there were three rooms in which Stephen lived. A broad stone staircase gave access above to a large room extending over the three under it. It looked like a ball room exiled from more splendid regions,

and its windows, seven of them, overlooked a triangular vestige of some garden—once spacious—now only large enough to accommodate three or four trees, that lived there—as if in a dungeon—between the high blind walls of neighbouring houses. Their pale foliage waved below the windows of the pavilion in a shimmer of green tints that seemed pale and delicate with the pathetic frailness of town children. The sunshine lay on their branches, penetrated no lower, entered the studio as if guessing of the vision of light and colour that unrolled itself there in the head of the restless and solitary man. Below in the damp and uniform gloom the grass sprang up, vigorous and conquering, over that desolate remnant of beauty; covering the ground thickly with a prosperous, flourishing growth in a triumph of undistinguishably similar blades that pressed thick, low, full of life around the foot of soaring trunks of the trees; the grass unconquerable, content with the gloom, disputing sustenance with the roots, vanquishing the slender trees that strove courageously even there to keep their heads in the splendour of sunshine. In the branches a colony of blackbirds—probably unconventional—who had been expelled from the ordered communities of the gardens of La Muette led a disorderly, noisy, fluttering, whistling kind of life; flying constantly across the windows in and out of their grimy and disreputable nests; and wondering, perhaps with compassion, at the big stone cage where dwelt an immense and unfortunate creature that could not fly, or whistle, or sing.

On the courtyard side the big room had only two windows; big windows from ceiling to floor, having a wrought iron guard that rose in a complicated design of arabesque to the height of a man's elbow. The court itself was gravel, with stone

walks, right and left along the wings of the main house. In the middle of it a circular clump of flowering bushes, once upon a time ornamental and kept under the control of a stone border, had run wild and luxuriated now in incult freedom. Through the high main building a wide archway, a carriage archway, led into the street. Trailing under the archway, over the court; rising as high as the windows of Stephen's studio, a strong perfume of oranges carried amongst brick walls and over sooty bushes a romantic suggestion of dark foliage and golden fruit, of tepid breezes and clear sunshine, of rustling groves in a southern land. Outside, the street rattled, murmured, shouted: inharmonious and busy. Inside, the sweet scented silence was almost undisturbed by the feeble tapping of Ortega's hammer. Now and then, about once a week, a heavy van would stop before the archway and boxes of oranges streamed into the court on the backs of men that ran in, bent nearly double, and dumped their loads down with a low groan. Then Ortega's voice piped all day, thinly voluble, agitated and important. At times it would be drowned by the harsh tones of strident scolding under the recess of the archway. The noise would burst violently, rasp the air with the cruel sharpness of its spite, end in scornful exclamations drawling crescendo: "They will ruin you under your nose! Look at that man, José. You see nothing! I will teach him! But look! Look! All these oranges.... Sanctissima.... Look! You! José!" Old Ortega unshaven and dirty tripped about on his meagre shanks here and there like a man in extreme distress. And when the scolding had abruptly ceased his thin squeaky voice would be heard modulated and persuasive with tender intonations: "But Dolores! ... Don't ... Don't Dolocita! ... My dearest!"

## V

Those Ortegas were the owners of the house, or rather the man owned the house which the woman ruled with a perpetually irritated masterfulness. They had established themselves there some years ago; and the blue sign-board over the ground floor windows, proclaiming that I. Ortega sold within oranges, olives and wine in a wholesale way, had become faded with the rains of many autumns before Stephen found rest in the interior pavilion after his long wanderings. The couple were well-to-do. José, one of the three children of prosperous Biscayan cultivators, had wandered away early, seeking martial distinction in the ranks of colonial troops. Returning, he found for himself in Seville a wife, and then after many changes had found also, what to him seemed, and indeed was, a fortune in commerce far from his native land. His brother, the genius of the family, had become a priest and now was in charge of a hamlet-full of fiery Basque souls which he endeavoured to keep in the path of godliness with fierce denunciations, with menacing words, with gloomy fanaticism, knowing nothing of the world; hating it, for it was the hospitable playground of the devil, hardly able to bring himself to tolerate the impious sunshine that, by an inexplicable oversight of the Creator, shone indiscriminately upon the believing and upon the wicked. A tall, lean priest with a narrow forehead and an ascetic yet coarse face; moving amongst hot-headed and fearless men, respected, admired and feared wherever he went, indefatigable and keen in his shabby, black, close-fitting cassock, amongst those reckless sinners; ready to leap, for the defeat of evil and error, out of his

ominous and concentrated silence, like a sword from the scabbard in the hand of an unforgiving God. A mystical fanatic who in the darkness of black nights saw visions, who in the silence of barren hills heard voices; who living amongst simple men and women felt clearly that he was living in a world inhabited by damned souls. A man of great faith who battled for his belief in an obscure and arid valley of the Pyrenees, wearing out his unyielding heart with the rage, the humiliation, the bitterness of his inefficiency in that terrible contest against the victorious Destroyer of mankind.

The youngest of the three children, a girl, married a mountaineer possessor of a patch of ground and of a ruinous stone dwelling that stood in the unproductive disorder of a narrow valley bestrewn with grey boulders. The fellow, handsome, sinewy and brown-faced, went through life singing: a royalist, a smuggler and a gay companion, very popular amongst the men of the hills, who were ready any day to die for their King and their *fueros*. One evening he went away singing, carbine in hand, into the purple confusion of towering peaks—and never returned. Doubtless he died in good company. And even in these peaceful times the frontier-guards talk to this day of that sharp and bloody affair in the pass, where a wooden cross stretches its black arms in stiff indifference, over the common grave of the breakers and the guardians of the law.

The widow, always delicate, sickened seriously soon after. The priest brother came, confessed, absolved, buried her—and took the orphans: two girls.

The priest was poor—very poor. Poor with his own poverty

and with all the indigence of his flock. That he was wealthy enough to endow both girls with the Everlasting Treasure, he never doubted. Yet he suffered to see them exposed to those privations which for himself he considered to be a reward too splendid for his merits. He corresponded irregularly with his brother José—with that righteous man, amassing wealth, away there in the magnificent and sinful city. He wrote him of his difficulties. He got an answer written by his sister-in-law. The virtuous Dolores said her husband had consulted her. Well, as to money, commerce had its exigencies and money was scarce. But they were childless. They would take one of the girls, care tenderly for her, and, eventually, marry her to a man of good repute—if Heaven so willed. José on his annual business tour to Murcia would on his return call on his brother and take the child. She, Dolores, would be a mother to a deserving and obedient girl. And the child would have many advantages. They knew many good people.... Father Ortega read on for four pages, with a thoughtful face, at last with a frown. He had doubts. On the other hand he trusted his brother. He believed in the wickedness of mankind with all the innocence of his soul. With equal innocence he believed in the virtue of Ortegas. In the appalling desert of human sinfulness the blood of his race flowed pure like a miraculous stream. José had been a soldier. What of that! There had been soldiers who also had been saints. José, if no saint, would be a good Christian. His own brother! Yes! One of the little ones must go. She also was an Ortega. His parentage was a safeguard for the child. He could not believe in the possibility of any of his kin falling away from grace. He would not even think of it. It would be too terrible.

The brothers met after many years. Away from his

"Dolocita, my dearest!" José bore himself with a free joviality becoming a successful merchant who had not quite forgotten his warlike youth. They talked together of old times, of the dead, of the old people, of the sister they had loved much. Before the stern soldier of the Faith the ex-sergeant of colonial troops was like a child: affectionate and respectful—a little awed. Father Ortega asked about the King—the rightful King—who also lived in Paris. Had José seen him? Yes? Good! A better time was coming. With the rightful monarch the fear of God would reign in the land. The time would come! And Father Ortega grew animated, talked loud. The two little girls, standing close together, very quiet, listened open-eyed. As the time for separation approached the priest became tender, very solemn too. "Mind, José," he said impressively, "I deliver to your care a Christian soul. See that you do your duty. A sacred charge!" Poor José was touched and not a little discomposed. He repeated: "Good! Good! Of course! How else?"—and looked down at his imposing charge. He saw only a barelegged girl of about twelve with tumbled brown hair and large grey eyes that streamed with tears. The other one was crying too. He felt moved to tears himself. "Brother," he blubbered out, "I will take ... take ... both of them ... Poor ... things. Dolocita won't mind!" But the priest refused with an air both exalted and austere. Theresa must remain under his influence. That child had dispositions ... a sacred spark that must be nursed into a flame. Later on if there was need for a little money to help her into a convent of her choice he would ask his brother. She was different from the younger, Rita. She had a vocation—a sacred spark. As he spoke his sunken eyes glimmered, like a pair of votive candles before a rude altar, in the gloom of a wayside shrine.

The sisters parted in the dust of a narrow road that winds along the bottom of the shallow and rocky valley. The brothers clasped each other in a long embrace, then the younger gave his blessing to the elder man, who stood with bared head before the uplifted hand. José and Rita had to walk some little distance to the village where José's conveyance awaited him. Father Ortega holding Theresa by the hand turned his back upon the setting sun and stood looking at them as they went on, diminishing in the distance, under the escarpment of the stony cliffs. The priest's shadow fell slender and long on the white dust of the path as if darting after the departing figures; and the shorter shadow of the child, pressing to his side, mingled with it for a part of its length. The two made as though only one distorted and blank image of a giant hound, pointing with a fantastically elongated finger at the young wanderer going into the unknown. The priest stood silent, the child sobbed gently by his side; and they remained gazing till José and Rita disappeared on a turn of the path behind a big detached bush, crowned aslant, with a solitary pine waving on its summit: a round, grey boulder that lay on the brown flatness of the sward like an enormous and aged head under a sombre and plumed béret.

## VI

José loved the child. The girl was affectionate in an independent kind of way and the old man wanted some unchecked outlet for the kindness of his heart. She reminded him also of his sister, who in having left his home early he

remembered best as just such another girl. To Dolores her husband's niece was interesting principally as a costly memorial of an unheard-of concession to conjugal weakness: a concession that must be repaid to her by years of meek obedience. She was a strange product of ignorance and shopkeeping instincts. She was the daughter of a man looked upon in his native town as imbued with western ideas, a man very clever and audacious. In fact the only really enterprising ship-chandler of poetical Seville. She could read, even in French, with assurance—she could write with, not an altogether fatal, hesitation—she could cast up sums, in addition, in her husband's books with the ease of natural aptitude revelling in a charming occupation. She was prejudiced, unforgiving and knew how best to assert her personality against José. The gentle combatant of the glorious Philippine wars, accustomed to discipline of a sort, was not a very rebellious subject. Still there were points on which he dared to have his will—sometimes, even, his way. But with the arrival of Rita even the shadow of imperfect freedom departed from him. The astute Dolores soon noticed the strength of his affection for the child, and from that time Rita's comfort, education, her needs, her welfare became in Dolores's hand so many irresistible instruments serving to grind José into very small dust. To the consideration of the child's happiness he gave up his tastes, his opinions, his comforts—even his habits; all—but one! Abnegation has limits. To save Rita from unjust scoldings, from unnecessary slappings, from being shut up cruelly in a dark room or unnecessarily deprived of her supper he would give up his plans of business, his yearly journeys (those green oases of his life), would consent to have his opinion on wine or olives impugned, sneered at, overruled; but he would not give up his evening visits to a café where his

countrymen used to congregate. Dolores with the prudence of an accomplished tyrant gave way on that point: for a man must not be robbed of every incentive to endure the burden of existence if he is to remain a fit subject for autocratic rule.

Every evening in the festive glare of gas-lights, amongst the polish of tall mirrors, the gleam of gildings, the cheerfulness of white marble tables intensified by the glowing, rich note of colour in the crimson plush of the seats, José luxuriated at his ease, enjoying his short-lived liberty, his fleeting sense of self-respect, in the midst of men who would listen, without unkind remarks, to what he had to say. He was an extreme, a ferocious Legitimist, ready, theoretically, to pay the price of war, famine and conflagration for the triumph of his ideas. The sonorous periods of his speech rang with the words extolling "our mother the Holy Church" and the "*Rey neto*" in strange rhapsodies; while the aproned waiters circulated in the smoke and murmur of the café, clattering with the saucers, beer-glasses and coffee cups which they distributed smartly upon crowded tables with an air of bored disdain. José was happy every evening—and all day (more fortunate in that than most men) he had the certitude of that happiness to help him through his trials. It may be said without exaggeration that he lived only for the joy of these moments and—more unselfishly—to watch over Rita.

It is hard to say what the wild girl of Basque mountains, transplanted into the heavy-scented but sordid atmosphere of the house in Passy, would have become had it not been that José found a good friend for the child in one of his café acquaintances of the same political way of thinking with himself. Señor Malagon was socially superior to the seller of

oranges being a considerable leather merchant from Cordova. His circle of acquaintance was extensive, for his wife was French and they moved in a very respectable, well-to-do and proper world of solvent business men possessing sociable wives. Mrs. Malagon, a vivacious and sentimental person, was immensely interested in Rita's story as told her by her husband. Poor José wearied all his friends with the eulogies of his niece. Malagon, a grave man with a cameo profile and a bluish chin, listened patiently, raising, from time to time, towards his lips, a beringed hand holding a cigar. José confided to him his difficulties in hints, in half-admissions of his wife's impracticability. He spoke, discreet, longing for advice, mindful of his out-of-doors dignity but ready to sacrifice even that for the good of his niece. Señor Malagon—imperturbable—heard, pondered for a long time: impenetrably sympathetic, cautiously dumb. But the little Mrs. Malagon would not admit any caution. They must befriend the girl. The daughter of a smuggler killed in the exercise of his functions? How wicked and romantic! And an orphan? How sad! Brought up by a solitary priest in a lonely valley? It made her shiver, but in that case there could be nothing wrong there. "We must help your friend about her, Henry," she said. "He is not my friend," protested Henry; "he's just a right-thinking and respectable Spaniard with whom I played dominoes every evening for the last year or two. That's all." "And the girl is pretty?" asked the wife. The husband admitted she was. Strange but pretty. He had called on Ortega and saw her there. "Business, you know, my dear," he explained. "Could one speak to that horrid Mrs. Ortega? Could one really venture to go and see her?" wondered Mrs. Malagon. "H'm! She is very ... proper. Common but ... respectable," admitted Henry, with deliberate heaviness of diction. He did not want to commit himself to anything very

precise. Personally he had no objection. It did not seem very necessary. Those people were by no means poor. Not at all. Well off, rather. Still, if his wife liked.... Malagon, married late in life, spoiled his wife—paternally.

In this way, after many preliminary manoeuvres of cunning diplomacy on the part of José, it came to pass that Mrs. Malagon's serviceable, one-horse landau was seen at last, waiting before the wide archway of the Passy house. It cannot be said that Dolores was very gracious. She could no more smile graciously than a cockatoo; a bird she resembled somewhat, when viewed from one side, by the irritated curve of her nose and by the invariable cold fury of her round and pitiless eye. But she was decently polite and made no vehement objection to Mrs. Malagon's desires. She only remarked afterwards that the little Frenchwoman was a fool—to which opinion the unprincipled José hastened to assent. Of course she would not part altogether with the child. Indeed it was not demanded of her. She had no objection however to be relieved now and then from the bother of looking after the girl. "Unruly minx! Well, if your sister was like that I am glad I never knew her." José, pretending not to hear, would slink out, to swear and stamp with rage in some secluded place. From sheer affection for Rita he was reduced to a pass where he dared not protest against any abuse, any insult, any blasphemy. He was afraid of what his wife might do. She was capable of going to these people, of abusing them foully, of taking away the child, of making an awful disturbance. She would break the windows perhaps! *Quién sabe?*

## VII

Rita, tamed under the heavy hand of Dolores, was softened by the peaceful influences of a commonplace and happy home. The ordered life, the decencies of a civilized household of pretty surroundings—for Mrs. Malagon piqued herself on being cultivated and artistic—seemed to make round her a sort of tender half-light in which the child moved happy, joyous, herself the brightest spot in the haziness of a mediocre daylight, where life appeared a quiet and an easy achievement. Adèle Malagon—only a year younger than Rita—had for her companion that kind of fierce friendship of which only very young girls seem capable. They were very much together, almost continuously, being at first educated together by Miss Malagon's governess. Only now and then Dolores's capricious fiat—when José had to be punished for some want of pliability—would call the girl back into the atmosphere of scolding and garlic of her aunt's home; where, for a few days, or even a couple of weeks, she lived—painfully on the alert; combative and unrestful; prepared for strife, like a warrior in the presence of an enemy. Then her uncle was childishly happy and ludicrously miserable. He admired her bravery in holding out—with more or less success—against Dolores, he enjoyed her caressing ways—that were for him only—and he deplored the state of affairs that hardened the character of the girl. In the other household Adèle moped, the governess—good soul—complained dolefully, "That child will forget everything! When she gets back from that awful house she is positively wicked for a time. I can't manage her". Mrs. Malagon staring hard with those unseeing, swimming eyes of hers would murmur serenely, "Oh! It will be all right". At the family luncheon the corpulent Henry would miss the girl and remark

in his profound murmur, "Ho! The little savage gone again!" And when she returned he greeted her with "Ho! You have come back? *Bueno!*" Then he complained with ponderous playfulness about his Adèle learning "that barbarous jargon of those Biscayans from our wild mountaineer" and distributed impartially wholesome bonbons to both children. After dinner, before going to his café, he would sit in his wife's salon wheezing comfortably and beam in amused silence upon his wife, his Adèle and that waif of the mountains as if all three were his promising daughters. In the café José kept his seat, would jump up to meet him, would shake both his hands at parting. He liked the unassuming old fellow whose opinions were so very sound. Very sound! From time to time—very seldom—old Ortega, freshly shaved, scrupulously got up in black:—as if he were going to a funeral—would call on Mrs. Malagon and, after anxious inquiries if there were no visitors, would be introduced by a pert *bonne* into the splendour of Mrs. Malagon's knickknacks. Rita's benefactress—as he called her—received him always with sweet patience which he did not abuse. His calls were short. To him she appeared a princess, a queen, nay, more, almost supernatural: a benevolent fairy that had saved Rita from vague but immense misfortunes. He stammered, always embarrassed, his heart full, "You are an Angel. An old man thanks you—with his heart, all his heart!" When Mrs. Malagon said that it really was a small matter, she was pleased to do anything for Rita—who was charming; "We all love her", José would exclaim in a trembling voice: "Isn't she! Who wouldn't love her? But Heaven has sent you for my comfort. I kiss your hands and feet". And he always did kiss the little woman's hands devoutly before going out of that magnificent drawing room. Mrs. Malagon—when the door had closed after the simple old fellow—would hold up close to her

short-sighted eyes the plump white hand and look for a time with a faint smile at a tear José often left there, before she would dry it with quick, gentle taps of her cambric handkerchief, while she thought, "Am I really so very good? How extremely touching!"

The peaceful conventions of middle life, the conventions resembling virtues, made for Rita as if a shelter behind a respectable curtain that separated her from the real existence of passions. The pretty assumptions of selfish quietude gave to events an aspect of general benevolence, a polished surface of easy curves hiding the resounding emptiness of thoughts, the deadly fear of sincerity, the cherished unreality of emotions. It went on as a tale made up of charming but meaningless sentences, flowing with gentle ease through a succession of serene days. In the shallow stream Rita was carried away from year to year; listened to the soothing imbecility of its babble. Listening, she was willing to forget the impressions of young days, the rugged landscapes, the rugged men, the strong beliefs, the strong passions. To her all this was hardly a matter of experience. It was more like the memory of an atmosphere, the memory of some subtle quality of air made up of freshness of perfumes, of brilliance, of stimulating gusts, of gentle breezes—things intangible, indescribable, not understood; impossible to define and impossible to forget. She thought of them with love, with longing—sometimes with repulsion, often with scorn—now and then with rare lucidity that suggested fear, that swift fear of the unavoidable approaching in dreams. She would shake it off with the smile of unbelief—with the callous innocence that ignores the trammels of its origin. She was so adaptive that her adaptiveness had the aspect of a cruel absence of the heart. She appeared gracious

and heartless living in aimless periods of sunshine, living between sunrises and sunsets as if there had been, suspended over her head, no menace of another day.

Only from time to time during her repeated visits to Passy she caught a glimpse of sincere emotions. José's increasing love for herself, the love inarticulate and profound; that unchecked flow of tender impulse relieving the ignorant and oppressed heart was the first thing that struck her as unquestionable and imposing in its absolute openness, in its convincing unreserve. Its helplessness was touching and it seemed to her to be an indissoluble part of it, filling her with regret at the thought that so much affection must be bound up together with so much weakness. Was it always so? Was it always the most sincere that were the weakest? For her uncle as she grew up, she had a caressing, a deep gratitude—in which, almost unknown to her, lurked a faint flavour of disenchanting pity. The vagaries of Dolores she met with a rigidity of demeanor which caused that worthy woman to foam at the mouth in the imperfect privacy of a big glass cage where she sat from morning to night with her yellow profile of a bilious parrot hovering over the pages of account books. The angry miserliness of Dolores grew with age, rising by its vastness, its stupidity, by the blind ruthlessness of its strength to the dignity of an elemental force of nature. And the increasing griminess of the home where the plaster peeled in slabs between the grey sashes of dusty windows, the leprous aspect of its façade, remarkable even in the unhealthy blotchiness of the soiled street, hid the cold emptiness of big rooms: four stories of vast and dirty desolation through which, shaking his head dolefully, José shuffled with slippered feet in futile rounds of mournful and useless inspection.

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# TIGER, TIGER

*Being a Commentary on Conrad's "The Sisters"*

By Ford Madox Ford

I felt as if a beast from the jungle had suddenly leaped at me when first the editor of this periodical, and then the executors of the late Mr. John Quinn asked me to finish a story by Joseph Conrad—a story called "The Sisters". For "The Sisters", along with a story published in "Tales of Unrest" and called "The Return" occupied a curious position in Conrad's psychology—or at least in his psychological view of his own work. He seemed to regard them as something slightly obscene at which one could only peep in secret. They shared the quality of things kept in a locked drawer. I notice that in some notes he made for Mr. George Keating in a specially inscribed copy of "Tales of Unrest" Conrad writes:

"'The Return' was begun immediately 'The Nigger of the Narcissus' was finished. A thorough change. It shares with one other story of mine the distinction of never having been serialized. No editor would accept it—and I don't wonder at their unanimity. One was good enough to write: 'Very fine. But I can do nothing with it.' Some cultured Scandinavians liked it in translation. Nothing would induce me to look at it again."

This must have been written in 1924 and it astonishes me to find that, even so late in life, Conrad retained his feeling of aversion from this story which, personally, I always liked. For "The Return" and "The Sisters" are indications of the gradually weakening desire that Conrad had to be what I would call a "straight" writer, as opposed to the relatively exotic novelist of the sea and the lagoons which fate, the public and some of his friends forced him to become. It will be observed that "The Return" is placed in London as the other story is in Paris—a Paris rendered in so few words and so livingly that, upon my soul, reading of it here in New York I feel as homesick as can be for the Seine. It will be observed also that "The Return" deals with the relation of the sexes; so "The Sisters" was to have done. That no doubt was why the cultured Scandinavians—and I myself—liked the one story and why certain of his friends persuaded him to abandon the other.

It is with regret that I feel myself forced to refuse to finish this. There is nothing I should find more stimulating than the attempt—for it would be an attempt to throw myself back into an early frame of mind and to have a shot at a technical *tour de force* that would intensely engross me. It is as if Mr. Rascoe and the executors of Mr. Quinn had dared me to hold my finger in the flame of a lighted candle. But, although I would quite cheerfully accept that dare or even try to draw the bow of Achilles, literary politics of the moment forbid the contemplation and indeed, at present, I have other things to do. But think of the outcry that it would cause to arise amongst the aligned autograph collectors and old junk dealers who surrounded poor Conrad in his later years! It almost tempts me.

Conrad, then, at one time wished to be what I have called a straight writer, treating of usual human activities in cities and countrysides normal to the users of Anglo-Saxon or Latin speech. He desired in short to be a Dostoievsky who should also be a conscious artist writing in English or preferably in French. Think of what gorgeous visions that opens up.

I notice that the Polish minister to the Court of St. James stated the other day that in an interview he had with Conrad, Conrad asserted that he chose to write in English because that was the only language in which to write about the sea. But the point is that for quite a long period Conrad was intensely depressed at the thought that he would be forced forever to write about the sea.

At the time when I first knew him, which was just after the appearance of "The Return", he regarded writing about the sea as an avocation only for boys' writers and he regarded the writing about normal terrestrial humanity as the only glorious occupation for a proper man. That is to say, in common with myself, he regarded the writing of novels as the only occupation for a proper man and he thought that those novels should normally concern themselves with the life of great cities. Fate only permitted him to write two great novels dealing with city life—"The Secret Agent" and "Under Western Eyes". But although "The Secret Agent" was relatively a failure, "Under Western Eyes" with its rendering of political intrigue and really aching passion has always seemed to me by a long way Conrad's finest achievement. Here—again I say it seems to me—you have Conrad appearing in the rôle of a Dostoievsky who is also an artist, and if I were asked to name the book by which I was sure—and hoped—that Conrad

would go down to posterity this is the book that I should name.

But at the time of which I am speaking—in the middle '90's—Conrad still faced unshaped destinies. And the voice of reason proved too strong for the promptings of artistic ambition. Henley, who had just published "The Nigger of the *Narcissus*" in *The New Review*, impressed upon Conrad that his only chance of making a living lay in writing about the sea. Henley was the British Tory Imperialist and it was the sea as viewed from British bottoms about which he desired to read.

Mr. Edward Garnett, who at that time was—as I am sure I hope he still is—the literary dictator of London, also used very strong pressure upon Conrad not to write in the spirit of "The Return". That may be seen in the lately published letters from Conrad to Mr. Garnett—the letters written just before he was about to set out on his honeymoon and to write upon a French island the other stories which make up "Tales of Unrest". Conrad used to be of the opinion that the pressure exerted by Mr. Garnett was in a sociological, rather than in a marine, direction. Mr. Garnett, he said, disliked all empires and all colonies and all colonizers, and what he desired to see written was rather stories like "Heart of Darkness" or "The Outpost of Progress" or the Malay tales which rendered the veniality, lust and brutalizing influences which white men exercise over oppressed native populations, than any projections of modern normal city life.

That at least was Conrad's view of Mr. Garnett's exhortations, although it would appear from the letters that Mr. Garnett's pressure, like Henley's, was rather in a marine direction. Be that as it may and sensible as the advice was to a

man without any means and with a young wife and baby, Conrad viewed the prospect of becoming a sea writer with an extreme dejection.

With an extreme dejection! He considered the fate of Captain Marryat, whom he always regarded as one of the very greatest of English novelists, and he saw himself relegated like the author of "Midshipman Easy" to the tattered schoolbook shelves of eternity. His agony at this thought was at that time very great and indeed, even as late as 1923, he wrote to a gentleman who had written to him a distasteful puff of his collected edition: "That infernal tale of ships and that obsession of my sea life ... after all I may be a seaman, but I am a writer of prose". And of all the agonies of the poor fellow's agonized career this, if not the greatest, was the most consistent and enduring.

He bowed his head to his friends and the inevitable. Readers might be found for books about the sea; it was unthinkable that they would support Slav introspections passing in Paris. So, as I have said, the manuscript and the very thought of "The Sisters" was, as it were, put away in a locked drawer. He bowed his head and faced a destiny as harsh and bitter as the sea itself. He had to provide a future for his beloved Borys and that to him was a duty as sacred as that of any priest.

Nevertheless, from time to time, as if guiltily, as if swiftly contemplating the obscene, he would take a peek into that locked drawer and for a minute the Tiger would raise its burning head. In those years my intimacy with Conrad was very great. Day after day, month after month and year after year we sat till far into the night, sometimes right through the

night, devising of literature. Sometimes of the hearts of men but always returning to how to render what passes in the hearts of men! So I may claim to know the mind of Conrad of that day better than any other man. And he had that inhibition—that thwarted desire to write of the relationship between men and women. That he denied to himself as any church-warden and father of a family might have denied it to himself and for the same reason.

I remember his saying with extreme contempt that Stevenson in one of his letters declared he would never write about women because he would lose his market. And then suddenly he, as it were, drooped and added, "But after all am I any better?" And what he, curiously, desired to write of was incest.

I don't mean to say that he proposed to write of the consummation of forbidden desires, but he did want to render the emotions of a shared passion that by its nature must be most hopeless of all. At the end of his life when he felt his position secure he began upon this task. He was accustomed to say that it had always been his ambition to write a novel of Napoleonic frigate warfare, but far, far more it was his ambition to write of the passion between a couple who were, unknowingly, brother and sister. That, in "Suspense", he was going to risk. It would have contained precious little of the frigate warfare which he got off his chest in writing that very serenely beautiful book "The Rover".

Incest as a subject seems somehow predestined for treatment by Conrad. In Poland he had been brought into contact with a number of tragic romantic instances of unconscious unions that

were within the limits of the Canon Law. And curiously enough "The Inheritors", the first of our collaborations to be published, has a faint and fantastic suggestion of—unrequited—love between brother and sister. It was as much as anything, because of this, that Conrad fiercely—almost fanatically—insisted on collaborating in this book and interrupting the course of "Romance" upon which we had already been laboring for several years. "The Sisters" was an early try at the other thing. The pensive Slav painter was to have married the older sister and then to have had an incestuous child by the other. I do not profess to know every detail of the plot of this story as it would finally have stood. Conrad mentioned it perhaps half a dozen times in the course of ten years.

And of course in his shadowy and rather hurried projections of this forbidden story Conrad varied the narrative very often and I do not remember now all the variations. What comes to me as a sort of composite photograph is this: Stephen was to have met, fallen in love with and married the elder sister. Then the younger sister, failing in the religious vocation that her uncle the priest desired her to have, was to come to Paris and to stay with the young couple in Stephen's pavilion, the tyrannous character of her aunt being such that she could not live with the orange merchant and his wife. The elder sister proving almost equally domineering, Stephen was to fall before the gentler charm of the younger. And the story was to end with the slaying of both the resulting child and the mother by the fanatic priest.

That I think would have been the final form of the story, but of course there were many variations upon this backbone. I think the emotion was to have been screwed up by a visit to

Paris of Stephen's brother who, equally, was to have fallen in love with the younger sister thus creating a rivalry between the two brothers, and I know that at one time Conrad meditated transporting the characters both to Spain and to Russia so as to get the last drop of contrast out of contrasted race natures.

The difficulty was the figure of the priest. I don't know whether Conrad began the story before he had read *Une Vie* or the other story of Maupassant's in which a fanatical priest murdered the guilty couple. I rather think that must have been the case. Or he may have begun the story with the idea that he could sufficiently differentiate his priest from Maupassant's. Or he may even have thought of treating the priest out of rivalry to him as the author of *La Maison Tellier*. I know we both frequently talked vaingloriously and only half in earnest of treating one or other of Maupassant's projects and indeed, I did eventually have a shot at it.

But that abbé was the real snag—the question of how to treat him similarly and yet differently proved too difficult and I daresay that reluctance to face the problem was what really made him put the manuscript away once again. So we have "Chance" instead of "The Sisters". For myself I regret the substitution. The vista that opens to me of the works of an immensely great international writer, another but more impassioned Turgenev, another Flaubert but more of a poet, has a gloomy glory that I cannot but regret. Contact with Anglo-Saxondom has, alas, a belittling effect on the artist, we so love trivialities and so avoid the contemplation of great causes. But the majority of my readers will not agree with me and so I may as well drop the subject.

I had hoped to have sufficient room to write a little on the subject of Conrad's style at the time when "The Sisters" was written, but I haven't, so I must drop that too. Perhaps the Editor will permit me to return to it one of these days.

[The end of *The Sisters* by Joseph Conrad]