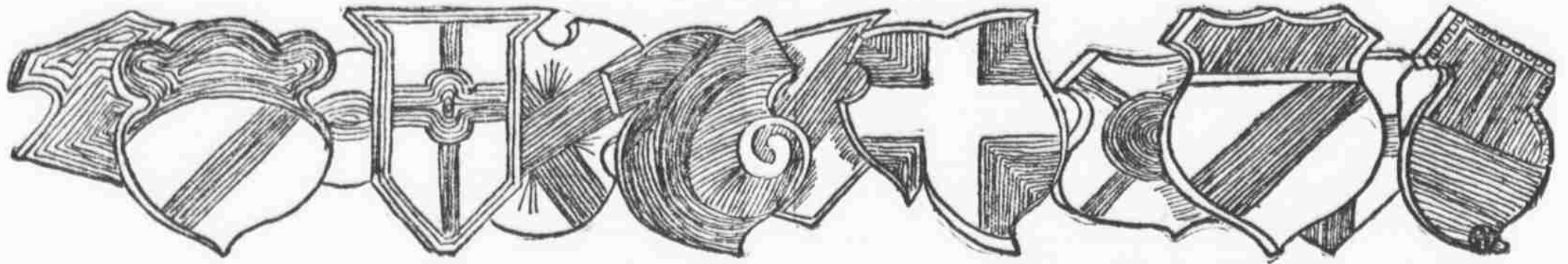


Romance: A Chronicle of the Adventures of John



Kemp in England and Jamaica-----By Joseph Conrad

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CHAPTER IV. (Continued.)

IDREW a deep breath. I thought for a moment that, after all, there was a little of fair play in the game—that I had a decent, fair, blue-eyed man in front of me. He looked hard at me; I hard at him; it was as if he were going to wrestle for a belt. The young girl on the bench had her lips parted and leant forward, her head a little on one side.

I said, "You won't swear I was the man . . . Nikola of Escocia?"

He looked meditatively into my eyes; it was a duel between us.

"I won't swear," he said. "You had your face blacked, and didn't wear a beard."

A soft growth of hair had come out over my cheeks whilst I lay in prison. I rubbed my hand against it, and thought that he had drawn first blood.

"You must not say 'you,'" I said. "I swear I was not the man. Did he talk like me?"

"Can't say that he did," Sadler answered, moving from one foot to the other.

"Had he got eyes like me, or a nose, or a mouth?"

"Can't say," he answered again. "His face was blacked."

"Didn't he talk Blue Nose—in the Nova Scotian way?"

"Well, he did," Sadler assented slowly. "But anyone could for a disguise. It's as easy as . . ."

Beside me, the turnkey whispered suddenly, "Pull him up; stop his mouth."

I said, "Wasn't he an older man? Didn't he look between forty and fifty?"

"What do you look like?" the chief mate asked.

"I'm twenty-four," I answered; "I can prove it."

"Well, you look forty and older," he answered negligently. "So did he."

His cool, disinterested manner overwhelmed me like a blow of an immense wave; it proved so absolutely that I had parted with all semblance of youth. It was something added to the immense waste of waters between myself and Seraphina; an immense waste of years. I did not ask much of the next witness; Sadler had made me afraid. Septimus Hearn, the master of the *Victoria*, was a man with eyes as blue and as cold as bits of round blue pebble; a little goat's beard, iron gray; apple-colored cheeks and small gold earrings in his ears. He had an extraordinary mournful voice, and a retrospective melancholy of manner. He was just such another master of a trader as Captain Lumsden had been; and it was the same story over again, with little different touches, the hard blue eyes gazing far over the top of my head; the gnarled hands moving restlessly on the rim of his hat.

Afterward the prisoner ordered the steward to give us a drink of brandy. A glass was offered me, but I refused to drink it, and he said "Who is it that refuses to drink a glass of brandy?" He asked me what countryman I was, and if I was an American.

There were two others from the unfortunate *Victoria*—a Thomas Davis, boat-swain, who had had one of Nikola's pistol balls in his hip, and a sort of steward—I have forgotten his name—who had a scar of a cutlass wound on his forehead.

Suddenly the conviction forced itself upon me that the whole thing, the long, weary trial, the evidence, the parade of fairness, was being gone through in a spirit of mockery, as a mere formality; that the judges took no interest whatever in my case. It was a foregone conclusion.

A tiny, fair man, with pale hair oiled and rather long for those days, and with green and red signet rings on fingers that he was forever running through that hair, came mincingly into the witness box. He held for a long time what seemed to be an amiable conversation with Sir Robert Gifford, a tall, portentous looking man, who had black horsehair sticking in the cranial creases of a cliff. The conversation went like this:

"You are the Hon. Thomas Oldham?"

"Yes, yes."

"You know Kingston, Jamaica, very well?"

"I was there four years—two as secretary to the cabinet of his grace, the duke of Manchester, two as civil secretary to the admiral on the station."

"You saw the prisoner?"

"Yes, three times."

I drew an immense breath; I thought for a moment that they had delivered themselves into my hands. The thing must prove of itself that I had been in Jamaica, not in Rio Medio, through those two years. My heart began to thump like a great, solemn drum, like Paul's bell when the king died—solemn, insistent, dominating everything. The little man was given an account of the "bawminable" state of confusion into which the misdeeds of a pirate called Nikola of Demonio.

"I assure you, my lads," he squeaked, turning suddenly to the judges, "the island

the little beggar's falsetto, it was a voice one does not forget.

"Remember," he squeaked. "Gad, gentlemen of the jury, he came as near as possible— You have no idea what a ferocious devil he is."

I was wondering why on earth Nichols should have wanted to kill such a little thing.

"As near as possible murdered myself and Admiral Rowley and a Mr. Topnambo, a most enlightened and loyal . . . inhabitant of the island, on the steps of a public inn."

I had it then. It was the little man David Macdonald had rolled down the steps with, that night at the Ferry Inn on

little man. It seemed to me that I must be able to crush a creature whose malice was as obvious as the green and red rings that he exhibited every few minutes. He wanted to show the jury that he had rings; that he was a mincing swell; that I hadn't and that I was a bloody pirate. I said:

"You know that during the whole two years Nichols was at Rio I was an improver at Horton Pen with the Macdonalds, the agents of my brother-in-law, Sir Ralph Rooksby."

"I certainly know nothing of the sort," he said, folding his hands along the edge of the witness box, as if he had just thought of exhibiting his rings in that manner. He was abominably cool. I said:



"WILLIAMS! FOR GOD'S SAKE, WILLIAMS, WHERE IS SERAPHINA?"

was wrought up into pitch of . . . ah . . . almost disloyalty. The . . . ah . . . planters were clamoring for . . . ah . . . separation. And, to be sure, I trust you'll hang the prisoner, for if you don't . . ."

Lord Stowell shivered, and said suddenly with haste, "Mr. Oldham, address yourself to Sir Robert."

I was almost happy; the cloven hoof had peered so damagingly out. The little man bowed briskly to the old judge, asked for a chair, sat himself down, and arranged his coat-tails.

"Mr. Oldham, you saw the prisoner three times. If it does not overtax your memory pray tell us." And the little creature pranced off in a new direction.

"Tax my memory. Gad, I like that. You remember a man who has had your blood as near as could be, don't you?"

I had been looking at him eagerly, but my interest faded away now. It was going to be the old confusing of my identity with Nikola's. And yet I seemed to know

the Spanish Town road.

"He was lying in wait for us with a gang of assassins. I was stabbed on the upper lip. I lost so much blood . . . had to be invalided . . . cannot think of horrible episode without shuddering."

He had seen me, then, and when Ramon (a Spaniard, who was afterwards proved to be a spy of El Demonio's—of the prisoner's. He was hung since) had driven me from the place of execution after the hanging of the seven pirates; and he had come into Ramon's store at the moment when Carlos ("a piratical devil if ever there was one," the little man protested) had drawn me into the back room, where Don Balthasar and O'Brien and Seraphina sat waiting. The men who were employed to watch Ramon's had never seen me leave again, and afterwards a secret tunnel was discovered leading down to the quay.

Then my turn came.

It was as if I flew at the throat of that

"You must have heard of me. The Topnambos knew me."

"The Topnambos used to talk of a black-guard with a name like Kemp who kept himself mighty out of the way in the Vale."

"You knew I was on the island," I pinned him down.

"You used to come to the island," he corrected. "I've just explained how. But you were not there much, or we should have been able to lay hands on you. We wanted to. There was a warrant out after you tried to murder us. But you had been smuggled away by Ramon."

I didn't lose my grip; I went at him again, blindly, as if I were boxing with my eyes full of blood, but my teeth set tight. I said:

"You used to buy things yourself of old Ramon; bought them for the admiral to load his frigates with; things he sold at Key West."

"Upon my soul!" he said.