

JOSEPH CONRAD

THE PLANTER
OF MALATA

It's time to read
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Joseph Conrad

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Joseph Conrad was a Polish-British writer regarded as one of the greatest novelists to write in the English language. Though he did not speak English fluently until his twenties, he was a master prose stylist who brought a non-English sensibility into English literature. The both mystery and romance Joseph Conrad's short story The Planter of Malata, set partly in Sydney and partly on the fictional island of Malata, is a tale of unrequited passion and tragic inevitability.

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To
Mr. and Mrs. RALPH WEDGWOOD

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CHAPTER I

In the private editorial office of the principal newspaper in a great colonial city two men were talking. They were both young. The stouter of the two, fair, and with more of an urban look about him, was the editor and part-owner of the important newspaper.

The other's name was Renouard. That he was exercised in his mind about something was evident on his fine bronzed face. He was a lean, lounging, active man. The journalist continued the conversation.

“And so you were dining yesterday at old Dunster's.”

He used the word old not in the endearing sense in which it is sometimes applied to intimates, but as a matter of sober fact. The Dunster in question was old. He had been an eminent colonial statesman, but had now retired from active politics after a tour in Europe and a lengthy stay in England, during which he had had a very good press indeed. The colony was proud of him.

“Yes. I dined there,” said Renouard. “Young Dunster asked me just as I was going out of his office. It seemed to be like a sudden thought. And yet I can't help suspecting some purpose behind it. He was very pressing. He swore that his uncle would be very pleased to see me. Said his uncle had mentioned lately

that the granting to me of the Malata concession was the last act of his official life.”

“Very touching. The old boy sentimentalises over the past now and then.”

“I really don’t know why I accepted,” continued the other. “Sentiment does not move me very easily. Old Dunster was civil to me of course, but he did not even inquire how I was getting on with my silk plants. Forgot there was such a thing probably. I must say there were more people there than I expected to meet. Quite a big party.”

“I was asked,” remarked the newspaper man. “Only I couldn’t go. But when did you arrive from Malata?”

“I arrived yesterday at daylight. I am anchored out there in the bay – off Garden Point. I was in Dunster’s office before he had finished reading his letters. Have you ever seen young Dunster reading his letters? I had a glimpse of him through the open door. He holds the paper in both hands, hunches his shoulders up to his ugly ears, and brings his long nose and his thick lips on to it like a sucking apparatus. A commercial monster.”

“Here we don’t consider him a monster,” said the newspaper man looking at his visitor thoughtfully.

“Probably not. You are used to see his face and to see other faces. I don’t know how it is that, when I come to town, the appearance of the people in the street strike me with such force. They seem so awfully expressive.”

“And not charming.”

“Well – no. Not as a rule. The effect is forcible without being clear...I know that you think it’s because of my solitary manner of life away there.”

“Yes. I do think so. It is demoralising. You don’t see any one for months at a stretch. You’re leading an unhealthy life.”

The other hardly smiled and murmured the admission that true enough it was a good eleven months since he had been in town last.

“You see,” insisted the other. “Solitude works like a sort of poison. And then you perceive suggestions in faces – mysterious and forcible, that no sound man would be bothered with. Of course you do.”

Geoffrey Renouard did not tell his journalist friend that the suggestions of his own face, the face of a friend, bothered him as much as the others. He detected a degrading quality in the touches of age which every day adds to a human countenance. They moved and disturbed him, like the signs of a horrible inward travail which was frightfully apparent to the fresh eye he had brought from his isolation in Malata, where he had settled after five strenuous years of adventure and exploration.

“It’s a fact,” he said, “that when I am at home in Malata I see no one consciously. I take the plantation boys for granted.”

“Well, and we here take the people in the streets for granted. And that’s sanity.”

The visitor said nothing to this for fear of engaging a discussion. What he had come to seek in the editorial office was not controversy, but information. Yet somehow he hesitated to approach the subject. Solitary life makes a man reticent in respect of anything in the nature of gossip, which those to whom chatting about their kind is an everyday exercise regard as the commonest use of speech.

“You very busy?” he asked.

The Editor making red marks on a long slip of printed paper threw the pencil down.

“No. I am done. Social paragraphs. This office is the place where everything is known about everybody – including even a great deal of nobodies. Queer fellows drift in and out of this room. Waifs and strays from home, from up-country, from the Pacific. And, by the way, last time you were here you picked up one of that sort for your assistant – didn’t you?”

“I engaged an assistant only to stop your preaching about the evils of solitude,” said Renouard hastily; and the pressman laughed at the half-resentful tone. His laugh was not very loud, but his plump person shook all over. He was aware that his younger friend’s deference to his advice was based only on an imperfect belief in his wisdom – or his sagacity. But it was he who had first helped Renouard in his plans of exploration: the five-years’ programme of scientific adventure, of work, of danger and endurance, carried out with such distinction and rewarded modestly with the lease of Malata island by the frugal colonial government. And this reward, too, had been due to the journalist’s advocacy with word and pen – for he was an influential man in the community. Doubting very much if Renouard really liked him, he was himself without great sympathy for a certain side of that man which he could not quite make out. He only felt it obscurely to be his real personality – the true – and, perhaps, the absurd. As, for instance, in that case of the assistant. Renouard had given way to the arguments of his friend and backer – the argument against the unwholesome effect of solitude, the argument for the safety of