THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

JOSEPH CONRAD'S "ROVER"

By Christopher Morley

THE first requisite of good fiction, I suppose, is to tell a tale: to carry the reader along in a current of narrative: to keep him eager to know What Happens. The second desideratum, perhaps, is to tell the tale in such a way that it seems set in an eddy or vibration of a much larger meaning than is immediately apparent. The story must not merely turn on its own axis, but also move in some perhaps unreckonable orbit in a wider dimension.

Conrad's "The Rover" seems to me to fulfil, with enchanting completeness, both these requirements. It is a good story, even a breathless story; but it is always, to the attentive reader, something more than that. I write of it here under a serious disadvantage —by the hazards of the Christmas season I have to set down my impressions with horrid haste, and after only one reading of the book. For it is the kind of novel that transpires best after a second union. It is so full of rich little commentary on human life and passion that one is eager to read it again, just as we long to live again episodes of our own experience that (we dumbly feel) were of great significance. We wish—indeed how furiously we wish!—it were possible to transact those moments anew, more slowly (like a retarded cinema film) so that we might more patiently and curiously study the details and gestures we instinctively realized were of seizing importance. A look in the eyes, a troubled moment, a stammering clumsy word—how full of precious sensibility they were; but they passed like a flash; and we had no chance to scrutinize them as they deserved. "But at my back I always hear Time's winged chariot hurrying near."

Now I have a disagreeable suspicion that perhaps in a notification of this sort the reviewer is supposed to outline the plot of the novel: a thing I have a resolute objection to doing. I will assume that most readers of THE BOOKMAN have, by the time this appears, already read "The Rover", or inwardly (in the inscrutable casket where Velleity becomes Will) determined to do so.

As you already know, the story is laid in the South of France in the years succeeding the French Revolution. The French setting and characters accentuate the French manner of Conrad's prose. It has always struck me that much of his writing sounds oddly like a translation from that language; and here, by unconscious association with his French fantoms, I believe he has often and often given us a French word order which delays the reader's grasp of the sentence until the very end—

> The thought that if he had remained at home he would have probably looked like that man crossed unbidden the mind of Peyrol.
>
> The rover had to turn his attention to that other invader of the strained, ques-

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tionable, and ominous in its origins, peace of the Escampobar farm.

The disinherited soul of that rover ranging for so many years a lawless ocean with the coasts of two continents for a raiding ground, had come back to its crag.

I think you will admit that the arrangement of these sentences is not quite in the English tradition. And indeed the whole book is so steeped in Mediterranean feeling that it seems to belong to French literature rather than to that of our own tongue. This, then, I submit as the first proof, and a very characteristic Conradian proof, of the book's stature, that the reality of his characters has swung him clean off the orbit of English ways of thinking. Perhaps as much as any novelist of modern times, Conrad is susceptible to his fantoms. It is like Walt, "I do not pity the wounded person: I myself become the wounded person." From this point of view "The Rover" appeals to me especially (I trust this will not be misunderstood) because, considered as *English* style, it is by no means the most impressive of his books.

In purely narrative skill, I don't think Conrad has ever surpassed this novel. Again and again we are enchanted by the minute discretion of his selective observation. Exquisitely he can sum a mood, a moment; linger over it, omitting no quaint or tiny analogy of suggestion; then, without loss of an instant, pass flashingly to the next urgency of the story. The one word that comes repeatedly to my mind in regard to this book is *watchfulness*. From the very first pages we find ourselves alertly on the lookout for strange and foreboding movements. As the characters do in the tale, we are continually looking round the corner of the house; looking out of the window; looking for the British ship that is moving slowly on the wrinkled silver of the strait; looking from the kitchen into the *salle* . . . for we are always at the mercy of what is going on somewhere else. Surely that is the essence of art in a tale of suspense.

And then another point. I remember no story of Conrad's in which the strange sacredness of both things and animals is so plainly suggested. Those who have had the contemplation forced upon them—it is an intuition we are all reluctant to admit—know that *things* (I mean things like chairs, teacups, any furniture) have often the most painful and astounding meanings to the mind. Things acquire violent and exclamatory significance by association with human beings with whom we are closely implicated. (Just as human beings, I suppose, acquire significance only by association with those larger vibrations of reality in which we all eddy and turn.) There is a whole minor company of these psychological retainers in "The Rover", and every one of them plays a superbly helpful part in fixing the mood and the mystery in our minds. Old Peyrol's canvas money vest; the humble and pitiable dog whose decease so affected the career of its owner; the goat, the hens, the chairs in the *salle*, the pitchfork, even the soup in the kitchen and the fire on the hearth—each enters, at some appropriate instant, into the movement of the reader's mind. Conrad's watchful and tenderly humorous observation of animals is a trait that I have never seen alluded to; it is not one to be exaggerated, of course; but these creatures are all part of the general mystery of life, and deserve our attention and respect. What more stunning touch than this characterization of Peyrol in terms of poor Michel's very negligible dog—"He, personally, would not

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have made a friend of a dog like Michel's dog, but he understood perfectly the sudden breaking up of the establishment on the shore of the lagoon." The "establishment" (lovely word!) was merely Michel and his mongrel in a little hut.

For that was the essence of old Peyrol, the sea rover, ex-pirate and skeptic as to the purity of Revolutionary zeal. He understood. He was not sentimental; he was simply calm. "What he had gone through had put a drop of universal scorn, a wonderful sedative, into the strange mixture which might have been called the soul of Peyrol." There was something so real, so massive, about the old seaman that even Arlette, who had lived in a fog of the mind ever since the days of the Terror in Toulon, began to revive when she first saw him.

"The Rover", furthermore, seems to me a masterpiece in Conrad's peculiarly characteristic quality of perspective. It is so extraordinarily real because, by being placed far enough away in time, it is drained of all merely irrelevant circumstance; only the essential human necessities come through to us. And the whole world falls away: for a few hours we are suspended there on that southernmost promontory of France, with the Mediterranean underneath us, the profile of the hill rounding the background, and old Peyrol moving solidly among the frailties and passions of that little group. Like Fate itself, Nelson and the British blockading fleet poise just over the sea horizon; and Conrad has never paid more subtly perceptive tribute to the land of his adoption than in his comments, through French mouths, on the strangely mingled generosities and rigors of the English race.

I feel, rather miserably, that these memoranda are painfully inadequate. It would take much careful ratiocination to transmit an effective *précis* of the peculiar fascination of this tale, which is not only more humorous and more rapidly narrative than many of Conrad's books, but is also remarkable in the extraordinary minuteness of its detail. What used once to be described as Conrad's ironical "detachment" proves, more than ever, to be a silly label: he may be detached from merely spurious non-essentials, but over the thrilling obsessions and sorceries of the spirit he lingers with most assiduous care. Arlette seems to me, even in her dreamy and half crazed mind, more real than many of her predecessors in his gallery of women. The question as to why Peyrol set out to sea and certain death has been raised by some reviewers. We can see the author smiling half ironically; for (whether or not Peyrol felt himself falling in love with Arlette, which is fairly plainly hinted at) this dénouement was the only possible one. The blue Mediterranean—"where he lay, lulled by the coil of its crystalline streams"—was not only the boyhood home of Peyrol the sea rover, "the man of dark deeds but of large heart", but also the home, in a sense, of Conrad's own art. After so many years he has returned to it, and has enriched it with one more of those passionate and troubled associations which give certain places of the earth a meaning and a loveliness beyond the color of earth and sky and sea.

The Rover. By Joseph Conrad. Doubleday, Page and Co.

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