

# THE SKETCH BOOK

## A BLESSING IN DISGUISE

By Mrs. Joseph Conrad

THE reception of "The Rover" both here and in America, and the widespread interest in its author, tempt me irresistibly to relate an incident that happened some years ago and which so nearly resulted in a great calamity.

It was in the autumn of 1903, the year that the novel "Typhoon" was published and during one of my husband's all too frequent attacks of gout. Those attacks—so much deplored by his many friends, but in this case surely a blessing in disguise. We lived at that time in a dear old farmhouse some four miles from Hythe, and perhaps two miles from the rather large village of Lyminge. It was a lonely isolated spot with the house lying low down under the hill far below the road, and quite half a mile from the nearest human habitation. Our household at that time consisted only of our two selves, a small boy of four, two young maids (both much too nervous and superstitious to have been of the slightest use in any emergency), and a youth who did duty as groom and handy man. He also was well provided with what are known as nerves. Truly a valiant band in a tight place. Still the English countryside might be considered a safe enough place, and I cannot remember ever before feeling nervous myself.

As we all know, a small boy of four claims a lot of one's attention, particularly when there happen to be several deep water holes around, not to speak of loose horses and cattle.

On this particular autumn afternoon I was endeavoring to amuse the child out of earshot of the sick room. We had worked our way round to the back of the house, when looking over the stone wall I saw a stranger riding into the farmyard. He dismounted somewhat heavily from his machine, and coming close against the wall accosted me in curt tones and without any preamble: "I have come to make Mr. Conrad's acquaintance!"

There was something in his strange manner and mode of address that roused my ire. I answered him somewhat shortly, to the effect that his desire could not be gratified since my husband was ill in bed and unable to see anyone. I added that he could state his business to me. The man glared fiercely for a moment and his right flew to his hip. To this day I remember my feeling, almost of gratification, as the thought crossed my mind: "Ah! a twinge of rheumatism, my friend. Serves you right for being so rude."

"I've come a long distance to make Mr. Conrad's acquaintance", he repeated, "and I'm determined to do so; I shall come again." With that he turned abruptly and wheeled his bicycle out of the steep yard onto the road. Afterward, when relating the incident to my husband who asked me to describe the man to him, I laughed and said, "Well, the description of your character Hermann in the story 'Falk' fits him absolutely; he might almost be the original, and I don't believe he was an Englishman."

For nearly three weeks after that we were always hearing that a strange man

had been seen wandering on the road above the house, in the fields, and even close under the garden wall. Apparently he never spoke to anyone, but the fact of his being always there was somewhat disquieting. All this time the gout claimed its victim and my time was fully occupied. At last one day a hurried note was left at the back door for me; I read its contents with horror and apprehension. It appears that this man had been living at a farm near Lyminge, whence he had made his daily pilgrimage to watch his chance of coming across the man he had determined to see. Only that morning the farmer had chanced to discover that he had in his possession a loaded revolver; whereupon my visitor (a German) had declared it his intention to shoot Joseph Conrad at sight. He had also a copy of the book "Typhoon" with several passages marked—the description of Hermann was one which he had decided applied to himself, hence his enmity against a man totally ignorant of his existence. That the man was mad—no sane person could be so foolish—was little comfort. I turned again to the letter in my hand, which contained only the further information that since the farmer had declined to house him any longer he had gone to Folkestone to get another lodging.

I spent some anxious hours seeing a lurking figure in every shadow. Before night, however, the groom returned from executing a commission and with very round eyes announced that the German, whose name was Mee, having heard some man walking on the Folkestone Leas laugh as he passed, and thinking the man was laughing at him, had turned and shot him dead. I recalled with a shudder his significant gesture, that movement I had in my ignorance attributed to a twinge of

rheumatism. A few years ago, we heard that he was still being detained during His Majesty's pleasure.