

Miguel de Cervantes



*Rinconete and
Cortadillo (Peter
of the Corner and
the Little Cutter)*

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The Exemplary Novels of Cervantes — Rinconete and Cortadillo: or, Peter of the Corner and the Little Cutter

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At the Venta or hostelry of the Mulinillo, which is situate on the confines of the renowned plain of Alcudia, and on the road from Castile to Andalusia, two striplings met by chance on one of the hottest days of summer. One of them was about fourteen or fifteen years of age; the other could not have passed his seventeenth year. Both were well formed, and of comely features, but in very ragged and tattered plight. Cloaks they had none; their breeches were of linen, and their stockings were merely those bestowed on them by Nature. It is true they boasted shoes; one of them wore alpargates,^[1] or rather dragged them along at his heels; the other had what might as well have been shackles for all the good they did the wearer, being rent in the uppers, and without soles. Their respective head-dresses were a montera^[2] and a miserable sombrero, low in the crown and wide in the brim. On his shoulder, and crossing his breast like a scarf, one of them carried a shirt, the colour of chamois leather; the body of this garment was rolled up and thrust into one of its sleeves: the other, though travelling without incumbrance, bore on his chest what seemed a large pack, but which proved, on closer inspection, to be the remains of a starched ruff, now stiffened with grease instead of starch, and so worn and frayed that it looked like a bundle of hemp.

Within this collar, wrapped up and carefully treasured, was a pack of cards, excessively dirty, and reduced to an oval form by repeated paring of their dilapidated corners. The lads were both much burned by the sun, their hands were anything but clean, and their long nails were edged with black; one had a dudgeon-dagger by his side; the other a knife with a yellow handle.

These gentlemen had selected for their siesta the porch or penthouse commonly found before a Venta; and, finding themselves opposite each other, he who appeared to be the elder said to the younger, "Of what country is your worship, noble Sir, and by what road do you propose to travel?" "What is my country, Señor Cavalier," returned the other, "I know not; nor yet which way my road lies."

"Your worship, however, does not appear to have come from heaven," rejoined the elder, "and as this is not a place wherein a man can take up his abode for good, you must, of necessity, be going further." "That is true," replied the younger; "I have, nevertheless, told you only the veritable fact; for as to my country, it is mine no more, since all that belongs to me there is a father who does not consider me his child, and a step-mother who treats me like a son-in-law. With regard to my road, it is that which chance places before me, and it will end wherever I may find some one who will give me the wherewithal to sustain this miserable life of mine."

"Is your worship acquainted with any craft?" inquired the first speaker. "With none," returned the other, "except that I can run like a hare, leap like a goat, and handle a pair of scissors with great dexterity."

"These things are all very good, useful, and profitable," rejoined the elder. "You will readily find the Sacristan of some church who will give your worship the offering-bread of All Saints' Day, for cutting him his paper flowers to decorate the Monument^[3] on Holy Thursday."

"But that is not my manner of cutting," replied the younger. "My father, who, by God's mercy, is a tailor and hose maker, taught me to cut out that kind of spatterdashes properly called Polainas, which, as your worship knows, cover the fore part of the leg and come down over the instep. These I can cut out in such style, that I could pass an examination for the rank of master in the craft; but my ill luck keeps my talents in obscurity."

"The common lot, Señor, of able men," replied the first speaker, "for I have always heard that it is the way of the world to let the finest talents go to waste; but your worship is still at an age when this evil fortune may be remedied, and the rather since, if I mistake not, and my eyes do not deceive me, you have other advantageous qualities which it is your pleasure to keep secret." "It is true that I have such," returned the younger gentleman, "but they are not of a character to be publicly proclaimed, as your worship has very judiciously observed."

"But I," rejoined the elder, "may with confidence assure you, that I am one of the most discreet and prudent persons to be found within many a league. In order to induce your worship to open your heart and repose your faith on my honour, I will enlist your sympathies by first laying bare my own bosom; for I imagine that fate has not brought us together without some hidden purpose. Nay, I believe that