



***LEONARD  
MERRICK***

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OF HIS YOUTH:  
AN EXTRAVAGANCE  
OF TEMPERAMENT***



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# **Conrad in Quest of His Youth: An Extravagance of Temperament**

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# CONRAD IN QUEST OF HIS YOUTH

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## CHAPTER I

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"How we laughed as we laboured together!  
How well I remember, to-day,  
Our 'outings' in midsummer weather,  
Our winter delights at the play!  
We were not over-nice in our dinners;  
Our 'rooms' were up rickety stairs;  
But if hope be the wealth of beginners,  
By Jove, we were all millionaires!  
Our incomes were very uncertain,  
Our prospects were equally vague;  
Yet the persons I pity who know not the city,  
The beautiful city of Prague!"

If you can imagine the lonely shade of the man who wrote that verse returning to Literary London—where there is no longer a young man who could write it, and merely a few greybeards are left still to understand what it means—I say, if you can imagine this, you may appreciate the

condition of Conrad when he went back to the Quartier Latin.

Conrad was no less sad, his disappointment was no less bitter, the society that he had sought so eagerly was no less alien to him. But while he commanded boots for all, and mourned the change that left him desolate, the melancholy of his mood was a subtler thing—for he realised that the profoundest change was in himself.

Something should be said of the longings that had brought him back to the Quarter—longings in one hour tender, and in the next tempestuous—something hinted of the regretful years during which his limbs reposed in an official chair while his mind flew out of the official window to places across the sea where he had been young, and sanguine, and infinitely glad. To a score of places it flew, but to none perhaps so often as Paris, where he had studied art in the days when he meant to move the world.

Of course the trouble with the man was that he wanted to be nineteen again, and didn't recognise it. We do not immediately recognise that our youth is going from us; it recedes stealthily, like our hair. For a long time he had missed the zest, the sparkle, the buoyancy from life, but for the flatness that distressed him he blamed the Colony instead of his age. He confused the emotions of his youth with the scenes where he had felt them, and yearned to make sentimental journeys, fancying that to revisit the scenes would be to recover the emotions.

Because the office rewarded his mental flights ungenerously he was restrained by one of those little realities which vulgar novelists observe and which are so

out of place in novels—"sordid" considerations, like ways and means. Give us lots of Blood, and the dummy over the dashing highwayman's shoulder! If you call him a "cavalier" it's Breezy Romance.

And then his Aunt Tryphena died, and left him everything.

At once he was lord of himself. Liberated by "everything," he sailed for Home, and savouring the knowledge that he was free to rove where he listed, lingered in London. Some months afterwards—when the crocuses were perking behind the Park rails, and Piccadilly was abloom with the first millinery of spring—he travelled to Dover, en route for the Past.

And lilac was everywhere—Paris was all lilac and sunshine. He drove to an hotel on the left bank. To behold it again! The grotesque clock under the glass shade, and the clothes pegs that were too large to hang clothes on, the scarlet édredon that he would throw on the floor before he got into bed, the sight of these things was sweet to him as the welcome of a woman is sweet after a passage made on a slow steamer to reach her side.

He said to the femme de chambre—she was elderly and she was plain; pretty chambermaids are all employed in farcical comedies; but she was a femme de chambre, and he felt communicative. He said, "La dernière fois que j'étais Paris, j'étais un gamin." She smiled and gave a shrug: "Monsieur n'est qu'un enfant aujourd'hui." What English servant would have earned that tip? ... Oh, yes! English servants are all too truthful.

When he had scattered his things about the room, he strode out to seek the little restaurant where the dinners had been so good, and the company had been so witty years before. Well, it had vanished. Perhaps he wasn't surprised, but he loitered wistfully in the street from which the faded sign had gone, and at the flashy establishment where he dined instead, the plats lacked flavour.

By-and-by he sauntered along the Boul' Mich'. While he walked he perceived that he had ceased to look about him, and was again looking back. The sigh of names that had been long forgotten was in the plaintive night, and the air was thick with echoes. He moved along the lamp-lit boulevard seeing ghosts, and to right and left the heedless faces of the fleshly crowd were strange to him. All strange to him. This was the first impediment in his road.

"Gay Paree" is gayest in the doggerel of the English music-halls; its gaiety is declining fast, but its beauty is fadeless. No city goes to bed more worldly, and wakes up looking more innocent. At six o'clock next day, when they began to beat carpets, and Conrad flung the windows wide, some of the happiness of the wakened capital's simplicity was breathed into his heart. And his fervour, and his purse, overcame the first impediment. Within a week of his arrival he had already been called "Mon cher."

He was called "Mon cher," and other things. He puffed his "caporal" at the Café Vachette, and found that he had lost his relish for French tobacco; he sat among the cards and the dominoes at the Café d'Harcourt—bought carnations and *écrevisses* from the pedlars' baskets for Angèle and Suzanne; and Angèle and Suzanne proved witless compared



with what their mothers had been, and he noted—not without some slight pride, for we are all patriotic abroad—that though the art of tying a veil has been granted to French women, the pretty features have been granted to the English.

It was now that the disappointment fell, now that he cried:—

"Oh for one hour of youthful joy!  
Give back my twentieth spring!"

The ardour of the students left him chilly, the rodomontades of his compatriots sounded merely stupid. They were all going to sacrifice themselves for an ideal, all going to England to paint persistently the class of work that England did not want. "No concessions" was their battle cry. Youth can never believe that it will live to make concessions. Your adept finds nowhere so scathing a critic as your novice.

O beautiful time when he, too, had imagined he was born with a mission! Bright morning when he had vapoured with the vainest! This afternoon the Rapsodie Anglaise was played to duller ears. The freaks seemed joyless, and he said the aspirations were "out of drawing." He was not sure that it was of immense importance whether one painted well, or ill—whether one painted at all. There were more useful things to be done in the world. He did not wish to do them, but he suggested that they were there. Then the audience hurled passages from the preface to "Mademoiselle de Maupin" at him—without acknowledgment—pelting him with the paragraphs full of shoes and potatoes until he was dizzy, and perhaps a little

shaken. After all, when one has failed to pluck the grapes it is easy to proclaim that potatoes are more nourishing. On the whole he was scarcely a success in the Quarter—a success of curiosity at most—and he won no converts to his theory (advanced in the *Soleil D'Or*) that the greatest services to modern art were rendered by the writers of ladies' fashion articles.

"They are the Teachers who make the widest school," he urged. "Under their influence the fairest work of Nature takes an added loveliness. To them we owe the enticements of the tea-gown, the soul-compelling whisper of the silk petticoat. What other apostle of Beauty can hope to shed beauty in every home? Into how many homes do you suppose your ballades will go?" He was chatting to a poet. But the poet became diffuse.

Conrad returned to his hotel not wholly dissatisfied with the impression he had made upon the poet. In la Rue du Haut-Pavé he had one or two vigorous thoughts concerning the vanity of versification which he wished had occurred to him in the cabaret, and when he had lit the lamp he began to write. You can know very little about him if you are surprised to be told that what he wrote was verse. It was of course a monody to his Boyhood.

As his age has not been stated, and he had begun to deplore it so much, it may be as well at this point to say that he was thirty-seven. A less venerable figure than you have pictured him, perhaps, despite the chambermaid. There were, however, hours when he felt a hundred.

He felt a hundred towards the close of his stay in Paris. He had resolved to go back to London, but it had few associations for him, and he packed his portmanteaux drearily. On the evening before he crossed, his thoughts flashed to a little English watering-place where he had spent a summer when he was still proud of wearing trousers. He recalled the moment of his invitation, the thrill of its unexpectedness. A nursery, and four children: three of them his cousins, departing for the seaside next day, in fancy already on the sands. And one of the trio had exclaimed—was it Ted who began it?—one of the trio had exclaimed: "Wouldn't it be jolly if Con could come too?" He was "Con." He was Con hanging over the banisters breathless five minutes later, for Nina, and 'Gina, and Ted had descended to the drawing-room tumultuously to prefer a petition to "Ma."

"Ma says there wouldn't be beds enough," they announced with long faces, mounting the stairs; and then he stammered that he had "expected there'd be something like that," and they danced round him in a ring, crying: "We made it up. You're to come with us if you may—you're to go home and ask."

The nursery was very clear to him. He saw the gleeful group on the threshold again, and the bright pattern of the wall-paper. He could see the open window with the radiant sky across the roofs.

So they had all gone to the seaside together—he, and Nina, and 'Gina, and Ted, in charge of the governess; and the house had turned out to be a school called "Mowbray Lodge," but the boys were away. Jack, the dog, had been lost on the journey—and killed the schoolmaster's chickens

when he was restored. The rows there used to be with the master! Mr. Boulton, that was his name. There was a yellow field blazing with dandelions, Conrad remembered, and behind the shadow of the fir trees, apples swayed. He remembered the garden of Rose Villa next door, and the afternoon when Mary Page kissed her hand over the fence. Mary Page! On a sudden how close it was—all except her features—her hat trimmed with blue, and her dangling plaits, and the vibration of the time. Ted and he were enslaved by her equally—without bitterness—and used to show each other the love-letters she wrote to them both after they went home. And oh! how they longed to be back, and oh, the plans they made, which never fructified, for husbanding their pocket-money and taking her by surprise one brilliant morning!

"Qu'est-ce que vous m'offrez, monsieur? Payez-moi un bock, hein?"

"No," said Conrad, starting, "run along and play, there's a good child!" These memories had come to him at the Bal Bullier, and the band was banging, and the petticoats were whirling, and a young lady was asking to be refreshed.

## **CHAPTER II**

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She pouted a protest at him, and whisked into the dance. He observed that she had graces, and heaved a sigh for the time when it would have been piquant to brush the pout

away. To-night it would be tasteless. "Kissing a cocotte is like eating tinned salmon," said Conrad to himself regretfully, and went to the vestiaire for his overcoat.

The interruption had jarred him, but it was not until the Closerie des Lilas was a hundred yards behind that he knew he had left the hall for the purpose of resuming his reverie in comfort. When he reached the Boulevard Saint-Michel his interest in the projects of five-and-twenty years ago was again so keen that he grieved to think they had been fruitless. Improving on history, he permitted the boys who were boys no more to amass the sovereign that they coveted, and, giving his fancy rein, lived through the glorious day which had never dawned. He tried very hard to be fair to Ted after Mary had welcomed them, though to prevent the conversation becoming a dialogue irked him a good deal. In moments he discovered that he was talking to her rather well for his age, and then he corrected himself with loving artistry. But he could seldom find it in his heart to correct Mary, and she said the prettiest things in the world. He came back to the present, swimming with tenderness for the little maiden of his retrospect. It shocked him to reflect that she must be about thirty-eight if she lived still, and might even have a marriageable daughter. The pathos of the marriageable daughter indeed overwhelmed him, and, taking a seat at the Taverne du Panthéon, he pictured himself waking to realise that he was only twelve years old and that all events subsequent to the epoch had been a dream.

The October air was bleak when he crossed on the morrow, and the deck rolled to meet the splashes of the

waves. The idea of revisiting the watering-place—and the idea had germinated—attracted him less forcibly as his chair played see-saw with the taffrail, but he remembered that he had often been advised by advertisements "not to risk infection from foreigners, when he could winter in sunny Sweetbay, the fairest spot in England." The fact that it had a reputation as a winter resort encouraged him somewhat, and by the time he saw the lamps of Charing Cross he felt adventurous again. He also admired a girl on the platform. "There's nothing like an Englishwoman for beauty," he said; and the girl exclaimed: "Oh, I've left my little fur in my grip, right there!"

He fulfilled his programme the next morning. The drowsy station of Sweetbay seemed to him larger than of yore as he glanced about him, but he did not stop to gather information in the matter. His bag was in the fly, and he was rattled to an hotel where the manager appeared surprised to see him. Although his sensations on the boat had left him with no insistent longing for a room with a sea-view, he accepted one without complaint, and learning that luncheon was being served, descended to where three despondent-looking visitors were scattered among an acre of tables. Evidently people continued to go abroad in spite of the advice. However, he had not come to Sweetbay for society.

It was a neat and decorous little town awaiting him when he sallied forth from the hotel. Everything was very clean, very tidy. The pink-paved sidewalks, bordered by trees, glistened like coral; the snug villas, enclosed by euonymus hedges trimmed to precision, had a fresh and wholesome air, an air that made him think of honey soap and good rice

puddings. He backed before the walls of the Parish Church. A play-bill of the Rosery Theatre, near by, seemed an anachronism, and even as he recalled Sweetbay it had been content with Assembly Rooms. On a hoarding he saw a poster of the Pier Pavilion—the pavilion was an innovation too. In the High Street photographs of some popular actors had invaded a shop window, and he was struck by the extraordinary resemblance they bore to one another—all wearing on the brow the frown of intellectuality, and carefully disordered hair. The Town Hall was a landmark. He murmured Matthew Arnold's line: "Expressive merely of the impotence of the architect to express anything," but the unparalleled ugliness of the building warmed him with recollections. He branched to the left, as he used to branch to the left when he carried Mary's bathing shoes, and surrendering himself to sentiment unreservedly now swung joyously for Eden.

And from this point landmarks flocked thick and fast. The way began to climb the hill, the hill began to show the boughs, the boughs began to veil the road, the road began to woo the lane, the lane began to near the house, and—like the old woman's pig—Conrad got over the stile.

And "Mowbray Lodge" was still painted on the gate! It was all so wonderfully the same for a moment in the shade behind the fir trees—so wonderfully—that he felt tearful. The scene had stood so still that there seemed something unreal in his returning here a man. Again he saw the slender columns of the long veranda, and the summer-house on which the weather-cock still perched. He looked, and looked wide-eyed, at a faded door—not green, not blue—and knew

suddenly that behind that door there should be currant bushes and a tangle of nasturtium, and hens prinking on the path. His soul embraced the scene. And yet—and yet it was not the features which had lived in his mind that moved him most. The magic lay in the pervasive hush, and in a gust of the fir trees' smell, which he had forgotten until it swept him breathless across the years.

Yes, there seemed something unreal in his standing here a man. His spirit was listening—and he knew that it was listening—for calls from children who had grown to middle-age now; his gaze was waiting—even he knew that it was waiting—for the rush of childish figures which the scene should yield.

Presently he sought the space where they had played. But the Field of the Cloth of Gold was transformed. Where the dandelions had spread their splendour for Mary he saw a market-garden, and the sun that had made a halo for Mary glittered on glass. There was a quantity of glass, there were consequential rows of it, all raising money for somebody, all reminding the pilgrim that meadows move with the times. "Well, I suppose it's progress," said Conrad, shaking his head. But he missed the dandelions. He was a Conservative by instinct, though he was a Liberal by reason.

When he loitered back to the view of Mowbray Lodge, a lady of the age which it is gallant to call "uncertain" had come out on the veranda. She had a little shawl over her shoulders, and in her hand she held a pair of scissors with which she was clipping a palm. The placid gaze she lifted to him was not discouraging, and advancing towards her with a bow he said:—



"Pray forgive me for troubling you, but may I ask if Mr. Boulton lives here now?"

"N—no," answered the lady pensively, "no gentleman lives here. 'Mr. Boulton'? I'm afraid I don't know the name. Are you sure he is still living in the town?"

"I am sure of nothing," replied Conrad. "It is so long since my last visit that I am even doubtful if he is living at all."

She seemed to reflect again and said: "Perhaps they might be able to tell you at the post-office."

"It really isn't important," he declared, "though I'm obliged by your suggestion. To confess the truth, I am more drawn to the garden than to Mr. Boulton. Years ago I spent a summer here, and being in the neighbourhood again I couldn't resist the temptation to come and dream over the top rail of your gate."

"Oh—er—would you care to look round the place?" she murmured with a tentative wave of the scissors.

"I should be charmed," said Conrad, "if I am not intruding."

"Of course you don't see it to advantage now. Last month —" She moved across the lawn beside him, telling the falsehoods with which everybody who has a garden always dejects a visitor. He affected that thirst for knowledge with which everybody who is shown a garden always rewards a host.

"It's a long time since you were here, I think you said?" she remarked, pleased by his eagerness.

"It is," said Conrad, in his most Byronic manner, "just a quarter of a century." The lady looked startled, and he continued with a sigh, "Yes, I was then in that exquisitely

happy period of life when we just begin to know that we are happy; you may imagine what memories are stirring in me:

—

"I can recall, nay, they are present still,  
Parts of myself, the perfume of my mind,  
Days that seem farther off than Homer's now  
Ere yet the child had loudened to the boy' ...

That poem—Lowell's 'The Cathedral'—flashed into my mind as I came upon your parish church awhile ago, and

"gazed abashed,  
Child of an age that lectures, not creates,'

at its old honours. I quoted the best part of a stanza to myself in the street. I'm afraid that is a habit of mine."

"It must be very nice," said the lady apprehensively; "yes, indeed."

It appeared that she was no more acquainted with Lowell than with Mr. Boulton, so gliding to a subject which lay quite near his heart this afternoon he introduced a third name.

"When I was here last a Dr. Page occupied the villa across the fence," he went on. "He had a daughter. To be prolix, he had several daughters, but to me his family consisted of Miss Mary. We were engaged. I won't ask you if they are there still—something warns me that they are not—but can you, by any chance, give me news of them?"

"I am sorry I cannot," she returned, fluttering. "There has been no Dr. Page in Sweetbay—I am almost certain there has been no Dr. Page in Sweetbay since I settled here. I am

positive there is none now—quite positive. There's Dr. Hunt, there's Dr. Tatham—" She recounted laboriously the names of all the medical men practising about the town, while he wondered what she was doing it for.

"I thank you heartily," he said, when she reached the end of the list.

The next moment it became evident that she, in her turn, had a question to put, for her glance was interrogating him already, and at last she faltered:—

"Pardon my asking you, but did I understand you to say that you were—h'm—engaged to the daughter of Dr. Page twenty-five years ago? Surely when you said you were a child then, it was no figure of speech?"

"No," answered Conrad; "but to be frank with you, it was nothing less than the thought of her that lured me back to-day. Let me admit that I wasn't quite ingenuous when I spoke of—of 'being' in the neighbourhood; I came deliberately, in fulfilment of a cherished plan. To me your garden is a tomb—if I may say so without depressing you—it is the tomb of the Used-to-be. We were both children, but there are some things that one never forgets:—

"'I'm not a chicken; I have seen  
Full many a chill September,  
And though I was a youngster then,  
That girl I well remember.'

Holmes wrote 'gale,' not 'girl,' otherwise he might have been speaking for me."

"Such constancy is very beautiful," breathed the lady; "I thought—" She paused, slightly pink.

"But it was unfair," he assured her; "men can be quite as constant as women—especially to the women they never won."

"Er—perhaps you would like to see the house?" she inquired; "and you will allow me to offer you some tea before you go?"

"I accept both offers gratefully," said Conrad.

He followed her into the hall, and she conducted him, with little prefatory murmurs, to such of the apartments as a maiden lady might modestly display. Repapered and rearranged they looked quite strange to him, but the knowledge that he was in Mowbray Lodge averted boredom.

"You find them altered," she said, as they went back to the drawing-room.

"Improved," said he.

"And the town," she added; "no doubt you find the town improved too?"

"Altered," said Conrad, thinking of the market garden. "Well, it is certainly bigger."

"The rapid development of Sweetbay can astonish none who bear in mind its remarkable combination of climatic advantages, but the sylvan fairness of the town is not diminished, and it continues to present an unrivalled example of the 'rus in urbe,'" responded the lady with surprising fluency. "Do you take sugar and milk?"

"Ah—thank you," he said.

"Are you making a long stay among us, or——?"

"A very brief one. Indeed, I thought of returning tomorrow."