Conrad’s Wedding*

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The great day dawned without a cloud in the sky.¹

Here, again, Joseph Conrad took refuge in the most matter-of-fact attitude. To begin with, he kept me waiting to be married just half an hour, and even when his two friends, Mr Hope and Mr Krieger,² did persuade him to make a move, he delayed still further in some futile argument with the cab-driver. I was feeling physically sick at this delay and rejoiced when the ceremony was over and we were on our way to a little café in Victoria, where we five lunched. My mother was the only one of my vast family in attendance, and I was touched to see her pitiful attempts to keep calm. Still, lunch over and Joseph Conrad having duly signed his will which his two friends witnessed, they departed. Mr Krieger had presented me with a beautiful bouquet of early roses, red and white, the Polish colours. These I had reluctantly to relinquish for my husband flatly refused to allow me to carry them to my home, where we were due for the purpose of cutting the wedding-cake and bidding my family farewell.

I have thought many times with amusement of the comic distress displayed by my husband on the day of our wedding when the whole of my many brothers and sisters raised their voices in loud lament when the time came for us to leave.

‘Good Heavens, if I had known this would happen, I – well, I would never have married you,’ he muttered, turning away with an expression of utter disgust.

We dined that night at Overtons, and then we walked the short distance to the bachelor rooms that Joseph Conrad had retained for our last night in town. First of all I tackled a huge heap of masculine garments that had somehow to be included in my trunks which had been sent there the day before. I managed very well on the whole and the trunks swallowed the last pair of socks without a strain. Surrupitiously I shook out a quantity of the telltale rice in the process.

This done, I seated myself at the table and took my share of the heap of correspondence that had to be disposed of before we could leave England. A great deal of it I found was nothing less than our two photographs and a curiously formal and grandiloquent

announcement of the day's proceedings. My awe increased and I felt shy and a little disconcerted. Still he gave me no time to think much of my personal feelings, but pushed the pile of envelopes towards me and called my attention to a list of addresses in his note-book. It was thirsty work licking the stamps, but at last this task was finished and the tearful landlady appeared with a welcome tray with tea.

After this my strange husband insisted upon going out to post the batch that night. He took no heed of my protest that it was then nearly two in the morning and they might well wait until a little later in the day. Just as he closed the street-door, the curtain-pole fell to the ground and our brilliantly lighted windows faced the street uncovered. An unkind stroke of fate— with the dawn yet some few hours distant.

The next morning, or rather, some seven hours later we were ready to start on the first stage of our big adventure. My mother had elected to come to us for lunch and to see us off at Waterloo. I had received the strictest orders that there should be no tears or display of emotion on my part. I was rather concerned because I knew that this restraint would be a lasting reproach in the eyes of my parent. She stood at the door of the railway-carriage, and behind the back of my new husband I raised my handkerchief effectively to my eyes as the train steamed out of the station, then I turned to him dry-eyed and quite composed. This little deception may, I hope, be forgiven me.

One incident disturbed me greatly during that run to Southampton. We were passing through a long tunnel, there was no light in the carriage and we were sitting opposite each other in the most decorous fashion. Without the least warning there was a terrific detonation somewhere very close at hand and the carriage was momentarily filled by a blinding flash. I was startled and for a second a sickening fear held me dumb. It was then that I realised how great an adventure it was on which I had so lightheartedly embarked, and how little I really knew of the man I had married. Suppose he turned out to be a member of some secret society? The flash and explosion had seemed to be in the very compartment, and he had made no sound since. I held my breath as the train cleared the tunnel and the welcome daylight filled the carriage. He smiled across at me, evidently quite undisturbed. I was ashamed to tell him the reason of my sudden fright, but I suppose my face betrayed me. I explained as best I could. 'Silly little donkey, it was only a fog signal they were using as a warning to the men at work on the line.'

My relief was almost painful, but I decided not to give a complete explanation. Instinct somehow showed me that I might be misunderstood. He might think I distrusted him, and anyhow, my feeling was too indefinite, too unreal for me to give it expression—least of all to him.