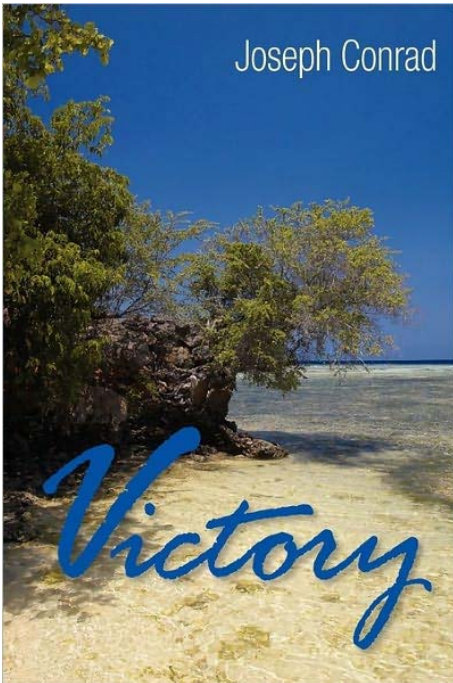


Victory
By Joseph Conrad, 1915

Review by Stephen Carter



Heyst is a perfect gentleman, always amiable, and polite, if perhaps a bit distant. None of the other colonials are quite sure why he drifts about the Malay South Seas, or what he is doing there. "Facts," he says, "gathering facts." The others think he is a queer chap. The problem, it seems, is that Heyst is the only child of a widowed, Swedish philosopher, someone along the lines of Friedrich Nietzsche. Such a dry and incisive upbringing has reduced Heyst to the condition of one of life's observers, not a participant. A superior amusement tinged with compassion for the human condition is the extent of his emotional compass.

That is, until he sees the plight of a Alma, a poor, British orphan conscripted into an all-girl club orchestra, forced to saw away at her fiddle under the crass baton of a German bandmaster who has adopted the stage name of Zangiaco. Zangiaco's All-Girl Orchestra tours the port dives and seedy hotels of the Malay Peninsula, with the added attraction that the heavily rouged girls circulate among the customers during break time. That is what melts the heart of Heyst, and he spirits her away to his remote island where he lives alone in the abandoned shell of a bankrupted coal mining camp, with a single remaining Chinese coolie. Yes, Conrad calls the Chinaman *inscrutable* Wang, but somebody had to start these clichés. Due to his pidgin English, nobody understands him, but Wang turns out to

be one of the more sensible inhabitants of the abandoned camp, when a trio of desperadoes intrudes upon their Shangri-la intent upon murder and plunder. From a philosophical tone the book takes a turn toward the genre of thriller as Heyst, Alma, and Wang play a game of cat and mouse with the vagabonds.

Conrad, best known for his short stories of the sea, is not generally regarded as funny, but there are some really amusing passages.

Later, years afterward, when the last vestiges of youth had gone off his face and all the hair off the top of his head, and his red-gold pair of horizontal moustaches had grown to really noble proportions, a certain disreputable white man fastened upon him an epithet. Putting down with a shaking hand a long glass emptied of its contents--paid for by Heyst-- he said, with that deliberate sagacity which no mere water drinker ever attained:

'Heyst's a puffect g'n'lman. Puffect! But he's a ut-uto-utopist.'

And, his description of the Zangiaco Orchestra, which might do as a description of my own musical aptitude,

... there is an unholy fascination in systematic noise. He did not flee from it incontinently, as one might have expected him to do. He remained, astonished at himself for remaining, since nothing could have been more repulsive to his tastes, more painful to his senses, and so to speak, more contrary to his genius, than this rude exhibition of vigour. The Zangiaco band was not making music; it was simply murdering silence with a vulgar, ferocious energy.

Well, Heyst might have been a bit too ethereal for this world.

It is worth pointing out that the English language was Joseph Conrad's third language. Born speaking Polish, he went to sea on French ships, but achieved absolute mastery as an English prose writer. Read him, you'll like him.

Note: *Victory* is available in Fiction "F CON" and as a downloadable eAudiobook through NetLibrary.