

## *The Nonconformists*

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APPARENTLY these two stories have no relationship between them, because Comoko and Peter—who are the respective protagonists—don't even know each other. They meet only at a certain point, but by chance and barely have time enough to exchange one lost look. I'll tell you about it later.

Now I must explain how it happened that I was able to follow the vicissitudes of the one and those of the other. It was in the period of Mr. Pitt, an indomitable hunter of butterflies. He had pitched camp exactly halfway between a village of Negroes and the town of the whites. I was there to help him catch the red, yellow, blue, and pink butterflies, a hopeless task if I hadn't had recourse to the stratagem of pretending to be asleep: then they came to rest on my nose and all I had to do was go like this with two fingers, as if to blow it.

And so I had a lot of free time, which I

divided impartially between the town of the whites and the village of the blacks. They weren't distant, at least in miles, but they knew absolutely nothing of each other, as if they existed in completely different epochs, both visible for a practical application of that theory of Einstein's about relativity.

The Negroes of the village had preserved intact their customs and their habits, their dances, their idols, their five wives. They hadn't let themselves be civilized in the least by the whites of the nearby town, who for that matter hadn't even tried, intent as they were on preserving their own habits, customs, and so on.

It must be said that they were very particular whites: a community of rigid and puritanical Boers who had come to find refuge in the jungle at the time of the war against the English. They had cleared an island of land and built their town in

the middle, spandy clean and with the church steeple pointed like a spear to hold up the sky, which especially in Africa is heavy.

People upright indeed, proof of this being the absolute lack of mulattoes in the vicinity. But there weren't many white children, either: as a rule two for each married couple, so that in over half a century the community had not increased a bit.

Whereas in the village of the Negroes, right nearby, there were throngs of children and new ones were always being born. Keep this difference in mind, because it's significant.

Comoko was a Negro of the village. Peter, instead, was a Boer of the town. It's time I spoke to you about them but I don't know which of the two to begin with, seeing that they have the same importance.

For racial chivalry, I'll start with Comoko.

I noticed him at once the first time I set foot in the village, and yet it's not easy for a white man to tell one Negro from another. His eyes were full of dismay and certainly that's why. Not a Negro's dismay, which is made up of instinct and of terror: Comoko's dismay was limpid and aware, you could tell, with its roots buried in a civilized grief.

He came toward me unexpectedly, polite and genteel. He spoke the language of the whites fluently, who knows how he had managed to learn it. He said: "I beg you to pardon me if I am naked as a worm."

I told him I should have been amazed by the contrary, given the general usage of the village. That on the other hand his body was very handsome and there was no reason for him to be ashamed of it.

But he shook his head sorrowfully, the dismay still remaining in his eyes. And from time to time the huts and the other Negroes were reflected there, deformed.

The Negro women were reflected there, too, the beautiful, beautiful Negro women: with their capacious hips and a voracity in their eyes, in their lips, in their nostrils.

Laughingly I said so to Comoko, but he didn't laugh.

"There are too many of them," he replied. "Too many Negro women and a man has to have at least five wives, here in the village."

I told him that, oh well, a man can resign himself to obligations of the sort. Comoko looked at me with a sad astonishment and said: "I love one woman alone and want to be faithful to her."

Nor was that the only singular affirmation Comoko made. I returned to the village often and each time he revealed a new cause of his dismay to me. There wasn't a custom or a law among his people that agreed with him: so he gasped, poor man, like a fish out of water.

Day after day, fathers and brothers of Negro girls—knowing he was almost a bachelor: he had only one wife—went to offer him daughters and sisters, becoming his arch-enemies when he refused them.

As a result Comoko was most hated and scorned in the village, as happens to anyone who goes against the established mores. And not only in regard to wives did Comoko want to go against custom: among other things he had put a door on his hut so that no one could enter, whereas the other huts were left open.

Besides, if he killed a gazelle while hunting, he refused to share it with the others, saving for the next day the meat he could not eat right away. And then so many little things of the sort sharply divided Comoko from his people. It would be too lengthy and boring to enumerate them, anyway you must already have an idea of him and his nonconformity.

So I'll turn to Peter, in the town of the Boers.

He was so much the opposite of Comoko that between them there was a kindred bond, I noticed it at once. He was white but his eyes were dark. The uneasiness in them wasn't reasoned and especially at times it showed instinctive violence, wild like that of caged animals.

Just imagine the contrast with the serene and well-bred eyes of all the other Boers. And not only in this did the contrast lie. They seem two cases invented to point out a moral, but I'll swear (almost) for their authenticity. Peter was intolerant of the customs of his people at least as much as Comoko was of those in his village, nor does it count that the customs against which they rebelled were completely diverse.

Despite the heat of Africa, the Boers were always irreproachably dressed. And the first words that Peter addressed to me were these: "You suffocate, in these shirts, shoes, and trousers. Here everything is naked and man alone prisoner of his clothes."

I observed that maybe it was better that way, on account of one's shame.

"What shame?" demanded Peter baring his teeth. "I'm not ashamed of what nature has given me!" He ripped open the collar of his shirt and the uneasiness was evident on his face, his sweat was red as blood.

And listen to the rest. Peter had only one wife but she wasn't enough for him and therefore he pursued more or less all the women of the town, earning for himself a well-deserved hatred on the part of fathers, husbands, and brothers. I think I've already remarked that it was a very rigid and puritanical community, where thine is thine and mine is mine.

Huge locks kept shut the doors of the houses, within which everyone jealously nursed the fruit of his own work. Whereas Peter left his door open wide as the

winds and wouldn't have had a second's hesitation before forcing someone else's, in case of need.

In sum, take Comoko and turn him upside down: you will have Peter. And for that matter, by turning the village of the Negroes upside down you will have the town of the Boers. If then you still understand anything, follow my intervention in the question, which was modest but decisive.

When I thought that he would really suffocate in his clothes, I told Peter the only thing to do was to take them off, courageously and resolutely: if they're inevitable, rebellions have at least to be complete.

Nor did Peter ask to have it repeated, evidently he had been waiting for nothing else and was naked in the wink of an eye: a spectacle, however, truly indecorous, opaque and dry as he was.

I placed his clothes under my arm and ran through the jungle, to the village of the Negroes, to take them to Comoko. I had a simple and precise plan in mind. I advised Comoko to dress himself, seeing that he was gasping with the shame of being naked. And he didn't ask to have it repeated either: but those clothes were tight for him and he had a very funny aspect, like a monkey in evening dress.

This done, I returned to my post as butterfly hunter, halfway between town and village, sure that something would happen: And not even one lepidopteron had come to rest on my nose, in fact, when I heard the howls coming from the two opposite directions.

Then from one side appeared Peter, naked and shoved on by the enraged Boers: And from the other side right after appeared Comoko, dressed and shoved on by the enraged Negroes. It was then that between the two passed that lost look I told you about at the beginning. Brief, but

enough to confirm my idea that between them—on the day of their birth—there had been a mistake in souls. Town and village were close by and you can understand how the stork might have got confused, delivering to the Negro a Boer soul and vice versa.

The two groups of people crossed, ignoring each other, and the Negroes pushed Comoko up to the town of the whites, the whites pushed Peter up to the village of the Negroes. It was a just exchange and I had the conviction that now everything would fall into its right place, together with their souls.

Instead from here two other stories begin: that of a white body among black bodies and that of a black body among white bodies. I remained halfway between the village and the town, to catch butterflies under orders from Mr. Pitt, therefore was able to follow them easily right to the end. And I assure you that it was a very instructive experience.

Comoko in the town of the Boers really felt good. He was a Negro by skin but his soul was white, isn't that the most important thing? I scarcely recognized him the first time I went to visit him. His shirt was immaculate and his tie tight as the rope around the neck of a hanged man. He was wearing a dark suit, which almost made his skin seem white. His manners were extremely polite and measured, as for that matter were his words.

He was living in the house that had been Peter's, right next to the church, but he didn't mind the proximity and even went every morning to worship and hear the sermon. He did everything to be worthy of his own white soul and still more were the things he didn't do, just to keep it candid. He had of course brought his only wife along and he didn't so much as glance at the other women, et cetera.

In sum it was impossible for the rigid

Boers to be scandalized by that Negro in their midst and given their rankling memories of Peter they couldn't help but appreciate the exchange, despite the dark skin of Comoko. Who thus found himself immersed in the social life of the town, accepting with joy all its duties, in number much greater than its rights, as always happens in white countries.

Meanwhile in the nearby village Peter in his turn had easily found his bearings. Naked and disheveled he was living in the hut which had been Comoko's, only he had had it enlarged a little from time to time by his new fathers-in-law, to make room for new wives. He was a white man by skin but his soul was Negro, isn't that the most important thing? And therefore no scruples prevented him from accepting as many wives as possible and from doing his neighbors the honor of borrowing theirs.

In sum it was impossible for the dissolute Negroes to be scandalized by that Boer in their midst and given their rankling memories of Comoko they couldn't help but appreciate the exchange, despite Peter's white skin.

And so everything went well and I was thinking how in the final analysis it takes only a little courage, at times, to improve your own life and that of someone else: it's simply a matter of following one's natural vocations.

In addition I made many intelligent observations on conformity, nonconformity, the individual, the community, and so on, which I will spare you but you can imagine what they were (in this way you'll have to take the brunt of the embarrassing finale). And I was finally about to lose interest in both Comoko and Peter—by now their lives were more tranquil than mine, as assistant butterfly hunter—when new complications arose, quite unexpectedly.

I'll recount the facts to you, without

comment, beginning with Peter this time, but as always the events regarding the two were contemporary, for the puerile sport of destiny.

Well, then: I saw the uneasiness reappear all at once in Peter's eyes and at first I thought it was on account of the sun, which had burned his skin, so unused to nudity, beyond the telling.

Instead there was something else, I realized it upon entering his huge hut. I had expected, with a certain trepidation, to find it full of women as a harem.

Whereas it was empty and squalid, with the straw mats deserted. I asked Peter where he had sent his wives, maybe to pick bananas, I asked him with a laugh.

But he sadly told me: "They've run away."

He stood without moving in the middle of the hut, small and wasted like those statues of saints you find in churches, but he without drapery to hide the wretchedness of his body.

His body was really a sorry sight, through the blisters you could see the flesh bleeding darkly and you could tell there were weak and contorted bones inside.

"I don't know why they've run away," he said.

I knew, instead, remembering the solid and gleaming bodies of the Negro women, the fullness of their lips. The contrast was evident and more evident than ever was the incompatibility between those bodies and his, Peter's.

So then I began to laugh, for the sim-

licity of it all, whereas Peter tried to cry but not even tears issued from his tiny, dried-up, exhausted body, scorched by the sun of Africa which is too strong for us whites, nor does it change anything if you have a Negro soul inside.

Immediately after I went to the town, to Comoko. I hoped that at least in his case the body had not nullified the conquests of the soul. But as soon as I saw him my hopes fell. His body was powerful and had ripped his clothes apart, his muscles could be seen rippling again.

I say could be seen because looking at them were various women, in the house as though hallucinated. Boer women, and each of them had a pretext for being there, something to teach Comoko's wife, the only woman desired by his white man's soul.

Poor Comoko, imploring and dismayed he came toward me trying to avoid the women who to do one thing or another set themselves before him, slender and full as sails before the wind.

But before he could reach me I slipped through the door and was gone, because anyway by now I knew there was nothing to be done to help them, him and Peter.

I knew that the soul, black or white, counts up to a certain point. So it's not very important to know whether Comoko stayed in the town of the Boers and Peter in the village of the Negroes, or whether each of them returned to his own place of origin: in both cases the conclusion is the same, and by no means comforting.