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About the Author <DIV>

John Sutherland is Lord Northcliffe Professor of Modern English Literature at University College London and wrote the introduction to Chekhov's **The Shooting Party** for Penguin Classics.

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BOOK ONE

THE TWO LADS

CHAPTER I

AT THE SIGN OF THE SUN IN KETTLEY

SIR DANIEL AND his men lay in and about Kettley that night, warmly quartered and well patrolled. But the Knight of Tunstall was one who never rested from money-getting; and even now, when he was on the brink of an adventure which should make or mar him, he was up an hour after midnight to squeeze poor neighbours. He was one who trafficked greatly in disputed inheritances; it was his way to buy out the most unlikely claimant, and then, by the favour he carried with great lords about the king, procure unjust decisions in his favour; or, if that was too roundabout, to seize the disputed manor by force of arms, and rely on his influence and Sir Oliver's cunning in the law to hold what he had snatched. Kettley was one such place; it had come very lately into his clutches; he still met with opposition from the tenants; and it was to overawe discontent that he had led his troops that way. By two in the morning, Sir Daniel sat in the inn room, close by the fire-side, for it was cold at that hour among the fens of Kettley. By his elbow stood a pottle of spiced ale. He had taken off his visored headpiece, and sat with his bald head and thin, dark visage resting on one hand, wrapped warmly in a sanguine-coloured cloak. At the lower end of the room about a dozen of his men stood sentry over the door or lay asleep on benches; and, somewhat nearer hand, a young lad, apparently of twelve or thirteen, was stretched in a mantle on the floor. The host of the Sun stood before the great man.

"Now, mark me, mine host," Sir Daniel said, "follow but mine orders, and I shall be your good lord ever. I must have good men for head boroughs, and I will have Adama-More high constable; see to it narrowly. If other men be chosen, it shall avail you nothing; rather it shall be found to your sore cost. For those that have paid rent to Walsingham I shall take good measure--you among the rest, mine host."

"Good knight," said the host, "I will swear upon the cross of Holywood I did but pay to Walsingham under compulsion. Nay, bully knight, I love not the rogue Walsinghams; they were as poor as thieves, bully knight. Give me a great lord like you. Nay; ask me among the neighbours, I am stout for Brackley."

"It may be," said Sir Daniel, drily. "Ye shall then pay twice."

The innkeeper made a horrid grimace; but this was a piece of bad luck that might readily befall a tenant in these unruly times, and he was perhaps glad to make his peace so easily.

"Bring up yon fellow, Selden!" cried the knight. And one of his retainers led up a poor, cringing old man, as pale as a candle, and all shaking with the fen fever. "Sirrah," said Sir Daniel, "your name?" "An't please your worship," replied the man, "my name is Condall--Condall of Shoreby, at your good worship's pleasure."

"I have heard you ill reported on," returned the knight. "Ye deal in treason, rogue; ye trudge the country leasing; ye are heavily suspicioned of the death of severals. How, fellow, are ye so bold? But I will bring you down."

"Right honourable and my reverend lord," the man cried, "here is some hodge-podge, saving your good presence. I am but a poor private man, and have hurt none."

"The under-sheriff did report of you most vilely," said the knight. "'Seize me,' saith he, 'that Tyndal of Shoreby.'"

"Condall, my good lord; Condall is my poor name," said the unfortunate.

"Condall or Tyndal, it is all one," replied Sir Daniel, coolly. "For, by my sooth, y' are here, and I do mightily suspect your honesty. If you would save your neck, write me swiftly an obligation for twenty

pound."

"For twenty pound, my good lord!" cried Condall. "Here is midsummer madness! My whole estate amounteth not to seventy shillings."

"Condall or Tyndal," returned Sir Daniel, grinning, "I will run my peril of that loss. Write me down twenty, and when I have recovered all I may, I will be good lord to you, and pardon you the rest."

"Alas! my good lord, it may not be; I have no skill to write," said Condall.

"Well-a-day!" returned the knight. "Here, then, is no remedy. Yet I would fain have spared you, Tyndal, had my conscience suffered. Selden, take me this old shrew softly to the nearest elm, and hang me him tenderly by the neck, where I may see him at my riding. Fare ye well, good Master Condall, dear Master Tyndal; y' are post-haste for Paradise; fare ye then well!"

"Nay, my right pleasant lord," replied Condall, forcing an obsequious smile, "an ye be so masterful, as doth rightwell become you, I will even, with all my poor skill, do your bidding."

"Friend," quoth Sir Daniel, "ye will now write two score. Go to! y' are too cunning for a livelihood of seventy shillings. Selden, see him write me this in good form, and have it duly witnessed." And Sir Daniel, who was a very merry knight, none merrier in England, took a drink of his mulled ale, and lay back smiling.

Meanwhile, the boy upon the floor began to stir, and presently sat up and looked about him with a scare.

"Hither," said Sir Daniel; and as the other rose at his command and came slowly towards him, he leaned back and laughed outright. "By the rood!" he cried, "a sturdy boy!"

The lad flushed crimson with anger, and darted a look of hate out of his dark eyes. Now that he was on his legs, it was more difficult to make certain of his age. His face looked somewhat older in expression, but it was as smooth as a young child's; and in bone and body he was unusually slender, and somewhat awkward of gait.

"Ye have called me, Sir Daniel," he said. "Was it to laugh at my poor plight?"

"Nay, now, let laugh," said the knight. "Good shrew, let laugh, I pray you. An ye could see yourself, I warrant ye would laugh the first."

"Well," cried the lad, flushing, "ye shall answer this when ye answer for the other. Laugh while yet ye may!"

"Nay, now good cousin," replied Sir Daniel, with some earnestness, "think not that I mock at you, except in mirth, as between kinsfolk and singular friends. I will make you a marriage of a thousand pounds, go to! and cherish you exceedingly. I took you, indeed, roughly, as the time demanded; but from henceforth I shall ungrudgingly maintain and cheerfully serve you. Ye shall be Mrs. Shelton--Lady Shelton, by my troth! for the lad promiseth bravely. Tut! ye will not shy for honest laughter; it purgeth melancholy. They are no rogues who laugh, good cousin. Good mine host, lay me a meal now for my cousin, Master John. Sit ye down, sweetheart, and eat."

"Nay," said Master John, "I will break no bread. Since ye force me to this sin, I will fast for my soul's interest. But, good mine host, I pray you of courtesy give me a cup of fair water; I shall be much beholden to your courtesy indeed."

"Ye shall have a dispensation, go to!" cried the knight. "Shalt be well shriven, by my faith? Content you, then, and eat."

But the lad was obstinate, drank a cup of water, and, once more wrapping himself closely in his mantle, sat in a far corner, brooding.

In an hour or two there rose a stir in the village of sentries challenging and the clatter of arms and horses; and then a troop drew up by the inn door, and Richard Shelton, splashed with mud, presented himself upon the threshold.

"Save you, Sir Daniel," he said.

"How! Dickie Shelton!" cried the knight; and at the mention of Dick's name the other lad looked curiously across. "What maketh Bennet Hatch?"

"Please you, sir knight, to take cognisance of this packet from Sir Oliver, wherein are all things fully stated," answered Richard, presenting the priest's letter. "And please you farther, ye were best make

all speed to Risingham; for on the way hither we encountered one riding furiously with letters, and by his report, my Lord of Risingham was sore bested, and lacked exceedingly your presence."

"How say you? Sore bested?" returned the knight. "Nay, then, we will make speed sitting down, good Richard. As the world goes in this poor realm of England, he that rides softliest rides surest. Delay, they say, begetteth peril; but it is rather this itch of doing that undoes men; mark it, Dick. But let me see, first, what cattle ye have brought. Selden, a link here at the door!"

And Sir Daniel strode forth into the village street, and, by the red glow of a torch, inspected his new troops. He was an unpopular neighbour and an unpopular master; but as a leader of war he was well beloved by those who rode behind his pennant. His dash, his proved courage, his forethought for the soldiers' comfort, even his rough gibes, were all to the taste of the bold blades in jack and salet.

"Nay, by the rood!" he cried, "what poor dogs are these? Here be some as crooked as a bow, and some as lean as a spear. Friends, ye shall ride in the front of the battle; I can spare you, friends. Mark me this old villain on the piebald! A two-year mutton riding on a hog would look more soldierly! Ha! Clipsby, are ye there, old rat? Y' are a man I could lose with a good heart; ye shall go in front of all, with a bull's-eye painted on your jack, to be the better butt for archery; sirrah, ye shall show me the way."

"I will show you any way, Sir Daniel, but the way to change sides," returned Clipsby, sturdily.

Sir Daniel laughed a guffaw.

"Why, well said," he cried. "Hast a shrewd tongue in thy mouth, go to! I will forgive you for that merry word. Selden, see them fed, both man and brute."

The knight re-entered the inn.

"Now, friend Dick," he said, "fall to. Here is good ale and bacon. Eat, while that I read."

Sir Daniel opened the packet, and as he read his brow darkened. When he had done he sat a little, musing. Then he looked sharply at his ward.

"Dick," said he, "y' ha..."

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