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KING LEOPOLD'S GHOST

A STORY of GREED, TERROR, and HEROISM in COLONIAL AFRICA

ADAM HOCHSCHILD

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9

MEETING MR. KURTZ

At the beginning of August 1890, several weeks after he wrote his furious *Open Letter* to King Leopold II, George Washington Williams finished the long return journey down the Congo River to the station of Kinshasa, on Stanley Pool. Either in the waters of the pool or when docked on the riverbank at Kinshasa, Williams's steamboat crossed paths with a boat that was at the start of its voyage upstream, the *Roi des Belges,* a long, boxy sternwheeler with a funnel and pilot house on its top deck. Had Williams managed to catch a glimpse of the other boat's crew, he would have seen a stocky, black-bearded officer with eyes that look, in the photographs we have, as if they were permanently narrowed against the tropical sun. Newly arrived in the Congo, the young officer would be at the captain's side for the entire trip upstream, learning the river in preparation for taking command of a steamer himself.

The apprentice officer was in many ways typical of the whites who came to the Congo at this time: an unmarried young man, in need of a job, who had a yen for adventure and some troubles in his past. Konrad Korzeniowski, born in Poland, had grown up with an image of Africa based on the hazy allure of the unknown: "When nine years old or thereabouts . . . while looking at a map of Africa of the time and putting my finger on the blank space then representing the unsolved mystery of that continent, I said to myself . . . 'When I grow up I shall *go there.*'" In his youth, partly spent in France, he had problems with debts, dabbled, he claimed, in gunrunning, and made a suicide attempt. He then spent more than a decade as a ship's officer in the British merchant marine, learning

English along the way, although never losing his strong Polish accent. In early 1890, Korzeniowski was looking in vain for a master's berth at sea. While job-hunting in London, a city filled with talk of Stanley's just-completed Emin Pasha expedition, he began thinking again of the exotic land of his childhood fantasies. He went to Brussels, applied for work on the Congo River, and returned to Belgium for his final job interview just as Stanley was finishing his gala visit to the city.

In conversations before he took up his new job, the thirty-two-year-old Korzeniowski showed that, like almost everyone in Europe, he believed Leopold's mission in Africa was a noble and "civilizing" one. He then said goodbye to his relatives and sailed for the Congo on the ship that carried the first batch of rails and ties for the new railway. Like other white men heading for the interior, he first had to make the long trek from Matadi around the rapids, along with a caravan of black porters. Once he reached the river at last, he filled his diary with the notes of a businesslike seaman, making long entries about shoals, refueling points, and other items not included on the primitive navigational charts available. It would be almost a decade before the aspiring steamship captain managed to get down on paper the other features of the Congo not shown on the map, and by that time, of course, the world would know him as Joseph Conrad.

He spent some six months in the Congo altogether, carrying with him the partly written manuscript of his first novel, *Almayer's Folly.* The thousand-mile apprenticeship trip upriver, from Stanley Pool to Stanley Falls, took only four weeks, a fast voyage for the time. Sandbars, rocks, and shallow water made navigation tricky, especially far up the river in the dry season, which it then was. "The subdued thundering mutter of the Stanley Falls hung in the heavy night air of the last navigable reach of the Upper Congo . . ." he later wrote, "and I said to myself with awe, 'This is the very spot of my boyish boast.' . . . What an end to the idealized realities of a boy's daydreams!"

At Stanley Falls, both Conrad and the steamer's captain fell ill. Conrad recovered sooner, and on the first part of the return trip downriver — going with the current, the boat traveled almost twice as fast as earlier — he was in command of the *Roi des Belges.* But a few weeks after the voyage ended, he canceled his contract and began the long journey back to Europe.

Several bitter disappointments punctured Conrad's dreams. At the start, he hit it off badly with an official of the company he was working for,

which meant that he would not gain command of a steamer after all. Then, after coming downstream, he got sick again, with malaria and dysentery, and had to convalesce at an American Baptist mission station on Stanley Pool, in the care of a Scotch missionary doctor. He remained so weak that he had to be carried back to the coast and never fully recovered his health. Finally, he was so horrified by the greed and brutality among white men he saw in the Congo that his view of human nature was permanently changed. Until he spent his six months in Africa, he once told his friend the critic Edward Garnett, he had had "not a thought in his head."

After brooding about his Congo experience for eight years, Conrad transformed it into *Heart of Darkness,* probably the most widely reprinted short novel in English. The nautical jottings in his ship's officer's notebook — "Lulonga Passage. . . . NbyE to NNE. On the Port Side: Snags. Soundings in fathoms: 2, 2, 2, 1, 1, 2, 2, 2, 2" — now become prose unsurpassed by any of the other literary travelers to the Congo over the years:

> Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances. On silvery sandbanks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands. You lost your way on that river as you would in a desert and butted all day long against shoals trying to find the channel till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known.

Marlow, the narrator of *Heart of Darkness* and Conrad's alter ego, is hired by an ivory-trading company to sail a steamboat up an unnamed river whose shape on the map resembles "an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country and its tail lost in the depths of the land." His destination is a post where the company's brilliant, ambitious star agent, Mr. Kurtz, is stationed. Kurtz has collected legendary quantities of ivory, but, Marlow learns along the way, is also rumored to have sunk into unspecified savagery. Marlow's

steamer survives an attack by blacks and picks up a load of ivory and the ill Kurtz; Kurtz, talking of his grandiose plans, dies on board as they travel downstream.

Sketched with only a few bold strokes, Kurtz's image has nonetheless remained in the memories of millions of readers: the lone white agent far up the great river, with his dreams of grandeur, his great store of precious ivory, and his fiefdom carved out of the African jungle. Perhaps more than anything, we remember Marlow, on the steamboat, looking through binoculars at what he thinks are ornamental knobs atop the fenceposts in front of Kurtz's house — and then finding that each is "black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids — a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of the teeth."

High school teachers and college professors who have discussed this book in thousands of classrooms over the years tend to do so in terms of Freud, Jung, and Nietzsche; of classical myth, Victorian innocence, and original sin; of postmodernism, postcolonialism, and poststructuralism. European and American readers, not comfortable acknowledging the genocidal scale of the killing in Africa at the turn of the century, have cast *Heart of Darkness* loose from its historical moorings. We read it as a parable for all times and places, not as a book about one time and place. Two of the three times the story was filmed, most notably in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now,* it was not even set in Africa. But Conrad himself wrote, "*Heart of Darkness* is experience . . . pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case." Whatever the rich levels of meaning the book has as literature, for our purposes what is notable is how precise and detailed a description it is of "the actual facts of the case": King Leopold's Congo in 1890, just as the exploitation of the territory was getting under way in earnest.

In the novel Marlow, as Conrad had done, begins his trip with the long walk around the rapids: "A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. . . . I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope, each had an iron collar on his neck and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking." These were the laborers starting work on Leopold's railway.

A few pages later, Marlow describes a spot where some starving rail-

way workers had crawled away to die. Farther along the trail, he sees "now and then a carrier dead in harness, at rest in the long grass near the path, with an empty water-gourd and his long staff lying by his side," and notes the mysterious "body of a middle-aged negro, with a bullet-hole in the forehead." This is simply a record of what Conrad himself saw on his walk around the rapids to Stanley Pool. In his diary entry for July 3, 1890, he noted: "Met an off[ic]er of the State inspecting; a few minutes afterwards saw at a camp[in]g place the dead body of a Backongo. Shot? Horrid smell." The following day: "Saw another dead body lying by the path in an attitude of meditative repose." And on July 29: "On the road today passed a skeleton tied up to a post."

During the hike around the rapids, Marlow also describes how people had fled to avoid being conscripted as porters: "The population had cleared out a long time ago. Well if a lot of mysterious niggers armed with all kinds of fearful weapons suddenly took to travelling on the road [in England] between Deal and Gravesend catching the yokels right and left to carry heavy loads for them, I fancy every farm and cottage thereabouts would get empty very soon. . . . I passed through several abandoned villages." This, too, was what Conrad himself saw. The porters of the caravan the novelist was with came close to mutiny during the trip. Only three and a half years later a fierce uprising would break out along this very route, as Chief Nzansu and his men fought their long, doomed battle against the Force Publique.

In describing the caravans of porters that walked this trail, Marlow gives a crisp summary of the Leopoldian economy: "a stream of . . . rubbishy cottons, beads, and brass-wire set into the depths of darkness and in return came a precious trickle of ivory." In 1890, this was still the colony's most prized commodity. "The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it," says Marlow. He even mentions Leopold's commission system for agents: "The only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages."

Conrad stayed true to life when creating the charismatic, murderous figure at the center of his novel, perhaps the twentieth century's most famous literary villain. Mr. Kurtz was clearly inspired by several real people, among them Georges Antoine Klein, a French agent for an ivory-gathering firm at Stanley Falls. Klein, mortally ill, died on shipboard, as Kurtz does in the novel, while Conrad was piloting the *Roi des Belges* down the river. Another model closer to Kurtz in character was Major

Edmund Barttelot, the man whom Stanley left in charge of the rear column on the Emin Pasha expedition. It was Barttelot, remember, who went mad, began biting, whipping, and killing people, and was finally murdered. Yet another Kurtz prototype was a Belgian, Arthur Hodister, famed for his harem of African women and for gathering huge amounts of ivory. Hodister eventually muscled in too aggressively on the territory of local Afro-Arab warlords and ivory-traders, who captured and beheaded him.

However, Conrad's legion of biographers and critics have almost entirely ignored the man who resembles Kurtz most closely of all. And he is someone we have already met, the swashbuckling Captain Léon Rom of the Force Publique. It is from Rom that Conrad may have taken the signal feature of his villain: the collection of African heads surrounding Kurtz's house.

The "Inner Station" of *Heart of Darkness,* the place Marlow looks at through his binoculars only to find Kurtz's collection of the shrunken heads of African "rebels," is loosely based on Stanley Falls. In 1895, five years after Conrad visited this post, Léon Rom was station chief there. A British explorer-journalist who passed through Stanley Falls that year described the aftermath of a punitive military expedition against some African rebels: "Many women and children were taken, and twenty-one heads were brought to the falls, and have been used by Captain Rom as a decoration round a flower-bed in front of his house!" If Conrad missed this account, which appeared in the widely read *Century Magazine,* he almost certainly noticed when *The Saturday Review,* a magazine he admired and read faithfully, repeated the story in its issue of December 17, 1898. That date was within a few days of when Conrad began writing *Heart of Darkness.*

Furthermore, in the Congo, Rom and Conrad may have met.

On August 2, 1890, Conrad, accompanied by another white man and a caravan of porters, finished his month-long trek inland from the coast. Five miles before his caravan reached the village of Kinshasa on Stanley Pool, where the *Roi des Belges* was waiting, it had to pass through the neighboring post of Leopoldville. These two collections of thatch-roofed buildings were only an hour and a half's walk apart. (They soon grew and merged into one city, called Leopoldville by the Belgians and Kinshasa today.) When Conrad's caravan, trudging along a path near the riverbank, passed through Leopoldville, the station chief there was Léon Rom. Conrad made no entry in his diary on August 2, and Rom's notebook, which

in a calligraphic hand faithfully records any raid or campaign that could win him another medal, mentions no expeditions away from Leopoldville at that time. If Rom was on hand, he would certainly have greeted a caravan with European newcomers, for there were only a few dozen white men at Leopoldville and Kinshasa, and new ones did not arrive every day. What, if anything, spoken or unspoken, passed between Rom and Conrad we will never know. Rom's collection of twenty-one African heads lay in a different place and a different time, half a decade in the future, but when Conrad read about Rom in December 1898, it is possible that he made the connection to a young officer he had met in the Congo.

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Heart of Darkness is one of the most scathing indictments of imperialism in all literature, but its author, curiously, thought himself an ardent imperialist where England was concerned. Conrad fully recognized Leopold's rape of the Congo for what it was: "The horror! The horror!" his character Kurtz says on his deathbed. And Conrad's stand-in, Marlow, muses on how "the conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much." Yet in almost the same breath, Marlow talks about how the British territories colored red on a world map were "good to see at any time because one knows that some real work is done in there"; British colonialists were "bearers of a spark from the sacred fire." Marlow was speaking for Conrad, whose love of his adoptive country knew no bounds: Conrad felt that "liberty . . . can only be found under the English flag all over the world." And at the very time he was denouncing the European lust for African riches in his novel, he was an investor in a gold mine near Johannesburg.

Conrad was a man of his time and place in other ways as well. He was partly a prisoner of what Mark Twain, in a different context, called "the white man's notion that he is less savage than the other savages." *Heart of Darkness* has come in for some justified pummeling in recent years because of its portrayal of black characters, who say no more than a few words. In fact, they don't speak at all: they grunt; they chant; they produce a "drone of weird incantations" and "a wild and passionate uproar"; they spout "strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language . . . like the responses of some satanic litany." The true message of the book, the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe has argued, is: "Keep

away from Africa, or else! Mr. Kurtz . . . should have heeded that warning and the prowling horror in his heart would have kept its place, chained to its lair. But he foolishly exposed himself to the wild irresistible allure of the jungle and lo! the darkness found him out."

However laden it is with Victorian racism, *Heart of Darkness* remains the greatest portrait in fiction of Europeans in the Scramble for Africa. When Marlow says goodbye to his aunt before heading to his new job, "she talked about 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways,' till, upon my word, she made me quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit."* Conrad's white men go about their rape of the continent in the belief that they are uplifting the natives, bringing civilization, serving "the noble cause."

All these illusions are embodied in the character of Kurtz. He is both a murderous head collector and an intellectual, "an emissary of . . . science and progress." He is a painter, the creator of "a small sketch in oils" of a woman carrying a torch that Marlow finds at the Central Station. And he is a poet and journalist, the author of, among other works, a seventeen-page report — "vibrating with eloquence . . . a beautiful piece of writing" — to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. At the end of this report, filled with lofty sentiments, Kurtz scrawls in a shaky hand: "Exterminate all the brutes!"

In Kurtz's intellectual pretensions, Conrad caught one telling feature of the white penetration of the Congo, where conquest by pen and ink so often confirmed the conquest by rifle and machine gun. Ever since Stanley shot his way down the Congo River and then promptly wrote a two-volume best-seller, ivory collectors, soldiers, and explorers had tried to imitate him — in books, and in thousands of articles for the geographical society journals and magazines about colonial exploration that were as popular in the late nineteenth century as the *National Geographic*

* The biggest profiteer, King Leopold II, does not appear in *Heart of Darkness,* although he does in *The Inheritors,* the lesser novel that Conrad later co-authored with Ford Madox Ford. One of its central characters is the heavily bearded Duc de Mersch, who controls the Greenland Protectorate. The duc's Society for the Regeneration of the Arctic Regions is dedicated to uplifting the benighted Eskimos by bringing them a railway, proper clothes, and other benefits of civilization. The duc has invested in an English newspaper in an attempt to buy favorable press coverage of his "philanthropic" activities. "We have," he says, "protected the natives, have kept their higher interests ever present in our minds." The Greenland of the novel is rich in oil and gold.

is in the United States today. It was as if the act of putting Africa on paper were the ultimate proof of the superiority of European civilization. This aspect of Kurtz is yet another reason to suspect that, in creating him, Conrad was partly inspired by Léon Rom. Rom, we saw, was a budding entomologist. He was also a painter; when not collecting butterflies or human heads, he did portraits and landscapes, of which five survive in a Belgian museum today. Most interesting of all, he was a writer.

In 1899, Rom, by then back in Belgium, published a book of his own. *Le Nègre du Congo* is an odd little volume — jaunty, arrogant, and sweepingly superficial. Short chapters cover "Le Nègre en général," the black woman, food, pets, native medicine, and so on. Rom was an enthusiastic hunter who jubilantly posed for one photo atop a dead elephant, and his chapter on hunting is as long as those on Congolese religious beliefs, death rituals, and chiefly succession combined.

The voice we hear in Rom's book is very much like the voice in which we might imagine Mr. Kurtz writing his report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. Of *la race noire,* Rom says, "The product of a mindless state, its feelings are coarse, its passions rough, its instincts brutish, and, in addition, it is proud and vain. The black man's principal occupation, and that to which he dedicates the greatest part of his existence, consists of stretching out on a mat in the warm rays of the sun, like a crocodile on the sand. . . . The black man has no idea of time, and, questioned on that subject by a European, he generally responds with something stupid."

There is much more in this vein. When Rom describes, for example, the Congolese conscripted to work as porters, he says they enjoyed themselves splendidly. As a caravan sets off in the morning, the porters all bustle noisily about, each one eagerly wanting "to succeed in finding a place in line of his choice, for example beside a friend with whom he can trade dreams of the previous night or elaborate the menu, more or less varied and delicious, of the meal they will have at the next stop."

At some point while he was in the Congo, Rom must have begun planning his book. Did Rom, finding that Conrad spoke perfect French, confide in him his literary dreams? Did Conrad see one of Rom's paintings on the wall at Leopoldville, just as Marlow sees one of Kurtz's? Or was it sheer coincidence that the real head-collector Rom and the imaginary head-collector Kurtz were both painters and writers? We will never know.

There are several other tantalizing parallels between Léon Rom and

Mr. Kurtz. In the novel, Kurtz succeeds in "getting himself adored" by the Africans of the Inner Station: chiefs crawl on the ground before him, the people obey him with slavish devotion, and a beautiful black woman apparently is his concubine. In 1895, a disapproving Force Publique lieutenant confided to his diary a strikingly similar situation involving a fellow officer:

> He makes his agents *starve* while he gives lots of food to the black women of his harem (for he wants to act like a great Arab chief). . . . Finally, he got into his dress uniform at his house, brought together his women, picked up some piece of paper and pretended to read to them that the king had named him the big chief and that the other whites of the station were only small fry. . . . He gave fifty lashes to a poor little negress because she wouldn't be his mistress, then he *gave* her to a soldier.

What is significant is how the diarist introduces his account of the officer: "This man wants to play the role of a second Rom."

Finally, the murderousness of Kurtz seems to echo one other detail about Rom. When Rom was station chief at Stanley Falls, the governor general sent a report back to Brussels about some agents who "have the reputation of having killed masses of people for petty reasons." He mentions Rom's notorious flower bed ringed with human heads, and then adds: "He kept a gallows permanently erected in front of the station!"

We do not know whether Rom was already acting out any of these dreams of power, murder, and glory when Conrad passed through Leopoldville in 1890 or whether he only talked of them. Whatever the case, the moral landscape of *Heart of Darkness* and the shadowy figure at its center are the creations not just of a novelist but of an open-eyed observer who caught the spirit of a time and place with piercing accuracy.