

## G O D S O F A R M S

*“With the Might as of a Deity”*

### 34

The great world event of the autumn of 1889 was Stanley's return after a three-year expedition into the interior of Africa. Stanley had saved Emin Pasha from the Dervishes.<sup>21</sup>

“The Dervishes” was the nickname of an Islamic movement that successfully resisted the English in the Sudan. The Mahdists, as they were also called, took Khartoum in January 1885. Relief arrived two days too late to save General Gordon. It was the most humiliating defeat the British Empire suffered in Africa.

But at the end of 1886, a courier reached Zanzibar with the message that one of Gordon's provincial governors, Emin Pasha, was still holding out in the remote interior of Sudan and was requesting relief.

The government hesitated, but some large companies made Emin Pasha's situation an excuse to equip an expedition, the main aim of which was to turn Emin's province into a company-ruled British colony.

Stanley was asked to take command. The man who saved Livingstone was to crown his career by repeating the exploit. “Dr. Emin, I presume.”

### 35

But like Huckleberry Finn when he saved Jim, Stanley thought it too simple just to go straight on up to Emin and give him the arms and ammunition he had requested.

Instead, he led the expedition from Zanzibar, rounding the

whole of Africa to the mouth of the Congo, past the steaming waterfalls, up to the navigable upper stretch of the river. There, with the help of King Leopold's boats and the slave hunter Tippu Tip's bearers, he hoped to be able to ship hundreds of tons of military material from the Congo to Sudan through Ituri, the much-feared "forest of death," where as yet no white man had set foot.

There were, of course, no boats. There were no bearers. Stanley had to leave most of the military material behind in the Congo and hurry on himself with an advance force.

Stanley was stocky, lower-class, as muscular as a garbageman and scarred by years and experience. As his deputy he chose an elegant young aristocrat, Major Bartellot, soft as silk, handsome as a lush tenor—but with no experience of Africa. Why?

Stanley detested the English upper class and measured himself by it. Perhaps he hoped to see such an upper-class creature broken by the jungle, see him lose his fine manner, lose his superior confidence, his self-control, thus throwing greater light on Stanley's own capacity as a man and leader.

Bartellot was indeed broken. Left behind as leader of the rear guard, he tried in vain to keep discipline with terrible daily floggings. His racism flourished, he became more and more isolated and hated, and was finally killed.

## 36

Meanwhile Stanley is struggling on in the suffocating heat, moisture dripping from the trees, sweat soaking clothing, hunger a torment, diarrhea, festering sores, and rats gnawing at sleeping men's feet.

The inhabitants of the forest are frightened. They refuse to trade or act as guides. Stanley has no time for anything else but violence. To acquire food for his expedition, he murders defenseless people on their way to market and shoots unarmed men in order to get their canoes.

Perhaps that was necessary to get there. But was it necessary to get there? Everyone had advised him against taking the route he did. Only his own aspirations required that he should do the impossible, which in its turn required murder—murder to acquire a goat or a few bunches of bananas.

Shackleton, explorer of the South Pole, was not so vain. Rather than sacrifice lives, he swallowed his pride and turned back. Stanley goes on leaving heaps of corpses in his wake.

One of the most horrific scenes: Stanley has a young bearer hanged for “desertion.” The bearers had taken on the job of marching across East Africa’s dry savanna. Stanley had taken them into this dripping primeval forest, where half of them had already died. He’s only a boy, hungry and a long way from home, the others plead. But Stanley is unrelenting. He could not afford, he thought, to show the slightest sign of weakness now.

He was possibly right in that. But he had deliberately put himself in a situation in which killing was the only way out.

Ragged, starving, evil-smelling, tormented by fever and boils, stumbling at every step, the survivors finally reach the shores of Lake Albert.

Emin arrives with his steamer to receive them. He is wearing his dazzling white uniform. He is in good health, calm, rested. He brings with him cloth, blankets, soap, tobacco, and provisions for his rescuer. Just who is rescuing whom?

### 37

The Mahdists have left Emin’s distant province in peace for five years. But rumors of Stanley’s expedition challenge them to attack. Stanley returns to the Congo to fetch the rest of the expedition. The Mahdists immediately conquer the whole province except the capital, where Emin’s men mutiny.

Soon the only hope is for Stanley to return and halt the disaster he himself has triggered off. Day after day, they all wait impatiently

for Stanley to arrive with machine guns, rifles, and ammunition.

Instead, Stanley again comes stumbling in the lead of a bunch of skeletons shaking with fever. They have lost the arms and ammunition and are scarcely in a state to defend themselves, far less to overcome ten thousand screaming Dervishes.

Nevertheless, Emin wants to stay. He pleads with Stanley to let him return to his province and try to defend it. But Stanley cannot allow that. For in that way his own failure would have been far too obvious. He had not been able to provide anything Emin had requested, and he had simply made the situation worse.

But by taking Emin with him to the coast, even if by force, Stanley hoped to decide just what news was to be telegraphed all over the world. "Emin saved!" Emin was the trophy that was to turn Stanley's defeat into a media victory.

The coup succeeded. It was the only thing in the whole expedition that did succeed—getting the general public to rejoice.

In the moment of triumph, no one was interested in examining the details. Stanley had once again done what no one else had been able to do. That became an established fact in the minds of the public. So the victory was at least for the moment a reality—whatever it had cost, whatever it actually contained.

## 38

When the unemployed sea captain Korzeniowski, whom we know as Joseph Conrad, came to Brussels in November 1889, to be interviewed by Albert Thys, the director of Société Belge du Haut-Congo, the city was in the throes of Stanley-fever. It was known that Stanley was on his way to the coast, but he still had not arrived.

On December 4, when Stanley triumphantly brought Emin to Bagamoyo, Conrad was back in London. The press hummed for weeks with homage to the great hero of civilization.

In January 1890, Stanley arrived in Cairo, where he started writing his version of the story of the expedition. For the first time in



*The noble Emin Pasha, as he looked while everyone was awaiting his rescue. Illustrated London News. November 30, 1889.*

sixteen years, Conrad returned to Poland and spent two months in his childhood Kazimierowka.

Meanwhile Stanley had finished *In Darkest Africa* and returned to Europe.

On April 20, he went to Brussels, where he was met with ovationlike tributes. At King Leopold's welcoming banquet, all four corners of the hall were decorated with a pyramid of flowers from which hundreds of elephant tusks protruded. The festivities went on for five days.

Meanwhile Conrad was on his way back from Poland. He arrived in Brussels on the 29th, while the Stanley festivities were still on everyone's lips. He met Albert Thys and was appointed and ordered to leave at once for the Congo. Conrad went on to London, where he made preparations for his Congo trip while the Stanley celebrations were at a pitch.

Stanley had arrived in Dover on April 26. He was taken by special train to London, where a huge crowd was waiting. On May 3, he spoke in St. James's Hall to thousands of people, including the royal family. He was awarded honorary degrees by both Oxford and Cambridge. Then countrywide celebrations took place.

Conrad was not present for all of them. On May 6, when Stanley was received in audience by Queen Victoria, Conrad returned to Brussels, and on May 10 he boarded a ship for Africa.

### 39

Conrad was on his way to Stanley's Africa.

Stanley was sixteen years older than Conrad. Like Conrad, he had grown up motherless. Like Conrad, he had been adopted by a benevolent father figure. Conrad was fourteen when Stanley found Livingstone and became world famous. At fifteen, Conrad ran away to sea, just as Stanley had done. Like Stanley, Conrad changed his name, his home country and his identity.

Now with all the homage still echoing in his ears, he was on his

way to Stanley's Congo—knowing nothing about the murky reality behind the Stanley legend.

## 40

On June 28, 1890 (the same day Conrad left Matadi at the mouth of the Congo to set off on foot to Stanleyville further upriver), Stanley's *In Darkest Africa* came out.

The book was an enormous success and sold 150,000 copies. But it did not attract only flattering attention. Bartellot's father published his son's diaries to defend him against Stanley. During the autumn, all the European participants in the expedition published their own versions of what had happened. In November and December 1890, while Conrad was seriously ill in an African village, the English newspapers almost daily printed articles for and against Stanley.

During his eight months in Africa, Conrad found that reality differed glaringly from the grandiose speeches he had heard before his departure. When he returned to London at the New Year, 1891, sick and disillusioned, even opinion at home had begun to shift.

The discussion continued all through 1891. The most careful and detailed criticism was made by Fox Bourne in *The Other Side of the Emin Pasha Expedition* (1891). When everything had been said, a great silence settled over Stanley and his expedition, most of all about Emin Pasha.

## 41

In Africa Stanley had already discovered to his alarm that the man for whom he had sacrificed so many lives was no noble pasha but a stubborn Jew from Silesia.

Stanley was able to make Emin go with him, but could not make him appear in public. Emin protested during the return jour-

ney by maintaining total silence. During the actual welcoming banquet in Bagamoyo, he disappeared unnoticed from the table and was found on the paving stones below the balcony with his skull cracked. He was taken to the hospital while Stanley continued on his triumphal procession.

When, in April 1890, Stanley was being honored in Brussels and London as Emin's savior, Emin lay forgotten in a hospital in Bagamoyo. One night, he slipped out and, half-blind and half-deaf, started walking back to "his" province.

By October 1892, the Stanley fever in Europe was definitely over. By then Emin had also managed to get back home. The Dervishes found him and cut his throat.

A few years previously, his "rescue" had aroused hysterical attention in Europe. Now his death went unnoticed.

## 42

Six years later, in October 1898, George Schweizer's *Emin Pasha, His life and work, compiled from his journals, letters, scientific notes and from official documents* was published in London. In it the story of Emin was told for the first time from his own point of view.

The book was advertised and reviewed exhaustively through October and November. In December, Conrad sat down to write *Heart of Darkness*.

Just as Stanley traveled up the Congo to rescue Emin, in Conrad's story Marlow travels up the river to rescue Kurtz. But Kurtz does not wish to be rescued. He disappears into the darkness and tries to creep back to "his" people. Emin had also done that.

Kurtz is no portrait of Emin. On the contrary, everything sympathetic in Emin can be found in Marlow, the rescuer in Conrad's story. The monster is Kurtz, the man to be saved, who resembles Stanley.

Stanley also had an "intended," Dolly, who was told the untruth she desired. Just as the whole of the white world was told the lies



they desired.

When Marlow lies to Kurtz's "intended" at the end of Conrad's story, he not only does what Stanley himself did, but also what official Britain and the general public were doing while Conrad was writing the story. They were lying.

### 43

History loves repetition. In the autumn of 1898, Stanley returned for a second time, now under the name of Kitchener.<sup>22</sup>

General Horatio Herbert Kitchener, called "the Sirdar," had done what Stanley had not managed to do. He had defeated the Dervishes and "saved" Sudan.

On October 27, 1898, he arrived in Dover. Just as when Stanley returned, great crowds had gathered to honor him. Just like Stanley, he was taken in a special train to London and granted an audience with Queen Victoria. At the welcoming luncheon, he maintained that the victory over the Dervishes had opened the whole length of the Nile valley "to the civilizing influences of commercial enterprise."

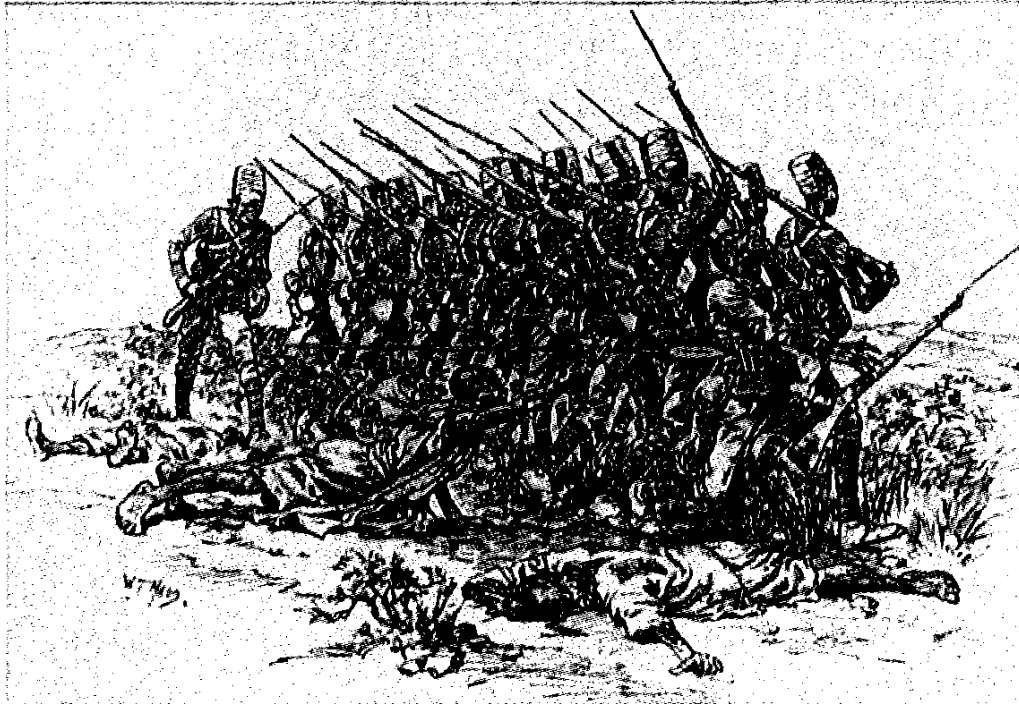
That was precisely what Stanley had said about the Congo River.

The following five weeks became a whirl of celebrations. In Cambridge, where Stanley had received his honorary degree, Kitchener received his on November 24. Some academics who had opposed the award were thrown fully clothed into the river while fireworks were let off in honor of the Sirdar. He went on to Edinburgh, where he received an honorary degree on November 28. Then countrywide celebrations took place.

A more exact copy of Stanley's return could hardly have been achieved. In the same issue of the newspaper that advertized and reviewed the book on Emin Pasha's journals, the book that showed how hollow the delirium had been the previous time—in the same issue the rejoicing of the people again resounded, cheers



THE DARK SIDE OF CAMPAIGNING IN THE SOUDAN: DESPATCHING WOUNDED DERVISHES



*Above: "The Dark Side of the Sudanese Campaign: The Liquidation of Wounded Dervishes." Below: "The Reason." The Graphic, October 1, 1898.*

ringing out and empty phrases echoing.

Few questioned the victory at Omdurman. Few wondered how it came about that eleven thousand Sudanese were killed while the British lost only forty-eight men. No one asked why few or none survived of the sixteen thousand wounded Sudanese.<sup>23</sup>

But at Pent Farm in Kent, a Polish writer in exile interrupted the novel he was writing and instead started writing the story about Kurtz.

#### 44

I go out into the sun, and as I draw breath, the hot air rushes into my mouth just as food often did when I was small and in far too much of a hurry to wait until it had cooled. Where now is that glass of cold milk that every breath demands?

#### 45

At the battle of Omdurman, the entire Sudanese army was annihilated without once having got their enemy within gunshot.

The art of killing from a distance became a European specialty very early on. The arms race between coastal states of Europe in the seventeenth century created fleets that were capable of achieving strategic goals far away from the home country. Their cannons could shatter hitherto impregnable fortresses and were even more effective against defenseless villages.

Preindustrial Europe had little that was in demand in the rest of the world. Our most important export was force. All over the rest of the world, we were regarded at the time as nomadic warriors in the style of the Mongols and the Tartars. They reigned supreme from the backs of horses, we from the decks of ships.<sup>24</sup>

Our cannons met little resistance among the peoples who were more advanced than we were. The Moguls in India had no ships

able to withstand artillery fire or carry heavy guns. Instead of building up a fleet, the Moguls chose to purchase defense services from European states, which thus were soon in a position to take over the part of rulers in India.

The Chinese had discovered gunpowder in the tenth century and had cast the first cannon in the middle of the thirteenth. But they felt so safe in their part of the world that, from the middle of the sixteenth century onward, they refrained from participating in the naval arms race.

Thus the backward and poorly resourced Europe of the sixteenth century acquired a monopoly on ocean-going ships with guns capable of spreading death and destruction across huge distances. Europeans became the gods of cannons that killed long before the weapons of their opponents could reach them.

Three hundred years later, those gods had conquered a third of the world. Ultimately, their realm rested on the power of their ships' guns.

## 46

But most of the inhabited world at the beginning of the nineteenth century lay out of reach of naval artillery.

So it was a discovery of great military significance when Robert Fulton got the first steam-driven boat to head up the Hudson River. Soon hundreds of steamers were to be found on the rivers of Europe. In the middle of the nineteenth century, steamers started carrying European cannons deep into the interior of Asia and Africa. With that a new epoch in the history of imperialism was introduced.<sup>25</sup>

This became a new epoch in the history of racism. Too many Europeans interpreted military superiority as intellectual and even biological superiority.

Nemesis is the name of the Greek goddess of revenge, the punisher of pride and arrogance. With profound historical irony, that

was the name of the first steamer in 1842 to tow British warships up the Yellow River and the Great Canal in the direction of Peking.

Soon steamers were no longer used as tugs of the fleet, but were equipped with artillery of their own. The “gunboat” became a symbol of imperialism on all the major African rivers—the Nile, the Niger, and the Congo—making it possible for Europeans to control huge, hitherto inaccessible areas by force of arms.

The steamer was portrayed as a bearer of light and righteousness. If the creator of the steam engine in his heaven is able to look down on the success of his discovery here on earth, wrote Macgregor Laird in *Narrative of an Expedition into the Interior of Africa by the River Niger* (1837), then hardly any application of it would give him greater satisfaction than to see hundreds of steamers “carrying the glad tidings of ‘peace and goodwill toward men’ to the dark places of the earth which are now filled with cruelty.”

That was the official rhetoric. At Omdurman it was demonstrated that the gunboat also had the ability to annihilate its opponents from a safe distance.

## 47

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, small arms in the third world were able to measure up to those of Europe. The standard weapon was a muzzle-loaded, smooth-bored flintlock musket, which was also manufactured by village smiths in Africa.

The musket was a frightening weapon for those hearing it for the first time. But its range was only a hundred yards. It took at least a minute to load the gun between each shot. Even in dry weather, three shots out of ten failed, and in wet weather the muskets ceased functioning altogether.

A skilled archer still fired more quickly, more surely, and further. He was inferior only in his ability to shoot through armor.

So the colonial wars of the first half of the nineteenth century were lengthy and expensive. Although the French had an army

of a hundred thousand men in Algeria, they advanced only very slowly, as the arms of the infantry on both sides were quite comparable.

But with the percussion cap came a musket that failed only five shots in a thousand, and then accuracy improved with grooved barrels.

In 1853, the British began replacing their old muskets with Enfield rifles, effective at a range of five hundred yards and firing more quickly because the bullet was enclosed in a paper cartridge. The French brought in a similar rifle. Both were used first in the colonies.

But these weapons were still slow and difficult to handle. They emitted puffs of smoke, which revealed where the marksman was, and the sensitive paper cartridges absorbed the damp. The soldier also had to stand up while reloading.

Prussia replaced its muzzle loaders with the breech-loaded Dreyse rifle. This was tested for the first time in 1866 in the Prusso-Austrian war over hegemony in Germany. During the battle of Sadowa, the Prussians lay on the ground and with their Dreyse rifles fired seven shots in the time it took the Austrians, standing up, to load and fire one shot. The outcome was obvious.

A race now began between European states to replace muskets with breech loaders. The British developed the paper cartridge into a brass cartridge, which protected the gunpowder during transport, kept in the smoke fumes when the shot was fired, and hurled the bullet three times as far as the Dreyse rifle did.

In 1869, the British abandoned the Enfield and went over to the Martini-Henry, the first really good weapon of the new generation: swift, accurate, insensitive to damp and jolts. The French came next with their Gras rifle, and the Prussians with the Mauser.

Thus Europeans were superior to every conceivable opponent from other continents. The gods of arms conquered another third of the world.

## 48

The new arms made it possible even for a lone European traveler in Africa to practice almost unlimited brutality and go unpunished. The founder of the German East Africa colony, Carl Peters, describes in *New Light on Dark Africa* (1891) how he forced the Vagogo people into submission.

The chieftain's son came to Peters's camp and placed himself "quite unembarrassed" in the entrance of Peters's tent. "At my order to remove himself, he only replied with a wide grin and, quite untroubled, remained where he was."

Peters then has him flogged with the hippo whip. At his screams, the Vagogo warriors come racing in to try to free him. Peters fires "into the heap" and kills one of them.

Half an hour later, the Sultan sends a messenger requesting peace. Peters's reply: "The Sultan shall have peace, but eternal peace. I shall show the Vagogo what the Germans are! Plunder the villages, throw fire into the houses, and smash everything that will not burn."

The houses turned out to be difficult to burn and had to be destroyed with axes. Meanwhile the Vagogo gather and try to defend their homes. Peters says to his men:

"I shall show you what kind of mob we have here before us. Stay here, and alone I shall put the Vagogo to flight."

With these words, I walked toward them shouting hurrah, and hundreds of them ran like a flock of sheep.

I do not mention this in any way to make out our own circumstances as anything heroic, but only to show what kind of people these Africans in general are and what exaggerated ideas people in Europe have of their fighting abilities and the means required for their suppression.

At about three, I marched further south toward the other villages. The same spectacle everywhere! After

brief resistance, the Vagogo took flight, torches were thrown into the houses, and axes worked to destroy all that the fire did not achieve. So by half past four twelve villages had been burned down. . . . My gun had become so hot from so much firing I could hardly hold it.

Before Peters leaves the villages, he has the Vagogo told that now they know him a little better. He intends to stay as long as any one of them is still alive, any village is still standing, and any ox remains to be taken away.

The Sultan then asks to hear the conditions for peace.

“Tell the Sultan I do not wish for any peace with him. The Vagogo are liars and must be eliminated from the earth. But if the Sultan wishes to be slave to the Germans, then he and his people may possibly be allowed to live.”

At dawn, the Sultan sends thirty-six oxen and other gifts. “I then persuaded myself to grant him a treaty in which he was placed under German supremacy.”

With the aid of these new weapons, colonial conquests became unprecedentedly cost-effective. In many cases, expenses were largely limited to the cartridges needed for the killings.

Carl Peters was appointed German commissioner over the areas he had conquered. In the spring of 1897, he was brought to court in Berlin. His trial caused a scandal and received a great deal of attention even in the British press. He was found guilty of the murder of a black mistress. What was actually being condemned was not the murder but the sexual relationship. The innumerable murders Peters had committed during the conquest of the German East Africa colony were considered quite natural and went unpunished.<sup>26</sup>



## 49

A new generation of weapons quickly followed: rifles with repeater mechanisms. In 1885, the Frenchman Paul Vieille discovered nitroglycerin, which exploded without smoke or ash, and this meant the soldiers could remain invisible as they fired. Other advantages were its greater explosive effect and relative insensitivity to damp. The musket's caliber, nineteen millimeters, could be reduced to eight millimeters, which dramatically increased the accuracy of the weapon.

The automatic rifle also came with the smokeless nitroglycerin. Hiram S. Maxim manufactured an automatic weapon that was light to carry and fired eleven bullets a second. The British supplied their colonial troops with automatic weapons early on. They were used against the Ashanti in 1874 and in Egypt in 1884.

At the same time, with the Bessemer method and other new processes, steel had become so cheap, it could be used for the manufacture of arms on a large scale. In Africa and Asia, on the other hand, local smiths could no longer make copies of the new weapons, as they had none of the necessary material, industrially manufactured steel.

At the end of the 1890s, the revolution of the rifle was complete. All European infantrymen could now fire lying down without being spotted, in all weathers, fifteen shots in as many seconds at targets up to a distance of a thousand yards.

The new cartridges were particularly good for use in tropical climates. But, on "savages," the bullet did not always have the desired effect, for they often continued their charges even after being hit four or five times. The answer became the dum dum bullet, named after the factory in Dum Dum outside Calcutta and patented in 1897. The lead core of the dum dum bullet explodes the casing causing large painful wounds that do not heal well.

The use of dum dum bullets between "civilized" states was prohibited. They were reserved for big-game hunting and colonial wars.

At Omdurman in 1898 the whole new European arsenal was

tested—gunboats, automatic weapons, repeater rifles, and dum-dum bullets—against a numerically superior and very determined enemy.

One of the most cheerful depictees of war, Winston Churchill, later winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, was the war correspondent of *The Morning Post*. He has described the battle in *My Early Life* (1930), the first volume of his autobiography.

## 50

“Nothing like the battle of Omdurman will ever be seen again,” Churchill writes. “It was the last link in the long chain of those spectacular conflicts whose vivid and majestic splendour has done so much to invest war with glamour.”

Thanks to steamboats and a newly laid railway line, even out in the desert, Europeans were well supplied with provisions of every kind. Churchill observed

many bottles of inviting appearance and large dishes of bully beef and mixed pickles. This grateful sight arising as if by enchantment in the wilderness on the verge of battle filled my heart with a degree of thankfulness far exceeding what one usually experiences when regular Grace is said.

I attacked the bully beef and cool drink with concentrated attention. Everyone was in the highest spirits and the best of tempers. It was like a race luncheon before the Derby.

“Is there really going to be a battle?” I asked.

“In an hour or two,” replied the General.

Churchill thought it a “good moment to live” and determinedly set about the meal. “Of course we should win. Of course we should mow them down.”

But there was no encounter that day. Instead they all concentrated on the preparations for dinner. A gunboat approached and the officers, “spotlessly attired in white uniforms,” flung ashore a large bottle of champagne. Churchill waded out into the water up to his knees and grabbed the precious gift, then bore it in triumph back to the mess.

This kind of war was full of fascinating thrills. It was not like the Great War. Nobody expected to be killed . . . . To the great mass of those who took part in the little wars of Britain in those vanished light-hearted days, this was only a sporting element in a splendid game.

## 51

Unfortunately the British often missed out on their splendid game. Their opponents learned all too quickly that it was pointless to fight against modern weapons. They gave up before the British had the pleasure of wiping them out.

Lord Garnet Wolsley, commander of the British troops in the first Ashanti war in 1874–76, met resistance and really enjoyed himself. “It is only through experience of the sensation that we learn how intense, even in anticipation, is the rapture-giving delight which the attack upon an enemy affords. . . . All other sensations are but as the tinkling of a doorbell in comparison with the throbbing of Big Ben.”<sup>27</sup>

The second Ashanti war in 1896 provided no opportunity for experiences of that kind. Two days’ march away from the capital, Kumasi, Robert Baden-Powell, the commander of the advance troop, later to found the Boy Scouts, received an envoy offering unconditional surrender.

To his disappointment, Baden-Powell did not fire a single shot at the natives. To get hostilities going, the British planned extreme provocations. The king of Ashanti was arrested together with his



*"They crept up to him on all fours." The Submission of King Prempeh.*  
Illustrated London News. February 26, 1896.



*The Submission of King Prempeh. The final humiliation. The Graphic. February 29, 1896.*

whole family. The king and his mother were forced to crawl on all fours up to the British officers sitting on crates of biscuit tins, receiving their subjugation.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Harlequin describes how the natives used to approach their idol, Kurtz, crawling on all fours. Marlow reacts violently. He starts back and shouts that he does not want to know anything about the ceremonies used when approaching Mr. Kurtz. The thought of the crawling chieftains seems to him even more unbearable than seeing the heads of murdered people drying on poles around Kurtz's house.

The reaction becomes comprehensible when you see the drawings of the ceremony in Kumasi two years earlier. These drawings were all over the illustrated press and are an expression of a racist arrogance that does not flinch from the extreme degradation of its opponents.

This time the British found no use for their weapons. They returned sadly to the coast. "I thoroughly enjoyed the outing," Baden-Powell writes to his mother, "except for the want of a fight, which I fear will preclude our getting any medals or decoration."<sup>28</sup>

## 52

Sometimes, however, provocation did succeed.<sup>29</sup>

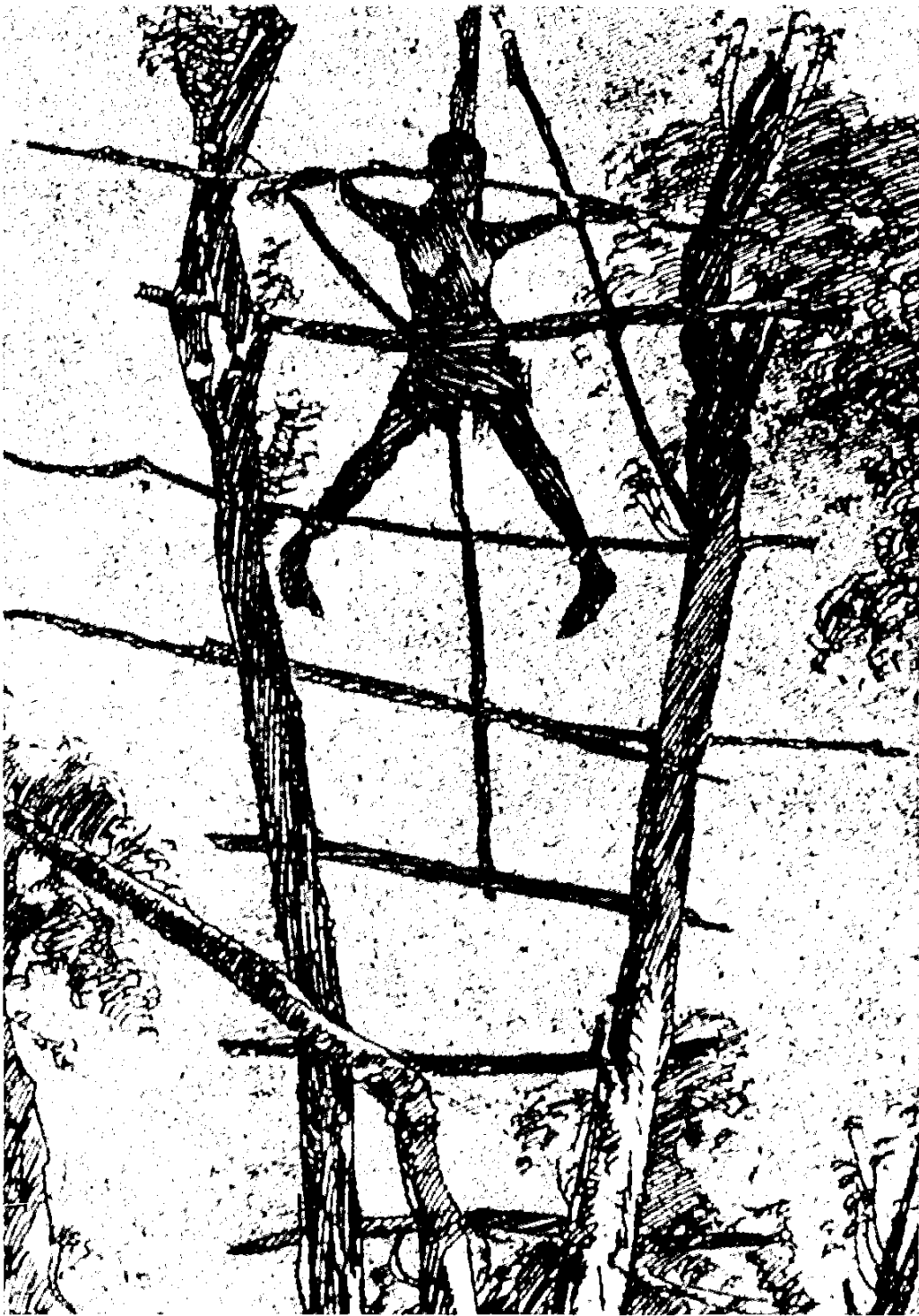
British consuls at the mouth of the Benin River had for years suggested that the kingdom of Benin should be taken. Trade demanded it, and the expedition would pay for itself by plundering the king of Benin's store of ivory. But the Foreign Office nevertheless regarded it as too expensive.

In November 1896, the suggestion was made again by the temporary consul, Lieutenant Phillips. Provisions and ammunition were ready for the assault scheduled for February–March 1897. On January 7, 1897, the Foreign Office reply arrived. As usual, it was negative.

But to be on the safe side, on January 2, Lieutenant Phillips had



*"Unspeakable rites." Golgotha, Benin. Illustrated London News.  
March 27, 1897.*



*Crucified human sacrifice from Benin—The City of Blood (1897)*  
by R. H. Bacon.



already set off with nine other white men and two hundred African bearers on a courtesy visit to the king of Benin.

That first evening he was met by a messenger from Benin who asked him to postpone his visit for a month as the king was occupied with ceremonies before their annual religious festival.

Phillips went on.

The following evening more representatives from Benin came and pleaded with the white men to turn back. Phillips sent the king his stick, a deliberate insult, and went on.

The next day, January 4, eight white men—including Phillips—and their bearers were killed in an ambush. On January 11, the news of “the Benin Disaster” reached London. The press raged and demanded revenge. The attack on Benin that Lieutenant Phillips had planned in November, but had been turned down in January, was now put into action as a punitive expedition in revenge for his death.

Despite stiff resistance, the British captured Benin City on February 18. The town was plundered and burned to the ground.

How many Benin inhabitants were killed by the British troops was never investigated. Instead, the human sacrifices by the Benin king were sensationally exaggerated in the illustrated magazines. Skulls glowing like wood anemones on the ground were clearly evidence that no inhabitant of Benin ever died a natural death. In Captain R. H. Bacon’s book, *Benin—The City of Blood* (1897), the crucified who hung with ripped-open bellies were the real reason for civilization conquering Benin.

What is certain is that, when the first readers of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* read two years later that Kurtz had allowed himself to be worshipped as a god and participated in “unspeakable rites,” it was the pictures from Benin that readers saw in their mind’s eye; then they remembered descriptions of the stench of mass graves into which the dead and living were thrown together and of the idols covered with dried blood.

These “idols” are today reckoned to be outstanding masterpieces of world art. But the press accounts of Benin as the special

hell of the dark races were so powerful, the British could not see the artistic value of the sculptures. They were sold in London as curios to pay for the cost of the punitive expedition. German museums bought them cheaply.

## 53

What did the king of Benin feel as he was hunted like a wild animal in the forests while his capital was going up in flames? What did the king of Ashanti feel as he crawled up to kiss the boots of his British overlords?

No one asked them. No one listened to those whom the weapons of the gods subjugated. Only very rarely do we hear them speak.

At the end of the 1880s, the British South Africa Company advanced from the south into Matabeleland in today's Zimbabwe. In 1894, the Matabelele people were conquered. The company shared their grazing lands out to white agents and adventurers, reduced their herds of cattle from two hundred thousand head to fourteen thousand and prohibited all arms. White death patrols ruled with martial law, labor was forcibly recruited, and anyone who protested was immediately shot.

The rebellion comes in 1896. The company calls in British troops. Baden-Powell is with them, pleased "to have a go" at last against an enemy "without much capacity to inflict damage on trained soldiers." In the very first battle, he and his troops kill two hundred "natives" at the cost of one dead European.<sup>30</sup>

It had become easy and amusing to kill, but in this case still too expensive. The army was there at the request of the company and received payment for their military services. After a few months of fighting, the company was on the verge of bankruptcy. In order to bring about peace, on August 21, Cecil Rhodes and other white leaders were for the first time forced to listen to the black Africans.

## 54

“I once visited Bulawayo,” said Somabulano.

I came to pay my respects to the Chief Magistrate. I brought my indunas with me, and my servants. I am a chief. I am expected to travel with attendants and advisers. I came to Bulawayo early in the morning, before the sun had dried the dew and I sat down before the Court House, sending messages to the Chief Magistrate that I waited to pay my respects to him. And so I sat until the evening shadows were long. And then . . . I sent again to the Chief Magistrate and told him that I did not wish to hurry him in any unmannerly way; I would wait his pleasure; but my people were hungry; and when white men came to see me it was my custom to kill that they might eat. The answer that came from the Chief Magistrate . . . was that the town was full of stray dogs; dog to dog; we might kill those and eat if we could catch them.

Lord Grey's priest, Father Bihler, was convinced that the blacks had to be exterminated. “He states that the only chance for the future of the race is to exterminate the whole people, both male and female over the age of fourteen,” Grey writes to his wife on January 23, 1897.

He himself did not wish to accept such a pessimistic conclusion. But the idea of extermination was near to hand, produced again and again in the white man's press.

African leaders were quite aware of the risk of their people being exterminated. Somabulano himself took up the threat of extermination in his speech at the peace negotiations: “You came, you conquered. The strongest takes the land. We accepted your rule. We lived under you. But not as dogs! If we are to be dogs it is better to be dead. You can never make the Amandabele dogs. You may wipe them out. But the Children of the Stars can never be dogs.”<sup>31</sup>

## 55

At Omdurman, the strongest African military resistance was crushed. The battle can best be followed in the book Churchill wrote immediately after the experience, *The River War* (1899). The morning of September 2, 1898, the following occurred:

The white flags were nearly over the crest. In another minute they would become visible to the batteries. Did they realise what would come to meet them? They were in a dense mass, 2,800 yards from the 32nd Field Battery and the gunboats. The ranges were known. It was a matter of machinery. . . .

The mind was fascinated by the impending horror. I could see it coming. In a few seconds swift destruction would rush on these brave men. They topped the crest and drew out into full view of the whole army. Their white banners made them conspicuous above all. As they saw the camp of their enemies, they discharged their rifles with a great roar of musketry and quickened their pace. . . . For a moment the white flags advanced in regular order, and the whole division crossed the crest and were exposed.

About twenty shells struck them in the first minute. Some burst high in the air, others exactly in their faces. Others, again, plunged into the sand, and, exploding, dashed clouds of red dust, splinters, and bullets amid the ranks. The white flags toppled over in all directions. Yet they rose again immediately, as other men pressed forward to die for the Mahdis' sacred cause and in defence of the successor of the True Prophet of the Only God. It was a terrible sight, for as yet they had not hurt us at all, and it seemed an unfair advantage to strike thus cruelly when they could not reply.



*The Battle of Omdurman. "The maxims and infantry annihilated them. Whole battalions vanished under the withering fire."*

*The Graphic. September 24, 1898.*

The outmoded character of this description is particularly evident in the last sentence. An old-fashioned concept of honor and fair play, an admiration for such pointless bravery, had still not been superseded by the modern understanding that technical superiority provides a natural right to annihilate the enemy even when he is defenseless.

## 56

Eight hundred yards away a ragged line of men was coming on desperately in the face of the pitiless fire, Churchill goes on. White banners tossing and collapsing, white figures subsiding in dozens . . .

The infantrymen fired steadily and stolidly, without hurry or excitement, for the enemy were far away . . . Besides, the soldiers were interested in the work and took great pains. But presently the mere physical act became tedious.

The rifles grew hot—so hot they had to be exchanged for those of the reserve companies. The Maxim guns exhausted all the water in their jackets. . . . The empty cartridge cases, tinkling to the ground, soon formed small but growing heaps round each man.

And all the time out on the plain on the other side the bullets were shearing through flesh, smashing and splintering bone; blood spouted from terrible wounds; valiant men were struggling on through a hell of whistling metal, exploding shells and spurting dust—suffering, despairing, dying.

Churchill's empathy with the opponents' situation was not concerned with an enemy in wild flight away from there. This concerned a still attacking enemy who, if not stopped, in a short while



*The Battle of Omdurman. The picture portrays the battle as man-to-man combat—but no Sudanese got closer than three hundred yards from the British positions.*

would have shown themselves to be superior. The Caliph had put fifteen thousand men into this frontal assault. Churchill finds the plan of attack wise and well thought-out except on one vital point; it was based on a fatal underestimation of the effectiveness of modern weapons.

Meanwhile the great Dervish army, which had advanced at sunrise in hope and courage, fled in utter rout, pursued by the 21st Lancers, and leaving more than 9,000 warriors dead and even greater numbers of wounded behind them.

Thus ended the battle of Omdurman—the most signal triumph ever gained by the arms of science over barbarians. Within the space of five hours, the strongest and best-armed savage army yet arrayed against a modern European Power had been destroyed and dispersed, with hardly any difficulty, comparatively small risk and insignificant loss to the victors.

## 57

For a few weeks in October, 1898, it looked as if the victory at Omdurman would lead to a major European war.<sup>32</sup> The French had dug in at the little outpost of Fashoda south of Omdurman and demanded a share of the booty Kitchener had gained. Day after day the patriotic press in both countries showed off their biggest guns, while Europe slid nearer and nearer to the precipice.

But finally, on November 4, at a major gala dinner in London at which Kitchener received the signia of victory (a gold sword in monstrous bad taste), the news came that the French had given way. The Fashoda crisis was over. Great Britain remained the undisputed superpower, and the great poet of imperialism, Rudyard Kipling, wrote



Take up the white man's burden  
Send forth the best ye breed  
Go bind your sons to exile  
To serve your captives' need<sup>33</sup>

## 58

While Kipling was writing "The White Man's Burden," Joseph Conrad was writing *Heart of Darkness*. That leading expression of imperialist ideology appeared at the same time as its opposite pole in the world of writing. Both works were created under the influence of the battle of Omdurman.

Already in *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), Conrad had described what it felt like to be shot at by naval guns. Around Babalatchi, the ground is slippery with blood, the houses in flames, women screaming, children crying, the dying gasping for breath. They die helpless, "stricken down before they could see their enemy." Their courage is in vain against an invisible and unreachable opponent.

The invisibility of the attackers is remembered far later in the novel by one of the survivors: "First they came, the invisible whites, and dealt death from afar. . . ."

Few Western writers have described with greater empathy the helpless rage when faced with superior forces killing without having to go ashore, victorious without even being present.

That novel had just been published when the battle of Omdurman was taking place. In *Heart of Darkness*, written during the patriotic delirium after Kitchener's homecoming, Conrad opens the imperial toolbox and one after another examines what the historian Daniel R. Headrick calls "the tools of imperialism": The ship's guns that fire on a continent. The railway that is to ease the plundering of the continent. The river steamer that carries Europeans and their arms into the heart of the continent. "Thunderbolts of Jupiter" carried in procession behind Kurtz' stretcher: two shot-guns, a heavy rifle and a light revolver-carbine. Winches-

ter and Martini-Henry rifles spurting metal at the Africans on the shore.

“Say! We must have made a glorious slaughter of them in the bush. Eh? What d’you think? Say?” Marlow hears the whites saying.

“We approach them with the might as of a deity,” Kurtz writes in his report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. He means the weapons. They provided divine power.

In Kipling’s verse, the imperial task is an ethical imperative. That is also how it is depicted by Kurtz, who surrounds himself in a cloud of Kiplingesque rhetoric. Only in a footnote to his torrent do we see what the task truly is, for Kurtz as well as for Kitchener, at the Inner Station as well as at Omdurman: “Exterminate all the brutes.”

## T O T A M

59

The buses that ply the four hundred miles between In Salah and Tamanrasset are rebuilt Mercedes trucks painted orange, to be visible in the swirl of sand. The passenger compartment on the back is like a diving bell with small peepholes instead of windows. It is hideously hot and cramped inside, and there is no question of anything like springs—you have to bring them with you in your own body.

I am frightened, as usual. But when departure finally cannot be postponed any longer, as I stand there at dawn with my heavy pack, crouching before the leap—then I am again elated at being where I am.

The Sahara lies spread out before me like a fireman's canvas sheet. All I have to do is to jump.

The day starts among white dunes, exquisite and conical like whipped cream. Sand-worn roadsigns with almost eradicated symbols. As the road changes direction, the sand also changes color—white dunes become ash gray, yellow, red, brown, even black when the light comes from another quarter.

Then the first mountains appear, coal black, purple, scorched. They are badly weathered, surrounded by masses of fallen rock resembling slag raked out of some immense forge. Occasional tamarisks, mostly withered and dead. The driver gets down and collects them for the fire that night.

The bus stops for the night in Arrak, where there is a small café calling itself a restaurant and hotel. You sleep two by two in straw huts on mattresses directly on the sand.

## 60

On the map it looks as if the road would improve after Arrak, but it is the same turgid grinding in first gear, second, or four-wheel drive. You drive straight into the desert within a track area about a kilometer wide, all the time searching for the most navigable in a tangle of tracks.

Now and again huge plumes of smoke from other vehicles appear on the horizon. Toward midday the smoke mixes with the clouds of sand the evening wind blows up. They surround the setting sun with a thick mist through which occasional mountains and tamarisks can be seen outlined.

The rocks are ancient, their shapes often like vertebrae fallen from the spine of a mountain. Nearer to Tam, inside the Ahaggar massif, the peaks are higher, the core of the mountains offering greater resistance—but even there the landscape testifies most of all to the terrible power of the forces of erosion.

You travel for miles through a desert of shards, searching for a reality that has been irretrievably shattered.

I start back when I catch sight of my face in the mirror. Even I have been exposed to eroding forces, sun and wind, heat and cold, those that make the mountains fall to pieces.

## 61

Tam is the focal point of southern Algeria, an international town in close contact with neighboring Niger and Mali owing to transit traffic, streams of refugees, and smuggled goods.

European desert expeditions and tourists—all come to Tam sooner or later; and all get lost in the corridors of Hotel Tahat.

Its architect had an exaggerated preference for symmetry. The hotel has sixteen precisely identical points at which precisely identical corridors radiate out to the four points of the compass.

When Reception shouts that they have La Suède on the phone,

I rush round in the labyrinth like an overstimulated lab rat until I finally come out at the right place, panting for breath; on the telephone I can hear my own gasps, vastly exaggerated, being thrown between relay stations in Ouargla, Algiers, and Paris. Wiped out by these huge reverberations, my daughter's voice disappears and grows fainter than a whisper. I finally have to give up, overpowered by my own echo.

One of the cleaners has a small child with her, and she puts it down on the stone floor in the broom cupboard, then goes to work. The child cries ceaselessly from eight in the morning until late afternoon, by which time it is so exhausted it can manage only a few pitiful whimpers.

If an adult lay crying so tortured as that, how long would it be before anyone reacted? But children—children cry, everyone knows that. Everyone seems to think it perfectly natural.

## 62

It is on your back you feel the loss.

Your front can keep up appearances. If nothing else, your face can face itself in the mirror. It's the nape of your neck that is lonely.

You can embrace your stomach and roll yourself round it. But your back remains, alone.

That is why sirens and djinns are portrayed with hollowed-out backs—no one ever presses a warm stomach from behind against them. The carving chisel of loneliness works there instead.

You don't meet loneliness. It comes from behind and catches up with us.

## 63

Conrad lost his mother when he was seven and his father when he was eleven. He emigrated from Poland to France, from

France to England. He served on sixteen different ships. Every time he changed country or ship, he had to find new friends or remain lonely.

Then he exchanged the loneliness of the seaman for that of the writer. His wife was his housekeeper. It was in his friends he sought sympathy and confirmation.

One of Conrad's oldest English friends was called Hope and lived in a small village called Stanford-le-Hope. After his marriage, Conrad moved with his wife to Stanford-le-Hope to be near his friend.

Marlow tells the story about Kurtz to a small circle of four friends. That kind of circle was just what Conrad longed for all his life. In 1898, he thought he had at last found it.

As he sat down to write *Heart of Darkness*, he had just left Stanford-le-Hope and moved to Pent Farm in Kent. With that, he also moved into a circle of writer friends who lived quite near to each other. They are all there as invisible listeners to Marlow's story.

## 64

I have rigged up a table to start work, but am having great problems with the dust invading the disks. Tamanrasset is as dry as an early spring day in Peking. Swirling dry and windy, the town is constantly shrouded in a cloud of its own dust.

Just as the Peking wind brings with it the Gobi, this wind brings with it the Sahara—the same desert that runs on through Libya and Egypt, through the Middle East and Iran, Baluchistan and Afghanistan up to Sinkiang and on from there to the Gobi. All those millions of square kilometers of dust show a definite inclination to make their way to Tamanrasset and collect right there on my disks.

Clusters of animals and people are incessantly on their way across the dried-out riverbed that is Tam's equivalent of Hyde Park. Weary camels lower their heads and blow at the dust to see if

it conceals anything edible, and patient goats graze pieces of paper. Women come with their burdens, not on their hips as in In Salah, but on their heads. Groups of boys drift around, every step tearing up a cloud.

But Tam has a specialty. It has a road—indeed, a motorway—on which if necessary you would be able to make your way across the river bed with polished shoes. It is reserved for the army.

An officer comes across this bridge on his way to the post office, four men with him in white lace-up boots and white helmets, the chinstraps under their noses. Outside the post office they march on the spot while he walks past the queue, demands a stamp, and sticks it on. Then six steps forward and another spell in neutral as he mails the letter—at which they all march on with the same solemn expression of satisfaction.

## 65

The barber's in Tam has a poster of Elvis in its window and another of the Algerian national football team. I read Wells and listen to Algerian radio while I wait my turn.

Afterward, I slowly return to the hotel, zigzagging between the shadows. I think I know how I shall go on.

When Conrad was writing *Heart of Darkness*, he was not only influenced by the Congo debate, Kitchener's return, and other events of the day. He was also influenced by a literary world, a world of words, in which Kipling was the rival and the opposite pole, but several other writers meant more to him: Henry James, Stephen Crane, Ford Madox Ford, and, most of all H. G. Wells and R. B. Cunningham Graham.<sup>34</sup>

## THE FRIENDS

66

The time traveler in H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) takes us with him into a future world in which the human family has divided itself into two species: the weak flower children of the upper world and the dark creatures of the underworld, the "morlocks."

It is as if Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde had bred and created two different families, each of which populates the future. As if superego and alter-ego had been separated and each created a people of his own. As if the working classes of "darkest England" had been forced down below the earth and had created another race there. As if the inhabitants of "darkest Africa" had lived an underground life in the actual heart of the empire.

Of these potential interpretations, the last-mentioned is the one to carry the story on: the morlocks turn out to be cannibals, and they have the power. The beautiful people on the surface are simply fattened cattle the cannibals capture, slaughter, and eat.

Hatred and fear seize the traveler. He longs to kill morlocks. He wants to go straight into the darkness, "killing the brutes."

This killing in Wells is both horrific and voluptuous. The time traveler falls asleep as he sits there in the darkness, and when he wakes the morlocks are onto him, soft and repugnant. He shakes "the human rats" off him and starts striking out. He enjoys the feeling of a swishing iron pipe smashing into juicy flesh and crushing bones . . .



## 67

The leading philosopher of the day was Herbert Spencer. As a child, he had been very strictly brought up. The principle of his upbringing became for Spencer the innermost secret of life. All living things are forced to progress through punishment. Nature appears to be an immense reformatory in which ignorance and incompetence are punished with poverty, illness, and death.

The time machine is an experiment with Spencer's theory of evolution. The novel shows how mankind, as the time traveler puts it, "commits suicide" by minimizing the pain that is the mother of intelligence and evolution.

Wells's next book, which we know Conrad also read, was called *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896). In this, the opposite possibility is investigated: maximizing the pain and thereby hastening evolution.

Dr. Moreau uses his surgical skill to create a kind of human being out of animals. He tortures the animals so that pain will increase the pace of their evolutionary progress: "Each time I dip a living creature into the bath of burning pain, I say, this time I will burn out all the animal, this time I will make a rational creature of my own. After all, what is ten years? Man has been a hundred thousand in the making."

Dr. Moreau has created one hundred and twenty creatures, of which half are dead, but he has not succeeded in creating a real human being. As soon as the doctor takes his hand off the creatures, they revert to bestiality. The animal in them is strongest at night, in the dark. One night, the puma tears itself free and kills its torturer. The monsters rebel and take over power on the island. The narrator sees, day by day, the way they become hairier, their foreheads lower, and they growl instead of speaking.

When he has saved himself and returned back to civilization, he sees the same there. Human beings seem to him to be tormented; animals soon to revert to all fours. He chooses solitude beneath the stars. "It is out there in the starry sky that whatever is more than

animal within us must find its solace and its hope. And so, in hope and solitude, my story ends.”

*The Island of Dr Moreau* can be read as a story of colonialism. Just as the colonizer civilizes the lower, more animal races with the whip, Dr. Moreau civilizes the animals with torture. Just as the colonizer tries to create a new kind of creature, the civilized savage, Dr. Moreau tries to create the humanized animal. In both cases the means is terror. Just like Kurtz, he teaches his created creatures to worship him as a god.

## 68

In *An Outcast of the Islands*, which Wells reviewed in May 1896, Conrad assembles the criticisms of the colonialists in the image of “the invisible whites,” who kill without even being present. Perhaps it was Conrad who inspired Wells to write another story of colonialism, *The Invisible Man* (1897).

This is the story of Kemp, a man who, owing to a much too successful scientific experiment, has made himself invisible and does not know how to get his visibility back again. At first he is desperate about his position, but he soon realizes it can be exploited. As no one can see him, he can commit any outrage he likes without being punished. No one can stop him from killing anyone who resists his reign of terror. Invisibility has made him inhuman.

“He is mad,” said Kemp. “Inhuman. He is pure selfishness.”

“Pure selfishness” were also the words Conrad chose when he described to his publisher the main theme of *Heart of Darkness*.

The men representing civilization out in the colonies were “invisible” not only in the sense that their guns killed at a distance, but also in that no one at home really knew what they were doing. Cut off from their native country by enormous distances, poor communications and impenetrable jungles, they exercised imperial power without any control from home.

Charles Dilke had taken up these questions in “Civilisation in

Africa” in the summer of 1896. They were discussed in 1897 in connection with some articles in *The Times* by Benjamin Kidd and again in 1898 when the articles came out in book form under the title *Control of the Tropics*. Wells was topical as usual.

Conrad had already taken up this theme when he found it in Dilke and wrote “An Outpost of Progress,” about the two rogues who become more and more inhuman when no one can see them. On November 17, 1898, he asked Wells if he would send him *The Invisible Man* because he had mislaid his own copy. On December 4, he praised it enthusiastically in a letter to Wells, and, at Christmas, Conrad wrote to his young relative Aniela Zagórska and urged her to read it. *The Invisible Man* was one of the books Conrad had just read when he was writing the story of Kurtz.

## 69

The letter to Zagórska also recommends Wells’s most recent book, *The War of the Worlds* (1898). Criticism of colonialism in this book is even more pronounced, perhaps because it was written in the 1897 jubilee year, during the orgy of self-satisfaction the British Empire was indulging in at the time.

In Wells’s novel, London is attacked by an extraterrestrial master race. The Martians have lived in perpetual cold, which has sharpened their brains and enabled them to invent spaceships and death rays. They envelop London bit by bit in a cloud of black gas, an impenetrable, irresistible killing darkness.

The story seethes with words that also have a signaling function in *Heart of Darkness*: “darkness,” “blackness,” “extermination,” “brutes,” “horror.”

The Martians’ weapons kill “like an invisible hand.” They are as superior to those of the British as the British’s are superior to those of the colored peoples. And just as the British consider themselves to have the right to conquer the lands of the lower races, the Mar-

tians think they have the right to conquer the Earth, taking it from people they regard as a lower species of animal. As Wells wrote:

[B]efore we judge of them too harshly, we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but upon its own inferior races.

The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit?

In the London area, humanity is soon exterminated, down to about a few stragglers. The narrator meets one of them on Putney Hill. He suggests future life and resistance in the sewers. The risk is that the humans “will go savage,” degenerate into a kind of large wild rat. The extremes of the situation are motives for extreme solutions: “We can’t have any weak and silly. Life is real again, and the useless, the cumbersome and mischievous have to die. They ought to die. They ought to be willing to die. It’s a sort of disloyalty after all, to live and taint the race.”

When that was written, Adolf Hitler was just eight years old.

The riddle of malaria was solved in 1897, when Wells wrote his novel. Just as malaria had long been the natives’ best protection against the white conquerors, the bacteria in the novel become man’s protection against the Martians. It is the bacteria that save humanity. The Martians have conquered the whole earth only to fall victim to its smallest and most insignificant inhabitants.

Just because we have been successful at one time, we should not think the future belongs to us, Wells warns. “In the case of every other predominant animal the world has ever seen, I repeat, the hour of its complete ascendancy has been the eve of its complete overthrow.”

## 70

Wells had studied biology and paleontology under Thomas Huxley, and his popular science articles demonstrate a special interest in extinction. "On Extinction" (1893), for example, deals with the "saddest chapter" in biological science, describing the slow and inexorable extinction of struggling life.<sup>35</sup>

In the long galleries of the geological museum are the records of judgments that have been engraved on the rocks. Example: *Atlantosaurus*. Whether it was through some change of climate, some subtle disease, or some subtle enemy, these titanic reptiles dwindled in numbers and faded at last altogether. Save for the riddle of their scattered bones, it is as if they had never been.

The long roll of paleontology is half-filled with the records of extermination; whole orders, families, groups, and classes have passed away and left no mark and no tradition upon the living fauna of the world. Many fossils of the older rocks are labeled "of doubtful affinity." Nothing living has any part like them. They hint merely at shadowy dead subkingdoms, of which the form eludes the zoologist. They are index fingers, pointing into unfathomable darkness and saying only one thing clearly, the word *extinction*.

Even in the world today, the forces of extinction are at work. In the last hundred years, human beings have swarmed all over the globe and shoved one species of animal after another over the edge of the precipice. Not just the dodo, but hundreds of families and species.

The annihilation of the bison was swift and complete. Seals, Greenland whales, and many other animals are faced with the same cruel destiny. Their situation is almost beyond our ability to comprehend, Wells writes. Our earth is still warm from human beings, our future apparently full of human life. The most terrible thing we can imagine is a desolated earth in which the last human being, utterly alone, stares extinction in the face.

## 71

The air in the big department store is dry, and I find it more and more difficult to breath. They take me to the inhalation room, where the air is as moist as in a greenhouse, soft and pleasant to the lungs. After a minute or so in there, I feel quite recovered. But as soon as I come out into the dry air of the store, I am again breathless and hurry back into the inhalation room. In a few moments, it has been totally changed. It is empty. There is not a human being there, no equipment, nothing.

“I want the inhalation room,” I say.

“You’ve gone astray,” replies an invisible loudspeaker. “This is the annihilation room.”

“I don’t understand.”

“There’s a great difference,” the matter-of-fact voice explains. “You’re annihilated here.”

“And that means?”

“This is the destruction chamber. All life ceases here. It ends.”

The words explode in slow motion within me, their meaning unfolding like parachutes and slowly sinking down through the mind to the sudden realization: I don’t exist any longer. The end has come.

## 72

In April 1897, while Wells was writing *The War of the Worlds*, the English newspaper *Social-Democrat* published a story marked with the same biting irony, the same rebellious pessimism. The piece was called “Bloody Niggers.”

Why did God create man? Was it out of carelessness or ill will? We don’t know. But in all events, man exists, black, white, red, and yellow.

Far back in history, Assyrians, Babylonians, and Egyptians lived and fought, but God was aiming all the time at something different and better. He let Greeks and Romans appear out of the dark-

ness of barbarity to prepare the way for the race that from the start was chosen to rule over mankind, namely the British race—"limited islanders, baptised with mist, narrowed by insularity, swollen with good fortune and wealth."

Lower races live in Africa, Australia, and America and on all the thousands of islands in the South Seas. They perhaps have different names and petty differences between them, but all of them are essentially "niggers," "bloody niggers." Nor are Finns or Basques or whatever they are called anything to be reckoned with. They are just a kind of European nigger, "destined to disappear."

Niggers remain niggers whatever color they are, but the archetype is found in Africa. Oh, Africa! God must have been in a bad mood when He created that continent. Why otherwise fill it with people who are doomed to be replaced by other races coming from outside? Would it not have been better to make the niggers white, so that in all good time they could become Englishmen, instead of giving us all the trouble of exterminating them?

Niggers have no guns, so no rights. Their land is ours. Their cattle and fields, their wretched household utensils and all they possess is ours—just as their women are ours to have as concubines, to thrash or exchange, ours to infect with syphilis, leave with child, outrage, torment, and make by contact with "the vilest of our vile, more vile than beasts."

Our bishops scream to high heaven when the Armenians are violated by Turks, but say nothing about the much worse crimes committed by their own countrymen. The hypocritical British heart beats for all except those their own empire drowns in blood. The God who has created people like us—must not he have been a fool?

### 73

The author of this scream was the Scottish aristocrat and socialist R. B. Cunningham Graham. After an adventurous life in South America, he had returned to his native country and begun a new

career as politician and writer.

A few months after “Bloody Niggers” was printed, Graham read “An Outpost of Progress” and recognized a soulmate in the criticism of imperialism and hatred of hypocrisy. He wrote to Conrad, and with that begins a correspondence remarkable in its seriousness, intimacy, and intensity. Graham became Conrad’s closest friend.

The two friends always loyally praise each other’s stories and articles, but in one case Conrad’s reaction is much stronger than usual. That is when in June 1898 he read “Bloody Niggers,” by then over a year old.

It is good, he writes. Very good, but . . . (here he switches into French) but, my dear friend, you spread yourself too thin, your thoughts drift around like wandering knights when they ought to be kept gathered together in firm and penetrating battle array.

“And why preach to the already converted?” Conrad continues. “I am being stupid. Honour, justice, compassion and freedom are ideas that have no converts. There are only people, without knowing, understanding or feeling, who intoxicate themselves with words, repeat words, shout them out, imagining they believe them without believing in anything else but profit, personal advantage and their own satisfaction.”

The criticism of language Conrad made in the summer of 1896—great words are nothing but sounds—is repeated here, sharpened to extreme despair: “Words fly away—and nothing remains, do you see? Absolutely nothing, you man of good faith! Nothing at all. One moment, and nothing remains—except a lump of dirt, a cold, dead lump of dirt thrown out into black space, spinning round an extinguished sun. Nothing. Neither thought, sound nor soul. Nothing.”

## 74

Conrad calls Graham an “*homme de foi*,” a man of good faith.

Conrad neither wanted nor was able to have anything to do with Graham’s socialism (or with politics in general). He was his father’s



son and knew what politics led to. Politics had killed his mother, broken his father, made him an orphan, and driven him into exile.

Graham, with his secure national identity, could perhaps afford politics. Conrad, writer in exile, could not. He could love and admire his father's politics in Graham, but he also hated them and could never forgive what they had done to his father.

Who today could be called an *homme de foi*? The species seems to have died out. Graham's problems, however, remain, utterly recognizable, his despair as well. It is only his faith and his hope that have been taken away from us.

## 75

On December 1, 1898, Conrad read Graham's newly published travel book *Mogreb-el-Acksa*. He wrote to Graham's mother on December 4: "It is *the* book of travel of the century. Nothing approaching it has appeared since Burton's *Mecca*."

And on December 9, Conrad wrote to Graham himself: "The individuality of the work imposes itself on the reader—from the first. And then come other things: skill, pathos, humour, wit, indignation. . . . This should work for material success. Yet who knows! No doubt it is too good."

Graham's book was one of the most recent Conrad had read when on December 18 he started writing *Heart of Darkness*.

The narrator in *Mogreb-el-Acksa* turns to a small circle of men lying around the evening fire, their pipes lit and staying their tin mugs on the way to their mouths when they hear the horses sneezing. He is a mounted equivalent of the seaman Marlow in his circle of sailors.

He tells, he says, only of what he has seen, with no flag waving, no pretence of fulfilling some great moral mission. He has no theories on empires, the destiny of the Anglo-Saxon race, the spread of Christian faith, or the expansion of trade. He is as guarded and distanced as Marlow.

He is on his way to Taroudant. At first, like Marlow, he is taken by boat along the coast of Africa. He thinks about “the Orient,” “the East,” a concept which at that time covered almost the whole of the non-European world.

“As I see the matter, Europeans are a curse throughout the East. What do they bring worth bringing, as a general rule? Guns, gin, powder, and shoddy cloths, dishonest dealing only too frequently, and flimsy manufactures which displace the fabrics woven by the women, new wants, new ways and discontent with what they know . . . these are the blessings Europeans take to Eastern lands.”

The ruling classes in Morocco “understand entirely the protestations about better government, progress, morality and all the usual ‘boniment’ which Christian powers address to weaker nations when they can contemplate the annexation of their territory.” Some areas are already in foreign hands, and “the Moroccans like the fact as much as we should like the Russians in the Isle of Wight,” Graham writes.<sup>36</sup>

Even these modest attempts to see Europe from the point of view of the threatened were in the 1890s so rare and challenging that they gave Graham a profile as a writer entirely his own. It is the same narrative attitude Conrad had taken in “An Outpost of Progress” and that he again lets Marlow take at the beginning of *Heart of Darkness*.

When Conrad read Graham’s story of a westerner traveling farther and farther into an unknown and dangerous Africa, he read not only what was in the book. Alongside or behind his friend’s experiences, he saw his own. Behind his friend’s words, he saw his own words, the story he himself would be able to write on the same theme, in the same spirit, with his friend as a secret addressee.

## 76

Earlier in the autumn, Graham had worded his criticism of European influence in “the Orient” even more sharply in his story “Hig-

ginson's Dream," which Conrad proofread for his friend, in September 1898.

"It is super-excellent," wrote Conrad to Graham's mother on October 16. "It is much too good to remind me of any of my work, but I am immensely flattered to learn you discern some points of similitude. Of course I am in complete sympathy with the point of view."

During the final battles over Tenerife, it says in "Higginson's Dream," the Guanches were afflicted by a strange disease which killed more than those who fell in battle. The whole country was covered with the dead, and Alfonso de Lugo met a woman who said: "Where are you going, Christian? Why do you hesitate to take the land? The Guanches are all dead."

The disease was called *modorra*. But in fact it only required the white man's presence—with his rifle and Bible, with his gin and cotton and his heart full of charity—to exterminate the people he wished to save from barbarism.

It is "apparently inevitable that our customs seem designed to carry death to all the so-called inferior races, whom at a bound we force to bridge a period it has taken us a thousand years to pass," writes Graham.<sup>37</sup>

It is worth noting that in contrast to most other intellectuals of the day, Graham writes "the so-called inferior races." According to him, the fact that colored peoples died out was not due to any biological inferiority but to what we today would call culture shock, the demand for immediate adaptation to a strange variant of Western culture (gin, Bible, and firearms).

In the autumn of 1898, Conrad was working on his novel *The Rescue*, about a noble and chivalrous imperialist who puts his whole existence at risk to help a Malayan friend who had once saved his life. The theme is the exact opposite of that in *Heart of Darkness*.

The novel caused Conrad endless torment and brought him several times to the brink of suicide.

It is also very bad. I have only one reason to concern myself with it, and that is a passage in which Mr. Travers “with some force” utters the following words: “And if the inferior race must perish, it is a gain, a step towards the perfecting of society which is the aim of progress.”

These words appear in part three of the book, which means Conrad must have written them at about the time when he proof-read “Higginson’s Dream.” Both texts allude to the same widely known concept—that the “inferior” races must be sacrificed for “progress.”

It is worth noting that the character in the novel pronouncing these words is Mr. Travers, and that his words immediately are associated with “the coming of utter darkness.”

## 78

Things had gone well for Higginson. At this time he was already wealthy and lived in Nouméa, the group of islands he had “rescued from barbarism.”

Higginson had spent his youth on the islands, loved their women, hunted with their youths, learned their language, lived their lives and considered it the best of lives. Tired of his wealth, he now often dreamed of returning to the little bay not far from Nouméa, where in his youth he had had a friend called Tean.

One day when the champagne seems flat and the demimonde particularly vulgar, he does return. The place is oddly changed. It seems deserted. He slashes his way through the undergrowth, finds a hut and a man digging yams. He asks:

“Where black man?”

The man leans on his hoe and replies, “All dead.”

“Where Chief?”

“Chief, he dead.”

Conrad read—not only read, but proofread—these words in his best friend’s story a month or two before he himself wrote the words that would one day be the epigraph to T. S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men” (1925):

“Mistah Kurtz, he dead.”

## 79

Inside the hut he finds Tean, the friend of his youth, dying. A strange conversation ensues in which Tean tries with metaphors—bird, mouse, rain—to explain what is happening within him, and Higginson replies as if the metaphors were an external reality in which the bird can be shot and the cat set on the mouse.

“It’s no use,” says Tean. “I die, John, black man all die, black women no catch baby, tribe only fifty ‘stead of five hundred. We all go out, all same smoke, we vanish, go up somewhere into the clouds. Black men and white men, he no can live.”

Having got that far in his story, Higginson starts blaspheming the gods, cursing progress, and railing at civilization (just as Graham had in “Bloody Niggers”) in a torrent of half-French and half-English (just as Conrad had when he read “Bloody Niggers”)—and then in confusion reminds himself that he made the roads, started up the mines, built the pier, that he and no one else had opened up the island to civilization. . .

Higginson is, as Kurtz is, a cosmopolitan, “half French, half English.” In short, he is European. Just as Kurtz does, he represents a Progress that presupposes genocide.