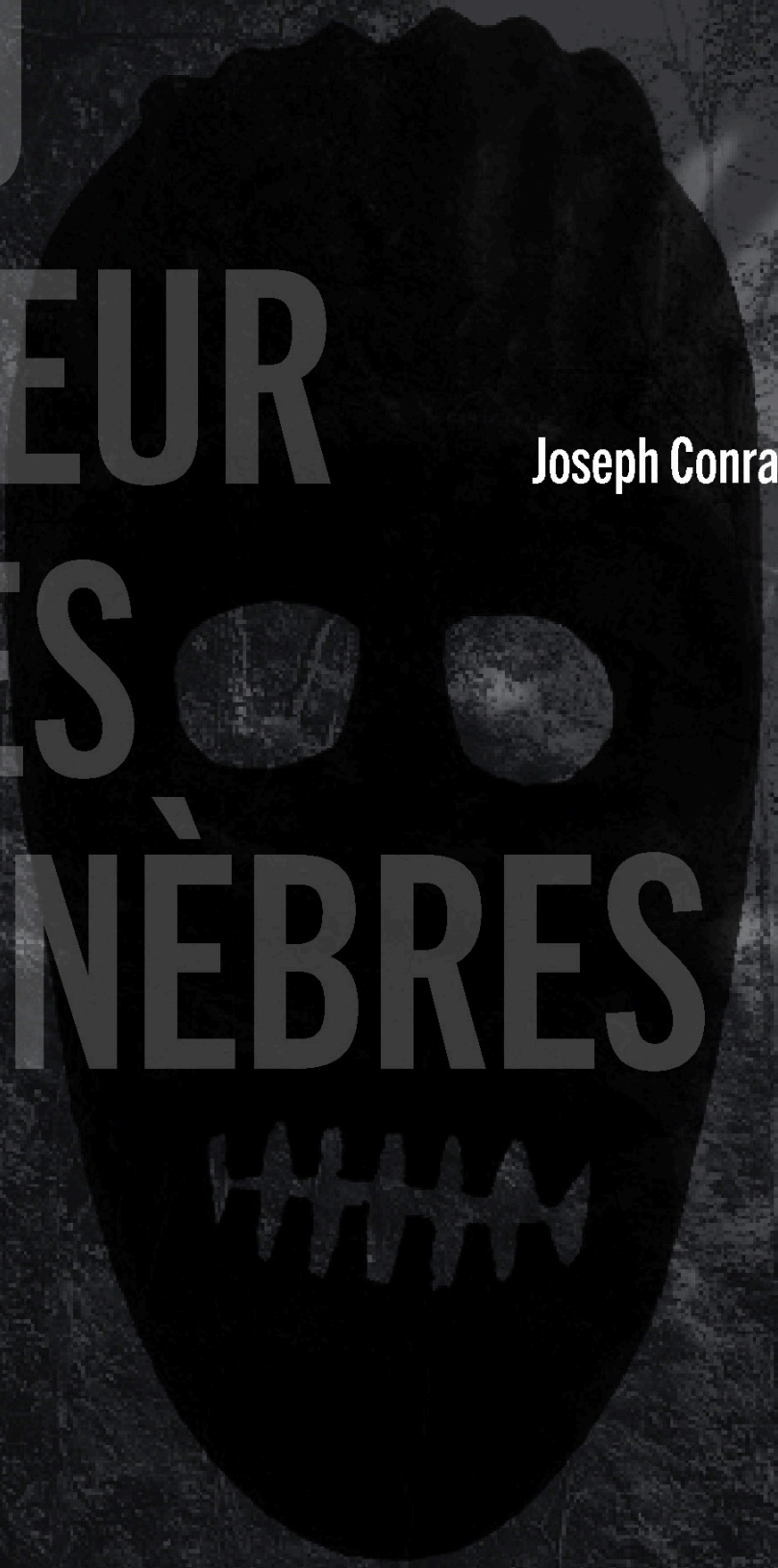


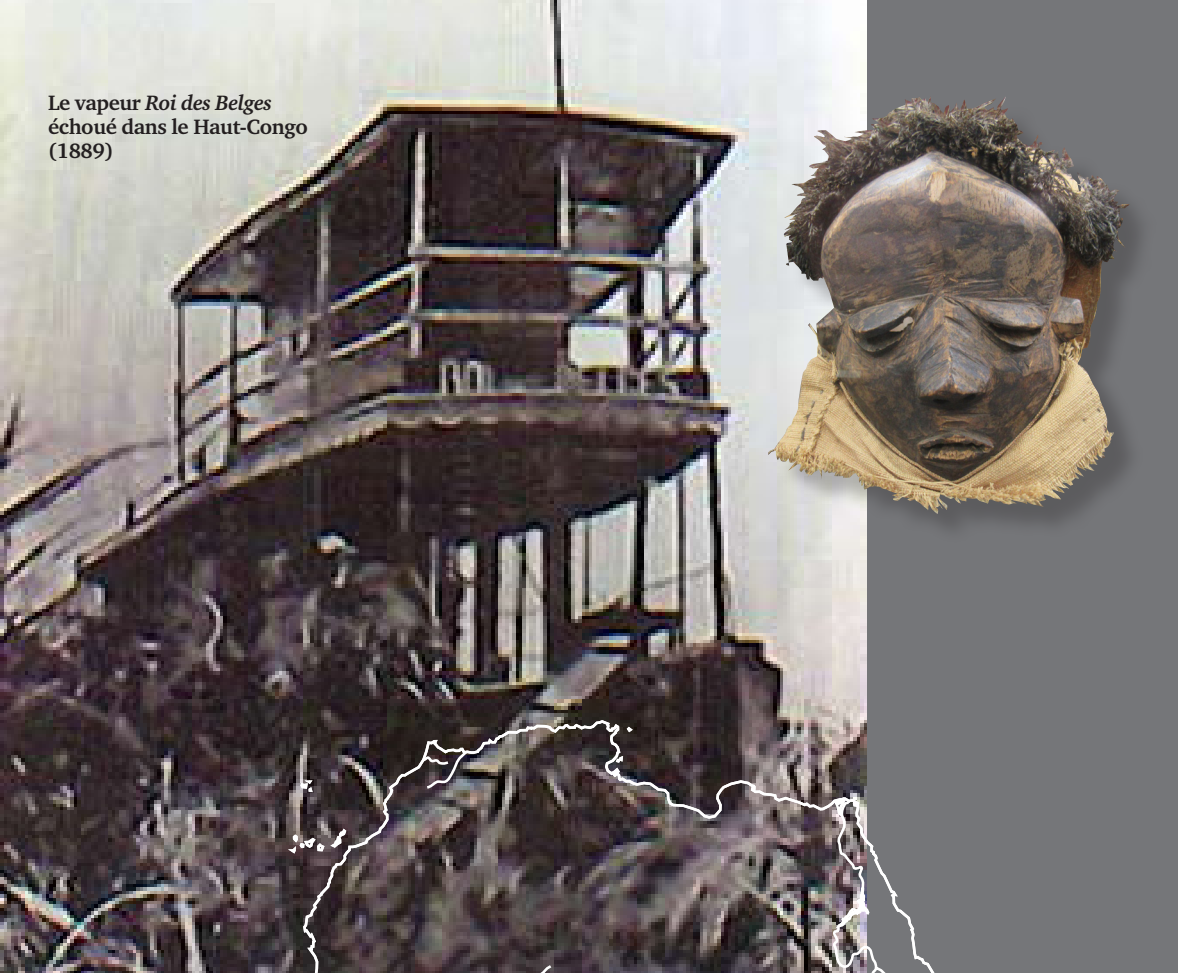


AU  
CŒUR  
DES  
TÉNÉBRES

Joseph Conrad



Le vapeur *Roi des Belges*  
échoué dans le Haut-Congo  
(1889)



Joseph Conrad,  
Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski,  
1857-1924

## AU CŒUR DES TÉNÉBRES

### I

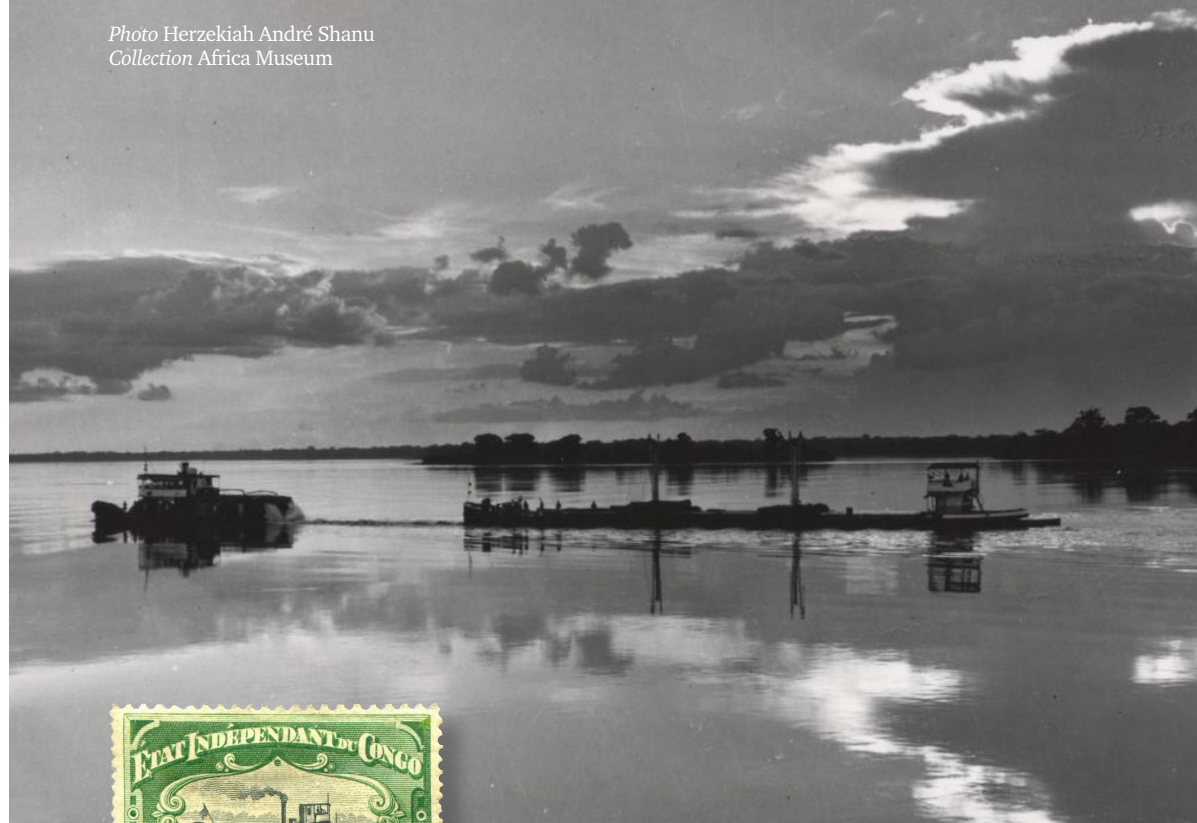
**T**he *Nellie*, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide. The sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway. In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint, and in the luminous space the tanned sails of the barges drifting up with the tide seemed to stand still in red clusters of canvas sharply peaked, with gleams of varnished sprits. A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness. The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still exchanged a few words lazily. Afterwards there was silence on board the yacht. For some reason or other we did not begin that game of dominoes. We felt meditative, and fit for nothing but placid staring. The day was ending in a serenity of still and exquisite brilliance. The water shone pacifically; the sky, without a speck, was a benign immensity of unstained light; the very mist on the Essex marshes was like a gauzy and radiant fabric, hung from the wooded rises inland, and draping the low shores in diaphanous folds. Only the gloom to the west, brooding over the upper reaches, became more somber every minute, as if angered by the approach of the sun. And at last, in its curved and imperceptible fall, the sun sank low, and from glowing white changed to a dull red without rays and without heat, as if about to go out suddenly, stricken to death by the touch of that gloom brooding over a crowd of men. Forthwith a change came over the waters, and this serenity became less brilliant but more profound. The old river in its broad reach rested unruffled at the decline of day, after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks, spread out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth. We looked at the venerable stream not in the vivid flush of a short day that comes and departs for ever, but in the

August light of abiding memories. And indeed nothing is easier for a man who has, as the phrase goes, «followed the sea» with reverence and affection, than to evoke the great spirit of the past upon the lower reaches of the Thames. The tidal current runs to and fro in its unceasing service, crowded with memories of men and ships it had borne to the rest of home or to the battles of the sea. It had known and served all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin, knights all, titled and untitled--the great knights errant of the sea. It had borne all the ships whose names are like jewels flashing in the night of time, from the Golden Hind returning with her round flanks full of treasure, to be visited by the Queen's Highness and thus pass out of the gigantic tale, to the Erebus and Terror, bound on other conquests--and that never returned. It had known the ships and the men. They had sailed from Deptford, from Greenwich, from Erith--the adventurers and the settlers; kings' ships and the ships of men on 'Change; captains, admirals, the dark «interlopers» of the Eastern trade, and the commissioned «generals» of East India fleets. Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth! . . .

The dreams of men, the seeds of commonwealths, the germs of empires. The sun set; the dusk fell on the stream, and lights began to appear along the shore. The Chapman light-house, a three-legged thing erect on a mud-flat, shone strongly. Lights of ships moved in the fairway--a great stir of lights going up and going down. And farther west on the upper reaches the place of the mon-strous town was still marked ominously on the sky, abrooding gloom in sunshine, a lurid glare under the stars.» And this also,» said Marlow suddenly, «has been one of the dark places of the earth.» He was the only man of us who still «followed thesea.» The worst that could be said of him was that he did not represent his class. He was a seaman, but he was a wanderer, too, while most seamen lead, if one may so express it, a sedentary life. Their minds are of the stay-at-home order, and their home is always with them--the ship; and so is their country--the sea. One ship is very much like another, and the sea is always the same. In the immutability of their surroundings the foreign shores, the foreign faces, the changing immensity of life, glide past, veiled not by a sense of mystery but by a slightly disdainful ignorance; for there is nothing mysterious to a seaman unless it be the sea itself, which is the mistress of his existence and as inscrutable as Destiny. For the rest, after his hours of work, a casual stroll or a casual spree on shore suffices to unfold for him the secret of a whole

**Le fleuve Congo,**  
vers 1898  
Avec ses 4 700 kilomètres, il est  
le huitième plus long fleuve du monde  
et le second après l'Amazone pour son  
débit de 80 832 m<sup>3</sup>/s au maximum.

*Photo Herzekiah André Shanu  
Collection Africa Museum*



**Les neuf anciens rois de Boma,**  
vers 1898  
Dignitaires congolais avec  
leurs insignes de pouvoir,  
habillés de vêtements  
traditionnels et européens.

*Photo Herzekiah André Shanu  
Collection Africa Museum*



**Comptoir d'ivoire, vers 1898**

Au plus fort de ce commerce, pendant la colonisation de l'Afrique, entre 800 et 1.000 tonnes d'ivoire étaient envoyées en Europe chaque année.

Photo Herzekiah André Shanu  
Collection Africa Museum



**Forêt pluviale, vers 1898**

Le bassin du Congo constitue l'un des plus importants massifs de forêt tropicale pluviale de la planète derrière l'Amazonie.

Photo Herzekiah André Shanu  
Collection Africa Museum



Carte, vers 1898

Collection Africa Museum

continent, and generally he finds these secret not worth knowing. The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. His remark did not seem at all surprising.

It was just like Marlow. It was accepted in silence. No one took the trouble to grunt even; and presently he said, very slow--» I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago--the other day. . . . Light came out of this river since--you say Knights? Yes; but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind--as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. 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. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea--something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. . . . » He broke off. Flames glided in the river, small green flames, red flames, white flames, pursuing, overtaking, joining, crossing each other--then separating slowly or hastily. The traffic of the great city went on in the deepening night upon the sleepless river. We looked on, waiting patiently--there was nothing else to do till the end of the flood; but it was only after a long silence, when he said, in a hesitating voice, «I suppose you fellows remember I did once turn fresh-water sailor for a bit,» that we knew we were fated, before the ebb began to run, to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences.

«I don't want to bother you much with what happened to me personally,» he began, showing in this remark the weakness of many tellers of tales who seem so often unaware of what their audience would best like to hear; «yet to understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap. It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me--and into my thoughts. It was somber enough too--

**Poisson tigre,**

Le poisson tigre goliath (*Hydrocynus goliath*) ou encore Poisson-chien, appelé localement *mbenga* est une espèce de poissons d'eau douce du fleuve Congo. Sa taille, son agressivité et sa mâchoire en font un prédateur même pour les crocodiles.

Photo Herzekiah André Shanu  
Collection Africa Museum



**Le fleuve Congo,**  
vers 1898

Avec ses 4 700 kilomètres, il est le huitième plus long fleuve du monde et le second après l'Amazone pour son débit de 80 832 m<sup>3</sup>/s à son maximum.

Photo Anonyme  
Collection Africa Museum

**Population Kamba,**  
vers 1898

Les Kamba (ou Bakamba) sont une population d'Afrique centrale vivant en république du Congo, en république démocratique du Congo ou en Angola. Ils font partie du groupe des Kongos.

Il est possible que cette photographie ait été prise depuis le bord du navire *Le roi des belges* par Alexandre Delcommune.

Photo Herzekiah André Shanu  
Collection Africa Museum





**Masque Pendé,**  
vers 1898

Chaque masque correspond à un rituel spécifique et met en scène une catégorie sociale précise (le chef, le devin, l'ensorcelé, la prostituée, le colon...)

*Bois dur, polychrome, raphia, coquillages.*

*Photo Herzekiah André Shanu  
Collection Africa Museum*

**Coupe d' Afrormosia,**  
vers 1898

Cet arbre peut atteindre 40 à 60 m de haut et 150 cm de diamètre. Il est reconnaissable à son écorce grise tachetée de marques brunes à rouges, qui se desquame à la manière de l'écorce de platane. Avec sa couleur allant du brun au jaune doré, la finesse de son grain et sa durabilité, il est souvent utilisé comme substitut du teck.

*Photo Herzekiah André Shanu  
Collection Africa Museum*

-and pitiful--not extraordinary in any way--not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light.» I had then, as you remember, just returned to London after a lot of Indian Ocean, Pacific, China Seas--a regular dose of the East--six years or so, and I was loafing about, hindering you fellows in your work and invading your homes, just as though I had got a heavenly mission to civilize you. It was very fine for a time, but after a bit I did get tired of resting. Then I began to look for a ship--I should think the hardest work on earth. But the ships wouldn't even look at me. And I got tired of that game too.

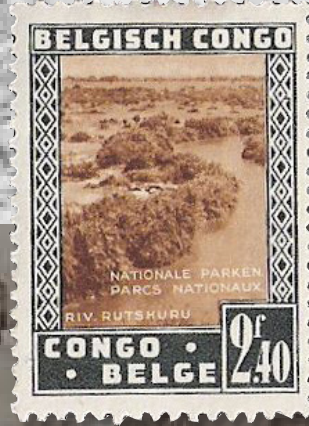
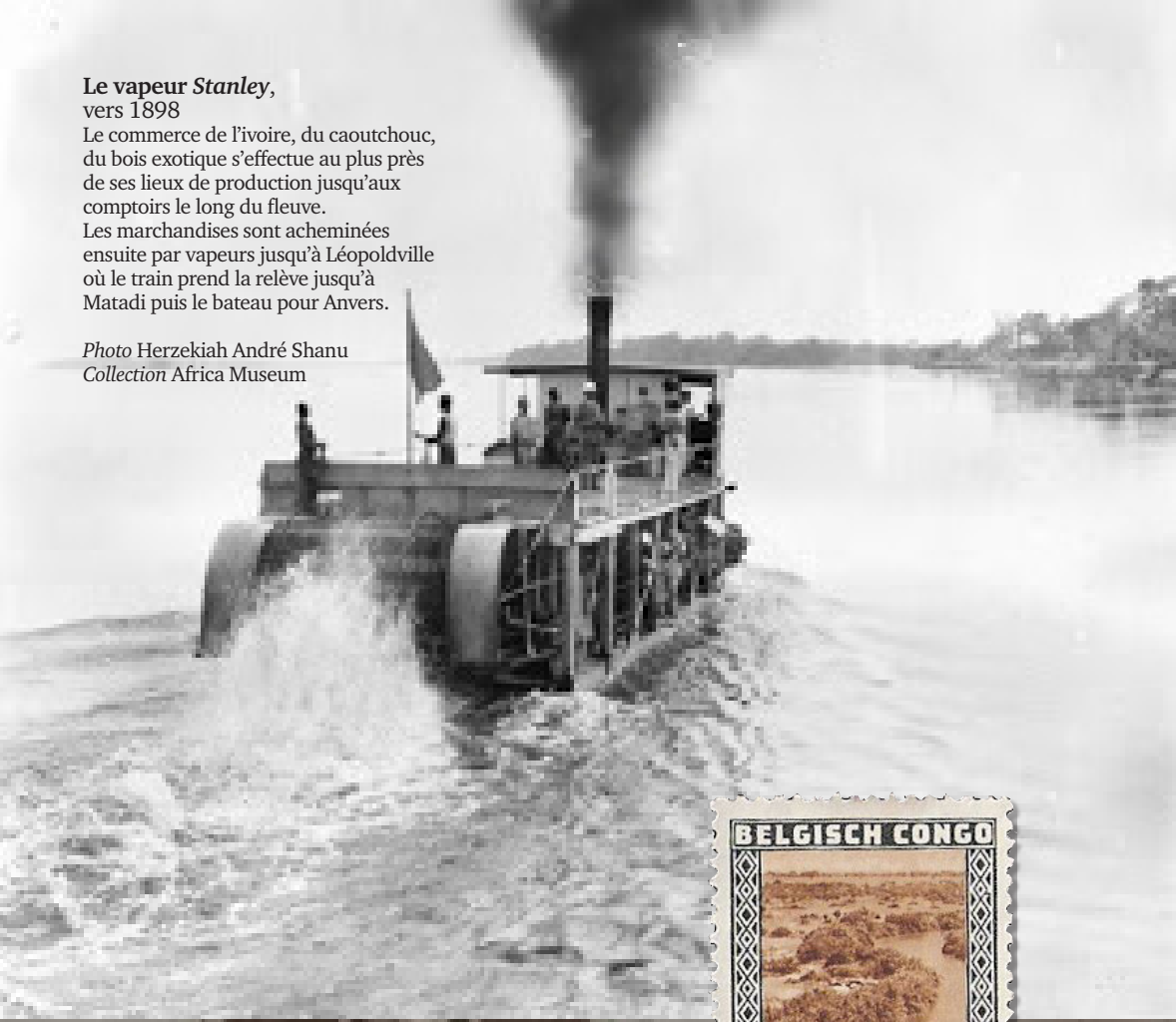
«Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, When I grow up I will go there. The North Pole was one of these places, I remember. Well, I haven't been there yet, and shall not try now. The glamour's off. Other places were scattered about the Equator, and in every sort of latitude all over the two hemispheres. I have been in some of them, and . . . well, we won't talk about that. But there was one yet--the biggest, the most blank, so to speak--that I had a hankering after.» True, by this time it was not a blank space anymore. It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery--a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness. But there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling 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. And as I looked at the map of it in a shop window, it fascinated me as a snake would a bird--a silly little bird. Then I remembered there was a big concern, a Company for trade on that river. Dash it all! I thought to myself, they can't trade without using some kind of craft on that lot of fresh water--steamboats! Why shouldn't I try to get charge of one. I went on along Fleet Street, but could not shake off the idea. The snake had charmed me.» You understand it was a Continental concern, that Trading society; but I have a lot of relations living on the Continent, because it's cheap and not so nasty as it looks, they say.» I am sorry to own I began to worry them. This was already a fresh departure for me. I was not used to getting things that way, you know. I always went my own road and on my own legs where I had a mind to go. I wouldn't have believed it of myself; but, then--you see--I felt somehow I must get there by hook or by crook. So I worried them. The men said 'My dear fellow,' and did nothing. Then--

**Le vapeur Stanley,**  
vers 1898

Le commerce de l'ivoire, du caoutchouc, du bois exotique s'effectue au plus près de ses lieux de production jusqu'aux comptoirs le long du fleuve.

Les marchandises sont acheminées ensuite par vapeurs jusqu'à Léopoldville où le train prend la relève jusqu'à Matadi puis le bateau pour Anvers.

Photo Herzekiah André Shanu  
Collection Africa Museum



**Bureau des postes,**  
Bulangi, vers 1898

Photo Herzekiah André Shanu  
Collection Africa Museum



would you believe it?--I tried the women. I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work--to get a job. Heavens! Well, you see, the notion drove me. I had an aunt, a dear enthusiastic soul. She wrote: 'It will be delightful. I am ready to do anything, any-thing for you. It is a glorious idea. I know the wife of a very high personage in the Administration, and also a man who has lots of influence with, ' &c., &c. She was determined to make no end of fuss to get me appointed skipper of a river steamer, if such was my fancy. » I got my appointment--of course; and I got it very quick. It appears the Company had received news that one of their captains had been killed in a scuffle with the natives. This was my chance, and it made me the more anxious to go. It was only months and months afterwards, when I made the attempt to recover what was left of the body, that I heard the original quarrel arose from a misunderstanding about some hens. Yes, two black hens. Fresleven--that was the fellow's name, a Dane--thought himself wronged somehow in the bargain, so he went ashore and started to hammer the chief of the village with a stick. Oh, it didn't surprise me in the least to hear this, and at the same time to be told that Fresleven was the gentlest, quietest creature that ever walked on two legs. No doubt he was; but he had been a couple of years already out there engaged in the noble cause, you know, and he probably felt the need at last of asserting his self-respect in some way. Therefore he whacked the old nigger mercilessly, while a big crowd of his people watched him, thunderstruck, till some man,--I was told the chief's son,--in desperation at hearing the old chap yell, made a tentative jab with a spear at the white man--and of course it went quite easy between the shoulder-blades. Then the whole population cleared into the forest, expecting all kinds of calamities to happen, while, on the other hand, the steamer Fresleven commanded left also in a bad panic, in charge of the engineer, I believe. Afterwards nobody seemed to trouble much about Fresleven's remains, till I got out and stepped into his shoes. I couldn't let it rest, though; but when an opportunity offered at last to meet my predecessor, the grass growing through his ribs was tall enough to hide his bones. They were all there. The supernatural being had not been touched after he fell. And the village was deserted, the huts gaped black, rotting, all askew within the fallen enclosures. A calamity had come to it, sure enough.

The people had vanished. Mad terror had scattered them, men, women, and children, through the bush, and they had never returned. What became of the hens I don't know either. I should think the cause of progress got them, anyhow. However, through this glorious affair I got my appointment, before I had fairly begun to hope for it. » I flew around like mad to get ready, and before forty-eight hours I was crossing the Channel to show



myself to my employers, and sign the contract. In a very few hours I arrived in a city that always makes me think of a whited sepulcher. Prejudice no doubt. I had no difficulty in finding the Company's offices. It was the biggest thing in the town, and everybody I met was full of it. They were going to run an over-sea empire, and make no end of coin by trade.»

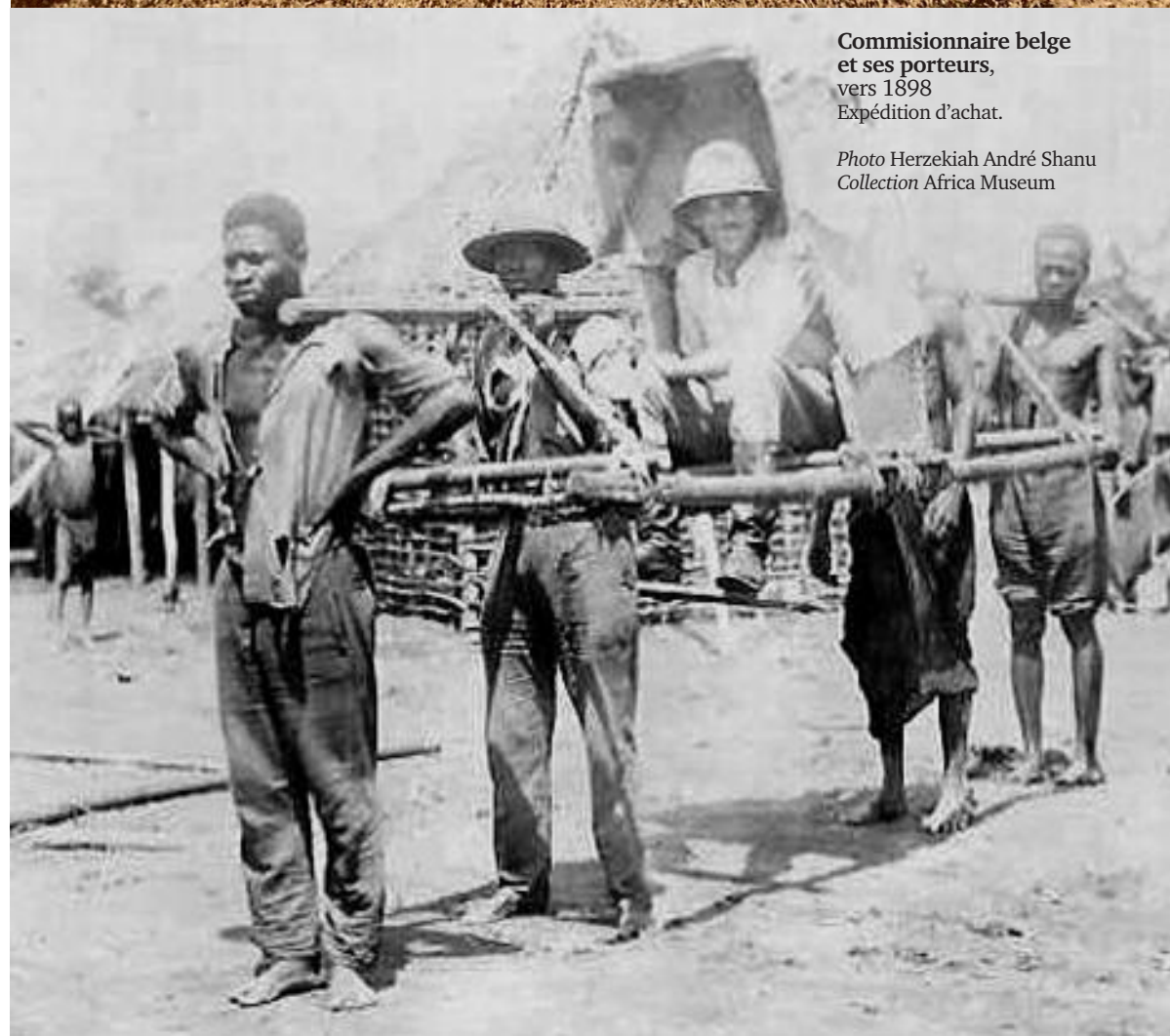
A narrow and deserted street in deep shadow, high houses, innumerable windows with venetian blinds, a dead silence, grass sprouting between the stones, imposing carriage archways right and left, immense double doors standing ponderously ajar. I slipped through one of these cracks, went up a swept and ungarnished staircase, as arid as a desert, and opened the first door I came to. Two women, one fat and the other slim, sat on straw-bottomed chairs, knitting black wool. The slim one got up and walked straight at me--still knitting with down-cast eyes--and only just as I began to think of getting out of her way, as you would for a somnambulist, stood still, and looked up. Her dress was as plain as an umbrella-cover, and she turned round without a word and preceded me into a waiting-room. I gave my name, and looked about. Deal table in the middle, plain chairs all round the walls, on one end a large shining map, marked with all the colors of a rainbow. There was a vast amount of red--good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there, a deuce of a lot of blue, a little green, smears of orange, and, on the East Coast, a purple patch, to show where the jolly pioneers of progress drink the jolly lager-beer. However, I wasn't going into any of these. I was going into the yellow. Dead in the center. And the river was there--fascinating--deadly--like a snake. Ough! A door opened, a white-haired secretarial head, but wearing a compassionate expression, appeared, and a skinny forefinger beckoned me into the sanctuary. Its light was dim, and a heavy writing-desk squatted in the middle. From behind that structure came out an impression of pale plumpness in a frock-coat. The great man himself.

He was five feet six, I should judge, and had his grip on the handle-end of ever so many millions. He shook hands, I fancy, murmured vaguely, was satisfied with my French. Bon voyage.» In about forty-five seconds I found myself again in the waiting-room with the compassionate secretary, who, full of desolation and sympathy, made me sign some document. I believe I undertook amongst other things not to disclose any trade secrets. Well, I am not going to.» I began to feel slightly uneasy. You know I am not used to such ceremonies, and there was something ominous in the atmosphere. It was just as though I had been let into some conspiracy--I don't know--something not quite right; and I was glad to get out. In the outer room the two women knitted black wool feverishly. People were arri-



Porteurs d'ivoire,  
vers 1898

Photo Herzekiah André Shanu  
Collection Africa Museum



Commissionnaire belge  
et ses porteurs,  
vers 1898  
Expédition d'achat.

Photo Herzekiah André Shanu  
Collection Africa Museum

**Fleuve Congo,**  
vers 1898  
A hauteur de Liranga, à la confluence  
avec la rivière Ubangui.

*Photo Herzekiah André Shanu*  
*Collection Africa Museum*

**Masque Pendé,**  
vers 1898  
Chaque masque correspond à un rituel  
spécifique et met en scène une catégorie  
sociale précise (le chef, le devin,  
l'ensorcelé, la prostituée, le colon...)

*Bois dur, polychrome, raphia, coquillages,  
graines, agrafes et clous.*

*Photo Herzekiah André Shanu*  
*Collection Africa Museum*



**Pélican**  
Cosmopolites à l'exception des hautes  
latitudes, les pélicans fréquentent les  
étendues d'eau libre, à la fois sur les côtes  
et à l'intérieur des terres, depuis les régions  
tropicales jusqu'aux zones tempérées  
chaudes.

*Photo Anonyme*  
*Collection Africa Museum*

**Peuple Nande,**  
vers 1899

Les Nande sont une population bantoue d'Afrique centrale établie dans l'est de la République démocratique du Congo dans les territoires de Beni et Lubero, dans la province du Nord-Kivu, également en Ouganda où ils sont appelés Konjo.

*Photo Herzekiah André Shanu  
Collection Africa Museum*



**Fusil Martini-Henry,**  
vers 1898

Sans expérience coloniale, les belges se sont systématiquement inspirés des anglais auprès desquels ils se sont entièrement équipés.



**Navire de charge,**  
vers 1898

Le *Peace*, en service à Léopoldville à partir de 1883.

*Photo Herzekiah André Shanu  
Collection Africa Museum*



ving, and the younger one was walking back and forth introducing them. The old one sat on her chair. Her flat cloth slippers were propped up on a foot-warmer, and a cat reposed on her lap. She wore a starched white affair on her head, had a wart on one cheek, and silver-rimmed spectacles-hung on the tip of her nose. She glanced at me above the glasses. The swift and indifferent placidity of that look troubled me. Two youths with foolish and cheery countenances were being piloted over, and she threw at them the same quick glance of unconcerned wisdom. She seemed to know all about them and about me too. A eerie feeling came over me. She seemed uncanny and fateful. Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. Ave! Old knitter of black wool. Morituri te salutant. Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again--not half, by a long way.» There was yet a visit to the doctor. 'A simple formality,' assured me the secretary, with an air of taking an immense part in all my sorrows. Accordingly a young chap wearing his hat over the left eyebrow, some clerk I suppose,--there must have been clerks in the business, though the house was as still as a house in a city of the dead,--came from somewhere up-stairs, and led me forth. He was shabby and careless, with ink-stain on the sleeves of his jacket, and his cravat was large and billowy, under a chin shaped like the toe of an old boot. It was a little too early for the doctor, so I proposed a drink, and thereupon he developed a vein of joviality. As we sat over our vermouths he glorified the Company's business, and by-and-by I expressed casually my surprise at him not going out there. He became very cool and collected all at once. 'I am not such a fool as I look, quoth Plato to his disciples,' he said sententiously, emptied his glass with great resolution, and we rose.» The old doctor felt my pulse, evidently thinking of something else the while. 'Good, good for there,' he mumbled, and then with a certain eagerness asked me whether I would let him measure my head. Rather surprised, I said Yes, when he produced a thing like calipers and got the dimensions back and front and every way, taking notes carefully. He was an unshaven little man in a threadbare coat like a gaberdine, with his feet in slippers, and I thought him a harmless fool. 'I always ask leave, in the interests of science, to measure the crania of those going out there,' he said. 'And when they come back too?' I asked. «Oh, I never see them,' he remarked; 'and, moreover, the changes take place inside, you know.' He smiled, as if at some quiet joke. 'So you are going out there. Famous. Interesting too.' He gave me a searching glance, and made another note. 'Ever any madness in your family?' he asked, in a matter-of-fact tone. I felt very annoyed. 'Is

that question in the interests of science too?' 'It would be,' he said, without taking notice of my irritation, 'interest-ing for science to watch the mental changes of individuals, on the spot, but . . .' 'Are you an alienist?' I interrupted. 'Every doctor should be--a little,' answered that original, imperturbably. 'I have a little theory which you Messieurs who go out there must help me to prove. This is my share in the advantages my country shall reap from the possession of such a magnificent dependency. The mere wealth I leave to others. Pardon my questions, but you are the first Englishman coming under my observation. . . .' I hastened to assure him I was not in the least typical. 'If I were,' said I, 'I wouldn't be talking like this with you.' 'What you say is rather profound, and probably erroneous,' he said, with a laugh. 'Avoid irritation more than exposure to the sun. Adieu. How do you English say, eh? Good-by. Ah! Good-by. Adieu. In the tropics one must before everything keep calm.' . . . He lifted a warning forefinger. . . 'Du calme, du calme. Adieu.'

«One thing more remained to do--say good-by to my excellent aunt. I found her triumphant. I had a cup of tea--the last decent cup of tea for many days--and in a room that most soothingly looked just as you would expect a lady's drawing-room to look, we had along quiet chat by the fire-side. In the course of these confidences it became quite plain to me I had been represented to the wife of the high dignitary, and goodness knows to how many more people besides, as an exceptional and gifted creature--a piece of good fortune for the Company--a man you don't get hold of every day. Good heavens! and I was going to take charge of a two-penny-half-penny river-steamboat with a penny whistle attached! It appeared, however, I was also one of the Workers, with a capital--you know. Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle. There had been a lot of such rot let loose in print and talk just about that time, and the excellent woman, living right in the rush of all that humbug, got carried off her feet. 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.» 'You forget, dear Charlie, that the laborer is worthy of his hire,' she said, brightly. It's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset. Some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with ever since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over.» After this I got embraced, told to wear flannel, besure to write often, and so on--and I left. In the street--I don't know why--a queer fee-



**Porteurs,**  
vers 1898

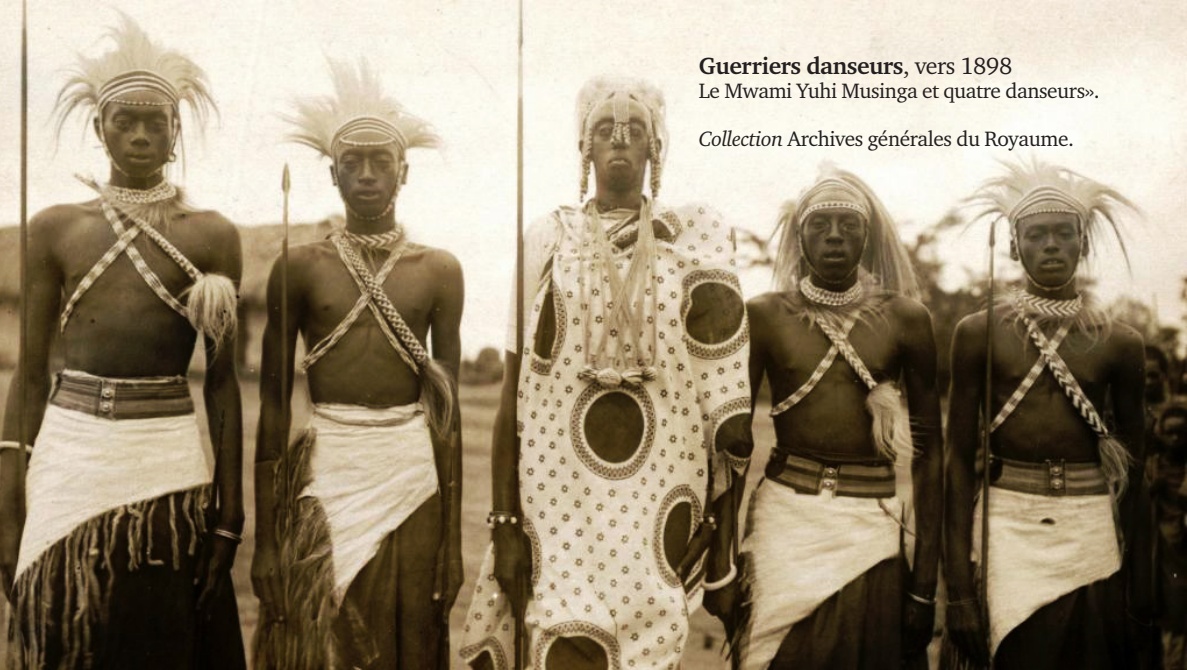
La culture de l'hévéa, qui permet de produire le caoutchouc naturel, est en plein essor notamment en Afrique. Le secteur des pneumatiques représente le principal débouché de l'industrie du caoutchouc (environ 70 %).

Photo Herzekiah André Shanu  
Collection Africa Museum



**Visite de plantations par des émissaires du gouvernement belge,** vers 1898

Photo Herzekiah André Shanu  
Collection Africa Museum



**Guerriers danseurs, vers 1898**  
Le Mwami Yuhi Musinga et quatre danseurs».

*Collection Archives générales du Royaume.*



**Maison de colons, vers 1898**

L'entreprise coloniale belge au Congo, appuyée par les trois acteurs que sont l'Église, l'État et les grandes entreprises, marque toujours le territoire de la RDC, dont singulièrement sa capitale Kinshasa, en particulier à travers l'architecture coloniale et les paysages urbains.

*Collection Archives générales du Royaume.*

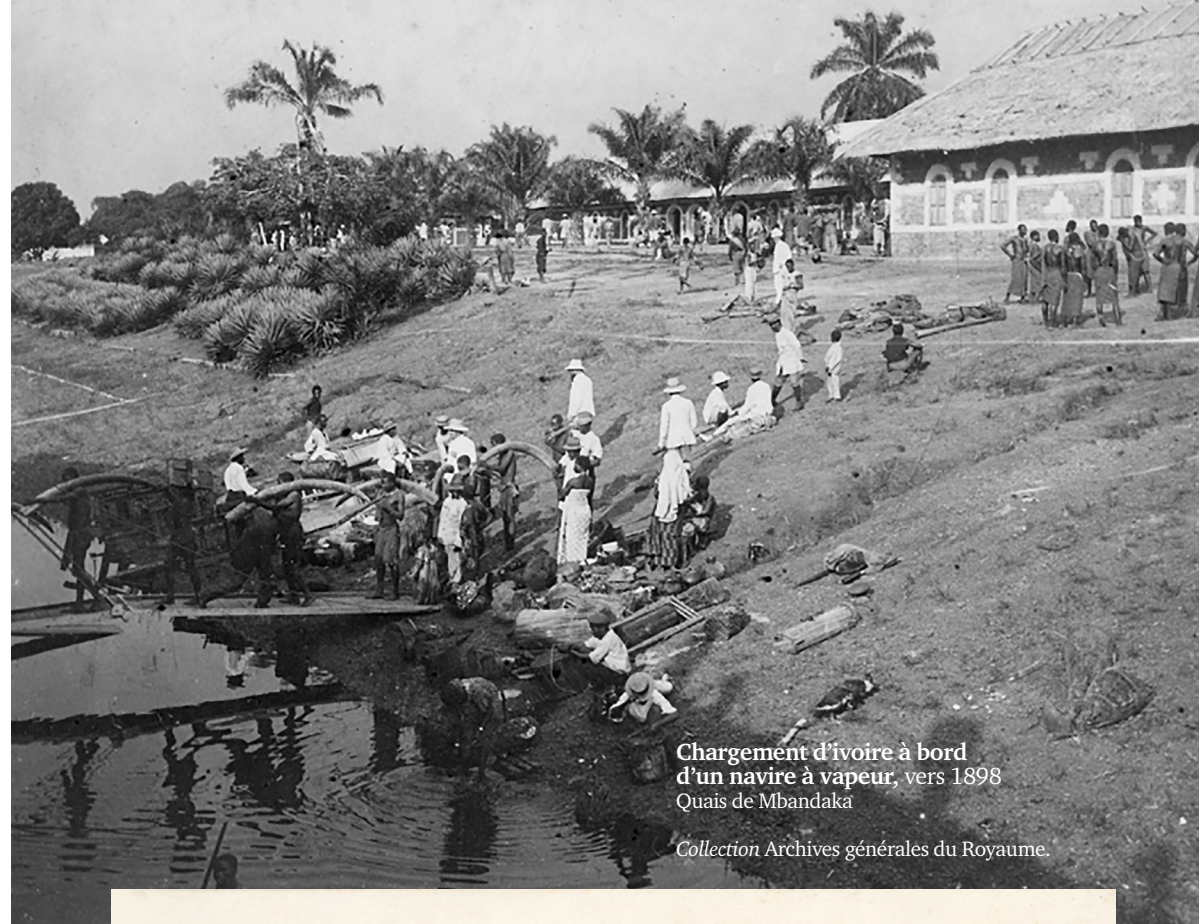
AU CŒUR DES TÉNÉBRES

ling came to me that I was an impostor. Odd thing that I, who used to clear out for any part of the world at twenty-four hours' notice, with less thought than most men give to the crossing of a street, had a moment--I won't say of hesitation, but of startled pause, before this commonplace affair. The best way I can explain it to you is by saying that, for a second or two, I felt as though, instead of going to the center of a continent, I were about to set off for the center of the earth.» I left in a French steamer, and she called in every blamed port they have out there, for, as far as I could see, the sole purpose of landing soldiers and custom-house officers. I watched the coast. Watching a coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma. There it is before you--smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering, Come and find out. This one was almost featureless, as if still in the making, with an aspect of monotonous grimness. The edge of a colossal jungle, so dark-green as to be almost black, fringed with white surf, ran straight, like a ruled line, far, far away along a blue sea whose glitter was blurred by a creeping mist. The sun was fierce, the land seemed to glisten and drip with steam. Here and there grayish-whitish specks showed up, clustered inside the white surf, with a flag flying above them perhaps. Settlements some centuries old, and still no bigger than pin-heads on the untouched expanse of their background. We pounded along, stopped, landed soldiers; went on, landed custom-house clerks to levy toll in what looked like a God-for-saken wilderness, with a tin shed and a flag-pole lost in it; landed more soldiers--to take care of the custom-house clerks, presumably. Some, I heard, got drowned in the surf; but whether they did or not, nobody seemed particularly to care. They were just flung out there, and on we went. Every day the coast looked the same, as though we had not moved; but we passed various places--trading places--with names like Gran' Bassam, Little Popo, names that seemed to belong to some sordid farce acted in front of a sinister backcloth. The idleness of a passenger, my isolation amongst all these men with whom I had no point of contact, the oily and languid sea, the uniform somberness of the coast, seemed to keep me away from the truth of things, within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion. The voice of the surf heard now and then was a positive pleasure, like the speech of a brother. It was something natural, that had its reason, that had a meaning. Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening.

They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks--these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at. For a time I would feel I belonged still to a world of straightforward facts;

but the feeling would not last long. Something would turn up to scare it away. Once, I remember, we came upon a man-of-war anchored off the coast. There wasn't even a shed there, and she was shelling the bush. It appears the French had one of their wars going on thereabouts. Her ensign dropped limp like a rag; the muzzles of the long eight-inch guns stuck out all over the low hull; the greasy, slimy swell swung her up lazily and let her down, swaying her thin masts. In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the eight-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech--and nothing happened. Nothing could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight; and it was not dissipated by somebody on board assuring me earnestly there was a camp of natives--he called them enemies!--hidden out of sight somewhere.»

We gave her her letters (I heard the men in that lonely ship were dying of fever at the rate of three a day) and went on. We called at some more places with farcical names, where the merry dance of death and trade goes on in a still and earthy atmosphere as of an overheated catacomb; all along the formless coast bordered by dangerous surf, as if Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders; in and out of rivers, streams of death in life, whose banks were rotting into mud, whose waters, thickened into slime, invaded the contorted man-groves, that seemed to writhe at us in the extremity of an impotent despair. Nowhere did we stop long enough to get a particularized impression, but the general sense of vague and oppressive wonder grew upon me. It was like a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares.» It was upward of thirty days before I saw the mouth of the big river. We anchored off the seat of the government. But my work would not begin till some two hundred miles farther on. So as soon as I could I made a start for a place thirty miles higher up.» I had my passage on a little sea-going steamer. Her captain was a Swede, and knowing me for a seaman, invited me on the bridge. He was a young man, lean, fair, and morose, with lanky hair and a shuffling gait. As we left the miserable little wharf, he tossed his head contemptuously at the shore. 'Been living there?' he asked. I said, 'Yes.' 'Fine lot these government chaps--are they not?' he went on, speaking English with great precision and considerable bitterness. 'It is funny what some people will do for a few francs a month. I wonder what becomes of that kind when it goes up country?' I said to him I expected to see that soon. 'So-o-o!' he exclaimed. He shuffled athwart, keeping one eye ahead vigilantly. 'Don't be too sure,' he continued. 'The other day I took



Chargement d'ivoire à bord d'un navire à vapeur, vers 1898  
Quais de Mbandaka

Collection Archives générales du Royaume.



LÉOPOLDVILLE. - Vapeurs des Huileries du Congo Belge

Carte postale légendée, vers 1899

Collection MusAfrica, Namur.