

Also by Peter Høeg in English translation

THE HISTORY OF DANISH DREAMS
MISS SMILLA'S FEELING FOR SNOW
BORDERLINERS
THE WOMAN AND THE APE

Peter Høeg

TALES OF THE NIGHT

*Translated from the Danish
by Barbara Haveland*



THE HARVILL PRESS
LONDON



JOURNEY INTO A DARK HEART

A book is a deed . . . the writing of it is an enterprise as much as the conquest of a colony. JOSEPH CONRAD in *Last Essays*

Mathematics is the shadow of the real world projected on to the screen of the intellect. ATTRIBUTED TO ARCHIMEDES

On March 18th 1929 a young Dane, David Rehn, was in attendance when the railway line from Cabinda, near the mouth of the Congo, to Katanga in Central Africa was dedicated to integrity.

Also present were the King and Queen of Belgium, Prime Minister Smuts of the Union of South Africa and Lord Delamere of Kenya, all of whom made speeches; their words, like champagne, making David's blood sing. Later, at the dinner in the governor's palace, he mingled with black servants and white guests, deliciously giddy without having touched a drop of alcohol. Although he could not remember with any certainty who had said what he would never forget their words: had it not been the King himself who, pointing, had said, "See, ladies and gentlemen, the ocean is as blue as the Aegean, and with the bright sun hanging above us and soft sea breezes wafting around us surely it is quite evident that we are in the presence of Ancient Greece. The Greeks, too, sailed along the African coastline; they were the first to colonize this continent and have we not, in truth, fulfilled the ideals to which the ancients aspired: integrity of thought, integrity in the wielding of power, integrity in trade and commerce was their goal, in the pursuit of which no sacrifice was

deemed too great. And in dedicating this railway, possibly the longest in Africa, do not our thoughts turn to the Colossus of Rhodes, is it not the temple of Artemis at Ephesus, is it not the Seven Wonders of the World that spring to mind and is this railway not the eighth? Are not these two shining rails of steel the pure lines of thought and commerce which, as the arteries of civilization, shall carry clean, oxygenated blood three thousand kilometres through the jungle, deep into the heart of the dark continent?"

Never in his life had David found himself in such close proximity to heads of state and the aristocracy of international finance and it seemed to him that their enthusiasm and forthrightness on this day helped him to see clearly for the first time in a long, long while.

One year earlier a sudden, nauseating instance of life's unpredictability had thrown him off the track he had been following since childhood and cast him out into a wilderness of uncertainty. Influential and well-meaning relatives had tried to set him back on the right path by placing him with a trading company – a global concern of Danish origin – where they had procured for him the only guaranteed key to upward mobility in this life, a good, secure position, and where one of the company's directors had promised to act as his guide. At the company's head office in Copenhagen David had endeavoured to work his way back to that vantage point from which the world acquires some semblance of coherence and order, but so far all he had gained was the sympathy of his fellow men. People liked David for his pleasant manners, his diligence, his open and trusting face and his physical gaucheness, and for something else which they could not quite put their fingers on. Even the company director had not been able fully to explain his motives for suggesting that David accompany him to the Belgian Congo for the dedication of the Katanga railway, in which the company had a certain interest.

Until a year previously and for as long as he could remember

David had been a mathematician. Not the sort who studies this discipline because he believes he is quicker on the uptake in that field than in any other, nor because one must make a career of something, nor out of curiosity. No, he became a mathematician out of a deep, burning passion for that crystal-clear, purifying algebraic science from which all earthly uncertainty has been distilled. By the time he moved up to the middle school he had a better understanding of infinitesimal calculus than any of his teachers and when, at the age of eighteen, he was interviewed about an article on Abelian groups he had had published in a German journal, he explained – blushing because the immediacy of the female journalist disturbed his concentration – that “cool mathematical reasoning is my greatest joy”.

Algebra seemed to offer an obvious, exhilarating and in every respect satisfying career for David until, while studying at the University of Vienna, he met a boy a couple of years his junior, a boy who ran into David in a fog of abstraction and optimism. The boy's name was Kurt Gödel. He was a sickly individual with a thirst for knowledge that took nothing for granted and had earned him the nickname “Herr Warum”. When they met he was pursuing a line of thought which would result just a few years later in a proposition destined to shake the world of mathematics to its very foundations and even though it had not as yet been perfected it shook David to *his* on the day, sitting in a café, that the boy made him privy to his cogently formulated doubts. Afterwards, David walked the streets of Vienna in a state of shock, knowing full well that after what he had heard that day nothing would ever be the same again. He had long since also learned to use mathematics as both medicine and stimulant. Whenever he felt down-hearted he could console himself with the scintillating logic of Bertrand Russell, if he were feeling cocky he would read one of the unsuccessful attempts at a geometric trisectioning of the angle and when his mind was in a turmoil he found

tranquillity and stringency in Euclid's *Elements*. But on this particular day, in seeking some salve for his despair, he slipped up.

On his desk lay a beautifully bound facsimile of the notes of the French mathematician Galois and, as he had done so often before, David read the young man's hastily scrawled résumé of his momentous work on the solving of irreducible equations and of his burning faith in the future. At the end Galois – then twenty-one years of age – had written: "I have run out of time. I am off to fight a duel." Then he had risen from his papers and gone out to his death. And suddenly it occurred to David that he was reading of his own undoing.

He left Vienna that same evening, firmly resolved never again to have anything to do with mathematics, and those who, later, laughed behind his back at his despair were people who had never understood that so all-embracing is love that to a person in love the very nature of life may be revealed in the smallest details and the verity of life stand or fall on the minutest grain of truth, even that contained within a mathematical proof.

In order, nevertheless, to survive, David had withdrawn into a state of assiduous insensibility, out of which he was jolted only upon encountering the tropics. At first he felt that he had merely been awakened to fresh and unbearable confusion – their ship, the *Earnest*, one of the company's own passenger and cargo ships, having sailed, a fortnight after setting out, into a heat that rose up into the air like an invisible wall. Then came landfall in Africa and with it the blazing sun over David's head, unfamiliar vegetables and spices to assail his digestive system and dark, inscrutable faces all around him to weigh on his mind. It took a month for his initial bewilderment to give way to a feeling, if not of security, then at least of stability and the dedication of the railway brought him the first joyful sense of seeing with a clarity he had never thought to experience again.

On the day itself an unforeseen coolness in the air had eased the almost palpable pressure; the thoughts of all the people gathered outside the governor's palace ascended freely into the blue sky. The sea breeze carried the voices of the speechmakers to their audience and David saw that these speakers were happy; that, on this day, these sovereigns and statesmen of the civilized world blushed with pleasure, their hands shook with profound, inner emotion, their eyes shone and their voices faltered. To David it seemed obvious and fitting that the future of the world should rest in the hands of these particular men and for the first time he realized that with leaders such as these ordinary people need have no grasp of politics; with leaders such as these, he thought, we might never need to concern ourselves with politics at all, since not only are these men possessed of an insight deeper than the rest of us could ever hope to plumb, they can also – on a day such as this – render politics as lucid and transparent as the blue ocean out there beyond the breakers of Cabinda.

For David, absolute truth had always taken the form of numbers and this day had abounded in numbers. With reckless courage and sincerity the managing director of the railway, Sir Robert Wilson, had detailed the numerical aspects of its construction. "We have," he said, "set seven thousand men to lay two thousand seven hundred and seven kilometres of track through country where the temperature fluctuates between fourteen and one hundred and twenty degrees Fahrenheit. The sum of all its ups and downs amounts to two hundred thousand metres. The track is one metre wide and has cost two hundred and fifty thousand francs per kilometre – two hundred and seventy million seven hundred and fifty thousand francs in all. It follows the river Congo through Leopoldville to Llebo, then on to Bukama and the Katanga copper mines, where it joins the Benguela line from Angola, the Rhodesia-Katanga railway, and in a few years' time it will link up with Tanganyika's central railway network, thus

penetrating and opening up Africa from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic, from Cape Town to the Sahara.”

“Opening and penetrating,” thought David later, bewildered and blissful, and heard himself telling the wife of the Belgian colonial minister how the great Kronecker, one of those upon whom he had modelled his own life, had once said that “God created the natural numbers – the rest is the work of man”. “And what a work,” he declared rapturously to the minister’s lady.

For the occasion a number of partitioning walls in the palace had been removed to create a reception room running the entire length of the building and here, at a table that seemed to stretch into infinity, down the length of which a miniature model of the railway had been set up, a place had been set for every one of them. The dinner service was Crown Derby, the wine was Chambertin-Clos de Bèze and the saddle of venison tasted to David just like the red deer at home. For once the sudden tropical nightfall did not seem to him like an assault, for the chandeliers had been lit and only the white tropical suits, the sun-tanned men and the black servants in their livery and white gloves betrayed the fact that this was not Europe.

A powerful air of kinship pervaded that dinner. Each and every guest was filled with the sense of a tough job well done. Their limbs ached slightly, as though they personally had shovelled earth and hauled sleepers into place, and their concerted efforts had eradicated all differences in rank, everybody was forthright, everyone talking at the tops of their voices. The minister’s wife playfully teased David who, for his part, felt that their presence in such sterling company increased the worth of every single one of them, himself included. “Here,” he thought, “we all have our natural place and a part to play in the scheme of things, none of us need languish in a corner like some indefinable quantity.”

During the dessert a message was delivered to the banquet, a message which erased the last stiff traces of formality. At one

point the King of Belgium was called away and when, minutes later, he returned his face was so pale that no one had wit enough to get to their feet as he positioned himself behind his chair. He struck his glass and raised his voice slightly. “I have just received some good news,” he said, “from an English journalist who arrived here on the Sankuru steamer twenty minutes ago; a man who, as a guest of the Belgian government, is to represent the world’s press on the maiden run along our railway line tomorrow. He brings us word, ladies and gentlemen, that yesterday at Kamina a joint Belgian, British and Portugese force led by General Machado defeated the native rebel bands which have posed the greatest problem to construction work in recent years. The Ugandan rebel leader, Lueni, was killed in the fighting. His body is to be brought downriver to Cabinda.” The King clicked his heels together. “Ladies and gentlemen, a toast to our gallant armed forces!”

For a second not a breath stirred. Then everyone stood up and gravely raised their glasses, there being times when a happy event may be so overwhelming that it can only be digested gradually and in silence. To new arrivals like David the name Lueni had an exotic ring to it, as menacing as the dense jungle that surrounded the town. But to the permanent residents it constituted the essence of fear, it represented death as precipitate as cerebral malaria, it meant cut supply lines and hunger, steamships drifting downriver with no trace of their crew. A name from the innermost chamber of Africa’s murky hell.

Fleetingly and amid total silence, as in a vision they all saw the body, black as polished wood, laid out on a canvas stretcher. Then joy swelled like a river, the cry went up for champagne, the King lost his composure and hugged Sir Robert to his chest and tears could be seen glistening in the monarch’s eyes. Old Lord Delamere who, as everyone knew, had trekked across the Rift Valley from Mombasa with an oxcart and more than once had

fought, rifle in hand, for the lives of his wife and his children, sat slumped in his chair with his hands resting on the edge of the table, muttering, "Can it be, can it be?" A few voices broke into the Belgian national anthem, "La Brabanconne", people were slapping one another on the back and at one point David discovered to his consternation that he was holding the wife of the colonial minister by the hand. He gazed happily on the flushed faces, the glinting medals, the shimmering gowns and the servants' livery; he sensed a mood of unrestrained camaraderie flowing through the room buoyed up by these mighty feats of engineering and military prowess and with the lady's hand in his, suddenly sensitive to symbols, he realized that this was like a celebration in a barracks, a gay carnival behind which lay the most perfect form of justice.

Later, wanting to be alone for a moment, he went out into the garden. He felt that the tropics, like a young Negress, were laughing to him. Strange and enticing sounds and scents swirled around him, the gramophone music carried to his ears through the open doors – inside they were dancing to Strauss waltzes. With its white pillars the governor's palace looked for all the world like a floodlit Greek temple and above its ridgepole rose the constellation of Libra, that great, celestial square. "Perhaps," thought David, "as a sign not to give up where Galois did."

The following afternoon when, with the first ever train from Cabinda to Katanga, the railway was officially declared open; when the rejoicing of the previous day had been reinforced by the prospect of the journey; when the military band had played; when the King had shaken the travellers by the hand in farewell; when everyone's thoughts were quite plainly running with the railway tracks all the way up to the distant blue mountains, on the platform, unnoticed by anyone other than a handful of servants and stewards, in the grey area between the shade of the

platform canopy and the dazzling sunlight, there arose a moment's doubt. The previous day the colonial minister – carried away by the elated atmosphere and the news of the rebels' defeat – had announced that he too intended to make the trip. As regards this man, his wife had confided to David that for every new position of authority he had attained he had gained two pounds in weight, and once this colossal figure had eased his way into the leading Pullman, which was to have carried all of the invited guests, it became immediately apparent that the coach was full.

At that moment came the hiss of the train's pressure valves being checked and in the cloud of steam that enveloped the platform four remaining figures gravitated towards one another, as though springing straight out of the ground. While round about them arrangements were being made for yet another carriage to be coupled to the train they stared at one another, eye to eye. Over the past few days David's attention had been caught by a good number of faces but he was certain that he had never seen these three before. They appeared, standing there before him, to have crystallized around this distressing little breach in the otherwise faultless arrangements, so silent and strange that it seemed they would never make contact, that they shared nothing other than just this: that they were on the outside.

Directly opposite David stood a soldier, a short, stiff-necked, thickset and forbidding individual with a black eye-patch over one eye and a uniform bedecked with so many tokens of imperishable military glory that, thought David, one would have had a hard job finding room enough to scribble the tiniest *Quod erat demonstrandum* in pencil on that impossibly white dress uniform. David knew nothing of military matters but among the gleaming symbols he recognized the German eagle and he was struck by a vague sense of surprise at meeting this ruffled bird from the losing side here, among the representatives of those nations which had won the World War.

Out in the sunshine stood a slim black servant girl in a white dress. She carried a large leather suitcase belonging to the fourth and eldest member of the party, a ruddy-faced man with doleful eyes, a coarse and unhealthy-looking complexion and a flamboyant waxed moustache. He wore an expensive tweed suit, complete with waistcoat and stock, an outfit which seemed tantamount to suicide in the tropical heat.

Just when David could bear the silence no longer and had put out his hand, meaning to introduce himself, the party were shrouded in yet another cloud of steam. Solicitous hands took hold of David and his luggage and led him past the soldiers in the personnel carriers, past the goods wagons – which were, for the first time, to carry a goodly quantity of the boons of the Western world to the mines at Katanga and return bearing copper and gold – and up to and into the newly coupled Pullman. From the running board he watched their Majesties and the Belgian district commissioner waving them off while behind the station building the sun was setting so fast that it seemed to drop straight down on to the horizon. Through the carriage windows the soldiers saluted with fixed bayonets and, thought David, here we are driving into the heart of Africa bristling with rifles – like a hedgehog, a belligerent hedgehog on rails. In that selfsame instant he was consumed with embarrassment at his own unbridled imagination and at all of the people on the platform waving and shouting “Hurrah!”. Cheeks flaming, he lurched into the little cloakroom at his back.

Here he paused for a moment and straightened his light-coloured jacket. Then he opened the door into the carriage.

After a month in the tropics David believed himself to be more or less inured to the sudden shifts between darkness to light, to the violent contrasts which had, during the first few weeks, made his head ache. Even so, he remained in the doorway for one stunned moment trying to work out how it could possibly have

come about that he had stepped out of Africa and into the most extreme and yet classic example of European comfort. A thick, deep red Persian rug was spread on the floor, curtains of heavy cream silk covered the windows, some leather-upholstered chairs encircled a table, the walls were hung with paintings of cool oak forests, the ceiling was adorned with gilded stuccowork, at the far end of the room stood an open marble fireplace and the whole of this unlikely tableau was lit by two tall, slender oil lamps set on the table.

His two travelling companions were still on their feet, as though they had been waiting for him, and as he eyed the man in uniform and the gentleman in tweeds the word that occurred to David was “theatre”. “This is a stage set,” he thought, “that is why everything is juddering and swaying, we are being lowered from the flies on to the stage.”

Into the narrow void of doubt and irresponsibility which had opened up between them the man in tweeds now stepped, bowed stiffly, waited for a series of nervous twitches originating in his left shoulder to run across his face and away, then began to speak, courteously and with authority.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “allow me to introduce myself. I am a reporter. I had the honour yesterday of bringing His Majesty the news of our troops’ victory. So you see, I came this way only yesterday by river, a journey I made once before, many years ago. Bearing in mind my somewhat wider, relatively speaking, experience and the – how shall I put it – *responsabilité sociale* accorded by age, I therefore offer my services as your host.” He tapped two of the broad leather chairs lightly, David and the military man took their seats and the thought crossed David’s mind that this was no invitation but a command, and that beneath the old man’s politesse, from his first words of welcome, there had lurked something which David – if he had not known how well dressed and how respectable in every respect his host was –

might privately have considered calling lugubrious impudence.

Unasked, the girl settled herself on a stool in one corner where she remained quite motionless.

"I have been given to understand," continued the man who was now their host, "that yesterday this expedition was dedicated to integrity and that it is therefore the intention that it should be no ordinary railway journey at the end of which one is every bit as much a stranger to one's fellow passengers as at the outset. On the contrary, it is up to us to fulfil His Majesty's wish by making this an open and honest journey, and to this end it goes without saying that we must begin by making one another's acquaintance. My name is Joseph Korzeniowski but my friends, among whom I am sure by the end of our journey I will be able to number your good selves, call me Joseph K."

Just then a black waiter entered carrying a bottle of champagne in a large silver ice-bucket. Having placed this on the table he proceeded to light a fire in the grate. At that very moment a gentle shudder ran along the length of the train as the locomotive commenced its ascent towards the distant mountains and David found himself thinking that even here, on the equator, it could well be a cold night.

Then he realized that the others were waiting for him and he drew himself up to his full height. "My name is David Rehn," he said, "and I am a mathematician."

This last was a quite involuntary addition. He ought to have introduced himself as a secretary with the Danish delegation but had their host not said that they were all travelling into a night of integrity?

And Joseph K. was in fact now rubbing his hands together with satisfaction. "A mathematician," he said, "how fitting, how . . . symbolic, after all would you not say that mathematics is the sincerest of all disciplines, and the one which most closely approaches the concept of the universe?"

"Yes, indeed!" blurted David and, blushing but nonetheless with some pride, he added: "A great mathematician once said that when God created Heaven and Earth and separated light from dark and water from land and above from below he showed himself to be a mathematician, since such actions presuppose a knowledge of binary opposites. So, to the question of what was there in the beginning we can reply: 'In the beginning was mathematics'."

"What a brilliant aphorism," said Joseph K., and attempted to open the champagne. In this he was unsuccessful and David noted that his right wrist was badly swollen. The soldier then took the bottle from him and in those expert and powerful hands the cork slid out with only the faintest whisper of carbonic acid, then – with the napkin held between the warmth of his hands and the cold bottle – he poured the champagne, leaned back in his chair and said, in a thick German accent: "I am von Lettow. General Paul von Lettow Voerbeck."

Even to David, who prided himself somewhat on his ignorance of that part of the world not featured in mathematical journals, this name as it was uttered seemed to fill the air with all the weight of an equestrian statue suddenly materializing in the room. In the eyes of Europe at that time General von Lettow Voerbeck represented the very quintessence of courage, he was a hero and as far as that fact was concerned it made not the slightest difference that he had fought on the losing, German, side. On the contrary, in East Africa during the Great War von Lettow Voerbeck had fought with all the courage of a lion, the wisdom of an elephant and the venom of a snake for the legitimate German colonies against a devastatingly superior force. Among those English and Indians who had been shipped to the African continent to take part in the European war he had become a legend on whom they never laid eyes but whose presence they could always sense. With the white troops and black "askaris" under his command he had

developed and refined his own hit-and-run strategy, a form of guerrilla warfare that put off the inevitable confrontation and the inevitable defeat, thus earning him the same nickname as the wily Roman consul Quintus Fabius Maximus: "The Procrastinator". On Germany's surrender, having received orders from Berlin to down arms at Kasama, he returned home to a hero's welcome and a number of honorary military and political posts all of which carried with them a fine though never overstated air of martyrdom together with the implication that, had General von Lettow Voerbeck not received orders to capitulate, somewhere along the banks of Lake Tanganyika he would be fighting yet.

And here was this giant, of whom everyone had heard but whom so few had seen, sitting in the capacious leather armchair like some comfortably ensconced phantom from the jungle.

"General," said Joseph K., spreading his hands palms upward in a gesture of impotence, "I do not know what to say. The god of war's chosen one here in our midst! I must tell you, General, sir – having now learned who you are – that I take the liberty of feeling I already know you, since I have of course read your *Memoirs of East Africa* and your unforgettable *Rallying Cry to the German People*, in which you remind us all that we must keep an iron grip on our colonies and never let them go. Mr Rehn, come and stand beside me so that we two, as representatives of both the victorious and the more . . . circumspect powers, may drink a toast to this gallant son of Germany and of Europe, the Cunctator of German East Africa," and with one swift and practised flick of his unswollen left wrist Joseph K. drained his glass, then refilled it.

"General," he said, after a moment's thought, "you too are, of course, an apostle of the truth. In your *Rallying Cry*, I remember quite clearly, you also described how it was in fact the war which prompted Africa to reveal its true face. 'The humane war', as you so elegantly put it, and I hope that during this night of integrity

you will elaborate upon that interesting viewpoint to enable the two of us here to defend it against the evil – and mainly Bolshevik – voices throughout Europe which rail against war, claiming that no matter where or when it occurs it is invariably inhumane."

The general's one good eye had been fixed unwaveringly on the speaker. Now, without the powerful features, which put David in mind of heavy cast-iron mouldings, losing any of their concentration, he lifted his eye-patch away from his face and, using a snowy-white handkerchief, dabbed his eye socket with the same leisurely thoroughness with which he had uncorked the champagne.

"The war," he then said, calmly, "has proved the potential within our colonies for the founding of a new Germany. It has revealed that Africa possesses undreamed-of resources, that this continent represents the perfect territory for the coming German expansion."

"As a matter of fact," said Joseph K., smiling affably, "I have always thought of you as Paul, Our Lord's commander-in-chief, preaching the gospel on his missionary travels. Have you ever wondered whether you are preaching to heathens who listen or to Jews who turn their backs on the truth?"

"In my life," said the general guardedly, "I have never found much time for Bible reading."

"How wise," Joseph K. answered warmly. "The practical side of life ought always to go hand in hand with the spiritual side. Was it not your colleague, Cromwell, who said: 'Trust in God, lads, but keep your tinder dry?'"

Joseph K. turned to David. "And you, my young friend," he said, "while we are on the subject of Christian names and their symbolism, you must of course be the boy David, newly anointed, unaware that the world awaits him, so meanwhile he tends . . ." – and here the speaker judiciously pondered his metaphors – "tends his mathematical sheep."

As he said this, David was suddenly convinced that their host's bluff courtesy was a front for something else, something sinister. He leaned towards him.

"And who might you be?" he asked Joseph K.

"I," replied the old man, and his face beamed with triumph, "I am Joseph, cast out by his brothers among men, thrown into a well out of which he will nonetheless manage to drag himself. I am, of course, Joseph the interpreter of dreams and no one has ever understood the dream of Africa as well as I."

Speaking of himself all irony vanished from his voice to be replaced by a note of tremendous pride. Cloaked in this he stood up and stepped into the centre of the room, where the lamps on the table lit his pallid face from beneath and cast his shadow up behind him as though he had summoned a witness to testify to his stature.

Prior to this David had been, in all ways, an amiable soul. Indeed it is likely that if one had asked those who knew him the majority would have said there was no other side to his character, that this unreserved friendliness said all there was to say about David Rehn.

In which case those same people were forgetting his desire for truth. All those who are searching for something must learn to separate what is false from what is true and must therefore be just as familiar with downright lies as with reason. So now, when David spoke to the old man, his polite question masked a tremor of something that was at one and the same time curious, provocative and impertinent.

"Then perhaps," he said, "you can explain to me why in Europe pictures of Africa always seem so inaccessible. It seems to me that those pictures of Africa which find their way to us always show the dark fringes of a forest, from which sudden death strikes in the form of a wild animal or a poisoned dart. And it has crossed my mind that this might not be anything

like the whole truth. One would expect a theory to be free of contradiction, exhaustive and as simple as possible. As far as I can see, this cannot be said of the 'forest-fringe' theory."

The smile left Joseph K.'s face and when he answered his voice was quiet and cold.

"The dream of which you speak was created by me," he said, "and it is dark because Africa is dark."

He gave one sharp tug on a cord, the pale curtains slid back and there on the other side of the window was the tropical night, black and impenetrable.

"Out there," said Joseph K., "lies Africa, out there the dark lies waiting to . . . tear every one of us to shreds. Out there is the river Congo, a mighty serpent, coiled up with its head in the sea and its body in a fever-ridden hell. And if it seems reasonable to dedicate this journey to integrity that is only because there are no clear-cut lines out there. Out there, there is nothing but utter oblivion. Ah, yes, in encountering this blackness, certain stripes are scored into our souls and out of these wounds, for some of us, wells an awareness of our true selves and of the fact that loneliness is, as it were, built in to life, that we live as we dream – which is to say, quite alone."

Even though he had, with this last sentence, regained control of his voice, the carriage was now filled with a hypersensitive silence, such as comes in the wake of any sudden exposé.

Without warning, David leaned forward and blew out the oil lamps. At first the carriage was plunged into pitch darkness. Then, out of the gloom, the moonlit landscape outside emerged, glittering whitely, as if the treetops were covered with an endless carpet of snow.

"The trouble with the light of learning," said David quietly, "is that we can end up believing both the world and ourselves to be already charted when in fact we have been blinded by the light source itself, with the result that our surroundings seem dark and

unfathomable while our own noses are brilliantly illuminated. Anyone who travels through Africa in a brightly lit railway carriage is bound, on his return home, to tell everyone that Africa is a lowering forest fringe."

They sat for a while in silence. In the moonlight streaming in from outside the faces of the general and Joseph K. were pale and smooth, of the servant girl only her dress was visible, the light did not penetrate to her dark face. Then Joseph K. struck a match and lit the lamps on the table. In the glow his features seemed at first set and hard, then they relaxed.

"You," he said, as if noting with interest some delightful surprise, "are an . . . intelligent young man. And I am sure that you are also, to some extent . . . on the track of the truth. But what you say would not sound too . . . good to European ears, would it, it lacks – am I not right, General – any real . . . punch."

"I am not interested in punch," said David, with a new dryness in his voice. "As a mathematician, as a logician, I am only interested in the truth."

Joseph K. got slowly to his feet and walked over to the window, and for a moment he stood there looking into the black glass surface in which the carriage, the lamps and the general's medals showed up as duplicated, glittering, golden reflections. Then he drew the curtains and turned to face the table.

"The truth is an excellent thing," he said softly, "an excellent thing. I take some interest in it myself, as it happens. There is just one thing wrong with it and that is that it is so . . . bloody poorly paid! And I know what I am talking about since, as yet another contribution towards our pool of integrity, I will let you into a secret. I am here not so much in my capacity as a journalist but because I am a writer, and a famous one at that. I have had a long and full life in which to familiarize myself with the difference between reality and fantasy and for you, Professor," said he, addressing David, "I am prepared to lift the lid on what I have

gleaned from experience – namely that for those of us who, like the Field Marshal here and myself, earn our living as travellers, there is no bloody way we could survive on the truth."

For a moment the general just sat there, saying nothing, then he leaned towards Joseph K.

"You consider yourself then," he said, "to be a man without honour."

The writer poured the last of the champagne into his glass and downed it with relish. Then he smiled at the general.

"Even at my great age," he said, "life never ceases to amaze me. To think that I should be lectured on pride by a man who won his gongs" – pointing at the decorated chest in front of him – "for beating a retreat."

Von Lettow's eye never left his antagonist's face. "I have always believed," he said, "that I could serve my country better by going on fighting on my knees than by dying on my feet."

"And I," replied Joseph K., "as a human being and a writer, prefer to stand with both feet firmly planted on the bottom rather than flounder about, out of my depth, with my arse in the air. As an old sailor I can tell you a thing or two about the sweetness of knowing one cannot sink any lower. I once wrote . . ." he said, throwing himself back in his chair in exasperation, ". . . I tell you, gentlemen, I once wrote a book about a trip I made over the very stretch of country through which we are now travelling. I put my heart and soul into that book, it was a valid expression of myself as a person and consequently it quite naturally contained both lies and truth. For the truth the public threatened to stew me with onions and sweet potatoes while, for the lies, they were prepared to fête me. Ever since then I have taken great care to emphasize that my books are works of fiction. That way I can always refute the truth by saying that it is all make-believe and, with the lies, claim that they have a solid foundation in reality. But, General, I am in fact standing upright on the bottom,

I would not sink so low as to call my lies 'memoirs' or 'rallying cries'."

Even when, as now, the general grabbed hold of the old man by the lapels, hauled him out of the chair and pulled him to his chest, his face remained expressionless and his voice soft. "What lies?" he asked.

Displaying not the slightest hint of fear Joseph K. supported himself on the table, to allow some breathing space in the iron grip from which he hung. "The actual basis of your . . . writings, Field Marshal, is formed not by the modest and meticulous . . . Teutonic accounts of how you, by virtue of your beliefs, have conquered countries, administered justice, gagged the lion, quenched the power of fire, evaded the sword point and emerged a war hero. No, most telling of all is your assertion that the niggers love us, that – proudly, happily and with a song in their hearts – they fought against us and their own kind and died like flies fighting our, and more especially Germany's, glorious World War, when the truth is that they walked into that war on the point of a German bayonet with their heads in a cloud of promises and religious hot air. In your history of the willing and eager black men and their voluntary colonial war you, General, have exposed yourself as the biggest liar of us all."

For a split second David was afraid that von Lettow was about to break the old man's neck, sensing as he did the blind rage beneath the soldier's outward semblance of self-control. But the general merely looked Joseph K. straight in the eye. Then he released the old man, allowing him to drop back into his chair.

"A military mask may be necessary," said von Lettow – and David detected a new note in his voice, the timbre of age-old weariness, "if one is to arrive at a deeper political truth."

"And your uniform, General?" Joseph K. persisted, gloating with triumph, "That imposing piece of . . . *Weihnachtsbaum* frippery. Here, among the subjects of the very nations that dealt

Germany the final blow, rubbing shoulders with people who will only tolerate a German uniform as long as it is behind bars, does that also serve as a mask of sorts? I believe you owe our young friend here, our . . . mathematical ewe lamb, some kind of explanation for this."

At first it seemed that von Lettow would never answer, as if he had withdrawn from the company in disgust and hidden himself in some inner foxhole. Then, slowly, as though reading aloud from an apologia which he had had ready prepared, he said: "A number of German banks have a stake in this railway. And the Belgians requested my presence here. I have been accorded diplomatic immunity and I wear my uniform because I was asked to do so. All of the formalities are thus observed."

Joseph K. stared straight ahead with something resembling ecstasy in his eyes. "How wonderfully cunning," he said. "To reassure the shareholders, obviously. The soothing presence of the old lion. And to Hell with the fact that it has no troops, no authority, no teeth, just so long as it can roar and remind everyone of the Maasai massacred at Mara, the Chinks butchered in China – you have also been to China, haven't you, General? – of the Somalis at Dar es Salaam, of all those bodies in reassuring colours. Gentlemen, I give you integrity. Boy, more champagne!"

A fresh bottle was brought in. Brought in as promptly and silently as one would expect, with only David noticing that the waiter who brought it was not the same one as before and that he wore a uniform which was far, far too small for him. And that he carried the bottle cork downwards.

The general opened the bottle and poured the wine and in the silence that then ensued David looked at the girl. His eyes met hers and he realized that she had been watching them all this time. And, too, he had the strange feeling that she, who could have understood nothing, had been taking in everything that had been said and done in the room and that everything he had said

had actually been aimed at her – or at any rate said with her in mind. Then, for the first time in his life, it occurred to David that even when talking to other men or to a lecture hall or to himself or into thin air he had perhaps always, in some corner of his consciousness, had an unseen woman in mind.

The atmosphere in the railway carriage had grown hostile but even in that hostility there lay a strange sense of all being in the same boat, as though these three men had something else, something as yet undisclosed, in common – over and above this journey. It was Joseph K., the writer, who put this air of intimacy into words.

“We are now,” he said, “in the process of complying with His Majesty’s request, insofar as we have reached a new and enlightened position, thereby confirming what I myself said a lifetime ago, namely that this expedition into the heart of darkness may also be a journey into the light. Now, it has just been revealed that I am not some unknown journalist with a passion for the truth but a famous writer and an expert . . . editor. And von Lettow Voerbeck turns out to be, not an invincible Teuton, but a prisoner of war enjoying diplomatic immunity, a kind of military sweetener for the shareholders. And our young David has proved not to be a blank page with a few algebraic curlicues in the topmost corner but a young and questing warrior who has no fear of the Goliath of . . . falsehood when brought face to face with him.”

“I,” said the general as though, for a moment, he too were more agreeably disposed, “have a lady friend who maintains that one can learn the truth about a person by the mask he or she wears. By this she means,” he went on to explain – and suddenly David could picture him, just before a battle, outlining his strategy clearly and concisely – “that by their choice of mask people betray the truth behind their tactics.”

“Your friend,” said Joseph K., “ought to write a book, for she

speaks more truly than she knows. The mask actually represents the ultimate truth. Not because it reveals anything of what lies behind it, but because there is nothing behind it. This holds true for everything in life. It holds true for you and for me. And, of course, it holds true for literature. I,” he said – and here, with a flash of the same intuition which could on occasion produce the solution to a mathematical problem, the thought crossed David’s mind that the greatest truth about their host, a man who had told them that he earned his living as an illusionist, might be that he himself harboured no illusions – “I myself put it most accurately and succinctly when I wrote that the point of a story lies not in the story itself but outside of it, so to speak, in its form. Hence the greatest truth about this journey is the train itself and the three thousand kilometres of track. The greatest truth about you, General, is your medals and the greatest truth about our young David is his undisguised naïveté.”

“And you, Joseph K., sir,” David asked, “what is the greatest truth about you?”

“The greatest truth about me is . . . my face,” replied the old man. “These days an artist must also sell himself on his personal appearance and it strikes me as a cruel trick of Fate, although a most apt reflection of my life, that now, after sixty-seven years of hard work and unimaginable difficulties and a deal of . . . artistic drinking, all to sculpt this face, this . . . intriguing, self-promoting physiognomy, a face which, in the theatre of life, projects all the way to the very back row, I have become” – and his voice dropped to a hiss – “too senile to remember my lines.”

“I find it surprising,” said David thoughtfully, “that the truth, if it lies on the surface, should only come to light when people offend one another, or fight a world war or build a three-thousand-kilometre-long railway. I mean: if it is indeed there, on the surface, it should be immediately apparent.

“And I also find it surprising that we – or at any rate you,

gentlemen – appear to have been wearing several masks, one on top of the other, while Africa, which your servant girl, sir, seems to me to represent, says not one word and yet remains exactly what she has purported to be all along. I am beginning,” said David, aware that he was becoming strangely moved and his voice growing hoarse, “to believe that this continent, unlike Europe, has nothing to hide.”

At this, von Lettow got to his feet. “Gentlemen,” he said, “I regret to say that I feel I have fallen into bad company. I have seen and experienced too much in my life to waste any more time with pacifists and men without honour. I shall take my leave of you. I see now that I ought never to have left the personnel carrier.” And the general clicked his heels together and executed a slight bow, first to Joseph K. and then to David.

At that moment the girl in the corner moved for the first time. She straightened her shoulders, stretched her feet out in front of her and said: “That way is closed, General.”

At the sound of her dark and faultless English the three men froze. As far as two of them were concerned, until now the carriage had contained no fourth person, the Negress had been indistinguishable from the fireplace or the curtains or the paintings or, perhaps more accurately, from the darkness outside. Now here she was, materializing in the room, and no spirit from any dark forest fringe could have come as more of a surprise.

“The doors,” she said, “are locked. And the gangway to the next coach has been removed.” And as David glanced over his shoulder she added pensively: “The attendants have left the train.”

The general had been staring fixedly at the girl while she spoke. And he was looking at her still as he said, to no one in particular and seeming not to have heard one word of what she had said: “She speaks English.”

Joseph K. shook his head slowly as if in denial of something, or as if there were something he did not understand.

Then the general turned the full force of his power to command on the girl, like the beam of a searchlight.

“Stand up,” he told her. He did not raise his voice but it was now heavy with menace, “stand up when a white man is talking to you. Who are you?”

The girl now looked at the general alone. With an air of supreme self-confidence she settled herself more comfortably on her stool.

“I am Lueni of Uganda,” she said.

David was glad to be sitting down just then, with a sudden dizzy spell causing the room slowly to spin as he relived his vision from the day before of the prone body while being bombarded by recollections of the horrific tales he had heard about that name during his month in the Congo.

“But surely Lueni is a man,” said von Lettow.

“I,” said the girl, “am Lueni.”

The three men did not look at one another, nor did they need to. The girl on the stool in the corner exuded an air of authority which rendered any shred of doubt and all questions useless.

Then von Lettow moved into the attack, as soundlessly as a big cat. One long, lithe bound and he was almost upon the African – his hands raised, taut and white – and in that fraction of a second David caught a glimpse, beneath his age and his military honours, of this Prussian warhorse’s astounding swiftness.

But the girl was swifter still. She did not so much as blink but something glinted in the light and a snub-nosed revolver appeared in her outstretched hands, pointing straight at the bridge of the general’s nose.

“This too has only one eye,” she said, “but it is very clear-sighted.”

Von Lettow had never understood Africans. But he had no trouble identifying death and so, never taking his one eye off her,

he stepped back and dropped down into his chair – a gesture embodying all of his personal fearlessness and his talent for postponing the final rout.

“We won’t have to wait too long,” said the girl. “Soon we will reach the summit and then start the descent. At that point the track crosses a bridge running high above a deep, narrow valley. You are all in search of the truth? Well, you will find it at that bridge, or at least the truth about the next life, because we have removed most of the bridge supports.”

David tried fleetingly to picture the bridge ahead of them, the loosened bolts, the slowly spiralling plunge and the impact. Then he looked at the faces of his fellow passengers, only to find a wide range of emotions: shock, anger, determination and cynicism, but no fear. Whatever else they may be, he thought, they are certainly not afraid; and at that very moment he too became aware of a strange and unnatural sense of hope and a new warmth, as though the fire in the grate had flared up once again. Coolly and deliberately von Lettow filled the three glasses on the table, Joseph K. produced some pince-nez from his waistcoat pocket, polished them and put them on and the girl lowered the revolver and rested it in her lap.

“A toast to Fortune,” said Joseph K., “Fortune which has not as yet failed us,” and solemnly they raised their glasses. “*Fortuna*,” said Joseph K., “*morituri te salutant*,” and they regarded one another with a new gravity which in some inexplicable way also took in the African and her revolver. And all at once David understood where it came from, this feeling of kinship. “This,” he thought, “is the intimacy of people about to die together. It is that insane, bourgeois gentility, so overweening that it also embraces the executioner and her victims, as it will continue to do till death them do part. What is more, so familiar with death are these three lunatics that now, when it proves to be the fifth, stowaway, member of our party, they

actually consider themselves to be in excellent company,” and it was with some difficulty that he stifled the urge to scream.

Joseph K. studied him through his pince-nez, then leaned towards him and said heartily: “I believe, my boy, that this is your chance to take yet another step across the shadowy line separating youth from real life. By which I mean that perhaps now you can see what I am getting at when I talk of standing on the bottom and knowing that one can sink no lower.”

“Not sink, perhaps,” snarled the general, “but fall two hundred feet, certainly.”

“If my former housegirl is speaking of the valley to which I think she is referring,” said Joseph K. pleasantly, “then it will be more like seven hundred feet.”

“You are all quite mad,” thought David to himself, while the scientific scholar in him felt duty-bound, nevertheless, to correct them. “That five hundred feet of a difference is neither here nor there, gentlemen,” he said, “two hundred feet is far enough, all other things being equal, for the falling train to reach something approaching the maximum rate of descent.”

There was a momentary hush in which the truncated span of David’s young life appeared to him like the brief, cold stretch of track lying ahead of the train.

Then Joseph K. raised his arm, as if calling a large gathering to order. “Gentlemen, the events of the last few minutes caused me momentarily to lose my presence of mind. Now, however, I feel quite recovered and while I would remind you that the need for integrity is now more pressing than ever, since” – and he pulled a gold watch from his waistcoat pocket – “since, if it is indeed the valley of which I am thinking, we have scarcely more than three-quarters of an hour until the . . . moment of truth, I would ask you, young David – considering that we know nothing about you except that you have an honest face and an . . . easily aroused sense of right and wrong – to tell us who you are.”

David stared at his fellow passengers in disbelief, but it was obvious that their composure was not feigned but genuine. He shook his head. "I am afraid," he said, "that I find it difficult to think clearly, knowing as I do what lies ahead of us. I believe we should use what time we have to come up with some means of escape – jumping off, for example," and he looked appealingly at the general.

But von Lettow turned his head away in disgust. "First of all," he said, "we would never survive jumping in this terrain and at such a speed. Secondly, Mr Korzeniowski's Negress would shoot us down like dogs before we could so much as open the window. And lastly, I would not subject myself to the humiliation of attempting to run away from a blackamoor."

"Listen to the experts," said Joseph K. amiably, "and let us use this time to truly . . . live on our knees. You, young David, may perhaps take courage from observing the general and myself."

David looked at the speaker and noted, to his great dismay, that the author had a manic, somewhat elated look about him; the look of a man who has spent his whole life being humiliated, but who has now thrown all caution to the winds, delved down into the depths of his soul and found a liberating insolence.

"The general," said Joseph K. ebulliently, "has lived his whole life on the brink of the descent into Hell and I, at my advanced age and in my state of health, have for many years greeted with surprise each new day on which I have awoken to find myself still alive. Think of the general and myself, my young friend, or of something else just as enduring. Mathematics for instance."

David gazed hopelessly into space. "In actual fact," he said, "at those times in my life when I have been truly afraid I *have* studied one especially beautiful mathematical theorem, and this has generally brought me some comfort. It has occurred to me that logic seems to contain the very essence of life and indeed that if one were trying to discover the divine plan behind the universe

then it is more likely to be found in arithmetic than in the Bible."

He was aware that his fellow passengers were regarding him with interest and under the pressure of knowing that he had only a few minutes left to live he heard himself rambling on to no one in particular. "And yet I am here because I turned my back on mathematics," he said, "I gave it up because I had a dream. I have been thinking over what you said, Joseph K., sir, about how we live and dream alone and I think I believe that to be wrong. You see, this dream that I had was one I shared with an entire world. It was the dream of perfect simplicity. I have the feeling that there is, in a way, something wrong with telling you this now, but I will tell you anyway: we dreamed that the world was utterly coherent and simple. Our hoping this was the case had something to do with the fact that," – David struggled to find the right words – "that mathematics was beginning to resemble the Leaning Tower of Pisa. An enormous structure which is very gradually starting to list to one side, so that there is no telling what one should do. But one goes on hoping."

He stared straight ahead with sadness in his eyes. "It isn't just in mathematics, it's the sciences too. It is names such as Boole and Hilbert and Maxwell and Planck, names that mean nothing to you, but all of which have added a few bricks to the pile. And it keeps getting taller and listing further and further. Perhaps it is not only science but the whole world. Just think of the war. So perhaps the Tower of Pisa is not the best metaphor. It is all more like Venice, it is all slowly sinking. So we create a dream, a dream of making sense of this confusion, one coherent theory which might enable us to check the slide into the mud. Not that anyone dares to say it in so many words, but we all know what it is: a longing akin to that which raised the Tower of Babel, a longing to reach all the way to God."

David swayed back and forth in desperation. Before the eyes of his companions the openness of his features dissolved and they

beheld a man who had adopted the listing action of the world in which he lived and who now seemed, in his own despair, about to imitate that selfsame slide.

"We thought," he went on, "that the neurologists and psychiatrists would prove that the human soul is also biological in form. The biologists and physicists would reduce this biological form to chemistry and physics and the mathematicians would break the chemistry and physics down into arithmetic. It would then be up to us to reduce this mathematical exercise to a logical equation.

"Human beings," said David, and for an instant his voice rang with all the unshakeable conviction of European science, "would be thoroughly accounted for by means of a handful of signs and the rules governing their various permutations."

At this point Joseph K. leaned across the table and for the first time that evening the old man seemed to have been drawn out of himself. "It is just as I have always known," he said. "It is what I predicted in my books. And it will come true. To a visionary writer it is quite obvious. There is something . . . predictable about the human race. If one unearths its background, its . . . brooding urges, if one charts its shadowy inner landscape, at the end of the day everything appears so very, very simple."

He got to his feet with a jolt, propelled out of his chair by some powerful surge of emotion, and proceeded to limp back and forth across the floor. "As a boy I used to look at maps, I was . . . obsessed with maps, the white areas most of all. They denote those places of which we know nothing, dark spots in the universe that exert a . . . savage attraction. That is why I went to sea. I had to visit those places. So one travels and travels, through Asia, through South America, up the river Congo, and it is . . . it is . . . a journey into one's self, the drawing up of a vast map. One becomes a . . . psychological geodesist. And then a landscape looms up which is so terrifying and dark that it takes . . . a

real man to set foot in it, and one learns something, something or other. And there comes a day when one has seen it all, when one comes up against . . . a wall in the universe, one can go no further, there is nothing new under the sun, no more blank spots on the map. And yet there is still something that one does not understand. Inside human beings there are still some blank spots and one . . ." At this point he fell silent, staring vacantly through his pince-nez with brimming eyes. "This is where," he said when he had once more gained control of his voice, "science has to step in. Once the artists and explorers among us have shown the public all that there is to be seen it is up to science to prove that those last blank spots, guilt and religion and morality and . . . love, are a . . . what was it you called it?"

"A logical equation," said David.

"Just so, a logical equation proving that we are all, you and I, General, and this young man here, in fact, one."

"I feel no kinship with you, chemically or in any other way," said the general in a voice cold as ice and for a moment the girl was forgotten, this seeming to be a more crucial matter than the question of life and death. "This evening has shown me that you are an unscrupulous civilian and a coward, driven by the impertinence of an inferior race!"

For a moment Joseph K. just stood there blinking disconcertedly in the face of this first verbal broadside from the self-possessed military man. Then his moustaches turned upwards in an infinitely compliant smile. "Ah," he said, "you arouse my curiosity. By what noble and complex motives is our son of the Fatherland driven, then?"

"Till the day I die," the general had no hesitation in replying, "in all that I do I shall serve the spirit of Teutonic brotherhood as expressed by our great poet, Goethe, when he says:

*nimmer sich beugen, kräftig sich zeigen
rufet die Arme der Götter herbei*

“Well, as far as the day you die is concerned,” said Joseph K. thoughtfully, “that would appear to be taken care of. As regards Goethe, I must say that once again you surprise me by turning out to be . . . a man of letters. But when it comes to the bond between you and me, General, there is no way round it.” Propping himself up against the table he brought his face down to the soldier’s. “A few years from now our young friend will have united us in a . . . logical equation. A few years from now some young orderly will click his heels together and pass a bundle of papers bearing a handful of signs and the rules for combining them across the counter in some dingy Prussian army camp and say: ‘Here – down to the last detail – you have General Paul von Lettow Voerbeck!’”

“I seem to remember you saying earlier,” the general said blandly, “that you had invested your entire being in a book about a journey through Africa. That being the case, then day after day a bundle of papers bearing a handful of signs and the rules for combining them must also be being passed across British bookshop counters, with the words: ‘Here – down to the last detail – you have that great writer Joseph K.’”

For the first time on this journey the old man appeared to be lost for words and in the pause that then ensued, David cleared his throat.

“I am afraid,” he said, “that is most unlikely,” and he felt all eyes upon him. He surveyed the company, then his eyes met the girl’s and stayed there.

“In Vienna,” he continued hesitantly, “I met . . . someone with a very clear view of things. He is working on a particular theorem, a proposition. When I saw this proposition it seemed to me to shatter my dream. Of course he is not the only one. There have, as I have said, been various indications of what was afoot. But he showed me Venice, he showed me that it is the foundations that are unsound. He has proved – no, he intends to prove

that when one is dealing with complex systems, and we humans *are* complex” – and here he felt himself reddening under the girl’s gaze – “within any complex system there are certain elements which cannot be deduced from its basic characteristics. This may mean that even if we had known every particular of the circumstances surrounding this journey, we would still have been unable to guard against the unpredictable.

“This proposition also suggests,” he continued, “that, even when fully aware of our own circumstances, we cannot be certain of avoiding contradictions at a later date. And,” he said, and had to lower his gaze, “life is, as we know, full of contradictory emotions.”

He lifted his head again. “At the end of the day,” he said, “it will be established that it will never be possible, as we had thought, to determine in advance what shape a logical theorem may take. At any rate not in mathematics and possibly in no other area of life. We cannot,” – and here he found himself searching for words – “do without . . . ingenuity and . . . emotion in mathematics.”

He fell silent for a moment, then: “Until tonight,” he said, “I had always thought it dreadful that there was nothing in this life, nothing at all, that was not, right from its inception, subject to uncertainty. Now, however, I have the idea . . . I have the idea that perhaps it doesn’t really matter anyway, that one could perhaps do some work. And now it is too late . . .”

Using both hands, and with some difficulty, Joseph K. filled their glasses, as if preparing to toast whatever it was that was too late.

“And yet,” said David slowly, “it is odd that tonight it should be we, the Europeans, who have taken the wrong turning. Each of us has left his native land. You, Joseph K., have left your writing behind, the general his soldiers and I mathematics. We seem to be on the wrong track. You, Miss, on the other hand,

appear to be" – David groped after a suitable expression – "in your proper place."

"You fool," the girl said, almost kindly, "I am four thousand kilometres from my home."

"But perhaps only for the time being," suggested David.

"I was educated in England," said the girl. "In my tribe we have a saying: 'He who wishes to dream like *otoyo*, the hyena, must learn to eat corpses.'" David looked at her blankly. She bent forward. "The European languages," she said, "are good for large numbers. In English, for example, the seven thousand slaves who built this railway are easily counted."

"Slavery," said von Lettow, "has been abolished."

The girl regarded him thoughtfully. "We also say that *omuga*, the rhinoceros, runs faster than it thinks, with the result that on the savannah one encounters little gusts of wind – those being the little thoughts from which the big beast has fled. In order to build this railway Belgian troops rounded up four thousand Africans from the Gold Coast and Angola. Some were drawn by the promise of what was a very low wage but the majority came because it is hard to say no to a rifle barrel. They worked under armed surveillance, under the lash, and with steel rings around their necks so they would be easily recognizable should they run away. But we must finish our sum: the final three thousand were made up mainly of European convicts, most of them from Portugal. Of these seven thousand workers, five thousand died of ill-treatment, blackwater fever, sleeping sickness and overwork. In my tribe we say that the railroads across Africa run not over railway track but over African bones. What would you call slavery, if not that, General?"

Just then a shudder ran through the train and with a squeal of brakes the locomotive went into a sharp turn. The girl straightened up. "It is time," she said, getting to her feet, and without so much as a glance at them she crossed the carriage floor and went out of the door.

Feeling slightly sick, David went limp. The girl had been the power source which had held them all in a quivering, watchful state of suspense. As soon as she was gone they collapsed.

Then the focus within the room shifted as Joseph K. produced a flat, dully gleaming pistol. "Gentlemen," he said, "five minutes from now the train will brake as it goes into the third, very tight turn. That is where we get off."

David had noted how the general's face when he saw the weapon stiffened into a suspicious mask, a sign that on this night his credibility had been stretched to its limits and that he would now meet everything that came his way with the most profound distrust.

"General," said Joseph K., "I have yet another mask: that of businessman. One of the goods wagons trundling on ahead of us contains a number of boxes stamped with my name. These contain a consignment of excellent Webley rifles which I sold to that young lady. From my sailing days I have retained a taste for certain . . . enterprises more profitable than writing."

"So you are on the side of the Negroes?" said the general.

"I am on my own side, General," said Joseph K., "and in this century, that, I believe, is the only possible side to be on."

"Words fail me," said the general.

"That I can well believe," replied Joseph K. "It's not as though the spirit of Teutonic brotherhood has any long story to relate. But I," he said, taking out his pocket watch and considering it for a moment, "I have one last tale to tell, before we jump. And it is only fitting, don't you think, that the writer should have the last word."

Only now, so near the end, was David coming to understand the old man. He realized that throughout his life Joseph K. must have kept himself on a very tight leash. And yet all that time a fuse must have been burning away inside him. And now, just as he was about to meet his end, this hissing ember had reached

the secret powder-magazine of his soul. What they had been witnessing tonight was the great writer's swan song which, in his case, was bound to consist of one long series of explosions.

"In Dar es Salaam," said Joseph K., "on Biashara Street, there is a little shop. It is run by an Indian who was once tremendously fat but who had, over the years, cast off the burdens of this life and by the time of this story had already grown lean. This shop is possibly the only place in the African continent where genuine articles can be bought: the heavy silk *kente* cloth of the Ashanti tribe, interwoven with symbols whose significance was forgotten two hundred years ago; bronze statuettes from the vanished kingdoms of Central Africa; gold ornaments from Zanzibar.

"And on the wall of this shop hangs the rarest piece of all: a green dancing mask from the Maconde tribe, a crude, upward-slanting face with an impassivity that makes it seem continually to be shifting expression.

"One day, a couple of years before war broke out, an army officer visited the shop. A colleague of yours, General. As soon as he saw the mask he felt the need to buy it. When told that during a dance it took possession of its wearer and foretold the future he insisted upon having it, as only a German officer in pre-war Dar es Salaam could insist. The Indian explained to him that the masks of the Maconde people can neither be bought nor sold.

"At that, the officer donned the mask, danced a few steps in his riding boots and bellowed from behind the carved wood: 'And if I buy you, where will that lead?' And a voice replied: 'To Hell.'

"At this the officer flew into a Teutonic rage and, service revolver in hand, forced the Indian to sell him the mask, that he might prove it to be harmless. Because, wherever it has come across it, the European – and perhaps most especially the German – race has always encountered the primitive African idea of a mask and its bearer being one, with their guns cocked.

"Soon after this the officer left on a tour of duty, first to Arusha and then on to Bismarcksburg and Lake Tanganyika, and wherever he went he would put on the mask and dance for the white officers, who were thoroughly entertained, and the black soldiers and native inhabitants, who were not at all amused, but the mask never spoke again and its silence bored into the officer's flesh like *loa-loa*, the worm that causes river blindness. Eventually he took to drink and one day in Ngorongoro he danced himself into a seizure from which he did not emerge until his death three months later. His belongings were either given away or put on sale in the garrison at Bagamoyo – I bought a razor with a tortoiseshell handle myself – and no objections were made when the Indian came for the mask.

"The funeral took place the next day. It was during the monsoon, the funeral procession was coming down Biashara Street and, just as the blue urn drew level with the shop window, the carriage bearing the officer's ashes drove into a mudhole. The mask and the Indian looked at the urn and then the mask said: 'To Hell.'

At that moment the locomotive emitted a long-drawn-out whistle and with a bow their host invited them to step into the cloakroom. Then he kicked the carriage door open and the mountain air came rushing to meet them, cold and clear. The sky was milky with stars and ahead of them ran the train, taking the bend like a long, glittering worm.

"Jump, gentlemen," said Joseph K. and brandished his weapon persuasively. "Jump and let us see whether Africa will cremate us or glorify us."

Soon afterwards the same four people were standing facing one another just as they had once stood on the railway platform. On the track a group of Africans waited in silence. Off in the distance the train – no more than a string of twinkling pinpoints

and a faint rumble – headed, on collision course, into the heart of darkness.

The general made an attempt to brush the dust from his uniform with a tuft of grass.

“I assume you will allow me a minute or two, that I can be sure to die looking spruce,” he said.

Joseph K. looked at him benignly. “You are not going to die, General,” he said. “You are a free man, free to set out on the return journey.” He pointed back along the track. “I am sure that once you have walked the two hundred kilometres back to His Majesty you will have discovered new meaning in the phrase ‘to live on one’s knees’.”

The writer stuck his gun into his jacket pocket, turned on his heel and started walking towards the waiting Africans. He was limping and in a flash David saw that this man must indeed greet every prolongation of his life with surprise.

A moment later the general faced about and, with a spring in his step, began to walk back along the track in the direction from which they had come.

For the first time David and the girl were alone. They eyed one another warily for a while. Then the girl said: “In my own language my name means ‘war’.”

David nodded. “Europeans,” he said, unaware that he spoke as though this were a class in which he no longer formed a subset, “Europeans are experts when it comes to waging war.”

“In my tribe,” said the girl, “we say: ‘The croaking of the little frogs will not stop the cattle from quenching their thirst.’” Then she shook David briefly by the hand, turned and walked over to the men who stood waiting for her.

David did not watch her go. Instead he sat down and buried his head in his hands. Above him Libra crossed the zenith of the night sky and dropped towards the horizon. European justice descending over tropical Africa.



HOMAGE TO BOURNONVILLE

The height of artistry lies in concealing mechanical action and effort behind harmonious serenity.

AUGUST ANTOINE BOURNONVILLE
in *My Life in the Theatre*

It was March 19th 1929; the beginning of the twenty-sixth night of Ramadan, the night on which Allah sent the Koran from Heaven to Earth; and in Lisbon harbour, just down from the Alfama district, two young men had, in all respects, reached the end of the road.

They were sitting on the deck of a small sailing boat, of a kind known south of the Horn of Africa as a *meli*, a craft which has no business in Lisbon, her sails being designed for another sort of wind and her hull for another type of swell, in addition to which she leaked slightly and sagged at her moorings as though drunk on the salt water she had taken in, or as though sinking to the bottom in despair over the two who sailed her.

They were lit by a small charcoal fire which glowed on a metal sheet set between them. They had gone without food for a long time and one of them, sitting straight-backed and cross-legged, was by now so emaciated that his naked torso seemed to consist solely of the levers of its bones and the fine cords of muscle that allow these to move. He wore a turban of white wool and in his face African and Oriental features and a number of individually mordant and volatile qualities blended into a harmonious whole. His name was Rumi and he was a monk of the Islamic Mawlawiyah order.