

AI-Generated Graded Readers

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About This Edition

This book is a simplified English adaptation created for extensive reading practice.

The text was generated using ChatGPT and prepared for intermediate English learners as part of an educational project.

Target reading level: CEFR A2-B1

This edition aims to support fluency development through accessible vocabulary, expanded narration, and improved readability while preserving the original story structure.

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Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified by ChatGPT)

Part 1

The Nellie, a small sailing yacht, rested quietly on the wide river Thames. The sails hung loose, and the boat moved only a little with the slow water. The tide had turned, and there was nothing to do but wait. Evening was coming gently. The air was calm, and the sky above us was wide and clear.

Five men were on the yacht. The Director of Companies stood at the front of the boat, looking out toward the sea. He was our captain and our host. His strong back and steady posture gave the feeling of a man who could always be trusted. Behind him, on the deck, the rest of us waited quietly.

The Lawyer lay comfortably on a rug with a cushion under his head. The Accountant had opened a small box of dominoes and slowly arranged the pieces on the deck, as if building a little tower. I myself sat nearby and watched the fading light over the river.

Marlow sat apart from the others near the back of the yacht. He sat cross-legged against the mast, very still. His face was thin and yellow from years at sea. His hands rested loosely with the palms turned outward. In the quiet light he almost looked like a strange idol carved from wood.

At last the Director came back and joined us. We spoke a few lazy words, but soon the conversation ended. None of us felt like playing dominoes or telling stories. The evening was too peaceful for that. We were content simply to look at the water.

The Thames stretched before us like the beginning of a great road across the world. Far away the sea and sky seemed to join together in a soft grey line. Slow ships moved along the river, their red sails glowing faintly in the light of the setting sun.

A light mist rested on the low shores. Farther up the river, where London stood, a dark cloud hung over the city. It seemed heavy and silent, like a shadow that

never moved.

The sun slowly dropped lower in the sky. Its bright white color changed to deep red. For a moment it looked weak and tired, as if the darkness rising from the land would soon swallow it.

Then the sun disappeared, and the river changed. The shining light faded, and a deeper calm spread across the water. The Thames flowed slowly and quietly, as it had done for thousands of years.

We looked at that old river with a feeling of respect. This water had carried many ships. It had carried explorers and traders. It had carried soldiers and sailors who sailed away to unknown parts of the world.

Long ago ships had left this very river and sailed toward distant lands. Some had returned with gold and strange goods. Others had sailed away and never come back.

The Thames had known great names from history—men who searched for new lands, men who fought battles at sea, men who dreamed of building empires. Ships like the Golden Hind once sailed proudly down this river. Others left on dangerous journeys and disappeared forever into the unknown.

The dreams of men had begun here. From this quiet river they had spread across the earth.

Darkness slowly covered the water. Lights appeared along the shore. Ships moving along the river showed small green and red lights that crossed and passed each other in the night.

For a long time no one spoke.

Then Marlow suddenly said, “And this also was once one of the dark places of the earth.”

His voice was quiet, but we all heard it clearly.

Marlow was the only one among us who still worked regularly at sea. Most sailors live their lives on ships and travel the same routes again and again. But Marlow was different. He loved wandering and exploring strange places.

When he told stories, they were not simple tales like those of most sailors. His stories moved slowly and strangely. The meaning did not sit neatly inside them

like a nut in its shell. Instead the meaning seemed to surround the story like a mist around a light.

None of us answered him at once. His remark did not surprise us. It sounded exactly like the sort of thing Marlow would say.

After a moment he began speaking again.

“I was thinking about very old times,” he said slowly. “About the first Romans who came here almost two thousand years ago. Imagine them sailing up this river. To them this place must have seemed the end of the world.”

He lifted one hand slightly as he spoke.

“Think about it,” he continued. “A Roman officer sent from the warm Mediterranean to this cold and gloomy land. He would see grey skies, dark forests, and strange people living in the wild. The river would seem endless and mysterious.”

Marlow paused and looked out into the darkness.

“Those men were far from home,” he said. “They faced cold weather, disease, and danger. Many of them must have died here. But they came anyway, because that was their duty.”

He leaned back again against the mast.

“The conquest of the earth,” he said quietly, “is not always a very beautiful thing. When you look closely, it often means taking land away from people who look different from us.”

The water moved softly beside the yacht.

“What makes such conquest seem noble,” Marlow continued, “is the idea behind it. Men tell themselves that they bring light into dark places. They believe in that idea. They worship it.”

He stopped speaking again. The river traffic moved slowly in the darkness. Small lights passed each other like wandering stars.

For a long time we listened to the quiet sounds of the water.

Then Marlow spoke again.

“You may remember,” he said hesitantly, “that once I worked for a time as a river sailor.”

None of us answered, but we knew what that meant. The tide had not yet turned, and we had nothing else to do.

Marlow was about to tell us one of his long stories.

He shifted slightly and began.

“I do not want to trouble you too much with my own adventures,” he said, “but you must understand how I came to travel into the heart of that great continent. Only then can you understand what happened to me.”

He looked again toward the dark river.

“Many years ago,” he said, “after sailing in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific for several years, I returned to London. At first I enjoyed resting. But after a while I became bored.”

Marlow smiled faintly.

“So I began to look for another ship.”

The lights of the river moved quietly past us as he continued his story.

Part 2

“When I was a boy,” Marlow continued, “I had a strong love for maps. I could sit for hours looking at them. I would follow the lines of rivers and mountains with my finger and imagine the strange places they passed through.”

The river beside the yacht moved quietly in the darkness as he spoke.

“At that time,” he said, “there were still many blank spaces on the maps of the world. When I saw one of those empty places, I would put my finger on it and say, ‘When I grow up, I will go there.’”

Marlow smiled faintly.

“One of those places was the North Pole. I never reached it, and now I never will. The charm of it has gone. But there were other places too. I have visited some of them. Others were waiting.”

He paused.

“There was one place that interested me more than all the rest. It was in the middle of Africa. When I was young it was still mostly blank on the map.”

He lifted one hand slowly, as if drawing a shape in the air.

“Later the blank space was filled with rivers and lakes and names. But even then it remained a place of mystery. And there was one river that fascinated me more than anything else.”

The water beside the yacht made a quiet sound.

“On the map the river looked like a great snake,” Marlow said. “Its head was at the sea. Its body curved across the land. Its tail disappeared far away in the center of the continent.”

He shook his head slightly.

“That river seemed to call to me. It was like a snake charming a bird. I could not forget it.”

Marlow continued.

“One day I learned that a trading company was working along that river. They had stations there, and they used steamboats to travel inland.”

He spread his hands.

“I thought to myself: they must need captains for those boats. Why should I not try to get such a job?”

Marlow laughed softly.

“At that time the company was based in Europe. It was a continental company. But I had some relatives living on the continent, and I decided to ask them for help.”

He looked down at the deck.

“Now that was unusual for me. I had always found my own way in the world. I did not like asking people for favors. But the idea of that river had taken hold of me. I could not forget it.”

Marlow paused again.

“So I asked for help. The men in my family said, ‘My dear fellow,’ and did nothing. But then I spoke to the women.”

His voice held a little amusement.

“I had an aunt who was very energetic and enthusiastic. She immediately began writing letters and speaking to important people. Soon she told me she knew

someone in the government who had influence with the company.”

Marlow spread his hands.

“She promised to do everything possible to help me.”

He smiled again.

“And she succeeded.”

A faint wind moved across the river as he spoke.

“Very soon I received the appointment. The company had just lost one of their captains. He had been killed during a quarrel with some natives. So the position was open.”

Marlow’s voice grew more serious.

“The captain’s name was Fresleven. He was a Dane. People said he was a quiet and gentle man. But he had been living in that country for two years. Perhaps something inside him had changed.”

He continued slowly.

“One day he went ashore in a village because he believed the chief had cheated him in a trade. He began beating the chief with a stick. The villagers watched in silence.”

Marlow shook his head.

“At last the chief’s son could not bear it any longer. He threw a spear. The spear went straight through the captain’s back.”

The quiet river seemed darker around us.

“After that,” Marlow said, “the villagers ran away into the forest. They expected punishment from the white men. The steamboat crew panicked and sailed away. No one returned to the village.”

He paused.

“Months later, when I arrived in the country and replaced Fresleven, I tried to find his body. I finally saw it lying in the grass. The bones were still there. The jungle had slowly grown around them.”

Marlow’s voice became quiet.

“The village was empty. The huts were falling apart. The people had vanished.”

He looked down at his hands.

“All that remained was the body of the dead captain.”

For a moment he said nothing.

Then he continued.

“Because of that unfortunate event, I received the job. I hurried to prepare myself. Within two days I was crossing the English Channel to meet my employers and sign the contract.”

Marlow looked out toward the dark water.

“The city where the company had its offices always made me think of a white tomb. Everything looked clean and respectable on the outside, but something about it felt strange and lifeless.”

He described the place slowly.

“The street was narrow and quiet. Tall buildings stood on both sides. There was almost no sound. Grass even grew between the stones of the road.”

Marlow spread his hands slightly.

“I entered a large doorway and climbed a bare staircase. The first room I reached contained two women sitting on chairs and knitting black wool.”

His voice lowered.

“One of them was young and thin. The other was old and fat. The younger woman stood up and walked toward me while still knitting.”

Marlow smiled faintly.

“She looked so serious that I almost stepped aside to avoid her, like one avoids a sleepwalker. But she stopped directly in front of me and looked up.”

He continued.

“Without speaking she led me into a waiting room. I gave my name and looked around. There was a large table, several chairs, and a big map of the world on the wall.”

Marlow leaned slightly forward.

“That map was covered with colors. Red, blue, green, orange. Each color showed where different countries had their colonies.”

His finger traced a shape in the air again.

“I saw the great yellow area in the center of Africa. And there was the river—

curving across the land like a snake.”

He shook his head slowly.

“Even there, on the wall of that office, the river seemed to fascinate me.”

Marlow paused.

“Soon a secretary called me into another room. A small pale man sat behind a large desk. He was one of the company’s directors.”

He gave a short laugh.

“The meeting lasted less than a minute. He asked if I spoke French. I answered yes. He shook my hand and wished me a good journey.”

Marlow spread his hands.

“And just like that, I was employed.”

The river moved quietly beside the yacht as Marlow prepared to continue his strange story.

Part 3

When I left the director’s office, I returned again to the waiting room. The same secretary stood there beside me. He looked at me with a sad and sympathetic face, as though I had just received some terrible news.

He placed a paper in front of me.

“You must sign this,” he said.

I signed it. I believe it was a promise not to reveal the company’s secrets. At that moment I did not think much about it.

But as I stood there I began to feel slightly uneasy. Something in the air of that place felt strange and heavy. It was as if I had been allowed to enter some secret agreement without understanding it.

When I walked out again into the outer room, the two women were still there knitting their black wool.

The younger one moved about the room quietly, bringing in new visitors. The older woman sat still in her chair. A cat slept peacefully on her lap. She wore round glasses low on her nose and looked at each person who entered with a calm and

curious expression.

When she looked at me, I felt a strange chill.

Her glance seemed to say that she already knew everything about me. She seemed to understand exactly where I was going and what would happen there.

Later, when I was far away in Africa, I often remembered those two women.

They seemed like guardians at the door of darkness.

One of them introduced men to their unknown future, while the other watched them carefully, as if measuring their fate.

Many of the young men who passed through that office would never return again.

After signing the paper I was told to visit the company doctor.

“It is only a formality,” the secretary said kindly.

A young clerk came from upstairs to guide me. He looked untidy and careless. His coat sleeves were covered with ink stains, and his tie was loose and crooked. His chin stuck out sharply like the toe of an old boot.

It was still early for the doctor’s appointment, so I suggested we have a drink together.

The clerk quickly agreed. Soon we were sitting in a small bar drinking vermouth. He began talking proudly about the company and its great business in Africa.

After a while I asked him why he did not go there himself.

At once his cheerful mood disappeared.

He emptied his glass and said quietly, “I am not as foolish as I look.”

We finished our drinks and went to see the doctor.

The doctor was a small man with a rough beard and worn clothes. He felt my pulse while staring at the wall, as if thinking about something else.

“Good, good,” he murmured. “Very good for the tropics.”

Then he suddenly asked, “May I measure your head?”

I was surprised but agreed. He took out a strange metal instrument and carefully measured my skull from every direction. He wrote the numbers down in a notebook.

“Why do you do this?” I asked.

“For science,” he replied calmly. “I measure the heads of all the men who go out there.”

“And when they return,” I said, “do you measure them again?”

He shook his head.

“I never see them again,” he said quietly. “Besides, the changes happen inside the head.”

He smiled slightly, as if amused by his own remark.

Then he asked another question.

“Has anyone in your family ever been mad?”

I felt annoyed.

“Is that also for science?” I asked.

“Yes,” he answered calmly. “You see, I have a theory about men who go to that country. Perhaps you will help prove it.”

I laughed impatiently.

“I am not a typical Englishman,” I told him.

“Perhaps not,” he replied thoughtfully. “But you will still be interesting to observe.”

He looked at me carefully once more.

“Avoid anger,” he said. “Avoid excitement. And above all, remain calm.”

He raised a finger in warning.

“In the tropics, a man must keep calm.”

That was the end of my medical examination.

One thing remained to do before my departure. I had to visit my aunt and say goodbye.

I found her extremely pleased with herself. She believed she had done a wonderful thing by helping me obtain the job.

We sat together by the fire in her comfortable drawing room and drank tea. It was the last good cup of tea I would taste for many weeks.

During our conversation I discovered something rather surprising.

My aunt had been telling important people that I was a remarkable and talented

man. She had described me as a special gift for the company.

According to her, I was going to Africa to bring civilization and light to millions of poor people.

She spoke about it with great excitement.

“You will help guide those ignorant people,” she said. “You will teach them better ways of living.”

I felt very uncomfortable hearing this.

I tried to explain gently that the company’s main purpose was trade and profit.

My aunt only smiled.

“Of course,” she said. “But the workers deserve their pay.”

It is strange how women sometimes live in a world of their own. That world can be very beautiful, but it does not always agree with reality.

At last she embraced me warmly and reminded me to wear warm clothes and write letters home often.

Then I left the house.

When I stepped into the street, I felt a strange sensation.

For many years I had traveled easily from one part of the world to another. I could leave home at a moment’s notice without hesitation.

But this time was different.

For a few seconds I felt uncertain.

It was only a small moment, but it surprised me.

I felt as though I was not merely going to Africa, but descending into the center of the earth.

Soon afterward I boarded a French steamer.

The ship sailed along the west coast of Africa, stopping again and again at small ports. At each place soldiers and government officials were unloaded onto the shore.

Day after day I stood on deck watching the coast pass slowly by.

The land looked mysterious and silent.

A dark jungle stretched along the shoreline. The trees were so thick and deep green that they appeared almost black. White waves broke endlessly against the

coast.

Sometimes small settlements appeared. They looked tiny and lonely beside the endless forest.

The air was hot and heavy. The sun burned fiercely above the steaming land.

One day we passed a warship anchored near the shore.

It was firing its guns into the jungle.

Boom.

A flash of flame came from the gun. Smoke rose slowly into the air. But nothing happened.

The jungle remained silent and unchanged.

It seemed like a strange and meaningless act—like firing weapons into an empty world.

Someone on board told me there was a war going on somewhere in the forest.

But from where we stood, it looked like madness.

After many days of travel, we finally reached the mouth of the great river.

My journey into the heart of that continent was about to begin.

Part 4

It took more than thirty days before I finally saw the mouth of the great river. The ship stopped near a small settlement that served as the seat of government. It was the main coastal station of the Company.

But my real work was not there.

The place where I was to take command of my steamboat was two hundred miles farther inland. To reach it I first had to travel thirty miles up the river to another station.

I found passage on a small coastal steamer.

The captain of this vessel was a young Swede. He was tall, thin, and rather gloomy. His pale hair hung loosely around his face, and he walked with a slow and careless step.

When he learned that I was also a sailor, he invited me to stand with him on the

bridge.

As the steamer pulled away from the miserable little harbor, he nodded toward the shore with a look of contempt.

“Have you been living there?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

He shrugged.

“Those government people,” he said bitterly. “It is strange what some men will do for a few francs a month.”

After a moment he asked another question.

“And you are going farther inland?”

“Yes,” I answered. “That is my plan.”

He gave a quiet laugh.

“Do not be too sure,” he said. “Not everyone who goes up that river comes back.”

He shuffled across the bridge and stared carefully ahead at the water.

“The other day,” he continued, “I carried a man who had hanged himself.”

I looked at him in surprise.

“Why would he do that?” I asked.

The captain kept watching the river.

“Who knows?” he replied. “Perhaps the sun was too strong for him. Or perhaps it was the country itself.”

At last the steamer turned into a wide stretch of river.

I saw a rocky cliff rising above the shore. Around it were piles of earth and broken ground. A few buildings stood on the hillside, some with iron roofs. Everything looked damaged and unfinished.

A dull roaring sound came from the rapids farther up the river.

Many people moved about the place. Most of them were black and nearly naked. From a distance they looked like ants working among the rocks.

A wooden pier stretched out into the water.

“That is your Company’s station,” the Swede said, pointing to three large wooden buildings on the slope.

“I will send your luggage there.”

A few moments later the steamer left me at the pier and continued its journey.

I stood alone in the blazing sunlight.

The heat was overwhelming.

As I began walking up the hill, I noticed something strange lying in the grass. It was a large iron boiler, abandoned and half buried in the ground.

Soon I found a narrow path leading upward.

The path twisted between rocks and broken machinery. At one place I saw a small railway truck lying upside down. Its wheels pointed toward the sky like the legs of a dead animal.

Nearby were piles of rusted rails.

Everything looked damaged and useless.

Suddenly I heard a horn blow somewhere to my right. At once several black workers began running.

A loud explosion shook the ground.

A cloud of smoke rose from the cliff above me.

But when the smoke cleared, the rock remained exactly the same.

Later I learned that they were building a railway there.

The explosions did not seem to serve any clear purpose. The cliff was not blocking the path of the railway. Yet the workers continued blasting it again and again.

It looked like meaningless destruction.

As I climbed higher up the hill, I heard a strange metallic sound behind me.

I turned around.

Six black men were walking slowly up the path in a line. Each carried a small basket of earth on his head. Iron collars were fastened around their necks, and a long chain connected them together.

The chain moved with their steps and made a steady clinking sound.

Their bodies were thin and exhausted. Their ribs showed clearly under their skin. Their arms and legs looked like sticks tied together with rope.

They passed very close to me without even looking in my direction.

Their faces were empty.

They seemed completely indifferent to everything around them.

Behind them walked a guard carrying a rifle. He wore a torn uniform jacket and looked bored and tired.

When he saw me, he quickly raised the rifle to his shoulder. For a moment he seemed ready to shoot.

Then he realized I was a white man like himself.

He lowered the rifle and smiled with a wide and foolish grin.

His smile seemed to invite me into partnership with him.

After all, I too was part of the great enterprise that had brought these men here.

I continued walking.

Soon I reached a group of trees that cast a little shade on the hillside. I decided to step beneath them for a moment to escape the burning sun.

But the moment I entered that shade I felt as if I had stepped into another world.

The roar of the rapids filled the air with a deep and endless noise. Yet the trees themselves stood perfectly still. Not a leaf moved.

In the dim light beneath the branches I saw shapes lying on the ground.

At first I could not understand what they were.

Then I realized they were men.

Black figures lay scattered among the trees in strange positions. Some sat leaning against the trunks. Others lay stretched out on the ground. Some crouched with their heads resting on their knees.

They looked weak and sick.

It was the place where the workers came when they were too exhausted to continue.

They had been brought from the coast under contracts to work for the Company. But the food was strange, the work was hard, and the climate was deadly.

When they became too sick to work, they crawled away into this grove to die.

As I stood there in horror, one of the men slowly raised his head.

His eyes opened and stared at me.

They were large and empty.

I felt helpless.

I had nothing to offer him except a biscuit from my pocket. I gave it to him.

His fingers slowly closed around the biscuit.

That was the only movement he made.

Around his neck I noticed a small piece of white thread tied carefully.

I could not understand why it was there.

Was it a charm? An ornament? A sign of something important?

The bright white thread looked strange against his dark skin.

Nearby two other men sat with their legs drawn up beneath them. One stared straight ahead without moving. The other rested his head on his knees as if he were too tired to lift it again.

Everywhere I looked there were more bodies lying among the roots of the trees.

They looked like shadows waiting quietly for death.

One of them slowly crawled toward the river on his hands and knees. He reached the water and drank from his hands. Then he sat in the sunlight and let his head fall forward again.

I could not remain there any longer.

I hurried back up the hill toward the station buildings.

As I approached them, I suddenly saw a white man walking toward me.

His appearance was so strange that at first I thought I was seeing a vision.

His clothes were perfectly clean.

He wore a white shirt with a high collar, bright cuffs, and polished shoes. His trousers were spotless. His hair was carefully combed and oiled.

He held a green parasol above his head.

It was an extraordinary sight in that ruined place.

The man greeted me politely.

I soon learned that he was the Company's chief accountant.

Part 5

I shook hands with this extraordinary man, and he told me at once that he was

the Company's chief accountant at that station. His voice was calm and polite, as though he were standing in a quiet office in Europe rather than in the middle of that wild and ruined place.

"I came outside for a moment to get some fresh air," he said.

The remark sounded strange to me. The air around us was hot, heavy, and full of strange smells. But he spoke as if he had stepped away from a comfortable desk in a city building.

I must say I respected the man immediately.

Everything around us was in disorder. Broken machinery lay everywhere. Workers moved aimlessly across the ground. The buildings were badly built and poorly maintained.

But this man remained perfectly neat and tidy.

His collar was stiff and white. His cuffs were spotless. His hair was carefully brushed.

In the middle of all that chaos, he kept up his appearance with great determination.

That required strength of character.

Later I asked him how he managed to keep his clothes so clean in such a place. He blushed slightly.

"I have taught one of the native women to wash my linen," he said modestly. "It was not easy. She did not like the work."

This simple remark impressed me.

The man had accomplished something real in that wilderness.

His office was inside one of the wooden buildings. Everything there was carefully arranged. His books and papers were perfectly orderly.

Outside, however, the station was a complete mess.

Black workers with wide, flat feet came and went constantly, carrying loads on their heads. Boxes of goods arrived from Europe—cheap cloth, beads, wire, and other small objects.

These things were sent deep into the forest.

In return, only a small amount of ivory came back.

I was forced to remain at that station for ten days.

It felt like an eternity.

I slept in a small hut in the yard. Whenever possible, I escaped the heat and confusion by sitting quietly in the accountant's office.

The building was poorly constructed. Sunlight entered through the cracks between the wooden boards, creating thin lines of bright light across the room.

The air inside was hot and filled with buzzing flies.

I usually sat on the floor while the accountant worked at his high desk.

He wrote constantly in his books. Sometimes he stood up to stretch his legs, but he always returned immediately to his writing.

His appearance remained perfect.

His clothes even carried a faint smell of perfume.

One day a sick man was brought into the office and placed on a small bed. He was an agent who had come down from the interior and had fallen dangerously ill.

The accountant was not pleased.

"The groans of this man disturb my work," he said gently. "It is very difficult to make correct entries in this climate."

He continued writing calmly while the sick man lay nearby.

One morning, while he was working, he spoke without lifting his head.

"You will probably meet Mr. Kurtz in the interior."

I looked up with interest.

"Who is Mr. Kurtz?" I asked.

The accountant paused briefly.

"He is one of the Company's best agents," he said. "A remarkable man."

I felt slightly disappointed by this vague description, but the accountant continued.

"He is in charge of a very important trading station deep in the interior," he said slowly. "The best ivory country in the region."

The accountant placed his pen carefully on the desk.

"Mr. Kurtz sends more ivory than all the other stations together."

Then he picked up his pen again and continued writing.

The sick man nearby had become too weak even to groan.

The flies buzzed steadily around the room.

Suddenly a loud noise came from outside. Many voices shouted at once. Feet stamped across the ground.

A caravan had arrived.

Through the thin walls we could hear the workers shouting loudly in their own language. In the middle of the noise another voice could be heard complaining bitterly again and again.

It was the chief agent of the station.

He seemed close to tears.

The accountant stood up slowly.

“What a terrible noise,” he said calmly.

He walked across the room and examined the sick man briefly.

Then he returned to his desk.

“He is not dead yet,” he said quietly.

The noise outside continued.

The accountant listened for a moment.

“When one must keep correct records,” he said thoughtfully, “one begins to hate those savages.”

He remained silent for a moment.

Then he turned toward me again.

“When you meet Mr. Kurtz,” he said, “please tell him that everything here is satisfactory.”

He gestured toward his books.

“I do not like to write letters to him. You never know who might read them along the way.”

He looked at me with his large pale eyes.

“He will go far,” he said slowly. “Very far indeed.”

The accountant believed that the leaders of the Company in Europe had great plans for Kurtz.

“They expect him to become someone important,” he added.

After that he returned to his writing.

Later, as I stepped outside, I paused for a moment at the door.

The scene before me struck me strongly.

Inside the office the sick agent lay quietly, almost unconscious.

The accountant bent over his books, writing careful entries about trade and ivory.

Outside the building, only fifty yards away, the grove of dying workers lay silent beneath the trees.

The contrast was terrible.

The next day I finally left that station.

I joined a caravan of sixty men who were traveling inland.

Our journey would cover two hundred miles through the forest.

It was the beginning of a long and exhausting march.

The path ran endlessly through tall grass, burned fields, thick bushes, and rocky hills.

There were paths everywhere.

Paths crossing and dividing again, spreading across the empty land like a network of lines.

Sometimes the trail passed through abandoned villages.

The huts were empty.

The people had fled long ago.

I could understand why.

Imagine, for example, that a group of armed strangers suddenly appeared in a peaceful English village.

They seized the farmers and forced them to carry heavy loads through the countryside.

Before long every house in that village would be empty.

That was exactly what had happened here.

Day after day we walked across the lonely land.

Sixty pairs of bare feet shuffled behind me, each man carrying a heavy load on

his head.

We marched.

We camped.

We slept.

Then we marched again.

Sometimes one of the carriers would collapse and die beside the path.

The others continued walking.

The silence of the forest surrounded us.

Occasionally, during the night, I heard distant drums.

The sound rose and fell slowly in the darkness.

It was strange and mysterious.

It seemed to carry some meaning that I could not understand.

On the fifteenth day of our journey, I finally saw the great river again.

By that time I was exhausted.

But my long journey was not yet over.

At last we reached the Central Station.

Part 6

When I finally reached the Central Station, I could hardly walk. The long march through the forest had exhausted me. My clothes were dirty, my boots worn, and my body weak from the heat and the endless walking.

The station stood beside a quiet backwater of the river. Thick bushes and trees surrounded it on all sides. On one side there was a wide stretch of foul-smelling mud. On the other sides a weak fence made of thin reeds tried to mark the boundary of the settlement.

The fence had a large gap that served as the gate.

The moment I looked at the place, I felt something strange.

Everything seemed loose and careless, as if no one truly controlled what happened there.

A few white men appeared slowly from the buildings when they saw me arrive.

They carried long sticks in their hands and walked with lazy steps. They looked at me with curiosity, then wandered away again without saying much.

One man approached me with great excitement. He was fat and had a thick black moustache. He spoke quickly and loudly, as if he had not spoken to anyone for many days.

The moment I told him my name, he began explaining everything at once.

“Your steamer has sunk,” he said.

I stared at him in disbelief.

“What?” I asked. “How did that happen?”

He waved his arms and spoke even faster.

“Oh, it is all right! Everything is perfectly correct! Everyone behaved splendidly—splendidly!”

His excitement made it difficult to understand him.

After several minutes I finally learned what had happened.

Two days earlier the station manager had decided to travel upriver with my steamboat. They had placed a volunteer captain in charge and hurried away without waiting for my arrival.

After only three hours of travel, the steamer struck rocks near the southern bank of the river. The bottom was torn open, and the boat sank.

I stood there in silence.

My entire purpose for coming to that place had disappeared.

The man with the moustache continued talking loudly.

“You must see the manager at once,” he said. “He is waiting for you.”

I followed him toward one of the huts.

At that time I did not yet understand the real meaning of the accident. Now, when I think back, I suspect there may have been more to it than simple carelessness. But at that moment it only seemed like an enormous inconvenience.

My steamboat lay at the bottom of the river.

I would have to recover it piece by piece before I could continue my journey.

The work of raising and repairing the wreck took many months.

The next morning I began the task.

But before that I had my first meeting with the manager of the Central Station.
The meeting was strange.

I had walked twenty miles that morning, yet when I entered his hut he did not invite me to sit down.

The manager looked like an ordinary man in every way. His face, his body, his voice—all were completely average.

Only his eyes seemed unusual.

They were pale blue and very cold.

When he looked directly at someone, his gaze struck like the edge of an axe. Yet the rest of his face remained calm and expressionless.

His lips carried a faint smile that was not really a smile.

It appeared briefly after he spoke, then disappeared again.

I could never fully understand it.

The man himself was not impressive. He had no special intelligence and no great ability. He had spent many years trading in that country and had slowly risen to his present position.

He inspired neither respect nor affection among the other agents.

Yet they all obeyed him.

The reason was simple.

He possessed one powerful advantage.

He never became ill.

Many of the agents died quickly in that terrible climate. Fever, disease, and exhaustion destroyed them one by one.

But the manager remained healthy.

Three times he had completed three-year terms in the interior and survived.

That alone made him powerful.

When he returned to Europe on leave, he behaved proudly and spent money lavishly. But here in Africa he ruled the station quietly and carefully.

One strange remark of his remained in my memory.

Once, when nearly every agent in the station had fallen sick, he said calmly, "Men who come here should have no entrails."

Then he sealed the remark with that small mysterious smile.

It was as if he possessed some secret darkness inside himself.

When the white agents quarreled about their places at the dining table, he solved the problem in a peculiar way.

He ordered a huge round table to be built.

Whoever sat beside him was considered to hold the first place.

Everyone else was simply nowhere.

This arrangement satisfied him completely.

He was neither polite nor rude.

He simply remained quiet and watched everything.

Even his young servant—a spoiled boy from the coast—treated the white men with open disrespect, and the manager allowed it.

The moment I entered his hut, he began speaking quickly.

He said he had been forced to leave the station earlier than planned because the upriver stations needed supplies. He had no choice but to depart without me.

Now the situation was serious.

No one knew what had happened to the agents far inland. Some might already be dead.

He repeated several times that the situation was “very grave.”

I tried to explain that I needed time to examine the wreck of my steamer.

But he hardly listened.

He kept repeating one name again and again.

“Mr. Kurtz,” he said. “Ah, Mr. Kurtz.”

Apparently this man was the chief agent at the most distant station.

There were rumors that he had fallen dangerously ill.

The manager seemed extremely worried.

“He is my best agent,” he said. “An exceptional man. The Company depends greatly on him.”

By this time I was tired, hungry, and annoyed.

I interrupted him.

“How long will it take before the steamer can travel again?” he demanded.

I answered impatiently.

“How can I know? I have not even seen the wreck. It may take several months.”

He considered this quietly.

“Three months,” he said at last. “Yes. Three months should be enough.”

I left his hut feeling irritated.

I believed him to be a foolish man.

Only later did I realize how exactly he had predicted the time required.

The next day I began my work.

The wreck of the steamer had to be pulled from the river. Every piece of metal had to be repaired or replaced.

The task was difficult and slow.

For months I worked almost without rest.

In this way I avoided the strange atmosphere of the station.

Because whenever I looked around, I saw the same strange scene.

White men wandered aimlessly through the yard carrying long sticks.

They spoke constantly about one thing.

Ivory.

The word seemed to fill the air.

It was whispered, sighed, and spoken with excitement.

They spoke of ivory as if it were something sacred.

As if it were something holy.

But the greed behind those whispers made the whole place feel unreal.

Beyond the station fence the forest stood silent and watchful.

It seemed patient.

As if it knew that this foolish invasion would one day disappear.

The wilderness waited quietly for its moment.

And all around us the endless jungle watched.

Part 7

Those months at the Central Station passed slowly.

I spent most of my time working on the wreck of the steamer. The vessel lay half buried in the mud near the bank of the river. Piece by piece we raised the broken parts and carried them back to the station for repair.

The work was difficult and frustrating.

Every nail, every board, every piece of metal had to be repaired by hand. Nothing useful existed in that place. Tools were missing. Supplies arrived late or not at all.

Yet this hard work was a kind of relief to me.

As long as I worked beside the steamer, I could forget the strange life of the station.

Whenever I turned toward the buildings, however, the same strange scene appeared.

White men wandered aimlessly across the yard with their long walking sticks. They spoke little to one another, but they were always watching each other carefully.

Their conversations were full of whispering and suspicion.

They seemed to spend their days waiting.

Waiting for promotion.

Waiting for ivory.

Waiting for something that never seemed to arrive.

I began to call them the pilgrims.

They always carried their long sticks as if they were sacred staffs, and they spoke of ivory with almost religious excitement.

The word "ivory" floated constantly through the air.

It was whispered quietly.

It was spoken loudly.

It was sighed like a prayer.

Sometimes it seemed that the men worshipped it.

Their desire for ivory poisoned everything around them.

They argued constantly among themselves. They spread rumors and lies about one another. They tried to gain advantage in small and foolish ways.

But none of them ever lifted a finger to do any real work.

They simply waited and hoped to be sent to a station where large amounts of ivory could be collected.

There they could earn commissions and become rich.

That was their only dream.

One evening something unusual happened.

I was sitting quietly beside my dismantled steamer, smoking my pipe. The sun had just set, and the air had become cooler.

Suddenly flames rose into the sky.

A large grass shed at the station had caught fire.

The flames spread quickly through the dry building. Inside were stored many goods—cloth, beads, cotton prints, and other trade items.

The fire burned fiercely.

The white agents ran around shouting and waving their arms. Some tried to carry water in buckets.

I watched them from the riverbank.

The man with the black moustache ran down to the river with a tin bucket. He filled it quickly and rushed back toward the fire.

“Everyone is behaving splendidly!” he shouted as he ran past me.

Only after he had gone did I notice that the bottom of his bucket had a large hole.

I walked slowly up the hill.

There was no hurry.

The fire had already destroyed the shed.

The flames had burned high for a short time, lighting the whole station with a bright red glow. Then they suddenly collapsed.

The building became a pile of glowing embers.

Nearby, a black worker was being beaten.

Someone said he had caused the fire.

The poor man screamed loudly as he was struck again and again.

Later I saw him sitting weakly in the shade, trying to recover from his injuries.

After a few days he disappeared into the forest.

No one asked where he had gone.

As I approached the burning ruins, I heard two men speaking quietly behind me.

One of them was the manager.

The other man stood silently beside him.

I heard the name Kurtz spoken.

Then the manager said something strange.

“We must take advantage of this unfortunate accident.”

At that moment I stepped forward and greeted them.

“Good evening,” I said.

The manager turned to me quickly.

“Did you ever see anything like this?” he asked. “It is incredible.”

Then he walked away.

The other man remained standing beside me.

I had noticed him before at the station.

He was younger than most of the agents and dressed with great care. His small pointed beard and sharp nose gave him a slightly aristocratic appearance.

The other agents disliked him.

They believed he was secretly reporting their behavior to the manager.

Until that moment I had spoken to him only once or twice.

But now he began speaking with me politely, and soon we walked away together from the glowing ruins.

After a short time he invited me to visit his room in the main building.

When we entered, he lit a candle.

I immediately noticed something surprising.

The man possessed an entire candle for his own use.

At the Central Station that was a luxury.

Only the manager was normally allowed to use candles.

The walls of his room were decorated with native mats. Spears, knives, and shields hung on them like trophies.

I had been told that this man was responsible for making bricks at the station.
But during my entire stay I had never seen a single brick.
He had been waiting there for over a year.
Waiting for materials.
Waiting for orders.
Waiting for something.
Like everyone else at that station.
As we spoke, I slowly realized something.
The man was trying to question me carefully.
He asked about Europe.
He asked about important people in the Company.
He asked about acquaintances I might have in the city where the Company
headquarters were located.
His small eyes shone with curiosity as he watched me.
At first I was puzzled.
Then I became amused.
I decided to let him continue questioning me and see what he would discover.
In truth I knew almost nothing about the Company or its leaders.
My thoughts were filled only with the problem of repairing my steamer.
But the man seemed convinced that I possessed secret information.
Finally he became frustrated.
He yawned loudly to hide his irritation.
I stood up to leave.
At that moment I noticed a small oil painting hanging on the wall.
It showed a woman wearing a blindfold and carrying a torch.
The background was very dark.
The light of the torch illuminated her face in a strange and almost frightening
way.
I asked about the painting.
“Mr. Kurtz painted it,” the man replied.
He held the candle closer to the picture.

“He stayed here for some time last year while waiting to travel to his station in the interior.”

I looked again at the strange painting.

“Tell me,” I said, “who exactly is this Mr. Kurtz?”

The young man answered shortly.

“He is the chief of the Inner Station.”

Then he added quietly,

“And he is a remarkable man.”

Part 8

For a moment the young man said nothing more. He looked at the painting again, then turned away from it with a slight movement of impatience.

“He is a prodigy,” he said at last.

His voice had changed. It now carried a strange excitement.

“Mr. Kurtz,” he continued, “is an emissary of science, of progress, and of pity. Europe has sent him here for a great purpose.”

He began speaking faster, almost like a man delivering a speech.

“We need men like him,” he said. “Men with intelligence and sympathy. Men who can guide the work of civilization.”

I interrupted him quietly.

“Who says that?”

He shrugged.

“Many people,” he replied. “They write about it. They speak about it. And Mr. Kurtz is one of those chosen men.”

I looked at him with curiosity.

“Why do you think I should know all this?” I asked.

The man gave me a sharp glance.

“Because you belong to the same group,” he said. “The group that supports him.”

I laughed.

“I do not belong to any group,” I answered.

But he ignored my words.

“Mr. Kurtz is already the chief agent at the best station,” he continued. “Next year he may become assistant manager. And after that...”

He stopped speaking and looked at me carefully.

“You know what will happen after that,” he said quietly.

At last I understood what he believed.

My aunt’s letters had reached important people in Europe. Those people had recommended me to the Company. Somehow this young man had learned about it.

He thought I had powerful friends.

He believed I belonged to the same influential circle that supported Kurtz.

I nearly burst out laughing.

“Do you read the Company’s private letters?” I asked.

He did not answer.

His face darkened with irritation.

The conversation ended quickly after that.

He blew out the candle, and we stepped outside into the cool night air.

The moon had risen above the forest.

Its pale light covered the station yard.

Black workers moved slowly through the darkness, carrying water to pour over the glowing ruins of the burned shed. Steam rose softly from the hot embers.

Nearby the beaten worker continued to groan weakly.

Suddenly the man with the moustache appeared again.

“What terrible noise that fellow makes!” he said loudly. “But he deserves it! Punishment must follow wrongdoing.”

He nodded proudly.

“This will prevent future accidents.”

Then he noticed the young agent standing beside me.

At once his confident manner disappeared.

“Still awake?” he said nervously. “Of course—of course. Very natural. Good

night.”

He hurried away.

I walked toward the river.

The young agent followed me quietly.

After a moment he muttered angrily under his breath.

“A useless crowd,” he said. “Fools—all of them.”

In the distance I could see the other agents walking in small groups across the yard. Many still carried their long sticks.

I believe they even took those sticks to bed with them.

Beyond the station fence the forest stood tall and silent under the moonlight. It seemed immense and powerful.

The wilderness surrounded the little clearing of the station like a great wall.

The groans of the injured worker grew weaker behind us.

After a while I heard a hand touch my arm.

It was the young agent again.

“My dear sir,” he said politely, “I hope you will not misunderstand me.”

His voice sounded smooth and careful.

“You will meet Mr. Kurtz long before I do,” he continued. “Therefore I would not wish him to form a wrong opinion about me.”

I allowed him to keep talking.

As he spoke, it occurred to me that the man was hollow inside.

His words sounded impressive, but they seemed empty.

If I had pushed my finger into his chest, I felt that I might have discovered nothing there but a small handful of loose dust.

He had been planning for a long time to become assistant manager under the present manager.

But the rise of Kurtz threatened his plans.

Kurtz was already becoming famous in the Company.

The young agent could see his own future disappearing.

That was why he questioned me so carefully.

He hoped I might reveal some secret about Kurtz’s supporters in Europe.

But he learned nothing from me.

Eventually he grew tired of speaking and returned to the station buildings.

I remained by the river.

The forest seemed enormous in the moonlight.

The faint sounds of the station drifted toward me—voices, footsteps, the quiet hiss of steam rising from the burned shed.

But beyond those small human noises lay the great silence of the wilderness.

The jungle breathed slowly in the darkness.

It felt alive.

And it felt patient.

It seemed to watch the strange activities of the men at the station without interest.

As if it knew that they were only passing visitors.

Visitors who would not remain long.

That night I stood beside the river for a long time, thinking about Kurtz.

His name had already begun to fill the air of the station.

The agents spoke of him constantly.

Some admired him.

Others envied him.

Some feared him.

But none of them truly understood him.

I myself had not yet seen him.

And yet his presence already seemed to influence everything around us.

I did not know then that my entire journey into that country would soon revolve around that one mysterious man.

The next morning my work on the steamer continued.

Month after month I repaired the damaged vessel.

Slowly the pieces came together again.

At last the steamer was ready to travel upriver.

The time had come to continue my journey toward the Inner Station.

Toward Kurtz.

And toward the heart of the wilderness.

Part 9

At last the steamer was ready.

For three months I had worked constantly on the repairs. Piece by piece the broken vessel had come together again. When the final work was finished, the small steamer floated once more in the muddy water beside the station.

She was not beautiful.

She was a long, narrow boat with a tall pipe rising from the middle. Her deck was covered with rough boards, and a small wooden cabin stood near the wheel.

But to me she looked magnificent.

She was the only thing in that place that truly worked.

On the morning of our departure, the whole station gathered at the riverbank.

The pilgrims stood there with their long sticks. The manager watched quietly with his pale blue eyes. The young agent with the small beard also appeared, looking curious and thoughtful.

Several black workers loaded wood onto the deck. The steamer burned wood for fuel, and we needed large supplies for the long journey.

My crew consisted mostly of Africans from the coast. They had been trained to handle the boat and understood their duties well enough.

One of them served as my fireman.

His job was to feed wood into the furnace that powered the engine.

He was an impressive figure.

He wore a piece of cloth around his waist and a bright brass plate on his chest. His hair was carefully arranged in small curls, and his expression was very serious.

He treated his work with great dignity.

When he stood beside the furnace, he looked like a priest performing a sacred ceremony.

Soon everything was ready.

I gave the signal.

The engine began to beat slowly.

Thump... thump... thump...

Thick smoke rose from the tall pipe.

The steamer moved forward.

The river carried us slowly away from the Central Station.

I stood at the wheel.

The manager and the pilgrims grew smaller and smaller on the shore.

The wilderness closed around us.

At first the river was wide and calm. But the farther we traveled, the more difficult the navigation became.

Sandbanks appeared suddenly beneath the surface. Long branches from the forest hung low over the water. Sometimes the river twisted sharply between high walls of jungle.

I had to watch carefully every moment.

The forest stood on both sides of the river like an endless wall of dark green leaves.

The trees rose high above us.

Their branches formed thick roofs over the water.

It seemed as though the wilderness had existed for millions of years and would continue to exist long after we were gone.

Day after day we traveled deeper into the interior.

The river wound back and forth across the land like a great snake.

Sometimes it flowed through open marshland.

Sometimes it passed through narrow passages where the forest nearly touched the deck of the steamer.

The silence was enormous.

No villages appeared.

No fields.

No signs of human life.

Only the forest.

Occasionally we heard distant drums echoing through the trees.

The sound was strange and mysterious.
It seemed to carry messages from one hidden village to another.
But the villages themselves remained invisible.
One evening we noticed a small hut standing alone beside the river.
A thin column of smoke rose from its roof.
As we approached, a black man ran out of the hut and waved his arms wildly.
We stopped the steamer.
The man hurried down to the water's edge.
He spoke rapidly in a language none of us understood.
But soon he made his meaning clear.
He pointed urgently upriver.
Then he said one word that everyone on board understood.
"Kurtz!"
The name seemed to travel through the air like an echo.
We exchanged glances.
The man continued speaking excitedly.
He pointed again toward the interior and repeated the name.
"Kurtz! Kurtz!"
At last we understood.
Something had happened at the Inner Station.
The man seemed to say that Kurtz was ill.
Very ill.
We gave the man some food and continued our journey.
After that moment the name Kurtz seemed to follow us everywhere.
The manager's uncle was traveling on the steamer with us. He was a short, thick man with rough manners.
One evening he stood near me on the deck speaking quietly with his nephew.
They believed I could not hear them over the noise of the engine.
But their voices carried clearly through the night air.
"The chief agent will be dead within six months," the uncle said.
The manager answered calmly.

“Perhaps sooner.”

“Then you will be in charge,” the uncle continued.

“Perhaps,” the manager replied.

There was a short silence.

Then the uncle spoke again.

“But what about that man Kurtz?”

The manager hesitated.

“He is very ill,” he said at last.

The uncle laughed softly.

“If he dies, that will solve many problems.”

Their conversation ended there.

I stood at the wheel and watched the dark river ahead of us.

The jungle pressed closer on both sides.

Somewhere far upstream lay the Inner Station.

And there, waiting for us, was Kurtz.

The mysterious man whose name had already begun to fill my thoughts.

Part 10

As we continued upriver, the wilderness seemed to grow deeper and more ancient.

The river twisted endlessly through the forest. Sometimes it turned so sharply that we seemed to be going back the way we had come. The banks rose high above the water in some places, while in others the land sank into wide marshes covered with tall grass.

The forest never changed.

The same dark wall of trees stood on both sides of the river.

The same silence surrounded us.

Now and then we heard distant cries from the forest. Sometimes it sounded like laughter. Sometimes it sounded like anger. But we could never see who made the sounds.

It was impossible to tell whether the voices belonged to men or animals.

The feeling was strange.

We were traveling through a land that seemed older than humanity itself.

I often thought about the first men who had come to such places thousands of years ago. They must have felt the same fear and wonder.

Perhaps they had also traveled up rivers like this, facing the same mysterious forest.

One afternoon the steamer moved slowly around a wide bend in the river.

The sun was bright above us.

The air was heavy and hot.

Suddenly the forest exploded with noise.

A shower of arrows flew from the trees.

They struck the water around the steamer with sharp splashes.

Some of them landed on the deck.

My crew shouted in alarm.

The pilgrims immediately rushed forward with their rifles.

They began firing wildly into the forest.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The sound of gunfire echoed across the river.

Thick smoke rose around us.

I could see nothing through it.

“Stop firing!” I shouted.

But they continued shooting.

The forest itself seemed to roar with strange cries.

Hidden voices shouted and screamed among the trees.

Arrows continued to fall around us.

One of my crew suddenly collapsed beside the wheel.

An arrow had struck him in the side.

Blood flowed down his body.

The steamer drifted dangerously close to the bank.

I struggled to keep control of the wheel.

The engine beat faster.
The fireman worked desperately beside the furnace, feeding wood into the fire.
The thick smoke from the engine mixed with the smoke from the rifles.
For a moment everything was confusion.
The pilgrims fired again and again into the forest.
But their shooting had no clear target.
They were firing blindly into the jungle.
I shouted at them again.
“Stop! You will hit our own men!”
At last they lowered their rifles.
The arrows stopped falling.
The cries from the forest faded away.
Slowly the river grew quiet again.
The wounded helmsman lay on the deck beside me.
His breathing became weaker.
I knelt beside him.
He looked up at me with wide eyes.
He tried to speak but could not.
Blood filled his mouth.
A moment later his body became still.
He was dead.
I stood up slowly.
The pilgrims gathered around us.
One of them examined the arrow.
“Savages,” he said with anger.
Another man looked toward the forest nervously.
“They were trying to stop us,” he said.
But why?
I began to wonder about that.
Why had the attack happened at that exact place?
The answer came to me suddenly.

They were trying to protect someone.
Someone who lived farther upriver.
Someone important.
Kurtz.
The steamer continued its journey.
The forest remained silent again.
The body of the dead helmsman lay on the deck.
I wrapped it carefully in cloth.
After a short time we pushed the body gently into the river.
The current carried it away.
None of the pilgrims seemed troubled by the death.
They returned to their rifles and began talking excitedly about the attack.
One of them even said he wished the attackers had come closer so he could shoot them more easily.
I said nothing.
My thoughts were elsewhere.
The attack had revealed something important.
There were people in the forest who were loyal to Kurtz.
Loyal enough to fight and die for him.
That realization made the name Kurtz seem even more mysterious.
Who was this man?
What kind of power did he hold over the people of the wilderness?
The answer waited for us farther upriver.
And the river continued to carry us slowly toward it.

Part 11

After the attack the river became quiet again. The steamer moved slowly forward through the wide brown water. The forest on both sides stood silent, as if nothing had happened. Only a few arrows still lay on the deck, reminding everyone of the sudden violence that had burst from the trees.

The pilgrims gathered around the place where the helmsman had fallen. One of them picked up an arrow and examined it carefully.

“Poor fellow,” he said. “Still, it might have been worse.”

Marlow knew what the man meant. If the helmsman had not been standing beside him at the wheel, the arrow might easily have struck Marlow instead.

Marlow looked down at the deck. The man had fallen directly at his feet. His blood had spread across the boards and onto Marlow’s shoes. It was a strange feeling. Marlow had seen death before during his travels, but this death had happened suddenly and without warning.

Only a few minutes earlier the man had been steering the boat calmly beside him. Now he had vanished from the world.

The pilgrims soon lost interest in the matter. They began discussing the attack with excitement. Some of them even laughed. One man said loudly that he hoped the attackers would return so he could shoot them properly next time. Another complained that he had not been able to see his targets clearly through the smoke.

Their voices sounded foolish and empty.

They did not understand what had really happened.

The attack had not been an attempt to destroy the steamer. If the people in the forest had truly wanted to stop them, they could have done so easily. Instead they had tried only to frighten the travelers.

Perhaps they hoped the steamer would turn back.

Perhaps they wanted to delay its arrival.

But they had not tried to sink it.

Marlow began to believe that the people in the forest were protecting someone farther upriver. Someone important to them. Someone who did not want the steamer to arrive too soon.

That someone could only be Kurtz.

For a long time Marlow stood at the wheel thinking about him. The name seemed to grow larger and larger in his mind.

He had heard many different things about Kurtz.

According to the accountant at the Outer Station, he was the Company’s most

successful agent. According to the young brickmaker at the Central Station, he was a brilliant and important man. According to the manager, he was dangerously ill. And according to the attack they had just experienced, he was a man whom the people of the forest were willing to defend.

What kind of man could inspire such loyalty?

The river continued winding deeper into the wilderness.

Toward evening the steamer approached a small clearing beside the bank. In the middle of the clearing stood a simple wooden hut. A long pole rose above the hut, and from the top of the pole hung a piece of white cloth.

It looked like a flag.

Marlow ordered the steamer to stop.

They moved slowly toward the shore.

As they approached, a thin white man ran out of the hut and waved his arms wildly.

“Welcome! Welcome!” he shouted in English.

His voice sounded cheerful and excited.

The pilgrims stared at him with surprise.

The man hurried down to the water’s edge and greeted them warmly as they stepped onto the shore. His clothes were patched and worn. His face was thin and sunburned, yet his eyes shone with energy. He seemed delighted to see them.

“I have been waiting for you,” he said eagerly. “Waiting for months!”

Marlow asked him who he was.

“I am a trader,” the man replied proudly. “I live here alone.”

He explained that he collected ivory from the villages in the surrounding region. Then he sold the ivory to the Company when their steamer arrived.

His hut was filled with small piles of ivory tusks.

Suddenly his expression became serious.

“You must go on quickly,” he said.

“Mr. Kurtz is very ill.”

At the sound of that name the pilgrims leaned forward with excitement.

“How far is the Inner Station?” one of them asked.

The trader pointed upriver.

“Only a few miles now,” he said.

Then he lowered his voice.

“You must be careful.”

“Why?” Marlow asked.

The trader hesitated. He looked toward the forest behind his hut.

Then he spoke quietly.

“The people here are devoted to Mr. Kurtz.”

He paused again.

“They do not want him taken away.”

His words confirmed Marlow’s suspicions. The attack on the steamer had been meant to stop them—to protect Kurtz.

The trader climbed aboard the steamer with them. He would guide them the rest of the way.

The engine began to beat again.

Slowly the steamer pushed away from the shore.

The final part of the journey had begun.

Ahead of them lay the Inner Station.

And the mysterious man whose shadow already seemed to cover the entire wilderness.

Part 12

The trader stood beside Marlow on the deck as the steamer moved slowly upriver. He seemed unable to remain still. He talked constantly, pointing toward the forest, the riverbanks, and the distant trees as if everything around them were full of meaning.

“You see,” he said excitedly, “the people here adore Mr. Kurtz.”

He leaned closer and lowered his voice.

“They would do anything for him.”

Marlow watched the river ahead while the trader continued speaking.

“When I first arrived here,” the man said, “I did not understand it either. But soon I saw that Mr. Kurtz is not like other men.”

The trader paused and smiled slightly.

“He has ideas.”

The pilgrims listened carefully.

“Ideas?” one of them asked.

The trader nodded.

“Yes. He speaks about great things. He speaks about bringing light to the wilderness.”

He gestured toward the endless forest.

“The tribes listen to him as if he were a spirit.”

The steamer moved slowly around a bend in the river.

Suddenly the trader pointed ahead.

“There!” he said.

“That is the place.”

On the bank stood a group of rough wooden buildings. They were smaller and more irregular than the buildings at the Central Station. The clearing around them looked strangely empty. No workers moved about. No voices could be heard.

The place seemed abandoned.

As the steamer approached, Marlow noticed something odd. Tall poles stood in front of the buildings. At the top of each pole something dark had been placed.

At first Marlow thought they were decorative carvings.

But as the steamer came closer he felt a sudden chill.

They were not carvings.

They were human heads.

The heads had been cut from their bodies and placed carefully on the poles. Their faces were turned toward the house. Some were shriveled by the sun. Others still showed their teeth in strange expressions.

The sight shocked the pilgrims. Several of them stepped backward on the deck.

But the trader seemed almost proud of the display.

“They are rebels,” he said calmly.

“Mr. Kurtz punished them.”

Marlow felt a strange sensation inside him.

The wilderness had always seemed silent and patient. But here at the Inner Station something else had appeared. Something violent. Something dark.

The steamer moved slowly to the bank.

A group of black figures stood near the buildings watching them. They wore strange ornaments and carried long spears. Their bodies were painted with bright colors.

Yet they did not attack.

They simply watched.

Among them stood a tall woman.

She was magnificent.

Her body was strong and proud. Around her neck she wore many necklaces of ivory and brass. Her hair was decorated with bright feathers.

She looked at the steamer with intense eyes.

The trader spoke quietly.

“She is very powerful among the tribes,” he said.

“She is devoted to Mr. Kurtz.”

At that moment several men came out of the largest building. They carried something on a small stretcher. As they approached the river Marlow could see the shape of a human body lying on it.

The trader stepped forward eagerly.

“That is Mr. Kurtz,” he whispered.

The men placed the stretcher on the deck of the steamer.

Marlow looked down at the figure.

Kurtz was extremely thin. His face looked like a skull covered with yellow skin. His eyes were large and bright, and they burned with strange intensity.

For a moment he stared directly at Marlow.

His lips moved weakly.

“The steamer...” he whispered.

His voice was barely audible.

“You have come.”

The manager approached and spoke quickly to him.

Kurtz listened without expression.

Then he closed his eyes.

The trader looked very troubled.

“He must not be taken away,” he said quietly.

“The people here will not accept it.”

But the manager ignored him.

He ordered the crew to prepare for departure immediately.

The stretcher was placed inside the small cabin of the steamer. Kurtz lay there silently, breathing with difficulty.

Outside on the riverbank the tribespeople began to gather. They stood in large numbers among the trees. Their spears shone in the sunlight.

The tall woman stood at the front of the group.

She slowly raised her arms toward the steamer.

Her face showed both anger and grief.

The trader stepped forward and shouted something in their language. His voice echoed across the clearing.

The tribespeople hesitated.

Then slowly they stepped back into the forest.

The engine of the steamer began to beat again.

Smoke rose from the tall pipe.

The boat moved away from the bank.

As the steamer turned downriver, Marlow looked back once more. The tall woman still stood at the edge of the forest with her arms raised toward the departing boat.

The wilderness slowly closed around her.

And Kurtz lay dying inside the cabin.

Part 13

As the steamer moved slowly away from the Inner Station, the forest closed behind it once again. The figures on the shore became smaller and smaller until the tall woman and the silent crowd disappeared among the trees.

The river carried the steamer back down toward the Central Station.

Inside the small cabin Kurtz lay on a narrow bed. Marlow visited him several times during the first evening. Kurtz looked extremely weak. His body seemed almost weightless beneath the blanket. His thin arms lay beside him like sticks. Yet his eyes burned with a strange and powerful light. They were the eyes of a man whose mind still possessed enormous energy.

The manager stayed close to the cabin door, watching everything carefully. He spoke quietly to the pilgrims, giving instructions in a low voice. Marlow noticed that he did not like to leave Kurtz alone with anyone.

That night the river was calm. The engine beat slowly beneath Marlow's feet as he stood at the wheel. The forest passed silently on both sides.

Late in the night one of the crew members came running to him.

"The man in the cabin," he said. "He is gone."

Marlow hurried to the cabin.

The bed was empty.

Kurtz had disappeared.

The manager looked pale and furious.

"He has crawled away," he said quietly.

"Into the forest."

For a moment no one moved.

Then Marlow understood.

Kurtz had not wanted to leave that place. Even in his weak condition he had tried to escape.

Marlow took a lantern and walked down a narrow path leading into the forest. The night air was warm and heavy. The jungle seemed alive with quiet sounds—the whisper of leaves, distant cries of animals, the slow breathing of the wilderness.

After a short distance he saw a shape moving ahead of him.

It was Kurtz.

The man was crawling slowly across the ground. His thin body dragged forward with surprising determination.

When he heard Marlow's footsteps he turned his head.

For a moment the two men stared at each other in the dim lantern light.

Kurtz's eyes shone with anger.

"You..." he whispered.

Marlow stood silently.

"You must come back," he said quietly.

Kurtz tried to rise but fell back again. For a moment he seemed ready to shout. Then he stopped.

His voice became calm.

"You do not understand," he said slowly.

"This... this is my place."

He lifted one trembling hand toward the dark forest around them.

"All this... belongs to me."

His words were strange, yet Marlow understood their meaning.

Kurtz had ruled that wilderness like a king. The tribes had obeyed him. The ivory had flowed to his station. He had possessed enormous power there.

And now that power was slipping away.

He could not bear to lose it.

Marlow spoke gently.

"If you remain here," he said, "you will die."

Kurtz laughed weakly.

"Perhaps," he murmured.

"But I have lived."

His voice faded.

For a long moment they remained silent.

Finally Kurtz allowed Marlow to help him stand. Slowly they walked back toward the steamer.

When they reached the riverbank, the manager was waiting for them.

He said nothing.

But his pale eyes watched Kurtz closely.

After that night Kurtz no longer tried to escape.

His strength faded rapidly.

During the long journey downriver he spoke often. Sometimes he spoke calmly about his plans and ideas. He spoke about the great work he had hoped to accomplish in the wilderness.

At other times he spoke wildly. He talked about power, about the tribes who had worshipped him, about the ivory he had gathered.

His voice rose and fell in strange bursts of excitement.

Marlow sat beside him many nights listening to his words.

Even in his weakness Kurtz possessed a powerful mind. His thoughts were bold and intense.

But something terrible had happened to him in the wilderness.

Something had broken inside his soul.

One evening Kurtz called Marlow to his side.

“My papers,” he whispered.

Marlow found a bundle of documents tied together with string.

“Keep them safe,” Kurtz said.

“They must reach Europe.”

His eyes searched Marlow’s face.

“Promise me.”

Marlow nodded.

“I promise.”

Kurtz closed his eyes with relief.

The next night his breathing became weaker.

The air inside the cabin felt heavy and still.

Marlow sat beside him quietly.

Suddenly Kurtz opened his eyes.

They were wide and full of terror.

He seemed to see something beyond the walls of the cabin—something terrible and invisible.

His lips moved slowly.
Then he spoke two words.
“The horror... the horror...”
His voice faded into silence.
A moment later Kurtz was dead.

Part 14

After Kurtz died, the steamer continued its journey downriver. The forest moved slowly past on both sides, just as it had before. The same trees, the same silent water, and the same heavy air surrounded the boat.

Yet everything felt different.

Kurtz was gone.

The powerful voice that had once filled the wilderness had fallen silent.

His body was wrapped carefully and placed on the deck.

The pilgrims spoke about him for a short time. Some praised his success in collecting ivory. Others spoke quietly about his strange behavior in the interior.

But before long they lost interest. Soon the word “ivory” returned to their conversations. They began speaking again about trade, commissions, and promotion. It seemed as if Kurtz had already begun to disappear from their memories.

Only Marlow continued thinking about him. Kurtz’s last words remained in his mind.

“The horror... the horror...”

Those words seemed to contain a final judgment.

It was as if, in that last moment of life, Kurtz had looked clearly at something terrible—something that existed both inside himself and in the world around him—and had understood it completely.

Perhaps that understanding had been the final victory of his soul. Marlow could not say. The steamer finally returned to the Central Station.

The manager immediately took charge of Kurtz’s belongings. Boxes of papers,

letters, and documents were carried away and examined carefully. Marlow watched him closely.

At last the manager approached.

“Mr. Kurtz’s papers,” he said calmly. “You were close to him during his final days.”

Marlow handed him several documents. But he kept the packet of personal papers Kurtz had given him. The manager looked at him with his cold blue eyes.

For a moment Marlow thought the man might demand the remaining papers. But the manager only smiled slightly.

“Very well,” he said.

Then he walked away.

Soon afterward Marlow left Africa. His work for the Company was finished. The long voyage across the sea back to Europe felt strange.

The cities of Europe seemed quiet and comfortable compared with the wilderness he had left behind.

The streets were full of ordinary people living their normal lives. They walked, talked, laughed, and worried about small everyday matters.

None of them knew anything about the distant forests and rivers where Kurtz had lived. None of them knew what had happened there. Kurtz’s name, which had once filled the wilderness, meant nothing to them.

Yet in Europe Marlow began meeting people who had known Kurtz. They came to speak with him after hearing that he had been with Kurtz at the end.

One man was a journalist. He believed Kurtz had been a great political thinker. Another man was a relative who believed Kurtz had been a brilliant musician. Each person imagined Kurtz in a different way. None of them truly understood him.

Finally Marlow visited a woman who had loved Kurtz deeply. She was his fiancée. She lived in a quiet house in a large city.

When Marlow entered her drawing room, he noticed how dark the room felt. Heavy curtains covered the windows, and only a little light entered the room.

She came forward to greet him. Her face was pale but beautiful. Her eyes

looked serious and full of devotion.

“You knew him well,” she said softly.

Marlow hesitated. In truth he had known Kurtz only during the final weeks of his life. But she believed he had been Kurtz’s closest friend. They sat together in silence for a moment.

Then she began speaking about Kurtz. She spoke about his intelligence, his ideals, and the great future he had promised. Her voice trembled with emotion.

“He was a remarkable man,” she said.

“Yes,” Marlow answered quietly.

Outside the window the evening slowly grew darker. The room filled with shadows. At last she asked the question she had been waiting to ask.

“Tell me,” she said softly, “what were his final words?”

For a moment Marlow could not speak. He remembered the dark cabin of the steamer. He remembered Kurtz’s dying face. He remembered the terrible understanding in his eyes.

“The horror... the horror...”

Those had been Kurtz’s final words.

But Marlow could not repeat them to her. The world she lived in was peaceful and full of hope. He could not destroy that world.

So he answered differently. He told her the last word Kurtz had spoken.

“Your name,” he said.

She closed her eyes. Tears filled them slowly.

“I knew it,” she whispered.

“I knew he would think of me at the end.”

The room grew darker. Outside, night had fallen over the quiet city.

And far away, beyond the sea, the great river continued to flow through the silent wilderness.