

THE DREAM OF THE CELT

MARIO VARGAS LLOSA

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH

BY EDITH GROSSMAN

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In Jail 1916 ~~Conrad~~ ^{Conrad's} ~~with~~ ^{friends}

Ireland, and even radical nationalists who demanded total independence for Ireland. In the elegant, book-lined rooms of the house on Grosvenor Road, where Alice preserved the library of her late husband, the historian John Richard Green, Roger met W. B. Yeats, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, George Bernard Shaw, G. K. Chesterton, John Galsworthy, Robert Cunningham Graham, and many other writers.

"I have a question I almost asked Gee yesterday but didn't have the courage. Did Conrad sign the petition? My lawyer and Gee haven't mentioned his name."

Alice shook her head.

"I wrote to him myself, asking for his signature," she added with annoyance. "His reasons were confused. He's always been slippery in political matters. Perhaps, as an assimilated British citizen, he doesn't feel very secure. On the other hand, as a Pole, he hates Germany as much as Russia, both of which made his country disappear for so many centuries. In short, I don't know. All your friends regret this very much. One can be a great writer and a coward in political matters. You know that better than anyone, Roger."

Roger agreed. He regretted having asked the question. It would have been better not to know. The absence of that signature would torment him now just as it had tormented him to learn from his lawyer, Gavan Duffy, that Edmund D. Morel had not wanted to sign the petition for a commutation of his sentence either. His friend, his brother Bulldog! His companion in the struggle to assist the natives of the Congo also refused, claiming reasons of patriotic loyalty in wartime.

"Conrad's not having signed won't change things very much," said the historian. "His political influence with the Asquith government is nil."

"No, of course not," Roger agreed.

Perhaps it had no importance in the success or failure of the petition, but for him, in his heart of hearts, it did. It would have done him good to recall, in the fits of despair that assailed him in his cell, that a person of Conrad's prestige, admired by so many people—himself included—had helped at this critical moment and sent him, with his signature, a message of understanding and friendship.

"You met him a long time ago, didn't you?" Alice asked, as if reading his thoughts.

"Twenty-six years ago exactly. In June 1890, in the Congo," Roger specified. "He wasn't a writer yet. Though, if I remember correctly, he told me he had begun a novel. No doubt it was *Almayer's Folly*, the first one he published. He sent it to me, with a dedication. I still have the book somewhere. He hadn't published anything yet. He was a sailor. You could barely understand his English, his Polish accent was so thick."

"You still can't understand him," Alice said with a smile. "He still speaks English with that awful accent. As if he were 'chewing pebbles,' as Bernard Shaw says. But he writes it like an angel, whether we like him or not."

Roger recalled the day in June 1890 when, perspiring in the humid heat and bothered by the bites of mosquitoes gorging on his foreigner's skin, the young captain in the British merchant fleet arrived in Maradi. About thirty, with a high forehead, deep black beard, robust body, and deep-set eyes, his name was Konrad Korzeniewski, a Pole who had become a British citizen a few years earlier. Contracted by the Société Anonyme pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo, he came to serve as captain of one of the small steamboats that carried goods and merchants back and forth between Leopoldville-Kinshasa and the distant cataracts of Stanley Falls in Kisangani. It was his first position as a ship's captain, and he was filled with hopes and projects. He arrived in the Congo imbued with all the fantasies and myths used by Leopold II to create the image of a great humanitarian, a monarch determined to civilize Africa and free the Congolese from slavery, paganism, and other barbarities. In spite of his long experience sailing the seas of Asia and the Americas, his gift for languages, and his readings, there was something innocent and childlike in the Pole that charmed Roger immediately. The feeling was mutual, for from the day they met until three weeks later, when Korzeniewski left in the company of thirty porters on the caravan route to Leopoldville-Kinshasa, where he would take command of his ship *Le roi des Belges*, they saw each other morning, noon, and night.

They went for excursions in the environs of Maradi, as far as the now nonexistent Vivi, the first, transitory capital of the colony of which not even the rubble remained, and the mouth of the Mpozo River where, according to legend, the first rapids of Livingstone Falls and the Devil's Cauldron had stopped the Portuguese Diego

Cão four centuries earlier. On the Lafundi plain, Roger showed the young Pole the place where Henry Morton Stanley built his first house, which disappeared years later in a fire. But, above all, they talked a good deal about a great number of things, though principally about what was going on in the new Congo Free State where Konrad had just set foot and Roger had already spent six years. After a few days of their friendship, the Polish mariner had formed an idea of the place where he had come to work that was very different from the one he had brought with him. And, as he told Roger when they said goodbye at dawn on Saturday, June 28, 1890, en route to the Crystal Mountains, he had been "deflowered." That is how he said it, in his gravelly, stony, sonorous accent: "You've deflowered me, Casement. About Leopold the Second, about the Congo Free State. Perhaps even about life." And he repeated, dramatically: "Deflowered."

They saw each other again several times, on Roger's trips to London, and exchanged a few letters. Thirteen years after that first meeting, in June 1903, Roger, who was in England, received an invitation from Joseph Conrad (that was his name now, and he was already a prestigious writer) to spend a weekend at Pent Farm, his small country house in Hythe, Kent. The novelist led a frugal, solitary life there with his wife and son. Roger had a warm memory of those few days with the writer. Now he had silver in his hair and a thick beard, he had put on weight and acquired a certain intellectual arrogance in the way he expressed himself. But with Casement he was exceptionally effusive. When Roger congratulated him on his Congolese novel, *Heart of Darkness*, which he had just read and which had stirred him deeply because it was the most extraordinary description of the horrors people were living through in the Congo, Conrad cut him short with his hands.

"You should have appeared as co-author of that book, Casement," he declared, patting him on the shoulder. "I never would have written it without your help. You removed the scales from my eyes. About Africa, about the Congo Free State. And about the human beast."

Alone after dinner—the discreet Mrs. Conrad, a woman of very humble background, and the child had gone to bed—the writer, following the second glass of port, told Roger that for what he was doing to help the indigenous Congolese, he deserved to be called

"the British Bartolomé de las Casas." Roger blushed to the roots of his hair at such praise. How was it possible that someone who had so high an opinion of him, who had helped him and Edmund D. Morel so much in their campaign against Leopold II, had refused to sign a petition that asked only for his death sentence to be commuted? How could that compromise him with the government?

He recalled other occasional meetings with Conrad on his visits to London. They saw each other once at Roger's club, the Wellington Club on Grosvenor Place, when he was with colleagues from the Foreign Office. The writer insisted that Roger stay to have a cognac with him after his companions had left. They recalled the sailor's disastrous state of mind six months after he had passed through Matadi, when he returned. Roger was still working there, in charge of stores and transport. Konrad Korzeniowski was not even a shadow of the enthusiastic young man full of hope Roger had met half a year earlier. He looked years older, his nerves were frayed, and he had stomach problems because of parasites. Constant diarrhea caused him to lose many pounds. Embittered and pessimistic, he dreamed only of returning to London as soon as possible to put himself in the hands of real doctors.

"I can see the jungle has not been kind to you, Konrad. Don't be alarmed. Malaria is like that, it takes time to leave even when the fever has disappeared."

They talked after supper on the terrace of the small house that was Roger's home and office. There was no moon or stars on this night in Matadi, but it wasn't raining and the drone of the insects lulled them as they smoked and sipped from the glasses in their hands.

"The worst thing wasn't the jungle, this unhealthy climate, the fevers that kept me semiconscious for close to two weeks," the Pole complained. "Not even the ghastly dysentery that kept me shitting blood for five days in a row. The worst, the worst thing, Casement, was witnessing the horrible things that happen every day in this damn country. The things the black devils and the white devils do wherever you look."

Konrad had made a voyage in *Le roi des Belges*, back and forth between Leopoldville–Kinshasa and Stanley Falls. Everything had gone wrong on that trip to Kisangani. He almost drowned when a canoe overturned and its inexperienced rowers were trapped in a whirlpool

near Kinshasa. Malaria kept him in bed in his small cabin with attacks of fever, without the strength to stand. There he learned that the previous captain of *Le roi des Belges* had been shot dead by arrows in a dispute with the natives of a village. Another official of the Société Anonyme pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo, whom Konrad had gone to pick up in a remote settlement where he was harvesting ivory and rubber, died of an unknown disease in the course of the voyage. But the physical misfortunes that had plagued him were not what had so disturbed the Pole.

"It's the moral corruption, the corruption of the soul that invades everything in this country," he repeated in a hollow, gloomy voice, as if horrified by an apocalyptic vision.

"I tried to prepare you when we first met," Roger reminded him. "I'm sorry I wasn't more explicit about what you were going to find on the Upper Congo."

What had affected him so deeply? Discovering that very primitive practices like cannibalism were still current in some communities? That among the tribes and in commercial posts, slaves were still circulating who changed masters for a few francs? That the supposed liberators subjected the Congolese to even crueler forms of oppression and servitude? Had he been overwhelmed by the sight of the natives' backs cut by the lash of the *chicote*? Did he see for the first time in his life a white flog a black until his body had been transformed into a crossword puzzle of wounds? He didn't ask for details, but the captain of *Le roi des Belges* had undoubtedly been witness to terrible things when he waived his three-year contract in order to return to England as soon as possible. Further, he told Roger that in Leopoldville—Kinshasa, on his return from Stanley Falls, he'd had a violent argument with the director of the Société Anonyme pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo, Camille Delcommune, whom he called a "savage in a vest and hat." Now he wanted to return to civilization, which for him meant England.

"Have you read *Heart of Darkness*?" Roger asked Alice. "Do you think that vision of human beings is fair?"

"I assume it isn't," replied the historian. "We discussed it a great deal one Tuesday, after it came out. That novel is a parable according to which Africa turns the civilized Europeans who go there into barbarians. Your Congo report showed the opposite. That we Europeans were the ones who brought the worst barbarities there. Be-

sides, you were in Africa for twenty years without becoming a savage. In fact, you came back more civilized than when you left here believing in the virtues of colonialism and the Empire."

"Conrad said that in the Congo, the moral corruption of human beings rose to the surface, in whites as well as blacks. *Heart of Darkness* often kept me awake. I don't think it describes the Congo, or reality, or history, but hell. The Congo is a pretext for expressing the awful vision that certain Catholics have of absolute evil."

"I'm sorry to interrupt," said the guard, turning toward them. "It's been fifteen minutes and the visitor's permit was for ten. You'll have to say goodbye."

Roger extended his hand to Alice, but to his surprise, she opened her arms. She gave him a warm embrace. "We'll keep doing everything, everything, to save your life, Roger," she whispered in his ear. He thought: *For Alice to permit herself this much effusiveness, she must be convinced the petition will be rejected.*

As he returned to his cell, he felt sad. Would he see Alice Stopford Green again? She represented so much to him! No one embodied as much as she did his passion for Ireland, the last of his passions, the most intense, the most recalcitrant, a passion that had consumed him and probably would send him to his death. "I don't regret it," he repeated to himself. The many centuries of oppression had caused so much pain in Ireland, so much injustice, that it was worth having sacrificed himself to this noble cause. No doubt he had failed. The plan so carefully structured to accelerate the emancipation of Ireland, associating her struggle with Germany and coordinating an offensive action by the Kaiser's army and navy against Britain with the nationalist uprising, did not work out as he had foreseen. And he wasn't able to stop the rebellion. And now Sean McDermott, Patrick Pearse, Éamon Ceannt, Tom Clarke, Joseph Plunkett, and so many others had been shot. Hundreds of comrades would rot in prison, God only knew for how many years. At least his example remained, as a weakened Joseph Plunkett said with fierce determination in Berlin. An example of devotion, of love, of sacrifice for a cause similar to the one that made him fight against Leopold II in the Congo, against Julio C. Arana and the Putumayo rubber planters in Amazonia. The cause of justice, of the helpless against the abuses of the powerful and the despotic. Would the campaign calling him a degenerate and a traitor succeed in erasing all the rest? In the end,

1916-17 in jail talking to head Morel
where they spent the rest of the night drinking cognac, chatting, smoking, and debating until they saw through the blinds that it was the next day. They had spent twelve hours in uninterrupted dialogue. Afterward they both would say this meeting had been the most important of their lives.

They couldn't have been more different. Roger was tall and very thin, and Morel was rather short and husky, with a tendency to put on weight. Every time he saw him, Roger had the impression that his friend's suits were too tight. Roger was thirty-nine, but in spite of the physical effects of the African climate and malaria, he looked, perhaps because of how carefully he dressed, younger than Morel, who was only thirty-two; Morel had been good-looking when younger but now had aged, with badly cut hair that was already gray, like his handlebar mustache, and burning, somewhat bulging eyes. Seeing the other man was enough for them to like and—they would not have thought the word exaggerated—love each other.

What did they talk about for those twelve uninterrupted hours? A great deal about Africa, of course, but also about their families, their childhoods, their adolescent dreams, ideals, and longings, and about how, without their intending it, the Congo had established itself at the center of their lives and transformed them completely. Roger was amazed that someone who had never been there knew the country so well: its geography, history, people, and problems. He listened in fascination to how, many years ago now, Morel, an obscure employee of the Elder Dempster Line (the same company Roger had worked for as a young man in Liverpool), responsible in the port of Antwerp for inspecting the ships and making an audit of their cargoes, began to be suspicious when he noticed that the free trade His Majesty Leopold II had supposedly opened between Europe and the Congo Free State was not merely asymmetrical but a farce. What kind of free trade was it when the ships that came from the Congo to the great Flemish port unloaded tons of rubber and quantities of ivory, palm oil, minerals, and skins, and to go there carried only rifles, chicotes, and cases of colored glass?

This was how Morel began to be interested in the Congo, to investigate, to ask those who went there or returned to Europe, merchants, functionaries, travelers, pastors, priests, adventurers, soldiers, police officers, and to read everything he could lay his hands on about that immense country whose misfortunes he came to know

thoroughly, as if he had undertaken dozens of inspection tours like the ones Roger had made to the Middle and Upper Congo. Then, without giving up his position in the company yet, he began to write letters and articles in magazines and newspapers in Belgium and Britain, at first under a pseudonym and later using his own name, denouncing what he had discovered and disproving with facts and testimonies the idyllic image of the Congo that hacks in the service of Leopold II offered to the world. He had been doing this for many years, publishing articles, pamphlets, and books, speaking in churches, cultural centers, and political organizations. His campaign had caught fire. Many people now supported him. *This is Europe too*, Roger often thought, *not only the colonists, police, and criminals we send to Africa. Europe is also this clear, exemplary spirit: Edmund D. Morel.*

From then on they saw each other often and continued the dialogues that excited both of them. They began to call each other by affectionate pseudonyms: Roger was Tiger and Edmund Bulldog. During one of these conversations the idea emerged of creating a foundation, the Congo Reform Association. Both were surprised by the vast support they received in their efforts to obtain sponsors and adherents. The truth is that very few of the politicians, journalists, writers, clergy, and well-known figures they asked to help the association refused. This was how Roger met Alice Stopford Green. Herbert Ward introduced them. Alice was one of the first to give her money, her name, and her time to the association. Joseph Conrad did as well, and many intellectuals and artists followed his lead. They gathered funds and respectable names and very soon began their public activities in churches and cultural and humanitarian centers, presenting testimonies, promoting debates and publications to open the public's eyes to the true situation in the Congo. Even though Roger, as a diplomat, could not appear officially on the association's board of directors, he dedicated all his free time to it once he had finally turned in his report to the Foreign Office. He donated a portion of his savings and salary to the association and wrote letters, visited many people, and succeeded in persuading a good number of diplomats and politicians to become promoters of the cause Morel and he defended.

Many years later, when Roger thought about those feverish weeks at the end of 1903 and the beginning of 1904, he would tell himself

that most important for him had not been the popularity he achieved even before His Majesty's government published his *Report*, or much later, when agents in the service of Leopold II began to attack him in the press as an enemy and slanderer of Belgium, but, thanks to Morel, the association, and Herbert, his meeting Alice Stopford Green, whose intimate friend and, as he boasted, disciple he would be from that time on. From the first moment there sprang up between them an understanding and affection that time would only make more profound.

The second or third time they were alone, Roger opened his heart to his new friend, as a believer would have done with his confessor. He dared tell her, like him from an Irish Protestant family, what he hadn't told anyone yet: there in the Congo, living with injustice and violence, he had discovered the great lie of colonialism and begun to feel "Irish," that is, like the citizen of a country occupied and exploited by the Empire that had bled and weakened Ireland. He was ashamed of so many things he had said and believed, repeating his father's teachings. And he vowed to make amends. Now that he had discovered Ireland, thanks to the Congo, he wanted to be a real Irishman, know his country, take possession of her tradition, history, and culture.

Affectionate, somewhat maternal—Alice was nineteen years older—she reprimanded him at times for having childish bouts of enthusiasm when he was a man of forty, but helped him with advice, books, talks that were for him master classes, while they had tea with biscuits or scones with cream and marmalade. In those early months of 1904, Alice Stopford Green was his friend, his teacher, the woman who introduced him to an ancient past where history, myth, and legend—reality, religion, and fiction—blended together to create the tradition of a people who, in spite of the denationalizing drive of the Empire, continued to maintain their language, their way of being, their customs, something about which any Irish man or woman, Protestant or Catholic, believer or doubter, liberal or conservative, had to feel proud and obliged to defend. Nothing helped so much to calm Roger's spirit, cure him of the moral wounds caused by his trip to the Upper Congo, as having established a friendship with Morel and with Alice. One day as she was saying goodbye to Roger, who, having requested a three-month leave from the Foreign Office, was about to leave for Dublin, the historian said:

"Do you realize you've become a celebrity, Roger? Everybody is talking about you here, in London."

It wasn't something that pleased him, since he had never been vain. But Alice was telling him the truth. The publication of his *Report* by the British government had enormous repercussions in the press, parliament, the political class, and public opinion. The attacks aimed at him in Belgium in official publications, and by English gossip columnists who were propagandists for Leopold II, served only to strengthen his image as a great humanitarian fighter for justice. He was interviewed in the press, invited to speak at public meetings and at private clubs, showered with invitations from liberal and anticolonialist salons, and leaflets and articles appeared praising to the skies his *Report* and his commitment to the cause of justice and freedom. The Congo campaign took on a new impetus. The press, the churches, the most advanced sectors of British society, horrified at the revelations in the *Report*, demanded that Great Britain ask her allies to revoke the decision by the Western countries to hand the Congo to the king of the Belgians.

Overwhelmed by this sudden fame—people recognized him in theaters and restaurants and pointed him out with interest on the street—Roger left for Ireland. He spent a few days in Dublin but soon continued on to Ulster, North Antrim, and Magherintemple House, the family home of his childhood and adolescence. His uncle and namesake Roger, the son of Great-Uncle John, who had died in 1902, had inherited it. Aunt Charlotte was still alive. She received him with great affection, as did his other family members, cousins and nieces and nephews. But he felt that an invisible distance had grown up between him and his paternal family, who were still committed Anglophiles. Yet the Magherintemple countryside, the big old house of gray stone, surrounded by sycamores resistant to salt and wind, many of them smothered in ivy, the poplars, elms, and beech trees dominating the meadows where sheep lay, and beyond that the sea, the view of the island of Rathlin and the small town of Ballycastle with its snow-white cottages, moved him deeply. Walking through the stables, the orchard at the back of the house, the large rooms with deer antlers on the walls, or the ancient villages of Cushendun and Cushendall, where several generations of ancestors were buried, brought back memories of his childhood and filled him with nostalgia. But new ideas and feelings about his country

meant that this visit, of several months' duration, would become another great adventure for him. An adventure, unlike his journey to the Upper Congo, that was pleasant and stimulating and which would also give him the sensation as he lived it that he was shedding his skin.

He had brought a pile of books, grammars, and essays, recommended by Alice, and he spent many hours reading about Irish traditions and legends. He tried to learn Gaelic, first on his own and, when he realized he never would, with the help of a teacher from whom he took lessons several times a week.

But, above all, he began to spend time with new people from County Antrim who were Protestant like him but were not unionists. On the contrary, they wanted to preserve the personality of ancient Ireland, fought against the Anglicization of the country, defended the return to old Irish, traditional songs and customs, and opposed the recruitment of Irishmen into the British Army. They dreamed of a separate Ireland, safe from destructive modern industrialism, living a bucolic, rural life, liberated from the British Empire. This was how Roger became connected to the Gaelic League, which promoted Irish and the culture of Ireland and from which Sinn Féin ("Ourselves Alone") would emerge. When it was founded in Dublin, in 1893, its president, Douglas Hyde, reminded the audience in his speech that until then, "only six books had been published in Gaelic." Roger met Hyde's successor, Eoin MacNeill, professor of ancient and medieval Irish history at University College, and they became friends. He began to attend readings, lectures, recitals, marches, academic assemblies, and the raising of monuments to nationalist heroes, sponsored by the Gaelic League and the new Sinn Féin party. And he began to write political articles defending Irish culture in its publications under the pseudonym *Shan van Vocht* ("The Poor Old Woman"), taken from an old Irish ballad he was in the habit of humming. At the same time he grew very close to a group of women, among them Maud Young, the chataine of Galgorm Rose; Ada McNeill; and Margaret Dobbs, who traveled the villages of Antrim collecting old legends from Irish folklore. Thanks to them he heard a *sanchaí*, or traveling storyteller, at a popular fair, though he barely could understand more than a word or two of what he said.

During an argument in Magherintemple House with his uncle

one night, Roger declared excitedly, "~~Like the Irishman I am, I hate the British Empire.~~"

The next day he received a letter from the Duke of Argyll informing him that His Majesty's government had decided to honor him with the decoration Companion of St. Michael and St. George for his excellent service in the Congo. Roger excused himself from attending the investiture ceremony by claiming that a knee problem would not allow him to kneel before the king.