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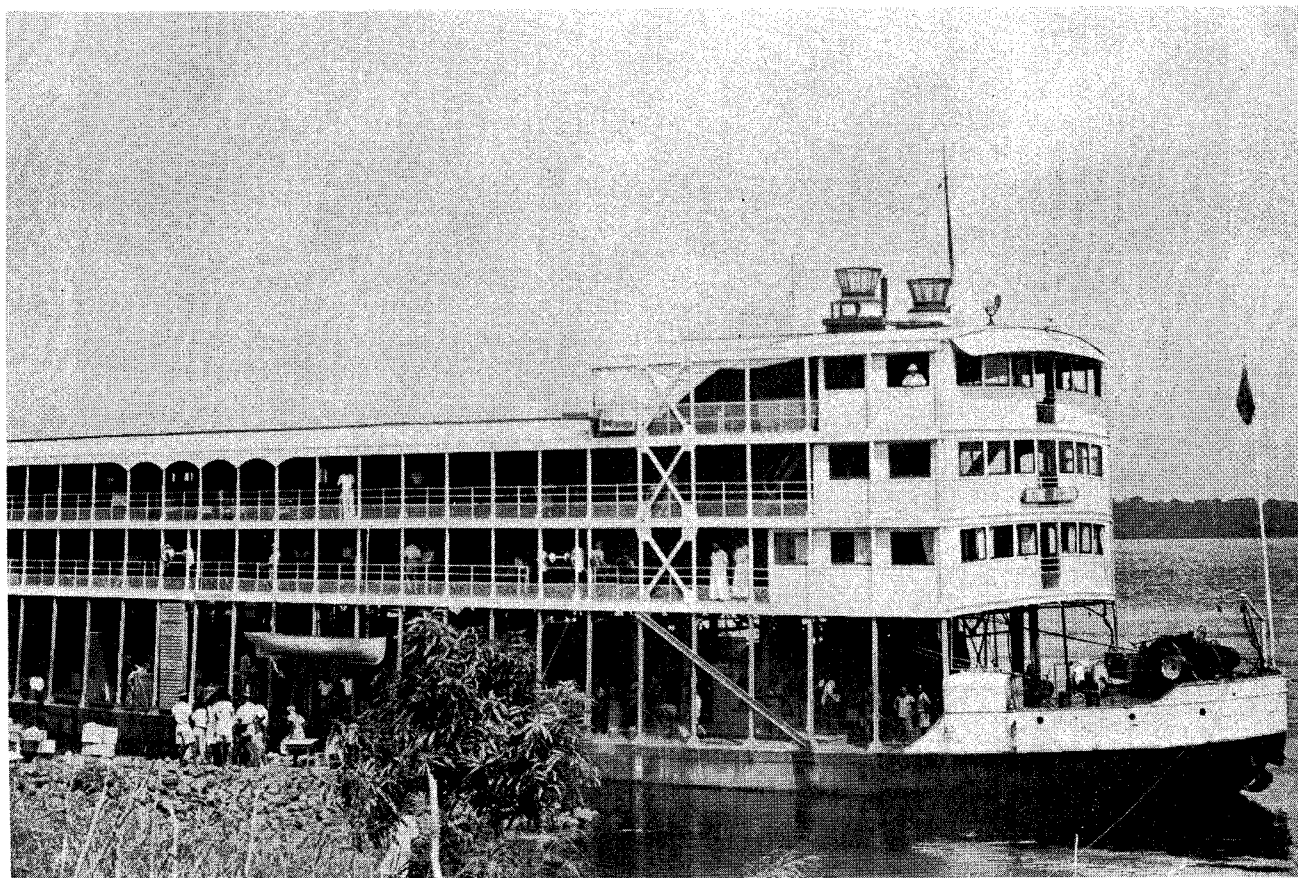
DER - 39  
Down The Congo

March 23, 1955  
Leopoldville  
Belgian Congo

Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Stanleyville is in the interior of the Belgian Congo, thirteen hundred miles up the Congo river from the Atlantic, but there is more life and activity there than in any town in East Africa. New buildings are going up in practically every block, four-lane divided-pavement boulevards have been laid out and, with the paving crews unable to keep pace with the growth of the town, some of these fine thoroughfares are still mud roads. The Congo is a rich, dollar-earning area and



The Reine Astrid, Congo Sternwheeler

new Buicks and Cadillacs are on display amid the chrome and glitter of American-style auto showrooms. Prices are high but every man you talk with says he is making money and doesn't care. "Bongo, bongo, I don't want to leave the Congo," says a Cockney garage foreman. "Bongo--- that means money in the natives' language, see?"

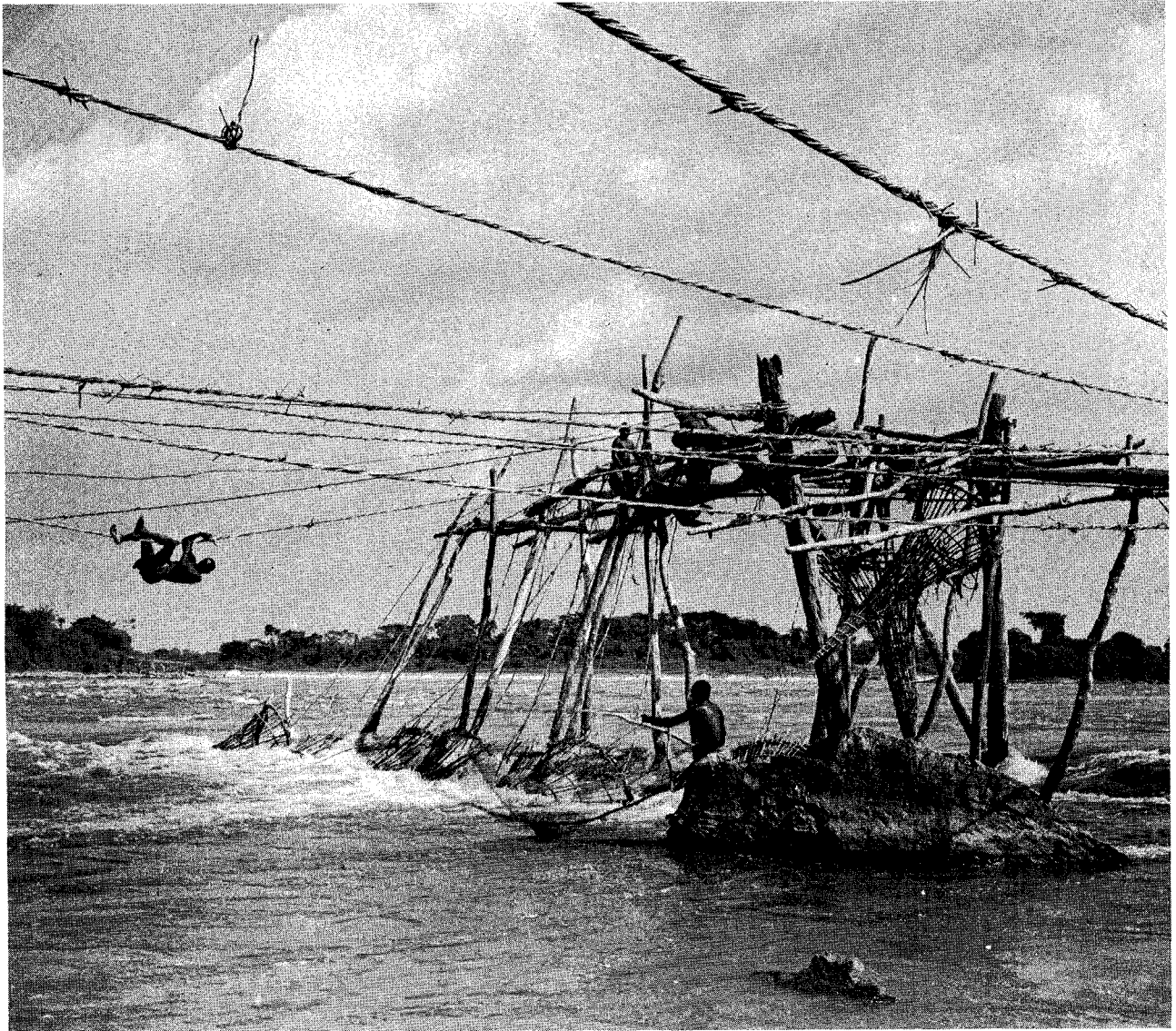
The altitude is low in Stanleyville and the days are hot and the sun burns in the sky. But now it was night and raining hard and the town was cool. The rain lashed the otherwise placid surface of the great river and beat down on the verandah roofs of the riverfront cabarets. Inside there was music, American tunes and French chansons, chateaubriand and langouste, champagne and vin rouge, American cigarets, outrageous bills and African waiters talking a mixture of Swahili and French. After nearly two years in East Africa, where little of interest stirs after sundown, it seemed like a reasonably good imitation of Paris and the evening went quickly. But then it was ten o'clock and time to leave. We walked through the rain to the docks to board a steamer for the thousand-mile trip down the river to Leopoldville, capital of the Congo Belge.

At Stanleyville the Congo has covered nearly one-half of its 2,900-mile journey. It has crossed the equator once and will cross it again. Just above Stanleyville the river races and churns through a series of rapids and that stretch is not navigable. In the old days, explorers had to make portages around the rapids but now narrow gauge trains take the passengers and freight from one boat to the next. Stanleyville is just below the seventh and last cataract and the Congo is quiet and wide again as it flows past the town. The waters are still, the current is not detectable at first glance and the shores are half a mile apart.

The sternwheeler Reine Astrid was moored alongside the Otraco docks---the Office d'exploitation des Transports Coloniaux, a government corporation. The boat was named for a former Queen of Belgium and her glory is that of another day. For years Otraco has been talking of scrapping the old wood burner in favor of an economical diesel. But there is a shortage of vessels for the Congo---the territory's main highway---and the Reine Astrid continues to putter up and down the river long after she should have been retired to the junkyard. The diesels make the journey in five days but the Reine Astrid is part of an older Africa, when time meant little. She stops a couple of times a day for firewood and it is not until the eighth morning that she steams into Leopoldville.

From the docks the Reine Astrid looked something like a floating tenement house. Three decks were tiered closely on each other. On the lower one were the boilers, the stacks of firewood and the African deck passengers. The boilers were dark and cold---the Reine Astrid would not get underway till dawn. The deck was littered with trash, a foul odor arose from it and the African passengers were spreading blankets and trying to get a little sleep.

The middle deck was for the first class passengers and they were Europeans. The cabins were tiny and hot and already some passengers were unpacking suitcases and getting ready for bed. First class means second class on the Congo and above was the de luxe class, another 1,500 francs or \$30 per person. It too was filling with people. There was a bar and passengers were drinking with people who had come to see them off. A phonograph



Native fishermen of the Wagenia tribe build scaffoldings like these in the middle of the Stanleyville rapids to hold fish traps in the chutes. The fish are swept into the nets by the racing current.

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blared out La Ronde, then some nasal chansons and finally switched to an American polka that contained the line: "How many burps in a bottle of beer, a bottle of beer, a bottle of beer?" An elderly Belgian man listened for a moment and then said, "What is that he is singing. I cannot quite understand." The rain stopped and the captain, a young man with dark curly hair and nervous mannerisms, came aboard. An African ventured up from the lower depths to ask him for a job and the captain kicked him back down the companionway. Midnight came. The passengers retired to their cabins, turned up the electric fans and went to bed.

It is eight o'clock in the morning and the Reine Astrid has been underway for two hours. Its twin stern wheels throw out plumes of muddy brown Congo water. Stanleyville is miles in the wake now. There is nothing but forest along the banks and the forest will stretch for many hundreds of miles and many days. It is not the steaming tropical jungle that one expects to find along the Congo. The trees and undergrowth look about the same as those encircling a lake in northern Michigan. The only things out of place are the frequent clusters of palm trees and exotic red flowers and the occasional crocodile slithering into the river.

Here the explorer Stanley fought battle after battle with native war canoes in 1877. He was en route down from the headwaters and wanted to find out for certain whether they were the headwaters of a Nile tributary or of the Congo that appears at the Atlantic, a couple of thousand miles away. One native war party consisted of fifty-four canoes but they were no match for the guns of the white man, his Arab lieutenants and their black askaris. Many of the river tribes were cannibals in those days. "And along the riverbank a thousand miles, tattooed cannibals danced in files." Livingstone, who made a long and unsuccessful search for the headwaters of the Nile, wasn't interested in similar explorations on the even vaster Congo system. "Everything for the Nile, but I'll not be made into black man's meat for the Congo," he said.

On the lower deck, African firemen are throwing logs down from the stacks and they hit the metal plates with thundering crashes. Other firemen grab the logs and heave them into the boilers. The boilers are red hot now and steam is escaping in shrieks as the pistons hammer back and forth. Two decks up there is another disturbance. The phonograph wails out the veteran La Ronde as the first class and de luxe passengers are trying to have their breakfast. Eggs? "No, monsieur, there are no eggs." Cereal? "No, monsieur." Oranges, grapefruit? "What?" The waiter serves pieces of salami and cheese, bread, butter and coffee. "How many burps in a bottle of beer." "Can't someone turn that damn phonograph down?" Two decks below the African passengers sit amid stacks of firewood and the clatter of the engines, eating bananas and pieces of cold fish.

The Reine Astrid steams effortlessly down the river. Sometimes it is in the center of the stream with half a mile or more of smooth water on either side. At other times the steamer comes so close to the banks that the passengers can almost reach out and tear a leaf from a

passing tree. Sometimes the forest yields a bit and an African village comes into view, a tiny collection of huts. Long, thin dugout canoes are drawn up on the shore. These are fishing canoes; now that the Europeans have come to the Congo, the war canoe is almost forgotten. Naked African children swim out toward the passing steamer shouting greetings and women in calico frocks and men in European shirts and shorts wave from the bank. "In these wild regions," said Stanley, "our mere presence excites the most furious passions of hate and murder." As quickly as they come, the villages are gone and the forest rushes back to the very edge of the water.

The bridge is above the de luxe deck. The captain spends most of his time sitting in a high chair, staring moodily through field glasses at the channel ahead. He has had another fit of temper on this first morning and has slapped and booted another African. No one knows why. This is the captain's second trip down the Congo and perhaps he is nervous about taking the Reine Astrid, one of the biggest boats on the river, a thousand miles to Leopoldville. Or maybe he has been in Africa too long without leave. Before coming to the Congo, he spent a couple of years as captain of a steamer on the Kasai, a big tributary. "It was better there," he says, bubbling over with nervous excitement. "No other boats cluttering up the river. When you arrived somewhere the people were happy to see you because they had seen no one for two weeks."

Two Africans are perched on the bows of the ship and every few minutes they take soundings with long striped poles. The Reine Astrid draws only a few meters of water, but the Congo is even more shallow than that in places. The channel is staked out with buoys and signs planted on the tips of islands and along the shores. The helmsman is an African. He keeps his eyes fixed on the channel. The river widens. He swings into midstream. Then the river flares out into a dozen distributaries and a signpost on a tiny island points to the proper channel. It is not the biggest, not the one in the middle. The helmsman swings the Reine Astrid against the current and takes the distributary along the far shore. More distributaries; a buoy. The helmsman swings the floating tenement house around and we head for the far shore and the proper channel.

The captain, in fact, is the only European running the boat. The radio operator, busy sending signals at that moment, is an African and so is the chief engineer and the maitre d'hotel. The chief engineer is the most highly paid African on board, earning the equivalent of \$180 a month. The maitre gets only about \$15. "If the machinery is not working, the boat stops and Otraco loses money," says Andre, one of the passengers. "But if we are not eating?"

Andre is in his forties and was a member of the Belgian resistance movement during the German occupation. One of his jobs in those days was to bump off collaborators. Now he manages his family's estates in Belgium and lately has been put-putting around Africa in a peanut-sized Volkswagon automobile. He wanted to find out about investment possibilities around Lake Kivu in the eastern Congo, so he drove his Volkswagon to Gibraltar, crossed over to North Africa, cut south across the Sahara and arrived in Kivu a couple of months after



leaving Belgium. Now he is floating home in comfort, distressed because the Reine Astrid does not stock his favorite drink, yoghurt. From Leopoldville, he will drive to Matadi, the nearby Atlantic port and put himself and the little auto on a ship for Antwerp.

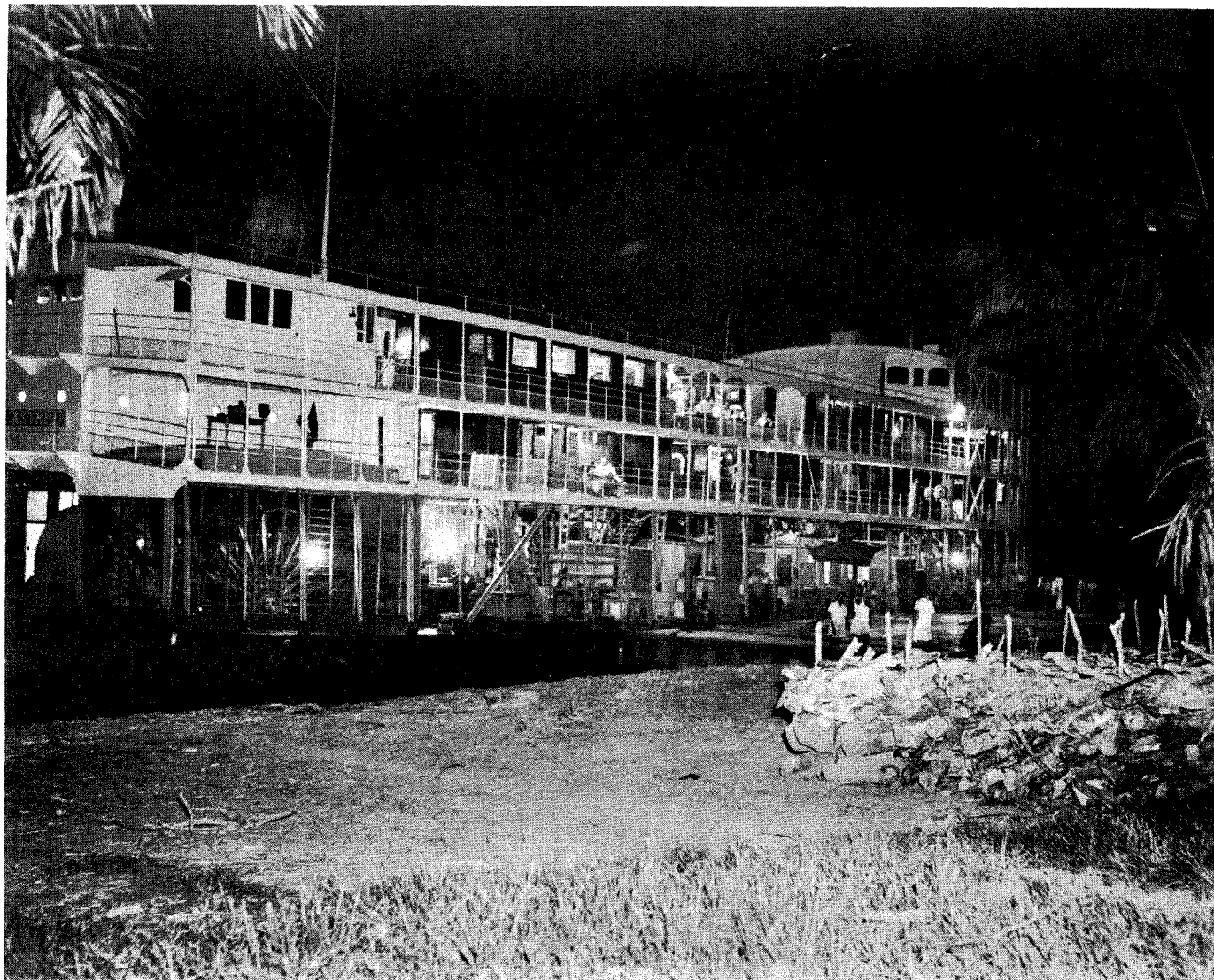
Noon approaches. It is hot, too warm to remain in the cabins, even with the fans going. Shirts are wet with perspiration and the passengers mop their foreheads with handkerchiefs. Excitement. All of the passengers are leaning over the railing. An African boy has swum out from a village with a cane in his hand and has reached up and hooked the Reine Astrid. Now he is skimming along like a surfboat. The passengers applaud. Another boy comes into sight and grabs the feet of the first one. A quarter of a mile down the river they drop off to swim back to shore.

More excitement. A dugout canoe has hooked onto the side of the Reine Astrid. It too is skimming along. The Africans in the canoe have just killed a young crocodile and want to sell the meat to the Reine Astrid's African passengers and crew. Every piece is snatched up and the canoe drops behind, many francs richer. The captain hears about it and storms down to the lower deck. He tells the Africans they can either eat it raw or throw it in the river. Africans take a couple of days to cook crocodile meat and the captain says he doesn't want the boat stunk up with it.

It is lunchtime for the European passengers. The phonograph blares out a Salvation Army marching tune. "Can't someone turn that damn phonograph down?" An African waiter finally turns it down. "How many burps..." The burps are subdued. The diners are in a bad mood anyway. Meals, they have found, are going to be served on an inexorable schedule: eight o'clock, breakfast; noon, lunch; seven, dinner. "We're like Pavlov's dogs---whenever the bell rings we're supposed to salivate and eat." For those from British territories, used to late and leisurely dining, it is really rough. "We'll have a gin and tonic or two first and we'll eat when we damn well please and the wogs can bloody well wait till we're ready." But the wogs will not wait.

After lunch, the siesta. As the passengers sleep, more miles of forest glide by unseen. A monkey crawls out on a limb for a cautious look at the passing spectacle, a crocodile slides into the muddy brown waters and a hippo plunges to the safety of the river bottom as the Reine Astrid draws near.

Late in the afternoon we round an island, steam across half a mile of placid water, swing around to face into the current and edge up to the shore and a village. There is perhaps half an acre of firewood stacked along the banks. The Reine Astrid's boilers have been running at full ahead all day and now, for the first time, there is plenty of room for the African passengers. But not for long; we have come to shore for more firewood. A rope splashes into the water, an African drags it ashore and then begins to haul in a steel cable tied to it. He fastens the cable to a tree as another line goes splashing out from the stern. The boilers blow off excess steam and the gangplank goes down. Fifty Africans on shore have been waiting for this moment and they begin to carry



The Reine Astrid loading firewood  
at night.

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firewood aboard. They are recruited casually from the villages and get a few cents for each cubic meter of wood they bring aboard.

The first person down the gangplank at each village is a gray-haired grandmother known as "K. C." K. C.---her real name is Mrs. Kent Cottrell---is in her sixties and has been an artist all her life. She is British, lives in South Africa and frequently travels around to sketch and paint African tribesmen. She has published some of her work as "Sunburnt Sketches" and the trip down the Congo was part of a tour of the continent to gather material for a new book.

K. C. is typically British in that crossing the Belgian Congo presents no more difficulty to her than crossing London in the tube. She speaks no French and subscribes to the belief that loud, firm and clear English will get you by all over the world. This leads to difficulties sometimes. While in Stanleyville she told an African hotel servant to bring her a glass of milk with honey in it. He brought her a bottle of beer. She repeated the order (in English, of course) and he disappeared to return with a bottle of whisky. She never did get the milk and honey.

At each village K. C. alights with her battered old Rolleiflex in search of picturesque types to photograph. Perhaps she spots a villainous and wild looking African man. "Magnificent type," K. C. exclaims. "I want your photograph." The wild man senses what is up and growls in French that it will cost her twenty-five francs. The shutter clicks and K. C. hands the man two francs. Then she is off through the crowd in search of a new type, leaving the first one to howl insults. K. C., oblivious to what he is saying, tells herself that the Congo Africans are really such lovable darlings.

It takes two hours to fill the Reine Astrid with firewood. Then there is a toot, the gangplank is pulled in and the boat swings out into the river, turning so it points downstream again and resumes the lazy journey to Leopoldville.

It is sunset. Every sunset in Africa is a pageant of color. The days are long and hot and the sun burns in the sky, giving everything a baked-out look. But then the hour of sunset comes and this evening, on the Congo, orange and blues are splashed across the western sky and K. C. says that one cloud looks just like a castle on the Rhine. For a few moments there are two sunsets, one in the sky, one mirrored in the placid Congo. Then it is six thirty and dark. Days and nights are almost equal in length in the tropics. Lightning flashes far ahead, over French Equatorial Africa, and the Reine Astrid's searchlight begins to sweep back and forth across the river, searching for reflectors on buoys and landmarks. The night sky is dark blue, the Congo still darker in color. Flurries of orange sparks shoot out the smokestack and flutter down on the river. Later the moon rises, a full moon, and it lingers for most of the long tropical night.





Sunset

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The days go by quickly and merge one into another under the spell of the river and soon you forget which day of the week it is. In the morning you rise, shower, shave, have breakfast, play bridge, write or gaze at the river and the forest that seems to have no end. Sometimes you read and in one book, The White Tower, you are taken on an expedition toward a frozen Alpine peak. At the end of each chapter you light a cigaret and you are back once more in the sultry Congo. Then comes lunch, maybe a siesta, and another afternoon of reading, bridge or watching the river. Soon it is time for cocktails, then the seven o'clock summons to salivate and after that the long night, sometimes hot, sometimes cool. If the Reine Astrid is loading wood, the logs are crashing on the metal plates and there is little sleep. But otherwise the river is still and the Reine Astrid moves almost without a sound, taking its sleeping passengers farther and farther down the great river.

The Congo, you find, has many moods. There are the bright sweltering days when the electric fans go continuously and not a wisp of air stirs on the river. But on other mornings the sky is gray and the surface of the river is flecked by cold driving rain. The decks are wet and the wind drives the chilly rain through the cabin windows and the passengers dip into their suitcases for jackets. The rain beats down all morning but then, at lunchtime, the clouds are gone and the sun returns to pour equatorial heat on the river and the steamer.

Inch by inch your progress is recorded on a map next to the bar and you find that on the fifth day---or was it the fourth? or the sixth?---you are in Coquilhatville and crossing the equator. But there is no King Neptune ceremony as the Reine Astrid steams into the southern hemisphere. Most of the passengers have lived in Africa long enough so that they have crossed the equator scores of times, on foot, in cars, in trains, on boats and in planes.

At frequent intervals the Congo is swelled by tributaries. Many are sizeable rivers in their own right and if one of them flowed through Kenya it would not be the poor, arid place it is. But then, just below Coquilhatville, a giant of tributaries appears---the Ubangi, marking the border with French Equatorial Africa. The confluence is all but hidden in a thick cluster of islands and Stanley missed it on that first trip down the Congo. Below the confluence the river is like a lake, a long expanse of unrippled water cutting through the virgin African forest. It seems to be two, three, five miles wide in places. But that is deceptive. All that you see on either side are islands. The shore, the real shore of the Congo, is many miles behind these. In places the Congo is fifteen miles wide. The left bank is Belgian territory, the right bank is French Equatorial Africa.

Two more days glide by. Another big river, the Kasai, from the central part of the Belgian Congo, has joined the Congo. When the Kasai is in flood, the Ubangi is low and vice versa. Hence there is very little seasonal variation to the mighty Congo. The trip is almost over now; Leopoldville is just down the river. The date? The passengers scratch their heads and argue about it.



Leopoldville docks

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The forest is thinning out now and sand bars appear along the shore. Then the forest is gone, replaced by rolling bush and savannah. The coastal hills, the western rim of the Congo basin, loom up and then the Reine Astrid is gliding along miniature gorges. It is the last night of the journey and the passengers are granted a special privilege. The dinner bell will not toll till seven thirty and there is joy at the bar. The dining room tables have been pushed back to the walls and after the African waiters have brought flaming crepe suzettes and coffee there is dancing. It is a dark night but from the deck you can see that the river has narrowed sharply in places, pinched in by the territories of the two colonial powers. The current seems to be a little faster and the river winds around as it picks its way through the coastal hills.

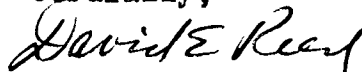
It is morning, six thirty, and the Reine Astrid rides at anchor. There is a heavy mist and the hills are barely visible. We are in the Stanley Basin, where the river widens to form a two hundred square mile pool. At the other end of the basin is Leopoldville and across from it is Brazzaville, capital of French Equatorial Africa. Beyond the two cities the Congo narrows again and the combined waters of twenty great rivers race wildly through a series of cataracts on the last three hundred miles to the sea. There is no question of any further navigation: a boat would be torn to pieces while still in sight of Leopoldville. The trip to Matadi, the Atlantic port, must be made by train or car.

The Reine Astrid is waiting for the signal to enter the basin. When it comes the anchor is weighed and we begin the last lap, less than two hours in duration, of the journey from Stanleyville. The mist lifts and in the distance three hazy yellow shapes appear, looking like dust devils in the eroded plains of Tanganyika. Minutes pass and then the dust devils turn out to be tall buildings. "The skyline of Leopoldville," says Andre. "Hardly as impressive as New York, but, still, those are fifteen story buildings." It had been nearly two years since I saw a building of more than seven stories.

We steamed straight toward the buildings and then the docks appeared. There was a long line of gantry cranes, clusters of river boats, warehouses packed with merchandise on the move, railway engines and trucks, crated automobiles swinging through the air, hundreds of sweating black stevedores. Our cars had come on another boat and we drove up from the docks to the main part of town amid hurrying traffic on boulevards up to six lanes in width. There were more tall buildings, big hotels, restaurants, stores and crowds of people everywhere.

I found myself remembering the times in Kenya when I had sat around campfires in the bush and had told incredulous Africans that there really are cities larger than Nairobi. "Ho, ho, ho, the white man tells the funniest jokes," they would reply. Now I was in Leopoldville, a city of nearly a third of a million, twice as large as anything I had seen in nearly two years. It would have seemed strange and bewildering to those Kenya Africans and, in fact, it seemed a little that way to me that morning.

Cordially,



David E. Reed