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The Captain of
the Reine Astrid

Victory Palace Hotel
Pointe Noire,
French Equatorial Africa
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Mr. Walter S. Rogers
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522 Fifth Avenue,
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers :

The long, slow voyage down the Congo River from Stanleyville to Leopoldville on the sternwheeler Reine Astrid is one which appeals to most of the senses and satisfies many of the appetites. I am almost ready to include it in my personal list of favorite trips--the plodding of a loaded oil tanker across the summer Caribbean from Venezuela to the United States, the rush of the air-conditioned train that runs the 90 miles from New York to Philadelphia in 90 minutes through some of the most pleasantly uninteresting scenery in the world and a day's drive almost anywhere in New Hampshire or Vermont in October.

The Congo trip has most of the requirements. The boat itself is perfect, a high, square, white-painted building which was originally intended for use on the Mississippi when it was built in 1928. It has scrubbed wooden decks and varnished mahogany stateroom doors, twin stern wheels and stubby twin smoke stacks, an open lounge that runs from one side of the boat to the other on the top deck and a bottom deck filled with tubes, boilers, noise and heat. On each side are hung useless steel "lifeboats," always half-filled with rain water and impossible to lower because of the cordwood piled on the bottom deck beneath them. Steam hisses from one pipe or another from the time the fire is built in Stanleyville until it goes out at Leopoldville.

You float down the river, staying close to one bank or the other. The forest is thick and rich green; there are villages of huts, dugout canoes and swimming children. There's the bustle of the daily stop for wood, the quiet of the few hours after lunch when the sun beats down and people are taking their siestas in the stuffy cabins leaving you to enjoy the coolness of the lounge made to seem even cooler by the glaring sunlight on the River. An efficient refrigerator keeps the beer and the Coca-Colas icy, an efficient cook serves the steaks rare and the mayonnaise unrancid. In the evenings there is talk and the shower of bits of red-glowing wood from the chimneys. It lasts for seven days, the river widening and narrowing, passing islands and piling floating clumps of green plants against the wharves of sluggish river towns. But the comfort and the relaxation lose some of their savor when you get to know the captain of the Reine Astrid.

The captain looks like Lord Byron in shorts, with dark untrimmed curls, dark eyes and an olive skin turned a golden brown by the sun reflected from the River. He isn't unusually tall or short and wears no badges of rank--just unvarying white shorts and white shirts, with white socks rolled down over his low-cut street shoes. The first time I saw him was in Stanleyville, the afternoon we went aboard the Reine Astrid. There was no way of knowing he was the captain. He was sitting at a table in the lounge, leaning forward in one of the wicker armchairs talking loudly to three other men. They were drinking cold beer in frosted green bottles and laughing and I took them for port officials or veteran Congo travellers. It was plain they were not new passengers like myself; they took no notice of the last minute bustle of loading and seemed perfectly at home.

The next time I saw him stands out more vividly in my mind. It was the same day, in the afternoon as I was going ashore to give the keys of the car to the man in charge of loading it on the boat. I walked down the deck a few feet behind the captain, went through the door to the lounge and headed for the top of the companionway stairs. At the top of the steps stood an African, dressed in tattered khaki and barefoot. In his hand he was holding a dog-eared brown folder, apparently some kind of identity card or permit to seek work. As the captain approached, the African held out the card to him and began to say something in French. The captain didn't even break his stride. With a quick motion he twisted the African's arm, forcing him to face back down the stairs. Then he kicked him, hard, and the African stumbled and half-fell down the flight of steps to the second deck. The captain moved on to the bar and I followed the African down the stairs. He was standing at the bottom, looking up at the captain's white-shirted back. The look on his face was frightening. Europeans who subscribe to the Natives-are-just-like-children theory would say he looked like a child who had been beaten, perhaps unjustly. They would add that, like children, Africans do not bear grudges or carry feelings of hostility over from one time to the next.

I saw the look of a man who had been taught that the way to find work was to speak the white man's language, fill out the white man's registration card, and go to the white man without pride, holding the card in his hand and speaking politely. And when he had done all that, he found that complying with the white man's rules meant getting kicked. He did not look like the kind of man who was taking his tumble down the stairs as part of the normal white-black relationship. He looked at the captain with stark hatred; and when I passed he looked at me the same way.

When a river boat is under way you see very little of the captain. He spends all his time on the bridge, following the channel of the river with the precision of something out of Mark Twain. There are always two Africans with long graduated poles standing on the bows feeling for the bottom and every 15 or 20 minutes the channel switches from one side of the river to the other or from the east bank of an island to the west bank of the next. The captain eats, sleeps, washes and drinks on the bridge, only coming down to run along the deck shouting orders during a landing and to drink beer with his friends from ashore when the boat is tied up. This is especially true in the narrow section of the river from Stanleyville to beyond Coquilhatville, about five days' steaming.

One evening, as we were nearing Coquilhatville, we were sitting in the lounge sipping Grand Marnier. It was after dinner and a waning full moon showed the dark wall of the forest slipping by. We were debating whether to play a second game of Scrabble when behind us, along the deck towards the bridge, we heard loud shouts and a collection of expressive French curses. Turning, we saw the captain with two of the African members of the crew. As we watched he hit one of them in the face--then turned to the other and told him to stay where he was standing. The captain chased the first African down the deck--he came running into the lounge and scurried down the companionway to the lower deck.

Then the captain walked slowly back to the other African who was standing with his back to the rail. He shouted something to the African, hit him in the face and told him to get out. The second African didn't run. He stared at the captain for a moment, then turned on his heel and walked away with a certain amount of dignity with the captain screaming insults at his receding back.

I had a long talk with the captain the night before we reached Leopoldville. True to passenger-ship tradition, the last night was meant to be a time of great festivity with a specially elegant menu and dancing after dinner. The menu was elegant indeed--chicken cooked in a piquant sauce and a flaming pancake for dessert--

but the dancing proved something of a flop. There weren't enough women to go around and what women there were had long since passed the time of life when dancing on a Congo River boat would seem like fun. It was like any other night except for the men's neckties and the appearance of the captain after dinner dressed in long white trousers.

After a few abortive attempts at dancing, I joined the group sitting at the captain's table. There were four of us; a bearded Belgian touring the Congo in search of investment possibilities, an official of an insecticide-fertilizer company returning from a field trip, the captain and myself. The Belgian was chaffing the captain when I sat down. During the day's steaming the boat had hit a sandbar, with enough speed to pass over it, but also with enough force to make the collision apparent to everyone aboard. A few minutes later the boat had struck another.

"What a captain," the Belgian was saying. "Here we find ourselves in the widest part of the River and you cannot find a channel." He smiled broadly to prove he was speaking in fun, but the captain was not in a cheerful mood.

"Ah, passengers," he sighed. "I wish I were back on the open sea on a cargo ship instead of on this packing box. You do not understand that I took the shallow channel to save us eight hours going the long way. I knew the sand was there; I also knew that I could pass over it. If you want a different life, change places with me. I would like to see you direct this boat all by yourself, with no other European aboard. Except, of course," he said with a casual sweep of his hand, "the passengers."

The Belgian seemed hurt. He sank back in his chair and pulled deeply on his grenadine soda. There was a painful pause in the conversation. The company official sat silently, observing us all with a smug detachment and the captain ordered another whiskey.

To end the silence I mentioned to the captain that I, also, had been to sea. At this he brightened and began the first of what turned out to be 45 minutes of sea stories, most of them dealing with personal violence. He began with the days during the war when he first went to sea and ended with a tale of two years ago when, as chief mate of a cargo vessel he was threatened by a drunken boatswain with a six-inch knife in a rum-soaked port in South America. "Then, like a fool, I left the sea and came here," he said, despondently pointing towards the bridge.

"Is it so bad then?" I said.

"It is terrible. Do you know that I left Leopoldville on this trip with a crew of 16? And that there are now only seven left to run the boat? The captains of the cargo boats do not have to keep to a strict schedule. But I, who must direct the boat which breaks down most often and which needs to stop for wood once, sometimes twice a day, must keep a very precise schedule. Who gets the devil if we are late? Me. And the passengers"--he seemed to be talking as one sea-faring man to another--"are brave enough to tell me that I should not touch the sand when it means saving many hours."

This was too much for the Belgian. He rose heavily from his chair, scowled at the captain and went off to revive the dancing. The company official seemed interested. He called the waiter and ordered whiskeys all around. Then he asked the captain, "Why do the Natives leave the ship?"

The captain said, "Oh, they say that the work is too hard. Tonight, when you were eating your dinner, I saw that the steam pressure was going down. So I went down to the engines to see the trouble. All the Natives were sitting about, the fire

was dying and no one was putting wood into the furnace. I said 'What is this?' The Natives said that they did not have enough to eat and they were tired. It was too much work, they said, for only seven men. So I was forced to beat them with a stick of wood until they went back to work.

"It is like this during all the voyages. It happens that a Native says he will not work. So I say, 'Eh bien, come to my bathroom.' They know what it means to come to my bathroom. I take them there and I lock the door behind us. Then I tell them to take down their trousers." He glanced about to see if any tender-minded women were within hearing distance.

"Then I beat them with a good stick until they say they will go back to work. Many times they refuse to take down their trousers. So I say very well and I take my handcuffs--very heavy steel. I take the two circles together like this and put them on my hand." He went through the motions of putting on a set of brass knuckles. "Then I hit them, hard, in the mouth. I do not have to do it twice--they say they will go back to work. You have seen the one with the mouth like this?" He puffed out his lips and assumed a mournful expression. "It was the handcuffs that did it, two days ago.

"But these Natives, they are worse than children--they are savages. They say that they will go back to work and then, pouf! The next time we stop for wood they are gone and I must continue with a smaller crew. Every time I return to Leo with more than half the crew vanished." He shook his head, then swallowed the rest of his drink.

"What does Otraco¹ say to you when you return with less than half the crew? I asked.

"Oh, they complain all the time. Tonight after dinner you wrote your complaints on the paper, hein? They go to the company, you see, and if there are bad complaints they call for me. 'What is this?' they cry. 'A passenger says his cabin was not properly cleaned.' And then they give me a very bad time. But the steward knows that if this happens I will give him a very bad time when I return to the ship." He made a fist and shook it threateningly. "We do not have many complaints.

"And if they talk of the disappearance of the crew I say, 'if you are dissatisfied, discharge me.' They never do it for they know they will never find another captain for this old box. All the other captains are afraid of the Reins Astrid. She is too old and it is too much trouble to stop for wood all the time. And, when there is a strong wind, she is very hard to manage. I am the only captain who does not lose time with her by sticking in the sand. The company knows that if they have published a schedule they must keep it even if it means replacing half the crew each voyage."

The captain got up. "You must excuse me," he said. "We must stop several hours tonight before we go into the basin at Leo. I am afraid we cannot meet again. Tomorrow I am too busy." He shook hands very formally all around, then went off down the deck towards the bridge.

I saw the captain once more before I left the ship. The day we arrived in Leo, in the middle of getting the baggage ashore, I saw him rush across the gangplank and run up a long ramp to the pier. He threw his arms around a pretty young woman, then kissed the small child with her. He picked up the child and walked back towards the boat with the woman, talking happily. The sun was bright and sharp and his white shorts and his shirt gleamed dazzlingly in the sun.

1. The shipping company which runs the river boats.

Men of physical violence like the captain are rare in the Belgian Congo--the government sees to that. It is fairly certain that the government knows of the captain's brand of discipline and will do away with him when someone is found to replace him or when the Reine Astrid is put out to pasture. But in the meantime he is there, carrying on the good work of the South African herrenvolk, the old Rhodesians, the Kenya settlers, the palm oil ruffians and the Arab, European and American slavers.

The Congo Government is awfully proud of the job it is doing to eliminate the color bar in practice as well as theory. It points to its immatriculés and its African railway engine drivers as symbols of the bright, new Congo. It is funny that the Africans you talk to seem to accept immatriculation¹ and the abolition of the color bar as natural. What they object to is the attitude of white men towards them. They point out that it is not necessary to act like the captain to think like him.

They hit, I think, on one of the real problems of Africa.

Sincerely,



Peter Bird Martin

1. An immatriculé is an African who has proved to the satisfaction of a review court that he has accepted and adopted European civilization. He is given a card which is of great assistance in gaining good employment, moving about freely and eating in good restaurants. The system has only recently been introduced and there are now somewhere between 80 and 150 immatriculants in the Belgian Congo.

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