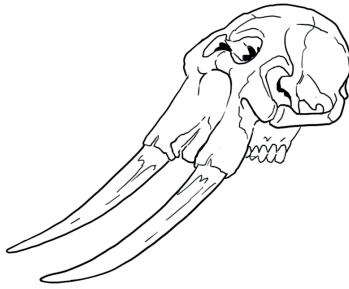


HEART OF DARKNESS

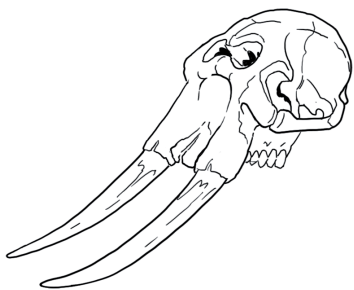
Joseph Conrad

*With an Introduction by
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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	vii
PART I	1
PART II	39
PART III	71
ANSWERS TO DISCUSSION QUESTIONS	103



INTRODUCTION

H*heart of Darkness* spellbinds its reader from its title to its final word, perhaps the only predictable word in the work: “darkness.” Indeed, Joseph Conrad held so true to his title’s promise that, generations later, readers still recoil, calling out for light.

So, what is this strange tale before you? The epicenter of sin? Racist propaganda? An attack on imperialism? An absurd experiment? Thanks to Conrad’s unforgettable novella, this guide is a rumination on one of “the dark places of the earth.”

The World Around

In the late 1800s, European powers vied for dominance in Africa. In fact, most European colonization of Africa *began* in the 1880s and ended by WWI in what is known as the Scramble for Africa. Though England was only one of many European powers who engaged in this dubious enterprise, one nation stands out from the rest for its incredible brutality: Belgium. Under King Leopold II’s personal rule, a Congo River region in Central Africa (now a part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo) attracted interest because of its rich resources such as rubber, ivory, and labor. But beneath a rich veneer lie the grisly secrets of the King’s program of forced labor: hacked off children’s limbs (when they failed to meet work quotas), missing ears and eyes,

disease, and legalized murder. Many of the tribal atrocities we cry out against in Sudan, South Africa, Congo, or Rwanda today were practiced by conscience-seared colonizers then. And it is precisely this tale of colonization, idealism, greed, and hypocrisy which Joseph Conrad witnessed in his travels (he, too, captained a steamboat up the Congo river, as does our novella's protagonist) and used as a background for *Heart of Darkness*.

About the Author

Joseph Conrad (1857–1924) was born in Poland into tension. His family, though noble by birth, had no real fortune; and his father was a struggling author and revolutionary, clandestinely working for independence from the Russian Empire. That region (present-day Ukraine) continues its weary bid for sovereignty under the menacing eye of Russia. The boy's mother died when he was seven and his father at eleven, both of tuberculosis. Conrad was then raised by an uncle.

Though Conrad enjoyed reading and telling stories, he did not flourish in school. He left for the French merchant marine at age sixteen. At twenty, in deep debt and depressed, he attempted suicide, shooting himself in the chest. Recovering, he left for England and served the merchant marine there for fifteen years, learning English through his trade and becoming a British citizen.

As he sailed and steamed around the world, Conrad amassed a rich fund of experience and reflection. A growing fascination with writing (combined with his usual ill health and a temporary lack of ships to captain) brought on an early retirement, and he settled in England to pursue his literary ambitions in 1894, at age thirty-six. Two years later, he married Jessie George, with whom he remained until his death in 1924, age sixty-six. He completed nineteen novels and novellas (not bad for learning English as a third language in his 20s!) as well as many short stories and essays, but *Heart of Darkness* (first published in 1899) proved to be his most influential work.

Marlow's tale concludes. The scene returns to the Thames. The tide, having shifted, beckons the travelers on again, and Conrad concludes his novella in ominous, aural beauty: "The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness" (102).

Worldview Analysis

Heart of Darkness's interpretation hangs on perspective. Although we may think of perspective as something that distorts or obscures the truth, perspective is actually the handmaid of wisdom. How many times did Christ Jesus answer a question with a question, or a parable, or a surprising turn? Why? Partially, no doubt, to confound and reorient the listener. For instance, consider the man who asked Jesus the following: "Good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Now, you might expect Jesus to jump right into sharing the gospel; wouldn't we all? Someone actually asked for it! Instead, Jesus responds, "Why do you call me good?" (Lk. 18:19). Jesus begins by questioning the address ("good"), challenging the man's (and audience's and reader's) view of this teacher before him. How disorienting; yet also, what an effective means of reorienting the audience. Paradoxically, an indirect route is sometimes the surest way to wisdom. Conrad employs a manifestly indirect route to meaning. Is it a path to wisdom or an unnecessary obscurity? You'll have to judge for yourself.

In our novella, recognize first that we have a frame narrative on our hands, which adds an element of circuitry or ambiguity. The framing element is an anonymous man on the yawl listening to Marlow. The framed work within is Marlow's own tale. From Marlow himself smaller framed stories emerge, since Marlow is sometimes recalling other men's tales (such as the Russian or Kurtz himself). Thus, we may be reading the narrator's recollection of Marlow's recollection of the Russian's recollection. Like a telephone game, the reader knows

that each narrative layer adds complexity and ambiguity. There's complexity because each narrator recalls a story from the vantage of their own character, shading colors; there's ambiguity because, like a real person, that character may have a poor recall or may willfully manipulate the facts. The reader usually seeks clues concerning the reliability of the narrator. In the case of the narrator, the reader has very little to go on. He does seem frustrated with another one of Marlow's "inconclusive experiences" at the outset, but story-grip sets in for the whole party while Marlow word-weaves (at the end, the tide had turned some time before they decide to continue their journey; the listeners were so deeply engaged). Overall, the anonymous narrator seems reliable enough, given the little the reader has to judge from.

Still, this worrying of the reader over Marlow's perspective continues as he witnesses the wretched treatment of natives or offers summaries like this: "No, [the natives] were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman" (45). Marlow is employed by the Company abusing the natives. He takes a superior view of the white place even there in Africa, but he is clearly bothered, knows something is deeply amiss, even admires many aspects of the natives, yet can't seem to address the underlying inequality directly.

By crafting a narrator that the reader knows little about, and by supplying an unreliable Marlow for the storytelling, Joseph Conrad left many more doors of possibility open for thematic interpretation. This ambiguity is woven into the literary style of the work, showing the genius of the author. For instance, while everyone will talk of "Africa" and "the Congo" as the context to nail down an interpretation, the novella *never even mentions* these places! At first, this may appear to be an authorial oversight; perhaps he just forgot. But when one recognizes that Conrad's aim was to explore the heart of darkness in *mankind*, not simply in people of particular geographical locale, it makes good sense. Conrad provides enough detail to draw the

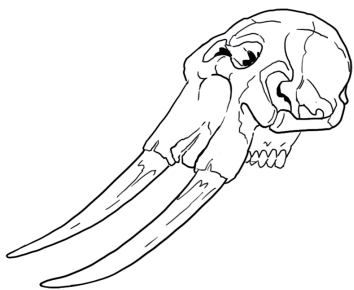
reader into a realistic expectation, but then he supplies so little else that it begs for a more universal application. “The accountant”, “the manager”, “the Intended”, and “the great man himself” who heads “the Company” float off the page to stand for character types and constructs around us today, types that will remain with us throughout our ages. Even Conrad’s subtle title shift (originally *The Heart of Darkness*, changed to *Heart of Darkness*) emphasizes the geographical displacement of the theme; this is not about the particular location of a darkness on the earth but the heart of darkness anywhere on earth, anywhere we find the heart of man.

Conrad’s indirect, ambiguous style is not chiefly something to confuse or discourage the reader. Instead, it is a means to creating a perfect atmosphere for *Heart of Darkness*, a dark dream of the human soul confronting an impenetrable moral challenge. When John Milius was writing the script for *Apocalypse Now* (the allegorical retelling of *Heart of Darkness*) he decided *not* to reread the book because he believed the essential component he needed to begin with was what stayed lodged so deeply within him: the atmosphere of a “dream.” Milius knew he had to move with the ambiguity rather than fight for each factual detail for the cinematic parallel to manifest properly.

What does it mean to give oneself to a tempting darkness? To a tempting character? What happens when that power that once tempted the mind and then was received by the mind, finally betrays that mind? Dark thoughts indeed.

The geographic locations, chronological order, and minor character development all fade into a nearly anonymous background while the minds of the two central characters grow red hot with intense, even horrific, reflection and passion. This is the difference between the indirection or ambiguity of Conrad here which leaves one looking

* “Apocalypse Now—Interview with John Milius,” YouTube video, 49:45, April 8, 2010, posted by “DeadBySense,” accessed on April 5, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i4nY2J1gRzg>.



PART I

The *Nellie*, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide.

The sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway. In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint, and in the luminous space the tanned sails of the barges drifting up with the tide seemed to stand still in red clusters of canvas sharply peaked, with gleams of varnished sprits. A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness. The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth.

The Director of Companies was our captain and our host. We four affectionately watched his back as he stood in the bows looking to seaward. On the whole river there was nothing that looked half so nautical. He resembled a pilot, which to a seaman is trustworthiness personified. It was difficult to realize his work was not out there in the luminous estuary, but behind him, within the brooding gloom.

Between us there was, as I have already said somewhere, the bond of the sea. Besides holding our hearts together through long periods

of separation, it had the effect of making us tolerant of each other's yarns—and even convictions. The Lawyer—the best of old fellows—had, because of his many years and many virtues, the only cushion on deck, and was lying on the only rug. The Accountant had brought out already a box of dominoes, and was toying architecturally with the bones. Marlow sat cross-legged right aft, leaning against the mizzen-mast. He had sunken cheeks, a yellow complexion, a straight back, an ascetic aspect, and, with his arms dropped, the palms of hands outwards, resembled an idol. The Director, satisfied the anchor had good hold, made his way aft and sat down amongst us. We exchanged a few words lazily. Afterwards there was silence on board the yacht. For some reason or other we did not begin that game of dominoes. We felt meditative, and fit for nothing but placid staring. The day was ending in a serenity of still and exquisite brilliance. The water shone pacifically; the sky, without a speck, was a benign immensity of unstained light; the very mist on the Essex marshes was like a gauzy and radiant fabric, hung from the wooded rises inland, and draping the low shores in diaphanous folds. Only the gloom to the west, brooding over the upper reaches, became more somber every minute, as if angered by the approach of the sun.

And at last, in its curved and imperceptible fall, the sun sank low, and from glowing white changed to a dull red without rays and without heat, as if about to go out suddenly, stricken to death by the touch of that gloom brooding over a crowd of men.

Forthwith a change came over the waters, and the serenity became less brilliant but more profound. The old river in its broad reach rested unruffled at the decline of day, after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks, spread out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth. We looked at the venerable stream not in the vivid flush of a short day that comes and departs for ever, but in the august light of abiding memories. And indeed nothing is easier for a man who has, as the phrase goes, “followed

the sea” with reverence and affection, than to evoke the great spirit of the past upon the lower reaches of the Thames. The tidal current runs to and fro in its unceasing service, crowded with memories of men and ships it had borne to the rest of home or to the battles of the sea. It had known and served all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin, knights all, titled and untitled—the great knights-errant of the sea. It had borne all the ships whose names are like jewels flashing in the night of time, from the Golden Hind returning with her round flanks full of treasure, to be visited by the Queen’s Highness and thus pass out of the gigantic tale, to the Erebus and Terror, bound on other conquests—and that never returned. It had known the ships and the men. They had sailed from Deptford, from Greenwich, from Erith—the adventurers and the settlers; kings’ ships and the ships of men on ‘Change; captains, admirals, the dark “interlopers” of the Eastern trade, and the commissioned “generals” of East India fleets. Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth! . . . The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires.

The sun set; the dusk fell on the stream, and lights began to appear along the shore. The Chapman lighthouse, a three-legged thing erect on a mud-flat, shone strongly. Lights of ships moved in the fairway—a great stir of lights going up and going down. And farther west on the upper reaches the place of the monstrous town was still marked ominously on the sky, a brooding gloom in sunshine, a lurid glare under the stars.

“And this also,” said Marlow suddenly, “has been one of the dark places of the earth.”

He was the only man of us who still “followed the sea.” The worst that could be said of him was that he did not represent his class. He

was a seaman, but he was a wanderer, too, while most seamen lead, if one may so express it, a sedentary life. Their minds are of the stay-at-home order, and their home is always with them—the ship; and so is their country—the sea. One ship is very much like another, and the sea is always the same. In the immutability of their surroundings the foreign shores, the foreign faces, the changing immensity of life, glide past, veiled not by a sense of mystery but by a slightly disdainful ignorance; for there is nothing mysterious to a seaman unless it be the sea itself, which is the mistress of his existence and as inscrutable as Destiny. For the rest, after his hours of work, a casual stroll or a casual spree on shore suffices to unfold for him the secret of a whole continent, and generally he finds the secret not worth knowing. The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.

His remark did not seem at all surprising. It was just like Marlow. It was accepted in silence. No one took the trouble to grunt even; and presently he said, very slow—

“I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago—the other day. . . . Light came out of this river since—you say Knights? Yes; but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker—may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday. Imagine the feelings of a commander of a fine—what d’ye call ‘em?—trireme in the Mediterranean, ordered suddenly to the north; run overland across the Gauls in a hurry; put in charge of one of these craft the legionaries,—a wonderful lot of handy men they must have been too—used to build, apparently by the hundred,

in a month or two, if we may believe what we read. Imagine him here—the very end of the world, a sea the color of lead, a sky the color of smoke, a kind of ship about as rigid as a concertina—and going up this river with stores, or orders, or what you like. Sandbanks, marshes, forests, savages,—precious little to eat fit for a civilized man, nothing but Thames water to drink. No Falernian wine here, no going ashore. Here and there a military camp lost in a wilderness, like a needle in a bundle of hay—cold, fog, tempests, disease, exile, and death,—death skulking in the air, in the water, in the bush. They must have been dying like flies here. Oh yes—he did it. Did it very well, too, no doubt, and without thinking much about it either, except afterwards to brag of what he had gone through in his time, perhaps. They were men enough to face the darkness. And perhaps he was cheered by keeping his eye on a chance of promotion to the fleet at Ravenna by-and-by, if he had good friends in Rome and survived the awful climate. Or think of a decent young citizen in a toga—perhaps too much dice, you know—coming out here in the train of some prefect, or tax-gatherer, or trader even, to mend his fortunes. Land in a swamp, march through the woods, and in some inland post feel the savagery, the utter savagery, had closed round him,—all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men. There's no initiation either into such mysteries. He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable. And it has a fascination, too, that goes to work upon him. The fascination of the abomination—you know. Imagine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate.”

He paused.

“Mind,” he began again, lifting one arm from the elbow, the palm of the hand outwards, so that, with his legs folded before him, he had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus-flower—”Mind, none of us would feel exactly like this. What saves us is efficiency—the devotion to efficiency. But these chaps were

not much account, really. They were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force—nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind—as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. . . .”

He broke off. Flames glided in the river, small green flames, red flames, white flames, pursuing, overtaking, joining, crossing each other—then separating slowly or hastily. The traffic of the great city went on in the deepening night upon the sleepless river. We looked on, waiting patiently—there was nothing else to do till the end of the flood; but it was only after a long silence, when he said, in a hesitating voice, “I suppose you fellows remember I did once turn fresh-water sailor for a bit,” that we knew we were fated, before the ebb began to run, to hear about one of Marlow’s inconclusive experiences.

“I don’t want to bother you much with what happened to me personally,” he began, showing in this remark the weakness of many tellers of tales who seem so often unaware of what their audience would best like to hear; “yet to understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap. It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me—and into my thoughts. It was somber enough too—and pitiful—not

extraordinary in any way—not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light.

“I had then, as you remember, just returned to London after a lot of Indian Ocean, Pacific, China Seas—a regular dose of the East—six years or so, and I was loafing about, hindering you fellows in your work and invading your homes, just as though I had got a heavenly mission to civilize you. It was very fine for a time, but after a bit I did get tired of resting. Then I began to look for a ship—I should think the hardest work on earth. But the ships wouldn’t even look at me. And I got tired of that game too.

“Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, ‘When I grow up I will go there.’ The North Pole was one of these places, I remember. Well, I haven’t been there yet, and shall not try now. The glamour’s off. Other places were scattered about the Equator, and in every sort of latitude all over the two hemispheres. I have been in some of them, and . . . well, we won’t talk about that. But there was one yet—the biggest, the most blank, so to speak—that I had a hankering after.

“True, by this time it was not a blank space any more. It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery—a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness. But there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land. And as I looked at the map of it in a shop-window, it fascinated me as a snake would a bird—a silly little bird. Then I remembered there was a big concern, a Company for

trade on that river. Dash it all! I thought to myself, they can't trade without using some kind of craft on that lot of fresh water—steamboats! Why shouldn't I try to get charge of one? I went on along Fleet Street, but could not shake off the idea. The snake had charmed me.

"You understand it was a Continental concern, that Trading society; but I have a lot of relations living on the Continent, because it's cheap and not so nasty as it looks, they say.

"I am sorry to own I began to worry them. This was already a fresh departure for me. I was not used to get things that way, you know. I always went my own road and on my own legs where I had a mind to go. I wouldn't have believed it of myself; but, then—you see—I felt somehow I must get there by hook or by crook. So I worried them. The men said 'My dear fellow,' and did nothing. Then—would you believe it?—I tried the women. I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work—to get a job. Heavens! Well, you see, the notion drove me. I had an aunt, a dear enthusiastic soul. She wrote: 'It will be delightful. I am ready to do anything, anything for you. It is a glorious idea. I know the wife of a very high personage in the Administration, and also a man who has lots of influence with,' &c., &c. She was determined to make no end of fuss to get me appointed skipper of a river steamboat, if such was my fancy.

"I got my appointment—of course; and I got it very quick. It appears the Company had received news that one of their captains had been killed in a scuffle with the natives. This was my chance, and it made me the more anxious to go. It was only months and months afterwards, when I made the attempt to recover what was left of the body, that I heard the original quarrel arose from a misunderstanding about some hens. Yes, two black hens. Fresleven—that was the fellow's name, a Dane—thought himself wronged somehow in the bargain, so he went ashore and started to hammer the chief of the village with a stick. Oh, it didn't surprise me in the least to hear this, and at the same time to be told that Fresleven was the gentlest, quietest

creature that ever walked on two legs. No doubt he was; but he had been a couple of years already out there engaged in the noble cause, you know, and he probably felt the need at last of asserting his self-respect in some way. Therefore he whacked the old nigger mercilessly, while a big crowd of his people watched him, thunderstruck, till some man,—I was told the chief's son,—in desperation at hearing the old chap yell, made a tentative jab with a spear at the white man—and of course it went quite easy between the shoulder-blades. Then the whole population cleared into the forest, expecting all kinds of calamities to happen, while, on the other hand, the steamer *Fresleven* commanded left also in a bad panic, in charge of the engineer, I believe. Afterwards nobody seemed to trouble much about *Fresleven's* remains, till I got out and stepped into his shoes. I couldn't let it rest, though; but when an opportunity offered at last to meet my predecessor, the grass growing through his ribs was tall enough to hide his bones. They were all there. The supernatural being had not been touched after he fell. And the village was deserted, the huts gaped black, rotting, all askew within the fallen enclosures. A calamity had come to it, sure enough. The people had vanished. Mad terror had scattered them, men, women, and children, through the bush, and they had never returned. What became of the hens I don't know either. I should think the cause of progress got them, anyhow. However, through this glorious affair I got my appointment, before I had fairly begun to hope for it.

“I flew around like mad to get ready, and before forty-eight hours I was crossing the Channel to show myself to my employers, and sign the contract. In a very few hours I arrived in a city that always makes me think of a whited sepulcher. Prejudice no doubt. I had no difficulty in finding the Company's offices. It was the biggest thing in the town, and everybody I met was full of it. They were going to run an over-sea empire, and make no end of coin by trade.

“A narrow and deserted street in deep shadow, high houses, innumerable windows with venetian blinds, a dead silence, grass sprouting

between the stones, imposing carriage archways right and left, immense double doors standing ponderously ajar. I slipped through one of these cracks, went up a swept and ungarnished staircase, as arid as a desert, and opened the first door I came to. Two women, one fat and the other slim, sat on straw-bottomed chairs, knitting black wool. The slim one got up and walked straight at me—still knitting with downcast eyes—and only just as I began to think of getting out of her way, as you would for a somnambulist, stood still, and looked up. Her dress was as plain as an umbrella-cover, and she turned round without a word and preceded me into a waiting-room. I gave my name, and looked about. Deal table in the middle, plain chairs all round the walls, on one end a large shining map, marked with all the colors of a rainbow. There was a vast amount of red—good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there, a deuce of a lot of blue, a little green, smears of orange, and, on the East Coast, a purple patch, to show where the jolly pioneers of progress drink the jolly lager-beer. However, I wasn't going into any of these. I was going into the yellow. Dead in the center. And the river was there—fascinating—deadly—like a snake. Ough! A door opened, a white-haired secretarial head, but wearing a compassionate expression, appeared, and a skinny forefinger beckoned me into the sanctuary. Its light was dim, and a heavy writing-desk squatted in the middle. From behind that structure came out an impression of pale plumpness in a frock-coat. The great man himself. He was five feet six, I should judge, and had his grip on the handle-end of ever so many millions. He shook hands, I fancy, murmured vaguely, was satisfied with my French. *Bon voyage*.

“In about forty-five seconds I found myself again in the waiting-room with the compassionate secretary, who, full of desolation and sympathy, made me sign some document. I believe I undertook amongst other things not to disclose any trade secrets. Well, I am not going to.