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## Chapter I

### Conrad, Joseph

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"Heart of Darkness" is one of the most recognized and profound works by the outstanding English writer, Polish emigrant born in Ukraine, Joseph Conrad (1857—1924). From the pages of the novel, before the reader's eyes there arrives the sailor's, steamboat captain's narration about the journey to the banks of the Congo, full of reticences and, at times, even innuendoes. It is essential that the nature of Africa appears in the novel as an individual character. The meeting with this world, the possibility of glancing at it from the point of view of the colonists and the colonised enables the main character to assess in quite a new way the darkness which peeps out from the dense jungle and to see it in the souls of the white people who claim themselves the bearers of civilization and culture.

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The Nellie, a cruising yawl<sup>1</sup>, 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<sup>2</sup>. A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness. The air was dark above Gravesend<sup>3</sup>, and farther back still seemed condensed into

<sup>1</sup> yawl — a ship's small boat, usually rowed by four or six oars

<sup>2</sup> sprit — a light spar pivoted at the mast and crossing a fore-and-aft quadrilateral sail diagonally to the peak

<sup>3</sup> Gravesend — an ancient town in north west Kent, England, situated 21 miles (35 km) south-east of Charing Cross (central London) on the south bank of the Thames estuary and opposite Tilbury in Essex.

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<sup>1</sup>. He had sunken cheeks, a yellow complexion, a straight back, an ascetic

<sup>1</sup> mizzen-mast — the third aftermost mast of a three-masted ship, typically shorter than the fore-mast

aspect, and, with his arms dropped, the palms of his 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<sup>1</sup> 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 sombre 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 pro-

<sup>1</sup> Essex — a ceremonial and administrative county in England, and a Home County north-east of London.

found. 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<sup>1</sup> to Sir John Franklin<sup>2</sup>, knights all, titled and untitled — the

<sup>1</sup> Sir Francis Drake, vice admiral (c. 1540—1596), was an English sea captain, privateer, navigator, slaver, and politician of the Elizabethan era. Drake carried out the second circumnavigation of the world (1577 to 1580), during which he managed to plunder a lot of Spanish gold and on this account he was given the kighthood. "The Golden Hind" (initially called "Pelican") was the only ship out of six which returned safe from the navigation.

<sup>2</sup> Rear-Admiral Sir John Franklin (1786—1847) was a British Royal Navy officer and Arctic explorer. He disappeared on his last expedition, attempting to chart and navi-

gate a section of the Northwest Passage in the Canadian Arctic. The expedition included two ships: "Erebus" (in ancient Greek mythology "Ereb" or "Erebus" is one of the names of the underground land of darkness and the personification of eternal gloom) and "Terror".

<sup>1</sup> Deptford, Greenwich, Erith are districts of South-East London, on the River Thames.

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<sup>1</sup> — 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.

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