

“Heart of Darkness”

by Joseph Conrad

Scene 3

(“Heart of Darkness” is a novella with neither scene nor chapter divisions;
the scene numbering is mine)

“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 sepulchre. 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 colours 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 centre. 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.

“I began to feel slightly uneasy. You know I am not used to such ceremonies, and there was something ominous in the atmosphere. It was just as though I had been let into some conspiracy—I don't know—something not quite right; and I was glad to get out. In the outer room the two women knitted black wool feverishly. **People** were arriving, and the younger one was walking back and forth introducing them. The old one sat on her chair. Her flat cloth slippers were propped up on a footwarmer, and a cat reposed on her lap. She wore a starched white affair on her head, had a wart on one cheek, and silver-rimmed spectacles hung on the tip of her nose. She glanced at me above the glasses. The swift and indifferent placidity of that look troubled me. **Two youths** with foolish and cheery countenances were being piloted over, and she threw at them the same quick glance of unconcerned wisdom. She seemed to know all about them and about me, too. An eerie feeling came over me. She seemed uncanny and fateful. Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. *Ave!* Old knitter of black wool. *Morituri te salutant*. Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again—not half, by a long way.

“There was yet a visit to **the doctor**. ‘A simple formality,’ assured me the secretary, with an air of taking an immense part in all my sorrows. Accordingly a

young chap wearing his hat over the left eyebrow, some clerk I suppose,—there must have been clerks in the business, though the house was as still as a house in a city of the dead—came from somewhere upstairs, and led me forth. He was shabby and careless, with ink-stains on the sleeves of his jacket, and his cravat was large and billowy, under a chin shaped like the toe of an old boot. It was a little too early for the doctor, so I proposed a drink, and thereupon he developed a vein of joviality. As we sat over our vermouths he glorified the Company's business, and by-and-by I expressed casually my surprise at him not going out there. He became very cool and collected all at once. 'I am not such a fool as I look, quoth Plato to his disciples,' he said sententiously, emptied his glass with great resolution, and we rose.

"The old doctor felt my pulse, evidently thinking of something else the while. 'Good, good for there,' he mumbled, and then with a certain eagerness asked me whether I would let him measure my head. Rather surprised, I said Yes, when he produced a thing like calipers and got the dimensions back and front and every way, taking notes carefully. He was an unshaven little man in a threadbare coat like a gaberdine, with his feet in slippers, and I thought him a harmless fool. 'I always ask leave, in the interests of science, to measure the crania of those going out there,' he said. 'And when they come back, too?' I asked. 'Oh, I never see them,' he remarked; 'and, moreover, the changes take place inside, you know.' He smiled, as if at some quiet joke. 'So you are going out there. Famous. Interesting, too.' He gave me a searching glance, and made another note. 'Ever any madness in your family?' he asked, in a matter-of-fact tone. I felt very annoyed. 'Is that question in the interests of science, too?' 'It would be,' he said, without taking notice of my irritation, 'interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals, on the spot, but ...' 'Are you an alienist?' I interrupted. 'Every doctor should be—a little,' answered that original, imperturbably. 'I have a little theory which you Messieurs who go out there must help me to prove. This is my share in the advantages my country shall reap from the possession of such a magnificent dependency. The mere wealth I leave to others. Pardon my questions, but you are the first Englishman coming under my observation ...' I hastened to assure him I was not in the least typical. 'If I were,' said I, 'I wouldn't be talking like this with you.' 'What you say is rather profound, and probably erroneous,' he said, with a laugh. 'Avoid irritation more than exposure to the sun. Adieu. How do you English say, eh? Good-bye. Ah! Good-bye. Adieu. In the tropics one must before everything keep calm.' ... He lifted a warning forefinger.... *'Du calme, du calme. Adieu.'*

ANALYZING THE SCENE

A STORY EVENT is an active change of life value for one or more characters as a result of conflict (one character's desires clash with another's).

A WORKING SCENE contains at least one Story Event.

To determine a Scene's Story Event, answer these four questions:

1. What are the characters literally doing?

Marlow goes through the various bureaucratic steps required of a new employee.

2. What is the essential action of what the characters are doing in this scene?

Marlow gets an inauspicious impression of the Company employees, and, hence, the Company.

3. What life value has changed for one or more of the characters in the scene?

Fresleven (though he's only in the scene by reference) goes

Internally: from Gentle to Brutal; Externally from Alive to Dead.

Marlow goes

Internally: from Eager to Uneasy; Externally: from unemployed to Employed

4. Which life value should I highlight on my Story Grid Spreadsheet?

Eager to Uneasy

HOW THE SCENE ABIDES THE FIVE COMMANDMENTS OF STORYTELLING

Inciting Incident (Causal):

Marlow learns he has gotten the appointment.

Turning Point (Revelatory):

He's required to sign "some document" and begins to feel uneasy, sensing "something ominous in the atmosphere".

Crisis Best Bad Choice):

Should Marlow follow the instinct that makes him uneasy and forget about the job, or continue with the process?

Climax:

Marlow continues to go through all the bureaucratic rigamarole.

Resolution:

Marlow leaves the office with a new job, but has some reservations about it.

NOTES

- There is much symbolism and foreshadowing in this scene. Here's a sample:
 - Fresleven's story foreshadows Kurtz's as well as the physical and spiritual dangers to Marlow himself.
 - The two women knitting are reminiscent of the three Fates of Greek myth. Marlow even says that one of them "felt uncanny and fateful"
 - The document Marlow signs is the classic "contract with the Devil".
 - The doctor's remark that the changes in those who go out to the colony "take place inside, you know."
- This is the Crossing of the Threshold in Marlow's Hero's journey. He literally crosses thresholds as he enters the Company's office and goes from room to room and meets a number of Threshold Guardians. He is made to sign a document as a prerequisite for entering the Extraordinary World.
- Though it's never stated in the story, the Company is an instrument of the Belgian government, and the river Marlow will be navigating is the Congo.