

CONGO CORSET

Excerpts translated from Dutch by Paul Vincent

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Antwerp, the Scheldt quays, SS Anversville

2 June 1904, noon

I looked around and tried to imagine what tableau vivant my family would take with them as a last impression of me. Everyone was standing on deck, especially young men in the prime of life, with sturdy moustaches and hair combed straight back, stiff white collars and dark suits. They raised their panama hats or their *chapeaux melons* by way of a greeting, but not in an exuberant way, rather as in a slow-motion film, almost regally. Most of them looked serious and despite my youth I felt no urge to rejoice or dance. It was a restrained, almost religious moment.

Three worthy missionaries were drawn up in battle array. With their intent stance, hands crossed behind their backs, their buttoned-up habits from which only a strip of white collar peeked out and especially their thick dark beards, they looked much older than their lively eyes led one to suspect. They did not say anything either, just looked around, and obviously had their own opinion on things.

There is a photograph of that hushed moment. I am in the middle, Gabrielle Sillye-Deman, the outsider from Brussels. I was a young woman, almost a girl still, full of ideals, but already thought myself quite a lady. Under my *imperméable* I wore my favourite dress, red with white dots. With my delicate spindly heels, a carefully gathered-up hairdo under a large hat, the black *voilette* with dots which strewed my wrinkle-free smiling face with *tâches de beauté*, I stood out amid all that piety.

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Just to my left stood four nuns, dressed from head to foot in white wimples and habits. They were enjoying themselves most. Although they were definitely older than me, they whispered and laughed like boarding-school girls on their first school trip. 'It is really true? Is Monseigneur Grison on board?' I heard them whisper. They muttered about him as if he were a notorious womaniser from Brussels nightlife.

Albert, my brand-new husband and Siffer, his inseparable lieutenant, had also heard. 'He must be a popular priest,' they grimaced.

Let them have that crazy feeling of a foal on a fresh spring meadow just for this moment, I thought. If even I with my libertine upbringing want to free myself from that European corset, how must these provincial nuns feel?

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Kasongo – Niembo Kiloko, by steamer and on foot

4 November – 21 December 1904

With a bunch of bananas weighing no less than seventy-four kilos to replace the Biblical dish of lentil soup, we left La Romée and sailed further up the Congo. Under a baobab on the bank stood a man. A breeze made silver and black marks on his bare chest, which made him seem to vibrate in the sun. He was still young, in the prime of life, was standing erect, but stared at me with a look of old grief. He wore a loincloth which ran down almost to his ankles and had wide folds around the waist. He had his hands in his pockets. Pockets ? How strange, I thought for a moment, I had never seen a native garment with pockets here before. I looked more closely. His hands were not in his pockets. They were reduced to stumps. I had already seen that silhouette : on Alice Seeley's magic lantern. With a jerk I turned to look at Albert.

‘Why is de Magnée so cruel ? What does he gain by chopping off hands ? That man, who may be younger than me, can never do anything more for La Romée. Never harvest, never caress.’

Albert adressed me in measured tones. ‘Gabrielle, control yourself. I already explained to you when you were so under the spell of that English troublemaker. This man may just well be the victim of an Arab campaign or a tribal dispute Africa is a cruel continent. There are head hunters roaming around, cannibals, poisoners. Negro massacre each other with arrows and spears.’

‘Must we whites be outdone by the blacks ? Does a conflict, be it over land, a woman, or honour, justify a free-for-all without rules ?’

‘If there are whites who overstep the mark, then they have often learned their tricks from the natives. When a black loses his hand he has deserved it.’

‘I don’t accept that a person must allow such cruelty under the guise of justice. Under the traditional African, the Arab or the European flag, it doesn’t matter. Cutting off a hand is stealing a life ; I’m sorry, Albert, but there’s no valid reason for that.’ Albert shrugged his shoulders.

‘Welcome to the man’s world, Gabrielle. The god of war and the goddess of peace will never meet.’

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