RETURN TO THE CONGO

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ON July 1st the Congo was still substantially a Belgian territory. The army was officered by Belgians. Belgians occupied all key positions in the administration. The huge industrial and commercial monopolies were directed and staffed by Belgians. The Congolese relied on Belgium for their lawyers, doctors and specialists in a score of fields. The proclamation of independence on June 30th had done little more than give the Congo a Head of State and a Prime Minister whose names were scarcely known outside the big towns.

A week later the Belgians were in headlong flight. The masters, law-givers and teachers were vilified and humbled. Their collapse was swift and total. Nothing remained but street names in Flemish and French.

Faced with such a staggering debâcle, we might be excused for seeking an explanation at once simple and all-embracing. Did the Belgians themselves plan it in order to prove to the Congolese they were unfit to manage their own affairs? Was it the Communists, intent on penetrating black Africa? Could it have been Patrice Lumumba, seeking to revenge himself on the Belgians, who stage-managed the mutiny of the Force Publique?

It is only necessary to set down such propositions in order to recognise their inadequacy. There is no simple explanation for what happened in the Congo. My purpose is to describe what happened as I saw it, and from the telling it will perhaps become clear why it happened thus and not otherwise.

I returned to the Congo towards the end of May, after an absence of three years. The Belgians had changed. Three years ago they had been confident, even smug, about their Congo; there was no political freedom for the African, no thought of teaching him to be a doctor, lawyer or administrator; for as far ahead as one could see, he would be a sub-citizen in the Belgians' Shangri-La. Now, however, he was about to become the master, and the Belgians were frightened and behaving contemptibly. The Belgian immigration officer at Elisabethville airport kept us waiting while he got rid of his Congo francs and bought Rhodesian pounds. "It's my money and I'll do as I like with it," he answered when I suggested that his conduct scarcely befitted a government officer.

It was the same in Leopoldville later: civil servants and private citizens alike could hardly wait to be introduced before begging you for dollars and sterling with which to evade the currency regulations.

There were other little things too. The hostess at a small dinner party, apologising because we were having to share spoons, explained: "I've sent the silver back to Belgium." As often as not, the wives and children went back with the silver, while the men remained, equipping themselves with guns.

They did not trust the Congolese, and they said so. Those people, they said, would take their money, their jobs and their homes.

Whether or not they had good reason to mistrust the Congolese, it is certain that by their actions the Belgians helped to create the very situation they professed to fear. The Congolese servant who saw the silver being packed for Belgium, the airport clerk who watched the daily departure of European wives and children, and the politician who heard of the white men's purchase of arms could hardly be blamed for jumping to the conclusion that somebody was preparing for a fight; and there must have been many a Congolese who speculated on the advantages of striking the first blow.

It was at this point, when the Belgians and the Congolese were eyeing each other with mutual mistrust and fear, that Mr. Walter Ganshof van der Meersch arrived in Leopoldville early in June.

He brought with him the reputation of a strong man, largely derived from his successful prosecution of Belgians who had collaborated with the Nazis during the war. There seems little doubt that the Belgian Government, dismayed by the crumbling of Belgian authority and the spreading disloyalty of its citizens in the Congo, had sought a man of unassailable reputation who would win the confidence of Africans and Europeans alike. Mr. Ganshof van der Meersch, however, was so unsure in his grasp of Congo affairs that when I interviewed him all his replies to my questions were supplied by a secretary.

Still, he was the strong man who, as Belgium's Resident Minister, on June 14th took up the task of helping the Congolese to find a Prime Minister. His sole visible achievement was to deepen Congolese suspicions of Belgian motives.

He sent for Patrice Lumumba as leader of the largest party in Parliament, and he gave him until 6.30 p.m. on Friday, June 17th, to find out if he could form a government. But two hours before the deadline expired, he sent for Lumumba, withdrew the man-

date and revealed that he had already invited Joseph Kasavubu, leader of the *Abako* tribal party, to form a government instead.

Van der Meersch offered no adequate explanation for this brusque rejection of Lumumba. Lumumba himself was convinced that he had been sent for in the first place solely in order to mislead the public into believing that he had been given a chance and failed, that the Belgians had never wanted him to become Prime Minister.

Whatever the motive, the manoeuvre failed. Kasavubu was obliged to confess to van der Meersch that he did not have a parliamentary majority, and Lumumba had to be sent for again.

This episode, if it did nothing else, certainly increased Lumumba's dislike of the Belgians, but not until the morning of June 30th were we permitted to glimpse the depths of his bitterness and resentment. Independence day, instead of becoming a day of reconciliation, widened the gulf between the Belgians and the Congolese. Lumumba answered King Baudouin's praise of Leopold II with a denunciation of Belgium's colonial record. It was only with difficulty that the King was persuaded to remain for the rest of the day's ceremonies.

Thus the Congo was launched into independence in an atmosphere of suspicion, confusion and recrimination. And scarcely had Lumumba installed himself in the official villa on the banks of the Congo river when Leopoldville was torn by a series of tribal clashes.

The Force Publique handled these with its usual competence: armed soldiers descended on the battling Africans, clubbing and kicking them before carting them off to the nearest police post. Such a state of affairs was not abnormal in the city, and even provided the Belgians with a certain reassurance. After all, they had said often enough that the Congolese were brutal savages prevented from slaughtering one another only by the loyal, Belgian-officered Force Publique.

The Force Publique—that was all the Belgians had left now. But there were signs that even that was not sacred. On Sunday, July 3rd, a Belgian officer who had ordered the arrest of a dozen Africans for rioting in the suburb of Ngiri Ngiri suddenly found himself confronted by the Minister of the Interior, Mr. Christopher Obenye, who professed to believe that the Belgians were deliberately allowing the Africans to batter one another to pieces. For twenty minutes he argued furiously with the Belgian, while the soldiers stood around smoking cigarettes and listening.

Even so, all was well. General Emile Janssens, commander of the Force Publique, said so. Laughing and joking, he appeared in full dress, rows of medals on his chest, at the American Embassy's Fourth of July cocktail party. "The Force Publique? It is my creation. It is absolutely loyal. I have made my dispositions. Disorders will be firmly suppressed."

Twenty-four hours later the soldiers of the Leopold II barracks in Leopoldville were in revolt. There had been murmurings of discontent during the day, and in the evening the soldiers met to discuss their grievances. Belgian officers ordered them to disperse and, when they refused, attacked them with tear gas.

June 6th—Before dawn the Belgian officers at Leopold II had been disarmed, and troops at Thysville, the Force's main arsenal 100 miles down the Congo river, had joined the mutiny and arrested their officers. These officers, with their wives and children, numbered one hundred and were held as hostages. A 28-year-old African sergeant announced: "I am a soldier and I like to see discipline, but there has been too much discrimination between Europeans and Africans."

In Leopoldville, groups of soldiers, with their uniforms unbuttoned and swinging their swordbelts, roamed the streets, attacking Europeans and overturning cars. They invaded the parliament building, demanding the dismissal of General Janssens. They complained that the Belgians had told them independence was for civilians and that the soldiers would continue as before, with white officers.

Gradually other grievances came to light. They protested at being given extra parades for independence. They objected to the salaries M.P.s had voted themselves—some £3,000 a year plus expenses. They believed Lumumba was going to offer Belgians positions in the Ministry of Defence. Some reported rumours that Lumumba intended to invite the Russians to take over the country. True or false, no rumour was too wild to be believed by the soldiers. But in the end all these were consumed in their devouring hatred of their Flemish masters.

The Flemings, Catholic, stubbornly devoted to their Dutch dialect, jealous of the sophistication of their French-speaking countrymen, had over the years secured a position of ascendency in Belgium. That ascendency was reflected in the Congo, where Flemings occupied the most important positions in the Force Publique and the civil service and where they showed themselves in general as boorish, grasping and unimaginative. It was to them that the saying was attributed: "Knowledge of the whip is the beginning of wisdom—for the black man." And it was against the Flemish that the Congolese soldiers let loose the full fury of their resentments. On this first day of the mutiny, roaming bands of soldiers appeared in the village of Inkisi and, hunting down the Flemish families, beat up the men and raped the wives.

June 7th—During the night Leopoldville police joined the mutineers and expelled their white officers. From a score of places in the Lower Congo came reports of attacks by soldiers on isolated farmhouses. Before the day was out the Belgians had abandoned any hope of recovering control and were thinking only of rescuing their womenfolk. A convoy of 20 motor cars accompanied by a Congolese Minister of the Leopoldville provincial government set off for Thysville. A train also left Leopoldville for Thysville.

At this stage, Lumumba and his colleagues still seemed to think the uprising could be checked. Lumumba promoted every soldier in the force immediately and met all the other demands of the mutineers for the expulsion of Belgian officers. But the mutiny continued.

Late at night the blacked-out train returned from Thysville. Men stood on the darkened platform watching the women, children, babies in cots, and nuns emerging from the carriages. Within a few minutes everybody had heard the story of the rape of Inkisi. Men began to shout and laugh hysterically. A government official with me wept. "What have they done to our

Congo!'' he sobbed. ''Those apes!'' A few minutes later I noticed him checking his revolver.

More refugees from the Thysville area arrived in the motor convoy soon after midnight, and this started fresh rumours of violence and rape. Hundreds of Belgians gathered in the main square of Leopoldville outside the Belgian embassy. They shouted for Belgian paratroopers to be brought in. More people arrived in cars.

Suddenly two white officers of the Force Publique appeared, shouting: ''The blacks have seized the armoury and they're marching on the town.''

Panic swept the crowd. Men shouted, ''To arms!'' Women clung to their husbands screaming. Drivers crashed and bumped their cars as they tried to get away. More and more people appeared, drawn by the noise and the headlights. At two o'clock the rush for the ferry began: shopkeepers, government officials, engineers, doctors, wives, typists, hotel chambermaids—all had but one thought and that was to get to the ferry which would take them across the Congo river to the safety of Brazzaville.

The soldiers appeared. They stopped every car, they searched every European, they invaded the hotels and turned us into the street, and everywhere they went they demanded: ''Where is your gun?'' The Belgians, who had for so long talked of standing and fighting, meekly handed over their guns or fled to the ferry. Through the night the ferryboats went back and forth across the Congo, and in Brazzaville French gendarmes searched the refugees, so that when dawn came the beach was heaped with pistols, revolvers and sporting rifles.

June 8th—The mutiny was now rolling irresistibly across the whole country, and everywhere the pattern of behaviour was the same. The troops turned on their officers, and took as their special victims the Flemish. Then the city workers, the labourers and the clerks, joined in demanding the dismissal of their Belgian managers.

Everywhere the Europeans were in flight. Grey-faced Flemish priests climbed out of helicopters at Leopoldville airport and told how they have been tied and beaten. A few nuns and wives went to the airport medical officers and asked for injections against venereal disease. Nobody denied the atrocities. Lumumba himself said that those responsible would be punished. The argument was to come later—about the numbers. I can make no estimate. I spoke to only six women who said they had been

assaulted. The medical officers at the airport said that, of the tens of thousands who passed through as refugees, some two hundred and fifty asked for injections against V.D.

June 9th—By the week-end it seemed certain that the Lumumba government was tottering towards its collapse. When Lumumba tried to address the troops at Leopold II barracks he was booed and chased away. He never once appeared in public, as his Foreign Minister, Justin Bomboko, did often enough to persuade the mobs to disperse. Persistently, Bomboko turned up and rescued groups of Europeans seized by the mutineers. But there was no organised authority. Army and police had disintegrated, the civil servants had fled and government offices were deserted. No taxes were collected and nobody worked. Lumumba was sleeping in a different house each night.

July 10th—Ganshof van der Meersch reappeared from Brussels. He brought with him an ultimatum; but was never allowed to deliver it, for Lumumba refused to see him. Nevertheless, it was clear that the Belgians had decided to intervene with their soldiers.

As the planeloads of refugees arrived from the Congo and the stories of brutality were told and retold and embellished, public opinion in Belgium became irresistible. But when the Belgians sent in their soldiers, they provided Lumumba with the classic situation which unites a country. The sight of Belgian soldiers in the streets of Leopoldville was something every Congolese could understand. The Belgians had come to take away the independence they had so recently granted. That day, and for many days afterwards, you could not find a Congolese who had a word to say against Lumumba.

The Belgians who had never wanted Lumumba as the head of the Congo government, had at last succeeded in turning him into a national leader.

Already, of course, we are being carefully taught the lessons of the Congo and being warned against granting independence too hastily to other African territories. No doubt the Congo can teach us many lessons. But surely the most important of them all is that for fifty years the Belgians held the Congo by force, never even knowing—since they permitted no freedom of expression until it was far too late—just how great the hatred was that they had earned.

It would seem that the Belgians were guilty not of granting freedom too soon, but of withholding it for too long; of giving only when they were forced to give, and then giving without generosity or grace.