

ARTHUR CONAN
DOYLE

THE CRIME
OF THE CONGO

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Arthur Conan Doyle

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Arthur Conan Doyle (1859 – 1930) was an English writer best known for his detective stories about Sherlock Holmes. “The Crime of the Congo” is a book intended to expose the situation of serious human rights abuses in the Congo Free State, personal property of the King of the Belgians, Leopold II. This exposure includes many cases of violations, including a serious excess of authority, slavery, and tortures.

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PREFACE

There are many of us in England who consider the crime which has been wrought in the Congo lands by King Leopold of Belgium and his followers to be the greatest which has ever been known in human annals. Personally I am strongly of that opinion. There have been great expropriations like that of the Normans in England or of the English in Ireland. There have been massacres of populations like that of the South Americans by the Spaniards or of subject nations by the Turks. But never before has there been such a mixture of wholesale expropriation and wholesale massacre all done under an odious guise of philanthropy and with the lowest commercial motives as a reason. It is this sordid cause and the unctious hypocrisy which makes this crime unparalleled in its horror.

The witnesses of the crime are of all nations, and there is no possibility of error concerning facts. There are British consuls like Casement, Thesiger, Mitchell and Armstrong, all writing in their official capacity with every detail of fact and date. There are Frenchmen like Pierre Mille and Félicien Challaye, both of whom have written books upon the subject. There are missionaries of many races – Harris, Weeks and Stannard (British); Morrison, Clarke and Shepherd (American); Sjoblom (Swedish) and Father Vermeersch, the Jesuit. There is the eloquent action of the Italian Government, who refused to allow Italian officers

to be employed any longer in such hangman's work, and there is the report of the Belgian commission, the evidence before which was suppressed because it was too dreadful for publication; finally, there is the incorruptible evidence of the kodak. Any American citizen who will glance at Mark Twain's "King Leopold's Soliloquy" will see some samples of that. A perusal of all of these sources of information will show that there is not a grotesque, obscene or ferocious torture which human ingenuity could invent which has not been used against these harmless and helpless people.

This would, to my mind, warrant our intervention in any case. Turkey has several times been interfered with simply on the general ground of humanity. There is in this instance a very special reason why America and England should not stand by and see these people done to death. They are, in a sense, their wards. America was the first to give official recognition to King Leopold's enterprise in 1884, and so has the responsibility of having actually put him into that position which he has so dreadfully abused. She has been the indirect and innocent cause of the whole tragedy. Surely some reparation is due. On the other hand England has, with the other European Powers, signed the treaty of 1885, by which each and all of them make it responsible for the condition of the native races. The other Powers have so far shown no desire to live up to this pledge. But the conscience of England is uneasy and she is slowly rousing herself to act. Will America be behind?

At this moment two American citizens, Shepherd and that noble Virginian, Morrison, are about to be tried at Boma for tell-

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ing the truth about the scoundrels. Morrison in the dock makes a finer Statue of Liberty than Bartholdi's in New York harbour.

Attempts will be made in America (for the Congo has its paid apologists everywhere) to pretend that England wants to oust Belgium from her colony and take it herself. Such accusations are folly. To run a tropical colony honestly without enslaving the natives is an expensive process. For example Nigeria, the nearest English colony, has to be subsidized to the extent of \$2,000,000 a year. Whoever takes over the Congo will, considering its present demoralized condition, have a certain expense of \$10,000,000 a year for twenty years. Belgium has not run the colony. It has simply sacked it, forcing the inhabitants without pay to ship everything of value to Antwerp. No decent European Power could do this. For many years to come the Congo will be a heavy expense and it will truly be a philanthropic call upon the next owner. I trust it will not fall to England.

Attempts have been made too (for there is considerable ingenuity and unlimited money on the other side) to pretend that it is a question of Protestant missions against Catholic. Any one who thinks this should read the book, "La Question Kongolaise," of the eloquent and holy Jesuit, Father Vermeersch. He lived in the country and, as he says, it was the sight of the "immeasurable misery," which drove him to write.

We English who are earnest over this matter look eagerly to the westward to see some sign of moral support of material leading. It would be a grand sight to see the banner of humanity and civilization carried forward in such a cause by the two great English-speaking nations.

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INTRODUCTION

I am convinced that the reason why public opinion has not been more sensitive upon the question of the Congo Free State, is that the terrible story has not been brought thoroughly home to the people. Mr. E. D. Morel has done the work of ten men, and the Congo Reform Association has struggled hard with very scanty means; but their time and energies have, for the most part, been absorbed in dealing with each fresh phase of the situation as it arose. There is room, therefore, as it seemed to me, for a general account which would cover the whole field and bring the matter up to date. This account must necessarily be a superficial one, if it is to be produced at such a size and such a price, as will ensure its getting at that general public for which it has been prepared. Yet it contains the essential facts, and will enable the reader to form his own opinion upon the situation.

Should he, after reading it, desire to help in the work of forcing this question to the front, he can do so in several ways. He can join the Congo Reform Association (Granville House, Arundel Street, W. C.). He can write to his local member and aid in getting up local meetings to ventilate the question. Finally, he can pass this book on and purchase other copies, for

any profits will be used in setting the facts before the French and German public.

It may be objected that this is ancient history, and that the greater part of it refers to a period before the Congo State was annexed to Belgium on August 10th, 1908. But responsibility cannot be so easily shaken off. The Congo State was founded by the Belgian King, and exploited by Belgian capital, Belgian soldiers and Belgian concessionnaires. It was defended and upheld by successive Belgian Governments, who did all they could to discourage the Reformers. In spite of legal quibbles, it is an insult to common sense to suppose that the responsibility for the Congo has not always rested with Belgium. The Belgian machinery was always ready to help and defend the State, but never to hold it in control and restrain it from crime.

One chance Belgium had. If immediately upon taking over the State they had formed a Judicial Commission for the rigid inspection of the whole matter, with power to punish for all past offences, and to examine all the scandals of recent years, then they would have done something to clear the past. If on the top of that they had freed the land, given up the system of forced labour entirely, and cancelled the charters of all the concessionnaire companies, for the obvious reason that they have notoriously abused their powers, then Belgium could go forward in its colonizing enterprise on the same terms as other States, with her sins expiated so far as expiation is now possible.

She did none of these things. For a year now she has herself persevered in the evil ways of her predecessor. Her colony is a scandal before the whole world. The era of murders and

mutilations has, as we hope, passed by, but the country is sunk into a state of cowed and hopeless slavery. It is not a new story, but merely another stage of the same story. When Belgium took over the Congo State, she took over its history and its responsibilities also. What a load that was is indicated in these pages.

The record of the dates is the measure of our patience. Can any one say that we are precipitate if we now brush aside vain words and say definitely that the matter has to be set right by a certain near date, or that we will appeal to each and all of the Powers, with the evidence before them, to assist us in setting it right? If the Powers refuse to do so, then it is our duty to honour the guarantees which we made as to the safety of these poor people, and to turn to the task of setting it right ourselves. If the Powers join in, or give us a mandate, all the better. But we have a mandate from something higher than the Powers which obliges us to act.

Sir Edward Grey has told us in his speech of July 22nd, 1909, that a danger to European peace lies in the matter. Let us look this danger squarely in the face. Whence does it come? Is it from Germany, with her traditions of kindly home life — is this the power which would raise a hand to help the butchers of the Mongalla and of the Domaine de la Couronne? Is it likely that those who so justly admire the splendid private and public example of William II. would draw the sword for Leopold? Both in the name of trade rights and in that of humanity Germany has a long score to settle on the Congo. Or is it the United States which would stand in the way, when her citizens have vied with our own in withstanding and expos-