

The Crime of the Congo

By Arthur Conan Doyle

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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.

It may be objected that some of 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 the Belgians 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. 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 anyone 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 exposing these iniquities? Or, lastly, is France the danger? There are those who think that because France has capital invested in these enterprises, because the French Congo has itself degenerated under the influence and example of its neighbour, and because France holds some vague right of pre-emption, that therefore our trouble lies across the Channel. For my own part, I cannot believe it. I know too well the generous, chivalrous instincts of the French people. I know, also, that their colonial record during centuries has been hardly inferior to our own. Such traditions are not lightly set aside, and all will soon be right again when a strong Colonial Minister turns his attention to the concessionnaires in the French Congo. He will remember de Brazza's dying words: "Our Congo must not be turned into a Mongalla." It is an impossibility that France could ally herself with King Leopold, and certainly if such were, indeed, to be the case, the *entente cordiale* would be strained to breaking. Surely, then, if these three Powers, the ones most directly involved, have such obvious reasons for helping, rather than hindering, we may go forward without fear. But if it were not so, if all Europe frowned upon our enterprise, we should not be worthy to be the sons of our fathers if we did not go forward on the plain path of national duty.

Arthur Conan Doyle.
Windlesham, Crowborough.
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- Since writing the above the passage marked with a star must be modified for the worse. It has been shown beyond doubt by an excellent German witness, Dr. Dörpinghaus, of Barmen, that in the Busiré country, which is in the very centre of the Colony, the outrages continue exactly as in the old time. The story he tells of the chicotte and the hostage house, the armed cannibal and the burned village, is exactly the same as is told so often elsewhere.