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Americans in the Congo

In trying to sum up what I found in the Congo Free State, I think what one fails to find there is of the greatest significance. To tell what the place is like, you must tell what it lacks. One must write of the Congo always in the negative. It is as though you asked: "What sort of a house is this one Jones has built?" and were answered: "Well, it hasn't any roof, and it hasn't any cellar, and it has no windows, floors, or chimneys. It's that kind of a house."

When first I arrived in the Congo the time I could spend there seemed hopelessly inadequate. After I'd been there a month, it seemed to me that in a very few days any one could obtain a painfully correct idea of the place, and of the way it is administered. If an orchestra starts on an piece of music with all the instruments out of tune, it need not play through the entire number for you to know that the instruments are out of tune.

The charges brought against Leopold II, as King of the Congo, are three:

- (a) That he has made slaves of the twenty million blacks he promised to protect.
- (b) That, in spite of his promise to keep the Congo open to trade, he has closed it to all nations.
- (c) That the revenues of the country and all of its trade he has retained for himself.

Any one who visits the Congo and remains only two weeks will be convinced that of these charges Leopold is guilty. In that time he will not see atrocities, but he will see that the natives are slaves, that no foreigner can trade with them, that in the interest of Leopold alone the country is milked.

He will see that the government of Leopold is not a government. It preserves the perquisites and outward signs of government. It coins money, issues stamps, collects taxes. But it assumes none of the responsibilities of government. The Congo Free State is only a great trading house. And in it Leopold is the only wholesale and retail trader. He gives a bar of soap for rubber, and makes a "turn-over" of a cup of salt for ivory. He is not a monarch. He is a shopkeeper.

And were the country not so rich in rubber and ivory, were the natives not sweated so severely, he also would be a bankrupt shopkeeper. For the Congo is not only one vast trading post, but also it is a trading post badly managed. Even in the republics of Central America where the government changes so frequently, and where each new president is trying to make hay while he can, there is better administration, more is done for the people, the rights of other nations are better respected.

Were the Congo properly managed, it would be one of the richest territories on the surface of the earth. As it is, through ignorance and cupidity, it is being despoiled and its people are the most wretched of human beings. In the White Book containing the reports of British vice-consuls on conditions in the Congo from April of last year to January of this year, Mr. Mitchell tells how the enslavement of the people still continues, how "they" (the conscripts, as they are called) "are hunted in the forest by soldiers, and brought in chained by the neck like criminals."

They then, though conscripted to serve in the army, are set to manual labor. They are slaves. The difference between the slavery under Leopold and the slavery under the Arab raiders is that the Arab was the better and kinder master. He took "prisoners" just as Leopold seizes "conscripts," but he had too much foresight to destroy whole villages, to carry off all the black man's live stock, and to uproot his vegetable gardens. He purposed to return. And he did not wish to so terrify the blacks that to escape from him they would penetrate farther into the jungle. His motive was purely selfish, but his methods, compared with those of Leopold, were almost considerate. The work the State to-day requires of the blacks is so oppressive that they have no time, no heart, to labor for themselves.

In every other colony—French, English, German—in the native villages I saw vegetable gardens, goats, and chickens, large, comfortable, three-room huts, fences, and, especially in the German settlement of the Cameroons at Duala, many flower gardens. In Bell Town at Duala I walked for miles through streets lined with such huts and gardens, and saw whole families, the very old as well as the very young, sitting contentedly in the shade of their trees, or at work in their gardens. In the Congo native villages I saw but one old person, of chickens or goats that were not to be given to the government as taxes I saw none, and the vegetable gardens, when there were any such, were cultivated for the benefit of the *chef de poste*, and the huts were small, temporary, and filthy. The dogs in the kennels on my farm are better housed, better fed, and much better cared for, whether ill or well, than are the twenty millions of blacks along the Congo River. And that these human beings are so ill-treated is due absolutely to the cupidity of one man, and to the apathy of the rest of the world. And it is due as much to the apathy and indifference of whoever may read this as to the silence of Elihu Root or Sir Edward Grey. No one can shirk his responsibility by sneering, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

The Government of the United States and the thirteen other countries have promised to protect these people, to care for their "material and moral welfare," and that promise is morally binding upon the people of those countries. How much Leopold cares for the material welfare of the natives is illustrated by the prices he pays the "boys" who worked on the government steamer in which I went up the Kasai. They were bound on a three months' voyage, and for each month's work on this trip they were given in payment their rice and eighty cents. That is, at the end of the trip they received what in our money would be equivalent to two dollars and forty cents. And that they did not receive in money, but in "trade goods," which are worth about ten per cent less than their money value. So that of the two dollars and eighty cents that is due them, these black boys, who for three months sweated in the dark jungle cutting wood, are robbed by this King of twenty-four cents. One would dislike to grow rich at that price.

In the French Congo I asked the traders at Libreville what they paid their boys for cutting mahogany. I found the price was four francs a day without "chop," or three and a half francs with "chop." That is, on one side of the river the French pay in cash for one day's work what Leopold pays in trade goods for the work of a month. As a result the natives run away to the French side, and often, I might almost say invariably, when at the *poste de bois* on the Congo side we would find two cords of wood, on the other bank at the post for the French boats we would count two hundred and fifty cords of wood. I took photographs of the native villages in all the colonies, in order to show how they compared—of the French and Belgian wood posts, the one well stocked and with the boys lying about asleep or playing musical instruments, or alert to trade and barter, and on the Belgian side no wood, and the unhappy white man alone, and generally shivering with fever. Had the photographs only developed properly they would have shown much more convincingly than one can write how utterly miserable is the condition of the Congo negro. And

the condition of the white man at the wood posts is only a little better. We found one man absolutely without supplies. He was only twenty-four hours distant from Leopoldville, but no supplies had been sent him. He was ill with fever, and he could eat nothing but milk. Captain Jensen had six cans of condensed milk, which the State calculated should suffice for him and his passengers for three months. He turned the lot over to the sick man.

We found another white man at the first wood post on the Kasai just above where it meets the Congo. He was in bed and dangerously ill with enteric fever. He had telegraphed the State at Leopoldville and a box of medicines had been sent to him; but the State doctors had forgotten to enclose any directions for their use. We were as ignorant of medicines as the man himself, and, as it was impossible to move him, we were forced to leave him lying in his cot with the row of bottles and tiny boxes, that might have given him life, unopened at his elbow. It was ten days before the next boat would touch at his post. I do not know that it reached him in time. One could tell dozens of such stories of cruelty to natives and of injustice and neglect to the white agents.

The fact that Leopold has granted to American syndicates control over two great territories in the Congo may bring about a better state of affairs, and, in any event, it may arouse public interest in this country. It certainly should be of interest to Americans that some of the most prominent of their countrymen have gone into close partnership with a speculator as unscrupulous and as notorious as is Leopold, and that they are to exploit a country which as yet has been developed only by the help of slavery, with all its attendant evils of cruelty and torture.

That Leopold has no right to give these concessions is a matter which chiefly concerns the men who are to pay for them, but it is an interesting fact.

The Act of Berlin expressly states: "*No Power which exercises, or shall exercise, sovereign rights in the above-mentioned regions, shall be allowed to grant therein a monopoly or favor of any kind in matters of trade.*"

Leopold is only a steward placed by the Powers over the Congo. He is a janitor. And he has no more authority to give even a foot of territory to Belgians, Americans, or Chinamen than the janitor of an apartment house has authority to fill the rooms with his wife's relations or sell the coal in the basement.

The charge that the present concessionaires have no title that any independent trader or miner need respect is one that is sure to be brought up when the Powers throw Leopold out, and begin to clean house. The concessionaires take a sporting chance that Leopold will not be thrown out. It should be remembered that it is to his and to their advantage to see that he is not.

In November of 1906, Leopold gave the International Forestry and Mining Company of the Congo mining rights in territories adjoining his private park, the *Domaine de la Couronne*, and to the American Congo Company he granted the right to work rubber along the Congo River to where it joins the Kasai. This latter is a territory of four thousand square miles. The company also has the option within the next eleven years of buying land in any part of a district which is nearly one-half of the entire Congo. Of the Forestry and Mining Company one-half of the profits go to Leopold, one-fourth to Belgians, and the remaining fourth to the Americans. Of the profits of the American Congo Company, Leopold is entitled to one-half and the Americans to the other half. This company was one originally organized to exploit a new method of manufacturing crude rubber from the plant. The company was taken over by Thomas F. Ryan and his associates. Back of both companies are the Guggenheims, who are to perform the actual work in the mines and in the rubber plantation. Early in March a large number of miners and engineers were selected by John Hays Hammond, the chief engineer of the Guggenheim Exploration Companies,

and A. Chester Beatty, and were sent to explore the territory granted in the mining concession. Another force of experts are soon to follow. The legal representative of the syndicates has stated that in the Congo they intend to move "on commercial lines." By that we take it they mean they will give the native a proper price for his labor; and instead of offering "bonuses" and "commissions" to their white employees will pay them living wages.

The exact terms of the concessions are wrapped in mystery. Some say the territories ceded to the concessionaires are to be governed by them, policed by them, and that within the boundaries of these concessions the Americans are to have absolute control. If this be so the syndicates are entering upon an experiment which for Americans is almost without precedent. They will be virtually what in England is called a chartered company, with the difference that the Englishmen receive their charter from their own government, while the charter under which the Americans will act will be granted by a foreign Power, and for what they may do in the Congo their own government could not hold them responsible. They are answerable only to the Power that issued the charter; and that Power is the just, the humane, the merciful Leopold.

The history of the early days of chartered companies in Africa, notoriously those of the Congo, Northern Nigeria, Rhodesia, and German Central Africa does not make pleasant reading. But until the Americans in the Congo have made this experiment, it would be most unfair (except that the company they choose to keep leaves them open to suspicion) not to give them the benefit of the doubt. One can at least say for them that they seem to be absolutely ignorant of the difficulties that lie before them. At least that is true of all of them to whom I have talked.

The attorney of the Rubber Company when interviewed by a representative of a New York paper is reported to have said: "We have purchased a privilege from a Sovereign State and propose to operate it along purely commercial lines. With King Leopold's management of Congo affairs in the past, or, with *what he may do in an administrative way in the future, we have absolutely nothing to do.*" The italics are mine.

When asked: "Under your concessions are you given similar powers over the native blacks as are enjoyed by other concessionaires?" the answer of the attorney, as reported, was: "The problem of labor is not mentioned in the concession agreement, neither is the question of local administration. We are left to solve the labor problem in our own way, on a purely commercial basis, and with the question of government we have absolutely nothing whatever to do. The labor problem will not be formidable. Our mills are simple affairs. One man can manage them, and the question of the labor on the rubber concession is reduced to the minimum." This answer of the learned attorney shows an ignorance of "labor" conditions in the Congo which is, unless assumed, absolutely abject.

If the American syndicates are not to police and govern the territories ceded them, but if these territories are to continue to be administered by Leopold, it is not possible for the Americans to have "absolutely nothing to do" with that administration. Leopold's sole idea of administration is that every black man is his slave, in other words, the only men the Americans can depend upon for labor are slaves. Of the profits of these American companies Leopold is to receive one-half. He will work his rubber with slaves.

Are the Americans going to use slaves also, or do they intend "on commercial lines" to pay those who work for them living wages? And if they do, at the end of the fiscal year, having paid a fair price for labor, are they prepared to accept a smaller profit than will their partner Leopold, who obtains his labor with the aid of a chain and a whip?

The attorney for the company airily says: "The labor problem will not be formidable." If the man knows what he is talking about, he can mean but one thing.

The motives that led Leopold to grant these concessions are possibly various. The motives that induced the Americans to take his offer were probably less complicated. With them it was no question of politics. They wanted the money; they did not need it, for they all are rich—they merely wanted it. But Leopold wants more than the half profits he will obtain from the Americans. If the Powers should wake from their apathy and try to cast him out of the Congo, he wants, through his American partners, the help of the United States. Should he be "dethroned," by granting these concessions now on a share and share alike basis with Belgians, French, and Americans, he still, through them, hopes to draw from the Congo a fair income. And in the meanwhile he looks to these Americans to kill any action against him that may be taken in our Senate and House of Representatives, even in the White House and Department of State.

For the last two years Chester A. Beatty has been visiting Leopold at Belgium, and has obtained the two concessions, and Leopold has obtained, or hopes he has obtained, the influence of many American shareholders. The fact that the people of the United States possessed no "vested interest" in the Congo was the important fact that placed any action on our part in behalf of that distressed country above suspicion. If we acted, we did so because the United States, as one of the signatory Powers of the Berlin Act, had promised to protect the natives of the Congo; and we could truly claim that we acted only in the name of humanity. Leopold has now robbed us of that claim. He hopes that the enormous power wielded by the Americans with whom he is associated, will prevent any action against him in this country.

But the deal has already been made public, and the motives of those who now oppose improvement of conditions in the Congo, and who support Leopold, will be at once suspected.

To me the most interesting thing about the tract of land ceded to Mr. Ryan, apart from the number of hippopotamuses I saw on it, was that the people living along the Congo say that it is of no value. They told me that two years ago, after working it for some time, Leopold abandoned it as unprofitable, and they added that, when Leopold cannot whip rubber out of the forest, it is hard to believe that it can be obtained there legitimately by anyone else. On the bank I saw the "factories" to which the unprofitable rubber had been carried from the interior. They had formerly belonged to Leopold, now they are the property of Mr. Ryan and of the American Congo Company. In only two years they already are in ruins, and the jungle has engulfed them.

I was on the land owned by the company a dozen times or more, but I did not go into the interior. Even had I done so, I am not an expert on rubber, and would have understood nothing of Para trees, Lagos silk, and liane. I am speaking not of my own knowledge, only of what was told me by people who live on the spot. I found that this particular concession was well known, because, unlike the land given to the Forestry and Mines Company, it is not an inaccessible tract, but is situated only eight miles from Leopoldville. In our language, that is about as far as is the Battery to 160th Street. Leopoldville is the chief place on the Congo River, and every one there who spoke to me of the concession knew where it was situated, and repeated that it had been given up by Leopold as unprofitable, and that he had unloaded it on Mr. Ryan. They seem to think it very clever of the King to have got rid of it to the American millionaire. To one knowing Mr. Ryan only from what he reads of him in the public press, he does not seem to be the sort of man to whom Leopold could sell a worthless rubber plantation. However, it is a matter which concerns only Mr. Ryan and those who may think of purchasing shares in the company. The Guggenheims, who are to operate this rubber, say that Leopold did not know how to get out the full value of the land, and that they, by using the machinery they will install, will be able to make a profit, where Leopold, using only native labor, suffered a loss.

To the poor the ways of the truly rich are past finding out. After a man has attained a fortune sufficient to keep him in yachts and automobiles, one would think he could afford to indulge himself in the luxury of being squeamish; that as to where he obtained any further increase of wealth, he would prefer to pick and choose.

On the contrary, these Americans go as far out of their way as Belgium to make a partner of the man who has wrung his money from wretched slaves, who were beaten, starved, and driven in chains. This concession cannot make them rich. It can only make them richer. And not richer in fact, for all the money they may whip out of the Congo could not give them one thing that they cannot now command, not an extra taste to the lips, not a fresh sensation, not one added power for good. To them it can mean only a figure in ink on a page of a bank-book. But what suffering, what misery it may mean to the slaves who put it there! Why should men as rich as these elect to go into partnership with one who sweats his dollars out of the naked black? How really fine, how really wonderful it would be if these same men, working together, decided to set free these twenty million people—if, instead of joining hands with Leopold, they would overthrow him and march into the Congo free men, without his chain around their ankles, and open it to the trade of the world, and give justice and a right to live and to work and to sell and buy to millions of miserable human beings. These Americans working together could do it. They could do it from Washington. Or five hundred men with two Maxim guns could do it. The "kingdom" of the Congo is only a house of cards. Five hundred filibusters could take Boma, proclaim the Congo open to the traders of the world, as the Act of Berlin declares it to be, and in a day make of Leopold the jest of Europe. They would only be taking possession of what has always belonged to them.

Down in the Congo I talked to many young officers of Leopold's army. They had been driven to serve him by the whips of failure, poverty, or crime. I do not know that the American concessionaires are driven by any such scourge. These younger men, who saw the depths of their degradation, who tasted the dirty work they were doing, were daily risking life by fever, through lack of food, by poisoned arrows, and for three hundred dollars a year. Their necessity was great. They had the courage of their failure. They were men one could pity. One of them picked at the band of blue and gold braid around the wrist of his tunic, and said: "Look, it is our badge of shame."

To me those foreign soldiers of fortune, who, sooner than starve at home or go to jail, serve Leopold in the jungle, seem more like men and brothers than these truly rich, who, of their own free will, safe in their downtown offices, become partners with this blackguard King.

What will be the outcome of the American advance into the Congo? Will it prove the salvation of the Congo? Will it be, if that were possible, a greater evil?

E.R. Morel, who is the leader in England of the movement for the improvement of the Congo, has written: "It is a little difficult to imagine that the trust magnates are molded upon the unique model of Leopold II, and are prepared for the asking to become associates in slave-driving. The trouble is that they probably know nothing about African conditions, that they have been primed by the King with his detestable theories, and are starting their enterprises on the basis that the natives of Central Africa must be regarded as mere 'laborers' for the white man's benefit, possessing no rights in land nor in the produce of the soil. If Mr. Ryan and his colleagues are going to acquire their rubber over four thousand square miles, by 'commercial methods,' we welcome their advent. But we would point out to them that, in such a case, they had better at once abandon all idea of three or four hundred per cent dividends with which the wily autocrat at Brussels has doubtless primed them. No such monstrous profits are to be acquired in tropical

Africa under a trade system. If, on the other hand, the methods they are prepared to adopt are the methods King Leopold and his other concessionaires have adopted for the past thirteen years, devastation and destruction, and the raising of more large bodies of soldiers, are their essential accompaniments; and the widening of the area of the Congo hell is assured."

The two things in the American invasion of the Congo that promise good to that unhappy country are that our country is represented at Boma by a most intelligent, honest, and fearless young man in the person of James A. Smith, our Consul-General, and that the actual work of operating the mines and rubber is in the hands of the Guggenheims. They are well known as men upright in affairs, and as philanthropists and humanitarians of the common-sense type. Like other rich men of their race, they have given largely to charity and to assist those less fortunate than themselves.

For thirteen years in mines in Mexico, in China, and Alaska, they have had to deal with the problem of labor, and they have met it successfully. Workmen of three nationalities they have treated with fairness.

"Why should you suppose," Mr. Daniel Guggenheim asked me, "that in the Congo we will treat the negroes harshly? In Mexico we found the natives ill-paid and ill-fed. We fed them and paid them well. Not from any humanitarian idea, but because it was good business. It is not good business to cut off a workman's hands or head. We are not ashamed of the way we have always treated our workmen, and in the Congo we are not going to spoil our record."

I suggested that in Mexico he did not have as his partner Leopold, tempting him with slave labor, and that the distance from Broadway to his concessions in the Congo was so great that as to what his agents might do there he could not possibly know. To this Mr. Guggenheim answered that "Neither Leopold nor anyone else can dictate how we shall treat the native labor," that if his agents were cruel they would be instantly dismissed, and that for what occurred in the Congo on the land occupied by the American Congo Company his brothers and himself alone were responsible, and that they accepted that responsibility.

But already on his salary list he has men who are sure to get him into trouble, men of whose *dossiers* he is quite ignorant.

From Belgium, Leopold has unloaded on the American companies several of his "valets du roi," press agents, and tools, men who for years have been defenders of his dirty work in the Congo; and of the Americans, one, who is prominently exploited by the Belgians, had to leave Africa for theft.

That Mr. Guggenheim wishes and intends to give to the black in the Congo fair treatment there is no possible doubt. But that on Broadway, removed from the scene of operations in time some four to six months, and in actual distance eight thousand miles, he can control the acts of his agents and his partners, remains to be proved. He is attacking a problem much more momentous than the handling of Mexican *peons* or Chinese coolies, and every step of the working out of this problem will be watched by the people of this country.

And should they find that the example of the Belgian concessionaires in their treatment of the natives is being imitated by even one of the American Congo Company the people of this country will know it, and may the Lord have mercy on his soul!