
The Congo

THE IVORY TRADE, long the chief source of wealth extracted from Africa, is by the turn of the century being rapidly overtaken by a sudden growth in the need of rubber. Following the 1890 invention of an inflatable rubber tire, the popularity of bicycle riding soars—seven million bikes are in circulation by 1895—and, soon after, the market for automobile tires also expands rapidly. The double development leads to a huge demand for rubber. In the forests of the Congo, the wild rubber vine, easily tapped, abounds, and as the need—and price—for the product mounts, the region's economy is transformed. Between 1890 and 1904, earnings from rubber increase year after year by leaps and bounds, with profits reaching 700 percent. The “Congo Free State”—Leopold's personal fiefdom, independent of Belgium—becomes the most profitable colony in all of Africa.

To maximize his profits and to keep potential European competitors at bay, King Leopold—a mere six years after signing the 1885 Berlin “free-trade” agreement—takes absolute and exclusive control of a hundred thousand square miles of the Congo's richest rubber-producing region. He issues what becomes a protracted series of secret decrees to his officials in Africa, declaring himself the sole owner of not only the land but also the forests and minerals, and ordering them to see to it that the previously thriving trade between the native people and merchants from European countries be swiftly ended. Henceforth, Leopold declares, the Africans are tenants of the Congo Free State and subject to its authority; they may own *only* the small patches of cultivated land surrounding their huts; all the rest is declared “vacant”—which is to say, the property of Leopold.

In 1888 Leopold establishes the Force Publique, armed native troops chosen to serve in areas distant from those of their birth and under the command

of European officers. He also instructs his agents zealously to ensure—at the point of the bayonet if need be—that the “slothful” natives be transformed into a rigorously productive workforce. The harsh regime of the *commissaires* is henceforth to hold sway. As agents of the Congo Free State, they are to work strictly on commission; if they wish to maximize their income, it’s up to them to create, by whatever means necessary, a diligent and dutiful army of laborers.

The effect on the native workforce is catastrophic. As the demand for rubber soars, so too does the level of barbarity inflicted on the indigenous population. Several of the braver missionaries—William Sheppard, for one—are among the few to speak out against the endemic cruelty. The most forceful voice is that of the Swedish Baptist missionary E. V. Sjoblom; so vigorous and unyielding are his complaints that the local authorities threaten him with five years imprisonment. Undaunted, Sjoblom takes his case directly to London.

Richard Fox-Bourne, secretary of the Aborigines Protection Society, organizes a public meeting in the spring of 1897, at which Sjoblom speaks: “Within my own knowledge,” he tells the crowd, “forty-five towns have been burnt down. Soldiers are stationed in every village—the so-called sentry-system—they live off the people, and drive them into the forest to gather india-rubber. I saw one soldier seize an old man who, to keep from starving, had dared to fish for food in the river; they shot him dead right in front of me. If the natives’ quota of rubber is short, I’ve seen sentries beat them so badly that some die, then they cut off their hands and bring them to the Commissioner as proof they’re doing their job. One day, when I crossed the stream, I saw some dead bodies hanging down from the branches in the water. As I turned my face away from the horrible sight, one of the native corporals—Leopold’s agents employ natives from distant or hostile tribes—said, ‘Oh, that is nothing, a few days ago I brought the white man 160 hands and they were thrown into the river.’”

Sjoblom’s revulsion at the endemic cruelty in the Congo is far from typical. The large majority of the missionaries keep mum about the horrors they see around them, fearing that their calling to bring Christianity to Africa might be compromised. Yet a few, like Sjoblom, are conscience-stricken, and by the late 1880s their outspoken accounts have begun to trickle through. One such account reports native women being forced into concubinage, another of women and children being bayoneted and thrown into the river, a third of widespread starvation as the people, dragooned into gathering

rubber, are prevented from planting and tending crops. “This rubber traffic is steeped in blood,” one missionary writes, “and if the natives were to rise and sweep every white person on the Upper Congo into eternity there would still be left a fearful balance to their credit.” In 1900 these are still voices in the wilderness, anguished cries that Leopold’s unctuously clever reassurances—abetted by clamorous praise in the press for his wondrous expansion of European commerce and Christianity—easily drown out.

Roger returns to London on sick leave in July 1900. He explains to the Foreign Office that he’s suffering from a “general condition of rundownness,” compounded by an attack of jaundice. He omits mention of a return bout of piles, as well as his doctor’s recommendation for additional surgery for the *fistula-in-ano*—a common side effect of frequent anal intercourse—for which he’d been operated on five years earlier. As his health gradually improves, Roger spends a month traveling in Europe, with his sister Nina accompanying him for part of the trip. In Spain he attends his first bullfight—and finds the spectacle appalling: “an exhibition of bad butchery carried on in the bloodiest and most revolting manner.”

Italy—“my eternal joy and delight”—helps erase the memory of Spain’s national “sport” of “blood lust.” He adores Naples above all. In a letter to his fellow Englishman Richard Morten—they first met in Africa and then (as with Herbert Ward) became close friends—Roger sends a glowing report replete with sexual innuendo: “It is the most human town in Europe. People there do what they think. . . . It is a last link with the outdoor life of the ancient world, when men were quite natural. Whether it is better to hide our hearts—to muffle up our lives—and to live the truer part of our lives in secret as we do today, the future only knows—for my part I cannot help feeling that the world lost something when discretion became the first of the ten commandments.”

Roger returns to Africa at the end of 1900—though not to Kinshasa, as expected. The Foreign Office has changed its mind and decided to locate its new consulate instead at Boma, the coastal administrative center of the Congo Free State. Roger has of course heard the ugly talk about Leopold’s policies, and his own recent audience with the king had confirmed his distrust. But what is wanted, Roger feels, is more concrete proof of Leopold’s misdeeds, the sort of evidence William Sheppard has been unable to provide. Even before taking up his consular duties at Boma, Roger decides to organize a trip into the Congo interior to see for himself what conditions are actually like. What he finds leaves no doubt in his mind that gross mistreatment of

the natives is even more widespread and horrendous than suspected and that Leopold, during their private interview, had simply been lying.

Roger sends off a dispatch to the new British foreign minister, Lord Lansdowne, describing his findings. “By a stroke of the pen,” Roger writes, “the Congo has become the private property of one individual, the King of the Belgians.” Aware that commercial arguments will have more impact at the Foreign Office than humanitarian ones, Roger stresses in his report that the 1885 Berlin accord that supposedly guaranteed free trade in the region has not been even marginally honored. A month later, after completing another inspection tour to the interior, Roger sends Lansdowne a still more forceful call for action. Leopold’s Commission for the Protection of the Natives, Roger reports, has proven worthless, less than a fig leaf. The situation has become so grave that Roger urges Lansdowne to intervene directly: “The only hope for the Congo, should it continue to be governed by Belgium, is that its governor should be subject to a European authority responsible to public opinion, and not to the unquestioned rule of an autocrat whose chief preoccupation is that autocracy should be profitable.”

Lansdowne rejects Roger’s suggestion out of hand. Should the Foreign Office rebuke Leopold, Lansdowne replies, the aggrieved king might seek support from Germany; meddling in the Congo could, in Lansdowne’s view, result in swelling the territorial possessions of both Germany and France. He smugly assures Roger that the Foreign Office will keep its Congo Atrocities File updated should the time ever come when intervention seems more appropriate than it does at present. Roger gets the message: the Foreign Office is focused on imperial ambition, not on the welfare of “savages.”

Dispirited, Roger is forced to bide his time. Bereft of compelling work or sustained companionship (except for his beloved dogs), he grows lonely and restless. His distress is accompanied by a (temporary) spell of disenchantment with Africa itself, along with a deepening (and permanent) revulsion over the British Empire’s lofty arrogance. Africa, he writes Richard Morten, “isn’t the Earthly Paradise I once felt it—or rather I’m no longer the bird of that Paradise. I’ve grown old and grey—and now I want peace and music—and nice people round me. . . . I shall try for some nice healthy post.”

As for the empire, the Boer War and the hideous conditions of the concentration camps into which the British had thrown its prisoners had horrified Roger. He is no less appalled at the importation of Chinese laborers to work in the British-owned South African mines, where conditions are deplorable—the men confined in prison-like compounds, cut off from their families and

(thanks to Lord Milner's approval of flogging) subjected to harsh punishment. From Roger's perspective, the British government has proved willing to encourage, and collude with, the abysmal greed of the mine owners.

Granted an extended leave of absence in England, Roger returns to Africa in the spring of 1902 with his energy considerably recharged and his outlook somewhat more positive. He decides on another inland expedition to track down concrete evidence of the Congo Free State's inequities, but no sooner are his investigations begun than he comes down with a recurrence of malarial fever, made more miserable still by "bleeding badly aft" from a series of sexual encounters. His doctors insist this time on a sustained period of rest, and the Foreign Office concurs. After several weeks of recuperation in the Canary Islands, Roger's condition improves, yet he's still unsure if his uncertain health will allow him to stay in West Africa long enough to make a difference. It's in this depressed state—with the Foreign Office detached and unresponsive and the rumors of atrocities mounting in tandem with the exponentially expanding rubber trade—that Roger happens upon a set of articles by a young journalist named Edmond "E. D." Morel.

Born in France, Morel is a naturalized Englishman, and his background is strikingly similar to Roger's: both their fathers died penniless, both left school at fifteen, both got their first jobs with the Elder Dempster shipping firm, and both had earlier been somewhat conventional imperialists. Morel has initially discounted reports of atrocities in the Congo put forth by what he then called the "misinformed philanthropists" Charles Dilke, MP, and Richard Fox-Bourne, secretary of the Aborigines Protection Society. Adopting what was then the conventional defense of colonialism, Morel characterizes Dilke's and Fox-Bourne's tales of mutilations and massacres as—even if true—inescapable byproducts of an essentially benign enterprise: no European nation "which has undertaken the heavy responsibility of introducing the blessings and vices of civilization into the Dark Continent," Morel writes, "can claim immunity for its representatives in this respect." Morel, unlike Roger, initially shares the common assumption of the day among Europeans that the black race is inherently inferior (a view, in diluted form, Morel will continue to hold, later denouncing France during World War I for using black troops—for, as he would write, "thrusting her black savages . . . into the heart of Germany," where "primitive African barbarians" would become a "terror and a horror").

Morel's shifting views on the blessings of empire begins not with a direct protest about the exploitation of Africans in the Congo Free State but with

Leopold's interference with the right of free trade mandated under the terms of the 1885 Berlin agreement. It's the same emphasis Roger had earlier placed—for strategic reasons—when appealing to the Foreign Office for action, knowing that commercial rights would be of far more concern to the powers-that-be than native rights. But once Morel, like Roger before him, begins to study trade reports from the Congo Free State, he's led, like Roger, to the inescapable conclusion that native laborers are unwilling slaves, not salaried employees—that forced labor is systemic in the Congo, the foundational stone for the huge profits of the rubber trade.

Morel writes up his findings from the trade reports in a series of articles that catch the eye of those longtime reformers, Dilke and Fox-Bourne. The three men organize a protest meeting at the Mansion House on May 15, 1902. The turnout is small, but it marks the beginning of an attempt to rouse public opinion against the man Morel calls the “royal megalomaniac.” A number of other British journalists take up the cry, and articles against Leopold's rule start to appear in publications as diverse as the *Morning Post* and the *Manchester Guardian*. The Foreign Office, however, continues to shrink from any involvement; when Dilke appeals to Lord Lansdowne for action (just as Roger had earlier), the foreign secretary makes it clear that in his view any reopening of the Pandora's box of the 1885 Berlin agreement could be tantamount to risking a reconsideration of the partition of Africa that has turned out so splendidly for Great Britain.

Morel persists. In May 1903, working through his humanitarian allies, and Dilke in particular, he gets a Congo resolution through the House of Commons, calling for the signatories to the Berlin act “to abate the evils prevalent in the Congo State.” The sponsors acknowledge, however, that before a paper resolution can be converted into action, much more eyewitness evidence of widespread mistreatment is needed. Though they aren't aware of it, Roger has already set the wheels in motion for achieving precisely that end. His plan hinges on the fact that Leopold's agents have been hiring black West Indians, themselves British subjects, to serve as overseers in the Congo, and word of their discontent has reached Roger's ears.

Here is the entering wedge he's been waiting for. Roger personally arranges for the repatriation of several West Indians who'd been illegally jailed in the Congo—and reports this “abuse of British subjects” to the Foreign Office. The tactic works. Lord Lansdowne denounces the “terrible story” and authorizes the Colonial Office to warn West Indians against signing up to work in the Congo. Capitalizing on this success, Roger cables for permission to

mount another expedition into the Congo interior to gather additional information. By return cable the Foreign Office authorizes him to proceed whenever he feels ready.

As Roger is making final preparations for the trip, news arrives that Sir Hector Macdonald, an army major general who's served for thirty years in India and South Africa, has committed suicide. It turns out that Macdonald decided to take his own life on his way to face court-martial proceedings in Ceylon on charges of homosexuality. Roger records his dismay in an emotional entry in his newly inaugurated diary, characterizing the news—though he's never met Macdonald—as “pitiablely sad! The most distressing case this surely of its kind and one that may awake the national mind to saner methods of curing a terrible disease than by criminal legislation.”

It's here, in relation to Macdonald's suicide, that Roger uses for the first and only time the word “disease” (or anything comparably pejorative) to describe same-gender sexual relations. Perhaps the shock of Macdonald's death set off in him a level of self-scrutiny—and self-doubt—he ordinarily skirts; perhaps too the incident shakes his confident sense of invulnerability, causing him briefly to employ the derogatory terminology then current and only beginning to be challenged by the new “science” of sexology being pioneered in Germany by Magnus Hirschfeld and in England by Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter.

Roger makes the prudential decision to employ a severely truncated shorthand—a kind of crabbed, telegraphic code—for any diary entry he makes that relates to his sexual activities:

[CAPE VERDE]: “Enormous, stiff and music”

[LIVERPOOL]: “Walk. Medium—but *mu nua ami monene monene beh!*
beh! [in the Kikongo language: “in my mouth very big”]

[MADEIRA]: “Augustinho—kissed many times. 4 dollars.”

[DUBLIN]: “Enormous. Came, handled and also came.”

[LONDON]: “Walked. Dusky—depredator—Huge. Saw 7 in all. Two beauties.”

And so on . . . “Saw 7 in all”—that comment will serve as grounds for particular disgust once hostile eyes later read his diary. Yet the meaning of the phrase isn't transparent: “saw” doesn't necessarily equate to “had.” Nor can the transient nature of most of Roger's encounters be automatically

equated with anonymity; the particular musculature of an arm, the bulge of a thigh, the way the hair is parted on the head—any physical property of a total stranger—can instantaneously trigger an emotional memory or cue an attraction (or revulsion) based on some earlier event barely recalled, if at all, more often than can any polite verbal exchange. It's possible, of course, that Roger did actually have seven orgasms that evening, which could be regarded, depending on one's value set, either as "depravity" or as an enviably prodigious sexual energy.

Roger also starts to keep, intermittently, a second, much fuller diary that, unlike his shorthand erotic journals, expounds expansively and often in great detail on aspects of his public life. This unusual disjunction between two kinds of diary keeping represents not—as sometimes claimed, then and now—a "soul divided" or a schizoid personality but rather a sensible decision, mandated by social convention, to make *some* effort at concealing those aspects of his behavior regarded at the time as transgressive (at best) or "degenerate" (at worst). Of course, Roger need not have kept a sexual diary at all: the surest way to keep his "offensive" behavior secret would be to never write about it, never to run the risk that other, disapproving, eyes might see it.

But the daredevil in Roger overrides his cautionary side. The rebel who defies authority and courts danger is a distinctive element in his private as well as public life. The temperament that allows Roger to challenge public arrangements of power also expresses itself in his challenge to current norms of personal behavior—and all but guarantees that in any contest between defiance and discretion, he will almost certainly choose defiance. The mindset is reminiscent of Gwendolen Fairfax in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, when she brazenly announces, "I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in the train."

Roger is finally able to set out for the interior with a file of porters—and his beloved bulldog John—on June 5, 1903. Having briefly been in the Congo interior sixteen years before while serving a youthful apprenticeship, Roger has a personal frame of reference against which he can measure recent changes in local conditions. The changes are profound—beyond anything he anticipated, though he thought himself prepared for the worst.

He reaches the upper Congo by early July and spends the next two and a half months investigating conditions there. Early on, one missionary confides to him that (as Roger writes in his diary) "the rule of the State has swept off the population wholesale." Roger confirms the statement with his own eyes when he arrives at Chumbiri on July 6. It's a village he'd visited on his trip in

1887, when “the settlement contained from 4,000 to 6,000 people.” What he finds in 1903—as he’ll later describe the scene in his 1904 Congo Report to the Foreign Office—is that most of the villages “are entirely deserted, the forest having grown over the abandoned sites, and the entire community at the present date cannot number more than 500 souls.” Sleeping sickness, he discovers, has been a factor in decimating the population; another is flight—to another village, into the forest, or across the border—all to escape the onerous hand of the state.

Carefully interviewing survivors, Roger concludes that those who haven’t taken flight have been forced to labor long hours—primarily in hunting for rubber but also in cutting wood to supply government steamers, keeping the undergrowth clear for the government’s telegraph line, preparing *kwanga* (cassava root), and carrying the food a considerable distance to the government post. The villagers complain bitterly to Roger about having received no payment—the recognized currency is in brass rods—for a year, or payment only in short rods that undervalue what is owed. Their forced labor, they tell him, has become so exhausting and time consuming that they’re unable to plant and weed their own plots of land. If they complain, they’re beaten—or killed.

Moving farther north into the interior, Roger stops next at Bolobo. He knows the place from his earlier visit as the thriving center of the Bobangi tribe, remarkable for their skill as traders and hunters. The town’s population back in 1887 had been around forty thousand; it’s now “not more than 7,000 or 8,000 souls.” Where numerous large canoes once plied the river, Roger can locate almost none. The surviving inhabitants, Roger gradually comes to understand, are on call at all times to answer the needs, or whimsies, of state officials. Should the order come to cut wood, hoe and weed, or prepare and serve food, they must comply on the instant or face beatings, imprisonment, or death. One long-standing project that began when Roger earlier visited is still underway: the construction of a wooden pier to enable visitors to disembark. Roger estimates that the Bobangi have already been forced “as a public duty” to cut down some two thousand trees and saplings and carry them a considerable distance to the pier site—for which they have been rewarded with neither food nor pay.

By the third week in July, moving still farther into the interior, Roger arrives at two large villages of the Batende tribe. He discovers that fully half the population are Basengili refugees, skilled blacksmiths and brass workers, who’ve sought asylum with their friends, the Batende. “Life had become intolerable,” Roger writes in his report, “nothing had remained for them at

home but to be killed for failure to bring in a certain amount of rubber or to die from starvation or exposure in their attempts to satisfy the demands made upon them.” He makes a point of checking on the accuracy of these accounts and all his sources, including a local Baptist missionary, confirm it.

At the town of Mpoko he visits a Basengili blacksmith’s shed; the five men in the shed stop working and, with the help of an interpreter, talk to Roger at some length. He asks them why they decided to leave their own villages. One of the men replies, “I am Moyo. These other two beside me are Wankaki and Nkwabali. . . . Each village had to take twenty loads of rubber. These loads were big: they were as big as this.” He produces an empty basket that comes up nearly to the handle of Roger’s walking stick. “That was the first size. We had to fill that up, but as rubber got scarcer the white man reduced the amount. We had to take these loads in four times a month.”

ROGER: “How much pay did you get for this?”

ALL FIVE MEN: “We got no pay! We got nothing!”

MOYO: “Our village got cloth and a little salt, but not the people who did the work. Our chiefs eat up the cloth, the workers get nothing. . . . It used to take ten days to get the twenty baskets of rubber. We were always in the forest, and then when we were late, we were killed. We had to go farther and farther into the forest to find the rubber vines, to go without food, and our women had to give up cultivating the fields and gardens. Then we starved. Wild beasts—the leopards—killed some of us when we were working in the forest, and others got lost or died from exposure and starvation, and we begged the white man to leave us alone, saying we could get no more rubber, but the white men and their soldiers said, ‘Go! You are only beasts yourselves, you are *nyama* (meat).’ We tried, always going farther into the forest, and when we failed and our rubber was short, the soldiers came to our towns and killed us. Many were shot, some had their ears cut off; others were tied up with ropes around their necks and bodies and taken away. . . . Some white men were good. . . . These ones told us to stay in our homes . . . but after what we had suffered we did not trust more any one’s word, and we fled.”

ROGER: “How do you know it was the white men themselves who ordered these cruel things to be done to you? These things may have been done without the white man’s knowledge by the black soldiers.”

NKWABALI: “The white men mocked the soldiers: ‘You kill only women; you cannot kill men. You must prove that you kill men.’ So then the

soldiers, when they killed us”—here Nkwabali stops and points to the genitals of Roger’s bulldog John, asleep at his feet—“then they cut off those things and took them to the white men, who said, ‘It is true, you have killed men.’”

ROGER: “You mean to tell me that white men ordered your bodies to be mutilated like that, and those parts of you carried to him?”

ALL THE MEN, SHOUTING: “Yes! Many white men!”

ROGER: “You say this is true? Were many of you so treated after being shot?”

ALL, SHOUTING: “*Nkoto! Nkoto!* (Very many! Very many!)”

Writing up his account that night, Roger concludes that “there was no doubt that these people were not inventing. Their vehemence, their flashing eyes, their excitement, was not simulated. Doubtless they exaggerated the numbers, but they were clearly telling what they knew and loathed.”

Roger adds a kind of coda: “Poor frail, self seeking vexed mortality—dust to dust—ashes to ashes—where then are the kindly heart, the pitying thought—together vanished.” He elaborates his anguish further in a letter to cousin Gee: “I know not where to turn to, or to whom to make appeal on behalf of these unhappy people whose sufferings I have witnessed and whose wrongs have burnt into my heart. How can they, poor, panic-stricken fugitives, in their own forest homes, turn for justice to their oppressors? The one dreadful, dreary cry that has been ringing in my ears for the last six weeks has been, ‘Protect us from our protectors.’”

As Roger proceeds further in his investigation, he does find reason now and then—a missionary’s kindness, a black soldier’s sympathy—to feel a modicum of restored faith in human nature, but the bulk of the evidence he continues to gather clusters heavily on the side of dismay. The tales are often so horrific that Roger fears Europeans might discount them out of hand as yet another instance of the “childlike exaggerations” typical of the “savage” imagination. When it later comes time to draw up his formal report, Roger will append a number of signed and witnessed affidavits, making sure to include some by “reliable” (i.e., white) missionaries.

He also makes sure to implicate Africans whenever he finds them collaborating with the authorities in enforcing ruthless punishment. Near Lake Mantumba, he comes across a training camp at which eight hundred native troops are being drilled by a European staff to join the notorious Force

Publique—Leopold’s personal army, the largest in Central Africa, equipped with rifles, bayonets, and machine guns. All the officers are white, and most of the soldiers black. Ill-paid and ill-fed, flogged for minor infractions, they sometimes resist and run away (one large-scale uprising lasts for three years). But the white officers shrewdly play off existing intertribal hostilities and post black sentries in villages inhabited by their traditional enemies, where—like their white masters—they too sometimes engage in rape and other atrocities, including use of the *chicote*, the whip made of hippo hide that cuts deeply into the flesh.

One such episode involving Africans—it becomes widely known as the “Epondo Case”—involves a young boy of fourteen or fifteen, answering to the name Epondo. Roger comes across him in the Bonginda area; the boy’s left arm is wrapped in a dirty rag, and when Roger removes it, he finds the arm has a bullet wound and has been hacked off at the wrist. When Epondo tells him that a sentry has done it, Roger succeeds in finding the man and in front of the chief and headmen of the town, accuses him of the crime:

ROGER (TO EPONDO): “Who cut off your hand?”

EPONDO: “The sentry Kelengo there.”

(Roger calls several of the headmen, and they testify to the same effect.

Nearly everyone present, numbering some forty people, shout out that Kelengo is guilty of cutting off Epondo’s hand. Roger now calls Kelengo himself to testify.)

ROGER (TO KELENGO): “*Did* you cut off this boy’s hand?”

KELENGO: “Kelengo is not my name. I am Mbilu.”

ROGER: “Answer the question.”

KELENGO: “The people of this place have done bad things to me.”

ROGER: “Please confine your answer to the question I asked. We can talk later of other matters. Your refusal to reply ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to a direct and simple question leaves me convinced that you cannot deny the charge.”

KELENGO: “I know nothing about Epondo’s hand being cut off. Perhaps it was the first sentry here before I came, who was a very bad man and cut people’s hands off.”

ROGER: “How long have you been in this town?”

KELENGO: “Five months.”

ROGER: “You are quite sure?”

KELENGO: "Five months."

ROGER: "Do you then know this boy Epondo? Have you seen him before?"

KELENGO: "I do not know him at all."

(The crowd roars with laughter. Several people shout out their mocking praise of Kelengo for his skill in lying.)

KELENGO: "It is finished. I have told you all. I know nothing of it."

Roger finally accepts no for an answer, but he subsequently files a report with the governor general of the Congo Free State, insisting on an investigation. There is no reply. Epondo then recants his testimony, now claiming that a wild animal had bitten off his hand. Roger isn't persuaded. He points out that Epondo also has a gunshot wound; did that too come from a wild animal?

In his notes Roger focuses his indictment not on Kelengo the individual but on the system that spawned him. In the course of his further inquiries he learns of many more cases, besides that of Epondo, of dismemberment—including one youth who had both hands beaten off by a rifle butt against a tree trunk and another who after losing a hand stayed absolutely still on the ground for fear that the soldiers would kill him if they realized he was still alive.

Later, when Roger comes to write up his final report—amply documented with photographs he's taken—one Belgian newspaper will insist that unfortunates like Epondo suffer from cancer of the hands. Another will maintain—declaring it inconceivable that any European would participate in such practices—that severing limbs has long been a customary punishment among African tribes and that Epondo and the others are victims of fellow Africans.

The writer Joseph Conrad will be among those who deride such complacency. More than a dozen years earlier, he'd met and admired Roger when their paths crossed at Matadi; Conrad had then described him in his diary as "most intelligent and very sympathetic." When in 1903 Roger tries to solicit Conrad's public support ("he will, I hope, move his pen when I see him at home"), Conrad replies that he is too busy to get involved in advocacy but adds, "It is an extraordinary thing that the conscience of Europe which seventy years ago has put down the slave trade on humanitarian grounds tolerates the Congo State today. It is as if the moral clock had been put back many hours. . . . The Belgians are worse than the seven plagues of Egypt."

While still in the field gathering evidence, Roger discovers that even when punishment takes less barbaric forms, due process is entirely lacking.

Summary arrest and imprisonment—men are often taken from their homes and never seen again—are the rule. The African prisoner is given no recourse to legal aid, has no trial, and is indefinitely detained rather than sentenced to a fixed period. Some are carted off to a distant government station where, bereft of family and tribal ties, they're subject to hard labor dawn to dusk; others are dragooned into the Force Publique, some to die in a distant part of the country, others to risk desertion and flee into the forest, and still others to discharge their own rage by brutalizing strangers.

Roger insists on asking, and then asking again, what specific law has been broken, what "crime" committed—other than refusing to be a slave laborer—that warrants these capricious proceedings. He scours the penal code of the Congo statute book but finds no legal sanction that the Free State can cite—assuming it cares to bother—to justify its arbitrary policies. If punishments are to be inflicted for infractions of the law, Roger asks, *what* law has been disobeyed? *Where* are fines enumerated for given infractions, or prison terms mandated and their length specified? *Where* does it say that a certain tax is to be levied and that those who fail to pay it must work out their debt deep in the forest, foraging for rubber vines—while their wives are kept as hostages to ensure good behavior?

If, as the state claims, the native population is content—or consists solely of liars and rogues, as the state alternately insists—why are so many armed men needed to keep them in line; why are so many wearing iron neck braces or rope braces that cut deeply into the skin? "You insist that forced labor is necessary to prevent the natives from spending their days in idleness," Roger asks, but why then do the natives tell me they no longer have time to till their fields, to practice their skills in basketry and brass, to build their canoes, to fish in the waters—or to supply their children with sufficient food?

By mid-September 1903 Roger realizes that he's gathered so much damning information to refute the Congo Free State's claim to "benign intent" that further efforts would be redundant. He cables the Foreign Office that he has "convincing evidence of shocking misgovernment and wholesale repression." The point now is to return to Britain, write up a formal report, and let the facts speak for themselves. But facts never do, and Roger is about to discover that what seems irrefutable can be distorted and denied, that governments prefer to ignore what they cannot discredit, and that pious Christian gentlemen can be expert at moral evasion.

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