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978-1-108-05069-2 - The Congo State: Or, the Growth of Civilisation in Central Africa

Demetrius Charles Boulger

Excerpt

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THE CONGO STATE

CHAPTER I

THE CONCEPTION OF THE CONGO STATE

IF it be permissible to apply to modern affairs the Biblical imagery that the man who successfully plants a tree where none grew before has done a good life's work, then it is true to say that the happiest monarch should be the one who founds a new State. That happiness must be enhanced by the fact that his creation is no fleeting achievement won by the sword, but that it is firmly based on what ought to be permanent claims to respect and security in the welfare of the subject race as well as the credit of the ruling power. How much greater, then, should be the happiness and the title to fame when the interest of the monarch and the benefit of the people can be shown to harmonise with, and indeed to form part of, that human progress which must within the æons of coming centuries place, according to our limited powers of comprehension, man, irrespective of creed, colour, and climate, on something like an equality before the God of all!

To this credit there will never be any difficulty in showing that Leopold, the second King of the Belgians of that name and of his House, is entitled. His prescience, energy, and courage have erected to himself a monument

that will not pass away, and that, unlike memorials of stone and brass, seems destined to acquire increased importance and magnificence with the lapse of time. Yet the future historian will surely marvel that it should have fallen to the lot of two succeeding princes, father and son, to accomplish on two different continents of the Old World practically the same feat, one which Napoleon, despite all his military triumphs, never achieved.

The Belgian nation owes to Leopold the First, who but for the unkind decree of fate would have figured among the wisest of British rulers, the fostering care of its freedom and independence. When he accepted the crown of the youngest and most perilous throne in Europe, he said, in the appropriate words that never fail to flow from true eloquence, "Human destiny does not offer any nobler and more useful task than to be called upon to found the independence of a nation and to consolidate its liberties." It may be said, in his case, that Europe assigned the task, to which it was his proud distinction to prove that he was more than equal. But in the case of Leopold the Second no such qualification can be made. The founding of the Congo State, the opening of its territories to all the beneficent enterprises of civilisation, the moral and material improvement of its native races, marked out by King Leopold when he first gave definite form to ideas that he had expressed years before, and that at the present moment are well advanced on the road to realisation, represent an achievement very similar to that accomplished by his illustrious father and predecessor. The one converted "the cockpit of Europe" into the most prosperous State of the Continent; the other has founded in Central Africa a vast dominion, where the only serious and promising attempt has as yet been systematically made to redeem the negro race from the curse of ages.

From a very early period of his career King Leopold the Second had shown a deep and intelligent interest in

THE CONCEPTION OF THE CONGO STATE 3

distant regions, and had fully grasped the fact that the manufacturing countries of Europe would decline from their high prosperity owing to the growth of population, unless they discovered fresh markets for their manufactures and colonies for their surplus population. No country was, or is, more actively and intelligently devoted to industry and manufacture than Belgium ; in none also was, or is, the population increasing at a greater annual rate ; and the few clear-sighted men who looked ahead—and among these King Leopold II. is entitled by universal admission to the first place—realised the inevitable consequences at some future date. But among many admirable points in the Belgian character is not included the spirit of adventure that founds great colonies or carries the trade of a State into remote regions. The typical Belgian would rest content with what he possessed, indifferent to what might happen in some future generation. Caution controls his courage, and, left to herself, Belgium would have been the last State of Europe to found a colony or to participate in the division of a continent. Fortunately for her, she has possessed a ruler whose larger views have supplied the main defect in the national character. The courage of her King has proved equal to the accomplishment of a task that would have tested the strength of the greatest of colonising Powers, while his sagacity has known how to eliminate from the undertaking, one by one, the dangers that might well have thwarted his plans and nullified all his enterprise.

If the first origin of what resulted in the Congo State has to be discovered, it would perhaps be found in the speech which the now reigning King of the Belgians delivered, as Duke of Brabant, before the Senate on 17th February 1860. In that speech, which was no doubt the result of his own observations during the tour he had then recently made in the Far East, he said, “The possession of coasts and of a magnificent port, perhaps unique in

the world, are the elements of wealth which we could not exploit too much, and which all the peoples who have enjoyed great fortune have largely made use of." Having laid down this general proposition, the Duke went on to use the memorable words, "I claim for Belgium her share of the sea." In subsequent speeches he pointed out the urgent need there was for his country to procure fresh markets, and, with the view of stimulating national effort and confidence, he recalled the brief but brilliant deeds of the Company of Ostend, which was deemed such a formidable rival by the East India Company that its suppression formed part of one of the treaties of alliance between Great Britain and the old empire. It was not with words only that the young Prince strove to induce his countrymen to take up schemes beyond the narrow confines of their State. From an early period he devoted himself to the improvement of the ports of Ostend and Antwerp, and, during a reign that has now covered more than thirty years of ever-increasing national prosperity, he has contributed largely to the remarkable but little appreciated development of the port of Antwerp as an outlet for the commerce of Germany as well as of Belgium.

There is reason to think that at the beginning of his reign King Leopold held the view that the new markets for his country would be discovered in Asia. Africa was still "the Dark Continent," and the least promising of the divisions of the globe; but the progress effected in the elucidation of its mysteries, in the acquisition of definite knowledge concerning the new world of inner Africa, found in King Leopold the most attentive and, as it has proved, the most appreciative student and observer.

The discovery of Lake Tanganyika by Sir Richard Burton and Captain Speke in 1858 may be regarded as the first act in the revelation of the region which occupies our present attention. A few years later Speke and Grant discovered the sources of the Nile and Lake Victoria.

THE CONCEPTION OF THE CONGO STATE 5

These travellers all proceeded inland from Zanzibar. Sir Samuel Baker, acting as the Khedive's lieutenant above Khartoum, completed their work on the Nile by the discovery of Lake Albert and of the section of the river connecting that lake with Victoria. At a much earlier period David Livingstone had explored the valley of the Zambesi and appeared before the blacks as a messenger of good tidings, healing the body and the soul, preaching peace and goodwill, and teaching them respect for life and the love of labour; but it was not until 1866 that he reached the Congo region and placed his name among its discoverers by adding Lakes Moero and Bangweolo to the map. The finding of Livingstone by Mr. H. M. Stanley in November 1871; the death of Livingstone, the discovery of the fact by Commander Lovett Cameron, and the conveyance to Europe of his remains by that officer; the second departure of Stanley at the end of 1874 to explore the Dark Continent and to complete the geographical labours of Livingstone,—these were the concluding geographical incidents of the period when the King of the Belgians first took up the subject before the world.

But the explorers and the missionaries had done more than add to geographical knowledge. They had thrown a lurid light on the horrors of the slave trade. They had tracked the evil to its root, and shown the inhumanity and devilish cruelty with which the slave hunters prosecuted their raids among a population of millions, unarmed and unable to defend themselves. The only export from that region was “black ivory,” as human beings came to be termed, and each successive traveller harrowed the feelings of the reader with tales of the barbarities inflicted on the unfortunate captives. The soul of Christendom and civilisation revolted against these outrages, and the suppression of the slave trade in Central Africa came to be regarded as a solemn duty imposed on the charitable public of Europe and America. The Governments which

had decreed universal freedom could not feign indifference to proceedings that defeated their own laws, and brought a common pressure to bear on the ruler of Egypt so that he might be induced to adopt repressive measures on the Upper Nile. With that object, Samuel Baker, and after him Charles Gordon, were appointed Governors of the Soudan, and in the time of the latter it at last became true in the year 1879 to say that the pursuit of slaves had been suppressed between Khartoum and the Equator. This result, however, had not been attained in 1876 at the time of the first Brussels Conference, when the corner stone of the Congo State was laid, and south of the Equator to as far as the Zambesi the slave trade flourished uncontrolled and unchecked.

It will be convenient at this point to sum up the considerations which determined the views generally held at the moment of the first Brussels Conference. The desire to fill up the dark places of the map had resulted in great geographical discoveries in the interior of Africa. What had been discovered justified the view that what had still to be revealed would prove of permanent importance. Already enough was known to encourage the belief in the existence of inland navigation, and that Europeans would find life supportable on the Equator. The desire to evangelise the blacks had long been felt among Christians of all creeds, and the labours of Livingstone and others had shown that success was possible, and perhaps easy of attainment. The missionaries and the explorers had also made clear the imperative duty of the free and happy nations to deliver their unfortunate brethren from the terrible sufferings under which they passed through life. To release Africa from the slave trade was admitted, even by the sceptic, to be necessary for the removal of a stain from the escutcheon of civilisation. These facts appealed to the religious and the philanthropic.

THE CONCEPTION OF THE CONGO STATE 7

But it would not be right to eliminate from our survey other considerations of a more self-interested character. The exploration of Africa had given rise to the desire to absorb it. The old view that Africa was a continent of no value had been shaken, and was on the eve of passing away. The opinion was fast spreading, that Africa might prove, as a centre of trade and as a possible seat of empire, not less important, to say the least, than Australia and South America. Three of the European States—England, France, and Portugal—were already established on its soil; Italy was known to covet Tripoli, if not Tunis; and Germany was already meditating over the creation of colonial dependencies. The demonstration that Central Africa was inhabitable by the white man marked the first step towards its absorption within the zone of civilisation. The proof that it was a fertile and prosperous region, with immense latent wealth of every kind, hastened the process of absorption, and made it inevitable. The remarkable feature in the transfer of African territory to the hands of Europeans, was that Belgium should have been able, with the general assent of the Powers, and with their solemn sanction, given beyond the possibility of retractation, to obtain so large a part—indeed the whole, geographically regarded—of Central Africa. The manner in which this pacific and durable triumph was achieved has now to be described; but it was due to the remarkable prescience and promptitude with which the King of the Belgians saw that the psychological moment had arrived to take the lead in solving what had become one of the great international problems of the time. He was able to stand before the world in this question as the representative of civilisation, and at the same time to pave the way for the accomplishment of his long-sought purpose in providing his country with new markets and a promising outlet for her excessive population.

In the summer of the year 1876 King Leopold addressed a letter to the most eminent geographical authorities and

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the leading geographical societies, inviting them to take part in a geographical conference at Brussels. The King said in his letter: "In almost every country a lively interest is taken in the geographical discoveries recently made in Central Africa. Several expeditions, supported by individual subscriptions, which prove the desire to attain important results, have been, and are being, undertaken in Africa. The English, the Americans, the Germans, the Italians, and the French have taken part in their different degrees in this generous movement. These expeditions are the response to an idea eminently civilising and Christian: to abolish slavery in Africa, to pierce the darkness that still envelops that part of the world, while recognising the resources which appear immense,—in a word, to pour into it the treasures of civilisation: such is the object of this modern crusade. Hitherto the efforts made have been without accord, and this has given rise to the opinion, held especially in England, that those who pursue a common object should confer together to regulate their march, to establish some landmarks, to delimit the regions to be explored, so that no enterprise may be done twice over. I have recently ascertained in England that the principal members of the Geographical Society of London are very willing to meet at Brussels the Presidents of the Geographical Societies of the Continent, and those other persons who, by their travels, studies, philanthropic tastes, and charitable instincts, are the most closely identified with the efforts to introduce civilisation into Africa. This reunion will give rise to a sort of conference, the object of which would be to discuss in common the actual situation in Africa, to establish the results attained, to define those which have to be attained."

The King's invitation met with a ready response in the six great States of Europe to which it was addressed, and from each of them the most distinguished persons in

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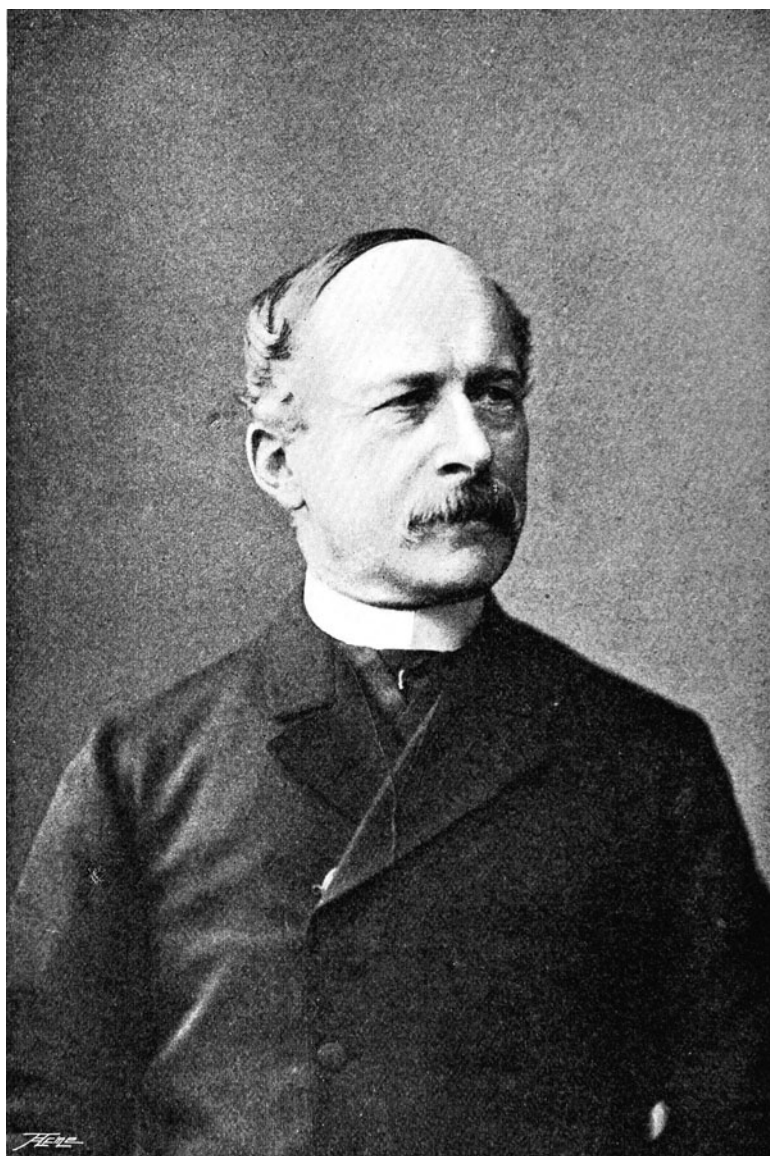
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