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Thirty Years' Experiences in Central Africa

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VICE-PRESIDENT G. M. SMITH:—Our guest today is Mr. John Clarke. Mr. Clarke has spent the greater part of the last thirty years in Africa, mostly in Central Africa. His experiences there have been extremely varied, as missionary explorer, student of languages, and also, I believe, working in the field of preventive medicine. This is his first visit to Toronto and we are very fortunate to have him here, to hear some of his experiences and to learn something of the marvellous development of that part of a great continent of which I imagine most of us know but little. Mr. Clarke.

MR. CLARKE:—Mr. Chairman and gentlemen, I am exceedingly happy indeed to have this privilege of addressing you members of the Canadian Club and especially when our subject is my own experiences in Central Africa. Two or three hundred miles south of the mouth of the Congo there is a long long trail awinding from the Atlantic seaboard inland for 1,500 miles. It has been known for many years as the Onjila, or the great slave highway. Along that highway have come thousands and thousands of slaves from the highlands of Central Africa, that is to say from the Upper Ranges of the Congo and Zambesi Rivers, right down to the great slave market of Benguela. Thirty years ago on my arrival I found that nefarious trade the order of the day. Thousands of those slaves passing through the hands of the Portuguese authorities were going on to the various small islands dotted along the west coast. Today

I am very glad to say that, due to the intervention of Great Britain principally, that slave traffic is a thing of the past. When I went along that highway it was a common thing to see in one great army as many as five thousand slaves. I had the great pleasure of accompanying Col. Harding who was the British resident at Lealui. He had come from the south and he had heard that there was such a thing as the slave traffic. One day we ran into such a caravan as I have referred to. We found one woman carrying four little children on her head. I inquired where is the mother. Oh, she said, they have been left behind. They are unable to keep up with us. Day after day I witnessed sights that were sufficient to stir the blood of a Briton and I remembered the American poet's words:—

Careless seems the great Avenger; history's pages but record
One death-grapple in the darkness 'twixt old systems and the Word;
Truth for ever on the scaffold, Wrong for ever on the throne,—
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above His own.*

Along that great slave highway I wended my way. Three days out from the coast I found that part of Central Africa alive with game. We climbed 5,000 ft. to great plateaus and there as far as my eye could reach I could see herd after herd of antelope; even giraffes were seen in the distance. A sportsman's paradise indeed! We passed on and came presently to the rivers which go to make up the great Zambesi. A few hundred miles further on we reached the waters of the Congo and at long last I reached my objective, Garenganze Kingdom. I found a great warrior chief there. He had come from the north and subjugated all the people. He was reigning supreme. He had enormous towns of one hundred thousand people. He had five hundred wives, fifty of them special favorites to whom he gave the power of magistrates and judges, and through those queens he was reigning supreme in all that part of the country.

Today that Kingdom is known as Katanga, the center of a tremendous mining industry. On the eve of his death David Livingstone stood on the banks of the Luapula river and said, "The men of this district tell me that across this

*Lowell, *The Present Crisis*.

river there is the great country of Katanga. I have been able to buy Katanga copper. I am hoping to cross the river tomorrow and go into this great unknown land where, said he, I believe I shall find the fountains of the Nile." He was mistaken as to the origin of the Nile. He was right with regard to the copper. There in that land we have over two hundred miles of copper. After I had been in that land some three or four years Mr. George Grey, who came out in the interests of the Tanganyika Concessions, Ltd., found me on the head waters of the Zambesi. After a day with him I discovered he came to look for copper. He said, "Have you found any indications of copper?" Said I, "Why only the other day I crossed a great copper mountain. If you care I will take you over the whole of this copper field." And so we had a most interesting two weeks with George Grey, brother of Earl Grey. And it is due to him that today there are several thousands of white men, Europeans, Americans, Canadians and Australians, exploiting this magnificent find. The concessions are worked in co-operation with the Union Minière du Katanga. It is a fifty-fifty proposition. Sir Robert Williams is chairman of the concessions and also one of the directors of the Union. Through their financial help the Cape to Cairo railway was brought from Victoria Falls to the Rhodesian border.

Katanga is one of five provinces of the Belgian Congo into which that land has been divided for administrative purposes. For each province we have a vice-governor and for all provinces we have a governor-general resident at Boma near the mouth of the Congo. Katanga today is before the whole mining world. It has marvellous potentialities with regard to the mining industry. They have not only discovered these great mountains of copper, four per cent is the average of the richness, but there is also a great stretch of tin seventy-nine miles long running from southwest to northeast. They have also discovered traces of gold, platinum, radium and also asbestos. So it seems to me that Katanga shortly will prove to be the mining center of the world. Today we have a railway going in from Lobito following almost that long long trail of which I spoke, which has been financed principally by Sir Robert Williams and his company. So it is possible now for you to

disembark at Lobito Bay, take the train, and in three or four days do the journey which took me the eighteen long months, through being held up at intervals by the various local chiefs. For the last ten years nearly all the copper wealth of that country has been taken out by the south, which was a remunerative proposition for Rhodesia and South African Government Railways. But now Sir Robert Williams tells us that within a year or eighteen months all the copper from the Katanga mines will go out by the west coast on this new line which of course, as you can understand, will be a very serious thing indeed for the Rhodesian Government.

Now we are up against a tremendous situation there. We are now in the period of transition. I am speaking from the native point of view, that is, the Africans'. When I went there I settled down to a linguistic study trying to find out what these Africans were thinking. I found no help, no books, nothing written in the language, and so I had to pick it up phonetically, putting down every phrase and every sentence as I heard them dropped from the lips of those Africans. By and by the discovery of copper brought white men into the country. There was a clashing of civilization with that primitive and unsophisticated life. Our Africans had been taught to project themselves out into the great unseen. Their whole life, their social life, their tribal life, their ecclesiastical life, was all governed by the unseen world. Then came the clash, and today we are in what Thomas Carlyle talked of as the "terrors of transition." These Africans, whom I found to be simple docile people, were all farmers; a man with his four or five acres and three or four wives to help him, growing maize and beans and other vegetables, their only thought being their own wants. Now labor is needed and we have the clash between these great mining companies and the government with respect to the welfare of these natives. Some of you may remember the great agitation which took place over the Congo atrocities. That was at the time before the Belgian people themselves had taken over the administration of the Congo. The country was then known as the independent state of the Congo and the country was divided up and put into the charge of several trading companies and the trading

companies themselves were directly responsible for the atrocities. Of course the late King Leopold was indirectly responsible, for knowing that the atrocities were taking place he had not endeavored to put an end to them.

Today I am glad to say that the Belgian people themselves are administering justice to the natives and they are caring for the welfare of the natives. Some of our mining magnates think they are championing the native cause too much and only recently there has come to me a copy of a report on the labor situation given by one of the leading business men of that great stretch of country. He is manager of a diamond mining company, one of the largest corporations in the Belgian Congo. Speaking before the League of Nations at Geneva he said that the principle on which they were working now with regard to their treatment of the natives was that of seeking to uplift them and to help towards their welfare. He says this is commanded by the principles of economy and morality. The colonization companies have to face twin duties of social policy and of economic policy; on the one side the duty to raise the physiological, moral, intellectual and social level of the community; on the other side the duty to develop the prosperity of the territory. The social policy and the economic policy are inseparable. The managers of the Belgian Congo companies unanimously state that compulsory labor for the benefit of private enterprise and of private peoples ought to be categorically forbidden. The managers of the Belgian Congo companies will at all times collaborate in the work of the conference, the work started today by the twelfth session of the International Labor Conference. And this gives satisfaction to all of us who for many long years have labored for the welfare of those people.

As I told you, I discovered these Africans simple farmers, and one of the great dangers, now that modern machinery is going into these countries, is that we do not pay sufficient attention to the condition in which we find these Africans. For instance, almost invariably I have discovered great missionary societies begin at once to draw these young men and women away from the land, bringing them to college to give them an education which unfits them to carry on the work in which they were engaged. So after

a few years' education invariably these Africans are driven down to the great centers to find employment. More and more our missionary societies today are giving attention to conducting these Africans along the lines of agriculture. For instance I found those Africans there with a miserable grain. Maize that had been brought into the country years before had deteriorated. And I found that a woman that worked hard for months would get only about three or four per cent for her labor. I sent down and at my own expense I brought up three or four sacks of the famous Hickory King maize and that ensured right away two hundred or three hundred per cent so that those men and women used to come around me and say: 'you must have magic. We used to receive only so many basketfuls; now we get forty, fifty, sixty and one hundred.' In that way I sought to encourage them along their own lines of agriculture. Again I introduced oranges and all kinds of citrus fruits, knowing that soon the whole country would open up and they would have a large population around these mines, and so I was preparing these Africans to be a self-contained, independent and self-respecting people.

The Belgian government in this work has given me every assistance. I had the honor of meeting in person King Albert, when he came out as Prince Albert, and through his intervention I was called upon to lead one or two expeditions with regard to sleeping sickness research, and here again I found my knowledge of the language extremely useful. Several doctors were put under my care with regard to leading them through the country. They did not know what these Africans said to each other and it was imperative that someone interpret the thinking of the Africans to these men. We went up and down to the Congo and we found tremendous ravages of the sleeping sickness. In one place where there used to be one hundred to one hundred and fifty thousand people, the whole population had been decimated. An appalling devastation. I entered some of the small houses to find three or four skeletons. They had died sitting around the fire with no one to bury them. After four years' service we were happy to remove these Africans from the Tsetse fly district right into the high plateaus and we were rewarded by the know-

ledge that we had saved at least two or three hundred thousand lives. And today that country for the most part is free of the dreaded sleeping sickness. Yet only recently I have discovered that away down on the head-waters of the Congo in some of those places we almost had to force those Africans to leave their homes. They are sentimental. Our fathers have lived here. Our mothers lived here. They didn't die. You white men tell us sleeping sickness is going to kill us. You must have brought it. If you will go back to your own country we will get rid of all our troubles. Which was partly true because it was through white men travelling from place to place that we brought the carriers of the dreaded sleeping sickness down into that particular district. But there must be vigilance all the way through, otherwise as long as we have the fly which is the carrier of the disease the moment the fly is inoculated again we are in danger.

One word with regard to the character, and quality of these Africans. They correspond to the Bantu Zulus in South Africa. The people of the Katanga country are one race. They are not the people you think they are. It was a marvellous discovery to me when I got behind their minds to discover the wisdom of the ancients. They sit around their blazing faggots night after night and talk with each other, and sitting there, once one has the language, life becomes intensely interesting and intensely real. I discovered in my study of the language that these Africans have an unwritten literature; all the Brer Rabbit stories we have in the Southern States, all these wonderful stories found their origin around the camp fires in Central Africa. I remember hearing one story. The river and the grass can never be friends, they said. What did it mean? Oh, said an old African, you know the proverb is that that little river once entered into a friendship with that great bunch of pampas grass which grows out of the river, but when the testing day came, and that river was always babbling of friendship, when the prairie fire began to sweep up the hillside and the pampas grass stopped down and said, 'Help, help, my enemy is coming,' the river went on dashing and splashing and talking of friendship. So, said the Africans, the river and the grass can never be friends, because when the day of testing came the river failed the grass.

Another very interesting proverb is in respect of old Mother earth urging the hunter to rest and try again and so we have a parallel to our own proverb, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." And one was tremendously interested to find that long before the white man reached Central Africa God had been there. The knowledge that these Africans have of God revolutionized all my ideas about the Africans. You don't need to sympathize with them. You talk about these poor Africans. They live with Mother Nature and everywhere, everywhere, the voice is of God God everywhere. I found that they had forty names for God. The father of Creation. God, the great Mother Nurse, the one who plays the part of Mother to us all. It is really El Shadai of the Old Testament. And our Africans like to have once and a while a little gamble, and we come along and find these Africans gambling and they always swear by Kapinanwanabo. Oh, they said, it means to bet, you grip the small finger and then the other fellow sees that the bet is on. And they said, you know you cannot do that to God because you would always lose. One goes on and finds the most interesting names—the Forger of the eternal hills. It was he who made all the hills and the rivers and one old African said to me—I had been making a road from my camp right down to the river so I could go along in the early morning without being drenched with dew, and he came along to help me with a number of his people and was very curious when he saw me using bamboo poles. I was trying to make a straight line, and he said, "What do you mean by putting up one pole after another and then shutting one eye and looking along. Is that magic?" "Oh," I said, "I am trying to make a straight line to the river." And then he laughed and he turned around and said, "Now I know it was God who made the rivers. The white man would have made them all straight."

Now I know in such a company of business men there is an interrogation in your hearts, and you say, 'If these people have such a wonderful conception of God, the great Father of Creation, what use is there going out there with another religion? Why can't you leave them alone?' I have been asked this question often, and I have been trying

to find a satisfactory answer. Why go out with Christianity? Well, if Christianity is only a means whereby we attain a certain form of respectability, well, I say at once it is futile to go to Central Africa; but to me Christianity is much more profound, much more vital. To me Christianity is not even a religion; it is a revelation. What is the difference? Well, I found these Africans a religious people, just as the Hindus and Brahmans and Buddhists are. Religion is always earth-born. You have man trying to climb, climb up by his own efforts, right up to the topmost rung, and by and by he steps off into Paradise regained. Christianity is rather a movement beginning in the heart of God and one coming out of the mystery of infinite love down to the simplicity of a human life. In short Christianity has to do with Jesus Christ our Lord, and I say He has a claim on all lives, and He, and He alone, can exalt the hearts of all men. I believe Christianity has a message that they cannot find in any other religion, a message that will lay hold of their hearts and revolutionize their lives. Here again there is tremendous danger of taking away from these people that which they have and giving them nothing in return. By so doing we create vagabonds and men who will be terrors to the community. Hence all this talk about the mission boy. It is said, "Don't give us a mission boy." We in giving him education only have given him something that has not gripped his life.

As I wended my way along the African forest I came across an old woman in earnest conversation with her child. As I passed I heard her say something and I wrote it down. Presently my caravan arrived and observing my old lady friend passing across to her little house, I followed her and addressing her with the highest term of respect, which is Mother, and clapping my hands, which is equivalent to saying, "I beg your pardon,"—[They are most polite, until they come in touch with civilization.] I said, please tell me what you meant. "Do you mean to say you don't know and you brought all these wonderful things into our country, and yet you don't know something so obviously simple?" and she began to interpret to me the proverb, for proverb it was, and said: "God gives beauty but we must help him." What an extraordinary proverb to find right in the heart of

that country. Why this is one of our old proverbs over again. The sovereignty of God and man's responsibility. She said, "Didn't you see my daughter? I was saying good-bye. She is the most beautiful child in our country and she is going away on a journey of three or four days and you know the terrors which await a young pretty girl by the wayside. I was just reminding her that God had made her very beautiful but she must do her part. She must co-operate with the Great Father of creation in the preservation of that which He had given her."

Surely we have a wonderful people here worth caring for. We found them away out in the wilds of that wild country projecting themselves into the unseen. What a striking contrast to the materialistic aspect of things, when we leave these great lands and come back to these civilized countries!

In closing I want to bring before you one other aspect of the situation as I see it today, especially with regard to the mining industry. Those Africans are coming from the far north and from the far south, and they are being herded together into compounds just like so many cattle, with the result that their birth-rate is going down and the death-rate rising. And we are face to face with the tremendous problem: how best to arrange the situation so that these mining companies may have sufficient labor to develop the mines, and yet we may be able to preserve the old-fashioned agricultural life of the country. It is only, I believe, as the companies co-operate sympathetically with the government and the great missionary bodies in the work in that country that we shall be able to arrive at some satisfactory solution. Railways are coming into the country. Roads are being made, automobiles are facilitating the transport, and transport is civilization. From every part these Africans are beginning to shake themselves and look out and wonder what it means, and I am hopeful that, with the wise co-operation of the government, the mining companies and the great missionary bodies we already have in that country, we shall be able not only to develop the riches of that vast country but also to preserve something of the delightful and interesting agricultural life of the people and preserve their ways and customs and maintain their contact with the past

and their beautiful legends. You remember Rudyard Kipling in that wonderful poem tells us of the fellow who became surfeited with civilized life and leaves it all behind him, even though they besought him not to go beyond the edge of cultivation. You remember he tells us he throws himself right out into the wilds and sitting one night around the fires he says,

'I remember lighting fires, I remember sitting by 'em;
I remember seeing faces, hearing voices,
I remember they were fancy
For I threw a stone to try 'em,
"Something lost behind the Ranges" was the only word they spoke.'

And so he climbed over plateaus and by and by we find him blazing the trail and ringing his trees and entering his great possession. And you remember Kipling puts these words into his mouth:

"Have I named one single river? Have I claimed one single acre?
Have I kept one single nugget—(barring samples)? No not I!
But you would not understand it, you go up and occupy."*

*The quotation is from Kipling's poem 'The Explorer' in *"The Five Nations."*—D. R. K.