

MARK TWAIN
King Leopold's Soliloquy
1905

Belgium led the way in colonizing sub-Saharan Africa, under the flag of the Congo Free State, a benevolent organization that claimed to bring the

From Mark Twain, *King Leopold's Soliloquy: A Defense of His Congo Rule* (Boston: The P. R. Warren Co., 1905), pp. 38–40.

benefits of European civilization to Africa. In fact it made massive sums of money for Leopold II, at tremendous human cost to the Congo natives. Despite tight Belgian control over travel to the Congo, reports filtered out of forced labor and amputation of a hand for failing to meet rubber production quotas. In 1905 Mark Twain published a pamphlet written from Leopold's perspective, in which the king's speech on civilization was interspersed with images like the ones shown here.

It is all the same old thing — tedious repetitions and duplications of shop-worn episodes; mutilations, murders, massacres, and so on, and so on, till one gets drowsy over it. Mr. Morel³ intrudes at this point, and contributes a comment which he could just as well have kept to himself — and throws in some italics, of course; these people can never get along without italics:

“It is one heartrending story of human misery from beginning to end, and *it is all recent.*”

Meaning 1904 and 1905. I do not see how a person can act so. This Morel is a king's subject, and reverence for monarchy should have restrained him from reflecting upon me with that exposure. This Morel is a reformer; a Congo reformer. That sizes *him* up. He publishes a sheet in Liverpool called *The West African Mail*, which is supported by the voluntary contributions of the sap-headed and the soft-hearted; and every week it steams and reeks and festers with up-to-date “Congo atrocities” of the sort detailed in this pile of pamphlets here. I will suppress it. I suppressed a Congo atrocity book there, after it was actually in print; it should not be difficult for me to suppress a newspaper.

[*Studies some photographs of mutilated negroes — throws them down. Sighs*]

The kodak has been a sore calamity to us. The most powerful enemy that has confronted us, indeed. In the early years we had no trouble in getting the press to “expose” the tales of the mutilations as slanders, lies, inventions of busy-body American missionaries and exasperated foreigners who found the “open door” of the Berlin-Congo charter closed against them when they innocently went out there to trade; and by the press's help

³Mr. Morel: E. D. Morel (1873–1924); British author and socialist politician who wrote important exposés of Leopold's brutality in the Congo.



we got the Christian nations everywhere to turn an irritated and unbelieving ear to those tales and say hard things about the tellers of them. Yes, all things went harmoniously and pleasantly in those good days, and I was looked up to as the benefactor of a down-trodden and friendless people. Then all of a sudden came the crash! That is to say, the incorruptible *kodak* — and all the harmony went to hell! The only witness I have encountered in my long experience that I couldn't bribe. Every Yankee missionary and every interrupted trader sent home and got one; and now — oh, well, the pictures get sneaked around everywhere, in spite of all we can do to

ferret them out and suppress them. Ten thousand pulpits and ten thousand presses are saying the good word for me all the time and placidly and convincingly denying the mutilations. Then that trivial little kodak, that a child can carry in its pocket, gets up, uttering never a word, and knocks them dumb!