

Duke of Brabant's eloquent appeal for protection of wild life in Africa.

Prince Leopold Duke of Brabant, heir to the throne of the Belgians, and his lovely wife Princess Astrid Duchess of Brabant, were the guests of the African Society at a dinner held in their honour at Claridge's Hotel on Thursday evening 16th November 1933.

Prince Leopold returned a short while ago from a most happy and successful tour of the Belgian Congo, and on his present visit to London he took this occasion, as the guest of the African Society, to further the cause he has at heart by emphasising the urgent necessity for the preservation of nature in the wilds of Africa, especially in the Belgian Congo.

H.R.H. the Duke of Brabant

Prince Leopold, Duke of Brabant, and Crown Prince of Belgium, was accorded a most enthusiastic reception on rising to reply. His Royal Highness, a trim, commanding figure with the Star of the Grand Order of Leopold glittering on his breast, spoke in very earnest fashion, and his distinct, softly modulated tones could be heard without effort in the farthest corners of the big ball-room at Claridge's, where the dinner was held.

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, commenced His Royal Highness. I desire to express my thanks to the Prince of Wales for his gracious words delivered with that particular charm which impresses all his hearers. (Applause.)

His opinions on the Congo are of very special value, emanating as they do from one of the most distinguished travellers of our day, and from one who has already given proof of his keen powers of observation. (Applause.)

Valuable Support and Co-operation

If we have succeeded in carrying through the work of civilisation which was

initiated by our great King Leopold II, we owe this largely to those special friends who, from the beginning, have given us their valuable support and co-operation. I am happy to see some of these present to-night.

I desire to express my sincere thanks for his charming welcome to Lord Buxton, one of the most distinguished Governor-Generals South Africa has ever had. (Applause.)

We are greatly touched and flattered by your cordial reception, and I wish to express to you all my appreciation and gratitude.

When your invitation reached me, Mr. President, I gladly accepted it, as it gave me the opportunity of showing you, by my presence here, how much I value and admire the activities of the distinguished Society over which you preside.

Protection of Nature

You left to me the choice of a subject for the lecture you so kindly asked me to deliver this evening, and I thought that the question of the protection of Nature would meet with the approval of my audience; for I know how much this question interests you. And let me pause here to offer my warmest congratulations to Sir Philip Cunliffe-Lister for the great success achieved by the International Conference convened under the auspices of the Colonial Office. Allow me also to congratulate Lord Onslow on the masterly way in which he presided over the deliberations. (Loud applause.)

I would like to deal with certain aspects of a problem, the importance of which I have realised more and more in the course of my numerous journeys.

During my four years at Eton and these will always remain vividly in my memory I was taught, among many other things, never to be pedantic. I do not know if I can follow out this excellent advice, but I hope so; not only in order to do justice to my Eton masters, but also because it would be great presumption on my part to seem to lay down the law in a sphere in which you are pre-eminent among nations.

If there is one subject altogether transcending human horizons, it is undoubtedly the preservation of those everlasting possessions of which we are the temporary guardians, responsible to future generations. Have we any right arbitrarily to alter the natural condition of things, without taking into consideration the results which can be foreseen from our present imperfect knowledge of the universe?

If we revert to the old classical descriptions of those green and fertile shores of the Mediterranean and compare them with present conditions, we may ask if the aridity which has succeeded the former abundance of trees and plants is not due to wilful and short-sighted destruction by man.

An Irreparable Loss

The disappearance of a civilisation is certainly a great loss, but man bears within him the embryo of its renaissance, for he has the power of substituting a new culture for the one which has vanished. The annihilation, on the other hand, of a created element is an irreparable loss, for man cannot re-create. We may excuse the faults committed in the past by our ancestors on account of their ignorance as to the consequences of their acts. But our successors will make no such excuse for us; our generation has been taught by experience, and it recognises that it has no arbitrary power even over those things, the possible utility of which cannot be foreseen.

The analysis of the problem of protecting nature leads us to study it in relation to the different forms of human activity.

Examining it from the scientific point of view, we observe that natural reserves constitute an indispensable element in the work of our laboratories.

Up till now, progress in natural science has been chiefly due to indoor work, and only in a much lesser degree to the first hand observation of nature.

I have constantly been struck by the poverty of knowledge which is apparent whenever the element "time" appears in any problem.

If you ask a naturalist for information on the anatomy of any known animal or microscopic organism, he will at once give you the fullest information. But if you ask him about the length of life of a certain animal, or the period of growth of some plant, or for any other explanation in which the element "time" intervenes, you will be astonished at the vagueness of his answers. (Laughter.)

The complete study of natural phenomena can only be accomplished by taking into account their successive evolutions and transformations, and these cannot be apprehended during the short lifetime of one observer.

Fundamental Importance of Natural Reserves

The study of geography and biology in their various phases will teach us that natural factors control the most diverse manifestations of human activity, and herein lies the fundamental importance of natural reserves.

Not only do they constitute the "store-room" if I may use that expression from which the laboratories derive their raw materials, but they also supply the naturalist with an ideal field for observation.

The economic advantages due to the protection of Nature are nowadays apparent to everyone.

The numerous scientific discoveries in connection with agriculture, for example, prove beyond doubt the danger of wantonly destroying plant life.

Before the most valuable discovery of rubber, over extensive colonisation of the Brazilian forests might have led to the extermination of the hevea, and have robbed us for ever of the comfort and pleasure of pneumatic tyres. (Laughter and applause.)

The indiscriminate felling of trees in the tropical forests of Africa might likewise have deprived us of the delight of our morning coffee. (Hear, hear.)

Periods of Indifference

The history of mankind has been marked by periods of indifference towards Nature, when literary and analytical preoccupations, as well as the spirit of speculation, seem to have predominated. But there have also been periods of enthusiasm, when human activities have been stimulated by the irresistible appeal of the physical and spiritual enjoyment experienced in the contemplation of natural phenomena.

Our present age seems to be returning more and more to this conception. The enthusiasm shown for sport, touring, camping, hygiene, and physical education are characteristic of this evolution. We seem to be imbued with a craving for freedom. We want to escape from our restless towns, with their stuffy houses, their noisy streets, their shops and their factories, which hem us in on all sides. We ask for pure air, light, and space, for land, water, and green fields, where we can move and breathe freely. Our generation has once more become friends with Nature. (Hear, hear.)

The social and moral effects of this tendency are deep-seated, and impose a salutary discipline on the masses. Education is directed towards a better understanding of living realities. The greater leisure afforded by the constant improvement in machinery is devoted to simpler and more healthy recreations. Such an evolution is bound to raise and purify the moral level of mankind.

The more sensitive among us have attuned our minds and hearts to this return to mother earth, and its gratifies me to pay a tribute to one of the most fervent apostles of this movement, Rudyard Kipling. (Applause.) He has shown us the profound solidarity which unites men to nature. He has expounded to us the changeless laws to the jungle, and brought man, the destroyer, face to face with the divine works, wherein all is order, harmony, beauty and obedience.

The protection of nature raises problems of universal importance, the evolution of which cannot be left to the initiative of isolated groups, whose action is necessarily limited, and who are unable to enforce in their entirety the effective measures of preservation which are necessary.

The State alone can and must take the responsibility for a protective organisation which will command the interest of all mankind in its moral, social, economical, and cultural development; and thus the political aspect of the question becomes apparent. (Loud applause.)

The "Parc National Albert"

Having called your attention to these general considerations on the fundamental principles of the protection of Nature, I now wish to put before you a few pictures of the the "Parc National Albert," the first sanctuary of its kind which we have established in the Congo. (Applause.)

The "Parc National Albert," buried in the boundless solitude of the very heart of Africa, is situated in the district of the Great Lakes and the sources of the Nile, between Lake Edward and Lake Kivu. It presents two very characteristic aspects : a vast plain in the north, and a mountainous range in the south.

The Northern Sector

Let us first examine the northern sector. The great alluvial plain of Lake Edward is crossed by two principal rivers running parallel from south to north. Their yellowish waters, the colour of which shows their erosive nature, slowly carry back to the lake the very soil of this plain which they contributed to deposit at a former period.

Situated on the Equator, at an altitude of some 3,000 ft., this region enjoys a distinctly tropical climate. The high temperature and the scarcity of rain explain the savannah-like appearance of the district. The scattered umbrella-shaped trees and the curious aspect of the Euphorbia candelabrum at once produce a strange impression on the traveller. The water-courses are skirted by narrow strips of forests where graceful palm trees emerge at intervals. The shores of the lake stretch out into extensive swamps covered by innumerable reeds. Animals large and small wander about this region, where extensive prairies are periodically ravaged by fire.

Thousands of antelopes, buffaloes, elephants, lions, leopards, hyenas, jackals, wild pigs, and many other savannah animals are to be seen, and these are a constant source of wonder to the traveller. Great herds of hippopotami swim about in the rivers, sleep on the sandbanks, or wallow in the warm mud of the marshes.

Birds are numerous everywhere. On the shores of the lake is a colony of mainly aquatic birds : pelicans, ibises, egrets, spoonbills, cormorants, to name only a few of those which hunt for their food in these waters, perhaps the richest in fish to be found in Africa.

The Southern Sector

Let us now turn towards the southern sector of the park to explore the high mountain group entirely due to volcanic action. The even lines and subdued colouring of the great horizontal plain of Lake Edward are here replaced by a broken landscape consisting of huge volcanic cones, some still in action, others only recently extinct.

Their outline, sometimes rounded, sometimes jagged and pointed, can be seen silhouetted against the usually dark and threatening sky. Clouds of smoke pour forth from these volcanoes, which thus betray their activity, and at night they are visible from a great distance, against a background of red sky. For the most part the mountains possess gigantic craters, but near these central cones may be observed a large number of craters of secondary importance, and of various dimensions. These produce the effect of a lunar landscape, a character which still persists, despite the vigorous forest vegetation. Numerous streams of lava have poured forth from all these gaping mouths, filling all the depressions and flowing over one another like the waves of a stormy sea.

The absence of rivers and lakes is due to the porous nature of the soil. The rain water runs through the lava and collects in subterranean streams which find their way to Lake Edward or Lake Kivu, where they rise in springs under the waters of the lake.

The climate is markedly different from that of the northern district which I have already described.

The mountains, some of them thirteen thousand and fourteen thousand feet high, often attract thick clouds, which for weeks together form an opaque cap round their summits.

At certain seasons torrential rains fall daily on the mountain sides and in the valleys. Hail storms burst from time to time over the higher summits, leaving them clothed in white. In the passes between these huge volcanic mountains violent gusts of wind blow furiously, their repeated onslaughts being heralded by deep rumbling. Throughout this district, during the greater part of the year, diluvian rains, fog, and cold hold their sway, and the penetrating damp adds to the inclemency of the climate.

Difference in Altitudes

Owing to the difference in the altitudes, which range from five thousand to fourteen thousand feet, one comes across the most varied vegetation, superposed in strips on the sides of the mountains, and comprising various flora, from the tropical to the alpine. Here and there in the lower forest are clumps of bamboo, which sometimes form homogeneous groves. These tall and slender bamboos are found growing at an altitude of ten thousand feet, and these again are replaced by forest trees recalling in their general aspect our old oaks. The rays of the sun which shine through the light foliage, contribute to the development of undergrowth where enormous sweet-scented St. John's wort mingles with large patches of celery. The ground is carpeted with wild flowers somewhat resembling those of our own country.

But if one ascends further one reaches a new zone, with vegetation so strange as to suggest another world.

Here is gigantic heather, with trunks two or three feet in diameter, bearing a multitude of flowers and covered with heavy cushions of moss which considerably modify its usual shape. These are surrounded by everlasting flowers and ragwort; lobelias also may be seen, with their tall stems covered with hundreds of little blooms; these, although

insignificant by themselves, form a brilliant mass of colour.

Just below the heights one finds nothing but grass and moss growing with difficulty on the rocks.

Such is this picture, inadequately drawn, of this remarkable vegetation, which is a source of never-ending astonishment.

And to this rich and varied botanical life there corresponds a no less remarkable animal life.

Animal Life

Among the numerous species of monkeys which inhabit the volcanic forests mention must first be made of the gorilla, which during recent years has aroused so much interest. It belongs to a race which so far has not been met with elsewhere. Only amounting to a few hundred in all, these curious animals live scattered in small family groups, and make their homes on the ground. They feed on the young bamboo shoots and on celery leaves.

The males, who are often seven feet high and weigh over five hundred pounds, are peaceable so long as they are not interfered with, but they become terrible antagonists if roused. Standing to their full height, beating their broad chests with their heavy fists, they utter fearful yells which strike terror into the heart of the boldest.

Among the larger animals, I may also mention the buffalo and the elephant, which may be found at an altitude of about 12,000 feet.

Numerous other animals are to be found in these distant regions, some of which are scarcely known, and we may be sure that the study of these will prove of considerable interest to science.

As I have tried to point out the "Parc National Albert" is remarkable for the variety of its flora and fauna, which are peculiarly original, owing to the equatorial position, the great differences of altitude and the volcanic nature of the soil.

A Three-Fold Duty

The possession of this unique patrimony imposes a three-fold duty upon us.

In the first place we must, with the greatest possible vigilance, see that it be preserved in the exact state in which it has been conferred upon us by nature. To help us in this task we shall no doubt eventually call on the pygmies who dwell in the dark recesses of the Park forests. These natives, the study of whom is so engrossing from an anthropological point of view, have a common interest with ourselves; namely, to maintain unchanged the regions in which they have lived for centuries and with the future of which they are so intimately concerned.

But in addition to our efforts to carry out this fundamental aim we wish also to undertake the methodical and scientific exploration of our incomparable domain. This is our second duty: to make our foundation contribute actively to the furthering of knowledge. For this purpose specialists have been sent on missions to study certain predetermined problems.

And finally, without in any way endangering the most rigorous principles of preservation, we wish to throw open to visitors certain parts of our Reserve, for we do not feel justified in withholding from men the splendours and sources of emotion to be found there. (Loud applause.)

A Public Tribute

We Belgians are still novices in the matter of the protection of Nature. We lack experience, for our first National Park has only recently been established. To whom can we turn for guidance with greater confidence than to you, who have been our precursors in this field? For this reason we are particularly gratified to include among the members of the commission on the "Parc National Albert" Lord Onslow, who so ably presided over the International Conference for the Protection of Nature. We also had the honour of the co-operation of the late and deeply lamented Lord Grey of Fallodon, of whom we shall always

preserve such sympathetic memories.
(Applause.)

I am happy to have this opportunity of rendering them a public tribute of our gratitude and of expressing our great appreciation of the other pioneers of the movement here present of whom Great Britain may well be proud.

In the course of my travels I have seen the many splendid results you have attained.

In the United Kingdom, as in Africa, America, Asia, and Australia, indeed, wherever the British flag flies, successful efforts have been made in the same direction. You have undertaken a real mission, which stands out as an example and an encouragement to all others. (Loud applause.)

imbued with a love of Nature. They are brought up from earliest childhood to protect the weak. This virtue, the practice of which is extended to the lowest creatures, has left an indelible mark on the British character and heart. May I be allowed to suggest that it is this sentiment which underlies the chivalrous ideals of your nation? A nation whose solicitude for the weak has not been limited to its own frontiers. Of this solicitude Belgium, of all countries, is most conscious. (Loud and sustained applause.)

Lord Leverhulme then proposed the health of the chairman, and the great occasion drew to a close, everyone leaving with a deep impression of the Duke of Brabant's most interesting and enlightening lecture.

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The English people themselves are