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ATROCITIES IN THE RUBBER FOREST.

VALUABLE WORK OF DISTINGUISHED IRISHMAN.

There is just now on a short visit to Ireland a well-known Irishman, whose distinguished career in the Consular Service of His Majesty's Government has been made the more notable by his almost lifelong devotion to the work of helping the oppressed natives of far-away and strange lands. Our visitor is Sir Roger Casement, whose remarkable disclosures in his exhaustive report to the Foreign Office in reference to the atrocities perpetrated on the Indians in Putumayo led to the appointment of a Select Committee to inquire into the subject. It is an interesting fact that the report of the Committee has

An Indian chief of the River Igaraparava, the main tributary of the Putumayo, some of whose young men had been drowned by holding them under water for not bringing in enough rubber.

been published at a time when Sir Roger Casement is on a visit to his native land, where since his arrival he has been busying himself in focussing public attention on the distress prevailing amongst the peasantry in the remote parts of the West of Ireland. His letters to the Press during the past fortnight on behalf of the people of the Connemara Islands plead eloquently for them, and contain many valuable suggestions for relieving their condition. Sir Roger has lived the greater part of his life in distant lands, but not even in the most primitive regions has he encountered, as he says, a population housed as many of these people are, or battling for an existence with soil so incapable in itself of supporting human life. To Sir Roger the thanks of his fellow-countrymen are due for his sincere and active interest in the case of the people of Connemara, but by his disclosure of the shocking state of things existing in Putumayo he has earned the gratitude of every lover of justice and humanity. Sir Roger has had a varied and active career in the Government service. In 1895 he was appointed H.M. Consul in Lorenzo Marques, and held that post until three years later, when he was appointed Consul for the Portu-

Two young Indians—one a boy only—just in from the forest with their loads of rubber for weighing.

guese possessions in West Africa, south of the Gulf of Guinea, Consul in the Gaboon, and Consul to the Congo Free State. In 1906 he was appointed Consul in Santos, and in the following year he was selected as Consul-General for Haiti and San Domingo, but he did not take up the appointment. He acted as Consul in Para in 1908, and in 1909 he was gazetted Consul-General for Rio de Janeiro, a position which he at present holds. He received the Companionship of the Order of St. Michael and St. George in 1905, and was knighted in 1911.

The first account the British public received of the atrocities in Putumayo was contained in a series of articles that appeared in *Truth* in September and October, 1909, which

were followed by three special investigations—the inquiry by Sir Roger Casement, that of the Commission sent out by the Peruvian Amazon Company, in 1910, and that of Dr. Paredes, a Peruvian judge, in 1911. The investigations of Sir Roger Casement first established the facts beyond dispute. The Commission despatched by the Peruvian Amazon Company started their inquiry at the same time as Sir Roger, but independently of his inquiries, and availing themselves of separate sources of inquiry reported to the company in substantially the same form, and both reports pointed to the discovery of additional and more atrocious crimes than were alleged by the revelations in *Truth*. Sir Roger Casement's report was published as a Blue Book, and the accounts given in it of the outrages on the natives in Putumayo are succinctly summarised in a letter written by Sir Edward Grey in January, 1911, after the receipt of

in Peru. The directors included one Senor Arana, who had been a member of the old company, and whom Sir Roger Casement, in his evidence before the Committee, charged with being criminally responsible for the atrocities, and whom the Committee in their report say had, together with the other partners of the vendor firm, knowledge of, and was responsible for, the outrages perpetrated by his agents and employes in Putumayo, although in his evidence Arana repudiated all knowledge of the infamies. He declared that the allegations were exaggerated, and when asked for a definite instance, he referred to what he described as the "fantastic" stories of the burning of Indian women and men with kerosene oil, but the Committee state that, however great may be the reluctance to credit the possibility of diabolical outrages of this kind, the truth of the burning of Indians is too well established by the evidence

A band of Indians with loads of rubber on their backs ready to set out to carry it down to the chief rubber station.

the report. In it Sir Edward wrote—"Many of the principal officials of the Peruvian Amazon Company are unquestionably guilty of the most revolting atrocities against Indians, for which abundant and irrefutable evidence has been collected, and has been accepted without demur by Senor Tizor, the company's representative at La Chorrera, as being incontrovertible. The crimes charged against these men include murder, torture, violation, and constant floggings of a barbarous nature, and other acts of unspeakable cruelty. These cases are not isolated, but are part of a system." The order of reference to the Select Committee on the outrages was "to inquire whether any responsibility rests upon the British directors of the Peruvian Amazon Company in respect of the atrocities in the Putumayo district, and whether any changes in the law are desirable to prevent the machinery of the Companies Acts being used in connection with similar practices in foreign countries." In their report the Committee declare that they find no evidence that the British directors made themselves individually parties to any overt act which would expose them to a charge under the Slave Trade Acts, but they cannot absolve them from the charge of culpable negligence as to

the labour conditions that prevailed under their company. The Peruvian territory, in which the company started the business of rubber-gathering, and which covered an area of between 10,000 and 12,000 square miles, though nominally under the Peruvian Government, was the subject of dispute, as it was claimed by Colombia, so that at the time of the formation of the company, as the Committee in their report observe, Putumayo was a veritable no man's land, Peru and Colombia having both agreed by *modus vivendi* in July, 1906, to withdraw all their civil and military authorities from the region, pending arbitration to settle the delimitation dispute. There was consequently no legal authority on the spot to punish crime, and the nearest Court, at Iquitos, seven to eight days' journey distant, owing to this agreement, declined to act when charges of atrocities were made. The rubber collecting industry was in existence before the Peruvian Amazon Company came on the scene, and put more working capital into the business, the place of the old company being taken by the Peruvian Amazon Company, which was registered as a British company in 1907. Four of the directors of the new organisation were English, and two of them had experience

Sir Roger Casement, C.M.G.,

of eye-witnesses in Sir Roger Casement's report, which is confirmed by the statements of Dr. Paredes.

Included in the "atrocities" was the system of forced labour akin to slavery which was proved to exist, and, apart from the gratuitous murders and tortures, the Committee find that the treatment of these unfortunate Indians was deplorable in the extreme. The system of slavery had two principal features. The first was the practice of the "correrias," the procedure being for "commissions" or patrols of whites (armed with rifles) to go out and collect Indians by force, shooting those who ran away, while the rest were "reduced" to obedience. When so "conquered" or "reduced" they were put to gather rubber in the forest, and then occurs the second feature of the forced labour. "Advances of European goods," the Committee report, "were made to the Indians, and they were then regarded as debtors to the company, and forced under pain of merciless flogging to work off their debts in rubber. Thenceforth, they were held under a chain of "peonage," a system of debt-bondage from which, in fact, they never got free. Their debts were a transferable and saleable asset, and with the debts was

transferable also the right to work the Indians. If they ran away they were hunted down by bodies of armed men, and brought back; and it appears that the Peruvian law would sanction the handing over of such debtors to their employers. Any tampering with Indians thus regarded as debtors to an employer was a grave offence on the Putumayo. It was the cause of frequent quarrel between Colombian and Peruvian squatters, who each accused the other of carrying off or attracting away "their Indians from their legitimate masters." The Committee say that this is not an exceptional instance, as there is an increasing tendency for tropical regions to be developed by absentee and international capital through the use of coloured labour. Thus we have a return to the old slave driving methods that existed in parts of the United States in the nineteenth century in tropical countries which were easily accessible. Let us now hear the character of the unfortunate Indians who were the victims of all sorts of infamies. The following account is given of them by the company's commission—
"In the commissioners' opinion the natives are far from being the bloodthirsty and ferocious savages they are often said to be.

Cannibals they undoubtedly were, and in outlying parts still may be. That, however, appeared from inquiries in various parts to be more of a religious or magical rite, the eating of a slain enemy, than the expression of gross ferocity, and they certainly would have been less than human if they had not occasionally broken out in resentment of the treatment they received. To the commissioner they appeared to be a simple people, of naturally friendly disposition, whose confidence and affection it would not be difficult to gain. Much bad work remains to be undone, and it will take time to eradicate the memories of the past ill-treatment and the distrust engendered by it, but it will be time well spent." An interesting extract is given from a private letter written from El Encanto, in

An Indian man who had been flogged and maltreated at the station of Ultimo Retiro.

the Putumayo by Mr. Barnes, one of the commissioners, who gave evidence before the Committee, recording his impression of the Boras Indians. He writes—"After seeing the terrible way the poor wretches have been treated, one can only wonder how they left a Blanco alive, or allow one to live. They are awfully nice people, manlier and stronger in every way than the Huitots, and, properly treated, would undoubtedly make splendid labourers, and be on the best of terms with white men, and, realising this, and seeing how things are, is heart-breaking." With regard to the question whether any changes in the law are advisable, more particularly in

the matter of responsibility of the directors whom the Committee find guilty of culpable negligence, they express the opinion that the English Criminal law, which would have covered the case if the directors had knowledge, could be extended to include cases of culpable negligence, but Sir Edward Spicer held the contrary view. Referring to the communication sent by the company to the Foreign Office, stating they were taking all steps open to them to ensure that the company's business in Putumayo was carried on with all possible consideration to the natives, and also to the letter from Senor Arana, stating that the greatest care was taken in the selection of the employés of the company, the

Indian man with his daughter outside the rubber "section" of Entre Rios, whose chief was one Andres O'Donnell.

Committee observe that no care at all was taken, and the employés were, in fact, a gang of ruffians and murderers, who shot apparently from sheer lust of blood, or burnt, tortured, and violated in a spirit of wanton devilry. Directors who merely attend board meetings and sign cheques, or limit themselves to a special branch of the business, cannot escape their collective moral responsibility when gross abuses under their company are revealed. They should not lightly have exposed to risk the good name of England. They ought to have realised the responsibility of being the pioneers of commerce in a new and uncivilised region, where they must have known that the authority of the Government was at least weak.









