

BOKWALA
THE STORY OF A CONGO VICTIM

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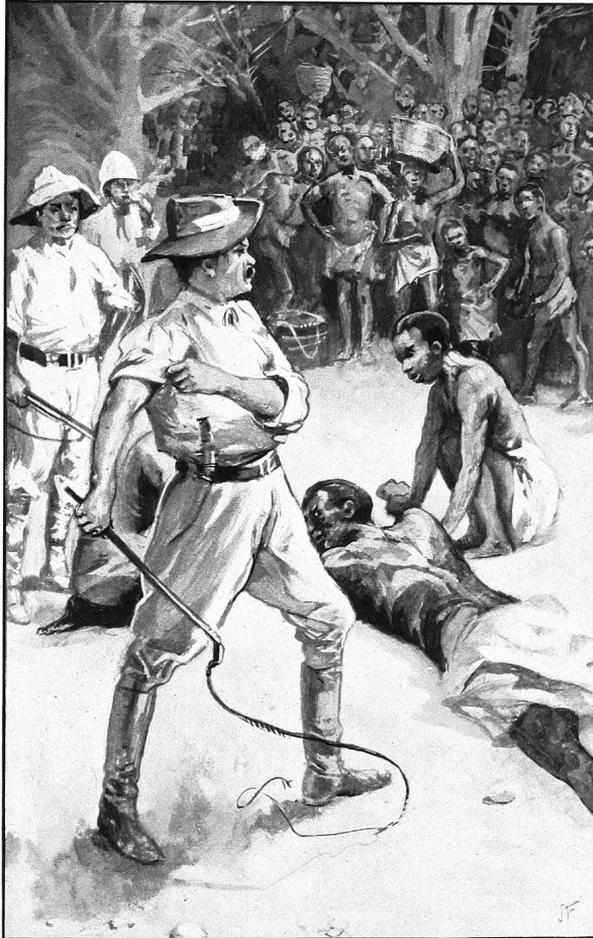
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"DOWN IT CAME ON ME, LASH AFTER LASH."

PREFACE

Having personally visited the Upper Congo in the days preceding the establishment of the notorious rubber *régime*, and being intimately acquainted with the conditions of native life which then obtained, I have watched with profoundest pity and indignation the development of Congo slavery. Old-time conditions of savage barbarity were awful, but it has been reserved for so-called "Christian Civilisation" to introduce the system of atrocious oppression and hopeless despair under which, during the last fifteen years, millions of helpless natives have perished directly or indirectly, for whose protection Great Britain and the United States of America have special responsibility before God and men.

It is particularly appropriate that in this moment of Congo crisis these pages should render articulate the voice of a Congo victim. Bokwala tells his own story, thanks to the clever and sympathetic interpretation of a gifted and experienced resident on the Congo. And a touching story it is, told with admirable directness and simplicity, truthfulness and restraint.

I heartily commend the book to all who are interested in the greatest humanitarian issue which has appealed to us during the last thirty years, and to those also who as yet know little or nothing of the Congo Iniquity.

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HARLEY HOUSE, BOW, LONDON, E.

O Lord, how long shall I cry, and Thou wilt not hear! even cry unto Thee out of violence, and Thou wilt not save!

Why dost Thou shew me iniquity, and cause me to behold grievance? for spoiling and violence are before me: and there are that raise up strife and contention.

Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous, therefore wrong judgment proceedeth.

Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest Thou on them that deal treacherously, and holdest Thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?

FOREWORD

This story of Bokwala, a Congo victim, has been written in the belief that it will help the friends of the Congo native to see something of how Congo affairs appear when looked at from the standpoint of those whom they most nearly concern in their actual working, *i.e.*, the Congo natives themselves.

Bokwala's story is the truth, and nothing but the truth. The whole truth, however, is written only in tears and blood wrung from the unfortunate people who are subjects of such treatment as is described in this book. Even if it were written with pen and ink, it could not be printed or circulated generally. No extreme case has been chosen, the story told has none of the very worst elements of Congo life in it; it is the life which has been lived by hundreds and thousands of Congo natives, and in great measure is being lived by them to-day.

Now in July, 1909, while these words are being written, wrongs are taking place; men and women are being imprisoned for shortage in food taxes; messengers of white men are threatening, abusing, and striking innocent villagers; and constant demands are being made upon the people who find it impossible to supply such except at great expense to themselves, which they do not hesitate to incur rather than be tied up and go to prison.

Changes there have been in the name and *personnel* of the administration: but no change in the system. We who live here and see what takes place pray that you at home may stand firm

and not for one moment think that the battle is won. It is not won yet; and will not be until we see the changes actually worked out by reformers here on the Congo as surely as you see the proposals and promises of them on paper in Europe.

If what is here recorded helps to bring about that happy state of things one day sooner than it would otherwise come, surely readers and writer will unite in praise to Him who alone is able to bring it to pass.

A CONGO RESIDENT.

BOKWALA

CHAPTER I

HOW WE ONCE LIVED

My early days—Life at home—How we fared—Work and play—Our one fear, the cannibals—Iseankótó's warning—We despise it—We are captured by cannibals—The journey—A horrible meal—The cannibal village reached.

I have heard that there are many white people in Europe, both men and women, who feel compassion for us black men, and who would, if they knew more about us, take pity on us and save us from our sorrows and trials. So I am going to tell the story of my life, that they may know and help us.

Long, long ago I was born in the village of Ekaka, and having lived so long I have seen many things, and who is better able to tell them than I? We have great controversy with the white people about our ages: they say I am about thirty years old, but of course I know better; and I say that I am about three thousand years old—which shows that white men do not know everything.

My name is Bokwala, a slave. I do not know why my father and mother named me so; for I was a freeborn child. But afterwards I became a slave in truth, as I shall tell you, so then it suited me well.

We lived all together very happily in my father's compound. He was the chief of Ekaka, and had great authority; he had but to give an order, and at once the people would hurry to execute it. His own name was Mboyo, but he was always called Isek'okwala, after me, and in the same way my mother was

called Yek'okwala. It is one of our customs to call the parents "father" or "mother" of Bokwala, or whatever the name of the child may be.

My mother was my father's favourite wife, but, being a chief, he had several others, and necessarily our compound was a large one.

In the centre of one side of a large open space was the chief's own house, and next to it the open house for talking palavers, feasting, &c. Then there were the houses of the women, one for each wife, where she lived with her own children, and other houses for slaves. As we boys grew older we built houses for ourselves in our father's compound, and in time it grew to be almost like a small village.

Those were good days, as far as we ourselves were concerned. We were free to do as we liked; if we quarrelled, we fought it out, and the strongest won; if we wanted meat or fish, we went to hunt in the forest, or to fish on the river, and soon had a plentiful supply; and in our gardens there was always as much vegetable food as we needed.

Sometimes the women had quarrels amongst themselves, and then we had no peace for a time. They talked and talked, and scolded each other from morning till night, and almost from night till morning, and there was no sleep for any of us. Not even my father could put an end to these rows: for the time being the women were masters of the situation and of him. You see, the women provide us men with food, and if they are angry with a man they starve him, therefore what can he do? He just

waits, and by and by their anger is finished, and a time of peace ensues, and possibly a feast.

I will tell you how we passed our days in the time of my childhood. Every one rose with the sun, for our people do not think it good to sleep late, and it did not take long to eat our morning meal of manioca, and anything which had been kept over from the night before.

Then we began to scatter, some of the women to the large manioca gardens at some distance in the forest, and others to fish in the river. Sometimes they went fishing for a day only, at other times for as long as a month. The length of time and the kind of fishing depends on the season, whether the water is high or low, and what sort of fish are plentiful. Some of the men and boys would go out to hunt with their nets and spears, others would be busy making nets, canoes, paddles, and cooking utensils, or doing smithy work, making spears, knives, or ornaments for the women. The chief and elders of the village would gather in the large shed and talk palavers, hear and tell news, smoke and chat all day long.

We children would fish, go for picnics in the near forest, bathe in the river, play games, quarrel and fight and make it up again, and return to our play until we felt hungry, when we made our way homewards to seek our mothers.

Towards evening, when the sun was slipping down, the men would come in from the hunt, and the women from the gardens, from woodcutting in the forest, and water-drawing at the springs, and then the cooking would begin. All round us were

women chatting, and little girls running errands and helping them in various ways.

Some of the women would be making *tökö* (native bread) from the steeped manioca they had just brought from the river, and they were busy with pestle and mortar, pots and calabashes. Others were making *banganju*, a kind of pottage made of manioca leaves, palm nuts, and red peppers, and yet others preparing *bosaka*, or palm-oil chop.

The animals killed in the hunt were first taken to my father to be divided by him, and soon the portions were given round to the women to be cooked, while we youngsters sat about waiting, talked and feasted on the appetising smells emitted from the various boiling pots.

My mother sat and talked with my father; she did no cooking, as she was the favourite wife, and the others cooked for her. In the fruit season we might add our quota to the feast in the form of rubber and other fruits, or even caterpillars or palmerworms, and these were greatly enjoyed by all.

When the food was ready the women brought it in hand-baskets to my father, who first helped himself to his share, and passed some to any visitors who might be with him, then he gave the rest to his wives, and each in turn divided it amongst her own children. The slaves were treated much the same as children when food was served out, they received their share.

We had no plates or spoons then, as some of our people who work for the white men now have, leaves served for plates, and twisted into a scoop did equally well for spoons. The chief

possessed his own carved ivory spoon, worked from a solid elephant's tusk, but that was taboo for any but himself. Nowadays we may not work ivory for ourselves, we have to take it to the white men.

As soon as we had all finished eating, and drinking spring water, some of us carefully gathered up all the leaves which we had used, and the peelings and cuttings of the food, and threw them away in the forest, lest some evil-disposed person should get hold of them and by means of them bewitch us. We are all very much afraid of witchcraft, unless we ourselves practise it; then, of course, it is for others to fear us.

The meal finished and cleared away, and the leavings tied up to the roof to be served again to-morrow morning, we all gathered round the fires and the old men told stories of their prowess in hunting or in war, or retold to us young ones some of the legends and fables of our ancestors of long ago. Sometimes, on rare occasions, my father would sing to us the legend of Lianza, the ancient warrior and hero of our race. This story takes a long time to tell, and at frequent intervals the whole company would join in singing the choruses, with clapping of hands and great excitement.

This lasted far into the night. And sometimes when the moon shone brightly we would sing and dance and play games, which we enjoyed greatly at the time, although they were not good games, and we generally had to suffer for them afterwards. On the following morning many of us were sick, our heads ached, and we were fit for nothing.

We do not play these games so much now as we used to.

There was just one thing we were always afraid of in those days, and that was an attack from our enemies who lived on the other side of the river. They were very bad people, so wicked that they even eat men whom they have killed in battle, or slaves whom they have taken prisoners or bought for the purpose. They were at that time much stronger than we were, and when they attacked us we always got the worst of it. So we dreaded them very much, more even than the wild animals of the forest.

On a certain evening we were sitting talking after having finished our evening meal, and we began to make plans for a fishing expedition to the marsh near the river, and finally decided to start on the next day.

We slept that night at home, and were awake betimes in the morning ready for an early start.

There was a very old man in our village named Iseankótó, or the Father of Discernment. He had been a strong man and possessed great fame; but that was in the past, and now we did not pay much heed to his sayings. He called us together as soon as we were awake, and told us of a very vivid dream he had had during the night.

It was this. We went to fish just as we had planned, but while we were there the cannibals came, attacked and overpowered us, and we were all either killed or taken prisoners. He besought us to lay aside our plans and stay at home that day, as he was certain that the dream was a warning to be disregarded at our peril.

We were self-willed, however, and would not listen to advice, but rather ridiculed the warnings of old Iseankótó.

“It is only a dream,” we said; “who cares for dreams?” and snatching a few mouthfuls of food we set off merrily, making fun of the old man as we went. What fools we were! And how we blamed ourselves and each other afterwards!

Down the hill we went towards the river, singing, shouting, and skipping along, heedless of the danger into which we were running. Having reached the bottom of the hill, we made our way along the forest path which skirts the river bank, and ere long came to the place we had decided on visiting.

Very soon we scattered and commenced work, and were just rejoicing to find that the fish were plentiful and we were likely to have a good lot to take home with us at night, when we were suddenly startled by a rustling in the bush close to us.

Before we had time to realise what had happened, we were surrounded by numbers of fierce cannibal warriors who had been in hiding, waiting for a chance to pounce upon some defenceless party of a weaker tribe.

We tried to fight them, but being almost without arms, we had no chance against these men who had come prepared for battle, and we were completely at their mercy. One or two slaves who went with us were killed, but the women and we boys and girls were tied together with strong creepers and taken prisoners.

Our captors gathered up the corpses of the men they had killed, and compelled some of our number to carry them, and then we were ordered to march off with them. We kept a sharp look out

for any opportunity to escape, but this was impossible as we were too well watched. We were taken across the river and away into the forest, in the depth of which we encamped just before the sun went down.

During all that night we lay awake, weeping for our homes and friends, and more for ourselves, watching our enemies prepare fires, cut up the corpses of our friends, cook, and afterwards eat them; for to those people we are but *nyáma* (meat); and all the time we feared even to speak, lest we also should be deemed fit morsels for their evening meal.

Early the next morning we were on the road again, and at last towards evening we arrived at Bosomo, the village of our captors, footsore and weary, and faint for want of food.

Everything was strange to us. We could not even understand the language which we heard spoken, but we could guess that inquiries were being made as to the success of the expedition, and that we were being examined and scrutinised from head to foot as to our usefulness either as servants or as food.

Some manioca was given to us by the women, and we were put all together in a large open shed, while some warriors acted as sentries lest we should escape. But there was no danger of that just then, we were far too tired, and in spite of our misery were soon fast asleep.

CHAPTER II

I AM A CANNIBAL'S SLAVE

In the cannibal village—Before the council—Our fate—Desire to please my master—How I succeeded—Our fears and their justification—A sad company—Siene's murder—The boy who lied—The ordeal by poison—Village strife—The human peace-offering—The haunting dread—Rumours of the white men—A fright—Makweke's peril—How he escaped—We plan flight—The start—The chase—A near thing—The river reached—Over, and at home again.

When we awoke it was to find the sun already shining, for after the fight and long walk, in addition to the much talking of the night before, our new masters were as weary as ourselves.

It was not long, however, before the whole village was astir and the morning meal eaten. We were glad to eat the manioca which had been given us the previous night, because now that we had rested we felt the pangs of hunger. Needless to say, we watched the people furtively to see what they did and what kind of mood they were in.

We were surprised and amused to see that they washed their hands and faces in the dew which was on the plantain leaves, whilst they were also very particular about their teeth. We, of course, clean our teeth; but if one rubs his body occasionally with oil and camwood powder surely he has no need of water! It only spoils the effect.

When they had finished their ablutions and taken their food the chief and elders of the town gathered together in council, and after a little while we were brought before them. There

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