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Содержание

PROLOGUE	5
I	5
II	9
III	11
IV	13
V	16
VI	18
CHAPTER I	22
I	22
II	24
III	26
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	28

Edgar Wallace

Bones / Being Further Adventures in Mr. Commissioner Sanders' Country

PROLOGUE

SANDERS—C.M.G

I

You will never know from the perusal of the Blue Book the true inwardness of the happenings in the Ochori country in the spring of the year of Wish. Nor all the facts associated with the disappearance of the Rt. Hon. Joseph Blowter, Secretary of State for the Colonies.

We know (though this is not in the Blue Books) that Bosambo called together all his petty chiefs and his headmen, from one end of the country to the other, and assembled them squatting expectantly at the foot of the little hillock, where sat Bosambo in his robes of office (unauthorized but no less magnificent), their upturned faces charged with pride and confidence, eloquent of the hold this sometime Liberian convict had upon the wayward and fearful folk of the Ochori.

Now no man may call a palaver of all small chiefs unless he notifies the government of his intention, for the government is jealous of self-appointed parliaments, for when men meet together in public conference, however innocent may be its first cause, talk invariably drifts to war, just as when they assemble and talk in private it drifts womanward.

And since a million and odd square miles of territory may only be governed by a handful of ragged soldiers so long as there is no concerted action against authority, extemporized and spontaneous palavers are severely discouraged.

But Bosambo was too cheery and optimistic a man to doubt that his action would incur the censorship of his lord, and, moreover, he was so filled with his own high plans and so warm and generous at heart at the thought of the benefits he might be conferring upon his patron that the illegality of the meeting did not occur to him, or if it occurred was dismissed as too preposterous for consideration.

And so there had come by the forest paths, by canoe, from fishing villages, from far-off agricultural lands near by the great mountains, from timber cuttings in the lower forest, higher chiefs and little chiefs, headmen and lesser headmen, till they made a respectable crowd, too vast for the comfort of the Ochori elders who must needs provide them with food and lodgings.

"Noble chiefs of the Ochori," began Bosambo, and Notiki nudged his neighbour with a sharp elbow, for Notiki was an old man of forty-three, and thin.

"Our lord desires us to give him something," he said.

He was a bitter man this Notiki, a relative of former chiefs of the Ochori, and now no more than over-head of four villages.

"Wa!" said his neighbour, with his shining face turned to Bosambo.

Notiki grunted but said no more.

"I have assembled you here," said Bosambo, "because I love to see you, and because it is good that I should meet those who are in authority under me to administer the laws which the King my master has set for your guidance."

Word for word it was a paraphrase of an address which Sanders himself had delivered three months ago. His audience may have forgotten the fact, but Notiki at least recognized the plagiarism and said "Oh, ho!" under his breath and made a scornful noise.

"Now I must go from you," said Bosambo.

There was a little chorus of dismay, but Notiki's voice did not swell the volume.

"The King has called me to the coast, and for the space of two moons I shall be as dead to you, though my fetish will watch you and my spirit will walk these streets every night with big ears to listen to evil talk, and great big eyes to see the hearts of men. Yea, from this city to the very end of my dominions over to Kalala." His accusing eyes fixed Notiki, and the thin man wriggled uncomfortably.

"This man is a devil," he muttered under his breath, "he hears and sees all things."

"And if you ask me why I go," Bosambo went on, "I tell you this: swearing you all to secrecy that this word shall not go beyond your huts" (there were some two thousand people present to share the mystery), "my lord Sandi has great need of me. For who of us is so wise that he can look into the heart and understand the sorrow-call which goes from brother to brother and from blood to blood. I say no more save my lord desires me, and since I am the King of the Ochori, a nation great amongst all nations, must I go down to the coast like a dog or like the headman of a fisher-village?"

He paused dramatically, and there was a faint—a very faint—murmur which he might interpret as an expression of his people's wish that he should travel in a state bordering upon magnificence.

Faint indeed was that murmur, because there was a hint of taxation in the business, a promise of levies to be extracted from an unwilling peasantry; a suggestion of lazy men leaving the comfortable shade of their huts to hurry perspiring in the forest that gum and rubber and similar offerings should be laid at the complacent feet of their overlord.

Bosambo heard the murmur and marked its horrid lack of heartiness and was in no sense put out of countenance.

"As you say," said he approvingly, "it is proper that I should journey to my lord and to the strange people beyond the coast—to the land where even slaves wear trousers—carrying with me most wonderful presents that the name of the Ochori shall be as thunder upon the waters and even great kings shall speak in pride of you," he paused again.

Now it was a dead silence which greeted his peroration. Notably unenthusiastic was this gathering, twiddling its toes and blandly avoiding his eye. Two moons before he had extracted something more than his tribute—a tribute which was the prerogative of government.

Yet then, as Notiki said under his breath, or openly, or by innuendo as the sentiment of his company demanded, four and twenty canoes laden with the fruits of taxation had come to the Ochori city, and five only of those partly filled had paddled down to headquarters to carry the Ochori tribute to the overlord of the land.

"I will bring back with me new things," said Bosambo enticingly; "strange devil boxes, large magics which will entrance you, things that no common man has seen, such as I and Sandi alone know in all this land. Go now, I tell thee, to your people in this country, telling them all that I have spoken to you, and when the moon is in a certain quarter they will come in joy bearing presents in both hands, and these ye shall bring to me."

"But, lord!" it was the bold Notiki who stood in protest, "what shall happen to such of us headmen who come without gifts in our hands for your lordship, saying 'Our people are stubborn and will give nothing'?"

"Who knows?" was all the satisfaction he got from Bosambo, with the additional significant hint, "I shall not blame you, knowing that it is not because of your fault but because your people do not love you, and because they desire another chief over them. The palaver is finished."

Finished it was, so far as Bosambo was concerned. He called a council of his headmen that night in his hut.

Bosambo made his preparations at leisure. There was much to avoid before he took his temporary farewell of the tribe. Not the least to be counted amongst those things to be done was the extraction, to its uttermost possibility, of the levy which he had quite improperly instituted.

And of the things to avoid, none was more urgent or called for greater thought than the necessity for so timing his movements that he did not come upon Sanders or drift within the range of his visible and audible influence.

Here fortune may have been with Bosambo, but it is more likely that he had carefully thought out every detail of his scheme. Sanders at the moment was collecting hut tax along the Kisai river and there was also, as Bosambo well knew, a murder trial of great complexity waiting for his decision at Ikan. A headman was suspected of murdering his chief wife, and the only evidence against him was that of the under wives to whom she displayed much hauteur and arrogance.

The people of the Ochori might be shocked at the exorbitant demands which their lord put upon them, but they were too wise to deny him his wishes. There had been a time in the history of the Ochori when demands were far heavier, and made with great insolence by a people who bore the reputation of being immensely fearful. It had come to be a by-word of the people when they discussed their lord with greater freedom than he could have wished, the tyranny of Bosambo was better than the tyranny of Akasava.

Amongst the Ochori chiefs, greater and lesser, only one was conspicuous by his failure to carry proper offerings to his lord. When all the gifts were laid on sheets of native cloth in the great space before Bosambo's hut, Notiki's sheet was missing and with good reason as he sent his son to explain.

"Lord," said this youth, lank and wild, "my father has collected for you many beautiful things, such as gum and rubber and the teeth of elephants. Now he would have brought these and laid them at your lovely feet, but the roads through the forest are very evil, and there have been floods in the northern country and he cannot pass the streams. Also the paths through the forest are thick and tangled and my father fears for his carriers."

Bosambo looked at him, thoughtfully.

"Go back to your father, N'gobi," he said gently, "and tell him that though there come no presents from him to me, I, his master and chief, knowing he loves me, understand all things well."

N'gobi brightened visibly. He had been ready to bolt, understanding something of Bosambo's dexterity with a stick and fearing that the chief would loose upon him the vengeance his father had called down upon his own hoary head.

"Of the evil roads I know," said Bosambo; "now this you shall say to your father: Bosambo the chief goes away from this city and upon a long journey; for two moons he will be away doing the business of his cousin and friend Sandi. And when my lord Bim-bi has bitten once at the third moon I will come back and I will visit your father. But because the roads are bad," he went on, "and the floods come even in this dry season," he said significantly, "and the forest is so entangled that he cannot bring his presents, sending only the son of his wife to me, he shall make against my coming such a road as shall be in width, the distance between the King's hut and the hut of the King's wife; and he shall clear from this road all there are of trees, and he shall bridge the strong stream and dig pits for the floods. And to this end he shall take every man of his kingdom and set them to labour, and as they work they shall sing a song which goes:

"We are doing Notiki's work,
The work Notiki set us to do,
Rather than send to the lord his King
The presents which Bosambo demanded.

"The palaver is finished."

This is the history, or the beginning of the history, of the straight road which cuts through the heart of the Ochori country from the edge of the river by the cataracts, even to the mountains of the great King, a road famous throughout Africa and imperishably associated with Bosambo's name—this by the way.

On the first day following the tax palaver Bosambo went down the river with four canoes, each canoe painted beautifully with camwood and gum, and with twenty-four paddlers.

It was by a fluke that he missed Sanders. As it happened, the Commissioner had come back to the big river to collect the evidence of the murdered woman's brother who was a petty headman of an Isisi fishing village. The *Zaire* came into the river almost as the last of Bosambo's canoes went round the bend out of sight, and since a legend existed on the river, a legend for the inception of which Bosambo himself was mainly responsible, that he was in some way related to Mr. Commissioner Sanders, no man spoke of Bosambo's passing.

The chief came to headquarters on the third day after his departure from his city. His subsequent movements are somewhat obscure, even to Sanders, who has been at some pains to trace them.

It is known that he drew a hundred and fifty pounds in English gold from Sanders' storekeeper—he had piled up a fairly extensive credit during the years of his office—that he embarked with one headman and his wife on a coasting boat due for Sierra Leone, and that from that city came a long-winded demand in Arabic by a ragged messenger for a further instalment of one hundred pounds. Sanders heard the news on his return to headquarters and was a little worried.

"I wonder if the devil is going to desert his people?" he said.

Hamilton the Houssa laughed.

"He is more likely to desert his people than to desert a balance of four hundred pounds which now stands to his credit here," he said. "Bosambo has felt the call of civilization. I suppose he ought to have secured your permission to leave his territory?"

"He has given his people work to keep them busy," Sanders said a little gravely. "I have had a passionate protest from Notiki, one of his chiefs in the north. Bosambo has set him to build a road through the forest, and Notiki objects."

The two men were walking across the yellow parade ground past the Houssas hut in the direction of headquarters' bungalow.

"What about your murderer?" asked Hamilton, after a while, as they mounted the broad wooden steps which led to the bungalow stoep.

Sanders shook his head.

"Everybody lied," he said briefly. "I can do no less than send the man to the Village. I could have hung him on clear evidence, but the lady seemed to have been rather unpopular and the murderer quite a person to be commended in the eyes of the public. The devil of it is," he said as he sank into his big chair with a sigh, "that had I hanged him it would not have been necessary to write three foolscap sheets of report. I dislike these domestic murderers intensely—give me a ravaging brigand with the hands of all people against him."

"You'll have one if you don't touch wood," said Hamilton seriously.

Hamilton came of Scottish stock—and the Scots are notorious prophets.

II

Now the truth may be told of Bosambo, and all his movements may be explained by this revelation of his benevolence. In the silence of his hut had he planned his schemes. In the dark aisles of the forests, under starless skies when his fellow-huntsmen lay deep in the sleep which the innocent and the barbarian alone enjoy; in drowsy moments when he sat dispensing justice, what time litigants had droned monotonously he had perfected his scheme.

Imagination is the first fruit of civilization and when the reverend fathers of the coast taught Bosambo certain magics, they were also implanting in him the ability to picture possibilities, and shape from his knowledge of human affairs the eventual consequences of his actions. This is imagination somewhat elaborately and clumsily defined.

To one person only had Bosambo unburdened himself of his schemes.

In the privacy of his great hut he had sat with his wife, a steaming dish of fish between them, for however lax Bosambo might be, his wife was an earnest follower of the Prophet and would tolerate no such abomination as the flesh of the cloven-hoofed goat.

He had told her many things.

"Light of my heart," said he, "our lord Sandi is my father and my mother, a giver of riches, and a plentiful provider of pence. Now it seems to me, that though he is a just man and great, having neither fear of his enemies nor soft words for his friends, yet the lords of his land who live so very far away do him no honour."

"Master," said the woman quietly, "is it no honour that he should be placed as a king over us?"

Bosambo beamed approvingly.

"Thou hast spoken the truth, oh my beloved!" said he, in the extravagance of his admiration. "Yet I know much of the white folk, for I have lived along this coast from Dacca to Mossomedes. Also I have sailed to a far place called Madagascar, which is on the other side of the world, and I know the way of white folk. Even in Benguella there is a governor who is not so great as Sandi, and about his breast are all manner of shining stars that glitter most beautifully in the sun, and he wears ribbons about him and bright coloured sashes and swords." He wagged his finger impressively. "Have I not said that he is not so great as Sandi. When saw you my lord with stars or cross or sash or a sword?"

"Also at Decca, where the Frenchi live. At certain places in the Togo, which is Allamandi,¹ I have seen men with this same style of ornaments, for thus it is that the white folk do honour to their kind."

He was silent a long time and his brown-eyed wife looked at him curiously.

"Yet what can you do, my lord?" she asked. "Although you are very powerful, and Sandi loves you, this is certain, that none will listen to *you* and do honour to Sandi at your word—though I do not know the ways of the white people, yet of this I am sure."

Again Bosambo's large mouth stretched from ear to ear, and his two rows of white teeth gleamed pleasantly.

"You are as the voice of wisdom and the very soul of cleverness," he said, "for you speak that which is true. Yet I know ways, for I am very cunning and wise, being a holy man and acquainted with blessed apostles such as Paul and the blessed Peter, who had his ear cut off because a certain dancing woman desired it. Also by magic it was put on again because he could not hear the cocks crow. All this and similar things I have here." He touched his forehead.

Wise woman that she was, she had made no attempt to pry into her husband's business, but spent the days preparing for the journey, she and the nut-brown sprawling child of immense girth, who was the apple of Bosambo's eye.

¹ Allamandi—German territory.

So Bosambo had passed down the river as has been described, and four days after he left there disappeared from the Ochori village ten brothers in blood of his, young hunting men who had faced all forms of death for the very love of it, and these vanished from the land and none knew where they went save that they did not follow on their master's trail.

Tukili, the chief of the powerful eastern island Isisi, or, as it is contemptuously called, the N'gombi-Isisi by the riverain folk, went hunting one day, and ill fortune led him to the border of the Ochori country. Ill fortune was it for one Fimili, a straight maid of fourteen, beautiful by native standard, who was in the forest searching for roots which were notorious as a cure for "boils" which distressed her unamiable father.

Tukili saw the girl and desired her, and that which Tukili desired he took. She offered little opposition to being carried away to the Isisi city when she discovered that her life would be spared, and possibly was no worse off in the harem of Tukili than she would have been in the hut of the poor fisherman for whom her father had designed her. A few years before, such an incident would have passed almost unnoticed.

The Ochori were so used to being robbed of women and of goats, so meek in their acceptance of wrongs that would have set the spears of any other nation shining, that they would have accepted the degradation and preserved a sense of thankfulness that the robber had limited his raiding to one girl, and that a maid. But with the coming of Bosambo there had arrived a new spirit in the Ochori. They had learnt their strength, incidentally they had learnt their rights. The father of the girl went hot-foot to his over-chief, Notiki, and covered himself with ashes at the door of the chief's hut.

"This is a bad palaver," said Notiki, "and since Bosambo has deserted us and is making our marrows like water that we should build him a road, and there is none in this land whom I may call chief or who may speak with authority, it seems by my age and by relationship to the kings of this land, I must do that which is desirable."

So he gathered together two thousand men who were working on the road and were very pleased indeed to carry something lighter than rocks and felled trees, and with these spears he marched into the Isisi forest, burning and slaying whenever he came upon a little village which offered no opposition. Thus he took to himself the air and title of conqueror with as little excuse as a flamboyant general ever had.

Had it occurred on the river, this warlike expedition must have attracted the attention of Sanders. The natural roadway of the territory is a waterway. It is only when operations are begun against the internal tribes who inhabit the bush, and whose armies can move under the cloak of the forest (and none wiser) that Sanders found himself at a disadvantage.

Tukili himself heard nothing of the army that was being led against him until it was within a day's march of his gates. Then he sallied forth with a force skilled in warfare and practised in the hunt. The combat lasted exactly ten minutes and all that was left of Notiki's spears made the best of their way homeward, avoiding, as far as possible, those villages which they had visited en route with such disastrous results to the unfortunate inhabitants.

Now it is impossible that one conqueror shall be sunk to oblivion without his victor claiming for himself the style of his victim. Tukili had defeated his adversary, and Tukili was no exception to the general rule, and from being a fairly well-disposed king, amiable—too amiable as we have shown—and kindly, and just, he became of a sudden a menace to all that part of Sanders' territory which lies between the French land and the river.

It was such a situation as this as only Bosambo might deal with, and Sanders heartily cursed his absent chief and might have cursed him with greater fervour had he had an inkling of the mission to which Bosambo had appointed himself.

III

His Excellency the Administrator of the period had his office at a prosperous city of stone which we will call Koombooli, though that is not its name.

He was a stout, florid man, patient and knowledgeable. He had been sent to clear up the mess which two incompetent administrators made, who had owed their position rather to the constant appearance of their friends and patrons in the division lobbies than to their acquaintance with the native mind, and it is eloquent of the regard in which His Excellency was held that, although he was a Knight Commander of St. Michael and St. George, a Companion of a Victorian Order, a Commander of the Bath, and the son of a noble house, he was known familiarly along the coast to all administrators, commissioners, even to the deputy inspectors, as "Bob."

Bosambo came to the presence with an inward quaking. In a sense he had absconded from his trust, and he did not doubt that Sanders had made all men acquainted with the suddenness and the suspicious character of his disappearance.

And the first words of His Excellency the Administrator confirmed all Bosambo's worst fears.

"O! chief," said Sir Robert with a little twinkle in his eye, "are you so fearful of your people that you run away from them?"

"Mighty master," answered Bosambo, humbly, "I do not know fear, for as your honour may have heard, I am a very brave man, fearing nothing save my lord Sanders' displeasure."

A ghost of a smile played about the corners of Sir Robert's mouth.

"That you have earned, my friend," said he. "Now you shall tell me why you came away secretly, also why you desired this palaver with me. And do not lie, Bosambo," he said, "for I am he who hung three chiefs on Gallows Hill above Grand Bassam because they spoke falsely."

This was one of the fictions which was current on the coast, and was implicitly believed in by the native population. The truth will be recounted at another time, but it is sufficient to say that Bosambo was one of those who did not doubt the authenticity of the legend.

"Now I will speak to you, O my lord," he said earnestly, "and I speak by all oaths, both the oaths of my own people—"

"Spare me the oaths of the Kroo folk," protested Sir Robert, and raised a warning hand.

"Then by Markie and Lukie will I swear," said Bosambo, fervently; "those fine fellows of whom Your Excellency knows. I have sat long in the country of the Ochori, and I have ruled wisely according to my abilities. And over me at all times was Sandi, who was a father to his people and so beautiful of mind and countenance that when he came to us even the dead folk would rise up to speak to him. This is a miracle," said Bosambo profoundly but cautiously, "which I have heard but which I have not seen. Now this I ask you who see all things, and here is the puzzle which I will set to your honour. If Sandi is so great and so wise, and is so loved by the greater King, how comes it that he stays for ever in one place, having no beautiful stars about his neck nor wonderful ribbons around his stomach such as the great Frenchman—and the great Allamandi men, and even the Portuguesi men wear who are honoured by their kings?"

It was a staggering question, and Sir Robert Sanleigh sat up and stared at the solemn face of the man before him.

Bosambo, an unromantic figure in trousers, jacket, and shirt—he was collarless—had thrust his hands deeply into unaccustomed pockets, ignorant of the disrespect which such an attitude displayed, and was staring back at the Administrator.

"O! chief," asked the puzzled Sir Robert, "this is a strange palaver you make—who gave you these ideas?"

"Lord, none gave me this idea save my own bright mind," said Bosambo. "Yes, many nights have I laid thinking of these things for I am just and I have faith."

His Excellency kept his unwavering eye upon the other. He had heard of Bosambo, knew him as an original, and at this moment was satisfied in his own mind of the other's sincerity.

A smaller man than he, his predecessor for example, might have dismissed the preposterous question as an impertinence and given the questioner short shrift. But Sir Robert understood his native.

"These are things too high for me, Bosambo," he said. "What dog am I that I should question the mind of my lords? In their wisdom they give honour and they punish. It is written."

Bosambo nodded.

"Yet, lord," he persisted, "my own cousin who sweeps your lordship's stables told me this morning that on the days of big palavers you also have stars and beautiful things upon your breast, and noble ribbons about your lordship's stomach. Now your honour shall tell me by whose favour these things come about."

Sir Robert chuckled.

"Bosambo," he said solemnly, "they gave these things to me because I am an old man. Now when your lord Sandi becomes old these honours also will he receive."

He saw Bosambo's face fall and went on:

"Also much may happen that will bring Sandi to their lordships' eyes, they who sit above us. Some great deed that he may do, some high service he may offer to his king. All these happenings bring nobility and honour. Now," he went on kindly, "go back to your people, remembering that I shall think of you and of Sandi, and that I shall know that you came because of your love for him, and that on a day which is written I will send a book to my masters speaking well of Sandi, for his sake and for the sake of the people who love him. The palaver is finished."

Bosambo went out of the Presence a dissatisfied man, passed through the hall where a dozen commissioners and petty chiefs were waiting audience, skirted the great white building and came in time to his own cousin, who swept the stables of His Excellency the Administrator. And here, in the coolness of the stone-walled mews, he learnt much about the Administrator; little tit-bits of information which were unlikely to be published in the official gazette. Also he acquired a considerable amount of data concerning the giving of honours, and after a long examination and cross-examination of his wearied relative he left him as dry as a sucked orange, but happy in the possession of a new five-shilling piece which Bosambo had magnificently pressed upon him, and which subsequently proved to be bad.

IV

By the River of Spirits is a deep forest which stretches back and back in a dense and chaotic tangle of strangled sapling and parasitic weed to the edge of the Pigmy forest. No man—white or brown or black—has explored the depth of the Forbidden Forest, for here the wild beasts have their lairs and rear their young; and here are mosquito in dense clouds. Moreover, and this is important, a certain potent ghost named Bim-bi stalks restlessly from one border of the forest to the other. Bim-bi is older than the sun and more terrible than any other ghost. For he feeds on the moon, and at nights you may see how the edge of the desert world is bitten by his great mouth until it becomes, first, the half of a moon, then the merest slither, and then no moon at all. And on the very dark nights, when the gods are hastily making him a new meal, the ravenous Bim-bi calls to his need the stars; and you may watch, as every little boy of the Akasava has watched, clutching his father's hand tightly in his fear, the hot rush of meteors across the velvet sky to the rapacious and open jaws of Bim-bi.

He was a ghost respected by all peoples—Akasava, Ochori, Isisi, N'gombi, and Bush folk. By the Bolengi, the Bomongo, and even the distant Upper Congo people feared him. Also all the chiefs for generations upon generations had sent tribute of corn and salt to the edge of the forest for his propitiation, and it is a legend that when the Isisi fought the Akasava in the great war, the envoy of the Isisi was admitted without molestation to the enemy's lines in order to lay an offering at Bim-bi's feet. Only one man in the world, so far as the People of the River know, has ever spoken slightly of Bim-bi, and that man was Bosambo of the Ochori, who had no respect for any ghosts save of his own creation.

It is the custom on the Akasava district to hold a ghost palaver to which the learned men of all tribes are invited, and the palaver takes place in the village of Ookos by the edge of the forest.

On a certain day in the year of the floods and when Bosambo was gone a month from his land, there came messengers chance-found and walking in terror to all the principal cities and villages of the Akasava, of the Isisi, and of the N'gombi-Isisi carrying this message:

"Mimbimi, son of Simbo Sako, son of Ogi, has opened his house to his friends
on the night when Bim-bi has swallowed the moon."

A summons to such a palaver in the second name of Bim-bi was not one likely to be ignored, but a summons from Mimbimi was at least to be wondered at and to be speculated upon, for Mimbimi was an unknown quantity, though some gossips professed to know him as the chief of one of the Nomadic tribes which ranged the heart of the forest, preying on Akasava and Isisi with equal discrimination. But these gossips were of a mind not peculiar to any nationality or to any colour. They were those jealous souls who either could not or would not confess that they were ignorant on the topic of the moment.

Be he robber chief, or established by law and government, this much was certain. Mimbimi had called for his secret palaver and the most noble and arrogant of chiefs must obey, even though the obedience spelt disaster for the daring man who had summoned them to conference.

Tuligini, a victorious captain, not lightly to be summoned, might have ignored the invitation, but for the seriousness of his eldersmen, who, versed in the conventions of Bim-bi and those who invoked his name, stood aghast at the mere suggestion that this palaver should be ignored. Tuligini demanded, and with reason:

"Who was this who dare call the vanquisher of Bosambo to a palaver? for am I not the great buffalo of the forest? and do not all men bow down to me in fear?"

"Lord, you speak the truth," said his trembling councillor, "yet this is a ghost palaver and all manner of evils come to those who do not obey."

Sanders, through his spies, heard of the summons in the name of Bim-bi, and was a little troubled. There was nothing too small to be serious in the land over which he ruled.

As for instance: Some doubt existed in the Lesser N'gombi country as to whether teeth filed to a point were more becoming than teeth left as Nature placed them. Tombini, the chief of N'gombi, held the view that Nature's way was best, whilst B'limbini, his cousin, was the chief exponent of the sharpened form.

It took two battalions of King Coast Rifles, half a battery of artillery and Sanders to settle the question, which became a national one.

"I wish Bosambo were to the devil before he left his country," said Sanders, irritably. "I should feel safe if that oily villain was sitting in the Ochori."

"What is the trouble?" asked Hamilton, looking up from his task—he was making cigarettes with a new machine which somebody had sent him from home.

"An infernal Bim-bi palaver," said Sanders; "the last time that happened, if I remember rightly, I had to burn crops on the right bank of the river for twenty miles to bring the Isisi to a sense of their unimportance."

"You will be able to burn crops on the left side this time," said Hamilton, cheerfully, his nimble fingers twiddling the silver rollers of his machine.

"I thought I had the country quiet," said Sanders, a little bitterly, "and at this moment I especially wanted it so."

"Why at this particular moment?" asked the other in surprise.

Sanders took out of the breast pocket of his uniform jacket a folded paper, and passed it across the table.

Hamilton read:

"Sir,—I have the honour to inform you that the Rt. Hon. Mr. James Bolzer, his Majesty's Secretary of State for the Colonies, is expected to arrive at your station on the thirtieth inst. I trust you will give the Right Honourable gentleman every facility for studying on the spot the problems upon which he is such an authority. I have to request you to instruct all Sub-Commissioners, Inspectors, and Officers commanding troops in your division to make adequate arrangements for Mr. Bolzer's comfort and protection.

"I have the honour to be, etc."

Hamilton read the letter twice.

"To study on the spot those questions upon which he is such an authority," he repeated. He was a sarcastic devil when he liked.

"The thirtieth is to-morrow," Hamilton went on, "and I suppose I am one of the officers commanding troops who must school my ribald soldiery in the art of protecting the Rt. Hon. gent."

"To be exact," said Sanders, "you are the only officer commanding troops in the territory; do what you can. You wouldn't believe it," he smiled a little shamefacedly, "I had applied for six months' leave when this came."

"Good Lord!" said Hamilton, for somehow he never associated Sanders with holidays.

What Hamilton did was very simple, because Hamilton always did things in the manner which gave him the least trouble. A word to his orderly conveyed across the parade ground, roused the sleepy bugler of the guard, and the air was filled with the "Assembly." Sixty men of the Houssas paraded in anticipation of a sudden call northwards.

"My children," said Hamilton, whiffing his pliant cane, "soon there will come here a member of government who knows nothing. Also he may stray into the forest and lose himself as the bridegroom's cow strays from the field of his father-in-law, not knowing his new surroundings. Now it is to you we look for his safety—I and the government. Also Sandi, our lord. You shall not let this

stranger out of your sight, nor shall you allow approach him any such evil men as the N'gombi iron sellers or the fishing men of N'gar or makers of wooden charms, for the government has said this man must not be robbed, but must be treated well, and you of the guard shall all salute him, also, when the time arrives."

Hamilton meant no disrespect in his graphic illustration. He was dealing with a simple people who required vivid word-pictures to convince them. And certainly they found nothing undignified in the right honourable gentleman when he arrived next morning.

He was above the medium height, somewhat stout, very neat and orderly, and he twirled a waxed moustache, turning grey. He had heavy and bilious eyes, and a certain pompousness of manner distinguished him. Also an effervescent geniality which found expression in shaking hands with anybody who happened to be handy, in mechanically agreeing with all views that were put before him and immediately afterwards contradicting them; in a painful desire to be regarded as popular. In fact, in all the things which got immediately upon Sanders' nerves, this man was a sealed pattern of a bore.

He wanted to know things, but the things he wanted to know were of no importance, and the information he extracted could not be of any assistance to him. His mind was largely occupied in such vital problems as what happened to the brooms which the Houssas used to keep their quarters clean when they were worn out, and what would be the effect of an increased ration of lime juice upon the morals and discipline of the troops under Hamilton's command. Had he been less of a trial Sanders would not have allowed him to go into the interior without a stronger protest. As it was, Sanders had turned out of his own bedroom, and had put all his slender resources at the disposal of the Cabinet Minister (taking his holiday, by the way, during the long recess), and had wearied himself in order to reach some subject of interest where he and his guest could meet on common ground.

"I shall have to let him go," he said to Hamilton, when the two had met one night after Mr. Blowter had retired to bed, "I spent the whole of this afternoon discussing the comparative values of mosquito nets, and he is such a perfect ass that you cannot snub him. If he had only had the sense to bring a secretary or two he would have been easier to handle."

Hamilton laughed.

"When a man like that travels," he said, "he ought to bring somebody who knows the ways and habits of the animal. I had a bright morning with him going into the question of boots."

"But what of Mimbimi?"

"Mimbimi is rather a worry to me. I do not know him at all," said Sanders with a puzzled frown. "Ahmet, the spy, has seen one of the chiefs who attended the palaver, which apparently was very impressive. Up to now nothing has happened which would justify a movement against him; the man is possibly from the French Congo."

"Any news of Bosambo?" asked Hamilton.

Sanders shook his head.

"So far as I can learn," he said grimly, "he has gone on *Cape Coast Castle* for a real aboriginal jag. There will be trouble for Bosambo when he comes back."

"What a blessing it would be now," sighed Hamilton, "if we could turn old man Blowter into his tender keeping." And the men laughed simultaneously.

V

There was a time, years and years ago, when the Ochori people set a great stake on the edge of the forest by the Mountain. This they smeared with a paint made by the admixture of camwood and copal gum.

It was one of the few intelligent acts which may be credited to the Ochori in those dull days, for the stake stood for danger. It marked the boundary of the N'gombi lands beyond which it was undesirable that any man of the Ochori should go.

It was not erected without consideration. A palaver which lasted from the full of one moon to the waning of the next, sacrifices of goats and sprinkling of blood, divinations, incantations, readings of devil marks on sandy foreshores; all right and proper ceremonies were gone through before there came a night of bright moonlight when the whole Ochori nation went forth and planted that post.

Then, I believe, the people of the Ochori, having invested the post with qualities which it did not possess, went back to their homes and forgot all about it. Yet if they forgot there were nations who regarded the devil sign with some awe, and certainly Mimbimi, the newly-arisen ranger of the forest, who harried the Akasava and the Isisi, and even the N'gombi-Isisi, must have had full faith in its potency, for he never moved beyond that border. Once, so legend said, he brought his terrible warriors to the very edge of the land and paid homage to the innocent sign-post which Sanders had set up and which announced no more, in plain English, than trespassers will be prosecuted. Having done his *devoir* he retired to his forest lair. His operations were not to go without an attempted reprisal. Many parties went out against him, notably that which Tumbilimi the chief of Isisi led. He took a hundred picked men to avenge the outrage which this intruder had put upon him in daring to summons him to palaver.

Now Sugini was an arrogant man, for had he not routed the army of Bosambo? That Bosambo was not in command made no difference and did not tarnish the prestige in Tumbilimi's eyes, and though the raids upon his territory by Mimbimi had been mild, the truculent chief, disdaining the use of his full army, marched with his select column to bring in the head and the feet of the man who had dared violate his territory.

Exactly what happened to Tumbilimi's party is not known; all the men who escaped from the ambush in which Mimbimi lay give a different account, and each account creditable to themselves, though the only thing which stands in their favour is that they did certainly save their lives. Certainly Tumbilimi, he of the conquering spears, came back no more, and those parts which he had threatened to detach from his enemy were in fact detached from him and were discovered one morning at the very gates of his city for his horrified subjects to marvel at. When warlike discussions arose, as they did at infrequent intervals, it was the practice of the people to send complaints to Sanders and leave him to deal with the matter. You cannot, however, lead an army against a dozen guerrilla chiefs with any profit to the army as we once discovered in a country somewhat south of Sanders' domains. Had Mimbimi's sphere of operations been confined to the river Sanders would have laid him by the heels quickly enough, because the river brigand is easy to catch since he would starve in the forest, and if he took to the bush would certainly come back to the gleaming water for very life.

But here was a forest man obviously, who needed no river for himself, but was content to wait watchfully in the dim recesses of the woods.

Sanders sent three spies to locate him, and gave his attention to the more immediate problem of his Right Honourable guest. Mr. Joseph Blowter had decided to make a trip into the interior and the *Zaire* had been placed at his disposal. A heaven-sent riot in the bushland, sixty miles west of the Residency, had relieved both Sanders and Hamilton from the necessity of accompanying the visitor, and he departed by steamer with a bodyguard of twenty armed Houssas; more than sufficient in these peaceful times.

"What about Mimbimi?" asked Hamilton under his breath as they stood on a little concrete quay, and watched the *Zaire* beating out to midstream.

"Mimbimi is evidently a bushman," said Sanders briefly. "He will not come to the river. Besides, he is giving the Ochori a wide berth, and it is to the Ochori that our friend is going. I cannot see how he can possibly dump himself into mischief."

Nevertheless, as a matter of precaution, Sanders telegraphed to the Administration not only the departure, but the precautions he had taken for the safety of the Minister, and the fact that neither he nor Hamilton were accompanying him on his tour of inspection "to study on the spot those problems with which he was so well acquainted."

"O.K." flashed Bob across the wires, and that was sufficient for Sanders. Of Mr. Blowter's adventures it is unnecessary to tell in detail. How he mistook every village for a city, and every city for a nation, of how he landed wherever he could and spoke long and eloquently on the blessing of civilization, and the glories of the British flag—all this through an interpreter—of how he went into the question of basket-making and fly-fishing, and of how he demonstrated to the fishermen of the little river a method of catching fish by fly, and how he did not catch anything. All these matters might be told in great detail with no particular credit to the subject of the monograph.

In course of time he came to the Ochori land and was welcomed by Notiki, who had taken upon himself, on the strength of his rout, the position of chieftainship. This he did with one eye on the river, ready to bolt the moment Bosambo's canoe came sweeping round the bend.

Now Sanders had particularly warned Mr. Blowter that under no circumstances should he sleep ashore. He gave a variety of reasons, such as the prevalence of Beri-Beri, the insidious spread of sleeping sickness, the irritation of malaria-bearing mosquitoes, and of other insects which it would be impolite to mention in the pages of a family journal.

But Notiki had built a new hut as he said especially for his guest, and Mr. Blowter, no doubt, honoured by the attention which was shown to him, broke the restricting rule that Sanders had laid down, quitted the comfortable cabin which had been his home on the river journey, and slept in the novel surroundings of a native hut.

How long he slept cannot be told; he was awakened by a tight hand grasping his throat, and a fierce voice whispering into his ear something which he rightly understood to be an admonition, a warning and a threat.

At any rate, he interpreted it as a request on the part of his captor that he should remain silent, and to this Mr. Blowter in a blue funk passively agreed. Three men caught him and bound him deftly with native rope, a gag was put into his mouth, and he was dragged cautiously through a hole which the intruders had cut in the walls of Notiki's dwelling of honour. Outside the hut door was a Houssa sentry and it must be confessed that he was not awake at the moment of Mr. Blowter's departure.

His captors spirited him by back ways to the river, dumped him into a canoe and paddled with frantic haste to the other shore.

They grounded their canoe, pulled him—inwardly quaking—to land, and hurried him to the forest. On their way they met a huntsman who had been out overnight after a leopard, and in the dark of the dawn the chief of those who had captured Mr. Blowter addressed the startled man.

"Go you to the city of Ochori," he said, "and say 'Mimbimi, the high chief who is lord of the forest of Bim-bi, sends word that he has taken the fat white lord to his keeping, and he shall hold him for his pleasure.'"

VI

It would appear from all the correspondence which was subsequently published that Sanders had particularly warned Mr. Blowter against visiting the interior, that Sir Robert, that amiable man, had also expressed a warning, and that the august Government itself had sent a long and expensive telegram from Downing Street suggesting that a trip to the Ochori country was inadvisable in the present state of public feeling.

The hasty disposition on the part of certain Journals to blame Mr. Commissioner Sanders and his immediate superior for the kidnapping of so important a person as a Cabinet Minister was obviously founded upon an ignorance of the circumstances.

Yet Sanders felt himself at fault, as a conscientious man always will, if he has had the power to prevent a certain happening.

Those loyal little servants of Government, carrier pigeons—went fluttering east, south and north, a missionary steamer was hastily requisitioned, and Sanders embarked for the scene of the disappearance.

Before he left he telegraphed to every likely coast town for Bosambo.

"If that peregrinating devil had not left his country this would not have happened," said Sanders irritably; "he must come back and help me find the lost one."

Before any answer could come to his telegrams he had embarked, and it is perhaps as well that he did not wait, since none of the replies were particularly satisfactory. Bosambo was evidently un-get-at-able, and the most alarming rumour of all was that which came from Sierra Leone and was to the effect that Bosambo had embarked for England with the expressed intention of seeking an interview with a very high personage indeed.

Now it is the fact that had Sanders died in the execution of his duty, died either from fever or as the result of scientific torturing at the hands of Akasava braves, less than a couple of lines in the London Press would have paid tribute to the work he had done or the terrible manner of his passing.

But a Cabinet Minister, captured by a cannibal tribe, offers in addition to alliterative possibilities in the headline department, a certain novelty particularly appealing to the English reader who loves above all things to have a shock or two with his breakfast bacon. England was shocked to its depths by the unusual accident which had occurred to the Right Honourable gentleman, partly because it is unusual for Cabinet Ministers to find themselves in a cannibal's hands, and partly because Mr. Blowter himself occupied a very large place in the eye of the public at home. For the first time in its history the eyes of the world were concentrated on Sanders' territory, and the Press of the world devoted important columns to dealing not only with the personality of the man who had been stolen, because they knew him well, but more or less inaccurately with the man who was charged with his recovery.

They also spoke of Bosambo "now on his way to England," and it is a fact that a small fleet of motor-boats containing pressmen awaited the incoming coast mail at Plymouth only to discover that their man was not on board.

Happily, Sanders was in total ignorance of the stir which the disappearance created. He knew, of course, that there would be talk about it, and had gloomy visions of long reports to be written. He would have felt happier in his mind if he could have identified Mimbimi with any of the wandering chiefs he had met or had known from time to time. Mimbimi was literally a devil he did not know.

Nor could any of the cities or villages which had received a visitation give the Commissioner more definite data than he possessed. Some there were who said that Mimbimi was a tall man, very thin, knobbly at the knees, and was wounded in the foot, so that he limped. Others that he was short and very ugly, with a large head and small eyes, and that when he spoke it was in a voice of thunder.

Sanders wasted no time in useless inquiries. He threw a cloud of spies and trackers into the forest of Bim-bi and began a scientific search; snatching a few hours sleep whenever the opportunity offered. But though the wings of his beaters touched the border line of the Ochori on the right and the Isisi on the left, and though he passed through places which hitherto had been regarded as impenetrable on account of divers devils, yet he found no trace of the cunning kidnapper, who, if the truth be told, had broken through the lines in the night, dragging an unwilling and exasperated member of the British Government at the end of a rope fastened about his person.

Then messages began to reach Sanders, long telegrams sent up from headquarters by swift canoe or rewritten on paper as fine as cigarette paper and sent in sections attached to the legs of pigeons.

They were irritating, hectoring, worrying, frantic messages. Not only from the Government, but from the kidnapped man's friends and relatives; for it seemed that this man had accumulated, in addition to a great deal of unnecessary information, quite a large and respectable family circle. Hamilton came up with a reinforcement of Houssas without achieving any notable result.

"He has disappeared as if the ground had opened and swallowed him," said Sanders bitterly. "O! Mimbimi, if I could have you now," he said with passionate intensity.

"I am sure you would be very rude to him," said Hamilton soothingly. "He must be somewhere, my dear chap; do you think he has killed the poor old bird?"

Sanders shook his head.

"The lord knows what he has done or what has happened to him," he said.

It was at that moment that the messenger came. The *Zaire* was tied to the bank of the Upper Isisi on the edge of the forest of Bim-bi, and the Houssas were bivouacked on the bank, their red fires gleaming in the gathering darkness.

The messenger came from the forest boldly; he showed no fear of Houssas, but walked through their lines, waving his long stick as a bandmaster will flourish his staff. And when the sentry on the plank that led to the boat had recovered from the shock of seeing the unexpected apparition, the man was seized and led before the Commissioner.

"O, man," said Sanders, "who are you and where do you come from? Tell me what news you bring."

"Lord," said the man glibly, "I am Mimbimi's own headman."

Sanders jumped up from his chair.

"Mimbimi!" he said quickly; "tell me what message you bring from that thief!"

"Lord," said the man, "he is no thief, but a high prince."

Sanders was peering at him searchingly.

"It seems to me," he said, "that you are of the Ochori."

"Lord, I was of the Ochori," said the messenger, "but now I am with Mimbimi,—his headman, following him through all manners of danger. Therefore I have no people or nation—wa! Lord, here is my message."

Sanders nodded.

"Go on," he said, "messenger of Mimbimi, and let your news be good for me."

"Master," said the man, "I come from the great one of the forest who holds all lives in his two hands, and fears not anything that lives or moves, neither devil nor Bim-bi nor the ghosts that walk by night nor the high dragons in the trees—"

"Get to your message, my man," said Sanders, unpleasantly; "for I have a whip which bites sharper than the dragons in the trees and moves more swiftly than m'shamba."

The man nodded.

"Thus says Mimbimi," he resumed. "Go you to the place near the Crocodile River where Sandi sits, say Mimbimi the chief loves him, and because of his love Mimbimi will do a great thing. Also he said," the man went on, "and this is the greatest message of all. Before I speak further you must make a book of my words."

Sanders frowned. It was an unusual request from a native, for his offer to be set down in writing. "You might take a note of this, Hamilton," he said aside, "though why the deuce he wants a note of this made I cannot for the life of me imagine. Go on, messenger," he said more mildly; "for as you see my lord Hamilton makes a book."

"Thus says my lord Mimbimi," resumed the man, "that because of his love for Sandi he would give you the fat white lord whom he has taken, asking for no rods or salt in repayment, but doing this because of his love for Sandi and also because he is a just and a noble man; therefore do I deliver the fat one into your hands."

Sanders gasped.

"Do you speak the truth?" he asked incredulously.

The man nodded his head.

"Where is the fat lord?" asked Sanders. This was no time for ceremony or for polite euphemistic descriptions even of Cabinet Ministers.

"Master, he is in the forest, less than the length of the village from here, I have tied him to a tree."

Sanders raced across the plank and through the Houssa lines, dragging the messenger by the arm, and Hamilton, with a hastily summoned guard, followed. They found Joseph Blowter tied scientifically to a gum-tree, a wedge of wood in his mouth to prevent him speaking, and he was a terribly unhappy man. Hastily the bonds were loosed, and the gag removed, and the groaning Cabinet Minister led, half carried to the *Zaire*.

He recovered sufficiently to take dinner that night, was full of his adventures, inclined perhaps to exaggerate his peril, pardonably exasperated against the man who had led him through so many dangers, real and imaginary. But, above all things, he was grateful to Sanders.

He acknowledged that he had got into his trouble through no fault of the Commissioner.

"I cannot tell you how sorry I am all this has occurred," said Sanders.

It was after dinner, and Mr. Blowter in a spotless white suit—shaved, looking a little more healthy from his enforced exercise, and certainly considerably thinner, was in the mood to take an amused view of his experience.

"One thing I have learnt, Mr. Sanders," he said, "and that is the extraordinary respect in which you are held in this country. I never spoke of you to this infernal rascal but that he bowed low, and all his followers with him; why, they almost worship you!"

If Mr. Blowter had been surprised by this experience no less surprised was Sanders to learn of it.

"This is news to me," he said dryly.

"That is your modesty, my friend," said the Cabinet Minister with a benign smile. "I, at any rate, appreciate the fact that but for your popularity I should have had short shrift from this murderous blackguard."

He went down stream the next morning, the *Zaire* overcrowded with Houssas.

"I should have liked to have left a party in the forest," said Sanders; "I shall not rest until we get this thief Mimbimi by the ear."

"I should not bother," said Hamilton dryly; "the sobering influence of your name seems to be almost as potent as my Houssas."

"Please do not be sarcastic," said Sanders sharply, he was unduly sensitive on the question of such matters as these. Nevertheless, he was happy at the end of the adventure, though somewhat embarrassed by the telegrams of congratulation which were poured upon him not only from the Administrator but from England.

"If I had done anything to deserve it I would not mind," he said.

"That is the beauty of reward," smiled Hamilton; "if you deserve things you do not get them, if you do not deserve them they come in cartloads, you have to take the thick with the thin. Think of the telegrams which ought to have come and did not."

They took farewell of Mr. Blowter on the beach, the surf-boat waiting to carry him to a mail steamer decorated for the occasion with strings of flags.

"There is one question which I would like to ask you," said Sanders, "and it is one which for some reason I have forgotten to ask before—can you describe Mimbimi to me so that I may locate him? He is quite unknown to us."

Mr. Blowter frowned thoughtfully.

"He is difficult to describe! all natives are alike to me," he said slowly. "He is rather tall, well-made, good-looking for a native, and talkative."

"Talkative!" said Sanders quickly.

"In a way; he can speak a little English," said the Cabinet Minister, "and evidently has some sort of religious training, because he spoke of Mark, and Luke, and the various Apostles as one who had studied possibly at a missionary school."

"Mark and Luke," almost whispered Sanders, a great light dawning upon him. "Thank you very much. I think you said he always bowed when my name was mentioned?"

"Invariably," smiled the Cabinet Minister.

"Thank you, sir." Sanders shook hands.

"O! by the way, Mr. Sanders," said Blowter, turning back from the boat, "I suppose you know that you have been gazetted C.M.G.?"

Sanders flushed red and stammered "C.M.G."

"It is an indifferent honour for one who has rendered such service to the country as you," said the complacent Mr. Blowter profoundly; "but the Government feel that it is the least they can do for you after your unusual effort on my behalf and they have asked me to say to you that they will not be unmindful of your future."

He left Sanders standing as though frozen to the spot.

Hamilton was the first to congratulate him.

"My dear chap, if ever a man deserved the C.M.G. it is you," he said.

It would be absurd to say that Sanders was not pleased. He was certainly not pleased at the method by which it came, but he should have known, being acquainted with the ways of Governments, that this was the reward of cumulative merit. He walked back in silence to the Residency, Hamilton keeping pace by his side.

"By the way, Sanders," he said, "I have just had a pigeon-post from the river—Bosambo is back in the Ochori country. Have you any idea how he arrived there?"

"I think I have," said Sanders, with a grim little smile, "and I think I shall be calling on Bosambo very soon."

But that was a threat he was never destined to put into execution. That same evening came a wire from Bob.

"Your leave is granted: Hamilton is to act as Commissioner in your temporary absence. I am sending Lieutenant Francis Augustus Tibbetts to take charge of Houssas."

"And who the devil is Francis Augustus Tibbetts?" said Sanders and Hamilton with one voice.

CHAPTER I

HAMILTON OF THE HOUSSAS

I

Sanders turned to the rail and cast a wistful glance at the low-lying shore. He saw one corner of the white Residency, showing through the sparse *isisi* palm at the end of the big garden—a smudge of green on yellow from this distance.

"I hate going—even for six months," he said.

Hamilton of the Houssas, with laughter in his blue eyes, and his fumed-oak face—lean and wholesome it was—all a-twitch, whistled with difficulty.

"Oh, yes, I shall come back again," said Sanders, answering the question in the tune. "I hope things will go well in my absence."

"How can they go well?" asked Hamilton, gently. "How can the *Isisi* live, or the *Akasava* sow his barbarous potatoes, or the sun shine, or the river run when *Sandi Sitani* is no longer in the land?"

"I wouldn't have worried," Sanders went on, ignoring the insult, "if they'd put a good man in charge; but to give a pudden-headed soldier—"

"We thank you!" bowed Hamilton.

"—with little or no experience—"

"An insolent lie—and scarcely removed from an unqualified lie!" murmured Hamilton.

"To put him in my place!" apostrophized Sanders, tilting back his helmet the better to appeal to the heavens.

"'Orrible! 'Orrible!" said Hamilton; "and now I seem to catch the accusing eye of the chief officer, which means that he wants me to hop. God bless you, old man!"

His sinewy paw caught the other's in a grip that left both hands numb at the finish.

"Keep well," said Sanders in a low voice, his hand on Hamilton's back, as they walked to the gangway. "Watch the *Isisi* and sit on *Bosambo*—especially *Bosambo*, for he is a mighty slippery devil."

"Leave me to deal with *Bosambo*," said Hamilton firmly, as he skipped down the companion to the big boat that rolled and tumbled under the coarse skin of the ship.

"I *am* leaving you," said Sanders, with a chuckle.

He watched the *Houssa* pick a finnick way to the stern of the boat; saw the solemn faces of his rowmen as they bent their naked backs, gripping their clumsy oars. And to think that they and Hamilton were going back to the familiar life, to the dear full days he knew! Sanders coughed and swore at himself.

"Oh, *Sandi*!" called the headman of the boat, as she went lumbering over the clear green swell, "remember us, your servants!"

"I will remember, man," said Sanders, a-choke, and turned quickly to his cabin.

Hamilton sat in the stern of the surf-boat, humming a song to himself; but he felt awfully solemn, though in his pocket reposed a commission sealed redly and largely on parchment and addressed to: "Our well-beloved Patrick George Hamilton, Lieutenant, of our 133rd 1st Royal Hertford Regiment. Seconded for service in our 9th Regiment of Houssas—Greeting...."

"Master," said his Kroo servant, who waited his landing, "you lib for dem big house?"

"I lib," said Hamilton.

"Dem big house," was the Residency, in which a temporarily appointed Commissioner must take up his habitation, if he is to preserve the dignity of his office.

"Let us pray!" said Hamilton earnestly, addressing himself to a small snapshot photograph of Sanders, which stood on a side table. "Let us pray that the barbarian of his kindness will sit quietly till you return, my Sanders—for the Lord knows what trouble I'm going to get into before you return!"

The incoming mail brought Francis Augustus Tibbetts, Lieutenant of the Houssas, raw to the land, but as cheerful as the devil—a straight stick of a youth, with hair brushed back from his forehead, a sun-peeled nose, a wonderful collection of baggage, and all the gossip of London.

"I'm afraid you'll find I'm rather an ass, sir," he said, saluting stiffly. "I've only just arrived on the Coast an' I'm simply bubbling over with energy, but I'm rather short in the brain department."

Hamilton, glaring at his subordinate through his monocle, grinned sympathetically.

"I'm not a whale of erudition myself," he confessed. "What is your name, sir?"

"Francis Augustus Tibbetts, sir."

"I shall call you Bones," said Hamilton, decisively.

Lieut. Tibbetts saluted. "They called me Conk at Sandhurst, sir," he suggested.

"Bones!" said Hamilton, definitely.

"Bones it is, skipper," said Mr. Tibbetts; "an' now all this beastly formality is over we'll have a bottle to celebrate things." And a bottle they had.

It was a splendid evening they spent, dining on chicken and palm-oil chop, rice pudding and sweet potatoes. Hamilton sang, "Who wouldn't be a soldier in the Army?" and—by request—in his shaky falsetto baritone, "My heart is in the Highlands"; and Lieut. Tibbetts gave a lifelike imitation of Frank Tinney, which convulsed, not alone his superior officer, but some two-and-forty men of the Houssas who were unauthorized spectators through various windows and door cracks and ventilating gauzes.

Bones was the son of a man who had occupied a position of some importance on the Coast, and though the young man's upbringing had been in England, he had the inestimable advantage of a very thorough grounding in the native dialect, not only from Tibbetts, senior, but from the two native servants with whom the boy had grown up.

"I suppose there is a telegraph line to headquarters?" asked Bones that night before they parted.

"Certainly, my dear lad," replied Hamilton. "We had it laid down when we heard you were coming."

"Don't flither!" pleaded Bones, giggling convulsively; "but the fact is I've got a couple of dozen tickets in the Cambridgeshire Sweepstake, an' a dear pal of mine—chap named Goldfinder, a rare and delicate bird—has sworn to wire me if I've drawn a horse. D'ye think I'll draw a horse?"

"I shouldn't think you could draw a cow," said Hamilton. "Go to bed."

"Look here, Ham—" began Lieut. Bones.

"To bed! you insubordinate devil!" said Hamilton, sternly.

In the meantime there was trouble in the Akasava country.

II

Scarcely had Sanders left the land, when the *lokali* of the Lower Isisi sent the news thundering in waves of sound.

Up and down the river and from village to village, from town to town, across rivers, penetrating dimly to the quiet deeps of the forest the story was flung. N'gori, the Chief of the Akasava, having some grievance against the Government over a question of fine for failure to collect according to the law, waited for no more than this intelligence of Sandi's going. His swift loud drums called his people to a dance-of-many-days. A dance-of-many-days spells "spears" and spears spell trouble. Bosambo heard the message in the still of the early night, gathered five hundred fighting men, swept down on the Akasava city in the drunken dawn, and carried away two thousand spears of the sodden N'gori.

A sobered Akasava city woke up and rubbed its eyes to find strange Ochori sentinels in the street and Bosambo in a sky-blue table-cloth, edged with golden fringe, stalking majestically through the high places of the city.

"This I do," said Bosambo to a shocked N'gori, "because my lord Sandi placed me here to hold the king's peace."

"Lord Bosambo," said the king sullenly, "what peace do I break when I summon my young men and maidens to dance?"

"Your young men are thieves, and it is written that the maidens of the Akasava are married once in ten thousand moons," said Bosambo calmly; "and also, N'gori, you speak to a wise man who knows that clockety-clock-clock on a drum spells war."

There was a long and embarrassing silence.

"Now, Bosambo," said N'gori, after a while, "you have my spears and your young men hold the streets and the river. What will you do? Do you sit here till Sandi returns and there is law in the land?"

This was the one question which Bosambo had neither the desire nor the ability to answer. He might swoop down upon a warlike people, surprising them to their abashment, rendering their armed forces impotent, but exactly what would happen afterwards he had not foreseen.

"I go back to my city," he said.

"And my spears?"

"Also they go with me," said Bosambo.

They eyed each other: Bosambo straight and muscular, a perfect figure of a man, N'gori grizzled and skinny, his brow furrowed with age.

"Lord," said N'gori mildly, "if you take my spears you leave me bound to my enemies. How may I protect my villages against oppression by evil men of Isisi?"

Bosambo sniffed—a sure sign of mental perturbation. All that N'gori said was true. Yet if he left the spears there would be trouble for him. Then a bright thought flicked:

"If bad men come you shall send for me and I will bring my fine young soldiers. The palaver is finished."

With this course N'gori must feign agreement. He watched the departing army—paddlers sitting on swathes of filched spears. Once Bosambo was out of sight, N'gori collected all the convertible property of his city and sent it in ten canoes to the edge of the N'gombi country, for N'gombi folk are wonderful makers of spears and have a saleable stock hidden against emergency.

For the space of a month there was enacted a comedy of which Hamilton was ignorant. Three days after Bosambo had returned in triumph to his city, there came a frantic call for succour—a rolling, terrified rat-a-plan of sound which the *lokali* man of the Ochori village read.

"Lord," said he, waking Bosambo in the dead of night, "there has come down a signal from the Akasava, who are pressed by their enemies and have no spears."

Bosambo was in the dark street instant, his booming war-drum calling urgently. Twenty canoes filled with fighting men, paddling desperately with the stream, raced to the aid of the defenceless Akasava.

At dawn, on the beach of the city, N'gori met his ally. "I thank all my little gods you have come, my lord," said he, humbly; "for in the night one of my young men saw an Isisi army coming against us."

"Where is the army?" demanded a weary Bosambo.

"Lord, it has not come," said N'gori, glibly; "for hearing of your lordship and your swift canoes, I think it had run away."

Bosambo's force paddled back to the Ochori city the next day. Two nights after, the call was repeated—this time with greater detail. An N'gombi force of countless spears had seized the village of Doozani and was threatening the capital.

Again Bosambo carried his spears to a killing, and again was met by an apologetic N'gori.

"Lord, it was a lie which a sick maiden spread," he explained, "and my stomach is filled with sorrow that I should have brought the mighty Bosambo from his wife's bed on such a night." For the dark hours had been filled with rain and tempest, and Bosambo had nearly lost one canoe by wreck.

"Oh, fool!" said he, justly exasperated, "have I nothing to do—I, who have all Sandi's high and splendid business in hand—but I must come through the rain because a sick maiden sees visions?"

"Bosambo, I am a fool," agreed N'gori, meekly, and again his rescuer returned home.

"Now," said N'gori, "we will summon a secret palaver, sending messengers for all men to assemble at the rise of the first moon. For the N'gombi have sent me new spears, and when next the dog Bosambo comes, weary with rowing, we will fall upon him and there will be no more Bosambo left; for Sandi is gone and there is no law in the land."

III

Curiously enough, at that precise moment, the question of law was a very pressing one with two young Houssa officers who sat on either side of Sanders' big table, wet towels about their heads, mastering the intricacies of the military code; for Tibbetts was entering for an examination and Hamilton, who had only passed his own by a fluke, had rashly offered to coach him.

"I hope you understand this, Bones," said Hamilton, staring up at his subordinate and running his finger along the closely printed pages of the book before him.

"Any person subject to military law," read Hamilton impressively, "'who strikes or ill-uses his superior officer shall, if an officer, suffer death or such less punishment as in this Act mentioned.' Which means," said Hamilton, wisely, "that if you and I are in action and you call me a liar, and I give you a whack on the jaw—"

"You get shot," said Bones, admiringly, "an' a rippin' good idea, too!"

"If, on the other hand," Hamilton went on, "I called you a liar—which I should be justified in doing—and you give me a whack on the jaw, I'd make you sorry you were ever born."

"That's military law, is it?" asked Bones, curiously.

"It is," said Hamilton.

"Then let's chuck it," said Bones, and shut up his book with a bang. "I don't want any book to teach me what to do with a feller that calls me a liar. I'll go you one game of picquet, for nuts."

"You're on," said Hamilton.

"My nuts I think, sir."

Bones carefully counted the heap which his superior had pushed over, "And—hullo! what the dooce do you want?"

Hamilton followed the direction of the other's eyes. A man stood in the doorway, naked but for the wisp of skirt at his waist. Hamilton got up quickly, for he recognized the chief of Sandi's spies.

"O Kelili," said Hamilton in his easy Bomongo tongue, "why do you come and from whence?"

"From the island over against the Ochori, Lord," croaked the man, dry-throated. "Two pigeons I sent, but these the hawks took—a fisherman saw one taken by the Kasai, and my own brother, who lives in the Village of Irons, saw the other go—though he flew swiftly."

Hamilton's grave face set rigidly, for he smelt trouble. You do not send pleasant news by pigeons.

"Speak," he said.

"Lord," said Kelili, "there is to be a killing palaver between the Ochori and the Akasava on the first rise of the full moon, for N'gori speaks of Bosambo evilly, and says that the Chief has raided him. In what manner these things will come about," Kelili went on, with the lofty indifference of one who had done his part of the business, so that he had left no room for carelessness, "I do not know, but I have warned all eyes of the Government to watch."

Bones followed the conversation without difficulty.

"What do people say?" asked Hamilton.

"Lord, they say that Sandi has gone and there is no law."

Hamilton of the Houssas grinned. "Oh, ain't there?" said he, in English, vilely.

"Ain't there?" repeated an indignant Bones, "we'll jolly well show old Thinggumy what's what."

Bosambo received an envoy from the Chief of the Akasava, and the envoy brought with him presents of dubious value and a message to the effect that N'gori spent much of his waking moments in wondering how he might best serve his brother Bosambo, "The right arm on which I and my people lean and the bright eyes through which I see beauty."

Bosambo returned the messenger, with presents more valueless, and an assurance of friendship more sonorous, more complete in rhetoric and aptness of hyperbole, and when the messenger had

gone Bosambo showed his appreciation of N'gori's love by doubling the guard about the Ochori city and sending a strong picket under his chief headman to hold the river bend.

"Because," said this admirable philosopher, "life is like certain roots: some that taste sweet and are bitter in the end, and some that are vile to the lips and pleasant to the stomach."

It was a wild night, being in the month of rains. M'shimba M'shamba was abroad, walking with his devastating feet through the forest, plucking up great trees by their roots and tossing them aside as though they were so many canes. There was a roaring of winds and a crashing of thunders, and the blue-white lightning snicked in and out of the forest or tore sprawling cracks in the sky. In the Ochori city they heard the storm grumbling across the river and were awakened by the incessant lightning—so incessant that the weaver birds who lived in palms that fringed the Ochori streets came chattering to life.

It was too loud a noise, that M'shimba M'shamba made for the *lokali* man of the Ochori to hear the message that N'gori sent—the panic-message designed to lure Bosambo to the newly-purchased spears.

Bones heard it—Bones, standing on the bridge of the *Zaire* pounding away upstream, steaming past the Akasava city in a sheet of rain.

"Wonder what the jolly old row is?" he muttered to himself, and summoned his sergeant. "Ali," said he, in faultless Arabic, "what beating of drums are these?"

"Lord," said the sergeant, uneasily, "I do not know, unless they be to warn us not to travel at night. I am your man, Master," said he in a fret, "yet never have I travelled with so great a fear: even our Lord Sandi does not move by night, though the river is his own child."

"It is written," said Bones, cheerfully, and as the sergeant saluted and turned away, the reckless Houssa made a face at the darkness. "If old man Ham would give me a month or two on the river," he mused, "I'd set 'em alight, by Jove!"

By the miraculous interposition of Providence Bones reached the Ochori village in the grey clouded dawn, and Bosambo, early astir, met the lank figure of the youth, his slick sword dangling, his long revolver holster strapped to his side, and his helmet on the back of his head, an eager warrior looking for trouble.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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