

WALLACE

EDGAR

THE KEEPERS

OF THE KING'S

PEACE

Edgar Wallace

The Keepers of the King's Peace

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Содержание

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| CHAPTER I | 5 |
| CHAPTER II | 14 |
| CHAPTER III | 23 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 28 |

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The Keepers of the King's Peace

CHAPTER I

BONES, SANDERS AND ANOTHER

To Isongo, which stands upon the tributary of that name, came a woman of the Isisi who had lost her husband through a providential tree falling upon him. I say "providential," for it was notorious that he was an evil man, a drinker of beer and a favourite of many bad persons. Also he made magic in the forest, and was reputedly the familiar of Bashunbi the devil brother of M'shimba-M'shamba. He beat his wives, and once had set fire to his house from sheer wickedness. So that when he was borne back to the village on a grass bier and the women of his house decked themselves with green leaves and arm in arm staggered and stamped through the village street in their death dance, there was a suspicion of hilarity in their song, and a more cheery step in their dance than the occasion called for.

An old man named D'wiri, who knew every step of every dance, saw this and said in his stern way that it was shameless. But he was old and was, moreover, in fear for the decorum of his own obsequies if these outrageous departures from custom were approved or allowed to pass without reprimand.

When M'lama, the wife of G'mami, had seen her lord depart in the canoe for burial in the middle island and had wailed her conventional grief, she washed the dust from her body at the river's edge and went back to her hut. And all that was grief for the dead man was washed away with the dust of mourning.

Many moons came out of the sky, were wasted and died before the woman M'lama showed signs of her gifts. It is said that they appeared one night after a great storm wherein lightning played such strange tricks upon the river that even the old man D'wiri could not remember parallel instances.

In the night the wife of a hunter named E'sani-Osoni brought a dying child into the hut of the widow. He had been choked by a fish-bone and was *in extremis* when M'lama put her hand upon his head and straightway the bone flew from his mouth, "and there was a cry terrible to hear—such a cry as a leopard makes when he is pursued by ghosts."

A week later a baby girl fell into a terrible fit and M'lama had laid her hand upon it and behold! it slept from that moment.

Ahmet, chief of the Government spies, heard of these happenings and came a three days' journey by river to Isongo.

"What are these stories of miracles?" he asked.

"*Capita*," said the chief, using the term of regard which is employed in the Belgian Congo, "this woman M'lama is a true witch and has great gifts, for she raises the dead by the touch of her hand. This I have seen. Also it is said that when U'gomi, the woodcutter, made a fault, cutting his foot in two, this woman healed him marvellously."

"I will see this M'lama," said Ahmet importantly.

He found her in her hut tossing four bones idly. These were the shanks of goats, and each time they fell differently.

"O Ahmet," she said, when he entered, "you have a wife who is sick, also a first-born boy who does not speak though he is more than six seasons old."

Ahmet squatted down by her side.

"Woman," said he, "tell me something that is not the talk of river and I will believe your magic."

"To-morrow your master, the lord Sandi, will send you a book which will give you happiness," she said.

"Every day my lord sends me a book," retorted the sceptical Ahmet, "and each brings me happiness. Also it is common talk that at this time there come messengers carrying bags of silver and salt to pay men according to their services."

Undismayed she tried her last shot.

"You have a crooked finger which none can straighten—behold!"

She took his hand in hers and pressed the injured phlange. A sharp pain shot up his arm and he winced, pulling back his hand—but the year-old dislocation which had defied the effort of the coast doctor was straightened out, and though the movement was exquisitely painful he could bend it.

"I see you are a true witch," he said, greatly impressed, for a native has a horror of deformity of any kind, and he sent back word of the phenomenon to Sanders.

Sanders at the same time was in receipt of other news which alternately pleased him and filled him with panic. The mail had come in by fast launch and had brought Captain Hamilton of the Houssas a very bulky letter written in a feminine hand. He had broken the glad news to Commissioner Sanders, but that gentleman was not certain in his mind whether the startling intelligence conveyed by the letter was good or bad.

"I'm sure the country will suit her," he said, "this part of the country at any rate—but what will Bones say?"

"Bones!" repeated Captain Hamilton scornfully. "What the dickens does it matter what Bones says?"

Nevertheless, he went to the sea-end of the verandah, and his roar rivalled the thunder of the surf.

"Bones!"

There was no answer and for an excellent reason.

Sanders came out of the bungalow, his helmet on the back of his head, a cheroot tilted dizzily.

"Where is he?" he asked.

Hamilton turned.

"I asked him to—at least I didn't ask him, he volunteered—to peg out a trench line."

"Expect an invasion?" asked Sanders.

Hamilton grinned.

"Bones does," he said. "He's full of the idea, and offered to give me tips on the way a trench should be dug—he's feeling rotten about things ... you know what I mean. His regiment was at Mons."

Sanders nodded.

"I understand," he said quietly. "And you ... you're a jolly good soldier, Hamilton—how do you feel about it all?"

Hamilton shrugged his shoulders.

"They would have taken me for the Cameroons, but somebody had to stay," he said quietly. "After all, it is one's business to ... to do one's job in the station of life to which it has pleased God to call him. This is my work ... here."

Sanders laid his hand on the other's shoulder.

"That's the game as it should be played," he said, and his blue eyes were as soft and as tender as a woman's. "There is no war here—we are the keepers of the King's peace, Hamilton."

"It's rotten..."

"I know—I feel that way myself. We're out of it—the glory of it—the chance of it—the tragedy of it. And there are others. Think of the men in India eating their hearts out ... praying for the order that will carry them from the comfort of their lives to the misery and the death—and the splendour, I grant you—of war."

He sighed and looked wistfully to the blue sea.

Hamilton beckoned a Houssa corporal who was crossing the garden of the Residency.

"Ho, Mustaf," he said, in his queer coast Arabic, "where shall I look for my lord Tibbetti?"

The corporal turned and pointed to the woods which begin at the back of the Residency and carry without a break for three hundred miles.

"Lord, he went there carrying many strange things—also there went with him Ali Abid, his servant."

Hamilton reached through an open window of the bungalow and fished out his helmet with his walking-stick.

"We'll find Bones," he said grimly; "he's been gone three hours and he's had time to re-plan Verdun."

It took some time to discover the working party, but when it was found the trouble was well repaid.

Bones was stretched on a canvas chair under the shade of a big Isisi palm. His helmet was tipped forward so that the brim rested on the bridge of his nose, his thin red arms were folded on his breast, and their gentle rise and fall testified to his shame. Two pegs had been driven in, and between them a string sagged half-heartedly.

Curled up under a near-by bush was, presumably, Ali Abid—presumably, because all that was visible was a very broad stretch of brown satin skin which showed between the waistline of a pair of white cotton trousers and a duck jacket.

They looked down at the unconscious Bones for a long time in silence.

"What will he say when I kick him?" asked Hamilton. "You can have the first guess."

Sanders frowned thoughtfully.

"He'll say that he was thinking out a new system of communicating trenches," he said. "He's been boring me to tears over saps and things."

Hamilton shook his head.

"Wrong, sir," he said; "that isn't the lie he'll tell. He will say that I kept him up so late last night working at the men's pay-sheets that he couldn't keep awake."

Bones slept on.

"He may say that it was coffee after tiffin," suggested Sanders after a while; "he said the other day that coffee always made him sleep."

"'Swoon' was the word he used, sir," corrected Hamilton. "I don't think he'll offer that suggestion now—the only other excuse I can think of is that he was repeating the Bomongo irregular verbs. Bones!"

He stooped and broke off a long grass and inserted it in the right ear of Lieutenant Tibbetts, twiddling the end delicately. Bones made a feeble clutch at his ear, but did not open his eyes.

"Bones!" said Hamilton, and kicked him less gently. "Get up, you lazy devil—there's an invasion."

Bones leapt to his feet and staggered a little; blinked fiercely at his superior and saluted.

"Enemy on the left flank, sir," he reported stiffly. "Shall we have dinner or take a taxi?"

"Wake up, Napoleon," begged Hamilton, "you're at Waterloo."

Bones blinked more slowly.

"I'm afraid I've been unconscious, dear old officer," he confessed. "The fact is—"

"Listen to this, everybody," said Hamilton admiringly.

"The fact is, sir," said Bones, with dignity, "I fell asleep—that beastly coffee I had after lunch, added to the fatigue of sittin' up half the night with those jolly old accounts of yours, got the better of me. I was sittin' down workin' out one of the dinkiest little ideas in trenches—a sort of communicatin' trench where you needn't get wet in the rainiest weather—when I—well, I just swooned off."

Hamilton looked disappointed.

"Weren't you doing anything with the Bomongo verbs?" he demanded.

A light came to Bones's eyes.

"By Jove, sir!" he said heartily, "that was it, of course.... The last thing I remember was...."

"Kick that man of yours and come back to the bungalow," Hamilton interrupted, "there's a job for you, my boy."

He walked across and stirred the second sleeper with the toe of his boot.

Ali Abid wriggled round and sat up.

He was square of face, with a large mouth and two very big brown eyes. He was enormously fat, but it was not fat of the flabby type. Though he called himself Ali, it was, as Bones admitted, "sheer swank" to do so, for this man had "coast" written all over him.

He got up slowly and saluted first his master, then Sanders, and lastly Hamilton.

Bones had found him at Cape Coast Castle on the occasion of a joy-ride which the young officer had taken on a British man-of-war. Ali Abid had been the heaven-sent servant, and though Sanders had a horror of natives who spoke English, the English of Ali Abid was his very own.

He had been for five years the servant of Professor Garrileigh, the eminent bacteriologist, the account of whose researches in the field of tropical medicines fill eight volumes of closely-printed matter, every page of which contains words which are not to be found in most lexicons.

They walked back to the Residency, Ali Abid in the rear.

"I want you to go up to the Isongo, Bones," said Sanders; "there may be some trouble there—a woman is working miracles."

"He might get a new head," murmured Hamilton, but Bones pretended not to hear.

"Use your tact and get back before the 17th for the party."

"The—?" asked Bones.

He had an irritating trick of employing extravagant gestures of a fairly commonplace kind. Thus, if he desired to hear a statement repeated—though he had heard it well enough the first time—he would bend his head with a puzzled wrinkle of forehead, put his hand to his ear and wait anxiously, even painfully, for the repetition.

"You heard what the Commissioner said," growled Hamilton. "Party—P-A-R-T-Y."

"My birthday is not until April, your Excellency," said Bones.

"I'd guess the date—but what's the use?" interposed Hamilton.

"It isn't a birthday party, Bones," said Sanders. "We are giving a house-warming for Miss Hamilton."

Bones gasped, and turned an incredulous eye upon his chief.

"You haven't a sister, surely, dear old officer?" he asked.

"Why the dickens shouldn't I have a sister?" demanded his chief.

Bones shrugged his shoulders.

"A matter of deduction, sir," he said quietly. "Absence of all evidence of a soothin' and lovin' influence in your lonely an' unsympathetic upbringing; hardness of heart an' a disposition to nag, combined with a rough and unpromisin' exterior—a sister, good Lord!"

"Anyway, she's coming, Bones," said Hamilton; "and she's looking forward to seeing you—I've written an awful lot about you."

Bones smirked.

"Of course," he said, "you've overdone it a bit—women hate to be disillusioned. What you ought to have done, sir, is to describe me as a sort of ass—genial and all that sort of thing, but a commonplace sort of ass."

Hamilton nodded.

"That's exactly what I've done, Bones," he said. "I told her how Bosambo did you in the eye for twenty pounds, and how you fell into the water looking for buried treasure, and how the Isisi tried to sell you a flying crocodile and would have sold it too, if it hadn't been for my timely arrival. I told her—"

"I think you've said enough, sir."

Bones was very red and very haughty.

"Far be it from me to resent your attitude or contradict your calumnies. Miss Hamilton will see very little of me. An inflexible sense of duty will keep me away from the frivolous circle of society, sir. Alert an' sleepless—"

"Trenches," said Hamilton brutally.

Bones winced, regarded his superior for a moment with pain, saluted, and turning on his heel, stalked away, followed by Ali Abid no less pained.

He left at dawn the next morning, and both Sanders and Hamilton came down to the concrete quay to see the *Zaire* start on her journey. Sanders gave his final instructions—

"If the woman is upsetting the people, arrest her; if she has too big a hold on them, arrest her; but if she is just amusing them, come back."

"And don't forget the 17th," said Hamilton.

"I may arrive a little late for that," said Bones gravely. "I don't wish to be a skeleton at your jolly old festive board, dear old sportsman—you will excuse my absence to Miss Hamilton. I shall probably have a headache and all that sort of thing."

He waved a sad farewell as the *Zaire* passed round the bend of the river, and looked, as he desired to look, a melancholy figure with his huge pipe in his mouth and his hands thrust dejectedly into his trousers pockets.

Once out of sight he became his own jovial self.

"Lieutenant Ali," he said, "get out my log and put it in old Sanders' cabin, make me a cup of tea and keep her jolly old head east, east by north."

"Ay, ay, sir," said Ali in excellent English.

The "log" which Bones kept was one of the secret documents which never come under the eye of the superior authorities. There were such entries as—

"Wind N.N.W. Sea calm. Hostile craft sighted on port bow, at 10.31 a.m.
General Quarters sounded 10.32. Interrogated Captain of the hostile craft and warned him not to fish in fair-way. Sighted Cape M'Gooboori 12.17, stopped for lunch and wood."

What though Cape M'Gooboori was the village of that name and the "calm sea" was no more than the placid bosom of the Great River? What though Bones's "hostile craft" was a dilapidated canoe, manned by one aged and bewildered man of the Isisi engaged in spearing fish? Bones saw all things through the rosy spectacles of adventurous youth denied its proper share of experience.

At sunset the *Zaire* came gingerly through the shoals that run out from the Isongo beach, and Bones went ashore to conduct his investigations. It chanced that the evening had been chosen by M'lama, the witch, for certain wonderful manifestations, and the village was almost deserted.

In a wood and in a place of green trees M'lama sat tossing her sheep shanks, and a dense throng of solemn men and women squatted or sat or tiptoed about her—leaving her a respectable space for her operations. A bright fire crackled and glowed at her side, and into this, from time to time, she thrust little sticks of plaited straw and drew them forth blazing and spluttering until with a quick breath she extinguished the flame and examined the grey ash.

"Listen, all people," she said, "and be silent, lest my great ju-ju strike you dead. What man gave me this?"

"It was I, M'lama," said an eager woman, her face wrinkled with apprehension as she held up her brown palm.

The witch peered forward at the speaker.

"O F'sela!" she chanted, "there is a man-child for thee who shall be greater than chiefs; also you will suffer from a sickness which shall make you mad."

"O ko!"

Half dismayed by the promise of her own fate; half exalted by the career the witch had sketched for her unborn son, the woman stared incredulously, fearfully at the swaying figure by the fire.

Again a plaited stick went into the fire, was withdrawn and blown out, and the woman again prophesied.

And sometimes it was of honours and riches she spoke, and sometimes—and more often—of death and disaster. Into this shuddering group strode Bones, very finely clad in white raiment yet limp withal, for the night was close and the way had been long and rough.

The sitters scrambled to their feet, their knuckles at their teeth, for this was a moment of great embarrassment.

"Oh, M'lama," said Bones agreeably, and spoke in the soft dialect of the Isisi by-the-River, "prophesy for me!"

She looked up sullenly, divining trouble for herself.

"Lord," she said, with a certain smooth venom, "there is a great sickness for you—and behold you will go far away and die, and none shall miss you."

Bones went very red, and shook an indignant forefinger at the offending prophetess.

"You're a wicked old storyteller!" he stammered. "You're depressin' the people—you naughty girl! I hate you—I simply loathe you!"

As he spoke in English she was not impressed.

"Goin' about the country puttin' people off their grub, by Jove!" he stormed; "tellin' stories ... oh, dash it, I shall have to be awfully severe with you!"

Severe he was, for he arrested her, to the relief of her audience, who waited long enough to discover whether or not her ju-ju would strike him dead, and being obviously disappointed by her failure to provide this spectacle, melted away.

Close to the gangway of the *Zaire* she persuaded one of her Houssa guard to release his hold. She persuaded him by the simple expedient of burying her sharp white teeth in the fleshy part of his arm—and bolted. They captured her half mad with panic and fear of her unknown fate, and brought her to the boat.

Bones, fussing about the struggling group, dancing with excitement, was honourably wounded by the chance contact of his nose with a wild and whirling fist.

"Put her in the store cabin!" he commanded breathlessly. "Oh, what a wicked woman!"

In the morning as the boat got under way Ali came to him with a distressing story.

"Your Excellency will be pained to hear," he said, "that the female prisoner has eradicated her costume."

"Eradicated...?" repeated the puzzled Bones, gently touching the patch of sticking-plaster on his nose.

"In the night," explained this former slave of science, "the subject has developed symptoms of mania, and has entirely dispensed with her clothes—to wit, by destruction."

"She's torn up her clothes?" gasped Bones, his hair rising and Ali nodded.

Now, the dress of a native woman varies according to the degree in which she falls under missionary influence. Isongo was well within the sphere of the River Mission, and so M'lama's costume consisted of a tight-fitting piece of print which wound round and round the body in the manner of a kilt, covering the figure from armpit to feet.

Bones went to the open window of the prison cabin, and steadfastly averting his gaze, called—"M'lama!"

No reply came, and he called again.

"M'lama," he said gently, in the river dialect, "what shall Sandi say to this evil that you do?"

There was no reply, only a snuffling sound of woe.

"Oh, ai!" sobbed the voice.

"M'lama, presently we shall come to the Mission house where the God-men are, and I will bring you clothing—these you will put on you," said Bones, still staring blankly over the side of the ship at the waters which foamed past her low hull; "for if my lord Sandi see you as I see you—I mean as I wouldn't for the world see you, you improper person," he corrected himself hastily in English—"if my lord Sandi saw you, he would feel great shame. Also," he added, as a horrible thought made him go cold all over, "also the lady who comes to my lord Militini—oh, lor!"

These last two words were in English.

Fortunately there was a Jesuit settlement near by, and here Bones stopped and interviewed the stout and genial priest in charge.

"It's curious how they all do it," reflected the priest, as he led the way to his storehouse. "I've known 'em to tear up their clothes in an East End police cell—white folk, the same as you and I."

He rummaged in a big box and produced certain garments.

"My last consignment from a well-meaning London congregation," he smiled, and flung out a heap of dresses, hats, stockings and shoes. "If they'd sent a roll or two of print I might have used them—but strong religious convictions do not entirely harmonize with a last year's Paris model."

Bones, flushed and unhappy, grabbed an armful of clothing, and showering the chuckling priest with an incoherent medley of apology and thanks, hurried back to the *Zaire*.

"Behold, M'lama," he said, as he thrust his loot through the window of the little deck-house, "there are many grand things such as great ladies wear—now you shall appear before Sandi beautiful to see."

He logged the happening in characteristic language, and was in the midst of this literary exercise when the tiny steamer charged a sandbank, and before her engines could slow or reverse she had slid to the top and rested in two feet of water.

A rueful Bones surveyed the situation and returned to his cabin to conclude his diary with—

"12.19 struck a reef off B'lidi Bay. Fear vessel total wreck. Boats all ready for lowering."

As a matter of fact there were neither boats to lower nor need to lower them, because the crew were already standing in the river (up to their hips) and were endeavouring to push the *Zaire* to deep water.

In this they were unsuccessful, and it was not for thirty-six hours until the river, swollen by heavy rains in the Ochori region, lifted the *Zaire* clear of the obstruction, that Bones might record the story of his salvage.

He had released a reformed M'lama to the greater freedom of the deck, and save for a shrill passage at arms between that lady and the corporal she had bitten, there was no sign of a return to her evil ways. She wore a white pique skirt and a white blouse, and on her head she balanced deftly, without the aid of pins, a yellow straw hat with long trailing ribbons of heliotrope. Alternately they trailed behind and before.

"A horrible sight," said Bones, shuddering at his first glimpse of her.

The rest of the journey was uneventful until the *Zaire* had reached the northernmost limits of the Residency reserve. Sanders had partly cleared and wholly drained four square miles of the little peninsula on which the Residency stood, and by barbed wire and deep cutting had isolated the Government estate from the wild forest land to the north.

Here, the river shoals in the centre, cutting a passage to the sea through two almost unfathomable channels close to the eastern and western banks. Bones had locked away his journal and was standing on the bridge rehearsing the narrative which was to impress his superiors with a sense of his resourcefulness—and incidentally present himself in the most favourable light to the new factor which was coming into his daily life.

He had thought of Hamilton's sister at odd intervals and now....

The *Zaire* was hugging the western bank so closely that a bold and agile person might have stepped ashore.

M'lama, the witch, was both bold and agile.

He turned with open mouth to see something white and feminine leap the space between deck and shore, two heliotrope ribbons streaming wildly in such breeze as there was.

"Hi! Don't do that ... naughty, naughty!" yelled the agonized Bones, but she had disappeared into the undergrowth before the big paddle-wheel of the *Zaire* began to thresh madly astern.

Never was the resourcefulness of Bones more strikingly exemplified. An ordinary man would have leapt overboard in pursuit, but Bones was no ordinary man. He remembered in that moment of crisis, the distressing propensity of his prisoner to the "eradication of garments." With one stride he was in his cabin and had snatched a counterpane from his bed, in two bounds he was over the rail on the bank and running swiftly in the direction the fugitive had taken.

For a little time he did not see her, then he glimpsed the white of a pique dress, and with a yell of admonition started in pursuit.

She stood hesitating a moment, then fled, but he was on her before she had gone a dozen yards; the counterpane was flung over her head, and though she kicked and struggled and indulged in muffled squeaks, he lifted her up in his arms and staggered back to the boat.

They ran out a gangway plank and across this he passed with his burden, declining all offers of assistance.

"Close the window," he gasped; "open the door—now, you naughty old lady!"

He bundled her in, counterpane enmeshed and reduced to helpless silence, slammed the door and leant panting against the cabin, mopping his brow.

"Phew!" said Bones, and repeated the inelegant remark many times. All this happened almost within sight of the quay on which Sanders and Hamilton were waiting. It was a very important young man who saluted them.

"All correct, sir," said Bones, stiff as a ramrod; "no casualties—except as per my nose which will be noted in the margin of my report—one female prisoner secured after heroic chase, which, I trust, sir, you will duly report to my jolly old superiors—"

"Don't gas so much, Bones," said Hamilton. "Come along and meet my sister—hullo, what the devil's that?"

They turned with one accord to the forest path.

Two native policemen were coming towards them, and between them a bedraggled M'lama, her skirt all awry, her fine hat at a rakish angle, stepped defiantly.

"Heavens!" said Bones, "she's got away again.... That's my prisoner, dear old officer!"

Hamilton frowned.

"I hope she hasn't frightened Pat ... she was walking in the reservation."

Bones did not faint, his knees went from under him, but he recovered by clutching the arm of his faithful Ali.

"Dear old friend," he murmured brokenly, "accidents ... error of judgment ... the greatest tragedy of my life...."

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Sanders in alarm, for the face of Bones was ghastly.

Lieutenant Tibbetts made no reply, but walked with unsteady steps to the lock-up, fumbled with the key and opened the door.

There stepped forth a dishevelled and wrathful girl (she was a little scared, too, I suspect), the most radiant and lovely figure that had ever dawned upon the horizon of Bones.

She looked from her staggered brother to Sanders, from Sanders to her miserable custodian.

"What on earth—" began Hamilton.

Then her lips twitched and she fell into a fit of uncontrollable laughter.

"If," said Bones huskily, "if in an excess of zeal I mistook ... in the gloamin', madame ... white dress...."

He spread out his arms in a gesture of extravagant despair.

"I can do no more than a gentleman.... I have a loaded revolver in my cabin ... farewell!"

He bowed deeply to the girl, saluted his dumbfounded chief, tripped up over a bucket and would have fallen but for Hamilton's hand.

"You're an ass," said Hamilton, struggling to preserve his sense of annoyance. "Pat—this is Lieutenant Tibbetts, of whom I have often written."

The girl looked at Bones, her eyes moist with laughter.

"I guessed it from the first," she said, and Bones writhed.

CHAPTER II

BONES CHANGES HIS RELIGION

Captain Hamilton of the King's Houssas had two responsibilities in life, a sister and a subaltern. The sister's name was Patricia Agatha, the subaltern had been born Tibbetts, christened Augustus, and named by Hamilton in his arbitrary way, "Bones."

Whilst sister and subaltern were separated from one another by some three thousand miles of ocean—as far, in fact, as the Coast is from Bradlesham Thorpe in the County of Hampshire—Captain Hamilton bore his responsibilities without displaying a sense of the burden.

When Patricia Hamilton decided on paying a visit to her brother she did so with his heartiest approval, for he did not realize that in bringing his two responsibilities face to face he was not only laying the foundation of serious trouble, but was actually engaged in erecting the fabric.

Pat Hamilton had come and had been boisterously welcomed by her brother one white-hot morning, Houssas in undress uniform lining the beach and gazing solemnly upon Militini's riotous joy. Mr. Commissioner Sanders, C.M.G., had given her a more formal welcome, for he was a little scared of women. Bones, as we know, had not been present—which was unfortunate in more ways than one.

It made matters no easier for the wretched Bones that Miss Hamilton was an exceedingly lovely lady. Men who live for a long time in native lands and see little save beautiful figures displayed without art and with very little adornment, are apt to regard any white woman with regular features as pretty, when the vision comes to them after a long interval spent amidst native people. But it needed neither contrast nor comparison to induce an admiration for Captain Hamilton's sister.

She was of a certain Celtic type, above the medium height, with the freedom of carriage and gait which is the peculiar possession of her country-women. Her face was a true oval, and her complexion of that kind which tans readily but does not freckle.

Eyes and mouth were firm and steadfast; she was made for ready laughter, yet she was deep enough, and in eyes and mouth alike you read a tenderness beyond disguise. She had a trinity of admirers: her brother's admiration was natural and critical; Sanders admired and feared; Lieutenant Tibbetts admired and resented.

From the moment when Bones strode off after the painful discovery, had slammed the door of his hut and had steadfastly declined all manner of food and sustenance, he had voluntarily cut himself off from his kind.

He met Hamilton on parade the following morning, hollow-eyed (as he hoped) after a sleepless night, and there was nothing in his attitude suggestive of the deepest respect and the profoundest regard for that paragraph of King's Regulations which imposes upon the junior officer a becoming attitude of humility in the presence of his superior officer.

"How is your head, Bones?" asked Hamilton, after the parade had been dismissed.

"Thank you, sir," said Bones bitterly—though why he should be bitter at the kindly inquiry only he knew—"thank you, sir, it is about the same. My temperature is—or was—up to one hundred and four, and I have been delirious. I wouldn't like to say, dear old—sir, that I'm not nearly delirious now."

"Come up to tiffin," invited Hamilton.

Bones saluted—a sure preliminary to a dramatic oration.

"Sir," he said firmly, "you've always been a jolly old officer to me before this contretemps wrecked my young life—but I shall never be quite the same man again, sir."

"Don't be an ass," begged Hamilton.

"Revile me, sir," said Bones dismally; "give me a dangerous mission, one of those jolly old adventures where a feller takes his life in one hand, his revolver in the other, but don't ask me—"

"My sister wants to see you," said Hamilton, cutting short the flow of eloquence.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Bones hollowly, and strode into his hut.

"And what I'm going to do with him, Heaven knows," groaned Hamilton at tiffin. "The fact is, Pat, your arrival on the scene has thoroughly demoralized him."

The girl folded her serviette and walked to the window, and stood looking out over the yellow stretch of the deserted parade-ground.

"I'm going to call on Bones," she said suddenly.

"Poor Bones!" murmured Sanders.

"That's very rude!" She took down her solar helmet from the peg behind the door and adjusted it carefully. Then she stepped through the open door, whistling cheerfully.

"I hope you don't mind, sir," apologized Hamilton, "but we've never succeeded in stopping her habit of whistling."

Sanders laughed.

"It would be strange if she didn't whistle," he said cryptically.

Bones was lying on his back, his hands behind his head. A half-emptied tin of biscuits, no less than the remnants of a box of chocolates, indicated that anchorite as he was determined to be, his austerity did not run in the direction of starvation.

His mind was greatly occupied by a cinematograph procession of melancholy pictures. Perhaps he would go away, far, far, into the interior. Even into the territory of the great king where a man's life is worth about five cents net. And as day by day passed and no news came of him—as how could it when his habitation was marked by a cairn of stones?—she would grow anxious and unhappy. And presently messengers would come bringing her a few poor trinkets he had bequeathed to her—a wrist-watch, a broken sword, a silver cigarette-case dented with the arrow that slew him—and she would weep silently in the loneliness of her room.

And perhaps he would find strength to send a few scrawled words asking for her pardon, and the tears would well up in her beautiful grey eyes—as they were already welling in Bones's eyes at the picture he drew—and she would know—all.

"Phweet!"

Or else, maybe he would be stricken down with fever, and she would want to come and nurse him, but he would refuse.

"Tell her," he would say weakly, but oh, so bravely, "tell her ... I ask only ... her pardon."

"Phweet!"

Bones heard the second whistle. It came from the open window immediately above his head. A song bird was a rare visitor to these parts, but he was too lazy and too absorbed to look up.

Perhaps (he resumed) she would never see him again, never know the deep sense of injustice....

"Phwee—et!"

It was clearer and more emphatic, and he half turned his head to look—

He was on his feet in a second, his hand raised to his damp forehead, for leaning on the window sill, her lips pursed for yet another whistle, was the lady of his thoughts.

She met his eyes sternly.

"Come outside—misery!" she said, and Bones gasped and obeyed.

"What do you mean," she demanded, "by sulking in your wretched little hut when you ought to be crawling about on your hands and knees begging my pardon?"

Bones said nothing.

"Bones," said this outrageous girl, shaking her head reprovingly, "you want a jolly good slapping!"

Bones extended his bony wrist.

"Slap!" he said defiantly.

He had hardly issued the challenge when a very firm young palm, driven by an arm toughened by a long acquaintance with the royal and ancient game, came "Smack!" and Bones winced.

"Play the game, dear old Miss Hamilton," he said, rubbing his wrist.

"Play the game yourself, dear old Bones," she mimicked him. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself—"

"Let bygones be bygones, jolly old Miss Hamilton," begged Bones magnanimously. "And now that I see you're a sport, put it there, if it weighs a ton."

And he held out his nobbly hand and caught the girl's in a grip that made her grimace.

Five minutes later he was walking her round the married quarters of his Houssas, telling her the story of his earliest love affair. She was an excellent listener, and seldom interrupted him save to ask if there was any insanity in his family, or whether the girl was short-sighted; in fact, as Bones afterwards said, it might have been Hamilton himself.

"What on earth are they finding to talk about?" wondered Sanders, watching the confidences from the depths of a big cane chair on the verandah.

"Bones," replied Hamilton lazily, "is telling her the story of his life and how he saved the territories from rebellion. He's also begging her not to breathe a word of this to me for fear of hurting my feelings."

At that precise moment Bones was winding up a most immodest recital of his accomplishments with a less immodest footnote.

"Of course, dear old Miss Hamilton," he was saying, lowering his voice, "I shouldn't like a word of this to come to your jolly old brother's ears. He's an awfully good sort, but naturally in competition with an agile mind like mine, understanding the native as I do, he hasn't an earthly—"

"Why don't you write the story of your adventures?" she asked innocently. "It would sell like hot cakes."

Bones choked with gratification.

"Precisely my idea—oh, what a mind you've got! What a pity it doesn't run in the family! I'll tell you a precious secret—not a word to anybody—honest?"

"Honest," she affirmed.

Bones looked round.

"It's practically ready for the publisher," he whispered, and stepped back to observe the effect of his words.

She shook her head in admiration, her eyes were dancing with delight, and Bones realized that here at last he had met a kindred soul.

"It must be awfully interesting to write books," she sighed. "I've tried—but I can never invent anything."

"Of course, in my case—" corrected Bones.

"I suppose you just sit down with a pen in your hand and imagine all sorts of things," she mused, directing her feet to the Residency.

"This is the story of my life," explained Bones earnestly. "Not fiction ... but all sorts of adventures that actually happened."

"To whom?" she asked.

"To me," claimed Bones, louder than was necessary.

"Oh!" she said.

"Don't start 'Oh-ing,'" said Bones in a huff. "If you and I are going to be good friends, dear old Miss Hamilton, don't say 'Oh!'"

"Don't be a bully, Bones." She turned on him so fiercely that he shrank back.

"Play the game," he said feebly; "play the game, dear old sister!"

She led him captive to the stoep and deposited him in the easiest chair she could find.

From that day he ceased to be anything but a slave, except on one point.

The question of missions came up at tiffin, and Miss Hamilton revealed the fact that she favoured the High Church and held definite views on the clergy.

Bones confessed that he was a Wesleyan.

"Do you mean to tell me that you're a Nonconformist?" she asked incredulously.

"That's my dinky little religion, dear old Miss Hamilton," said Bones. "I'd have gone into the Church only I hadn't enough—enough—"

"Brains?" suggested Hamilton.

"Call is the word," said Bones. "I wasn't called—or if I was I was out—haw-haw! That's a rippin' little bit of persiflage, Miss Hamilton?"

"Be serious, Bones," said the girl; "you mustn't joke about things."

She put him through a cross-examination to discover the extent of his convictions. In self-defence Bones, with only the haziest idea of the doctrine he defended, summarily dismissed certain of Miss Hamilton's most precious beliefs.

"But, Bones," she persisted, "if I asked you to change—"

Bones shook his head.

"Dear old friend," he said solemnly, "there are two things I'll never do—alter the faith of my distant but happy youth, or listen to one disparagin' word about the jolliest old sister that ever—"

"That will do, Bones," she said, with dignity. "I can see that you don't like me as I thought you did—what do you think, Mr. Sanders?"

Sanders smiled.

"I can hardly judge—you see," he added apologetically, "I'm a Wesleyan too."

"Oh!" said Patricia, and fled in confusion.

Bones rose in silence, crossed to his chief and held out his hand.

"Brother," he said brokenly.

"What the devil are you doing?" snarled Sanders.

"Spoken like a true Christian, dear old Excellency and sir," murmured Bones. "We'll bring her back to the fold."

He stepped nimbly to the door, and the serviette ring that Sanders threw with unerring aim caught his angular shoulder as he vanished.

That same night Sanders had joyful news to impart. He came into the Residency to find Bones engaged in mastering the art of embroidery under the girl's tuition.

Sanders interrupted what promised to be a most artistic execution.

"Who says a joy-ride to the upper waters of the Isisi?"

Hamilton jumped up.

"Joy-ride?" he said, puzzled.

Sanders nodded.

"We leave to-morrow for the Lesser Isisi to settle a religious palaver—Bucongo of the Lesser Isisi is getting a little too enthusiastic a Christian, and Ahmet has been sending some queer reports. I've been putting off the palaver for weeks, but Administration says it has no objection to my making a picnic of duty—so we'll all go."

"Tri-umph!" said Hamilton. "Bones, leave your needlework and go overhaul the stores."

Bones, kneeling on a chair, his elbows on the table, looked up.

"As jolly old Francis Drake said when the Spanish Armada—"

"To the stores, you insubordinate beggar!" commanded Hamilton, and Bones made a hurried exit.

The accommodation of the *Zaire* was limited, but there was the launch, a light-draught boat which was seldom used except for tributary work.

"I could put Bones in charge of the *Wiggle*," he said, "but he'd be pretty sure to smash her up. Miss Hamilton will have my cabin, and you and I could take the two smaller cabins."

Bones, to whom it was put, leapt at the suggestion, brushing aside all objections. They were answered before they were framed.

As for the girl, she was beside herself with joy.

"Will there be any fighting?" she asked breathlessly. "Shall we be attacked?"

Sanders shook his head smilingly.

"All you have to do," said Bones confidently, "is to stick to me. Put your faith in old Bones. When you see the battle swayin' an' it isn't certain which way it's goin', look for my jolly old banner wavin' above the stricken field."

"And be sure it *is* his banner," interrupted Hamilton, "and not his large feet. Now the last time we had a fight...."

And he proceeded to publish and utter a scandalous libel, Bones protesting incoherently the while.

The expedition was on the point of starting when Hamilton took his junior aside.

"Bones," he said, not unkindly, "I know you're a whale of a navigator, and all that sort of thing, and my sister, who has an awfully keen sense of humour, would dearly love to see you at the helm of the *Wiggle*, but as the Commissioner wants to make a holiday, I think it would be best if you left the steering to one of the boys."

Bones drew himself up stiffly.

"Dear old officer," he said aggrieved, "I cannot think that you wish to speak disparagingly of my intelligence—"

"Get that silly idea out of your head," said Hamilton. "That is just what I'm trying to do."

"I'm under your jolly old orders, sir," Bones said with the air of an early Christian martyr, "and according to Paragraph 156 of King's Regulations—"

"Don't let us go into that," said Hamilton. "I'm not giving you any commands, I'm merely making a sensible suggestion. Of course, if you want to make an ass of yourself—"

"I have never had the slightest inclination that way, cheery old sir," said Bones, "and I'm not likely at my time of life to be influenced by my surroundings."

He saluted again and made his way to the barracks. Bones had a difficulty in packing his stores. In truth they had all been packed before he reached the *Wiggle*, and to an unprofessional eye they were packed very well indeed, but Bones had them turned out and packed *his* way. When that was done, and it was obvious to the meanest intelligence that the *Wiggle* was in terrible danger of capsizing before she started, the stores were unshipped and rearranged under the directions of the fuming Hamilton.

When the third packing was completed, the general effect bore a striking resemblance to the position of the stores as Bones had found them when he came to the boat. When everybody was ready to start, Bones remembered that he had forgotten his log-book, and there was another wait.

"Have you got everything now?" asked Sanders wearily, leaning over the rail.

"Everything, sir," said Bones, with a salute to his superior, and a smile to the girl.

"Have you got your hot-water bottle and your hair-curlers?" demanded Hamilton offensively.

Bones favoured him with a dignified stare, made a signal to the engineer, and the *Wiggle* started forward, as was her wont, with a jerk which put upon Bones the alternative of making a most undignified sprawl or clutching a very hot smoke-stack. He chose the latter, recovered his balance with an easy grace, punctiliously saluted the tiny flag of the *Zaire* as he whizzed past her, and under the very eyes of Hamilton, with all the calmness in the world, took the wheel from the steersman's hand and ran the *Wiggle* ashore.

All this he did in the brief space of three minutes.

"And," said Hamilton, exasperated to a degree, "if you'd only broken your infernal head, the accident would have been worth it."

It took half an hour for the *Wiggle* to get afloat again. She had run up the beach, and it was necessary to unload the stores, carry them back to the quay and reload her again.

"*Now* are you ready?" said Sanders.

"Ay, ay, sir," said Bones, abased but nautical.

Buongo, the chief of the Lesser Isisi folk, had a dispute with his brother-in-law touching a certain matter which affected his honour. It affected his life eventually, since his relative was found one morning dead of a spear-thrust. This Sanders discovered after the big trial which followed certain events described hereafter.

The brother-in-law in his malice had sworn that Buongo held communion with devils. It is a fact that Buongo had, at an early age, been captured by Catholic missionaries, and had spent an uncomfortable youth mastering certain mysterious rites and ceremonies. His brother-in-law had been in the blessed service of another missionary who taught that God lived in the river, and that to fully benefit by his ju-ju it was necessary to be immersed in the flowing stream.

Between the water-God men and the cross-God men there was ever a feud, each speaking disparagingly of the other, though converts to each creed had this in common, that neither understood completely the faith into which they were newly admitted. The advantage lay with the Catholic converts because they were given a pewter medal with hearts and sunlike radiations engraved thereon (this medal was admittedly a cure for toothache and pains in the stomach), whilst the Protestants had little beyond a mysterious something that they referred to as A'lamo—which means Grace.

But when taunted by their medal-flaunting rivals and challenged to produce this "Grace," they were crestfallen and ashamed, being obliged to admit that A'lamo was an invisible magic which (they stoutly affirmed) was nevertheless an excellent magic, since it preserved one from drowning and cured warts and boils.

Buongo, the most vigorous partisan of the cross-God men, and an innovator of ritual, found amusement in watching the Baptist missionaries standing knee-deep in the river washing the souls of the converts.

He had even been insolent to young Ferguson, the earnest leader of the American Baptist Mission, and to his intense amazement had been suddenly floored with a left-hander delivered by the sometime Harvard middle weight.

He carried his grievance and a lump on his jaw to Mr. Commissioner Sanders, who had arrived at the junction of the Isisi and the N'gomi rivers and was holding his palaver, and Sanders had been unsympathetic.

"Go worship your God in peace," said Sanders, "and let all other men worship theirs; and say no evil word to white men for these are very quick to anger. Also it is unbecoming that a black man should speak scornfully to his masters."

"Lord," said Buongo, "in heaven all men are as one, black or white."

"In heaven," said Sanders, "we will settle that palaver, but here on the river we hold our places by our merits. To-morrow I come to your village to inquire into certain practices of which the God-men know nothing—this palaver is finished."

Now Buongo was something more than a convert. He was a man of singular intelligence and of surprising originality. He had been a lay missionary of the Church, and had made many converts to a curious religion, the ritual of which was only half revealed to the good Jesuit fathers when at a great palaver which Buongo summoned to exhibit his converts, the Church service was interspersed with the sacrifice of a goat and a weird procession and dance which left the representative of The Order speechless. Buongo was called before a conference of the Mission and reprimanded.

He offered excuses, but there was sufficient evidence to prove that this enthusiastic Christian had gone systematically to work, to found what amounted to a religion of his own.

The position was a little delicate, and any other Order than the Jesuits might have hesitated to tackle a reform which meant losing a very large membership.

The fate of Buongo's congregation had been decided when, in his anger, he took canoe, and travelling for half a day, came to the principal Mission.

Father Carpentier, full-bearded, red of face and brawny of arm, listened in the shade of his hut, pulling thoughtfully at a long pipe.

"And so, Pentini," concluded Bucongo, "even Sandi puts shame upon me because I am a cross-God man, and he by all accounts is of the water-God ju-ju."

The father eyed this perturbed sheep of his flock thoughtfully.

"O Bucongo," he said gently, "in the river lands are many beasts. Those which fly and which swim; those that run swiftly and that hide in the earth. Now who of these is right?"

"Lord, they are all right but are of different ways," said Bucongo.

Father Carpentier nodded.

"Also in the forest are two ants—one who lives in tree nests, and one who has a home deep in the ground. They are of a kind, and have the same business. Yet God put it into the little heads of one to climb trees, and of the other to burrow deeply. Both are right and neither are wrong, save when the tree ant meets the ground ant and fights him. Then both are wrong."

The squatting Bucongo rose sullenly.

"Master," he said, "these mysteries are too much for a poor man. I think I know a better ju-ju, and to him I go."

"You have no long journey, Chief," said the father sternly, "for they tell me stories of ghost dances in the forest and a certain Bucongo who is the leader of these—and of a human sacrifice. Also of converts who are branded with a cross of hot iron."

The chief looked at his sometime tutor with face twisted and puckered with rage, and turning without a word, walked back to his canoe.

The next morning Father Carpentier sent a messenger to Sanders bearing an urgent letter, and Sanders read the closely written lines with a troubled frown.

He put down the letter and came out on to the deck, to find Hamilton fishing over the side of the steamer. Hamilton looked round.

"Anything wrong?" he asked quickly.

"Bucongo of the Lesser Isisi is wrong," said Sanders. "I have heard of his religious meetings and have been a little worried—there will be a big ju-ju palaver or I'm very much mistaken. Where is Bones?"

"He has taken my sister up the creek—Bones says there are any number of egrets' nests there, and I believe he is right."

Sanders frowned again.

"Send a canoe to fetch him back," he said. "That is Bucongo's territory, and I don't trust the devil."

"Which one—Bones or Bucongo?" asked Hamilton innocently.

But Sanders was not feeling humorous.

At that precise moment Bones was sitting before the most fantastic religious assembly that ecclesiastic or layman had ever attended.

Fate and Bones had led the girl through a very pleasant forest glade—they left the light-draught *Wiggle* half a mile down stream owing to the shoals which barred their progress, and had come upon Bucongo in an exalted moment.

With the assurance that he was doing no more than intrude upon one of those meetings which the missionizing Chief of the Lesser Isisi so frequently held, Bones stood on the outer fringe of the circle which sat in silence to watch an unwilling novice getting acquainted with Bucongo's god.

The novice was a girl, and she lay before an altar of stones surmounted by a misshapen *beti* who glared with his one eye upon the devout gathering. The novice lay rigid, for the excellent reason that she was roped foot and hands to two pegs in the ground.

Before the altar itself was a fire of wood in which two irons were heating.

Bones did not take this in for a moment, for he was gazing open-mouthed at Bucongo. On his head was an indubitable mitre, but around the mitre was bound a strip of skin from which was suspended a circle of dangling monkey tails. For cope he wore a leopard's robe. His face was streaked red with camwood, and around his eyes he had painted two white circles.

He was in the midst of a frenzied address when the two white visitors came upon the scene, and his hand was outstretched to take the red branding-iron when the girl at Bones's side, with a little gasp of horror, broke into the circle, and wrenching the rough iron from the attendant's hand, flung it towards the circle of spectators, which widened in consequence.

"How dare you—how dare you!" she demanded breathlessly, "you horrible-looking man!"

Bucongo glared at her but said nothing; then he turned to meet Bones.

In that second of time Bucongo had to make a great decision, and to overcome the habits of a lifetime. Training and education to the dominion of the white man half raised his hand to the salute; something that boiled and bubbled madly and set his shallow brain afire, something that was of his ancestry, wild, unreasoning, brutish, urged other action. Bones had his revolver half drawn when the knobbly end of the chief's killing-spear struck him between the eyes, and he went down on his knees.

Thus it came about, that he found himself sitting before Bucongo, his feet and hands tied with native grass, with the girl at his side in no better case.

She was very frightened, but this she did not show. She had the disadvantage of being unable to understand the light flow of offensive badinage which passed between her captor and Bones.

"O Tibbetti," said Bucongo, "you see me as a god—I have finished with all white men."

"Soon we shall finish with you, Bucongo," said Bones.

"I cannot die, Tibbetti," said the other with easy confidence, "that is the wonderful thing."

"Other men have said that," said Bones in the vernacular, "and their widows are wives again and have forgotten their widowhood."

"This is a new ju-ju, Tibbetti," said Bucongo, a strange light in his eyes. "I am the greatest of all cross-God men, and it is revealed to me that many shall follow me. Now you and the woman shall be the first of all white people to bear the mark of Bucongo the Blessed. And in the days to be you shall bare your breasts and say, 'Bucongo the Wonderful did this with his beautiful hands.'"

Bones was in a cold sweat and his mouth was dry. He scarcely dare look at the girl by his side.

"What does he say?" she asked in a low voice. Bones hesitated, and then haltingly he stammered the translation of the threat.

She nodded.

"O Bucongo," said Bones, with a sudden inspiration, "though you do evil, I will endure. But this you shall do and serve me. Brand me alone upon the chest, and upon the back. For if we be branded separately we are bound to one another, and you see how ugly this woman is with her thin nose and her pale eyes; also she has long hair like the grass which the weaver birds use for their nests."

He spoke loudly, eagerly, and it seemed convincingly, for Bucongo was in doubt. Truly the woman by all standards was very ugly. Her face was white and her lips thin. She was a narrow woman too, he thought, like one underfed.

"This you shall do for me, Bucongo," urged Bones; "for gods do not do evil things, and it would be bad to marry me to this ugly woman who has no hips and has an evil tongue."

Bucongo was undecided.

"A god may do no evil," he said; "but I do not know the ways of white men. If it be true, then I will mark you twice, Tibbetti, and you shall be my man for ever; and the woman I will not touch."

"Cheer oh!" said Bones.

"What are you saying—will he let us go?" asked the girl.

"I was sayin' what a jolly row there'll be," lied Bones; "and he was sayin' that he couldn't think of hurtin' a charmin' lady like you. Shut your eyes, dear old Miss Hamilton."

She shut them quickly, half fainting with terror, for Bucongo was coming towards them, a blazing iron in his hand, a smile of simple benevolence upon his not unintelligent face.

"This shall come as a blessing to you, Tibbetti," he said almost jovially.

Bones shut his teeth and waited.

The hot iron was scorching his silk shirt when a voice hailed the high-priest of the newest of cults.

"O Bucongo," it said.

Bucongo turned with a grimace of fear and cringed backward before the levelled Colt of Mr. Commissioner Sanders.

"Tell me now," said Sanders in his even tone, "can such a man as you die? Think, Bucongo."

"Lord," said Bucongo huskily, "I think I can die."

"We shall see," said Sanders.

It was not until after dinner that night that the girl had recovered sufficiently to discuss her exciting morning.

"I think you were an awful brute," she addressed her unabashed brother. "You were standing in the wood listening to and seeing everything, and never came till the last minute."

"It was my fault," interrupted Sanders. "I wanted to see how far the gentle Bucongo would go."

"Dooeed thoughtless," murmured Bones under his breath, but audible.

She looked at him long and earnestly then turned again to her brother.

"There is one thing I want to know," she said. "What was Bones saying when he talked to that horrible man? Do you know that Bones was scowling at me as though I was ... I hardly know how to express it. Was he saying nice things?"

Hamilton looked up at the awning, and cleared his throat.

"Play the game, dear old sir and brother-officer," croaked Bones.

"He said—" began Hamilton.

"Live an' let live," pleaded Bones, all of a twitter. "*Esprit de corps* an' discretion, jolly old captain."

Hamilton looked at his subordinate steadily.

"He asked to be branded twice in order that you might not be branded once," he said quietly.

The girl stared at Bones, and her eyes were full of tears.

"Oh, Bones!" she said, with a little catch in her voice, "you ... you are a sportsman."

"Carry on," said Bones incoherently, and wept a little at the realization of that magnificent moment.

CHAPTER III

THE MAKER OF STORMS

Everybody knows that water drawn from rivers is very bad water, for the rivers are the Roads of the Dead, and in the middle of those nights when the merest rind of a moon shows, and this slither of light and two watchful stars form a triangle pointing to the earth, the spirits rise from their graves and walk, "singing deadly songs," towards the lower star which is the source of all rivers. If you should be—which God forbid—on one of those lonely island graveyards on such nights you will see strange sights.

The broken cooking-pots which rest on the mounds and the rent linen which flutters from little sticks stuck about the graves, grow whole and new again. The pots are red and hot as they come from the fire, and the pitiful cloths take on the sheen of youth and fold themselves about invisible forms. None may see the dead, though it is said that you may see the babies.

These the wise men have watched playing at the water's edge, crowing and chuckling in the universal language of their kind, staggering groggily along the shelving beach with outspread arms balancing their uncertain steps. On such nights when M'sa beckons the dead world to the source of all rivers, the middle islands are crowded with babies—the dead babies of a thousand years. Their spirits come up from the unfathomed deeps of the great river and call their mortality from graves.

"How may the waters of the river be acceptable?" asks the shuddering N'gombi mother.

Therefore the N'gombi gather their water from the skies in strange cisterns of wicker, lined with the leaf of a certain plant which is impervious, and even carry their drinking supplies with them when they visit the river itself.

There was a certain month in the year, which will be remembered by all who attempted the crossing of the Kasai Forest to the south of the N'gombi country, when pools and rivulets suddenly dried—so suddenly, indeed, that even the crocodiles, who have an instinct for coming drought, were left high and dry, in some cases miles from the nearest water, and when the sun rose in a sky unflecked by cloud and gave place at nights to a sky so brilliant and so menacing in their fierce and fiery nearness that men went mad.

Toward the end of this month, when an exasperating full moon advertised a continuance of the dry spell by its very whiteness, the Chief Koosogolaba-Muchini, or, as he was called, Muchini, summoned a council of his elder men, and they came with parched throats and fear of death.

"All men know," said Muchini, "what sorrow has come to us, for there is a more powerful ju-ju in the land than I remember. He has made M'shimba M'shamba afraid so that he has gone away and walks no more in the forest with his terrible lightning. Also K'li, the father of pools, has gone into the earth and all his little children, and I think we shall die, every one of us."

There was a skinny old man, with a frame like a dried goatskin, who made a snuffling noise when he spoke.

"O Muchini," he said, "when I was a young man there was a way to bring M'shimba M'shamba which was most wonderful. In those days we took a young maiden and hung her upon a tree—"

"Those old ways were good," interrupted Muchini; "but I tell you, M'bonia, that we can follow no more the old ways since Sandi came to the land, for he is a cruel man and hanged my own mother's brother for that fine way of yours. Yet we cannot sit and die because of certain magic which the Stone Breaker is practising."

Now Bula Matadi ("The Stone Breaker") was in those days the mortal enemy of the N'gombi people, who were wont to ascribe all their misfortunes to his machinations. To Bula Matadi (which was the generic name by which the Government of the Congo Free State was known) was traceable the malign perversity of game, the blight of crops, the depredations of weaver birds. Bula Matadi

encouraged leopards to attack isolated travellers, and would on great occasions change the seasons of the year that the N'gombi's gardens might come to ruin.

"It is known from one end of the earth to the other that I am a most cunning man," Muchini went on, stroking his muscular arm, a trick of self-satisfied men in their moments of complacency; "and whilst even the old men slept, I, Koosogolaba-Muchini, the son of the terrible and crafty G'sombo, the brother of Eleni-N'gombi, I went abroad with my wise men and my spies and sought out devils and ghosts in places where even the bravest have never been," he lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper, "to the Ewa-Ewa Mongo, the Very Place of Death."

The gasp of horror from his audience was very satisfying to this little chief of the Inner N'gombi, and here was a moment suitable for his climax.

"And behold!" he cried.

By his side was something covered with a piece of native cloth. This covering he removed with a flourish and revealed a small yellow box.

It was most certainly no native manufacture, for its angles were clamped with neat brass corner-pieces set flush in the polished wood.

The squatting councillors watched their lord as with easy familiarity he opened the lid.

There were twenty tiny compartments, and in each was a slender glass tube, corked and heavily sealed, whilst about the neck of each tube was a small white label covered with certain devil marks.

Muchini waited until the sensation he had prepared had had its full effect.

"By the Great River which runs to the Allamdani,"¹ he said slowly and impressively, "were white men who had been sent by Bula Matadi to catch ghosts. For I saw them, I and my wise men, when the moon was calling all spirits. They were gathered by the river with little nets and little gourds and they caught the waters. Also they caught little flies and other foolish things and took them to their tent. Then my young men and I waited, and when all were gone away we went to their tents and found his magic box—which is full of devils of great power—Ro!"

He leapt to his feet, his eye gleaming. Across the starry dome of the sky there had flicked a quick flare of light.

There came a sudden uneasy stirring of leaves, a hushed whisper of things as though the forest had been suddenly awakened from sleep.

Then an icy cold breeze smote his cheek, and staring upward, he saw the western stars disappearing in swathes behind the tumbling clouds.

"M'shimba M'shamba—he lives!" he roared, and the crash of thunder in the forest answered him.

Bosambo, Chief of the Ochori, was on the furthest edge of the forest, for he was following the impulse of his simple nature and was hunting in a country where he had no right to be. The storm (which he cursed, having no scruples about river and water, and being wholly sceptical as to ghosts) broke with all its fury over his camp and passed. Two nights later, he sat before the rough hut his men had built, discussing the strange ways of the antelope, when he suddenly stopped and listened, lowering his head till it almost touched the ground.

Clear to his keen ears came the rattle of the distant lokali—the drum that sends messages from village to village and from nation to nation.

"O Secundi," said Bosambo, with a note of seriousness in his voice, "I have not heard that call for many moons—for it is the war call of the N'gombi."

"Lord, it is no war call," said the old man, shifting his feet for greater comfort, "yet it is a call which may mean war, for it calls spears to a dance, and it is strange, for the N'gombi have no enemies."

"All men are the enemies of the N'gombi," Bosambo quoted a river saying as old as the sun.

He listened again, then rose.

¹ This was evidently the Sanga River.

"You shall go back and gather me a village of spears, and bring them to the borderland near the road that crosses the river," he said.

"On my life," said the other.

Muchini, Chief of the Inner N'gombi, a most inflated man and a familiar of magical spirits, gathered his spears to some purpose, for two days later Bosambo met him by his border and the chiefs greeted one another between two small armies.

"Which way do you go, Muchini?" asked Bosambo.

Now, between Muchini and the Chief of the Ochori was a grievance dating back to the big war, when Bosambo had slain the N'gombi chief of the time with his own hands.

"I go to the river to call a palaver of all free men," said Muchini; "for I tell you this, Bosambo, that I have found a great magic which will make us greater than Sandi, and it has been prophesied that I shall be a king over a thousand times a thousand spears. For I have a small box which brings even M'shimba to my call."

Bosambo, a head and shoulders taller than the other, waved his hand towards the forest path which leads eventually to the Ochori city.

"Here is a fine moment for you, Muchini," he said, "and you shall try your great magic on me and upon my young men. For I say that you do not go by this way, neither you nor your warriors, since I am the servant of Sandi and of his King, and he has sent me here to keep his peace; go back to your village, for this is the way to Death."

Muchini glared at his enemy.

"Yet this way I go, Bosambo," he said huskily, and looked over his shoulder towards his followers.

Bosambo swung round on one heel, an arm and a leg outstretched in the attitude of an athlete who is putting the shot. Muchini threw up his wicker shield and pulled back his stabbing-spear, but he was a dead man before the weapon was poised.

Thus ended the war, and the N'gombi folk went home, never so much as striking a blow for the yellow box which Bosambo claimed for himself as his own personal loot.

At the time, Mr. Commissioner Sanders, C.M.G., was blissfully ignorant of the miraculous happenings which have been recorded. He was wholly preoccupied by the novelty which the presence of Patricia Hamilton offered. Never before had a white woman made her home at the Residency, and it changed things a little.

She was at times an embarrassment.

When Fubini, the witch-doctor of the Akasava, despatched five maidens to change Sandi's wicked heart—Sanders had sent Fubini to the Village of Irons for six months for preaching unauthorized magic—they came, in the language of Bones, "dooedly undressed," and Patricia had beaten a hurried retreat.

She was sometimes an anxiety, as I have already shown, but was never a nuisance. She brought to headquarters an aroma of English spring, a clean fragrance that refreshed the heat-jaded Commissioner and her brother, but which had no perceptible influence upon Bones.

That young officer called for her one hot morning, and Hamilton, sprawling on a big cane chair drawn to the shadiest and breeziest end of the verandah, observed that Bones carried a wooden box, a drawing-board, a pad of paper, two pencils imperfectly concealed behind his large ear, and a water-bottle.

"Shop!" said Hamilton lazily. "Forward, Mr. Bones—what can we do for you this morning?"

Bones shaded his eyes and peered into the cool corner.

"Talkin' in your sleep, dear old Commander," he said pleasantly, "dreamin' of the dear old days beyond recall."

He struck an attitude and lifted his unmusical voice—

"When life was gay, heigho!
Tum tum te tay, heigho!
Oh, tiddly umpty humpty umty do,
When life was gay—dear old officer—heigho!"

Patricia Hamilton stepped out to the verandah in alarm.

"Oh, please, don't make that hooting noise," she appealed to her brother. "I'm writing—"

"Don't be afraid," said Hamilton, "it was only Bones singing. Do it again, Bones, Pat didn't hear you."

Bones stood erect, his hand to his white helmet.

"Come aboard, my lady," he said.

"I won't keep you a minute, Bones," said the girl, and disappeared into the house.

"What are you doing this morning?" asked Hamilton, gazing with pardonable curiosity at the box and drawing-board.

"Polishin' up my military studies with Miss Hamilton's kind assistance—botany and applied science, sir," said Bones briskly. "Field fortifications, judgin' distance, strategy, Bomongo grammar, field cookery an' tropical medicines."

"What has poor little making-up-company-accounts done?" asked Hamilton, and Bones blushed.

"Dear old officer," he begged, "I'll tackle that little job as soon as I get back. I tried to do 'em this mornin' an was four dollars out—it's the regimental cash account that's wrong. People come in and out helpin' themselves, and I positively can't keep track of the money."

"As I'm the only person with the key of the regimental cash-box, I suppose you mean—?"

Bones raised his hand.

"I make no accusations, dear old feller—it's a painful subject. We all have those jolly old moments of temptation. I tackle the accounts to-night, sir. You mustn't forget that I've a temperament. I'm not like you dear old wooden-heads—"

"Oh, shut up," said the weary Hamilton. "So long as you're going to do a bit of study, it's all right."

"Now, Bones," said Patricia, appearing on the scene, "have you got the sandwiches?"

Bones made terrifying and warning grimaces.

"Have you got the board to lay the cloth and the paper to cover it, and the chocolates and the cold tea?"

Bones frowned, and jerked his head in an agony of warning.

"Come on, then," said the unconscious betrayer of Lieutenant Tibbetts. "Good-bye, dear."

"Why 'good-bye,' dear old Hamilton's sister?" asked Bones.

She looked at him scornfully and led the way.

"Don't forget the field fortifications," called Hamilton after them; "they eat nicely between slices of strategy."

The sun was casting long shadows eastward when they returned. They had not far to come, for the place they had chosen for their picnic was well within the Residency reservation, but Bones had been describing on his way back one of the remarkable powers he possessed, namely, his ability to drag the truth from reluctant and culpable natives. And every time he desired to emphasize the point he would stop, lower all his impedimenta to the ground, cluttering up the landscape with picnic-box, drawing-board, sketching-blocks and the numerous bunches of wild flowers he had culled at her request, and press his argument with much palm-punching.

He stopped for the last time on the very edge of the barrack square, put down his cargo and proceeded to demolish the doubt she had unwarily expressed.

"That's where you've got an altogether erroneous view of me, dear old sister," he said triumphantly. "I'm known up an' down the river as the one man that you can't deceive. Go up and ask the Bomongo, drop in on the Isisi, speak to the Akasava, an' what will they say? They'll say, 'No, ma'am, there's no flies on jolly old Bones—not on your life, Harriet!'"

"Then they would be very impertinent," smiled Pat.

"Ask Sanders (God bless him!). Ask Ham. Ask—" he was going on enthusiastically.

"Are you going to camp here, or are you coming in?" she challenged.

Bones gathered up his belongings, never ceasing to talk.

"Fellers like me, dear young friend, make the Empire—paint the whole bally thing red, white an' blue—'unhonoured an' unsung, until the curtain's rung, the boys that made the Empire and the Navy.'"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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