

Wallace Edgar

Sanders of the River



Edgar Wallace

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CHAPTER I THE EDUCATION OF THE KING

Mr. Commissioner Sanders had graduated to West Central Africa by such easy stages that he did not realise when his acquaintance with the back lands began. Long before he was called upon by the British Government to keep a watchful eye upon some quarter of a million cannibal folk, who ten years before had regarded white men as we regard the unicorn; he had met the Basuto, the Zulu, the Fingo, the Pondo, Matabele, Mashona, Barotse, Hottentot, and Bechuana. Then curiosity and interest took him westward and northward, and he met the Angola folk, then northward to the Congo, westward to the Masai, and finally, by way of the Pigmy people, he came to his own land.

Now, there is a subtle difference between all these races, a difference that only such men as Sanders know.

It is not necessarily a variety of colour, though some are brown and some yellow, and some – a very few – jet black. The difference is in character. By Sanders' code you trusted all natives up to the same point, as you trust children, with a few notable exceptions. The Zulu were men, the Basuto were men, yet childlike in their grave faith. The black men who wore the fez were subtle, but trustworthy; but the brown men of the Gold Coast, who talked English, wore European clothing, and called one another "Mr.," were Sanders' pet abomination.

Living so long with children of a larger growth, it follows that he absorbed many of their childlike qualities. Once, on furlough in London, a confidence trick was played on him, and only his natural honesty pulled him out of a ridiculous scrape. For, when the gold-brick man produced his dull metal ingot, all Sanders' moral nerves stood endways, and he ran the confiding "bunco steerer" to the nearest station, charging him, to the astonishment of a sorely-puzzled policeman, with "I.G.B.," which means illicit gold buying. Sanders did not doubt that the ingot was gold, but he was equally certain that the gold was not honestly come by. His surprise when he found that the "gold" was gold-leaf imposed upon the lead of commerce was pathetic.

You may say of Sanders that he was a statesman, which means that he had no exaggerated opinion of the value of individual human life. When he saw a dead leaf on the plant of civilisation, he plucked it off, or a weed growing with his "flowers" he pulled it up, not stopping to consider the weed's equal right to life. When a man, whether he was *capita* or slave, by his bad example endangered the peace of his country, Sanders fell upon him. In their unregenerate days, the Isisi called him "Ogani Isisi," which means "The Little Butcher Bird," and certainly in that time Sanders was prompt to hang. He governed a people three hundred miles beyond the fringe of civilisation. Hesitation to act, delay in awarding punishment, either of these two things would have been mistaken for weakness amongst a people who had neither power to reason, nor will to excuse, nor any large charity.

In the land which curves along the borders of Togo the people understand punishment to mean pain and death, and nothing else counts. There was a foolish Commissioner who was a great humanitarian, and he went up to Akasava – which is the name of this land – and tried moral suasion.

It was a raiding palaver. Some of the people of Akasava had crossed the river to Ochori and stolen women and goats, and I believe there was a man or two killed, but that is unimportant. The goats and the women were alive, and cried aloud for vengeance. They cried so loud that down at headquarters they were heard and Mr. Commissioner Niceman – that was not his name, but it will

serve – went up to see what all the noise was about. He found the Ochori people very angry, but more frightened.

"If," said their spokesman, "they will return our goats, they may keep the women, because the goats are very valuable."

So Mr. Commissioner Niceman had a long, long palaver that lasted days and days, with the chief of the Akasava people and his councillors, and in the end moral suasion triumphed, and the people promised on a certain day, at a certain hour, when the moon was in such a quarter and the tide at such a height, the women should be returned and the goats also.

So Mr. Niceman returned to headquarters, swelling with admiration for himself and wrote a long report about his genius and his administrative abilities, and his knowledge of the native, which was afterwards published in Blue Book (Africa) 7943-96.

It so happened that Mr. Niceman immediately afterwards went home to England on furlough, so that he did not hear the laments and woeful wailings of the Ochori folk when they did not get their women or their goats.

Sanders, working round the Isisi River, with ten Houssas and an attack of malaria, got a helio message:

"Go Akasava and settle that infernal woman palaver. – Administration."

So Sanders girded up his loins, took 25 grains of quinine, and leaving his good work – he was searching for M'Beli, the witch-doctor, who had poisoned a friend – trekked across country for the Akasava.

In the course of time he came to the city and was met by the chief.

"What about these women?" he asked.

"We will have a palaver," said the chief. "I will summon my headmen and my councillors."

"Summon nothing," said Sanders shortly. "Send back the women and the goats you stole from the Ochori."

"Master," said the chief, "at full moon, which is our custom, when the tide is so, and all signs of gods and devils are propitious, I will do as you bid."

"Chief," said Sanders, tapping the ebony chest of the other with the thin end of his walking-stick, "moon and river, gods or devils, those women and the goats go back to the Ochori folk by sunset, or I tie you to a tree and flog you till you bleed."

"Master," said the chief, "the women shall be returned."

"And the goats," said Sanders.

"As to the goats," said the chief airily, "they are dead, having been killed for a feast."

"You will bring them back to life," said Sanders.

"Master, do you think I am a magician?" asked the chief of the Akasava.

"I think you are a liar," said Sanders impartially, and there the palaver finished.

That night goats and women returned to the Ochori, and Sanders prepared to depart.

He took aside the chief, not desiring to put shame upon him or to weaken his authority.

"Chief," he said, "it is a long journey to Akasava, and I am a man fulfilling many tasks. I desire that you do not cause me any further journey to this territory."

"Master," said the chief truthfully, "I never wish to see you again."

Sanders smiled aside, collected his ten Houssas, and went back to the Isisi River to continue his search for M'Beli.

It was not a nice search for many causes, and there was every reason to believe, too, that the king of Isisi himself was the murderer's protector. Confirmation of this view came one morning when Sanders, encamped by the Big River, was taking a breakfast of tinned milk and toast. There arrived hurriedly Sato-Koto, the brother of the king, in great distress of mind, for he was a fugitive from the king's wrath. He babbled forth all manner of news, in much of which Sanders took no interest whatever. But what he said of the witch-doctor who lived in the king's shadow was very interesting

indeed, and Sanders sent a messenger to headquarters, and, as it transpired, headquarters despatched in the course of time Mr. Niceman – who by this time had returned from furlough – to morally "suade" the king of the Isisi.

From such evidence as we have been able to collect it is evident that the king was not in a melting mood. It is an indisputable fact that poor Niceman's head, stuck on a pole before the king's hut, proclaimed the king's high spirits.

H.M.S. *St. George*, H.M.S. *Thrush*, H.M.S. *Philomel*, H.M.S. *Phoebe* sailed from Simonstown, and H.M.S. *Dwarf* came down from Sierra Leone *hec dum*, and in less than a month after the king killed his guest he wished he hadn't.

Headquarters sent Sanders to clear up the political side of the mess.

He was shown round what was left of the king's city by the flag-lieutenant of the *St. George*.

"I am afraid," said that gentleman, apologetically, "I am afraid that you will have to dig out a new king; we've rather killed the old one."

Sanders nodded.

"I shall not go into mourning," he said.

There was no difficulty in finding candidates for the vacant post. Sato-Koto, the dead king's brother, expressed his willingness to assume the cares of office with commendable promptitude.

"What do you say?" asked the admiral, commanding the expedition.

"I say no, sir," said Sanders, without hesitation. "The king has a son, a boy of nine; the kingship must be his. As for Sato-Koto, he shall be regent at pleasure."

And so it was arranged, Sato-Koto sulkily assenting.

They found the new king hidden in the woods with the women folk, and he tried to bolt, but Sanders caught him and led him back to the city by the ear.

"My boy," he said kindly, "how do people call you?"

"Peter, master," whimpered the wriggling lad; "in the fashion of the white people."

"Very well," said Sanders, "you shall be King Peter, and rule this country wisely and justly according to custom and the law. And you shall do hurt to none, and put shame on none nor shall you kill or raid or do any of the things that make life worth living, and if you break loose, may the Lord help you!"

Thus was King Peter appointed monarch of the Isisi people, and Sanders went back to headquarters with the little army of bluejackets and Houssas, for M'Beli, the witch-doctor, had been slain at the taking of the city, and Sanders' work was finished.

The story of the taking of Isisi village, and the crowning of the young king, was told in the London newspapers, and lost nothing in the telling. It was so described by the special correspondents, who accompanied the expedition, that many dear old ladies of Bayswater wept, and many dear young ladies of Mayfair said: "How sweet!" and the outcome of the many emotions which the description evoked was the sending out from England of Miss Clinton Calbraith, who was an M.A., and unaccountably pretty.

She came out to "mother" the orphan king, to be a mentor and a friend. She paid her own passage, but the books which she brought and the school paraphernalia that filled two large packing cases were subscribed for by the tender readers of *Tiny Toddlers*, a magazine for infants. Sanders met her on the landing-stage, being curious to see what a white woman looked like.

He put a hut at her disposal and sent the wife of his coast clerk to look after her.

"And now, Miss Calbraith," he said, at dinner that night, "what do you expect to do with Peter?"

She tilted her pretty chin in the air reflectively.

"We shall start with the most elementary of lessons – the merest kindergarten, and gradually work up. I shall teach him calisthenics, a little botany – Mr. Sanders, you're laughing."

"No, I wasn't," he hastened to assure her; "I always make a face like that – er – in the evening. But tell me this – do you speak the language – Swaheli, Bomongo, Fingi?"

"That will be a difficulty," she said thoughtfully.

"Will you take my advice?" he asked.

"Why, yes."

"Well, learn the language." She nodded. "Go home and learn it." She frowned. "It will take you about twenty-five years."

"Mr. Sanders," she said, not without dignity, "you are pulling – you are making fun of me."

"Heaven forbid!" said Sanders piously, "that I should do anything so wicked."

The end of the story, so far as Miss Clinton Calbraith was concerned, was that she went to Isisi, stayed three days, and came back incoherent.

"He is not a child!" she said wildly; "he is – a – a little devil!"

"So I should say," said Sanders philosophically.

"A king? It is disgraceful! He lives in a mud hut and wears no clothes. If I'd known!"

"A child of nature," said Sanders blandly. "You didn't expect a sort of Louis Quinze, did you?"

"I don't know what I expected," she said desperately; "but it was impossible to stay – quite impossible."

"Obviously," murmured Sanders.

"Of course, I knew he would be black," she went on; "and I knew that – oh, it was too horrid!"

"The fact of it is, my dear young lady," said Sanders, "Peter wasn't as picturesque as you imagined him; he wasn't the gentle child with pleading eyes; and he lives messy – is that it?"

This was not the only attempt ever made to educate Peter. Months afterwards, when Miss Calbraith had gone home and was busily writing her famous book, "Alone in Africa: by an English Gentlewoman," Sanders heard of another educative raid. Two members of an Ethiopian mission came into Isisi by the back way. The Ethiopian mission is made up of Christian black men, who, very properly, basing their creed upon Holy Writ, preach the gospel of Equality. A black man is as good as a white man any day of the week, and infinitely better on Sundays if he happens to be a member of the Reformed Ethiopian Church.

They came to Isisi and achieved instant popularity, for the kind of talk they provided was very much to the liking of Sato-Koto and the king's councillors.

Sanders sent for the missionaries. The first summons they refused to obey, but they came on the second occasion, because the message Sanders sent was at once peremptory and ominous.

They came to headquarters, two cultured American negroes of good address and refined conversation. They spoke English faultlessly, and were in every sense perfect gentlemen.

"We cannot understand the character of your command," said one, "which savours somewhat of interference with the liberty of the subject."

"You'll understand me better," said Sanders, who knew his men, "when I tell you that I cannot allow you to preach sedition to my people."

"Sedition, Mr. Sanders!" said the negro in shocked tones. "That is a grave charge."

Sanders took a paper from a pigeon-hole in his desk; the interview took place in his office.

"On such a date," he said, "you said this, and this, and that."

In other words he accused them of overstepping the creed of Equality and encroaching upon the borderland of political agitation.

"Lies!" said the elder of the two, without hesitation.

"Truth or lies," he said, "you go no more to Isisi."

"Would you have the heathen remain in darkness?" asked the man, in reproach. "Is the light we kindle too bright, master?"

"No," said Sanders, "but a bit too warm."

So he committed the outrage of removing the Ethiopians from the scene of their earnest labours, in consequence of which questions were asked in Parliament.

Then the chief of the Akasava people – an old friend – took a hand in the education of King Peter. Akasava adjoins that king's territory, and the chief came to give hints in military affairs.

He came with drums a-beating, with presents of fish and bananas and salt.

"You are a great king!" he said to the sleepy-eyed boy who sat on a stool of state, regarding him with open-mouthed interest. "When you walk the world shakes at your tread; the mighty river that goes flowing down to the big water parts asunder at your word, the trees of the forest shiver, and the beasts go slinking to cover when your mightiness goes abroad."

"Oh, ko, ko!" giggled the king, pleasantly tickled.

"The white men fear you," continued the chief of the Akasava; "they tremble and hide at your roar."

Sato-Koto, standing at the king's elbow, was a practical man.

"What seek ye, chief?" he asked, cutting short the compliments.

So the chief told him of a land peopled by cowards, rich with the treasures of the earth, goats, and women.

"Why do you not take them yourself?" demanded the regent.

"Because I am a slave," said the chief; "the slave of Sandi, who would beat me. But you, lord, are of the great; being king's headman, Sandi would not beat you because of your greatness."

There followed a palaver, which lasted two days.

"I shall have to do something with Peter," wrote Sanders despairingly to the Administrator; "the little beggar has gone on the war-path against those unfortunate Ochori. I should be glad if you would send me a hundred men, a Maxim, and a bundle of rattan canes; I'm afraid I must attend to Peter's education myself."

"Lord, did I not speak the truth?" said the Akasava chief in triumph. "Sandi has done nothing! Behold, we have wasted the city of the Ochori, and taken their treasure, and the white man is dumb because of your greatness! Let us wait till the moon comes again, and I will show you another city."

"You are a great man," bleated the king, "and some day you shall build your hut in the shadow of my palace."

"On that day," said the chief, with splendid resignation, "I shall die of joy."

When the moon had waxed and waned and come again, a pencilled silver hoop of light in the eastern sky, the Isisi warriors gathered with spear and broad-bladed sword, with *ingola* on their bodies, and clay in their hair.

They danced a great dance by the light of a huge fire, and all the women stood round, clapping their hands rhythmically.

In the midst of this there arrived a messenger in a canoe, who prostrated himself before the king, saying:

"Master, one day's march from here is Sandi; he has with him five score of soldiers and the brass gun which says: 'Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!'"

A silence reigned in court circles, which was broken by the voice of the Akasava chief.

"I think I will go home," he said. "I have a feeling of sickness; also, it is the season when my goats have their young."

"Do not be afraid," said Sato-Koto brutally. "The king's shadow is over you, and he is so mighty that the earth shakes at his tread, and the waters of the big river part at his footfall; also, the white men fear him."

"Nevertheless," said the chief, with some agitation, "I must go, for my youngest son is sickening with fever, and calls all the time for me."

"Stay!" said the regent, and there was no mistaking his tone.

Sanders did not come the next day, nor the next. He was moving leisurely, traversing a country where many misunderstandings existed that wanted clearing up. When he arrived, having sent a messenger ahead to carry the news of his arrival, he found the city peaceably engaged.

The women were crushing corn, the men smoking, the little children playing and sprawling about the streets.

He halted at the outskirts of the city, on a hillock that commanded the main street, and sent for the regent.

"Why must I send for you?" he asked. "Why does the king remain in his city when I come? This is shame."

"Master," said Sato-Koto, "it is not fitting that a great king should so humble himself."

Sanders was neither amused nor angry. He was dealing with a rebellious people, and his own fine feelings were as nothing to the peace of the land.

"It would seem that the king has had bad advisers," he reflected aloud, and Sato-Koto shuffled uneasily.

"Go, now, and tell the king to come – for I am his friend."

The regent departed, but returned again alone.

"Lord, he will not come," he said sullenly.

"Then I will go to him," said Sanders.

King Peter, sitting before his hut, greeted Mr. Commissioner with downcast eyes.

Sanders' soldiers, spread in a semi-circle before the hut, kept the rabble at bay.

"King," said Sanders – he carried in his hand a rattan cane of familiar shape, and as he spoke he whiffled it in the air, making a little humming noise – "stand up!"

"Wherefore?" said Sato-Koto.

"That you shall see," said Sanders.

The king rose reluctantly, and Sanders grabbed him by the scruff of his neck.

Swish!

The cane caught him most undesirably, and he sprang into the air with a yell.

Swish, swish, swish!

Yelling and dancing, throwing out wild hands to ward off the punishment, King Peter blubbered for mercy.

"Master!" Sato-Koto, his face distorted with rage, reached for his spear.

"Shoot that man if he interferes," said Sanders, without releasing the king.

The regent saw the levelled rifles and stepped back hastily.

"Now," said Sanders, throwing down the cane, "now we will play a little game."

"Wow-wow – oh, ko!" sobbed his majesty.

"I go back to the forest," said Sanders. "By and by a messenger shall come to you, saying that the Commissioner is on his way. Do you understand?"

"Yi-hi!" sobbed the king.

"Then will you go out with your councillors and your old men and await my coming according to custom. Is that clear?"

"Ye-es, master," whimpered the boy.

"Very good," said Sanders, and withdrew his troops.

In half an hour came a grave messenger to the king, and the court went out to the little hill to welcome the white man.

This was the beginning of King Peter's education, for thus was he taught obedience.

Sanders went into residence in the town of Isisi, and held court.

"Sato-Koto," he said on the second day, "do you know the village of Ikan?"

"Yes, master; it is two days' journey into the bush."

Sanders nodded.

"You will take your wives, your children, your servants, and your possessions to the village of Ikan, there to stay until I give you leave to return. The palaver is finished."

Next came the chief of the Akasava, very ill at ease.

"Lord, if any man says I did you wrong, he lies," said the chief.

"Then I am a liar!" said Sanders. "For I say that you are an evil man, full of cunning."

"If it should be," said the chief, "that you order me to go to my village as you have ordered Sato-Koto, I will go, since he who is my father is not pleased with me."

"That I order," said Sanders; "also, twenty strokes with a stick, for the good of your soul. Furthermore, I would have you remember that down by Tembeli on the great river there is a village where men labour in chains because they have been unfaithful to the Government and have practised abominations."

So the chief of the Akasava people went out to punishment.

There were other matters requiring adjustment, but they were of a minor character, and when these were all settled to the satisfaction of Sanders, but by no means to the satisfaction of the subjects, the Commissioner turned his attention to the further education of the king.

"Peter," he said, "to-morrow when the sun comes up I go back to my own village, leaving you without councillors."

"Master, how may I do without councillors, since I am a young boy?" asked the king, crestfallen and chastened.

"By saying to yourself when a man calls for justice: 'If I were this man how should I desire the king's justice?'"

The boy looked unhappy.

"I am very young," he repeated; "and to-day there come many from outlying villages seeking redress against their enemies."

"Very good," said Sanders. "To-day I will sit at the king's right hand and learn of his wisdom."

The boy stood on one leg in his embarrassment, and eyed Sanders askance.

There is a hillock behind the town. A worn path leads up to it, and a-top is a thatched hut without sides. From this hillock you see the broad river with its sandy shoals, where the crocodiles sleep with open mouth; you see the rising ground toward Akasava, hills that rise one on top of the other, covered with a tangle of vivid green. In this house sits the king in judgment, beckoning the litigants forward. Sato-Koto was wont to stand by the king, bartering justice.

To-day Sato-Koto was preparing to depart and Sanders sat by the king's side.

There were indeed many litigants.

There was a man who had bought a wife, giving no less than a thousand rods and two bags of salt for her. He had lived for three months with her, when she departed from his house.

"Because," said the man philosophically, "she had a lover. Therefore, Mighty Sun of Wisdom, I desire the return of my rods and my salt."

"What say you?" said Sanders.

The king wriggled uncomfortably.

"What says the father?" he said hesitatingly, and Sanders nodded.

"That is a wise question," he approved, and called the father, a voluble and an eager old man.

"Now, king," he said hurriedly, "I sold this woman, my daughter; how might I know her mind? Surely I fulfil my contract when the woman goes to the man. How shall a father control when a husband fails?"

Sanders looked at the king again, and the boy drew a long breath.

"It would seem, M'bleni, that the woman, your daughter, lived many years in your hut, and if you do not know her mind you are either a great fool or she is a cunning one. Therefore, I judge that you sold this woman knowing her faults. Yet the husband might accept some risk also. You shall take back your daughter and return 500 rods and a bag of salt, and if it should be that your daughter marries again, you shall pay one-half of her dowry to this man."

Very, very slowly he gave judgment, hesitatingly, anxiously, glancing now and again to the white man for his approval.

"That was good," said Sanders, and called forward another pleader.

"Lord king," said the new plaintiff, "a man has put an evil curse on me and my family, so that they sicken."

Here was a little poser for the little judge, and he puzzled the matter out in silence, Sanders offering no help.

"How does he curse you?" at last asked the king.

"With the curse of death," said the complainant in a hushed voice.

"Then you shall curse him also," said the king, "and it shall be a question of whose curse is the stronger."

Sanders grinned behind his hand, and the king, seeing the smile, smiled also.

From here onward Peter's progress was a rapid one, and there came to headquarters from time to time stories of a young king who was a Solomon in judgment.

So wise he was (who knew of the formula he applied to each case?), so beneficent, so peaceable, that the chief of the Akasava, from whom was periodically due, took advantage of the gentle administration, and sent neither corn nor fish nor grain. He did this after a journey to far-away Ikan, where he met the king's uncle, Sato-Koto, and agreed upon common action. Since the crops were good, the king passed the first fault, but the second tribute became due, and neither Akasava nor Ikan sent, and the people of Isisi, angry at the insolence, murmured, and the king sat down in the loneliness of his hut to think upon a course which was just and effective.

"I really am sorry to bother you," wrote Sanders to the Administrator again, "but I shall have to borrow your Houssas for the Isisi country. There has been a tribute palaver, and Peter went down to Ikan and wiped up his uncle; he filled in his spare time by giving the Akasava the worst licking they have ever had. I thoroughly approve of all that Peter has done, because I feel that he is actuated only by the keenest sense of justice and a desire to do the right thing at the right time – and it was time Sato-Koto was killed – though I shall have to reprimand Peter for the sake of appearances. The Akasava chief is in the bush, hiding."

Peter came back to his capital after his brief but strenuous campaign, leaving behind him two territories that were all the better for his visit, though somewhat sore.

The young king brought together his old men, his witch-doctors, and other notabilities.

"By all the laws of white men," he said, "I have done wrong to Sandi, because he has told me I must not fight, and, behold, I have destroyed my uncle, who was a dog, and I have driven the chief of the Akasava into the forest. But Sandi told me also that I must do what was just, and that I have done according to my lights, for I have destroyed a man who put my people to shame. Now, it seems to me that there is only one thing to do, and that is to go to Sandi, telling the truth and asking him to judge."

"Lord king," said the oldest of his councillors, "what if Sandi puts you to the chain-gang?"

"That is with to-morrow," quoth the king, and gave orders for preparations to be made for departure.

Half-way to headquarters the two met; King Peter going down and Sanders coming up. And here befell the great incident.

No word was spoken of Peter's fault before sunset; but when blue smoke arose from the fires of Houssa and warrior, and the little camp in the forest clearing was all a-chatter, Sanders took the king's arm and led him along the forest path.

Peter told his tale and Sanders listened.

"And what of the chief of the Akasava?" he asked.

"Master," said the king, "he fled to the forest cursing me, and with him went many bad men."

Sanders nodded again gravely.

They talked of many things till the sun threw long shadows, and then they turned to retrace their footsteps. They were within half a mile of the camp and the faint noise of men laughing, and

the faint scent of fires burning came to them, when the chief of the Akasava stepped out from behind a tree and stood directly in their path. With him were some eight fighting men fully armed.

"Lord king," said the chief of the Akasava, "I have been waiting for you."

The king made neither movement nor reply, but Sanders reached for his revolver.

His hand closed on the butt, when something struck him and he went down like a log.

"Now we will kill the king of the Isisi, and the white man also." The voice was the chief's, but Sanders was not taking any particular interest in the conversation, because there was a hive of wild bees buzzing in his head, and a maze of pain; he felt sick.

"If you kill me it is little matter," said the king's voice, "because there are many men who can take my place; but if you slay Sandi, you slay the father of the people, and none can replace him."

"He whipped you, little king," said the chief of the Akasava mockingly.

"I would throw him into the river," said a strange voice after a long interval; "thus shall no trace be found of him, and no man will lay his death to our door."

"What of the king?" said another. Then came a crackling of twigs and the voices of men.

"They are searching," whispered a voice. "King, if you speak I will kill you now."

"Kill!" said the young king's even voice, and shouted, "Oh, M'sabo! Beteli! Sandi is here!"

That was all Sandi heard.

Two days later he sat up in bed and demanded information. There was a young doctor with him when he woke, who had providentially arrived from headquarters.

"The king?" he hesitated. "Well, they finished the king, but he saved your life. I suppose you know that?"

Sanders said "Yes" without emotion.

"A plucky little beggar," suggested the doctor.

"Very," said Sanders. Then: "Did they catch the chief of the Akasava?"

"Yes; he was so keen on finishing you that he delayed his bolting. The king threw himself on you and covered your body."

"That will do."

Sanders' voice was harsh and his manner brusque at the best of times, but now his rudeness was brutal.

"Just go out of the hut, doctor – I want to sleep."

He heard the doctor move, heard the rattle of the "chick" at the hut door, then he turned his face to the wall and wept.

CHAPTER II

KEEPERS OF THE STONE

There is a people who live at Ochori in the big African forest on the Ikeli River, who are called in the native tongue "The Keepers of the Stone."

There is a legend that years and years ago, *cala-cala*, there was a strange, flat stone, "inscribed with the marks of the devils" (so the grave native story-teller puts it), which was greatly worshipped and prized, partly for its magic powers, and partly because of the two ghosts who guarded it.

It was a fetish of peculiar value to the mild people who lived in the big forest, but the Akasava, who are neither mild nor reverential, and being, moreover, in need of gods, swooped down upon the Ochori one red morning and came away with this wonderful stone and other movables. Presumably, the "ghosts of brass" went also. It was a great business, securing the stone, for it was set in a grey slab in the solid rock, and many spear-heads were broken before it could be wrenched from its place. But in the end it was taken away, and for several years it was the boast of the Akasava that they derived much benefit from this sacred possession. Then of a sudden the stone disappeared, and with it all the good fortune of its owners. For the vanishing of the stone coincided with the arrival of British rule, and it was a bad thing for the Akasava.

There came in these far-off days ('95?) a ridiculous person in white with an escort of six soldiers. He brought a message of peace and good fellowship, and talked of a new king and a new law. The Akasava listened in dazed wonderment, but when they recovered they cut off his head, also the heads of the escort. It seemed to be the only thing to do under the circumstances.

Then one morning the Akasava people woke to find the city full of strange white folk, who had come swiftly up the river in steamboats. There were too many to quarrel with, so the people sat quiet, a little frightened and very curious, whilst two black soldiers strapped the hands and feet of the Akasava chief prior to hanging him by the neck till he was dead.

Nor did the bad luck of the people end here; there came a lean year, when the manioc¹ root was bad and full of death-water, when goats died, and crops were spoilt by an unexpected hurricane. There was always a remedy at hand for a setback of this kind. If you have not the thing you require, go and take it. So, following precedents innumerable, the Akasava visited the Ochori, taking away much grain, and leaving behind dead men and men who prayed for death. In the course of time the white men came with their steamboats, their little brass guns, and the identical block and tackle, which they fastened to the identical tree and utilised in the inevitable manner.

"It appears," said the new chief – who was afterwards hanged for the killing of the king of the Isisi – "that the white man's law is made to allow weak men to triumph at the expense of the strong. This seems foolish, but it will be well to humour them."

His first act was to cut down the hanging-tree – it was too conspicuous and too significant. Then he set himself to discover the cause of all the trouble which had come upon the Akasava. The cause required little appreciation. The great stone had been stolen, as he well knew, and the remedy resolved itself into a question of discovering the thief. The wretched Ochori were suspect.

"If we go to them," said the chief of the Akasava thoughtfully, "killing them very little, but rather burning them, so that they told where this godstone was hidden, perhaps the Great Ones would forgive us."

"In my young days," said an aged councillor, "when evil men would not tell where stolen things were buried, we put hot embers in their hands and bound them tightly."

¹ There is a tremendous amount of free hydrocyanic acid (prussic acid) in manioc.

"That is a good way," approved another old man, wagging his head applaudingly; "also to tie men in the path of the soldier-ants has been known to make them talkative."

"Yet we may not go up against the Ochori for many reasons," said the chief; "the principal of which is that if the stone be with them we shall not overcome them owing to the two ghosts – though I do not remember that the ghosts were very potent in the days when the stone was with us," he added, not without hope.

The little raid which followed and the search for the stone are told briefly in official records. The search was fruitless, and the Akasava folk must needs content themselves with such picking as came to hand.

Of how Mr. Niceman, the deputy commissioner, and then Sanders himself, came up, I have already told. That was long ago, as the natives say, *cala-cala*, and many things happened subsequently that put from the minds of the people all thought of the stone.

In course of time the chief of the Akasava died the death for various misdoings, and peace came to the land that fringes Togo.

Sanders has been surprised twice in his life. Once was at Ikeli, which in the native tongue means "little river." It is not a little river at all, but, on the contrary, a broad, strong, sullen stream that swirls and eddies and foams as it swings the corner of its tortuous course seaward. Sanders sat on a deck-chair placed under the awning of his tiny steamer, and watched the river go rushing past. He was a contented man, for the land was quiet and the crops were good. Nor was there any crime.

There was sleeping sickness at Bofabi, and beri-beri at Akasava, and in the Isisi country somebody had discovered a new god, and, by all accounts that came down river, they worshipped him night and day.

He was not bothering about new gods, because gods of any kind were a beneficent asset. Milini, the new king of the Isisi, had sent him word:

"Master," said his mouthpiece, the messenger, "this new god lives in a box which is borne upon the shoulders of priests. It is so long and so wide, and there are four sockets in which the poles fit, and the god inside is a very strong one, and full of pride."

"Ko, ko!" said Sanders, with polite interest, "tell the lord king, your master, that so long as this god obeys the law, he may live in the Isisi country, paying no tax. But if he tells the young men to go fighting, I shall come with a much stronger god, who will eat your god up. The palaver is finished."

Sanders, with his feet stretched out on the rail of the boat, thought of the new god idly. When was it that the last had come? There was one in the N'Gombi country years ago, a sad god who lived in a hut which no man dare approach; there was another god who came with thunder demanding sacrifice – human sacrifice. This was an exceptionally bad god, and had cost the British Government six hundred thousand pounds, because there was fighting in the bush and a country unsettled. But, in the main, the gods were good, doing harm to none, for it is customary for new gods to make their appearance after the crops are gathered, and before the rainy season sets in.

So Sanders thought, sitting in the shade of a striped awning on the foredeck of the little *Zaire*.

The next day, before the sun came up, he turned the nose of the steamer up-stream, being curious as to the welfare of the shy Ochori folk, who lived too near the Akasava for comfort, and, moreover, needed nursing. Very slow was the tiny steamer's progress, for the current was strong against her. After two days' travel Sanders got into Lukati, where young Carter had a station.

The deputy commissioner came down to the beach in his pyjamas, with a big pith helmet on the back of his head, and greeted his chief boisterously.

"Well?" said Sanders; and Carter told him all the news. There was a land palaver at Ebibi; Otabo, of Bofabi, had died of the sickness; there were two leopards worrying the outlying villages, and —

"Heard about the Isisi god?" he asked suddenly; and Sanders said that he had.

"It's an old friend of yours," said Carter. "My people tell me that this old god-box contains the stone of the Ochori."

"Oh!" said Sanders, with sudden interest.

He breakfasted with his subordinate, inspected his little garrison of thirty, visited his farm, admired his sweet potatoes, and patronised his tomatoes.

Then he went back to the boat and wrote a short dispatch in the tiniest of handwriting on the flimsiest of paper slips. "In case!" said Sanders.

"Bring me 14," he said to his servant, and Abiboo came back to him soon with a pigeon in his hand.

"Now, little bird," said Sanders, carefully rolling his letter round the red leg of the tiny courier and fastening it with a rubber band, "you've got two hundred miles to fly before sunrise to-morrow – and 'ware hawks!"

Then he gathered the pigeon in his hand, walked with it to the stern of the boat, and threw it into the air.

His crew of twelve men were sitting about their cooking-pot – that pot which everlastingly boils.

"Yoka!" he called, and his half-naked engineer came bounding down the slope.

"Steam," said Sanders; "get your wood aboard; I am for Isisi."

There was no doubt at all that this new god was an extremely powerful one. Three hours from the city the *Zaire* came up to a long canoe with four men standing at their paddles singing dolefully. Sanders remembered that he had passed a village where women, their bodies decked with green leaves, wailed by the river's edge.

He slowed down till he came abreast of the canoe, and saw a dead man lying stark in the bottom.

"Where go you with this body?" he asked.

"To Isisi, lord," was the answer.

"The middle river and the little islands are places for the dead," said Sanders brusquely. "It is folly to take the dead to the living."

"Lord," said the man who spoke, "at Isisi lives a god who breathes life; this man" – he pointed downwards – "is my brother, and he died very suddenly because of a leopard. So quickly he died that he could not tell us where he had hidden his rods and his salt. Therefore we take him to Isisi, that the new god may give him just enough life to make his relations comfortable."

"The middle river," said Sanders quietly, and pointed to such a lone island, all green with tangled vegetation, as might make a burying ground. "What is your name?"

"Master, my name is N'Kema," said the man sullenly.

"Go, then, N'Kema," he said, and kept the steamer slow ahead whilst he watched the canoe turn its blunt nose to the island and disembark its cargo.

Then he rang the engines full ahead, steered clear of a sandbank, and regained the fairway.

He was genuinely concerned.

The stone was something exceptional in fetishes, needing delicate handling. That the stone existed, he knew. There were legends innumerable about it; and an explorer had, in the early days, seen it through his glasses. Also the "ghosts clad in brass" he had heard about – these fantastic and warlike shades who made peaceable men go out to battle – all except the Ochori, who were never warlike, and whom no number of ghosts could incite to deeds of violence.

You will have remarked that Sanders took native people seriously, and that, I remark in passing, is the secret of good government. To him, ghosts were factors, and fetishes potent possibilities. A man who knew less would have been amused, but Sanders was not amused, because he had a great responsibility. He arrived at the city of Isisi in the afternoon, and observed, even at a distance, that something unusual was occurring. The crowd of women and children that the arrival of the Commissioner usually attracted did not gather as he swung in from mid-stream and followed the water-path that leads to shoal.

Only the king and a handful of old men awaited him, and the king was nervous and in trouble.

"Lord," he blurted, "I am no king in this city because of the new god; the people are assembled on the far side of the hill, and there they sit night and day watching the god in the box."

Sanders bit his lip thoughtfully, and said nothing.

"Last night," said the king, "'The Keepers of the Stone' appeared walking through the village."

He shivered, and the sweat stood in big beads on his forehead, for a ghost is a terrible thing.

"All this talk of keepers of stones is folly," said Sanders calmly; "they have been seen by your women and your unblooded boys."

"Lord, I saw them myself," said the king simply; and Sanders was staggered, for the king was a sane man.

"The devil you have!" said Sanders in English; then, "What manner of ghost were these?"

"Lord," said the king, "they were white of face, like your greatness. They wore brass upon their heads and brass upon their breasts. Their legs were bare, but upon the lower legs was brass again."

"Any kind of ghost is hard enough to believe," said Sanders irritably, "but a brass ghost I will not have at any price." He spoke English again, as was his practice when he talked to himself, and the king stood silent, not understanding him.

"What else?" said Sanders.

"They had swords," continued the chief, "such as the elephant-hunters of the N'Gombi people carry. Broad and short, and on their arms were shields."

Sanders was nonplussed.

"And they cry 'war,'" said the chief. "This is the greatest shame of all, for my young men dance the death dance and streak their bodies with paint and talk boastfully."

"Go to your hut," said Sanders; "presently I will come and join you."

He thought and thought, smoking one black cigar after another, then he sent for Abiboo, his servant.

"Abiboo," he said, "by my way of thinking, I have been a good master to you."

"That is so, lord," said Abiboo.

"Now I will trust you to go amongst my crew discovering their gods. If I ask them myself, they will lie to me out of politeness, inventing this god and that, thinking they please me."

Abiboo chose the meal hour, when the sun had gone out and the world was grey and the trees motionless. He came back with the information as Sanders was drinking his second cup of coffee in the loneliness of the tiny deck-house.

"Master," he reported, "three men worship no god whatever, three more have especial family fetishes, and two are Christians more or less, and the four Houssas are with me in faith."

"And you?"

Abiboo, the Kano boy, smiled at Sanders' assumption of innocence.

"Lord," he said, "I follow the Prophet, believing only in the one God, beneficent and merciful."

"That is good," said Sanders. "Now let the men load wood, and Yoka shall have steam against moonrise, and all shall be ready for slipping."

At ten o'clock by his watch he fell-in his four Houssas, serving out to each a short carbine and a bandoleer. Then the party went ashore.

The king in his patience sat in his hut, and Sanders found him.

"You will stay here, Milini," he commanded, "and no blame shall come to you for anything that may happen this night."

"What will happen, master?"

"Who knows!" said Sanders, philosophically.

The streets were in pitch darkness, but Abiboo, carrying a lantern, led the way. Only occasionally did the party pass a tenanted hut. Generally they saw by the dull glow of the log that

smouldered in every habitation that it was empty. Once a sick woman called to them in passing. It was near her time, she said, and there was none to help her in the supreme moment of her agony.

"God help you, sister!" said Sanders, ever in awe of the mysteries of birth. "I will send women to you. What is your name?"

"They will not come," said the plaintive voice. "To-night the men go out to war, and the women wait for the great dance."

"To-night?"

"To-night, master – so the ghosts of brass decree."

Sanders made a clicking noise with his mouth.

"That we shall see," he said, and went on.

The party reached the outskirts of the city. Before them, outlined against a bronze sky, was the dark bulk of a little hill, and this they skirted.

The bronze became red, and rose, and dull bronze again, as the fires that gave it colour leapt or fell. Turning the shoulder of the hill, Sanders had a full view of the scene.

Between the edge of the forest and slope of the hill was a broad strip of level land. On the left was the river, on the right was swamp and forest again.

In the very centre of the plain a huge fire burnt. Before it, supported by its poles, on two high trestles, a square box.

But the people!

A huge circle, squatting on its haunches, motionless, silent; men, women, children, tiny babies, at their mothers' hips they stretched; a solid wheel of humanity, with the box and the fire as a hub.

There was a lane through which a man might reach the box – a lane along which passed a procession of naked men, going and returning. These were they who replenished the fire, and Sanders saw them dragging fuel for that purpose. Keeping to the edge of the crowd, he worked his way to the opening. Then he looked round at his men.

"It is written," he said, in the curious Arabic of the Kano people, "that we shall carry away this false god. As to which of us shall live or die through this adventure, that is with Allah, who knows all things."

Then he stepped boldly along the lane. He had changed his white ducks for a dark blue uniform suit, and he was not observed by the majority until he came with his Houssas to the box. The heat from the fire was terrific, overpowering. Close at hand he saw that the fierceness of the blaze had warped the rough-hewn boards of the box, and through the opening he saw in the light a slab of stone.

"Take up the box quickly," he commanded, and the Houssas lifted the poles to their shoulders. Until then the great assembly had sat in silent wonder, but as the soldiers lifted their burden, a yell of rage burst from five thousand throats, and men leapt to their feet.

Sanders stood before the fire, one hand raised, and silence fell, curiosity dominating resentment.

"People of the Isisi," said Sanders, "let no man move until the god-stone has passed, for death comes quickly to those who cross the path of gods."

He had an automatic pistol in each hand, and the particular deity he was thinking of at the moment was not the one in the box.

The people hesitated, surging and swaying, as a mob will sway in its uncertainty.

With quick steps the bearers carried their burden through the lane; they had almost passed unmolested when an old woman shuffled forward and clutched at Sanders' arm.

"Lord, lord!" she quavered, "what will you do with our god?"

"Take him to the proper place," said Sanders, "being by Government appointed his keeper."

"Give me a sign," she croaked, and the people in her vicinity repeated, "A sign, master!"

"This is a sign," said Sanders, remembering the woman in labour. "By the god's favour there shall be born to Ifabi, wife of Adako, a male child."

He heard the babble of talk; he heard his message repeated over the heads of the crowd; he saw a party of women go scurrying back to the village; then he gave the order to march. There were murmurings, and once he heard a deep-voiced man begin the war-chant, but nobody joined him. Somebody – probably the same man – clashed his spear against his wicker shield, but his warlike example was not followed. Sanders gained the village street. Around him was such a press of people that he followed the swaying box with difficulty. The river was in sight; the moon, rising a dull, golden ball over the trees, laced the water with silver, and then there came a scream of rage.

"He lies! He lies! Ifabi, the wife of Adako, has a female child."

Sanders turned swiftly like a dog at bay; his lips upcurled in a snarl, his white, regular teeth showing.

"Now," said Sanders, speaking very quickly, "let any man raise his spear, and he dies."

Again they stood irresolute, and Sanders, over his shoulder, gave an order.

For a moment only the people hesitated; then, as the soldiers gripped the poles of the god-box, with one fierce yell they sprang forward.

A voice screamed something; and, as if by magic, the tumult ceased, and the crowd darted backward and outward, falling over one another in their frantic desire to escape.

Sanders, his pistol still loaded, stood in open-mouthed astonishment at the stampede.

Save for his men he was alone; and then he saw.

Along the centre of the street two men were walking. They were clad alike in short crimson kilts that left their knees bare; great brass helmets topped their heads, and brass cuirasses covered their breasts.

Sanders watched them as they came nearer, then: "If this is not fever, it is madness," he muttered, for what he saw were two Roman centurions, their heavy swords girt about their waists.

He stood still, and they passed him, so close that he saw on the boss of one shield the rough-moulded letters: —

"AUGUSTUS CAE."

"Fever" said Sanders emphatically, and followed the box to the ship.

When the steamer reached Lukati, Sanders was still in a condition of doubt, for his temperature was normal, and neither fever nor sun could be held accountable for the vision. Added to which, his men had seen the same thing.

He found the reinforcements his pigeon had brought, but they were unnecessary now.

"It beats me," he confessed to Carter, telling the story; "but we'll get out the stone; it might furnish an explanation. Centurions – bah!"

The stone, exposed in the light of day, was of greyish granite, such as Sanders did not remember having seen before.

"Here are the 'devil marks,'" he said, as he turned it over. "Possibly – whew!"

No wonder he whistled, for closely set were a number of printed characters; and Carter, blowing the dust, saw —

"MARIUS ET AUGUSTUS

CENT... NERO

IMPERAT... IN DEUS

... DULCE."

That night, with great labour, Sanders, furbishing his rusty Latin, and filling in gaps, made a translation:

"Marius and Augustus,

Centurions of Nero, Cæsar and

Emperor,

Sleep sweetly with the gods."

"We are they who came beyond the wild lands which Hanno, the Carthaginian, found.

"Marcus Septimus went up into Egypt, and with him Decimus Superbus, but by the will of Cæsar, and the favour of the gods, we sailed to the black seas beyond... Here we lived, our ships suffering wreck, being worshipped by the barbarians, teaching them warlike practices.

.. "You who come after.. bear greetings to Rome to Cato Hippocritus, who dwells by the gate."

Sanders shook his head when he had finished reading, and said it was "rum."

CHAPTER III

BOSAMBO OF MONROVIA

For many years have the Ochori people formed a sort of grim comic relief to the tragedy of African colonisation. Now it may well be that we shall laugh at the Ochori no more. Nor, in the small hours of the night, when conversation flags in the little circle about the fires in fishing camps, shall the sleepy-eyed be roused to merriment by stories of Ochori meekness. All this has come about by favour of the Liberian Government, though at present the Liberian Government is not aware of the fact.

With all due respect to the Republic of Liberia, I say that the Monrovia are naturally liars and thieves.

Once upon a time, that dignity might be added to the State, a warship was acquired – if I remember aright it was presented by a disinterested shipowner. The Government appointed three admirals, fourteen captains, and as many officers as the ship would hold, and they all wore gorgeous but ill-fitting uniforms. The Government would have appointed a crew also, but for the fact that the ship was not big enough to hold any larger number of people than its officers totalled.

This tiny man-of-war of the black republic went to sea once, the admirals and captains taking it in turn to stoke and steer – a very pleasing and novel sensation, this latter.

Coming back into the harbour, one of the admirals said —

"It is my turn to steer now," and took the wheel.

The ship struck a rock at the entrance of the harbour and went down. The officers escaped easily enough, for your Monrovia swims like a fish, but their uniforms were spoilt by the sea water. To the suggestion that salvage operations should be attempted to refloat the warship, the Government very wisely said no, they thought not.

"We know where she is," said the President – he was sitting on the edge of his desk at Government House, eating sardines with his fingers – "and if we ever want her, it will be comforting to know she is so close to us."

Nothing more would have been done in the matter but for the fact that the British Admiralty decided that the wreck was a danger to shipping, and issued orders forthwith for the place where it lay to be buoyed.

The Liberian Government demurred on account of expense, but on pressure being applied (I suspect the captain of H.M.S. *Dwarf*, who was a man with a bitter tongue) they agreed, and the bell-buoy was anchored to the submerged steamer.

It made a nice rowdy, clanging noise, did that bell, and the people of Monrovia felt they were getting their money's worth.

But all Monrovia is not made up of the freed American slaves who were settled there in 1821. There are people who are described in a lordly fashion by the true Monrovia as "indigenous natives," and the chief of these are the Kroomen, who pay no taxes, defy the Government, and at intervals tweak the official nose of the Republic.

The second day after the bell was in place, Monrovia awoke to find a complete silence reigning in the bay, and that in spite of a heavy swell. The bell was still, and two ex-admirals, who were selling fish on the foreshore, borrowed a boat and rowed out to investigate. The explanation was simple – the bell had been stolen.

"Now!" said the President of the Liberian Republic in despair, "may Beelzebub, who is the father and author of all sin, descend upon these thieving Kroomen!"

Another bell was attached. The same night it was stolen. Yet another bell was put to the buoy, and a boat-load of admirals kept watch. Throughout the night they sat, rising and falling with the swell, and the monotonous "clang-jangle-clong" was music in their ears. All night it sounded, but

in the early morning, at the dark hour before the sun comes up, it seemed that the bell, still tolling, grew fainter and fainter.

"Brothers," said an admiral, "we are drifting away from the bell."

But the explanation was that the bell had drifted away from them, for, tired of half measures, the Kroomen had come and taken the buoy, bell and all, and to this day there is no mark to show where a sometime man-of-war rots in the harbour of Monrovia.

The ingenious soul who planned and carried out this theft was one Bosambo, who had three wives, one of whom, being by birth Congolaise, and untrustworthy, informed the police, and with some ceremony Bosambo was arrested and tried at the Supreme Court, where he was found guilty of "theft and high treason" and sentenced to ten years' penal servitude.

They took Bosambo back to prison, and Bosambo interviewed the black gaoler.

"My friend," he said, "I have a big ju-ju in the forest, and if you do not release me at once you and your wife shall die in great torment."

"Of your ju-ju I know nothing," said the gaoler philosophically, "but I receive two dollars a week for guarding prisoners, and if I let you escape I shall lose my job."

"I know a place where there is much silver hidden," said Bosambo with promptitude. "You and I will go to this place, and we shall be rich."

"If you knew where there was silver, why did you steal bells, which are of brass and of no particular value?" asked his unimaginative guard.

"I see that you have a heart of stone," said Bosambo, and went away to the forest settlement to chop down trees for the good of the State.

Four months after this, Sanders, Chief Commissioner for the Isisi, Ikeli, and Akasava countries, received, *inter alia*, a communication of a stereotyped description —

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Wanted, – on a warrant issued by H.E. the President of Liberia, Bosambo Krooboy, who escaped from the penal settlement near Monrovia, after killing a guard. He is believed to be making for your country.

A description followed.

Sanders put the document away with other such notices – they were not infrequent in their occurrence – and gave his mind to the eternal problem of the Ochori.

Now, as ever, the Ochori people were in sad trouble. There is no other tribe in the whole of Africa that is as defenceless as the poor Ochori. The Fingoes, slaves as they are by name and tradition, were ferocious as the Masai, compared with the Ochori.

Sanders was a little impatient, and a deputation of three, who had journeyed down to headquarters to lay the grievances of the people before him, found him unsympathetic.

He interviewed them on his verandah.

"Master, no man leaves us in peace," said one. "Isisi folk, N'Gombi people from far-away countries, they come to us demanding this and that, and we give, being afraid."

"Afraid of what?" asked Sanders wearily.

"We fear death and pain, also burning and the taking of our women," said the other.

"Who is chief of you?" asked Sanders, wilfully ignorant.

"I am chief lord," said an elderly man, clad in a leopard skin.

"Go back to your people, chief, if indeed chief you are, and not some old woman without shame; go back and bear with you a fetish – a most powerful fetish – which shall be, as me, watching your interest and protecting you. This fetish you shall plant on the edge of your village that faces the sun at noon. You shall mark the place where it shall be planted, and at midnight, with proper ceremony,

and the sacrifice of a young goat, you shall set my fetish in its place. And after that whosoever ill-treats you or robs you shall do so at some risk."

Sanders said this very solemnly, and the men of the deputation were duly impressed. More impressed were they when, before starting on their homeward journey, Sanders placed in their hands a stout pole, to the end of which was attached a flat board inscribed with certain marks.

They carried their trophy six days' journey through the forest, then four days' journey by canoe along the Little River, until they came to Ochori. There, by the light of the moon, with the sacrifice of two goats (to make sure), the pole was planted so that the board inscribed with mystic characters would face the sun at noon.

News travels fast in the back lands, and it came to the villages throughout the Isisi and the Akasava country that the Ochori were particularly protected by white magic. Protected they had always been, and many men had died at the white man's hand because the temptation to kill the Ochori folk had proved irresistible.

"I do not believe that Sandi has done this thing," said the chief of the Akasava. "Let us go across the river and see with our own eyes, and if they have lied we shall beat them with sticks, though let no man kill, because of Sandi and his cruelty."

So across the water they went, and marched until they came within sight of the Ochori city, and the Ochori people, hearing that the Akasava people were coming, ran away into the woods and hid, in accordance with their custom.

The Akasava advanced until they came to the pole stuck in the ground and the board with the devil marks.

Before this they stood in silence and in awe, and having made obeisance to it and sacrificed a chicken (which was the lawful property of the Ochori) they turned back.

After this came a party from Isisi, and they must needs come through the Akasava country.

They brought presents with them and lodged with the Akasava for one night.

"What story is this of the Ochori?" asked the Isisi chief in command; so the chief of the Akasava told him.

"You may save yourself the journey, for we have seen it."

"That," said the Isisi chief, "I will believe when I have seen."

"That is bad talk," said the Akasava people, who were gathered at the palaver; "these dogs of Isisi call us liars."

Nevertheless there was no bloodshed, and in the morning the Isisi went on their way.

The Ochori saw them coming, and hid in the woods, but the precaution was unnecessary, for the Isisi departed as they came.

Other folk made a pilgrimage to the Ochori, N'Gombi, Bokeli, and the Little People of the Forest, who were so shy that they came by night, and the Ochori people began to realise a sense of their importance.

Then Bosambo, a Krooman and an adventurer at large, appeared on the scene, having crossed eight hundred miles of wild land in the earnest hope that time would dull the memory of the Liberian Government and incidentally bring him to a land of milk and honey.

Now Bosambo had in his life been many things. He had been steward on an Elder Dempster boat, he had been scholar at a mission school – he was the proud possessor of a bound copy of *The Lives of the Saints*, a reward of industry – and among his accomplishments was a knowledge of English.

The hospitable Ochori received him kindly, fed him with sweet manioc and sugar-cane, and told him about Sandi's magic. After he had eaten, Bosambo walked down to the post and read the inscription —

TRESPASSERS BEWARE

He was not impressed, and strolled back again thinking deeply.

"This magic," he said to the chief, "is good magic. I know, because I have white man's blood in my veins."

In support of this statement he proceeded to libel a perfectly innocent British official at Sierra Leone.

The Ochori were profoundly moved. They poured forth the story of their persecutions, a story which began in remote ages, when Tiganobeni, the great king, came down from the north and wasted the country as far south as the Isisi.

Bosambo listened – it took two nights and the greater part of a day to tell the story, because the official story-teller of the Ochori had only one method of telling – and when it was finished Bosambo said to himself —

"This is the people I have long sought. I will stay here."

Aloud he asked:

"How often does Sandi come to you?"

"Once every year, master," said the chief, "on the twelfth moon, and a little after."

"When came he last?"

"When this present moon is at full, three moons since; he comes after the big rains."

"Then," said Bosambo, again to himself, "for nine months I am safe."

They built him a hut and planted for him a banana grove and gave him seed. Then he demanded for wife the daughter of the chief, and although he offered nothing in payment the girl came to him. That a stranger lived in the chief village of the Ochori was remarked by the other tribes, for news of this kind spreads, but since he was married, and into the chief's family at that, it was accepted that the man must be of the Ochori folk, and such was the story that came to headquarters. Then the chief of the Ochori died. He died suddenly in some pain; but such deaths are common, and his son ruled in his place. Then the son died after the briefest reign, and Bosambo called the people together, the elders, the wise men, and the headmen of the country.

"It appears," he said, "that the many gods of the Ochori are displeased with you, and it has been revealed to me in a dream that I shall be chief of the Ochori. Therefore, O chiefs and wise men and headmen, bow before me, as is the custom, and I will make you a great people."

It is characteristic of the Ochori that no man said "nay" to him, even though in the assembly were three men who by custom might claim the chieftainship.

Sanders heard of the new chief and was puzzled.

"Etabo?" he repeated – this was how Bosambo called himself – "I do not remember the man – yet if he can put backbone into the people I do not care who he is."

Backbone or cunning, or both, Bosambo was certainly installed.

"He has many strange practices," reported a native agent to Sanders. "Every day he assembles the men of the village and causes them to walk past a *pelebi* (table) on which are many eggs. And it is his command that each man as he passes shall take an egg so swiftly that no eye may see him take it. And if the man bungle or break the egg, or be slow, this new chief puts shame upon him, whipping him."

"It is a game," said Sanders; but for the life of him he could not see what game it was. Report after report reached him of the new chief's madness. Sometimes he would take the unfortunate Ochori out by night, teaching them such things as they had never known before. Thus he instructed them in what manner they might seize upon a goat so that the goat could not cry. Also how to crawl on their bellies inch by inch so that they made no sound or sign. All these things the Ochori did, groaning aloud at the injustice and the labour of it.

"I'm dashed if I can understand it!" said Sanders, knitting his brows, when the last report came in. "With anybody but the Ochori this would mean war. But the Ochori!"

Notwithstanding his contempt for their fighting qualities, he kept his Police Houssas ready.

But there was no war. Instead, there came complaint from the Akasava that "many leopards were in the woods."

Leopards will keep, thought Sanders, and, anyway, the Akasava were good enough hunters to settle that palaver without outside help. The next report was alarming. In two weeks these leopards had carried off three score of goats, twenty bags of salt, and much ivory.

Leopards eat goats; there might conceivably be fastidious leopards that cannot eat goats without salt; but a leopard does not take ivory tusks even to pick his teeth with. So Sanders made haste to journey up the river, because little things were considerable in a country where people strain at gnats and swallow whole caravans.

"Lord, it is true," said the chief of the Akasava, with some emotion, "these goats disappear night by night, though we watch them; also the salt and ivory, because that we did not watch."

"But no leopard could take these things," said Sanders irritably. "These are thieves."

The chief's gesture was comprehensive.

"Who could thief?" he said. "The N'Gombi people live very far away; also the Isisi. The Ochori are fools, and, moreover, afraid."

Then Sanders remembered the egg games, and the midnight manoeuvres of the Ochori.

"I will call on this new chief," he said; and crossed the river that day.

Sending a messenger to herald his coming, he waited two miles out of the city, and the councillors and wise men came out to him with offerings of fish and fruit.

"Where is your chief?" he asked.

"Lord, he is ill," they said gravely. "This day there came to him a feeling of sickness, and he fell down moaning. We have carried him to his hut."

Sanders nodded.

"I will see him," he said grimly.

They led him to the door of the chief's hut, and Sanders went in. It was very dark, and in the darkest corner lay a prostrate man. Sanders bent over him, touched his pulse lightly, felt gingerly for the swelling on the neck behind the ears for a sign of sleeping sickness. No symptom could he find; but on the bare shoulder, as his fingers passed over the man's flesh, he felt a scar of singular regularity; then he found another, and traced their direction. The convict brand of the Monrovia Government was familiar to him.

"I thought so," said Sanders, and gave the moaning man a vigorous kick.

"Come out into the light, Bosambo of Monrovia," he said; and Bosambo rose obediently and followed the Commissioner into the light.

They stood looking at one another for several minutes; then Sanders, speaking in the dialect of the Pepper Coast, said —

"I have a mind to hang you, Bosambo."

"That is as your Excellency wishes," said Bosambo.

Sanders said nothing, tapping his boot with his walking-stick and gazing thoughtfully downward.

"Having made thieves, could you make men of these people?" he said, after a while.

"I think they could fight now, for they are puffed with pride because they have robbed the Akasava," said Bosambo.

Sanders bit the end of his stick like a man in doubt.

"There shall be neither theft nor murder," he said. "No more chiefs or chiefs' sons shall die suddenly," he added significantly.

"Master, it shall be as you desire."

"As for the goats you have stolen, them you may keep, and the teeth (ivory) and the salt also. For if you hand them back to Akasava you will fill their stomachs with rage, and that would mean war."

Bosambo nodded slowly.

"Then you shall remain, for I see you are a clever man, and the Ochori need such as you. But if – "

"Master, by the fat of my heart I will do as you wish," said Bosambo; "for I have always desired to be a chief under the British."

Sanders was half-way back to headquarters before he missed his field-glasses, and wondered where he could have dropped them. At that identical moment Bosambo was exhibiting the binoculars to his admiring people.

"From this day forth," said Bosambo, "there shall be no lifting of goats nor stealing of any kind. This much I told the great Sandi, and as a sign of his love, behold, he gave me these things of magic that eat up space."

"Lord," said a councillor in awe, "did you know the Great One?"

"I have cause to know him," said Bosambo modestly, "for I am his son."

Fortunately Sanders knew nothing of this interesting disclosure.

CHAPTER IV

THE DROWSY ONE

There were occasions when Sanders came up against the outer world, when he learnt, with something like bewilderment, that beyond the farthestmost forests, beyond the lazy, swelling, blue sea, there were men and women who lived in houses and carefully tabooed such subjects as violent death and such horrid happenings as were daily features of his life.

He had to treat with folk who, in the main, were illogical and who believed in spirits. When you deal in the abstract with government of races so influenced, a knowledge of constitutional law and economics is fairly valueless.

There is one type of man that can rule native provinces wisely, and that type is best represented by Sanders.

There are other types, as, for instance:

Once upon a time a young man came from England with a reputation. He was sent by the Colonial Office to hold a district under Sanders as Deputy Commissioner. He was a Bachelor of Law, had read Science, and had acquired in a methodical fashion a working acquaintance with Swaheli, bacteriology, and medicines. He was a very grave young man, and the first night of his arrival he kept Sanders (furtively yawning) out of his bed whilst he demonstrated a system whereby the aboriginal could be converted – not converted spiritually, but from unproductive vagrancy to a condition of good citizenship.

Sanders said nothing beyond using the conventional expressions of polite interest, and despatched the young man and his tremendous baggage to an up-country station, with his official blessing.

Torrington – this was the grave young man's name – established himself at Entoli, and started forth to instil into the heathen mind the elementary principles of applied mechanics. In other words he taught them, through the medium of Swaheli – which they imperfectly understood – and a tin kettle, the lesson of steam. They understood the kettle part, but could not quite comprehend what meat he was cooking, and when he explained for the fortieth time that he was only cooking water, they glanced significantly one at the other and agreed that he was not quite right in his head.

They did not tell him this much to his face, for cannibals have very good manners – though their table code leaves much to be desired.

Mr. Torrington tried them with chemical experiments, showing them how sulphuric acid applied to sugar produced Su^2 , Su^4 , or words to that effect. He gained a reputation as a magician as a result, and in more huts than one he was regarded and worshipped as a Great and Clever Devil – which in a sense he was. But the first time he came up against the spirit of the people, his science, his law, and his cut-and-dried theories went *phutt!* And that is where Sanders came in – Sanders who had forgotten all the chemistry he ever knew, and who, as a student of Constitutional Law, was the rankest of failures.

It came about in this way.

There was a young man in Isisi who prophesied that on such a day, at such an hour, the river would rise and drown the people. When Mr. Torrington heard of this prophecy he was amused, and at first took no notice of it. But it occurred to him that here might be a splendid opportunity for revealing to the barbarian a little of that science with which he was so plentifully endowed.

So he drew a large sectional plan, showing —

- (a) the bed of the river;
- (b) the height of the banks;
- (c) the maximum rise of the river;

(d) the height of the surrounding country; and demonstrated as plainly as possible the utter absurdity of the prophecy.

Yet the people were unconvinced, and were preparing to abandon the village when Sanders arrived on the scene. He sent for the prophet, who was a young man of neurotic tendencies, and had a wooden prison cage built on the bank of the river, into which the youth was introduced.

"You will stay here," said Sanders, "and when the river rises you must prophesy that it will fall again, else assuredly you will be drowned."

Whereupon the people settled down again in their homes and waited for the river to drown the prophet and prove his words. But the river at this season of the year was steadily falling, and the prophet, like many another, was without honour in his own country.

Sanders went away; and, although somewhat discouraged, Mr. Torrington resumed his experiments. First of all, he took up sleeping sickness, and put in three months' futile work, impressing nobody save a gentleman of whom more must be written in a further chapter. Then he dropped that study suddenly and went to another.

He had ideas concerning vaccination, but the first baby he vaccinated died of croup, and Torrington came flying down the river telling Sanders a rambling story of a populace infuriated and demanding his blood. Then Torrington went home.

"The country is now quiet," wrote Sanders to the Administrator, with sardonic humour. "There are numerous palavers pending, but none of any particular moment. The Isisi people are unusually quiet, and Bosambo, the Monrovia, of whom I have written your Excellency, makes a model chief for the Ochori. No thefts have been traced to him for three months. I should be grateful if full information could be supplied to me concerning an expedition which at the moment is traversing this country under the style of the Isisi Exploitation Syndicate."

Curiously enough, Torrington had forgotten the fact that a member of this expedition had been one of the most interested students of his sleeping sickness clinics.

The Isisi Exploitation Syndicate, Limited, was born between the entrée and the sweet at the house of a gentleman whose Christian name was Isidore, and who lived in Maida Vale. At dinner one night with a dear friend – who called himself McPherson every day of the year except on Yum Kippur, when he frankly admitted that he had been born Isaacs – the question of good company titles came up, and Mr. McPherson said he had had the "Isisi Exploitation" in his mind for many years. With the aid of an atlas the Isisi country was discovered. It was one of those atlases on which are inscribed the staple products of the lands, and across the Isisi was writ fair "Rubber," "Kola-nut," "Mahogany," and "Tobacco."

I would ask the reader to particularly remember "Tobacco."

"There's a chief I've had some correspondence with," said Mr. McPherson, chewing his cigar meditatively; "we could get a sort of concession from him. It would have to be done on the quiet, because the country is a British Protectorate. Now, if we could get a man who'd put up the stuff, and send him out to fix the concession, we'd have a company floated before you could say knife."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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