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Содержание

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Preface

FAR away, toward the other side of the round earth, far to the east and south of America, lies the great continent of Africa. There live many people strange to us, with their black skins, kinky, woolly hair, flat noses, and thick lips. These black people we call Africans or negroes, and it is a little child among them that we are going to visit by and by.

Different as these African people of the negro race are from us, who belong to the white race, they yet belong to the same great family, as we say. Like all the peoples of all the races of men on this big earth, they belong to the human family, or the family of mankind. So we shall call the little black child whom we are going to visit our little black cousin.

We need not go so far away from home, indeed, to see little black children with woolly, kinky hair and flat noses like the little African. In the sunny South of our own land are many negro children as like the little negro cousin in Africa as one pea is like another. Years and years ago slave-ships brought to this country

negroes, stolen from their own African homes to be the slaves and servants of the white people here. Now the children and great-grandchildren of these negro slaves are growing up in our country, knowing no other home than this. The home of the great negro race, however, is the wide continent of Africa, with its deserts of hot sand, its parching winds and its tropical forests.

So, as we wish to see a little African cousin in his own African home, we are going to visit little black Mpuke instead of little black Topsy or Sammy, whom we might see nearer by.

It's away, then, to Africa!

CHAPTER I
THE BOY

ARE you ready for a long journey this morning? Your eyes look eager for new sights, so we will start at once for Mpuke's strange home. We will travel on the wings of the mind so as to cross the great ocean in the passage of a moment. No seasickness, no expense, and no worry! It is a comfortable way to travel. Do you not think so?

Yes, this is Africa. Men call it the "Dark Continent" because so little has been known of it. Yet it is a very wonderful land, filled with strange animals and queer people, containing the oldest monuments, the greatest desert, the richest diamond mines, in the world.

Some of the wisest people in the world once lived here. Large libraries were gathered together, thousands of years ago, in the cities of this continent.

Yet the little negro whom we visit to-day is of a savage race. He is ignorant of civilised ways and customs. He knows nothing of books and schools. I doubt if he even knows when his birthday draws near; but he is happy as the day is long; his troubles pass as quickly as the April showers.

Let us paint his picture. We must make his eyes very round and bright and black. The teeth should be like the whitest pearls.

His head must be covered with a mass of curly black wool. His lips are red and thick, while his skin is black and shining. He is tall and straight, and has muscles of which any boy might well be proud. He is not bothered by stiff collars or tight shoes. He is not obliged to stay in the house when he has torn a hole in his stocking, or ripped his trousers in climbing a tree, because he does not own any of these articles of clothing.

From morning until night, and from night until morning again, he is dressed in the suit Mother Nature provided for him, – his own beautiful glossy skin. She knew well that in the hot land near the equator, where Mpuke was born, he would never feel the need of more covering than this.

One of the first things Mpuke can remember is the daily bath his mother gave him in the river. In the days of his babyhood he did not like it very well, but gave lusty screams when he was suddenly plunged into the cold water. Yet other babies and other mothers were there to keep him company. It is the custom of his village for the women to visit the shore every morning at sunrise to bathe their little ones. What a chattering and screaming there is as one baby after another receives his ducking! Then, spluttering and choking and kicking, he is laid up on the bank to wriggle about on the soft grass, and dry in the sunshine. Now comes a toss upon mother's back, and the procession of women and babies hastens homeward through the shady pathway.

It lies in the very heart of Africa, this home of Mpuke's. The houses are so nearly alike that we almost wonder how the black

boy can tell his own from his neighbour's. It can more properly be called a hut than a house. It has low walls made of clay, and a high conical roof thatched with palm leaves. There is not a single window; the narrow doorway faces the one street running through the village. A high wall is built all around the settlement. There are two reasons for this: in the first place, the wild animals must be kept out, and secondly, the village is protected in case another tribe of black people should come to make war upon it. It is sad that it is so, but we know that the negroes spend much of their time in fighting with each other.

There is a small veranda in front of Mpuke's home. It is roofed with the long grasses which are so plentiful in this country, and is a comfortable place for the boy to lie and doze during the hours of the hot midday. The house itself nestles in a grove of banana-trees and stately palms. It makes a beautiful picture. I wish we could take a good painting of it home to our friends.

Look! here comes Mpuke's father. He is the chief of the village, and all the people bow before his greatness and power. We must show proper respect to such an important person, so please don't laugh, although he is certainly an amusing sight.

He is a strong, well-built man, but his body is coloured in such a ridiculous fashion with white and yellow chalk that it reminds us of the clowns at the circus. The braids of wool on his chin look like rats' tails, and others stick out at the sides of his head from under his tall hat of grass. He has a string of charms hanging around his neck; he thinks these will protect him from

his enemies, for he is a great warrior. His only clothing is a loin cloth made from the leaves of the pineapple-tree. His good wife wove it for him. His eyebrows are carefully shaved. As he walks along, talking to himself (the negroes are always talking!) he is trying to pull out a hair from his eyelashes with his finger-nail and knife.

This odd-looking man was chosen by the people to be their chief because he is so brave in fighting and so skilful in hunting. He has had many a battle single-handed with an angry elephant or furious panther. He has killed the cobra and the gorilla. He could show you the skulls of the enemies he has slaughtered in battle. He bears many scars beneath that coat of chalk, the marks of dangerous wounds he has received.

Mpuke honours and fears his father, and hopes in his boyish heart that he may grow up to be a chief like him, and have as many daring adventures. His greatest pleasure is in the mock battles which he has with the other boys of the village. Each one must be provided with a wooden spear and a blunt knife before he is ready for the game. Then the boys gather in the open field they use for a playground. This sport is a serious thing; it is a training for the hard fighting which is sure to come later in their lives. The boys rush at each other as if in dead earnest. Hours sometimes pass before either side gains a victory.

CHAPTER II
BLACKSMITH AND DENTIST

WHEN the first rays of the morning sun find their way through the tree-tops, the village wakes up. It is the best part of the day in any land, but especially in all tropical countries. The women come hastily out of the doorways, and prepare to get breakfast. All the cooking must be done out-doors, and soon a row of fires can be seen burning brightly in front of the houses. Mpuke's mother is very busy. She must boil the manioc pudding and bake some hippopotamus meat for a hearty meal.

Manioc takes the place of flour with the black man. It looks somewhat like the potato, but the bulbs are not ready to gather till the plant is about fifteen months old. It is a very stringy vegetable. The women gather it in baskets and sink them in the river for a few days. They must stay there until the vegetables have fermented. This fermentation makes them mealy; it also makes it easy to draw out the tough fibres. The manioc is afterward kneaded into dough and made into round puddings, which are boiled several hours.

Mpuke's mother is a careful cook. When her manioc pudding is taken from the fire it is snowy white. It is a wholesome dish, and Mpuke is very fond of it. You may not agree with him unless you like sour milk; for the pudding has a flavour very much like

that.

As soon as the meat is cooked, it is cut up and placed in earthen jars, a quantity of pepper is added, and palm oil poured over it to make a rich gravy.

The men eat their breakfast first. When it is finished they sit around under the trees while the women and children satisfy their hunger. The manner in which these people eat is not at all nice, but we must always remember they have never been taught a better way.

There is no table to set; no knives, or forks, or spoons. The savages use only the kind they carry around with them, furnished by Mother Nature when they were born.

They gather around the jars and take out the pieces of meat with their fingers, sopping up the gravy with the manioc bread. Now for some palm wine to quench their thirst. The meal is quickly over. We are glad, for it has not been pleasant to watch.

Both men and women join in a friendly smoke. From the laughing and chattering they must be having a merry time.

But it is growing warm as the sunshine finds its way through the foliage, and there is much work to do before the stifling noon hours.

The women and children hurry away to their plantations of sweet potatoes, or groundnuts (peanuts), or tobacco. Some of the men get their spears and bows and arrows for hunting. Others prepare nets for fishing in the river. Every one is so busy that the village suddenly becomes quiet.

We will follow Mpuke on his way to the blacksmith, who is also the dentist in this little settlement. "What," we say, "is it possible that a savage knows how to fill teeth?" We discover that his work is of a very different kind from that of any dentist we ever met in white man's land. His business is to grind the beautiful white teeth of the people till they are wedge-shaped. Mpuke is going to his hut to-day for this very purpose. His father has a small looking-glass he bought from the white traders, and when Mpuke is a good boy he is allowed to take it and look at himself for a few minutes. He will take great delight in viewing his teeth after they have been ground to the fashionable shape. There is some danger of his growing vain over the compliments he will receive. In the eyes of his own people he is a handsome boy, and needs only the finishing touch to his teeth to make him a beauty.

It is to be hoped that he will not become a dandy when he grows up. His mind, however, is very busy in thinking of warfare and hunting, and he is inclined to scorn the men who think too much of their looks.

See! There is one of the village dandies, now. He is strutting along like a peacock, and expects every one to stop and look at him. He has spent a long time in plastering his hair with clay well mixed with palm oil. The oil is fairly dripping from his face and neck now. We certainly can't admire this style of beauty, so we will turn our attention to the hut on the other side of the road.

The man in the doorway is busy at his work. He is shaping jars

and dishes out of clay. Some of the jars are beautiful in shape. Wouldn't you like to buy one of them? A few beads or a bit of bright calico would pay him well, according to his ideas.

Hark! There is the sound of a hammer. Let us take a peep inside of this next hut; we must discover what is being done here. A metal-worker is making armlets and anklets of copper. They will find a ready sale in the village, for no woman considers herself well-dressed unless she is able to wear a number of such ornaments. She is willing to work very hard on the plantation if she can earn enough jewelry to make a rattling noise and a fine display as she walks along.

CHAPTER III
WORK AND PLAY

THE dentist works steadily for an hour or so upon Mpuke's teeth; but he grows warm and tired, and says he has done enough filing for one morning. The boy has been very patient and has not uttered a sound of complaint during the painful operation. But now he is delighted to be free, and hurries off to the shore of the river to work on the canoe he is building. His father helped him cut down a large tree, but he is doing all the rest of the work alone. He has worked many days in hollowing out the trunk of the tree. He has shaped it into a narrow, flat-bottomed boat. The paddles are beautifully carved, and there is very little left to be done now except the making of the sail.

That is easy work. The long grasses are already gathered, and he sits on the bank of the river weaving them into a large, firm mat. This will serve as well as canvas for the sail.

What pleasure he will take in this canoe! Many a day he will spend in it, sailing along under the shade of the tall trees which line the river's banks. Many a fish he will catch and bring to his mother for the next meal. He delights in the sport, and does not seem to mind the myriads of gnats and mosquitoes which would send us home in a hurry.

But the black boy's life is not all play. He has had regular work

to perform from the time when he began to walk alone. He must learn to make the rattan war shields, shape spears for battle, and weave nets for trapping fish and game. In fact, Mpuke must be ready to help his elders in all their occupations.

The boy has a sister who is nine years old. She looks very much like her brother, and has the same happy disposition. She has many duties, but they are quite different from her brother's.

She is a good cook, young as she is. She can broil a buffalo steak to perfection; it is her work to gather the insects and caterpillars which are considered dainties at the feasts of the black people. She weaves the mats on which the family sleep at night. She helps her mother raise the tobacco, and gathers the peanuts and stores them away for the rainy season.

But let us go back to the river, where Mpuke is giving the finishing touch to his sail. As he turns his head to get a cooling breeze, it brings to his nostrils the smell of the dinner cooking in the village. He knows he must not be late at meal-time, and, besides, he has a good appetite for each of the day's three hearty meals.

He hurries down the path, thinking of the favourite dish his mother has promised him to-day. Do you care to taste it? It is boiled crocodile. The broth is seasoned with lemon juice and Cayenne pepper. "How kind my mother is," thinks Mpuke, "to cook such savoury messes. There are few boys so fortunate as I am. I will try to be a good son, and, if the white traders ever come this way again, I will buy her a chain of beads long enough

to wind three times around her neck."

With these thoughts the boy reaches home, but the whole village is in a state of much excitement; great news has just been brought by one of the men. He has discovered a herd of elephants feeding in a forest swamp only a few miles distant. He says that he counted at least a hundred of them.

The black people know that the elephant's sleeping time is from about eleven in the morning till three or four in the afternoon. It is the time that the people themselves take for rest; but to-day there is no noonday nap for Mpuke's village.

Dinner is eaten in haste. The men rush in and out of the houses getting their spears, bows, and poisoned arrows in readiness. The chief orders his assistants to get out his treasured elephant gun. It is the most valuable possession in the village. A small fortune (as the black people count) was given for it to the white traders. The chief's eyes shine, as he says to himself: "This shall bring down an elephant to-day."

CHAPTER IV
THE ELEPHANT HUNT

MPUKE is wildly delighted when he finds that he may go on the hunt. But he is warned to be very quiet; he must not even whisper as the party creeps through the dense forest.

The hunt will be a failure unless the elephants are taken by surprise while they are sleeping. The men know that the wind is in their favour, since it is blowing from the elephants toward them. Otherwise, the keen-scented creatures would quickly discover the approach of their enemies.

Listen! do you hear that queer noise? It is the champing sound the elephants make in their throats when they are asleep. The hunters creep nearer and nearer; more and more and more carefully, if possible, they turn aside the thick undergrowth of trees and bushes. Ah! Mpuke's father is within a dozen yards of the herd. He looks keenly about till he discovers a huge tusker; he gives a signal to two of his followers to bring up the gun. It is carefully placed and aimed at a spot in the elephant's forehead about four inches above the eyes. It is a vital spot. Two of the best marksmen of the party direct their poisoned arrows at the heart. If all succeed in reaching the parts aimed at there will be nothing to fear. But if the huge creature is only slightly wounded, woe to Mpuke and this company of men who are taking their

lives in their hands at this moment! A maddened elephant is a fearful creature to encounter.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.