

***EDGAR
WALLACE***

***BOSAMBO
OF THE RIVER***

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CHAPTER I

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ARACHI THE BORROWER

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Many years ago the Monrovia Government sent one Bosambo, a native of the Kroo coast and consequently a thief, to penal servitude for the term of his natural life. Bosambo, who had other views on the matter, was given an axe and a saw in the penal settlement—which was a patch of wild forest in the back country—and told to cut down and trim certain mahogany-trees in company with other unfortunate men similarly circumstanced.

To assure themselves of Bosambo's obedience, the Government of Liberia set over him a number of compatriots, armed with weapons which had rendered good service at Gettysburg, and had been presented to the President of Liberia by President Grant. They were picturesque weapons, but they were somewhat deficient in accuracy, especially when handled by the inexperienced soldiers of the Monrovia coast. Bosambo, who put his axe to an ignoble use, no less than the slaying of Captain Peter Cole—who was as black as the ten of clubs, but a gentleman by the Liberian code—left the penal settlement with passionate haste. The Gettysburg relics made fairly good practice up to

two hundred yards, but Bosambo was a mile away before the guards, searching the body of their dead commander for the key of the ammunition store, had secured food for their lethal weapons.

The government offered a reward of two hundred and fifty dollars for Bosambo, dead or alive. But, although the reward was claimed and paid to the half-brother of the Secretary of War, it is a fact that Bosambo was never caught.

On the contrary, he made his way to a far land, and became, by virtue of his attainments, chief of the Ochori.

Bosambo was too good a sportsman to leave his persecutors at peace. There can be little doubt that the Kroo insurrection, which cost the Liberian Government eight hundred and twenty-one pounds sixteen shillings to suppress, was due to the instigation and assistance of Bosambo. Of this insurrection, and the part that Bosambo played, it may be necessary to speak again.

The second rebellion was a more serious and expensive affair; and it was at the conclusion of this that the Liberian Government made representations to Britain. Sanders, who conducted an independent inquiry into the question of Bosambo's complicity, reported that there was no evidence whatever that Bosambo was directly or indirectly responsible. And with that the Liberian Government was forced to be content; but they expressed their feelings by offering a reward of two thousand dollars for Bosambo alive or dead—preferably alive. They added, for the benefit of minor government officials and their neighbours, that they would, in the language of the advertisement, reject all

substitutes. The news of this price went up and down the coast and very far into the interior, yet strangely enough Arachi of the Isisi did not learn of it until many years afterward.

Arachi was of the Isisi people, and a great borrower. Up and down the river all men knew him for such, so that his name passed into the legendary vocabulary of the people whilst he yet lived; and did the wife of Yoka beg from the wife of O'taki the service of a cooking-pot, be sure that O'taki's wife would agree, but with heavy pleasantry scream after the retiring pot: "O thou shameless Arachi!" whereupon all the village folk who heard the jest would rock with laughter.

Arachi was the son of a chief, but in a country where chieftainship was not hereditary, and where, moreover, many chiefs' sons dwelt without distinction, his parentage was of little advantage. Certainly it did not serve him as, in his heart, he thought he should be served.

He was tall and thin, and his knees were curiously knobby. He carried his head on one side importantly, and was profoundly contemptuous of his fellows.

Once he came to Sanders.

"Lord," he said, "I am a chief's son, as you know, and I am very wise. Men who look upon me say, 'Behold, this young man is full of craft,' because of my looks. Also I am a great talker."

"There are many in this land who are great talkers, Arachi," said Sanders, unpleasantly; "yet they do not travel for two days down-stream to tell me so."

"Master," said Arachi impressively, "I came to you because I desire advancement. Many of your little chiefs are fools, and, moreover, unworthy. Now I am the son of a chief, and it is my wish to sit down in the place of my father. Also, lord, remember this, that I have dwelt among foreign people, the Angola folk, and speak their tongue."

Sanders sighed wearily.

"Seven times you have asked me, Arachi," he said, "and seven times I have told you you are no chief for me. Now I tell you this—that I am tired of seeing you, and if you come to me again I will throw you to the monkeys.[#] As for your Angola palaver, I tell you this—that if it happen—which may all gods forbid!—that a tribe of Angola folk sit down with me, you shall be chief."

[#] Colloquial: "Make you look foolish."

Unabashed, Arachi returned to his village, for he thought in his heart that Sandi was jealous of his great powers. He built a large hut at the end of the village, borrowing his friends' labour; this he furnished with skins and the like, and laid in stores of salt and corn, all of which he had secured from neighbouring villages by judicious promises of payment.

It was like a king's hut, so glorious were the hangings of skin and the stretched bed of hide, and the people of his village said "Ko!" believing that Arachi had dug up those hidden treasures which every chief is popularly supposed to possess in secret places to which his sons may well be privy.

Even those who had helped to supply the magnificence were impressed and comforted.

"I have lent Arachi two bags of salt," said Pidini, the chief of Kolombolo, the fishing village, "and my stomach was full of doubt, though he swore by Death that he would repay me three days after the rains. Now I see that he is indeed very rich, as he told me he was, and if my salt does not return to me I may seize his fine bed."

In another village across the River Ombili, a headman of the Isisi confided to his wife:

"Woman, you have seen the hut of Arachi, now I think you will cease your foolish talk. For you have reproached me bitterly because I lent Arachi my fine bed."

"Lord, I was wrong," said the woman meekly; "but I feared he would not pay you the salt he promised; now I know that I was foolish, for I saw many bags of salt in his hut."

The story of Arachi's state spread up and down the river, and when the borrower demanded the hand of Koran, the daughter of the chief of the Putani ("The Fishers of the River"), she came to him without much palaver, though she was rather young.

A straight and winsome girl well worth the thousand rods and the twenty bags of salt which the munificent Arachi promised, by Death, devils, and a variety of gods, should be delivered to her father when the moon and the river stood in certain relative positions.

Now Arachi did no manner of work whatever, save to walk through the village street at certain hours clad in a

robe of monkey tails which he had borrowed from the brother of the king of the Isisi.

He neither fished nor hunted nor dug in the fields.

He talked to Koran his wife, and explained why this was so. He talked to her from sunset until the early hours of the morning, for he was a great talker, and when he was on his favourite subject—which was Arachi—he was very eloquent. He talked to her till the poor child's head rocked from side to side, and from front to back, in her desperate sleepiness.

He was a great man, beloved and trusted of Sandi. He had immense thoughts and plans—plans that would ensure him a life of ease without the distressing effects of labour. Also, Sanders would make him chief—in good time.

She should be as a queen—she would much rather have been in her bed and asleep.

Though no Christian, Arachi was a believer in miracles. He pinned his faith to the supreme miracle of living without work, and was near to seeing the fulfilment of that wonder.

But the miracle which steadfastly refused to happen was the miracle which would bring him relief at the moment when his numerous creditors were clamouring for the repayment of the many and various articles which they had placed in his care.

It is an axiom that the hour brings its man—most assuredly it brings its creditor.

There was a tumultuous and stormy day when the wrathful benefactors of Arachi gathered in full strength and took from him all that was takable, and this in the face of the village, to Koran's great shame. Arachi, on the contrary,

because of his high spirit, was neither ashamed nor distressed, even though many men spoke harshly.

"O thief and rat!" said the exasperated owner of a magnificent stool of ceremony, the base of which Arachi had contrived to burn. "Is it not enough that you should steal the wear of these things? Must you light your fires by my beautiful stool?"

Arachi replied philosophically and without passion: they might take his grand furnishings—which they did; they might revile him in tones and in language the most provocative—this also they did; but they could not take the noble hut which their labours had built, because that was against the law of the tribe; nor could they rob him of his faith in himself, because that was contrary to the laws of nature—Arachi's nature.

"My wife," he said to the weeping girl, "these things happen. Now I think I am the victim of Fate, therefore I propose changing all my gods. Such as I have do not serve me, and, if you remember, I spent many hours in the forest with my *bete*."

Arachi had thought of many possible contingencies—as, for instance:

Sandi might relent, and appoint him to a great chieftainship.

Or he might dig from the river-bed some such treasure as U'fabi, the N'gombi man, did once upon a time.

Arachi, entranced with this latter idea, went one morning before sunrise to a place by the shore and dug. He turned two spadefuls of earth before an infinite weariness fell upon him, and he gave up the search.

"For," he argued, "if treasure is buried in the river-bed, it might as well be there as elsewhere. And if it be not there, where may it be?"

Arachi bore his misfortune with philosophy. He sat in the bare and bleak interior of his hut, and explained to his wife that the men who had robbed him—as he said—hated him, and were jealous of him because of his great powers, and that one day, when he was a great chief, he would borrow an army from his friends the N'gombi, and put fire to their houses.

Yes, indeed, he said "borrow," because it was his nature to think in loans.

His father-in-law came on the day following the departing, expecting to save something from the wreckage on account of Koran's dowry. But he was very late.

"O son of shame!" he said bitterly. "Is it thus you repay for my priceless daughter? By Death! but you are a wicked man."

"Have no fear, fisherman," said Arachi loftily, "for I am a friend of Sandi, and be sure that he will do that for me which will place me high above common men. Even now I go to make a long palaver with him, and, when I return, you shall hear news of strange happenings."

Arachi was a most convincing man, possessing the powers of all great borrowers, and he convinced his father-in-law—a relation who, from the beginning of time, has always been the least open to conviction.

He left his wife, and she, poor woman, glad to be relieved of the presence of her loquacious husband, probably went to sleep.

At any rate, Arachi came to headquarters at a propitious moment for him. Headquarters at that moment was an armed camp at the junction of the Isisi and Ikeli rivers.

On the top of all his other troubles, Sanders had the problem of a stranger who had arrived unbidden. His orderly came to him and told him that a man desired speech of him.

"What manner of man?" asked Sanders, wearily.

"Master," said the orderly, "I have not seen a man like him before."

Sanders went out to inspect his visitor. The stranger rose and saluted, raising both hands, and the Commissioner looked him over. He was not of any of the tribes he knew, being without the face-cuts laterally descending either cheek, which mark the Bomongo. Neither was he tattooed on the forehead, like the people of the Little River.

"Where do you come from?" asked Sanders, in Swaheli—which is the *lingua franca* of the continent—but the man shook his head.

So Sanders tried him again, this time in Bomongo, thinking, from his face-marks, that he must be a man of the Bokeri people. But he answered in a strange tongue.

"*Quel nom avez vous?*" Sanders asked, and repeated the question in Portuguese. To this latter he responded, saying that he was a small chief of the Congo Angola, and that he had left his land to avoid slavery.

"Take him to the men's camp and feed him," said Sanders, and dismissed him from his mind.

Sanders had little time to bother about stray natives who might wander into his camp. He was engaged in searching

for a gentleman who was known as Abdul Hazim, a great rascal, trading guns and powder contrary to the law.

"And," said Sanders to the captain of the Houssas, "if I catch him he'll be sorry."

Abdul Hazim shared this view, so kept out of Sanders's way to such purpose that, after a week's further wanderings, Sanders returned to his headquarters.

Just about then he was dispirited, physically low from the after-effects of fever, and mentally disturbed.

Nothing went right with the Commissioner. There had been a begging letter from head-quarters concerning this same Abdul Hazim. He was in no need of Houssa palavers, yet there must needs come a free fight amongst these valiant soldier-men, and, to crown all, two hours afterwards, the Houssa skipper had gone to bed with a temperature of 104.6.

"Bring the swine here," said Sanders inelegantly, when the sergeant of Houssas reported the fight. And there were marched before him the strange man, who had come to him from the backlands, and a pugnacious soldier named Kano.

"Lord," said the Houssa, "by my god, who is, I submit, greater than most gods, I am not to blame. This Kaffir dog would not speak to me when I spoke; also, he put his hands to my meat, so I struck him."

"Is that all?" asked Sanders.

"That is all, lord."

"And did the stranger do no more than, in his ignorance, touch your meat, and keep silence when you spoke?"

"No more, lord."

Sanders leant back in his seat of justice and scowled horribly at the Houssa.

"If there is one thing more evident to me than another," he said slowly, "it is that a Houssa is a mighty person, a lord, a king. Now I sit here in justice, respecting neither kings, such as you be, nor slaves, such as this silent one. And I judge so, regarding the dignity of none, according to the law of the book. Is that so?"

"That is so, lord."

"And it would seem that it is against the law to raise hand against any man, however much he offends you, the proper course being to make complaint according to the regulations of the service. Is that so?"

"That is so, lord."

"Therefore you have broken the law. Is that truth?"

"That is truth, lord."

"Go back to your lines, admitting this truth to your comrades, and let the Kaffir rest. For on the next occasion, for him that breaks the law, there will be breaking of skin. The palaver is finished."

The Houssa retired.

"And," said Sanders, retailing the matter to the convalescent officer next morning, "I consider that I showed more than ordinary self-restraint in not kicking both of them to the devil."

"You're a great man," said the Houssa officer. "You'll become a colonial-made gentleman one of these days, unless you're jolly careful."

Sanders passed in silence the Houssa's gibe at the Companionship of St. Michael and St. George, and,

moreover, C.M.G.'s were not likely to come his way whilst Abdul Hazim was still at large.

He was in an unpleasant frame of mind when Arachi came swiftly in a borrowed canoe, paddled by four men whom he had engaged at an Isisi village, on a promise of payment which it was very unlikely he would ever be able to fulfil.

"Master," said Arachi solemnly, "I come desiring to serve your lordship, for I am too great a man for my village, and, if no chief, behold, I have a chief's thoughts."

"And a chief's hut," said Sanders dryly, "if all they tell me is true."

Arachi winced.

"Lord," he said humbly, "all things are known to you, and your eye goes forth like a chameleon's tongue to see round the corners."

Sanders passed over the unpleasant picture Arachi suggested.

"Arachi," he said, "it happens that you have come at a moment when you can serve me, for there is in my camp a strange man from a far-away land, who knows not this country, yet desires to cross it. Now, since you know the Angola tongue, you shall take him in your canoe to the edge of the Frenchi land, and there you shall put him on his way. And for this I will pay your paddlers. And as for you, I will remember you in the day of your need."

It was not as Arachi could have wished, but it was something. The next day he departed importantly.

Before he left, Sanders gave him a word of advice.

"Go you, Arachi," he said, "by the Little Kusu River."

"Lord," said Arachi, "there is a shorter way by the creek of Still Waters. This goes to the Frenchi land, and is deep enough for our purpose."

"It is a short way and a long way," said Sanders grimly. "For there sits a certain Abdul Hazim who is a great buyer of men, and, because the Angola folk are wonderful gardeners, behold, the Arab is anxious to come by them. Go in peace."

"On my head," said Arachi, and took his leave.

It was rank bad luck that he should meet on his way two of his principal creditors. These, having some grievance in the matter of foodstuffs, advanced, desiring to do him an injury, but, on his earnest entreaties, postponed the performance of their solemn vows.

"It seems," said one of them, "that you are now Sandi's man, for though I do not believe anything you have told me, yet these paddlers do not lie."

"Nor this silent one," said Arachi, pointing to his charge proudly. "And because I alone in all the land can make palaver with him, Sandi has sent me on a mission to certain kings. These will give me presents, and on my return I will pay you what I owe, and much more for love."

They let him pass.

It may be said that Arachi, who lent "to none and believed no man," had no faith whatever in his lord's story. Who the silent Angola was, what was his mission, and why he had been chosen to guard the stranger, Arachi did not guess.

He would have found an easy way to understanding if he had believed all that Sanders had told him, but that was not Arachi's way.

On a night when the canoe was beached on an island, and the paddlers prepared the noble Arachi's food, the borrower questioned his charge.

"How does it happen, foreigner," he asked, "that my friend and neighbour, Sandi, asks me of my kindness to guide you to the French land?"

"Patron," said the Angola man, "I am a stranger, and desire to escape from slavery. Also, there is a small Angola-Balulu tribe, which are of my people and faith, who dwell by the Frenchi tribe."

"What is your faith?" asked Arachi.

"I believe in devils and ju-jus," said the Angola man simply, "especially one called Billimi, who has ten eyes and spits at snakes. Also, I hate the Arabi, that being part of my faith."

This gave Arachi food for thought, and some reason for astonishment that Sandi should have spoken the truth to him.

"What of this Abdul Arabi?" he asked. "Now I think that Sandi lied to me when he said such an one buys men, for, if this be so, why does he not raid the Isisi?"

But the Angola man shook his head.

"These are matters too high for my understanding," he said. "Yet I know that he takes the Angola because they are great gardeners, and cunning in the pruning of trees."

Again Arachi had reason for thinking profoundly.

This Abdul, as he saw, must come to the Upper River for the people of the Lesser Akasava, who were also great gardeners. He would take no Isisi, because they were

notoriously lazy, and moreover, died with exasperating readiness when transplanted to a foreign soil.

He continued his journey till he came to the place where he would have turned off had he taken a short cut to the French territory.

Here he left his paddlers and his guest, and made his way up the creek of Still Waters.

Half-a-day's paddling brought him to the camp of Abdul. The slaver's silent runners on the bank had kept pace with him, and when Arachi landed he was seized by men who sprang apparently from nowhere.

"Lead me to your master, O common men," said Arachi, "for I am a chief of the Isisi, and desire a secret palaver."

"If you are Isisi, and by your thinness and your boasting I see that you are," said his captor, "my lord Abdul will make easy work of you."

Abdul Hazim was short and stout, and a lover of happiness. Therefore he kept his camp in that condition of readiness which enabled him to leave quickly at the first sight of a white helmet or a Houssa's tarboosh.

For it would have brought no happiness to Abdul had Sanders come upon him.

Now, seated on a soft-hued carpet of silk before the door of his little tent, he eyed Arachi dubiously, and listened in silence while the man spoke of himself.

"Kaffir," he said, when the borrower had finished, "how do I know that you do not lie, or that you are not one of Sandi's spies? I think I should be very clever if I cut your throat."

Arachi explained at length why Abdul Hazim should not cut his throat.

"If you say this Angola man is near by, why should I not take him without payment?" asked the slaver.

"Because," said Arachi, "this foreigner is not the only man in the country, and because I have great influence with Sandi, and am beloved by all manner of people who trust me. I may bring many other men to your lordship."

Arachi returned to the camp, towing a small canoe with which the slaver had provided him.

He woke the Angola stranger from his sleep.

"Brother," he said, "here is a canoe with food. Now I tell you to paddle one day up this creek of Still Waters and there await my coming, for there are evil men about, and I fear for your safety."

The Angolan, simple man that he was, obeyed. Half a day's journey up the creek Abdul's men were waiting.

Arachi set off for his own village that night, and in his canoe was such a store of cloth, of salt, and of brass rods as would delight any man's heart. Arachi came to his village singing a little song about himself.

In a year he had grown rich, for there were many ways of supplying the needs of an Arab slaver, and Abdul paid promptly.

Arachi worked single-handed, or, if he engaged paddlers, found them in obscure corners of the territories. He brought to Abdul many marketable properties, mostly young N'gombi women, who are fearful and easily cowed, and Sanders, scouring the country for the stout man with the fez, found him not.

"Lord Abdul," said Arachi, who met the slaver secretly one night near the Ikusi River, "Sandi and his soldiers have gone down to the Akasava for a killing palaver. Now I think we will do what you wish."

They were discussing an aspect of an adventure—the grandest adventure which Abdul had ever planned.

"Arachi," said Abdul, "I have made you a rich man. Now, I tell you that I can make you richer than any chief in this land."

"I shall be glad to hear of this," said Arachi. "For though I am rich, yet I have borrowed many things, and, it seems, I have so wonderful a mind that I must live always in tomorrow."

"So I have heard," said the Arab. "For they say of you that if you had the whole world you would borrow the moon."

"That is my mystery," said Arachi modestly. "For this reason I am a very notable man."

Then he sat down to listen in patience to the great plan of Abdul Hazim. And it was a very high plan, for there were two thousand Liberian dollars at the back of it, and, for Arachi, payment in kind.

At the moment of the conference, Sanders was housed in the Ochori city making palaver with Bosambo, the chief.

"Bosambo," said Sanders, "I have given you these upper streams to your care. Yet Abdul Hazim walks through the land without hurt, and I think it is shame to you and to me."

"Master," said Bosambo, "it is a shameful thing. Yet the streams hereabouts are so many, and Abdul is a cunning man, and has spies. Also, my people are afraid to offend him lest he 'chop' them, or sell them into the interior."

Sanders nodded and rose to join the *Zaire*.

"Bosambo," he said, "this government put a price upon this Abdul, even as a certain government put a price upon you."

"What is his price, lord?" asked Bosambo, with an awakening of interest.

"One hundred pounds in silver," said Sanders.

"Lord," said Bosambo, "that is a good price."

Two days afterwards, when Arachi came to Bosambo, this chief was engaged in the purely domestic occupation of nursing his one small son.

"Greeting, Bosambo," said Arachi, "to you and to your beautiful son, who is noble in appearance and very quiet."

"Peace be to you, Arachi. I have nothing to lend you," said Bosambo.

"Lord," said Arachi loftily, "I am now a rich man—richer than chiefs—and I do not borrow."

"Ko, ko!" said Bosambo, with polite incredulity.

"Bosambo," Arachi went on, "I came to you because I love you, and you are not a talking man, but rather a wise and silent one."

"All this I know, Arachi," said Bosambo cautiously. "And again I say to you that I lend no man anything."

The exasperated Arachi raised his patient eyes to heaven.

"Lord Bosambo," he said, in the tone of one hurt, "I came to tell you of that which I have found, and to ask your lordship to help me secure it. For in a certain place I have come across a great stock of ivory, such as the old kings buried against their need."

"Arachi," said Bosambo, of a sudden, "you tell me that you are rich. Now you are a little man and I am a chief, yet I am not rich."

"I have many friends," said Arachi, trembling with pride, "and they give me rods and salt."

"That is nothing," said Bosambo. "Now I understand richness, for I have lived amongst white folk who laugh at rods and throw salt to dogs."

"Lord Bosambo," said the other eagerly, "I am rich also by white men's rule. Behold!"

From his waist pouch he took a handful of silver, and offered it in both hands for the chief's inspection.

Bosambo examined the money respectfully, turning each coin over gingerly.

"That is good riches," he said, and he breathed a little faster than was his wont. "And it is new, being bright. Also the devil marks, which you do not understand, are as they should be."

The gratified Arachi shoved his money back into his pouch. Bosambo sat in meditative silence, his face impassive.

"And you will take me, Arachi, to the place of buried treasure?" he asked slowly. "Ko! you are a generous man, for I do not know why you should share with me, knowing that I once beat you."