

BONNY'S KING AND RIVER

OUR OLD FRIEND OKO JUMBO NOT YET DEAD.

LIMITS TO THE BOUNDS OF HIS TERRITORY—FEROCIOUS CANNIBALS AND A HIDEOUS FETICH HOUSE.

BONNY, West Africa, Sept. 21.—I find that rumor has lied as usual in reporting three months ago the death of King Oko Jumbo, of Bonny, having confounded him with his eldest son. The illustrious companion of our last year's shipwreck is almost as much alive as before, although his narrow escape from drowning seems to have given him a distaste for the sea, for he has now gone to live 40 miles further inland, leaving all his local interests in the charge of our old acquaintance Prince Herbert Jumbo, who accompanied the King on that memorable voyage to England and back in 1885, and in the crisis of the wreck took equal care of his bulldog and his father.

King Jumbo's rule may well be termed a "limited" monarchy, for—so far at least as this district is concerned—it depends very much upon the state of the Bonny River whether he has any territory to reign over. Russia has been defined as "despotism tempered by murder," and in like manner this amphibious kingdom may be described as "despotism tempered by inundation." Oko Jumbo is theoretically the master of Bonny, but Bonny is practically the master of Oko Jumbo. During the dry season he is a monarch of high rank and large dominions. When the rains set in his realm shrinks as suddenly as the assets of a business man when called upon for a subscription. Throughout a large portion of the year the dissensions of the rival factions of land and water leave the real character of his territory as uncertain as an office seeker's politics, making his town a floating capital, and his wealth a sinking fund.

The fact is that the Bonny, like every other river in this part of West Africa, is distinctly connected with the Niger, and, in common with other small relatives of great celebrities, gives itself outrageous airs on the strength of the relationship. How many mouths the Niger has really got is one of the things which, as Lord Dunsyre would say, "no fellow can find out." But whatever river you may enter anywhere between the Bonny and the Benue will turn out sooner or later to be one of the pipes of the great reservoir as surely as every Scotchman is descended from Robert Bruce, every Irishman from King Brian Borohme, and every Englishman from some gentleman who "came over with William the Conqueror."

Once past the white leaping line of breakers marking the formidable bar you see before you as you glide into the broad brown river a flag waving jauntily over the small white-fronted sanitarium, which stands alone amid the dark green mass of half-drowned thickets appropriately called Breaker Island. It might fitly be conducted on hydropathic principles, for when the river comes down in its might during the season of heavy rains there is hardly anything left of the island except the sanitarium itself. The expanding and contracting power of this elastic islet would just have suited the ingenious schoolboy who, having stated that heat expanded objects while cold contracted them, gave as an example that "the days were longer in Summer than in Winter."

It must be owned that the Bonny River—whether from its gray, sullen stream, the unsightly dreariness of its low flat banks, the leaden sky that always overhangs it at this season, or the deadly reputation which it shares with its sister river, the New-Calabar—produces at first sight a singularly depressing effect, deepened tenfold by the rotting timbers of the wrecked ships and dismantled hulks which stand gauntly up out of the gloomy waters like giant skeletons every here and there. Nor is the sombreness of this ghostly panorama much lightened by the recollection that not many miles up this very river, if all tales be true, are to be found some of the most ferocious cannibals in Central Africa, fit tenants indeed for a region which seems to be the chosen home of death in his worst form.

It is a vast relief to turn from these sinister objects to the trim and businesslike smartness of the neat little English gunboat anchored off the town, which looks so light and dainty as her spotless white hull and tapering masts sway to and fro upon the long smooth swells which come rolling in from the sea that one might almost take her for some white-winged sea-bird hovering a moment on the surface to poise itself for another flight. Everything on board—the clean white planks of the main deck, the neatly painted boats, the well scoured 7-inch gun amidships, the carefully stowed hammocks, the polished brass-work, the shining cutlasses and boarding pikes on the lower deck, the poop with its two smart little Gatling guns on their well oiled pivots—bears that stamp of thorough order and discipline which is the greatest charm of a modern man-of-war. But the blue-jackets themselves, as they stood mustered upon the deck on Sunday morning in a far-extending line of sturdy frames and bold, brown faces, echoing with their deep voices the grand old prayer for "us, thy servants, now at sea," were the goodliest sight of all. Were I a King, the thought that such men were leading my name with their prayers thousands of miles away would be more precious to me than the widest latitude in the matter of crown jewels or of "civil lists."

But the blighting breath of this evil place has made itself felt even here. Two hammocks are slung beneath the awning of the main deck, and in each hammock lies a fever-stricken man, with his haggard, wasted face turned wistfully seaward to drink in the first breath of the life-giving breeze which is just beginning to relieve the stifling heat of the long, weary, burning day. One of these when he first came on board a few months ago was a handsome English lad with a fresh, smooth, ruddy face. But who could recognize it now? The other was a stalwart man in the prime of life; but the wrinkled visage of an old man of 70 would now appear comely beside these livid, ghastly features, pinched as if by the bony fingers of death. Eight more brave fellows lie prostrate and helpless upon the lower decks: and how many may be added to that gloomy list before the voyage shall end none but God can tell.

Amid the throng of canoes that come crowding round us as usual appear three or four big aristocratic boats manned by 20 or 30 natives apiece, and roofed in amidships with the awning of brown matting which proclaims them to be the property of a chief. One of these black magnates—a rather good-looking young fellow, with features almost as regular as those of a European—comes on board, and is presented to us by the somewhat original title of "David Fine-Country." As the boats circle to and fro there arises from them a weird, monotonous music like the distant beating of a drum. This is produced by a kind of rude harmonicon formed of thin slats of wood nailed upon a rough framework and played with two short sticks. This curious contrivance is a telegraph as well as a musical instrument, every note being a signal unintelligible to outsiders. In this way two natives can hold a conversation at a considerable distance, and a negro trader aboard one of the floating "hulks" can signal to his agents on shore. The huge wooden drums of the Duallas, on the Cameroons River, which I described in my letter of Sept. 11, are used in a similar way.

"Do you see that big red-roofed house a little behind the others?" says one of the ship's officers to us. "That's where your friend King Oko Jumbo used to live when he was in the town, but he's hardly shown his nose down here since he was wrecked with you last year at River Cess. Now, can you make out the mouth of a creek behind that low wooded point yonder? Well, it was just there that the Portigee slavers used to lie at anchor in the old times when our cruisers were hunting after them. They were quite hidden by the trees, you see, and there they'd lie snug for days and days with all their niggers aboard waiting for a dark night. And when it came at last Mr. Portigee would say to himself: 'Now's my time!' and he'd up stick and slip away down the river as quiet as a mouse, without showing lights or anything, to try and sneak past the British cruisers outside, and sometimes he did and sometimes he didn't."

Our first visit to the shore was quite a

composite piece of travel, a part of it being done by boat, another part on a wheeled truck pushed along a line of rails, a third on our own feet, and a fourth on the shoulders of native porters. But such things are everyday matters in Africa, where the canoe and the hammock are what the railway and the postchaise are at home. When I came aboard again in the Cameroons River after my trip to Aqua Town I was brought down to the boat seated on the shoulders of a brawny Dualla, who trotted so briskly down the sloping bank that I was fain to cling to his head with all my might, having no reins to steer him with. In the same way the great Goorkha chief, Jung Bahadoor, when he came down from Nepal to meet the Prince of Wales during the latter's tour through India, came mounted upon a man, and brought another man along with him for the Prince to ride if he thought fit. But his Royal Highness prudently declined intrusting his sacred and corpulent person to a diminutive Goorkha soldier little more than 5 feet high and as thin as a weasel.

When once we had climbed the steep wooden stair leading up to the broad, shady veranda of the house tenanted by the company's agent and his colleagues we might easily have imagined ourselves back in some well appointed country station of Northern India, rather than upon the bank of an African river. There were the snug canvas chairs, and the cushioned lounges of cane, the photographic albums on the light tables, the scattered books and magazines, the tray of tea and biscuits brought by a white-robed native, the bedrooms opening into the veranda, the vast sail-like mosquito curtains, the thin partitions falling short of the roof by more than a foot in order to give as free play as possible to what little air there is.

Equally incongruous in this savage region was the appearance of the trim and well kept little garden behind the house, the arrangement of which had evidently been a work of time and labor. European civilization asserted itself in the gin bottles and preserved-meat jars that formed the edging of the borders, but the vegetation had all the barbaric richness of tropical nature. There were the forkleaved pawpaw, and the stiff, angular euphorbia; the slender feather-crowned cocoa palm, the swordlike "croc-chien" cactus, the "variegated croton," all green and gold like an Indian snake; the formidable spikes of the prickly pear, the dark glossy orange tree, the vast bannerlike shadow of the plantain, the scarlet hibiscus flower wherewith our Malay servants used to "shine" our boots in Sumatra; the twining granadilla wreathing itself around a tiny arbor in the centre of the garden, and the delicate oval leaves of the frangipani, rich with that marvelous fragrance which is the delight of fashionable Europe. But all the trees without exception are smeared with coal tar to a height of several feet above the ground in order to protect them against the ants, the most dreaded and destructive of all the insect scourges of Africa.

On leaving the garden five minutes' walk along a sandy path close to the water's edge brought us to the "cathedral," by which sounding name was designated a meek little church of corrugated iron not much bigger than an ordinary dining room. Just beyond it we turned sharply to the left over a swampy flat dappled with dark thickets, above which rose like a pillar the dead, white, sapless trunk of a mighty ceiba, magnificent even in its decay. Our approach scared from among the bushes several small black and white animals which I at first took for goats, but which were really full grown African cattle! I had laughed only a few days before on hearing our Captain speak of having put into his sheep pen three or four oxen of the native breed, but the proof was now before my eyes that he had not spoken without warrant.

All at once the path which we had been following disappeared into a vast lake of muddy water almost big enough for a boat race, which filled up the whole breadth of a hollow lying between two dense masses of thorny undergrowth. The sight of this quagmire at once explained what had been puzzling me for some time past, viz., our host's previous order for "two strong boys," and the persistent attendance of the "boys" themselves, two strapping natives who had already seen their thirty-fifth birthday. But I afterward learned that the presence of two or three native servants to carry you across a "wet bit" is as recognized a feature of every walk in this marshy region as the constant companionship of an umbrella in England. The two colored gentlemen grasped each other's wrists in such a way as to form a kind of rude seat, upon which Mrs. Ker was borne safely across the perilous pool like a second "Lady of the Lake," while the rest of us picked our way as best we might along the two or three inches of tolerably firm mud left between the water and the thorny thicket.

In this primitive fashion we at length reached the closely packed mass of native huts forming the real "town" of Bonny, to which the handful of European houses around the landing place serves only as a kind of preface. The huts were for the most part of one traditional type, viz., that of an enormous basket with one side knocked out. In fact, were a monster picnic to disperse suddenly, leaving their hampers and lunch baskets scattered around in the dirt, it would represent fairly enough an ordinary African village. A few of the larger hovels had attained the dignity of a roof of corrugated iron stuck on one side like a soldier's cap, while patches of the same material clung to their sides like overgrown postage stamps. The interiors of one and all were fully open to the public gaze, which mattered the less inasmuch as there seemed to be nothing in them except two or three cracked pots and a tiny fire.

As among the Duallas at Cameroons, the mere appearance of a "little white lady" was amply sufficient to create a general and overwhelming excitement. The whole population, masculine, feminine, and neuter crowded round us in a body, and our progress through the town forcibly reminded me of the account which one of my father's Brazilian negroes used to give of his first day in England: "Queer people dese, master; man look, woman look, little child look, very dog look, see black man." At last we halted in front of a hut considerably larger than the rest, with an iron roof, which threatened to press down altogether the light bamboo walls below it. This was the town residence of a great local chief called Nat Fine-Country, brother of the David Fine-Country whom I have already mentioned as having boarded our steamer on arrival. Entering the house—which was no easy matter, for a pool of dirty water nearly six feet broad lay right in front of the door—we found the chief (as an Irish doctor once phrased it) "enjoying the very worst of health, and getting rapidly no better." He explained to us that "jump-jump pain live for neck," which meant that he was suffering from a bad attack of rheumatism.

The room in which Mr. Nat Fine-Country received us was as extraordinary as the name and appearance of its owner. It had no roof, and might almost be said to have no floor either, consisting as it did of a crazy wooden platform around its four sides, with a deep hollow in the middle, the whole thing being extremely suggestive of a public swimming bath. The platform was so narrow that there was barely room upon it for our chairs and ourselves, and when I unwarily pushed back mine in getting up to take leave I came within a hair's breadth of tumbling backward head over heels into the yawning pit below. On leaving the house we were beginning to make merry over this singular apartment, when an object suddenly confronted us which made us all grave enough. It was a strange looking hut of wattles and grass, hung round with broken jars and bottles, and standing all by itself as if the surrounding dwellings had shrunk away from it. To all appearance it had neither door nor window, but through a chink in the wattlework we could see that its earthen floor was literally heaped with human skulls. "What on earth is this place?" asked I of our conductor. The answer, brief though it was, spoke volumes: "It's a 'fetich house.'" DAVID KER.