

Chapter 1

The waters of the mighty Zambezi River in Africa flow onward toward the sea as they have done for millenniums. Raising its furtive eyes above the river's turbid surface in sheltered coves, the stealthy crocodile lies in wait for its prey. So has it done for millenniums. Ponderous elephants lumber down to drink from the shallows by the muddy banks. Wrinkled, gnomelike, black-faced monkeys chitter and peep as they peer through screens of leaves. Great buffaloes, malignant and fierce, crash through the bush, and baboons yap and scamper over the rocks and sunbaked anthills beyond.

Where the Livubwe River flows down into the Zambezi, the little village called Milongo once spread out over the rocks and little rises. The bwala in the center of the village, beaten flat almost to iron hardness, had been made by the footsteps of many generations. Here in this little village, Malinki was born more than a hundred years ago to Mwasekera, whose name means Laughing or Happy One.

When Mwasekera was but a small child, she lived in the central part of the country then called Nyasaland at Kadzio village near the rushing Bua River. One year a great drought came upon the land. The time of the beginning of the rains came and went, and the earth became baked and seared. The people gazed in mute appeal at the brazen sky. The drums of the witch doctors beat in vain. Not a cloud drifted across the burning dome. No one planted, for the soil was as dry as the tongue of an old shoe. There was no harvesting, because there had been no planting. Food became scarce, and at last there was no food at all. Wild beasts, crazed with hunger, came into the village and boldly carried off the weaker people. Flesh hung from starved bodies in horrible wrinkled folds. Eyes were sunken wells of hopelessness edged by the gathering scum of disease. Teeth loosened and fell out. Sores oozed; thin bodies wasted away. The people died. Cattle, sheep, and goats lay

down by cracked water holes and perished. The Bua River shrank until it became a dirty brownish trickle in some places, and at other places the riverbed lay dry and stony.

Wearing red fezzes on their heads and riding on fat little donkeys, Ajawa traders came one day to the village of Kadzio. And Mwasekera was sold by her own brother to an Ajawa trader. She who had been slim and comely of figure and who had had an unusually pretty face, now gaunt and wizened from the famine, was traded for four quarts of meal!

The traders tied the slaves securely in gangs by the use of slave forks, called gori sticks. A long forked stick was placed around the neck of each slave and each stick fastened to another by thongs and chains. Before nightfall the slave caravan left Kadzio village and moved sluggishly southward.

Mwasekera moved mechanically like one in a dream. After several days the caravan reached Fulangkungu Hill, where a thriving village stood. Here the streams had not dried up. There had been rain. Gardens thrived. There was food to eat.

Mwasekera and the other slaves were set to work carrying water for the gardens.

Mwasekera, dressed only in a garment made from the skins of animals, bent her young shoulders to carry water all day long from the stream and from the water hole for the crops and for the animals. She was child enough to be comforted somewhat by the abundance of food. But she often wept when she thought of her home in Kadzio village—her mother and father and sisters and brothers. Would she ever see them again?

And then Mwasekera, small, undernourished, and afflicted with rickets, was given in marriage by heathen rites to a man four times her age. Life now became more unbearable for her, made so by the three older wives of her husband.

“Wash this,” they commanded, or “Fetch this or that.”

“Go do this.”

“Sweep here.”

“Hoe there.”

The commands kept her running from morning till night. She was pinched or hit if she was a little slow or did not please

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the other wives. At night her legs and body ached. Many times she wept herself to sleep.

As if Mwasekera did not have enough to bear, there came a greater burden into her young life-motherhood. Not quite fifteen years of age, little "Happy One" bore in misery and wracking pain a sturdy boy child. The old women who watched over her in her labor muttered grimly and wagged their heads knowingly as they clucked: "She surely must die. There must be some evil in her to make her suffer so."

The babe first saw light in the midst of a downpour of cold, tropical rain. Water ran in dirty freshets through the doorway of the mud-walled house. It soaked the mat whereon the slave girl lay, weak and shivering. She named the child Donda, a word contrived from that meaning misery.

The next year a little daughter was born on the same ragged mat. The smell of the unwashed bodies of the women attending Mwasekera and smoke from the fire hole in the center of the room filled the dank, mud-walled hut.

The new babe at birth was placed naked under the unwashed blanket that covered Mwasekera.

Later when she went to fetch water, the babe was tied on her back in a goatskin, while little Donda, her firstborn, toddled naked beside her. When she hoed in the garden, she took both children with her, the one warm against her bare back and the other following close behind her.

As she worked, Mwasekera kept alert watch for the fierce Angoni warriors who were making war on the other tribes continually. Chief Mpenzeni's warriors had devastated hundreds of villages and seized many of the people, their crops, and their animals. Mwasekera knew that when the Angoni warriors came it was as if a fire consumed the countryside. Neither man nor beast nor fowl would be seen for many days after the warriors had passed by. The weak ones of a village—the old, the babes, and the sick ones—were ruthlessly slain.

Stories had been told around the village fires of how women pounding mealies in rough mortars, or grinding grain into flour between two flat stones, or hoeing in the mealie

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gardens were snatched by the Angoni. As old women were weaving mats or making clay pots, and little children were running here and there in happy abandon, the warriors suddenly came upon them all with blood-curdling shrieks. In an instant all would be fire, turmoil, and death.