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LIFE IN FRENCH CONGO

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ILLUSTRATED



KOUYOU WOMEN WHOM I ENTICED FROM THEIR CONICAL HUT.

[Frontispiece.]



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Arriving by the most beautiful motoring roads at *Bouka* and *Marali*, we find ourselves, as at *Batangaso*, in a region of forests. Here the women have for their customary clothing a bunch of green leaves. The nostrils are decorated by two enormous nails. From the lower lip or from the nose hang sometimes long stems of glass, ivory, or wood. Some of the men have large round bits of the same materials as large as a two-franc piece in their upper lip. The chiefs are fond of sporting a voluminous tuft of many-coloured feathers. Some of the necklaces worn by the women are more like instruments of torture.

Their weapons consist chiefly of a short spear or *assegai*, from which they never part. They use also bows and arrows, knives, daggers, and "troumbaches." A "troumbache" is a formidable weapon, the like of which is probably not to be found in Europe. It is like an enormous knife of which all the blades are open at the same time. The blades have a double edge and are long and tapering. The knife is hurled from a distance of 50 or 60 metres, and the wounds they cause are frightful.

The European station at *Bambari* is built high up, on a splendid terrace almost a kilometre in length overlooking the Kouango River—a truly splendid situation. Here had been arranged for medical inspection some important native gatherings. What a picturesque sight it was! and what unexpected discoveries one made! It was at *Bambari* that I saw one of the wives of the great chieftain, *Gono de Sinémi*, wearing among her hanging ornaments a real live scarab! The élite among the women have a coiffure of beads, produced by dividing the hair into an infinite number of strands and threading them with beads.

At *Grimari* the coiffures are made to stand erect by means of quantities of porcupine quills.

In the matter of tattooing there is wonderful diversity. Some varieties indicate the origin of the tribe, others have developed from mere fashion. Passing through villages it is not an uncommon sight to see patients submitting to the ordeal. In order to make deep furrows in the skin and set the designs in relief the wounds are prevented from healing at once by being sprinkled with a powder made from red wood, rubber, or ashes.

Coming to *Bangassou*, the capital of the sultans of old, we still find relics of its ancient glory. Its oriental gates beneath the giant mango-trees still give it an air of majesty, while there are still to be found white mares of pure Arab breed, which, however, fall immediately victim to the onslaughts of the tsetse fly if they venture into the forest. The *Azendé* of *Bangassou* are the famous *Niam-Niams* of *Schweinfurth*, made famous for all time by *Herodotus* as "the men with tails." There are also the *Nzakara* and the *Banziri* tribes, who have shown signs of a higher civilization than other black tribes in the *Oubangui*.

Fouroumbala has a charming situation. From the flagged veranda of my bungalow, I get a view of the *Kotto* River as it bounds over the rocks from waterfall to waterfall. A gentle slope, lined by palm-trees and flowering coffee shrubs, leads me down to it. Women and children bathe in the clear water. The bank on the opposite side rises steeply up a mountain side sprinkled with giant trees and huge red boulders. Other travellers besides myself must have experienced the peculiar charm of this little corner of Africa. For the "crotons" which they once

planted round about the house now make a veritable garden, displaying in the sunshine leaves of transparent gold, emerald, and burnished copper. Beyond and through their luxuriant foliage one gets the truly beautiful distance made up by mountain and river.

Crampel is full of reminiscences of our past history in the colony. Here we see the celebrated Kaga Bandero, an enormous mountain peak of granite formation which dominates all the country. Gentil made use of it in his own defence. The ruins of his house are still to be seen down below. It was here he was hard-pressed, and climbed to the top of the peak by a rope ladder and defied the hail of arrows. Later he was given a bodyguard of Senegalese troops. Crampel has always been one of the most important stations in the Oubangui-Chari. Situated on the confluence of the Nana and Gribingui Rivers, it is the point where all the principal roads converge, namely, those from the Tchad, from Batangafo, the Sultanates of Oubangui, M'Brès, and N'Délé. All convoys from Lake Tchad used at one time to start from Crampel. It is named after the explorer who in April 1891 was murdered with his companion Biscarrat. Their graves can be seen near the Kaga Bandero, but tradition has it that they were eaten by cannibals.

It was at Crampel, too, that the Governors Gaud and Toqué lived. Left to their own resources with insufficient arms or provisions in the midst of an unruly and rebel population, they resorted to very original means of defence. A huge hole is shown containing thousands of skeletons. On the slightest pretext or provocation natives were thrown into it alive, and the executions by blowing up the victims with



A RHINO SHOT ON THE RIGHT BANK OF THE CHARI RIVER.



A SARA-DJINGÉ WOMAN FAMOUS FOR HER LARGE LIP ORNAMENTS.

dynamite have to this day left a most vivid impression on the minds of the populace, serving rather to enhance the reputation of the perpetrators than otherwise. Villages pride themselves on bearing the names of the famous "Commandants," and children are still often called "Toqué."

As soon as we reach *M'Brès* and *N'Délé* we are getting into a sandy country, the precursor of the northern desert.

At *Fort Archambault*, 750 kilometres from Bangui, we are no longer in Oubangui-Chari but in the Tchad State. To go from one province to the other, one is obliged to go through this town. Situated high up on the left bank of the Chari River, it overlooks an immense plain, which at one season of the year is under water, but which in the dry season can be crossed by motor.

Archambault is a very attractive spot for many reasons. The European quarter will not regain its old important standing until it becomes the capital of the Tchad province in place of Fort Lamy.

The native quarter has a very mixed population. Thousands of Bornous, Fellatahs, Ouadiens, and Arabs mix with one another and also with the handsomest of all the black tribes, namely the Sara. The best point of observation is the market-place, for the villages are surrounded by palisades or "seccos" which protect them from the eyes of the curious.

The district is rich and productive. In the market, the most important one after Bangui, there are quantities of domestic animals—horses, oxen, donkeys, sheep, and kids. One can buy a hand-woven material, called "le gabac," soap, monkey-nut oil, beans, meat, fish, kapok, fruit,

cotton, millet, sugar, rice, maize, clothes, pearls, sesame, tobacco, ornaments, and other finery. The flame of the forest trees in flower round the market formed a scarlet canopy beneath which moved kaleidoscopic groups of various races and colours. Mahommedans with their long-flowing drapery and gold ornaments mingled with negresses bronzed, naked, and stalwart. Curious to see side by side the Arab, so noble-looking in the soft folds of his robe, and the Sara in his savage nakedness, yet with well-proportioned figure. The Sara are the principal inhabitants of this district. They are handsome, thriving, increasing in numbers, and are essentially agricultural. You can see them and their families working hard from early dawn in their fields of millet. Such a sight is rare indeed in Equatorial Africa. It is from the Sara that the best type of recruit for military service is collected. The women who insert the great wooden circles in their lips, which prevent them from speaking or eating properly, are to be seen at Archambault and the surrounding villages.

Archambault is without gainsaying the paradise of the African hunter. Herds of buffalo and antelope are very common. It is a favourite resort of the rhinoceros, and lions are to be met with in the forest and round about the villages, together with the panther, the jackal, and the hyena. The hippopotamus, too, is not uncommon. As for elephants, the best herds have migrated towards the eastern frontier, but there still remain quite a fair number, among which are some remarkably fine specimens.

Once during a hunting excursion on the right bank of the Chari, I came by chance upon a mysterious and secret ceremony which was taking place under the trees in the forest to the beat of

the tom-toms. Some Sara women were dancing round a group of young men, who were sitting motionless. Their heads rested on their arms and their arms on a forked stake driven into the ground. Their bodies were painted red and their hair was shaved in patches. A panther-skin was about their loins. At my approach not the slightest movement was perceptible. The young women, whose clothing consisted of a belt of blue pearls and a little bell, renewed their slow dance around the young aspirants for their hand. This Sara custom was an initiation into sexual life which held so important a place under the Pharaohs in the time of the goddess Isis.

The regular linking up of all these countries with the Mediterranean by motor may be hoped for in the near future. It was actually realized for the first time on December 14, 1924. The expedition, led by Haardt-Ardouin-Dubreuil, starting from Algeria, crossed the Sahara, the Sudan, French West Africa, and reached Fort Lamy without mishap. Other expeditions followed. From now onwards all France's African colonies will form a single whole. The last entrant and the one which in the past has been least favoured, namely, French Equatorial Africa, is now joined to its neighbours, thanks to the progress made by the motor and the aeroplane.

That the expeditions found good motor roads from Lake Tchad as far as the Oubangui River was a fact which probably astonished not only the French public but even perhaps the pioneers themselves. After the successful trial runs across the country they painted the colony in glowing colours. Its only drawback was its inaccessibility. It used to take ten whole days in the favourable season to get up the Congo by boat from Brazzaville to Bangui, and eighteen to twenty days