

Literature, &c.

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LAGOMA.

A TALE OF THE COAST OF AFRICA.

THE great river Gambia, after running a course of eight hundred miles through the tropical regions of western Africa, disembogues into the Atlantic at about 12 degrees of north latitude. At its mouth lay the small Island of St. Mary, now occupied by the British colony of Bathurst. This settlement, originally of a mercantile character, has since become a station for recaptured slaves, auxiliary to Sierra Leone, which is situated a few degrees farther south. In the principal town reside thirty or forty English merchants, who exchange the manufactures of their own country for the gum, bee's wax, hides, ivory, and gold of Africa. Besides these, there are the governor of the colony and his assistants, together with a small guard of soldiers for the defence of the place.

On a pleasant day in June, some six or seven years ago, a small party of Europeans rode out of the town of Wellington towards the villages of the recaptured Africans. It consisted of two naval officers from a frigate then lying in the river, the colonial Secretary, and the Chaplain of the Station. Their course led them along a level country covered with long loose grass. A few trees were scattered over the plain, among which were conspicuous the tall, graceful palm, with its feathery coronal leaves, and the huge, swollen trunk of the baobab (known there by the singular name of monkey bread), which sometimes attain to the monstrous girth of sixty feet, although not remarkable for either height or foliage. At length they came in sight of some fields of maize, sweet potatoes, bananas, and ocras, among which appeared the conical roofs of the native huts.

'Yonder, gentlemen,' said the Secretary, 'is the village to which we have given the name of Melville. You will observe that the people are allowed to live according to their own ideas of comfort, receiving from us such assistance and instruction as they are willing to accept.'

'Do you find them amenable to instruction?' inquired one of the officers, a middle aged man, with a weather beaten countenance, who wore the uniform of a lieutenant.

'Why yes,' replied the colonial functionary. 'But the parson is best qualified to speak on that subject. He devotes a great deal of time and labor to his black sheep, as I call them.'

'The character of the native Africans,' said the chaplain, 'varies with the tribe to which they belong. Those of the interior are more civilized and tractable than those of the coast. The Ashantees are warlike and bloodthirsty; the Foulahs jaunty, bold, and enterprising; the Mandingoes, are shrewd, given to traffic, and with strong religious feelings. But speaking in general, I consider the negroes a tractable, good humoured race, easily led by appeals to their affections. That mild, gentle, flexible character which renders them so valuable as slaves, makes them also good free citizens, provided the government under which they live be not so managed as to excite their evil passions, and particularly to mortify their vanity, which is a ruling principle with them. Occasionally, however, we find among them men of a different stamp—obstinate, headstrong, unmanageable. Such a man—a very remarkable personage, by the way—you will probably see in the village which we are approaching.'

'You mean Lagoma?' observed the Secretary.

'What is his history?' asked the younger officer.

He is a native of the Eboe country, near the mouth of the Quorra or Niger; replied the secretary, he 'was liberated about four years ago from the slave Africana, which, you will recollect, was captured by the Bronte, off the Cape Verd Islands. From his story it appears that he was the chief, or I suppose we might call him the king, of a sept or subdivision of the Eboe tribe not far from the great river. An older relative, a cousin or uncle, governed a larger district, situated on the western banks of the Quorra. This kinsman of his managed to involve himself in debt with some of the rascally Portuguese slave traders, who kept him in constant annoyance by their demands for payment. As this was to be made in slaves, and he was at that moment too weak to undertake a war with any of his neighbors, the hereditary enemies of the Eboes he could hit upon no other scheme for discharging his obligations than that of raking up an old quarrel with his cousin, and falling upon him suddenly, as to give him no opportunity for resistance. Poor Lagoma was taken prisoner with all his family and half his subjects. His younger brother was killed in the conflict. His wife and her two children, along with more than a hundred of his people, died of fever, and the effects of ill usage, on board the Africana before she was taken. These sufferings and injuries have sunk into his mind and produced a powerful effect. He never smiles and never joins with the other blacks in their amusements or conversation. His whole mind is absorbed with the idea of vengeance. From the time he landed, and was devoted to understand his position here, he has made himself to a single object—that of procuring, by his labor sufficient funds to hire a passage in a

trading vessel to his native country, with a supply of arms, which will enable him, by joining some of the tribes opposed to his cousin to take condign vengeance on the treacherous scoundrel. He is assisted by about twenty of his people, who were liberated with him, and whom he has inspired with the same feelings. They have really made wonderful progress towards the execution of their design, and have already accumulated a considerable amount of money by the sale of their crops. They are exemplary for their industry and sobriety, and could they be but disabused of this extravagant idea of revenge, would be a most valuable acquisition to our colony.'

'Here you see him,' observed the chaplain, pointing with his whip to a man engaged in weeding a field of maize in the vicinity of a hut. He did not even look up until the secretary called him by name, when he slowly raised himself, and moved towards the party. Both the officers were struck with the air of composed dignity with which he returned their salutations, and led the way to his hut. He was tall and well proportioned, with the appearance of great strength. Although perfectly black, with thick woolly hair, his features had not otherwise what is commonly considered the negro cast. His eyes were small, and set deep beneath his overhanging brow; his nose was not flat, but rather of an aquiline shape; his lips were not very thick; nor did the lower part of the face protrude as is common with the race to which he belonged. He wore the ordinary garb of the African colonists—loose white cotton trousers—turned up to the knee while working, and a straw hat. His house, to which he led them, was like all the rest, of a circular shape, with walls composed of a wattling of bamboo, and a conical roof thatched with straw; the whole bearing a great external resemblance to a round hay stack. The furniture was extremely simple; more so than is usual with the negroes; for all Lagoma's earnings had been carefully reserved for the purchase of arms; a cooking pot and a few baskets, with a raised bedstead covered with mats, were all. He pointed his visitors to the bedstead by way of a seat, and placed before them a bunch of plantains, and a calabash full of palm wine; then seating himself on a mat by the door, he calmly waited till they should address him.

'Always hard at work, Lagoma,' said the secretary.

'Yes, hard work—large crop; plenty money,' replied the negro chief laconically.

'Then you still hold out to your scheme of revenge, my friend?' inquired the chaplain.

'What you call revenge?' retorted Lagoma, sullenly, as if annoyed at the prospect of renewed expostulation. 'I no call it revenge; call it punish.'

'But consider,' urged the chaplain, 'is not your feeling a bad one? Revenge or punishment is the same, if undertaken in savage, unchristian spirit. Think how much happiness, how many comforts, you might enjoy with your crops and money, if you would but renounce this vindictive enterprise.'

'Misser officer, you a lieutenant, hey?' asked Lagoma, turning suddenly to the oldest of the two naval officers, who answered in the affirmative.

'You got wife and children?' inquired the chaplain.

'Yes.' 'Ha! suppose somebody came in the night, set fire to the house, kill wife, children, brother, sister and all—what you do to him, misser lieutenant, hey?'

'I would shoot the villain,' answered the lieutenant hastily; 'that is,' he added, after a moment's thought, 'if I caught him on the spot.'

'Yes! yes! suppose you catch him on the spot. But suppose you no catch him till five, six year; what then?'

'Then I would hand him over to the government, to be dealt with according to law.'

'What the governor do to him?' inquired the chief.

'He would be tried before a judge, and if found guilty, would be hanged.'

'Good!' replied Lagoma, rising to his feet, and drawing himself up with great dignity. 'I in my country, I, Lagoma, the governor; I the Judge, I speak the law. Tokla came in the night like a thief, give no sign, burn my house, kill my brother, sell me, my wife, my children, my people, to the slaver. All die nobody left to live with Lagoma. You say forget—no punish!' he continued, turning quickly to the clergyman, and speaking with much earnestness. 'You are very good man. But when I die I forget—not before,' so saying, he walked hastily out of the hut, and was soon lost among the rows of the lofty maize stalks that surrounded it. It was evident that he did not wish his agitation to be seen.

'This is the inevitable result of every attempt I have made to soften his vindictive passion,' observed the chaplain; 'yet he is not without good feelings. In fact, his very desire of vengeance springs, as you may have observed, from the strength of his affections, and is kept alive by his constant sense of loneliness.'

This observation met with general assent, the younger seaman, who was a midshipman, evidently inclining to the opinion that Lagoma's determination was not so very abject as the chaplain seemed to consider it. As there was no likelihood of his reappearance, the party mounted their horses, and returned to the port to dine. Here they found that a slaver had just come in, with a prize crew, under the charge of a lieutenant of the Althea, by whose boats the slaver had been captured after a desperate resistance. She was a vessel of about two hundred tons, polacca rigged, and

had on board nearly three hundred slaves. The space between deck was so low that it was impossible to stand upright in it, and so crowded, that there was no room to lie down. The sufferings of the miserable wretches, crammed into this suffocating hole under a vertical sun, amidst filth and noxious effluvia, heavily shackled, with deficient food, surpasses the power of the imagination to conceive.

After dinner, the party, increased by the addition of the governor, and of lieutenant W—, the prize master of the slaver, walked down to the slave yard to view the recaptured Africans. They had been supplied with food and clothing on board the vessel after her capture; and those who were suffering under serious illness had been removed to the hospital immediately on landing. But notwithstanding these alleviations, the sight was wretched enough. Their emaciated figures, the eagerness with which many of them still devoured their rations, never appearing satisfied, the weakness in their limbs, caused by the shackles, and by the constrained postures which they had been compelled to maintain, the listless attitudes, the vacant dreary stare, all spoke so plainly of the miseries to which they had been subjected, that it was impossible to view them without pain. The governor, however, observed, 'These poor creatures seem wretched enough. They have evidently been treated worse than usual. Yet in a week, one half of them will be singing and dancing; and in a month, all but one or two will be as merry as crickets. Now, that's a singularity in the negro character which I should like to hear explained. It cannot proceed from insensibility, for no people have more feeling.'

'It is a natural cheerfulness, and sprightliness of temper,' replied the chaplain. 'It is curious to reflect that if these poor people had been of harsh, morose disposition, like the Malays or the American Indians, they never could have been made slaves. Their very virtues have been turned against them.'

'True enough,' replied the governor. 'Mr W—, from what part of the coast did you say these people came?'

'From the Quorra, sir; a little above its mouth. Most of them are Eboes.'

'A bad set those Eboes,' observed the governor, 'crafty and ferocious. Always fighting among themselves.'

'I think,' replied the lieutenant, 'that that proceeds more from the machinations of the slavers than from any other cause. Now, that old man whom you see there, and who is the principal person among them, was conquered, taken prisoner, and sold by his own son.'

'His own son!' exclaimed the hearers.

'Yes. It appears that the old fellow had governed his subjects after a rather tyrannical fashion, and made a number of malcontents. The traders, who are constantly among them, and are acquainted with all that is going on, took advantage of this state of feeling, and persuaded them to rebel. The revolted party, after the fashion of our own ancestors in the middle ages, got hold of a son of the old chief, and in a manner compelled him to be their leader. They were victorious. The old man and most of his adherents were taken prisoners, and of course sold to the traders.'

This information drew the attention of all parties towards the old chief, who presented a pitiable sight. His meagre, attenuated figure, was wrapped in a thick blanket, and yet, though the day was very warm, he shivered as though in the cold stage of a fever. A deep gash, yet unhealed, extended from his temple to his chin, and disfigured still more a naturally unprepossessing countenance. His low projecting forehead was partially bald, and his hair was slightly grizzled. He lay reclining on the bosom of a young woman, who appeared to watch over him with great care. His small eyes roved with a lustreless gaze around the yard.

'What consummate knaves those traders must be, to be able thus to stifle the feelings of natural affection in a people in whom they are so strong!' observed the governor.

'True, sir,' replied Lieutenant W—; 'and there is an evidence of their strength. That young girl, who supports the old man so tenderly, is his daughter. Her name is Nandee. She accompanied him voluntarily, in spite of all the efforts of her brother to dissuade her. She became a slave in order to attend her father in his old age and illness.'

It will easily be conceived that this information excited a great interest in favour of the young negroess. She was a mere girl, of apparently not more than sixteen. Her slender, graceful form was clothed from the waist in a wrapper of blue cotton. Her face was not handsome, but it had that pleasing expression of patient, loving meekness so often seen in the females of her unhappy race. She shrunk with such evident confusion when she found their eyes fixed upon her, that the spectators, with a common feeling of delicacy, withdrew to the other part of the yard, where the lieutenant pointed out an old negro, who, he said, was a Mohammedan Moodlah, and able to read Arabic with facility. While they were examining him, a loud cry was heard, which recalled their attention to those whom they had just left. It proceeded from the old man, who was sitting upright, and staring with a look of affright at a figure just then entering the yard. This was none other than our friend Lagoma, who had come from Melville on hearing the report of the arrival of a slaver from the Quorra, in the hopes of receiving some intelligence of the friends or the enemies whom he had left there. His wishes were more than gratified. No sooner had he beheld the old

man, than, with a shout of 'Toklah!' he darted towards him like a lion rushing on his prey.

The looks of all present, negroes and English, were rivetted on the scene that followed, which was a very striking one. The tall form of Lagoma, with every feature convulsed by passion, towered over his prostrate enemy, who, falling back into the arms of his daughter, fixed his gaze, as if fascinated, on the terrible countenance of his injured kinsman. Nandee, with one arm around her father, stretched the other imploringly towards her cousin. After a brief pause, Lagoma spoke. His words were unintelligible to the English, but it was evident that they were expressive of rage and violent denunciation. At one time his excitement became so great, that the chaplain was on the point of interrupting him, but was prevented by the governor. 'Let him alone,' said the latter. 'I think I know Lagoma. We shall see a different termination to this scene from what you anticipate.'

At length the negro chief paused for a moment, as if expecting a reply. The old man, however, was so overcome by the shock, acting upon his enfeebled frame, as to be incapable of utterance. Nandee, therefore, answered in his stead; and though her words, like those of Lagoma, were unintelligible, yet their general import was readily perceived. Her piteous, appalling tone, the tears that slowly gathered and rolled down her dusky cheeks, the manner in which she pointed to the attenuated form and gray hair of her father, made it evident that she was endeavouring to move the compassion of her angry kinsman. At first he listened in sullen silence. Then, in answer to a few brief questions, she seemed to enter into a long narrative relating to the fortunes of their family—at least so the lieutenant judged from a few words of their language, which he had picked up. As she proceeded, the cloud gradually passed from the brow of the listener. He gazed at her with looks of interest, which at length seemed to become admiration. Then looking again at her father, he shook his head for a minute he stood irresolute, with knitted brows, and eyes fixed on the ground. He seemed to be undergoing a powerful struggle between contending emotions. At length he turned, and slowly approached the group of officers who had been watching his proceedings.

'Well, Lagoma,' said the governor, 'if I understand the case rightly, your desire for revenge ought to be fully satisfied. Your old enemy has met with a heavy retribution. His fate seems to be worse than your own.'

'No, no,' replied Lagoma quickly; 'he no lose all.'

'You mean his daughter, I suppose,' said the governor. 'Very true. She seems to be a jewel—a real treasure. As you say, the old rascal is fortunate in having such a child—more so than he deserves. Well, Lagoma, what do you mean to do with your relations?'

'Suppose you like, governor,' replied the negro in a hesitating manner, 'I take them home with me.'

'What! and wreak your vengeance on the poor old man at your leisure?' returned the governor with great gravity. 'For shame, Lagoma! Certainly I shall not allow any such thing.'

'No, no,' replied the chief; 'no more revenge—no more bad feeling. Toklah plenty punish. Ah, only think, his own son fight him, catch him, sell him to the trader! His own child! Oh, plenty punish. I no more angry. Take him home to Melville—give him good house—plenty to eat—make him well. He very sick now.'

'So, Lagoma, you are turning Christian at last, after all,' said the kind chaplain, with a good-natured laugh.

A smile, the first for many years, lighted up for a moment the dark features of the chief as he replied—'Yes, now I like to get religion. I feel good here (laying his hand on his heart.) Suppose you come to Melville now—I like to hear you talk.'

'Oh ho!' said the governor; 'I begin to understand the mystery. Lagoma is tired of living alone. He has been talking to his pretty cousin there, and begins to look after the parson directly. Why, Lagoma, you get on famously.'

The chief bore this attack with much good-humour, and answered, 'Me no go courting now. What for I want a wife? Governor no got any.'

This retort courteous created a laugh at the expense of that dignity, in which he joined very heartily. 'Well, Lagoma,' said he, 'if I am unfortunate, that is no reason why you should be miserable too. So you have my permission to take your relations to your residence, on condition that you are responsible for their good treatment; and mind, I advise you to secure your wife before any of these young Mandingo gallants about Melville, with their white jackets and figured waistcoats, hear of the prize, and cut you out.'

'Very well, me see,' replied the chief coolly, as he turned to rejoin his relations. With the assistance of some of the other Eboes, old Toklah and his daughter were quickly removed to the habitation of their kinsman. There the chaplain visited them on the following day, and found that Lagoma had kept his word, by making them as comfortable as his means would admit. Part of his treasured store of money had been expended in buying clothing for them, and furniture for the hut: this he had given up to them entirely, and was now engaged in building another for himself. The dark cloud which had covered his countenance for so long a time was dispelled by the new feelings of forgiveness, good-will, and affect.