

The Story of Josefa (Joseph)

Below is from *Bolenge: A Story of Gospel Triumphs on the Congo*, by Mrs. Royal J. Dye (2nd Edition, Foreign Christian Missionary Society, 1910)

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Below excerpts are from pages 123-129 and 315-316.

Mr. and Mrs. Dye were among the Pioneer missionaries to this part of Africa then known as the Belgian Congo. Below describes the work of Dr. and Mrs. Edwin A. Layton in the area of Bolenge, setting the context for Joseph's story in the year 1902:

In December, 1899, Mr. and Mrs. Edwin A. Layton, of Chicago, received their appointment to Africa. He was taking a medical course; at the same time Mrs. Layton was a teacher in the city schools. It had been their prayer for many years to go to the mission field. Dr. Layton completed his medical course, and they started on the day of graduation for Congo. They reached Bolenge August 29, 1901 ...

Dr. and Mrs. Layton were eminently capable people and well qualified for mission work in Congo. They entered immediately into it and studied the language diligently. Mrs. Layton was splendidly qualified for the school work which she soon raised by most advanced methods to a much higher standard. Dr. Layton assisted in the medical and surgical work, but took advantage of every moment to work on the language, as they were soon to be left alone.

No visible fruits of these years of toil could be seen save the little prayer-meeting instituted by Joseph, which was most spontaneous in its character. Before the departure of the Dyes for home on furlough, ten boys came, bringing their names on a slip of paper, with the request that the white people in America pray for them. In February, 1902, Dr. and Mrs. Dye and Polly left for America, leaving the Laytons alone, after but five months on the station. It was eight months before they received reinforcements except for one of "divine appointment," a baby daughter, Evelyn Azalia, bom June 24, 1902. Another baby joined the mission force that year — Eva Dorcas Dye, bom in Ionia, Mich., August 30th. These eight months saw the wonderful development in interest, not

only in that little prayer-meeting, but also in the country round about. Dr. and Mrs. Layton did the best they could to foster this spirit, and with remarkable success considering their short acquaintance with the language. He also began a slip system of arranging words for a Lonkundo vocabulary. Mr. Faris returned to the Congo, accompanied by his young wife, arriving at Bolenge October 2, 1902. Mr. and Mrs. Eldred, a newly appointed couple, also were of the same party ...

A series of protracted meetings were held by Mr. Faris and Dr. Layton, after which the first baptisms were witnessed in November, 1902, and in March following, the church was organized with twenty-four charter members.

In September of that year Dr. and Mrs. Layton left for home, having little hope of their baby's life. The Congo climate is well nigh impossible for white Children ... Little Lita, as the natives had called Evelyn, was some stronger, though for days after leaving the Congo her life was despaired of. Then these workers separated, the Laytons proceeding to America and the Dyes to the Congo. They were destined never again to be associated, for later that same year Dr. and Mrs. Layton were transferred to China, where they are still laboring. Their transfer was China's gain, but Congo's loss. Their leaving is still deeply regretted by natives and missionaries of all societies, by all of whom they are held in high esteem.

CHAPTER XIV

Joseph and Lonkoko

For three years our work at Bolenge was attended with great difficulty and discouragement. First the spoken language of the people must be learned. Then this had to be reduced to written form and a literature created for the people. At the same time we strove in all ways to gain the confidence of the natives, and in return to give them as they were able to receive it, the words of eternal life. Day school was opened and medicine dispensed — from the bath-room window. The station grounds were kept in order for the sake of health, fresh foods were grown and the homes kept in

repair, all of which required much hard labor. The difficulties of housekeeping in a tropical climate under a thatched roof were greater than they might seem, and much time was consumed in these more menial duties. In spite of this, regular services were held and a Sunday-school, all in one class, was organized. Special meetings for women once or twice a week were started, and short preaching trips were made to nearby villages. No attempt was made to have an emotional revival or evangelistic effort. It seemed wisest to wait until a desire for a changed life manifested itself in the lives of the people. One of the slaves who had been redeemed by the former missionaries was a lad named Joseph. His original home was somewhere around Stanley Falls, and there he had been captured and sold. His masters having changed from time to time, he was carried farther and farther from his old home. Thus he gradually forgot most of his own language. He was an expert fisherman, using a big seine net, and was very profitable to his various masters. Finally he was redeemed by the missionary, and came to make his home at Bolenge. His slave name was dropped and he was called Josefa (Joseph), a name that seemed most fitting for a boy thus carried into slavery to a distant country where he had to learn another language. For some time he worked at his trade as a fisherman. He was successful and supplied fish not only for the table of the missionary, and for the orphanage children, but even had much left over to sell. Then, in the prime of his young manhood, a strange malady attacked him.

This disease affected not only his flesh but also his bones, so that for years his life was a horrible nightmare of intense agony. There was then no medical missionary on the whole reach of the Upper Congo, and although there were others having medical skill, this pitiful case baffled them. Joseph was the first person to whom the attention of Dr. Dye was called. Joseph alone had kept his faith in God when all the others returned to heathenism. When Dr. Dye first saw him he was terribly crippled, and also partially paralyzed. He spoke indistinctly and with great difficulty a few words of several different languages, having chosen from each the words that were easiest for him to enunciate. He was often seized with sudden spasms of pain, causing him to shriek in unutterable agony.

During these spasms his muscles would contract until his bones would break. During the days of our installation at Bolenge we heard for the first time that piercing cry, and hastened to find some means of relieving the sufferer. The case was of such long standing that no ordinary means would stay its progress, so the advice of eminent physicians in New York City was sought, and with some success. The joy of Joseph knew no bounds as he felt the old pains gradually cease and strength return. How often we wished he could have felt the healing touch of the Master, for even after his release from pain his body was most horribly deformed!

There was then a boys dormitory on the station, with small rooms opening out on both sides. Joseph occupied one of these small rooms because of his trustworthy character and his wholesome, quiet influence over the boys. He had been such a terrible sufferer for so long that he could then seldom even sit up. All through the day he lay patiently upon his board pallet, with a look on his face which comes to those who have the fellowship of Christ in suffering. Even then, when helpless and confined to his bed, he was trusted by all. He became the "banker," not for the mission boys alone, but for people of the heathen village as well.

Before his affliction he had learned to read and write a little, and, having a quick, retentive memory, he had stored away treasures of story and song, on which he feasted in his hours of loneliness. Little by little he grew stronger. He could soon sit on a stool in the doorway, and later learned to hitch himself down the little flight of steps that led from his tiny upper chamber. The heathen resigns himself to die on the most trifling provocation, but not so Christian Joseph. His life became a burning and shining light. He had no use of his entire right side, and but limited use of the left, yet he made a saw from a piece of strap iron, and with it sawed all of his own firewood. He had a little use of his left hand. By holding the cords with his toes and his teeth he tied fish nets and made little fish traps, which he rented to the children and young men. Thus he earned part of his own living. He also took the native peppers and ground them to a

powder in a mortar ... he mixed with salt and sold it in small quantities to eager buyers. He also raised fowls and sold them. Though uncomely to look upon, he wore a ready smile which transformed his face and won all hearts. From his little doorway he could watch the mission baby, whom he had named Okuki, as she played about the house. The natives had called her the little white spirit Joseph and Okuki soon formed a close friendship, and amused themselves by calling back and forth to each other during the heat of the day. Then when the sun was down and it was safe for the little toddler to run out of doors, she would go to her little hat, and over to Joseph she would run as fast as her little feet could carry her. There we were sure to find her, seated on a stick of wood, entertaining him with her limited vocabulary of Lonkundo. His face would be all aglow with love and delight as he listened to her. She always understood him, and often of her own accord carried him an orange, a banana, or a mango, which though too common to be a delicacy to him, was prized because of her sweet thoughtfulness. She was like a bright beam of sunshine in his life, and he cherished her memory and her quaint little sayings to the day of his death.

Joseph and the two dozen or more boys who roomed in the same dormitory cooked their dinner every night out of doors, several boys clubbing and cooking together. Supper is the chief meal of the day, and a time for general gossip and recital of the whole day's doings. These boys were all in school, and as Joseph could already read, he began informally to read to them a little. Then in an offhand way he would tell them some Bible story or lesson learned from the white teachers. Some one voluntarily would start up a song, and then another, until several were sung. Any one spoke as the inclination came, and altogether it seemed like a somewhat spirited Quaker meeting. -The boys' house was raised on piles, and often when this camp-fire prayer-meeting would first start, the boys who were not interested would be seated about their own little fire on the opposite side of the house, evidently paying no attention to the little service. It was never long, however, after the meeting started until these also joined the group. None were invited, so these meetings were open and informal. All meetings were closed

by mutual consent at any time. It was inspiring to slip quietly over after they were assembled, and, seated on a log of firewood, listen to that simple service. How little we realized into what it was destined to grow!

Before long a few people from the village began to attend, and then the mission work changed hands, new workers taking the place of the old ones who left for home on furlough. The little meeting thus begun kept up with ever-increasing interest until there was no longer room about the camp fire, and it adjourned to meet in the chapel. Joseph was carried in a hammock and placed on a little stool which was reserved for him in the front of the chapel.

While God was thus preparing the soil of Bolenge, he was also implanting a desire elsewhere, and one day a marching column of one hundred people from an inland village came to ask for teaching. This was a genuine revival, without the human agency of a revivalist. The whole subsequent history of the church has proved it to have been a genuine and abiding spiritual awakening. In November of that year, 1902, the first converts were baptized. Great care was taken to make sure that they were "intelligent believers" able to give a reason for the faith that was in them.

Many of the regular attendants at the camp fire prayer-meeting were admitted to the church at this time. Joseph did not cease this quiet work, but he took up, in addition, a more extended ministry. For several years he was carried in his hammock to preach the gospel in surrounding villages. A little house was fitted up for him after the old dormitory was torn down. Here beside his own doorway he gathered little groups of eager learners, whom he taught the way of life more perfectly. He took charge of the sale of all fruit on the mission station that he might feel he was really earning his livelihood.

His long illness made him an easy prey to disease. The dread scourge of Congo came upon him and claimed him as its victim. He bravely fought off the dread sleeping sickness, but it was a losing fight. How he begged to return to his old home to preach to his own people before he died! We knew it was impossible, and

had, to refuse his pleadings. Day after day, as long as he was able, faithful friends carried him to give a last message and exhortation to those still out of Christ. When he gave up and took to his bed, the end was in sight. He was mercifully spared a lingering death. His death, even as his life, was triumphant. Joseph went to receive that "crown of life" promised to those who are "faithful unto death." Surely the crown of this faithful cripple will be radiant with stars.