



AMOS FORTUNE

free man



Elizabeth Yates



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Elizabeth Yates

Illustrated by Nora S. Unwin

PUFFIN BOOKS

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PUFFIN BOOKS

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AFRICA 1725

☞ NIGHT CAME DOWN SWIFTLY OVER the equatorial forest. There was no lingering of daylight; but, after the snuffing out of the sun, darkness and the bright appearing of stars. No silence came with the darkness, for this was a night alive with song and movement. In the village of the At-mun-shi the people were gathering for their mystic dance that would welcome in the time of herbage, the time for the planting of corn.

Into the center of the clearing surrounded by small conical huts that was the village, a wooden drum had been brought. With solemn reverence Saala, the old wise man of the tribe, approached and began beating it. It was not long the only sound in the darkness. Soon smaller drums in distant parts of the clearing took up a beating. Then wooden flutes joined in from the outskirts of the village. Their sound was muted at first but it grew sharper and higher as the men blowing the flutes came nearer. Joined by the beaters on the drums, the sound quickened in pace and fervor as all gathered in a group around the great drum, coming into time with Saala's rhythmic beating. The moon rose high enough for the light to filter through the heavy foliage. It gleamed on the black bodies of the men, on the faces of the women and children who had been gathering in the clearing, summoned by the music and swaying with it like a field of tall grass before the wind.

When the flutes and the drums ceased, all the At-mun-shi turned and faced the same way, making obeisance to their chief who sat on a

raised platform at one end of the clearing, the moon full on him and his children standing beside him. At-mun, the young prince, was tall and powerfully built, though he had seen no more than fifteen summers. He carried his head high and his eyes flashed. Ath-mun, the twelve year old princess, smiled shyly at her tribespeople, then turned to whisper in her father's ear. She leaned against him, hoping to hide the deformed leg that—but for her father's love—would have caused her to have been drowned as an infant. Only the sacrifice of the imperfect to the God of Life could assure protection for the perfect. But the chief had gone against his tribal code and sacrificed his favorite dog to keep his infant daughter and thus far the God of Life had wreaked no vengeance on him. The At-mun-shi were as pagan as all the tribes in Africa, but they were peaceable and they were, as well, intense in their love of freedom.

The chief acknowledged the obeisance of his people and spread his hands before them, palms down, indicating that they might do their own pleasure for the next space of time. The people

stood quietly while more and more of the At-mun-shi came in from the jungle to join the group in the clearing. At the outskirts of the village, beyond the circle of conical huts, they laid down their knives and spears. The weapons, lying in their piles without men to hold them, gave back the moonlight's sheen in harmless splendor. This was a night of peace and during it no At-mun-shi would bear anything symbolic of killing. This was the time when the earth was reborn.

Saala commenced beating the great drum again and all the smaller drums followed, but in such unison that it was like single reverberations on the night; then flutes picked up the sound. The dancers gathered themselves together, twelve men well matched in size. Slowly they made their way around the open space in the clearing, shoulders, hips, feet translating the sound of flutes and drums into movement. The music quickened, steps grew longer, and guttural voices uttered the incantation which had been said by their fathers and would be said by their children:

Earth our mother, Sun our father,
Watch while we plant.
Moon our sister, Rain our brother,
Aid the seeds to bear fruit
That the harvest may be good,
Enough for us and our children.

Over and over the words were repeated as family after family of the At-mun-shi joined in until the forest beyond the clearing echoed and re-echoed the chant. Then, at a signal from the chief, the chanting ceased and the dancers fell back, leaving an open space in their midst.

At-mun bowed to his father and with a series of leaps covered the distance from the raised platform at one end of the clearing to the open space. There he stood in his full height, lifting his hands palms up to the sky. Then swiftly he knelt, palms down to the earth, bowing his head and pressing his lips to the soil: all that he had, all that he ever would be, he gave to his people. He was their prince, someday to be their chief. He could not do otherwise. Rising, he bounded back to the platform and knelt before his sister. Taking her in his arms, frail and slight of body as she was, he danced with her before the people.

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“It does a man no good to be free
until he learns how to live.”

These were the words of Amos Fortune, born the son of a king in the At-mun-shi tribe in Africa. When Amos was only fifteen years old, he was captured by slave traders and brought to Massachusetts, where he was sold at auction. Although his freedom had been taken, Amos never lost his dignity and courage. He dreamed of being free, and of buying the freedom of his closest friends. By the time he was sixty years old, Amos Fortune began to see those dreams come true.

“The moving story of a life dedicated to the fight for
freedom.”
—*Booklist*

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