

might be able to put together something towards their ransom. Domestic slaves were not to be passed from one master to another. "Thus," remarked the Minister with satisfaction, "this serious question may be said to be on its way towards a solution that will answer to every humanitarian, political and economic interest."

The modest ameliorations, so pleasing to the Ministry, were unfortunately accompanied by provisions to prevent slaves from obtaining freedom by escape, as they had formerly done:

"In the case of a servant escaping towards the coast, he will no longer obtain unconditional freedom, but only after the decision of an Italian Tribunal, purposely established, that will examine the reasons of the fugitive slave, and those of his master. If the latter should prove guilty of cruel treatment, or of any other infraction of the regulations agreed upon, the former will be immediately released from every obligation towards his master, and declared free, whereas if the servant should prove to have escaped without any justifiable motive, he will be returned to his master, and obliged to pay him a fair indemnity."

Thus the Italian Government formally approved the existence of slavery, gave it a legal status in Italian Colonial law, and provided for the punishment of a slave who attempted to escape from the master, unless the slave could satisfy an Italian tribunal that his master had been guilty of excessive cruelty. The odds against the slave in such cases were usually overwhelming. Thus slavery continued in Italy's Somaliland Colony.

In 1935, when preparing war against Ethiopia, the Italian Government raised a hue and cry throughout the world that slavery existed in Ethiopia. On this account it was claimed that Italy's civilising mission compelled her to make war on that ancient African State.

At the very time when this outcry was raised to beat up propaganda for the forthcoming war of conquest, the Italian Government made the following communication, dated May 1, 1935, to the Secretary-General of the League of Nations, relative to domestic servitude in the Italian Colonies. The terms are, of course, guarded, but the facts are clear.

#### CYRENAIKA

"In zones controlled by us it was not possible, however, to extirpate the residual form of slavery that subsisted—essentially slavery of a domestic character. The old slaves continued to live in the families in which they already are, some of them refusing to leave their former masters, and even asking our authorities to intervene."

"The present situation as regards domestic servitude is uniform throughout the colony. There is no need to recapitulate the special features of this kind of servitude; but it may be mentioned that every well-to-do Arab-Berber family includes not only one or more families of masters, but also one or more negro families, who have been living with their masters for a more or less long period of time."

"When these negroes reach marriageable age, the masters themselves make arrangements for their marriage with slaves belonging to the same family or to friendly families, and defray the marriage expenses. This is,

in short, a form of voluntary servitude which will eventually die out owing to lack of new blood; at the moment, however, it cannot be eradicated because the serfs accept it willingly. If the law required the negroes to be removed from their masters' families, they would soon come back and ask their former masters for employment."

"Furthermore, as these negroes have had no opportunity of learning any trade, if they were removed from their families they would be reduced to the most squalid poverty and would have no hope of earning a living."

#### TRIPOLITANIA

"The status of the different groups of slave origin is now roughly as follows:—"

"**Abid**.—There are frequent cases of men and their families, who have remained with their former masters under the old condition of servitude, either because they are unable to make a living in any other way, or because they are attached to their masters' families. These are cases of domestic serfdom (domestic servants, guards, watchmen, etc.), or agricultural serfdom (cultivating, sowing, ploughing) or serfdom as shepherds, the sole remuneration being maintenance."

"**Shushena**.—Here again we find old slaves who have remained with the families of their former masters for similar reasons to those mentioned above. A few individuals or families are also still in a state of servitude on account of old debts; this is not a case of slavery, but merely of working off the debt year by year until it is extinguished."

"**Astara**.—The position of these groups in the communities to which they belong is undoubtedly one of inferiority; but it is not, strictly speaking, one of servitude."

"We must, however, regard as being clearly remnants of a former state of servitude the by no means small number of serfs who have remained in that condition of their own free will, with the families of their former masters."

#### ERITREA

"There are some natives whom the people call slaves, but they are no longer slaves, since they live of their own free will in that state of domestic servitude which is wisely permitted by the Brussels Act, and which it would be neither just nor expedient to disturb by an exaggerated and restricted interpretation of the intention of the law."

"The conditions of these serfs is perhaps better than that of many completely free natives. The excessive zeal of certain officials has caused what was actually domestic servitude to be regarded as a condition of slavery."

#### Slavery in the Interior of the Colony

"Certain forms of agricultural serfdom, where they survive, present no feature resembling those of slavery, and are free of all essential elements of that institution; such serfs or dependents of the 'nobleman' are remunerated for the work they do, and can leave the family with which they are living whenever they wish to go to another family, or, if they prefer it, can change their occupation and residence."

"This condition of labour is not offensive to Western morality nor subversive of public order; these local authorities have never had occasion to intervene in these relations of employer and employed, which are established between the parties by free and mutual consent."

#### SOMALILAND

"Domestic serfdom also, although it should be tolerated under the law in force, no longer exists in any compulsive form restricting individual liberty."

[The Parliamentary statements by the Italian Minister, Tommaso Tittoni, quoted in this and the following chapter are from the authorised English translation of his speeches, "Italy's Foreign and Colonial Policy," published by Smith Elder in 1914.]