

#### Swema's Story

Swema was born in Yaoland which would today be part of Tanzania. She had two elder sisters and a younger brother. Her father was a great hunter so they always had ivory to trade for cloth and beads whenever the caravans passed by their village. In addition to the ivory, like everyone else in the village, they also traded with rice which was widely grown in the area.

Swema's hardships began with the death of her father. He was killed by a lion during a communal hunt and in order to survive Swema's family turned to their plot of land on which they grew rice and millet. But, just then a locust plague ravaged the country. Famine and disease killed off her sisters and brother. Alone with her mother Swema left the village and struck out to seek refuge in another country.

They found refuge after three days of walking and in the new village built a hut and cultivated a plot. They borrowed two bags of sorghum millet, one for planting and the other for food. But the rains failed to come and their crop was lost. The draught affected everyone in the area and their neighbour who had lent them the two bags of millet came to collect his debt. Swema's mother begged for a delay and she turned to making pots but she was unable to pay a quarter of her debt.

It was around this time that an Arab caravan arrived in the area. Afraid of what might happen to them Swema said:

"Who does not know how the passage of caravans is always dangerous for the weak? Evil subjects habitually steal children and poor people, whom they sell to the Arabs for salt, cottons and beads. Creditors profit from circumstances to extract the payment of debts. When the debtors are unable to pay, one seizes their slaves or their own children. Often it happens that they are reduced to selling themselves into slavery."

That very morning their Yao neighbour arrived at their hut with two elders of the tribe and an Arab. Swema continues . . .

"Without asking permission, he entered our hut and said with severity to my mother: 'Mother of Swema, you haven't anything to pay in return for my two sacks of millet; for that reason I am seizing your child'.

'You are my witnesses,' he said to the elders. Then turning to the Arab he said to him: 'Well sir, it's settled, six coudées (about 3 metres) of American cloth for this little girl.'

"The Arab took me by the hand, made me stand up and walk, examined my teeth, and after several moments of thought responded: 'It's fine, come take the six coudées of cloth'."

Swema's mother then sold herself into slavery in order to be with her daughter. She had to carry a tusk of ivory to the coast. But she was unable to fulfil this task with the result that she was abandoned by the caravan. Swema's mother then tried to follow the caravan, but without food she grew weaker and weaker. She tried to keep going by eating insects and red earth to fill her stomach.

The caravan then entered a plain which had been laid waste by fire, leaving nothing green, no insects and no birds in the trees. All that remained was "an immense extent of earth charred and blackened by the fire." In these conditions it was impossible for Swema's mother to sustain herself and she could go no further. Swema resisted separation from her mother, even when she was beaten with sticks she refused to let go.

Eventually she had to be forcibly carried by another slave so that the caravan could get on its way. At last the caravan reached the coast where they boarded a small Arab boat and set sail for Zanzibar. Tight packing made it impossible for Swema and those with her to turn over and even breathing was difficult.

After six days at sea they finally reached Zanzibar. By this time Swema was suffering from extreme dehydration and had to be carried off the boat.

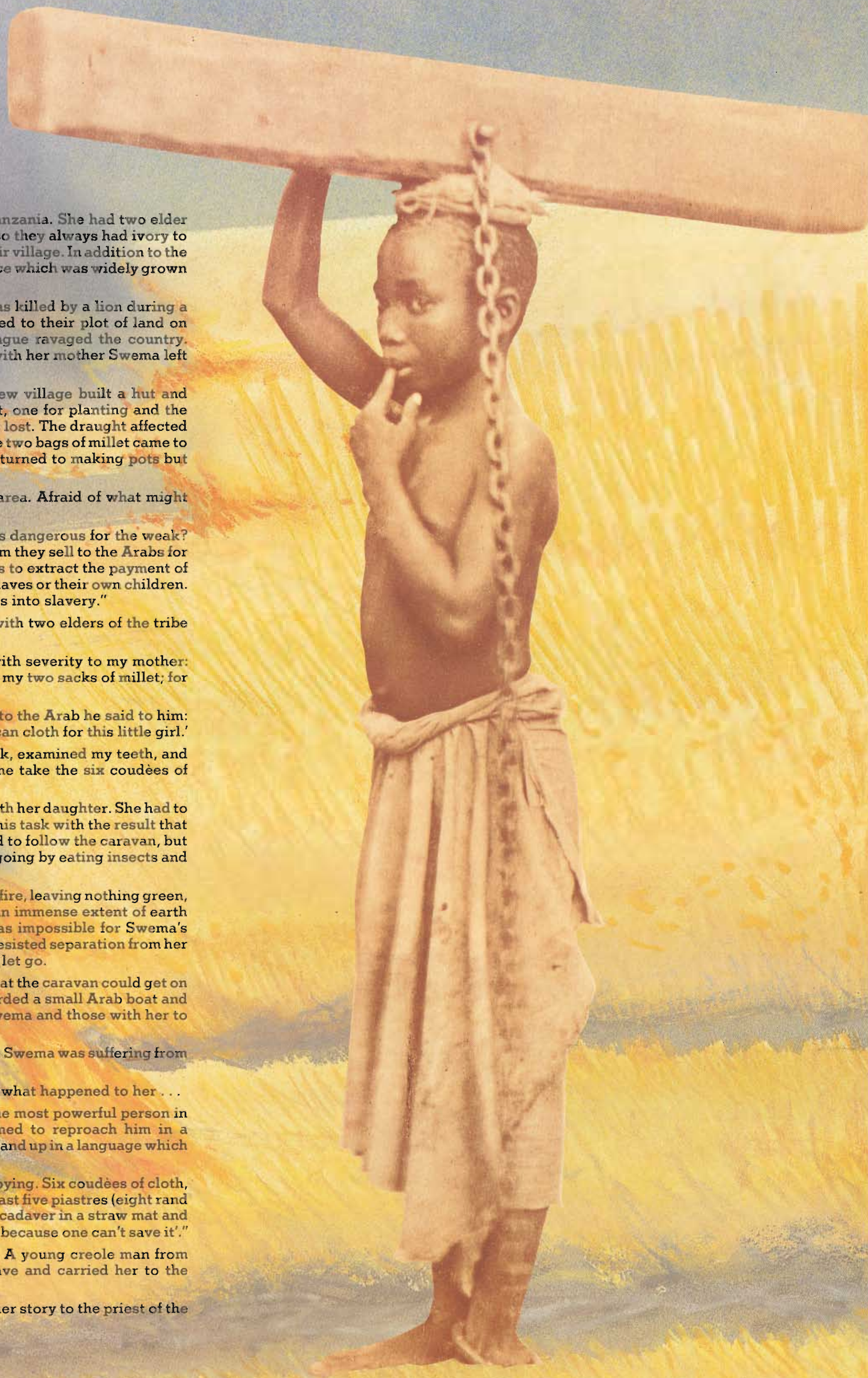
Almost dead, Swema was still able to observe and remember what happened to her . . .

"I saw the leader of the caravan, whom I had regarded as the most powerful person in the world, stand humbly before another Arab, who seemed to reproach him in a language that I didn't understand . . . Then I was ordered to stand up in a language which resembled that of my country but I was unable to rise.

'This slave is lost,' said the new person. 'It's too bad, it's annoying. Six coudées of cloth, the cost of transport by land and sea, and customs duty, at least five piastres (eight rand fifty-three cents) of losses. Khamis and Marzauc, place this cadaver in a straw mat and carry it to the cemetery. It's useless to nourish it any longer because one can't save it'."

Swema was then buried in a shallow grave and left for dead. A young creole man from Reunion heard her muffled cries and took her from the grave and carried her to the mission in Zanzibar.

Some time later, after she had recovered, she was able to tell her story to the priest of the mission who wrote it all down in the mission records.



**All children have a right to be protected from all forms of neglect, cruelty and exploitation.**

DECLARATION OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS