

**BLACK
MAN'S
COUNTRY**

**Isobel
RYAN**

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ISOBEL RYAN

Illustrations by "Bill"



BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

The author believes that while sociological surveys, statistical analyses and similar official activities are commendable and necessary, they do not tell us enough about the African himself — the human being as apart from those amorphous generalizations, 'the African element', or 'the black population'.

Isobel Ryan's book is the result of two years spent in Nigerian West Africa. It consists of personal impressions which — vivacious and acute — present her black friends to us as human beings, not statistics. Intelligent, tolerant, humorous, full of curiosity and entirely free from prejudice, she conveys a truthful and amusing picture of a white girl living in the wilds of Nigeria. To anyone who knows Africa she will give pleasure by her good sense and exact observation.



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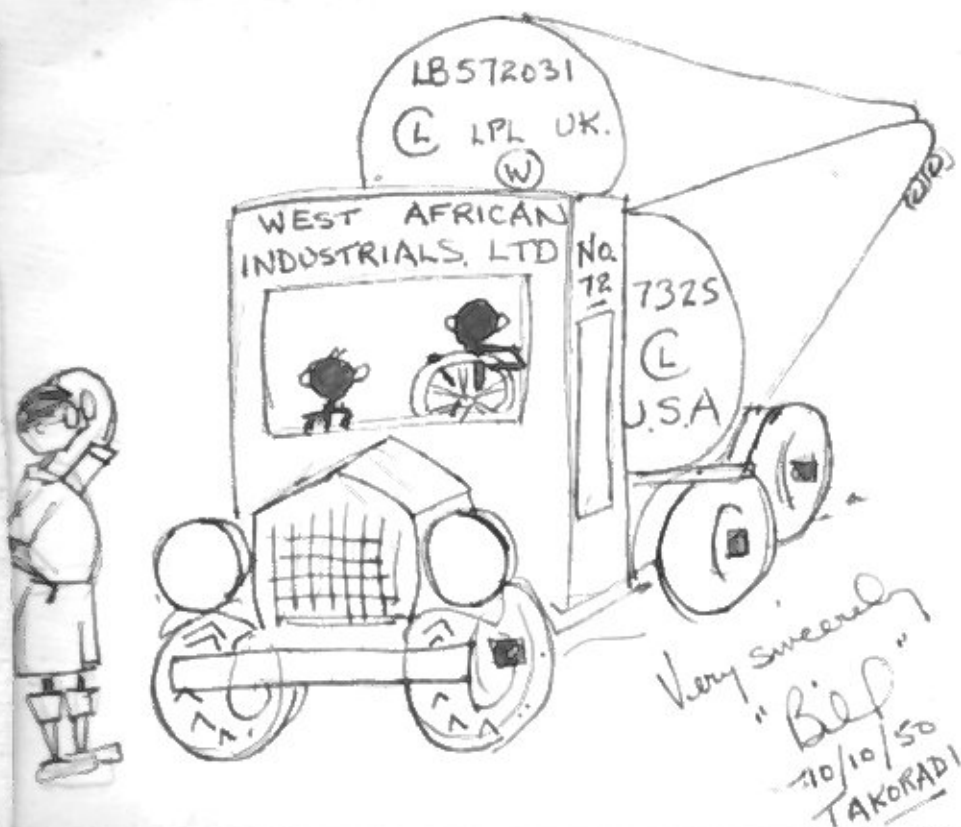
'F. P. H.' Takoradi

Gold Coast W.A.

6th Oct. 1950

All the very best to Col. & Mrs. Pye
— our chaler neighbours & good
friends in Takoradi.

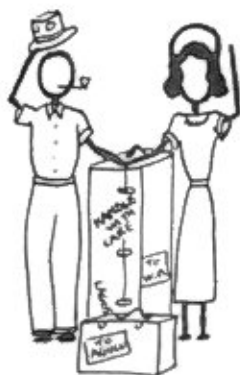
Isobel Ryan.



BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

by

ISOBEL RYAN



Illustrations by
'BILL'

JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE
LONDON

To
A. E. P.

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

CHAPTER I

WELCOME TO AGULU

WE came to Agulu at dusk. The lorry climbed the darkening hill and we got out stiffly in the house driveway where the light from Small Boy's waving lantern fell upon a flurry of outstretched ebony hands and a circle of black faces — on the white robes of the village deputation, on flashing smiles and inquisitive, friendly eyes. 'Welcome, Massa! Welcome, Madam!'

The African Forest Assistant flanked by Forest Guard and Postmaster spoke the deputation's greeting. A grinning piccan thrust an upside-down bouquet of four protesting live fowls towards me and it squawked dismally in my unpractised hands.

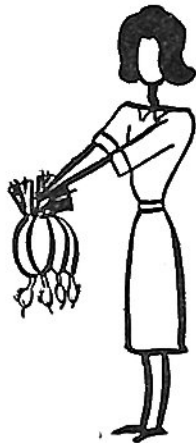
'Smile,' reminded Bill *sotto voce*, and I smiled.

'Say something,' he muttered. My 'Thank you' was drowned by raucous noises from my frantic, flapping bouquet.

'Welcome, Massa! Welcome, Madam!' the deputation chorused. 'We hope you will be happy with us in Agulu.'

We told them we knew we would be happy in Agulu.

This is part of a letter I wrote back to England a few days later: 'Bill met my ship at Lagos and we drove in the desert truck for three days inland, making a wake of yellow dust behind us for 500 rough, winding West African miles. At first everything seemed as unreal and melodramatic as if I



BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

had stumbled upon a Hollywood set of "Sanders of the River", or the pages of the *Geographic* had come to life. We wore our sun helmets in the cab of the lorry, against the heat — a formidable force — which struck down from the scorching steel roof. It is difficult for eyes accustomed to a temperate English landscape to take in all the colour and scope and abandon of scene — the blue of the vast hot sky, red richness of earth, brilliant green of flamboyant vegetation. At last I have seen palm trees, bananas and pineapples growing wild, and mud and wattle villages where the people share their huts with an exuberance of miscellaneous mongrel livestock, chickens, goats, pi-dogs. Our lorry's passing through these communities caused a sensation every time. Men in loin-cloths and turbanned women in calico skirt wraps came out to stare, and the naked piccans clapped their pink-palmed hands and shouted after us in shrill falsetto excitement.

'We made our first night's stop at a rest-house in a rain forest like a giant's cathedral which shut out the sky and caused our voices to sound as puny and insignificant as we ourselves felt. The forest silence was strange, even awesome, as the silence of remote primitive places can be to people who are used to a reassuring background of town noises. It was not flat silence, but vibrant with an undertone of chirping insects and small, secret sounds, and with something else: the brooding character and powerfully individual personality of the black man's country. When our lantern was turned out and we lay in our mosquito-netted camp cots, I listened to rustlings and stirrings in the straw roof above us. As casually as possible I asked Bill about snakes. He just said, "Lizards — or bats", and suggested I should guard against imagining things. The tenderfoot in West Africa could hardly have better advice, nor a more sensible example than Br'er Fox who "lay low and said nuffin". This is not easy when the rain forest is dark, the straw thatch rustles and all Africa lies asleep in enigmatic dark beyond the door....'

WELCOME TO AGULU

The house at Agulu was set like a square white brooch on the tawny hillside. All around us was sepia and green, rolling, bush country, with a lake reflecting sky and hills, just below. The house looked far too large for two people, but it had in fact only three rooms, excluding the bath section and larder. Forty pillars held the roof aloft. Plaster-faced concrete blocks, each a foot thick and topped by ventilation gaps, made the walls. The middle room was a breezeway opening at both ends. We came to call it 'the baronial hall' and used it as a dining-room. On one side of this was the bedroom with adjoining bathroom — on the other the living-room and larder. The coolness of the whole interior was promoted by glassless, shuttered windows, smoothly polished cement floors and whitewash as the general décor. From the pillared front veranda (nine feet wide and ninety feet long) low steps led down to a wide expanse of turf which we called lawn — this dipping to a second narrow terrace with an abrupt ending in a steep lakeward descent of tangled brush and trees. A second veranda followed along the back of the house, looking out on clumps of orange and lemon trees which bordered the sandy driveway. There in the middle stood the oil bean tree, spreading an immense shade. Its trunk and most of its lower branches were covered by a black honeycombing of ants' nests, the headquarters, it appeared, of all the ants in the world.

A thatched pathway led from the larder door to the cookhouse and boys' quarters which pursued a concentrated, semi-detached life divorced from yet dependent upon the main body of the house. Here the cook worked over his brews and bakings in a small building which had an aspect of Dante's *Inferno*, complete with leaping flames (under the kerosene-tin-cum-mudbank stove) and perspiring black goblins in the shape of Cook, Steward and Small Boy. Bare feet had worn the area in front of this quarter to a hard, grassless surface, ineffectually scratched by mongrel fowls of dusty plumage and fatalistic mien. Under a mango tree near the cookhouse a

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

rough bamboo table served for washing up, and lengths of *tie-tie* (native rope) strung between house, mango tree and palm trees, made our clothes-line. I surveyed all this and was intrigued by the sense and freedom of having the whole outdoors as supplementary kitchen space. Not, it was clearly indicated, that such arrangements had much to do with me. I gathered immediately that anything but my general supervision from a distant deck-chair would probably disrupt the whole organization.

Water was to a degree 'laid on' in two vast cement rain-storage tanks alongside the house. These filled to overflowing in the rainy season and kept the house supplied during part of the period of drought. Our bathroom was most thoughtfully equipped with a bathtub, not luxurious in design or quality but more practical than the all too collapsible canvas tub we had brought with us. The bung-hole was particularly impressive, this being, as Bill pointed out, an unusual amenity in bush. The lavatory, known technically as the Bucket System, was a simple device, at intervals discreetly collected through a hatch opening at the back of the superstructure and carried away on a stolid head. This duty fell to one Pius, gardener and man of many useful parts.

There is more to any house than its walls, roof and furnishings. Certainly our dwelling for two years in Agulu, though spacious, was far from luxurious. Yet, strangely, it was home. It is not easy to say why this should be so. Perhaps a true home is best established in a wilderness where two people must make the best use they can of existing circumstances and materials, without access to or choice of a 'desirable residence'. There can be no doubt that fundamentally 'home' is an old-fashioned idea, having very little connection with the modern additions of radio, telephone and up-to-date gadgets designed for physical comfort and convenience. Agulu's house had none of these, yet was to be remembered afterwards with affection and nostalgia in other climes when vivid pictures of its remote, sun-drenched

WELCOME TO AGULU

solitude came to mind, and we said as Adam and Eve might have spoken of their lost Garden: 'Remember Agulu?'

To have a house equipped with an Ivory Tower is the rarest good fortune. This was no visionary citadel but a solid erection of whitewashed timbers forming steep steps upward from the lawn to the roof where it became a small balcony keeping company with the tops of the palm trees. From this eyrie we could view the ribboning colours of the sunsets, look down at the whole undulating stretch of lake and forest panorama and watch the villagers going their endless ways to and from the local markets along the dirt road which curved up the hill. The tower, so strategically placed, was particularly satisfying in that while one was removed from the world below, that world could be examined both in general and in detail, and at leisure. (So must the old gods have felt on Olympus, detached and invulnerable, watching the hurly-burly below.) Through binoculars the lake was brought so close we could watch little boys in dugout canoes, birds skimming the swampy sedges, villagers dropping their market burdens to bathe, picnics splashing, women like dark Junos scrubbing their calico cloths. We could look across to the distant hills, making out the clearings where mud houses sheltered within frescoed walls and cooking fires made domestic smudges against the far horizon. At the foot of the hill by the roadside we could descry the local market's rows of ramshackle stalls, pyramids of fruit and corn-cobs, baskets of fish and cassava, gourds of palm wine and the whole dusty, sociable vortex into which passers-by were drawn by the magnetic attraction of wayside barter and gossip.

From the Ivory Tower we could view the whole local scene. Across the road which passed our driveway stood the court-house, a long mud structure glorified by a corrugated tin roof, where local affairs were discussed — sometimes solemnly, more often with fierce vivacity — by the village elders, and the District Officer held meetings. The same clearing was shared by Bill's newly-built office, notable only for its freshness of

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

whitewash, newness of thatch and signpost which bravely said: 'Development Office. Soil Conservation (Anti-Erosion) Scheme.' Beyond it and the courthouse was a thick tangle of forest screening most of the village huts and the busy communal life which went on all around us.

With a population of approximately 600 bush people per square mile throughout the district it would have been absurd for us to believe ourselves in any sense isolated. The constant trekking of villagers along the road at the bottom of our driveway made a never-ending frieze of burdened figures, sometimes varied by the hurtling passage of a bicycle with bell loudly ringing, or the slow plodding of a herd of wretchedly emaciated northern cattle which had lost their substance on the long journey southward, and made their goaded way with a villager in attendance, towards one of the smaller bush markets.

The dusty road bore the imprints of a multitude of Man Friday footprints, barefoot symbols of a civilization which had not advanced to discovering for itself the principle of the wheel, and which in a startling number of respects was 'savage' to the point of knowing nothing about the outside world of wars

and cities, or the behaviour of Christian nations towards each other. There was a timeless quality about the road and its bush traffic as viewed from the Tower. Here little had changed since the days of cannibalism. Even while in Lagos Westernized Nigerians clamoured for self-government, the bush people of Agulu lived much as their ancestors had done, content because they did not know any other way of life existed.

Here indeed was the Simple Life which the 'civilized' cannot hope to recapture, for the simple life is not deliberately contrived, it is completely

WELCOME TO AGULU

natural. Attempted by the world-weary the result is almost inevitably a studied and intellectually snobbish fiasco such as may be found in nudist camps, artists' colonies and strength-through-joy organizations. The simple life is, alas, impossible for those who have known any other. In striving to regain it, the whole point of peace and acceptance is lost. It is impossible for Western man, simply by kicking off his shoes and living in a grass shack, to shake off as well his education, his heredity, his acquired needs, his highly developed ego and his whole instinct for the Progress he damns. Even in his most earnest pilgrimages back to simplicity civilized man, whether he wishes it or not, is hampered by the same restless intelligence which has prompted him to reject the less desirable by-products of his own civilization.

So it was that while we lived in the village of Agulu, we were not of it. While we attempted to understand our neighbours we were not fitted to be in any sense akin to them. This was not a matter of difference of colour — for surely shades of complexion are petty obstacles to human understanding — but of outlook. For the White Man (or Woman) to see life through the eyes of the bush African is a feat rarely accomplished and then only by those of remarkably selfless, brilliantly sympathetic disposition. We could only be observers of, not true participants in, Agulu's way of life.

On my first morning there I woke to see through the veil of mosquito netting the imperturbable steward, Christopher, bearing in a tray of tea. Tactfully ignoring me, who not knowing whether to say 'Good morning', pretended sleep, he woke Bill, then busied himself folding clothes and giving subdued commands to the Small Boy, Wilson, who could be heard filling the bathtub. On rising I found every detail correct, even to lace-edged undergarments draped artistically over a chairback. For a moment I panicked at a vision of giant Ethiopie armed with loofah, attending Milady's bath, but Christopher, discreetly retiring, had closed the door behind

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

him. A moment later I flung it open. 'There's a rat in the wash-basin!'

Christopher viewed it, large and dead, its scaly tail sticking over the edge, and summoned Small Boy to take it away. I gathered that when the basin had been filled the night before, no suicidal rat had been anticipated. Christopher's face was shocked and I almost expected him to say, Jeeves-fashion, 'Most reprehensible'. Instead he fished out the sodden rodent and handed it to Wilson who took it into the garden to Pius, for burial. 'There be many rats here,' Christopher explained apologetically. And by way of soothing my alarm, 'That be only small one.'



A few days later, returning from my first visit to the Protestant Mission seven miles away, I brought back the black kitten who was to become a creature of great dignity and anti-rat fervour, known to us in time as 'Mrs. Murphy' and to the boys as 'Missus Puss'. In cathood she came to be the morning terror of the jewel-eyed lizards whose domain in the Tower was speedily invaded. On hot afternoons,

however, they sunned themselves in peace, for Mrs. Murphy's habits were more Egyptian than Irish and her respect for the hours of siesta was absolute. Few cats are lucky enough to have their food brought by servants who in reply to the order, 'Pass cat's chop' come bearing dishes of chicken skin and coconut milk, as if on silver salvers. In the Egyptian days of cat worship it may have been so, for Mrs. Murphy showed less surprise than I at this remarkable service. As for rats in the wash-basin, there never was another, although Christopher never failed in his virtuous chore of morning inspection, to make sure.

On my first day, before breakfast, I ventured to the top of

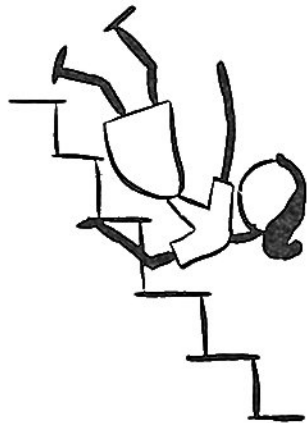
WELCOME TO AGULU

the Tower while the lustre of the morning was yet untarnished by the great heat. Damp cobwebs spangled the lawn, mist rose from the lake, and the Tower steps were slippery with dew. Having leaned on the parapet the better to indulge in poetic soliloquy on pastel-tinted sky and vast, tranquil view, I began to descend, still thoughtful as befits the mood of one who contemplates alone and early on a high place. Suddenly my feet left the steps and I came to earth with a thud at ground level where I nursed my hurts and sudden grievance against the Tower until Bill came to pick me up. 'I told you,' he reminded me, 'not to trust it. Going up's easy, but you have to come down carefully.'

On my cushioned chair at the breakfast table I made this mental note: at no time is it more necessary to keep your head than when descending from imaginary or real Ivory Towers. Remember that the force of the ordinary world is as strong as the pull of gravity. It was a chastening experience.

Not that this dampened our enthusiasm for the Tower. At dusk, when the whole landscape took on a silent shining greenness with every leaf and frond outlined in light while the lake absorbed the tints of red and yellow from the sunset, the Tower was a stage-box for the whole display. Sometimes there were serried ranks of billowing 'celestial' clouds rayed about by the last hot gleams—or the sky was slate-coloured, laid across with bars of scarlet. And always there was a stillness in which the smallest sound was magnified and the preliminary chirping of crickets curiously distinct. Then quite abruptly night came.

We would go up stargazing, Bill pointing out the great luminaries,



BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

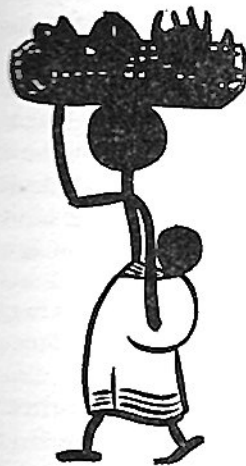
hopeful for me to graduate from the dead easy Big and Little Dipper class. His zeal was unrewarded, for even Big and Little had taken up new positions in that hemisphere and I could not hide my disappointment in the Southern Cross which was not the dazzling Crusaders' Motif I had expected, but just a vague tracery which might be anything. The luminous swathe of the Milky Way was more satisfying, but for the rest I grew only star-dizzy and incapable, for the great planets seemed strangely close to earth here, so glittering in array that I flinched from even a nodding acquaintance with Orion and Jupiter and could never remember where to find them. But moonlight nights brought a different, more friendly radiance. The orange and lemon trees cast shadows and within their waxen leaves the fruits looked enchanted, like the silver nutmeg and golden pear of the the nursery rhyme. The driveway was drenched in cool light which transformed whitewashed cement into sculptured alabaster and the compound into flawless lawns and terraces in an unearthly realm of silent, timeless perfection. The sun in tropical Africa is a brazen force to be respected, I concluded; the stars are too many, too awesome and too close — but the African moon is of more gentle character, its limpid sway a respite from the sun's harsh autocracy.

For several days after I had arrived I was the object of my neighbours' unblinking scrutiny. Singly and in pairs they came with *dashes* (presents) of cockerels, eggs, pineapples, oranges and sticks of bananas which I learned to accept with the traditional 'Thank you — very fine *dash*.' My shorts and slacks intrigued the women, whose own garments were usually only two pieces of bright cotton, one girded about the hips, the other about the head. Those of higher social standing added a brief bodice and ivory or silver bracelets. Some carried fat babies papoose-fashion in the back folds of their skirts, though it was always a mystery to me how the infants kept from slipping out of those insecure wrap-around garments. Still, the piccans seemed happy. They slept like puppies most of the

WELCOME TO AGULU

time, waking only when hungry at which time they were nursed without hesitation or shyness.

Despite every encouragement of which I was capable my neighbours did not care to speak unless spoken to, and then only in monosyllables. Only a few had even a modicum of pidgin English and I even less Ibo. Christopher, the steward,



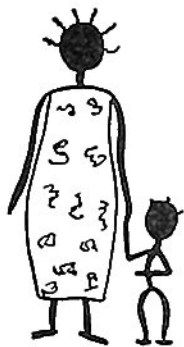
stood by to interpret but for the most part there ensued long silences during which we all looked politely at each other in the manner of conversation-shy bus or train travellers. Sometimes one of my guests would nudge another and giggle disconcertingly, after which the inspection of 'Madam' was resumed, as if she were indeed a remarkable specimen — a woman, but not like them in any visible way, a woman with white face, pale eyes and curious hair, a woman wearing shorts such as Mission schoolboys wear. A woman who is her husband's only wife because a white man takes only one wife, though

he could afford as many as the richest chiefs. A woman who though she has no piccans seems neither sad nor ashamed. A woman, mark you! So while I tried to imagine what they were thinking, they sat wordlessly 'visiting' for the allotted time, a period they gauged punctiliously but apparently without reference to each other. It always ended by their rising simultaneously and saying gently, 'We go now.'

Once when a visit from the local ladies coincided with tea-time I offered them tea and macaroons which they accepted with little clicking noises of anticipation, or possibly apprehension. The tea contorted their expressions into grimacing conflict between natural politeness and extreme distaste, but they drank on, determined to down the white woman's nauseous

beverage. The macaroons, however, were impossible. After nibbling a piece, each woman hid the rest behind her teacup. (My own reaction to roast goat at a village feast was much more cowardly. Bad manners or no, I declined the proffered lump of meat, hair and hide. Truly one woman's macaroon is another's poison.)

Bill, to whom I confided my social problems, failed to comprehend them. 'Just talk,' he said, 'just say anything.' But inevitably after my inquiries as to their health, their number of children and *their* health, the impetus slackened. Even on domestic grounds I was afraid of tactlessness, since I might be entertaining two wives of the same husband, and could not be sure which was living with him at the time — the rota being subject to variations usually dependent on the wives' alternating pregnancies. There were two Mrs. Maduokas, three Mrs. Awonsis and Chief Obuvudu's wives numbered at least six. There was, too, the problem of seniority.



It would have been a *faux pas* to single out the most junior for 'conversation' if her senior were on hand. On the whole, I found it safest to concentrate on admiring the piccans, the establishment of rapport with the African babies having no language handicap and no complicated social hurdles to consider. But even this gambit came to an end eventually, and the mothers still sat. Once when I had given up all hope of anyone ever speaking again, the Forest Guard's wife (Mrs. Maduoka) clasped her hands earnestly and said with serene distinctness, 'Tell us about a bomb.'

It transpired that she, more worldly-wise and widely travelled than the others, had once seen a newsreel at a distant township, in which figured some pictures of blitzed London. While the ladies patiently waited, I groped for simple words in which to describe bombs and bombing, and Christopher co-operated as

best he could in interpreting. 'Fire', 'enemy' and 'bang' they understood, although this kindergarten description of scientific warfare could hardly have been exact, and certainly I had no wish to scare the innocents out of their wits. Despite my censorship of lurid details the ladies were horrified, their next silence troubled. It seemed to me that their perplexed dismay was an interesting comment from the uncivilized world on the march of civilization.

By way of diversion I gave them orange juice cooled with lumps of ice from the kerosene-operated fridge, and they marvelled at this 'hard water'. In certain English seasons, I told them, ice lay on the ground and hardened the lakes; people wore heavy garments and made big fires in their houses. To which Mrs. Maduoka murmured, 'So?' and the others shook their heads in wonder. Everything about me and my country, it seemed, was fantastic to them. They must have gone away with a strange picture of England, ice-covered, razed by fire and plagued by enemies, populated by a pale race wearing Mission schoolboy shorts, who drank a brew called 'tea' and a food called 'macaroon'. Mystifying!

In time I grew more at ease with my visitors and they came to talk about themselves a little. Not that we ever accomplished any spontaneity or anything akin to discussion. Mostly we just kept afloat, they contributing a word or two occasionally and I adjusting myself to the inevitable gaps of silence. Christopher as interpreter did his best but there were times when I imagined he was not faithfully translating all that my guests said. Clearly he believed their remarks too personal, or verging on the risqué sometimes — as doubtless they were — but I often thought it a pity he should have so Puritan an opinion of what was suitable for my ears.

'Now what exactly did Mrs. Maduoka say?' I would insist.

But Christopher, as near to blushing as was possible for a man of his department and complexion, would view the joke askance and make bald travesty of the sentence which was

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

causing the ladies to titter so intriguingly behind their hands. The whole business was like a puzzle with some of the pieces missing, but at least goodwill was not, nor a mutual curiosity which kept us going when the gulf seemed widest, and words, both Ibo and English, evaporated entirely.

CHAPTER II

PROPER BUSH

THE paint on Bill's office signpost was hardly dry when the *Nigerian Spokesman*, an African edited newspaper printed at Onitsha, thirty miles away, printed this in its editorial:

'The checking of the erosion menace has brought tremendous joy not only to the citizens, but also to the surroundings where the demon spreads. It is a great turnover in the history of the village when it is remembered that her sons and daughters in the past had promised anything and everything within human reach to the person who could relieve them of this menace. Several souls, numerous houses and acres of lands had been swallowed by the merciless erosion which travelled to far distant places . . . Ignorantly our forefathers sacrificed domestic animals and valuable properties to the gods in order to be rid of its menace but all proved an utter failure. Now that scientists have discovered the cause of erosion the citizens of the affected areas have been relieved. We wish the Development Officer and his workers a successful venture.'

Not far from Agulu was a stretch of country to delight the kind of surrealist whose inward eye sees a constant vision of desolate wasteland, razor-sharp hills and blank, dun vistas of inimical, inhuman aspect. Here there was nothing of the gentle mother in Nature. Had the landscape a personality, it was harsh, malicious, no friend to man. So deep were some ravines that a pebble, thrown down, made a delayed hollow echo; the largest gully measured almost a mile across.

Land erosion is one of Nigeria's greatest problems and education in soil conservation a great need. The primitive system of land clearing for cultivation is drastic in its thorough-

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

ness. Trees are felled and the grassy undergrowth fired, robbing the soil of all natural anchorage; crops are often planted in downhill ridges which form channels to catch the heavy wash of wet-season rains and invite catastrophe. Market trails begun without regard to the land's slope become sluices in the flooding downpours so that, in a few years' time, a harmless-looking path becomes a sizable ditch, thence a small gully and finally



an unfertile canyon into which more of the terrain washes with every rainfall, and from which smaller branches split away to absorb yet more of the countryside. And so the unsightly, useless gorges come into being, with abandoned villages on their crumbling brinks. Below the precipices whole tracts of once cultivated farmland lie avalanched, complete with dwellings and miniature forests.

By its very nature erosion is a cumulative condition which can only be checked by direct and vigorous combat. Like a cancerous disease it militates against a complete cure. However,

with vigilance and strategy the process can at least be arrested. The Government's Soil Conservation Scheme, begun with a mind to long-term planning, had a twofold policy: to employ villagers on government-financed anti-erosion work, and to teach them preventive measures in their own agricultural methods. Meantime there was some local prejudice to overcome. What was the white man's *real* reason for wanting to make mysterious holes, ditches and dams in land which was by right of inheritance the villagers'? What right had he to issue edicts about market trails and crop planting? True, the gods had not heeded their appeals. Yearly the land split and crumbled. Crops were poor.

PROPER BUSH

But just what was the white man's aim? The main fear, steadily and often vociferously asserted, was that Government's ulterior motive was to rob them eventually of their heritage. Ownership of land in Nigeria creates more 'palaver' and enmity than any other form of dispute. Every farmer knows, or thinks he knows, by native law and the involvement of inheritance, exactly what land is his. When opinions differ the air is loud with accusations and the recounting of complicated family history. In Nigeria 'land palaver' sometimes means months of argument during which a man's claims may be traced down through a family tree multitudinous in its polygamous branches and reft by dissenting factions. Add to this, superstitious apprehensions and prejudices too deep-rooted or complex to be understood even by those who have them; add again a fear of the power behind the white man (for Government is often envisaged as a kind of super Jujù who works only for the benefit of the pale-skinned) and you have something of the average bushman's attitude when his land is in question for any kind of government treatment.

The superintending of gulch and gully taming near Agulu had fallen to Bill. That any mere band of ordinary mortals, no matter how firmly backed by 'Government', could hope to deal with such terrestrial havoc was my own private doubt, and I remembered the Walrus and the Carpenter. 'If seven maids with seven mops swept it for half a year, do you suppose,' the Walrus said, 'that they could get it clear?'

Bill, with Ladipo the Forest Assistant and Maduoka the Forest Guard, three hundred labourers, thirty headmen and twelve superintendents, all Africans, were the 'seven maids with seven mops'. With the fifteen-mile district divided into three sections, each equipped with labourers' camps, an office and a dispensary — and Bill armed with government memoranda and fortified by advice from Agricultural, Forestry and Administrative Departments, the battle with Erosion was joined.

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

'Erosion' was to figure largely in our lives during our two years in Agulu. Letters to Bill came addressed: 'The Explosion Officer', 'The Eruption Officer' and even 'The Reproductive Manager'. Sumps, rain-gauges, wave-beds, steppes, dams, peripheral and lateral drains, and contour ridging were transformed from paper edict to plain earthy fact. Gangs of labourers clad in loin-cloths worked at ramparts and rain-breaks, wielding their native hoes in unison and chanting, as they dug, an impromptu singsong comment on the immediate situation. When Bill was in sight, the tempo noticeably accelerated and the intonation was vigorously punctuated by snorts of exertion:

Look, Massa be watching us,
See, Massa be watching us,
Make [grunt] this look like work hard,
Make [groan] this look like *work* hard.

which song might grow more lighthearted as Bill moved away, to:

See, Massa be leaving us,
Now Massa be leaving us.
God look down upon his going,
God give him a good day.



but all this was in Ibo, not English, and the translation we felt could sometimes be an inspiration on the part of the interpreter who was occasionally observed to hesitate before revealing either in Ibo or English the gist of the foreign tongue. That the labourers' intoning (like my own visitors' remarks) should often be highly personal and improper was to be expected. The interpreter, impassive in countenance except for an occasional flicker of secret mirth, recited his own blue-pencilled versions,

PROPER BUSH

and we could not help admiring his graceful balance on the Ibo-English fence.

At palavers — village meetings attended by chiefs and elders — the interpreter had to keep his wits about him, for the debates could drag on interminably, personal feelings run high and pandemonium reign at the slightest provocation. All would begin calmly enough, with Bill sitting at a table set in a market clearing beneath the spreading shade of a Juju tree, while the village people squatted in a semi-circle before him. Any and all forms of palaver attracted the populace. Even when they had no personal contribution to make and felt no interest in the matter under discussion, there was the attractive likelihood of excitement. So piccans and grandfathers gathered around as well, the youngsters stark naked and big-eyed, the derelict ancients seated on goatskin mats where they chomped their gums and glowered at Progress. These had been the warriors of cannibal days, the mighty hunters and dancers of this once fierce and quarrelsome district. Beneath those skinny ribs the pagan heart still beat and the pagan blood remembered great Juju feasts adorned with human skulls and made intoxicating by rites of incredible cruelty and gruesome portent. While the leaders debated and Bill persuaded, I watched the old men. Sometimes they smiled or wagged their heads, but for the most part they might have been sinister old Keepers of the Gate for the gods within the odorous Juju shrine which was usually no more than a stone's throw from the meeting place.

When a decision had to be taken, the whole gathering would rise, split into groups and argue the point with impassioned voices and fervid gesticulation. This uproar would go on for a long time until quite suddenly the groups mingled and sat down. Then the spokesman with a flourish of his robes stood up to divulge the sum total of communal opinion. Words always flowed from this deputy as if, although his fellows' speech had run dry, his own oratory had a fathomless source. Eventually when Bill with a gesture slacked the rhetoric long

enough to gain speaking time for the interpreter, the result of all this was quite likely and surprisingly simply, merely, 'We agree.'

'So,' Bill would say, 'you agree.' And with that the meeting would adjourn and everyone trek home pleasurably stimulated by the afternoon's entertainment.

Yet there was one occasion when no agreement could be reached and the meeting was brought to an end in chaos. The beginning was inauspicious, for the crowd had already divided itself into three parts, representing the three separate 'families' which made up the village. Over all the chief was supposed to have influence but his bearing was so lacking in confidence and his voice so timid that the disputing families obviously cared nothing for his authority. He stood alone, a thin young man in a curious monkish garment which I recognized as a brown woollen dressing-gown, and he spoke with an unmistakable public school accent. Anxiously he twisted a signet ring round and round his finger, the while looking from Bill to his fractious, thrice-divided brood, and back again. Politely he raised his voice to quell the bedlam which could not be subdued even when Bill thumped the table with his cane to call order. His diffident remarks were lost in the angry abuse which his divided clan hurled at each other, heedless of interpreter, Bill and their own leader.

'Land palaver,' said Bill resignedly. 'One family says we can start anti-erosion work, the other two say it's not decided whose land it is, anyway.'

By this time the groups had mingled, but not amicably, and Bill's table was islanded in an agitated mass of angry bushmen and irately clamouring voices while the young chief, brushed aside, stood watching sorrowfully from the outskirts.

'Meeting closed,' said Bill, and we walked back to the lorry, the departure of 'Government' scarcely heeded in the fracas.

The chief followed us. 'I am sorry,' he said dejectedly, 'that my people are so unprogressive.'

'Well, you're progressive,' said Bill, 'and you're their chief.'

The young man shrugged. 'My father could lead them, but he is dead. I have been away to school because my father thought I should gain wisdom and be able to teach my people new ways. I was away many years. It was not like this.' He pointed at the surrounding bush, the pile of rancid rubble in front of the Juju shrine, the earth worn glossy with the trampling of bare feet, the gnarled Juju tree, and away to the gloomy mud cloister that was his dwelling. 'I do not understand my own people today. And they do not respect me or listen to me.'

'They haven't listened to me — yet,' said Bill helpfully.

'I should not have gone away to school. I wish I had stayed here.' The boy's thoroughbred face showed pride but not certainty. 'I *am* a chief. My father was a great man. The people would not have dared to disobey him. Am I not his son?'

His insistence on his place in a village which hardly noticed him was pitiable. Training in scholarship and all the gentlemanly virtues had unfitted him for the position which by blood and law he was required to fill. By whose standards should he live? Even if he chose those of his people he could hardly abandon easily the precepts he had so diligently absorbed when he was away. It was strange, perhaps, that he might wish to, and evidence that family ties are stronger than any other. 'I am a chief,' he had said, in his cultivated, aristocratic voice. We went home wondering how on earth he would reconcile his admirable education with the pagan cussedness of his angry-eyed people.

We encountered what the boys called 'proper bush' when we ventured a few miles down any of the trails leading away from the main road into an agglomeration of smaller villages hidden in the forest. The trails themselves were narrowly tortuous as if designed to deter visitors. The mud and thatch huts which seemed to grow like brown mushrooms out of the cinnamon-coloured earth, were protective in colouring. Razor-sharp raffia spines topped the compounds' thick walls which in the old days were bulwarks against surprise attack. Entrances in

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

the walls were few, these being midget gateways no more than four feet high and two feet wide, with doors of solid, ornately carved iroko. Within each compound a number of huts housed a family comprising anything from a score to fifty persons as well as goats, pi-dogs and scrawny chickens. Adjacent yam storage huts held the big tubers in readiness for the 'hungry' (dry) season. The village drum, a blackened hollow log covered with hide, usually stood centrally under the Juju tree which grew in gnarled, ancient isolation, shading and casting its all-powerful influence over the small market place around which the compounds were grouped.

Within the compound walls there was no grass, only hard-baked earth swept daily with brooms of tied-together raffia. Beyond the walls the forest was absolute, save for the market clearing and patches of cultivated ground where the villagers tended their plots of cassava, pumpkins, maize and yams, with their only tools, the machete and curved native hoe. On any dewy morning before the great heat of the day, such a scene was idyllic. The Arcadian woods were pooled and shafted with sunlight, the sky opalescent, the villages snug and sheltered

beneath the forest's shining mantle. Yet there was a niggling flaw in the enjoyment of this tropical wonderland — a fly in the ointment, or more likely, an ant in the underbrush. For there was no escape from the tenacious tailor ants, an inch long and militant in attack from the bushes to which they clung. Ferociously they bit the unguarded arm or ankle, and so long as there were tailor ants there could be no peace, no tranquil contemplation of a 'proper bush' morning.

In these out of the way places our approach was regarded with nervous inquisitiveness. The piccans, as wary and

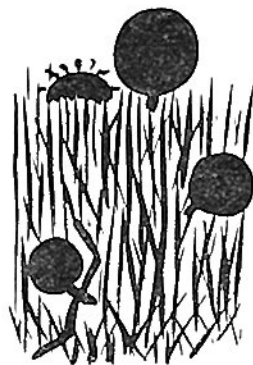


PROPER BUSH

quick as kittens, would dart into the undergrowth where only the trembling of the tall grasses would mark their presence. Others, scampering away through the little gateways into the safety of their compound, were followed by a frantic, mindless scurry of goats, dogs and chickens, while the bush women would silently retreat to a cautious distance. The attraction of the yellow truck, more than our own efforts to make friends, brought them eventually closer until, if we were quiet, we were ringed about by a press of solemn black visages. Closer and closer they came until Bill flicked his cigarette lighter, and they all blinked and pushed back in alarm. Again the mysterious flame, marked this time by a chorus of pleasure and wonder. When Bill offered 'fire' to a grizzled grandfather who was sucking a clay pipe, the old man recoiled against the crowd — but the assembly, pushing forward to see better, would not let him escape. His pipe suddenly alight, he leapt into the air while the crowd clapped like children at a conjuring show. We left to the sound of loud applause,

only to discover later that the lid from the side petrol tank, a shiny chromium cap, had been removed, probably by some jackdaw piccan with an eye for sparkling 'treasure'.

In 'proper bush' where clothing is practically nil, bodily decorations are particularly elaborate. Tribal scars are one embellishment, comprising serrated marks on the upper female torso and the male forehead. The village belles wear nothing except a thin, plaited belt of black and crimson raffia. Those of higher social caste are more weightily adorned with heavy ivory arm-bracelets and a cumbersome knee-to-ankle succession of brass rings. The palms of the hands may be stained with henna and the body intricately painted with blued tracteries and curlicues in an all-over symmetrical design akin



BLACK-MAN'S COUNTRY

to tattooing. Even the smallest infants are painted with spirals and triangles, so that when their heads are shaven except for two grotesque side-tufts they look like quaint baby clowns. While the young girls, like the boys, have their hair closely cropped, the older women's coiffure is generally an arduously contrived multitude of tight ringlets wound with thread after the hair has been parted and cross-parted with quilted effect. The result is a stiff raying out of disciplined 'tails', modish in the eyes of the bush women, and apparently quite impossible to disarrange.

Perhaps it is strange that we never thought of our neighbours' near-nudity as anything but completely appropriate. Its aspect was unselfconscious to an extent impossible in European countries where nothing more swiftly prompts a smirk or an innuendo than the idea of nudity. Innocence, like beauty, may very well be in the eye of the beholder — and certainly in 'civilized' countries stress on sex and glamour makes it almost impossible for advertisement readers and film-goers to maintain anything like innocence of eye or mind. On sex, in the white countries, depends a vast commercial network of advertising in the spheres of dress, cosmetics and household goods, even those which one would not at first imagine to be likely material for titillation — the approach being provocatively direct, or most skilfully indirect. The Cult of Glamour (use So and So's product for petal-soft complexion, lustrous hair, that come-hither look) has been found a resoundingly successful business proposition. Its dicta are absorbed universally, and pulp literature contributes to the prevailing mental strip-tease. The whole Western idea of dress, feminine dress at least, appears to be: clothe the woman with such artistry that immediately someone will wish to unclothe her. And of course the Western notion is that an unclad woman means more, far more than merely her absence of clothes. Such is the general 'civilized' way of thinking; nudity and sex are automatically linked.

There can be no doubt that our bush neighbours knew all about the facts of life, but they were mercifully spared having

PROPER BUSH

these facts dished out to them *ad nauseam* by radio and magazine, on hoardings and in vaudeville. They were not, as we are, sex conscious to the extent which makes white women in their thousands buy perfumes with names that excite the feminine imagination, and presumably masculine desires. It would seem that the bush people took their bodies altogether for granted. At least their unclothed state carried with it an air which although it could not be precisely termed 'modesty' (for modesty implies a deliberate restraint of boldness) was certainly self-assurance.

That they understood 'romance' or 'love' as the Western world knows it, is doubtful. One might say they were too practical, too close to nature, to comprehend such refinements and elaborations of the basic force. The mere fact of polygamous bush marriage customs with their early betrothals, dowries and strongly economic aspect, precludes 'romance'. Not that for a moment there was any hint of prudishness in our neighbours' attitude to the Facts. Their jokes could be Rabelaisian — more hearty than subtle, and their numbers of piccans testified to their freedom from inhibition or lack of interest in each other. It may have been that sex, taken as much for granted as the earth, the sky and the seasons, was not to them any seven-veiled mystery for perpetually adolescent conjecture or novelistic asterisks, but a perfectly straightforward matter involving the getting and bearing of children of whom the more the better.

Our closest neighbour, a fisherman-farmer who lived further up the hill behind our house had, he said, six wives and thirty children — approximately. At first we thought he had lost count, as might be understandable, but we realized afterwards his reluctance to be specific. To count your wives and children in a precise and boastful way was, we gathered, an affront to the gods who could punish by depleting the family circle. Only the vaguest calculations were suitable. This respect for malevolent forces who lay in wait to snub and

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

admonish the boastful was general throughout our district. Consequently paternal humility prevailed always in the spoken word when families were mentioned. What of pride and self-congratulation went on in the paternal heart was a different matter — it was presumably only the gods' quick ears that were sensitive.

I often wondered what the bush people made of our childless state. Possibly, never having seen a white infant, they were not able to visualize such a phenomenon. But much about us and our way of living must have puzzled them — unless they simply accepted our peculiarities lock, stock and barrel.

It would not have been characteristic of them to analyse any situation, despite the inquisitiveness they evinced in anything new to them. The yellow lorry with its noisy engine often caused them astonishment, but no bushman ever inquired what 'made it go'. The weekly aeroplane which passed overhead was accepted as a governmental machine, occasioning no surmise as to the extraordinary fact of man-made flight. Even the bicycles owned by a few of the more go-ahead villagers did not stimulate mechanical investigation; bicycles were meant to carry you quickly over the ground and what made the wheels go round was of no particular interest to the possessors.

Of cause and effect they sometimes showed a sad lack of understanding, particularly in regard to their infants of whom, according to statistics, 60 per cent die before the age of two years. Yet their affection for children is undoubtedly one of the strongest feelings in their communal life, and probably it is a misplaced indulgence which contributes to a baby's small chances of survival. In Nigeria's scheme of natural economies the infant, if he is to survive, must have a strong grip on life. There are distressing waits between mealtimes when the mother is away at the market place and has left her baby in the care of an older child. To the baby's cry for nourishment the answer is copious draughts of water forcefully administered, and such titbits as winged ants, caught alive and thrust into the hungry mouth.

To imagine that African bush infants are born immune to

PROPER BUSH

the thriving bacteria in bad water and airless huts, is a fallacy. Nor have they any marked resistance to the sting of the malarial mosquito. So they sicken of 'fever' or 'pain-in-belly' or simply fade away for no reason anyone understands, and there is great lamentation for the loss of a beloved piccan. Yet strangely it is only recently that twin babies have been tolerated at all. Not many years ago the birth of twins was an event so shocking as to necessitate the destruction of at least one baby, and the probable driving out of the mother from her village by a path made for that purpose and covered over when she had gone. The taboo on twins is secretly in force even today in remote districts, despite the organizing of 'twineries' — government orphanages for the unwanted babies.

Although to the casual observer the general physique of the people seems strong and erect, the usual expectation of life is far short of three score years and ten. Once there is illness a fatalistic refusal to believe in return of health makes recovery unlikely. Many an African will turn his face to the wall and die, just because he is not interested in living. Among the small piccans, stomachs greatly swollen by an almost entirely starchy diet are commonplace; yet once the children are able to fend for themselves they are lithe, energetic and in no way puny or weakling. At an early age they begin to carry head-loads, minute gourds and baskets, a stick of wood or three oranges tied in a cloth. Often we saw family processions in a series of steps — first the woman carrying the heaviest load, with an erect head and graceful posture which would be the envy of any department-studying debutante. Then the children, with loads graded down to the smallest toddler as diminutive as Mrs. Maduoka's eldest, who once brought me a postage stamp carried on his head and weighted by a pebble. For the older people a load of fifty pounds is quite usual and will be carried at a brisk pace for ten, or even twenty miles. If man and wife are travelling together it is she who bears the burden, following her spouse who walks ahead with his cane in his hand, as

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

defender against any possible assailant who might spring from the bushes. This is so unlikely in present times as to require no consideration, but custom dies hard.

We realized that bush Nigeria is no land of feminists when one afternoon of grilling heat we witnessed a procession in honour of a soldier newly home from Burma. In the centre of the welcoming throng he strode in what we took at first to be his full Army kit, with thick, brass-buttoned great-coat flapping, and wide-brimmed hat, the marvel of all eyes. Then we noticed that he had discarded the rest of his uniform in favour of a loin-cloth, and was barefoot. At the tail of the procession his wife, all happy smiles and glistening with perspiration, carried his box atop which lay folded his trousers and tunic surmounted with studded boots and Army belt. Even under this load she managed a few dancing steps which would seem to prove that while she was not potential suffragette material, neither was she the weaker sex.



In time I came to know the sound of a market long before we reached it. From a distance the noise was slurred, like waves breaking on a sandy beach; closer to hand it became more staccato like the hubbub of a Sunday school picnic, or a circus. When business was slack there was impromptu dancing and music to pass the time; when buying was brisk, the sound of bargaining took on a querulous timbre, rising sometimes to loud dispute with occasional violent affrays in which the whole market took sides. In the shadows of their straw-thatched stalls the women displayed fruit and vegetables, piles of groundnuts and sticky titbits wrapped in banana leaves. For goods less in value than a penny, cowrie shells changed hands as in the old days when the cowrie was the only currency in Nigeria.

PROPER BUSH

Even in the smallest market place there was usually at least one vendor of cloth, Manchester calico in lurid checks and stripes, khaki and white drill and a piece or two of sleazy rayon. Small boys sat by the roadway with cheap cigarettes, sold more often singly than by the packet. Others offered baskets, fans and cartwheel raffia rain hats, buckets, machetes and little Birmingham-made mirrors. But the stall for surefire trade was the medicine stand. Here liniments, potions and purges, talcums, aspirins and purple elixirs brought from the town offered respite from every known disease and gladdened the bushman's eye.



The instinct for trading appears to be a particularly pronounced trait in Nigeria, for how else would these unlikely goods penetrate into the most remote villages? The answer may be that the Nigerian market place is an everlasting source of social excitement, a safety-valve for quarrels, a neighbourly club, a place where you may search out your friend or your enemy and have audience for your opinions. You can watch or participate, sample or stroll, drink wine at the *tombo* stalls, or simply sit in the shade and sleep. Like Mr. Micawber the Nigerian is always confident that 'something will turn up' and on market day he is rarely disappointed.

CHAPTER III

BOY!

WHEN Bill with enthusiastic promptitude turned the house over to my care, or more precisely, me to the house, he clearly had no doubt that I would easily take to tropical domesticity. 'When you want anything,' he said, 'just tell the boys. Keep the food stores locked up. Inspect the cookhouse every morning. Tell Christopher what wants doing and find out what's happening to my socks — they're shrinking.'

The general idea is to call 'Boy!' and the steward appears, like the genie in Aladdin's Lamp, to do your bidding. However, if the house is large and one's voice small, the summons does not always carry and in this case the easiest and most voice-saving way out is to do the job yourself, until you realize the staff's horror when they know you have lifted a finger in your own service. When, tenderfoot that I was, I insisted on painting all the shutters green myself, and in siesta time, Christopher looked so unnerved I felt I must have dealt a deathblow to household etiquette. Since the boys' own system is as rigid as that of any group of Victorian servants, any confusion or deflection from the mistress's place at the top must be felt all the way down the ranks. A white woman in the tropics is expected to sit on a cushion and sew a fine seam, or somehow occupy herself with dainty accomplishments which do not bring her into the back quarters. It is grievous loss of face for everyone, and Madam is sure to suffer for it, if she puts on an apron and essays any energetic escape from lotus-eating.

Our household began with Christopher as Steward, Wilson as Small Boy and Alphonsa as Cook. Christopher was short, burly, jet black, with massive hands, butler baritone and a

BOY!

heavy-visaged solemnity. He had two wives in his 'own town' fifteen miles away and one son at a Mission school in Onitsha. His first marriage, we gathered, was by native custom before he became a member of the Catholic Church and married his 'legal' wife. In his room, prominently displayed, we saw his wedding photograph, a picture of the groom only, stiffly dressed in a store suit and gloves and a high celluloid collar which may have been the reason for his choleric, pompous expression. This picture was flanked by two others, a highly coloured lithograph of the Royal Family in Court dress, and an Arctic scene complete with husky-dogs and sleds and Eskimos which must have privately perplexed him. This art work was given him by his 'last Massa', Christopher said. I think he considered our own bare walls depressingly bleak.



Next to the safety razor Bill had given him, Christopher's sun helmet was his most prized possession and it was a bad day for him when white ants ate most of the lining. He took pride in his house uniform, khaki for daytime, white for evening; his exterior always rustled with starch and virtue. His fondness for decoration made him salvage some pink gingham buttons I had thrown away, and when he sewed these on his evening suit by way of making it look more cheerful, I had my first lesson to learn in the tactful handling of a minor domestic situation. Luckily I had some shiny brass buttons which he agreed were even more distinctive.

In many respects Christopher was an admirable steward. He knew fifteen different ways of folding dinner napkins and had a knack of setting our table so that our war-time cutlery and china looked what it was not. We knew our lack of fish knives

gravely offended his sense of fitness. Fish knives had apparently been essential to the governmental table of his 'last Madam' whose household knew no bush improvisations. My reckless departures from correctness must have troubled him as on one occasion when, alone, I asked for a lunch of some sandwiches and coffee on a tray. This Bohemian request was so obviously frowned upon by our ceremony-loving steward that I weakened and submitted to having my lunch set out in solitary state on the big table. There Christopher stood like a statue of orthodoxy in the offing, to hand me the plate after my self-conscious consumption of each single sandwich. After that, I made it clear that tray meals were not symptoms of dangerous eccentricity, and moreover I could pick up my own sandwiches quite capably.

Wilson, the Small Boy, of cherubic, bouncing gait and pop-eyed cheerfulness, often reminded me of Harpo Marx. Short, rubicund, anxious to please, he made a good foil to Christopher's solemnities. At night after dinner had been cleared away he sat at the larder table with a lantern, a Grade 1 primer and an exercise book, inkily copying words which he spelled out laboriously to himself in an attempt to improve his English. Inevitably he fell asleep at his task, and when locking-up time came, could be roused only to a dim twilight of consciousness in which he made the rounds automatically, like a sleepwalker, with eyes wide open and the rest of him comatose. Ordinarily his daytime responses were swift, too swift, as once, when a sheep bleated fretfully from the hillside, he came breathlessly to ask me, 'Madam call?'

Later Bill was surprised to hear me practising in the bedroom the alternatives between 'Boy' and 'Baaa' — which both he and I concluded sound much the same if pitched in an imperative feminine key. My voice, I decided, should be promptly supplanted by a handbell, for summoning purposes at least. One was immediately installed so that Wilson would know when to ignore the sheep, and when to answer me — a face-saving idea all round.

Mindful of Bill's socks, some of which seemed to be diminish-

ing to the size of babies' bootees, I approached the laundry arena one morning, determined to solve the problem. There I found Wilson with Pius, the handyman, wringing out sheets amid a clutter of tubs, basins and buckets.

'Massa's socks,' I began, 'no be so big as last week. Massa say you make um too small in wash.'

Wilson pondered this seriously, then brightly volunteered, 'Maybe Massa be growing.'

'No,' I persisted, 'Massa's feet be same size as last week. His legs be same long. Well then? Water be too hot!'

'Not hot,' said Wilson, leading me to a steaming panful into which more woollens were about to be plunged.

'It's *boiling!*' I protested, while Wilson put his own hands into it without flinching. 'Small hot,' he admitted for courtesy's sake, and added a few drops of cold water in order to humour me back to my deck-chair.

With Christopher, Cook and Pius as audience, and Wilson to help, I held a sock-washing demonstration with lukewarm water, but the whole point was lost when I realized that Wilson really could not 'feel' the difference between tepid and hot. I concluded that our notions of 'hot' and 'cold' do not tally with African notions. Alphonsa could barehanded extract a bubbling dish from the oven, or without any great haste lift a glowing ember from the fire. There was presumably some difference in epidermis sensitivity.

My dissertation on the mistake of using boiling water for woollens was politely received, but on the enigmatic faces of the group I could detect a reservation of opinion, an overriding doubt. All this was very well, and Madam's commands must, for the sake of peace on washdays, be obeyed. But — Massa's feet *could* be growing. . . .



BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

Ironing was Wilson's chief accomplishment and the results he gained made it inadvisable for me to criticize his excess ardour in banging at the clothes, or to suggest short-cuts in his involved, laborious methods. The irons reposed in a nest of embers kept glowing by a human bellows in the shape of Pius, who blew until his eyes bulged. When the iron was supposed ready it was whipped out with a forked stick, scoured on the ground, tested on a piece of sacking and if still too hot, plunged (with forked stick as handle) into a pail of water from which clouds of hissing steam rose. Wilson scorned to damp clothes beforehand; he dabbed at them with a fragment of moist cloth as he worked, and by a combination of skill and unfailing luck achieved an immaculately smooth surface without scorch marks. For some weeks he persisted in ironing Bill's socks as well, until we had one final discussion about these sensitive garments.

Wilson alarmed us one day by complaining of illness, nausea, headache and various forms of internal and intestinal distress which he described with unflinching realism of detail. Hastily I consulted the handbook, *Hints on the Preservation of Health in Tropical Africa*, which, with pictures, described 'Diarrhoea and Food Poisoning', 'Enteric and the Paratyphoids' and 'Undulant Fever, Dysentery, Parasitic Worms (hookworm, tapeworm, Schistosoma and other parasitic worms)', any of which might be Wilson's trouble. But it turned out that he had merely been trying to cure a mild stomach ache by overdosing himself with his favourite and most noxious 'purge' called 'African Wine', a native remedy for almost everything. We administered reproof and milk of magnesia which effected a quick cure. Wilson's tonsillitis was another crisis necessitating his visiting the doctor at the bush hospital up the hill. He returned from this errand elated, with a packet of aspirins and a quart of gargling fluid. Bill, who is a man for emergencies, tried to teach him to gargle, an absorbing business for Wilson who was passionately interested in 'medicine'. The aspirins we doled out at intervals, like sweetmeats, knowing that Wilson

BOY!

would bolt the lot if he had a chance. He refused to admit himself recovered until he had consumed the last of them, and finished the gargle mixture. For a long time he cherished the swathe of lint which had bound his throat. We sometimes thought unkindly that Wilson looked forward to his illnesses, which made a dramatic flourish in the back compound, and there were times when we suspected him of downright invention.

As for Alphonsa, the cook, he was from start to finish a prime enigma. Tall and slim, with coltish legs and bony wrists, he was so shy that even the effort of lisping 'Yeth'm' and 'No'm' was an ordeal for both of us. From his excursions to market he would return with a list which it was my duty to check, while he stood by gazing unseeingly into space, with the air of a youthful mystic.

A representative market account was: 'Spinig..1d., 4 corps..1d., 20 oringe..2d., 3 pinappals..6d., 1 ponkin..3d., pamwin for bredd..2d., 3 onins..5d., 14 egg..1/9, 1 cokfowl..2/-.' Spelling, despite Alphonsa's several years at school, was not his strong point, but his arithmetic was flexible, enabling him to make his 'perk' as almost all cooks do. He was a moderately good cook at first, although his 'salad dressing', an innocuous-looking liquid compounded of peppered vinegar thickened with mustard, was a shock to our systems and his coffee was as black and powerful as if it were made of gunpowder. Yet his wine-leavened bread was light, his chicken dishes tender (considering the muscular, flat-chested nature of the fowls) and his yam cakes successful. Also he made something he called 'Yerksherpuddin'.

It was in buying eggs that Alphonsa showed unusual talent, for an understanding of the Nigerian egg — as of the Nigerian hen — required a subtle, many-sided technique. The Nigerian



BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

hen of piebald plumage, nomad disposition and undersized muscularity is one inexpensive sacrifice for the Juju shrines in front of which mounds of chicken feathers, small bones and eggshells smell to high heaven. Chicken feathers plastered gorily on bare, pagan torsos form part of the traditional costume at certain feasts and ceremonies. The unfortunate hen in Nigeria has little expectation of a peacefully domesticated life; she lays her eggs where she may, and often, after she has brooded over them to no avail, leaves them to addle in the noonday sun. Small wonder that the market eggs were objects requiring Alphonsa's most expert diagnosis.

His method was first to shake an egg; if it made no liquid gurgle it was surely bad. Next, he squinted through the egg at the sun — hopeful if it were transparent, critical of opaqueness. Finally the selected eggs were given their last test, by water, in the larder bucket. Those which sank were applauded, those which did not were suspect. Nothing if not thorough in his classifications, Alphonsa marked the shells in pencil, a few 'good', several 'bad', and some that were still elusive, with a question mark. On the rare occasions when I invaded the cookhouse to superintend some special dish, the cracking of the eggs was a nervous business from which we stood well back, with Wilson in the offing to bear away the bad ones. Understandably we never asked for boiled eggs.

When I discovered that Alphonsa's method for separating yolks from whites was to tip the whole into the palm of his hand and let the white leak through his fingers, I tried to teach him the orthodox system in which a spoon is used. Baffled by this, he altered his tactics, puncturing the eggshell and slowly, very slowly, decanting the white — which method I could not criticize.

Weevils-in-the-flour were another cause of cookhouse palaver for I suspected Alphonsa did not strain the flour as carefully as he should have done. The original presence of the unattractive creatures was no fault of his, since weevils and weevil

BOY!

larvae had invariably settled into the bags before they reached us. Thrice-straining through muslin was the rule, but a cook in a hurry is apt to overlook a weevil or two. Admittedly one must expect such small inconveniences as part of bush living, but it is difficult to be hearty and uncaring about them. When I found myself examining every crumb of bread on my plate for evidence of weevils, which I was quite apt to imagine present even in the most blameless slice, I decided it was more sensible to strain the flour myself, and did so — collecting from every sifting a small weevil residue which I did not care to contemplate. In nuisance value, I thought, the fly-in-the-ointment was nothing compared to the weevil-in-the-flour. Or even the red-ant-in-the-larder.

The pertinacity, blind determination and imperviousness to obstacles, characteristic of the ants, provided an object lesson one could not ignore. Singly they were innocuous, very small and not in the least menacing. But in brigades, alert for the smell of sugar and meat, heedful of every nook and crevice by which to gain access, willing to commit suicide in batches for the sake of their single-minded goal, they were formidable. Against their wiles we devised a mosquito-netted larder cupboard suspended by ropes from the ceiling; we put the legs of table and fridge into tins of kerosene-tainted water and kept all food stores in tightly lidded tins. Even so the marauders plotted and contrived their way by fantastically devious routes into fridge and cupboard, there to end stickily in the jam, be imprisoned in the sugar tin or drowned in the milk jug. When I watched their toilsome strategies I marvelled at the ordered senselessness of their life scheme. Why so *many* ants and why so busy? Outdoors their pervasive activity made it impossible for us to sit casually on log or grass. Indoors there was need for constant battle against them and their brothers, the white ants or termites. These had an even less discriminating appetite and could digest any material except stone. If I disliked the weevil, I had even less love for the ant, which I thought could

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

benefit enormously by studying the sluggard instead of so absurdly setting itself up as an example of virtuous industry.

Alphonsa's two main faults were his difficulty in producing meals to schedule, and his habit of studying his Catholic catechism with such rapt attention that pots boiled over and burned dry untended. To our idea of time he paid lip service by asking for a clock in the cookhouse, but even this did not stimulate punctuality. One morning Bill broke all rules and precedents



by storming into the cookhouse, taking the frying pan from an astonished Alphonsa, and frying his own egg (luckily a good one) in a matter of seconds. To the shaken establishment he announced firmly, *'I will have my breakfast on time.'* Thereafter it was, but at what cost to Alphonsa's nerves I could only imagine.

His preoccupation with his catechism was proof, I thought, of a devoutness which I respected even when it came into conflict with his cooking. Wilson was a Primitive

Methodist, or so he informed me when first presenting himself. Yet between these two Christians there came about a violent difference of opinion of which we were informed when Pius came running to the veranda, crying, *'Massa, come quick! Boy be killing boy!'*

Bill found them in front of the cookhouse, Wilson armed with machete and Alphonsa defending himself with carving knife in one hand, carving fork in the other. The buttons were slashed from Wilson's tunic, and Alphonsa's apron was torn. There was some blood and minor gashes, and the fight had just begun. Like fighting cocks they were dancing around each other in deadly earnest, but on Bill's approach Alphonsa flung down his

BOY!

weapons and burst into tears while Wilson launched into excitable explanation in which figured a kettle of water, a pumpkin and a banana skin. The boiling kettle had been claimed by Alphonsa who had it earmarked for cooking a pumpkin. Wilson wanted it for filling the larder water-filter. The banana skin Wilson maliciously scoured over Alphonsa's newly scrubbed cookhouse floor brought the battle to a head. Alphonsa had seized his weapons and attacked. We thought Wilson must be more Primitive than Methodist at heart; he showed little repentance whereas Alphonsa, so newly Catholic, continued to weep. For some hours, in cookhouse and larder, there was no sweetness or light, and only when a snake invaded the boys' quarters that night was friendship re-established in the excitement of the kill. When we heard Wilson and Alphonsa singing their favourite song, *'My Bonny Lies Over the Ocean'*, we concluded that larder and cookhouse had made an armistice.

That houseboys are invariably dishonest is not true. That they expect perquisites and sometimes overstep the mark is often the case, but the boundary line between 'perk' and 'theft' is not always easy to define. I knew, and probably Alphonsa was aware I knew, that he charged me two shillings for fowls he had bought for one and ninepence. Leftovers, even though much too substantial to be termed 'broken victuals', automatically disappeared once they had left the table, and a characteristic of the evaporated milk we used was that it did with uncanny swiftness 'evaporate'. By the time it was cooked, a joint of meat was known to shrink, on occasions, to a suspiciously small size, and a good share of Mrs. Murphy's 'cat's chop' never reached her saucer. But the judicious extraction of a perk here and there, while not publicly approved, was tacitly understood. It would be harsh to condemn the practice as pilfering, especially since white people in the tropics are regarded by their boys as plutocrats who should find it beneath their dignity to grudge such unconsidered trifles as a handful of sugar lumps, a slice off the roast, or a piece of yam. So long

as these oddments were taken with some regard for proportion we did not protest. Unfortunately Christopher consistently overestimated his perquisites, and when a full four-gallon tin of kerosene was spirited away, his service was regretfully brought to an end. The investigation of this matter and an alarming increase in other disappearances from the larder brought Wilson into the picture. Admitting some guilt, he blamed Christopher for bullying him into it. Said Wilson, 'That black boy look at me with his big eyes and if I do not obey him my life look to be shorter.' (We were surprised to know that Wilson, whose complexion was dark enough, considered Christopher 'a black boy'.)

When Christopher went he hinted darkly that it was as well, for Wilson had threatened to poison him. Tackled on this point Wilson protested and rolled his eyes in horrified innocence. Only many months afterwards when he, too, had left us, we learned that Wilson had nearly succeeded in poisoning an 'enemy' steward in a former billet. The cherubic Wilson in a Borgia role struck us as incongruous; we should have known that surface impressions in Africa are often totally misleading.

Christopher's departure, and Wilson's later, were precipitated by a discovery that our white-uniformed, ceremony-loving boys were capable of abrupt fallings from grace and lapses of decorum — behind the scenes. 'What the eye sees not, the heart does not grieve over', is a truth which might have originated in a tropical household; it is better, perhaps, not to investigate too much, and far more peaceful for one's state of mind to accept the polished façade of smooth service within one's immediate horizon, without delving into goings-on in the back quarters. While Bill did not delve, he had a way of stumbling upon unorthodox domestic incidents. This happened one night when he rose from his cot to investigate a noise on the back veranda. Such nocturnal brushings and rustlings were commonplace — due mostly to lizards or small bush creatures, but it was not in Bill's nature to ignore the

soft padding of paws or the approach of any of Agulu's long or short-legged beasties. The noise proved nothing eventful, but Bill's attention was distracted to an outpouring of smoke from the cookhouse chimney. This led him to foray into the back quarters.

The cookhouse was locked and tightly shuttered, yet from within came a small human sound, as of gentle snoring. Sensing that all was not according to household regulations Bill knocked, and knocked again, until the door was opened by a sleep-drugged Alphonsa clad only in his loin-cloth. The air within was stifling and stale; the fire blazed merrily, casting a flickering light over the recumbent forms of Christopher and Wilson, and a pile of unwashed dinner utensils. Christopher lay on a mat in one corner. Alphonsa's mat was alongside the fire, and Wilson was blissfully stretched on the kitchen table, his coverings the ironing blanket and cloths. This hodge-podge of primitive comfort, this total disregard for cookhouse hygiene, was the occasion for 'palaver' next morning. When I asked the boys, particularly reproaching Christopher, why they preferred the cookhouse to their own quarters which were furnished with beds, the answer was, 'We be cold.' This I had to believe possible even though Bill and I needed no more than a single sheet as bed covering on those sultry nights. The boys' crimes were narrowed down to (a) leaving the dinner pots unwashed, (b) sleeping on the kitchen table, (c) using the ironing blanket as personal bedding and (d) (this particularly for Christopher's benefit) abandoning all ideas of orderliness and discipline as repeatedly stressed by me in my cookhouse inspections.

The little storm blew over quickly but the incident spurred me to greater vigilance in household affairs. For a time I even pursued a campaign against the presence of chickens in the cookhouse. The birds, opportunists to the last pinfeather, would come in to pick up scraps (which should not have been there) on the floor, and even roost on the table. Alphonsa saw nothing untoward in their presence; occasionally he flapped his

apron in desultory fashion, but only when Madam might be in the offing. When I made a firm stand about the incursions of poultry, he confounded me by tethering one leg of each wretched fowl to a large block of wood outside. After that, Pius constructed a bamboo hen-run, and we graduated to 'keeping chickens' instead of merely having them underfoot.

Pius was a fixture, the 'George' of 'let George do it', the obliging lender of a hand and doer of the oddest jobs. A bushman, he spoke very little English, and wore only a brief girdle of cloth and a raffia hat which most punctiliously he doffed to us each morning. Lacking much in the way of outward garments, he wore a striking air of virtue characteristic of all the janitors, caretakers, concierges and gardeners in my experience — nothing so unlikeable as smugness, just quiet self-reliance and a kind of dedicated apartness. Although possessing no extraordinary skills, he worked methodically and amiably. Alphonsa's eventual successor, one George, said approvingly, 'Pius is a humble man,' which summed him up exactly. He was neither young nor old and there was nothing about his manner or appearance to excite particular note. He was just there, giving, as the boys would say, 'no worry'. As happens so often with the salt of the earth, he came to be so taken for granted that we accepted him as part of the garden landscape.

Every morning he could be seen tending the vegetable patch which occupied a large corner of the grounds. Against roving sheep and fowls Pius had fenced off this portion with overlapping palm mats which gave a unique, grass-skirted effect to the plot. Within, during the rainy season, rows of carrots, beets, spinach, tomato plants, dwarf beans and cucumbers thrived or succumbed to the hazards of ants and other insects. Carrots and beets presented luxuriant tops but little else; the spinach flourished until we wearied of it; the tomatoes grew into dense bushes and bore lavishly no matter how diligently we pinched out the offshoots; the dwarf beans climbed six feet and more; the cucumber bed sprawled, gaining ground daily.

Pius's own idea, the 'one-man-bean', dominated the scene, towering even above the outsize 'dwarf', and bearing pods twelve to eighteen inches long, each in truth containing enough beans for a one-man portion.

Ours was a garden with no half-way results. Things either grew almost beyond control, or died in their early stages. One lot of parsley threatened to suffocate the whole patch; another barrenly did not come up at all. Pius watched every healthy upshoot proudly and brooded over each blighted leaf. Before the sun rose high he covered all the beds with a raffia ceiling and in the evening watered diligently. When birds threatened the tomatoes we suggested, as best we could, the erection of a scarecrow and were greatly impressed by the effigy Pius made. This was no genial, lopsided, old-clothes sentinel, but a figure with Juju malevolence made of tightly girded straw, stiffly erect, with one arm upraised. On its head it wore a cracked earthenware casserole, salvaged from the cookhouse. Alongside was a forked twig intricately knotted with *tie-tie*, which we recognized as a Juju symbol of warning against thieves. The birds quite properly kept away from this formidable set-up which made even me a trifle nervous when I walked around the patch.

Elsewhere at intervals around the verge of our lawn we planted bushes and flower seeds, some optimistically English in character. The bushes of Canna Lilies and Elephants' Ears (large green leaves flecked with scarlet) were appropriate and lusty; the English seeds produced attenuated blooms, reproachfully anaemic and pitifully short-lived. Only zinnias and chrysanthemums flourished, the first spreading boldly and degenerating from multi-coloured to purple as they re-seeded, the second proving healthy but small, like asters. Snapdragons grew but in miniature, like dolls'



BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

antirrhinums; a few convolvulus seeds scattered at random developed into vines which climbed the Ivory Tower's full height and trailed across the parapet. A bed of rose bushes planted before we came, probably by some nostalgic-minded Englishman, made a brief, ragged display from time to time. Chewed by insects, scorched by hot noons, swamped in flooding rains, they maintained a tenacious, stunted life. Like white people in the tropics who have known many tours they wore the same draggled albeit doughty countenance.

Pius never commented on our sowing English seeds so optimistically; he made cone-shaped raffia tents to protect the weaklings. Nor did he show surprise when we decided to convert a rough patch of ground alongside the driveway, into a croquet court, but levelled it neatly and helped install the home-made wickets. The villagers stopping *en route* from market gazed up the driveway at this strange activity and gossiped with each other as to the nature of the innovation. (When they saw us actually playing croquet they marvelled even more. Our friends, the Irish Fathers from the uphill Mission, played croquet with an irrepressible gusto and verve which surprised even us until we knew the Fathers better.)

Pius, being 'a humble man', did not complain when Alphonsa engineered him into the job of stoker for the cookhouse fire. He fitted in dutifully with Wilson's laundering operations, being given the heavier garments to scrub, and the hauling of water from the rain tanks. We suspected that in any back-quarters crises about which the boys did not wish us to know, Pius was called in to help. If a wayward hen flew away into the trees it was Pius who coaxed it back — Pius, too, who dispatched the luckless birds for the cooking pot. When we were away, Pius was left in charge of the house and Mrs. Murphy whose 'chop' he was bidden to provide at regular intervals. On the first occasion, mindful of Mrs. Murphy's nourishment and remembering other occasions when 'cat's chop' had been diverted into

BOY!

other channels, Bill told Pius, 'You feed cat plenty. If she be hungry when we come back, she will tell us.' We left Pius looking with mystified respect at the cat, as if fearful she might start a conversation with him on the instant. On our return we found her licking her whiskers in front of a row of saucers. Pius had taken no chances!

In one respect Pius had a unique ability; he could pick up and handle scorpions without fear of being stung. Normally no one in his right senses would touch a scorpion, knowing the excruciating pain of the sting and the certainty of being attacked on the moment of contact. Yet Pius had this strange knack. I often saw him remove a scorpion from beneath an earthenware seed pot, which damp, cool cover the creatures enjoyed. He would examine the vicious little crab-like shape, turning it this way and that, before putting it down elsewhere. He never raised the hue and cry appropriate to the finding of a scorpion, nor did he ever kill one. Between Pius and the scorpion tribe there seemed to be some amicable truce and we often wondered how this had been arranged.

Alphonsa's encounter with a scorpion happened one dinner time, between the soup and the roast chicken. When Wilson came to explain the long hiatus which resulted, we repaired to the cookhouse, to find Christopher administering first aid, slashing the wounded foot in several places above the sting and bearing on the scene a bucket of potassium permanganate solution into which the moaning Alphonsa placed the injured member. Meantime Pius hopped about, for once noisy and excited, holding a lantern, screwing up his face in anguished compassion and murmuring, '*Ndo . . . ndo . . .*' which means 'Sorry . . . sorry'. On sight of us Alphonsa moaned more



BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

loudly, and Wilson brought the dead scorpion for our inspection. The sight of it and its poison-barbed tail made Alphonsa cover his face with his hands; he was clearly in great pain. In accordance with my Handbook's instructions I brought ammonia water to the patient who quaffed it gratefully and, as one who takes a magic philtre, ceased his groans. His audience anxiously watched him take an aspirin, and Pius tentatively, hopefully, put out his hand for one, but Pius was given to understand that it was 'medicine to take away pain' and 'no pain, no aspirin'. Next day Alphonsa limped a little but he had recovered sufficiently to cook breakfast. Excusing himself from going to market he sent word to me via Wilson that he 'felt delicate'. I was not surprised to hear it. The scorpion-touch is a shock to any system, and Alphonsa's could at no time be termed rugged.

Okeke, the Mail Runner, was attached to Bill's office. Although he had no connection with the household staff, on Mondays his duties included the collection of a box of 'cold stores' from the wayside police-hut, seven miles away, where the long-distance lorry dropped it. As a Runner Okeke would not have been much use, but he had a bicycle which to some extent accelerated his naturally slow progress. Early every morning he would leave the office, charged with a few messages and instructions to bring back letters from the post office; on Mondays he was reminded of the cold stores. Usually his tardy return was explained by the post office's phenomenal slowness in disgorging mail, but there were other reasons, mainly social, which delayed him. One was his natural inclination to stop along the roadside to quaff *tomba* (palm wine) with his friends in the market place. Another was the variable temperament of his long-suffering bicycle which after several collisions with cows, trees and other features of the landscape, was apt to break down anywhere and often. This was hard on the cold stores packed in ice and sawdust which Okeke carried on the back of his bicycle — and even when the messenger was

BOY!

swiftest, the ice barely lasted until his return. Whether delayed socially or from faulty working of his bicycle, Okeke was hours late in bringing my first box of cold stores. The ice was gone, and liquefying butter leaked into wet sawdust. When Christopher returned from upbraiding Okeke we set out to salvage what we could from the depressing mess, noting that the fish smelled 'high', and the meat was distinctly *passé*. Viewing this waste, I told Christopher, 'We can save the butter — we'll strain it.'

At this point Bill appeared in the remarkable way of husbands in a culinary crisis which cannot profit by their participation. 'Ugh!' he said. 'Throw the whole lot away. It smells awful, and you needn't think the sawdust is hygienic either.'

But womanlike, for women will often perversely insist on rescuing the unrescuable out of any major or minor disaster, I ordered the butter to be strained and boiled as well — but although it eventually hardened again in the fridge, the result was not attractive, nor was its taste enhanced because Alphonsa, in the excitement of the moment, boiled it in a pan previously used for onions. Bill scorned it despite my pointing out how illogical this squeamishness was; he'd been known to accept far more doubtful, less sanitary foods at village feasts. 'But not *butter*,' Bill said, 'only goat.' Since we seemed to be in danger of elaborating on the Mad Hatter's Tea Party, I protested no more. By degrees we disguised the unlovely stuff in other cooking which Bill consumed innocently and without comment.

Hyacinth, christened, I suppose, when a flowerlike infant who could not be imagined as growing into a six-foot, powerful-



BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

voiced bushman, was the night watchman or 'watch-night' who patrolled the office and toolshed areas from dusk till daybreak. Clad like Pius in little save an air of militant virtue, he carried a long, razor-sharp spear with which he came close to ramming Bill one night when Bill forgetfully made no warning sound in crossing to the office for some papers. Although Hyacinth's presence was reassuring, we often wished he would go about his duty more silently. At intervals during the darkness he



strode about singing and making loud noises of hallelujah, probably on the principle that the advertisement of his stalwart presence would naturally deter any thief's approach. However, there were times when exhausted by his energetic shadow-spear, he slept. Though formidable in action, it is doubtful whether he could have been awakened by anything, from the profound state of unconsciousness in which the bush African takes his rest. At any rate no thief ever did rifle the stores, and we were bound to look on the 'watch night' as an effective, if sometimes earsplitting, protector of the peace.

The exit of Christopher and Wilson was followed by Alphonsa's departure, owing to the sad deterioration of his cooking which had grown steadily more absent-minded and unpunctual in ratio to the absorbing increase in his piety. His dishes were burned or tasted so odd that we suspected him of confusing salt and sugar canisters; his *soufflés* were dolefully flat; his egg diagnoses sadly careless. We saw that he was too single-minded to be both cook and Catholic. He left us calmly, taking as his last perk a cookbook full of bright pictures which absent-mindedly or more possibly with human vulnerability to temptation, he packed along with his catechism. He was promptly supplanted by an ex-serviceman,

BOY!

George, wise in years and experience, with a fair English vocabulary and a sheaf of references, including one glowing testimonial from an officers' mess in Burma. This told us that while within sight of the Japanese lines, George had provided excellent emergency meals, and had distinguished himself by managing cooking fires which sent forth no betraying smoke. Remembering the acrid haze which had been Alphonsa's occupational atmosphere, I was much impressed.

George, like Pius, became a pillar of the household, revealing unexpected talents for chicken-in-aspic and other exotic dishes the names of which George loved to roll off when we were considering what-for-dinner. He was a cookbook devotee and took an artist's pleasure in attractive descriptions of concoctions such as 'Potato Angel', 'French Puffs', 'Spatchcock', 'Meringue Jumbles' and 'Golden Glory Cake'. He also knew the meaning of 'pot luck', diffidently suggesting it when unexpected guests arrived too late for him to make extra preparations. Military in appearance, for he wore his Army boots and khaki uniform most of the time, his authority in the back quarters was supreme and no one dared cheat him in marketing. Behind steel-rimmed spectacles (an Army acquisition) his eyes were quizzical, shrewd and kindly; his face was mobile in expression and maturely wise. We knew he dyed his hair with a bottle of black liquid he kept on the cookhouse window ledge, but no one could guess or would dare to ask his age. For his whole term with us he showed all the advantages of a faithful retainer, and few of the drawbacks. True, he had an extra vocabulary of lurid swearwords, but it is doubtful if he understood their meanings, for he uttered them often and with fervour even in my presence. This was a departure from etiquette but I hesitated to make belated protest and explanation, knowing that poor George would suffer shameful loss of face if he realized the purport of his casual exclamations. So George continued to swear shockingly and amiably, and I to appreciate his many virtues.

The problem of replacing Steward and Small Boy was solved by the arrival of Elias and Jacob. Elias was a beanpole of a boy, about eighteen, with a fund of natural common sense and sensibility, and a pleasant disposition enhanced by a smile and expression of such loving-kindness that we took to him instantly. Though lacking Christopher's imposing butler presence, he was more adaptable and far less obtrusive. And Elias's strict honesty was beyond question, a phenomenon in a land where the elastic 'perk' is the accepted feature. Once he and George had made fast friends and both settled into the household routine, we knew no more palaver or upset. The tenor of our domestic way continued happily, without incident. Except, that is, for the spasmodic arrivals and departures of Small Boys of whom Jacob was the first.

Jacob came, a small boy indeed, clad in a red rayon shirt, his whole frame palpitating with the importance of his first job. Although he had acquired a smattering of white ways from the Mission school he knew nothing of white households, and followed anxiously in Elias's steps trying to understand the weird novelty of our requirements and the strange confusion of our furniture and dishes. It must have been a strain on Jacob who had been recommended by one of the Irish Fathers as 'teachable', and probably we expected too much of him. I would not have liked to contemplate my success in fitting into the routine of the bush mud hut which was Jacob's home, and we should not have expected him to adapt himself overnight to our ways. Poor little Jacob; setting the table made him frown as over a Chinese puzzle; his dishwashing was a series of ineffectual dabs because he feared the fragility of our china; he could not help standing and staring at us, particularly when we played cards in the evening. What were those spotted pieces of paper, and why should Massa and Madam sit in front of them for an hour or more saying, 'Hah!' and 'Got you!' and 'My King beats your Queen!' in such a fierce, fantastic way?

Never having seen a cake before, he blithely set a laden tray atop one of George's 'Golden Glory' triumphs fresh from the oven, flattening it to a crumbling ruin and rousing George to new heights of lurid invective. Knowing no 'civilized' shyness he went to the lavatory bush fashion when and wherever the need overtook him, despite Elias's frantic signalling that he should not so scandalize Madam's lawn view. Doubtless Jacob in time would have learned our ways, but when George and Elias petitioned his departure, in the interests of all we let him go with a reference, at least to his 'willingness', which quality Jacob had in plenty. Three other Small Boys came and went. Thereafter George and Elias, alone, with the faithful Pius to lend a hand, proved capable with the stimulus of a Small Boy's wages divided among them. Thus after three months of trial and error we composed our staff.

It was natural that we soon came to think of them as far more than Boys; they were personalities, in a sense part of the family, and we recognized and tried to make allowances for temperament, foibles and ways sometimes difficult to understand — just as they did for us. I doubt whether there is any such servant as the silent, faultless African automaton sometimes depicted in travel books. Such beings would appear hardly human, or even desirable. The prevailing notion that life in the tropics is a simple, luxurious business, in which a procession of genii waits upon your every whim, is far from exact. It is the way of the white man to attempt to make his home his castle in strange, torrid lands where, admittedly, human labour can be hired very cheaply. But since the labour *is* human, and human nature unpredictable, the white man must take on (if he has any conscience or fellow-feeling) a small burden of mixed personalities. He can hardly prevent himself from becoming involved in his servants' problems and woes, for the boys will look upon him with touching dependence as their father and mother, shepherd and teacher, a being who as lord of the mansion is all powerful to ease their hurts and sort out

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

their family confusions. In all fairness, it would be absurd to imagine that you could buy a boy's loyalty and diligence — his ability to cook and housekeep, wash clothes or perform a hundred and one personal services without assuming as well a small or great responsibility for his personal life and such inevitable Old Nick as the boy has in him.

CHAPTER IV

JUJU

I ENCOUNTERED Juju for the first time one hot, still afternoon when not a breath of wind rustled the palms or stirred the heavy-hanging banana leaves. We were walking down towards the lake, passing groups of village women returning from market with headloads of yam and cassava, their bare feet making swirls of reddish dust along the sandy path. Too hot for conversation, with our shirts sticking wetly to our backs, we blamed the lake's deceptively cool invitation for luring us away from our siesta cots out into the baking sunlight which abbreviated our slow-moving shadows and quenched the vivacity with which we had set out. Having broken the silence to recite to Bill (the originator of this torrid lakeside jaunt) the genteel Victorian maxim:

Horses may sweat; gentlemen may perspire,
But, my dear, ladies only *glow*,

I was about to add suitable comment when we saw the village women dropping their burdens in agitation to disappear into the roadside bush.

Alone on the path, we watched an apparition approaching — a Juju in full ceremonial attire, strolling on his solitary way and fanning himself as he walked. His face was hidden by a grimacing wooden mask topped with horns, the rest of him by an enveloping scarlet suit which flapped in fringes beyond his finger-tips and under his feet. The sunlight flashed on the cracked mirror he wore as a locket; the cowrie shells of his belt and anklets rustled as he saluted us by raising one dignified mitten in our direction. To this I confusedly murmured, 'Good afternoon', while Bill, less bemused, spoke an Ibo greeting.

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

The creature bowed and continued on his way. Some minutes later, when he was lost to view, the women came out of their hiding places giggling like excited children playing a boggy-man game.

As we neared the lake we skirted one part of the verge known to be 'bad bush'¹ — a flat marshy place where the villagers, despite the edicts of missions and Government, were known to throw the corpses of those who died of leprosy, smallpox, elephantiasis and other diseases considered as 'abomination'. It was bad bush certainly, in odour and Juju portent, shunned by the community as territory haunted by the unhappy spirits of the outcasts. Even the lake was Juju — the belief being that in the course of each year at least one human sacrifice was exacted by the gods. It was an easy-going superstition for no annual sacrifice was deliberately made; accidents of drowning were always accounted for as the god's seizing of his just due. The god, we imagined, might be in the shape of a crocodile, a favourite guise for waterside Jujus. Although we had never seen any large saurians in the lake, we knew them to be there. The villagers frequently spoke of crocodiles and we had positive proof when Bill caught one, fortunately no more than

¹ ARCHAIC CUSTOMS IN IJAW AREA. While some centres of this country are scrapping bad and obsolete customs there are certain out of the way places . . . that are steeped in incredible habits. A good instance of this is what happens in Ijaw villages around the Niger, concerning the disposal of the dead and, it is believed, of the living too.

According to a correspondent in the above area, foul and swollen corpses in the most advanced stages of decomposition would be seen floating down the river. The most pathetic case was of small babies, obviously newly born, who it is alleged, might have been twin babies.

It is gathered that while some of the villages throw their dead into the river as a matter of routine burial, the more constrained ones do so in three cases: of people who died of bad diseases like leprosy, smallpox, ulcers and diseases of swollen body, etc.; of people suspected of witchcraft during their lifetime; and worst of all, of innocent twin babies in whose cases the custom demands the death of one in each pair.

The correspondent says: 'While I concede that some of these floating corpses might belong to persons who died by drowning, I reckon that such cases must definitely be in the negligible minority, when it is remembered that people in the area under discussion, whose lives are bound up with the river, are excellent swimmers . . .' — From an article in the *Nigerian Spokesman*.

JUJU

two feet long, in his fishing net. Elias, who was with him, showed marked resistance to the idea of bringing it home. Although a Catholic, he was palpably nervous lest there be Juju repercussions, so Bill returned the miniature croc to the lake and the green-scummed backwaters of crocodile existence.

In the light of day when swallows and wavebirds wheeled and darted over the shining waters, and dragonflies skimmed the sedges, Juju associations were far from our minds. It was at dusk that the lake, its multicoloured sunset reflections fading, grew dark, secretive and alien to us. When night fell and no moon shone, the down-dropping hillside and convoluted waterway were blotted out in musky darkness beyond the range of our veranda lamplight. Then it was that we noticed the eerie, slow-moving crimson lights which wavered like balls of glowing and fading fire over the lake. Unlike the phosphorescent jack-o'-lantern or will-o'-the-wisp, the individual lights were large, seeming to give off a glitter of sparks, and we never tired of watching the phenomena bloom into being, move slowly in arcs and die away. Sometimes we watched in vain; the darkness remained implacable. On other nights the lake and bush country around it gave off clusters of these silent glowings which rose now here, now there, remaining constant for minutes on end, yet shedding no reflection or illumination. Their appearance *may* have scientific explanation in puffs of marshy vapour rising in spontaneous combustion — but though reason dictated this answer, I confess to a pricking of the skin, an uncomfortable sensation which would not have allowed me to go down to the lake in a mood of rational curiosity. As for the boys, nothing would have persuaded them to leave the windows of their sleeping quarters unshuttered, or to believe that the 'balls of fire' were not roving Juju spirits.

Questioned, the villagers spoke of cattle lost on 'fire' nights, found next day with singed hides. They believed that the travelling lights were Juju priests in supernatural form, taking part in rites which made them invisible,

clothed in fire, or spirits rising in flame from the crude pallets of the outcast dead. Always, they argued, the lights appeared only over sacrosanct Juju country of which the gods were in possession. Enterprising desperadoes were known to capitalize on the people's fear, by lying in roadside ambush with covered cauldrons of red-glowing embers. When these 'phantoms' suddenly revealed themselves in the darkness the lonely trekkers scurried away in terror, leaving their burdens behind.

One ravine in particular, an uninhabited canyon six miles from Agulu, was the scene of myriad lights which we watched from the camp hut perched near the brink. Here we spent some days each month while on trek through Bill's erosion territories, and here the boys swore that spirits dwelt in the limestone depths into which no villager ventured at night. The gully was a giant ragged split in the landscape; to reach its bottom one descended by a crumbling narrow path, at times no more than a precarious foothold in the steep, unsafe walls. In the hollow far below a chalky spring bubbled. To this the villagers made their way, climbing like mountain goats down the canyon face to collect the precious water in gourds which they miraculously balanced on their heads during the return journey. The purple chalk of the spring basin, having Juju significance, was collected by the women for offerings at their local shrines. All day long the difficult descent and ascent was made. (And even later, when Bill had contrived a fenced pathway of safe gradient and easy access, many continued to use their old precipitous trail, hand over hand, grunting with the effort, oblivious to the easier way.)

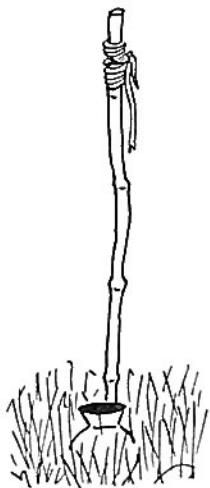
The ravine's strataed walls, white, sepia and mauve, were patched with tenacious bush growth inhabited only by monkeys; a few palm trees leaned into space at dizzy angles around the lichened ruins of abandoned avalanched bush huts. Accessible by another devious trail, a clump of forest land, intact amid the desolation of bare rock, was known as 'Juju bush', a playground for monkeys, and a focal point for wheeling,

searching, opportunist kites and vultures alert for the smell of death. The ravine, while spectacular in ruinous contours of coloured shale and crumbling red earth, was not a friendly place even in sunlight; at night it was wholly dark, a silent black abyss in which no life stirred. In that barren wasteland the camp hut made a small oasis of light and humanity beyond which the boys did not care to stray. All night they kept a sizable bush fire blazing, as is the way of travellers in hostile country, and they did not join us in gazing out at the dim sparks which mushroomed into hanging or drifting spheres of crimson in the depths of the canyon. One night we counted more than a hundred glowings at one time; then they quenched as suddenly as if an unseen hand had flicked out the entire array. No human agency caused them, for they rose beyond the reach of any path. More than once Bill suggested we go down into the canyon to find the cause of the lights, but no boy would follow him, nor did I choose to go. In retrospect this seems a cowardly and superstitious attitude; at the time it was the most prudent common sense. Although we saw the lights frequently their fascination never failed to bring us to the edge of the darkness, staring out and marvelling at the quixotic blossoms of smouldering brilliance over lonely stretches of sunken, abandoned country.

Juju bushes were everywhere, patches of dedicated forest where the villagers worshipped at their shrines, and on feast days danced and ate roast goat in a spirit of noisy carnival. Often Bill was perplexed by the presence of a sacred 'bush' in the path of a proposed roadway or anti-erosion device. Several times, even after a palaver had settled the boundary lines with due avoidance of bush trespass, the marking stakes were found to have been privily moved further away by Juju priests anxious to make sure there could be no hint of desecration. The priests were bushmen who tended the shrines and were believed to have means of direct communication with the gods who reigned over the evil-smelling, crude altars of the market places and

forest depths. Their badge of office was a white chalk-drawn monocle signifying their close association with the Evil Eye. As a rule they were older men who had no love for 'Government' or the interferences of white people.

One afternoon, with the interpreter, we descended the path of the big ravine to visit the Juju bush. There in the depths of a thicket before a shrine piled with small bones and mounds of



chicken feathers, we saw the priest. With him was a villager holding a kid over his shoulder. Priest and supplicant parleyed in hushed voices. Having no stomach for witnessing sacrifices, I signalled to Bill that I did not wish to stay, but the interpreter murmured, 'They will not kill the animal — not today.'

So cavesdropping, we watched the ritual. The participants followed it with such concentrated attention that even had we spoken above a whisper our presence would not have been detected. The supplicant — 'a man of many worries' our guide told us — had come to ask the gods to smile more kindly on his affairs, which had been going badly. Fearful lest he had displeased the god he offered the kid in atonement. Having listened to his petitioner's singsong chant of woe, the priest held up his hand for silence and addressed an upright piece of mouldering rust-stained wood in front of the shrine. In an oration both wheedling and flattering the priest delivered the first part of the plaint to the spirit. Kneeling, the petitioner held the kid before the Juju stick while the priest droned on. The little animal was a token offering of good faith at this time, but later when it had grown and itself borne kids, it was pledged to become a blood sacrifice in thanks for benefits received. Ceremoniously the priest broke two kola nuts and

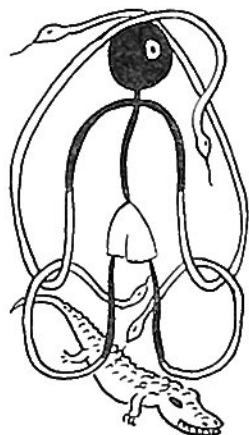
scattered part over the shrine, sharing the remainder with the man. Then they parted company, the petitioner taking the pledged kid once more on his shoulder and starting back along the secret narrow path out of the bush, while the vultures wheeled in vain, cheated of the food of the gods.

Despite the difficult descent, the daytime traffic to and from this place was, we noticed, fairly constant; our guide assured us it included many orthodox members of Catholic and Protestant missions. For himself, he was a Protestant, oh yes — but he came here himself occasionally. Why? 'It is our custom,' he informed us. Those words sum up the difficulties of white religious workers in Africa. 'It is our custom' is an unshakable statement, summing up decades of primitive instincts and ways of living established long before the white man set up his missions and secretariats. 'It's wrong; it's false; it's a force against order, kindness and Christian precepts!' cries the white voice in the wilderness. To this the reply, sometimes hidden beneath a deceptively submissive acquiescence, is, 'It Is Our Custom.'

Juju is an integral part of bush life, its outward signs being the crude, wayside shrines, the knotted *tie-tie* symbols (of warning against thieves) in the cassava and yam plots — and the frescoed walls around the big Juju houses where the idols sit in perpetual malevolent twilight and a stench of pungent primitive earthiness. Outsiders are not welcome within the Juju houses, but when we offered to cross one priest's palm with silver, we found him obliging, showing his sharply filed black teeth in a travesty of a smile, and doffing the greasy hat which was almost his only clothing.

The walls of the enclosure were decorated with hunting scenes — crocodiles, sacred fish, spears and shields, elephants and warriors in bold lines of black, yellow and crimson. Although the chalk drawings were flat and without perspective they showed a strong sense of colour and the liveliness of a child's imagination. (Staring 'Evil Eyes' were a favourite

motif, akin to that of modern surrealistic art.) The gateway door was elaborately carved with the same designs; as the priest opened it we were joined by an elder of the village who, as proof of wealth and social standing, wore a pair of gumboots with his calico toga. Thus escorted we crossed the inner courtyard of hard-baked mud to the Juju house from the roof of which were suspended rows of grinning animal skulls. Leaving the dazzle of sunlight we entered a semi-darkness which reeked



of damp, unsavoury earth and age. The bleached whiteness of bones and tusks gleamed from the ceiling and grotesquely patterned the walls. If buildings do absorb and give forth again, as well they might, the emotions of their occupants—this Juju house had indeed more than the simple bad odour of an aged, unventilated habitation. It smelled of fear and superstition, of blood-lust and cruelty. So oppressive was the fetid darkness of this first chamber that I could scarcely pay attention to our guide's replies to Bill's questions. Yes, his father, still alive, had been a great

head-hunter in times past, before the English came. In those days his tribe was much feared. From warring expeditions they brought back trophies with which to adorn the stakes at the four corners of the Juju compound walls. The animal bones and skulls we saw were replacements for the human relics frowned upon by the first missions, forbidden by 'Government', and accordingly buried.

The second, smaller, innermost room smelled even more evil than the first, and was so dark that only when our eyes were accustomed to the gloom did we make out seven wooden Juju images, seated in a semi-circle on carven stools. The two central largest figures were rough-hewn and featureless with

age; they wore necklaces of ivory and feathers and their 'thrones' were painted red. A deep indentation, about two feet square, hollowed the floor in front of them, rust-stained and greasy like the shallow groove which ran from it, bordering the entire room. Bill pointed to this questioningly, although the explanation seemed only too clear. Our guide said conversationally, 'In 1912 the English said my tribe should hunt heads no more.' When we signified that this was a wise and humane edict he showed neither assent nor dissent, but stated simply, 'The English did not like it. So 1912 was the end of the season.'

'The end of the *season* . . .' echoed Bill, intrigued by this strange idiom, while I, chafing to leave the sinister gods and their floor's rusty basin, led the way to the outer air.

Again in the courtyard we saw other smaller shrines, some for men, some for women and others communal. But one differed from all the rest, for atop a pole sticking out of the rubble of eggshell and debris dangled a Toby jug of expensive lustre and rubicund jovial shape. 'That?' I pointed, asking the guide, who pursed his lips and said proudly, 'That be Juju.'

We left it undisputed, this strange Dickensian Juju, lording it over chicken feathers and earthen pots of 'offering' wine. At another shrine a family group sat picnic fashion, eating handfuls of a greasy stew from a pot in their midst. As they ate, they flung occasional gobbets of food at the shrine and our guide told us they were 'taking chop with Juju'. In thanks for good fortune, they were showing positive gratitude by sharing their meal with the god. When we approached, a woman arose, all smiles, extending a fistful of mashed fish and oil towards me while yellow juice ran down her outstretched arm. The priest was not slow to act as proxy; even while I hesitated for a face-saving reply he was promptly accepting the food and downing it greedily.

From this domestic scene, which seemed to have so little connection with the hoary gods in the Stygian inner chamber,

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

we returned through the gateway to the busy market scene beyond. The priest rubbed his stomach and held out his hand in anticipation of further reward; the guide showed interest in money as well. Paying both, we shook off the last clinging coldness and gloom engendered by the Juju house. Sunlight and shadow chequered the women's trays of green peppers. The smells were of food and humanity; the sound of speech and laughter was reassuring. Were these irrepressibly alive people the same who worshipped the stiff wooden idols, so devoid of wit and humanness? How much was religion, and how much bogey-man?

The character of the Juju gods is far from lovable. Vengeful and quick to take umbrage, they are considered responsible for thunderstorms and hurricanes, landslides, sudden deaths, crop failures and in fact every possible calamity that disturbs the serenity of living. Unless constantly propitiated with sacrifices they are apt to grow fretful and mischievous. The villagers look on them as temperamental dictators without pity or humility, as all-powerful forces inspiring only awe and fear. 'The Juju will get you if you don't watch out!' is the threat that lies behind every shrine offering and makes Juju houses citadels of fear.



In the courthouse at Agulu, a Juju image holding a machete in one fist and a carved head in the other, stood by the witness box. Five feet high, hewn from a single log, the idol had a haughty bearing and a tribal-scarred countenance set in a mould of scorn compounded with bad temper. Here the District Officer administered justice with calmness, fairness and method under the very eyes of this symbol of diehard paganism.

Christian witnesses were sworn in with the Bible; pagan witnesses put their hands on the Juju's carved head. The District Officer assured us he could depend on the reliability of a pagan's

JUJU

Juju oath. But it is possible that its place in a court presided over by a white man had robbed the image of some of its more fearful significance. Once we noticed a tattered cap (belonging to the local carpenter) slung on its head, hat-rack fashion, which heresy we thought must make the old god wince and cause him to recollect the good old cannibal days when Baptist carpenters were unheard of.

That Juju can be frolicsome we saw when we attended a village 'play'. ('A Play?' I queried. 'No, just play,' said Bill.) We made our way across to the open space in front of the courthouse, past rows of massed feast-day faces, to places of honour which were our own deck-chairs borrowed beforehand. The courthouse chairs had been brought outside for chiefs and elders; the rest squatted in a circle, vying for the shade cast by the roadside mango trees. Normally at siesta time the whole village would have been taking its sleep with wholehearted abandonment to the established custom of repose during the shadowless middle-day hours. Now all were awake and astir for the ceremonial 'play', the dancing and the feast of roast goat and palm wine which would follow.

The Big Juju's entrance caused a stir and a murmur through the ranks. Fully eight feet high, clad in a weighty suit of raffia surmounted by a grinning baboon's mask, it came strutting into the clearing striking fearful attitudes. Beating its chest and posturing with gorilla mimicry it came towards us. There was a ripple of laughter from the crowd — a sound less of mirth than excitement underlaid with fear. With some satisfaction I observed that Hollywood even in its most epic Darkest Africa scene could not have improved on this monumental



BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

witch-doctor style masquerade. The creature was so uncommonly hideous, so horrific as to snarling mouth and staring painted eyes that the piccans, taking fright, tumbled over each other in their concerted dartings for cover. Accompanied by three disciples who pranced alongside chanting falsetto (for spirits' voices are supposed shrill) and blowing on reed whistles, the effigy came to a halt in front of us and bowed.

I was about to bow in return but Bill in his wisdom produced a shilling instead. Big Juju, with a curiously human noise of approval, reached it one jump ahead of his retinue, a feat of unique agility considering the weight of costume and mask he carried. Recovering himself the Big Juju made a final threatening display, bowed to us once more and disappeared with his trio behind the courthouse where the palm wine calabashes waited in readiness for the thirsts of Jujus and townsfolk.

Then came other masqueraders, smaller but no less fearsome, displaying top-heavy hybrid masks with tusks, horns, Evil Eyes, chalk-white faces and grotesque mouths. Some had paint-smearred torsos stuck with chicken feathers, others coverall garments of striped stuffs which flapped into mittens on hands and feet. Cowrie-shell leg bracelets, raffia garlands and stiff straw skirts, mirror lockets and bangles rustled and tinkled as they struck haughty or clownish attitudes. Some masks were topped by totems with caricatures of snake, crocodile, elephant and leopard in bas-relief. All were surrounded by drumming, whistling, jiggling attendants, one of whom fanned the Juju through a vent just below his mask when the all too human African within signalled that the atmosphere inside his costume was stifling beyond the bearing of man or spirit.

The other dancers, all men, stamped and shimmied endlessly while the orchestras blew and banged out a tireless, faultless syncopation on log drums, iron cymbals and wooden flutes. Their whirling black bodies glistened with perspiration

JUJU

which trickled unheeded down their rapt faces. Dust stirred by pounding feet hazed the air, sandflies bit and the orchestra's rhythms took on a louder staccato tempo, a minor-keyed, pulsating spate of raw jazz which assaulted the eardrums and intensified the afternoon's blanketing heat. Even the children joined in the stamping and shimmying, following in the wake of their elders with infantile but exact traditional gestures, while the onlookers threw coins into the arena of the exuberant entertainment.

Mopping our faces, we strove to maintain smiling concentration despite the soporific sameness of the drumbeats, the dust grits between our teeth, the trickling perspiration down our backs and the hypnotic, repetitive weavings and stampings of the rhythm-intoxicated dancers. Hours later, since the celebration showed no sign of wearying, we came away. That night I dreamed of the Big Juju's red-rimmed eyes, and hybrid heads, part man, crocodile and tiger, and woke uneasily past midnight, to hear the tomtoms still sounding.

The Night Juju dancers are a different order of beings whose antics require no masquerade trappings and whose feats of athletic stamina require years of rigorous training. One night, while staying at the camp overlooking the big canyon, we were invited to watch the Night Jujus whom the local village had bidden to dance in honour of a feast. The scene behind our resthouse was like Macbeth's blasted heath, lit fitfully by moonlight. The Night Jujus, like the Witches, numbered three. Musicians, the usual ragged crew in greasy loin-cloths and skirt wraps, began the entertainment with shrill noises from their reed pipes and into this preliminary tuning up the drums felt their way with monotonous but exact emphasis. Music it was not, for there was no melody, but the rhythm, as always, was



BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

startling, perfectly co-ordinated and patterned with weavings and interweavings of double and treble beats, precise pauses and disciplined teamwork.

Two of the three dancers, stalwart men in short raffia skirts and shell anklets, carried hollow gourds which they slapped resoundingly at intervals; the third, their leader, brandished a tall spear with jangling sidepieces which clanged eerily when powerfully thrust into the ground. The dances were feats of strength and muscular control, a frenzy of movement performed with such fanatical precision that the three men might have been one. The Night Jujus danced with set frowning faces, every fibre of their powerful bodies working towards the perfection of traditional mimings and posturings: the dramatic impersonating of the struttings and dartings of birds, the stealthy chase of hunters, the fierce pride of warriors.

The occasion was for men only. Women and children, forbidden even to glimpse the Night Jujus, stayed in their huts behind doors and windows tightly shuttered. The scene was as it might have been long before Africa was known to the white race; here there was no vestige of government or mission influence. This was the dark, primitive Black Man's country, beyond range of our total comprehension, with a gulf as deep and wide as the dark canyon between the old and the new — lit only by flickerings of brief understanding, like the pale glimmerings of this bush moonlight. I felt, as I had not at the earlier daytime 'play', that we were intruders. As visitors we watched what we could not hope to understand, and no power on earth could make us wholly acceptable. For the hundredth time I wondered, 'What do they make of us who live in a way so unlike their own, thinking in a different fashion and having no true home among them?' And once more I found no answer.

As a finale the dancers made their way around the circle to collect the *dashes* due them. Singly they went up to the on-lookers, pausing before any likely faces and dancing *at* them until

JUJU

the expected coin was produced. When the leader approached us he put on an especially threatening display — to honour rather than alarm us, we imagined — thrusting his clanging spear a few inches from our feet and contorting his face into bloodcurdling expressions as he danced. Stimulated by our largess to the dancers the musicians crowded about us, putting heart and soul into deafening cacophony. We struggled to maintain politely interested expressions and produced our coins quickly, not reckoning on a second, even more violent, serenading which left us unable to hear anything for some time afterwards. The musicians exhausted, palm wine was borne on the scene. Bill's share came in a well-handled cow's horn and he drank it with the resolute but slightly strained expression natural to him when sampling village roast goat or ceremonially tasting the social bitter kola nut.

It was only by accident that we learned of the snake worshippers in our neighbourhood. On the roadway not far from Agulu our lorry ran over a python in the path of the vehicle. Elias and Bill with his rifle jumped out to dispatch the injured reptile when two bushmen appeared out of the woods, gesticulating in horror and chattering in scolding tongues. Bill, cocking his gun, said, nonsense, there was no other way. Again the men protested, at the same time busying themselves with the frantic digging of a hole near the snake's head. Distracted, Bill questioned this. 'They dig hole,' said Elias nervously, 'so snake can go hide.'

'Tell them,' said Bill, 'that snake go be shot. He be bad snake and I go shoot him, so they stand back.'

This ultimatum understood, the men threw up their hands. When Bill shot the snake they stood rigidly with their backs to the scene as if the deed were too fearful for human eyes to witness. As we started off again, much subdued by this incident, we saw the python's defenders standing over the dead reptile. Elias, ill at ease, said mournfully, 'Snake be their god. They go carry him away.'

The making of Juju¹ — casting of spells or the ritual damning of any member of the community — is something which has long intrigued psychologists who are apt to call this black magic a concentrated persuasion of fear, resulting in the victim's sickening through morbid fancy and pessimistic fatalism. When Ladipo, the Forest Assistant, dismissed one Benjamin, a headman, for consistent laziness, Benjamin used strong words, swearing that Ladipo and his family would fall ill and die within a few weeks, for he, the pagan Benjamin, would 'make Juju'. Ladipo, a highly intelligent and truly progressive product of a Baptist Mission and Government Forestry School, shrugged off the threat, mentioning it only in parenthesis to Bill while they considered a replacement headman.

But some days later when Ladipo came to the house his manner was so overwrought we feared some domestic tragedy. Both his children had fever, he said, and Mrs. Ladipo was unwell. He himself felt, he thought, a pain in his chest. He did not know what to do. Benjamin was making mischief and the Ladipo family was in danger. The man who told us this was not the Ladipo who neatly typed out office memoranda in impeccable governmental officialese, or the common-sense Ladipo who was Bill's right-hand man. We saw him divided in mind, taken out of his progressive way of thinking, no longer capable of consigning Juju to the limbo of pagan ignorance and superstition. Black magic, he confessed, was a force from which even he, a

¹ Alleged to have been indulging in midnight Juju practices so that the family would no longer have offsprings and die to the last man, a father has taken action in Court against a daughter of the household. The defendant concerned is said to have returned home after having quarrelled with her husband. Outlining the case, the plaintiff said that the defendant, instead of being a blessing, became a canker worm in the social side of the family by wishing them evil always. The defendant had brought one Juju called 'Iyioji' to kill the whole family and had stated publicly that their wives would remain barren as long as she lived. Proving his case further, he went on to say that the defendant had the cruel audacity to erect a pot of Juju which she had been worshipping with a series of evil incantations and songs every midnight. The defendant, who had refused to quit her father's compound, in her cross-examination, asked the plaintiff to produce the list of deaths in the family since her alleged Juju dealings. Case was adjourned. — From a report in the *Nigerian Spokesman*.

Baptist, was not immune. Strange things happened which could not be explained, evil things against the laws of light and goodness. 'Christian teaching says there is an Evil One,' said Ladipo. 'In Africa, through Juju, the Evil One's powers are summoned by black magic, and they can do great harm. I have seen it happen to others many times.'

Bill was nonplussed but said he would do what he could to help. Next day he found the culprit, Benjamin, and told him most forcefully that if he persisted in making Juju against Ladipo he would have him brought to court and exposed as a mischief maker. Whether Ben took this to heart we do not know. Certainly Ladipo's children recovered with the help of the quinine we gave them. Mrs. Ladipo, who had certainly looked far from well, took heart with the piccans' return to health, and in a week or so the entire family was back to normal. The coincidence of the piccans' malaria and the amenability of their parents to the power of suggestion may explain the apparent effectiveness of Benjamin's machinations. Which does not mean that the destructive action of 'black magic' is without potency. Nor would many Christians deny the existence of positive forces of evil. In bush Africa strange things happen beneath the veneer of laws and creeds imposed by the white man — and Juju is more than a bogey-man legend inspired by the witch doctors for their profit and power. It may well be a force impossible to measure or define, a dark knowledge taken with the African infant's first milk and absorbed into his very blood. Even later, as with Ladipo, when years of education and example have seemingly proved him completely rational and beyond reach of pagan influence, he will capitulate when an inner voice of fear tells him he is within the toils of Juju and cannot escape.

The white man may call it what he will, arguing logically about the sway of fear and the impulse to self-destruction. That way lies over-simplification. Probably Juju is beyond range of Western logical understanding; its emotional power defies any

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

exact analysis. It is too easy to dismiss Juju as humbug or mumbo-jumbo, for such facile dismissal leaves out an important point, namely, that there are many mysteries which the civilized mind has not yet fathomed, and forces still exist which cannot be given tidy scientific labels.

Many long-established government officers and Old Coasters in West Africa, from first-hand knowledge, do not question the power of Juju and black magic in out of the way bush places. But very few white men are permitted to see what occurs inside the inner sanctums of Juju houses, for African secrets are well kept. The educated town African, who might be expected to shed some light on the dark practices of his bush brothers, invariably sidesteps the topic with an embarrassed air of knowing nothing of such things. In his desire to become wholly 'European' he frequently and mistakenly disowns his heritage as a rich man might veil his poor social beginnings. He is often ashamed to speak much of pagan customs, believing that if he shows knowledge of these he will reveal how recent is his own acquisition of the white man's ways. Missions have taught him Juju is 'wrong'; government schools have imbued him with a conviction that the old ways were stupid and ignorant. His instinctive mistrust of questioning makes him evasive. In his desire to be on the same side of the fence as the white man he wilfully erects a barrier between himself and his own uneducated people. It may be this mixture of pride and sensitivity which prevents many intelligent Africans from contributing to an understanding of customs in remote parts of their own country. Racial pride ought to increase rather than diminish with education, and the telling of the African story should not be left entirely to foreigners and outsiders. Understanding, like charity, should begin at home, and in the African scholar's case what more vivid, more human material could he have for understanding than his own people?

CHAPTER V

STREET OF A THOUSAND SMELLS

WHEN, via the village grapevine, news of our going to town percolated locally, groups of villagers always appeared in the driveway before breakfast, waiting to ask if they could 'follow' (accompany) us. We packed them in with their burdens and piccans until there was not an inch to spare, and so, armed with lists and early morning shopping resolutions, set off on the thirty-odd mile journey to Onitsha.

Roughly one hundred miles up the Niger from the coast, this waterside town has probably the largest market in Nigeria. It is the bargaining place for traders from every quarter — the Mecca for dealers in cloth, cattle, fish and European goods, the meeting ground for buyers and sellers of every status and every conceivable commodity. The sprawling town edging the flat, muddy river has on its upper reaches a superimposed governmental neatness: the Resident's house, several government department buildings (District Office, Posts and Telegraphs, Forestry Office and Public Works Department), four European trading stores, a European Club, a large Catholic College, a Convent and a Hospital. The wide, treeless main street, flanked by trading warehouses and a clutter of open-fronted African stalls, has no sidewalk. Cement gutters, three feet deep, run odorously alongside, punctuated at distant intervals by the hydrants providing the town's water.

Behind the façade of the main thoroughfare are labyrinths of crowded little stalls and dwellings, carpenters' sheds, tin-smiths' shacks, bicycle repair lean-to's and junk piles in which life goes on busily with a multitude of minor transactions and volatile quarrellings while the dust rises and settles, the drains

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

give off their ancient, medieval stench and smoke from the cooking fires wavers in the hot, heavy air.

At the foot of the main street the roadway debouches into a motor park beyond which is the market area, a ten-acre sea of bobbing turbans and palm-thatched stalls. Into this George Cook would launch himself purposefully in search of fish, groundnuts, plaintains, rice and other market goods, cheaper here than in the local bush markets, while Bill and I made the rounds of the trading stores to pick up supplies of flour, tinned goods, coffee beans, tea and kerosene. Our trips were performed usually on Saturday mornings; the warehouses closed at noon, and shopping was always a losing battle against personal lethargy engendered by heat, and an all-pervading inertia, which encompassed the African clerks and blanketed all our dealings.

Beyond the vortex of the market the Onitsha citizens on fences, steps, under trees, on stools or goatskins, took their ease, some with closed eyes, others reposing with blank faces and sprawled limbs. Within the warehouses the clerks leaned on the counters — slowly, slowly writing out their bills and moving like sleepwalkers to select goods from the shelves behind them. At one store where Bill sought fourteen pounds of nails, there were four clerks. The head clerk roused himself, propped his head on his hand and said to a subordinate, 'Fourteen pounds nails.'

'Nails?' said the other, as in a dream.

'One inch nails,' repeated Bill.

'Oh, *one inch* nails.'

Nobody moved. Bill said, 'Haven't you got any?'

The first clerk frowned, padded over to his desk and thumbed through a vast ledger, murmuring half-heartedly, 'Nails . . . nails. . . .'

'They're here,' Bill pointed out, indicating a keg-full in front of the counter.

The clerk looked startled as if it had been a conjuring trick.

STREET OF A THOUSAND SMELLS

'Here,' he said to his underling, 'weigh fourteen pounds nails.'

The second clerk frowned. 'Fourteen pounds?'

The other two clerks seemed to be quite asleep by now, with their heads pillowed on their crossed arms. 'Look,' said Bill, 'just weigh fourteen pounds of nails and charge them to the Development Office.'

The head clerk looked doubtful. 'What will you put them in?'

'This box,' said Bill, producing it.

The second clerk weighed the nails while the first began confiding to his ledger again, this time: 'Development Office? It is not here.'

Bill took the book and found the place. The clerk found a pen and began to write laboriously while one of his sleeping brothers, stirring, glanced at the clock, nudged the other and spoke wearily, 'Time to close. . . .'

While the trading stores (or 'factories') supplied European residents with staple foodstuffs, hardware and incidentals, their main business was with African traders of means who bought large quantities of cloth and other goods for reselling in the town stalls and smaller market places. The wealth of some of the merchants could be gauged by the quantities of bicycles, patent medicines, Manchester cloth, cases of biscuits, matches, cheap cigarettes, shoes, cooking pots, sun helmets and talcum powder which their boys carried out of the buildings to be sold at the highest profit to lesser traders who would exact their own rake-off — and so down the scale to the smallest itinerant vendor, who, in some bush market, would sell to his own considerable advantage. By this process an English-made bicycle could double its price in a day, causing some impoverished but covetous bushman to hesitate and deliberate whether, after all, he would not be better off with a bicycle rather than the wife he wanted and for whose dowry fee he must in any case mortgage himself to moneylenders. Dowry money for a wife was no

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

small sum, the cost of a bicycle hardly less. A comely bride or a shiny bicycle, which should it be? The presence of European goods in bush was a temptation, as the traders knew well, a cumulative temptation making for the enrichment of the traders' pockets and the bushman's impoverishment and dissatisfaction with his own lot.

Trading is in the African's blood. Generally speaking he does not build up a steady business through regular custom with fair prices, but aims at the highest possible immediate profit. His goods are rarely ticketed; he simply assesses the top sum his customer might pay and adds 50 per cent as margin for the inevitable course of haggling. This being understood, the opponent bargainer sets out with the object of getting the article for one third of the price first demanded. It would be infinitely simpler and quicker if the whole byplay were dropped entirely, but no African trader or buyer would dream of dispensing with the parries and thrusts, the mock retreats and skirmishings of the initial encounter. To him life without haggling would be without salt or savour, too straightforward for his subtle inclinations and too bleak for his drama-loving spirit.

In the market the traders are in their chosen element, selling everything from an orange felt hat to stinkfish, the most primitive of kippers. The winding dirt avenues are divided into sections, the largest for cloth of every texture and colour: sheeting, shirting, woollen suit materials, ginghams, rayons, voiles, sateens, damasks and sham brocades. The stalls, hung with their multicoloured displays, are like fabulous tents, some modestly khaki, white or discreetly pin-striped — others jazzy with vibrating patterns of spirals and checks or voluptuous with



STREET OF A THOUSAND SMELLS

theatrical velveteens in purple and cerise. The smell here, rising even above the more pungent odours of earth and humanity, is the dry, starchy odour of cotton stiff with 'size'. The jostling of so many kinds and colours of materials in such quantities at such close range, has an eye-aching effect. The gaudy patterns, especially designed for export to the tropical markets, show Manchester to have some surprisingly uninhibited designers. Working in the damp greyness of that enterprising English city they turn out ebullient prints bursting with colour, with borders of pineapples and elephants, letters of the alphabet spilled haphazard, patterns of scissors, needles and thread, red lions and tigers, fishes, crowns and sceptres — Manchester fantasies as unexpected as a comic paper hat on a staid Conservative.

To seek with single-minded purpose the goods on our list was practically impossible once we were within the market. Colour, noise and smell conspired against any straightforward shopping. No matter how determined my resolve I always found myself drifting in the crowds, drawn into sections where I could



not conceivably wish to buy anything, but unable to extricate myself or Bill from the fascination of the scene. In the portion devoted to the display of medicines I was attracted to arrays of fly-blown bottles and jars of cure-all with enterprising signs stuck at random among them. 'WORMS? ORDER OUR WORM EXPELLER.' 'TRY OUR STOMACH TONIC. IT CLEARS DISEASES, STIRS UP THE NERVES!' 'HAIR STRAIGHTENING FLUID SOLD WITHIN.'

Aspirins, liniments, castor oil and cough mixtures jostled doubtful pint bottles of Rejuvenating Medicine, Bile Mixture, Blood Medicine and Bone and

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

Nerve Food, with Epsom Salts well in the foreground. Perceptive of the slightest flicker of interest, the trader appeared from behind his stall's bulwark of hypochondria to murmur beguilingly, 'You buy something? We got face powder, perfume, health salts . . . ' Despite protest he would whip the top from a bottle of powerful Devon Violet or English Rose scent and offer it at close quarters, urging, 'Fine smell for a lady. . . .'

Bill maintained that if led blindfold through the market one could easily identify the various sections by their highly individual smells. Certainly the fish avenues asserted their character odorously and emphatically with a combination of seaweedy whiffs from the trays of glistening Niger perch and yellow-fleshed mudfish, pyramids of prawns and shellfish, and racks of stink-fish. The meat section advertised itself from afar with indescribable stench from gory cowhides pegged out to dry in the sun, and piles of bone, horn, hoof and offal of which no scrap was wasted. We avoided the meat section and took no pleasure in reviewing the livestock enclosures where the doomed cattle, goats and pigs were tethered and fowls cramped in airless baskets.

The fruit and vegetable portion of the market was mainly open ground where the women squatted in front of their spread-out merchandise. George, in his knowledgeable rounds, prodded corncobs, sifted rice through his fingers, squinted through eggs at the sun, scanned pineapples, oranges and bananas shrewdly, argued hotly about prices and emerged from the arena dusty, laden and with the glint of successful battle in his eye. It was, I knew, unwise to reflect overmuch on the sanitary aspect of our market food purchases; one would not need to be unduly queasy as to stomach or neurotic in mind to develop an alarm-



STREET OF A THOUSAND SMELLS

ing germ phobia after even one glimpse of the place from which our foodstuffs were garnered. The market earth trodden for years by thousands of bare feet, criss-crossed with green-scummed drains, overhung by brazen heat, was palpably a giant incubator for bacteria. Of the picturesque, certainly it lacked nothing — but with the simplest principles of hygiene it had not the most distant nodding acquaintance.

Even when the food was brought home to be washed in potassium permanganate, a doubt lingered. And even while delighting in the colour and surging life of the kaleidoscopic bazaar, I confess to occasional yearnings for immaculate white counters, scrubbed surfaces, white-aproned servitors, marble slabs and clean tiled floors. Sometimes after a session in the market I thought I could write a poem in praise of carbolic soap and scrubbing brushes — a modern hymn to the Goddess of Tested-For-Purity in her shrine of sterile aluminium and cellophane. When I spoke like this Bill said it was time to go home.

Any student of tropical humanity would find the market a happy hunting ground for data of no use statistically but rich in inconsequential fascinations: old women huddled beside trays of dried peppers and greasy pastes wrapped in palm leaves — infant hucksters selling cigarettes and fried cakes — Hausa men, different from the Ibos, with lean, crafty faces, skull caps, proud noses and supercilious mouths, moving with slow, independent dignity — blind beggars, still centres in the crowd, plaiting rope at which they stared patiently with sightless eyes — women grinding grey salt — parakeets screeching and preening in the narrow alleyways — tailors fashioning pink rayon shirts on their treadle machines, and the sunlight flashing on the gauds of the trinket stalls.

'Name anything,' Bill said as we surveyed the plethora of the market, 'and it would be here . . . somewhere.' We had come in search of a roll of wire netting and three yards of gingham, but in passing had already collected a wastepaper basket, two

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

Yale locks, a reel of fishing line, a raffia mat and a pair of fur slippers. And I had run a voluble gauntlet of hat sellers which began when I innocently admired a beret which must have originated in the French Company's store. Vendors watching from adjacent stalls were instantly possessed with the idea that I was hat-vulnerable, and hastened to bring out sun helmets, Hausa skull caps in cotton and velveteen, striped raffia hats, men's felt hats of orange and green hue, workmen's caps in tweed, cloth and purple plush — and lastly policemen's fezzes with tassels.

The purchase of fur slippers was enlivened by the presence of competing traders offering 'mules', sandals and second-hand boots. We bought the raffia mat out of sheer weakness, to stop the Hausa weaver from unburdening and spreading out more of his wares or causing a worse traffic blockage in front of his stall.

In our wanderings we glimpsed another European couple in the throng and I realized with something of a shock the contrast between white and dark physique in a Negro crowd. We too must have looked as they did, colourless, strangely bloodless beneath the unbeautiful sun helmets, pale-eyed, thin-lipped and . . . alien. Or was it, I wondered, just a freak trick of the enervating sunlight? By contrast the pallor of fair skins seemed anaemic, the subdued English voices toneless. 'Are we like that?' I asked Bill. But he was lost in contemplation of a Hausa man who, in a barber's raffia alcove, was having his beard trimmed with a razor-sharp penknife. The operation looked so dangerous I forgot to repeat my question and for the sake of ego it was probably better so.

Once or twice later I thought I saw other white people, but these turned out to be Negro albinos, pink-white with sandy hair and eyes lacking colour and lustre. Otherwise African in form and feature, their sameness yet startling differentness was arresting to me, though apparently albinos were so commonplace as to evoke no especial attention from those of normal dark complexions.

STREET OF A THOUSAND SMELLS

The motor park on the edge of the market was a cindery clearing where long-distance trucks disgorged and took on passengers in accordance with a timetable subject to extraordinary fluctuations. The vehicles were dilapidated contraptions which at first glance seemed unlikely ever to start off without falling to pieces or having the sheer weight of passengers flatten the much-patched tires. The 'first class' seats were in the cab alongside the driver who was rarely averse to accepting money on the side for the provision of his travellers' extra comfort and convenience.



The rest of the seats were planks laid crosswise in the back of the lorry. The waiting passengers crowded in with boxes and sacks of produce, with piccans, fowls and even a bicycle or two tied on the roof, until the back of the vehicle was a solid press of human freight without even a toehold for even one more perspiring claimant.

Discontent might be expected from this sorry mode of travelling but the mere fact of having won access to a crowded transport caused the squash of passengers to joke and gossip with cheerful good humour while the engine coughed, died and was again investigated. Foodsellers circulated, offering trays of bread at extortionate prices; pinioned fowls squawked; the driver plumbed deeper into the mysteries of his recalcitrant engine and everyone took the whole business as a matter of course with an optimism typified by the mottoes emblazoned across the cab fronts. On one we read: 'In God We Trust', on another: 'Keep Cracking.' But the most inspiring truck slogan of them all was *Dum Spiro Spero* (While I Breathe I Hope). How it got there we never could find out.

The advertising power of the printed sign was understood by the African traders along the main street. One shop called

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

'The Depot of the Realm of Fashions' beguiled the public with this invitation: 'Please remember that Ladies', Gents' and Children's requisites, namely white and khaki helmets, Shoes, Felt and Straw hats and Caps, broad striped Trouserings, suitings, neckties, fountain pens and nibs, belts, headties, cotton piece goods, Socks, dress materials, velvets, blankets, Braces, sulphur bitters, Extra strong Female pills, Rejuvenating pills, specific and pills, ready mixed paints, Varnishes, linseed oil, distempers, brass and blank Rimlocks are to be obtained here.'

Another sign proclaimed: 'For Decent and Clear Barbing please consult Chief I. K. Bosman.' In front of a tailor's stall we read: 'Tunda Savage. Try Me and Be Convinced of Gents' Natty Draping', and we wondered how he had come by the name of 'Savage'. We wondered, too, about the Biblical texts painted over the doors of other traders' shops whose signs piously said: 'Treat Your Neighbour as Yourself', 'Thy Kingdom Come' and 'Faith, Hope and Mercy Doctor Shop'. At first it occurred to us that a missionary influence might have tempered the trading instinct and made it benevolent, but we quickly learned otherwise. The Biblical signs, like much of the traders' own psychology, remained a mystery.

Another mystery was the chalk-white effigy in front of the Faith, Hope and Mercy Doctor Shop — a figure of a white woman with shapeless short dress, vintage 1925. Why *white*? we pondered. If this unlovely creature was meant to personify glamour, every African woman in search of it would have to cake herself with whitewash. There seemed no relation whatsoever between the advertisement of this lily-white complexion and its possible attainment. And surely beauty in the modern African's mind was not associated with deathly pallor! Bill and I always argued about these signs and portents seeking, probably foolishly, to read into them much more than was there. In time we came to realize that the trader's advertisement had no logical import, being merely an eye-catching stand-in for his own: 'Want to buy something?'

STREET OF A THOUSAND SMELLS

The town pumps were gathering places for the piccans who elbowed each other in chattering, giggling groups to hold battered buckets under the spout, take baths and drink straight from the tap. The hydrants were verdigris stained. The ground beneath was slimy trampled mud, the buckets and water vessels usually ancient germ-traps. Here, as in the food market, I found myself divided between a perverse artistic appreciation for the slummy picturesqueness of the pump scenes — the antics of the splashing piccans and the grace with which the women lifted their water pots to their heads — and my increasing respect for plumbing and modern sanitation, for tiled showerbaths, porcelain bathtubs, impeccable enamel fixtures and chromium taps.

Usually I viewed the pump scenes while waiting for Bill to finish his errands. By noon the metal of the unshaded lorry was burning to the touch and the heat within the cab stifling. The end of a session in stores and market found my earlier resolves, like my freshly ironed dress, sadly wilted, and my handkerchief damp from mopping the dew of perspiration that beads on the stiffest upper lip in that climate. So it was that looking across the open gutter to the town pump I fell even to thoughts of grandeur in plumbing, of sybaritic marble and Hollywoodian refinements, of scented foam and pastel perfection of decor. From one such hopeless reverie I was distracted by the approach of a tiny child who had brought some tattered, filthy garments to wash in a bucket. In the most exact imitation of her elders she bent over her task, swaying her shoulders and wriggling her expressive, diminutive rear in pantomime of energetic toil. Engrossed in playing the part, she forgot to do more than move her hands in desultory fashion; to her mind laundry was done



BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

by movements of the knees, shoulders and hips, and what happened to the clothes in the bucket was incidental. With more suds on her person than on the washing so sorely in need of it she tipped out the pail, refilled it and pantomimed rinsing. After which she dropped the wet clothes on the muddy ground and went into an impromptu dance, beautifully patterned, as if the whole time she had been guided by an inner rhythmic impulse embroidered with mimicry, her laundry task only an unimportant side-issue. Still dancing, she wiped her wet hands on her minute chemise, but finding this already too wet to be of service, strutted to the hoarding alongside the hydrant where was pinned a yellowing poster (issued by the Sanitary Department) and listing in large red lettering all the thou-shalts and thou-shall-nots pertaining to communal pump use. This document she casually tore down, wiped her hands on it, slung it into the gutter and still heeding that blithe pulse of inner rhythm, picked up her muddy laundry and cakewalked away down the road.

Usually we stopped at the Public Works Department yard for drums of petrol which kept the lorry supplied in bush. There, while I waited for Bill, I looked on a scene which, considering that it was supposed to be *Public Work* had a strangely soporific effect on the onlooker. Labourers in charge of a headman shovelled piles of sand into baskets which they carried on their heads into nearby sheds. If the headman were absent the labourers' toil was reduced to the most dreamlike slow motion, as if fatalistic disinterest leadenly weighted every limb. It was easy to understand. Nothing can be more monotonous than sand shovelling, nothing less stimulating than the prospect of another heap to shovel when the present mound is cleared away. A hopeless, helpless monotony hung in the air, wiping expression from the workers' faces; monotony was in the tatters of their sackcloth garments and the sliding, sifting ingredients for cement. The labourers laboured after a fashion; to know where their thoughts or ambitions lay was impossible to

STREET OF A THOUSAND SMELLS

fathom. When the African is bored or tired he is a husk of himself, all merriment obliterated, all rhythm quenched. When he labours in the white man's hire as the most miniature cog in a machine he does not understand, his only object the precious daily shilling, he brings to his task only his body and nothing of his mind. So, often and unhappily, he gains for his race a reputation for bone idleness. Yet the African enthused and busy with his own interests is far from idle. His tempo is his own since

he is not engrossed, as are most Europeans, with a clock-conscious race against time, and he has adapted himself to a pace which suits him best in the long run. Europeans bring to Africa their own pace (which usually lasts no more than six months) and are apt to be irritated when they find 'everyone out of step but Johnny'. Quite possibly the proverbial laziness of the African is no more than a myth. In Brain Trust phrasology it all depends on what you mean by 'lazy'.



No visit to Onitsha could be uneventful. There were often Hausa processions, robed dignitaries bobbing along on richly saddled ponies and bowing from the shade of their silk canopies, while heralds with long thin trumpets cleared the way. Even the poorest Hausa in voluminous travel-stained robe showed in gait and manner that his was a proud race. Haughty-featured, long-limbed and graceful, the Hausa trod the town's byways like aristocrats, often with small boys as servants to carry their master's parasol and raffia-tied bundle. In comparison the Ibo seemed lacking in mastery over himself and his fate, as if he were more a particle in a massed population than an individual who could stand alone on the strength of his own personality. Physically more plebeian, temperamentally less self-sufficient,

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

he had not the Hausa man's urbanity or subtle philosophy.

The Ibo is, perhaps, an extrovert, the Hausa an introvert — the first a child of nature, the second a product of an ancient civilization akin to the Arabs'. Though countrymen in a broad sense, their dissimilarity of race and religion maintains a sharp demarcation line between their communities. In the Onitsha market the Ibos do not specialize in their trading; all is grist to their stalls and their preference is notably for European goods. The Hausas are of three main groups: cattle dealers, tailors and vendors of northern handcrafts. Their skill in fine handwork is shown in bags, slippers and cushions of leather, fur, crocodile and snakeskin, stitched and tooled with traditional embossings and inlay. As carvers they work in ebony and ivory; from the soft Nigerian 'silver' they fashion trays and trinkets. Their work, while far from uniformly excellent, shows ingenuity and precision, an understanding of colour blending and symmetry. It seemed to us that the Hausas refused to imitate while the Ibos (particularly in their carpentry and tinsmithing) were content to do little else. It would appear that while the Southern Nigerian is more malleable and adaptive than his Northern brother he might also be in greater danger of losing his identity and his heritage.

When two Hausa men or women met, their greeting was a low curtsy maintained while they conversed, and their progress down the road was a succession of these elegant dips and risings. The Ibos in Western fashion shook or clasped hands. At sunset the Moslem Hausas, after washing hands and face in water from the diminutive kettles they always carried with them, faced the east and touched forehead to ground. In groups along the roadside, their robes billowing about them, they prostrated themselves, between whiles sitting with immobile, withdrawn expressions, telling their beads. The gulf between the Hausa Moslem and all others whom he classes 'infidel' is palpably much greater than the Ibo bushfolk's distinction between Juju worship and Christianity.

STREET OF A THOUSAND SMELLS

Onitsha is a trading centre by virtue of its position on the Niger; a river highway for the warehouse boats (which ply to the go-downs of more distant river beaches), the fishermen's ramshackle houseboats and the long dugout canoes which bring yams and produce to market. The dugout canoes make a constant traffic, laden to the gunwales with twenty or thirty passengers plus loads and livestock, and paddled fore and aft by sweating boatmen with as sure a balance as the fishermen who throw out and haul in their nets from their tippable crafts. In the manner of an expert equestrian astride a nervous horse, the African controls his home-made boat as if it were part of him. His remarkable innate sense of rhythm and balance gives him the 'feel' of his canoe in a process more instinctive than deliberately practised.

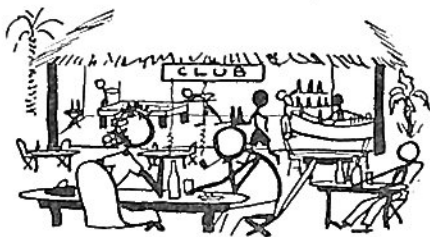
In the yellow shallows, the riverside people scrub their washing, tub goats and pigs in readiness for market and take impromptu baths. The steep river banks are patchworks of washing laid out to dry. In the shade of the iroko trees Hausa tailors treadle their indefatigable sewing machines, and those weary of the market sleep pillowed on their headloads.

Bill and I have a penchant for boats and waterways which we often indulged too long, until shimmering water and slow-dipping paddles induced a mild hypnosis from which one could only rescue the other by suggesting a cold drink at the Club before collecting the boys at the market. The Clubhouse was an oasis for European visitors from out of town. It provided coolness beneath a whirring fan, a small library, washroom, billiard table, and of course a bar and the inevitable old copies of *Punch*. There, within sound of the market, congregated a handful of Europeans, making a little England in one room. The men wore white shorts and open shirts, the women light dresses and chic coiffures testifying to the ingenuity of Eve despite climatic disadvantages and the absence of hairdressers. The pre-lunch Saturday club atmosphere was convivial and gossipy, with queries as to how 'Dicky' or 'Freddy' or 'Bunny'

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

were faring, comparisons as to merits and vagaries in the servant problem, morsels of scandal ('have you heard . . .?'), mention of 'fever' (someone was usually 'down', with it) and nostalgic or anticipatory reference to 'leave' past or imminent. It was Club at its most clubbish; a combination of safety-valve and clearing house; a focal point — like the bush markets — for news, and most important of all, a-place-to-go-to.

The Englishman's Club in the tropics may seem standoffish from the hurly-burly of real life outside its doors — cliquy,



unnatural and unnecessary. But it fills a real need. It provides sanctuary from the demands of Empire Building and it bolsters the European ego, often sadly deflated by heat and many pricking

irritations of body and mind. So it may be that the picture of the white man fortifying himself with sight and sound of his own countrymen (and women) gives a false impression. He may drink too many pink gins; he may be indiscreet in jocularly and rash in his generalizations about the nature of the African, particularly if he is feeling 'end of tourish', jaded and edgy towards the finish of his eighteen-month stint. The Club may serve him at times as a kind of confessional and a forum for the airing of grievances, real or imagined. The translation of petty irritation into anecdote restores his senses of proportion and humour; an audience of kindred spirits enables him to laugh at himself without loss of face. Here he need not try to be the all-wise 'Massa' or the imperturbable pillar of Government; he can relax his official vigilance and his efforts to be master of a hostile climate.

As a mariner in strange waters finds safety in a known port, the white man in the tropics turns instinctively to his Club for anchorage. It is doubtful if he would ever admit this need.

STREET OF A THOUSAND SMELLS

The Club to all appearances is just a place for the most superficial social pleasures, the most casual comings and goings, and the most ephemeral conversations. To the outsider its discussions and diversions may seem shallow, unrealistic, childishly inconsequential. 'Is this group of Europeans representative of the pride and power and responsibility of Empire?' he may (a trifle stuffily) exclaim. But what he sees is not meant to be a picture of pride, power and responsibility. If any comparison can be made, the Club might be considered as a most primitive campfire to which are attracted for safety and reassurance, individuals who, making a group, feel stronger, more important, less apprehensive to the soft footfalls and glowing eyes in the dark outer wilderness. Most clubs have, at bottom, this function, though degrees of 'wilderness' may vary in big cities and country places at home and abroad. Initiation may be no more than a circumspect 'I propose a new member', and the qualifications for membership no more exacting than conformation to certain accepted standards of speech and behaviour. There are fetishes often, in dress and drinking, taboos in social etiquette; a strict order (especially in Colonial clubs) of seniority and social precedent. Yet seldom are these stated categorically. One is a member; one conforms or one does not 'belong'. Discipline is so veiled as to appear non-existent, but for any grievous *faux pas* or sustained nonconformity the punishment at its lightest is polite censorship, at its heaviest, ostracism. In clubs of this kind heavy drinking is no fault — in fact it is commonplace, but drunkenness is frowned upon. (Being 'merry' or 'having a good time' is not the same thing.) In argument, graceful fencing even with uncapped rapiers is permissible; out and out bludgeoning with heavy weapons is in the worst possible taste, for then the encounter ceases to be 'amusing'. He who disturbs the sanctum's reposeful good humour and happy make-believe with self-revealing stark sincerity of expression is, perhaps, the worst embarrassment of all.

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

Not that the Club was by any means frequented only by dull, convention-ridden souls. There were characters as Maughamish as you could find in any Colonial backwater — notably one official of remarkable wit and perspicacity whose secret wicked joy it was to insert guilelessly into the general conversation a remark with dynamite in its tail, designed to stir up a pothole of conflicting opinion and a good measure of high feeling. Sitting back, he would silently watch the ferment he had with such apparent innocence engendered, smoothly injecting a brief, provocative comment for either side when the stir-up showed signs of waning. It was a game he loved and it sometimes resulted in battles royal which he viewed contentedly, smoothing the goatee he affected and looking exactly like a character out of the Yellow Book. Long faced, lean and ageless, impeccably dressed and punctiliously courteous, he lived mostly on gin. This diet seemed to agree with him for he worked hard and preserved an extraordinary (if sometimes apparently irrelevant) insight into human nature, both African and European. Like many supposedly confirmed cynics he had unusual sensitivity of comprehension and a fondness for cats, one of which travelled about with him, sleeping in club chairs or in his car outside courthouses while its master pondered over the ways of Leopard Men and dark practices in bush regions.

There was the unhappy youthful misfit attached to a trading firm, who translated his need for companionship into relays of whisky-sodas which brought him no respite from loneliness. Invariably, gaining false courage, he talked too much and too foolishly so that afterwards in the cold light of his hangovers he was smitten by the numbers and extents of his *faux pas* and offered abject apologies to everyone whom he vaguely remembered as having possibly offended. Nothing could make him popular; he was one of those who did not 'belong' and no airy signings of drink chits or hopeful gatecrashings or over-looking of snubs could change this fact. Privately and painfully, beneath his exterior of insensitive bravado, he may have

STREET OF A THOUSAND SMELLS

been aware of it. The less he was accepted the more he was anxious to break down the barriers that were mostly of his own making. And the more drinks he downed in pursuit of good fellowship the further his social rating fell. His was the Midas touch in reverse; all that he touched conversationally turned to lead. He could prick any gay bubble of a gathering simply by appearing in a doorway. Why all this was can hardly be explained, although there must have been a background to his misery, so needless and so acute. He just did not 'fit in' and no one had time or patience to plumb the matter. Except perhaps the goateed cynic who drank with him in a sympathetic, detached way, just possibly thinking, 'There but for the grace of God go I.'

There were several Old Coasters who tended to group themselves in corners and swap hard-boiled stories to which the tenderfoot could make no contribution. Nothing surprised them; they were weathered to the tropics, with complexions a trifle yellow and eyes a little bloodshot. There was little they did not know about 'fever', dysentery, old scandals, 'leave', pensions, and Who was Who. Mostly bachelors, they lived comfortably and were averse to changes, viewing with particular disfavour the 'new African's' agitation for self-government. Their attitude to the African in general was quite human although they felt he should 'keep his place'; beyond that they rarely gave thought to problems of race or their own place in the scheme of things. They were a merry crew and good company, albeit with some tendencies to bigotry and prejudice, and they presented a sturdy front for the white man in Black Man's Country. Their original motives in braving West Africa were varied. Some came to escape mundane jobs and earn more money, some to forget disappointment or tragedy; some to 'see the world'. Their jobs may have turned out eventually to be as mundane as at home, and shuttling from West Africa and back again was hardly 'seeing the world'; but by the time they had established these facts they had acquired sufficient

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

worldly wisdom and appreciation for certain tropical advantages to enable them to compromise between their first ideas and the actual state of affairs.

By virtue of long experience they felt equipped to correct the greenhorn who might make rash pronouncements about matters new to him, the African labourer's minuscule wage, for instance, his learning capacity and his need for more hospitals. 'You wait,' they would say sagely, 'you'll have different notions after a few years. You haven't *lived* here yet . . .' and while it might be easy to assume that they were diehards fearful lest they be stirred out of their complacency, certainly something about the Old Coasters demanded respect. They were not fools, and they had learned the unwisdom of rushing to conclusions or of trying to package neatly and solve African problems in a way to satisfy everybody. Their belief, right or wrong, appeared to be: slow and steady does it. It was an attitude at the same time reassuring and provoking. Their experience could not be gainsaid or their advice belittled. But how much of it was tropical acclimatization (with its menace of *laissez-faire* and satisfaction with the *status quo*) and how much common sense? In a hot and humid clime it is easy to accept catchwords without question, easy to sit in a Club and be wise about Empire. Easier still to ignore thorny African questions on the grounds that these are best left to the missionaries. Easy to quiet the conscience and skim the best of a comfortable existence rather than be embroiled in situations and dilemmas best looked into by Reports and Committees of Investigation. 'Am I,' the Old Coaster, and the New Coaster as well argues, 'my brother's keeper?'

Talk usually turned to other things, perhaps to discussion of a rogue hippopotamus which on being shot was found to have an abscessed tooth that accounted for its perpetual gigantic toothache and resultant vile temper. Or to the eccentric behaviour of an official who having for years breakfasted, lunched and dined solely on 'palm oil chop' (a rich and oily tropical

STREET OF A THOUSAND SMELLS

dish) had taken fright at the prospect of his retirement to Scotland and radical change of diet. With scrupulous care he had supervised his cook's preparation of several batches of 'palm oil chop' which were sealed in Mason jars and installed in his luggage so that his Scottish housekeeper could copy this delectable dish. The Club debated how palm oil would be obtained in Scotland. 'Poor old Jimmy,' they said, 'he'll starve to death among the haggis.' Another added, 'Where he'll end up he'll get the institution's menu. Too much noonday sun's his trouble.' At which our goateed friend put his fingers delicately together and murmured '. . . or too much Club.'

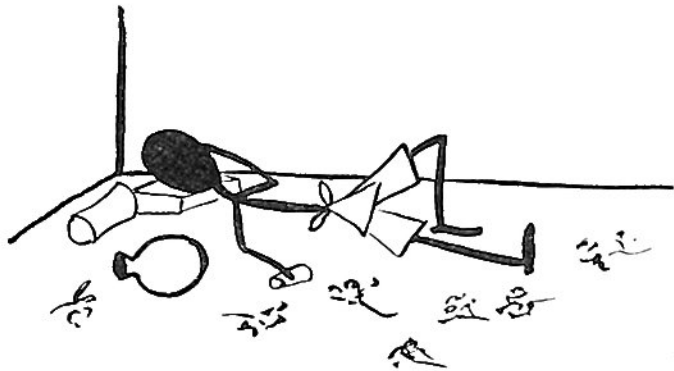
There was the story of the official's wife who had a degree in psychology and some interest in zoology. She had acquired a baby monkey as a pet with a view to studying its reactions, complexes and general I.Q. from infancy to adulthood, but was thwarted by the small monkey's astonishing backwardness. Even when well past infancy it would neither feed itself nor even sit up unaided and everything it did was unintelligent to the point of imbecility. At last the official's wife confessed herself to be at an impasse, her researches ending with her certainty that she had a cretinoid monkey with sub-monkey intelligence, and no potentials of any kind, not even those common to average monkeys. Altogether it was a disheartening experiment for a graduate in psychology to make.

From zoology the conversation reverted to houseboys and one learner steward in particular who just before his Madam gave a large dinner party, was lectured on the importance of table decoration and food garnishing. Everything on the table, she said, should be bright and pretty, with flowers everywhere and nicely arranged dishes.

The guests were a little surprised to find zinnia petals floating in their soup, but thinking they might have got out of touch with current garnishing fashions, made no comment. When the *pièce de résistance*, a large baked fish, was brought in, there was more private astonishment, for zinnias had been stuck,

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

porcupine style, all over the fish, and one especially fine zinnia was planted in the sauce boat. Here was garnishing with a vengeance; and Madam, a little confused and more than a little angry, excused herself after this horticultural meal to see the cook whose instructions had been relayed via the steward. She found him sleeping exhaustedly with a large calabash of palm wine beside him on the cookhouse floor, in a litter of flower



petals. It was, we gathered, an interesting evening, and a lesson in what the amateur garnisher can do with zinnias.

When we left the Club for the outer world of smells and heat and market to collect the boys at an hour previously arranged, they were not always to be found, and Alphonsa's era was particularly notable for this problem. Wilson would be there, waiting by the roadside, but Alphonsa would be lost in the maelstrom. When, wearying of waiting, we sent Wilson to find him with instructions to return promptly with or without the cook, Wilson, too, would vanish. When Alphonsa at length came in sight but *sans* Wilson we refused *his* offer to search for the other. Eventually Wilson would return, greet Alphonsa like a long-lost brother (as indeed he was) and we were ready to head for home. But when we had a lorry load of passengers all sharing a heedlessness of clock time, the searching of boy

STREET OF A THOUSAND SMELLS

for boy, or worse, Boy A in pursuit of Boy B who had gone off to look for Boy C, came to be an involvement solved only by the stern warning that the lorry would depart not one second later than a given time, regardless of the number aboard. After one distressing occasion when Alphonsa, two hours late, was left behind, this worked wonders. (It also provided a dilemma in the cookhouse and consternation when Madam girded on an apron and prepared 'chop'. Such universal loss of face rocked the household to its foundations. Alphonsa was not late again.)

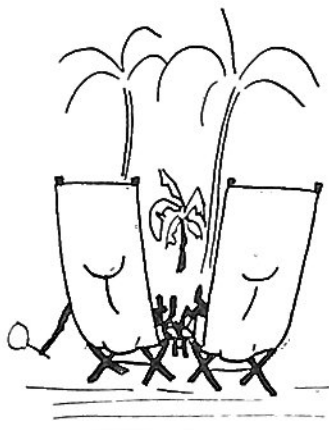
On our way home we often looked in on our friends at the Catholic College, an imposing building on the outskirts of the town where a group of friendly Irish priests guided large classes of day boys and boarders through the intricacies of Higher School subjects. The College was modern and airy with neat dormitories and playing fields beyond. Its plan was a blending of public school requirements and African needs, and it functioned with outstanding efficiency owing to the driving enthusiasm and imagination of its Head who, like the Fathers on his staff, was young enough to have an irrepressible sense of humour and mature enough to temper idealism with common sense. In their Faculty Room we listened to football matches on the radio, or heard at least the news of a game's progress from whichever Father was stationed with his ear glued to the set to catch the faintly audible commentary and ghostly cheers of the crowd.

Sometimes we lunched in the teachers' dining-room under a punkah fan which stirred the heavy air and created a lazy, whispering background to the Irish voices. Always—though not Catholic ourselves—we felt at home in this gathering of white-soutaned priests in whom wit bubbled as spontaneously as argument, sometimes combining in repartee as subtle, unexpected and 'Irish' as would make a script writer reach for his pencil and prick up his ears. But who can reproduce the exact inflections of the Irish brogue when a pause says as much

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

as a word, a deft backhanded remark sums up a whole situation and the entire conversation is unconsciously embroidered with fragments of fantasy which, being 'Irish', neither ask nor require explanation.

We liked the Fathers for themselves, arguing not at all with their religion, nor they with our apparent lack of any. Possibly our Irish name gave us our first entry to their circle, for they insisted that Bill's ancestors must have come from Tipperary —



to which we hopefully agreed because we wanted the Fathers as our friends. During our whole stay we visited them often and they us, casually, as good friends do. We came to admire their stamina and their boundless sincerity, even when we hotly disputed politics, which topic we ventured again and again, just for the exhilaration of the verbal ripostes and skirmishes. 'Sure,' one would say, half exasperated, to Bill, 'ye are from Tipperary!' And strangely we felt congratulated as if mea-

sured by a high standard of quixotry and not found wanting. We argued often and at length about everything under the sun, and emerged even from the most knock-down, hot-and-heavy differences of opinion with our respect for each other undiminished and our friendship the more firmly cemented.

At last we came home. Agulu, after the thronging market crowds and dusty heat of the town, always seemed to welcome us back. Bathed and changed we subsided on the veranda to renew acquaintance with our lake view and the sprawling peace of the scene around us. The silence was good; the air seemed lighter and cleaner on our hilltop, and the peace was more than mere absence of sound, or any deliberately con-

STREET OF A THOUSAND SMELLS

trived condition. The Street of a Thousand Smells had its points, we agreed; there was drama and colour aplenty to intrigue the eye and fancy. And it was as well for us to go to town at intervals lest we grow self-satisfied or bored or lazy. But for ordinary living, we agreed, we were lucky to be in bush.

ON FRIENDS, KITE-FLYING AND THE
JAILHOUSE

'OBUVUDU Sticks Like Glue' we said sometimes at the end of an interminable veranda session with this dignitary of our village, for Chief Obuvudu loved to 'visit' and he would sit timelessly like an amiable Buddha until somehow we tactfully pried him from his chair and sent him home. But we had great affection for him; he was a character, part child, part astute leader who had plumped for the side of Government when proposed anti-erosion operations caused land palaver and some initial bickering in the villages. Obuvudu, welcoming the land reclamation project in an area at first determinedly against it, had endangered his popularity and, he told us, even his life. 'Enemies' had lain in wait for him one dark night and only by fiercely defending himself had he escaped. Now as protection he carried a dagger in an ivory sheath and showed his zeal for Government by having himself made a headman in charge of a gang of workers. He did not say it outright, but his attitude by implication was: You see how loyal a helper I am in your cause and how suitable for quick promotion to Superintendent.

Obuvudu was a stout, dignified bushman, not young, whose extensive family farmed much land in the district. He had several wives. 'I married another nice young lady last week,' he would tell us naively via Elias, who as a good Catholic disapproved of these untidy polygamous ways. Even in his workaday headman's garments he was still imposing. A worn crimson calico skirt wrapped his sturdy hips; a shrunken sleeveless sweater covered the upper part of his chest and exposed a bare expanse of jovial belly which, like Father Christmas's 'shook like a jelly' when he laughed, and which he slapped

resoundingly when surprised or impressed. He carried with his dagger a chief's staff, and always bore himself proudly as befitted a man of big ideas and refusal to be cowed by anything.

In his ceremonial toga of striped rayon and crimson velvet skull cap adorned with gilt tassels and sprouting red and white feathers, he made a picture of wealthy autocracy, and his senior wife — known to us as Mrs. Obuvudu — was a black duchess beside her lord. She came with him to see us sometimes and always sat perfectly erect, saying little. By any standards she was not pretty, but her appearance was striking; the French would call her a *belle laide*, a beautiful plain woman. Her garment was usually a brown and yellow patterned cloth tightly swathed to leave her shoulders bare. An elaborate brown silk turban and enormous ivory bracelets completed her ensemble which, worn with that regal air of poised quietness, had the effect of *haute couture*. On occasions they brought their thirteen-year-old daughter, Benedict, who as the most modern element in the family was receiving a convent education in sewing and housewifery in preparation for marriage. Benedict wore short little European dresses and showed great interest in whatever I was wearing. Sometimes she would enliven a conversational hiatus by pronouncing, 'I pray for you *every* night' or 'I am learning to make an an-ti-ma-cass-ar for the seat of my brother's bicycle.' (For some inexplicable reason fringed seat-covers for bicycles were the vogue among well-to-do bush dwellers.)

Benedict delighted in magazine pictures, although I could not tell how much of them she understood. She would ponder over the boy-meets-girl illustrations and I would boggle at explaining the curious pictorial situations in which the inventive writers and artists placed their heroes and heroines. She would pause at a full-page advertisement of a dazzling beauty (eat



BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

So-and-so's breakfast cereal for that early morning sparkle, that ready-set-go vitality) and murmur, 'What *pretty* shoes!'

Mrs. Obuvudu could not 'see' the pictures; the flat representation of objects on paper meant nothing to her. She looked as puzzled as one trying to decipher ancient hieroglyphics. For Mrs. Obuvudu and most of her townswomen pictures did not exist except on Juju walls and these were understood drawings. Life otherwise was three dimensional; a house or a person on paper was not recognizable, being smaller than reality and having no substance. Our Catholic College Fathers had mentioned this general bush inability to focus imagination and understanding on objects portrayed on paper, and said that even schoolboys who had vacationed in their own home compounds sometimes realized for the first few days of the new term a *bloc* between eye and mind when they returned to books and blackboards.

After Obuvudu had worked capably for several months as headman his fretting ambition to become Superintendent caused him to petition again and again for promotion. Possibly with the notion of qualifying by smartness of appearance for this raise in working status, he dazzled us one afternoon by coming in new garments: an ex-Army greatcoat of ankle length and many brass buttons, which he wore with the collar turned up as if in protection against a north-easterly gale. And an ex-Army hat, like the coat too large so that the chief seemed to be temporarily extinguished by his impressive disguise. As a prelude to palaver, and doubtless for relief from stifling oppression, he would thrust his stave into the ground, hang upon it his hat and coat and address himself winningly to Bill on the vexed promotion question; this he did regularly at least once a week. Each time Bill told him that a Superintendent should be able to speak a little English and keep a daily record in a notebook — which Obuvudu could not do. To our consternation on one occasion the chief burst into tears and went away trailing his coat like a disappointed child. We felt his

KITE-FLYING AND THE JAILHOUSE

dejection so keenly that Bill decided he might make a Superintendent after all, loyalty and common sense being more important in this case than book-learning. Acquainted with this good news on his next visit Obuvudu fidgeted to be away to tell his people, rammed his hat excitedly down over his ears and then shocked us by going down on his knees and banging his head with violent gratitude on the floor.

'You must not do that,' said Bill, his democratic instincts outraged. 'You're a *Chief*!'

Obuvudu rose gracefully and Elias interpreted, 'I am a chief to my people but you are Government and I am your worker.'

'All right,' said Bill, 'I am Government and you are Chief. We are equal people so we'll shake hands.'

And they did — after which Obuvudu had to be restrained from banging his head again.

'Charles' was already a Superintendent; he understood and could speak some English. He professed to be a member of the Catholic Church until one day when he was discovered to have acquired two extra wives and a Juju shrine in his compound, whereupon the local R.C. Mission decided he was not a Catholic after all. Charles was a man of 'title' and some means. Although not a chief he had some say in village affairs. He had bought his title for fifty pounds and four cows, which membership fee was divided among those of the upper social strata, already titled, who had considered his suitability before admitting him to the elect. Charles was now eligible to receive a portion of dues from the next would-be titled applicant, though entry into the upper circle was obviously not possible for many.

On Charles's invitation we visited his compound one Sunday morning to find his three wives and their children lined up to welcome us. Charles's property was extensive and by bush standards imposing, with a small room set just inside the gateway as night-time look-out for thieves. His title-shrine was placed in the centre of a small courtyard. Mud and palm

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

thatch made three of the buildings; the fourth and largest was roofed with corrugated iron, hot and unbeautiful, but termite-proof and indicative of its owner's prosperity. In this main dwelling there were other signs of 'progressiveness': a table, three stiff little chairs, ugly and inferior alongside the intricately carved three-legged 'title' stool, and, most strangely, a dilapidated Victorian sideboard adorned with mildewed fretwork and a wavy green mirror. There were couches of polished mud, contrived by thickening parts of the walls. These looked as uncomfortable as the wooden blocks which served as pillows, but for durability and coolness they were obviously without equal. Charles's own apartment was in this central house; his wives each had separate dwellings, walled off from each other, and separate outside cookhouse lean-to's as well. We gathered that this segregation kept the family contented, for as Charles sagely remarked, 'Women fight when they see each other all time in one house, and they fight plenty when they make chop together.'

Later we commented on the number of wretched pi-dogs, undersized, red-eyed and pitifully emaciated, roaming the compound. We asked Charles if his wives traded in the local dog markets which caused me some private misery. 'I do not eat dog,' said Charles, 'but dog is meat and many in the village like it. My wives make shillings that way some days.' Alas for Man's Best Friend, the Nigerian bushman is no friend to him. We enjoyed visiting Charles's family but I wished, as I always did, that we had not seen the dogs. (Ever since one inadvertent glimpse of a bush dog market I had blinkered myself against memory and knowledge of the market's character.)

Charles's most recently acquired wife was proof of his prestige for she had cost him a good deal of money. On her departure to Charles's compound, her first husband had demanded and got back the dowry money he paid her parents, whom Charles was not slow to compensate with a sum considerably larger than the first. Mrs. Charles III was a tall, rather ungainly girl,

KITE-FLYING AND THE JAILHOUSE

not pretty but comely and cheerful, with a startling habit of jumping to her feet and slapping her hands loudly together when she was amused. Her tomboyish grin and impulsive good humour were perhaps the qualities to which Charles was first attracted — those and her capacity for hard work.

Early in our acquaintance she told me, via Elias, that I was her good friend, demonstrating her affection by swiftly clasping me about the middle. When, in a roundabout way I inquired why she had left her first husband she said briskly, again via Elias, who seemed reluctant to interpret: 'Because he gave me no piccan.' She patted her stomach meanfully and Elias doggedly added, 'She say Charles will give her plenty piccans.'

Delighting in Elias's wooden expression, she added more, this time in a questioning way, but this too-personal interrogation Elias refused to interpret. Unabashed she unwrapped the bundle she had brought, to display some strange brown kernels which I was told were breadfruit.

Here was an illusion undermined. Since childhood — and tropical adventure stories of castaways who lived on the delectable things they foraged — I had imagined breadfruit to be a kind of Food of the Gods, a cross between manna, popcorn and angel-food cake, a substance as light and white as snow. So this was the delicious stuff on which legendary adventurers sustained themselves! I ate some. It was tasteless and gritty but I managed to hide my disappointment and said, 'Thank you — very fine *dash*', as is the custom.

Even when Mrs. Charles had gone and Bill came in, I was still disconcerted. 'Breadfruit,' I complained, 'it's not at all like manna or angel-food.'

'Of course not,' said Bill, cracking some between his teeth. 'It's not like anything but breadfruit. Mangoes aren't like anything but mangoes, either.'

Personally I thought mangoes were like Victorian waxed fruits dipped in turpentine. The more exotic the fruit, I found, the more abrupt the disenchantment.

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

Reverend Ibi did not approve of Mrs. Charles or indeed of the whole Charles family, although they were neighbours with very little distance between the African pastor's bush mission compound and Charles's pagan *ménage*. Charles and Ibi had little in common, for Charles, in addition to having several wives, was a backslider from the R.C. Mission, and so a double-dyed pagan. Ibi was almost too correct in his Protestantism; we would have welcomed his visits more had he been a trifle less smug and not so much given to pious exclamations. Ibi's usual visiting garb was a tight brown woollen store suit which caused him to perspire excessively on days when we found even the thinnest shorts and shirt a burden. He was a stout man, despite his energetic bicycling around his parish, and we unkindly suspected that between his bodies physical and spiritual, the physical was probably the better nourished.

Yet he was a well-meaning, conscientious man, always including us in his round of visits and keeping us informed of his mission's doings. When he had completed the building of a new little schoolhouse and what he called an 'inauguration' was impending, he came to consult me about the refreshment he should provide his European Bishop and several other clerical dignitaries who would arrive early in the morning of the big day. They would have travelled far, he told me, and they would be hungry. At ten o'clock, before the day was too hot, perhaps a bowl of stewed meat and some bread would be a suitable snack for them? Put myself in their place, he urged. Would it be acceptable food?

Putting myself in the place of the eminent clergy was not easy but I imagined we shared prejudices about the character of our morning snack. I said I thought coffee and sandwiches might be better than stew. 'Ah, pity . . . pity . . .' said Ibi ('pity' being his strongest word of apprehension or perplexity), 'no one in my compound can make such European dishes. I have fowls but no bread, no sugar, no milk. . . .'

In the end I promised to send Elias very early with all that

KITE-FLYING AND THE JAILHOUSE

was necessary. Ibi was to have the fowls roasted in readiness; Elias would do the rest. Yet on the morning of the inauguration Elias returned almost immediately from the scene of the festive preparations — bearing two *live* chickens and saying as he hastened towards the cookhouse, 'Chicken no be ready for sandwich.'

A good deal later they were, and I imagined by that time that the Bishop and his friends were waiting, famished. But it so happened that the programme was tardy; the speeches (especially from Ibi, who had an eye on the refreshment situation) very long, and the snack necessarily late. Elias reported a grateful and hearty consumption, and said the visiting clergy were impressed with Ibi's thoughtfulness and enterprise. In token of gratitude Ibi sent us a basket of oranges and a fervent hope that Heaven would reward us. In a postscript he added that he would have come to thank me in person but his bicycle tyres had sustained punctures and were useless. Since they were so hard to buy, would it be possible for Bill to get him some, somewhere and soon?



When bidden to one Joseph's wedding we hardly knew what to expect for we were asked to come not to the R.C. church-mission ceremony, but to the feast afterwards. Joseph was not a village man; he had come from 'outside' to gain a knowledge of anti-erosion work which he might take back to his own people. The feast was to be in the bride's family compound.

We saw them all returning downhill from the church, in a singing, dancing procession to a catchy tune oddly like 'She'll be Comin' Round the Mountain'. In the midst of the trucking, shimmying revellers who were unburdened by festive clothes,

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

the bride and groom walked sedately in bridal raiment. The bride, shielded from the hot sun by an attendant's black umbrella, wore a white muslin gown and a veil of the same stuff. She carried wild flowers in a jam jar (a measure against their wilting) and her step was uncommonly hesitant even for this solemn occasion. The reason, we eventually perceived from her occasional grimaces of pain, was the tightness of her borrowed shoes which she had endured on the long walk to the church and was continuing to endure, though she must have wept inwardly at the pinching torment of these fashionable accessories.

The groom wore a store suit, a stiff collar, polka-dotted tie and handkerchief to match, also a new green felt hat which would have made him a handsome picture in the eyes of his bride had she glanced at him. Neither she nor her husband appeared joyful; they were rapt in the serious business of wearing their uncomfortable clothes and probably a little weary of the whole affair. When, later, we joined the throng at the compound near the lake we found men and women divided into two groups absorbed in eating, drinking and being merry, while bride and groom sat a trifle forlornly by themselves, like strangers who cannot think of any interesting topic of conversation. Yet they smiled at us when we approached and were delighted when we suggested taking their picture. At this juncture the bride whispered frantically to her husband and in response to her pleading he took off his wrist watch and allowed her to wear it for the picture. The snapshot shows her with one wrist extended a little, to show her borrowed splendour the better, and her expression is that of a child in a party theatrical. But Joseph tilted his hat at such a rakish bridal angle that his face in all its pride was totally obscured in shadow. We left them sitting on their stiff chairs in the middle of the sun-baked feasting compound. It was a red-letter day for a community quick to make the most of weddings, Christian or pagan.

KITE-FLYING AND THE JAILHOUSE

The pagan bride is a butterball by intention. For several months before the ceremony she undergoes an intensive fattening regime. Isolated in a dark hut she spends her time lazily stuffing herself with succulent titbits so that she may be enchantingly chubby, albeit a trifle torpid, on her wedding day. That this custom is by no means outmoded is shown by a recent account in a modern Lagos newspaper.

PROGRESSIVE WOMEN UPHOLD FATTENING CUSTOM

AN interesting debate was held on Wednesday by the Progressive Women's Movement. After the opening remarks by the President, the Secretary, Miss O—, introduced the speakers and warned them how to debate in a proper manner. The subject of the debate was 'That the Fattening of Young Women Before Marriage is Good'. The argument of the Pro's was that fattening was an age-old custom in Africa and that it was a means of checking undue immorality. Neglect of this custom tends to create a disharmony between husbands and wives, and encourages waywardness. A married girl after fattening, it was further argued, was consecrated and well tutored in the sanctity of marriage; and also that fattening enhances the girl's beauty and physique. In opposition the Con's condemned the custom and pointed out that fattening causes many abdominal diseases such as constipation, flatulence, etc. etc. The fattening rooms are invariably very unhygienic and must not be encouraged under any circumstances or conditions. The referee, Mrs. I—, after hearing the arguments from both sides, threw the debate open to the floor and many other speakers contributed other points. The debate was finally decided by 42 votes against 15 in favour of the Pro's.

As for funerals, when we heard a distant ceremony it was difficult to distinguish the noise of revelry from wedding gaiety. An African 'wake' may begin slowly and mournfully but inevitably reaches a crescendo of lively drumming and dancing

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

in which all participants make merry in speeding the departing spirit. For anyone important the 'big guns' are fired at exactly spaced intervals; the more salutes and the louder the reports, the greater the distinction. The guns may be ancient rusty cannons, acquired in far-off days and greatly prized as village ceremonial armoury. Or they may be derelict muzzle loaders, filled with home-made gunshot and fired at the risk of the guns' and firers' disintegration. If real cartridges (at approximately one shilling each, bush price) are used, the cost is formidable and may well cause the bereaved family to mortgage itself heavily in doing honour to the dead. There must be gallons of palm wine too, and food for the crowd; nothing may be stinted. And this happens not only at the actual funeral but at the Second Burial, an anniversary celebration in which the memory of the departed is revived in an atmosphere of rollicking merriment unmarred by the least trace of mourning.

The death of a family member, however, is not immediately accepted with resignation by those widowed and orphaned. When a man's wife dies he shaves his head in token of bereavement and his friends come to sit with him day and night lest he do himself harm in his sorrow. When a bushman dies in a place remote from his village he must be placed on a pallet and carried back to his birthplace. Sometimes along the road we saw a weary group resting from the heat and weight of their burden, while the vultures floated above and the sweat ran down the faces of the pall-bearers.

One morning Bill and the lorry were pressed into the assistance of a widow and her two 'brothers' who begged him to carry them and their dead relative to their village twenty miles away. At the bush hospital up the hill the lorry took on its strange cargo, the corpse on a bamboo stretcher with body (but not face) covered, and the relatives silent on either side.

The woman wept silently and in real grief; the men were withdrawn but seemingly less moved than she. Further along

KITE-FLYING AND THE JAILHOUSE

the road, when approaching their own territory, the men began to wail loudly, spreading the news to the village people who paused, baskets on heads, to reply in the same mournful chanting. Noisier and in more desolate key, mourning gained strength and volume. Bush folk began to run behind the lorry whose progress was made slow by the overgrown trail which penetrated the forest. At the fringe of the village, from every compound and clearing men and women and piccans came to join the hurrying, lamenting procession. From their perch the relatives told their woe to the crowd, said their brother had lived but three days in hospital, and bemoaned the plight of his widow. Then while the lorry faltered in negotiating a difficult turn, a woman came running from a side trail. On glimpsing the dead man she cast herself into the dust where she rolled in a frenzy, tearing at her garments and wailing bitterly. (Yet she did not weep as had the widow. Few among the mourners showed tears, although they gesticulated in attitudes of inconsolable distress.) The 'brothers' roared lustily, seeming to punctuate their sounds of wordless grief with explanatory asides to those who were not fully acquainted with the circumstances.

When Bill left, the party was surrounded by a press of keen-ing townfolk to which were added constant fresh voices and new bringers of condolence from more distant places. As he turned homeward he heard the market-place drum beginning to beat out the news. The deepening dusk was charged with melancholy and even when Bill was far from the scene he could still hear the village lamenting and the drum's hollow, rhythmic announcement of the death of a brother.

Yet there would be merriment later, with dancing and feasting, and in this there may be some wisdom. The African indulges at first in a passion of despair and self-pity. When this is spent he puts all of himself into a fitting ceremony of farewell, a funeral which, in our sense, is not funereal. Many marvel at the African's capacity for switching his emotions from gloom to

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

gaiety; they question his sincerity and real depth of feeling and call him childish. Yet it may be that the African is fortunate in still possessing the rare quality of single-mindedness which permits him to show first one kind of feeling and then another, clearly separate (even opposite) but equally genuine. Simplicity is the keynote; it does not amount to 'childishness' in the derogatory sense although it can be childlike. Education may enlarge the mental horizon and introduce complexity of ideas, but it may also divert spontaneous, single-channelled impulses into a multiplicity of smaller impulses and counter-reactions, with a self-conscious question attached to each.

The bush African is self-conscious only when he mimics behaviour which he thinks impressive because it is imported; he is usually insincere only when he tries to belittle his natural impulses because he has learned they stem from 'ignorance', or when he tries to explain his ways and motives in a manner he considers necessary for a European's understanding. The bush African, having no 'education', goes on being single-minded, living in the present rather than the past or future and devoting to the present his entire self. This by no means implies a constant dramatic intensity. The African does not deliberately seek sensation, even though he is quickly infected by it. His daily life, tending his yam plot, thatching his house, trekking the familiar paths to market, is monotonous and he accepts it uncritically, not wasting energy or happiness by fretting uselessly. Resting, he is languor personified with ease in every limb and oblivion encompassing every part of his being. When he gives himself to dancing his eyes shine and his rapt body is prepared to exhaust itself in strenuous rhythms. Angry, he shouts and waves his arms in a fury. Sad, he covers his head with ashes and may die of woe. Happy, his face lights up and his chuckle comes from a deep satisfaction. Bored, he is a husk of himself and no use to anyone. From one state he may pass into the next quite easily, as one who goes into another room and shuts the door behind him.

KITE-FLYING AND THE JAILHOUSE

Despite the distance of our house from the village, and our alien ways which set us apart from the people, we were yet considered as belonging to the community, and it was not long before our formal visitors became neighbourly callers who did not hesitate to call on us when a piccan had fever, a chief's wife suffered earache or a woman in difficult labour had to be taken to hospital. Scorpion victims were frequent emergencies who came to be treated with the 'magic' hypodermic's local anaesthetic which stopped the pain at its source and caused Bill's rating to rise with every case. 'You are my father!' was the typical expression of gratitude. Often, like the Old Woman of the Shoe, Bill was perplexed by the numbers and demands of his 'children'. Armed with thermometer, aspirin and the anti-malarial mepacrine tablets, he would (with the overworked bush hospital's blessing) try to teach the villagers to 'sweat out' fever, which cure few understood. That a feverish person should, despite his protests, be swathed in a blanket to make him feel yet hotter until he sweated was difficult to explain. That many illnesses come from bad, unboiled water was another point which had to be proven. Said Bill, 'Anyone with a hankering for a Life's Work could spend all his days teaching bush people how to boil water and why. Just that. How to boil water.'

It was impossible to know where Bill's official duties ended and his social responsibilities began. There was the matter of a group of labourers who on their way to work were impounded by a suspicious village who set upon them in the early morning darkness, thinking them to be thieves. When Bill came they released the prisoners grudgingly, but explained that they would not permit the silent passing of strangers through their territory before daylight. Without this short cut the labourers' way to work would have been miles longer and it was Bill's job to make some agreement with the vexed villagers. And so it was eventually decided: in token of their harmless intentions the men would sing loudly as they walked through the hamlet.

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

It was argued and understood that thieves do not sing. After that, mindful of the village's apprehensively pricked ears and uncertain tempers, the strangers were in powerful voice long before sun-up.

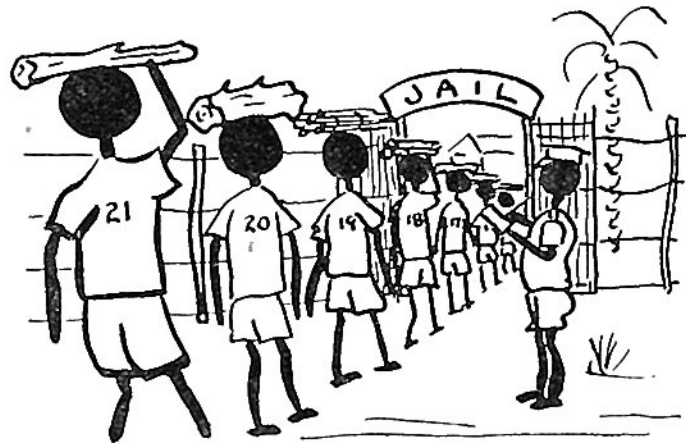
And there was the insane labourer. Bill was informed belatedly of the man's increasing peculiarity of behaviour which culminated in his disappearing one afternoon into the bottom of a ravine where he stayed, shouting threatening gibberish at those who attempted to coax him home. Although the emergency arose in the middle of the afternoon, at which time the gullies caught and held the glaring heat, Bill went forth to cajole the poor lunatic. Extricating him was not easy. Quite quietly he was eating lumps of chalk in the bottom of the canyon; he appeared to understand nothing. Yet finally the flashing of a shilling, which even that unfortunate crazed mind comprehended, brought him up. With it clutched in his hand and accompanied by two policemen, he went quietly to the local lock-up where for lack of a better reason he was charged with 'disturbing the peace'. At all events there was nowhere else to put him.

The local jail was several miles further down the valley, across from a large market place and alongside the Government Station's Post Office. It is conceivable that a blind man might have mistaken the Post Office for the Jail because of the frequent angry buzzings which came from behind the barred wickets and the harassed plaints of customers who thronged about them. Compared with the ferment and dissension which was the Post Office's natural atmosphere, the Jail's serenity made a happy contrast. It was a pleasant, cottagery establishment bowered in flowery shrubs which climbed the token strands of barbed wire and concealed the gaps. The entrance to the Jail compound was by a door of stage-prop character, scrolled with decorative ironwork and opened by an enormous, stage-prop key.

Here was no shadow of Wormwood, no clanging gates, sour

KITE-FLYING AND THE JAILHOUSE

brick walls or sooty prison backwater. The warders wore khaki, brass-buttoned uniforms, the wardresses khaki dresses and the prisoners clean cotton shorts and middies on which their numbers were stencilled. When a handful of prisoners returned from a wood-gathering expedition, each man carrying a head-load of faggots, the head warden opened the door with a flourish and counted heads, 'One, two . . . nine . . . eleven. . .



twelve', quite likely adding, 'Do not *push!*' if his charges seemed too anxious to escape from the ordinary outside world into their own haven for which some 'crime' had made them so happily eligible. From the roadway, through the blossoming hedge, the inside compound of the Jail could be glimpsed: greensward, flower beds, orange and lemon trees, neat huts, prisoners lined up with mugs and plates for a meal and the sun shining as if on a pleasure garden.

During our stay at Agulu we heard of only one incident at the Jail. This was not an escape, for none of the prisoners had ever been known to be so eccentric as to run away from three meals a day and such attractive security as the Jail provided. It was a simple matter of burglary. The newspaper account,

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

headed 'Burglar Raids Prison Store' said, '... the matter was immediately reported to the police who are now very active on the matter. The mysterious side of the incident is that the raider had gained access to the store without breaking through either wall, window or door, but it is alleged that he might have opened the door with a key. It was further alleged that the warder on duty during the night of the incident had been arrested and that he is still in police hands.'



It occurred to us that a jail guardian weary of being on the outside, looking in, might consider it sensible to make himself eligible for a more attractive situation inside, looking out. That was just a surmise, but in view of the Jail's advantages we could understand the temptation.

Possibly a more careful survey might have revealed some flaws in this delightful place, but on the face of it the Jail was a cosy and decorative institution. The prisoners' tasks were mostly odd jobs of gardening, keeping the Government Station neat, the grass cut, the stream's water supply flowing and the precincts of Jail, Post Office and District Office seemly. There was wood-gathering and some road and bridge repair, but nothing so exhausting as hard labour. When we played tennis on the District Officer's tennis court, three or four prisoners came as ball-boys, often more eager than understanding of the game's rules and the change-overs of service. The whole business must have perplexed them and caused an occasional doubt as to why we ran and leapt after the little white balls, and why, flushed and sticky we persisted for an hour or more in these strenuous, unproductive acrobatics. The Massa runs forward, he runs back, he cries Sorry Partner, he hits well and

KITE-FLYING AND THE JAILHOUSE

hard far behind the white line and he says Sorry Partner again. The Madam jumps high, she drives the ball beyond the other Massa who does not move but says Bad Luck. And *she* says to the first Massa, Sorry Partner. Then the first Massa makes a face and sends a mighty blow with the ball, and both Madam and the other Massa say Oh Well Played. What is this tennis?

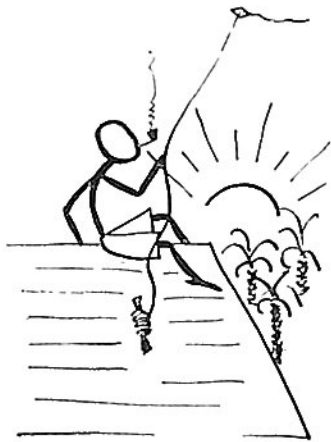
The zeal with which we pursued our recreations was not easily understood by our bush neighbours. Certainly they made nothing of our croquet pitch and the battles which ensued when the Fathers came down from their hilltop to play a warlike version of croquet which would have no place in the average vicarage garden or Hoyle's Book of Rules. Into the Irish ferment Mrs. Murphy, the cat, usually introduced herself as a hazard among the hoops or an ambush for passing balls. Often a game begun at four o'clock would continue well after dark when, with a lamp at each end of the course, the conclusion would be fought out. This was not croquet for dilettantes; at best it could be described as a combination of hockey and golf with no holds barred and the devil take the hindmost. We called it the Agulu Version and were always a trifle nonplussed when a passing visitor said, 'Croquet?' in a surprised voice as if this were a tame pursuit indeed.

Such visitors, we felt, would not understand kite-flying either, so we did not mention it. Bill's kites were a wonder to the villagers, who probably thought them a part of all white men's equipment for recreation. After the day's work he ascended the Tower and rooftop which might have been made for kite operations, especially when the light late afternoon breeze offered a challenge to him who loves kites. There is probably no reason for kite-flying, indeed why should there be? Business with kites is not a pastime you can explain. Enthusiasts need no analysis of their pleasure; outsiders can never be persuaded it is not a mild lunacy. Bill offered no excuse or apologies. He simply mounted the Tower and flew his kites, hexagonal and triangular, orthodox and mongrel,

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

some of the frailest tissue with long, feathery tails and others of sturdy canvas which had to be coaxed into the upper air. Once aloft they floated up and away above the trees and the lake, spinning out a quarter of a mile wake of string. It was less easy than it looked, for in the inconstant breeze the highest, most serenely soaring kites were apt to dip suddenly earthward and have to be shrewdly played from the Tower.

The boys never tired of watching and even our worldly-wise



George Cook was known to abandon dinner operations to stare upward with the rest. Elias always grew nervous when the kites soared almost out of sight, warning, 'They go too near sun, Massa, and will be burned.' I think, too, he felt the heavens might be affronted by Bill's presumption in sending up such freakish foreign gadgets. The chiefs came *en masse* to see the fun, and took turns to test the strong tug of the string, to play it out a little, or reel it in, while the local piccans stood

open-mouthed and the traffic along the market road bunched into knots of gaping villagers.

Sometimes a kite broke its mooring and came down in bush with Elias in hot cross-country pursuit. One old man, knowing nothing of Bill's kites, fled from the fantastically painted descending object which, he vowed, 'chased me from the sky'. Elias found him cowering under a tree and tried to explain, but the victim was convinced that this was a Jujū phenomenon. As he recovered his wits he regaled the villagers with a tall story about 'the thing from the clouds' which had come down upon him as a great portent. The villagers, themselves kite-flying initiates, listened and baited him mischievously.

KITE-FLYING AND THE JAILHOUSE

Daniel Dimmo, an agricultural school student, was a frequent visitor during his holidays at Agulu, which was his home town. Daniel was a youth with a lean and hungry look and a determination to make himself necessary to our household by way of advice on gardening. On his first formal call, he surveyed our flower beds and vegetable patch with an expert and mildly disapproving eye. Next day he came with many packets of seeds and the strictest instructions as to their planting, watering and tending. We found ourselves and Pius put to the test and did our best to come up to Daniel's standards. His next visits were mainly of inspection; more in sorrow than in anger he went the rounds, explaining our gardening faults (witness the 'whistling plant' which had not come up, and those stunted creepers) and emphasizing the poverty of our compost.

Yet more seeds were thrust upon us to replace the failures, and Pius developed a tendency to busy himself elsewhere when the importunate Daniel was sighted coming up the driveway. Clearly our friend's motives were not entirely selfless; he believed in reciprocal aid. From school he wrote often to Bill saying how glad he was to have 'befriended European' and sending frequent S.O.S.s for books and financial aid, saying, 'I should be pleased if this letter should reach you in a good temper for I am asking a big favour which no one but he who has love to someone will do for him.' At this point he suggested Bill might send him to England for higher education which would 'give me some respectable backbone'. His P.S. said dismally, 'All of my school uniforms are teard off, I am wearing only threads and have no money now. God be with you. If only you will send me a fountain pen happiness will burst out upon me like drops of perspiration. What of the whistling plant?'

This last remark was a brisk reminder of his continued zeal in respect of our garden. We did not ignore his contributions nor neglect to pay for them but, alas, we could not be the fount of all blessings poor Daniel imagined us.

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

Requests for aid and advice came often. The local tailor with the help of a scribe wrote: 'I respectfully inform you that after the devastation of thieves in my store I am hopeless. I humbly approach you to help me to suggest what branch to follow, I wish to be permanent in tailoring but hence my machine has been stolen I am put off by hand time. To be idle is against my wish, therefore I come to you to ask if I would have the chance of being engaged in that your department as a head man or any fair post. But if the idea does not work, please sir, help me to think of how to get my daily bread and clear the debt deposited for me by cruel robbers . . . May you pay your best and prompt attention in working any possible way to assist me.'

A long and indignant tale of matrimonial grief came from an ex-soldier labourer whose Biblical language left nothing in doubt. 'Please it is a pity and very shameful to me to report before you that the only wife of mine whom I married while I was in Army was taken by someone to please himself. So when I return from Army I see my wife being underpregnant and since then it took me a very long time to find out the man. At last I find out the dower which promotes my anger to see that it is a lazy bachelor who only lives to eat is the one that likes to please himself with my wife at home. While I was in Middle East sleeping alone and bearing the coldness of the desert every winter, roasting myself in desert sunshine, using my head to protect the country's life, I fronteered myself to die for the sake of my country. But this lazy fellow was only making the best plan to my wife, advising [her] to take all the amount I sent her to buy fish and meat and plenty of food so that they may eat bellyfull with sweet soup and injoy themselves on my bed and praying hard that I may die away and let them fear nobody. Sir, I would have kill him but it was that I promised to obey the Government advice. Our chief is another ful. When I returned from Army I take all this complaints to him but he thought my complaint was a funny or a joke and his

KITE-FLYING AND THE JAILHOUSE

answer was, if I am annoyed that someone conceives my wife, let me go and summons the man in court. He also said it shall be my money that shall judge me. Sir, I want you to tell me what I am to do. . . .'

But it was easier to solve this one: 'Sir we come to lay a complaint before you against Obuvudu who is your headman. We are the men you saw on the 6th inst. at a Juju compound near Agulu. On that day we were beating our tomtom before the idol. We did some dancings for you to photograph and you gave us four shillings (4/-) afterwards. When you had gone, Obuvudu jumped over us and took the four shillings which up till now he refuses to give us. Now we approach you just to see to this complaint and advise him to hand the money back to us, many thanks, sir . . .' (Our friend, the Chief, when reproached did hand back the money, though grudgingly and with the protestation that it had merely been 'borrowed'.)

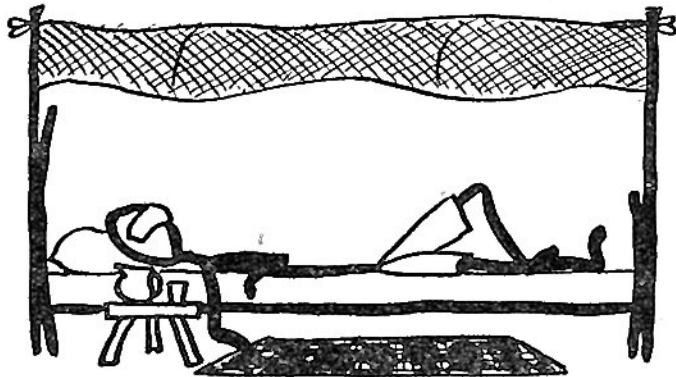
COME WET, COME DRY

TO the newcomer Nigeria appears to have no weather, but only stark seasons, wet from April until October and dry thereafter until March. During the long dusty months of drought one hankers for rain; throughout the time of flooding downpours when green beards of mould sprout overnight on shoes and books and clothes, one craves dryness. For anyone who holds to moderation in all things, the climate's two drastic extremes seem both wasteful and unnecessarily melodramatic. The regular annual seesaw between the wettest wetness and the driest drought knows nothing temperate. The heat, at least, is fairly constant, averaging eighty degrees Fahrenheit which on paper looks like a pleasant midsummer temperature, until you reckon with the humidity and the fact that nightfall brings little coolness. The wet season is less hot but because of its heavy dampness brings little respite from atmospheric oppressiveness. The dry season heat which can soar to one hundred and twenty degrees in the sun, and ninety in the shade, has its own discomforts despite its lower percentage of humidity. There is no escape from these sticky alternatives save perhaps at 'Harmattan time', usually in December, when for a few weeks a cool wind blows from the north — cold indeed where it begins in the desert spaces, but only pleasantly astringent when it reaches Southern Nigeria.

At Harmattan time white people find themselves briefly refreshed, glad of a second blanket for their beds and grateful for the unusually fresh air which has in it nostalgic hints of English autumns and the clean taste of September mornings at home. Africans shiver, calling this temporary surcease from the great heat, 'Winter', and they are as glad as the white man

COME WET, COME DRY

is sorry when the Harmattan abruptly ceases. During Harmattan the water in your washbowl is cold rather than tepid; though microscopic particles of dust carried on the breeze form a constant bloom on furniture and parch the throat, the luxury of many minor coolnesses is compensating. During this short time of respite the sky ceases to glare. Through a gentle haze the sun is a round coppery ball at which one may look without



blinking, and this milder sun sets in a calm red glowing unlike the fierce suns of other seasons.

After the break of Harmattan the dry season continues its motionless, implacable heat. Icewater becomes lukewarm in a few minutes; jelly melts on its way from refrigerator to table; bodily contact with canvas cots and deck-chairs makes clothes stick to the skin, and there is no lasting coolness even in shuttered rooms where the hot sunlight is banished and the floors newly damped. Siesta time is oven-hot. The favourite book which so far has made 'siesta' a pleasant time for reading, weighs heavy in your hand; the print dances and the brain lags. Ridiculously you complain, 'It's hot . . . too hot', forgetting that a discomfort dwelt upon is a discomfort increased. One sleeps a little, or falls into a dozing languor, to awake flushed and a trifle irritable, needing the restoration of bath and tea. Day after day

the sun rises in a sky like turquoise shot silk which later grows blank and colourless, a giant lid over a baking landscape. While watching the dull-eyed fowls ineffectually scratching in yellow clouds of hot dust, one has private foolish fantasies: how delightful it would be to sit dangling one's feet from the top of a glacial Alp; what joy it would be to toboggan down a snow slide with the diamond-bright air nipping nose and fingers; what rare pleasure even a London fog would be, frosty and chill, with coldness coming up from the pavements and everyone muffled against the rawness of the day!

Dry season vegetation was sere and brown. The garden plot languished and even Pius's Juju scarecrow withered, all arrogance parched away. Market vegetables diminished to spinach, onions and green papayas which endlessly boiled, curried, frittered and otherwise camouflaged, we ate without enthusiasm. Our lawn showed bald patches, especially in the centre where the happy feet of a party of village dancers had rubbed the grass away. Palm-tree fronds grew rusty at the tips. The long, wooden pods of the oil bean trees split open with a crack like gunfire, releasing the giant beans to earth, and in the night we started up at their resounding impact on the iron roof.

The vast colony of ants in our driveway tree thrived unceasingly in their black honeycombings which covered all of the main trunk and most of the lower branches. By some trick of osmosis many hardy shrubs stayed green and glossy, although the earth, where it was not impoverished dust, was baked to a brick-like hardness veined with deepening cracks; spilled water soaked away in an instant. Yet in some parts of bush stood the freakish 'rain tree' which slowly, incessantly wept moisture from its leaves and made a circle of rich dampness beneath. In the middle of the worst drought the rain tree, a law unto itself, provided its personal climate of wet coolness. In the way of the Tibetan priest who on frozen mountain tops generates a mystical warmth from his body, the rain tree stood green, lush and weeping in a sterile, dry-as-dust landscape.

Now the gullies and ravines knew no landslips; they were static dust-bowls rebounding heat from wall to wall, where only the febrile edges of the upper precipices showed how soon and how easily other splits would come. At this time Bill watched the flat stretches around the ravines. On some the tough-rooted shrubs, acioa and baffia, earlier planted, had taken hold and showed promise of closely binding the loose earth — and the Bahama grass with which some dangerous slopes had been seeded had already formed a tenacious mat against the shifting of the subsoil. New dams, drains, sumps and rain gauges spaced about the ravines anticipated the test of the heavy rains which the villagers, towards the end of their 'hungry season', awaited for the planting of fresh crops, the renewal of the earth and the gushing of water springs which now gave no more than a rusty trickle.

Even the lake was sluggish and yellow. From it, now that the rain tanks were exhausted, the lorry carried water up to the house, and our baths were necessarily shallow and unlovely. That this same lake water boiled and passed through the larder filter could be made fit for drinking, often surprised me. The laundry was not enhanced by the shortage of water or its yellowness, and the boys used such quantities of blueing in hopes of restoring whiteness that many white garments turned a pale green, interesting chemically or from an artist's viewpoint, but no pleasure to Madam. And the dry season ants' habits seemed more than usually exasperating. War was waged on them from time to time but their numbers never diminished nor did their persistence weaken. It was their way to get inside one's sandal and trapped, bite until the sandal was cast off and the minuscule tormentor routed. Small and insignificant individually, multitudinous and tenacious in their united aggravations, they eventually came to be so much a part of our scene that life without the everlasting tiny annoyances of ants could hardly be imagined.

Dry season eggs frequently caused George Cook to lament

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

loudly in the cookhouse when his hopes of a *soufflé* or a meringue were defeated with the cracking of each unpredictable ovoid. Poor George, for all his disciplinary army experience, he remained possessed of some artistic temperament and when frustrated would beat his head with his clenched hands, to the bewilderment of Elias who was less subject psychologically to the deeps of despair.

Our own fowls which we hopefully 'kept' and fed plumply in anticipation of fresh eggs, degenerated into lazy boarders which did nothing to justify the care George lavished on them. Yet when Bill threatened they must go, George usually found some pretext for their reprieve, at first saying that he could tell 'by the way they walk about' that they would soon lay. To my amateur eye the fowls' gait was no different, but we waited patiently. After some weeks Bill reminded George that the hens were as useless as ever — with the startling result next day that he had for his breakfast one palpably fresh egg. We suspected it was not the work of any of our slothful hens, but indeed it was a fresh egg and a tribute to George's ingenuity if not to his powers of prophecy.

When shortly afterwards one hen secreted three eggs and went broody, George's expansive smile said 'I told you so'. The eggs were left to hatch and became chicks, but no sooner did we begin to envisage a prolific henhouse than a hawk, in a succession of lightning swoops, carried away our hopes. This so blighted the mother's instincts and those of her sisters, that thereafter no egg was ever laid again in our compound, and the fowls achieved a garrulous old age under George's loving and still expectant eye. (Occasionally the unworthy thought came to me that the hens did lay sometimes, and that I paid George for this produce as market eggs. However, this could not be proved, and 'what the eye does not see . . .'.)

Towards the tail-end of the dry season the best European tempers are apt to fray and minor neuroses may begin to burgeon in the most placid souls. It was easy to lose patience

COME WET, COME DRY

over trifles and to lack both sense of humour and proportion when there was no escape from the day-by-day building up of heat and tension. There was a sense of waiting, as if most of the joy and virtue had been parched out of life, leaving only a prickling residue of discomfort to mortify the flesh and test the spirit. To catch such small stirring airs as might arise in the night, Bill and I moved our cots out to the veranda; even there our single sheets made warm covering and the mosquito nets under which we slept seemed like stuffy cages. The wood of doors and shutters shrank; paper curled as if scorched; leather lost its pliancy and grew hard. Hair crackled under the comb, and the refreshment of a tepid bath did not last throughout the sticky effort of putting on fresh clothes. The capacity of the human body for exuding moisture seemed to me at times as remarkable as that of the rain tree; we trickled as we walked or stood, and when we sat down found our clothes damply adhering to chair backs. Like Falstaff we 'larded the lean earth' and in the process waged a constant battle to preserve at least a façade of coolness in the face of great odds.

Mrs. Murphy, the cat, spread her plummy blackness in the coolest corners of the house. She had never seen a fireplace, the natural heritage of all cats, and showed no inclination to go anywhere near the cookhouse fire. Her active life was in the early mornings when she inspected the Tower for lizards and trod the garden delicately, amusing herself with grasshoppers and Pius's legs — and in the evening when flying beetles and insects attracted by our lamplight gave her some skirmishing exercise. Between whiles she took long, secluded siestas interrupted only by the boys' 'Pst . . . pst . . . chop for Missus Puss!' and brief, companionable visits to see what we were doing. Nothing disturbed the even tenor of her ways or the dainty composure with which she arranged her life. To me who often vainly tried to work against the heat and at first considered the siesta hours a waste of time, Mrs. Murphy was an example of how life in the tropics should be lived by the Lotus Eater. In

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

the last part of the dry season she wisely attempted no more than to exist decoratively and tranquilly, which was more than could be said of Madam.

The rainy season did not settle in all at once; its preludes were periods of flickering lightning at night, and in the daytime the uprising of sudden tearing winds blowing clouds of red dust. At first the lightning was a quiet, offstage affair uncomfortably reminiscent of other, war-time glowings when bombs fell distantly and the night skies held the red reflections of burning cities. Still, night by night we waited, watching the horizon, though this time welcoming the nearer approach of the rumbings and sheets of brilliance which tokened the coming of the rains. Then, usually in the afternoon, ragged clouds would begin to muster and darken in the east, even while over the compound the sun shone hot out of a clear sky. Then the boys would begin to take the veranda furniture into the house and to batten down the shutters as if in preparation for a siege. Always before the storm there was a heavy stillness which weighted the drooping palm fronds and magnified the smallest sounds. As the sky slowly darkened it shed a grey-green light in which all colours sharpened and all forms asserted their separate outlines, so that the smallest shrivelled grass blade seemed to stand apart from the rest and the eye was startled by the singleness of each stark bush and branch and leaf.

Then we heard the wind coming from a great distance, and watched a steaming wall of rain gradually obscure the valley and blur the lake. In the space of seconds it was upon us, with big drops pockmarking the dust and the palms bending to the thrashing of the gale. Soon all was noise and water. The coming of the first rains brought thunder and lightning which at night illuminated the countryside in swift successions of mauve-white glarings as bright as day, followed by crashes of unearthly noise. At such times we sat indoors listening to the sated gurgling of the rain tanks and the heavy thrumming of water on the roof. There was a feeling of primitive security within, of

COME WET, COME DRY

relaxation and respite from waiting. And best of all there was coolness which invaded the house with a welcome smell of damp earth. Our cots back in the house, we slept with windows fastened while the storm raged and the lightning made swift, striped patterns through the slatted shutters.

The rains transformed everything. George, returning late from market, splashed ankle deep up the driveway which was like a muddy creek; if he dropped a corncob or a banana it would swirl away out of reach in an instant. Trees and flower beds were islanded; everything dripped and chuckled wetly. Such villagers as ventured into the watery wilderness wore cartwheel-size raffia rain-hats, and the piccans walked along under banana leaf umbrellas. Bill created a precedent by donning his swimming trunks and going outside for a showerbath without reckoning on Elias, who came pelting after him with raincoat and umbrella.



'No,' Bill shouted, with waterfalls glissading from chin and shoulders, 'I am taking bath!' Elias looked dumbfounded and Bill explained himself, splashing by way of illustration, 'No need pass bath. I gettum in garden!'

'Oh?' said Elias, promptly fetching soap and standing by with a towel to lend a correct note to this unorthodox behaviour.

So the rains came. But this was no endless Noah's Ark season, for there were often several days together of clear skies. In the morning after a night of

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

deluge the sun shone brilliantly over a steaming landscape; the driveway was rippled as if the tide had just gone out and the compound looked newly scrubbed. Sometimes heavy rain and crystal-bright sunshine alternated in a single day with rainbows arching between times, and clouds like dinosaurs advancing and retreating. After the monotonous glare of the long drought the vagaries and emergencies of the wet season were a positive pleasure. It was good to have the rain tanks constantly replenished. A new, jubilant croaking from the tanks' wet surrounds showed that the frog population had its own reasons for rejoicing. With the renewal of succulence in grass and vegetation the scrawny bush sheep no longer searched in vain for green pasturage, and the fowls scratched the yielding earth more purposefully, making staccato exclamations of discovery. Swiftly the burnt lawn renewed itself and while the villagers hastened to plant fresh crops Pius set to work restoring our vegetable patch.

Every other day clothes, books and bedding were put out into the sun to arrest the dampness which caused a green veiling of mould to gather on anything neglected. During the rains the best-kept tropical bookshelves and desks smell musty. Snapshots grow blotchy; envelopes perversely seal themselves shut; typewriter and clock mechanisms are apt to rust as are sewing needles, despite their most careful proximity to oil or French chalk. Furniture must be frequently polished lest it take on a blue cast. Mildew is the all-pervasive enemy, sunshine the means of defence in a battle which must be unceasingly fought on the rainy season's domestic front.

Against erosion Bill gathered his forces again. The planting of barren slopes began afresh with the deep digging of more pits and drains to catch the flooding waters. Having already witnessed some results most of the villagers approved his work now; only a few diehards continued to set obstacles in the form of man-traps, jagged iron hooks embedded in pieces of wood and cunningly placed just below the soil surface to endanger the

COME WET, COME DRY

unwary bare foot. But the labourers, after several unhappy trips to the dispensary, had grown cautious of these devices and for the most part the work went on without serious incident. Yet the dwarf Juju cows were a problem. By government edict the owners were forbidden to let the creatures stray along the edges of the ravines where tender new growths of bush and grass made tempting pasturage. Still the cattle broke fences and browsed at risk of precipitating further landslips and themselves falling into the gullies. Betsy Trotwood and her furious sallies forth against goats in her garden was an amateur compared with Bill, who stalked the cattle constantly and wrathfully, and had endless palavers with the villagers concerning their wayward sacred charges. He pointed out the bitten foliage and trampled grass, the hoofmarks close to the brinks' edges, the danger to the cattle and the blighting of anti-erosion prospects. And still the cows roamed unchecked.

So Bill, mindful of other listening ears and watching eyes, told Obuvudu and Charles, 'There must be an example. The next animal you find trespassing is to be haltered and brought to the office. When the owner comes to claim it his name will be given to the Native Court and he will be fined.'

Shortly afterwards a messenger came to the gully where Bill was brooding over other ways and means, to say, 'Massa, cow he be caught and people be waiting.'

Tethered to the office veranda the diminutive hostage and its claimant were surrounded by excited, gesticulating villagers who had watched the cow's capture and been swift to inform its owner. Glad of the audience who would take this business to heart, Bill wrote down the man's name with a flourish and said he would probably be fined in the Native Court. Likewise all others whose cows wandered on ground agreed by the Native Court to be out of bounds would go to court and be fined. It was for their own good that they should keep their cattle away from the ravines and if they could not see this wisdom without having first to make forfeits, then fines they

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

must pay. Thus spoke Authority. The man took his cow away and the villagers followed him reflectively while Bill said, 'Now we'll have some peace from these confounded cows.'

For some days no cattle wandered. The Court met and gave the man a week in which to pay a fine of two shillings and sixpence. Then a deputation came to Bill (who had privately been expecting it) not to protest against the justice of the example but to propound a personal problem. Said the spokesman, 'Our brother is poor. He cannot pay the fine. His land grows no crops, his children are hungry and he is in despair. Now we know Massa is a rich man, a good father to the people. We have come to ask Massa to pay the money for our poor brother who has suffered enough. If Massa gives him the money it will make him happy and we shall all be grateful.'

There was more palaver, Bill protesting and the deputation agreeing with everything he said. Diplomatically they made it clear that the case had been proven, the man punished (in theory anyway) and the village taught an example. The government edict was now respected. No cows would roam again on forbidden territory for Massa had proved his wisdom in controlling this situation . . . But there was just this little matter of the *money* for the fine, a mere nothing to a rich man (like Bill) but a crippling burden for their unfortunate brother.

Bill paid the fine; it would have been churlish not to. He kept the good will of the villagers who obligingly kept their cattle away from the ravine edges for a week or so. Then one by one the little cows strayed back. 'Jehoshaphat!' said Bill. 'What Can a Man Do?'

Towards the middle of the rainy season a 'small dry' occurred, untimely and unwanted, jeopardizing crops and holding up some ambitious anti-erosion experiments. To Bill's lamentations Charles Superintendent replied helpfully, 'We have a rainmaker. I will bring him to see you tomorrow at five o'clock and he will tell you himself about his handwork.'

COME WET, COME DRY

The unexpected drought had already persisted for a week and showed no signs of breaking. All next day there was no rain and the afternoon waned, as dry as the morning. Then at five o'clock, just as Elias came in to tell us that Charles and 'one other' were coming up the driveway, we heard a thin pattering on the roof, unmistakably rain. This was no deluge, only the lightest shower lasting just long enough for Charles and the rainmaker to gain the house and make a dramatic, damp entrance. Then it ceased abruptly, as if it had fulfilled its purpose as a weatherman-showman's calling card.

The rainmaker himself was not imposing in appearance although he carried his head proudly as befits one of unusual talents. Through Charles he told Bill that he could 'make medicine to bring rain' at any time . . . for a fee. He did not work in the proper dry season, for that was not the time for rain, and it was not a good thing to 'spoil the seasons'. But when drought interrupted the wet season he could make plenty rain as could his fathers before him and all his family. 'Can you promise us rain for Thursday?' said Bill in the manner of someone ordering coal or groceries. 'That gives you two days for your preparations.'

'I must first find certain leaves,' said the rainmaker, 'and there is much else to be done. But I can make rain two days from this day, and when I have shown my handwork I will come for my fee.'

That night we had a brief second shower. Next day, although clouds gathered, only a few drops fell, without warning or much conviction. On the following day there were five showers so slight and swiftly over we wondered if they could count as 'rain', and on Thursday came the same succession of fitful



BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

Aprilly drizzles. It looked to us as if the rainmaker were working under difficulties, as if some potent ingredient must have been forgotten in the spells he was weaving. Late on Thursday Charles came to apologize on his behalf. 'He will not come to see you face to face because he is ashamed and cannot say why there is not yet rain. He has tried many ways. You have seen some of his work, but it is not good, and he does not take money for so little.'

For another week the 'small dry' persisted and it was apparent that the rainmaker had given up trying, for there was not so much as a teacupful of water sprinkled from the Agulu skies in the whole of that time. It was a bad interlude not only for him but for the rainmakers of the entire district who lost face wholesale. The villagers who depended on them to bring rain to their crops grew restive and finally angry. In the end a whole company of rainmakers, balked by some uncommon snag which baffled their most united operations, were driven to ask their District Officer for sanctuary from their own people's wrath. Still no rain, and no prospect of returning to their homes until a cloudburst caused their failure to be forgotten in general rejoicing. There is no dejection like that of a rainmaker whose magic has lost its power. It was a bleak time for those weather-wizards whose feats in the past had won them praise and veneration.

It would be easy to scoff at the rainmaker as an impostor who knows better than most when to expect rain and times his 'making' accordingly. Yet there are strange true stories of District Officers and others enlisting the help of the weather men both for and against rain. One official seriously told us that he had been provided with just sufficient rain over a certain quarter to enable his labourers to mix and dry the bricks for a much-needed building. He ordered the rain as required, and had it stopped upon request. Another said that certain difficult trekkings necessary to his work would have been impossible without the rainmaker's co-operation in holding the rain away

COME WET, COME DRY

from his route for a given time. Fantastic? But these officials were practical men not in the least given to fantasy. From their evidence and that of many others it would appear that rainmaking, while hardly an exact science, certainly 'has something'.

The 'small dry' did not last long enough to cause any damage save temporarily to the rainmakers' reputations. Thereafter the course of the wet season was fairly constant and as wet as the most radical moisture lover could wish. In the previous season we had grown tense and weary of drought; now in times when the rain gauges overflowed and the world seemed made of water, there were moments when the prospect of dryness, though utterly remote, seemed pleasing. Human nature is never content, but I hardly dared murmur lest I provoke Bill into reciting for the thousandth time in that climate, his favourite piece:

As a rule Man's a fool,
When it's hot he wants it cool,
When its cool he wants it hot —
Always wanting what it's not.

adding extempore:

When it's day he waits for night,
Can he never get it right?
When it's dry he wants it wet,
Forever Man is in a fret.
When it's wet he wants it dry,
Will *no* season satisfy?

BISMARCK THE HORNBILL

THE handwriting of Reverend Ibi's note to me looked hurried and the words were brief: 'I send you a bird which was donated to our Church Harvest Home Festival. We are trying to raise money for parish funds.'

The two shy little girls who were bearers of the note and the bird watched me anxiously. At first I thought the dragged object tucked under the arm of one of the children was another wretched chicken. When I realized it was a most unhappy wild fledgeling I felt a moment of sudden anger against the well-meaning Ibi and his Harvest Home. 'Parish Funds!' I fumed, while the children blinked nervously at my displeasure, 'Taking birds from their nests, tying their legs and carrying them like paper parcels! Elias, what do they think I will do with this poor bird?'

After some monosyllabic parley with them, Elias volunteered, 'They say "chop him" . . .' but at my expression he hastily added, 'or keep him in a cage.'

The children fixed gentle, puzzled eyes on me while Elias interpreted my wrathful remarks concerning cruelty to wild creatures. More comprehendingly they took the shilling I paid for the release of their limp burden, and proudly trotted off with their church money, leaving in my hands the half-dead fledgeling which was far too exhausted to protest. Its disproportionately large curved ivory beak gaped open; its eyes were filmed and I was sure it would never recover. Its neck and head had the baldness of extreme youth but its scrawny body had the beginnings of plumage, white on the breast, black on the undeveloped wings, black with white tips on the promise of a tail. Though as large as a pullet it was as helpless as a

BISMARCK THE HORNBILL

sparrow chick and flopped clumsily as we carefully set it free in a shady corner of the veranda. Then slowly it came to life, emitting at last a subdued, plaintive chattering to which we replied with offers of food. Corn and fowls' grain it took greedily only to eject it immediately and disappointedly, likewise the most tempting morsels we could produce from the larder. Slowly its eyes began to close again, its head to droop and wilt as if wholly defeated by shock and hunger. Hastily we sent a message to Charles who came instantly on his bicycle to tell us our refugee was a hornbill and must have grasshoppers.

At this all hands set to scour the lawn and Pius distinguished himself by catching ten grasshoppers in as many minutes, while Elias and George, on hands and knees, did their slower best. Languidly at first but with increasing gusto, the bird accepted this more lively fare, and at last revived enough to chatter for more, as if at last there was something to live for. At the fortieth grasshopper it signified enough, and we relaxed, only to face the problem of how to keep up with our patient's healthy appetite. At this point Elias disappeared, to return with a tin of crawling white grubs, large, fat and sectioned like caterpillars, with protuberant black 'eyes'. These, the boys told me, were 'good chop' much relished by the village people. With this opinion the fledgeling instantly agreed, accepting a succession of the repulsive offerings with squawks of enthusiasm which told us that if his life would so continue to improve in prospects, he had no intention of leaving it.

Pius constructed a large bamboo cage for the bird's safety at night; to this the obliging fledgeling adapted himself quickly. In a matter of hours, so clear were the chick hornbill's signs of individual character that we found ourselves referring to our boarder as 'he' rather than 'it'. Our plan was to provide food and shelter for just so long as these were required. Once airborne and capable of fending for himself, the bird would be free to take up his life again as a wild creature. For this reason, at first, we forebore to treat him as a pet, though sometimes

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

the temptation was strong; partly on account of his extraordinary Disney-bird eyelashes which gave him, even in his extreme youth, an air of comic sagacity, and partly because of his talkative chattering in which we thought we discerned a decidedly social inflexion. Because of the martial character of his beak we came to call him 'Bismarck' and for many days he was a happy part of the veranda scene.

Mrs. Murphy's reactions were mixed. She eyed the bird narrowly but made no move towards him. Perhaps she imagined him a weird species of chicken, and chickens had never interested her. Whatever her reasons she remained aloof, only mildly interested in his top-heavy ramblings along the veranda floor. It took Bismarck some time to learn to control his ungainly feet without falling over them, but once the art of hopping was mastered he gained a new confidence that went well with his complete set of feathers. These smoothly covered a neat head, a long neck and slim body, tufted around his legs and made his black wings strong. His tail lengthened rapidly. The grub and grasshopper diet must have had all the correct vitamins, for his plumage shone richly and his manner grew frisky to the extent of foolhardiness. No longer was he all beak and claws and appetite, but a well-formed, perspicacious adolescent, almost sure enough of himself to leave us.

Nightly, at dusk, when the time came to enter his cage, he watched other birds flying to roost, and instinctively essayed a few wing-flappings as if anxious to join his kin. Although in the daytime he was content to perch or hop about, the coming of night found him charged with an anxious restlessness. With increased determination his self-taught 'flying' became more adept. Convinced that soon he would fly away we put one of our linen name tapes on his leg in the event that we might later recognize him among his wild relatives who sometimes alighted in the compound's mango trees.

One morning while Bismarck was exercising himself on the lawn, two larger hornbills came to hover and chatter loudly

BISMARCK THE HORNBILL

in a way that signified some especial interest in him. Possibly they were his parents offering advice and warning as to the ways of humans. At any rate Bismarck did no more by way of acknowledgment than to cock his head and blink, even when one of the birds dropped him a grasshopper. Perhaps because he indicated in some way that he was quite well provided for, the birds flew away and did not return. Daily as he showed increasing signs of being able soon to fend for himself, he grew in friendliness towards us, stepping lightly to an outstretched finger, amusing his beak with buttons on shirts and dresses and showing a covetous, jackdaw interest in all shiny objects. Every morning his noisy clamourings for breakfast caused his meal to precede our own. A supply of grubs was always on hand, the less filling grasshoppers being reserved for Bismarck's odd-moment snacks of which it seemed he never could have too many. Strips of raw meat, we found, were acceptable; to his untutored eye they may have resembled worms. He liked pieces of banana, especially taken at our breakfast table where he watched the proceedings from the convenient perch of a lampstand. Towards this — despite Elias's stewardly conservatism which made our breakfast a formal affair — we often threw titbits for the fun of watching Bismarck catch them gracefully in his beak.

By this time, of course, it was no longer possible to think of Bismarck as just *any* bird. With every flip of his fantastic eyelashes and every morning squawk of welcome he endeared himself to us and we came to view his imminent departure with increasing sadness. His flying efforts had reached a point where he could fairly confidently stagger into the air for a succession of wingbeats and flop back to earth with something like a three-point landing. But he lacked sustained ambition, or perhaps the coaching of his parents, and Bill felt obliged to act as foster parent in the matter of flying instruction. Together they mounted the Tower, Bismarck perched on Bill's finger. At the top Bill launched our hornbill, and in the manner of a skater

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

newly on the ice or a greenhorn skier on his first slope, Bismarck put all of himself into the business of balancing; he glided tentatively, flapped his wings vigorously and suddenly began to fly perfectly as if the air had always been his chosen element, his tail an exact rudder and his wings the means for the most carefree dippings and climbings. When he came to earth he managed alone to leave it again, flying this time haphazardly away over the bushes until he was lost to view.

'There goes Bismarck,' said Bill sorrowfully, in the way of a parent who knows the child must go out into the world but fears for its safety. The lawn looked empty, the cage emptier and we told Pius to take it away. Though we did not confess it, we each listened for Bismarck's familiar chattering, and turned the pages of our books in a desultory fashion, occupied with other thoughts. During dinner we were unduly silent. Afterwards, in the middle of our ritual game of poker patience Bill said, 'I hope he's all right,' and I, too quickly for real assurance, said I was sure 'he' was. We went to bed gloomily, separately convinced of our un wisdom in letting Bismarck go out into the dangers of an African wilderness for which he should have been more gradually prepared.

Next morning Elias, bearing in early tea, abandoned his usual silent correctness by thumping the tray to rest beside Bill and exclaiming, 'Massa, massa, the bird he come back!' Bill was out on the veranda in a moment, and from the glad noises of welcome on both sides I knew an ecstatic reunion was being celebrated, and that our friend had not found the outside world so attractive that he wished to leave us for good. Mrs. Murphy was the only member of the household who was not pleased. She waved her tail airily and stalked off to commune with the lizards. Pius, unasked, gathered a rich harvest of grasshoppers and Elias hastened to bring a fresh supply of grubs. Meantime Bismarck, in his new adulthood, sat atop a shutter, unfurling his wings so that they drooped about his claws, and excitedly ruffling his neck feathers. This expression we came to know as

BISMARCK THE HORNBILL

'Bismarck's umbrella pose'; always thereafter he relaxed and ruffled himself simultaneously in this way when showing gladness in seeing us after any absence.

But his absences were never prolonged. Though as free as air to come and go as he wished, he considered the house a focal point for all his activities. Mostly he foraged for himself, though in lazy moments he came to tap meanfully at the covered basin of grubs which decorated one corner of the veranda balustrade. Usually his interest in us was purely social, and it was not long before we were surprised to realize just how much Bismarck's good opinion of us mattered. As 'company' he was a comedian, mischievous yet gentle, incorrigibly inquisitive but never destructive or a nuisance. It was his delight to stunt-fly in and out of the open windows, alighting on door tops or in the wall ventilation gaps, and dropping to rest on chair backs. When he could not find either of us he grew plaintive, flying, peering, chattering until he made sure of our whereabouts. Our first sight every morning was of Bismarck perched on the mosquito-netting rod above us, rending the dawn air with raucous salutations while he unfurled his wings in his 'umbrella pose' and beguiled us into waking and taking proper notice of him. Mrs. Murphy, whose habit it was to take a saucer of milk with us while we had our morning tea, cared nothing for this flamboyant behaviour. 'I keep myself to myself,' was her attitude. 'The conceit, the show-off ways of these intrusive birds!' Bismarck often eyed her scornfully twitching tail-tip with longing, and more than once when the cat was asleep save for that last flickering half-inch of furry tail, he hopped down to nip it in a spirit of investigation. For this audacity he deserved to be reprovved but Mrs. Murphy, as dignified in her stupors as when awake,



BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

gave him only a cold stare. Daily we expected hostilities, but no matter how plainly Bismarck asked for punishment, he never caused the cat to unsheathe her claws.

Perhaps Mrs. Murphy had taken note of that large, powerful beak at which our visitors often exclaimed fearfully when the bird made friendly overtures towards them. It was indeed a sharp weapon when used practically, but socially Bismarck's gentleness was constant, his beak only a playful tool for inquiring into textures and movements. From a chair back he would investigate the nature of an ear lobe, or twisting himself sideways, consider the feel and purpose of spectacles and eyebrows. Buttons, bangles, rings and brooches roused high excitement in him, likewise the contents of pockets into which he plunged his head delicately and fearlessly in hopes of rich loot. One guest whom we carelessly forgot to warn, was made breathless by the sudden looming up of what must have seemed a large and hostile bird which aimed straight for the glittering pin on her bosom. Bismarck's attention had to be promptly deflected before our visitor had hysterics. 'Why,' she said, shocked, 'that's a dangerous creature.' We relayed this to our airy friend who was

by now half asleep on a shutter top. He opened one eye and made a derisive noise. There was a good deal of Peck's Bad Boy in our bird.

We did not seek to train Bismarck in any way. It just happened that he came to recognize Bill's whistle and never failed to answer it by promptly appearing. My whistle was also effective, but he was really Bill's bird, and would follow him with a devotion and trust sometimes embarrassing. Bill carried him nowhere; it would have been unthinkable that Bismarck should not be entirely free in all his comings and go-



BISMARCK THE HORNBILL

ings. But through some mysterious process of affection in his bird brain Bismarck often insisted on accompanying Bill down the driveway to the office, stunting along from tree to tree to the vast astonishment of the villagers who could hardly credit this strange attachment. In the small mud building which was Bill's governmental sanctum, Bismarck lent a note of happy abandon to the austere scheme of memoranda, files and no-nonsense anti-erosion graphs. Through too closely inquiring into a red inkwell he developed a bright crimson beak-tip which gave him more than ever the appearance of a slapstick clown. One of his minor wickednesses was a habit of flying away with erasers, but for the most part he sat on Bill's desk like a cheerful raven — not the dismal Nevermore Bird, but another who took joy in life and with blithe generosity noised his enthusiasms abroad.

In the house he soon became acquainted with my sewing machine and typewriter, both of which had shiny attachments and plenty of movement to fascinate him. Since he was no help in sewing or typing I sometimes tried to undertake such duties secretly, but in this underestimated Bismarck's keen hearing and vision. With a flurry of wings and an unholy light of discovery in his eye, he would come as if jet-propelled from the outdoors.

Sewing was impossible while he perched alongside, eyeing the turning wheel in a way which boded disaster if I continued. As for typing I learned patience, even when the bird discovered the entertainment of perching on the carriage and moving along with it, not in the least disconcerted by the ringing of the machine's bell at the end of each line or the ensuing jerky backward movement of the roller. At first I complained to Bill, 'How can I concentrate with this bird riding on my typewriter all the time?' 'Throw him out,' Bill advised callously, 'show him who's boss.' And Bismarck would seem to wink from his shutter at such a preposterous notion.

'He's *your* bird,' I would unfairly say, especially after Bismarck had done something downright prankish, like robbing my sewing basket of three yards of lace which he draped

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

artistically in the top branches of the mango tree. 'You deal with him.'

But in truth we were so flattered by Bismarck's interest in us and our affairs that we welcomed him wherever and whenever he chose to join us. At siesta time he usually looked in for a social interlude which Mrs. Murphy, who liked to nap quietly at the foot of my cot, considered positive sacrilege at this sacred hour. She did not care for a third wakeful party who pantomimed sand-bathing in the net above, swooped down to practise pneumatic drilling with his beak on my dressing-gown buttons, or perched on my book all agog for some really rousing pastime. Only when Bismarck, his claws curled about a net rod, himself sunk his head into his feathers and went to sleep, was the afternoon at peace.

In flight Bismarck was indistinguishable from any member of the flocks of hornbills which streamed across the sky or chattered in groups on the highest branches of cottonwood or iroko trees. Some called them 'stick birds' because their bodies were so slender, their necks so long and straight in flight that beak, neck, body and tail seemed all of one slim piece, carried by broad, strong wings. There were hundreds of them, all alike in plumage and voice, yet — and this was something we vainly wondered about — there was, there could only be, one Bismarck. We were careful not to overestimate his intelligence or exaggerate his capacity for the kind of friendliness one usually expects from a dog; both existed and were proven daily. Did this mean that all hornbills, described by one naturalist as 'unusually wary and shy of people', could in Bismarck's circumstances behave as he did?

It seemed quite possible. After all we had not selected our bird from a list of promising hornbill applicants. Bismarck's original meeting with us was purely coincidental. Although no other hornbills shared his peculiar education they must have had as strong social potentialities. Or, we wondered, was it wrong to confuse the spheres of men and birds? We remem-

BISMARCK THE HORNBILL

bered reading Darwin's account of his visit to the uninhabited Galapagos where the birds, even the eagles, accepted without the least apprehension his presence among them. From this example of harmony one might deduce that man has wilfully separated himself from wild creatures, earned their fear and distrust, shut himself out of a whole world of natural pleasures and sympathies. Man is supposed to be living in an era of advancement; constantly he uncovers scientific wonders which may change the whole face of his existence. He has unleashed power beyond his most fantastic imaginings and caused himself to triumph over many of his natural limitations. Yet he knows 'astonishingly little about the creatures which inhabit this earth with him. Scientifically, zoologically perhaps, working with microscope and camera he has collected data concerning the habits of many creatures — but in terms of a different, more human understanding, he lags far behind. Even when he is capable of this understanding the pace and character of modern living prevents him from developing it.

Gentleness with animals might be considered one of the most revealing attributes of a civilized person or country. Cruel or thoughtless treatment of wild or domestic creatures is the mark of the barbarian, no matter how civilized he may think himself. In Agulu the villagers had no comprehension of 'kindness to animals'. The idea of 'being friends' with any creature was completely foreign to them, for in their eyes animals and birds were simply a lower order of beings, useful only as meat. To their sufferings they were strangely deaf and blind, taking no more pity on a trussed, anguished dog in a dog market than they would on a tree or a stone. Their cruelty was not wilful; it was the product of ignorance and a form of total insensitivity. In so many ways their living showed sensibility and a primitive wisdom, yet in their treatment of animals and birds they were barbarians. This contradiction baffled us (as it has done many more profound thinkers) and at no time did we even touch upon an explanation.

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

Although Bismarck seemed to have no fear of the boys he would not submit to being touched by them, whereas even a strange white person could pick him up within a few minutes of acquaintance. We could only imagine that the bird could distinguish between lightness and darkness of complexion, and that towards the latter he harboured an instinctive mistrust. Once when I had over my shoulders a dark brown sweater with sleeves hanging loose, he refused to come near me, but with the removal of the garment was as companionable as ever. When we made it known to the villagers that Bismarck was under our protection they respected what was to them just another of our peculiarities. The boys, who at first had certainly looked on Bismarck only as potential 'chop', shortly came to consider him as an individual personality, and while we were not so optimistic as to believe this education would long outlast their acquaintance with the bird, we hoped it might linger a little while. At first we believed that Bismarck's example might possibly illuminate the villagers' imagination, but it resulted only in their bringing to us two civet cats, a young heron and a wave-bird, with an obvious notion of making hay while the sun shone. The wavebird died in our hands; the heron went back to the lake and the civet cats to bush. We paid ransom for all these but had to refuse any further dealings. As opportunists our villagers knew few equals and they must have been disappointed when what seemed like a promising market closed so abruptly.

Bismarck's combination of wild and tame ways continued. From the outset he had chosen his own night-time roost in a deep thicket behind the house, and disappeared towards this at the same time every sunset. No matter how intriguing his interests with us on the veranda, the Tower or the croquet pitch, or how we beguiled him into staying a little longer, he would grow restless, watch the sky intently, and leave us as dusk came. Several times by way of experiment we whistled for him after he had gone to roost. Habit triumphing briefly over instinct, he would return to stay with us for a few minutes,

BISMARCK THE HORNBILL

but never longer. He would not come back a second time and we forbore to persuade him. During the day, after providing his usual alarm-clock service and breakfasting with us, he spent part of the morning in his own pursuits, returning as the spirit moved him, or at our summons, to join in official or domestic business. At siesta time he came, and again in the later coolness to take part in our brisker recreations. Our Agulu Version croquet took on an extra hazard when the bird began to share Mrs. Murphy's interest in the game. Had we acquired Alice in Wonderland flamin-goes as well no one would have been particularly surprised, least of all the Fathers who in their blessed Irishness, accepted the most curious situations matter-of-factly. (Another R.C. Mission had a favourite tame chimpanzee which often rode with them in the mission car's front seat, upright like a person, between the two priests. Passers-by glancing into the car often wondered if they had suffered a hallucination.)

One of Bismarck's diversions was his daily bath at which Bill officiated, pouring pitchers of water over him until, drenched to the last pin-feather and eyelash the bird flapped wetly away to sun himself on the cookhouse roof. There, turning this way and that like a bathing beauty, he preened his feathers in a passion of vanity. Although he made frequent friendly overtures to the fowls they would have none of him, perhaps associating his size and broad-fringed wingspread with their fear of hawks. So always when Bismarck alighted sociably among the hens there was indignant outcry and much ruffling of feathers. With his own kind he was under no such stigma. Briefly he joined hornbill conclaves and choruses on the highest treetops, but only for so long as suited his odd timetable. Like



BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

the Cat That Walked By Itself, Bismarck kept his separate identity no matter what other hornbills did, or where they flew.

Sometimes Bill feared for our pet. Once when they were returning from office to house together, they encountered an old man, a stranger, who stopped and stared. Then rubbing his stomach he approached, pointing at Bismarck perching on



Bill's wrist. Bill made strongly negative gestures whereupon the old man spoke up, still pointing at the bird. 'You eat um?'

'I no eat um,' Bill said, shocked, 'this bird he is my friend.'

At this the old man rocked with laughter and wandered off to repeat this extraordinary joke to his friends. Later that day Bismarck disappeared, and when by nightfall our whistle brought no reply we were oppressed with the certainty that he had met some distressing end. During the night I awoke sensing something grievously amiss and remembered that Bismarck had gone. The morning of St. Patrick's Day came without his salutation, and we visited the Fathers at the uphill mission. There the Fathers attempted consolation by saying that perhaps St. Patrick would restore the bird to us. (This was momentarily comforting until I began to doubt whether

BISMARCK THE HORNBILL

the Irish saint knew about the especial peculiarities of our hornbill, or indeed of the temptation Bismarck must have been to our villagers.) Outwardly we expressed the reasonable opinion that Bismarck had simply gone back to a completely natural life. (Had not even Elias suggested, 'The bird he have gone to be with his own people?') Inwardly we knew that was nonsense. So another night came and another quiet dawning.

But Bismarck came back. We were on the Tower balcony watching a flock of passing hornbills when one of their number detached itself and came to us screeching welcome. With his wings draped in the familiar 'pose' he made much of us, and we of him; thenceforth all was as before. When twelve officials came from distant parts to hold a committee meeting in the dining-room (the office was too small) they had to put up with an exhibition of acrobatics from Bismarck who enlivened what had promised to be dull proceedings by practising dive bombing over the heads of Government. Bill apologized at first, but since the entertainment appeared quite welcome, Bismarck was allowed to stay. However, eventually, the murmur of official conversation so stupefied him that he drowsed openly and discourteously on an adjacent lampstand, his somnolence a hornbill's frank comment on the stodginess of human behaviour.

Sometimes it was difficult to persuade Bismarck to stay behind when we started out in the lorry for 'trek' or town. More than once Bill found himself foolishly and vainly saying, 'Go home, boy,' to the bird when Bismarck curled his claws atop a portion of the lorry, braced himself against the breeze and seemed determined to ride with us. Pius was set to lure him back to the veranda with grubs while we made off. Always on our return the bird came down the driveway alongside the lorry to greet us, with Mrs. Murphy sauntering slowly after in the more constrained way of cats. Bismarck was a fixture (if anything so mobile and airy could be called fixed) in our *ménage*. Daily our new discoveries about him were accom-

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

panied by his fresh interests in our affairs. When Bill was amusing himself by painting lifesize pictures of exotic insects and wondering if he were transferring their colours exactly to paper, Bismarck flatteringly pecked at the reproductions, tokening his notion that they looked real enough. He showed that he could easily distinguish between Bill and me, declaring his favouritism always to Bill if both of us summoned him at the same time.

The bird's fate when we went back to England on leave was a problem which frequently troubled us. Caging Bismarck was not to be thought of, nor the alternatives of either giving him to anyone or simply abandoning him. The problem was resolved for us, but not without sadness. In some encounter the nature of which we could only surmise, he lost several large feathers from one wing. This made his flying difficult and erratic. Then an early wet season deluge hit the village with unusual force; the wind was a day and night gale with sluicing rain. Afterwards we found our bird in the driveway with his damaged wing in much worse condition. Although he could glide down from a height he could not remain aloft, but would fall again and again to earth. His attempts to soar upwards were strenuous but in vain; he was earthbound with all the power and magic of his flight gone. As if he sensed something seriously amiss with his world he refused food and began to mope and pine in gloomy convalescence which Bill and I watched with growing anxiety. Nightly his instinct prompted his return to roost in the thicket, and Bill did his best to help him to gain it, for Bismarck could not reach the height unaided.

At that time two doctors, one a Zoological Society member, were visiting the uphill R.C. Mission and we asked their advice. Kindly and carefully they examined Bismarck and shook their heads over his wing, which they said was irreparably damaged and meant that the bird would surely fall prey to some wild creature, or die in his own time by constantly attempting to fly and falling to earth. Moreover, there was danger from the village.

BISMARCK THE HORNBILL

Our first impulse was to make a very large cage in which we might keep and care for Bismarck and hope for the best, but we knew this invalid imprisonment could offer him no more than a slow death. At last we accepted our doctor friends' offer to put him to sleep, and this was done so quickly and gently that Bismarck could not have known his passing.

Buried under his mango tree he left an emptiness behind. Sentimental perhaps — but Bismarck was a friend; loyalty and devotion are real qualities no matter how unlikely their dwelling places. We knew that we had lost not just a novel plaything, a decorative and amusing pet, but more — a personality we had only begun to appreciate. So passed our beloved Bismarck who taught us much and whom we mourned unashamed.

CHAPTER IX

ON TREK

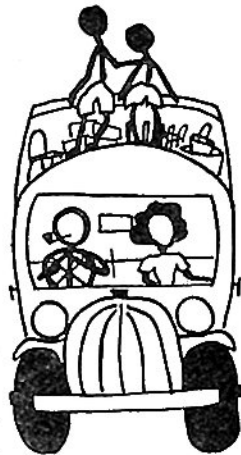
ACCORDING to the dictionary 'trek' comes from the Dutch *trekken*, 'to draw', and means: to drag a vehicle; to journey by ox wagon; to migrate; to tramp and camp dragging one's equipment. In the old days when the African hinterland was only vaguely mapped, 'trek' was a word rightfully used. Old Coasters, missionaries, traders and government officers did indeed 'tramp and camp', often scorning the hammock slung on bearers' poles, and subsisting on native food or whatever they could shoot for the evening cooking pot. Camp equipment was toted on the heads of more bearers, and journeys were reckoned in days rather than hours. This arduous way of covering the country involved hardships but Old Coasters often speak favourably of it, telling of exhilaration in the completion of a difficult journey and of satisfaction in coming to know territories and people more intimately than is possible when using mechanized transport.



Today in Nigeria there are still many places difficult of access where the traveller must go on foot, on bicycle or by canoe, but much of the country has roads. Some, connecting the administrative centres, are admirably surfaced; others are no more than rudimentary tracks which yet await the attention of the Public Works Department. Travelling by car and lorry is not unusual, and generally successful so long as the driver makes allowances for breakdowns, has an extensive tool-kit, an

ON TREK

emergency supply of petrol, a versatile way with recalcitrant carburettors and feed lines — and not least important, a limitless patience when he and his car are stalled miles from anywhere under a blazing sun. The shiny modern car is most socially presentable and makes an impression in government stations and in front of clubhouses; the kit car, resembling the shooting brake, is perhaps the lightest and most adaptable vehicle, while the capacious heavy lorry is more impervious to the punishment of dust and deluge. Generally speaking the ox-wagon connotation is outmoded. Obviously it would be absurd to 'go on trek' in a streamlined Chevrolet, so the journey has come to be known as 'going on tour'.



If this affronts imaginations addicted to Darkest Africa adventure stories there is solace in remembering that there remain great stretches of West African forest, plain and jungle which can be traversed only by the old method of foot-slogging along time-worn paths leading from village to village. It is the way of many travellers now and will be for years to come. Nigeria does not blossom with arterial highways overnight, and few would have it so.

When Bill and I went any distance afield we took with us an amount of gear which would have horrified the tough old-timers whose bush equipment was a mosquito net, a frying pan and a change of socks. Our occasional nomadism could hardly be called 'camping', yet no item of our equipment seemed either luxurious or superfluous. There were our folding canvas cots, rods and nets, with bedding stowed in the canvas bed bags; there were folding chairs and a collapsible table, a wash basin and a small canvas bathtub, a pressure lamp for us and lanterns for the boys, a water filter, regulation tin box

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

(airtight and ant-proof) for clothes, books and personal things, a 'chop box' containing dishes, cutlery, flour and tinned stuffs — the cook's tools (including two kerosene tins for the making of a temporary stove), buckets, pots and pans, extra canisters of petrol, and finally the boys' own sleeping mats and 'chop'. Packing all this and more looked like a laborious business, but the boys took it as a matter of course, often having to be restrained from adding the best tablecloth and such frills as flower vases and bric-à-brac without which they thought our surroundings away from home would be too bleak to be borne. The moves seemed to me sometimes like covered-wagon migrations, especially when Cook, knowing the markets for miles around and taking a poor view of some of them, insisted on carrying fowls, whole sticks of bananas and enormous yams, as if he imagined we might be marooned for countless days on the verge of starvation in the wilderness.

With our house, so to speak, loaded on behind, getting away on time was problematical, for there were usually last-minute emergencies in larder or cookhouse, or when Mrs. Murphy disappeared as cats will when they sense a serious disruption in household routine. Often Bismarck had to be dissuaded from coming with us, likewise a hopeful congregation of villagers infected by our departure with a roving impulse to visit distant friends and relatives. Bill, a punctual soul, found it necessary to lay down the deadline for leaving a good hour earlier than we needed to go, reasoning that by this ruse we might hope to be no more than an hour late in starting. Usually between the impetus of Bill's strictures on punctuality and the brake of the boys' own slower habits, a compromise was achieved. We were never punctiliously early or distressingly late, and everyone was moderately satisfied.

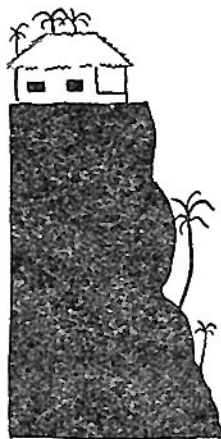
Rest-houses varied. The one overlooking the ravines had been built as a camping place for Soil Conservation officials on tour. Its site, though unbeautiful, was practical. No official could be more on the spot than here where he was faced by the

ON TREK

enormous cracks and fissures in the earth's surface which shouted Erosion at his very doorstep. It was a gesture of confidence, too. One could easily throw a stone from the camp veranda into the ravine. Sometimes I thought King Canute, with the waves lapping at his feet, must have felt as we did, camping so close to the ravine's hungry maw. Canute said, 'Waves, advance no further.' Bill and his colleagues said, 'The gullies' spreading will be stopped!'

The rest-house so bravely posted on this front line of defence was a modest little place, half of it roofed veranda, the remainder divided into a small all-purpose room, larder and wash-room, cement-floored throughout (as a measure against termites) and palm-leaf thatched, with boys' quarters and a miniature cookhouse behind. The immediate view across the gully was of islanded, avalanched forest inhabited by a large colony of grey monkeys. During the day none were to be seen, but in the cool quiet of early morning or late afternoon they frisked and chattered in great numbers, climbing the jagged ledges of their natural sanctuary to stare across at us, as we did at them.

If we stood quietly whole families would come out to play in the sunlight, whisking about the pinnacles of their chasm-surrounded castle while one old grandfather stood sentinel above. Sometimes they seemed to take a sudden dislike to us, chattering resentfully, jumping and scampering in anger and alarm, hurling ribald comments across the gulf and stirring themselves into clannish simian hysteria which culminated in their abrupt disappearance and silence — until next day when the scandal of our presence would again be investigated and denounced with fresh vituperation from the monkey tribe.



BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

The ravine rest-house was a peaceful spot in fine weather, but when the bare expanse of eroded country on which it stood was swept with rain shot through with lightning, it seemed as flimsy as a matchbox or Charlie Chaplin's avalanching cabin in 'The Gold Rush'. On stormy nights when all outside was pitch darkness and the ravines were blotted out in driving rain, we sat indoors, the mosquito nets stirring and the lamp flickering when gusts of wind smote the walls and tugged at the thatch. It was lonely, yet exhilarating. We read old newspapers and played poker patience for fabulous stakes while the shutters rattled and flakes of whitewash dropped from the walls. In such conditions it would have seemed necessary to dine on dry bread and cheese or beans eaten straight from the tin. Yet the undaunted George, his lantern a dim pilot light in the cookhouse and his kerosene tins mounted on a raised mudbank, never departed from his ritual preparation of a three- or four-course meal for us, served by an unruffled Elias with as much ceremony as if the elements were not raging or the roof apparently in imminent danger of leaving its moorings altogether.

Other rest-houses in the district were more substantial bungalows which local caretakers kept supplied with wood and water in readiness for travellers. On arrival with our laden lorry the settling-in routine was always the same. The deck-chairs were unloaded and within fifteen minutes tea was served. Elias made up the cots while George got to work with his gear in the cookhouse. Before dinner the canvas tub was twice filled. Certainly we did not dress for dinner in accordance with the legend of the Empire Builder who keeps a stiff upper lip by donning evening dress in bush, nor did we ever meet anyone who practised this stimulus against possible loss of morale.

In the evenings Bill was usually busy with visitors from the local villages who came to discuss erosion or agree payment for the building of labourers' huts. At these palavers contracts had to be prepared, understood and signed, which business was always preceded by long-drawn-out talk, coming at length to

ON TREK

the interpreter's slow reading of the papers in English and in Ibo, and finally to the appending of the contractors' 'signatures'. These were usually thumbprints witnessed by the interpreter and whoever else happened to be able to write his name. Once there was weighty pantomime with a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles which a village elder brought out from his waistbelt and carefully clipped on his nose so that he might better peruse his contract. For some minutes he mumbled seriously to himself, running his finger along each line (although we knew he could not read) and at last putting his mark cautiously on the dotted line as if he were lighting a stick of dynamite. When he took off his spectacles and tucked them away for safekeeping, we noticed they lacked glass, but no one was any the less impressed.

From time to time Bill made spasmodic attempts to root out the system of bribery which spread through all ranks of his workers and occasionally caused a flare-up of resentment from some hard-pressed bottom dog, and a plea to Bill for help. But where to begin? As a parallel to the rhyme: 'Big fleas have little fleas to torment and to bite 'em, Little fleas have lesser fleas and so *ad infinitum*', bribery in its ramifications of flea-bites caused an itching in every palm, from the supposedly scrupulous Superintendents down to the lowliest digger of ditches.

The Chinese call such infectious bribery 'squeeze money', the Americans 'protection' or 'graft', the British 'oiling the wheels', the Africans 'money for *dash*'. Whatever it may be called the habit is pernicious and in Nigeria it pervades every kind of African association and service. He who crossed another's palm with silver or a *dash* 'in kind' hoped for the favour of extra consideration, or at least insurance against dis-favour. In the overworked bush hospitals African orderlies were known to suggest to the relatives of patients that a little something on the side could buy a little extra care for the sick person, and no *dash* meant only the most cursory attention in

nursing. Clerks in post offices and warehouses had inconspicuous ways of extracting *dashes* from customers who saw no reason why public service should not be put on a more personal basis.

He who was relatively high on the ladder was apt to indulge all the feudal whims of minor extortion, sometimes practically painless to the subscriber, more often a considerable strain on his nerves and pocket. The ins and outs of this were subtle. The underdog who kept the good graces of the top dog, in hopes of recommendation for promotion or for the privilege of working at all, rarely complained. After all, he reasoned, when he reached a top dog position (as he might if he provided *dashes* largely and frequently in the right direction) he would be able to recoup his losses by using the same methods from which he had himself suffered. This seemed to him a logical reasoning, having nothing to do with matters of ethics. Top dogs and underdogs alike felt that every man had his price.

So it was that the Superintendents generally extracted an initial sum, a kind of entrance fee, from a new labourer who, since his qualities were unknown, could easily be denounced as worthless and fired if he refused to pay. The labourer would probably have to pay his headman — next in line to the Superintendent — as well, and if one of his own brothers had been instrumental in getting him the job, there would be yet another fee. Bill knew all about this, but to get proof of exact cases was almost impossible, for there were three hundred labourers and if one among them dared to bring up the forbidden topic before Bill, his story would be confused by those of twenty others anxious to ingratiate themselves with the fee-taker. Yes, they would say, Gabriel (or Moses or Kaulo) was seen to bring three fowls and some yams to the Superintendent's compound, but among neighbours cannot there be exchanges of food? Did not Gabriel himself ask and receive a calabash of palm wine and some money from his brother who became a labourer only yesterday? The Superintendent was a good man, and so was

their headman, asking nothing from them. Gabriel was just making trouble. He was a bad worker (said the Superintendent), jealous and angry because he had not himself been promoted to headman. And so on.

Under this system the danger was that an inferior worker who paid his tax obediently and regularly had a better chance of being pushed up the scale than a good worker who grudged payment or had so many other calls on his small salary that he could not afford the wherewithal for buying his superiors' good graces. To keep a clear, impartial record of each member of crews scattered throughout a large district would have required a whole posse of inspectors, and even then the inspectors might themselves have been vulnerable to temptation, Bill could only use his eyes wherever he was, sniff the wind and keep his wits about him. By so doing he unearthed the curious fact that five new labourers whom he had personally engaged and whose names he had written in the roll call with his own hand, could not be seen anywhere, although their wages were drawn and in theory they laboured. There were still three hundred labourers and five voices still said 'Sah!' to the five new names the clerk called out with the rest each morning.

Bill pondered the mystery until one dawn he woke up, said, 'Masqueraders' with an air of revelation and went swiftly across to the office to listen to the roll call and scan faces again. So it was. The five new men, presumably unwilling or unable to pay their entrance fee, had been quietly and skilfully sent packing by the offended Superintendent who replaced them with five others more obliging. Since the original names could not be altered or erased without explanation, the impostors had been told to take these for the time being. No one thought Bill deigned to take note of the physiognomical or other differences among his labourers. What were five faces, five voices to the Massa, among so many? The organization was in for a surprise. Learning that the Superintendent was under a cloud, the original five banished workers returned to oust their

usurpers. The Superintendent was deposed, and Bill, like Diogenes, searched for an honest man to replace him.

Here he was confronted, not for the first time, with the knowledge that in questions of ethics the workers did not share his own viewpoint. A Superintendent who never expected any 'money for *dashi*' from them or used his position to personal advantage, would have been regarded as a queer and not very bright specimen. It is doubtful if they would have worked happily under such a paragon, if such a man could have been found. Bill had to recognize that a system that was in the blood and fibre of the local people could not be changed in a month, or even a year. Resignedly he elevated the best and most upright among his headmen, not expecting the impossible but merely hoping that the new Superintendent would use some discretion in his extortions. An eminently unsatisfactory conclusion, he admitted, but not even the most zealous crusader, alone, could change this natural state of affairs. Bill had no love for the middle path at any time, but in questions of bribery and many other local abuses on which he tried reforming tactics, he was forced to realize that the middle path was the only way.

In the outlying places where we stayed, Bill's functions ranged from the official inspection of progress in buildings and anti-erosion projects, to the education of village diehards in the wisdom of soil conservation measures, and the maintenance of happy relations generally. The contractors' work often caused him grief, as on occasions when he came across carpenters blithely building a hut with two large doors and one small window when he had specified two large windows and one small door. To explain to the bushmen the meaning of 'plumb' in relation to roofs and floors was as difficult as the expounding of Einstein's theory. The floors often sloped at one angle, the roofs at another, while posts supposed to be upright slanted drunkenly in the way of the Crooked Man Who Built a Crooked House. It worried Bill, who likes his buildings foursquare and

does not care to see them leaning towards each other like groups of alcoholics or Towers of Pisa.

There was some palaver about that, and about the deep sumps which some farmers filled in when no one was watching. A typical complaint was that the holes 'worry me too much'; understandably when animals and piccans were apt to fall into them in the dark. There was nothing for it but to fence many of the drains and keep watch lest anyone succumb to the temptation of the fences as easy firewood.

There were social problems, too, arising out of Bill's guarantee that his labourers in the camps he had set down throughout the district would not interfere with local people or crops. A defaulting labourer would immediately cause a storm of protest from the village whose attitude towards outsiders, if not openly hostile, was always tinged with suspicion. There came one complaint from a villager who maintained that his wife was being led astray by a labourer who night after night inveigled her away from her sleeping husband and into his own hut. The man brought his erring wife to Bill and during the ensuing palaver she sat demurely, denying everything; once she giggled and the interpreter frowned. Had the woman no shame? Several witnesses declared they had seen her climbing through the window of her lover's hut. Then she folded her hands, all smiles, and said yes, it was true after all, and moreover she was going to have a piccan soon — as was perfectly obvious. 'You see,' the husband tiraded via the interpreter (for whom all this and especially the witnesses' realistic detailed accounts meant unusual efforts in presenting an expurgated version) 'how your labourers take our women and cause them to laugh at us.'

The business was settled with a promise that the amorous labourer would be transferred elsewhere. Then Bill, fearing other repercussions, said he hoped the man would forgive his wife and not send her away. The man replied that indeed he would not, for the woman belonged to him. Had he not paid good dowry money for her? Also, would she not soon deliver?



'Deliver?' said Bill — 'Oh, the baby! You do not mind that?'

'We are glad to have a piccan at any time,' said the husband. 'My wife is not a bad woman. It is all the blame of that other. We do not blame the piccan.' Which on reflection seemed good sense. The woman followed her man out docilely. Perhaps she reasoned that her days of climbing in and out of windows were past anyway and it was as well to return to more settled habits. But Bill looked puzzled for some time afterwards.

Not all the labourers in the camps were single; family men were allowed to bring *one* wife with them. But some of the wives' were so young, scarcely more than small children, that Bill protested, saying the camps were not supposed to include kindergartens. He was promptly informed that while the little girls were not 'proper wives' they were 'wives-in-training' who cooked chop and kept their master's hut clean until they were old enough to acquire a more adult status. It seemed to us an odd, pathetic, all-wrong arrangement but since Bill's was the only voice raised against it, and everyone else appeared quite content, Bill could not interfere. 'It is the way of our people,' they said, and that was that.

Our late afternoon routine when away from home was to explore the mazes of trails and villages near our rest-house. Less known abroad than at Agulu, our presence caused ripples of curiosity and consternation where we rambled. As in provincial European towns the movement of lace curtains at front windows betrays inquisitive peerings-out at strangers, the tops of coconut palms within compound walls rustled when a look-out sighted us and described our peculiarities to his friends beneath. The more daring piccans followed us, hiding behind bushes or falling flat on their faces when we glanced back.

Once we turned the tables, redoubled our traces and came out behind two youthful scouts to whom I testingly said 'Boo!'

At this and our close proximity their eyes popped; they squeaked faintly and pelted for the nearest open gateway. We wondered sometimes if their mothers used us in boggy-man stories when the piccans needed some chastening influence. With a shade of disappointment I remembered films wherein parties of explorers were stealthily followed and at length encircled by hosts of grease-painted cannibals. Death and danger stalked alongside the apprehensive travellers; a poisoned arrow came from nowhere to strike down the foremost, and the face of a grinning savage leered behind the long grasses . . . good heavens, how times had changed!

In our wanderings we had leisure to scrutinize the frescoed compound walls, trying to make out the symbols scratched deep in the mud: triangles and whorls, snakes, staring eyes and figures that might be of men or gods. Some of the walls were crumbling, their paint and markings almost obliterated; others were freshly made, gaudy with red, yellow, blue and black dyes on the cinnamon background. Again and again the motifs of eye, elephant, fish and serpent recurred with other scrawlings of which we could make nothing, although we presumed each decoration had its own private significance. But this opinion was revised when we sighted a group of naked urchins who, in the way of city children magnetized by wet cement paving, clustered in front of a freshly built mud wall on which they were doodling their own designs. At this I fell to wondering whether some ancient museum stone scripts, imagined to hold secrets which still baffle experts in hieroglyphics, might not be the thousand-year-



old scribblings of infants in far-off dynasties. In which case it is small wonder that the learned ones have their hands full.

Sometimes we went to Awgu, fifty miles to the south-east to collect bags of lime from a quarry there. Awgu was always a delight after the dun vistas and creviced landscape around Agulu. This might have been a different country altogether, with its thickly forested hills, its terraced, thriving crops, fertile valleys and rich black soil. To eyes accustomed to erosion scenes Awgu was a pastoral paradise, yielding at the District Officer's lunch table Arcadian foodstuffs unknown in our part of the country: asparagus, tender carrots and corn, and giant crisp cabbages. The District Officer's garden blossomed as ours never could, and its smooth lawn shamed our ragged turf. Here, too, was a house with a difference, boasting two bathrooms with sunken bathtubs ingeniously contrived from finely sanded cement and painted a lily-pond green. There were parquet floors, mullioned windows with chintz curtains and a Cheltenham-ish flagstoned path between the herbaceous borders. The roof's thick grass thatch was more county England than bush Nigeria. Even the beds' mosquito nets which in their natural state positively militate against 'interior decoration' had been transformed by means of watered red ink into roseate boudoir canopies. Passing Old Coasters may have wondered what the country was coming to: ye gods, pink mosquito nets in the land of the White Man's Grave! But women are the real pioneers, the makedoers and the conjuring magicians who will shape a home out of a piece of tarpaulin, a cracker barrel and a jar of dandelions, if need be. More, they will transplant their native home's personality and atmosphere to a strange land and make it thrive, for there is nothing like the power of a woman when she is arranging the place wherein she rules.

Going to Enugu, the government, railway and mining centre fifty miles east, meant a brief taste of the Larger Life. Although

a small township numbering no more than two hundred Europeans, it seemed to our bush-accustomed eyes a Mecca of bright lights and hectic sophistications. There were, for instance, the remarkable facts of electric light and modern plumbing; several fair-sized trading stores (one with real glass windows); a substantial, rather formal Club; a rest-house on the lines of a good hotel; a swimming pool and an open-air cinema. The main street was well paved, the government houses laid out in spacious grounds along shady avenues; the government offices, though starkly red brick and unmistakably Public Works Department, had an air of dignified authority.

There was no dearth of social life of a kind peculiarly Colonial. Here hospitality was rich and abundant, the evening drink a ritual, the ladies' morning bridge gossip witty albeit a trifle sharp-clawed, the complicated social taboos and fetishes most carefully observed. This or that was 'done' or 'not done'. There was a place for everyone and everyone knew his place, from the most exalted senior officer downward. The rules were unwritten but no less definite for that. Discretion was one of them; its interpretation 'when in doubt, don't'. The Old School Tie was a discreet but omnipresent emblem of courtesy, correctness and official brotherhood. There were cliques and the inevitable feminine business of 'keeping up with the Joneses' in matters of entertainment, dress and servants. The standard of European living was high, even luxurious, as a compensation for temporary exile and the risk to health in this enervating climate.

For those of resilient physique and strong social proclivities it was an ideal set-up, offering the constant excitement of storms in teacups (official and social), frequent new faces (for the official eighteen months' tour with four months' 'leave' meant constant comings and goings) and freedom from the more style-cramping forms of domesticity.

Except for the servants attached to these households and the small army of clerks who worked in government offices and

trading stores, the Africans of the town lived their personal lives apart, in this little European world but not of it. Mostly their houses were in the African quarter, both literally and figuratively, on the other side of the railway tracks. The houses, rented by mine and railway workers and clerks, were diminutive, cement, tin-roofed bungalows which though towny and closely set together, still had the communal look of bush compounds. This was especially so at night when families gathered to gossip around the outside fires, or on doorsteps; when piccans tubbed themselves in buckets and street vendors traded late over their candlelit soapbox counters set outside their dwellings.

Few had blinds for their windows, and the night-time interiors were as revealing as those of open-fronted dolls' houses. Here a woman could be seen sewing in a garish front room decorated with Sunday-school texts and tinted photographs; here a student bowed over his books, industriously writing. The furnishings were cluttered and cheaply European; the inhabitants were neither true 'bush' nor true townfolk, but something in between — people in the process of losing their natural selves in imitation of Western ways. It was their habit to look down on the bushfolk as bumpkins and yokels who knew nothing of towny habits or European dress and manner. The younger women liked to wear tight, short little frocks which they learned to make in sewing classes — and shoes bought from the traders. Some used highly scented face powder which made a violet bloom on ebony cheeks; they carried fur handbags with a modern air. The young men of the clerk class chose full-bottomed, tight-waisted trousers, dressy palm beach suitings, colourful shirts and gay ties, jaunty-angled sun helmets. They looked dandyish and a trifle self-conscious as if part of their minds was constantly engrossed with the effect they were making on the public eye.

It seemed to us that their manner as a whole lacked the spontaneous charm of the bush people. Sometimes there was

an embarrassing mixture of self-defensiveness and obsequiousness which we had not found in our village neighbours. On occasions we noticed that when Europeans came within earshot, conversants were apt to switch from their own tongue to a loud and rather show-off English. In this and many other ways the town African showed his anxiety to shape himself in the mould of the governing white man whom yet he did not wholly admire, in whose company he was not entirely at ease and whose ways he could only mimic in form without true comprehension of their substance.

The result was confusing and uncomfortable for no other reason than that naturalness was destroyed and with it, sincerity. This was bogus 'progressiveness', a tribute to no one, a probable source of perplexity to the African and a kind of baffled irritation to the European. It fostered suspicions on both sides, making understanding the more difficult. Whose the blame? It appears to lie, as in all problems of human nature, neither completely with one side nor the other, but a little with both. To mock the African for making himself a travesty of the white man is no more fair than to accuse the white man of exploiting the African outright and disrupting his traditional way of life. The balance is probably weighted against the African who in his 'progressiveness' and unsureness, his break with old habits and uncertain grip on new ones, is material on whom fanatics (white or black) with high-pressure slogans and facile promises might work for their own advantage.

One amenity enjoyed by all Enugu's townfolk was the open-air cinema which showed films every night of the week, with Wednesdays and Saturdays as 'European nights'. The cheapest seats were benches close to the screen; further back, under cover, were the wicker chairs at prices which usually only Europeans could afford, and these had the advantage of being sheltered when rain drenched the rest of the theatre, screen and all. On fine nights the screen's background was a starlit sky and the silhouettes of palm trees. No one had devised any

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

method of keeping lizards from wandering over the screen with incongruous effect when one settled apparently atop the heroine's head during a desperate love scene. Nor had anyone found a way of restoring the ancient sound tracks of some time-worn films which progressed jerkily with cracklings, blackouts and background creakings from improbable beginning to inconclusive finish. Sometimes the sound diminished to a laryngitic whispering; when the fault was cured it blared forth with deafening volume and had to be hastily soft-pedalled again.

Fortunately the audience was not choosy. Its major African element laughed uproariously during the soft-lights-and-music screenplay; a sultry embrace and tender endearments might have been the wildest slapstick. Disney cartoons were received blankly, but knockabout with pies and fat men was surefire success. Likewise melodrama, fist fights of the break-all-the-furniture variety, pell-mell villain-chasing by car or on horseback, hatchet men, faces at the window, murderous hands coming out of the shadow — simple, stark but wildly improbable scenes with plenty of action and noise. Conversation pieces bored the audience who had no interest in watching characters who mulled over their problems verbally instead of settling them by lively movement. They had no patience with sustained monosyllabic suffering either, and no sympathy whatever with tears.

It is difficult to know what they made of Hollywood's version of American life: thugs in New York hats, boudoir scenes complete with bubble baths, night-club scenes with waiters (white men as *boys!*) and gala paper hats — home-life scenes with vacuum cleaners and white women doing housework, street scenes of skyscrapers and metropolitan crowds, occasional London scenes usually fogbound or murkily drizzling in the Sherlock Holmes manner. How they reconciled all this with the lives of the Europeans in the township is something we never found out. It seemed unlikely that they could begin to follow the plots, especially of the 'mystery' pictures. As a con-

ON TREK

tribution to African-European understanding the picture house was a doubtful aid, and a psychologist could have spent months speculating on what was going on in the minds of the Africans who witnessed the feminine heart throbs of Betty Grable or the he-man adventures of Tyrone Power. Were a master analyst to occupy himself so strangely, his deductions would make surprising reading.

We spent our 'local leave' at Nsukka, forty-five miles north of Enugu — a sparsely populated district of rolling grassy downs and wild hilly forest country of immense tawny views and great spaces. Here we found a rest-house of northern design, low-roofed and sprawling, with arabesques and curlicues adorning the thick mud walls, and in the middle room a Moorish fireplace with an open chimney which allowed the smoke to escape into the ceiling. At night we built a fire, for the evening air was cool on this higher elevation, and the crackling blaze a luxury we had never needed at Agulu, yet still had perversely missed. At this altitude the sunshine was more kindly than at Agulu, inviting sunbathing without danger of a splitting headache. The mornings had the misty tranquillity of English midsummer and the coolness of the dawn lingered in the walls and floors of the house until midday.

All around us was a panoramic expanse of undulating yellow and beige, patchworked here and there with green, and traversed by trails as narrow and lonely as caravan paths in the desert. In the early morning and late afternoon a few toy-like figures with headloads toiled slowly along these trails. In full noon sunlight the scene lay deserted and glowing; towards evening cloud shadows drifted like moody expressions across the face of grassland and knolled terrain.

One morning we went with Elias to drive a distance and explore a particularly deep and devious forest. Leaving the brilliant early sunlight we stepped at once into a musky, humid otherworld, caged about with a density of leaf and vine which

made the air oppressive and admitted sunshine only in lacy patches where the vegetation thinned out. Exotic butterflies of all colours and incredible size were everywhere; in damp places we found small orchids and giant fleshy fungi, scarlet, white and crimson. Ungainly grey birds with long necks and heads sporting stiff ginger crests and large orange beaks flapped overhead, their wings making a loud 'wooshing' noise like waves on the shore. The thick carpet of humus made our steps soundless along a trail criss-crossed with other, smaller, ape trails. We saw tracks of wild boar, antelope and leopard, and we startled colonies of grey and brown monkeys which passed above us, swinging and crashing through the trees. First came the smaller ones, mothers and babies, and after an interval, the big bucks, angrily tirading. To us, earthbound, the lightning speed and ease of their travelling was enviable; like shadowy tree spirits they moved in their leafy element with far more swiftness and sureness than we who trod the ground beneath. We stood quiet while we watched the blur of their migration, intent on the hopeless task of counting the slim arched bodies and looping tails which frisked above.

Only when Elias hissed behind me, 'Look . . . *big monkey!*' and pointed, did we see no more than a hundred yards away an ape or a baboon, apparently as large as Bill (but a good deal less concerned) breakfasting in the low crotch of a tree. We held breath for the space of some interminable seconds while the enormous creature stared back at us open-mouthed. Then with a loud splintering of lower branches the ape vanished while we stood in total silence. Elias came to life first. He mopped his face and said huskily, 'We go back now?'

We had heard something of the ways of 'big monkeys'. They lived, we knew, in closely knit communities. If one of their number was set upon and wounded the whole tribe would come to the rescue, furiously prepared to inflict serious damages on the enemy, in protection of their brother. Should any of the colony be killed, it was their habit to carry the body away,

even in the face of the strongest opposition. Like all monkeys they were, if not angered, socially inclined, incorrigibly inquisitive and, especially in the case of chimpanzees, mischievous in their habits. One District Officer in that region who did his touring on a temperamental motor bike, found himself one day accompanied by two chimps who ran alongside the fitfully chugging machine. Failing to outpace them, the officer was dismayed to find other chimps joining the gambolling cortège. Sweating and ill at ease he continued in this fashion for several miles and what seemed to be an endless stretch of time. At one point he imagined he had all the district's chimpanzees as his insistent escort party. But at last, bored with this sport, they dropped behind and the officer never knew just what would have happened had his spluttering vehicle died altogether.

As for smaller monkeys, our own villagers viewed them with respect and dislike — with respect because of their uncommon shrewdness and wariness — with dislike because of their depredations of crops, and thieving ways. In some parts the hunting and eating of monkey was taboo by reason of a Juju belief that the village's ancestral spirits took the shape of these oddly human-looking creatures. No matter how exasperating your revered ancestor in his monkey shape, it was asking for trouble to molest him. In other districts where monkeys were not taboo they were not generally used as food except by pregnant women for whom monkey soup was presumed to work wonders in ensuring strength and cleverness for the unborn child.

Hunting thieving monkeys and trouble-makers was a hush-hush affair because even a whisper (so the experts said) of the plan and place of the hunt would be picked up by monkey spies who would make sure none of their tribe were anywhere near the chosen spot. So the hunt was always arranged with elaborate secrecy, with false plans spoken loudly and the real route and scene decided by roundabout allusions, eyebrow raisings and half-hearted nods. Even so, the monkeys usually outwitted the villagers. It was a sport at which they had grown

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

adept, and may well have been the topic for some of the ribald monkey comment which made the air blue in high treetops where the tribe gathered for discussion after the hunt had passed.

For several months through dust and downpour the lorry bore up sturdily, apart from occasional asthmatic lapses cured (it seemed) by Bill speaking strong words into the engine and



blowing apoplectically down pieces of tubing. Then, as a routine measure, a mechanic came to service and overhaul the engine, with the result that next morning the lorry stopped dead at the bottom of the hill, and for two hours Bill collected layers of sand, grease and sweat on himself in a hopeless attempt to get the hulk moving again. Trekkers to market stopped to stare; picnics crowded round and Bill's varied acrobatics were the cynosure of all eyes. Finally, pushed by fifty stalwarts, we crawled back home where the

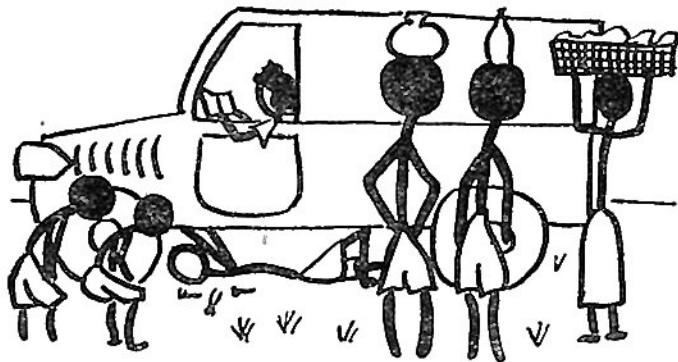
summoned mechanic confessed to having mislaid a small spring from the carburettor during his servicing operations. After some searching, this necessary part of the engine was found at the foot of the mango tree where he had taken a brief nap during his previous morning's work.

After that all should have been well, but it was not. The lorry, developing an aversion to hills, was apt to 'come over queer' at the most unsuitable times and places, usually on a shadeless road at midday or half an hour away from home with all our camp goods loaded on behind. There followed two days garage hospitalization in Onitsha for the vehicle while we waited on the other side of the Niger, staying with friends. Returning early on the appointed day, expecting to find the lorry restored, we found it instead in a hundred pieces

ON TREK

on the garage floor, the atmosphere charged with post-mortem discussion and disagreement. At sight of Bill the head mechanic pulled himself together, put on a face of fanatical optimism and said the job would be finished in an hour or so.

By noon, since the lorry had further disintegrated, friends suggested we stay the night with them, even several nights,



but at the end of the afternoon's garage palavers, delivery of the lorry to the Club was faithfully promised for four o'clock. At six it came roaring into the Club grounds; the driver saluted and disappeared, leaving the engine running. We got into the cab, waved a cheerful farewell to our sympathizers and progressed fifty yards before the engine died.

From then until long after midnight we started and stopped along the dark homeward road. Some distance from Agulu we broke down in front of the Protestant Mission's gates, causing sleepy people to come out with lanterns and hospitable offers of a meal and a bed. Our words of acceptance were no sooner said than the lorry came to life again, and not daring to linger, we roared away to gain the hill, and at last home.

George had prepared dinner, then given us up and gone to bed. Now he roused himself and the drowsy Elias to produce his held-over meal. Warily we sat down to it. The wilted

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

roast struck me as being singular in shape and of no recognizable identity. 'This is not beef,' I said, though hardly caring.

'It be porcupine,' said Elias. 'Hunter come *dash* Massa with meat. Cook say you will like.'

With such patience as was left to us we banished the porcupine joint which did not seem attractive at two o'clock in the morning after a day of anticlimaxes. We gave it to the boys and ate sardines in silence. Bill spoke with an air of tight restraint as he climbed under his mosquito net, 'Will you tell Cook, for the love of Mike, to get rid of that mess of quills on the back veranda?'

CHAPTER X

AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION

THE tropical breakfast table may be a delectable arrangement of fruits, flowers and early sunshine, yet it would be incomplete without a yellow mepacrine or white quinine tablet beside each water glass as chastening reminder of the malarial mosquito's existence. One five-grain tablet daily is the prophylactic rule. Generally the nuisance value of this daily dose is nil, except for a slightly yellow tinge in the complexion of mepacrine users — or for those relying on quinine, a faint buzzing in the ears. Recently new drugs have been compounded in the long search for an absolute safeguard against 'fever'; up-to-date schools of thought swear by paludrine or pamequin, though they admit that nothing can dye a pair of curtains a more glowing primrose shade than a few dissolved mepacrine pills. 'Fever' is pretty much taken for granted as an occasional visitation, not necessarily serious or prolonged if the sufferer sweats it out with heavier dosages and takes care in convalescence. The symptoms are languor, headache, a chill which may develop into a teeth-chattering ague and a swiftly rising temperature. In bed, aching and sweating, the patient is apt to curse the anopheles mosquito which has for countless years been the tiny agent for this elaborate form of tropical misery.

Only the anopheles carries the malarial parasite, and for the guidance of those with uncommonly sharp perceptions the official handbook gives this clue to recognition: 'When resting on a flat surface the body of the adult anopheles lies at an angle to the surface, and in a straight line from head to tail' — in contrast to the less harmful 'culex' which 'when resting on a flat surface has its body bent at an angle at the waist and

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

appears humped'. However, few have sufficient scientific detachment or skill for analysing the body lines of the attacking pest; it is easier to suspect all mosquitoes. Moreover, if by chance you should recognize an anopheles after it has done its damage the psychological effect can hardly be comfortable. A general opinion is that having taken all normal precautions, a healthy unconcern is the best attitude. You cannot for ever be considering whether your veranda mosquitoes have their bodies at an angle to the surface, or bent at the waist; that way lies certain neurosis.

Nor did we find it wise to pore over the booklet's Hints on the Preservation of Health in Tropical Africa. This, though admirably succinct and clear in its exposition of communicable, intestinal and excremental diseases, its magnified photographs of the tsetse fly and varieties of mosquito in larva and winged form, sensible references to snakebite and the attack of jiggers and tumbu flies, made hypochondriac reading. The newcomer might jump to the conclusion that disease and danger lurked everywhere and that his days must be spent in running the gauntlet of innumerable microbes and pests. Yet in the whole of our stay we encountered no illness save occasional 'fever'; our only other incident requiring the handbook's advice was my encounter with a tumbu fly. This brought about two large skin eruptions each of which, to my horror, housed a lively maggot. Bill evicted these briskly according to the directions, and no harm was done. Thereafter we had no recourse to the book's warnings which, I must confess, had shadowed my first contemplation of life in the tropics. Needless so, I realized later, for under modern conditions and with normal care the health of Europeans in West Africa is good. It is achieved by attention to medical laws of cause and effect, moderate habits, respect for the mosquito, insistence on cleanliness in food preparation and not least important, a contented frame of mind.

With an eye to maintaining hygienic conditions in cookhouse and larder I gave Elias and Cook a dissertation on the connec-

AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION

tion between dirt and germs, with emphasis on strict cleanliness of hands and dishes, the usefulness of disinfectant in floor washing and the necessity for washing all market goods in permanganate solution. Elias listened wide-eyed; George screwed up his face in impressive revulsion at my account of the unseen enemy. To keep the story simple yet graphic enough to be remembered, required some careful verbal balancing. 'You cannot *see* germs,' I said, 'except through a strong glass, but they are wherever things are not clean. Some are bad ones which make us sick.'

'Pain in belly?' remarked Elias, seizing on something understood.

Cook came to the rescue. 'Hands be dirty. They have small bug-germs. Make pain in the belly, pain in head, sick-up, all sorts. They kill you, so they tell me in Army. You wash hands all time, you put carbolic on floor, in dishwater. No bug-germs. Easy. Most, you wash hands after latrine.'

'That is so,' I agreed, relieved that George had got so briskly to the main point of the discussion.

'So,' continued George who was enjoying this opportunity for showing off before me and impressing Elias, 'if things be not clean, Madam and Massa go be sick. They get pain in belly, one time they say, "Elias no wash hands, he be to blame".' He wiped his hands virtuously on his apron, which could have been cleaner, and Elias nodded humbly. For a week afterwards the dishes hinted of carbolic; floor-washing buckets gave off a hospital smell. Elias was so germ-conscious I felt guilty, and we got through astonishing quantities of Jeyes Fluid and Izal.

The African respect for 'medicine' knows no bounds, as we learned from the doctor in charge of our neighbouring R.C. mission bush hospital. He was an earnest, shy young man, just out from Ireland, with a strong sense of vocation and limitless patience with the vagaries of our villagers who only came to him when their own *dibias* (doctors) had failed to work a cure. Dr. G. had come with a determination to master

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

the Ibo language but from the outset was kept so busy that he had progressed no further than the words for: 'Stick out your tongue.' His hospital was a collection of small mud buildings, some equipped with beds, others having only floor pallets. His pride and joy was his operating theatre, of the simplest kind, wherein he performed numbers of skilful emergency operations, ranging from strangulated hernia to the amputation of gangrenous limbs when machete wounds had been long neglected. The villagers' passion for self-medication caused him grief and puzzlement as to their basic symptoms. One in the first stages of diphtheria swallowed quantities of cheap liniment. Another, having drunk a bottle of Lysol to cure a stomach ache, came groaning to the doctor, miraculously stayed alive for several days and then died, from which the villagers deduced the doctor could not have given him 'good medicine'.

There was a man who presented himself complaining that he had a dragon inside him. The local *dibia* had said so but could not make it go. Therefore would the white doctor please cut him open and take out the dragon which was gnawing him from within all the time, giving him such pain-in-belly that he could not eat or sleep.

An examination revealed a condition curable by rest and a light diet, which fact the doctor cheerfully communicated to his distraught patient. To this the man said he *knew* there was a dragon and he would die unless the doctor got it out. When the reasonable cure was begun the patient was apathetic; it did him no good and in a few days he seemed close to death. Straightforward treatment thus proving useless, the doctor shrugged and agreed to remove the dragon. The patient gladly submitted to ether and the making of a small stomach incision, authentically stitched. Conscious again, he enthusiastically demanded to see what had been removed. A scorpion in a bottle, made more dragonlike by means of red ink, was enough to make all well with his world. He recovered swiftly and was an enormous credit to the hospital.

AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION

When a bushman, having drunk too much palm wine and thirsting for more, fell out of the palm tree he was tapping and crushed his face, the doctor had the long and difficult job of reconstruction. It was a supremely difficult task, almost impossible, but Dr. G. put all his patience and skill into it. There followed days of watching and careful nursing until at last the bandages were removed and the shattered face revealed



to be mending as no one could have anticipated. Then tetanus set in and the patient died.

Dr. G.'s life was no bed of roses, and his patients' mobility was a constant worry to him. Unless desperately ill they would leave their beds or mats whenever the African nurses' backs were turned, and visit each other or go outside and sit under a tree. Sometimes infectious cases got bored and went home. They believed that the more medicine they swallowed the quicker would be their cure, and invented the most complicated symptoms in hopes of being dosed with larger draughts and more colourful pills. They delighted in injections, demanding a 'head injection' for a headache and flatly disbelieving that disharmony in one part of their bodies could bring about pain in any other part.

Quack bush 'doctors' capitalized on this injection mania, obtaining through dubious channels hypodermics and miscel-

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

laneous drugs which for a fee they administered for every conceivable complaint or no complaint at all, often with disastrous results. One case was reported in the local town paper as follows:

EFFECTS OF QUACK INJECTION

THREE teachers and a lady were recently reported to be very seriously sick as a result of injections taken on Sunday. That morning, it was alleged, one A., a native of Ogidi, had appeared on the school compound.

He advertised himself as a licensed medical man of no mean order, capable of curing all human ailments. The headmaster and another man were carried away by the man's gift of the gab.

Misses O. and N. on hearing the man blowing his own trumpet, approached the scene. When the alleged quack saw them he told Miss O. that he could wash her brains so that she might beget brainy children.

Without stating the price he took her hand and gave her some injections on the shoulder. Miss N. is also said to have offered her hand.

Soon afterwards there came painful swellings on their shoulders and all fell sick with high fever. Nevertheless, the next day matters came to a crisis. Miss O. became desperately sick and died at Ogidi on the way to hospital.

There was, too, a 'leakage' of M and B tablets, probably purloined from hospitals and sold at extortionate prices as a panacea for all ills. It was a state of affairs Dr. G. bemoaned bitterly and with reason, for it often fell to him to remedy the havoc caused by this indiscriminate appetite for dangerous drugs.

The Africans' attitude to pain was variable. A harmless scratch drawing a little blood would reduce some to trembling misery, and the application of iodine resulted in a wincing and eye-rolling as if the agony were indescribable. But serious hurts were often borne without a murmur. The initial making of

AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION

facial tribal scars, and cicatrices on the women's bodies, must have caused great pain, yet the process was considered necessary and natural. The native doctors' crude surgery and operations without anaesthetics caused agony, usually endured with stoic courage. Dr. G. often spoke of the fortitude with which patients bore their gravest hurts, this having no comparison with the melodrama they often made of a minor injury.

There was the bushman who submitted himself to an 'operation' performed by the village *dibia*. While ten men held him down a swelling under his arm was cut out with a razor blade. Since a second swelling had yet to be removed, the patient came to Dr. G. to beg for a bottle of 'sleeping-stuff' (chloroform) so that his next ordeal with the *dibia* might be painless. 'Faith,' said Dr. G., 'you'll not have my chloroform for bush doctoring. Come here if you want to, and welcome, but I'll have no part in your razor-blade operations.'

The man eventually returned, stretcher borne, with far-gone septic poisoning. Dr. G. washed out the dirt which, bush fashion, had been deliberately rubbed into the festering wounds and murmured to the Saints for patience.

Another man came to him, not so much concerned with pain as with the appearance of his toes. Two of these had been roughly amputated by the *dibia* and as the man said (and Dr. G. agreed) the remnants were 'not good to look at'. The patient wished to have the two stumps neatly trimmed and finished off. 'Here's a mind for symmetry,' commented Dr. G., setting to neaten and make artistic the *dibia's* job. We thought it providential for the villagers that Dr. G. was not only an excellent doctor, but a philosopher as well.

The locals showed scant mercy to any of their number who contracted the dread leprosy; lepers were turned out to fend for themselves. Sometimes, driving at night, we passed a wretched misshapen outcast foraging under cover of darkness, less fearful of the 'night spirits' than of his own daytime brothers' revulsion. In our district there was a large leper

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

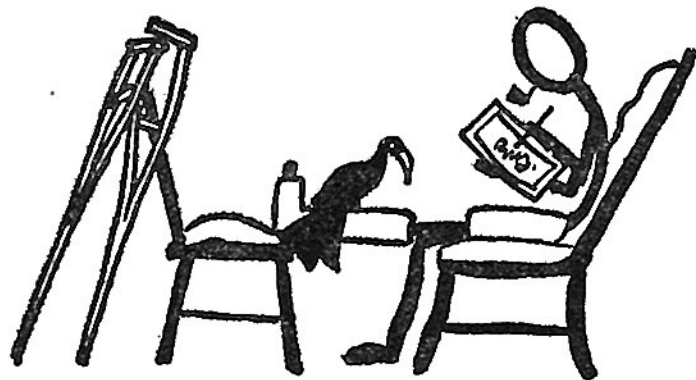
population. Even their approximate number could not be determined, for many were too frightened to come to the leper clinics, especially in the early stages of their disease when effective treatment could have been begun.

Often it was only when their obvious condition brought about their ostracism and the prospect of almost certain death from starvation that they made their way to the leper mission which had instituted a large community of 'villages' within boundaries beyond which the 'clean' did not go. The Protestant staff there with its hospital and welfare organization worked wonders of skill and patience, segregating, healing, rehabilitating, working against financial and climatic odds to make the centre self-sufficient. The lepers had their own schools and workshops, farms and markets; they learned carpentry, tinsmithing, weaving; the compounds were orderly and the only hard and fast rule was that no leper should cross the demarcation line between 'clean' and 'unclean' territory. Daily the hospital gave numbers of treatments; their method an oil injection which in time rendered many cases non-infectious and fit to take up life again in the outside world. It was work requiring unremitting patience and strength of mind. There are few Europeans who would not instinctively shrink from the prospect of spending their lives among leprous bushfolk, knowing that no matter how strenuous or dedicated their efforts, only a percentage could be cured, and knowing too that even the most ambitious settlement could care for no more than a minute fraction of a district's leper population. Home sophisticates who, if they think at all about the evangelizing missionaries, dismiss them as self-righteous in dull good works, ought to contemplate their own reaction to the prospect of even one day's duties in a leper mission. 'Good works' is a feeble description. Neither can there be dullness in such self-dedication. And surely if anyone has claim to occasional moments of self-righteousness, that one is the worker among lepers.

For the European population there were well-equipped

AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION

hospitals in the larger places. Had Bill been wise he would have taken himself to the nearest and stayed there when he damaged his leg and found it temporarily useless. This happened as a result of showing his labourers the quickest and most strategic way of rope-climbing down a ravine. It would have meant loss of face and confidence to let his audience know he had hurt himself during this acrobatic stunt. The exhibition was a success. Bill's Tarzan trick was easily imitated and there-



after used as a quick method of gully penetration, while the Development Officer went on the sick list, suffering a torn leg tendon. Misliking the idea of languishing in hospital, Bill had prevailed on the government doctor to let him come home after treatment. An African orderly put the leg in plaster; thereafter for ten days Bill and his cast sat goutily on the veranda. On the appointed day he returned to have the weight removed, but it transpired that the orderly had made a small mistake. Another cast would have to replace the first. Bill returned with a bigger and better lot of plaster, to spend another fortnight of impatient idleness enlivened by the sympathetic visits of Obuvudu and the villagers who found the solid white casing a fascination, delighting to wrap their knuckles on its hardness and bringing their piccans to witness this new evidence of the

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

white man's cleverness. Bismarck found it a solid perch and a useful beak polisher. As for the labourers, they rejoiced to know that Massa was securely anchored to his house, with not a chance of surprising them if they took forty winks in the shade. Those three weeks were a trial to Bill, but for the diggers of ditches and sumps they were halcyon days.

When the District Officer's dog died horribly convulsed and frothing at the mouth, the dozen Europeans who were possible 'contacts' found themselves faced with the depressing prospect of anti-rabies treatment in the form of a daily stomach injection for fifteen consecutive days. Apart from the discomfort, this would mean great inconvenience for those who lived far from town and hospital. The question of the day was: had the dog really died of rabies? If so who could remember which, if any, of their host's dogs they had touched? Two were pups, which should have made remembering easier, but in such an important matter it was easy for the memory to play tricks. Usually a visitor did pat whichever of the D.O.'s dogs happened to be on the spot, but the animals' family resemblance was too strong for the casual patter to know afterwards exactly which one he had touched.

For reassurance we were happy to know that only one in a thousand 'contacts' contracted hydrophobia; that this was possible only if the skin were broken and the dog's infected saliva had touched such an open place. On the other hand, the disease was always fatal, the most painful and lingering of deaths. If precautions were not taken there was a chance (grim, even though a thousand to one against) of succumbing to hydrophobia even after an interval of several years. That is *if* (and there were countless ifs in this discussion) one really had touched the dog that had died, with a hand marked by some small open scratch, and the dog *had* licked it at a time when the rabid tendencies — if they *were* rabid — were beginning. On the face of things, certainly confused, the majority

AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION

decided to plump for safety-first injections. The remainder stubbornly questioned the animal's symptoms. The knowledgeable said that since the dog had died so suddenly, with less than half an hour's 'madness', its demise was more likely caused by snakebite than rabies. The pro-injection group maintained that you could not be too careful, for whoever heard of even distantly flirting with rabies? The unconvinced maintained it was absurd to endure numbers of anti-rabies 'shots' without real necessity.

A post-mortem dictum was awaited. Prudently half the dog's brain had been immediately dispatched to one hospital laboratory, half to another, to ensure a positive ruling. Time passed; the pro-injection group started on their course. Then it transpired that the first brain sample had decomposed en route; the second dispatch was apparently lost. Meantime reference books and statistics yielded a few more facts about hydrophobia and snakebite, and we began to feel well up on both subjects. In the light of these gleanings the pro-snakebite group gained assurance but this did not prevent one or two of them joining in the injection sessions. Who was right and who wrong may never be known — at least Bill and I hope not. We said 'snakebite' all along, not in the least authoritatively but out of simple stubborn aversion to fifteen stomach injections apiece, and our trustful belief that death from hydrophobia was not our destiny.

After a medical-research man had broken a stretch of bush travelling to spend an evening enthusiastically describing for us his department's work against yellow fever, Bill found himself with a new sideline: collecting monkey blood. The research depot was investigating the chain of yellow fever transmission, linking mosquitoes with monkeys as fever carriers and infectors, and surveying certain suspected districts where epidemics might break out. For this research the laboratory needed supplies of monkey-blood samples. When he left, our

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

medical visitor handed Bill a fistful of venules, saying briskly, 'Well, send us all you can get, and don't forget: skulls and skins for identification. Pinpoint the map where you get the monkey. . . .'

Bill gave his assistance, wholeheartedly monkey-hunting in his spare time and wrapping up grisly packages of 'samples' from which I averted my unscientific eyes. It was an ill wind for the monkeys of the district but it blew nourishment to the boys' quarter. Cook, Elias and Pius were all eaters of monkey meat when they could get it, and every specimen made a feast night in the back regions of the compound. No monkeys could have had a more socially useful end. The villagers were happy to point out places where the monkeys looted fruit and made havoc with crops; the laboratory was glad to have new samples for analysis; the boys' stewpot was enriched. Bill felt that his contributions might indirectly benefit the village and was justifiably pleased with himself. Considering this universal satisfaction it may have been finicky of me to make a fuss when I discovered George drying a monkey skull in the oven.

'I won't have my cheese *soufflé* baked alongside *that!*' I stormed. 'Yellow fever research has no business in my oven.'

'Yes, Madam,' said Cook, plucking out the relic with his oven cloth. 'But Massa say. . . .'

Bill came on the scene then and I left him talking man-to-man with George. 'Madam no like monkey bones in oven at chop time. . . .'

I appreciated the nice distinction between chop time and any other time. And I could see that my obstructive attitude was illogical. As Bill queried, what was the difference between, say, a leg of Cold Store lamb and a nice clean monkey skull? For this delicate conundrum I had no answer beyond, 'I'm used to legs of lamb.'

'You're feeling end-of-tourish,' said Bill kindly. 'It makes people edgy.'

About monkeys Bill and I never did quite agree.

CHAPTER XI

OF INSECTS, ALICE AND MRS. MURPHY'S COURTSHIP

IN England we once met a man who had returned from a spell in the tropics with a horror of insects or, as he called them with a shudder, 'those damned creepy crawlies'. The amiable advances of his friends' cats and dogs made him go pale; the proximity of anything furred or feathered (which might conceivably harbour a flea or a tick) caused him the most acute misery amounting to a phobia which blighted his whole outlook. He carried with him at all times a supply of insecticide which he scattered on his bed (so he told us) and on the seats of railway carriages. As a guest his peculiarity was not always understood. Hostesses and hotel keepers were apt to take umbrage at his safety-first measures. His friends were made nervous by his fussy expostulations when a fly buzzed on a window pane or a spider crossed his path. He was not a happy companion. His incessant recounting of creepy-crawly stories about tropical insects — for the subject fascinated as much as nauseated him — did not make for his popularity. At that time we had not much understanding for these neurotic fidgetings, but when we came to Agulu we remembered our insect-haunted acquaintance.

It was fortunate that we did not share his aversion and so were able to enjoy watching our night-time veranda's accumulation of insect life. To say nothing of the gecko's, the night lizards, which decorated the whitewashed walls of our dining room. These, ivory-grey and small, were easily distinguishable from the larger, brighter day lizards; their apparent immunity from the laws of gravity enabled them to walk on the ceiling. Once only did we hear of an 'incident' when one too confident

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

gecko plumped into a bishop's soup plate, considerably enlivening an otherwise prosaic meal. Our lizards kept to themselves. They would lie motionless for minutes on end in wait for a witless fly or moth. Only their tails flicked impatiently as they waited — then forward swiftly and without a sound, to dart and devour. Their little, flitting lives were led in search of perpetual live snacks, bitterly contended. Each lizard for himself, was their motto, and no holds barred. Larger ones chased the smaller, the smaller the lesser. The loss of a tail was commonplace. Apparently without any inconvenience the fleeing lizard could leave its tail behind to discomfit the attacker who found in his grasp only a mocking, derisively flicking end-piece, while the lizard made a brisk getaway. Free enterprise made for everlasting warfare among them, but all in silence, with tiny cunning manoeuvres and furtive sallies. Often we contemplated these noiseless, sinister little battles until our coffee grew cold. Then we repaired to the veranda where our lamp attracted a different congregation — of iridescent insect freaks and beauties.



On damp evenings after rain we had invasions of winged ants which tangled in our hair, fell down our necks and drove us indoors. Great numbers of them committed suicide; the remainder crawled away earthbound, leaving a gauzy litter of wings half an inch deep on the floor. The moths came in batches, some pearl-white with shadings of mauve and grey — others brown or orange or purple-black, each marked with whorls and trceries of intricate transparent delicacy. Some had a wingspan of four fingers; others were no larger than a drawing pin; all fluttered frailly in the hypnotic light.

The beetles were enormous and glossy. Usually they landed upside down, buzzing

MRS. MURPHY'S COURTSHIP

angrily on the veranda floor. Ignored, they continued to buzz; righted, they zoomed into our magazines or crashed into the lamp. They were a problem of thick-headed, idiotic energy and contributed nothing to a peaceful session of reading. The winged 'sausage beetles' were most common. These had inch-long, soft, cylindrical bodies and no sense of direction. Once

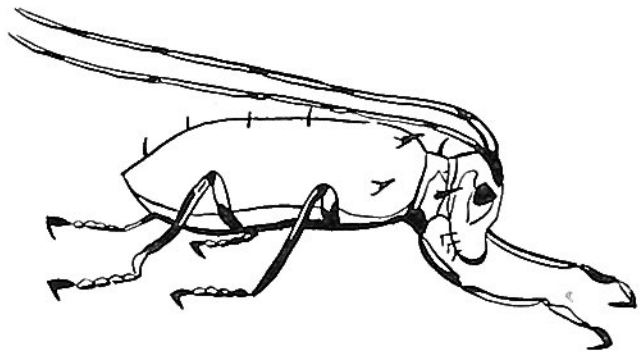


within the floor's circle of lamplight they went in circles, faster and faster, making a noise like gentle snoring. There were many species of crickets, not only the musical cicadas, but streamlined pale-green insects built for speed and lightness, their wings folding precisely into their bodies with the effect of a super-modern-de-luxe streamlined chassis. There were insects distinguishable from twigs only when they moved — and belligerent beetles with pincer claws, like minuscule lobsters. Mrs. Murphy, usually circumspect in her dealings with the veranda creatures, found the pincer beetle irresistible perhaps because, unlike the others, it moved sluggishly, safely shellbacked and sharply weaponed. Twice her tentative paw was punished before she learned that the pincer beetle was a cantankerous plaything, allowing not even the most gentle familiarities.

My first praying mantis was an unnerving vision. It appeared over the top of my book as a cliff-climber pulls himself up to a pinnacle and we were almost eye to eye. Its head

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

swivelled on its brittle neck and it seemed to take alert, careful stock of its surroundings. Curiously erect and about two inches long, it had three pairs of legs, the first in the shape of triple-jointed forearms, saw-edged along their first two sections. When gingerly I approached a finger it raised both 'arms' with an uncanny elbow movement and put itself into the first boxing



position. Losing my nerve I said hoarsely, 'Bill, what is it?'

'Mantis,' said Bill. 'The Japanese tie them to bedposts to catch mosquitoes.'

I could believe that. Had I been told it could write its name or cock a snook, or any mortal thing, I would have thought it quite possible. The pious attitude of the praying mantis when its 'forearms' are raised is its characteristic stance when waiting to seize any insect which comes within reach of those serrated members. All its movements are slow, catlike and considered, save that lightning snatching. I learned that the female often treats the male as both husband and wedding breakfast; and that females, if kept together for observation, vent their spleen on each other, the survivors relishing the corpses of their sisters after the battle. Young mantids, newly hatched, look and move like ants, thus achieving protection, for most insect-eating creatures will have no truck with ants. Our interest in the mantis never palled. When one alighted alongside we

MRS. MURPHY'S COURTSHIP

could not ignore the presence of its queer, sly, insect personality, or its fantastic, cruel little mechanism. The mantis was not pretty or foolish like our trembling exquisite moths, but devilishly self-sufficient—a fierce midget that fancied itself a Goliath.

On the whole the insects of Agulu were more an entertainment than a nuisance; our house knew no common flies nor cockroaches, nor any winged or creeping creatures that did not love the light. We waged war only on ants. An 'ant boy', one Godspower, was employed to go around the outside of the house, office and all the camp buildings daily, to knock down the tunnels of red earth which veined the walls every morning after the ants' busy night. Without this precaution the palm-leaf thatch would have required constant renewing. As it was, not even Godspower's attentions ensured ant-free roofs. Wooden doors, window frames, bamboo supports were all vulnerable; the only obstacle known to the ants' digestions was cement. They disliked creosote when it was fresh but were not deterred by it after a week or so. All day every day Godspower brushed away the climbing red tunnels; all night every night the ants tunnelled again. It did not occur to the ant boy that his own actions were antlike in their persistence against great odds. And there was only one Godspower against more ants than we ever dared to think about. Yet the boy made his daily rounds, never oppressed by the sameness of his toil. Sufficient to the day were the tunnels thereof and the shilling he got for scraping them down. He wore a loin-cloth and a battered sun helmet and always looked happy. Some inner rhythm attuned him to his dullest of all dull jobs. It was something to wonder about and sometimes to envy.



BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

There were a good many spiders, and while we could not tell which, if any, were poisonous, the largest and hairiest were suspect on general principles. It was not our lot to meet a bird-eating spider which we felt should be easily recognizable, but one night a tarantula was discovered near the knob of our bedroom door by a homing guest who providentially shone his flashlight on it and knew enough about spiders to recognize its nature. It was a large, dun-coloured, velvety-legged creature and we looked at it with careful respect, trying to memorize its special peculiarities and wondering what would have happened if either of us, groping for the door handle, had been bitten. Our authentic tarantula added spice to the insect situation; we were guilty of mentioning it casually quite often when people spoke of the queer things they had found in their houses.

The long-legged mud wasp was commonplace and harmless, a droning accompaniment to siesta hours and an inveterate builder of small, random nests constructed with grain after laborious grain of red sand, in the most unlikely places. We found the beginnings of these sandy cones in the sleeves of little-worn garments, in bookshelves and behind the dressing-table mirror. The mud wasp appeared to be a scatterbrained builder, always wanting a change of habitat; unlike the ant its labours were erratic. In its lack of go-ahead accomplishment it had something in common with the blind caterpillars which formed long head-to-tail processions inching along behind a leader presumably as blind as the rest. If the single file were directed into a circle it would continue thus until a long-delayed spark of instinct prompted one to strike away, followed by the rest, *en route* for some mysterious, blind destination.

Of the several species of grubs the villagers like to eat, one was an especial delicacy. On mornings when tenuous strands of cocoon silk caught on the lorry's windshield and the bush branches were alive with emergent larvae, the local people went out with gourds and baskets to pluck the grubs as we

MRS. MURPHY'S COURTSHIP

would the fruits of the wayside. They also enjoyed a kind of dried locust sold in the market places, and winged ants were common titbits for hungry babies. 'The things they eat!' I said to Bill out of my shocked conservatism. 'How *can* they?'

But in time I ceased to exclaim. Meat was scarce and expensive, out of the question for many of the bush people, and nature's economies are adaptable. When I jibbed at the information that field rats were the *pièce de résistance* in many a local stewpot, I was chastened by the account of a cook (for a European family) who was so overcome with revulsion at the prospect of preparing lobsters, he had to be excused this task he could not face. 'You cannot eat these things!' the cook had protested, in exactly the shocked voice I had used against the villagers' grub feasts. It occurred to me belatedly that the white man's diet contains some *bonnes-bouches* quite as strange as the bushman's. Oysters, snails, frogs' legs, goose liver and caviare grace the most civilized *cordon bleu* menus; Chinese vintage eggs and bird's-nest soup are said to be epicurean delights; game is not considered ready for cooking until it has reached a state of partial decomposition; there are cheeses rich with age, mould and mites which have warranted gastronomic eulogy; whelks and jellied eels have their place on many a Britisher's list of tasty morsels; octopus, turtle soup and turtles' eggs make happy memories for some. Considering all this, I had to admit that so far as food was concerned, the European could offer some shocks and surprises to the bush African. It cannot be denied that one man's meat is another's poison, and in strange lands that is a point to remember.

Bats, we knew, fed on mosquitoes, so we did not object to the small colony which lived a secret, squeaking life in the veranda eaves. Often we heard their rustling commotions; their family life sounded irritable and pushful. Louder squeaks betrayed violent discord among them. Like the lizards they scuffled and bit, having no brotherly love. At dusk they left

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

their hiding place, streaming out like grey scraps blown by the wind, away over the compound. We encountered them rarely. Only once when one stunned itself against the veranda wall had we the doubtful pleasure of looking at it closely: a small silky thing with diminutive hooks on its ribbed wings — and a gargoyle head, wrinkled and flat-nosed, with sharp teeth in a tucked-under mouth. Some of our friends were shocked to think we did not rout them all. Yet bats in their place, we argued, did no harm, were even useful. 'But they're so blind and horrible!' was the cry. Still we maintained that bats were much maligned, having been given a bad name in Dracula stories, too much associated with churchyards, haunted houses and the gloomier superstitions. Nor were they truly blind, being equipped, our books told us, with a kind of radar which gave sureness to their seemingly aimless flight. (The veranda bat must have got its signals crossed, we imagined.) So long as our bats kept to themselves we had no complaint.

According to the letters our friends sent us, it seemed to be taken for granted that being in African bush meant our hobnobbing with lions, tigers and all the denizens of the jungle. We had to reply diffidently that apart from our village's dwarf cattle, sheep, pigs, dogs and goats, we knew only of antelope, cuttinggrass and civet cats, and our meat-hungry neighbours kept even these down to a minimum. Monkeys did not rank as 'big game' and although there were occasional leopards, we did not meet any. As for lions and tigers, we had heard that Nigerian boys taking higher education in England, saw the lords of the jungle in London's Zoo for the first time and returned much impressed to tell their friends about these mighty beasts. We always felt slightly apologetic about Agulu's dearth in this respect. Though we could boast of snakes: black and green mambas, vipers and boas, encounters with these were far from common. Had Noah attempted to stock his Ark in our district he would have been much handicapped

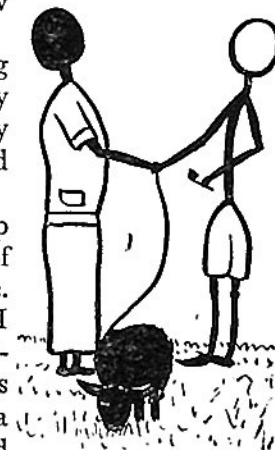
MRS. MURPHY'S COURTSHIP

and obliged to make weight with the scrawny sheep, for these were everywhere.

We had one of our own, a melancholy animal *dashed* us by a chief in gratitude for the cure Bill had effected on his wife's earache. He came with the sheep personally and made quite a ceremony of handing it over. Politely and sincerely we protested, but good manners forbade downright refusal. So in the end we pretended joy and pleasure in the sheep which not for a moment did we want or know what to do with.

'Make good mutton,' said Cook, eyeing the creature's miserable ribs and skinny haunches. I saw that he was mentally apportioning certain parts to himself and lesser pieces to Elias and Pius.

I balked at this. Having met the sheep it was my idiosyncrasy to shun the idea of being faced with it on my dinner plate. (Concerning the compound cockerels I shut my eyes hypocritically to their temporary life with us and in the interests of roast chicken refused them even a nodding acquaintance.) Bill agreed, and the sheep became part of the daily scene — not decorative or useful, or even an outlandish pet, for though she came to be called 'Alice' and lost her first shambling nervousness, there was nothing likeable about her. Her days were spent in dispirited meditation on the lawn, which she grazed apathetically. It had occurred to me that Alice's presence might give an Arcadian aspect to our view. But Arcadian sheep are fleecy-white, picture-book animals, not like Alice, whose moth-eaten black looked like the dreariest widows' weeds and whose sourly mournful visage indicated either chronic dyspepsia or bitter introspection. She may have been ailing when she came to us; after two months her condition was more



BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

scraggy and languid than ever. A passing Agricultural Officer took one look at her and said, 'Fly' — by which he meant tsetse fly and the end of Alice. Cook gladly took charge of this in our absence and though we said firmly that fly-bitten sheep was not fit food for anyone, we suspected that Alice's demise caused an orgy of behind-the-scenes mutton.

Oddly, we missed her. The lawn looked vacant where Alice had been, and I found myself briefly lamenting, 'Poor old Alice!'

'Why on earth was she called Alice?' said Bill.

I supposed it had been an inevitable association engendered by Lewis Carroll's: 'Alice . . . Mutton . . . Mutton . . . Alice.'

Of birds the commonest were the harsh-voiced, demure guinea fowl, tame enough to come to the lawn's edge. More exotic smaller birds with black-tipped orange wings and kingfisher-blue bodies made aerial displays, catching minute insects just before dusk. Particularly dainty visitors were black and white birds with tiny bodies and absurdly long, whirring tail feathers. Down by the lake scores of martins and long-legged cranes haunted the sedges, and congregations of immaculate white 'tick birds' accompanied the valley's dwarf cattle. Occasionally there were flights of storks, and sometimes the kites abandoned their solitary ways to wheel in dozens, their fringed wings making drifting shadows across the lawn. We preferred them to the vultures which, though surprisingly graceful in the air, seemed to live apart from the other birds as if made outcast by their carrion intimacy with death and decay.

On the ground the vultures shuffled clumsily like very old men in snuff-stained, overlarge brown overcoats. Their plumage was dusty; their eyes bleary, hooded and baleful; their reddish bald heads a travesty of venerable age. They might have been one of nature's grimmer jokes, so sordid was their disreputable aspect, so cruelly hooked their unfastidious

MRS. MURPHY'S COURTSHIP

beaks. And yet — how useful and virtuous were their despised habits.

None of the birds sang; their voices were monotone or strident. Nightly the owls made their lonesome noise from the thickets and the garage roof, and theirs were the only voices familiar to us from other times and places. Mrs. Murphy was not interested in birds. Perhaps her early acquaintance with Bismarck had been a brake on normal bird-hunting, or it may have been that her well-fed, lazy life provided no stimulus for stalking. Apart from that, she lacked none of the usual ways of a she-cat, and there came a day when she was heard sounding forth in unmistakable throbbing contralto a love call which we could not imagine would possibly be answered.

Elias grinned widely and informed me, 'She is calling her man.' Cook paused in the larder to cock his head and say, 'Missus Puss is unhappy.'

Rather prudishly I wished Mrs. Murphy would be less blatant in her maunderings, for she had set the whole compound wondering just where her mate would come from, and there were giggles and innuendoes in the air. So far as we knew, Mrs. Murphy would just have to put up with spinsterhood and we hoped she would quickly reconcile herself to a mateless, kittenless fate, and stop yodelling so dolefully.

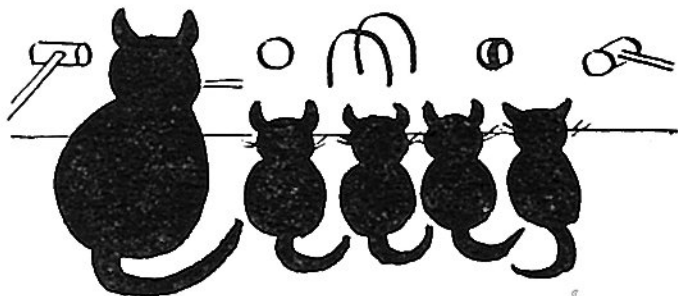
In this we did not reckon with Long Tom, who appeared like a rakish ghost on the moonlit croquet pitch. Elias announced the arrival of the suitor, startling us at dinner by announcing, 'A black fox is here.'

We crept out to see — not a fox but a wild version of cat, with the high, nervous shoulders of a fox, a brushy tail and narrow head, and forelegs longer than hindquarters. Since the breeze came from his side he did not scent us although he pricked his tufted ears in constant awareness and frequently turned his head towards the house, watchful against intrusion. He had a rakehelly look and was jet black.

Alongside this wild wastrel Mrs. Murphy gambolled and

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

flirted in shameless glee. Most strangely his eyes shone a fiery crimson while Mrs. Murphy's glowed green. We left them frisking in the moonlight and later the revels reached a noisy pitch. Still later, waked by the din, I rose from my veranda cot to see Mrs. Murphy pelting along the veranda and Long Tom crouched under Bill's bed. We never saw him again, and



Mrs. Murphy, after her one crowded hour of glorious life, reverted to her usual proud, complacent self.

In due course she presented Agulu with four pure black kittens which we named Eke, Oye, Afor and Nkwa, after the days of the Ibo week. The all-black effect was tidy, artistic and appropriate. When the time came it was not difficult to find homes for them, and on later inquiry we were assured that none of the litter revealed any developing characteristics for which their renegade father might be answerable. We might have known Mrs. Murphy would see to that.

CHAPTER XII

LULU OF THE LAKE

EVEN in the most attractive setting it is the fretting way of human nature to want to add a little something extra, a finishing touch, a gesture of possession. We should have been wholly content with our good fortune in having a lake practically on our doorstep, but we wanted more. We did not speak about it much until one afternoon when out of silence and from the depths of a deck-chair a considering voice said, 'It would have to be a *small* boat. . . .'

'Sails?' inquired the other with telepathic promptitude.

'Sails of course,' said Bill.

We pondered, seeing a fair mirage (small, with sails) down there on the shining water, and wondered how you went about building a boat. When packing our trunks in England our proximity to a waterway in bush had seemed unlikely, and it would have seemed too much like the White Knight's habit to include any comprehensive boat-building directions or diagrams in our luggage. But Bill did what he could, starting with the boat's name and working backward. The result was a diagram of the embryo *Lulu* and a conference with Tony Carpenter who had never made a boat either.

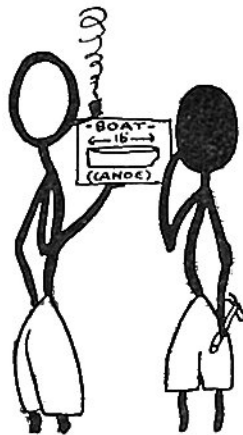
Tony was a short sturdy man whose respect for Bill's innovations warred with his own natural conservatism. He listened while Bill explained. He mistrusted the whole business and looked upon it as a most eccentric invention. Canoe dugouts, yes, but a boat made from planks — whoever heard of such? Patiently, almost apologetically Bill explained that white men's boats sailed all the big seas and had a certain reputation for strength and design.

'Ah,' Tony replied, doubtfully tapping his pencil against his teeth, 'but I think this one will sink.'

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

Despite this unpropitious beginning Tony soon saw it was best to humour Bill's whim. He tried to comprehend the framework outlined on paper and to connect it with the specifications. He wrinkled his brow, scratched his head and said, 'A-hh,' sympathetically. Then abruptly, 'No can do.'

The next step was Bill's converting a cigar box into a small-scale model, which toy stimulated Tony to a glimmering of understanding. To make it all perfectly clear, Bill drew a life-



size, fifteen-foot long outline on the veranda floor, carefully measuring and chalking until he was at last satisfied that Tony's final resistance must be broken when he saw it next morning.

But of this work not a trace or a shadow remained when he brought Tony to study it. The boys, in an excess of floor-washing, had scrubbed out every mark, thinking it had been the idle, if large-scale, doodling of a master whose recreations were known to be slightly out of the ordinary. At this setback Bill decided to transfer the whole operation to the courthouse. There, overlooked by the witness-box Juju, Bill with Tony and his two apprentices set to work. Hand-hewn planks were head-loaded from a forest ten miles away. The apprentices nervously began on the first planing while Tony supervised in lordly fashion with his tape measure and cigar-box model. Every day after lunch, when the languid heat of siesta time settled over Agulu, the courthouse was the scene of unusual energy, and when word got round that Bill was building a 'white man's boat', heads crowded the doorway; there was puzzlement, nudging and some uncomplimentary speculation on which Tony either glared or turned his back.

Before the skeleton of *Lulu* was completed much work was done and undone. Tony persisted in driving nails where nails

LULU OF THE LAKE

should not be and sawing off boards without first squaring them. He caused Bill minor apoplexy by going ahead, without prior consultation, to nail on the side planks without bevelling the wood to allow for caulking. In the face of Bill's distress the little carpenter offered soothingly, 'But Massa, we can nail pieces of tin over the cracks.'

Lulu grew just the same. During the bending on of the first side timbers Tony perspired with responsibility. Though usually a dressy man, he worked stripped to the waist. Unmercifully he bullied his apprentices who served as useful scapegoats and face-savers when things went wrong.

At last the job was done, the timbers securely fastened with copper screws and Bill drew breath for the next step, which was the business of making the craft watertight. Oakum was unobtainable. The only alternative material was a tough, stringy grass, sent down from the north and mixed with tar. The tar was nearly Bill's Waterloo. It found its way into his eyebrows and stuck to the bottoms of his sandals; it streaked his forehead and was as ubiquitous and tenacious as black glue. Everyone was glad when this phase came to an end, with boat's cracks firmly wedged and the bottom tarred over. The heads in the doorway watched and wondered all the more as *Lulu* became a kind of fixture in the back of the courthouse. Was there ever such a toilsome siesta occupation in all Agulu's history? The wooden Juju, we imagined, seemed on the verge of making some sarcastic comment on the whole strenuous enterprise.

In the end *Lulu* became a boat of sorts, solid, with a dependable frame and keel, workable rudder, bamboo bowsprit — and a pair of iroko oars, strange in design and remarkable in weight. The mast was an eighteen-foot bamboo pole. After the fitting of this, Tony gladly retired to the sidelines while we deliberated the question of sails. Since ordinary canvas would be too heavy for the light airs of the lake, we decided on strong sheeting, which we sought in the Onitsha market. Sheeting was our one aim that day. We refused to be sidetracked into buying a

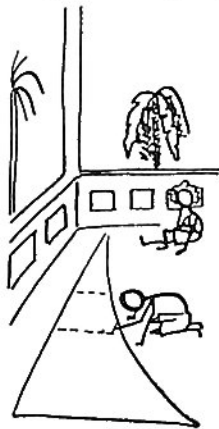
BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

parrot in a cage, or a crocodile skin or any other beguiling market goods.

'Shirting?' the cloth vendors cried, pushing forward with lengths of mauve stripes and delirious prints.

'No, *sheeting*,' we insisted, shutting our eyes against the picture of a Jezebel *Lulu* in scarlet polka-dot rigging. Nothing but virginal white would do, and we persevered until we found a quantity of tough Indian cotton.

We drew the sail pattern in chalk on the veranda floor and warned the boys beforehand. It was a process to shock a master sail-maker, but it was the only way we knew. Gingerly, on hands and knees, we pinned, sheared and basted. Tony, hearing by village grapevine of this latest development, and considering himself a partner in *Lulu's* creation, came to watch — or more likely to show off his Sunday outfit: thick navy trousers with swaggering bell bottoms, a green rayon shirt with a jazzy tie, shiny brown boots and a greyfelt hat made gala with a red feather. Against little competition he was Agulu's Best Dressed Man, ambitious, too, despite his profound conservatism during *Lulu's* first stages. He had learned something new and thought he might profit by it later, making another such boat



for a chief perhaps, or another European. In this he would have knowledge far beyond the ken of the average carpenter. It would mean prestige for him if Bill's boat was a success. If it were not — and this made Tony wince in anticipation — there would be general and serious loss of face.

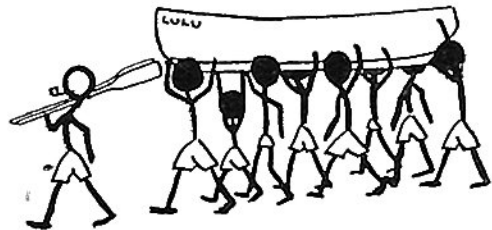
The local tailor stitched the sails. We occupied ourselves with the heavy hand-work of splices and grommets. *Lulu* took on two coats of green paint and we were ready to introduce a new personality to the lake. She was not impressive except

LULU OF THE LAKE

in our eyes, and we did not think she could be praised in yachtman's parlance. But we had translated her from mirage to fact. There she was, a small boat with sails, and it remained only to know whether the lake would accept her on our terms.

Eight labourers bore her on their heads down to the water. In silence *Lulu* was set down on the marshy rim with her stem across the path and her stern gingerly nosing the lake. A combined heave — and she was in her own element.

Tony's expression veered from gravest doubt to dawning hope and back again. *Lulu* wallowed tipsily, righted herself and was at home. Tony's face shone with sudden prideful confidence: 'Take notice, my friends. I made this fine boat, *and it floats!*'



Because of *Lulu* we came to know the lake intimately. Its uneven contours invited exploration and discovery, offering always some different charm of perspective. The dense forest margin surrounding the lake was broken by three miniature beaches where the dugout canoes were drawn up and the villagers washed their market goods and bathed. Here and there about the edge were raffia fish cages, about five feet square, contrived with below-water nets and weights and daily inspected by canoers in their blunt-stemmed dugouts. They viewed us narrowly at first, not knowing what to make of the alien *Lulu*, the like of which they had never seen — or of Bill with his fishing lines and patent reels which whirred as he cast and recast among the deep waters' cloud reflections. Having no knowledge of oars they watched us rowing *Lulu* in search of breezes and must have wondered at our pleasure in this uncommonly hard work.

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

As for sailing, the fickle winds of Agulu more often than not frustrated our hopes of skimming and slanting across the lake. We rowed; we rigged and tacked; we waited like the Ancient Mariner on his painted ocean; we whistled — and not a breath stirred. Our manœuvrings excited curiosity and conjecture from the shore. Small boys silently paddling their home-made canoes came out to see better what we were trying to do. Others swam as lithe as seals, to tread water and keep an eye on our peculiar antics. Even when the beaches and lake were deserted and we imagined ourselves alone, we would glimpse among the thick brush and palm frond of the shore, groups of still, dark figures intently regarding us, though so perfectly camouflaged as to be scarcely visible.

Unlike the white man who cannot hide himself in a tropical forest, whose every movement is apt to betray his unsureness, the African merges with his surroundings as an expert swimmer takes to the sea. In colour, in movement, more — in *feeling*, he is completely at home. Intuitively he walks, he pauses and breathes as part of the forest, not as an outsider who must scheme against it. He could not teach his awareness or his naturalness; it would not occur to him that these were not the most casual part of living. The white man may learn some of the bushman's skill, but his knowledge of the African wilds is necessarily something deliberate, superimposed and synthetic. He seeks to tame or subdue his surroundings rather than blend with them. In this he is worlds apart from the bush Africans whose shadowy figures silently watched us and *Lulu* from the lakeside.

Lulu's berth was alongside a mudbank jetty. As a precaution against thieves Pius erected a Juju stick knotted with *tie-tie*, though we thought this unnecessary because *Lulu* was palpably too bulky and recognizable to be stolen safely and would be as difficult to hide as to dispose of. We spent many afternoons on the lake, Bill fishing, I reading or watching the clouds and

LULU OF THE LAKE

the small, secret ripples and stirrings on the water and along shore. Lovers of boats, even the humblest boats, know the deep content of being snugly afloat on a tranquil waterway. It is perhaps the purest form of escapism. You are removed from all the ties and bothers of the land; your awarenesses are narrowed to the gentle creaking of trusted timbers, the shimmer of sun on the sky's calm mirror, and the sensation of adventure and make-believe makes even the briefest, most prosaic excursion a venture into the unknown. For the confirmed boat lover, any boat, any stretch of water will serve to kindle his delight. Witness the numbers of mongrel craft in small harbours all over the world, the pride and joy of their owners who devote week-ends to painting, re-rigging and beautifying their charges so that they may go forth as proudly as Columbus with who knows what trials and triumphs ahead. It is a strange yet natural obsession, akin to physical love. It is dilatory yet progressive, a pleasant fever you would not wish to cure. In *Lulu* we found — not perfection by any means, but more than adequate recompense for the work of making her.

Sometimes, escaping the dazzle of sun on sequined water we moored in a favourite spot in the shade of a giant iroko which spread gnarled, leafy branches out from the bank. There Bill would cast his lines and wait with the kind of patience which fishermen (and perhaps cats) understand — it being comparable only to the profound, mystic concentration of those who practise Yogi. Most of his catches were flat-bellied, stiff-whiskered mudfish or armour-scaled, fighting tigerfish which often snapped his lines. When a tigerfish strikes it leaps several feet out of the water in an effort to shake free. Its mouth is a mass of sharp teeth more numerous and sharper even than those of pike. The mudfish were more docile, but wary. Neither were good to eat, or so Cook told us, saying, 'Those be not white man's dish.'

Our palate for fish differed from the boys' in that Cook, Elias and Pius enjoyed the yellow flesh of the mudfish and

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

had patience with the tigerfish's multiplicity of small bones. Though Bill caught other kinds of fish, unidentifiable but looking as if they ought to be 'white man's dish', Cook always shook his head and warned us with a characteristic grimace of revulsion that such outlandish chop was not for us. 'If you think we can eat porcupine . . . ' I wanted to say but always thought better of it. Bill and I were trained to believe that all the fruits of the lake were by a natural deposition wholly and without question, 'black man's dish'.

In the dry season the question of bait was difficult, for the worms so attractive to tiger and mudfish descended so far below the surface of the ground that Pius in his most strenuous excavations could not find them. In a southern France fishing village where we once lived, this same problem resulted in one shrewd peasant cultivating worms during the driest part of the year. So, cornering his curious market, he sold worms at outrageous prices to visiting foreigners, the only fishermen who could afford this luxurious bait. Lacking any such sources at Agulu, Bill made do with bits of chicken gizzard and bacon rind. His lures, gaudy bait facsimiles made of feathers and bright metal, so successfully inflamed the tigerfishes' imagination that most of these cunning artifices soon lay at the bottom of the lake. Bill and the tigerfish had many scores to settle, and went on settling them during our whole term at Agulu. For every one of their number he caught, he lost many others, along with a quantity of line and hooks and a large measure of patience. Not that this deterred him, for such difficulties are the most important part of a fisherman's existence. 'They just snap the line,' Bill would complain bitterly, and I knew he could hardly wait to get back to the lake and have more lines snapped.

Our visits to the lake meant a new diversion for the village piccans. It began when two who had been watching us tie up *Lulu* accepted a ride back up the hill in the lorry. Thereafter hopeful congregations of piccans waited for us to go home.

LULU OF THE LAKE

Like a mass of puppies they clambered in and our swift ascent of the hill was marked by a twitter of keyed-up giggling and excited waving to friends. The ride became an institution, some piccans coming a distance to join in, and apparently finding the thrill worth the long walk home. A lorry load of joy-riding piccans is something to be seen. As a concentration of young enchantment and *joie de vivre* it is a rare spectacle, not vouchsafed to everyone. Cook would grin broadly when we rattled up the driveway and the ecstatic little mob scrambled out; Elias would clap his hands and say, 'Ooooh!' to see so many children. Agulu liked it. It seemed as if the pleasures of *Lulu* were cumulative.

When *Lulu* was kidnapped there was widespread consternation. Pius's Juju charm should have prevented it. Out of his worldly wisdom Cook said, 'He who stole the boat is Christian. No pagan could pass the Juju *tie-tie*.'

'Christian!' snorted Bill, and went in search of the culprit. But no one had seen the missing *Lulu* or her abductor. It was suggested that an 'enemy', perhaps a dismissed labourer, had sunk the boat deep in the lake. Canoes searched but there was no sign. The villagers waited to see what Bill would do next. Having found his own questionings and investigations profitless, Bill consulted with Chief Obuvudu and the other chiefs who were indignant that any of their people should behave so inhospitably. In effect they said, 'Someone wants you to offer reward money. That is bad. Leave it to us — we will have your boat returned.'

Yet out of communal pride they imposed a condition. If *Lulu* were returned intact the Massa should say no more, nor seek to know the thief's identity. If he completely entrusted to them the inquiry and the punishment, all would be well. To this Bill gladly agreed. Having boundless faith in the chiefs' authority and their uncanny means of obtaining information, he expected to find *Lulu* at her mooring next day. But she was not, nor on the following day, nor indeed for so many days

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

that we believed the chiefs, being only human, had been forced to abandon their promise. Still, when Bill saw them again they said, 'If you trust us and make no palaver, your boat will come back.' It seemed wholly unlikely.

Then one morning when we looked out before breakfast there was *Lulu* resting at her usual place. Pius went hotfoot down to the lake, returning to report that all was well; *Lulu* was a little dirty, but dry and undamaged. Bill thanked the chiefs who looked smug and would say nothing except, 'The man has been punished.'

Pius tied a fresh knot of *tie-tie* on the jetty's guardian Juju stick. Had not the first one proved effective? But of course it had, for though the robber had tried, he had not succeeded. Of this *Lulu's* reappearance was proof enough. We did not argue whether the credit was due to Pius's fetish or to the wily detective work of our local chiefs. Although we respected Pius's ideas on the subject we were inclined to give praise to Obuvudu and his friends, and by way of thanks took them out on the lake, in *Lulu*. Though entirely at ease in the most tippable dugouts they sat stiffly, carefully, in our boat, and their dignified weight made our progress slow.

At that time, so much were we a part of Agulu, we accepted an afternoon's boating with the chiefs as nothing out of the ordinary. But it was something to remember. We spoke of it one rainy day in London some months later while we were riding in a bus, and grew so absent-minded that we tended the fare carelessly.

'Where to?' asked the conductor.

'Agulu,' said Bill promptly.

'You're on the wrong route, mate,' the conductor said.

On such days it did us no good to remember *Lulu* and the lake.

CHAPTER XIII

OF MISSIONS AND MISSIONARIES

IT is significant that we looked upon our closest neighbours, the Sisters at the hilltop and the small band of local Irish Fathers, as friends rather than 'missionaries' and as lovable, vivacious personalities, not a whit smug concerning good works or critical of our own position on the Catholic-Protestant fence. 'The Sisters' Convent had the spacious coolness of calm uncluttered living. In the little parlour where guests were received, the simple furnishings were in admirable taste, the serving of tea a homelike ceremony enlivened with Irish wit and memorable for its gracious hospitality. The Sisters wore white habits, immaculately starched and seeming to have an extraordinary virtue of coolness despite the abundance of drapery which many would consider insupportably stifling in that climate. It was a fact that I, barelegged and wearing the lightest possible garments, inveighed against the heat, while the Sisters never showed awareness of any discomfort. Most remarkable, their 'tour' lasted from five to eight years, while 'Government' considered an eighteen-months' stretch long enough for its officials. When I remarked on this, one Sister said, 'It is easier for us. We live here in much the same way as in Ireland. We have few adjustments to make, while you have many. The pattern of our lives is arranged for us. You are constantly making decisions and adaptations, knowing you will have to make new ones all the time. We have already made our greatest decision and that stays as when we made it.'

It was a typically modest refusal to accept admiration. I was not to believe that the Sisters found their long tours arduous or beyond their strength. In so many respects, she

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

would have me believe, their lives were easier than those of government wives whose leisure was sometimes a burden to them. Of this I was not qualified to judge, but I felt there was some truth in it. By 'easier' the Sister paradoxically meant more useful and therefore conducive to peace of mind. Her explanation was not an accusation of lotus-eating nor a self-righteous description of convent existence. It was simply an analysis of the reason for the Sisters' apparent immunity from the nervy weariness and end-of-tourish boredom which beset most secular women in the tropics. Having in effect chosen to live apart from the world (while still ministering to the world's needs) their 'exile' in Africa, so the Sister said, was not much different from the life they led apart from the world in their own land. The tug of home was not so great a force. Convinced of their place in mission work, they suffered no division of loyalties nor were driven to construct a pattern of inconsequential busy-ness which gave no lasting satisfaction or knowledge of accomplishment. They enjoyed fewer superficial pleasures but escaped a multitude of superficial frettings.

Without exception their faces were tranquil; many were humorous or physically pretty; all were beautiful in a different sense. When first I called at the Convent to thank the Sisters for the neighbourly gift of bread, cake, preserves and vegetables which came on the day after our arrival, I was more than a little nervous, afraid we would have no interests in common and no meeting ground for real understanding. It proved quite otherwise. Far from being (justifiably) holier-than-thou or restricted in their conversation, they showed a breadth of knowledge and tolerant insight into the quirks and oddities of human conduct; their descriptions of people and places showed remarkable shrewdness of observation; their anecdotes were related with point and that Irish savour which gives every story an extra something in charm. That I, a non-Catholic, felt as much at home in the convent parlour as on my own veranda was proof of the Sisters' talent for projecting their understanding

OF MISSIONS AND MISSIONARIES

beyond their immediate world into the other world which was the only one Bill and I knew.

Afterwards I saw the buildings which dotted the convent grounds: the kitchens, model bush huts where girls were taught to vary the usual monotonous yam, cassava and corn diet with eggs and a wider use of vegetables, and the hygienic preparation of all native foods. Again in the sewing-room an interest in cleanliness and order was fostered, through an appeal to the Africans' love of colour and decoration. The kindergarten section demonstrated methods of child care revolutionary in the eyes of the bush women, but 'catching on', the Sisters said. The example of cleanliness was a feature apparent in all aspects of convent education; the mud floors of the school buildings were highly polished, the furniture scrubbed. Even the grounds looked as if they were frequently and thoroughly swept and dusted.

There are some who believe it pointless to attempt to raise the living standards of primitive people who, the critics say, have rubbed along very well for centuries without the interference of soap-and-water addicts. Moreover, the debunkers of hygiene for Darkest Africa maintain, bush people have developed immunity from dirt-carrying germs, so why bother with the laborious business of teaching them a new set of finicky habits which might even cause them to become less resistant and hardy? But the airy supposition that bush people are not subject to tropical diseases has no more basis in fact than the lazy citizen's notion that slum dwellers prefer to live the way they do. The bush people suffer from malaria, tuberculosis, dysentery, yaws, hookworm and many other serious ills too numerous to catalogue. Their wounds become as quickly septic as the uncleansed hurts of a white person. Germs are no respecters of skin colouring; they thrive on ignorance and are active wherever there are heavy moist air, crowded unventilated sleeping places, fetid water and careless sanitation. Those who believe that while godliness is good for the mind, cleanliness

can avert a mort of trouble for the body, and actively spread this doctrine, know that primitive Africans are by no means immune to local diseases. This does not mean that they are 'dirty', for the bushman likes to bathe several times a day and washes his garments often. It means that he does not (nor can hardly be expected to) understand the dangers which lurk in bad water and hookworm-infested soil, the need for space and fresh air where he sleeps, the necessity for segregating the sick from the healthy, and a hundred other principles which are commonplace to the white man. To say that it is unnecessary to teach these principles to bush people is to ignore the facts of widespread sickness and misery among them.

Yet I have often heard Europeans say: 'Granted, the bush Africans die from all sorts of diseases. It's the survival of the fittest now. But what will happen if through teaching hygiene and saving thousands of lives, nature's economies are disturbed and the population increases out of all proportion to the food and living space available? Why — they'll starve or kill each other off. Just think what it would mean if the 60 per cent of bush piccans who die shortly after birth, lived and produced healthy families!'

I would not presume to know the complete answer to this economic conundrum, but for a start would be inclined to refer the cynics to the medical missionaries' concept of the brotherhood of man which permits no *laissez-faire* wherever there is needless suffering. Believers in this idea are content to tackle daily the problems thereof with the brave certainty that the problems of years hence will be as courageously tackled by like-minded crusaders who consider every human life a worthwhile entity.

Another fallacy is that all primitive women have their babies as easily as the beasts of the fields and therefore require no medical attention. Protestant and Catholic missionaries who build and staff maternity hospitals in Africa do not agree with this blithe supposition. Primitive women, while less self-

conscious about their natural functions than white women, and therefore less prone to nervous imaginings, have, when the time comes, no certainty of relatively easy childbirth. Moreover, at the mercy of their own 'doctors' crude administrations and the dangers of infection they often suffer needlessly.

When after hours of agony a woman of Agulu bore twins, one dead, our Irish doctor said that had she forsworn native treatment and come to the hospital earlier she would have been saved much misery. Bill, who with the lorry, was often called upon to take local women *in extremis* to hospital, testified that none looked as if she were taking her ordeal with animal-like insouciance. The Sisters who supervised the bush hospital near us were not sentimentalists and they knew as much as anyone about the way the bush people lived. According to them the bush women needed maternity care. Not for them was the notion that primitive womankind led a charmed life when bringing piccans into the world. The Sisters did not flinch from the facts nor gloss over the agonized helplessness and pitiful bewilderment of the district's women when through ignorance and wrong native treatment their lives and the lives of the unborn were in jeopardy.

At first I failed to understand how the Sisters, so immaculately coiffed and gently composed, seemingly so removed from the fractious stresses and unbeautiful aspects of an earthier way of life, could tackle with level-headed skill and unflagging energy jobs which many secular women could not stomach. It was a frivolous incomprehension, based entirely on surface appearances. For it was not in the Sisters to draw their skirts away from thorny, ugly, physical problems, but rather to tackle these firmly. Like the Good Samaritan, they did not 'pass by on the other side'; rather, they ventured far, they spared no pains to seek out those who needed them.

Ourselves the 'heathens of Agulu', Bill and I knew many missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant, and for the most part admired the work they did. We did not attend their

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

churches and so were not qualified to know much about the conversions of pagans to Christian beliefs, except from outside evidence which was conflicting. It seemed to us that the pagan African must be confused by the presentation of two separate creeds, each in a sense critical of the other, and neither easy for him to grasp. The use of Latin in the R.C. litanies cannot be even remotely comprehensible to a bushman whose English, if he has any, is the most limited pidgin. Since even the white man with all his education and church training often finds difficulty in understanding some of the more involved parts of the Prayer Book, it seemed likely that the pagan must be puzzled by all of it — except the most simple phraseology concerning matters which he recognizes as part of his own existence. Again, Cook, who had been given a Christian baptism and knew his catechism well, confounded me one day by saying something about 'the white man's God'.

'Not the *white* man's God,' I corrected, 'the God of all peoples. Yours too.'

George brought out a book and pointed to a coloured illustration. 'Jesus be a *white* man,' he said.

There are wise people who would have known how to deal clearly with such an abstraction and set this confusion right. I did my best but afterwards wondered just how many other African converts, for whom many of our abstractions are next to meaningless, thought of God as a 'white' divinity, and consequently *not of their own*.

This incident illustrates nothing important but it shows that even the most satisfactory and apparently devout African convert has some reservations which he considers too trivial or foolish to mention to the head of his Church. The African is no child, but his approach to religion must lack the framework and foundation with which, unconsciously, Europeans find themselves equipped in matters of orthodox religion. He quickly accepts what he is taught, and this quickness is conducive to his retention of the form rather than the substance. At such

OF MISSIONS AND MISSIONARIES

times his extraordinary adaptability makes him less a realist, but his realism will assert itself when he is not deliberately setting himself to be adaptable.

It is of course understood that it is the example of the missions, rather than church preaching, which is important to the African. When he sees that his teachers put their principles into practice with results useful to his whole community, he recognizes a pattern of life which makes sense to him. Some may adopt a true Christianity; others may accept the benefits and pay lip service to the Church. (This is by no means a form of hypocrisy solely confined to the African race.) The temptation of prestige is sometimes an obstacle to the usefulness of converts who, after mission training, themselves go out as ministers and pastors. It is a human temptation. For the African it may mean that he looks upon himself as a superior person and the bush people from whom he came, ignorant and slow, owing him a large measure of respect and obedience. Pride of church office may cause him to put self-advancement before the humble duties of work thankless and unobserved. He may carry his religion as a fine bright silk handkerchief which he flourishes proudly before the eyes of lesser beings. Or he may faithfully, if sometimes narrowly, teach and preach and build well.

The practical good done by the missions is something that should be known in wider circles than those which normally hear about it. There is an unkind and sophisticated conviction in many places that missionaries are clannish, hidebound, interfering — and worst of all, dull. We met many who were none of these. One adventurous lady, not young, newly out from a quiet English town where she had led a sheltered, uneventful life, found herself in a remote bush mission, her only means of conveyance a rickety bicycle which her steward pedalled while she rode behind. By this means, bouncing and desperately clinging, she travelled mile on mile throughout the district, stopping at villages where her curious equipage

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

attracted throngs of pop-eyed bush people among whom she did her work. 'If only,' she said to us, 'the vicar and my English friends could see me on that bike!'

The first missionaries came to a West Coast which was then indeed a White Man's Grave. Numbers died from fever and dysentery, and their story ranks high with the world's feats of grim endurance and determination. To those pioneers who survived, the first credit is due for the schools and hospitals they built despite long-continued hostile mistrust from the people. They persevered through years of disappointing setbacks, the scourge of much illness and the doubts which must have beset them as to their place in this torrid, inimical land. Missionaries of this type must have the most earnest and self-denying temperaments, and a single-mindedness that admits no deviation or compromise. Such goodness requires a particular effort of appreciation from the secular and more frivolous world which is naturally embarrassed by such high virtue. It is a curious but true fact that nothing more acutely exasperates the ordinary imperfect mortal than the evidence of unremitting goodness. Were Protestant missionaries more prone to human failings they would surely be accorded a larger measure of secular affection. Human failings create a bond of understanding. Those who exalt the spirit and deny the flesh are generally accorded only a chilly respect by the vain world. It is difficult for the normal being, beset by original sin, to show generosity and warm-hearted enthusiasm towards those who use their lives for the betterment of humanity. When I said as much to Bill he pointed out that Human Nature is a queer critter, and that cannot be denied.

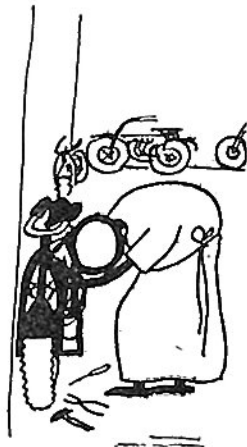
Our local Fathers lived in a large echoing house furnished with the bare minimum of creature comforts. They lived austere, but not drearily, for that is not possible to the Irish. Our first visit to the Mission coincided with a rainstorm which obscured the road in a stream of raging water. We ran from

OF MISSIONS AND MISSIONARIES

the lorry into the mission porch, I catapulting into the foremost of the circle of white-soutaned figures whose lantern illuminated a friar-like expanse of jovial frontage.

'Come in, come in,' said a mellow voice. 'We're right glad to see ye.'

We went up the dark stairway. The shutters were closed against the storm and in the friendly lamplight I looked at the faces of the four priests. Father X.'s was the most striking. Young in spirit, it was difficult to imagine him accepting anything so pedestrian and style-cramping as old age. He wore his venerable years merrily. His hair was white, making the more ruddy his square, mobile face with its shrewd, deep-set, eyes and bushy, autocratic eyebrows. He was sturdy in a peasant's way but more gentle, as if a meditative albeit occasionally mischievous spirit dwelt in that substantial body. He was both patriarch and small boy, wise *religieux* and common-sense organizer, humble priest and strong-minded arbiter



of the Mission's affairs. As *religieux* he and his fellow priests guided and shepherded a populous parish which included not only members of the large church adjacent to their compound, but several out-missions to which they journeyed by kit car or motor bike.

Old motor bikes and cabbages were two of Father X.'s sidelines. The undisciplined nature of motor bikes was as much a challenge to him as the happy-go-lucky ways of garden stuffs in eroded soil. He pitted himself against stubborn mechanisms and garden blights with the same energy he brought to all his projects. Of motor bikes the Mission had four, all in various stages of decrepitude. Using three as a reservoir of spare parts, Father X. maintained one machine in something like working

order. It was not always the same one, but the cream, so to speak, of the lot. There were endless permutations and combinations in this motor-bike rearranging and Father X., being a man of ideas, could not rest if he had a notion for more successfully contriving a faster and more reliable machine than he had already put together. Almost any afternoon his doughty figure could be seen in singlet, shorts and battered straw hat, wielding a spanner in the blazing sun. He would be working on an improved version of the current bike as an artist works and modifies in the light of fresh inspiration. To observe him a little later in priestly robe, moving with dignity across to his church, was to see another aspect of Father X. Again we knew him in other roles, as croquet player *par excellence* and keeper of the mission garden. His green thumb made the mission plot prosper and cabbages were his speciality. Ours might refuse to heart, or would take blight and shrivel, but Father X.'s cabbages obediently grew round and firm. When we asked him how he did it, he said, 'Ye can either grow a cabbage or ye cannot. If ye cannot, welcome to ours. Faith, it's as much as I can do to get the Fathers to eat them at all now. They'll be finding them too often on their plates, no doubt.'

Having spent thirty years and more in Nigeria, Father X was almost immured to shocks and surprises, but he admitted to indignation when in an excursion through Onitsha market he came upon a vendor selling a book, *The Gospel Story*, at a greedily profiteering price. The irony of it came to him later, and he could smile — but wryly.

Of the other priests Father H. was the ascetic. He had not Father X.'s restless busy-ness nor fighting Irish exuberance, but was quiet, soft-spoken, reflective — a tall, lean man with hands



like the saints in sculpture and a gentleness which made Elias speak of him as 'the kind Father'.

All could sing. We had no radio or gramophone and our only musical instrument was a ukelele which Bill mastered to the extent of twanging out two pieces: 'In the Evening By the Moonlight', and 'Then You'll Remember Me', both of which had the advantage of being in such slow time that the amateur player had a chance for cogitation over the next string without appearing to search for it too frantically. Although our musical sessions were not soirées by any means, they had verve and an element of vocal competition which made everyone feel cheerful. Father X. always starred with his eighteen-verse solo, 'Kate Muldoon'. Father H.'s surprising speciality was 'The Old Bog Road'. We sang 'The Mountains of Mourne', 'Mother Machree' (with much feeling and tremolo experimentation), and 'Phil The Fluter's Ball', also 'They Cut Down the Old Pine Tree', and 'The Wreck of The Old Number Nine' — for the most part a collection of abysmally mournful ditties sung with exuberance and a certain harmony that vastly pleased our uncritical ears. I do not know what the boys or the village thought of it. The sound carried far, effectively drowning the throb of bush tomtoms which made a nightly tattoo in the remoter darkness. Our own version of 'feast night' must have caused the village to prick up its ears as we did during their celebrations. When the strains of 'Did Your Mother Come From Ireland?' floated down the driveway, even the owls were silent, and when the Fathers had gone the house seemed still to echo a little, and a warmth of companionship lingered on the veranda air.

The missionaries of both Churches were our friends and although we did not attend their services, we enjoyed, I think, a mutual respect. Only the Faith Tabernacle, a small, all-African mission near the Post Office, often asked Bill to attend their meetings. He demurred tactfully only to find, on many occasions after he had stopped nearby, the lorry seat littered with

persuasive tracts and pamphlets which mentioned the torments of the damned in detail and spared no adjectives. This attempt to convert Bill to the Tabernacle's faith was a most surprising reversal of the usual white-man-converting-African procedure. The African pastor was so anxious to make Bill join his congregation that Bill had to dig in his heels and protest strongly. 'Take those and read them,' urged the pastor, thrusting upon him several mimeographed pages of militant exhortation.



They were written, we saw, by a minister in Philadelphia whose control of the Tabernacle's way of worship was not in the least weakened by his remoteness from the scene. His religion seemed to be compounded of fire and brimstone, of wailing and teeth-gnashing and angry hallelujah. We tried to imagine him writing these sermons for his parish thousands of miles away, and marvelled at the furious energy of his evangelistic typewriter.

On one of our late-afternoon excursions into bush we came upon an intriguing object which caused us to stop and stare. Jutting out of a wayside thicket a weatherbeaten wooden hand pointed to a narrow trail leading off the road. It said 'Salvation Army Headquarters This Way'.

We followed the uneven, winding path. The forest was deep and quiet with the beginning of evening; we saw no one nor any sign of habitation. We thought the sign must have been derelict, a relic of some other time, and were about to turn back when we glimpsed the clearing ahead. The last gleams of sunlight fell across the deserted mud building in its centre. We looked inside. There were mud benches and a raised platform at one end where stood a modest table alongside a magnificent, freshly painted red and yellow drum. Everything

was neat and simple. The windows had no shutters and a lizard rustled in the straw roof. As we lingered a voice behind us said, 'Do you like our church?'

An African stood watching us — not an unlettered bushman but a self-possessed, well-spoken young man who introduced himself as the caretaker of the church. He asked us into his own hut which stood at the edge of the clearing. In a front room so small that the three of us sat knee to knee, we talked with our new acquaintance. Sunday school texts and glossy coloured pictures of Daniel in the Lion's Den, the Serpent in the Garden of Eden and the Israelites Crossing the Red Sea covered most of the wall; there was a Bible on the table. 'Surely,' said Bill, 'you cannot have a large congregation.'

'Very large,' said the young man.

'But the Roman Catholic church is not so far away, and the Protestant Mission is on the other side. Who comes here?'

The man smiled. 'All those whom the others do not accept — the ones who do not agree to have but one wife — and others. We admit all who want to come. Our way is understood and no one is refused. The door is always open and each Sunday there are many, many. . . .'

We returned by another path pointed out to us, passing a Juju shrine built among the torn, sprawling roots of a tree the tip of which touched the church clearing — and another shrine where the path debouched upon the road. Once more we came to the pointing signpost and could not but admire its sturdy character and the conviction with which it said 'Salvation Army Headquarters This Way'.

REFLECTIONS ON SOLITUDE

What is this world, if full of care
We have no time to stand and stare?

BUT most city dwellers regard standing and staring as but one stage removed from idiocy. He who falls into this habit might be suspected of 'loitering with intent', for anyone who is not actively and obviously doing *something* must be up to no good. At best he may be killing time which, although not a criminal practice, is not well thought of. In cities, unless you want to seem an oddity, you keep moving. Your actions may not be particularly useful to yourself or anyone else, but you are borne along on a restless tide of human activity, stopping only to exclaim with the rest, 'I'm so rushed! Where does the time go?' and 'My dear, I haven't a moment!' City time is a clockwork tyranny which says: now you must do this or that . . . you'll be late . . . it's five minutes to already . . . or a quarter past . . . hurry!

In Agulu there was all the time in the world. At first I felt some guilt about it and had a notion that the efficient American alarm clock on my desk wore a look of downright disapproval. It and the kitchen clock were our only timepieces, for our wrist watches, not liking the climate, had stopped and would not start again. Having no means except the sun for correcting the respectively fast and slow variations of our two clocks we could never be sure of the exact time, and if by chance we forgot to wind them, we were even less sure. Not that it mattered.

REFLECTIONS ON SOLITUDE

Any fretting on this score was due simply to a persistent well-trained attitude that come hell or high water, you must know what time it is.

After years of submission to the autocracy of clocks, this habit was not easily broken. When I mistrusted the time our clocks gave us, I listened for Father X.'s evening Angelus bell which had an authoritative clang. By this we set the house clocks, also the office timepiece so that at seven next morning the clerk could strike the metal bar outside the office, signifying the start of the working day. We thought we were keeping accurate time this way until passing visitors informed us from their town watches that we were anything up to an hour in error. Then I complained to Father X. about the unreliable nature of his Angelus. Blithely he informed us that he set *his* clock by Bill's 7 a.m. office gong, though when he disagreed with that he used the sun as an approximate check. Agulu and the Mission were going in circles. There was no getting away from it; what we had was 'bush time'.

We even had a little trouble with the calendar, especially in any dealings with the villagers whose 'week' was made up of four days only. A man might say he would come to see Bill on the Eke following after the next Eke. Though 'Eke' was the first day of the Ibo week, it did not necessarily mean our Sunday. We had to ask him what the present Ibo day was — whether Eke, Oye, Afor or Nkwa — and from there work out on our calendar the day he would be expected. Even ordinarily the calendar meant less to us than ever before. Since we knew no winter the calendar's December seemed a mockery, nor in fact were any of the months' names convincing.

As for Christmas, its celebration in the tropics requires unlimited imagination or none at all. On most European lawns there are gala tables complete with streamers, crackers, a Christmas tree (the top of a casuarina), tinsel, turkey, plum pudding, wassail and a carnival paper hat for every head. With fireflies flickering, poinsettias in full flower on the bushes,

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

carols competing against cicadas in the hot, airless night, Noël becomes a slightly feverish time, as unreal as if in England one elected to celebrate Christmas in high summer. Because of this willy-nilly 'proper Christmas' in December we found ourselves jolted out of our normal existence, and it took several days to shake off the nostalgia for a *real* Christmas which the tropic version induced.

It was literally impossible to be up to date with news of the outside world. Our newspapers were six weeks old when they reached us, and the temptation was strong to devour them wholesale in one evening, so having to endure a news famine until the next lot came. Against this temptation to gluttony, Bill locked up the bundles of papers and periodicals, abstemiously selecting in order of date our 'daily' each morning. Sometimes, without cheating, we even managed to have a Sunday paper on Sunday. It mattered not in the least that we lagged more than a month behind current world news — that what we were reading was almost ancient history in the light of fast-moving events. We marched in time with, although at a considerable distance behind, the usual run of newspaper readers, and were content to do so. We were jarred only when a town radio owner burst in on us with news of the moment, or at least only a few hours old. It struck a discordant note in our placid, behindhand routine, and when we picked up our next 'daily' we found its contents flat, stale and unprofitable. So long as no one disturbed us in our belated following of world affairs we did not mind the time lag, and even began not to notice it at all.

But we are not capable of the happy make-believe practised, we heard, by one veteran in bush living. He elaborated on our method to the extent of having his steward arrange his carefully ironed newspapers on



REFLECTIONS ON SOLITUDE

a tray. When this was brought to his breakfast table he made his selection and paid the boy (whose role was vendor) a penny in City style. It was a soothing if complicated delusion. We thought he must have been that almost extinct type of European who dresses for dinner in the jungle and allows his regime to depart just so far from that of his natural habitat, and no more.

When you live on a bush hilltop with neither radio, telephone nor frequent contacts with English-speaking persons, the printed word takes on an extra importance. So we caught up on some substantial, if mixed, reading, ranging from Shakespeare and Pascal's *Pensées* to *Pear's Encyclopedia* and even the dictionary. Bill persevered through two volumes of small print concerning the history of Ancient Rome, normally a subject without much attraction for him. A book called *The Different Kinds of Wood* had long languished on our bookshelf; as a last resort we read that too. We did not skip through the glossier magazines but read them page by page, advertisements and all, admiring mammoth American refrigerators and opal-tinted, multiple-mirrored bathrooms no less than the pictures of beautiful, pin-neat housewives preparing oh-so-good meals in kitchens where everything worked by push buttons. The magazines were a heady tonic. Everyone therein was so zippy and zestful, so vitamin-nourished, well-insured and smoothly groomed. A stranger to the planet, picking up one of these journals might imagine the modern world to be a Utopian paradise entirely peopled by smart, successful, git-up-and-go citizens whose problems were only of deciding between this or that garbage disposal unit or robot coffee maker, or phenomenally youthifying, satinating, super-lathering Soap.

After a magazine session I felt bound to attempt some self-improvement. I saw danger lest we let ourselves go to seed and never again be able to face the modern world with equanimity. The magazines' complexion consciousness, for instance, caused me to search my mirror anxiously for signs of that deterioration

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

which the beauty articles warned against if you did not follow a System. A clay facial pack is not the most comfortable aid to a peaceful siesta hour, but it was at least more comfortable than thinking about the havoc mepacrine and the tropic sun had surely wrought. So it was that one afternoon when Elias knocked and I forgetfully opened the bedroom door, he was confronted with a weird plaster visage of concrete rigidity and ghastly pallor. Suddenly mindful of this I did not speak but shook my head carefully and shut the door again. When I came out to the veranda at tea time Elias seemed to have recovered from the shock. He may have reasoned that bush women have their rites and fetishes — why not Madam also?

Bush living is a test — matrimonially speaking. One friend was aghast at what she called our remoteness from the real world, and our dependence on each other for companionship and amusement. 'What on earth,' wrote this sophisticate, 'do you use for conversation? Day in, day out, don't you begin to find each other's faces just a bit boring.'

It was a sensible question. I replied that, thank goodness, Bill and I did not feel any need for constant conversation; we often spent hours busy with our separate pursuits and at such times hardly spoke a word. I ventured to opine that these spells of wordless harmony are one of the greatest blessings of marriage. And God forbid that we should for ever be trying to entertain each other! As for each other's faces, we had learned to like them and to live with them fairly amicably, and had no criticism to make beyond an occasional jibe at a certain mepacrine yellowness apparent in both countenances. So far as I was aware, even my most exasperating little habits had not driven Bill to eyeing me in a homicidal manner, nor did I find myself watching him (as exiles do in desert island melodramas) with that histrionic, tropic-fomented, one-of-us-must-go-or-else feeling. Not allergic to the sound of tomtoms which are said to inflame the brain with all sorts of antagonistic

REFLECTIONS ON SOLITUDE

savage notions — nor particularly to the heat and tension which can wear thin some kinds of patience, we knew as great a degree of serenity as is normal or even desirable for any couple. In our occasional spirited differences of opinion there was no point in flouncing out and slamming the door. For where could one go? He who made this dramatic move left the other in the best position, on the cool veranda. Moreover the doors, being warped by alternating wet and dry seasons, did not slam well, and when a door refuses to slam the first time it is labouring your point to begin your gesture all over again.

We found ourselves attempting new skills, not for profit or education, or for any reason except that we were thrown upon our own resources in devising leisure-time activities. And it was because these activities were not motivated by necessity or influenced by 'what the neighbours think', or imbued with any especial significance, that they were all the more a source of pleasure and satisfaction. Bill made and flew his kites; he painted pictures, not in the Art for Art's sake manner or because he thought anyone would care to see them, but just for the fun of doing it. For a time he drew and painted insects, moths and butterflies, a pastime which intrigued the bird, Bismarck, as much as it surprised the boys. Apropos of our having to put up with bush time he made tentative plans for a sundial, but this project was thwarted by the difficulty of having the sun vertically overhead at noon and the shadow therefore non-existent. Apart from collecting monkey blood (and busying himself with everything connected with this bizarre occupation) and taking *Lulu* around the lake, he acquainted himself with the possibilities of mud.

Bill went to some trouble to get his mud from a village noted



for the strength and sheen of its pottery. It was a substantial, cinnamon-coloured gumbo, wonderfully slippery and plastic. Bill said he was going to try sculpting, just to see what would happen. Infected by his enthusiasm, I tried it too, but after an hour or so decided that my talents must lie elsewhere, for they were not in making mud look like anything but itself. Bill had talent. His two African heads, larger than life, did not look like mud; they looked like real Africans. Because of this we doubted their value as Art. From time to time Pius and Elias, as if hypnotized by this curious form of creation, drifted near to watch, and Cook came diplomatically to admire. When he inquired, 'What will Massa *do* with them?' we did not know, but supposed they would stay on the veranda. What do people do with their sculptings but sit back and look at them? We could consult no professionals in this line, nor for that matter in insect-drawing, boat-building or kite-flying. Or even in the business of constructing men's shorts.

When, though by no means a brilliant tailor, I set out to make Bill a pair of linen shorts, I fondly imagined that the shape of these garments should be easy enough to reproduce on the sewing machine. As a pattern you used another pair of shorts and the rest was routine (I thought). But something went amiss architecturally. Though the seams were neat and the pockets where they should be, the garment was, as Bill said during several increasingly perplexing tryings-on: too short from here to *here*, too big *here*, and isn't there something not quite right *here*? I could not then, nor do I yet understand, why in the front part of the waistband there was room enough for a good-sized pillow (besides Bill) while the back was of dangerous tautness. Also that while the legs were long — as a prudent measure against laundry mishap — the waist came down over the hips and could not be hauled up higher.

After that experience Bill had his shorts and shirts made by the local tailor, a man of no mathematics whose measuring tape was a piece of knotted string and whose attitude was so casual

as to be totally uncaring. He made some rough scrawls on a piece of paper, carried away the cloth and returned with garments which adhered correctly where they should to Bill's outline, and fell away where slackness was desirable. So the bush tailor succeeded where I (who had once taken a Domestic Science Course) failed. My vanity suffered a minor jolt, as sometimes happens to white people when they find out that an untutored African can outshine them in some form of skill. It was a salutary experience, and not the first of its kind.

Fortunately it was not required of me to cut Bill's hair, for that was done by an itinerant barber on our visits to town. On several occasions when one of the Fathers kindly undertook his barbering he emerged with a tonsure crop which made up in coolness for the striking way it altered his appearance. When I wanted my hair cut Bill did a workmanlike job, as thorough as Delilah in her shearing of Samson. 'There,' said Bill, the practical man, 'you'll be cooler now.' He was right. I was cooler. But one such trimming sufficed. I decided to let my hair, if it recovered, grow as long as the Sutherland Sisters'. To a woman, even if she lives in bush, coolness of coiffure is not everything — not if she has a reasonably truthful mirror.

Bush life, like any other, is precisely what you make it, but it is different from town life in that you cannot hope to find nepenthe for your irritations by going to the pictures or buying a new hat. You cannot run away from your surroundings if you find them dull and it is useless to deplore the absence of metropolitan diversions. There is nothing for it but to alter your pace and turn your eye and mind to simpler things which, you may eventually realize, are not simple after all, but complex, intriguing and important. This may be common knowledge to all hermits; it is, in fact, the Loaf of Bread and Jug



BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

of Wine and Thou theory which city dwellers so often sigh for but usually avoid like the plague when put to the test.

By some austere standards our wilderness was fairly comfortable, and it provided a variety of *divertissements* of a kind not blatantly exotic nor even particularly eye-catching, but giving us pleasure and incidentally a measure of that kind of education which is usually possible only to pre-school-age children. We had time and opportunity to look (to stand and stare) at the shapes and colours of ordinary creatures and objects which, in



other ways of living, pass unnoticed. As, for instance, our unremarkable (or so we first dismissed it) tortoise which lived a free life in the compound and sometimes came on the veranda. The study of a tortoise's mechanism and personality is likely to strike many casual observers as a singularly monotonous, unrewarding pursuit. We on our hilltop found the tortoise as entertaining — in proportion to our dearth of more worldly amusements — as a three-ringed circus. The incomparable

neatness and workmanlike perfection of its shell and retractable legs and head; the comedy of its transformation from a slow-motion creature to an innocent hillock from which peeped out a wary, senile face, was a lesson in the importance of taking notice. So it was with the insects and butterflies, the scorpions and the birds, most notably our own Bismarck.

Bill and I had never considered ourselves in any sense naturalists; our observations were entirely amateur and their basis nothing but a general curiosity which bush time and opportunity permitted us to indulge. Our enthusiasms were as variable as our disinclinations. Ants for instance — insects which apparently offer a field of inexhaustible investigation to learned entomologists — did not stimulate anything in us except hostility. Of ants whose governments and systems are among

REFLECTIONS ON SOLITUDE

the greatest wonders of nature we could only say: the fewer the better. We preferred spiders which in our experience we found to be unobtrusive, leading their lives without impinging on ours. We were especially intrigued by one which on our approach would shake its large web in what appeared to be an excess of rage — a tiny, bright insect with the heart of a tiger.

So, when distant friends wrote in envy, 'How lucky you are to have so much leisure!' and then contradicted themselves by sympathizing, 'Poor thing, what can you find to do with all that spare time?' it was difficult, even impossible, to say just how we used this gift of time. Reading, writing, drawing (within reasonable artistic limits) and lake-exploring sounded feasible and needed no apology — but for the rest, how to describe the multitude of adventures into Lilliput or the fun of standing and staring? Had I tried to do so there might have been some head shaking over us. 'They've gone completely mad, you know, out in that funny Nigerian village.' It seemed to me that this preoccupation with the avoidance of that direst of all states, boredom, and the assumption that people who live away from large communities of their own kind must be bored, is no tribute to the intelligence of man or woman. We could not explain how it was, but we had daily proof that the combination of Agulu and 'bush time' added up to the absolute antithesis of boredom.

THE WHITE MAN IN BLACK
MAN'S COUNTRY

IN matters concerning The White Man's Burden, Empire Building and the Colour Question, capital letters spread like a rash that indicates a widespread infection of vagueness. The more complex the subject, the more sweeping the generalizations. Even while admitting the probable inaccuracies of such wholesale summings-up, many people hold to a notion that the Negro race is shiftless, stupid and dishonest, to say nothing of being hyper-sexed, childish, wilfully unhygienic, crafty and exhibitionist. These same people, if confronted with generalizations as rash and contradictory about the white man, i.e. that he is arrogant, phlegmatic, materialistic, smug, inhibited, superficially educated and greedy, would exclaim in horrified capitals, 'Wicked Propaganda!'

It is no more fair for a white man to judge the whole Negro race on the evidence of the shiftless, stupid or dishonest Negroes he has met, than it is for the African to assume that all white men are arrogant, materialistic or smug. But this is exactly what does happen. It is too often forgotten that *both* white and black races, being only human, demonstrate most of the less attractive traits common to human kind. There are as many arrogant, phlegmatic, greedy Negroes as there are childish, exhibitionist, hyper-sexed white people. Conversely, both races have as common a basis of the human virtues of patience, courtesy and willingness to co-operate. Such ordinary virtues, having no sensation value, are as rarely mentioned as the rest are frequently and hoarsely proclaimed from a variety of soap-boxes. One might imagine that the brotherhood of man is a slogan only for milksops and the more dreamy-eyed fanatics.

WHITE MAN IN BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

It is too often assumed that a capable, farsighted, cultured, fair-minded colonial administrator is all these things because he is white, and that the illiterate, importunately petitioning African is what he is because of his darker complexion. This 'white' and 'black' distinction has more than meets the eye. It is probably exaggerated by some deeply buried conviction of superstitious, medieval character, that while 'white' stands for purity, clarity and highmindedness, 'black' means everything opposite. The dictionary gives the word 'white' these meanings: transparent; pure, unblemished; innocuous; gracious; favourable. Of 'black' we read: of the darkest colour; obscure; dismal; sullen; horrible; dusky; foul; dirty; malignant.

From childhood people instinctively associate colours with feelings: white for honour and justice, red for danger, yellow for treachery and cowardice, green for jealousy — black for all that is sinister and most to be feared. So words like blackball, blackmail, blackguard, black sheep and black market have come into being. The white man thinks: 'black man' and a host of 'black' impressions promptly bedevil him. His reaction is instinctive, the first and most foolish jumping-off place for a whole sequence of extraordinary prejudices.

The most common basis for hostility against a person or a race is that the individual or group is not of your own kind. Nothing works more perniciously against human understanding than the automatic association of preconceived superstitious notions. For those persons who have never met a Negro and whose opinions are therefore based only on hearsay or that same mechanical absorption of the idea, 'black', there is some excuse for lazy thinking. However, it might be expected that people who spend their lives working among the Africans in the Africans' own country should adopt a more sensible and exact view.

Some do and some do not. Their sense and good manners, or lack of both, has not so much to do with the fact that they are *white* people, as that they are assorted human beings with

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

assorted backgrounds, heredities and instincts. Some are missionaries, in which case their attitude (generally speaking) is unselfish and persuasive. They are imbued with the spirit of rescue and a belief in the one-ness of all souls with God — regardless of race. Having this conviction they seek to convert the pagan African, to change his spiritual outlook through association with their own Church. The term 'missionary' may conjure up a picture of the heroic Dr. Livingstone — or an image of a pale, spectacled Bible-reading maiden lady may come to mind. (Which seems to prove that, as with the word 'black', 'missionary' evokes its own set of conventional mental snapshots.) But there is no Genus Missionary — there are only people. Some have more patience, insight, physical endurance and humility than others. Some, no matter where they were, would make whoever came into contact with them happier, kinder, more Christian. Those who have this power of what can only be called 'goodness' and bring it to Africa, naturally achieve results; it could not be otherwise. For these rare spirits do not believe themselves holier than others, or apart; they are willing to learn as much as to teach and therein lies much of their strength. Some missionaries may do as much harm as good. They are those who, although they have a strong sense of vocation, do not themselves understand what they are trying to teach, and by lumping all Africans into one category cannot hope to teach the individual African. But all these shining virtues and foibles and major or minor blindnesses cannot be pigeon-holed as specifically missionary qualities; they are just the ways of human beings who happen to be white — and missionaries.

So it is with the government officials whose responsibilities are as weighty and considerable as those of the missionaries, though of a somewhat different nature. The government official represents British authority. In all his departments: Administrative, Educational, Medical, Agricultural, Public Works, Forestry and Development, etc., his present duty is

WHITE MAN IN BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

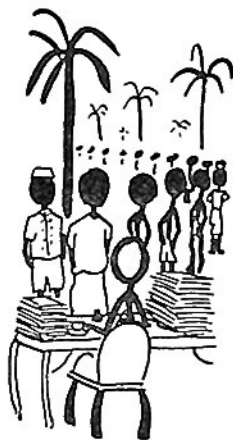
to help the Nigerian in Nigeria to make his country better educated, healthier, more prosperous and productive and an increasing credit to the British Empire. For this ambitious task the official is required to have a certain fairly high standard of academic education and extra technical training, a medically approved physique and 'a good background'. In addition he must be 'the right type', i.e. adaptable, energetic (but not impetuous), thorough, enthusiastic (but not unorthodox) and diplomatic. This is a list of the excellent qualities which the candidate for a colonial position may be expected to have in some degree — but not all at the same time, for that would make him too good to be true. The choice of exactly the right men for the responsibilities they must carry is a feat of singularly good judgment and by no means an everyday occurrence. Even during a succession of the most careful interviews it is not easy to gauge the temperament of a man — once he is in the tropics. And once in the tropics, the candidate who is known among his white friends and colleagues as an officer and a gentleman may display towards Africans anything but a gentlemanly attitude.

It is one thing to talk sagaciously and adventurously about colonial work in Africa while you are in a temperate climate and West Africa five thousand miles away — but quite another thing to put your training and principles into practice. There is the enervating heat, and perhaps loneliness; a bewilderment quickly covered by an air of the most casual superiority — and possibly an antipathy, to be joked about in the company of fellow wits and fellow sufferers. There is a tendency among some to feel that the African has no right to be so close at hand in such numbers, creating so many problems and causing so much noise and untidiness. Let him wait . . . let him go away . . . let the white man have some peace! Confound and confound again those close-pressing black visages so eager to tell their little, complicated woes — everlastingly wanting things written down for them on pieces of paper — not understanding

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

what they are told — arguing, making one's head ache and one's nerves as taut as fiddle strings!

Irritable resentment against those very people and conditions which make the official's job necessary and provide him with his bread, butter and jam, is at some time or other experienced by most colonial government employees in the tropics. It is an illogical and yet almost inevitable resentment. Officials are often overworked; they have not the wisdom of Solomon or



the patience of Job. Unlike the missionaries they may not even have a strongly humanitarian sense of vocation — but only a tidy mind, an official conscience, a liking for prestige and an eye to the main chance for promotion. For such an official the personal world of Nigerians is incidental — it does not directly concern him and he does not feel particularly responsible for its betterment. He may spend most of his time among Africans and still know them no better, nor feel in himself any lack. Having technically fulfilled his duties he sees no reason why he should give more of himself than

he can spare with comfort.

All other things being equal, the difference between an orthodox official and a man who is a force in furthering colonial harmony and progress is that one is content with what he knows, and the other, with some humility, tries to keep an open mind. The first shows some little tricks of character which betray his conviction that all Africans are inferior beings, much of a muchness. Though normally the politest of men among his own kind, he may refer to Africans as 'wogs' or needlessly keep their deputations waiting for hours. He may adopt an offhand smiling ('now this is going to be really *funny*') attitude during a palaver the outcome of which means little to him but everything

WHITE MAN IN BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

to its African participants. He may be kind to his dog but rail at his boys as if they had no feelings whatsoever, and no memory either. He is not a man, you would think, to depart from any of the rules of social correctness, but among Africans he departs daily from most of the ordinary concepts of tolerably courteous behaviour. To his mind — though this does not excuse him — all Africans might be deaf, dumb, blind and mentally deficient. He may be cultured, witty, pleasant to know and an ornament to any white club gathering — but the African will not like him. And since all white men are looked upon as 'brothers' by the African, the wrong kind of official does a great disservice to those who come after him.

There was for instance an occasion when several white officials were enjoying their Sunday ease, all cares laid by, the conversation easy, the house knowing that peace which comes after a good luncheon curry shared by friends. Into this peace came the steward saying, 'Massa, a boy come with this message.'

The message, a laboriously pencilled note, said that a neighbouring African, a post office employee, had been taken ill and should go to hospital. Since there was no other way, would the Massa take him in his car?

The party's host read this, frowning. He spoke the routine words: 'Let the boy wait.' The conversation, hardly disrupted, continued; peace returned and all was as before, serene and convivial. Three hours later the steward came again to murmur, 'Massa, the boy still wait for answer.'

The Massa, who was in the middle of a good story, was in no mood to deal with an importunate messenger. 'Still waiting? Who? Oh — for me to drive that somebody who thinks he's got a pain, thirty miles to hospital. Tell him to go away. Massa is busy. No can do, understand?' And to the gathering, 'These people expect you to be chauffeur and every damn thing under the sun.'

The unseen messenger did not go, for the African has genius when it comes to waiting; it is his forte. Patience is one of his

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

most obdurate weapons against all the slings and arrows of his misfortunes. It is the African's capacity for waiting that reproaches the white man into punishing him by making him wait all the longer. When one of the guests, troubled by the situation, detached himself and took an early farewell from the party, he found the boy still sitting outside, and went with him to the sick man's hut. Although the drive to hospital took some time, the man did not die. But he would have died had he not arrived there and been given immediate care that evening.

This is an incident that demonstrates not so much the wrongness of one attitude as a difference in character between the official who said, 'No can do,' and the official who, without making much commotion or indeed, any great sacrifice, followed the only course possible to his nature. Each, being what he was, acted accordingly, not in conformity to any official ruling, or in a manner prescribed as the white-man's-way, but out of his own individual instinct.

No one denies the importance of a high level of ability in any group of colonial officials. Personalities, however, are less easily gauged, and the small, subtle details of individual temperament are difficult to record. Yet it is just these details which, added together, provide for the African a picture of the white race as a whole. It may be absurd for him so to judge an entire race, but no more absurd than to hold the all-Africans-are-the-same theory so strongly maintained by many white people who work among them.

It is impossible to hope that the white race could begin to represent itself, even to its own kind, as a community of saints; it is possible to hope that it can show itself to another race in a fairly good light, if its representatives are aware of their unusual *extra*-official obligations. Such men Bill and I met almost as often as we met the 'wrong type'. They had humour, patience, natural good manners, a sense of proportion and a balance of judgment which served them well at critical times when lesser men might have been brusque, petty and stuffily

WHITE MAN IN BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

unco-operatively 'official'. They did not set themselves deliberately to shine in the eyes of the African; indeed, such is the waywardness of human nature, their best deeds were often unnoticed, sometimes misconstrued and generally unrewarded. They were not sentimental about Africans any more than they were sentimental about their own kind, and they made no noticeable adjustment of voice or manner when speaking to Negroes. In them we saw the best kind of British (or any other) character, notable for calmness and integrity; for the courtesy that comes as much from instinct as from training, and for the kind of patience which is not marred by the tight rein of a fretting temper.

Such men are not necessarily paragons of official virtue. They do not consciously disseminate sweetness and light. It is just that their minds do not pigeon-hole their attitudes; they do not have one code to be used solely in connection with white people and another, more slipshod, for Africans. They are not so illogical, even subconsciously, as to make the African a scapegoat for their own personal fatigues and stresses: something on which to vent the spleen resulting out of situations varying from homesickness to a pink gin hangover. They may realize more than most the cataclysmic effect of a tropical regime on bodies accustomed to a way of life in every sense more temperate. In this hot, humid environment, human traits for good or ill become exaggerated. Smug, easy-going people, if satisfactorily provided with enough creature comforts, will become as lazy as cats who live on cream. Thin-skinned, hypersensitive souls will find fuel for a chronic irritability in the series of exasperations that plague them. The blasé are in their natural home where they may practise a more elaborate detachment and astringent cynicism. The hypochondriacs, idealists, martyrs and message-bringers are in their element as much as those who love authority for its own sake. Believers in Spartan self-discipline may here test themselves; the eccentric will elaborate his eccentricities; the ostentatious will become

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY



autocratic, and the just will become more punctiliously just. The socially minded become more ingeniously social; recluses retreat further into their shells. In torrid climes not by nature suited to the white man's constitution, the character of the individual may seem to change, to become different for better or worse. But the actual process is generally an intensification, an italicizing of the qualities he already possesses.

When people think of the white man in the tropics they are almost certain to picture him downing rum swizzles or stinkahs or some kind of sundowner (in the prescribed manner) — even drinking himself to death in some lonely outpost. Drink and the tropics seem to go together. There may be some truth in the assumption that the average Empire Builder spends a good part of his leisure time comforting himself with alcohol, but he is not much more likely to 'drink himself to death' in the tropics than anywhere else. Again, it all depends on the individual — whether he is relatively content with his lot or burdened by a feeling of futility or inadequacy — whether living far from any kindred souls, he has no social safety-valve for his tensions, or living in a community centre he feels he must drink his quota in order to 'belong'.

There are more reasons for drinking (and not drinking) than anyone has ever cared to list fully. In the tropics there is generally more opportunity, and a tendency to make one's leisure life a succession of small rituals in which 'Boy! Pass drinks!' figures as one of the most attractive. A man, alone on his veranda, with darkness settling about the quietness of his house, unconsciously makes a ceremony of his evening drink as a gesture towards his self-sufficiency, his grip on his present situation and his reliance upon himself as agreeable company.

WHITE MAN IN BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

He does not necessarily think: 'I'm lonely (or worried), I will Drink and Forget.' And quite often he drinks very little. His diversion is as harmless as any of the patterns of habit which people living alone weave about themselves. If he is an Old Coaster, alcohol most likely figures in his scheme of things as it has since the old days when water filters were unknown and spirits as safe a drink as any. If he insists that whisky and gin are prophylactic agents against malaria, and bitters an excellent cure for dysentery, he may perhaps achieve some degree of immunity. The newcomer anxious for social acceptance and conformity to all existing standards is apt to drink more than the rest by way of proof that he really is a Man of the Tropics. (Just as, if he is young and eager to fit in with current attitudes, he may chameleon-fashion take on the colour of his seniors' opinions about Africans, and within a few days of arrival behave as if there were no subtleties in Nigerian character of which he is not aware.)

Drinking in the tropics might be classified as Domestic (or Harmless), Social (or Club), and Eccentric (or Radical). Domestic drinking is usually moderate, quiet and thoughtful, often accompanied by reading, and conducive to some physical and mental restfulness. The Social (or Club) kind goes with having-a-good-time, seeing your white friends through rose-coloured glasses and knowing that they see you in this same happy, if not strictly truthful, light. It goes with anecdotes and gossip, sometimes witty, often singularly revealing. Also with easy laughter, some argument, exchange of confidence (sometimes regretted) and a temporary conviction that This Is The Life. Eccentric (or Radical) drinking is not confined to any sphere, for the Radical Drinker, but permeates all. Bill and I met several. One was known to have almost entirely substituted spirits for food; his daily diet, apart from gin, was a banana at 10 a.m. and an onion in the evening; on Saturdays he ate a curry. Yet to all appearances his mental faculties were unimpaired; his work bore all the marks of a clear, logical, even unusually under-

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

standing mind, and not once was he known to behave in an undignified or reprehensible manner. His reading was philosophy and metaphysics; his speech was cultured but not pedantic and his health reasonably good. (Whether he was a happy man at heart was not a question anyone ever asked him, for that is the most embarrassing and rarely asked question among civilized souls. You may inquire of a man about his health, business, family or prospects, but although he may exhibit the most melodramatic symptoms of neurosis, you do not ask him if he is unhappy. The reason for this avoidance may be that the questioner, apart from feeling foolish, cannot know what to do with the answer, and his inquiry if made in good faith devolves upon him some obligation to remedy this most common of human maladies, unhappiness.)

Some Radical Drinkers still hold to the idea that drinking is moderate so long as it does not continue after dinner. This means that as many drinks as possible must be consumed in the interval between dusk and the meal-serving time. Since to the Radical Drinker food is not important, his dinner hour is accordingly subject to later and later postponement.

Bidden to the house of an R.D. for dinner and asked to come at seven o'clock, Bill and I took with us our normal appetites and a hope that we might dine by nine. The already set dining table augured well, but the laden smaller table by our host's elbow should have warned us that we should not be fed for several hours. The ritual commenced and with some foresight we adapted ourselves to our host's pace (but not to his capacity) by taking an excess of soda water in each glass. The evening wore on. When Bill glanced covertly at his watch our host said, 'Dear me, we must have chop — you'll be hungry.' Then he added hurriedly, 'We'll just have one more before we sit down?' Towards eleven a certain inner preoccupation caused us to talk about food and the skilful way of African cooks in keeping a meal hot and ready for hours, to be served at their

WHITE MAN IN BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

master's whim. 'I don't know how they do it,' said our host generously, 'but they manage it somehow.'

From a woman's viewpoint, food does not improve in taste or appearance by being kept waiting. And from personal experience I could not imagine that any cook's temper or patience would remain unimpaired during a lengthy vigil over a wilting dinner. The African may be adaptable, but as a cook he can exercise no especial Juju over the chemistry of food once it has reached readiness for consumption and thereafter begins to deteriorate. I suspected that our host's habits were so well known to his boys that they could safely gamble on his eight o'clock meal being called for at midnight, or even not at all, and that they adjusted their working schedule accordingly.

Shortly after midnight Bill, who had apparently given up all hope of dinner, signalled to me with a movement of eyebrow which between husbands and wives means it is time they were going. He was about to say so when our host said cheerfully, 'Boy! Pass chop!' and we sat down to it. The Radical Drinker may seem a normal enough person but when he invites you to dinner it is as well to have your meal beforehand, at home.

There is no abracadabra by which white people, having uprooted themselves from their natural habitat, may automatically and happily adjust themselves to West Africa, and no way of finding out beforehand how they will react. A man becomes a government officer before he goes out to the Colony, and having cast his die, must adapt himself as best he can, even if he finds his conditions and work uncongenial. If he is not contented his resentments and frustrations will plague him like a nest of hornets. In such a man's house there will be an atmosphere of unquiet. He may shout or speak rapidly to his boys on the principle that authority means noise, and boys are so stupid that nothing less than a roar or a spate of words will set their brains and feet in motion. When they do not understand, or retreat into sullenness, he is theatrically certain that

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

their attitude in one of deliberate sabotage against his peace of mind. He may also take it for granted that all Africans are dishonest, and devise such elaborate precautions against his boys' 'untrustworthiness' that he will almost certainly be robbed. He may be imbued with the conviction that the whole country is against him, plotting fever and disease, prickly heat, sunstroke and nameless antagonisms. In his opinion the African seems to be the instigator of all his peevish discomforts and the *raison d'être* of all his weariness and rancour.

He will say that the African is incapable of learning anything except menial tasks, and add that no matter how far the African does advance he will certainly regress or 'go native' the moment his guiding props are removed. The African could reply that most houseboys, in addition to proving their adaptability in such tasks as cooking, housecleaning, laundering, table-waiting and valeting, also speak some English. English is presumably a language no easier for an African to learn than, say, for a Frenchman or an Italian — in fact it must be considerably more difficult. If the white man views with some pride his attainment of even a smattering of African dialect, the African is entitled to some praise for acquiring the white man's language as readily as he does. The fact that boys born in bush and having little, if any, formal education, can understand even part of what their master says, is some proof that the African mind has its potentialities.

It is the African who is always obliged to adapt himself to the white man's ways — not vice versa. A bush boy, having no background in the least similar to the white man's, goes to school (if he has the opportunity), learns from English textbooks according to the English school system and acquits himself well enough, considering that most of his school subjects have so little relation to his primitive home surroundings. There is no proof that the African bush boy has less receptivity than the average white child, or fewer potentials for acquiring knowledge — even though the bush boy is handicapped in this sort

WHITE MAN IN BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

of comparison because his home life contributes far less towards book learning than the white child's. For the African, learning in the white man's fashion means his adoption of a whole set of foreign ideas; foreign, that is, because they are set forth in a language not his own and stem from a culture not traditional to him. While he may pass examinations and prove to be a bright scholar it is impossible in a single generation for him to absorb so much of the new, and wholly or even partly reconcile it with the old. There are sure to be gaps and anomalies; a tendency to mimic and to learn by rote. This does not imply stupidity, but a dangerously facile adaptability. When the African is told: this and that are so, he has not time to discover or even inquire about the whys and wherefores. During his few years of formal schooling he must make up for past generations of illiteracy. If in his eagerness he swallows more than he can possibly digest, the fault lies less with him than with the system of education.

Some would have it that an academic education is of little value to the average African — that technical training in carpentry, mechanics, smithing, farming, weaving and kindred studies would be better suited to his natural abilities and economic needs. These critics maintain that algebra, Latin and English literature have nothing except 'snob value' save for those who evince a genuine inclination towards these subjects. They also maintain that every scholar's ambition to become a government clerk or teacher cannot possibly be satisfied, and that Nigeria needs skilled craftsmen above all else.

Yet the African manual workers' present reputation for slowness and carelessness causes many white overseers to decry the possibility of any African ever becoming skilled in anything. Those who hire labour employ Africans by the dozen or the score without giving much thought to the qualities of individual workers or attempting the teaching of new skills. In itself the popular notion that 'it takes ten Africans to do the work of three white men' militates against the white man's patience and

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

inclination to explain with any thoroughness or clarity just how he wants a job done. The white man accepts responsibility for a project; to him comes the praise or the criticism. He sees its beginning and ending, and has in his mind far more than he would think of communicating to his workers. Having a goal, a set ambition, he is understandably far more enthusiastic, more concerned with the outcome of the job than his labourers who, 'theirs not to reason why', swing shovels and tote burdens and get their daily shilling.

The average white hirer of African labour is not employed for his ability as a teacher or psychologist. His task is to get a practical job done as well and cheaply and quickly as possible, using such means as are at his disposal. In himself he may be conscientious, energetic and highly skilled as a result of some years of specialized training and competitive experience. Using his own skill as a standard he may look upon his labourers (of a different race, background and very little training) as a group of malingering, unteachable, brain-torpid automatons. It is possible that the labourer, if he thinks about it at all, partly subscribes to the white man's opinion, for there is little in it to foster any workman's pride or hope towards progress. In the long run the African has found it just as well to agree with the white man, no matter what he thinks; for in any difference of opinion the African is not likely to benefit materially by winning his point. Here again is adaptability brought to its ultimate and most harmful conclusion.

The employer of Africans, being only human and rarely an idealist, puts a limit on his responsibilities. He does not see why he should exhaust himself attempting the outlook and functions of sociologist, anthropologist, public relations advocate and Universal Aunt. To him Africans are just Africans and in the main raw material lacking quality but abundant in quantity. When his workers do not please him he fires them and hires others. These replacements are usually glad to come, especially when, having been dismissed from their last job, they have

WHITE MAN IN BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

long languished in idleness. If, as is probable, they prove scarcely more satisfactory than their predecessors, their employer will take up his old self-pitying chant: 'They're all the same, you can't teach 'em, and they're bone-lazy, but that's the way they are, and I can't help it.'

With the white man's coming to Africa, money has become something of interest and necessity to the African. His economic life is changed and he has been taught an appreciation of Western goods: clothes, bicycles, tinned food and medicines which the trading stores have brought to his land to stimulate his covetousness and their profit. If he is not a trader among his own people he can expect to earn money only by hiring out such of his abilities as are useful to the white man, and the attainment of the white man's approval (since it is linked with money) may become the most important aim in his life. With this stimulus he may adapt himself out of all recognition. The desire to please — if the reward is sufficient and the prospects of success attractive — may cause him to take on any task, regardless of its unsuitability to his nature, or the possibility of failure and consequent rebuke. He will study the white man's strengths, weaknesses and whims as the white man rarely studies the African's character. And though he may make dire mistakes in his strategies, he usually learns from his errors.

The African's belief that references provide an Open Sesame to any job may have some connection with his feeling of insecurity. Armed with a 'paper' which bears even the most cryptic comment from the pen of his past employer, he has greater confidence. He is aware that white men are more inclined to rely on the written word than their own ability to form an estimate of any African's character. Not that character is all; skill matters to the white man, and if it is written for all to see that Moses (or Okonkwo or Kaulo) is a good steward, there should be no delay, thinks Moses, in his being hired.

But there are certain kinds of references, carried with

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

optimism and presented with pride, which do not impress the reader. Bill, in his interviewing, was perplexed by several such doubtful testimonials. One said flatly: 'If you are looking for a reliable worker, I advise you to give this boy a wide berth . . . ' and another: 'His dismissal was due to a difference of opinion regarding the ownership of certain of my possessions' — and lastly a Bible reference which revealed itself as: 'I was a stranger and he took me in.' In all cases the applicant stood smiling, hopefully waiting for his precious 'paper's' magic words to bring about his prompt hiring.

To the first Bill said, 'But this is not a good paper.'

'It be good,' was the protest. 'It say my name be Enos Okonkwo. I be that man.'

'It say,' Bill answered, 'that you are not good worker.'

'But it be paper,' pleaded Enos, 'proper paper. I say to my Massa: please give me reference. He say: no can do. But I say: Massa, write that I be Enos Okonkwo and some small thing about me and my handwork. He do this and it be proper paper.'

Probably Enos and the others deserved to be dismissed. Their insistence on a 'paper' when they should have known it could not praise them, may have driven their masters to write these double-edged testimonials in order to be rid of the boys. But behind each 'paper' lay the implications of a tragic-comic story of bad management, mistrust and sheer cussedness, qualities which are by no means confined to the African race. Were all white men infallible judges and managers the references they write could be implicitly believed. Since they are not infallible and Africans must depend for their next jobs on these references the balance is weighted against the African, for his 'Massa' always has the final word.

At present an obstacle to the white man's understanding of the black man in Africa is his difficulty in visualizing the African as his equal in any sphere. Nor at this time are there any large numbers of Africa-born Africans capable of taking

WHITE MAN IN BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

over the jobs in which white men are currently employed. Yet those Africans who have opportunities for training in semi-skilled or skilled occupations do prove themselves the equal of the white man. They are to be found driving railway engines, building and maintaining roads and railways, operating cinema projectors, efficiently using surveyors' and draughtsman's instruments, operating printing presses, driving and repairing all kinds of road and water transport, working in government offices and scientific laboratories — and taking to modern innovations with a rapidity and dexterity which are the more commendable because the African has to bridge so formidable a gap between his old way of life and the new.

Such is the difference between white and African backgrounds of education that a more general equality is not yet existent, though it may very well come if an effort is made on both sides. This requires a measure of all-round humility — on the part of the white man so that he will cease to believe himself a superior being solely by virtue of his heredity, and on the African's part so that, with learning, he will refrain from despising his origins. It seems to be taken for granted that the white man's culture is worthy of introduction to the so-called 'backward' countries; if this is so, the white man must in fairness go all the way with his dissemination of knowledge. He cannot disrupt a primitive way of life, take from its resources only that which suits him, mollify his conscience by saying he has brought 'advancement', and then leave matters in mid air. If he insists upon judging Africans by his own standards he must allow them at least the opportunity for rising to his own level, or rather, for thoroughly adapting themselves to his different mental climate and complex skills.

Confusion lies in saying with the same breath (*a*) that the African brain has not and never can have the potentials of the white man's and (*b*) that the African is to be censured for his slowness in conforming to the white man's standards. *Either* he is capable, if given the opportunity, *or* he is not — in which case his

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

lacks (presumed to be specifically racial rather than universal) should be more tolerantly regarded. It is obviously both greedy and illogical to expect of the African all the virtues of the better type of white man while at the same time impressing upon him that he is a distinctly inferior species of *homo sapiens*.

Since there are few white men in Black Man's Country, compared with the large population of Africans, it follows that each represents to the Africans around him everything, bad or good, that the white man stands for. The white man, whether he knows it or not, has a responsibility. It requires little of him except some mental discipline and an awareness that no matter how neatly African traits are pigeon-holed as 'comic', 'typical', 'bush' or 'semi-educated', there are qualities in all human beings, regardless of colour or race, which improve with knowledge and understanding. Daily contacts between Africans and the white people who live in their country have more to do with inter-racial understanding (or the lack of it) than any number of brilliant speeches and august gatherings in high places.

At no time does it do any harm to remember that Africa is, or was, the home of the African, and that the white man may do well to wipe his feet on the threshold and close the door gently, as befits any polite guest in a strange household.

CHAPTER XVI

GOING HOME

'IMAGINE,' we said, standing ankle-deep in excelsior with our trunks and boxes nearly packed, 'what it will be like to be cool again!' Already our thoughts ran a medley of anticipations: England in springtime, London streets, theatres and shops — neatness of suburbs and the tidy, gentle contours of English meadows, the clean smell of northern air, vagrant pleasures of a sailboat on the Menai Straits and the companionship of old friends. It was March, the hottest part of the dry season. *Lulu* had gone to a waterside mission, Mrs. Murphy to another home. Already the house looked different, no longer our own, and we were restless and a little weary, glad to be going home but finding no joy in our leavetaking.

Yet as the day approached for our going we had little time for any sentimental pre-occupations with either the past or the future; the present claimed us with a variety of unexpected problems, not the least of which came with the arrival of the new Development Officer. With wife, child and a good deal of luggage he had moved into the rest-house near us so that Bill could hand over to him all matters of erosion and official business. It was not the newcomers' presence in Agulu which caused any perplexity — for they were most congenial neighbours — but rather their cook-less condition until such time as our George was free to work for them. At first the new family took all their meals with us. Then, since we had finished packing we saw no reason why we should not release the house



straightway. This meant camping in the rest-house until our departure and (because we had to share George between two households) reversing the mealtime position. Now we became guests for breakfast, lunch and dinner in the house we had called 'ours' but was so no longer.

During our time as hosts our guests politely praised the meals we gave them, and I as politely deprecated them. Now, with a transference of houses and a *volte-face* in our guest-host standing there arose a slight confusion of etiquette. Since I was still in the main responsible for George's creations it did not behove me to praise them — not even his most ethereal Potato Angel or successful Golden Glory Cake. George's new Madam, now at the controls instead of at the receiving end, had a problem on her hands, for you cannot as a guest praise a cook's work on Sunday and disparage it on Monday when you are his employer — especially if the menu is much the same and your ex-hostess sitting alongside. Because of this situation our separate attitudes at mealtimes became strangely neutral, even a little cramped. Bill could not exclaim, 'What is this concoction?' Nor could our friends murmur, 'I hope it's eatable . . . we've just acquired a new cook.' Only the child was truthful and socially uninhibited. 'This chicken is tough,' he complained. It was, too, but his mother felt bound to smooth my pride in her/my cook by saying, 'Ssh, dear, it's *lovely* chicken.'

Poor George. His world had shifted about him and he could not tell where his loyalties lay. Privily he would come to me, for although his cookhouse was exactly as before and his regime little altered, he no longer had Elias as his working companion, and while his new Madam was tactful and friendly, he could not immediately accustom himself to seeing her in my place. Moreover, as he told me in pride and anxiety, his wife was soon to enter the local hospital, 'to deliver our next piccan.' 'We would like,' said George, 'to call our son by the Massa's name.'

I said we should be delighted, but supposing the son was a daughter?

'Then,' said George, philosophically accepting this slightly less desirable alternative, 'we wish to call it after Madam.'

In the middle of that same night a dishevelled George knocked at our rest-house door and announced to a sleepy Bill, 'Massa, the piccan is coming too soon . . . one time! May you take my wife now to hospital!'

So it was that after a hectic lorry ride up the hill another new African life came into the world. Next morning George greeted us with thanks and a beaming smile. 'A girl baby,' he pronounced, ' . . . our Isobel Laura.'

On the afternoon before we moved out of 'our' house — when we sat on an uncomfortably tidy veranda in the flat silence that settles with the dust when all concentrated packing and label-sticking is done, we heard a procession coming up the driveway. It was headed by Chief Obuvudu and several other village dignitaries with satellite elders in tow; behind came dancers and drummers, villagers, piccans and carriers with calabashes of palm wine on their heads. The village worthies wore their best clothes and Obuvudu was regal in striped toga and feathered cap. He carried his ivory cane of office and a little tin box. This was not Obuvudu Superintendent, the anti-erosion working man, but Chief Obuvudu, leader of his people. We went out to meet him.

As the dancers and orchestra swirled around the house to the lawn, and Elias and Pius brought more chairs, Obuvudu clasped Bill's hand and said, 'We have come to honour you with a title.'

Our guests, numbering eleven, seated themselves in a semi-circle facing the lawn, Obuvudu in the centre with men on either side of him in their order of rank. Our neighbour of the seven wives and thirty children was there. (Part of his family was represented in the crowd which slowly massed to watch the



BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

dancers.) There was the chief who had given us Alice the Sheep, and there were those who had so enigmatically restored *Lulu* to us. The only chief's wife present was the senior Mrs. Obuvudu, as duchessy as ever in elaborate turban and dark rayon wrap, her arms weighted with ivory bracelets. Benedict stood behind her father, to interpret, and the rest settled well back in their chairs. We saw that this was an important occasion, not to be hurried.

Obuvudu's most recently acquired junior wife led the dancers — a slim, agile creature, shimmying and clapping her hands to the drumming rhythm. When we praised her gracefulness both Obuvudu and his senior wife were gratified, and Mrs. Obuvudu called the girl to us affectionately, patted her hand and told her what we had said.

With increasing verve the dancers executed their patterns in a whirl of dust; the orchestra at close range made deafening jazz and everyone perspired with cordiality and satisfaction. Obuvudu hugged the box on his knee; under cover of the din he and the others chatted, via Benedict, with Bill — and Mrs. Obuvudu and I, having no common tongue, exchanged friendly becks and smiles. Elias, Pius and George stood in the background. Whenever I caught Elias's eye he grinned from ear to ear in the selflessness of his delight in Massa's being given a 'title'. George, I could see, was explaining the occasion to Pius, whose face was duly solemn. At this point the new Development Officer came in and was given the last remaining seat on the veranda. He looked interrogatingly at Bill but since Obuvudu was rising to make a speech, there was not time to explain.

Benedict patly translated the speech which said that the villagers wished to show the Development Officer a sign of their appreciation and good feeling. They had brought him an honorary title which he should always keep. Even if he moved far away he would be one of them. And if he returned, they would welcome him back as a man of title who belonged with them. In this vein Obuvudu spoke long and with some emotion.

GOING HOME

He finished on a note of warm congratulation and mutual brotherhood. He sat down. Then Benedict whispered an urgent reminder in her father's ear. He rose again to say, beaming and with exact articulation, *in English*, 'May-God-keep-you-and-Madam-alive-amen.'

Bill was about to reply but Obuvudu was intent on opening his tin box. From it he carefully brought out a quantity of small red parrot feathers, large white feathers and woven



anklet strings. The feathers, Benedict explained, were Bill's regalia of titlehood, to be worn in a crimson skull-cap like Obuvudu's. The strings, two at a time, were to be tied about his left ankle, signifying his position. And finally there was a heavy dagger in a brass-ornamented sheath of antelope skin.

Before he made his thanks, Bill tied on the anklet strings and everyone clapped. He said he would always remember the honour he had been given. Obuvudu nodded reassuringly at him, for having been through all this himself, he knew what it meant to an initiate. Then, speeches over, Obuvudu beckoned to the palm-wine bearers. The brimming, blackened ceremonial horn made the rounds of the titled men, Obuvudu first, Bill last. After each had drained the vessel he knocked it resoundingly three times on the floor, whereupon it was refilled and passed to the next member. The new Development Officer

who had been watching all this, asked Bill, 'Aren't they going to pass the cup to me?' Chief Obuvudu looked affronted and made a brusque noise of negation. Benedict said softly, 'My father say the new Massa must prove himself first.'

Good naturedly the 'new Massa' accepted the refusal. The actual ritual title-making over, everyone relaxed into more normal attitudes. Dancers and musicians started up again and Bill, to make all peaceful between his successor and Obuvudu, signalled to Elias to pass refreshments. In any event Obuvudu was already glancing wistfully behind him where a tray and some glasses stood on a packing case. Pius (for George had gone back to the cookhouse) helped Elias in serving. It was Pius's first experience of this kind; he carried his tray as if it contained a treasure, and watched Elias's every move so as to copy it exactly.

Obuvudu did not care for diluted gin; to our amazement he could and would drink half a tumbler of the fiery stuff at a gulp and show no reaction whatever, except a certain mellowness and bonhomie. So it was that I began to wonder how it could be that the gin bottle became no emptier despite Obuvudu's liberal pourings out. Later I analysed this phenomenon. Pius had taken his stewarding seriously. He had been so anxious to please, so afraid there might be some dearth of refreshment, that he had filled up the bottle with water after each round. This, freshly put into the filter by George, was still hot. But no one had minded, although Obuvudu, who must have drunk plain hot water in his final glass, must surely have wondered at this most unusual-tasting white man's *apéritif*.

Later the Night Jujus danced in the courthouse clearing and there were more speeches. We came back home along the driveway in moonlight. Shadows lay under the mango tree where Bismarck had once perched, and along the croquet pitch where Mrs. Murphy and Long Tom had frolicked. The house was full of silver light and very quiet. We went up the Ivory Tower to look out at the familiar scene, thinking: in what other places shall we remember all this?

But Bill still had work to do. Daily at the office his workers came asking for promotion. Those who had been laid off during the drought pleaded for assurance of re-employment under the new Development Officer. 'The new Massa,' they reasonably argued, 'does not know us. We are many and how can he know which are worthy?' So Bill drew up lists, assuring some of re-employment and others of due reward for good work. Pius, whom Bill knew to be not only a humble man but a loyal and hard worker, was elevated from handyman to headman. He accepted this trust with astonishment, never having thought of himself as anything but a hewer of wood and a drawer of water. 'Headman pleases him too much,' reported Elias who was always vicariously elated by anyone else's good fortune.

Then, when all seemed neatly disposed of, a stormy deputation of local women demanded a hearing. Their husbands, now seasonally laid off from anti-erosion labouring, had in their poverty contracted large debts with yam sellers who now pressed for payment. The women said things had come to such a pass that the men were determined to sell their wives' skirt cloths and headwraps to clear these debts. Would the Massa please pay the yam sellers all that was owing? If not, they would all be naked and ashamed before their neighbours.

Bill could do no more than assure them their husbands would be re-employed when the right time came. The women sat down in the driveway, and said they would stay there until this clothing dilemma was solved. Bill sought out the yam sellers and found out that in this 'hungry season' they had been charging outrageously profiteering prices, so that debts were inevitable. He suggested that wives and yam sellers argue the question between them.

By this time the women had reached a state of shrill indignation; they were on the warpath in defence of justice and their (admittedly scanty) wardrobes. At sight of the yam sellers they rose as one woman and descended on their husbands' creditors like a nest of hornets. Before this Amazonian on-

slaught the yam sellers retreated, for hell hath no fury like that of even one woman who thinks she is to be robbed of her clothes — and in this case there were many women, each furious in her own right and collectively just that much more angry. The creditors sensibly withdrew with all speed, but we did not learn what happened to the husbands.

Between whiles there were intervals of normalcy. We said reluctant farewells to the Fathers and our Government and Protestant Mission friends. The villagers whom we knew best came separately to say goodbye. On the last morning Obuvudu appeared, with two small boys each carrying five fowls. This was explained to us by Elias. For some time Obuvudu had been worrying about our 'chop' for the journey. It was, he knew, a long way to England, and when he, Obuvudu, travelled he took all his food with him. The fowls were intended to tide us over until we reached our homeland. Since the lorry, with our luggage piled on behind, was waiting, we had to tell our friend that everything had been packed and there would be no room for ten live, lusty cockerels on the train. He seemed to understand and said, as Elias interpreted:

'Greet all English people in your home compound for me, and tell them of our village and Obuvudu. Keep well your title, Massa.' Bill pointed to the strings about his ankle and Obuvudu grinned. With Elias sitting on the luggage we waved them goodbye — George, Pius and Obuvudu — and drove down the hill for the last time.

So we left Agulu, the lake and the Tower and the village, and forbore to look back. In the valley we stopped at the blacksmith's shop. Bill knew the man well; he was a craftsman with metal and his smithy under the palm-leaf awning was a sociable place where people sat and waited while the blacksmith worked, and a diminutive boy with primitive bellows kept the fire bright. Although there was nothing especially notable about his premises or person the blacksmith differed from other men in the district; he had been to London. It was

a long time ago, he told us, but he could never forget it. The occasion was an Arts and Crafts Exhibition. 'Government' chose him to demonstrate African smithying to the British public, and had him transported with other Nigerian crafts' representatives all the way to England and back.

Since he had spent most of his time in the Exhibition which apparently had included a circus, his picture of the British way of life was more colourful than precisely focused. 'In London,' he said, 'I saw ladies jumping from horseback to horseback.'

He had seen the Tower, the Palace and the Zoo, but had less to say about these than 'the children who wear wheels on their feet.'

'Wheels?' I said.

He demonstrated with roller-skating movements. 'Oh,' we said. 'Of course — wheels!'

'And in the houses,' he went on, 'you step into a thing like a net or a cage — and whoosh, you go down or up.' He put his hand to his stomach to indicate the confusion caused therein by these modern wonders.

We asked him if he would like to go to London again. He shivered. 'Too much sea, too far, too much cold. They look at me because I am . . . different. To be happy a man should stay in his own town, never go away, be safe. I go to England, I see it, I come back to stay. There will not be another Exhibition for me.'

For three days and nights the train ran on 929 miles of narrow-gauge track from Enugu north to Kaduna and thence south-westwards again via Jebba and Ilorin to the port of Lagos. Dust was our portion; it accumulated thickly on our belongings and our hot, sweating persons. Mistrusting the corridor's ancient water filter we drank soda water and brushed our teeth in it. From our compartment we looked out at a vast, sweltering landscape, parched and lonely, through which

the train crawled — sometimes at twenty miles an hour, more often at twelve or fifteen. Twice we saw stark little white wooden crosses and signs beneath with the words: 'Here Lies. . .' British names of men who had died in this inimical land of gruelling, shadeless heat, building a railway.

In comparison with the primitiveness of the close-huddled, straw-hutted villages of this country, Agulu's district was refined and sophisticated. Nor had we in Agulu such ants as this northern species whose work jutted out of the landscape in anthill pillars twelve feet high. Our villagers would have marvelled at the people here: wiry little men with shells in their hair, bows and arrows in their hands, and shy, pagan plateau-women wearing nothing except their native modesty and sometimes a leafy fore and aft bustle.

On the station platforms when the train stopped — usually with an unholy grinding and bumping — business was brisk with the food vendors, and rogues made hay while the sun shone. During such moments of respite from travelling the passengers stretched their legs and picked their way among the islands of inert humanity which may have been waiting for another train, or had given up all hopes of any train and decided that sleep was all. These were northern Mohammedans, Hausa men in flowing robes and embroidered slippers, Hausa women in loose, high-piled turbans, the same who decorated Onitsha's market with their leather crafts and brought hump-necked cattle so many miles southwards to sell, with profit, to the infidel.

We shall remember Ilorin Station because of the ostrich which highstepped along the platform. And we shall remember the Army officer, newly out, who had been spending most of the journey drinking in his compartment. Briefly emerging to call the porter for more soda water, he looked out of the corridor window and found himself eye-to-eye with the ostrich. His expression changed from mild wonder to covert disbelief. 'I say, old boy,' he murmured to Bill, 'do you see what I see?'

'What?' said Bill.

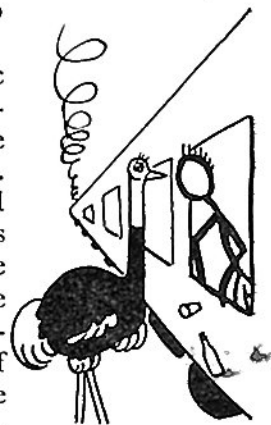
'Well — a damned great *bird*,' said the puzzled traveller. 'Swear it was . . . it *looks* like . . . an *ostrich*.'

'Where?' asked Bill.

'Great Scott,' said the man, shakily, peering at the apparition. 'D.T.s!'

At Lagos we found the better accommodations already taken by transients like ourselves who had arrived earlier and were waiting for ships delayed by bad weather in England. The hotel which put us up had the night before been the scene of a riot. Its Greek owner was in bad odour with the African townspeople because, having a dearth of rooms, he had turned away an African government official in favour of a white man. This provided a spark for local feeling already highly inflammable. The Nigeria-for-Nigerians political group seized on the incident as an occasion for demonstration. Three hundred townsfolk had mustered in front of the hotel to shout and throw stones, and although police arrested the agitators and broke up the crowd, the place still held an air of unease. Crash-helmeted African police guarded the hotel and sat in the courtyard against the recurrence of another mob scene.

For a day or so in the hotel the topic came into every lounge and mealtime conversation. Some of the guests said the whole business was a storm in a teacup. Were not white travellers in overcrowded Lagos having as much difficulty as Africans in finding accommodation? Yet because an African was refused a hotel room the whole town was up in arms! Political propaganda, they said — just the kind of thing to incite street hooligans and idle malcontents into a stone-throwing shindy.



Others said the hotel proprietor should at least have allowed the two officials (white and black) to decide for themselves which of them should take the only room available, as he might do were two white officials concerned. It did not look well that a hotel, run by a free-enterprise, profit-making alien should show preference to a white man in the African official's own capital city. And a few flippant souls said that apart from the ugly aspect of discrimination, the turned-away African was really the fortunate one, for the food was so bilious here and the



street noises so raucous, one neither ate well nor slept at all. The ill-treated, they said, were the ones who stayed in this discomfort and even had to pay for dis-services rendered.

For a good part of the sixteen days while we waited in the queue for shipping, Bill and I lived with cotton wool in our ears. Our room, overlooking the small but clamorous thoroughfare was assaulted by jazzy discord not only from a learners' orchestra in the next building, but also from an untiring gramophone (with loudspeaker) which ground out brassy medleys in the street stall opposite. The orchestra practised ear-splittingly and *ad nauseam* 'A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square'. While we admired the ambitious fervour of the group sweating over their time-worn piece, we wished the wavering clarinet would, just once, make up its mind. We could not maintain a charitable attitude towards the saxophone which, a fraction off-key, sounded like a soul in torment and imbued the Nightingale with all the noises of a distraught banshee. As for the competing gramophone, day and night it blared rumbas, sambas and congas except on Sundays when it gave forth loud, scratchy hymn tunes.

We closed our shutters against bedlam and suffocated.

We opened them and let the noise in. My best escape was the bathtub in our adjoining bathroom where there was a little coolness, and by some trick of acoustics, comparative quiet. The March heat was something remarkable even to Lagos. By ten o'clock each morning the streets were airless under a glaring sky, the harbour like the Ancient Mariner's painted ocean, with heat-smudged horizon towards which we looked often and with longing. The hotel food might have been an experiment in the multiple culinary uses of groundnut oil. It came in globules on the soup, in congealing pools about the chops and curries; it lubricated tepid fricassees and fritters and made of every dish a dyspeptic catastrophe. 'The Greeks,' Bill complained, 'may have a word for it but it isn't "food".' He fared less well than I who abandoned meals in favour of Bovril made from bathroom tap water, and store biscuits, reasoning that a shortage of caloric heat units could do no harm in this place which already had more heat than was necessary or desirable. Bill ate through whole menus of groundnut oil and looked depressed.

For coolness in the evenings we were glad to discover the hotel's flat roof from which we had a bird's-eye view, not delightful architecturally, but diverse in life and colour. There was the broad, busy harbour; the Marina, a spacious avenue of large shops and warehouses; the dignified European buildings and houses with fine gardens. And there was, too, the sprawling warren of slums, walled and roofed with rusty pieces of tin, corrugated metal, cardboard and miscellaneous debris, and traversed by narrow alleys cluttered with chickens and the slums' overflow.

We heard of an English woman writer who had lived for some months in these slums while garnering material for a book. And we marvelled at the phenomenal optimism of a lecturer for the British Council who, our newspaper told us, was currently lecturing in a Lagos hall on 'Greek Mythology'. We looked again down at the odorous, ramshackle, disease-

ridden makeshifts in the slum quarter. 'Maybe,' said Bill, 'it would be a good idea to manage on a little less Culture, and work up instead a slightly better garbage disposal service.'

Like the Little Girl with the Curl, Lagos in its more seemly (European) parts was 'very, very good'. The Club with its neat chalets under the casuarinas, spacious Clubhouse, golf course and swimming pool, the Marine drive with seaward prospect of sailboats and landward glimpses of gardens and the imposing Government House — all these were refreshing and restful to the eye so long as the mind refused to compare these attractions with the eyesores on the other side of the picture.

We went with Elias to Victoria Beach where white sand, palms and glittering sea would have made a bathers' paradise had not the undertow and the prevalence of pirhanas been so dangerous. Elias had never seen the sea; he was at first alarmed by such an extent of water and pounding surf. He approached it diffidently, allowed a wave to lap his feet and laughed as swirling wet sand gripped his ankles. He shielded his eyes and looked out over the bay. When we told him the sea went on and on for thousands of miles — that once away from land you saw only the sea for days on end, and in this way we returned to our country, he shook his head under the burden of imagining immensities of continents and oceans. Finally he said, 'It is too big. They will not believe what I tell them.' We saw Elias in the role of returned traveller, informing his bush friends of Marco Polo wonders. Or would he with his native adaptability so soon take all this for granted that enchantment would promptly evaporate, and the vast sea and hugeness of the world dwindle from revelation to plain, ordinary fact?

As we returned into town along the crowded thoroughfare Elias suddenly cried, 'Massa! Massa! I see a brother!' and we stopped the car to let him out. In the middle of the traffic Elias was clasping hands with a man of his own family, in the way of Stanley and Dr. Livingstone. We left them to compare their

astonishments and co-ordinate news of town and village. Now Elias would have something to tell his people!

As the days passed (and the band gained more confidence with its tremolo Nightingale) and the heat waxed hotter and the food oilier, we met from time to time newcomers, some pale-skinned and anticipant, and others yellowish and jaded, who came and went by plane. One morning on the stairs I passed a boy who was carrying a breakfast tray, not normally a hotel service. When I asked if someone were ill, he said yes, the Madam on the floor above was confined to her room. 'Madam no can move her feet. She would like,' he said, 'someone to talk to.'

I went expecting to find a fever or dysentery convalescent, though for this I thought the hospital would be a more suitable place for recuperation. Least of all in this Maugham-ish scene and in this heat did I expect to condole with a sufferer from chilblains.

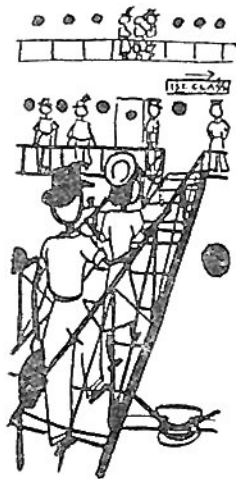
She had come by air from England, leaving in snowstorm and bitter cold. Little more than fifteen hours later she had set foot in Lagos, or rather been carried to the hotel with a case of tropic-aggravated chilblains which would not permit her to put on her shoes or walk without great pain. 'I've been vaccinated against smallpox,' she said, 'and inoculated against typhoid, paratyphoid and yellow fever. Then ye gods, my dear — *chilblains* in this inferno!'

The police still guarded the hotel. One evening their number was noticeably reinforced and a certain foreboding (not entirely gastronomic) could be felt in the dining-room. But nothing happened and the 'incident' was gradually forgotten. Yet in the streets there was an indefinable sensation of disquiet. This may always be a part of Lagos life but we who met it for the first time found it disturbing. It was not so much hostility as underlying suspicion and oblique resentment in the eyes of shop clerks and loiterers and those who stared but did not smile. Here we felt interlopers as we had not done in Agulu. Here

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

there was a prickly barrier across which the Nigeria-for-Nigerians African group threw complaints at government officers and institutions. It was a political climate that could

breed trouble, not immediately, perhaps, but soon enough.



Our ship came, no luxury liner but a war-time-grey, travel-stained vessel. We went aboard gladly. The shore was Africa, but the ship was England, and the gang-plank's distance was a gulf between the two worlds. Out of their little kingdoms Massas and Madams became ordinary voyagers in crowded cabins, and each had a prospect in view of 'home' in post-war Surbiton or Cheltenham or Manchester — as different from his tropical household as the clean April breezes from pre-rainy season feverish heat. When the anchor chains rattled and slowly the ship

swung her head to the open sea the passengers knew their temporary exile over, their home leave begun. No one called 'Boy!' and if he had there would have been no answer.

Next morning early, Bill and I stood by the rail on the empty boat-deck. We were far out from land; there was no sound except the muted pulsing of engines, the steady thrumming surge of our moving ship. We had no need to say much, knowing each other's thoughts to be less of what lay ahead than of the village that had been our home. Bill still wore the title anklets the chiefs had given him.

Goodbye, we said — though not with words — goodbye to Agulu and Black Man's Country. I knew that in his shirt pocket Bill carried a red parrot feather.

