

Isobel Ryan

has also written

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

and

BLACK MAN'S TOWN



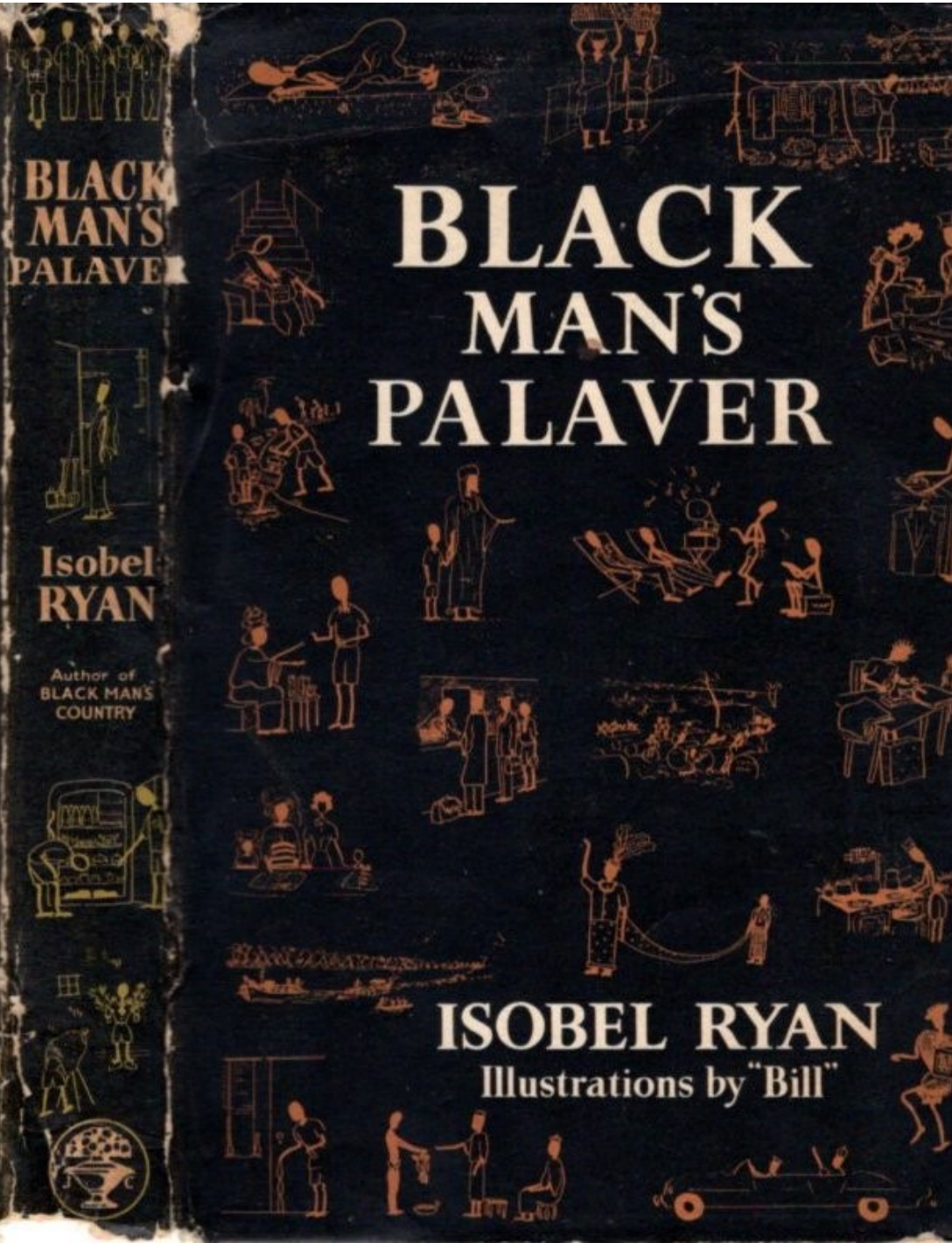
BLACK
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PALAVER

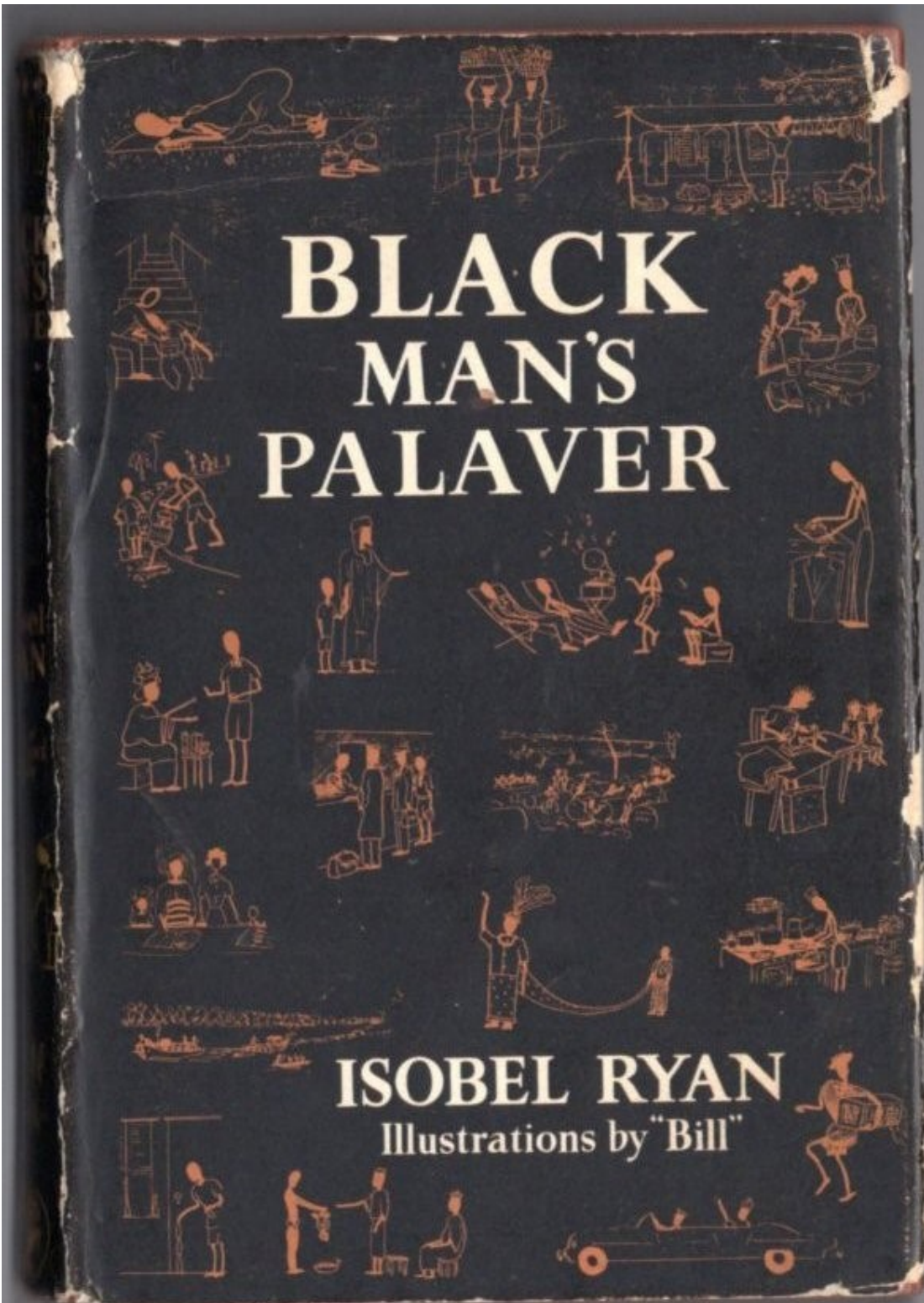
Isobel
RYAN

Author of
BLACK MAN'S
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ISOBEL RYAN
Illustrations by "Bill"





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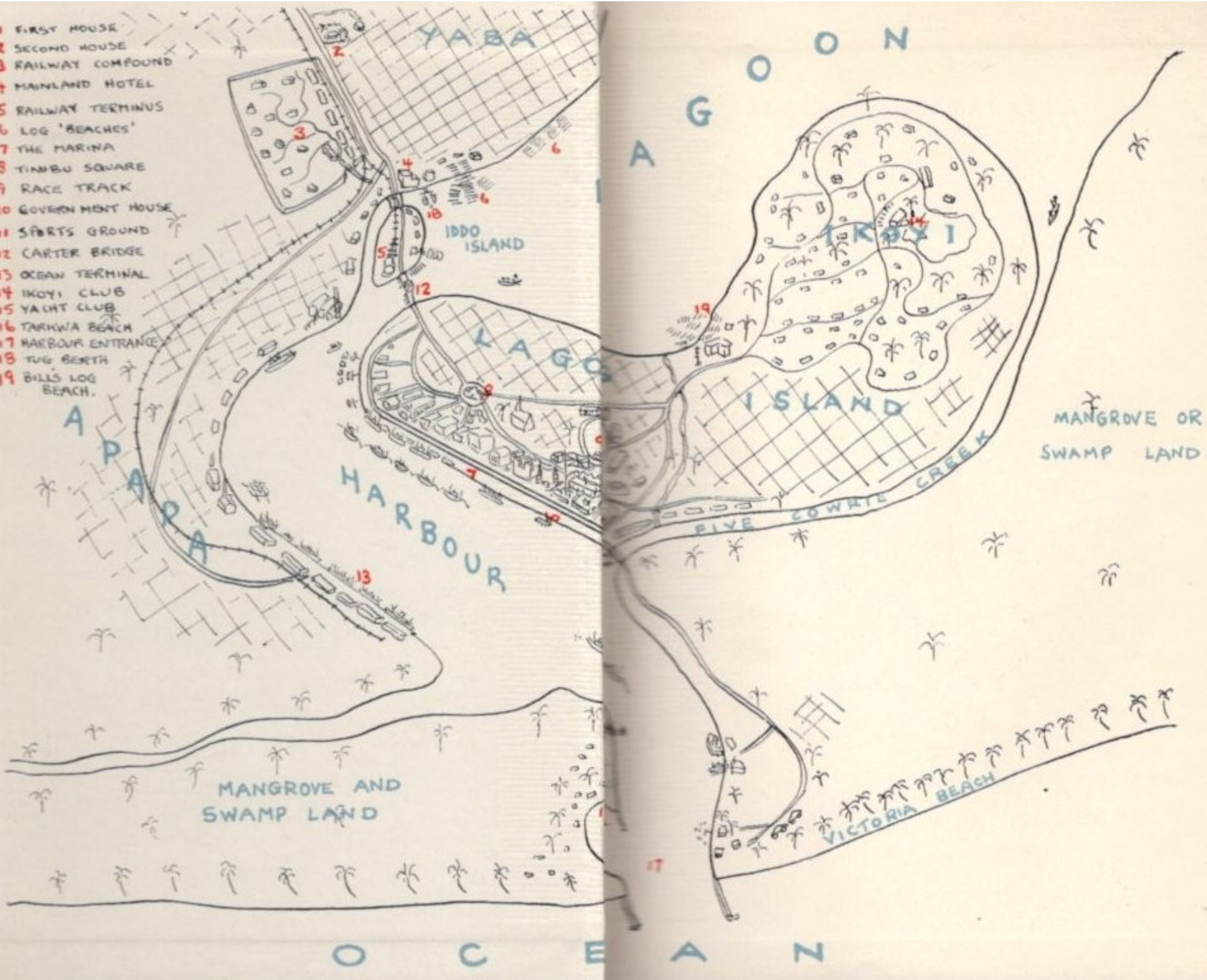


BLACK MAN'S PALAVER

The speed of progress in West Africa has taken much of the world by surprise, and Isobel Ryan has been able to study 'the new, energetic, venturesome, sensitive African spirit' on the spot. Not politics, but personal, social, commercial and domestic contacts are her theme. With the same exact eye, good sense and good humour that gave us *Black Man's Town*, she plunges us into the 'continuous ferment of development' in present-day Nigeria, and particularly Lagos. Everyday happenings — and the great occasion of the Queen's visit — enable her to show, with affectionate detail, a variety of those 'plain people' whose lives are the foundations upon which a new Africa is being built.

Line drawings by 'Bill'.

- 1 FIRST HOUSE
- 2 SECOND HOUSE
- 3 RAILWAY COMPOUND
- 4 MAINLAND HOTEL
- 5 RAILWAY TERMINUS
- 6 LOG 'BEACHES'
- 7 THE MARINA
- 8 TIMBU SQUARE
- 9 RACE TRACK
- 10 GOVERNMENT HOUSE
- 11 SPORTS GROUND
- 12 CARTER BRIDGE
- 13 OCEAN TERMINAL
- 14 IKOYI CLUB
- 15 YACHT CLUB
- 16 TARKWA BEACH
- 17 HARBOUR ENTRANCE
- 18 TUG BERTH
- 19 BILLS LOG BEACH.



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To
ALDWYN AND GEORGE
— GOOD SHIPMATES

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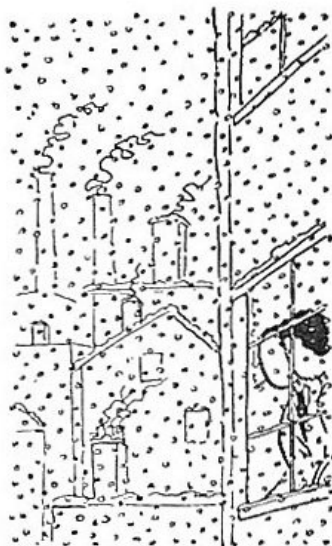
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Goodbye to the North I

IT was winter in Liverpool. Our hotel window framed a sombre snow-sky. We watched the white flakes flickering softly down to roofs, car tops and pavements darkly polished by the afternoon cold. William, our infant son, was asleep; our luggage stood about the room. Close behind us, but as if buried at a great distance beneath Surrey's snowbanks, lay all the minor tremors and stresses preliminary to a voyage to West Africa: the list-makings, inoculations, jettisoning and storing of household goods, the nocturnal roping of boxes and tying of labels, and all the provisioning and remembering that go with the word 'goodbye'.

Now briefly pausing in our journey, we contemplated Liverpool, not as a city we might ever know, but as a second point of departure — the Liverpool of the traveller to distant places. As in times past, it seemed to us a city whose mood might have been prescribed for our temporary condition. Its enormous unsentimental dockland views inhibited any backward glancing; nipping winds like the shrewd winds of Sparta prowled the thronged streets; solid-looking citizens moved industriously among buildings grown massive and many-windowed with foreign investment.

In our eleventh-hour state, poised between anxiety neurosis and tonic relief, we saw it as a place of heavily overcoated, nerveless taxi-drivers, laconic porters and shop assistants used

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to the seasonless demand for Kwells, bathing caps and sun-glasses. Since our visits to Liverpool had always coincided with rain or snow or the muted greyness of northern early-closing days, we could not imagine sultry pavements here, or any kind of midsummer languor or levity. For us the city's character was fixed in durable coldness; its colours were white, grey and black, its noises purposeful and loud: clatter of winch and rumble of heavy traffic against a background of ships' sirens and the shrill cries of the energetic harbour gulls.

Looking out on Liverpool's gaunt winter geometry we were neither sad nor gay. Although Africa's brilliant suns and palm-

tree-feathered horizons stood ahead, familiar to us, it was impossible for us to imagine ourselves so soon a part of that exotic picture. Preoccupied with immediacy, intent on the minutiae of luggage and timetable, we could scarcely realize that later, so little time hence, we should sharply recall in another land the qualities of this, our northern life: the solid certainties of policemen, pillar-boxes and daily papers, the rhythmic unfoldings

of four temperate seasons; and the casual, rich, everyday drama which is common property to all who dwell close to the civilized world's heart. Of these large and small ordinary memories our later nostalgias, by no means exclusive to us, would certainly be made. It had been so before.

At length we stood on the windy deck of our ship watching the distance of oil-streaked dark water smoothly widen between us and the impersonal shore. We knew that this was the best way to go — not in spring or summer but now, under a grey veil, almost silently and unobserved. There were many at the rails who stared reflectively at the land, shielding their faces with scarves and coat collars against the wind and anyone's



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casual gaze; their thoughts were unguessable. A few other restless spirits talked and laughed in coveys, pretending indifference to the moment of departure. Then, as the ship's pulse grew stronger, there was an end to tension and hiatus; the voyage had begun.

Within, the ship was as warm and bright as an incubator. The cabins' climate was semi-tropical; ice cubes in smokeroom glasses cleverly suggested hot-weather sundowners. Everywhere we found the same shift of focus. In vivid simulation of halcyon sunlight the ship's shop displayed tropical merchandise which no longer seemed absurd; frail lingerie, beachwear, prickly-heat powder, dress shirts, cummerbunds and sweets and cigarettes in tropic-proof tins. It was as if all the harshness of a northern February had been politely cancelled out by a solicitous shipping company who understood their Liverpool-West Africa ferrying job from A to Z, and as part of their service substituted an interim uncalendared fortnight for the speedier acclimatization of an Africa-bound cargo.

We walked through the ship, down the thrumming corridors, through the social arcade and convivial lounges. Because the vessel's décor and routine were so little altered from previous voyages, the years seemed to fall away. Ashore the minority Colonial, on leave or retired, had shown himself in contrast to his stay-at-home countrymen; now he was everywhere and already at ease. We reflected on the essential qualities of the 'Coast look', and decided it was chiefly due to a complexion a trifle parched or yellow-tinged, with paler skin exposed only along the outlines of pre-voyage haircuts. And the 'Coaster' physique was, we thought, curiously ageless, as if prolonged exposure to an unnatural climate had early robbed these expatriates of their pink and tender youth while absolving them from the contours and temperaments of conventional middle age. There was, moreover, another subtle distinction — a difference of stance and physical substance which gave them, in their home tweeds, lounge suits and mackintoshes, the look of men wearing, briefly and with some impatience, an unsuitable disguise.

But all this was true only of those veterans, men of the tropics,

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who commuted to and from West Africa at twelve- fifteen- or eighteen-month intervals, as others might travel between London and Edinburgh. The newcomers — those with pristine passports and fresh complexions — still bore their home stamp; their manners were not tropically typed, and they could not conceal their buoyant pleasure in this, their first real venture abroad. Many were young men journeying with pretty brides or plump ex-suburban wives and small children. Their accents were not the accents of pukka-sahibs, bwanas or massas; their ties were motley; they did not subscribe to

the one-time unwritten ship's law regarding evening dress. They were Britain's contribution of new blood and technical or artisan skill to West Africa, and part of the changing times both in England and Africa.

But as if to prove that even the most inexorable changes are slow to become total, we had among us a passenger whose old-school tie reminded us of the banner of a proud but retreating battalion. High in Government office, he preserved in his appearance and behaviour the form and quality of the old-time administrator. Nowhere had he capitulated to the prevailing casualness, the classless concept. His features were lean and classic like the immutable features on a coin, with steady pale eyes and firmly sculptured mouth. His pipes, like all else about him, were scrupulously tended. Although unostentatious and never unsociable, his look was peculiarly solitary, and it seemed as if he wore a little space around him, his strong invisible protection against the familiarities of sticky-fingered children or people who were not his own kind. Others might loll about in whatever gypsy cruising clothes they fancied; his well-worn monogrammed blazer was of severe and perfect cut, and his three-quarter-length hose came from the best London outfitters. As everyone knew, he had been for years a man of practical wisdom and diplomatic punctilio at his hard-

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working post. He was scarcely past forty now, yet we sensed that he was almost an anachronism.

'Only a short time ago,' Bill observed, 'he'd have been one of a crowd, *the* crowd. Now he's practically unique.'

And as if to prove how the old order had changed we were joined at our lounge table by a new acquaintance, an affable man of commerce whose sales line was confectionery.

'West Africa is changing fast,' he chuckled, rosily suggesting, over his pre-dinner whisky, a combination of Santa Claus and clubman. He made a sweeping gesture, wafting towards us little fragrances of good soap and bay rum. 'Expansion everywhere!' And he went on happily to tell us about his next Coast itinerary by taxi, plane and train — 'the bagman's circuit' he called it. Bill said that he must often see himself as a modern Marco Polo. The traveller gave him a careful look. 'Mmm — only I don't need to *know* the country and, frankly, I don't want to. These days everything's laid on. The groundwork's done. With me it's just a question of getting from A to B, keeping up the goodwill and getting the orders. Business is business in Africa like anywhere else. Our products don't have any racial boundaries. Everyone has a sweet tooth, or you can educate it in the youngsters.'

Then he twinkled, ordered another round, and said, 'Of course I've studied the business. There's another good reason for our success on the Coast.'

We asked him to tell us.

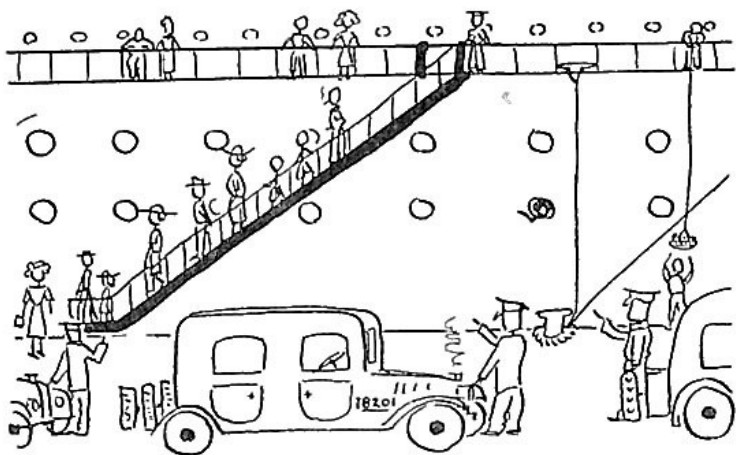
'*Tact*,' he told us almost in a whisper, as if confiding a secret formula. 'Tact, the light touch, softly-softly all along the line. Don't expect miracles overnight. Keep clear of the two terrible P's — palaver and politics. Be popular. Don't gossip. Keep fresh. Make *short* visits. Never let the country get you down. Simple, isn't it, now?'

It was a homily we had heard often before, but never from a tropical confectionery salesman. We thought that the attitudes of some white visitors to West Africa must be responsible for part of the country's changes, and that no voice can more gently woo African custom and good opinion than that

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of the hard-headed, forward-thinking white man who has something to sell.

Within a week winter was behind us. Las Palmas lay alongside like a pastel-coloured confection in Spanish sunshine, its flower-market an arena of bright blooms and delicate perfumes, its white-dusted quays thronged, as always, with ship-meeting taxis and horse-drawn carriages. The ship docked to a hubbub of vivacious Spanish invitations from the swarthy vendors of convent-made lace, basketry and imitation pearls, who deployed themselves and their wares near the gangplank. Above the noise a company of caged canaries sang irrepressibly like sun-drunk prisoners who had forgotten the meaning of freedom.



The passengers welcomed the half-day ashore and used the brief time according to their temperaments, pockets or thirsts: shopping along the narrow, hot pavements, pausing in the ancient cathedral's cool daytime dusk, where black-shawled women knelt before the tiers of pale-glowing candles; sampling in resolutely fiesta mood the Spanish wine (or ordering non-sense beer); or with a guide driving around the island's vineyards and volcanic heights. All returned refreshed and elated by the foreign novelty, but glad to see again their cabins and the ship which now felt almost as familiar as home.

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So, with the weighing of anchor and a knowledge of warm sea-days ahead, West Africa came suddenly closer to everyone.

Always the sea-change from temperate to tropic happens, it seems, when one's back is turned. Suddenly there comes a morning when the cabin's heating system coolly reverses its function; the portholes are opened to frame a blue and white poster-picture sea; overcoats, still hanging from hooks, look like the clothing from another hemisphere; and the hitherto chilly pre-breakfast decks are drenched in white-gold sunshine. On such a morning travelling mothers search out sunhats and minimum cotton garments for their youngsters, and resolve to be early in the ship's ironing-room before the perspiring feminine queue gathers to wait and compare nursery news, while the current ironer works stoically and with haste borne of the mounting heat.

'Oh, for a boy!' sighed one, meaning an African houseboy. 'Nappies all over the place!' despairingly spoke another, whose husband had preceded her on deck with infant, carrycot and another child.

'Sure enough,' countered an ironic third, 'if you're a woman you'll be washing and ironing the family's smalls in Timbuctoo or Greenland, or anywhere — you can never forget the damn' laundry.'

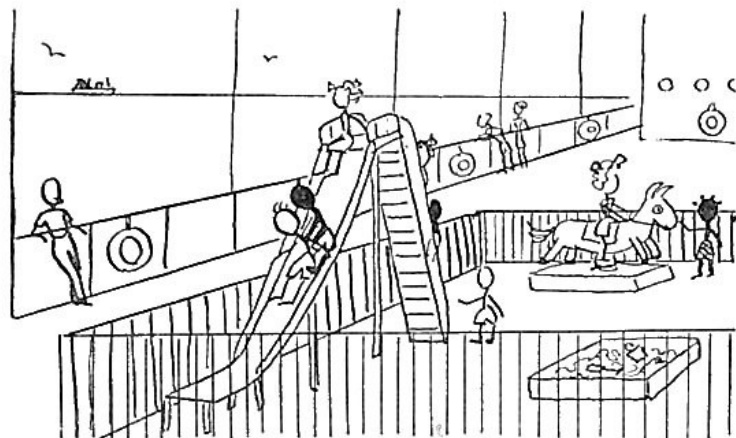
'That's life, isn't it?' agreed a childless fourth, younger than the rest and eagerly charitable, although her ironing was no more than a cotton dance-dress and a frilled petticoat. 'We're all in the same boat.'

At this, which was essentially untrue, no one smiled more than was politely necessary. Generous laughter among women does not come easily in the crowded ironing rooms of vessels in tropical waters.

The children's dining-room and deck playpen were crowded with juvenile Coasters. It was obvious that their white majority and the African minority enjoyed a natural social rapport which could be shattered by primitive nursery tiffs but was never affected by the self-consciousness or racial tension to which the worldly-wise grown-up world is prone. The small children, most

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of them keenly colour conscious when investigating the shades of the spectrum, observed, as William did, the difference ('he's black, I'm pink' or vice versa) but saw it merely as a surface



idiosyncrasy, one more of life's odd facts to be noted with dispassionate interest. Watching the infant democracy behaving at mealtimes and playtime in much the same uninhibited fashion, it occurred to me that if sociologists could find out at what age the reservations on both sides came into being, they might revolutionize the entire colour problem.

I spoke this notion aloud to another white mother who looked faintly surprised and at a loss, as if I had said something either indelicate or not very funny. Steadying, she said firmly, 'The children are too young to understand how *difficult* it is.' Then vaguely, 'Mind you, little Africans *are* poppets....'

I told Bill about this. He was more coherent but not helpful. 'But who ever does know how far a "reservation" goes or what it's made of? It'd take a committee of geniuses to put salt on that kind of tail.'

As during past voyages, the main bodies of adult and African passengers maintained their own tacit, well-mannered apartheid. No avoidance was blatant and no one was snubbed; there were no contretemps; merely a poor line of communication, a poverty of social coinage. The white faces formed their own

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shipboard circles, the dark ones theirs. The exceptions, the active go-betweens, were the missionaries, a scattering of men and women of varying denominations but similar good-heartedness. Some appeared wholly at ease during their long deck-chair conversations and deck-strollings with African travellers. Others demonstrated a strangely excessive, hard-working amiability — something beyond their ordinary social habit with Europeans. One sensed the sincere effort, the deliberate intention, the absence of nonchalance. The effect was of ambassadors devoted to the ideal of an entente cordiale. So with eager sensitivity they took every chance to bolster goodwill and make a lasting impression of receptivity and solicitude. The Africans nodded, smiled and carefully replied in their deep, gentle voices, but they rarely posed leading questions or seized the opportunity to speak their minds on any controversial issue.

Whatever the immediate or distant value of these uncasual conclaves, they made the ebullient mixed-colour kindergarten companionships the more refreshing to witness. Easy gaiety and affection, a spark of honest wilful temper, a touch of high-spirited nonsense — all or any of these, we thought, could have made something more fruitful of the adult travellers' resolute fellowships.

The journey ended, as such voyages do, not with any sense of smooth finale, but abruptly and urgently. We joined in the quickening human pace, were keyed to the new vivacity in faces and voices. The cabins, now electric with emergency and strewn with packing, lost all their temporary look of home. Soon the luggage was massed along the corridors. On the horizon Africa shouldered into grey-green view. Beneath a sky of frail, parched blue the wave-tips of an olive sea glittered like serrated metal and their reflections hurt the eyes.

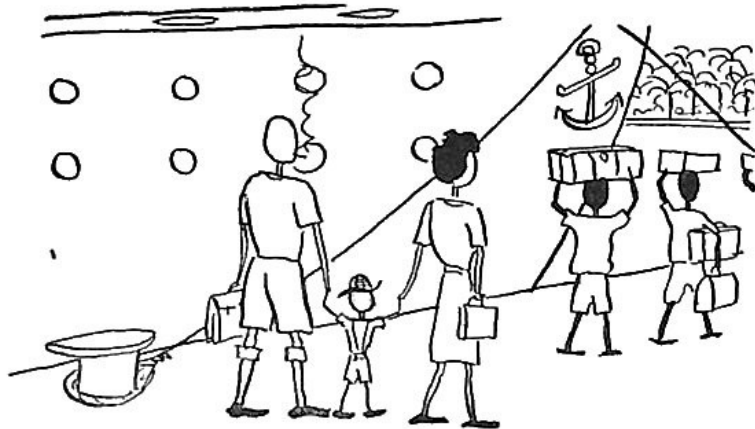
With the slowing of the ship's engines the vessel was embraced, unresisting, by the fullness of noontime heat. It was all as we had known it before, and its magic was the same. Palm trees leaned like feather dusters propped haphazardly along a sulky-looking shoreline. Above, a motionless stencil of cloud shapes hung low, threatening rain. Towards us came the ancient

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emanations of Africa, moist, earthy and acrid — the same which had quickened the imaginations of white travellers to a mysterious continent more than a hundred years ago. We thought of them, the pale pioneers of bygone tropic landfalls, who in those precarious days caused it to be written: 'Take heed and beware of the Bight of Benin ... few come out but many go in.'

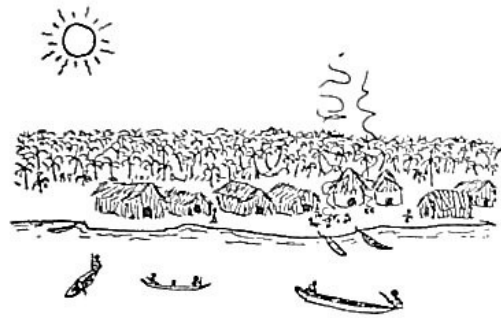
Lagos harbour was ahead. We moved within the rough stone breakwater where a group of European figures stood waving, and past a green promontory, Yacht Club territory, where small tables and sun umbrellas made a tranquil still-life in siesta-time silence. Then slowly, like a ship in a dream, we progressed by the green banks, the storeyed commercial buildings, gardens and ivory balustrades of the Marina's harbour promenade. 'Government House,' indicated the knowledgeable ones, pointing landward to the square white mansion, the brave flag, and the immaculate private jetty. Towards us, across the dimpling water, Lagos presented itself, as an actress might offer her best profile to a critical audience. We heard someone's exclamation of pleasure and another's cautioning voice. 'It always looks good from here....'

Bill lowered William from his shoulder and we made ready to leave the ship. We joined the crocodile of passengers who, outwardly obedient in British fashion but murmurous with impatience and the perspiring discomfort of their airless con-



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fines, filed through the ship's public rooms. We paused at long intervals before the uniformed African officials who regarded us straitly, asked us the routine questions and wielded large rubber stamps charged with purple ink and formality. The next two hours bore us down to the clattering shadeless dock, through the ragged press and noise of dark porters, into the human welter and echoing chaos of the Customs shed and out, with dry throats and Africa-dazzled eyes, into a Nigerian afternoon.



An Outpost in Suburbia 2

NOT long ago, as the world's progress is measured, Lagos Island, modern Nigeria's metropolitan pride, was a seagirt mudbank in uncharted swamp territory. Its early story suggests a careless calligraphy smudged by damp heat and confused by too many hands. But it is known that Lagos began as a small settlement of fisherfolk, fugitives from the mainland's incessant tribal feudings and perilous Juju seasons. Driven by fear, families of migrants crossed the lagoon waters to become, in their drifted embattled fashion, the first Lagosians.

Today three hundred thousand citizens inhabit, in varying degrees of comfort and security, the Island's twenty-seven square miles. Where in 1851 the British Navy fought its last official battle against slavery, the Yacht Club gardener tends the tame greensward and stewards move with decorous trays under the sun umbrellas. Once in Five-Cowrie Creek, a domestic backwater near what are now the formal gardens and Victorian presence of Government House, pirates waited to ambush trading vessels exposed in the outer harbour. From the longboats tallymen counted aboard, not today's cocoa bags or loadings of mahogany and palm kernels, but hapless human freight, the 'black ivory' which avaricious inland chiefs sold to speculating merchantmen. Twentieth-century Lagos is too busy and perhaps too proud to recall the extravagant barbarities of its primitive past, and by ignoring these is inclined to forget even its respectable ghosts: the first white message-bearers and law-

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bringers who died in their numbers from malaria, dengue fever and sleeping sickness in that early inscrutable Nigeria of punishing climate and ominous legend.

In modern Lagos, yesterday's follies and glories have little significance; today's chances and tomorrow's possibilities are all-engrossing. So the city, seething with new expendable life and caught up in rich visions, hastens towards the future. In its hothouse atmosphere every kind of extreme flourishes: the squalor of slum warrens where five thousand souls per square mile inhabit a rust-brown malodorous shackland, and the air-conditioned luxury of costly housing estates and streamlined office blocks; the medieval smells and bacterial dust of back streets bordered by open drains, and the go-ahead gloss and salesmanship of petrol pumps and Coca-Cola signs; the ancient hubbub of the street markets, and the juvenile cacophony of street-side gramophone jazz; the footsore plodding of ragged trekkers with headloads, and the queuing of travellers in palm-beach suits and Western frocks in the big, new, ornately Italianate railway terminus.

In Lagos hovels the sellers of hush-hush Juju amulets and elixirs flourish while vendors at neighbouring stalls offer imported nylon goods, plastic mackintoshes, Hollywood cosmetics, volumes of Charles Dickens, and 'L' signs which motoring novices display as proudly as badges of proficiency. An 'occult healer' and a qualified doctor may live in the same street with equal prosperity. Nightly, at the entrance to the central open-air cinema close by Lagos's substantial pseudo-Gothic cathedral, a beggar without speech makes an incessant strangulated howling, so familiar as to be scarcely noticed by the amusement-seekers. In Lagos's rich stew of living, the unlikely is the most commonplace.

Since 1929 a steel bridge has linked island with mainland; its traffic, wheeled and pedestrian, is heavy and perpetual by day and night. The sweltering harbour, active with tugs, barges, log rafts, canoes and hardworking ferries, handles three million tons of shipping annually. Along its waterfront the Marina's broad promenade reveals to incoming and outgoing ships only

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one view of a city which is never, at any given moment, exactly what it seems.

Nigeria's Federal capital is as many-sided as its people are diverse: profit-minded Yorubas and Ibos; transplanted northern Hausas and Fulani; Western-educated African politicians; teachers, journalists, business men; missionaries of many sects and races; British Government workers and traders, and a confusion of 'commercials' — Syrian, French, Lebanese, Indian, Greek, Italian, Dutch, American, Swiss and German. In the main each group inhabits its own concentrated competitive orbit, its own personal Lagos.

For hundreds of African citizens the most important part of the city is a trading pitch athwart an open drain which serves as business frontage, gossiping ground and domestic sanitation. The improvised counter — soap-box, rough table or up-ended bucket — displays penny-penny goods, small portion groceries, cigarettes and medicines, lit at night by crude candles or oil lamps. Beside it the vendor, usually a 'mammy', squats timelessly; her babies suckle or sleep; her piccans play in the sour dust. She keeps her coins in a long purse-belt, thrice knotted and wound about her waist beneath her skirt wrap.

For others, immediate Lagos is framed by a shop doorway. The mud walls on either side are hung about with shorts and shirts sewn on the premises, and imported underwear in raw colours. Again, for many the city begins in a Levantine store-cubicle crammed, like the bazaars all along the street, with cloth bales, polka-dotted hardware and bright-coloured miscellany. Above, in the flat-roofed domestic areas, stout olive-skinned women fan themselves, and their big-eyed children peer down from the rickety balconies.

Not far away, in the important business houses, African and European workers occupy their part of the city — high-ceilinged, smooth-running, equipped with files, telephones, typewriters and adding machines which register the movements of imports and exports. The big windows of these rooms look across the world to other windows in Liverpool, Rotterdam, Basle, Naples, Calcutta, Beirut, Hamburg and New York —

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places unknown to most Lagosians. And there are other Lagos: that of the well-to-do African with brief-case, American car and membership to the sophisticated Island Club; of the average white wife with her social dinner table and long chair on the veranda; and, variously, of the taxi-drivers, clerks, houseboys, artisans and the tall bony nomads from the northlands who pause in dusty robes before the shop windows and see in the city yet another face, rich, strange and obsessive, a place to come to from afar and to boast of having visited. Even for the blind beggars who drift in the streets or lie suppliant in doorways, Lagos is revealed by a flux of scents and odours, the effluvia of oil and petrol, frangipani, street dust and rancid garbage, stock-fish, market peppers, Paris perfume, cheap talcum, sandalwood, brine, wood smoke and human sweat.

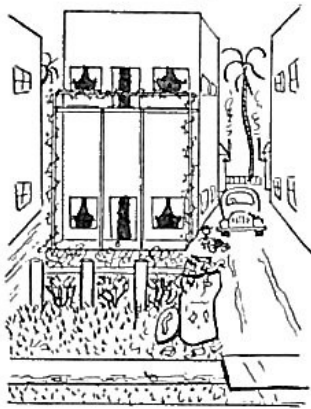
Bill and I, having no one to blaze our trail or preview our domestic setting, sought to rent a house. We soon found that vacant dwellings of any but slum standard were uncommonly scarce. Newcomers to the well-established Companies and Departments automatically took on the addresses left available by leavetaking colleagues, or moved with the fast expanding times into newly built premises whose stucco was scarcely dry. Those like us, for whom no such prepared niche was possible, were obliged to depend on the slight chances afforded in the daily newspaper's 'Accommodation Vacant' column. Through this medium we discovered, in a built-up area on the mainland, a furnished house temporarily vacated by its Syrian owners. 'Well, anyway, it's somewhere to live,' Bill stated, no more enchanted than I by this prospect of four months' residence in a West African suburb.

Our address was not in one of Lagos's superior residential districts nor in any of several new sections whose comparatively fresh air and clever streamlined architecture gave them social prestige. Our close-packed suburb was bounded on one side by the railway and a grimly walled Army Transport Depot, and on two sides by traffic-hustling main thoroughfares. On the fourth side it petered out into a straggle of cheaper development

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areas, mud villages and open country, beyond which lay the airport flatlands. In our immediate area the short streets were unpaved and much alike; all bore the signposted names of British admirals. Here and there among the closely massed dwellings official-looking new structures stood out: a Mission, a school, a bank — townish extensions and outcroppings which forecast the suburb's business future as an integral part of Lagos.

Our residence was one of a mixed dozen which lined a dirt roadway. Five of these — ours, the two which flanked us, and the two opposite — were Syrian, the remainder African.



The two dwellings opposite had a look of wealth; their porticoes and upper structures were elaborate, their gardens green and bowery. Our house, like those on either side, was modestly square and two-storeyed with only a few yards of token garden inside a low concrete wall. Farther down the property scale the street's remaining seven African houses showed cracked, brown-streaked walls; their extrovert doorways led into dark passages; their thresholds gave on to areas of hard-baked earth. Life overflowed here from the

inner rooms to continue its chores and refreshments under the sky. The whole thoroughfare was potholed and its deep bordering gutters were concrete-covered only at the intersections to private driveways. Here and there along the street large brown rubbish bins stood, their bases scattered with ill-aimed corn-cobs, tin cans and other debris. As we saw it on our first day of tenancy, the outlook was not inspiring.

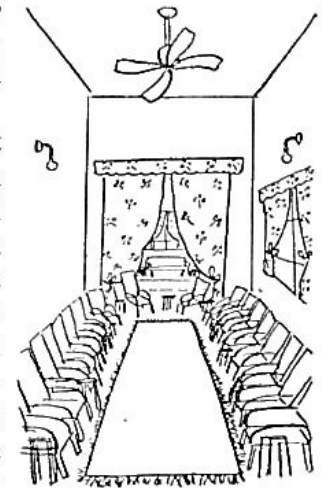
Here in suburbia we were to enjoy what, during former bush days in Nigeria, we should have regarded as a plethora of tropical amenities: plumbing, electricity, telephone, radio, ceiling fans, access to shops and social centres. 'But somehow,' I told Bill ungratefully as we supervised the deploying of trunks, unpacked William's toy box and inspected mosquito nets, 'it

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just isn't us!' To which he briefly replied that it couldn't be — not a furnished house in Lagos with all those Middle East curtains and piles of soup plates inscribed in gilt Arabic. We had cause to feel doubly alien.

The interior décor revealed a strongly Syrian influence. The drawing-room's likeness to the inside of a tent was due, we soon realized, to a prevalence of cotton curtaining whose pattern was as insistent as its yardage was enormous. The drapery was not limited to windows and front entrances; it came down in loops and folds on either side of the archways which led to the dining-room and to an extension of the drawing-room. This last suggested purdah and indeed was known as 'the women's room'.

The drawing-room and its adjunct contained between them nineteen chairs, twelve small coffee tables and two settees. We left them there for a day or so and, wherever we sat, were troubled by two fantasies: a March Hare's coffee party, Arabian-style, and a vision of twenty-three Syrian guest-revenants who silently reproached us for having taken down most of the curtains. Then we distributed the chairs



and coffee tables at random around the house, and even added a pair to the bathroom, so introducing to that plain apartment a surprising air of Eastern leisure.

In 'the Stores', a heavily locked cupboard off the small back kitchen, we stowed away the gilded soup plates, three dozen demi-tasses and an Arabian Nights jar of black olives. We allocated the purdah room to William as play centre. Otherwise we accepted, or nearly accepted, the original character of the house. We were in any case powerless to alter the position of the stairway between ground and upper floor. This was situated at the back, outside, in full view of the African population in neighbouring kitchen yards. ('Well, they're only interested in

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looking,' said Bill fairly. 'It's the giggling I mind,' I told him, 'and never knowing exactly what the joke is.')

We had a further problem. The spare bedroom's chest of drawers contained, we soon discovered, a solid mass of newspaper. The drawers were stuffed with over-ripe Continental and Asiatic journalism and pulp literature devoted to the triple exposure of vice, female anatomy and uncommonly sultry international mayhem. When opened even slightly the chest spilled out a scattering of DDT dust and seemed to crackle as if, like Pandora's Box, it were about to release a horde of Furies. Closed, it looked the innocent receptacle of socks and shirts. We left it so, and hoped that future guests in the spare room would accept our explanation.

From our front veranda we looked across a narrow grassy strip to the flowering hedge which richly clothed the roadway wall. This was our garden, augmented by a vine which climbed the veranda's pillars; its cloudy white blossoms softened and scented our bedroom balcony above. At the rear of the house only tough grass and a few stunted eggplants managed to survive in the hard, impoverished earth. Yet, surprisingly, this same soil nourished another vine which grew powerfully upwards to form on one side of the rear balcony a broad screen of leafage thickly clustered with flowers whose fragile pinks and whites suggested the colour scheme for a Victorian nosegay. The vine pleased us at first, but we soon realized that its speed of growth was fantastic. Daily, even hourly it seemed, fresh shoots advanced, restless and groping, to invade more of the balcony space. At night especially, under the veranda's harsh electric light, the jungly leaves glistened with bold yet secret life, and among them the flowers hung, slyly modest and far too profuse, we thought, among the tiny thriving tendrils. We began to feel an active dislike for this oppressive greenery and told the houseboys to keep it severely trimmed. They, regarding this as no more than a fetish for tidiness, attacked the growth with machetes only when urgently instructed. For a few brief days, thinned and disciplined, the vine looked ordinary and innocent. Then almost overnight it dominated the scene again,

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and we could not cross the veranda without sensing its curious challenge and, worse, the certain knowledge that we were no match for it.

From our front door we could follow the life of the street, which was sometimes so close at hand that it seemed in danger of coming right into the drawing-room. Early mornings and late afternoons brought the bicycles, pedalled by clerks trim as tailors' dummies in white trousers and shirts with neat ties, and by men in native dress whose vivid sleeves and tunics flapped and billowed in their wake. Early and late the serious precocious young foodsellers came carrying bread in half- and quarter-loaves, sugar to be doled out in penny-penny lumps at back doorways, miscellaneous highly flavoured tinned goods, kerosene in bottles, charcoal in tiered basins, and trays of sardine tins filled with meticulously counted groundnuts. They drifted past, their headloads steady, their stance somnambulistic (or kneebent if the load was heavy or liquid), their chants harsh, unchildlike and fatalistic, as if measured to a metronome. At intervals of a week or fortnight the municipal dustcarts, with much authoritative shouting and virtuous clattering, toured the streets, thus defeating the intentions of derelict old men and women who came to scavenge, with the choosy skill of connoisseurs, the bins' noisome top layers. Rarely, and always during the cooler hours, white pedestrians passed our way: sometimes a European mother with child and pushcart, or strolling newcomers to the local Mission. The newness of these was apparent from the energy of their stride and the keenness of their gaze as, fresh from disembarkation and ready to get to grips with Africa, they took stock of our street.

They would have been told what to expect: that Lagos was urban and progressive and quite unlike any bush village or inland township, but, one imagined, they had half expected something more exotic here. They might have been surprised to see the African family from the street's corner house cramming pleasure-bent into the limousine taxi which blew its summoning horn in front of the unkempt yard. More in keeping, perhaps, with the newcomers' expectation of a picturesque Nigeria was

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the shy African girl, who with multi-plaited coiffure and brilliant skirt-wrap, silently passed by with a headload of calabashes and murmured, in reply to their greeting, a gentle, unintelligible salutation.

To our street on Sundays the blind beggars came with limbs as thin as their tapping sticks, and stridently importunate voices. Of these the most senior was a bearded Northerner whose ancient face was sculptured in noble lines of sorrow and patience. His turban was dust-smear'd; his once-white robe fell in limp folds of dirty yellow. His simple off-key plaint was 'Saidi! Saidi!' and this continued without modulation or appreciable interval until he was noticed. The houseboys, Robert and Simon, always pretended he was not there, although he stood in plain view on the veranda ('like a Judgment', Bill said, 'or a Warning') staring with filmed eyes into the drawing-room. His most important competitors, who sometimes succeeded in arriving before he did, were a trio of curiously frivolous blind women led by a small businesslike boy. Coquet-tishly turbaned, blooming with violet face powder and dressed in garish cottons, they assembled briskly under a window, took breath and broke into what sounded like a glee-club harmony, nerve-plucking in its raw energy and exactness of beat. Usually we were jazzed and nagged into a speedy distribution of alms and thanked by an even more exuberant encore. When the old man and the three women had gone we sat in silence at our breakfast table, feeling slightly debilitated and exceedingly low in our minds.

It was the time of greatest heat, before the onset of the May rains. The sequence of our daytime life was governed by the sun's ascent, its fierce noon sway and diminishing late-day authority. Every dawning expressed mild beauty and a charming false promise. Freshly bathed and dressed, we were pleased

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by little movements of cool air along the tiled floors, and the tender aspect of a pure, pale-blue sky. Until nine o'clock the hours were tranquil and auspicious, like the best hours of an English midsummer morning. Then gradually the long calm fingers of light on walls and ceilings merged into an aggressive blaze of sunlight. Mirrors and metals gave off sparks of light; dust motes danced in shafts of yellow brilliance, and the tiles grew hot beneath our sandalled feet.

As the day advanced its foregone victory, we thought of the heat as a secret agent with pale face and moist hands, all-pervasive, fanatical and subtly sabotaging. By two o'clock all the morning's momentum had gone, and human pace was slowed almost to a standstill. In airless white silence clocks in shuttered rooms ticked away the drowsy siesta time. Then with the four o'clock tea-tray the afternoon was revived and the sun's spell began to wane. Soon after six o'clock darkness fell as swiftly as if an impatient puppeteer were manipulating the great yellow disc by an invisible string which dropped it jerkily beyond the darkening horizon. So with the sky's light gone and ourselves again bathed and clad for the evening, we felt once more grateful, reprieved and renewed.

Our household circumstance in regard to servants was fairly typical. Although we were only a family of two adults and one child, and not particularly luxurious in our tastes, we soon found ourselves with a staff of five: Cook, Steward, Smallboy, Driver (Lagos rarely says 'chauffeur') and 'Watch-night'. Our method of selection was orthodox. We spoke our needs aloud within hearing of interested ears. In due course applicants arrived with sheaves of references over which we pondered. We knew that, apropos of cooks, such culinary adjectives as 'plain' were usually meant to warn rather than advocate. We were not blind to enigmatic gaps of months or even years among the



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papers' dates. Sometimes spotting significant erasures and over-writings in another pen we concluded that the testimonials had been bought, borrowed or amended. We were also aware of the commission system which causes a new employee to pay part of his first salary to the intermediary who recommends and skilfully assists him into a job, and of the diligent clannishness which so often contrives that a household's concentration of servants, closely or distantly related, has the same village background.

The actual interviews were little more helpful than the chancy 'papers'. Invariably, as in our past experience, the applicant's buoyant answer to any query was a smiling, 'I can do it', 'You will see my handwork with your own eyes', or a confident 'I will try'. Whatever we asked of stewards, small-boys, cooks, drivers or watchnights, this was the response. Their motto might have been: Seize Every Opportunity: A Man's Reach Must Far Exceed His Grasp. The probability — even certainty — of failure or fiasco and consequent 'palaver' did not daunt them; they were as one man enthusiastically prepared to bite off, if necessary at a moment's notice, more than they could chew, and determined to present themselves as paragons. So it turned out that Tom Cook — engaged because of his old-fashioned courtesy, and perhaps because he vaguely reminded us of the venerable man in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* — had after all no comprehension of the construction of the soufflé he at once agreed to make. Despite his assurances, Smallboy Simon so little understood the volatility of Flit that he sprayed it lavishly on our cutlery. Steward Robert, self-styled valet par excellence, boiled Bill's nylon socks. Driver, who had lightly referred to chauffeuring an Army General, polished our car upholstery with red shoe polish that came off on our clothes. Watchnight Ayo, reputedly insomniac and a terror among thieves, snored at his midnight post on his second night of duty.

'Well, of course they can't be the marvels of perfection they pretend to be,' Bill said, no more surprised than I that most of their first-day professions to domestic expertise were unfulfilled. When word and deed too dramatically showed no connection,

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we pointed out the failure. And as always the reply ended with the same smooth, palaver-averting assurance: 'I will try again. You will see my handwork.'

'It might be a magic phrase,' I crossly told Bill one sweltering afternoon, 'to cure everything that goes wrong, from a mix-up in the market book to a hole in the mosquito net.'

'Well,' protested Bill mildly — for his morning in town with the log-trade had been promising, and Steward had perfectly timed the serving of an ice-cold drink — 'they do try.... Anyway, count yourself lucky to be a white woman in the tropics, living a life of leisure.'

'I'm the athletic mother of a lively two-year-old child in the tropics,' I pointed out, 'not just a woman. This morning Fatima and Abdul from next door had a big scene with William in the purdah room. Then I discovered Abdul's baby brother in there too with his nursemaid who fell sound asleep on the settee while the baby ...'

'What's for lunch?' Bill queried, as one who must change a subject.

'Cheese soufflé,' I told him, still nettled by the carefree white-woman motif, 'or you can call it cheese pancake if it has gone flat again.'

Small Fatima, our son's constant playmate, was a stocky, swarthy little girl with gold earrings in her pierced ears, a shrill imperious voice, a resilient philosophy, and an onyx-hard scrutiny which, especially at the hottest times of day, could be unnerving to adults. Her mother, large and languid with pregnancy, left the child to her own devices or those of a heavy-browed African nursemaid, who sat much of the time on the back step of the house next door eating groundnuts and looking sulky. On this step the houseboys of Fatima's household ate their highly seasoned, heavy food: dishes of garri or ricey stews hot with chili. Often Fatima would share a spoon and dish and complete her impromptu meal with a lump of raw coconut or a corncob.

We watched Fatima and the little boy Abdul (from the other

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adjoining house) out in the roadway scabbling in the scatterings from the rubbish bin, or ruffling with sticks the scum of the gutter; we saw Abdul's baby sister playing in the noonday sun with a pile of sharp-edged rusty tins. We heard Fatima and Abdul playing outside, unprotected from mosquitoes, long after dark until their tempers reached screaming point and the tearful commotion of their late bedtimes began, and we thought



that the guardian angels delegated to tropical nurseries were uncommonly hand-capped and hard-pressed.

Our purdah room was the trio's and my nursery proving ground. During a reading of 'Mary had a Little Lamb', Abdul made fierce gestures of recognition and annihilation and shouted 'Killum! Killum!' in which Fatima gleefully joined. When a quarrel broke out Fatima would turn on either of her playmates with the bitterest insult known to African townees: 'You are a bushman, you!' Both Fatima and Abdul were, like their quasi-nursemaids, vocal in staccato exclamatory pidgin. 'Make you go!

'Why for you do dis t'ing?' 'That man' (indignantly of the steward) 'say we go-go, but we go-stay!' 'What time William go take his chop?'

Fatima was always extrovert; Abdul, when alone, was given to watchful periods of self-effacing, almost eerie, silence. He haunted the house soundlessly at all hours. We would find him motionless behind one of our chairs at mealtimes, or mutely at our elbow while we tried to read a newspaper. When at intervals a voice in shrill crescendo from next door would shout his name, he would give us a vestigial smile, secret and pathetic. His eyes would brighten warily but stay fixed on us as if he were held by the spell of our strangeness. When he was carried off by his nursemaid or steward boy, he made no protest. Whatever the repercussions, he stayed at home only for as long as he needed to make his escape once again.

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Fatima's parents lived quietly; Abdul's were less reserved. Some weeks after our arrival they took possession of the house, hitherto empty, beside ours. They came at dusk with a vanload of loosely stacked household furniture and bulging string-tied cartons. Abdul's father, a stout, short man (whom we saw as a Damon Runyon character out of context) was sweating freely with effort and exhortation. He mopped his glistening blue-jowled chin nervously while supervising the wobbling progress indoors of a refrigerator carried by two barefoot labourers, who made the sorrowful groaning noises of the heavily burdened and insufficiently paid. 'No, thanks,' he replied offhandedly to our offer of assistance, 'It's okay, no trouble. We fix the whole business tonight.'

All through the long dark hours we lay under our mosquito nets beside windows necessarily open to the impassioned sounds of the settlers' moving-in: the thudding, shifting and hammering of furniture and curtain rods; the domestic consultations from room to room; and the rapid harsh arguments. We slept fitfully, feeling exposed and apprehensive. By breakfast time our new neighbours' abundant curtains were up, a boy was putting out a long line of washing, and the cookhouse — immediately in our breakfast-table line of sight and smell — was pungent with wood smoke and sputtering fat. The baby crawled outside while his nurse, not uniformed or aproned but dressed in a rayon frock patterned with roses, visited Fatima's nursemaid. Abdul was already in our house, while his mother, jet-haired, with small scarlet mouth and a face as smooth, pale and hard-looking as ivory, leaned on ample bosom at an upper window, absorbedly eating something on a skewer. When the baby cried she did not stir nor glance down at its woe but shrilled, 'Maree!' The nursemaid came slowly from Fatima's house, using our front veranda as a short cut and glancing in at us with mild interest as she passed.

That evening Abdul's house was ablaze with unshaded new hundred-watt light bulbs. Many cars drew up. Many voices were raised in party conversations and laughter which drifted, it seemed, from the open windows across the way straight into

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our bedroom. Just as, on the night before, we had been too aware of the moving-in activities, we were now obliged to follow, from our restless pillows, the entire gamut of celebration night. We leaned on our pillows to see a parade of dishes, piled with festive food, carried in from the cookhouse. We gave up the idea of sleep when, from our new neighbours' gramophone, there issued sinuous Arabic music whose melancholy quarter tones assaulted our untutored ears and depressed our spirits. Later we heard slitherings and heavy bumps which I thought might indicate a return to furniture-shifting, but Bill was sure, judging by happy shouts and quick breathless pauses,

that the visitors were playing Musical Chairs. Eventually we heard the hearty departures, the car-revving and door-bangings which signalled peace. Then, with dawn in sight, Bill and I turned our pillows again and agreed that of all the discomforts we had known in West Africa, suburban propinquity was the hardest to bear.

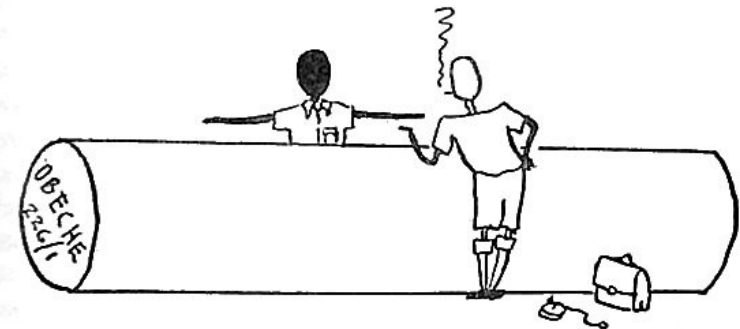
For a time, as is always the case when Britons come fresh from the United Kingdom to West Africa, we were not yet truly part of the life around us; in many ways we continued to think and behave in northern fashion, resisting assimilation or alteration. During our first few weeks in Lagos our position was unequivocally on the outside looking in. At the same time we knew that as soon as we found ourselves on the inside, looking out, our perspectives would gradually alter and we should become comparative strangers to our home selves.

Perhaps because we were by our minority position and brief tenancy the street's most foreign members, we were not encouraged to know any of our neighbours well. We all dwelt closely together, yet for reasons of language, custom, taste and occupation the compact Syrian group, the African bloc and our small unit lived in three separate compartments, sharing

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only the municipal amenities, the roadway's traffic, the district's daytime and nocturnal noises, and the encompassing heat. No situation could have been in greater contrast with the life we had enjoyed nine years before, in a Nigerian up-country bush village. There we had known a genuine solitude leavened by easy undemanding relationships with our neighbours, the Catholic Mission Fathers and local pagan bush people. Now we remembered the taken-for-granted simplicities of that time almost as if they had happened in another life. In this other many-sided urban Nigeria they had no place.

Meantime, while we tried to feel at home in our temporary house, Bill prospected the involvements of Lagos's — and indirectly Nigeria's — timber world, and considered the establishment of a log-business base. With Driver he would set out for the Island very early each morning, to return hot and thirsty from the glare and fret of the day, and relate the encounters, frustrations and occasionally the satisfactions of the expedition. His day by day preliminary investigations took him along the active waterfronts, to some of the lagoon 'beaches' which served as storage and dressing depots for logs from up-country, up the narrow stairways of side-street African timber offices, into solicitors' rooms, to the Marina's Cable Office, the modern Banks and Shipping Lines, the prim anterooms of Government Departments, and the polyglot lounge of Lagos's central hotel



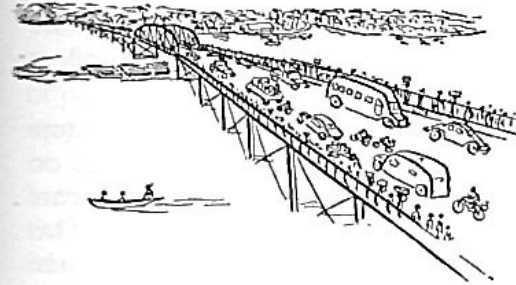
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which often served as forum for timber news and meeting ground for European and African transients on business.

'Modern pioneering in Africa,' Bill declared one noontime, 'is like an obstacle race. Time was when a man went to the tropics to break new ground, look over new horizons and find fresh geographical elbow room. Now he drives round to Departments, hands in his card and fills in forms. Everything has to be so thought-out and polite, and all the pioneers and locals are for ever looking over each other's shoulders....'

'And,' I supposed, 'having palavers.'

Bill said that the Coast air was full of them, as irritant and hard to subdue as a prevalence of pepper or itching powder. So there were bound to be palavers.



Over the Bridge to Lagos 3

THE plain facts about Lagos's Carter Bridge are these: that it was built during 1928-31 at a cost of £450,000, is supported by 420 steel piles, and involves 8721 tons of steel and more than 8000 yards of concrete. Along its half-mile length at peak periods approximately 1500 vehicles travel every hour; its structure incorporates the pipes and cables which provide the city's water, heat, light and energy, and link it by telephone and telegraph with the mainland. All Lagos's roadways and those of the mainland converge at Carter Bridge; there is no other crossing except by lagoon ferries or canoes.

Driving along the bridge to Lagos in clear morning light we could view along that half-mile almost the whole of Nigeria. In two streams, vehicular and pedestrian, a richness of life flowed to and from the city's heart — its market places, streets, schools, offices, shops and houses — to and from urban duties and pleasures and plodding routine. Under the early benign sun the traffic moved impatiently and with positive intent. Across the smooth lagoon waters lit by the first warning flashes of volatile sunlight, snubnosed tugs with weighty log rafts or barges in tow headed for the cargo vessels which lay out of sight in the greater harbour behind the island's dark flank; the fishermen's canoes made wakes as dainty as brush strokes on grey silk. On the lagoon's mainland side the imposing modern outlines of the railway terminus and power station stood high above the angularities of waterside cranes and the diminishing smudge of railway sidings. The island's marshy shoreline appeared from

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the bridge as a mud-coloured coalescence of low sheds, tin roofs, shacks, dugouts and canoe-houseboats — the featureless marginal home for hundreds of humble Lagosians.

The bridge was everyone's territory. From their perches atop the Public Works Department's lorry-loads of cement bags or oil drums, ragged labourers grinned down at the all-African buses crammed with dark densities of hardy commuters. The nonchalant drivers of freshly valeted automobiles piloted their employers, European and Asian men, on their way to work, and their cool wives in sun-frocks en route to the shops. Other chauffeurs at the wheels of long sleek cars drove their African masters — velvet-fezzed and in robes, or hatted and formally suited — towards the House of Representatives, the Law Courts, Government Departments and Company offices. Among them the town taxis jockeyed, cheeky and opportunist, with pale or dark cargoes, and mascots or bunches of paper flowers hazardously bobbing at rear windows. At intervals there were the bright-coloured self-advertising vans of the big shops, bakers, brewers and travelling orchestras, and sometimes those topped by double-sided megaphones which periodically invaded the streets with a mixture of dance music and brass-lunged political exhortation.

The bridge traffic proved, we thought, the enormous and often naive prestige-value of car-ownership in West Africa. It is widely understood there that the car a man uses may be no indication whatsoever of his bank balance; as a rule Europeans are provided by their Departments or Companies with seemly and often luxurious transport which keeps them mobile and reasonably contented in a torrid land where buses are rarely used by white people. Yet despite this understanding, the man with the new klaxon-horned two-toned American model will be widely regarded as a Big Massa; he who makes do with a smaller or homelier car has less general cachet. In a country easily impressed by the look of wealth it is considered necessary by most to look as wealthy as possible, and by the gloss of the façade promote confidence in whatever goods lie behind it for sale or advertisement. Generally speaking, West Africa has no

OVER THE BRIDGE TO LAGOS

time for noticing lights under bushels, and is likely to regard modesty in anyone's personal furnishings as a sign of meanness or poverty. (As Steward Robert scornfully remarked of a former employer's cuff-links: 'He not have proper gold one — he only be Junior Massa.') So the shiny big cars with powerful engines betokened, it seemed, shiny big people with powerful natures that ought to be respected. And any car at all was an important improvement on none, even if it were a mongrel machine, the result of skilful backyard tinkering, and not yet paid for. It might emit poisonous exhaust fumes and stutter to a standstill in the middle of the bridge, but still it separated the owner by a great distance from those who travelled on bicycles, and those others, still lower in the arbitrary social scale, who jostled along the bridge pavements. In a country where formerly — except in horse-breeding northern areas free from tse-tse fly — everyone was pedestrian and wheels had no place in the scheme of things, the automobile has rapidly become a symbol for all that is go-ahead.

By the same token any new-day African, whether townee or bush villager, vastly enlarges his ego the moment he finds himself on two wheels, progressing towards the greatly desired four-wheel status. In the peak morning hours the bridge was aflutter with the winged sleeves and ballooning robes of cyclists, all of them, for reasons perhaps known only to an older African, male. Others, of the white-clad clerk tribe, thronged the bridge, nimbly threading their way among the heavy traffic, and joining their bell-ringing with the greater noise of excitable horns and peevish klaxons. The newness of the cycles was fitting. Many of their young riders had the same fresh-minted look, as if boys and machines had been fabricated simultaneously from modern materials, according to latest designs, on a double entity principle.

Almost it was as if these fleet fortunates speeding towards their leaders' vision of a new Nigeria, were not of the same breed as the 'omolenkes' (barrow-pushers) who with bodies bent and shoulder muscles knotted, hauled Lagos's heavy, double-shafted handcarts. Always the 'omolenkes' looked dogged

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and indignant, as if what they attempted was already far past their endurance, and deeply hurtful to their pride. They were the lowest of all in the bridge thoroughfare and perhaps the strongest, for they would push and pull the cumbersome wooden carts loaded with cloth bales or market produce for miles at the behest of their merchant employers, setting up a groaning chant when the way was uphill, and braking with dug-in heels and a desperate downward pressure when the carts gained dangerous downhill momentum in the path of an irate driver or grinning cyclist. 'Omolenkes' were much slower than the most quixotic public transport, but they were cheaper. In Lagos where the top dogs were still by far outnumbered by bottom dogs, some-one illiterate, unchoosy or hungry could always be found to do an ill-paid heavy job for a well-paid master.

In a land where a generation ago the topeed white man often trekked long distances, sometimes hammock-borne, but more often on foot, European pedestrians are nowadays rare. The white man in Lagos who strolls any distance usually does so as a deliberate late-day exercise, with a solitary, athletic keep-fit look about him. But for most of the Africans crowding along the bridge pavements the idea of walking as healthful exercise is entirely foreign; they walk because they must.



We thought the bridge's motto might have been: '*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*' Always the pavement people looked as if they might be those we had seen from the car-window on our last journey across the lagoon. Each time we viewed what

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might have been the same frieze: of skipping school children, burdened market women, white-robed Muslim Northerners, petty traders, beggars and the immobile pairs and trios who leaned on the parapet as if carved with it, and stared down at the water.

There were always those few who sprawled full length, felled by fatigue almost under the feet of the uncaring passers by. There were the young women in Western dresses, with shiny plastic handbags and hair tricked into an aura of short, pert pigtails, and the unclassifiable loitering male dandies in pastel shirts of transparent nylon. There were the customary scattering of the aged with seamed faces and toothless gums, the occasional éccentric or harmless lunatic in filthy rags, shifty-eyed and muttering, the usual labourers in oil-stained shirts and singlets worn into rags which held together as delicately as lacework, and the inevitable scrawny complaining sheep and goats pulled along by close-hauled tethers.

The poorest pedestrians went barefoot, their soles long since toughened to leathery hardness. The rest wore shoes or flapping flat slippers or sandals; for shoe-consciousness is another manifestation of material superiority, and Lagos shoe-vendors do a good trade. But although the city sets great store by such aids to mobility as cars, cycles and footwear, it does not, in general, care for perambulators. Those African babies who were not car-borne crossed the bridge in the old-fashioned way on their mothers' backs within the sling of her skirt-wrap, lulled by the maternal warmth and motion. Their heads, often muffled in bright woollen bonnets, were reposefully slumped and their closely confined limbs did not struggle; they seemed preternaturally contented and we never heard one crying. ('Why don't these babies cry?' I asked Driver. 'Because they like to sleep,' he said, 'and their bellies get plenty chop anytime.')

For hundreds of mobile traders the bridge was a familiar pathway taking them to the places of greatest vantage for the endless fascination of selling or trading the goods they sturdily balanced on their heads. Some, having invested in town stuffs, would find their small but steady profits in the suburbs or

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distant villages. Others, coming in from the country with loads of pineapples, bananas, oranges, yams and other produce, sought their customers in the city's markets. So a 'mammy'



with a complex load of corncobs or plantains and the stool and other paraphernalia for street trading would meet one of her sisterhood returning from Lagos with a towering basketful of light bulbs, or cheap handbags, or assorted cosmetics and patent medicines.

The street traders' shrewdness was, we knew, something uncommon even in a country of expert bargainers. Some had earned enough to pay for the education abroad of promising young rela-

tives; many had built up substantial businesses, bought properties and retired in comfort. Volunteered Driver ambiguously, 'A-ah — these women they say: "You got no money, all-right, take food, take cigarettes, take singlet, pay me when you get pay." So you go to them and buy some small thing sometimes and that makes plenty in one month. Then they come to house when you get wages and they say: "Where is my money?" People say: "What is this?" and palaver is bad and people shout, so you pay — all or some — and they get proper rich.' Driver grinned. Like most Ibos he admired commercial acumen, even when he suffered because of it. And we knew that he would continue so to suffer and complain, for like many of his wage-earning brotherhood he lived often on his expectations and slid easily into debt.

The women traders were, we imagined, expert advocates of a system as old as Africa which enabled them to charge fractionally more for goods given on credit, and to hold their indebted customers on the check-reins of their financial obligations. They knew that a worker's arithmetic could be as weak as his will when he was tempted by the flashy new necktie or

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savoury food he could not really afford, and that the man with no ready cash could be a more reckless spender than he who counted the hard coins in his hand. But, whatever the women's philosophy or tactical expertise, both were matched by a formidable energy in collecting their dues.

In West Africa an old saying could be altered to 'Hell hath no fury like a woman with money owing'. Often, on Saturday noontimes when men came crowding out from their places of work, we had heard the noise — like a swarm of bees — of the dunning women who were as one woman angry, importunate and in the right. The men often tried to slip away (for in these money matters no one bothered much about the ethics of the situation) but they rarely succeeded. Although the scenes of argument and expostulation were — as Driver had told us — fierce and bitter on both sides, the brouhaha was soon over and calm was restored. But not merely calm. The protagonists — who, after all could not do without each other — were, by Monday, renewing their association, buying and selling and cheerfully allowing the score to mount. We understood why Driver disliked and admired the women traders. Their role was, in a sense, that of Conscience.

The bridge was a thoroughfare for Hausa men who, with the professional ease of Covent Garden porters, carried piles of big square cushions on their heads. Like cretonned Leaning Towers of Pisa they advanced, wary of the slightest breeze, one hand manipulating the string which secured the top cushion. The goods had been tailored and kapok-stuffed in some grimy shed or shop entrance open to the city dust, but always the finished result was to the casual eye smart and brightly clean. This was so, too, of all Lagos's uncountable yardages of piece goods. Cloth of every conceivable weave, pattern and colour stood about in bales or hung like banners in the markets. Along the Levantine side-streets dainty fabrics spilled out of cavern dark-nesses in flurries of ethereal organdies, nylons, velvets, broderies, chiffons and imitation lace. Much handled by bargaining customers, and left outside in the cruel sunlight from dawn till

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dusk, sometimes almost trailing in the gutters, the frail textiles always looked miraculously fresh and fair.

In fact, Lagos's whole general toilette often astounded us. The morning bridge traffic was, in the main, freshly garbed; the women's turbans were crisply tied and their layered cotton wraps newly laundered. The men's wardrobes were as dressy as could be afforded, with well-creased shorts or trousers and carefully ironed shirts. And again we thought it remarkable that a city which was in parts so unkempt and evil-smelling should be the home of a people who set great store by personal



cleanliness, bathed regularly (if only in a bucket of street-pump water) and showed their zeal for laundry work by the numbers of 'cloths' spread out to dry on every stretch of waste ground, and by the general popularity of the trading stores' charcoal irons.

At the city end of the bridge there was usually a bottleneck of traffic and a hiatus which small-time pedlars used for offering, from the kerb, wool-embroidered bicycle saddle covers, and handkerchiefs. These last small squares of cloth are conclusive evidence of Africa's increasing Westernization. Now that it has become infra dig, in many parts of Africa, to blow the nose with the fingers, the handkerchief trade has found a vast new clientele. From such minor alterations in habit and trade the larger changes come — such changes as we saw in Lagos, after our absence of nine years.

Materially much had been gained. New or recently expanded buildings stood like square white temples which had been conjured up from the streets' dusty plains; around some the scaffolding remained, and there lingered in the hot air a smell of new plaster. The four largest shops on or near the Marina boasted up-to-the-minute window-dressing and advertising that would not have been out of place in Oxford Street. Near them,

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in the shadeless heat (which could raise a car's interior temperature to that of a slow oven) the shoppers' vehicles were haunted by street vendors with trays of sun-glasses, cheap fountain pens, clothes pegs and other oddments. We were often puzzled by the optimism of the tenacious commercial mites who worked so closely under the lee of the biggest store, and we never did discover who purchased, out in the street, wares which cost less on the counters within and had, in fact, been bought there.

The entrances of the biggest shop were, for Lagos, impressive. They were attended by white-uniformed commissionaires who carried truncheons and served as watchdogs against the would-be invasions of cheeky urchins with lawless natures and bodies as fast-moving as quicksilver. The everlasting business of separating the juvenile goats from the young sheep of Lagos had given the shop sentries' faces a look of concentrated vigilance, and sometimes of outrage, as when a small jeering figure flashed indoors from the *hoi-polloi* pavement to disappear among the aisles of the bona-fide European and African shoppers.

Within the shop one could almost forget the existence of the steamy, hugger-mugger West Africa outdoors. Here were tiled floors, high ceilings, whirring fans, the click of the Supermarket's turnstiles, tinkle of cash registers and muted hum of buying and selling. Here were European housewives with their small children sipping Lagos's ubiquitous Coca-Cola in the Soda Fountain, consulting shopping lists and filling their shopping baskets. But this was High Street with a difference. In the fruit and vegetable section citrus fruits, pineapples, papayas, bananas and coconuts were cheap; imported brussels sprouts, turnips, carrots and apples were luxury foods.

The most remarkable aspect of the Cold Stores was not that it sold Scotch salmon, Devonshire cream and even haggis, but that here at last in West Africa one could buy, at a price, new-laid eggs and pints of cow's milk fresh daily from the Government Experimental Farm. The Cold Stores department had, too, a section indicated by a lively sign, 'Quick Service', and this we thought was an extraordinary development in Nigeria where for years slow haggling has been both a skill and

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a pastime and no one has expected to buy or sell anything in a hurry.

In many Lagos stores brand-new commercial procedures had come into being; the European experts were clearly hard at work streamlining the merchandise arenas, gearing their machineries to a faster tempo and attempting to inculcate a new-world sales psychology. Sometimes their success shone like a golden light over assembly-line counters that worked with smooth precision. The new regime creaked and showed signs of strain only when human nature refused to co-operate in the admirable display of efficiency. Once when some mysterious background hiatus occurred to bring business at a haberdashery counter to a standstill, a general wilting was observed among the congestion of feminine customers, and one of their number fainted while still holding forward a fragment of cloth for which she desired a spool of matching cotton. The fault was not in the shop method but in the vitiated air of a crowded building in West Africa in the hottest part of the day. It is at times like these when Coast shoppers need all their hardihood. On other occasions certain reserves of philosophy are necessary. Once, having bought from one of the stores a packet of rice that proved, at home, to be swarming with insects (whose species I did not, on the way to the dustbin, pause to identify), I sought redress. The African in charge of the grocery department to whom I made the complaint was not of the customer-is-always-right school. He said, 'Where is the rice?'

'I couldn't bring back such a parcel to you,' I protested.

'Sorry,' he said firmly. 'If anything is wrong like that we must see it. You must return the goods.'

'So I must bring back the insects?' I retorted.

To which he blandly, incredibly replied, 'Of course.'

Another time, in yet another shop, I bought two handkerchiefs which, according to routine, were carried by the African girl assistant to a wrapping-up counter. The wrapper-up was an African boy who was at that moment struggling with the parcelling of a large knobbly purchase. Its customer patiently waited with others whose unwrapped goods lay on the counter.

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To these the girl assistant added my handkerchiefs and stood back to wait and watch the boy's efforts with his awkward package. Distractedly he paused for a moment to push the handkerchiefs and a paper bag towards her. 'You can do it,' he suggested. The girl looked at him haughtily, 'It is not my job to wrap up — it is your job.'

The minutes passed. The boy began his second parcel. I picked up the handkerchiefs as they were, and the salesgirl shrugged. It was not her job, as she had said, to wrap up.

The rhythm of shopping life, as of other mercantile activities in Lagos, was subject to a fortnightly emphasis. On alternate Wednesdays a mailboat docked and off-loaded fresh supplies which appeared on the shop counters during the next day or so. Then Lagos Europeans, hungry for magazines and periodicals, besieged the high-piled news-stands and carried away armloads of the bright-covered ephemeral literature which had such power to bring the United Kingdom vividly to tropical veranda or siesta-time bedroom. The mailboats' punctual comings and goings gave to Lagos's white population far more than the temporary refreshment of new wares; they represented an invisible but powerful lifeline between Liverpool and the Coast; they docked and departed in an atmosphere of businesslike Lancastrian routine which minimized three thousand sea miles into a casual excursion; their movements were as certain as sunrise and sunset; their recurring sameness on a changing seascape was reassuring, and their schedules neatly blocked out the white man's expatriate twelve or eighteen months' tour into assimilable segments of time with a 'home' connection. And this feeling, we knew, extended inland to the farthest bush stations whose white people enjoyed, as we did, the comfortable satisfaction of mailboat Wednesday.

Even on ordinary days the biggest shop was crowded with a heterogeneous variety of shoppers. Along the counters stout, affluent African hausfraus with large handbags rubbed elbows with Lagos's white wives. Pale nuns in layered ivory habits composedly stated their needs to the African clerks. Soutaned priests scanned grocery shelves and replenished mission larders.

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In the Book Section, bachelors from up-country bought new stock for their lonely bookshelves. Visitors to town always carried long lists, their own and their neighbours'. We heard one male shopper's plaint to a shepherding friend: 'I'll need a pantehnicon to get it all back. There's a set of china and an ironing board for the Carters, pillows and a new stove for the Browns, Tommy's tricycle, all that face stuff for Mildred ... and where do I get Joan's curtain rods?'

The paucity of hats among the shoppers pointed to the death of the old idea that British West Africa's sunshine threatened instant sunstroke for the unwary. Pith helmets, once the regulation headgear for white men and women, had become

the exception; their wearers now were mostly nuns, priests, Frenchmen or uniform-conscious African officials. It was the African women rather than the white who from habit or dressy impulse covered their heads — usually with turbans or felt hats of old-fashioned shape. The British women, as if by a tacit truce, kept their millinery—decorative,

not protective—for those formal dress-up occasions whose etiquette also required the wearing of stockings and gloves. The white man's Africa had come a long way since the old days of spine pads and chin-strapped topees. We thought the expatriate women, whose power to cast down or build up shibboleths is legendary, were much responsible for the hat trade's loss, and for a new flippant attitude to an old bogey.

In the serve-yourself Supermarket the ghosts of the old-time trading store were firmly laid. Here was no exchange of gin for palm kernels, nor accent on tinned sardines and bully beef, kerosene and weevily flour. The Supermarket offered a wide variety of high-quality cosmopolitan groceries, and its business was animated by the magical commercial wand of the customer's charge account. African boys in monogrammed overalls stacked the shelves. The trolleys rolled along. The adding

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machines at the exits, under the big Credit signs, ticked up the totals which the clerks wrote out in duplicate in the customer's 'book'. But first they inquired, 'Credit number?' and scanned a mimeographed page. This listed those black-sheep 'numbers' whose credit had been stopped. Only by this moment of hesitancy was it hinted that the shop was not after all a fairy godmother with a limitless cornucopia who smilingly handed over the goods without thought of money in exchange. Otherwise the illusion, fostered by the easy signing of 'books', persisted. At the end of each month it caused many Lagos husbands to wish their jobs were in farthest bushlands, far from Supermarkets, Cold Stores, dress departments and the many tempting counters where a cash-poor, 'book'-rich white wife might linger.

The shop's general façade confirmed the city's keen interest in the newest goods from Western production lines. Piccans, whose confectionery was once a simple stick of sugar cane, bought choc-ices whose frozen sweetness was no greater novelty to them than the deep-freeze bin which held it. Lagos matrons quizzed the cocktail dresses displayed on the chic dark-complexioned dummies, and bought deep-toned cosmetics in which one enterprising British firm of beauty products specialized. Lagos 'youngmen' (a term expressive of the junior African male's modernity and élan) frequented the photographic supplies counters; photography in West Africa is one of the most popular masculine hobbies, and snapshots further continue the general theme of prestige-via-gadgetry. Like its competitors the shop was, in fact, a powerful educator in sophistication, first interesting the novice in small novelties — tooth-brushes, baby foods, detergents and birthday cards — and eventually selling him an electric percolator or a pop-up toaster or even a hundred-guinea hire-purchase refrigerator.

Such a pioneering shop and its fortunate clientele must take risks. It was not uncommon for the serenity of a Department to be reft from time to time by the kind of palaver-revealing splash and ripple of excitement that we witnessed one morning. One moment everything in the hardware department was quietly



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correct and restrained; the next, a substantial white housewife was sprinting past us flushed with anger and shouting, 'Little devil! I saw him with his hand in my bag! Stop him! THIEF!' In the far distance near the stairway there was slight flurry, as of a disappearing shirt tail. There had been scarcely any other movement except of a few shoppers who had, by accident or design, effectively blocked the pursuer's path. The Europeans near us looked jarred and embarrassed, chiefly, we thought, because their countrywoman had so loudly and wrathfully made her feelings public. The African clerks leaned on their counters and smiled faintly at each other as if the culprit and his huntress were no more than quaintly humorous details in the morning's work.

The thief, we gathered, got away. When, a little later that morning, I found that my own change purse had gone, I went to the girl clerk who represented a curiously bare Lost Property Section. As a matter of form I asked, 'Do you think someone might hand in my purse?'

Though very young, the girl regarded me with the kind of tolerant adult smile one might give to a dense child. Then kindly she said, 'Maybe.' But we both knew that her comment, too, was only a matter of form.

Because of the simmering heat and the tradition which holds that white people in the tropics should not carry large parcels, the shoppers gave a good deal of random employment to the street boys whose main body the commissionaires so energetically kept at bay. For a coin they would serve as porters, carrying on their heads cases of beer, bulging shopping bags and heavy boxes which to them must have represented more money than they had ever seen. Although as a crew they looked like ragamuffins, most were obviously eager to make their reputations as steady workers.

The thin bright-faced boy who regularly appeared at our elbow at the shop entrance was known to us as 'Joey'; he was deaf and dumb. We first noticed him in the thick of a kerbside scuffle with one of his companions. Shirtless and pirouetting with rage, he was making noises like those of an exasperated

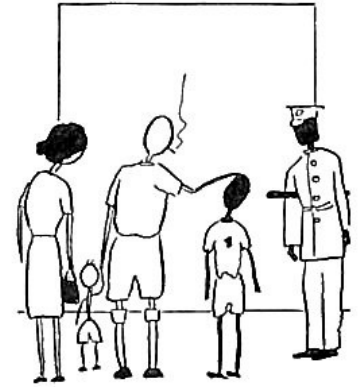
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turkey, and landing his blows with a strategy and ferocity that made us stand and stare. Later, impressed by his look of intelligence and touched by his eager manner, we employed him as our regular parcel-carrier.

We did not know in what quarter of Lagos Joey lived; his family background was unguessable, his age anything from twelve to fifteen. He always wore the same patched shirt and shorts, and a triple bracelet of plaited string — an amulet, we imagined — on one bony wrist. Joey made no bid for pity and we thought he did not consider himself in any way pitiable. His eyes were bright and quick-glancing and their communications were often as clear as words. His hands made easy, self-assured movements of inquiry or explanation, and he seemed to possess an unfailing extra sense which told him what we wanted him to do.

Often we forgot that Joey, shadowing us through the store, could neither hear nor speak; only rarely did he draw our attention to some oversight by uttering a small croak of warning or remonstrance. When Bill and I had errands in separate departments, he contrived a well-organized dual portorage and, if we lost track of each other, could straightway round us up. Sometimes I wondered what his thoughts were as we moved past the bright counters at which he gazed without apparent longing or, in fact, any visible emotion. Now and then his thin-faced seriousness was lit by an inner twinkling, as if within the shell of his silent world he contemplated much that was fanciful or absurd. He slipped through the mutely mouthing crowds as if they or he had no substance and, in the few months that we knew him, he kept all of his young mystery intact.

We gave him two new shirts and a pair of shorts, but were not surprised a week later to see him in his old clothes again. We had half expected that he or his family would sell these



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perquisites, or that his elders would ban them as unsuitable to the waif look which probably attracted other shoppers besides ourselves. Bill inquired about the garments by raising his eyebrows and touching the boy's ragged sleeve. Joey replied with a quick look of apology, a shrug, a spreading of hands and a wry confidential smile which said, 'They've gone. That's how life is. I'm used to it.'

Then one day at the shop we could not find him. We asked a commissionaire who, still keeping a stern eye on the usual gaggle of boys around the doorways, said, 'Oh, that one, yes, they have taken him away.'

'Who has?' we persisted, with a vision of Joey as a mongrel pup borne off in a meshed van. Dismayed, we knew that Joey's freedom must have been his only personal possession.

'The Welfare took him,' said the doorkeeper, 'he will be better with the Welfare.'

We drove away trying to imagine exactly what had happened. Although pricked with doubt, we hoped that Joey would be happy with 'the Welfare' and that no one for whatever good or just reason would fetter his Ariel spirit. Bill spoke for us both as we traversed the town and looked out at the head-bobbing vistas of Lagos's teeming humankind, 'I wonder how many others are there like him.'

Although it was possible sometimes for us to complete our shopping rapidly and with success, there were other days when our way was slowed and our tempers were tested by the reiteration of those three simple words which so often frustrate shoppers in West Africa: 'It is finished.'

At a stationery counter laden with cross-index cards, rubber stamps and beautiful desk equipment we might ask for blotting paper, or at a haberdashery glinting with ornate buttons and boxes of sequins and rainbow embroidery skeins, for a reel of white cotton, or in a chemist's shop pyramided with *recherché* unguents and potions, for a tube of toothpaste. And a clerk, blandly pointing to the empty shelf-space where the goods had been, would say, 'It is finished.'

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'When will you get some more?' we would ask.

'I cannot tell. It is finished.'

Often, on notably hot days, the reiteration of negation had power to convince us that our expedition was incurably beset by bad Juju; we lost momentum and were absorbed into the heavy, do-nothing mood of the fatalistic shop assistants. But sometimes we were stirred to almost fanatical determination, and would drive here and there in search of some small foolish article which, reason told us, could not really have disappeared (like musk or the Dodo) from the entire face of Lagos.

'It's psychologically destructive,' I told Bill, as vainly I sought a typewriter ribbon from three successive shops which should have stocked them. 'You feel that the thing really is finished now and for always. No one ever says where or whether I shall ever find a typewriter ribbon ... or cares. And somehow you get the impression that it's a freakish sort of article for anyone to want when there are so many other things to buy.'

'You have to keep calm,' Bill said, and I could tell from the slight lift of Driver's cap, which, being overlarge, tended to shift with his facial expression, that Driver was smiling to himself. Driver did not know Bill as a calm man.

'At this place,' I said, 'I'll get one.'

We stopped in front of an expanse of recently fitted plate glass behind which stood an array of office furnishings, gleaming comptometers, chromium-legged desks and chairs in the newest shapes, filing cabinets and, behind them, mysterious many-keyed robots which suggested enormous payrolls and inhuman accuracies.

I went inside to ask for any kind of ribbon for a portable typewriter. A European girl, dressed like a perfect secretary and with the same cool poise, rose from her seat behind a pin-neat desk, said 'Yes, of course,' and called across a distance of marbled flooring to an African clerk who also said, 'Yes, of course.'

He went into another room from which voices were eventually heard discussing typewriter ribbons. He returned then and spoke to the secretary who said to me, 'How many?' 'Well,

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two,' I told her, repressing the impulse to order a gross. She relayed the information to the clerk who went away and came back with the two small round boxes. Then he presented a sheaf of papers between which the secretary-salesgirl inserted four carbon sheets.

'I'll pay cash,' I volunteered, thinking this might be some ultra-complicated form of bill. 'We always do this,' she said, so I signed the quintuplet papers and offered a pound note.

'Change,' she said, gazing appealingly around the shop at all the lifeless machinery, then examining her desk drawer and handbag without results. 'John, have you any change?' The clerk felt in his pockets, went out into the other room again, conferred there and came back. 'Sorry, we have none.'

'Well, pop out and get some, please,' she told him, and he did, returning at length triumphant.

I went back to the car and surprised Bill and Driver by speaking the verse lines that had persisted in my head all morning:

The King asked
The Queen, and
The Queen asked
The Dairymaid:
"Could we have some butter for
The Royal slice of bread?"
The Queen asked
The Dairymaid;
The Dairymaid
Said "Certainly" —¹

all the unlikely way to the happy ending. And so we continued home, thankful because we had proved that in Lagos, after all, typewriter ribbons were not finished.

¹ 'The King's Breakfast' from *When We Were Very Young* by A. A. Milne: with acknowledgments to the author's executors and to Messrs Methuen & Co., Ltd.



Night Scene

4

By day our street, like all the other streets which honeycombed the suburb, lay under the eye of the sun, and every part of it was observable. Upper balconies overlooked the domestic routines and gossipings of the roadway. Wide-open windows stared across to other windows; the rows of roofs were as one under the flat hot sky. Bleached and devitalized by harsh sunlight, the street had neither individuality nor subtlety. Lacking the charm of shade and soft fluctuations of light, it was unprivate territory, anyone's thoroughfare.

But with nightfall the district changed its nature and came differently alive. Like a theatre stage magicked from plain noontime utility to nocturnal fantasy, it gained mystery and importance, part real, part artificial. The roadway's few lamps made shimmering pools of occasional brightness which attracted groupings of after-dark strollers, moth-like in their loose, wide-sleeved recreation-time robes. Much of the thoroughfare was obscured by the warm, transfiguring darkness, while the humbler houses glimmered and the larger façades became luminous with veranda lamps and active with evening preparations.

During the sunny hours the two houses facing us appeared deserted. Early each morning we saw the male occupants — a sleek brotherhood of dapper young men and their elders, as plump and prosperous-looking as Caliphs — drive away to

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Lagos in their burnished, high-powered cars. The women appeared more rarely. We glimpsed them only as anonymous flitting figures, full-skirted, high-heeled, soignée and ripely brunette, who drove away at intervals and returned to vanish indoors. Sometimes we did not see them — not so much as a flicker of garment or flash of smile — for days on end; the houses swallowed them up.

During most of the daytime hours the verandas of these houses were peopled only by their houseboys who sat at ease, stripped to the waist, reading newspapers or napping in sprawled abandon. The plaster balustrades made wide lazy perches for others who stopped for a chat, or merely to sit slack-limbed, with dangling legs, in a kind of communal trance. But with the onset of the brief violent sunset the loiterers disappeared. Porch lights were flicked on and formal tables set out to make the scene Arabic, intimate and expectant. Meanwhile the men, home again from their commercial town dealings, continued, across the luxuriant garden strip which connected the two establishments, a quick-fire commentary, staccato with the hearty sallies, hailings and laughter which amiably publicized their bathing and dressing. Afterwards they gathered in veranda groups to play cards, while the houseboys, transformed by night and their masters' presence into stiff-backed, brass-buttoned automata, moved about in silent attendance.

As if by some freak-chemistry of darkness, the acoustics of the street always seemed to sharpen after sundown; then the smallest distant sounds — bleat of car horns or backyard-tethered goats, whirring of cookhouse egg-whisks or clink of pantry trays — became audible, even intrusive. From our front door we could hear the ritual faint slap-slap of the cards, and the deep murmur of foreign talk across the way. The women did not sit outdoors with the men. Their withdrawn condition made them appear to us as enigmatic and unknowable as if they wore yashmaks and lived behind gilt lattices. And although our dwellings were so close to each other, neither we nor the card players ever ventured any exchange of casual evening

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greeting. Africa's enormous distances are not always measurable in the ordinary way. The space between our house and those opposite was infinitely more than the width of a roadway. It stretched, we sometimes thought, all the way from London to Damascus.

But all of us came under the same general spell of evening. We felt more at home in our house then, better orientated and able to enjoy the spectacle, on clear nights, of the crowding coruscation of stars which held our eyes whenever we glanced upward. And always we marvelled at their bold tropical extravagance which made the night above the suburban rooftops so rich and strange. On such nights we remembered the older Africa that lay far beyond the city's confines: of warm, cricket-chirping bush distances that throbbed with drums, and of the labyrinthine forests which sheltered their enormous secrecies of tenacious life and casual death. Under that sable and *diamanté* sky old Africa continued its swift ruthless cycle, now stained and odoriferous with exhaustion and decay, now cleansed and made innocent with fresh unblemished life ... and always changing.

At night our jungle vine looked glossier, more formidable; and the white blossoms which wreathed the front pillars of the house gave out a bitter-sweet fragrance. The earth, even the hard-used earth of suburbia, exhaled, as did the coarse patches of stunted grass, a slight damp freshness, as if with respite from the sun every growing thing gained zest and lived more strongly. In the same way people's looks and voices were strengthened. Steward and Smallboy, rustling with their uniforms' starch, served dinner with greater care than they had given the dog-hour mid-day meal. Our drawing-room, mellowed by the gentle oases of reading lamps, suggested a greater peace than ever it knew in the day hours; the ceiling fan revolved rhythmically in upper dimness. Because so much of our evening contentment depended on illusion, we did not seek to fathom the darkness outside, nor ask what kind of life went on in the islands of window-wide interior brightness which spaced the darkness around us.

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But there were some nights when no illusion of ours was proof against the neighbourhood's fervid outpouring of mechanical sounds. Our own radio, for reasons of age, tropic damp or BBC gentlemanliness, would no more than murmur its home programme. On noisy evenings we had no need to adjust it to any other, for the street was already broadcasting, with full voice, the remaining selection. We agreed that Hell must surely be furnished with megaphone-type gramophones, a dozen unbreakable records, and a variety of radios tuned to conflicting wavelengths; no imaginative Devil could overlook such a form of torture-by-excess. Appropriately our Sunday evening repertoire was more Christian by virtue of the local Mission's joyful amplifications of its community singing sessions. On such nights 'Sound the loud timbrels o'er Egypt's dark sea' came to us with exaggerated significance.

Often we were astonished by our district's aural endurance, and the single-minded capacity of each radio-listener or gramophone-winder to concentrate on his own choice without admitting the rest. When Abdul's parents next door turned on the dinner-time Arabic programme our spirits sank; helpless over soup and fish we tried first to ignore the sinuous, sinewy music which suggested, to our ineducable Western ears, an endless muezzin call; a plaintive voice crying in a wilderness of mosques and minarets and rising, by unbearably slow degrees, to a pitch of purest, most foreign melancholy. But occasionally we detected, among the circuitous ancient lamentations, a hint of something surprisingly new-world and carefree, and this echo of Tin Pan Alley's spirit and tempo perplexed us all the more, for as soon as we began to follow what we knew among what we could not understand, we became more lost than ever.

After a succession of Arabic evening programmes we became acutely and defensively sound-conscious. We wondered, reversing the situation, whether Mozart or Schubert had similar power to disturb Syrian ears; we failed to see why the standard human auditory apparatus should function, among the races, with such differences of taste and tolerance. We reflected, too, on the power of brass-lunged gramophones to enchant some

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ears and appal others. The repertoire of our local machines included recordings of West African bands, whose exuberant voices and instruments combined to tear serenity into jagged fragments, and to destroy silence utterly. Fortissimo, with no holds barred, they presented a pulsing jazz as something that, even from a considerable distance, could fill a room, or, by relentless repetition, stun the senses. Eventually we knew all the hardworked local discs by heart, from their first presaging wheeze and click to the last drawn-out sigh and whirr; we anticipated every too-familiar inflection of popular blues or ballad, every minute idiosyncrasy of vowel and consonant, while in the pregnant intervals between ends and beginnings, we craved the respite which in mid-evening was generally denied.

Our nearest gramophone, which belonged to the cook employed by Fatima's house, so aggressively invaded our dinner hour one night that we could scarcely hear the Arabic programme. Our sensation was that of being taken by the scruffs of our necks and drowned in noise. Bill, recovering first, sent Steward to investigate. He, with Smallboy, had, on seeing our dismay, made fastidious grimaces of sympathy and disapproval; now he hastened away with the message, tut-tutting indignantly to himself. The music accordingly moderated, but an hour or so later became gradually louder and more insistent, as if the gramophone caged a raging spirit and a throbbing lust for life beyond anyone's control. Soon its din surrounded us, as trauma-inducing as before. Bill rang the drawing-room bell. We were not surprised when no one came. He looked out from the back veranda on the deserted yard. Then he went to the next-door boys' quarters where, in the absence of his employer, the cook was conducting his musical evening. Stripped to a loincloth he was rapt in dancing, long-heeled bare feet stamping the unyielding earth, muscles rippling in the harsh electric light, eyes blank and blind with concentration. Young Simon, our Smallboy, with face shining, was clapping the rhythm from a soap-box perch; others eagerly circled the music box and the whirling soloist. Our Tom Cook and Steward sat

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in deck-chairs, places of honour close by the shouting gramophone; they leaned back with closed eyes, apparently lapped in contentment. No one saw Bill's arrival or heard his first attempts to penetrate the spell. Only when he shouted at point-



blank range, 'Turn it off!' did the group freeze into a tableau of astonishment. A hand lifted the machine's claw and there was a sudden violent silence; everyone looked dazed.

'Too loud,' Bill remonstrated, 'no one can rest.' Tom Cook, veteran peacemaker and upholder of the law, rose and said dutifully to his cook-host, 'The Massa is right. It must play more softly.' The group grinned and murmured explanations. Sulkily throttled to half-voice, the machine resumed its entertainment. Steward uncrossed his white-uniformed legs, stirred from slumber and yawned in his deck-chair.

Said Bill, killjoy in a necessary cause, returning incredulous to the house, 'He was sound asleep. He was actually *sleeping* like a baby!' Later, when with the dimming of house lights the gramophones had ceased their competition, we sought our own sleep. But it seemed that almost on the instant of oblivion the exquisite quiet was annihilated again by a booming intrusion of curiously familiar conversation. We sat up alarmed, groping for common sense. 'Lord!' said Bill, stung to furious wakefulness, 'it's the *Archers*....' Enormously rustic, prodigiously cosy, swollen by the volume knob into giant Archers with abnormal dilem-

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mas, they dominated the houses with a gusting family dialogue. But their time was brief. Abruptly, as if by an impatient hand, they were snuffed out. Then at last we contemplated the gift of silence as something the more positive and precious for having so long been withheld.

In darkness Lagos's thieves prospered; their reputation for cunning agility and swiftness tautened the nerves of the nighttime city. Against their wiles and depredations the entrances and windows of closed shops were wooden-shuttered and heavily fortified with criss-crossed steel. The lights over doorways burned until dawn, and watchnights in their scores stood vigil. In our street all the ground-floor windows were barred or metal-meshed, and even the local one-storey Mission, pillar of hope and faith in mankind, had veiled its every aperture with steel. Bristling defences of broken glass topped the highest concrete walls. Yet the burglaries continued, and the house opposite us had, we heard, been robbed five times within as many months, despite its night-long outdoor lights, its trio of dogs, and two watchnights.

Our household's night vigilante, Ayo, a small muscular man with a fierce shock of kinky hair, assured us, however, that no robber could ever disturb us while he, Ayo, was on guard, for (he told us) he 'watched with all his eyes'. When asked what he would do if faced with a desperado, he replied, without hesitation, 'Killum ... *so!*' making his face a mask of fury and lunging dangerously forward with the well-honed machete he carried as part of his equipment. We realized after a time that Ayo awake might well be formidable. He was naturally quarrelsome and could be heard loudly arguing with the house-boys, who often joined their comrades from Fatima's house to gossip or play the intricate African game of draughts in the narrow area between our two premises. But in the dull hours after midnight, Ayo, exhausted perhaps by his earlier belligerent posturings, tended to doze on the back step, or even to sleep so deeply that no one could wake him, not even Bill returning home late.

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When for the third time he found Ayo gently snoring on the stairs, Bill wrote out and pinned to his shirt-front a sign which said, 'I am asleep and I am sacked.' Then, still making no effort to be silent, Bill locked Ayo's bicycle inside the house and came to bed, stepping over the supine body and pausing only on the top veranda to test Ayo's reflexes by pouring a cupful of water down on his insensible head. At this our stalwart merely stirred and murmured, 'Oh, Madam!' — he did not wake.

Next morning a flustered watchnight waited for Bill. 'What is this t'ing?' he indignantly demanded. 'In the night I sit watching, then Madam come and pour a bucket of water on me. Next a t'ief-man come. I fight him but he too strong and he take my bicycle ... I want to know what Massa go do!'

Bill wheeled the machine out from the house while Steward, pretending to lay the breakfast table, watched sardonically and Smallboy Simon, dusting the drawing-room, tried not to smirk. 'How so?' queried Ayo after a speechless moment.

Bill told him. The watchnight looked amazed. Then he struck his fists to his head and groaned, 'Ah-ah, the cigarette!'

'How so?' asked Bill, in turn.

'A friend,' declared Ayo, talking fast, 'give me a cigarette when he pass by this house near middle of night. But that friend was a bad man to do me harm. The cigarette he bad one, ah-ah! That black man want himself to be watchnight for Massa, so he do it, that is so sah. Ask Steward if that no be so.'

Steward, straight-faced and with an eye on Ayo's machete which leaned against the veranda wall by the kitchen door, said it could be so. Smallboy Simon stared solemnly. Tom Cook, well within earshot, broke eggs carefully into a pan and did not look up. Ayo lost his job, not then but later when the watchnight from the house opposite was dismissed. It appeared, from the distressing evidence, that the two men had dispatched and nocturnally feasted on one of the Syrian house-dogs in their

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master's absence from home. So Ayo left us, not because he was an inefficient watchnight, but because we were too squeamish to retain his services. We could not countenance the presence of a self-confessed dog-eater on our doorstep.

We had good reason at this time to be sensitive about such matters. It was the habit of Abdul's father to bring home in his car, once or twice a week, a goat which was tethered bleating in the back yard, to await its certain fate. Only then were we grateful for the back veranda's screening vine which partially shut off the frantic late-day proceedings which Abdul and Fatima watched with such dancing primitive excitement, and from which William was protected by the most attention-distracting purdah-room games that I could devise. With the arrival of each goat — grotesquely resembling a plump flustered passenger in the back seat of the family car — and with the imminence of each slaughter, tension mounted, and while we waited we tried every gambit for diverting our minds from the afternoon's main theme. Since nothing availed, we began to drive out, anywhere, in order to be absent at the fatal hour, and more than once found ourself car-pent in pouring rain, cowardly fugitives from the scene of suburban sacrifice. On our return we would glance up to see a scarlet carcass hanging outside the next-door dining-room window, and Madam could be glimpsed, her plump fingers delicately arranging titbits on a dish for the evening meal.

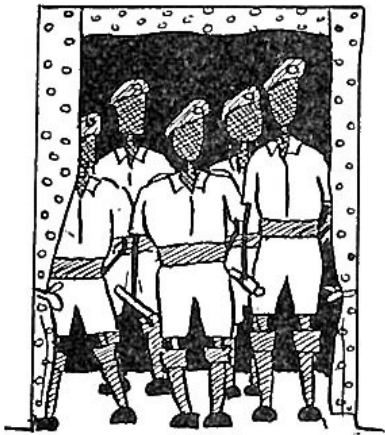
Although it was perhaps sentimental and unrealistic so to grieve for the little goats, it was impossible for us to change our natures, which were prone to be fretted, not so much by the fact of death in general, as by the crude manner and detail of so many little near-by deaths. On Saturdays we re-learned one of the oldest and most painful truths: that the heart is touched mainly by what the eye sees; imagination is a coward that deliberately dons blinkers so that the heart may be kept safely incommunicado.

Not only in this matter was it clear to us that our attitudes were not shared by the rest of the street. There was the night when we found ourselves alone in quite another kind of

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situation. It began when we heard a crescendo of human shrieks from the darkness obliquely across the roadway, a desperate noise of terror or hurt, something far beyond the plane of ordinary outcry. At once we looked out at the street, late, empty and dark except for the street lamps' insect-clouded aureoles. But no one emerged, startled, from any of the houses; no kindred inquiring face appeared at any window. The silence (for the gramophones had hushed) was eerie, and to our minds the darkness had become a sinister cloak for some tearful distress. The cries began again, high-pitched and frantic, soaring higher into frenzy or dementia. Bill said, 'Police,' and seized the telephone, while the night voice rose again, harshly fell, and did not stop.

During what seemed an endless interval we waited for the police to come. On a choking note the voice hushed, and we



stood shaken and still, apprehensively listening. At last to our great relief, our front veranda became suddenly populated with strapping policemen, to whose spokesman Bill rapidly confided the facts and pointed out the patch of night, now silent, from which the cries had risen.

The policeman listened and cocked us a glance of polite but obvious disbelief. 'There is no noise now.'

'But there was,' we declared. 'Ask anyone down the street. Go and look. Something was going on across there.'

Someone was — probably still is — in great trouble.'

'We will inquire,' the policeman said, smartly saluting and shepherding his athletic team back into the night. Later we heard their voices as they stood discussing with householders in doorways. Soon they returned, courteously virtuous and pacifying. 'We have looked but there is nothing.'

'But,' we lamely insisted, 'there was something about half an hour ago, and it went on for at least ten minutes.'

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The policeman did not precisely shrug, but the effect was the same. Nor did he tell us that we had either dreamed the episode or fancifully magnified it, but that was our impression. Apparently no one else in the neighbourhood had heard any disturbance whatever. 'Nothing is wrong, so you need not worry,' the policeman kindly told us on parting, and he saluted even more energetically than before.

We worried all the same, but that did not solve the mystery. There are screams and screams; those we heard that night had proclaimed crisis *in extremis*. But of what nature, or why, or with what consequence we never learned. Nor, we imagined, had our policemen, whose attitude to screams in the night was, we thought, oddly matter-of-fact. After all, we told ourselves as we tried to put together the shreds of the evening, people do not scream without reason. For that matter, whole houses full of people are not, without reason, afflicted by temporary deafness. Finally, one does not telephone to the police without reason, especially in Lagos. But that was as far as we could go with reason. Beyond lay mystery and bafflement as deep as the darkness beyond the houses.

After such an evening we welcomed the brash brightness of morning. Daytime then appeared safe and free of such secrets and fears as spawn nocturnally. But even when the sun was well up, the night's events could sometimes intrude into the house. It was so one breakfast-time when we saw that Steward Robert's expression reflected a look of gloom and suppressed emotion. Recognizing the palaver signals and knowing that the atmosphere would deteriorate until we made suitable inquiries, we asked with foreboding, 'Why have you so long a face?'

Robert told us in a rush of words. Last evening late, he said, he had been returning home on his bicycle from a function. (Robert's social life was rich in functions which we imagined as more gay and elaborate than any of our evening pleasures.) Of a sudden, while peacefully cruising along a deserted street, he had been hailed by a policeman. He had dismounted promptly, he said, and waited like a respectable citizen, conscience-free

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and obedient to the law's demands. And then came the law's accusation: that Robert had stolen the bicycle. At this point the story became almost incoherent. It seemed that Steward always kept the bicycle 'paper' in his room, so he asked the constable to accompany him home in order to see the receipt which was proof of ownership. Said Robert, 'That man say, no, no, come with me now to the Station. I say, only *asking*, please let us fetch paper first. He say DO NOT ARGUE, COME! And he strike me.'



Steward pulled off his tunic to show us a swollen upper arm; he winced when Bill touched it. 'It pain me too much, maybe broken. That police be a fool. We go to Station, then come back here to get paper, and when morning time come he say all-right you can go free.'

We looked at Steward's impeccable bicycle 'paper'. He replaced it in his breast pocket and carefully buttoned the flap. 'That man do me harm,' he continued, 'I go today to start a court case against him if Madam will give me time off.'

Immediately after breakfast Robert, law-abiding citizen with rights, went to register his protest, and returned several hours later, satisfied with his new role of litigant. Smallboy Simon, who had added his senior's morning tasks to his own, was less content, and did not join the back compound's circle of admiring listeners to Steward's increasingly embellished tale. Aware of a second atmospheric pressure, I asked Smallboy privately, 'Why have you so long a face?' Simon replied, glumly prophetic, 'If Robert make palaver with policeman, that Court case can take plenty mornings.'

He was right. During the following eight months Steward continued zealously in his cause, a regular witness (as his mounting Court 'papers' proved) in the protracted case which was adjourned so often and for so many reasons that we wondered if the trial was simply to prove which man, plaintiff or accused, could endure the longest. Added to Steward's Court

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Palaver, and heavily reinforcing it, were his out-patient visits to hospital for what Steward mystifyingly referred to as Fire Treatment for his injured arm. During this period he developed an alarming but entirely irrelevant toothache which swelled his face to lugubrious proportions. We knew this had nothing to do with the main court-hospital theme, but somehow it was generally regarded as part of Steward's much-wronged state, a further Job-like misery that a hard-done-by citizen must bear. Robert went to the dentist but returned declaring that the wrong tooth had been extracted — more evidence that he was, all on account of his bicycle, being obscurely victimized.

Under these mounting afflictions, Steward's work, never highly efficient, became notably slipshod, but it did not seem fitting for us to deal the final blow by dismissing a man already so wronged and worried. In our own interests we thought it might be opportune to elevate Smallboy Simon to Head Steward and reduce Robert's official status accordingly, but when we came to it we saw that in so fixed a tradition of domestic hierarchy neither servant's position would be tenable. Eventually Simon, who did the greater part of the work, was given more wages, while Robert never once doubted his capacities as major-domo. Often this invidious situation produced such odd back-compound dilemmas, resentments and long faces that we wished, logically or not, that Robert had never owned a bicycle or stood by his rights. But we might have expected that something of this kind would happen, for we knew from former experience what sequences of freakish repercussion could be set off by the most ordinary 'palaver'.

By the way of a change from our daytime concerns we went sometimes to play after-dinner Tombola at a Club whose bar corner was remarkable for its nostalgic representation of an English pub façade complete with a rustic well, whose windlass worked, a curly inn sign, and other affectionately contrived effects of Tudor mullion and mellowness. The decorative make-believe had no seriousness and was in any case powerless against the evidence of climatic temperature, the members' tropic

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clothing and conversation, the waiters' dark complexions and the inescapable West African setting. But still, in the right frame of mind, with half-closed eyes and an effort of schizophrenic detachment, one could begin to imagine some faraway village snug, sturdy with oak and tradition, and its welcome to the wayfarer. Although this pretence was frail to the point of absurdity, we thought it a brave and cheerful effort to have introduced it, even as a reassuring idea. From the outside the Club was no more than a flimsy-looking wooden building whose windows gave on to the sultry darkness of a scrubland trilling with crickets, and a narrow roadway packed with the socially parked cars of British expatriates, Continentals and Syrians.

The Club's Tombola evenings were always well attended and spiced with the ephemeral thrills of affordable gambling. For many bachelors and young couples they were safety valves against boredom. The Club was somewhere to go after dinner, with the possibility of a win to cheer the pocket and pay for the drinks. As a routine entertainment, they punctuated the weeks and helped to give shape, as did the regular comings and goings of the mailboats, to a tour that was the more tolerable for a variety of undemanding dates and definitions. They served, as Club evenings do in all manner of outposts, as palliatives and tension-easers for people homesick, worried, gregarious, lonely, or simply at a loose end with nothing better to do.

So the chairs filled around the small alcohol-stained tables, high heels tapped the bare floorboards and the buzz of evening Club talk rose. Acquaintances hailed acquaintances with the extra harmless heartiness of such occasions; orders were given to African stewards threading their uniformed barefoot ways with trays of drinks from the bar behind the inn sign and the Tudor pastiche. Faces shone moistly pink with the heat of the enclosed place and the perfumed, tobacco-ey exhalations of the crowd. There was a look of the easy expectant gaiety which goes with bright new dresses, clean white shirts and club membership cards, or inspires children released from school who say, 'Now what shall we play?'

We played Tombola, queuing to buy the chequered cards

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and waiting with pencils poised for the caller's jargon to begin: 'Eyes-down-look-in! Sixty-six-clickety-click. Legs-eleven. Twenty-two-two-little-ducks. Number-seven-lucky-for-some. Twenty-one-key-of-the-door. Twenty-four-Rory-O'Moore. Seven-and-six-was-she-worth-it?' (Tireless male cries of 'Yes!' 'No!') 'Sweet-sixteen-and-never-been,' and so on until a voice broke the spell by shouting 'House!' Then the room sighed and everyone compared notes on all the near-misses, and ordered another round of drinks.

For two hours with only one impatient interval, the queer fascination of the numbers prevailed while the lone voice called and a miasma of cigarette smoke drifted up to the churning fans.

On Big Nights when the prize money might be as much as one hundred pounds for each 'house', and the Club was packed to capacity, people came early to be sure of a seat; latecomers had to make do with empty beer-crate perches. On Big Nights the crowd was more bright-eyed and highly strung. Visions of wallets full of windfall notes charmed the assembly, which was as attentive and hopeful as a classroom at examination time. Always when the caller cleared his throat there was the familiar anticipant rustle and quick hushing of chatter and laughter before the sonorous ritual send-off: 'Eyes-down-look-in.'

The gathering, although all-white, was mixed. It was substantially composed, as on our voyage out, of a different breed of Colonials from that which in pre-war years had frequented West Africa's Clubs and outpost verandas. Very few now wore the doubly protective evening dress which had once served as armour both against slackness (even in the most casual bush circumstances) and the fevered bite of the anopheles mosquito. Now those minority wearers of the one-time regulation mosquito boots were either once-bitten-twice-shy Coasters or unusually nervous novices. Most of the women



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guests, hatless in the noon sun, blithely short-skirted and bare-legged after dark, seemed as heedless as their predecessors had been regardful of the Coast's bad name.

By openly refusing to take the country's worst mischiefs seriously they seemed to have acquired an immunity from them. Their disregard for the tiny, terrible mosquito stamped the veterans' true cautionary tales as fussily old-fashioned ... until the mosquito bite and its consequences proved the veterans' wisdom. Their careless matter-of-factness was yet another new habit in West Africa.

And yet, as we looked around at the Clubroom's democratic middle-class throng we did not feel particularly inspired or exhilarated. Perversely, perhaps made captious by too much Tombola without profit, we partly regretted the Coast's new order. Everything and everyone appeared to be scaled down and levelled to a sameness. The giants were gone, and the diminished landscape lacked their strong stubborn individuality, incorrigible idiosyncrasy and unquenchable spirit. Their replacements were admirable enough, ambitious, hardworking, motivated by quicker rewards, bigger salaries, higher standards of living and larger pensions than home jobs allowed. To our eyes the loss was in scope and vision and variety, and in that peculiarly British compound of derring-do and authority that the world has at different times eulogized and condemned. Now it seemed to us that all the talk of imperialism and exploitation was as dated as the topee and the spine pad. A fresh subject — the character of the new-style British colonial worker — was to hand. So far this appeared to have excited no one's vehement opinions — except perhaps the Old Coasters'. Slowly over recent years those stock figures, the tropical Club Member and his wife, had changed their faces, voices and habits in conformity with the new look, voice and manner of West Africa. Now, with only a few exceptions, the present-day informal unremarkable expatriates were as accepted as if they had always been there.

With the world's better geographical education, its swifter pace and easier ways of travelling, and with the coming of a

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generation which has its own personal values and its own scientific curiosities and terrors, West Africa has lost its harsh, exciting exclusiveness. New controls over tropical disease, and the steady importations of domestic comforts, have made it for the ordinary white man an agreeable enough place for ordinary living. An unastonishing address today for increasing numbers of white family bread-winners, it is no longer the world's-end destination for those of a dying breed, the travellers who set out for another Africa, intent on old-fashioned power or self-sacrifice or the deepest kind of solitude.



After an evening of Big Night Tombola, such thoughts came easily. We left the Club feeling empty and a trifle edgy as if, though hungry, we had eaten a Benzedrine tablet instead of a meal. In our ears the caller's voice persisted; our eyes still saw the numbered cards. During the drive homeward we passed occasional buildings where drawn-up cars, plaint of saxophone, thump of drum, and doorways rimmed with fairy lights advertised the sophisticated revelry within. Many of these night places looked in sunlight so hollow, dusty and down-at-heel that it was hard to believe them capable of containing such substantial gaiety after dark. Again it was the close-drawn, velvet-textured tropical night that worked on them the same queer intimate magic that made our own dull daytime street nocturnally unrecognizable.

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We drove on through the lesser streets, dark except for the sentinel doorway lights and the starshine which glimmered down through time and space to touch Lagos's silent rooftops and empty roads, gardens, balconies, wharves and hovels with a night strangeness. Then we would have welcomed any kind of extraordinary diversion or manifestation that might out of its own nature accelerate our pulses or quicken our heartbeats. But during those homeward drives the city, withdrawn deeply into itself, gave us nothing; there never was so much as a leopard in our path. Perhaps we should have been glad to know that in a Lagos well furnished with night-clubs leopards were unknown, but we were not glad. After a Tombola Evening even one small African leopard would have been a tonic sight.



People and Logs

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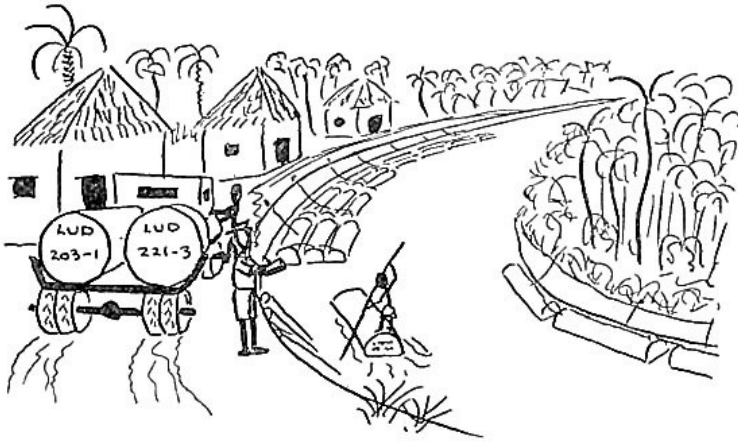
PART of Nigeria's wealth, present and future, is in her trees: the richly russet mahoganies, tough abura, and, most popular, the tractable white 'soft hardwood', obeche. With roots powerfully set in the Ondo forest floor two hundred road miles from Lagos, thousands of obeche in the enormous woodlands of southern Nigeria stand waiting for the men with saws and axes. Their branches lean across the blazing days and humid nights; they toss and shiver under the onrush of tornadoes and the shock of tropical rain as dense as whirling smoke. Throughout the long African years the trees have stood inviolate and unconsidered. Even now, so tranquil is their place in the primitive woods, one might think that nothing could touch or change them, not even the remarkable schemes of ordinary little men with extraordinary cheque books and ringside seats at the world's timber markets.

But the trees fall, already marked in someone's mind, or in the minds of many, as a commodity. They crash to earth in a commotion of boughs under patches of suddenly vacant sky, and the Africans who have cut them down stand back and wipe their faces. Then the big obeche are trimmed and cut into log-lengths of from twelve to twenty feet, weighing from one to eight tons apiece. The butts are inscribed with the 'producer's' identifying initials and numbers, and the logs begin their

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protracted, well-guarded journey from a forest clearing in Nigeria to the dockland of a far country.

The actual stages of the journey can be as complex and problem-fraught as the financial negotiations and documentation which punctuate the huge logs' progress. Initially a village chief or the African or European holder of a 'timber concession' has his own men fell the timber and cut crude lanes from the stumps through the virgin woods to the nearest main road. Along these rudimentary tracks the timber is hauled by tractors or makeshift old lorries ingeniously reinforced with cables and winches. At the main roadside the logs are collected by heavy-duty timber trucks which carry loads of up to ten tons either the whole distance to Lagos or, more often, to the nearest creek deep enough to float the logs. There, dumped into the water,



secured with native 'tie-tie' or wire ropes in rafts of up to one hundred pieces, the logs are drifted with the seaward current to a point navigable by the tugboat that will tow them the rest of the way down the twisting narrow creeks to the harbour. Sometimes the initial shallow-water 'drift' takes a fortnight or more, during which time the raft's attendant water-boys cook and sleep in crude huts built on the floating timbers. Their attitude to the log trade is simple. The lithe footsure boys are not concerned with any of its later involvements. For them the

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practice of an ancient watercraft and the making of a humble livelihood are sufficient, and the 'parcel' of timber for which the buyer will pay hundreds of pounds is merely one more buoyant, slippery platform riding the sluggish, familiar waters during a long sameness of days and nights.

But for others who are devoted to the larger possibilities and mathematics of timber, the logs have a different importance. The goods may first be sold where they lie in the forest, or at the initial roadside. Often the owner of the logs requires advance payments to cover the cost of labour, tools, extraction vehicles and petrol. Such cash stimulation usually comes from the local buyers, who are in turn under contract with, or financially supported by, timber firms and brokers in the United Kingdom or the Continent, who depend on them for steady supplies.

The original owner aims at a good profit above the cost involved in converting a growing tree into logs of exportable quality. The buyers hope for good profits above the cost of financing the owner, covering transport fees to the nearest harbour and paying for the loading of logs on board ship, labourers' wages, export duties, harbour dues and every other expense that has to do with the business of dispatching the logs. And all along the rest of the way to the eventual distant wharf, and through the hands of brokers, sawmillers, wholesalers, small timber merchants, furniture makers and retailers of finished wooden articles, the logs swiftly and steadily gain value and make, in the right economic circumstances, a chain of profits which can cheer a long line of waiting purses. That is why in England a plank cut from tropical timber can cost as much as a whole log in the African bush, and why the price tag on a small piece of household furniture may equal the sum originally paid for the entire tree.

Bill's concern was to buy logs from local sellers and see to their progress down the convoluted ways from bush to Lagos log-beach, or depot, where they were de-barked, trimmed and otherwise groomed in preparation for loading on cargo vessels. From time to time it was necessary for him to travel up-country by car through the Ondo forests, and on occasion to make the

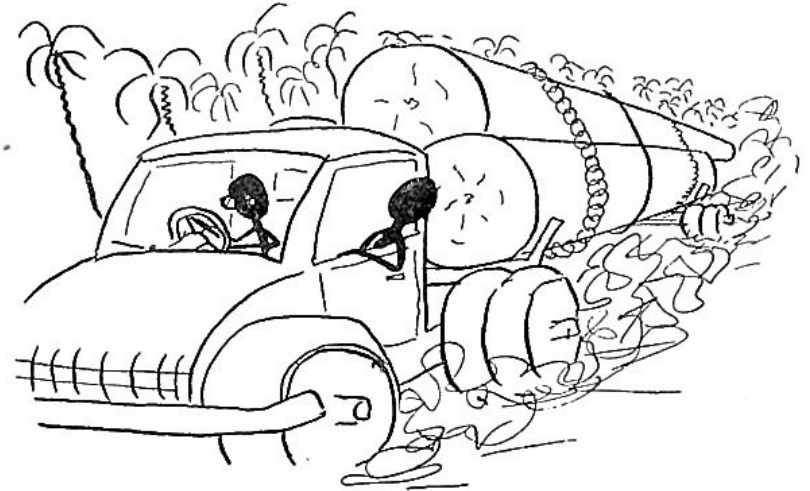
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eight-hour journey as far as Sapele, another log-loading port. Usually, to save time and avoid the day's heat, he set off at about ten o'clock in the evening with Driver, Smallboy, a midnight lunch basket and a sufficiency of sleep-inhibiting kola nuts. His system was simple. The trip was made in four stages. During the first two hours Bill would sleep in the back seat while Driver, with Smallboy alongside, drove. At the end of this first lap the meal was eaten and Bill took the wheel while Driver and Smallboy slept in the rear. During the third stage, Driver's inclination to doze was thwarted by his chewing kola nuts and by Smallboy's dutiful marathon conversation and singing. Smallboy Simon was tone-deaf, his singing a doubtful accomplishment. However, his quavering efforts helped Driver to concentrate, and Bill had learned to sleep even during Simon's most painfully off-key renderings of his favourite piece, 'Beautiful, Beautiful Brown Eyes'. When the driver-passenger positions were again reversed and dawn approached, it was Bill's turn to chew the stimulating kola nuts and sing to himself while the others slumbered. So the 360-mile trip via Ibadan, Akure and Benin was concluded and the jetty reached in time to catch the day's first ferry across the river to Sapele on the opposite bank. And by this time the travellers had enjoyed all the sleep they would get, and so made ready for the day's work.

In times long past such a journey would have required many days and been fraught with many natural dangers. Bill's overnight trip was relatively swift and would have been easy had it not been for the entirely modern hazards of a night-happy traffic loud and dangerous with hurtling mammy-lorries, wooden-sided, strongly klaxoned and crammed with Lagos-bound produce and passengers. These lorries rarely paused in what appeared to be a headlong flight from east to west, and it was a wise driver who slowed down or stopped on the road verge until they had passed. During the second half of the journey the road was shared with heavy-laden timber lorries en route with logs for Sapele. These vehicles could block the road ahead of an ordinary car for miles, unmoved by the most desperate signals of horn and headlamps. As a rule, when at

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last the lorry drivers signalled an invitation to pass, they yielded so little of the narrow road that the manoeuvre of passing became a test of nerves and calculation. Added to these substantial traffic menaces was yet another — of timber lorries returning triumphantly empty and at a rocking speed from Sapele. It followed that the accident rate was as high as the lives of the vehicles were short.

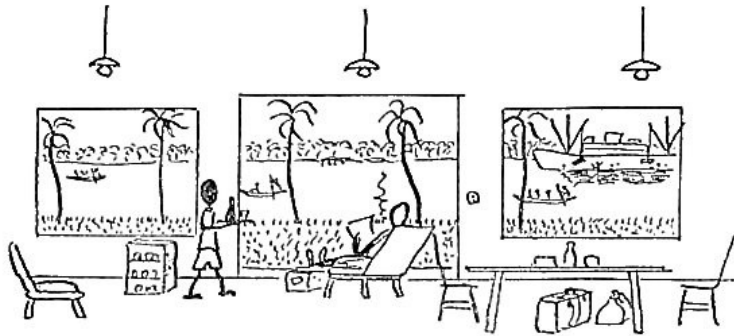


In these big careening timber trucks we saw how the internal combustion engine has galvanized West Africa's notions of mechanical pace and individual pride. A seat at the controls of so large and powerful a transport seemed to engender in the driver a state of flaunting hyper-ego, and a supreme confidence in his tyres and engine, no matter how ominously the latter boiled, clattered or smoked, or how often it furiously and theatrically died. But if this blind faith in tyres and engines occasioned periodic dilemmas and palavers for the drivers, delays for the log-shippers and heavy bills for the truck owners, it enabled a great many garages and repair shops in Nigeria to prosper, and numbers of eager 'prentice mechanics to learn a trade with a lively future. The psychological and financial gains of such rapid progress, despite the material losses from constant

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heavy wear and tear, were helpful to the country's general profit and well-being. Even so, as Americans say of tense and crowded situations, 'something's got to give'. On the road to Sapele that 'something' could be anything from an ill-used brake-lining to a hard-pressed temper.

At Sapele Bill occasionally stayed at a resthouse, a bungalow of simple traditional type, cement-floored with two large rooms, a bathroom *sans* plumbing, a broad veranda and a view of



scrub lawn extending to the river. The cookhouse and boys' quarters were, as usual, offstage at the rear. A pump supplied water, and after-dark lighting was by naked light bulbs. In comparison with Lagos's cityfied arrangements, those in the resthouse lacked sophistication. The furnishings were the austere property of the Public Works Department, to our minds a Calvinistic body, which in all its branches abjured frivolity. In our experience of resthouses furnished by the P.W.D., the solid, stiff-backed chairs seemed designed to prevent lolling or lounging; the paintwork was grey, frowning brown or bottle-green, and the iron-framed bedsteads (proof against white ants, wood-borers and other blighting influences) were equipped with mattresses stuffed with a hard durable substance which nowhere yielded an inch to the weary traveller's contour. The grey-enamelled water-filter, enshrined in a conspicuous corner of the living-room, was a stark reminder of the old-style wayfarer's need for unremitting caution. Such a resthouse

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summed up at first glance the Coaster's plain domestic habit on trek. It had a Spartan bachelor air but it lived up to its name; by its very austerity it was restful in fundamental ways that owed nothing to the kind of ease achieved by soft carpetings or cushionings. Since the rooms held nothing extraneous, their tenant was freed of all the tiny demands on eye and mind which are usual in a house replete with objects and aspects of personality. In such neutral stopping places as this, Africa is likely to come closer to the expatriate than is ever possible in his own tropical citadel. The Coaster who sits alone in the cricket-trilling evening on the veranda of a remote resthouse has better opportunity to come to terms with himself and the Africans in his daily orbit. He has time to think, as the townsman sometimes has not, and to realize that the old Africa still persists strongly.

During such excursions Bill enjoyed respite from the city; he found it stimulating to be for a time out of touch with the amenities, to lunch on a handful of bananas and a pineapple bought at the roadside, and to stand in forests where men's voices still make an alien sound. Simon and Driver loyally humoured him but were not themselves enthusiasts. Although Driver had lived in Lagos for only three years, and Smallboy less than two ('It is 597 days exactly', he had told us earlier) their tastes and attitudes were urban. They viewed life in the mud-and-thatch villages with the eyes of superior people entitled to smile at the conservative habits and modest ambitions of Nigerians less cultivated and travelled than themselves. Driver made this particularly clear one day at Sapele. A small crowd had gathered on the river bank, watching two women canoers. They looked and sounded terrified, flailing their paddles and crying out shrilly in their haste to reach the shore. While pulling up their canoe they continued their high-pitched chattering. They pointed strong arms out to the water and noisily complained to the onlookers. Bill asked Driver what was amiss.

Driver replied, widely smiling, 'They say big snake follow their canoe long time. They fear it too much.'

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Said Bill, 'Because it was a bad snake and could harm them?'

Driver looked wise and scornful. 'Not so. They say it be Juju. They get no sense so to shout. Everybody laugh at them.'

'The women don't think it's funny,' Bill demurred.

'Ah!' declared Driver, 'they get no savvy at-all! People must laugh to see them hurry-hurry and talk so foolish only for a water snake.' He added importantly, 'At Mission School I learned not to fear such nonsense.'

'Yet,' Bill reminded him, 'when you had that boil on your leg you put a charm on it for a cure. Wasn't that Juju?'

Driver cheerfully disagreed. 'It was good medicine, better than hospital. It was not like thinking water snake be Juju. I am a Christian, thank God!'

In his travels up-country Bill met many men to whom logs were all-important. Some worked in small, bougainvillaea-wreathed banks, whose windows looked out on the oblongs of hardy grass and beds of scarlet canna-lilies that are customary frontage for European business houses in West Africa. No matter how immoderate the sequences of his Nigerian day, the visitor, coming from the harsh heat into one of these fan-purring bank sanctums, could find object lessons in the cool discipline of mathematics and perfect logic of currency. Dark hands riffled notes, counted tidy piles of coins, and jotted

impeccable hieroglyphics on slips of paper. At the wickets tailored African clerks conferred formally with clients, many in native dress with well-thumbed cheque books and brief-cases pregnant with papers relating to money earned, borrowed or specifically desired. The air, smelling, as banks do, of paper, purple ink, typewriters and furniture polish, was instinct with a subdued churchlike earnestness. Levity had no place here; the hum of voices carried all the proper modulations of money-



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discourse, which at bank level is always serious. The actualities displayed by the columns of soldierly numerals were what mattered, the testament of ledger, affirmation of rubber stamp and seal of careful signature. Tortuous pilgrimages ended here; slow bargains were irrevocably consummated; gambles were won or lost, palavers finished, the births and deaths of commercial ventures attended. The human fret and mêlée of the local market places, their wily cogitation and honest sweat, stayed outside; the pure residue was seen here simply as a précis of profit, loss or application for loan. Here bank accounts could swell with greenhouse suddenness into fortunes, or as swiftly dwindle to shoestring attenuation or to overdraft at which the bank manager frowned, reading into the cryptic figures their familiar stories of valiant false optimism, overreaching greed, or simple failure.

The European, shirt-sleeved and nimble at the hub of his Nigerian counting-house responsibilities, bore scarcely any resemblance to the stock figure of a banker — the conventional faceless man in the stiff-collared sombre suit and dark overcoat of temperate climes. Tropical banking, while governed by the same laws of cause and effect, has its special demands on character, its own peculiar problems and rewards. It requires — or so outsiders must believe — keener insight into commercial motives, a particularly resilient philosophy, and a saving sense of humour in the face of a climate that can act as a brake on the quickest minds and easily tease European tempers to snapping point.

Most of the men Bill met in banks looked more like figures out of the 'Wide Wide World' than orthodox pillars of Lombard Street. One suspected that the lines about their eyes were premature and that the determined set of their chins was an occupational development. As a rule they presided in their official chairs with an air of uncommon alertness, looking shrewdly across their desks like skippers with a weather eye out for squalls, or like doctors obligated to listen and pronounce with equal sureness no matter how acute the quandary or delicate the remedy. And like doctors, they knew more about their

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fellow-men, African or European, than was socially comfortable in a small community; their work permitted them few illusions.

One morning Bill asked one of these ready-for-anything bankers whether he enjoyed his job in a country where the accumulation and deploying of money via the banking system was a comparatively new absorption. 'Money?' the banker said lightly. 'I see it this way: in any language we're only score-keepers, umpires, croupiers, pushing out the chips, raking in and picking up the pieces.'

'*Faites vos jeux ... ?*' said Bill, who had never before used such an expression in a bank.

'That's about it,' said the young man, glancing thankfully up at the big clock. '*Rien ne va plus*, thank God — come upstairs for a drink before lunch.'

The banker regarded logs as merchandise that involved the movements of substantial moneys and stimulated other forms of trade in the area. The man in the shipping office treated them as 'parcels' — remunerative freight requiring precise timing, handling and cataloguing. The timber sellers and buyers saw them speculatively and more intimately in terms of investment and turnover, detailed paper work, measurement and judgment of quality. The timber men's fraternity operated with varying success on many levels. Some who had recently gained a foothold in the business had small, hastily-put-together offices. Others, beginners, conducted their peripatetic negotiations from a brief-case. West Africa's brief-case is standard equipment for the hopeful young business man. It signifies his progressiveness, his orderly mind, his respect for the value of words typed or penned. It offers islands of positive proof where reason can be steadied amid the quicksands of verbal bargaining. To many ambitious young Nigerians the first advice might be: Get a brief-case. Even if you have little to carry, it is something to open and shut while reflecting. It amplifies the person who might otherwise look too young, shabby or shy. Its papers are like decoy eggs that can attract more fertile material. The larger and more expensive the brief-case, the better, and one with initials and a shining lock gives everyone greater confidence.

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At the other end of the scale there were the men of substance — African, British, Greek, Dutch and others — who needed no dress-up properties to state their importance in the world of logs. Most of them lived well and hospitably. Their horizons were large and their energies constant. They boarded planes casually to find themselves soon, and with swift adaptation, in London, Milan or Hamburg in the company of brothers who spoke the same timber language. In order to radio-telephone from Nigeria across the world, they came to the Cable Office in Lagos, thinking nothing of the long journey down from bush stations. One Sapele merchant employed two drivers who took turns in piloting his car during the time-saving overnight trip while, thriftily conserving his forces, he slept comfortably pillowed on the back seat. The most successful among these timber-rich men combined in their persons capacities for two separate kinds of life — the utterly plain and lonely, and the luxuriously, gregariously sophisticated — the former amply paying for the latter. They were as much at home at an elegant party as in a forest gathering of palavering Nigerian village elders. Because they lived close to the old and the new Nigeria they appeared to be more at home in the country of their self-spun fortunes than many expatriates whose work required far less initiative and no personal risk.

While not averse to using, when necessary, the slow ancient method of travelling, these men improved, wherever possible, on their own transport systems. One up-country morning Bill — on this occasion the house guest of a Big Man — set out with his host's office manager in a motor-powered canoe to inspect a quantity of logs lying rafted some distance down-river. The canoe, the Big Man's property, was cumbersome and old-style, but its brand-new outboard engine had rejuvenated both the craft and George, the canoe man, who now regarded the paddles scornfully as objects practically *démodé*. Although the



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rainy season had begun, the day had dawned clear, so Bill and his companion carried no raincoats. Anticipating their speedy return to base they had accepted a luncheon invitation. The day's pattern had a tidy look.

The first part of it went according to plan. Bill inspected the log raft. The return journey began. The canoe motor chattered efficiently; the glassy olive-green river streamed smoothly past. Even the slow, sulky massing of low-lying cloud feather-stitched with random storm lightning could not diminish the general satisfaction. If there was to be some rain, no matter; the errand would soon be finished. They were only three miles from base.

Then the engine began to cough unevenly. The canoe man bent over it, muttering. The engine stopped, its cheerful din snuffed out in storm-heavy silence. George said, 'I don't think we go have enough petrol.'

'Enough petrol?' fumed Bill's companion. 'How d'you mean, enough?'

'No petrol, sah,' George stated, for superfluous self-blaming emphasis adding, 'at-all.'

'Why in heaven's name not?'

George took breath and began an explanation, but when it began to sound even to his own ears too complicated and improbable he fell silent under criticism. He listened stoically to the recital of colourfully phrased reproof, doubtless understanding that the European, having himself failed to double-check the stowage of the customary spare petrol tin, must save face as best he could.

Rain stopped the palaver. It was not ordinary rain but a comprehensive, single-minded and apparently limitless down-pour, falling violent and vertical — as only tropical rain can fall — straight from a sky whose ceiling seemed lost in fluid turmoil. George instantly wrapped himself in the engine canvas. The white travellers fared worse. Within seconds cigarettes were quenched and clothes saturated and clinging.

The current, though slight, was against them. As the wind rose, the river blurred and roughened. Under the force of

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sweeping deluge the green shoreline margins became sighing, grey-veiled undulations of pliant leaf, branch and frond. Intermittently, the unnatural dusk was split and dazzled by lavender light, and thunder prowled and crashed.

In the wild eye and heart of the storm the canoe's trio paddled silently and heavily home, wet beyond caring or conversing. Towards five o'clock they reached their host's house with intent to apologize and leave again. But the news was heartening. Lunch was, in fact, still imminent. Cook had 'kept' it in the mysterious way that veteran cooks preserve postponed meals in apparently perpetual readiness all over Africa, no matter what the hour.

Dry clothes were produced, and the meal was punctiliously served by artificial light while the rain teemed in the premature darkness outside the battened windows. Later in the evening, Bill inquired of the Big Man's steward for the shoes he had discarded sodden in his room, and received them as freshly polished and moisture-free as if they had never been exposed to so much as a light April shower. Impressed, he asked how they had been dried.

'In the fridge, sah,' replied the servant, opening the door proudly wide to reveal another pair of shoes in process of similar dehydration.

'Good Lord,' remarked the boy's employer, 'so that's where you put them. What would Madam say?'

'She say not do it,' replied the boy. 'Say it be no proper — shoes in with beef and jelly. But shoe-leather be beef-skin, not so?'

'There you are,' said Bill's host to his friend, 'absolutely sound sense. Funny, a woman doesn't see it that way.'

But Madam, although her wifely absence was lamented, was safely out of the way on a visit abroad. So when other timber



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men, similarly wife-bereft or of bachelor condition, dropped in, a poker game began straightway and went comfortably on till daybreak. Then from the serene and willing cookhouse of an all-male menage a large breakfast was brought; and, for no reason except that it could be afforded and helped to brighten the day's dawning, champagne and beer were served with the eggs and bacon. 'Sometimes,' one of the party robustly understated, 'it's a good life here.' Whereupon, freshly shaven and clad and again transformed by the pristine shining morning into men of serious purpose, they returned, every man for himself, to the unbrotherly thrusts, parries, pacts and palavers of the log trade.

Europeans in West Africa's smaller, essentially artificial communities are usually glad to see a visitor. In these tropical microcosms where most white residents are known to the rest by their first names, familiarity breeds, from time to time, an acute craving for novelty. In their islanded group-apartness, further sectioned into the compartments of the men's working spheres, the same faces meet, smile and talk with village frequency at the counters of the station's few stores, at evening gatherings and at the Club. The day's 'shop' has a way of infiltrating into after-dark occasions, causing the helpless compacting of wives in a false look of vivacious sisterhood, while at the other side of the room their men put earnest heads together in leisurely conference. As one exasperated party wife commented, 'Too bad John and Henry didn't bring the office files along; then they could really get some work done tonight.'

The tropical social situation has always intrigued the outside world, who tend to see it as an equatorial adventure story, heavily spiced and perfumed and entirely peopled by clearly typed characters whose feelings for each other easily run to novelettish emotional extremes. This picture, in West Africa at least, is only partly true. There are many Coasters who, having put their minds to it, manage to follow the difficult middle path between the dizzy extremes of party-packed recreation and the monastic bleakness of an existence which

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sets 'everyone out of step but Johnny'. Perseverance in this middle way, no matter how torrid or cramped the setting, or how ill-assorted the members who form the rigidly bounded community, is an exceptional feat. Some maintain that the people who preserve such equilibrium are imbued with ordinariness that is not only genuine but uniquely dull and durable; others envyingly ascribe it to a remarkable determination and self-sufficiency. These staunch moderates, so useful in ballasting effervescent tropical neighbours and situations, are rarely publicized: they are not sensationally book-worthy, nor suitable material for cinema-projections of life in faraway lands where everything is expected to be much larger than life and ten times more volatile.

But at times when the moderates are offstage, and their influence inactive, the short-term visitor to a small outpost station might assume that Hollywood's view was not ill-focused. He would realize that people living at close quarters for long periods become ultra-sensitive to each other's ways, and that a lack of novelty and normal outlet stimulates the deliberate cultivation of idiosyncrasy. Hence the white members of a bush community tend easily to collect a reputation for incident and behaviour that is just sufficiently off-centre to suggest infectious eccentricity. For weeks nothing may happen. The community jogs along another stretch of the tour, the men working hard, the women apparently contented, the evening 'shop' recurrent, everyone zealously preserving his marriage, dignity or general façade. It is usually after one such long flat spell of heat, humidity and sameness of routine that the Big Evening happens. A misfiring joke sparks mutual dislike into public hostility; a random remark uncovers something of background or personality that has been thus far hidden; an indiscreet confidence sets off the newest scandal. In this dangerous party atmosphere people are likely to enjoy their own and their friends' rash behaviour and to ignore thoughts of the next day's reckoning.

After one such evening Bill reported approximately as follows: 'After dinner there was dancing, and a woman, a quiet type till then, did a Spanish number with one of the

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bachelors. Her husband didn't approve, and it looked as if there'd be words later. Another incident: one guest took umbrage over something he overheard. After hasty dialogue he left and the ranks closed tactfully. Then there was nearly a seance — that was after one of the men had confessed to being psychic. But the vote wasn't unanimous. Some seemed afraid he really might be a mind-reader or clairvoyant. So things settled down, and there was conversation about Scouting, Guiding and Camp Craft. Soon they were all busy with pieces of string, doing clovehitches, bowlines, reefs and so on. Which led to our host tackling a String Trick. Too ambitious and a complete fiasco, but funny. The party ended with a serious discussion on the colour question, especially the happiness or misfortune of children from mixed marriages. Inconclusive, of course. Afterwards some of the debaters tried to remember exactly what they *had* said. This worried them when it came to light that one of them, a likeable quiet fellow, was father of five illegitimate half-caste children. They'd all been taken up with theory and completely overlooked the chance that any one of them might have contracted a fruitful alliance.'

'But how could they not know about it?' I asked.

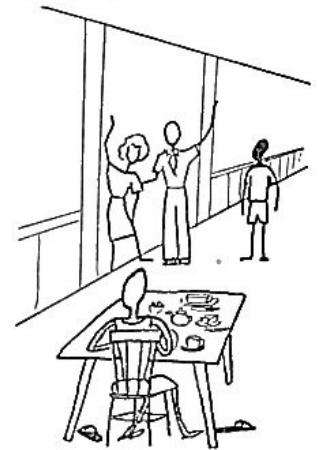
Said Bill, 'The few men who knew usually pretended the children didn't exist. They hadn't told their wives. Male solidarity, probably. So the secret was well kept ... until that night. Now everybody knows, but because it's so awkward for them they're trying to forget it again. Once that kind of talk gets round you never know what might come to light in other quarters.'

We agreed that forgetfulness should be easy, since 'Coast memory' is such a common malady. This frequent state of vagueness concerning details past or future is due, some say, to a climate which acts like a warm, damp sponge to fog or even wipe out lesser memories. People badly affected by it write themselves reminders and then forget where they left their notepads; they are not precisely sure when last they saw the Joneses or who was with them at the time; they put valuables in a succession of increasingly safe places and afterwards

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search for them with mounting alarm, convinced of theft but afraid to make a pronouncement for fear of losing face when the goods are tracked down to the bottom of a suitcase which has been stowed on top of a wardrobe. 'Coast memory' is, perhaps, far more general than any other tropical malady, and no one has ever found an on-the-spot cure for the constant state of bafflement and irritation that it induces.

This story shows what can happen. A young European couple who regarded themselves as normally balanced and well-scheduled were sitting down to late lunch at home when they remembered a casually given and accepted invitation to lunch at this particular time elsewhere. So, hastily dismissing the remaining dishes on their table, they drove at once to a friend's house seven miles away. Hastening up the steps, prepared with self-mocking explanations, they found their host sitting serenely on the veranda dressed only in slippers, vest and shorts at his noon meal, a solitary plate of bread and cheese. For a moment he was taken aback, but rallied quickly to apologize, in turn, for forgetting the occasion. His guests, aware that he could not remember having given the invitation, were further confused. They sought to withdraw, but their host insisted that since they had left their own lunch uneaten they must share another with him. During the next two hours host and guests tried to reassure themselves as to the true facts. These were relatively unimportant, but the mismanagement of the day had hurt their pride. The host uneasily reflected that, on second thoughts, he might have asked them to come. The guests, convinced of their error, tried to remember who had asked them to lunch. The whole thing, they all agreed, was ridiculous, or it would seem so, once they were on leave. And in view of their threefold mental deterioration the trio sadly admitted that leave could hardly begin soon enough.





Compound Palaver

6

IN Nigeria, as anywhere else, the most common causes of argument, remonstrance and misunderstanding are domestic. And since for reasons climatic, economic and traditional a staff of workers must be employed to keep the white man's castle in working order, most tropical household difficulties come under the headings of Cook Palaver, Steward Palaver, Laundry Palaver, Garden Palaver and Car Palaver.

Cook Palaver heads the list. At the best of times the preparation of food is a tricky and debatable matter. Cooks of any nationality tend to be temperamental and with reason, for they are often misunderstood. Too much criticism makes them over-anxious and irritably heavy-handed; too much praise makes them blasé and autocratic. In West Africa there is the delicate business of perquisites, the inconsiderable food trimmings and extras, and the minor cash percentages that are just reward for skilful market bargaining. But a nice judgment of perquisites is a fine art. Misjudge the mark a little and the friendly easy word becomes another that is ugly and accusing, shattering everyone's confidence and stirring up resentment and suspicion.

Next: cookhouse cleanliness. In a country where decay follows fast on ripeness and every form of bacterial life thrives in the moist heat, hands unwashed, and food left uncovered and fly-visited may gravely menace human health. So many possible issues for palaver stand between 'Madam' and her cook that even their most mutually placatory dialogues are bound to be underlaid with nervousness. If the cook is new to the household he is not likely to forget that his predecessor's departure

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was precipitate and histrionic, nor is his employer able to pretend that a brand-new leaf has been turned to make her hopeful of an extraordinary cookhouse renaissance.

Every woman has her own 'ways'; what passes muster with one may be anathema to another. Some declare that a cook worth his salt deserves freedom from close supervision. Other women are convinced that 'taking an interest' is the key to success, so to this end they participate actively from time to time in the kitchen proceedings, while the cook in his cleanest apron ceremoniously hands utensils and watches his mentor's movements with closest, most flattering interest. If, after all this demonstrating and special preparing, Madam's dish — which she *would* do 'her way' — is a failure, her loss of face is her own sad concern, and no one would be so foolish as to smile.



The practice of diplomacy in the kitchen worries some sensitive employers, who invariably obtain the worst results. The strong-minded ones care nothing for the tiny unguarded expressions and undertones of voice which reveal their helper's state of mind. For them only the cooking matters; the cook is a cipher. Some women, intent on keeping the upper hand, zealously scrutinize, query and double-check the cook's market book, while believers in a free method (too lazy or generous or unmathematical for argument over sixpences) give it a haphazard weekly glance. Many bachelors hand over a regular house-keeping sum with the breezy instructions to keep the commissariat from atrophy, while others dole reluctant coinage whenever Cook states his intention of marketing. Some employers are sticklers for punctual mealtimes. Many, determined that they, rather than their staff, shall rule the roost, expect a cook to keep food hot and edible for hours after it is ready to serve. Some love food and its ceremonies; others, less hungry or social, treat it offhandedly. In view of white employers'

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enormous variations in culinary skill, taste, money-management and human insight, and considering the constant palaver risk and emotional wear and tear of life in any kitchen arena, it is astonishing that so many Nigerians desire to be cooks.

The first qualifications for a long career would seem to be endurance and resilience: qualities that may see them through the varied peculiarities and palavers of a dozen or twenty kitchens whose owners are separately lavish or miserly, orderly or slipshod, cheerful or bad-tempered, fair-minded or unjust. Stamina and mental flexibility are, of course, especially valuable when the cook is not, and never can be, a good cook.

It turned out that Tom Cook, grandfatherly, neat-aproned, and a model of rectitude, was, despite his initial assurances and his precious bundle of parched and yellowing 'papers', no asset to our kitchen. Years of repetitive work with stews, fritters and fried fish, and the pancakes and caramel custards which, curiously, head the repertoire of every West African cook, had staled his talent. Innovation and improvisation alarmed him. In his younger days he had been able to bake bread, but he no longer had the knack of handling yeasty doughs. His gravies were insipid and watery, his 'little cakes' (another West African favourite) were flat and pale. He serenely and conscientiously cooked relays of tasteless food in a kitchen which he kept as tidy and blameless-seeming as his person; his perquisites were modest and his market book a work of thrift and exactness.

For several weeks we lacked the courage to dismiss him. It seemed an act of crudeness and ingratitude to turn from our door an old man of such virtue and loyalty whose only fault was that he depressed our mealtimes. But at last, one afternoon, we explained that he could not stay. He listened attentively, nodded politely, and accepted his money with trembling fingers. We tried to soften the blow by praising his many virtues. He heard us out in a gentle, forgiving silence that made us feel callous and unworthy. Then he brought in his perfectly folded aprons with the market book on top — an uncomfortably funereal touch — and with the dignity of a departing Senator bade us goodbye. When he had gone we worried about our action and

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his future. Steward Robert, unmoved by Tom's exit, assured us lightly that Tom's enormous family would care for him. He said precisely but with what seemed to us a harsh inflection, 'That man was too old to cook proper.' And quickly added, 'I will bring you a good young cook one time.'

When Joseph Cook arrived we realized what had been missing. Joseph, young, plumply smiling, professionally alert, gave us for three days a succession of delicious, artistically decorated dishes. Steward set them on the table with great aplomb, as of a magician producing rabbits out of a hat. But on the fourth day Joseph looked ominously preoccupied and meditative, while Steward's manner was strangely sulky. On the fifth day Joseph came with a bandaged leg and a pitiful limp. He told us that his doctor had pronounced the leg to be overtaxed with much cycling, and that he must find employment nearer home. We offered inducements, suggested he come by bus. Joseph dodged the arguments. He would find us a fine cook to take his place, he said firmly, and that was final. The shoe, we had to admit, was clearly on the other foot; in this palaver the loss and the chagrin were ours.

Steward Robert seemed to share our defeat. Having acted as intermediary he had lost face seriously and would volunteer nothing except an enigmatic 'Hah!' when we asked him the real reason for Joseph's going. We could only conclude that Robert and Joseph had disagreed about the job-entrance fee that Robert expected of him, but we knew better than to interfere in a dispute involving a matter of such traditional delicacy and privacy.

Kaulo, Joseph's delegated replacement, was hoarse-voiced, ingratiating and shifty-eyed, ex-cook on a small coaling vessel. He stayed long enough to produce a parade of culinary catastrophes followed by a palaver which was, this time, less calm.



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Kaulo was hotly indignant, vowing that none but us had ever found fault with his dishes. According to him we were unstable, unreasonable despots since, as piously he called God to witness, he had done nothing the whole time but work, work, work! Ostentatiously, his lip curling, he counted the money we gave him as if he suspected underpayment or counterfeit coins. Then he turned on his heel and left, spitting contemptuously on the veranda and leaving his dirty aprons lying in a heap on the floor of our storm-swept kitchen, and our sitting-room vibrating with the aftermath of his hostility.

His successor, Ephraim, turned up the next day as if telepathically summoned, in trousers and shirt so freshly white and person so groomed that he appeared, in comparison with Kaulo, a marvel of fastidiousness. His last 'paper' further raised our hopes; it bore a signature from the Medical Department.

We hired him, and for a time fared moderately well. Then the palavers began, over freakish shrinkages in sizeable joints, family tea-parties in the kitchen, and startling fits of absent-mindedness which caused him, once, to present a simple fish-and-rice dish without the rice. Daily Ephraim's eyes grew more bloodshot until their whites were wholly suffused and his expression thereby rendered uncommonly sinister. His appearance became unkempt; his working clothes ragged and soiled. During the next mealtime crisis Bill inquired if Ephraim were drinking heavily. The cook vowed that he was a pledged teetotaller and for an hour afterwards muttered indignantly in the kitchen. But on the day of his dismissal, Ephraim's condition was so abstracted and benign that he seemed scarcely to hear the words of banishment. He pocketed his money, smiled crookedly, and automatically asked for a testimonial. When we declined to write this, he merely said carelessly, 'Too bad.' After he had gone Steward made clicking noises, as of censure on Ephraim and thankfulness for our action. 'He did drink,' Bill declared aloud. 'No, not drink, sah,' Steward said mysteriously, and after a little pause he gathered up some ashtrays and flicked his duster over a lampshade. 'He take drug. Opium. Plenty.'

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None of the departed cooks bore us any grudge. When later we met them individually in Lagos they greeted us in a friendly way, especially old Tom who was dressed, for his retirement, in a suit of respectable dark cloth and a new panama hat. He told us that he had given up his work and gone to live with a 'good son'. His look of contentment assuaged our feelings of guilt. Ephraim, when we saw him next, was volubly conducting a rollicking party of sailors down one of Lagos's seedier side streets. He waved cheerily and so did the sailors. Joseph was carefully selecting kippers at a Cold Stores counter. His manner was all goodwill; his limp had gone. As might have been expected, we came across Kaulo wandering aimlessly and scuffing the dockside dust with a look of dedicated idleness. He appeared pleased with life and said that he had a good job cooking for a single man, with plenty of time off. 'There is no Madam,' he said, squinting meaningfully at me. We were acquainted with the bachelor who later told us that Kaulo had proved the last domestic straw, causing him to dismiss his staff, give up his house and move, untrammelled, into an hotel. Kaulo might even have changed the man's whole life, for the supposedly confirmed bachelor returned from his next leave with a bride.

Our own Cook Palavers ended with a timely application from one Benjamin Cook, a middle-aged, middle-of-the-road, middle-sized family man whose cooking was neither so dazzling nor so dull as to warn us of any kind of excess in his makeup. Tired of cookhouse conjecture and analysis we shut our eyes to the implications of Benjamin's last 'paper' which said that he was a 'past master in market book tactics' and 'able to make a pound of sugar go a long way'. So Benjamin, imperfect as he doubtless was, stayed with us, imperfect employers as we doubtless were. To keep the whole situation in perspective we sometimes wondered what kind of obliquely phrased 'papers' our cooks would have written for us had the recommendation system been reversed.

When we gave proper thought to it we knew that every cook in West Africa must be remarkable, if only for his speed and diligence in learning from scratch the white man's range of

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culinary fads and fetishes. The little 'cook's mate', who loves ricey-spicy dishes hot with chilli peppers and heavy with garri, yam, plantain and cassava, and rich with palm or groundnut oil, must learn to prepare food that does not appeal to his own palate. Later he may himself acquire a liking for European food but initially he must master the white man's kitchen machinery and method, and a whole range of foreign ingredients: sugar, tinned stuffs, imported vegetables and Cold Store perishables unknown to his personal larder.

He qualifies when he understands the routine perfectly from soup to savoury, and can duplicate any British dish so that, apart from an indefinable intrusion of what can only be labelled 'tropical flavour', it is a reasonable facsimile of what the Briton may call 'home food'. 'Tropical flavour' is hard to describe because, while no one can ever explain what it amounts to, most Coasters agree that to some extent it pervades every meal. It has been suggested that African-produced vegetables, meat, fish and eggs are imbued with this difference, or that the constant 80-degree temperature and 80 per cent humidity so mitigate against freshness that nothing can come to the table with the crisp look and taste of home supplies. Or again, that old-fashioned cookhouses with wood-burning stoves permeate everything with a faintly smoky taste. Or — possibly more truly — that the recurrent hint of an offbeat flavour is only an illusion; the European palate abroad becomes jaded, hypercritical and fails to discriminate with exactness, or even to remember, the subtleties of his established taste sense.

Sometimes we imagined, grouped in the early history of West Africa's European cookhouses, a little gallery of formidable pioneering white Madams: those who first laid down the rules and brought British cooking to a continent which then must have been unversed in the mysteries of cottage pie, jam roll or caramel custard. We saw them, probably unfairly, as stout uncompromising housewives, determined that their tropically based husbands should keep their strength up with bacon-and-egg breakfasts, solid lunches, meaty dinners and 'little cakes' for tea. To their African helpers — the originals who taught the

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next generation of recruits — all the housewifely-cook principles had somehow been imparted: the pre-soup simmering and pastry making, and an understanding of the whole gamut of time-honoured British food affinities: liver and onions, lamb and mint-sauce, cold meat and salad, fish and chips, roast beef and Yorkshire pudding.

These original instructress-Madams did their job thoroughly. Every West African cook in our experience understood the esoteric vocabulary of recipe books and knew that beans, spaghetti, scrambled eggs and sardines always involved toast; dumplings automatically went with stew; and that prunes and custard was one long word. These powerful, nostalgic-minded ladies, whoever they were, had set their stamp firmly on tables everywhere in the tropics, causing cabinet puddings to be spooned steaming in the noonday heat, and ensuring that the Sunday evening cold cuts (with beetroot and tomato) were properly followed by a dish of trifle.

Only on Saturdays, it seemed, the women had given way to what may have originated as a bachelor institution: the 'country-chop' which is chicken curry or 'groundnut stew' or 'palm-oil chop'. The main dish, basically chicken, swims in pungent juices and comes with a heaped platter of rice. These nobly centre a table spread with saucered 'gages': chopped tomatoes, onions, bananas (all both raw and cooked), pineapple, grapefruit, tangerine, prawns and shredded coconut, okra, groundnuts (whole and crushed), powdered ginger, stink-fish, red and green peppers and chutney — with a big bowl of cold, astringent fruit salad afterwards to refresh the heated palate. Such is West Africa's own colourful ceremonial contribution to the week's bill of fare; a meal usually preceded by pink gins and washed down with ice-cold beer and best taken with friends at leisure and slept off in the late lazy afternoon of a non-working day. It is the calorie-crammed Coaster meal which pleases not only the formal luncheon party but its servitors and any hangers-on who may follow the rich hot scents to the cookhouse door. During 'country-chop' preparations Cook is in charge; Madam can teach him nothing, and

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for once the man in the cookhouse and those who eat his ritual concoctions are likely to be in complete gastronomic accord.

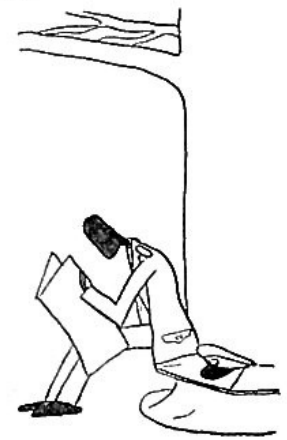
When the British in hot countries adopt a custom such as this, they weave it into their own conventional patterns; it becomes a normal, even necessary, part of their tropical life. At home again in the United Kingdom they may gather together the components for a 'country-chop' and stage it as a special meal-event. But most who attempt this feat will admit that a Saturday groundnut-stew eaten in Middlesex or Lancashire somehow does not taste the same. It fails in essence, and does not bring the spirit of the tropics home. What has been the most natural kind of week-end food abroad turns out to be singularly unnatural when prepared by a servantless white wife in an English kitchen and placed before a circle of woollen-clad guests in a home-type dining-room warmed by a gas fire.

It is odd that while so many temperate-zone customs, goods and atmospheres are superimposed with fair success even on the remotest Equatorial regions, the process cannot be made to operate in reverse. Exported tropicana prove as fragile as the gloss on a bird's wing or the bloom on a grape. They easily wilt, fade and look flimsily out of context. This is particularly so of many tropical ornaments and souvenirs whose collectors bear them proudly home only to discover that the colours and textures and meanings of these goods cannot be happily transplanted. The only extraordinary exception is, perhaps, jazz. Whether concentrated or in diluted form, Africa's syncopations are her most sensational contribution of personality to the outside world. Many pale-skinned people who might regard Africans as a race utterly different from themselves, with languages, customs, religions and traditions inexplicably foreign, still delight to hear the dynamic beat that comes from the very heart of Africa. Clubs are formed the better to enjoy it; dancers gyrate and prance to its hypnotic tempo; gramophones feed on it; radios send it into millions of drawing-rooms; errand-boys sing and whistle to its strong compulsion, and young romances begin everywhere against its background of ageless earthy rhythm.

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Without exception our domestic helpers carried, as if in their very bones, this abiding sense of rhythm; none in his own element ever moved awkwardly or revealed such tight-lipped, hard-jawed tensions as are common to the white race. During his idle moments, young Smallboy Simon, though tone-deaf, would dreamily tap out a complicated tattoo on anything handy — a tray, the lid of a biscuit tin, the bottom of a bucket. Steward Robert off duty was a rejuvenated being when he danced to any casual drumming that his background produced; music as such was never necessary. So all the cooks, weaving gently, flexing their shoulders and knees and snapping their loose-wristed fingers, obeyed the compulsive rhythmic urge that seemed to enter the soles of their bare feet and invade their bodies, as if the very earth they trod contained this property of irrepressible, pent-up life. Driver on the job tried, we knew, to starch his loose-limbed, easy-moving body into a stiffer discipline, but the effort was always obvious. Tall and willowy, with natural attitudes reposeful and pliant rather than erect; he walked like an American college boy, with an easy strolling gait. On the back compound's private territory he easily gave way to comic mummery, and during any gramophone soirée he would ecstatically jive with the rest. His garment then was an outrageously striped green-and-orange sarong which, with the music, changed him almost beyond recognition.

But during working hours Driver generally kept his distance from the other employees. When dressed in uniform, peaked cap and metal-strapped wrist-watch, he represented himself as an employee of higher station, a composite of technician and aide-de-camp. He was proud of his knowledge of motor mechanics, and of his skill in piloting the car through Lagos streets hazardous with crowding vehicles and pedestrians. He was a reliable guide, interpreter and message-taker, and particularly brilliant in the art of waiting. The streak of laziness that softened



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Driver's long flexible frame was often, in fact, an asset to his work. He would sit by the hour with profound, half-dozing serenity at the wheel, waiting for Bill to return from behind the portals of shipping office, timber merchant or Government Department. We, who like so many of our race, are obsessed with the wickedness of 'wasting time', were impressed by his capacity on these occasions for doing absolutely nothing and remaining totally contented. Yet Driver was ambitious. No more than twenty, he had six years of his working life behind him. Like Smallboy Simon he had bravely ventured four hundred and fifty miles from his village to Lagos, drawn by the city's offerings of adventure, opportunity, money, modernity, prestige — all the cornucopian riches promised by young Nigeria's insistent daemon.

At first he had fed and clothed himself by serving as a 'small-boy' in a European household. We surmised that he had soon rebelled against housework as a tedious dead-end occupation, and that, already very tall, he had found the 'smallboy' connotation comical and undignified. So he determined to become a driver, and while intent on this goal kept himself by petty trading. He persuaded a 'brother' who was a taxi-driver to teach him to manage a car. Then he worked in a garage long enough to improve his education in transport, obtain a 'paper' and, more important, meet some of Lagos's fraternity of drivers. He passed lightly over his first short-term chauffeuring jobs which he regarded only as part of his apprenticeship. His main chance came when a friend-driver in a fair position left to improve his salary and for a consideration assisted Driver into the gap. Driver's status then became fixed and his objective accomplished.

In three years, by careful strategies and enormous self-confidence, the bush-village boy had made himself a bona-fide member of the brotherhood of Lagos car pilots. On the whole he worked well. Most of the time he drove with caution and sensitivity, as if his human cargo in the back seat were marked: Fragile, Do Not Drop. But there were — fortunately rare — days when Driver's concentration lapsed without warning. This

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happened only when some big background palaver (with the dunning marketwomen, or one of the houseboys, or another driver) had upset his equilibrium and left a residue of debate rankling his mind. Then he alternately dawdled, clashed the gears, stepped fiercely on the accelerator or killed the engine, while he paced the car to the alternate defensive and aggressive impulses of his private cogitations. If his behaviour were left unremarked, the mood passed within the day. But if we protested in the smallest way, Driver's face took on a tragedian's stare, as if he saw the whole world ranged unfairly against him. Then, sighing, he would shame us for our reproaches. He pointed out the many lucrative mischiefs to which other drivers of his acquaintance were addicted. He indicated that by sheer strength of character and high moral principle he was denying himself easy opportunities which other drivers would surely have seized to feather their nests. Privily, he said, he might have plied the car as a taxi or used it as a runabout for his friends, 'lost' the tools, siphoned and sold off the petrol, or exacted repair fee percentages from some of the lesser garages. But he protected our property, denied himself these extras. And what was his reward now? *Palaver!* Driver sadly regretted that we should so lack gratitude for his forbearance from temptation.

But in fact we were grateful, for we had long since discovered that exploitation in West Africa is not solely practised by white visitors on luckless African underlings; it works just as unfairly the other way round.

Driver's unfashionable attitude to marginal profiteering gave him something to talk about on his bad days when we vexed him by pointing out his lesser faults. It was a completely illogical palaver situation — palaver usually is. It was, however, useful in burning up whatever emotional scrap material happened to be lying about, and usually we all felt better afterwards.

The brief palaver times were always followed by long calm spells. One such period endured even while we knew Driver to be anticipating marriage to a girl from his village. Love-longing, it appeared, did not affect a good driver's attitude to work. It

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was money-worry that proved at length disastrous. When, by letters, telegrams and family messengers, Driver began to debate his fiancée's dowry fee, we saw trouble ahead. An ultimatum arrived from the bride's parents. They would not — positively would not — reduce the bride price below £100. Overnight Driver slumped into a defeated condition. He became melancholy and was given to obscure muttering. He drove so unseeingly that we even wondered if he had suicide in mind. Bill, threatening dismissal, took the wheel, while Driver sat alongside with a pained profile. But two days later the clouds began to lift. Driver announced that a plan of dowry payment by instalments had been proposed by an intermediary, and his bride was now available, as it were, on the hire purchase system. 'Now,' said Driver, wiping out the past miserable days with a generous grin, 'if I get small more wages I can manage to pay.'

'Otherwise?' Bill queried.

'I will starve to get my girl, or I will be as now with heavy heart and no wife,' said Driver, putting the onus squarely on Bill.

Driver won the day. He married his sixteen-year-old betrothed, kept up payments and soon had a son. And he became not only a mellow man but a better driver.

Steward Robert often reminded us of The Cat That Walked By Itself. His age was unguessable, perhaps between forty and fifty. His industrious wife and most of his large family stayed in Owerri, across the Niger River, but his eldest son, John, had come to Lagos to await the acceptance of his application to a technical school. During his interview with us, Robert did not mention John, who materialized on the compound two days after Robert moved in to the back quarters and began to work for us. We found the boy sitting on the back step, eyes meekly downcast. 'Who is this?' we inquired of Steward. 'Ah — my son,' he replied smoothly. 'Soon he go start College to learn electrician work. I know Madam agree he stay here for small time.'

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John stayed. Either of his own volition or because Robert had given instructions, he made skilful overtures to our small son, William, who was delighted with his new friend. Soon he requested and was given a small wage for supervising the purdah room's morning nursery activities. In the first flush of his duties John was patient and ingenious in kindergarten brick-building, toy-winding and general entertainment. Then his interest began to wane, and there were times when his young adolescent face gave hints of deep contempt for the proceedings. Off guard he had a look of bitter boredom. I overheard father and son exchanging *sotto voce* comments whose purport was easily imagined. Steward was telling John not to be so stupid and throw away the chance to earn this easy money. Was he not able to live rent-free, eat well and buy new clothes? (John had a new wardrobe of American-style shirts patterned with jazz and rodeo motifs.) Was it work at all to sit on the floor and play with a piccan while he, the old father, was busy all day in the house?

But John, being young, had not his father's tenacity or philosophy. His look of submissiveness soon disappeared; he lacked the guile to keep up the pretence of gentleness, and he did not like us. Although the situation was, with his father's help, of his own making, he resented it. There were no palavers (for John hardly spoke) until one day Fatima flew into a rage and we learned that the boy was in the habit of confiscating and eating the infants' biscuits. 'That man he t'ief um!' declared Fatima, shaking a suddenly empty carton. John shrugged and thankfully sauntered away from the purdah room whose little routines and skirmishes were such affronts to his young manhood. With the ease of an experienced diplomat Steward glossed over the rift and kept his son out of sight for a week. Then the boy returned to sit by the hour on the back step, his long slim hands hanging idle between his knees. There,



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with the dignity and curious haughty pathos of an electrician-to-be, he gave himself up to waiting for the day when he should go to college.

After Robert's failure to bring John into the house the father never again spoke about the boy. As before, we were expected to treat John as if he were invisible. Yet since he was much on the doorstep, a presence to be greeted, a human being to be considered, he could not be ignored. His glance continued to be strangely inimical, and sometimes on the hottest days when the smallest matters weighed heavily and significances sprang formidably from the most trivial gestures and expressions, we were convinced that John, though powerless to change the circumstances, despised his father for working in a white house, and us for having the power and money to employ him. Throughout the tour he remained on the fringe of our existence, an unabsorbable problem teenager, sharing without gratitude the perquisites we gave to his father, and biding his time. While wondering, as parents will, what kind of adult our son would be twenty years hence, we wondered, too, how in the far future John, the Nigerian, and William, the white man, might appear to one another if one day, they should meet.

Steward's personality was, in a more mature way, as inscrutable as John's. Some trace of Chinese ancestry might have accounted for his bantam build, high, prominent cheekbones, slanting eyes, round skull and soft-spoken formality. Only once, during the bicycle incident, did he demonstrate genuine excitement and anger. Otherwise he moved aloofly around the house, delegating to Smallboy Simon all the heavy or tedious jobs, while he appeared smoothly in the foreground whenever we had guests, or he had particular reason to impress us. An old hand at housework, he knew how to achieve the most pleasing results with the minimum of physical effort, polishing surfaces and plumping cushions that especially caught the eye, arranging flowers or setting a table slowly and fastidiously, while Smallboy Simon perspiringly toiled offstage or waited for Robert to give the next order.

We knew that Steward had a poor opinion of our suburban

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house; he gave it to be understood in a hundred delicate ways that he was used to better arrangements; larger rooms, a vacuum cleaner, grander parties and a richer array of sideboard silver. When we asked him to perform some minor task that was not strictly within a Head Steward's province he would hesitate fractionally before answering, allowing us to note his tiny correct reservation. His sensitivity to atmosphere was acute; he could exactly judge our degree of satisfaction or pique at any given moment, and would instantly adapt himself profitably or appeasingly to the current emotional temperature. He would never volunteer the smallest political comment (although he regularly attended political meetings and read our local daily paper absorbedly), or commit himself to any opinion outside matters of housework. His most positive facial expression was a worldly wise half-smile, tolerant, a little weary, the merest trifle derisive, the joyless smile of a man who sees nothing new under the sun. Although for a year he was an intrinsic part of our domestic landscape, he kept the greater part of his real self hidden. To him we were only one more Massa-Madam combine, the most recent in his years of service. His belief in himself as the Perfect Butler was oddly convincing, even when his errors were proved. Even Smallboy, eager and ambitious as he was to attain stewardship, never publicly rebelled against his senior's false superiority. Robert rarely did a day's work so badly as to attract serious palaver, nor so brilliantly as to set an exhausting precedent. We soon discovered that he was by no means the paragon he pretended to be. We frequently considered replacing him, but whenever we neared the proper moment and discovered some good reason for giving him notice, Robert would deflect us by giving an especially well-styled performance in the field of valeting, where he excelled.

Madam was not much of a hand at



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palaver; Massa was a force to be reckoned with. Therefore it was as well to be sure that Massa's clothes were lovingly cared for as if by a gentleman's gentleman, his evening cuff-links in place, his shoes mirror-bright, his socks set ready for his toes' ingress, and all his changes of garment beautifully laid out. Robert was, above all else, an outstandingly shrewd psychologist.

Smallboy Simon, eighteen years old, round-faced, hard-working and athirst for knowledge, was living, we were sure, the first part of a success story. Barring accident or notable bad luck, we thought he could not fail to end up rich and respected. He closely studied Steward's drawing-room technique but overdid the imitation; the result was caricature, a theatrically gliding slow-motion pace, an Oriental formality of gesture and portentous gravity of voice that made guests stare. When we asked him the time he told us, 'thirteen and a half minutes to nine', or looked closely into the clock's face, waiting for its hand to reach the mark before scrupulously relating the position. He improved on Robert when answering the telephone, always writing down the smallest details of conversation. If in doubt as to how the caller had spelled his name he gave us several alternatives, viz. 'Smit, Sumith, Smith, Summpt or Simp'.

With the fountain pen which he always carried at the ready in his breast pocket, he helpfully penned the market book accounts for those of our cooks who were illiterate, and wrote us long neat manifestoes whenever he thought we needed enlightenment on some aspect of his work, and especially if he felt he had been in any small way misunderstood. Unlike Robert he needed constant assurance of our good opinion, which he solicited in letters like this:

'Dear Sir or Madam: Please I will be glad with pleasure if you could by a coffee plate and take its money out from my salary which I have break this evening. It break by surprise to me and I am feeling so badly as I do not like to do anybody's things wrong. That was the one which Madam puts cat's chop. Please I am verry, verry sorry for it, with all best good wishes and happy days and nights to you all, forever amen. I remain yours s.s. Simon.'

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At the outset he told us, in a solemn private interview, that we must never doubt his honesty. He came, he said, from a village that punished its thieves with terrible strictness. Once the penalty had been amputation of one or both hands; now it was banishment for life from the community. With this background of tribal law, how could he ever take what was not his? If his father heard that he had committed the crime of theft, he, Simon, would be outcast. Therefore we need never fear that he would be stealing our treasures.

He was both proud and ashamed of his bush origin. Although he often sermonized (especially in his 'messages' to us about his family's background of strong old-fashioned tribal principle) he wanted more than anything to be a Lagos 'youngman', a dapper, go-ahead, self-assured, cycle-owning personality with slick political opinions and a rosy business future.

He was careful to tell us why his first job in Lagos had ended badly, without a 'paper'. It seemed that his employer had, in a fit of temper, insulted him by calling him 'a bad name', and straightway Simon had left that house, regardless of the consequences.

'What kind of bad name?' Bill asked, wondering what could have caused the forward-thinking boy to jeopardize his future.

Smallboy looked away from us. 'He call me "bushman"!'

That was his sorest memory. Having come, like so many city-seekers of his generation, from a village of mud huts, Juju shrines and ancient customs, he was deeply hurt by any suggestion that he lacked Western polish and education. 'Bushman' is the 'bad word' that can most deeply affront the modern African. 'Bush' no longer simply means 'hinterland'; it is used accusingly or mockingly to sum up any situation or state of mind that is primitive, slothful and gauche. The epithet 'bushman' especially shames the Nigerian who is too close to memories of his village family to disown them. It is a blow to the tender heart of his self-esteem. In any major palaver it is the flung gauntlet that sets fists flailing and voices shouting. Always it is a word too raw, personal and sneering to be laughed aside. Coming from a white man it implies the worst stigma of

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all; an inherent, incurable racial inferiority. That is why Smallboy Simon, having begun to explain why his former job had failed, balked at repeating the 'bad name'. Even coming second-hand from his mouth it sounded like a cruel, final judgment.

We thought that such a jolt at the start of his working life must have increased his determination to become a real city boy. No wonder he joyfully counted, as if stringing precious beads, the days of his Lagos citizenship; studied his primers and dictionary avidly in the pantry, and tried to please us so that his eventual 'paper' might rapidly elevate him above the smallboy ranks.

We were certain that Simon, so recently a bush villager, was yet no 'bushman'. His favourite reading exercises were close-printed manuals on photography. He kept them on the kitchen windowsill with his school books and dictionary, all brown-paper-jacketed and inscribed: 'Never Look Into The Property of Super Simon O.K.' 'Super Simon O.K.' was the way he signed all written messages except those he addressed to us. He doodled the elaboration constantly on the back of the market book, sprawling the letters with grandiose loops and curls as if in a state of exalted wishful thinking.

One of nine children ('same father, different mothers'), he had enjoyed only three weeks of formal schooling during which he had learned the alphabet. 'My father,' Simon admitted apologetically, 'do not like school. He put me to be a weaver. Instead I come to Lagos. Now my father say, all right, but never forget my teaching.'

With his first earnings Simon had bought school books; he worked through them word by plodding word, and phrase by stumbling phrase. He gripped his pen and made it trace the magic shapes of letters until somehow he had learned to read and write. But he was no longer content with mere literacy. He wanted to know the long hard words, the stiff technical words of the photographic manuals.

'Why camera magazines?' Bill asked, finding Simon on the back step, doggedly mouthing the syllables while his forefinger

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pressed slowly across the page. 'Some day,' Simon stated, 'I may be a photographer.' He spoke lightly, as if quite willing to agree this was a preposterous ambition for anyone so humble.

'Do you take pictures?' Bill asked.

Simon modestly said yes, it was his hobby, and he was learning more from Moses, the next-door (Fatima's) cook, who was a real photographer with a tripod and customers.

In fact Moses, a swaggering, hard-eyed, loud-talking man, conducted from his cookhouse a thriving subsidiary business which he called 'Jolly Coast Studios'. He rubber-stamped this title, with his employer's address, on the back of each print. He used the cookhouse as a darkroom, the siesta hours for appointments with his clients, and the small garden patch and house-wall for his photographic backgrounds. We often saw his little groups posed as if for execution with eyes screwed up against the dazzling sunlight, while Moses, with head covered by his tripod's black cloth, gave orders and clicked the shutter.

The part-time gardener-handyman from Abdul's house had his picture taken with two big vases of canna lilies which he held like a fisherman displaying a prize catch. He wore, for this portrait, the pair of ex-Army boots which he had bought from a pedlar who regularly visited the back compounds with headloads of singlets, ties, handkerchiefs and second-hand oddments. These goods were scarcely cheaper than in the town shops, but the boys enjoyed a leisurely examination of the goods and the chance for a bargaining battle.

The boots were much admired, and all the boys tried them on. It was a reversal of the dainty Cinderella glass-slipper situation, for the boots were uncommonly big. The gardener's feet, though still three sizes too small to allow an approximate fit, were the largest in the compound; he bargained for and got the coveted footwear, which was so heavy with hobnails and iron trimmings that he moved as if dragging a ball and chain.



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One afternoon he fainted at work and lay sprawled across the path next door. Steward, ironing at the back veranda table, scarcely bothered to glance across at the small fuss around the prone figure in the garden, but Smallboy ran out to help gather up the exhausted youth and carry him into the shade. The rescuers at once took off the boots and the boy recovered. But next afternoon we saw that he was once more encumbered and shuffling. Amazed by such endurance we asked, 'Why *does* he wear those boots?'

Smallboy, for all his earlier promptness with first-aid, grinned callously. 'To show he is a man. Also they cost ten shillings. And that boy never have shoes before, so he want everybody to see them.'

It was a statement of fact without pity. Robert, hearing Simon's remark, gave a brief snort of mirth and added, 'That boy be a fool.' Characteristically, all in the back compound saw the incident as a slapstick item. While to them ostentation on a grand scale was never funny (it was in fact something to be envied, respected and worked for), minor showing-off with deflatory consequences deserved loud guffaws. In the boys' judgment there was no harm in anyone being too big for his boots, but he who turned out to be too small for them was an irresistible target for ridicule.

We could not help feeling sorry for the gardener. We flattered ourselves that our judgment of human idiosyncrasy was more tolerant than the boys' and better poised. Then, as if to teach us a sharp lesson and test our vaunted equability, we had the odd little problem of Simon and the Montage.

One Sunday evening when all the staff had gone off duty, I was in the cookhouse. As usual Simon had left his books on the windowsill. When I lifted them aside, away from the tap's splashing, a picture fell on the floor. It was a clever trick photograph, showing a wide-eyed Simon, in city suit and collar of throttling stiffness, embracing with mild affection a white pin-up girl, a Hollywood star in a tight décolleté gown. Bill joined me in the kitchen and neither of us knew what to make of the picture.

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On the face of it there seemed no reason why a Negro small-boy should not share a negative with an international glamour-queen. Or, perhaps, we suggested, the trick was entirely Moses's work. He was much older, tougher and more sophisticated (we thought) than his naive, camera-minded disciple. Or maybe Simon himself had engineered the absurdity, intending it to be funny. Or, just conceivably, such pictures might be a current fashion among Lagos's youngsters. But no matter how we explained the photograph we could not discard our prejudices. We felt hoodwinked and affronted and in need of explanation. But, having stumbled on such delicate private territory, we could not ask Simon precisely what the picture meant. In any case he would certainly have been devastated by embarrassment, and would have written us long foolscap pages of explanation and apology. The thought was daunting. So we thrust the picture back into the book, vaguely depending on 'Coast memory' to obliterate the discovery. But it was oddly difficult to forget. The recollection returned uneasily sometimes, because we had no mental pigeon-hole for the Montage ... or would not admit one.

Simon, unaware of our discovery, continued to practise photography under Moses's eye, and to use the cookhouse sink for developing his negatives. With a rusty old box camera he took pictures of William and Fatima and presented them to us as formal gifts blackly bound in passe-partout. Offguard we offered to buy a few of the prints. They were delivered to us in a professional-looking envelope with an itemized bill, headed 'Simon Photographer', which charged us three times the shop price. Then, as if the boy had set out to explore a promising market, we received numerous sample gift enlargements. But at this point we withdrew our patronage, finding it cheaper to raise Simon's salary instead. He asked for the raise, diffidently but fairly pointing out that he did most of the housework, and adding that he had been saving for a long time for the new camera which he proposed ordering from a firm in England. 'It will cost plenty,' he told us. 'It is a fine one.'

Six months later Simon reached his goal. He returned one

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day from the Post Office with a bulky parcel which contained a second-hand Press camera complete with most of the attachments listed in the photography manuals. It had cost him twenty-five pounds, nearly a third of Simon's yearly earnings. We could not imagine how he had saved such a sum or how he might have mortgaged his future. Whatever the cost, Simon was complacent. His camera cast all the others for miles, including Moses's, into the tropic shade. And while still he worked at his smallboy routine as if this were his whole life, he began the career he had chosen — that of a 'proper photographer'.

Whatever their differences among themselves, Cook, Robert, John his son, Simon, Driver (and, on the nocturnal periphery, the current watchnight) preserved the outward look of smooth-functioning unity. We knew that the back compound lived in two camps, Driver and Simon deeply compacted against Robert and John, with Cook distributing kitchen treats to whoever made it most worth his while. Yet under our eye Robert and Simon behaved with paternal-filial circumspection, Driver pretended a high-minded aloofness from all domestic politics, and Cook treated all three with an offhandedness which was supposed to inform us of his total impartiality. We understood only from the occasional unguarded glances, the rapid exchanges in Ibo on the back veranda and the sudden silences that could fall when we unwittingly disturbed a closely hobnobbing pair or trio, that the balance of power in the back quarters was intricately contrived, and that many individual plannings and counter-schemes flourished, chiefly to our material disadvantage. But no matter what happened elsewhere, we were kept, so far as possible, soothed and comfortable. Our ignorance of most offstage palavers was due to the boys' strict overall code. This worked on the foolproof principle that he who rocked the boat must surely swamp himself, and



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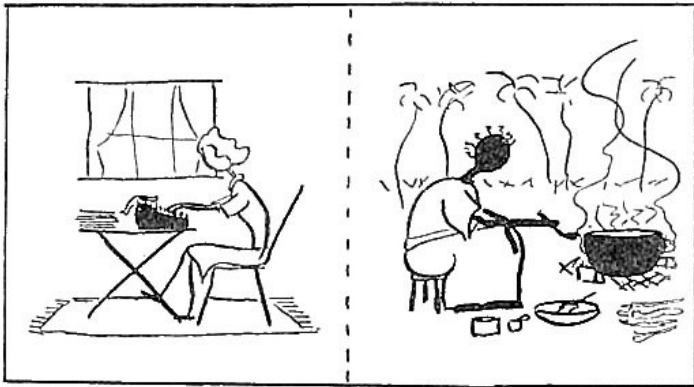
no staff palaver was worth the personal risk. Though sometimes piqued by what seemed a general conspiracy to keep us blinkered against everyone's peccadilloes, we could hardly object to the idea so skilfully presented of an amicable well-disciplined brotherhood who cared only for our well-being. To complete the theme, we accepted, as do most Europeans, the prescribed roles our staff allotted to us. Occasionally out of character, we wondered who was the prime mover in the establishment (for even split factions have their leaders); who gained or lost the most, and what sort of people stood behind the uniforms and polite voices and dark faces that were so familiar to us. Yet it was difficult to know any one of them as a real person. Each had his own separate past remote from our own, and a future that had, again, hardly anything in common with ours.

Some might think it unimportant whether we knew them or not, or whether they knew us; that between employers and employees, especially of different races, the barriers of money and social etiquette must always hinder understanding. Yet it is impossible to live in today's Africa, the world's most challenging, swift-changing continent, in the old neatly labelled ways. Everywhere you may see straws flying in the freshening wind — across the desks of offices, schools and universities, through the big shops and even down the sleepy market trails of the far bush regions. Everywhere, by innumerable minute alterations in the small details of the country's ordinary life, the change is made plain and the forecast of further change declared. This was so in the unexceptional pattern of our household which we shared with our employed handful of chance-met Nigerians. They were neither typical nor atypical of the Africans who will eventually inherit their own Westernized country. They and we may have had more in common had not convention, mutual prejudices, different histories and languages barred a real meeting point. As it was, we behaved to them much as all European Massas and Madams behave, and their manner to us was that of traditional Nigerian servants.

Yet, compared with times past, we sensed a subtle difference in the tropical domestic climate. Greater enlightenment, freer

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speech, the world's gradual lowering of racial barriers, had altered the once-fixed relationships. The new atmosphere lacked cohesion and continuity; the old pattern was blurred. It seemed as if everyone were striving to hold hard to as many advantages of the old system as was possible, while still grasping hungrily for the opportunities of a new regime in hopes of making the best of two incompatible worlds. Whatever the reasons, our ensemble of helpers, like our rented house, stood for expediency and temporization. We thought that a great number of other white dwellings in Nigeria must be like ours — solid-looking social structures but really only transit camps where Africans and Europeans lived briefly and closely side by side and still were strangers.



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HALF WAY through our tenancy of the house in suburbia we began to look for our next dwelling place. Everyone was quick to tell us that our chances of finding attractive premises were small. For such houses as came vacant there was keen competition; many newcomer Europeans and their families lived in hotels or with friends, waiting to snap up any reasonable accommodation. The rate of building lagged far behind the expansions of Government Departments and trading firms, and the influx of Europeans starting fresh ventures. Accordingly rentals, even for shabby or cramped accommodations, had soared, and the profitable real-estate business had become thronged with speculators, middlemen, opportunists and friends-who-had-a-friend. All this we had already learned from our first search.

Daily we scanned the local newspaper columns, both the short one offering vacant premises, and the long one (in which our own advertisement appeared each morning for six weeks) which specified the housing needs of homeless expatriates. Our telephone rang incessantly, and at first we were heartened by the eager rush of offers, even though they were all unsuitable. African voices that soon began to sound like the same voice wooed us with news of fine houses, spacious, modern, exactly what we wanted. But the investigations always revealed some snag. The house was dilapidated or had no plumbing, or it was 'not quite finished' (one was roofless, stairless and apparently

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abandoned half completed for lack of funds) or was after all merely part of a house, or it overlooked a rubbish dump.

We spent the late afternoons looking at houses, cruising along the dusty streets in search of addresses, and finding the 'fine property' to be, perhaps, a ramshackle shell tortuous with Victorian plaster balconies and entered via a petrol station. Or it materialized as a swiftly run-up speculative job, a number of tiny airless rooms squeezed between two bazaar shops on a main thoroughfare with builders' rubble on the doorstep and the inevitable prison-like concrete wall, spiked with broken glass, surrounding all. Occasionally the houses themselves looked livable but their setting explained the absence of bidders. One afternoon, with freshly roused hopes, we set off for another suburb. The soft persistent telephone voice had warned us that we must make haste, for this house was remarkable, palatial, brand-new, with parquet floors, the last remaining vacant residence in a popular, recently completed 'development'. As a special favour to us the voice would hold off other visitors for a few hours.

We followed a smooth pleasant road, past charming, secluded bungalows and lawns with flowering hedges and striped garden furniture, and past airy, pastel-coloured blocks of new flats. Then we rounded a bend and came to the 'development' boundary. There the good road became an uneven cinder track running alongside a village encampment of smoke-stained hutments and bare, greasy soil on which washing was spread to dry. The front door and side windows of the new house faced across the potholes. There was neither wall nor fence, nor any blade of grass — only a barren extension of village ground. We admired the inside of the house, then climbed an outer stairway to glimpse, in the distance behind a veiling of trees, the pleasant patchwork of desirable residences which we had passed earlier. We returned to earth, closely watched by an old man who squatted like a loosely wrapped bundle of bones by the dark cavern of his open doorway, spitting into the open drain which bordered the row of shacks. Small, fat, ragged piccans came out to gaze at the car and us. A young woman regarded

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us without expression over the dark, downy head of her suckling infant. A mangy, piebald, rat-hunting cat scrambled away under the shack boards. Undersized Nigerian fowls and the usual scattering of dusty chicks pecked listlessly among the orange peels along the gutter margins; the leg of one bird was grotesquely swollen with disease.

We remembered our two years in a Nigerian bush village, a place of pulsing night drums, ancient market places and shrines in deep forests far from pretty new bungalows, 'developments' and modern conveniences. It may have seemed illogical for us now to declare that this new house, so superior to our former tin-roofed bush dwelling, was untenable merely because of its nearness to the African village. The difference, of course, was in villages — the one natural, spontaneously alive and growing, this other no longer a real village but an in-between area whose lifeline was blocked. We saw it sunk in apathy and squalor, half dead, waiting only to be swept away by bulldozers and town-planners. The old man hawked and spat; the young woman, still staring, carelessly hitched up her bodice; the mangy cat skulked and the diseased fowl stood inert. A piccan came from a hut with a cooking pot and set it on an outside fire. The bitter smoke came from the silent tableau across the roadway like the smell of defeat, and drifted across the white front and shiny windows of the new house. It seemed more than ever a surprising building then, a phoenix splendidly risen from the ashes, New Nigeria springing from the immolation of its old self. But we were looking for a house, not an oracle, and so we left it.

That night we told the telephone voice that we did not want the house, and held the receiver away from our ears as it crackled incomprehension and reproach. Then there was a pause for breath and the voice, recharged, began to talk about another prospect, very fine, large, modern, in a first-class district. It belonged to the friend of a friend who was going abroad and might possibly be persuaded.... The rent was only sixty pounds a month and we could also buy all the magnificent furnishings, worth at least two thousand pounds, for much less.

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We had better see it quickly, though, because the friend's friend was already besieged by offers. As a very special favour he might hold it for twenty-four hours....

As we drove about Lagos, sometimes needing only to glance at the outside of premises to conclude our errand, we learned how many domestic front doors the city had besides those which the average comfortably housed European enters. There was the so-called modern flat which, through a builder's error or gross subsidence of foundations, had so many levels and slopes of flooring that the unwarned visitor lurched along them as if drunken. It seemed to us, in fact, a flat perfectly tailored to the uncertain movements of a habitual alcoholic. The small kitchen was dominated by a dark-visaged gas-stove that glowered from one corner as if crouched resentfully against our intrusion.



We could imagine it sadistically burning our eggs and bacon, or developing an 'asphyxiating leak. We turned from it to inspect another room which was most remarkable for its photograph, enlarged to life-size, of a nude that was unquestionably female. As we stumbled out to find a firmer footing we resolved never again to believe the flat-advocating telephone voice whose last adjective had been 'sumptuous'. Shortly afterwards we heard that the building had been condemned

and was soon to be demolished.

When we visited friends in their charmingly appointed residences, we tried not to air our housing problem, because this tended to depress the general conversation. One dainty house-proud hostess declared that her worst experience during a short-term tenancy had been due to a prevalence of fleas. They had been deeply entrenched in the old wooden flooring, she said, and soon invaded her own furniture. She had waged a battle of wits and science against their numbers, but was never

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sure of victory until at last the chance came to move to a new house. Then, having injected her furniture with enormous lethal doses of insecticide, she had thankfully installed it in a setting where the very word 'flea' sounded outrageous. 'Whenever I think of that time,' she declared, 'I shudder.'

The other guests politely shuddered with her, and sympathized, although few of them had ever been called upon to deal with such a problem. Most were well-established in up-to-date dwellings with large, private verandas and pleasant gardens. Several enjoyed — or wondered, after all, whether they did enjoy — air-conditioned bedrooms. To us, coming from close-huddled suburbia's unvarying blanketing heat, the debate had no personal meaning. When we entered an air-conditioned room we felt a momentary shock to the system. It was as if we had stepped from an oven to which we were fairly well accustomed, directly into a refrigerator. Our skin prickled and we were prone to sneeze. Used as we were to the breeze-inviting openness of tropical rooms, we were claustrophobically aware of the tightly closed doors and windows which imprisoned the false, crisp coolness and shut out the rest of West Africa. The beds, lacking conventional mosquito netting canopies, were scarcely recognizable as beds in Africa. Strangely, too, such an artificial room contained no sense of time; the clock looked more a toy than a true measurer of passing hours; the calendar, always puzzling in countries of only two clearly defined annual seasons, looked doubly unreliable. We stood surprised by the unnaturalness of our own natural climate, as if we had penetrated into a world within a world and had lost our bearings. But after a few minutes we became orientated. The conviction of uncomfortable chilliness vanished. The refreshing dryness, the fifteen-degree drop in temperature, became sweetly reasonable, and we recognized that this atmosphere was what our northern minds and bodies secretly craved, even though we had almost forgotten how it felt.

Then we opened the close-fitting door and were again without warning in the real Nigeria, as vulnerable as ever, as stickily oppressed, and helplessly back to abnormal normality.

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We were like children disconcertingly allowed one bite of an apple and no more, and the memory of the vanished moment was tantalizing. We thought then how strangely we expatriates lived: for ever too hot and moistly mopping, handicapped always by an alien atmosphere that sapped our minds and thinned our blood. Yet this half-acclimatization, so usual to so many Europeans, was not half so strange as the roomfuls of ease which the imported air-cooling machines brought to white people in the tropics. Air-conditioning was no longer uncommon in Lagos; no one regarded the ingenious apparatus as in the least fantastic. Most Europeans hoped eventually to air-condition their offices or parts of their houses. But still, perhaps because we lived concentratedly in a rented dwelling of irremedial greenhouse temperature, we saw the development as one of the bravest and strangest Western novelties ever to challenge the terrible power of the African sun.

It was as if those Europeans whose business backers could afford it had brought their own cool nimbus with them in special boxes of rarefied atmosphere. We imagined that West Africa's air-conditioning, unlike many other revolutionizing imports, must be chiefly for the benefit of white people, for we had never heard any African complain distractedly that his own country was too damply hot to be borne, or that his own climate affected his health or business efficiency. It did not seem reasonable (we said, on our way home to our stuffily netted, heat-encompassed beds) that Africans should genuinely wish to condition the domestic air of a country to whose nature the Almighty had presumably carefully suited their minds and bodies. 'But,' remarked Bill as an afterthought, 'we heat our houses at home — we don't live like polar bears. So maybe Africa would choose, if it could, to be cooled down sometimes.'

But we never did find out if this might be so. It seemed somehow a cheeky question to pose, out of the blue, to our African friends. As impertinent, almost, as the question we would have liked to ask about gardens.

Why, we often asked ourselves, was the town African so often content to look out from his front door on a patch of bare

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earth which might so easily have been transformed to a green and flowering prospect? Why did he raze his trees and scour away the grass roots until the brown floor of his compound was like any other floor, an area to be swept, not fruitfully planted? We wondered if the very richness of his country, the great tangled forests and fecund swamplands, had made him more skilful with a machete than with a spade. Or whether his new concentration on material goods left small room in his thoughts for the exterior pleasuring of his house. Or even whether, having so prodigal a background of colourful trees and bushes which seeded, grew and multiplied without the smallest human encouragement or attention, it seemed to him absurd to foster them laboriously in his own little patch of Africa.

Again, in many parts of old Nigeria it was by ancient custom the women who cultivated the yam and casava and maize plots; they stored part for food during the 'hungry' season, and the rest they carried to market. Even the average African townswoman, kin to her hardworking bush sisters and by heritage used to working on the soil, rarely showed any interest in lawns or flowerbeds. It might partly have been European influence that made every manual occupation appear servile and out of the question for anyone who valued his leisure and prestige. The white man's enthusiasm for gardening must therefore appear to Africans one of his strangest national idiosyncrasies. Lagos's hired gardeners dug and planted and tidied mostly for European employers; of these helpers the best were the northern Nigerians who came green-fingered from their distant fertile plateaux and great sandy spaces, and who had a great natural gift for cosseting and contemplating, in the way of the white man, a Lagos bed of tender lettuce or a pale expatriate rose.

As the days passed, our hopes rose and fell in sudden peaks and deep depressions like those of a fever chart. The telephone voices continued their indefatigable buzz of advice and assurance, sometimes offering, with the same happy zeal, the same impossible houses, which we had to decline several times

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daily. Until the very end of our search we parried every suggestion that we meet the owners of these voices. Although frequently they offered to 'pop round' with lists of houses or to 'talk it over', we preferred to keep a safe distance of telephone wire between ourselves and the ebullient commission-agents. Otherwise, we fantastically thought, we might be brought to bay by sheer persuasive eloquence. The situation was already sufficiently hypnotic. In our vulnerable state we needed to keep a sharp eye on our defences. So the faceless dialogues continued. The voices were usually optimistic and self-confident, only occasionally losing patience with us when, after the appropriate interval we rejected with one negative sentence half a dozen highly praised properties.

'Ah-h,' one uninvited adviser would say, deeply saddened by our obduracy, 'I have done my best. What you want is never possible.' Or, briefly scolding, 'You will find no finer houses in Lagos. You say you must have garden ... I find garden! You say big rooms ... I get big rooms! Then you say garden *and* big rooms!'

'True,' we inflexibly insisted, 'both.'

The voice would die away in a pitiful exhausted silence. Then, as if it had made a little prayer for patience and strength, it would return with amazing certainty. 'So! You shall have it. I will ring you tonight at seven sharp...'

We looked at another house whose only disadvantage was its situation, directly overlooking a railway turntable and an engine-cleaning shed. At intervals the train-whistles shrieked and puffing locomotives belched dark smoke that hung like a pall over the scorching sidings and sooty trackside walls. We did not care for trains enough to accept this railway eyrie, and went away to view another residence whose imposing architecture was a remarkable compound of Moorish and modern. We ascended wide shallow marbled steps to a vast veranda, and were welcomed in the owner's absence by a steward who showed us the interior. 'The bar,' he told us, unnecessarily pointing to a magnificent elevation strikingly like a streamlined pulpit (except for the telephone and the massed bottles) which

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dominated the main downstairs room. This section of the house was apparently given up to refreshments. A large number of facing chairs, each with its drinks table, seemed to await crowds of thirsty, long-staying guests.

A tiny olive-skinned child, shadowed by an African nursemaid in a skirt-wrap, came to watch us as we admired the new pastel gadgets in kitchen and bathrooms, and we walked about the maze of upper rooms and balconies while the steward chatted. 'Plenty work here,' he agreed, following my eye along dusty margins and flapping his duster apologetically. 'Floors, steps, bedrooms!' Over all the costly newness of gaily coloured lustrous surfaces a film of neglect had ominously begun to gather, like the shadow of a shadow, that deepened in the house corners. It reminded us, as houses in West Africa sometimes do, of an ambitious hotel whose opening-day sparkle is fast followed by this same vague, careless decline into the first stages of premature shabbiness. The steward flung open french windows to reveal more balcony spaces and more steps down to ground level. I mentioned burglars and the boy brightened.

'Plenty t'ief here,' he declared. 'Lights burn all night around house but t'ief still come. Fine house like this one always get t'ief.'

Later at home we found the telephone eager for our verdict. 'You like that house? We can arrange everything right away. Nine hundred pounds rent is cheap I think!'

'Nine hundred pounds for five years?' we unhelpfully said.

The voice tried to humour us with laughter but this business was far too arduous for levity. 'But of course *one* year ... very cheap!'

Kind friends, alerted to our need, told us of a large, ultra-modern block of flats that was now nearing completion, and offered an introduction to its influential Middle-eastern owner. Abandoning the idea of a garden, we went at once to seek out



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the man of property and see what he had built. He received us in his little office on the waste ground near his magnificent new building. The block rose, in tiers of balconies, out of a grey-green scrubland, most of which was already earmarked, he told us, for building plots. This area was soon to become an important commercial extension of the city. Clearly he was happy with his impressive part of it, his foresight and judicious investment, and with the rewards which the years would surely bring.

With him we picked our way across the hot flinty yard to the half-finished driveway and the hoarding which concealed the builders' gear, and debarred trespassers. The whole of the ground floor lacked only a few finishing touches; it was to be a shopping centre, completely up to date. The flats above were accessible by flights of stairways at the side of the building. We climbed the stairs, looking down at an enormous concrete back yard bordered by garages. This space was destined to accommodate a fleet of transport lorries, and the tenants' cars.

We climbed higher, past the first-floor flats and the long narrow balcony which was common to all the apartment entrances. On the second storey we found exactly the same arrangement. Our guide led us to one of the doors which opened into a Riviera-type flat all of whose surfaces were of the most chic, cleverly assorted textures and colours. The wide-open windows caught the fugitive afternoon breeze; the cream kitchenette and pink bathroom might have come straight from New York. Every inch of space had been put to excellent use. We returned to the narrow balcony which united all the doorways and looked down again at the concrete area which we could imagine echoing with the metallic din of parking and departing heavy transport. We thought of the white families who would soon be so expertly pigeon-holed in the strata of this concrete West African colossus, with the busy shopping centre below, the lorry depot behind and nowhere to go but out and away. 'Or, of course, up,' the block owner philosophically said, leading us higher, with further glimpses of long back balconies and rows of doors, until we reached the top. There we stood as if on the deck of a great ship, looking out at the scrubland, the

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distant mass of Lagos buildings, and the heat-blurred horizon whose coconut palms reminded us that this was Nigeria. There was to be a garden on this height, and refreshments would be available from a steward who would supervise the pantry and bar on the roof.

'Astonishing!' we said, meaning that everything about the place was astonishing, not least our companion. We knew him to be an Old Coaster, deeply familiar with the old Nigeria. From the humblest beginnings he had worked his way to the eminence on which we stood. Like so many of his countrymen whose commercial success alarms those with less stamina and gambling spirit, he had during many of his early years in West Africa refused to interrupt his business by taking the usual, inevitably disruptive, intervals of 'leave'; from the start he had unreservedly accepted Nigeria as the country where he would spend most of his life and earn his wealth. Born under his own hot sky and racially attuned to the ruthless pace and subtle method of his own thronged marketplaces, he was less a foreign element in the Coast life than were so many Britishers who instinctively kept a distance between themselves and the real Africa. He had worked, watched and waited, and now had profitably put his old knowledge and new vision together to make himself rich. Patriarch of a large, hardworking, prosperous clan in Lagos, his family roots were deep and tenacious. During his transplanting it seemed that no part of him had withered or lost character. On the contrary, he had flourished hardily. This stocky, little, heavy-shouldered grandfather with the quick, careful, dark eyes still made the large impulsive gesticulations of his unquenchable youth.

We did not add our name to the long list of would-be flat-dwellers because it was not possible to imagine ourselves and small William in the setting we had viewed. Something about the place — perhaps the enigmatic rows of doors opening on to the stark communal balcony vistas — perversely put us in mind of a de luxe penitentiary. Although brilliantly modern in every detail, it took no account of peace and privacy. It shaped its inhabitants into one mould from the outset, and we thought

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that such conformity was too great a price to pay for so tiny a unit of living space in the vastness of West Africa. Moreover, an element of superstition had by this time crept into our search for a dwelling. *The* place, we stubbornly began to believe, would soon materialize, and we should know it by the pricking of our thumbs. With only a fortnight of our present tenancy remaining, we lived in a state of Micawber expectancy.

Even so, our thumbs did not prick when one of our least popular telephone voices described, with the usual superlatives, a property that sounded much like all the others. The voice prevailed on Bill to seek out one Mr Eke who was described as an important, fabulously wealthy man of property. One of Mr Eke's many houses was available, although he did not much care whether he let it or not. Since Mr Eke was 'a little difficult' a personal meeting was recommended and Bill was advised to surprise him at lunch.



Bill, intrigued by this 'unusual conversation, went in search of Mr Eke. In an hotel dining-room he asked a steward to point out the gentleman. The steward led him to a table where a frail-looking white-haired African in a black suit sat alone. Bill introduced himself while he tried not to notice the diner's dentures which lay near the cruet as if guarding the immediate area. The following conversation went like this:

Bill: I am told that you have a house for rent....

Mr E.: Oh, that house. Yes?

Bill: We would be glad to view it if ...

Mr E. (addressing himself entirely to his

fish): You want it?

Bill: Perhaps, but first ...

Mr E.: The rent is a thousand pounds a year.

Bill: But surely ...

Mr E.: One thousand pounds if you want it. Good afternoon.

Bill came home annoyed and frustrated. The telephone rang

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almost immediately. It was the morning's voice again. 'I hear you have seen my Mr Eke. Now I will bring the key. This afternoon at four o'clock will do?'

Past any surprise, Bill agreed, but with the echo, 'one thousand pounds', still in his ears, he asked what fee the speaker had in mind for himself... unless he were doing all this out of kindness.

'Ah,' chuckled the intermediary, 'well, naturally I like to help, but for my trouble in making arrangements and so on, I should have a little commission. Fifty pounds is fair, I think. But no hurry about that. First I will show you the house, and then you will take it, and we will discuss the full details.'

The African agent came as promised. He jumped out of his small fast car, all easy smiles and bonhomie, flourishing a hessian bag full of keys, and introduced himself as 'Mr Shalo'. When pressed to divulge his exact status he said he was 'friend to Mr Eke' who, being immensely rich with investments everywhere, did not bother himself with little details. And he hinted that it was necessary to treat Mr Eke very carefully. He was old, and perhaps a trifle touchy with white strangers. But he himself was like a son to this ancient; Mr Eke always listened to *him*.

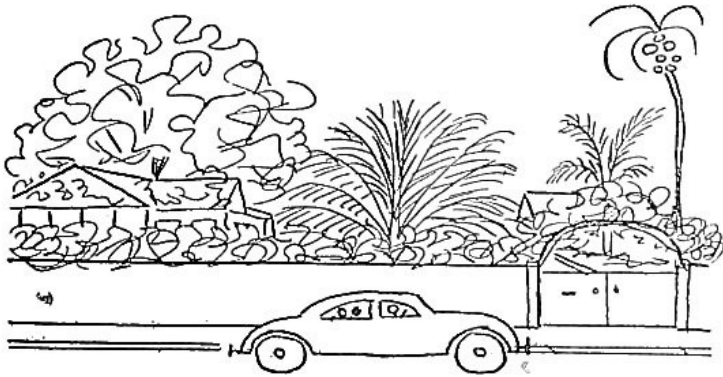
We did not go straightway to the house we wished to see. Mr Shalo breezily drove us first to other premises, a transparent psychological gambit which fooled no one, but successfully whetted our interest. He himself criticized these hors d'œuvres offerings, glibly pointing out their many faults and saying each time, 'But I wish you to be quite sure, to make no mistake. You want something good, not such a house as this!'

At last the car stopped outside a high wall which bordered a considerable length of roadway. Above the wall only a small portion of terra cotta roof, bright with purple bougainvillea, was visible, and the tufted tops of palm trees. Mr Shalo jumped out to open the tall green gates, and we drove in beneath a green archway from the dust and heat of the traffic-rushing commercial thoroughfare. We found ourselves in the shade-patched quietness of a large garden wilderness completely enclosed by walls, eight feet high. These were almost hidden by thick

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flowering bushes that might never have known a pruning hook.

The grass of neglected lawns grew knee-high; the concrete paths were strewn with fallen leaves. All along the paths formal stone urns stood at intervals, some of them holding the desiccated



skeletons of ferns and rose bushes, others cradling hardy scarlet-flecked 'elephant's ears' and fleshy lilies. Peony-size flowers, shaded from ivory to deepest pink, hung from a blushing hibiscus tree that was decorated with giant silky webs centred by brilliantly coloured spiders. Black and scarlet lizards scuttled away from our trespass, or posed themselves like tiny pre-historic monsters with scaly palpitant bodies on the pathway kerbs.

Mr Shalo talked and pointed, urging us towards the house, but the strange beauty of the garden held us. We had no wish yet to unlock the door of the bougainvillea-smothered bungalow whose porches were drifted with fallen leaves and whose glass windows were darkly reinforced with inner shutters. Mr Shalo misinterpreted our reluctance. 'It is all a little bit wild, but I will find you a gardener and soon everything will be in order. And see this!'

We were standing now at the rear of the house which was joined by a trellised archway to a large circular arbour where a broad-leafed tree of great size, a giant Tarzan tree, cast a stippled shade. The archway was thickly entwined in tendrilled vines from which big white flowers dangled like ghostly

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trumpets, heavily scented. Leaves, ankle deep, carpeted the arbour; they rustled down from the tree as we stood beneath. We saw that new buds were forming even as the old foliage was shed. Mr Shalo, leaning against the tree's broad trunk, kicked away the leaves to show us the asphalt flooring. He indicated a switch at the entrance and strings of dusty coloured lights interlaced among the branches. 'Very nice for parties and dancing,' said Mr Shalo.

Standing in the sun-drenched silence of the garden, outside the shuttered, empty house, we remembered the communal noises and unprivate windows of our suburb as if they were part of another faraway existence. Beyond the high front walls the roadway's traffic was muted, the world shut out. Here were the safety and privacy we had craved. We looked at the hibiscus hedge whose garlands screened the garage, and at the wide stone-bordered troughs that formed the kitchen garden where 'red hot pokers' surprisingly grew among clumps of seeded asparagus. Near by stood custard-apple and pomegranate trees, and one of the fruit-clustered coconut palms whose top we had glimpsed from the road.

We crossed the compound in front of the bungalow where three sentinel fan palms stood. Their symmetrically spread fronds drily whispered in the small warm breeze that ruffled the tall grass of the one-time lawn, where stood a dark green mango tree whose wide shade was almost black. We skirted the bungalow and followed a path to whitewashed outside buildings — boys' quarters, kitchen, pantry, storerooms — bordered with bushes of waxy-white gardenias. In the area between the Tarzan arbour and the pantry an African apple tree stood loaded with its strange, pinkly transparent fruit. Many of the 'apples' had fallen, and lay rotting in a swathe of pink, white and brown beneath. Mr Shalo picked one up and tossed it familiarly in his strong dark hand. 'Now,' he said, 'we will go back to the house.'

Mr Shalo took out a skein of keys from his bag. The front door stiffly resisted our entrance, but he pushed hard against it, and suddenly we were in the stuffily dark interior, unable at first to adjust our eyes from brilliance to gloom. In room after

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room Mr Shalo pulled the shuttering louvres aside and the light streamed in.

Everywhere, as in the garden, the long weeks of desuetude had done their stealthy work. The bungalow was without life or continuity. In the dining-room the door of an ageing 'fridge' swung agape. Bedroom dimnesses were humped with folded mattresses. The drawing-room carpet was rolled up, the furniture huddled. A large velvet-legged spider was in possession of the bath. The dark interiors of wardrobes gave out a musty odour and a faint foreign scent. Every surface we touched was silky with fine black dust.

'A wonderful house!' declared Mr Shalo, striding about. 'Everything you want. Look! A veranda in front, and this one off the dining-room, and another from the bedroom. Parquet floors, very costly, bathroom all tiles, electric water heater, lounge and bedroom ceiling fans....' Here he paused to switch on a fan but it did not revolve. Nor did any of the lights illumine. 'Oh, sorry, no electricity — all off at the mains of course.' Unabashed he continued his recital. 'Furniture, you see, all very fine!'

We thought some of it a trifle rococo for our taste, particularly a bureau whose front was inscribed with the legend, inlaid: 'The Happy Home — Peace be Onto You', but even that had an auspicious air, and we could no longer deny the pricking of our thumbs.

We followed the agent out again, across the garden to the annexe which contained kitchen and adjoining pantry. 'All tiled and modern,' he said, 'look, two sinks, cupboards, fine electric stove.' He disappeared around the annexe corner. 'Boys' quarters and lavatory, plenty of room, boys' kitchen.' He stopped a little out of breath and mopped his glistening face. 'You like it all?'

Despite all the work in prospect if we obtained the house, we liked it far more than was prudently admissible to Mr Shalo. We said that if the rent were reduced to a reasonable sum the negotiations might begin. We pointed out that the landlord should have the house painted, and the garden restored. We wondered if Mr Eke had seen it lately.

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Mr Shalo promptly agreed to almost everything. The rent would be whittled, the painting done. As for Mr Eke having seen the place, it was just one of his investments, he had never set foot in it, he was far too busy and important. Now the agent was impatient to leave us, 'to get cracking', he said, with the contract. Promising to telephone us next day he left us on our suburban doorstep and whirled blithely away to Lagos and Mr Eke. We went indoors to talk about the bungalow with far more optimism than future events warranted.

When Steward learned that we might soon improve our position and his with a better house he seemed relieved. But when we mentioned Mr Eke's name he laughed nervously, and Simon stared. 'Plenty rich,' mused Robert, 'plenty rich.'

'You know him?' we asked.

'Everybody know that man,' Robert said, 'Ah-h!' and went away shaking his head as if deeply amused or perturbed.

Mr Shalo telephoned to say that 'the negotiations were going on'. They were many-sided, involving permutations and combinations of participants: Mr Shalo, Mr Eke, Bill and two solicitors. The rent, as we had expected, was made less than Mr Eke had stipulated and more than Bill had offered. The debate on redecoration also ended in compromise. Mr Shalo continually sang Mr Eke's praises, but warned us that he must not be pushed too far. He also gently referred to his commission,

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saying that since he had been instrumental in such an enormous saving of money, he deserved every penny of the fee he had generously, after some discussion, pared to forty pounds.

But on the day before the contract was signed and the keys were handed over there was a Palaver. Bill, driving past the house, stopped by the gateway on an impulse to view the outside of the premises again and plan the gardening. With Driver he walked around the peacefully shuttered bungalow. It was Driver who said warningly, 'The side door. It is not fastened.'

The door swung open at a push. Together they entered the house, Driver a cautious pace behind, as if fearing that someone might jump out from behind the 'fridge' or be lurking in the shadowed hallway. Everything was as it had been, with one discouraging difference. From every wall of every room the electric switches and plugs had been removed. Short ends of torn flex dangled from ceilings bereft of light sockets and bulbs. Dirty footprints against white plaster spoke of the burglar's cheeky acrobatic work. 'An electric thief,' said Driver excitedly, 'What you go do?'

Bill returned home perturbed to telephone Mr Shalo. He was not at home. So Bill telephoned the news to Mr Eke, explaining his discovery and urgently advising that the police be informed. Astonishingly Mr Eke merely laughed, a faint, tinny mirthless cachinnation.

'But your house has been broken into,' Bill protested. 'The police should be told.'

Mr Eke stopped laughing and said impatiently that none of this was his concern.

Bill reminded him that the contract was not yet signed. He asked when the electric fittings would be replaced.

'That is not my business,' said Mr Eke, 'It is up to you if you want the house.'

Bill telephoned the police, who sent a conscientious young African in 'plain' clothes, native costume so un-plain and unlike police attire to our eyes that we could not associate him with the word 'detective'. He wrote vigorously in his notebook but was baffled by the house-owner's lack of interest in the case. He was,

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moreover, doubtful that the electric thief would ever be caught. Bill referred him to Mr Shalo, who came to see us later, biting his knuckles over Mr Eke's refusal to care about the vanished fittings. Finally, 'I have an idea,' the agent said. 'If you will have the electrical repairs done, I will somehow persuade Mr Eke to pay the bill later on.'

Bill was unimpressed. Mr Shalo fretfully concluded, 'Otherwise you can take it from my commission.'

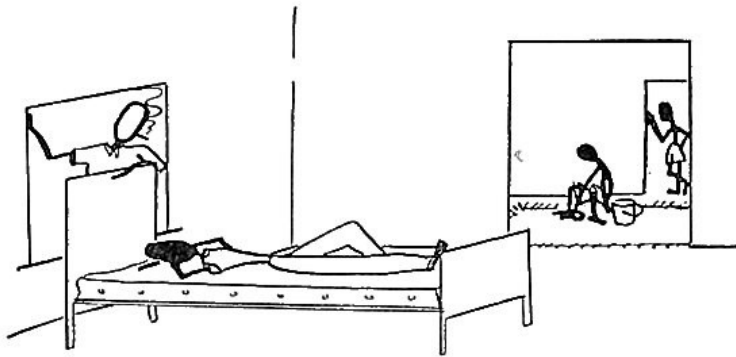
Bill found an electrician, an amiable Nigerian giant who surveyed the despoliation dispassionately and set to work. His was the true professional's laconic approach that discourages the layman's simple foolish questions. He smilingly shook his head when we showed interest in the details of his work, reminding us of a medical specialist who doubts his patient's intelligence and will not waste valuable time in esoteric explanation. His air of natural superiority was enhanced by his great height, which usually made a step-ladder superfluous. Simon obviously regarded him as a kind of superman, the fearless controller of a terrible power. Seeing him and all electricians through Simon's clear eyes, we gained a new respect for the entire shockproof brotherhood who flirt so nonchalantly with high voltages.

We also admired the skilful work of Godfrey, our hired painter. He painted slowly and spotlessly like a tireless automaton. He was by far the most efficient housepainter we had ever met anywhere, and his only fault was an inordinate appetite for paint. He refused ever to admit the smallest surplus. No matter how much we gave him of any one colour, he soon declared, poker-faced, that it was used up to the last drop. 'You must be chopping it,' Bill declared when Godfrey next presented his empty paint pot. Godfrey looked pained and said simply, 'A painter must have paint. Too thin it no be good. Massa t'ink I steal it?' This was a recognizable opening gambit to palaver, and the house was only half decorated. Bill dropped the subject and gave Godfrey more paint.

Robert, with two casual labourers to help him, was in charge of the house-cleaning. We looked in daily on an industrious scene populated by the electrician, a carpenter and his two

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small 'mates', Godfrey on his ladder, the two mute henchmen labouring with scrubbing brushes and buckets of ink-dark water, with Robert, Chinese-neat in singlet and shorts, presiding over all and occasionally doing a little light dusting. Outside a jobbing gardener cut the grass, swept paths and tended bonfires. We bade Robert and his helpers shampoo the dining-room carpet, polish furniture and wash windows — yet the house looked little better for their dawn-to-dusk ministrations. When Bill discovered Robert asleep on one of the beds, we dismissed the labourers, returned Robert to base and put Simon alone to improve on the trio's efforts.



Immediately the house began to brighten, except for the carpet, which was surprisingly discovered to be, *au fond*, pale beige, not the dark grey it seemed. Simon was given two bottles of powerful carpet soap and told to spend an entire day, if need be, in transforming grey to beige. Next morning we found him beginning to tackle this job on the veranda, and while Bill and I took curtain measurements, Driver benevolently joined Simon at his task. Fifteen minutes later they declared, all smiles, that the job was finished, and indicated the empty bottles to prove it. The carpet was still mostly grey except for occasional patches of beige where the pattern glowed richly. We pointed out the striking contrast which Simon and Driver tried to 'see' but strangely could not. In the end Madam solitarily shampooed the carpet one evening by hurricane lantern, so that Simon's

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face should be saved and her own dignity preserved. No one stood by in the silent house to attempt assistance or hover appalled. The secret work induced perspiration and exhaustion, but it was remarkably satisfying. Robert characteristically made no comment on the transformation but Simon, staring at the carpet next day, said amazed, 'That was fine medicine to make it all one same colour in the night. It is like magic.'

'Just so,' I agreed, for the day was far too hot and the domestic front too cluttered for any further discussion on carpet-cleaning.

As moving day approached we sought a seamstress to cut out and stitch curtains and covers for the big square cushions which in West Africa so often constitute 'upholstery'. Driver, hearing of our need, instantly went to fetch a highly recommended relative and her sewing machine. They arrived after lunch one day, the seamstress a thin, plain, steel-spectacled little matron in native dress, her sewing machine a new hand-model carefully wrapped in protective calico. She brought her two small daughters who clung to her skirts, apparently speechless with shyness, in their best frilled rayon dresses. Quietly bidden by their mother to sit, they sat, legs dangling, close together on one straight-backed chair. The seamstress brought out her measuring tape and swiftly measured a sample cushion. She firmly declined any assistance or direction, saying in her soft-severe way, 'I can do it, ma'am,' and without hesitation started to scissor the chintz. Her look of expertise was compelling. Even the two little daughters seemed hypnotized by it as they sat like a pair of dark dolls with their eyes fixed on her. When our son came to inspect them and make friendly overtures, they giggled and instantly were hushed to stillness and silence by a monosyllabic maternal command.

I suggested that the children need not be so immobilized and



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offered a plate of biscuits which the tots ate, swiftly and neatly, wasting not a crumb. Their mother sat supremely confident at her whirring machine. I went away to the kitchen for a few moments. During this interval I found that Fatima had arrived from next door, and the two small visitors had slid off their chairs to stand in rapt contemplation of the toys which could be glimpsed through the purdah-room archway. Soon overcome by temptation, they drifted over to watch William's and Fatima's games more closely. Within ten minutes the four children were playing together as if they had always been good companions, and the seamstress-mother, no longer sensing any need for her reproofs, smiled fondly at the peaceful kindergarten scene. Then, growing more excited by toys and novelty, the little girls threw away all pretence of sobriety. Fatima egged them on; William pressed upon them his tricycle, his drum, his horn. The pace grew hotter and suddenly the purdah room was bedlam dominated by the sewing woman's daughters. They sped out, both mounted on the tricycle, pigtailed quivering as if electrified, into the drawing-room. With William and Fatima in full cry behind, they circled the dining-room table where their mother sat working and fondly smiling. Then calmly she announced, 'The covers are all too big.'

Having cut up all the material and stitched several cushion covers, she had left her machine to fit one finished cover on its cushion. It was by far too large. Still her poise was unshakeable. While I sought to quell the madness which had transformed the docile children into pell-mell racketing delinquents, she announced further, 'I can alter,' whereupon she began to scissor the pieces again.

By the end of the afternoon two cushion covers were finished and fitted; the rest were in process of adjustment, being either reduced or re-enlarged; the sum total of the material was now insufficient by several yards. Fatima had thrown a tantrum and had been carried away screaming. The remaining three had exhausted the resources of the toys and damaged the tricycle. William's grazed knee had been doctored. The frilly rayon dresses were crayon-marked, the purdah room in chaos. The

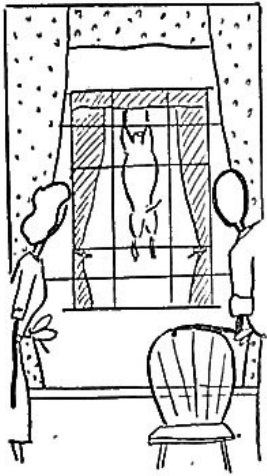
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little girls' mother held whispered conversation with her daughters. Their eyes flashed and they smiled the brilliantly wide white smiles with which they had illuminated the past hectic hours. The mother said, 'They wish me to thank you for this happy day. Now I will take the sewing home to finish ... or I may work here tomorrow.'

Hastily I agreed that the work be concluded off the premises. Driver came to collect the seamstress, her sewing machine and her children, and when they had gone the house seemed remarkably empty. Robert and Simon stoically tidied up the aftermath, and when Bill returned later from Lagos no trace of the occasion remained.

'Quiet day?' he inquired, as one who does not expect an answer. 'So-so,' I replied, according to routine, for it seemed to me that this was one of those times when recapitulation serves no purpose and silence is more healing than words.





A Chapter of Incidents

8

ON the evening before moving day our hopes were high; nothing could quench our spirits. A fresh goat carcass hung from our neighbours' window; the Arabic programme wailed through our dining-room; Fatima and Abdul quarrelled outside in the mosquito-haunted darkness. Under arc lights across the road labourers hammered, shovelled and exhorted in the stress of ambitious alterations to the front of one of the two big houses. The men were working overtime and their tempers, it seemed, were in worse condition than the torn-apart premises. Occasionally a Syrian voice cut across what sounded like a non-stop disputatious accompaniment to the pounding on metal and stone. The fractious din continued until midnight.

To this was added an outpouring of festive noise from a usually silent African house farther down the road. Robert told us that a 'function' was being held there. Whether its purpose was political or purely social we could not tell, but judging from the full-voiced singing and chanting, the marathon bi-lingual speech-making in many voices, and the delighted roars of laughter and applause, it was not only a success but a triumph of natural energy over the increasingly sultry, storm-laden atmosphere. Several gramophones, near and far, moaned or shouted their separate all too familiar themes. Normally our Anglo-Saxon nerves would have been shaken by the district's cacophony, but because we were so soon to leave we felt happy

for the celebrants, sorry for the angry toiling labourers, philosophical about the hanging carcass, amused by the weird dissonances of the competing gramophones, and even able to cease to worry that Fatima and Abdul might be mosquito-bitten with malarial consequences.

Working like scene-shifters we restored the house to its original appearance, re-hanging the voluminous curtains, lining up the social chairs, bringing out the gilt-edged soup plates and demitasses from the Stores and dusting the Arabian Nights jar of black olives. We stood on the upper back balcony, looking out across the night patchwork of crowding roofs, high walls and populous back yards, and were no longer troubled by the lustily encroaching vine or its unpleasantly mock-modest pink and white flowers. We had lived concentratedly in this house, but it had nothing more to do with us now, nor we with it. We had been of mutual practical service temporarily but nothing remained here of our personal imprint. The house and its setting had been more powerfully influencing on us than we on it. Had this not been so we might have seen our removal as something more ordinary than flight, and we might have expected someone to be sorry that we were leaving. As it was, we looked forward eagerly to living in the prospective dwelling which, with all its new palavers and strangeness of background, was so much more suited to our taste.

We lay beneath our mosquito nets, hearing the distant rumble of thunder across the hot darkness, and sensing a slow accumulation of stillness in which the bedroom curtains hung limp and straight. This was no ordinary late-night calm, but a magnification of tension, expectancy and awareness. Behind the velvet silence, as behind a heavy arras, the storm prepared itself. It came at last to detonate the suburban hush with thunder and fill the house with flashes of glaring light. Shutters banged warningly, curtains billowed, mosquito nets strained against the damp rush of air. The downpour came at first with a swilling, racketing force, like an enemy pounding on the roof. We fastened the windows and balcony door against it, and waited in an airless echoing vacuum for the deluge to abate.

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The noise soon died to the conventional undertones of steady rain that murmured around the house like a conspiracy of voices. Lulled by it, we ceased to wait and listen. The novelty of the storm palled and we slept at last in long-deferred comfort and tranquillity.

Next day we moved by instalments. The storm-washed sky was flatly grey, but in the afternoon shafts of pale sunlight brought a brief return of colour to the monotone puddled streets, through which we drove with the last carload of goods to our new address. We turned off the busy road, away from the concourse of fast-moving cars, buses and bicycles, into the entrance, and closed the gate. It was sufficient to be there, standing in weak sunshine on the threshold of another episode of Lagos living. It did not trouble us that the house, despite all our efforts, was not completely habitable. The paint-work had been done, the premises cleaned, the garden partially restored. But although there was electric light and the bell system had been repaired, all other electrical amenities continued either faulty or moribund. The bathroom water-heater was wholly inactive; the cookhouse oven-switch was inoperable; the drawing-room's ceiling fan would revolve only at 'slow'; the decrepit 'fridge's' interior was no more than slightly cool. The electrician, with the solemnity of a great surgeon giving his verdict after an operation, told us that he would have to take the fan away to effect a cure, that nothing in his power could mend the water-heater or the oven, and that the bell system would certainly be out of action by the next heavy rain. He pointed to a damp patch in the drawing-room's wooden ceiling. 'The wires,' he said, 'are up there. If anything goes wrong, please telephone me.'

Without much conviction we said we would. As yet the house had no telephone, and the Telephone Allocations Committee's formal replies to our pleas were not reassuring. Friends differed in their views as to whether we should be successful. Some said that getting a telephone in Lagos in these competitive days was possible by patience and persistence; some mysteriously declared that it all depended on the way you went about it; and

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a few cynics spoke of applicants who had 'put in' for a telephone regularly every month during the past five years and were still on the waiting list. We pointed out that since our house was also registered as business premises we must be considered eligible for a telephone, but this assumption was unfounded. Despite our many letters, the Telephone Allocations Committee continued to be politely ours faithfully but adamant to the end.

To Benjamin Cook's disgust the electric oven was taken away next day for repairs. He was obliged to temporize with a paraffin stove. Robert and Simon, bidden to heat bath water in bush fashion (in a kerosene drum on an outside fire) did not care for this improvisation. Also, they primly reported, the boys' lavatory was 'not fit'. As the small difficulties mounted, we remembered with increasing nostalgia our bush house of nine years ago, its lack of electricity and plumbing and absence of modern problems, and its 'boys' who prided themselves on their natural skills and ready adaptabilities. Here the tiled bathroom with its elegant chromium shower fittings mocked us. Benjamin, made helpless by constant access in the past to automatic switches, allowed the soup to taste of paraffin. The inefficient 'fridge' was less useful than the screened wooden-box larder of former days. Deprived of its revolving fan our drawing-room was far hotter than the fan-less veranda-room in the bush. We were not the first Europeans in West Africa to learn that the so-called higher standards of tropical town living can rapidly decline to rock-bottom if there is no bush resourcefulness to fill the gap when the amenities fail.

Slowly, however, the troubles were put right. We bought a new 'fridge' and electric stove. The water heater, doomed by our professional repairer, was cured in fifteen minutes by an odd-job electrician whom Robert brought on the scene. Fearing electrocution, we hesitated at first to trust it, but, when our professional at length gave the work his grudging approval, we dismissed our qualms in favour of large, much-needed baths. The ceiling fan was brought back, carried on the thin shoulders of our electrician's two sons. This time it revolved, faintly rumbling, at 'Fast'; its pace was not alterable. Timidly, with a

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disastrous picture in our minds of the heavy fan flying from its upper mooring and circling murderously loose, we asked if it were safe. Our electrician ambiguously replied, 'The ceiling must fall before the fan will come down.'



The complaint about the boys' lavatory led us at first to find a plumber, who declared that the trouble was serious; the septic tank required immediate municipal attention. On his advice Bill went to call on the appropriate Department in a honey-comb of downtown offices active with civic

voices, files and typewriters. A white official eventually received him and they discussed septic tanks and responsibilities — concerns which Bill thought might be reason for the official's look of waxy pallor and weariness and his 'apparent inability to smile even slightly. Soon afterwards an African representative called at the house. Khaki-uniformed and topeed, he had come, he said, to measure the septic tank, which was duly discovered, lying like a forgotten tomb, beneath an overgrown hibiscus bush. 'Why *measure* it?' we asked, mystified.

'It is my job,' the man replied, firmly declining to enlighten us, and when he had meticulously measured the concrete slab he went away. That same day another plumber called. Word of our difficulty had reached him via the usual grape-vine system, and he had brought his tools with him. He was ushered to the scene and stayed there some time. He left triumphant and well-paid, after telling us that the drain leading from the boys' lavatory had merely been blocked with leaves that were now cleared. The septic tank was blameless.

During the first confused days of our new tenancy we were visited by Mr Shalo, three Inventory-takers, Mr Eke himself, and one solitary unclassifiable young man who said that he had 'come from Mr Eke'. He presented himself one morning in a well-cut Palm Beach suit and a snap-brim hat. He wore a

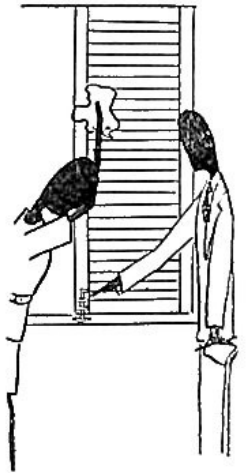
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massive signet ring and a look of aristocratic authority. In cultured accents he asked if we had 'any complaints'. Delighted to be asked, we cited our need for a new mattress, and our anxieties about the dizzily revolving ceiling fan and the leaking roof. The visitor walked about the rooms with us, helpfully pointing out small defects and making detailed sympathetic memoranda in a new notebook. Belatedly we told him that Mr Shalo was already well aware of all our house problems. 'I do not know that man,' said our visitor distantly.

'Mr Eke does,' we assured him.

The emissary looked blank. 'There are so many,' he said, 'and one cannot know everybody.' He closed his notebook and secured it with an elastic band. 'I will do all my best to get some of these things put right. At least I can assure you that you will have a new mattress.'

He strolled towards the front door, past Robert and Simon who were polishing the windows' louvres with coconut husks. He paused to watch them critically for a moment, then with elegant forefinger touched the small brass fastenings by which the louvres could be bolted together at night. 'These,' he earnestly informed his audience, 'should be cleaned with Brasso.' Then he went away, promising to call next day at nine o'clock precisely to tell us of Mr Eke's response to the requested 'complaints'. We never saw the man again. Mr Shalo shrugged off any knowledge of him; Mr Eke via his clerk disowned acquaintance. Busy with other matters we dismissed the odd incident. It was not until a fortnight later that we had particular reason to remember the notebook and our caller's conscientious interest in the louvre bolts.



The three inventory-takers were genuine. Their leader was a stout man of jovial mobile expression and great dignity in fez, richly patterned robe and embroidered slippers. His first lieutenant was similarly garbed, but less splendidly, in a robe of

white lace; the third man was a clerk in Western dress who followed some distance behind his seniors, carrying the communal brief-case and trailing, like a cloud of boredom, the smoke from his languid cigarette. The trio made a slow procession through the house and around the grounds, reciting, in three voices, each listed furnishing, and ticking off each item with scrupulous thoroughness. In this way they counted the heavy stone urns and all the lesser flowerpots, and they paused only when it turned out that certain substantial pieces of furniture were nowhere to be found. We reminded the men that we had long since informed Mr Shalo that these items — the extra wardrobe, the bookshelves and various other inventoried pieces — were missing. The inventory-takers showed no surprise. The clerk casually scored out the descriptions of the goods in question and wrote 'Gone' marginally on the documents. When they came to 'Garden Hose: New', we pointed out its innumerable perforations, whereupon they crossed out 'New' and wrote 'Leaky'. At length the inventory — which now looked, we thought, like the heavily revised version of a first-draft manuscript — was signed and witnessed with due formality. The leader handed the papers via the second man to the third and told us briskly, 'Now we have everything in order, you will have no more worries.' Bill, refraining from comment, showed the party out, accepting, at the moment of the big man's farewell, a card which listed his many trading businesses and sideline activities. 'You must be making a fortune with all these occupations,' Bill remarked. The velvet-robed figure made an effort to look modest. 'I gain roundabout what I lose on the swings,' he replied, and, leaving us with this unexpected version of an old metaphor, he regally led his henchmen out to the waiting taxi.

One morning a little later, Robert, preserving his customary poker face but unable to hide the glint of excitement in his eyes, announced, 'Mr Eke is in the garden. He will not come inside.'

We went out to find our landlord standing alone on the lawn, leaning on a walking stick in apparent reverie, as motionless as a dark statue. His black suit accentuated his

skeletal thinness; his narrow craggy-browed face had the burnished immobility of an Epstein carving in ebony or stone; the heavy-lidded old eyes were expressionless. We greeted him and he nodded but did not speak. We were unnecessary to his scene, extraneous to his thoughts. He ignored us. We stood islanded in silence and hot sunshine, with the fecund brilliance of the garden all around us. We observed Benjamin Cook covertly peeping from the cookhouse doorway, Steward standing as if hypnotized on the side veranda. Smallboy had disappeared. Driver was vigorously cleaning the car in the driveway, polishing and repolishing the same patch of metal and not looking up at our guest, who now began to walk very slowly to the gate. He paused there to nod to us again briefly and dismissingly before he was assisted into his mammoth car, whose driver, not in uniform but wearing a pink nylon shirt with its tail out for coolness, waited proudly by the door.

Smallboy Simon emerged from behind the cookhouse, halted long enough to assure himself that the coast was clear, and hurried forward to resume his house duties. From the cookhouse, heavily silent until now, came Cook Benjamin's customary singing, only a little louder than usual, 'There is a happy land, far far away.' We had lunch, and the day was uneventful again until teatime and the next diversion.

Simon, as usual, brought a tray into the front room which Bill had made his office. Without preamble he stated, 'a little magician has come'. Bill looked up from a pile of timber specifications and quipped abstractedly, 'Magician? Good! We can do with one. Send him in.'

'He is already here,' said Simon, and we saw that he was, though he was so diminutive that his head, topped by a plush fez, came scarcely higher than Bill's desk. Incredibly elflike, he presented himself, a tiny urchin of perhaps ten or eleven, barefoot in a loose, gaudy



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rayon shirt which exposed much of his bony chest and ended in shredded rags at his knees. His delicate face was all enormous eyes and ingratiating grin. His professional poise was flawless.

'I will swallow for you a pound note,' he said promptly. 'I will eat razor blades. I will do plenty magic, see?' He dramatized these remarks by idly striking together what looked like two ordinary pebbles and causing sudden cracking noises and flashes that made Smallboy Simon's eyes pop with half-horrified fascination. Then, bringing out a penny from his shirt pocket, he made it 'disappear'. Deftly, with flashing fingers, he plucked it from Smallboy's nose and demonstrated its transformation into a shilling. Without pause he continued his repertoire of legerdemain until Bill asked, 'Where did you learn this magic?'

The boy chattered animatedly. While very young he had gone to live with the spirits in the bush near Onitsha. How he had lived and what he had learned were secrets that he never would tell. When he travelled up and down country he did not go by lorry or on foot; he could move anywhere at all at will, as a spirit. He had no father, no mother, nobody; he did not need to have parents or family like other people.

Smallboy, solemn and silent, was clearly impressed; the waif watched our faces. We asked for more 'magic', though Bill cautiously substituted plain paper for the requested pound note. This the little magician convincingly appeared to masticate and swallow. Then he opened his mouth wide and invited inspection of his empty pink gullet. Smallboy also looked, amazed and slightly fearful, as if wary of a bite from the sharp little teeth. Duly the paper was produced again, dry, intact and little the worse for wear. Business with razor blades followed, and it looked real enough to make us wince. We contemplated the child with suitable amazement, seeing some of his illusionist performances equal if not superior to the feats of one of our friends who was a member of London's Magic Circle.

At the end of the performance Bill paid the boy and asked Smallboy to give him food. The little magician did not go; he

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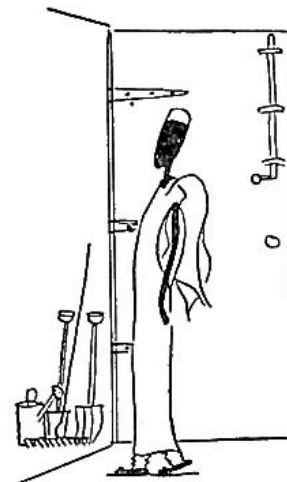
looked thoughtful and declared, 'I wish to 'live here.' He continued in his own tongue, Simon interpreting. The boy would stay in the compound and bring Massa plenty good luck, save him from enemies and sickness, help him with fine magic to grow very rich.

Bill said he was sorry that this idea was impossible.

The little magician's face abruptly lost its happy vivacity. He looked sulky and turned a brooding gaze upon us. Hastily Simon said, 'Come, we will get some chop.'

With another lightning switch of mood the child recovered nonchalance, bowed deeply to us with a touch of derision and whisked himself away in Simon's wake. There lingered in the office only a faint peppery smell — of gunpowder, perhaps, or brimstone, or juvenile wizardry. After half an hour with the little magician we could not easily concentrate again on the logic of timber statistics, so we went out for a drive.

As soon as Umam, the gardener, joined our staff, our wilderness began to look cultivated. Umam had the unmistakable attributes of a born gardener: a bony face that was slightly careworn and moderate in all its expressions; a mysterious but effective schedule; and a total self-sufficiency. Although thin and small, he had the northern Nigerian's characteristic calm pride of glance and dignity of movement, and he made our every encounter with him a minor ceremony. He came to work in a white robe and skull cap which he doffed in the garage, wearing for work a pair of baggy blue shorts that were a masterpiece of fine needlework in their elaborate patchwork piecing. One day, having gashed his leg deeply with his machete, he came unhurriedly to find me and diffidently report the accident; even as the blood flowed from his sinewy calf to the path, he made his usual salute with hands clasped and head courteously bowed. Antiseptic and bandages



were fetched by Smallboy in a flurry of ejaculations and confusion, while Umam stood impassive as if he were the onlooker rather than the centre of the fuss. I bathed the wound saying, 'It must hurt badly.' 'It hurt,' admitted Umam indifferently, not permitting himself the slightest catch of breath or give-away grimace during my ministrations. Then he picked up his machete again, preparing to continue his work. I protested that he must go immediately to the European doctor for professional treatment. He shook his head positively, 'This leg he all-right now. Other times I cuttem, he grow better. I no go for hospital. People go inside, no come out. I get my own medicine.'

Umam hobbled about his tasks for the next few days. The bandage disappeared and we saw that the cut was thickly covered with an adhesive white substance, the 'medicine' of which he had spoken. In a remarkably short time the wound was completely healed, and Umam was as nimble as ever.

Under his hands the garden took on trimmer outlines; the juicy, sprawling growths, the meshed pendent vines, the tangled, clutching roots were rigorously disciplined. Umam's bonfires were like triumphant beacons celebrating law and order. Much of the densely swathed purple bougainvillaea which had already weakened the bungalow roof was stripped away; window views were cleared of obstructive greenery; withered palm fronds were lopped; fallen rotted fruits were shovelled into a compost pit; hedges were drastically sheared. The kitchen garden's stone troughs were furnished with tomato seedlings, lettuce, radishes and cucumbers, over which Umam erected shady raffia tents. In the shaggy garden borders hitherto occupied by exotic weeds, self-grown marigolds and zinnias, Umam planted regimental lines of scarlet and yellow canna lilies whose ranks he inspected severely each morning, like a sergeant-major who will not tolerate any slacker or nonconformist. We were sure that the garden would never be easy to manage. Its spirit was essentially renegade, and only a gardener of Umam's calibre could have controlled it.

It often defied even his authority by spreading a bloom of

woolly aphids on the blushing hibiscus and gardenia bushes (cured by patient application of soapsuds, kerosene and ruthless amputation), starting plagues of insects and fatal blights among the tender vegetables, and by promoting rampant growth where growth was least desired, so that his machete was ever active. For some weeks the constantly drifting leaves from the giant shade tree, which changed its foliage twice a year, had to be swept up morning and night; and even in the hours between, the asphalt flooring beneath the tree became a littered rustling arena. The lawn's coarse grass resisted the lawnmower, whose blades frequently needed re-sharpening. No improvement happened readily; nothing that grew hardily was of its own nature tame and sedate. Even the imported roses, carefully installed in the theatrical urns, lost their home identity. With intemperate speed their tight buds became full-blown disintegrating blooms that disallowed the kind of leisurely admiration which is the proper due of natural roses.

During its early days the garden gave up an odd harvest of hidden bottles and tins, and even a few rusted light-plugs that may have been part of the electric thief's plunder. William made the most interesting find, to which, after some initial consternation, he grew attached. It was an empty cream-and-brown-stippled snail shell, eight inches long and four inches wide. We showed it to Umam, trusting that his problems did not include invasions of such monsters. But snails of this kind, we were told, were not Lagos denizens. They were a variety that thrived in distant bush country. Fiercely carnivorous and edible, they were brought for sale as delicacies in the town markets. Emphasized Umam, 'Such t'ing live for bush. They fear town too much.'

We had already noticed the absence of other forms of exotic life such as had long ago been commonplace on our bush veranda. In Lagos we were not visited by gorgeous nocturnal moths, or 'sausage beetles', or bats, or any of the vivid comic fantasia of winged and crawling life that once had nightly made its miniature circus around our lamplit chairs. Only the night geckos came — small, colourless and almost transparent, like

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the diminished ghosts of the bold scarlet and black daytime lizards — to flit soundlessly across the walls or engage in silent darting skirmishes around the picture frames. Of ants there were plenty but, whereas in the bush their numbers and depredations had made them a formidable domestic enemy, they seemed as town ants to have less character. In the bush we had been vigilant lest we disturb an easily angered scorpion; in town we forgot the existence of this once-common hazard. Nor did we any longer regard tsetse flies or tumbu flies or snakes as possible interferences with health or serenity. Only the mosquitoes and the night crickets remained unvanquished by the city — the mosquitoes fewer than in the hinterland but still malarial, the multitudinous shrill crickets harmless and impossible to imagine silent.

On some evenings it seemed as if, in our pleasant bungalow, buffered by its controlled garden, we were sealed off from everything we had known of the country in our bush days. It did not help us to sit outside under the Tarzan tree whose artificial lights twinkled so gaily in the black-green maquis of boughs and leafage. We recaptured the atmosphere of a bush evening only when moonlight filled the garden with blanched quietness and other-world shadow, coolly silhouetting the formal palm trees and making elegant perspectives along the paths where all had been blurred and foreshortened by the day's heat. By day it was not our habit to look at the sky or regard the far hot distances, our general vision being restricted to the obvious and immediate. But on moonlit evenings we saw whole and easily, as if through a magic silver mirror, what was around us. It was the preferable view, a clear distillation of excellence from which all visual dross and discomfort were expelled. Seen from outside, the bougainvillaea-wreathed bungalow was a charming ivory shell glowing with friendly lights, and the poinsettia tree which leaned across the office window revealed itself with the delicacy of an etching. When we walked through our moonlit garden we felt increased rather than, as in daytime, diminished by West Africa, and we knew that it must be memories of indestructible moments like this that can lure

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white people back and back again to a continent where they do not by nature belong.

We did not easily become blasé in our different setting. It never ceased to please us that we should be able to look out from any window at any hour on tranquillity, or to surprise us that so green and quiet a retreat should exist behind its screen of hedges only a stone's throw from the hustling main road. Our new pattern soon became defined, its centre the front-room office that was accessible from the veranda by a private door. Callers with brief-cases mounted the steps. Messengers with cables and telegrams propped their cycles by the gate. Driver was a mobile substitute for the missing telephone. A clerk, Thomas, was engaged to assist Bill in the office and help keep the lines of communication clear between house-office and the log-beach on Lagos island. Thomas, having decided to become a clerk, completely looked the part. He wore beautifully laundered white shorts and shirts; he owned a well-groomed, three-speed bicycle, an imitation leather attaché case and a matching pen and pencil set. He combined deference with an unshakeable self-confidence and, although he had not completed his course at a secretarial college and his shorthand and typing were slow-motion, he had not hesitated to declare himself perfectly able to manage the entire office single-handed. Bill assured him that he needed a general aide rather than a secretary, but Thomas, having got his teeth into typing, would not relinquish his grip and doggedly pounded the machine whenever he had a spare moment. Sometimes the resolute clacking sounded through the lunch hour, and the waste-paper baskets filled with his trial-and-error pages. Thomas begged to have letters dictated that Bill could have drummed out with two fingers himself in five minutes. Having slowly inscribed them in exquisite Pitman, Thomas would frowningly tap them out with much recourse to his typists' manual and the red half of the ribbon. When the errors were too many, Bill would retype the correspondence, while Thomas, as sensitive as he was ambitious, looked deeply hurt.

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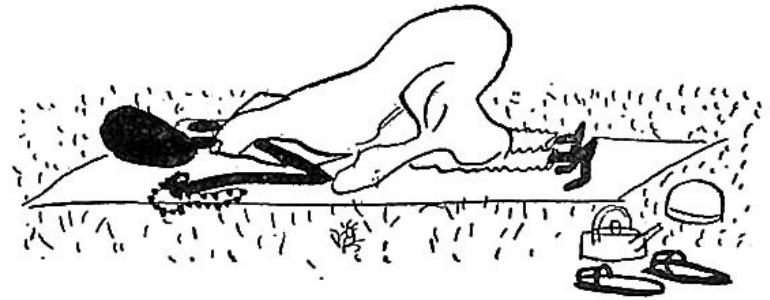
He was pained to the point of palaver when at length Bill put the machine out of bounds for Thomas and pointed out that it would save everyone's time and energy if the boy concentrated on other necessary tasks at which he was more proficient. 'But, sir,' said Thomas, 'a clerk must do shorthand and typing, and I will practise to become perfect.' 'Not here,' said Bill firmly. 'Anyway, when you are a big business man you'll have someone to do it all for you, surely.' Since Thomas was already convinced that this was his destiny, he acquiesced in this reasoning. That work, he agreed eventually, was for lesser men who got nowhere.

Accordingly the technical books he brought to the office henceforth were no longer shorthand and typing primers but volumes of instruction for junior executives, chartered accountants and advanced law students. Whatever Thomas's failings, Bill always maintained that he gave the office tone. His beautifully penned ledgers made arithmetic look like art; his calligraphy was copy-book. And nothing was more stimulating on a dull day than a series of Thomas's helpful quotations from his exalted mentors.

Between Thomas and the houseboys was little *rapport*. They exchanged minimum greetings as from separate spheres. Steward, asked to include a third coffee cup on the office's morning coffee tray, set it down with a look of especial bleakness. A true conservative and product of his training, he never approved our giving refreshment to African visitors, much less to staff. Though himself a heavy drinker of perquisite coffee, he quaffed our brew privately, on his own initiative. Smallboy placed the clerk on a level above Steward and Driver (Driver, in Smallboy's eyes, being exalted above Steward) and always called him 'sir'. Driver saw himself as the clerk's equal, as did Steward's son, John, the budding electrician whose status was soon to be that of technician. This subtle grading of importances did not, however, appear to concern Umam, the gardener, the northern odd-man-out, whose scale was much simpler. His manner to us was of particular respect, to all the rest an easy neutral acceptance. When Umam opened the gate for Driver,

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the act was ordinarily dutiful; he added a graceful bow and flourish when we were in the car. On separate occasions the clerk, Steward and Driver fell into the error of treating Umam as an underling and giving him an order. Umam, without emotion, ignored them, or thinly smiled at their ignorance; he took orders only from us directly. At sunset, when the clerk wheeled his bicycle towards the gate and distributed gracious nods to anyone in the vicinity, Umam was oblivious, kneeling to Mecca and telling his beads.



When we read our local paper's dissertations on Nigeria's problem in achieving unity of thought and government between its three racial and political regions, we thought of the separate factions within our compound: northern Umam, western Thomas, eastern Steward, Smallboy, Driver and Cook. It seemed to us that the Thomases and Roberts of Nigeria's political world would need more than a talent for speech-making and order-giving to persuade the country's Umams to their way of thinking and doing. If the fundamental differences between Thomas and our household's eastern bloc was anything to go by, we saw that east and west were also strongly individual in their past traditions, present attitudes and future ambitions. But most clearly we realized that, in any attempt to unify all three sections, the north would prove to be the least assimilable or likely to compromise.

At last came a day when we congratulated ourselves on solving all the little problems precipitated by our removal. Mr

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Shalo of the unctuous voice and expectant palm had disappeared from our ken with Mr Eke and all his satellites. The compromises were ended; the police had apparently ceased to ponder the identity of the electric thief; the workmen and their mates had gone. The amenities sufficiently functioned. The new office regime was established. Bill and I enjoyed a sense of rare and invigorating victory, and dared to boast that from now on our course in Lagos would surely be all smooth sailing.

We spoke rashly in this vein over a lunch that was one of Cook's best, featuring an excellent prawn salad. To our garden view from the dining-room was added the presence of a pair of guinea-fowl which we had accepted from a flat-dwelling neighbour, to whom the birds, a gift to him, were an embarrassment. We thought that the fowl, which had arrived from a far distance suffocatingly pent in a box marked 'Gordon's Gin', must enjoy our premises, where they were allowed to roam freely. Cook had come at once to ask when we should 'chop them' and was non-plussed by our reply, 'Never'. 'You just keep them in garden?' he inquired, incredulous. 'Not for roast?' 'We like to look at them,' we told him truthfully. Cook shook his head at the waste, and, when we asked him to buy market corn for the birds, we had to repeat the request which at first he had dismissed as a poor joke. The refugee guinea-fowl were by no means so splendid as the peacocks which would have been so suitable to the lush landscape, but they were the best available substitute. Moreover they provided some delicate comic relief; their mincing walk and tweedy plumage suggested a certain striving elegance which made us think of two timid middle-aged sisters of borderline County standing and fluttering social aspirations.

The turkey which came to join the pair as a third free-roving boarder had not been decoratively intended. It was delivered to us as a potential meal, in a small circular basket from which it emerged apoplectic with rage, fright and thirst. Cook made a prompt appearance but was again frustrated, for we preferred hypocritically to buy our dinner-time turkeys ready for the oven, not in full gobbling voice and rusty black

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feather. Sensibly, none of the feathered trio attempted to leave the garden. The guinea-fowls, plump, narrow-shouldered sycophants with chalk-white cheeks and simpering beaks, followed at a demure distance wherever the turkey led them. On blazing silent afternoons when idle imagination grew extra fanciful, the birds typified a group of garden-party ladies — the turkey an autocratic dowager (titled, we were sure) who was in demand for fête openings and prize-givings. Fashionless in her trailing black and given to tetchy rebukes and ultimatums, she was, in majesty of parading bulk, mottled complexion and quelling eye, a perfect foil to the meek-looking but valiantly social guinea-hen 'girls'. Despite Cook and Christmas and many other hazards the three lived with us in this way until the end of the tour.

But on the noontime of the prawn salad when we flattered ourselves that we had come into a new calm era, the tour's end was still seven months distant. Nor was the day's calm to endure for long. A few hours after lunch Bill complained of a turbulent malaise which he attributed to the prawns. The Cook Palaver that followed was curtailed by a rainstorm. It came upon us out of a darkening sky that was soon, like Tweedledum's and Tweedledee's vast crow, 'as black as a tar barrel'. Similarly it 'made the two quite forget their quarrel'. As the rain drummed down on the close-shuttered bungalow and all the outside world became a southing of wind and a blur of water, we heard a crash from the front of the house. It was our heavy iron gate-archway — thickly entwined in flowering greenery — which had collapsed in a great heap of debris, completely blocking the entrance. Meantime the lounge ceiling began to leak in a new place and we remembered the electrician's warning about the bell system in wet weather. Soon we heard the bells sounding loudly and steadily through the rain, ringing in the boys' and kitchen quarters like an urgent summons. Steward and Small-boy came startled from their siesta, sleepily buttoning their tunics and doubtless expecting to find one of us leaning on the bell-button in an inexplicable fit of temperament. The mad noise could not be silenced. Smallboy volunteered to go out into the

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deluge to fetch the electrician; Steward brought a basin to catch the drips from the leaking ceiling. Bill, pale and distraught because of the prawns, went back into the office. Smallboy returned, dripping and heroic, to say he had not been able to find the electrician but had left a message. So the bells went on ringing wildly against the mocking susurrations of rain.

By teatime it seemed as if order was restored. All hands (except young John's) helped Bill and Umam to clear away the sodden, derelict archway. The electrician came to quiet the bells' clangour and declare that we must have an entire new system installed if the incident were not to be repeated. We decided that bells were a superfluous domestic refinement.

A little later we wished, not for the first time, that we might similarly dispense altogether with keys. There were car keys, keys for the garage, house doors, wardrobes, kitchen, office, luggage, drinks cupboard and stores, petty cash box and filing cabinet, keys, large and small, that represented the careful Coast habit of keeping all valuables and consumable goods locked away. Their ritual use had also something to do with the vagueness of 'Coast memory'; it was reasoned that if there was a lockable place for everything and everything was in its place, self-doubts, unfair suspicions and generally careless activity would be minimized. That afternoon all the keys lay on Bill's desk, in process of labelling. At five o'clock we heard the ominous click of a briskly slamming desk drawer. Our infant son was discovered to have placed all the keys in it and to have pushed the Yale self-locking compartment irrevocably shut. Consternation followed. 'Now,' pronounced Bill gloomily, looking out at the continuing dark downpour, 'we need a locksmith.'

At that moment Cook appeared at the doorway to ask for fresh supplies of sugar, flour, tinned milk and coffee from their locked repository, and at his heels came Steward who wished to have the drinks cupboard opened.

'Too late for a locksmith,' Bill decided, and strove variously with hairpins, screwdriver and other instruments to pick the drawer's sturdy intricate mechanism. Steward stood by fascin-

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ated, and unable, for once, to maintain a straight face. The situation tickled his fancy, and though he murmured words of sympathy he could not sound convincing. Smallboy, himself a firm believer in the key system — always stoutly securing his own room's door and windows and advising us whenever we left a lock unfastened — was apparently genuinely dismayed. But neither boy would assist Bill in trying to pry open the lock. Nor would Cook or Driver. All professed to be without the slightest skill in lock-picking. All waited with keen interest to see what would happen next.

Bill, nettled by his audience and the ingenuity of Yale, took



the easy way out. With screwdriver and hammer he prised open the drawer, which cracked away to reveal the hoard of keys within. We saw them freshly, newly astonished by their number and by the incredible customary vigilance of the Coast householder. Soon the evening schedule was properly under way as the keys did their ritual work of opening and closing, releasing and confining, according to the usual expected pattern. Only Steward's smiling mood continued to hint how much he had relished our impasse. Ruefully we saw that the joke had indeed been on us, like all the other little jokes of that salutary afternoon. That night over dinner we did not boast of victory over anything. We were properly humble and thoughtful and went to bed early.



Strangers Within the Gates 9

Each evening at eight the current watchnight would loudly and dutifully take up his position on the front veranda. He would bob us a reassuring salute through the open window, then set down his mat and other provisions for the long vigil. Usually seen in darkness, he had a look of nobility and solitariness, set apart from other men by his guardianship of the shadowed secret hours when the compound slept. During the ordinary bright daytime he slept, or was presumed to sleep, though some watchnights were known to have day jobs which in theory altogether rule out any rest. Our watchnight made it plain that in him valour and wisdom were truly welded. His robes were prudently inconspicuous and he always brought a shapeless ex-army greatcoat as protection against the dewy chill of the lonely small hours. He carried concealed on his person a keenly honed, readily accessible machete. His voice was gruff, his long rough-hewn face solemn and enduring. His air of gravity and mystery might have been borrowed from the Ferryman who waited by the river Styx. Because we rarely saw him in daylight he seemed less an individual than a routine nightly presence.

Although in the course of time we employed a succession of watchnights, each of them appeared as the same tall, draped, brooding sentinel, the same aloof, huddled figure to whom time was only a drift of familiar darkness which he must scrutinize at

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intervals for lurking bandit shapes. He did not, however, make any secret of his responsibility. The night silences were constantly broken by his challenging reminders to us and any chance hidden thief that he was at his post and wide awake. Our first watchnight, though so lean-shanked and hollow-cheeked that one could not imagine him a trencherman, whiled away part of the night with two large meals: oily, starchy mixtures which he brought in enamelled tureens bright with scarlet polka-dots. While he ate this food in the veranda light, at midnight and again before dawn, he cheered himself further with comfortable soliloquy. All the watchnights had this habit of conversing with themselves meditatively, vivaciously, placidly or irritably, depending on their natures. After each meal would follow a series of deep and prolonged eructations, magnificently uninhibited. Sometimes we woke to hear them and drifted off to sleep again, content to know that Watchnight was alertly digesting his recent nourishment.

Another watchnight divided his time between reading his newspaper aloud on one or other of the lighted verandas and addressing his Deity strenuously and at length. He was, we sometimes thought, a man cheated by his job of the audience he needed for his proper fulfilment. He read his paper slowly from first page to last with pauses for dramatic effect, and during this lone recital gesticulated busily with his free hand and contorted his face in suitable expressions. Syllable by syllable he worked at his reading between intervals of pacing the compound. His prayers came later, delivered with such feeling and resonance that we were often awakened by them. One night Bill stumbled out of bed and to the window to remonstrate. 'Please not so loud,' he called into the pious darkness, 'Allah isn't deaf!' And was immediately surprised when the watchnight, who stood masked in the deepest darkness immediately under the window boomed obediently, almost in his ear, 'SAH!'

When one sentry promised to bring his dog to help him guard the compound we were not enthusiastic. We pictured a muscular, fierce-fanged beast prowling through the shrubbery and perhaps attacking Sheba, our newly acquired white cat whose

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nerves were as delicate as her tastes were sybaritic. But the dog turned out to be so small and timid that the mere sight of Sheba strolling the night lawn sent it trembling to its master. When Sheba sensed the dog and turned in fury to face it, the sad little creature whimpered in fear. Pitying its thin flanks, we fed it while the cat watched from a disdainful distance. The little animal was never known to bark, not even when a thief, surprised in the house next door, made a gymnastic escape through our compound. The burgled neighbour called on us next day, puzzled because our watchnight had evidently remained immobile during all the fuss. Watchnight's reply to our reproachful questioning was, 'I see that man pass by, but he not thief for this house so he no be my palaver.'

Our own burglar came one night during a short interval between the departure of one watchnight and the hiring of the next. Some time after midnight William cried out, and I took him a drink of water, possibly passing close by the disturbed marauder as I moved between dining-room and bedroom. Next morning Steward greeted us with special-occasion, trouble-boding formality, and announced, while Simon stood mutely behind him, that a thief had broken in. We saw the telltale marks on the front veranda walls and observed how the louvres had been prised apart to allow an outside hand to manipulate the inside bolt. That night we had been unusually neglectful of the ritual of keys. Binoculars, fountain pens and other small valuables had not been locked up, and now were gone. Bill had stowed his watch and wallet — thick with notes for the staff's payday — in his shorts pocket on a chair within the bed's mosquito net canopy. There, close by his pillow, he had thought them safe enough. Now, the garment lay on the floor outside the net, the pockets empty. The silent thief had made a good haul.

When the clerk came to work he found us still sleuthing after clues — all except Smallboy, who had taken our message to the police station. Steward Robert seemed to ignore the clerk. He said, into the air, 'The police will say it is a man who knows this house. Somebody inside, somebody new here.'

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'I?' bristled Thomas, his voice sharpened to falsetto.

Steward tried to look innocent of malice. 'I did not speak your name.'

'You accuse me!' Thomas was in a fury. 'Then I accuse you! You are the man who knows this house.'

Smallboy's return at this dangerous moment created a diversion and no blows were exchanged. A little later the police came, and by that time the nervousness that had caused other waspish comments was somewhat dissipated and a gloomy decorum prevailed. It was as if everyone was practising a manner most suitable to the solemn interviews in prospect.

One of the investigators brought a box containing sheets of glass and tins of graphite. His concern was with fingerprints. Two other men dealt with questions and answers in the boys' quarters and conducted a search there. Meantime the day settled heavily on our shoulders. Thomas in the office was haughtily silent, Steward huffy, Smallboy so unnerved that he broke a cup and plate while washing up in the pantry and absented himself for an hour to write a distracted letter to us deeply regretting the breakages, deploring the whole situation and protesting his innocence. There was no singing from the cookhouse. Cook trudged off to market looking injured and affronted. He had been the first to be formally questioned and complained to me, 'Why do they make me first one? Why not Robert, Simon, Driver? Tcha! Policemen!' We told him that somebody had to be first; they had to begin somewhere. 'I never cheat Madam of one halfpenny,' declared Benjamin hotly. He added darkly, 'Yet some people who work for this house take Nescafé, tea, biscuits, oh, plenty! I tell nothing, I do my own work. Then this police come and snoop for kitchen, I say why not snoop for pantry...?' And so on.

Since the day was sufficiently confused we wished Benjamin had kept his usual discreet silence. We had no wish at this time to start a general discussion about pantry pilfering and so touch off a whole new set of fireworks. Then Umam came to say, without heat, but as a matter to be reported, that all the coconuts had gone from the tree near the gate. Did the police want

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to know this too? We thought not. We could not believe that our neat-fingered, choosy burglar would have bothered to climb the tall tree on his way in or out. Simon, however, had something to say about this in a second letter which he delivered privately to Bill's desk before lunch. It said, 'Please do not quarrel with anyone about the nuts that it was a bad thing John took them yesterday by teatime.' We thought about John then, Steward's nimble son who once, when we had locked ourselves out from the former house, had incredibly squeezed his lithe narrow body through a tiny transom and been hero of that emergency. Then, trying to be fair, but beset by sudden doubts, we considered everyone else in turn, even Smallboy Simon who for so long had been fanatically saving up for his costly new camera and was, we suspected, in debt to a money-lender. And we remembered the dapper, quick-eyed young visitor and his notebook. But thinking did not help.

In mid-afternoon the police came to announce that during their search of the boys' quarters they had found the Driver's box to contain 'forbidden goods', and Driver was under arrest.

'What kind of forbidden goods?' we asked with foreboding.

'Stolen drugs,' the policeman told us smoothly, his face less stern now and illumined by little glints of satisfaction.

So they took Driver away. He went in martyred silence, aftermath to a bout of bitter expostulation. As the party prepared to go, Bill asked Driver precisely what mystery his 'box' had harboured. 'Medicine,' declared Driver brokenly, his tall body caved in and gangling with distress. 'It was gift to me. I was to send it away for a present to my family — M and B tablet and penicillin to help their health.'

'How did you get them? You should tell them who gave the stuff to you,' Bill persisted.

Driver only shook his head as if the ignominy and unfairness of his situation had bereft him of speech and wits. Now the pattern of the day was altered, drawn askew by the totally unexpected. The boys were silent concerning Driver's misfortune, but the tension was slightly eased because the Law's hunger for a culprit had been partly assuaged. The investigations

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had led to something, if only a red herring. And the police could not be expected to think about two things at once.

It was left to Bill to rescue Driver by assuring the magistrate that to his personal knowledge Driver was a man of good, if occasionally foolish, character. Following on Bill's plea, Driver was let off lightly with a fine of thirty shillings. Driver, increasingly sorry for himself, expected Bill to pay it for him, but Bill did not. With the air of a man doubly oppressed and pathetically misunderstood, Driver counted out the money and drove Bill home. Back in the compound he was the centre of speculation and comment which seemed to cheer him a little. The source of his cache of 'drugs', however, was not revealed then or ever. Nor, despite police diligence, was our burglar caught. The incident sank into the general limbo of burglar-dom. We could understand that the frequency of theft must make it impossible for the police to solve old cases while new ones were cropping up as speedily as daisies on a summer lawn.

Almost every European family of our acquaintance had been visited by thieves. One housebreaker had made his joyful getaway with a wireless under one arm and the householder's green pork-pie hat on his head at a rakish angle. Another snatched a whole week's pile of ironing, and the iron as well, while ignoring a canteen of silver. (The hopes of the fingerprint expert working on this case were dashed soon after he had rejoiced at finding an especially large, clear print on the dining-room window. This disconcertingly turned out to be a bold impression made by the inquisitive nose of the family's youngest.) Nylon shirts, cigarette lighters, cameras, trinkets and desk gadgetry were popular loot. Some vandals systematically 'worked' all the houses of a street, up one side and down the other, in amazing defiance of the inhabitants' extra precautions; some returned to burgle the same premises more carefully. Their agility and daring were legendary. One



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mounted, by drain pipe, the walls of an hotel to the fourth floor despite watchnights posted at back and front entrances. At that safe altitude he stripped all the sleeping guests' pockets and night tables and left them to their placid dreams and early morning consternation.

During our earlier Nigerian days in the bush we had never experienced any such sensation of siege as was aroused by the night conditions in Lagos. In the dry season we had moved our cots and nets to the open veranda and slept there. No lawless shadow had ever crept up the steps or moved within the open house. In those days we had never approached night time with any apprehension. Now, as city dwellers, we came to doubt the security even of the day hours.

One blazing bright afternoon I met a thief in the hall. He was a personable young African in a blue shirt and clerky trousers. We almost collided as I came from the bathroom with my head, newly shampooed, turbaned in a towel. I was at a disadvantage for dealing with unexpected visitors. Robert and Simon were off duty; the office was temporarily empty, and in any case the bell system had expired. The intruder was more composed than I, who asked, 'What are you doing here?'

'I am looking for the master,' he said, polite and direct. 'He is not in the office though the door is open, and I have an appointment. I could see no one about....'

His reassuring story, his apology and unhurried withdrawal were convincing. I said, feeling that the words were unnecessarily harsh, 'You might have been taken for a thief!' He smiled. 'So sorry. I had not thought of that.'

Very shortly afterwards, but too late for remedy, I found that my handbag, left in the drawing-room, was empty. A cigarette box had vanished. And so had Bill's bathing trunks which had been drying under the Tarzan tree. Again we had been careless.

We tightened our defences, gave more detailed instructions to stewards and watchnights, sharpened our alertness. The drill with keys permitted no slackness; window louvres were reinforced with extra bolts and wedges. One morning Watchnight

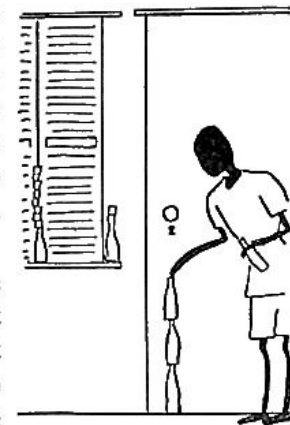
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reported that he had sighted a man in the shrubbery but the figure had slipped away over a wall as quick as a cat. We re-installed the bell system and devised our burglar alarms. Balanced at every point of ingress where latch could be worked or door forced, we poised, one above the other, empty Coca-Cola bottles, William's hollow clattering nursery bricks and empty aluminium cigar casings. Robert and Simon entered into the spirit of these precautions and in their nightly locking-up routine they improved on the erection of these surrealist-looking little barricades.

The new plan should have given us peace of mind, but in fact it made for more intent and anxious habits of listening. One night Smallboy re-entered the house late to do some forgotten task in the dining-room. (He used the boy's key which was the one weak link in our chain of defences, but necessary if we were not to rise each morning at dawn to re-admit the boys into the house.)

Hearing the warning noise of three clattering bottles, Bill was out of bed like a flash and into the dining-room, to find Simon picking up the bottles. He straightened aghast, saying, 'Oh, not to shoot me please!' — an odd plea since he knew that Bill did not possess a gun.

Feeling foolish, we retired and slept again, though shallowly, as if only marking time until the next incident. It began with a faint but continuous scratching sound to which we added our whispers. Bill stole silently to the dining-room. He saw a form spread-eagled outside against the slatted shutters, a perfectly symmetrical black cut-out shape with its feet on the windowsill. Bill quickly and quietly cleared the impediment around the dining-room door while I looked out to see where Watchnight was. He lay curled up asleep under the Tarzan tree. 'Bell!' mouthed Bill as he moved the door handle soundlessly and prepared for action. The bells rang, disrupting the stretched silence in house and garden. The pasted-on figure ceased



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whatever it was doing to the louvres, left the windowsill in a great leap, and for an instant was clearly visible on the lawn, a lean, dark body, clad only in black trunks, a beautifully co-ordinated ebony sprite. Then he was nowhere. Suddenly the compound was alive with people running; bodies sprang shocked and clumsy from sleep to join the chase, with voices declaiming and exhorting. Simon pelted past the door, his usually amiable round face a mask of ferocity. Watchnight revealed himself as a tireless runner, and when he brandished his machete to the common danger he looked like a strange avenging angel,

while his little dog shrank against a wall, sadly regarding the amazing spectacle. Steward, clad, like Simon, only in shorts, was scarcely recognizable out of the brass-buttoned uniform which normally gave him such confident substance. His bony bare chest panted; he looked much older, smaller and more ordinary.

When it was thoroughly proven that the thief had vanished the hubbub abruptly ceased and all the excitement drained away. Everyone felt that he had done his duty well, and shuffled off thankfully to sleep again. All except Watchnight, who continued to prowl the grounds and to talk loudly to himself about the night's event, arguing, explaining and perhaps inviting the rash interloper to reappear at his peril.

We wondered to what dark sanctuary the thief had sped empty-handed, and whether he would come again. We wondered if he thieved often, or had tried tonight for the first time; whether he had been desperately afraid or only exhilarated; who, in what thieves' kitchen, accepted his plunder or ordered his movements, and what kind of daylight boy it was that had flattened himself against our window and lost himself in the pools of garden darkness. We could imagine nothing about him; he was only a faceless, nameless, voiceless silhouette.

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Thrice a stranger because of his foreign race, his unguessable identity and his hostile intention, he was more clever than all of us because he had got away.

The downtown street urchin who some weeks later was caught taking a parcel from the car had the same talent. The theft happened in a few seconds while Driver, only a few paces from the car, was making some small purchases of food at a street-side trader's stall. He turned back in time to see the child's uncannily rapid movement, and shouted. Immediately a crowd ringed the scene, all eyes upon the drama, the pressed together bodies making a wall against the delinquent's flight. The boy, although cornered, tried to wriggle between the observers; he fought wildly for freedom and when he lost the struggle he stood his ground, jeering. A policeman materialized, stocky and athletic in his belted uniform, heavily shod, proud-faced, commanding. The ranks of the crowd, respectful to policemen as a fire-eating, all-powerful race apart, thinned a little. The policeman took notes. Driver, fully recovered from his recent court session and enjoying his role as zealous vigilante was vocal and intense, as were the culprit and a number of the onlookers, who vehemently agreed or disagreed with the differing stories and with each other. During the general excitement the child spotted a loophole of escape and dived into it. His swiftness took everyone by surprise. In seconds he was gone, swallowed up by Lagos.

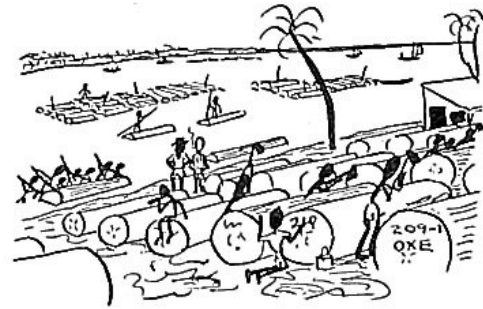
The policeman remained solidly calm, holding the small parcel which contained a pair of barber's clippers. These were to be retained as evidence. Bill did not wish to press the charge but the wheels of the law were not so easily stopped. He wanted the clippers (which had been bought for young William's home-barbering) but the police would not release them. The case was not on the immediate agenda, so the exhibit stayed with the police for some time. At length — more frustrated now by the law than the thief — we bought more clippers.

As we had discovered before, the causes and effects of such a situation can seem logical and correct, up to a point. And then they apparently cancel themselves out; they disallow any

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satisfactory QED. The juvenile offender was not brought to justice, at least not for stealing from our car. He was cloaked and sheltered by his own anonymity. We thought it unlikely that the small, taunting outlaw, whose Lagos brothers were many, would ever be held for long within any disciplinary net.

He was, we were sadly certain, irrevocably apprenticed to that mutinous enemy force that strives and suffers by its own harsh rules, and delights to mock and pillage the reasonable unsafe majority anywhere.



Log Palaver IO

THE log depot where Bill spent much of his time was like many other timber 'beaches' in and around Lagos. It was a stretch of lagoon-bordering territory, formerly scrubland, adjoining Lagos's main cemetery and accessible from the city road by a rough track. There the sun burned down on the flat steel-bright water and its roughly cleared margin. The logs floated offshore in rafts tied to anchoring poles, or were massed like stranded whales high on the beach. Everywhere the fresh-cut timber gave off an astringent smell of sap and resin which at the sludgy water's edge became a stink of sodden bark peelings, sawdust and wooden chips. The beach labour, under its African beachmaster, numbered fifty-five stalwarts: gangs of 'water-boys', 'log-rollers', 'log-dressers' and others who tallied the logs, inscribed them with identity marks, and wrote bold initials and numerals on the ends.

Each unit had its own prescribed accustomed duties. The water-boys, their near-naked bodies seal-like and shining, rode the rafts, detached the individual logs as required, and paddled them to the shore. There the teams of brawny log-rollers took charge and shouted surging, chanting rhythms as they levered the slippery timber up on dry land and into the care of the 'dressers'. These, working barefoot, expertly plied the keen blades of heavy adzes, stripping off the bark and shaping the logs into smooth, exportable cylinders with clean-sawn ends.

When the tally-boys, the dresser members of the staff, had re-measured, re-numbered and initialled the logs and noted their new particulars in ledgers, the vocal log-rollers again

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manceuvred the timbers down to the water-side, and the raft boys floated them out again on the lagoon to make new rafts in preparation for the next ship-loading. When time was short and a delivery to shipside imminent, the beach was as active as an anthill, while each group, strictly keeping to its own tasks, strove with the great logs and mastered them.

The beachmaster, Mr Alapo, benignly presided over the scene from the raw little office-shack which housed not only the usual typewriter, files and papers, but all the tools, tapes, paint pots, coils of wire rope, metal timber 'dogs' (heavy staples), hurricane lamps and other beach equipment which was best kept under authority's close surveillance. Mr Alapo, a neatly dressed, quietly spoken ex-schoolmaster, was the still centre of the storms of temperament which could break over the logs when the volatile gangs disputed, or when palaver between two members made the air noisy with invective and ultimatum. Mr Alapo dealt with any contretemps as coolly as if it were a classroom incident and with the same steady results. Whatever the brawl or difficulty or calamity, he was a match for it. We admired his philosophical cheerfulness and the strength and modesty of his nature — not, however, because they seemed to us unique qualities in a man of African race. We knew that Nigeria was blessed with a great number of men of Mr Alapo's calibre. They composed here, as anywhere, the backbone of the country: the sturdiness that did not so much proclaim itself as endure and stabilize thrusting events. Mr Alapo was generally given to understatement; he mistrusted superlatives and self-aggrandizement. We thought that his quiet confidence was centred not specifically in himself as an Ibo or even as a Nigerian or African, but as a person who needed no racial props to sustain his actions or opinions and did not expect us to need any either.

The beachmaster's right-hand office clerk, Ezekiel, was a youth so fresh from school that the dust had scarcely begun to gather on the glassed frame which preserved his General Certificate of Education. He was conscientiousness personified, although, unlike Thomas, the house-office clerk, he confined

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his ambitions to immediate possibilities. His desire to learn, improve and shine, gave his unguarded face a look of hunger and wistfulness. As if hastening ardently towards adulthood and its goals he grew week by week, it seemed, in slender coltish length of limb, while the narrow sculpting of his serious dark skull began to look less fragile and defenceless. Mr Alapo could scarcely have had a more promising pupil nor Ezekiel a better teacher. The clerk was generally known as a 'bright lad'; we saw him as incandescent with the fires of hope which burn passionately in the hearts of so many of West Africa's young sons. In different ways we had seen this quality in Smallboy Simon, in Steward's son, in Driver, Clerk Thomas, in deaf-and-dumb Joey, in the odd-jobbing youngsters who congregated around Lagos's big stores and car parks, and in the passing coveys of school children to whom the classroom door meant deliverance from illiteracy and the Open Sesame to a superior way of life.

Children of any race anywhere radiate, en masse, an energy and eagerness that vivifies their dullest setting. A group of school-age West Africans gives off a superabundant joy and force of life that seem almost to electrify the sultry air. It is as if, having so far to go so fast and competitively if they are to catch up with the rest of the world's youth, they are empowered almost from infancy with extra reserves of zeal, certainty and patience. At least that is the general impression, undiminished by the natural inclusions, among the zealots, of some sluggards and unteachables whose destiny it is to be pushed aside by the main stream's pitiless onward rush.

The bright scholars won certificates which declared them to be sufficiently educated for certain kinds of work and accordingly gave them special social status. Knowledge was chiefly



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absorbed with two ends in view: a prestige job above the level of manual work; and a corresponding salary that would permit some display of sophistication. The valiant young people's yearning for these things made them precocious in resolve and quick to seize any opportunity; they were untouched by European-style nihilism and never doubted the marvellousness of the futures on which they had determined. Their palates for European chattels and notions were unjaded, and this was so even of the radically nationalistic youngsters (like Steward's son) who saw all white people in Africa, even their teachers, as interlopers and profiteering aliens who obstructed the path to freedom.

But Ezekiel, the beach office clerk, was not radical except in enterprise. He accepted us and his first job gratefully with a look of mildness which softly cloaked his core of inflexible opportunism. Bent, still like a schoolboy, over the ledgers and papers on the rough desk, stolidly ruling lines, penning smooth numerals and adding the interminable columns of weights and measurements, Ezekiel might have been any junior African clerk in a commercial office. But we who saw him daily were not deceived by his appearance of humble anonymity. We suspected that the biddable new clerk was the least restful, most important person on the whole busy beach landscape, and we surmised that he also saw himself in this light.

The acquisition of the beach had been a protracted affair. We regarded it afterwards as a long series of skirmishes in which Bill figured variously as protagonist, pawn, scapegoat, and occasionally as spectator. The crux of the matter was, of course, Land Palaver, West Africa's constant preoccupation and cause of much bitter feuding, endless litigation, and searchings into obscure tribal histories.

To begin with, as Bill saw it, the beach land appeared innocent of palaver. Two separate intermediaries suggested that they could engineer introductions to the owner, who was looking for a tenant, but Bill did not accept their services; he was weary of middle-men. Next came a phone call from the supposed owner himself, who declared that Bill could take the beach

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over immediately on the payment, in advance, of a substantial rental. Bill went to a solicitor who said that this 'owner' had no right to rent the land to anyone; it was Crown Property. The man strongly denied this, declaring that if given time he could produce any number of papers to prove the strength of his position. The solicitor coldly ignored this suggestion and advised Bill to make no treaty for the use of this particular piece of land, except with the Lands Department who were all-wise in these matters and strongly empowered by law. So Bill went to the Lands Department who, after much chin-stroking and memoranda-writing, saw no reason why Bill's Company, whose timber dealings meant considerable revenue to Nigerians, should not lease the small strip of land in question on a short-term basis, and accordingly drew up an agreement.

At this juncture no one mentioned that the ownership of this section of the lagoon border on Lagos Island had been hotly disputed by at least two families for as long as anyone could remember. The argument could be dimly traced all the way back to the early days of Lagos, whose existing 'king' was, for reasons of trade, desirous of good relations with the British. According to the legend, this ruler, having dined and drunk well one night with his white companions, generously, or perhaps with a little persuasion, signed a document ceding the land to the British. The propriety of this act was not greatly disputed at the time, and the British for years afterwards built their homes and tended their gardens on the excellent gift soil. The tag-end of the district, swampy and neglected (with, moreover, the cemetery close by) had not of recent years been tenanted by anyone. Now that a white man showed interest in it, the site became a subject for fresh palaver. The court ruling which earlier had proclaimed none of the Nigerian claimants as the rightful owner had by no means settled the issue in the minds of the losers. When Bill came unsuspecting on the scene they were still battling with appeals, producing fresh evidence and making public proclamations which re-stated their cause. The unwitting intervention of a white man brought the whole simmering palaver to boiling point.

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But during Bill's first interview in the Lands Department Office the dissenting voices could not be heard. The atmosphere within the tidy governmental walls indicated only the unassailable facts of property deeds and the pellucid reasonableness of official minds. When the signatures had been witnessed, Bill went lawfully down to the beach with a crew of labourers to make the scene ready for the first log-raft delivery that was already on its way from an up-country depot. He found the beach occupied by a small group of furious squatters who had heard of the new development. Their spokesman declared that they would neither go away nor remove the piles of sand and the shack which were their property and their livelihood; this was their ancestral land and no one, least of all a European, should take it away from them.

Bill began to explain the new situation, but the squatters were adamant and loudly hostile. 'I will bring a man from the Lands Department to explain this to you,' he told them, sweating and disconcerted. And he drove back into town to find an African official who came at length, armoured with facts, correctness and his city suit, to address the little mob while Bill stood by, not caring for the role of European 'oppressor of the poor' that had been thrust upon him by the spokesman's accusations.

That palaver ended in the squatters' grudging agreement to vacate the beach, dismantle the shack and take away all their possessions before the end of the day. Bill, lamenting the wasted day, withdrew his labourers to let the squatters complete their cleaning-up in peace. He returned in the late afternoon to find the beach in dormitory silence. The working party of six men, having removed one side of their shed, was using the rest of it as shade for a siesta; they lay sunk in sleep, pillowed on their tools. Their sentinel, posted outside beneath a banana tree, was likewise stretched out with eyes closed, jaw slack and hands folded as if the dove of peace were nesting in the branches above his head. Bill roused the serene tableau and the clearance continued, but no man had his heart in it. With much grumbling and side-commenting, the task was scarcely completed by nightfall.

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It was an unpropitious beginning. A few days later Bill received a belligerent letter from one of the beach land-palaver disputants. It accused him of trespass, threatened immediate court action with heavy damages, and enclosed a bill-poster, 'Warning Notice (No. 2)', part of which read: '... we hereby seriously warn you against purchasing, leasing or negotiating with any other person, persons, or persons under the cloak of an organized body in respect of any landed property, farmland belonging to, etc. etc.' And it ended: 'Failure to comply with this warning puts the purchaser or negotiators to a great risk.'

Meantime, having sought the necessary reassurance from the Lands Department, Bill set to work building the beach office and employing staff, including two seasoned watchnights who were to guard the site and the logs which would soon be arriving in quantity. It was well known to everyone in the local log trade that the logs' weight and size did not protect them from the depredations of nimble lagoon pirates. Practised in night water-craft, they could easily remove a huge timber from any outlying raft, noiselessly paddle their prize away into some hidden cove or shelter, and there slice off its identification scribings and paint marks. Then they would offer the loot for quick sale at some log beach where questions were not asked. Because of the logs' value Bill engaged a double guard. The two men were expected to keep each other awake, or at least to sleep alternately while one listened for the stealthy splashing sound of log-rustling.

Busy with defences against one form of undesirable activity, Bill was not prepared for another kind that was equally inconvenient. One dark night a company of workers made a surprise visit to the beach, bringing a raft of forty alien logs which they cunningly disposed about the beach in such a way that the entire area was blocked. The timber belonged to one of the irrepressible 'owners', who could hardly have found a more dramatic and expensive way of drawing attention to his case. Next morning the beach buzzed with talk about the extraordinary affair, while Bill and Mr Alapo interviewed the

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two sheepish watchnights who had witnessed the logs' arrival. Mr Alapo demanded explanation. The beach lookouts, red-eyed after their sleepless hours, were plaintive. 'You say we watch that no logs be t'iefed from this place. You no say we stop logs that come for beach. That not be our proper work. Also those men be plenty and get plenty machete for night!'

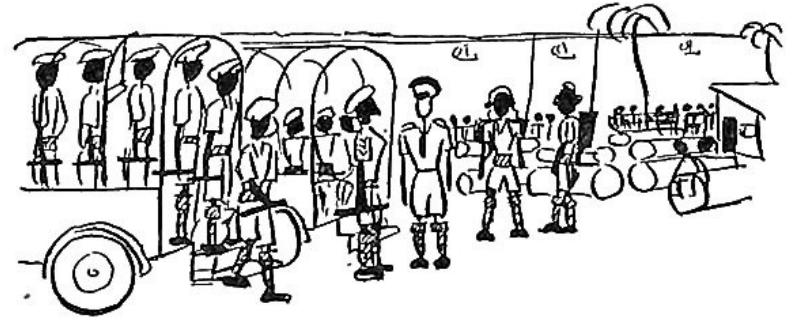
Bill, who by this time knew all the city's short-cuts to the Lands Department building, went there again to seek advice. The European at the desk heard the tale glumly; he was due for home leave and was disinclined to discuss the finer points of land palaver. He said, 'You should never have allowed those logs on the beach. And you must understand that this is not really our affair; the land is leased to you.'

Bill swallowed the words he first thought of and asked whether he should seek the aid of the police. The official frowned. 'Yes, I suppose so, if you can't somehow persuade the fellow to take his logs away, but from our point of view it's a pity this trouble couldn't have been avoided.'

The day was too hot for argument. Since all work had been suspended on the blocked beach, action was imperative. Bill called on the district's young, pink-faced police superintendent, fresh at his post, and apparently only too pleased to tackle the problem. The owner of the obstructing logs was given three days' notice to clear them away. Eight o'clock on the morning of the fourth day was zero hour; then the logs would be evicted. The three days of grace passed in stalemate. Everyone waited. It was rumoured that the intruder had vowed himself and his helpers ready to see the palaver through to any conclusion; so a certain feeling of nervousness prevailed, for it was feared that the eviction might be physically argued by the log owner's labourers and that a head-on, free-for-all battle might be precipitated with unpredictable consequences. We did not sleep well on the night before Operation Log-Clearance. Bill visited the beach around midnight, hoping that a face-saving withdrawal in darkness might already be under way, but returned gloomily to the house to report no change. The day dawned on bleak spirits.

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At seven o'clock Bill and Mr Alapo deployed and briefed their beach workers who might be given the signal an hour later to roll the logs back into the water. At half-past seven two lorry-



loads of police drove up. They were a spruce, impressive body, complete with batons, radio telephones and enviable non-chalance. Everyone stood about in stiff little conversational groups, glancing at wrist-watches and expectantly viewing the lagoon horizon and the rough track from the main road. At ten minutes to eight a car arrived. It stopped a little distance away from the beach watchers and two men got out. They surveyed the scene, put their heads together in apparent conference and, without a word to anyone else, drove away again. Minutes later a gang of workers came on the beach and without preamble began to roll the logs down to the waterside. At the end of a peaceful hour the main body of police departed, leaving only a handful of men with a sergeant as a token display of law-enforcement. By noon the beach was empty and, as the errant raft was poled away over the flashing water, Mr Alapo mopped his solemn face and permitted himself to smile and to join Bill in drinking the bottles of beer which had been waiting, wrapped in a wet towel on the office shelf, for that moment.

That was not, however, the end of the major dispute. It continued unabated offstage as a three-sided sparring match between the two chief claimants and between each of them and the Lands Department, while Bill and his workers continued to occupy the much-argued property. Their foothold often felt precarious; there was a sense of no-man's-land unease and

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temporariness; it was felt that at any time some new development in the acrimonious background might bring disturbance of the log-routine and disintegration of the impermanent office-shack where already the white ants were at work undermining the floorboards.

The logs, however, were substantial enough. Fresh rafts of about one hundred logs apiece arrived offshore at intervals; consignments of groomed logs were shepherded out into the greater harbour by hired tugs, to nudge the steep sides of winch-clattering cargo boats. When greater mobility and self-sufficiency became desirable, Bill requisitioned a tug-boat. It came from England on the deck of a freighter and, when its bottom had been protected with anti-fouling paint and its uppers from the scorching sun by a full-length canopy, it needed only two exterior coats of paint and a crew to make the tough little craft ready for duty. The Nigerian crew comprised a Quartermaster, an Engineer and two deck hands; the Quartermaster, who had a peaked white cap for special occasions, navigated, kept the log book and was generally responsible for the tug; the Engineer tended the diesel engine, and the deck hands did all the menial tasks. At first their up-creek log-collecting missions were unsupervised, and during the tug's absence of five or six days Bill could only trust that the vessel would return without mishap and with the requisite quantity and quality of logs. These, usually booked some time ahead for loading on board a cargo vessel, were required to arrive punctually at the beach depot so that the timber could be graded, dressed and re-raftered for strictly scheduled shipment. Not infrequently the tug's course was impeded by human or climatic difficulties. On its arrival at a creek village one hundred miles of circuitous waterway from Lagos, there might be delay due to misunderstood instructions, or scarcity of wire rope or 'dogs', or sunken logs or trouble with the engine or minor hurricanes, or even to the crew's injudicious intake of convivial palm wine ashore.

Once the tug was out of sight Bill could only roughly estimate its geographical and human situation. All too often

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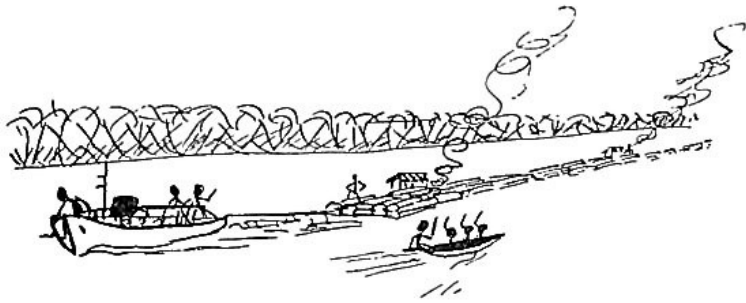
the returned voyagers reported the mysterious vanishing of wire rope (of which, on each journey, the tug carried an issue of hundreds of feet), or of 'dogs' necessary for securing the logs together against the strains of towage. The raft boys were partly responsible for this gear, and they explained the usual losses, especially of wire rope, in various ways. 'We lose-um, he drop for bottom.' 'He go-go. No one can find him.' 'For night somebody chop-um, no one knows how.' And so on, apparently indignant and amazed by the elusive behaviour of the bulky, expensive coils.

Clerk Thomas was soon deputed to accompany the crew on log-collecting trips, to serve as Bill's eyes, ears and even, in emergencies, as his voice. Surprisingly, since Thomas's tastes were urban, he took to this field work with alacrity, and his presence aboard the craft and at its destination greatly improved the team's general efficiency. Making no concessions to rough living he would start out on a trip as if for a pleasure cruise, clear-eyed and confident in spotless white shorts and shirt, and carrying his pale cloth cap, neatly folded raincoat and attaché case. And he would return after the watchful interval of some days and nights, travel-stained, crumpled and heavy-eyed but undaunted, with the papers in his attaché case dry, legible and safe, and his notebook pages full of useful information.

Thomas sacrificed some personal popularity in the interests of duty. There was an immediate saving in diesel oil which had formerly been declared 'used up' to the last drop at the end of each trip. The tug kept its second set of new mooring ropes — the first set had been replaced, under odd circumstances, with old, dangerously frayed lengths. The engine was apparently less hard-used now that the possibility of unauthorized raft-towing was ruled out — 'side-line' towing was a tempting proposition to many tug boats plying between up-creek log-collection 'stations' and Lagos; for a substantial consideration the hitch-hiking rafts would be roped behind the legitimate floats of timbers, and towed for whatever distances seemed sufficiently discreet and profitable to both parties. The strain of the extra load on the boat's engine and the inevitable slower

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progress of the labouring craft might fret the man who waited in Lagos for his tug's return, but it did not worry anyone else.



Thomas, however, was not likely to permit any activity that would prolong his rough-riding excursion or threaten his budding career. Sometimes he even went too far in thoroughness, as when he sent Bill a telegram marked 'Urgent', which reported a crisis in log affairs and asked for speedy remedial advice. The telegram arrived at the house forty-eight hours after its dispatch from a sub post office twenty miles inland from a creekside village where, it seemed, the tug had moored while Thomas made his way by bush path on foot or bicycle to send his cryptic S.O.S. Answer, however, could not be given since there was nowhere to send it, except to the bush post office which could hardly be expected to 'message' a tug boat problematically lying on a distant waterway. So Bill, unable to reply, fumed and was helpless, imagining the precious time vainly passing while the diligent clerk scanned the horizon from which no help could come. Since Thomas cleverly solved the problem on his own initiative, although without notifying Bill of the solution, it was sad for him that on his return to base only a day late with duty well done, Bill was too exasperated to offer immediate congratulation.

On occasional afternoons we took the tug for leisurely tours of the harbour which, seen from the water, had an endless charm. Afloat and holding the shore, as it were, at arm's length, we felt in the freshening breeze a new freedom. The most

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familiar vistas of wharves, cranes and sheds became, with the little distance, romantic and faintly mysterious.

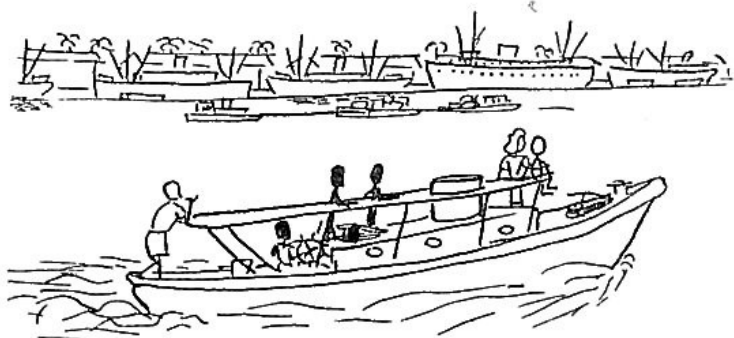
Our trip took us under Carter Bridge, a manoeuvre that the crew always contrived without disaster, but with a contagious nervousness that made us thankful to have passed the dark cement piles and sea-stained ironwork where the sunless waters swirled and sucked about the supports. This view of the bridge's under-belly was always faintly disturbing, because it seemed to have no relation to the smooth, hot, traffic-busy surface high above our heads. When we came into the harbour area where the barges lay, the grey-faced, heat-blistered wharf buildings congregated to disprove the whimsical notion that tropic-destined ships enjoy a constant contemplation of white sands and murmuring palms. Here were the dry-docks and all the hardworking industry behind the adventurous sea stories — the gritty, sooty mercantile monotony with its din of machinery, its careful tallying of goods, barrow-pushing, load-toting and precise scheduling. Near by, where the docks had become more sophisticated, the many-portholed mailboat might be lying, thrumming with its own business in the interval between off-loading one batch of passengers and cargo and taking on the next. As always, the mailboat, by its familiar look and nostalgic association, dominated the harbour scene. People liked to see it there, as homelike and good-looking as a freshly iced cake; to landbound Europeans it was less a ship than an institution. And although there were, in fact, three mailboats, the differences between them, when 'leave' was far distant, were unimportant; they all stimulated the same vague, cosy notions.

Within the harbour lay a different, intensely dramatic world that could change its shape before our eyes, or, by casting its huge placid reflection in the rainbow-coloured water, make us almost believe it would be there, like a picture on glass, for ever. The big cargo ships loomed above and around us, each charged with its own pulsing domestic life and emanating its own seafaring individuality. Bronzed seamen in shorts and singlets lounged at the after-rails with the lordly indifference of off-duty mariners. Lines of washing flew like jaunty flags from the

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crews' decks. Sometimes we heard the melody of mouth-organs, or full-throated singing, or sighted the lonely looking, shirt-sleeved figure of a Captain high on his bridge. There were the industrious noises of rust-chipping hammers on sun-baked iron decks, of impatiently rattling chains and throbbing winch engines, and the evocative smells of hemp and linseed and soup from the cargoes, new paint and steamy galleys of the working ships. We looked up at little groups of home-going passengers who to us were diminutive figures set apart and illumined with the excitement and expectation of imminent sailing. The vessels' names were polyglot — British, Dutch, French, American, Norwegian, Italian, Greek, Japanese and Israeli — and each ship showed its own unalterable home character, with Lagos as mere port-town, palm-treed background, strangely insubstantial.

Because we lived tied to the land we were the more refreshed



by our late-afternoon tug-boat excursions around and past the temporary ships. We saw, whole and with detachment, all their strength of design and personality: the power of massive dark propellers, sheer lines of aggressive prows and the great spread of iron flanks. We watched them loading the exotic West African cargoes of logs, cocoa beans and palm oil that would soon be transmuted to unremarkable consumer goods — furniture, chocolate and margarine — and observed the small white launches importantly bringing people and messages to the ships anchored in midstream.

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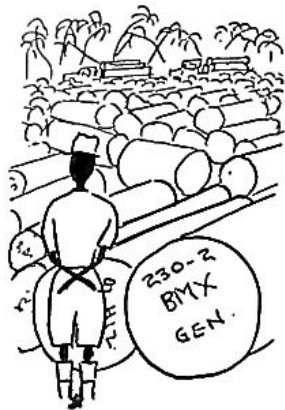
The harbour was never without some marine byplay; a party of sailors trimly sculling; a European, all-male boatload rapt in fishing; dugouts and frail native sailing canoes weaving their serious way among the giant vessels; occasional motor boats with families laughing while the spray flew; pert sailing dinghies from the Yacht Club out for an hour's recreation before drinks time. And there were the squat, stolid ferries, plying heavy-laden between Island and mainland, bringing the African workers home. Like the town buses at rush hour they were so crammed with stoic, close-huddled humanity that their decks were seen as a dark blur. As the craft neared the jetty they listed sharply when the commuters jostled towards the shore side, and they levelled and gained buoyancy as the passengers streamed off like ants towards their homes and meals and evening rest. There were other smaller, older ferries too: flimsy grey wooden craft with crude lavatories built out over the stern. While these boats always appeared to us momentarily in danger of breakdown or disintegration we never witnessed a mishap. They were kept going, apparently, with a combination of desperate faith and mechanical genius by hard-eyed young Africans who more than once exchanged insults with our crew, who viewed them with scorn and apprehension. A trip around the harbour in the tug-boat was always a revelation of many-sided living, and we returned to land feeling the better for our glimpses of other worlds.

That was recreation on a quiet afternoon under a clear sky from which the heat was ebbing, as if someone had mercifully turned off a main switch. During the time of heavy rains and sudden wind-storms the harbour was no place for pleasure. Often the storms gathered at night, when we in the bungalow heard the ominously strengthening wind, and Bill reflected anxiously on the safety of the tug at its berth, and of the logs which lay in the unprotected shallows off the 'beach' shore. When the rain came down to swill the verandas, and the whistling gale threshed the garden palms until their fronds clapped as if in ironic applause, there were sometimes melancholy siren wailings from harbour vessels whose moorings were

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endangered. On one such night a drenched 'beach' watchnight reported to Bill that two rafts had broken up. Four hundred and fifty mahogany and obeche logs had gone swirling away across the chaotic lagoon waters. Next morning Mr Alapo sent a crew of labourers on the arduous job of scouting both shores of the lagoon for twenty miles to round up the lost timber, a task which they accomplished after some fretted days, to the amazement of everyone but Mr Alapo.

So long as the vagrant logs retained their markings they were traceable; tracking down pilfered logs from which the scribings and paint 'brands' had been removed was far more difficult. Mr



Alapo, however, would not easily admit himself defeated, and when two logs disappeared from the beach one night, he went himself immediately to all the neighbouring log 'beaches' in search of them, even while admitting that finding an anonymous log anywhere around Lagos was almost an impossible feat. But he remembered, as he told the police, exactly what these particular logs looked like, and he had their measurements. At the end of some days of dogged activity he reported to Bill

that he had located the strays in the same log yard from which they had recently been bought by Bill as 'fill-ins' to complete an urgent shipment. Bill, in the guise of prospective buyer, went with Mr Alapo to investigate, and agreed with him that the logs he had spotted were certainly the absentees. Having come full circle, they were again offered for sale to him, though this time at a slightly higher price. Inquiry as to their source was vaguely answered; the logs had 'come in' from an agent who 'picked up' occasional business. ('"Picked up",', said Bill, 'describes it.')

Mr Alapo, now reinforced by police insistence, pressed for the name of the so-casual vendor. The man was produced. Police records showed that he had twice been convicted for log-stealing. Mr Alapo formally identified the

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timbers and thanked the police and 'beach' proprietor. Bill thanked Mr Alapo, and the deeply embarrassed log yard owner thanked everybody, albeit a trifle insincerely, and with all speed ushered the little scandal off his property. The unrepentant thief went to jail again, and the logs came back to Bill's 'beach'. The watchnights, made wistful by worry and palaver, were glad to see the returned timbers, but more particularly the smiling faces around them. They knew that people who are pleased with themselves find it easy to forgive and forget so little a thing as an ill-timed cat-nap.

One of the raft-boys, 'Monday', expecting, perhaps, too much of his overseers' forgiveness and forgetfulness, grew over-ambitious in his wire-rope manipulations; he was, after some palaver, summarily dismissed. He left the office declaring vengeance, but since his departure proved such a saving in equipment, the disturbance was justified. 'Monday' struck back indirectly some weeks later. While Bill was absent from home I heard, first, loud knocking at the front door, and then sounds of dissension. 'Let me see the master,' said an angry voice. 'He is not here,' stated Steward. 'I demand to see him!' blustered the voice. 'I have a court paper he must take.' There followed some muffled argument and then a noise of scuffling and Steward's call to Smallboy. When I came into the drawing-room, Steward, ruffled, was barring the way to the visitor who was trying to shoulder past him into the house. Smallboy joined Steward while I asked what the aggressive youth wanted. He stood boldly before us, unkempt in a sweat-stained shirt and ill-girt trousers, brandishing an envelope and repeating, 'Where is the master?'

'Out,' I said, 'as you have heard.'

The boy concentrated a malevolent gaze on me. 'Then *you* will sign for this paper.'

He approached, closely flanked by Robert and Simon, to fling the stained dog-eared envelope on a side table. 'You are witness!' he hectoring Steward and Smallboy, who had frozen into statues of starchy disapproval. The room was charged with far more emotion than the situation warranted. Making an

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effort at calm, I said, 'You can leave your paper here if you like, but indeed I will not sign for it. This is not *my* palaver.'

'So,' sneered the young clerk, alarmingly malign and sarcastic, 'you refuse! The master's palaver is not your own! Then you will hear from the Court.'

'You will go,' I said, dismayed to realize that the seedy, glaring youth had succeeded in his clear intention of infuriating me. I left Robert and Simon to usher him out of the compound, and they returned looking slightly shaken, Robert wearing the odd false grin which he always put on when excited or distressed, Simon almost tearful with emotion. The uncomfortable little episode left an unpleasant atmosphere for some hours. It turned out that the caller had been acting for one of 'Monday's' legal relatives who at intervals had been threatening to sue Bill for damaging 'Monday's' reputation, with vain hints that 'settlement out of court' might be considered. The case never reached fruition; its preliminaries made gossip around the log beach and then were forgotten. Only the face of the hostile clerk was impossible to forget because it had been the ugly, obdurate, primitive face of racial antipathy.

Sometimes it seemed strange to us that business with tonnage of supine, dead-weight logs, the once-lordly trees of West Africa's natural forests, should produce so many dilemmas and fractious occasions. During the more lively stresses of the log trade it would not have surprised us to learn that every African tree released at its death its own mischievous, trouble-making spirit. Logs, for all their dull, incorruptible look, were at no stage dull, and the people concerned with them were often far from blameless. The reason for this was, of course, simple; the timber represented temptations of money and power that are common to people of all races; those of white complexion were not exempt.

One white timber man (no longer on the scene) had in fact so artfully conducted his log business that, when he privately decided to conclude it abruptly, no one suspected his intention of jettisoning his obligations and large debts, and fleeing the

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country while his purse was fat and the law permitted. While his final deals gained audacity and complexity, he had bolstered goodwill and allayed suspicion by cheerily inviting all his business associates to a party to be held a fortnight hence at his substantial house where hospitality had always been lavish. At the same time he had negotiated yet another loan from his bank. The expectant company, including his banker, came festively in their cars from many distant places, only to find the big house and its staff unprepared for a gay evening, and their host nowhere in sight. At the airport a safe distance away he had taken his reserved seat a few hours earlier, and even as his frustrated guests fussed and fumed on his deserted threshold, was flying comfortably through the night, away from recrimination and retribution to newer, greener pastures where his money was already cached.

The party-cheated people whose pockets were most affected by the flight collected together to air and compare their causes for chagrin, but none of them spoke with more feeling than the elderly African creditor who, after some reflection, said suddenly in a general way to the veranda confusion, 'And always it was his joke to say that the timber trade was being ruined because all of us Africans were rascals!'



The Wider View

II

WHEN a Briton first leaves his homeland for the tropics he is likely to be athirst for new knowledge and experience, keenly anticipant of the expected strangenesses, and determined to take on a new lease of life in fresh circumstances. Eagerly arrived on the foreign shore, he exclaims like a child at all the exotic details which crowd upon his attentive senses; he is acutely perceptive of every novelty and aware, even, of pulse-quickenning differences in the air he breathes. He writes long descriptive letters home, and is certain that he will never become like so many white habitués of this extraordinary land who seem to suffer from mass myopia and no longer notice much of what enthralls him. But by the time he himself has become an habitué his vision has lost its early sharpness; and when this happens he is no less safe from boredom and cramping inhibition than if he had stayed in the United Kingdom. Africa then may become a set of expatriate habits, and the early magic is recalled only as part of an excusable naivety, its loss unregretted.

The white man's tendency to become a blasé tropics-dweller may be a defensive reaction to extremes that his middle-path psychology cannot deal with. When a taxing climate and a richness of foreign personality press upon him, making their strong demands upon his limited resources of health, conscience and understanding, he retreats and for safety's sake shuts the door on all of Africa that does not directly concern him. The

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price of this defensive move is retributive boredom, the grey bogy which haunts sun-gilded Africa and lies in wait for the tenderfoot, slowly to stifle his valuable first excitement and open-heartedness. Those who know how dangerous this neurosis-fraught equatorial boredom can be try to vary their lives a little; to get, as they resolutely say, 'a breath of fresh air' when staleness threatens an imported business routine and a ritualistic domesticity.

The white man's orthodox escapisms in Africa are curiously like those of the Briton in his own country: tennis, golf, swimming, evening drinks, cinema, car drives to take a meal anywhere but at home, card games, parties—stimuli which shake up movement as one shakes to a small flurry a 'snow scene' crystal ball that soon must re-settle into its basic pattern.

Because these activities are of themselves patterned they are considered, not as true respites from the monotony of ordinary living, but as the only available alternatives. Some Britons wistfully confess that what they miss most in West Africa is the mental comfort of 'culture'—good theatre, ballet, libraries, picture galleries—though this confession is not always kindly received. 'Culture!' one hardened Coaster retorted in our hearing. He seemed stung by the superior word or the way it was spoken. 'At home, now be honest, are we all so keen on improving our minds—unless you count TV and having a pint with the intelligentsia at the local? If we're so starved for the Arts why don't we bring more of our "culture" with us, or maybe take a look at African culture?'

'There isn't any,' someone patiently told the iconoclast. 'Everybody knows it's a vacuum here.'

'Look at the Ife bronzes,' insisted the Coaster, true to form. 'And what do we know about the dances, drums and folklore that you call "vacuum"? Why don't we learn the language and understand more about these things? Because we're too damn lazy! What is "culture" anyway? God help us, we're in Africa!' So ended a conversation that has been spoken, with slight variations, times without number on European verandas and in European Clubs all over West Africa.

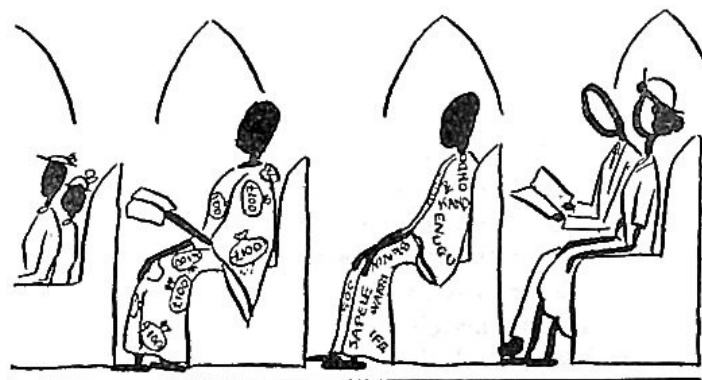
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When we went one evening to hear a performance of Haydn's *Creation* in Lagos, we were not in deliberate search of culture. The idea intrigued us partly because we were sure that it would have intrigued Haydn. We went with a musical friend, newly arrived by plane from London. He was less surprised by the idea of a Nigerian evening of Oratorio than by the small attendance of Europeans in the Cathedral. None of the white 'culture' advocates, not even its strongest supporters, seemed to be there.

That sultry night the congregation filled only a third of the seating space. Seated on polished hardwood of uncommon hardness, we gazed magnetized at the brilliant human picture raised before us in a composition of black, scarlet and ivory — dark faces, scarlet robes, white surplices. The youngest members stood poised like slim ebony angels with scarlet 'chop-frills' about their slender necks, and from them and their transfigured elders the African-Haydn music rose up. The organist-conductor, half concealed in his alcove, was glimpsed at his difficult work, and in its brief intervals he hastily mopped his face which shone with warmth and his striving effort. Being wholly occupied with his part of the music he seemed to discipline his choristers telepathically through the intricate passages and, though the strain showed sometimes in their tightly gripping hands and in little flickers of tension across their faces, they stayed closely with him, even to the anxious boy soprano whose soaring voice trembled, now and then on the verge of gruffness and catastrophe.

In the surge of music (which, sung by these rich voices, was Haydn with a difference of energy and panache) the small audience sat seemingly bemused, holding its prim, printed word-sheets which seemed to have so little connection with the grand noise we were hearing. In front of us sat a large African robed in a Manchester cotton 'cloth' whose design combined palm trees and boldly printed Nigerian place names; and ahead of him another whose brown and purple robes presented an all-over fantasy of money-bag motifs, each prominently labelled '£100'. It was impossible to disregard this textile treasure hoard.

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The eye-catching garment dimmed all its neighbours, especially the modest crêpe silk dresses of a few middle-aged and elderly African ladies in plain felt hats, and even the bright rayon headbandanas of the young girls who sat so demurely and all-alike, with faces carefully composed into expressions of maidenly attention. Near them sat an African and his white wife; he jet-complexioned and elegant in an expensive dark suit, she very blonde and candle-pale without make-up. Her slender shoulders hunched in apparent concentration gave her an air of frailty and determination that suggested (perhaps because one was looking for it) a valiant, or possibly stubborn, unusualness. He or she alone would not have drawn anyone's second glance or private conjecture; together they set themselves, or other people set them, slightly apart from the crowd; their situation, even in Lagos, was not common enough to give them the casual privacy of ordinariness.

But while the music continued we were held by it from anything more than brief contemplation of our neighbours. We observed that our musical friend was pointing an ironic finger to the next lines which the choir earnestly sang:

'Unnumbered as the sands, in swarms arose
The hosts of insects ...'

and our attention wandered because it seemed so odd and inconsistent in Lagos to give praise for 'hosts of insects', especially

since we had that night already privily annihilated a few stray irreverent mosquitoes whose tiny warning hum was drowned in the hymnal rejoicing. We began to notice the hardness of the seats and the passing of time, and then the singing gathered us into its power and the spell continued until the voices paused before the full-throated chorus which ends the Second Part.

On this instant of taut preparatory silence, even as the choir tensed and took breath for the final vocal assault, a robed figure stood up (a trifle drowsily, we thought) to announce the taking of the collection. The choristers, with remarkable control, checked the lusty conclusion before it passed their lips. They swallowed heroically and sat down. The collection was swiftly taken. Then the choir stood up to the Chorus and released it as a triumphant musical postscript, only slightly diminished by the hiatus.

Our admiration, as we left, was unstinted for the spirit and team endeavour that had gone into the choir's mastery of a profound composition. It was in this case the performers who counted more than the performance. It occurred to us that many people in the United Kingdom would not readily associate West Africans with oratorios. For ourselves we knew that after this evening we should not listen to Smallboy drumming his rhythms on the back of a teatray and accept that as the whole story. Far from it; the story had only begun. We were convinced that a people who have leaders and choristers capable of singing *The Creation* for sheer pleasure in the accomplishment are no mere race of drummers.

A close neighbour to the Cathedral was Lagos's main cinema whose prudent patrons, mindful of the unyielding iron seats which supplemented the wicker chairs, were accustomed to bringing their own cushions. The cinema was a popular place, especially on Saturday night. Then the carefully locked cars were closely parked along the waterfront and up side-streets haunted by self-styled 'car-watchers' hopeful of tips and hardened to rebuffs. The cinema customers streamed into the enclosure, past a seated, croaking beggar-figure whose

customary pitch was in the doorway at the feet of the amusement seekers. Intermittently he shouted wordlessly, a choking, hardly human cry that would have been hair-raising had it not been so usual a noise at this place and time. For the beggar was a fixture, a shape and a din scarcely noticed by the regular cinema-goers whom the beggar saw from the knees down as hurrying legs and feet, dark and pale ankles, grey trouser legs and vivid robe-skirts, sandals, high heels and scented silk hemlines. Some glanced down or gave small alms, but most, with their minds on after-dinner conversation or a good seat within, passed by unnoticed. Lagos had too many beggars for any one of them to enjoy individuality. The scrawny blind ones with white-filmed eyes were steered by their ragged helpers along the bright daytime commercial streets; the maimed ones crawled in the hot dust on stumps of legs or put out withered arms without hands from public doorways. This human flotsam was customary; its presence proved that people can get used to almost anything so long as it is invariable; and by the same token the dusty suppliants may have grown just as accustomed to the crowds they mutely or noisily implored. The beggars, it was said, had a 'king' who headed their well-managed organization; and many citizens declared that the unfortunates netted substantial livelihoods. We thought that if they had anything to contribute to the city scene it may have been in promoting, here and there, some feelings of compassion and personal thankfulness; this work, it seemed to us, must surely be exceedingly arduous and deserving of a plump income.

The cinema itself was, like all cinemas, a little world apart, though in Lagos the contrast between the city's real life and the screen's make-believe involved an unusual shift in mental and optical focus. The overhead corridor of light from the projection room transformed the white-sheeted oblong into an hypnotic area towards which the faces of the mixed assembly were upturned like moonflowers in the warm night air. There were rows of stripling European bachelors, in the dusk a brotherhood made uniform by their grey flannels, open shirts and Lagos haircuts. There were white couples, the young wives

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sun-tanned and cool-looking with bare shoulders and bright necklaces; and members of dinner-parties, more dressed-up, perfumed and animated than the pairs of home bodies. There were Indian groups of stout, heavy-jowled patriarchs and delicate-featured, pale-bronze sons, with wives wearing sheeny chignons, butterfly-coloured saris and twinkling ear-gems. There were Africans, mostly Ibo and Yoruba, in native and Western dress; and occasional small mixed groups of Africans and Europeans. The white-uniformed, epauletted officers and the sailors on shore leave from the ships in harbour revealed themselves as birds of passage, unassimilable but natural to the scene. The average audience, briefly unified under the lane of light, included Syrians, Lebanese, Greeks, Italians, Swiss, French, Dutch, American and Swedish; and this many-tongued company, silent under the spell of Hollywood's or Elstree's phantom world, sat under the black and silver tropical night sky while the larger-than-life dialogue resounded past the palm trees which framed the screen, into the shuttered streets beyond.

We imagined that the inhabitants of houses bordering Lagos's cinemas must have been thankful when the local programme changed; when, for instance, a gangster thriller shrill, staccato and disruptive with threats and gunfire gave way to some more restrained performance. The film of *Julius Caesar* we witnessed was remarkably subdued. Something was amiss with the sound effects and with the lighting also. The Rome revealed to us that night was a tenebrous, grey-pillared city dimly peopled by noble characters who appeared to be suffering from acute laryngitis. After an interval of patience some of the audience clatteringly left and were heard in the background trying to get their money back. But a group of African students near us sat on the edges of their seats, determined to see and hear the veiled, muted drama; and their faces in the half-light shone with more than academic satisfaction. In unison they murmured many of the long speeches and whispered advance notice of the great scenes. ('Look — Caesar! Soon comes, "Friends, Romans, countrymen lend me your

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ears...." Now — Brutus, see him? "I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him...."') So, all along the way they participated. We remembered seeing, some years earlier in Lagos, a cinematic *Hamlet* during which a section of the bored audience had greeted Ophelia with wolf whistles and roared with mirth at her madness. This time, it seemed, Shakespeare was made welcome, and it was we who went critically home while the students were still rapt.

Now and then, to vary the evening theme, we went out to dinner at one of the local hotels. Once, feeling the need to put a maximum distance between us and the office-house after a day of log-palaver, we elected to drive some miles out of town to a place which we remembered from a previous occasion as a hostelry of no special pretensions but of home-like, old-style character; it had, we recollected, a veranda which looked out over the scrubland, and was a refreshing change from the city.

With our guest from London we drove along the night thoroughfares dotted with glimmering lights from the street traders' stalls. These smoky yellow blossomings from thick candles and flickering oil lamps illumined the faces of the vendors and their pyramided small wares, and made a deep mystery of the darkness behind them. Lagos's night populace was always gregarious and busy, preparing its evening food, mending its bicycles, splashing its buckets at the communal hydrants, playing its gramophones, strolling and talking along the pavements where the foodsellers tended their charcoal braziers. Many of the roadside African houses were filled with extrovert brilliance from pendent naked 100-watt bulbs which presented passers-by with vividly detailed window-square views into inner rooms, where a turbaned woman sat at her sewing machine, or a student chewed his pencil over his school books, or a family played with the new baby. And then suddenly the road became a long, straight stretch of black silence where the brightness of our headlights travelled softly over the wayside fronds and verdure, or dazzled to a standstill an occasional patient, trotting head-loaded figure, or blinked

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at the jostling swift passage of a mammy-lorry burdened with goods and passengers.

When we came to our destination we failed to recognize it. In place of the old-style resthouse there stood a box-like building of stark roadhouse character with a blazing sign across it; other smaller square new buildings flanked the rough roadway, and from one of these, which was a cinema, was wafted an enormous male American voice, husky, intimate and eerie in the scrubland emptiness.

We entered one of the buildings and found ourselves looking at an emerald-green swimming pool and a piece of complicated machinery through which fresh water splashed and gurgled. The poolside tables, like the pool, were deserted and the bar boys leaned idly beneath the small bar's chic, candy-pink-and-white striped awning, a smart Mediterranean plage touch which was oddly unsettling.

We explained to our guest that the establishment had changed a good deal since we had last seen it, and led him back across the driveway into another doorway whose small foyer was entrance to a big room dominated by a full-length bar and its battery of tall white refrigerators. The chairs, at least, were recognizable as the kind of Coast chairs which furnish most of West Africa's hotels, bars and airport lounges. They were of locally carpentered hardwood, low-slung and softened by big cushions made limp by much sitting. Around us sat the usual influx of itinerant Europeans, on their way to or from ships or planes, or visiting Lagos from up-country or, like us, seeking a change from their town setting. The old Coasters sat back and stolidly quaffed their whisky-sodas as if no one and nothing could disturb their hard-won equanimity; the new ones were gay, restless and mettlesome, unbothered by comparisons with earlier Coast times. There was no traditional veranda. We sat warmly indoors until it was time to go into the adjoining restaurant which employed, we were impressed to know, a Coast rarity, a European maître d'hôtel.

We were not sure how in its first flush of newness the restaurant may once have presented itself; we saw only that,

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whatever its beginning, it had become in the usual, apparently inevitable way, a Coast-type public dining-room. We fitted our knees under one of the small tables and recognized the fast-melting butter-pat in a coffee-saucer, the damp salt in the plastic cruet, the stark sauce bottles, the vase of zinnias, the bread that tasted of 'tropic flavour'. Plangent sophisticated dinner-time music was piped into the room from a concealed source.

The European head waiter did his utmost to infuse the occasion with elegance, but he was at a disadvantage in a pale lounge suit that made him look like an ordinary man. (The African stewards wore, as is customary, white uniforms and cummerbunds. We thought it likely that the maintenance of European prestige precluded a maître in West Africa from wearing the uniform which on home territory dignified his position.) Our adviser sorrowfully regretted that the guinea-fowl was 'off', and while endeavouring to make the menu's Cuisse d'Agneau (N.Z.) Rôtie, Pommes Macaire and Choux Bruxelles sound compensatory, toyed nervously with the wine list as if it were a talisman.

We did not know what to make of it all — whether to lament the passing of the old-time comfortable, ordinary atmosphere, or to congratulate the ambitious pioneers of novelty on achieving this slightly shaky token façade of metropolitan luxury. In this mixed state of mind we could not be wholeheartedly convivial. Our guest, feeling that some helpful comment was due, termed the evening 'something different', which, as we saw it, was a fair summing-up.

There were at this time in the Lagos air many intimations of further changes. The impending visit of H.M. Queen Elizabeth



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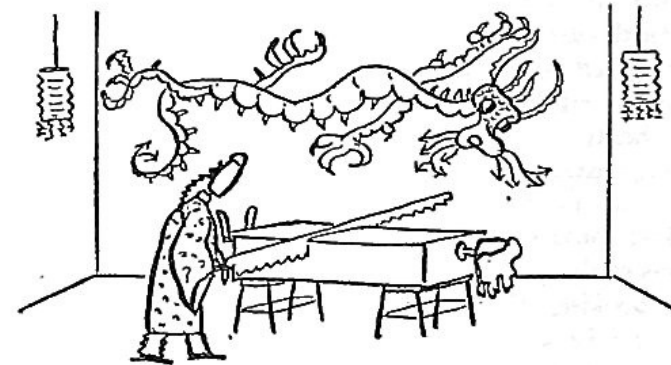
and H.R.H. the Duke of Edinburgh had stirred the local newspapers to glowing editorials. Even those which normally were given to fervid anti-European fulmination showed honest pleasure in the prospect of welcoming their Sovereign. One forecast accurately 'A Warm Welcome for the Queen', and a reader's letter in a Correspondence Column respectfully hoped that for even greater all-round glory 'the English football team could be here at the same time as the Queen' and ended: 'the presence of both at the same time in Nigeria will no doubt be fascinating and captivating'. The papers told also of the city's practical planning and costing. Apart from the considerations of festival flags, bunting, grandstands and triumphal arches, there were other pressing projects: road-mending, white-washing, refuse-dump camouflage and general municipal spring-cleaning. 'Soon', one paper declared, 'we shall have our chance to shine in the eyes of the whole world that will be watching the Queen in our midst.' It announced that more than a hundred reporters from abroad were to interpret the event to the world via cabled dispatches and by television, newsreel and Press cameras, and ended in effect: 'Nigerians, this will be the chance we have longed for to show our hospitality and let people see what kind of people we really are.'

And while this major excitement began to develop — the civic offices agog with minutes and memos, the Public Works Department and building contractors arranging unprecedented schedules, the big stores planning for a boom in long gloves, little hats and other big-occasion finery — the chrysalis of Lagos's newest hotel stood almost ready to emerge from its cocoon of scaffoldings. It promised to be, for West Africa, a remarkable hotel, with a lift, air-conditioned bedrooms, big wide-windowed lounges and dining-rooms, ultra-modern furnishings, a ballroom, a multiple-gadged kitchen complete with Paris chef, a pastry-room and pastry-cook, and a general de luxe atmosphere. Nearly complete, it loomed whitely by the lagoon shore like a signpost to Progress that may have struck some feelings of apprehension in the hearts of the city's established hoteliers.

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It was not that all Lagos's lesser hotels lacked enterprise. One of these had already begun to make local history in its own way by announcing the arrival of 'the first large professional American, Chinese and European show ever to be seen in Lagos'. Programmes and billboards proclaimed it: 'The Biggest and Best Show in the World — Chang and European Company — also the American Singer, Shirley Howard, from New York.' The programme, on bright pink paper headed by a picture of a convoluted dragon with nine forked tongues, listed forty-one fascinating items, among them: 'The Jewel Boxes of Aladdin', 'Chang Gives a Lesson In Magic', 'The Enchanted Butterfly', 'A Woman Sawed in Two', 'Floating In Space', 'The Pagoda Mystery', 'A Trip To Spirit Land', 'Table Lifting by the Spirits' and 'Do You Want to See the Spirits?'. In a prudent footnote Chang disclaimed supernatural powers and stated: 'All experiments are produced from years of investigation and experience in other lands.'

The troupe, with its sixty pieces of luggage and thirty Oriental backdrops, had blazed its trail to Lagos via the Canary Islands, Liberia, Sierre Leone and Ghana; in most places it had been greeted as a nine-days' wonder. The act,



'A Woman Sawed In Two' was received in Lagos with particular amazement, and excited spectators argued about it for days afterwards. ('No, it cannot be so, it would kill her.' 'But I see it happen with my own eyes, I tell you!') To these

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receptive African audiences the urbane Chang, who was a Panamanian with a Chinese father, and his dainty blonde New Yorker co-star, were a novelty from every point of view. Chinese people were rarely seen in Lagos, and everything about them was mysterious and extraordinary; Chang's stage dragons were a sure-fire sensation. White girl cabaret singers were likewise rarities, and professional stage 'magic' was sufficiently reminiscent of hush-hush Juju to set up an electric atmosphere among the spectators who crowded the small tables set close together on the hotel's open-air, fairy-lit dance floor and watched, from the stage erected at one end of the arena, a presentation glamorous with silk, satin, greasepaint and unusualness. Added to the magic was the spotlighted glamour of a white girl singer who filled the West Coast air with modernized racy syncopation whose far-distant origin was African. To Lagosians accustomed to seeing white women as a race of Colonial wives, teachers, missionaries, nurses and secretaries, this new manifestation was a natural astonishment, a revelation of the briefly clad seductive cabaret artiste whose own country takes her for granted. Accustomed to giving precise labels to all its expatriate residents and visitors, the city saw the illusionist, the singer and their supporters as unclassifiable *rarae aves* — birds of so different and exotic a feather that they could not be placed with any known flock.

Even the city's white population was unsure of its attitude to the theatre people who were so unlike themselves. In the main its manner was cautious; it did not throng to see the show or offer its members invitations to its drawing-rooms and verandas; some might have detected in its reaction a certain primness or disapproval, with Victorian undertones. During the hotel's booking the troupe mostly performed for African, Syrian and Lebanese audiences, who seemed not to share the apparent inhibitions or reservations of the British bloc. The twice-nightly show was professionally skilful and colourful; it was produced with a pioneering stamina that disregarded the heat, the discomforts and makeshift dressing-rooms and the fatigues of countless improvisations. Marvelling at the faith and

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hope implicit in show business, we understood why this troupe had no predecessors, and why it might be a long time before any other travelling company put itself to the same test in West Africa.

The calendar and the mounting dry season heat told us that Christmas was close at hand. Lagos's European population perspiringly persevered in its northern habit, stocked its larders with turkeys, plum puddings and mince pies, and prepared to make the best of both worlds by planning a Christmas Day trip to the beach to cool off after the traditional meal. Poinsettia trees reddened in Lagos's parched gardens, and groups of African carollers lifted their voices in 'Good King Wenceslas' under the moonlit palms. It was a time of nostalgia and party invitations, and even those cynics who mocked the traditionalists usually ended by seizing any last-minute chance to join a cosy, home-minded circle wearing paper hats and cracking the annual bowl of mixed nuts. Despite all the equatorial snags and irrelevancies the Yuletide spirit prevailed.

On Christmas Eve when William was asleep and Smallboy Simon had brought his school books into the house to combine study with baby-sitting, Bill and I went to a party whose guests, among them, spoke nine languages: Norwegian, Dutch, German, Swedish, Greek, English, Italian, French and Danish. We sat on a big white modern balcony graced by a real imported Christmas tree that gave out the faint disturbing scent of its distant cold homeland. We heard recorded carols, dined on Scandinavian delicacies, drank aquavit and at midnight looked up at the big warm Christmas stars that seemed so unlike the frosty stars of other Christmases. The party was gay on the balcony deck, snapping crackers and exchanging traditional seasonal greetings, while simultaneously another celebration ran its course. From the darkness below, the houseboys and their friends could be heard drumming, clapping, singing and dancing, complementing the hospitable noise of the all-white party above-stairs with their own exclusively African merriment.

We drove back home through quiet empty streets scarfed

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with mist, and peaceful after the day's heat and the party excitement. For the first time that Christmas the strains of 'Silent Night' echoed in our minds tranquilly and with a sense of reality and comfort. At home in our dawn-lit house we decorated the artificial tree for our son, set his toys beneath, darkened the room and lit the candles for a preview of his morning pleasure. The small artifice, star-topped, shimmering and glinting with jewelled light, came suddenly to life before our eyes as if its fringed branches were fresh from a northern forest. It was so simple and slight an illusion that we expected it to vanish when the candles were snuffed out, but the power of the little enchantment was not so easily quenched. It stayed with us during the rest of Christmas time, and proved that, after all, geography is sometimes only a state of mind.



Extraordinary Occasions

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IT was fitting that Carter Bridge, symbolic in its merging of old and new in Nigeria, should show the first sign of Lagos's resolve to transform itself for the Queen's visit. A serviceable but unprepossessing iron-brown for nearly thirty years, the bridge slowly blossomed into a processional route of pastel blue and silver. People in fast-moving cars enjoyed a new and happy optical deception: the lagoon seen through the freshly painted railings was a shining blue-blurred prospect, bright as the Caribbean, that cleverly distracted the eye from the mud-browns of the shore-side shacktown markets and their close-huddled old-style houseboat dugouts. At intervals along the bridge blue-painted oil-drums were weighted and fitted with the striped standards that were to moor crosswise strings of multi-coloured pennants. Even some of the workmen had a premature carnival look in ancient topees gladdened with silver paint from brushes that tipped the railings with an argent glitter.

Elsewhere gangs of labourers and good-conduct prisoners worked with more than usual alacrity on roadways pitted and potholed by the past rains. The noise of steamrollers, picks and shovels sounded everywhere along the royal way. Holes were dug for the thousands of posts which were to link miles of rope cordons. Whole streets of buildings became, in an astonishingly

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short time, immaculate with new whitewash. There was fresh stimulation to complete work on fences and walls that cut off some of the city's less attractive views. In this way the hummocky wastelands around the imposing new railway terminus were swiftly and solidly screened. Then it was realized that the large unlovely view across the road from the terminus demanded similar treatment; this cindery eyesore loud with long-distance lorry comings and goings, and ramshackle with dilapidated storage sheds, was rapidly concealed by a spotless façade of new galvanized sheeting. The finishing touches were hastily added to civic buildings and projects due for inspection during the royal itinerary; window boxes were planted out; lawns were trimmed and weeded with especial care, and garden borders outlined with whitened stones. Town officials were to be seen measuring street distances, pacing the sites of especial importance and staring raptly upward as if seeing visions of municipal splendour.

The shopping marts thrived on the city's anticipations. Street market fabrics displayed regal motifs, designs of crowns and sceptres and textile representations of the royal portraits. The big shops devoted whole counters to the display of flags, gilt-cardboard insignia and coloured lights. Millinery and gloves sold in record quantity that was to exceed the total sold during the past twenty years. Among the feminine white population there were the usual social stresses, the glowing certainties of invitation cards, the well-hidden disappointments, the anxious preoccupations with wardrobes and a rarefied etiquette. Lagos hairdressing salons were solidly booked by clients to whom the proverb *il faut souffrir pour être belle* was applicable in the most literal sense. In West Africa even half an hour of imprisonment under a hot hair-drier is an ordeal, and submission to claustrophobia in a cubicle at Turkish-bath temperature is high cost for a tidy head. But the women did not falter. It was an emotionally taxing period when small considerations loomed large, large matters appeared enormous, and the competitive spirit flourished as never before. Altogether it was a testing time for the whole white population, but more so for the women,

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perhaps, than for their husbands, in whose shadows the wives stood, and whose glory or lack of it they willy-nilly shared.

A few weeks before the royal advent the big new hotel opened its doors in time for Lagos to view its special features before the big rush of visitors began. The spacious lounges filled with interested citizens, both African and European, who sat in the foam-cushioned modern chairs, admired the array of wall portraits of African politicians and other dignitaries, and looked out from the wide windows at a night view of surprising charm. After dark the familiar lagoon waters were seen from this height as a satiny black lake fringed with the town's multiple reflected lights. The large rubbish dump which had embarrassingly reared itself in the foreground of this pretty picture had, in anticipation of the royal tour, been levelled by burning and camouflaged with railway cinders. It was, for the time being, the most discreet, least offensive rubbish dump that Lagos had ever known.

Although the hotel welcomed all comers, the mixed clientele tended at first to segregate itself — the Africans (who preferred to use the stairs rather than the lift) to one side of the lounge, the Europeans to the other, so that a stranger, seeing the colourful robes, fezes and turbans to his left and the European suits and frocks on his right, might have suspected apartheid. But soon the situation became more flexible; the races mixed so far as to share the lounge generally, though they did not often drink together. The newly hired, carefully drilled stewards in bar and dining-room showed early signs of nervousness, as if in this high-grade, brand-new atmosphere they were afraid of committing *faux pas* that would instantly lower the standard. (There were, naturally, some such incidents but usually they only served to humanize the relations between guests and staff.) The whole character of the place appeared designed to sift all the dross from the business of living in West Africa, to exclude the heat, dust, noise and poverty of the environs, and retain only the tropical graces and comforts. So the hotel was, in its setting, an atypical place that revealed to white strangers, arriving directly from ship or plane, none of the less attractive

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realities which lay beyond the plate glass and parquet. Some of the older Coasters, even those who were quickest to avail themselves of the hotel's sybaritic services, were a trifle indignant that newcomers should be so protected from the real facts of Africa. It nettled them that the visitors should so casually, with so little knowledge of the country, come to roost in this ivory tower and think it nothing exceptional.

'And what happens next?' one bush-dwelling, leather-faced timber Coaster inquired of his lounge circle of contemporaries. 'The Press will fly out here, straight from home to this kind of luxury. What'll Nigeria mean to them? Pâté and crêpes suzettes in the dining-room, no bedroom nets or mosquitoes, air-conditioning, quick laundry, everything Ritzy and laid-on. How d'you think they'll see how Lagos lives, from here?'

The new hotel did in fact automatically shelter the majority of visitors during that unusual season, but during this busy time the other hotels did not suffer any slump. One of them enjoyed a certain publicity by accommodating the driver of the imported royal automobiles. Cars and man arrived in Lagos some weeks beforehand in order to become acquainted with local conditions, and all were objects of curiosity and speculation. The chauffeur, whom our Driver saw as a unique species of white man and in no sense a brother, was a modest person who preserved his dignity while allowing his reflected glory as the Queen's driver to be further reflected on those Europeans who wished to have snapshots taken with him in his full livery. As for his high responsibility as pilot of a royal vehicle, he surprised everybody by stating that in the course of his official duty he had never seen his exalted passengers. The strict etiquette implicit in his duty kept his eyes looking straight ahead while royalty entered or left the vehicle, and precluded him from turning his head at any time. The obligatory absence of an interior rear-view mirror made his passengers invisible to him even while the crowd along the pavements pressed forward to cheer the royal figures whom he, closer to them than any, could never glimpse.

At this time of uncommon happenings the arrival in Lagos of

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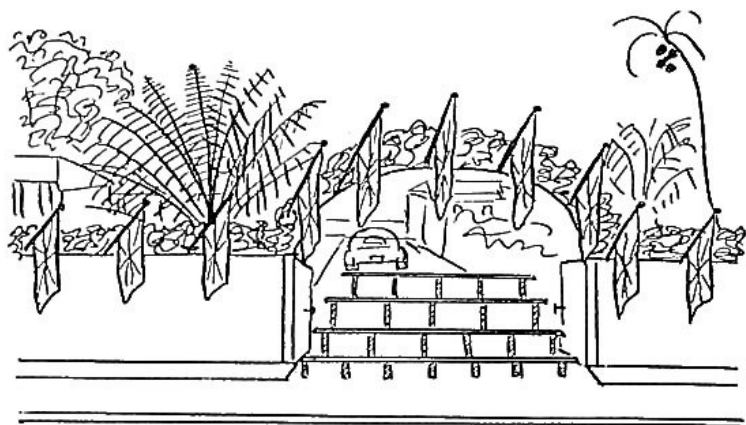
thirty fresh-faced British workmen evoked its share of comment. In a land where the majority of white men do no manual work, this imported artisan force was as novel a sight as any that had lately intrigued the city. In sticky heat that must have pressed like a warm sponge on bodies so recently braced against bitter winter cold, the men set up tiers of grandstands around the city racecourse and did the job with methodical speed and British matter-of-factness, apparently oblivious of the stares and frank comments of the African townspeople who swiftly gathered around the work in progress. In Lagos, as anywhere else, the fascination of workmen at work held the public gaze, but at this time in this place the sight of white men labouring en masse was something that warranted a particularly close scrutiny.

Soon, all along the twelve-mile royal way, the decorations began to flower; the striped poles and banners, pennants and triumphal arches, and swathes of bunting over the smiling portraits. At intervals along the streets aluminium-grey trumpets, which were to relay the speeches and sounds of rejoicing to all parts of the city, bloomed like giant metal lilies, even along the flatland roads near the airport where the only possible audience for this re-diffused joy appeared to be the twittering weaver birds whose round nests loaded the roadside trees.

The citizenry was hard at work setting out its own private house flags and erecting grandstands at every vantage point. From our wide gateway on the main route we looked across the road to see a group of soldiers athletically jumping up and down on a grandstand under the command of a sergeant who closely watched the wooden planks for signs of strain. Our own private, home-made grandstand was portable, designed to fit into the open gateway and hold fifteen people; the house staff, Driver, Clerk Thomas, Gardener Umam, ourselves and a few friends.

When Lagos turned on its festival lights the city's transformation was as complete as Cinderella's when she set out for the ball, and the city was almost as impressed by itself as by the lustre of its expected guests. Bathed in luminous colour the

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streets looked wider, the Marina's graceful promenade sparkled; in brilliant neon the railway terminus said 'Welcome To Nigeria'; floodlit buildings suggested an unsuspected nobility of architecture; and the new power station, which Her Majesty was to open, loomed and glowed across the water like an ethereal primrose-yellow palace that housed a fabulous foreign djinn.

As if all this were not enough, one of the large shops featured, behind burglar-proof grilles, a window display of the Crown Jewels in replica, and the motley evening crowds surged along its length to see this spectacle of velvet-cushioned magnificence, this treasure house that set Lagos minds marvelling at so great a Queen so rich in jewels. The humblest Nigerians, the barrow-pushers, dock-workers, taxi-touts and beggars, jostled together to feast their eyes on the token splendours, and for several hours every night this hypnotized press of admirers sent up a non-stop sibilance of gratification.

The street-strollers with upturned faces wandered through their own Lagos that was now a city altered in appearance, pace and outlook, changed in almost everything except its January Gulf of Guinea climate. The heat simmered along the gala thoroughfares and beat down upon the airport tarmac; no shade of roof or leafage could keep it at bay, nor any number of whirring fans bring daytime respite.

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Yet at this gruelling time of year which as a rule incubates and swiftly hatches African and European palavers, and serenity of mind is rare, a political truce was declared and, moreover, scrupulously observed, so that, as one paper put it: 'the Queen might enjoy a cordial atmosphere'. No one cared to hazard what effects this unprecedented period of goodwill would have on longstanding party antagonisms, whether hatchets buried for three whole weeks might lose their razor edge, or, perhaps, whether they might emerge all the sharper for their rest from battle. But everyone, except possibly the politicians involved, thought it a delightful change to read newspapers that were so cleansed of acrimony as to sound all alike in sweetness of temper and loyalty to the Throne.

Even when at the eleventh hour the Ministers of Finance, and of Land and Social Services, and the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Labour disappeared from the political field, their obligatory resignations were almost silently effected, without any of the bitter accusations or angry post-mortems that would normally have heightened the headlines. This generally gentling influence extended even to the distant Cameroon Territories which, while deeply envious of Nigeria's honour, swallowed their protests against exclusion from the already exhausting royal itinerary and generously added their own temporary political armistice in the interest of the Queen's peace.

For the planners behind the scenes this was an era of frantic activity. Bulky folders of pamphlets, maps, précis and timetables were prepared for the visiting Press. The Nigerian soldiery was drilled with stop-watch precision by stern-jawed white officers who were apparently immune from heat exhaustion. The police were briefed on the management of complicated traffic and the handling of crowds that might become uncontrollable. The gloomier white Cassandras reminded each other of the hostile demonstrations and torn decorations of Coronation time, and thought it likely that jackdaw-minded have-nots would steal the unguarded night streets' detachable flags and ornaments for quick re-sale. When it was learned that displays of jet-planes were to enliven Nigeria's skies during the

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royal tour, some were certain that much of the population, unacquainted with jet-propulsion, would be frightened out of its wits, no matter what careful warnings were issued beforehand. And, with reason, a good many people felt that a Queen descending from her aircraft in everyday clothes rather than the gorgeous robes and crown which so many imagined to be her customary dress might grievously disappoint the keyed-up regalia-loving crowds.

Meantime the window-dressing, at once literal and figurative and competitive between the Regions, continued not only in Lagos but in Eastern Port Harcourt and Enugu, Western Ibadan and Benin, and Northern Kano and Kaduna, its purpose to impress not only the royal guests but the accompanying bevy of men and women armed with cameras and notebooks whose interesting portrayals, accounts and opinions Nigeria anticipated with eagerness and confidence. It was thought that no observant stranger could fail to be impressed not only by the pageantry of the forthcoming great formal occasions but by all the substantial proofs of the country's speedy development in education, administration, science, agriculture, mining and commerce. It was hoped that this time those hard-worked capital-lettered shock-words, White Man's Grave and Dark Continent, would be allowed to die a natural death.

On the morning of the Queen's arrival Lagos rose early to go into its tidy garlanded streets and mount its grandstands in readiness for the acclamation. Everywhere throughout the city there was a subtle change of timbre, an absence of customary background workaday noise. The rope-cordoned royal route, cleared of vehicles, was fenced with militia and police, and streets usually filled with a lumbering, hooting, bell-ringing concourse of traffic became long lanes of space and silence. Across the road from our small grandstand the Army wives, on their well-tested tiers of seats, sat in their new hats and put up temporary parasols as the sun rose higher in the burning sky. Along the dusty pavements the ordinary crowd wandered, carrying its small flags, headloading its street-trading wares;

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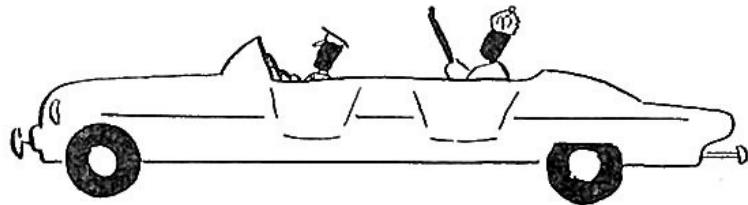
wheeling its bicycles. When distantly the noise of an aircraft heralded the start of all the ceremonies, there was a general stir, a shading of eyes staring upward at the silver-glinting transport. Soon along the tense thoroughfare the megaphones began to relay from the airport seven miles away from us the first roar of civic joy and then the Queen's voice. At last the faint important rumble of the approaching cars was heard, and as the waves of cheering grew louder the soldiers stiffened and the pavement people pressed forward. Smallboy Simon hoisted William to his shoulders; Umam, in his whitest robes and a new fez, stood like a statue; and even Steward Robert, who hitherto had shown little interest in the occasion, rose to his feet, pulling his son John with him. Driver, with brass buttons winking, looked solemn enough for tears. Benjamin Cook, who for reasons of celebrant curry lunch, was the last to join the group, flung down his apron inside the gate and, smelling slightly of onions, climbed to his perch.

So the well-rehearsed cars rolled decorously past, carrying the city's Nigerian and British dignitaries and their wives. The nudging crowd was swift to spot its most popular Members of Parliament and to admire the politicians' splendid traditional and sometimes original garments, particularly the rakish straw boater adorned with tall ostrich feathers which Chief Festus S. Okotie-Eboh, M.H.R., the ebullient Federal Minister of Labour and Welfare, had chosen as headgear suitable to the rest of his ceremonial costume. This included a train that was so remarkable in length and opulence as to defy all sartorial competition and to require a train-bearer who conveniently wrapped his end of the garment scarf-fashion around his neck.



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It was, some of the more blasé British considered, a simple procession, lacking any fanfare of music or pride of horsemen or massed marchers, and a few purists frowned to see several Volkswagen cars among the rest. But for the uncritical crowd



the spectacle was entirely satisfying, and when His Highness the Oba Adeniji Alake II, King of Lagos, was borne slowly past, democratically waving and smiling from his big open car, there was unreserved applause.

Then the long-awaited peak moment came, swiftly and with an element of surprise, as such moments do come. For a space of seconds the street around us saw the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh as real people, the Queen a woman — no ordinary woman, but still charmingly human and wearing a pink hat — rather than a mystique of pinnacled faraway Majesty. This revelation of humanity, perhaps more remarkable to the street than any vision of jewelled and panoplied Sovereignty, hushed the crowd during its instant of scrutiny. Then the jubilation went up all along the way to follow rather than surround the royal car which bore a Queen, as exquisite, poised and petite as a Dresden figurine, and seemingly invulnerable to the heat and clamour which were to be her portion during the next twenty highly-keyed Nigerian days.

They were for the country twenty days of closely crowded, newly minted events, state banquets, garden parties, official openings and inspections, investitures, rallies, speeches, drives, contests, pageants and fireworks, in whose brilliant formal foregrounds the favoured named few appeared against the mobile, vocal, darkly massed backgrounds of the anonymous majority. People passing Lagos's Government House glanced

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through the entrance, past the guards to the sculptured steps, tailored lawns and perfect beds of canna lilies, with the royal standard flying over all, and sensed a new and special atmosphere, the Queen's own climate. Yet, dwelling at a distance removed from this extraordinary atmosphere, there were the ordinary people who had shared in setting its scene. The Rosy Stores, a small but go-ahead Lagos bazaar shop, had its own reason for satisfaction since its shelves had been the source of the crimson velvet which had re-covered the State Banquet Room's chairs at Government House. A nameless little carver in one of Lagos's street markets had fashioned an ornate chest of drawers which now stood in the royal suite whose hand-woven fabrics had been worked by Yoruba weavers. The Queen's white dressing-table had been carpentered at a local technical institute, and even the royal waste-paper basket spoke of the proud hand of the Nigerian who had carved it from a shapely gourd.

During the limelit scenes that followed, the small dainty royal person tirelessly moved, spoke, accepted bouquets and smilingly greeted those of her subjects selected for this special honour. Among the thousand guests who drifted across the lawns at the Government House Royal Garden Party there was at least one for whom the Queen's handclasp meant a kind of mystic communion with greatness. As if holding a priceless fragile gift this one Nigerian 'carried' the Queen's touch in fingers tightly closed and held away from contact with the crowd. Arrived in a secluded place away from the throng, he pressed palm to forehead in a gesture of formal ritual assimilation. For this African citizen, as for thousands of his kind, the royal visit was not merely a time of nation-wide spectacle, or even of individual distinction. It was a few transforming moments on the heights that would touch the valleys of ordinary living with a private glow for years to come.

After several days of closely scheduled events, to which the local newspapers devoted glowing columns and pages of photographs, the royal party flew northward. Lagos, breathless, footsore and perhaps a trifle weary of the sustained excitement,

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prepared to resume plain living until the Queen's return from her visits to Kaduna, Enugu, Benin, Port Harcourt and Calabar, where all the preparations which for Lagos were past history were in their anxious final stages. In Lagos streets, busy again with neglected breadwinning routines, the street megaphones trumpeted the commentaries and rejoicings from other places. To these outpourings the passers-by, occupied with their own affairs, listened absent-mindedly or not at all. Only the Northerners — the livestock-traders, vendors of crocodile and lizard-skin bags, ivory carvings and Nigerian silver trinkets, the city's watchnights and gardeners — were keenly attentive when Kaduna relayed descriptions of its vast 4000-horse durbar which was, by scope of imagination, sheer force of energy and antiquity of tradition, to outshine all other royal Nigerian occasions. Next afternoon, gardener Umam, who could not read, bought a paper from a passing news-seller in order to look at the durbar pictures, and for once forgot his customary restraint by hastening up to us, his face illumined with rare emotion. 'Something good?' we asked.

'Very good,' declared Umam, holding the paper wide so that we might see the illustration in which massed horses and riders with poised spears and sabres seemed almost to leap out of the page in all their medieval magnificence of caparison and coats of mail. Umam focused his gaze, reverently pointed an earth-damp finger to one of the tiny figures in the scene and said, 'My Emir'. And we saw our gardener then not as a nondescript little man cut off from the traditions of his northland, but as a warrior Fulani whose Emir embodied all the fiery pride of race which at that moment made Umam's face vivid with exaltation. For him it was as if he had been there in Kaduna.

During these red-letter days, the legends of the past and portents of the future made strange company. In contrast with the brilliant tapestries of the durbar and all the many displays of dancing, drumming and traditional Nigerian masquerade, the spectacle of the dinning, cavorting jet planes struck a nervous modern note. Yet although the ear-splitting low-flying novelty caused many unsophisticated Africans to run for cover

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with hands clapped over their ears, there was no incidence of panic. During one of the first days of jet performance over Lagos, the small crowd of Nigerians who stood at the airport barrier were more curious than fearful, and the trio of Hausa pedlars who had a sales pitch for ivory and ebony carvings near the runway appeared to regard the phenomenon with complete detachment. As the flight whistled into the late-afternoon sky, leaving a singing in the ears of nerve-shocked spectators, the trio of men from the north did not flinch or even glance upward. Carefully, as was their custom at this time of day, they poured water from the small tin kettles, which are part of every good Hausa's equipment, over their dusty hands and feet, and prostrated themselves, beads in hand, to face Mecca. While the rest of the airport people exclaimed and grimaced and involuntarily ducked their heads as the aircraft swooped above, the kneeling Hausas retired into their own aura of prayerful peace and were as remote from the planes' fearsome noise and awesome meaning as if their place of worship were some silent desert mosque.

The more ambitious the theme the more likely it is to sound an occasional flat or discordant note. In the little village of Shagamu, about fifty miles north of Lagos, one African speculator had thought to reward himself by his foresight in ordering a substantial supply of flags and bunting. This he expected to sell to the local people who understood that the royal party would make a leisurely stop at Shagamu on their return to Lagos from Ibadan. But when it turned out that Shagamu was to figure only as a five-minute royal pause, the villagers, from vexation or thrift, refused to deck their houses. The speculator's disappointment was as keen as anyone's, because flags in quantity are not often in great demand, and the long stretches of time between flag-waving occasions are hard on frail tropic-stored fabrics. However, Shagamu as a whole was, after all, to enjoy some measure of distinction via its unique Shagamu Arms Hotel. This is an hotel in name only, for it caters mostly to car travellers made thirsty by the long stretch of shadeless road that links Lagos with Ibadan. Its public

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house character is stated by its name and especially by its surprising inn signpost which portrays, in black against white, two human arms neatly crossed. If humble Shagamu saw little of the royal visitors, the 'Arms' did at least provide drinks for a party of B.B.C. commentators and British pressmen, some of whose photographs in due course made a small gallery in a place of honour near the bar. The flags-speculator, a man of some education, viewed them wryly and was heard to murmur, '*Sic transit gloria*'.

It was during the investiture that glory in individual portions was meted out to illumine those particularly meritorious Africans and Britons who had long and honourable records of service to Nigeria. During the ceremonies one Mrs Malama Kabura, a pioneering primary school teacher for fifteen years, was given the first decoration ever to distinguish a woman of the male-dominated Northern regions. She was photographed for the newspapers while held high on the shoulders of her sisterhood in whose expressions of joy the district's fathers and husbands may have detected the first alarming spark of a new crusading feminist spirit. In Ibadan's Western Hall a Queen in tiara and regal gown bestowed knighthoods on the splendidly garbed Oni of Ife and the Alake of Abeokuta, and honours on other citizens, while a richly robed multi-crowned audience watched the gracious profferings of praise and accolade. It saw, too, an elderly missionary come forward to accept her reward. Hatless, gloveless, grey-haired and dressed in an ordinary frock, she stood before her Queen and the jewelled assembly to hear the citation. Behind her lay her youth that she had given to Africa, the stretches of bush country she had travelled, the long perspective of all her arduous endeavours. And beside her, closely sharing her moment, she must have felt the presence of the larger company she represented. Missionaries, as everyone knows, bring to Africa an extraordinary selflessness and courage. Therefore it seems odd that, except for the times when one person among them is singled out for especial recognition, these

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qualities are generally taken for granted. 'Missionary' is unfortunately an unbeautiful, stiff-sounding word that often suggests to more worldly minds a built-in 'goodness' which needs little cultivation. We wondered what remarkable adventure story lay behind the stately phrases of approval addressed to the grey-haired spinster that Ibadan afternoon, and how many bitter minor defeats she may have been measuring against this shining proof of what everyone else saw as a positive personal victory.

When, on their return from Ibadan to Lagos, the royal party stopped for luncheon at the Residency in Ijebu-Ode, the local population came out in its gayest clothes to wave its patriotic flags. No policeman's frown marred the public joy; no skeleton rattled in any cupboard; the picaresque past was forgotten. Ijebu's character had not always been law-abiding. In bygone days when cowrie shells and manillas composed the greater part of bush currency, and the value of a shilling equalled that of today's pound, some of the Ijebu people discovered in themselves a talent for counterfeiting. This they practised until at the peak of their success a worrying proportion of Nigerian shillings came from the Ijebu district. Eventually the harassed Mint was obliged to put out a new issue of shillings with distinguishing rims that were so elaborately grooved and patterned as to defy even Ijebu's skill in simulation. Nothing daunted, the workers turned their imitative skills elsewhere, and were for a time thought to be responsible for large quantities of genuine-seeming modern drugs which were regarded in bush centres as panaceas for all ills. After this spell of illegal resourcefulness Ijebu-Ode turned its lively intelligence to law-abiding pursuits. The face it presented to the Queen was both guileless and proud. Its standard of living was relatively high, its people were hardworking, its commercial acumen, especially in the realm of the women traders, was much admired. Several of its sons had risen to political eminence; one of them was now Premier of the Western Region. Even the echoes from the past that persisted in far distant market places paid a kind of tribute to

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the district's old-time craftsmen. It has long been Nigeria's habit to examine its small change closely after each money transaction. When a doubtful coin surfaces, the ejaculation, even today, is almost certain to be 'Ijebu!'

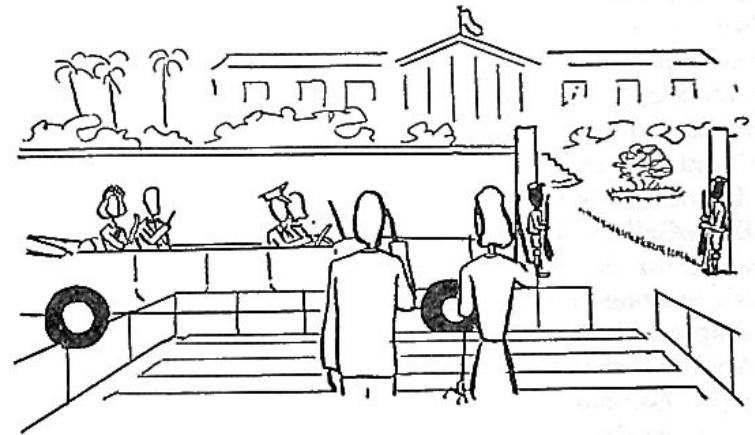
With the Queen's return to Lagos the city, after its interval of ordinariness, made ready for the tour's grand finale. Again the traffic halted and the crowds cheered, although this time its mood was a degree less awed,

a trifle more casual. By this time most of the Capital had at least glimpsed the royal couple; every speech had been published in all the local papers; every detail of every event had been forecast and described. So that when Bill, emerging with Driver from a Lagos traffic hold-up, asked a bystander about the state of the two current divergent processions, the knowledgeable reply was, 'The Queen she done go by, but her man he no come yet.'

When at length the Duke of Edinburgh's entourage appeared, Driver, seeing a loophole in the cordon, innocently stepped on the accelerator and took the car across the bridge in the wake of the exalted limousines. Bill might have stopped him, but the heat was oppressive, the congestion of waiting cars formidable, and the log business in urgent need of attention. The crowd, generous with its first applause, had enough enthusiasm left over for Bill who was fifth in the line of vehicles and — perhaps because he was now contentedly smoking a cigar — presumed to be in some way deserving of waves and cheers. Driver, enchanted with the situation, sat with ramrod-stiff circumspection that belied his delighted face. It was, Bill said afterwards, a kind of invigorating Walter Mitty experience for both of them, a tonic for wilting egos on a hot, all-too-ordinary log-minded day.

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It was a day that ended memorably. After dinner we set out through the bright night-time streets for the crowd-packed Marina, to view a harbour display of fireworks from the vantage point of the Press grandstand in front of Government House. Because the Queen and Prince Philip were momentarily expected to return from an Investiture, many of the streets were cordoned off. We made our way with difficulty past a succession of sentries and police who scrutinized our pass and at last admitted us to the small wooden construction. Since the Press were either in their hotel rooms writing the busy day's dispatches, or attending the Investiture, we sat alone in an oasis of calm and silence some distance removed from the holiday assemblage that jostled behind the barriers. The fireworks which later fizzed and dazzled over the harbour like tropic stars run amok were a pretty spectacle that Lagos shared with the royal group, who watched it from the seaward-facing balcony of the big white house. But for us the evening's best moment came at the very beginning, when the Queen and



Duke, driving close by our solitary perch, gave friendly wave and smile to us alone; this salute to two anonymous Britishers from two tired people at the end of yet one more day of exhausting formalities seemed to us to demonstrate a quite remarkable humanness and generosity.

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Next morning early, with a commotion of drums and prancing feet, Nigeria neared the end of its three weeks of royal-tour marvels and portents. Its epilogue, danced and mimed along the city streets as the royal car passed on its way to the airport, was the 'Admuorisha Play' whose beginnings were in Lagos's earliest times. Now, as then, the leaders of the many dance 'sections' were chosen from the tribal aristocracy, and the whole colourful creation was intended to celebrate the end of one auspicious period in the people's life and usher in the next era with hopeful omens of peace and prosperity. It was a fitting royal farewell.

That afternoon as we drove to Victoria Beach the city looked already different, as if subdued by a certain unbuttoned, post-festival drowsiness. The street decorations, their short heyday over, were already beginning to look draggled and faded. From the main rubbish dump, which had latterly lain so quiescent beneath its camouflage of cinders, were rising whiffs that made us think of the first pale puffs of smoke from a brooding volcano.

We noticed again the detail of the ordinary streets where normal business was being resumed: the profusion of drapery hanging outside the small shops; the pillow-slips lavishly embroidered with thought-provoking mottoes, 'Abide With Me' and 'Never Trust a Friend'. Again our eyes were caught by Lagos's varied signs of which our favourites were: 'Hello, Hello — Call in Here for Quick Jobs on Tombstones': 'Occult Healing for all your requirements', and 'Demon Stove for Hire'. So long as the sign writers flourished it was impossible for Lagos to be dull.

We found that the quiet beach road, which had not figured as a processional route, was as corrugated and pitted as when we had last driven along it, and as hazardous with wandering pigs, goats and fowls. This part of the Lagos scene had not been touched by the civic magic wand. We were glad it had been excluded, for the charm of the beach was in its naturalness. A crescent of pale sand fringed with feathery casuarina trees bordered the brilliant sea where the incoming surf boomed, and

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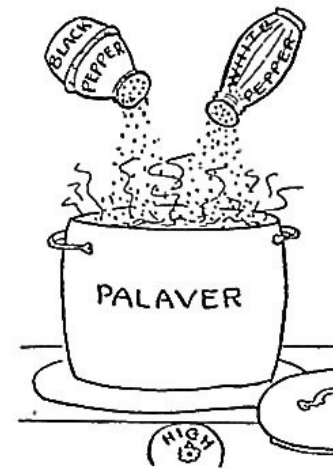
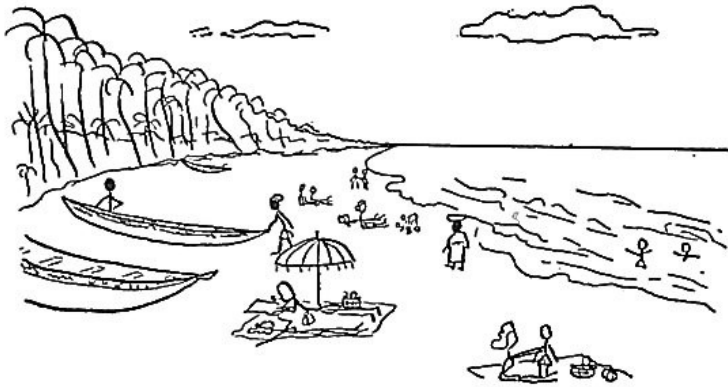
the ebbing waves left trails of white froth like lacework on the rippled wet strand. In the background among the trees, at some distance from the parked cars, sophisticated beach parties and family groups with uniformed African nannies supervising infants and sandcastles, a fishing encampment lived its inbred village life. Its heavy dugout canoes lay on the beach, and its men sat mending their spread-out nets as if the sea and beach were more truly theirs than the bathers. And this was so; for most swimmers did not venture beyond their depth in these chancy, turbulent waves, while the fishermen took their canoes far out into the distant deep calm waters that gave them their livelihood.

The beach was much frequented by yet another Nigerian group, distinct from all others because it was a religious body whose white-robed men and women members were generally known as the Cherubim and Seraphim. These conducted exclusive open-air meetings under the trees and by the rocks of the breakwater, and during their ceremonies worshipped the elements. On afternoons when after bad weather the beach was deserted by fishermen and bathers, their plump, angelic-looking conclaves suggested a domestic scene in Heaven out of *Green Pastures*, or some homely illustration of prophets and seers discussing the worldliness of the world while the wind fluttered their saintly robes and the skies brooded.

The beach, many expatriates declared (especially near a tour's end), was the best part of Lagos. Always a faintly salty freshness blew landward from the tumbling waters, bringing respite to people made weary by the steamy workaday city. Moreover, the shoreline was subject to refreshing contour changes from week to week, or even from day to day, as the powerful flux of waters piled up a beach hillock where there had been a familiar flatness, or retreated to leave new fresh plains of sand in place of former steeps. Sometimes it occurred to us that in its capacity for swift, almost revolutionary alteration, the beach might after all reflect the city's mood, pace and variety. For while the beach was constantly in process of being moulded and remoulded by the ruthless sea, the city's plastic

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shape, thought and future were likewise subject to many strong pressures from within and without. Some of these we had seen at work before and during the royal tour. We knew that the rest lay powerfully in store, far beyond anyone's vision.



Pepper for Soup

13

WHEN, in Nigerian idiom, anyone 'puts pepper for soup' he is inviting a heated discussion. Since the introduction of Western-style politics and eight hard-hitting newspapers the 'pepper' that has never been lacking in Nigeria's debates has come to be a staple ingredient, especially in Lagos and the volatile Eastern and Western Regions. It flavours all manner of large and small Coast palavers, African versus African, European versus African, European versus European. On the higher levels it pervades political meetings, editorial columns and courts of justice; on the lower strata it stimulates the restiveness of ambitious underlings and the resentment of village people who do not care for authority's disturbance of ancient rites and routines, and view census-taking, tax-collecting and the reapportioning of land as the unforgivable impudence of dictatorial citified upstarts. 'Pepper' rises in stinging clouds wherever there is fear, ignorance, sensitivity, pride or frustration, or bitter memory. It is the scratchy stuff of rebellion, part of a new-old country's struggle to shape itself for independence.

None of this is surprising when it is remembered that Nigeria's 373,000 square miles are broken up by many internal boundaries and shared by many tribal factions. These speak a dozen principal languages and more than two hundred dialects in which they may voice their incompatibilities in culture, religion and formal education. The European minority scattered throughout the country is in one sense helpful to the unification of all the other elements, while in other ways its own 'different-

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nesses' provoke many invidious comparisons. Even within themselves the Nigerian groups often do not agree, since in the general developmental trend there is always a percentage of citizens who lack opportunity or motivation for keeping up with the ambitious Joneses whose efforts they decry. Not that the condition of the advanced Joneses is wholly enviable, for their reach often exceeds their grasp; the jettisoning of old-fashioned tribal disciplines is likely to leave them in a state of social and moral bewilderment, aggravated by their contempt for those who persist in the ancient mould. Although throughout the clan structures of Nigeria the term 'brother' is used between the most distant relatives or even village friends, the idea of selfless brotherhood is still remote. Paradoxically, it is in the country's striving towards the unity which it must have for self-government that its most inflammatory situations arise.

There were many who judged the royal tour as a test of a divided nation's ability to work together towards one objective: the smoothly scheduled entertainment of distinguished visitors. The political truce proved that single-mindedness was possible. The Nigerian journalism which heralded the tour confounded its critics by concentrating its energies almost entirely on the amiable business of making the royal guests welcome. In circumstances which some European Jeremiahs thought must stimulate nationalistic troublemakers to pique and palaver, there was no sign of friction or reason for disquiet. The pepper pot that eventually caused a general heating of the national temper was not initially of Nigerian origin. Wielded with innocent exuberance by a few of the visiting white reporters, it set up a commotion of public opinion that began when one Lagos newspaper offered its readers a page of excerpts from British, Canadian and American publications under this reproachful heading: 'We went out dressed for the occasion and in multitudes to welcome our Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh but this is how others saw us.' The quotations, culled from dispatches solely intended for a faraway white readership, proved how difficult it is to interpret one world to another. Nigeria, as eager as a good child for praise, and as hopeful for

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admiration as a debutante at her first ball, was not happy to read these paragraphs, some of which were printed in other Nigerian papers:

'For the children the eve of the Queen's arrival was bath night. Gurgling joyfully they queued by the roadside pumps and drinking fountains for buckets to be poured over their heads. In the morning some will wear clothes for the first time in their lives.'

'Obsessionally and professionally anti-white, the [Nigerian] newspapers ... take advantage of every white visit to castigate both the visitor and whites in general. The fact that the Queen was spared this vitriol was not due to a muzzling of the Press nor to good African manners, but to the simple fact that many Nigerians are enamoured of the symbolism of monarchy, and the idea of a sovereign Queen as attractive as the present one captivates them.'

'Over a million of the Queen's subjects screamed a frenzied greeting ... tin shanties almost collapsing under the weight of flags and bunting. Out into the mass of sweltering, noisy, brown humanity went the Royal pair, out into the riot of smells and colour.... It was a national holiday ... and home-brewed palm wine flowed from every native gourd because "Mrs Queen has arrived".'

'Up in the air went the Nigerians lining both sides of the road.... Up too went the dust — reddish-brown stuff brought in with the wind from the Sahara. Down it came on the Royal procession. It covered the so-carefully polished cars. It fell on the Queen ... it fell on the Duke.... The entourage in the closed cars behind rapidly wound up the windows. The Queen put up a white parasol. In ten minutes that was coated brown. The Duke just had to face it out.... Then the comedy of the hats. For days local papers had told their readers: "It is customary to remove your hat in the presence of the Queen. Don't forget." But few Nigerians wear a hat. So what did they do? They bought hats specially to put on and take off and put on again

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as the Queen rode by. And what hats — trilby hats, bowler hats, cloth caps, railwaymen's caps, pith helmets.'

'The men wore anything from Anthony Eden hats to full Scots kilts.'

'Brand-new shoes, bought specially for the occasion, were hastily torn off ... it was so much easier to keep up with the Queen's car barefoot.'

'This African capital, where a white face on the streets is a rarity, throbbled with excitement.'

'Cursed beyond most corners of Elizabeth's empire with a hellish climate and a poverty that festers through vast acres of its capital city in some of the world's most squalid slums, Nigeria is nevertheless an optimistic and happy land.... On Sundays and pleasant evenings in Lagos, the folk who dress by day in rags emerged, as if by magic, in natty slacks and clean, yellow nylon sport shirts for an evening at the movies.'

'Twenty-four hours under this sun-blanchd sky assaulted by a hundred smells, a thousand colours and the wide, smiling, slightly dopey charm of the Nigerian produced a feeling that can only be described as excited exhaustion, or exhausted excitement.'

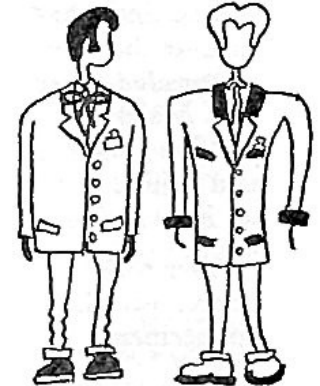
While the royal party was absent from Lagos, attending the northern functions, the reprinted Press comment from overseas continued to stimulate the circulations of Lagos newspapers. Many of the quotations were read with pride, but these reports failed to soothe the Nigerian journalists who were intent on energetic retaliation.

'Nigerians have been brought up in the belief that the British Press, even the sensational Press, stands for all that is honest and honourable. There have been times when the Nigerian Press, young in journalistic experience, has misrepresented certain aspects of our political and social life. "Ah," we have said, in happy ignorance, "the British Press would not stoop to this sort of thing." How greatly mistaken we were emerged as the British

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papers started flowing into Nigeria bearing the "facts" and "news" of the Royal tour.... This country has for so long been the butt of shoddy humour; it has for so long been imbued in the British mind that we are backward and not yet come forth from our primeval slime, that were the truth to be told, the Great African myth might be imperilled.... There are admirable exceptions among the Press representatives too, but their voice is all but drowned beneath the tidal wave of derision of their colleagues.'

'A few British journalists, still haunted by decadent ideas of Empire, and anachronistic enough to imagine that Nigeria is still the "White-Man's Grave", have chosen the happy occasion of the Queen's visit to sneer, to jeer and to jibe at Her Majesty's most loyal people. We may be sad about this, but we have no reason to be despondent. A multitude of more responsible newspapermen have also chosen the occasion to give Nigeria a fair and glorious show. And it is to the more responsible section of the British Press that we need pay any attention at all. Let it not be imagined that I do not realize that Nigerians feel deep in their hearts the gross ingratitude to which they have been treated. Let it not be imagined either that, as a Nigerian, I cannot sneer, jeer and jibe at a people in whose Christian country there are the shameful spectacles of an evening in Hyde Park and where abound disgusting stories of bloodthirsty escapades of "The Teddy Boys".'



'Those who had felt dismayed by the tripe written by irresponsible newspaper reporters covering the royal visit about Nigeria should again read the news ... 23 people have so far died in the United Kingdom from cold. The irony of it is that these journalists poke fun about the so-called "steaming heat" of Africa. It has not yet been brought to our notice that anyone, white, black or yellow has died as a result of the heat of tropical

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Africa. Rather, people go to great pains and expense to provide or pay for heating apparatus to withstand the miserable English climate, particularly during winter.'

'... if Nigeria is to be encouraged to remain in the Commonwealth after her independence, then Britain must learn to respect other people's feelings. At this stage nothing but goodwill and mutual respect will foster the relation between England and Nigeria.... Let England know in time. Let England read the handwriting on the walls before it is too late!'

'Why do our people rage over the sweet nonsense which some of the foreign journalists amidst us have been writing about us and our country since the Queen's arrival? Why do some people think the best way to retaliate is for Nigerian newspapers to descend to the same level with certain United Kingdom newspapers whose main policy is to create sensation and make a mountain out of a mole-hill. We have maintained studied silence since these days not because we too cannot abuse and ridicule the people of the island kingdom but because we, as a responsible organ, would not like anything to mar the visit of Her Majesty to our country.... A visit to the East End of London ... will prove that London, with centuries of civilization behind her, still has worse slums, shanties and hovels than we have here in Lagos.'

After some days of this, the Oba Adeniji Adele II, King of Lagos, issued, via all the local newspapers, a gentling pronouncement:

'I am indeed sorry to have to speak to you now to say that some of our great happiness seems likely to be spoiled because of articles in newspapers. Things have been written in one or two newspapers in the United Kingdom which have been repeated in papers here and to which our people have much objected. My purpose now is to appeal to you not to let this spoil, in the least, for you the joy that we all rightly feel about the Royal visit and, even more important, not to let it spoil the pleasure of our Royal visitors. My own name has been used in

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these papers — sometimes incorrectly — but I am not allowing that to lessen my pride and pleasure in these historic and memorable days.... Never have we had visitors who so deserved the best we have to offer. Let us be happy in offering it. And let the most sensational news that the newspapers can print be of the warmth of our welcome and the sincerity of our feelings.'

In one issue of a Lagos newspaper which gave dutiful prominence to this soothing comment there appeared on another page a lurid account of London life under the headings, 'Terror in "The City to be Proud Of": Teddy Boys turn London into Whiteman's Jungle'. Steward Robert, a methodical reader of all our newspapers, was discovered in the pantry absorbed in this account of metropolitan mayhem. 'Can this be so?' he politely inquired of me, not allowing himself to smile.

Smallboy Simon and Benjamin Cook stood by. They had obviously been discussing the article and were interested to know my answer. 'In all countries,' I began without inspiration, 'there are good and bad people....'

'Boys in England who fight with knives?' queried Smallboy. 'And razors?' added Robert, a trifle smugly.

We reflected on the minority of young Englishmen whose notoriety had spread all the way to West Africa. I said, 'There aren't many of them. I have never met one.'

'Why then,' asked Robert, 'do they say in the paper London is a bad jungle place?'

I knew the answer this time. 'Because the newspaper people are vexed with all Europeans. I suppose they did not like what some white reporters wrote about Lagos.'

Smallboy, Cook and Steward considered the matter among themselves in Ibo, though it did not sound as if they were of one mind about it. 'All time pepper for soup,' Robert said in a general way, folding the paper neatly and tucking it into his tunic pocket. The debate was closed. Cook and I amicably discussed lunch and admired the pineapple he had brought from the market. On impulse I asked him, 'Would you like to see London?'

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Cook, taken by surprise, grimaced. 'Not so,' he said vehemently, 'a man should stay in his own country to be safe.'

I went back to the house with a sense of failure and a new comprehension of the inadequacies and peculiarities of ordinary prose and conversation: of random words that yield unexpected ideas under close scrutiny: effortless clichés, catchy headlines, editors' italicized phrases, slogans with capital letters, sparkling firecracker sentences that can start conflagrations, well-meant words misunderstood, hasty words whose meanings harden in irrevocable print, words flushed to a high colour with temporary excitement ... and all the precise learned dictionaries that explain the words but cannot help people to understand each other.

In West Africa the curiously staccato abridged English known as 'pidgin' may be partly responsible for many failures in rapport between Africans and white people. It permits the recitation of simple facts, the uttering of commands and the positive registering of approval or censure, but it bars all subtlety and inhibits any exchange of ideas. 'Pidgin', insensitive, over-emphatic, easy to learn and habit-forming, often sounds imperious, inquisitorial or condescendingly jocular on European lips. It can never nourish or balance a conversation. The African who speaks it is at the greatest disadvantage. His white listeners may forget that the speaker has any other language and think him mentally handicapped, a primitive-tongued fellow, naturally inarticulate. Since 'pidgin' allows so little leeway for modification, the speaker's aim must always be dead-centre if the result is not to be a chaos of misunderstanding.

Yet the general African feeling for the English language is, given opportunity, enthusiastic and venturesome. It delights in verbal richness and profusion, borrows heavily from the Bible and Shakespeare, likes to salt its lines with Latin tags, and abjures economy. It tends to pile words on words for sheer pleasure in their vivacity or sonority, in the manner of the African woman columnist who advised her readers: 'Make Him Pop-Eyed: ... spray your petticoats and yourself with perfume so that when

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you run to the door to meet your husband the whole place reeks of rose garden....' Or of the serious African feature-writer who in a learned article on metaphysics and witchcraft, said: 'As the witch is in possession of the shadow only, it stands to reason that when the real spirit-energy intervenes, the particle of the shadow imprisoned within the witch will melt, and the witch not be able to function in her normal fiendish consciousness. She develops sudden hypochondria and a feeling of hopelessness which leads to hallucinations and a general inco-ordination of the five senses.'

One may wonder whether the educated African's inclination towards polysyllables indirectly suggests a distaste for 'pidgin', or merely advertises that the British tongue has no difficulties for the zealous student. Few of the British who are prone to smile, both at the occasional plummy, highly decorated English of some West Africans and at the quaintness of lower-level Coast 'pidgin', consider mastering the daunting intricacies of Ibo, Yoruba or Hausa. In view of this failure it seems surprising that Africans do not more often reproach them both for laziness and inconsistency. But for most Coaster British 'pidgin', being well-established, is sufficiently serviceable. The main thing, they say, is to be understood, and if, even in the least encouraging circumstances, 'pidgin' is spoken sufficiently loudly and with enough gestures, its gist is sure to be approximately received. Many Europeans, it may be imagined, do not wish to go beyond the point of having their wants comprehended. The stiff simple vocabulary provides a natural barrier against any too-familiar association, and it may be, too, that a great many Africans foster this conservatism on their own side of the 'pidgin' fence; not all wish to become deeply involved in the white man's world. However that may be, British travellers to French West Africa are often impressed by the fluent correct French spoken by so many Africans in this region, and there are some who, knowing the general facility for rapid learning of English in Nigeria and Ghana, refuse to speak 'pidgin'. Their argument is that it is an outmoded system of communication, an obstacle to progress and an insult to everyone's intelligence.

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They say: 'If we can't speak to an African in his own language in his own country, the least we can do is to try to talk to him in normal English. Why say, "Make-you-go" instead of just "go"? Why say "chop" instead of "food", or "one-time" rather than "at once"?' And there is, from the West African point of view, a further objection. The educated Nigerian, bluntly addressed in 'pidgin' by a stranger-Briton is likely to be sorely affronted. The inference that all Africans live on 'pidgin'-level smacks, he may think, of an unwonted high-handedness, the 'Massa complex' which modern Africa cannot abide.

Yet, as some Britons would be quick to point out, the 'Massa complex' is by no means exclusive to white people; it flourishes, in a slightly different form, among Africans, who are no less immune from the enjoyment of power merely because they deplore self-aggrandizement in others. The progressive African top-dog might be expected to be compassionate in his dealings with bottom-dogs who are of his own race, but in fact he often fails to practise what he has most energetically preached. So the tendency to lordliness, so bitterly castigated in African diatribes against 'British imperialists', shows itself again especially among Africans who have won their way to the top against strenuous competition. The African with the masterful job has not achieved his promotions easily, nor is he likely afterwards to alter his nature in which self-interest is so often paramount. In Africa's current bewildering kaleidoscopic scene, the prevailing sense of urgency and apprehension of impending change leave little room for benevolence. The times are too nervous and impatient for philanthropy's soft words and selfless deeds. So while the top-dogs jockey for position in the new order, the bottom-dogs must as ever either accept their situation or climb out of it as best they can. Nowadays, at least, no one may blame 'British imperialism' for the deprivations and humiliations of the underprivileged.

It would be surprising if the new African 'Massas' who have taken over important chairs of office did not enjoy some inflation of ego, or privately relish the reversed situation in which white subordinates must constantly 'yes-sir' their African em-

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ployers. The test of broad-mindedness and equability in circumstances where controlling Africans and advising Europeans must work together involves men (and, indirectly, women) of both races, but perhaps it is the harder test for the demoted residual white 'Massas' whose tact might easily deteriorate into servility or flattering tongue-in-the-cheek acquiescence to procedures they know



to be unwise. As always, it is in the small details of ordinary daily life that forbearance and inspiration matter most. The affable public handshakes and wise speeches between top-level Africans and Europeans must have their proving ground, far from the public gaze, in the everyday behaviour of ordinary people, white and African, in Africa.

It is in Nigeria's attempt to reconcile her ancient customs with modern habits that her most peppery predicaments arise. Her crusaders for reform condemn what they declare to be an alarming prevalence of bribery and corruption. If newspaper headlines mean anything, argument about bribe-giving and commission-taking makes up the country's major palaver. No Nigerian is in the least amazed to read columns with such headings as 'Purify the Civil Service' (relating an irrevocable loss of £15,000 of national revenue in 1955 'from embezzlement, theft and fraudulent accounts'); 'Corruption in Our Hospitals' (concerning nurses' and orderlies' exacting of extra fees from patients); 'West Appoints Corruption Officer' (to study the problem of bribery and corruption in the Public Service of the Region); or 'Legislator, Councillors Arrested' (allegedly for demanding and receiving sums of money from candidates for university scholarships). The keynote of all such palaver material was clearly sounded by one Lagos newspaper editor who said: 'Many people in this country have come to regard bribery as an inevitable thing which anyone who hopes to get

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on would have to offer ... the people's minds have been conditioned to regard bribery as a necessary evil ... there is need for the development of character and moral integrity if the rapid development in various fields of endeavour is to be sustained.'

The debate continues, its outcome uncertain. The reformers point out that Nigeria's future strength could be imperilled by the pernicious habit of 'favour-buying'; the realists assert that a tradition so deeply ingrained in a people is bound to permeate the life of West Africa for so long as racial memory functions, and that gift-giving and perquisite-taking (words more polite



than bribery and corruption) have always stimulated the roots of African business and social relationships. The optimists insist that a new generation with limitless horizons will not be held within the restrictive pattern of its

grandfathers' etiquette, and that new pupils may be taught new ethics. To which the cynics reply that if European ethics are to be the standard, no one need hope for perfection, since not all white people are models of rectitude and especially in the worlds of commerce and politics enjoy their own system of side-door rewards and persuasions.

Out of all this accusation and rebuttal and a widespread airing of what has newly become scandalous in West Africa, one fact emerges: that whereas not so many years ago few Nigerians ever thought twice about the propriety of offering a 'present' to a potential job-giver or benefit-dispenser or 'protector', or of expecting payment from anyone soliciting aid or easy access or evasion of punishment, the once-automatic giving and taking is now more often marked by a preliminary hesitation, a novel self-consciousness. The exchanges, having lost their ceremonial feudal gracefulness, have begun to look like hole-

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and-corner duplicity. Because an old habit in a new setting provokes the modern world's scorn and derision — and new Nigeria is acutely sensitive to both — the reformers may eventually be justified in their hopes. As they see it, institutions that have become self-conscious as well as illegal are liable to attrition, and they may be right.

On the social front Nigeria is divided between the adoption of European dress and deportment which advertise progressiveness, and the retention of her own costumes and manners which are more suitable to her climate and personality. Inevitably there are occasions when the two sets of standards, both excellent in their own way, fail to harmonize. Bill and I saw an enactment of this failure in harmony one evening in a modern hotel dining-room which was, as usual, filled with an assortment of diners: European and African men wearing ties and lounge suits, and European and African women in fashionable gowns, all orthodox in the Western manner. Or almost all. One table was occupied by a Nigerian foursome: two men, a woman and a child, all richly dressed and ornamented in the fashion of wealthy traditionalists. The little group, who may have journeyed from some inland township, showed no signs of unease because of their dissimilarities from the rest of the company. They sat at ease, enjoying the food and the amenities, the two men talking together, the child primly sitting on the edge of her chair, the mother, who had waved away the menu, using her fork to abstract occasional titbits from her companions' plates. The room was warm despite the many whirring fans, and in the most natural way one of the men discarded the top part of his costume. He sat then with his upper body clothed only in a singlet made modestly dressy by a string of amber beads — an ensemble which some of the male diners, restricted within their conventional garments, might have had reason to envy.

But the restaurant manager, soul of courtesy, upholder of all the correctnesses, appeared anxious. He may have been thinking that a singlet was surely impermissible dress in a dining-room whose refinements were the talk of the town. On the other hand, the guests appeared to be aristocrats, influential people,

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and it was certainly bad business policy in Nigeria to offend Nigerian notables. Again, even if the diner were requested in the most agreeable way to robe himself again, an incident that must involve request, apology, explanation and reassurance, might attract more general attention than the singlet itself. The manager, obviously divided in mind, began to drift towards the problem table.

But before he reached his objective, the man in the singlet cast a frowning glance at the fan behind him and shrugged his top garment on again. The manager paused at another table, looking much relieved. But as Bill and I left the room we saw that



the dilemma was still unsolved; the restless Nigerian had again doffed his top garment and the singlet was once more revealed. It was brand-new and as white as any of the other guests' blameless shirt fronts, and yet it seemed all wrong: the not-done-thing, the crux, perhaps, of palaver. We wondered afterwards how the manager solved his small quan-

dary, or even, since similar situations would inevitably occur again, whether he ever has solved it.

During Bill's earlier log- and land-palavers we had seen how the most logical-seeming innovations could be fraught with human waywardness, and suffer from misinterpretation. One morning when the income tax man called at our house we foresaw similar difficulties. Clad in the khaki uniform and sun helmet of officialdom, he unsmilingly proffered several large sheets of closely-printed paper. These were tax demands with 'amounts due' clearly stated, one for Smallboy, one for Driver, one for a steward whose name we did not recognize, and one simply headed 'Cook'. 'These are for your staff,' the young official said. 'Have you more people than these?'

I mentioned Steward Robert. The man shook his head and pointed to the paper. 'This other is not your steward?'

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I said that probably the boy in question had been employed by some previous tenant of our house, and that he could now be almost anywhere in the country. Since Nigeria's population of house workers was so mobile it was not surprising if stewards were hard to trace.

'But you do *have* a steward,' the official said patiently. 'You say his name is Robert. Then please give him this paper.'

Whereupon he crossed out the original name on the form, penned in Robert's name, and prepared to leave. 'You will see that your employees have those papers.'

'But wait,' I said, 'this one just says, "Cook"'. Our cook is the fifth we have employed this year. There must be hundreds of cooks in Lagos.'

'What is the name of your present cook?' asked the tax man, waving aside this extra information.

I told him and he added Benjamin's full name at the top of the 'Cook' page.

'The boys,' I ventured, 'might not agree that these papers are correct. They might question the assessment. Surely wages and allowances vary a great deal?'

'If they have any complaint, let them come on Thursday to the Income Tax Headquarters,' stated the visitor, adding with a shade of petulance, 'People must pay their taxes, you know; they must co-operate with us.'

Bidden to come to collect their tax forms from my desk, Smallboy, Steward, Driver and Cook filed in, looking anything but co-operative. Robert viewed his paper's crossed-out, written-in names with suspicion and said flatly that the man had made a mistake. Benjamin barely glanced at his paper. He averred that since he was so new to our household it was impossible for Income Tax to know his address; the form was for some stranger. Neither would touch his second-hand document. Simon and Driver, both looking quenched and apprehensive, carried away theirs and for the rest of the hour were closeted together in the pantry from which issued sounds of their indignant parley. When Thursday came no one asked for leave from duty to go to the Income Tax Headquarters.

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The two unwanted tax forms which I had placed, weighted by a stone, on the back veranda balustrade, began to gather a film of dust. The tax man did not return and everyone appeared to have forgotten the incident which rankled for some days in our minds as something we might, perhaps, have tried to clarify, if only we had known where to begin.

We were already aware of the unpopularity of tax-collectors, census takers and land surveyors in a country whose humbler inhabitants deeply mistrust new-style regimentation and doubt the motives of those of their countrymen who are empowered to give orders. During one interlude of prickly resentment of their Education Department's activities, the local people of an Eastern Region village waged a form of warfare against their children's instructors. The trouble began when a headmaster was allegedly murdered by a farmer infuriated by inquiry about his son's absence from school. Soon afterwards another teacher was ambushed and beaten. Finally, because a senior pupil was punished for refusing to attend a rural science lesson, village parents and guardians, armed with clubs and machetes, marched upon the school house. The teachers made a prudent escape, an official inquiry was begun, and soon afterwards three teachers were dismissed, presumably in the interests of public and classroom peace. I inquired of Smallboy, champion of modern education, why there should be such troubles anywhere in Nigeria when, for the most part, children were so eager to attend school and teachers were generally much respected.

Smallboy looked embarrassed. 'These farm people,' he said finally, 'do not understand the education people. They do not understand that a school teacher may vex a pupil and even strike him if that pupil do not obey. They think only teachers attack children out of rage, for revenge or something like that. They get no sense in bush so to strike teachers with machetes even when they are annoyed. No one in Lagos will agree for that. It is bad palaver.'

Yet not all the bush palavers were wholly 'bad'. In one of our morning papers we saw what had resulted from an altogether different kind of local argument. We read:

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'TWINS CAN NOW LIVE IN EDDA

'Twins and their mothers in the Edda Clan of Afikpo Division will no longer be ostracized or exposed to other social disabilities. This is one of the provisions of new regulations on native law and customs made by the Edda District County Council. This regulation, the council stated, will "liberate" forty-five twins, their mothers and the mothers of twins who have died, who have been living in isolated huts, barred from mixing with the rest of the populace.

'The council has also made regulations governing the marriage system in its area. Bride price, excluding "petty presents and services rendered to the parents of the bride" has been fixed at £5.

'The marriage, or giving away for marriage, of girls under eighteen is prohibited.

'All girls, before being led away to their prospective husbands, "shall complete the customary period of fattening", and parents or suitors failing to do this will be fined or jailed on conviction.

'Adultery shall be punished with a fine of £3 10s. od. which will be paid to the aggrieved husbands.'

The lack of compensation for possibly aggrieved wives, and the retention of 'the customary period of fattening' were to my mind the only unfavourable aspects of a situation which otherwise promised so much for the women of Edda. We remembered from our former days in the bush with what horror the birth of twins had been regarded. Now, it seemed, this one-time 'abomination' was rid of all its fearfulness, and there should be little further need for the Government and Mission 'twineries' which gave sanctuary to the unwanted babies. People might still easily recall the days when twins were killed at birth and their disgraced mother sent from the village by a trail thereafter blocked and never again used. But they would also remember that one of the Queen's bouquets was presented to her by Nigerian twins. And that, we thought, was an appropriate fairy-tale ending to a brutal true story.

In the increased feminine emancipation that accompanies

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most social revolutions, a measure of 'pepper' is to be expected. Nigeria's women, however, appear to be gradually raising their status with a minimum of outcry from any quarter. The participation of many of them in what is known as 'higher education' may in part be due to their proven zeal and shrewdness as breadwinners in the market places, and in part to their male relatives' broadmindedness. Every year numbers of Nigerian girl students set off by plane or ship to England, the Continent or the United States for training in professional fields; no one doubts their capacities. No one protested when a Nigerian woman barrister took her place in Lagos Law Courts. There was no audible murmur of disapproval when the first detachment of women police was formed. In practice, it seems, many modern Nigerian men have adapted themselves rapidly to the idea of an approximation to equality between the sexes. Even those who argue against it do so with a vehemence that betrays their alarm. 'A good wife is she who cooks, sweeps, dusts and plays well' was one masculine statement published in, of all places, a Lagos newspaper's women-edited section called 'Mildady's Bower'. Another wrote 'there is no wife who would not develop a bloated idea of herself the moment she believes she is equal to the very husband who paid raw cash on her head'.



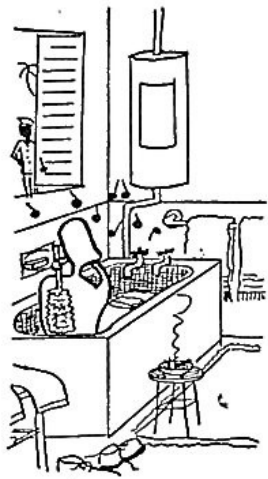
It does not seem likely that even this kind of opinion can check the course of Nigeria's young daughters towards greater freedom and usefulness. Nor will it stop Nigeria's enlightened politicians and educators from reiterating their conviction that opportunities for education must be given to boys and girls without discrimination, in the interests of the country's speedy advancement. So it may be that Nigeria, which like Ghana, has had so short a time in which to catch up with twentieth-century civilization, may telescope its forthcoming suffragette period, or even declare that its women's battle is won before its strategies have even been formulated.

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The other major battles, chiefly political, may be expected to continue vigorously and noisily, with frequent casualties and a sufficiency of the drama which the Nigerian public expect during their politicians' active skirmishes. As our Mr Alapo put it: 'This is not the time for quiet men in Africa; the quiet men must wait until the loud men have finished the first big palavers for their country.'

familiar strident shouting from the paper-seller, the muffled noises of carpet-beating and shutter-banging from near-by houses, and the clattering entrance of Steward and Smallboy by the dining-room door. As usual Robert signalled the arrival of tea on the bedroom veranda by sounding three taps on the bedroom door. As usual we breakfasted at seven, looking out from the dining-room on a lawn netted with sun-glinting dew-sequined webs where our turkey and guinea fowl, and Sheba, the white cat, made their morning promenade. All the little tropical routines by which we lived persisted. Driver, with uniform jacket slung over the arbour lattice, sluiced the car and greeted Umam as the gardener hastened to his duty. Thomas Clerk punctually wheeled his bicycle up the path. Robert came with cryptic smile and another Court 'paper' to say he required part of the morning off to pursue his marathon case against the policeman who had struck him that night, eight months ago, during argument over Robert's bicycle. Benjamin Cook hovered on the veranda, wanting to know whether we wished 'little cakes' for tea, and whether he could have some of his month's wage in advance. When asked why he had so long a face, he replied that a 'brother' had died ('he fight too much, that man, and this time fighting kill him') and now must be expensively buried. 'Too much worry,' he said ominously, and went away looking chapfallen and preoccupied. Smallboy Simon came with a message from Umam, who inquired whether we wanted any of the new crop of African apples which loaded the tree. We said not, and Smallboy asked if we would supervise the share-out of the fruit among the staff, otherwise there might be some small palaver between Umam and Robert.

We went out into the garden whose roots in Africa were as deep as ours were shallow. Always as visitors we had walked in its paths and sat beneath its giant shade tree, and admired or deplored its fierce wilful character that seemed to need no European hand to help it nor expatriate heart to give thanks for its bounty. Although we had sown the dark soil of the kitchen patch with seeds from our imported packets, the quick hopeful shoots had proved, even despite Umam's vigilance, too tender



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FOR most Britishers near the end of a Coast tour the crisp actualities of sailing tickets and luggage labels set up an agreeable domestic ferment, a state of holiday expectation that make light of everyday minor grievances and irritations. The back compound lives in anticipation of largesse: food, clothing and miscellaneous properties that will certainly fail to fit into home-going luggage; a perquisite harvest likely to be made generous by the light-hearted mood of the leave-takers. 'Massa', recently short-tempered because of his prickly heat and the harassing demands of his pre-leave business life, now sings in his bath; Madam, latterly pensive during inspection of morning market book or captious about the household's consumption of tea and sugar, and given to confusing lapses of memory, is newly tolerant and better organized. Even during the household's exhausting interior disintegration, the domestic atmosphere is vitalized with a nascent freedom, all because of the pencilled circle which sets apart one future day — sailing day — on the calendar.

Yet while we lived out the last part of our Lagos adventure, the pattern of our days was shaped as before by the demands of the log trade, the ritual habits of the house staff, and the recurring variations within the day's measure of heavy heat. In the white cages of our mosquito-netted beds we woke soon after dawn to hear the change in the tempo of early traffic, the

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and foreign to endure. Now, as the end of our tour approached, we knew that the garden was too strong for us, or we were too weak, and allowed it to go its own way. The flower beds now were massed with stiff-petalled gaudy zinnias and lusty marigolds; the hardy plumbago had widely spread; the multi-coloured flowerless bushes, whose leaves are variegated from pale green to streaked scarlet and purple, shone glossy, without alien competition; the cannas and flame trees burned in the noon sun; the quick-blooming, short-lived white lilies spaced along the pathways stood waxy and scentless among their fleshy whitestriped leaves; the arbour vine let down its ropes of sweet ghostly flowers around the back doorway; and again the Tarzan tree was shedding its leaves while new buds formed. We had moulded the house to ourselves and become at home in it, but the garden would not be wooed or fundamentally altered, and after we had gone it would retain no sign of us. We ceased to care; we were going home.



Clothes long stored were disinterred from tin trunks: sweaters, gloves and overcoats that did not look like our garments and lay bulkily on chairs and beds in problem heaps. We tried them on with misgiving and took them off again quickly because they were so chafing and clammy a burden on our

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heat-oppressed bodies. These cold-country garments, soon hanging incongruously to air on the clothes-line under the African apple tree, prompted us to remember Liverpool in winter, but we could see the city and our past selves only hazily; too many other vivid scenes had intervened since that early time. Only the suitcases and trunks had kept their stoic personalities intact. Smelling of DDT dust and mothballs, their fastenings damp-tarnished, they stood warm and empty, with a look of destiny, in the sun.

While we prepared for our return to our other kind of life, the staff meditated upon their own futures. It was Steward's plan to spend some weeks of ease with his wife and family in Owerri before taking a job as dining-room steward in a Lagos hotel. He preferred hotels to houses, he frankly told us, because there was more time off and the 'dashes' (tips) were more profitable. His son, John, was proving an exemplary pupil at the technical school; it seemed certain that he would become a proficient electrician. We glimpsed the boy occasionally in the back compound, observing how tall he had grown, and how assured in manner. Although he had lived on the perimeter of our household for a year, watched our comings and goings, eaten his share of our Saturday curries and burned our electric light late over his studies in the boys' quarters, he was still to us a young stranger who viewed us obliquely and without favour.

Driver lost no time in securing a job which he greatly prized. The car he was to groom and pilot was a new two-toned American model of great size, and its garage was situated in Lagos's best residential district. Driver left us as soon as he had found his new niche, explaining with much graceful apology that this chance could not be missed, and thanking us for the reference which prematurely took him from us.

The composition of references was as usual a difficult task, since it was as easy to damn utterly with lukewarm praise as to stretch commendation beyond the limits of merit. When we came to cite Benjamin's history with us we could not decide whether on balance he cooked well or badly; his work often suffered from his emotions, and now, while the worry of his

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'brother's funeral' was upon him, even his 'little cakes' tasted of his bitter state of mind. So we told Whom-It-May-Concern that Benjamin was a 'good plain cook' and then, because that comment did not seem of much help to a family man with financial anxieties, found him a job with a bachelor who surprisingly assured us that he liked plain cooking. Umam was already bespoken by observant visitors to our house. We wrote him an enthusiastic 'paper' which he could not read, so we read it to

him, while he bowed and bowed again in humble amazement. Thomas Clerk, who deservedly was to improve his position, scanned his testimonial with satisfaction; it was no more than he had expected. Smallboy, as was his habit, brought us one of his letters stating appreciation of his reference and the job we had arranged for him to take if he wished. He added that soon he expected to 'be proper photographer' and fervently hoped that we should 'live happily for ever, amen'.

On the morning when the papers were being composed, Ezekiel, clerk at the log-beach office, came ostensibly to say his farewell with proper formality but actually to make sure that Bill had not forgotten about him. As an aid to Bill's memory, Ezekiel brought his framed Certificate of Education with him, and set it down casually on Bill's desk while he gave us his good wishes. Then picking up the precious diploma he murmured gently, 'Sir, I would like to have my paper.' Bill handed him one of the waiting envelopes and Ezekiel bore it away. We saw him reading it carefully under the mango tree, and thought he could not fail to approve our remarks. But Ezekiel did not go. Looking thin and worried he retraced his steps and knocked again at the door of the house-office, now busy with final signings and listings and a last discussion with Mr Alapo. Bill looked up blankly at Ezekiel. 'Sir,' the boy said, scarcely audible,

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ignoring Thomas who glanced at him censoriously over the files he was tying up, 'will you change my paper? My name is spelled not quite right, and you do not put all my names.'

Bill sighed, made room on his overflowing desk, and began to alter the typescript with his pen, but Ezekiel put out his hand in protest. 'No sir, it should be typed fresh, or someone will think this paper not mine, that I have changed it.'

So, with the log-beach clerk standing over the typewriter and the office business brought to a standstill, the 'paper' was retyped. 'All right now?' asked Bill. Ezekiel did not reply until he had scrutinized every syllable on the page. Then he timidly smiled. 'It is all right,' he said, and hurried away, leaving us to wonder at the steely power of will that lay behind Ezekiel's look of boyish diffidence.

We turned to reckon, as best we could, with our own responsibilities. Knowing that the turkey and guinea-fowl would certainly go the usual way of poultry, we hypocritically reasoned that they had at least enjoyed a pampered existence with us so far, and flung them extra handfuls of corn to prove it. For Sheba, a cat of regal, singularly aloof habit, we found a home sufficiently rich in cushions and regular in mealtimes to suit her. But there was no such haven waiting for one of Sheba's poor relations, a waif-cat that was accustomed to arrive punctually on our dining-room veranda at dinner-time in expectation of the meal that was always ready for her. Her visits began one evening when she crept in from the garden shadows to rifle Sheba's plate while our plump white cat looked down her aristocratic nose at the scrawny little animal with matted fur who dared this impudence. After that, encouraged by ample bowls of milk and barracuda steaks from Bill's harbour catches, the little starveling came regularly, lost her look of terror, stood her ground against Steward's disdain, and addressed her nightly plaint, a piercingly importunate cry, to us. Her hunger was always prodigious, for it seemed that she was obliged to eat during one evening meal enough to sustain her for the next twenty-four hours. (Steward or Smallboy, bidden to refill her

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plate, did so with the no-expression that reprimanded us for giving good victuals to a worthless animal.) Soon she ventured a few paces indoors from the veranda into the dining-room where she would sit, primly upright with ragged tail curled around her feet, keeping her distance and fixing us with a compelling luminous yellow gaze. We thought that, although her voice was neither still nor small, she made, when silent, a perfect picture of Conscience: frail, watchful, neutral, troubling, that you might look away from but could never ignore. She would not be tamed in the ordinary domestic sense and, although we knew that her fragility contained astonishing powers of endurance, the problem of her future evening meals worried us. This difficulty solved itself in a way we might have expected. There came a night when no diminutive pale shape flitted across the lawn towards the bright house; no small skinny black and white cat-presence plaintively announced itself; no pinched triangular face was poised over the saucers of charity. Our visitor, least among Lagos's underworld of hapless homeless denizens, did not call again.

At last we began to say goodbye to Lagos: to our esteemed Mr Alapo, to European and African friends, to the log-beach and the city. We were thankful that we should not much longer need to drive across Carter Bridge which vital, hardworked part of the highway had recently revealed some structural weakness and symptoms of subsidence. When the danger was realized, a speed limit of fifteen miles per hour was imposed on all bridge-crossing vehicles. Cars, lorries and buses now crawled nose to tail, while the sun beat down on metal roofs, and frustrated drivers and passengers fidgeted, scowled and sweated. The bridge crossing, once a breezy, carefree business, had become an ordeal that was loud with complaining car horns and vexed by the total stoppages of all-or-nothing motors. The bridge was unchanged for the trudging pedestrians, but it taxed the nerves and tempers of the wheel-borne who could no longer care about the azure paintwork which was all that remained of the span's once-royal splendour.

PLUMJEZAKKEN UND KISTKOFFERS

Early one morning our roped boxes stood ready; the trunks strained at their fastenings, the last suitcase was packed. The car was already on board a Dutch cargo vessel which was to carry us and our luggage — unfamiliarly listed in the ship's papers as 'plumjezakken und kistkoffers' — to Rotterdam. All the eleventh-hour largesse had been distributed and carried away. No residual scrap from our abandoned house was wasted; every leftover, whether of cloth or metal, wood or glass, had been removed by willing hands. From the house surfaces every trace of ourselves was swept away, while the boys' quarters took on the colour and variety of a jumble sale. Although our last breakfast was from picnic plates with a newspaper for a tablecloth, Robert presided in his usual stately fashion. He had not at any time permitted our emergencies seriously to affect the tenor of his life. Smallboy was more flustered. He had less experience than Robert of upheavals and departures and had not yet learned to dissociate himself from his employers' emotional atmospheres. Moreover we had given him a tennis racket (with a 'paper' to prove Smallboy's honest possession of it) and this sudden acquisition had, more than anything else, upset his equilibrium.

As for the last time we looked into drawers and cupboards and under beds, and checked the keys, tickets and passports, an obliging timber-business friend arrived ready to drive us to the docks. He assured us that the lorry he had ordered for the luggage transportation was now on its way to the house. We stood impatiently by the open gateway as the minutes ticked away and the boys stood stiffly awaiting the final handshakes. At last a van drew up, the smallest van we had ever seen in Lagos, a midget vehicle further dwarfed by the waiting mound of luggage. The driver, a tall, thin man in white robe and fez, expertly disengaged himself from his seat and signalled to Steward and Smallboy to assist him in loading the boxes into the van's tiny interior. Amazed by this optimism, Bill told the driver he must go back to his garage and return to us with a lorry. The man made soothing gestures. 'There is no other I can get,' he said. 'This one can do it.'

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'It is impossible,' we persisted. 'And we are late. There is not time for two trips.'

'Oh, but I will try,' stated the driver cheerfully. 'You will see my handwork.'

During the next strenuous minutes the van was surrounded by helpers who pushed and levered most of the luggage into its unreasonable confines and tied the doors half shut. The driver seemed to telescope his body and squeezed it behind the wheel. The rest of the suitcases, the typewriter and sewing-machine crate, were built up into a pile beside him; there was nowhere an inch to spare. He revved the motor. The wheels slowly turned; the tyres did not wholly flatten; the doors held; the transport was in perilous motion.

'You see,' said our imperturbable Coaster friend, 'as usual it's all a matter of faith, and not interfering.'

We drove towards the docks, glancing back often at the van which bravely followed at a curious waddling gait as if the driver were propelling it by simple determination. The docks where our Dutch freighter lay were strangely quiet. The heat of the concrete wharves struck through our shoes as we walked towards the sheds which on mailboat days were clamorous with travellers and congested with luggage. Today the great halls were almost empty; our voices and footsteps echoed in the spaces between the formalities.

Soon we were walking up the gangplank into another world. It began as soon as we had closed a door on deck behind us and came from corridor half-light into a small, bright, utterly unfamiliar air-conditioned saloon whose artificial foreign coolness made us shiver. Seen through the tightly fastened window the sweltering harbour scene, though still clear and bright, became something remote and shut away. Its noises were muted; its heat could not touch us, and we viewed it as if through the thick glass of an aquarium, surprised that it could so suddenly cease to concern us.

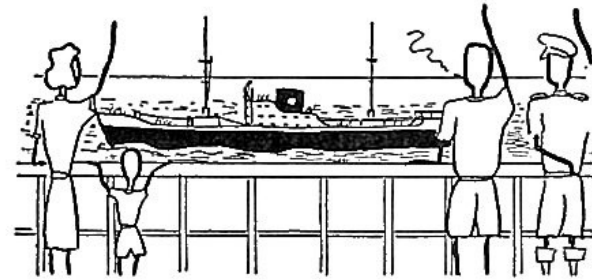
In this short space of minutes, after a year of Lagos living, we found ourselves again on the outside, looking in. But our Coast friend, soon to leave the ship and return to his bungalow and

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business, had experienced no such volte-face. He beckoned a steward, not a Nigerian boy but a fresh-faced young Dutchman who brought us a tray of tall, cold glasses. We drank deeply and began to feel better orientated. We realized, too, how great a thirst we had brought to this moment of sudden ease, and how hungry we were for home.

Our passage to Rotterdam was made up of the usual succession of idle timeless sea days. On arrival at Takoradi we forsook the ship's cool sanctuary, that no longer seemed in the least exceptional, to visit friends ashore, and again we paused briefly at Freetown. We hurriedly spent our last West African coinage there, though Bill did not enjoy his shopping. Having arrived warm with haste in a music shop at the far end of the town, he proffered his last five shillings for a gramophone record, 'Home Again'. The clerk tested each coin with his thumbnail and handed them back to Bill. They were all counterfeit.

Our sea life continued warm on deck, temperate within, until half way in our journey, when a sister ship passed close by



and we saw that her crew still wore their dark northern uniforms while ours were still clad in tropical 'whites'. Then as the waves roughened and the sky's colour deepened, and a different air — the true sharp air of a northern spring — blew fresh through our cabin's open portholes, our transformation became complete. All that was visibly left to us of Lagos was a camera study that Smallboy Simon had given us at the moment of parting. Bound with electrician's tape, it decorated our dressing-table. It was mostly a picture of our wayward garden, for the

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figures of ourselves in it were reduced and foreshortened by distance, and made anonymous by shadow. They might have been the figures of any Europeans in any palm-treed West African background, and we thought that Smallboy had unwittingly contrived a remarkably exact portrayal.