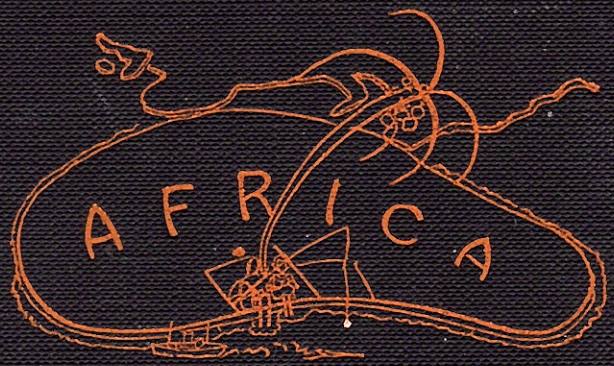
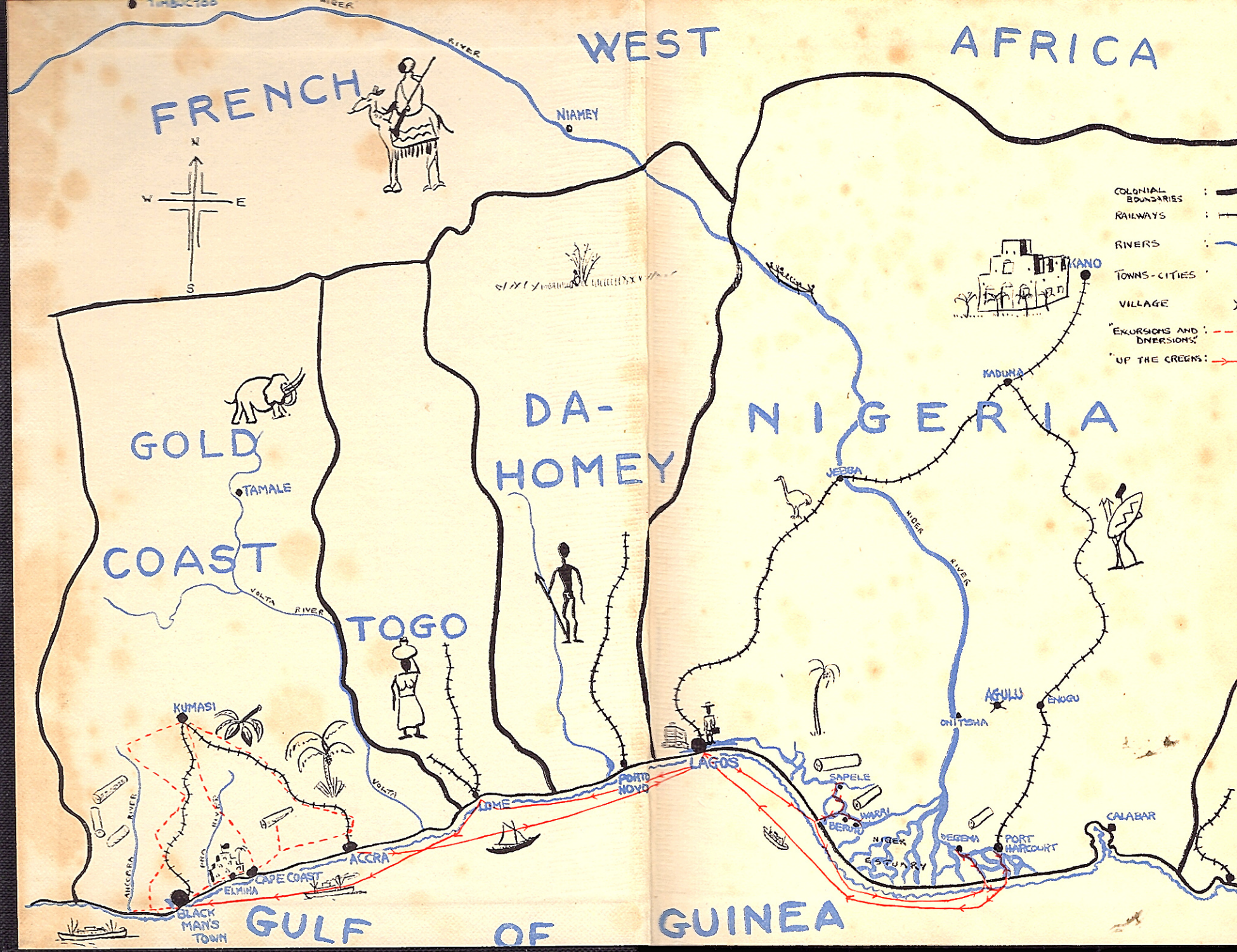

AFRICA

BLACK MAN'S TOWN

ISOBEL RYAN

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ACCRA
CAPE COAST
ELMINA
BLACK MAN'S TOWN
GULF OF GUINEA

BLACK MAN'S TOWN

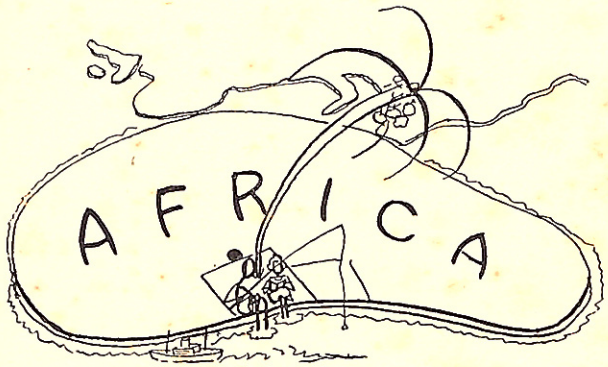
By the same author

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY

BLACK MAN'S TOWN

by

ISOBEL RYAN



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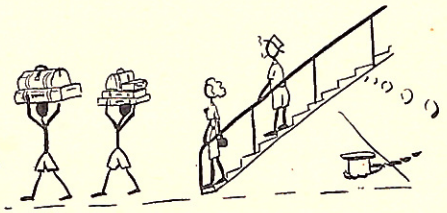
To the newcomer
BILL II

BLACK MAN'S TOWN

CHAPTER I

HERE IT IS AGAIN

MORNING brought West Africa to the ship's side, a clattering grey wharf splashed with colour, the white heat of a tropic sun striking up the steep flanks of our vessel. Bill and I watched the sling-borne descent of our Jeep station-wagon and black tin trunks from hold to dock, while a child, peering down through the rails at the upturned dark faces and African noise below, cried, 'Look! Black people!' The journey was over. We followed our suitcases down the gang-plank and across the wharf's clamour to the steamy turmoil of the Customs Shed.



In two weeks our fellow passengers had suffered a sea-change; these suntanned voyagers in shorts and new cotton prints (now herding luggage and penning declarations) were in fact the same thickly gloved and mufflered Britishers with whom we had embarked at Liverpool. With them, twelve days before, we had undergone, in Liverpool's bitter December, the fatigues and anxieties of departure that exist after the end and before the beginning.

Aboard ship the beginning had been voiced by the automatic repetitive 'Had a good leave?' which always follows on the hailings and handshakes of ship-sharing southbound Coasters. Along corridors, in the lounge and on deck, Bill and I sensed that atmosphere of renaissance which prevails in a School on the first day after the holidays: the same air of determined jollity, of taking up the threads again and

resuming an understood jargon. Here was the usual compound of relief and nervousness, formless anticipation mixed with the hollowness and regret symptomatic of a School mustering for a new term. The eager 'hellos' so closely layered on the stoic 'goodbyes' filled in the empty spaces; there was not yet time for the growth of a larger homesickness. At this stage the ship, still cradled in home waters, was united in its impending departure, the stresses of its passengers gentled by gay telegrams, brave last-minute letters and bon voyage bouquets in cabin washbasins. By two's and three's those who had lingered at the rails turned from the shore's wintry retrospect of crises and farewells, to seek the warmer actuality of the ship's interior, a refuge of lights, social voices and eleventh-hour excitement.

That December afternoon, as on another some years before, Bill and I stood on the blowing deck, leaned against the wind and watched Liverpool's outline receding in smoky mist. The present, for all its little palliatives, was poignant; it was difficult to believe in West Africa. Above, the northern

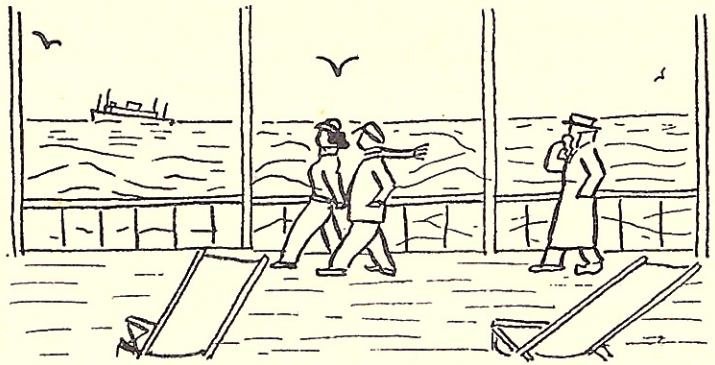


seagulls wheeled and made lonely answer to the siren's blast. Along our wake seemed to echo all the goodbyes; in the cabins below were already disposed the silent companies of framed photographs and snapshots which smilingly regarded the tooth glasses filled with restorative draughts of bismuth or alcohol, the tissue paper and shoe trees which littered the cabin floors. Along the corridors the luggage still bumped and trundled, watched over by stewards who, like philosophical guardian angels in starched white uniforms, thought their own thoughts.

Our own steward was a grizzled little bantam man with a one-sided grin and that especial manner, paternal-confidential with cynical undertones, that comes of twenty years' experience with the inmates of ships' cabins. He welcomed us at our doorway and stayed to talk, the while giving us, as it were, a once-over for our possibilities as bell-pressers and tip-providers. He asked us if we wished breakfast served in the cabin; proof, we deduced, that our rating was not too low; then, perhaps in reference to our remaining traces of North American accent, he went on to say that a Coast ship wasn't like anything on the Atlantic run; you had not the same variety of passengers. 'On an Atlantic crossing,' he said, 'and I've done dozens of 'em — you get a proper mixed bag, big-wigs, actors and actresses, commercial travellers, holiday families, invalids, politicians, writers, riff-raff, emigrants, foreigners, the lot, and every sailing different. You'll not find that on a Coast ship.'

We concurred. We knew that passengers on a West-Africa bound vessel are for the most part units which compose the pattern of European Coast interests. These may be roughly divided into 'Government', 'Commercial' and 'Mission'. In the Government section the Staff List catalogues its workers under the headings: Administrative, Public Works, Agricultural, Educational, Sanitary, Medical, Marine, Railways, Police, Development, etc. The Commercial groups are mainly Trading, Banks, Shipping, Mines, Timber, Cocoa, Manganese and Constructional; the Missions, Catholic (chiefly Dutch, Irish, Alsatian) and Protestant (British and American), Methodist, Baptist, Church Mission Society, Scottish Mission Society, Salvation Army, Seventh Day Adventist and others. And each category within the respective scopes of 'Government', as to some extent of 'Commercial' and 'Mission', contains within itself well-defined gradations of responsibility, pay, social status and length of 'tour' on the Coast. Thus everyone, before he boards the ship,

knows his niche, understands his function as a unit, is travelling with a positive destination and will return home on leave when his tour (of six, twelve, fifteen or eighteen months — or in the case of Mission workers, anything up to five years) is complete. There is no free and easy notion of 'going to have a look' or 'maybe settling down there' — nothing so elastic or New-World. The 1951 Empire Builders (Government and Commercial) go out to scheduled jobs with salaries that are supposed to compensate for tropical hazard and exile. 'Otherwise,' as we heard a passenger in the lounge inquire with amiable cynicism of his table, 'who would ever go out to West Africa?' To this well-worn sally the others did not bother to reply for, true or false, it is an accepted legend among Coasters that no one who is not a fugitive, an idealist or a missionary goes out to West Africa for the second time enthusiastically.



Our third day 'out' was December 25th. The Sports Committee was not yet organized, and the windows of the steam-heated lounge outlined only a chalky monotony of cold sky and sea against which moved the thickly muffled shapes of that stoic group, the Deck Exercisers. Below, around a central Christmas tree splendid with lights and tinsel, the spangled and festooned dining saloon hinted of the

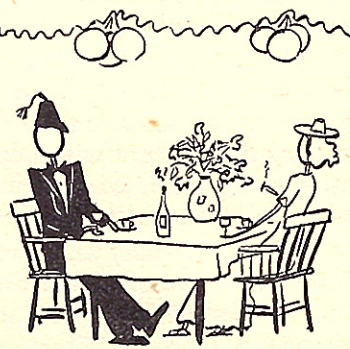
special menu, the paper hats and balloons held in readiness in the ship's store. To grace the day a loudspeaker gave out a programme of carols, and a reedy 'Good King Wenceslas' made background to the murmur of Coast conversation. Yet while the passengers appreciated the shipping company's diligent effort to bring Noël to the Bay of Biscay, in the main they could not entirely bring themselves (for an enormous number of personal reasons) to feel that this Noël was anything like the genuine article. Unlike Janus who could simultaneously look forward and backward, they had set their faces in one southward direction, unitedly and en masse. They did this not with any obvious joy in anticipation, but because 'leave' was over and they must return their thoughts to the jobs and 'stations' which awaited them and towards which willy-nilly they were journeying.

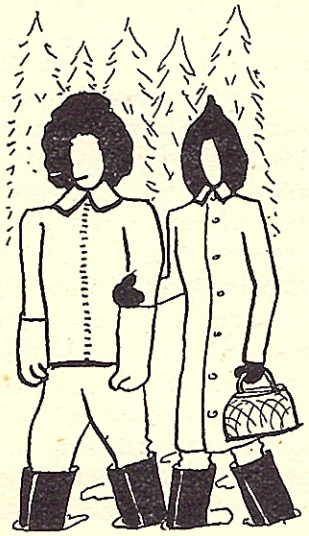
While below in the dining-saloon the small children (too young to be left at school in England) lived for their present tea-party vision of Santa Claus, alias the Chief Steward, Bill and I improved an hour in the lounge with a Coast history from the ship's library. It was a closely written book in small print, peppered with dates and facts whose drama came more by implication than from any power of the terse historian's pen. We leafed the pages. 'In 1821 thirteen Europeans out of fifty-two living in Cape Coast died from malaria, yellow fever and other tropical diseases . . .' '. . . In 1770 one hundred and ninety-two British ships were employed in the slave trade. One slave in every eight died at sea. The men slaves were fastened together in pairs by handcuffs and leg irons and stowed so close together as to admit of no other posture than lying on their sides. The height between decks was sometimes only eighteen inches. . . .'

We shifted uncomfortably on the lounge settee as the loudspeaker gave out 'King Wenceslas' again: '. . . therefore Christian men be sure . . . wealth or rank possessing . . . it is ye who bless the poor . . . who shall yourselves find ble-ess-ing . . .' A

steward came to set before us a teapot and a plate of fancy cakes. We closed our history book and told him 'Merry Christmas' which he accepted politely but without enthusiasm.

That night I looked across our table at Bill and the dining-saloon which, with tree glittering, balloons floating and autographed menus circulating, was in full fête. All wore paper hats, Bill's a gaudy Napoleon-style model beneath which I observed his face, momentarily off guard, to be unusually solemn. Streamers floated around our shoulders and our table was as gay as the rest, yet it was not easy to prevent the intrusion of memory.





Other Christmases were in our minds: our last in England, the waits singing in the garden, the cats on the hearth, the King's Christmas Message in the drawing-room. And our last-but-one in north-west Canada where, had Santa Claus materialized hoary-bearded in the frosty Alaskan moonlight, we would not have been astonished. Then back further over time and geography to another Noël on a Nigerian lawn at a table stewarded by African 'boys' who had decked our Tree, a growing casuarina, with candles

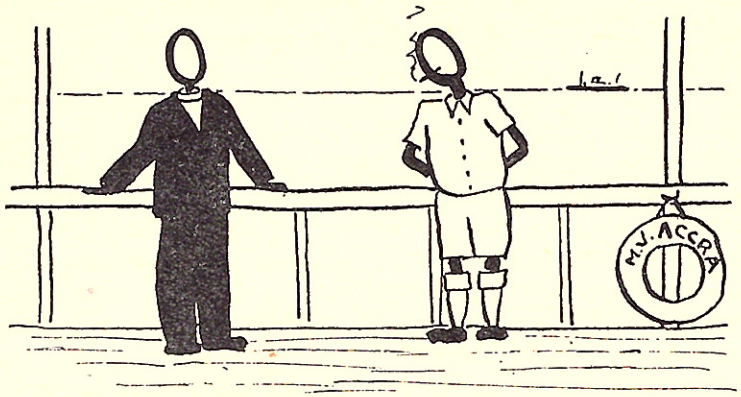
whose flames scarcely wavered in the languorous heat. Now we had come almost full circle. It was best to abandon such reflections and eat our shipboard plum pudding uncritically. As Bill said *sotto voce*, leaning across to pull a cracker with me, 'No use hanging back. We're all in the same boat. And we *chose* to come.'

As the sub-tropical Canary Islands with their Spanish charm of arcaded streets, oleandered haciendas and elastic pesa fell behind us, the ship's character, never seriously in doubt, was fully established as 'Coast'. Since the first day of warmth the voyagers had begun to replace tweeds and cardigans with lighter stuffs. Like chrysalids emerging from cocoons, they gained definition; they looked a little more vulnerable and had more life. Their complexions grew pink, then brown; the women's bare shoulders emerged from pastel linens; the men changed from trousers to khaki or white shorts. Certainly they all looked much cooler than one passenger, a Catholic Father, who doughtily continued to wear his sturdy black cloth suit and stiff clerical collar. Only on the fourth hot day did he confess to Bill that a trunk containing all his lighter clothing had been mislaid in the ship's hold. 'The fact is,' he told us, dabbing a moist forehead, 'unless it's found I've got to continue as I am, and I have Shetland wool underneath, that's the worst of it.'

'What a penance!' we said, amazed at his endurance but refraining from even the most delicate reference to hair shirts. 'You'll get prickly heat!'

'That I already have,' admitted the Father sadly.

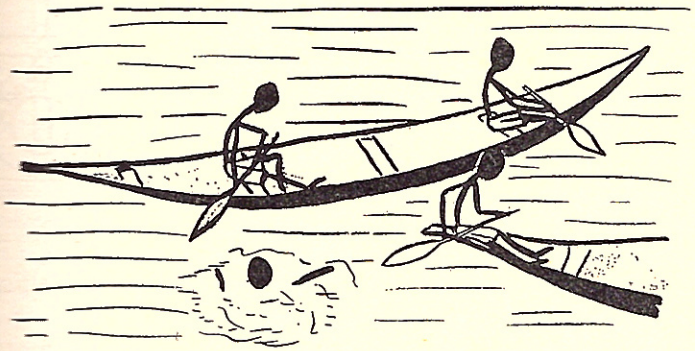
Bill measured the wilting cleric with his eye. Then they both went to our cabin from which the Father at length returned in different, freer garments both outer and under. They were too large and quite unlike him in character (for he had donned something of Bill with his clothes) but clearly the change had removed as great a load from the Father's mind as from his person. After he had gone away happily



in his disguise to play deck quoits, Bill told me, marvelling, 'They were actually the *long* kind.'

As the ship pursued its southward way the heat prompted most to return to the post-lunch siesta habit; ice clinked in the lounge glasses at sunset; at night in the dining-saloon black-tied men mopped red faces and envied their wives the comfort of their unrestricting gowns. New Year's Day found us lying off Freetown on an olive-grey sea in a vacuum from which in lounge, cabin or deck-chair there was little escape. Freetown harbour was, as everyone agreed, a hot spot in January — however, one got used to it. Bill and I wondered whether some people ever did. We viewed the harbour, African unmistakably, the shore's green heights scarfed with a familiar brooding haze, the tin-roofed beach sheds and go-downs reminiscent of the old-time trading days, the very name, Freetown, a reminder both of slave-trading and its abolition. Our land view from the ship's rail was not strikingly different from that of our first ambassadors, the sweating crews aboard the early trading schooners, who with piratical toughness fought the deadly Coast fevers, the black men and each other. Our view was much the same; it was only our outlook that was modernly our own. As we looked

out on the flashing black bodies of the ebullient Freetown divers whose slim canoes thronged the ship's side and heard their insistent busking cries for coins (*'Give me "dash", Massa, "dash" me, Massa, seespence, Missus, seespence!'*) we



heard another voice in which there was no joy, no sign of ever becoming 'used to it' sighing by my elbow, 'Just tell me: who would marry into the Colonial Service?'

It was while we sat by the edge of the Boat Deck's swimming pool watching sunburned passengers gingerly contesting on the pool's greasy pole, that Bill I and idly challenged each other to recall Liverpool in winter, Liverpool *now*, in fact. Our combined retrospect, stimulated perhaps by the blazing African sun's opiate effect on our imaginations, was reasonably effective: of cold rain on the windscreen of a dock-bound luggage-loaded taxi: of sodden patient bus queuers: of mackintoshed news-vendors, fishmongers' shops, then grimy brick frontages and at last the prison-like walls which conceal the no-man's shedland of Customs, Immigration and the ship. There it all was, scarcely two weeks behind us, and we decided that a little physical study of geography was more personally edifying than a deal of the text book and Atlas kind. By the ship's side the lithe amphibious citizens of Freetown still splashed in and out of their

dugouts, requiring no Sports Committee to shepherd their water games. We assumed them to be descendants of Freetowners whose opinions on their own arbitrary geography lessons (had they been recorded) would surely have been illuminating.

As yet our re-acquaintance with West Africa was a tenuous affair, to say the least. No amount of tropical voyage atmosphere, no succession of golden days and starry nights at sea, prepares one for the Coast or indeed for renewed contact with any life that is real and earnest. With the shipping company's connivance we ate the lotus, were diverted by the Ship's Sweep, 'Bingo' and 'Racing', concerts and cinema, and between whiles watched flying fish skim the warm blue seas and sportive schools of porpoise play about the bows. Yet the passengers, despite their pleasure in the lotus, showed an increasing awareness of the approaching shore. The Old Coasters did not waste their energies on observing Freetown or going ashore there; ensconced in the coolest corners of the ship they settled down to comfortable reminiscence on the West African geographic and social territories they held in common as far back as 1920 and further. On the perimeters of these little name- and yarn-swapping groups the New Boys, still unused even to their shop-fresh tropical kit, maintained a respectful interest. It would henceforth be part of their extra-curricular study to observe and digest not only the customs and attitudes of West Africans, but also of the established White Coaster who provided a model for the adaptation of further recruits to the ranks.

However, according to our cabin steward, these New Coasters mostly lacked, even in their potentials, the full-blooded character of the oldsters. Milder, more cautious, they had, he maintained, nothing like the stamina or cash for the old-time heavy gambling and drinking, or the extrovert eccentricities that once made for memorable pranks

and wagers en route to and from the Dark Continent. 'Time was,' said our wistful mentor, 'when we'd have a regular crowd in their dressing-gowns for brandy-gingers in the lounge before breakfast. Full of life they were, ready for anything, and no regrets afterwards. In those days they lived rough — any who couldn't, didn't last. They worked hard and played hard. We didn't get the wives out then. Made a big difference.'

We said that we had heard some extol the invasion of the women as a good feature. It had, he agreed lukewarmly, made the ship's life more domestic, better ordered; it couldn't be denied that there was some connection (only very general, mind) between women and discipline. Yet we knew that privily he regretted the departure of the truly rumbustical male days when tips were spontaneously generous, 'incidents' not infrequent, 'characters' commonplace and life somehow larger and freer. 'Just look at us now,' he said, 'Play-pen, nursery stewardess and the shop selling cold cream and nylons. It's bound to make a change in the men.'

While acknowledging some truth in this, we believed his implication — the women's taming of West Africa, as of Coast ships and Coasters — to be a trifle too emphatic. No matter what the redoubtable 'power of a woman' we could not yet see all the Coast as a mere suburb of Empire. We knew the destinations of passenger Coasters, both Old and New, to range from such towny sea-ports as Lagos, Accra and Takoradi to bush stations up the Niger Creeks, in Togoland and Gold Coast's Northern Territories. Some would live in modern bungalows with sophisticated amenities, some in lonely mud and thatch dwellings with lantern-lit verandas; their African associates might be white-collared clerks and car-driving business men, or loin-clothed Juju-worshipping bush pagans whose instincts had much in common with those of their cannibal forefathers. The dis-

tances of vast bush between the patches of comparative modernity in West Africa were extensive, we knew, both as regards actual territory and in degree of civilization, and the ship's passengers' present compact circles would soon be broken, their lines of communication become tenuous over the miles between their stations. The wonder of it was that they would continue to remember each others' names, pay each other enthusiastic visits when travelling through bush, and maintain, as it were, a sturdy British grapevine of news.

Yet this is exactly what does happen. The get-togethers of 'neighbours' from widely separated Canadian and Australian homesteads have the same quality, for the larger the terrain and the more inclement, the more eagerly people seek to establish their social identities, their feeling of 'belonging'. In tropical countries where humid heat gives oppressive reason for leisure-time sitting and drinking, the drawing together of chairs at every opportunity is natural — and with the drawing together a need for homogeneity, a Club feeling, is satisfied. The male Coaster, perhaps because it would be so easy for him to live solitarily, is on the whole a particularly social creature, the female Coaster no less.

On our last evening aboard the harbour-moored vessel sociability was the keynote. Tomorrow would bring the breakup of the present groupings, the introduction of new faces and voices, the beginning of 'tour'; tonight was for farewells and invitations to acquaintances to drop in were there chance to do so, at Bolgatanga, Zaria, Lomé, Okigwi or even Timbuktu. Then swiftly conclusion was in the air, as when at a party the first guest looks at the clock. The lounge windows outlined, beyond the dark harbour water, a prospect of the waiting town's twinkling lights; it was as if that welcoming sparkling from the shore signalled the hopes of those who, at their tour's end, awaited their replacements, and their own north-bound journeys. As for us, we were on

our own with a Jeep station-wagon and camp kit for mobility. We could not expect anywhere in West Africa the kind of welcome which had marked our arrival in a Nigerian bush village five years ago; there would be no white-robed deputation, as at Agulu, with lanterns and speeches and a bouquet of live fowls. We went to our cabin in a mood that was necessarily open-minded and independent.

Next morning the temperature of the Customs Shed was that of a boiler room. Already, at nine o'clock, the back of Bill's shirt was wetly patched and my going-ashore frock clung moistly. Bill stood over the luggage. 'Twelve, thirteen pieces... fourteen counting the typewriter.' On a packing case beside me a Catholic nun sat composed and immaculate in her sculptured draperies. Sweating Empire Builders organized their families and boxes. African officials gave us forms to sign, and a press of ragged porters jostled in competition to head-load our goods.



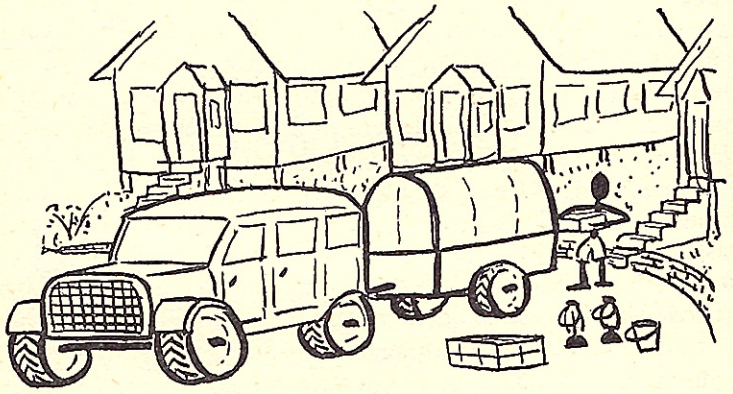
We surveyed this scene which, while new to us, still had in its essentials a strongly familiar aspect that brought our Coast memories crowding back to us. We followed the porters outside into the challenging glare of white sunlight.

'Well,' said Bill, with an attempt at detachment, 'here it is again.'

CHAPTER II

GO HOME, MISSUS!

THAT morning from ship's cabin via Customs and Jeep we came to a small white chalet in the grounds of the town's European-run resthouse, and there bathed and changed before walking down the grassy compound's driveway to its central building. Unexpected vistas of lawns, paths and flowering shrubs pleased our sea-accustomed eyes,



as did the hovering butterflies and lizards which darted away at our approach. Feeling ourselves to be strangers with the unseasoned looks and bearing of new arrivals, we hesitated outside the main building's gauze-screened front entrance.

There on a veranda, in canvas chairs around small glass-topped tables, an assortment of Old and New Coasters were cooling off before taking their lunch in the adjoining dining-room. We joined their number, and while waiting for cold drinks, scanned the town newspaper we had bought at the

dockside. 'Read this,' said Bill, pointing to the front-page editorial. Its black print crackled with denunciation of the British; its words were harshly angry, its exaggerations and exhortations those of a man drunk with the power of hate-words. Commented Bill, 'We seem to be remarkably unpopular.'

At this a voice from the next table spoke up, 'You've come at an awkward time. Trouble's brewing — not that trouble's anything new here.'

We knew it was not. Our newspapers five years before in Nigeria had regularly tiraded in much the same fashion against Europeans but, as in the past, we read the rough-printed columns with a sense of puzzlement, for we had at no time heard any African speak in such furiously accusing italics. The gist of our present reading was a strenuous address to Gold Coasters to unite as one man in a final demonstration against the iniquities of British Capitalism and Exploitation. 'Save Our Workers from the Iron Grip of Imperialism!' 'Keep Strong Faith in Our Cause!' demanded the headlines. 'Self-Government Now!' 'The White Capitalists Must Go!'

From all this we could not doubt that Black Man's Town carried a large chip on its ebony-dark shoulder. Yet when 'trouble' is in the air, one expects to scent its brewing — not merely have it baldly stated in a news sheet. The man at the next table, having made his cryptic comment, was now deep in a month-old *Picture Post*; a group of young men in bright shirts swapped stories over their beer; two linen-frocked matrons exchanged confidences while a rompered infant trailed a duck on wheels around their domestic perimeter. Others were coming in from outside, mopping damp foreheads and drawing up chairs. To us they appeared as ordinary white people, neither wealthy nor autocratic, having about them no palpable nimbus of Capitalism or Imperialism. From them we turned our eyes to the white-



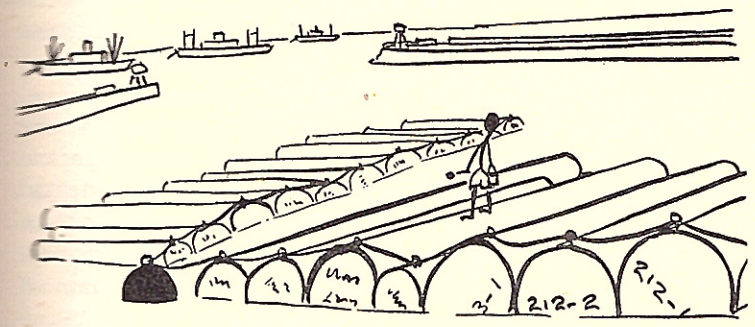
uniformed African stewards setting the lunch tables and bringing out drinks from the bar; we detected nothing brooding or resentful in their manner.

Yet from the table between us the town newspaper with its hotly peppered slogans stared up at us like a glove thrown down. Outside the blanched noon sunlight sparked on the chromium of cars drawn up in the driveway, and shone on the black satin wings of crows on the lawn; the black and scarlet lizards with palpitating throats darted and basked beneath a frangipani tree in waxy blossom. Beyond, the tropic sea, its surf clearly sounding, glinted and winked through the trees, reminding us how far we were both from the monochrome austerities and certainties of home.

Later, too, in the dining-room where the mealtime hum of conversation was pitched in normal tones, 'trouble' seemed still to be just a word. Perhaps it is that a substantial meal in midday heat further inhibits the calm British who, legend has it, are never easily agitated. It is difficult, after a tropical lunch, to feel strongly about anything, and in this mood we recalled some cosy scraps of Old Coaster dicta: 'If you take West Africa seriously, you're finished.' 'All these little upsets blow over.' 'Africans have no real stamina or impetus — only fits of emotion.' The humid siesta-inducing atmosphere slowed our steps as we walked back to the chalet, but even this could not stop us from reflecting (as we had done when reading the vitriolic newspaper) on the nonsense that can burgeon from the germs of truth.

Next morning by way of self-reorientation, we set out with

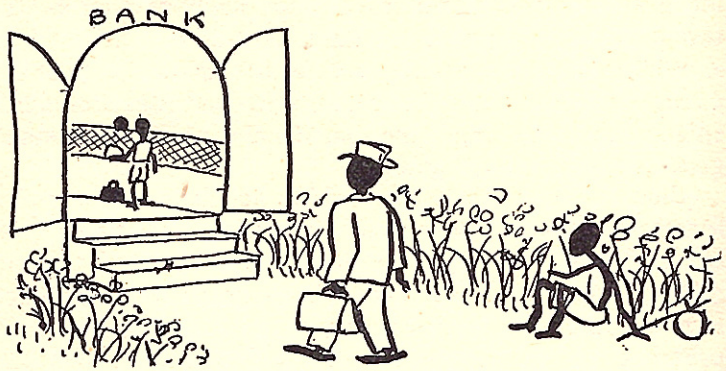
the Jeep to view Black Man's Town. First, from the harbour's dusty, oil-stained flats which semi-circled the smooth indigo water, we surveyed the cargo ships, British, American, French, Dutch, Norwegian, loading by lighter and at dockside. Winch chains rattled to the shouting of deck orders; crate-burdened slings described parabolas from dock to hold; bare-chested seamen in bosun's chairs refurbished paintwork while white-uniformed officers watched from above the well-known Coast port loading routine. Piles of



giant hardwood logs lay beneath the quay's cranes and floated in rafts. African-driven goods trains shunted. Overhead carrier buckets rattled, loaded with manganese ore. Here was rich evidence of a busy harbour's important traffic with the world's markets beyond the haze of its scorching horizon — and far beyond the imaginations of the gangs of dock workers, the cycling clerks, the strolling food-selling 'mammies' and the blue-fezzed police who stood guard at the harbour gates.

Along a wide paved road which led from the port we found the town's commercial centre, an outcropping of square white buildings, the Bank, shipping and railway offices, United Africa Company, and the chalky beginnings of new structures. Behind a sprawl of fresh masonry which promised an impressive new Post Office we found the

original worn cement and wooden structure which was for the town's Europeans a hungry, hopeful place of waiting for home mail. Nearby was further proof of urban development: a modern bus drawn up by an erection labelled 'Bus Stop'. A docile queue of African passengers climbed in: clerks in neat shorts and trouserings, girls in Western frocks and turbans, ragged labourers, tall slim Northerners in white robes, and market women of that shrewd sorority whose roadside soap-box counters sold rice, cigarettes, peeled oranges and roasted plantains to the passing townsfolk. Ramshackle 'mammy lorries' crammed with persons and produce rattled past us, followed by a horn-blowing taxi with a bouquet of paper flowers bobbing in its rear window. It was obvious to us that in this new Africa the graceful primitive headload and timeless trudging were, for the moneyed and emancipated, out of fashion. Wheels and speed carried (as in other parts of the world) an important social significance, an illusion of power and authority. With something like envy (for our Jeep while strong and fast was not luxurious) we watched a portly figure in native robes emerge from a Buick and carry a well-filled brief-case into the respectful portals of the Bank. Yet it was to us rather than to him that a skinny beggar who crouched by



the driveway's hibiscus hedge supplicatingly extended an arm which ended in a withered stump.

In Black Man's Town we were soon to find that neither beggars nor briefcases were uncommon. Here, as in all other towns, were the rich and poor, the opportunist and the indolent, the lucky and the star-crossed. The contrasts seemed more dramatic to us, perhaps because we looked for them with eyes that remembered a Nigerian bush village which had no Bank or Post Office, worshipped its Jujus with drumming and dancing, and lived primitively; in Africa again (fresh from the north, temporarily immune to tropic apathy) we sought in town to find comparisons with our familiar 'bush', and thus were easily surprised. At first glance, more than surprised: a trifle discomfited and uneasy; more than a little perplexed. It was clear that much had happened in an astonishingly brief time, both to the country and its people. 'Is it not odd,' I asked Bill, 'that Africans who have such a widespread reputation for slowness and backwardness can adapt themselves from bush cannibalism to all these Western notions in the space of fifty years? Bus stops, bicycles, American cars, Legislative Assemblies?'

'A very long way,' Bill agreed, and I knew he was thinking of the White Massa in his jungle hammock dispersing appeasing gifts of Birmingham trinkets to the wide-eyed simple savage.

'Well then?' I inquired.

'Maybe the tortoise is a hare in disguise,' said Bill enigmatically. 'Though the real point is what all this progress is *towards*.'

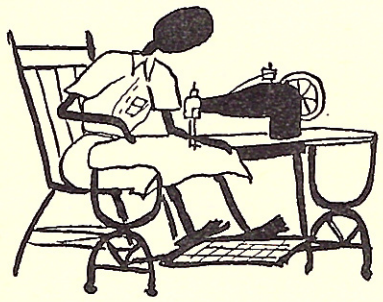
'That's an old problem,' I agreed, and felt bound to quote, 'A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's Heaven for?'

'Yes,' said Bill, 'but what you reach for must be important.' I conceded him the last word.

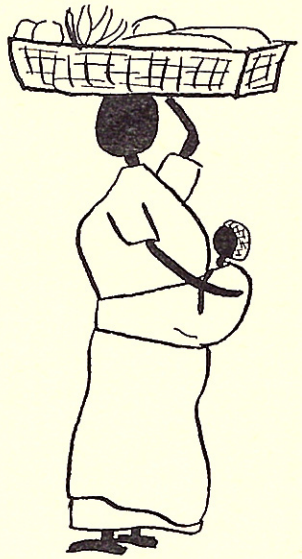
Part of the town's European section, graced by Golf

Course and Clubhouse, fringed the beach shore. The rest retreated into a cultivated pattern of Crescents and Avenues bordered by houses built in the spacious-veranda'd tropical style. From this residential oasis we drove towards the harbour again, skirting the European commercial section to find the African town proper. Here, along streets lined with small African, Syrian and Indian shops and the lesser European branches, was to be found a profusion of goods and services, a smell of cooking, open drains, dust and humanity; here the roads were gritty and the open shop-fronts gaudy, offering glimpses of high-piled ironmongery, the red and blue enamel cooking pots and polka-dotted tin trunks beloved of the African, sensationally coloured shirts, scarves and textiles, and shelves of tinned and bottled European food, drinks and medicaments.

At intervals the town bars (the 'Happy', the 'Love-All', the 'Paradise' and the 'God-Will-Provide') announced themselves with blasts of gramophone syncopation of a volume, it seemed to us, sufficient to stir the very dust of their outer pavements. Their signs said, 'Slip In Here for Iced Beer' — 'Come In and Play' — 'Rest and Have Music'. There were many tailor's shops, their sewing machines briskly treadled by long-heeled bare feet. Alongside the Happy Bar a cushion-maker stuffed kapok into ticking bags and, as an eye-catching sideline, hung for sale outside his doorway a small gallery of Victorian oil-painting reproductions: sunless Scottish lochs, pale young ladies, and Fauntleroy children with curly dogs — all in four-inch gilt frames. As we looked at these and tried to connect them with the rest of the street, a woman came out from an



alley way to observe us. African fashion she carried a piccan astride her back, swathed tightly in her bodice cloth. Its tiny dark head in an orange wool bonnet lolled asleep. Our appraiser might have been a bush neighbour of ours, so inquisitive and ingenuous was her smile.



We found no signs of 'trouble' here. Nor did we find them along the hard-packed tree-shaded dirt avenues which criss-crossed the outer town where the African townsfolk had spread to the whitewashed box-like houses of its 'suburbs'. The scene was domestic and slow-moving in the heat. No one paid much attention to us. Chickens, the under-sized African breed, foraged anxiously in the roadside dust, and mangy dogs scratched their fleas. Women gossipped and children played around the communal pumps; foodsellers tended their braziers of roasting plantains and peanuts; old men sucked their pipes in doorways. Dust rose from passing lorries and water splashed in buckets. We perceived no indication of rebellion or umbrage.

Then Bill left me outside while he made a purchase in a Syrian shop. Almost immediately a raggle-taggle of children gathered about the car. Its bold-eyed boy spokesman came close to the window to tell me fiercely, 'Go home, Missus!' Close on his heels the others, jigging and grimacing, joined the chant. 'Go home. We no want you at all. Go home, Missus!' But as Bill reappeared and took the wheel they scattered like kittens tumbled out of a basket and ran away giggling with bravado.

'Is that what they mean by "trouble"?' I asked Bill who had, however, larger matters on his mind. He said it looked certain that the Big Strike, the Positive Action, would start next day. 'If it's a general strike don't they mean Positive Inaction?' I inquired, 'though that mightn't sound so formidable.'

Bill pointed out that politicians were always careful to avoid negations in their slogans. Anyway positiveness certainly lay in the fact that bank and store clerks, railway workers, dockers, Government employees, all, were about to down tools. According to the strike leaders, the 'Action' was bound to confuse, disorganize and embarrass those whose orders anticipated, as a matter of course, a quick and obedient, 'Yes, sah!' Tomorrow voices might be raised, orders given, only to fall on the empty air of clerkless counters, shrouded typewriters, moribund dock cranes and shuttered Bank wickets. 'Then they will see,' in effect promised the strike leaders, 'how helpless "they" are without our everlasting "Yes, sah!" Moreover we shall have proof that what we can do for others we can very well do for ourselves.'

On our way back to the resthouse Bill and I drove past the hub of disquiet: a one-storey building on the shore road. This was the local headquarters of the left-wing, strongly nationalist Convention People's Party whose political power and success were undisputed. Through its open doorway we glimpsed forms, tables and whitewashed walls splashed with slogans. 'Liberty or Death' was painted in outsize dripping-red letters as if both concepts might thus be invested with greater urgency and the necessity for an immediate choice. I had read some authority's comment (although this was nothing one needed to be told) that 'the African is excessively susceptible to a slogan'. Perhaps we all are, until we have swallowed so many slogans that we become cynical and cease to believe even in the best of them, which state of mind

is surely almost as dangerous as undue susceptibility. I told Bill this and his reply was, 'Nobody has ever yet started a social revolution with a nice, quiet, well-reasoned battle cry. It's the intemperate shouters and exhibitionists who usually start the excitement. Historians sometimes manage to sort out the real issues afterwards.'

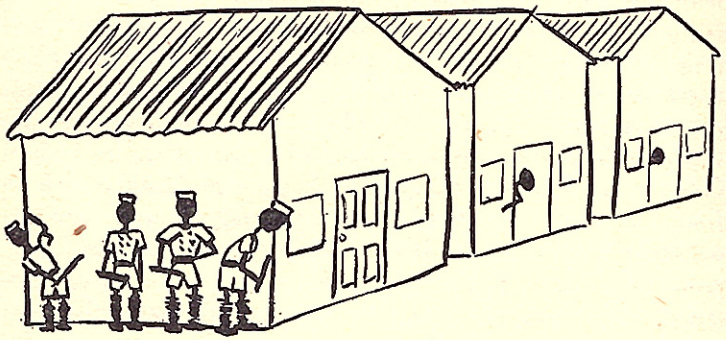
'Well *that's* cynical,' I said, 'and exactly what I mean.'

'Quite so,' agreed Bill with unhelpful docility.

Next day the strike did begin, but in an atmosphere which, if one ignored the town's newspaper, was curiously like that of a Bank Holiday. The streets were unexpectedly quiet and clear of crowds; there were no 'incidents'. Neither was there any perceptible acceleration of European pulses on the resthouse veranda; only a few aggrieved comments on the inconveniences of the situation: no proper train service; ('But was there ever?' a bored voice inquired); the shops shut; no reliable information on what would happen next. Some had difficulty in cashing cheques because the Bank's African chief clerk, a long-term trusted employee, had absent-mindedly started his Positive Action by taking the safe key home with him. But although a sense of harassment prevailed, there was no threat in the air, no premonition of impending drama or violence. Even so, as precaution against recurrence of the previous year's Accra riots, the Police ranks were reinforced by civilian European 'Specials' and a number of no-politics Northern Territory Africans armed with cutlasses and primitive bows and arrows. A strict 7 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew was promptly imposed on Africans and Europeans alike.

The Positive Action lasted for three weeks during which the town's commercial life was maintained, after a fashion, by skeleton European staffs who manned switchboards, stoked engine boilers, served at the grocery counters, and drove mail vans for the Post Office which managed to smuggle into its sorting office by the back entrance a few

faithful (or faithless — depending on your point of view) clerks dressed in native clothes. Northern Territory blacklegs were recruited to load the most urgent ships' cargoes. As was inevitable, these 'foreigners' were sometimes set upon, though not with impunity, for it was a rash Gold Coaster who dared to inflame the proud temper of the despised but feared Northerner. Inland, a policeman was killed, we heard; there was an occasional minor fracas in the villages and gold mining camps in the interior. But it was rumoured that such incidents were connected with personal feuds, conveniently settled under cover of the larger issue.



For daytime Positive Action the nationalists were responsible. Such action as resulted during the curfew hours was the affair of the police who, cat-like, waited in the street shadows, ready to pounce on the unwary townsman who foolishly dared to emerge from his shuttered house. The main African populace, those who had not the especial concession of a 'pass-paper', far from proving dangerous, retired indoors early, and prudently left the streets to the police whose nightly bag of culprits was therefore small. It was the 'bag' attitude which Bill, in his role of Special Constable, did not care for. To nab a luckless citizen on his way to visit the outdoor latrine which served his house — to ignore

his excuse, pummel him into a police van and jail him overnight — seemed to Bill an occupation that was at best slapstick in the Komedy Kops vein, and at worse the kind of bullying that can arise from schoolboy nervousness and boredom. To this 'bag' attitude some European officials and African police wholeheartedly subscribed, although their motives and opinions were far from crystal-clear. 'We', it was implied, had to maintain a strong hand over 'them'. The nightly patrols offered stimulation to the slightly shocked European ego, and the Police were always glad of a little strong-arm exercise. We heard of no arrest of Europeans for curfew evasion, and certainly of no European being thumped on the head by a punitive truncheon. Perhaps it was reasoned that black skulls are thicker than white, or perhaps, more anonymous. The game, then, had some rules, although as Bill declared when he retired unimpressed from Special Constabulary — cricket, or even baseball, was preferable as a sport . . . if one had to hit something.

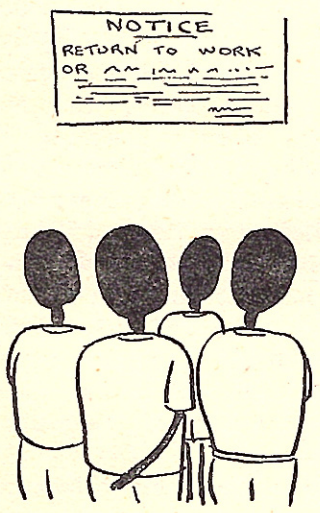
Such an opinion, reasonable as it may seem to those who have not visited West Africa, was, we knew, considered faintly heretical. During Colonial crises it was usual for Europeans to stick together — 'we' firmly against 'them', with no complication of opinion. At such times impartiality is particularly out of favour and may be regarded as part of a 'pro-African' attitude, a term equivalent in disfavour when applied to a Briton, as 'pro-British' to an African. 'Why must people be pro-*anything*?' I asked Bill, not for the first time, as we sat in our by now accustomed place in the corner of the veranda. 'The more you think of it, the sillier it is — at times I can be as "anti" an African as I can be "anti" a Frenchman, or a South Sea Islander for that matter. But whoever in his right mind could consistently be pro or anti a whole *race*, hook, line and sinker?'

'Well, people can,' said Bill. 'The thing gets to have a

simple special meaning, like "united-we-stand, divided-we-fall". You can't have odd, stray remarks going about when mass arguments are brewing. And mass arguments and accusations have to be in simple language like "Pro", "Anti", "Left", "Right", "Forward March".'

'You're right about *simple*,' I agreed, 'in more ways than one.'

The strike ended, as had been anticipated, with the gradual return of the town's workers to approximately their former pattern of employment — this return accelerated by the workers' need for money and by Governmental and Commercial edicts which threatened the stubborn with forfeiture of the pensions, houses and privileges attached to their jobs. There were arrests, too, of kingpin strike instigators. One Chief who with his entire village continued in radical support of the now wilting Positive Action had his community raided by the Police and himself clapped into jail. Others of his ilk received the same treatment — among them one young firebrand in particular whose very name, Kwame Nkrumah, had come to be a byword for stop-at-nothing nationalism. So, with removal of the main props and voices in the cause of the Convention People's Party (and with some compensatory assurances and promises from Government) the strike came to its ragged conclusion.



To some it may have seemed that little had been gained by so brief, even so childish, a dis-

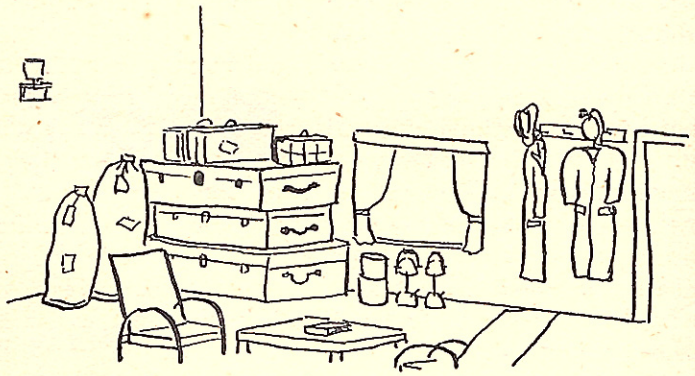
play of independence. On the surface, certainly, British Government and Commerce had won the day. But below, the foundations remained to some extent altered and disturbed, as if a company of wilful moles, having briefly emerged above ground to cock a snook at authority, had returned, not particularly daunted, to their own busy and determined unseen activity.

With the resumption of what for lack of a better term was called 'normality' Bill and I — whose purpose on the Coast was our investigation of the timber business — began to give some thought to our own personal plans.

CHAPTER III

ALL THE AMENITIES, INCLUDING BAGPIPES

THERE is a saying, 'Destiny comes sideways,' with which Bill and I are inclined to agree. In our experience, the more we congratulate ourselves on what appear to be foolproof blueprints for a new venture, the more likely it is that we shall be obliged to revise them in the light of unexpected circumstance. Pretending to be in charge of our fate, we may optimistically vote for the unpacking of our trunks and the disposal of our patient household gods on solid-looking shelves and tables. But often no sooner is this done than a telegram comes, or some other out-of-the-blue signal to dictate all the sudden activity and accoutrements for a journey. Thus it was that we had come for the second time to West Africa, equipped with Jeep, luggage trailer, camp kit and road maps of Gold Coast, Togoland, Dahomey, Nigeria and Sierra Leone.



Destiny, we told each other, could hardly catch us napping this time. We were prepared for mobility even to the extent of including camp beds, water filter, collapsible canvas bath and hurricane lanterns in our luggage, and perhaps because we continued to be so prepared we spent most of the next two years in Black Man's Town. The Positive Action strike which at the outset of our tour inhibited our movement and perforce successfully narrowed the horizon of Bill's timber survey, was part of the 'sideways' influence. We accepted it, knowing better than to argue with destiny's quixotic barriers and halt signs. Thereafter, although we ventured afield at intervals, we lived in the resthouse chalet where, having hung up our hats, we stacked our suitcases and more carefully looked around us. It was soon clear to us that in place of the large West African kaleidoscope which we had thought to observe from our Jeep, we should have to make the best of that afforded us from our chalet windows and our journeys about the town.

A month later our chalet view was perfectly familiar to us as we surveyed it, out of early-morning habit, in dressing-gowns with early tea in hand. West Africa is at its best before breakfast, when for an hour or so the air has a novel freshness and gauze patterns of dew veil the grass under a sky of temperate summer blue. Briefly then the fierce golden heat of the day waits offstage with all its attendant languors and all its subtle negations of physical and mental effort. Our pre-breakfast view was of the compound 'watch-night' departing with bed-mat and cutlass from his vigil beneath a palm tree in the driveway — garden labourers on their haunches weeding, slow-motion, the undulating lawns — 'boys', some uniformed with drivers' caps, sluicing and polishing the waiting cars and gossipping as they worked. Beneath a low, spreading bush in feathery leaf and yellow blossom a wide circle of fallen flowers lay like a pastel shadow; a small brown bird with an errand boy's shrill

whistle explored its five-note repertoire; from the roofs, sheeny bold crows made noises like unoiled door hinges; minute white birds with long black tails held airy conference on telephone wires, and in the distance, against the scarlet of the flame trees which marked the compound's boundary, two tall ivory egrets paced the greensward. From the pantry adjoining the main building came a rattle of early-tea trays. White garbed stewards approached the chalets with freshly polished shoes for the guests. A chuckling sound of running bathwater tokened the compound's awakening.

Taken by itself, framed by the chalet's modern window and enhanced by an early-morning outlook, this was an attractive view of West Africa, safe to contemplate, pleasant to the eye. One could understand the exclamations of surprise and pleasure with which newcomers, fresh from a boat's docking or a plane's landing, greeted this tidy, colourful European-made oasis. On its own merits the view was rewarding, having nothing to do with politics, palavers or the Big West African Question. As a picture it had the quality of a bioscope scene over which one might pleasurably linger, while postponing those views more embarrassing or less artistic in the sequence.



For the Coast European the most satisfying portions of the day are early morning and late afternoon, the former for clear-minded work, and the latter for conscience-free play. European shops, offices and banks open at 8 a.m. Most business doors close at noon to reopen at two o'clock for another two or three hours. Thereafter the day is recreational. The white bachelors,

husbands and wives of Black Man's Town could choose between golf and tennis (at the European Club where thirsts could be quenched afterwards), a little sailing, fishing or 'taking the air' from the mile-long harbour breakwater, swimming or sunbathing at the beach, or just 'driving around' which usually meant taking almost any circuitous route whose conclusion at half past five was the parking space in front of the town Post Office. This agreeable Post Office ritual, part purposeful, part social, played its indirect part in cementing European solidarity, for no matter how unalike the nature of the acquaintances who exchanged small talk while awaiting the sorting of the mailbags, all shared one common hope: of news from the larger world beyond the harbour.

In Black Man's Town a general hunger for the written word which stood for 'home' imbued the Post Office — a dingy uninspiring old building in itself — with the character of a generous giver that still was capable of an uncaring unkind withholding. The recipients of its generosity would stand on the steps to select one particular letter from a sheaf and scan it eagerly; the empty-handed unlucky would saunter out to their cars as if going to collect the post had only been an idle notion. One never knew what little private dramas and shocks, what hidden excitements, or sharp disappointments were felt in the hearts of those who thrust their letters into pockets and handbags and drove away. The cause of fleeting smile or frown was not revealed, nor what lines on flimsy airmail paper had such power to slow or speed the step. But we gathered from the faces we observed, and from our own experience as well, that the drawing of a succession of blanks sharpened one's news-hunger to an almost painful degree; it made the evening long and time pass heavily until the next afternoon's re-enactment of the scene. Then, always an hour before sorting time as the mail plane passed on schedule overhead, one could imagine the



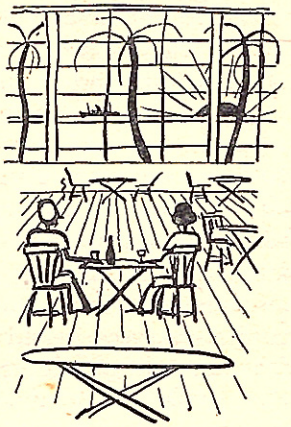
white population of Black Man's Town looking up from tea or golf, beach or breakwater — stoic from habit but still, like all humankind, immensely vulnerable to hope.



Depending upon our mood, Bill and I usually went either to the beach or the breakwater before collecting our post. Skirting the European Golf Course and Clubhouse, we parked the Jeep and walked down to a long quiet curving stretch of sand patterned by foam and shells where the waves had receded, and inhabited by minute scuttling crabs that were almost invisible, like crab ghosts, so protectively camouflaged were they against the attentions of occasional long-legged birds whose sharp eyes and sharper beaks explored the shallows. There, even on afternoons of greatest heat, small breezes stirred, borne landwards, it seemed, with the ranks of blue-green water masses that piled up far out towards the horizon, to make leaping white tongues over the shoals and a roaring turbulence of conclusion before they spent themselves in creaming ripples at our feet. For bathing, the sea was warm but considered unsafe because of the shifting variations of depth in the sea bed, the menacing outsweeping currents and the turmoil of the continuous surf. Moreover to the nearer shoals, those partially uncovered at low tide, adhered a species of tropic shellfish covered with sharp black spines that could become painfully imbedded and fester in the unwary bather's flesh. One bathed and swam cautiously, therefore, in the knowledge that strong and sensible swimmers had been defeated here. 'Be careful,' was the warning to enthusiasts who proposed to swim straightway out to the rocks. 'There are bad undercurrents. It's

not so safe and easy as it appears.' And in this way, we thought, the beach (which, while unsophisticated, could be as golden and inviting as any Mediterranean *plage*) typified the whole modern Coast. One was unwise to accept surface impressions or to venture with impunity; one always had a lot to learn, and the learning was rarely a comfortable business.

Sometimes after visiting beach and Post Office we dropped in at the Club whose groupings of small tables and chintz-cushioned chairs afforded us—and the other habitués of our resthouse veranda — occasional variety in our pre-dinner scene. The wide lounge windows looked out on green turf, thence to the blue and white seaward distances over which we watched the flamboyant sunsets fade into the sudden darkness of tropic nightfall. Like others of its Coast kind, the European Club was much more than a casual amenity; it was the public heart and centre of social life, the natural place for friends to meet at the end of the day, or acquaintances to 'look out' for each other. At the tables flanked by a rack of magazines and a small library corner (smelling faintly of mildew) sat each night, with post-golf or tennis sweaters around their shoulders, a fairly representative portion of the town's European husbands, wives and bachelors. Lightly, but not without feeling, the women discussed domesticities, 'leave' past or future, social events and sometimes each other; the men's leanings were to mild arguments, interspersed with hearty laughter, about cars, sport and 'shop' — for by some unwritten law Club conversation is usually like this.



Inevitably, as in all small communities, there were inner cliques and outer cliques on varying strata whose boundaries were fixed, yet not so rigidly as to prohibit the promotion of members from one to another. Such promotion, however, required the utmost tact on the part of the promotee lest she (or he) be considered too brash a winner of friends and influencer of people, not only by the group from which he (or she) had been elevated, but by that which formed the new and more desirable circle. Although, as is perfectly natural and indeed unavoidable in small white tropical communities, tensions sometimes occurred, little heartburnings and betrayals, misunderstandings and coolings-off in friendship, rarely was any of this advertised in the public life of the Club where it was customary for all who knew each other to wave and smile with the utmost cordiality, as if gloves-off business and social competition, grudge, prejudice and antipathy had never been heard of. Here, it was implied, was to be found good fellowship in the sharing of a quiet drink and amiable conversation with one's own kind. That, perhaps, is what everyone would have wished: an ideally gay yet restful communing under one family roof. But the fact remained that while the Club never ceased to function with the sweetness and light of this ideal as its motive, neither was so easy to maintain in actual practice. The contradiction of Club Utopia by the multiple facts of human frailty was accorded a don't-careish tolerance by many; others confessed some secret alarm at the power of offhand scandal, ephemeral but damaging rumour, and the kind of oblique and curiously fascinating gossip whose vocabulary is less of real words than side-glances, knowing smiles and telling silences. 'I suppose,' I said to Bill as we drove back to dinner one night, 'all Clubs are essentially the same everywhere. One likes to belong, and it is bad to be an anti-social isolationist, but the behaviour of human beings in the mass can be rather disturbing.'

'You can't get away from it, it's individuals who make the mass,' Bill pointed out.

'Funny, though,' I said, 'how much more likeable and admirable people are individually than when they make a crowd, and a kind of yeast, a fermentation — something difficult to explain — is at work among them.'

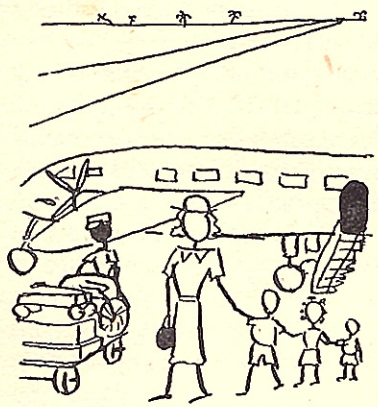
'That's a natural process,' Bill declared, 'and it's the main reason why people have Clubs — to hear what's going on, and as an outlet for the pressures within them. What you call yeast is just the atmosphere generated by a roomful of good, bad and indifferent people, drinking together and feeling the necessity of talking about something. And if they didn't, life would probably be a lot duller for everyone.'

That was inarguable, but I suspected that we were straying from our topic. Clubs, after all, are innocent enough organizations with hardworking Secretaries, Treasurers and Committees and carefully drawn up programmes democratically designed to create amity and social satisfaction within a community. So perhaps it was not Clubs that we were discussing, after all, but that ever recurring multi-sided phenomenon which for lack of a better name we call Human Nature. If in a Club there appears to be concentrated an undue amount of Human Nature, that is surely not the fault of the establishment.

Five years before, in the away-from-it-all Nigerian village of Agulu, Bill and I had known a rare kind of solitude. Our neighbours there were Africans untutored in the white man's ways. Daily down the winding dirt road they trudged barefoot to market with headloads of produce from their plots of yam and cassava; nightly the sound of their drumming and dancing came across the dark bush spaces to our lamplit veranda. In Agulu where our newspapers were six weeks old, we learned the meaning and uses of 'bush time', and thought ourselves fortunate indeed to possess an Ivory Tower (our rooftop balcony) set high above the sepia and

green wilderness which for two years composed our personal horizons. There our amenities and diversions were self-contrived, and white visitors came seldom. Except when we went thirty miles into the nearest township we had what some might envy and others deplore: a freedom from social obligation to our own kind.

In Black Man's Town we had no Ivory Tower, and solitude was a luxury out of bounds. Bill was not now a Development Officer, concerned to combat the eroding forces of drought, rain and primitive husbandry on Agulu's shifting soil; his present timber business was a commercial affair. For the people of our village the soil, the threatened land, had been their most valuable and necessary possession; for the citizens of this township money was the important commodity, newly realized by some, increasingly coveted by others, silver, notes, and bank accounts, the elusive coinage of modern economy. Concomitant with money were trouser pockets and brief cases, and a different relationship (though not yet completely defined) between Africans and Europeans. In Black Man's Town the glaring sky and implacable African sun were the same as Agulu's; we found all else markedly unalike.



We had not, for instance, in our remote and uncrowded Nigerian village any such transient white population as daily arrived at and departed from the resthouse which now served as our temporary home. Ships and planes brought gold miners and engineers, geologists, builders, men with interests in cocoa, textiles, manganese, timber,

shipping and the trading companies — and sometimes their wives and children — to the resthouse chalets, the main building's veranda and the dining-room. Vicariously with the strangers to whom we passed the salt at our table we enjoyed 'leave' recent or imminent. We exchanged fragments of opinion, occasionally discovered mutual Coast acquaintance and had opportunity for a varied education in matters so miscellaneous as, for instance, gold-dredging, pets (mainly dykas, monkeys, tree bears and parrots), the diamond business, the cost of cement, the cocoa mealie-bug menace, adding machines, the town's dustbin shortage — politics in Buenos Aires, New York and Paris — Yoga, Christian Science, the tse-tse fly, land drainage and Judo. (It was at breakfast that we met our Judo expert, a Black Belter; out of cowardice or early morning lassitude we declined a personal physical demonstration.)

It was natural that among our succession of chance table and veranda companions we encountered some who appeared to us as far from ordinary or average in their tastes and behaviourisms. This gave us to reflect on a prevalent notion that the inhabitants of hotels in the tropics are mainly composed of 'characters', strange birds in a picturesque aviary. In books and films whose backgrounds are of bougainvillaea, hibiscus, jungle and monsoon you find the remarkable variety of personal quiddity, neurosis and idiosyncrasy which makes equatorial fiction and cinema almost irresistible. Nor is this only a make-believe state of affairs; people in the tropics very often are 'characters', although one may never be sure whether they are such in their own right, or simply appear so because they are out of context, like cut-out pictures superimposed on an artificial background. Again, because conclusions of this kind are always potential boomerangs, an alarming question is bound to arise: is one a 'character' *oneself* in the eyes of the rest?

On this score Bill attempted reassurance. 'We've not been on the Coast long enough to develop into anything so unique as, say, Mr. Ealing. A really full-fledged character like his doesn't bloom overnight, even in West Africa.'

This was true. Mr. Ealing was a wisp of a man whose thirty-five years in West Africa had bleached and dehydrated his body until all that remained were his small, brittle frame, his pale, undaunted spirit, a nervous Adam's apple and a remarkable thirst. In the early days (to which he scarcely ever referred when sober) he had trudged the bush trails on long prospecting trips; for years, apparently with courage and resource, he had endured the recurrent physical discomforts of fever and dysentery and the alternating exhilarations and depressions of long periods of solitary living. Now as a resthouse guest his daytime manner was painfully shy; social exchanges set his Adam's apple working anxiously, inhibiting speech. During our communal breakfast and lunch he kept his eyes on his plate and for the most part tried to be invisible. After sundown, however, a startling change was manifest. Still pale and small but curiously incandescent, Mr. Ealing would emerge from his room as hail-fellow, craving company, eager to sing and to tell mysterious whispery yarns interspersed with mime. He was happy then, carefree, beaming at his companions like an alcoholic sparrow. When all had left to go to bed Mr. Ealing was the veranda's last survivor. It was his habit so to remain (until what hour no one knew) sitting upright and vivacious, rapt in the secret and absorbing monologues he addressed to his empty glass. Indeed Mr. Ealing was so humbly inoffensive, drunk or sober, and so vulnerable always that it seemed only right and proper that he should be, without question, allowed his eccentricity — particularly since he was clearly unaware of any part of his difference from the rest of us.

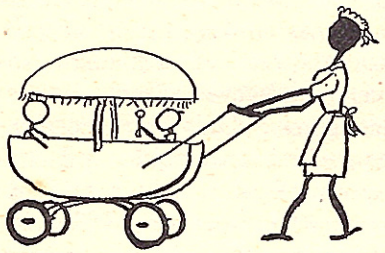
At that time our number — those of us who qualified as

long-staying resthouse residents — included a 'timber' couple from New York, a Pickwickian 'bagman' (commercial agent) and his wife, an ex-Indian Army colonel now building a bridge, several young clerks attached to Banks and trading companies, a Scot who sold adding machines, a Polish aristocrat ex-refugee engineer, a woman Education Department officer, a French architect and a Swedish girl awaiting marriage into the police force. In ordinary circumstances it is possible that none of these would have actively sought each other's company; as it was they formed permutations and combinations of groupings for eating and drinking together in the manner of old acquaintances. We assumed that theirs were in the main the artificial relationships of propinquity which are built on the frail scaffolding of 'good morning' and 'good evening' greetings which become small talk and thence (even among the most apparently uncongenial personalities) long conversations and first-namings. Bill and I concluded that the West African atmosphere must give out a kind of socially adhesive substance whose power is remarkably enduring.

This was demonstrated also in the life outside the resthouse — on private verandas and in drawing-rooms, in the Club and on the beach where the social instinct (or adhesion) flourished, and people gravitated together to achieve and maintain the all-important state of knowing-each-other. This European cohesiveness, however, rarely operated beyond the bounds of its white limits. Only very occasionally were Africans invited into white households, and conversely Europeans only rarely visited African homes. Even those Africans and European men who worked side by side in offices and whose relationship had proved both friendly and mutually advantageous during many years, did not 'mix' after office hours. This was an accepted situation (not without some undercurrents of feeling, perhaps, but still 'accepted'), and only the veriest greenhorn would have

commented on it or wondered whether it was not indicative of some general inelasticity of outlook — some diehard refusal to move with the changing times. Occasionally an inquiring newcomer did innocently seek information on this topic, but as a rule his listeners volunteered little more than the stock rebuttal: 'Impossible, old chap — where would it end?' Or, '"*they*" wouldn't like it, you know — make 'em damned uncomfortable'. Or, simply and dismissingly, 'My dear fellow, you'll soon learn that it just can't be done — and for heaven's sake best keep quiet about it.'

So most people did 'keep quiet about it' — to the extent that one could forget almost entirely the size and importance of the issue so successfully and smoothly ignored. One lived in a modern West African township, conducted business with Africans, employed African domestic and office staff, shoemakers, plumbers, carpenters and tailors, and pegged almost the whole of one's work and pleasure on African economy — but one did not ask Africans as guests into the drawing-room or to sit down at the dining-table. In every other sphere except that which was personal the African was taken for granted; he wrapped Europeans' foodstuffs, drove their cars, typed their letters, manned their banks and even minded their babies; economically he was important both as customer and supplier. In short, his activities were multifold and his numbers great in all spheres except those graced by the white man's social rituals. From these he was excluded on the grounds of possible mutual embarrassment, because in the stock attitude 'a line had to be drawn somewhere', or for no reason except that the African who stepped across the invisible line which divides private white and African



worlds might be unwilling to step back again; he might be slow to understand all the little but essential unwritten laws of white society; to put it at its most polite, he might prove a problem and a misfit. The mere notion was enough to cause white host or hostess a nervousness which not even their expectation of the most outrageous white guest could occasion. 'I wonder exactly why this is,' I told Bill — 'I mean, what is at the bottom of their feeling.'

'Nobody knows,' said Bill, 'although there are hundreds of ready-made explanations bringing in superiority and inferiority complexes (on both sides), the herd instinct, the insistence on lesser formalities where larger formalities are threatened, the last stand of white against black peoples, the wisdom of having some positive pattern, the inhumanity of the not completely educated — you can view the whole thing from almost any angle and make your conclusions sound extremely sensible.'

'As usual — bits of truth and logic hidden in assorted packages of nonsense?' I queried.

'That,' said Bill wearily, 'has been going on for a very long time, and not only in West Africa.'

In Black Man's Town the European life followed a pattern much like that of other white communities in the tropics. The ghosts of the earliest footslogging or hammock-borne Old Coasters would have been now surprised to observe their modern counterparts driving the morning mile or so — from residential section to town office — in African-chauffeured vehicles which, having deposited the 'Massa', returned home to collect the 'Madam' and her friends for a little social shopping or coffee-drinking. On the modern Coast, footslogging as such is out of favour, and 'transport' is an important word. To be even temporarily without 'transport' is irksome, and even oddly humiliating; then one rides in a horn-blowing, bone-jolting town taxi to the cost of one's

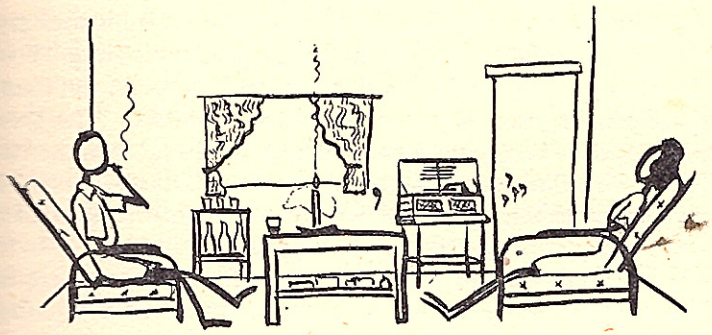
pride, nerves and pocket. One's ego (vital personal equipment in West Africa) deflates, and once again one is aware of the personal motor car's curious buttressing effect on the average human personality. The pedestrian who at last acquires a car, almost overnight acquires also a larger, stronger way with him; he belongs now to the wheelborne tribe who speed rather than plod; he has a new freedom and a beautiful shiningly enamelled protective shell. Before, he was just a two-legged self-propelling human; now merely by sliding into the driver's seat he may control the power of twenty horses, and thereby feel himself more a personage. It seemed, then, that not only the energy-reducing heat but the shrinkable tendencies of Coast egos gave a particular value to the white men's cars.

And not only cars, but much else that was subtly stimulating to prestige: the well-filled drinks cupboard, impeccable steward and efficient cook, the party invitations and the first-naming and old-boying which gave both social and business life (closely related Coastally) smoother progression and greater geniality. Whereas in Rome one does as the Romans, in West Africa one follows the white man's tropic custom which in the main — since it is alien to the country — is bound to be an artificial affair, a social framework of thou-shalts and shalt-nots designed to promote white solidarity on the highest possible level of material comforts. Of mental ease and refreshment one hears less; the accent is on physical pleasures and palliatives by means of which West-Africa-in-the-raw is kept, at least in leisure hours, at bay. It is this 'warding off' attitude which Bill and I particularly noticed among the white people in Black Man's Town, and it seemed the more strange to us, since in our Nigerian village (whose African population numbered 600 per square mile) we had not, even in our minority position, been obliged to adopt it.

In bush, certainly, life had been a great deal simpler in

many ways, even though we had lacked all the civilized amenities which, in theory, banished all need for water-toting and lamp-lighting in the white households of Black Man's Town. In theory, that is, because both water and electricity supplies, suffering from extensions more rapid than their sources could bear, were subject to abrupt and sometimes prolonged shut-downs. During such spells, when our chalet taps were dry from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m., we, like the other guests, kept a reservoir of red-silted water in our bath-tub. (Sometimes, however, the taps unexpectedly renewed their functions during what were supposed to be the shut-off hours; then people who had gone out, leaving their useless faucets by accident turned on, returned to flooded rooms and floating shoes and carpets.) One night when the drought persisted until midnight Bill and I went sticky and bathless to bed, leaving the bathroom tap turned on so that we might wake if the supply were resumed. This resource was successful; between three and four a.m. we took weary but satisfying baths. Next morning our nocturnal ablutions were mocked; there was no shut-off. And that night, when the water failed again, so did the electric light, as was its not uncommon custom.

Bathless again and by candle-light one evening Bill and I sat in the chalet sitting-room whose curtains hung limply in



folds unstirred by any zephyr. As was our usual habit before dinner we played our gramophone records, our favourites at that time being 'Cool Clear Water' (sung by the Sons of the Pioneers) and 'Jonah and the Whale' with 'Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego' on Jonah's reverse disc. The Pioneers' lyric concerned two men lost and consumed by thirst in a desert; its finale was the diminuendo, poignant with hope denied . . . 'coo-ool, clee-ear waatter . . .' We stirred ice into our glasses and heard then the song-story of Shadrach and company in their fiery furnace that was (and we could easily imagine it) 'seven times hotter'n it oughtta be'.

'Maybe we should play something less appropriate,' I suggested. 'Music should always fit the mood,' said Bill. In our semi-darkness the record clicked to its conclusion and the night-time cicadas outside our screened window came into their own again in full whirring chorus. 'Nearly time now for Grand Opera,' Bill went on. Grand Opera was our nightly portion, a WAF soldier's unselfconscious contribution to the pre-dinner hour as he took his bath in the Forces ablution hut just behind our chalet. Only a wire fence and a stretch of rough ground separated the resthouse compound at this point from the neighbouring Army territory of barracks, cookhouses and washrooms. The singer's warming-up cadences came clearly across to us now. '*La Bohème* tonight,' said Bill. Sang the soldier, releasing all his soul and feeling, advertising his joy in bathing and singing, 'Your tiny hand is fro-ozen . . .' and so he continued. At the sound of the dinner gong, we pinched out our candles. 'The great thing about living in town and not in bush,' commented Bill as with flashlights we made our way towards the dimly lit main building, 'is that one suffers so few of the hazards of the country, and enjoys all the amenities.'

It is true that some of our more prosaic amenities were far from constant in operation; with music in various unexpected

forms, however, we were kept well supplied. All the resthouse stewards, for instance, enjoyed whistling and every morning there came from the otherwise quiet and empty chalets a medley of shrill but tuneful individual accompaniments to dusting, polishing and bed-making. Sometimes these were of modern jazz, sometimes curious half-toned phrases with subtle changes in tempo almost impossible for us to remember, even after hearing them a dozen times over. The garden boys were not to be out-done in whistling. Every morning after breakfast the random fluting sounds broke out all over the compound, only to cease when the sun had risen high to diminish the first early zest. Even then the garden boys, those working in pairs, often gave voice to their own ballads in Twi, Fante or Ga, one boy producing the main theme gruffly from his chest, the other interpolating or replying in a falsetto startling to the unaccustomed ear. Without preamble they started their duets, and having once begun, never faltered or appeared closer to any conclusion, as they clipped, weeded or dug, unconscious of my presence at the window table. Only once, when a pair were scything the long grass behind our chalet did their rhythms abruptly cease; there was an outcry, a scuffle, a thumping, and I looked out to see the boys standing over a decapitated four foot snake whose dark coils still moved. 'Bad one?' I called out. 'Proper bad one, missus,' they affirmed. 'Poison snake go spit for eye.'

I told Bill about it when he came in. 'Spitting snakes aren't at all what you expect in this domestic setting,' I concluded. Bill reminded me that you never knew what might happen; we had not expected bagpipes either. Nor had we; they had come as a complete surprise, their initial high-pitched howl and following full-blooded skirl and drone bursting suddenly and without warning upon the post-siesta torpor of our West African afternoon. We looked out at the back beyond the wire fence to see a solitary figure in



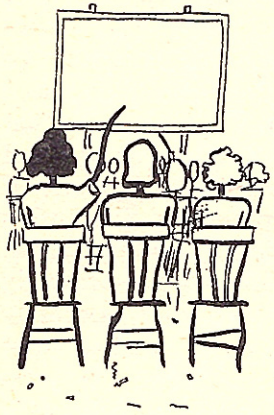
khaki drill with chest expanded, and crimson cheeks inflated, piping and slowly pacing, as disciplined and correct as if all the eyes of Edinburgh were upon him. Thenceforth at four o'clock every afternoon he paced and practised for an hour, dreeing his weird while others played tennis or went down to the beach for a swim or to the town's most popular late-day haunt, the Post Office. Our sense of incongruity concerning our piper soon faded, and when some weeks later a new visitor to the veranda cocked her ear and murmured, 'Not bagpipes, surely, not here!' we replied almost with pride, 'Yes indeed, we always have bagpipes after tea.'

As Bill had said (and we shall disregard his tone and manner of saying it) the great thing about town life on the Coast was its amenities. We were not now required bush-fashion to boil and filter our drinking water, nor had we to say 'Pass bath' to a boy who prepared it by carrying buckets of water heated on an outdoor fire. Such bush appurtenances as oil lamps, charcoal irons and mosquito nets, were unnecessary here. Our screened windows kept out mosquitoes, and we had not, as on our Nigerian veranda, any nightly invasions of winged ants, fantastic moths, praying mantis or sausage beetles, nor any pale darting night lizards on our walls. We had recourse to a telephone call-box on the veranda, and sometimes listened to the resthouse lounge radio. Our airmail newspapers here were only four days old. We could enjoy a beach, an up-to-date Post Office and a Club. And after dinner, if we wished, we could even go to the cinema.

By metropolitan or even the humblest provincial standards the cinema in Black Man's Town harbour was a place of no pretensions whatever; it boasted no twinkling neon or carpeted foyer, no tip-up seats, or stage, or rosily lit curtains. Its screen was merely a white sheet stretched between wooden posts; its floor was of none too clean concrete. Its customers, who usually brought their own cushions, sat in wooden arm-chairs grown grey and creaking with time and weather. To ensure that the public paid to see the show, the cinema area was walled off; as an aid to coolness it was roofless, so that stars of sky and screen were displayed simultaneously. And here, with a twice weekly change of programme, were offered — as the newspaper advertisement promised, alternating Breath-taking Romance, Heart-Stopping Thrills and Spills, Hilarious Capers, Revenge, Gun Battles and so on, scarcely fresh from the American and English film studios, but rarely of more than ten years' vintage. One could watch Charles Boyer and Ingrid Bergman, almost forgetting the ever-hungry mosquitoes that haunted the warm darkness beneath the wooden chairs. Less easy to forget were the harbour trains which from time to time shunted along the siding just behind the screen, their down-to-earth actuality of bumping and whistling sometimes drowning out a tender love passage altogether, or ruining a meaningful dramatic silence. That the cinema not only survived but throve despite its cruelly hard seats, multifold mosquitoes and intruding trains was proof, we thought, of the screen's peculiar power of magic. Its popularity demonstrated that the cinema-goer can do without the customary opiated preliminaries to the seduction of his senses.

We took our seats in front of the blank white screen in the concreted yard whose illumination was a dozen unshaded light bulbs. Introductory canned jazz came from the projector's sound box. The small audience was mixed: African, British, French, Dutch, Syrian, Lebanese, American, with

bachelors predominating, as usual, over husbands. Some had shared offices during the day and met afterwards for golf or drinks; some of the wives had gone shopping together or dropped in on each other for tea, or seen each other at the Club; now they waved and smiled again, these willy-nilly friends and neighbours, wife nudging husband with the reminder, 'The Smiths, darling!' — or 'Heavens, the Browns, but maybe they won't see us.' Then the lights went out and the magic started, its only props the bald screen, the cone of light, and the rolls of old celluloid that could, despite trains and mosquitoes and the sticky night-time heat, carry us through space and time so that we forgot the alien oneness of the little audience spending two hours down at the harbour in Black Man's Town, and were lost in the superimposed world of shadows that moved before our eyes. Then briefly 'shop' was banished, and the political situation, and the propinquity (congenial or otherwise) of Smiths and Browns. Even, by virtue of the shadow world's contrasts and surprises, Black Man's Town itself receded and we lived vicariously until, perhaps, the screen blacked out or the sound faded or was magnified to an unintelligible din, or through some miscalculation of projection, the screen's moving figures appeared as if beheaded. Then everyone stirred and murmured a little (if the fault was long-lasting) and the magic temporarily evaporated. Such was its potency none the less, that rarely did anyone leave the cinema. Since there was little choice of evening entertainment, and none at all of films, the cinema's customers in Black Man's Town soon developed a remarkable tolerance in their critical



faculties. Either that, or they stayed away altogether and would never on any account have attended, as we did, a showing of 'Forever Amber', Black Man's Town harbour version.

The chief virtue of this film was its comparative newness; its chief drawback, we soon discovered, was the viewer's difficulty (magic or no magic) in discerning what was happening on the screen. In Darkest Africa we regarded a Technicolor that, possibly affected by travelling or climate, turned out to be Darkest Amber, in gloomy tones of sulphurous sepia, scarcely animated by its heroine's well-known vivacious peccadilloes, or even by the Fire and the Plague. That night our critical faculties took sharp notice of the trains, the mosquitoes, the Smiths and the Browns, and the whole absurd artificiality of our evening.

So, picking up our cushions, we left early and drove along the beach by moonlight in a restless and frustrated state of mind. But as we drove our spirits were calmed and lightened by the quiet of the night and a strange glory that lay upon the sea. Phosphorus ran like blue fire where the rollers broke far out. In lines of light it advanced with the curling waves, cascading in a flurry of eerie brilliance on the pale deserted shore. We stopped the car to stare at it, tracing the flashes, marvelling at the vastness of the glittering sea beneath the fantastic African moon, and so forgetting Amber, the cinema and the amalgam of trivial botherations which had caused us our trivial vexation. It was odd, perhaps, that we should have so striven first for artifice, then for negation of its falseness. Odd, but not at all unusual, for in Black Man's Town there were many contradictions, as many, we thought, as the amenities. And the strangest contradiction was that the imported amenities, even for those who worked hardest to attain and maintain them, did not always produce the most complete satisfaction. Life, as Bill would say, is like that.

CHAPTER IV

THE WOOD AND THE TREES

OUR chalet calendar was a handsome pictorial affair which illustrated its pages of February, March and April with frosted hedgerows, lambs and daffodils. We had come to those months of dog-days which are the Coast's sweltering prelude to the onset of the rainy season: a time when white people, mopping and trickling in their lightest garments, confess their losing battle against physical lethargy and mental laisser-faire. Frost and daffodils were so remote from us that they scarcely evoked nostalgia.

By March the resthouse compound lawns were straw-coloured from drought, and the midday sky was a giant sun-reflector, making outdoor metals hot to the touch and clothing damply adherent to the perspiring body. Marigolds, zinnias and the gaudy fleshy-leaved canna lilies bloomed lustily in the flower-beds. Grapefruit, oranges and limes hung heavy on the big trees which shaded the kitchen garden near the boys' quarters. The resthouse family of ducks found a little coolness and dampness in the hollows there; among them the resthouse turkey strutted and gobbled, a bird-caricature of pride and red-wattled choler. All the colours of that season were hard and bright, as if printed in a technicolor too hot and vivid for naturalness. We looked out from the chalet window at the scarlet and black lizards basking on the warm stones of the pathways, at the stark sun-dazzled white of the compound's buildings, at the canna lilies and marigolds, and beyond the trees to a sea and sky merged by the haze of heat.

Across this landscape the garden boys moved slowly, watering and weeding. At intervals they foregathered under



a tree where they ate their communal 'chop' and then with ragged hats tilted over their eyes disposed their limbs like inert puppets in a hypnotic repose from which I averted my eyes lest it bedevil my timber computations by the chalet window. Our routine was by now established. As a timber man during those first exploratory months in Black Man's Town, Bill was entirely occupied with essentials relating to logs: timber contractors, long-distance haulage lorries, shipping space — prices, specifications, bills of lading, invoices, Forestry Department regulations, banking documents, and journeys into bush to inspect his prospective timber purchases. Like Cromwell's, Bill's motto might then have been: 'Wait not until the iron be hot to strike; make first the iron hot by striking.' This was a commendable policy, but its working required an extravagance both of patience and exertion. Ours was no smooth-running London office where West African hardwoods, mahogany, wawa, baku, edinam, ofram, white and black afara, dahomey and avodire were merely money-values, 'species' or ledger words; here were no decorous transactions between well-tailored business men over a City lunch; here was neither furled umbrella nor even, in fact, the comfortable ballast of a business address. Ours was 'Poste Restante' and our telephone instead of properly reposing on a desk, functioned precariously in the veranda public call-box. Bill's African business associates were not then known quantities to him or — as it turned out often enough — to each other. Their backgrounds were often vague, their formal business experience brief or nil. Some wore Western dress, drove big new cars and spoke excellent English. One was an Oxford graduate. Several had visited England and

America. Others were less sophisticated, but perhaps even shrewder and more adept in palaver than their educated brothers. Sandalled they might be, and in native toga cloths, but more than a few of them possessed enviable bank accounts, and behind them all stretched the great shadowy tangled forests whose rich timbers, in their ultimate forms, were in demand to grace the world's most fastidious dining-rooms and salons.

For three months, until Bill managed to secure a temporary office on the harbour front, his timber activities were conducted in and around the Jeep, the Post Office, the Bank, the shipping offices, the Paradise Bar and our resthouse chalet which last, with its typewriter and filing cabinet, was the nerve centre from which Bill made his daily sorties. Since the resthouse had no facilities for business discussions and in any case did not admit African visitors within its gates, the 'Paradise', favourite rendezvous of the African timber contractors, necessarily featured in Bill's first contacts and explorations. It was principally a bar, although it boasted a reception desk at the foot of a narrow stairway, and a number of upstairs bedrooms. Otherwise its decor was much like that of the 'Happy' or 'Love-All': of cement floor with strips of frayed matting, whitewashed walls decorated with old calendars — worn canvas and wicker chairs around beer-marked tables — a bar counter and a gramophone with a merciless loudspeaker. This whole downstairs portion was social in character and unprivate in construction; it was screened from the main street's thoroughfare only by flimsy sections of battered grey plyboard. This insecure frontage scarcely kept at bay the pavement merchandise of a hardware shop on one side and a furniture maker's on the other — these establishments run by a brother and son respectively of the hotel management. A guest in the Paradise Bar could, if he wished, purchase an enamel bucket or a curly Victorian-style hat stand, merely by raising his voice and

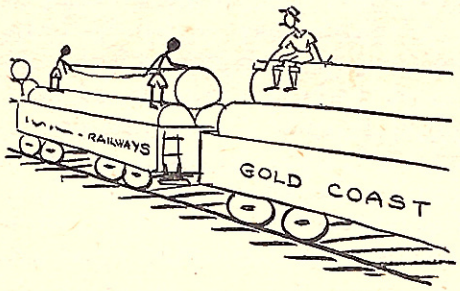
shifting his chair a little. This rarely happened, however, because the bar habitués were in the main busy with matters of far greater import. The casual passer-by would be much mistaken in assuming that the figures lounging around the little tables were merely idling away their time; the ambitious briefcases held on laps or propped against chair legs told a different story — likewise the seriousness of voices absorbed in talk of gainful getting and spending, borrowing and lending, and the cautiousness of fountain pens drawn from breast pockets to conclude yet another 'deal'.

For the town's African business men, as for those out-of-towners intent on making their visits profitable, the 'Paradise' was a useful forum for the exchange of news and views over beer and under cover of the gramophone's comprehensive cacophony. The reception desk trafficked briskly in 'trade' messages; the telephone was constantly busy. Information-seekers who dropped in to reconnoitre could glean much by casual inquiry: who was in town and what doing; who would be likely to enter the bar that day to meet whom, and when; who had just left town and why. Europeans did not frequent the 'Paradise' — only the sailors, young bachelors bored with verandas, occasional strangers unable to find other hotel accommodation, and a few like Bill, on positive errands.

From Bill's point of view the chief drawback to this establishment was its bartender's quite justifiable assumption (shared by Bill's contractors) that regardless of the hour of the day, those who occupied the canvas chairs should order drinks. Since Paradise business etiquette demanded this, and Bill had little choice of sites for his business discussions, he often found himself obliged to quaff beer (from a doubtfully clean tumbler) immediately after breakfast — or worse, after lunch, when cloying heat, din, dust and argument combined in headache productivity. Then the starting of a West African timber-buying business appeared to him

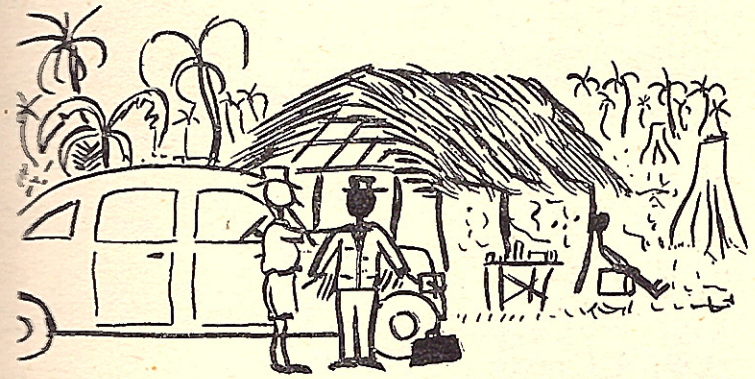
an uphill affair, fraught with many curious human difficulties and a few entirely novel discomforts.

Despite these, in four months Bill made headway with the timber business, by dint of his exploratory journeys to bush concessions and his negotiations with a growing number of African timber contractors whom he met by their design or his, and assessed (as they assessed him) for dependability and business potentials. Initially their meetings were extremely tentative; the information each gained of the other was mainly hearsay, and conclusions were often arrived at less from facts than intuition. There were many go-betweens and a general resorting both to the European and African news grapevines which are so rich in more or less accurate case histories concerning white men and Africans. On the whole, results were good, as was proved by the number of logs now arriving from bush by rail and lorry to gratify Bill and enhance the contractor's bank balances. But inevitably some mistakes were made, and one of Bill's earliest mistakes was his acquiescence to the importunings of one Mr. Ghama, who at length prevailed on Bill to go with him to see some mahogany logs in an outlying forest.



On that occasion Mr. Ghama, an affable rotund African gentleman, blandly insistent, zealous in the timber business, had taken Bill half a day's drive inland in a mongrel car whose brakes worked by faith and whose doorhandles were ingeniously secured with string. After their early start Bill, feeling hungry in the middle of the morning (and expecting a quick viewing of the mahogany logs which were, Mr.

Ghama assured him 'very close') ate his packet of sandwiches. At noon, under a bush village shade tree where the heat was scarcely less than that which shimmered and wavered beyond the forest margin, Mr. Ghama excused himself while he ate a substantial lunch of rice and fish from his lunch tin. Under the interested gaze of a covey of village children, Bill drank most of the water from his flask and accepted a banana



from Mr. Ghama who said blandly, 'Africans eat more than Europeans, but less often.' Vainly Bill scanned the humble mud houses, the wandering goats and fowls and a roadside soap-box stall for possible emergency provender, but saw nothing anywhere to suit his palate, except, perhaps, a rusty tin of Palm Toffee which the stall's vendor sleepily indicated, saying, 'Ten shillings.' 'This is not a good place to shop for toffee,' said Mr. Ghama. 'Makes you thirsty anyway,' said Bill resolutely.

Leaving the car they went on by foot into the forest. According to Mr. Ghama the cache of fresh-cut mahogany logs awaited them only fifteen minutes' walk distant. It was two o'clock. The forest offered no coolness; rather, its walls of tangled greenery and maquis of juicy undergrowth held fast the drowsy close-layered heat. Bill, his shirt now sodden

on his back, drank the rest of his flask water. Aloud he considered it strange that neither sound nor trace of Mr. Ghama's timber concession labourers had been manifest anywhere along the route. To this Bill's guide, still fully dressed in his brown wool suit and, though freely perspiring, not at all jaded, replied that they would soon come to men and mahogany. And, after four miles, 'Now — we go along this path and you will see!' They entered a clearing to find only fresh stumps, the debris of felling, and the charred remains of a campfire. Bill pushed his hat to the back of his head in a gesture which to those who know it, means the onset of impatience. 'Well?' he said.



Mr. Ghama looked asonished. 'Goodness, I am sorry. Something has happened!'

'Could you explain what?' inquired Bill.

'Oh, I know,' said Mr. Ghama with lightning cheerfulness, 'A little mistake, easy to put right. The mahogany is on the *other* side of the village, not far if we go back.'

'I think,' Bill said, 'that your partner, Mr. Onwu, has sold the timber to somebody else and — well, forgotten to tell you.'

'No, no,' said Mr. Ghama, at the same time obviously absent and busy with private doubts and plans.

'We'll go back,' said Bill.

'It is only a matter of two or three miles beyond the village to see some very good mahogany,' Mr. Ghama assured him. 'Let us stroll there now.'

'I have strolled enough,' said Bill, 'and I can smell a rat somewhere.'

'You do?' Mr. Ghama looked nonplussed.

'Something fishy,' Bill amended accusingly.

'Oh, fish!' said Mr. Ghama, trying to understand. 'A bad smell?'

'Pretty bad,' said Bill. 'I've smelled it most of the afternoon.'

'You don't mean my lunch?' asked Mr. Ghama, worried.

'No, your timber,' said Bill, 'and Mr. Onwu's methods.'

'I shall send him a message,' promised Mr. Ghama. 'He is only my sleeping partner, you know.'

'Asleep or awake, he's been busy lately,' Bill said.

'A clever man, Mr. Onwu,' sighed Mr. Ghama, as if he knew that to his cost.

In the late afternoon they regained the car beneath the shade tree and Bill insisted on returning immediately to town. This they might have managed by dark had not the car stalled half-way for lack of petrol. Bill who arrived late that night at the chalet, dirty, hungry and thirsty, did not tell me how they had overcome this difficulty; after sketching the outlines of the episode he made it clear that he did not wish to dwell on it further.

Mr. Ghama was patient, allowing a week to elapse while Bill renewed his eagerness for mahogany and mellowed his opinion of the unfortunate expedition. Then Bill was prevailed upon to come to the Paradise Bar for 'further discussion'. Mr. Onwu had sold that particular mahogany, Mr. Ghama admitted on the telephone, because he needed some quick money to pay their concession labourers. He had 'messaged' Mr. Ghama about this, but the message had gone astray. Could anything be more reasonable? And now they looked forward to doing business with Bill and taking him to see some very good mahogany which they had recently felled, only a short distance from town.

At this time an important property in Bill's timber dramas was the telephone call-box on the main building veranda,

two minutes' walk distant from our chalet. Although scarcely the most convenient possible, this telephonic system should have been a fairly simple arrangement. It was, in fact, extremely complicated because, as we soon found out, Ephraim, the telephone 'boy' preferred either not to answer the telephone if he were busy on his second line of duty, which was polishing doorknobs — or to tell the voice at the other end that 'Massa [or Madam] no dey [not there]', without inquiring firstly whether they were there, or secondly, asking the voice its name or telephone number for future reference.

To overcome Ephraim's dislike of the telephone and the distance between it and our chalet, we resorted to simple bribery: threepence for each of our calls that were properly answered and 'held' while I was summoned from the chalet to speak into the instrument. To earn his threepence, however, Ephraim had also to ascertain the telephone number of the caller lest the African switchboard operator cut him off while I was being informed. More often than not, no matter how I hastened, I found the telephone 'dead' whereupon I was obliged to rouse it again with the number Ephraim gave me. As a result I was apt to find myself incomprehensibly conversing with people who had never heard of me or Bill, with asides to the operator whose replies, repetitively curt and monosyllabic, were of no help whatsoever. I soon realized that the operator could not be expected to offer aid, since, because of some twist in Ephraim's brain, the numbers he gave me were invariably reversed or altered — as 27 for 72, 110 for 101 or 533 for 355. While Ephraim stood outside fretting for his threepence I strove to conserve patience in the claustrophobic box whose temperature rose in proportion to the drooping of my spirits; its walls were adorned by pencillings of names and sailing dates, interspersed by elaborate doodles with heavy boredom thickening every arabesque. In time I came to develop a near-psychic

approach to Ephraim's wrong numbers and often hit on a correct alternative at the first attempt; my failures occurred when, as rarely happened, he had given me a number the right way round. Then he was understandably surprised and pained when, instead of my coming out of the box to praise him, I wilted against the door and said, 'Oh, Ephraim!' in tones of reproach and despair.



Even at the best of times the telephone was a bogy, often emitting on the instant of my 'hello', a crackle of frantic information of which only the recurrent word, 'logs', could be distinguished. 'Who-are-you?' I would twice or thrice beg of the runaway voice which impatiently would tell me. (But African names are not easy to understand, and neither is a lorry-driver's 'pidgin'. Nothing could be done to cure this since it was necessary for the drivers of the lorries carrying Bill's timber purchases to get in touch with him immediately on their arrival from bush. Then an inspection could be made without delay at the dockside, and the logs unloaded, measured and marked in readiness for shipment.) The lorry driver would accelerate his racing discourse which I strove to interrupt with a repetitive '*Where* are you?' 'At harbour!' the voice would shout, by now emotional with the effort of telephoning. 'How many logs? What kind?' I would persist.



'Goodbye! Goodbye!' the voice would yell back hoarsely. Then suddenly the line would be empty.

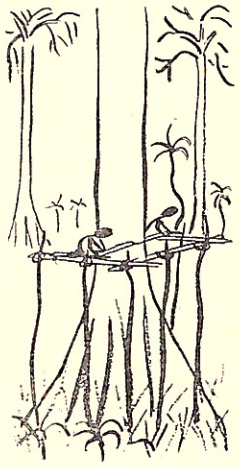
By comparison I enjoyed Mr. Ghama's and Mr. Onwu's calls although these were in other respects valueless. Both spoke clearly, indeed beguilingly; they inquired after my health and Bill's and when I asked after theirs they said they were 'splendid-splendid'. Their talk of logs was so calm, leisured and full of such interesting detail that I always took down their messages faithfully, simply because it was such a pleasure to have notes which did not read like something out of Jabberwock. Messrs. Ghama and Onwu might have been thorns in Bill's flesh, but they did wonders for my telephonic self-respect and gave me fresh courage to say 'Who are you?' against the next lorry-driver's strenuous pidgin outpouring.

Although initially Ephraim's appreciation of coins spurred him at least to improve his attitude to our telephone calls, the improvement was not longlasting. As the days passed, I noticed an increasing slowness in his gait, a growing discontent in his mien. He was dissatisfied with his resthouse pay, although it was a fair wage for his haphazard doorknob polishing and telephone answering. In public he dragged his feet and in a voice melancholy with self-pity spoke of the many injustices he suffered. He carried C.P.P. pamphlets in his pockets and was often heard haranguing the stewards on political matters in the back quarters. Only then did he show the fire and animation of which he was capable. Our impression, gained from a number of unexpected sources, was that Ephraim led a double, even a treble, life, and had his fingers in many little pies around the town. 'Heaven help the country,' said Bill, 'if Ephraim ever becomes a politician.'



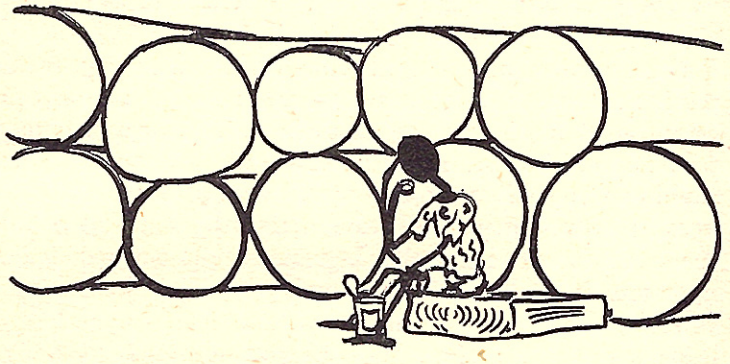
Soon afterwards there was 'manager-palaver' and Ephraim, shrilly inveighing against the wicked unfairness of the world, departed from our scene. The last we heard of him was via a newspaper report in which his name was mentioned in connection with the illegal selling of stolen diamonds.

Even when timber comes from Africa, it rarely evokes much response from the average imagination which considers wood in the raw to be dull stuff. Gangs of ebony-skinned men in loin cloths attack the growing tree with saws and axes; the toppled giant lies with bruised bark in the shattered jungle clearing. As a log it has little character; it is tonnage now, or cubic feet — a weight with a value and a destination. On the seas it is freight or cargo; as boards issuing from the sharp teeth of a sawmill it is lumber and more statistics for invoices and ledgers. Only when craftsmen of experience and sensibility use it to shape a table, a chair or a cabinet, does that which was 'lumber' become something more than wood. The costly finished article then becomes instinct with its own secret life and character, and a kind of pride that mellows and is refined by human care and affection. From mere wood has been achieved an object of shining grace that may endure for generations.



'Coffee tables, television sets, wall panelling — luxury detail,' commented Bill as we stood on the dock by a pile of rough-hewn chunks of selected mahogany known to the trade as 'curls'. A labourer in patched khaki shorts and a shirt so ragged that it hung on his back like a web, sat on the edge of the pile, eating with his fingers an oily mixture out of

an old tin can. The sun blazed down on railway trucks piled with logs and struck with the brightness of a sword across the Jeep's windscreen. There was a smell of locomotive grease, African dust and acrid smoke from a refuse dump. 'It would



be nice to have a coffee table,' I said, aware of the trickle of sweat between my shoulder blades. And, as we climbed back into the oven-hot seats of the station-wagon, 'Any kind of luxury detail would be welcome.'

'Just think of the education you're getting,' Bill reminded me.

'Logs!' I said ungratefully as we bounced over the railway lines on our way back home to the chalet, the specifications and the filing cabinet. The romance of timber was something I thought of afterwards.

CHAPTER V

AN OFFICE BY THE HARBOUR

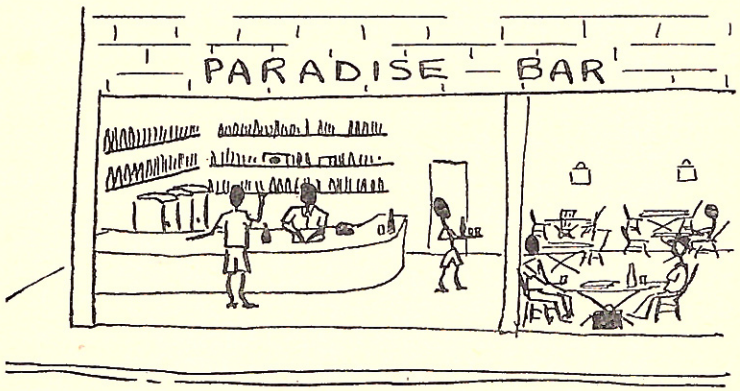
IN April Bill sought office premises in the town, but booming new trades and rapid expansions of those already established had long since caused a serious dearth both of personal *lebensraum* and business shelter. Building, though rapid considering local difficulties of climate, labour and the necessity of importing most raw materials, lagged far behind the town's needs. Some Europeans therefore had recourse to makeshift accommodation in the crowded African section where cramped space, noise, dust and heat frayed nerves less hardy than those of the true townsfolk who took their surroundings for granted, enjoyed their evening bucket baths outside their doorways, ignored the smells from open drains and maintained large families and numbers of chickens and goats in a state of communal and extrovert gregariousness.

In their alien dwellings over the Syrian shops (or even less agreeably, in the Paradise Bar's back bedrooms) the temporizing Europeans lived as best they could, but one gathered that morale suffered. 'Wives' so housed sometimes sailed home on leave months before their husbands; one was even heard to murmur her unwifely doubt that 'home' really was 'where the heart is'. 'And I heard so much,' she sadly concluded, 'about the fine place I'd have, and the servants — all that tropical luxury business. *Luxury*, I ask you, in two miserable rooms over a mammy lorry parking place — chickens, dogs, goats, piccans and dirt on the doorstep, no privacy, and my husband out all day! Local colour, they call it. Well, you can have it.'

Although fortunate in the physical comforts of our rest-house chalet, Bill and I needed commercial housing for our

filing cabinet, desk, and the office staff which by now we urgently required; also a telephone of our own was an amenity to which I looked forward with every trip to the unpredictable veranda call box. Bill had put in his bid for one of a group of harbour offices as soon as he heard that Government planned to build them. Time passed. When Bill called on the Authority to find out how the plan was progressing he was told his office might be ready by June, or July, or August . . . perhaps. 'Nothing more definite than that?' Bill queried, to which the official raised his eyebrows. 'Don't forget this is West Africa,' he said with a soothing inflexion. 'I'd not be likely to mistake it for New York,' Bill replied a trifle huffily, and drove off to the 'Paradise' where he had an early appointment with a new contractor, one of those who considered a glass of beer (or even of plain gin) part of everyone's morning business etiquette.

Bill's timber business was growing fast. In his now enlarged orbit a new personality, unexpectedly useful and interested, had emerged in the form of a young African called Francis. At first Francis was no more than a background figure, the reception desk clerk at the 'Paradise', he whose routine duties were concerned with messages, bar

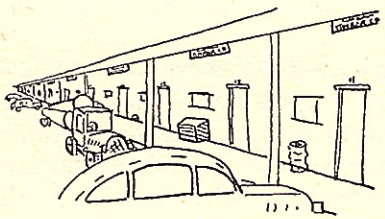


transactions, the telephone and the cash till. Only gradually did Bill become aware of Francis' alertness to all that went on around him, and of the boy's unobtrusive performance of many minor liaison duties between Bill and the African timber men who gathered at the 'Paradise'. It soon became clear that in these unofficial (one might almost say social) activities Francis of the grave face and perfect manners demonstrated an uncommonly shrewd instinct; he combined tact and discretion with a natural commercial courage; his memory was quick and exact; he did not gossip but was omnipresent and knew the full value of a quiet timely comment in the right direction.

It was understandable that between Bill and Francis (son of a chief and himself a business man in the making) there evolved a genuine rapport based on mutual respect. Francis stood out from his dingy setting with the air of one who with patient confidence waits to be recognized and removed to a sphere more suitable to his natural endowments. Bill said to himself, 'The boy has a good head.' Francis, having made up his own mind about Bill, one day asked for the position of clerk in Bill's future office. To this Bill (half-expecting the proposal) agreed, and meantime Francis used his eyes and local knowledge on Bill's behalf, succintly warning him against known scoundrels, and suggesting reliable log sources and the names of 'small' men who had timber and ability and were worth investigation. Thus the way was smoothed towards happy relations and brisker business, and so began a faithful association of advantage to both, which continued during the whole of our stay in Black Man's Town.

In August the harbour office was ready. We moved in to hang on the wall (whose plaster was still damp) the proudly framed document which testified to the formal registration of Bill's new Company. To an outside pillar Bill affixed his

self-lettered business 'shingle'. We tried out the telephone. It worked and we were gratified. We attempted to switch on the light but without effect; we were not surprised. We drew up carpenter-fresh wooden chairs to new desks, disposed other chairs in readiness for visiting contractors, admired our shining ink-pots and sharply pointed pencils, and were altogether so thankful for having, at last, a proper business address, that not even the noise — the grinding, bumping and whistling — of the locomotives which passed immediately behind our back windows, troubled us in the least. In



Black Man's Town we had learned to be grateful for any niche. It did not become us to criticize the squat, grey flat-fronted line of twenty small offices of which ours was one, nor had we any quarrel with our front view of dirt road, log-piles, cranes and shunting box-cars.

Our back view (when not blocked by a railway engine) was perhaps less desirable; mostly it was of a trading company's backyard, and straightway we observed why it was that rubbish destined for its several garbage bins lay as much around the receptacles as inside them. From an upper window a boy hurled some greasy rubbish down at the lidless containers; his aim was poor. 'No hygiene,' I said unnecessarily to Bill. 'And by the way, where are the . . . arrangements for the offices?' 'There aren't any,' he said. 'Only the harbour in general.' 'But,' I protested, 'according to the rules of the Sanitary Department . . .' 'Rules,' said Bill, 'are one thing; the constructing of latrines is another.' 'But how *can* you . . .?' I began. 'You can't,' said Bill. I observed that this was the sort of situation which has caused West Africa to be called no-place-for-a-white-woman. But

I was cheered when the telephone rang again, to prove not only tractable but soundly informative. Francis was inquiring with dignity whether he should start work with us immediately.

When Francis arrived we sat down to the serious business of his taking over the books of log calculations whose working had been my duty during our months of using the chalet as part-office. From his expression, concentrated and attentive, I could gain no clue as to his mathematical ability. 'One cannot,' I told myself, 'expect a boy from the "Paradise" desk to grasp all this specialized figuring immediately.' So, slowly, I showed Francis how I arrived at my computations, and demonstrated each step by carefully written-out fractions, rather as one might teach a child simple arithmetic. Francis nodded politely during his instruction, but volunteered neither assistance nor comment. 'Here, you do one now, if you feel you understand it,' I suggested. Whereupon Francis, with lightning but unostentatious speed penned several calculations in impeccable decimals beside which my fractions looked not only fussy but slow-witted. 'That's fine,' I told him, trying not to sound astonished. 'Thank you, Madam,' said Francis, not permitting himself even the most rudimentary glimmer of mockery or smugness. For this small but true courtesy I was grateful. It showed me the stuff of which Francis was made and enabled me, moreover, to give my ledgers into his charge not only with feelings of relief but of positive pleasure.

At this same time we employed as 'car boy' one Johnson who came to us with an ingratiating smile and an immaculate history (or so he and his written references implied) in the zealous washing, polishing and tending of all kinds of vehicles; it was his earnest desire to attach himself to the Jeep and make himself invaluable as its valet and guardian. Johnson was compact and tidy of body, and apparently willing in mind; his radiant smile was perhaps his most

appreciated feature, and second to this his happy knack of dropping off to sleep in the back seat whenever he was not required for any definite duty. Concerning this capacity for repose Bill echoed my own thought. 'One feels better knowing the boy isn't just glooming around the car when he's waiting for us to come back. Asleep he looks as if he's really enjoying his job.'

'He seems to have a pleasant nature,' I agreed, and unwittingly added an Old Coaster's term of approval, 'quite unspoiled.'

It was something of a shock when the transparently cheerful and tranquil disposition, that I (wishfully or even sentimentally thinking) had assumed was Johnson's, showed itself in a different light. One afternoon during a Jeep journey I noticed that Johnson in the back seat was engrossed in a highly inflammable article in the town newspaper. Even upside-down its heading appeared to me both scurrilous and melodramatic; it referred wholesale to the Colony's British as schemers and thieves whose discreditable behaviour should be punished by a summary ejection from African territory. We were used to these headlines by now; their constant repetition had, perhaps, blunted our sensitivities. We dismissed the town newspaper's journalism as hotheaded and overstated, and could not admire the way it whipped up the smallest happenings into italicized and frenzied Issues. 'Do you believe what that paper says?' I now inquired of Johnson, feeling that we knew and liked each other well enough for a frank answer. Johnson folded his paper small, put it deeply into his pocket, and neither answered nor



smiled. 'I shan't at all mind what you say,' I assured him. Still Johnson did not reply but stared out of the window, his face a mask, his eyes stonily averted.

At this, since I had made my inquiry only out of mild curiosity, I felt both angry and humiliated; I realized that Johnson did in fact look upon us as rogues and scoundrels. Said Bill rather sharply, 'You haven't answered Madam's question.' 'But he needn't,' I said for Johnson's benefit, and quietly to Bill, 'He thinks I've outraged his personal privacy. Perhaps it was an intrusive question. . . .'

'Some people would sack him on the spot,' declared Bill, nettled. We drove the rest of the way in silence, Johnson by now asleep or appearing to be so, Bill and I occupied with this uneasy problem and its emotional sack-the-boy reaction. Afterwards Bill said, 'Well, shall he go? He was extremely rude, didn't apologize, went away sulking.' 'Still, he was honest,' I pointed out. 'He made no concessions at all. Maybe his silence was more polite than the answer he had in his mind. Anyway he's not expressive with words at any time. Best leave it.'

Yet human resentments being what they are, we could not forget that Johnson had so poor an opinion of the white race; we came to feel that he was observing us closely, taking note of all the flaws which he had been taught were imbedded in the European character; we even imagined that we could discern the contempt behind the flashing smile which he had quickly recovered after that afternoon's episode. It was a blow to confidence. I realized then how necessary for white composure in West Africa is an assumption that (no matter what the newspapers say) one is liked and admired by the Africans in one's own immediate sphere of working. Then one may disassociate oneself from bulk animosity which may vaguely be presumed to be directed anywhere but at one's own virtuous person.

Realizing this, I remembered too that European re-

sponsibility must accept a burden commensurate to the ability of the European mind which, having had longer opportunity for human and political comparison and reflection, ought to be well equipped for tolerance and far-sightedness. So much for the avoidance of pettiness and recrimination. Yet what the mind knows and what the nerves feel can be two different, even entirely opposite, affairs; as everyone knows, very little emotion is required to upset the stability of even the most logical-seeming apple-cart. To a point, therefore, in rationalism and tolerance one could make allowances for Johnson's attitude: Johnson was very young, quick in mind but insufficiently educated, eager to absorb any kind of bloodstirring propaganda, ambitious for himself and resentful of an authority he no longer respected — and so on. Yet despite these inarguable facts in his favour, our actual feeling towards him had suffered a deterioration. Despite all the logic in the world, we felt disappointed and a trifle antagonistic. This, too, Johnson may have observed while scrupulously he attended to the Jeep, opened the car door for me, and performed all the duties for which we paid him.

When one evening we discovered a cache of Convention People's Party literature which Johnson had absentmindedly left under the back seat — and read a little more about the exploitive, capitalistic, imperialistic and generally unsavoury characteristics of the Coast British, we felt the strain on our relationship with the boy to be growing almost beyond the bounds of forbearance. Still, as Bill and I agreed, to dismiss him merely because of our personal attitude to his politics would surely confirm him in all his anti-British (anti-us, also) opinions. Even though, as Bill pointed out, it was conceivable that he might — because of our apparent obtuseness — now consider the British to be fools as well as villains, we should have to take a chance on that. So, in the interests of education we continued

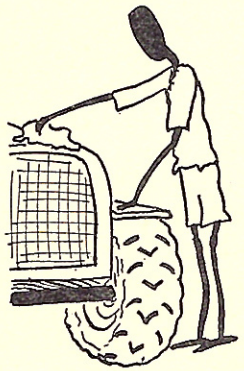
to turn a blind eye on Johnson's ultra-nationalistic convictions.

One cannot know whether reason or emotion would in the long run have triumphed — whether eventually Johnson might have been caused to sweeten some of his more bitter private feelings, or we to overcome our unfortunate antipathy to Johnson. As it turned out, the boy left us for the sufficient reason that he was an inveterate picker-up of sweets, cigarettes and office trifles to which he began to help himself so liberally (despite strong comment and threatened dismissal) that in the end we had no alternative but to discontinue his employment with us. So we were given an easy way out. In all honesty it must be admitted that this was a great relief; were we to search our consciences we might even say that because we no longer liked Johnson we were glad he had proved to be an unreliable employee. That this shows a narrow and uncharitable way of thinking is indeed admissible; but perhaps, since it is a fairly representative way of thinking, it is also illuminating. West Africa is full of instances of this kind, some very small, some so large that their beginnings are lost in piled-up detail and most of them confused by the impossibility of disentangling emotional issues from rational standpoints. If Johnson's and our situation were multiplied by many thousands, something of the complexity of the 'West African situation' might be envisaged. But as Bill said when I mentioned that Johnson's attitude, although disturbing and self-disillusioning, was interesting from the viewpoint of observation, 'Observation? That's only half the story. It's deduction *from* observation that's the very devil.'

And there the whole problem is stated. One would not care to estimate how many — or rather how few — humans, European or African, possess truly selfless and accurate powers of deduction.

Johnson's replacement, Solomon, was not a boy to brood

over large issues; perhaps because for most of his young life he had been far too busy scratching for an existence. Physically he was not robust; he had a long bony face, prominent teeth and cheekbones, and a round-shouldered, knock-kneed frame. Neither did he scintillate in personality, nor indicate that he had ambitions beyond the fulfilment of his present capacity of car-tender, message-carrier and assistant log-measurer to Francis and Bill for whom he carried yard-stick, tape, timber-stamping hammer and log-marking paintpot and brush. Solomon always prefixed Francis' name with a respectful 'Mr.', and called him 'sir' in recognition of Francis' superior position, or perhaps in gratitude for Francis' explanation to us that Solomon, an orphan without education, roots or anyone to care about him, was eager not only for steady-paid employment but for acceptance into an office 'family' to which he might feel he belonged when he had proved himself. So it was that Solomon, who at intervals during several days had uncertainly haunted the office doorway (rather as a stray prospects its intended home of adoption), joined our staff. We knew when we engaged him that nothing short of downright perfidy on his part could ever bring about his dismissal. Because of his vulnerable dependence and toothy gratitude we were indefinitely committed. Had Francis not initially signified his full approval we might have felt more apprehension of our responsibility. As it turned out, Solomon, while never, even on his best days, excelling in the performance of his odd jobs, showed just sufficient capability to maintain his position. He brought upon himself neither high praise nor crushing blame but — perhaps adept from long experience



in self-preservation — maintained the fairly steady middle course in which, from every point of view, he may have considered himself safest and least conspicuous.

Our first typist, Bailey, pleased none of us although, feeling that he may have been suffering from the new-job nerves which can wreck havoc with typescript, we did not at once voice our displeasure. Also, as was well known among the town's European business men, a good typist was a rare find; typists were much in demand and those who were skilled were already in employment. Bailey, we hoped, might improve as he came to understand exactly what was required of him. But Bailey deteriorated. He was a large young man with a heavy face that inclined to sullenness when he realized yet again that he had reversed his carbons or blackly finger-printed an invoice. When first he came to work he wore a clean shirt and presentable shorts; later, as apathy set in, his clothing became more slovenly until one day I noticed his upper part to be clad only in a sweat-stained singlet. When I spoke privately to Francis about this, I was told that Bailey had gone into debt and sold all but one shirt which was being washed. Said Francis prophetically, 'I think you will not want to keep him.'

Soon afterwards I realized that both office typewriters had suffered mechanical injury, not surprisingly, since Bailey's touch was far from featherweight. That day Bill gave him notice, pointing out logically enough that his work was not up to our required standard. At this the boy flew into a rage, and with head lowered balefully and eyes red-rimmed, accused me (who had been obliged to take over some of his work) of 'robbing the bread from the mouths of poor Africans'. Of his tirade little more could be clearly distinguished, except the words 'Union' and 'Labour Exchange'. During this we all sat as if frozen: Bill watchful, Francis rigid with disapproval, Solomon aghast and myself embarrassed. Then, still muttering threats, Bailey made a scornful exit.

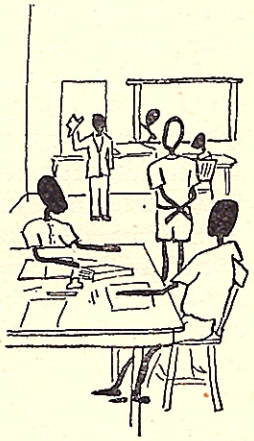
'Very bad manners,' Francis commented with magnificent understatement.

Next day Bailey reappeared to request a 'reference'. 'Impossible,' said Bill. 'You are a shockingly bad typist and I cannot recommend your work to anyone.' 'I will tell them about you at the Labour Exchange!' Bailey began to bluster. Bill stood up impatiently and Bailey, misinterpreting his movement, hastily gained the door. 'Give me a reference!' 'No,' said Bill. Bailey spat on the doorstep and left us. Said Solomon surprisingly (for he was not given to unasked-for statements), 'That boy Bailey is all tongue, no head, and he will make plenty of trouble for himself.'

We advertised for a typist in the town newspaper, and received numbers of applications both written and in person. Wrote one boy hopefully: 'I can draw shorthand and type all kinds of letters and also I am a sportsman of rare ability.' Said another: 'I wish to be able to typewrite but do not have a machine. If I may be favoured with the position I shall learn all that you require, for I have a bright head.' Among several others we interviewed one Isaac, who attacked one of our already crippled typewriters with almost demoniacal zest. As was our habit when testing applicants we did not stand over Isaac while he typed his sample letter, but allowed him some privacy for covert erasures and fresh starts. From the loud banging he made with the machine, the untutored ear might have deduced that remarkably speedy work was in progress. It was in parts, however, the wrong sort of noise — less of tapping alphabet keys than the alternate thrummings of shift key which filled in voids of what would otherwise have been a damning silence while Isaac perspired over the mysteries of his shorthand notes. Regretfully we concluded that Isaac could not be employed — regretfully because we knew that every muscle in his thin body was steeled to the effort of passing our test, while his face wore the taut and desperate expression of one who strives to do that which is

beyond his immediate power. 'I'm afraid not,' I told Isaac after I had scanned his third smudged and ill-typed effort. He looked utterly disconsolate. 'I will try very hard,' he pleaded, a nervous pulse beating in his temple. 'No, I'm sorry,' I told him. Slowly he replaced the typewriter cover; his hands shook a little. He offered us a dejected 'good morning' and went away. To Bill I said, 'I don't think I can stand much more of this. I haven't the temperament for hiring and firing.' Bill was reassuring. 'The next one will be all right.'

And so he was — but more than merely 'all right'; his shorthand and typing were exemplary, and such was his bearing that all of us — Bill, Francis, Solomon and I — straightened in our places and felt that something new and extraordinary had come into the office. Ansah was small slender and sure of himself; his round spectacles gave his neat features a look of secretarial acuity; he wore a clean, carefully pressed linen suit of which he doffed the jacket before sitting down (in white shirt with stiff collar and bright new tie) to the machine which obviously he considered servant rather than bogy. Rapidly he transcribed his shorthand into a faultless letter. Francis and Solomon, about to set out with tape and paintpot to measure some newly arrived logs, paused in the doorway to see the outcome of his success. Promptly we engaged Ansah who proved not only consistently efficient but set the office so high a standard that Francis took to wearing a tie and Solomon invested in a green shirt with white polka dots. On his first morning Ansah cleaned and mended both typewriters and instituted a reform in the filing system. Automatically Solomon —



who never had 'mistered' Bailey — called him 'sir', for Ansah, like Francis, was a personality to be respected. Obviously in Solomon's eyes the prestige of the whole office 'family' was now enhanced.

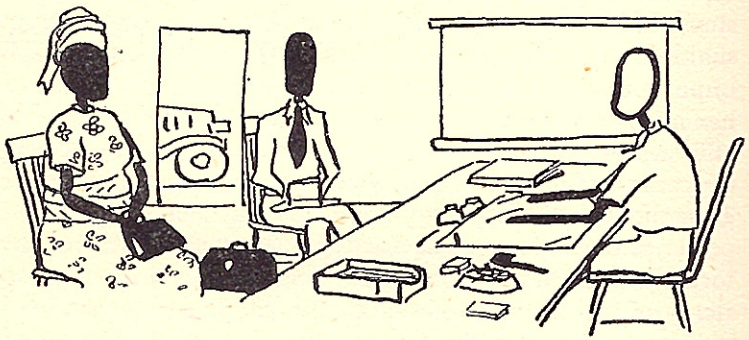
Business was brisk. Bill no longer had need of the 'Paradise'; the contractors came to him of their own accord — discreetly vetted, as always, by Francis who had his own methods of ascertaining the flaws or virtues in their business background. Sometimes while a visitor seated before Bill's desk held forth glowing promises or skilfully argued his need for some special financial consideration, Francis would look up from his ledger to catch Bill's eye with a scarcely perceptible movement of affirmation or warning — but this occurred only when the contractors were unknown quantities. Already Bill had gathered about him a nucleus of reliable log suppliers: well-established African businessmen who had no need to resort to some of the complicated and often precarious jugglings of finance on which were based the hand-to-mouth commercial existence of a number of 'little' timber men. Several of these had no business address; their so-called 'Companies' were no more than printed letterhead fiction; their bank accounts swelled and shrank in a manner too extreme and abrupt for the promotion of true confidence. As a rule they carried all the details of their somewhat involved 'dealings' in their heads and within their bulging brief-cases; their chief talents lay in persuasive palaver, an apparent lack of guile, a sharp ear for personally advantageous news and a way of melting into thin air when their plans went awry. A few revealed themselves as deliberately, even enthusiastically, dishonest; some barely maintained a façade of business principle; others, as much sinned against as sinning, showed an anxiety to bring order into their shifting affairs, and a genuine eagerness to associate themselves with long-term, trustworthy negotiations.

Although at times exasperated by his little men's repeated

evasions, disappearances and elaborately explanatory rigmaroles concerning their failures to produce the logs they had so earnestly promised, Bill was obliged to remember that none of these contractors had enjoyed more than a few years' experience in the timber trade. From clerks or traders they had promoted themselves into independent middlemen through their determination to make money somehow — anyhow. Always their grasp of business detail, their ready comprehension of shipping and banking documents and all the paper work connected with log transactions was (if one remembered their bush background and relatively slight education) an astonishing feat. Their mental arithmetic — even if it tended to err in their own favour — was unhesitating, and their speedy recognition of the smallest advantage was an object lesson in the technique of self-preservation. Whatever their faults, they rarely fumbled or were at any loss to suggest remedies (usually unworkable but still ingenious) for almost any contretemps which further threatened their shaky financial situation. It seemed that money-hunger had sharpened their wits to a remarkable degree. 'One would almost admire them,' said Bill, whose own wits had taken on a finer edge through recent exercise, 'if only they would devote as much energy to *producing* logs as they do to talking about them.'

It was hard to say at what stage a 'little man' became, by virtue of ability, persistence and good luck, a 'big' contractor — or exactly what manner of borderline separated the striving 'little' from the respected 'big'. In the big men, of whom James Ondo was one, the expected qualities were of reliability coupled with a steady, subtle shrewdness — a business attitude progressive and opportunist without hotheadedness. Instead of veering with every wind that blew, they pursued, well-ballasted, a considered course. Their trading was dignified rather than histrionic. When, for instance Mr. James Ondo came into the office in his neat

grey suit and polished black shoes we felt him to be of quite a different order from our previous caller, an excitable young up-and-comer who had uttered his exaggerations with theatrical verve while Francis, having briefly glanced up to send Bill the silent message 'no good', bent over his figures. But on Mr. Ondo Francis never presumed to make so much as an eyebrow-flicker of comment, nor indeed on Mrs. Ondo who was her husband's business partner and, some said, even more capable than he. The partnership surprised me at first, for in our past bush experience we had not met anything like it. Mr. Ondo, lean and aquiline of feature, thin and restless of body, well-tailored, direct but ineffusive in manner, might have been, had he a paler skin, any successful business man anywhere — for such was his conservative Western outline of looks and personality. Mrs. Ondo, however, made no concessions whatever to the vogue



for European dress and custom. She wrapped her considerable bulk in folds of striped and figured cotton, and her head in West Africa's traditional turban; her large bare feet were thrust into bright shambling slippers. Her appearance beside that of her spare, grey-coloured husband struck a gaudy primitive note, by no means beautiful but utterly self-assured.

As a business woman Mrs. Ondo was formidable; the more so, perhaps, because although she could 'hear' English she did not speak it and only occasionally made pronouncements in her own tongue. Her knowledge of Coast timbers was extensive, and her comprehension of all documentary intricacies as swift and sure as her mathematical and human summing up of potential profit or risk. Here in this middle-aged unsophisticated African wife (who had borne six children and sent one daughter to the London School of Economics) was a fearless first-class mind which, despite little or no formal education, had somehow made itself capable of meeting on equal grounds the minds of trained European business men. Not that she frequently did so directly; she preferred to remain as a power behind the scenes in the sprawling warren-like house which the Ondos shared with four generations of their kinsfolk. James Ondo had his small dark office there, up the steep shallow-grooved steps which ascended from a communal courtyard to a shabbily linoleumed corridor. Although we understood the important — even controlling — part Mrs. Ondo played in her husband's timber concerns, we never found her in that office. Her commercial talents were not for the mechanics of typing or filing, nor even, as a rule, for the niceties of *tête-à-tête* discussion. They lay in the subtle offstage use of her power of memory and large-scale bargaining, and her access to a news grapevine which we imagined to be even more richly productive than Francis'. Mr. Ondo was welcome to his place as Company Director, influential citizen and signer of documents so long as Mrs. Ondo held the family purse strings.

In timber prestige Alfred Jackson was a close runner-up to the Ondos. A young 'modern', his recent background had been of London and Oxford, and to this he referred often and with nostalgia, his broad dark face lighting up as he spoke of the jolly good times he had had, of the splendid friend-

ships he had made, and of the beauty of the English countryside.

'A wonderful experience,' he would sigh, leaning back in his chair, oblivious of the locomotives which hissed furiously outside the window just behind him, and of the amalgam of ashcan and engine grease smells which proved how far we were from Oxford's dreaming spires. 'Ah, London!' he would say staring unseeingly at the Coast map on the wall opposite, 'Covent Garden, the Changing of the Guard, Kensington Gardens, cricket at Lords. . . .'

The office would be sympathetically silent except for the slightly reproving clacking of Ansah's busy typewriter. Then, with a quick turn of the wrist and a scanning of his watch, Alfred would return to Black Man's Town and the present. 'I suppose now we must talk of the log business, although in intelligent company I would far rather discuss philosophy or metaphysics or poetry. Cultural pleasures are practically *non est* here.'

'Maybe we can be philosophic about logs,' Bill offered comfortingly.

'An intellectual test indeed,' remarked Alfred unsnapping his superior briefcase and with an air of careless unconcern placing on Bill's desk a sheaf of timber specifications and invoices.

'Well — a *test*, anyway,' Bill agreed, briefly scrutinizing the figures before handing them over to Francis who respectfully but with great care began to check them against those in his own ledger. 'But more like chess, isn't it, than philosophy?'

'Good business — that is *interesting* business — is always like chess,' admitted Alfred. 'One must think out future moves and see how one may gain over one's opponent while still observing the rules. That is why intelligently conducted commerce never can be dull. You agree?'

'I've a notion you're a good chess player,' Bill observed.

Alfred grinned delighted agreement. 'When I was quite a small boy I learned to play our African style of chess — though perhaps it is more like draughts. To the European mind it is very complicated, very quick and subtle. Have you met with this kind of game?'

'Only in the timber business,' said Bill, accepting from Francis' hands Alfred's figures which were now embellished with a number of politely pencilled queries and amendments.

There followed a brief brisk palaver on timber qualities, tonnages and banking matters. At its mutually satisfactory conclusion Alfred rose gracefully, flicked a crumb of cigarette ash from his Daks, adjusted his well-cut blazer and said, 'It is always a pleasure to revive my pleasant associations with England. We must have another chat soon.'

When he had gone Francis innocently commented: 'Mr. Jackson has one of our best heads in business. A rich man, very rich.'

Said Bill, thinking aloud, 'And with nothing airy-fairy about *his* philosophy, no matter what he says about poetry and metaphysics.'

Joseph Armah was our favourite visitor mainly because of the *joie de vivre* which animated his boyish countenance and a *gamin* smile which revealed a wide gap between his two front teeth. Joseph had only recently crossed that mysterious borderline between the little and big contractors: the Bank approved of his financial affairs, as did Bill of his logs which were sound and — so far as bad roads, much punished lorry engines and heavily burdened rail freight would permit — arrived at the harbour to a reasonable schedule. Despite Joseph's improved status, made clear to us by his increasing wardrobe, his new car and his greater assurance in timber negotiations, he evinced no sign of the grandiose pride which sometimes mars the nature of a self-made man. Even a first

business trip to England, with its dizzying experiences of fast aeroplane travel, lunch at the Savoy and a view of London's bright lights had not made him in the least *blasé*.

On his return Joseph spoke as one who has seen a new vision of life, and we did not need to ask him for details. His story came tumbling out, its events not in sequence but in order, apparently, of their impressiveness, 'I was amazed,' said Joseph, 'by the British women swimming the Channel. I did not know such a thing could be, but I saw it with my own eyes, these young British women who swim so far and so strongly. This seemed marvellous to me.' The office took this in, Francis explaining in a whispered aside to Ansah and Solomon that the English Channel was a wide, wide stretch of water. Solomon looked taken aback, as well he might, for out of his simplicity Joseph had given us a picture of British womanhood which none of us had even before considered — as a race of husky mermaids who swam Channels as a matter of course. A correction of this impression seemed in order, but I decided to postpone it rather than cut across Joseph's glowing tale of travel which he now illustrated with further marvels.

'In London,' he began, 'the hotels go up to the sky and they are very fine with hundreds of big rooms and staircases and glass windows and green bathrooms . . .' He glanced at us apologetically. 'And white women doing cleaning work . . . and white men as stewards at the chop tables. I could not believe it at first.' Ansah and Solomon looked as if they did not believe it now. '*True!*' he told them. 'Perfectly true,' Bill assured the faintly disapproving office. Resumed Joseph, 'A car drove us around London which is the biggest city anyone can think of. I sat in the back seat, and the white-man driver called me "Sir".' At this further astonishment Solomon whistled involuntarily through his teeth. 'Yes,' said Joseph firmly, 'he called me "Sir". We drove all

afternoon and I saw so many things I would need to talk for a week to tell you about them.'

'Fine shops?' suggested Ansah who had been openly admiring Joseph's new palm beach suit and lustrous tie.

'Everywhere,' said Joseph, 'so many. To buy something from all you would need to be the richest man in the world. And the buildings with offices — offices everywhere! The British work very hard in their own country, from sunrise to sunset. On my first business appointment only a little time after I arrived in London, I went to find a man in one of these big buildings. Somebody in a uniform told me, "His office is this way," and led me into the smallest room I have ever seen.'



'The smallest?' said Bill.

'Ah, but that was not his room,' admitted Joseph. 'I thought it was strange and I was frightened because the man in uniform shut an iron gate which locked us inside.'

'A lift,' said Bill.

'Uh — yes,' continued Joseph. 'It began to move. I put my hand on the man's arm, saying, "Sir, what is this?" Then we stopped and the iron door was opened. I was glad.' Joseph chuckled at his past naiveté. 'When my appointment was finished I found some stairs to take me to the bottom of the building. I thought that the man in the uniform would laugh to see me again.'

'Even so, you enjoyed your trip,' said Bill.

Joseph needed no encouragement to tell us more. 'A friend took me to the theatre, and I was ama-azed, oh yes, I was very amazed! The music and coloured lights, red and green and blue! And young ladies dancing. I thought at first that they were angels.' This time Joseph did not laugh at himself; his expression was solemn, almost reverent.

'They *were* like angels from Heaven in a dream.' He mused. 'We Africans think we know what London is like, but we must go there to find out for ourselves. It is not what we expect.'

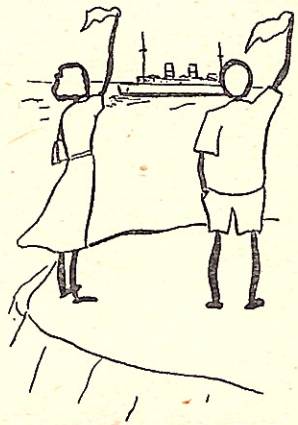
'In what way different?' inquired Bill.

'So *big*,' explained Joseph, 'a man feels small. So much knowledge. Ah, and then to see white men do hard rough work with their hands. Nobody thinks it unworthy.' After an impressive pause Joseph delivered his final opinion, 'We in Africa should not be in such a big hurry. We should learn more. We must work hard, eat our chop in peace, pray to God and wait a little. Oh, we should *work*. I, Joseph, will go to the harbour and work with my hands and be proud to sweat with toil when my logs come in. A big man grows bigger if he is humble. . . .'

By now the May to October wet-season was well advanced, and we were accustomed to the prevailing damp greyness over sea and sky and a comparative coolness which to some extent compensated for the insidious invasions of mildew and rust among our belongings. The rains which now fell intermittently had not the furious temper of May's initial storms whose screeching winds and walls of darkness heralded mighty conflicts in the upper elements, and deluges which beat against shuttered windows, filled the gutters to overflowing and transformed inland roads into pot-holed bogs which drivers navigated cautiously, with frequent breakdowns. Now that the tempo of the rains had slackened, there were occasional days when the very air, clean and dust-free, seemed to sparkle, and the sea's blueness was frilled with white wave-tips. In this buoyant mood the Coast briefly reminded us of the Riviera — especially when sunsets of Turneresque violet and scarlet streaked the sky with breath-taking magnificence. Then it was as if some temperamental daemon had repented of past sullen violences; here

was a richness of atonement, shortlived perhaps but unstinted. Like a sudden smile from a person of uncomfortable and captious habit, it made us all the more attentive and thankful.

On such evenings Bill and I liked to go down to the end of the breakwater. From this vantage point we could watch the homegoing ships depart, and vicariously share the excitements of those end-of-tour passengers now anticipating respite from Empire Building, dinner parties, pink gins and Club conversation, dry-season drought and wet-season downpour, and all the complexities of climate and character that compose the Coast.



When such a ship left in the evening with such an eager company, it gave out, we thought, an especial gaiety and effulgence. The harbour's sunset faded; the blue light deepened behind the shore's palm trees until the lying-in ships became sombre silhouettes pricked out with red and green. Among them a departing vessel, like an actress bidding her friends adieu, made her own limelight; she became a sparkling galleon, each porthole a golden ducat casting its twin glitter on the black water. Fascinated by so brave and bright a spectacle we would stay until the ship became no more than a twinkling on the unseen horizon, a brief suspension of retreating light between the African night sea and sky. So long as a glimmer remained we remained to watch her, although with an increasing sense of unreality as if she were a will-o-the-wisp vessel with a cargo of fireflies.

Then, returning to our own world, we would drive back down the long night-shrouded breakwater, and past the

row of locked and silent harbour offices to the resthouse and our chalet. As we bathed and changed for dinner the cicadas made a constant chirping in the outer darkness, and to their background whirring was added the frog colony's hoarse jubilation. We closed the chalet door behind us to walk down our steps and along the driveway to the main building's lights which beckoned us to our communal meal.

CHAPTER VI

EXCURSIONS AND DIVERSIONS

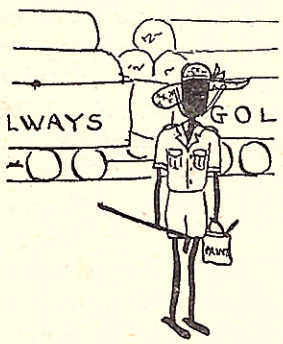
NOW that the harbour office was established, Bill contemplated exploration further afield. We set a tentative schedule, and with the help of a Coast road map, made plans for a fortnight's absence. This, however, was postponed because Francis required leave for travelling inland to marry and bring back to Black Man's Town the girl to whom he had for a year been betrothed. Bill gave his sanction readily, convinced that the steady, conscientious Francis would return to the office punctually on the day he promised. We made a second set of plans for our departure. But when that time came a fortnight later, we were dismayed to have, instead of Francis, a telegram from him: 'Regret must delay my return.'

'Even Francis . . .' said Bill in a sad, you-too-Brutus voice. I knew he was thinking of the bush village wedding celebrations, the feasting and drinking and clan excitement, and of a bridegroom Francis we could only dimly imagine, who might be quite other than our responsible hardworking aide — a Francis who, having temporarily abandoned his meticulous ledgers and office cares, was rapt in merry-making, heedless of all else. Bill frowned in disillusion. 'He'll probably tell us he had to go to his grandmother's funeral.'

Francis' failure to live up to his solemn word may seem a small matter, but it cast a gloom upon us which was scarcely relieved even by our satisfaction with the increasingly spruce and smoothly running office. As a final touch Solomon had been outfitted with a smart khaki messenger's uniform whose breast pocket was proudly emblazoned with the Company's timber brand monogram. In this, and astride a new bicycle, his

appearance did us such credit that no one objected to his new-born vanity or his fussy palavering with our itinerant African tailor over the precise fit of his uniform shorts and the number and size of his tunic's brass buttons.

It did not occur to us that Solomon, carried away by clothes greed, would add extempore to his well-considered garments. Only from the casual remarks of a passing European did we learn that on his log-tallying excursions around the docks and his routine message-carrying to the Post Office and around the town, Solomon was wearing a discarded beach hat of mine, a floppy-brimmed, gaudily bordered affair ribboned beneath his chin, while still his soberly monogrammed uniform proclaimed his connection with us. Divested of this—at least during office hours—Solomon moped a little, until Ansah, our sartorial expert, explained to him how it was that no 'proper' messenger's outfit included ladies' headgear.



Without explanation or further communication Francis overstayed his leave by eight days. His reappearance in the office was occasion for a certain stiffness in Bill's attitude. Ansah and Solomon pretended to be busy, but their watchful side-glances betrayed their interest in an impending palaver. While not deliberately hopeful of Francis' fall from grace, they may have pleasurably anticipated some slight decline in the office star's lustre. At any rate their own expressions were a trifle smug and good-child as Ansah virtuously tidied out his desk drawer and Solomon whittled Bill's pencils to unnecessarily sharp points.

When Francis came in he gave us his usual 'good morning', but instead of seating himself at his desk he came to

stand in front of Bill's. He looked tired and travel-worn; his eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot; his manner had not its customary self-assurance. He and Bill spoke together. 'Now look here, Francis . . .' 'Sir, I am sorry . . .' Another pause. 'Why are you eight days late?' 'Sir, I have had some grief.'

'Not your grandmother,' said Bill, steeling himself against the pathos in Francis' looks and voice.

'No, sir. My wife,' said Francis. 'My wife miscarried during the wedding feast, and she has been taken to the hospital.'

'Well!' said Bill. 'Well, I . . .' He looked shocked and confused: I knew that of all the unlikely explanations Francis could have offered, this was the least forseeable. The ground had gone from beneath Bill's feet. He was, for once, taken completely off guard. Rallying a little he said, 'I am very sorry.' Ansah and Solomon shook their heads sympathetically. 'Is she recovering now?'

'Yes,' murmured Francis. 'She will be better soon.'

'If you had only told me,' Bill pointed out, 'I would not have wondered at your absence.'

Francis looked at his feet. 'I thought you would be annoyed.'

Bill explained that this was not so. No man (he tried to make Francis understand) could be *annoyed* when so disastrous an event disrupted his clerk's happy nuptial celebrations. Neither he nor I commented on the basic strangeness of this situation according to our Western ideas. It had obviously not occurred to Francis that we should regard the bride's pregnant state as anything out of the ordinary, for in parts of West Africa it is not at all uncommon for the bride to be required to prove her maternal capacities before the wedding pact is finally sealed. 'I am not at all annoyed,' said Bill, 'now that I know why you stayed away. I am sorry for you and your wife.'

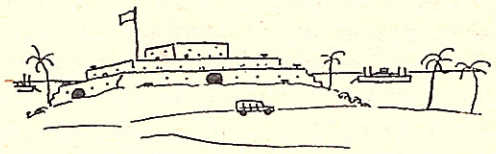
'Thank you,' said Francis sombrely returning to his desk and opening his ledgers in readiness for the day's work. From where I sat I viewed his kinky dark bowed head and wondered what he was thinking as he entered and added his neat columns of log figures. For here indeed was, in part, a Francis not at all understood — whose private life was remote from us in its deep-rooted African traditions — whose personal emotions as husband were far beyond our ken. The Coast's oft repeated phrase 'understanding-the-African' came again to mind, with all its implications of urgency and bafflement. Who or what was our esteemed Francis, capable office worker, respectful colleague, Bill's right hand man? 'Even Francis . . .' Bill had said earlier, meaning that even Francis, our chief prop and stay, could be a total stranger to us in his personal impulses and intentions. Yet by the end of the morning the air of distrait otherness which had clouded Francis' being and set him inconsolably apart from us all, had vanished. Now that his hands were again on his books and his mind back in the familiar office harness, it seemed that the 'other Francis' whom briefly we had glimpsed, had retired — or had existed, perhaps, only in our labouring imaginations. Thereafter, although we frequently inquired of Mrs. Francis' welfare and were finally reassured that she was perfectly well again and happily installed in Francis' family house in the town, we did not again detect any disturbance in the boy's mind, any hangover of anxiety or dismay. All was serene and the incident might never have happened. Once again Francis appeared to us in one tidy comprehensible piece, far from enigmatic. Or perhaps it was just that — like so many other Europeans — we preferred not to ponder overmuch on African riddles. Office relations were far more comfortable and stable when we accepted not only Francis, but Ansah and Solomon, on a straightforward 8 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. working basis with the clear energetic facts and figures of 'timber' as our common team concern.

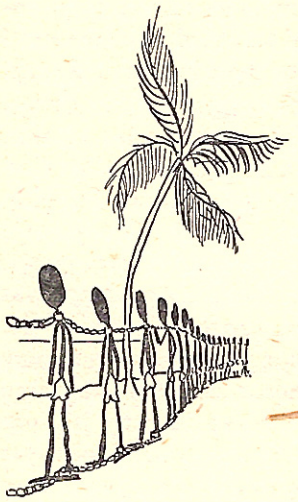
Soon after Francis' re-establishment Solomon polished the Jeep to a special-event glitter. With suitcases, lunch and vacuum flasks packed, we set off on the Coast road to Accra. As on past occasions, knowing the unreasonable but no less inhibiting steady-driving boredom which can dim the eyes' perception and lull the mind to take almost any wind-screen view for granted, I told myself sharply, 'We are travelling along a road in *West Africa*'. Not that we could seriously doubt this fact, for the roadway was in places so deeply rutted that we bounced roofwards; on our left unrolled the endless prospects of green thicket, soaring cotton trees, mud and thatch villages, farm plots of maize and cassava and stretches of dun-coloured tree-denuded scrub-land; on our right we passed fishing villages on whose palm-treed beaches the grey sea rushed and tumbled as if threatening the drawn-up black fishing canoes, the wind-eroded huts, and the coarse copper-coloured nets pegged out to dry.

Above all the sky hung low with ragged rain clouds. There was no breeze, and the whole landscape seemed arrested in an unnatural immobility, palm fronds hanging still in the quiet damp air, all life and movement slowed and softened. We seemed to be driving in a kind of grey-green no man's land devoid of ambition or animation. Here was no 'Africa of golden joys', no hothouse fever of teeming life such as is commonly imagined, but a melancholy country mutely mourning the sun's absence. 'It isn't inspiring weather,' I told Bill after a long silence. 'Lucky it's not pouring,' remarked Bill, skilfully braking to avoid yet another of Africa's feckless roadside fowls which, following the habit of Coast hens and goats, had from nowhere suicidally projected itself almost beneath our wheels.

At the historic little township of Elmina we halted to look at the ancient stone fortress which stands, sea-surrounded on three sides, on a rocky promontory. Here in the old days the Portuguese first-comers (among them a

seaman by name of Christopher Columbus) built their fortification while richly trading in gold, slaves, ivory and pepper and keeping the sailing ships of the competing and envious French and Dutch at bay with oared galleys and fierce bow guns. Here in damp-dripping bat-infested caverns beneath the castle the luckless slaves were herded; here in the embrasured hall (now the innocuous Recreation Room of the Gold Coast Police Force Headquarters) the slaves were mustered before their chancy transportation across the seas. Here were inflicted all the cruelties of which man's inhumanity is capable in the name of personal wealth and national prestige. We found in the upper part of the fortress a small chapel where the garrison worshipped, even while from its windows the slave ships could be sighted lying-off with their battened-down cargoes of cash-value flesh and blood. 'The old traders called the *slaves* "savages",' I said to Bill. We stood on the ramparts, looking out over the inimical tossing sea and trying to imagine the distant past which still we thought, with all its valour and brutality, clung to these worn stones like an odour or a stain which never could be banished. 'History,' said Bill reflectively as we descended to the empty courtyard and made our way back to the car, 'history is a dull word for it.'

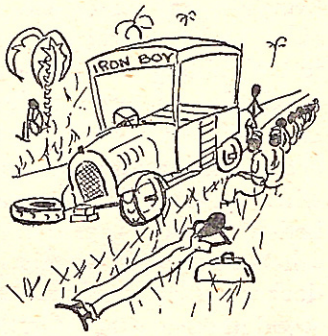




Soon we were past the undulating streets of Cape Coast

with their hugger-mugger of grimy old-style shops dwarfed by new Trading Company edifices with plate glass windows and prosperous frontages. We drove again along the open Coast road, passed at times by furiously rattling 'mammy lorries' whose passengers and goods were so tightly pressed together as to appear a blurred coalescence of stoic bodies and cloths, sacks and baskets. Painted letterings adorned these pell-mell rickety transports: 'Iron Boy', 'Blow, Man, Blow', 'Love Thy Neighbour' and 'Don't Say Die Till the Bones Rot'.

One overtaxed Iron Boy had broken down. Its driver bent over the open bonnet, while the passengers who had dismounted on the grass verge gathered in apparently unconcerned groups to refresh themselves with snacks wrapped in leaves or cloth. One white-robed Northerner with the philosophic calm and flexible time sense of his race had disposed himself full-length for slumber. It was a peaceful scene. Evidently its participants had long ago learned the wastefulness of kicking against the pricks of bad fortune. Soon the driver with fatalistic optimism would adjust some part of his engine and afterwards smoke a leisurely cigarette to demonstrate his unworried control over the situation; eventually the transport would jerk into life and move on; for that, despite all the known laws relating to internal-combustion cause and effect, was what usually happened. But sometimes one of the long-distance lorries which daily plied the rough roads between the townships was abandoned as a dead hulk. Then, considered past faith or repair, its mechanical corpse was deserted, left tilted in a ditch and bereft of all its removable parts, to

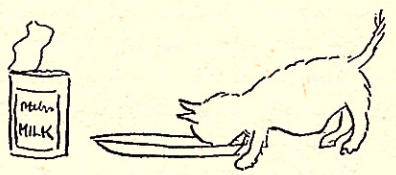


become by inexorable stages of corruption, a rusting skeleton in the undergrowth. In place of the bleaching bones, the stark human debris which in past days testified to the arduous passage of travellers through a harsh country, West Africa now left along its highway trails ancient punctured tyres, crippled fenders and mouldering chassis. This vehicular jetsam was less dramatic, perhaps, than the relics of bygone caravans, but just as revealing. The old order had changed, yielding place to new; the onward struggle left traces of a different kind.

At Adjumako we stopped at an old-style mud-block and thatch wayside resthouse to stretch our cramped limbs and bring out our sandwiches, while a grizzled elderly caretaker (who had been dozing on the front stoep) creakily busied himself filling a washbasin and setting out — with dainty solicitude — a terrible old grey towel. We looked into the low-ceilinged resthouse's three rooms where, presumably, a few visiting Government officers still pitched their camp when on trek. In one was the regulation hard-mattressed bed with black iron uprights for mosquito netting — in the others some stiff wooden seats, scarred tables and sagging deckchairs. A derelict water filter and screened cupboard stood in one corner. On the back veranda was a dark cubby-hole which housed a bucket-system lavatory. The compound had no pretensions to a garden. Flowering bushes screened it from the road, and trees with spreading branches made shady patches in the dirt driveway; only the itinerant's bare essentials were planned. Yet although the place was Spartanly simple and even, by town standards, ill-kept, it still held something of the intriguing slower-paced tempo of a passing era, a bachelor self-sufficiency, a reposeful quietude and naturalness which made 'resthouse' a fitting name.

As we ate our sandwiches and waved away the pertinacious flies which promptly gathered, a minute white kitten sidled in from the back quarters, its pink mouth widely

plaintive and belly distressingly flat. 'Your cat?' we asked the caretaker. He shrugged, 'Cat belong here.' 'It's hungry,' we reproached him. 'Cat catch mice for chop,' we were told. 'It's too small. It needs milk,' we protested. 'I get milk but he cost plenty,' said the caretaker, bringing out an unopened tin from his screened cupboard. We bought it, not arguing the ransom price, and poured it into a picnic dish. The kitten, fascinated, delicately approached, tasted, then with trembling pleasure lapped it down to the last drop and carefully licked the plate; its stomach became round and firm with the surprising nourishment.



'He like milk plenty,' observed the caretaker dispassionately while the kitten moved away groggily to sink into a replete torpor by the door.

Late in the afternoon we arrived on the doorstep of one of Accra's hotels which other travellers had recommended to us (for recommendation of a Coast hotel is rarely fulsome) as 'so-so', 'all right for a few days', 'better than some'. No one came out to greet us; the shuttered grey-white façade and deserted veranda offered us no welcome. Our footsteps echoed on the wooden floor of a foyer curtained by the usual limp floral hangings and furnished by the usual drinks tables and flat-cushioned wooden chairs and settees. A steward boy who, with arms folded had been gazing out of the window, glanced at us bleakly and said, 'The Massa is coming'.

The Massa was a corpulent dark man in white shirt and trousers. His olive-skinned features were siesta-blurred but his eyes were as bold and alert as those of a fight-hardened pugilist. His professional hotelier's smile, switched on as he came through the doorway, had in it little of human kindness; his voice was as misleadingly soft as his handshake.

'Long drive?' he inquired, snapping his fingers and waving the steward boy out to fetch our suitcases. 'Road bad?' We replied 'yes' to both questions and said we were looking forward to a bath. 'Pity the water's off just now,' he told us. 'The boy will bring you a bucket.'

The steward returned with the suitcases. 'Take the madam and master to their rooms and bring water bucket one time.'

'I'd like some tea, please,' I said, trying to make it sound more like an ordinary request than an orphan's entreaty.

'Tea,' said the Massa, 'quick.'

'Yessah,' answered the steward with a low, flat, much-put-upon inflection.

We followed his bare padding feet upstairs and past a singularly bad odour that came from an apartment inadequately labelled 'Bath', to our room. The boy opened the shutters. At intervals and with much heavy breathing he brought us a slopping bucket and a tea tray. 'Plenty work this place,' he observed, though brightening considerably as coins passed from Bill's hands to his. 'Your name?' we inquired. 'My name is Gents,' said the boy. 'But tomorrow you get new boy for I go go. Manager-palaver, a-ahh! He say I t'ief-um, I say no. Badman, plenty trouble.' On this discordant note he left us.

With the Jeep duster and a bottle of antiseptic I wiped the table top, chair arms and washbasin surrounds. 'Microbe neurosis?' inquired Bill. 'Lady Macbeth complex?' Then he opened the dressing table's top drawer and withdrew, chastened, from its scattering of face powder and alien hairpins. 'We won't use the drawers.' 'How about the mosquito nets?' I asked. They were grey and like the rest of the room smelled of months' old staleness. Said Bill evasively, 'This is no time to behave like a housewife or a sensitive plant. This is West Africa. . . .'

We put an end to this unprofitable exchange by recourse

to tea tray and bath bucket. (Before emptying bucket into basin, however, we carefully inspected the outlet pipe to make sure of its proper extension into the wall. A former guest had warned us that on removal of the plug from *his* basin the waste water had poured straight through to the floor and over his trouser legs and feet. Carelessly, in his case, someone had forgotten to complete the plumbing.) Bathed after a fashion, and changed, we went down to the dining room where stewards in white uniforms girt by cummerbunds attended us. The Massa sat centrally and alone where everyone could see him, thinking perhaps by his own substantially piled plate to advertise the safety and succulence of his kitchen's output. Avoiding captiousness I admired the table flowers, so fresh, colourful and tastefully arranged that they almost served as antidote to a thumbprint of menacing distinctness which arrived with my plate of oxtail stew.

The other guests included a distinguished looking elderly man with a fresh-faced younger male companion, both, we judged, newcomers to the Coast. Of another couple, man and wife — he in well-tailored white suit, she in expensive floral silk — we thought the same. About all four there was an absence of what is as difficult to define as it is easy to recognize: the 'Coast look'. Perhaps it had something to do with clothes which still retained a northern crispness of texture and their own individuality of outline. Perhaps it was partly a matter of physical attitude, something less casual in the way of sitting and standing, something more alert and eager in the voice and the eyes' expression. Perhaps it came, too, from a slightly tensing overall self-consciousness, an unsureness of the degree of affability or authority expected of them from Africans — or from that anxiety to 'do the right thing' which must always detract from true poise and mental comfort. Whatever composed this 'un-Coast look', it labelled the four newcomers as

strangers with the vital breath of the North still cool on their cheeks and Northern habit starching even their easiest gestures.

We found out later that we were right in our assumptions. The two men, one eminent in law, the other his junior, had flown out from London to attend the trial of the major African strike leaders who now were charged with sedition; the man and wife were making a rapid series of point to point 'plane journeys 'in textiles'. They appeared to be of the Visitors category, which is looked upon by many Coasters as naive but well-meaning and relatively harmless, if rather a nuisance.

On the subject of Visitors, those 'on the outside, looking in', the average Coaster had definite opinions, especially definite concerning the occasional VIP's — Company Chairmen, Directors and the like, and even Members of Parliament — who required particularly careful handling. On the whole, Visitors were something of a problem. Their bodies, untried by tropical living, were wonderfully energetic, their minds zestful, all agog to examine and inquire and take back files of helpful news and views on the West African Situation. The most alarming type was he who behaved, as one Coaster put it, as 'a chiel amang us takin' notes'. The Coasters, depending on their individual psychology or state of nerves, adopted varying tactics in the treatment of the Visitors for whose care they were responsible. Some, irritated by ingenuous or arbitrary comment, adopted a rub-their-noises-in-it attitude. Attempting to inculcate humility or confusion by shock tactics, they allowed their wide-eyed charges to roam where they would, see what they liked, and 'rough it' to their heart's content. When such Visitors (more hardy than was expected) came through their tests smiling, full of interesting facts and ready and eager for more, the Coaster hosts sighed and did not argue, but patiently waited for them to return home. Other Coast folk

(nicer by nature or more sycophantic) planned for their guests congenial social entertainments, scenic car drives, curry parties and beach picnics to demonstrate how gay and charming Coast life could be, and notably how considerate and gracious its European hospitality. Thus by heavily sugaring the pill they often managed to banish the notebooks. The fundamental feeling of both groups was that since during his short stay no Visitor could possibly learn anything of value about the Coast, the only way to deal with him was to keep him occupied and out of the way while the Coaster got on with his own well-understood routine.

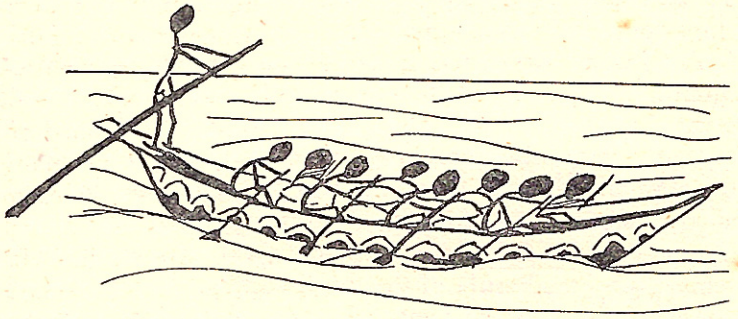
On second thoughts, however, Bill and I doubted that the four newcomers in the hotel dining-room could be classed as true Visitors, since obviously they had no one either to shield them from Coast discomforts or to direct their schedules. They too may have found thumbprints on their plates of stew; it was not likely that the Massa would have offered them any special consideration. We saw them glance up at the fairy lighting which, incongruously, we thought, illuminated our after-dinner coffee drinking on the veranda. The coloured lights were overdone. There were too many of them and the effect was as hard on the eyes as if we sat exposed in the Roll-Em-Up stall of a circus fairway. Yet for all that our situation lacked serenity, we hesitated to go upstairs again to the grey mosquito nets, grimy furniture and the 'Bath' apartment which housed a peeling blue enamel bath and a lavatory unflushable in water-off hours. So we sat joylessly contemplating the heavy-handed fairy lighting, the boys' formal cummerbunds and the pervasive Oriental personality of the Massa, and as we sat we wondered if the semi-Visitors realized that here, for those with seeing eyes, was one truly notebook-worthy aspect of the Coast.

Next day our schedule was that of many out-of-towners: business calls in the morning, lunch at the European Club,

shopping during the afternoon, and cinema in the evening. As we drove through the streets we were again impressed by West Africa's contradictions — the size and formality of the town's public buildings and the dignity of Governmental edifices as compared with the noisy primitiveness of the heterogeneous stalls which lined the gutters and sold all manner of goods: from leather sandals and tin buckets to cooking pots, Manchester cottons, brightly packaged medicines and cosmetics, cheap cigarettes, celluloid combs, tinned food, old tyres and alarm clocks. Along these lesser streets of small traders was a jostling of people and merchandise, comparable in colour and energy with the picturesque bazaars of the East, but not, to our minds, in charm. The Coast West African is far more a trader than a craftsman, and his skill and patience are less for imaginative creativeness and manual delicacy than for the reckoning of profit, the buying and selling of crudely home-fashioned or, preferably, imported objects. It puzzled us that so many stalls so much alike should be able to sell their wares in sufficient quantity to remain commercially afloat. At first glance the greater part of the population appeared to be engaged in some form of small trading; one might almost have imagined that the stallholders outnumbered their customers. To this economic riddle we never did discover a reasonable answer. The multitudinous stalls must somehow have earned their keepers a living, despite the competition of the town's many solidly established small shops and its several large Trading Companies.

So far our morning had held little inspiration. The streets were closely congested as if the town had grown too fast for proper expansion of its buildings and boundaries and the effective disposal of its waste products. Too many people were herded in too little space; too many cars blared their horns and manœuvred in roadways too narrow. Our senses were assaulted and minds wearied. When Bill had

finished his errands we escaped from commerce and sought the shore road. Soon we were regarding an invigorating seascape: of white-maned waves plunging beachward, and surf-boats manned by crews of husky dark paddlers, rising on the wave crests and falling steeply as they breasted the turbulent water out to the unloading cargo vessels. A breeze came from the sea, fresh after the close air of the streets, and faintly salt. Fish-sellers head-loaded baskets of silver-scaled catches from the sturdy fishing canoes; porters carried hempen bags into a high-piled shed which gave out the cloying sweet aroma of raw cocoa beans. It was a vigorous scene with its background of surging sparkling water, its



striving surfboats and rhythmic paddlers, the strong colours and outlines of its fishing craft and the labouring figures of the porters.

Refreshed, we went on to the European Club, parked the Jeep in the impressive company of a number of large cars in the sandy driveway, and joined the white company already at lunch at small tables on the long, latticed veranda. The lunch itself had no particular merit, flavoured, as communal meals so often are in West Africa, by an intrusive intangible which might be called 'essence of tropics'. Distinction had gone from it, and we ate not with any particular pleasure but merely because custom dictates a mealtime

at noon. Although this mid-day had nothing like the roasting brilliance of the dry season it held a languor-inducing greenhouse warmth of the kind which most subtly inhibits physical movement. It was with a conscious effort that we left our chairs to view the rest of the Club: the long gleaming mahogany bar where late-lunching groups still convivially perched on the barside stools — the billiard room (with its formal geometry: cone of overhead light, bright rectangle of green baize, exact placings of shining coloured spheres) inhabited by a foursome who, with beer mugs half-emptied, were finishing a leisurely game — and finally the library with its bookshelves, cretonned chairs and the copies of *Tatler*, *Punch*, *Country Life* and *Sphere* which all good British clubs consider indispensable.

The Ladies' Room was a recent improvement, spaciously shining and pastel-tinted, with mirrors everywhere, a surprising abundance of water in the brand-new taps, and instantly responsive plumbing. One could not but admire the strength of mind (feminine surely) which had brought all this about — the crusading Club spirit which had somehow raised the funds and laid the plans and, even more remarkably, made sure of the water supply. I remembered our ship cabin steward's wry reference to the white woman's recent influence on Coast life. If she could do this, I thought (dazzled by the mirrors and pleased with the plumbing), she ought to extend her pioneering powers. But when, returning to Bill on the veranda, I passed the kitchen's back premises it seemed to me that their state was as lamentable as the Ladies' Room's was admirable. How attractive the bright table coverings, the white uniforms and flowers which graced the kitchen's 'front'; how dreary, grey and untidy the unloved back yard! Yet I knew well enough the Coast answer: that imported interior decoration is one thing, whereas the human attitude to dish-washing and cookhouse cleaning is quite another. That was true. Whatever is exhibited for

public inspection and approval, whatever provides scope for the little dramas of ritual domestic service, will always be accorded some special care; these arrangements and maintenances are extrovert and can be self-fulfilling. But for the diligent scouring of greasy saucepans, the conscientious disposal of potato peelings and the disinfecting of refuse buckets — all unwatched, unhonoured and unsung, something approaching true nobility of spirit is required, even in West Africa.

Afterwards, though with a marked diminishing of our early morning impetus, we went shopping along the crowded streets. Our errands took us into several of the big Trading Company warehouses whose European managers sat in small typewriter-clacking offices, behind piles of invoices, bills of lading and credit notes, directing the operations of the numerous office clerks who came and went with files and messages. In these steamy little nerve-centres the effect was of high-pressure activity; the managers and their assistants always seemed to be breasting a sea of paper which threatened to engulf them. In the effort their faces tensed and voices became quick with imperatives; they issued rapid instructions down the telephone, looked up sharply with signed chit in hand to call a clerk, started on the next job and said 'good afternoon', all in the space, it seemed, of seconds. We asked one commercial impresario if he were always so busy. 'Every day,' he said, 'like a one-armed paper hanger. Check and double check — monthly stock-taking (the stuff that "walks"!) — keeping the place on its toes. But you get used to it after a bit. Just routine, really . . . excuse me . . . Jacob, shut that door!' The clerk shut it against the powerfully amplified strains of a gramophone's 'Ave Maria' from the store counter immediately outside. 'The louder it is the better they like it,' said the manager. 'The African ear for music beats me.' As we went out (carefully shutting the door) the machine was at top volume

playing 'Cigareets and Whisky and Wild Wild Women' to an entranced group of Africans, none of whom looked like possible purchasers of 'Cigareets' or any other record. 'Call *that* "routine"?' I asked of Bill who knew he did not need to answer.

The smaller Indian shops were of a different order: quieter and faintly scented with a dry, dusty, sweetish perfume from the baled silks and cottons which filled shelves from floor to ceiling, and the glass cases of embroidered satin kimonos, ivory carvings and brassware. Here was a touch of Eastern richness, a hint of sandalwood and spice, something a little mysterious and exotic that held itself apart from the thronging African street beyond the threshold. From behind the counter the soft Indian voice inquired solicitously of one's needs; the delicate bronze features smiled ingratiatingly; the fine-boned hands invitingly indicated the shop's wealth of possibilities. If one hesitated over a fair-sized purchase, there was a proferred cigarette and a hospitably lighted match; the minutiae of commercial courtesy which yet might advantageously weigh the balance. Here was nothing brash, blatant or naive, but an ancient maturity and an instinctively sensitive veiling of the crude outlines of business transaction. The intention might be calculating to the last degree, but the method was proportionately fastidious and extraordinarily patient. Every customer was worthy of a sustained wooing, and even those who did not immediately succumb were, as they left the shop, given to understand that a future visit would be a pleasure for the entire establishment. So, against logic (which left to itself suspects the habitually soft-spoken, those who practice politesse for mercenary ends) the senses of the prospective purchaser were intrigued and flattered. Why should he be concerned with the feats of shrewd bookkeeping in the shadowy curtained-off sanctum behind the hospitable counter, or the fanatically competitive early

risings and late retirings which help to augment the slow steady profit? In such things no customer of average susceptibility is interested. If he is treated as though his smallest remark were wisdom and his most ordinary request a royal command, his parting from pence and even pounds will be most happily anaesthetized. For the cream of the Indian shopkeepers, therefore, Bill and I felt that kind of admiration which one accords to people who practise a beguiling artistry where art is least expected. Not, of course, that we reasoned this out at the time; we merely found that we had bought far more from the Indian shops than had been our intention.

By the middle of the afternoon we had again wearied of the town and its flux of traffic: European wives shopping, African traders carrying new bicycles and bales of cotton goods from the warehouses, beggars with sightless eyes and withered limbs haunting shop entrances, piccans playing in the gutters, foodsellers tending their pungent smoky braziers — dark bodies crowding, African voices mingling, bare feet stirring the streets' black dust. Now, sated with the town's crowding sights and smells, we wished only to return to the hotel. 'Just one more stop,' said Bill, halting the Jeep at a petrol pump.

Across the road, from the doorway of a mixed provisions and clothing shop there suddenly issued with a clatter an empty wooden crate which partially splintered as it fell close to the kerb. Instantly a group of small children gathered around it, as quick as sparrows when food is thrown on a lawn. At the bottom of the crate were broken biscuits which rapidly they tipped out upon the pavement. Some stuffed bits into their mouths and pockets; some with tiny hands held up and tried to fill their skirts; some produced scraps of cloth for use as containers. All this happened in silence, with astonishingly fast scurryings and exact placings. Not one infant fumbled or hesitated. The object was to

salvage every crumb, to sweep the box clean, to collect from the pavement every scattering. And this was done with a dexterous precocity and tidiness, and a frightening economy of motion in three minutes. Then the shopkeeper appeared, nonchalantly collected the box, and the little crowd dispersed with its spoils. Bill returned to the driver's seat and as we drove away we observed from a billboard on the garage wall that the town's main cinema attraction was 'Hamlet'. 'I'm beginning to learn now,' I told Bill, 'that it's the unexpected one must always expect in these parts.'

Bill and I were glad, when we settled into our open-air seats for an evening of 'Hamlet,' that we had already viewed this film in more appropriate circumstances; we suspected that anyone seeing it now for the first time might find himself distracted by audience atmospherics. The most single-minded Shakespearean, we realized, as the misted battlements of Elsinore came into view, and Hamlet's voice posed us his bitter soliloquy — might find it hard to disassociate himself from twentieth-century West Africa whose mind and ear now hearkened with mixed surprise, perplexity and appreciation to the Dane's private and terrible speculations. During these the West African element of the audience (which formed its major part) was attentive, seemingly awed by the grave accents of 'To be or not to be', and stricken into quietness one imagined, more by their expression, timbre, authoritative emotion, than by the import of the words.

At this time a kind of hypnosis fell upon the arena, a waiting tension which, we hoped, augured well. It did not, however, endure for long. With the commencement of what it considered real action the audience stirred, shook off its temporary wonderment, became participant and excited. Ophelia's first appearance occasioned some sporadic whistling, for here, by all the understood standards of Hollywood technique, was the Girl in the Movie, the glamour queen,

the sex interest. (And if this was an unfortunate, adolescent deduction, one can easily reconcile it with average movie-making recipes which demand that sex interest be liberally stirred into the mixture to please the customers.) After that, receptivity to 'Hamlet' became more noisily flippant in proportion to the versions of tragedy enacted before us. We dreaded Ophelia's mad scene, and when it came were justified in our apprehension. It was, in Hollywood jargon, 'a riot'; the audience laughed uproariously. When Ophelia, with small sweet trailing voice, sang her snatches of heart-broken melody, she brought down the house as successfully as if she had been a Komedy Kop or one of the Three Stooges after the direct impact of a custard pie.

At intervals quiet or near-quiet was resumed, caused perhaps by boredom or laughter-fatigue or (for this could not be altogether discounted) by occasional intuitive understanding, at least in part, of some starkly clear phrase or situation. Certainly the Grave Digger's lines elicited not so much as a murmur of ironic humour. His remarks fell on a blank but vibrantly alert silence. When Poor Yorick's skull came to light, the hush deepened, as if with shock or most solemn disapproval. To watch a pretty, live, fantastically twittering-voiced girl, was, one gathered, one form of entertainment; to contemplate this grisly human relic, this bleached head, handed up from the earth was — even in a film — an unnatural and unpleasant business. So no one laughed. A measure of sulkiness and embarrassment prevailed until the finale. Then was the tension snapped again by everyone's pleasure. Action! Swords! Torches flaming! People running! Bodies strewing the stage! All clapped and were happy, for in this glorious mêleé there was at least a straightforward turmoil.

Bill and I came away, with one part of our minds wishing that we had not attempted to see 'Hamlet' again, and with the other part intrigued by what we had been obliged to

observe beyond the screen's range. 'Queer evening,' said Bill. 'What did you make of it?'

I said, 'Nothing — except perhaps a little education.'

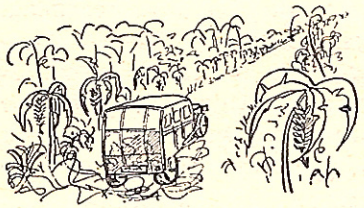
'Not Shakespeare,' argued Bill, astonished.

'No — Coast,' I told him, 'or maybe just "human".'

'Strewth,' said Bill who sounded a trifle jarred and out of sorts. Later, out of his own reasonable mental confusion, he reflected with a renewal of dismay, 'Poor Ophelia. . . .'

Three days later we took the road inland from Accra to Kumasi, a journey of about two hundred miles. The coastal tarmac behind us, we travelled through stretches of detimbered scrubland where only the tall elegantly useless cotton trees and outcropping palms remained. Now the villages, the repetitive sepia-coloured clearings with their mud and thatch houses, goats, chickens, piccans and smoky domestic fires, came at more distant intervals, as did the random, roughly cultivated farm patches. By gradual stages we came to wooded country punctuated by cocoa plantations and lush bamboo thickets which screened the dark forest fastnesses beyond.

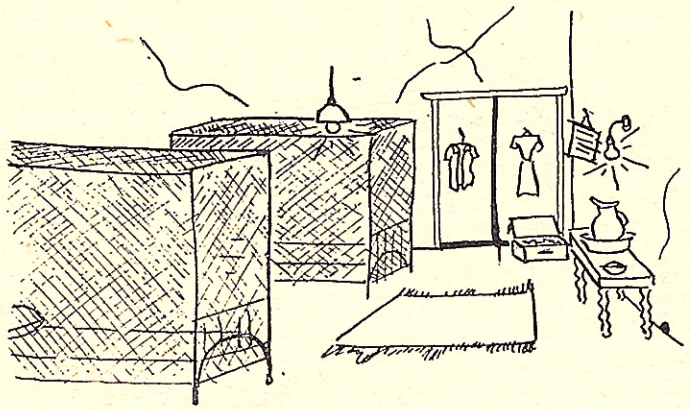
As always, when driving for many hours through the vast West African terrain, our eyes and minds tired long before the journey's end. Since early morning we had travelled through a panorama of apparently endless permutations and combinations: of featureless sky, mud village and market place, tangled wilderness, rough track, maize plot and sprawling, untamed forest colossus — all green and brown, brown and green, without accent or emphasis, like a huge expressionless primitive mask across which we, in our absurdly doughty Jeep, crawled ant-like and unobserved. Here was indeed an extravagance of 'scenery', but its character was of quantity rather than quality; its scale was too prodigious to invite human affection or even to sustain exhilaration. We passed through it without desire to prove or to savour its textures and nuances, and of no one place along the way did either of us exclaim with pleasure, 'We'll remember this.' That which we regarded from the car windows was less a succession of clear-cut views and vistas than a moving impression of West Africa's wastes and riches, its monotonous samenesses and elemental dormant powers. Enormous in self-sufficiency, it spread far beyond the horizons and towered skyward in mahogany heights which dwarfed the tortuous man-made road. For a proper perspective, a clear understanding of it all, we felt, one would need to be a giant in seven-leagued boots, with an eye to whom a hundred miles was mere glancing distance, and a mind of like capacity. Shortly after noon we (being no giants but only our limited selves) halted the Jeep to uncork the flask of coffee and unpack our lunch while listening to the forest's muted wild sounds which so enlarged and intensified its deeper silences. By-mid afternoon we reached the town of Kumasi.



Our hotel, tucked among the usual town assortment of French, Swiss, British, Syrian and Indian trading depots which lined the thoroughfare, was a double-storeyed building, mustard yellow with green pillars. No fairy lighting graced this establishment, nor even a recognizable foyer. Directly from the street we entered a dim cement-floored corridor flanked by a barn-like room which was mainly furnished with long tables, plain wooden chairs and beer glasses. Here a dozen or so African men and women were gathered in an atmosphere very much like that of an English public house — in an atmosphere, that is to say, social but respectable. Only in one corner was there a jarring note, a young white man, unkempt of dress and pallid of face, who slumped solitarily over his glass as if posing for a modern

impression of Prodigal Son or Rake's Progress. A comely young African woman detached herself from the rest to greet us and lead us up a flight of narrow stairs to our bedroom. She wore a turban, a tightly fitting cotton frock and black patent shoes with high heels. Her manner was hostessy, her English good. In orthodox style she ushered us into our room and left us with her charming smile and her hope that we should be comfortable.

'Unfortunately *that's* not very likely,' said Bill. Our front windows looked out on part of a long balcony whose chairs and tables announced its use as a second drinking area.



The room's opposite side was composed of folding doors which failed to meet; an inch-wide aperture gave us a clear, unwanted view into an adjoining bedroom. The meagre mattresses of our beds were supported only by wooden slats. We had no top sheets, only time-greyed body-soiled blankets. Other features of the room were an uninviting washbasin, a mildewed mirror and a 1936 Esquire calendar across which reclined the likeness of a lush girl lightly clad in a careless arrangement of chiffon and marabou.

This time I made no housewifely or sensitive-plant comment. Bill hung a dressing gown over part of the folding door's gap. We employed the bottle of antiseptic and the Jeep duster without reference to Lady Macbeth. While we were extracting our immediate needs from our suitcase, there was a polite tap on the door and a dusky head (which later we knew to be the manager's) looked in to ask Bill, in the most cultured accents, whether he would like to see the location of what he called 'the bawthroom'. Bill returned without gaiety from this little sortie to relay the bathroom's position to me. Such faint interest as I felt for it was, however, promptly inhibited. The pale young man whom we had noticed in the downstairs lounge appeared from the corridor shadows to reach the door just ahead of me. Something in his bearing made me fear he was suffering from acute alcoholic nausea. I was right. As I hastened away I could hear him being prodigally sick.

'Very sordid,' I said to Bill. 'There's nothing exotic in the local colour of this place.'

Bill, rather pleased with himself because, despite the room's disadvantages he had managed to shave and semi-bathe and attire himself in clean clothes, felt obliged to set my ideas straight. 'Local colour,' he told me, 'isn't necessarily agreeable. You needn't *enjoy* it at the time. Anyway, you can only think about it properly afterwards when you've something to contrast it with.'

'Such as a hotel suite at the Savoy,' I said. 'One good extreme deserves another.'

Later, in company with several other subdued travellers, we dined on meat pie and blancmange in the dining-room whose one light was shaded in couleur-de-rose silk. The discreet B.B.C. voices which came from a radio in the corner could not compete with an uprising of gramophone music from the street outside. Neither could Victor Sylvester and

his Orchestra, or Sandy Macpherson and his Theatre Organ, whose melodies, in contrast with the competing full-blooded volume of the town African's favourite entertainment, sounded positively anaemic. We returned to our room to debate on the relative values of ventilation and privacy. When the front shutters were open they admitted a harsh electric light from the balcony outside and gramophonic din from the street below; when they were closed, we stifled. Either way, by a trick of hotel acoustics, we still had the B.B.C. with us. We compromised by propping the shutters half-open, and at length gingerly laid our heads on our pillows. Our sleep was fitful because, in view of two African boys (stewards, we imagined) bedding themselves down on the balcony we had, after all, to close the shutters; moreover, in the volatile ground floor levels, a brawl of the first order developed and was pursued in a variety of key and tempo for more than an hour; to this was added the inexhaustible gramophone and a number of other extrovert shoutings and hailings. To Bill I muttered across the room's stuffy semi-darkness, 'Deafness would be almost a pleasure.'

But Bill had his own problem: a blood-lusting mosquito within his perforated net. Soon I had one (or more) of them myself. Mosquitoes are surprising creatures, as anyone knows who has occasion to lie awake because of their torments. Since they are almost without weight or substance one thinks of them rather as malicious spirits than insects: or simply as a peace-destroying hum connected with a tiny terrible determination. Against their absurd smallness one pits one's full human strength and cunning, though clumsily in the dark, like giant Cyclops when confounded by Ulysses' nimble stratagems. 'Little devil!' fumed Bill, swatting furiously. 'ZZzzzz!' taunted my mosquito close to my ear. 'Got him!' proclaimed Bill, disproportionately proud. 'Zzzz!' sang my mosquito, making it sound like a gremlin's raspberry.

Dawn was welcome. We breakfasted early and alone except for a solicitous visit from the manager who, in his beautiful deep-throated University voice trusted we had had a good night. We recognized him as one of those whose charm has the temporarily magic quality of glossing over — even completely transforming — the truth of the dreariest circumstance. Because of this curious protective magic it was quite impossible for us to complain or protest. When the manager summoned for us what he called a 'box lunch' as sustenance for the day's journey, we found ourselves being both gracious and grateful. The overlarge bill was discreetly proffered and settled, and our departure was marked by all-round adieux as polite as if we had been the molly-coddled guests of an unusually talented host. At noon we opened the cardboard container of our box lunch across which was artistically printed the hotel's name. Inside were four corned-beef sandwiches made of weevil-speckled bread.

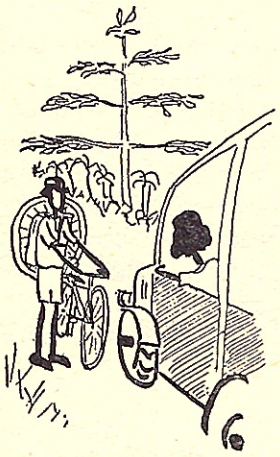
'We'll buy bananas at the next village,' said Bill, casting box and contents into the roadside bushes. 'That manager is in love with the sound of words. He's out of touch with reality.'

On our way back to Black Man's Town Bill and I reflected on the difference between the nature of our present journey, and the nerve-thrilling escapades which spice stories of high tropical adventure. One might prefer to give the impression of a jodhpured familiarity with lions, snakes and leopards; one might choose to be able to relate one's witnessing of primitive witch-doctor rites and conversations with headhunters. 'But for all that,' said Bill, 'we've come to the wrong place — or perhaps we've just come too late.'

As we bounced uneventfully over the bush road, past the cocoa plantations, the roughly cultivated maize plots and the peaceful villages, I thought of the skull-decked Juju houses, the Night Dancers, and the feasting-time tomtoms

of our previous Nigerian bush experience. 'You never know,' I offered, though without much hope, 'something might turn up.'

And something did — as if to reassure us that the West African wilds still held the marvel and surprise of the totally unexpected. True, on the face of it, our encounter might not seem astonishing, for all that happened was that we met a white man on a bicycle. Had we met him on the London Great West Road or pedalling along a Sussex lane we should not have noticed him. It was our present geography which made all the difference — and something about his travel-stained appearance, his lonely battered look, which made us stop. When we drew up he dismounted to greet us: a sinewy little man who doffed a travesty of a felt hat to wipe the sweat from his bald head and small-featured leathery face. Here, it was immediately clear to us, was no run-of-the-mill Government official, or missionary, or settled employee; this man with the gentle brown eyes, broken nose and diffident Irish voice was an Original whose stubborn meek individuality and odd equipage instantly excited our curiosity.



As is the way of strangers who meet on a lonely foreign road, we asked where he had come from. He gave us a smile of weary but fanatical cheerfulness. 'From Rhodesia,' was his reply. 'Six months and seven thousand miles on the bike.' Gratified by our appropriately stunned expressions he softly recited, 'Through Tanganyika, Kenya, Uganda, French Equitorial Africa, Belgian Congo, Nigeria, Dahomey and Togoland.' From the pocket of his sweat-stained khaki

shirt he brought out a dog-eared much-stamped passport to show that this was indeed the case. 'All on the bike,' he repeated, gesturing towards it as if to deflect a little of our admiration from himself to the fragile, enduring machine. 'You must have to travel light,' we commented, thinking what quantities of luggage most people (unless they are 'plane passengers) take with them over seven thousand miles. 'When you come to it,' he said, 'it's wonderful what you can do without.'

Our imaginations balked at contemplation of the path behind him, the toiling miles of desert dust and torrid highway, the long lonely bush roads, the night-dark forest tracks. We saw him, a puny midget in a giant wilderness, a slightly comic mannikin with an immense resolve which meant nothing to anyone but himself. He was patient with our questions. Food? He picked it up as he went along; sometimes he ate with bush Africans, or the Europeans he met gave him a meal; on one sparsely inhabited stretch he had lived for a week on raw eggs. Sleep? He had sheltered in mud huts, white folks' bungalows, a French jail, an Emir's palace. Water? He took a chance on it as with mosquitoes, and hadn't been ill yet. Money? Apart from small expenses for maintaining the bike, he'd no special need for cash. All along the way he'd met with a few small difficulties but no misadventures. The moderation of his answers, his refusal or inability to comumnicate the drama of his experience, left us fascinated but nonplussed. Already he had one foot poised on a worn pedal.

We asked how far he had yet to go, and whether he would not accept a lift to Black Man's Town. 'I have two thousand miles more or near that before I find a ship for County Down,' he told us. 'And thank you, but it's against my rule ever to ride any way except by the bike.' But before we parted from him we arranged that on his arrival in the town he should allow us to accommodate him overnight at the

resthouse. To this he agreed, courteous in appreciation, but not fulsome.

Our journey resumed, Bill and I pondered on our brief meeting with this cycling enigma. What sort of man was he? we wondered. A super tramp? An eccentric with a passion for variety in his solitudes? An exhibitionist with a difference? A restless philosopher who carried a problem within him? By experience confirmed in our belief that all habitual travellers know why they must be nomadic, we wondered what had prompted our new acquaintance to undertake his arduous and, in some respects, thankless, journey. 'He'll tell us, surely,' I said to Bill. 'That is something we must find out.'

Not that evening, but on the next, we had our opportunity. The cyclist sat with us at our resthouse table for dinner. Although we were well aware of his difference from the other guests, no one else seemed to notice it, perhaps because the quiet little man manifested no limelight-attracting idiosyncrasy in dress or manner. His wiry body was attired now in clean (though unpressed) shirt and trousers from his saddlebag's meagre wardrobe; he had a scrubbed, close-shaven and modest look, and nothing about him spoke of high adventure. Our mealtime conversation did not scintillate, though since it concerned his travels, it gave him every opportunity for stirring anecdote and fresh-minted opinion. Flattering although our interest must have been, its rewards were practically nil: the little man appeared to possess no gift of description and indeed very little power of communication. Yet he seemed eager that we should read the log book which accompanied his passport: the signatures and scrawled comments, dates and destinations which were proof of the way he had come. We looked through it impressed, but still with a sense of bafflement and frustration because our soft-spoken eager-to-please guest had still, in effect, told us nothing, given us no illumination. His im-

poverished narrative had not contributed a solitary spark to the ready fires of our imagination.

After dinner we adjourned to the resthouse billiard-room where, in introducing our cyclist to several other fellow guests, we mentioned what he had done. Now all eyes were upon him; drinks were brought; he was, despite himself, the centre of the evening. His bicycle stood on the veranda outside. Everyone went out to view it, and to marvel at its performance. But soon the small stir was over since its originator did nothing to sustain it. A billiard game began while the cyclist and I looked on from the sidelines. Shortly afterwards Bill came to my side to lean on his cue and privately suggest that my chance had come. Now that we knew our guest better I might find out what was behind his urge for solitary trekking. In both of our minds was the thought that present human contacts and the drinks he had gladly accepted might have thawed his reserves a little and released his tongue's inhibitions.

So, careful not to alarm or embarrass, I asked if he might tell me the reason for his journeying since clearly it was not money or fame. The little man, sitting with shoulders forward (as if he were still wheeling down the interminable roads of Africa) gave the question his most complete attention. With an incredible simplicity he said, 'I like cycling.'

So there it was, and we were no wiser. Next morning Bill in the Jeep escorted the cyclist a mile out of town so that he might take his photograph with an appropriate perspective of bush road as background. This done they shook hands, and in the salute Bill included a pound note, saying that it might be useful in some emergency circumstance which only money could help. But after they had parted Bill observed our friend to be following some distance behind, and stopped the car to inquire the reason for this. Explained the cyclist, 'It's no distance back. For the past thousand

miles I've had need of a head-lamp, and now I've the money, I'll buy one. It's easier to travel with a light at night.'

'I give it up,' said Bill to me later that day after we had reconsidered the whole unusual encounter and tried again to understand our guest's extraordinary mixture of determination, inarticulate ambition, childish simplicity and herculean stamina. 'I couldn't even begin to explain it.'

Some months later a few lines of print in a London newspaper told us that our cyclist had reached the United Kingdom. The brief report carried only the bare facts, without any power to excite or astonish. We wondered if the reporter's first eager curiosity, his feeling of discovery — 'What a story!' — had, like our own, been defeated by the other's mild and incredible response, 'I like cycling.'

Although Stevenson has it that 'to travel hopefully is better than to arrive', Bill and I, after many hours of bush driving were usually glad to reach our destination — whether it was our home base at the resthouse chalet in Black Man's Town, or some distant bush rendezvous essential to the furthering of Bill's timber dealings. No matter how eagerly and hopefully, or with what freshness of vision we set out in the Jeep, the time came when the long dirt roads asserted their tropical sameness and we craved comfort for our bodies: respite from jarring motion, baths, cold drinks and reorientation in the cool chairs of a domestic shelter. And this was particularly so when with the close of the rainy season the traveller's portion was of dust, ochreous clouds of it — and sweat, and a pitting of his will against the torpid atmosphere of heat-laden midday and simmering afternoon. Bill went on some of his journeys alone, often returning with shorts, shirt and shoes powdered yellow, hair dust-blonded and skin jaundiced, while the Jeep, transformed from polished green to dull amber, testified to the friable nature of our highways. Along the inland routes he travelled where

dust from passing vehicles rose to great cloudy heights which left their bloom, as thick as pollen, on roadside trees and thickets, disguising the verdancy of branch and stem with a heavy veil of autumnal sepia.

At dusk, after one such arid trek, we were happy to reach the compound of an American timber firm whose principal had invited us to stay overnight. Freshly painted white bungalows with green roofs were disposed in a setting of lawns with well-kept driveways; beyond, the buildings of the sawmill stood silent with stacks of sawn timber appearing as strange geometric outlines in the fading light, and cranes poised motionless over great caches of sapele and mahogany logs. To the fugitive damp freshness which came from the surrounding forest were added the sharp aromatic scent of newly cut wood and clean sawdust, and the tangy smell of the protective creosote. Our host, a six-footer with the substantial physique of an American football player, rose from his veranda chair to give us that kind of slow-smiling heart-warming welcome for which America is justly renowned. Soon we were sharing with him and his timber colleagues a homelike atmosphere which came out to us through the french windows of the rosily-lit bungalow to banish fatigue and pleasure the senses. We might, we thought, have been sitting, neighbourly fashion, on some country porch anywhere in the United States; one had — even without the actual properties — a powerful illusion of homely rocking chair, chintz curtains, corner drugstore and communal self-sufficiency. West Africa — for all that we accepted our whisky sodas in the approved Coast style and talked timber 'shop' — was less with us than Wisconsin and Virginia, whose unhurried accents now carried across the darkening lawn.

Our impression was of men at home with their surroundings — or more likely, of men who without any affectation or appearance of effort, had brought their environmental

appurtenances with them, lock, stock and barrel, across the seas or the skies, without any preliminary debate or conjecture. If any compromise existed, it was not revealed in the general effect. The men's cool slack suits had the easy nonchalance of a *New Yorker* advertisement; the veranda furniture was of the latest design in rust-proof chromium and tropic-proof canvas; the very tiling of the veranda floor was of some new composition, contrived, one could not help imagining, by go-ahead young industrial chemists in rimless spectacles who, in all-glass American factories, had worked overtime to perfect this immensely desirable termite-proof, super-hygienic substance.

The whole of the spacious bungalow interior reflected this same national attitude. The lounge contained no carved elephants or ebony heads, no ivory bric-à-brac or pieces of brassware such as so often decorate the white man's West African bungalow. To avoid capitulation to these objects the average Britisher must make a strong and sustained effort of will, but it seemed that our Americans had been, from the very first, immune both to the temptations of the market place and the importunings of the itinerant pedlar. Bill and I, intrigued by such strong-mindedness, sought its confirmation. The answer, characteristically, was, 'Oh, we picked up some, but shipped it back home where the folks appreciate it. After a while you get tired of having that stuff around the place.'

The bathroom showed signs of feminine handiwork; that of our host's absent wife. There were frilled plastic curtains, enormous fluffy towels, a superior chenille bathmat and, at eye level around the bath, a frieze of pastel and black fishes with, once more, something of a *New Yorker* look about them. All was contrived with a diligence which had obviously brooked no interference from West Africa. The only flaw lay in the fact that while the bath's twin taps emitted only boiling hot water, those of the shower gave forth only

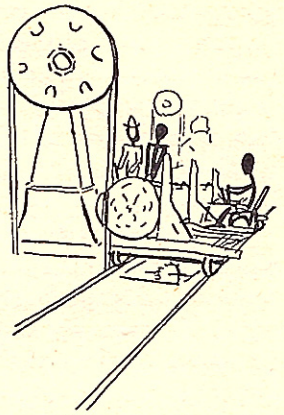
cold. Our host carefully warned us of this, while adding with his deceptively lazy inflection, 'but we're not fazed yet — we're working on it.'

Dinner, which showed no indication of grass-widower laissez-faire, was all-American, easy in its rituals but, again, implacable in its insistence on the kind of home cooking which is illustrated in all the best household journals of the New World. We concluded with apple pie à la mode of uncommonly high quality. 'Your cook,' we said, with truth and envy, 'is a marvel.' Modestly our host replied that his wife had carefully instructed the cook in her ways, and that, luckily for the remaining all-male household, the instruction had 'stuck'. The graceful explanation was typical. Offhand, casual-sounding, it covered what we knew to be a united front of smooth but relentless attention to detail, and a physical energy which, from a cursory acquaintance with our loose-limbed, self-deprecatory Americans, might well have been underestimated. It was an impressive, although somewhat disconcerting combination — this uniformly happy-go-lucky exterior, this serious resource of high-geared private power. We wondered whether its contradiction arose from a code of good manners whose first precept demanded that a guest should be made as comfortable in mind as in body; by every means to hand he should be soothed and made cheerful, not bored or worried by the mechanics of the hospitality afforded him. To us, as recipients, such a Christian philosophy seemed wholly praiseworthy.

Afterwards — and by this time we were so cosily lapped about by Americana that it seemed the most natural bush evening's entertainment — we viewed a show of lantern slides. During coffee one of the men disappeared to adjust the white screen (a tacked-up sheet) on the wall of an adjoining room, arrange his projector and films and place chairs with ashtrays and cigarettes conveniently to hand. Without

fuss or preamble, in this after-dinner parlour atmosphere, the little display began and continued without a hitch to its finale. Commented the projectionist's voice, as we regarded a slide of New York's Times Square and the grouping of a healthy-looking all-American family, 'That's the wife and kids, last leave.' And — accompanying a view of stark green, apparently impenetrable virgin jungle animated by a foreground gathering of our present company, 'That's Luke and Joey on the job.' From this he switched casually to a succession of pictures of a West African High Chief ceremony resplendent with ceremonial umbrellas and striped robes. 'Big day locally. We all went to the show.' Then back to Virginia, a small-town street with — yes, there they were — the movie house, the corner drugstore and Luke's car outside — and next, the front of a stucco house adorned by a pretty young woman in jeans and a little boy in the popular outfit of infant cowboy: 'Joey's family.' So, in this way crossing and re-crossing the world's great spaces we considered shots of Washington's Pentagon, San Francisco's Golden Gate, vistas of mahogany logs, timber wagons in process of loading, Joey with a District Commissioner's tame monkey, Luke in a city suit on the top of the Empire State Building — a *mélange* that might have made for our mental indigestion had not the others viewed it with such serenity and satisfaction.

Next morning before we left them, we viewed their mill with its entire staff of Americans and Africans in action, the shining saws slicing the roller-borne hardwood logs with the screaming noise of aggressive steel on resistant fibre, and the smooth disciplined planks obediently falling away on conveyor belts to be stacked and air-dried in the yard. In the veneer plant we watched razor-sharp knives like guillotines peeling the mahogany into sheets as thin as cardboard for the enhancement of radios, television sets and fine drawing-room furniture. Everywhere was up-to-date method, a



house-proud clean-swept orderliness, a pace and complexity of machinery to which were harnessed the pace and ingenuity of men both black and white. At the beginning of this tightly linked chain were the sawyers and loaders in the forest; at its end were the labelled crates of precision-packed veneers and the graded lumber. We thought of the deftly manipulated lantern slides and the taken-for-granted bridging of seas and continents from Coast forests deeply rooted in ancient African soil to the stucco bungalow's new television set. 'Could anything be more remarkable or more casual?' I asked Bill. 'That,' said he, 'is modern Economics — miracles served up the fast, practical way, C.O.D., without wear and tear on anybody's imagination.'

The rest of our morning was mostly occupied in reaching the house of one Mr. Belak, a Syrian timber man who had invited us to lunch. En route, Bill and I stopped at a market place to ransom a young pigeon with tethered legs from the rough hands of a youthful trader. Freed, it lay unresisting on my lap in the Jeep, a sheeny bird the colour of jade, with opalescent neck feathers and round bright eyes — a creature of the woods, warmly alive, helpless and beautiful. 'Probably it's not reasonable,' I said to Bill, 'to rescue just one pigeon from so many — there must be hundreds of them in the markets — and think *that* does any good.' 'Better one than none,' consoled Bill. 'Not sensible at all, though,' I continued, 'because everyone thinks of them just as food.' 'It's a hard world for pigeons out here,' said Bill, 'so a little sentimentality can do no harm.' The sun shone through my window to fall on the glowing plumage and the meek, round-

eyed gaze of our trustful hostage. 'Pigeon pie isn't my favourite dish,' confessed Bill, and halted the Jeep by a deep thicket into which he released the bird. We drove on, feeling (rightly or wrongly) a measure of inner content about that one pigeon — of all the flocks in the forests and all the captives in the market places — whose destiny we had influenced.

Mr. Belak was waiting for us on the steps of his large house whose ground floor comprised offices and store-rooms containing various imported goods in which, besides timber, he dealt. He was, like many others of his race, a man of tough physique, commercial acumen and wide influence. He appeared content to spend year after year on the Coast, not interrupting his ever-growing business ventures to take the home leave which so many Europeans consider essential both to health and peace of mind. A little mystery surrounded him — nothing sinister or blameworthy — but something not fully understood, as if Mr. Belak had gleaned a harvest of secret knowledge about his African neighbours and, expert in the diagnosis and handling of human frailty, knew precisely how to employ his analytical power to his own advantage.

He was rich, but no one knew to what extent, for he did not use his money showily but appeared to deploy its main bulk in the extensions of his numerous business transactions. His only known background was West African. He lived alone, was not by habit gregarious, but when acting the host exerted himself to provide — as we were to realize — an alarming excess of hospitality. One could meet him often socially, we gathered, and conduct business with him for years without ever feeling that one knew the mind behind the cool dark eyes and faintly cynical full-lipped smile. In many ways he was like the Cat Who Walked By Himself, taking with the utmost perseverance from his selected surroundings only that which he deliberately chose, while keeping intact every detail of his own elusive, original personality.

In contrast with our American household of the previous evening, Mr. Belak's upstairs establishment was out-and-out 'Coast' with a few embellishments which, perhaps, reflected something of his distant homeland. We sat in a high-ceilinged lounge fronted by a narrow iron-balustraded balcony. There was a profusion of carved, brightly varnished little tables and heavily embroidered, though limp and faded, cushions. From the blue-green distempered walls looked down a number of old-fashioned dark photographs in steel frames. A 'boy', not uniformed but clad in patched khaki shorts and a check shirt, brought refreshments. The telephone rang and our host excused himself to answer it. He listened for a moment. His shoulders tensed. He spoke briefly and reprovingly in English, then a sudden whirlwind of emotion swept him into an outraged tirade in his own tongue. There was a pause while the telephone mumbled anxiously. Mr. Belak cut across this with a final stinging unintelligible denunciation, set down the receiver, wiped the perspiration from his face and turned back to us with a bland and apologetic smile. 'Somebody being stupid,' he remarked. 'Any day I would rather deal with a villain than an idiot.' Realizing that we had been sitting on the edges of our chairs, we relaxed again into our cushions, with a feeling of sympathy for any idiot in the power of Mr. Belak.

Just before lunch was served another guest, one Mr. Jones, arrived, a pale bespectacled visitor who was staying at a nearby European residence. Mr. Belak greeted him affably, refused to believe he wished only to drink orange squash and handed him a liberally ginned glass which Mr. Jones accepted helplessly, with no further protestation. The reason for his easy submission was clear as soon as Mr. Belak left us to inspect the lunch table. 'Rather awkward, isn't it,' our fellow guest asked us, 'not to be able to refuse things in a Syrian house? Awfully bad manners, they consider it; downright offending, they say, not to do justice to whatever

is provided. My friends warned me it'd be a big lunch so I went without breakfast.' Reminded of what was indeed a reasonable apprehension we wished we had foregone our all-American breakfast of eggs, bacon and hotcakes.

Mr. Belak returned, looking gratified, to lead us into his dining-room. 'I have a very special dish in your honour,' he told us, 'something from my own country. And since you have a journey before you, you will eat with good appetite.'

From the head of the table he presided over an array of laden platters and tureens, spooning delicately though largely from each into four outsize soup bowls: layers of rice and vegetables, mutton, chicken, pickles and other substantial oddments, and ladling over the whole an oily richness of green purée. 'It looks delicious,' said Mr. Jones heartily while we murmured what we hoped sounded like a heartfelt appreciation of the feast.

With the first quarter of the dish we had no difficulty, for the food was pleasant to the palate. Had we stopped then we should have been content. But when our spoons began to move a little more slowly Mr. Belak looked up from his own rapid demolishing to say with a slightly hurt look, 'Perhaps it is after all not to your taste?' This was denied. 'Quite to the contrary,' Mr. Jones proclaimed, nobly adding that he would like a trifle more of the excellent chicken. And so we ate on, refusing, in the interests of polite Syrian custom, to hearken to our inner protest which as our dishes slowly emptied, strengthened with every mouthful. The conversation — at least so far as the guests were concerned — became slightly inattentive, flagged, and in the end practically ceased, by which time we were able to observe something of the pattern on the bottom of our plates. I looked across at Mr. Jones who wore an enduring look; although his jaws moved steadily, his eyes were downcast as if in despair. By my side I heard Bill (whose eye I dare not catch) sigh faintly. 'You will have a little more,' said Mr. Belak, picking up his

ladle with a purposeful muscular hand. Bill, to Mr. Jones' and my own great admiration, accepted a further portion while we mutely shook our heads. 'Delicious,' murmured Mr. Jones in a small voice. 'A memorable lunch,' I said with truth.

'Ah, then, some sweet!' said Mr. Belak, indicating the sideboard's richness of what looked like an enormous plum cake and a gargantuan caramel custard. We were sorry, but it was impossible, even though we thought a shadow of vexation crossed our host's mobile face. 'Cheese then,' he insisted, ' — a little cheese to finish.'

To this we acquiesced, though with private misgiving. The 'little cheese' came to us in slabs of a generosity proportioned to the rest of the meal. After that we drank strong syrupy coffee, and as soon as was compatible with courtesy, took our leave. Mr. Belak ushered us out into the afternoon's broiling heat. Mr. Jones, paler than ever, made a heroic little speech of gratitude and walked away, his whole being, we could see, craving recuperative siesta. Through the car window Mr. Belak gracefully handed me a white camellia as we made our farewells.

Bill and I drove for the next two hours without speaking, and when Bill at length gave voice it was to say, 'Now we can understand boa-constrictors better.' We rested on that heavy thought all the way home.

CHAPTER VII

'THIS-IS-WEST-AFRICA'

IN England for six long years (and even afterwards by force of habit) one weary phrase, 'there's-a-war-on', was used wholesale to pacify or bludgeon the occasional obstreperous citizens who, by word or action, persisted in kicking against the pricks. On the Coast the stock expression 'this-is-West-Africa' has a curiously similar ring. It effectively reproves, reminds and consoles; its implications defy answer; its elasticity of application is astonishing; its very frequency on the lips of Coasters show that good reason for it must exist as a soothing or remonstrative comment. Like the French 'C'est la vie' (which goes with a shrug of resignation) it can have cynical or laissez-faire overtones. Or it may, with slightly modified inflexion, indicate sympathy for another's apparently unsolvable problem, rationalize failure, excuse loss of temper. In 'this-is-West-Africa' there are worlds of meanings, most of them oblique. A fault in book-keeping pyramids into a ledger's impasse; because of 'cook palaver' a dinner party must be cancelled; a car returns from garage convalescence with more defects than before; a capable steward boy becomes, for no clear reason, taciturn and slovenly; a friendship deteriorates; a business arrangement fails because of unforeseeable human or mechanical weakness; heat and humidity set up little networks of tensions and irritabilities. One wants what one cannot have and dislikes what one is given. So — 'c'est la vie' or 'there's-a-war-on' or 'this-is-West-Africa', for one must have some vindication, some rebuttal of personal ineffectuality or failure in responsibility; one has need to share with one's own kind some generally agreed and widely useful explana-

tion for almost every sort of fret and hindrance which can bedevil the white Coaster. 'This-is-West-Africa' fills the bill admirably.

Like all well-worn phrases it has come to mean far more than its mere words state. For those who are inquisitive or finicky enough to examine it exhaustively its significance is this: that West Africa as a whole is 'against' the white man who, to use the ironic American expression, 'can't win' in the face of its human resistances and climatic aggravations. It means that West Africa, though diminished in vindictiveness from White Man's Grave to White Man's Headache, is still fraught with tiresomeness and backsliding propensity, and that for long life and comparative peace of mind the wise European must accept this picture and work within its limits rather than wastefully expend his energies and emotions in a fruitless struggle against forces larger and stronger than himself. It is this attitude which the tenderfoot, zealous in his first tour's duties, finds at first singular, then merely irritating and finally — although he may carry on a rearguard action for some time — fairly reasonable. If he is unusually analytical or independent in mind, however, he may still balk a little at swallowing it whole. Its fault, he may point out (stubborn while his logic lasts) is that 'this-is-West-Africa' sounds more African than European: it savours of addiction to the path of least resistance and is dangerous because its presumptions are without disciplined margins. Yet if he hears it often enough — and if he has frequent cause, himself, to require its slight comfort — it is likely that any tendency he may have for academic pondering will die away. For successful material results in West Africa



an extrovert's outlook is essential. Introversion — too serious a preoccupation with the *reasons* for what is happening — inhibits positive action and the white man who is not positive concerning his actions on the Coast is not likely to stay there for long.

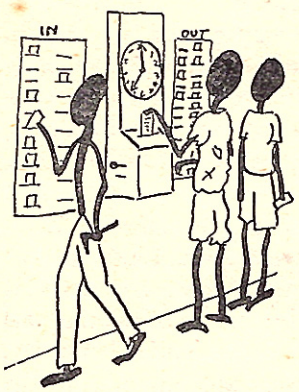
In Black Man's Town Bill and I were acutely aware that this was West Africa, for while the ubiquitous phrase can be applied to bush living, it crops up with particular frequency wherever interdependent African and European groups are, while sharing the same terrain, faced with separate economic and moral problems and spurred by different motives. To illustrate: there came to our resthouse one day, fresh from the mailboat, a Company Director in whose energetic and likeable personality were combined all the success ingredients. His large flourishing home business had long since rewarded him for hard work, scrupulous attention to detail and his fostering of a lively team spirit within his organization. Its West Coast Branch, however, was not thriving; long-distance query, instruction, investigation and correction had proved unavailing. Impatient of recurrent negation and eager to strike at the root of the trouble the Company Director himself crossed the seas, primed with his proven capacity for industrial fault-probing and convinced that in the space of a month the books of his wilting Branch would show more gains and fewer losses. Promptly he set to work. His questions and improvements, like his expectations, were reasonable and fair-minded; his innovations, by home standards, were excellently considered. His interviews were tactful and exhaustive; his desire to 'get to know' his African employees was sincere. Patiently (while his European manager looked on without any noticeable resurgence of hope) he weeded out the misfits, promoted the deserving and instituted various systems which — again based on their efficacy by home standards — should promptly have infused the drooping concern with fresh life. Punctual and method-

ical by habit himself, he attempted to instil in his workers a greater respect for clock time and detail in both verbal and written reports. By the end of the first month he felt he had made a little headway; a few more weeks, he argued, and the changes would reveal the desired effects.

Three months later he was a trifle discouraged. In theory, by now, the business machine should have been working smoothly; in practice there were successive snags, an outcropping of queer complicated palavers, perverse attitudes, oblique resentments and small but insidious cracks in the whole refurbished framework. Patient still — for he had been warned that reformation could not be easy — he reanalysed the position, strengthened weak links, made further judicious dismissals and hirings. Yet the pattern of his new business, while a thing of sense and beauty in itself, was still lacking in some unknown and mysteriously elusive quantity. Though tamed and tidy, some vital part was missing. At the end of the fifth month the Company Director returned home. It was not in his nature to admit to failure, and in fact he was convinced that he was at last on the right track. Only time was needed — the further months (or years?) for the sorting out of those fresh and peculiarly West African problems which had burgeoned during his visit. The application of logical business principles must surely, he insisted, be eventually of some avail. It is doubtful whether he found any comfort in the Greek chorusing of those Europeans who, well-acquainted with his dilemma, waved him goodbye with 'Sorry-old-boy-but-what-do-you-expect-this-is-West-Africa.' So, to that phrase which can also serve as lament, departed from the Coast yet another white man whose first-class executive brain and good intentions had proved themselves insufficient on foreign ground.

On the face of it, there is no easy explanation for such a commonplace failure to achieve good results from the use of rational and tested tactics. One may, however, hazard a

reason. Our Company Director had placed great value on the virtues of exactness, on what he called 'getting the thing *right*'. To him a method, a situation or an answer was either 'right' or 'wrong'; half-right was not good enough, nor even nearly-right. In his previous successful dealings on home ground he had discouraged compromise and himself lost the capacity for tolerating it in any degree. In West Africa the necessity for compromise is endless. The perfectionist — he who will not countenance half-measures, makeshift arrangements, semi-finished projects — is, no matter how patient, eager and energetic, far more likely to be worsted in the end than he who makes allowances of varying elasticity. The perfectionist may become bitter and contemptuous of a people who, unfairly, he expects could make an effort comparable to his own if only they *would*; his reactions develop a hostility that ricochets from the uncaring Coast back upon himself. The ordinary man, while rarely thoroughly satisfied with his West African endeavours, suffers less physical and mental wear and tear, is far more resilient to disappointment, and better able to retain his sense of humour and proportion. In the long run his self-protective attitude may prove a valuable bulwark against the slings and arrows which can ultimately prove the total undoing of the much harried idealist.



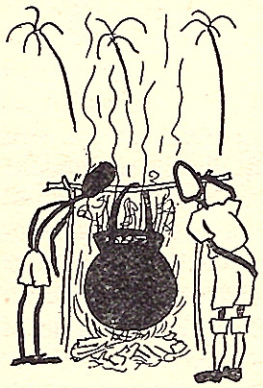
Admittedly it is not easy for anyone to maintain a vision of high accomplishment while at the same time conditioning himself to a constant acceptance of the imperfect, the second-best. Daily compromise of this kind is bound to exert a strain on human principle, quite apart from its effects upon

the human nervous system. So it is understandable that most white people in West Africa are in some way affected both as regards principle and nerves — though not always seriously or even visibly or permanently. But usually a little damage is done, and no matter what idealists or perfectionists may claim, it appears to be unavoidable. It follows, of course, that for those whose standards are not in any country particularly high, the damage is less while the ratio of accomplishment falls lower.

In the old days West Africa's Empire Builders were perforce men who lived by old-fashioned action rather than modern psychology, and their problems, like their achievements, were primarily of a physical order. In their eyes Africans were a race apart, having no kinship with white people; while living was hard, jobs were clearly defined and (rightly or wrongly) issues both national and private appeared to be simple enough. These old-time blazers of trails and pitchers of camps were too occupied with immediate and pressing matters of quest and survival to concern themselves with the Dark Continent's future. They could no more imagine subservient bush dweller's grandsons as trousered and car-driving business men than they could envisage the Coast's present-day importance in the new design of world commerce. For these rugged firstcomers no West African Question existed such as today occupies the thoughts and energies of so many politicians, churchmen, economists and new-style men of Empire, whose combined responsibility it is to assist a lusty emergent country through its growing pains and integrate it into a changing world pattern.

As anyone knows who has read the newspapers, talked with Africans or visited the Coast, the problems of the new West Africa cannot be compared with those, past or present, of any other country. The biases of bush tradition, the superimposed sophistications and trading practices of the western

world, the daunting character of the equatorial climate, the riddles of ethical value, human temptation and opportunism, the future's uncertainty, the pace of events and scientific progress in relation to man's slower personal evolution — all these and many more facts, fears and concepts have gone into the West African cauldron whose mixture has, almost overnight it seems, become such a lively brew that no longer can any one ingredient be disassociated from another. The



wise men, both white and dark, peer into the pot to criticize this or that as a mistaken addition or combination, and to blame each other sometimes for cowardly withholdings or impetuous interferences; each, according to his taste, volunteers suggestions or insists on alterations. At present the pot-pourri pleases no one, but there can be neither turning back nor starting afresh. Meantime the fire burns hungrily beneath the vast cauldron which sends up an obscuring steam, a bubbling force. It is in truth a melting pot rich and strange in the possibilities of its contents which no one can prejudge — not even those who apprehensively wield the spoon and from time to time seek to modify the startling flavours it yields — nor even those who, impatient to enjoy the finished product, pile on the fuel and wilfully shake the pepper pot.

Such analogies apart, a picture of the modern West Coast may best be observed through the eyes of the average white Coaster, he who affects and is affected by his particular tropic environment while still remaining only an instrument of higher policy; in large ways his authority, compared with that of his predecessors, is limited; in small ways his influence is extensive, for by his pattern the Africans within his orbit

are apt to judge all white men. It goes without saying that, in fact, there is no such person as the 'average' Coaster whom home people may still imagine the sun-tanned topeed Carruthers-type of African adventure stories. Coasters vary as much in looks, tastes, prejudices, enthusiasms and mental calibre as do ordinary men. What they share for certain is their West African background, and what they cannot avoid is a necessity for compromise, not only in their dealings with Africans and each other, but in the details of their own private lives.

In the first place, because of his Northern physique and his deep roots in his own homeland, the white man is never likely to become a part of West Africa. Always he has, as it were, but one foot in the Coast, and his most anxious personal compromising begins as soon as he finds himself with family responsibilities. His wife, for reasons of health or disposition, may not take kindly to the Coast, and so may join her husband only for parts of his tours. If there are children she may consider it her duty to stay with them at home or to divide her time between husband and children; so the conscientious mother-wife suffers conflicts of loyalty and emotion. These must in part be shared by her husband whose domestic compromises are saddened by partings whose only salve is his self-regard as a breadwinner with a Coast salary larger than that which he might earn at home.

In any case, for married and single alike, 'leave' breaks across the threads of Coast living and for two or three months embraces an entirely different kind of existence — the 'home' as opposed to the 'Coast' variety. Always one mode of living shadows the other. During his Coast tour the white man maintains by air-mail letters, newspapers and relayed wireless news, strong ties with his native land which is his true base. At home, on leave, however, he is not quite as other settled men; he is a Coaster recently arrived, shortly to de-

part, a little out of touch, a trifle exotic in character, a visitor in a number of half-way houses, a man with not fully understood tropical interests and habits. Never, therefore, can he be entirely one person, whole and complete. He has, instead, two circles, and very often two sets of entirely contradictory nostalgias. At times in West Africa his wistful thoughts may dwell on all the charming details which fickle memory summons to constitute a picture of 'home', the desirable haven which is all that the Coast is not. Nostalgic, perhaps, for London, he reminisces on occasions buoyant with auld lang syne, and Town expeditions rich in theatre-going, restaurant-partying, and the many savoured pleasures of all his 'leaves'. If he is a countryman his thoughts may linger on pastoral simplicities, the good feel and smell of English earth, the bounty of orchards and the clean perspectives of serene pastures. There is no end to the delicious and detail-perfect vignettes, urban or Arcadian, which can compose the pipe dreams of the homesick Man of the Tropics while he sits meditative on his veranda, three thousand miles from where he longs to be.

And yet — at home once more, is his experience unadulterated joy? In a maidless household there are unaccustomed chores and a standard of living which lacks the surface polish of a steward-and-cook-equipped ménage; no African servitor folds his clothes or waits at his table or runs his errands; he is 'massa' to no one, and he feels a little diminished in stature. Laughingly his friends may chide him for being 'spoiled', or they may even callously fail to understand his need for so long a holiday while they are still at work. The robust character of home friends and neighbours may alarm him when without a qualm they brave, by habit, jostling bus queues, set out for long sturdy walks or, stoic in cardigans and thick woollen underwear, endure fogs and frosts and east winds which shrivel the long-term Coaster's spirit. Then, crouched beside his northern fireplace or hotel-room

radiator, he may half-guiltily look forward to his sailing date. The Coast presents itself — again in the light of wishful remembering — as desirable, as a place where he belongs, gilded with sunshine, set about with low-slung canvas chairs and easily obtainable whisky-sodas, cosy and gay in its white coteries, unrestricted in its horizons and generally abundant in easy-going creature comforts. It is small wonder, in view of the alternating powerful pulls from the south and north that most confirmed Coasters suffer from mild schizophrenia. The most honest of them will freely admit that it is an incurable state of affairs which makes them regard 'Coast' both as exile and escape, and home as the source where, in the final analysis, the heart is and always will be.

It is common knowledge (true or false) that in times not so far distant the white man — sensitively bred brother, one imagines, to the he-man Carruthers-type — as a matter of course dressed for dinner in the jungle. Bow-tied, cuff-linked and impeccable in his great loneliness, he yet preserved a façade of Empire; he was the exponent of the 'done thing', a personage to be respected by the simple savage from whom he stood apart on a pedestal of higher culture and superior intellect. His actual furnishings were simple; he 'roughed it' because he had no alternative, and his life cannot have been enviable. Yet he had — far less than today's Coaster — reason for temporizing and compromising. He understood, or thought he understood, the character of the Africans with whom he had dealings; in his palavers with them, as in his general relations, he was clear as to his standing and theirs. As in an old-fashioned household, everyone's peace of mind depended on a general understanding and formal observance of the importance of 'place'; in accordance with firmly laid down standards of behaviour, rewards and rebukes were administered. The former were accepted with gratitude; the latter rarely occasioned open rebellion. The pattern,

while lacking in subtlety, was at least exact and provided a certain amount of general satisfaction.

Today's Coaster may attempt to maintain some such manner of tidy pattern, but even those who are old hands at its contrivance and upkeep confess that they are steadily losing ground. This is not surprising. Since the days of dinner jackets in the jungle the whole world has been lively with social revolution, and out of the ferment and reform its peoples have emerged with only a scornful regard for anyone's 'place'. Acts of expediency have gradually ousted the 'done thing'. Underdogs have learned that it is fashionable and moreover comparatively safe to nip at the heels of top-dogs. This being the state of affairs, there is little use now for anyone to waste time in lamenting the swift passing of the old systems, or to attempt to pursue the personal habits on which these were originally founded. What rests on everyone's hands and conscience is the problem of controlling, or fitting into, the new order.

In all of this, West Africa, having belatedly but energetically entered into the universal state of flux, now finds itself entirely à la mode — with its black and white peoples alike a little confused, uncertain but extremely aware of an altering African-European relationship whose implications cannot much longer be ignored. A few diehard white Coasters, especially those shortly due for retirement, do try to ignore them, on the principle that if you shut your eyes tight enough for long enough, the unpleasantness may not personally touch you. For the rest there is a gradual adaptation, a realization that the changing times demand — again — a talent for compromise, a faculty for tact, a new kind of patience. It is a testing time for the new



Coaster, whose best efforts are not likely to meet with any notable appreciation; just as it is a testing time for the new West African to whom sudden access of comparative independence can be in effect as dangerously intoxicating as it is valuably tonic.

The West African Situation, however, like national Situations the world over, does not hour by hour, day by day, obsess the thoughts of ordinary Coast Africans and Europeans; only those few who are most intimately concerned with its fostering and control are engaged in the constant close study of its variations in symptom and temperature. The rest merely go on living and working according to their tastes and ambitions. There are few people who can maintain a white heat of excitement about any Situation, especially when they are part of it and in any case can only view those aspects of it which most directly affect their own little lives. No matter what prevails, humans must work and eat and sleep, and occupy themselves with various minor attemptings and satisfyings, for it is these repetitive activities of which the lives of most are composed, and for many they are sufficient in themselves.

For the Coaster at work, Situation or 'social revolution' is often no more than a familiar backdrop to the staging of his daily bread-winning programme. His qualifications are not those of philosopher, sage or saint; at best he is likely to be only an experienced man of Government or commerce, or a well-trained technician — an ordinary white man, that is, with ordinary weaknesses and self-preoccupations. His initial interest in West Africa might just as well have been accorded to Siam or Brazil or some 'otherwhere' which fortuitously offered escape from his exasperations with the post-war austerities, taxations and housing shortages of his homeland — or palliative to his post-wartime Service wanderlust — or bedazzlement of higher pay and quicker promotion overseas. Perhaps, anxious to 'settle down', he

has plumped for a safe job with steady increments and a solid pension, and so in the interests of economic security, thrown in his lot and that of his family with the unknown Coast. But even for the most forward-thinking, a planned security of money does not always carry with it any security of happiness. While 'safe' jobs in West Africa are certainly stable in regularity of pay-cheques and positional up-gradings, their cramping effects on individuality can induce a particularly insidious conviction of frustration. Then it is that economic safety takes on the character of a self-imposed will-weakening imprisonment.

He who has so committed himself does not, as a rule, easily break his physically comfortable bonds to make a bid for independence. Too many arguments against this may restrain him: the pressures of family responsibility, children at school in England perhaps, and a wife accustomed to fairly high social standards — the paid 'leave' which allows for good holidays and Continental travel — and a certain feeling of 'position' which may be envied by home friends and approved by relations. All these factors may weigh against his occasional forceful resolve to jettison mere security for the more chancy adventure of seeking a truly self-fulfilling way of life (taxes, austerities and uncertainties notwithstanding) at home or elsewhere. If it turns out that he is in fact an out-and-out misfit whose Coast work means no more to him than routine money-making, he may in moments of disturbing prevision see the rest of his useful life as a succession of tours which sorely vex his spirit even while they provide some ballast for his bank account. And not always that. The upkeep of status and the expectation of reasonable pension can combine to dissipate his earnings surprisingly. 'Leaves', although fully salaried, can be costly in their eagerly anticipated pleasures. The Coasters' brief return to civilization's shopping marts, and two months of mobile home compensations for eighteen months' exile can

strain even a bridled budget. Nor is Coast town living itself so cheap as is sometimes imagined. The wages of cooks and stewards have risen steeply in proportion to West Africa's own increased cost of living; imported goods, considered as necessities in most households, cost more with every rise in production and freight charges; keeping up with the Coast Joneses can be likened to riding on an expensive merry-go-round from which, for reasons of pride or habit, no one (not even the pace-making, purse-light Jones) can bring himself to dismount.

So the misfit Coaster, quite apart from viewing his life's work with a jaded eye, may be disappointed also in the fading of what once appeared a rosy financial outlook. What strength or weakness is it then which holds him where he is, deeply dissatisfied but tenacious, stiff of upper lip but inwardly rebellious? It may be that the mentally enervating Coast climate has robbed him of confidence in himself as competitor in the open market at home where his tropical experience will avail him little and may even prejudice him as a man 'out of touch'. Even to the Coaster who honestly realizes that he is wrongly placed in West Africa, the uncongenialities he deplores may be preferable to the northern hardships he so sensitively imagines. The prospect of ceasing to be 'somebody' and braving the anonymity of the hustling crowd may well frighten him. The severance of Coast connections (for it is severance — there is no half-way method) entails departure, not merely from a job, but from a whole way of life. The man faced with the ancient problem of whether to risk present consolidations for some greater measure of inner content (perhaps only ephemeral, perhaps never attainable) can easily be encouraged to believe that his unhappy state of mind is mostly due to some species of recurrent tropic neurosis which temporarily drains his stamina and confuses his clear thinking. The tricky human equation is not solved by this conclusion and may never be.

But this is the answer which suits many; an answer which one resigned Coaster summed up for Bill and me, while adding lightly, 'Q.E.D., reductio ad absurdum, ad infinitum, ad nauseam — and more fools we.'

So much for misfits, the square pegs who lose power to forsake the round holes in which they have become so firmly wedged; of these there are many in every walk of life in every land; they are not peculiar to West Africa. But West Africa is a country where emotion is apt to get out of hand. Its spiritual temperatures fluctuate and its atmospheres breed radical exaggerations. The same qualities of logic, true stability, temperance and moderation thrive best in cooler climes. It is no invention of adventure-story fiction that the white man who lives townily near the equator subjects himself to stresses from without and within against which his resolve may prove totally ineffective and his powers of judgment (particularly in relation to his own conduct) insufficient. At work he must accommodate his mind to other minds which are foreign in their thought processes and not easily readable in their exact intentions — for it must be remembered that his most earnestly desired goals are not always those of his dark-skinned colleagues or servants who have their own ambitions which they must seek in their own fashion. His pace is not necessarily theirs, nor even his language; his ethics spring from a different system. Those who surround him are sensitive to any implication of 'difference' from him, while yet they strive to emulate the outer forms of his manners and methods. Because the old West Africa has Westernization thrust upon it, the new Coast now seeks to model itself on Western standards. So the white man, wishful



or not, capable or not, for the role of educator, is willy-nilly its instructor. And if sometimes in this regard he proves half-hearted or a failure, the fault may lie in the fact that he feels no responsibility either for the irrevocable acts of his white forebears on the Coast, or even for the current decisions of his top-level contemporaries whose edicts sway the destinies of Empire. He is, more often than not, just a man with a job whose private concerns are all that he can manage.

And sometimes even these prove intractable by virtue of their geographic placement. If, as is frequently the case, he must account to a home office for his business' progress, he is likely to be constantly irritated by the incomprehensions and criticisms (real or imagined) voiced by people far away from the equator, who can never be made to understand properly why West African commerce cannot be managed on lines as clear-cut and reasonable as their own. If he has dealings with machinery he must for ever be on guard against a climate whose forces of corrosive damp and choking dust are inimical to even the most expert engineering. And if he is a member of some Government department he often becomes a harassed attendant to files and forms compact of papery regulation and unyielding formality which keep his pen busy while slowly they stifle his natural human instincts. As humble servant of his papers he is ridiculed for stupidity or blamed for callousness; and when in self-defence he produces the evidence of his adamant printed stationery he may be rebuked for despotic inflexibility or cowardly subservience. Pity indeed the Man with the Files in a land where circumstances are for ever altering cases, and where today's apparently blameless and workable blueprints are likely to appear in tomorrow's critical light as ill-considered or even ingloriously idiotic.

West Africa for the white man may be called the Land of Too Much and Too Little, excessive in its human and mechanical predicaments, too intense in spheres both of

'shop' and social life, abundant in fleshpots of a kind, but at starvation level in its provisions for general culture and spiritual grace. Of vitality-exhausting heat, rain and drought there is too much; of even-paced energy, moderate reasoning and real joy in living there is too little. Of trivial fatigues and frustrations there are too many; of heart-lifting satisfactions and mental stimuli there are too few. In West Africa's very soil certain plants cannot be stemmed in their lush invasions



of the landscape; others, no matter how apparently suitable or painstakingly nurtured, cannot be persuaded to root or flourish. Comparably, while an almost uncontrollable speed and force imbues certain features (not all desirable) of the country's life, a kind of blank resistance often defies other well-intentioned introductions. These opposites operate both in great and small matters, and the white man who is conscious of them as an integral part of West Africa's climatic and personal character, is not surprised to find the workings of his own private household likewise affected.

Those who are not closely acquainted with his situation may consider it strange that the modern Coast town European should ever dare to complain that he is not domestically in richest clover. For has he not a sizeable house, a well-stocked pantry and a staff of servants? Have not he and his wife freedom from manual work? Have they not opportunity for hours of leisure-time ease and for the kind of social entertaining which only the presence of cook and waiters-at-table will allow? Have they not, in effect only to say to this or that biddable minion, 'Do' (and he doeth), or 'Go' (and he goeth)? To all these questions (except on occasion,

the last) the Coaster is obliged to answer 'Yes' — so on the face of it, his Englishman's home may seem to be a delightfully arranged castle wherein he and his lady ought to live in an atmosphere of extraordinary gaiety or tranquillity, depending upon their personal tastes.

From what Bill and I observed in Black Man's Town, in the houses of our friends and later in our own establishment, such a state of tropical domestic bliss is far from general. Oddly enough, while a rewarding feeling of 'at-homeness' can be produced from the most meagre material properties, it does not always follow that softness of cushions, abundance of china, taste in colour-scheming or presence of servants will create any heartfelt satisfaction. A true home is much more than the sum of its physical parts; its sustaining values depend more upon its intangibles than its mechanics; fundamentally it is a shelter not only against the natural elements but against the whole outside world; it is a place wherein its owners may find peace and privacy and from which they may with greater heart make their jousts and sallies on fortune. Some have it that because of instincts deep-seated in their northern character the British are exacting in some of their basic home requirements. While they may admire labour-saving devices and are not averse to being waited on, neither gadgets nor servants are of prime importance in their domiciles. What they value is a privacy-ensuring façade (be it hedge or fence or even close-drawn curtain), a sturdy structure, and a hearth which centres all. On these values, depending upon their means or originality, they may elaborate, but the principle remains the same: to shut out the tumultuous world and to provide the human spirit not only with breathing space but with small congenial attentions for its necessary restoration and further growth.

In West Africa's European houses there can be no such withdrawal; the Coast comes indoors. Against the depreda-

tions of mould and rust, clothing and leather goods are kept in cupboards dusted with DDT and fitted with ever-glowing electric light bulbs; against malaria the daily prophylactic is taken and doors and windows are carefully screened against mosquitoes; against the heat there is every possible draught-inducing contrivance, and against boredom there is automatic provision (in drinks-cupboard and larder) for social entertainment. Then, too, there are the keys which lock away the tempting imports, the tins of milk and packets of sugar, the cigarettes and valuables, beyond reach of hands — potentially guilty or guiltless — which on general principles are never completely trusted. And there is the watchful eye on pantry, cookhouse and wood pile, on market-book and 'fridge, and even on the washman's soap supply. In such precautions are revealed the householder's permanent state of defensiveness against a multitude of little climatic and human dangers which, if ignored, might work havoc with his material furnishings and mental comfort.

Therefore it may be said that in a Coast town home a truly home-like atmosphere requires the most careful stage-management and maintenance. Because of West Africa's basic unsuitability to the European's special needs, the white man's modern household is apt to be based on artifice — that is to say, on goods and services necessary to *his* idea, and not West Africa's, of a desirable domesticity. Yet in this he is far from self-sufficient. While he may arrange the physical structure of his dwelling to his own liking, he must still depend for its upkeep on the paid assistance of African workers — cook and steward, washman and gardener (or odd-jobber) and 'watch-night', whose duties bring a pervasive element of Africa into the very heart of his variously beleaguered citadel. The idea, of course, is merely to employ attendants for the domestic machinery: a washer of dishes and maker of beds, a preparer of food, a cleanser of clothing, a weeder of lawn, and a keeper of the night peace. But every

servant is a being in his own right, not merely a dark-skinned robot, and while he may be controllable in method of duty, there remains a residue of personality which is beyond anyone's power to organize or alter. It is on this incalculable residue that the household's fundamental serenity may eventually depend.

In present-day Coast townships whose populations, black and white, are in process of rapid growth and flux, jobs are as easily changeable as loyalties are frail. In days gone by, and even in bush now, the African who worked in a European house was often an appreciated member of the family in the sense that in return for the trust and consideration of his employers he gave more than ordinary salaried service. In such a case master and servant enjoyed a rapport based on a mutual dependence. Such relationships are nowadays more rare. The town 'boy' is less likely to approve of the white race to whom, for money, he ministers. If he has worked in a number of white households his intelligence may be sharply observant, and obviously so. His manner, while generally impersonal, may yet betray glimpses of the private busy life he leads beneath his veneer of obedient stewardship. In conversation with master or mistress he may withhold an expected smile or permit some fleeting shadow (even the shade of a shadow) of contempt or mockery in his face — something too slight and transient for rebuke or even comment, but most subtly damaging to European peace of mind. So is caused a faint ripple of unease within the vulnerable white citadel, for all that its comfort remains static and well-ordered. The white 'Madam' may return to her embroidery or book, the white 'Massa' to the consoling pages of his 'plane-delivered newspaper, while both wait for the little disturbance of atmosphere to subside and be forgotten. 'What exactly *happened*,' each may privately ponder, 'nothing or a great deal? — No, it was really nothing.'

Human nature is indeed hard to satisfy. Most white

'Madams' newly arrived in the tropics are at first delighted to be free of the time-taking domestic chores which are the lot of the northern housewife; she anticipates joy in her house and her staff of servants whom quite likely she innocently imagines as those silent, fantastically efficient dark automatons of fiction who materialize like genii at the clap of a hand to do her slightest bidding. Such a picture is doubtless most pleasing to any woman in dark northern December as, aproned and sweatered, she stokes the boiler or peels the lunch-time potatoes. And for a time, in her tropic house she may enjoy what appears to be a far easier régime, infinitely more conducive to what the magazines call 'gracious living'. All is novel and intriguing, until human nature restlessly begins to look for and find a few flaws in the new order. For one thing, the establishment may begin to feel a little overcrowded, considering that it exists to accommodate only two people: Massa and Madam. It lacks cosiness and individuality because so many rules must be followed as faithfully by their originators as by the servants. Times and rituals must be laid down for breakfast, lunch, tea, dinner, and the performance of various tasks, and these times and rituals must be adhered to lest steward or cook or both be 'spoiled' or be confused by flexible arrangements which in their eyes are merely contradictory. Madam's dinner, planned early in the morning before her cook's departure to market, must be duly eaten at the prescribed time for its consumption; her whimsical late-day preference for sandwiches and coffee, instead, may be considered either eccentric or weak-minded and may bring upon her some loss of respect. If she normally requires tea at four she will hesitate, no matter how thirsty, to ask for it at three. If as a rule her elevenses are of coffee, she will not



blithely request orange juice — not, at least, if she is an average coward who, having carefully explained her household schedules, fears even temporarily to revoke her dicta. Rules and set times there must be to maintain discipline and keep the machinery running smoothly — but when rules and times obscure all other considerations and rob the house of its minor freedoms, Madam is apt to rebel inwardly and to lament what looks very much like her serious loss of a beautifully free and elastic domestic independence. Then may Madam, hoist on her own petard, wish herself back in her own northern kitchen where, if she felt like it, she could eat kippers at midnight, or paint the kitchen chairs red before breakfast, or indulge any number of absurd but somehow important little cravings of which the present routine takes no cognizance. In her Coast house, if Madam wishes to save her face and keep her dignity, she must suppress her foolish idiosyncrasies and endure her frustrations.

Although it is dangerous to generalize on such a topic, it may be that enforced leisure and the number of 'shalt nots' which surround her together stimulate the white woman's social instincts in the tropics to an unusual pitch of competitiveness and ingenuity. Basically the social life (which does not normally extend into African circles) may have its primary *raison d'être* in white cohesion and consolidation, and in an extension of that Club Feeling which Bill and I observed to be a psychological necessity for the majority of Coast Europeans. The Club Feeling has to do, as we have already seen, with the importances of 'belonging' and having access to the safety valves of white good fellowship; at its best it makes Coast life, for some, worth while; on its ordinary levels it at least satisfies clannish inclinations. In the old days of smaller white circles it served as a refuge from West Africa's massed pidgin voice and primitive habit. Then even two or three Coasters grouped about a meal-table or a

decanter felt the larger and better for the reinforcement of each other's company and common background. Bush problems would recede while the diminutive circle spun its strong Club magic; Africa's enormities of distance and difficulty contracted a little and tensions slacked, while loneliness and the ever-lurking fear of personal inadequacy might never have been.

Today's European Coast gatherings are of rather a different order — prompted less by personal fear of solitude than by general considerations of colonial duty and assertion of individual status. But the 'we' and 'they' separation persists as in the old days when 'we' were a powerfully governing minority and 'they' were the subject 'natives'; now the position, and indeed the capacity of both have vastly changed. Today's attitude of defence ('we' against 'them') is still maintained, even when it is not admitted, because today's Coasters in the main do not care for the present comeuppance of the erstwhile 'natives'. With the publication of every new political edict in favour of nationalistic progress, and with the world's every fresh realization of dependence upon West Africa's rich resources, the need for co-operation between 'us' and 'them' is implicit. Yet because of assorted prejudices beyond curing by even the most reasonable politics or economics, 'we' and 'they' remain far distant from each other so far as any valuable understandings are concerned. On the surface there may be amicable pretensions, and in public speeches there may be noble words and gestures, but still in ordinary life the gap continues.

In Coast social conversation few outright opinions on this state of affairs are voiced. The topic is prickly with possible embarrassment and apt to precipitate those 'pro' and 'anti' references productive of hard feelings and upsetting to hostesses whose whole aim is to create a richness of European amity and a restful homogeneity of attitude within their drawing-rooms. This social effort is naturally escapist and

it is usually shared by the guests who, having concerned themselves all day long with West Africa in some form or other, are usually only too glad to ignore it in the evening. This they do best in company which by tacit agreement sheds undue seriousness and unitedly concentrates on amusing itself. If 'shop' creeps in, that is admissible. The wives bow to its inevitability, even though 'shop' segregates the party's sexes, huddles the males together in off-duty but still possibly useful conclave, and leaves the females to mull over those comfortable homey subjects which are all the more palatable for a light seasoning of raconteur's paprika or even an innocent confidential soupçon of reputation-blasting T.N.T.

The casual observer of any such occasion might assume from the separate male-female groupings (which tend to operate during some part of the evening) that the wives are not greatly concerned with their husband's business affairs and that, in fact, their general influence on the Coast is not particularly strong. Such an assumption is far from correct. The place of white women in West Africa deserves closer scrutiny; offhand notions of their idleness and/or frivolity are not strictly fair. True, the part they play in the whole Coast scheme of life is mostly indirect, for their wifely code rarely permits their interference with or even participation in their husbands' working schedules. But as a rule they are far from disinterested, and often their unflagging determinations and quick intuitions are valuable in the assistance of spouse towards promotion. In any land where social and working spheres overlap, the power of a woman intelligently alert and of pleasing personality is a force to be reckoned with. Her role is that of tactful publicity agent for her husband; by methods swiftly adaptable to opportunity it is her job to win friends and influence people who are, as she considers it, 'useful'. In this regard she is anything but idle or frivolous; she is thoroughly wide-awake. No one knows

better than such a modestly ambitious wife how much easier it is to deal with a Christian name than with a 'Mr.' or an 'Esq.' No one appreciates more fully the values of reciprocal aid in a small community where exchanges of favour and invitations to dinner are important aspects of white brotherhood and sisterhood — and not only important but civilizing. The man who is able casually, over coffee and liqueurs, to 'have a word' with one whom otherwise he would face across the barricade of protecting desk and official manner, is likely to obtain the desired result with the least possible wear and tear. The best publicity-agent wives, even those who subscribe to formality, are experts in the arranging of such unobtrusive shortcuts to the heart of human nature.

The chief occupations of the average white Coaster's wife are, in fact, much as they would be anywhere: home-making and husband-helping, wifely concerns whose principles are little affected by geography. The 'wives' do not consider themselves in any way responsible for what is happening in West Africa. Many of them are acquainted with the Coast only by marriage. Often their interest in its people and problems stops not far distant from the thresholds of their tropical dwellings; they do not feel it socially necessary to associate with African women or to exert themselves in any way to foster an African-European *entente cordiale*. Nor even do they as a rule evince much curiosity about the bush peoples and the teeming wilder life beyond the township's boundaries. To many, West Africa means simply a house, a husband's occupation, a temperamental hot climate and a European social minuet whose steps must be carefully learned. For this, in view of wifely responsibilties and personal uncertainties, they can scarcely be blamed. The township has its fixed pattern of European existence and its unwritten laws to which the newcomer wife must subscribe if she is not to stand out as an eccentric or a dabbler in matters beyond her experience or intelligence.

The wonder of it is that still she makes her presence strongly felt in a great number of indirect ways. Not a few of the recent changes in the face of West Africa may be attributed to her natural capacity for domestic and social enterprise within her own sphere. As the Scots have it, 'many a mickle maks a muckle'. When numbers of white wives persist in their expectations of better cookhouses and bathrooms, more imported foodstuffs and superior domestic arrangements in general — when choruses of wifely voices protest, exhort and advise on such matters — when brides are tearful or helpmeets adamant, husbands who feel the first impacts of these determinations and criticisms must needs bestir themselves constructively on levels which range from the humblest to the highest. The aims of such reformative women (who, after all, are intent only on the praiseworthy business of making their Coast houses as homelike as possible) are based on a reasonable assessment of West Africa's drawbacks and dangers: its malarial mosquitoes, food-spoiling heat and humidity, cookhouse inadequacies and water shortages, ant invasions, germs and discomforts which must be faced and if possible remedied. To this end, the wives maintain, 'improvements' must be introduced and living made not only safer but more comfortable, to such effect that the old 'White Man's Grave' stigma becomes old-fashioned and no longer applicable. Overseas employers with important Coast interests have learned to endorse this ambition. A Coast employee works better when his wife is with him and content, and his home is both healthy and serene in management; he finds his tours more agreeable and his increased efficiency makes for larger overseas dividends. The morale of today's Coaster is nowadays carefully studied by his astute superiors; if its upkeep is expensive, the expense is often easily afforded.

Apropos of the town Coaster's increasingly high standard of living, no one argues that its adjuncts are other than arti-

ficial superimpositions on the original structure. The improvements are bound to be artificial graftings, as are all the white man's introductions: his language and his habits, ethics and money system, all the luggage which, bit by bit, he brought with him to a raw and hostile country. Only by reliance on artifice has the white man survived in West Africa and grown in force of numbers. Only by his Western ingenuity has he outwitted the Coast's climatic animosity and harnessed its people to his needs. In all this he has striven bravely against what at first appeared to be impossible odds. And now he has on his hands and conscience a new West Africa where the European body may appreciate many more comforts than formerly, while the European mind is startled by the varieties of by-products which are the result of his slow, well-argued 'improvements'. These by-products (of resurgent African character, ambition, independence) do not fit into the average Coaster's scheme of personal well-being; they have a disturbing and mettlesome life of their own.

For the indirect development of these wayward by-products European women have only latterly shared in responsibility. Their role has been to add a finishing touch to the *faits accomplis* (not at all united or similarly motivated) of trading firms and Government departments, banks, missions and shipping companies, to cite but a few influential bodies. In their different pioneering ways these and others have provided the Coast with motor cars, typewriters and Western food and clothing, to say nothing of literacy and access to a world of high-powered modern marvels; perhaps even more important, they have given to the Coast by personal example, a portrayal of the white man, to whom these innovations are normal necessities even though they by no means faithfully represent all that go to make up his personal culture and tradition. If the African, admiring and envying, has sought to experiment, mind and body,

with the uses of the white man's novelties (while yet he has had little contact with the fragile uncommercial abstracts of white culture), he cannot with justice be sharply criticized either for his experimentings, his remarkably speedy adaptations or his incomplete assimilations.

Yet he is so criticized, for on the Coast the most doleful European *cri de cœur* amounts to this: that the town African is 'spoiled', brash, too big for his boots and ambitious beyond his possibilities: that in natural courtesy and working zeal he lags far behind his untutored bush brother; and that as a person he is unreliable and unlikeable. Daily his shortcomings are related as evidence of what-the-Coast-is-coming-to, even by those Coasters who, as instruments of Westernization, are busy filling their Companies' warehouses with European goods and looking forward to expansions and greater profits — or superintending valuable export shipments of cocoa or manganese — or administering gold-mining operations — or loading timber in ships' holds — or performing any of those economically advantageous duties for which they draw their salaries or percentages. Brought down to its final essence, the Coasters' plaint might be this: that West Africa could be a fairly decent place for the white man if only it were not populated by West Africans of the present-day kind: if only the amenities, commerce and newly learned skills might continue without the modern politics and restlessness and trade unions of the Coast problem children, its indigenes. How happy life could be, maintains the Coaster, if only we had a Coast unfretted and unhampered by the African Attitude.

To some, this lack of logic may seem so deplorable in its myopic refusal to face the true facts, that sympathy instantly swings towards the African. Yet in this quarter sweetness and light and clarity of vision are far from prevalent. The Coast African, restless indeed and much preoccupied with politics, trade unions and a morass of indignations and

resentments, is all too apt to make *his cri de cœur* a bitter lament against the whole white race, whom he considers unscrupulously exploitive, hypocritical, parasitic and possessed of a dual Blimp-and-Bligh complex. As capable as the white Coaster of violent exaggeration and poverty of reasoning, the black Coaster often seriously proclaims that his transformed country could indeed be Utopia if only it could be rid of the machinations and obstructions of the white man.

There are still parts of the world where observers may enhance their notebooks by colourful reportage on a remote people's way of life — their unique habits and customs and the natures of their outlandish totems. In such comparatively untrodden territories all is fresh and plain; barbaric perhaps but stimulatingly 'different', antagonistic even, but adventurous. One journeys there (with difficulties which spice the account of the effort); one views; one returns to state the out-of-the-way facts and to paint the strange picture in primitive colours which give everyone a thrill of vicarious exploration. Once upon a time the whole of West Africa yielded just such satisfying material to its strenuous investigators. It was everywhere rich in Juju and dark practice, salutary in some of its simplicities, vivid (albeit uncomfortable) in local sensations, stark in its traditional reasonings — and generally strong stuff for strong stomachs. All its pictures came clearly, sharp in perspective and bold in outline, entirely distinct from civilization's monochromes. True, West Africa remained mysterious, but its mysteries were



mostly physical and, fortunately for the outer world's peace of mind, self-contained within the boundaries of the Dark Continent.

Nowadays these boundaries are easy to cross and the modern mysteries of West Africa are everyone's business. The observer intent on the truth finds himself contemplating with increasing puzzlement the habits and customs (some traditional, some the products of expediency) of a new-style African people and a new-style set of European Coasters. To study the condition of the first without reference to the state, mental and physical, of the second, is to arrive at no conclusion of any value. But where to begin and where to end, where to cease dovetailing and comparing, and where to find durable facts that will not melt away into a fog of conjecture or be banished with a terse 'not proven'? Where to blame and where to praise? And how, for that matter, to see the picture at all; since far from showing itself in those old-time clear-cut terms with which armchair travellers are so familiar, it changes month by month, as sensitive as a chameleon and as illusory as a diagram on wet sand.

It is not to be wondered that observers nowadays return from their surveys of West Africa with a variety of impressions which have very little in common. Those who have visited it in a robust and ready-for-anything frame of mind may be of the opinion that the Coast is 'a good-enough place', with cheap drinks, a convivial white society, a wealth of export goods, a high standard of living (both European and African) and wonderful possibilities commercially. Others, afflicted with hyper-acute sensitivities, may sentimentalize the African as a 'poor lost child', whose innocence has been violated and tradition despoiled, a man who *because* he is dark-skinned must be emotionally and shrilly defended against even the most everyday harms and temptations. Another category, sensitive in a different way, may return from the Coast convinced that West Africa is uniformly un-

pleasant, alcoholic and gossipy, germ-ridden, danger-beset, physically irksome and mentally moribund. Because all of these conclusions bear the little truth which is tantamount to none, the nature of the 'real West Africa' remains as problematical as before.

Yet if in all this West African merging, superimposing, assimilating, altering, complaining, compromising, tolerating, developing and resenting, there is to be found anywhere a core of absolute necessity, it is this: that European and West African have a great need, each for the other's co-operation, friendship and trust in a world whose once formidable boundaries are now no more than faint lines of demarcation and where the need for unity has never been more urgent. West Africa and the white population who represent European Coast interests may be likened to partners in a haphazard marriage which neighbours view with misgivings as they overhear its acrimonious bickerings and try to judge its simultaneously voiced grudges. Simplified to its furthest extent, the West African Situation resolves itself into a plain enough question: how can the partners continue to live together — not in a state of impossible bliss or starry-eyed devotion, but ordinarily, reasonably, in maturity of mind? Ill-matched they may seem. Their present relationship may appear as confused as was their past history. But live together they must, for the only alternatives for both are grave and equal losses.

CHAPTER VIII

UP THE CREEKS

AFTER dinner, from the dining-room in the main building, Bill and I walked back to our chalet. Around the small tables on the veranda behind us sat the usual complement of resthouse transients; in the billiard room a game was in progress. Ahead of us, looking out upon the dark shapes of the cars drawn up in the driveway, the chalet windows made a twinkling crescent of private lights. The April night was heavy with warmth and brilliant with tropic stars; from beyond the silent lawns and the darkly-massed trees came the sea's familiar blurred noise of surf on deserted beaches. On guard at the foot of the palm tree which was his nightly station the old watch-night made a tireless muted twanging on his home-made guitar. As we passed he jumped to his feet and saluted Army fashion as was his custom in expectation of greeting and a few cigarettes for the long night hours.



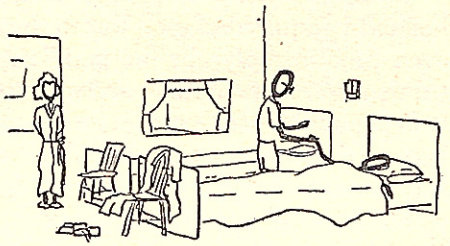
In this pre-rainy season's April Bill and I viewed our winter leave in England as a fast-receding memory, for now, only a few weeks after our return, it was as if we had always lived in a resthouse chalet in Black Man's Town. But the past months held their proofs of change and action. Now there was another desk in the harbour office, and a European assistant to Bill. Francis, Ansah and Solomon were by this time long-term employees well-versed in their duties. The

site for permanent office and living premises had been chosen, and already on our way to and from the harbour we were able to admire the rough concrete structure which day by day took on the shape of a building with virgin rooms and stairways, plastered walls and solid floors. According to the Scots contractor — who needed all his native resolution to combat his human and material problems — the outlook was hopeful. If the rains held off and the African masons and carpenters maintained their pace we might expect to move in sometime in June — or July — or August.

With this prospect in mind, and the office in good hands, Bill made plans for a timber-investigating trip entailing a four weeks' cargo-boat journey from Accra to Lagos and up the Niger estuaries to Sapele. Since these plans did not take into account any possibility of Bill succumbing to malaria, it was as well that they were laid well in advance so that, in fact, Bill was able to recover in time for our departure. His fever began in the usual way with a slight loss of *joie de vivre*, a faintly critical attitude to the carefree enthusiasms and facile witticisms of friends and neighbours. Thence it degenerated, in a matter of two or three hours, to a wholesale bodily ache, a physical chill and mental bleakness — and an abrupt rise in temperature. That so frail an insect sprite as the female anopheles mosquito can fell and render powerless a normally vigorous twelve-stone constitution always seems surprising and discouraging. The victim feels that nature has played on him a joke in singularly bad taste, as if unkindly proving that man is not nearly so powerful or all-directing as he imagines. One little mosquito uses its mite of venom against him, and the man is transformed from a hale and optimistic being into a heavy-eyed creature limply sweating, as helpless as a new-born infant. When one evening Bill's temperature rose to 104°, hospitalization seemed, in my view, preferable to treatment in the chalet, but to this wiser course he would not agree. A mosquito

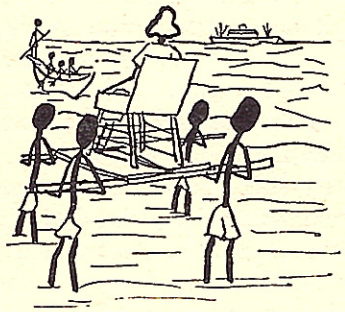
might manage to render him horizontal, he maintained, but not in a hospital.

Having done all that was possible for the patient, I settled that night to a Florence Nightingale vigil in our chalet sitting-room, consoled somewhat by my private knowledge of a chalet neighbour's thoughtful offer to drive Bill willy-nilly to hospital at any hour should our thermometer's reading override Bill's stubbornness. Very late the same solicitous neighbour knocked to inquire of the patient's state, and entered the bedroom to find Bill exactly as he had been for the past four hours, unnaturally pink and comatose beneath his pile of blankets. As the visitor approached his bedside Bill did not stir. 'We ought to take his pulse,' said the kind friend and proceeded to search for Bill's wrist beneath the coverlet. At this a flicker of animus, a shadow of resistance crossed Bill's features even though his eyes were as tightly shut as the opossum's when for protection it feigns death. 'Your pulse, old boy,' appealed the visitor, at last (after what appeared to be a silent struggle) firmly securing Bill's wrist and holding it while he studied his watch expertly. Then Bill took his hand away, opened one eye and scowled. 'What in heaven's name do you think you'll do with it now you've got it?' he demanded ungratefully. 'He's quite all right, really,' I told the friend hastily. 'A difficult patient, your husband,' complained the friend, withdrawing, a trifle hurt, from the sick bed. 'Difficult certainly,' I agreed with wifely pride as I ushered him out. I did not add that this was of great cheer to me, who knew from what had just transpired that Bill was rallying fast, stung by the indignities of pulse-



taking and his realization of the hospital plot, into the beginning of a speedy recovery.

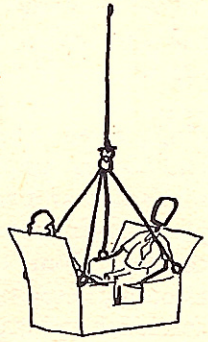
Some days later we stood on the shaly beach at Accra looking out at a choppy white-crested sea whereon, some distance out, our waiting cargo vessel rode at anchor. A shipping line official told us we should be conveyed to its side by surf-boat, and thence by 'mammy chair' be hoisted up on deck. The surf-boat was waiting; its crew of ten paddlers, nude except for loin cloths, held its weight steady against the inrushing waves. Wooden armchairs were brought, and in these Bill and I, seated stately and upright, were bumpily carried the short watery distance and deposited amidships.



'Roughish out there. You won't be sick?' the official belatedly inquired of me. But to this solicitude there was not even time to reply, for the paddlers, their strong legs wetly shining, were already inboard with three-pronged scarlet and yellow paddles at the ready, and we were immediately under way. It was an exhilarating journey — twenty minutes of spray and movement and noise while all around us the green water rose and tumbled. We climbed its green hillocks and glissaded into its valleys. The crew, seated on the gunwales, thrust prehensile toes into rope 'stirrups' and so braced, wielded their paddles with loud gruntings which quickly became a full-throated rhythmic chanting. 'Wirra-wirra-WA!' they shouted against the waves, 'Wirra-wirra-WA, wirra-Wa!' with occasional exhortative interpolation from the coxswain who steered standing, even when at an acute angle to the tilting sea. Spray blew against us; the

seas slopped over us; the hypnotic chanting dinned in our ears as Bill and I sat, fenced closely about by these sea-drenched freely sweating primitives who, like animated ebony statues larger than life, lustily propelled us shipwards. We were bemused and enthralled by the surging vitality which permeated the striving craft, tautened the straining muscles of the crew, and prompted the unearthly noises in their throats; it came to us, the pale-skinned unparticipating cargo, as something whose existence we had almost forgotten.

Suddenly the ship's flanks rose high above us. Faces looked down and orders were given. We leaned against the gunwales to allow for the manœuvring of the 'mammy chair' which descended on a chain from the upper deck and was skilfully guided into our wallowing boat. It was a stout wooden affair with a floor and two facing seats. In this we settled ourselves, not forgetting to 'dash' the coxswain with coins to which the crew gave instant absorbed attention. At a signal the winch chains rattled and we were swiftly chair-borne upwards, swung over the rails and set down gently on the iron deck. As we got to our feet an officer who turned out to be First Mate regarded me anxiously. 'Not sick?' he queried. 'No,' I told him truthfully. 'The ladies are sometimes,' he said with that slightly patronizing inflexion which mariners use when making a distinction between their obligatory human freight, especially female, and true seafolk of their own kind.



We were the ship's only white passengers. Everywhere on this well-appointed vessel was cleanliness and an impression of house-wifely Liverpudlian good management. Here, so little distance from West Africa's shores, was a little sea-borne world whose atmosphere had more to do with England

than with the Coast. We found it in our modern, well-furnished cabin and in the Liverpool-furnished lounge where a tray was set out for us with tea, buttered toast and raspberry jam, and the Chief Steward, a sociable Lancastrian in an immaculate white uniform, bade us welcome. Unpacked and refreshed we returned to the ship's rail to look down at the orderly commotion of discharging cargo. To the rattling of winch chains the slings came up freight-burdened from the holds and with remarkable precision brought their cumbrous weights to rest in the surf-boats which jostled and tossed below. It was an object lesson in exactness and energy, as in co-operation between modern and primitive method. As the slings swung heavily out and down, the boats were deftly jockeyed, so that without delay or damage the goods came to rest in their intended places. Shouting and scrambling, in a perpetual flux of motion, the crews loosed the slings, eased the burdens into position and distributed their bulk, while simultaneously fending off their craft from the ship's side and keeping their own place among their close-packed neighbours. Momently Bill and I anticipated loss or collision from this turmoil of split-second timing; but smoothly sling after sling conveyed the crates of sewing machines and cod liver oil, the cases of whisky (for a trading company), the boxes of Bibles (for a mission), the powdery bags of cement and the unwieldy sheets of galvanized iron, variously labelled 'Fragile' and 'Keep Away From Heat and Damp'. When laden to its fullest capacity a boat was paddled away shoreward to the waiting sheds, through the heavy sea which we knew to be both damp and hostile to fragility. Everywhere, like a song of defiance, the crews' chanting sounded over the surging waters; as one boat left the ship's side another took its place.

Then what had appeared to us inevitable did in fact happen. There was a cry from below, a potheration in one of the boats, a turning of heads and an abrupt stopping of

the winch. Someone had not been quick enough; a boy's leg had been struck by a heavy wooden box, and now the victim lay supported in the arms of his fellows. His face was contorted and teeth bared in pain, and across the coarse black skin of his damaged leg appeared a startling pale red brightness of blood. While still we felt the first shock of this observation, a launch chugged alongside the arrested boat. With a smooth dispatch that was born, perhaps, of practice, the injured one was lifted into it. Two of his crew accompanied him, one with rough tenderness holding his shoulders, the other supporting his legs. Promptly the launch drew away and instantly the winch, the slings and the crews resumed work.

The First Mate joined us at the rails. When we remarked on so calm and swift a method of handling accidents, he said hardily, 'We're always prepared. Somebody's bound to get hurt now and then. These fellows don't seem to mind taking the chance, even at sixpence a loaded trip. It works out to about eight trips, or four bob a day.'

We said we thought they gave good value for the money. 'Good enough,' said the First Mate. 'We can't complain. They know their job, and they're quite a happy bunch. Of course they wear out fast — don't live long.'

It seemed true enough, as we looked down at the seething activity which continued below, that the surf-boat men were indeed singularly free from care. One judged their extrovert *joie de vivre* to be constant with them; the restless sea was their familiar element, danger their daily challenge, and communal excitement their natural condition. Here, though we looked for it, was no sign of underdog resentment or sullen despair — only a massed ebullience, a crude clamour and dark power in cheap harness. The strong and wary survived; the weak or careless did not. The issues were simple and physical, those of the old Africa whose lusty lives were easily expendable, danger-fraught, and subject to harsh un-

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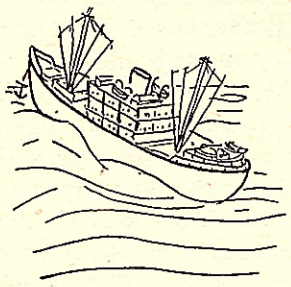
questioned laws. In the primitive surf-boat men who served the modern ship we saw whole and clear this ancient West Africa from which today's Coast townsmen have emerged — the business men, clerks and politicians who view with scorn their backward brothers, and have little in common with them save darkness of skin and quickly-roused blood. It seemed to us ironic that the barbaric-voiced paddlers, these husky labourers of small account in the new African society, should be so directly responsible in conveying to the shore the cement and whisky, the Bibles and cod liver oil and sewing machines which now were necessities to the changing Coast — and that these sinewy labourers should spend their days in such toilsome liaison between the western world and their own, which now so eagerly embraced its goods and habits. For sixpence a loaded trip they were engaged unwittingly in furthering their country's evolution and — it may eventually be seen — in changing the whole present pattern of international thought and economy. It takes more than slogans and 'movements' to alter the character of a race; the unsophisticated power of muscle and the importances of little coins cannot be discounted.

Holds battened, manifests completed, we weighed anchor that night for Lagos with eighty cheap-fare passengers who made their own overnight domestic arrangements with bed mats and cooking pots, piccans and luggage bundles, beneath a rigging of tarpaulins on the lower deck. Nightfall brought a quiet sea, as we steamed under a star-studded sky along the shore where only a few lonely lights pricked the velvet darkness. We dined informally with the ship's officers whose Captain was a vast man



whose girth and secret twinkle and chuckle fitted him for the role of a Santa Claus paterfamilias. The Chief Engineer, like so many, was a ruminant pipe-smoker, a wise-visaged solid man preoccupied with the engines, centre of his and the ship's life, that were his enormous pride. The First Mate, his foil, was jaunty, debonair and limber; the Wireless Operator a gentle cynic whose immaculate sanctum reflected his own tidy mathematical mind; the Chief Steward a seasoned optimist with a nautical veneer; and the Purser a young and eager novice, the fledgling of the ship's family.

Although all were in a sense Coasters in that they had made frequent voyages along the West Coast, their contacts with the African world were tenuous, confined to the ports. For them West Africa meant the low-lying steamy shores viewed from the rails, the marshy waterways and the grey dusty docks beside which their ship sweltered during the long hours of loading and discharging — white uniforms, black labour, and on the way homeward, seasonal freights of cocoa beans or palm oil, cotton and timber, and a handful of Coast passengers who played Bridge well or badly, or were glum or anecdotal, ill or gay — but in any case belonged only briefly to the vessel. For the ship had its own serious business life whose heart was in the north and whose parent brain was contained in a Liverpool building where men in grey suits hung up tweed overcoats and sat at office desks. To these, West Africa spelled a traffic of goods and invoices, bills of lading and percentages; the shadowy backdrop of palm, mangrove and mud village was there, but it was excusably taken for granted, for by their very nature grey-suited business men are more interested in commercial facts than Dark Continent romanticism. It was to this home body that the ship's crew owed allegiance. Dealing with the Coast from the comparative security of their floating northern home they retained their true selves, which were far less

nomadic than they imagined. Although their scene changed constantly, their northern aura remained unaffected; their charts were as clear as their purpose was positive. And because of this, for all that they had acquired some of the white man's Coast jargon and habit, they were not Coasters, but rather people in a category of their own.

We surmised this particularly from the Chief Steward whose most recent defence against shipboard boredom and the monotonies of the ports was his embroidery, which he performed with a patent gadget whose demonstration he had observed in a home department store. He showed us his work, seriously asking our opinion on a convoluted floral design with which he was adorning a cushion cover. 'Wool rugs the past four trips,' he said, 'and beauties, some of them. But the wife thought cushions'd make a change. Now would you say that these roses ought to be red or yellow, or some of both? Red, I thought, but will red go with the lilacs in the corner here?' With a spatulate tobacco-stained forefinger he traced the mechanics of the problem, then decided it for himself. 'Red. Red's more cheerful on a winter night.' We realized then that, whereas even on this vessel of home character we had stayed in West Africa, the Chief Steward had never truly left Liverpool, whose winter night no tropic latitude could blur or cancel. The vision in his mind's eye was constant and undivided. Africa was only the passing show, the ship's list of destinations, but reality was in his hand in the form of a cushion cover whose roses ought to be red. We almost envied him.

In their contours the estuaries of the Niger river are like a tangle of string thrown down, haphazard in loops and turns and intersections, and apparently without beginning or end. Their borders are dense low-lying mangrove, a swampy greenery without solid foundation in the shallow, yellow-green waters. Their climate is oppressively humid, and

during the rainy season when the clouds are low over the marshes, an atmosphere of brooding solitude prevails, a mosquito-haunted loneliness which hangs like mist among the tangled roots and lichens. When darkness falls, the shores seem to retreat further into their secret timeless life which only the river dwellers in their bush canoes know. At intervals a crude bamboo shrine propitiates the Juju gods of these unloved watery wastelands, the country which civilization has scarcely touched because it can offer so little, and which slides past the ship's rail like a sombre dream or a landscape shaped in a dark imagination.

For two days we had journeyed from Lagos, enjoying the best of two worlds: the ship's, comfortable, well-ordered and unfatiguing, and the shore's, which we were able to observe closely and in detail without submitting ourselves to its dangers or depressions. Such a method of travelling gave us, we thought, a god-like immunity to the shore's vexations. Transient and without any direct responsibilities, we were free to observe our changing panorama: the marshy banks with their occasional diminutive beaches: the estuaries' green swamp islets: narrow canoes with their grinning inquisitive paddlers: and sunlight lancing through cloud to strike a sudden brilliance from sombre leafage or shallows. Sometimes we passed clusters of straw huts which here and there maintained perilous toeholds on the river's muddy margins. From these tiny centres of human activity would issue, on sight of us, the slender dugouts whose wakes, compared with the creaming wash made by our vessel, were like pale brush-strokes. Everywhere we saw the crude cork markers for the fishing nets from which, we learned, the river people reaped moderate catches. Of bird and animal life there were few traces; once the First Mate called us to observe, too late, the still trembling branches of a tree wherein he had sighted monkeys, and sometimes we heard the harsh cry of a parrot; for the rest we observed only a few swallows and two white

flamingoes which stood on a spit of sand like bird shapes in carved ivory and watched our passing unperturbed.

On the afternoon of the second day we lay in a wide, lagoon-like estuary off Burutu, a trading post based on little more than a square mile of land reclaimed from the swamp, with a river frontage of sheds and quays. We were followed to our anchorage by a host of canoes clamouring for 'dashes'; the waterway was alive and swirling with the movements of paddles and dugouts and noisy with the shouts, 'Hey, Joe, Joe! Dash me, Joe!' from the paddlers to whom the business of ship-accosting was a sport as rich in entertainment as it was potentially remunerative in empty tin cans, bottles, biscuits and other unconsidered trifles thrown down by the crew. So the canoers sported in their craft around us, briskly competing for their oddments of largesse, calling attention to themselves by slapstick antics in and out of the water, and throwing up their raucous pidgin comments to the watchers at the rails above. Some of the village girls paddled demurely confident in the eye-taking attraction of their good looks which they had embellished with bright turbans and tightly wound skirt cloths; the matrons, harder, more experienced, shouted with the rest, and one nursed a tiny clinging infant while with strongly flexing arms she nudged her boat in among the rest. Small naked boys, tautly expectant, quick to wrestle or dive in competition, shrilled their cries; young dandies, old men, grizzled crones, all flocked into the watery mêlée of thrusting prows, outstretched hands and insistent bush voices. Their determinations, their raw energies, circled the ship, which slowly moved to her place like a duchess whose decorous skirts were tugged and nerves besieged by a flurry of supple, vociferously importuning puppies.

Next morning we were alongside the quay, unloading sheets of galvanized iron while the crew, in bosun's chairs, set to work tarring the ship's sides. Before lunch Bill and I

went ashore, even though, as the Chief Engineer assured us, most of the port was clearly visible from the ship, and in any case possessed singularly few attractions. In an hour we had seen all that we cared to view: the concrete wharf with its piles of grey-black Nigerian coal and palm-oil barrels, the one small trading store, the residential section (laid out on either side of a cinder road flanked by mosquito-breeding drainage ditches), the rough-grassed golf course with rusted tin tee-flags, the Club and cinema and main trading company offices. These features composed an easily walked-around segment of land where twenty-three trading company members lived and worked and had their being for eighteen months at a time, with their backs to the swamp-land and their verandas facing the river. As we walked, a cloying moist heat rose from the black earth, and our clothes clung to our limbs. It was as if we had stepped into a Turkish bath's steam room. The store, a raw wooden building whose shelves appeared to contain little save jars of jam and tins of vegetables, offered us neither the ink nor the envelopes we sought. Although this disappointment was slight indeed, we felt strangely depressed, and with sensations increasingly joyless, made our way towards the African village which flanked the harbour. This we found to be a higgledy-piggledy jumble of unsavoury-looking huts, many of them hovels composed of bamboo, straw and miscellaneous pieces of galvanized sheeting. Their narrow verandas were mud-tracked; everywhere along the cinder tracks greasy puddles daunted the step and rust-corroded barbed wire fences affronted the eye. Even the scrawny hens, a puny and slack-feathered breed at the best of times, seemed here so degenerate that we marvelled at their survival.

By this time the ship, whose funnels we had kept in view, appeared to us as a haven of homely reassurance. Gladly we retraced our steps towards baths and clean clothes, cold

drinks and the cheerful Liverpool voices. So intent were we on this pleasing prospect that only a second hailing from a white man on the quayside arrested our attention. 'It's been a long time,' he said, shaking hands warmly and with such assurance that our memories were stirred to recall a name and an occasion. For this stranger was known to us; at some time in the Nigerian past we had cemented sufficient acquaintance now to warrant an enthusiasm for this second unlikely meeting. Here was the Coaster's Club Feeling in action; obviously our kindly accoster craved company, was eager (and we could understand his feeling, if he lived in this ungay outpost) to have conversation with new faces. 'Come to tea this afternoon at my house,' he urged and provided careful directions at which, afterwards, he mocked, saying with truth, 'Not that you could get lost or miss the place, not here, you couldn't.' We said that we would come; Club Feeling had worked its usual mesmeric spell even on us to whom the ship appeared so much more desirable than the land.

That afternoon, although increasingly it seemed a curious and ill-considered expedition, we went down the ship's gangway towards afternoon tea in Burutu. The Chief Engineer, arms folded on the rail, removed his pipe to warn us of rain coming up, and we knew he was right. The waters of the estuary had darkened beneath the brooding sky, and all colour had left the scene. We walked, as before, along the quay, past the clerks tallying the clanking sheets of metal which descended from the ship, and through the African village to a riverside path which took us to the house of our acquaintance. It had no garden, only the remains of a toughly rooted 'lawn' which now grew rank and tall where it had not died away into cindery bald patches. The house was on stilts, its entrance a steep flight of old-style wooden steps. When we knocked, a sleepy-eyed steward, buttoning on his uniform jacket, came to tell us his Massa had not yet

returned but that, 'lef' small-small', he would be with us. Thereupon the boy ushered us into a large sitting-room and left us.

We sat down, feeling not at all at home in this room whose bare echoing wooden floor smelled powerfully of turpentiney furniture polish and whose general decor offered small comfort either to mind or body. Its pictureless walls were distempered in a practical but unlovely shade of greenish-blue, and its tall windows which began above eye-level were curtained with dark green netting. The furniture, in no way related, had the look of inventoried Public Works Department items which were no one's joy or pride but simply regulation necessities: fridge, desk, settee, table, two straight-backed chairs and china-cupboard. A black tin trunk stood by the desk on which reposed a few old home papers, neatly folded; by one of the chairs was placed a pair of well-worn slippers; above our heads dangled a green-shaded light bulb. And that was all. The effect was of emptiness, transience and bachelorhood, emphasized by the grey river light which filtered through the green curtains and fell on the featureless walls. It was a room of uneasy silences in which our voices sounded self-conscious and over-loud. During the intervals while we sat in wordless waiting-room fashion, a tin alarm clock on the desk made a solitary ticking to which we found ourselves listening as if it held a solemn warning, or voiced a message that we (or any others sitting there) should heed. 'I don't know how he can live with that clock,' declared Bill, at length getting up and wandering restlessly about the room, as if determined to indicate that we had no place in it — that it had no power to affect us. 'It must be especially bad at night,' I said. We thought of our host, slippered and alone, reading his old newspapers under the light bulb, or sitting at the desk writing letters home, while the river flowed dark and alien past his windows, the mosquitoes whined, and the austere clock ticked. 'A

penance,' said Bill. 'You'd hardly think any salary was worth it.'

When at length our host arrived, the steward boy brought a meal of brackish tea, bread and butter, and a tin of chocolate biscuits which beneath their silver paper wrappings proved soft and spotted with a white bloom. We talked of conditions in the trading post, and were informed that its small and isolated white community was not particularly imbued with any spirit of brotherly love; there was trouble, sometimes, over the distribution of the 'cold stores' which arrived only at intervals; little feuds and jealousies brewed up from time to time, stimulated by unnatural propinquity, prevalence of 'shop', and poverty of contact with the outside world. 'In a place like this,' said our host, 'it's hard to keep a sense of proportion about anything — I mean, just look at these biscuits! And one of the new sheds we're building — its foundations are sinking, and there'll be the devil to pay because we're behind schedule and already above the estimates. I've got six more months to do here, though it was supposed to be three when I came. Mind you, not that I'm complaining. It just doesn't do to get low-spirited.'

'Oh, no,' we agreed, hastily but vainly casting about for words of cheer and inspiration. Bill abandoned the attempt and indicated the ominous sky. 'We'd better get back to the ship.'

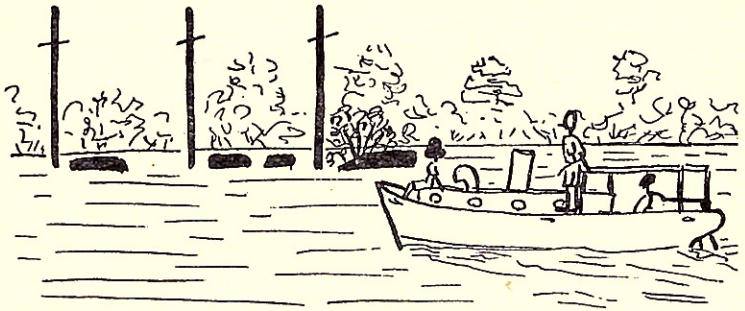
Urgently our host proposed that we stay for the evening, but with one voice (whose emphasis we tried to soften) we declined the invitation. Already large drops made a sound like gunfire on the metal roof, and as we gained the outer door we saw the river crinkling beneath the oncoming deluge. The warm rain fell on us as we made our way towards the quay; the muddy track squelched beneath our hurrying feet. As we skirted the African village a goat scrambled across our path and into the doorway of a nearby shack. A roughly printed sign above it pointed to an alley-

way and a jumble of huts where a huddle of chickens, goats and villagers sheltered from the downpour. 'To the Mid-summer Café' the sign read. We passed it without comment. And that night, since the rain persisted, we did not go ashore to visit the cinema whose showing of Ginger Rogers in 'Fifth Avenue' was perforce cancelled.

Next day Bill and I availed ourselves of the ship's launch to prospect the immediate shore and several of the smaller creeks which fed the main estuary. We navigated in sun-shine under a new-minted sky, and although the shore air was hot and still, our progress made a breeze against us. The water shone mirror-like, with inviting byways between the sedgy banks which now we were able to approach closely, passing within hailing distance of the small communities of shoreside straw and bamboo huts whose floors were rough platforms to which canoes were tethered. Said Bill enviously, 'Imagine being able to fish all day from your own veranda.' Said I, who cannot share Bill's piscine enthusiasms, 'Imagine your house floating on the river in the morning and stranded on the mud in the afternoon.' 'Ah well,' said Bill, still rapt in a fisherman's dream, 'every house has some small dis-advantage.'

Not all the riverside was picturesque. A charming Catholic mission church with neat hedge and serene bell tower was almost immediately adjoined by another kind of civilized structure, admirable in its way but architecturally disastrous: a stark row of galvanized iron latrines on stilts to which long wooden jetties afforded access. From this spectacle of strong-minded, strong-smelling utility we quickly departed, in search of views more suitable to our Sanders-of-the-River mood. We found one shortly after we had rounded a bend in the estuary whose thick mangrove hid from sight the trading post and our big ship and all that attached us to the modern present. Our discovery was a derelict sailing

clipper, an iron-bodied three-master which (our Captain later told us) had been abandoned, worn out with service, forty years ago in this backwater. Our launch slowly circled her half-submerged iron hull and the swamp tree which grew from her stern; her masts stood tall and strong, and although we found her rusted and stripped of all her old



power, the ghost of an enduring grace and courage remained in her clean lines and the brave sweeps of prow and bowsprit. Drifting in her shadow, which still had strength to command respect, we wondered about her history and that of her crew; we thought of her lying here through the steamy days and dark nights, no longer an object of curiosity to the local canoes who accepted her hulk as part of their natural scene, a dead object around which in days far past, they had once swarmed with their cries of 'Joe! Dash me, Joe!' Yet it was strange that the sunken relic of what once had been a lively and splendid ship evoked in us no melancholy. Rather it seemed fitting to us that she should have ended thus at the end of her travels, accepted by the marshes and lying quiet, as now, beneath the tropic sun.

Three days later, having traversed a further stretch of riverway, we dropped anchor and lay, in company with two other cargo vessels, off Warri. Warri's port character,

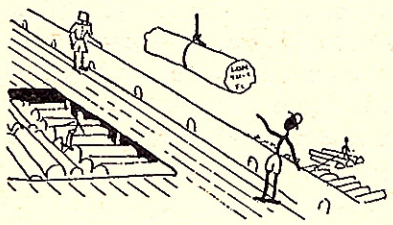
unlike Burutu's, was mellow and established, and its connections with other parts of the mainland were not completely obstructed by a swamp barrier. At Burutu our impression had been of a white commercial stronghold bravely entrenched and on guard against the hostility of the swamplands; its atmosphere, while busy and resolute, spoke of the frets and confines of exile. Warri — for all that it was but a small settlement dominated by the river and vulnerable to heavy rains — had its own character, freer, wider, more stimulating, and at the same time more domesticated, as if the roots of the township had long since grown to some depth both in the actual soil of the river margin, and in the life of its people. Were it not for its financially rewarding quays and sheds, dykes and cargoes, and the adamant attitudes of its European residents, Burutu, one felt, might easily crumble and dissolve into its marshy backwaters and be mourned by no one. Warri was not like this, nor perhaps had it ever been, since the fifteenth century when Portuguese priests with some effect set up a church there, and later when the Dutch carried on a brisk trade in palm oil, ivory and pepper.

Bill and I found the modern Warri engrossed in a new development, the lively and competitive timber business which now lucratively engaged many of its African citizens. Previously notified of Bill's interest in log-buying, a number of contractors came out to the ship to meet and parley with him. As had been the case in Black Man's Town, some were struggling small fry, ex-clerks in timber offices, now eager to become log-dealers in their own right — some were well-intentioned 'big men' who, though scarcely literate, displayed their astute comprehension of the timber world — some were bona fide middlemen who acted as interpreters or 'fronts' for less sophisticated associates — and a few were confirmed rascals who lived by their wits on the fringe of the log trade, and carried on their operations so deviously and

parasitically that it was hard to understand exactly how or where they reaped their undoubted profit. Although their methods were complex and artful, their rascality of mien was so obvious that Bill failed to see how anyone could be persuaded to do business with them. We could only assume that they worked best in the company of like-minded scoundrels with whom they alternated in thieves-kitchen roles of victim and betrayer. Almost all of Bill's visitors, the naive and the hard-headed, the impressive and the garrulous, came with bulging brief cases and glowing reports of the excellent quality and easy availability of their timber.

While Bill discussed log prospects and prices with a succession of contractors, the business of timber-loading into the ship's holds continued, and as the morning progressed, the First Mate (who for good reason disliked logs as cargo) found it increasingly difficult to maintain his loading schedule and his temper. Already, as he told us, his timetable had been hindered by a police investigation of a timber shipment, part of which had already been stowed in the holds. It was suspected that some of the logs had been pirated upriver, their identification marks altered, and the goods wrongfully sold. The law's inspection of the suspect timber now involved an expensive cessation of loading and a reversion of winch activity, an uncommon amount of expostulation and explanation, and a deal of frustrated muttering from the First Mate who on general principles had learned to dislike even the most blameless logs.

His antipathy was understandable, for even at the best of times and with the most up-to-date equipment log-loading in the creeks is a slow and difficult business. From miles around the estuaries the rafts are poled and paddled to the ship's



side. The logs (some of them unbuoyant 'sinkers') weigh from three to five tons apiece; as cargo their slippery weight requires the most careful handling, balancing and stowage. On the rafts the loading crews work as much in the water as on the timber, wielding axes to loosen the iron rings by which the logs have been secured together with rope or native 'tie-tie', and diving to attach the winch cables securely. It is skilled work in which a fault of judgment could mean serious damage to the ship or hurt to its crew, and it requires an exact threefold co-operation between the loading crews, the winchmen and the nimble workers in the holds.

During that morning while the ship lay sweltering at anchor, and the contractors (who made their way out from the shore by canoe or ship's launch) ascended the gangway, the steady winching and careful stowage of the awkward freight continued, until the din of the business — the reverberating thuds and chain-rattlings and warning shouts from above and below — became an accepted background of tumult. The First Mate, having at length ushered the police and the vocal disputants from the vessel, recovered his temper and told us something of the prevailing log-piracy which high timber prices had stimulated all along the little beaches of the estuaries and up and down the secluded tributaries which offered such admirable hiding places for stolen timber. 'What they get up to,' said our friend with feeling, 'is nobody's business. Now and then somebody gets knocked on the head, or a body is found in the water — all part of the log business in these parts, no holds barred or questions asked. It's just as well not to think what goes on around here on a dark night. Daytime's bad enough as far as I'm concerned. After this stuff it's a pleasure, I can tell you, to get back to palm kernels and cocoa. Logs! They just amount to a hell of a lot of trouble for everybody.'

'Money too?' we queried, knowing the freight rates.

The First Mate, frowning, said well yes, naturally, if it wasn't for the money interest there wouldn't be any trouble — or logs. 'These fellows,' he complained, pointing to a departing canoe-load of contractors, 'will do anything for money.'

'Fascinating stuff,' we agreed, 'more exciting than cowrie shells or bead necklaces. Buys more, too.'

He looked at us doubtfully. 'Ye-es, I suppose we started this money ramp in a way, so maybe you can't entirely blame these blokes for the results.'

'That's logic,' we said, at which the First Mate, a trifle heartened, looked at his watch and said the bar was open now, so how about it? A morning of logs, he added, produced a terrible thirst, and that, anyway, was a matter you could do something about.

In the afternoon Bill and I went ashore to find the local Telegraph Office and send a number of cables home. While the launch tied up at a jetty we watched a canoe-load of fourteen substantial citizens paddling downriver with gunwales three inches above the water, and everyone perfectly composed. In another craft two African businessmen maintained, with nonchalance, a bicycle balanced across the thwarts; behind them glided a sugar-cane loaded dugout which its paddler navigated with so easy a grace that his canoe was for all the world like a water-ski instinct with an effortless rhythm beautiful to witness. (Later, when Bill boarded one of his contractor's canoes, a vessel which appeared to our apprehensive eyes as narrow and frail as a hollowed-out darning needle, a swash of water came inboard and Bill reported that the remainder of the journey most seriously tested all his powers of balance and concentration.) Away from the loading noise and potheration which surrounded the big ship, the river scene was restful to the eye and calming to the mind; its waters were tranquil and

opalescent, and the aspect of the green shoreline opposite was like the feathery smudged softness of an agreeable summer's day watercolour. All along the banks were moored the dwelling places of nomad river people who had travelled from the far northern reaches of the estuaries: houseboat-canoes wherein they ate and slept and traded, bore their children and lived their compact communal floating lives. Some of the humbler superstructures were of straw and bamboo, woven cocoon-like as shelter against sun and rain; at night their charcoal cooking fires sent out a lantern-like glowing. Other more substantial vessels demonstrated both pride and worldly wealth in the evidence of square wooden verandas and bright paintwork. All gave to the river a haphazard gypsy colour and vivacity. Casually they decorated the banks with that kind of homely nautical detail of which only small, intensely populated boats of their kind are capable. Each craft was self-sufficient in its family preoccupations with merchandise, piccans and food-getting, as in its palavers, destinations and amusements. And yet all the boats along the waterway were, in a sense, kin, as, perhaps, they are everywhere.

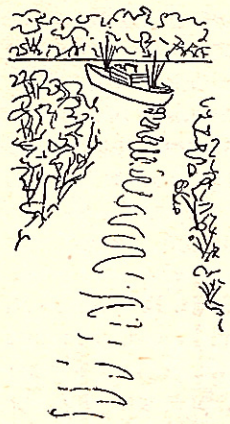
Ashore, Bill and I walked along a sandy road bounded by verdant hedges to the Telegraph Office, which we found to be a small tin building crowded almost to the door by a press of impatient customers who wished to dispatch telegrams. This surprised us, for while we knew that the African people are, as a race, enthusiastic patrons of the Morse Code, we had not expected to find Warri such a centre of telegram-conscious citizens, particularly since the Telegraph Office was in itself a poor medium for any kind of speedy activity. Despite its congested and uninviting appearance, Bill, spurred by his necessity, added himself to the crush, while for an hour or so I waited by the doorway. (In days gone by a white skin may have provided automatic passport to attention-priority in any African gathering, but this is not

the case now. Bill waited his turn, or rather used the same elbowing, thrustful methods as the rest to whom orderly queueing was a solution as yet unheard of.) From my post I could see that the only writing-space for a telegram was a short shelf which resembled some fixture in an unkempt chicken-house. Above it hung a cupboard whose joins were encrusted with white cocoons whose undisturbed condition proclaimed the cupboard to be either empty or unused. From behind a heavy iron-work grille which seemed to serve as protection for the two African clerks from the crowd, there came a steady loud-voiced haranguing monologue, addressed first into a telephone and then at random at the customers and the haranguer's junior. Even from where I stood I was acutely aware of the atmosphere brewing within the Telegraph Office; already stuffy with jostling bodies, its air seemed steadily to be thickening with censure, resentment and general nervous agitation. Through the barred window I could see a small and uncertain youth attempting to write out his telegram on the shelf while he braced himself against the push from behind. Perhaps it was the first telegram he had ever essayed, for he licked his pencil and licked it again, and grimaced, and glanced over his shoulder, counted on his fingers, wrote down a word, looked more than ever worried, and in all required twenty minutes to set his message to paper.

Meantime the loud-voiced African official had reached a state of wrathfulness which seemed to border on physical violence. It appeared that his junior had made some disastrous error for which he was to be reported and almost certainly sacked. He was, the voice declared, an idiot, a fool and a bushman. At this final insult the crowd swayed forward, forgetting its telegrams in its absorption. Then a figure pushed out from their midst, that of the underling clerk, still pursued by the voice which hectored, 'Hi, you, come back! You hear me, John, I forbid you to leave! You

disobey me again?' But by now John had gained the door and there was a safe distance between him and his oppressor. 'You cannot stop me,' he declared across the heads of the company. 'Where are you going?' demanded the other. 'Tell me this minute!' Replied John aggrievedly at the top of his voice, yet with the smug air of one who has the last word, 'I go to pass out water. You cannot stop me.' Having delivered this victorious sally he disappeared around the corner of the building and reappeared only when his intention had been fulfilled. Shortly afterwards Bill emerged from the Telegraph Office. His cables had been dispatched and they actually reached their destinations. I have always been impressed by the power of wireless, but that day the triumph of Morse over distance and time and human conflict seemed wonderful indeed.

In a cool-blowing morning mist we began the ten-hour journey from Warri to Sapele. Soon the estuary narrowed until the shores were close alongside; in places we moved slowly between walls of mangrove and lichen-tangled 'monkey bush', and all in a silence unbroken except for the steady pulsing of the ship's engine and an occasional stridently echoing parrot's call. The brown shallows which surged alongside as we passed were veiled with a floating fleshy green leafage starry with water lilies whose purity was as startling to the eye as fresh-fallen snowflakes on a mudbank. At noon the mist gave way to streaming rain and a high wind which rendered our views from the rail so desolate and lonely that we were glad to adjourn to the domesticated brightness of lounge and dining-saloon where still, through the portholes, the shoreside greenery obtruded its storm-tossed reflection. Later, on coming to a particularly narrow converging of three estuaries, we went again on deck to admire the Captain's manœuvring of his vessel where, it seemed, there could scarcely be room for so sizeable a craft to turn

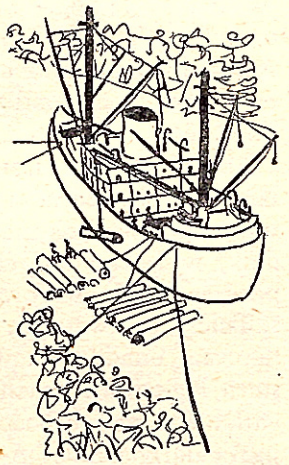


without touching the banks. This section of the creeks, we learned, was a testing place for navigators; of this there was evidence all along the shore, where piles of crushed bush testified to miscalculation and a ploughing of bow or stern into the marshes. One ship had left her masthead lantern hanging in a tree, although with no harm except in the Captain's loss of face. It pleased us all when our vessel, now proceeding dead-slow, now full-ahead, expertly rounded a tricky bend and so accomplished the test with flying colours. The entire ship shared in a general satisfaction concerning the Old Man's skill — although as the Chief Engineer was obliged to point out for the honour of his engines, the Bridge could not be effective if the Motors didn't look sharp, too.

That night we were moored to the bushy shore opposite Sapele, beneath a low-hanging yellow-green moon. The storm was past, leaving the olive-coloured water flat-calm without sound or ripple, or light from the withdrawn secret darkness of the shore mass. After dinner we walked the silent decks whose lights brought, as exotic nocturnal visitors from the land, a collection of moths which clustered motionless, dazed and trembling, on the white paintwork. The most regal (like those we had known on our Agulu village veranda) were of dense velvet purple tipped in pink and crimson, with a wingspan of nine inches; the frail beauty of others was in intricate designs of turquoise and beige, white and rose, yellow and black, or softly patched brown which perfectly imitated tree-bark. The ethereal charm of these winged fantasies made us exclaim, not for the first time, at Nature's quixotic prodigality, her lavishing of such exquisite fashionings in places where none might view them,

and her delicate comedy in almost miscroscopic perfections where there were no eyes to appreciate such miracles of wit and pattern. We thought of the great fields of water-lilies lying far behind us beneath this same green and impassive tropic moon, and found no answer to our marvelling.

Next day the ship resumed business with logs, and all morning Bill interviewed his eager African visitors who, as at Warri, came out in numbers from the shore to offer their goods. Here was evidence of the timber boom at its zenith in the newly-cleared log depots which scarred the shore, the rafts which dotted the glinting water and swarmed ready for loading at the ship's side, the rhythmic sounds of saws and axes trimming and debarking the valuable merchandise, and the enterprising press of Africans with their ready briefcases and facile knowledge of the involvements of timber buying and selling.



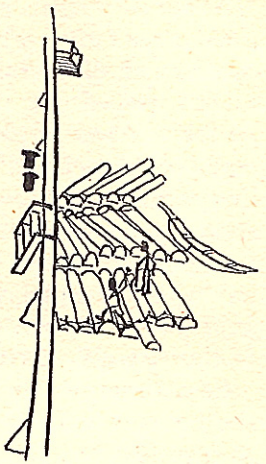
As before, Bill's visitors were of all kinds and conditions, from youthful enthusiasts scarcely out of school to seasoned business men; their garb varied from native cloths to tweed tailormade suits, and in one case, blue-striped velvet shorts worn with a cap of imported imitation leopard skin. One visitor, presenting his card and credentials, announced himself as the district's Pig King and kindly offered to conduct us, during our stay, over his extensive and apparently highly successful piggery. We did not accept his invitation, mainly because of my hypocritical and formless aversion to connecting live pigs with plattered bacon, or learning anything further concerning the transition of the

former to the latter. Although the Pig King's personality was impeccable both in charm and courtesy, I balked at extending our acquaintance — as was once the case in England when Bill and I were introduced to a most affable and popular Jellied Eel King. There is indeed no accounting for the foibles and prejudices which cause us to warm to or retire from a unique social opportunity.

In any event Bill had immediate business ashore with one particularly important timber man who was not of the contract-soliciting brotherhood. His superior status permitted his remaining comfortably in his office where, on his own ground, he conducted his transactions. Bill and I met him there.

Mr. Mansora was, we could see, an extremely prosperous Nigerian, shrewd of eye, ample of girth, and educated to the impressive psychological effect on his clients of sizeable office desk, well-oiled swivel chair and constantly ringing telephone. These were his chief properties, and apparently sufficient to his needs, for he had left the rest of his roomy sanctum unadorned. Its bare windows kept watch over a steep log-strewn beach and the river traffic; its floor of new wood was unpolished, and its distempered walls were not particularly clean. A pile of old magazines, English and American, lay scattered in one corner.

It was Mr. Mansora's arrangement of his telephone which especially intrigued us. Although almost immediately upon our entrance we heard its insistent ringing — seemingly *in* the room — we could see no sign of the instrument, and Mr. Mansora appeared quite unconscious of any necessity to answer it. The ringing ceased. Then, under our interested gaze a calendar hanging on the wall by Mr. Mansora's desk moved sideways, displaying a square opening behind. As we watched, a long black human arm extended itself from the adjoining room, through the space, holding the telephone receiver, which Mr. Mansora casually accepted



and spoke into. When his remarks were concluded the long black arm (which, thus disconnected from any visible body had a curiously sinister aspect) reached out again to retrieve the receiver, and the calendar flapped back into its camouflaging position. At intervals during our conversation the same action occurred, lending to Mr. Mansora's communications as to his person an odd sense of mystery. We gathered that although but two years previously he had been no more than a shipping company's clerk, his private timber interests now extended far afield. Offhand he referred to two recent flying trips to England and spoke of another which was imminent. He regretted that owing to engine trouble he could not, as he would have wished, offer us his new Humber Snipe for an excursion around the town. And all the while, although he engaged smoothly and amicably in timber discussion with Bill, and although the gold fillings in his teeth flashed affably during his rare smiles, he still seemed to be watching us, as if his face had been schooled to caution until its function had become only that of a dark mask which hid the real man from us. Commented Bill briefly after we had been politely ushered out, 'We'll not be buying any timber from him.' 'Why?' I guilessly inquired, recalling nothing in the discussion to warrant such an opinion. 'Because,' explained Bill patiently, 'he has absolutely no intention of selling us any logs.' I asked why, then, had not Mr. Mansora said so. 'Don't you see? That would have been far too simple for a man like him,' said Bill enigmatically, at which, abashed and aware of psychological deeps beyond my comprehension, I abandoned the subject.

As our ship resumed her journey and once more negotiated the narrow forked estuary, Mr. Mansora and Bill's thronging contractors, the clerks, quays and sheds and such modernities as had graced our stopping places — all faded into limbo. As for our base in Black Man's Town, the harbour offices, resthouse chalet and the new premises, these too, appeared immeasurably far away. The present primitiveness of our scene occupied us to the exclusion of all else. We were aware now only of the old West Africa, which gave no thought to any world beyond that of its crude waterside dwellings, Juju shrines, canoes and fishing nets, and the ebb and flow of the changeless creek waters.

Sometimes, as we regarded the river scene and watched the canoers whose dugouts hastened out from the banks to surround our vessel, it seemed to us that the shrill chorus of African noise and the crowding upturned visages below were, in fact, but different aspects of one imperative African voice and one African face — the voice and face of the bushman, the raw product with all the fierce energies which burn beneath his ebony skin and the wilderness that looks out of his eyes. Then it was hard to believe that this untamed, uninhibited composite should be in any way related to such impressive personages as, say, Mr. Mansora, or our decimal-expert Francis, the white-collared Ansah, Messrs. Ondo or Armah, or the University-educated Mr. Jackson who sandwiched his timber dealings with discourse on poetry and metaphysics. The gulf between the bush people and these others, their totally unalike contemporaries, was so wide and deep as to cause us almost to forget that West Africa was their common home, and that, for all, the bush village had been their original source.

Small wonder, we thought (while the babble of high-pitched bush laughter and the flat-toned harsh shouting from the swarming canoes assailed our ears and tautened our nerves) that some Westerners find it hard to believe in

the bushman's effective translation into the 'new African'; small wonder that even when he is shown the modern, altered Negro version, the European suspects a veneer which only thinly conceals the old barbaric ancestor. Although such a transformation — in the space of relatively few years — has proved to be entirely possible, the average Westerner still reserves judgment. Something instinctive in his sensory reactions promotes a lurking physical antipathy to the dark skin, flattened nose and sibilant tongue, and engenders a nervous defensiveness upsetting to logic and perhaps the most powerful obstruction to the attaining of anything like white and black brotherhood. No matter how nimbly educable the African mind, or how remarkably adaptable and careful to follow the white observances it has learned to value, the African body remains a problem, for by it the black man is emotionally rather than fairly judged.

We spoke, one day, of such matters with the Wireless Operator who optimistically opined that the Western world would eventually learn to overcome its emotional attitudes to the coloured races, and that in fact it would be driven to do so for reasons of orderly world economics and sane government. 'But surely,' we demurred, 'that's looking a long way ahead.' 'Not so far,' he replied. 'People haven't much time left now. They will have to decide soon where Africa stands in the scheme of things, or Africa will decide for herself. And when the main issues are resolved, the colour of a man's skin or the look of his face won't be of much importance.'

'It won't be easy,' we said, fearing that his forecast might be unduly sanguine.

'It's not easy now,' he agreed. 'Nobody imagines it's simple to solve the problems which will come out of *that*.' He indicated the miasmic shoreline at the ship's side, its ragged green wastes and small muddy beaches now in late afternoon lying under a slate-dark cloudbank. And he went

on to tell us of a recent feud between two local tribes in this region over a question of land ownership. At length their 'land-palaver' had grown so bitter that a battle with machetes ensued with many casualties. During a Government investigation of this fracas a District Officer and a Police Superintendent had entered one of the tribe's Juju houses in search of evidence — a terrible affront to the local Juju diety to whose sanctum only a few high priests and prominent tribesmen were normally allowed access. The outcome of the case was Government's imposition of a collective fine of £20,000 upon the warriors. But this was not the end of the affair. Some time later the culprits brought a counter-suit against Government in which they demanded a compensatory £15,000 for the desecration of their shrine and the damage and defilement of its goddess. In making their plaint the chiefs maintained that this spoliation of the sacred premises had brought upon their heads outbreaks of smallpox, a poor fishing season and many other misfortunes among which was the heavy fine imposed on them. Their Juju, now rendered either impotent or enraged by the white man's gate-crashing, no longer worked on their behalf, and for all they knew might have abandoned or turned against them for ever. In view of this extra-legal punishment and the grave anxiety of their present state, they considered £15,000 compensation no more than a reasonable sum — and even then, as they pointed out, because of Government's heavy-footed meddling in their private affairs, they must still remain £5000 out of pocket.

'They argued all this in court?' we asked, intrigued by such bizarre litigation.

'Indeed they argued,' the Wireless Operator told us, 'and they paid their African lawyer £150 to help them.'

We wished to know if the lawyer could possibly have imagined that such a case would be successful. 'That,' said our friend, 'is anybody's guess. Maybe the fee was tempting.'

'But the original business,' we persisted, 'the land-palaver that caused the war, what happened to that?'

'You know what land-palaver is,' said the Wireless Operator. 'It's part of the country's existence. Nobody ever can remember the beginnings or see the end of these quarrels.' Again he pointed to the mute, fast-darkening shore whose only sound was of lapping water. 'In there a lot happens that nobody knows about.'

'But haven't you contradicted yourself?' we pointed out. 'In places like this, West Africa is in no condition to take on self-government, let alone enter into world affairs.'

'A patchy country,' admitted the Wireless Operator, 'but remember that fifty years ago it was mostly all bush, full of cannibals, the White Man's Grave, not even properly mapped. It's come a fair way since then.' We stood for a few moments longer, watching the shore retreating into its black night fastness. Then, our discussion abandoned, we went inside to the lights and little tables of the friendly lounge. The Chief Steward was there before us, waiting to show us the full glory of his finished cushion cover. 'Why so solemn?' he demanded. 'Talking about West Africa,' said the Wireless Operator. 'And where d'you think *that'll* get you?' inquired the other. We should have liked to be able to tell him.

Four days later we rode again at anchor off Abonnema where a further consignment of logs awaited the ship. On one side of the wide waterway stood the 'old town', a small straggling collection of huts and sheds; this faced across to a sandy, treed island which was, we learned, the station for Abonnema's fifteen European residents. 'They have a golf course,' remarked the Chief Steward who stood with us at the rails, 'but it's a sad situation — at the moment only two out of the lot play golf.'

We wondered if the rest did not play because the game did not appeal to them, or because golf, like Bridge, can be

fractious recreation if its partners live at too close quarters. 'You could go ashore and find out while you're looking around the place,' suggested our informant, 'but to my mind all these stations are the same. They look best from the ship — a matter, you might say, of distance lending enchantment. And what can you do ashore, anyway, except mooch around the Store and look in at the Club? What's the matter with the ship? If you were stuck month in, month out, on shore there, you'd want to be out here with us. Trouble with travelling people is that they are never satisfied with wherever they happen to be.'

We agreed that this was perfectly true; this time we did not intend leaving our deckchairs. 'You'll not be missing anything,' the Chief Steward told us wisely. 'Abonnema's almost as dead as Bonny, and that place couldn't be deader.'

From the ship's rail Bonny had indeed appeared to us as a ghost town, featureless in its sandbanks and wrapped in a solitary, almost melancholy quietness. No canoes ventured out to us from its sea-girt flats; no life seemed to animate its shores. Yet we remembered what we had read of this scene as it was in the old slaving days, when the people of Bonny had a reputation for irrepressible nefarious activities and a barbarous ferocity equalled, perhaps, only by that of the despotic captains of the trading brigs and their hard-bitten ruffianly crews. One story in particular remained in our minds. At Bonny, where the monitor lizards and pythons of the town were worshipped as objects of sacred Juju significance, and allowed to roam freely about its streets and houses, any harm done to these venerated creatures was instantly and heavily punished. In 1787 two Liverpool seamen, while rolling a water cask on Bonny's beach, inadvertently killed an iguana and were promptly sentenced to death by the Chief of that region. The best that may be said of the seamen's Captain is that by bribing the Chief he attempted to avert the sailors' doom, and in fact his action

did obtain for them a remission of sentence from death to a fine of '700 bars'. Since this, however, amounted to the formidable sum of £175, the Captain considered his responsibility concluded, and he sailed away, leaving his men to a doubtful fate of which nothing further was ever heard.

In 1830 Richard Lander (in his *Journal of an Expedition to Explore the Course and Termination of the Niger*) wrote: 'We were glad to get out of this vessel, for the unfeeling commander employed every means he could think of to annoy us and make us uncomfortable while we were with him. At night, while the people were sleeping, he would make his men draw water and throw it over them for mere amusement. There are many commanders as bad as he is on the coast, who seem to vie with each other in acts of cruelty and oppression. The captain of the palm-oil brig *Elizabeth*, now in the Calabar river, actually whitewashed his crew from head to foot while they were sick with fever and unable to protect themselves; his cook suffered so much in the operation that the lime totally deprived him of the sight of one of his eyes, and rendered the other of little service to him.' In 1841 one Dr. Madden, an observer reporting to the British Government on the state of affairs in the Bonny river, commented: 'When I was in the Bight of Benin . . . the master of a vessel was then in the Bonny who had been recently tried in England for the murder of one of his sailors by flogging him so severely that he died, and been sentenced to imprisonment for several months, yet no sooner got out than he was reappointed to the command of one of the largest vessels in the trade. . . .'

As late as 1854 one historian, Dr. Baikie, referred to a white trader who for a whim had ordered the seizing and flogging of a native boy who had come aboard his vessel. The boy's father, hearing of this, thereupon manned two war canoes and having attacked the ship (whose crew,

apparently, could not or would not defend it) bore the trader back to shore and left him for twelve hours tied to a tree. He would certainly have been killed had not the people of Bonny, out of their past experience, feared man-o'-war reprisals.

Such was the nature of Bonny's history. Abonnema's past, we imagined, must have been much the same, plunderous and disputatious, cheap in its lives both white and black, terrible in its deaths from fever and sharks, fraught with hatreds and brutal in its vengeances. Now all was quiet even on Abonnema's European golf course, and quieter still at Bonny — and as the Chief Steward had said, what could you do now at either place except mooch around the Store and look in at the Club?

At Port Harcourt, after our creeks journey of three weeks and some days, we found that since our ship's variable schedule was not to include a stop at Lagos (for us a necessary port of call) we should be obliged to trans-ship to another vessel. Regretfully, for we had enjoyed living *en famille* with our ship's most likeable company, we made our farewells and soon were ascending a gangplank further along the quay, prior to settling ourselves in another cabin and at another saloon's dining-table. The day was damp and without a breeze to stir the moist heat which rose from the wharf and was blanketed by a grey rain-filled sky. The combined smell of palm oil (in process of being piped into the heated tanks of an adjoining ship), palm kernels, wharf dust and railway grease rose from the long sheds and shunting box cars on the dock. On our seaward side the view was of the delta's swampy green islands, which floated on oily water whose multicolours were those of the combed coloured edges of old books, flecked with everchanging purple and blue and gold. All along the wharfs the business of loading and discharging was carried out to the familiar noise of

winching and shouting, barrow-trundling and box-car engine steaming; all around us the clattering open holds received or disgorged their cargoes. The lower orders of the African stevedores, those who carried bales in and out of the maws of the sheds and pushed the barrows, wore ancient rags which seemed to stay together only through the cohesive influences of oil and sweat. It was their headgear which proclaimed their individuality, their pride as working men. Even those labourers who worked in shredded shorts and shirts so holey as to give the effect of large-scale lacework, still sported plush tweed caps, or battered felt hats with silver-painted hat-bands, or best of all, sun-helmets glittering with the fresh application of this same aluminium ship's paint which provided for the humblest docker the illusion of a glistening topper or a Pageant Viking's helmet.

Among these lesser folk — the gaily-hatted toters of loads and pushers of barrows, strolled the wharf aristocrats, the tally clerks with important notebooks in their breast pockets and pencils casually tucked in their kinky hair. These were men of a different standing: the possessors of fine, serious-looking spectacles, sharply creased trousers or shorts, and shirts to whose natty bosoms tie-pins moored superior ties. Watchfully they checked and counted; nimbly they intercepted; haughtily they questioned; tidily they wrote in their notebooks, while their shiny bicycles leaned against the sheds as final proof of their owners' apartness from the wharf's common herd. As we looked at them we thought again of the canoe-paddlers and the bush dwellers, and of the multifold differences among the peoples of West Africa.



After a night wakeful with the sounds of train shunting, small-hour dockside conversation in argumentative pidgin, and a commotion of palm-wine roistering which came to us from the wharf — then a dawn rent by the crashing noise of heavy iron hatch covers striking on iron decks, we set sail for Lagos. Our brief voyage was mainly accomplished in a cool pearly mist which at times gave way to a bleak drizzle so untropical by the usual standards that we might have been journeying along the summer coast of Scotland or in the English Channel.

The ship, an old eight-passenger cargo boat, cramped in her accommodations and rheumaticky in her joints, did not pretend to anything like the modern elegance of our former vessel. Her cabins were small and Spartan; her ladies' bathroom door was vexed by a captious bolt which either jammed or would not fasten; her dining-saloon had a frankly boarding house air, and her passenger lounge, reached by a steep narrow companionway, was tiny and stiffly furnished. When the sky's drizzle and the sea's monotony made our deck space uncongenial we sought refuge in the lounge. Our fellow passengers were two missionary ladies, the elder a neat grey-haired teacher who, no matter what she wore, gave the impression of being garbed in gentlewomanly tweeds and a good-quality felt hat. A fastidious and resourceful traveller, she carried in her well-bred but astonishingly expandable handbag a supply of notepaper and envelopes, anti-seasick tablets, a first aid kit, a little Bible, matches, eau-de-cologne, a pocket knife, measuring tape, and a wide selection of other small articles which proved her to be as versatile in accomplishments as she was seasoned in emergencies. Though she was slight of body and delicate of feature, her erectness of bearing, warmth of smile and kindliness of voice proclaimed her inner strength. We liked her. Accompanying her was a younger woman of square unsmiling face and unprepossessing manner

who, so far as we could judge from her expressions and inflexions, appeared to have no especial love for the white members of the human race; only when she spoke of the bush Africans among whom she worked, did her blue eyes soften and her gentler tone reveal where her affections were concentrated. In that sphere, it was clear to us, she worked with a passionate devotion to duty, and a total disregard of her own comfort. We may have misinterpreted what seemed to be an attitude of faint contempt towards non-missionary Europeans; her lack of social grace might have been due merely to shyness. The Purser, however, snubbed (so he thought) by her bleak reception of his mealtime small-talk, spoke to us of her as 'that Miss Missionary'. Here was evidence of the lay Coaster's sensitivity to what he interprets as a critical 'missionary attitude' and labels promptly as such on the slightest provocation. 'Miss Missionary', the Purser huffily informed us, was entirely true to type. We asked why it was then that her elder companion, also a missionary, could be so charming. 'Oh, she's an exception,' the Purser told us, 'she's different.' Bill and I thought that the truth of the matter was this: that missionaries, for all the legends and labels that may be attached to them, are, *au fond*, ordinary human beings, not all-alike packages with the nature of their contents printed on the outside. There are tall missionaries and short ones, gay and sombre, extrovert and retiring, dour and charming — anything but 'all of a type'. Rather diffidently we said as much to the Purser. 'You mean to tell me,' he said, 'that missionaries are as different as ordinary people are?' 'Exactly,' Bill said. 'You astonish me,' said the Purser, and I could see that Bill had done so.

We spent our second evening in the lounge with the Captain, a stout pink personage with a jovial sea-dog air, the Chief Engineer, Purser, and Chief Steward, a frail-boned man of Indian blood, aquiline of feature with a

serious, darkly opaque gaze. It was he who, as the ship's authority on the spirit world, first mentioned ghosts, a subject fitting to the rainy darkness of the night beyond the portholes. His comments were diffident, casual; he had first to see whether we should be unsuitably flippant or properly interested. Then softly but with growing intensity he spoke of a 'woman spirit' who had been tamed by the simple Indian sorcery of a thorn from a lime tree thrust into the top of her head — of Indian spirits' night-time preference for the deep shadows beneath tamarind trees — of the efficacy of violin music or the thrumming of a jew's harp in summoning up dancing spirits who could be held captive for as long as the music lasted — and of the land spirits' disinclination to cross water. At this, the Captain interrupted our expert's occult discourse to inform us that while ordinary spirits might dislike the sea, Chinese devils — as he knew from his experiences on the China Seas — were by no means landlubbers. During a one-to-four watch on the bridge, he said, his Chinese bosun had of a sudden slumped to the deck, apparently unconscious. Considered to be suffering from a fit, he was taken below. Shortly afterwards the Captain's helmsman cried out in obvious terror, abandoned the helm, and cowered in a corner of the bridge with arms outstretched, as if warding off a physical attack. And there he remained in a trance of fear, impervious to question or reproof until, with the end of the watch, dawn came. Thereupon the helmsman struggled shamefaced to his feet and explained, 'A bad night for devils, sir, plenty devils. One push me from the helm and frighten me bad — the same who struck our bosun.' Reasonably the Captain inquired why, then, he himself had escaped molestation — to which the helmsman replied enviously, 'Ah, but the Captain is friend of the devil, and the devil no touch his friend.' Concluded the Captain to us, 'A backhander of a compliment, but the fellow wasn't joking. And no doubt

about it: both men were attacked by something, and the helmsman had been scared nearly out of his wits.'

Encouraged by this account, the Purser recalled an occasion in his own seagoing history when after the sea burial of a ship's fireman, the crew, chastened and depressed, returned to their fo'c'sle. Immediately someone came to tell them that a seagull had taken sanctuary on board. Food and water was given to the refugee on deck, but the bird could not be dissuaded from entering the fo'c'sle; during the night a sailor who had been the dead man's boon companion awoke to find the seagull roosting on his chest. Most uncannily the bird appeared to know its way about the ship, and it stayed with the crew, the Purser related, for several days. Then abruptly one morning it left the vessel. Too weak, however, to fly far, it attempted to turn back to regain the deck, and failing in this, disappeared into the waves. 'Just so,' said the Chief Steward, turning his dark gaze on us, 'The seagull was carrying the restless spirit. . . .'

The First Mate then leaned forward, to say, at last, *his* piece: concerning a seaman who returned ashen-faced from a night watch to report his having witnessed on the Bridge the apparition of a man in naval uniform. For this 'fancy' he was promptly assailed by mockery and reprimand until he was almost convinced that what he had seen had been no more than a trick of shadow magnified by the kind of hypersensitive apprehension which can come to a man who stands alone under the silent stars with only his thoughts for company. But on the following night he returned from watch to confound his hearers by a far more detailed account of his ghostly companion whose appearance he described in detail, even as to the fashioning of the beard and the four gold rings on the sleeve of the visitant. After that, our First Mate said, it could not be kept from him that on a previous voyage the ship's captain (a bearded man) had been killed in an explosion. Remarked our raconteur, 'Usually these

things are kept pretty hush-hush, and you can understand why.'

'In my opinion,' said the Chief Steward, 'it is very strange that people should be so afraid of these spirits. If they seek us, we should not run away, we should welcome them. . . .'

'Welcome, be damned,' said the Captain. 'You scare me enough in the flesh. As a spirit, you'd finish me off entirely.'

The Chief Steward did not smile but brooded on this, looking past or through us as he pondered on himself in this interesting other-world condition. 'I shall not wish to alarm you,' he stated finally, 'but I hope I might visit you after my death.'

'Not likely!' said the Purser, 'You won't if *I* can help it . . . Now then, who's for a game of Pontoon before Charlie gets out his violin.'

'No need to worry, I told you they will not cross water — not for me,' said Charlie coldly.

'That suits us,' the First Mate told him. And after the Chief Steward had silently, without another word, left us, he added heartily, 'Nice fellow, good-hearted, one of the best, but — you know — apt to be superstitious.'



And at that everybody laughed and talked all at once and said what a lot of foolish notions there were — about ghosts and spirits and so on.

A good deal later Bill and I ascended the companionway to our cabin and there packed our suitcases in readiness for the morning docking at Lagos.

CHAPTER IX

THE BIG CITY

'PLENTY t'ief here,' the elderly African steward of our Lagos resthouse chalet told us, pointing to the heavily grilled windows and the warning notice which hung by them. 'Plenty cockroach too,' I said, opening a cupboard and sighting two dark scuttling shapes before they disappeared down a crevice in the wood. 'A — ah!' the steward mournfully intoned, 'you no can catchum. They be too fast; they go hide one time.' 'Thieves or cockroaches?' asked Bill. 'They both, sah,' said the old man, permitting himself a rusty chuckle. 'They be like bad brother, work night-time, hide day-time, chop plenty.' He went away delighted with his joke.



'Cheerful place,' said Bill. 'Maybe we should have gone to an hotel.'

'Not our last one in Lagos,' I put in, remembering our room's too close proximity to an African learners' orchestra and its addiction to 'A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square' — and the street gramophones, and the greasy food which on that occasion had driven me to subsist for several days on tap-watered Bovril and biscuits.

'We'll see,' said Bill, refastening his suitcase. 'We'll spend one night here and see.'

There, however, in one sense Bill was over optimistic, for the electricity fuses failed throughout the compound and we sat down to dinner in a room so dimly lit by candles and oil

lamps that we were not even clear as to the food on our plates. We wondered if any of the diners, mainly transient Government and Army personnel, were known to us, but the tenebrous light forbade any possible recognition of old friends or acquaintances. We shared our table with a Public Works Department man and wife who, with many vicissitudes and breakdowns had travelled to Lagos by car from some remote bush station; apparently at some stage in their journey Mrs. PWD had been badly frightened by what she thought must have been a hippopotamus, and her most earnest wish now was to board their north-bound ship and with all speed depart from Nigeria's difficulties and discouragements. 'It's marvellous,' she said, 'to be even partly back in civilization . . . I suppose you could call this civilized?' We supposed she might. 'No hippopotami here, anyway,' said Bill, 'and the Club is almost on the doorstep.'

After dinner, because the resthouse lounge was so crowded and the chalet so uninviting, we went to the Club. We found its glossy parquet and chintz chairs remarkably empty, and we were the Bar's only customers until the Secretary arrived, a little concerned because he had planned a Tombola Evening and required at least fifteen participants. 'Members seem to be staying at home more than they used to,' he complained. 'The Club isn't what it was, except for golf and Big Nights. And you may have heard about the palavers we've been having — Africans wanting membership, very upsetting, really. If they get in the place is finished.'

'Odd,' remarked Bill, 'that people should demand entrance to a Club where they don't expect to be popular.'

The Secretary looked surprised. 'Lord, you can't imagine they care about *that*. It's just all this Africa-for-the-Africans nonsense. Thick-skinned! — you've no idea.'

'So it's only done to annoy because they know it teases,' I suggested.

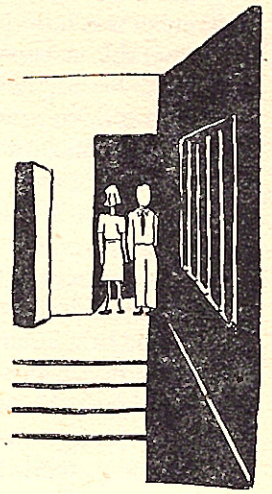
'Er-what? Well, yes, maybe so, another way of getting at

us. But mark you, quite seriously, it's the thin edge of the wedge. *African* Club members. Just shows you what a devil of a mess the country's getting into.'

'Quite a state of affairs,' said Bill in his polite-conversation voice, which means that he is bored and not paying proper attention. 'Frightful, I can tell you,' said the Secretary. 'It's a real case of backs to the wall.'

Meantime a dozen or so members had arrived. The Secretary looked at his watch unhappily. 'Not much support, but we may as well begin. Do stay and help us out.'

Obediently we stayed, bought our numbered cards and played Tombola. For so frivolous a game the atmosphere was curiously heavy. The caller's playful rhyming slang soon sounded tired, and his voice flagged. The players tried to be brightly enthusiastic; they endeavoured valiantly to muster and maintain a group jollity proper to the occasion. But from the start it was plain that the evening lacked any true leavening of gaiety, and soon, like a 'sad' cake doomed to failure in spite of its well-tried recipe, it sank into itself. No one was sorry when the allotted time was up and we could abandon so flat a pursuit of merriment. Bill and I walked back to the chalet where, in the light of a full moon, long barred shadows stretched from the window grilles across the concrete floor. I was not surprised when, from beneath his mosquito net, Bill announced that next day we should seek an hotel. His inflection was that of a man vaguely dissatisfied with the life around him, and convinced that any kind of change would surely be an improvement.



On the face of it, the hotel was, for West Africa, an impressive establishment. Its frontage was chromium-lettered and neon-lit. Its lounge (which occupied most of the ground floor) was lavish with more chromium, Riviera-type striped chair covers and an elaborate bar whose bottles were bathed in a glamorous effulgence of strip lighting. Above was a galleried dining-room and bedrooms whose bathrooms were fitted out in pastel colours. Our bathroom was sundae-pink and although one of the taps did not work and the plumbing gave forth a reverberating clanking at frequent intervals, it would have been churlish for us to mind such trivial drawbacks when so much had been done for us in the way of roseate porcelain and new paint. Lagos, it seemed, had made remarkable headway in such matters since our visit five years earlier. This time we were not afflicted by orchestral or gramophonic noise beneath our window; instead we had the din which characterizes every expanding town in West Africa: the shouting of labourers, clanging of pan metal sheeting, and the banging of hammers on the site of yet another new construction. As regards our food, the difference was not perceptible. Soup, curries and coffee, the inevitable caramel custards and pineapple fritters, and even the bread, were imbued with that same curious anonymous flavour which the Coaster knows so well: something (impervious to sauce bottle, salt-shaker or sugar-bowl) which may be partly due to cookhouse smoke or groundnut-oil, or perhaps is only a matter of lethargic tropical palate.

The hotel lounge, far more than the dining-room, was a popular rendezvous for Lagos' travellers and citizens who came there socially and on business, to alleviate boredom or genuine thirst. Their nationalities were mixed: Ibo, Yoruba, Greek, Indian, Syrian, German, French, American, Hausa and English — the male African dress ranging from dinner jackets or lounge suits to striped pyjama-like garments and loose-flowing white robes, and the female, from many-

layered 'cloths' and headwraps to tight-fitting European frocks and pastel felt hats. Mostly the groups around the small tables were self-contained in race and colour, so that parts of the lounge had a patchwork effect — a white-complexioned hexagon contrasting with an ebony circle on one side and a bronze ellipse on the other. Tonally the self-assured voices of Manchester and Oxford competed with the high-pitched conversation of the town people, the staccato vivacity of the French, and the creamy smoothness of the Greek — but predominating, we soon realized, was the voice of one single American. His eager loquacity was vibrantly persuasive; he was, we gathered, a super-salesman. His smile flashed; his eyes sparkled; his speech was marathon. Apparently an habitué of the hotel he must yet have had recourse to some private supply of vitamins or magical energy-provider which enabled him, each night, to entertain and to talk into obvious submission his African, Syrian and Greek customers. From the parts of his discourse which overflowed from his table we gathered that he had recently concluded successful business in Spain, Germany, Haiti, Mexico, Edinburgh, Capetown and Paris, and this seemed proof enough of the whole world's desire for whatever commodity it was that so inspired his commercial crusade and his tireless vocabulary.

How unlike these new-world methods, we thought, were those of the lounge's Hausa trader who had perfected a different line in sales psychology. With his crocodile handbags, ivory carvings, brass and raffia goods, he drifted silently among the tables, never importuning but ever-vigilant for the smallest flicker of interest in the faces of those who pretended not to notice him. He was patience and dignity personified; his voice was the least part of him, his knowledge of human nature the greatest. How well he understood the transparent guile of the newcomer female European who had been so well briefed in bargaining method and told, 'my dear, you have to haggle *endlessly*'; how capably he

estimated the quickly-veiled covetous glance at his goods and the eager whispering of wife to husband when it was thought that the trader was beyond earshot. How perfect was the unhurried timing of his presentations and how skilled his reluctant compromises which were, in fact, his most profitable victories. At intervals diffidently spaced over two hours one evening he occupied himself in selling an ivory bracelet to the American, who finally pocketed the bangle with the nonchalance of a practised bargainer. The trader, having accorded his customer the flattering chastened look of one who has at last met his equal, strolled away to sell an identical trinket to a meek-looking man a few chairs distant from us. The deal was swiftly concluded, and for half the money paid by the first purchaser. We thought it must have been the Hausa man's well-balanced habit to allow himself rather more generosity on the roundabouts after he had made some particularly rich haul on the swings.



Although the night-time lounge scene was not lacking in interest and diversion of a kind, Bill and I, remembering Black Man's Town's dearth of screen entertainment, went to a Lagos cinema. There, wilful in our pursuit of Hollywood, we viewed a singularly mixed programme which embraced an old-time slapstick comedy, a musical piece called 'Film Vodvil' (with orchestra members as mobile as engine pistons in their rhythmic up-and-down drill) and a newsreel viewing of the statues, both 'conservative' and 'modern' in London's Battersea Park. These last caused some mystification among the African audience who, however, quickly decided that the

straightforward nudes were of ribald significance. As the camera moved among the classic studies they roared with Rabelaisian mirth, as if to their awakened eyes the unclothed human form were exquisitely comic. The abstract pieces did not amuse or even intrigue them; they were regarded simply with blank puzzlement. Only Epstein's 'Visitation' elicited a respectful, if slightly shocked quietness, as did one or two close-up heads whose stony-eyed expressions were of audience-quelling Juju severity. Next came an instalment of thriller-serial into which were crowded a car-chase, a break-all-the-furniture battle with fists, a sinister Chinese Gentleman Thug, a detective disguised — in mask and cloak — as a Bat Man, and a TNT explosion which left the series literally in mid-air. Of all this the audience noisily savoured every moment.

Finally the main feature took us to one of those quasi-Oriental archipelagos complete with minarets, yashmaks, a set-piece Fire Mountain and bevies of saronged, lagoon-minded lovelies. In this Technicolor Eden, however, were any number of snakes, a whole pit full of them, used to dispose of human sacrifices in a Snake Temple presided over by a beautiful but bad Island Queen. With all this our audience was enchanted, and showed its uninhibited delight when at last the Fire Mountain erupted, the Queen fell horribly into the snake-pit as the Snake Temple's masonry crumbled, and the screen became a whirling kaleidoscope of screaming panic.

At this stage of the general disintegration, pursued by the mad noise from the screen and suffering a trifle from cinematic indigestion, Bill and I quitted our seats. 'It's odd,' said Bill as we walked back to the hotel, 'very odd that nobody ever suggests that these moronic films are bad for the African public.'

'When you think,' I added, 'of all the import licences, restrictions, permits and official palavers about other goods

entering the country — all the rules and vettings of Customs and Trade Departments. . . .'

'And then,' said Bill, 'nobody bats an eye at imported films full of snake-pits and human sacrifices and cut-rate blue murder and mayhem.'

'Extraordinary,' I agreed, 'a most curious addition to the African education.'

'You mean a canny addition to the cinema-owner's pocket,' amended Bill, 'West African cashbox-office, with good old Mammon punching the tickets.'

By daytime during our brief stay, Bill attended to timber business, and between whiles we shopped and viewed the street and harbour scenes, the horn-blowing traffic of cars, taxis and bicycles, the variety of dress, colour and commerce along the wide street which fronted the sea — the mixture, even more evident in this large township than elsewhere, of basic Africa and glossy Western enterprise. All along the thronging thoroughfare where the main business of the town was concentrated, strolled Mohammedan trader-itinerants, ragged labourers, mission schoolboys and schoolgirls, natty clerks and uniformed police, plump dignitaries in rainbow-coloured robes, soberly suited businessmen, stout African mammies in layered 'cloths' and flapping slippers, and slim, high-heeled young moderns in dressmakers' voiles and calicoes. Through the concourse of dark bodies moved a pale current of Europeans — resident and transient English and Scots, Americans, French and Swiss — the traders and administrators, Protestant Mission workers, ships' crews and shipping officials, nuns and Fathers and housewives of the white community. And to this, again, were added the self-contained strains of olive-skinned voluble Armenians, Syrians, Indians and Greeks,—the merchants whose cash tills made a silvery music in little bazaar shops all over the expanding city. In its total, however, this population was less

a truly cosmopolitan mixture than a West African town *mélange*, still strict in the group separations of its black and white, bronze and swarthy human components, and still governed by the habits of the old order even while experimenting with new conceptions and alert for further changes.

I was not troubled by boredom while waiting for Bill outside a shipping office on the Marina. First, two Yoruba women sauntered by in skirt cloths which proved, again, Manchester's astonishing ingenuity in its provision of up-to-date coverings for the fashionable African torso. One matron's comely girth was enfolded in a cotton wrap whose arresting purple, brown and white design was a repetitive out-size Churchillian portrait, complete with smoke-wreathing cigar; the other's was girdled in a lively cerise and yellow print of assorted bombs and battleships. Even in a town of such tropical colour and contrast the northern cotton trade's little woven drama of political personality and belligerent science was eye-catching,



and I would have studied it more closely, had not a bevy of Hausa women, rich in gold earrings and large handbags, pushed forward on the pavement, obscuring my view and intent on hailing three taxis into which they plumply clambered. But no sooner were the doors fastened on the press within than it was discovered that the youngest member of the party, a small blue-uniformed schoolgirl, had been left outside. The problem was solved by sheer physical determination; with much laughter and some rearrangement of hips and knees the child was squeezed in on the floor of the last taxi, and the door finally shut on the

giggles and squirmings of the ebullient cavalcade which rattled away in a cloud of oily exhaust.

Meantime a skinny old man had halted near me to lighten a barrowload of slushy refuse by tilting its evil-smelling liquid accumulations into the gutter of the thoroughfare. This operation was interrupted by the arrival and friendly greeting of a youth, one of the tiny-waisted, dandified clerk fraternity, who had added, as a final touch to his ensemble, a pink plastic ladies' mackintosh such as at that time were *le dernier cri* in rainwear among the young bloods of Lagos. The boy, it appeared, was the refuse collector's son, the new grain from the old seed, although so different from his sire that one could scarcely believe such a transformation had come about in one generation. They stood together briefly, new bicycle leaned against filthy barrow, and then parted — the old man pottering along the street with his unlovely cargo and the boy, his fine plastic mackintosh ballooning behind him, weaving away into the impatient traffic.

When Bill returned we investigated Lagos' — and the entire Coast's — most remarkable edifice, — its modern three-storeyed emporium. There we found spacious tiled floors, plate glass counters, a lift, a profusion of Western goods and an atmosphere of European-determined progressiveness which was particularly evident in a pastel-tinted hairdressing salon, and a shiny black and chromium refreshment room. Fresh from the creeks, or even, for that matter, from the street of such hybrid character immediately outside this palace of commercial marvels, we could take none of it for granted. The doorway's epauletted commissionaire surprised us, as did the frozen foods section of the cornucopian grocery department and the aplomb of the African shoppers who, barefoot, sandalled or fashionably shod, skirt-wrapped, trousered or toga'd, rode up and down in the lift and made their purchases as if Lagos had always been equipped with such a department store and its customers had always known

about fountain pens, photographic supplies, knitting patterns and pressure cookers. It was almost a relief to us when we observed, among these matter-of-fact acceptors of marvels, occasional naive sightseers who gave themselves up to open-mouthed contemplation of the lift, gesticulated in wonderment at the acreage of fancy foodstuffs, stared at the frock-display dummies, and were obviously much too overcome to buy anything from the bow-tied African clerks or the smartly-bloused feminine servitors.

Even so far afield as Black Man's Town we had heard of the hair-dressing parlour. There, having consulted a pretty African receptionist who in turn considered her efficient appointments book, I had my hair cut — the while observing that facilities existed here for either the straightening or curling of hair by the most advanced (although surely diametrically opposite) modern methods. To be curly-topped was the European woman's ambition; to have tresses as straight as a poker was the girlish African dream. While the scissors snipped, I pondered on these contradictory ideals of beauty, and wondered what the operator would say if I asked to have my coiffure not shampooed and set but washed and straightened. Abandoning this frivolous notion, I thought it a pity Bill had not waited for so unique an opportunity for a skilled barbering. As things were, it was plain that he would not require a haircut for many months. On our first cargo ship he had submitted to the haircutting attentions of one of the African crew, a greaser, and so eager a lopper and clipper that very little of Bill's hair now remained. 'A thorough job,' Bill had called it, unwilling to admit



that in the interests of coolness he had been hasty. 'Wonderfully thorough,' I had agreed, and we left it so, thankful that European hair grows rapidly in West Africa.

Bill was waiting for me in the refreshment room whose walls displayed tariffs including morning coffee and pots of tea, ice cream sodas (in several flavours), buns, and sandwiches. Around the shiny black tables Lagos in variety took its mid-morning snacks. A group of European wives compared the contents of their shopping baskets while their children ate ice cream; three sprucely jacketed African men shared a pot of tea and a plate of buttered toast; two attractive Hausa women in native dress but with smart handbags and sensible Oxford shoes sipped strawberry sodas. So far, the room, while assorted in its dress and conversation, was homogeneous; the mixtures blended; there was no direct clash in looks or manners. Then there entered, after only a brief hesitation at the doorway, an itinerant Hausa vendor in fez and flowing travel-stained robes, and his 'boy', whose costume was a pyjama-type suit and a cricket cap sectioned in green and crimson. On his head the boy carried a bundle wrapped in a sleeping mat. The pair seated themselves in the middle of the room and removed their sandals which carefully they placed beneath the table. Then after some consultation with the table-steward they ordered two Spam sandwiches.

When this food was placed before them they extracted and ate straightway the pieces of meat, while the Hausa man looked proudly straight ahead, not deigning to be openly impressed by the room or anything in it. The boy found this impossible; his eyes glanced swiftly here and there; his thin brown fingers inquisitively smoothed the table top and exhaustively investigated the cruet; his small frame tensed and face glowed with the novelty of his surroundings. But at an impatient signal from his master he was at once all

obedience. Elder and younger redonned their slippers and the boy bent to his bundle. On their way out they ate the bread from their sandwiches, with only a slight contretemps at the exit when the involvements of payment at the cash desk were explained. No one but ourselves, it appeared, had paid the smallest attention to the little drama. In their self-contained groups the white wives and the Hausa women gossiped while the African business men further plumbed the depths of solemn discussion. In that room Lagos was blasé. Ruminated Bill, finishing his coffee, 'Elevenses in the Big City. It's all very like Selfridges.'

And so, with one or two little differences, it surprisingly was.

That afternoon we learned of a Dutch cargo ship's imminent departure for Black Man's Town, and on the following morning we braved the Customs Shed. There we found a company of newly-arrived American missionaries whose expressions beneath brand-new topees were eagerly anticipant. Their luggage, labelled 'Sears Roebuck', almost filled the shed; their declarations were impeccably listed and admissions of dutiable goods provided in a spirit of pellucid honesty. Yet, for no reason that we could understand, the African official in charge frowned and muttered and snapped questions in a way that seemed to indicate his angry disapproval of the entire meek-mannered party and all their possessions. When their spokesman indicated a large case of gramophone records, the official pounced upon it with ill-concealed pleasure in his authority and promptly demanded an extortionate duty fee. Thereupon palaver ensued. The missionaries pointed out that the records were educational, donated by charitable American friends for free distribution among deserving bush parishioners. It was maintained that in view of the discs' nature and purpose, the levy on them should either be waived or rated moderately.

To this argument the official listened impatiently. He pointed to his lists. 'It is the law,' he stated.

'But honestly, it doesn't seem quite fair,' one of the party sturdily demurred. 'We are bringing these things as gifts to your own people.'

At this the official smiled, but not with cordial intent. '*My* people? We in West Africa are of many peoples. I am not a bushman, Madam.'

'Oh dear!' murmured she who had protested. 'No, of course not. But surely you have some feeling for your — for those who have never had any education and need our help.'

'Myself,' said the Customs man wearily, 'I am very busy. By the law you must pay on the records. That is all. I have my duty.'

'You *certainly* have!' exclaimed a small indignant voice in the background which was instantly hushed by the spokesman's, 'Never mind, we shall pay.'

'Sign here then,' said the official crossly, while Bill and I, as onlookers, wondered what was at the root of his bad temper — a hangover, a superior's reprimand, an antipathy towards the whole white race? 'We're next,' I warned Bill. But Authority's spleen had been vented. Scarcely glancing at our suitcases he chalked them rapidly. 'How do you know we haven't any records?' Bill cheekily asked him. 'Have you?' the other suspiciously inquired. Then a real smile broadened his face. 'A-ah, you're joking me,' he declared. And on this note of precarious good fellowship Bill and I swiftly hailed a porter and left the place.

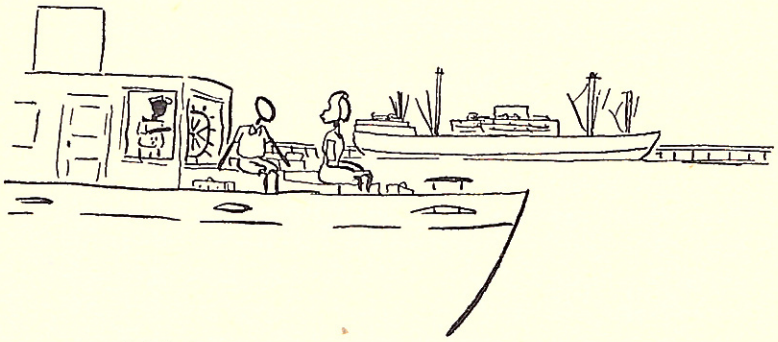
We had, however, no real need for haste, since the dockside launch which was to take us to the outlying cargo vessel was for an hour or so delayed in its departure by the tardiness of another passenger. While we waited we observed a French Company's barge alongside, in process of loading cases of champagne and choice liqueurs, their unexpected destination

(as marked on the boxes) the swampy creek station of Burutu. In vain were the precious burdens stamped 'Fragile', for the six labourers who handled them cared nothing for fragility. In fact it seemed to us that they were making the most of a wonderful opportunity for the kind of joyful destruction at which the Marx Brothers are so adept. We winced as the cases thudded to the deck, now and then cornerwise with a splintering of wood, a strawy scattering and an expensive trickling of their contents. When such damage was done the crew mimed a histrionic dismay; the goods were swiftly encircled and six pairs of hands busied themselves in pushing the broken boards back into place while at the same time adroitly investigating what was within. The patching and pilfering of the boxes was as mercurially speedy and deft as their loading had been unskilled and clumsy. It was alarming and fascinating to view such a dramatic reversal of method. 'When the hand is so much quicker than the eye,' Bill commented, 'the cargo needs all its insurance.'

'Maybe,' I suggested, considering the ragged filthy garments of the loaders, 'they just can't resist the odd perquisite.' 'Evidently not,' Bill agreed, while at that moment one of the crew brought out from the pocket of his tattered shorts an important cigarette case whose silver glinted richly, like treasure trove, in the harbour sunlight. From this, with a languid albeit self-satisfied air the boy extracted a cigarette, whereupon his mate, not to be outdone either in magnificence or nonchalance, produced an equally fine cigarette case and a handsomely flashing lighter as well. 'Loot!' said Bill, patting his own pockets as if wary, even at our distance from the barge, of our nimble-fingered neighbours' acquistiveness. Then briefly, while the crew awaited further cargo, work was halted. There was a stretching of limbs, a slumping to deck, a noisy bantering, an air of living boldly in the here-and-now. The morning sun shone hot

and clear on the boat loaders and their cases of champagne which to us seemed an appropriate cargo, effervescent, heady, the elixer of gaiety. Like Riviera aristocrats they reclined in sun-drenched ease, while the spilt wine gave up its vineyard perfume. 'Shocking characters,' said Bill, 'regular young pirates.' But still, perhaps because the morning was so bright and our own spirits high, we could not muster any degree of solemn disapproval. Confirmed in their delinquency the barge boys may have been, but at that moment we could neither censure nor pity them.

Just as our launch was about to depart, our other passenger, an African girl, came along the dock with two well-wishers who, between them, carried her suitcase, two tin hat-boxes, a plywood crate with a loose top and three bulging paper bags tied with string. 'Am I late?' she inquired of the launch helmsmen while the others made a precarious pile of her goods on the deck and pushed back into place a few odd-



ments which had fallen out of the crate. 'More than an hour,' the helmsman said. 'We were going to leave you.' 'It was not my fault,' the girl explained. 'The lorry broke down and there was so much difficulty. I have not even finished my packing . . . but I am here now.' She waved gaily to her departing friends and sat on her suitcase, clearly not in the least discomposed. We set off, Bill and I at the bow. Our

way out to the ship was tranquil and the harbour water so calm that when of a sudden we met broadside the wake of a swiftly passing craft I was taken off guard and drenched from head to foot. The effect was as saturating as a bath taken when fully-clothed. Hair streaming, frock sodden, I steamed gently in the sun while the helmsman grinned and the African girl, who had not observed the little incident, raised astonished eyebrows and said, 'Oh, how did you get yourself so damp?'

The Chief Steward who welcomed us aboard the Dutch vessel may have been surprised to observe an apparently half-drowned female passenger ascending the gangway, but decorously not permitting himself the ghost of a smile, he ignored my dripping condition and led us to a spotless cabin which was as airy and competently arranged as the rest of the ship. And after that came a luncheon which made us wonder why the Dutch cuisine is less often eulogized than French, Italian or Greek. Throughout the short voyage every course was impeccably served, the cheese in wafer-thin creamy slices, the breakfast kippers scrupulously skinned and boned, the bread nuttily brown, pure white or thickly curranted, the coffee clear and strong, and the salads crisp, cold and ornamental.

After our second meal I suggested to Bill that as soon as we possibly could, we should visit Holland in tulip time. Bill, heartily agreeing, maintained that tulips were as good a reason as any, and more aesthetic-sounding than, say, filleted kippers. We were enthusiastic in our admiration of the Dutch for their calm character and the scrubbed neatness of their persons and ship. 'Such a sensible race,' we called them, already anticipant for the next delicious repast, '— such an equable, rational, likeable people.' (It may seem odd so to judge an entire nation by a few ship's menus, but Coast judgments often have a physical bias, and Lagos had left us a little jaded in spirit and appetite. The traveller who

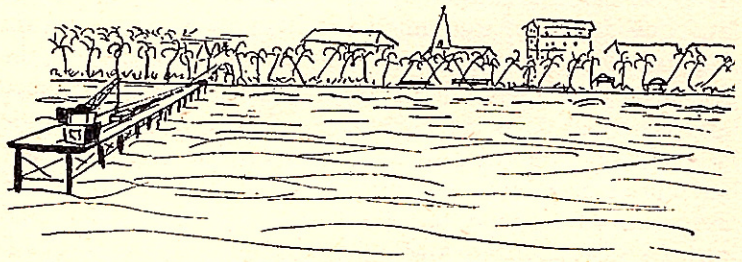
remains entirely dispassionate in his opinions, no matter what he is obliged to eat during his wanderings, is something of a paragon. Bill and I do not pretend to other than perfectly ordinary reflexes.)

Our fellow passengers, apart from the African girl, were a young Dutch trader, milk-fair and blue-eyed, and a German of hardy leathery countenance who spent much of his time aboard watching over his valuable luggage: a collection of West African fish caught up the creeks and along the Coast, and now tenderly accommodated in shallow specimen tins supplied with oxygen by rubber hose and motor on the upper deck. This was destined for an enterprising Hamburg firm who equipped museums and aquaria with such exotic finned and amphibious creatures as our German was anxiously cosseting: a fiercely snapping two-foot baby crocodile, an iguana, an eel whose family ancestry had continued unchanged for twenty-five million years, squadrons of 'butterfly' or 'flying' fish, 'electric' catfish (of guaranteed shockability), 'leaf' fish (paper-thin, dappled-brown), some exactly imitative of floating grass stems and others of unique perambulatory and even tree-climbing character.

We lay off Lomé, Togoland, on a smooth black sea lamé-streaked where the ship's lights were reflected. With lamps lowered over the ship's side, the African crew fished for red snappers, whose scales flashed like *diamanté* against the sea's darkness. We heard the boys celebrating their haul with a drum-beating, hand-clapping singsong led by their master of ceremonies who pirouetted and stamped on the covered hatch which was his stage, and in penetrating falsetto sang the solo parts of interminable ballads to which the rest added their precisely-timed unison responses. Leaning on the rails we looked towards the town whose elusive sparkling came to us as an invitation for the morrow. 'We'll go ashore immediately after breakfast,' declared Bill, succumbing to the everlasting contradiction of magnetisms which charms

sea voyagers to the land and lures shore people to the sea.

Togoland, perhaps for no reason except the evocative Dark-Continent quality of its name, had always intrigued us, just as such names as 'Samarkand' and 'Timbuktu' have magic to kindle an especial eagerness in hopeful travellers. In this mood next day, across a stretch of sheeny cruise-blue water, we viewed Lomé's yellow beach whose sands shelved steeply, worn by the foaming inrush of white surf. Beyond,



the French pastels of Mairie, Consulate and church stood out against a background of feathery palms, and the morning air held all the bright freshness appropriate to new exploration. By the ship's mammy-chair we descended into a launch-towed surf-boat and soon found ourselves rocking at the foot of a long black jetty, while a second mammy-chair was manœuvered from the arm of the crane high above, to receive us. This time, however, a simple iron hook, rather than a secure bolt and shackle, was our means of suspension. We dangled in mid-air when the crane came to a sudden jerking standstill, and although a bereted man in blue jeans waved to us with casual reassurance from the jetty top, Bill felt bound to voice what we were both thinking: that French insouciance, while charming on occasions, can be unnerving when it is extended into the realms of machinery. On terra firma at last, we found Lomé — as we might have expected — to possess little of the 'Wide Wide World' glamour we had associated with 'Togoland'; it was, after all, merely a small

West African township under French management. We walked along its unpaved sandy roads, past the Bureau de Poste and the trading shops wherein we glimpsed the inevitable shelves of tinned foods, hardware and textiles — past a railway station where bags of cocoa beans gave out their oily-sweet aroma, and beyond a garishly-postered cinema (advertising a film about Canada's Royal North West Mounted Police) to the plaster balustrades and Riviera lattice of the Hotel du Golfe, where for the equivalent of nine shillings in francs we quenched our thirsts with one bottle of weak beer and another of lemonade. After that — captious because Togoland underfoot was so much less stimulating than Togoland observed from the ship or previously imagined — we lost interest, returned to the ship in the same manner as we had set out, and for the rest of the day tamely read magazines and wrote letters on deck. We were glad to notice that our intrepid German ichthyologist was similarly engaged. Since he was a man of proven 'Wide Wide World' character we felt that, by the measure of his unmoved attitude to Togoland's shore, our own depletion of adventurous enterprise was excusable.

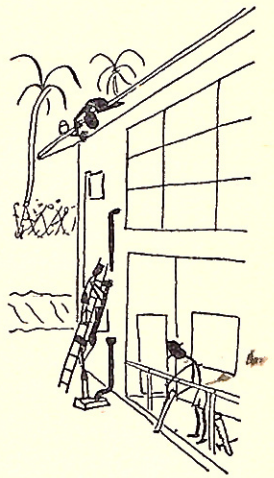
'End of the line,' said Bill forty-eight hours later as we stepped off the harbour launch and back into the life of Black Man's Town, 'All set for home life, curtain-making, housekeeping?'

If the house were ready, I told him — so was I.

CHAPTER X

A HOUSE IN BLACK MAN'S TOWN

ONE afternoon soon after our return we took stock of the new white construction which now stood foursquare and almost complete where so little time ago had been but a grassy open space and our visions of office expansion and private establishment. The premises were as stark in outline and as orthodox in Coast type as many other such fresh outcroppings of masonry in Black Man's Town, but for Bill and me, long-term resthouse chalet dwellers, their charm was both individual and inspiring. 'Here,' Bill said, ignoring a pile of builders' rubble, 'we'll have a hibiscus hedge — and the driveway should come along *here*.' 'With a terrace at the back,' I contributed, 'and an almond tree for shade. Zinnias and cannas and moonflowers at the side.' 'Kitchen garden over there,' Bill advised, indicating a lumpy, refuse-littered corner.



Such is the power of homemaking, we saw in clearest detail the whole transformation. In the echoing downstairs office quarters we visualized the placing of desks, chairs and filing cabinets; upstairs we considered sizings of carpets, colourings of curtains and positioning of household gods, and from the narrow screened balcony admired the view of golf course, beach palms and sea. 'Surely any day now,' I rashly proclaimed, 'we'll be able to take possession.'

'Quite soon,' Bill agreed. 'There's just the bathroom plumbing, and a second coat of distemper throughout, water and electricity connections, a few details. . . .'

That was in July. In August we were still hopeful. In September, with plumbing installed, walls distempered and water connected, we yet awaited action from the Electricity Department. Once again we wrote, not formally this time, but as human to human, and put all our hope into a *cri de cœur* for the inclusion of our house on the overtaxed local grid. The harassed Department's reply said, in effect, that it would continue to do its best, but this-was-West-Africa. Having, as usual, no answer to so cryptic a negative, we unearthed pressure lamps and hurricane lanterns from our luggage, and moved in with our as yet merely decorative electric stove, fridge, standard lamps and bath geyser. To our credit was one small triumph: in the winning of an argument about our bathroom's lavatory, which for several weeks the Water Board had threatened with banishment on the grounds that the town's water supply could not for the time being support further such extravagantly aqueous amenities. When, however, we pleaded that in view of the layout of our accommodation, a bush-type Bucket System would make for peculiar difficulties of disposal, the Water Board sympathetically relented. From it we received a cordial handwritten note which instantly endeared us to its writer, whom thenceforth we admired as a man of the utmost sensibility in respect of Bucket vs. Flush systems. Later, when we met him socially, we were able to tell him so, and he modestly agreed with us that in such matters — perhaps more than in any other — sensibility is a prime requisite.

One does not, of course, expect to set up housekeeping in West Africa without some minor trials of patience. We were obliged to be patient in our quest for the dustbin which the town's sanitary laws decreed to be an obligatory feature in every back compound. Yet none could be found in any

trading store, nor even could the dustbin's champion, the Sanitary Department itself, tell us where we might obtain the article. Temporarily, in pidgin Coast parlance, all dustbins had 'finished'; nothing could be done about it. So, frustrated in this domestic detail, I turned to another: a search for cleaning cloths which Humphrey, our newly acquired Nigerian steward, reasonably requested for the efficient performance of his duties. It was reassuring to know that one trading company sold such waste in bulk to the inland gold mines for the care of their machinery. In a rag-seller's Paradise, a shed piled high with bales of old tattered textiles, I was shown a bundle of cotton miscellany whose astonishing price was forty-five shillings. 'Gold mines, forsooth!' I thought, and on the way out told the company's European manager that I considered his second-hand clothing fragments inordinately expensive. To this he soothingly replied, as superior male economist to mere housewife, 'Ah, but you see, all our rags are specially *imported*.' I waited for a smile, but none came, and my levity when I suggested that the whole business sounded like something from the Mad Hatter's Tea Party ('. . . only the best butter . . . the most *exclusive* rags . . .') was not at all appreciated.

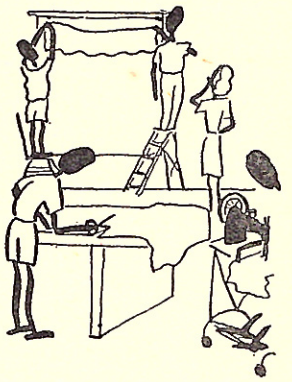
Although in theory we now dwelt in a private establishment, the domestic privacy which for so long had been our cherished goal was — at least for the first fortnight — far from actual. One morning, aware of an increasing congestion on the premises, I counted not only steward, cook, visiting washman and the handyman employed to clear debris from the grounds, but Mr. Tafo — the curtain-maker, with his two treadle sewing machines and several apprentices, — our semi-resident carpenter and his two mates, and a plumber's fitter, who with *his* mate had come to rectify a slight miscalculation in the bathtub's outlet. Under the same roof but on the lower layer, as it were, of our dwelling, Bill and his assistant worked in company with Francis, Ansah, Solomon

and two new clerks, while outside, at frequent intervals, laden timber lorries drew up to await inspection of their log cargoes. 'Peace,' I said, fervently echoing the late Aimée Semple Macpherson, 'peace — it's wonderful.' When Bill briefly appeared on my upstairs scene, thinking perhaps to achieve respite from his own, he gave the mixed assembly a bemused greeting, and murmured against a background of sewing machine whirring, hammer-banging and pipe-clanking, 'Is this home, sweet home?' His question was purely rhetorical.

It was fortunate that I had in Humphrey, the steward, a capable ally in the achievement of a state closer to tranquillity; Mr. Tafo likewise assisted. Both worked neatly and quickly, unlike the carpenter's diminutive apprentices who trailed in procession after their master, one with box of screws or handful of nails, the other with hammer or gimlet, 'helping' with so little effect that the construction of a small shelf was a whole day's work and the framing of a wall mirror required two. Sometimes I looked up startled to find the youngest mate regarding me with open-mouthed wonderment. Like Dopey of Disney's Seven Dwarfs, his overlarge garments hung precariously on his thin frame, and all his gap-toothed expressions were guilelessly transparent. Wherever his hand rested on furniture or paintwork he left a small black print at which Humphrey vainly scolded. 'Call yourself carpenter!' I heard the steward deride. 'Making our new house dirty! Go and wash hands, go!'

Mr. Tafo, a family man — with, to be precise, six wives and twenty-two children — kept his young aides in better order. He was a neatly dressed personage in smart linen trousers and well-cut shirt; steel-rimmed spectacles contributed to the austerity of his physiognomy and his air, at all times, of strictest attention to the duty in hand. His work was excellent. In four days he and his disciplined crew cut out and stitched eight pairs of curtains, twenty cushion covers, three

uniforms for Humphrey and two more for Solomon, three cook's aprons, a set of car-seat covers and four pairs of shorts for Bill. Electing to be useful in the face of such industry, I began independently to make bedspreads, but Mr. Tafo, apparently shocked by the sight of Madam wielding scissors and tape-measure, instantly sent one of his juniors across to my table to hold the tape and shear the material. 'My son,' he murmured proudly by way of introduction, and as if to assure me that no boy of Tafo blood could be other than capable in tailoring. 'He will soon be a partner in your business,' I told him, impressed by my assistant's silent concentration and the deftness of his fingers. 'No, no,' said Mr. Tafo firmly, 'he is at home now for holiday from school, and it is better for him to work than be idle. But he will train to be a geologist. That is what we have decided.'



'A geologist!' I echoed.

For the first time the boy spoke, setting down the scissors and straightening his shoulders. 'I shall go to England to University.'

'To be educated,' said Mr. Tafo, 'is a good thing.' And having delivered himself of this worthy opinion, he accelerated his machine's treadling and bent closer to his stitching as if to reprove us all for wasting time.

During this settling-in period the powers of Saidu, French-Sudan cook, remained for the most part untested, and in fact while the carpenters were engaged in completing extra shelves for the cookhouse, Saidu carefully avoided work of any kind. He was, his faintly forlorn but uncompromising attitude told us, an experienced chef, not a jack of all trades;

it was useless for anyone to expect a man of his training and standing to assist Humphrey or the handyman in *their* particular spheres. Demand that he prepare *langoustes au mayonnaise*, *omelettes aux fines herbes*, or *pot au feu*, well and good—but demean him by putting into his hands a floor-polisher and the result would be a sad accident (as did happen) to the polisher's handle. Humphrey, showing me the piece of snapped-off wood remarked, not critically but as a statement of plain fact, 'Cook cannot do steward's work.'

Saidu stood by in the pantry, shaking his head sadly. In looks he made direct contrast to the graceful Humphrey who now, with Mr. Tafo's help, was smartly outfitted in brass-buttoned khaki tunic and shorts by day, and cummerbunded trousered white uniform in the evening. Little could be done about Saidu's appearance, which was naturally grotesque by reason of shortness of stature, powerful width of shoulder, excessive length of arm, and legs so bowed that Saidu was obliged to walk on the outer sides of his feet. The whole disproportionate effect was the more pronounced by his costume: an old grey suit with sagging jacket and overlong trousers rolled up to the ankles. But for all the fantasy of his body, Saidu's face had intriguing character. It was the face of experience, not quick and bold in expression, or smooth and self-sufficient (like Humphrey's) but rugged in its outlines and subtle in its smiles — tough, shrewd and ageless. After I had engaged him, Bill professed to be surprised by my choice and hoped I had been wise. 'He has wonderful references,' I protested, 'and he can cook *bouillabaisse*. What's more, he scorns caramel custard and pineapple fritters — *babu au rhum* is more his style. You can't possibly mind his being bow-legged.' 'It's not that at all,' said

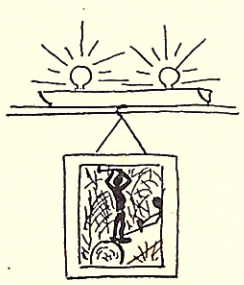


Bill. 'I've a notion he drinks.' Unfortunately Bill was right, although for some weeks before this was disastrously proven, and Saidu's addiction made confusion in cookhouse and havoc in market book, we lunched and dined in the best French style. After that we employed an ordinary teetotal cook called Moses, who could be relied upon to provide ordinary teetotal meals. Then we had peace of mind, but no more *babas* or *œufs coquettes*. Moses' blameless safety-first policy included an uncommon number of caramel custards.

Humphrey, who considered our bush improvisations beneath the dignity of a town dwelling, shared with us our continued interest in the intentions of the Electricity Department. Sometimes he sighed as he dusted the moribund cooker, standard lamps and fridge, or polished the bath geyser; and at dusk when he brought buckets of hot water from cookhouse to bathroom he sometimes added to his comment, 'Bath ready', a hopeful, 'maybe we get electricity tomorrow'. So it was with real excitement one morning that he announced a working crew's arrival on the compound and post haste went to find out from its foreman precisely the nature of their activity. From this sortie he returned crestfallen. 'That man say they will work on the next-door house today.' A little later Bill came upstairs to tell me indignantly that the crew, although certainly engaged in electrifying the adjoining premises, had chosen our downstairs veranda as site for their mid-morning snack. 'Chop tins all over the place — a real picnic,' he concluded, 'and not a sign of their starting a job here.' 'But you mustn't antagonize them,' I urged, since Humphrey looked so anxious. 'I know when to be tactful,' Bill assured us. 'So,' pronounced Humphrey, 'they are not annoyed and will come back one day to us.'

They came a few days later. The connection was made and all the switches operated. Hot water poured from the

bath geyser, the fridge purred; the standard lamps glowed. The indirect lighting, however, proved anything but unobtrusively lambent, for the electrician had misjudged his placing of the sockets in the wooden bowls which contained them, and the effects were so Chad-like that Bill suggested



we paint gremlin faces on the naked bulbs which so starkly peered over their enclosures. For the pantry cooker's behaviour he could offer no solution. When affectionately I touched its warming surface it responded with a forceful shock; when Bill, doubting my reaction, tapped its outer casing, it repelled him even more decisively. 'Madam will have no stove,' said Humphrey gloomily, and he was right. The trading company from which it had been purchased several months previously now belatedly confirmed its defect. Since in the interim all their electric stoves had 'finished', they could suggest only that our rogue cooker be supplied with a new element if I would wait for one to be sent out from England. At this stage Madam's patience, or perhaps her culinary aspiration, waned and could not be revived. It was at least some consolation when, on the following Sunday, as we greeted and seated the guests we had bidden to lunch, two electricians and their mates appeared among us with stepladders, tools, and a determination to please us by subduing our extrovert lighting to a proper discretion. By this time we knew better than to send them away. Guests, we told ourselves, are usually more adaptable than electricians; at least that is so in the new houses of Black Man's Town.

Ironically, although eventually our residence boasted not

only the sophistications of water, light and telephone, but comfortable imported furnishings quite unknown in our former bush village experience, the results were less satisfying than those we had achieved with far simpler ingredients in Agulu. There, neither interior decoration nor commercial prestige had been reckoned important; our domestic improvisations, pagan acquaintances, self-contrived diversions and the natural interests and amusements of our bush scene had been entirely sufficient and remarkably rewarding. Now, in Black Man's Town, as units of a growing European population, it was as if we had exchanged our previous free-acting self-sufficiency for membership in a town-wide European Club with all the arbitrary rules and habits of White Coasterdom. Like the majority of our fellow members we lived in a manner designed to shut out, so far as possible, the stresses of West Africa. Our dwelling, defensively screened and double-doored against mosquitoes, made functional (at last) in amenity, and carefully arranged to provide the maximum of physical ease, yet lacked some vital ingredient, some adventurous aspect of heart or humanity. In its essentials our establishment was, we realized, entirely true to town pattern. It conformed obediently and kept its distances to a nicety.

Even Humphrey, our well-trained houseworker and loyal member of the local Stewards' Union, by no means regarded our association as either permanent or essential to his happiness. His impersonal attitude was that of salaried employee who knew his job and had his 'rights' and lived his private life; he volunteered to us nothing more of himself than he considered our due, and expected from us only clarity and reasonableness of request and our maintenance of a workable housekeeping timetable. Unlike George Cook, Elias, and Pious Handyman of Agulu, Humphrey appeared to be without any intriguing aspects of temperament or idiosyncrasy; his groomed and capable personality had

much in common with the character of our new abode.

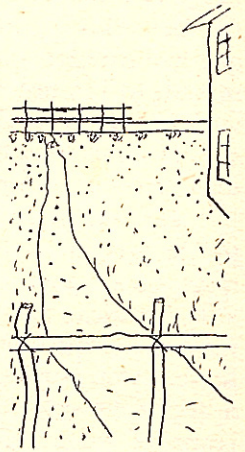
We could find no positive fault with our domestic situation, yet felt strangely dissatisfied. This was not, however, because in our normal routine we were unduly downcast by the small ordinary background problems well known to every housekeeping Coaster who as a rule accepts them philosophically. 'Laundry palaver', for instance, had at intervals its natural place in the back compound where, thrice weekly Leopold, the visiting washman, surrounded our linen in towering pyramids of soapsuds, rinsed it in a minimum of clear water and left it, without a backward glance, to hang for hours in rainstorm or scorching sunlight while he repeated his performance elsewhere. Next day he returned with heavy charcoal iron to press the clothes and incidentally to remove most of their buttons. Yet despite the damage he perpetrated, Leopold was secure in his livelihood, since washmen were as much in town demand as other household staff; he could, in fact, choose his clients at will and de-button their shirts with impunity. Serious palaver meant only a slight readjustment in his schedule, a different backyard view, and another clothes-line. As Humphrey pointed out to me with clearest logic, 'If Leopold is vexed he will not come back, and the Massa will not have clean shorts.'

Adept now in Coast compromise, we resigned ourselves to Leopold, but it was less easy to accept the constant presence of several persistent trekkers (cooks and stewards from neighbouring houses) who with airy disregard for our new grass and tender hedge, used our compound as short-cut to the main road. First, we requested that they respect the emergent garden; next, we urged their use of the proper thoroughfare; finally we firmly forbade their trespassing. Then we were made aware that what had seemed to us a reasonable attitude, a natural right to preserve property and privacy, was to the interlopers outrageous presumption.

Stormed their spokesman, 'This is our country and we go where we wish. In Ghana we are free to tread our own soil. You have no right to tell us where to walk!'

Inquired Bill with commendable restraint, 'Would you like me to come through your family compound without asking permission?'

'You come to our country and do not ask us first,' the other replied, and having delivered this volley, he withdrew in triumph.



'That man likes palaver,' remarked Humphrey dispassionately but with a kindly look which showed us that our steward did, after all, care something for our state of mind. 'He quarrels even with his own people and it is said everywhere that he is too big for his shoes.'

We felt much the better for knowing this, and set our minds towards defensive measures. Since it was so apparent that a formidable barrier already stood between us and those who wandered through our grounds, we saw no reason why a real fence should make any difference to our relationship.

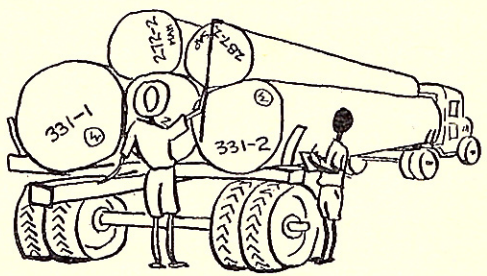
In the middle of November the rainy season came to its fitful close. Day by day thereafter the heat of the 'dry' mounted, and again it was hard to believe in our northern calendar which illustrated its version of the season with rimey country lanes and frozen ponds. In the trading stores of Black Man's Town the torrid advent of Christmas was marked by displays of tinned plum puddings and cakes, boxes of Yuletide greeting cards, paper garlands and other gala festoonery which European housewives in bare-shouldered linens bought dutifully, although with mixed

feelings. In the dog days of early December any sustained mental image of St. Nicholas, fluffy-bearded and rosy-cheeked in fur-trimmed costume and red mittens, was conducive only to prickly heat. On West Africa's simmering shores, robins on snowy branches, Merrie England hearth-fires, Pickwickian coaches, lantern-lit carollers — all that in myth and memory is materially associated with the time of holly and mistletoe — made almost impossible demands on the Coaster's imagination. Yet, since custom dies hard, the general attitude was resolute. No matter how the mercury soared, turkey and flaming pudding, mince-pie and wassail were the order of the day for the approaching 25th.

A broiling Christmas Eve afternoon found us with festive fowl in cookhouse oven, Ice Company celery and yellowed but still recognizable imported brussel sprouts in fridge, mince pies in their tin and pudding in its cloth. On the pantry floor reposed a treat and a problem: a box of perishable American apples (gift from a shipping company) whose tissue-wrapped crispness gave out a nostalgia-evoking perfume. Atop our lounge bookcase our Christmas cards made a bright showing. In the dining-room Humphrey (who, because of some private philosophy concerning the household's social rating, liked us to have guests) decorated our table with shining fringed crackers which his dark fingers handled as reverently as if they were butterflies, in respect of their special significance.

The downstairs office was disbanded after a morning of goodwill exchanges with our contractors and a final allocation of Merry Christmas 'dashes'. Bill and I now sat over tall glasses of iced five o'clock tea which did little either to cool us or convince our minds of the imminence of Christmas. As we whiled away the hour, our thoughts returned to a shipboard Christmas two years before when, en route to the Coast, we had no knowledge of what lay before us. Once again we had come full circle. Bill had accomplished

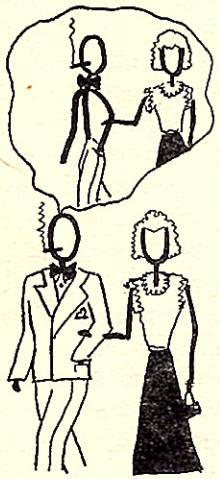
what he had set out to do, and proof of this was in the procession of laden timber lorries which every morning lined our roadway. The pioneering days of Paradise Bar, rest-house chalet and call-box, harbour office and creek exploration were behind us, although still, as loyal reminders of the way we had come, Francis, Ansah and Solomon were our daily company. For Francis we had, perhaps, an especial regard. In the continuance of his initially self-appointed liaison duties between Bill and the contractors he had proven himself invaluable, a man of increasing commercial stature whose intelligence and integrity were beyond dispute.



Mrs. Francis (a naive gentle girl with none of Francis' town composure) was now known to us, although her shyness on introduction had so bereft her of speech that Francis had been obliged to say on her behalf all the graceful comments which, he explained, she had prepared but could not personally bring herself to utter. Next day a messenger had brought to me what in the confusion of the occasion she had forgotten to present: a gold ring whose design was of hands clasped in friendship. In our understanding of this token, as in our reading of other small signs and portents, we felt ourselves to be far distant from the 'go-home-missus' hostility of the strike era which had been our first experience in Black Man's Town. Although from time to time a faint unease pervaded the streets and gave rise to predictions of further unrest, no actual 'trouble' had been manifest. Kwame Nkruma, having served his sentence for sedition and qualified for the politically admired distinction, 'Prison Graduate',

was now a Government Minister of importance. As a Coast slogan, the once vociferously shouted 'Self Government Now' had become a muted theme, like that of an air which, for the full power and volume of its orchestral effects, obediently awaits the signal of its conductor's baton.

So we reviewed and remembered while the afternoon faded around us. Then we rallied to the present. Here we were, we told ourselves once more, on the threshold of Christmas Eve, and the time had come for us to bath and change in preparation for the evening's paper-hatted gaiety. At this juncture Humphrey came in to announce the taps to be dry. 'No water, no water at all,' he told us despondently, and I knew that his particular worry was more concerned with the post-dinner washing-up than with our unbathed selves. Bill said something which sounded like, but could not have been, 'Donner und Blitzen!' We used a little of the precious liquid from the fridge bottles to damp our sponges and refresh our persons, and without any feeling of goodwill towards the Water Board, reclothed ourselves, I in long frock, Bill in dinner jacket and black tie. 'How much saner, how much more reasonable,' said Bill wistfully, running a finger around his moistly wilting collar and mopping his bedewed forehead, 'if only in decency one could wear just the black tie. . . .'



We ate, that Christmas season, three Dinners, one of our own and two, on subsequent evenings, at the houses of friends. It was a social time unique even in a community of strongly social instinct. At the Club a European Santa Claus ('plane-delivered, since reindeer were not available, and a sled would have in any case

too seriously strained even the most ardent young imaginations) presided with gifts at a tree-glittering children's party. The Water Board's lapse was short-lived, and a general fear lest the Electricity Department might suffer a breakdown owing to the prevalence of fairy lighting was not substantiated. For stewards and cooks, messengers and other dash-worthy persons extra fatigue was balanced by extra coinage for, as was well known in Black Man's Town, even the most purse-tight white patron was (for mysterious emotional reasons which no one bothered to analyse — the result was sufficient) inclined to be generous with loose change during his December feast-time. So, far from resenting the White Coasters' party-making and full larders, the others who stood by or fetched and carried, approved. In their minds a Merry Christmas was occasion for the spilling-over of richness, and it was their happy duty to see that nothing was wasted.

Early on Christmas morning, according to our previous intention, Bill and I drove to a beach thirty miles distant from Black Man's Town, and there rediscovered an idyllic solitude of blue sea and clean-washed yellow sand. We swam in the sparkling water and rode the creaming breakers, and afterwards, while yet the sun was indulgent, stayed to enjoy a curious realization: that here, rather than in the town, was that Christmas spirit which had eluded us. Now that we had so easily and spontaneously found it, we were at once reassured and freed from all the small tensions and cynicisms which had earlier assailed us.

The sun, now almost at its zenith, blazed down on the golden beach, and like a play of flashing blades its rays struck sparks of light from the water; the sands were burning to the touch. It was time to go home. Through the car windows the gathering heat came in warm puffs, like those from a giant oven, as we returned along the quiet dusty roads of Christmas midday.

We had given Humphrey and Moses the day off, and so — not altogether by unselfish design — had the house to ourselves. In the rare inconsequential ease of total privacy we lunched barefoot and alfresco from the fridge in a random, picnicking way that the correct Humphrey could not have happily countenanced. A remarkable peace, an extension of beach serenity, encompassed us while we contemplated the harmonious stretch of afternoon hours ahead, considering whether to read or sleep, or just to sit as now, savouring the calm quietness of our house before the evening and our departure to a second Christmas dinner. I was about to ask Bill why we could not enjoy more of this especial brand of content when both of us were startled into listening attitudes. A sudden uprising of melody came to us from outside. 'Humphrey's gramophone!' said Bill, rising to investigate.

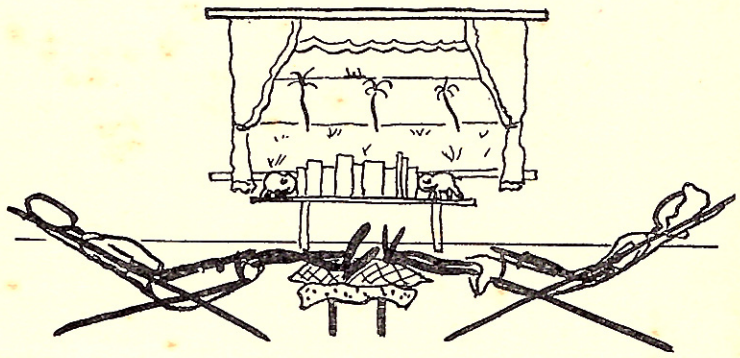
We went out to the balcony, to look across the compound towards our steward's quarters from whence the unexpected music came. Normally the sound volume of Humphrey's machine was kept subdued, but now it was allowed full voice, and at topmost pitch clamoured forth a raucous, uninhibited, '*God rest ye merry, Gentlemen, let nothing you dismay* . . . .'

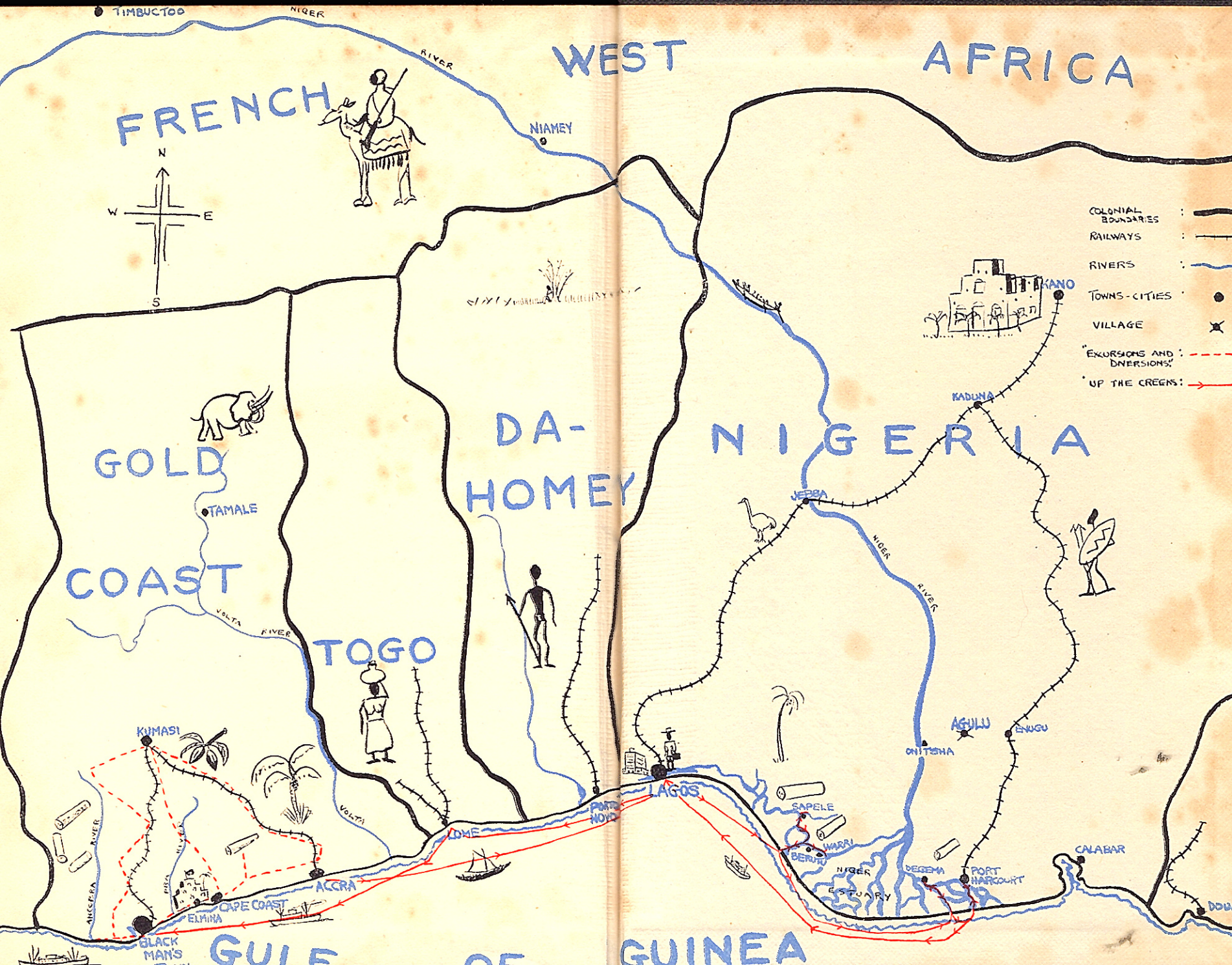
Half-doubtful, half-amused, we listened, not knowing whether to approve or condemn the astonishingly loud-pedalled performance, so powerful even at long range that we winced for our neighbours whose siesta windows overlooked Humphrey's room. At length Bill ventured that the boy, having observed our return to the house, must be sending his carol across to us as his idea of a cheerful Christmas signal; any remonstrance would surely be an affront to good intention. So, a trifle nervously, we waited until the record came to its end, and when silence fell once more we were considerably relieved. Humphrey, apparently, had made his gesture.

We remained on the balcony for a time, looking out over

the deserted golf course, the dazzling sea and the sculptured, motionless palms leaning across the brilliant sky. Slowly the gilded peace resettled all around us and Black Man's Town. Like a tangible essence it filled the shining air. Nothing moved; there was no sound, not a voice or a footfall. Said Bill with lazy finality, 'What better time for a Christmas siesta?'

We turned to go indoors. Then, as if we had broken an enchanted spell, the compound stillness was shattered. From Humphrey's room the incorrigible gramophone, roused to fresh assertive life, now proclaimed with unrestrained, earsplitting joy, '*Christians awake! Salute the happy morn. . . .*'

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"EXCURSIONS AND DIVERSIONS" :
"UP THE CREEKS" :
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KADUNA
GOLD COAST
TAMALE
DA-HOMEY
NIGERIA
JEBBA
NIGER RIVER
VOLTA RIVER
TOGO
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AGULU
ENUGU
ONITSHA
LAGOS
PORTO NOVO
SAPELE
LOME
VOLTA
BENIN
WARRI
CALABAR
DEGEMA
PORT HARCOURT
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ACCRA
CAPE COAST
ELMINA
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BLACK MAN'S
GULF OF GUINEA

BLACK MAN'S TOWN



Isobel RYAN









BLACK MAN'S TOWN





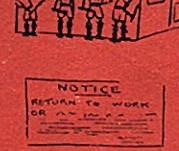


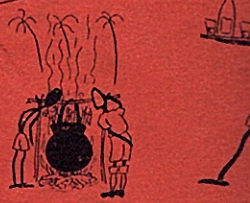












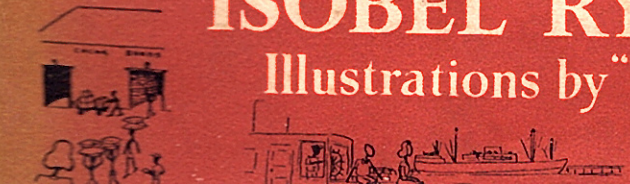






ISOBEL RYAN

Illustrations by "Bill"



BLACK MAN'S TOWN

Isobel Ryan's new book is the outcome of two years recently spent by her in a Gold Coast port, where her husband was in the timber trade. The growth of political consciousness has altered for good the former subservience of Black to White, and the two races seem now to have recognized and accepted the change without much difficulty. In her detailed account of social, business, and domestic life, the author affords a general view of what life in West Africa is like for Europeans today, and explains the difference between present and past conditions.

She brings to her writing the same fresh observation, light touch, freedom from prejudice, and independence of judgment that she showed in *Black Man's Country*. Entertaining as it is, her new book is a most useful conspectus of present-day life in the new West Africa, as seen by a good-humoured woman with no political bees in her bonnet.

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