

# The Crane



Isobel Ryan

One of the cranes to which the title refers is a 120ft boom derrick crane required by an enterprising local tycoon, Mr Adjako, for the development of his timber business in the village of Manango. The other is a diminutive toy crane which the sawmill's British General Manager, Philip Connor, keeps on his desk as a 'lucky piece'.

Isobel Ryan's new novel is the story of a white man's experience in today's West Africa, in one small village where, despite his genuine good will, his wish to understand and be understood, he is always an outsider. As a microcosmic fragment of a huge country, Manango reflects much of the vast change in which West Africa is involved. This remote, close-knit community registers the effects of a dictator's regime, the subtle ploys of resentful ambition, the continuing forces of old beliefs, the Establishment's disapproval of a black girl's love for a white man, and the death of a village youth during a military coup.

Wittily and well-drawn characters – both European and African – authentic and vivid local detail and an absorbing story of many moods make *The Crane* Isobel Ryan's most enjoyable novel.

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ISOBEL RYAN was born in Saskatchewan, Canada, where her Scots father owned and edited a local newspaper. She was educated at Vancouver High School and London University. At intervals from 1945 to 1967 she lived in West Africa where her husband Bill – otherwise known as Jacques Penry 'the faces man' – was a timber company general manager. While in Nigeria she wrote *Black Man's Country* and *Black Man's Palaver*, and *Black Man's Town* was written in what was then the Gold Coast. She now lives in England with her husband, her son and two cats: one Ghanaian and one English.

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Jacket design by Leigh Taylor  
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Franklin  
Massachusetts

*by the same author*

BLACK MAN'S COUNTRY  
BLACK MAN'S TOWN  
BLACK MAN'S PALAVER

ISOBEL RYAN

# THE CRANE



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To  
BILL RYAN  
or  
JACQUES PENRY  
or both

## CHAPTER ONE

"That is where the mill is, Mr Connor. *There!*" Mr Adjako's finger pressed down on the map which lay between them on the hotel-room coffee-table. He was bending stoutly forward from his too-low brocade chair, puffing slightly and straining the trouser seams of his London suit. The expensive fine matt charcoal cloth was smooth foil to the sheen of black skin; the cuff-links appeared to be solid gold nuggets embedded in the Simpson's white shirt-cuffs — cuff-links so big, so darkly yellow and so outrageously plutocratic they must be real. There was a flourish of gold in the smile. A capped tooth flashed with every affable expression, as the burnished dark cheeks cushioned, and the plump skin around the eyes folded, and the full rich mouth within the spade beard widened. Mr Adjako, a striking composition in black, white and gold, was an impressive prospective employer.

Glancing sideways at the wall mirror Philip saw this image of affluence repeated. Also he observed his own long legs in the trusty grey best-suit, the thinning sandy hair and wiry, tropic-faded eyebrows, the touch of tension in the solid shoulders and freckled hands. Against the soft colours and textures of this elegant London room he looked less at home than Adjako. In the corridor beyond the door a vacuum cleaner hummed. On Mr Adjako's rumpled silk bedcover a new briefcase lay open, with papers spread out; on the bedside table by the white telephone there was a tin of Andrews Liver Salts and a bottle of aspirins, and on the window sill, half hidden by the curtain, a ribboned powder puff and a bottle of pearl nail varnish which might have belonged to Mrs Adjako. But they did not. She was in West Africa.

So, in one sense, at this concentrated moment was her

husband, with his eyes on the map, his finger prodding confidently about the Yamina Forest region. *There*, about sixty miles from Yamina, were his natural treasures, his forest domain of mahogany and obeche, afrormosia and utile, spread about the vital pinpoint, *there* — which was the bush village, Manango, where his sawmill stood.

Philip knew it, though not specifically. It was to him more a matter of the familiar atmospheres which compounded so many memories: of fringed forest distances, red laterite dust crunching under the car wheels, the nearness of the sun, the magnetism and hostility of bush Africa's wide freedoms and half-melancholy solitudes. After a year or so you came home to England, glad to be back, to wear an overcoat and be spoiled by Helen's cooking, and flit in holiday mood across to the fleshpots of the Continent or drive up to Scotland or Ireland for some fishing. Then gradually you began to look forward to the end of leave; you had had enough because you were no longer a home person, but a man blessed or cursed with an attachment to two countries. This part of it now was the best: when the venture was fresh and challenging, and you were studying the map, the terrain, the names of the villages; and thinking beyond these to the facts of the journey and the job.

Mr Adjako explained. He required a European General Manager to organize, vitalize and develop his mill production to the full. He had made a beginning and was prepared to invest further. To ensure his timber markets he needed the confidence of the London and Continental buyers. A European manager would best promote this confidence. He wished to bring production up to the high standards they expected in cutting and delivery. He was himself busy with many other interests and responsibilities: in cocoa, yams, diamonds, transport, many concerns of which he was Chairman or Director. Mr Connor would realize he had little time to spend in the forest and the mill. It would

be a relief to get this development work started and know it was in good hands.

Philip listened and understood and remembered, seeing in Mr Adjako new Africa's self-made full-fledged man of affairs. Behind him were all the triers of the early days: the bouncy, loquacious middlemen who carried their entire offices in their briefcases. These were the small-time mobile speculators who would promise an overseas timber buyer the earth in log supplies; then, contract in hand, would forage into bush for the goods, persuading the small timber concession owners to wait for their money, here and there tipping the balance with a judicious 'dash' or gift, juggling facts and figures with vivid persuasion, and occasionally coming out on top. Or after a fiasco disappearing for a spell, to bob up months later hoping that all former misunderstandings were forgotten; and ready with some new and glowing proposal.

This breed of commercial optimists and adventurers had brought forth, with the help of hard knocks, wider knowledge and adaptation, not only the suave progressive politician, but the modern business man like Mr Adjako, skilled in economics, shrewd in investment, courageous in innovation. And tough withal, very tough indeed, beneath the groomed, polite exterior.

Well, this project would have its problems; there always were problems. (And fantasy, more than ever under the fantastic dictator, Angyhome Dowo, the man of Independence, the political wizard.) There was always some incredible rumour, some wild straw in the wind, always some major or minor palaver brewing, some speculation, some flux or dénouement or anticlimax. Nothing was temperate or fixed. The horizons shifted like theatrical scenery; mirages beckoned; beautiful bubbles floated up to be admired, and were pricked. You could always expect the unexpected. But there was one constancy: an incorrigible energy, optimism and flexibility in the surge of thrusting life and

hard-elbowing competitiveness. There were intervals of tremendous accomplishment and farcical failure. And always, with the new possibilities, a touch of pepper in the air.

'The mill is right in Manango, on my own land to save cost,' said Mr Adjako. 'Near to the forest. So there is no great log-haulage cost. All is there together, on the spot.'

'How about your local roads? Are they in reasonable shape?'

'We have only one road, Mr Connor. Most of it is quite good.' Mr Adjako flicked with finicky plump fingers at his trouser knee, removing an errant speck of dust or fluff. 'From Yamina twenty-seven miles on the fast highway. Then we branch off thirty miles or so.'

'I gather most of the mill labour comes from the village.'

'Oh yes! And many of my family live there. We are a large family with many relations: uncles, cousins and so on. Owing the land with me. I, however, take charge of the business matters. They depend on me to put up a good show. But I do not live there. I keep one flat in Yamina, and two houses and a flat in Echobe. My businesses keep me travelling about a lot. I run several cars, though it is often quicker to move by plane between Yamina and the capital.'

Perhaps because of the cuff-links Philip said, 'Your personal plane?'

Mr Adjako liked that. 'No, not my own. Not yet. I hope to get one before too long. I use West African Airways at the moment. Also when I come to London.'

The telephone rang. Nimbly Mr Adjako went to it and bent to the receiver. From behind he looked a dumpy little man; it was his beard which gave his front view dignity and distinction. 'Adjako here ... Yes, I will take it. That is all right. You may pack it up. Tomorrow I will arrange payment and shipping instructions. Tomorrow ... yes ... don't mention. Thank you.'

He sat down again, hands on knees like a bearded Buddha, compact with energy and purpose. 'That was a gas stove.'

Philip looked up from the map. 'A gas stove?'

'For my wife. I saw it in a shop. We can obtain gas in cylinders of course. I buy such things when in London because they are not easy in our homeland now. What you do not need yourself you can always sell. So I stock up while in the U.K. Also in Germany. The profit in re-sale is good. It is all business. When you come, be sure to bring plenty of equipment. Send it by sea, unaccompanied luggage.'

'What sort of equipment?' asked Philip.

'Oh, anything at all. Household. Clothing. Typewriter. Sewing-machine. Dishes. Anything. There is a pinch in many shop goods. All cost very high because of import duties. Shelves are often empty. Trade is much with the East. China, Poland, Russia ...'

'President Dowo is pro-East all right,' Philip observed neutrally.

'He has done much,' said Mr Adjako, without expression. There was a hiatus, as if the dictator in his Peking tunic might be listening at the keyhole. He hastened on. 'Your car, Mr Connor. It is good. I will buy it here, at second-hand list price, and arrange for shipment. Then I will not need to buy a new car for your use at the mill. You can arrange for your equipment to go with the car. Before Friday I will telephone you about your contract which will be typed and ready to sign before I go. Immediately on my return to Yamina I will arrange for your air ticket and inform you. You can expect to fly in three or four weeks' time, which will give me a chance to have everything ready for your arrival. So. That is all, I think.' He glanced at his watch. 'This afternoon I am inquiring about a crane for the mill.'

'That will take some investigation,' suggested Philip.



Surely Mr Adjako would not buy a hundred-and-twenty-foot-boom derrick as blithely as he bought a gas stove. 'It's an expensive item.'

'Several thousand pounds new, yes. Oh, I won't buy it right away. But I hope, soon. In a few months' time. We will go into it at the mill. We have only a gantry crane. We must have a proper crane if we are to make progress. It is a necessary expense.'

'Absolutely necessary,' Philip agreed, reflecting on his salary, the cost of the existing mill machinery, the price of a crane, and the tariff of this hotel, and wishing he had that kind of bank account.

They shook hands at the door: the big square-fingered freckled hand with a deep scar on the thumb — and the smaller, softer, dark hand with the blackberry-pink palm. Mr Adjako's handshake was curiously passive, hardly a grip at all, more like an encounter with a warm, inflated rubber glove. Even as his mouth smiled and his voice murmured conclusions, the physical contact was either reluctant, reserved or uninterested; it offered no reinforcement. Either Mr Adjako was averse to shaking hands because of some quirk of sensitivity or fastidiousness, or he did not look upon the traditional, firm, eye-to-eye business handclasp in the European way, as a special fixative in the bonding of brotherhood and mystique of pact-making.

'Goodbye, Mr Connor,' he said, not lingering for a moment. He looked already abstracted, half way to his next appointment. Probably thinking about the crane: its weight and strength, transport, accommodation, and money-making possibilities. And its value, moreover, as an object of prestige and self-enhancement. For a new crane has a presence; it is something that people notice and talk about.

'Thank you and goodbye, Mr Adjako,' said Philip. 'If I'm out when you ring, my sister, Mrs Hill, will give me

your message.'

In the corridor, waiting for the lift, he felt stimulated and intrigued. All in all, it looked good. He quite liked the little man.

Back at Croydon he found Helen in the kitchen, sitting on a high stool, mixing something in a yellow bowl. As usual the kitchen looked like a *Good Housekeeping* advertisement; everything matched and fitted together and had been planned. Because Harold was a first-class electrician with his own lucrative shop, all the gadgets were there, all new. Their house had evolved and developed with them; they had moved only once in their ten years of marriage, and then carefully, without haste. They were the contented nest-makers and stay-at-homes; Philip the one who over the years came to stay for a few days or weeks, according to his leave arrangements. This time, however, he had fretted at anchor for a restless ten months.

He was good for them, Helen often said; he kept them from getting too staid and suburban. When he was on leave they enjoyed his tropical aura. Behind Philip there glimmered, for them, another view: of swampland, and ruin forests, and Juju dancers, and palm trees under the noonday sun — a vision slightly blurred at second hand and perhaps too highly coloured, because it is every traveller's natural instinct to relate chiefly what is dramatic, vivid and mysterious. People who live in Africa are supposed to have something to show for their absence, and to bring home, along with their heathenish laundry and sweat-stained bush hats and corroded typewriters, accounts that cause laughter or admiration, or a shiver of thankfulness that one need not go bucketing on trek over those dusty roads, or kill a tarantula on the bedroom doorknob, or endure the ague of malaria far from civilization.

And Philip had always obliged. As when, over a snack in Helen's primrose-and-white kitchen, he spoke of one

journey's bush cookhouse: the improvised kerosene tin set on stones, with a lump of goat roasting inside; the old-timer cookboy separating an egg yolk from the white by straining it through his fingers before preparing yam-cakes; the smoke-blackened walls; the palm wine for leavening bread; the weevils in the flour.

Helen, dishing up cheese soufflé, said on cue, 'Oh, I would absolutely hate that, wouldn't you, Harold?'

Harold, whose farthest travels had been to St Malo, admired the soufflé and said, 'What's that, dear?'

'Goat, Harold. Wouldn't you hate to eat goat?'

'I've never tried,' said Harold. Amiable was the word for him; and the oddities of his brother-in-law's domestic regime in Africa were his own business.

But this afternoon Helen was alone in her kitchen, and Harold not due home from the shop till seven. She said, smiling up. 'Hello, there, Phil! Tea's ready in the pot. Sit down now and tell me. I know you *have* decided. You've got that look ...'

She was younger than he by seven years, but often behaved as his elder, perhaps because of her early years as a nurse, and, before that, prefect. Only in general colouring and angularity of feature were they alike. She was the smaller, more close-knit Connor, beige-blonde and pale while he was sandy with a reddish tan. It was she who insisted on his having his Croydon latchkey; the undisturbed room for his books and home-clothes; their address when filling in forms; their telephone number for messages; and even in the drawing-room the chair she called 'Philip's chair', in which to sit slippared whenever he wished, without any of the demands or possible frictions implicit in permanence.

When he was engaged to Julia — and it seemed to them both like another era now — Helen was glad for him, warning him only that he was mad if he really expected Julia to agree to flying out to the Coast for the wedding; Julia

wanted a London wedding on schedule with her own people around her. Helen was right, also, in judging that Julia would frown on any extension of Philip's tour. Though he wrote about it apologetically well in advance to explain the four months' delay, it proved disastrous; she was already vexed with the boredom of having a fiancé whose only presence was in his anxious, hasty air-mail forms. The finale, Julia's, was a registered envelope containing the ring. It was waiting for him when he came off the plane, and the note with it was cool and definite.

It was a blow, though Helen was not really surprised, declaring she had always felt that Julia, who from the outset had hoped Philip would switch to a home job, wasn't the type to take on West Africa; she had wanted to keep her good office job and be a real helpmeet, not just a girl in a sun-dress on the sidelines, one of the featureless expatriate 'wives'.

'Face it, Phil,' Helen said when the blow fell, 'she's found another man.' And so she had, younger, smoother, home-based, with good prospects in advertising, a fast worker. They had already put a deposit on a Wimpey house and ordered the G-Plan furniture.

So Philip nursed his pride; and Helen, as if he were one of her former patients, assured him he would recover. And he did. By the end of that leave he was a free whole bachelor again, with new telephone numbers in his book and a fortnight's restorative pike-fishing on Lough Derg to complete the cure. He had looked forward to his return to Africa. Then ironically his firm, Baldwin and Jones, delivered their own shock: Mr Baldwin wanted him to remain at the London head office; his Coast job was being given to his capable African assistant as a part of the company's new policy, stimulated by the view that African ability must be fostered.

He stood it for ten months: the commuting, the private stuffy office with a view of London masonry, the sameness;

timber reduced to City statistics, physical freedom curtailed, and a nine-to-five greyness over all. So that when, through a friend in the trade, Mr Adjako's need for a General Manager was known, he acted swiftly, though judiciously. Mr Baldwin advised him against the move, of course, but did not impede him.

Helen said, behind her teapot, 'So that's it, then. You're really *sure*, Phil?'

'Sure I'm sure, Helen,' he told her, knowing that her unspoken reservation had to do with Mr Adjako, but determined not to go into this. In theory Helen was all for racial equality and moving with the times, but the fact of an African as an *employer* ...

Philip said, 'The pay's good. Adjako's got the right touch. This could grow into something big.'

She drank up her tea. 'You know best, Phil. I know you want to go back. I wish it wasn't all so unsettled, that's all.' Helen, having dutifully read her newspapers and library books, and watched T.V. riots, coups and conferences, saw all Africa as a crucible abrim with strange, ill-mixed ingredients which could sensationally spill over or turn out nasty. Civil wars, intrigues, foreign weapons ... everything so uncertain. She examined her empty cup, like a soothsayer looking for portents in tea-leaves.

Philip waited. She looked across at him and smiled. 'Sorry, Phil, I'm being a wet blanket. I'm sure it's marvelous —'

'Don't worry,' Philip assured her. 'This job is exactly what I want.'

## CHAPTER TWO

There had been some rain. The West African sky hung low, without stars, over the Echobe airport. The bus shuttled in darkness away from the plane towards the blurred lights and floodlit flags of Customs and Immigration. Philip Connor, in his resurrected tropical suit, sat near the door. The bus passengers — two opposing rows of Africans, Indians, Lebanese, British and others — clutched hand-luggage and burdens of raincoats and sweaters. An Indian mother, calm as a carved Madonna in a sari, held on her lap a Marks and Spencer carrier bag stuffed with plastic flowers; her small son in tartan dungarees knelt on the seat to stare out at the featureless swirling night.

As Philip leaned to steady his sliding briefcase and cabin bag his jacket fell open to display the small embarrassment of a dry-cleaner's tag held by a large safety-pin. He unclipped this oddity and disposed of it in his pocket. No one was watching. The young Italian couple opposite were bent over their fat baby in its carrycot, the husband's Adam's apple moving anxiously as he shifted a bulging bag of nappies, the girl-mother fussing with cot covers. Two African men in good dark suits of British wool were engrossed in a jovial tête-à-tête; their foreheads, noses and black shoes shining, their white shirts stiff-collared and radiant. Two young nuns in white habits were conferring with a veteran Sister; an elderly Lebanese rested his paunch with heavy patience, self-sufficient. A British wife whispered, fussing with her child's hair ribbons, 'Soon we'll see Daddy, darling. Daddy will be waiting for us.'

The four African girls were all giggles and airy, high-rising wigs like jet-lacquered candy floss. They wore high-bosomed, ankle-length dresses, gold earrings, high heels and a sweet heady scent. Their handbags and cardigans had

come all the way from a summer in Oxford Street. Beside Philip a balding man with executive spectacles sat as nonchalant as if still in his Liverpool taxi. In the plane he had been working on the papers now filed ready in his document case; he might be an importer. Now he turned to Philip with the easy confidential chat of a seasoned traveller to a fellow-Briton.

'The V.I.P. planes with the Congress delegates don't unload here, y'know. We're just the *hoi polloi* while this show's on.' He pointed out into the tarmac distance. 'Dowo's got *his* special show set up at the other end. Exit direct on the main road. New reception building for the bigwigs. Red carpet, loudspeakers, big-occasion grandstand. The lot. They know how to do it all right! Absolutely *colossal* façade! What a showman that chap is! It's a helluva job to get a booking at the Commodore Hotel. They just don't want to know —'

Philip, half-listening, said 'Really?' and 'Yes, amazing!' and nodded; nothing more was expected. The traveller, having let off this burst of pre-barrier steam, was satisfied. He had heard his own voice and confirmed his own post-flight identity. Now he dabbed a handkerchief over his perspiring forehead. The abruptness of a West African touchdown, no matter how familiar, was both soporific and confusing. This was the time of disorientation, when the white skin sweated into a dampness between the shoulder-blades, under the chin, behind the knees and in the palms.

After the arid oxygenated purity of the aircraft's atmosphere, this moist warmth clung like a close invisible envelope, and even this darkness had an alien depth. So soon — only seven jet-propelled hours non-stop from a temperate London afternoon — you felt the steamy breath of the tropics on your face and in your northern lungs; and while your mind was ready for it and all else, your habit-ridden body protested and needed time.

Philip straightened defensively and rubbed his chin. It felt presentable enough. He looked for reassurance at the watch on his broad wrist. Seven thirty p.m. At home Helen and Harold would be sitting in the mauve glow of television, supper trays on their knees. When the ads came on, Helen would reflect over her coffee cup, 'He'll be there by now if the flight's on schedule — though it's hard to believe he's gone.' Helen always said that people never went away in one piece, like *that*, especially when they went by air; they left by degrees, fading like the Cheshire Cat.

The bus slowed. Philip touched his pockets, testing for wallet, glasses, keys, gold pen (which, as part of his person over many years, had promoted itself into a form of talisman), passport, vaccination certificate and luggage tickets. All correct, and he knew the drill. No need to worry about the entry permit which was Mr Adjako's affair — it would be there waiting for him at Immigration. 'I will make all arrangements,' Mr Adjako's letter said, not, of course, specifying. Conceivably, even, Mr Adjako might have taken the trouble to come himself. He might be there in the crowd by the entrance — or he might have sent a car, a driver and a message, someone to greet and assist.

The Italians with the carrycot alighted first; the African girls followed. The expectant crowd glimpsing friends became animated and vocal. Philip hopefully scanned the welcomers, searching for a chubby figure with a beard and a flash of gold, but he could not see Mr Adjako. Entering the building in the wake of the plodding Lebanese he sensed a minor uncomfortable hunch, a flicker of doubt which at once he dismissed. He could not be immediately recognizable to any driver or messenger. Mr Adjako, if he were there, would most likely be detached from the steamy crush, sitting waiting somewhere, comfortable and unhurried.

There was a dogged, perspiring queue at the Immigration desk. The room was like an overpopulated greenhouse,

claustrophobic, with a polyglot buzz and conflicting eddies of traffic around the hustle and thump of luggage on the Customs counters. At strategic points, phlegmatic and watchful, stood navy-blue police and khaki soldiers with rifles, guardians of peace and order during the grand Congress of the Federation of African Countries. The baby wailed loudly in its carrycot. The British wife and child were enfolded by the large, glowing, red-faced Daddy; the African girls were embraced and fussed over by two senior women in yards of festive rayon and celebratory headwraps. The Lebanese moved on alone, laconic and stolid, making his own heavy way. The Indian woman and child were surrounded and borne away by a protective concourse of Indians in rainbow shirts and saris. The Liverpool importer was now in his element, exchanging pleasantries with a delegation of wide-smiling African gentlemen. Mr Adjako, however, was nowhere here; nor did anyone appear to be looking for Mr Connor – though the messenger might be late, or the car and driver delayed by some mishap, or the plane time was mistaken. Still it was fruitless to worry – as yet anyway. There was plenty of time and plenty to do.

The young official at the Immigration desk was at once concerned about the entry permit. It had not come to his office; no messenger had delivered it here. No, no one had telephoned. Philip was incredulous. 'But it was all arranged.' He persisted. 'It must be here somewhere. Could it have gone to some other desk or been mislaid?'

The official was calm and pleasant. He shook his head and was sorry – for himself, perhaps, as well as for this overheated Englishman. The queue languished and shifted its feet. He repeated very clearly that no permit, message, letter or telephone call had come from anyone regarding Mr Connor. Since this matter must have special attention later he wished Mr Connor please to step to one side and wait.

Philip, stranded on the sidelines of the turgid movement from the Immigration desk to the crush at the Customs, felt a firm touch on his elbow, and turned sharply, with relief. Here was somebody for him at last! But it was only a policeman, sturdy in dark shorts, puttees and stiff cap, amiably volunteering assistance.

'Your friends may be held up in the traffic. The traffic is very bad tonight because of the Congress.' He produced a paper. 'You may fill in this form while you wait.'

Away from the main stream Philip leaned on a desk corner to write, while his helper hovered alongside. 'How much English money have you got?'

'Twenty-five pounds. That's what I was told. Do you want to ...?'

'No, no.' The policeman was very friendly. 'Of course you will soon need to change it for dibis.' His voice dropped; he indicated the as yet blank space. 'You do not need to write down *all* twenty-five. Just put twenty. Then I will change you five pounds right away. It is no trouble ...'

But Philip pretended to be obtuse; it was simpler. 'Well, that's kind of you, but don't trouble. There's no rush. I can do it later.' He finished as much of the form as he could.

The policeman looked regretful but not affronted, and took the paper. 'I will complete this for you.' His hand went to his empty breast pocket, then to Philip. 'Your pen, yes. For a moment, to borrow it. Thank you.'

He beckoned to a fellow policeman, who went with Philip to the Customs counter. This escorting and supervision might have been irritating had it not been conducted with such grace and amiability. The polished dark faces under the uniform caps were all kindly in their authority. No one in the building said 'sir', however, except the tip-hungry, sinewy, opportunist porters who strenuously darted and wove among the arrivals. They said 'massa' to the Britons as if through force of old habit. 'Yes massa, yes madam,' they declared fervently, while humping the luggage

away to the waiting cars, and competing for the best prospects.

At the Customs counter the crowd was fast thinning. It was easy to spot the well-worn cases, with stick-on labels from former journeys, and the fishing rods. Philip's policeman spoke to the Customs inspector in his own tongue; they enjoyed some private joke. Tuning in on the mood, Philip said mildly, keys ready, 'I didn't pack any bombs.'

'Any ... ?' The man leaned forward, ready for a problem. 'Oh ... *bombs!*' He slapped the suitcase merrily, agreeable to this touch of frivolity. It was a cheeky remark to make to the servants of Dowo, the Great One, at a nervous time like this, with the Congress beginning. Even the policeman grinned.

'No bombs at all?' persisted the Customs man, gaily poisoning his chalk.

'Not even a small one,' said Philip, pleased to be popular with anyone.

A portlet was summoned to guard the luggage. Philip's second policeman returned him to the Immigration desk where the young official was conferring with a senior man. The queue had gone. The room was almost empty. In the free darkness beyond the exit, car doors banged and drivers bleeped their horns. The Liverpool man, in the tow of his hosts, glanced back to wave a cheery hand to Philip who returned the salute of a brother-Briton so much luckier than he with his entry permit and welcomers. He felt envious, thirsty, neglected, harassed, and slightly bitter towards Mr Adjako.

Upon the remaining group there fell a bleakness, an after-school atmosphere whose centre was this European, this Mr Connor, the problem pupil who must be kept in after hours a difficulty, alas, to himself and authority. The younger man gathered up his files. 'I regret: until your entry permit is settled we must retain your passport and ask you to remain in the airport area tonight. Tomorrow

you may make inquiries. We will help you to fix your stay overnight at the airport hotel.'

But they still viewed him without rancour; they understood this was only a mistake which would soon be put right. They went to the trouble of explaining their vigilance. 'Our orders are strict at this time, we cannot make even one exception. During the Congress our security arrangements are very important.' They were ready to go.

Philip, however, was registering a new anxiety. 'Sorry, just a minute! I lent my pen to one of your policemen. I can't see him ...'

'The police have gone off duty, Mr Connor.' The senior man stood patiently. No permit. Lost pen. More time wasted. He persevered. 'Is it of value?'

'It's a gold one,' declared Philip, which made the senior man look pensive, as if doubting the common sense of anyone flaunting a gold pen in such a place at such a time as this.

The junior man prepared to jot down particulars. 'Can you tell me the man's number? The number on his shoulder?'

'Why no, I didn't notice.'

The senior man sighed. He still doubted. 'Are you sure he did not hand it back?'

'No, he was filling in a form.'

'Could anyone have stolen it?' suggested the junior, with some distaste.

'Only from him. Is that likely?'

They smiled slightly and agreed it was not. 'You could identify it?'

'It's filled with green ink,' Philip said, 'It's not new. It can leak if you don't hold it in a certain way.' He added facetiously, 'So it would be a case of *green*-handed, not red.' It was a silly thing to say. He must be getting tired.

'A gold pen filled with *green* ink,' repeated the senior man, patiently keeping to the facts. 'If, as you say, the

discreet explanation and added something further in his own tongue. The desk clerk nodded, impassive. It appeared understood that this guest was not to leave the premises until his minor but vexatious problem was solved, as was hoped, tomorrow. As they moved away Philip observed the clerk's signal to the stewards. They were being instructed. If Mr Connor should rashly summon a taxi, for instance ... Philip was nettled. 'You needn't worry,' he told his companion. 'I'll be quite glad of an early night.'

'That would be sensible. Because if you went into the town and had an accident, that would cause a lot of questions and trouble for us over the entry permit. You see: you have not as yet *entered*. Officially you are not here.'

'No, but I'm here enough to be thirsty. Would you join me?'

They sat down together. It was useless to try to telephone Mr Adjako if he were still up-country. According to the desk clerk the village line, more than two hundred miles away, which carried only two numbers, one for the police-station, the other for the sawmill, was long since shut down for the night. As for trying to contact Mr Adjako at either of his flats, the Yamina line had been out of order all evening. The call must then wait for tomorrow.

But still Philip watched the door. 'He has a beard, if you should see him — he's short and ... well built. I should have thought he'd be down here at a time like this. I really can't imagine what's gone wrong.'

'I should not try to imagine,' said the Immigration man, meaning to be sympathetic. 'There are so many things.'

'I don't like being without my passport.'

'It is quite safe, Mr Connor. *In a safe.*' He drained his glass and rose, a good type, using his authority with dignity and discretion. 'Thank you and good night, Mr Connor. We will hope for your clearance tomorrow.'

\*

The bedrooms were in four long narrow blocks behind the main buildings. Leading to them was a cement path adjoining a wasteland of darkness and neglect. The building he entered was silent, the corridor to the communal bathroom deserted. In former days each bed had its mosquito net; now the entire building was gauze-screened like a cage which kept out most mosquitoes and all cooling breaths of air.

The room was small and plain, with a high-powered overhead light bulb which added a glare to the stifling heat. Philip touched the ceiling fan's wall-switch tentatively at 'Low', and the propellers at once whirled into a dervish frenzy. He tried 'Medium' and 'High'; there was no difference. The fan made a hypnotic blur of movement and juddered slightly as if drunk with power. He called the steward who came with a single towel which smelled of soap. The steward, a gnarled, anxious-looking little fellow, was pessimistic about the fan, though he clicked the switches on the off-chance that the mechanism, like some wild animal, might respond better to one hand than the other. It continued to whirl furiously, with a savage whining noise.

'Too strong. Too, too strong,' observed the steward, ready to adjust his expression to comic, dismayed, or whatever might be most congenial. Late evening guests could be aloof, frivolous or drunk, or they could suddenly start a big palaver over nothing. This one looked unsettled, walking around a lot but only unpacking his pyjamas and sponge bag, and not as yet offering any kind of massa-type joke or chat. The steward volunteered reasonably, 'Electrician will come tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow,' said the guest moodily. 'Everything happens tomorrow.'

'Yes, massa, tomorrow,' agreed the steward, hoping that was meant to be funny. But this massa was not one of the easy, joky kind. He had a long face because of the fan, or

something else. Too bad. He hoped there would not be trouble. He closed the door softly and wandered away to collapse bonelessly to rest on the corridor step by the screen door, like an ebony marionette with slackened strings. He chewed a kola nut, enjoying its stimulus; he was not supposed to sleep on duty. A little later he looked up at a pair of long legs to the face of this last arrival, who was impatiently asking, 'Any chop still going in the dining-room?'

'Chop still deh, massa. Plenty good chop,' said the steward, referring to his wrist-watch (which was fourth-hand and somewhat deviously acquired) and venturing a lively grin with this helpful information, while observing that this massa was not one of the new people who never said 'chop' right away, but 'lunch' or 'dinner' and liked to talk and ask questions. He watched Philip disappear and spat with great positiveness, not at all from contempt, but because he had a habit of spitting and was good at it.

Philip lay gently sweating under a single sheet, eyes closed, waiting for sleep under the motionless fan. The day would not be dismissed; it returned to him in a series of flitting pictures under his eyelids: the London take-off gentled by latex and filtered music, the toy roads and rooftops of England falling away. Then the bland sunlit cruising among drifting cloudscapes which were too unearthly to accept; you had to compare them with snowbanks or fields of cotton wool or acres of meringues. Drink in hand, you looked down through layers of gauze at France and the Mediterranean and North Africa, at the hummocks which were mountains, and the patches of moss or velvet which were forests six miles below. You glided over the giant sand carpet of the Sahara, seeing only the movement of a penny-sized cloud shadow darkening the desert face. You watched the flaming melting-pot of the stratosphere sunset, and accepted a plastic refreshment tray. An easy

hop, six and a half bus-riding hours in the sky; its detail fast fading already because what really mattered was not there but here. Mr Adjako. Entry permit. Passport held. Delay. What to do? Then his fret focused, became one single indignation. The pen. Early up tomorrow, and straight to the head of the Police Department to get *that* sorted out.

The tall glass of cold beer, already dewed with condensation and forming a wet ring on the cardboard mat, was one modest palliative, one simple measure against boredom. Alongside lay two paperbacks, a *Newsweek* magazine, an airmail note-pad and the Government-controlled *Despatch* with its Congress headlines, group-pictures of the rich-robed visitors, and obedient columns of praise for the wonder man, Angyhomu Dowo: the political Great One, a being who no longer seemed mere flesh and blood, but more an image of power, an everyday legend and a brooding atmosphere.

On the almost deserted terrace a black and orange lizard boldly scuttled, and stopped, and scuttled, flicking up biscuit crumbs. In the airport car park across the road sunlight splintered and burned on glass and laminate. People moved among the cars: women in bare-shouldered vivid dresses and sunglasses, men in open-necked shirts and shorts, small children in floppy cotton hats, making for the Arrivals and Departures doors. A big smooth Pan American plane had just landed; a V.C.10 was due to leave. Philip sat in his canvas chair, not watching now for anyone, or able to plan to go anywhere. He was just sitting with his drink, waiting, filling in time.

In need of some — any — definite occupation, he reached for the note-pad and began a second bulletin to Helen, to compensate for the unsatisfactory gaps in his first somewhat cryptic and distracted note on arrival.

'I am writing this on the hotel veranda before lunch, still



hoping to get clear of this place soon. Tomorrow maybe, though I'm beginning to lose faith in all this "tomorrow" business. This is my *fourth* day here, but it feels a lot longer because I can't leave the place. As I think I explained, there has been difficulty over the entry permit, though everybody is quite nice about it, even sympathetic. It's not suggested that I go home — only that I wait until Mr A. completes whatever manoeuvres he is busy with to sort out the problem. Of course he turned up (on the evening after my arrival). I managed to get through to him on the phone that morning. He said that his clerk, who sent me my tickets, told him they were for the next flight (following the one I came on) and that he had been expecting the permit by every post. He sounded worried, which certainly didn't help my state of mind. Since then I've found out that because he had never before brought out a European to work for him, he was much too optimistic about getting the entry permit. The purpose of the permit system, of course, is to control the number of Europeans coming in to the country. Otherwise the whole Africa-for-Africans policy would be defeated.

'Mr A. is partly solving this dilemma by calling me an "engineer", European engineers being more acceptable than General Managers. Even so, though he has been buzzing round the Ministry every day, the best he seems able to expect for the moment is a three-month authorization for my presence, and this means their hanging on to my passport. Now we are waiting for this "temporary" paper which every day has been promised for "tomorrow".

'When, following my phone call, he got here, he had apparently quite recovered from his earlier worry. He's remarkably resilient. He brought three business friends with him, all very prosperous looking, and ordered a special dinner. I *think* he was showing off — as if I were a new personal acquisition or status symbol. An odd feeling. I'm not sure whether the effect is enlarging or belittling. They

all treated the permit business as a bit of a joke, a minor slip-up, nothing serious. Mr A. spoke of it as a business snag to be solved by personal enterprise — and I think he has plenty of that. I got the impression that it didn't occur to him at all that the situation — all the palaver and delay — could bother me personally since I was on the payroll. Extraordinary! Of course he's very popular with the staff and my standing has now gone up. Flowers on the table, for instance, and they fixed the room fan, and bring me ice cubes.

'Mr A. is staying with friends in town while making his calls on the Ministry (and doing other business), though over this Congress period I imagine that the higher echelon are mostly preoccupied, or out. Not that this deters him. He may take too much for granted, but he certainly doesn't give up easily.

'One rather funny thing: he pays cash for everything. He has a henchman to carry his briefcase which holds wads of dibis — the local currency — like a travelling bank. (A dibis, by the way, is ten shillings.) Impressive, naturally. Money in the raw always is. Having been asked several times already, I wasn't surprised when he asked if I'd brought some English pounds. A pound now fetches thirty shillings to two pounds value in dibis, which explains its popularity.

'It's as hot as blazes. Echobe is always a sweltering stewpot at this time of year. I use up three shirts a day. You may have seen some of the Congress excitement on T.V. — probably more than I have. It feels idiotic to be marooned like this on the sidelines or in the doldrums, helpless to do anything about it when by now I'd expected to be settled in on the job. After flying out at the speed of sound, at that.

'One good thing: my pen (as you'll know from this ink) came back. No note or explanation. I saw the head of the police department over at Immigration and spoke to him

about it. He offered to parade the few constables who were on duty that night for my identification, but I said I was sure the chap had just forgotten. He looked slightly doubtful but said he'd make his own investigation. It took him about forty-eight hours, but it obviously worked. Now I've got the pen I feel in a way sorry for the policeman.

'I haven't spotted a single familiar face — no one I used to know; though I expect there are some around somewhere, and I'll run into them. People of my sort keep coming back in spite of all the new problems and maybe against their better judgment. I don't know exactly what is the attraction. I never do when I'm *here*. It certainly isn't comfort or prestige. Something else I can never put a name to. At the moment I'm thinking of home already, and beginning to miss things. You never can really belong, because you are European-British and different for whatever reason, and everybody knows it. As usual many Africans do their utmost to make us feel we have a niche here, and some think we're anathema, never to be forgiven or made welcome, because we are white.'

His old pen ran out of ink; its gold casing masked inner peculiarities. He gathered up the pages, to finish later, after lunch, in good time to catch the next homeward flight. The veranda lizard skittered away as he stood up, though he moved without haste; he had no need to hurry. A large cheerful group from the latest plane was invading the area, organizing chairs, passing duty-free cigarettes, and ordering gin-and-tonics. They had a look of self-sufficiency and bonhomie as if they sat within a charmed circle. They were pale-skinned, new young people, strangers all. The watchful old peddler by the door picked up a clutch of baskets and moved obliquely towards them. He paused in front of Philip, who again shook his head. He was still not in the mood for buying a basket.

### CHAPTER THREE

The driver drove fast and well, like an automaton at the wheel of the new cream-coloured Mercedes. Mr Adjako, who evidently was not one for unnecessary conversation, sat with Philip in the heavy, cushioned silence of the back seat. He wore matching coffee-coloured shirt and slacks, and brown suede Chukka boots, his briefcase and an aerosol fly spray rested beside him on the seat, which was of real leather, covered with thick, slippery plastic.

Their early morning departure had been smoothly negotiated from the Airport Hotel, past the proud Government grounds and across the sweltering flatlands. They climbed up to the steepness of an escarpment, and from this cooler, greener height looked down at the plain which, already at the mercy of the climbing sun, lay shimmering and vaporous like a giant griddle.

Mr Adjako caused the car to halt, the better to see Dowo's 'personal residence'. It stood just above them, as big as two Grand Hotels put together: swimming pools, catwalks and awninged terraces, gates and sentries, mosaics and flagpoles, with ivory towers and an eagle's-eye view of the coastline and the capital — or, if you were a visionary, of all Africa.

They stood considering this remarkable construction, and all it stood for. 'Astonishing place,' said Philip, at a loss for the right word.

'Yes.' Mr Adjako shook his head in wonder, moved perhaps by such magnificence, or by envy, or pride of country. 'It is a very fine building. It shows what can be done here, in Independence.'

'But what on earth did it cost?'

Mr Adjako, climbing back into the car, said solemnly over his shoulder, 'No one can tell. It is not only a big

house. It is something for wonderment. In that way it is like Buckingham Palace.'

Philip regretted his question and did not argue. He was here on a job, not to talk about politics or architectural megalomania. As for Buckingham Palace — he let it go.

The driver, who had stayed in the car reading his newspaper without apparent interest in his surroundings, flicked his cigarette out of the window and started the engine. He was an impassive young man, there only to drive and take orders. If he had any opinion on the great Angyhome Dowo's dwelling, he kept it to himself.

This drive, compared with any of Philip's up-country expeditions by kit-car in the old days, was a pleasure trip. Main roads, formerly pot-holed, sway-backed, narrow and grit-strewn were now, mile upon mile, broad and smooth-graded. The Mercedes sped over new asphalt while the huge landscape unfolded and slid past the car windows. Cotton tree, tufted palm and charred scrub; cassava, yam, banana and plantain plot; bamboo boscage, cocoa grove, shaded river bed, and liana-laced forest wall running like a leafy pattern in all the shades of green from yellow to near-black, and all the earth colours of brown from tobacco to sepia, with repeating motifs. They were now one hundred and five miles from Echobe.

Philip, glancing to see if his employer were dozing, saw that the thick-lidded eyes were half closed, the plump cheeks and beard peaceful; the hands reposed slackly on the knees. He was not asleep, then, only digesting his lunch, self-absorbed and switched off. Philip stretched and cautiously retracted his long legs to ward off the cramp of inaction. He had had quite enough of sitting still, and would have preferred to drive, though he could not fault the man at the wheel. He felt a slight sharp inner misery and hoped it did not mean the onset of stomach palaver. It was probably only the unwise extra beer at the early lunch-time stop at what Mr Adjako

called a 'motel'.

This had turned out to be a newly built hostelry with a crazy-paved courtyard strung with coloured light bulbs. It was furnished with a small thatched pavilion where a night-time jazz band might play for outdoor dancing. Inside the 'motel' there were easy chairs, striped curtains, glass-topped tables, tin ashtrays and a low-moaning radio — and, beyond, the dining tables set out with checked cloths, chromium cutlery and sauce-bottles. The washroom amenities were contained in two separate lobbies. One, large enough for a bedroom, housed only a small lonely toilet and a big, gilt-framed mirror. In the other, slightly smaller, there stood a sink and a bucket, and nothing else.

'Hot Snacks', as the sign said, were available: either curry and rice or eggs and bacon. They had the eggs and bacon, with thick bread and butter and beer served by a heavy-faced matron in a turquoise rayon head-wrap. They smoked Mr Adjako's excellent cigars. The bill came to seven and a half dibis. Could that be right? Three pounds fifteen shillings? There was no mistake; this was the usual price. Mr Adjako paid without blinking.

'I consider this a progressive place,' said Mr Adjako as they returned to the car. 'It is very useful to call in here for a comfortable meal and so on.'

Philip could not deny it. Not so long ago you stopped, during a journey like this, either by the wayside or at one of the old British-type rest-houses, bordered by canna lilies, hedged by a tangle of bougainvillea, where, in the dim and dusty dining-room with its Public-Works-Department Victorian furniture, you ate sandwiches and were served with tea and bananas by a sleepy old caretaker in an atmosphere of flies and heat and Colonial stoicism. And went to the lav which was a high-smelling 'thunder box' with a gritty wooden seat over a bucket of sand, and more mud to shovel in. Then you signed the Visitors' Book. Of such curious primitive disciplines was nostalgia made.

They were, of course, different from Mr Adjako's, whose comparisons were his own, and not mentioned.

Now, after three hours they were passing another bamboo thicket, and another yellow stream shafted and stippled with brilliance between the tangled trees. Half-stripped African bodies stood or bent or squatted, soaping themselves and their garments. A patchwork of coloured cloths lay spread out to dry on the rough verge. The naked children pranced and waved; their elders turned their heads, incurious. Then they were gone, flipped away like a snapshot. The Mercedes sped on.

In the lesser villages, which were sometimes a density of low, ochre-stained, porched buildings, and sometimes no more than a straggle of tin-roofed shanties where the red-eyed vultures sat, the traders watched them pass, leaning against outdoor counters of polka-dotted enamel pots or black tin trunks, or ranks of cheap singlets and shorts, or pyramids of Omo and Sure Fire matches. In the shadowy caverns of the larger stores there stood Primus stoves, oil-lamp chimneys, galvanized buckets, chamber pots, iron bedsteads and other basic objects — not displayed, merely there, waiting. The tailors, as usual, treadled their sewing-machines in the dusty shade of doorways overlooking the open drain. The market women walked with the familiar gait of the headload carrier: with a brisk rhythmic wobble of buttocks under the tight, jazzy skirt-cloth, and the graceful uplifted arm steadying a meshed cage filled with loaves or fritters — or a burden of eggs in a bowl, or a platter of plantains. There were the usual chalked-up signs outside the Love-All-Bar, the Paradise, the Happy Bar: 'Slip In Here For Iced Beer: Stop Here For All Drinkables'. Within the open doors, behind the rough wooden frontage, stood the bar's gleaming refrigerator, centre of all, like a new-rich visitor to a slum house.

Everywhere the foraging goats, sheep and chickens meandered into the road, oblivious of traffic. Free-range

fowls proper, thought Philip, as one piebald hen flapped and squawked to safety, an instant from extinction. He tried not to drive mentally, but his foot instinctively pressed down hard and often on invisible brakes. A stupid occupation, and frustrating. He lay back, eyes half-closed, practising fatalism, and letting the landscape blur past.

'A new accident there,' stated Mr Adjako, with one finger indicating a car in a ditch. It lay crumpled and abandoned but still shining with newness, and it had the violently surprised look of sudden death. Soon, bit by bit, all its detachable parts would disappear until it became one more among so many carcasses left to rust by the roadside.

'A depressing sight,' acknowledged Philip.

'It is a sign of foolishness,' declared Mr Adjako. 'Some men think when they buy a strong car that it is a protection and will carry them along in complete safety. They trust too much.'

The road was dead straight now; it lay like a line drawn from the car wheels to the horizon, a smooth grey Dowo road with a perspective of telegraph poles and a green border. The driver sat up to it, accelerating. Philip remembered some long-ago member of the European Club telling him, 'You have earned a distinguished order now, old boy. Letters after your name. Philip Connor M.M.B.A. — Miles and Miles of Bloody Africa.' A very club joke, old as the hills, part of the camaraderie then, the 'we'—versus—'them' routine. And now 'they' were 'we', and 'we' were 'they', which was indeed a large and subtle alteration.

Mr Adjako, employer of a British General Manager, was asleep, his head back and jogging slightly, his beard horizontal, his plump mulberry lips puffing in and out. The order of M.M.B.A. was his by birth; he had no need to prove himself with a window view of Africa. England was his particular extension, which some might call a 'veneer', though it was more than that. Peculiar, Philip pondered, that it should be such a one-way cliché.

While Africans were supposed to be so subject to this veneer, this frail layering-on of new taste and habit, tropical-based Europeans were generally presumed either pig-headedly to resist change, or to become mellowed and 'knowledgeable' about Ghana, Nigeria, Congo or wherever. At worst, white men 'went bush' through becoming altogether too knowledgeable and assimilated – from the European viewpoint, anyway, which could be as naive in its way as the African's. So round and round we go ...

Philip dozed briefly and woke to see his employer taking two phials of tablets from his briefcase and tipping four pills, two red and two green, into his mouth, which opened wide and serious to receive them.

They were, he said, treatment 'for my blood condition which gives cause for anxiety'. His health, he said gravely, was his worst worry.

'But you look so extremely fit, Mr Adjako.' Philip could not believe anything could be physically wrong with anyone of such vital and glossy exterior.

The sufferer was stoic. 'I am so because I am always on guard. I have frequent check-ups. A man should never ignore his health. Men die that way, every day. I have seen it happen. These tablets cost two dibis fifty for a dozen in Echobe – when you can get them. They are very helpful.'

A fast-approaching timber lorry with a high load of three huge russet-dappled logs now bore down on them, and swept by. 'Beautiful mahogany. Ten tons at least,' said Philip warmly, feeling a need to salute near-perfection when he saw it.

Mr Adjako observed, 'A very good lorry. It is strong, of good make, and very economical for long distance log-hauling.'

'I was looking at the timber,' said Philip.

'Oh! The logs, yes, fine veneer. We have many like that, you will see. We can supply them in quantity. No trouble.'

Philip doubted it. To his knowledge there was little

accessible mahogany left in the country. The few remaining stands of mahogany were in remote areas, deep in the concessions, far from main roads. To find good mahogany trees was one thing; to get them out of the forest was another. Prices were high for first-class logs, but the demand was small. Taste in furniture and panelling had changed. Young people wanted something different. Mahogany was no longer the vogue. England and the Continent had practically dropped out of the market. America was still interested, but only in very specially selected prime veneer logs, still valuable but scarce. It was far more of a business proposition for timber producers to concentrate on other species such as utile and sapele which were still to be found in some abundance and fetched a reasonable price. And, of course, there was afrormosia, a good substitute for Burmese teak, for which there was a steady market and whose price was second only to that of mahogany.

Philip was about to state his view that it was better, surely, to concentrate on the more abundant species, easier to get at and more economical to exploit, but Mr Adjako cut across abruptly, out of his own reverie, 'I keep my eye on high profits, whatever I deal with. I want to capitalize at once on the best timber. The Americans want top-grade mahogany. I am first of all a business man.' There was a pause. He continued blandly, 'That is the difference, of course. You are first of all a timber man, Mr Connor, and then a business man.'

*Well, hell's bells, and for the love of Mike!* Philip thought. *What am I here for?* He felt a flush of annoyance. Business man! What about the entry-permit fiasco and the dead loss of almost a week? Muddle and waste, and money down the drain. What about the flashy wads of briefcase money, doled out like a housewife from her purse? Sheer arrogance. Yet this little African enigma could afford to bring him more than three thousand miles by jet and Mercedes to make his bush mill productive! A British

timber man established in the trade long before Adjako had left the ranks of the 'small boys'. What an extraordinary thing to say!

Mr Adjako leaned forward, telling his driver to stop. They had reached a junction by a new Texaco petrol station. The passengers from two refuelling bus-lorries were climbing out to stretch their limbs, drink from their water bottles and buy bread from the strolling vendors. This social scene, redolent of kerosene and hot oil, made a chattering commotion, as if the act of travelling had worked like a drug on all emotions. The muscular young drivers, men of power, lounged apart like young lords in charge of their vehicles. There was a dense circle around a quarrel. Exclamations rose from it, loud staccato accusations and rebuttals, at which the bystanders smiled broadly, enjoying the drama. Colours, as from a spilled paintbox, looked stronger in the shadeless heat, against the vitality of black skin. Infants fed on rich brown breasts, and when they slept were hitched up to ride, tight-swathed in cloth slings, on their mothers' backs. In the involuntary eternal gesture of old Africa all the women in traditional dress made constant small adjustments to their cloths, with a bending and straightening of supple spines and a quick movement of hands, and a fluttering as of bright cotton wings.

Mr Adjako sent his driver to buy yams in the open space near by, where piles of the rough-skinned tubers lay on the ground, awaiting customers. Each pile was symmetrical, Philip observed; each arrangement had its own importance. It was like this always in any West African market place: this obsessive exactness in the placing of produce, setting it into precise heaps and pyramids which were for ever being turned over, checked and inspected, as if some secret zeal or stubborn purpose were at work, concealed in the almost casual, offhand manner of the final transaction. You could not call it deliberate salesmanship or artistry, but more a powerful physical grip on existence, a close

identification of the seller with his goods which became his complete and totally absorbing horizon.

A girl vendor of chilli peppers sidled up to the car with a head-tray on which were positioned six identical scarlet heaps on six identical leaves, and each small fiery conical pod looked as if she had valued it as a separate investment. She addressed herself in her own tongue to Philip who repeatedly told her, 'No thanks,' while she remained hopefully staring in at him. At length she moved across to the other window and spoke winningly to Mr Adjako. He replied briefly, with a forceful snap of the fingers. That was enough. She turned away expressionless, tightening her skirt wrap around her skinny waist, and sat down with her tray, to pat her offerings back into perfect order.

The driver returned with three yams for which Mr Adjako paid, in exact coins out of his pocket. He told Philip that this was the best and cheapest place in the region for yams. 'You like yam?' he inquired. 'Do you eat fou-fou?' He made a pounding gesture of fist on palm, miming the movement of pestle on mortar, and then, with bunched fingers, the act of eating the putty-like mash.

Philip said, 'Of course. Often. I like it.' He didn't say 'in bush' lest that should sound patronizing. Mr Adjako enjoyed fou-fou and was clearly pleased with Philip for his sophistication. A compliment to a country's food is always a compliment to its people. Criticism suggests other uncongenial aspects. Philip recalled his own private irritation with a homesick African who went out to lunch with him in London and, unhappy with the menu, confessed to a longing for a good palm-olive stew. With fou-fou.

'Potatoes', said Mr Adjako, 'are a high cost here. Six times the U.K. price. Yam is always better. In London you can find it only in certain good shops.'

'At a high cost,' suggested Philip.

'Terrible,' said Mr Adjako. 'But it is a rarity there, more so than mango or avocado. I have not found any first-class

London restaurant where they make fou-fou. Why is that?’

‘Convention, I suppose,’ said Philip, unsure. After his immurement in the Airport Hotel, and the motel lunch, he could not as readily as Mr Adjako switch his mind to a Soho greengrocer’s or a West End restaurant table. He could not imagine an assiduous maître d’hôtel suggesting fou-fou as the chef’s speciality today. Anyway the very notion of food now aggravated the niggling disturbance under his belt. He tried unobtrusively to swallow three anti-diarrhoea tablets from the packet Helen had tucked into his cabin bag. But Mr Adjako caught him out and asked questions. ‘Ah, yes, stomach-ache. You should have told me, Mr Connor. It is a germ. I always carry a remedy for that.’ He plucked a sheet of dimpled foil from his briefcase, tore off and offered a section, ignoring Philip’s protest. ‘No, take it. You will be cured in no time. These are strong. They work.’ He leaned back, the matter settled.

Philip almost said, ‘You’re a real medicine-man. Mr Adjako,’ but checked himself. What a dropped brick that would be; you had to be careful. Anyway with all that stuff inside him he ought to be all right soon, unless Helen’s stuff warred with Adjako’s, in which case he could expect to feel a lot worse.

He concentrated on the road. The driver, having bypassed Yamina some miles earlier, now turned off the highway to a narrower, secondary road fringed by straggling, thinned-out forest and scrub.

A yellow taxi, celluloid Kewpie mascot bouncing against the rear window, passed them, issuing a black stench from its exhaust pipe. It disappeared at histrionic speed round a bend. The file of people walking in the roadway stepped aside at its passing, steadying their head loads of up-ended stools, pots and produce; their cloths glowed against the darkening forest margin. One old woman carried a piece of charred, smoking wood, nucleus for the night’s cooking fire. She hurried steadily on, not looking at the splendid

car.

‘It is not far now,’ said Mr Adjako. They swept on — through more villages and black-shadowed cocoa plantations. A crude mission church stood like a child’s drawing inside its fence. On a grassy plateau around a low cement school building a covey of small schoolgirls in Reckitt’s-blue uniforms played organized games. A teacher, an African girl in a gingham dress, blew a whistle and called out in a high clear note of command; it was the sound, almost dreamlike here, of school-England in the wilds. Several miles on there was a palm-wine hut, just four poles supporting a social raffia-roof. The drinkers, whose lorries were drawn up off the road, sat round a collection of calabashes and green bottles. They all waved and called a greeting as the car passed, and one of them mockingly swept off his tattered hat and bowed low.

Since they had left the tarmac of the main road, the forest had gradually deepened and thickened, until now on one side the close-meshed woods made a leafy wall indented only at long intervals by trail entrances. The terrain opposite made an undulating sweep from green to violet to palest blue distance. Mr Adjako’s ‘not far now’ must have been a wild understatement. The way led now along an escarpment. The road became rougher, and the driver flexed his shoulders in concentration to allow a timber wagon to pass on mud-spattered wheels. As the hulk edged close alongside he exchanged amiable shouts with the man in the cab. Mr Adjako leaned forward energetically to speak a message which was relayed. ‘One of mine,’ he told Philip.

The road narrowed further, dipped and twisted. They progressed in low gear, passing the taxi which was halted with its bonnet up for investigation. ‘This car’, observed Mr Adjako, patting the seat as if touching wood, ‘is very strongly made. We shall be there in half an hour.’

They lurched on. The driver muttered to himself. Philip peered ahead. ‘This must be pretty sticky going in the

rains.'

Mr Adjako was unworried. 'But not impossible, Mr Connor. We seldom get stuck.'

They were feeling their way ahead now, with respect for the shaly surface and washboard corrugations. A wheel slid into a rut and they tilted sharply. Mr Adjako sat up straight, avoiding Philip's critical eye. 'We will have it surfaced soon.'

Their path was uphill, rippled and rocky, with wicked potholes and humps. Near the top they faced a serrated ridge of which each stone tooth was a separate hazard. Philip was mentally driving again ... gently, gently, take it easy. They advanced gingerly, at a crawl, and in silence negotiated the stony ridge, straddled the ruts. Mr Adjako now seemed almost to be enjoying himself; he was broadly smiling, and so, incredibly, was the driver, as if they were playing some kind of game with the road's malevolence, and outwitting it. Their queer pleasure was almost infectious.

'But this must be death to lorry-tyres!' Philip found nothing stimulating in this goat lane, this crazy mixed rock-and-dirt track which was the London Mr Adjako's 'quite good' road. 'I'm sure this must be the worst road I've travelled anywhere.' He wondered how his own car, now somewhere on the water, would stand up to it.

Mr Adjako was unmoved. 'Oh, there are worse, much, much worse! The lorries are powerful – built for heavy use. We are not in the town, you know, Mr Connor. Or in the U.K. This is West African timber country, you must remember. It can be hard going, but never impossible.'

Again there was an imposed silence. Mr Adjako did not wish further comment. He turned his profile away, reserved, no longer smiling. The sun, a blood-red disc, was setting on a horizon streaked with fading rose and mauve; on this upland the glare was softening into something like coolness. Philip felt another inner twinge, an abdominal tension, a hint of nausea; he was in for it, and thankful for a smoother

passage now as they sped over red laterite towards the village at the end of the journey.

Mr Adjako had recovered from his sulks. He was bringing home his new General Manager from England; this was a moment for pride and optimism. 'You will like your house,' he stated. 'There was a European here before, but he was with me only for a very short time. The house suited him quite well.'

'Why – but I'd no idea you had ... When was this?' Philip, preoccupied with his nagging interior, was completely off guard, unaware as he was, of any predecessor. The news was so sudden he could scarcely believe it. But then Mr Adjako would be the last man to admit to any earlier error of selection, or to suggest the possibility of some best-forgotten palaver.

'A little while ago. He had finished a contract in Yamina and I engaged him as engineer for the workshop.' He yawned. It had been a tiring journey.

'Where is he now, then?'

'Oh, he did not work for me very long,' said Mr Adjako. 'It was unfortunate. He died.'



## CHAPTER FOUR

The house was screened from the dirt road by an overgrown hedge, and enclosed on three sides by a high cement wall. Beyond lay the silhouetted tops of palm trees and African compounds and houses with square-lit uncurtained windows, and from them came domestic night sounds: the splash of water and clank of bucket, the murmur of voices and muffled wail of gramophone.

There was no garden except for a fringe of greenery. Steps led up to a formal, bright-lit stoep with creeper-clad pillars and louvred double-doors, into a high-ceilinged living-room which in brilliant artificial light looked like an empty stage between the acts. Beyond, there was a wide stone corridor, and other rooms. The whole place smelled of Flit and disuse. It cried out for a woman's hand to renew the sun-streaked curtains and dented lampshades, and to rebuke the stains on the carpet and the spade-shaped charring — the mark of an iron — on the solid mahogany table which was big enough for a board room. The gilt-legged occasional tables were marked with white circles; a handle was missing from the drinks cupboard. The settee, however, was so aggressively new that its price-ticket still dangled from one arm. It was spread with a fan of greasy satin cushions. He could see Helen carrying them out, high-nosed, as if they were dead rats.

The driver brought in the boxes of Echobe groceries and the crate of beer; the suitcases and fishing-rods stood by the door. Mr Adjako, who was in a great hurry to be off to stay somewhere with his clan overnight, made short work of their tour around the bungalow. 'Plenty of space,' he said, hurrying down the corridor, opening doors and flicking switches like an estate agent. 'This is a very good bathroom.'

They surveyed it in a downpour of white light on gloss

paint, chalk-pink fixtures, chromium shower attachment and sagging rose-sprigged curtains. 'Very nice. I put all in new,' said Mr Adjako, approving his image in the neon-rimmed mirror above the basin. He gave a playful tug at the toilet roll which responded with a tinny musical sound; it played, eerily, a dirge-like fragment of melody. 'A novelty.' He smiled broadly, and the gold tooth glittered. 'You can get them in U.K.'

'Marvellous,' said Philip, marvelling. But this diversion surprised him less than the achievement of modern plumbing and electricity so far out in bush. He spoke of this.

Mr Adjako was proud of the amenities. 'We have a good pumping station three miles away, completely up to date. Our mill generator provides electric power. Soon the entire region will have electricity. We have moved fast since you were last in this country, Mr Connor.'

But the back bedroom had no light bulb, Mr Adjako struck Sure Fire matches which spluttered, snapped and burnt his fingers. Philip went back to his luggage for his torch and shone it on gaping wardrobe, bare mattress, two stained pillows and a pile of empty beer cartons. Mr Adjako, disappointed, said 'Guest room,' and shut the door quickly. The front bedroom was better, with a made-up bed, its top sheet tightly smoothed, tucked and folded, like a set piece in a nurse's handbook. There were, in addition, a wardrobe, a chair, a packing-case stencilled 'Muller' full of wood-straw, and a small table bedizened with a lace mat and zinnias in a milk jug.

The kitchen smelled of drains and was grey as to paint and character, with a dim, unshaded bulb, an old electric stove, and a big mottled sink. On high shelves there was an array of dishes and utensils, and a row of dusty storage bottles containing leftovers of macaroni, rice and damp sugar. Alerted by the sudden light two cockroaches vanished into a crack in the floor. Mr Adjako's London-shod foot stamped down too late to crush them. He had nothing to

say about the kitchen.

In the corridor they stood before the tall rust-stained fridge whose motor laboured asthmatically. 'It is old but perfectly all right,' said Mr Adjako, peering inside. Then he thumped hard on the top, producing a convulsive hiccup from the machine. 'You see. It is quite all right. Everything is fine. I will go.'

Then they stood again on the veranda under the fringed ceiling light, where a dazzle of moths circled and clustered.

'You will be quite comfortable.' Mr Adjako was half-way down the steps on his way back to the Mercedes. All along he had managed, very skilfully, Philip realized, to block any talk about the previous European. 'It is quite past,' he had said briefly. 'He was only a temporary man, not a manager.' And when Philip persisted, he had declared, almost huffily, 'No, there is nothing we need to discuss on this, Mr Connor.' And to prove it there was again the arbitrary switched-off look, the turned-away profile.

Philip went with him to the gate, receiving instructions, 'I have arranged for your steward. His name is Moses. My driver has sent somebody to find him and tell him to come here. Talk strong when he comes. He is lazy. He should have been here to greet you.'

'I suppose he didn't know when we were coming.'

'He should have waited. That is his job. You should dock his pay to teach him. Do not let him humbug you.'

Mr Adjako stepped into his car, apparently oblivious of a fast-growing knot of villagers who stood at a respectful distance, watching from the other side of the road. Philip felt their gaze on him; he was an event, a curiosity, somebody important and different to talk and wonder about. The women hitched their wraps and exchanged comments; the children clutched at their mothers' skirts and stared like small owls.

'The car will pick you up by seven tomorrow to bring you to the mill office. It is not far.' He pointed across the

road at the signboard, at least eight feet high and almost as wide: ADJAKO TIMBER COMPANY: MANANGO. Beside it a lane led away into a darkness with light-pricked buildings beyond.

'I can walk if it's so near,' said Philip. He would have liked to go across at once for a look round, while the mill was silent and empty.

'No, no. Never walk. The car will come. Good night, Mr Connor.' Mr Adjako sat back and was carried away, while the villagers stood watching him go.

Philip, perplexed by a sound of music from the veranda, went back up the steps to find the steward, Moses, waiting. He was elderly, thin and small, in a patched shirt with sleeves rolled up, baggy grey flannels, and child-size pale-blue plastic sandals; he carried the source of music, a battery radio, under one arm and switched it off as Philip approached. The steward had one good, though bloodshot, eye; the other was a puckered socket. Philip's hopes sank.

'Welcome, massa!' The old man gave out a strong whiff of palm wine as he spoke.

'You are Moses,' Philip acknowledged.

'Yessa, massa! I only go 'way to buy chop. I clean house all day, I put Flit around, I polish all. You see my handwork. Mr Adjako say I go work for you. I get you chop one-time if you get t'ings for stores. Fly-fish, fowl, chips, flitters. What massa go have?'

'Not tonight,' Philip told him. The thought of food was disturbing. 'I don't need anything tonight. Come early tomorrow, six o'clock.'

'I get no money,' the little man observed. 'Half-pay till you come. Two weeks no money at-all. Mr Adjako come to pay me sometimes, then he no come.'

'I'll sort it all out tomorrow. Not now.'

'I am senior man, I know my work. Two weeks no pay, massa. No money for chop.'

Philip sighed and brought out a dibi note. 'Take this for

now.'

The leprechaun eye brightened at once. The thin little hand enfolded the money. 'I never get paid one week for Mr Muller, that massa before. He dead now so he never pay me what he owe me.'

'I said *tomorrow*,' stated Philip repressively.

'Please, massa, you ask Mr Adjako. He always say "tomorrow" for that money Mr Muller owe me.'

Philip said, 'What happened to Mr Muller?'

'Happen? Oh yes, plenty happen.' The steward reflectively scratched the inner leg of his trousers whose waistband was thickly gathered and cinched with string around his pixy waist. The trousers which sagged down over the blue sandals must be Muller's. 'One night he go sick. I surprise. That massa a big man, strong, he never sick. He get pain for belly, pain for head. He sit' (he pointed to the settee) 'longtime. He say: Moses, no chop, no hungry. He drink. Plenty whisky. He hold head. He say: bring water for medicine. He go for bed. I go off. Morning tea-time he no deh.'

'Not there?' echoed Philip.

'He no deh for bed. He for floor. He no drunk. He dead-man. I run out.'

'What then?' said Philip. But he could imagine.

'Plenty palaver, plenty. Oh-oh!' Moses spread his scrawny arms wide to demonstrate the commotion, the questions, the hullabaloo.

'There would be,' said Philip.

There was more. Having begun, it could not be stopped. 'They don't bury him next tomorrow. They keep him long-time, nine, ten days before they bury. Everybody say: *why?* *why?* Police come ask what he chop, where he go, who he talk to. They write in books. They go for kitchen, bafroom, look at bottles and ever't'ing, say: what is dis? They go for town, say: anybody vex him? But nobody know at-all why he go die. So they finish and they bury him.'

That was it, then, but quite enough. No wonder Adjako

was so mum. You either talked about it a lot, or not at all.

'I worry too much for all dat,' complained Moses. 'I say: I go one-time, I no like it here. But I get no pay, massa. Mr Adjako say stay for new manager. He give me dis radio for "dash" ...' He patted the box, inviting admiration. Philip looked. 'Why do you carry it around?'

Moses smirked bitterly. 'If I lef' it somebody go t'ief it. I never trust dis people for dis town. Some bad people here, massa. I Methodist. I honest, I never t'ief or do wrong t'ing to anyone ...'

'How do you mean, they're bad?'

Moses smirked again. He certainly had been drinking; his eye had the dark rosiness of the palm-wine imbibor. 'They proper bush, massa, they never savvy anyt'ing. They get some wicked people here. You go see.'

'All right,' said Philip. 'You go now. Come early tomorrow. And don't drink any more tonight.'

'I drink? *Massa!* I never take drink ... Oh!' He looked hurt and affronted.

'Never mind,' said Philip. He watched him go, the bird-boned little fellow, hugging his radio. He saw him, by the gate, hawk and spit, and blow his nose neatly and cleanly between two fingers.

Philip left the groceries on the kitchen draining-board except for the beer, and the frozen chicken and meat which had become sodden parcels. He put these into the fridge which, rumbling heavily, was producing a faint interior chill. Its uneasy performance seemed to echo his own discomfort, though this would ease in a day or so, with acclimatization; it always did. He was thankful for the good water supply, and electricity: two points in favour. The steward Moses, though, probably hopeless. This house a bit grim, but might be improved, and could be worse. Mr Adjako: well ...

He knew it was unwise to pour out a beer, but poured it anyway, for companionship, and took his glass to the desk

by the window to catch what cool airs were moving. He felt sticky and unkempt, in need of a bath and a shave before bed, but was too tired and empty-headed to bother. There was a flyblown Swiss calendar – edelweiss and a chalet – hanging askew over the desk. He dropped it into the waste-paper basket, near a pile of old magazines on the floor: *Despatch* and *Newsweek*, the *Timber Trades Journal* and *Playboy*. In the desk drawer he found a bottle-opener, a Hoppus Ready Reckoner, an old B.O.A.C. flight schedule, some rusted paper clips, a big black hairpin and a desiccated cockroach. Outside, the night-crickets whirred without ceasing, like darkness transmuted into sound. You only heard them on the first evening. Afterwards you didn't notice. Any more than you bothered to see the indoor night-lizards, almost transparent, flitting soundlessly across the walls. You soon fitted in and took everything for granted ...

A tall white-robed figure loomed in the veranda doorway, holding a spear. It bowed and smiled. 'Ah, massa! Welcome, massa!' The nightwatch, like all nightwatches in Philip's memory, spoke loud, hoarse and hopeful as if all white men were stone deaf. Philip shook his head. No use, the massa could not savvy. The watchman made a noble circular gesture, embracing the premises, to which Philip replied, 'O.K. Fine. Carry on.'

The man looked at him in a kindly way for a further moment, establishing rapport, and said 'Ah, massa!' again, in a different key. It was almost, against impossible odds, a conversation, a reciprocity. He went away to his vigil, content, his sandals slopping down the stoep steps.

Philip took his empty glass back to the kitchen, past the brooding fridge, which startled him, in the corridor silence, with a loud thermostatic belch. It seemed to be working anyway, whereas the pink bathroom cistern did not. The pressed chromium handle caused only a dull clanking; no obedient torrent laved the pristine plumbing. Damned nuisance! You filled the bucket under the sink with water from

the bath and poured it in to make the blasted thing flush. That was the purpose of the bucket. So – a plumber, tomorrow morning, and get that thing fixed for a start. His dour mirrored self reflected his opinion of the stupid musical toilet roll. And get that U.K. novelty shut off too. It would drive anybody mad.

He put on pyjamas, then stripped off the jacket. Too hot. Now for tomorrow: one of the new white shirts. Long sleeves and a decent tie. Nothing too casual for the first day, with Mr Adjako showing him off to the office staff and mill crew, and probably making a speech, like a respected prophet in the wilderness producing a small miracle: all the way from U.K. a hand-picked European General Manager who, in turn, would effect his own transformations. Better make a good show, look the part and kick off on the right foot.

All set then, everything straight and safe to hand, gold pen and wallet under the pillow, suitcases locked again. His watch said ten o'clock but it felt like the middle of the night. Finally two more of the tablets – that beer was a mistake – but where were they? Left on the dining-room table.

He took one step to the open door. The lights went out. The corridor was pitch-dark, the fridge struck dumb. Now what? Breakdown? He found the torch and looked out. Total darkness everywhere, not a glimmer, except for a hurricane-lamp glow at the front of the stoep steps, where the nightwatch sat. Philip waved his torch and called to him. 'Where be light?'

The nightwatch scrambled to his feet, all knees and elbows and flapping garments, and brought his lantern, holding it high. 'Be light, massa!'

'No, not yours. The big light!'

The nightwatch said 'A-aah, massa!' pointed towards the mill, and with the flat of one hand pressed down on the air strongly. He waited, head cocked, for understanding.

Philip did not feel like playing charades. He nodded and said 'Yes, all right', and went back to the living-room. To hell with it, and find out tomorrow.

He spotted the bottle of tablets, gleaming white on the table edge and in picking it up knocked some other small object to the floor. He bent, to see better. Only a halfpenny. No, a five-peti piece, value sixpence. Not his. Somebody else's. Not pocketed by the impoverished Moses — why not? Because, of course, it must be Muller's. So Moses had left it strictly alone, and so had others who came into this room. Superstition probably.

Nobody, for whatever reason, wanted it.

Philip did not want it either. He put it back on the table and went to bed.

## CHAPTER FIVE

'Massa no hungry?' questioned Moses, looking worried.

'Just some quick coffee,' Philip told him, emerging from the pink bathroom. 'What's wrong with this flush?'

'He no work.' Moses was subdued this morning. He looked pinched and even smaller with a hangover. 'Mr Muller put in water by bucket.'

'I know.'

Moses looked dumbfounded. 'But massa never see Mr Muller!'

'I see the bucket,' said Philip frowning. It sounded to him as if a whole jazz orchestra had taken violent possession of the kitchen. 'Play your radio, but play it softly. *Softly*, understand?'

'Yessah.' Moses drooped away crestfallen, trousers sagging. Palaver so soon. The radio was shut off and the silence was a reproach.

Philip sat down to his solitary coffee tray at one end of the long table in the big front room. Moses had set another jug of zinnias in the middle of the table at a little distance from the five-peti piece. In the clear sunlight of early morning the room, with doorway opened wide to the stoep, looked more co-operative; and Philip, rested, bathed, shaven and freshly dressed, was its master. Some part of his home self, slow to catch up, had come to roost. The gap of northern time widened; Croydon and the London office era lost focus. He walked in one piece out to the island of his simple veranda, feeling the heat lapping, already warmer around him, clearly seeing the fleshy white flowers in the hedge, and the leafy plants — the red-speckled 'elephant ears' — someone had planted in two oil drums by the gate. It was the best, freest part of the African day, when you could move about without sweating, and think clearly, and

haughty aquiline noses and narrow skulls, indifferent, detached and hard to read; some were bullet-headed and low-browed with flattened profiles like boxers, and wary eyes on the lookout for trouble. Some looked straight ahead, like soldiers, standing to attention and letting the words fall where they might; some looked woefully solemn as if the announcement must bode some heavy incomprehensible discipline. Some, the battered old hands, offered fixed sycophantic grins which might hide other feelings, of resistance to change, perhaps, or even a ribald disrespect.

Each face carried the pressure of its own life behind it, its promise or warning, its sloth, suspicion, faith, confidence, greed, generosity, vulnerability or guile; for each face was a whole man. And Philip, looking from one to another had, as so often before, a sudden moment of clear seeing. The workers: no homogeneous entity, with a single intelligence quotient. Far from it. Two hundred and fifty separate characters, with African roots and colour, each man black but unique. It was so easy self-protectively to look at any African crowd – or for that matter Arab, Indian or Chinese – and view it as a run-together chunk of humanity, almost featureless because of its foreignness in colour and physiognomy. Maybe a host of individual Africans, Arabs, Indians and Chinese saw the white race in the same way: as a bloodless and antipathetic blur with easy labels attached, not to separate men, but to the whole faceless mob.

Mr Adjako talked well, anyway. He had a certain magnetism, a stance, a wealth of assurance, good timing. His clothes and pregnant briefcase, the parked Mercedes, the presence of the new white General Manager, all spoke separately for him. His Senior Staff, with the office workers grouped around him in their smooth shirts and pressed trousers, framed his importance while enhancing their own. These men had the impressiveness of education; they were accustomed to owning ties and wrist-watches and fountain pens; they could read and write and give certain orders.

Each had a niche in the office and was known to Mr Adjako as a person, or even as a relation, for Mr Adjako's nephews, uncles, and brothers-in-law were many, and they all needed jobs, either here or in other concerns with which Mr Adjako was connected. The Senior Staff comprised Mill Manager, Logging Manager, Transport and Stores Manager, Powerhouse Engineer, Accountant and Chief Clerk. The lesser staff – cashier, typists, timekeeper, and tally clerks – had their place on the office heights as well, as did the office messenger who had been deploying a dustpan and brush on the steps just before the speech began. While he earned less than a mill labourer his status was a good deal higher, for he was a servant with personal duties of trust among the elite, and a little of their special quality rubbed off on him.

Mr Adjako's talk was over. He had firmly dubbed Philip with authority and shown him to the people. He made it clear that he, Adjako, stood behind any new, even surprising, orders that Mr Connor might issue in improving and developing the business. He hinted that Mr Connor would deal strongly with anyone who dragged his feet or impeded the reformation which was to start at once.

Now he took off his hat and dabbed his moist forehead with a clean folded handkerchief. The Senior Staff made way for him to enter the office, and the crowd, buzzing with talk, dispersed towards the mill, the sheds and the vehicles. The small motor coughed and thrummed an introduction to the big generator, which came to life like the resumption of a heavy heartbeat; and the voice of the mill set up its routine intermittent whine and shriek. The lorries moved off with their work-gangs on their way to the forest, and all hands returned to their labours.

The office comprised five rooms, and was clean and well-ordered, with chequered linoleum and polished desks, each with its name-plate: 'Chief Clerk', 'Accountant', 'Logging Manager', and so on; the largest desk in each room also supported a pale blue telephone. The desk-plates, like the

neat labels on the doors – ‘General Office’; ‘Managing Director’ – looked to Philip like typical Adjako embroidery. Business visitors to this outpost would certainly be rare, and any caller would certainly know whom he wanted to see. The numbers fixed to the various doors were sheer superfluity; somebody must have wanted to use them up.

Mr Adjako led the way to his own office, beyond the door labelled ‘Managing Director’. His personal desk occupied much of the room. It was, thought Philip, accustoming his eye to gradations in size, the Father Bear’s desk. On it, beside a display of pigskin and onyx, stood a miniature flagpole which held aloft the Party flag. There was also a silver-framed portrait – not of wife or child, but of Adjako. On the wall behind the desk President Dowo’s portrait solemnly hung. Three large photographs of Mr Adjako looked from the other walls, facing one another in executive poses. Philip, caught in the cross-current of these portraits, thought Mr Adjako must have had an orgy of picture-taking; there would be a lot more somewhere, or perhaps he gave them away, like visiting-cards.

‘This is my office,’ remarked Mr Adjako, surprisingly, in view of the name on the door, the sign on the desk, the size of the room and the prevalence of his image.

‘Now *that’s* very useful,’ commended Philip, his eyes on a neatly boxed arrangement of buttons and switches on the desk. He thought it must be for communication with the mill yard outbuildings. Efficient, that.

Mr Adjako ran his hand over it with pride, as one might pat a sleeping dog’s head. ‘Yes, a very good German make. Unfortunately it does not work – the mill generator is too strong. Between the hours of seven o’clock and half past four, while we use the big motor, it is not possible to use household electrical things. The motor will burn them out.’

‘Then you can’t use your air-conditioning unit either.’ It seemed an absurd waste. There it stood built into the window space, a new streamlined Westinghouse, moribund,

while the office temperature rose steadily. Mr Adjako removed his jacket and hung it over the back of his swivel chair.

‘I can use it before seven, and after the mill stops for the day. Then we have the small generator. That one shuts off at ten p.m. Any domestic electrical equipment can be used in safety when the small generator is running.’

‘So that’s why the light went out on me,’ said Philip. ‘Last night.’

‘Oh yes, that was why – I should have mentioned. You must be prepared for that. Be sure that your steward irons early in the morning or in the evening. Be careful about your radio, electric razor, anything like that.’

‘I see,’ said Philip, putting an oil lamp on his mental list. ‘You haven’t got a transformer?’

‘I bought one, but it was not quite suitable. It is standing outside the power-house. I will try to get another one, but they are extremely difficult. You must realize, Mr Connor, we have great trouble getting new equipment and spare parts. We have to manage.’

‘So the intercom and air-conditioning have to wait for ...’ but Philip wasn’t sure for what.

‘You never know,’ said Mr Adjako cheerfully. ‘They are first-class equipment.’

Philip looked at the telephone. ‘I haven’t heard the telephone ringing yet.’ He was beginning to suspect everything now. Surely the telephones were not mere decoration.

‘Oh, it can ring! I am expecting several calls.’ Mr Adjako was totally serious. ‘There is nothing at all wrong with our telephones. Only with the line, at times. The line is subject to breakdowns and hold-ups because it goes through such long distances of forest. And there are people who will steal the copper wire. I have had telephone problems in U.K., where everything should be easy.’

He dismissed the telephone; it was bound to ring some time. He unlocked his desk drawer with a Yale key from

his pocket, and brought out two other Yale keys. 'Private washroom,' he said, unlocking an inner door to reveal a small white well-furnished cubicle. 'I have installed my safe there, under the wash-basin. A good place for it, I think.'

'Ingenious,' agreed Philip. The safe at least was bound to function since it did not depend on the mill generator. Mr Adjako washed his hands at the sink, using a new bar of Imperial Leather soap, and a towel monogrammed with a big satin-stitched 'A'. He gave his beard a thoughtful look in the mirror, and nodded approval at it.

'And this would be your store-room?' Philip indicated the last door.

'No. That is my private room,' said Mr Adjako, hesitating only for a moment.

'Sorry, I didn't realize ...' Philip turned away.

'No, see it. It is for resting sometimes.' Mr Adjako deployed the second key. Philip looked into a shadowy, close-curtained, carpeted bedroom, complete with made-up full-size double bed. There were four pillows. A dressing-gown dangled behind the door. There was a hint of something, a faint perfumed sweetness in the air.

'Very nice, Every mod. con.' Philip was not exactly surprised.

Mr Adjako looked blank. 'I did not hear you.'

'All modern conveniences,' said Philip.

'Oh yes, it is convenient.' Mr Adjako closed the door on the room and the subject. 'Now I will order some tea and we will discuss the programme for the business. I will call the managers in afterwards. Then we can all get down to work. Tonight I must return to Yamina.'

## CHAPTER SIX

It had been a week for getting to grips. First, with the office records of trees felled and logs brought to the mill for sawing on the spot or for export; also lumber output averages per day, week and month, together with percentage figures of waste, sawdust and offcuts. So far, it appeared, no one had bothered with production summaries or statistics. Adjako's flying visits and office sessions must have been more concerned with hurrying up overdue contracts or dealing with breakdown crises, or the injecting of emergency finance for spare parts and operating expenses. The filing system had no cohesion, though the files themselves were multiple and artistically labelled in the Chief Clerk's graceful round script. (There was, in fact, one elaborate cross-index system on which apparently no one had had the courage to make an entry. It stood blank and virginal, an Adjako U.K. prestige purchase. No one could guess what it was for.) The accounts were a headache, though not for lack of ledgers or entries. There was an accumulation of dunning letters, from the Yamina Oil Company about diesel supplies, and from the Forestry Department concerning royalties long overdue. No costings of any sort had ever been set up; it was impossible to tell offhand whether the company was running at a profit or a loss. But the green ink in Philip's managerial pen was beginning to blaze some kind of trail through the confusion, and soon, he hoped, the way would become clear, if only on paper.

His two-day investigation of every section in the outside area — mill, log dump, lumber yard, workshop, saw-doctor's shop, power-house and stores — was easier than his sortie into the office. You could at least see much of what was wrong; it stared you in the face. The workshop



was in crying need of a ramp on which vehicles could be elevated for servicing. For tyres in need of constant repair because of the surfaces of bush trails and the Manango road, a petrol-driven air pump was imperative; the men were using an out-of-date foot-pump. In the shed purporting to be a smithy, with a so-called blacksmith on the payroll, there was, incredibly, neither forge nor bellows. So the list continued. There must be an ablutions centre for the men, a place where they could change and hang up their clothes, and wash; and new latrines, for which a larger ditch would have to be dug, and quickly. There was plenty of timber for proper buildings and no reason for such a patchwork proliferation of sheds. That was the trouble with extempore construction. Put up any random shed, or shelf, even, and it filled up with something, junk usually: old oil cans, rags, bits and pieces of metal and rubber. Behind one of the sheds the skeletons of three old lorries squatted red-rusted, with grass growing half way up the wheel rims: a demoralizing eyesore. But apparently only to him; everyone else was used to it, and to much else. There was so much space. Perhaps that was the reason. It might be some kind of peculiar natural law: the more room the less feeling for order, thrift and discipline. A squad must be got busy to tidy things up.

So much for routine improvements. The top-priority necessity was a power-driven crane. It was hard to imagine how the mill had functioned for so long when its only log-lifting equipment was a crude, obsolete, hand-operated gantry. The men nursed and bullied it along somehow. The logs, haphazardly dumped behind the mill from the bush lorries, were tractor-hauled through mud or dust to the gantry pickup; the gantry hoisted them on to the carriage which bore them along to and past the saws. The whole business was not only in itself clumsy, but slow and fraught with expense and error; it held up work all along the line. The answer stood out a mile; a child could have

seen it. A new electrically operated crane with a one-hundred-and-twenty-foot boom could galvanize production. Now that he saw the awkward makeshift gantry for himself, he could understand Adjako's obsession: there would have to be a new crane.

His notes gathered, Philip called a morning meeting of the heads of sections. It began at eight o'clock, after the establishment of the day's work. Chairs were carried into Philip's office, and the men disposed themselves round the managerial desk. The Mill Manager, Mr Obuta, placed himself squarely in the forefront; he was never a background figure. With him were Mr Donkwa, the Logging Manager; Mr Sachi, Workshop and Stores Manager; Mr Tomi, the Power-house Engineer; Edward, the Chief Clerk; Mr Bantio, Accountant; and Mr Larte, Chief Tally and Dispatch Clerk.

On this handful of men, the mill elite, efficiency and progress depended. Since he had not chosen them Philip could only hope for their co-operation and goodwill. Among them the Mill Manager (who until now had been in overall charge as Mr Adjako's stand-in) was the only man who might possibly harbour feelings of resentment; the rest might well welcome a more neutral controller, someone more detached from local affairs than Obuta, and more available than Adjako. Since it was important to win their confidence and to scotch at the outset any misgivings or suspicions, he began his talk by making the reason for his presence as General Manager absolutely clear: that the Adjako Timber Company might become solidly established, everyone's job made secure, family men live without fear of unemployment, and the whole village gain from the mill's steady improvement and expansion. He went on: 'Mr Adjako brought me here to use my experience for as long as it is necessary. We cannot know just how long that will be. When it is finished I shall hand over the general managership. Let no one think that I am robbing him of a job, or intend to remain here indefinitely. But I shall be

here for some time.'

The men appeared to approve this; there was a general murmuring of acceptance, though no clear sign of enthusiasm from Mr Obuta, to whom Philip's remarks had been chiefly directed. Obuta's half-smile might mean anything.

As Philip spoke, the mill sounds came to them from across the yard: the chugging of the big generator, which grew louder and strove harder as the band-mill and big saws coincided in the whirr and buzz of slicing log and board, then slacked away in respite, and again laboured. This was the customary concentrated 'sweet music' that no mill man ever heard as noise. It was part of the work, as the healthy action of heart and lungs is part of the body, and the 'music' meant that all was well, all parts functioning. Only when any sudden untoward silence fell was there a sense of shock; or when there was some unaccountable jarring of rhythm or pace. Ideally the understood interwoven sounds continued throughout the working day: the fluctuating pitch of the big motor, the revving of vehicles and crunch of heavy tyres, the banshee shriek of metal on wood, the dead-weight thump of the logs being unloaded and the thinner clattering fall of loading lumber; and the workmen's voices in routine shouts and hailings rising above the machines.

Philip went on with his list of improvements. The drivers, whether of lorry, tractor or caterpillar, must now expect spot-checks on equipment, to ensure proper maintenance and careful driving. All equipment these days was prohibitively expensive, and new plant and spares, as they should know, the worst problem of all; it was no use entirely blaming the roads for all the broken springs. (Sachi, the Workshop and Stores Manager, a fatherly-looking little chap with a bald head and spectacles, nodded approval.) Then the timekeeping: some of the forest men were being picked up in the village instead of checking in with the timekeeper

at the gate before departure. Mill and yard men straggled in late in the morning and after the lunch break, and were often half-way home before the closing gong sounded. This could not continue.

Mill Manager Obuta's expression was unsmiling now, hard to read. He gave a scarcely perceptible shrug at the timekeeping. Logging Manager Donkwa was closely attentive, sitting on the edge of his chair: a wiry man with a furrowed forehead; obviously a hard-worker; a useful bloke.

Chief Clerk Edward looked a likely lad too. He appeared to be just the kind of well-balanced young aide a new general manager needed. He sat at ease, taking his notes, and he looked well-padded and thoughtful. Younger perhaps than the others (African age was always difficult to guess), he was clearly intelligent, patient and malleable. The dapper Power-house Superintendent, Tomi, in whose sphere there was thus far little to fault, lounged with one toe tapping the air and chin raised to suggest a degree of boredom. Tomi wore his usual neat dark dungarees; he had not altered his working dress for this meeting. A Party sunburst-badge was pinned to his lapel. This was a link with the portrait of the Great One which hung in the oily gloom of the power-house, beside the big motor. Philip, coming upon it unexpectedly and alone, had received a slight shock, as if the contact had been physical — and then smiled to see how Tomi had decorated the picture with two crossed toy Party flags. Here there must be some special devotion.

Philip's next words were chiefly for Mr Obuta's benefit. He spoke of the crane, asking the Mill Manager to prepare recommendations as to its position: how the log-yard might be re-laid for its accommodation; and how much, in his view, the crane would increase production. In this shaft of limelight Obuta seemed to expand and mellow; he made notes on his pad, while conferring with Edward. Philip observed and approved Edward's deference to the

Mill Manager during this week of changes when some of the younger staff had acted and spoken without much sympathy for the down-graded Obuta's feelings. Here Edward had shown diplomacy and imagination, valuable qualities in any office. He could hardly be blamed for the chaos within the files. Apparently Mr Adjako had been in the habit of abstracting handfuls of papers he wished to study, carrying them off at intervals to his flat in Yamina, and returning them days or even weeks later, the worse for wear and rarely intact.

Nor could Accountant Bantio be held wholly responsible for the state of his ledgers; Mr Adjako's fondness for cash disbursements, disregard for receipts, and habit of sending the nearest Tom, Dick or Harry on shopping errands, had made nonsense of the books. Which might explain the accountant's blasé air and glances at his watch as he heard Philip stress the importance of co-operation, economy and a proper liaison between forest, mill, workshop, and office. At one point Bantio made some whispered aside to his friend Larte, the Chief Tally and Dispatch Clerk, who pursed his mouth sympathetically. Larte, of course, had none of Bantio's debit and credit problems; his work was straightforward; his tally clerks toed the line — he saw to that — and nothing stopped him from being efficient.

Philip ended his peroration; that should be enough. He asked the men to think over what he had said; they could come to him at any time to discuss their problems; he would welcome ideas and discussion. But not now. They all had immediate things to see to. Consider a bit first, he advised; then talk things over later.

Mr Obuta, however, wished to speak at once, without delay; he looked full of suppressed opinions and urgency, and was just beginning, 'Mr Connor, I wish we would take time now, while we are at this first meeting ...' when Philip stopped him with an uplifted hand. 'Sorry, Obuta — just a minute ...' The others stared and listened. It was

the mill sound — it wasn't right. The big generator chugged on sluggishly without the counterpart of the saws' screech; there was something wrong, some hitch. The men got up.

'We'll have to stop,' Philip said. He was not sorry either; he wanted the meeting to end. Obuta hurried out without uttering another word, followed by Sachi and Donkwa together. Tomi veered away on his own.

Philip did not go with them; he checked himself at the door, and turned back. This was Obuta's pigeon and he could deal with the trouble, or send for him if it was serious. He called Daniel, the office messenger, to take away the chairs. Then he sat down at his desk. Surprisingly his telephone rang, a sudden shrill noise beside him. It did not ring often and when it did the call was usually from Adjako.

So it was. The line crackled but the voice was unmistakable, lively, peremptory. 'Mr Connor! Mr Connor! Your car and other things have arrived at port. Will you ask Mr Sachi to send a driver here to my flat in Yamina, and to bring your car Customs papers. I will go down to Echobe with him to clear the car and the driver will bring ...'

The voice blurred, became strangulated, as if some assassin had crept up behind Adjako and throttled or gagged him. There was some odd, derisive static; then dead silence. Philip said 'Mr Adjako!' He tapped the phone-rest furiously; silence still. He looked up to see Edward in the doorway, shaking his head. 'Can you make this damned thing work?' Philip demanded. 'Can you get the operator for me?'

Edward tried, but of course he could not. And Philip remembered what Adjako had said some days ago. It wasn't the telephone; it was the line.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

In the flat heat of Sunday morning the logs lay like fallen and drowsing giants. The stacks of fresh-sawn timber stood pale and smooth beside the heaped detritus of rough bark and offcuts. There was the sour scent of new sawdust, and of smoke from the gateman's domestic fire. Marooned vehicles awaiting maintenance rested in sunlight, their metal hot to the touch; the usual Sunday logging crews and lorries and tractors were already at work in the forest beyond the river.

After their departure there was always a slowing of action in the mill area, and respect for silence; it was a time to think, and take stock, and give care to detail. The dozen or so maintenance men in the mill worked methodically in the shade of the broad, high roof, checking and considering the resting machinery, greasing and testing and moving without haste to the relaxed Sunday rhythm. The electrician inspected switches and starters; a fitter, removing his Sunday shirt, crawled under the log carriage to tighten vital bolts. From the saw-doctor's shop came the intermittent buzz of the automatic sharpener, the occasional lonely metallic clang of his tensioning hammer; and from the further region of the power-house the steady *ptt-ptt* of the small generator.

On Sunday the pace was peaceful and rules flexible. Occasional strollers could be admitted by the gateman: wives bringing food for the workers; the post-office clerk and his son visiting the power-house assistant (who, without Tomi's oversight or the demands of the big motor, felt free to welcome a few friends to a chat or a game of draughts); off-duty men in rest-day robes walking with their families, as families all over the world, with time on their hands, idly promenade on Sunday. The quietness brought, through

various small gaps in the fence, a scattering of nomad livestock which grazed or scratched the rough grass and the red dust.

To this domestic detail was added some laundry activity around the mill taps. Out of sight of the office veranda, shorts and singlets and yardages of cloth were spread out, in Company time, to dry in the hot, shimmering air, and be carried home again in headload bundles, down the wide village street where every shade tree was a communal roof for those who slept, squatted round a calabash, played draughts or shared gossip as they might a meal, nourishing their hunger for amazement and conjecture, drama and comic mimicry. The young doe-eyed wives and sisters, with one ear and eye to infant babble and mischief, painstakingly dressed one another's hair with quilted cross-partings and myriad cotton-wound, thin, stiff, looping pigtails. The women food-sellers sat in the shade with their cages of bread, peeled oranges, charcoal buckets, and plantain fritters. The food-sellers were always there to accept a coin (or make a mental pay-at-the-end-of-month debit note) for some hand-to-mouth leaf-wrapped titbit; they kept their money knotted in lengths of cloth tied round their waists under their skirts, and even the youngest had the sharp, bold-eyed look of the born street-trader. Yet even they had a Sunday air about them, a difference in their stance and voices.

Philip, strolling the mill yard, was glad of this off-day freedom to think and move without interruption, commotion or timetable; and to look ahead. He had already made changes: pruned some of the crews and strengthened others; spotted, investigated and stopped an amount of inexplicable overtime; improved the system of diesel oil and petrol issue; provided the timekeeper with an alarm clock: set up an efficient first aid box on the office veranda; posted up a number of bulletins at strategic points; jacked up safety precautions; and exercised all possible diplomacy in easing

staff and labour into the new regime.

He unlocked the office and walked into the stale hush, the air of suspended crisis which fills all deserted offices. The desks and filing cabinets bulked pregnant with arrested importance; the chairs were tucked under the desks; the typewriters were muffled under their covers; the numbered doors and name-plates stated their fussy particularity to him alone. The office messenger, Daniel, had failed to empty the waste-paper baskets; he had left a duster dangling from a door-handle, and on the floor a forbidden, unwashed chop tin. He must have been in a hurry to get away; he was the kind of moody, handsome, willowy lad who needed watching. According to timekeeper Joseph (who tended to sourness and whose face was marked with acne scars) Daniel was a puffed-up Don Juan who had kept his job only because he was related to the Mill Manager – though Joseph never spoke of the boy by name, only as ‘the messenger’. Daniel was certainly happiest when riding round the village on the office bicycle. Which, come to think of it, was nowhere to be seen. It was not, as it should have been, leaning against the inner door of the office, locked away for the week-end. No great matter, perhaps, but an annoyance. Daniel must have taken it without leave for Sunday joy-riding. He would have to mention it to him tomorrow.

Philip felt a slight jarring of Sunday calmness. There were always some such juvenile trivia to deal with: an errant bicycle, or the flash-happy night-gateman’s torch in need of batteries, or an unwonted consumption of office pencils and envelopes; little things, adding up. But you could not behave like a pussyfooting, cheese-paring misanthrope. As a new man, an outsider, it was necessary to be liked.

Typist Amos’s rickety, hard-hammered typewriter: there was another small problem. Amos, a neat student zealot with owlish spectacles, said he needed a new machine; the

‘e’ and ‘g’ were out of line and the space-bar often stuck. And no wonder, the way Amos bullied the typewriter and clanged its bell. He had persuaded Mr Sachi to put his request on the Workshop Manager’s optimistic Stores List, which already presented a startling costs figure. As Philip was already tired of insisting, every scrap of imported equipment was hard to come by and cost the earth. Economy must be the watchword for everyone until he could see the exact state of affairs – and first things first.

Though Mr Adjako’s office had been handed over to him, Spode china tea-set, keys and all, he was still not easily at home in it. The three Adjako portraits and the one of Dowo still kept vigil over desk onyx and leather, the Party flag, the doors concealing the safe under the wash-basin, and the ‘room for resting’. And Mr Adjako’s swivel chair: its rotating action was too well-oiled, too easy; it could turn you around, without warning. Then there you were reversed, facing the wall and the unsmiling Angyhoma.

At the vast avodire desk he sat in the Adjako chair, his feet firmly on the floor. He unscrewed his gold pen and made ready to deal with the Pending tray. But there was some interference, a sense of being watched; Adjako’s portrait was looking at him.

He placed it, with finality and an overdue sense of relief, in the empty bottom drawer – no, of course, *not* empty. His lucky piece was there where earlier he had stowed it. He held it affectionately on the flat of his hand: the red toy tractor hooked to the diminutive yellow crane; bought years ago in Regent Street out of Hamley’s window on one of those daft leave impulses – to endure through all his travels and become, like the gold pen, a part of his desk and his life. Most people had such small, special objects in their lives, adult versions of the schoolboy’s treasured marble or conker or medallion. You called a thing like this ‘lucky’ because you gave it – or it collected – its own emotional aura.

With the mill crane in his mind the toy this morning looked especially propitious and relevant — like a *fait accompli* in miniature. It gave him a sense of connection — the genuine lucky feeling. He set it down where Adjako's portrait had been.

But it was odd company for the desk's sleek mute intercom box which sat there with its bank of shining buttons by his elbow, a useless gadget, like something stillborn. Though maybe in time it would come alive. It might stand for progress in reverse: the cart impatient for the horse, or the gilt waiting for the gingerbread. Audacious and silly, a cock-eyed bit of Adjako wishful thinking which might just work. Somehow. Some time. (Like the unusable air-conditioning unit which Daniel respectfully dusted — while Amos begged for a new typewriter.) He would get used to it; he'd have to.

Concentrating on the new contracts before him, he drafted memoranda and letters in his small square green script; this was straightforward satisfying work, plain sailing. He re-examined and queried the Store Manager's estimates and the Consumable Stores stock balances. Then, needing the previous week's mill production figures, last seen on a clip on the Mill Manager's desk, he crossed into the adjoining office to find them. The desk, except for its name-plate and desk-blotter pad, was bare, the trays empty — no sign of the papers anywhere. He began to search for them in the drawers, revealing a clutter of dog-eared machinery catalogues, bills, invoices, timber chalk and loose stationery which offended his orderly mind. What a mess, all shoved in anyhow. Surely the man shouldn't keep so much stuff unfiled and stuffed away out of sight. Lord, what a way to run an office! what was this petrol invoice doing here — and these receipts for firewood sales? He scowled, irritated by the muddle; he tried to make out the illegible dates and signatures.

'Are you looking for something, Mr Connor?'

Philip looked up, startled. It was — it would be — the Mill Manager, Mr Obuta, stepping forward from the veranda with a look of polite concern. His voice was as deep and smooth as melted chocolate; he must enjoy the richness of it in his broad throat and on his heavy lips. Every syllable came easy, separate, slow and deep. 'I was looking over the maintenance work. I saw the office was open.'

With no more than a glance at the papers in Philip's hand, he set down his sun-glasses and a bunch of keys on his blotter. A natural gesture. This was his personal desk; it had his name on it. His boldly patterned orange and black Sunday robe hung from his shoulders in regal sculptured folds, leaving the powerfully muscled arms and legs bare. His sandals were of black leather, on big broad feet planted wide apart on the office floor; feet of authority.

He stood waiting and regarding Philip with large, steady, slightly protuberant eyes. His forehead, heightened by a receding hairline, was broad and glossy; and its commanding look was continued in the lines of the heavy chin, wide mouth, broad-flanged nostrils and coarse, grainy skin. The small, delicate ears and clipped moustache were refinements on a face that was more forceful and tougher than Mr Adjako's; and his splendid Sunday dress added drama. This was a different view of the weekday Obuta in grey trousers and solid, well-polished, brown-laced shoes, who drove his own Volkswagen and smoked the Dunhill pipe Mr Adjako had brought him from London, possibly to sweeten any recent hurt to his managerial pride. (Mr Adjako, active in promoting good relations, had warmly commended Obuta to Philip. 'A good fellow, a hard worker. As nephew to our Queen Mother he is quite an important man in the village. You will find him very helpful to you since he knows the area so well, and the men respect him.')

Philip swung at once into cordiality. 'Obuta! Glad you came in. I was looking for the production sheets.' He dropped invoice and receipt into the gaping drawer, and

pushed the drawer shut, though not too hastily. It was an awkward moment. 'We have to think about these new contracts. I've marked two of them urgent; they're new customers. I think we shall have to plan an extra mill-shift to make sure of deliveries on time. I thought I'd line things up today if possible. Can you find me last week's figures?'

With one easy, obliging movement Mr Obuta lifted his desk blotter. The sheaf of papers was underneath. He handed it over. 'I made a few personal notes on these for you, and thought it best to keep them out of sight of the office staff. They will talk out of school, you know – anything that is different gets about all over the mill. One tells another ... I don't usually leave my desk unlocked.'

He was preparing to lock it now. 'Or do you require any other papers?'

The action and inflection, though courteous enough, made his point clear: Respect my territory. I am the Mill Manager, not a junior typist or tally clerk.

Philip said promptly, 'No, go ahead. This is all I wanted.' He felt bound to add, 'It's not a habit of mine to rummage around like this.'

'Oh, don't apologize! You have a right to look anywhere. You are the General Manager.' Mr Obuta straightened, unruffled, his desk secure. 'In this country perhaps we lack trust. You may think we lock things up too much. But we have reason. We do not trust one another, because there is so much competition and temptation. If a man needs something badly he will take it or use it. To lock things up is to make honesty easier.' His manner was rueful; he understood human nature.

Philip, refusing to extract anything remotely personal from this, said on impulse, 'But in my experience most people in bush are remarkably honest.' Too quickly. There it was, sticking out like a sore thumb, the fatal word 'bush'. Mr Obuta seemed to stiffen at this word, which could sound

so innocuous, or, to hypersensitive ears, the worst insult. Philip groaned inwardly. He should have known better than to judge him tolerant of the word. Mr Obuta was eyeing him, unsure.

'I mean,' said Philip scrupulously, 'in bush, where people know one another well, there's surely a better feeling than in the town – a greater trust.'

Mr Obuta reflected. 'Are you thinking of the world in general? But since you say "bush", you mean Africa ...'

'It's just a word,' said Philip, wishing it was only that. (He remembered how the gateman, quarrelling with a labourer, had sneered, 'You be proper bushman!' The labourer looked as if he could have killed the old fellow.)

Then Obuta gave a brief snort of laughter; so he could hardly be offended. 'We are not exactly bush here, I think. We have keys and keyholes, so we use them, as we use other ideas which have been taught us. They are nothing new now.'

The conversation ran down. It was not going well. There was a silence. Mr Obuta, gathering up keys and putting on his sun-glasses, prepared to go. 'I agree it is a good plan to arrange another shift. You may need to appoint an extra supervisor to watch the work.'

'It wouldn't be for long,' said Philip. 'Just to get these contracts out. I'll gladly supervise some of it myself – share supervision with you – we'll work that out when we get the shift plan settled.' He remembered something else. 'Oh, I meant to ask you. I really can't understand why the logging crews don't work to schedule like everybody else. Why should they work in the forest on Sunday and take *Thursdays* off? What's so special about Thursday? For these particular men, I mean.'

The Mill Manager paused on his way to the door. 'It would be better to discuss that with the Logging Manager. It is Mr Donkwa's authority, arranging the time off for his men.'

'Of course. It's just a point that doesn't make sense to me. I thought you might know.'

'Of course, everybody knows! Because of the river. It is a custom here not ever to cross to that area on Thursday. The men would never do it.'

For Philip a light began to dawn; he should have realized; though the river was only a stream at that point, practically dried up in the dry season. Some local taboo of course, about the area and Thursday. 'They should have said so. Nobody has mentioned anything special to me about the river.'

'Perhaps you did not ask.' Mr Obuta in his dark glasses spoke lightly; it was scarcely a criticism. 'Mr Donkwa would have told you at once if you had asked ... unless he thought you would see it as a foolish idea.'

'Not at all,' Philip assured him. 'I've worked in West Africa a long time. I'm always glad of advice on local customs.'

'That is always wise – in bush.' The last word fell evenly and softly, without emphasis. Mr Obuta offered nothing further.

'Just one more thing. Do you know if Daniel has taken the bicycle somewhere? It's not supposed to be taken away.'

'The bicycle? Yes. It had a puncture, a flat tyre, I believe. He took it to his house to mend it.'

'So that's it.' Philip belatedly remembered that Obuta was Daniel's uncle, and switched into neutral.

Mr Obuta nodded, as if in admiration. 'A very good boy, very reliable. Mr Adjako thinks highly of him.'

Philip balked. This was too much like pressure. He could make up his own mind about Daniel and anything else. 'He could have mended it here tomorrow.'

Mr Obuta smiled indulgently. 'That is true. It should not be taken home for any reason, even to mend it. But a boy does not always understand such rules. He was trying to

help.' The smile faded. 'I would be sorry if you sacked him.'

'Sack him? Of course not. I was only asking.' (Did Obuta imagine he was such a fire-eating autocrat? He must have some odd notions.)

'Sacking should not often be necessary,' the Mill Manager continued. 'Discipline has always been strong here, in my hands. I had to sack plenty of people, of course, when we were starting – when I was managing the business for Mr Adjako. It took a little time to get things running smoothly; there were the usual difficulties. But you will find everything works well now; there is little trouble.'

Philip let it pass. If the Obuta regime had been so admirable, why should Adjako import a General Manager? There was nothing more to be said – or what might be said was far better left unspoken. Philip watched Obuta stroll in his leisurely confident way across the yard to his Volkswagen: a man of some stature in a robe of dignity, but, despite his discipline, hard work and loyalty, still – because of Adjako's ambition and a white man's presence – only the Mill Manager.

When Philip returned to the house, Benedict, the new steward, was waiting with bottle-opener in hand, ready for the signal to broach his master's pre-lunch bottle of beer. The front room shone neat and serene. A starched white cloth, hiding the charred mark on the table, was set out with saucers of tomato, onion, banana, avocado, ground-nuts, coconut, ginger – all the colourful curry embellishments, displayed as proof that the meal was ready and waiting, even overdue, and that Benedict was pressing energetically on towards washing-up and a two-o'clock start to his afternoon off.

In the noon heat, after the morning on the mill-site, Philip's shirt clung damply to his shoulder-blades. He peeled it off in the bedroom and put on another, freshly ironed, and a pair of Sunday-white shorts. Returning barefoot from



sluicing his sweating face he found that Benedict had already whipped away the discarded clothes and dust-powdered shoes. The lad worked like that, skilfully and quietly, keeping things up to scratch. After the slovenly Moses he was a godsend.

He had arrived just after Moses's shambling, alcoholic exit, materializing in the vibrating post-palaver silence with a quickness suggesting he might have been spying out the situation from some vantage point, up a palm tree, perhaps, or behind the compound wall. Or the news might well have percolated with customary speed through the village grapevine. Benedict offered suitable 'papers', but their value at first glance was diminished by his scarlet headgear; a long-peaked American baseball cap, slightly too large and, like fancy dress, a distraction. 'Too young,' Philip warned himself, fearing after Moses's near-senility some extreme of callowness. Benedict's tee-shirt, printed with a snarling tiger's mask, did not help, though the rest of him, the spotless brief khaki shorts and piebald track boots, was all right. He carried his possessions in a blue bundle and in fact had come on the morning bus from Yamina. Manango was his village. He would rather, he said, work in a house than a hotel. 'I know everything,' the lad had declared. 'Clean. Wash. Cook. Make cakes.' He had the buoyant, bright-eyed vitality of a fighting cock, which in fact he was — a feather-weight amateur boxer, as well as steward.

Moses had left a sink full of dishes, a trail of disorder, and the echo of his hysterical threats to inform the whole village that the massa was a no-good employer, so that no one would ever come to work in his house which was a bad house where bad things happened to people. It was remarkable how much malevolence could be concentrated in that one violently accusing red eye. When at last Moses, still muttering imprecations, departed, Philip tipped away a left-over pot of soup; it might well have been spat in.

As proof that a scarlet baseball cap is no reliable guide

to the whole of a young man's character, Benedict was an admirable houseboy. His touch of bossiness was no great fault when exercised to restore, for instance, the bathroom cistern. On his third day Benedict presented the repair as a *fait accompli*; he had gone to the mill, ferreted out a fitter who had once been a plumber's mate, and stood over him until the job was done. His reward was the five-peti piece from the dining-room table, with other coins. Philip saw this transference as a kind of Muller-dilution, or even as outright exorcism.

The boy now brought in the steaming bowls of Sunday curry and rice. He was already wearing his tiger-printed tee-shirt for his afternoon off with a gathering of contemporaries in the village compound where he had started a weekly boxing class. It was an easy class to organize, and, as the fee per lesson was small, most of the local young bloods were interested; though not Daniel, the office messenger, whose partners and conquests were female and of a different kind.

Benedict was pleased to hear that his curry had a good flavour; he had already taken his share of it to eat in his room where he kept his boxing gloves, his red cap, and a pile of mail-order lessons in Business Management. Having scrubbed the place free of Moses's unlovely imprints, he had made it his own with pull-out pictures from the Muller magazines, an ex-Army blanket, a crucifix (for he was a Baptized Catholic), his framed Standard IV Diploma, and a spare length of Philip's rose-sprigged bathroom plastic strung on wire to screen his bed.

Off-duty he would sit at his table with his cheap ball-point pen and exercise book, following the lessons in Business Management, or reading old newspapers, column by column, not wasting one inch of the valuable print. The home *Despatch* was mostly an illustrated Party hymn of praise to Angyhomadowo, the Great One. The *Despatch* photographers were hard-worked; the text-writers had only

to dip into a stock vocabulary of superlatives. There were pictures of the bare-headed One speech-making from flagged dais to smudged crowd (the *Despatch* ink was usually smudged); or at a Function, surrounded by non-drinking watchdogs and grateful well-dressed Top People raising their brimming glasses; or at a Conference, where he sat as the lonely apex of a perspective of spectacled Dignitaries; or at an Inauguration, Unveiling, Tree-Planting, uniformed Youth Rally, or Ceremony of Propitiation, in front of some triumphant new hunk of concrete or spectacular machine; or waving to his subjects from the steps of an aircraft on the eve of a Mission. Pictures of Dowo blossomed in every issue, day in, week out. His scene was invariably densely populated; he was, whatever the occasion, its beaming sun-flower centre and Source of Inspiration. When Benedict tipped kitchen tea-leaves or fishbones on the middle pages of the *Despatch* it was impossible not to splatter that day's blown-up photograph of the One, but mercifully there was not – not yet, anyway – any law against this sacrilege. Such a law might come, for there were a number of shocking offences that might be connected with old newspaper, and new laws constantly being enacted.

Philip's U.K. papers, those with the stimulating advertisements, were the ones Benedict saved. It was for people like him that the mail-order promises ('Your Blueprint for Success' – 'A Higher Salary' – 'Better Opportunities for Advancement') and exhortations to 'Use Your Spare Time Profitably and Wake Up to Your Possibilities' were as bugle-calls to the world of briefcases and Mercedes, leather shoes, tailored suits and a bank account. Boxing was good; it offered a dressing-gown and an audience, and a choice of soft, silly girls who liked strong little men – and money; but the big fight prizes were a long way off. Much closer to hand was the example of the paunchy, punch-drunk ex-champ who now staggered along the bush-roads, witless and laughed at by the people who once had screamed him

on to victory and admired his picture, gloves held high, on the Sporting Page. (Here Benedict gave a sidelong thought to the political Great One. Great glory today, but what about tomorrow? And though this was scarcely a heresy, and certainly not spoken aloud, he glanced over his shoulder, as people so often did these days, lest there be some stranger's shadow in the doorway, somebody with questions and a notebook – or, more to be feared, a rough hand on the scruff of the neck.)

Business Management was safer. And steward-work in a good one-man house all right for a start, with easier hours than hotel work, no rent, some free food and transport, and advantages of one kind or another. Though a European employer was probably himself only a temporary man here, he was still part of some larger, richer life beyond the village, and Yamina and even distant Echobe. The idea, the steady plan, was to take time and never rush at the nearest thing, but to watch and learn and try, and work; then you were bound to win.

Philip stretched out in his chair, ready for the sleep after the Sunday curry. Later he might go for a stroll – up the path in the woods behind the office, maybe, to take a look at the Juju shrine. Lazily watching Benedict clear the table, he spoke of the landmark. 'I've heard about the place. I know you're a Catholic, but tell me about it.'

Benedict, wearing his Catholicism without pomposity, showed no reserve. 'Plenty believe it. They go to visit the spirit there. They fear it. The Juju was on the hill before Manango was a village. In the olden days – long, long time before the mill. The old men can tell stories about it. The people had to go to the Juju and ask before anybody could build the mill.'

'What, *Mr Adjako* ask the Juju?' This was incredible. He could not begin to picture Adjako in his American hat and Russell and Bromley chukka boots having any truck with a

straw mannikin on a mound of rubbish and eggshells, or with ancient, intoning priests, amulets and moonlight frenzies.

'The Juju was asked,' Benedict insisted. 'Only the priests talk to the Juju. They know how to — they learned it. These ones are not like ordinary men. They use certain kinds of magic. They can walk on fire when others would be burned. They can stick themselves with knives and never hurt. I have seen it — no blood, no hurt, when others would kill themselves. One day my grandfather went when many were walking on fire. So he said: why not do it, and he rush to try.'

'What happened?'

'He burned himself. They took him to the Catholic Hospital at Yamina and the hospital told him never to do it again.'

'I should think not. What a daft thing to do.'

'Oh, he was drunk,' explained Benedict. 'Because he was drunk he thought he could fly or walk on fire or do anything. He had no fear at all. The ones who went on the red fire had no fear. They could dance on it — no burn or blister — but he had to be carried to hospital. He is a Catholic like me. I don't think he still go to the Juju, he never tell me. The Fathers don't like it.'

'Because it's black magic — bad magic?'

Benedict parried. 'No, not so always. Only if the men are bad. Good men must always do good magic.'

'Good men don't need any magic,' Philip teased.

Benedict gave him a sage, measuring look, slightly pitying. 'Some people say Juju is always bad. They think Africans use it only for hurt.'

'That's because people usually remember the worst things,' Philip said, mollifying.

The boy was putting cutlery away in the sideboard drawer, his face hidden. He was in a hurry, but he liked to talk like this, man-to-man; it smoothed the way ahead; it was a mutual compliment. 'Oh, it can happen. Some bad

people can do it. I hear that was the trouble for the past European who was here, but not long.'

Philip sat up, alerted. 'You mean Mr Muller?'

'Yes, that man. They don't forget about him. That is what the village people say.'

'Just gossip, I expect.' But he could not leave it there.

'Why do they talk?'

Benedict flipped off the tablecloth and held it neatly, ready to carry away like a bag, by the four corners. He placed a mat on the table to cover the iron mark which he had been unable to erase, even with sandpaper. He said: 'They did not like him. Too many palavers. Shoutings. Swearing. At the mill he threaten to strike one man and call him a bloody fool. He say the blacksmith is a monkey. After, he made a driver go to jail for stealing petrol. That was the father of Daniel, office messenger.'

'Mr Obuta's brother?'

'The same. Mr Obuta was very angry. Mr Obuta say Europeans always bring trouble. He have a big palaver with Mr Muller, but Mr Adjako came from Yamina and stopped it. Mr Obuta had called a meeting in the village ... ' Benedict's speech became a mumble. He was making for the door with his tray and tablecloth, anxious to be off.

'Hey, what did you say?' Philip would not let him go.

The boy turned. He might have been exaggerating or, in his turn, being provocative — impossible to tell — and gone too far. 'He say we don't need Europeans in our country any more to shout orders and take away jobs from Africans.'

'That's ridiculous,' said Philip with deliberate detachment. 'You just can't lump all white people together like that. Muller was only one man. Don't you listen to any more of their nonsense.' He yawned, to show what he thought of it, and, having started, yawned again. Too hot. He'd had a good morning's work and a good lunch. That was quite enough about Obuta and old palavers. He slumped and closed his eyes.

Benedict, looking briefly quenched, said 'Yessah' with mock humility, and retired from the scene of the sacred Sunday post-curry nap.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Philip trod the eroded dirt path which climbed up through the high woods behind the mill. The Sunday siesta silence hummed over the hill, which was like the humped sleeping shoulder of a giant sprawled above the village. The path was old and sunken, the surface hard-packed and ribbed with tree-roots. It rose steeply at intervals in rough natural steps and was impeded by stony outcroppings. Gaps in the trees framed glimpses of the broadening village below, a corner of the sun-bleached mill yard, a deserted stretch of the road. The air, trapped by heavy leafage and screens of parasitic vine, was thick and warm, and the forest floor gave up odours of moss, humus, rotting bark and imprisoned damp.

A broad black battalion of ants was crossing his path — a Lilliputian army on the march, with scouts and porters, and a bustle of minuscule, disciplined purpose. Driven by what to where and why? Philip watched them — ants by the thousand, close-herded, hurrying, jostling, frenetic, all-alike — and he thought, without regret, of the City at rush-hour. He stepped over them and climbed on up, bending to recognize and pluck from the verge a handful of sensitive plant, whose long thin leaves flinched and folded at his touch. He looked back at the steep way he had come, at the sunlight flooding over fleshy greenage and scaly ancient tree-trunk, lighting up secret patches of bottle-green undergrowth. None of this fecund leaf, vine, frond or flower suggested home vegetation known from childhood or recognized with affection. This bush strolling was as always slowed and restricted by heat and caution. You could not sit down anywhere; in two seconds you would be acrawl with ants. You would not carelessly wander or take your eyes off the path; this was, as the mill men had warned, 'bad snake

country'. If in any wayward exploration you scratched arms or legs, the scratches could swiftly redden and fester, and the white skin itch and tingle for hours afterwards. Some of these bushes were as innocent as home laurel, other plants rank poison. At home you were trustful; most of nature was benign. Here, from ignorance or experience you mistrusted all that was purple-hooded and thick-fleshed, with sticky white stamens, or tendrils which clung, or juices which stained, or spines which drew blood at a touch. Even the freakish sensitive plant was not friendly. Though harmless it recoiled and trembled, neurotic.

Yet this scene could make a colour photograph for people at home to exclaim over: a picture of tropical peace in frail gold light, feathered with casuarina plumes, and lush with spotted wild orchids and festoons of white flowers like wax trumpets. And giant spider webs; and butterflies as big as saucers. A feast for the grey, heat-hungry northern eye. That would be the tropical picture on film. From it would be sifted all the real sensation of standing here on this path, aware of the conspiracy of rejection. It warned you at every pace to keep your distance and watch your step. It had a thousand small foreign voices and attitudes which in their denial of you never changed, no matter how long you lived with them or pretended that you belonged. Whatever was changed and changing in this huge, yeasting new Africa, a white man's solitary bush stroll was still to be taken according to the old rules; the bush was as it had always been.

The shrine, he expected, would be at the top of this steep way. At every turn he expected to see it dominating the wilderness and confronting him. But it was not so blatant. He found it in a natural dip shielded by trees on the right side of the path. And it was nothing much to see: just the usual lumpy mound of earth and stones, scattered with decaying debris and small bones and feathers. It made him think of a back-garden compost heap. What richness,

what a mulch for suburban peas and marrows! But home people did not cover their smelly piles of homely corruption with a raffia roof such as sheltered this Juju, which was not a straw mannikin after all, but a stunted flat-faced figure in dark wood, a doll-man presiding over the clearing like a portentous political dwarf about to make a speech. An image, a focus, core or kernel of an abstraction; a compacting and tight-knotting of a communal emotion; a blood-soaked touchstone so close to the earth that it seemed still part of the tree it had come from. Philip stood, considering it.

It was what the people made it, as Benedict said; its power was exactly what they brought to it from their belief. Strangers might see this object as no more than a quaint pagan curiosity; as a crude, weather-beaten effigy, the work of some ordinary carver who had chipped and whittled the figure — not to his own design, but following a sacred pattern or an ancestral memory to shape this rough, simple symbol. A spirit, the villagers said, not meaning this poker-faced wooden thing, but the reason for it which was as many-sided as their own need: for a dark excitement in the guts; a living, suffering history; and a seed which their human weakness fed and watered until it became a *something* far stronger than they.

Philip looked at the surface of the Juju, which baffled him; it might as well have been a lump of anything. He tried to imagine himself a bush villager, perhaps one of the mill labourers, from whom this place demanded homage and obedience. A man like himself in body, except for details: skin protected by a richer pigment, a slightly different arrangement of physiognomy, a stronger jazz-beat in the blood. But a man, an earthling, homo sapiens — a brother, if you like. He tried to catch, out of the air, such residual shock-waves of mass fear and awe and fervour as should still quiver and pulsate around the idol. If certain places, as some people testified, retained traces of soaked-in

strong atmospheres at which dogs' hackles rose, or horses shied, or sensitive trespassers shivered, surely this place should cause him some involuntary frisson or sense of chill. But nothing happened, because he was the wrong person, and stood outside it all. He was Philip Connor, from Croydon, a spectator with limitations; and between him and the Juju there might as well have been a wall of glass which cut off all communication. They had nothing personal to say to one another.

On his way down the hill back to the house he thought about Muller, and Benedict's nonsense. Anything shocking or incomprehensible, an epileptic fit, a child's death, withered crops, a strong man's sickness, could end up in Juju talk. Whenever there was a thought-vacuum, superstition filled it in; whenever life or death was insipid and meaningless, Juju was there to add flavour. People needed the crackle and flicker of magic as they needed the hot peppers for their economical stewpots. So it was certainly there, but from the white viewpoint non-exportable, uninfected and non-contagious – this brand of raw magic anyway; the modern European's magic, made respectable by advertising, was for different susceptibilities. As for Juju: you could read and write about it, swop stories, relate incidents chapter and verse, analyse and accept it as an idea – but never know what it felt like; what it meant to be involved with it nakedly, body and soul, and scared to death.

But *Muller* struck down by Juju, that was too much. Juju victims sickened through believing that a distilled hatred could destroy them. (Crack the shell of the love-demanding ego and life seeped away until man was a husk, at the mercy of that sneaking whisper in his brain which told him he was bedevilled and done for.) Muller was no frightened bush illiterate, not this brash-sounding German engineer who arraigned the Mill Manager's brother for stealing petrol and called the men monkeys and bloody fools.

Muller, by all accounts, was no weakling or tenderfoot, or strong on imagination, but a hard drinker and probably a careless wench, an average, tough, surface-living white wanderer. The sort who might well end his days, as he had, suddenly alone in pain and vomit, because of the state of his kitchen or his person – through employing a broken-down old misery like Moses, maybe, or through other stupidities and tolerances which could only be guessed at. And then after all the brouhaha and speculation, when dead was sent to Coventry. At the mill no one spoke his name; no office paper carried his signature; Mr Adjako reduced him to an unimportant incident. All that remained of the man now was a Muller-stencilled packing-case, serving as a chop table in Benedict's kitchen. As for the boy's comment, youth always relished the outlandish and was agog for a spot of scandal and hearsay; youth loved to stir things up and make an effect. Philip could imagine how Muller would flatten such Benedict's mischievous rumour-mongering. 'You talk crazy Juju-talk, woman bush-talk! Get some sense, boy!'

He was soaking himself at leisure in the pink bathtub and whistling in the afternoon quietness when he heard the sound of summoning clapping on the veranda. Steward away. Visitors? Hell's teeth! Take a bath, and somebody had to come. He waited, sinking lower, half-submerged like a wary hippo, hoping whoever it was would take the hint from his silence and go away. But his late-afternoon peace was shaken. Maybe there was some trouble with the generator. Adjako – alarming thought – might have arrived out of the blue. Another fusillade of clapping and loud throat-clearing brought him out of the tub. Randomly towelling his stark white torso and weathered brown face and arms, he thrust dripping feet into sandals, pulled a towel round his waist and hurried to see.

The man at the door stood tall and thin in a loose striped

robe: a man with a hawklike, thrust-forward profile and a look of tense piratical exuberance: the super-salesman's look which is prelude to the foot in the door, the glad hand and the spiel. Philip, fuming, thought he might be wanting a job, or selling something; he was holding out a large brown paper bag. But his manner was wrong. On sight of Philip, towel-girt, hair on end, pink-white in his half-nakedness and as vulnerable as a peeled banana, he laughed; his narrow face split up with relieved, surprised laughter. As he briskly crossed the threshold he said, 'Welcome! Chief Wallula! I bring you "dash"!' And he formally presented the paper bag, which was slightly torn, crackling, and giving out signs of live protest.

So this was just a neighbourly visit. Philip backed away, but with hospitable intent. 'Just a minute ... I'll dress ... I was in my bath ...'

'Oh-ho!' acknowledged the affable pirate chief, not at all put out. His eyes were keenly examining the room in detail, and particularly the tray set out with glasses and bottles on the drinks sideboard. He reminded Philip of a setter, pointing. The Chief nodded energetically. 'You go. I go wait.'

When Philip returned, his nakedness covered, the caller jumped up from the chair on which he had spread himself, still holding his twitching parcel. He began strenuously again from scratch, like an actor on a retake. 'Welcome! I bring you "dash"!'.

Philip took the bag, which, in view of the weight it held, was fortunately sturdy. He loosed the string with which it was tied. The head of a furious red rooster shot out, comb flopping. Its irascible red-eyed glare reminded him of Moses. The Chief looked on, like a children's party wizard, expecting applause, but Philip was occupied with the fowl whose legs were tightly pinioned. At his uncertain touch it struggled, squawking outrage, and it was difficult to juggle with the bag which contained something else. Or some things. Eggs, he saw, mostly broken, and the marvel was

that any were intact. He was fumbling this extraction badly and wondering if the Chief were deranged, when with one movement the visitor took firm charge of the creature, swinging it nonchalantly by the feet so that its wings brushed and bumped the floor. Peering meantime into the bag he pointed down at the smeared eggs with a thin forefinger and said with melancholy, 'Twenty when I start, but some go break. Too bad. I bring some more next time.'

'Well,' said Philip, sweating freely, 'thanks a lot.' He left the mess on the table for a moment, worried about the rooster which after its moment of fury looked the worse for wear. Its eyelids were closed like scaly shutters, its wings flopped slack and trailing. 'I'll just put the chicken away. Very fine "dash". Thank you.'

'You chop him,' the Chief advised. 'Chicken good chop. Make your cook put him for soup.' He patted his stomach, organizing; he strode to the inner door, peering down the corridor and shouted: 'Cook-oh! Cook-oh!'

'No use. Sunday off-day,' explained Philip. 'I'll put the chicken away.'

He carried the bird out to the back yard. Benedict's door was shut; the boy had not yet returned. However, the compound was safely enclosed. He cut loose the tight string and set down the captive which staggered but at once rallied, with a flapping of wings, a fluttering of iridescent tail feathers, and an arching of the proud neck. It strutted away from him with high, fast, disdainful steps, mistrustful. 'I don't blame you,' Philip told it. Leaving a saucepan of water and a bowl of rice, he returned with a tray to collect the leaking eggs from the front-room table.

Chief Wallula sat back in his chair, benevolently watching the entertainment. It was all a huge absurdity: first, Philip holding his towel round him, then fussing over the fowl, and now awkwardly easing the sodden bag on to a kitchen tray. Well, now ... Next there ought to be drink. He hunched himself forward, expectant.

Philip hastened to his duty. 'Schnapps?' Bound to be schnapps, something with a real kick in it. He poised his hand on the bottle, questioning.

The Chief made a sound of vigorous assent. Philip poured half way and paused. The Chief's expression lacked something. Philip filled the glass. 'Ah-hahh!' approved his guest, shooting out a long, hard-muscled arm and bending a sharp elbow to drink deep.

They talked, with gaps filled in by the schnapps whose go-between genie provided a sufficiently warm and understanding communication. Wallula had walked from the village of Fayooli, eight miles beyond the hill, drawn by news of a new General Manager at the mill. He had fine timber on his land and wanted to sell some that had been felled – better timber than Adjako's. He wanted Philip to look at it and tell Mr Adjako that the mill should take it. They would make a feast if he came. Good chop, palm wine, dancing. And look at the timber as well, which was not far into the bush and easy to get at and bring to the mill.

'We've got plenty of timber – we don't need to buy any.' Philip refused to be inveigled. He might have known there'd be timber-talk somewhere.

'Next time I come,' said the Chief, draining his glass and holding up its emptiness for his host to deplore, 'I go bring you one sheep.'

'Not in a paper bag,' advised Philip.

'Oho-no!' rollicked his visitor, who had a sharp ear for a jest. 'It can walk by foot.'

But Philip did not want a sheep; it was the last thing he desired. 'Thank you, I don't eat sheep meat,' he lied, causing his guest a brow-furrowed look of dismay.

'Ah!' Comprehension. A refinement on the pig taboo, or the dog taboo, or the snake or monkey taboo. Which was to be respected, no matter for laughing. 'So. Never sheep. But fowls. Pineapple. Orange. Bananas. More egg. All right. I

have plenty ...' He exhaled loudly; he could hardly offer more.

'You seem to have everything,' Philip smiled.

'Oh no.' Wallula cocked a merry bandit eye. 'I need shirt.' And added swiftly, 'You will dash me shirt!'

'Will I?' said Philip, but went away to find one which was almost new but had shrunk and was expendable. The Chief examined it carefully, back and front, fingering the buttons, as if he were buying it. 'It is all right. Also some matches.'

'Any other small thing?' queried Philip, mocking.

'Soap,' said the Chief persuasively, 'I need soap.'

Philip held up a hand to stop this flow of needs. 'But you're a rich man! You've got houses and land and servants. And palm wine and timber, and crops and sheep. And wives ...' That was a safe bet.

'Oh yes, all. Wives, children ... plenty!' Sitting there brimful of life and schnapps he looked as if he owned the earth.

'No hard work. Easy life. Plenty of chop. No worry.'

'Ah! I worry for soap,' said the crafty visitor, sure now that he would get it, and making comically appealing washing motions like a cat.

'You, a rich man wanting soap,' Philip repeated. And it was funny, because Wallula was so much richer than he was. In comparison his own possessions were nothing to speak of. While this titled live-wire, this bush squire, lived on his own natural wealth, he, Philip, vacillated between two countries, a two-way migrant without house, wife or child, or a square inch of earth to call his own. Gathering no moss or certainty, just working for a living. In this schnapps-illuminated moment he genuinely almost envied the Chief his deep roots, his place of honour under his own shade tree with his clan around him, his forests tall behind him, his wives ministering and his children running free. 'Soap,' he said again; it was ridiculous.



'I? A rich man?' said the Chief, snorting disbelief. This was the best joke of all. The joke of the white man who lived like this in his fine house crammed with clothes, drink, pockets full of dibis, importance. White lords, with cars, getting big pay, sitting in offices, giving orders. White lords, making fun, pouring drinks. 'I am never rich,' declared the Chief, ready for Philip's next funny remark.

Almost immediately after Chief Wallula's departure Benedict returned.

'Back early,' said Philip, surprised to see him again so soon.

'The Queen Mother is coming,' Benedict omnisciently told him, gathering up the used glasses and putting clean ones ready. He looked out from the window towards the gate. 'There is the taxi. She is coming now.'

Philip went out to the veranda to meet her. She approached with calm, deliberate steps, followed by a small bashful girl in a drooping white dress, who carried a shallow white enamel basin on her head, and balanced on it a twin-handled saucepan covered with cloth.

The Queen Mother stood before him. She was not tall, reaching only to his shoulder, but she had great dignity. Her robe of sombre black and green, with a voluminous stole which left one shoulder and arm bare, was loosely held by one gold-ringed hand. Her feet were clad in flat black sandals like Obuta's, and there was nothing coy or fussily feminine about her. Even her hair was close-cropped, the hairline steeply shaven to heighten the forehead, so that she wore, it seemed, a tight woolly black cap from ear to ear. She was a square little woman, not young, perhaps sixty, and the heavy gold ring was her only adornment; yet Philip was at once aware of her beauty — or the illusion of it — which was both kind and austere. It rested in her face: in the exaggerated aristocratic brow and wide-spaced eyes and symmetry of features as pure as those of

an older, wiser Nefertiti. It was a face for a coin.

Benedict, knowing his place, was there to interpret and to uncover the Queen Mother's gifts which her servant set down straight away on the veranda floor. Bananas. Oranges. Two coconuts. Twelve eggs, all intact. 'I thank her,' said Philip to Benedict. The Queen Mother replied briefly. 'She say: Welcome!' said Benedict. On cue Philip said, 'Ask her to come in and take some refreshment.'

They went into the house. The Queen Mother sat on the settee; the girl stood behind her. It was like being given a royal audience; this was a lady one might conceivably address as 'ma'am'. And like any queen the lady took the lead. She chatted; she did not converse. She made statements and asked small questions, relayed by Benedict: she hoped Philip liked Manango (he did), and would stay a long time (perhaps he would) and be content here (yes, indeed). Adjako had visited her on returning from England, and had spoken to her about him. She believed the business would now prosper. (He hoped so too.) And in reply to Philip's invitation, yes, she would take some schnapps.

What about the child? Coca-Cola for her. The girl hung her head and was inaudible; perhaps she was not often asked.

Then the guest, formally rising, took her glass to the veranda steps, and with a murmured intensity of supplication splashed a few drops of liquor on the threshold. She stood for a moment, small, commanding and absorbed; spoke again, and poured another token offering; and straightened, and completed the ceremony with a concluding imploration and dribble of schnapps.

She returned, satisfied and confident, under their gaze. Benedict said, 'She say: Blessing to this house and may only good things happen here and may the spirits guard you well and make happiness for you in this place.'

'Thank you,' said Philip warmly, though it sounded a far from sufficient acknowledgment for such benevolence,

either from his visitor or from her gods. This was by no means his first attendance on a libation, but he never had been able to think of much to say on such occasions. Nor did much seem expected of him; his ignorance was always taken for granted.

Yet he was appreciative, and wished it known. He was touched and grateful. The act, which looked so ingenuous when viewed from the outside, and the words, probably not perfectly translated, had real charm and sincerity; and the whole idea was certainly soothing, gracious and amiable. Benedict looked pleased with it; and he a Catholic.

For a moment – surprising himself with this thought – Philip wondered if the Queen Mother had poured a libation for Muller, and if so, whether she thought of it as an outright failure. Maybe today's ceremony had contained some stronger plea to compensate; he almost hoped so.

He beckoned to Benedict, and spoke privately. 'What could I give her? What would she like? I must give her some "dash" ...'

'Tin beans,' advised the resourceful Benedict unhesitatingly. 'Or sardines. Or sugar lumps.'

Well ... that might do. 'Are you sure?'

'Yes. She would like that too much.'

So Philip excused himself to collect a few groceries which he offered in a Sainsbury's carrier bag, left over from his luggage. As an afterthought he added a tin of Irish stew, made in Poland.

The Queen Mother touched the offerings; her smile illuminated them. She seemed deeply gratified. Declining a second drink she motioned the girl to set the gift on her menial head, and rose to leave.

Philip went with her to the gate. The sun was fast sinking on a wide horizon streaked with burning rose and deepening violet. His favourite time of day: the most temperate and clear-coloured; when the dazzle had gone from the air and through some optical trick of slanting

light perspectives broadened and flattened, and outlines of fences, rooftops, trees and people took on clarity, and sounds a cool distinctness.

The Queen Mother's taxi was waiting; it was the only one in Manango, an old Morris saloon, painted orange, used only for occasions of emergency or grandeur. Its driver slumped smoking and reading a *Despatch* at the wheel. The lady stood while he roused himself to open the car door on the old plaid rug spread over the back seat. Her mistress installed, the small servant climbed in and Benedict handed her the Sainsbury's bag. In her taxi the Queen Mother, in ample robe and flat sandals, sat squarely poised and erect, as if she were about to be borne away in a palanquin; as if the dingy low taxi roof were a tasselled ceremonial umbrella with a gold handle, and her driver some factotum from an earlier age.

'Goodbye-ee,' she said to Philip, nodding her handsome old Nefertiti head at him through the open window. It was her only direct speech to him, but as maternal and approving as any handclasp she might have offered. He liked her, felt the better for her visit, and when he stepped back over his threshold it was with a light foot, whistling.

## CHAPTER NINE

The office was familiar now; he had won it over. He was at ease in the swivel chair, resigned to Amos's grumbles about his typewriter, and thankful for Edward's good work in the new filing system. He had accepted the forest crew's refusal to work across the river on Thursdays. The extra mill shift was going well and the first batch of new, higher priced orders should get down to the port for punctual shipment. Obuta, however, was dodging the extra supervision. Sometimes he was just not there; sometimes he offered excuses about other duties Mr Adjako had given him to carry out in Yamina: errands and commissions to do with Adjako's cocoa interests. It appeared that Obuta had been co-opted like this in the past, for Adjako had this disconcerting habit of deploying staff members around his varied interests like pawns on a chess-board. He had even without warning intercepted one of the log lorries before it could return from a major repair in a Yamina garage, and put it to work on cocoa deliveries although it was much needed at the mill. His note of explanation came two days later; the lorry should be back for timber haulage, with luck, within a fortnight. Neither was the lorry the only subtraction. A substantial payment from the U.K. buying agents had not, after all, remained to swell the shrinking mill bank account. Mr Adjako, eventually reached after much effort with the telephone, would not discuss finance. He said with impatience that he would come out to Manango soon to talk everything over; the money was needed elsewhere for the moment. (It was his money; no one could dispute that, or would care to.)

So the accounts were still the biggest problem. Bantio sat hunched over the books, biting his pen. Philip insisted that the Yamina Oil Company should be paid; they were

threatening to refuse further diesel supplies. And the Forestry Department had sent a man out to say that tree-felling in the area across the river would have to stop if the overdue royalties were not paid.

'It is nonsense. They are junior officials. I will settle all that when I come to the office,' said the distant telephone Adjako, 'but I am much too busy now. You must deal with them.'

So he was dealing, if that was the word. He was exercising tact, and writing reassuring letters in the knowledge — which was no comfort — that his own reputation and his European signature promoted more confidence than Adjako's. But there were other problems: such as Donkwa's insistence that Philip dismiss two of his logging-truck drivers. The men had been sacked once, before Philip's arrival. Then, said Donkwa, Obuta had stepped in with a last-minute reprieve from Adjako, to whom the men had made a humble personal petition.

No wonder Donkwa was incensed. He complained that the reinstated men laughed at him because, although they were not reliable drivers, they felt safe. While Philip was making changes, Donkwa wanted these drivers properly sacked. Both of them were wasting petrol and abusing tyres as before by driving their log-lorries too fast and carelessly over the inferior bush roads; they would not heed warnings or reproofs — either from Donkwa or from the anxious Workshop Manager whose records showed that their lorries, more than any others, needed constant repairs to the springs. Without any investigation Mr Adjako had given them their jobs back. How then could he, Donkwa, make the rest of his crew respect orders?

At the end of this long plaint, Donkwa had stood there, creasing his face with worry and cracking his knuckles nervously, as was his irritating habit. He was clearly depending on an immediate show of common sense, strength and justice from the new General Manager.

'I'll talk to the men,' Philip told him, afraid that Donkwa might start his story again. 'I'll make it clear that if they don't heed my warning, they'll go.'

'And when you sack them they will go to Mr Adjako again,' Donkwa declared. 'They will beg him as before.'

'I am in charge of this,' said Philip, annoyed equally by Donkwa's pessimism and Adjako's interference. 'I'll see the men on Monday morning before they go to bush.'

But his mind was entirely on Adjako: the way he loved power and the drama of dispensing or withholding money and favours; his suddenness of rebuke or unreadable silence; his knack, while declaring all the cards on the table, of keeping some vital ace up his sleeve. It was at this moment, while Donkwa waited, that he realized what damage Adjako might do to his timber business, which could certainly prosper if given half a chance.

'Tell them to report to me at seven o'clock Monday morning.'

Philip stood up dismissively, clipping his pen in his breast pocket. It was time to set off for Yamina, to do his Saturday provisioning for the week ahead, before the stores closed at one. The mill would shut down at noon anyway and all was going well.

Donkwa went away. It was not necessary for Philip to tell him that he was determined to seek out Adjako in Yamina immediately; the matter of the drivers was only one further reason, not important in itself, but of a piece with the rest on his Adjako list.

It was already nine o'clock, the early coolness gone. Benedict, dressed for town, was waiting on the bungalow veranda, ready to load the car with the crate of beer empties, the ice chest for the cold-stores shopping, the water flask, and his own bundle of boxing paraphernalia; for Benedict that evening was scheduled to fight eight rounds in the Yamina Gymnasium with a featherweight

called Thunderbolt, and would return to Manango by the early Sunday bus.

'Have you fed the fowl?' The boy, preoccupied with anticipation of the evening contest, might have forgotten.

'He has food and drink,' said Benedict, rapidly stowing the gear on the back seat. 'But that fowl needs some woman-chicken. If you don't chop it.'

'No, I won't do that.' He had a soft spot for the cock, which gave his yard the domestic, occupied look of a proper menage. Chief Wallula's rooster, that magnificent, vital, glossy bird with a bold bright eye and a lusty voice, was too ebullient and proud a creature to consign to a mess of feathers and a Sunday stew.

'That fowl', said Philip to Benedict, as they sped along the first short easy lap of the road to Yamina, 'is my friend.'

This made the steward giggle. 'Then we keep it. If we get some women-fowl for him we can get fresh eggs cheap for the kitchen.'

'Not women-fowl,' said Philip. 'Hens.' Benedict's lapses into pidgen were unpredictable. He had this way of casting off his careful English at odd moments as one might a pair of too-tight shoes. Pidgen was sloppier, easier and often more meaningful.

'Yes, hens. Or even one hen. He needs a hen, as he is a man. He cannot live alone. Yesterday he try to get over the wall to get a hen for himself.'

Philip smiled. 'All right, we'll get him a wife.' He had meant to, anyway. Who could have more male sympathy than he who lived, at the moment, in the same deprived condition? Benedict might speak only of the fowl, but he was no fool.

He concentrated on the road; the bad bit was beginning. They began to crawl in bottom gear over a section as wavy as an old washboard, encountering two new deep potholes with sharp edges. An old man by the roadside stopped to

watch their sluggish, bone-shaking progress. 'It be bad road,' commented Benedict, pulling down the peak of his scarlet cap against the yellow-powdered glare, and sitting sharply forward as if even this slight adjustment of weight might help.

'Why in hell doesn't Government mend it?' Philip, alternately squinting ahead and leaning out of the window as the wheels dropped into two deep ruts, was tensed for the dreaded sound of scraping underneath. This was hell on the nerves. Good! they were over that bad patch.

'Somebody chopped the money,' the boy stated. 'That is why.'

Philip spared him a glance. 'How d'you mean, chopped it?'

'A contractor, some say. His brother was in Government. They gave the contractor the job and he sent a bill for the mending. They paid him. But no work was done.' Benedict flashed a grin. 'Or maybe there was no contractor at all.'

'I can't follow you.' Philip was pitting all his wits and skill against the road. One day for certain he'd blow out a tyre or break a spring ...

'Nobody could find the contractor. Nobody ever saw him. Some say he was just a name on paper. But he might have been a real man and gone away. Somebody chopped the money. The case was dropped.'

'Crazy,' said Philip. 'How can anybody run a country with paper men?'

'They are the bad ones.' Benedict pulled down his cap-visor to its limit and sprawled back in his seat. 'Some others do well with the new work – the buildings and schools and roads – even in Yamina. They say one day this country will be rich and everybody have good jobs and plenty money. Not long ...'

'Your paper contractor must have made a packet,' Philip observed.

'Ha,' said Benedict, 'but God will punish him. And he

will reward the Party which had done so much ... to save Africa from all the ... bad things that happened in Imperialism before Independence.'

'You sound like the *Despatch*,' said Philip absently. He eased thankfully into third gear. The road was now getting better. 'Well, it's your country, and if everybody's so happy ...'

Benedict was asleep, head resting against the window, eyes closed, jaw relaxed. There was excitement in gossip or even in the worst part of the road; plain politics, like routine travelling, could be soporific. Anyway, a fighter called Thunderbolt, a dancing, dangerous opponent, was waiting for him and he needed to conserve all his energies.

After Manango's big sky and slumbering forests Yamina looked a restless and complicated town with, for Philip, a demanding Saturday character. As if alerted by some private alarm clock, Benedict woke up as soon as they crossed the railway line into Yamina's outer region of sawmills, factories and petrol pumps, shacks, rubbish heaps, and an area known as the Graveyard where, in a ten-acre wasteland of makeshift stalls and sheds, it was possible to find new black-market machine parts or old plant which had been welded, re-bored, hammered out or in other ways worked over for re-sale. Old tyres lay piled high beside dissected chassis; cog-wheels, axles, springs, fenders, wire rope, cables, and bits and pieces of every kind of old iron lay everywhere in sorted heaps for the purchaser's inspection. You could buy anything there, from a set of brand-new bandmill belts to a thrice welded propelling shaft if you were sufficiently in need and willing to take a chance on opportunist smithying or mechanical patchwork. Where the Graveyard ended a big red-and-white sign said: 'WELCOME TO YAMINA'. Then the road became smooth tarmac bordered by palm trees and big pastel houses with balconies and pillared stoeps: the affluent suburbs which

dwindled into nondescript byways. Then suddenly there were the new high white buildings which housed the municipal offices. These presented bronze gates and imposing medallioned doorways; but the roadside drains were still uncovered, green-scummed and odorous. The municipal buildings shared with the near-by club a view of the Yamina river, and of the modern bridge which had superseded the old, slow, cable-drawn ferry. Glorifying the bridge there stood, centring a roundabout islanded with canna lilies, a statue of Dowo, seated with one hand raised, reading his Book of Purposes. At his feet the chiselled inscription read: *Give All to Gain All*; the Party motto.

There Benedict dismounted with his parcel. Philip gave him a dibi and wished him luck for his contest with Thunderbolt. 'I will beat him if God lets me,' said Benedict, pocketing the money and tucking in his shirt-tail. He wore a Mission cross on a chain round his neck, and spoke with genuine piety.

'Be sure to get on that bus tomorrow morning,' said Philip. 'Whatever state you're in.'

'No worry for that. I will return by nine o'clock.'

He left Benedict, small and cocksure in his scarlet cap under the stony gaze of the One; and drove straight away to call on Adjako. It was just after eleven. The Adjako flat occupied the top storey of a new block of offices beside the transformed post-office in the remodelled Town Centre. Here, along this privileged street, as in the riverside municipal area, stood the streamlined architecture of brave new West Africa, with freshly stuccoed pillars, and scrolled burglar-proof window grilles, Italianate balconies and mosaics, air-conditioning boxes and touches of gilt. Here stood a white-helmeted policeman on a white-roofed podium directing the cars which swirled past the façades of overseas investment and enterprise. This was the street where men like Adjako conferred or strolled with their briefcases

to the bank or to collect their letters from the bronze lock-up pigeonholes in the roadside wall of the post-office. Yet even here the young street traders had their pitches, sitting with feet dangling above the gutter, with their leaf-wrapped ground-nuts and *bonnes bouches* set out on the old-style enamel platters and baskets. There were no restaurants here, nor ever had been; the chop-bars were in the back streets.

The office block topped by Mr Adjako's flat was the street's newest edifice; builders' planks still leaned against it. Leaving his car in the adjacent courtyard Philip hurried into a foyer whose tiled floor was smeared with plaster dust. A framed notice-board listed, with some gaps, the names of business tenants. Buckets and ladders stood by the lift trellis. An old caretaker, seated by the door reading a *Despatch* looked up to say, 'He no work.' He pointed to a sign on the lift handle: 'Out of Order'. 'Tomorrow he go fix.'

Philip moved to the wide stairway where another sign said: 'Wet Paint'. Sounds of hammering came from above. He said, 'How do I get up to Mr Adjako's flat?'

The caretaker said, 'Mr Adjako be for top. To save your suit from paint, go by the steps outside, straight up for Mr Adjako.'

The outside stairway led by stages up from the dustbins in the courtyard. He climbed, sweating in the noon glare, and was relieved at the top to find a black lacquered door with Adjako's business card at eye level, attached by a piece of sticking-plaster. There was a bell which sounded a dulcet chime within; this was no ordinary back door. It was opened by a stout young woman in a yellow sun dress, gold earrings, diamanté-trimmed spectacles and bouffant, western-style straightened hair; she was not pretty but neatly groomed with beautiful white teeth and dark bronze skin.

'I am Mr Connor from Manango,' Philip told her. 'I had

to come up this way because of the workmen.' He assumed, because the door led into a large streamlined blue-and-white kitchen, that he was speaking to Mrs Adjako. 'Is Mr Adjako at home?'

'Mr Connor — I am glad to meet you!' she said. 'I am sorry the lift is making trouble. I will tell my husband. Will you come in and wait, please?'

She led the way through the kitchen where, at the stainless-steel sink, an aproned houseboy was busy with a live crayfish. Pots were bubbling on the electric stove. A high chair decorated with yellow ducks stood against the wall. Here was a glimpse of Adjako, the family man, though there was no photograph of him in sight. They arrived in a hallway lined with closed doors, and Mrs Adjako ushered Philip into a room of abrupt and astonishing coldness. As the chill struck him he sneezed loudly. It was almost like finding himself at home again on an autumn morning in the Croydon drawing-room before the fire was lit; but this room, with a strenuously patterned carpet, a three-piece red-leather suite with satin cushions, and a pink marble mock fireplace, did not feel like home. A radiogram stood beside a television set; and a setpiece of plastic flowers on a gilt and marble pedestal guarded the tightly closed windows.

Mrs Adjako laughed gaily at his sneeze. 'Is it too strong for you — the air conditioner? We are so used to it. My husband likes to be cool.'

'No, it's fine.' But he thought it fanatical, even dangerous, to create such coldness. And unreal. Beyond the pale-blue frilled nylon curtains the sun burned powerless like a locked-out tiger.

'My husband has so often mentioned you,' said Mrs Adjako earnestly. 'You must come in to take some chop with us soon. Are you quite comfortable at Manango? He says you have no wife.'

'I've got quite a good houseboy.' The room's mausoleum

chill further inhibited his small talent for social chat. He wanted to see Adjako and get on with his shopping before the stores closed.

Mrs Adjako left him sitting in one of the leather chairs, wondering if he should smoke and sully the tiny cut-glass ashtray on a doily on the small table beside him. He stared at the room, away from the red settee (which, imported, must have cost a pretty penny) and its oriental satin puffs, and the cream-washed walls where the bare plaster showed through in rough patches — as if the room had been put together impatiently, before the workmen had finished. He glanced up. Two chandeliers, all crystal bobs, beads and prismatic icicles. Venice in Yamina. The room worried him, not only because it was glacial.

Mrs Adjako came back, flurried. 'I am sorry, Mr Connor. My husband is talking to London and Hamburg. He says he is very busy and cannot leave the telephone. He wishes you to come back at two o'clock.'

Philip stood hesitant. Somewhere in the farther reaches of the flat an infant wailed and Mrs Adjako smiled maternally. 'My baby. He is very troublesome. He is having teething troubles.'

He could sympathize; so was he. And the poor little chap was probably half-frozen. Mrs Adjako continued sociably, 'Will you take some drink? Some whisky?'

He did not want whisky; he longed for a tall beer but could hardly say so. Besides, returning at two o'clock gave him a small enough margin for shopping and a snack at the club. So, explaining this, he followed her back through the kitchen where the air above the blue Formica smelled thickly of spice and fish, accentuating his hunger. The houseboy was tipping a great pan of rice into a serving dish.

The warmth of the real world enfolded him again. This was like stepping out of a refrigerator straight into a Turkish bath. He hurried down the outside steps, the metal

rail hot under his hand. The sunlight made him squint so that near the bottom he almost collided with a tall, upward-proceeding figure, spruce in checked sports shirt and flannels, calm in big sun-glasses and carrying a document case. It was the Mill Manager, Obuta.

Obuta stopped. 'Oh, Mr Connor! I have just come from the mill. I have bad news. There is difficulty. We have had a breakdown.'

Philip braced himself. 'The gantry?'

'Yes, but more. The chain broke while loading. A log fell down on the bandmill carriage. It broke an axle. It was just after you left the office. So the mill has stopped. I have had to send the men home until we can manage repairs on Monday or Tuesday.'

Philip stared. 'Monday? Didn't you bring the axle with you to see if it can be repaired? Today, at once, not Monday.'

'Impossible,' said Obuta in his measured way. 'I could not wait for the dismantling. I had to leave because of instructions from Mr Adjako to see to some other business — not mill business — and bring him some papers here by twelve o'clock.' Obuta tapped his briefcase to prove his argument, or his importance.

'Then you should have had someone follow you in with the axle,' said Philip crisply. This was so obvious it shouldn't need saying.

There was a prickly silence. Then Obuta said blandly, 'I was busy with many things, Mr Connor. Saturday morning is always busy. I had to rush to get here. Mr Adjako was expecting me. These papers are most urgent.'

'Well, he's busy right now on the radio-telephone ...'

Obuta glanced at his watch. 'My appointment with Mr Adjako is for twelve sharp. That was my instruction. It is twelve o'clock now.' He began to mount the stairway, imperturbable.

Philip's temper was at snapping point. 'Wait a minute!'

Obuta stopped, and Philip said, 'Let's get this clear, I want the axle brought in from the mill today, before night-time. It's got to be here, no two ways about it. You'll have to work out how to fetch it.'

Obuta stood obdurate, looking down at him. 'Everything is closed here this afternoon, and tomorrow is Sunday. I think it must wait for Monday.'

Exasperated, Philip took a step upwards. The hell it could wait till Monday just because Obuta was running cocoa-shipment or other errands for Adjako! He said, tightly, 'You get the axle here. I'll handle the repair. I'll see to that. I'll be back here at two o'clock to see what you've managed about collecting it.'

Obuta's eyes flickered behind his sun-glasses. He said formally, without inflection, 'Yes, I will do it as you say, Mr Connor.'

Viewed from below, Obuta's big ascending frame, his brown shoes, striped socks, heavy bottom and wide shoulders, composed an irregular blot against the pale burning sky. It was not a hopeful view.

The courtyard was like an oven, in which his car baked. Philip eased in behind the wheel, temper ragged, throat dry. He brought his town list from his pocket: meat, bread and tinned stuff, cigarettes, drinks, and another bottle of schnapps for visitors. Collect the post; then to the club for a beer and a snack, and a think about the blasted breakdown.

The quickest way to the main shopping centre in the old part of Yamina was by narrow, congested streets flanked by open-fronted shops, Indian, Lebanese, African, Syrian and Greek. They were like rows of gaudy boxes, each frontage crammed and draped with its specialities: cheap handbags, nylon watchstraps, babies' bonnets, underwear; worm cures, hair dyes and potent elixirs; bales of vivid textiles and rolls of glistening linoleum. The olive-skinned managers waited behind counters flanked by



checked shirts, Hong Kong embroideries, skeins of plimsolls, cheap toys and extrovert tee-shirts and peaked caps such as Benedict's. Or they stood in the kerosene-smelling recesses of their hardware stalls, among galvanized bathtubs, paint pots, machetes, and nests of plastic buckets which the town market women now used instead of baskets. The small shops bought goods from the bigger ones and the street peddlers from both, and somehow they all made a profit, or — at the bottom of the scale — eked out an existence. The shopkeepers had living quarters above their establishments; fretwork-shuttered balconies leaned over the road, and dark women drew back Victorian-Indian lace curtains to look out. Where the grey alleyways debouched, food vendors squatted while their children danced and tumbled, or were suckled, or bathed in tin buckets. It was all familiar enough to Philip, though some details were new. The stoic pot-bellied child, for instance, being prepared for a scrub; his female attendant was dusting him all over with soap powder from a cardboard packet. It was, of course, one of the whiter-than-white detergents.

The three main trading stores stood close together on their own superior level, with plate glass and colonnades, and crowded entrances where shoppers loaded their cars with crates and boxes of week-end provender; and beggars with blind, milky eyes or deformed limbs squatted whining with upheld hands; and trader-urchins, regardless of the richness within the stores, touted with trays of lurid plastic combs and ballpoint pens. Philip found the usual three-deep Saturday mob at the drinks counter. Two stalwart British housewives were in the forefront, deep-tanned, broad-beamed young women with north-country accents and a houseboy minding their lolly-sucking children on the sidelines. In England there would have been an obedient queue; here you used your elbows and spoke up.

'No beer, sorry,' said the assistant, a harassed townee in white shirt and black bow tie. 'Beer is finished.'

It was half past twelve. The self-service grocery section was packed with perspiring shoppers, the usual mixture. Pushing his trolley Philip roamed the shelves for tea, coffee, rice, dried milk, sugar and flour; Belgrade jam, Chinese pressed pork. Everything was at least double the British price, usually more. No canned milk, corned beef, sardines or beans — all, like the beer, 'finished' earlier. He ignored the high-stacked tins of pimentos and rice pudding, and the hotel-size bottles of bay leaves and dried parsley. He could not be bothered to decipher all the foreign tins with unreadable labels — Chinese, Yugoslavian, Hungarian or whatever — and wondered what cock-eyed Governmental Trade Agreement could account for such an influx of costly desiccated coconut, peanut butter, tinned grapefruit and pineapple into a land by nature rich in coconuts, ground-nuts and citrus fruits, and so hungry for proteins. And why so much Oriental pork when for the bulk of the population there was a pig taboo?

In the cold stores there was no butter except the tinned stuff which was likely to be rancid. There was a flurry around one of the cabinets; today there was cheese, a rarity; but at this price you bought it like wine or cigars, with care. The same, ludicrously, with kippers. Pale bread, the usual; meat in frozen chunks, rock-hard plastic-sheathed chickens. No bacon or local fish, but a whole freezerful of exorbitantly expensive imported fish fingers.

He queued at one of the checking-out points behind a tall Northerner in fez and flowing sleeves, a petty trader whose trolley was crammed with packets of lump sugar; ahead of him stood two nuns, white-gowned and unflurried, watching the cashier clicking up the cost of their mound of convent purchases. Across the way an Italian matron, probably a new arrival, was struggling with the language and the currency, while behind her an immensely fat African woman, another trader perhaps, deployed her brood of youngsters as carriers. The two doughty north-

country housewives were leaving, burdened with bulging paper sacks. In the old days they would not have carried anything; a 'boy' would have headloaded their purchases. But these women were of a different breed from the pre-Independence expatriate wives; their households, on their husbands' salaries, would not run to a domestic crew of cook, steward, second steward and small boy, gardener and what-have-you. Domestic staff wages were high now. These latter-day wives could probably afford only one 'boy' apiece to take the heavy end of the housework; most likely they did their own cooking. It was the finish of the Massa-Madam era, like the end of the Indian Sahib-Memsahib autocracy, though in West Africa it had ended in its own way; it had petered out by degrees, with a new generation unsurprised by self-service fish fingers in Yamina, who went bareheaded in the noonday sun and carried their own parcels.

Outside again with the car, Philip packed the cold stores into the ice chest on the back seat. A quarter to one; fifteen minutes left to find a crate of beer. No use trying the other two stores. Better press on to one of the back-street places. The Joy and Peace Bar was one of Benedict's recommendations. According to Benedict, the proprietor there would sell you a crate once he was sure of you, at two dibis above the usual price.

Philip drove there, only to be blocked from getting out of the car by a broad-smiling importunate vendor who was the bulkier for his yoked burden of baskets, bows and arrows and strings of sandals. 'I don't want any,' said Philip. 'At all,' he fiercely insisted, pushing out, and crossing the plank across the scummed drain to the Joy and Peace. Gramophone music blasted from its entrance where a group of youngsters leaned, as if hypnotized, against the solid cacophony of trumpet, electric guitar and drum. The rotund African proprietor, in an expansive mood, allowed him to buy a case of beer, and from cartons piled on the bar floor pressed forward other scarcities: American king-

size cigarettes marked 'Duty Free', tinned cheese, sardines, beans, vacuum-packed English coffee and porridge oats. It was prudent, in view of beer shortage on future Saturdays, to buy some extras even at such cost. Such, these days, was the price of a commonplace thirst. A photograph of the Great One looked benignly down from the bar wall over the shoulder of the jolly black-marketeer; he might have been a relative; there was much in common.

Food and drink assured for the bush week ahead, Philip drove back to the post-office to unlock the Adjako Timber Company pigeon-hole and disinter the packets of airmailed *Daily Telegraphs*, the sea-mail journals, sundry business envelopes and a blue air-letter in Helen's handwriting. He scanned the street on the offchance of sighting Obuta and finding out what he had done; he was not there. Ten past one. He drove on to the club with the usual Saturday noon sensation of having run the town gauntlet with doubtful success. He badly needed a spot of peace and quiet in a chair, or on a bar stool.

The club was an oasis. There was nowhere else, except the pilastered new Yamina Hotel (a luxurious stopover for expense-account visitors and top-flight politicians) or the crummy old Carter Hotel down one of the sweltering side-streets. The club had an easy, go-as-you-please atmosphere. You could be social or solitary, look through your letters or read a paper. You could get a sandwich at the bar, or cool off on the terrace with a prospect of the lawn and the river. You could enjoy a spot of peace before two o'clock and Adjako.

You moved with the times; this was a new place on the site of the old European Club which, because of termites or out of need for some more subtle exorcism, had been pulled down. Its secretary was an Indian, and only one member of the committee was British. Of the once solid British enclave, only a handful of Britons remained. They were not even the same kind of British. An old-time Public-

School Carruthers-type was a rare bird nowadays. Most were classless technical men, engineers, miners, agricultural advisers, and commercial men acceptable to the new regime and allowed into the country on strict quotas. Though there was still a small hard core of versatile Old Coasters, who could still, through influence or adaptability, wangle entry permits. With West Africa in their blood they got back somehow, worked their way back like determined cats or homing pigeons. And having returned they often stayed; not bothering to take their once sacrosanct regular leave, lest their permits expire, leaving them lonely, lost odd-men-out in their own cold, fast-changing homeland.

So here the new membership, the dark and pale mixture sat in the new club. Nor was there any uneasy apartheid grouping. No longer – as in the first days of change – did the fair-skinned, blue-eyed sons of Britain and a smaller number of loyal, transplanted wives graciously include at their tables acquaintances who were African, Indian, Greek, Italian, Syrian or Chinese. Nowadays it was the darker-skinned circles which added to themselves a few white faces.

Yet the club itself was of the same old pattern, even to the heavy wooden chair-frames filled in with Yamina-tailored cushions, and the little tables dotting the polished wooden floor. And the importantly decorated bar with its round tin trays, the notice-board advertising the Cinema Night Programme and Saturday Dance – and listing for sale household oddments which were, for new reasons, in short supply. The old off-key piano was still there in the corner, a relic, like the Snooker Room's baize tables and tiered chairs, from the prototype club. There was a Powder Room and a Men's; there were, as before, white-uniformed stewards with bright cummerbunds; and airline posters to cheer up the walls. The picture of President Dowo was in full view, out of some inexplicable psychology flanked on either side by portraits of the British sovereign and her

consort. The effect was to minimize or enhance the central figure, depending on how you looked at it.

These days the bar bills were totted up on an adding machine. And the library had vanished along with Library Night. The musty-smelling old volumes in glass-fronted bookshelves had been swept away, along with the library desk where the bookish spectacled committee-chosen wife had tried to keep track of losses not recoverable from members who went on leave and never came back. Not these days were there any club magazines in black, gilt-labelled leather covers. *Punch*, the *Tatler*, the *Spectator*, the *Illustrated London News*, *Time and Tide*, the *Field* – all gone. You might find a *Despatch* lying around on one of the tables after someone's quick glance-through; the *Despatch* was usually expendable.

From the club terrace the view, of coarse-grassed lawn and river bank, had shrunk. Formerly the greensward had widely extended to a golf course where the white District Officer, the Bank People, Railway, Oil and Hospital People. Managers and Shippers trod, with others of their kind, on African turf that was out of bounds to all Africans except the caddies. Now the course was built over, accommodating a petrol station, a biscuit factory and a warehouse, all, like the bridge, brand new. But the remaining lawn was still centred by its flagpole where the national flag was raised or lowered on occasions with the old-style British decorum. And the old cannon was still posed there on its cement slab, pointing riverward with three rusting cannon-balls alongside – an historical quaintness, doubly instructive if you noticed it. As few did.

Philip sat at the bar; there was not time now for more than a couple of lagers and a sandwich. The cold drink slid down agreeably. The bar was crowded, with the usual Saturday hubbub of greetings and repartee, but no face or voice was known to him. Then he felt a comradely blow on his shoulder, and his name was warmly spoken. 'Philip

Connor it is! Phil, old lad, how are you?

He swung to recognize – as if he could forget? – the broad red face, wide ginger moustache and sharp blue eyes of Marty Jones. ‘Marty!’ He was astounded. ‘I can’t believe it!’

Yet why not? This was one of the everyday explosions of brotherhood which punctuated club life, happening all the time. Proof of a small world, or that birds of a feather were likely to find themselves on the same roost again, no matter how far they had flown meantime, or how rarely they had thought of one another. But the bond had held; they were Coasters who often had sat together at just such a bar, or on one another’s lamplit evening stoep; and once shared a homeward voyage, though never a rendezvous on home-leave soil. Marty in England might turn out, as tropical friends could, somehow antipathetic, ordinary or embarrassing; he might not be at all the same with an address in Fulham or Stockport. The test, being severe, was never made. Philip Connor and Marty Jones existed for one another, by a tacit understanding, only in West Africa. Also, of course, in the same context, there was Sylvia.

Automatically Philip, half rising, looked for her; she must be here somewhere. ‘Where’s your ... where’s Sylvia? Isn’t she out with you?’ (By which he naturally meant ‘out’ from England.)

Marty set down the drink he held in his muscular fist, slid on to the stool beside Philip and rested his feet on the familiar rail. He had put on weight; his blue shirt strained at the buttons; the stool creaked. ‘Nope. All finished. Divorced. Gone for good. I don’t *know* where ... I couldn’t care less.’

He presented this fact neat, resisting discussion or, worse, sympathy. And nimbly erased any possibility by asking his own question: ‘Weren’t *you* getting married?’

It was Philip’s turn, wry and laconic, to encapsulate his loss. ‘It didn’t happen. Probably just as well ...’

‘Heigh-ho then ...’ Marty reared up like an amiable dolphin to wave at some acquaintance across the room. (Same old resilient Marty, everybody’s pal.) ‘I could have stayed at home but I didn’t. I’m still at the old trading post; an adviser, they call me. Who’re you working for these days. Same firm?’

‘No. They’re pulling out. I’m with Adjako Timbers, Manango. Know the place?’

Marty gave him a look. ‘Adjako? Who doesn’t? Adjako Timbers had a chap there called Muller. Not long, though. Ever meet him?’

‘No.’ Time was getting on. Ten to two already. There was a lot to do ...

‘Funny business. There was a lot of talk. Well, there always is. You know ... rumours flying as usual.’ Marty looked aggrieved. ‘You’re not going, are you? You look all of a doo-dah.’

True enough; he was. ‘I’ve got an appointment with Adjako in ten minutes. And we’ve had a breakdown at the mill. I’ve got to get a bandmill-carriage axle repaired or replaced somewhere this afternoon. The blasted gantry-crane dropped a log on the carriage and cracked the axle. *You* tell me where, in this town on Saturday, I can sort that one out.’

‘Let me be a father to you,’ said Marty sagely. ‘Pop down to the Railway Workshop – they’ve got all the tackle. They’ll do it right away if you just ...’ he made a money-caressing movement of thumb against forefinger. ‘The drill is to look for a chap name of Akanse. He’s your man.’

‘Marvellous,’ said Philip. ‘I knew you’d know somebody.’

‘Don’t forget: *Akanse*. No one else. He’s sure to be there. And tell him I sent you.’

Philip stood up. ‘Look, Marty. Too bad, but I really must go ... We must meet for a long chat. What about next Saturday, same time?’

Marty nodded. ‘I’ll be here, Phil. Thank God they didn’t

throw out the snooker tables. I'll trim you with pleasure.'

Philip moved off at top speed, dodging an ample Indian lady in a purple and gold sari who, with her African nanny, was reasoning with a fretful child in a push-chair by the door. Marty was drifting over to sit down at a mixed table; he raised a farewell hand. The club was in full, hot, humming, Saturday noontime swing. A pity to leave. That was the thing about a club; one single, brief conversation with one old acquaintance gave a meaning to the whole room.

Yamina, after its earlier flurry, had the lazy, withdrawn look of a Saturday afternoon. Philip climbed the outside stairs again up to the Adjako flat, and was admitted by Mr Adjako himself, in shirtsleeves, tie loosened, all workman-like energy and readiness. The kitchen was bare and tidy, with a damp tea-towel draped over the stove. Adjako led the way. 'I am very glad to see you. I am sorry I was telephoning when you came this morning. A lot of work has piled up. So many things! Come into my study.'

From the hallway they entered a small, thickly carpeted office, less frigid than the morning room had been but cool enough. The decor, appropriate to the atmosphere, was Scandinavian, with metal shelf units from floor to ceiling, and a big bleached desk spread with papers. There was also to hand a jug of ice water and a packet of Rennies. Green venetian blinds slanted against the sunlight. Mr Adjako's jacket hung from one limb of a modernistic piece of knobbed ironwork which was, apparently, a hat stand. The picture on the wall behind the desk was not specifically of Adjako. Its background was the Manango office veranda, with the staff standing and sitting in four rigid rows, like a football team around their captain. There they were: Obuta, Donkwa, Tomi, Edward and the rest of them, with tall Daniel smirking at the back.

Mr Adjako pointed. 'You like it? I will have another taken soon ... when we get the crane, I think.' He indicated a canvas armchair, and composed himself opposite, behind

the desk. 'You know about the breakdown. Mr Obuta — you saw him — called in to tell me.'

'He knows what I think. I simply cannot understand why he didn't bring the axle in with him. Did he say what he ... ?'

Adjako interrupted. 'Obuta is a good man, but a little slow; that is his failing. He tries, but he does not think. Of course we cannot have the mill shut down. Every day counts. Our orders must be delivered on time. I sent a man at once by taxi to Manango to fetch the part. He has full instructions. It will be here with any luck by five o'clock. I have given Obuta some other work to do in the town this afternoon. I will be happy if you will personally see to the repair. It is more likely to be done quickly.'

Flattery, of course — but true. He wished he could have listened in on the Obuta-Adjako conversation.

Mr Adjako pressed on. 'You have in mind someone for this work?'

'I'm told there's a man called Akanse. At Railways, if I can find him. I hope I can.'

'Excellent.' Adjako appeared certain he would. 'I think I have heard of this Akanse. Give him ten dibis if he agrees. He will agree.' He bent forward to his briefcase, which stood faithfully on the floor by his desk, and extracted the notes.

'I'll do that.' He remembered Marty's artful gesture.

'Everything else going well?' Adjako looked challengingly cheerful as if he had a right to expect nothing but good news from his capable, expensive General Manager.

'I'd like to discuss the accounts,' said Philip.

'You are having difficulty with the accounts?' said Adjako, with the same bright encouraging look. As if Philip had run into some small, easily ironed-out snag in arithmetic.

Philip explained. He was precise, tactful and positive. The facts, marshalled by Bantio, were all there, set down

in detail on a paper which he put on the desk in front of Adjako. In addition to the bills there was the month's payroll due on Friday, to consider. It would be suicidal to switch export production just now, to concentrate on local timber sales for some quick cash; but what was the answer? Philip pulled no punches. That should make him sit up.

Adjako glanced at the paper, listened and stared round the room, fiddling with a pearl-handled paper-knife, not meeting his eye. 'I see ... Yes, costs have been high, and you have paid off the Oil Company bill. It will be best if I come out myself, as soon as I can manage it. We will sit down and go into it fully then.'

'Yes, but the payroll ...'

'You must send Edward in to see me with the payroll forms made up. On Thursday. I will give him the money to bring back to you.'

Philip balked. 'Surely ... couldn't you let me have a cheque now? Then I'd come in myself with Bantio or Edward, Thursday or Friday, to cash it and get all the small change we shall need.'

Adjako leaned back, smoothing his beard like a paterfamilias dealing with an impetuous spendthrift son. 'I would like you to send Edward, and Bantio can come with him if you have any doubt. Though Edward is entirely honest. The money is safe with him.'

Philip shook his head, as if to shake off the irritating irrelevances which always seemed to swarm, like dancing midges, around any Adjako conversation.

'I don't doubt that at all. That wasn't what I ...'

'Then you need not worry about the payroll; it is taken care of. Just carry on to get the new orders finished. Don't waste your time otherwise. We are in a condition of transition, but payments will be quickly forthcoming. We shall soon be on top of the situation.' Adjako delivered himself of these remarks with eyes half closed, and an air of

superior wisdom. He had a gift for hypnosis; his statements sounded like instructions to the subconscious, his own or Philip's.

Well, there it was. So much for the accounts. Adjako had spoken.

'Obuta says the new shift is going well. I am glad to hear of it.'

But there was no point in discussing the new shift; Obuta hadn't helped it much. Philip presented Donkwa's trouble with the drivers, and advocated their dismissal, once and for all on Monday. He was not prepared to give way by one iota. 'You must see that my own authority is at stake. Not just Donkwa's.'

Adjako waved a careless hand. 'Surely this is no problem, Mr Connor. Do just as you please. If these people are humbugging you, send them away at once. Sack them!'

Doggedly Philip kept on course. 'I only brought this up because the men had *already* been sacked — before I arrived, by Donkwa. And they came to you and got their jobs back.'

Adjako's gold tooth glistened from his patient smile. 'You were not here, or they would have come to you, not me. Sacked men will always go to somebody higher. I was too busy to bother with this palaver. And Donkwa — I am not sure about him. He worries too much. He handles men badly. So I let the men stay on. I expected you to deal with them later if you thought they were not good drivers. *You* are in charge at Manango now, Mr Connor. Never forget that.'

'Well, exactly!' said Philip, nettled to find Adjako now with instead of against him. 'But the point is ...' and he rubbed his cheek, preparing to get something clear out of this; 'the point is ...'

The telephone rang, like the bell at a ring side, ending an indecisive round. (He must be thinking of Benedict and Thunderbolt. It was certainly a day for contests.) Adjako

swung round in his chair to answer it, speaking low and quickly, and making notes on a pad. 'Good. They have agreed? Yes, that is the price. Cash, you do understand. I prefer it. By my messenger tomorrow. He will come. Goodbye.'

He tore off the paper and impaled it on a chromium spike, and returned to Philip. (As fresh as a daisy, Philip thought, only darker.) 'I have something for you to see.'

With the quick, light step of a plump man, he went across the room to open a cupboard door, perhaps to bring forth some file, ledger or letter of particular importance. But the object was none of these. It was a weighty roll of green striped cloth. 'For your house. For curtains. I observed that the curtains there were poor and old. You can get someone in Manango to make them. Charge it to the Company. They will look very fine, I think. You like this colour?'

'Why, yes.' Philip, taken by surprise, laughed. Adjako was proudly holding out a length of the cloth. He had the winning look of an enterprising draper. 'Anything else you need for your comfort; tell me and I will get it.'

'I shouldn't think I'd quite need so much just for curtains.'

'No. Take what you need and send the rest back. My boy will carry it down to your car.' He propped the roll against his desk. 'Now before you go I will show you my garden upstairs.'

'Upstairs?' said Philip.

'Yes, my roof garden.' Adjako slid a wall-curtain aside to reveal a small door which opened on to a flight of iron steps, leading up. This was an intriguing diversion with the character of an escape hatch; surely not intended as such. They went out of the green-slatted coolness into the bright hot outside light, and up, Adjako puffing ahead. 'The lift does not rise this far. This top is quite private to the flat.'

They stood on the balustraded flat roof in the shade of

a striped awning. 'This is the bar,' said Adjako, pointing to a sweep of Formica, a large fridge and an array of built-in cupboards with Yale locks. Six stools were up-ended on the counter. From poles on the four corners of the roof coloured light bulbs were strung. Three fringed sun-umbrellas provided pools of warm shade over long, flower-patterned garden chairs; and there were bright blooms and greenery in tubs along the rooftop edge, at the base of the low wall. 'As soon as the roof was finished I employed extra men to prepare this in readiness.' Mr Adjako was walking up and down, like a captain on the bridge of his ship. 'Also a gardener. Flowers grow fast in our climate. It is not like U.K.'

'It certainly isn't,' said Philip.

'My wife enjoys sun-bathing in the morning here, and our children have room to play. Also it is good for parties.'

So Mrs Adjako liked sun-bathing. But surely you sun-bathed to get brown. She was already dark brown by nature; her sun needed no wooing. So maybe this was some imported U.K. notion packaged, as it were, along with the Riviera-type chairs. Curious. Or maybe it was just the words. To sit in the sun was one thing, natural. To sun-bathe — what was the point? Philip, looking out over the wall at the panorama of Yamina, said abstractedly, 'I must say it looks quite a town, bird's-eye view.'

'It *is* quite a town,' corrected Adjako. 'In five years it has changed much. All the new building ... the bridge ... the Technical College ... factories for biscuits and plastics. The Party Offices ... the new fish warehouse ... the Yamina Hotel. I have some interest in real estate.'

This wasn't surprising. Adjako continued to scan the fresh-hewn white geography below, disregarding the sprawling slum patches of beige and grey with their twisted old alleyways, and roofs of pieced-together tin. From this height these had some likeness to the junk-piled Graveyard, from here seen as a blotch of darkness on the town's rim.

dibis changed hands.

When he returned to the building and the vestibule where the caretaker dozed in his chair, he hoped to find that the axle had already been delivered. It had not. 'He will come lef' small, massa,' the caretaker advised him; he was an old man, accustomed to waiting. All his life he had waited in different places for things and people, and had become expert in watching the hours pass without pain, if not with pleasure.

The Mercedes was not in the courtyard. Philip edged his car into a segment of shade, and waited. He glanced again through his duty letters — routine business — and opened Helen's airmail form. Helen spoke of the weather (gales) and the havoc in the garden: and of the annual dock-strike so soon after the one on the Southern Region; and of Harold's touch of fibrositis (he was overworking); and of some mild scandal pertaining to the next-door neighbours. She was glad to hear that Philip had a good steward boy, and wondered if he'd been able to go fishing. She said there really wasn't much news as they were just jogging along much as usual; she sent their love. With a P.S.: 'If you have a cock bird already, you must have somewhere to keep a few hens. Wouldn't fresh eggs be useful? From what you say about the shop food you ought to take vitamin tablets, but I know you won't.'

For a moment he saw the Croydon scene: the wind-swept garden; the snug drawing-room; and Harold nursing his fibrositis in front of the television. He could see the streets and the bus stops and people hurrying home from work in the chilly dusk. He would rather be in Manango than Croydon any day ...

At last. Here was a taxi pulling up, with its passenger, a young man, one of Adjako's many satellites, emerging with a long, rag-wrapped bundle. Philip went over to congratulate him on the speed of his errand.

'Don't mention,' said the young man, blithely obliging, while the taxi driver, responsible for the speed, hung out of the window, grinning and sharing the praise. He had an exhilarated weary look such as Philip had observed in Adjako and his driver during that first drive; as if perversely he had enjoyed the ride.

At Railways very soon afterwards, Akanse cordially received and examined the cracked axle, confirmed that the work could be done, and that the mill messenger — with the balance of the payment — would find him here on this same spot at noon the next day.

'I want to be sure the mill is in production again on Monday morning,' Philip told him. 'I'm depending on you.'

Akanse said, 'Never worry for that.' He accepted a cigarette and lit Philip's with a superior lighter. 'I know your friend, Mr Jones, very well. He is a good fellow. He knows my work. The repair will be ready on time.'

'You know Mr Adjako?' asked Philip. Judging from the current state of the mill plant there could be other breakdowns on other Saturdays. It would be useful to know that Akanse was there in the outfield.

'Only be reputation,' said Akanse, leaving it good, bad or indifferent at that.

The sunset was fading as he passed the black silhouettes of the Graveyard junk heaps on his drive back to Manango. The miles spun along with their familiar landmarks, uneventful, in the gathering dark. He looked forward to a quiet evening with the airmail *Daily Telegraphs*; and to steak and onions cooked by his own hand, without Benedict insisting on handing him utensils and bossily humouring his master's whim to invade the kitchen. He could imagine the boy preparing, skipping, limbering up for his contest with Thunderbolt; he could see the small pair of them, dapper in their peacock dressing-gowns, ferocious in their gumshields, slogging it out.



he could not stop, but would tell them at the village, and someone would come at once. He would give the message. Flat tyre, yes, and say to bring a jack. O.K.! So no worry, help would come. And with a wave of brawny arm he and his human load were away and out of sight round the next bend.

Philip sat alone with the forest and the stars for an hour or more until he saw the advancing lights round the curve ahead of the mill Land Rover bringing Donkwa and a fitter to the rescue. The gate-man, alerted, had fetched Donkwa from his house; Donkwa's house was nearest. Donkwa looked acutely harassed, as if the General Manager had suffered some shocking discourtesy; he moved jerkily; emergencies always upset him. 'Are you all right, Mr Connor? You are not hurt?'

'Of course not, Donkwa,' Philip told him. 'It's only a puncture.' He got out to show them. 'Look at that, a perfectly good tyre. It's this accursed road ...'

'It is a wickedness. Government should mend this road *really*,' observed Donkwa, and, while the fitter got to work, he recited, with a few embellishments and variations, Benedict's story about the paper contractor. But Donkwa did not think it funny. His version was serious and indignant.

'Maybe the Party could do with a bit of an overhaul,' Philip suggested. Surely this could not be a novel notion; it might even be a widespread opinion. In private, of course. Public denunciation didn't last longer than was required for a police van to draw up; and a man in jail without a trial might as well be a mute.

'The Party needs more than that – it *cannot* continue.' Donkwa sounded bitter, and spat hard on the road, as if on some hated image. Philip gave him a silent cheer. Good for old Donkwa, so brave in the dark. Who'd have guessed it? Donkwa had some backbone after all.

## CHAPTER TEN

Sweet Monday music. The saws were singing; the orders would not be delayed, thanks to Akanse whose work had been good, and the Sunday messenger who did not tarry on the way, and the Workshop Engineer and his fitters who got down to the job to make the log carriage ready for Monday morning. His ear gratified by the robust noise from the machines, and his eye on the Friday payroll which lay almost completed on his desk, Philip put through his duty telephone call to Mr Adjako. This must be one of the better Mondays; there was no delay in connecting with the Yamina flat. Within minutes a young male voice replied. But – and this was frustrating news – Mr Adjako had just left for Echobe ... yes, very early ... and was not expected back before Tuesday evening. Yes, the obliging voice would ask Mr Adjako to telephone Manango on Wednesday morning ... he would remind him about the messenger who was coming ... yes, he would be sure to tell him ...

'Thank you,' said Philip, to the loquacious unsatisfactory telephone. He felt uneasy about the payroll. If Adjako were delayed in Echobe the men's wages might be held up for lack of funds; and there was risk of serious loss of face for the General Manager.

'Don't mention,' said the voice politely, having done its best.

Restless, Philip walked out to the veranda, and down to the yard in search of Obuta who, though invited to drop in at the bungalow for a Sunday evening drink, had conspicuously failed to come. Which meant, very likely, that the man was still feeling sore after the Saturday axle palaver. At the best of times he was an odd, touchy sort of cuss; now brooding over his rebuke and maybe magnifying it, he just might become really awkward. The man's co-operation

was vital just now; there simply wasn't room or time for grouses or antipathies. So the answer was to smooth over this sensitive patch right away (if his guess was right) by spreading a bit of cheer around; to achieve something like togetherness, for the love of Mike, somehow. They had a devil of a long way, probably uphill, to go together, and no reason in the world why they should not progress also in understanding.

Obuta was in the mill, standing by the notice-board where the day's cutting specifications were pinned up. He was puffing at his pipe as if this were a full-time preoccupation; and he looked morose.

Philip joined him. 'Sounds good. Looks good. No problems, I gather?'

Obuta half turned, removed his pipe and reflected. 'No ... no, we have no problems, Mr Connor.'

You could hardly call it conversation, but the mill noise filled in any lack of communication. Philip breezily persevered. 'I thought you might drop in last night.'

'Sorry. It was not possible. I could not manage it.' He did not say why, or sound regretful.

'Another time, then. Any time – I *mean* it. Don't wait to be asked; I'm always there ...'

Obuta did not answer. No doubt about his lack-lustre mood; there was no shine anywhere about him. He was doing his work, no more than that. They paced the familiar managerial way together, pausing by the machines, speaking to some of the men. By the bandmill Philip brought out his pocket rule, and with a glance at the specification-sheet measured the thickness of a fresh-sliced board. Dead-on. And another; the same. Obuta silently kept his eye on the measurement. Philip said warmly, 'This is first-class cutting, Obuta.' At the output end of the edger he used his rule again, testing a board's width. 'Splendid! Couldn't be better.' And he said it heartily, playing to the gallery with a congratulatory thumbs-up sign for all to hear and see. Smiles

flashed all round.

Obuta looked satisfied, more animated, and murmured agreement. This was as it should be. They stood by the tally clerk and his mate, stationed near the end of the rollers, measuring and marking each approved board with its specifications, and sending flawed pieces back, chalk-marked, to the edger for re-cutting. (These boys knew their job; they were right on the ball this morning.) They followed the process to the crosscutter trimming the boards to the marked length; and watched the lumber emerging clean and true from shade to sunlight, out into the hands of the yard foreman and his crew for sorting and stacking.

It was an inspiring half-hour, seeing machines, men and wood moving in such steady, competent, good-humoured rhythm. (It happened, sometimes, after a breakdown. A jolt to routine could act as a shot in the communal arm.) Encouraging, to say the least. Obuta looked the better for their brief tour, he had more of a spring in his step now; his cloud had lifted. The stroll together along the smooth-running production line and the praise in public had done the trick. It was as simple and human as that.

'Now,' said Philip, still fostering solidarity, 'if we could just run through the payroll forms – there are a few points we might check over ...'

They mounted the office steps purposefully together, the General Manager and his Mill Manager, with strides synchronized. Daniel was energetically sweeping the veranda, probably having seized his broom to make an effect when he saw them approaching. He had been late again this morning (he was timekeeper Joseph's most constant irritant) and it was politic to demonstrate a lively efficiency. 'Tea now, sah?' he solicitously inquired of Philip, eager to anticipate every smallest need.

'Yes, soon as you can – and make sure the water's boiling. Something was wrong with the tea yesterday. It tasted worse than old boots.'

'It is the gate-man's fire that smokes,' complained Daniel, pushing out his underlip, looking hurt.

'Make your own fire then. We've got plenty of wood, haven't we?'

Obuta stood by, indulgent of addle-pated youth. 'Use your head, boy. Have sense.'

'Sah,' said Daniel meekly to his uncle, and was quick to bring tea to Philip's desk, with the extra porcelain cup which was a gesture to Obuta's status, and the Adjako Spode teapot which proved Philip's.

The payroll queries sorted out and the tea tray removed, Obuta lingered, leaning over the big desk, 'I have been looking at this, and wanting to ask. I saw it before. I was wondering what it is for ...' He touched, with one fascinated finger, Philip's toy lorry and the little crane attached; he pushed it, making it run across the blotter on button-sized wheels.

Philip was amused. 'Oh that ... It's just something I've had for years. I always keep it on my desk, wherever I am. It's my lucky piece.'

'You believe it brings good fortune to you?' Obuta took it up in his big hands, closely inspecting the minute cab, the crane handle and the midget boom and rigging. 'Very nice. I have never seen such a thing so small — so real. It works exactly like a real one.' He made the jib rise up; he lowered it. And put the toy back on the desk. 'Of course you value it.'

'I do, yes ... in a way.' But he couldn't explain how or why; he couldn't even try — not to Obuta, of all people.

'If it is to bring good luck, it is like a charm,' said Obuta. 'I am surprised that Europeans have such beliefs. In Africa many people do. Some say it is ignorant and backward — the fetish idea, that certain objects can bring good fortune.'

'Oh, but wait ... it's not meant to be *that* serious. Not like that.' Or was it? He was beginning to feel embarrassed. Ignorant and backward! Trust Obuta to call it a *fetish*. He could only laugh in deprecation, shaking his head at his

solemn interrogator. 'Oh, I'll grant there's a bit of superstition in most of us. Nothing to do with nationality, surely. It sort of ... crops up. But it's absolute nonsense. Childish, I suppose. It's just because we probably feel and need for a bit of something extra ...' He almost said '... to give us confidence.' But stopped in time.

'Ah yes, that is true. Exactly. I see your point.' Obuta touched the toy again, gently tentative, as if he would have liked to make it run again, or experiment to see more of what it could do. As a Manango child, a bush youngster, he would never have known such a plaything; his elders might have fashioned a catapult for him, or a drum, but he would never have had a toy from a shop; though he did not say so. His broad face pondered. His eyes stared intently, with a touch of something sorrowful; he was caught up in some private wishing or remembering. Then he straightened to his full, tall adult height; he was a Mill Manager again. 'That is all, then, I think?'

'It is, for the moment,' said Philip gathering up the payroll forms, and setting the toy back in its exact place. He was pleased with the morning.

The Mill Manager went away into the adjoining room to his own desk which was always locked, and bare of any frivolity; where normally he drank his tea from one of the ordinary thick office cups.

When Philip drove back to the bungalow for lunch, he saw a newcomer in the compound, a white hen, scratching by the patch inside the gate. She was pure white, plump-breasted, demurely crooning — no anxiety-ridden, fray-feathered local fowl, but something special: a beautiful hen with a calm productive look. The high-stepping red cock patrolled near by. He looked in fine healthy feather, and to the brilliantly sunlit yard added his own patch of arrogant glory. They were in perfect contrast, the busy meek female, the lordly overseeing male; and they made a handsome

pair.

Benedict, wearing a tea-towel for an apron, appeared on the stoep, ready for praise. 'You see the new hen?'

'I see it,' said Philip. 'A very fine one.'

'I got it at the market, the best one. Also more corn for they two. I savvy all about these chicken. When I can see another good hen, we will buy it.'

'You do well,' commended Philip, just as he had said on Sunday when the boy returned from Yamina. (Thunderbolt had lasted for no more than four rounds. He had been no match at all. 'He is all big mouth and flat feet, that Thunderbolt,' said Benedict.)

Philip sat down to his soup, with an old London newspaper propped against the cruet. 'I'm hungry. Are you making an omelette?'

'Yessah. Better when we get some fresh egg soon. Those Chief's eggs stay too long for sun. They smell bad. I throw away four.'

'Don't tell me,' said Philip, and began to read; but as usual Benedict was eager to talk. 'The woman to sew the curtains: I have seen her. She agrees for the work. She will report today.'

Philip, trying to read, feigned deafness. Benedict continued, 'She know her work. She will not charge too much. I will watch the price.'

Philip picked up his paper and patiently re-folded it. All he wanted was a quiet lunch, without domestic discussion. 'Why can't you give her some of the old curtains to go by, and let her get on with it at her own place?'

'That is not her fashion,' said the boy, hovering in wait for the soup plate. He went away to fetch yam-cakes, fried tomatoes and the omelette which, though heavily peppered, betrayed the Chief's eggs' staleness. 'She will carry her machine to work here. That is her fashion.'

No use arguing, then, if that was her fashion. (It was the logging crew's fashion not to work in the area across the

river on Thursdays, Daniel's fashion to drape dusters on door handles, Benedict's to fuss around the table. It was a waste of time to argue.) 'Then she can come here while I'm at the mill – not when I'm at home, understand? And you stay with her. I don't want strangers working alone in the house. I want you to keep an eye on her ...'

'Oh-ho, yes,' said Benedict promptly and with – was it? – something like a wink in his voice. Philip, eyeing him shrewdly, could discern nothing equivocal in the innocently amiable face bent so assiduously over the serving-dish. Jeeves, Manango style, in young zealous miniature. Nothing detectable there in the way of guile or innuendo – or nothing you could quite put your finger on. Which, of course, proved not a thing.

He returned to his London newsprint which was a distraction from the omelette, and a screen, usually, against unwanted chat. He read it with an exile's thoroughness; the papers were his escape and anchorage, and his strongest link with his other life. The radio news bulletins concentrated on African affairs; the voice of the B.B.C. Overseas Service sounded alternately laryngitic and gargling, as if speaking out of thick London fog. The papers kept him, he hoped, from becoming too bush-minded. Helen's supply, supplementing the airmail *Daily Telegraph*, was conscientious; she posted, each week, three Sunday papers as soon as Harold had finished the crossword puzzles, and sometimes before; then Philip finished them for him. In the Foreign News columns, Dowo, the Great One, was not adulated; he was merely written about. The items concerning him and his cabinet were usually brief and controversial: as when a too-inquisitive British reporter was sent packing from Echobe after filing copy concerning various Swiss bank accounts; or a once-favourite minister was abruptly pilloried and jailed for 'subversion'; or a fist-shaking anti-tax march by the incorrigible market mammies of Echobe ended in a scrimmage with the police; or Dowo flew off in his private aircraft,

with his Book of Purposes, to some Eastern citadel where he was photographed viewing processions of banner-carrying citizenry or athletes in block formation; or processions of ovoid or turreted armaments, or simple masses of upturned faces, as wide-spread and featureless as a plate of porridge. Or accepting yet another bouquet from some awestruck infant – and always benevolently, from some bunting-swathed dais which was his natural home from home. The difference was only that some other Top Man's portrait multiplied itself around him, which must have made Dowo aware that a Great One in his own country automatically becomes a Lesser One in somebody else's. Dowo, who liked his hosts to be properly effusive and was sensitive to cartoonists, rarely visited England. It was not the climate which prevented him: his away-from-home public wardrobe included an astrakhan hat and coat and fur-lined boots, gifts acquired during various excursions far from his sweltering homeland.

Benedict, standing by the window, stated with satisfaction, 'She is coming now.'

'What? Who?' said Philip, absorbed in mid-paragraph.

'The sewing woman. She is at the gate.'

He would not have this; he would not be managed. 'No! I am having lunch. I can't see her now.'

Benedict obediently disappeared. There was an exchange of voices outside. He returned to mollify. 'She says it is all right – she will come back.'

'What's all this fuss and hurry about these blessed curtains anyway?'

'No hurry,' said Benedict mildly. 'I only think the old ones look bad and spoiled. I try to make this house look fine and proper, like a Manager's house.'

'Tactics,' grumbled Philip to his paper.

'Yessah,' said Benedict, as if it were a compliment.

Turning his car back up the mill lane, Philip spotted the

sewing-machine before he saw the girl on whose head it rode. This was, in Manango, an uncommon headload, shining with a black and silver sophistication which set it apart from the everyday produce-filled basins, baskets and bundles of firewood. The girl carried it on her colourfully scarfed head as if it were no burden at all. She sauntered with one hand raised to poise the load; and her gait was that of a timeless, slim, sinuous water-pot carrier, a pleasure, as she must know, to the male eye. She wore the usual low-cut Manango blouse, with fluttering frills at sleeves and waist; and the traditional double-layered tightly girt skirt-wrap, yellow and black, with flashes of scarlet. Although another woman walked with her Philip noticed her only as a secondary, unclear figure – someone older, shorter and ordinary. He drove on up the lane. So that was Benedict's 'sewing woman'. He'd got an impression of some stout matron. Not like this one, not a bit. She looked quite a girl, this one ...

Soon afterwards there was a break in the mill routine. Hearing shouts and commotion in the yard, Philip left his desk, and from the veranda saw a crowd gathering round a pile of sawn timber near a half-loaded lorry. Something was up. A flight? An accident? Edward, responsible for the First Aid Post, hurried past him down the office steps, Daniel ahead of him, with Amos.

But an accident or any serious palaver would have brought someone straight to the office; so it was something else. The workers were jostling and clowning around the perimeter of whatever had happened; the noise they made was exhilarative, not distressed or quarrelsome. As when, listening to the modulations in the tune of the machines, you sharpened your awareness of the differences among human sounds; you were always at the ready, half listening. Edward was coming back, skipping up the steps, laughing.

'A big snake in the woodpile.' He held his hands wide apart. 'They killed it.' He looked stimulated.

'A bad one?'

'Yes, bad. But nobody hurt. They want you to see.'

So Philip went down to the chattering crowd centring the man who held the machete; and the dead reptile. The snake lay contorted; it was surely more than a yard long, and at least four inches thick, with the sinister flashy harlequin markings of a 'bad one'. Decapitated, its coils still moved; it still had an aura of drama and danger. Only minutes ago it had been venomous, a deadly enemy.

Everybody talked; the man with the machete was prancing and jocular, enjoying praise and limelight. The event enlivened all faces and gestures; it had released energies, banished afternoon boredom; this was a tonic. Though it was nothing extraordinary, in a snake-country mill yard, to kill a snake, the act never palled. For if, as now, the man seeing a sunlit glitter on the diamond-scaled skin had not shouted and jumped aside, and if he with the machete had not struck fast, it could have been a man, not a snake, lying stricken there in the sawdust.

Daniel, of course, was in the forefront, brave after the happening, with a long stick probing the bright-patterned beheaded body. As his stick made the corpse writhe, a labourer nudged the boy's elbow and squawked teasingly. Daniel sprang away, to derisive laughter. Amos, watching through his clerkly spectacles, made a face of disapproval at these antics and turned away. Philip congratulated the yard crew. Obuta was telling the rest to get back to work.

Philip saw that Tomi was beside him, hands in the pockets of his tidy blue dungarees: an aloof young man, carefully uninvolved. Because of his nature, or education, or the separateness of his work in the power-house, he always had this air of apartness; and his assistant called him 'Sir'. As a skilled worker Tomi could be relied upon, but he was not easy to know.

Philip, watching the small posse who now appeared to be removing the snake, said, 'Are they going to bury it?'

Tomi gave a surprised sniff. 'At all! They are going to

chop it.'

Stupid! Of course it wouldn't be wasted. Nothing edible was. Snakes were edible. (So were bats, he'd read somewhere. And what about jellied eels?) But something like this ... it was a pretty nauseating notion. 'What will they do, then? Will they *cook* it?'

'They will skin it; then they will boil it.'

'They boil it. I see,' But boiled, fried, fricasseed, or served on toast — it was still snake, wasn't it? And what the eye had seen, the stomach, you'd think, wouldn't accept for any money. Not his stomach. Prejudice? All right, prejudice.

'Yes, boil. With salt, onions, tomatoes and plenty peppers to give taste.' Tomi was merely giving information. 'It is a stew.'

It sounded like a witch's brew, and far worse with onions and tomatoes. Something to put in a letter home, though. The way the other half lived, beyond one's understanding, no matter how you tried. Tomi said, 'But only those men will do it. They are from outside. Manango people will not. It is against the religion.'

In the office Edward was deep in the files, but, when Philip spoke about the men and their meal, he was ready to explain. He was often asked to interpret local language and custom. Philip knew him as a youthful philosopher who had left school regretfully, too soon; and as an avid reader who borrowed books from the Yamina library: Shakespeare, Wodehouse, Dickens, D. H. Lawrence, Jules Verne, boys' adventure stories, almost anything. In the office he read the Oxford Dictionary. He was like Benedict, but questing in another area, a lonely traveller on a sea of words; a clerk with an eager restricted pen and thirsting intelligence. He enjoyed answering questions and asking them; it was a two-way arrangement, with respect on both sides. Philip had not smiled when Edward once asked, 'Is it true that in England people are often found dead in the streets from the

coldness of the weather?' Or – in the same conversation – 'What is snow *like*? I know it is white but I cannot understand how it feels.'

About the snake episode Edward said, 'They are hungry men. All food is costly now, even in bush markets. First the store food; then the market food, and meat the highest cost of all. Men who work hard need meat, and their stomachs are strong; any meat which is not against their religion will serve. They are simple men, and they will take into their own bodies the life that has been in any animal – any animal at all. In former times men would kill and eat other men in the same way, and in that way were like animals together. Very long ago. Now in wars men frequently kill but do not eat one another. To kill a man is all right in war. Men get medals for it. But to eat your enemy is terrible, worse than killing. I wonder why that is.'

'I honestly never thought about it,' said Philip. Nothing he could help with there.

'It must be religion,' said Edward. 'Manango people will not eat snake. I myself do not – it is against the religion.' And added offhand, 'Mr Obuta collects snakes.'

'Collects snakes? What for?'

'A sideline. He send them away in boxes to hospitals for serum. Also to zoos. People want them and will pay ...' He fell silent; he looked guilty. Obuta was coming into the office.

'Obuta,' said Philip. 'I never knew you were a snake-fancier.' Surely he could talk about it; it wasn't a shameful secret.

Obuta looked at Edward and then to Philip. 'It is my hobby, yes. Not boas. Mambas, puff-adders, carpet snakes, cobras – all kinds. There is a market for them. Also they are interesting.'

Philip was impressed. 'I'd have thought it was a dangerous sort of interest.' *Hobby!* Imagine enjoying collecting puff-adders: he couldn't imagine it.

Edward picked up his files; he had some figures for Amos to type. In Obuta's presence he was always subdued and deferential, and never strayed from office matters.

When he had gone, Obuta said, 'Edward should not talk like that.'

'Like what? He just mentioned that you had a knowledge ... I was interested. I don't know the first thing about snakes.'

'They are not dangerous if you understand them. Only anyone who is fearful will get himself hurt or killed.'

'You mean he'd be clumsy ...'

'That too. But the *fear* will be known; it will attract.'

Philip could not believe it, and said so.

'Oh, they know, I am sure of it. Fear will travel out from anyone afraid, and all wild things can tell. They have better senses than we. There is much about them that we could learn, and it is a mistake to close the mind.'

'You may be right. You know more than I do about it,' said Philip, trying to sound amenable. No point in arguing about the peculiarities of the creatures; he didn't give a tuppenny damn one way or another; his mind *was* closed, so what? But what a recreation – what a way to spend your spare time! Still ... everybody had to have something, apart from work; something absorbing, a get-away from the sameness of the daily job. To step right into another world, all fetters loosed; become another man, with another skill. Now if Obuta's interest had been fish ... Anglers were a brotherhood; a day's fishing begun in the most unlikely company could make a bond. Fishing was challenging and invigorating, the cleanest, sanest sport. He thought of salmon trout in a misted Irish stream, and of wily pike basking under shaded lily-pads; of cold clear water and peace in expanding ripples ... and of his rods and tackle stacked waiting in the back bedroom. But Obuta went in for snakes. If he'd been a fisherman that might have made all the difference.

Half-way up the bungalow steps he heard the whirr of a sewing-machine. On the veranda, by the door, were two pairs of sandals neatly aligned. So Benedict had not heeded his instruction; the women were still here. The sewing-machine rested on the big table, and Adjako's green striped cloth lay draped over the settee and chairs. The girl — the one he had glimpsed in the street at noon — was turning the machine handle. She stopped as he entered and gave him a young housewifely smile. His impression was of charm, pliancy and good humour; and of a dimple in a rounded cheek the colour of black coffee. Pretty, in a crisp cotton headwrap with one end fanned out obliquely. Very feminine, very neat and cool-looking. Nice to look at.

Philip asserted himself. 'How are you getting along?'

It was the plain companion girl — the more plain, probably, by contrast — who bent her head and giggled, as if he had been addressing her and not the seamstress. The plain girl had large prominent teeth and a receding chin, she was sitting awkwardly, her bare feet planted wide apart. She had the eclipsed look of an inept duenna.

The other one spoke. 'We are getting on.' Her voice was soft, precise and strange-sounding in this bachelor room where her work lay heaped about, upsetting the familiar contours of Benedict's stewardship. She viewed him with the composure of a woman taken unawares in the midst of some expert domestic task; she was in her right place even in this foreign room; her hand was on her machine, and her chaperone was there beside her. Head raised, she viewed her employer calmly; whereas the gauche companion could hardly bring herself to peep at him from under her eyelids, either because she thought him comical or a possible ogre, this strange white man, this General Manager.

Benedict hastened into the room, taking charge. 'They are going now — they are stopping.' He instructed them in his own language, and the pretty one coolly, briefly answered. Benedict told Philip, 'They wish to leave the sewing

machine here for tomorrow.'

'They can leave it. It'll be safe. I don't sew,' said Philip amiably, watching the girl stand up and with languid care pick up, fold and stroke the pieces of cloth with her narrow, polished dark hands, while the plain girl wound up the tape-measure and bent to pick up fallen pins. Barefoot, in silence, they crossed the carpet to the doorway where, without stooping, they pushed their feet into the sandal thongs. All their movements were restrained, as if being strictly judged with points for decorum. The seamstress moved in a light queenly trance; the other more heavily, with her hand to her mouth, as if barely managing to bottle up some explosion of maidenly mirth. They went away without a backward glance.

Philip, on his way to wash, called out from the bathroom door. 'What's her name?'

'There are two,' said Benedict, hastening to carry away the thrown-off shirt and dusty shoes.

'You know which one I mean.'

Benedict stopped. 'Oh yes, that one. Not the other one.'

'Stop playing games,' said Philip. 'What's her name?'

'Her name is Comfort Amara.'

'Miss or Mrs?'

'Miss. Her man is in England learning to be manager in a biscuit factory; then he will return. Until she marry him she is living with her sister, and the name of that one is Rose. That one is also a Miss.'

'She would be,' said Philip.

Benedict enjoyed that. He chuckled all the way back to the kitchen. He always got full value from a conversation; he was ever alert to catch any dry or mischievous inflection, and deaf only when he wanted to be. And his own contributions had a certain subtlety, particularly when he had conceived some would-be helpful notion which required a deft presentation. Philip (surveying his refreshed, not really bad looking reflection in the bathroom mirror) wondered



whether Comfort Amara could possibly be, quite selflessly, one of Benedict's bright ideas. Brought in like a lamp turned low. Could that be so?

'You see my handwork,' said Benedict later, standing in the back yard under the banana tree, and showing off the hen-house he had contrived from Muller's old packing-case.

'You think they'll go in there?' Ignorant of chicken-keeping he was doubtful.

'He will go inside if she does. Or the hen will follow the cock up into the tree. That is where he goes each night-time. But chicken should have a proper house with straw inside for the eggs.'

'You think she'll lay?'

'Oh yes! I can tell by the way she walk about.'

At dusk, from the kitchen window they watched the pair. The white hen walked into the shelter; the cock flew up on to its roof. The hen emerged and joined him. The cock in clumsy upward flight gained a low foothold; the hen, timid, waited as he struggled higher. The dusk deepened. The hen fluttered up like a small ghost, searching, fell back, flew up again, and by degrees gained the secure heart of the foliage above the stem of green bananas. And together, facing inward for the night, they roosted, sharing the shelter side by side.

'Well, there you are. They aren't going to roost in that box,' said Philip, lifting a saucepan lid to sample his supper stew. Oxtail. Not exactly *haute cuisine*, but not bad.

'Oh, the box,' said Benedict, cutting yam at the sink. 'I forget! I found something in the box.' He brought out, from the pocket of his shorts, a snapshot.

Philip examined it under the light: a picture of Muller. He didn't want it. It gave him a sense of unwelcome continuity or intrusive acquaintance; also, at variance, a curiosity. So that was Muller, standing blond and burly beside the log pile in the mill yard. He was flanked by two

Africans: Adjako on one side, Obuta on the other. Nothing special about it, apart from the vast size of the logs — maybe the first cutting from across the river, and Adjako on site to see how it was going. Muller, hands on hips, looked cheerful enough; and so did Adjako, who was always happy to face a camera. Obuta was not smiling, though.

He turned the picture over, looking for a date. There was none — only a pencilled scrawl: *I am the one in the middle*. Probably Muller had meant to send it to someone in a letter. Benedict had edged to Philip's elbow, inquisitive; after all, he had found the picture.

'I ... am ... the ... one ... in the ... middle,' Benedict recited, puzzled. 'Oh! His joke! He is joking. He is the only *white* man of they three. So anyone could tell, without he say so, that he must be the man between. I see that.'

But it failed to amuse Philip; it was a joke with a peculiar edge. And you did not forget what happened afterwards, how Muller died, the way that disreputable old steward Moses had told it. The snapshot was yellow at the edges, and damp-curled. No use to anybody — who would want it? He carried it into the front room and dropped it into the waste-paper basket. Enough of all that. But it bothered him. Odd: how you could throw away almost anything unwanted, flip it away, reject it without another thought — anything but a photograph, or even a snapshot, no matter how frail the link between you and it. Because these shadowy imprints resisted. They had a trustful, fixed life of their own, at your mercy to let it continue ... even this one.

Sitting at his desk by the window, he reached down to retrieve the snapshot and tuck it into the corner of his blotter. And there, beyond the edge of the papers he spread out, it continued to catch at his mind. Muller, the make-weight, the man in the middle; the man at this desk before him, sitting as he sat now, in this chair, by this window, writing. Feet on this floor: standing, crossing to the drinks cupboard, pouring himself a whisky; this was like walking

in another man's footprints. (Like the Echo Game played by teasing children: every movement and posture exactly, persistently copied.)

He sat with his whisky, not working at the papers. It was part of the ritual: the topaz-coloured drink, under the fuzzy yellow lamplight, making a strengthened focus for recollections, intonations and evanescent images attracted like moths by this light and stillness. It wasn't a case of being bored or lonely – not at all. It was much more. You could be crowded in solitude, and got at and harried by your own thoughts and questions ...

He called Benedict who replied distantly from the kitchen, 'Sah!' The boy appeared smartly in the doorway, in his clean, white, supper-serving shirt.

'Chop ready? You can pass chop now.' He brought his glass to the table and picked up the newspaper from the settee. He sat down to the single setting of knife, fork, soup spoon, and water glass, the stiff cone of dinner napkin, Muller's cruet and the jug of zinnias. He heard Benedict clashing saucepan lids in the kitchen, hurrying, though there was no need to hurry. He looked up from his paper to see the gaunt, faithful nightwatch, bowing, spear in hand, in the doorway, announcing his arrival. It was always a little event. 'Ah! Massa!'

'Good evening, my friend.'

'Ah-hahn! Massa!' And he slopped away in his sandals, to his post of vigil out of sight.

The small transparent lizards darted across the wall; the self-annihilating moths fluttered and softly crashed around the veranda light; from somewhere beyond the compound walls a child wailed, and a nasal village gramophone began one of its new-old rhythms. And yet it was a silence. The mill, except for its pinpoint guardian lights, lay off-stage in darkness. Benedict came, welcome, with his tray. It was another Manango evening, much like the last one, and probably the next.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

'Sewing-machine needles?' said Marty, chalking his cue by the scoreboard in the Saturday Snooker Room. He was winning. 'What d'you want sewing-machine needles for?'

'A sewing-machine,' said Philip, straightening after his shot and watching a red ball go down.

'Ask a silly question ...' agreed Marty, pink and amiable as ever, fresh-faced as a Boy Scout in his butcher-blue safari shirt, white shorts and white half-hose; a durable, equable character, fixed in his Coaster dress and habits. On Saturdays he always had three half-pints and then a pink gin or several. Buoyant he floated on the choppy surface of the changing times.

The Snooker Room was a comforting retreat, the green baize lying smooth under the smoke-gauzed light. Here was male plainness, precision and simplicity of furnishing, movement and companionship. There were no women in the room, though there might have been; they were not deliberately excluded. In the old Anglo-Saxon days Sylvia would have been gallantly, superfluously perched on the sidelines, gossiping with sister expatriates, not even pretending to watch the players' manoeuvres or the coloured balls' smooth collisions and changing patterns. Snooker was a recreation for the boys, whose womenfolk were discouraged from trying their frivolous hand with a cue lest they tear the baize or embarrass the conversation. Though the races were mixed now, it was the same male territory.

The game was nearly over, with Marty in great form. He squinted down his cue and potted the black ball into a corner pocket, the cheery winner. They hung up their cues and strolled to the bar. 'There you are,' said Marty; 'you want these needles; that's your man. Hassam. Hassam's Bazaar. He sells everything.' And stopped at a table where

a small, grizzled, dark-visaged patriarch sat with his family of sons and daughters-in-law. 'Mr Hassam, here's a friend of mine looking high and low for sewing-machine needles. I said you'd have some. He's in from Manango.'

'Plenty,' said Hassam. 'I'll send my driver to bring them. Two ... three packets? How many? No, you shall have them. You want them right away?'

'It's good of you to bother,' said Philip. 'Such a small thing.'

'Size does not matter,' said Hassam, the obliging shop-keeper, sending one of his obedient sons to see to the errand. 'What is a sewing-machine without a needle?' The little man spoke with an Arabic dignity which made his remarks sound like proverbs.

'Next time', said Marty affably, 'he'll buy something bigger.'

'That's business,' said Hassam, ever philosophical.

At the bar Philip explained. 'I've got this seamstress making curtains — Adjako's idea. She brought her machine, and her only needle broke.'

'Nice girl?' asked Marty, with a sidelong look.

'None of that,' said Philip. 'She's just a simple village lass, not your type at all. So forget it.'

'That reminds me,' said Marty suddenly. 'I was at the Yamina Hotel on Thursday having a drink with a girl-friend who frequents the place — and I saw Adjako. Who d'you think he was with? Kazzal!'

'Kazzal? Aly Kazzal? You don't mean it! That character! I thought he'd gone to South Africa or somewhere after that investigation. Guns, wasn't it? I thought he was kicked out of the country.'

'No, he just went quiet for a while. He was very matey with some of the Party people. Same old con man, sleek as an otter. Fantastic Swiss ties he used to have, d'you remember? Used to hand them round to his pals like sweets. Well, there he was up at the hotel with your Adjako, having

dinner on the terrace. Just the two of them. Cigars — the lot. And naturally I thought: what's he up to?'

Philip considered. 'I can't imagine. Could be cocoa.'

'Cocoa!' Marty looked almost disappointed. 'My guess was diamonds. Or politics. More Kazzal's line, surely. Unless he's got himself into timber in a big way.'

'I doubt it,' said Philip. 'Adjako isn't buying timber; he's got plenty. Politics — I imagine he *is* in. Diamonds too risky. Adjako isn't the buccaneer type. Besides, Kazzal is always *selling* something, don't forget.'

'And what a salesman! You knew he arrived steerage, first time out, not a bean? Then it was cameras and perfume — then cars and scrap metal or whatever, with sundry sidelines, and contributions to the Party. Did you ever play poker with Kazzal — what they call a "friendly game"?''

'I gather you did.' Philip could imagine it: the ageless Middle-Eastern Aly with a late-night blueness about the jowls, caressing the new pack of cards and spreading his peculiar brand of charm around; Aly of the vulpine nose and kinky, well-oiled hair and pale, lustrous ties; the self-promoting salesman with influence in high places, a gambler among gamblers. He said, 'I don't think Adjako plays poker. He's too fond of money.'

'Anyway,' said Marty, 'I thought you'd be interested to know they'd got their heads together — just in case ...'

'In case of what?' said Philip.

'How the hell should I know? I'm not psychic.'

All the same, it was something to know — and to think about.

He drove back to Manango with, as usual, the week's groceries, the cold stores box, the post and newspapers. Also a new cylinder of gas for the stove and, in his shirt pocket, the needles. A very good, pleasant, recreative Saturday. No meeting with Adjako or Obuta, or mill palaver. Payroll finished yesterday, production and deliveries going well,

and the accounts improved by a couple of good payments. All, you might say, relatively serene. Except, of course, for the road.

But by degrees you learned the road, in the way that you adapted yourself to sleep on an uncomfortable mattress, or to manage an old pen with functional peculiarities, or live with a bungalow fridge which needed understanding. You got the best from difficult materials by expecting the worst; they sharpened your wits because you had to stay in control. Until, that is, the materials became impossible.

The worst part of the road – about three hundred yards – could well become impossible as soon as the rains began. Then the only solution would be to cut a new bypassing higher track. And better to do it before the trucks bogged down – not a big operation if done now. Put the bulldozer and crew on right away. *Not* ask Adjako, just get it done and the sooner the better.

Lurching and crawling over the nearly impossible stretch he looked for and decided upon the exit and entrance points. There was nothing difficult in the way: no big timber or crops; this was easy terrain, dry scrub land on a higher level, on Adjako land. Difficult to understand why the road was ever built on this low-lying ground, a certain quagmire in the wet season, when it could have been made farther up. A situation due to some ancient 'fashion' no doubt; this must have been a market trail long before machines or wheels gave it the name of 'road'. Hell, he'd almost become resigned to it, through habit, himself, while the simple remedy stared him in the face. And making changes was what he was here for: to cut through anything that was time or money-wasting, and bring in a breath of fresh air. Or even physically blaze any new trail. Adjako had said, '*You* are in charge at Manango now, Mr Connor. Never forget that!' He would not forget it.

Home again, safely, well before dark. Benedict hurried out to meet him and unload the car which, as usual, after a

Yamina trip, looked a mess, with windscreen smeared and fly-spattered, and a film of abrasive red laterite dust over all. 'Hot,' said Philip, going slowly up the steps, feeling as he always felt after the drive, as soon as he got out and relaxed. 'I don't know how you can stand those exercises in this heat.'

Benedict's skipping-rope lay on the veranda where he had dropped it. He was always skipping to improve his footwork and calf-muscles; also he had acquired a second-hand chest-expanding spring mechanism which caused the veins on his narrow forehead to bulge with effort. He did no road work; his sprinting was chiefly domestic; but often, waiting for a kettle to boil or a dish to brown, he shadow-boxed in the kitchen. It was all part of the discipline.

'Rain will come soon,' said Benedict, bringing a tea tray. His forecasts of any arrival could be relied on. 'The big rains will start next week, I think.' He poured tea and lifted a napkin from a plate of flat brown objects. 'I made small cakes ...'

'Don't you mean biscuits?' Philip tried one. It was a tough confection.

'No, cakes. They should rise up, but the gas quenched. I am glad for the new cylinder. Also the water has gone off.'

Damn it! It had happened before here, and often in other tours; it was one of the things about modern Africa: the way a tap could, without warning, become a mockery. ('Water-no-deh', water finished, no water-for-bath-or-toilet, no water-for-kitchen, no water-for-town.) So you drank soda-water and cleaned your teeth in it, and waited, sticky and unwashed, for some municipal bouser-truck. Sometimes experts were flown in from overseas to advise on re-organization of water supplies, reservoirs and pumping stations. There were queues at the street hydrants when the water intermittently returned. People flooded their houses by forgetting about the turned-on dry taps. Water palaver was one of the most unpredictable harassments. No bouser-

truck would come to Manango. 'I hope you saved some water.'

'Three buckets and all the bottles. I change it every day when water is here.'

'And you got kerosene?' Because without kerosene for the lamps the generator's ten-o'clock shut-down imposed total darkness.

'I do.'

'The fowls O.K.?'

'That hen laid another egg this morning in the house at eleven o'clock sharp.' Benedict was proud of his choice, and the omelettes were better.

'The *hen*-house, you mean. She must feel at home. How about the curtains?' The work, when the needle had snapped, had not stopped, only slowed. The seamstress, Comfort, had been sewing by hand. Sister Rose, after a second spell of duenna duty, had been left at home.

'She never come today. Maybe she tire for handwork.'

'I got the machine needles.'

'She will be happy for that. She is trying to do other work in the village.'

'Such as what?' Manango did not go in for curtains much.

'She makes dresses and baby bonnets, and embroiders pillow-cases. She knows all these things. She has made an antimacassar for Daniel's bicycle.'

'It's the *office* bicycle. *What* has she made?'

'An antimacassar. To cover the seat. Daniel bought it for himself ...'

Philip marvelled. An antimacassar for a Manango bicycle! Queen Victoria in bush: another remnant – like the fret-work balcony over the post-office, and the twiddly bits on most of the old official buildings, where you might see a couple of lion statues, chipped but proudly British Imperial. And some of the furniture the carpenters made, with curly legs and pretentious inlays – and the ever-popular iron four-poster beds, huge fancy chamber-pots, chenille table-covers,

daguerrotype photography and anachronistic Colonial sun-helmets, all still going strong and much admired by many. But he did not care for this bicycle bedizening; it sounded immoral. 'Is she one of Daniel's girl-friends, is that it?'

'Huh!' Benedict scorned the notion. 'She is not a woman like that *at all*. She make it to earn her living. She is paying for the rest of the sewing-machine. Her man in England paid half for her, and she must get the rest herself. Before she start the curtains she worry too much to get work. All costs for food and rent are high, and there is the tax. All must pay the new taxes – and money to the union. The money-lenders make money too much; they charge plenty to lend money.'

'They usually do,' said Philip. 'Money's awfully expensive stuff.'

Benedict looked fidgety. Apparently he had been leading up to something which now stuck. His 'small cakes' were, perhaps, an effort to ingratiate. There was something he wanted.

'Anything wrong? Are *you* short of money?'

'I would be glad for an advance.' A pause, perhaps to assess what the mood, the temper of the moment, would stand. 'Ten dibis.'

'You're not mixed up with any money-lender, I hope.'

'Oh no! But I pay for the course. The Business Management. And the muscle machine ...'

'All right. Only in business you try to learn to stay out of debt. Or only to borrow money to make money.'

The dibis virtually in his pocket, Benedict was ready with the right answer. 'The course will teach me how, and the exerciser will make me strong for my next contest. It is not like borrowing for food or clothes to use and finish. I cannot waste time waiting for money.'

'You'll go far,' said Philip, sure of it. 'Because two other things about business are believing you're right and knowing how to talk.'

'I hope so,' said Benedict modestly. 'I try.'

On Tuesday Philip put the road crew to bulldoze the new track, and drove out to mark its proposed path himself, with a brush and paintpot marking the scrub trees. Donkwa was with his logging crew, seeing to the repair of the rough bridge across the river; they were renewing the planks laid crossways on the eight logs which spanned the stream. Adjako had commandeered a lorry and four men to go to Echobe to collect a piano from the dockside. ('A *piano*?' said Philip on the telephone. 'I ordered it in U.K. for my wife,' said Mr Adjako. 'My wife is quite musical. I would like Obuta to go with the lorry to arrange clearance. It will take only two days, or three. Also I cannot trust the men alone — they will break it. And they would not know how to deal with the Customs men.' He paused, 'Is everything going well?' 'Yes, fine,' said Philip, resigned; feeling no necessity to mention the road.)

He watched the bulldozer begin its work. The small trees leaned, splintered and fell; the bush was stirred, torn and uprooted from the rich soil. There was a waving of branches like arms upflung, and myriad sounds of cracking, snapping, leafy violation. The driver at the controls was not a Manango man, nor were his mates. They liked to work together and were a gay, dressy lot, a band of brothers. The driver wore a solar topee which he had decorated with silver paint so that it shone like a helmet among the wavering scrub. The gang foreman sported a vermilion shirt and a soldier's wide-brimmed bush hat; and his friend an over-large suit jacket and flat cap, both dyed in the same purple vat. Any head-gear — bowler, boater, topee, fez, turban, trilby, or official's cap; or, come to that, even a paper bag — could lift a man out of the poor bareheaded mass and enhance his importance. It was the African's hat-complex, cocky, extravagant, courageous, unquenchable. His shirt might be in rags and the seat of his shorts a mixture of new and ancient patches;

but if his head and feet were clothed he was on the way up; he had, in the eyes of many, an enviable wardrobe.

The crew, following the bulldozer with machetes, pick-axes and shovels, preparing for the arrival of the laterite-loaded tipper, sang as they worked, some falsetto ditty of complex rhythm and many verses as repetitive as their movements. Either they sang to the work, or they worked to the song — Philip could never tell, but saw and heard only that the thread of synchronized sound ran through the throats and nerves of six separate men to merge their identities, submerge their differences and give the look of automation to the hard, human sweating thrust and lift of corded sinews. These men sang the songs of their own region; Manango had its own, but to Philip's ear they were all the same: with a leading solo voice summoning and questioning, and a group reply, with pauses of a metronome precision, and no voice ever by one scintilla at odds with the rest. Never a raggedness; always, no matter how heavily embroidered the rhythm, a total hypnotic accord. They *were* the work; and the work was them, and their harness was the song. They sang for no one but themselves.

He left them working and singing; satisfied with what had been well begun, and in good time before the rains flooded the bad road. Back at the office there was Daniel signalling, and running out to the car. 'Telephone, sah! Edward is holding it.' He hurried up the steps and into his office where Edward was respectfully assuring the mouth-piece, 'Yes, Mr Adjako, hold on, he is coming, Mr Adjako, he is here ...'

'It is Mr Adjako,' said Edward, with relief handing over the handset which was damp from the anxious perspiration of his palm.

'Mr Connor! Is that you?' Adjako's telephone voice sounded stentorian as if he were using a loudhailer from his Yamina rooftop; and the words came in a rush to telescope information while the line held out. 'It is about the crane.

up his sleeve, as doubtless he did, Kazzal probably held the joker; he knew people. (He even knew *Dowo*.) And if they were people Adjako wanted, for other reasons, to know, the crane was only one of many moves in the game of getting on, making contacts, rising higher, expanding possibilities. In cocoa or diamonds, timber or politics, or anything else. Start off with a simple thing like a crane, and you got ... what? Hoisted. Or hoisted and dropped, or taken for a ride. Because people like Kazzal always set off a train of actions, none of them straightforward.

As he worried he felt a headache growing like a weight above his eyebrows. Not much, but an intimation that he might be getting a touch of fever. He rubbed his head, trying to rub away the idea, but the roots of his hair hurt, as if his scalp were faintly, uncomfortably electrified. It was the feeling a cat might have if you brushed its fur the wrong way. A sure old sign; no use ignoring it.

He might have sent Daniel across to the bungalow with a message for Benedict to send over the Paludrine, but, preferring to keep his fever a private matter, he went himself. The sunlight, sharp as knives through the windscreen, stabbed his eyes. On this blazing morning he shivered, and the weight in his head grew heavier.

He went into the bungalow where Comfort Amara sat at the table alone, not sewing, drinking what looked like orange squash from a tall glass, with curtains spread around. Benedict in the doorway – having apparently obeyed the instruction to give the seamstress some mid-morning refreshment – looked surprised, as did Comfort, to see the master of the house at this unusual time of day. She set down her glass at once, and picked up her work.

Philip went to the table. 'Are the needles all right, the kind you wanted?'

She gravely turned the machine handle to show him. 'They are all right. I will finish soon.' She sounded regretful.

Philip had an idea. 'Benedict, you need a couple of

kitchen aprons ...'

They watched him, the employer. Comfort said, 'I can make them.' She stood up. 'With a pocket here. And a pocket for top.' She laid her hand delicately on thigh and breast. Philip and Benedict watched her.

Philip was businesslike. 'That's right. Two good pockets. And some of my things need mending, Benedict.'

'Plenty,' the boy agreed. 'Shirt collars. Pyjama buttons. Trouser pockets. Underpants ...'

That was enough. 'I know. Whatever there is.'

'I will do it,' promised Comfort. 'I can sew anything you want. I like to sew. You see the curtains?'

He hadn't; but now he scrutinized the finished work which, even to his unpractised eye, looked like curtains: stitching straight, stripes running level, all correct. He ran a careless thumb along the stuff and struck a pin which tore the skin. He exclaimed, and dropped the material.

'Oh, sorry!' Comfort looked stricken. She came to see the scratch – which was nothing at all, though it bled – and stood close beside him, examining it. She wore some kind of musky scent, he thought; she smelled of some warm sweetness which came from her body or her clothes. Then inquiringly she touched the long old white scar which once had been a real wound, far more dramatic than this minor serration with its beads of blood. 'You hurt yourself there before.'

Her hand was smooth and small beside his, and very dark on the back with deeper smudges on the knuckles, and smoky pink fingernails and palm. Cool and dry. Somehow you expected African skin to be warm, as if some warmer, thicker, darker blood flowed beneath it. And yet the blood was no different: the usual human red stuff. Scratch the skin, black or white, and what was underneath was the same. The heart pumped; the blood coursed, and its colour was red. Philip blotted the ragged scratch with his handkerchief, remembering the old cut; he thought he'd lost his

thumb that time. 'This old scar? It was years ago ...'

Comfort went back to her chair, and Philip to get his Paludrine. He felt odd — not exactly ill, but with an extra awareness of his whole body, as if he were joined together badly. His eyes ached, and the backs of his legs. In the bedroom he called for Benedict.

'I don't want much lunch. Just some soup, that's all.'

'Only *soup*?' Benedict's eyes travelled to the phial of Paludrine in Philip's hand, and politely away.

'Small fever.' Philip shivered despite himself.

'Oh, sorry ...' When someone had fever, he had it, and 'sorry' was all one could say. Everybody got fever sometimes; it was part of living. You had it and got better, and while you had it you were best lying down and staying quiet or sleeping until the sweating started. Benedict went away and returned with a glass of water to go with the tablets: boiled water for safety because the taps, though running again, ran a cloudy liquid. Even boiled it had a beige sediment.

Philip, on his way out, spoke to Comfort again. 'You don't bring your sister any more. Why is that?'

She was taken off guard. For a moment, like the bashful Rose, she dipped her head, overcome. It was a personal question. 'She cannot sew. She makes baskets. She has other work for herself.'

'But she came here twice. I thought she was helping you.'

Comfort sat up, in command of herself now in the face of these questions, this teasing or whatever it was. 'Yes. She come with me to ... to see what kind of house ... if it is all right.'

'Do you mean for safety?'

'Yes. Because of men. It is not safe to go alone to a strange house. There was another master here before. They said he was not a safe man to go to.'

Muller: poor old Muller, leaving his warning signals behind after he had succumbed to his own danger. Philip tried to

look and sound unlike Muller; it ought not to be difficult. 'Well, you're not worried now, are you? You've left your sister at home, so you can't be worried.'

Comfort's composure wavered. She would not look at him, but inclined her head so that he could see only the top of her polka-dotted kerchief, the round curve of childlike brow and dimpled cheek. Then she faced him again. One hand went to her throat in a Victorian gesture, the slim dark hand lying across the top of her blouse. Defensive? Coquettish? Effective, anyway. She dispelled doubt. 'I am not worried. I do not need her. I am glad for the work, and I like this house.'

'Good!' He smiled at her, certain he was having a fever. She was an attractive young woman. Lovely cool hands! Gentle voice; nothing jarring. He said, 'I'm glad you like coming to the house, and I like your work.'

She did not add to this; she sat with her hands resting calmly, palms down, on her work. The moment of small panic was past, and they knew one another better; they had spoken together differently, not as before, and arrived at some personal conclusion.

He went out past the single pair of sandals by the veranda door, and down to the car. The sky was like a white lid, holding down the heat; and the path to the gate was hard-baked with cracks in the parched earth. It was brewing up, each day more sultry, before the clouds would gather, and this tension of metallic sunlight end in thunder and lightning and flooding downpour. He sensed the heavy heat in his eyes and head, but nothing could thaw the chill in his bones. He felt a trifle light-headed and reckless, with a lot of work to do, and knowledge of the fever starting — and another certainty which had begun, in fact, days ago, on that morning when Comfort first arrived with Rose. If you discard a chaperone you must either fear nothing or welcome the hazards. That meant he was either considered no risk at all or an *interesting* risk. No two ways about it, but



which was the reason? Wait and see, then ...

As he should with Adjako and Kazzal. He'd gone too fast there, maybe, spoken too soon; played it badly under the pressure of that damned telephone. He went thoughtfully into the office. Adjako was too impatient, like a child wanting something *now*; his 'tomorrows' were for other people; he would be easily tempted by nearness and a bargain ticket, *if* no more than that was involved.

But his brain was fuzzy; he couldn't think now how to handle it; he pushed it aside, and forced his attention to the desk work, holding the weight of his aching head on one hand. The sound of Amos's clattering typewriter irritated him and there was an inexplicable discrepancy between last week's mill lumber output figures and what they should have been, considering the number of logs which had gone through. Somebody's arithmetic was off the rails. He called the Chief Tally Clerk who scratched his head, manufactured a reason and took away the figures. Amos brought in a letter for signature; the 'e's and 'g's were more out of line than ever and a carbon-black thumbprint disfigured the margin. Philip complained. Amos said the ribbon was giving trouble, and Philip said that a typist who couldn't control his typewriter was no typist at all. He immediately regretted this castigation of one who strove hard towards excellence and sometimes asked to stay after hours to practise his speeds with a Pitman book and stopwatch; on his own initiative Amos had sent for a typewriter catalogue in hopes that the pictures might stimulate the longed-for purchase.

Then Edward, who was supposed to give a week's notice of their need to renew vehicle licences, admitted to a lapse of memory. Three licences had lapsed four days ago. The lorry sent to Echobe for the piano was on the road unlicensed. 'Sorry,' said Edward, mortified. 'I forget. I must go to Yamina to do it tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow,' said Philip. 'You could easily have gone in

with Sachi when he went to the Graveyard this morning. Nobody's going to Yamina tomorrow. And I want you here ...' Because, the way he was feeling now, he might not himself be on his feet by then, and Edward ought to be in the office to hold the fort.

'Then if I can have a driver for the Land-Rover I can go right away.'

Philip glowered. 'You know what it's like. They close at five thirty and if they've a lot of applications they won't bother with you; they'll close and you'll have a wasted journey. Petrol costs money, you know that. *Time* is money. Nobody seems to understand that.'

'There is a way,' Edward ventured. 'If you stand at the back of the queue and hold up your applications with a dibi note pinned on, the police will say: come forward. One time. Right to the front. That is the only way if you are in a hurry and there is no time to wait.'

'I know that,' said Philip, who did. Everybody knew. If the Echobe lorry were stopped, Obuta would do the usual. Once it was two shillings; now it was a dibi, but only the price was different; the method was as old as Africa ... 'But it shouldn't be necessary for you to take a special journey and give a "dash" for a perfectly ordinary service. All this hand-to-mouth way of doing things. What's the *matter* with everybody today?'

This was rhetoric, and Edward knew better than to hazard a guess. Philip said, 'Well, you had better go. And', he added unfairly, 'don't hang about in the library afterwards either. Get the Rover back here double-quick.'

'No, sir; yes, sir,' said Edward, chastened, and was heard, on his way out, to exchange with Amos comments of the kind office staff are prone to exchange when the atmosphere of the inner sanctum is fraught.

It was that kind of afternoon. Edgy. Ominous. The fever was beginning in earnest, and he saw everything and everyone through it as harsh in outline, perverse and too-demand-

ing. Daniel's tea tasted brackish, not even like tea; he left it. For once the mill 'music' was sheer noise, an exacerbating affliction. Even the scratch on his thumb looked red and angry. The voices of Bantio and Joseph, wafting merrily from the veranda, rankled. He worked dull-eyed and censorious, at his stoic worst, until the closing gong sounded, and the big motor died, and the workers streamed away light-hearted to the gates, so much faster, he observed, than they entered. The road-making crew returned to the yard soon afterwards, as exuberant as they had started; the caterpillar driver in his silvered topee reported the job done, and the new road-track ready for use whenever it was needed.

The declining sun slanted into the office in melancholy, dust-hazed gold ladders, spotlighting the portrait of the Great One. Philip sat, papers cleared away, straightening his desk, checking his keys, placing his lucky piece level with his blotter; but it looked to his jaundiced gaze a foolish, even sad trifle. Which only meant, another part of him knew, that he had fever, and was disgusted with his body for its weakness and at odds with this plagu country where discomforts such as this came slyly from some chance female anopheles mosquito or inconsequential sandfly, to undermine from within and cause chaos in the blood and brain. He washed his hands and splashed his burning face in Adjako's wash-basin, stubbing his toe, as usual, on the safe underneath; and did not care for his reflection in the mirror. He needed a haircut, and his eyes looked haggard and sunken; he thought he looked a bit bush, scruffy, gone to seed. Though the safe was empty he locked the wash-room door from habit, and for a moment was tempted to use the other key – to the door of Adjako's 'room for resting'. He had a strong feeling for creeping away somewhere dim and quiet where no one would find him, and pulling a cover round his ears, and lying doggo, opting out; but he rejected the temptation.

He drove home – if it could be called 'home'. No sandals at the door. Comfort had gone. But at least the sewing-machine was still there, giving the room some residual look of use and tranquillity. He flopped into the nearest chair, kicked off his shoes and closed his eyes. He might just have a little nap ...

He was aware of Benedict approaching, hovering, and inquiring, 'Whisky?', though it was not properly drinks time.

Philip could not be bothered with him, but he stirred. 'I'll get it myself – not now. No chop, I told you. Put cold water in my flask. Don't bother about the lamps – I'm going to bed early. You can go off any time.' He felt terrible. It was an effort to turn his head, and the chills were coming back. He clenched his jaw to keep his teeth from chattering.

'Better tomorrow,' said Benedict, still hovering.

Philip wished he would go. 'There's nothing else. You don't need to stay.'

But Benedict was bringing him something. 'Comfort ask me to give you this. She ask me to be sure you have it now.'

He sat up, obliged to receive this small rolled-up white bundle which was tied in a bow with hairy string, and unfurled it: a pillow-case, with a frill all around it, and embroidery in shades of mauve and pink and green: neat strong stitches with curlicues and elaborate capitals. In raised script the letters sprawled from frill to frill: 'Peace Be Onto You'. The cloth had a faint feminine scent.

They considered it, each from his own point of view. 'It is good quick work,' suggested Benedict, holding up one corner like an inspector.

Philip was amazed. Though the fever in his head and the ache in his limbs made him too muddle-headed for comment, he spread the gift on his knee, delighted. Marvellous quick work. Absolutely marvellous.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

The night began badly with thirst and prostration and kaleidoscope dreams in fever colours: yellows and reds intricately whirling, weirdly exotic, faster and faster as if he were drunk or drugged; while his mind plodded some vertiginous uphill way, worrying and weighted by the misery of his affliction. His skin and hair were slippery with sweat; his pyjamas clung dankly to his back and legs; and the sheet under his chin was sodden. He was enveloped in the sick smell of his perspiration and disgusted by the bad taste on his tongue. When he opened his eyes the darkness rang in his ears. He thought it must be nearly dawn but the watch on his wet wrist told him that he was at odds even with time; it was not yet two o'clock.

Yet that other part of himself which continued to be in charge commented that it was only fever, something he understood; it would exhaust itself. He could look after his body, attend to the drill. Drink plenty; keep drinking. The sweating was good: the more the better. And when it stopped, stagger up by torchlight to strip off his pyjamas and dry himself; put on fresh pyjamas; remove the creased damp towel on which he lay; change the sheets; put down another towel; turn over the pillow. He could have called Benedict, but would not. He was his own nurse, and he could do it. But he was clumsy. It was all a dizzying struggle. He knocked his water glass off the table and heard it splinter. It didn't matter. He could drink straight from the flask, and did, spilling the water over his chin and chest, and mopping it vaguely with a corner of the discarded sheet which lay on the floor. Messy and humiliating. He slumped on the edge of his bed, limp and drained of effort; he could have wept out of weakness and stupor. But the other part of him still looked on unimpressed, and observed that he

was merely swamped by the self-pity which was part of the fever. He might feel like death but he'd survive; he'd surface tomorrow, or the day after.

Then he stretched out again, his own patient, and slept, or half slept. He was aware of distant noises of drums and singing; of a throbbing and ululation somewhere off beyond the mill; and again the darkness became sound. Something going on. One of the Manango night feasts or junkets, with fingers and knuckles pounding out their persuasion on the stretched skins; and lips pressed to the flutes. And dancing, of course — by dancers rapt-faced, intoxicated with rhythm, born to it; twisting and contorting with spines as supple as cats'; shaking their shoulders and rotating their hips; stamping their tireless feet; transported and liberated by the beat which spelled out a unity of trance, mystery and ecstasy.

He lay on the rim of this sound, hearing it with the ears of a solitary white man whose everyday mill workers, the men on the payroll, would be at this celebration of wedding, wake or whatever: the labourers and tally clerks and yard crew, maybe Daniel and Joseph — though surely not Amos or Edward. But one could not be certain. He knew little of the men's life away from their work. A line was drawn; a space was indicated. He did not enter their houses or leisure, or meet their women, except briefly; for the women were shy, spoke little English, and were kept apart. He was a figure of power and importance known to but not by them, and in the same way he understood only as much of them as they allowed. In his separateness and incompleteness here he must be as Africans were in England, critical captives in a self-chosen territory of mind and climate foreign to their blood.

Was this half-assimilation natural or unnatural? Should men, black and white, for the good of all, mingle more or less? Would any widespread fusion result in a poor and muddy complex — or something new and galvanizing? Slow,

strong forces were at work, but what would the changes be? His thoughts, half dreaming into imagery, light and dark, seemed to him portentous. The fever ferreted and bullied like an inquisitor. At its mercy he dozed exhausted, and tossed, and slept fitfully.

At six o'clock Benedict came in with the tea, unconcernedly stepping over the floor's chaos. Philip remembered to say, 'Watch out for your feet. I broke a glass.'

Benedict picked up the jagged bits, squatting unperturbed. Nanny-like he bundled up the washing. 'Fever be better small?'

'Yes, better.' The tea had an unpleasant taste on his cracked lips, but he could focus. He might even get across to the office.

In the bathroom, however, he knew he could not. The bath water was brown; it always was after a shut-off. He laved himself feebly, disliking the glazed sugar-pink of the tiles, prodding his mind as to the next act: the discipline of shaving. Then, supporting himself with one hand on the basin, he did manage to shave. It was like the old Colonial nonsense, dressing for dinner in the jungle. The stiff upper lip; the refusal to get slack and sloppy; the determination to stay in command. He wondered if a brandy-ginger would help: the old Colonial brandy-ginger recipe for a morning after. In the bygone shipboard leave-going days there could be an entire brandy-ginger contingent in dressing-gowns around the bar before breakfast; those were the days, the bad or good old high-spirited days. He was in his dressing-gown but it had an invalid rather than a roistering look; there was no cure for him except in going back to bed.

He returned to find that Benedict, without being told, had it ready for him, top sheet folded back, flask replenished, clothes hung up. The hen was foraging and crooning under the window, a peaceful sound. He went, slippers shuffling, to the front-room desk, wrote a message for Edward and called Benedict to deliver it. The chills were

starting again. From his bed he heard the mill's starting gong, but remotely, and not for him.

Fever again played tricks with time. He woke to what felt like afternoon, but his watch said ten o'clock. He could hear the sewing-machine, and Benedict laughing and talking to Comfort. Their voices sounded jarringly healthy and busy. Feeling helpless and neglected he called querulously for Benedict who came running, to appear in the doorway with a dutiful face. 'Massa want something?'

'Too much noise. I can't sleep. All that drumming and noise last night too ...'

'It was a special night on the hill. Every third moon ... month, they make sacrifice. I don't agree for that.'

'No ... You can bring me some more water.' He turned over. It was an effort. He ached everywhere, however he lay. 'Tell Comfort I thank her for the pillow-case.' It was in his line of vision spread over a chair back; Benedict must have put it there.

'I already say so. She ask to see you. She sorry for the fever. I say she cannot see you.' But the boy looked inquiring, as if ready to be contradicted.

Philip closed his eyes. He felt only half alive, but his voice went on. 'It's all right. She can come in if she wants to - why not?'

Benedict straightened Philip's slippers and the bed-cover, and went away. In a moment Comfort was standing there, looking anxious. It was an odd situation, like nothing he had imagined, and in the night he had been imagining.

'I hope it is small better now. It is not worse?'

'It's just a fever ...' He hoped he did not look too tousled and uncouth; or that if he did she was not repelled. 'It's just my head.' He had lifted a slack hand to his temple, and the watchful part of him knew this was a gambit.

Comfort bent over him. 'I will get some cloth for it. I know fever.' And she went away to confer with Benedict at the fridge, and to return with a bowl of cold water; and

a face-flannel which she dipped and wrung out and laid across his head. Her fingers touched the pulse points of his brow and their coolness was delightful; also the gentle fussing. The light was in his eyes. She drew the curtains completely, to make an artificial dusk in which her patterned dress glowed, and her small rustlings were intimate. She sat down and patiently renewed the compress while with half-shut eyes he looked along the silky dark-brown length of her inner arm and across her tight-bloused bosom and the delicate bars of collar-bone, with the hollow between; but not at her face. In his weakness he experienced a floating slow-motion detachment, as if they shared some subaqueous cavern; as if his head rested, gently rocking, on an ocean floor, and she were some strange brunette Lorelei with green-mottled mermaid hips and sea-damp fingers, and the cloth on his head was a seaweed crown. And at this fancy he murmured drowsily, and closed his eyes to continue it.

'I will go,' said Comfort, very quietly rising.

'Afterwards ... come back again ...'

He thought he had spoken; he must have said the words, for she replied, 'I am here for whenever you want me. You will sleep again now, and be better.'

He slept in the hot shadowed room, leagues deep, as if she had given him a blessing.

On Friday morning Benedict was subdued, or preoccupied, or in some way troubled, perhaps because of the special lunch. He looked put out, it might be by the peculiarity of Mr Adjako bringing his own food and by his master's convalescent appetite. Three men and all the paraphernalia of best mats and starched napkins, but lunch, in fact, for one. The curtains were up; they looked fine; Comfort would not be here, not today.

'You don't need to have such a long face,' said Philip, toying with a slice of breakfast pawpaw and swallowing his

Paludrine. He was better, though pale and weak at the knees. 'I'll send Daniel to give you a hand.'

'I don't need Daniel, I don't worry for that,' said Benedict, long-faced indeed on this brilliant day. He had been talking early to passers-by outside the gate. Something might have upset him, but there was no time to inquire into it; this was no time for temperament. Philip said, 'Don't forget about the coffee cups.' He meant the *demitasses* which were not used on ordinary days.

Benedict merely nodded; he well understood all the expected formal differences: the small cups and special spoons, and the special steward manner for guests; and would not fail.

In the roadway just before he turned his car up the mill lane, Philip saw with half an eye an unusualness about the village main street. He was aware of blots of darkness: the clothes of the villagers which were not their everyday striped, catherine-wheeled, flower-splashed, multi-hued garments, but a dullness of black, dusty purple and ginger-brown. Several groups stood, dressed like this. There were none of the usual lively, white-flashing early-morning social exchanges. The street seemed imbued with an atmosphere of abnormal quiet, or disquiet. These people must be in mourning.

In the mill yard there was a crowd and a commination of voices in front of the power-house; a disturbance. Something had gone wrong. Though the starting gong had sounded the big motor remained silent. The logging crews still stood by their vehicles, heads together, deep in some discourse; and Donkwa was not with them, supervising their departure.

Philip went slowly up the office steps to the veranda where Edward, heavy-eyed and clutching the morning *Despatch*, was looking out at the yard. The main door stood wide; the offices were empty; the staff must be down there among the men. Philip braced himself for news of

breakdown, accident or palaver. He remembered, with a sense of shock, the funeral clothes in the village. He saw that Edward had been weeping.

'What is it. Quick — tell me! What's happening down there?'

'Palaver. You know the bad news?' Edward brushed his hand across his eyes.

'I *don't* know anything. Tell me!' He had missed the six o'clock radio news.

'Kifo. About Kifo.'

'Kifo?' The name swam at the bottom of his mind. Kifo ... a name half-forgotten. He caught it. The Independence Kifo, Dowo's comrade. Kifo and Dowo, the Independence names: the men at the top, the leaders side by side. But Dowo, the younger, was the firebrand then. It was Dowo who rode on the shoulders of the students. Kifo worked more temperately. He supported Dowo; he rallied the older people; he toured the country without the fanfare of Dowo's excursions. He had been a schoolmaster co-opted by Dowo's genius for surrounding himself with a phalanx of idealistic academicians and technicians. While Dowo unfurled and waved the banners and excited the country's imagination, Kifo organized, liaised, guarded and advised. Wherever the precipitate Dowo was, Kifo maintained an equilibrium. Together they shaped the new regime. But Dowo was like an actor, satisfied only with monologues and praise; he would not tolerate any moderation of political pace, or any criticism. Kifo was sent off stage, abroad on a series of overseas missions, and was well regarded. On his return he made a speech advocating reassessment and consolidation, and warning against corruption. There were rumours that he was gathering like-minded men about him, rumours that he had displeased the President. He was faded out, then 'detained'. His detention was reported in the same *Despatch* issue which headlined Dowo's first Party purge. Kifo was not cast out alone.

Edward said, 'Kifo has hanged himself in jail. We knew him. He was from this region. They are saying that Dowo's farewell handshake has broken his neck.'

It was shocking news. Philip said, 'What does the *Despatch* say?' Edward looked down at his hand, crushed the paper into a ball and dropped it. 'This paper? Nothing. The news has come here by mouth, by foot. It is true — he has hanged himself.'

The voices in the yard were louder, the crowd increasing by the door of the power-house. Edward said, 'It is Donkwa and Tomi, a big palaver, a fight.'

Philip tested his knees. He had not the strength to walk across the yard. Even three days after the fever he had not the physical strength. He said, 'Go and tell them I say the motor and the work must start one time. Ask Donkwa to come here. Tell the men I *order* them to start work.'

Edward went, holding his body stiffly; he seemed unable to hurry. Philip watched him penetrate the aggressive, pushing group. All heads turned to the office veranda where Philip's hand was raised, signalling. The crowd broke up, revealing Sachi standing between Donkwa and Tomi. Tomi disappeared into the power-house; and Sachi, with a hand on Donkwa's shoulder, was urging him away.

Soon afterwards Donkwa stood distraught in the office. Philip said, 'This isn't like you, Donkwa — you forget you're Senior Staff. You can't just stop work. I won't have palavers on the job. What *was* the palaver?'

'About Kifo,' said Donkwa, furiously cracking his knuckles. 'Tomi is Secretary of the Manango Party Group. When the news came we went to Tomi. We say, "Why is this? Kifo was a good old man who never hurt anybody. He was loyal to the Party and the country, and Dowo was his best friend, his brother. They said the jail was only for a short time, but it was more than two years. Now we know that in jail he was treated like a dog. They chained him and gave him slops to eat. They made him confess to what he had

not done. He had no hope. Dowo killed this good old man, his brother ...”

Philip broke in. He had to stop him. ‘Wait! What did Tomi say?’

Donkwa said, angrily, ‘He say the old man was mad and foolish, and killed himself to do the Party harm. And that whatever Dowo did *must* be right. Dowo can *never* do wrong. And that Kifo was punished for wickedness. And if the old man was hurt in prison it was the jailer’s fault – not Dowo’s.’

‘All right,’ said Philip wearily. ‘That is enough. I am sorry about this shocking news, and I know you feel strongly about it. But politics is not my business. I cannot have palavers holding up the work – not for any reason. I will speak to Tomi.’

‘Tomi is a fool,’ said Donkwa. ‘I told him that trouble will come one day – he will have to watch out for himself on that day. Big trouble. All this time nobody would speak for Kifo. All were afraid. But I am speaking. Let Tomi report me to Party Headquarters – I don’t care!’

‘Be careful,’ Philip advised him. ‘Don’t you rush into things like this, half-cocked. It won’t do anybody any good.’

‘Somebody *must* speak!’ cried Donkwa. ‘How can people think so much and never say it aloud? You see them in the village. They dress in black, not only for Kifo but because their hearts are sick.’

‘I will speak strongly to Tomi,’ Philip said. ‘I’m in charge of what goes on here on the Company’s premises.’

Donkwa muttered, turning away.

‘What did you say?’

Donkwa sounded stifled. ‘Only that Dowo is in charge. In Echobe, Yamina, Manango, everywhere ...’

Philip let him go, and sent for Tomi who came at once to stand to attention before him, like a soldier in his dungarees. He looked very young and hard-eyed, and defiant.

‘Don’t make trouble,’ said Philip. ‘Keep politics right out

of this yard – is that clear? I’m here to make sure this Company runs properly. You have been holding up the work with this palaver. I won’t have more of this.’

‘I do what is my duty,’ said Tomi, too loudly. (The outer office was silent; they must all be listening.) ‘This morning they dare to insult the President, our Great One. They forget all he has done for us in Independence and all he has promised to do. They are proper bush, crying like women. One old man dies and they shout. I say to them: what is one old man? He is no good to us any more. He would die anyway.’

‘Stop!’ Philip stirred, felt his own temper rising. This was outrageous, this callous, bigoted, dangerous talk – all hot blood and ferocious loyalty. It was a temptation to hold forth, wade in, attack. There was plenty he could say. But he could not, must not, become involved. He stared hard at the ambitious young Power-house Superintendent and said levelly, ‘This man Kifo was your President’s loyal friend, wasn’t he?’

Tomi stood straighter, scorning all softness, all emotion, all reproach. ‘Angyhoma Dowo, our President, cannot have friends. He is master. He lives for the country alone and every man must work for him or die for him without question. No man can call him friend. Kifo was a traitor who would have spoiled the Government – even the Party!’

‘I’ve told you, that’s none of my business,’ said Philip. ‘Do your job properly, that’s all I ask. No more political palavers. And don’t you go reporting Donkwa to your Headquarters, because he’s a good man and a good Logging Manager, and if I hear you’ve reported him, I’ll have to sack you for interfering with this Company’s business. You can go now.’

Tomi, without another word, went. The office staff and the yard men did not look up as he crossed the yard, sauntering solitary, head high, back to his generators.

On the office veranda Daniel, while sweeping, picked up

Edward's crushed *Despatch* and smoothed it out. Philip took it from him and looked through the pages. Same stuff. Dowo well-fed (getting a double-chin), white-robed, greeting a Trade Delegation somewhere, his profile strong and smiling, right hand clasped on another's; his left hand upon it reinforcing comradeship; Dowo's handshake of friendship – withheld from Kifo when Kifo was in a cell, chained like a dog; given slops to eat; ignored, disgraced, urged to die. The same old political story you read about sometimes, or heard dispassionately on the Home News, or glimpsed on one more of television's shadowland documentaries. This time it was real.

There was a lot to do. He cast an eye at his Pending tray. With the accidie of his post-fever state and the after-taste of the palaver upon him, he hoped that the telephone might ring with a reprieve; that Adjako might, as he often did, change his mind, and at the last moment postpone or cancel the visit with Kazzal. He tested the telephone, to find it working; and was tempted to put a call through to plead fever as an excuse. But after their last conversation, any excuse might sound faked. So the visitors couldn't be deflected; they would soon be on their way, speeding along in the Mercedes to a useless discussion. (Because it would be useless, or worse.) Daniel, alert to the advent, was already feather-dusting the portraits, polishing the door handles and using Brasso on the Yale locks; while the outer office sat like a classroom awaiting the arrival of the Schools Inspector. Adjako could be relied upon to greet each member of the staff briefly and scan his desk; he was fussy about the look of an office, and liked it to show itself as shipshape, well populated and worth its wages. Edward was doing his best, but he sat hunched at his desk, and kept shaking his head over his work; he had a strong, interfering imagination.

Philip filled his pen, disinterred Adjako's desk photograph and moved his lucky piece aside to make room for the

replacement. Then, imagining Adjako's comments on the toy crane, he put it out of sight. If Adjako got an inkling of its purpose he would surely covet it. If he saw something he fancied, he expected to get it. Open-handed in certain ways himself, he liked to give himself small presents by admiring them on other people's persons and desks. This caused the objects to gravitate to him as propitiations or occasion-sweeteners. But not this one; it would never go that way, not on your Nelly.

He was tackling the Pending file when Donkwa reappeared. 'Now what?' said Philip shortly, fearing some further upsurge of emotion. He was not fit to cope with any more; damn it, he was hardly out of bed and felt exceedingly brittle. He needed all his strength to handle the rest of this day.

'Sir,' said Donkwa formally, 'I must speak to you on another matter. About the new road work – the one you sent the bulldozer to make. There is something you do not know about it.'

Philip was baffled, 'What's wrong with it?'

'It should not have been done. They do not like it.'

Philip flung down his pen, irate. This was crazy. 'Who doesn't? There aren't any crops. It's good solid ground. It's Mr Adjako's land.'

'The older men in the village, the elders,' said Donkwa, wrinkling his face in embarrassment. 'They are saying you cannot use it. They stopped me in the Land-Rover to ask me to tell you, so I came back.'

'The elders?' repeated Philip. 'What have they got to do with the road?'

'They call it sacred ground,' said Donkwa, grimacing. 'People never farm on it or pass over it. They believe that if they do, evil will come to them and the village.'

Then Philip realized. 'Like this business of not working across the river on Thursdays.' He brought out the word Donkwa would not speak. 'Juju palaver.'



'Ah!' said Donkwa, looking away. 'Myself, I cannot agree with them — I am a Baptist — but it is right you should know what they say. If Mr Adjako was here they would come personally.'

'So now I know,' said Philip. It was a blow. He couldn't have imagined anyone being against such a simple, harmless piece of work which was for everybody's good. 'No hope of making them see we need that road?'

'They would never agree. Obuta knows all about that, but he was not here. Or you did not tell him of your plan.'

'Not his business,' said Philip crisply, and could have said, 'Or yours.' But Donkwa meant well. No use taking it out on him; he wasn't enjoying this errand.

'I hope they will not humbug you,' said Donkwa surprisingly, on his way out.

Philip sat, left with this word. *Humbug?* They were always talking about humbugging. Gumming up the works, being awkward. Those spirit-ridden old gaffers of Manango sounded like experts, holding court under the trees, watching, clutching their power tightly in skeletal hands, mumbling their charms and imprecations. Old buzzards! Well he would not *be* humbugged. And squaring his shoulders he set to work, with one ear cocked for the sound of the Mercedes.

They came into the office, Adjako and Kazzal, with the bouncy step of men on a day out from town, refreshed by a change of scene. Smoothly decanted from the Mercedes they looked in fine shape, ready for the discussion. Adjako, as usual, did not shake hands; Kazzal did, with the straight strong arm and optimistic stance of veteran salesmanship and, not incidentally, old acquaintance.

'This is a pleasure to see you here, Philip,' declared Kazzal, who had not altered from former days except by acquiring a small, round, almost elegant paunch. His hair still looked as if it had been black-lacquered in ripples; his

face was the same: angular, glossy, dark-tanned, big-nosed. He always had had a touch of the Riviera about him; his looks suggested the easy life of *plages* with sun-umbrellas, café Pernods, ripe pomegranates, croupiers, and cedars of Lebanon. He managed the effect of handsomeness because he clearly admired himself, and smiled frequently; and wore excellent pastel clothes — today sand-coloured slacks of silky texture and a Continental sports shirt of a type sold in the boutiques of St Tropez. There was a packet of Gauloises in his breast pocket. And he always looked as if he would not be staying long; he sat lightly, with trousers hitched to preserve the crease. Philip remembered the ring he wore on one little finger; it was of Egyptian silver, set with an onyx. Incredible that this Kazzal had ever travelled steerage.

Adjako looked stout and solid beside him; his aura was as expensive, but today, by comparison, a trifle conservative. He was at this moment on his dignity, the Chairman of the Adjako Timber Company. Philip offered him the swivel chair behind the desk, but Adjako declined it. He plumped down alongside Kazzal opposite the desk, with his briefcase beside him, and said, looking important round the office at the filing cabinet, the air-conditioning unit, and the intercom box on the massive desk, 'Well, Mr Kazzal, this is Manango.'

'Very nice,' said Kazzal, gracefully offering Gauloises which Adjako declined on grounds of health, and Philip because the fever had left him without any taste for tobacco. 'You have a nice outfit here. Very profitable, I am sure. Philip — Mr Connor — I know is a man to get things moving. You are lucky to have found him, Mr Adjako.'

'Oh yes,' said Adjako, taking this compliment to himself. 'We are making an excellent production.'

'As you know, I have heard talk about it,' said Kazzal, omniscient behind his aromatic smoke-screen. His ancestors must have looked like this, in their rich-carpeted tents,

cross-legged, puffing at their hubble-bubbles.

Flattery, thought Philip, will get you nowhere with me, you conniving old sinner. You're wasting your time. He said, 'I didn't realize you were still here, Aly. Somebody said you'd left for South Africa.'

'Oh, I went, yes,' said Kazzal, 'but only on an extended business trip. I like this country. I am at home here. So much is happening. The possibilities since Independence are tremendous. This is the country of the future. One day all roads will lead to the new Africa. There is something in the air now. You can feel it, and I cannot describe it.'

Adjako, intently listening, nodded. Philip grimly thought: Dead right, old boy, there's something in the air now and I could describe it. All hell is brewing up.

'Now, this crane, Mr Connor,' said Adjako, 'We have discussed it very fully and I would like your opinion. Mr Kazzal has pictures and specifications; it is all here. He will answer any questions. Has Mr Obuta returned? He should be back from Echobe. We might bring him in later.'

Philip said that Obuta had not come back yet and did not mention any possibility of a delay due to some honest policeman spotting the lorry's expired licence. Anyway, add Obuta to this mixture and it *would* be a day.

'We will carry on, then,' stated Adjako, for whom time was money.

In the bungalow before lunch, while Kazzal was in the bathroom, Philip said to Adjako, 'I'm sorry. I've given my reasons. I've said what I think. As soon as I saw the pictures I knew it was quite unsuitable for our purpose. It wouldn't solve our log-lifting and stacking problems. I only wish it was the right type; I would agree immediately. I don't want the Company to spend money on something it can't use profitably.'

'It's cheap,' said Adjako, esconced in the middle of the green settee, the papers beside him.

'But of no use to us,' said Philip. 'It couldn't lift our heavier logs, and the boom is too short.'

Adjako shifted, irritably pouting within his beard. He lowered his voice. 'You do not quite understand, however. I have other business with Mr Kazzal which I need not go into with you. If I buy this crane it will help me in other matters. It would show confidence.'

'I'm sorry,' Philip repeated. 'You ask what I think. This crane is not what we need and it isn't worth a quarter of the price. It would be a sheer waste of money.'

'I can go ahead and buy it,' said Adjako. 'I may be obliged not to accept your advice.' He sounded greatly displeased, and sat there huffing and slightly breathless in the curve of the settee, which did not suit his anatomy.

Philip, with a weather eye out for Kazzal's return, took breath to pacify. He might have been too brusque. He might put his viewpoint more diplomatically. But Benedict was in the room, bringing the polished cruet to his carefully laid table; and Adjako made a patting, warning gesture for silence. Then Kazzal rejoined them, whereupon Adjako promptly rose, saying, 'I also will wash,' and trotted off in a hurry.

Kazzal wasted no time. He seemed unaware of Benedict's presence. 'You have some doubt which you have not, perhaps, wished to go into. There is something more than you have said?'

'I am sorry' — what a day it was for being sorry — 'but you must know I couldn't agree to buy it.' Hell, why not lay it on the line, scotch the whole discussion, stop the argument? 'I've told you precisely why. The crane is not the kind we need. And even if it was, your price is more than twice what it's worth, second-hand. I can't agree, Aly.'

'Pity!' said Kazzal, holding his glass in the hand decorated with the Egyptian onyx ring. 'It is a first-class crane. Mr Adjako is all for it. He will be disappointed.'

Philip's whisky burned, ineffective, in his gullet; it was

his second drink from the tray which Benedict brought to them, in superior steward fashion, with ice cubes in a bowl, and the ice tongs, everything done properly. Adjako took only soda-water; Kazzal pink gin. The two whiskies were a mistake. In this stupefying heat they were no help. Yet he must stand firm and protect the Company; he would never agree to Kazzal's crane.

Kazzal glanced at the door. They heard the distant woosh of plumbing. 'If you take it,' said Kazzal, 'there is five per cent for you. You understand me. Cash. It is a fair amount. We are business men, Mr Connor.'

Benedict, having gone away, was back in the doorway, signalling to Philip with a discreet finger movement. Some small problem in the kitchen. Philip nodded to Benedict, signifying that he would come in a moment.

Kazzal, in the line of this communication, misunderstanding the movement of assent, looked satisfied and expectant. His smile curled. So Kazzal must imagine he had been holding out for a percentage. That was just what he would imagine. Kazzal's life was all percentages, the parings from multiple transactions; and so must be the lives of most with whom he transacted.

'I *can't*,' said Philip with decision, and just could not be bothered to say 'sorry' again. 'I don't want any part of it — five per cent, fifty per cent. I just don't want it, and don't suggest it again!' And he went to the kitchen where Benedict was worried about the cheese and biscuits. Was the cheese enough? Philip said it would have to be; there wasn't any more.

During the meal the crane was banished; there was a pretence that they sat there together for pleasure. Kazzal tucked his napkin under his chin, but Adjako had no need to. His nourishment was a patent multi-vitamin powder spooned from a packet into a glass of water, and some conversation about his health. Kazzal helped himself to Benedict's attentively spaced offerings of soup, stuffed

avocado, curried lamb and rice, and then to caramel custard. Philip accepted minuscule token helpings. His health was not mentioned, except briefly. 'I had a small fever,' he admitted, prepared to forget it if possible.

'The new drugs for fever are very good,' said Adjako. 'They knock it out in no time.' His hand stole out to a dish of pale buttered and salted ground-nuts which he could not resist; and again. He pushed the dish away, but returned to it. 'I should not eat these, but they are a temptation in my way.'

'You know the definition of will-power,' said Philip, watching the kernels rapidly disappear into the bearded mouth and trying hard against great odds to be a jocular host. 'Will-power is what you need for stopping yourself from taking one more peanut.'

'What *I* need?' said Adjako. There was only one smooth kernel left in the dish and his hand was in mid-air towards it.

'No, I didn't mean that. It's just a way of describing will-power.' Conscious of a gaffe, Philip blamed the drinks on an empty stomach. He wouldn't try to be funny again.

Adjako did not choose to understand. Kazzal said, perhaps from personal experience, 'It is perfectly true. One more of anything at all can be too much. It can be like the straw for the camel's back.'

'Aren't you mixing up two ideas?' said Philip, fogged by heat, weakness and Adjako's eccentricities.

'What is this about the camel?' interrupted Adjako, sitting bored and restless in front of his empty, white-filmed glass.

'If you keep on loading up a camel with straw there comes a time when only *one* more straw will break its back,' Kazzal vivaciously explained, making loading gestures with his fork; then bringing his hands heavily down on the table so that the dishes clattered. 'Finish!'

'I see. A saying,' Adjako bleakly acknowledged, and took

the nut. He was like a child wanting to leave the table. He wriggled in his chair while Kazzal spooned up his caramel custard and accepted biscuits and the solitary piece of cheese.

When Kazzal went out to the Mercedes to get his cigars Adjako, putting down his *demi-tasse*, said, dismissing the entire meal-time interval, 'There is something else. There is not time now for us to discuss this fully, but I saw you have cut into the bush by the bad section of the road – I don't know why. I have had no chance to talk about it. You should have asked me – you should have telephoned before doing this. It is a very big error. We cannot have it. You must not use the new road.'

'Donkwa told me this morning,' said Philip. 'I'd no idea it was special ground. The road is so bad just there I saw it as a natural precaution. Otherwise when the rains start we'll be in a devil of a mess. It's only common sense. It's so easy to go round the bad bit I thought it would save a lot of Company time and expense.'

Adjako jerked his head crossly, not at this moment interested in imported common sense. 'No, it was a big mistake. They will feel very strongly – I know them. I will have to go personally and see the elders before I return today.'

'Couldn't I see them, to spare you the trouble? They must realize I had no intention of upsetting anybody. I just didn't know. You did say I should make my own decisions.'

'It is a matter of local customs,' said Adjako. 'These matters have nothing to do with running the business. You have taken too much upon yourself. I must see to it because it is my responsibility that you are here.'

It was a rebuke, delivered point blank, almost as if they were strangers; and it told Philip that he was a meddling outsider. Adjako's feeling about the crane shouldn't come into it, but probably did. The look and the voice proclaimed

a sharp drop in favour. So Adjako was wrathful; he was smouldering within; he had had this on his mind all morning, and fasting had not improved his general state.

Kazzal, poised and lively as ever, came in on their silence with his cigars and a fancy gilt gadget for cutting them. Adjako accepted a cigar and played with the gadget; it seemed to lighten his mood a little. 'Take it!' said Kazzal with airy generosity. 'Keep it; you are very welcome to it, my friend.'

Philip watched Adjako pocket this trifle. 'My friend', was it, then? He did not know if it sounded patronizing, or ingratiating, or what. Call a man 'my friend' in Africa, and it was sometimes a form of laughing reproach: people used it in arguments which were getting out of hand; seniors used it when admonishing subordinates: it was an unsubtle but constant expression for sugaring a variety of pills or bridging a gap of race, position or understanding. Dowo in any number of ways might have called Kifo 'my friend'. Philip wondered how Kazzal meant it.

Benedict, carefully serving coffee, kept his eyes down. Kazzal had not praised his meal; neither of the guests appeared to notice that he was anything more than a pair of disembodied hands. In their importance and impatience they spoke across him – except for Adjako's one brief awareness – as if he were invisible; they leaned past him as if he were furniture. Even Philip did this. But Benedict accepted it as correct; he was there, temporarily faceless and voiceless, to serve.

The Mercedes carried Adjako and Kazzal back to the office. Before following them Philip looked in on the kitchen where Benedict was washing up. Benedict, scraping plates, said glumly, 'The news today about Kifo ... I cannot keep from thinking about this thing. My mind is not for the work. In the village there has been a lot of palaver, and some people were fighting.'

'A bad, sad business,' said Philip. Yet neither Adjako nor

Kazzal had mentioned it; he had scarcely expected them to. They had enough on their platters without this: the crane and all the rest that went with it. Also they were, genuinely or from expediency, pro-Dowo; they would be.

'Somebody came,' said Benedict, remembering his duties. 'That chief came at chop time, but he say not to worry you, he will wait at the office. He left a "dash" — eggs, orange, pineapple.' He pointed to them; they were in a bucket under the table. 'He say to tell you after you finish chop.'

'Chief Wallula, you mean — the one who came before with the rooster?'

'The same.' Benedict shook his head, remembering the Chief's paper bag.

'Oh well ... ' Philip looked at the 'dash', which spoke for itself; Wallula must want to see Adjako to talk timber. It was marvellous how the bush telegraph operated, alerting the Chief to Adjako's presence in Manango. Fantastic the way news travelled between villages which looked so sleepy and isolated; but then the people were for ever walking, gossiping, drumming and forgathering in the market-places. The people weren't sleepy; they were all agog; they were their own system of communication, their own reporters, censors and commentators. Adjako, important to Manango, travelled; it was known where and probably why. Kifo died; they knew when and how. You could gag a newspaper but you couldn't stop people hearing and quietly and privately talking. Nothing, thank God, could nationalize the human voice and the human ear.

Or the human eye. 'I see Mr Obuta's car going up to the mill since about one hour,' Benedict added. 'He has come back from Echobe.'

Perhaps Benedict was making it clear that he was visible and three-dimensional again, not just a pair of anonymous serving hands.

Philip said, 'You did well with the lunch, Benedict. Very

well.'

'The cheese is finished,' said Benedict with regret. He did not like cheese himself, but knew it to be a luxury food in these high-prices makeshift days.

But the finishing of the cheese was the least of Philip's concerns. He left Benedict to whatever his thoughts might be as he bent over the sink; and turned his own back to the demanding prospect of a chancy, over-populated managerial office afternoon.

On his way out he stopped in the bedroom to collect a handkerchief from the drawer, and saw that Benedict must have resurrected one of the pillows from the spare bedroom; because there were two pillows on his bed now, and one of them was enveloped in the frilly pillow-case with 'Peace Be Onto You' embroidered across it.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

'So the upshot of it was,' said Philip to Marty, 'Adjako backed out. He didn't buy it. He took my advice in the end, but he was livid. What a day! Poor old Wallula didn't get a look in ...'

They were sitting on the club terrace, looking out past the old cannon at the so-called lawn and the turgid river. Though the terrace was shady, there was no movement of air under the sloping roof. The black lizards darted across the steps and nodded their bright orange saurian heads; creatures of the heat, like the humming-birds which hovered around the blossoms of the veranda vines, and the gorgeous commonplace butterflies which clung trembling to the veranda pillar.

The other terrace chairs were empty. Indoors a Saturday game of Horse Racing was in progress on the white-taped floor, with a caller rattling the dice and shouting the numbers: 'Number six, *four* paces – number three, *two*.' While the youngsters moved up the wooden hobby-horses or stood by the non-starters; and the gambling onlookers cheered on their choices. Horse Racing, like Bingo, was an institution, a habit, perhaps because no one could think of an alternative. There was always a willing caller, a social live-wire, rousting about, perspiring, doing the club donkey-work – but it was never Philip or Marty.

Marty lifted his glass. 'Cheers! I can imagine. It must've been a rum do. Well, I suppose Kazzal will just go and peddle his crane somewhere else; he'll find some mug to buy it. Quite right – you couldn't let Adjako in for that. Your nose is clean.'

Philip watched a humming-bird; it was like a tiny wheel of hot rainbow vibration. It was pleasant to be here, just sitting; he could say anything to Marty. 'No, it's not.

Quite apart from the crane, I'm in the doghouse. I diverted a bit of the bad section of road into what now turns out to be Juju bush. That upset Adjako.'

'You *did*?' said Marty. 'My poor friend, you perpetrated an abomination. You did indeed slip up.'

'The road *is* an abomination already,' said Philip, 'The only person who got any satisfaction out of the situation was Obuta. He was quite pleased when he got back from his piano-collecting in Echobe and found what I'd done – and Adjako so riled.'

'Pleased?' said Marty. 'How could he be so pleased?'

'Because he hates my guts,' said Philip. 'He really does. He's a jealous type. It's as plain as daylight he can't stand Europeans. Oh, he's quite polite. He doesn't actually say anything. But he won't come to the bungalow – absolutely won't fraternize, though I've asked him over often enough. He's a funny character, broody. I think I get on perfectly well with the rest of them; there's no resentment; they know I'm trying to do a job, and it's all for their own good.'

Marty prodded the air with a wise forefinger. 'That's just it. From what you say, Obuta thinks it should be *his* job. You're standing in his light. He'd feel the same if you were an African; there's always this jockeying for position. No holds barred. It's a competitive country.' Marty drained his glass and called the steward for replenishment. 'Don't worry too much about Obuta. If you're not careful, things get on top of you in bush. Not enough distractions; you're on the job the whole time, aren't you? No outlet – no cinemas or dance halls or light relief. Or female company ... ? You don't sound properly organized.'

'In Manango ...' Philip began cautiously but the steward was there. It was Marty's round, and Marty was fishing in his shorts for coins, saying petulantly, 'I've got a damned great hole in this pocket ... my boy never mends anything.'

Philip helped out. His own pockets were mended; his clothes at least were organized. 'It's a bit hot out here,' said

Marty. 'Let's make a move. They've finished the Horses.'

They took their drinks inside, blinking and re-focusing on the room, which, after the wide white river glare, looked smokily tenebrous and crowded. An arm shot up from one of the farther tables, waving an invitation; Marty never moved far in the club without one. To Philip Marty said, 'We'll just stop by a few minutes, all right? Help show the flag, shall we?'

There was a reshuffle of chairs. They sat down. 'Philip Connor from Manango,' said Marty in a general way, as if giving a password, and followed with the other names. There were five faces, all, oddly enough, white, all Britons. Two women: Mrs Carter and Mrs Stone, one young and fair, probably new, a new wife; the other middle-aged and smartly grey with accomplished make-up. One wore lime green, the other pale blue. With their white trimmings and pink manicures, their snowy handbags and bare shoulders, they gave a coolness to the table, offsetting flushed, in-temperate masculinity. Young Carter was an earnest-looking junior, Stone an old hand, well-weathered and soldierly. The other man, Banks, was a tropical Scot, all eyebrows and moustache. It was their Britishness which threaded them together, like a circlet of pale beads; the room's only all-white group.

The six wooden hobby-horses were back in their stall behind the piano where someone was playing club medleys with a lot of left-hand vamping, pedal pressure and pauses for recollection. The Horse Race caller was sitting with his well-deserved pint at the secretary's table, helping to sort out the Saturday-night dance tickets. The stewards circulated among the tables, setting down the dishes of ground-nuts and potato crisps, clearing the empty glasses, taking orders for drinks and sandwiches. There was the usual gregarious Saturday beehive buzz, the tinkle of ice, the sudden burst of laughter, and the intermittent polite applause for the piano player who would have played without it.

They sat, the British circle, skimming a conversational surface; the two couples were almost ready to go. (It was Banks, the bachelor, who had waved Marty and Philip in.) The ladies rose, the men with them. 'We'll hope to see you next Saturday,' said Mrs Stone to Philip. 'I don't suppose you're able to get in during the week.'

'No, he never does. He's a proper bushman, old Phil is,' said Marty.

'Well, we'll see *you* before then, Mr Jones,' said Carter. 'Care to join us on Bingo Night — Wednesday?'

'I would indeed,' said Marty gratefully, his eye dwelling on the new young blonde Mrs Carter.

'Of course you would,' said Banks when they had gone, 'but you won't get anywhere, I can tell you that right now. Out of bounds, that one.'

'She looks like a peppermint cream,' said Marty. 'Lovely.'

Banks gave a heartless laugh, and licked the beer froth from his shaggy moustache. 'I thought you went for chocolate eclairs. Who was she — that piece I saw you snogging with at the hotel last week?'

'Which "she"?' Marty inquired, puffing himself out a little.

'That big girl. Black Venus type. I said to myself, Oho! I said.'

'You're dead right about the Oho! my boy,' said Marty. 'It was quite an evening, that one was.'

'All Marty's girls', said Philip, 'look like chocolate eclairs. I never could tell one from another.'

'Well, the *cost* varies,' Marty confided. 'Awful high prices now. Terrible the way everything's going up.'

'It is, it is,' said Banks ruefully. 'I'd hate to work out the price of my list.' He brought a little book from his breast pocket and bent with serious eyes over an open page.

'Women?' said Philip, who had only been half attending.

'What else?' chided Marty. 'Banks is a very thorough sort of chap, a true researcher. He's making a representative

collection.'

Banks handed over his book, and there they were, meticulously tabulated: not names, but districts and tribes. Against most of them there was a triumphant tick.

'You don't say,' said Philip, examining this tidiness. 'You've only got to find three more, then.'

Banks pocketed his evidence. 'I will then have slept with a girl from every tribe in the country. How's that for a survey?'

'Remarkable,' said Philip, contemplating the unremarkable-looking Banks. 'You'd make a first-class tally clerk.'

'Och aye,' said Banks modestly. 'You could call it a sort of hobby ...' He pushed back his chair. 'I'm off now, I'm away to a sleep.'

'How do you mean?' said Marty.

'A nap, you fool,' said Banks, 'an ordinary Saturday shut-eye.'

'You wouldn't think it, would you?' marvelled Marty, when he had gone. 'He's such a quiet chap. *You're* a bit quiet today. You all right?'

'I had a touch of fever in the week. It leaves you a bit off.'

'You're not still mulling over that chap Obuta?'

'Not exactly. It's the whole thing,' said Philip. 'A sort of patch. One gets patches.'

'About Obuta,' Marty persisted. 'He could have some bee in his bonnet – something from before your time. He might have had some raw deal from a white man. We did a power of good in the old days but some of us were shockers – I guess some of us still are.'

'They can be shockers themselves,' said Philip. 'Look at what Dowo did to his buddy Kifo. You can't beat that for a raw deal. No one can be harder on an African than another African.'

'Ah yes,' said Marty, 'but what happens inside a family is for the family to sort out. When we were top-dogs we were always *separate* ...'

'Don't keep on saying "we" like that,' said Philip. 'You and I – we never did any harm to any African: we never threw our weight around. We've always got on well ...'

'But we've inherited a situation,' Marty persevered. 'We get the odd kick in the teeth but we haven't got anything personal to be bitter about; we never were humiliated. Some of them were – especially the bright ones. I remember one day thinking what one junior African clerk might be feeling when he had to sit outside under a back-yard tree, waiting for an answer to a message he'd brought. A white bungalow, you know, a curry session – everybody enjoying themselves with food and drink and party tricks. This young fellow, educated chap – he might have been a lad like your Obuta was – just sat out there for I don't know how long. Even after he reminded the steward, and the steward reminded the master of the house, he still had to wait for hours, till the party ended. If a thing like that happened to me just once I'd never forget it. Also I recall – not so long ago, either – being in a car with somebody's wife when she was driving. The car stalled. Some Africans were walking along the road and she just got out and said to them, "Come on you, push! Get behind there and push!" Not so much as a please or thank you, or even a smile. These blokes put their shoulders down and got the car going – they thought they had to. Well, one of *those* might be like your Obuta. Something still seething underneath; and nothing *you* ever do will make any difference.'

'I know all about that,' said Philip. 'The details of Imperialism. All the little pinpricks.'

'Pinpricks in the same place,' said Marty. 'Very inflammatory eventually. You're right – a whole lot of little things: tone of voice, taking the micky, unnecessary pidgen ... all that. No matter how many good Colonials there were, it's the other kind who're remembered. That's quite apart from the old ancestral memories.'

'You believe in ancestral memory?'



'I do. Absolutely. I reckon it's at the bottom of everything — batted down or bursting out — the slave palaver. Can you imagine what it was like for those blokes, half dead with fear and thirst and misery? Shackled together, men and women and kids. Did you ever really think about it? Human freight, shipped abroad batted under the holds, in thousands. That takes a lot of forgetting. Wherever they are they don't forget how they got there. Their descendants don't. Race-hate goes a long way back, and it can reach out a long way ahead.'

'The slaves, though — somebody *sold* them. Their own people, the chiefs. Mostly chiefs from other tribes, but still their own kind.'

'I told you,' said Marty, 'what the chiefs did was in the family. So were all the other things they did to each other that we rescued them from. What the assorted whites did, missioning, advising, exploiting, teaching — all that — was different. It'll be donkey's years before it's sorted out. We'll need another planet for it, I reckon. We'll need to start again somewhere neutral.'

Philip pondered. 'I wonder if Adjako suffers from ancestral memory at all.'

'I imagine', said Marty, 'that he might have one of those chiefs in his background. It's a big country. I got a bit carried away. You know, they weren't *all* slaves by a long shot.'

Philip left the club at three o'clock; he'd had enough of it; he had sufficiently charged his social batteries for the week ahead, and done himself some good by talking to Marty. Now it was time to get back. Benedict said there would be some rain, maybe tonight; there was that extra claustrophobic tension in the heat now. The parched palm trees drooped their fronds; the purple bougainvillea looked desiccated; dust on the roads and bushes lay unstirred by any breeze; the houses were shuttered; the rooftop vultures

sat like posses of derelict sun-drunk, hung-over vigilantes.

He drove through the heat, past the Graveyard, taking the road which led to the petrol station, near to where the yam sellers had their pitch. He needed yams; he had to economize somewhere, Who wanted imported potatoes at forty petis — four shillings — a pound? You couldn't even afford a headache, with aspirins at five shillings a small bottle. The newest tax had rocketed store prices. Some people must have known about that new levy beforehand: there had been such a run on the shops as to sweep some of the shelves bare; others were decorated sparsely with bottled peaches from Belgrade, tins of rice pudding and token packets of Omo. The Joy and Peace Bar proprietor, however, was enjoying life, and the floor behind his counter that morning was shoulder-high in cartons. Though the *Despatch* had proclaimed that tinned milk was to be sold only to hospitals, clinics and maternity homes, the Joy and Peace provided not only milk, but fat tins of cream and honey, under cover of the bar gramophone whose current swinging ditty was one of the new Party songs. Philip hadn't bought any milk; there were limits.

Approaching a main crossroads, he spotted a pale Mercedes, going fast, cutting across his way. He slowed to a crawl, not wanting to be recognized. The Mercedes might be Adjako's. He was in no frame of mind to chat with Adjako, not just now; he needed notice of Adjako. Crossing the junction cautiously he confirmed his surmise. Through the rear window of the big car he could discern the heads of the two men, profiles (you'd know those two profiles anywhere — that nose and that beard) turned towards one another: Kazzal and Adjako. Heading where — who could tell? Talking about what — who could guess? But still together, linked by something. Not the crane for Manango, that was out. But one thing was sure: they weren't just joy-riding.

It was none of his business where they went or how

Adjako spent his Saturday afternoons, but he wished he hadn't seen the car and been reminded of Kazzal's persistence and Adjako's appetite for adventure. He'd had a funny hunch, ever since Marty mentioned seeing the pair at dinner, that Kazzal was going to jeopardize the mill. He'd been afraid of him at the outset, and still was – not personally, not by a long chalk, he could handle him personally – but as if Kazzal carried some infection that Adjako might catch and pass on to the Company and the mill which was his, Philip's, baby. He was its nurse and protector. It needed protection.

Or – he tried to be rational – all this conjecture and concern was just the heat, and the way he felt after fever: vulnerable in his ordinary, fast-aging car with its chassis in poor shape now because of the road, plodding with the hard-won groceries back to Manango while the chauffeured Mercedes flashed along to some other more glamorous and fateful destination. It was because there were those *two*, comfortably lolling in the back seat; he was but one man alone on the empty unreeling road; he felt like the odd man out.

The forecourt of the petrol station was as usual crowded with travellers from the refuelling buses. As usual the food hawkers circulated with their cages of bread and eggs and fritters; the drivers stood apart; the bonneted infants were suckled; gossip and argument filled the air; and the women hitched and fluttered their wraps. The same little girl came to the car window with her tray of chilli peppers; they might have been the same perfectly piled chillis she offered on that first day when he stopped here with Adjako. But the tall white-robed yam-sellers knew him now as a regular customer. They raised their long lean arms in greeting as they advanced with glad smiles in anticipation of the white man's quip or sally. He always amused them; they were readily amused, and often thought he was being funny when he was not.

The yams lay scrupulously piled as before, like miniature logs, each man to his pile; and the price had gone up. The lowest haggling sum was higher today. 'True,' avowed the vendor, swooping down with the wide white sleeves billowing like wings, to help choose six good yams. 'Everything cost. We poor men suffer too much.' And to demonstrate pangs of hunger he rubbed that approximate part of his robe which covered his belly.

'Yams just grow in the ground,' protested Philip. 'The ground doesn't cost any more, my friend.'

'For *bury* a man the ground cost more now,' chaffed the vendor. 'If it cost more to die, it cost plenty more to live.'

On this merry note Philip left the yam pitch. Farther along, he stopped to drink from his water flask and wipe dry his sweaty palms which were slipping on the wheel. The narrow road, steeply hedged by forest, was a grey funnel for the heat. He felt as small as Gulliver under the trees. There was no stirring of leaf or branch or bird. It was like a spell, a brooding over all. Everything was waiting for rain.

He got out to stretch his legs and almost at once felt a tickle and pricking of ants up his shin inside his trouser legs. The everlasting multitudinous ants: ants in the sugar basin or uncovered water glass; ants thickly afloat in the tins of kerosene where the kitchen table-legs stood; ants invading the bread-bin and wash-basin; driver ants, tailor ants, soldier ants, sugar ants, and now ants in his pants.

He danced around, slapping himself hard; and routed them. Back in the car, reaching into the glove compartment for cigarettes and matches, he felt a prick of conscience; Helen's letter had lain there, along with the ordinary post, unopened since morning. She wrote faithfully, and he not often. His intervals between writing were lengthening as the tour went on. He must do better.

He opened the envelope with the Croydon postmark; there was an illustrated newspaper clipping tucked into the flimsy airmail pages, and his mind registered: Kifo. But first,

out of a brotherly politeness maintained even at this distance, he read the letter. It was chiefly domestic but not without drama. Harold's shop had been burgled, a shock and a mess and a great worry, though fortunately Harold hadn't been there; it had happened after hours. So it could have been worse. A jeweller friend of theirs had been burgled, coshed, and appeared on television ... Helen's daily help had left, gone to better money in a frozen-chicken factory ('factory?' – yes, 'factory') and there was a lot of 'flu about ... She had, probably far too early, but to be certain, posted his Christmas present: books, because of the heavy duty he'd have to pay on other things she'd like to send. And now she enclosed a cutting she had spotted in the morning paper ...

He read the clipping, a piece written by 'Our Own Correspondent' newly returned to London. It was headed 'I Gave All ...' One group picture was of Kifo (white-circled by the Art Editor) with Dowo and other personages on a limelit Independence Celebration platform; the group in their togas stood with arms outstretched, like the winners of a Roman chariot race, acknowledging the joyful plaudits of the crowd. Dowo's hand was on Kifo's shoulder.

The other picture was of a jail: an old coastal fortress near Echobe, with gaunt ramparts and the sea frothing at its base. After many years it had been modernized; it was an economy to renovate this natural historic stronghold. Here political detainees were taken.

'Our Own Correspondent' told the facts and added something more: that Kifo, before taking his life, had managed to smuggle out a message, a frail, final scrawl which said: 'Our Party motto is Give All to Gain All. I have given all to gain nothing.'

The fortress jail. Philip remembered going over the place – it must be six years ago – one clear gold Sunday morning when he had a spare hour, passing through. There was an old custodian to show occasional visitors around; he

scarcely spoke pidgen even; he merely kept the keys. There was a cobbled courtyard, and grilles and banisters of charmingly wrought and patterned ironwork; there were narrow galleries, and upward-climbing stone steps into turreted look-outs; it all looked at first a bit like a romantic film set. From the whitewashed ramparts you looked out, with the old cannons, upon the flashing sea beyond the white-frilled rocks. Descending, you peered through the grilles, spaced along the galleries, into the cramped, damp-sweating, dark stone cells where the captives in their chains had been kennelled. In the courtyard again you looked up at the galleries where the slavers' men with whips and guns had patrolled and watched. Much farther down you did not go, because the steps were slippery, smooth-worn and dangerous, but with the light from the custodian's torch you saw where they led: steeply down to the vast dripping cavern whose floor was black water, with one end open, like a cave, to the sucking sea; and from this place the boat-loads of human cargo were sent out to the waiting ships.

Despite the brightness of the salty air above, the whole place had a curious ancient odour. It was not at first apparent; it grew about you as you walked, and stood and looked. It was there; you didn't just imagine it. Even the pure, hot, abrasive sea winds of three hundred years and more had not scoured the haunting smell away; perhaps never would.

But that the old Independence champion, Kifo, should die in this resurrected slave-hole: how strange that was. With modern African jailors in natty peaked caps and ball-point pens in their pockets; and the *Despatch* in the Head Warder's office; and the Party flag proudly flapping in the abundant breeze high above: the flag that the ardent freedom-fighter Kifo had himself helped to raise; how very strange it was.

Thoughtful, he folded up the clipping. Marty, holding forth about white folly and inhumanity, must have forgotten

where Kifo had been imprisoned. Though he'd probably still maintain that it made no difference. Because the Kifo business had happened, and the Dowo regime still was happening, within the African family.

Over the bad road the clouds were gathering, tall and strangely shaped, like swollen ragged Furies; and under them there spread the before-the-storm effulgence, a theatrical luminosity which deepened all colour, and separated all the minutiae of flower and leaf, branch and stone; and by its intensity made all naturalness unnatural. He was tempted to use the bulldozed virgin track; he began to turn the wheels off the road into it, but straightened again. There had been enough palaver about it and somebody, somehow, would know. The ground was taboo. No point in putting the elders' backs up further; no point in making an abomination more abominable in the eyes of the village gaffers. So he bumped and crawled over the old road once more, admitting defeat from a quarter he could never have expected. Not that he had ever expected defeat anywhere.

He was glad to get back to the bungalow, to find Comfort there at the front-room table calmly sewing, finishing what looked like Benedict's new aprons. She greeted him demurely. Benedict made no comment on her presence; he unloaded the car and brought the tea tray. Comfort folded up her work, stood up and said, 'I will go.'

'Didn't Benedict give you a glass of squash or something?' Philip inquired. 'Like some tea?'

'I like tea,' said Comfort, sitting down again. Philip called for another cup which the boy swiftly brought. (He had made some macaroons this time; not bad either. Unlike the 'little cakes' these were meant to be flat.) Benedict returned to the kitchen. Comfort sipped her tea and answered Philip's questions. She rarely asked any; on ordinary occasions she did not promote conversation, or appear to think that

silence between two people, even when they were drinking tea, must at all costs be filled.

Philip said, 'I haven't paid you anything yet for the extra work. Would you like some of the money now?'

She told him the price, and he put the money down. It looked a small sum. These days the dibis and peti pieces had a shrunken look; you needed a lot to make an effect. Either to help her if she were in need of money or to give a show of generosity, he added a note and a few more coins, at which she smiled, not protesting. But she was not avid; she had not the trader's instinct, and the price she had stated was fair. The incidental donation was not something peculiar to Philip or this occasion, but part of the way of the country, the graceful or graceless 'dash' habit. You gave (there was the embroidered pillow-case freely, proudly given) and you received; it generally evened out.

He was afraid she might go then. She did not wish for any more tea. She had left her cup a quarter full, and part of her macaroon guiltily hidden in her saucer. Philip said, 'Don't go yet. I never have a chance to talk to you ...'

She waited. He cast about for something to say: anything. 'Benedict says your fiancé is in England. Does he like the work?'

'He likes it,' said Comfort offhandedly. 'He is in Birm — somewhere.'

'Birmingham,' said Philip.

'That is the town. He will come back in four months' time, I think.'

'You *think*? Don't you know?'

She looked away. Always questions. 'He likes it too much. He never write to me now.'

That was news, this non-writing. It sounded as if this engagement, or whatever it was, had reached a low ebb. Surprisingly and with spirit Comfort added, 'I don't care.'

'Oh well, then, that's all right.' But it was odd that she didn't mind.

Comfort picked up her needle again; sewing made talking easier. She skilfully threaded her needle. Her eyes, when she looked up, were as lustrous as jet, and slightly on guard; there were points of light on her smooth forehead, small broad nose and wide cheek-bones. She was a serious dark-brown girl with small gold earrings, a slim neck and exquisite collar-bones; not a deliberate flirt or a practised, voluptuous exciter; not a chocolate éclair. Philip said, determined to push the conversation along, 'He's probably very busy.'

'He is getting on well. Somebody told me', said Comfort, bringing her gaze back to her work, 'that he has another girl now.'

'In Birmingham?' He probably had at that; it happened everywhere. The lonely male far from his homeland. Well, think of *Banks*, for instance ...

'A white girl,' said Comfort, sewing steadily. 'It was a surprise for me.'

He thought it must have been — or that she'd got the word wildly wrong. 'Still ... you don't mind too much.' There was some satisfaction in that.

'At all,' said Comfort. 'I don't want to see him any more. I will tell him when he come back here.'

The room had abruptly darkened to a false premature dusk. Something banged loudly somewhere. Benedict was running about in the back of the house, fastening windows, closing doors. The wind swept in, no breeze but a great billowing force of air, ballooning and snapping the new curtains, flapping the wall calendar, filling the room with disturbance. Philip jumped up to close the glass louvres. Comfort hastened from her chair to help him. Staccato voices sounded in the street where people were running. The wind flailed the bungalow. The sky cracked into mauve brilliance. There was a noise of distant thunder. Philip looked out from the veranda at the fretted, wind-lashed palms against the steely sky, and saw that the hill behind the mill was already blotted out by the wavering grey veils

of the approaching deluge.

Benedict appeared beside him to say 'Rain' with satisfaction. Then came a branched and trembling flash followed by a resounding crash immediately overhead. And again. It was like a bombardment or a judgment. It was — it always would be — an event: an enormous fit of climatic prima donna temperament on a colossal stage, with everything fleeing, hiding, bending and curtseying before it.

The wind slackened. Heavy drops pocked the dusty garden path and rattled on the roof. Their noise became a violence. No longer was this merely rain but an onslaught, a grey hissing wall.

'Plenty rain,' observed Benedict, looking out at the down-pour which was already swilling the veranda. He had precisely forecast it. They had all — Benedict, Philip and Comfort — known it was coming.

Philip gave a fleeting thought to the mill and the road: trouble ahead, perhaps, but nothing to be done about that, not any of it now. The storm was in charge and the rain would go on all night. He looked at Comfort; she couldn't go home in this; all three of them knew it. He said to Comfort, 'You cannot go in this rain.'

She considered, though it was obvious. 'I cannot go yet.'

'This is your night off,' Philip reminded Benedict, though it seemed unlikely now that he would try to leave his own room to go visiting in the village.

Benedict needed no reminding. Saturday instead of Wednesday had become his off-night. On Saturday, the larder freshly provisioned, Philip liked to cook his own meal; he liked to have the kitchen to himself.

'Everything all right before you go?' Philip continued his customary recital. 'Fowls O.K.? Lamps filled? Water on?'

'Everything is all right,' assured Benedict, picking up the tray. 'Good night, sah.' He did not say 'good night' to Comfort, or she to him.

Philip switched on the light. Comfort went on sewing.

They heard the back door close firmly; Benedict had gone to his own quarters. At his own desk Philip glanced through his post and tucked Helen's letter into the corner of his blotter; he would write tomorrow. Muller's snapshot was still there; he could never quite bring himself to throw it away.

There was a tap on the veranda door which, because of the rain, Benedict had closed. Philip opened it to see the night watchman heavily swathed, tall, stoic and bony, ready for duty, formally announcing his arrival. He looked, on this night, like a dripping Neptune; he needed only a white beard, and a trident in place of his spear.

'Ah, massa,' said the nocturnal old man heartily. The storm was nothing to him. Nor was Comfort's unusual presence there in his direct line of vision. Neither of them altered his manner, or his and Philip's evening dialogue.

'Good evening, my friend.'

'Ah-hahn!' responded the nightwatch with his customary rapprochement, while behind him the rain poured down from the black sky and spurted upwards from the steps. He would camp down inside the garage; he could always find a sheltered corner where, often enough, he slept; most night watchmen slept.

When he had gone Philip and Comfort sat for a time, separately occupied, or pretending occupation, while the rain swirled and gurgled beyond the closed louvres and the fastened door. The great heat had vanished; there was now a spreading coolness, like the damp coolness after a burning fever. 'Are you feeling cold?' said Philip into the silence. He thought he had seen Comfort shiver.

He went to find his only sweater which had lain all this time unused at the back of the wardrobe shelf; and brought it to her. She watched him approaching. He put the sweater around her and she put her arms gratefully into the sleeves.

'Now then,' said Philip looking down at her. 'You still can't go home, can you?'

'It is not very far. I could run,' said Comfort.

'Don't run,' said Philip. 'I like you to be here: if you like to stay.'

'I like it,' said Comfort earnestly. 'I like it too much.'

'Fine! Well, then ...' They ought to be hungry; it was chop time. 'I'm going to the kitchen to cook something, get some chop for us. Will you help me?'

'Yes.' The aprons were finished. She put one over the sweater, and the effect, pockets and all, was quaint. She knew it was; she laughed at herself, but left it so.

In the kitchen Philip made preparations, cut bread, put dishes on a tray. 'You can carry that in.' The steak transferred by Benedict from the ice chest to the fridge was, as usual, hard-frozen. He had entirely and remarkably forgotten to bring it out. He set it to thaw under the grill. The rain was beating against the tight-fastened window shutter, slopping and splashing in the yard outside. The grey kitchen was like a cave; it contained nothing but simple, functional objects; it was a far less complicated place than the big front room.

Comfort returned with her empty tray from the front room and stood beside him. 'I can cook,' she said, 'if you give me the things.'

'What things?'

She picked up the barbecue skewers. 'Onions. Pepper. Tomato sauce.' He sat on the kitchen stool and watched while she cut the meat into small pieces and scattered red pepper thickly on it. 'Hey,' he said, 'that's too much.'

'Plenty pepper is good,' said Comfort, chopping onions vigorously. She tipped them on to a plate with the tomato sauce and rolled the meat in the mixture; then she ran the skewers through. 'You will like it.' She hesitated, suddenly at a loss. 'But I cook for charcoal, not this fashion.'

'Oh, I'll do it. It's easy. I'll just put them under the grill ...'

But he didn't. Instead he took her by one hand while

with the other he firmly turned off the gas. His movement was neither hesitant nor greedy, but as if inevitable and expected.

And so it proved. Comfort, whose conversation was chiefly answers, looked down on their clasped hands as if this was, as indeed it was, the ultimate question, the one to which all the others had led them. And her silent response was easy and warm and sweetly obedient. She followed where he led, out of the kitchen; and in the bedroom with willing simplicity dropped away the apron, the sweater, the patterned blouse and skirt; nor was she in any way shy, for this was not conversation.

Later, however, with her head on her own frilled, embroidered pillow, she ventured, dimpling, in a moment of pause, 'I love you.' It was not necessary to talk, but she said it. The words, very soft, were an extra, like a 'dash'.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

'It is a terrible thing,' said Donkwa. 'I don't know how it could happen.'

Philip had been waiting for him to get back from Yamina Hospital. The night was late, almost eleven; shock and tiredness had cast a greyness over him. The accident happened at half past four when the tipper-lorry, returning to the mill, was struck by a falling tree limb. The branch had snapped and descended on three of the men riding nearest the cab on the back of the open vehicle. Two men were badly hurt; one was dead. The driver was that day new to the lorry; he was the one with the silver-painted sun helmet, the driver of the bulldozer on the new stretch of road. In the forest he had been working as usual with his Caterpillar, towing and winching out logs, but since the tipper-driver felt ill, he took his place in the cab for the journey back to the mill. Of the crew riding on the back of the tipper it was a Manango man who had been killed; the other two, the injured ones, were also Manango men, not his own gang of cheerful strangers, the ones who sang their own songs and liked to work together in their own fashion.

Donkwa had been riding in the cab with the driver; the impact was heavy. The cab roof was deeply dented. The crew of the other lorry coming behind saw it happen; they told their story to Philip: how the dead limb came down from high above like a club on the lorry, trapping the men underneath. 'Like a thunderbolt,' said Donkwa. 'We have never had this before.'

It was a tragic coincidence: that the dry storm-shattered limb should have fallen just then — neither seconds before nor seconds after — at that moment when the mud-splashed, slow-going vehicle was underneath. Though if the moment had been even briefly delayed, the second lorry would have

been struck. Had they all made this passage five minutes earlier – had they not been forced to stop to clear away a blown-down sapling from their path – all would have been safe. Other accidents had happened before: when a tree was felled badly, a log rolled, or a tractor cable snapped, or a man was hurt by axe or saw – but never anything like this: as in an ambush, straight from above, out of the forest ceiling, without a wind.

Nor even, at that time, rain. The afternoon was bright. After the big storm the rains were settling to their pattern, with intervals of rainbow mist, or clear sun and pure white clouds over the brown puddles and steaming rippled earth. The blow had fallen in bright sunlight. But now on this dark night there was rain again: the susurrant night rain, falling calm and peaceful. Donkwa's face glistened, either with rain or tears.

'Come in. Sit down,' said Philip. 'You look done in.' He poured schnapps neat into a glass, and offered it. 'Are you sure the other two men will be all right?'

Donkwa, his sodden shoes leaving a trail across the carpet, sat down on the edge of a chair and took the glass. His hand was shaking. 'Broken bones. Two broken arms. The other, nobody could save him. It was his head ...' Donkwa put one hand to his stomach; he had been sick earlier; he still looked sick.

'Their wives, Donkwa?'

'I have been to them. They will go to the hospital tomorrow. The other is with her people.'

'A bad day,' said Philip. The mill had been flooded; the road was a morass and the telephone mute. Yet the day, until the news of the accident, had not been wholly bad. The accounts were in better shape; the morning session with Bantio and the ledgers confirmed optimism. No claims after the arrivals of deliveries in the U.K. and Germany; everybody well satisfied, payments in and new orders coming forward. Which should cheer Adjako out of his sulks.

Fulfilled letters of credit were to him like lollipops to a peevish child.

But this blow in the woods had shattered the day. At the mill, when Donkwa's second lorry came in just before closing time with the news that Donkwa had taken the men straight to hospital (with other labourers to cushion and support them on the long jolting journey to Yamina), the crew stood talking morosely afterwards in the yard. They were still there after the gong sounded; they made their way slowly to the gate where other workers were gathered around Obuta who had received the news grimly, and muttered afterwards, and strode out to be in the centre of the aftermath in the yard. He was a man of importance in the village, and at a time like this it was to Obuta that the workers turned for explanation or reassurance in their own tongue.

Daniel, Amos, Bantio and Joseph departed silently and quickly from the office, but Edward lingered. He waited until everyone had gone; then came to stand at Philip's desk. 'They are much troubled,' he said. 'They fear all have been killed. There are many children to be fatherless. The women in the village ...'

'I have said', Philip told him, 'that if there is anything I can do to help, I will do it. They know Donkwa will bring back news from the hospital tonight. He will see the wives. The men may not be too badly hurt. It is too soon for us to know.'

'The lorry men are sure one man cannot live,' said Edward, whose face was in dark shadow. He was standing with his back to the aqueous late-afternoon light. 'They say it is because of the new road. They said before that it was a bad thing – that only bad will come. So many people in the village were saying it.'

'Now look!' Philip put down his pen carefully and faced Edward squarely. 'This is all absolute nonsense. The accident didn't happen anywhere near the road – it's got nothing



whatever to do with it.'

'They have been waiting for something to happen,' said Edward. 'Now they say it has happened. They are superstitious people, some of them.'

'We've never even *used* the new road,' said Philip hotly. 'I see it was a mistake. I respect their feelings about these things. I'd never have taken in the bulldozer if I'd known. Nobody ever mentioned it was Juju ground. The crew that day didn't know. If they'd known, they'd have told me.' He subsided. All this had been thoroughly gone over before with Adjako; and Adjako was supposed to have explained it to the elders, for the benefit of the village.

'They knew something would happen,' Edward repeated, 'but they could not tell what it would be or when.'

There was nothing more to be said about it then; no point in arguing, not with Edward who, as usual, was only interpreting, keeping him in touch, telling him for his own good. He might have argued that if anyone is determined to link one event with another it is often possible to find a bridge; or that if you are waiting for misfortune you needn't wait long; misfortune is common enough. Or even that men who do rough work are prone to accident, and that a storm-littered, branch-broken forest is a naturally hazardous place.

All this, and more, he might have said. It was in his mind as Donkwa sat there in the bungalow, weary in his work-clothes which had other stains on them, not only mud. It was Donkwa who had reported the village elders' anger about the new track. But Donkwa did not speak about that palaver now; he was full of the recent hours' happenings: the ride to the hospital and to Mr Adjako's flat, to tell him; the damage to the lorry cab, the grief of the bereaved wife — and back to the happening, the moment of stunning crackling violence when the great branch fell.

But Philip could not forget how seriously Edward had spoken. 'I cannot understand why the village has been say-

ing — not to me, but I heard about this talk — that the accident happened because we disturbed the Juju ground. To me this is just unbelievable.'

Donkwa was slumped, knees apart, worn out. He said slowly, 'Yes, it is true. Many of them believe it. My own crews were saying this same thing.'

'But it won't make big trouble, it couldn't, surely.'

'I think they will forget it. In time. Unless something else happens.' Donkwa's gaze was heavy; he sounded unsure.

'But things are always happening. There's bound to be something.'

'The elders will tell them. They will believe the elders,' said Donkwa. 'There has been some sickness in the village, but no one has spoken. Not as yet. It is a sickness among the children.'

'Children do get illnesses,' said Philip. 'This is the time they do, when the rains begin. It always happens. It's nothing unusual.'

'I agree with you,' said Donkwa, raising a tired pacific hand. 'As you know, I am a Baptist. This is superstition, the way they feel; it is wrong, but they don't know any better and they cannot help it.'

'I wonder ...' Philip deliberated, rubbing his chin. 'I don't like it. Suppose I call a meeting of the whole village at the mill. I could talk to them. This thing needs to be talked about properly, in the open.'

Donkwa looked alarmed and shook his head vehemently. 'Never do that. It would only ...' he circled his finger, indicating confusion.

'Because I'm an outsider, you mean? White? None of my business?'

Donkwa did not deny it. He was silent.

Philip appealed to him. 'Supposing you did it. Or somebody else from the mill.'

'Not I,' said Donkwa. 'It would not help at all.'

'Or Obuta ... No, not Obuta.' Though it ought to be

Obuta, the big man in the village: Adjako's trusted henchman. He remembered the day of the Adjako-Kazzal visit, and Obuta's behaviour that afternoon: the way he clicked his tongue and shook his head over the road blunder, and went to talk with Adjako on the sidelines, leaving him stranded in the office with Kazzal and the bewildered Wallula who had not stayed long. Obuta that day looked like a schoolboy, smugly observing teacher's pet caught out in a crass stupidity. He might have been trying not to show it but it had showed. And later he and Adjako spoke together in the vernacular in his presence, excluding him – not for long, but during some minutes of intense dialogue which separated them from himself and Kazzal. Personal or village business. As a rule Adjako, except in commanding or interrogating underlings, courteously spoke English; but that afternoon, because of the crane and the road and his lack of lunch, his manners had slipped; he was in a chastizing mood. Much, undoubtedly, to Obuta's satisfaction.

So: 'Definitely not Obuta,' Philip repeated.

But Donkwa, sitting so limply, looked as if he were beyond this kind of confabulation; too weary. All his usual spunk had gone out of him. He could only shake his head: no, not Obuta.

Philip urged him home, patting his shoulder, 'Better get along now, Donkwa – you need a good rest. We'll sort this out. Thanks for coming in, and for all you've done.'

'Do not worry too much about the village,' said Donkwa, rising. 'It is best to seem as if you did not know of any palaver. If there is trouble it is best to leave it to Mr Adjako. He said he would come tomorrow for the funeral.' On the stoep he paused to bring his torch from his pocket; its light shone out on the rain, falling like a silver curtain against the darkness. 'I am sorry these people in the village are humbugging you. Ever since the morning they stopped me by the new road I was hoping they would not do this. I was hoping they would not humbug you. But if you worry it is

worse. They want you to worry.'

'Good night,' said Philip, letting him go, watching him hurry away into the rain-filled night. He returned to the pool of lamplight which spread over his desk. Donkwa's empty glass stood there. The lateness, his tiredness and the room's deep silence after the talk make him slack-witted. He couldn't understand that last bit: they *wanted* him to worry?

All night and the next morning – the morning of the funeral – the rain continued. The mill was quiet. Mr Adjako came up the office steps under a big, black silk umbrella – his London umbrella – which his driver held over him. Daniel placed it carefully, spread out to dry in a corner of the inner office. Adjako's mien was serious but he looked magnificent in a robe of black and purple which spread about him as he sat. It was the first time Philip had seen him in a native robe. In this mourning garment Adjako looked disguised; he wore a different dignity. This was not like a respectful black suit. The stuff glistened with a rich formality; it had character and fluidity, meaningful and impressive. It was impossible not to speak of it.

Adjako looked down at himself, hands folded. The only instantly recognizable part of his other material self was his watch: a beautiful German watch. That and the briefcase. He said, 'My dress? It is my funeral wear. I have robes for every occasion. Yes.' He moved his hand smoothing the cloth. 'This is a sad day in Manango, Mr Connor.'

'Should I come with you? I'm quite ready.' He was ready in his suit and black tie.

'No, no,' said Adjako quickly. 'It is not necessary. I think it is better if you do not go.'

He sighed; the dark robe crinkled. 'They would not expect you to be there. I will represent the Company in these circumstances. I will tell them of your sorrow. Obuta and Donkwa and Tomi will be with me.'

*In these circumstances.* Philip did not question him. Adjako continued smoothly. 'You could not know our burial customs. It is like a family matter.'

'Yes, I understand,' Philip said. He understood that for whatever reason they preferred his absence.

'When it is over I must return at once to Yamina – so we have only' – he glanced at his watch – 'twenty minutes before I must go to the ceremony. While I am here there is a point of business I must arrange with you.'

He sat forward, with his usual mercurial speed returning to practical affairs. 'I have ordered a crane from Hamburg like the one from the U.K. we discussed. The same specifications and a 120-foot boom – exactly what we need, exactly what you wanted. The price is equivalent to fifteen hundred pounds: three thousand dibis. Kazzal is arranging it. It is second-hand but from a very reliable firm ...'

'Kazzal?' Philip could hardly believe it.

Adjako gave him a quelling look. 'There are many good reasons. This is a sound opportunity for me.'

Philip waited for the reasons, though they might be withheld. If the crane were right, he could not argue. As for the rest of it – trust the pertinacious Kazzal. Turn down one crane and he produced another, like a trump card. He was a magician. He could produce anything.

'I will require your signature for this,' Adjako said, bringing papers from his briefcase. From these he selected a typed letter and put it on the desk. It was addressed to the State Bank of Echobe, requesting the transfer of six thousand dibis to Germany, to be made payable to an engineering firm – the suppliers of the crane.

'This isn't right. It says *six thousand dibis – three thousand pounds*,' said Philip, studying the letter and its typed confirmation of his signature: General Manager, Adjako Timber Company. 'You said three thousand dibis ...' He was apprehensive. He had a suspicion.

'It is quite correct.' Adjako got up and firmly closed the

door – which had been slightly ajar – to the outer office. 'Government allows the transfer of moneys out of the country for *essential* machinery. Our crane is essential. I have had the purchase approved in Echobe. The price of the crane is fifteen hundred but the invoice will be made out for three thousand. In marks, of course, but it is easier to think of it in pounds. Kazzal must have his commission. That will be paid him in Germany.'

'And he'd get a cut from the sellers as well,' Philip stated the obvious.

Adjako brushed this aside. 'It is a service. He has already flown to Hamburg.'

'So it's all settled,' said Philip. Of course it was. That day on the road: they'd had their heads together, settling this.

'I wish to build up my funds in Germany,' said Adjako. 'This is an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone: to buy the crane and transfer funds. You know we are not allowed to send money out of the country for personal use. This transaction helps me to put a good sum into my Hamburg account.'

He made it sound like simple arithmetic; like a perfectly straightforward profit.

Treading on delicate ground, Philip looked for a way out. 'But if the invoice is marked up' ('falsified' was an unpleasant word) 'we'll have double the import duty to pay when the crane arrives. That's on top of the freight charges. Twenty per cent duty: twelve hundred dibis – six hundred pounds duty for a crane worth fifteen hundred pounds. This doesn't make sense.' He shook his head. He could not approve. 'Mr Adjako, you'll lose on it. Quite apart from the Company putting out such a sum just now ...'

'I can arrange a way round the import duty,' said Adjako, smiling for the first time. 'No trouble there. *I can manage it with Customs. These are people I know.*'

Incredible man, thought Philip. What an arranger – what a fixer! What a way to get rich! He didn't like it at all, this

wangle. And Kazzal, the arch-wangler, in on it.

Adjako went on, 'You are wrong, Mr Connor. It is good business. Dibis' – he flapped a scornful hand – 'six thousand or ten thousand: how many is not the point. They are no good to me here. I want the money outside where I can use it: make it grow by investment.'

Philip was silent. Investment outside. The shining transformation-scene with the Midas touch. Hey presto! – and the despised dibis from the struggling Manango account became, by a few strokes of the right pen, a few words in the willing ear and the allocations of percentage, good solid European currency.

'So you will sign this letter of application to the bank. It is only a formality. I have already made the arrangement in Echobe.' He stood up. 'Mr Connor – I must go ...'

'Mr Adjako,' said Philip, jibbing, 'It's not *right*, you know ...'

Adjako raised his head sharply; the beard jutted out. 'You are my General Manager. I am *instructing* you to sign. You want this crane. It is good for the Company – essential for the mill. It will bring up production. That is all that concerns you.'

'Very well. It is your instruction,' said Philip, signing. It looked like an innocent letter but he did not like to see his name on it. Or to bleed the Company account, for Adjako's personal benefit in Hamburg.

Adjako tucked the letter away. He called for his driver to carry his briefcase and umbrella. His farewell was hasty because he was a little late – but the funeral would certainly wait for him.

After lunch, when the mill was running again with all hands back to work and Adjako known to be on his homeward way, Philip, reflecting on the outgoing six thousand dibis, called Edward. The young man came with his notebook.

'What I want to know', said Philip, 'is how we stand; with an estimate of how we shall stand about sixty days from now. Work it out with Bantio and the Chief Tally Clerk and Mr Obuta: the logs and sawn timber awaiting shipment at port; what is already on the water and what's cut in the yard ready to go: and what we can expect in payments. Also a résumé of running costs and wages – an approximate figure.'

He felt in need of the sureness of figures, heartening or not; the facts. While the fifteen hundred extra might not seriously affect the Company account, the rains might hold up felling and extraction in the bush; the mill might run low on logs; there might be breakdowns. If so, it would be difficult to step up production – always at its lowest ebb in the wet season. This was a time, this afternoon, for spying out the way ahead. Six thousand dibis transferred, double the crane estimate, and freight charges on top to come – all above normal running costs; this needed some careful thinking.

Edward, fully briefed, left him. Philip cleared his desk for action. Adjako's picture had been there since the day of his visit with Kazzal – long enough. It was an extraordinarily capable camera study; the eyes followed you; you felt under observation. If you looked at it with half-closed eyes you could conjure up the gold glint of the smile, or imagine, even, the quirk of an eyebrow; it was the kind of compelling dark visage you might confront in a dream: accusing or commanding or – as now – troubling your conscience.

'Go away, you old fraud,' Philip said to it in his mind, and, as on that first Sunday in this too-concentratedly-Adjako office, opened the bottom drawer of the desk and slid the picture into it. He remembered the put-away lucky piece, and his fingers searched in the drawer for it. If ever a man needed his lucky piece before him ... He withdrew the picture, puzzled. The drawer was empty. He *thought* he'd

put it in the drawer, but that was just after the fever. His memory ... Coast memory again. Where *was* the thing?

He looked systematically through all the drawers: the wide one across the top, and the three on each side. All tidy – he could give Obuta a lesson on storing desk tackle – most of them practically empty: papers clipped together, notebooks contained in elastic bands; Hoppus Reckoners and percentage tables; no junk, and nothing anywhere superfluous.

It had been in the bottom drawer, he was certain. He lifted it out entirely, got down on his knees and peered into the empty square space in case the little crane boom or handle or rigging had got snagged somehow at the back recess. Nothing. Nothing there. He squinted under the desk, and with a ruler poked and swept the narrow space along the floor; and in this attitude was surprised by Edward's voice above. He got up, red-faced, dusting his trouser knees.

'Is it something lost?' Edward, carrying a sheaf of papers, was ready to help.

'It's gone,' said Philip. 'You know my lucky piece ... the little crane and tractor ... the toy.'

'Gone?' said Edward blankly.

'It was here on my desk. Positively. I put it away in a drawer.'

'Locked?' inquired Edward, deeply concerned.

'Of course not *locked*,' Philip told him. 'I don't keep anything of value in my ...' He stopped. 'It wasn't of *value*. Only to me.'

'Has somebody stolen it?' Edward sounded distressed. It looked as if somebody had.

'Why should they?' said Philip. 'Why in hell should they?' He was furious. He habitually left his pen and other things, even his watch, lying around. Nothing ever disappeared from the office except, from the general stock cupboard, the usual excess of pencils, envelopes and timber-chalk. Nothing had ever gone from his desk or anyone else's so far

as he knew – certainly not from Obuta's which was always locked.

'I don't know,' said Edward, wavering. 'I will go and ask everybody.'

'You do that,' Philip told him angrily. 'I want it back. It's my lucky piece. I need it.'

But Edward was having second thoughts. He began, doubtfully, 'Sir ...'

'All right, wait.' Philip sat down. 'Maybe not. There's something peculiar ... something funny about this.' He stared at Edward. '*Isn't* there?' He threw up his hands. 'I don't know ...'

'It is better not to mention it,' said Edward, having thought. 'If we mention it everybody in the mill will *know*.'

Trust Edward to cotton on. Pretty subtle. Fast thinking. Philip said, 'It's not an ordinary thief-palaver, because it isn't an ordinary thing.'

'At all,' said Edward.

'On the other hand, it was only a bit of nonsense, you know.'

'Yes sir,' said Edward gravely.

'It's just that it was a *personal* thing. I don't know whether you understand ...'

'I understand,' said Edward. 'You told us. You said what it was. I am sorry. It was small. Anybody could take it and hide it.'

'It was the only thing they took,' Philip reminded him. 'That's what worries me.'

'Yes, that was very wicked,' Edward said. 'I think it was somebody who knew where to look for it.'

There was a knock on the door behind him, and Obuta appeared, papers in hand. Though for the funeral he had worn a dark robe, he was again in his office shirt and grey trousers. 'These are some figures Edward was asking for ...' He stopped. 'Excuse me if you are busy, Mr Connor.'

'No, not busy. It's nothing,' Philip said. 'Let's have them.'

Obuta put the papers down and followed Edward out.

Philip returned to the work, but he felt bereft. It was like that evening in the Echobe Airport Hotel, without his other thing, his pen — though that was different. Now, today, he'd rather have had the pen stolen than the lucky piece. He tried to imagine where it could be: in whose pocket, or house, or in what dark corner of Manango. Because it was so identifiable, such a bright-painted mechanical curiosity, it would have to be hidden; it couldn't be flaunted around, played with, or sold locally. So what was the point? It was a futile theft. Futile or spiteful? They had taken away his luck ... And by this thought he surprised himself; because he almost believed it. It was easy to believe. And for how long had it been gone? No way of telling. All along, while Adjako's picture stood on his desk by the blotter, he thought it was there, safe, tucked away. Ever since Adjako came that day with Kazzal ...

Of all things to be missing — the little crane. Today of all days.

On the following morning, before Philip left the house for the mill, Benedict came running. 'Massa — those chicken!'

Philip did not need to ask. Something had got them: driver ants, disease, a rat or a snake.

'Snake. It was a snake,' said Benedict. 'They were in the house, low down, not the tree. I made them go for the house in case of storm.'

'Well, you shut them in, didn't you?' He moderated his sharpness. 'You *must* have shut them in.'

'There was a small-small space beside the board — no proper door,' Benedict confessed. 'It was a snake. They all swell up. I hear nothing in night time. I don't hear them cry out.'

It was not surprising. Benedict slept more deeply even than the nightwatch. And Philip, after a wakeful hour or so,

had slept at last, heavily.

'This is the first time my chicken get chopped by snake,' Benedict went on dolefully. 'I savvy these chicken. It was a good hen — plenty of eggs. But it was not a proper door. I mistake. Better we get more chicken.'

'No,' said Philip, ignoring these lapses into agitated pidgen. 'No more chicken. They're not safe — they attract snakes. I was afraid of that.'

'Snake palaver,' said Benedict miserably. 'I wish I catch that snake that do this thing.'

'Save it if you do,' said Philip. 'Mr Obuta might give you something for it. He collects snakes.'

'I know it,' said Benedict, not raising a smile. 'I know why.'

Philip said, 'It's a sideline. He sends them away. He sells them to zoos and hospitals.'

'Huh!' said Benedict, turning away. It was a sound he always made to indicate disapproval or his possession of more accurate, personal information.

It was Comfort who raised the alarm in the bathroom. She liked the bathroom, and especially the bath wherein she nested like a dark pearl in a pink shell; she liked the big coloured towels and the strip-lit mirror, and the shower attachment on the bath; and she often filled the room with steam, splashing sounds and talcum scent. She enjoyed the natural African pleasure in water and washing. The room she shared with Rose had not even a tap; they got their water in buckets from a street standpipe, and it was never like this, which came gushing from smooth chromium taps, cold or hot (because of the water heater) or spraying like needles from the shower nozzle. So Comfort, Philip was amused to observe, enjoyed the bathroom as no ordinary amenity, but as a place where you enjoyed yourself with watery sensations. The water was on; not brown now, but crystal clear; and for Comfort's sake Philip hoped it would

stay on.

Wrapped in a towel after one of her baths, she was looking at her image and rubbing the moisture from the mirror when she saw the snake coiled on the floor under the window, below the louvres which were not tightly closed. She did not cry out, not then; but with great care lifted the bathmat as a shield for her legs, and slowly backed out. She had not locked the door: had she been locked in she might have given way to panic. In the hallway she called out: 'Bene-dict! Snake! Snake!' and the boy, seizing a machete, came running.

The noise came to Philip in the bedroom where Comfort took refuge, holding her towel about her, still clutching the bathmat. When he reached Benedict the snake, already beheaded, lay like a shining jade ribbon on the bathroom floor. It was not a big one, but bad: a long, thin, green mamba. In the skirmish Benedict had knocked down Philip's shaving gear, Comfort's talcum powder and Adjako's shut-off musical toilet roll. One of the tiles was cracked. The place looked like a white-dusted pink battleground and smelled, to Philip's startled nose, like a whole field of lavender.

Comfort came to look at the snake from a distance beyond the doorway; she was still afraid of it, and held her hands tightly together. Benedict looked wild-eyed and aggressive with the battle anger in him. Since the moment Comfort had cried 'Snake!' his instincts had taken charge. From a series of reflexes, the primitive reflexes of a hunter or boxer or household guardian, he had dealt his blow harder than necessary, out of a male mixture of fear and fury. He was still holding his machete like a weapon.

'Well done! Take it away,' said Philip. 'Far away.' Benedict plucked up the green ribbon by its tail and bore it off. 'A bad one,' said Comfort, drawing sharply back as he passed her. 'Now I will fear to come here.'

'There won't be any more. I'll come in ahead to make sure ...' He was inspecting the bathroom, checking around,

wondering how the creature had entered; he opened the louvres wide. One corner of the fine mesh screening on the outside was frayed and bent back. Again, as with the henhouse there was 'a space'. Benedict was beside him again, with dustpan and brush, preparing to clean up; and Philip pointed to the window. 'Is that how it got in?'

Benedict, a Watson to Philip's Holmes, studied the aperture. 'I never see that before.' He was on his mettle, perhaps, lest he be blamed. It was his duty to be vigilant after the fowls had been stricken. 'True, I never see it. But I don't think the snake climb up from outside.'

They went out with the torch to make sure. There was no pipe leading up from the gutter under the bathroom window. The wall was sheer.

'No,' said Philip, 'I don't think it possible.'

'I never know a snake to go up a wall,' said Benedict. 'Maybe it enter some other way. They move fast and quiet. Now I will watch everywhere.'

Philip went back to Comfort, glad to find she had recovered from her fright: a sensible girl, dressed again, and sitting on the settee, looking at the fashion pictures in a London newspaper supplement. She could not read much but she enjoyed the pictures which she studied intently. She liked to take the magazines and other trifles home to Rose, perhaps to compensate for her absences, or even for a plain sister's lack of a lover. Twice Philip had met Rose walking dumpily past the house with her headload of high-piled baskets; the second time he bought two baskets he did not need for a sum twice the price in any market-place. They both behaved as if it were an ordinary transaction during which Rose, on her own village territory, with no issue unclear, was neither giggling nor gauche. No longer a duenna, she was a matter-of-fact seller of baskets, like any other.

Comfort did not talk to him, as Benedict often did, about village matters. It seemed that when she crossed the

bungalow threshold she left her other life behind her, stepping out of it as she stepped out of her sandals she left by the doorway. She would answer questions but did not gossip. It might be because of a natural pride – her feeling that the village, poor and humble compared with this house, could not interest him – or that she had been taught a meek demeanour and self-effacing attitudes in the presence of the master of the house. She was what a good Manango woman should be – or almost. Her difference from the rest had, however, its strict territorial boundary. It existed only in the bungalow. She was often in the house; she came and went gracefully, unobtrusively; was warm and pleased to be with him, standing or sitting, or lying close and abandoned while the night rain whispered a background to their own murmurs of praise and pleasure. 'You are a comfort, my Comfort,' Philip told her; and she said, 'That is my name.' But she did not call him by any name. In her mind she must have had one for him, but she did not speak it.

Nor would she speak about the accident or the funeral, or what the village was saying. She had not come to him that night, or the next; no one had come to the house except Donkwa. On the following evening she was unusually quiet. Benedict was also downcast. A child, he said, had died: one of the sad widow's five children, the youngest; of a fever, with painful eyes, and sores on his body. Two of his brothers had the disease which was making the village children sick. All the mothers were afraid; they were binding amulets on the children's wrists.

In the kitchen, as he spoke of this, Benedict was neatly cracking the hairy husk of a coconut with the machete with which he had slain the bathroom snake. On Philip's instruction he had scoured the blade with Dettol and Vim. He was about to make a coconut custard.

'I'll get the Health people to come from Yamina,' Philip said. 'It sounds like measles, if it's only among the children.'

'They don't like the Health people,' said Benedict. 'They

don't like strangers coming. When the Government took the count for taxes, they hid away, they went for bush. They don't like Government people coming to ask questions. If you do that they will blame you more. They have their own medicines for all sickness.' He poured the coconut juice into a dish and began to shred the hard white meat.

'Blame me *more*,' said Philip. 'It's nothing to do with me. It's this blasted road palaver, you mean. They're still talking, are they?'

'Oh yes,' said Benedict. 'There is some story, you know, about this house: the master here before. There was new talk about it today in the market.'

'Poor old Muller,' said Philip. 'So they're digging *him* up. It's just bush talk, you know that, don't you? It's like a sickness by itself.' He saw it spreading, as a palaver can spread, in a hot rash of whispers and innuendoes. Yet no one, except Benedict, Edward and Donkwa, spoke up and told him. At the mill everyone was behaving again as usual, as if he were to them simply the General Manager, kingpin in the office and the yard: the white man who lived apart in his special house, in his own fashion. And why shouldn't they behave well? He had made changes for the better; he had their interests at heart; he might be strict sometimes but he was fair. He was doing his best for them.

'They don't all talk,' said Benedict. 'Many like you too much. But it does not take many to do harm.' He looked sadly at the three eggs in a bowl on the window sill. 'The fresh eggs will finish soon – then no more fresh eggs.'

'No more snakes either,' said Philip, trying to make the best of it.

'It was lucky for Comfort she did not step on that one in the bathroom,' Benedict observed.

Lucky Comfort! Yes, she was all right. There was something, though, that Philip wanted to ask. It came out awkwardly. 'People know about Comfort – here?'

Benedict examined his knuckles. He had caught them on



the grater, pressing down too strongly. 'They know.'

'What do they say?'

'Not much,' said Benedict nonchalantly. 'That is not their palaver.'

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

'It's on the firm, naturally,' said Philip to Marty in the Yamina Hotel dining-room. Because Marty was staying there; his new top floor flat had a leaking roof; the first storm had flooded his bedroom.

'Of course it's on the firm,' said Marty. 'Where else would you stay on an expense account? I deserve a bit of inconvenient comfort. My place was in a hell of a mess — still is. They're tracking down the contractor — there was something wrong with the cement, I gather. Same old story: he spread himself out on too many jobs without enough cash to float them all, and the cement mix got too thin. Also he economized on the plumbing. The people in the flat below didn't like my bath-water invading their bathtub. Not my fault, but it made them a bit cool socially. So now there's some real revision going on — workmen all over the place.'

'It makes a change from the club,' Philip observed, contemplating from their corner table the white napery and gilt trolleys, the silver ice buckets, the ballet of impeccable stewards directed by the genial maître d'hôtel who was a personage with a quick eye for all the little niceties. The maître d'hôtel, having assured himself that the corner table's *saignant* steaks were satisfactory, was fractionally adjusting the floral centre-piece on a large table marked Reserved. He must be expecting someone important.

'The air-conditioning upstairs is a bit fluky,' said Marty, putting French dressing on his salad. 'Though it's only a detail ...'

'Especially when you remember the old rest-houses,' said Philip. 'You do remember them?'

Marty grinned. They were a bond. 'The filthy old cook-house at the back? The old water filter and canvas tube?'

And those P.W.D. mattresses ... Visitors to this place haven't a clue what it was like. I must say, at the time it seemed quite normal. D'you feel sometimes you're bothered by double vision? We're not so *old*, but we can't keep off the old days ...'

'Because it's all changed so fast,' said Philip, 'in *parts*. Look at us now – look at me in Manango. Don't forget I live in bush with a Juju on my doorstep, only a couple of hours away from this hotel. You say the air-conditioning's a bit fluky. I've got a road worse than anything I ever knew in the old days – along with other problems a lot more complicated.'

'Oh, everything's more *complicated*,' Marty agreed. 'Politics ...' He stirred the air with his fork.

But Philip was not thinking of politics. 'I meant personally. Kazzal, for instance ...'

Marty stopped him. 'I've news for you about Kazzal. I can give you the gen on that Koori crane deal – got it down in Echobe last week from an erstwhile friend of our Aly. You were right: the crane at Koori *wasn't* worth a quarter of the price, but with the invoice upped Adjako would have got the extra money across the border and from there on to Switzerland or U.K. or wherever, and into one of his overseas accounts. The Hamburg gambit is just another version of the same ploy. They're all at it, you know, getting the dibis out and exchanged for good solid currency, salting it down away from the homeland. The tide must be going out at the rate of knots ...'

'"Give All to Gain All",' said Philip. 'It strikes me the givers and gainers are in separate camps.'

'The *Party's* gaining,' said Marty, 'or that's the general idea. But the Party is men, and each man is getting his own whack out of the intake. What happens when the Government nationalizes some outfit? It's bought, but not cheaply. No, indeed; Government will always accept a price-offer more than the factory or land or forest concession or

whatever is worth, providing there's a substantial kick-back to the Party *and* the negotiator gets his pickings. Right now the Government is financing the Party. Chap I knew who was trying to pull out and sell his assets to Government was told the finalizing papers were ready to sign and payment ready to be made *but* ... he'd have to bring along two thousand pounds in dibi notes in a small suitcase for a so-called contribution to Party funds. So he got this along to the minister's house, thinking this would complete the deal. But no – that wasn't enough. The minister wanted his own cut, so the chap had to go back and bring another thousand pounds' worth before he got the signature and cheque. That was only one *small* deal. It makes the mind boggle when you think how this goes on all the time on a really big scale. The Party's full of nest-featherers. Talk about birds of a feather ... Every time I look at one of those weaver-bird colonies I think of the Party.'

'Because all those nests destroy the tree,' said Philip.

Marty nodded. 'Most of Dowo's lot are at it. If they have to take their cuts in dibis they buy up houses and businesses and cars here – but if they can get their percentages paid overseas that's really what they want. Like Adjako, they'll try every way to get money transferred abroad. As well you know.'

'That I do,' said Philip. 'Though Adjako is small fry by comparison. Even so, the Manango account can't stand a drain of an extra three thousand dibis on top of the actual crane price. I'm trying to build *up* the business. That's what I'm here for.'

'I reckon you're here to create a good impression on the foreign market,' said Marty. 'While you're at Manango the Adjako Timber Company is more likely to get good solid orders from good solid overseas buyers and it's the orders your Adjako chiefly wants – the security of steady production.'

'That and the crane,' said Philip. 'You can't get steady

production without a good crane. The gantry crane's on its last legs – we've had a three-day stoppage because of that contraption. One thing about Kazzal, he'll hurry it along. He may be a chiseller but he's speedy. He's an efficient rascal.'

'A rascal has to be efficient,' said Marty. 'If he was inefficient he might end up honest ...' He broke off. He was looking across the room. 'Nice kids over there,' he approved. 'Nice manners. Better brought up than I ever was.'

The African children belonged to an adult group at a separate table. The girls wore ruffled dresses, hair ribbons and white socks; the small boys circumspect diminutive suits and lace-up shoes. The junior group was supervised by two African nursemaids in grey uniforms with white collars and ruched cuffs. The children sat solemn, small legs dangling, drinking their orange squash and using their cutlery delicately, on their best behaviour. The smallest, bibbed and harnessed in his chromium high-chair, obediently opened his mouth to admit solicitous spoonfuls of mush from his attendant, while he stared past her spooning hand at the blue and orange flames leaping from a pan of *crêpes suzettes* on the trolley beside the senior table. There some celebratory occasion was in progress: the men well-tailored and upholstered, the women in the long-skirted vivid traditional dress, with wigs like fine-spun beehives, jet and auburn. The group shone with prosperity and sophistication.

'African children are taught to behave,' said Philip. 'Nobody bothers about psychology. The family rule is good enough. It works.' He was thinking of the family processions he so often passed between Yamina and Manango, and of their headloads: the seniors heavy-laden with produce or firewood, the adolescents with slightly smaller burdens, the children with less, and the infants, so long as they could walk steadily at all, carrying some token load: a tiny bowl, or basin, or even, with pride, a twig. None walked without their contribution to the family work; none were

idle; each had his task according to his age and strength. And life from the very beginning was serious for the most part, in the matter of breadwinning and education-getting and money-bargaining; in a respect for elders and in maintaining family solidarity. African bush childhood was not a time for toys and entertainment and day-dreaming; it was a full-time preparation for the real and earnest business of being an adult, and, more often than not, a trader in some commodity: chilli peppers or ground-nuts, cocoa or timber, or simply money. The prizes were there for those who planned hard and worked unceasingly, and the temptations to short cuts were formidable.

Marty was speaking to the maître d'hôtel, nodding to the big table marked Reserved. 'You're expecting somebody special?'

The maître d'hôtel bent confidentially. 'Ah yes, it is a Party function. The minister is coming, Mr Boko-Shumi, Minister of Interior Development. He is making a tour ...' He was away again on willing feet to another table where a middle-aged white couple sat: a tall athletic man in a seersucker suit and his stout wife whose fresh pinkness of cheek and air-labelled travelling handbag suggested newness of arrival.

'Americans,' Marty told Philip. 'Southerners. Something to do with the Information Bureau. You know – they're in all the main cities now. Sort of *entente cordiale*, though you'd think that might be a sticky wicket these days, what with the race problem they've got in their own home back yards. I can never fathom whether they're informing or being informed – I never like to ask.'

Another family had come in. A steward was bringing a cushion for the smallest child's chair. This family was mixed, the white wife's aquiline profile a cool cameo against the coal darkness of her husband's. Two of the children were black, with their mother's chiselled features; the third was café au lait, with negroid nose and full lips. They attracted

a few glances; they carried their difference gracefully, being used to it, and in their social position, safe.

'He's a surgeon – just about the best in West Africa.' Marty told Philip. 'She was a nurse. Very intelligent. They seem to have worked it out all right, better than some.'

Philip caught this nuance, the touch of envy. (Sylvia was never mentioned – Marty never spoke of her.) He understood the glances. A mixed couple always collected this covert interest: people were thinking about them sleeping together, reducing it to sex; it had to be sex in a half-tantalizing, half-forbidden zone; fraught. They brought their bed with them, or people dragged it in: the bed and the old bogey about the black man's virility which so many white women wondered about, and white men might privately envy – if it were true. Some would see it to a degree a triumph for the surgeon, or an act of doggedly idealistic exhibitionism on the part of the woman – a twofold snook-cocking at the apartheid idea. Well, whatever it was it took courage: the public demonstration, living in the shadow of the still socially startling black-and-white marital bed. The casual *affaire*, like his and Comfort's (if it were that) or Marty's one-night stands and peccadillos, or Banks's researching – nobody thought much about such things, promiscuity nowadays being pretty general and kicks of every kind commonplace. It was respectability – the notion of white and black parents growing old together, past sex to companionship – which staggered some imaginations. As for the half-and-half children: some saw them as split down the middle, at war with themselves, pulled two ways, welcome in African circles but kept at arm's length in white communities. Because though pallor was no stigma among Africans, a 'touch of the tarbrush' still horrified many Europeans, who saw the intrusive colour as a threat, a taint hovering over future generations: the threat to a later near-white marriage of a dark child who, victim of his chromosomes, might in some environments despise his

heritage and greatly suffer from the folly or courage of his antecedents. His suffering could be the social misery of the self-conscious misfit; he might not fit because he was too black for one setting, too white for another. Some mentors on eugenics, mindful of the children, said that no couple had the right so to put unborn generations at risk of contempt or confusion. And they spoke as if the issue of every white marriage – whatever its wild eccentricities or incompatibility of chromosomes – did not affect the rest of the line; as if continuing *whiteness* were all that mattered. So you arrived at the place where most racial arguments arrived: at human rather than skin-coloured, race-labelled relations. If love, like all other emotion, had no colour bias, hybrids would not be treated as freaks or mutants; they would still be regarded as individual humans. Or they might be, just possibly, some day – in a world ultimately forced, by its instinct for survival, to get rid of its blinkers.

'Hey, come back,' said Marty. 'You're miles away. I said: are you having the Charlotte Russe, or Rum Baba, or Pine-apple with Kirsch?'

Philip looked at the confections on the trolley, and the steward poised. 'Just cheese, thanks. Kazzal took the last of my cheese when he came to lunch – you remember. I haven't been able to get any since. I'd be glad of a bit of cheese if they've got any.'

'They've got everything here,' said Marty. 'Never forget that this place is a show-window for visitors. There's a Trade Delegation lunch going on in the private dining-room upstairs – caviare and borsch and vodka galore; yesterday it was chicken paprika and Hungarian Tokay. So what's a bit of cheese for a hungry Briton?'

It came: an international selection, though the biscuits were Yamina's, from the new riverside factory. There was never a shortage of biscuits; the appetite for them might be a legacy from the British.

'Funny', said Philip, 'how they turn out so many

*shapes* of biscuits with different names – yet they all taste exactly the same. I suppose they'll get round to working out a variety of flavours.'

Philip thought of Comfort's fiancé in Birmingham, learning about biscuit-factory management, but did not mention him. One way or another he'd be sure to bring back some new ideas. Comfort never spoke of him; but then he had never spoken of Comfort to Marty. There always were unexplored regions in relationships: buffers; there had to be. Marty never mentioned Sylvia because she represented hurt or failure. Comfort remained in an area protected from examination. Everyone had his pride, his vulnerability, an interior room labelled 'Do Not Disturb'. Adjako had his shut-off, critical moods – and so had Edward, poring over his library books – and Benedict, the Catholic, speaking of Juju and leaving so much out – and Tomi solitary in the power-house where Dowo's picture hung. And Obuta; he had a separate place within him, too. That was certain.

'Here comes the minister,' said Marty, *sotto voce*.

The maître d'hôtel advanced all smiles and concern, welcoming the important group. The stewards turned, like flowers to the sun. The focus of the room became the big table towards which the maître d'hôtel led the party whose central figure was the minister, the Right Honourable Boko-Shumi, a vigorous-looking, firmly-tailored man with commanding shoulders and heavy tortoiseshell-rimmed spectacles, a polished balding dome, and a cane. (The cane fashion had begun with Dowo, and spread. It had become an extension of ministerial dress, assisting in gestures of aplomb and inspection.)

The group was in hearty expansive mood, and all wore the Party's satin-frilled rosettes on their lapels. The stewards drew back the chairs, flicked napkins and filled water glasses, while the maître d'hôtel bowed and shepherded. A hatch was cautiously pushed up and the chef's head, in his tall white hat, looked through from the kitchen.

'They said there wasn't any fillet. I'll bet they get fillet if they want it,' said Marty. 'But I know the Right Honourable Boko-Shumi won't have *chips* – d'you know why?'

'Why?' said Philip.

'He's got a thing about chips,' said Marty. 'The first time he went to London he said he got chips non-stop. Not at Buckingham Palace though: that was a Garden-Party –'

'Buckingham Palace!' said Philip. 'After what he said about us. I thought he couldn't stand us. I thought he was *persona non grata* after what he said.'

'We're used to it, aren't we?' said Marty. 'Anyway that's his reputation: colourful, controversial, gimmicky. He's got some American university degree, by the way; he keeps scrapbooks of all his travels. He was pretty bucked by the Buckingham Palace invitation; he's got it framed over his cocktail cabinet.'

'Well, I'm glad that's where he keeps it,' said Philip.

'He's not a bad chap, really. I'll just have a word with him,' said Marty, rising. He crossed the floor to the big table and stood at the minister's elbow. A cordial handshake followed; Boko-Shumi leaned back, viewing Marty amiably; he chatted briefly, appearing pleased with the greeting.

Marty returned. 'They're ordering fillet. I told you. No chips. Chips are taboo. No one at the table is having them. Shall we have our coffee upstairs?'

They went out into the vestibule, passing between the two policemen maintaining surveillance from the dining-room door. Two other putteed navy-clad guardians stood by the front entrance's marble pillars; the ministerial Cadillac stood outside with its Party flag on the bonnet, and the motor cycles of the escort. There was an air of selfconscious busy-ness among the foyer staff: the clerks behind the black-marbled Reception Desk and the grilles of the interior-lit kiosks displaying postcards, cosmetics and artifacts of ebony, ivory and gold. An outside portrait of Angyhomia

Dowo, gilt-framed, looked down at the few guests sitting in cubist leather armchairs. The high ceiling was flamboyant with jungle emerald-greens, reds and yellows: a forest representation complete with cockatoos and birds of paradise. The forest motif was repeated in the curtains. 'You ought to feel at home here,' said Marty, leading the way across the springy ochre carpet to the pale veneered life.

They rose swiftly and silently to the seventh floor. In Marty's room they looked out from his balcony on to landscaped canna lilies, frangipani trees and a fountain, stone urns and abstract statuary: and three policemen strolling. As Marty and Philip looked down, one of them seemed to feel his gaze and turned sharply, squinting up. 'Those chaps have eyes in the backs of their heads,' said Marty, withdrawing from the balcony. 'The minister must be glad of that. Mind you, he just might have the odd Security bod watching *him*.'

They sat by the balcony doorway, deep in soft-sprung chairs, their feet up; Marty undid a repressive button. The coffee came, and Marty, fishing in his pockets for a 'dash', spilled some coins on the floor. Philip helped to retrieve them and came up with a Victorian penny-piece among the petis. He examined it. 'A bun-penny. What's this for?'

'That,' said Marty, reaching for it. 'I'd hate to lose that — I've had it for years. I passed my exams on it. I got it when I was twelve from a gypsy. I'd never part with it.'

'You hang on to it,' said Philip. 'I've lost my bit of Juju.' And he told Marty about the missing lucky piece.

'Psychological, I'll bet,' said Marty. 'You put it somewhere else and forgot. All this crane palaver — maybe you didn't want to be reminded. You could have been — you know — woolly-minded after the fever you had.'

'Not a bit of it,' said Philip brusquely. 'It was *pinched*.'

'That's what we always say when we can't find something,' said Marty. 'We start yelling "thief" — you need to be careful about that. You always feel a total fool when it's

just the old Coast memory playing up.'

'I know all about that,' said Philip. 'I know it was pinched. It was never anywhere except *on* or *in* my desk.'

'Did you tell anybody why you kept it?' said Marty.

'I did, yes — the office people. Obuta was interested. He called it a fetish — took it quite seriously.'

'Well, maybe Obuta pinched it, then,' said Marty lightly.

'What — Obuta?' Philip was astonished. 'What would he do with it?'

'I don't know,' said Marty. 'What did you do with it? You just *had* it.'

'You're way off,' Philip told him. 'Now the snake palaver's different. Obuta collects mambas and cobras and all sorts, so I'll admit I was bothered about that. Maybe you think the connection's far-fetched. Sometimes I wonder if my imagination isn't working overtime. After all — if he *did* plant those snakes it's too much like a "B" movie, isn't it? Ridiculous. All we need is a volcano erupting in the background.'

'That's all you need,' said Marty. 'Witch-doctors and temple fires and all that.'

'We haven't any temples in Manango,' Philip pointed out. 'It's a peaceful little spot — you'd never think anything ever happened in Manango.'

'Villages always look peaceful,' said Marty, 'but they can be hotbeds of this and that. You need to be hardy to live in a village and cope with all the feuding and palavering — even at home you do. Town life's safer every time. Emotions are more spread out. In a village things work up to a head; there isn't enough drainage or perspective.'

'You're so right about the Manango drainage,' said Philip. Here like this, talking to Marty, he could stand apart from Manango; it was his weekly bread. He could talk for the first time about Obuta and the snakes; and talking was what he missed — the kind of Coaster's shorthand language a fellow-Coaster understood. No need to draw diagrams.

'I don't know about Obuta's snakes,' said Marty, 'but nothing, absolutely *nothing*, would surprise me. Funny things can happen. Remember that no-good office chap of mine – the one with the forged references – who was under notice? Remember how I caught him putting a "friendship potion" in my coffee? Some stuff from the market. *That* was far-fetched all right. Put me right off coffee for weeks.'

Philip remembered. Marty had caught the lad with the bottle labelled 'Good-Thought Mixture', and what a palaver that had started. An office could be worse than a village.

'He meant well,' said Philip. 'He was trying to be constructive.'

'It was a pretty old-fashioned method,' said Marty. 'Manango's old-fashioned: that's my point. And if anyone there feels destructive, there's plenty of scope. At the same time it's easy to imagine things once you start. That's the very essence of Juju: it triggers off ideas you never thought you could have – it makes you jittery. I mean your lucky piece – you really *were* worried when it went, weren't you? No, seriously, Phil, it shows your state of mind. You start linking things up – your road palaver, and the snakes and the accident, and Obuta and anything else. You think *you're* the focus. Well, don't. You'll get a complex. If I were you I'd take a decent break at Christmas. How about coming down to Echobe with me? Get Manango out of your system for a few days. It'd do you good.'

'Christmas,' said Philip, dispirited. Two weeks to Christmas, imagine! 'The blasted shops – there's nothing in them. I met the Carters and the Stones in Hassam's this morning. But I gave up. I don't know why anyone bothers.'

Though the shops were doing their best, with a fervid amplification of carols – 'Silent Night' and 'Hark the Herald Angels' – booming over the barren self-service areas and the depleted cold-store cabinets; there was a brave dazzle of paper streamers, and a thin display of well-

thumbed Christmas cards, probably last year's, like the rust-stained pyramids of tinned plum puddings alongside the usual chop suey tins and peanut butter: The toy counters looked tattier than usual despite the jovial efforts of a black Father Christmas perspiring in a red cotton suit and white woollen whiskers against a tinselled backdrop of cut-out bells and plastic holly. Only the December poinsettia was profuse and authentic, great bushes of it, blooming in most gardens. There was a bowl of real poinsettias on Marty's coffee-table.

'I can't manage Echobe,' said Philip. 'Adjako's having a big Christmas do here on the roof garden. All the top people. Party bods and so on. He particularly wants me to come: it's virtually an order.'

'Of course. He wants to show you off. That's you fixed up, then, paper hat, plum pud, cracker and all,' said Marty.

Slumped, they contemplated, bachelors together, the rigours of a tropical Yuletide. 'Oh well, cheer up,' said Marty, 'there's still two weeks. Anything can happen ...' He yawned largely and returned to the present. 'Nearly time for *thé dansant* downstairs. You'll stay? No need to go rushing back, is there? Book in for tonight and we'll go out on the town later, why not? Collect a bit of female interest – that'll cheer you up.'

'I don't know about the tea dance,' said Philip, 'It's not in my line.' He thought he should be getting back. Donkwa might look in, or Edward. And Comfort later, certainly. 'No, I ought to get back. I've got all my groceries and stuff.'

'That's no reason. They'll keep your cold stores here for you in the kitchen fridge,' said Marty. 'I can lend you a clean shirt or anything ...'

They stood on the balcony. No rain, but clouds coming up. Rain probably again tonight – there was usually a night rain. The policemen had gone. The minister's Cadillac with its motor-cycle escort would be on its way, flag flying, to some other rallying place; and the people

along the road, the ordinary people carrying their head-loads to and from the market-places, would draw to the verge and stare at its passing; and then walk on, accustomed to walking and carrying, and breathing the dust from Mercedeses and Cadillacs.

'I *had* better get back home,' said Philip, troubled by a picture of Comfort finding the bungalow in darkness when she came. If he were not there she would turn, puzzled, and go home again. He had said he would be back; and among the shopping in the car he had a new tin of talcum powder and a silk head-scarf.

'Home?' said Marty. 'Did you say *home*?'

'Well, it's the only one I've got,' Philip reminded him.

They went down to the vestibule, passing the American couple who were deep in converse with the African surgeon and his white wife. From the big lounge which opened from the foyer, tuning-up orchestral sounds issued, and the preparatory clink of china. They looked in through the folded-back doors at the band in scarlet silk jackets and polka-dot bow ties. It was early yet; the dancing had not begun, but each table was ready with teacups and sugar bowls and assortments of fruit cake, pastries and chocolate eclairs. Marty cast an eye around, sizing up the possibilities. 'Sure you won't, Phil? Can't you be tempted?'

'Sorry. Thanks for the offer. I'm faithful to Manango.' Philip told him, meaning it.

Marty saw him to the main door. 'You remind me of a horse going back to its stable. Well — steady as you go, my lad.' He gave Philip a shrewd bright-blue look. 'Don't let them get you down, will you? Don't get too involved.'

'I *am* involved,' said Philip, looking back, half-way down the steps. In the driveway a bus was unloading a merry press of Yamina townfolk — some in native robes, some in Western dress — no white faces among them. The hotel-chartered buses ran free of charge collecting passengers at points in the town and around the suburbs; it was a hotel

service, bringing the people in, encouraging business.

Marty, who looked preoccupied with his own plans, didn't hear him. He raised an easy farewell hand. 'See you next Saturday then, all being well —'

Quite right: all being well; fingers crossed; weather and life in general permitting. Philip waved from the car and drove away; and when he looked back he thought the Yamina Hotel looked like a huge, rich, indigestible frosted cake of which a small piece at a time was enough.

The Queen Mother's taxi stood by the gate in the Sunday afternoon hush. Comfort, alerted by Benedict, had slipped out by the kitchen door. The Queen Mother, her 'dash' of fruit and eggs presented and thanked for, sent her girl servant outside to wait on the veranda; and seated herself on the settee. She spoke to Benedict, who said to Philip, 'She say she does not want me and I should go. She will speak to you for herself.'

Philip, pouring the customary schnapps, was less surprised to know she could speak English than that she should dispense with the etiquette of an interpreter. Benedict looked a shade disappointed, as if he would have preferred the importance of standing by. Or perhaps his expression was apprehensive. Philip could not fathom it, and there was no way of asking. It appeared that this was no formal call; she had something specific and important to say. Her face showed it. She was serious; she accepted her schnapps meditatively, and spread her dark-chequered robe in a preparatory way, seating herself more squarely.

'Your boy — he go?' she inquired, nodding to the corridor door. She listened; they heard the back door close. Philip sat down. She must have something on her mind, some private concern. This was to be very much a tête-à-tête.

But there was no hurry; to that extent the etiquette was maintained. The Queen Mother sipped her drink. 'The



work – the mill – he go well?’ she inquired.

‘Yes, quite well,’ Philip replied, wondering whether she were about to speak about the roadway taboo. The exit and entrance were now each marked by a pole from which a handful of rags fluttered; someone had put them there.

‘I come’, she said then, ‘for talk of Comfort Amara. For this I send off your boy so we talk face-for-face.’

‘Of Comfort Amara, yes.’ At once he was on cue, and on guard. The thought had been with him for some time that there might be questions from somewhere: from some relative, guardian or village senior; but no one had come, though everyone knew about Comfort. Most evenings she was here, sitting quietly, or withdrawing when Edward or Donkwa dropped in for a casual chat or on some extra-curricular mill business. Comfort was not a secret; and so far as he knew, their liaison had enhanced rather than harmed her reputation. Once in the office he overheard Joseph speak of her to Amos as ‘Mr Connor’s wife’. That gave him a startled moment. So domestic and substantial a word: wife. But it was only their polite way of speaking. He approved of Joseph’s euphemism. He did not know what he would have done if Joseph had used any of a number of other more contemptuous male words so commonplace around the mill – and the club.

‘Comfort Amara’, said the Queen Mother, choosing her own words from her small vocabulary with similar care, ‘is much for your house. You like her?’

*Like her?* So this was it: he was on the carpet, his own carpet at that. The regal little body had delivered her ‘dash’, accepted the friendly glass, and was now starting the main business. What was she up to? Wanting to know what *he* was up to. Though they sat quietly there was a sensation of wary circling. He said, ‘She is a very nice girl. I do like her.’ (A cock-eyed way of putting it, but Comfort was eminently likeable: neat, sweet, funny, generous, tactful and kind. Besides everything else, which was a lot, impossible to add

up. That he liked her – that she was likeable – was a bonus. She wasn’t just a bedroom girl, far from it.)

And his visitor – he admired her too, the way she sat there, straight-backed but gracious, with this duty to perform. So he dropped his caution. It was pointless to hedge. He said, helping her, ‘Are you worried about Comfort coming here? I am sure she is safe and happy coming to me. There is no reason to worry.’

‘No!’ said the Queen Mother, setting down her glass firmly. ‘*Not safe, never safe.*’ She pursed her mouth and quelled him with her beautiful bright old eyes, entirely in command of the interview. ‘You will spoil her life. I have called her to my house. I have talk with her.’

This was news. Comfort had said nothing, not a word of this. If she had he would not be at such a loss now, but as usual he was on the outside, heavily involved but only half-informed. So Comfort, if she were a rebel disregarding this ‘talk’, was risking a great displeasure.

‘You do not understand,’ said his visitor. ‘Some girl – many girl, it never matter at all. Wickedness never spoil such girl because they already spoil, when go for man not husband for them. You take girl like that – I say: no matter ...’ She shrugged. ‘Comfort Amara not so. She not ...’ but the word, even if she had one, was not said. Neither of them wanted to hear it.

There was a pause for digestion and consideration. The Queen Mother was in no hurry; she never hurried. The bright afternoon silence filled the room, slanting on gold ladders between the new striped curtains.

‘You have understand?’ said the Queen Mother, depending on him to supply for himself far more than her speech in this foreign tongue could convey.

‘I understand,’ said Philip. It was an old-fashioned situation, like nothing he had ever known. He wondered what Marty would have said – but Marty would never find himself in such a spot. Marty helped himself to the supply of

free and easy commercial girls and his intentions, like theirs, were frankly and unregenerately dishonourable.

The Queen Mother clasped her hands together. 'Comfort is for marry her own man. You never say to *marry* her.' She eyed him severely. 'You never want for marry her at all. She have her own man, for her children when she get children.'

He felt the heat rising in his face, and a new tension. *Her own man*. Who was he anyway – that dim, far-away, African biscuit-maker in Birmingham (*Birmingham*, it was ridiculous) not bothering even to write to his neglected betrothed, disporting himself with a Birmingham girl-friend, having it all ways? He didn't give a damn for him.

'When he come back,' the Queen Mother continued, 'he go marry Comfort. That be so. Comfort know. What she do now make plenty trouble for her.'

'Supposing', said Philip, to stave off what looked like some looming ultimatum, 'I said that *I* wanted to marry her?' But it sounded what it was, a reckless and jealous supposition.

The Queen Mother was not even faintly surprised. She had expected this, which was no more than a rising of male hackles, a fluster of male ego. 'No, you just say so. You stay for Manango small time, even two, three, four year, not always. You some time must go for your own town, your own country, your own family. That is not good for Comfort, if she go too, or if she stay alone when you go.'

Again the brilliant silence spread, shafted with thoughts. They both knew she was right. Comfort in Croydon – unimaginable, Comfort without the hot African sun, the forest space, the market-place and her own people – unthinkable. Because Comfort was not even a town girl, not educated or experienced or armed to face an outside white world bristling with strangeness, even hostility. And Africa was only partly his country, though he wooed it as steadily as he had wooed this girl. And now they were both – the

country and the girl – in his blood because of his own ambivalence or pig-headedness, or helplessness to withstand their wayward dark fascination.

'What does *she* say?' It was time he knew.

'She no say. We no ask her. The man he pay part dowry before he go. The families, they do it. It is the custom.'

'Please listen,' said Philip. 'Comfort says this man is not faithful to her. He did not write to her. He has a white woman in England. I didn't take her away from him. This is something *you* must understand.'

'Our men', said the Queen Mother, regarding him unwaveringly, 'can take many wife, not only one. A woman only one man. For man it is not the same. Men are diff ... diff ... erent.' She spoke instructively, as if the differentness of men might be news to him.

'The white woman,' Philip persevered, 'knowing he's coming back here – she'd never be his *wife*. I'm sure of that.' His voice showed his disgust for this shabby chit, this floosie picked up at some coffee bar or dance hall. He could see her clearly and with distaste: brassy, cheap and kinky, hanging on the black fellow's arm, and he so proud of his conquest. He was sure that was how it was. He wanted them to be like that.

As if disappointed in him the Queen Mother shook her head; he was falling further from grace. 'She is a woman, a stranger. You not know her. Is she more bad than Comfort? Is he more bad than you?'

This was her judgment of his prejudiced certainty, that whereas what he and Comfort had was defensible – even innocent, sunlit, good – the other pair had nothing but a slatternly bed and a garish town neon illumination – nothing more, no tenderness or communication. Philip, said stubbornly, 'I know my own country.' Even so, a doubt was invading his picture of the African and the girl; the white girl took on a vagueness. Why had he thought of her as a bit of common blonde fluff – why not some ordinary

lass, just any girl? Met in a library or some factory club, or anywhere? The ground was going from under his feet, and he knew it.

'You know your own country,' said the Queen Mother, taking her time. 'I know *my* country. This white woman he get no be my palaver at all. We have our own fashion. I message to him by letter – he go message me. Or he get no more money. I go cut it off – the money – if he no obey the message to say what he go do.'

'Whatever happens,' said Philip, facing it, 'somebody will be hurt.'

'*Woman* is hurt,' the old lady said. 'In Manango I mind for woman and little children when they go come. If I no mind, no one can tell what man go do for woman.'

He was beaten, entirely beaten by this wise, sturdy, small royal feminist, ruthlessly cutting through the tangle to guard the child of the village. Men as men she mistrusted, probably with reason; she appeared well experienced in parley about the muddles made by men with women; though she showed no dislike. A wise old bird, with impeccable manners. She could have railed at him, or not come at all. She could have ordered Comfort away from his door without explanation. But she saw it her judicial duty to make the situation clear, and must respect his intelligence or she would not have made the effort. She was willing to accept that he had his individual viewpoint, his particular stresses and weaknesses; and that he was something more human than a figure grandly labelled General Manager, using his position to buy the nearest pretty bedmate. She was earthy in her way but she would not necessarily reduce the situation to the simple sex-clinch: neither here nor in that distant cold city overseas where he had out of his own pique and prejudice so reduced it. She might be a bush village autocrat but she could teach him how to think.

He said, abandoning argument, 'Then what do you want me to do?'

She rewarded him with a smile; she leaned forward encouragingly now that he would listen. 'Take time, take time. Talk for Comfort, and try for best. You love her, then you can no do what be bad. Only if you do not love her she will suffer too much.'

'What about me?' said Philip. That might sound childish, but it was what he was thinking. Nobody seemed to give a damn about him, how he fared in this, the odd man out with the wrong colour and homeland, doing his utmost to understand and get things straight. The Queen Mother made no answer. There wasn't one.

He wasn't even sure that he was going to behave well. How could anybody know if he didn't? He said wearily, 'What makes you think you can trust me?'

'I *can* trust,' the Queen Mother said, 'because we know your heart is good.' She lifted her hand to her flat old bosom and left it there, tight-pressed, appealing. 'I tell my people so, Some of my people vex with you ...'

'They're not *all* vexed about Comfort,' said Philip. This was not possible. He had asked Benedict; he had watched and listened, and been reassured.

'At all.' His visitor shook her head. 'Not for that. The other. The death and sickness. I say these trouble cannot be blame for you.'

'Which people are vexed?' He never could get names; no one ever said names; you couldn't track down exactly who 'these people' were, the mischief-making ones talking behind their hands.

She would not tell him, or sharpen the focus. 'Some people who make palaver. They no tell *me*, but I know. Some are troublesome and bad. In every town there is good and bad peoples.'

'I've done my best,' Philip said. 'I don't want to upset anybody.'

'For you it be hard', she said, with sympathy, 'to know our way. Even if you stay long-time for Manango you be

white man proper. You can no be like black man. It no can mix.' She spread her wide hands apart, indicating a gulf, a dilemma. She dropped her hands to her lap. 'Not for you. For some time ... some time ... after we go die ... I do not know ...' She spoke in a murmur, like a soothsayer over a clouded crystal where shadows moved unresolved. Then she looked up, gently imperious, completely sure of herself. 'I sorry. I like you. For this I speak for myself, face-for-face.'

'I'm glad you did,' he told her. 'You were right to come.'

'So!' she said, with finality and stood up, the audience ending.

He remembered, belatedly, the social code, the correct reciprocity. 'I would like to give you some small "dash".' But what? This was a problem needing some quick thinking. He went to the cupboard and brought out the spare bottle of schnapps, still in its box. The Queen Mother gave it a controlled look of appreciation; this indeed was no mean thought. He knew the politeness: not to hand it to her. Instead he took it to the veranda where the small servant-girl sat patiently drowsing in her chair, the empty enamel basin beside her. Until now he had totally forgotten her. He went back for a bottle of Coca-Cola and handed it to the girl. 'For you,' he said to the barefoot little underling in the drooping cotton dress, and she clutched his offering and gave him a sudden smile. The Queen Mother swished sedately past them down the steps and along to the gate where the old carnival-coloured taxi waited, its driver sprawled asleep, head askew, as limp as a rag doll. She tapped his shoulder with one imperative forefinger, and he was at once animated, almost falling out to open the door to the back seat.

She disposed herself within, as before, with dignity; the girl ducked from beneath the headloaded basin and followed. Again, as before, the Queen Mother leaned from her window to Philip, and said, 'Goodbye-ee.' But this time she offered him her gold-ringed hand. It was a fine-boned

aristocratic paw with a surprisingly strong grip — or perhaps not surprising. She was no ordinary village grande dame.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

December 20th, his desk calendar said, with its Thought for the Day underneath the date: *A Coward Fears a Thousand Evils and Dies a Thousand Deaths*. Yesterday's was: *Circumstances Alter Cases*. He always read the motto and usually disliked its pi, too personal comment. Harold always gave him a Christmas desk calendar; the new one had already arrived with Helen's gift of books and their Christmas card portraying a Dickensian coach floundering in a snowdrift. He had just finished a telephone conversation with Adjako: the crane, dismantled and fresh-painted, was at Hamburg, now being loaded on a West-Africa-bound vessel; Kazzal, on the radio-telephone to Adjako, had said it was all arranged. About the hotel Christmas Dinner and Dance party – Mr Connor was booked into the hotel for that night. 'Evening dress? Oh yes, indeed. It will be quite a jolly evening, I think,' said Adjako. 'I have stopped my diet for the festive season.'

*Festive!* Amos's typewriter (which had developed an undiagnosable wheeze, its latest symptom) was rattling away in the adjoining office. The gantry crane had broken down again. Sachi, gloomy because of the increasing wear and tear on vehicles caused by the state of the road in the wet season, and shaking his head over the much patched equipment, had gone off to Yamina to forage in the Graveyard for a cog-wheel and some new or second-hand lorry springs.

The day was overcast, the sky like a sodden old army blanket, with brown puddles in the yard – all colour and sparkle leached away. In the bungalow Benedict strove against the wardrobe mildew, and brushed green mould from the stored-away shoes and suitcases. Matches failed to strike; envelopes stuck down; metal corroded; sheets felt

as clammy as winding-cloths; the soaked earth gave up the warm smell of rain together with its own acrid scents; and the fecund bungalow hedge fattened, flowered and dripped. The big Adjako Timber Company sign had fallen down, the rotted timber supports having eventually disintegrated at the base; they should have been set in cement. Looking out from the bungalow at the sign lying face down on the road, and at the short stumps left standing like decayed teeth, Philip thought: Now *this* – this is the next thing. Though of itself it was nothing but an irritating natural disintegration due to termites, weather and lack of foresight. He set the carpenter, the mason, and their mates to repair it at once; and, mindful of village talk, stood over them himself and told them to hurry. It stood now slightly crooked; work hastily done was often out of true. He fumed at them, 'Can't you ever get things *plumb*?' They stood back and looked at it; the angle was not much, surely not deserving of such red-faced denunciation.

Then the men were set to work putting a new floor in one of the sheds where floor-blocks were stacked; but with the stopping of the mill everyone's pace in the yard lost momentum. The quietness was demoralizing. The labourers headloading pans of cement began their work like somnambulists. They wore paper bags over their heads to keep the stuff out of their hair and eyes. Then one joker pulled his protection down over his face; he had cut out sections for his eyes and nose, and the effect was as grotesque as a Ku Klux Klan hood. When the others first saw him they set up a gleeful cheer, leaning back and slapping their ragged khaki-clad thighs. Hidden by his mask the carnival man made threatening sallies from which they fell back in mock fear. It was a game, but only partly. The mason, waiting for more cement, upturned his bucket and was drumming on it with flat palm and flickering fingers – at first softly, now louder; and the carpenter beside him leaned over casually to tap an accompaniment on an empty kerosene tin. The

pulse of the mill was stilled; but this other smaller impudent beat took its place. No one watched or seemed to listen; the young workmen were always drumming, tapping or syncopating in any lull, when anything hollow was to hand. Or they danced — not consciously — but as if their feet itched, as the drummers' fingers did; as if the rhythm was always there, inside them, trying to break out. Benedict, in the kitchen, staring out of the window while his saucepans simmered, would rap out some absent-minded complication on the washing-up bowl. It was a kind of fidgeting force, a canalizing of some deep impatience, an individual echo of the community's peremptory male- and female-voiced talking drums and the night drums which boomed and chattered on some nights. Philip never heard the intemperate drumming with pleasure; he was always glad when it stopped. His nerves were too taut for enjoyment, at least just now they were.

He spoke to Edward, and drove out to the forest area (it was a fortnight since he had last gone out into the forest) to find Donkwa and see how the rains were affecting progress; also to observe the effects of the latest heavy storm on the trees overhanging the bush tracks.

The river, which on bright days glittered with an Arcadian silver sheen, was sullen yellow and swollen now, littered with small branches and brown debris. The real road ended at the makeshift log bridge. On the other side, from a scarred and barren clearing, he continued for two miles or more along one of the lesser logging roads which penetrated deep into the forest. He could hear men and machines working, screened by the massive trees and their leathery dark leafage whose canopy shut out the sky and produced a permanent flickering twilight. Above him the trunks with their wide-flanged bases towered. Good timber, the least about a hundred feet tall, the greatest a soaring two hundred; deep-rooted, pushing out of the moist congested half-light to explode in huge triumphant sky-reaching crowns.

He left the car and approached the men's cooking fire where yams were roasting in hot ashes, and a stewpot bubbled: bony fish from the river, probably — a high-spiced oily stew.

Donkwa joined him, looking surprised. 'Welcome! No trouble?'

'No, nothing to bother you — the gantry's packed up, so the mill's stopped. I just came along for a look round. Everything O.K. here?'

'No trouble,' said Donkwa. 'The work is going well.'

There was the distant thud of fellers' axes: again a double beat, but steady and serious, the sound of work. They walked; and stood watching one gang of tree fellers who stood on a high scaffolding of stout sapling poles tied with vines. Stripped to breech-clouts they wielded their axes; their throats gave out an involuntary guttural sound with each blow, and their muscles moved as if oiled by their sweat. They were big strong men but they stood like pygmies on their perch, cutting with their sharp metal the preliminary notch in the living wood, before the sawyers took over the work.

'It'll be a long while before that one's down,' said Philip.

'Another tree is just finishing,' said Donkwa. 'If we walk now you will be in time to see it fall.'

They went together through the bush towards another sound, harsh and rasping, and another high scaffolding where the men worked like human pistons, bending to the crosscut handles while the sawdust trickled.

They waited. 'Now!' said Donkwa. The men shouted. There was a movement, a sway: the slow creaking noise of rending wood at the base and a turbulence from high overhead as branch and foliage dipped and trembled. The leaning tree crashed, bearing down saplings and brush, ravaging, crushing and bruising all in its path. It lay prone, pillowed on ruination. The sawyers wiped their faces with the sweat-rags they wore round their necks. Philip leaned his shoulder

against the rough bark of the trunk, looking up at the jagged hole in the forest ceiling from which the monkeys and birds had long since fled; and talked with Donkwa about the work, and the Company's arrangement for Christmas, and the men's bonuses. At length they walked back together to the cooking fire where a lad, the boy who tended the men's food, was squatting, turning the yams. 'Good chop today?' Philip said to him.

'Fish soup,' he replied, lifting the lid from the pungent saffron-coloured stew. Diffident, but proud of his cooking, he offered a spoon.

'Too much pepper for me,' said Philip, waving it away. 'You can give me a piece of yam.'

'No be too hot?' inquired the boy, plucking a tuber from the ashes and cutting off a portion which he offered on an enamel plate.

'Hot,' said Philip, 'but not hot like your soup. That is another kind of hot.'

'Yes, massa,' the boy laughed, 'but we African strong for belly.'

'Lined with asbestos, your bellies are,' said Philip and though the boy did not understand, Donkwa did, and chuckled, and interpreted. Work was stopping for the meal; the men were gathering round the fire. Philip distributed a generous largesse of cigarettes, as was the managerial custom, and left them to their meal.

He could hear the chugging of a caterpillar approaching through the bush, bringing another log to the loading point. By the roadside a half-loaded lorry, with tractor near by, stood with its chalk-scrawled logs, the forest numbers on their butts. Good logs. They would become — though he rarely thought much about it — smooth-polished British and German wall-panelling, expensive tables, cocktail cabinets, flooring, desks and chairs in elegant furniture showrooms; the sophisticated result, the end-product of today's and every day's work in this wilderness of ancient giants; the

price-tagged, transmogrified, civilized twentieth-century wood.

They talked, and Comfort wept into her frilled, embroidered pillow beside which lay the envelope with the English stamp and the Birmingham postmark. The letter briefly explained and excused a man's silence. His life had been busy. He was much taken up with his important work. He had suffered a fever and lain ill for some days, but a friend had been helpful. He begged the Queen Mother (to whom the letter was addressed) that money should not be cut off. His lodgings were costly, and so was warm clothing. Of the marriage he said there was no change in his heart against Comfort for whom part dowry had been paid. He would return in six months' time to marry her and take up his position of manager in the Yamina Perfect Biscuit Factory where a good house would be provided. That was his succinct message, written under the Birmingham factory letter-head, in a clear vigorous script. He included a photograph of himself which Comfort showed to Philip with the letter; though Philip did not much want to look at either. The picture was a street photographer's work. The camera had caught its subject by a news stand: a young African, hands thrust into the pockets of a short, heavy coat with a woolly white collar; sharply dressed, his stance confident. He had neat features, long sideburns and a small moustache; he was good-looking and aware of this. He had halted for the photographer with the street traffic around him — people gazing into Christmas-decked shop windows, a housewife wheeling a pram, cars passing, no one paying any attention.

Said Comfort, sitting up damp and dishevelled, 'I have been to ask an old man in Manango — he who came from far north — what is for me in my life. I go to him alone by night with money, and I ask him for look and tell me what he see for me. He look in his sand and his mirror,

and for my hand ...' She opened her hand, which had been clenched, and held it out palm upward, to demonstrate.

'A fortune-teller,' said Philip, looking at her hand where the lines were dark-engraved, brown on pink. 'So that's what you did ... and what did he say then?'

'He say I go have six piccans.' Her breath caught; she raised her chin, sniffing woefully, struggling to speak clearly. 'And plenty money. He say I go have long life and ...' she collapsed again into misery, 'hap ... hap ... happiness.'

Philip tightened his arm about her. Again she raised her face from her hands. 'Only now, he say, some bad trouble, some worry for me. He give me some medicine to rub my head each morning time, and roots to make drink for cure this trouble.'

He thought: if only something could ease it, some balm or potion; if only it could.

She said, 'I ask when I marry. He say, soon now, before three moons pass.'

'Then he's wrong; he must be,' said Philip. So there were flaws, as might be expected, in this old spider-man's web.

'That is what he say,' said Comfort, 'that I go marry a man for big work. Then he say no more. He finish; he sleep. I go home, make this drink. Nothing happen from that. I worry too much.'

'He's making it worse, this old man; he's not helping you at all.'

'At all,' said Comfort crossing her arms to clutch her shoulders, and rocking to and fro. 'It was a mistake. My people say what I must do. It must be what the old man know go happen for me. He can no be wrong. The spirit tell him.'

It was late, past midnight. Comfort had slipped in by the back door as if, now that the letter had come and the old man pronounced, she was no longer free to run up the front steps past the old nightwatch. Now she murmured, as if talking to herself, 'I was bad for start. After I come to

this house for sew, I say for Rose to leave me. She know why; she beg me no be so wicked.'

'You're *not* wicked,' said Philip, bending closely to hear her voice muffled against his shoulder.

'Wicked. Because I vex too much for that man. I say I will not mind this white womans who take my man for herself. He can no love me if he do this ...'

'He can.' There it was — a truth not until now admitted, though it had been there, a possibility, all along. 'Yes, he can.'

'It no be same like he have two *African* wife,' mumbled Comfort. 'At all, at all ...' She sounded drugged with tiredness. Her face and his shoulder were slippery with her tears. 'Then when I start, I love you. I love you too much; like a husband. It is punishment for wickedness.'

Tightly embraced they sat, Comfort enfolded, Comfort lost. Her long-heeled thin-boned bare foot dangled like a child's, across his. Their closeness was of grief without blame; because they loved they forgave; their bodies were quiet and unconsidered, their thoughts interlocked. They were onlookers at what they had so heedlessly begun; and now they were tired beyond talk. The lamp, wick turned low, guttered in the shadowed room, its tongue of flame labouring and flickering, the lamp glass which had earlier been bright now black-smudged.

'I will go,' Comfort huskily whispered, pulling away from him a little to push her feet into her sandals which had been waiting there. This time when she slipped out of them she had not left Manango behind. She had come into the room for the first time on sandalled feet.

He released her, and she stood up to pull on her flower-patterned blouse and twist her skirt wrap round her waist. From the bedside table she picked up the envelope with the snapshot and tucked them into her bosom, and fitted her bracelet on her smooth dark arm. He sat watching her swift supple movements and her withdrawn face. She leaned



to touch him; she bent to kiss his hand, which tightened on hers but could not hold it. She disengaged herself and was gone without a sound, leaving him to the room's disarray, the spent lamp, and the exhausted silence.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

'Locked the doors? Got everything?' said Philip, anxious for an early start. The nightwatch had just gone; the after-dawn sky was oyster-coloured. Benedict, stowing his boxing gloves and blue bundles of gear for the evening contest (against The V.C.10 Boy, a tough one) climbed into the back seat beside the ice chest, Edward's library books (*Wuthering Heights* and *Al Capone: His Life*) and Philip's evening suit which must go to the dry-cleaners. Edward sat in front, neatly dressed for Yamina, carrying shipping documents for the bank, and Sachi's current list of required spare parts, in the event that they might have time to call at the Graveyard.

'Quarter to six,' said Philip, switching on the ignition, his mind gloomily on the Christmas shops which opened at eight; two days before Christmas they'd be murder. If he went via the hotel he might catch Marty at breakfast: just for a quick hello and 'Merry Christmas' before Marty left for Echobe — unless he'd already gone. Benedict could be dropped off there to carry his suit to the Three-Hour Cleaners, Yamina's newest service. At the cleaners there was always a crowd of hopefuls who believed the three-hour promise; they often waited with a non-customer street audience, watching garments churning in the glass-walled stomachs of the Continental machinery; the jackets on the tailor's-dummy jacket-presser smoothing and inflating with hot air; and the plastic sheaths descending to envelope the individual finished garments: business suits, Northern robes, Western dresses and yardages of cloth.

'After you've got the suit from the cleaners,' he told Benedict, 'come to meet me at the post-office box. One o'clock. Be there even if you can't collect the suit — we'll go back for it later.'

'Sah,' said Benedict, in his town-going red cap.

'After that,' said Philip, 'we'll see.' Because he had learned not to plan a Yamina expedition too closely; it worked better, usually, if you let the day take its own course, as most often it did. He hoped to get a new or almost-new typewriter from Hassam's Bazaar; that would please Amos and revolutionize the appearance of outgoing correspondence. He might get along to the Graveyard, though the place depressed him: you never knew whether it paid to buy new expensive black-market gear or gamble on cheap old stuff which mightn't last.

They were on the worst part of the road — mud axle-deep in spots; a yellow bog in parts — with the rag-headed pole marking the spot where the frustrated good trail began. They did not discuss it; they ploughed, splashed and lumbered past it and the other pole marker. Benedict muttered at the rough going, and Edward looked straight ahead, or watched Philip's manipulation of gears, brake and acceleration; he wanted to learn to drive; Donkwa had given him a few lessons in the Land-Rover. One day he would have a car.

He said so. 'One day I will buy a car. In one or two years' time.'

'Not for this road,' said Philip. 'You'll only spoil it. You'd be better off with a bicycle.'

That reminded Edward of Daniel who had gone down to Echobe with one of the timber lorries: a special dispensation because it was Christmas time and he had asked for leave to visit a brother. (Obuta had approved and urged it for another reason: the delivery of a carpet-snake and a green mamba to the Echobe Zoo. The driver had protested at first at this unwelcome cargo; Obuta had overridden the man's fears. The snakes were in boxes and Daniel would watch over them.)

'About Daniel,' said Edward, one hand braced against the dashboard; 'Tom told Daniel that if he went past the

Government Block he might see ...' he bounced as the car lurched '... the President.'

'Maybe the President needs a new messenger,' said Philip drily.

Benedict snorted; Edward smiled. Daniel's office cleaning was spasmodic; he alternated between ill-planned feverish action and sloth; he was often late. He disappeared on cycling errands and returned with fanciful excuses for tardiness. He was a moody, vain, unreliable adolescent, Daniel was.

The going became smoother by degrees. Philip, with much on his mind, did not encourage talk. Edward's head was nodding; Benedict's silence was slumbrous. Philip said to Edward, 'Have a nap. It's early — we've a long way to go yet.'

Edward napped, though more decorously than Benedict, who sprawled across the back seat, his head flung back. Philip, content with his own company, drove thinking: M.M.B.A: on the alert for wandering sheep, goats and fowls, and children walking along the forest verge to school: early young starters for distant destinations — small boys in khaki, headloading satchels, exercise books and ink bottles; small girls in blue uniforms with blue berets — skipping through the pearling mist which blurred the outlines of the square mud-block mission buildings behind their neat fences. The road and the woods steamed. The air fanned into the car, damp and tepid. The older pedestrians thought this was cold weather. They muffled their adaptable wraps around their shoulders and heads; one old man walked swathed from chin to ankles in a striped blanket. Farmers carried their crude hoes like projecting rudders on their heads. The well-fleshed market-going women hitched up their pick-a-back infants and balanced maximum loads of plantains and maize whose pressure creased their foreheads into artificial frowns. Tall, white-fezzed Northern nomads stalked along like Moham-

medan grandees; sometimes a child-servant walked behind with his master's load or umbrella. There was always an old crone, a sibyl shape with hooded eyes and dark drapery, carrying a fragment of smouldering wood – her touchstick from the last cooking fire to the next. The early-morning foot-slogging population did not change much; there was always this variety, this interminable plodding progress from A to B or C to A, backwards and forwards throughout the years – the same peasant frieze with the same patient gait.

As the sun strengthened through the mist it transformed the walkers' cloths from drab to brilliant; it vivified the patterned mixtures of orange, yellow and purple, acid green, cerise, turquoise, ultramarine and sienna; and set a gloss like the gloss of black satin on the colour-sheathed African bodies.

Philip drove, seeing all this and every turn of the road as familiar as his freckled hands on the wheel. He waved to small boys, whose mischievous mouths split into grins and set up shrill wavering shouts as he passed. Neither Benedict nor Edward woke. He thought – trying not to think – of Comfort. Thinking, he stiffened his shoulders and drove harder. Christmas to get through: the men's bonuses; a bungalow evening for the senior staff, and a feast of meat, yams and palm wine for the other workers; the season's multiple 'dashes'; Adjako's Dinner and Dance. And afterwards? No use trying to see ahead. The here and now was enough to cope with.

He observed, passing a market-place, an unusualness; some kind of unnaturally early excitement; a crowd dancing and frolicking, flute-tooting, drum-beating and laughing around their palm-wine calabashes. They set up a multi-waving and cachinnation as he passed; they gave him a whooping cheer, as if he were the victor in a race. Their Christmas must have begun early. He thought they must be in a mood to cheer anybody. He waved back, warmed

a little by the overflow of their festive good humour. Edward opened his eyes and closed them again. Benedict hitched himself up on a sighing breath and slumped back to sleep again.

He drove on.

Approaching the outskirts of Yamina he made a wide detour round the main streets to reach the hotel; it was farther, but without traffic except for one overcrowded, horn-blowing bus whose passengers leaned out to call and wave at him. The driver made a gleeful gesture as he passed. Pre-Christmas revelry again; they were all starting early. He wished he could feel half so gay.

Before turning up into the hotel's palm-bordered driveway, he decanted Benedict, saying, 'Post-office – one o'clock. Right?'

'Sah,' said Benedict, wide awake in his red cap, and clutching the suit for the Three-Hour Cleaners.

Drawing up to the hotel, Philip looked along the line of parked vehicles for Marty's car, lest Marty be on the point of departure: it was not there. Edward was sitting up straight, surveying the balconied sugar-loaf architecture; the pink-veined marble pillars and fringed sun-umbrellas set out on the empty terraces. He was studying this habitation as if for future reference; it was one of the prizes waiting at the top of the ladder. But now he prepared to wait in the car and reached to the back seat for one of his books. He would read while waiting.

'No, come inside.' Philip told him. 'Buy a *Despatch* – have a look round. I shan't be long.'

The doorman was not there. They went in between the tall engraved plate-glass doors, and on to the sound-blotting ochre carpet under the jungle-painted ceiling. The shutters were closed behind the news-stand grille: no sign of a *Despatch*; all the grilles were shuttered. The dining-room looked empty. All the life of the foyer was concentrated behind the Reception Desk where three stewards, the

maître d'hôtel and all the clerks stood, heads together, confabulating. This was remarkable. It suggested a strike or some failure of the hotel's nerve-centre.

Leaving Edward in one of the leather chairs Philip approached Reception. The chief clerk detached himself from the huddle.

'I'm looking for Mr Jones,' said Philip. 'Is he still here?'

The clerk seized a ledger, fluttering his pen. He looked all on wires, not at all his usual suave self. 'Mr Jones ... Jones. No, I regret. He has gone. He went last evening.'

'Anything special happening here?' Philip inquired, still puzzled by the shuttered grilles, the out-of-school atmosphere, the clerk's disorganized manner, the continuing excited conclave.

'*Happen?*' The clerk leaned forward on the desk, exuding drama. 'You don't *know*? The news, sir, this morning?'

Edward had left his chair and was standing beside Philip who said, impatient, 'What about the news this morning?'

'The *announcement*,' said the clerk, 'by the radio from Echobe. A coup, a military coup! Army has taken over the Government — they have taken the Broadcasting Station, the Government Block, airport, police headquarters — all. They have taken Dowo. It is liberation — today is liberation!' He ran out of breath. He beamed upon them. 'True!' he said.

'Liberation,' Edward repeated, as if testing this strange word.

'The army?' said Philip, incredulous.

'Oh yes!' The clerk slapped his register shut; he could not stay still. 'A coup — it is a coup. They have done it and it must succeed because ...'

He broke off, open-mouthed. There was a noise of motors thrumming in the driveway; a banging of heavy metal doors. They turned to see the green trucks outside, and two officers striding across the carpet, followed by a mass of soldiers, twenty at least: heavy-booted men in khaki

uniforms, carrying rifles with fixed and shining bayonets.

One of the young, grim-faced officers brushed past Philip and Edward to gain the Reception Desk, from which he peremptorily ordered the staff away under escort through the door labelled Manager. Six of his men stood close by. His fellow officer dispersed soldiers to the dining-room, stairway, front entrance and terrace, while the man at the desk studied the register. He picked up the book, and with his six men disappeared into the lift. Voices, deep, staccato and urgent, sounded from the driveway; and boots thudded on cement. Everything had happened — still was happening — with a speed and laconic force astonishing in this area of rich, easy-paced gracious living. These men looked dangerous; they moved as if they were at war and their lives at stake. The set of their chins and shoulders was militant. They looked as if they might enjoy finding targets for their weapons.

'Come on,' Philip muttered to Edward who stood transfixed. 'we've got to get out ...'

They moved to the door, but a soldier, slanting his weapon, at once stepped forward to bar the way. He snapped, 'No one can leave.' He pointed with his bayonet to the chairs. '*Sit!*'

They sat.

'A coup,' Edward murmured, overwhelmed. He rubbed his head, as if he might be dreaming. 'This morning so early ... we did not know. God be praised if it is true!'

'It's *true*, all right,' said Philip. His thoughts jostled. Adjako. The mill. Benedict. Marty. The timber lorries at Echobe. For the first time he noticed a big sign on an easel in the corner, beside a set peice of velvet-red poinsettias: *We Wish All Our Patrons A Very Merry Christmas and a Prosperous New Year.*

Christmas. A coup; *this* for Christmas.

Edward, perched tensely on the edge of the settee, touched Philip's sleeve. Philip followed his frightened gaze.

A burly soldier standing near them had his rifle cocked. The barrel pointed directly towards them. Philip, feeling a dryness in his mouth, cleared his throat and carefully spoke. 'Your *gun*,' he said, trying to smile, 'would you mind? Can you point it the other way?' He motioned sideways with his hand.

The man fractionally shifted the angle of his rifle but did not reply. He was there to guard the room. He had this special duty to guard it. He could shoot if need be. He had orders, and this was the army's day of days.

'What are they doing – who are they looking for?' Philip asked Edward who sat with his hands clasped hard between his knees, still magnetized by the rifle barrel.

Said Edward huskily, 'Party leaders ... people like that. Ministers. Secretaries ... the kind who stay here. They will be trying to run away.'

'If only', said Philip, 'we could know what's happening.' He meant outside, everywhere.

Here it was plain enough what was happening. The army men, descending so early on the hotel, had caught most of the guests in their rooms; their work upstairs was easy. The guarded lifts were natural traps. A lift wheezed downward now and the doors slid apart. A tubby, shrilly expostulating African carrying a swollen briefcase was prodded out by an escort with rifle at the ready, and hustled across the foyer to the big glass doors and out. A vehicle revved up and roared away.

Edward looked shaken. 'They will put him in jail. They will carry them all away and put them in jail.'

There emerged from the lift in quick succession three others, frightened-looking men in dark suits, clutching at their dignity. One was silent, dazed, his tie hanging loose as if he had been caught half-dressed. One argued in dialect and made frantic imploring gestures. The third came out stumbling, half-collapsed, weeping into a big white handkerchief. And each time the lift door slid open the sentry

stiffened and turned; and his eyes dwelt coldly on the prisoners.

Next from the Manager's office a clerk was brought out: a bow-tied youth, proud-looking, inscrutable; and from the kitchen regions two others, young men, one in dungarees, one bare-chested, barefoot, flinching. The sentries watched them go out to the waiting truck.

'I am sure', Edward murmured, 'they will take Tomi. Each business has one strong Party man in it, or more – men like Tomi. That is how they do ... did it.'

'We'll go back', said Philip, 'as soon as we possibly can.' He was worried about Benedict, how to find him. They would have to look for him in the town. The suit ... the cleaners ... almost funny now, the least thing to bother with. There never would be any Christmas Dinner and Dance, with paper-hatted Party guests hobnobbing over the champagne buckets. Adjako and his list of V.I.P. guests. What a shock for Adjako! What a day for him, and for others of his kind, glued to their radios, waiting to hear and know for certain, and thinking hard about self-preservation!

Edward touched his sleeve again. The officer emerged from the lift, followed by his men. He carried a swagger stick. His eyes and buttons gleamed with authority and satisfaction, and the great challenge of this day. With rapid authoritative steps he advanced to the middle of the carpet with his stick pointed upwards at the large gilt-framed portrait of Angyhoma Dowo. He said sharply to his men, 'Remove that.'

A step-ladder was brought. One of the men handed his rifle to another and climbed up, a focus for the room's concentrated attention. Clumsily or deliberately he jerked at the picture, which crashed askew to the floor, shattering the frame. The officer came forward three paces and with his toecap contemptuously nudged the picture. 'Take it away. Throw it out.'

Two men did the job. One carried the portrait, the other the broken frame. It was an extraordinary moment which needed an audience, and Philip thought the officer, whose smooth-tailored back was eloquent, was enjoying their presence.

The officer turned then, as if seeing them for the first time. 'You can go,' he said brusquely. A sentry came forward to unfasten the door.

They left; and at the end of the driveway saw Benedict approaching, still carrying Philip's suit parcel under his arm. He climbed into the car. He was almost incoherent. 'Army lorries are every place ... people dance in the streets ... no chance for the cleaners. No fight tonight, it is off. Soldiers and army cars by the post-office, banks, at railways, every place. In Echobe big fighting, they say ... they were shooting early today in Echobe ... since five o'clock ... they killed some people. They have caught the Great ... they have taken Dowo ... They arrest him and carry him away, nobody know where ...'

Then, regardless of Philip, he and Edward went into a spate of the vernacular; their words tumbling out, question and answer and hissing exclamation. At the wheel Philip was himself engrossed, for they were approaching a great crowd, mostly in white – the colour of rejoicing – and seething out from the pavements into the roadway. White shorts and shirts, cloths and head-wraps, and a snowstorm of white bandanas and handkerchiefs, waving. 'Liberation!' they shouted. 'A coup! Down with Dowo!'

They pranced round the car, laughing into the windows. Edward leaned out and spoke to them. Their arms flourished and their feet jigged; they looked as if they would dance all day. 'They are filled with happiness,' said Edward, radiant. 'They are saying this is a Christmas as never before,' said Benedict.

Slowly they progressed to a khaki-manned road-block half-way along the main street to the post-office centre.

There was a line of cars ahead. Soldiers were strictly questioning the occupants, leaning into interiors, searching, scrutinizing papers. When they came to Philip they motioned him to get out along with Edward and Benedict; they inspected the empty ice chest; they pulled open the blue bundle and the suit parcel, and rummaged in the boot. 'Who are these?' they asked Philip, pointing to Edward and Benedict. 'My chief clerk and my cook-steward,' he told them, while clerk and steward stood respectfully under the eyes of a militia empowered to collar and thrust suspects into such a wagon as was drawn up near by: a truck whose body was a steel-mesh cage. A number of captives were cowering behind the mesh, like wretched dogs, Philip thought, in a dog-catcher's van. It was going to be a day for rough justice.

But it was also to be an ordinary day. A street-corner loudspeaker adjured the townspeople to continue as usual, to stay at their posts, not to desert their work in the shops and offices, not to block the roads or gather in groups in the streets or demonstrate. The post-office was guarded; likewise the bank, where Philip left Edward while he hurried with Benedict to do his essential shopping. The shops were almost empty; many people must be at home listening to the bulletins. The amplifier which had played 'Silent Night' and 'Hark the Herald Angels' was mute, Father Christmas's throne was empty; his red cap and white beard lay there as if he had hastily abdicated. No one was buying tins of plum pudding; nor was there even any customer competition at the drinks counter where the beer, for once, was not 'finished'.

'No need then for the Joy and Peace,' said Benedict, carrying a second headload of shopping to the car.

In fact, as they later noticed, the Joy and Peace Bar was shut, and Edward, spotting the padlocks, said briefly, 'They have taken him.'

Philip, leaving Edward and Benedict with the car in

Adjako's courtyard, went up in the lift to the Adjako flat. He rang the bell; no one came. He rang again and the door opened slowly, only enough to reveal Mrs Adjako's anxious face. At once she looked relieved and opened the door wide. 'Mr Connor! I did not know it was you. I was listening to the radio.'

'Fantastic news,' said Philip.

'It was a great surprise,' she said. 'They say it is certain now. We are so happy.'

Mr Adjako appeared behind her. He looked so self-absorbed that Philip took a step away from the door saying, 'I thought I ought to look in ... I'm sure the Manango telephone isn't working. But you're busy ...'

'Oh, I am very busy,' said Adjako, filling up the space Mrs Adjako had vacated. 'This is a day I did not think ever to see. *Everybody* is rushing about. There are so many things to think about. So many ...' He tapped his head, indicating the pressures. 'The telephone is not working. The army is in charge at the telephone exchanges.' He pulled himself together. 'Will you come inside for a drink to celebrate this event? There cannot be any Christmas party, not now. All such arrangements are off, you understand.'

Philip understood. Adjako's guest-list had the wrong political flavour. There could be no more parties for that Party. He said, 'I must get back to Manango.'

'You are right — you must go quickly,' said Adjako. 'I will telephone soon — when there is a chance.' He came out into the hallway, and pressed the lift button. 'Mr Connor, it is a day we will remember all our lifetimes: this day of liberation. You know Dowo has been detained and all the ministers taken. They are rounding up all the Party leaders and secretaries. The Yamina Party Headquarters building has been taken over. They have been very efficient. Now our troubles will be over. We will start a clean sheet. We will go ahead fast.'

It sounded fine; it also sounded like Adjako adjusting

his equilibrium, and preparing to make the best of it.

The automatic lift silently materialized and Philip stepped into it. Something more might be expected, though it was and sounded like an afterthought. 'Oh — I should say: Merry Christmas, Mr Adjako!'

Adjako accepted this graciously as a correctness. It was what people always said. 'Thank you. I hope so.' But he did not look merry, and he padded away before the lift door closed.

There was a sign in the downgoing lift: *Shop At Hassam's Bazaar For All Manner Of Delightful Seasonal Gifts*. Philip remembered the typewriter, and Sachi's list for the Graveyard — none of it mattered. It was right never to plan too closely. This day had with a vengeance taken its own course.

The office looked bare without Dowo's portrait. Edward had removed it, saving the glass and the frame, however; he never threw away anything useful. The desk calendar motto for December 24th said: *The Better the Day, the Better the Deed*. Beside it the *Despatch* headline in outside type proclaimed MILITARY COUP: DOWO UNDER ARREST. After one day of editorial silence the newspaper in one folded sheet spoke with a new voice under headings: LIBERATION FROM THE DICTATOR: A MESSAGE TO THE PEOPLE.

The mill was quiet, only the office staff at work, and they would go home at noon. It was an unreal morning with a sense of hangover; no one could sustain the high emotions of the previous day and evening. The village had been dancing all night; the bungalow open late to all comers; some main-road Company vehicles had been commandeered; Tomi had been taken. The small police jails in the region were full. Rumours ran and smouldered like wildfire — supplementing the bungalow radio bulletins which were interspersed with martial music and couched

in coup language. 'The Army Commander will speak to the people at nine p.m.; all communications will shortly be resumed.' Then the Commander, a deep-voiced new authority: 'The army has obtained control of all key services and the former President is in detention. The police in all districts are co-operating. We shall unrelentingly seek out all Party members who have brought misfortune upon this country and oppressed the people. We shall do our duty to obtain and maintain justice. Our cause is just in the eyes of the world.'

In the eyes of Manango the news, as Joseph said, was 'past belief, past everything'. The village silently watched Tomi, a dejected figure in his blue dungarees, taken away in a truck, with other Party men from near-by villages. The round-up continued. Tomi's assistant in the powerhouse had been closely questioned, but he was not a Group Secretary, not even a Party member. Philip, concerned with the generators, was thankful.

To the surprise of many, the buses to Yamina were still running, and Benedict at breakfast had reported the early departure of Comfort with Rose. He let this information fall in a matter-of-fact way while pouring coffee. 'I saw them take the bus. They have gone to visit another sister in some town past Yamina. They take the machine for sewing.'

'You always know everything,' Philip observed, wondering, however, if Benedict did. Probably he knew most of it; he would have found out, in his fashion.

'This house,' said Benedict, severely surveying the marks on the carpet, 'after all the people last night, I will clean proper. They break six glasses.' He added, 'One was a *best* glass. They drink too much.'

'Such things', said Philip, wearily, 'don't matter.' He did not want to be bothered about best glasses.

Now at his desk, while he cleaned up the Pending tray, the mill lad who in Daniel's absence had taken over the

office sweeping, errand-running and tea-making, came in with the tray and Spode teapot. Philip said, 'You've chipped the spout – look at it.'

The boy, who was small and anxious, looked. 'I never do that. It was so already. Somebody else do that.'

Philip waved him away. Details, always details, incongruous flotsam, crowding in, obscuring the view. If only it were possible to have a day – even one morning – free of these minor exasperations. At the moment he felt as tour-worn as if he had been at Manango for a full stretch; but this was because he had slept badly, and dreamed of Comfort. His sleep had been broken by the sound of drums and by reaction to the strange day and the hectic evening in that crowded front room so full of radio, rumour and celebrant staff: Donkwa, Sachi, Edward, Joseph, Amos, Bantio, the head sawyer, the saw-doctor – anyone, in fact, who happened to be passing; and a few who came in on the scent of free beer, and needed somewhere to focus. Obuta did not come. He never came to the bungalow.

All morning the office telephone had been silent; now it rang.

'Adjako Timber Company – Connor here,' said Philip.

'Manango? Manango?' fussed a highly-strung female voice. 'Are you hearing me?'

'I hear you.'

Mr Adjako broke in, booming. 'Can you hear me, Mr Connor?'

'Good morning,' said Philip. 'I'm glad you could get through –'

'Trouble,' said Adjako, breathing hard. 'A message from Echobe. This is very bad news. It will be a shock.'

At once Philip imagined Adjako on the point of arrest, or flight. He steadied himself to receive instructions or an S.O.S. Adjako would never battle with the telephone today without serious reason.



'Daniel, office messenger,' said Adjako, 'has been killed, shot dead yesterday in the fighting at Government Block when they took the President. It was a bullet which struck back from the wall. He was in the line of fire with several others. He should not have been there. The lorry driver has messaged me through the police. It is a tragedy. You must tell Obuta ... I will come to Manango as soon as I can ...'

Obuta received the news. He stood stubbornly unbelieving for a moment. 'No, it was not Daniel. There is a mistake. We will hear it was a mistake.' His face lost firmness and his eyes were glassy. He had to be persuaded; persuading him was a miserable business. Then he said, 'He was too young. It was I who said he should go. I asked you myself for the permission.'

'Don't blame yourself,' Philip said, himself stricken. He saw the boy lying in the street, a body, not a boy. He could imagine the whine and crack and confusion of gunfire and the brief amazed look on the lad's face. It was intolerable. Always there were innocent casualties: old people and youngsters like babes in the wilderness, expendable in the path of violence.

'I would like to help. Tell me if there is anything I can do,' Philip told Obuta, as he had told Donkwa on the night of that other accident.

Obuta shook his head. 'No. You can do nothing. I will go at once to Echobe to bring him back. I will see Mr Adjako on my way.'

'I am terribly sorry,' Philip said. He reached for his wallet. 'You might need some extra money —'

Obuta regarded the offered notes. 'No, I will see Mr Adjako.' He drew in a deep uneven breath. 'I will go to fetch Daniel home by tomorrow. I will travel tonight.'

Christmas Day was the strangest Philip had ever known. From jubilation the village had turned to mourning; though

they still awaited Daniel's body they made a preliminary procession of black woe, and wailed as they walked to Obuta's house. Within the bungalow the still-confused radio broadcast carols, military music, news flashes and a long explanation of new regulations in this State of Emergency. In the middle of the morning a present arrived from the Queen Mother: a turkey, as lively and furious as Chief Wallulas's rooster had been; but this great creature came in a close-fitting plaited basket. Its gobbling cry rent the air in the back compound, while Philip, not caring what he ate, sat down alone at noon to one of Benedict's peppery omelettes. Benedict, having attended Midnight Mass at the Catholic Mission and received his Christmas 'dash' from Philip, was pressing forward to an early 'off'; he looked half-asleep already, and cleared the table without any of his usual relaying of gossip or conjecture. Everything had been sufficiently — even too much — marvelled at, discussed, listened to and grieved over; and now there was weariness: a need to slacken off, tidy away, sleep and gain strength for whatever was ahead.

In his chair Philip began one of the books Helen had sent, not intending to evoke nostalgia: a book about fishing, with colour plates of northern lochs and streams and coves and mountain tarns; one of those books which invite an expatriate's homesickness. He set it down and picked up a magazine whose cover was a design of holly and ivy. The turkey gobbled incessantly — it was a noise with which you could not spend this kind of day. The glossy pages filled with unreal advertisements gave him no pleasure. It was then that he decided to drive into Yamina. Swiftly he changed his clothes, packed an overnight case (because the hotel booking for this night was probably still valid), left a note for Benedict and got out the car. Remembering the drinks — Yamina must be bone dry by now — he went back to pack a small carton.

From the hidden heart of the village he heard the people,

their cadences of family grief rising and falling. The roadway was empty. He looked at the crooked-angled Adjako Timber Company sign; they'd have to reset it – it increasingly offended his eye.

Once more he set out towards the bad road; and it was at least something to be doing this – heading towards town with some positive destination: towards the club; towards some group which included Britons who would welcome him in. Or it might be away from solitude; away from the aching loss of Comfort; away from the village and his Manango self.

The hotel had a room for him – one like Marty's. The place, though quiet, had recovered its poise, as hotels do, and been quick to hang another picture, a neutral still life, where Dowo's had been. The foyer grilles were unshuttered, the foyer serene, and the Reception Desk an island of cancelled reservations.

The informal club, however, was crowded. The pianist, abandoning carols, was thumping out the Coast favourites: 'Green Grow the Rushes-O' and 'Everybody Loves Saturday Night'. Some members were in full singing voice under the paper streamers; others danced. The Dowo picture had been banished, leaving a dusty outline, and no one had filled in the space. The bar had long since run dry but the tables had their private supplies to which the stewards ferried water jugs. Hassam and his tribe sat there; also Banks, the Stones and the Carters. They looked pleased to see him; they pulled up a chair, called for another glass and welcomed him in; and everyone went on talking, as if they would never stop, about the coup.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Mr Adjako, choosing between the swivel chair behind the desk and the one for visitors, this time had taken the managerial seat as befitted the extreme gravity of this day's business. The door was closed against the main office. Adjako's finger tittuped on the thick New Year desk calendar: January 20th: (motto: *It's An Ill Wind That Blows Nobody Any Good.*)

'Forty-eight hours,' he said, 'The Immigration people telephoned to say so. It is an order. You have forty-eight hours, no more. I have arranged the booking. I came as fast as I could. There was nothing I could do. They are new men – I don't know them, either at Customs or Immigration. They would not listen. Mr Connor, I have never had such a load on my mind as in this past week.'

Philip, in the visitor's chair, shared this load of worry, first the heavy Customs duty on the crane, and now the entry-permit palaver.

'So much worry,' Adjako repeated, smiting his palm with his fist. 'It is necessary to exercise extreme care. Everything has happened at an awkward time. It will mean a heavy cost for the crane duty, a loss. I would not believe they would put up the Customs duty to forty per cent. Before I can get the crane I must pay two thousand eight hundred and eighty dibis which is the duty on the crane cost and the freight. The freight alone was six hundred pounds. All out of the blue. The Company cannot afford it. The Company is in difficulty. I am being frank with you.'

That, Philip thought, I doubt. He believed in the difficulty but suspected withheld reasons. Adjako's entire financial structure was bound to be going through a period of complex strain and overhaul. The new Committees of Investigation were systematically inquiring into the overseas bank

accounts of wealthy importers, exporters and detainees — the Right Honourable Boko-Shumi, for instance. Daily the new-style *Despatch* printed with relish the exhaustive details of new scandals, while the committees probed and the heads rolled.

During this vigorous season of new brooms and harsh auditors every fresh-manned non-Party government department was busy cleaning up irregularities, winkling out suspicious evidence and regaling the populace with dissertations on the iniquities, the corruptions and black culpabilities of Dowo and the old regime. Nothing any longer was taken for granted, contracts, signatures, accounts — every old-regime document was under scrutiny.

Mr Connor's entry permit for example. Who was this Mr P. Connor, General Manager, who had signed this application for funds to be made available from the Echobe State Bank to Hamburg for a second-hand crane? ('They are very thorough now,' said Adjako. 'They have teams checking everything.') There was no official record of an entry or work permit for Mr Connor. (His passport showed only temporary work-authorizations signed by an ex-minister's ex-secretary, both men now in detention, under investigation.) A proper application made now for a valid entry permit would have been properly refused. It was refused. It was all irregular. Mr Adjako was in grave error for ever having allowed this repeated irregularity.

'I was heavily criticized and reprimanded,' confessed Adjako. 'You understand my hands are tied.'

He blinked at the picture this suggested; these days the use of handcuffs was all too general.

'*Forty-eight hours*,' said Philip, trying to take this in. 'You've actually got my flight ticket ...' He had an odd hunch that he was being hustled, not only by the Immigration Office but by Adjako, who would wish to show himself newly virtuous, a good citizen who had been misled by former corrupt bureaucrats but was eager now to fall in line

with every new edict; and who, balancing his threatened budget, might now wish to retrench by removing the onus of a European General Manager's substantial salary. He said, 'What about the Company? You'll have the crane here — we've got some excellent orders. You ought to be able to improve on production and finances.'

'We will try,' said Adjako. 'Obuta must take over. I spoke to him in Yamina last night — after the first talk with Immigration. He has agreed.'

'Has he, now?' said Philip. 'You didn't expect him to refuse, surely?' He felt the give-away hot flush in his face; he must watch his temper or this interview would end explosively, to his own detriment. 'I wish you had talked this over with me first, Mr Adjako.'

'No time,' said Adjako, spreading out his hands helplessly. 'I was obliged to act on the spot. I thought they might do this. Somebody must take over your position. This is an emergency, Mr Connor, entirely due to unforeseen circumstances.'

'I do have a contract with you,' Philip reminded him.

'Ah yes,' Adjako reached down to open his briefcase and bring out the contract. 'I have it here. You will recall this clause ...' he ran his finger down the numbered paragraphs '... which says: "The contract is subject to cancellation should there be any alterations of Governmental regulations concerning the employment of expatriates." There it is. I will compensate you because I could not give you notice.'

He put the contract down. He mused sorrowfully. 'It is not my doing, you see. It is like an act of God.' He bent to whip out another paper. 'Your salary account — your balance and leave pay and compensation; if you will sign and bring it to me in Yamina on your way to Echobe. I will arrange then for you to be paid in U.K.; I have more funds there than here at this time.'

Philip regarded him: the astonishing swift-moving Adjako, impossible even now to dislike. It was an experience to

know him; he was like a walking conundrum, peculiarly fascinating. Once again, everything had been arranged.

'Kazzal,' Philip said with distaste. 'What's happened to Kazzal?'

'Oh, he cannot return here,' said Adjako. 'They would let him come but it is better for him to stay in Hamburg just now.'

'Friend of Dowo — they'd be delighted to see him. He'd be locked up if he came. *All* the committees would love to investigate him.' That was certain. And if certain committees probed Kazzal's multiple manipulations with and for the Party, small fry like Adjako would surely be involved.

Following this thought Adjako patted his damp forehead with his handkerchief, causing an astringent whiff of Florida Water to scent the anxiety-laden air. 'He has other interests ... Every man knows his own business best.' He glanced down at his beautiful German wrist-watch. 'I have so many things to do now; and you do not have much time for your preparations. Also there is the handing-over. I suggest you call a meeting with Senior Staff and Obuta as soon as possible. I would stay myself for this but I must rush ...'

'You're trusting me a lot,' said Philip.

They looked at one another; it was true.

'Mr Connor, I know you to be one hundred per cent reliable,' said Adjako. 'Obuta will give you full co-operation.'

He called the driver to carry his briefcase, and led the way down the steps to the Mercedes. He glanced across the mill yard where the work was going well. The gantry crane was, in its fashion, functioning; the men were somehow nursing and bullying it along, keeping it going. Soon, when the new crane was installed, Sachi would take the worn-out gantry to the Graveyard; Sachi looked forward to that.

'My car will be ready to take you to Echobe,' said Adjako. 'I will see you in Yamina in the morning tomorrow.' He corrected himself. 'No — the day *after*

tomorrow.'

So for once, thought Philip, it's not 'tomorrow' when things really happen. Not *manana* this time, but the day after.

It was a crowded interval. There was little time to be glad or sorry. The clock carried him to and through the meeting which the Senior Staff, apart from Obuta, appeared not to enjoy. Donkwa, summoned from the forest, was with Edward, Sachi and Bantio, noticeably quiet. The new Power-house Superintendent had nothing to contribute. The meeting took no more than half an hour, and afterwards a widespread, thoughtful silence hung over the main office; even Amos's typing on the new fast machine was punctuated by long pauses.

The yard soon had the news; it percolated quickly among the tally clerks and drivers, the sawyers, greasers, fitters, lorry crews, carpenters, masons — everybody. Although Philip could not hear what they said among themselves he knew it was their topic for the day, as they bent their heads together over it and extracted from it all that it meant to each worker in terms of wages or prospects. Obuta walked and talked with a new energy among the men. Philip did not join him in that arena. He was too busy with personal concerns which his new short timetable dictated. He was all action; he would think about it, relive it all, later.

Benedict in the bungalow was bewildered. He said, 'It *cannot* be so.' His manner suggested that this was another kind of coup, more personal. Then he said, 'You will come back. You will take leave and then come back, and I will work for you again.'

'If I come back it won't be to Manango,' Philip told him, while writing out Benedict's reference papers, along with the testimonials Edward, Amos and Bantio had privately requested; and adding a note addressed to Marty, asking

him to find Benedict a good job.

'I can get work for the Perfect Biscuit Factory until you return,' said Benedict, carrying the suitcases out to air in the afternoon sun. 'The new manager will take me.'

This was not remarkable, for of course the new manager was Comfort's man, prematurely recalled from Birmingham, flown back to replace the detained manager who had been a Party Secretary. A week after the coup Manango had welcomed him home: the local son, the success story; most certainly the 'man for big work' of whom Comfort's soothsayer had spoken. So the Connor testimony to Benedict's quick intelligence and good character might be Open Sesame to a job under the management of Comfort's husband. Also Comfort might put in a useful word; she knew Benedict.

Philip, busy at the desk, said, 'I know you won't need to worry about a job.' He was busy tidying up his own bills and letters. Muller's snapshot was still there in the corner of his blotter. He dropped it into his briefcase. He couldn't throw it away.

'When you come back,' Benedict insisted, 'Mr Jones will know where I am. I will message him ...' He said determinedly, 'I know you will come back.'

'All right,' said Philip, 'we'll leave it like that.' It was the more comfortable way.

When the suitcases were packed, and the cases — to follow by sea — had been nailed down for transport by lorry to Echobe, there came the worst part of it: the goodbyes; the handshakes; the pulling up of roots which were not tenuous. Edward had come, then Bantio and Sachi, separately, not saying much, with a sad formality. Donkwa was the last; arriving late, after the ten o'clock power shut-down, to sit by lamplight, as he had done before, holding his glass of schnapps.

'So it is Obuta,' Donkwa said. 'He is Manager now. It is what Obuta has wanted.'

There was no denying it. 'But this is better than having a stranger, isn't it? You know Obuta. The village knows him.'

'I know him,' said Donkwa. 'And there is something else I know. There is no way now to make you stay here, so I can tell you what you do not know.' He glanced over his shoulder to the dark veranda where the night-watchman sat. No one would overhear. 'Because they feared — after the road palaver, the accident and the children sickness — they wanted you to go — you were not good for the village. That is what they did because they feared. They are so *foolish*.' He spat out the word.

It no longer mattered. The suitcases and fishing-rods stood there. The room was swept clear of everything personal. He was ready for the early morning departure, and this was only one more reason for it.

Donkwa said, 'In the village Obuta has special power; more than an ordinary man. I tell you this because, as you know, I am a Baptist. I like truth. You have tried to help the people, but they would not let you. Obuta would not let them forget the road.'

'What you say is very strange,' said Philip, 'but I believe you.'

Later, when Donkwa had gone, he sat for a time thinking about the entry permit and the crane, and Adjako and Manango: all of it strange, but the prospect of home, England in late January, still less credible. It was an effort, even now, to picture himself sitting in the aircraft, homeward bound through the cloud meringues, the acres of cotton wool, over the beige carpet of the Sahara and the blue crinkled Channel, and the dark, winter curtain over England. One more man in a business suit — flying home ...

Benedict was coming with him to Yamina; he would return later by bus. The suitcases and fishing rods were in the back of the car. The house was locked. They were ready

in the after-dawn light to drive for the last time over the bad road. Then Obuta's Volkswagen drew up and he approached: a tall strong man who did not bend easily – but he bent to the car window. 'You are on your way, I see,' he said.

'Just off,' said Philip heartily.

'Before you go I would like a word' – he nodded his head across the road – 'I have something to give to you.'

'Oh?' So Obuta did not want Benedict to witness this offering; it might be some farewell 'dash', some minor salve to conscience, impossible to know what. He left the car and followed Obuta round the Volkswagen.

Obuta brought from his pocket a small object. It was the toy crane, the lucky piece; and Philip stared at it, too astounded to speak.

'It is yours,' said Obuta stiffly. 'It was in Daniel's pocket on Liberation Day. I found it then. If I had given it back to you before, everyone would know Daniel was a thief. Now you are leaving I am returning it to you.'

Philip shook his head, wordless.

'It is your property,' Obuta persisted. 'You said it was of value to you alone.'

'You keep it,' said Philip. 'I give it to you.'

'You give it to me?' said Obuta.

'I said so; I *give* it to you.'

Obuta was silent for a moment, thoughtful. Then he said, 'I accept.'

In Obuta's strong dark hand the bright-coloured object, so perfect in detail, looked more than ever an enigma. It was a white man's former treasure. The African had once coveted it; now he freely possessed it. The white man no longer valued it. It was something impossible ever to jettison.

Obuta pondered. 'Is it for luck?'

'I don't know,' said Philip.

He honestly did not know.

As if reading Philip's mind, Adjako said. 'So much rebuilding. It has been costly, and is not finished. Independence has caused a heavy financial strain. It cannot all be done at once. It is necessary for us to tighten our belts for some time. We must practise austerity. We have a pinch which must be overcome.'

Amazing! Adjako's belt must be a good forty inches round, with that enviable crayfish lunch inside it. He certainly was not reading the *Despatch* editorials with any reference to himself. Though it must be difficult to take them seriously when only a thin black line separated the editor's increasingly Spartan homilies from the usual picture of the gracious, ascetic Dowo, surrounded by portly henchmen, the champagne bucket only slightly blurred in the background.

It was hot on the roof. The air trembled. The longer you looked down at the town, the less substantial it seemed. Its farther reaches blurred and floated like a mirage. Pearls of sweat shone on Adjako's forehead; Philip felt the trickle of perspiration on his back. 'I must get on now,' said Adjako, turning on his heel. 'I must rush to an appointment.'

He had a knack of gathering speed like this, without warning; he had his own unusual pace. They were swiftly back in the office. Adjako was pulling his sleeves down, deftly buttoning the cuffs, straightening his tie and plucking his jacket from the hatstand. Then, having shouted for the steward to carry down the roll of cloth, he locked his briefcase and was on his way.

'The axle ...' said Philip, close behind.

'The caretaker will hold it for you when the taxi comes back. I have given instructions.'

Adjako's driver rose from an upturned soap box in the margin of black shade near the dustbins. The Mercedes waited, polished and richly immaculate. The driver opened the car door. Adjako did not shake hands, but settled

himself inside. 'Telephone me on Monday. Be sure to telephone. I would like to know your progress.'

'I'll try,' said Philip. 'To phone, I mean.'

So that was that, and none of it profitable. Philip in his own car was displeased by his reflection in the driving mirror. He looked as he felt, tense and frowning. It was some distance through the old part of Yamina to the Railway Workshop. The yard lay, smoke-hazed, ahead: grimy rolling stock, glinting track, oil-puddled sleepers, a wasteland of cinders and gravel. Strings of flat trucks loaded with logs and sawn timber waited for the long haul to port. Nothing moved, except — with dreamlike slowness — a diesel engine carrying a gang of workers in greasy caps and blackened singlets. He picked his way across the tracks and over rough ground to a large wooden building where, in the open doorway, a man with a clean shirt and a look of alert, youthful authority stood. 'I am looking for a Mr Akanse,' Philip told him.

'I am Akanse!' said the man who, with his curly, dandified sideburns and crisp collar, stood out from this Saturday afternoon miasma of heat and silence — a man truly alive.

Philip earnestly posed his question. He explained the emergency and mentioned Marty's name.

'Depending on the nature of the break, we may be able to weld it to keep you going until you can order a new axle. Or we may have a rod of the right gauge to make a new one. I can manage one or the other, I *think*, by tomorrow. I could do it perhaps by working on it tonight.' Akanse gave him a particular look. 'I would see to it personally. By my personal attention.'

'Then I hope to get it to you in about an hour,' said Philip, patting his pocket.

Observant of this movement Akanse touched his elbow. 'Come inside, please. We can talk better.'

And there, in earnest of the full payment, the encouraging