

Draft 1 (e)
Bamenda,

16th July 1962

Please excuse the pencil; I am writing in bed where I've been for five days – the direct consequence of spending a couple of days in Mamfe. I suppose it was worth it, since I can say that I have seen the forest, and what looked like a hippo too: I've walked over the Cross river – two horribly insecure suspension bridges built by the Germans fifty years ago, hanging over a sixty foot gorge. Nothing to hold on to, and only 2 planks in the middle, through the cracks of which glimpses of the torrent below – the rest rotten! Hawsers almost rusted away. Ghastly noise of rushing water in one's ears; the bridge actually swaying as one walks and unnerving rifts in the planks, bits and pieces of decayed wood crumbling and splintering. And nothing to hold on to but a single limp wire that leaned out away from the bridge! Ghastly. I had to look straight ahead. Which was difficult because in the last half-century the thing had got somehow crooked. And halfway across, the worst thing possible happened: I stopped. Dry ache in the throat, I turned to jelly as the full impact of the yawning cliffs impressed itself on me. I thought I would have to kneel down and crawl over – and I still had to get back! But there were some women waiting at the other end, laden with pickins and baskets, so I had to go on. I made the crossing several times after that, and eventually got sufficiently used to it to take a photograph from it. And did I mention the crocodiles basking below?

But the net result of all this is that I have got Dengue Fever – or one of the innumerable plagues that haunt the Mamfe Basin. I've had fever since Wednesday, and today, Monday, with my head clear, my entire body is consumed with a burning rash. It is expected that the 3rd Act will bring a sensation as of one's bones breaking in pieces. And for this little number there is no remedy.

Since yesterday, fresh symptoms as of Plague have begun to manifest themselves in my groin, and now I would be at all surprised if all my finger nails started falling out.

I shall be leaving here at the end of the month, going to Enugu (via Mamfe!) and taking a train up to Kano. My uncle Alan very kindly sent me a long letter and an address in Khartoum that I shall certainly follow up. But he no longer knows anyone in either Cairo or Khartoum, so I hope I hear something from Mme. Nachat. Diddy says that if I want to use the house on Hydra I can, and this will solve accommodation in Athens. Just at this minute there's nothing I would like better than to get back the quickest possible way, but I know that I would forever regret losing this opportunity. It will probably be the last bit of travelling I will do for a very long time, and I do love it so. Peter Fayre (the very nice American doctor here) is going to give me a cholera injection next Saturday, and I've got a new supply of Nivaquine. I've been given one or two addresses in Kano, and I hope that one might lead to another. Also, in places like Cairo, the consulates will be very useful, if I tell them that I am virtually hitching from West Africa.

I've been held up somewhat with this wretched Dengue Fever; I was only able to get up for the first time yesterday, and I'm still very weak at the knees and easily tired.

I've been indoors all day drawing up a couple of posters for the Fete that Didy is organizing for the Mbingo Leper Colony, and listening to lovely records: Bach B minor Mass, and Peter Pears and Julian Bream singing Lute Songs. It is wonderful to think that I'm not too far from all that.

We have been seeing something of a very tragic family recently: a Mrs. Nono, with four children and one on the way. She is the English wife of a Camerounian who was brought out here, dubiously and against the advice of all her friends and relations, about a year ago. She is a Cockney (with, we've heard, a prison record) and, poor thing, is completely crushed by circumstances. Her husband is a rogue, and is obviously interested in the children only in so far as they will bring him a good dowry later on. He would like to keep them with here. But the wretched wife is obviously at the end of her tether, penniless, without friends, and with her slatternly ways, a complete enigma to the Africans, who expect from white people the immaculate decorum of senior service individuals. So now there is a move to spirit Mrs. Nono back to England without the knowledge of her husband, and we have the Consul coming up here tomorrow night to arrange the flight across the border. The difficulty is the unborn child: Mrs. Nono doesn't know when it's due, and Peter Fayre can't be sure. All that's certain is that last time she had a haemorrhage that almost killed her. The only hope for the children is that they might find help from the Welfare State in England, their father is a washout, and the mother, although devoted to them, is simple and hopeless. None of us think that they would survive if left in the Camerouns.

August 4th

Still here, but off, with any luck, midnight Tuesday. I'm going up to Benin by car with Ayang Beeley, a charming girl who is the African wife of the D.O.. I hope you will have a chance of seeing both of them when they come to England next year. This will give me a chance of seeing the Niger in flood, which should be impressive, and also more of West Africa. Benin is where the wonderful bronzes come from. I'm obliged to go up to Lagos in order to get all my visas in order, and from there it's easy enough to get up to Kano by train.

I had a couple of days at Bambui that ended in disaster. On the first evening I went out by myself to enjoy the sun. I walked up into the hills and climbed towards a narrow combe down which a little stream ran. It got more overgrown, and eventually, shaded by flamboyants and hanging bushes, I reached a small reservoir with a little waterfall dropping from its sluice. It looked delicious and I was very hot, so I stripped and placed my clothes on a kind of bollard with taps let into it, and stepped gingerly towards the curtain of water. A frightful repetition of something that had happened before: there, among the glistening stones, like a length of garter thrown casually down, slender and beady-eyed, stirred a young black cobra. I shivered back as though I had been given an electric shock: so near to my outstretched foot! Shaking violently, I clambered back into my clothes and gradually managed to control myself. I peered round the bollard, and the snake was still there, where I had left it. I was curious to see how long it was, so I stepped up, keeping a few feet of distance, and dropped a lump of moss on its head. It didn't seem to move, so I dropped another, and then a little piece of wood. At that, it suddenly galvanized itself, its pearly throat erect, eyes flashing, displaying unlimited potentials of malice. So I leapt

away and fled from the idyllic spot, leaving it to the silent regency of the cobra. The next day I went for a long fifteen mile trek in the mountains above the plain of Ndop. It was misty when we left at 7.30, and so the views I had been looking forward to were hidden. Pat Hawkins, who took me, is the in the Survey Dept., loaned by the UN, and his task was to dig pits along the way, so as to sample the profiles of the soil. We had no maps: only aerial photographs and an altimeter. Our highest point was 7000', and we fell to 3000' It was all quite wild, only occasionally the wide prairies running with white Foulani cattle and herds of horses. Lonely little encampments, two or three huts, humped like igloos, and roofed merely with dried grass. We came across a deserted crater, on the roof of the world, and we stood on its lip and looked at its marshy floor, a great expanse of waving grass, untrampled year in year out, (in which a horse would founder, we were told), spilling at its outlet into what should have been a heavenly view of the mountains and the plain but, that afternoon, was only a vague haze merging with the grey sky. Later on I slipped on the muddy path and twisted my leg, so that I had to be carried most of the remaining distance.

It is extraordinary that this period of my life is almost at an end. Just by me I have the menu of our last dinner on the Changuinola, signed with all our names, and it brings back with unfaded immediacy the moment when little Fiona, late one night on the deck, shouted "Land!", and we saw a single light of Africa far away in the dark; and then next day the extraordinary feeling, as we looked through our binoculars and saw the serrated horizons of giant trees silhouetted to the East; and the slender, leaf-like canoes of the fishermen; and the wonderful dawn as we nosed up the creeks past Casement's Isle, awaking the shrieks of birds from the depths of the forest whose walls we brushed. Conrad can describe that aspect of Africa marvellously. It's all unforgettable and almost incommunicable. If you should feel any doubt as to what it has brought me, I would say that it is one of the most wonderful things that ever happened to me. I wonder if I shall ever come back! I suddenly feel it's awful to be leaving so soon.

I did finally get away. From Benin I made my way to Lagos and thence to Kano where all my plans unfortunately unravelled. I went down with recurrent fever once more, and it was obvious that I could not risk staying any longer, let alone a trans-continental trip across the desert to Khartoum in a mammy-wagon. I boarded a plane for London, and before long I was high and dry in the Hospital for Tropical Diseases.

From Lagos I had written one more letter.

But the real mystery is at Ife about a hundred and fifty miles away, the museum set in a kind of orangery attached to the palace of the Oni, with tall windows and a colonnade outside. Its foundation is the gathering of about twenty portrait heads, nine of which are in bronze, their complexion tinted with sea-green and indigo, sometimes delicately scarified, standing in a semi circle like senators, aloof in their serenity. I can't remember when I was more moved by something strange. They are flawless, and seem exiled in their perfection. I was quite alone and stayed an hour with the sun slowly dying outside, going from one to the other and back again, trying in the short time I had - knowing that I'd never see them again - to catch them as in a net, to guess at their vanished community. Each possessing his own majesty, like caesars, princesses, priests, goddesses, eventually shrouded, the features blurred, only a cheek or a diadem catching the failing light.

Never go back. I never did – though many years later I urged one of my students at the Royal College of Music, Sasha Standen, to go to Cameroun virtually as a surrogate, where he undertook some research in ethnomusicology. His reports already showed that things had changed: he spoke heart-rendingly of the depredations of the forests – those endless green flanks, studded like the Auvergne with curious volcanic bumps. Mankon, the little town that nestled at the foot of the escarpment below my ‘folly’, where I used to go to the market and trawl around the bars with Godlove, is now an African city. Images on the net show a depressingly nondescript sprawl, boasting one or two undistinguished high-rise buildings and a network of busy roads. Fifty years on, nursing my memories, I don’t care to look much further.

But it is clear that that high place that I remember and those grasslands, which for all of us seemed to be blest with some paradisaical quality, still represents a chosen land. I learn that there is now an Archbishop of Bamenda...

Punnetts Town, 2013