

Draft 1 (a)

In the Spring of 1961, at the ripe age of 27, at last I won my spurs: the conferring of the degree of B. Mus. Dunelm. I had previously flunked my finals twice, so there was no particular call for celebration. Moreover, from the look of concern on the faces of friends and family, it was made very clear that I should waste no time in finding myself a job. In those days, unless you were head-hunted or shunted helpfully into academia, there was no alternative to putting yourself down on the books of Gabbitas and Thring, the most prominent agency for teaching appointments. (I had already recognized that I didn't have the talent for working in film music, which might have been an option; and there was no likelihood that I could make my living simply by composing).

So I presented myself at their offices off Baker Street, filled in various forms, and waited for something suitable to turn up. I had already some experience of teaching music in the 'state sector', a Secondary Technical College in Twickenham. This was a profoundly demoralizing experience, which reached its nadir when having lost my voice through shouting so much, I endeavoured to take control of the situation by putting on the gramophone. Cue total pandemonium, at the climax of which some of the boys started to let off fireworks. Gabbitas and Thring offered something rather more decorous: specialising in work in the 'private sector', public- and preparatory-schools. This was no less demoralizing. Summoned for interviews at various obscure prep-schools, I saw that I would be called upon not only to play the organ at services (which I was incapable of), train the choir (which I was afraid of), but also fill in with 'extra' duties involving discipline, like supervising assemblies, and – oh horror! – sport. The tired, faded look of those teachers whom I encountered, and the dishevelled, sometimes squalid impression made by the buildings and the grounds – moss on the tennis courts, glimpses of old laundry hanging up to dry – reminded me of Evelyn Waugh's 'Decline and Fall'. I kept expecting Prendergast and his 'doubts' to accost me.

I could only do better for myself. So I did what every other young man at a loose end used to do: I looked at the Personal Columns on the front page of the Times. Eureka! a post of tutor in a family in the west country! Another interview: this time in a comfortable sitting-room in a smart service flat in Maida Vale, not a dingy headmaster's study in some godforsaken prep-school in the depths of the New Forest. My prospective employers could not have been more decent. They required someone to coach their two little boys who were being prepared for Common Entrance while they waited to go up to Eton. They described the idyllic surroundings – the manor house and the home-farm at the foot of Bredon Hill. They described the swimming-pool; and then we hit a snag. "And I'm sure you will be able to help them with their cricket, sports and so on?" I could only be honest – they could see I was a bit of a weed - and regretfully they had to let me go.

A few weeks later I received a telephone call: Mrs. Holland-Martin had a friend who was looking for someone to take on her young son; he had been injured in a car smash and was unable to return to school: would I be interested? They were still on

holiday, but an appointment was soon set up and I made my way down to the village of Stanton near Broadway: a beautiful Cotswold farmhouse – Charity Farm – set on the escarpment overlooking the Vale of Evesham with the Malvern Hills far to the West. And here I made my first acquaintance with the family: Didy Cameron, her husband Pete (Big Pete), her son by her first marriage, Peter Asquith (Little Pete), and her daughter Fiona, who was just seven years old. They took me on and I spent an idyllic summer there, bicycling all over the place with Little Pete, exploring the rather run-down little villages – this was long before this part of the world became infested with new money – and from time to time giving our attention to French irregular verbs. I became ‘one of the family’. So it was not a complete surprise when, at the end of the term they asked me if I’d like to stay on. It was something of a bombshell however when they went on to say “Would you like to come out to Africa with us?”

Big Pete had returned home the previous spring from officiating in the Plebiscite in Cameroun, a process during which he had shown himself to be notably incorruptible. He had been asked to return as Magistrate responsible for the whole area of South Cameroun, a tour of duty which would last just one year.

Although I had no professional ties, and was not close to anyone at the time, I realized such a step could well affect both my musical career and my personal life. I would lose touch, and once I was out there there was no likelihood that I would be able to sustain any kind of musical life. On the other hand everything we heard about the place – ‘Bamenda’ with its grasslands already spelt some kind of glamour – suggested a life full of colour and adventure: perhaps I was ready to break out of the traces at last?

All the excitement of getting kitted out: tropical gear from the Army and Navy Stores in Victoria; a year’s supply of underclothes; even the obligation to take Nivaquine at breakfast – already? – and submit to countless injections; the eager consumption of ‘homework – no guidebooks of course, but useful handbooks on ‘West African Reptiles’ and birds; and at last packing everything up in the metal-proofed trunk that my father had used in the jungles of Burma during the war: all these preparations sharpened our anticipation as we finally boarded the train to Liverpool to catch the boat – an Elder and Fyffe ‘banana boat’! – that would take us on our passage to Cameroun.

S.S. Changuinola

21st November 1961

I’ve just come down from giving Pete a lesson in French on the Top Deck. It’s wonderfully sunny now and we are woken by the tropic glare at about 6.39. Our Steward, Cazzy (short for Casanova), brings us tea at 7.15, and we lie about until we feel like having a bath or shower. Breakfast is at 8.30, and we start with fruit juice, cereal, a vast assortment of grills, etc. and coffee, which is revolting because of the falsity of the milk. The luxury of this ship is something very special: we occupy State Room No. 7. We have two port-holes looking onto the deck, two beds, “A” and “B”, an enormous dressing-table between them brightly lit as in a theatre dressing-room with a mirror and jazzy side-lights, an electric fan, two armchairs, and a

magnificent bathroom. There are only eleven fellow passengers, most of them nice, and the crew are very pleasant.

Last night we were invited to the Captain's quarters for cocktails, and we had a glimpse of white uniforms with high collars, and the ladies, looking rather sunburnt, all of us drinking whisky on the rocks, etc. Two of our companions know the Camerouns well, and are very attached to the country. The more we hear of Bamenda, the more fabulous it appears. It seems our house is one of four situated in the hills, overlooking a drop of 1000' to the plain below. Everybody envies us staying in such a lovely spot.

Today was perfect, the sea calm and deep green under the burning sun, turning to black later on. Didy and I saw a school of porpoises dancing by, but all subsequent glimpses proved to be nothing but endless interpretations of the glittering waves: what seemed to be the turning of a smooth black back only the oily dazzle of the water. We've been on deck all day, wearing as little as possible, playing games and reading, and it seems so odd to think that not a week ago I was with you all in the wintry cold.

22nd November

Another lovely day: we saw a great number of flying fishes looking like nothing so much as a flock of starlings skimming and bouncing over the water. The binoculars are tremendously useful, and Pete and I dash from one side of the boat to the other, training them on all the ships that pass. Yesterday the whole ocean was filled with vessels, mostly fishing boats from far away, Lima, Japan, Russia and Finland; but one that passed close with ragged brown sails and a frail-looking cabin had Douarnenais painted on the back. With the breeze cooling us as we stood watching on the deck, we felt very much like spectators at a private regatta.

We have been told much of a strange effect when the sun goes down at sea in the tropics. As you will imagine, it is very large and ruddy, and it looks somehow liquid and three-dimensional. It disappears very rapidly beyond the horizon, and its echo rises instantly in the East as though both were balanced on the ends of a see-saw. At the moment of the sun's vanishing we are led to expect a green flash over the whole horizon and a bang, like the report of an early camera, but diligent watching this evening brought no such marvels to our eyes.

24th November

We had a most exciting time yesterday. The Captain had heard that the Queen would be at Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, in the evening, and adjusted his course so as to be able to strike the harbour about the time that the Queen's Yacht would be leaving it. After supper we all went up to the top deck and sat together watching the moon over the water. After a little, Didy saw a light on the horizon, and asked if it might be Africa; but we eventually came to the conclusion that it was a ship, and thought no more about it. We had retired to our cabins for about half an hour when suddenly we sighted out of the port-holes a brilliant chain of lights beyond the blackness. I quickly woke Didy, and Pete and I rushed to the front of the ship taking the binoculars with

us. Although it was still distant, we could see that they were letting off fireworks, and slow plumes of shimmering blues, greens, reds, and silver rose, lightly fluctuating, above the little collar of harbour lights. It being night, and our not being able to make out the rest of the shore, it seemed as if we had an island before us *en fete*. We cruised around for a while under the moonlight, waiting for the yacht to appear; and at about a quarter to twelve, when the fireworks had ceased, a bright little complex of lights detached itself from the main strand and moved slowly away.

In the afternoon, while we were resting, a school of porpoises passed by, rather more spectacular than those we had seen before. They seemed to be vying with each other in their sportive leaps, throwing themselves high in the air, and executing a few balletic frisks of the tail before dropping with superb *ballon* into the sea again.

We have only one more full day on board, which we regret, since we have enjoyed it all so much. The food has been delicious – six course meals, if we should want them – and we have been kept entertained throughout the journey by the odd flutter at Bingo and Horse Racing. Pete is a dab hand at deck-tennis, and I persevere at Shuffle Board. I didn't tell you that earlier we discovered a dog on board, by the name of Tandy, travelling to join its mistress. It was fearful at first, having been confined to a mean sort of sty for a couple of days and nights; but Didy stretched her wrist to it and managed to calm it, so that we were able to take it for brisk runs round the deck.

27th November

Our last day was very sad, and we celebrated our evening with a splendid dinner in which two wines were served. We had Oporto Fruit Cup, Darné of Tay Salmon Hollandaise, Roast Norfolk Turkey with Cranberry Sauce, and Raspberry Coupe. After Dinner we had a game of Scrabble with Olive, a girl who had come out, filled with terrible apprehensions, to join her husband. Then we went on to Pontoon which we played until 1 o'clock, and which I managed to win with a run of luck that was prodigious. We went to bed, and I seemed to have hardly closed my eyes, when Didy was roughly shaking my shoulder and calling my name. I wound a sheet around me and followed her onto the deck where, peering down the rail, we had our first sight of the Camerouns, a great hulk of a barge swarming with Africans who had come to help unload. It bobbed up and down in the murky water for a while before casting off into the darkness. This was a stopping point called Victoria, and there a pilot would guide us through the creeks to Tyko. I stayed with Didy for a while staring at the big island shapes that we passed swiftly by – one of them was called Casement Isle, and was where Casement had lived, in a house that was now a ruin and swallowed up in the bush – and we became aware of a tremendously sweet and powerful smell all about us – almost a greenhouse smell – which we drank in, although not able to trace directly its origin, as the first intimations of a lavishness of Nature never before granted to us.

My first letter from Cameroun, addressed 'The Magistrate's Court, Bamenda', might have given rise to concern from my readers. This was in fact the house that by very good fortune had been allotted to us: it was the most magnificent on the station, solidly built in stone by the Germans in the 1880's, with walls two feet thick and with a magnificent view. My quarters consisted of a small summer house or gazebo, also stone built, which we nicknamed 'The Folly', and I here I slept and did my work. Little Pete would come down in the morning to have his lessons; and often, after

siesta, I would either tinker with my music or write letters, either in long hand or using my old Remington portable.

Magistrates Court, Bamenda, Cameroun, West Africa

8th December 1961

We got here yesterday, and I must try to efface the dazzling impression that Bamenda has made on us, in order to get down all that has happened since we disembarked. Pete met us off the boat early on Monday morning, and we all went by car, with our luggage following in a large landrover, to Bouia, the capital, where we were to stay for a few days before coming on here.

The town is situated on the lower slopes of Mount Cameroun, and its fine position is somewhat marred by being more often than not decapitated by mist. Our hotel, which is the only one of quality in the West Camerouns, was quite comfortable, and we slept two by two in chalets dotted about a rather ill-kept garden. (Cannas, lilies, morning-glory, jacarandas, etc.).

The English population was just as could be expected : very blasé, but I should say efficient. We were invited to dinner at the consulate, a fantastic modern villa in the ostentatious style of Beverley Hills, which contained in its fabric some spectacular examples of African art. The entrance, reached by climbing a flight of steps from the drive, was very impressive, with great piers of ruddy and expensive-looking wood holding up a spacious balcony leading out of the reception rooms, which in its turn was shaded by a canopy supported by rich and vigorous totems. There were also some beautiful panels from Benin, carved and unpolished, representing ceremonies and battles, which I would like to buy if any came my way.

We left Bouia next morning, squashed very uncomfortably into the Ford Consul, and had barely gone fifty miles before we had a puncture, the first of seven in the course of a two hundred and fifty mile journey. We mostly travelled by way of the French side of the Camerouns, where the roads are a good deal better than the English ; and it was interesting and strange how the atmosphere changed as soon as we crossed the border. Apart from speaking true French as opposed to pidgin English, there was noticeable a certain chic, together with hardness, in the behaviour of the people, who had cultivated the manners of their guests. (The French colonialists). On the English side, where everything had been left undone, the freedom of the Africans appears in all things : the way they laugh and talk, their unselfconsciousness and lack of suspicion, and their easy dowdiness. On the French side, however, the people all seem to have an unfortunate vanity ; or if not that, a sort of closed-in look.

Politically, the whole region of the Cameroons had originally been a German colony, seized in the eighteen-eighties as a 'protectorate' as part of the 'Scramble for Africa'. With typical – and sometimes brutal - thoroughness they had established an impressive infra-structure, governed from the capital of Bouia in the South, later Yaoundé. Signs of their rule can be found all over the country in the massive stone-built forts and farmsteads which still remain. Following their defeat in the Great War this colony was partitioned between Britain and France, the bulk of the land mandated to France, and a rather thin strip bordering Nigeria up to Chad taken up

by Britain. The French mandate was given the name of Cameroun, and the British that of North and South Cameroons.

These arbitrary decisions took little account of latent racial conflicts. There are more than two hundred and fifty distinct ethnic groups to be found in Cameroun. Indigenous groups include the Baka pygmy tribes of the Southern Forest, the Bansa based in the coastal regions, and the Bamilike from the Western Highlands. Then there are the Muslim tribes from the North, the most numerous of which are the Fulani who rear their cattle and their horses in the Central Highlands. The incipient mutual mistrust among some of these groups – especially between Muslim and indigenous tribes – along with the frequently insensitive administration often found in French colonies, eventually broke out in violent uprisings. In 1955 the UPC (Union of the Peoples of Cameroon), an outlawed group chiefly comprising Bamileke and Bassa tribes, launched an armed struggle for independence in French Cameroun. Out of this conflict, which cost many tens of thousand lives, resulted the Republic of Cameroun (1960). In February 1961 a plebiscite was held to determine the outcome for the British mandate, following which Northern Cameroon, predominantly Muslim, voted to join Nigeria, and Southern Cameroon, with its varied indigenous population ceded with Cameroun.

Even after all the papers had been signed, violence still flared from time to time; and occasionally we would hear of ‘terrorists’, hi-jackings and kidnappings, especially on ‘the French side’. A near neighbour had had a lot of trouble on his coffee-farm. It didn’t do to drive across country at night, taking only the one car. I remember seeing a man being taken in for interrogation.

In those days South Cameroun still betrayed signs that it had been somewhat neglected under British rule. Everything looked a bit run-down: the roads in an appalling state, untarred, billowing with red dust from the exposed laterite; the office buildings also, tired, needing a lick of paint. Certainly not making any kind of colonial statement. Indicating a relaxed, laissez-faire attitude, sharply in contrast with the punctilious, officious manner – and indeed the beautiful roads – we encountered on ‘the French side’.

Our route was very exciting, and it is difficult to recall the impressions made on me by all the new things that met our eyes. In Kumba we saw as we passed the market some most beautiful beds and cots, turned delicately, made of red wood ; splendid parasols, carried by the women as a shelter for their pickins, whom they carry slung to their backs in colourful bands of cloth. Their costumes, such as we have seen, are extremely elegant, and mostly comprise : first, a plain blouse with a simple neck ; a low hanging skirt, usually patterned with large flowers or such ; and round their waists a broad and gaudy sash which outlines their splendid figures, and allows their skirts to swing gracefully. This common design is very often embellished with winning flourish and dash by a bit of nonsense on the head, strings of beads, and an earring or two, etc. But all this would be nothing were it not for the breath-taking lilt of their movement. Furnished with a calabash on the head, or a carboy of green glass, or even a basin with a chair in it, they seem like moving caryatids. And pregnancy, which accentuates their grace, brings swans, or ploughing galleons, to mind.

Facially the Camerounians are, I believe, very striking. Big Pete doesn't agree with me, and cites the Foulanis' and the Dahomey as being far more noble in feature. Here the women seem to have very open and generous faces, and the men a kind faun-shaped neatness of jaw and cheekbone. The children are charming, with adorable small heads like young coconuts, dusty. They are lithe and dancing in their play, but their eyes, thickly yellow like ivory, reveal an inward experience of ancestral suffering, rather than the innocence that we would like so much to be their possession.

Our journey to Bamenda ended in darkness, and we were doubtful that we would be allowed through the frontier, in case we should be molested by terrorists. Feeling far from secure in the knowledge that we were ailing from a recurrent puncture, we travelled on, gradually climbing into the hills, with coffee plantations, cocoa, sugar groves on either side; and scattered among them little hamlets of grass-roofed huts whose compact, bee-hive shape gave to each group, peeping from out of the tall grasses, an air of a sun-drenched plantation of mushrooms. "Like the Babar books", Fiona said.

Having arrived in the night we could make little of the house to which we had been led. We had a good meal, served by Gregory the steward – we have three servants – and after having unpacked a little and had a bath I was ushered by the light of a tilly-lamp down a roughly stepped path to the Folly, which lies about fifty yards from the house, a little below the level of the terrace. It seemed very small and was furnished solely with an iron bed; and it was strange to feel oneself suspended in a harshly lit cabin, with nothing beyond the windows but the night and the memory of the day's long journey. I had been told that the Folly was situated on the brink of the precipice, and that I was to be careful in stepping out not to venture further than four yards, or I would tumble down the steep – a drop of three hundred feet or so, sheer. As I fell asleep I could hear the distant clamour of the village which lies at the foot of the escarpment, a thousand feet beneath us.

I woke with the light and opened my doors. The sun had not yet risen, and all about me, on my promontory, washing my feet, was an indistinct, spacious emptiness. As the light warmed, the monotone responded, sky lifted, horizon delineated, and colour gradually breathed into the grey, I became aware of the loftiness of my eyrie, of the fellow cliffs striding on either side of me, and wherever I looked the distant mountain shapes. The village, far below, was disguised with white skeins of mist, which had long ceased to encroach upon the cliff; and these slowly evaporated leaving the landscape clear to gaze upon, totally green, hill upon hill, from which the sound of drums arose.

Before we came here, Big Pete refused to describe to us in his letters our new home; and I think I have muffed it. But we have before us a grandeur that, a week ago, was inconceivable to us. And on that first morning when I was greeted by it, the thought came to me that, were I to be offered, as a last temptation, the world in all its beauty, I might be regaled with such a revelation.

The Republic of Cameroun is not one of the larger states of Africa. Tucked into the armpit between Nigeria and Gabon, at roughly five degrees above the equator, it covers an area of about 180,000 square miles, more or less the size of England, encompassing an astonishing geographical variety. Not without reason is it sometimes held to contain a microcosm of the entire continent. From the deserts in the far north of the country to the tropical rain-forests and mangroves found on the coast it exhibits within a relatively small area the most sharply contrasted range of terrain and climate. Mountains stretch, all along the so-called Cameroun Line from south to north, for hundreds of miles, among them many volcanoes. The most massive of these, Mount Cameroun (4040 m.), is still active, but some of those that are extinct, having become crater lakes, are far from dormant. In 1986 Lake Nyos exploded, emitting a cloud of CO₂ gas in which 1700 people suffocated. The most temperate climate – and the most beautiful scenery – is found up-country, in the highlands of Bamenda and beyond, where the savannah grasslands with the blue mountains in the distance stretch for mile upon mile – not unlike the Great Karoo of South Africa.

Every few weeks we used to accompany Pete as he went on assize throughout the country. These were often protracted excursions lasting several days and covering hundreds of miles as we moved from one resthouse to another.

Journey from Bamenda to Wum: waterfall at Menchum; first sight of Foulani herdsmen, figures from the Bible – Jacob and Esau – with swirling robes and loosely bound turbans, driving their long-horned cattle, white mostly, with great lyre-shaped trophies brandished on their heads; first sight of spears, bows and arrows, the universal and customary accoutrements of the country people.

Arrival at noon, creaking – in spite of stuffing all the doors and windows of the car with towels and newspapers - from a patina of terra-cotta (laterite): the dust inescapable. The resthouse lies on the sides of Lake Wum, an extinct volcano; great depth, with rather alarming worm creatures, viridian, on the floor, horribly still. They feed on the mud. Delicious warmth of the water; splashing about with the African children, one of whom possessed great beauty, a girl who had modestly covered her breasts with her orange robe before entering, but whose face became darkened with suspicion the moment she realized we had levelled our cameras at her. Women cover their breasts until marriage when, through suckling, they lose their figures and promptly reveal the ruin. Startling sight of a flight of aigrettes streaming across the lakeside, to settle, beyond our sight, in the trees. We are in the middle of fields of coco-yams, an edible lily with large leaves of jade-green. Across the lake shady groves of palms, flame trees, etc.; the water bottle green, shelving after the first few feet into unfathomable depths. Walk at noon with the African children down a narrow, sun-baked path amidst lofty grasses, smothered with flowers, wild orchids, yellow daisies, pungent-smelling and rank. Still, motionless harmony of dark-skinned trunks and limbs, standing amongst the riot of ochreous savannah. Graciously progressing cavalcades of wood-carriers; porters of single, lance-like bamboos balancing like a tightrope walker's lath, on worn shoulders; boat-shaped baskets piled high with green bananas; polished calabashes seasoned like tortoiseshell.

The market: nervous, exotically caparisoned bevvies of Foulani girls, of the slim wrists and fine necks; their hair, like burnt grass, gathered with silver rings into tight wicks springing all over the head; lengthy, slender noses; inquisitive, experienced eyes; minute filigree of cicatrices at the corners of the mouth – delicate, like chased silver; vermilion of their dripping gums – they chew something like betel, mingled with powdered lime; and above all, their hectic animation; bespeak of an excess of inter-breeding. They are a wild people, and are loathed further south, where they bring their white cattle. Didy is reminded of the Cretans, and I of the Arabs. They are, in fact, the last remnants of the great horseback invasion from North Africa. We wonder if the lyre sprang from the horns of the Cretan bull.

I think it must be the aigrettes, the genii of this enchanted lake, which like an ancient dusky jewel lies fixed for ever within its slender-crested setting, unblinking beneath the sun; these heavenly white birds who drift across the lakeside, consistently at sunset, fairytale brothers and sisters bewitched, who utter the strange call, fluted in thirds, like the inversion of a cuckoo's call.

The bush: everything swollen, as though of liquor and generating juices there were more than enough to spare in the earth. Trees, six feet thick, skirted strangely at the base with thick, unwieldy-looking plaits, soaring nakedly into the sky, where at a remote two hundred feet skimpy branches spring, as a shelter for big clumsy birds. The Weaver bird, a little pellet of yellow, builds its home in lumpy nests of mud, which hang like Christmas tree decorations on any tree to hand.

Wherever we went, privileged to be fulfilling a virtually ambassadorial role, we used to cultivate the acquaintance of local dignitaries: the fons, or chiefs of the tribes of course, administrative officials, as well as various missionary representatives. These were of all sorts of denomination and background.

Visit of two Roman Catholic missionaries in their white soutanes: Father Ackermann, a Dutch pioneer of thirty years experience, and Father Henry, an African, whose acquisition of churchly folding of hands and lavish gesture, looks strangely with his comely black face. Father A. (who, we all feel, is a great man) is a thin, red-faced clown, with dry, sparse hair, and a big nose; his soutane is too short for him, and in telling one of his stories, of sorcery and horse-treks through the bush, he would seem to be impaled in his chair, to allow of every limb to flail about in wild and exuberant illustration of his ghoulish fancies. One tale, of a Chief's burial, recounted at the dinner-table while our food congealed before us:

They sit the corpse in a chair outside his hut, with a ladder behind his back, to which a cock is hung upside down. A dance or masquerade is performed, in delirium, and the machetes of the performers flash past the body in pantomime, never actually touching it. They dig a grave deep, with a chamber branching off the base of the shaft, in which a cage or sanctum of bamboo is fixed to prevent the earth from reaching the Chief. The Medicine Man, in a lewd mask, brings a calabash of 'medicine', and proceeds to seal up with leaves all the opening of the body, stuffing in mouth, ears, nose, etc. thick plugs of the stewy mess; and, having finished his decking out, he scoops up the dregs of the calabash, and sloshes it passionately on the face until the vessel is dry.

Father Ackermann designed and built the lovely basilica that stands on the side of the hills near Wum. He told us that it has been only in the last three years that what he has endeavoured has taken root. A friend of his had been *nine* years in the neighbouring district without conferring a single baptism. The whole country is under the sway of juju; and he admitted that the missionaries had to endeavour to convert the pagans by means of 'adaption'.

Journey from Wum to Nkambe: gigantic panoramas of endless grass hills; anonymous mountains the size of Cader Idris; blue valleys; empty burnt tracts of savannah, black, sown with stumpy mushroom shapes: the still-standing ant-ghettoes, swallowed in the holocaust; rocky bluffs, cooked in the fire, globed like blisters, 'Valley of the Rocks': a blasted landscape, visited periodically with ineffectual whirlwinds, cylinders of black ash winding vertiginously, swooningly over the plains, through which our road threads, endless, dusty, the ubiquitous laterite, arid, tangerine.

Once we had returned from our first excursion we were able to settle down in our new home. Bamenda, superbly sited on its precipitous escarpment overlooking the rather scruffy town below, could be described as a kind of hill-station, although its function had never been recreational. The German fort was still manned as a garrison, and several of the houses – including the Old Magistrate's court in which we lived – were given over to administrators and their families.

14th December 1961

In spite of blazing days and clear skies, we are beginning to feel the approach of Christmas: Didy has put all the presents into one big trunk – the lid will barely close – and elaborate preparations are being made for two parties: one, on the 23rd, for the children – about forty little Africans – and the other on Christmas Eve for the elders – all the Europeans (comprising barely more than twenty), and all Big Pete's African friends. Wherever I go, on being asked with whom I live, Pete is looked upon with the deepest respect and love. It seems that, during the Plebiscite, he was the one member of the observation body who remained completely un-biased and clean politically. Everyone else tried to get a finger into the pie, and so forfeited their chances of being asked to return.

I had a most beautiful walk this evening round about the station, after poring over your letters. I walked past the fort in the shade of great eucalyptus trees – there are woods all about us in which horses graze – and skirted the camp of the French military making towards the far end of the station, past the forestry reserve in the direction of the bathing pool. This is far beyond the last house and there was nobody on the road. It is not in fact built by man, but is a deep pool formed by a mountain stream before it spills in a sickening leap down the cliff. None of us has bathed in it yet as the water is ice-cold, dark, and supposed to harbour snakes. From here you can see the mountains behind us as well as before, and the view is indescribable.

Our house is the most glorious, the most beautiful on the station. It was built by the Germans in about 1890, and has immensely thick walls of stone, like a Norman or Welsh farmhouse. It has large rooms, which are cool during the day and warm in the evening, and a terrace outside the dining room on which we sometimes eat and from

where have this fabulous view. The food is very good, and we don't have to lift a finger. My 'folly' is the gem of the whole place. It is quite square, about 10', with windows on all but one of the walls, and a deep-eaved, stone-tiled roof, steep, which gives the tiny building the air of a miniature Chinese pavilion. It is sheltered by two tall trees from which leaves fall with a slight clatter onto the roof; and in front is a little terrace, or promontory, shored up with stones, from which falls the cliff. All around, in tangled heaps and bushes, are morning glories, deliciously blue; and to make my island yet more secure there is a narrow by effective little moat into which the rains will pour and be channelled out to the head of the cliff. Odd-looking birds – like glorified robins, or rocketing shuttle-cocks with tail-feathers splayed in flight – sing about my little house, and lizards quaver and lunge about the walls. From my windows I watch the elaborate marbling of the sunsets and the distant circles of fire, like a picture by Hieronimus Bosch of Hell and all its engines, that mark the burning of the grass fields in the night.

We have some excellent friends, and there is a fair amount of dining out and entertaining, which is nice. Our nearest neighbours are the Priestners', a very kindly couple: Orange-Irish wife and north-country husband. Both are wedded to Africa and have the plain-spoken, blunt good-humour that the country-people admire. There is George Kisob and his wife, the Senior District Officer, who is very useful to know as he comes to hear of all the excitements in the district. They came to dinner the other night with his Nigerian sister-in-law, a spectacularly beautiful, with the same kind of hatchings on the face as the Foulani women. Pete has many friends, and the custom is for us to go to the erstwhile Club on Sunday morning, where the bar, library, etc. are all under the supervision of one young African boy, and where the swings, slides and see-saws in the garden are rotting under the trees. Happily there is nothing of the hard Colonial type to be seen, for every European who works here has been carefully chosen for his beneficent qualities. It is good to see such a mutually respecting relationship between the two races.

I have made some good friends with the Africans, both South- and North Cameroonians, so I have plenty of opportunities to speak French, which I find more easy to understand than pidgin. We have all opened out to this wonderful hospitality, in which, at every turn, one is hailed with a brilliant smile and 'Welcome!', a crossing of hands and an enquiry as to how long we will be staying in the country. The Africans are frankly curious about us, especially about the children, and we all have a jolly stare at each other. We often go down to the market in Mancon, the village that lies below us, and we have found that practically everything can be obtained there. There is also a big market up here on Sundays, and people bring things from all round. I have bought a broad, flat basket for fruit; a Foulani cap embroidered in green; a pocket watch for 9/-; and a hair-clipper. There is also a bookshop run by the Basel mission where we can get Christmas paper etc.