

Magistrate's Court, Bamenda

11th March 1962

A short while ago I was taken by my friend Godlove, a forester, to Lake Bambuluwe which lies about seven miles away, high up in the hills above Bamenda. It was hard going, and the path was steep as we travelled through the plantations of Godlove's domain, crossing streams on narrow logs, and wielding our staves in a way that Wotan would have admired. There were lovely things to see: gigantic grass-hoppers, winged with scarlet and green, the origin perhaps of the Flying Poppy that Ursula saw in Ghana; and fat, stream-lined caterpillars, scale models of the lurid, trans-continental diesel trains that you find in the National Geographical Magazine.

It was delightful to get away from the 'station', and enjoy, instead of the prickly etiquette of Miss Atté, the Woman Education Officer, or George Kisob, the Senior District Officer, or any of the rest of the white-collar set, the easy companionship of Africans whose lives are not defined by kudos, and whose ambitions vaunt no higher than to a second wife, perhaps, or a crate of palm wine. I would be lonely indeed if I did not have these friends, but, happily, they have welcomed me, and few allowances are made for my being a European.

At Bambuluwe we stayed in a beautiful rest-house in the middle of a deep wood. There was no water other than that which came from a nearby stream, no light but from a single Hurricane lamp and the great fire we built of eucalyptus boughs, scorching and aromatic. We talked for a long time into the night, lazily eating our 'chop': Godlove and his uncle dipped their fingers into their fou-fou (a doughy mess without taste, made from crushed cassava seeds or semolina), dunking great plugs of it into a kind of soup highly spiced with peppers, etc., and quite unpalatable to a European – or so I found. My companions reciprocated my horror by testifying volubly to their belief that tinned luncheon meat, such as I was swallowing, arose from dubious origins; urgently refuting all my cheerful allusions to horse and whale, and swearing that, in the marbled inlay of glistening brawn and gristle that regales the eager consumer, it is possible to discern, palm upwards, the blushing lineaments of a man's hand.

These reflections led us onto actual cases of cannibalism, examples of which have been furnished in plenty through the Western Cameroons. The most gruesome story concerned a policeman – some say a Tax Inspector – who disappeared three years ago in peculiar circumstances. A village in the district of Wum had for a long time, under the authority of its Chief, evaded paying tax, asserting with justice that they were receiving little benefit in the way of roads, health services, etc., to warrant such a drain on their finances. Collectors had visited the village time and again but, their blandishments rebuffed, had always returned empty-handed, fruitless exhausted. The Wum District Officer was advised by the Government to investigate the matter. He prepared his brief, girded his loins – for the village was a day's trek away – nerved himself for the encounter and, wishing to make an impression, sought out a policeman to accompany him. A cloud of mystery hangs over the events of that day, but it seems that, having been summoned before the Chief to deliver his harangue, the District Officer overstepped his office, threatened the entire village with summary imprisonment if they did not conform, and said that anyway they did not deserve such amenities and would not know how to use them if they had them. Things must have

turned ugly, and we only know that the D.O. just managed to escape to his car before the fury of the mob, and that somewhere on the way the policeman got swallowed up: 'Missing on Duty - Believed Eaten', as somebody said. It is this same Chief Muduli who receives his visitors enthroned in state, his feet placed firmly upon a mat of fair, white, skin. Missionaries have made little headway in the district.

Next morning we got up early, and after a swift breakfast set out to walk from the rest house to the Lake, about 2 miles away. Our path lay through woods, and to my delight the dew drew forth from the undergrowth scents of bracken and pine, clear and unchoked by dust, which reminded me of Scotland. The variety of this country never ceases to astonish me. The lake is quite different from that of Wum, with a hard shingly bottom, weedless, and cold. There are no human-beings within sight of it; the deep, ruddy grasses waving on its banks remain untrampled, and there is no life within or about the lake. I remembered as I looked at it the strange stories Godlove had told me the night before: how its waters enclose the souls of the dead, and that once a year the Chief will go down to the shores and confer alone with them. How also that any man who wishes to enter can only do so with a conscience untroubled, and must ensure that he removes all 'jujus' and charms from his body. Should he fail to do so, the waters will drag him down – as befell the young English lieutenant, a strong swimmer, who was drowned on a clear day, far from any weeds or tangible obstruction.

Didy and I were introduced the other day to a medicine man. We had made several attempts at an encounter, but on each occasion were staved off by some obstacle. The first time, it was said that, having purified himself in readiness in the lake at Wum, he had defiled himself by drinking beer and so could not show us his cures. When we approached him again, we were told that he was away, called to investigate a supposedly accidental death in the village. But at last we were able to catch him, and our go-between, a male nurse at the hospital, led us up the narrow path to the wooden hut in which he holds his practise. Its doorways resembled the hatches in a ship, and to enter we had to lift our legs over a lintel nearly two feet high. It was absolutely dark inside and very mysterious; a crude bench of bamboo told us that this clearly was the waiting-room. Rustling noises from behind a dingy curtain indicated the sanctum of the herbalist. We sat down, feeling as though we had entered a fairground booth to have our fortunes told, and waited a few moments, until, abruptly, a large man appeared through the aperture. He was not the sort of figure we had been expecting. He cannot have been more than forty; strongly built, with an open, quite pleasantly ugly face; he had none of the sinister, emaciated properties of a Gagool - in fact, at first sight he was rather disappointing. He was dressed in a loose sort of tunic, rather like a Japanese wrestler, having a great slit down the middle which revealed his chest. We were introduced by Ntui, the nurse, and I immediately made a mistake by saying that, being the son of a doctor, I was interested to report to him anything unusual that he, the medicine man, would like to show us. (Native medicine is against the law, and heavy penalties are imposed on those found practising it). However, my remark passed quite innocently, and after further chatting we were ushered through the little opening whence he had appeared into the other room. This was very much the same, except that from wooden slats of the ceiling various cloths were hanging. In one corner, on an upturned old beer-crate, masked by a shabby piece of material, stood a large tray of objects. The canopy was removed briskly, and the conjuror's props

revealed. We looked at them curiously and silently, while the doctor bent over them, murmuring what was interpreted to us as an introduction, presenting the European visitors to the talismans of Africa. (I forgot to say that in order to cross the threshold of the sanctum at all, we had each to surrender five shillings). This over, we were once more conducted to the waiting-room, where one by one the pieces were exhibited before us.

An ancient stick of bark, crushed to powder and mixed with mimbo (palm wine): to ease menstruation – or ‘administration’, as it is misleadingly called.

Head of snake, assorted spiders, grasses, etc., mingled to make a blue-grey powder. Score the flesh, rub in the powder: for skin complaints, abscesses, etc.

A black ointment, malodorous and looking like tar, composed from some nameless fruit: rubbed on the body as a protective against witchcraft.

A dark red powder from roots and grasses, to be blown or scattered in the air: against ‘bad devil’.

A dark, waxy-looking juju, the size of a child’s fist, obscenely fissured and desiccated, made from a kind of resin from a pear tree.

A kind of passion-fruit, but larger – hollow and quite dry – scraping from a portion of which will cure snake-bite.

Seven grasses are gathered from the fields, squeezes with water into a large, conch-like shell, and administered orally seven times: for convulsions in children, etc.

The skin of an iguana, the quills of a porcupine, and a little prepared charm, bean-shaped, scarlet and white.

A dull powder to bring on copious vomiting: combined with ‘Kukubu’ (a large purple bean of doubtful use) to combat epilepsy.

A kind of moss, to be mixed with palm oil and cooked: to bring good luck.

‘Kujo’, a dark green, bayonet-shaped leaf: a guard against evil.

He said that he had been initiated into the arts of medicine at the age of twelve by his father. Many of the jujus’ which he showed us were very old, and had been collected before his time in the forests and grasslands.. Knowledge of these things cannot be written down: it depends on the father to discover to the son the whereabouts of these special trees, roots and flowers. He does not know the name of them: he can only tell where they can be found. Quite evidently he was no charlatan, and believed sincerely in the efficacy of his cures. We had hoped to ask for love-philtres, but his dignity was such that the question died on our lips. (Incidentally, as a result of the frantic demand for aphrodisiacs in the Indian market, the East African rhinoceros, whose horn is so much in favour for engendering delectable propensities, is in danger of becoming totally extinct. It is this fact that has led the authorities to protect the beast and offer it asylum in Serengeti).

We are in Bansa, the seat of the principal Fon. Of great wealth, he must have been at one time the holder of considerable power; however since the return of Foncha's government this has been steadily constricted: police and gendarmerie have been brought into the town, a District Officer is soon to be appointed, and then the old man with his hundred wives will lie, shrunken and wrecked with liquor, alone in his grand new palace.

We have met some of these wives. They came up yesterday to greet us, heralded by noisy trumpeting blown on a buffalo's horn. In spite of warnings, their appearance surprised us. Whimsically, long ago, the Fon dictated that every one of his wives, in all weathers, should go naked. Now, although elsewhere in the remoter parts of the country we have encountered men and women bare save for a loin-cloth or brightly coloured apron (often made in what looks like crochet), here there is no truck held with modesty, and unabashed troops of nude women, from fifteen to beyond sixty, go spiritedly through the town. The Fon has forbidden pidgin English, so conversation was impossible. However, with smiles and signs, they conveyed their welcome, and we our pleasure in meeting them.. They seemed to possess the same girlish unselfconsciousness as nuns, although one or two of them – she who held the horn, and another carrying aloft a long, tasselled ceremonial staff – had reached a considerable age.

The position of women in this country is unusual and worth study. For a long time under subjection, they are just beginning to emancipate themselves, and it is interesting to notice the number of women's societies springing up all over the country. Eagerly dipping their erstwhile toil-cracked fingers into every political, legal and administrative pie that they can find, it is a truly alarming sight to see, processing through the streets, an inebriated army of these women, waving banners and tossing their heads at their startled men folk. Their flushed faces betoken the truth that their supremacy is mutually acknowledged. They derive their power from the fact that in most districts it is left to the woman to labour. Their hardened figures, wherever we go, can be seen, bent perennially over fields of coco-yam, erect beneath great swathes of timber balanced on their head: loads that would confound a London porter. They are more valuable than cattle, and to the men indolently tapping Mimbo from their precious raffia palms, their essential usefulness cannot be exaggerated.

Among the more humble people, the social structure has become so atrophied the men's laziness so engrained, the women's devotion so abject, that it is rare to hear of a wife breaking out. But in the towns, besmirched and gaudy with long-spawned relics of European flirtation, there is barely a compound that does not protect a daughter fled from her husband or cast out by him. If a wife is unsatisfied and takes the ultimate step of desertion, there is little that she can do to earn her living but to serve in a bar and sell herself. Fortunately, for the large numbers of recreant wives there is an equally large number of bars. Her life is now settled, since nobody will vouchsafe to rescue her or undertake to pay dowry for a further marriage, considering her as a far from reliable investment. She will work every day, from 7.30 to 9 o'clock cleaning out the bar, and from 2.30 to 12-30 dispensing beer and winding interminably the cracked old gramophone for the men to dance to. For this she is paid

£3.00 a month, but feels herself in some way compensated by the false sense of glamour, her freedom, and if she's lucky the support and custom of her men friends. Beyond thirty any woman who is unmarried is regarded as, and usually is, a prostitute – or 'bloke', 'chap', 'pair of shoes', as she is variedly and misleadingly termed. But most often she is very much younger; and the unhappiest are those of sixteen or seventeen, whose dowry has been squandered before the wedding could be solemnized, or whose future husband has been too long in saving for it. There is no choice but to go out into the town.

Before we left Bansa we had two extraordinary examples of the still infectious power of the witch doctors. Big Pete has to do with a large number of cases in his court of alleged enchantment, and had the bright idea of collecting some of the strange exhibits in the form of 'jujus' that come before his eyes. He brought one back – a wicker basket lined with dead plantain leaves, in which was nestling a single white egg. This had been deposited, it was alleged, by the enemy of the plaintiff in some hidden part of his house, and was believed to bring on paralysis. There is often a great deal of embarrassment in court when it is insisted that the spell be called off. Pete has to look the other way and pretend not to hear. The basket was handed to Gregory, our steward, who rather unwillingly agreed to lodge it in the kitchen for the time being. After a week had elapsed, however, we had accumulated so many articles during our stay - souvenirs, animals, vegetables - that it was found that we would not have room in the car to take the juju back to Bamenda, and that it would have to be thrown away. Greg was overjoyed at this, and hurled it with all his might into the undergrowth. A load seemed to have been taken from the minds of all our staff. We were perplexed however when, a few days after our return, Greg went down with a peculiar illness, in which his pulse dropped to almost nothing, in spite of normal temperature and no signs of fever, and he seemed gripped in a fatal listlessness far from his usual mercurial ebullience. This continued for about five days during which there was no change, and Didy and I were convinced that he was fascinated by the charm he had been harbouring a short while before. Nothing we gave him was any help; and we gloomily remembered all the true stories of Africans who, once touched by the threat of magic, will respond to no remedy, knowing death is inevitable, blankly releasing their hold on life until the spark is extinguished. But at last he recovered and bounced up like a cork, challenging his recent mortal struggles by going off on holiday and buying a new wife.

Our other experience was almost more impressive. We were in the market in Bansa. Didy had just been shopping, and we just about to move off in the car, when we caught sight of a wild-looking group of running figures coming up the road towards us. Their heads were completely covered with sacking, bound so that it fitted tightly, and the same material hung loosely skirted about their bodies. They were each carrying two sticks, which they beat one against the other like Morris dancers; and in scattering among the market crowd they brandished these, causing the people to cower actually to the ground. But it was not these that made them so afraid; for, coming up the hill in the wake of his fore-runners, was a creature stalking erratically, masked and horned in the person of a buffalo-spirit, smothered in cowry shells and mantled to the ground, darting, bucking and waving his arms with the frenzy of a blind man suddenly deprived of his stick. Every soul in the market place was squatting or pressed against the wall, frantically recoiling at his approach. Secure

in the Ford, sealed as though in a bathyscope, I thought how far from human this sinister legion appeared; and how, with the donning of the mask, sightless eyes and gaping mouth will be inhabited with any spirit we care to lend them. The mumming of the man inside is merely a probe into our *own* memories of Dionysian bacchanalia.
