

Magistrate's Court, Bamenda
(Summer ?, 1962)

Darling Mummy, Daddy and Jonathan,

A lovely day, now ending with the tilly lamps all lit, and supper waiting next door – groundnut soup, avocado salad, and orange compote – with a hot bath after that.

We started, with breakfast on the terrace, the view somewhat obscured by mist, and a hot glare in the sky. Reading books and writing letters. At about 12 o'clock we were picked up by friends, Joe Bealy and his lovely wife from Benin – Aya, and dashed off the Bafut, the windows of the car all open and cool air blowing in our faces – we can release the hermetic seals now (damp newspaper and towels lining the doors), since the small rains have laid the dust, and it no longer comes pouring in through the cracks in the floor.

We arrived, after about half an hour's drive, at the gates of the Fon's palace, a pleasant courtyard of low-roofed buildings in the style of some of the smaller French chateaux or manoirs, with a green sward on either side of the broad walk leading to the principal quarters. We were conducted into the presence of the Fon, who was sitting on a broad throne patterned with a device of antelope heads, a recurring motif of great delicacy; while behind him, lending an air of cosy opulence to the receiving room, was a turgid Victorian tapestry. He was quite a big man, wearing glasses – (he only has one eye) – and he had the most beautiful hands of any man I have seen. He was very hospitable. He showed us his treasures, a row of ceremonial fly-switches, made from the tails of elephant, with the handles carved in the shapes of animals and men, covered with beads, the same we had seen at Bali: an art that seems very popular here and is very highly developed. We saw glittering thrones; calabashes heavily ornamented; pipes; whips – all smothered with these lovely beads, packed into geometric figures, arrows, repeated over the whole surface. The Fon told us that the beads come from Timbuktu. He took us into his museum, where were ranged all the masks and accoutrements of the juju men. Most of them were very large and of considerable weight, and wouldn't imagine how one could keep such objects on one's head and execute the dance at the same time.

[Drawings of three masks]

These are hopeless, and have successfully driven from my mind the true memory of the most imposing mask, carved from solid wood, raw, with a heavy, glandular inflation on either side of the jaw, giving it a squat, frog-like, cottage-loaf appearance – to the superstitious, thoroughly informed with evil.

We saw the great bell which sounds for war, the clutch of spears, which like the fasces, denotes the rank of the chief, shrouded with a hood of the inevitable beadwork. Most strange was to hear, bringing to life straightway 'The Golden Bough', after all but Pete and I had left, the two great figures, crude and brutally carved – the man slightly smaller than the woman, holding a drinking horn in his hand, and with a bobbly cap on his head; she, with teeth bared, small breasts, clutching a gourd – these two, somewhat apart from the other exhibits, referred to respectively as the 'Queen and King of the Wood'.

The most imposing feature of the palace is the great juju house, sixty feet high, rising from foundations raised above the earth, reinforced with log-shaped blocks of stone, making the whole structure appear as though founded upon a bastion of rocks. It is very old, and we were not allowed to enter – a great black doorway, its lintel overhung with faded swags of leaves and branches.

We spent the afternoon in the resthouse, drinking whisky with the Fon. This was the house of forty-eight steps, in which Gerald Durrell lived – a beautiful, colonnaded building shaded with deep creeping bougainvillea, and filled with the scent of the orange grove outside. We had a splendid picnic, hunks of chicken, pies, sandwiches; and between us, Jo, the Fon and I finished a bottle of Haigh's. We also had with us a portable gramophone, and a pile of records, and through the afternoon, in tune with our rising spirits and voices, these belted out New Orleans and Dixie, recalling to the old man the famous Conga party.

This was already more than two weeks ago. Since then I've been to Godlove's village, where a dance was given for me. This was such an exciting day that I shall have to put off describing it until my circular letter. Yesterday (Sunday 2nd) we went up to Bambue, where Martin Brunt, a very pleasant and intelligent man, looks after an agricultural laboratory. After a splendid meal of dyker, roast and stewed, rowan jelly, beans, potatoes and red wine, fresh pine-apple salad, etc. we all got into a land rover and dashed up to Babenkwe, where there is a leper colony run by the American Baptists.

Didy had been there before and had bought some very fine baskets. It's a long way from anywhere, in the hills, and apart from the scattered houses belonging to the staff, consists of a small hamlet of tin-roofed mud houses, a hospital (I should not think more than fifty or sixty beds), a school building, and an impressive church that is almost complete. All the cases in the leproserie are infectious – the others come in for periodic treatment from villages far away – and the most long-standing patient had been there for ten years. The weight of time would seem to me to be the most dismaying burden of all, and close on one's inexpressible pity – the leper is quite indifferent to pity – one feels the deepest anger, that these years could be curtailed by 70% if only a little money were waived from the tycoons of Europe – think of all that's wasted on commercials – to care for some of these poor people.

There were two kinds of cases: the nodular, which brings disfigurement to the face (I think I've got that right), and which didn't seem so prevalent as the other, whose name I can't remember, which gives rise to the most fearful contraction of the limbs, and ate away the extremities. Most of these, living for varying periods of years in the colony, visit the hospital every so often for courses of D.P.S., the most widely used drug at the moment, but one which is obsolete already. They rear children in the colony, and as these must be infected through the touch of the mother, treatment starts at birth.

The doctor and his nurses displayed an admirable, attentive coolness in exhibiting his patients, brusquely unwinding the bandages, appearing almost callous with his reproof of those who came too late; until one realized that both minister and ministered

understood each other clearly, that there is no time for pity. Miss Renwick had been there for twenty-seven years, a rather hard-faced woman with grey marcelled hair, gaudy fake pearls, and a rather nice dead-pan, caustic way of speech. But it didn't seem at all odd, amongst the execrable furniture, doilies, Mary Crooker Chocolate Cake, coffee, and shelves of Bible books elbowing the script of Ben Hurl, where we asked why she chose to come to the Cameroon's, that should reply quite simply: 'God sent me here' – conversational and almost surprised.

Lots of love –

JEREMY