



**Inspector Tucker
& The Leopard Men**
A Novel by Landeg White

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by

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Chapter One

On the morning the mutilated body of the Minister's twelve year old nephew was found in the water tank, the people of Nerekora were celebrating. For just over a year, American peace corps volunteers had been working in the village. They had built a small dam in the thick forest up on Bafai mountain. Then with the help of the American government, together with a generous contribution from Paramount Chief Amadu Kekora Mansaray and a water rate levied by the local All Peoples' Party Youth Leader, they had laid concrete pipes from the dam to an aluminium water tank erected in a gap where a cotton tree had fallen down on Nerekora's western flank. Finally, they had fitted standpipes at strategic points - one in the Chief's compound, one at the APP Youth Leader's door, and the rest at fifty yard intervals throughout the village.

Nerekora was changing in a lot of ways. Its old boundaries were still intact - the stockade which once protected it had grown into a splendid circle of cotton trees, half a mile in diameter and so massive that an hour after sunrise the village was still in shadow. But despite its isolation deep in the hinterland, only Paramount Chief Mansaray now lived in a mud-and-wattle house. He was, after all, a living link with the founder of the village and he was expected to cherish the past. He knew that his half-moon verandah, with its steady stream of cool air drawn across it into the house by the high conical roof, was by far the most comfortable spot in the whole village. Every day, the old men gathered there with or without a reason and satgossiping beside the ancient chieftaincy drum. For themselves, they had built concrete houses with corrugated iron roofs and walls of clashing pastel colours. Such houses were hot and airless, but they were expensive and fashionable. To build one, a man's sons had to work for many years away in the diamond mines to the south. Even Chief Mansaray had built such a house for his senior wife. Within his compound, tilting dangerously over the grave of his warrior grandfather, was the rusting body of a taxi.

The old men rarely talked about change. Their ancestors had arrived five generations before as refugees from the Futa Jalon plateau, fleeing south before Muslim invaders. Their horses were quickly wiped out by tsetse and their cattle weakened in the lowland humidity. But they survived behind their stockade. Fifty years later, expanding Islam had caught up with them. The invaders made no attempt to storm the stockaded village. They seized the stream, a quarter of a mile away. After a week of appalling suffering, Chief Mansaray's great-great grandfather summoned the elders to his compound. "Are you ready to live as slaves?" he shouted. They responded to a man by climbing up beside him on the boxes of stored gunpowder while the chief's senior wife brought a faggot from the cooking fire.

So Nerekora had fallen to the forces of Allah.

But if you asked today's elders about these events, you were told another story, a flat two-dimensional chronicle which stressed continuity and glossed over disturbance. We came from Futa Jalon, they would say, listing the chiefs who had led them and the battles they had fought on the way, and before that we came from Mecca. Change lay around them, in the prayer mats at the entrance to every house, in the rice diet they had adopted from their Limba neighbours, in the palm wine which they drank copiously but had never learned to tap properly themselves, in the village

shop which imported cheap cigarettes and soft drinks and boxes of sardines, in the jumble of old tyres, tins, cartons, broken bottles and chickenwire littering the ancient ditch under the tall cotton trees. Changes swirled around them like dead leaves before a storm. But they spoke, securely, of their ancestors.

Yet the storm was breaking. In the area they had dominated, on and off, for a hundred years, Nerekora was now only an outlying village. The English, in the form of a Welshman who liked the view and had walked far enough for one day, had made Symira their administrative centre. Then, in the 1890s, Symira had been a cluster of slave huts fourteen miles off in the bush. Today it was the largest town in the district. It had a bank, a bar, a garage and a primary school. It was to Symira that the men of Nerekora, grandsons of warriors, went to pay their taxes. The women, travelling once a week to the main market with baskets heaped high with gleaming red and orange guinea peppers, were laughed at for their village mannerisms. The children, the wealthy ones, travelled by lorry each day to Independence Primary School, and took little notice of their traditional teachers, the voluble village elders. In this new age, the elders were illiterates.

Even Paramount Chief Mansaray's authority was no longer secure. He had won a bitterly contested chieftaincy election six years before - the government used the word "election" though the candidates were drawn from a handful of families and Chief Mansaray's strongest claim was that his grandfather, the warrior chief, was in turn the grandson of the founder of the village. He ruled with the advice of his council of elders. But he was no longer the most powerful man in the area. At the first general election to be held after Independence, Brima Conteh was voted in as All Peoples' Party representative for the Symira and District constituency. Within a year, as the sole parliamentary representative of the country's fourth largest tribe, he was Minister of Natural Resources. Within eighteen months, he had moved his family from Nerekora to a multi-roomed mansion overlooking Symira. A private road led from the dusty highway west to the capital and armed policemen guarded his gate. The rear windows, overlooked by the huge bare boulder of Symira mountain, were double-glazed with bullet-proofed glass - just in case some disgruntled hunter from the surrounding villages tried to avenge the theft of his cattle or his wife.

In this war between the old and the new, most of the odds were stacked against Paramount Chief Mansaray. His village was poor and its traditions were fast becoming irrelevant. But, barring catastrophe, his authority was for life. Brima Conteh was up for re-election.

On the morning the remains of Brima Conteh's nephew were found in the water tank, the new water system had actually been in use for three weeks and already the women were beginning to forget the twice daily trudge back uphill from the stream with the heavy waterpots on their heads. But the opening ceremony had been postponed until the Minister could be present. He arrived only an hour late, his gleaming maroon mercedes benz, the third he had owned since his election to parliament, skimming majestically through the muddy puddles of the new rainy season.

"Ha", he exclaimed as he hoisted his squat body through the door held open for him by his white-gloved chauffeur.

"Ha! That road"

He pouted and stretched his arms.

"A-bom-in-a-BULL!"

Collapsing forward over his belly with laughter, he turned to embrace Usman Salifu, the APP Youth Leader who had rushed forward to shake his hand.

"Ha!", he repeated. It was his home village but he always spoke English since his elevation.

"Ha!, we must really fix that road. Soon, soon!"

Waving his chauffeur democratically aside, he reached back into his benz and removed the jacket of his thick woollen suit from the coat-hanger by the rear door. Usman Salifu helped him ease it over his swollen shoulders, covering the spear-shaped sweat mark on the back of his nylon shirt.

"How is it in the capital, Mr Minister Your Excellency, Sir?"

Paramount Chief Mansaray and the elders stood by in adignified group. They were waiting to be greeted but it was important that Usman Salifu detain the minister a little longer. The Youth Leader had lost his battle for the chieftaincy six years before and his party position had not compensated for the blow to his pride.

Brima Conteh frowned happily.

"Responsibilities," he said, rubbing his hand across the damp folds on the back of his neck. "Onerous duties. Committees. Documentations."

Still holding the Minister's hand, the Usman Salifu raised his voice and switched to the vernacular.

"We all know you are the best man. It is you who bring us this water"

The statement was not true and it was not offered as truth. It was simply a warning. The general election was approaching and there were rumours that Chief Mansaray intended to put up a rival candidate.

Pretending to be annoyed at this intrusion of politics into what ought to be a joyful occasion, Brima Conteh disengaged his hand and walked belatedly across the track to pay his respects to his Chief.

"Paramount Chief Amadu Kekora Mansaray, I greet you".

"I see you," said Chief Mansaray coldly. "You are home".

The Minister bowed to the elders and shook hands with the District Officer who had driven over from Symira. Then, trying to be both fulsome and quietly dignified, he thanked the Peace Corps Director, a red faced young man with an explorer's beard, for the help given by the American government.

The preliminaries over, the group drifted across the small savannah towards the chieftaincy courthouse. Two columns of young men lined the entrance. They wore the green shirts of the Youth League and, as Brima Conteh approached, they jerked suddenly to attention and gave a clenched fist salute. The Minister halted in momentary alarm. This was new. Then, reassured by Usman Salifu's smile of open triumph, he extemporised an open-handed, straight armed gesture of acceptance, cancelling it hastily when he remembered he was supposed to be against fascism and that there might be photographers present. As he did so, there was a burst of

clangorous music from inside the courthouse, and two yellibas came forward to meet him, pounding fiercely on the wooden slats of their xylophones. Again, Brima Conteh paused. He was afraid of that music. At any moment, these wandering poets who recognised no authority or boundaries might launch into a satire, ridiculing his appearance and his origins. All his power was helpless before their poverty and their independence. Nervously, he thrust his hand into his jacket pocket and gave them the first note he touched. It was for a hundred leones. Too much. He could see that by the sly grins they exchanged with the elders who pressed behind him. Angrily, he pushed ahead into the courthouse.

It was a simple oblong building with a corrugated iron roof and one wall at the front. The floor was already packed with villagers, the women at the back and the children hugging each other as they balanced around three sides on the low balustrade or clung to the wooden pillars.

Chief Mansaray sat to one side, not needing to claim attention. His polished wooden throne was inscribed E II R, and had been presented to the chieftaincy on the coronation of Queen Elizabeth. The elders filed on to two benches at the front of the audience. The minister, accompanied now by the district officer and the peace corps director, took his place on a raised dais where, to his extreme distaste, he found himself flanked by an arc of peace corps volunteers from the other villages in the district. Dressed as they all were in sandals, jeans and torn faded shirts, he looked in his woollen suit like a civilised emissary to a savage white race.

Not bothering to hide his ill temper, he stared round balefully while the Youth Leaguers took up position behind the courthouse, facing inwards over the heads of the children. His attention was especially drawn to a sallow-complexioned girl with pointed features and rimless spectacles whom he knew to be a teacher in Symira. Her uncombed hair was lank and greasy and her purple-patterned java print was arranged like a sari, exposing her midriff and one bra strap. She was smiling in a distant manner as though modestly satisfied with the performance her proteges were putting on - though, in fact, the occasion had nothing to do with her. Brima Conteh eyed her proprietorially but without enthusiasm. He had heard the rumour that she had an African lover in Symira.

A fresh scurry of music rose from the yellibas squatting cross-legged in front of the dais, their xylophones resting on the floor. Later on after nightfall when the Minister had departed, they would sing the ancient epic of Mali, about Sundiata and the Buffalo Queen and about Sumanguru and the battle of Krina. Now their bubbling arpeggios announced simply that the ceremony was about to begin.

First, Chief Mansaray greeted everyone and thanked them for coming. He wished to thank the peace corps engineers for taking kola with him and for being such generous guests. He hoped they would come back many times to drink the water they had brought to the village. The ancestors spoke of the stranger who came with a sharp eye. These strangers had come with sharp eyes and had seen we needed water. Now they were no longer strangers for they had made many friends in Nerekora. He wanted to give the chief engineer a piece of cloth which his grandfather, the warrior chief, had worn, and which had now been made into a shirt. (At this point, all the Americans produced cameras from under their seats and demanded that their colleague pose in his new hairy garment.) Finally, Chief Mansaray thanked the All

Peoples' Party. Before APP, we had no water. Now with an election coming, we have water. Gratitude was a good thing and when it was merited it should be offered freely, like kola.

The elders appreciated such a bald response to Usman Salifu's challenge and they grinned among themselves. Brima Conteh sat expressionless as the treasury clerk repeated the main points of Chief Mansaray's speech in English.

Next came the wife of one of the elders. As she began, her baby which she had handed into the care of a neighbour, started wailing inconsolably and it had to be passed to her over the heads of the audience. She produced a breast for it to suckle from the folds of her cloth and it gurgled happily throughout her speech.

She wished to thank the Chief for bringing the stream to the village. It was the women who would benefit. The men did not know what it was like carrying those heavy waterpots. And the path was uphill and in the rainy season it was very slippery.

"Have you ever seen a man carrying water?" she demanded.

There was a delighted chorus from the back of the courthouse.

"No!", she exclaimed along with it. They all took it for granted. But not their father, the Chief. The women would make songs to celebrate what their chief had done for them.

This speech brought much applause and the yellibas escorted her back to her seat with another burst of music.

Finally, the peace corps director made a long speech. It was too long for the occasion but he was anxious to be clear about how the water system had been established. He explained why Nerekora had been chosen from a dozen other villages, which agencies had paid for the different sections, and who precisely had done the work. Finally, he wished to thank "You, the people of Nerekora, for providing yourselves with this splendid water system". It was an example of how with self-help, determination, and sheer cooperative hard work, certain basic amenities could be provided. "But for the effort you, the people of Nerekora, put in, this celebration would not be taking place here today."

The treasury clerk did his best to adapt this speech to the vernacular, embellishing it so that every statement became indirect and every opinion was wrapped in a compliment. But he could not generate a response. The elders understood why Usman Salifu thanked the APP and why the women praised the chief. But everyone knew the Americans had built the water system, so why did they pretend they hadn't?

The director sat down to courteous if puzzled applause and the peace corps volunteers beside him on the dais fingered his new shirt, whispering to each other and giggling. There was a delay as Brima Conteh looked about him with disdain. Suddenly, the yellibas rose to their feet and advanced towards Chief Mansaray, pounding their xylophones and swaying backwards and forwards as though coaxing him to action. All the women at the back of the courthouse stood up and began a rhythmic clapping. The chief smiled and made a show of reluctance, only to provoke yet more persuasive music and some shouting from the elders.

At last he stood up among cheers and began a slow stately dance. It took little energy and his long, rust-coloured robes marked with little blue crosses concealed any real movements he might be making. But it was dignified and impressive. It

expressed the joy his people felt in their new water system. It drew the women forward, clapping and singing. It brought out the peace corps' cameras once again. It reduced the Minister of Natural Resources, who did not like to be so completely upstaged, to wild bullying anger.

He leapt to his feet, banging the table with his fist and causing instant shocked silence. Then, before anyone could think of protesting, he spread his hands in mock apology and smiled.

"This water," he exclaimed. "It is my duty as your parliamentary representative to inspect it. How can we celebrate until we have tasted the water?"

He turned to the peace corps director.

"Where is this magnificent water?"

Chief Mansaray was the first to recover. He motioned to the wife of one of the elders who ran barefooted across the savannah to the mud kitchen behind her husband's concrete house and returned with a calabash. Everyone watched in resentment as she paused beside the nearest standpipe. The tap ran for a moment while she rinsed the calabash. Then it coughed and stopped. She tried again, turning it off and on. It produced a thin trickle muddy water, and dried up again.

The peace corps director looked puzzled. Some of the women shouted advice and mock insults. One of the engineers ran to struggle with the tap, then took the calabash and tried another standpipe. But there was no water.

"Something must be blocking the pipe", he called back. "The tank can't be empty. It was okay this morning".

"That's right," said the director to no one in particular. "I had a bath". He smiled vaguely, then looked businesslike and serious.

The engineer was testing other standpipes, gradually working back along the system towards the watertank. Chief Mansaray with his orbiting elders and a column of women and children, excited by the crisis, accompanied him up the gentle slope towards the gap in the cotton trees on the perimeter. Brima Conteh looked very cross. Unwilling to lead a procession up the muddy path, he was equally unwilling to remain with the crowd. Eventually, he joined Usman Salifu and the Youth Leaguers some distance behind the women, his satisfaction increasing as each tap failed to work.

The procession reached the watertank and waited, enjoying the sudden coolness of the dense shade of the cotton trees. There was a brief argument among the peace corps volunteers. Then the director wedged a forked branch against the aluminium side of the tank and climbed up to look, dragging aside the sheet of corrugated iron which served as an inspection hatch and peering down into the dark pool of cold mountain water.

"Would you mind passing me that hoe?" he said to a small boy who giggled and hid behind his mother's skirt. One of the engineers repeated the request in the vernacular and the women scolded her son and handed it over. The director's head disappeared again through the hatch as he poked around in the water.

"This is a very serious matter", said the Minister, further irritated by the American's fluency in his own language. "I shall have to report this to the President."

But no one was listening. The director gasped and straightened up in horror. He looked round, his face twisted with shock. Chief Mansaray took a step forward and

halted. Some of the women wailed and scattered in fear, their hands clutching their breasts.

Protruding through the inspection hatch, held aloft by the peace corps director's bony fingers was the leg and scarred torso of a child.

Chapter Two

One week later, Detective-Inspector Eustace Tucker of the Central C.I.D. was in the toilet when the summons came.

"White man!"

It was Corporal Kargbo, stupid, gleeful, malicious and banging on the toilet door.

"Commissioner want to see you, white man. You best finish what you doing wid dem dirty book."

He guffawed and thumped again.

"White man. You dere?"

"All right," said Inspector Tucker wearily. "All right. I'm coming."

Inspector Tucker was not a white man. He was a Creole, one of the diminishing number of the true descendents of Africans rescued from the slave ships and deposited under the care of missionaries in the mountain villages about the capital. His ancestors had walked ashore and been embraced by the Methodist church about the time that Chief Mansaray's great-great-grandfather was bulding Nerekora as a refuge from Islam.

Nor was he reading a dirty book, though the fact that he kept it wrapped in brown paper and locked in the top drawer of his desk gave credit to such suspicions. It was a copy of *Mansfield Park*, one of a complete set of Jane Austen's novels in the standard Chapman edition. Whenever Tucker was overwhelmed by the disorder and corruption of C.I.D. headquarters in London Rd., he would withdraw to the lavatory for half an hour and console himself with visions of a purer society.

He zipped up his trousers and walked back along the corridor of the ramshackle wooden building to the office he shared with seventeen colleagues. In the whole police force, only the Commissioner, his deputy and the three Assistant Commissioners had offices to themselves in Police Headquarters round the corner in Victoria St. As a Detective-Inspector, he was entitled to his his own desk which he had managed to get shifted to the corner where the jalousied window overlooked the old tiny railway station, its gas lamps still intact, which now served as the city museum. But Tucker still had to share his telephone with five other policemen, who went to tremendous lengths to sustain the fiction that they each had offices with phones of their own.

The phone would ring and Harry Coker would seize it.

"Good morning. Detective Sergeant Coker's office. I'm afraid you have the wrong line but if you wait a moment I'll see if Inspector Laye is in."

Later there would be another call.

"Inspector Laye's office. You want Sergeant Grant? Hold on and I'll see if I can put you through to him."

And he would hand the receiver to Max Grant smirking beside him.

Locking *Mansfield Park* carefully away, Tucker left them to their games. Corporal Kargo was sprawled across a chair by the door so that Tucker had to climb over his legs. He had long since given up complaining about such insubordination. Kargbo's feeble brain and licensed tongue kept the facts of his position clearly before

him and, if anything, Tucker was a little proud of his unpopularity. He was not above preening himself as the one man in the whole building who had never taken a bribe. If his race was dying out, it would at least continue to set an example.

Not that he was especially proud of his Creole ancestry. He knew that his people had little to show for themselves. During their brief period of assisted eminence in the late nineteenth century, they had produced only doctors and preachers and an

endless supply of lawyers. Perhaps they might have achieved more. But rejected by the British from government and displaced from business by the energetic Lebanese, they had retreated into the closed world of freemasonry. At times, thoughts of his background made Tucker bitterly angry. More often, he was saddened by the inevitability of it all. How else could the experiment in assimilation have ended but in private theatre with fantasy titles and gaudy regalia. Nowadays, whatever little activity the climate and the new politics permitted was devoted entirely to the rituals and social intrigue of the Creoles' seventeen masonic lodges.

Tucker was not a freemason. For his twenty-three years in the force he had refused to join.

Only a handful of his colleagues were Creoles, but they were the ones whose venality he despised most. At the very least, Tucker felt - and it was the nearest he came to an image of himself - at the very least his people had been given standards. Now that they had been overwhelmed by new rulers from the provinces with their tribal politics, there seemed little to do but stick to what was right, and wait until it was all over.

He was nervous all the same as he crossed the road by the cotton tree and hurried past the grandiose bulk of the law courts. Although he was, at 43, one of the best qualified men in the whole force, the Commissioner rarely called him in. If he did, it was because a particularly disagreeable case had come up, one which might at last cause Tucker's disgrace and rid the Commissioner of a possible successor. It was a far cry from the days when Commissioner Whitehead, who was the source of Tucker's nickname, had handpicked the bright young sub-inspector and sent him to England for further training.

"The country will need officers like young Tucker," Whitehead wrote to his old friend at the police school at Hendon. "A bit effete at times and an appalling Anglophile - he seems genuine unaware that he's not English which, since he's as black as pitch, can be comical at times. But unlike the others I have to suck up to these days he's clever and efficient and completely honest".

Tucker had justified such confidence. After topping his year at Hendon, he had spent six months seconded to the Hampshire C.I.D. where he had learned to love Jane Austen and distinguished himself sufficiently to earn a further three months' training at

Durham in scientific aids which had become a second passion. The two English faces he fancied he remembered best were those of the curator of the Jane Austen museum at Chawton and of the principal of the Home Office Forensic Science Laboratory at Harrogate. To see the desk at which those marvellous novels were written and to gaze upon the author of the mixed agglutination test for blood groups - the fact that he had

done these things still amazed him and he never again expected to be so happy as during his twenty-one and a half months in England.

His difficulties had begun with his return home. The first military coup had come and gone and with it had gone Commissioner Whitehead to a cottage in Sussex where Tucker spent one last cherished weekend. He return to a promotion he hadn't expected but within his first week was in trouble.

Summoned to a house in Wilberforce to investigate the theft of some expensive hi-fi equipment, he had trailed the owner for three days until he caught him dining in the Paramount Hotel with the newly appointed agent of one of the biggest insurance companies. He had guessed correctly. The equipment, on which most of the instalments were still owing, was recoved from a warehouse rented by the owner's brother.

Tucker expected to arrest all three

Next day, he found himself berated by the new Police Commissioner for harassing the Deputy-Speaker's step-son and the Attorney-General's brother-in-law. Unwisely, Tucker had not concealed his contempt and had even gone so far as to write a complaint to the new Minister of Home Affairs. It might have worked - if, by any chance, the Minister had wanted to rid himself of his old friend Commissioner Sandi. But although the crime was recorded, the three men remained free and Tucker found himself established as the worst sort of neo-colonial trouble-maker, the kind with ideas about doing his job properly.

Turning into the four-storey wooden building which had been Police Headquarters before the world war one, Tucker climbed the gleaming, knotted stairs past the enquiry desk and knocked on Commissioner Sandi's door. Waiting, as always, he stared down through the cracked louvres at the trees lining Victoria St. They were flambouyants, just coming into scarlet blossom, their trunks newly painted white to head height. Rows of polished mercedes benz from the treasury building opposite were parked between them, and a big space was reserved for the Commissioner's BMW with its number painted in yellow. But the trees were old and diseased. They would not be replaced.

He knocked again and pressed his face against the louvres. From this top floor he could look above the delapidated shops of the poorer Lebanese traders at the bay shimmering in the white heat. The water seemed astonishingly close. It was littered with wrecks with bright funnels and tilting masts which never failed to stir his imagination. It was as though he had arrived on one of them and had lost for ever the chance of escape.

A taxi came up Victoria Street, hooting illegally for custom. Painted on the bonnet in crude red letters was the slogan *Your best Freind is your Secret Enemy*.

"Hurry up, Tucker. Hell, man, we've been waiting half an hour for you!"

"Sorry, sir."

Tucker, who had spent the last ten minutes knocking on the glass panelled door in the Commissioner's full view, knew he was in trouble.

Commissioner Sandi was not a fool. A genially corrupt man with little real malice in him, he even looked plumply distinguished in the light tropical suit which, contrary to the woollen fashions of the capital, he insisted on wearing in his office. His manner towards Tucker concealed a deep unease. After twenty-odd years during

which he had seen one legal change of government and four messy coups, he was still uncertain about his position. This was not because he thought he might be replaced - the manouverings and pay-offs only exhilarated him and he was surprised to have lasted so long. Nor did he have a conscience about taking bribes. That was how the system worked. Corruption was the whole point of power and the notion that power corrupted was therefore meaningless. That was how things had always worked. Even Commissioner Whitehead's leave baggage had always included some invaluable little nicknack of African art whose export was officially banned.

What Commissioner Sandi could never get used to was his authority over men like Tucker. He was a Mende and he had spent his first years in the provinces, working under English D.C.s. The old habits of respect and subservience were still deeply engrained. Tucker spoke like a white man and he seemed as clever as a white man. If the Commissioner hadn't bullied him a little, he might have found himself calling Tucker "Sir!"

He needn't have felt like this. Tucker was a meticulous detective but Comissioner Sandi knew far more about the problems of policing the country as a whole. As he now demonstrated.

"Tucker, meet Corporal Sesay from Symira. He came down here this morning with something I want you to handle. Listen now, and don't interrupt me because it's a bad case."

Tucker nodded to the corporal from the provinces who looked very unhappy and was doing his best to sit at attention.

"Last week Wednesday, the Honourable Brima Conteh went to Symira distict"

The Commissioner stopped and rapped his desk, irritated with himself. Briefings were not his strongest point.

"What's that blasted village?"

"Nerekora, sah!" said Corporal Sesay leaping to his feet, then lowering his buttocks gingerly until they just touched the edge of his chair.

"Nerekora. Somewhere near Symira. It's where the Minister comes from. He was attending a function, a new water system, when they found a body. A boy, twelve years old. It was in the water tank".

Commissioner Sandi leaned forward and nodded several times in Tucker's face.

"It turned out to be Brima's nephew".

Tucker's heart sank. Even the Commissioner would be nervous about a case like this. No wonder he was passing it on. But the Commissioner had risen and was staring out of the window at the mango tree in the courtyard. When at last he turned to speak

again, Tucker realised with shock his superior was acutely embarrassed.

"The boy had been torn apart. Everything - his heart, liver, bowels, genitals - all gone. The skin had been peeled from his hands and his forehead."

There was an appalled silence. Corporal Sesay sat rigidly to attention. As the spasms of fear tightened his stomach, Tucker's stare settled on the presentation copies of the Collected Works of Kim Il Sung, leatherbound and gathering dust, filling two shelves of the bookcase.

"You wouldn't know what that means, Tucker," continued the Commissioner angrily. "It means leopard murders, Leopard Men. The worst sort of witchcraft. Do you know how often this sort of thing happens?"

"No, sir".

"No, Tucker, you wouldn't. It happens about three times a month. It's increasing and it's spreading. But there hasn't been a case up north in Symira for over seventy years."

Tucker gripped the edge of his chair and tried not to show his fear. He couldn't help reflecting there was some justification in the Commissioner's sarcasms. Only once in his life had he been up-country and then it was to visit the spot near Pujehun where his great-uncle, a trader in oil nuts, had been be-headed in the 1898 Hut Tax war. The Creoles had never forgotten the slaughter of that time when the Africans had turned on them as "Black Englishmen" and had let most of the real Englishmen escape. Tucker's mind, during his childhood, had been fed with talk of cannibalism, filth and superstition. He had long since grown out of such prejudices and in fact enjoyed reading novels about rural life in other parts of Africa. But a strong distaste remained for the Africa on his doorstep. He didn't see why he should be involved. The provinces had their own police force and Corporal Sesay -

Then he pulled himself together.

"This was a week ago"

"Yes, Tucker"

The Commissioner sat down heavily.

"But don't blame the corporal. He hasn't been fooling around. There's a suspect. The Paramount Chief is making plans for the election. He wants to put up his own candidate against Brima Conteh. Not that there's anything wrong with that," he continued hastily, "except that it's a damn crazy thing to do. But ..." again, he seemed embarrassed. "There was too much witchcraft last election, Tucker, Even right here in the capital!"

It was true. One of Tucker's special duties had been to inspect all polling booths before dawn. He had collected an enormous pile of dead chickens, green pawpaws, coins smeared with dung, bags of bones, bottles with evil smelling contents - so many that by the end he was tossing them aside as nonchalantly as Commissioner Whitehead would have done. Witchcraft hadn't stopped the coup which followed the announcement of the election results. Nor had it prevented a week of total confusion in which the country had five different rulers in as many days.

Suddenly, Commissioner Sandi saw his way clear. He relaxed in his chair and began to play with his pencil.

"Corporal Sesay will tell you", he said with a slight smile.

The corporal rose and stood stiffly to attention.

"Go on", said Tucker.

"De man a leopard, sah".

There was a long pause. The Commissioner looked smug.

"Don't you want to question the corporal, Tucker?"

"Who is a leopard, corporal?"

"Paramount Chief Mansaray, sah".

"How do you know?"

"Everybody de talk dis t'ing, sah".

Tucker felt foolish.

"What does Chief Mansaray do?"

The corporal forgot his military posture. He bent forward, hunching his shoulders and gesticulating in excitement.

"When he go travel from home any place, he walk fust small distance. Den he mek everybody go way. He hide in de bush. Smalltime after, he done come out a leopard. he mek plenty speed tillhe reach close by de place. Den hide and come a big man again. Na so!"

Commissioner Sandi was grinning openly.

"All right, corporal, you can sit down."

Tucker sighed.

"Is that evidence?"

Too late, he saw the point. The commissioner rubbed his hands together, beaming with satisfaction.

"How long have you been a detective, Tucker? You think that's not evidence? Everyone in Symira thinks it's evidence. If you were a chief and you wanted your man elected and everybody believed you had supernatural powers, wouldn't you use them?"

"Has he been arrested?"

Commissioner Sandi's smile vanished.

"Ha! Lawyers are like you, Tucker. They live in a different world".

What he meant, as Tucker well knew, was that most of the capital's lawyers were Creoles.

"The D.O. ordered a search of Chief Mansaray's compound. They didn't find a thing - no skins, no medicine, no special knives. Nothing to stand up in court."

Which is where I come in, Tucker told himself. I'm being sent into the bush. The murder was witchcraft and the evidence is superstition. The clues are all a week old and everyone has decided who's guilty.

He almost failed to notice that Commissioner Sandi was handing him a scrap of paper. It was a page torn from a school exercise book. On it was written in a spidery fastidious hand:

If you want the murderer, come to the watertank at 8.00

The note bore no date and it was unsigned.

"That letter", said the commissioner, "was handed in to the Symira police yesterday afternoon."

"Who sent it?"

"It was delivered by a schoolboy. But it was sent by a teacher. An American peace corps volunteers called - " he frowned again and consulted his notes - "called Lois Huck. She taught at Independence Primary School".

Tucker held the paper between his thumb and fingernail by the to right-hand corner. This, at least, was evidence he knew how to handle. Better, it seemed, than Commissioner Sandi whose fingerprints must have been all over it.

"Unfortunately, there were problems. The corporal on duty did nothing. He thought it was a schoolboy joke. Corporal Sesay found the letter when he came on

duty. He had to get hold of the station chief and get permission to take a constable with him. Then there was trouble with the landrover and one of the bridges was down. In the end they had to walk and they didn't get to Nerekora until well after ten."

The commissioner again leaned forward across his desk, speaking with a fluency Tucker had never before heard from him.

"They found the girl's body, what was left of it. Her stomach had been opened and the intestines removed. Her heart and her right breast were missing and the skin had been torn from her hands and feet and forehead."

Again, Tucker felt the knots of fear. Then the commissioner's next remark left him deeply ashamed.

"Tomorrow, every blasted newspaper will be full of white girls and leopard men!"

Tucker started to his feet.

"You're a policeman, Tucker!"

He sat down.

"There was a boy killed as well, you know."

His confusion was complete. Of course a little boy had been killed. Yet he knew he was right. Commissioner Sandi loathed him because of what had been done. What sort of country was it where these things could happen, or where they became the occasion for exploiting private hatreds? As for himself - but here Tucker's customary honesty pulled him up short. As the commissioner had said, he was a policeman! There was no earthly reason why he shouldn't be given the case.

"Corporal Sesay showed great initiative", continued Commissioner Sandi smoothly, and again Tucker winced at the reflection on himself. "He told no one and made no enquiries. He and the constable wrapped the body in a mat and left it with the

District Officer for medical examination. Then the constable reported to the station chief and Corporal Sesay drove down here though the night. The President has summoned the American Ambassador. He will be told you are in charge of the investigation as one of our best qualified officers and that you are already making progress."

He justified this by pointing to the letter in Tucker's hand.

"My driver will take you to the stadium. The President's personal helicopter will fly you to Symira. I don't have to tell you the President takes this very seriously. If the Peace Corps are withdrawn, there'll be trouble for all of us."

Commissioner Sandi's eyes held menace.

"All of us!" he repeated.

He pressed the button on his intercom and a buzzer sounded in the adjoining office.

"My car".

"Waiting, sir."

It was how he always ended interviews whether he was leaving the office or not. Tucker was already edging towards the door. Corporal Sesay, slower off the mark, slammed his right foot hard on the carpet as he saluted and about-turned in one movement. He almost blundered into Tucker who, his hand on the doorknob, was

waiting for the closing remark the commissioner invariably kept back until this moment.

"One more thing. The President is ready for the election. Parliament will be dissolved this afternoon. Tomorrow, Friday, Saturday and Monday are all public holidays. The state of emergency will remain in force. Nomination day is next Monday. That gives you four days. We want this case solved quickly."

He grinned at the impossible.

"All those certificates of yours, Tucker. Let's see what you could do with them."

The two policemen withdrew, the Corporal marching outbackwards and closing the door quietly. He had been well trained.

They hurried downstairs and crossed the road to the BMW parked under the flamboyants. The driver saluted them in turn as Tucker ushered Corporal Sesay into the back seat.

"C.I.D.," said Tucker curtly. "Then the stadium".

They stopped briefly in London Rd. Tucker went to his desk, where Harry Coker was again on the phone, unlocked the bottom drawer and took out an old leather briefcase he had bought when he first learned he was going to England. It contained some personal effects, several notebooks and pens and a set of simple scientific aids, some of his own devising.

"Tucker lookin' ill," said Corporal Kargbo, winking broadly at the office.

But Tucker was not ill. He was in a state of high excitement. He had no illusions about why he had been selected. But at least this time he would have to be given a fair chance. The President would offer him to the world as their best man - top at Hendon - and would describe how every facility had been offered him. There must be no obstruction he could complain about afterwards. And he would be two hundred miles away from supervision.

For the first time since his training, he would have a free hand to investigate a proper case in his own way.

Chapter Three

If Corporal Sesay's departure from Symira had been admirably discreet, his return in the President's personal helicopter was as sensational as he could have wished. The first story was that the President himself was paying a surprise visit. By the time the helicopter had found a suitable landing site near the blue gum trees surrounding the District Office, a big crowd of market women and truant schoolchildren had run up, waiting only for the leaves and dust to settle. Their mild disappointment when a slim suited figure scurried from beneath the swirling blades, his briefcase protecting his head, turned to stupefaction as they watched Corporal Sesay perform the same manoeuvre. Tucker ran without a pause straight into the office but the corporal, conscious of his audience and uncertain of his reception. Stopped on the white-washed steps where the khaki-clad court messengers were equally dumbfounded. As the whine of the motor died away and the blades ceased turning, the crowd advanced in a single wave to the foot of the steps.

Corporal Sesay surveyed them calmly.

"Eh, corporal, who is dat, eh?"

He glanced briefly at the questioner, a market woman with a tiny baby bound to her back, then looked into the distance, his chin a little higher than before.

"Policeman, who dat man?"

He was just wondering how long he could reasonably sustain such magisterial dignity when the door opened and he was summoned inside.

The District Officer, a chubby-faced Tembe in his late teens with enormous tinted spectacles, was tilting back his chair, pressing his fingertips on the rim of his desk to maintain his balance. Tucker sat opposite, his briefcase on his knees. Between them lay an avalanche of files and folders, income tax returns, census forms, summonses, certificates, leaflets about fertilisers and booklets about family planning, none of which ever left his office. His out-tray was stacked high for the occasion, his in-tray conspicuously, unconvincingly empty. Behind him, like a cliff from which the debris had fallen, was a sheer face of bookcases rising to the ceiling, crammed with papers yellowing at the edges. A huge overhead fan revolved grudgingly maintaining a ceaseless flutter across desk and bookcase and across the dusty ordnance survey map of the district on the right hand wall. Along Tucker's side of the desk, like a miniature barricade, was a row of purple-stained rubber stamps.

"Corporal," said the D.O., letting his chair legs hit the floor with a crash and whipping off his spectacles. "The President's personal secretary is in contact with me."

He flourished the letter which Tucker had just handed to him.

"Yes, sah."

"You are to give Detective-Inspector Tucker every cooperation and assistance."

"Yes, sah."

The D.O. tilted his chair once more and replaced his spectacles. His fingertips showed pink where they pressed the desktop.

"These orders", he repeatedly meaningfully, "come from the President himself."

Corporal Sesay understood. He flung open the office door and caught one of the messengers listening intently.

"Haul your short black penis home," he shouted in the vernacular.

The messenger vanished, grossly offended.

"These people, sah." said the corporal, shutting the door. The D.O. was satisfied. The information that mattered was in circulation.

Tucker saw it was time he took the initiative.

"Now that we've done our best to destroy the secrecy Corporal Sesay had established", he said coldly, "perhaps you can tell me how many other people know about this business."

The D.O. looked offended.

"There was a constable last night", he began, rocking gently.

"His name?"

The spectacles turned towards Corporal Sesay.

"P.C. Ofori, sah. Number two three four."

"How many others?"

"The Chief Constable," said the D.O. sulking. "The government vet. No one else."

"The vet?"

"He examined the body. He's writing a report for you."

"The girl was a teacher. She'll be missed from school."

"I suppose so."

"Is anyone posted at her house?"

"I imagine the Chief Constable gave instructions."

"Only imagine?" said Tucker icily.

"The D.O., swung forward and banged his desk in annoyance. A small cloud of dust rose from the papers.

"You're job's to find the evidence," he shouted. "The more people know you're here, the better chance of proving who's guilty."

"So you know who did it?"

"Everyone knows."

"Paramount Chief Mansaray? It's strange how everyone agrees on that."

The D.O. said nothing.

"I understand you searched his compound".

"I'm obliged to by law. On the slightest suspicion."

"Did you discuss the boy's death with the Minister?"

"Naturally. I'm responsible for law and order around here."

"But again you learned nothing?"

"That," said the D.O. nastily, "is why you've been sent up here."

"And put in charge," said Tucker.

He let the words sink in. The D.O. didn't like them.

"Corporal," continued Tucker smoothly. "You've been on duty all night but I shall need you for a few hours longer."

He glanced at the D.O.'s clock above the door. It had stopped, God knew how many years before, at twenty-five past six. Fumbling in his back pocket, he pulled out the fob watch which had once belonged to his grandfather.

"Is the girl's house in Symira?"

"I go take you, sah."

"No, I'll walk. Meet me there with a landrover in an hour and a half."

Corporal Sesay looked gratified. Tucker turned back to the D.O. who was suddenly apprehensive.

"We'll begin with the body", he said crisply. "You have it here?"

The D.O. stood up, surprising Tucker by how short he was for his breadth of shoulder. He led the way through another dusty office and out by the back door, avoiding the children who were still excited by the helicopter on the front savannah and who were trying to persuade the pilot to jump down. Tucker and the D.O. followed the path between an orchard of old lemon trees past the Treasury and the Electoral Office to the Chiefdom Administration building - like all the others, a large brick hut with a corrugated iron roof. From the outside, there was an attractive air of neatness and efficiency about the compound, with fresh whitewash on the walls and tree trunks and on the rows of half-bricks set at angles to mark the edges of the pathways. Only its distance from Symira, the nearest shops half a mile away, hinted at the irrelevance of the paperwork to whose preservation and increase the compound was devoted.

The Chiefdom Administration building was closed and a court messenger in khaki with a royal blue fez and cummerbund guarded the wooden door. The D.O. unlocked it and crossed the empty office to an enclosed yard at the back. Set against the wall was a smaller building which he also unlocked.

"These used to be staff houses in the old days," he said with a hint of apology. "It was the only place I could think of."

He drew back a curtain of sacking. The body was in a bathtub, half submerged in melting bloodstained ice. It looked like a carcass from the meat market in Krootown Rd.

Tucker forced himself to study it.

"Did it have to be a vet?" he demanded bitterly.

"This isn't the capital. We've only one doctor and he was drunk".

There was crunch and the body lurched as a chunk of ice turned and settled. Tucker stared at what was left of the face. There were three parallel stab wounds on the throat. He was remembering what he had once read about Detective William Rawlings of Scotland Yard Murder Squad, how he "used to sit alone with the body, immersed in the atmosphere of the death room." Somehow, the revered words made little sense in this brick wash-house with its sweating plaster dropping from the walls, its grimy cobwebbed windows, its chipped enamel bath with the sacking curtain.

Sighing, he opened his briefcase and knelt on the damp concrete floor, laying out his scientific aids. Routine first, he instructed himself, mentally checking off the items. Propping his foot on the edge of the bath, he used his knee to steady the camera as he photographed the corpse from the only possible angles. Carefully, using a new razor blade, he took a sample of blood from her left ear lobe, sealing it in a jar lined with citric acid crystals. Then he measured her height and took samples of her hair. He examined her mutilated hands. Fingerprints were out of the question. Was she a nervous girl? Her fingernails were chewed back to the cuticle.

He packed his equipment away and stood back reflecting. Clothes, he thought.

"What happened to her clothes?"

The D.O. shrugged.

"Did the boy look like this?"

"More or less. The wounds in the chin were the same."

Tucker considered this reply for a moment, then tilted the girl's head back to study the marks on her throat. The D.O. was right. The blow was high, missing her throat, driving upwards into the back of her mouth.

She was only of medium height. Was the murderer a very short man? Had he seized her from behind and wrenched her head back?

He took two more photographs to get the angle right and let the sacking drop. Instinctively, the two men sought the shade of the lemon trees and stood in silence, oppressed by what they had just done. Tucker picked a leaf and crushed it. The lemony odour spread.

"Who identified her?" he asked suddenly.

"Officially, the vet. He's an Englishman. But I've seen her around town and so has the Chief Constable."

"Where?"

"At Kamara's bar, mostly."

"Alone?"

"With other peace corps."

"Anyone in particular?"

There was a slight pause before the D.O. shook his head. Against his will, his irritation growing, Tucker forced himself to try again.

"How well did she get on with people?"

"With who?"

"People. The local people."

"You mean the illiterates?" said the D.O. sarcastically.

"Her colleagues. People like yourself."

The D.O. smiled.

"One doesn't come to the bush for the social life. I expect to get away after the election."

"She must have had some friends."

"Peace corps. V.S.O.s from Britain. A couple of Dutch missionaries. Mostly other teachers."

Tucker pondered this.

"What happens to the children they teach?"

"The stupid ones go back to the bush. The clever ones leave and get good jobs. What do you expect us to do? You can't ask educated people to spend their lives with illiterates."

"Except the peace corps."

The D.O. snorted.

"They're more fucking trouble than they're worth. Most of them are C.I.A. agents anyway."

The D.O. was recovering his poise. Tucker wondered if he had missed something. Then he turned abruptly away. He was too annoyed to carry on.

"There's a coffin on board the helicopter," he said. "You can send her back to the pentagon."

The D.O. waited till he was out of earshot.

"Fucking creole bastard," he muttered.

Tucker concentrated on keeping his balance as he strolled with no great urgency along the narrow dirt road into Symira. The rains which had come to the capital three months earlier had only just begun in this northern province and the road, baked hard by six months of drought, had a surface of mud as slippery as oil. Dry patches were appearing, spreading visibly under the hot sun which struck at his shoulder blades.

The landscape was entirely new to him. Unlike the towering forests of the coast where villages could be hidden by their own crops, the mountains looked parched under their summits of black boulders. Even the semi-cultivated bush on either side was only just springing to life, with threads of green in the dead grass. The huge splayed leaves of wild pawpaws were still peppered with red dust thrown up by the passenger vans or poda-podas lurching past on their way north to the border. It would take heavier rains than had yet fallen to wash them completely.

"Why didn't the Chief Constable meet me?" Tucker wondered idly, then allowed his mind to follow the flight of a huge fish eagle circling in the white haze.

He had little idea where he was going. He paused, toying with the notion of returning to ask where the girl had lived. But he had no desire to meet the D.O. again. In any case, he was almost at the town. A Lebanese woman, enveloped in a colourless, shapeless silk tobe watched him stonily from the verandah of an upstairs house. Embarrassed by her stare, he turned the corner past a clump of coconut trees and found himself in what he supposed was the main street.

A long expanse of mud, gleaming like a beach, stretched a quarter of a mile to the roundabout. It was lined irregularly with two-storey concrete buildings with white-washed verandahs from which more Lebanese women gazed down. The shops seemed identical, all selling the same assortment of dry goods, tinned groceries and patent medicines. Africans tailors with pedal-driven sewing machines sat beside each doorway in the shade of the verandahs. Above them hung rows of shirts in brilliant tie-dye cloths with elaborate gold embroideries catching the reflected light. Behind the counters, in the dark recesses of the shops, were Lebanese faces of astonishing paleness. Tucker was used to another kind of trader, talkative, intimidating and rich.

These people looked lost.

The wooden shacks of the market appeared on his right and he realised for the first time how hungry he was. It was well after midday and he had eaten nothing since breakfast. He walked between the multi-coloured mounds of pumpkins, oranges, casava leaves, tomatoes, coconuts, guinea peppers and "jackass rope" tobacco, and bought himself half a hand of bananas for ninety cents (ninety cents! he felt he had stolen them) and fifty cents worth of roasted groundnuts screwed up in a corner of newspaper. The groundnut girl smiled at him and was concerned about his jacket which was brushing one of the wooden pillars, and he realised how pretty she was, how much more cheerful this little market than the ill-tempered pandemonium of Little East St in the capital. What kind of people were these? What had they to do with the torn body in the bathtub?

As he stood there, lost in thought, one of the women recognised him as the man from the helicopter. She gave a shrill laugh and called out to her neighbour. Tucker walked sheepishly away.

He continued through the market past stalls of dry fish and out through a narrow alley at the back where a butcher was hacking vigorously at a hanging carcass while his customers, oblivious of the spattering blood, shouted advice and instructions. He hurried past this, averting his eyes, and found himself in a narrower road with more Lebanese shops and ruts so deep he had to jump across them. Nobody seemed to bother much about the state of the roads. Were they the D.O.'s responsibility?

Yet the town seemed wealthy. The houses here, and not only the Lebanese ones, were spacious. Elderly men in long robes sat smoking, watching their goats nibble the hibiscus hedges. Someone was lying under the front of a lorry, its oily innards scattered about his bare yard. From the rears came the sounds of women pounding cassava. Tucker crossed a concrete bridge over a deep ravine with a shallow broken stream at the bottom, carving out a fresh course with the new rains. Climbing the steep hill the other side, he passed a couple of men weaving country cloth, the narrow looms extending to pegs thirty feet away. Then there were more large bungalows, more men sitting and talking, and a small mosque with a pink-washed onion dome. Next door, a hand-painted sign advertised Government Rest House.

Tucker was charmed. So this was "up country". It seemed a pleasant little town under its skyline of palms.

Then he reached the junction. To his right, a smooth freshly-tarred road led straight up the hillside to the wrought-iron gates of an enormous mansion, dominating the whole area. How could he not have noticed it? It changed the whole perspective. No problem guessing who that belonged to!

Turning left, he found himself back at the roundabout. It functioned as a roundabout though it was nothing more than a grass hump in a bare savannah. A poda poda labelled *The Lord is my Shepherd* bumped the wrong way where the mud was a little

firmer, honking viciously at Tucker who was caught unexpectedly in its path. Fighting down the instinct to take the driver's number, he crossed to the opposite side and stopped under the cool arches of the National Bank. From here, he looked back along the main street with the market now on his left. Across the roundabout was a petrol station with a tiny shop advertising Star Beer. Was that Kamara's bar? It was time he found out where the girl lived. He stepped out into the hot sun and the problem was solved for him.

The house was about thirty yards down the street to his right, unmistakable because of the blue-uniformed constable lying full-length along the garden wall. Not bothering to wake him, Tucker crossed the unkempt garden. Two kid goats were licking at a puddle, their tails stiffly erect as they drank showing the leather underflaps..

He tried the door, then noticed the broken pane. Wrapping his wrist with a handkerchief, he put his hand through and released the catch. The door swung open.

"Who dere?"

It was the constable, awake and alarmed.

"What de hell you doing?"

His anger turned to doubt and then anxiety as he studied Tucker's suit. Tucker pointed to the window.

"Did you do this?"

"No, sah. It already break dis morning."

"Have you been inside?"

The constable looked virtuous.

"No, sah," he said, too emphatically.

The door wouldn't open completely. The hallway was blocked by a fallen bookcase and the floor was littered with paperbacks. Loose pages blew on into the living room in the breeze from the door.

The constable was peering in under Tucker's armpit.

"Have you seen this?"

"Yes, sah."

Then he added as a careful afterthought, "I don't look through de window."

"Did you report it?"

"De Chief Constable sabi, sah. He done come dis morning wid de D.O."

Tucker strode inside angrily, slamming the door behind him. So this was what they meant by cooperation!

His first impression was that it looked like the capital's *Africana Nightclub* after a police raid. Flung across the unpolished red and black tiles were fish-baskets, broken pots,

wooden masks, a wooden xylophone, gourds with Spanish-looking faces painted in gaudy colours - why did white people always surround themselves with this stuff nowadays? Then he noticed the dining table, sloping with two legs broken off. The reed mats had been flung in a corner and looked from the cracked folds as if they had been stamped on. A poster of Malcolm X was torn down the middle and lay among beneath the smashed glass contents of the sideboard.

Peering into the bedroom, Tucker crushed a wooden necklace under his heel. Blankets and sheets were piled on the floor and the drawers had been emptied on the bare stained mattress. A bottle of face lotion had dripped from the dressing table to the wooden stool. He tugged at a gutted pillowcase and found a photograph album. The pages were unturned but it had been rifled. Only a picture postcard of an African market in Nigeria remained.

Back in the living room he tried the other door. Photographs, he was thinking. Friends. He remembered the D.O.'s anxious fatuities. Then the smell from the kitchen assailed him. The rubbish bin had been tipped across the floor and mixed with the contents of the fridge. He opened the window to let out the stench and let in some more light. Cockroaches scuttled for the shelter of the cupboards. In the sink, a pile of airmail letters had been torn up, the ink too smudged by tapwater to be readable. On a shelf by the back door was a bicycle pump and a puncture repair kit. That gave him an idea and he went out into the garden. There was no bicycle but there were tyre marks on the path from last night's rains.

He wandered a little way across the tangled garden which was green only where a pumpkin vine had grown around the garden tap, then hurried back inside as he heard angry voices from the front of the house. It was Corporal Sesay. The constable was disputing his right to enter. Tucker banged his shins on the bookcase as he opened the door and beckoned the corporal inside.

"You did do dis, sah?"

Corporal Sesay had never seen such a thorough search.

Tucker drew him into the bedroom and took Lois Huck's note, now wrapped in cellophane, from his inside pocket.

"How many people know about this?"

"Constable Ofori, sah. He did give me straight when I come on duty."

"You showed it to the Chief Constable?"

"Yes, sah."

"Where?"

"Kamara's bar, sah. He always dere six o'clock".

"And then?"

"He vex plenty. He tell me it all one big joke and I no sabi policeman work. He ask how I no shame to leave police station when I on duty."

Tucker stared at him in astonishment.

"You mean you went to Nekekora without permission?"

"Yes, sah."

It was incredible. No wonder the Chief Constable was keeping out of his way. He studied Corporal Sesay's face with new respect, thrusting from his mind all but the essentials. Note acted on at six, girl killed about eight, body discovered at ten, Chief Constable informed, say, just after midnight.

"What time was a man put to guard this house?"

The corporal became apologetic. he began to check off his fingers.

"It mean extra duty for someone, sah. I did take ConstabOfori wid me and I call back Constable Mohammed and fix up for he to take night duty - "

"No, no, I'm not blaming you, corporal. But", he pointed to the door, "What time was that fellow put there?"

"I t'ink dis morning, sah."

"Did you see anyone in Nerekora last night?"

"No, sah."

"Anyone on the road?"

"No, sah."

"Not even a bicycle?"

"No, sah."

"Someone," said Tucker impressively, waving his hand at the debris, "was afraid there might be evidence here."

Comprehension dawned on the corporal's face.

"Dat man de murderer, sah."

"Ah, but who told him about the note?"

"She did tell him, sah. She tell him police coming and he did kill she one time."

Straightway, Tucker's elaborate theory involving the Chief Constable and perhaps the D.O. collapsed. He rubbed his chin ruefully and gazed again around the room where he could have spent a couple of days collecting fingerprints, piecing together the letters, combing the floor for trace elements, questioning the neighbours. But he hadn't time to do it all himself and who could he trust up here? Anyway the main evidence must have gone.

That must be the intelligent assumption, unless it never existed which would explain the devastation.

"Corporal, the school. Get over there. See if she left any belongings there. Any -"

He broke off., What a fool he was.

"The boy. The Minister's nephew. Did he go to school?"

"De same school, sah. She his teacher."

Obviously.

"Get over there. She must have had a desk or a locker or something. There's nothing here in the way of textbooks or lessonnotes and she must have kept them somewhere. Then pick me up at the police station."

"Yes, sah."

"How do I get there, by the way?"

Corporal Sesay looked astonished at such ignorance.

"It just down de road, sah, by de junction. It go take you five minutes."

"Pick me up there. I want you to take me to Nerekora."

Tucker stood for a few more minutes in the centre of the living room, waiting for an impression which eluded him. The tourist junk was so anonymous - only the torn poster revealed her nationality and hinted obliquely at her ideals. Returning to the bedroom, he pressed the palm of his right hand hard on the dressing table next to the dripping face lotion. He did the same on a door panel, then came back to the living room and deliberately grasped a wooden carving by the torso. The figure was atrociously done, the cracks in the unseasoned wood filled with putty and blackened with boot polish. He set it down prominently on the sideboard. It was a trick he had often used when he first returned from England.

Stepping through the kitchen he went out through the back door and walked round the house.

"Don't let anyone in," he told the constable with grim irony. Then gripping his briefcase firmly under his elbow, he turned right towards the Symira District Police State.

Chapter Four

Tucker had never in his life been to an African village. Sometimes in London when for the first time he had been forced to think of himself as an African, he had been asked about mud huts and witchdoctors. He had always answered with reference to the Nigerian and Kenyan novels he was reading, and had made a private vow to find out more when he returned. But back in the capital he had dropped again into the old assumptions. For the Creoles, travel meant going overseas, preferably "home" to England. There was nowhere else worth going, except perhaps along the coast to Abijan or Lagos. The word village suggested only those tiny inbred communities in the mountains where the freed slaves had been settled under missionaries and from which anyone with enterprise had long since escaped.

"This leopard business", he said suddenly.

They were driving to Nerekora and Corporal Sesay was concentrating on the sequence of sand drifts, rock humps and shattering gullies which passed for a road. There was no other traffic - even the poda-podas were reluctant to attempt it now that the rains had come. But he continued to change gear crisply at every curve and to give stiff hand signals. Once when a troop of baboons ran across the way, halting to screech insults at the landrover, the corporal treated them as considerately as ordinary pedestrians.

"I mean," said Tucker, "this thing about Chief Mansaray being a leopard."

He felt a little foolish. He was about to ask if anyone really believed it, but he was beginning to like and respect the corporal and he didn't wish to sound rude."

"Why do they say this about him? How did it start?"

Corporal Sesay was delighted.

"It done begin wid Sewa Amadu, sah. De chief grandfader."

"Sewa Amadu. Was he a chief too?"

"Yes, sah. Was Sewa Amadu Mansaray. Den Forah Dinka Mansaray. Den come Amadu Kekora Mansaray. Dat Chief Mansaray, sah."

"So Forah Dinka was Chief Mansaray's father?"

"No, sah. He fader na Sanu Mansaray but dat man never make chief. But Forah Dinka fader he na Bana Dinka, and he broder to Bana Sewa who build up de town. And dat man Chief Mansaray great-great grandfader!"

Tucker was completely lost. It was like listening to his mother on the ramifications of his own family. He would have to ask again later when he could write it all down.

"That man get plenty sense, sah."

"Which one?"

"Bana Sewa, sah. He sabi everyt'ing one time. When he wake up every morning he fire off four arrows, nort', sout', east, west. Dey go travel every country right round de world, and when they come home dey done talk say everyt'ing dat happen."

"It's a pity we can't do the same," said Tucker. "We could solve this case right off."

Corporal Sesay beamed with pure joy.

"And the leopard business?"

"Wait you hear."

He stopped the landrover suddenly in the middle of the road and turned his seat to face Tucker, his hands cupped and his shoulders curving with pleasure.

"Bafai village up de mountain der. Dem people make plenty trouble. When war come dey don' help fightin', when farm ready dey don' trouble wid work. Dem been done full up wid all kind of bad t'ing. Dey just lazy bush people", he concluded contemptuously.

"Sewa Amadu, he go visit dem. He change fo leopard, he run dere fast-fast t'rough de bush. He see de Bafai people all gone make hunting so he done follow quiet t'rough de grass."

His fingers stalking along his left forearm, he mimicked the leopard creeping up on the hunters.

"Sewa Amadu, he let dem see him, just de tip of de tail one time, Deb he hide again. Dem Bafai people bad hunters. Dey make plenty noise, dey t'row spear."

The corporal jabbed a finger at Tucker's chest.

"Dey cahn hit Sewa Amadu, but he lie still and fool dem. Dem hunters creep up, slow-slow. Dey see de tail stick up and dey frighten, forsake when a leopard hurt it angry very bad. So wait you listen what dey do. Dey pick up a house, ol' bush house dat don' belong nobody, and dey carry it - one man one man one man, all dey way round. Dey creep up on Sewa Amadu and dey make palava. If de leopard hurt bad, we go put de house over him and he done trap. But if de leopard jump, we go get inside the house and we all go be safe."

Corporal Sesay's voice shrank to a whisper.

"Dey get close-close, plenty-close."

His fingers hovered, trembling slightly.

"Dey see de leopard have eyes like fire so dey scamp inside de house one time."

"So what happened?" said

"Sewa Amadu jump inside selfsame wd den and he done chop-am all all!"

The corporal gave a great burst of laughter and tapped his forehead several times on the steering wheel. Then suddenly, he became a policeman again. He climbed down from the landrover but couldn't resist a final fling through the open window.

"Dem Bafai people stupid bush people".

He walked stiffly on ahead. Chuckling at the tale, Tucker watched him disappearing round the corner. As the capital was to London, so Symira was to the capital. That much he had already known. But so, it seemed was Nerekora to Symira and so even Bafai to Nerekora. Somewhere behind the mountain was there some tiny cluster of huts that even the people of Bafai laughed at? Was there any village anywhere that considered itself "bush"?

Corporal Sesay returned.

"De bridge don fix, sah."

Tucker had forgotten about the difficulties of getting to Nerekora the previous night.

"This is where you had to stop_?"

"Yes, sah. We done walk from here. But it plenty close now."

Ten minutes later, they bumied over the narrow rampart where part of the ditch had been filled in and entered Nerekora's circle of cotton trees. It was an hour and a half before sunset but already the curved shadow stretched halfway across the village.

"Dat Usman Salifu house, sah".

"Who's he?" said Tucker, trying to remember the chiefs the corporal had listed for him.

"Big party man, sah. He de Yout' Leader."

Tucker was a little disappointed. The cotton trees were impressive but Corporal Sesay's enthusiasm had prepared him for something more arcadian than this jumble of ugly concrete houses set at irregular angles. The entrance to the village looked like a cheap housing estate, begun without plans and rapidly abandoned. The road simply vanished - the corporal steered the landrover wherever the hard earth with its slippery surface looked most nearly level. Groups of children stood grinning, their hands pressing their hard round bellies. Some of the older boys ran ahead shouting, leading them along the edge of the cotton trees' shadow, across the small savannah and past the open-sided courthouse where three goats stood chewing absentmindedly, then on past clusters of poorer houses built of mud and corrugated iron and surrounded by newly planted gardens of maize and cassava. The compound they were heading for was right across the village in the shadow. Only the conical thatched roof of Paramount Chief Mansaray's house reached high above the dusk into the late afternoon sunlight.

Tucker got down from the landrover and hesitated, staring at the upturned rusting taxi in the chief's yard while children danced and chattered around him. There was some anxious shouting. Women ran up, their breasts flapping, and seized the children, dragging them away.

"I t'ink dey frighten, sah."

"Of us?"

The corporal shook his head sorrowfully.

"Of de chief".

Tucker followed the corporal across the narrow courtyard and up a flight of wooden steps. He had a quick impression of neatness and symmetry, trimmed thatch and carved pillars, and then he was inside in the cool twilight of the broad verandah.

Chief Mansaray was seated to the right of the steps which bisected the verandah and led up further into the main room of the house. Tucker had a fleeting impression of a public statue in an English town, a provincial mayor, erect and motionless in the dim light of the verandah. He was wearing the red-rust gown of chieftaincy, covered with dark blue crosses. Beside him was the tall ancient war drum, last used in the days of his warrior

grandfather, which was the symbol of his authority. He did not rise but watched impassively as Corporal Sesay approached.

"Paramount Chief Amadu Kekora Mansaray, I greet you," said the corporal in the vernacular. He spoke with deep respect as though his own uniform was an irrelevancy.

The chief replied coolly in English, "I see you, policeman". He did not invite them to sit down.

"We bring kola chief", said the corporal.

He handed Chief Mansaray a bundle of kola leaves wrapped round half a dozen kolas to keep them fresh. The gift was bound with white string.

The chief's hands remained clasped in his lap.

"White thread is for friendship. You know the custom. I do not see friendship here".

Corporal Sesay tried again, this time in English.

"Chief, dis man na Detective-Inspector Tucker, A big man, sah."

Chief Mansaray glanced briefly at Tucker, his intelligent eyes betraying more interest than he intended. He had taken Tucker for some minor APP official come to buy him off. Suddenly, he relented and accepted the kola nuts, placing them carefully on the polished mud floor beside his chair. He beckoned his visitors to the empty seats beside him.

"As you see," he said bitterly, "I am alone."

Tucker examined the drum which swelled headhigh, separating him from Chief Mansaray. Its ancient wooden frame was badly cracked but the drum skin was new and taut. He fought down the impulse to tap his fingernails on it. There was a long pause. From somewhere through the house came the steady thump-thump of a mortar. Corporal Sesay cleared his throat noisily. Tucker leaned forward to look at the chief and was about to speak when the corporal hastily signaled him to keep silent.

"So", said Chief Mansaray, staring straight before him, his voice heavy with sarcasm. "Parliament is dissolved. Nomination day is next Monday. It is a clever trick. The party thugs are ready. The opposition must prepare its candidates while everyone is on holiday. I hear it on the radio. One hour later, you come to question me. I do not think that can be an coincidence."

On this last word, he swung round sharply and challenged Tucker.

"I oppose Brima Conteh. I have a better candidate. What is that to the police? Elections are not a police matter. Even in this country, elections are not yet a police matter."

"Murder", said Tucker, almost inaudibly, "is a police matter".

"Murder has nothing to do with me."

"But," continued Tucker in the same tone, "it may have something to do with the election."

"There are two candidates. Yet you come straight to me."

"The murder took place here in your village."

"Inspector Tucker," continued the chief after a long pause in which he was clearly trying to control himself, "I am angry at the boy's death. Brima Conteh pretends to be angry because it is his nephew. But the boy was from my village. In my care. I gave a goat when his father died. I have sent my own food to his mother. I paid schooling for the boy. His uncle is a government minister, but I paid! This witchcraft is a horrible thing. But now that same Brima Conteh tells people I am responsible. I! Amadu Kekora Mansaray!"

He raised his voice deliberately, shouting so the village could hear.

"My great-great-grandfather Bana Sewa planted these cottontrees to protect Nerekora. Am I now to kill his children?"

The challenge boomed across the silent village. Under the clear blue sky the cotton trees' shadow was like a drumskin. There was no echo and no reply. But Tucker sensed suddenly that everybody had heard.

"My compound is searched! My household is questioned! My ancestral shrine is desecrated to satisfy one ... politician!"

He spat the word out.

"My elders, where are they? They avoid my house. They tell me, Amadu Kekora Mansaray, it is unwise to know me. That is the wisdom of the elders! And my people. Do you see them greet me now? Do you see them give honour to my wives?"

He stabbed a finger accusingly at Tucker.

"Now you turn up. A big policeman from the capital. You talk about elections and you talk about murder. You think I don't know why you are here? You think I don't know who sent you?"

He rose to his feet and gathered his robe around him.

"I have made my statement. I have nothing more to say. You may go."

Tucker began to protest but the chief was too angry to listen.

"You want fool me? You t'ink I no sabi Brima Conteh?" heshouted, lapsing into creole in his sarcasm. "How much he done bribe you, eh policeman?"

Something clicked in Tucker's mind. Perhaps it was the creole, perhaps the bitterness, but he recognised this outrage, this helpless hatred of a corrupt system. He too had made this speech in anger and contempt as he traced the bribes through almost every investigation he handled until, eight times out of ten, he reached the top man - and was put on another case. His reports were filed away. They might be used retrospectively, after the next coup. Chief Mansaray had not even that satisfaction.

His eyes met the chief's.

"Chief Mansaray, you are a tall man," he said calmly.

"So?"

"It means I am convinced of your innocence".

It was flummery. There had been nothing about the position of the wounds on the body in the bathtub that specifically ruled out a tall murderer. It was a matter of angles. But he couldn't help relishing the sudden silence.

"I am here," he continued, "to investigate impartially and without prejudice the murder last week of a twelve-year-old boy."

For a brief moment, the hard lines of Chief Mansaray's mouth relaxed and his whole face softened. Then his eyes became ceptical again.

"And," continued Tucker in the same level tone, "the murder last night of a young woman."

"Woman?"

"Her name was Lois Huck. She was a teacher, a peace corps volunteer living in Symira. The boy was one of her pupils. Her body was found by Corporal Sesay around ten o'clock last night. It was lying beside the watertank."

"A white woman?"

"But murdered in the same manner".

Tucker was watching the chief carefully. He was slow to respond but it was hard to believe he was acting.

"A peace corps?"

He looked completely broken. As he sank slowly into his chair, tears sprang to his eyes. For a second, Tucker was intensely suspicious. He looked sharply at Corporal Sesay, standing by the steps, but the corporal was grief-stricken too."

"Chief Mansaya," said Tucker, moved despite himself. "I have very little information so far. But I know that you have powerful enemies. My job is to find the murderer and I need your assistance."

The chief nodded slowly. Then he turned to the corporal.

"Is this true?"

"Yes, sah."

"You didn't come to me?"

Corporal Sesay looked frightened. It was a turn of events he hadn't anticipated. Tucker intervened hastily.

"Corporal Sesay acted correctly. It was important to get the investigation started as quickly and with as much secrecy as possible. If he hadn't come straight to the capital you would probably be in jail by now."

For a long time, Chief Mansaray stared at the gleaming mud floor of the verandah. A woman came round the house to fill a metal saucepan at the standpipe in the courtyard. The child she had left behind began to cry in protest. Chief Mansaray half turned his head to listen.

"My youngest boy," he said abstractedly.

Then with sudden decision he picked up the bundle of kola nuts, selected one and handed it to Tucker. Tucker examined it and returned it to the chief who broke it into its three lobes and shared them out.

"All right," he said. "I will answer your questions."

Tucker nibbled the kola, relishing the astringent juice. Having gained his point, he was not sure where to begin. In the capital on his own ground he would have jumped straight in with "Where were you at last night between seven and midnight? When did you last see the victim?"

Instead, he said simply, "Tell me about Nerekora."

Chapter Five

Chief Mansaray shuffled his feet into a pair of wooden-soled sandals.

"Come," he said.

Detective-Inspector Eustace Tucker would never forget the next hour of his life. For the first time he sensed something solid in his own country, something he could respect and serve and which required from him as a policeman not just his example but his active protection.

Side by side, the chief in his flowing rust-coloured robes, the young man neatly suited, they crossed the compound with Corporal Sesay following like a bodyguard. They skirted the decaying taxi next to the grave of Chief Mansaray's grandfather, then turned towards the tallest of the cotton trees on the north-western perimeter. The shadow of the trees to the west now stretched right across the village and was beginning to climb the massive buttress-rooted boles of the trees opposite. The effect was of an unusually prolonged twilight, not just the normal luminous fifteen minutes when the bare earth was suffused with pink, but a gentle gradation of colours - almost, Tucker thought, like England. Yet the sky remained bright and clear, as though the village was receding into a vast shallow well.

The tension was gone. The silence which had fallen on the whole community withonly Chief Mansaray's household going about its normal business was broken everywhere by the thudding of mortars as the women, jerking from the waist, their long breasts swinging, pounded casava flour. Children celebrated their release from captivity, running around in screaming circles or chasing away the goats which had encroached on the gardens. The air became sweet with the smell of burning charcoal and cow dung, and the cooking fires themselves gradually became visible further and further off, each one its own centre of activity. Outside a few of the huts, men were already unrolling their prayer mats. Someone casually plonked a wooden xylophone. For Tucker, the muffled notes gave the whole scene an patina of sadness, an obscure feeling that he might have come here too late.

Chief Mansaray halted, pointing to the narrow track which led between the two tallest cotton trees disappearing downhill into the dry uncut grass.

"Our ancestors lived in the mountains of Futa Jalon in the land given to them by their ancestors. We are still called the people of Futa Jalon. That is what our name means. But the Susu came with armies like locusts and drove us into exile. This gate marks the road to our homeland."

He patted the elephant grey bark of one of the huge buttress roots.

"These trees were planted by Bana Sewa Mansaray. When my people abandoned Futa Jalon they were chased everywhere by the Susu. The chief in those days was Yala Dansa Mansaray. He led my people from one camp to another, but always the Susu found them and enslaved a few more. After many years of this they became angry. They overthrew Yala Dansa and turned to his brother Bana Sewa Mansaray instead. Bana Sewa brought my people here. He planted greenwood stakes so that they formed a strong stockade. He dug this rampart all the way round. Then he ordered the blacksmith Musa Conteh to make many arrowheads and spears. When the Susu came, they couldn't capture Nerekora. They had guns, but the stakes had taken root and become trees and the trees

swallowed the bullets. They made fire and burned the long grass but they couldn't burn the cotton trees. Bana Sewa Mansaray," concluded Chief Mansaray proudly, "was my great-great-grandfather."

Tucker stared up at the massive tree, its top two-thirds reddening now in the evening sunlight. The capital, too, was dominated by a huge silk cotton tree on the roundabout outside C.I.D. headquarters. His own ancestors had celebrated their deliverance from the slave ships by assembling beneath it and singing "Praise God from Whom all blessings flow" - or, at least, so ran the legend. Hearing it as a boy in Sunday school, he had wondered how they had learned the words so quickly.

"Conteh," he exclaimed suddenly. "The blacksmith, Musa Conteh!"

Chief Mansaray gave him a quick smile, then beckoned him back along the path, pushing his way through the stiff withered grass on the left. They were in a neat garden with damp, freshly-turned soil extending from the rear wall of the chief's compound right back to the arc of trees. Already, along the straight furrows, green slithers of maize were thrusting, planted just before the first rains. There was a patch of sugar cane and a circle of bananas and pawpaws, fenced off to keep away the goats and shading a small plantation of coffee. Beyond this was more maize and the struggling stems of casava bushes.

"The stockade", continued the chief, "had seven gateways, leading to all the villages Bana Sewa ruled. He put the gateways under the protection of the most important families in Nerekora. It was an important gift because -"

He looked at Tucker and added with heavy emphasis, "because it showed that they were completely trustworthy."

A path led off to the left through a second gap in the trees. Three women appeared suddenly out of the ditch, returning from their farms balancing hoes on their heads. The two youngest with round pretty faces and babies slung on their backs curtsied hastily, keeping their eyes fixed on the ground and shuffling off as soon as they could. The third, a middle-aged woman with a stiff back and a bony burnt face as rigid as a carving, held her head high, not bothering even to steady her hoe as she padded past on flat complacent feet.

Even Tucker was shocked at the deliberate insult. For a moment, Chief Mansaray looked a very old man. Then, aware of Tucker's scrutiny, he spat noisily and pulled his robe tight around his broad shoulders.

"This gate was given to Dumbuya. A great hunter. Once, on the journey from Futa Jalon when the people had no food, he killed a bull elephant single-handed. Every dry season when there was a big hunt, the young men would gather first at Dumbuya's compound and leave by this road.

Again, he smiled.

"In those days we were warriors and hunters. Now we make farms and pay taxes to the government."

The three men walked on in single file along the edge of the garden, following the curve of the trees, just out of reach of the lower branches which swooped down to head height from thirty feet above them. Across the village to their right, the far cotton trees were charred lace against the glowing sky and the scattered cooking fires looked like sparks from the furnace outside. Tucker would have liked to lag behind for a quick word

with Corporal Sesay but he felt as if he had surrendered all authority.

"Those women," he began.

Without turning, Chief Mansaray waved his hand dismissively.

"Even their husbands are afraid of me."

Under the trees this side, the light had almost gone. Each time the track wound beneath them, it was like entering a huge building with arches and galleries dimly visible overhead. Then once again they came to an opening and the sky shone suddenly overhead, bright with pink parallel streaks against the eggshell blue.

Chief Mansaray waited for Tucker to give him all his attention. Corporal Sesay, pleased with what he knew was coming, pulled himself erect.

"This gateway is called the brothers-in-law gate. It was given to the Kamaras. When a chief dies, one of the Kamaras becomes regent and it is the Kamaras who arrange for a fresh election."

Tucker opened his mouth to ask about Kamara's bar in Symira, then asked instead about what had surprised him.

"Election?"

He had taken it for granted that chiefs succeeded to power automatically.

"Anyone from Bana Sewa's family can be elected chief. When Bana Sewa died, his brother Bana Dinka was chosen to succeed him before his son Fila Sana. Then Fila Sana's son, my grandfather Sewa Amadu, became chief before Bana Dinka's grandson Forah Dinka. Do you understand? When Forah Finka died six years ago there were three candidates, including my brother.

"Where is he now?"

"He died four years ago."

"What about your father?"

"He is dead to. He was a court messenger. In those days the Kamaras didn't approve of education."

It was the second time Tucker had heard the lineage. He could see the pattern if he couldn't yet grasp all the details. Essentially, there were two chiefly lines with a common ancestor. He glanced at Corporal Sesay whose face was radiant with satisfaction.

"What happened to the first one?"

"Bana Sewa?"

"Before him. The one who was deposed."

"Ha! Yala Dansa! You shall see."

Chief Mansaray beamed as at an smart pupil. For the first time Tucker felt a surge of irritation. This was supposed to be an investigation, not a history lesson however fascinating. There was something mildly patronising about the chief's stylish English. Was it because he was talking to a Creole? Did people feel like that listening to him?

If only he could speak the language!

Moodily, he zig-zagged across the garden behind the Kamara's compound, dodging between the plants. The soil was heaped into separate mounds, each one planted with three or four different crops sprouting in green curls and slithers - tomatoes, maize, beans, pumpkins, cucumbers - which would eventually support each other in a thick tangle. It looked like one of those plots on the outskirts of the capital, dug for one year only by new arrivals from up-country. The Kamaras evidently didn't like Chief Mansaray's modern methods.

The ground beyond was a wasteland, half an acre thick with thistles and tall grass. Only a tiny plot was cultivated, a garden twenty feet square beside a delapidated mud house, its overhanging thatch blackened with decay. A wood fire glowed in the entrance, the thin column of smoke standing straight up against the far cotton trees and the red sky.

Chief Mansaray's good humour had gone. Despite his remarks about farming and taxes, he didn't like squalor.

"The blacksmith's gate," he announced abruptly, gesturing behind him to the nearest cotton trees. Bana Sewa gave it to Musa Conteh."

"The man who made the spears and arrowheads?"

The chief turned slowly.

"He made jewelry, hoes, cutlasses, knives. People used to come even from Malema to buy them. Sometimes, even from Guinea."

Chief Mansaray hesitated, staring at the darkness over Tucker's shoulder.

"He made things."

The words dropped among the other village noises - squealing children, barking dogs, the plonking plaintive music, half-sentences from the cooking fires amplified by the prolonged dusk. They seemed charged with a special significance but Tucker had no idea what to do with them. Was there any mystery about making hoes?

"It's strange the boy should carry the same name."

He almost missed it. The chief was still staring at the trees. Then, remembering the scene in Commissioner Sandi office, he realised to his shame that he was hearing the boy's name for the first time.

"Musa Conteh," he said slowly.

"That is the house".

In sudden anger, Chief Mansaray whirled round and pointed to the hut beside the tiny garden "You see what it is to have a big man in the village? And Brima Conteh pretends to be in mourning!"

A little boy, not two years old, crawled out of the gaping black doorway, stood up uncertainly beside the fire and stumbled towards them across the tiny garden, his eyes fixed on the chief. He was completely naked, his navel protruding from his swollen tummy. Leather charms dangled from his neck and his waist. Before he had tottered a third of the way towards them a woman scurried after him and snatched him up, her breasts flapping against her ribs. She curtsied fearfully, muttered a quick greeting, and scrambled back to the safety of her hut.

"She still has one son."

Tucker took a deep breath. The mother! A witness! But the chief's hand was restraining him.

"She will tell you she felt a great wind rush by and her boy was gone. That is all she would tell even me."

Tucker wavered, dissatisfied. Could he question the woman without the chief's help? Could Corporal Sesay be trusted to do it for him?

Chief Mansaray settled the matter.

"That house," he said, dropping his hand, "is just where Musa Conteh's forge stood."

He swung about sharply, striding off so fast that his robe billowed behind him. Corporal Sesay stood aside for Tucker to follow. It was ridiculous. In this village in his

own country he felt completely without bearings. One thing at a time, he excused himself. I'll be back.

The path veered inwards towards the village centre, avoiding a cotton tree which had collapsed inwards under its own weight, its lopped trunk lying as high as a two-storey house. Straight ahead, Tucker could see the courthouse building and through its open walls, barely visible against the black line of trees, the pale outline of the landrover parked beside the steps leading up to Chief Mansaray's house. A little to the left was the gap where the road led north-west to Futa Jalon.

Four of the gateways passed - they were half way round. So far, he had learned nothing which threw light on the murders. Chief Mansaray was still hurrying as they skirted the upper branches of the fallen tree which even now sprouted fresh leaves, then turned back left across another patch of waste land which seemed to be the village rubbish dump. The smashed cab of a lorry, swathed in creepers, stood up above the thistles. Through the broad opening where the tree had fallen, a broad expanse of the plain outside shimmered in the evening sunlight. The village within its stockade had become a brimming pool of dusk set in a glowing landscape.

"There was once a gate over there," said the chief over his shoulder. "Foday's gate, the executioner. The thieves and murderers condemned by the elders were led out that way to be killed. As you see, the road no longer exists."

"That must be an improvement," said Tucker firmly.

"You think so,"

Chief Mansaray stopped in his tracks, turning so suddenly that Tucker almost ran into him. "You think we need policemen, eh? You think we couldn't settle these murders ourselves?"

"How?"

"Ha!" He spat contemptuously. "That would be breaking the white man's law. Your law."

They were almost quarrelling and the chief's temper wasn't improved by the section of the village they were now approaching. Six concrete-block houses with iron roofs faced inwards, two with their backs to the cotton trees and four in an arc with their backs to the village. Between them ran the road from Symira, losing itself in the caked mud of the building site. The houses were very new, their walls painted alternately pink and pale blue, with mauve window frames and green-topped railings around their tiny verandahs. Two of them had television aerials. Next to the largest was a two-car garage with an elaborate mural outside - a lion, two pythons and a crocodile and an ostrich frolicked happily together, unaware of the Texas sheriff with a dazzling star and forty-gallon hat gunning them down with his six-shooters.

The garage was empty.

Noting this, Tucker noted too the untidy gardens littered with cardboard boxes, empty cans, worn tyres and broken whisky bottles. He saw the haphazardness of the planning which nevertheless excluded the rest of the village. And he saw the youths, appearing suddenly in groups of three or four round the corners where they had been waiting. A few wore the uniform of the APP Youth League. All of them carried cutlasses.

Chief Mansaray was unconcerned. But he pitched his voice loud enough to carry.

"After he had been overthrown, Yala Dansa Mansaray disappeared. The elders used to say the people killed him in their anger. His family came to Nerekora and Bana Sewa gave them this gateway. It was an important gift. All traders travelling to the coast left by this road."

The loud phut-phut of a two-stroke generator cut into his speech and lights went on simultaneously in all of the houses.

"None of this family has ever again been elected as chief. Every election they put up a candidate. But the people remember Yala Dansa."

"And Usman Salifu?" asked Tucker, very conscious he was speaking on cue.

"He is a Mansaray, Yala Dansa's great-great-grandson. He stood against me six years ago."

"How long has he been a Party man?"

"Since he lost."

Tucker was disappointed. Was this all the chief had been leading up to - that his political enemies were motivated by spite. Did he suppose Tucker believed them to be high-minded idealists? One of the youths was sharpening a cutlass on the corner of the garage beside the trigger-happy sheriff. The others, ganged together now, leaned against the animals and stared menacingly.

"Don't worry," said Chief Mansaray aloud. "These children will not touch us. They are waiting for you to arrest me and they will give you a little longer."

Suddenly, as they were standing, darkness fell at last on the village. The sun sank behind the rim of Bafai mountain as though someone had tugged it and a flock of fruit bats began making wild spirals as though released from a cage.

"There is one last gate to visit."

They set off together, the chief very erect gathering his robe about him as they passed the youths who, as he had promised, made no move to stop them. They crossed the Symira road, making straight for the western perimeter at a tangent to the remaining arc of the stockade. Above Bafai mountain with its spikey fringe of windblown trees, the sky was an angry purple. Stark against the horizon ahead, in the gap where another of the trees had fallen, was the black bulky silhouette of the water tank.

"Bana Sewa," said the chief as they drew near, "wanted to build on high ground. He made the stockade thick and strong. But the stream is too far away."

He pointed downhill into the darkness. Faintly, somewhere below, were the sounds of a river.

"The last time the Susu came was when Fila Sana was chief. Samori was the Susu leader in those days and he had a big army of horsemen. My people took refuge behind the cotton trees. But Samori didn't attack. He made his camp down by the stream. It was the beginning of the dry season. For eight days, the gate to the water was closed."

Frogs began to flute down in the valley. The noises of the night had begun.

"On the ninth day, Fila Sana beat the war drum to summon the elders to his house. We had bought guns by that time and all the powder was kept by the chief. Fila Sana asked all those who refused to capitulate to Samori to climb up beside him on the boxes of gunpowder. Every single man joined him and Kadiatu, his senior wife, brought a stick from the cooking fire."

Tucker exclaimed.

"Everyone died. Only the wives and young men were left. My grandfather was just a child. In his old age he used to say there was a spring near the village centre where the courthouse stands now and that it dried up after the explosion. But I do not see how that can be true."

"You mean," Tucker almost shouted, "that happened here?"

He was deeply impressed. He could scarcely credit such a thing had occurred in his own country. It sounded like something out of Roman history."

"It happened where my own house stands."

Then Chief Mansaray added with deliberate casualness, as though only by way of a postscript, "That is why this water system is such a great thing. I promised when I became chief I would solve this problem."

Beyond the gateway, the river was louder now in the cooling night air. It sounded full with the new rains. The cotton tree branching over their heads was like a huge starless hole in the sky. Oh grandfather, thought Tucker, it was beautiful after all. It all made sense. It came full circle like the cotton trees. The leopard myths, the rivalry extending back over five generations, the importance of the water - such a murder on the day the water system was officially opened could discredit only one man.

Then the doubts began. What about the girl? What had Lois Huck discovered? What had brought her to this spot last night to her own death?

Corporal Sesay was staring at the ground beside the water tank.

"It was here?"

"Yes, sah."

It was much too dark to see anything. Should he had come here earlier? In the helicopter?

But where was she killed?

She must have expected the police to arrive at any moment. And so, on the evidence of the ransacked house, must the murdered. The nearest huts were close by. He could hear people talking.

Again, the feeling of helplessness overwhelmed him. The butchered body, the girl's wrecked house, Musa Conteh's mother, and now in total darkness the patch of bare earth where the corpse had been found - grandfather, the day was over! He had seen them all and he had't started yet.

He was close to tears of frustration as he paced behind Chief Mansaray back to the chief's compound. The landrover glowed faintly, its red reflectors gleaming like charcoal. Tucker patted it familiarly, then paused half way up the steps, frowning to himself.

"Corporal", he said suddenly. "Take the landrover and drive round the village. I want to you make an announcement that anyone with information about these murders should meet us on the Symira road just outside the gateway in one hour's time. You can tell them about the girl."

He wasn't sure why he added this but it made him feel he had done something decisive. Corporal Sesay looked dubious. His gaze flickered towards the chief.

"You wan' me go use de megaphone, sah?"

"All the better," said Tucker.

Again, Corporal Sesay looked up at the chief. He was waiting for permission.

"Let me at least send the fina instead?" protested Chief Mansaray, shuffling his feet in annoyance on the mud floor of the verandah.

"The fina?"

"My orator,"

"No," said Tucker and felt better for his insistence. "It's time this was firmly a police matter".

He hurried up the steps into the darkness of the verandah and waited while Chief Mansaray lit a paraffin lamp.

"Now," he said, "I have some further questions."

Chapter Six

"I t'ink de chief not guilty, sah," said Corporal Sesay.

He was squirming with satisfaction. His performance with the megaphone had given him huge pleasure. For fully half an hour, twenty minutes longer than necessary, his voice had boomed across the dark village, pleading, commanding, cajoling like an election address. Now he jerked about in the driving seat, urging the landrover forward as if it were a mule.

They were returning from Nerekora along the pale rutted track which divided reluctantly before them as their headlights kept the bush at bay. Tucker had his briefcase open on his lap and was examining for the second time by the light of a pencil torch the items the corporal had brought him from Independence school. They consisted of three cheap exercise books inscribed L.H. and each three-quarters full of carefully itemised lesson notes ("Macro-teaching" they were headed. What on earth was that?), together with a packet of twelve newly-developed photographs which, despite the two-month old postmark, seemed to have only just arrived.

He had already compared the exercise books with the spidery handwriting of Lois Huck's letter. Now he looked again at the photographs. Two were of the girl herself, lanky and smiling in the doorway of her house. There was a picture of her with a class of solemn wide-eyed children, one of whom Chief Mansaray had pointed out as the dead boy, Musa Conteh, the blacksmith's descendent. The rest were various landscapes, taken at the height of the dry season and badly over-exposed, but the last one showed Paradise Beach, just outside the capital, with the Cape hotel in the background. The girl was wearing a yellow bikini and was smiling shyly, her arms around the neck of a tall African youth.

This one he slipped into his breast pocket. Then he remembered the corporal had spoken.

"Why so?"

"I does feel so. De chief a good man, sah."

Yet the corporal's megaphone appeal had achieved nothing. After leaving Chief Mansaray's compound, they had stopped the landrover just south of the cotton trees at Usman Salifu's gateway and waited optimistically for witnesses. Then Tucker had an idea and switched off the headlights. A moment later, a rock crashed through the canvas awning at the back and clattered on the metal tool box. There was some angry shouting, then another rock hit the rear number plate. This, at least, was a language Tucker could understand. Without waiting for instructions, Corporal Sesay accelerated away.

"He's a clever man," said Tucker, wiping the dust off his briefcase with his sleeve. "He told me nothing definite, yet he made me suspect his enemy."

"Yes, sah, Dat man!"

"You think so? Yet the case against him made sense too. He could have killed the boy to remind the people of his power."

He considered for a moment, then decided to trust the corporal.

"He showed me a leopard knife."

Corporal Sesay went rigid with shock.

"Sah?" he gasped.

The landrover swerved violently.

"He showed me a three-pronged knife. While you were broadcasting."

It was true. Sitting in the semi-darkness of the verandah, listening to the corporal's voice booming across the village like an angry god's, the paraffin lamp casting grotesque shadows as insects collided with the glass, Chief Mansaray had reached up suddenly into the thatch and produced what looked like the murder weapon. Tucker took it again from his briefcase, wrapped carefully in tissue paper. It was an ordinary cutlass with Birmingham burnt into the haft, but it had been filed down to form a knife with three curving parallel blades with needle sharp points. In its horrible way it was a work of skill.

"He says he found it by the back wall of his compound two days after the boy's death. The same morning the D.O. ordered his house searched. He says he hid it in his clothes while they looked around, then stuck it in the thatch afterwards. The searchers must have been pretty incompetent."

"Why you keep dat bad t'ing, sah?"

The weapon unnerved him. Only when Tucker wrapped it away did he relax.

"It's not much use to us," Tucker agreed lightly. "It might have been used to kill the boy but I doubt if it still carries fingerprints and I don't intend to have the boy dug up to check the wounds."

"Dey did burn him, sah."

"Is that so?" said Tucker, "Well there you are. Now if we could have proved the same knife was used for both murders, then the chief by his own confession would have to be guilty. But in that case, he would hardly have given it to me, would he?"

He belched softly and ribbed his stomach. The chief's food lay heavy and he could still feel the pepper at the back of his throat.

"But he's a damn clever man. Why shouldn't he use witchcraft to get his own way?"

Frowning in concentration, the corporal slowed down for a bridge, steering the landrover carefully across the uneven wooden slats, then accelerated too soon, hitting the mud step back up to the road with a sharp jolt. Tucker banged his head on the roof and swore quietly.

"Sorry, sah."

A bush pig ran in front, unable to escape their headlights, then turned off into the long grass.

"Still I t'ink de chief not guilty, sah."

"Yes," said Tucker, snapping shut the catch of his briefcase. "So do I."

It was not so much his tour of the village that had convinced him. Nor the interrogation afterwards on the verandah. Chief Mansaray's answers had been straightforward but they had told him very little. He knew Lois Huck by sight and she had been present when the water system was opened. He recognised her photograph but not that of her boyfriend. Yes, he had made his own enquiries about the boy's death - that was his duty. He had already explained his conclusions but he couldn't prove them. His people were angry and afraid and even the boy's mother could tell him nothing.

Awkwardly, Tucker broached the subject of leopards. The chief made it no easier for him, smiling enigmatically, his face held back in the shadow, as Tucker spoke of rumours which might have a bearing on the case, hinted at tales of metamorphosis, and

wondered aloud about the mythical powers attributed to certain chiefs. Finally he said, pointblank, "Do you believe it?"

He was furious with himself for giving the man so long to consider his reply.

Chief Mansaray pointed at the lights of the landrover which swept the verandah as Corporal Sesay, his voice becoming hoarse, drew into the compound and parked.

"When you get in that truck, you will travel fast to Symira. Do you know how it works?"

Tucker was about to say, "Of course."

"I mean," continued the chief in measured tones, "if it stopped, could you take it to pieces and make it go again."

"No," he admitted.

"There are many things like that. We know they work but we do not know how."

And Tucker, exasperated, could get him to say no more.

Corporal Sesay climbed slowly up the verandah steps and Tucker stood up to leave. What was the point of continuing. Usually, when he got his teeth into an interrogation he felt alert and exhilarated. But here his resolution ebbed, abandoning him in the quicksands of his ignorance. He had found out only what Chief Mansaray chose to reveal. Pride, anger, contempt - were those the reactions of an innocent man? Or of one who felt his inherited position justified everything?

He didn't know enough and most of what he was learning was a marvel to him.

Had Chief Mansaray undertood this? He refused to let them leave and insisted on their sharing his evening meal. At once Tucker recoiled, his Creole terrors rampant again. But he had eaten nothing since breakfast except a few bananas and he had no idea where he could get another meal. He allowed himself to be led into the main room, immediately behind the verandah, and washed his hands in an enamel bowl. And then it was too late for

apology. He sat opposite the chief at a low unvarnished table. There was apace only for two so the corporal squatted on a mat just inside the doorway. Above him hung the chiefs medicines, a collection of different coloured bottles plugged with twists of brown paper and some pieces of board, shaped like ancestral shields and inscribed in Arabic with what Tucker took to be texts from the Koran.

Four women entered the room from the rear of the house and knelt before the chief, greeting him quietly.

He took no notice.

"How often have you been to the diamond mines?"

Tucker was staring at the women and Chief Mansaray's question took him by surprise. Still kneeling, her eyes fixed on the hard polished floor, the senior wife - she must be a Kamara, Tucker remembered - repeated her greeting.

It seemed to Tucker whole minutes before the chief at last acknowledged her, nodding in an off-hand manner and muttering a word he didn't catch. Then the wives came and knelt before him, shaking his hand in turn. The youngest was bare-breasted and as, breaking custom, she glanced up frankly at the detective's face he felt a quick thrill of excitement. In his own community the women tended to be domineering - "ball-crushers", Commissioner Whitehead had once called them, and then apologised to him exquisitely.

What would it be like to have four submissive wives?

Ignoring Corporal Sesay squatting the doorway, the women rose and left the room in procession.

"When the Diamond Company takes over a new concession," said Chief Mansaray, ruthlessly pursuing his new topic, "You know the first thing they do?"

He made a karate chop with his right hand. Tucker dragged his mind to attention. What was the old fox up to now?

"They cut down all the trees"

He made it sound like the ultimate crime.

"They bring their bulldozers and make deep trenches, throwing away all the good soil. Then they bring up draglines and go even deeper, right where the houses and the farms used to be."

The wives returned with steaming gourds of boiled rice, peppered chicken and green-black casava leaves. They set them on the table alongside a single metal tray with a dented picture of the tower of London, and left without a word.

"So," he continued firmly, "no more homes, no more farms, no more market. Everything has to be imported. But the miners have plenty of money so they can afford it. The miners need houses and the white men need a club and a hospital and a school and their wives need a shopping centre, so more land is stolen."

He took a handful of rice and a handful of dripping chicken pieces and laid them together in the middle of the tray. Without waiting for Tucker, he moulded a neat ball of rice, dipped it in the casava leaf gourd, and thrust it in his mouth. Tucker hesitated, then nibbled apprehensively on a chicken leg. It was unexpectedly tasty. He picked at some rice and tried to imitate the chief but the ball came apart in his fingers.

"Then the miners need wives. So all the prostitutes come down from the capital."

That, at least, Tucker knew something about. Occasionally, the *Daily Star* carried pictures of them being transported back from Koidu ("Another load of glamour girls") in a purity drive. It was usually the signal that the headquarters branch of the Youth League was holding a party.

"That is if the foreign company takes over. If it is the local diggers, it's much worse."

Tucker stopped licking his fingers.

"You prefer the white men?"

"All right. So an African pays his licence fee and gets his piece of land, twenty feet square. You know the system. He pays surface rent to the chief. He employs his diggers. They dig holes, they sieve the gravel, they wash it, they find diamonds. He sells them to the Government Diamond Office and pays off his workers. Everyone is happy, so?"

Tucker was silent.

"You're not a policeman?" said the chief angrily. "You don't hear about smuggling? You don't hear about "accidents" - men getting buried but when they dig the body out his shovel not there? You never see a corpse with the belly cut open because his friends think he swallowed diamonds? And every policeman taking bribes and the minister taking the biggest bribes of all? You think Brima Conteh built that house in Symira on his salary?"

"So?", said Tucker, his heart sinking.

"Ha' there is an election coming"

"But there are no diamonds in Nerekora."

"I'm glad you say so. I'm glad you come here as expert to tell me so."

Tucker accepted the rebuke.

"And your candidate?"

The chief composed another mouthful, dipping it carefully in the casava leaf stew and then pausing, holding the ball of rice in the air. His animation had faded.

"He is a much better man."

"For Nerekora? Or for you?"

Chief Mansaray's eyes glinted.

"A better man," he repeated sharply. He thrust the rice in his mouth and chewed slowly, his head thrown back, staring at the thatch roof. When his eyes lowered to meet Tucker's he was smiling slightly.

"But he is not from Nerekora," he said.

Tucker could not have satisfied Commissioner Sandi, on the basis of this exchange, of the chief's innocence. Was he trying to get in on the diamond game? Have his own man in parliament instead of a personal enemy? Witchcraft was bad enough. But diamonds, an election, a cabinet minister? - Tucker had always kept well clear of that kind of trouble. So had Commissioner Sandi. If Lois Huck's death had these repercussions - oh grandfather, he thought, this is the worst yet.

But at least he now understood why he had been detained. Chief Mansaray had wanted to make something else clear. He was not just re-fighting ancient village battles. His range of concern was wider. His past and present fitted together. He was prepared to oppose a minister from his own village with a candidate from another tribe altogether.

Bouncing along the last dreadful half-mile into Symira, the landrover's headlights picking out the new wine-coloured leaves of the blue gums marking the approach to the administration compound, Tucker could focus his mind on only one thing. There was something behind the chief's anger which gave resonance to his sarcasms and with which Tucker deeply sympathised. It was the vision of an ordered, rooted society, shaped by etiquette and ruled by concern. He had not expected to find his Mansfield Park in the bush and he was discovering in himself a determination, whatever happened, to protect it.

They had finished their meal in silence. Tucker found he had enjoyed it but the amount was enormous and, as his appetite lessened, the chicken towards the bottom of the gourd seemed to get more and more peppery. He wondered when Corporal Sesay would get his share. At last, he could manage no more. Chief Mansaray ate on methodically, as though finishing a set task. He belched and sucked his fingers loudly. Then he clapped his hands twice and helped himself to one last piece of chicken.

The women re-entered, the senior wife carrying a basin in which the chief washed his hands and a gourd from which the chief drank long before gesturing that it should be offered to Tucker. The others carried the remains of the meal to Corporal Sesay by the doorway. Chief Mansaray searched in his robes for a bamboo pipe and stuffed it with tobacco from a coil hanging on the wall.

Tucker rinsed his fingers, wiping them on his trousers. He was nervous about the water and drank only a little, replacing the gourd on the table.

"The Susu were great warriors," said the chief, motioning his wives to leave the room. "And Samori was a great leader. He had a brother. The brother had a grandson

who came to rule in his land. There are diamonds there too, but throughout his reign he did not allow them to be mined."

With deliberate timing, he lit his pipe and puffed smoke over Tucker's head.

"His name was Sekou Toure."

Again, Tucker was impressed. The border was only twenty-five miles away.

"Perhaps," he said experimentally, "it is time to return to Futa Jalon."

He was rewarded with an immense warm-hearted smile, completely transfiguring the chief's face, the sudden view of different man, free from the necessity for intrigue.

"Who is your candidate?" he asked with genuine interest, forgetting its bearing on the case.

"Chief Mansaray shot a warning glance at Corporal Sesay who got up immediately, his mouth full, and went out to the dark verandah.

"His name is Moses Dumbuya. He is a mining engineer at Sefadu."

They turned the corner under the black silhouettes of the coconut trees and drove slowly between the shuttered Lebanese stores. Tucker glanced at his watch. It was still only ten to nine. It seemed much later. He remembered Corporal Sesay had been on duty for over twenty-four hours.

"Drop me just by the market," said Tucker. "I'll walk from here. You'd better take the landrover home with you and get some sleep. Can you pick me up at seven-thirty tomorrow?"

"Yes, sah."

The corporal was pleased and didn't sound tired. Tucker climbed down wearily, then half turned, his foot on the running board.

"Corporal," he asked, "have you ever heard anything about diamonds around here?"

"Is true, sah. Usman Salifu promise he go get Brima Conteh to start a mine."

"But are there any diamonds here? This area was surveyed years ago."

"Dey does move, sah."

He became confidential, leaning across the passenger seat to look through the window into Tucker's face.

"De diamonds travel underground. Wid all dis rain an' t'under, sah. Each time de lightning flash, dey does shoot along under de soil. You could dig hole one day and not'ing dere. Den you go look one mont' two mont' after and you go find big big diamond, sah."

Tucker nodded abstractedly and said goodnight, watching the landrover disappear down the road towards the police station. He was beginning to respect the corporal's beliefs. They were crazy but informative.

As he stood there, a car pulled away from somewhere near the roundabout, with no lights but roaring up fast through its gears. He stepped back for safety under the market awning and from sheer force of habit noted its make. It was a cream-coloured BMW, its

number plate unlit. Half a mile down the road towards Nekekora, he saw the lights come on just before the corner. Then the car disappeared. He continued up the road, making towards the lighted double-doorway.

Kamara's City Restaurant and Dining Parlour was a big name for the tiny room he entered. One pace from the top step brought him hard up against the counter running the length of the small shop, and most of the space was taken up by five wooden stools. Any drinkers or diners (though the restaurant was a fiction) who didn't get a stool could sit in the leaking armchairs which faced each other in pairs between the door pillars. They could also sit outside on the steps. Tucker was surprised that the only bar in a town the size of Symira should be so cramped until he remembered that here even a mildly tipsy man could be beaten up in the name of Allah the Good, the Great and the Merciful.

Behind the counter, A.B. Kamara the owner had secured a much larger space for himself. He liked to prowl while he was drinking. At one end of the counter he kept a pint of Guinness which he constantly replenished from fresh bottles. He would gulp a couple of mouthfuls, rubbing his belly under his dirty gara shirt, then saunter to the far end of the counter where he maintained a full glass of Heineken lager. Staring straight before him, his eyes glazed and his bruise-coloured face registering some internal rebellion, he would sip slowly, then top up the glass before returning north to his Guinness.

He was at the Guinness end when Tucker appeared in the left doorway, easing his legs between the unoccupied armchairs. There were only three customers, two schoolboys drinking coca cola but banging down their glasses and smacking their lips as though they were hardened spirit drinkers, and a squat middle-aged Englishman with a pointed red nose and pale evasive eyes which he wiped continually with a khaki handkerchief. He was drinking brandy, his blotched hand trembling, spilling a little on his white shorts. Tucker swung his leg over the middle stool next to the Englishman and waited.

Kamara was in no hurry to serve him. He was shifting a pile of old newspapers at the back of the bar, where shelves of rusting canned food, soap powder and patent medicines declared his other lines of business. Dust flew into his eyes and he coughed horribly, turning his face aside, before a second foray uncovered what he was looking for. It was a cardboard box tied with a dirty pink ribbon. He held it at arm's length and slapped it with the palm of his right hand, raising another huge cloud of dust which drifted slowly across the counter towards the drinkers. Then he opened it and took out a small pile of records. He studied the top one for a long time, frowning fiercely, then put it on the gramophone at the Heineken end of the counter.

He looked at Tucker.

"A beer", said Tucker.

The gramophone began to play *Those were the days, my friend* by Mary Hopkins. The schoolboys looked astonished. Kamara opened Tucker's beer and pocketed the money without checking it. He didn't bother to pour the beer but he brought his Guinness along the counter opposite Tucker and manoeuvred his belly against the stained wood until it was comfortable.

"Detective-Inspector Eustace Tucker," he said at last. "C.I.D."

Tucker felt humiliated.

"Since you know so much, perhaps you can tell me where to find Usman Salifu?"

"He was here just now", said Kamara breathing heavily. "He was looking all over town for you. Then he heard you had gone to his house and he followed you there."

"A cream-coloured BMW?"

Kamara nodded.

"Was he looking for me? Or avoiding me?"

Kamara drained his Guinness in a single draught and fetched a fresh couple of bottles. He paused opposite the schoolboys.

"You go," he said. "Closing time."

The two boys looked at each other and the taller one began to protest.

"Get out!"

Kamara's eyes looked dead but his voice was suddenly crisp. The boys slipped off the stool and hurried out, pausing only on the lower step to look back resentfully.

Kamara exploded.

"I fucking tell you to fucking get out, you fuck off fast!"

He breathed deeply, holding his belly with both hands. Then he picked up his glass and poured the Guinness gently. The Englishman had paid no attention but Tucker noticed that his knees, half-exposed by his carefully ironed shorts, were shaking violently.

The record came to a end but continued to revolve, scratching out a simple rhythm. Tucker took the photograph from his breast pocket and laid it on the counter. Kamara seemed not to notice. He walked away, poured the Englishman another brandy, putting the money straight into his pocket, and returned the needle to the start of the record. Then he sipped his Heineken at the south end for a few moments before returning and picking up the photograph.

Tucker watched his red eyes carefully. He could see no flicker of recognition.

"What do you want?" said Kamara.

"Identification."

Kamara shook his head, shutting his eyes as though the effort pained him.

"I never see him."

"The girl?"

Kamara shrugged.

"She is about town. A peace corps. She does come here sometimes but I don't know her name."

"And the boy?"

For a fraction of a second Kamara's eyes narrowed and met Tucker's.

"I say already."

Tucker tried a lie

"I have evidence that he is from Symira."

Unimpressed, Kamara took a sip of Guinness. Unexpectedly, the Englishman intervened.

"Let's see."

He held out his left hand which shook before Tucker's face. He could not control the trembling and repeated irritably, "Give it here."

Tucker passed him the photograph. A sly grin spread across the white man's face.

"You want the girl or the nigger?"

"Both" said Tucker evenly.

The Englishman nodded, his jaw open. The handkerchief dabbed at his eyes.

"Well, now, the girl," he said sagely. The photograph shook in his hand. "How should we describe her? a Novitiate? a Votary? A vestal virgin - no, hardly! A pilgrim, say, searching for the holy black phallus?"

He studied Tucker's face hoping to see shock.

Tucker was shocked.

"And our sable friend," he continued, satisfied. "Are you a literary scholar perhaps? I think we should call him Priapus. I thought of Priapus in the shrubbery, gaping at the lady on the swing. T.S. Eliot. It concerns Bertrand Russell, would you believe?"

He gave a mock bow as though the hidden applause. Mary Hopkins finished for the second time.

"His name," said Tucker sharply.

The Englishman looked disappointed.

"He was her freed slave, her Malcolm X, her Mohammed Ali, her Michael Jackson."

"His name!"

The Englishman threw the photo on the counter.

"Kamara will tell you for the price of a Guinness. He knows well enough."

"I'm asking you."

"Indeed!"

"I'm a police officer."

"Then," said the Englishman finally, "I can only suggest you sew up your pants and leave white girls alone."

A drained his glass and turned to leave, banging it unintentionally hard on the counter. Tucker leapt from his stool and grabbed him by the left shoulder, spinning him hard round against the counter. There was a crash as his right elbow knocked the glass to the floor at Kamara's feet.

The Englishman was expressionless. Slowly, he straightened his back and brought his quivering limbs under control.

"I am leaving this establishment," he announced. "On the matter of assault I shall say nothing, but if you attempt to obstruct me I shall report you this very night to your superior officer."

"The girl," said Tucker, "has been murdered."

Kamara took a hurried gulp of Guinness.

"In the circumstances, my superiors would be more than delighted to announce that a white man is obstructing their enquiries."

The Englishman was outraged.

"Why the hell didn't you say so? What the hell's going on? Bloody madman!"

Trembling helplessly, he tried to climb back on the stool.

Tucker made as if to help him but was repulsed angrily. He was muttering "Bloody madman!" over and over again. At the third attempt, he succeeded and felt in the pocket of his shorts for some loose change which he slapped on the counter. A fifty cent piece rolled to the concrete floor and Tucker retrieved it.

Kamara brought him a fresh tumbler, wiping it with a dirty rag, and a bottle of three-star Spanish brandy, then began slowly to sweep up the broken glass. There were tears of humiliation in the Englishman's eyes.

"She was a silly girl," he said, "and that fellow was her boyfriend. I wasn't misleading you. I don't remember his name but Kamara knows him all right."

Without hurrying, Kamara propped the broom in the corner and wiped his hands on the same rag. He went across to the gramophone which was still feebly scratching its revolutions and started the record yet again. Then he leaned across the counter at the far end from Tucker, cupping his Heineken glass in his hands.

"Well?" said Tucker impatiently.

"Sylvester Turay," said Kamara in a voice as leaden as his eyes. "I don't think that's his real name but it's what he goes by."

"From Symira?"

Kamara nodded slowly.

"When did you last see him?"

Kamara's eyes became puffed with thought. Tucker could see his memory being unpacked and dusted like the box of records.

"Last Wednesday," he said eventually. "I remember because he had money."

"A lot?"

"Enough to buy for everyone."

Tucker glanced round the cramped bar. It would not take much to pay for a round.

"Was that unusual?"

"He always took cokes. Or sometimes the girl would buy for him."

"Who else was here? What did they talk about?"

Kamara sighed.

"The girl," he said. "Some peace corp boss with a red beard. I don't remember. They sat over there. I couldn't hear them."

He inclined his head towards the armchairs in the right hand doorway.

"Usman Salifu? Was he here?"

"He passed by. I don't remember. I think they went outside."

His voice sank lower and lower. He looked so sluggish Tucker could almost believe him. Was he here like this, night after night, murder or no murder, ambling between the milestones of his two glasses or leaning across the greasy wooden counter like a turtle with a flabby shell?

"Listen to the monkey!"

It was the Englishman again, maudlin and exasperated, wringing the neck of the brandy bottle as though trying to make it speak.

"See no evil, hear no evil and, if you bribe him enough, speak no evil."

Kamara pursed his bruised lips, unoffended.

"There are dozens like him," said the Englishman crossly, waving a hand towards the photograph. "They leave their krall for school, they learn to read and write a little, they rush off to the capital. They spend five or six years scavenging, if not worse. Then they come back here fit for nothing but to show off what fine city fellows they are. I get them. I get them all the time."

He dug in his back pocket, dangerously straining the material, and produced a printed card. Tucker read John Barker, Builder and Contractor.

"He came to you for a job?"

"Regularly."

"What happened?"

The Englishman shorted, dabbing at his eyes. He was beginning to recover his aplomb.

"He wanted a desk job. That's what he called it. Desk job! Said he was educated. Wouldn't take anything else."

"So you refused him?"

"How many bloody desks d'you think I've got in a business like this,"

Tucker could imagine a tiny brick office with one table littered with dust-covered papers and perhaps a battered typewriter.

He turned back to Kamara

"Where do you think he got that money?"

"That," said the Englishman, with the air of a man achieving his exit line, "is something I should like to ask everyone up here."

Kamara gave a squeaky laugh. He straightened up slowly, ambled up the counter towards Tucker and his glass of Guinness and unexpectedly slapped down seven leones on the counter.

"Your change," he said.

Suddenly, Tucker felt terribly weary. He decided to take the Englishman's advice.

Chapter Seven

Sighing, Tucker let himself into the Government Rest House and switched on the light. The twenty-five watt bulb flickered dimly as though barely able to fight its absorption by the sweating olive-green walls. He crossed the tiny ante-room which contained a wash-basin, a fridge and electric stove and a kitchen table with two chairs, and switched on the bedroom light. The bedroom had orange walls and looked a little brighter but the air was stagnant and the concrete blocks of the wall beside the bed still radiated the afternoon sun's heat. There was no mosquito curtain and no netting on the window. He would have to choose between being bitten or being stifled.

Opening the window, he was startled by the shrill scraping of the cicadas. He pushed the bed over towards the doorway where at least he would get a little draught and climbed back over it to the kitchen, looking in the fridge for some cold water. It was packed with imported beer, a whole crateful of Heineken. So this was the D.O.'s idea of offering every facility to the big man from headquarters? There was also a loaf of bread, some margarine and half a dozen eggs. He took a knife and scraped some frost from the ice-box, mixing it in a toothmug with water from the tap, and climbed back into the bedroom, turning off the bedroom light so as not to attract quite so many insects. Then, lying on the bed in his underwear in the triangular patch of light from the doorway, he opened his briefcase.

First, he took an alka seltzer, a nightly ritual. He wished he'd had time to bring something stronger to purge himself of any diseases he might be picking up. Then he spread the twelve photographs across the greying sheets. The landscapes he could make nothing of. They were all badly over-exposed and though he tried to see one of them as somewhere in Nerekora he couldn't really place it. It dawned on him that the three good photos were those on which the girl herself appeared and which must have been taken by someone else. He was extra-ordinarily pleased with himself over this, the first piece of real deduction he had achieved all day. He picked up the school group picture and lay back on the pillow, holding he photo in the light. "Musa Conteh," he whispered, "Musa". But the boy remained unalterably anonymous. With his serious oval face and large eyes, he looked like a dozen others in the class.

Yet to Lois Huck, he had been someone whose fate she had felt compelled to investigate. He studied her standing in the back row, her arms around two little girls, then added the other pictures of her in the doorway of her house and on the beach with Sylvester Turay. She too seemed hopelessly ordinary, her gara cotton dress too tight on her lanky body. Was her uncombed hair greasy or was it just a trick of the light. "Lois Huck," he repeated. None of Jane Austen's characters had names like that! Why was she so horribly untidy when her handwriting was so fastidious. Some aspects of whiteness never ceased to baffle him.

He shuffled the photographs together and took out a fresh notebook. Its virgin page after a day's investigations depressed him. Lying on his side with his head in the light, he wrote a column of names down the left side of the page.

Chief Mansaray
Usman Salifu

Brima Conteh
Musa Conteh
Lois Huck
Sylvester Turay
The D.O. (what's his name?)

He stared at this list for a few moments, then confirmed the decision he had already made and added two ticks after Chief Mansaray's name and two after Corporal Sesay's. It meant he thought they could be trusted. Then he made a further list down the opposite side of the page.

Leopards
Chieftaincy
Election

Diamonds

He ticked off Chieftaincy and Elections as the two matters he believed he understood then, remembering the Englishman, added the word Money to the list. Sighing, he enclosed the word in a box. There was always money in it. At the top of the sheet he wrote Wed 8th, Tues 14th and Wed 15th. He signed his name with a flourish, practicing various versions of his signature, added a tiny Union Jack with a large arrow through it, and fell asleep with the light on.

It was some time before the sound penetrated his consciousness. He turned uneasily, feeling with his toes for the metal frame of his bed at home. Then suddenly he was awake, aware of the light and the chill on his body and the loud tap-tapping on the burglar bars. He sat up, intentionally shifting his half-naked body out of the light, and saw in the shimmering dark-blue shape of the window a woman's head and shoulders.

His first thought was that she was another "facility" provided by the D.O. He got up to close the window, then remembered his trousers and pulled them on hastily.

"Mista!"

"What you want?"

"Mista!"

He crossed to the window. The hands gripping the burglar bars were rough and calloused. In the bright moonlight, silvering the coconut palm at the end of the plot, he made out a thin woman dressed in striped country cloth with a sleeping child fastened to her back.

She looked anxiously into Tucker's face.

"Sita," she said.

In a flash he remembered. She was the dead boy's mother.

She nodded vigorously and began to mimic the action of pounding cassava.

Tucker frowned.

"Sita," she said again, her whole body jerking up and down with the imagined weight of the pestle. Then softly in a cracked voice, she sang a short verse. He looked up to see if he understood, and repeated the performance.

"Wait," said Tucker urgently.

She stepped back from the window. Tucker tried to lean out after her and banged his forehead on the burglar bars.

"You waitam!"

He scrambled over the bed and ran across the kitchen to the front door, struggling with the bolts and cursing himself for locking up so thoroughly. At last, he got it open and ran round the side wall, hopping madly as he trod barefoot on a straggling line of bougainvillaea.

She was gone.

He ran to the wire fence at the end of the plot and climbed through to the narrow dirt road. She could have made off either way. Staggering on the sharp lumps of laterite, he ran to the left as far as the bend. There was no sign of her.

He pulled his watch from his back pocket. It was almost three. Briefly, he considered going to the police station and organising a search, but quickly dismissed the idea. She must have walked all the way from Nerekora to deliver her message. She would want to get back before dawn when her absence might be noted. It would be stupid and cruel to expose her.

The pain in his foot sharpened and he limped back to the rest house. He bathed his foot extravagantly, wishing he had some disinfectant. Then he seized his notebook and tore out all he had written. On a fresh page he printed the word "Sita", and then added the words "Pounding Song" and underlined them three times. He switched off the light and crept under the sheet.

He lay for a long time, thinking of the poor woman with her child on the terrifying walk through the bush at night. He imagined her at different points of the journey and his wonder grew at what she had done. Then he fell asleep.

Chapter Eight

Sunlight woke him, striking in the elongated shape of the window on the orange wall above his feet where the wrought-iron burglar bars cast fussy arabesques. Immediately, he remembered the boy's mother. Half afraid it had been a dream, he grabbed his notebook from the stone floor. But it was there, Sita's pounding song. Pulling a towel round his waist, he crossed to the window. It was still very early with the crystal brightness of sun-up. Symira looked peaceful under its head-dress of coconut palms and papawps and there was a heavy dew on the grass and on today's hibiscus flowers. The mountain with its summit of black boulders loomed much nearer in the crisp clear air.

Instead of washing in the basin, he filled a bucket of water and took it to the backyard for a towel shower, something he had not done since his childhood. A family of house martins swooped down in surprise from their cup-shaped mud nests in the eaves and skimmed past his head. With their ruddy caps and forked lightning tails they brought good luck, the nests a blessing on the household. Though he was only lodging for a night or two, he appropriated to himself the good omen and felt cheerful and confident as he doused himself with cold water and pulled on his clothes. Then, acting again on impulse, he crossed the scruffy lawn to the wire fence, successfully avoiding the bougainvillea thorns and stopped a group of Limba women carrying their palm wine to market. The gourds on their heads were patterned and painted, foaming white at the stopper with sweet effervescent liquid. Tucker knew where to buy it in the capital but he had never tasted it before. He bought a mugful, then finding he did not have small enough change to pay for so little he tried to persuade the woman to keep the whole leone piece. She grinned at him with one tooth, her breasts dangling like leather bags against her ribs, and insisted on re-filling the mug and giving it to him to carry inside to drink with his breakfast. He fried a couple of eggs and made some toast. It was still too early for Corporal Sesay but he decided to walk through the town and catch him at the police station. He pulled on his jacket, picked up his briefcase, opened the front door and almost stepped on it.

At the last moment he pulled his foot aside in terror, clinging to the doorpost and staring with horrified eyes at the object on the step. It was a small polythene bag containing what looked like a bundle of white leaves. Seven strings were attached with fish hooks on the ends, stretched out to form a seven-pointed star. From a neat pattern of perforations rose an appalling stench of decaying flesh.

Immediately, he felt the effects of the curse. He was transfixed. His tongue seemed to swell up and choke his breathing. He clung to the doorpost, unable to move. Then pain stabbed through his guts, releasing him, doubling him over his briefcase as he tried to back through the door. But he had to get rid of the object. Straightening up with immense effort he kicked out wildly with his right foot, sending it flying across the overgrown flower bed and under a hibiscus bush. Then he rushed straight to the sink and vomited. He stood there bowed over his breakfast and the palm wine, its odour sour now in the basin, as the pain eased slowly. The shock subsided, developing into the dull certainty that he was doomed. Joko must have felt like this, he thought, Joko Jones who came up country to prosecute a D.O. and died of witchcraft. He ran to the door bolting it as he had done last night.

Learning on the kitchen table, he thought of his mother. She would have known what to do, who to contact, how to get the curse lifted.

"The woman", he said aloud, startling himself with the ring of his voice. Was it the boy's mother?

Immediately, he rejected the idea. She had come with news for him, Sita's Pounding Song. She had come because of his appeal for information. She had walked through the haunted bush at night, ignoring evil spirits, because she wanted her son's murderer brought to justice. Had she seen his other visitor? Clinging to the memory of her courage he began to feel a little better. It was, after all, part of the case. Joko Jones evidence had convicted the D.O. Someone was getting nervous of him.

He took the kettle to re-fill it and noticed his vomit for the first time. He flushed it down the drain and heated water for some coffee. He was going to stop all this nonsense. It was no way to run a modern country. Whatever happened to him personally he was going on with the case and no blasted witchdoctor was going to stop him.

He knew what Commissioner Whitehead would have done. He would have chuckled at the thing and treated it as an interesting piece of evidence. But what use was that to him? Witchcraft only affected those who were affected by it. All his training was useless before that simple fact.

The knots remained in his stomach, twisting without warning. He had to put the thing out of his mind and forget about it crouching there under the hibiscus bush. He tried sipping his coffee but the obscene object glowed before his eyes like a pale bloated spider and he could not drink anything. Angrily, he splashed it down the sink. Who the hell did these people think they were with their cannibalism and their fetishes and their poison ordeals and their scruffy little huts and their stupid drumming and obscene dancing and - what bloody use was it sending policeman to them? What did they know about law and order? The British way of dealing with such savages was the sensible one. Let them carry on with their primitive business so long as they didn't start any wars!

The landrover pulled up outside with a faint squeal and he made a determined effort to compose himself. No one must see that he was affected. The curse was only an attempt to frighten him off. A bit like a bribe.

Precisely, a bribe! Or better still, like blackmail! It was nothing he hadn't faced before. He picked up his briefcase, drew back the bolts for the second time and met Corporal Sesay on the doorstep.

"Good morning, sah. How's your T'ursday?"

It was marvellous to see him.

Half-expecting his knees to liquify as he passed the hibiscus bush, Tucker climbed into the landrover.

"I hope you sleep fine, sah."

Tucker sighed and nodded vaguely. He thought about the boy's mother, and put it off till later. They drove to the roundabout, going round it the wrong way like everyone else to avoid the bigger potholes, and down past Lois Huck's house - no longer guarded, Tucker noted irritably - to the police station. It was a tiny building, no bigger than the rest house. There were only two rooms and a miniature cell which looked as though it had once been a lavatory.

The Chief Constable was "out".

"Is he on duty?"

"Yes, but he out."

Tucker glared across the duty desk, suspecting insolence. Did they all know about the curse? Did they think he was now harmless?

"Do you have a report for me?"

Constable Ofori sensed trouble.

"No," he said automatically.

"The report of the C.I.D. men. It should have been waiting for me."

He spoke too sharply and the constable leapt to attention, his face blank and withdrawn. Corporal Sesay came to the rescue, repeating the question in the vernacular. Constable Ofori relaxed. The mistake was not his.

"No," he said, shaking his head vigorously as though to prove his good will, "No report."

"I t'ink Sergeant Argibu inside, sah," said the corporal.

"Bring him here at once."

The sergeant entered, wiping crumbs from his mouth and pulling on the jacket of his uniform. He beamed at Tucker and held out his hand, exclaiming, "Well, man, we finish that damn house. We work bloody late but we finish."

Tucker ignored his hand.

"What have you to report?"

The sergeant looked injured. He clasped his hands behind his back, his uniform unbuttoned, his string vest stretched tight across his stomach, and began to rock gently on his heels.

"Nothing," he said.

"Nothing?" shouted Tucker. "Someone went through that house like a hurricane. You tell me he left no traces? What kind of policeman are you?"

Sergeant Argibu looked down at his shoes. He had no idea why Tucker was making trouble for him. The house had been completely empty - no one hiding there at all.

Tucker slammed his right fist hard on the desk and spread his hand slowly, leaning hard on his fingertips which darkened with the pressure.

"You give me a full written report describing every detail of that house - floors, carpets, walls, furniture, books, door handles, light-switches, everything! I want statements from all the neighbours. I want to know who was there, when they came and went, and what they were looking for. If you find nothing, I want to know why you found nothing. If you try to tell me again there's not one print in that house, I'll have your stripes off before tonight."

Sergeant Argibu brightened considerably at this threat. He could recognise a climax. The scene was almost over, He looked up, relaxing, then stared at the duty desk where Tucker's finger was pointing to his sweaty palm-print.

"One print you'll find," raged Tucker, "is that one. I left it there to check on you."

He glared at the sergeant's face, noting with satisfaction the beginnings of alarm, then stormed out of the building, leaping into the landrover and starting the engine himself.

"Babboons," he muttered. "Witchdoctors and blasted cannibal babboons."

He struggled with the gears.

"Corporal," he shouted to Sesay who was running anxiously after him, "you wait here. See the fool gets started. I'll be back for you just now."

Putting the landrover into a squealing U-turn, he accelerated noisily up the hill to the roadabout, leaving behind a wake of grumbling mud-splashed market women. Yet it was still only five to eight when he careered past Kamara's shuttered bar and lurched to a halt outside the National Bank. He was too early. He would have to wait.

The bank was a whitewashed pentagonal building, occupying the fork between the dirt road to the capital and the tarred causeway leading up the hill to Brima Conteh's mansion. It faced across the roundabout, looking down towards the market awnings. Three broad arches led to a dim verandah, beyond which was a metal-studded wooden door of gothic proportions reinforced with wrought iron hinges and a massive lock. Everything except the door proclaimed its origins as a Lebanese shop.

Tucker sat impatiently in the landrover, glancing at his watch every few seconds. At two minutes past, he jumped down and studied the brass plaque fastened to the centre arch. He was right. The bank should have opened at eight o'clock. Didn't anyone up here do his job properly. Angrily, he paced up and down the verandah, in and out the curved shadows, checking off the minutes. Where the hell was the manager?

At nine minutes past he remembered, stopping short in his tracks and staring at the heavy door. It was a public holiday, five whole days of it until nominations were over. He shook his head, laughing to himself. Three years before on the Independence anniversary, the President in sudden euphoria had decreed ten days of national rejoicing and had caused utter confusion. Even the police had been afraid to report for duty for fear of being

accused of being unpatriotic. Eventually, the Minister of Finance had to make a special broadcast ordered essential services to operate normally. "It was not His Excellency's intention," he declared, "completely to disrupt the economic life of the nation". The speech had caused such derision that he had to be put in detention.

"Baboons," chuckled Tucer with cheerful contempt. There was a pattern to incompetence and corruption that sometimes brought its own justice.

"Baboons and blasted witchdoctors."

His grin vanished. These people were dangerous.

Moodily, he wandered a little way down the dirt road. Between the angle of the octagonal building and the high fence of corrugated iron which continued along the line of the road, he found an unpainted wooden door. Pushing it open, he followed a winding path through an orchard of diseased orange trees to the bank's rear entrance. A guard with a wooden truncheon was squatting on the worn mossy steps. He stood up uneasily but made no attempt to intervene as the smartly-suited Tucker nodded a confident greeting and strode without hesitation into the bank, closing the door quietly behind him.

The house martins were with him! He could scarcely believe his luck.

From along the narrow corridor came the sound of a typewriter. He approached it past the door of a reeking toilet and peered round the corner into the bank. Straight across the trapezoid room were the wooden doors, massively bolted. A tubby man with a thick neck and a billowing gara-cloth shirt was sitting at a desk behind the cashier's cage, his back to Tucker. Laboriously, with two fingers, he was typing up a ledger card, copying from another on the desk beside him.

Tucker crept up noiselessly and stared over his shoulder. Was this good fortune all the curse could achieve? He almost laughed out loud.

"You're not the usual typist," he said.

The man spun round, raising his arms in fright to protect his head and knocking the sheet he was copying to the floor. Tucker could half admire how quickly he recovered. He stood up, rubbing his fleshy hands, his boyish face making a quick assessment of Tucker's suit.

"I'm afraid the bank is closed today, sir. It's a public holiday.

Tucker laid his green warrant card on the desk and bent to pick up the ledger sheet. Pursing his lips in an attempt to conceal his elation, he began to compare it with the copy in the typewriter.

"I'm sorry, sir, but you shouldn't be in here. I must ask you to leave."

Still without replying, Tucker picked up the warrant card and placed it in the young man's hands. He continued to compare the two sheets, running his forefinger down the column of figures.

"Jesus Christ!"

The young man's face went grey with shock and he sat down abruptly. Tucker searched for the cheque which lay face down, half-hidden under the typewriter. It was made out to Basra Bros Ltd and was signed N. Bangura. The amount was eight hundred leones and it was uncrossed. He took it to the window and held it up to the light. The alteration was barely detectable. Grinning to himself, he compared it with the ledger sheets, the record of Bangura's account. The typist was covering his tracks, changing a withdrawal of eight hundred leones to conform with the forged cheque and adjusting all the subsequent figures.

"You took the money yesterday?"

The young man sniffed, his heavy shoulders quivering under his holiday shirt.

"Who's Basra?"

"He owns the store at Yogomaia."

"I suppose he cashed this over the counter?"

The young man nodded, weeping silently. Tucker felt almost sorry for him. It was a small enough sum for which to risk his career.

"Clever," he said harshly, and dishonestly - it was a stupid trick, impossible to get away with twice. "And when Bangura complains his cheque has been forged you'll blame Basra, eh? Blame the Lebanese crook and pick up a nice little bribe as well,"

"No," said the young man with some spirit, raising his eyes to Tucker's face for the first time.

"You will when you get round to thinking about it. After all, it wouldn't be nice to let Basra go to jail over a little thing like this, would it?"

"You can't prove that."

"I don't need to," said Tucker smiling.

Still holding the forged cheque and the original ledger sheet, he walked over to the heavy iron grill guarding the entrance to the safe, staring through the bars at the dark green metal doors. Curiously, for a senior officer, he had never seen inside one. Local thieves were not yet sophisticated enough to have given him the opportunity. Or perhaps they became politicians instead. Pleased with this idea he tugged at the drawers of the

filing cabinets lining the walls. Then, enjoying the young man's apprehension, he strolled back across the room and rattled the door of the cashier's cage.

"You have the keys?" he demanded suddenly.

"Only the back door and the ledger cabinets."

"Not the safe?"

"It's with the manager."

The young man spoke regretfully. He had only a few leones with him and it would take more than that to silence an inspector.

"Look," he said, "my pocket empty right now. But I could -"

Tucker had been waiting for the subject to come up. He sat on the desk beside the typewriter and took his warrant card from the young man's sweating fingers, replacing it carefully in his inside pocket.

"I want details of any large withdrawal over the past fortnight. I mean large for Symira - anything over fifty thousand leones. I'm especially interested in Tuesday 7th and Wednesday 8th."

The young man stared up at him.

"I can't tell you that. That's confidential information."

Tucker's eyebrows wrinkled in mock surprise.

"But the bank is closed", he protested. "It's a public holiday".

For a moment, the young man's spoilt-baby face darkened with anger. He took a deep breath and his lower lip trembled with impotence.

"Confidential information," Tucker added silkily.

Still the young man shook his head.

Tucker sighed. Leaning across the typewriter he removed the ledger sheet. He trolled the two sheets together with the cheque inside, took an elastic band from the open drawer of the desk and snapped it on. Tapping the tube on the palm of his hand, he waited.

"Last Tuesday," said the young man suddenly in a husky voice. "The 7th. Usman Salifu withdrew three million leones."

Tucker whistled softly. He understood the young man's reluctance. It was not really a fair bargain.

"New notes?"

"You think we keep that kind of money here? It was a special delivery. Forty-eight hours notice."

The innocence of it never ceased to stagger him. Hadn't these jumped-up villagers the intelligence to cover their tracks? None of the Lebanese ever gave a bribe in new notes.

"You have the numbers?"

Again, the young man hesitated.

"Look," said Tucker reasonably, "after what you've told me I can get a search warrant. For that I'll have to apply to the D.O. and then -"

He spread his hands expressively. For a moment, he had forgotten what the D.O. was like. But the young man understood. he pulled a bunch of keys from his trouser pocket and hurried over to one of the filing cabinets. He consulted a ledger book and locked it away once more. Then, inserting a blank sheet of paper in the typewriter, he

typed a column of five six-figure numbers entirely from memory and sealed the information in a brown envelope.

Without hesitating, Tucker pocketed it and handed over the tube of evidence. He knew he ought to destroy the cheque. Then the error, if maintained, would be the bank's. But suppose the young man "confessed" to Usman Salify? Basra would have to look after himself.

"Have any of these notes come back?"

The young man wiped his forehead gloomily and gestured towards the safe.

"You'd have to look in there."

He remembered the threatened search warrant and added hastily, "But you'd be wasting your time. Nobody spends that kind of money here."

Tucker opened his mouth and shut it. Three million. It was true. There was only one place for that kind of money.

"Never mind," he exclaimed fiercely. "I'm sure you'll be promoted somewhere richer soon."

With angry satisfaction, he strode out of the bank slamming the door behind him and responding with a scowl to the security guard's hurried salute. The guard watched him stalking between the orange trees and sat down with a grin. He liked it when these Creoles were put firmly in their place. When the young man finished work he would ask him for a cigarette.

Yet twenty minutes later, back with Corporal Sesay in the landrover, Tucker once again felt listless and depressed. He had enjoyed his brief advantage, but it was no use pretending he was in control of events. Three million! He was returning to Nerekora, but was he ready yet for Usman Salifu?

He had so little time. He knew now his deadline was not Nomination Day. His deadline was the moment it became clear he was not going to arrest Chief Mansaray. How much longer would they give him? Was the curse a warning that the moment had already passed? Oh grandfather, how long had he got?

He shut his eyes, trying once again to control the spasms. There was a loud bang. The landrover swerved suddenly, bounced off the log bridge and skidded sideways to a halt on the slippery embankment.

Bewildered, Tucker blinked at the sunlight reflected on the bonnet.

"We done get a blow out, sah."

Misunderstanding Tucker's deep sigh, Corporal Sesay busied himself contentedly with the jack and the spare wheel. The scene in the police station had made a deep impression on him, convincing him finally of the inspector's great abilities. He in his turn had had to put up with a display of angry shouting from Sergeant Argibu but he hadn't been taken in by that. The story of the fingerprint was sweeping through Symira and he was glad of a chance to demonstrate that he too knew what he was doing.

Tucker sat in the landrover breathing heavily. Then, his half-hearted offer of assistance cheerfully rejected, he wandered a little way up the road ahead, turning aside along a bush path. The grass was still blackened by dry-season fires but already greenspears were several inches tall and the scorched lower branches of the stunted wild

cashews were putting out fresh leaves. He strolled idly for about fifty yards and stopped beneath a baobab tree, staring up at the dropsical mass of the trunk, looking for all the world like a tree that had been uprooted and replanted upsidedown. Jumping to grab hold of a dangling branch, he plucked one of the furry yellow pods and sauntered back to the landrover.

The corporal was still tightening the wheel nuts, singing breathlessly to himself. He burst out laughing at Tucker's find.

"Monkey bread," he shouted. "You likam?"

"You can eat it?"

Corporal Sesay broke it open and put a piece of white spongy flesh into his mouth, spitting out a large seed. His fingers left a smear of muddy oil on the pod. Tucker tried a bit. It was very astringent, like the kola he had tried yesterday, but sweeter. He walked back towards the river, nibbling the flesh and leaving the corporal to put away the tools. He stared down at the swift brown water through the gaps in the rotting logs.

Then he crouched and shouted to Corporal Sesay.

Halfway across the bridge, driven up through the wooden slats which formed the wheel tracks, was a row of six inch nails. There were a dozen of them, spaced out the width of the track and bent forward to catch the tyres of their landrover. The woodwork around them was freshly splintered.

Someone, thought Tucker with a surge of hope, had felt the curse might not be powerful enough.,

"Someone," he said, "doesn't want us to get to Nerekora."

"Dey t'ink you wouldna walk, sah." said the corporal and spat contemptuously. He knew Tucker better than that.

They drove on slowly, inspecting the remaining bridges and watching out for other obstructions. When they turned the corner into the last straight stretch before the southern gateway to Nerekora, they stopped again. A hundred yards ahead, across the gap between the cotton trees, was a barrier of oil drums. A crowd of villagers swarmed round and over it like black ants. When they saw the policemen, they broke into angry shouting.

"Go on slowly," said Tucker.

They had covered two-thirds of the distance when the first stone hit the radiator. Hastily, Corporal Sesay shot the vehicle backwards out of range. The two sides watched each other.

"Dey no let we go pass, sah."

Tucker reached into the back of the landrover and passed him the megaphone.

"Tell them I'm a police officer investigating a serious crime. If they obstruct me in the pursuance of my duties they are committing an offence."

He stared at the row of youths in the front line, armed with cutlasses and stripped to the waist for action.

Corporal Sesay leaned out of the window, his voicing booming across the gap.

"What is all this dog shit? We have not come here to eat shit."

Even Tucker realised this was a rather free translation. It produced only angry yells and a barrage of small boulders, some of which bounced along the road to where they were parked.

"Dey vex pas' mark, sah. Dey no go let you pass."

Tucker swore in exasperation.

"I go fix palava, sah."

"That's my job," said Tucker immediately and opened the door to climb down. The corporal grasped his shoulder.

"No, sah! Dey go kill you for sure. Is best I go knock mout' wid dem."

He put his lips to the megaphone.

"Who can look on Kai-kai Dopo?" he boasted, naming an evilspirit. "Who can look on Kwaku? It is I, Johnni Sesay who look on these things. And can you look on me, bushmen?"

To Tucker's astonishment, this speech brought applause. Corporal Sesay jumped down and began to walk towards the barrier. The bristling crowd fell silent. Tucker moved into the driving seat and started the engine, ready to move in at the slightest sign of trouble. He wished he was armed. He looked around for a weapon but could find only the pencil torch he had used last night. Even the wheel spanner was tucked away under the seat.

Anxiously, he watched the palaver. It lasted only a few minutes. When the corporal returned, the swagger had gone from his walk and he looked pale and shaken. He sat silent and depressed, holding the megaphone on his knee while Tucker did a three-point turn and drove back out of earshot before switching off the engine.

The corporal sat still for several minutes. He began to shake his head and moan quietly. "Dese people too wicked," he said slowly. "Dese bush people too wicked."

Beside the road the stream roared faintly, curving towards the bridge ahead.

"Dey find borfima, sah". said the corporal at last.

"Borfima?"

"Is bad witchcraft. Leopard man witchcraft. I beg you we no go talk dis t'ing."

Tucker stared at the road ahead. There must have been more rain last night for the puddles were still full. The tracks of their landrover were printed clearly but there were no other marks. The rain must have been heavy. Bits of bright green vegetation were wrapped around the bridge supports, well above the present level of the stream. But someone had been along here last night. In fact, one way and another, the road had been busy.

"This medicine," he said. "Is it a bag with strings attached to it?"

Corporal Sesay looked at him in horror.

"Where was it found?" continued Tucker with fierce composure. "Was it found on Chief Mansaray's doorstep?"

The corporal was still staring.

"No, sah."

Tucker's heart sank.

"Where then?"

"Under de cotton tree by Usman Salifu house. I beg you, sah, we no go discuss it." He sighed noisily, then added, "De tree done belong to Usman Salifu great-grandfather. His spirit cuss plenty bad."

"What about Chief Mansaray?" asked Tucker quickly.

"Dey too frighten to hurt him, sah."

Again, he shook his head sadly. "I did t'ink de chief not guilty, sah. But dis is wicked wicked t'ing he done make."

"Nonsense!"

"Inspector, sah," said the corporal firmly. "You know sabi dis witchcraft."

Tucker laughed nonchalantly.

"Of course I do. I had one of them myself."

It was amazing how easily it came out. He felt like dancing for joy. The borfima was a trick. His whole body glowed with the assurance that there was nothing to be afraid of. He was too clever to be taken in by it. Too civilised! Then as he caught sight of the corporal's gaping mouth, he burst out laughing loud and fierce, gripping the steering wheel hard as the tears rained down his face.

"It was on the doorstep," he gasped eventually. "Just before you picked me up."

"You nah frighten, sah?"

"Of course not," said Tucker heartily and laughed again, too relieved to be ashamed of his lie. "Don't you see?", he added elaborately, "It's just another trick to make me suspect Chief Mansaray. That's why it was put under Usman Salifu's tree. It worked in Nerekora. It didn't work with me because I don't believe in such things."

Even he felt this was going too far. With something of a return to honesty, he added "In any case I didn't know what it was, so I didn't connect it with the chief."

But suppose he hadn't found it for himself? Suppose the corporal had identified it for him?

"What's in the damn thing anyway," he continued hastily, hoping Corporal Sesay wouldn't ask him what he had done with it.

"What's so terrible about borfima?"

"I beg you, sah -"

"But I need to know". Tucker's stomach gave a lurch. "I shall have to analyse it."

Corporal Sesay looked wretched.

"I t'ink dey does use ..." His voice trailed away. "I know dey does use human parts."

Tucker swallowed hard and looked down at the damp palms of his hands. He was thinking of the corpse in the bath tub, the shifting blood-stained ice, the missing skin and organs. Were they, or parts of them, lying under the hibiscus bush where he had kicked them that morning? He saw the photographs, the girl smiling in the doorway of her house or standing with her arms round two of her pupils with little Musa Conteh serious-eyed in the back row.

Was it his flesh also in the borfima?

Then he remembered the boy's mother. He clapped his palms together with a smack, swinging round in the seat.

"Do you know a woman called Sita?"

"My wife name Sita" said Corporal Sesay automatically.

"Your wife!" Tucker shouted. "Is she from Nerekora?"

"Dat anoder Sita. She an old dry-up woman, sah."

"But you know her?"

Corporal Sesay shook his head. "I sabi she call Sita. We did see her yesterday."

Tucker relaxed, breathing deeply. As he told the story, his resolution flooded back. He had forgotten his mood of that morning. Now he remembered her courage the exhilaration with which he had printed "Sita's Pounding Song" in large letters in his notebook.

Corporal Sesay was impressed.

"But I can't get into Nerekora," said Tucker impatiently, "and I don't intend to let you go back there."

Corporal Sesay was grinning, delighted to be indispensable. He made Tucker drive on for a couple of miles, then stopped just before the bridge with the nails.

"It go take some time, sah."

"You're not going back!"

"No, sah. My uncle make garden here. His wife, she could go."

He stepped down, turning to add apologetically, "It go take five leone, sah."

Tucker took out his wallet and handed him a note.

"Four o'clock, sah. You go send de driver for me?"

Tucker nodded. He leaned across the warm seat and slid back the window. For a moment, the two policemen stared at each other. The corporal's grin faded.

"Is it still there?"

There was no need to explain.

"Nobody go touch t'ing like dat. Nobody go touch borfima."

Tucker nodded again slowly. An idea was forming in his mind. It was a good one and it frightened him.

Chapter Nine

Nervously, without looking at the garden, he unlocked the front door of the rest house and let himself in. He crossed the kitchen to the window and drew the plastic curtains. Glancing briefly at the three pencil-scribbled pages of Sergeant Argibu's report, he tore them up contemptuously and threw the pieces in the dustbin. In the same envelope, picked up from the police station, there was also a typed autopsy report signed by the government vet. He ran his finger down it, skipping what he already knew, but noting two surprises. The girl had been struck first on the left temple with a rounded object heavy enough to stun her (expert forensic analysis, wrote the vet primly, should facilitate more precise conclusions), and she had been sexually assaulted. Folding the report carefully, he placed it in his wallet alongside Lois Huck's letter.

They weren't really surprises. It was the only way it could have happened. But in that case, what remained of his "short man" hypothesis?

Exasperated with himself for overlooking the injury to her temple - in spite of the missing skin he felt he ought to have noticed something there - he wiped the table and hunted in the drawers for a clean cloth. He could find only an old newspaper which he smoothed out carefully. The cheap newsprint came off on his hands and he washed them at the sink. He took from his pocket the twist of brown paper containing the half cupful of maize flour he had just bought at the market, rubbing a little between his finger and thumb and hoping it was fine enough. The women had laughed at him for buying so little and asked how many children he was going to feed. Then he unclipped from the various compartments of his briefcase a magnifying glass, a vacuum sealed jar, a pair of nail scissors, a pair of tweezers, a packet of razor blades, a packet of tissues, a packet of contact celceloid film, a role of inch-wide selotape and a bundle of polythene bags. He counted them twice and placed them carefully equidistant on the newspaper, leaving himself a working space in the middle. He spent some time on this, as though playing a private game of forensic chess, postponing the moment when he would have to act. His eye fell on some paragraphs of the newspaper, part of an old speech by Brima Conteh pledging his country's support in the deathless struggle against fascism, racism, imperialism, divisionism, neo-colonialism, and shortages of tomato puree, and pledging that "capitalism and communism would go hand in hand" under the government's new developmental policy of self-help.

This cheered him up considerably and he snapped open the front door.

The borfima was still there under the hibiscus bush but in the white glare of early afternoon with people passing on the road and with Tucker's professional instincts alerted to a piece of evidence, it seemed only a nauseating piece of filth, obscene to the mind but no longer full of terrors. Holding it by the strings, he carried it back into the kitchen and set it on a dinner plate for examination. That was a mistake, and he had to wash the plate and use a tissue instead before his leaping stomach would allow him to begin.

He unpacked one of the polythene bags, breathed heavily on the fingers of his right hand and pressed them down on the transparent surface. So far, so good. Then, taking a teaspoonful of the maize flour, he dusted the polythene and blew gently.

It didn't work. His prints were there, but mere smudges. The flour was too coarse to outline them clearly. At once, his hopes of a modest letter to the Journal of Forensic Sciences outlining a new practical method for African police forces operating in the bush faded irrevocably.

Disappointed, he tossed the twist of maize flour into the dustbin and took from his briefcase the packet of Grey Dusting Powder still labelled Allans of Liverpool Road, London.

At last, he turned his attention to the borfima on the tissue before him. As he snipped the strings, unstitching the bag, the stench of the thing filled the room. Quickly, he thrust the bundle of leaves into the jar, screwing the lid tight. He had a grim idea of the contents but they could be analysed later in the lab. Holding the bag carefully with the tweezers, he slit the sides and laid it flat on a clean tissue. The stink hung in the room and he went to open the window, gulping the warm air and afraid of a second disappointment. Finally, he was ready. Using the same teaspoon, he spread the grey powder across the polythene and blew.

He sat back in the chair, tilting it against the wall and laughing aloud with delight. There was a splendid set of prints, three fingers at one end and a thumb at the other, separated by the opening. He photographed them, packed the polythene between sheets of celloid film and replaced his equipment in the briefcase feeling, as he snapped it shut, as excited as if he had solved the whole case. Witchcraft had been conquered by patient science. He saw it as a huge mural, dominating the kitchen wall like the one on the wall of Usman Salifu's garage - a gigantic witchdoctor, hung with fetishes, a human leg protruding from the leopard skin bag at his waist, but cowering helplessly before a slim maiden, a pert smiling Jane Austen, dressed in soft muslin and armed only with a slide rule and a microscope.

Then he remembered. He needed the other bag to confirm his evidence, that other borfima still lying under the cotton tree in Nerekora.

Chapter Ten

The preparations didn't take long. From one of the cavernous Lebanese stores, which smelt like all the others of cooking oil and dry sacks, he bought half a dozen two-inch nails and a cutlass which he insisted on their sharpening for him. He crossed the road to the almost deserted market and after a long search managed to find a small green pawpaw and a fresh bundle of kola nuts. Then he parked the landrover outside Kamara's bar and settled down in one of the armchairs waiting for darkness.

Kamara had not yet settled down to his night routine. The counter flap was open and he came forward to shake Tucker's hand, his glass of Heineken on the front of the counter, the glass of Guinness behind. Tucker's request for half a bottle of good brandy disconcerted him. He rumaged on the lower shelves, eventually producing a bottle which he wiped half-heartedly, holding it at arms length as though disowning the quality. When Tucker took an experimental sip, Kamara retreated behind the counter, closing the flap and turning up the radio. The night's drinking had begun.

Someone on the radio began a long story in Temne. Tucker knew only a few words of the language but he was fascinated as he watched Kamara gradually respond. He turned up the radio and his dull bloodshot eyes began to glow as a slow grin crumpled his face. He listened as though to a storyteller across a village fire, shouting out in English at the end of each section.

"Ha"

"Man!"

"The fool! How a man could be such a fool!"

As the story finished and was followed by jiggging reggae music, his eyes clouded over and he poured himself another Guinness.

Tucker sipped his brandy slowly, watching the street flicker in the brief twilight, as though the laterite was on fire before fading to ash and darkness. No one came into the bar and Kamara didn't speak again. As soon as night fell, Tucker sealed the brandy bottle and put it in his briefcase.

"How far it is to Malema?" he asked.

Kamara put down his glass and turned his face slowly.

"You leaving?"

Tucker nodded.

"Case finish?"

Kamara was clearly baffled.

"Eighty mile," he said reluctantly. "Then it have one hundred and twenty to the capital. But good road."

Tucker made a show of exasperation. He buttoned his jacket, dusted his trousers fussily and left with a tiny wave.

He followed the main road for half an hour's fast driving, then slowed down looking for the turning. When he came to Yokounda, he was angry with himself because he knew he had missed it. He turned and drove back slowly with his wheels almost on the

verge. Even then, it drove past it a second time before he realised the pool was only floodwater. He reversed across the road and shone his single headlight into the bush.

Across thirty feet or so of shallow water he saw the track curving into the darkness. He smiled grimly - at least no one would notice his tyre marks! The real question was whether he could get the landrover along it.

Several times during the next thirty miles, he thought he wouldn't make it. Twice he got stuck in streams and had to mess around putting stones under the back wheels. The worst moment came soon after the lights of Symira had disappeared behind the mountain range to his right when the track continued through a clump of trees. They were too close together for the landrover to pass and when he doubled back to circuit the trees he couldn't find the track again. In the end he had to follow it on foot before he discovered it made an inexplicable loop, turning back towards Symira before veering off to the left.

It was an hour before midnight when he finally parked the landrover on a bend where the track widened slightly, and changed into the khaki overalls he had borrowed from Corporal Sesay.

First, he took a large swig of brandy to steady his nerves. Then he made his preparations. He cut the pawpaw in half and laid it open on top of the engine with a ten cent piece in each section. Then, taking one of the kola nuts, he split it open and nailed the lobes to a tall tree with hooked thorns on its trunk at the start of the path. Had anyone seen this sacrifice he would have been embarrassed, but he was glad it was done. It might not be enough to protect but it couldn't do him any harm and it made the journey through the thick dripping darkness seem a little less terrifying. Slipping the brandy and the remaining kola in his pocket, he tested the cutlass by hacking a chunk of bark from the thorn tree and set off. He had some three hours before the moon set.

At first it was easy. The path was wide and brilliantly lit, and he didn't really need Corporal Sesay's hunting torch, though he kept flashing it into the grass on both sides. He even considered going back for the landrover to see how far he could force it up the side of the mountain. But then he came to a tree, blown across the path by last week's storms, and he had to cut his way through the broken branches. No sooner had he passed this than the path steepened and the forest closed suddenly over his head.

He stood still, his heart thumping, waiting for his eyes to get used to the darkness. At once, the noise assaulted him. He could feel physically the forest screeching shrilly at him, stretching his nerves like catgut yet at the same time making him strain his ears to catch half-imagined purrs and grunts and snuffles. High on the mountain above, where he had to go, something was screaming and being answered. He crept forward on tiptoe, his cutlass raised, his torch straight before him, hardly knowing whether to shine it on the creepers which brushed his face coldly or direct it on the ground for fear of snakes. He almost yelled out loud when the beam picked out a pair of green eyes greaming from the void. They stared fixedly for several seconds while Tucker froze in terror, then vanished without sound or movement as though they had been switched off. It was this that made him realise it was no use his trying to be silent and he stepped out aggressively, swinging his cutlass at the creepers and shuffling his feet on the earth. He even tried singing, experimenting with various tunes until he settled to his grandfather's favourite hymn. "Who would true valour see? let him come hither."

It irritated him that he couldn't remember the next bit but he filled out the bars with bum de-dum bum de-dum bum! until at last it came back to him.

There's no discouragement
Shall make him once relent
His first avowed intent
To be a policeman.

Maintaining a sort of muttered humming, he even managed to keep step with the rhythm for long sections until the path became too steep and slippery and he had to catch at creepers to pull himself up.

He came to a small clearing, lit by an arc of bright moonlight, and rested a few minutes on a stone, listening now more discriminately to the noises of the forest. The loud screaming was further away now and receding rapidly along the ridge towards Symira. What was it? Parrots? Chimpanzees? It was ridiculous that he didn't know. He drank a little more brandy, remembering his weekend in Sussex where he had impressed Commissioner Whitehead by identifying elms and jackdaws and a Late Perpendicular arch with casual ease. Or had he impressed him? There was something very elusive about Commissioner Whitehead's manner, something Tucker couldn't always read and which he was afraid he might never be able to match. A sudden heavy rustling in the trees behind him made him leap to his feet in panic. The torchbeam showed nothing beyond a branch shaking slightly but his edginess returned. He hurried on, crashing through the undergrowth, convinced he was being pursued. He kept turning round and flashing the torch, expecting to see the green eyes stalking him, then running on, slithering in the mud and twisting quickly, sure that this time he would see the creature bounding after him. But the torch shone only on the path with his footprints plunging into darkness, the huge leaves dripping, the forest solid overhead. He breathed deeply, swallowing his copper-tasting saliva, and plodded on.

At last he emerged and could see the jagged top of the mountain only fifty feet or so above him. He scrambled up among the boulders and flung himself on a rock, shivering suddenly in the night wind. The whole landscape was bathed in moonlight. He could see Nerekora far below, secure in its huge circular hedge, and away to his right the lights of Symira with Brima Conteh's mansion blazing away on the hillside. Opening beneath his feet was the void through which he still had to descend, a hole in existence, swallowing the moonlight, broken only by a narrow sheet of faintly shimmering water several hundred feet below. From there, where the peace corps engineers had built their dam, Tucker was confident there would be a proper track to the river.

But he couldn't afford to rest. It took him some minutes to find the path into the thornscrub which marked the beginning of the bush this side of the mountain. It was steep and rocky, but the moon was astonishingly bright and he no longer felt panicky. The view from the top had made the bush seem isolated from the real world, a piece of nothingness in which he was the terrifying intruder. Even when he re-entered the forest he descended fast, worrying only about keeping his footing on the slippery surface which seemed much wetter this side. If he sprained his ankle now, he would be in a mess. He continued more carefully and, as if answering his anxiety, the path gradually levelled off, descending at an angle to the slope.

The night seemed suddenly darker. He flashed the torch round, wondering if he had miscalculated about the moon. Surely, it could not have set so quickly? But the undergrowth, too, had disappeared. He was walking on leaf mould among huge

branchless trunks which supported a thick black canopy overhead, far beyond the reach of his torchbeam. It was rain forest, like being in a cathedral at night, and the silence after the noises of the lesser bush was deafening. Only the river moaning gently below broke the stillness.

He walked on swiftly through the motionless air, feeling himself diminished by the vastness and welcoming the growing turbulence of the river. There seemed no end to it. he might have been marking time among the massive pillars while the river slowly broke through towards him. Then, at last, there was moonlight again, a patch of shining water on his left, and he was at the small reservoir. He had almost done it! He began to run, past the small dam and down alongside the overflowing stream towards the river which roared in applause at his achievement. He had crossed Bafai mountain at night! He was at the river and the bridge stretched before him.

But here another spirit had to be appeased. The bridge was a causeway of creepers, suspended like a hammock from the forks of mahongy trees on the opposite banks. Viaducts of lashed bamboo led up to the arc of the bridge itself which was forty yards long and seemed to get more and more precarious as it advanced. The contraption looked ridiculously amateurish with the river hissing below, smooth and brown in the moonlight with great boiling eddies. Two chops with his cutlass and the whole thing would collapse.

But Tucker knew there were greater dangers. If, for instance, he tried to cross at midday and his shadow fell on the river where it could be seized by the water devil, he could be enslaved for ten years. Even at night, with this moon, he would have to be careful. He hunted the river bank for a suitable stone and, taking the remaining kola nuts from his pocket, he nailed the lobes among the many other sacrifices on the tall roots of the mahogany tree. Then he crept up the bamboo raft into the fork and, leaning awkwardly to keep his shadow on the creeper matting, edged out cautiously over the water. The bridge rocked with every step he took, and the slower he progressed the more it seemed to shake. The thing didn't seem properly balanced. He tried not to look at the water but it roared in his head, getting louder every moment so that he was sure he must be dangling only a foot or two above the surface. He stopped, wobbling horribly, and tucked the cutlass into his belt so he could hold on with both hands. Then he reached the bottom of the arc. Climbing upwards, it was easier and he could feel the river receding as though it had given up trying to seize him. He was sweating hard as he hauled himself into the safety of the tree. His kola had been accepted.

Immediately, he extinguished his torch. From where he was standing, thirty feet above the river bank, he could see the nearest cotton trees of Nerekora and, silhouetted in the gap at the top of the rise, the black bulk of the watertank. Scrambling down the bamboo slope, he climbed up the path towards the village.

He had timed it beautifully. It was just after two o'clock when he crouched in the shadow of the watertank. Nerekora by moonlight was a vision of pastoral, a pale chequered pool with a gleaming surface of corrugated iron roofs broken here and there by dark islands of thatch. Waiting the last few moments before the moon set and he could move in. he gazed across the silver-barred rooftops and wondered which was Sita's house, Sita, the singer of the pounding song, Betsy's mother.

When Tucker, stretched out on the bed of the rest house, had been woken by Corporal Sesay with the news about Sita, he couldn't believe his continuing luck. He knew Betsy. She had given him information before and he still had ways of putting pressure on her. He realised at once that this fresh link between Nerekora and the rich elite which formed her cliental in the capital was an important one. So it was only gradually that Corporal's Sesay's melancholy about the news began to affect him.

The corporal announced that he had heard Sita's pounding song. Tucker turned sharply from the stove where he had put on the kettle to make tea.

"You went back to Nerekora?"

"No, sah. My uncle wife go. She hear it and she done teach me."

Softly, without embarrassment, he sang a short verse in a language Tucker hadn't heard before.

Tucker frowned, the steaming kettle in his hand.

"Dat Mandingo, sah. She fader come down from nort'. He make trade in cloth and dem, and Forah Dinka he done give him a wife".

"What does it mean?"

The corporal sang again.

My chil' Kaleya
She go come tomorrow
My chil' Kaleya
She go come see me.

Every woman does ask me
Who dis girl?
And I does tell dem
She is my chil' Kaleya
She is a gift
Give me by God.

Cassava in my mortar
does come from she
Rice in my pot
does come from she
She is my chil'
She is my husband
Clot' on my body
she done give me
House I sleep in
she done build.

My chil' Kaleya
She go come tomorrow
An' I does t'ank God
For dis gift.

Tucker filled the teapot and put the kettle down quietly, trying not to make the slightest sound.

Corporal Sesay brushed his eyes with his sleeve.

"Is a nice song, sah."

Tucker nodded slowly.

"But who is this Kaleya".

"Glamour girl, sah. Fust she wid Usman Salifu. Then she don run away to de capital. I t'ink she call Betsy. Betsy Gaye".

So Betsy Gaye was Kaleya, Sita's child. The contrast was hard to take in.

"Is she really coming here tomorrow?"

"Dat don' mean tomorrow, sah. Dat does mean she hope sometime soon."

Tucker thought of the last time he had seen her, in a chauffeur-driven mercedes-benz outside police headquarters in Victoria Street. She had been wearing a red imitation-leather suit, skin-tight and startling, and a scarlet bandana. There had been much speculation, which Tucker had pointedly kept out of, about who was her current favourite.

Corporal Sesay was quite right. It was sad.

At last, the shadow of the watertank grew less distinct and the pool of darkness rose to engulf the rooftops as the moon sanbehind Bafai mountain. Under the cotton trees it was pitch black. He muffled his torch with a handkerchief, glancing into it to check it would not give him away and, momentality dazzled, lost his footing on the edge of the ditch.

"Hell," he muttered, rubbing the ball of his right hand against his overalls. He stayed on his knees to see if he had been heard. Two guards, at the barricade of oil drums, were miming boredom. He moved on, wondering if he was being over-cautious. The trees formed a solid wall of blackness and for whole stretches, as he passed behind the houses, he was out of sight of the guards. But sounds carried and he was desperately afraid of attracted the dogs which barked spasmodically from all parts of the village.

He continued, bent almost double, treating the distance between each cotton tree as a separate danger. At the last tree but one, right by Usnam Salifu's house, he stopped to reconnoitre, crouching in the recesses of the deep buttress roots which sprang from the tree a dozen feet from the ground forming compartments the size of small rooms. One of the guards lit a cigarette, turning his face towards Tucker to shield his match from the wind. Then he sat down on one of the drums and contemplated the village. Tucker could see the cigarette glowing. Which was the tree he was looking for? Why hadn't he checked with Corporal Sesay?

Watching the guard steadily, he crept forward on his hands and knees and immediately found himself in a rubbish heap, a mound of cartons and broken bottles. He didn't dare use his torch now, but by crawling to his right and half-lowering himself into the ancient ditch, he was able to get the next tree between himself and the guards and to scramble into its shelter. Using the wall of a buttress root as cover, he flashed the torch quickly on the ground. There was nothing. he climbed over and examined the next recess. Again nothing, apart from a broken whisky bottle and a shed snake skin he

wished he had not seen. He climbed back into the first cavity and peered out cautiously. Any further movement would bring him into the guard's line of vision. The man continued sitting there on the oil drum, examining the edge of his cutlass while his companion paced up and down the barricade. Impatiently, Tucker waited for him to turn round. Damn it, he could smell the thing! It was the same stench! He peered out again. The taller one had stopped pacing and was demanding a cigarette. They were arguing in whispers across the drums. Swiftly, Tucker ran round the root and drew back into the tree's protection.

It was there on the ground, a polythene bag exactly resembling the one he had dissected. Sighing with relief, he picked it up carefully by the strings and wrapped it in tissues before easing it gently into his pocket. The guards were huddled together, lighting cigarettes from the same match. Tucker scurried back out of view and, without pausing, crawled along the edge of the ditch until he was three trees away. Then he stood up and looked back. It had been easy after all, so easy he wondered whether he didn't dare cross the waste land to Usman Salifu's house and get his final piece of proof. He was in no doubt about whose prints he had on the polythene in his briefcase and on the borfima in his pocket. There must be something lying around over there he could pick up to clinch his case.

Suddenly, he froze against the tree trunk. A light had appeared on the verandah.

A small spare man in striped pyjamas and a nightcap came down the steps carrying a paraffin lamp. Wee Willie Winkie, thought Tucker, wanting to giggle. The guards paid no attention as the man approached the tree and thrust the lamp into the recess. He withdrew, hesitating, staring round as if uncertain of his bearings. Then he crouched forward for a closer look.

Tucker's heart thumped wildly.

The man leapt to his feet, dropping the lantern, and roared aloud. It was an immense bellow, half of fear and half outrage, astonishingly loud for so slight a man. Flames spread where the paraffin had split and dogs began yelping angrily from all directions. The guards, with one movement, ducked down behind the oil drums. But the man ran towards them, shouting, challenging them with his name.

It was Usman Salifu!

He ran back to the house, screaming until lights went on and people began to call back from the windows. The youths ran out, half naked, spitting on their cutlasses. Someone lit a bundle of thatch, brandishing it as the crowd gathered.

Usman Salifu strode back to the cotton tree and gestured dramatically. The borfima had gone!

There was an appalled silence, followed by a wave of angry muttering as the villagers pushed forward to see for themselves. The medicine had been taken back by the owner! It was ready to be used against someone else!.

Usman Salifu seized his moment.

"Amadu Kekora!" he bellowed. "Amadu Kekora Mansaray".

There was an answering howl from the crowd. Usman Salifu grabbed the flaming bundle of thatch, holding it high with both hands, and began to march purposefully down the track towards the courthouse. The mob of villagers streamed after him, growing angrier every moment.

Tucker was horrified. He had not foreseen anything like this. As they passed between the brightly-lit houses, he could see the fury on their faces. Unless he acted quickly, Chief Mansaray was dead.

Making no attempt at concealment, he ran back towards the watertank. On the skyline, between the trees, he shouted as loud as he could.

The mob had reached the courthouse and were hurrying towards the chief's compound with Usman Salifu still striding ahead. Many of them had flares now. Tucker shouted again, but there was too much noise for them to hear him. He picked up a rock with both hands and flung it high on the roof of the watertank. It struck the corrugated iron with a tremendous clang, reverberating like thunder as it rolled off to the ground.

Nothing happened. The villagers were screaming with anger.

He tried again with another rock, shouting, flashing his torch, and dancing on the horizon in the gap between the cotton trees. It seemed hopeless. Then suddenly, there was a roar of command. and silence. Even the dogs stopped barking.

His third rock boomed like cannonfire across the dark village.

Tucker ran.

He had bargained on giving himself four hundred yards start. But before he was halfway to the bridge, the flares were streaming over the rise by the watertank. They were gaining on him fast, running with ease down a track they knew intimately and screaming like the unknown creatures of the forest. He could see others, running through the bush on his left, trying to cut him off. For a moment, he was very frightened indeed. Then he saw the bamboo viaduct rising before him and scrambled up. The roar of the river was nothing to the frenzy behind him. He raced across the bridge, surprised at how much firmer it was than when he had crawled laboriously the other way. It seemed to swing to his tread and in just a few second he was hauling himself into the fork of the mahogany tree and slashing at the bridge.

The twisted creepers were tough but the cutlass was razor sharp. Even as the first flares appeared in the fork opposite, the left hand cable snapped and the bridge sagged drunkenly. Even so, the leading men ran on to it, pushed by the mob which piled up behind them. They fought to hold on, creeping slowly towards him as he chopped at the other main support. It resisted stubbornly. Someone threw a spear which flew past his chin and stuck in the bark behind him.

Tucker became frantic. They nearly had him! The blasted babboons were throwing spears at him!

In sheer rage, he slashed through the remaining creepers with a single blow. The bridge swung away, plunging into the seething river. For a moment, Tucker stood in the fork, brandishing the spear in one hand, his cutlass in the other, howling with triumph at his pursuers who clung helplessly to the trailing netting of the bridge. Then he slid to the ground and ran off into the rain forest.

Part Two

Chapter Eleven

As soon as he stopped at the police barrier, ignoring the armed constable's vigorous efforts to wave the landrover on, he knew he had made a bad mistake. But he was tired and the journey had been a steady struggle through foot-deep mud to keep the landrover moving. It was mid-morning and steaming hot after a shower when he at last joined the main road, its tar gleaming seductively, and another hour at top speed before he reached the restricted area. From the police barrier onwards, all land - hundreds of square miles of it - belonged officially to the National Diamond Mining Company. He pulled in behind the long line of taxis and podas and walked into the guard room to present his papers.

His entry caused consternation. Even Tucker knew that the barrier was ridiculous. The smugglers flew their diamonds out, using the government airport where there were no security checks. Or else they went north through the bush to the border. As for guns, they too came in through the bush. The only effect of this roadblock, bristling with official guns, was to levy an unofficial tax on the people who actually lived here, forcing them into small-scale smuggling to meet the demands of the police.

But a law was a law. All the same, he was sorry. He could see the bewilderment in the sergeant's leathery face, desperate for some clue as to why this senior suited officer had stopped. Three constables in black shining capes stood to attention, their Sterling semi-automatic sub-machine guns pointing at the floor. A small roped-off alcove was packed with people waiting to proceed. Outside, the taxi drivers, used to the system, hooted impatiently.

"Thank you," said Tucker, holding out his hand for the warrant card. The sergeant seemed more reluctant to surrender it than he had been to accept it in the first place. Tucker knew he ought to take him aside and demand a bribe. They would curse his back but at least it would set their minds at rest. Now they would be sure to report to someone superior if only to cover themselves. It would have been far better not to have announced his arrival.

Wearily, he drove on without the information he had wanted. He would have to find the company compound for himself. But before he did anything else he was going to find a decent hotel and have a good wash and a meal. Nerekora was an interesting place, but it was time to return to civilisation.

Though for the moment, he seemed to be back in the bush! The road was wide and smooth, shining blue-black under a storm cloud, but the barrier was a false boundary, making no difference to the thin forest on either side. Then the devastation began. At first, he thought it was just the mess that accompanies any new road works - heaps of yellow clay, long craters half-filled with curdled water, scarred up-turned trees with roots cringing from the sun - until he realised with a shock that the wasteland retreated for hundreds of yards, as far as the eye could see, making a bleak, pock-marked watery desert like the site of a tank battle. Even now, survivors were digging in tiny groups of three or four, or walking in single file round the tops of trenches carrying shovels and metal sieves.

The landscape continued like this for half an hour. Then the town of Sefadu took him by surprise, rising theatrically out of nowhere. It looked curiously unreal, with pastel-coloured crenellated buildings like the backdrop to a Biblical film. Accelerating impatiently towards it, his eyes fixed on the tallest building which looked as though it was covered in green icing, Tucker had the feeling he would never arrive, that Sefadu existed in two dimensions only and would forever retreat before him like a mirage.

Then, again without warning, the road was flanked by brand-new houses, low, sleek and unfinished, built on the very edge of the waste land. The tarred road stopped in a confusion of yellow and turquoise and plum-coloured luxury cars, bumping and wheeling and hooting and lurching at eight miles an hour along a pot-holed track. Stupified, Tucker followed the traffic to the right, hardly noticing the roundabout. The din was incredible. He was on an untarred dual carriageway, whining in first gear, surrounded

by cadillacs, mercedes-benzes, pontiacs, jaguars and BMWs. He passed the tall green mansion which was labelled Hollywood Store, then the Opera Cinema and the Kit Kat Store, and then a narrow turning to his right. Breaking quickly, he swung into it, ignoring the angry hootings around him, and parked outside the post office.

"Grandfather!" he exclaimed with a deep sigh of exasperation.

For the moment, he had lost his bearings completely. Then he remembered - a bath and a meal! He locked the landrover, shoving his briefcase out of sight under the corporal's overalls in the back, and limped wearily back up the slope to the main street, shutting his ears to the pandemonium, alert only for somewhere to rest and refresh himself. There was a cafe next to the Opera Cinema with skewered meat roasting deliciously over charcoal. He ordered a plate of chips, a couple of skewers and a cold beer, and went to use the washroom.

Ten minutes later, he was awakened by an impatient knocking on the door.

"All right, Kargbo, I'm coming," he muttered.

Then it all came back to him - the spear, the cutlass in his hands, the screams of frustration from across the boiling river as the ruined bridge trailed in the current. He was still ahead of them. They hadn't defeated him yet.

He returned to the cafe, choosing a table near the strips of coloured plastic hanging in the doorway. Would Usman Salifu dare complain to Commissioner Sandi? Would the Commissioner believe what "whiteman" was supposed to have done?

Though, of course, he was supposed to be the hunter, not the hunted. He had come here to trace three million leones. But all the banks would be shut for the public holiday! All right, he had come here to talk to Chief Mansaray's candidate, Moses Dumbuya, the mining engineer.

He paid the bill and collected his change in one leone pieces including the one the barman had wedged under his thumb as a potential tip. Then he dropped it again so that it rang on the metal tray.

"Where can I get a taxi?"

He deserved a little luxury. The taxi driver could find the company compound for him.

"Up so," said the barman, gesturing vaguely to the right of the doorway. He made little rocking motions with the tray, swinging it like a sieve, then punched it from underneath so that the coin shot into the air and dropped straight into his mouth.

He spat it out and pocketed it.

"Up so! Up so!" he said crossly.

Tucker parted the plastic strips and passed back into the main street. The sunlight leaping off the hot pavement and the blaring car horns were like physical blows, and he stood still for a few minutes, his shadow hugging his feet, taking in the dual-carriageway with its water-filled craters and the cars jerking bumper to bumper along it. Then he turned right, following the barman's directions across the face of the Opera Cinema which, mysteriously, advertised *Il battaglia D'Inglaterra* with Italian sub-titles, and past the shop-wide doorways of the Lebanese mansions he had seen from the tar road. Nobody here seemed to have heard of the public holiday - except, he confirmly sourly, that the banks were shut. Pleasureland, he noted, Chic Bebe, the Original Store. The shelves were packed with chrome-plated radios and Hi Fi systems, watches and compact discs, bolts of imported silks and tweeds, row upon row of spirits and liquors in shininggreen and tawny bottles. Half the floor space was taken up with luxury beds with brandnames like Slumberglow or Glamoursleep, or with hideous furniture, knee-high tables topped with pink plastic, varnished cocktail cabinets, hot and heavy three-piece suites, toadlike radiograms with grinning tuning dials.

There were pavement displays, too, as though the flow of luxury goods couldn't be restrained within the shops' concrete caverns but spilled out on trestle tables to the very edge of the traffic. Scowling, Tucker picked his way between rows of trainers and gleaming shoes in every possible variety of yellow patent leather, There were flimsy imported bras alongside locally-made ones looking like embossed armour, comics and calendars and astrological charts, cigarette advertisements framed in passe-partout with their slogans still intact (who on earth would want to hang these in their houses?). The stuff was sheltered by bright umbrellas with socks and watches and cheap jewellery hanging from the spokes. Under every trestle, visible but unobtrusive, was a bundle of shovels and a pile of new sieves.

This was company land and the company was controlled by the government. No alien was permitted to own property here. Only essential goods could be traded here. The sale of mining implements was specifically forbidden.

According to the laws of the country, Tucker had grounds for arresting literally everybody in sight!

A taxi drove straight at him, hooting furiously as he re-crossed the side road where he had parked the landrover. He jumped aside, swearing, and saw the slogan painted clumsily on the bonnet. *Ha! Watch out! Enemy Around You!* It was true! It came to him suddenly with the force of a revelation.

He looked around him. It was true!

He knew all the popular taxi slogans - *Your Best Freind is your Secret Enemy; Friend Today, Enemy Tomorrow; Money Done, Baby go; Nor God No More Go Save We* - though he had never before taken them as anything more than a joke. But they were true! Hatred, suspicion, corruption, disloyalty and, if you were wealthy, ostentation - these were what his country added up to. The taxi mottos were the only true words!

At the same time, he remembered those on the poda-podas in Symira - *The Lord is my Shepherd, Slow but Sure, A Gift from God to my Friends*. Chief Mansaray wasn't just innocent. Oh grandfather, he was right! Right about the capital! Right aboutthe party!

Right about diamonds! And so was the murdered boy's mother. And so was Sita with her pathetic song. And so was Corporal Sesay with his love of genealogies.

They were right! And it was he who held their fate in his hands!

He stood still on the pavement's edge, oblivious of the mud which the cars splashed on his trousers, overwhelmed by the wish to stop dawdling and do something immediately. A couple of youths jostled past him, carrying shovels and a sieve. Illicit miners! They crossed the road, waving cheerfully to the constable on point duty who chuckled a loud obscenity, and continued down the hill past the post office.

Tucker followed.

The road narrowed quickly to a slippery footpath and descended an embankment to a shallow muddy river. Beyond it began the devastation he had seen from the road. Two boys, scarcely six years old, were sieving the sand at the water's edge. Another group was playing bey-bey, taking turns to toss one leone pieces into a sieve from six feet away, the one nearest the centre winning all the money for that round.

The two youths walked straight into the water which was only ankle deep. Tucker looked down at his shoes and hesitated.

The gambling boys began to laugh.

"Aporto!" they shouted gleefully. "Aporto!"

White man again! The word had meant that ever since the Portuguese navigators first sailed up to Port Loko.

Intensely annoyed, Tucker removed his shoes and socks and paddled awkwardly across the river. He would have liked to continue bare foot as a gesture, but the gravel hurt his soles. By the time he had replaced his shoes, the youths had disappeared among the humps of yellow earth, but he wasn't worried about them in particular. From the top of the bank, he could see small groups of people half a mile upstream beyond a cluster of tin-roofed shacks and he set out towards them.

The land was ruined. Even Tucker who had never planted so much as a pumpkin in his life could see that nothing except the coarsest grass would grow here for decades. The Mining Company draglines had done their work and moved on to other areas, leaving behind this empty moonscape, scarred and infertile for at least a generation. Even the river was artificial, a drainage trench cut by bulldozers and widened by floods and then abandoned and silted up. But the mining continued. Everywhere, there were people digging and re-digging for the diamonds the draglines might have displaced or the washing-plants overlooked. Sheltering the tin-roofed shacks, the Company's watchmen's huts, were two ancient cotton trees. Had there once been a full circle? Was this the site of a village? Strangler vines were slowly sucking them dry and in the upper branches a covey of vultures waited, their heads jutting from coffin-shaped bodies.

Beyond the huts, a crowd was watching a larger operation. Tucker joined the spectators. There were four huge pits, each thirty to forty foot deep, with a fifth shallower hole in the centre. Four petrol-driven pumps sucked yellow water from the larger pits, spewing it across a bulldozer track leading to the huts where it formed a fetid pool. He elbowed his way to the front and stood on the rim of the nearest pit. It was packed with men, wading thigh-deep in what looked like wet cement. Nine-tenths naked and barely human in their casings of slime, they formed a bucket chain, hoisting the grey mud up the sides of the pit and over into the shallower one where it was dumped above the waterline. This was all done in total silence. The chugging of the waterpumps, the

sucking sounds of the mud, the soft plop of empty buckets tossed back with a dangerous disregard for the men underneath - these formed the background to a mute sustained tension.

Then he saw the "masters". There were four of them, one for each of the diggings while a fifth, caressing a sub-machine gun, watched the shallow pit. All five had bodyguards, armed with rifles. Parked up the track, well away from the filthy pool, were five identical mercedes-benz, their rooftops gleaming in the after-rain sunshine.

Four of the "masters" wore embroidered gara-cloth shirts with tight jeans and trainers and they sat on the rims of their pits on wooden chairs under sunshades held by their bodyguards. They smoked without removing the cigarettes from their mouths, conscious of an audience. But their hard eyes never wavered, imposing absolute silence, alert to the slightest hint of trouble.

The fifth man, with the sub-machine gun, was dressed in guerrilla khaki. He slouched in the shadow of a striped golf umbrella, on a chair with a crimson cushion. His sun glasses were blank with blue sky, while a full black beard made his mouth unreadable.

Tucker side-stepped towards him along the curved slippery rim until he could see down into the shallower pit. Two men stood chest deep in water the colour of excrement. They held up sieves while a third man dropped a shovel-full of grey mud in each of them. Then they shook the sieves underwater. Every few seconds, they lifted them clear of the water and scoured the edges, throwing away the larger pebbles and accepting another shovel of mud. Tucker watched them do this six times. Gradually, their movements settled to a circular rocking motion with the sieves just below the surface, and they muttered to themselves as though begging the sieves to come up with something.

The guerrilla clicked his fingers. The two men stepped forward and overturned the sieves smartly at his feet. Eactly in the centre of the smooth circle of fine brown gravel was a disc of black mud, four inches across. The guerrilla studied it, apparently without interest, and gave the signal to start again.

There had been no diamonds.

Bestowing on Tucker a slow empty stare, the guerrilla re-crossed his legs and settled the sub-machine gun more comfortably on his lap, beckoning the bodyguard to hold the umbrella a little to the right.

Suddenly, he leapt to his feet, screaming with rage. Two tiny boys had filled a sieve with gravel at the far end of the pit. Like a man in a fit, he howled obscenities at them, slithering along the bank between the pits with such fury that they vanished in seconds. Kicking a hole in their sieve, he hurled it into the coarse grass after them. He seemed barely able to control his movements. Yet he hadn't used the gun.

So, thought Tucker, some illicit miners are more illicit than others, and he grinned to himself.

It was a mistake.

The guerrilla returned, his face working with disappointment. He was a man looking for violence and he caught the end of Tucker's smile.

"Fuck off!" he screamed.

He put his muddy hand on Tucker's chest and shoved hard. Tucker stumbled backwards along the edge of the pit, almost falling over in the mud. The bodyguard rushed up with the sub-machine gun.

"If you fucking look for trouble you go fucking get it!"

They were back on the edge of the track now. The diggers had stopped work and were scrambling up the pit sides to watch. The "masters" stood beside their chairs.

"Fuck off?" shouted the guerrilla again, giving Tucker another shove. But this time he stood his ground.

"Who the fucking hell you is?"

"I'm a police officer."

There was instant silence. The waterpumps chugged on. The yellow pool was right behind Tucker's feet. As one man, the "masters" moved towards the track. A sly grin of pleasure spread across the guerrilla's face,

"Po - lice - man," he said with slow sarcasm. Then he added, with mocking courtesy, "You have warrant card, not so?"

Tucker produced it, hoping he looked stern. He was conscious of the filthy water right at his heels.

"Ha!", said the guerrilla. "Inspector Tucker. Fucker Tucker!"

The "masters" guffawed at this witticism and the wave of laughter spread among the spectators, slowing engulfing the diggers watching from the edge of the pits. The guerrilla took the sub-machine gun from his bodyguard and tucked it under his elbow. Slowly, he tore Tucker's warrant card into tiny pieces and threw them in his face. The green fragments, including the photograph, settled on the yellow pool.

"Fucker Tucker's a sucker," one of the "masters" said.

The guerrilla gave a loud falsetto laugh and doubled up over his gun. When he straightened up, he shouted along the track to where the mercedes-benz were parked. A uniformed chauffeur climbed into one and drove up very fast, aiming straight at Tucker, who refused to move, and swerving only at the last moment so that a wave of muddy water splashed his shoes.

"Take Inspector Sucker to the fucking station."

He raised the gun and pointed it at Tucker's stomach. Tucker took one glance at it and, burning with humiliation, got into the car.

Chapter Twelve

Twenty minutes later, he was sitting in the courtyard of a Tudor inn, overlooking a golf course with soft green undulations which rested the eye and calmed the nerves. All around him, Mining Company employees - white, black and brown - were celebrating a late long holiday lunchtime. From somewhere round to his left came the happy yelps of children in a swimming pool.

He was back in civilisation, with cold beer and cucumber sandwiches pressed on him by friendly club members. Tucker recognised their performance. They were over-acting their hospitality, playing safe with a visitor who might be important. But so what? He felt safe. The rolling English parkland was planted with blue gums and frangipani exactly where the birches and laurels ought to be. The golden carpets of fading chestnut foliage lying along the first fairway were actually breadfruit leaves. But it was consoling. Better this safe artifice than the violence outside. Round the whole perimeter was a double fence of electrified wire patrolled by armed security guards.

Though it had been easy enough to get in. He had been dropped at the police station as ordered and there had been no more bullying. The driver had even been friendly, watching sympathetically as Tucker rubbed his shoes with Corporal Sesay's now grubby handkerchief.

"Who is that man?"

"You know sabi dat man?"

The driver sucked his teeth in astonishment.

"Dat man Jusu. Big man wid de Party".

Tucker did know the name. At the last election, Jusu was rumoured to have murdered an opposition candidate. That was before the coups and the unofficial amnesty. No wonder he was doing well.

Making as though to enter the police station, Tucker watched the mercedes-benz glide away before he waved down a taxi and asked for the company compound. It turned out to be just off the tar road the far side of town. The gateman wouldn't allow the taxi to enter but he summoned one of the guards to escort Tucker to the clubhouse where Moses Dumbuya was sure to be found at lunchtime.

It was an Irishman called O'Reilly who bought him his first beer and advised him to try the sandwiches.

"So Moses has one friend at least?"

Tucker decided to be straightforward. He admitted he was a policeman.

"Christ! What't the silly wee bastard been up to?"

Tucker laughed.

"I haven't come to arrest him."

"I know, I know. He's helping you with your enquiries. Do coppers here talk like that too?"

Tucker laughed again. He was feeling on display, as he had often enjoyed feeling in England.

"D'you know Moses?"

"I've never met him."

"You soon will," said O'Reilly. "Here he comes, the wee bastard."

Tucker followed the tilt of O'Reilly's beer glass towards the back of the clubhouse. A slim, almost elfin young man wearing a red and gold poncho and a huge sombrero skipped towards O'Reilly, grinning all over his face. Tucker had expected someone more substantial. Was this student really taking on Brima Conteh and the party thugs?

"He's supposed to be a mining engineer", continued O'Reilly with mock gloom. "Five years at university in Canada and he comes back looking like something out of a spaghetti western."

Moses leaned on the back of a wrought-iron chair, grinning. O'Reilly addressed Tucker in a confidential tone.

"Mind you, he's no bloody use to us anyway. There's no engineering in diamond mining."

"No?" said Moses.

"No," said O'Reilly ignoring him. He switched to a stage Irishman's brogue. "Sure it's a prabulum of shifting muck. That's all it is, begad."

"Bejabbers," said Moses, chuckling.

"It's a prabulum of shifting muck. From pint A to pint B. Mind you, there's ways of shifting muck. You might take ten trips. He might take twelve trips for all his bits of paper. I might take six and save all those extra wages and fuel. But I'm not qualified, you see. I only know about shifting muck from pint A to pint B."

"It's the same," prompted Moses.

"It's the same," continued O'Reilly, still addressing Tucker exclusively, "with those silly bastards they send to get degrees in geology. There's no geology in diamond mining, You just dig 'em up. Any bloody peasant can do it. Most of 'em are doing it anyway. But these fellows here, they have to have their wee bits of paper."

He drained his glass and, still without looking up, handed it to Moses.

"Get me another drink, man, will you?"

"You mean," said Moses, "you wan' go shift from pint A to pint B?"

O'Reilly was delighted.

"You hear that? After all the money we spend on him he still speaking talki-talki!. Oh sorry," he added swiftly, patting Tucker's knee. "Don't mind me. I have problems with the Queen's English myself."

Moses returned with three fresh bottles of Star.

"D'you still speak English in independent Ireland?" he asked.

"Independent Ireland," said O'Reilly scornfully. "Where the hell's that?"

He stood up, sticking the bottle of beer in his jacket pocket.

"Here's a copper come to arrest you and you talk about bloody independence." He patted Tucker's shoulder. "Be sure sure you lock him up good, the independent bastard."

After the playacting, there was an uneasy pause as both men pretended to be watching O'Reilly's exit. Moses sat down in the vacated chair and poured out his beer.

"Inspector Tucker?" he said, looking up suddenly.

"How did you know?"

"There are rumours."

His face was shadowed by the sombrero but Tucker was aware of handsome features, a slightly hooked nose, a small moustache, and intelligent eyes which were assessing him carefully as he raised the glass to his lips.

"Are you really a candidate?" asked Tucker.

"I suppose," said Moses slowly, "it depends on whether you make your arrest."

"Who should I arrest?"

Moses shrugged and shrank lower into his poncho. "You know this place. Who's blamed is innocent. Who benefits is guilty."

"The D.O. told me it was easy too. I don't have to find the culprit, only the evidence."

"The culprit being Chief Mansaray."

Tucker nodded.

"You believe that?"

Tucker grunted, non-committal. There were other things he didn't believe, notably that the diminutive figure before him was capable of taking on a thug like Brima Conteh. Moses didn't even look like a mining engineer - an art teacher, perhaps, newly returned and full of enthusiasm. He looked like a man who might start a poetry magazine.

"What do you want of me?"

"Connections," said Tucker.

Moses tapped his fingertips together, frowning at his lap so that his face was almost completely hidden. He seemed to reach a decision. Looking up suddenly, and grinning as he done at O'Reilly, he took off his sombrero and laid it on the table. To Tucker's astonishment, he was almost completely bald. A shining brown dome bulged above the handsome face, with wisps of reddish hair clinging in patches around the ears. In a moment he had aged twenty years.

"Go on," he said, amused at Tucker's expression.

Tucker had a brief vision of Moses in Nerekora, presenting himself for the elder's approval, suited and serious, or perhaps even in robes with a skull cap. It was credible. Perhaps he would make a politician after all.

"Chief Mansaray," said Tucker slowly, "thinks there are diamonds in Nerekora."

Moses laughed.

"Every chief in the country thinks there are diamonds under his village. Have you watched a well being dug?"

Tucker shook his head.

"It takes them about three months to get down twenty feet. Even up in Koinadugu, miles from the diamonds, they sift every shovel of earth on the off chance. These people are crazy about diamonds."

"What about Nerekora?"

"Not a chance."

Tucker looked unconvinced.

"You get diamonds in kimberlite," explained Moses. "The easiest way to find them is to look in river beds where the surface soil has been washed away. That's how these fields were discovered - there were diamonds down by the coast. So they followed the rivers back and explored which streams the diamonds were coming down till they got to Sefadu. Then of course, they could start digging. But there's nothing in Bafai river except a few crocodiles. The only other chance would be if the river courses had changed. That's why you need geologists, in spite of bigmout' O'Reilly - an earthquake a million years ago might have confused things a bit. But up there on the border, that's some of the oldest landscape in Africa."

Tucker sighed. The explanation was lucid enough. But in that case, why was Moses a candidate? And where else could three million leones have gone?

"Mind you," said Moses. "Chief Mansaray's one hell of a man. If he found a diamond in Nerekora, I'm sure he'd throw it away. Nothing would make him happier than to be convinced finally there's nothing there.

"To save his cotton trees."

Moses smiled. "The man's a poet. He deals in symbols. He doesn't want to lose what those trees have protected in the past."

Suddenly, Tucker liked him immensely. The feelings he had all along been trying to pin down could not have been expressed more succinctly.

"But if diamonds don't come into it," he began

"I didn't say that," said Moses hastily. "Diamonds are still his biggest problem."

People were beginning to drift away from the bar, crossing the courtyard in small groups, calling impatiently to their children who ran between the ornamental tables leaving wet footprints. Tucker became aware of their stares.

"Look man," said Moses. "You've been to Nerekora. Where were all the young men?"

"Parading round Usman Salifu's house with cutlasses."

Moses was sympathetic.

"There were up there waiting for you, were they? Usually, the whole gang is down here. nearly fifty of them".

"Working for the Company?"

"Working for themselves. Illicit mining."

"You mean," said Tucker, "like those across the stream. Down from the post officie?"

"You've been there too? No, that's for the immigrants -the Fulas and the Mandingos. They don't get paid, you know - just food and a corner of a hut and a bit of pocket money when they're lucky. If they complain, they get deported. No, there's a dozen ways of doing it. These boys from Nerekora are better organised.

His sipped his beer, banging the glass down with an angry scowl.

"No one knows exactly how they operate. But they're always on the spot when the biggest finds are made. So", he shrugged his shoulders under the poncho, "obviously they get information."

"What about the security police?"

"They're paid to look the other way."

"By whom?"

Moses became impatient.

"For Christ's sake, man! The Company's been taken over. The government owns fifty-one per cent. That's a controlling interest. They give the orders."

Tucker began to see.

"It's the Minister's village."

"Precisely!"

Inside the club house, the bar grill rattled shut and a uniformed waiter came to collect their glasses and empty bottles. Three white-shirted expatriates passed their table, nodding to Moses. A pair of golfers, one white one black, made their way to the first tee,

just across the drive. Life could obviously be very pleasant here. Not everyone would have the courage to do what Moses was taking on.

He watched the African golfer drive straight along the leaf-strewn fairway. Nodding in appreciation, the white man teed up.

"You know anyone in banking?" Tucker asked abruptly.

Moses grunted.

"I need to trace some notes."

"A bribe"

It wasn't a question. Moses took it for granted. Tucker was on the verge of telling him everything. Instead, he complained about the public holiday.

"If you want to know about money," said Moses, "go to a Lebanese."

"Who?"

"Hassim."

"Why him?"

"He deals in diamonds. Like all of them. But the boys from Nerekora sell through him. He owns Pleasureland Store in town.

Tucker sucked his teeth derisively, remembering the squalid dual-carriageway.

"Do you ever study the Diamond Office reports?" Moses demanded. "During the Israeli invasion, purchases went up over a hundred per cent. The market was closed to illicit gems, so for a couple of weeks people got rid of their diamonds legally. It works the other way round, too. Any trouble inside the country - elections, coups, rumours of any kind - and the takings go right down. At a time like this, Hassim and his friends are falling over themselves to get all they can outside the country."

"So?"

"So, he doesn't want trouble. He's scared of election too. Tell him you know about Nerekora and he'll probably help you - over a thing like this, anyway."

Tucker nodded two or three times. It made good sense.

"I'll take you," said Moses. Seeing Tucker about to object, he added quickly, "Look man. he knows I'm a candidate. he's already offered me favours. After all," he added lightly, shoving the sombrero back on his head, "I might win!"

There was no resisting him. Even if the advice had been bad, Tucker could not at that moment have objected.

"He won't be at the store now. He'll be doing his rounds. I know where to find him."

They passed through the deserted clubhouse and down the steps at the back, across the children's playground, taking a path through a grove of feathery casuarinas and came out on a road lined with beautifully kept bungalows in the colonial style. Behind brilliant hedges of hibiscus were large gardens of flowering shrubs interspersed with citrus trees and the odd mango and avocado. At the end of the road was a new two-storey brick building labelled simply "Bachelor Flats". That was interesting.

Had Moses never married?

His car was a bachelor's volkswagon, with one eye missing. The bodywork looked at least fifteen years old, but it moved as though new.

They drove out of the compound and followed the main tar road for a couple of miles before swinging off along a narrow track of laterite. For long stretches, it led through the same kind of bush he had driven through that morning, though here there

were stretches of swampland with tall reeds and the topless trunks of oil palms milked dead by the wine-tappers. Occasionally, they passed a deep scar left by former diggings, reverting now into shallow muddy lakes, and it was a relief when the green bush closed round them once again. Only once did Tucker catch a glimpse of a village - hardly a village by Nerekora's standards, just a cluster of delapidated huts in a clearing, with a patch of cassava bushes and a group of pot-bellied children staring at the road and the car racing past. Every two miles or so they passed a security post.

"Where are we going?"

"Sedu."

"What's there?"

"The biggest illicit operation this week. Hassim has a number of arrangements there."

Tucker was alarmed. Somewhat shame-faced, he recounted his morning's experiences. Moses didn't laugh.

"That Jusu is a real bastard. You know he's up for nomination? He's even managed to get the vice-president's backing against the official party candidate!"

Tucker wanted to ask if it was true Jusu had killed a candidate last time, but perhaps that wasn't a good idea. They slowed for a junction, and took the left fork.

"We won't have any trouble," promised Moses grimly. "It'll come, but it won't come today."

They pulled on to the grass verge to let three colossal front-loaders pass, shaking the ground like an earthquake as they carried gravel to the washing plants. A moment later, they came upon the company's newest diggings. Tucker stared across the hole at the mud cliff opposite, forty feet in height. The thick green forest had been chopped off as neatly as if with an electric saw.

"Shifting muck," he said.

Moses laughed. "You know O'Reilly's actually damn good at his job".

A uniformed guard was signalling frantically to them that they shouldn't stop, and they swerved right along an even narrower track which dipped and bucked alongside an artificial stream racing with yellow water. Suddenly, they were among cocoa trees, an abandoned plantation. The trees were old and unproductive but they had not lost their beauty. The wine-coloured leaves of the new season hung limp in the shade and the unpicked pods glowed like red and purple lanterns against the lichen-covered bark. Then the car climbed steeply back into daylight.

"Sedu", Moses announced.

A few empty huts straggled alongside the track. The garden plots were untended, halfway back to bush. They gained the summit and swung round the bole of a huge baobab tree.

At once, Moses braked. He did it so suddenly that the car skidded sideways and stalled and Tucker banged his head on the windscreen.

The road was packed with men. They were pouring on to it where two paths converged under the baobab tree and streaming before them six to eight abreast. It was like a crowd leaving the stadium after a football match, except that every man carried a shovel and hundreds also had sieves and cutlasses. Moses kept his thumb on the horn ring, trying to edge his way forward. But it was hopeless and, from the angry shouts and raised shovels, even dangerous to proceed. Tucker knew the arguments there would be if

the car so much as brushed one of them - the feigned injuries, the extemporised legalisms until "compensation" was paid and there would be smiles all round.

"We'd better walk," he suggested.

Moses parked the car and locked it. They followed the track for a mile until the men fanned out like locusts across a field which sloped gently down to a green-banked river. As they did so they disappeared, one by one. What looked like a meadow with an orchard of thorn trees was a labyrinth of pits and trenches and tunnels, so many it was impossible to walk safely.

Moses called his attention to one of the holes. It was about two feet in diameter and went straight down like a narrow well. The bottom was invisible.

"A maracas pit," said Moses. "These are gold miners from Guinea. They dig straight down to water level, twenty-feet or so, then make tunnels in all directions and dive down for the gravel.

"Doesn't it collapse on them?"

"Of course," said Moses with bitter violence. He jumped back to the roadway and strode ahead so quickly Tucker had to run to keep up with him.

"It's not like gold mining. It collapses and they suffocate. Or they dig through to the next man's tunnel and fight it out with shovels underground. Or they pass up the gravel and their friend throws the earth back down on them. Or they take the gravel to the river and do their fighting there instead. It's a free for all. They pay their entrance fee and then anything goes.

"Entrance fee?" asked Tucker stonily.

They were at the river's edge. Fifty yards away on the opposite bank, where the tall papyrus had been trodden down, another huge crowd waited. Six of the biggest dugout canoes Tucker had ever seen were ferrying them across the river, forty at a time. Four men could sit abreast, and the ten outer pairs paddled with their shovels against the swift current.

"You pay two hundred leones to the paramount chief to bring a shovel on to his land. It's another three hundred for a sieve. He pays the security police to keep away for one week. After that's, it's every man for himself."

A dugout landed its cargo and returned for another load. It was astonishing how quickly the men disappeared as they spread across the land they were despoiling. Thousands poured down the road and hundreds were crossing the river. Yet they, too, vanished almost immediately, down wells, down trenches, into hollows half full of stagnant water.

"One of the company's helicopters flew over a couple of days ago with some people from the World Bank. They were here to talk about debt re-scheduling. You know what the buggers did? They pelted the damn thing with stones!"

"What happens at the end of the week?"

"It depends how much is left. Either there'll be a new arrangement or the police will arrest a few. Then there'll be a lot of publicity about how energetically Brima Conteh is stamping out corruption. In time for the election, of course."

Tucker stared hopelessly at him. It might have been Chief Mansaray talking. The message was the same. Only this time he was surrounded by the evidence, and the evidence was overwhelming.

They followed the track along the river bank to a mud platform where a broken pontoon lay half in and half out of the water. A wooden shack advertised Heineken beer and Coca Cola. Parked outside were two BMWs, one black and one maroon.

Moses pointed to the maroon one.

"That's Hassim."

"Who's he with?"

"Anyone with diamonds to sell."

The two men regarded each other in silence, reluctant to separate.

"I'll be seeing you," said Tucker.

"You bet!" Moses paused "If you've nowhere to stay ..."

Tucker hadn't thought about it.

"Come to my place. The gateman will ring up and I'll collect you."

Tucker hesitated.

"I left a landrover in town. Beside the post office. Symira registration."

"Give me the keys. I'll send a driver to pick it up."

Still Tucker hesitated. He felt he owed Moses a confidence.

"That money," he said. "Three million. Usman Salifu has been paying people off. It started the day the boy was killed."

Without waiting for Moses's reaction, he walked swiftly towards the maroon BMW.

Chapter Thirteen

"My dear Inspector, how clever of you to contact me in this way!"

Tucker was prepared for it and he took it well.

"I had no idea you knew my good friend Mr Dumbuya. Though I imagine Chief Mansaray put you in touch with him."

Hassim held out a ringed hand across the back of the driving seat and flashed his unnaturally even teeth which glistened modestly with gold. His handsome Lebanese features and sleek grey hair brought all Tucker's prejudices to the boil.

"The good chief. A much abused man, but that's politics."

"African politics", said Tucker sourly, and immediately regretted it. Why did the Lebanese have this effect on him? No sooner had they met than he began playing Hassim's game - the educated, disillusioned national whom Hassim, with sympathy and generous reluctance, would manipulate into accepting the bribe. He could see the conversation stretching ahead, inevitably. After all, it was only his due. It was only right that talented Africans should have some share of their continent's immense wealth!

Hassim's mobile face registered unhappiness.

"Politics everywhere, my dear inspector. I was born here, you know, but I've never seen anywhere much different."

"Born here? In Sefadu?"

"Of course. My father was a trader long before anyone found diamonds. My grandmother was a Mende woman."

How often had he said that before, How many ministers, MPs, district officers, paramount chiefs, not to mention policemen, had he won over with such frankness? Was it even true? Yet he had succeeded in putting Tucker on the defensive. For all his mistrust, he knew that these people had been treated abominably. Years after independence, a bill had been rushed through parliament cancelling the citizenship of all those who could not produce an African grandfather. Grandmothers weren't good enough. A whole community, born in the country, working there, speaking the languages, had become stateless overnight. Only by annual wholesale bribery could they maintain the right to live in the land they belonged to.

Hassim started the engine and fastened his seat belt as a huge African man climbed into the back seat. Tucker didn't look round, but from the right wing mirror which was slightly askew, he could see the bodyguard was armed.

"I must say," continued Hassim seriously as they drove off, "it's a pleasure to deal with someone as discreet as yourself."

Tucker tried hard not to look blank.

"Stopping at the road barrier was perfect. Quite perfect. A legal requirement. Of course, I knew immediately I was dealing with an unusual officer."

Biting his lips with annoyance, Tucker stared out of the window. They were returning to Sefadu by a different road along the river bank. The afternoon was just beginning to fade. The swift broad river looked dark green and placid, mirroring perfectly the reeds and oil palms along its bank, with a gleaming strip down the middle reflecting the sky. How confident Hassim was! How certain Tucker could be handled just like everyone else! It was just a question of arithmetic - Tucker had the president's

backing for a few days, Tucker seemed quite clever (he flattered himself that Hassim's tribute to his discretion was sincerely meant), and Tucker had presumably learned enough from his two days in Symira to make himself a nuisance. Altogether, that should add up to a tidy little sum.

After all, it was people like Hassim who ran the country now. With the departure of the British, they had devised their own version of Indirect Rule, controlling the new leaders through bribery. It would be interesting to see how much he was offered, a sort of tribute to his present status. Was he still just a detective-inspector? Or had he temporarily risen to the ministerial bribe-bracket?

Hassim drew up gently at a point where the road curved away from the river. A narrow path led off to the left along the bank.

"I do apologise, my dear inspector, for breaking the law in your presence. But I understand you've already seen something of the situation here."

Tucker almost relented. The man really did seem apologetic.

They got out of the BMW, the bodyguard retrieving a sack and a leather travelling bag from the boot, and followed the path along the river's edge. The tall grass, greener here, gave way to bullrushes and papyrus, towering high above their heads, and there were gullies with little streams renewed by the fresh rains.

They disturbed a heron, fishing from a log. It flapped away uncomplaining, its heavy-fronted body threatening to plunge into the river between every wingbeat. Even with looking over his shoulder, Tucker could sense that the bodyguard was itching to gun it down. Only a hundred yards from the road, they were in another world.

Then they came to the inlet.

In a clearing in the reeds where a brown stream fell between steep banks into the river, three men were working. Two of them, comically fat men in torn shorts and looking like twins, were standing knee-deep in the running water, sieving the gravel which the third shovelled for them from a row of six potato sacks on the other side. Meanwhile, a boy, scarcely ten years old, was trying to light a fire with damp twigs and at the same time fix up a light with the aid of a foglamp and a row of car batteries. The twins glanced up and nodded a greeting, frowning as though their paddling was too serious a matter to permit normal courtesies. The boy ran over to the bodyguard, wrestling briefly with him for possession of the sack. Shoving him aside, the bodyguard threw it down beside the spluttering fire. The boy grabbed it and tipped out on the crushed reeds a loaf of bread, a cocoa tin full of rice and several tins of corned beef.

The man with the shovel tipped a final load into each of the sieves and stood watching while the twins rocked them gently underwater, holding them at a slight angle against the stream. He stared at the boy who was tearing at the loaf with his teeth.

"The light", he said brusquely.

Hassim waited. He seemed suddenly overwhelmed with languor. The boy fiddled with the wires, trying to get them to stick while the lamp went on and off several times. At last he got it to work and the yellow beam shot straight across the racing, beer-coloured water. The twins lifted the sieves into the light, jamming them against their hips as they scoured the black sand in the centre. One of them slipped something into his mouth. Then they stepped ashore, laying down the sieves, and stretched their backs in

unison, apparently paying no attention while Hassim took a pair of scales from the leather bag.

He set the scales by the fire, adjusting the light to shine on the pointer, and waited. The man with the shovel jumped back across the stream.

The twins looked at each other. Then one spat into his cupped hands and placed a tiny diamond on the scale.

Hassim looked at them.

"All! All!" he exclaimed impatiently.

Cupping their hands carefully, the twins let the diamonds drop into the brass bowl with a faint tinkling sound. There were about a dozen, like tiny pieces of stained glass glistening in the yellow lamplight with the polished brass shining through them.

He bent down, peering past Hassim's head at the pointer.

"Four," said Hassim dismissively, attempting to collect the stones.

"Nah, man," they protested. "It past four! Look!"

Hassim shrugged his shoulders, looking even more bored.

"Four and a half," he acknowledged. Then he became angry. "That's damn good gravel, company gravel. Why the hell you get so little?"

The twins glanced at each other again and produced another stone. Hassim took it sceptically, turning it round against the light. Suddenly, he stood up and handed it to Tucker. It was a perfect crystal, a rhomboid cube about a quarter of an inch thick. Tucker was astonished. He had been watching all this wading and shovelling in slime without actually believing the diamonds existed. Even now with the evidence in his hands, he found himself wondering who could have lost it there, unable to credit that such a lovely object occurred naturally in the mud.

"Pity," said Hassim, his voice vibrant with sympathy.

The twins exclaimed. Hassim retrieved the diamond and thrust it right into the brightest part of the lamp beam. His hand glowed with jaundice and the stone became almost invisible.

"Too yellow," he said, without emphasis.

One of the twins jumped up furiously and the bodyguard took a step forward, half raising his gun.

"Is the damn lamp," the twin protested, his voice rising to an angry falsetto. "Why you always come so late? Every diamond go look yellow wid dis blasted fog lamp."

Hassim ignored him. He took a polythene bag from his pocket, emptying into it the diamonds from the scale, and weighed the big stone.

"Three and a half," he said. "No quite, but -"

"Three and a half clear," said the twin who was still squatting. "It good for ten thousand."

Hassim paused, then gave a sudden smile, charming again as he collected the diamond. "Sixteen thousand altogether. You're lucky my good friend the inspector is here."

The twins glanced at Tucker with faint surprise. Immediately, their eyes flickered back to the bundle of thousand leone notes Hassim was taking from the briefcase. He peeled off sixteen and gave them to the twins in two bundles.

"You go finish tomorrow?" said Hassim, waving his hand at the row of potato sacks.

"Yes, boss," they said in unison, jovial now. They were stuffing the notes in various places about their clothing.

The man with the shovel turned away. He looked very cross. He patted the empty sack and looked inside, pulling out another tin of corned beef which he threw down beside the fire.

"Here," said Hassim.

He drew a bottle of Portuguese brandy from the leather bag, tossing it in a careless arc towards the man who caught it in his left hand and immediately opened it with his teeth.

"Tomorrow," said Hassim sharply.

He packed away the scales, holding the three and a half carat tone between his lips, locked the bag and passed it to the bodyguard who slung it across the barrel of his gun. Tucker half-turned, to go back along the track between the reeds.

"Inspector," said Hassim.

From the edge of the clearing, Tucker looked back at him. Hassim's features looked bilious in the lamplight. The faces of the twins, squatting by the fire which crackled fiercely in the darkness, were highlighted by the flames. The boy returned from the stream with a pot of water and began to measure out the rice.

"Take it," said Hassim.

He was holding out the diamond. It nestled on his palm like a huge spark from the fire. For a fraction of a second, Tucker didn't understand. He began to shake violently as the anger flared up in him. He could not have said a word, but he took two steps forward, seized the diamond from Hassim and hurled it high into the twilight above the faintly shimmering river. It fell somewhere without a sound, irretrievably.

"Goodnight," he said emphatically to the four men who were staring open-mouthed from the fireside.

As he stumbled fiercely along the narrow path between the papyrus, he heard Hassim shouting in Arabic against a background of astonished curses. He couldn't see where he was putting his feet and he swore himself as he slithered into the little gullies, feeling his socks suddenly wet and cold. But he didn't give a damn. For the second time in fifteen hours he felt the deep pleasure of destructiveness. He had a quick fright when the bodyguard came crashing along the path behind him, but he refused to run. The brute didn't touch him. He merely shone a torch between Tucker's legs and guided him back to the BMW. When Hassim joined them by the car a moment afterwards, he took a box of tissues from the glovebox, handing them to the bodyguard with a curt gesture at Tucker's feet. The bodyguard pulled out a fistful of paper and knelt to clean the mud of the shoes.

Tucker raised his feet obligingly. If Hassim didn't want mud in his car, that was his business.

"You do realise, inspector," said Hassim moodily, "you threw away about forty thousand leones."

Tucker noted with fresh satisfaction that Hassim hadn't been able to keep quiet.

"Do those men back there know that? Four hundred per cent profit in return for a few bags of corned beef?"

"Four hundred per cent," agreed Hassim complacently. "Less, of course, what I have to give your colleagues."

Tucker couldn't see the bodyguard's face but suspected him of grinning.

"As for those boys back there," continued Hassim, "I give them security. Do you know how many boys I feed, even when they don't have anything to sell?"

"Boys!" sneered Tucker, unable to stop himself and angry at that too. "It's slavery. You and Jusu, there's no difference. Overseers on a diamond plantation."

"Ah," said Hassim calmly.

Tucker could have killed him. he knew exactly what the man was thinking. Another Creole with a chip on his shoulder about the past. Another touchy nigger who wished he wasn't black. He got into the car, slamming the door unnecessarily hard, and buckled the seat belt.

When Hassim started the engine, Tucker put his hand on the gear stick.

"It's time we talked," he said.

"Not here, inspector. I'll take you to my office."

Tucker sighed and sat back. This time he was sure the bodyguard chuckled.

Hassim drove fast and, to anyone not used to driving on dirt roads, very wildly. But he obviously knew the road well and was never on the wrong side at bends or junctions. Reluctantly, Tucker admired the skill which gave them such a smooth ride on a

road littered with rocks and eaten away in soft gullies which altered with every storm.

Each side, the bush was a solid wall, flawlessly black. If anyone lived here, the night concealed them. The laterite was colourless in their headlights but the narrow strip of sky was pale with the last streaks of dusk. Once they passed a section of the forest glowing with flares as though a swarm of giant fireflies had settled there. The nightshift of illicit miners was busy here too. Only a mile later, the bush receded altogether, giving way to a gaping pit with pools of faint water and a group of huts with electric lights. Two cranes were silhouetted against the sky. Was this the company digging he had passed with Moses? It must have been another one for immediately afterwards they joined the main road and accelerated to a hundred and ten. The journey which had taken almost an hour in Moses' little volkswagon was almost over.

But even Hassim could do nothing about the road in Sefadu itself. As they bounced down off the tar he braked sharply, joining the dense column of traffic, weaving between the potholes with his fist on the horn. They passed the Opera Cinema, with a scuffle going on in the foyer, past the turning to the Post Office where Tucker saw his landrover had been removed (hopefully by Moses), and drove up on to the pavement outside one of the

open stores. Hassim parked alongside the pavement trestles and tossed the keys to the bodyguard in the back.

"This way, my dear inspector."

His voice was warm and welcoming. They were starting once again.

Taking Tucker's elbow, he guided him round the side of the pink-washed building and up a flight of slippery concrete steps. Two youths armed with sawn-off shot-guns stood up to let them pass, staring enviously at Tucker's suit. At the top was a wooden door with three separate locks. They crossed a room stacked with cardboard packing

cases, and mounted a bare wooden staircase guarded at the top by a heavy iron grill. Hassim unlocked this, but they had to wait while another armed guard drew back the metal bolts inside. On this floor, the corridor was thickly carpeted and the walls were hung with pictures of film stars. At the far end were two more guards, this time in uniform, and what looked like the sliding metal doors of a lift. Hassim pressed a button in the wall and said something in Arabic into a grill. A light flashed on from a glass eye in the ceiling. There was another brief exchange in Arabic, and the doors slid silently open.

"After you, my dear inspector."

Tucker's glance took in a marble-topped desk, plush chairs, a tinted photograph of Colonel Nasser and a picture of the Holy Prophet's tomb in Mecca. Then, as he turned to watch the doors closing behind them, he saw a miniature television screen.

Hassim smiled broadly. He flicked a switch under the desk and the screen showed the corridor foreshortened, the two guards lolling against the walls, pulling themselves suddenly to attention as the light went on.

"All a little elaborate, my dear inspector, But necessary."

He switched off the set.

"Some coffee, inspector? Beer? Whisky?"

He flung open the cocktail cabinet, revealing two shelves crammed with multi-coloured bottles.

"Just coffee."

"A clear head," said Hassim approvingly. "A clear head for negotiations."

Tucker who was lowering himself in an armchair stiffened momentarily.

"Enquiries," he said.

Hassim had pressed a button on his intercom.

"Inspector?"

"Enquiries," said Tucker firmly. "Not negotiations."

"Of course".

Hassim spoke in Arabic to another part of the house and settled himself behind his desk, his neatly manicured fingers tapping the white marble. He nodded towards the television and the metal doors.

"Occasionally," he said calmly, "I have a little money up here."

Tucker sucked his teeth, wishing passionately he had some definite line of enquiry, some secret information which would break up Hassim's composure. He did his best. He got up from the armchair and sat at the desk opposite Hassim, staring straight into his face.

"Usman Salifu," he announced, gambling on some reaction.

"My dear -"

"My dear stupid inspector," sneered Tucker. "I'm interested in murder, not your money or your toys. Two people have been killed."

Hassim paused in the act of spreading his hands in conciliation.

"Two?" he said, genuinely puzzled. "Ah yes, I was forgetting the boy."

There was a soft knock and Hassim pressed another button. Tucker hadn't noticed the second door behind the curtain to the right. A small boy came in, carrying with extreme care a tray with a coffee pot and two delicate cups. He put the tray on the desk and went out shyly, ducking away from Hassim's attempt to stroke his soft long hair.

"My sister's son."

Tucker felt like smashing the tray to the floor.

"Usman Salifu," he repeated angrily, ignoring the cup passed across the desk towards him.

Hassim gave a quick scowl. He unlocked the top drawer and drew out a file of papers. Thumbing through them, he removed the top six and handed them to Tucker. They were cyclostyled contracts. Clipped to the top corner of each was a cheap photograph of an African face, bewildered and anonymous.

"How much do you know, inspector, of what goes on up here? These boys tonight, I gave them eight hundred for a day's work. Do you know what they get working for the company?"

Tucker waited impatiently.

"They'd be lucky to get half that in a month. Not a day, a full month!"

Hassim turned to the wall beside him and took down the picture of Colonel Nasser, revealing a wall safe. He opened it and took out a small brown-paper package, sealed with selotape.

"You seem to think we're on opposite sides, inspector. Have you ever seen diamonds like these?"

There were about twenty of them, like pieces of a shattered windscreen. He picked up one, a perfect crystal, holding it between finger and thumb for Tucker's inspection.

"There's nowhere else in the world you get stones like these. Angola, South Africa, Brazil, Russia - there's nothing to compare with them."

He sighed, his face relaxing as he admired the diamond's beauty. Then he refolded the package and replaced it in the safe.

"How big is this country? Two and a half million people? A hundred thousand square miles? It's thirty years since mining started. It's twenty-five years since independence. Seventeen years since the government took a controlling interest. Where's all the money gone?"

"You know better than most."

Hassim smiled.

"Yes, a lot's gone to the Lebanon. Still goes every week on the Friday plane. I give you that for free - you can't do anything about it. But you shouldn't only look there. You should look in Geneva. You've heard about Swiss banks and numbered accounts? You should look in the Canary Island. You know how many cabinet ministers own property in Las Palmas?"

"Where must we look for yours?"

"I'm permitted", said Hassim sententiously, "to remit five thousand leones per year."

Tucker scoffed.

"All right, I've not done too badly. But what has the ordinary person got out of it? There should have been free schools. Free hospitals. This country should have been the El Dorado of West Africa. Hundreds of millions have vanished, and your government preaches self-help!"

Tucker was silenced. It was all true.

"There's only been one way the ordinary citizen can get his share. He can become a licensed digger. He can lease a plot of land, for hundred feet square. He sells what he

finds to the Diamond Office at fixed prices. All right. very good. Very fair. But not everyone can afford the licence. And the land they get is always swampland. They lose seventy per cent."

He rapped the sheaf of contracts with his knuckles.

"I get a group of them together. I pay for the licences and I arrange for the plots to be together. One nice big area. I provide them with proper equipment - water pumps, draglines, a washing plant. I charge them a small commission. They can sell what they find to me or to the government - I don't mind. But I pay better prices!"

"It's illegal," said Tucker.

"Illegal! Have you never solved a case by bending the law a little? It's a co-operative venture. I'm doing what a socialist government should have done years ago."

"What about those others? The ones you cheated tonight?"

Hassim waved aside this irrelevancy.

"If people want to work this way, I help them. Who else helps them? What would you do to help them?"

"It must be very profitable helping people!"

"Exactly," said Hassim, appropriating the irony. "Everybody benefits. Now you, with your laws and your honesty, who are you helping?"

It was coming at last. Tucker knew it was coming. The question was, how much? What was his rank in this new colonialism? Hassim re-opened the safe and began to pile money on the desk, thousand leone notes in bundles of fifty. There were thirty bundles in all. he lined them up neatly, tapping the edges into line, and shut the safe, adjusting the picture of Nasser.

"it's year country's wealth, my dear inspector. You're entitled to your share of it. Don't let it just disappear like all the rest."

Tucker stared at the one and half million leones, his heart thumping wildly. It was more, much more than he had expected. The notes were new ones.

Chapter Fourteen

"It was fantastic," said Tucker. "Absolutely fantastic. I had him right there!"

Clenching his fist round Moses's brandy glass, he discovered it was empty. The more he drank, the plummier and more English his intonation was becoming.

"Some more whisky?" said Moses.

His arm still extended, Tucker swung the glass in Moses's direction and concentrated on holding it steady. There was no doubt about it - there was nothing like sophisticated conversation with a fellow-countryman who had learned his irony abroad. One could admire Chief Mansaray and respect what he stood for. But when it came to friendship, even intelligent villagers like the chief were really a bit limited. Comparing the mud house and its complicated rituals with Moses's neat apartment, a row of detective novels on the bookshelf, a cassette recorder playing Beatles music, and Moses himself, still in his shawl and sombrero, serving White Horse with Canada Dry, Tucker knew where he fitted in.

"Lebanese," he said. "Bloody dagoes."

Moses started giggling.

"Think they're too clever for us. Too clever by half. Think they can run the country for us."

"Worse than the British," said Moses.

"Oh, there's no comparison," said Tucker. "The British..." He waved his glass, splashing whisky on the carpet, and lost his train of thought. "Typical," he concluded.

Moses leaned forward confidentially.

"After the election," he said, "when Brima Conteh is back in the village again -"

Tucker chuckled happily and pointed his finger.

"You'll be Minister of Mineral Resources!"

"You mean diamonds? Or whisky?"

Tucker roared.

"Not for me, man. Oh, no, not for me! But we'll have to do something about the Lebanese."

"Drive 'em into the sea," agreed Tucker. "Rule Britannia."

He drained his glass and stared at the glowing diamonds of ice in the glass.

"I had him! I had him right there!"

"So what happened?" said Moses.

Hassim pushed the thirty bundles of notes towards him. For a moment, Tucker stared at the white-topped desk, the neat finger-nails, the clean crisp money perfectly aligned like the pages of a Bible. He was trembling with excitement.

Misunderstanding, Hassim drew back his hands.

"Don't thank me," he said, ". It's only your due."

Tucker took out his wallet and counted two thousand leones in denominations of five hundred, one hundred and fifty. He unfolded a slip of paper, picked up the first and last of the bundles and removed one thousand leone note from each, replacing them with his own money. Then he compared the numbers with those typed on the slip of paper and

put the evidence away in his wallet. Even now he was sure, he had to press his fingertips hard on the desk to stop them betraying him.

"The other one and a half million." he said.

Hassim's smile vanished.

"What one and half million?"

"The rest Usman Salifu gave you. Three million leones in all."

"You think you're worth that much," exclaimed Hassim angrily. He leaned across the desk, snapping his finger's in Tucker's face. "I could break you like that."

Tucker relaxed.

"You think because the President's backing you, there's no limit? All right, you're a bloody big man today. The Americans know about you. The foreign newspapers will know about you soon. But the President's no fool. You think your name is in the local papers? You think you're famous? You wait till this nonsense is over six months, one year. I can finish you like that!"

"It might cost you more than a million and a half," said Tucker experimentally, and was delighted to see the shadow cross Hassim's face as he made a quick calculation.

"And new notes too," he added. "Not at all satisfactory".

Hassim glanced up at the television screen as though considering whether to summon his guards. The movement brought Tucker to his senses. He pushed the pile of money back across the desk.

"I'm waiting to talk about Usman Salifu."

"You're a fool, inspector. This law and order nonsense. Don't you know you're playing their game?"

"When Brima Conteh's nephew was murdered," said Tucker crisply, "Usman Salifu paid you three million. Right?"

Hassim didn't respond.

"And now you've tried to plant the same notes on me. To implicate me in the same chain of bribes."

Hassim looked up hopefully. "I could arrange -"

"I want to know about your deal with Usman Salifu."

"If you're accusing me of murder -"

"You're in a spot, Hassim," said Tucker angrily. "You're sticking by the wrong man. The party wants rid of Chief Mansaray. I know he's innocent and so do you, but it might have worked. But then the girl got killed too and that changed everything. The President has got to satisfy the Americans or he'll lose the Peace Corps. Maybe he'd like to get rid of them, but not this way. Cannibalism's a nasty thing. It makes a bad impression

abroad. Do you think it would upset him to be able to blame a Lebanese?"

"Nobody could prove I had anything to do with it."

"So," said Tucker silkily, "you're a law and order man too?"

For the briefest of moments, Hassim's grey eyes glinted with angry hatred. Then, just as quickly, he was charming again, his smile exposing as large of span of beautifully even teeth as when he had first greeted Tucker two hours before.

"My dear inspector," he said, with an air of great frankness, "you're an honest man. But if you saw the diamond I bought a fortnight ago, not even you would throw it away."

The cycle was over and for the second time they were starting again. It was a pattern Tucker recognised from previous encounters. It explained why his country would never be rid of the Lebanese.

"Seven four three carats!"

Tucker was slow to respond.

"Seven hundred and forty three carats," repeated Hassim passionately. "You've heard of the Star of Sefadu?"

Of course he had. The story of this colossal diamond, the third largest every found in the world, had dominated the papers for weeks, estimates of its value climbing daily as though it was being publicly auctioned. Then, quite suddenly, the story went dead.

"This one was nearly as big."

Hassim picked up a glass paperweight, cupping it in his left palm.

"As big as this," he insisted, "and as clear as water, A perfect diamond."

Tucker began to understand his enthusiasm.

"You bought it?"

"Over near Sedu. Where I picked you up. That's why they're all digging out that way now."

"You mean everyone knows about it?"

"It only takes a rumour. There are rumours every week. But this diamond, I had it! Up here!"

"How much?"

"It was Saturday night. They were desperate to get rid of their thing. When you find a diamond like that, it's too hot to hold on to. You want it and you don't want it at the same time."

"How much?"

"The same. Three million. I gave them every cent I had, and I had to borrow half."

He leaned forward on his elbows and ran his fingers through his wavy grey hair. When he looked up again, Tucker noticed his mouth was quivering slightly.

"I came straight back here like tonight. I put it in that safe. Only three people knew about it, two diggers and the bodyguard. Half past six, I called on Mahmoud over the road there and the first thing the old man asks me about is the big diamond. I tell you, I was frightened. I came running home fast and already it was too late."

"You mean someone broke in here?"

Tucker stared dubiously at the metal doors.

"My sister. They took her. The boy's mother. They took her and the boy from the store downstairs."

Hassim clenched the paperweight until his knuckles whitened.

"There was a black fellow waiting on the stairs outside. He told me to keep the store open late, but I had to stay in the office. At half past eight, someone would come in to buy a radio, a Sanyo four-band, short-wave, battery model. If the diamond was inside it, my sister and the boy would be all right."

"You did this?"

"You expect me to go to the police?"

"And the money?"

"I got a parcel five days later. It was handed in at the store. Until you kept asking about Usman Salifu, I didn't know who sent it."

"But why pay you back. I mean, why bother?"

"There was a note. Warning me not to talk."

"You still have it?"

"I burned it. There was something about my sister. Obscene."

Hassim glanced at the picture of the prophet's tomb and relaxed his grip on the paperweight.

"As you see, I still have the money. There was a trail for you to follow."

So Moses and the chief were right. The Party, the Youth League, diamonds - all were threatened by the election. Which was why Lois Huck had to be killed."

Taking the two photographs from his inside pocket, Tucker laid them face upwards on the desk.

"This fellow, the one who brought you the message - "

But Hassim had stood up and was stabbing his finger at Lois Huck's boyfriend.

"That's him," he exclaimed. "That's the one!"

A little unsteadily, Tucker re-crossed the carpet to re-fill his glass. His narrative had sobered him up considerably, and he didn't want to be sober. His first expedition up-country would soon be over and he had survived. Not only survived, he had found out more than he had dared hope. Tomorrow he would be back in the capital among his own people. All he wanted to do now was enjoy himself with his new old friend.

"I did hear about a diamond," said Moses thoughtfully. "But you hear about big diamonds every week."

Tucker replaced the whisky bottle on the sideboard. He didn't want to discuss it, but curiosity triumphed.

"How much is a thing like that worth"

"Oh, how long's a piece of string? Do you know what they got for the Star of Sefadu?"

Tucker shook his head.

"Nobody does. There was talk of two million, three million pounds. I think what happened was they got a lot less than they'd bargained for and had to clamp down on the news in case they were accused of stealing it."

Tucker giggled.

"Perhaps they did steal it."

"Oh, of course," Moses conceded. "Perhaps the whole damn country's run by a gang of blasted crooks!"

It was some moments before they stopped laughing at this. When they did, there was a long silence between them. Tucker stood by the sideboard, unconsciously half-dancing to the music, savouring his victory over Hassim. How adept the man was! Until that knock-out blow in the fourteenth round, he must have been well-ahead on points. But for all his defences, the armed guards, the metal doors, the space-age security devices, Tucker unarmed had burst through and - well, no, that was going a bit far! It was more a matter of intelligence, of mental agility. He had sacrificed a couple of pawns and - not that he wasn't capable of action when that was called for! There was the bridge.

Would Moses credit that only last night he was chased through the bush by a pack of screaming savages?

The cassette recorder stopped suddenly in the middle of a song and the shrill noises of the night burst in through the open window. It was like Kamara's bar with Those were the days, my friend revolving long after the record had finished. That was another victory, over the drunken white man who had called him nigger. Oh grandfather, one way and another he had really dealt with these people!

He picked up the whisky bottle, swilling the last three inches round and round.

"You finish it," said Moses.

"Man, you're not keeping me company."

Reluctantly, Moses held out his glass.

"You should think about that diamond."

Tucker sucked his teeth.

Moses sat up straight on the couch and wagged his finger in Tucker's face.

"There are three possibilities."

"One," said Tucker mockingly.

He had solved the case. He didn't want to listen.

"Usman Salifu, or whoever has it now, will go straight to the Diamond Office. They will buy it from him at the fixed price per carat and he will pay export duty on it at seven and a half per cent."

"Negative," said Tucker, swaying slightly. "Two."

"Usman Salifu, or whoever has it, will run it through the bush down to Monrovia. That bit's easy. He'll sell it for - well, let's say twenty million leones. Except that he won't take leones, he'll take pounds or dollars or deutschmarks or whatever he fancies, Gold if he wants it, and it will be banked wherever he chooses. Then the diamond will be officially valued at, say, fifty thousand leones, and he'll pay nine per cent duty. And it will be exported perfectly legally.

"Legally?"

The word dropped unexpectedly into Tucker's consciousness.

"Legally. With all the documents in order. Liberia claims to have a diamond industry. Like her navy. It exists just on paper. But enough stones go out through Monrovia to make it the country's biggest export after rubber. It's the perfect natural resource. No investment, no unions. She charges nine per cent duty on a fraction of the stones' real value in return for legal export documents. Perfect for them, perfect for the smugglers. And there's nothing this country can do about it. Except police the border, of course."

"Of course," said Tucker. "I'll get down there right away."

But Moses didn't laugh.

"Okay," said Tucker. "It's gone to Monrovia. Three."

"There's a snag," said Moses evenly. "An expert can always tell where a diamond's come from. Whoever buys the thing will know by the shape of the crystals it's come from Sefadu. With smaller stones, that doesn't matter. But this is a damn big diamond. There's not many people in the market for seven hundred and forty carats. So, if it goes out through Monrovia, it will probably have to be cut up first by someone who will make a mess of it."

"So."

"It will lose eighty per cent of its value."

Tucker was suddenly apprehensive.

"So," he repeated, "what about three."

Moses took off his sombrero and laid it on the couch. He stood up and crossed the room to the recorder to turn the cassette over. As the music resumed, he changed his mind and switched it off. Rubbing his hands two or three times across his bald head, he turned to look at Tucker.

"You'd better start thinking about Brima Conteh."

For a moment, Tucker held his gaze. Then he swung away and began pacing up and down behind the couch.

"Oh, no!" he shouted. "He's your problem. You beat the bastard fair and square. But don't ask me to pin a murder charge on him first."

"The easiest way to get rid of that diamond is for the Minister to do it. But he would have to remain Minister."

"Damn it, no!"

Tucker's head was spinning. The nasty suspicion that there was logic in Moses' argument made him unusually emphatic.

"Look," he exclaimed aggressively.

Then he looked himself and saw the expression on Moses' face.

"Look," he repeated gently. "It won't do. I have to deal in guilt. I've got the motive and I've got the evidence. I agree about the diamond, but it doesn't alter things. The motive is five generations old and the evidence -"

He broke off, cold with a sudden dread.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Why hadn't he checked. He was gripping the back of the couch, afraid to think.

Moses laughed bitterly.

"You and me, thinking we're going to change the country. Me with my sombrero and you looking like a London bank clerk."

"My evidence," said Tucker faintly.

He rushed out of the room and down the hallway into the garden. The landrover was parked at the end of the cul de sac. He tore across the gravel, his hands shaking as he struggled with the keys.

The passenger door was open. He had left it locked, but it was open. Feverishly, he scrambled in, flinging aside Corporal Sesay's overalls.

The briefcase was gone.

Chapter Fifteen

Failure. After a day's distracted driving, there was nothing to redeem it. But at least he had brought it to the right place - back home, back to the capital, that failed settlement on the coast.

He parked the landrover on the hard sand beyond the reach of falling coconuts. Along the glimmering sickle of beach, he could see oil lamps flickering from the huts on the promontory and behind them, five miles further on, the revolving beam of the Cape lighthouse. Thick cloud darkened the horizon and the coconut palms were black mops high above his head, blotting out the starlight. The Atlantic, thrashing below him, was invisible.

Switching on the interior light, he picked up the book and studied the title:

Human Leopards: an Account of the Trials of Human Leopards before the Special Commission Court: with a Note on the West Coast, Past and Present, by Kenneth James Beatty (1915).

How magisterial it sounded! How confident that a nasty little problem had been solved! Somewhere in a primitive backwater of the Empire, in a remote territory whose location had to be explained to the reader, there had been a rash of murders committed by Human Leopards. But His Majesty's government had dealt firmly with the matter in the form of a High Court Judge and a Commission of Enquiry culminating in a Special Court. The full power of the Imperial tradition had been brought to bear on these tiny scattered villages. There had been convictions, executions, and deportations. The outbreak had been checked.

A terrible oath had been administered in court. Incredulously, Tucker read out loud in the landrover what the witnesses had been made to swear in the special court.

'I swear by this medicine to speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Should I tell a lie, may my liver drop into powder, may my heart fall to pieces, may my hindquarters stop working, may I be impotent, may my wife be barren, may my blood run through two holes. If I go by water, may the spirits sink my canoe and may my belly be swollen. If I am caught in a storm, may lightning strike me. If I go to my wife, may I embrace a corpse.'

How ruthlessly, the British had faced the problem! They had made their court as terrifying as the borfima. Even so, Judge Beatty had to confess there had been difficulties. Some of the accused had been acquitted for lack of evidence (Tucker's heart warmed to this: they hadn't cheated: he was working in an honourable tradition), and had gone round afterwards boasting that their medicine had protected them. The borfima was too powerful even for the King of England!

Yet Tucker had to do it all on his own! He turned a couple of pages and read some more.

Two witnesses who confessed to be members of the Human Leopard Society were called and gave an interesting description of their initiation into the Society. They had joined the Society at different times and belonged to different branches of it, but their description tallied in almost every detail regarding the initiation ceremony and the objects of the sacrifice. A mark is made on a candidate for initiation, usually on the buttocks, so that it will be concealed by the loincloth, the usual and only article of dress worn by the ordinary native in these parts. The mark is made by piercing the flesh with an iron needle, raising it, and shaving off a thin slice of flesh. The wound is then treated with a medicine known as nikori, which apparently has antiseptic qualities, and which is made by grinding the bark of the wild groundnut. The blood taken from the wound is put on the Borfima, and the novice by this means becomes what is spoken of as "joined" or "married to the medicine", and a full member of the society.

Meetings are only held when the leaders of the Society consider that the Borfima belonging to their particular branch requires what is spoken of as "feeding" or "blooding", and that this can only be done by the killing of some person. Apparently one of the rules of the Society is that a victim must be provided by a member of the Society; usually, the person called upon to provide the victim is a member who has received some material advancement, such as becoming a Paramount Chief or a sub-Chief, as it is considered necessary on all such occasions to appropriate the Borfima, which is looked upon as all-powerful for good or evil.

When it is arranged who is to provide the victim, a date is fixed, usually four to six days later, a rendezvous is decided upon, and the persons who are to do the killing are selected. The second meeting is generally fixed for just after dark, usually in the Poro bush, and the victim is either enticed to a place in the vicinity of the meeting place, or certain members are appointed to do the killing in the town or village, and convey the body to the Poro bush. where the Borfima is first blooded and then the body is divided up among the members, and, according to the evidence of the ex-members of the Society, the flesh is either eaten raw on the spot, or taken away and cooked. To use the words of one of these witnesses, "some like it raw, some roast, and some prefer it boiled with rice."

Since when had he known it? Since long before Moses Dumbuya had insisted that he think about Brima Conteh and the diamond. Long before he had learned about the three million leones. He had known it when he was walking around Nerekora with Chief Mansaray. He had guessed it even earlier in the helicopter with Corporal Sesay. But - for what reason? fear? vanity? the wish to keep the case at a level at which it could be handled? - he had refused to pay attention. Behind the puppet, look for the string. Behind Usman Salifu, nothing less than a hawser led to the one man on whom his career depended. When had he become Youth leader? After the last election. Why was he chosen? Because of those generations of hatred. Who had chosen him?

The really humiliating thing was that the boy's own mother had told him.

In cases of this sort where the principal men are bound together by the bonds of guilt as well as of secrecy, where the victim is provided by the head of the family, who, instead of ferreting out the crime, uses all his influence to have the matter hushed up, and where the whole people cower down in dread of the terrible vengeance threatened by the awe-inspiring Borfima, it is not to be wondered at that it is exceptional to be able to procure independent evidence. The relatives, even the mother of the victim, will not come forward willingly, and when such witnesses are found to give evidence they will only say what they think is non-committal, and from that they will not budge.

But she had done so! She had come forward! Instead of trusting here and driving back to the capital to question Betsy Gaye, the heroine of Sita's Pounding Song, he had rushed off to the diamond mines, chasing up a bribe which told him no more than he could have learned from her. All because he was afraid to admit that behind this whole filthy business was Brima Conteh, the sitting member for the district, the Minister of Mineral Resources, who was up for re-election.

And in the process of wasting time, he had lost his evidence!

He got down from the landrover, descending the steep sandbank between the coconut trees to the water's edge, welcoming the cold night wind on his burning face. The beach faced west and bore the full brunt of the Atlantic rollers. It was known locally as

Policeman Beach, having been chosen as the site for the new Police Club and Beach House. But it wasn't a place for bathing. There was a full forty yards of sucking foam where the breakers struck, and beyond that a dark heaving sheen. Occasionally, after a big wave, a long causeway of rocks was exposed, tapering towards the beach like a giant crocodile. The rocks were gnarled and twisted, like petrified molten metal, or like the rusting hulk of an ancient wreck. The crocodile submerged with a crash as breakaway waves collided across its back.

Every thirty seconds or so, the beam of the lighthouse picked out a pair of masts and a dark funnel. They belonged to a Polish cargo ship, detained years ago by port officials for non-payment of fees and looted by thieves until it had actually sunk. Tucker had often stared at it with a strange fascination, as though it were the ship his ancestors

had arrived on, the cause of his being abandoned here on this dangerous coast. Where was his real home? Beyond this settlement of shacks were the West Indies and the Middle Passage. Beyond that was Africa. His grandfather used to speak lovingly of Dahomey, a romantic country of friendly forests and firm-breasted maidens. His text had been the Song of Songs, "I am black but comely."

Tucker knew better. There was no starting point. He had come from the sea, drifting. Even the national flag acknowledged it. The blue stripe was for the Creoles who had come from the sea. He belonged nowhere. He had to make his life here, on this beach

with the continent stretching behind him, and the wrecked ship in the estuary.

What had the D.O. told him in Symira? "Your job is to find the evidence. Everybody round here knows who did it."

Of course they did! Brima Conteh had offered his twelve year old nephew as a sacrifice. The little boy had been killed to appease the Borfima. Whether this was to guarantee his re-election or to celebrate the finding of the diamond was immaterial. But being a practical man, he had also left an identifiable part of the corpse in the watertank to discredit Chief Mansaray. As for Lois Huck, she had stumbled on the truth, probably through her boyfriend. She had been killed in panic, and the murder disguised to look like the work of the Leopard Society.

What good was it, knowing all this? It was no longer a problem of knowledge. It was a problem of authority. To get people to testify, he had to break the power of the Borfima. An honest government might do it. But this government was the Party. If the Party was using witchcraft to maintain itself in power, how could he hope to defeat them both?

Even to get hold of Beatty's book, he had to steal it. Driving back to the capital over the narrow mountain road through the old Creole villages, he was descending past the University College when the idea occurred to him. He stopped at the police post and demanded the keys to the library, which was shut for the weekend. He didn't sign for them and the duty constable, sleeping on a bench in his vest and underpants, made no objection.

More and more these days, that was how he operated. Like a private detective in an American thriller, not a member of a national police force.

Sitting on the rough sand just beyond the reach of the hissing, slithering breakers, he contemplated the scene before him. In the limpid moonlight, the horizon was a crisp line, marking off clearly the blue-black clouds from the ebony sheen of the ocean. On the headland the oil-lamps were extinguished, but along the bay's curve the coconut palms shone silver. The crocodile causeway was covered now, the foam boiling silver as the tide advanced. As each wave was sucked back, he could see spearheads of finer sand widening down the slope until engulfed by the next breaker. Once, a lump of driftwood was flung up beside him. He grabbed it, crumbling the soft wood in his hands.

When the first wave touched his shoes he shivered, starting at the realisation of how late it was. He climbed back up the beach, locking the landrover, and crossed the clearing to the concrete steps of the beach house. The Police Club had been open for a year, but this was the first time he had used it.

The wooden building was in darkness. Waking up the watchman who was sleeping on the verandah floor and sending him in search of the caretaker, Tucker tried the door

and found it was open. He took a cold beer from the fridge and, while he waited for a bed to be made up for him, flung himself on the couch to have another stab at Beatty.

On some occasions a Tongo Play was held. The Players were arrayed in barbaric costume. They wore a leopard skin cap, the side flaps of which drooped over the face, a leopard tail hung down from the back of the cap, and a sort of door bell was attached to the end. There was a leopard skin jacket; the wrists, elbows and ankles were further adorned with strips of leopard skin; the whole costume being completed by short cloth knickers, trimmed with leopard skins, and leopard skin gaiters.

The Tongo Players came out and danced; The headman and his attendants carried a knobbed staff set with sharp cutting instruments called the Tongora which was loosely veiled with leopard skin.

While dancing the headman and his attendants suddenly rushed up to the suspected persons and dealt them heavy blows with the Tongora. blows which may or may not have killed them at once; but whether killed or not they were quickly taken away and thrown on the fire.

After these last words, Tucker shut the book and laid in on the upholstered arm of the couch. Leopard skin gaiters! he didn't care much for Beatty's tone.

The caretaker appeared yawning in the doorway and nodded into the bedroom behind him. He shuffled across the the fridge, bringing the drinks book for Tucker to sign, then stood scratching his armpit. Tucker drained his beer slowly. Relenting, he gave the man a tip and went into the bedroom, opening the window and listening to the booming ocean.

As he stretched out on the narrow bed, he had an idea. What about the mark, the sign on the buttocks. Couldn't he line up all the suspects, remove their trousers or whatever Muslims wore under their robes, and conduct an inspection.

He could just see Brima Conteh agreeing to that!

Idly, he flipped through Beatty once more, looking for passages about evidence.

There is little doubt that members of the Human leopard Society are marked on entering into the Society, but such marks are so like the marks left by wounds caused by accident or disease that it is not possible for any ordinary person to distinguish with any certainty between them.

He wasn't disappointed. He was beginning to take failure for granted. But it was a pity about Moses. Such a waste of idealism and talent. About the boy's mother, too. Unusually, she had come forward. He must have seemed to her a forlorn hope. Or did she believe, with his suit and briefcase, he was a powerful man? Tomorrow, he would check on Betsy Gaye.

He fell asleep with the moaning of the breakers in his ears.

Chapter Sixteen

And awoke to a Creole Sunday.

He knew it even before he opened his eyes. A day of heavy suits and slow hymns, of violent sermons in sticky, steaming churches, of numbing conversations about family with enormous women in tight corsets and wide-brimmed hats.

How often as a boy he had woken up to a bright morning, and remembered. It was Sunday, the day of prohibitions. Church early, church late, his only pleasure being to sit at the organ console while his grandfather teased a querulous whine from his favourite vox angelica.

He opened his eyes and sighed. He could hear it consciously now, the caretaker's radio with the first of the day's batch of ponderous hymns.

Feeling that the day was irredeemably spoilt, he pulled on his trousers and a crumpled shirt and walked barefoot out to the verandah. A troupe of tiny monkeys scampered across the clearing, leaping on the roof of the landrover on their way up into the coconut trees where they sat rebuking him. He padded down the steps to the beach. The tide had receded. The scaly crocodile was simply one arm of a cluster of jagged rocks all but enclosing a sandy lagoon. Beyond it, the ocean had settled to a gentle swell, easing its way without a splash through two gaps in the rocks and meeting in a bubbling arrowhead.

Tucker walked out along the crocodile's back and sat at the end surrounded by seaweed, staring into the glossy water. If he kept quite still, holding his breath, blue-backed crabs appeared from crevices and scurried around him. But the moment he raised his hand, they vanished.

Back in the clubhouse, he found a stale loaf and made himself some toast and coffee, waving aside the indignant caretaker's offer to do it for him. Then he grabbed his jacket and set off along the beach to Betsy's place.

It was hard work. Along the high tide level, the sand was like gravel, tiny polished pebbles the colour of Hassim's diamonds in the fog lamp, beaten into ridges into which his shoes sank so that his ankles ached with the effort of walking. By the time he climbed the steep path to the white-washed beach house, he was regretting not having brought the landrover.

He was admitted by a uniformed steward who assessed him with a slightly mocking smile before showing him into a carpeted living room. It was dominated by an enormous sofa and the twin-loudspeakers of a hi-fi unit. He waited for half an hour, standing patiently by the bay window which looked out at the beach. He had no idea what questions he would ask.

Betsy was grumbling when at last she emerged.

"Sunday mornin'. De man t'ink I on de job all de time. De man t'ink I like she-goat."

Then, as she shuffled barefoot into the room, "You too early, frien'. When I go get some sleep? Oh god, it's whiteman!"

She burst out laughing. Tucker could have wished for a different reception.

"Well, de man sen' me some damn funny people, but I never did t'ink he go send me you. An' you so keen, nah? You wake me fust t'ing Sunday mornin'? You can't wait little bit?"

Tucker was feeling confused. He had always seen her with heavy make-up and a blonde wig, indistinguishable in her mask from the other expensive whotes. This morning, she was scrubbed and natural, her red cotton housecoat pulled tight around her slim figure. But it wasn't just the change in her appeared that disturbed him. He was seeing her as Kaleya, the heroine of Sita's song.

Every women does ask me
Who dis girl?
An' does tell dem
She is my chil' kaleya,
She is a gift
Give me by God.

She flopped down on the sofa, holding the thin cloth round her knees, her face glowing with amusement.

"Why he send you? What you don don for he?"

"I'm conducting an investigation," he said stiffly.

Her smile faded slowly.

"I've come to ask some questions."

"Who send you?"

"The President," he lied.

Betsy gazed slowly round the room, at the thick-piled woollen carpet, the heavy imported dining suite, the bookcase with its magazines, the television, the hi-fi unit. Pursing her lips in calculation, she leaned back on the sofa.

"Is de boy," she said suddenly.

It wasn't a question but Tucker nodded eagerly.

"I no sabi not'ing 'bout dat."

"But you know what happened?"

He was doing it all wrong. He heard the weakness in his voice. He should be bullying her, using his power to cause her trouble. But he let her sit, preparing her response. When she stood up and crossed the carpet to switch on the hi-fi, he didn't interfere. The record, already on the turntable, began a reggae number in soft falsetto. *Susan, beware of the devil. Don't let him into your heart.*

"You know about it?" he repeated.

It was as though he was trying to make conversation.

She was standing almost still, holding one side of the housecoat across her breasts and letting the other drape freely so that it rippled to her faint movements.

Tucker swore softly. For all his awareness, he was held.

Then she sucked her teeth loudly, shrugging her shoulders, and padded back to the sofa, curling her legs beneath her.

"I ain' hear not'ing."

She stared at him defiantly until she held his gaze, then patted the edge of the sofa. Hesitating only a moment, he sat down beside her. It seemed the only way, he excused

himself. If she wanted to mend her fences, he would have to assist her. She reached up and kissed him quickly, and lay back smiling luxuriously.

"Whiteman," she whispered, "you does wan' know who did it?"

Tucker's heart gave a great leap.

"You know?" he blurted.

She continued smiling.

"You ain' ask me, whiteman."

"Who did it," he said urgently.

"Please."

"Tell me please who did it?"

She sighed, satisfied.

"I never did t'ink to hear you talk like dat to me,"

Such was the spell she had cast on him that he felt rebuked.

He let her pull gently on his jacket, running her fingers expertly across his chest and she delved into his pocket. She pulled out his keys and his I.D. card, pouting at his official photograph.

"What dat say?" she asked, pointing at his name.

Again, Tucker was taken aback. No one in his community would admit to being illiterate

"Eustace," he confessed, reluctantly.

"What kinda name is dat?"

She gave a deep-throated laugh and plunged her fingers into his other pocket, taking out the wallet of photographs and spreading them on the couch.

Suddenly, she leaned forward, frowning in concentration.

"Is him," she said, stabbing her fingernail at Sylvester Turay, Lois Huck's boyfriend. Her nail scratched the gloss.

"Him?"

"I no sabi what dey does call him."

"But why him?"

"He worried," she insisted with sudden energy. "He frighten' bad! All de day, he jus' staring out de window. He don' say not'ing. He don' touch me at all. He jus' sleep here on de sofa two nights. Den he disappear. He don' say not'ing. I tell you, whiteman, dat boy guilty."

"He was here? In this house?"

"An did not'ing. He don' touch me at all.

The point seemed of special significance to her.

"When?"

"He don come -" She hesitated. "He don come Monday. It have Dallas on de TV."

"And stayed two nights?"

She was afraid of a trap.

"I did t'ink he was here. He stay in dis room. I ain' see him."

"Who sent him," demanded Tucker, brutal in his triumph.

Betsy looked frightened, her eyes went moist and her lips trembled as she stretched out her legs on the sofa, ignoring the housecoat so that her thighs were exposed.

"I finish wid him," she whispered.

Tucker lost his head.

He kissed her fiercely. Kaleya, he thought. He could feel her nakedness through the soft material. She arched her back, smiling at him and stroking the back of his head. Then she slipped the housecoat over her shoulders and lowered his face to her breasts.

"Kaleya," he said.

She froze. Her whole body went rigid.

"Who give you dat?"

She sat up, her face flushed with anger, hitting his eye with her elbow as she pulled the housecoat around her.

"Who give you dat name?"

Tucker sat stupidly on the carpet, rubbing the feel of her skin from his face. She was a whore! The woman was a damned whore and she had almost bought him.

The record jiggled on, *Susan, beware of the devil.*

"Stop that damn music."

When she made no move, he bounded across the room, dragging the needle across the record in his anger.

"Your mother sings better," he snapped.

"My moder,"

"Sita. Your mother!"

"You don't come from my moder?"

"Yes, women, your mother.," he raged. "Your village in bad trouble and I have to sort out the mess. While you sit here whoring."

Betsy burst into tears.

"Who tell you?" he demanded. "Who tell you to blame him?"

"He did kill de boy."

"Who paid him?"

"It was his own t'ing. De man himself ain't know."

"Betsy, the man lying to you!"

Exasperated, he seized her shoulders and shook her.

"In two days Brima Conteh go be finish for good. You wan' for to go to jail wid him?"

He let her go. She fell back limp.

"I know what he did for Brima Conteh. A little job up in Sefadu. It's not important."

She was lying quite still. He wasn't sure if she was listening. She seemed unable to take anything in. Then she muttered something.

"What?"

He leaned over her.

"I ain't hear you."

"I not a she-goat!" she said fiercely, spitting the words into his face. "He no go get send me for one li'l Sefadu job. I don't fuck just no one!"

Oh grandfather, she was right! He was under-estimating her. She was expensive.

So could Sylvester Turay be the murderer? Could he save Chief Mansaray by accepting this new version of events? Forget the impossible and save the village? It would be a solution of sorts. It would explain how the girl found out.

But he had been here on Tuesday night.

"He was here on Tuesday," he said. "That's when the girl was killed."

"Girl?"

"There was a girl too."

"Who," she screamed, vehemently. "Who?"

"A peace corps."

For an instant she looked relieved, then incredulous.

"American?"

It tumbled out angrily.

"He tell me it all settle. It all finish. He tell me he don fix it. I sabi de boy. His moder, my moder, dey good friends. de same day I hear tell what haoppen, I call up de man an mek him tell me. He say dey know de murderer and de whole t'ing finish."

"Right," said Tucker. "So you know the man lying. Tell me what really happen?"

Betsy stood up, clasping her hands on her breasts, and shook her head vigorously.

"I ain like dis business. Dese people too wicked."

"Which people."

"I ain know."

"You know they want me to arrest Chief Mansaray?"

There was a brief flash of scorn before her eyes went dead.

"I ain sabi not'ing."

"Look," said Tucker, and hesitated. "I haven't come from your mother. Somebody told me about her singing."

"Fuck off," she shouted. "Fuck off damn Creole bastard!"

There was nothing more he could do. Turning briskly, he strode out of the house and down the steps. He took the track through the village to avoid slogging back along the beach. Once again, he had made a fool of himself and to no purpose. The only thing left was for him to ask to be taken off the case.

As he turned the corner where the track curved parallel to the shore, he glanced back. Betsy was watching from a window. He paused, but she made no sign, and he walked on past the corrugated iron church, packed now for worship in the heat of the mid-morning. A hymn hung in the humid air, its beat slower than the crash of the incoming breakers.

The track narrowed to a path, curving seawards into the amber light under the coconut trees. He would resign from the police. Get another job - schoolmaster, accountant, go abroad and become a doctor. Doctors at least were allowed to do their job properly.

He reached the clubhouse. Up on the verandah, leaning over the rail and cradling a beer, was Commissioner Sandi.

Chapter Seventeen

"Enjoy your swim, Tucker?"

Commissioner Sandi, in imitation leopard skin bathing trunks, his slight paunch pressing against the metal table, grinned satirically at the stains on Tucker's creased suit.

"Don't you ever take that damn thing off?"

"When I'm off duty, sir."

"Duty, eh? You still on duty?"

"Yes, sir."

"Overtime?"

Tucker could have wept with frustration. Commissioner Sandi frowned abruptly, as though his subordinate had made the bad joke, and summoned the caretaker to pull up another chair.

"A beer,"

"No thank you, sir."

"Don't be so stuffy, man. This isn't headquarters."

He waited till the caretaker had poured the drinks, then caught the hand which held the empty bottles.

"You waitam!"

He lumbered along the verandah, leaving a faint trail of sand, and reached through the doorway, cocking a leg in the air. When he returned, he sat down heavily, starting at Tucker and the caretaker in turn, and tossed it on the table with a clatter.

It was the leopard knife.

Tucker was speechless with anger. So that was where his briefcase went! Did he have to keep his property in a double-locked fire-proof safe? Like Hassim?

The caretaker had jumped back in horror, his eyes bulging like Corporal Sesay's.

"You sabi that?"

"Yes, sah."

"What is it?"

"It belong Leopard Men, sah."

"What we go do with the man who own that?"

"You go arrest him, sah."

The Commissioner smiled blandly.

"Exactly!"

Tucker cleared his throat. The Commissioner held up a hand for silence, nodding to the caretaker who ran into the clubhouse. They could hear his feet thudding on the wooden steps at the back, cutting off suddenly as he hit the sand.

"Well, Tucker, I hope you have a full report for me."

"It's not fully written up yet, sir. I was planning to deliver it this afternoon."

The Commissioner eased his bum on the metal chair. Headquarters or not, Tucker knew exactly what was coming.

"Man, what the hell you been doing? I get the girl's body from you five days ago, then nothing! Every two hours, the President's office on the line. Every afternoon, the American Ambassador wanting assurances, progress reports, hell knows what else. Time

Magazine, Newsweek. Some nonsense it call The Denver Globe, on ccount the girl from Denver. And what I go tell them? You trying to destroy me or what?"

"It wasn't possible to keep you informed, sir. I had to move quickly and there are no telephones in Symira."

"No telephones! We sent the bloody helicopter up on Friday, and nobody knew where the hell you'd got to!"

Tucker bit back the word Sefadu. There were telephones there.

"And this?"

The Commissioner struck the hand of the leopard knife so that it began to spin slowly.

"I got it from Chief Mansaray, sir."/

"I know all that, man. Why the hell didn't you arrest him? Bring him back the same day? This is all we need."

"He's innocent, sir."

Commisioner Sandi rolled his eyes to the geckos on the ceiling as though appealing to them for help. How did he know, thought Tucker, how did he know?

The leopard knife stopped spinning, pointing straight at the Commissioner who picked it up by the blade and began patting the palm of his hand.

"All right, Tucker, tell me about it. I take it you've persuaded yourself this thing was planted?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why?"

"For the same reason it was sent to you, sir."

"D'you think I'm stupid, man?"

"Sorry, sir."

Wrong both ways, thought Tucker, hating him. He asks stupid questions for the sheer pleasure of sneering at stupid answers.

"There's a long history of rivalry, sir, going back five generations. Usman Salifu failed to get the chieftaincy six years ago, so he became a party official. If Chief Mansaray's candidate won the election, he'd be under pressure."

The Commissioner blew a stream of beer-laden air across the table.

"It also concerns the watertank, sir. The weakness of the Mansaray dynasty" - he stumbled over the word - "has been over water for the village. Now the chief has got the water system installed, it was necessary to find some way to discredit him. Lois Huck found out the truth. Her house was ransacked to destroy any evidence she might have left."

"Who killed her?"

"Usman Salifu, sir."

"The boy as well?"

"No, sir. That was Lois Huck's boyfriend. Sylvester Turay. He's a school dropout wanting the big time. He did it on instructions."

"Whose instructions?"

Tucker hesitated, afraid of the explosion.

"There's more, sir. Usman Salifu is involved in diamonds. He's organised the youth league into a sort of raiding party. They get inside information, then attack the diggers to steal the best stones."

"Nothing wrong with that, Tucker. It's official policy to stamp out smuggling."

"He paid a big bribe to a Lebanese trader. Hassim in Sefadu. It concerns a very big diamond. Seven hundred and forty three carats."

That, at least, was news to the Commissioner. He put down the leopard knife and rubbed his belly, wincing as though the information had given him indigestion. Got you, thought Tucker.

"Another Star of Sefadu, eh?"

"Exactly, sir."

He couldn't resist using the Commissioner's word.

"And what do you deduce from all this?"

"It seems, sir, to point to the Honourable Minister."

"Ha!"

Commissioner Sandi laughed aloud, rubbing his hands together in sheer pleasure. He stood up, padding along the verandah into the clubhouse and returned with another beer which he poured into his own glass.

"Go for the top man, eh Tucker? You people really don't like being ruled by Africans, do you?"

It was Tucker's turn to be disconcerted.

"I read your reports. They're all the same. Damn good for London, useless for here. You think we can change the government every two weeks because someone takes a little bribe?"

"Stamping out corruption is official policy, sir."

"This country runs on corruption. So does my police force. What do you expect with diamonds a yard below the surface, and a constable getting five hundred leones a month?"

Tucker was silenced. It was the argument with Hassim over again.

"And your evidence?"

"It was in my briefcase, sir. With the knife."

An exaggeration, but he might as well draw some advantage from his weakness.

"So no evidence?"

"Nothing definite as yet, sir."

"But you want me to march into Brima Conteh's Ministry and stick handcuffs on him?"

"No, sir."

Only thirty six hours ago, he had been saying the same thing to Moses.

Commissioner Sandi tipped his chair against the verandah rail, clasping his large hands behind his head, and looked at Tucker fondly.

"This afternoon, five o'clock, I have an audience with the President. He wants to know personally what's going on and thanks to you I've a lot to tell him. You caused one full scale riot up there. You've destroyed one valuable bridge. You've appropriated one police landrover without the Chief Constable's permission. You've fooled around with diamonds in a restricted area. And you've been pestering a Government Minister's girl friend, interfering in his private affairs. In the middle of it all, you've completely disregarded the only bit of solid evidence you've picked up. Quite a report, eh?"

This was fantasy and Tucker knew it. He should have called the Commissioner's bluff. But he let himself be provoked.

"I request to be taken off the case, sir."

"You'll finish it first, Tucker. Don't worry about that. We have it all lined up for you."

He knocked the leopard knife across the table so that it fell into Tucker's lap.

"Your evidence," he said. "Look after it this time. You go straight back to Symira where you were sent. You go straight to the D.O.'s office and you know what to ask for."

"I'll ask," said Tucker determinedly, "for a warrant to search Usman Salifu's house."

"The man's dead, Tucker. The man's dead."

Tucker didn't believe it. He almost laughed in dismay.

"He was found yesterday morning by the watertank. Same place, same method. Corporal Sesay came down again to tell us. Your friend Chief Mansaray has disappeared."

The Commissioner stood up slowly, leaning over him like a heavyweight boxer threatening the referee.

"The warrant's waiting for you. You find him, Tucker. You lost him, so damn you, you find him!"

Chapter Eighteen

He made his arrangements automatically, obeying his instincts, dimly aware of only one thing.

He was no longer a policeman!

Duty, training, discipline, rank - they had bound him hand and foot. He hadn't failed, not really. He had been ordered not to succeed. Now he must cut himself free.

He drove furiously, ignoring the speed limits, to his flat in Wilberforce and began to pack the landrover. Blankets, a lilo, a saucepan and utensils, a bag of charcoal, tinned meat, a few drinks in a cool box, a gun - his grandfather's ancient hunting rifle. Anything else? He ran back in for a tin-opener. His passport and the two thousand-odd leones left over from last pay day, he hid with the tools under the seat. All this occupied fifteen minutes of muttered anger. Then he raced upstairs to his bedroom, took off his suit, and stuffed it in the bottom of the wardrobe. Tipping out the drawers one after the other, he picked out an old pair of khaki trousers, a tartan shirt, and the maroon sweater he had bought at Hendon Woolworths, smelling a bit of mould and bursting at the elbows, but just right for an ex-Detective Inspector rebelling on a Creole Sunday!

It took only a few minutes to fill up the spare petrol cans at the garage opposite the barracks. Then he drove up through Hill Station back into the mountains.

In a few minutes, he had climbed to Regent Village. Already as he crossed the narrow bridge over the stream which fell from Leicester Peak, he felt he was in a different world. The afternoon smelt of damp rain forest, and the decaying village with its bulging yellow-washed Methodist church and gabled wooden houses, already half-hidden by their gardens, was like ointment on his raw wound. He parked on the waste ground in front of the village store, shuttered and bolted for Sunday. Best of all, the place was deserted.

Climbing the steep path to the tiny church, he sat in a plain wooden pew at the back, breathing the rank odour of the lilies on the harmonium, left over from the morning service. This was his grandfather's village, the place where he insisted he really belonged, despite all those years in the capital. His great-grandfather, whom he had never known, had spent all his life here. What was it like in those early days when the settlements seemed to be succeeding and the old ideals made sense? Buxton, Wilberforce, Zachariah Macaulay! A Province of Freedom! A community of Christians serving the whole West Coast! Black Bishop Crowther consecrated in Canterbury Cathedral! Edward Blyden, corresponding with Gladstone! Why had it all gone wrong? Had there been a time when his great-grandfather, too, felt torn in half?

Was that why the old man remained up here, intensely irritated if he had to descend to the capital more than once or twice a year?

There were still old men like him, scattered around these mountains.

Closing the church door quietly behind him, he walked up the road beyond the village to the graveyard. It, too, was deserted, though the wilting flowers and bundles of fresh kola nuts showed it had been visited that morning. His grandfather's grave was near the mango tree on the far side where the stream made a wide curve and only a wall of loose stones prevented the earth being washed away. Buried there, too, was his grandmother whom he could only dimly remember, and both her parents. It wasn't really

a family plot - his own father was buried in the municipal cemetery at King Tom. But he felt, obscurely, his father could not advise him now. If there was anything in the past that could help him, it was here where it had all begun.

He picked up the gourd from beside the weathered headstone and filled it at the stream, holding on to a low branch of the mango tree to get the clear running water from the middle. Carefully, with both hands, he carried it brimming to the grave and poured out his libation. Then he knelt down, wondering what to say. He knew what was usually said on All Saints and New Year's Day. But this was a crisis, and he meant what he was doing. In the end, he said simply that he hoped their hearts were cool towards him and that they pleased with what he was trying to do. He asked them to show him their wisdom in the decision he had to take. He knelt a little longer to give them the chance to speak now if they wished. Then he replaced the gourd by the headstone and walked briskly back to the landrover.

He wasn't disturbed by their silence. They would guide him when necessary, even if he didn't actually realise it until afterwards.

Now he had to buy himself time.

He cruised comfortably downhill till he reached the peninsular road and turned east, retracing yesterday's drive on the narrow lumpy tar. When he knew he was approaching the mile 47, the boundary of Western province, he used the headlights trick accelerating like a politician down the middle of the road and hooting at everything that failed to pull smartly out of his way. As he turned into the straight, past the straggling settlement of huts and flat-roofed Lebanese shops, he saw the line of waiting poda-podas and the constables frantically trying to raise the barrier in time.

He gave them a curt official nod as they saluted him, satisfied the report of his speed and enthusiasm would filter back to Commissioner Sandi.

Another ninety miles up the empty new road and he would be more than halfway. He had no intention of reaching Symira that night. Better to arrive first thing in the morning, when everyone would be preoccupied with Nomination Day. But first he had to complete his picture of new-found obedience and efficiency, before getting back beyond the reach of the telephones. He stopped at Malema to top up with petrol and called at the police station, pretending to ask the way.

"Should make it before nightfall," he announced crisply to the duty desk, amused at the thought of that Tucker-ish phrase winging its way down the wires to the ears of the corporal, possibly Kargbo, the Commissioner was sure to put on his track.

The duty constable only frowned and scratched his nose, sleepily.

Now he had to find a site. He completed thirty miles of the dirt road before he found a place which suited him. A clump of trees, festooned with creepers, hid the clearing from the bridge and, anyway, it would soon be dark. Fetching some dry stones from the river's edge, he built a fireplace, blowing on the charcoal till it clinked and tinkled with blue flame, and cooked himself a meal. But the time had he finished, night had fallen and the fire glowed red at his feet. He wrapped the greasy pans in newspaper and put them on the floor in the landrover where they wouldn't attract animals. Then he loaded his grandfather's rifle and stretched out on the lilo, staring through the open door at the twilight.

He felt extraordinarily contented. It didn't worry him that inspiration had not yet come. He would try to find Chief Mansaray, and then he would know what to do. If he failed, well, he was fully equipped and very close to the border.

All he had to do now was collect the warrant.

Though, in fact, he was given no alternative.

Down the slope from Lois Huck's house, outside the police station where the brief, inexplicable stretch of tar road ended, was the row of battered oil drums and the gang of Party thugs.

No racing through the barrier here!

Where do they get the oil drums, Tucker wondered, and then, where do they get all the guns? As he stepped down from the landrover, three half-naked men ran up thrusting bayonets against the Woolworths pullover.

"Tucker!", shouted a voice he remembered.

It was one of the 'masters' from Sefadu, bare-chested, bare-footed, ready to fight for democracy.

"Fucker Tucker! Where you been all dis time, eh?"

Tucker said nothing.

The master grinned and waved behind him. From the middle of the gang, Corporal Sesay was shoved forward. An ugly bruise darkened the left side of his face, almost shutting his left eye. But he saluted smartly and held out a creased envelope.

"My orders are to collect this from the District Officer", said Tucker.

The master hawked and spat, rubbing the mucous in the dirt with the ball of his foot.

"The D.O. tired waitin', man. We all tired waitin'. Where the hell you been eh?"

Tucker wondered about insisting on the regulations, wondered exactly what the regulations said, looked at Corporal Sesay's bruised face and accepted the envelope. Immediately, he was bundled into the landrover, straddling the gear lever with a thug on each side.

The master thrust his face in at the window.

"Curfew," he explained.

Corporal Sesay mouthed something silently, then staggered with a gun butt in his stomach as the landrover lurched forward. It swerved through a gap cleared hastily in the line of oil drums and, moments later, skidded to a halt in front of the government rest house.

Apart from the thugs, Tucker had seen no one. The whole town was empty.

As he was flung through the door of the rest house, Tucker grabbed hold of the fridge to steady himself. The door slammed shut behind him.

Curfew!

Even the police station had been shut. The Party had taken over the town for Nomination Day.

Rubbing his forearm where the thugs had gripped him, Tucker peered cautiously through the kitchen window. One of them was lolling against the back fence where he had bought palm wine from the market women. He crossed the room and listened. There

were heavy boots outside the front door. He opened the door a fraction and immediately the gun swung round, pointing at his chest.

Curfew!

They had handed him the warrant and imprisoned him. In a sudden panic, he tore open the envelope. The document was in order and made out in Chief Mansaray's name. They still expected him to be making the arrest.

Silently, he shot the bolts on both doors and sat down at the table where he had examined the borfima for fingerprints. Then he had an idea. He rattled the bolts noisily and sat down again.

A gun appeared at the kitchen window.

"Open!"

Tucker stared at the olive-green wall. The boots thumped round the side of the rest house. With a crash which made him jump, the gun was thrust through the glass.

"Open up!"

There was a tense silence, then a whispered discussion. One of the guards kicked the door hard, but the gun was withdrawn. Tucker relaxed his grip on the table.

That, at least, was worth knowing. They had been ordered not to harm him.

What had Corporal Sesay tried to whisper to him?

"Don' worry, sah!"

Don't worry! And got a gun butt in the belly for his trouble.

He examined the fridge. It was off. But there were still a couple of eggs left and some soft butter, and most of the loaf the D.O. had provided for him. Only the beer was gone! He cut the crust off the loaf and found it was edible inside. The stove wasn't working nor, now he tried them, the lights. The curfew applied to everyone, even the foreman at the electricity sub-station. Buttering himself a hunk of bread, he filled a cup with water, laced it with melting frost from the ice-box, and prepared to sit out the siege.

At least, he would be comfortable while the guards sweated in the hot sun.

Presumably, they were satisfied that Chief Mansaray was helpless. An arrest on Nomination Day might be unpopular, might even stir up some latent sympathy for him. Once the day was over, he would be released and expected to act on the warrant.

Except that he had his own plans.

He closed his eyes and tried to imagine exactly what he would do when he found the chief. Would they cross the border together? Walk back to Futa Jalon? The man who came from the mountain and the man who came from the sea?

He sat up.

Surely, that was gunfire!

He listened tensely. There were two more shots, from across the town by the road to Nerekora.

Or by the D.O.'s office! the Electoral Office!

Oh grandfather, surely Moses wasn't trying to present his Nomination Papers in spite of everything?

The guards were leaning together over the back fence, staring up the lane. From somewhere came a faint wave of laughter.

Then a long silence.

Reluctantly, the guards resumed their positions. Slowly, methodically, Tucker tried to argue himself back into assurance. Three shots only. It was probably some private matter. With so many thugs roaming the town, it would take very little to start trouble.

Maybe a quarrel over food. It was past midday and very hot. Maybe there weren't enough drinks to go round.

The police were under curfew. The Party youths possessed the town. How many old scores would be settled today! Had the bank manager bounced a cheque? Had some poor clerk sent an electricity bill to the wrong man? Had Kamara kicked someone out of his bar?

Or maybe it was simply a bush pig that had run across the road.

He returned to sit on the bed and found he was shaking. The thought was spinning in his head and he couldn't control it.

How could he have overlooked Moses. Moses would be here today to file his Nomination Papers. Otherwise, he couldn't stand. But surely, the man must have heard that it was hopeless.

Even if he hadn't heard about Usman Salifu and the Chief's disappearance, would he really turn up today to present his papers at the Electoral Office?

There was a faint, faint chance of justice for Chief Mansaray. But today! The nomination! It was hopeless!

Unable to sit still, he stood by the window, gripping the burglar bars, staring past the guard at the afternoon sunlight. Slowly, colour was returning to the pale houses after the midday heat. The shadows of oil and coconut palms no longer formed ragged pools around their boles but were lengthening fast. The emptiness was uncanny. The whole town seemed diminished, a collection of hovels in which the population cowered until politics were done for the day. It was easy to obliterate it altogether, to see the landscape as it must have looked a hundred years ago, just another stretch of bush under the frowning face of the mountain, with Nerekora the nearest centre of civilisation.

Could anything like today have happened then? Chief Mansaray would be Paramount Chief, acknowledged and secure. Usman Salifu would be troublesome, but powerless to do real damage. Brima Conteh would be the blacksmith, a man with respect and real skills. Betsy would be Kaleya, a senior wife if she were lucky, singing about her children as Sita sang about her.

And himself? Would he be like his great-grandfather, living in self-imposed isolation in the mountain village unwilling, both literally and symbolically, to descend to the capital? Unable to return to his original home because some African chief would only sell him a second time?

The past was complicated! He remembered his conducted tour of Nerekora, that trade to the coast through Usman Salifu's gateway. It must have included some trading in slaves, and Tucker was descended from slaves.

But was that any worse than today, worse than the obscenity of this so-called election? Suddenly, he remembered the fallen cotton tree, the execution's gate, and Chief Mansaray shouting "Youi think we need policemen? You think we couldn't settle these murders ourselves?"

What precisely had he meant by that?

Of course, there were the Susu, the invaders at the gates. It must have been only a little more than a hundred years since Fila Sana and the eklders had blown themselves up

with gunpowder rather than surrender to Islam. They wanted to preserve what they had been. Kadiatu, the Chief's senior wife, had brought the burning faggot. Would Betsy have been a woman like that? The passion of the past! That was something he had learned up here.

He jumped with fright as the shooting began again.

No doubt about it, this time. It was up by the Electoral Office. It started there, but the gunfire and screaming spread quickly.

Tucker rushed to open the door. The two guards were at the back fence, firing ridiculously into the air. From all parts of town, the youths were running northwards, shooting and howling.

Could he make it to the landrover? He was about to dash round the side of the rest house when he saw the car, swerving from left to right and back again as it bounced down the lane towards him.

It was a black volkswagon. One of the guards levelled his rifle at the windscreen.

Tucker flung himself forward, racing across the waste garden. In one movement he knocked up the gun barrel and grabbed the man's waist, swinging him to the ground. As he rolled over, he saw the other guard raising the rifle butt. There was a shout, and he lay still.

He was unharmed. The volkswagon had gone. The left rear tyre was flat, but it had kept going. He could hear its exhaust clattering somewhere beyond the roundabout.

O'Reilly had been driving. Propped up in the backseat by someone he didn't know had been Moses. His face was covered in blood.

Nominations closed officially at five.

By five-thirty, the occupying army of Party thugs had withdrawn, drifting past the rest house in small, excited gangs as they loitered up the hill towards Brima Conteh's mansion. Apart from their guns which they swung casually like walking sticks, they looked perfectly ordinary young men. For all his anger and bitterness, Tucker couldn't help noting that.

His two guards leaned against the landrover, grumbling aloud to their friends, wondering whether to join them. Since they had bundled him back into the kitchen, they had left him alone, hardly bothering to check he was still there. Eventually, as the town began to shimmer with evening sunlight, they wandered off after the others.

He was free to proceed with the arrest.

For all the hours of his confinement, he hadn't made any plans. But he no longer wished to escape across the border. He would stay and accept what was coming to him and the real release it would bring. First, he had to find out about Moses. He couldn't begin to think straight till he had set his mind at rest about his friend.

The curfew was over but the road was deserted. Turning left at the junction, he crossed the concrete bridge over the full stream. For an instant, its colour shocked him until he realised it was flowing straight out of the angry sunset, like an artery bearing blood from the sky. The power was still cut off but as candles and oil lamps began to glow from the windows of the locked houses, he felt he was being watched. Glancing back nervously, he saw white-robed figures stepping into the road for the first time that

day. Kamara's bar was shut. Under the arches of the National Bank, three elderly men were staring at a body.

Tucker hurried past.

There were no lamps on at the Police Station and the door was bolted. He banged on the wooden panels just in case Corporal Sesay was locked inside. Obviously, no one was on duty tonight. Like sensible government employees, they would wait until anything they might have to investigate had been removed from the streets.

Turning to walk back, he saw the mansion on the hillside. Only a moment before, it had been invisible in the sunset glare. Now, as darkness swept down from the mountain, it blazed across the black-out town in the sickening triumph of its private generator. Every moment of deepening twilight heightened the contrast. A man overtook him, swearing aloud and shaking his fist at the faint sounds of celebration.

It's too late now, thought Tucker. Why didn't you help Moses?

One door of Kamara's bar was open now, a candle burning on the counter. No one was drinking, not even Kamara who supervised with his normal bland stupor. The men stood in a semi-circle round the steps, listening to the transistor radio.

Kasunko East: APP candidate nominated unopposed.

Bure: APP candidate nominated unopposed.

Nomo and District: APP candidate nominated unopposed.

Makpele Central: APP candidate nominated unopposed.

One of the men spat furiously.

"Damn election finish before it start!"

It was such a formality, they weren't even bothering to give the candidates' names.

Bramaia: APP candidate nominated unopposed.

Gbo and District: APP candidate nominated.

UNPC candidate nominated.

There was a ripple of interest at this. In one constituency at least, the Party thugs had lost.

"It go make no difference," said the spitter. "Dey go lock him up tomorrow."

"For what?"

"Intimidation!"

There were grunts of satisfaction, but no one laughed. Tucker felt like screaming.

"What happened here?" he demanded urgently.

The faces turned to him, barely distinguishable in the flickering candlelight.

"Where the hell you been, man?"

"I mean, what happened to Moses? Was he badly hurt?"

Mambolo: APP candidate nominated unopposed.

Port Loko: APP candidate nominated unopposed.

"He no get hurt too bad. Dat whiteman pick him up when dey start beatin' him fust time."

"What about all that shooting?"

"Shooting? You call dat shooting? Dem monkeys couldn' hit elephant if it standing on dey foot."

Again, no one laughed. They had spent twelve hours hiding with their families behind locked doors. Now with the Minister's mansion shining over the dark town, they had trooped out in its shadow to complain.

Tucker was about to ask them about Corporal Sesay. Then it occurred to him. If the corporal were free, he would make straight for the rest house.

"Don' worry, sah".

Moses had survived. Was that what the corporal had meant?

Mabang: APP candidate nominated unopposed.

A one-party state emerging naturally through the ballot box. That was what the President had called for. "We have won the battle for Freedom! Now we are fighting for Unity!"

A one-party state! Up on the hillside in a bright bullet-proof mansion, the party was celebrating while the dispossessed voters grumbled in the darkness.

Ha! Watch out! Enemy around you!

He had to find Corporal Sesay.

Someone had switched on the landrover's lights. The front door of the rest house was ajar. He dashed inside, his heart thumping.

"Corporal?"

The place was empty.

He ran back out to the landrover. The rear door was open, but nothing had been touched. As his fingers closed over the barrel of his grandfather's rifle, he heard a noise on the concrete behind him.

"Corporal?" he said again, half turning.

In the dim light reflected from the whitewashed walls of the rest house, he saw the creature towering above it. The leopard mask with long fangs, the leopard skin stretched across massive shoulders, extending down the arms, the jangling amulets, the club poised to strike.

Instinctively, he raised his left arm to protect his throat. He saw the club descending in an infinitely slow curve. Then his left temple exploded with pain and he sank into the darkness.

Chapter Nineteen

He was in a boat. He had been in it for many weeks. At first, there had been other people with him but now, he didn't remember why, he was alone. The boat was pitching violently. Every time it rose to a wave, his brain rocked inside his skull as if turning on its own axis. He concentrated hard, trying to hold it steady, but the waves were getting bigger. He knew that if he opened his eyes, the images would shunt backwards and forwards across his retina. He was lying on his side on a beach. There was a lighthouse flashing in his face, burning through his eyelids. His head was resting on wet seaweed. It wasn't a beach, it was a graveyard. There was a mango tree. His eyes were screwed tight but he could smell the mango resin dripping from a claw mark in the bark.

People were talking. They were standing over him. Someone seemed angry, and there were excuses and apologies. He lay still with his eyes shut, breathing as quietly as he could until they went away. There was a long silence, but they weren't going to trap him like that. Then another voice spoke, and a hand felt his chest. He knew that voice and he stiffened involuntarily.

It was Corporal Sesay.

Tucker opened his eyes.

He was lying in a shaft of moonlight, pouring through a ragged hole immediately above him. Shutting his eyes, he tried again. He was in the forest in a clearing, staring straight up through a gap on the tree tops. Corporal Sesay was holding a compress of cold leaves against his temple.

"Inspector. Inspector Tucker, sah!"

The corporal flashed a torch in his face. He turned away from the pain. Then memory flooded back and he tried to sit up.

"Leopard men," he said.

"No, sah."

"Leopard men," he insisted, and this time he did sit up. His brain was swelling and shrinking with every heartbeat, but he could see them clearly across the the patch of moonlit earth.

Three enormous masked figures, draped in leopard skins.

Frantically, he struggled to his feet, knocking aside the corporal's hands. The wall of forest enclosed him on all sides.

Was Corporal Sesay, after all, their accomplice?

The tallest of the creatures leaped at him suddenly, so that he staggered backwards, catching his foot in a twist of grass.

"Don' worry, sah!"

The corporal was supporting him.

"You no go get hurt."

The masked figure had stopped in the middle of the clearing. It spun round, stamping its right foot four times in each direction, and began a violent, shuddering dance, as though every muscle in its body was being forced to vibrate simultaneously.

Tucker watched in horror.

The glistening limbs flashed in the moonlight. They were twisting in impossible directions, as though melting to pale liquid, as though some monstrous ghostly puppet

was being shaken dry by huge invisible hands. Yet the tall horned mask remained perfectly still, the eye sockets glowing yellow. The feet thumped like a drum. and the jangling amulets and anklets kept up a rhythmic unison which never faltered. Tucker could feel the shock waves through his feet. It went on and on, impossibly long. No one can do that, he thought. He could feel the eyes possessing him. The vibrations were passing up his legs. It got faster and faster. His body shook in sympathy. Suddenly, the creature spun round, stamping again in each direction, and stopped.

Silence.

Tucker strangled the scream in his throat. The corporal flung himself prostrate. Perfectly motionless, its eyes empty with moonlight, the horned mask bellowed.

"Gbowa wo Neppor!"

Then it vanished. Tucker blinked. The sound waves echoed through the forest. In one prodigious movement, the creature had leaped back into the shadows as though plucked aside by the same invisible hand.

The other two figures advanced.

There was an interval of clarity as Tucker felt the night wind cold on his sweating face. Then the drumming started. Oh grandfather, there were more of them! The drumming was everywhere, coming from the bush on all sides.

The creatures ran to opposite sides of the clearing and, with their backs towards him, began a stamping, buttock-shaking dance. He could see the leopard skins clearly now, the brief loincloths, the amulets and anklets, and he felt a little of the tension drain out of him. This, at least, was like something he had seen before. Corporal Sesay was standing beside him, like any other spectator at a Boxing Day Devil Dance in the capital.

"Don' worry, sah," he repeated nervously. It had become all he could say.

The drumming crescendoed.

Suddenly, from, nowhere, the creatures were armed. They sprang at each other, whirling thick wooden clubs wrapped with leopard skins, dancing with great leaps and feints as they aimed blows at each other's masks, missing by fractions of an inch. The battle lasted a few seconds. Without breaking step, they retreated to opposite ends of the clearing.

Which of them had attacked him? They had been arguing about that, he remembered now.

Again, the drums gave the signal. The second battle was longer and more violent. The blows, launched with tremendous rhythmic swings, whistled viciously. At any moment, Tucker expected to hear the sickening explosion of a strike. When the figures separated the second time, he realised with a shock they were nearer to him than before.

Beside him, Corporal Sesay began to dance.

Another drum broke in, deeper and more insistent. It was right behind him, thumping in his temple. He spun round, staring with growing panic at the blank wall of the forest. The new drum became frantic.

Immediately, the figures responded. They jumped at Tucker, swinging the clubs across his face and behind his head. The clubs had a strange jingle to them, as though they too were dancing. He closed his eyes, waiting for the final blow, trying desperately not to tremble. But he couldn't stand still. The drums thundered between his ears and his feet responded.

Tucker was dancing on the spot with the clubs flashing round his head. Above it all came the same immense bellow.

"Gbowa-wo-Neppor!

The drumming ceased abruptly. The echoes died away. There was a brief scuffle of leaves, then nothing. Cautiously, Tucker opened his eyes.

The clearing was empty in the moonlight.

Had it really happened? Was he only now recovering consciousness? He staggered to a boulder and sat down, sweating, fingering tenderly the bruise on his temple.

Corporal Sesay was solicitous.

"Dey sorry, sah. Dey plenty vex you get hurt."

Tucker smiled sceptically.

"Where the hell are we?"

"We up de mountain, sah."

"Where's Symira?"

The corporal pointed straight ahead at the wall of trees. Tucker eased his head round to where the summit should be. He couldn't remember seeing forest up here. Between Symira mountain and the spur where Brima Conteh's mansion stood, there must be a hidden valley. For the moment, all he could see were treetops and a patch of pale night sky.

But there was still something wrong. He wandered across the clearing, staring at the spot where the figures had disappeared. Palm branches didn't hang down like that. There were no palms on the mountain. He pulled at one and the dead branch came away in his hand.

This was no ordinary clearing in the forest. It was a Bush, the meeting place of a Secret Society. He ran to the centre of the clearing and scuffed his heels into the loose earth where the masked dancers had stamped it down, stooping to pick up a handful. The damp wood ash was white in the moonlight.

Was this the place? Had Lois Huck and little Musa Conteh been brought up here to be eaten while the borfima was blooded?

He remembered Beatty's witness, "Some like it raw, some roast, and some prefer it boiled with rice!"

Corporal Sesay nodded slowly.

"Is a bad wicked place, sah.,"

"You knew about this?"

"No, sah!" The corporal was emphatic. "Is dey done bring us."

Tucker giggled involuntarily, and swallowed hard.

"Why?" he said, in a slight falsetto.

"What for?" he repeated more firmly.

"Dey did need to smell you out, sah. I tell dem you good good man. You honest man, de best Inspector I ever see!"

Corporal Sesay grinned with the sheer pleasure of saying this.

"But dey did need to smell you deyself, sah. Like interview for job, sah."

Tucker moaned gently and sat down again, holding his head in his hands. He was completely lost.

"So who the hell were those creatures?"

"Dey de Tongoh people, sah."

"Tongoh people?"

"Yes, sah. Dem people have four eyes, sah. Deh African detectives."

The Tongo Players!

Tucker took a deep breath. It blew through his mind like a fresh wind from the sea. Tongo Players! The leopard skin gaiters! He had read about them in the beach house. What had Beatty said?

While dancing the headman and his attendants suddenly rushed up to the suspected persons and dealt them heavy blows with the Tongora, blows which may or may not have killed them at once; but whether killed or not they were quickly taken away and thrown on the fire.

Chief Mansaray had told him they didn't need policemen. They could do it their own way. Was this what he meant?

"Gbowa-wo-Neppor," he said. "What does that mean?"

"Is de Chief Spirit name, sah. It does mean Great T'ing".

The corporal became businesslike.

"Don' worry, sah. Is safe here. Dem jackass t'ugs no go t'ink to search here. Tomorrow, sah, we go drive to Nerekora,"

"Tomorrow, I have to find Chief Mansaray."

"De chief go be waitin' for you, sah. You go tell him you does want to ask for de Tongoh people."

Oh grandfather, the chief's own way!

"Dey very good, sah. Dey go settle everyt'ing."

Chapter Twenty

Not far, Corporal Sesay had said. But to Tucker, anxious about the missing guards, worried that the roads out of Symira would already be blocked, it seemed an endless scramble down through the thick scrub of the valley and along the bed of the stream in a wide arc round the foot of the spur. They found the landrover where the corporal had hidden it, upstream from the rest house under the collapsing eaves of an abandoned hut. He seemed to have thought of everything. But he refused to hurry. Tucker stood on the edge of the track, bouncing on his toes with impatience as the corporal, singing happily, washed himself in the stream. Some women appeared with foaming guounds of palm wine. When they caught sight of Tucker's scowling face, they hurried past, their chattering suddenly silenced.

That changed his mind. Stripping to his underpants, he jumped into the green sunlit pool beside the corporal and bathed thoroughly. Then they filled up with petrol from the reserve tins and drove into Symira.

The sewing machines whirred on the verandahs. The market was colourful again, with gleaming piles of green-gold oranges and baskets of red and yellow guinea pepper. The town had forgotten, or had wisely decided not to remember what had happened only yesterday.

As the landscape slid by, Tucker watched it with something like affection. It was less than a week since he had walked along here on his way to Lois Huck's house, his jacket slung over his shoulder with the sun burning through his shirt. Already, he felt as if he had known it for years. That was after the very first rains, and the earth was pricked with green. Now in places the grass was a foot tall, and the pawpaw trees, washed completely of the red-pepper harmattan dust, were sprouting fresh leaves.

The road was clear. Outside the Electoral Office, the oil drums had been rolled into the ditch.

In a few hours, he would be returning to the capital and would never see these places again. The market and Kamara's bar, the appalling road and dangerous bridges, the village with its ancient trees, the mountains of black boulders and sudden forest, these newly discovered scenes had gripped his imagination. But they would remain outside him, something up-country. He hadn't found the action which would connect him to them for ever.

Now he was hurrying to do what he had been expected to do last week. Arrest Chief Mansaray!

"These Tongoh people," he began

"Dey go settle everyt'ing, sah" said the corporal firmly.

"It's illegal!"

"Is why everybody waiting you go call dem, sah."

Tucker sighed. He was the President's man. It had counted for nothing all through the case. It hadn't protected him. It hadn't brought him cooperation, It hadn't inspired trust. Now it provided the excuse for breaking the witchcraft laws!

"You're a policeman, corporal. Why do you think it's illegal?"

"Is de British," agreed Corporal Sesay readily. "White men clever, but dey done make some crazy laws. Dey say is all right to be a witch. But you can' call de man a witch. What stupidity is dat?"

The old argument. Witchcraft was a superstition. It didn't exist. Therefore, by definition, it couldn't be made illegal. What the courts punished instead were accusations of witchcraft. It seemed a perfectly sensible reform. But Tucker, who had argued the case a hundred times, had never persuaded anyone of its logic, and secretly was not convinced himself.

It was going to be a difficult morning.

There was Chief Mansaray's point of view also to be considered. It was true the chief owed him something. He had saved the man's life on the night of the attempted lynching. But now the chief as coming out of hiding and was virtually giving himself up. What exactly had he been promised?

As they neared Nerekora, passing the sabotaged bridge where he had eaten the baobab fruit, the bend where the corporal had given babboons the right of way, the path to his uncle's far, where the borfima had suddenly lost its threat, every fresh landmark focussed his mind on different aspects of the problem.

He was supposed to be a policeman, trained in forensic science. He shouldn't be fooling around with witchdoctors and poison ordeals! The whole business was sliding once again out of his control.

From the rampart between the cotton trees, Nerekora looked deserted. Usman Salifu's house and its neighbours were locked and shuttered, as though with their owner's murder the occupants had moved out. It was only when they drove across the empty market and turned past the courthouse that he saw the people.

An enormous crowd was gathered outside Chief Mansaray's compound. The chief himself, erect in his rust-coloured robe of office, was sitting on the chieftaincy throne at the top of the steps leading up to his verandah.

As the crowd separated before them and they squealed to a halt beside the grave of the chief's warrior grandfather, Tucker looked up at the smooth mud walls, the decorated pillars, the neat trimmed thatch, the cool darkness of the interior where he had enjoyed the chief's hospitality.

Chief Mansaray was flanked by a row of old men. The elders had returned to his side.

What had happened?

A murmur passed across the crowd as Tucker approached the steps. Glancing back nervously, he felt a rush of anger. Last time he saw them, they were advancing with cutlasses and firebrands with Usman Salifu at their head. Now he had come to take their chief off to jail. That should satisfy them, shouldn't it?

He hesitated at the foot of the steps, wanting to begin his apology, to explain what he felt he had to do, and looked round for the corporal to give him moral support. But Corporal Sesay had remained by the landrover.

It was Chief Mansaray who came to his rescue. Relaxing his gravity into a warm smile, he came half way down the steps, holding out both hands in friendship. It was a breach of custom, and the villagers buzzed with surprise.

Tucker's nervousness increased. The crowd was like a taut drum, sensitive to the lightest touch.

Before the two men reached the verandah, a two-note car horn blasted across the village. Over the heads of the crowd, Tucker could see the top of a maroon mercedes-benz and, behind it, revving round the courthouse and approaching too fast, a lorry loaded with the Party thugs.

They knew everything! It was a trap!

Who had told them Chief Mansaray was here? Who had turned this into a public occasion?

Where had all these people come from, There must be two thousand of them at least, old men, women, children, some youths -far more than could possible live in Nerekora alone. Who had summoned them? Why was Corporal Sesay grinning with delight across the bonnet of the landrover?

Brima Conteh elbowed his way to the front of the crowd which seemed happy to let him pass. Last time he was here had been for the opening ceremony of the new water system. He had worn a thick woollen suit over his squat thick-necked body. Today, he was dressed in guerrilla fatigues. Like the masters from Sefadu, he was ready for violent action.

He stopped at the foot of the steps, hands on his hips, scowling up at Chief Mansaray and the elders as though controlling himself with difficulty. Six of the thugs formed a semi-circle behind him, their guns pointing to the ground.

There was a long moment of absolute stillness. Brima Conteh's glare shifted to Tucker. It was for him to act! Across the village, somewhere by Usman Salifu's empty house, a dog ululated mournfully, and the full enormity of what he was required to do broke on him.

He was about to destroy the Chieftaincy!

That was what Brima Conteh had come to witness. Not just an individual arrest, but the end of a lineage, the climax to all his scheming. Chief Mansaray was more than an individual. He would have to be deposed as chief, like Yala Dansa over a century ago. There would be fresh elections. Brima Conteh would have won.

Taking the envelope from his back pocket, Tucker held it up for all to see. It was crumpled and smeared with dirt and the flap was torn, but the official stamp was clearly visible.

"Paramount Chief Amadu Kekora Mansaray," he said in a voice ringing with decision. "I have a warrant for your arrest on a charge of murder."

The chief nodded gravely.

Deliberately, Tucker tore the envelope to pieces and flung them down the steps at Brima Conteh's feet.

There was a hum from the crowd. Chief Mansaray breathed deeply, for the first time betraying his own tension.

"Paramount Chief Amadu Kekora Mansaray, I have been appointed by the President to investigate these murders and I wish to consult the Tongoh people."

It was done.

He had only the vaguest idea what it would lead to. He had given his trust to the village, and felt only overwhelming relief.

A tall masked figure dressed only in a loin cloth mounted the steps and went down on one knee, speaking softly to Chief Mansaray who nodded, allowing him to pass. Moments later, from the back of the verandah, out of the twilight, came the thrilling

sound of the father-drum of the village. Tucker could feel the sound waves striking his body. A throaty purr of satisfaction spread across the crowd. As one person and with one will, they began to move off to the left.

Then Tucker saw something astonishing. Although Brima Conteh began to protest, he was given no opportunity. A section of the crowd, including old men and girls with babies on their backs, swarmed in front of him so that he and his supporters were quietly surrounded.

They were armed. They could have shot their way free. Yet they submitted to silent pressure to join the flow, while the chieftaincy drum sounded its steady double-beat sanction.

The long procession crossed the front of the Kamaras compound, joining the path past the blacksmith's gate, the home of the Contehs, and following it round the trunk of the fallen cotton tree, the upper branches of which were now dark green with fully formed leaves.

The whole abandoned area of bush in front of the ancient gate of Foday the executioner had been cleared of rubbish and cutlashed. An arena had been prepared with the earth beaten level. In the middle stood a pile of firewood and around it the villagers were forming a circle, thirty yards across, and standing eight to ten deep.

Brima Conteh and a dozen of the youths stood sullenly on the far side where the mid-morning sun shone straight into their faces. Behind them massed a dense guard of villagers, behind whom in turn rose the barrier of cotton trees, looking more than ever like sentinels. As Chief Mansaray arrived he showed Tucker where to stand, then strode across towards the Minister, the old men in his wake. Tucker watched in amazement. He couldn't hear the brief argument, but it ended with the elders collecting the guns and laying them in a pile at the feet of Corporal Sesay, whose chest swelled with satisfaction as he stared up at the cotton trees.

All these preparations could not have been kept secret. Everyone in the village must have known what was happening. Yet Brima Conteh had been taken completely by surprise. It was as though Tucker's request, invoking this ceremony he didn't understand, had destroyed at a stroke all the Minister's assumed powers.

From the chief's compound, the drumbeat still resounded. People were still arriving, so many that Tucker wondered how far they were coming, how many of the surrounding villages were being emptied by this ancient summons. It must have been like this in the old days when Nerekora was the ruling power. With a quick shock of pleasure, he saw Betsy Gaye standing not far from the corporal, wearing a long cloth over her city trousers. Was that Sita standing beside her?

From somewhere outside the circle, two fresh drums began a lighter, quicker beat. The crowd gave a faint sigh and Chief Mansaray stepped forward with a firebrand in his right hand. He held it high above his head until, at a signal from the tenor drum, he tossed it on to the pile of firewood which flared up instantly with the yellow smokey tongues of burning paraffin. The crowd sighed again, then stood silent and alert, waiting while the tall flames settled and the wood began to crackle, sending up long red splinters which blackened swiftly, drifting away from the cotton trees towards the courthouse. There was a series of shattering detonations from the bamboo at the heart of the pile, and the fire collapsed into a dense glowing mass.

Abruptly, new drums joined in, changing pace, and Tucker felt a fresh surge of excitement. He recognised this rhythm. He had danced to it hours before in the forest.

From opposite sides of the arena, two masked figures sprang, running wildly in opposite directions round the fire. They wore the same leopard skin costume with jingling amulets and anklets he had glimpsed in the forest. But now he saw that the masks were of polished wood, and that they had necklaces of leopards' teeth and tails of leopard skin with rattles on the end which cracked like whips as they jumped through the flames, shaking their buttocks in triumph each time they landed. Instead of clubs they carried long curving cow horns, studded with more teeth and, as they ran in ever widening circles, so that their leaps across the fire became more and more spectacular, they raised the horns to their ears as though picking up messages transmitted from the villagers.

Then they abandoned the fire and ran in little spurts along the edge of the circle, listening as they ran, occasionally lowering the horns and dancing furiously on the spot. Whenever they heard something, they stopped, holding the open end of the horn against the chest of the person who had caught their attention as though checking his heartbeat. Each time this happened, the drums stopped and the whole crowd held its breath until the moment had past.

The two longest pauses came when each mask in turn listened to Chief Mansaray's heart. In those appalled silences, Tucker felt sure his own heart was audible, booming its judgement. When last of all, Brima Conteh was investigated, and the drums stopped for what seemed an eternity of suspense, he found himself wanting to cry out "Guilty! Guilty!" as the drums at last resumed their frenzy. Then the two figures disappeared and Gbowa-wo-Neppor took their place at the centre of the arena.

Where this tall mask came from Tucker never knew. It seemed to manifest itself without warning as though it had ground out of the fire. It stamped once towards Chief Mansaray, then in a bound which seemed part of the same movement was stamping at Brima Conteh's side of the fire, and once again back across stamping in the other directions. Between each prodigious leap, the flames reared like cobras. Then the awesome dance began again, not this time on the one spot but in a slow procession round the fire, every muscle jerking compulsively until the tortured limbs became a dark blur. The arena shook with the power of those feet and the dust rose as from a stampeding buffalo, yet the jangling anklets kept up the same intricate rhythm and the immense wooden mask with its blank dispassionate eyes never once wavered, except when another leap took it high above the fire and the flames danced in response. Fighting the hypnosis of those eyes, Tucker forced himself to concentrate, waiting for the climax when he knew he would have to act. The invisible drums accelerated. He could feel his body wrenched by the counterpointed thunder of taut skin and stamping feet. When the last four leaps came and the villagers fell prostrate, when the mask roared and pronounced its terrible name, Tucker witnessed from his knees what followed and was ready for it.

The two assistants returned, brandishing their clubs. They ran round the whole circle of villagers while Gbowa-wo-Neppor stood motionless by the fire. Then they made a series of sudden rushes, whirling their clubs round the heads of those they had touched with the cow horns. The drums ceased. the silence was absolute, with the fire crackling in anticipation.

Then they struck.

Three of the village elders were clubbed across the head, so fiercely that they fell forward into the arena. In a lightning rush, the masks danced right along the line of party youths, striking each in turn.

Tucker, still kneeling, gripped his thighs hard. Brima Conteh had looked up. There was terror on the Minister's face. The masked dancers made one more circuit of the arena and fell upon him, clubbing him simultaneously. As he rolled over backwards, the whole village jumped to its feet with a tremendous cry.

The dancers seized Brima Conteh's arms and began to drag the unconscious victim towards the fire.

But Tucker was ready.

"Mine!" he screamed exultantly.

Springing forward straight over the fire, he grabbed the Minister by the collar and spun, round, wrenching hi free.

"He's mine," he shouted, turning again.

But the Tongoh people had vanished.

Chapter Twenty-One

"Left it a bit late, didn't you Tucker?"

Commissioner Sandi turned from the window where he had been glaring up Victoria Street at the massive bulk of the Law Courts.

Tucker was justifiably hurt.

He had brought it all back, the absolute, unavoidable, undisguisable proof. His report, a full case history occupying thirty-five A4 pages, quoted the Unlawful Societies Ordinances of 1909, 1912 and 1913. Three leopard skins "Shaped or made so as to make a man wearing the same resemble a leopard": two "Knives with one or more prongs": one "Kukoi or whistle used for summoning a meeting of the Society": one "Iron-needle commonly used for branding members of an Unlawful Society". All these items, discovered in a suitcase in the loft of Brima Conteh's mansion, had already gone to the police laboratory.

He had eleven signed statements by eyewitnesses, seven of them personal confessions, including that of the Minister himself. The originals had gone straight to the President's office. The copies were lying on Commissioner Sandi's desk in an unopened envelope.

And he had the diamond, retrieved from Brima Conteh's safe and now wrapped inconspicuously in a brown paper package which the Commissioner, with a maddening lack of curiosity, was tossing from hand to hand, uninvestigated.

Once the Tongoh people had broken the power of the borfima, opening mouths and unlocking the truth, the rest had been a matter of routine of the kind Tucker practised assiduously. He knew his case was caste-iron, and no one was likely to question his methods.

"It took only a week, sir."

"A week! I gave you till Nomination Day, Tucker."

The Commissioner glared out once again at the Law Courts, as though their solid existence offended him. The end of Tucker's problems was the beginning of his own.

"The Electoral Commission is meeting tomorrow to hear appeals. With these American journalists here, everything has to be done by the book. That candidate of the Chief's - "

"Moses Dumbuya, sir"

"Him. It's a blasted nuisance. He'll be wanted to use the evidence and you know the problems that causes."

"But surely the President - "

"You think he's going to reinstate an opposition candidate? In this election? Ha! It'll go to the Commission and we'll be involved. You know what these bloody Creoles are like when they're given something to wrangle over. If you'd fixed it all before the weekend, we wouldn't have this mess."

Tucker stared angrily at the back of the Commissioner's head. Moses had said something similar up in Symira, but at least there it had been a joke.

They had met by chance in the D.O.'s office where Tucker had discovered a typewriter in a back room and was busy writing his report while he awaited the helicopter Corporal Sesay had gone to Malema to summon.

"Why do you give me all this trouble?" said Moses, grinning round the door, his bald dome swathed in bandages. "Look at all this nonsense I have to fill in. Appeals, affidavits, eye-witnesses. There's even a bloody fee!"

"You can't expect all this service for nothing."

"Nothing?"

Moses fingered his white turban.

"How is it?"

"Nothing serious, man. I just wear it to win sympathy votes."

Tucker didn't know whether to believe him.

"I suppose, sir," he pronounced with reckless emphasis to Commissioner Sandi's broad back, "Moses could always join the Party."

"He'd be a bloody fool to do so. You can tell him that from me!"

Tucker was astounded.

Glancing swiftly at the glass-panelled door, the Commissioner sat at his desk, tilting his chair back, still passing the package from hand to hand. His manner was suddenly relaxed, as though he had put a problem behind him.

"Pity you let the boy escape."

"Sylvester Turay was here last week, sir. It's a pity he wasn't picked up then."

The Commissioner's mouth twitched. He seemed to be amused.

"I've never once set eyes on him," said Tucker firmly.

"Witnesses involve him in the boy's murder and the assumption must be he killed Usman Salifu in revenge for Lois Huck's death. My guess is he's over the border somewhere."

So he's your problem now, you sour bastard, he added mentally.

He waited for the pounce, the savage clawing of the one weak point in his evidence. Someone had told the Tongoh people everything. He was sure in himself it must have been Sylvester Turay, Lois Huck's boyfriend. He wasn't sorry the youth had escaped, but he was, after all, a murderer and there was no proof the Minister had personally killed anyone.

This could be said. It would make no difference. Brima Conteh's crime still carried the death penalty. But Tucker waited for it to be said.

Commissioner Sandi continued to stare at him ironically, tapping the package lightly on the desk. Suddenly, he gestured towards the desk, the bookcase with the Collected Works of Kim Il Sung, the thick-piled carpet, the slowly revolving fan.

"You want my job, Tucker?"

For the second time, Tucker was astonished. He examined himself swiftly and was further surprised at the truth.

"No, sir," he said fervently.

"Ha!"

The Commissioner nodded slowly. At last, he put the package down.

"Seven hundred and forty carats?"

"Seven four three, sir."

"It's as well we've got it. It'll help to keep the pack off. There's too much dirt coming out."

He chuckled sarcastically.

"Would you like to be telling the Americans your democratically elected One-Party killed and ate their girl? The President isn't pleased with us. But this might make a difference. Americans understand money."

"Us, sir?"

"Oh, he thanks you, Tucker. You are officially commended. There's even a letter from the Chief Constable in Symira. Did you ever meet him, by the way?"

"No, sir."

"You won't be meeting the President either. Just keep your head down for a bit. That's good advice. Oh, and you're going back up there, are you?"

The hint could hardly have been broader. Keep out of the way. No fuss. No publicity. Be unavailable. But in any case, he wanted to go. Chief Mansaray had invited him back for a proper celebration. He was looking forward to a village festival, to good food with dancing and praise songs from the yellibars.

"And keep away from that damn woman. That's good advice too!"

Commissioner Sandi pressed the button on his intercom and the buzzer sounded in the adjoining officie.

"My car!"

"Ready, sir."

But Tucker made no move. The man knew. He had known everything all along. He had known the whole truth about Brima Conteh and the Leopard Men from that first interview in this office a week ago.

Commissioner Sandi smiled faintly.

"I thought you realised, Tucker," he said softly. "Why do you think I sent you? Ha! The one man I could rely on to make trouble!"

It was like praise.

"I give this government one more year, that's all Tucker. After this fiasco, one more year."

Shutting the door quietly behind him, Tucker hurried along the corridor, glancing from habit down through the cracked louvres into the street. He didn't look at the wreck in the harbour, nor at the white-trunked trees now billowing with scarlet blossoms. His taxi was waiting. he had a full morning before him, the kind of neat schedule he needed at times like these.

First, a date with his grandfather at Regent. Second, home to collect his suit and drop it at the cleaners. Third, to C.I.D. headquarters to remove his copy of Mansfield Park. Fourth, to the Cape Hotel where Moses and O'Reilly had promised him lunch.

The taxi was an extravagance. But the freshly-painted slogan on the bonnet had been irresistible.

"Unopposed!"

