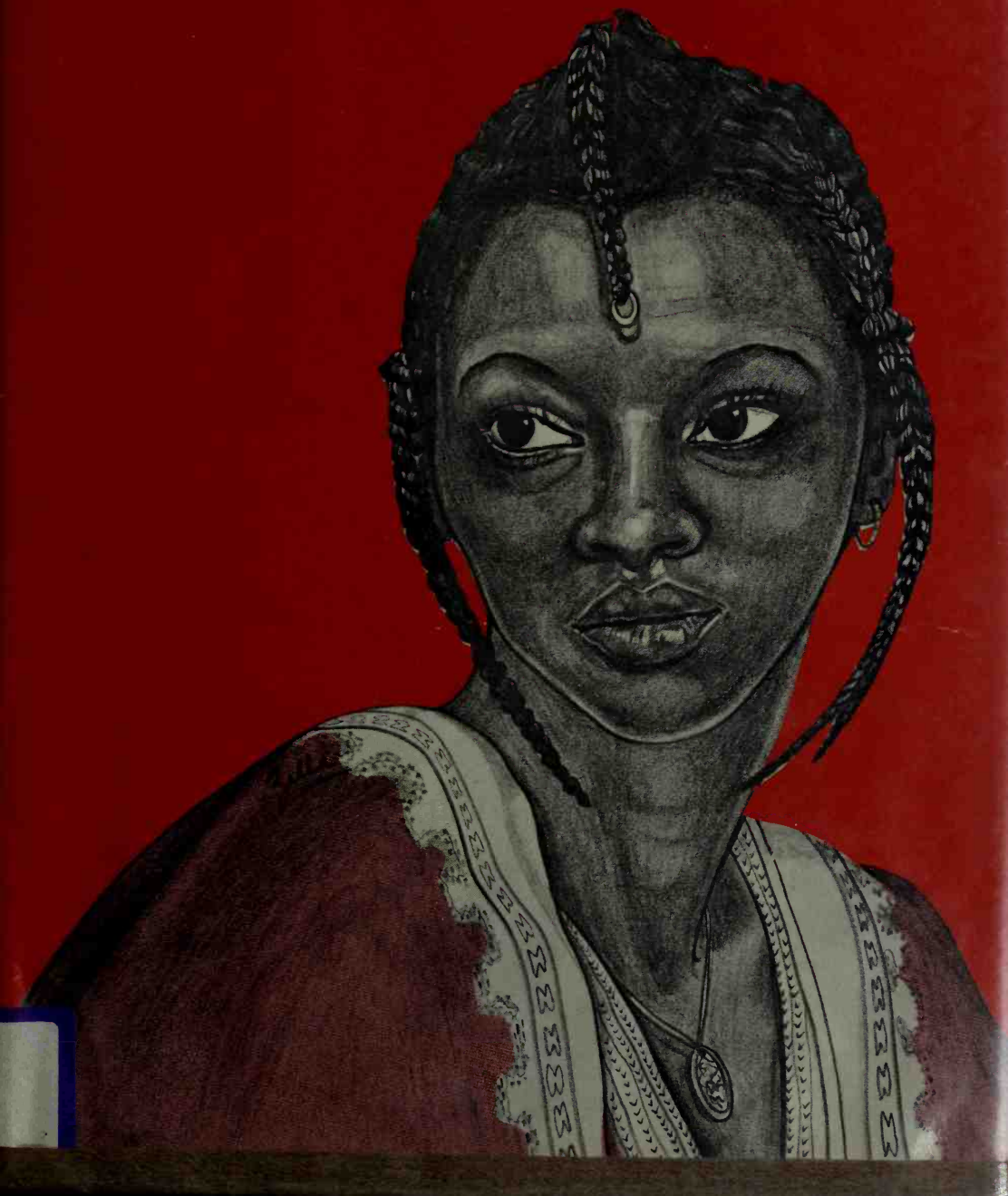
MASSENI

A novel by
Tidiane Dem

Translated by
Frances Frenaye



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$12.95

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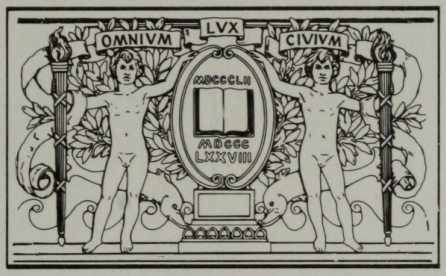
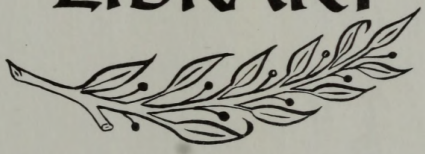
Winner of the Pegasus Prize for Literature

"*Masseni* is an extraordinary work that not only tells a gripping story but also reveals in the process the traditions and beliefs of an entire society. Behind the author's sophisticated modern presentation of folk material is the voice of the ancient African storyteller who makes the attachments, jealousies, and conflicts of his characters dramatically alive." – William Jay Smith

Set in the Ivory Coast in the early years of this century, *Masseni* tells of a beautiful young girl whose life takes her away from the village of her birth, and in whose simple experiences can be seen the entire panorama of predevelopment West Africa – its chiefs and harems, priests and magicians, merchants, herdsmen, and colonial administrators. A novel of customs, steeped in the rich day-to-day life of a lost epoch, this book by Tidiane Dem is also, more universally, a story where wickedness, avarice, and spite are held in balance by the powers of compassionate forgiveness and understanding, and where the inflexible authority of living rulers and long-dead ancestors is tempered by gentler traditions of courtesy, generosity, and friendship.

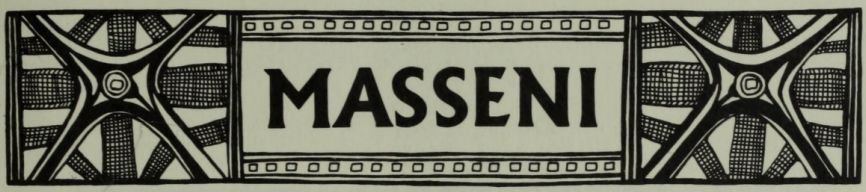
Born with the aid of a sorcerer who tells her parents that she is destined for greatness, Masseni – whose name means "more precious than my mother" – grows into an exceptionally beautiful young girl known for her intelligence, modesty, and good nature. When she is about sixteen, events bring her into the presence of a powerful regional chief, who is enchanted by her grace and beauty and offers her marriage. Masseni's subsequent life in





MASSENI

THE PEGASUS PRIZE FOR LITERATURE



A NOVEL BY TIDIANE DEM

TRANSLATED BY FRANCES FRENAYE

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The characters in this novel are fictitious. Any resemblance to living persons is purely coincidental.

Dedicated to the many friends who encouraged me to write this book, and especially to B. Mabrontié for his invaluable cooperation.

The Pegasus Prize for Literature has been established by Mobil Corporation to introduce American readers to distinguished works from countries whose literature is rarely translated into English. *Masseni*, by Tidiane Dem, was awarded the Pegasus Prize in Abidjan in October, 1980, after a committee of distinguished writers and scholars had selected it as the best contemporary novel from the Ivory Coast. The book, which is Mr. Dem's first novel, evokes village life in the Ivory Coast during the colonial period prior to World War II.

The chairman of the Pegasus Prize selection committee was Bernard Dadié, Minister of Cultural Affairs and an outstanding writer himself. Other members of the jury were François-Joseph Amon D'Aby, writer; Robert Cornevin, chairman of the Association of Overseas French-Speaking Writers; Jean-Jacques Fort, cultural advisor, French Embassy; Jeremie Gnalega, deputy manager, Houphouët-Boigny Foundation; Guy Navray, chairman, P.E.N. Club, Ivory Coast; and Laçiné Sylla, dean of the Arts and Human Sciences College, National University.

Mr. Dem is a former civil servant whose only published work prior to *Masseni* was a brief history for which he received an award from the French Institute of Africa. In *Masseni*, he has created a

work rich in the customs and folklore of the Ivory Coast. Masseni, its heroine, is a beautiful girl born to parents whose long and desperate wait for a child had led them eventually to consult with unscrupulous marabouts (Muslim miracle-workers). She grows up to marry a district chief, with whom she is happy, though another of his wives, known as the Favorite, engages in a vendetta against her. Through this vendetta, we see the critical role of sorcerers in the society; we are also introduced to the personal style of justice practiced by the district chief.

The book was published by New African Editions. It has been translated into English by Frances Frenaye. Ms. Frenaye has translated more than forty works by such authors as Balzac, Zola, Maurois, Troyat, and Sagan.

On behalf of the author, we wish to express our appreciation to Mobil Corporation, which established the Pegasus Prize and provided for translation into English.

PREFACE

This little book is a novel of manners, without literary pretensions. Those who go for well-turned sentences or elegant and poetic expressions may well skim its pages just to get through them and see how it ends. But anyone who reads it with patience, wanting to be informed, will learn something about the recent and yet already so remote African past.

Its intention is to reveal certain aspects of the old Africa to those, especially the young, who want to make connections with a passionately interesting past. Unalerted readers may be upset by a number of vulgar expressions and by the style of the dialogues, in which there is never any direct communication when more than two persons are talking together. The norms of Malinké civility, which I have respected here, demand that no one participating in a conversation be excluded from it. All those present must take an active part. Hence we shall see Dady and his marabout address each other only through the intermediary of Mory or Fourougnoniouman.

Had I worried about questions of style, I might have hesitated to write the book or even have given it up entirely. My wish to inform future generations prevailed over considerations of a literary order. And so it is that I wrote *Masseni*.

INTRODUCTION

This novel takes place in the northern part of the Ivory Coast, in the sub-Saharan savanna, just south of the frontier of Mali. Do not look on a map for the villages named hereafter. Your search would be in vain. They exist, but under names that I have changed in order to spare the feelings of their people.

One day, a long time ago, a young hunter, who for several days had been pursuing an old elephant that he thought he had wounded, was overtaken by night in the savanna. It was at the height of the rainy season, and the grass stood so high that he could see no farther than the end of his nose. After beating his way for some time through this heavy growth, the hunter suddenly came upon a trail, which he followed without any idea of where it led.

The plateau where he found himself was less overgrown than the rest of the surrounding country. He felt his way along the hollowed trail, which went slowly downhill. Suddenly he stumbled and became aware that the slope was becoming steeper and steeper. Soon he came to an eroded stretch that made walking even more difficult. He slipped but did not fall, thanks to the agility he had developed as a hunter, and realized that the terrain was now rather marshy. "Perhaps there's a stream nearby," he said to himself. "If I were to go any

farther, I'd be taking a chance. It might be a big river that I could fall into and drown. Better wait for daylight."

He retraced his steps to the foot of a tall tree, which he had noticed when passing by a few minutes before, and there he settled down as best he could. Soon he dozed off. Later, rolling over, he bumped into the trunk of the tree. Opening his eyes, he saw on the horizon a moon, such as nowhere else in the world is to be seen, rapidly rising in the sky and flooding the savanna with its mild light. He stood up, stretched, and saw that he had been wise to go no farther. Nearby was a stream swollen beyond measure by the rushing waters. The current was so violently rapid that, had he ventured into it in the dark, it would certainly have carried him away.

"There must be a way to cross that I'll find by the light of day," he said to himself. "I'll wait for sunrise."

He sat down again at the foot of the tree and fell into a deep sleep until the chill morning breeze awakened him. When he opened his eyes, he saw several huts on the opposite side of the stream. As he scrutinized the scene from left to right, he saw two canoes tied to a tree. In the huts he knew there must be boatmen, so he shot off his rifle to alert them to his presence.

Soon a man emerged from a hut, loosened one of the canoes, got into it, and started to paddle across the stream. He was a giant fellow, and a skilled boatman. With a few strokes of the paddle he made the crossing. His only clothing was a pair of cotton trunks tinted with a bark dye, and his muscular bare torso was as wrinkled as that of a crocodile. He reached the bank, tied up the boat, and stepped ashore.

"Good morning, friend," he said.

"Good morning," answered the hunter.

"Is this where you spent the night?"

"Yes. I got lost following an old elephant whose tusks were scraping the ground. Darkness came down when I was a little way off. There was grass up to my head when I came on the trail that led me

here. It was pitch black, so I spent the night in the shelter of this tree."

"We heard your shot, and I came to get you."

"Thank you. Tell me, is there a village near here where I can get something to eat and ask the way? I want to go on after my elephant."

"There's a village not too far away. When I've got you to the other side, I'll show you the shortest route."

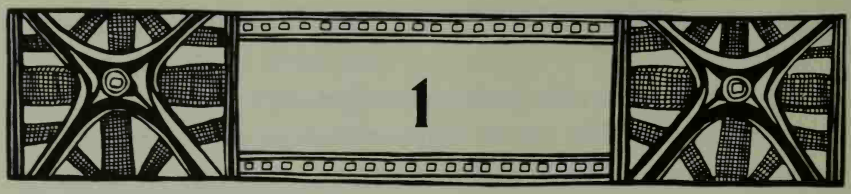
At once the hunter jumped into the canoe. As soon as they arrived on the opposite bank, the boatman pointed out the road that led to the village. This was a sizable market town, which lies at the foot of a mountain called Deïmba-Niouman, that is, Generous Mother. The granite mountain, which was covered at this season with green, has at its top a great rock that leans over the village like a mother watching over her children at play in the valley below. Our hunter walked straight ahead up one of the village paths, which opened onto the marketplace. The odor of frying grease assailed his nostrils, and, following the scent, he came upon some cake sellers. He bought some fried cakes, asked for water, and devoured everything with the appetite of a man who has not eaten for many hours.

After he had finished this frugal meal, he circled the marketplace until he found a shop where he could buy some tobacco, then continue on his way.

"What's the name of your village?" he asked the tobacconist.

"Ganda."

This marvelous place is where Masseni, the protagonist of the present novel, had her dwelling under the motherly watch of Deïmba-Niouman.



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It was the last day of Ramadan. This year the fasting had been particularly exhausting, and now the heat seemed to have reached a climax as the sun lingered in the sky. At last it faded away into an interminable twilight. Half the golden globe had no sooner sunk below the horizon than the inhabitants of Ganda gathered behind their houses to scan the sky. With empty stomachs and throats parched by thirst, shading their eyes with their hands as if to sharpen their sight, they looked for the new moon that would put an end to the privations of Ramadan.

For thirty days all the adults of both sexes had rivaled one another in endurance and devotion. Rising at the first cockcrow, they had managed to go about their usual occupations. Today they thought only of the new moon, whose rise would make for universal joy—that is, unless a malevolent cloud made it invisible and plunged them into consternation.

Suddenly a chorus of young girls broke into a hymn to the new moon that had been passed on from generation to generation since time immemorial. The chorus was made up of virgins whose pure eyes were as yet uncontaminated by sin. Every year at this time they

came in from the surrounding countryside with their hands full of green branches, which they waved as they intoned their chant:

"Greetings, new moon!
We welcome you with infinite joy.
Papa has been waiting impatiently,
And Mama languishing.
Your coming overwhelms them with joy.
Bring us, we beseech you, happiness and peace!"

Those who had been searching the sky since sunset redoubled their efforts to make the discovery on their own. Fingers pointed toward one segment of the sky, and children gesticulated with joy. Finally, one of them picked out the silvery sliver of the new moon between two orange streaks just above the horizon. Simultaneously, gunshots crackled here and there, informing all the villagers of the good news. The fast was over and the festivities began. There was rejoicing over the prospect of the feasting to which they would deliver themselves that evening and again on the morrow.

That day, Dady Konaté had ordered his wife Minignan to prepare a succession of succulent dishes. He and Fabarka, an old family slave, sat face-to-face on mats spread in front of the house with Minignan's savory creations set out between them. After a concoction of boiled honey, they set upon a *foutou* of mashed yams, then a *tô* and a braised mutton chop, and finally a honeycake. The two men chatted while Minignan ate her meal just outside the kitchen.

"Younger!" Dady cried out. This was how he addressed his wife.

"*Tôma*," she answered.

"Come clear away the plates and bring us a kola nut."

Minignan carried away the half-empty plates and returned with a kola nut that she had carefully cut into two pieces. Then she went back to finish her own meal.

Fabarka stood up, stretched vigorously, turned around, and spewed forth everything he had just eaten. Then he sat down again,

stroked his beard, and recited a string of blessings upon Dady, such as he habitually invoked at every celebration in honor of his own defunct father. After this he departed, leaving Dady and his wife to convey their holiday greetings and wishes for a long life and many children to their relatives and close friends.

"Younger, Younger!" Dady called out.

But there was no answer, for Minignan had already fallen into a deep slumber. Had she not gone to bed late every night and got up extra early ever since the beginning of Ramadan? Hadn't she just put in a long day working to satisfy her husband's gastronomic demands? Wasn't she entitled to a well-deserved rest this evening? Dady understood the futility of trying to rouse her and resigned himself to going alone to present his greetings and good wishes. When he came home, his wife was snoring. Happy to have scrupulously carried out the fast of Ramadan, which is a sacred duty for every Muslim, Dady succumbed in his turn to a deep sleep.

When his sister-in-law Doussou knocked at their door the next morning, husband and wife awoke with a start, embarrassed to be caught still sleeping.

"Dady, are you the one to keep my sister so late abed?" Doussou teased.

"You'd do better to scold your sister for keeping *me* beside *her*," Dady retorted.

Doussou took a stool and sat down on the veranda, while Minignan and her husband hastily got dressed. Soon Dady joined his sister-in-law and chatted uninhibitedly with her. After all, obscenity is permissible between a man and his wife's little sister. Minignan went to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. Her sister left Dady to lend her a hand, because the sun was already high in the sky and the hour for prayer was fast approaching. When breakfast was ready, Doussou took her leave and departed.

Dady and Fabarka sat down to eat.

"Younger," Dady asked his wife, "did you warm over yesterday's couscous?"

"Yes, Elder," she replied.

"Did you make the honey porridge with clotted milk?"

"Yes, I did."

"But didn't you forget to buy me some honeycakes?"

"But, Elder, where will you stow away so much food? Since yesterday, you've been stuffing yourself like a buffoon."

"For a whole month I lived like a lizard in the dry season. Now that the fast is over, haven't I the right to eat well?"

"Daughter," put in Fabarka, "let my master eat so he can get up his strength for you!"

All three burst out laughing, and the two men ate abundantly of everything Minignan set before them. When the meal was finished, Minignan came and kneeled beside the men. She held out, first to her husband and then to Fabarka, a calabash full of water in which to wash their hands. After they had done this, they each took a slice of kola nut that Minignan brought them. The old slave poured forth his blessings—punctuated with loud belches—upon the young couple.

As the hour of prayer drew near, Dady went into the house and took a skin bag closed by a fine Moorish padlock. From it he extracted his finest clothes and rapidly dressed himself to go to the midday prayer. Fabarka, in his turn, put on his best boubou* and tucked two sheepskins under his left arm to serve as prayer rugs for his master and himself. Then the two men set out toward the mosque.

From everywhere people flocked to the great square. A few old turbaned marabouts walked slowly behind their students, who were chanting verses from the Koran. When Dady and Fabarka arrived, the square was spilling over. They picked out the most accessible row and took their places.

Imagine a vast open space without benches, where an immense, motley crowd of men, women, and children crouch on the ground,

*A traditional West African masculine outer garment, usually made of a single length of fabric about seven feet long with an opening in the middle for the head. —TRANS.

all turned toward Mecca. Facing this piously seated assembly there stood the throne whence the Iman would preach after prayer. While grown-ups told their beads, children chattered, ran about, and sometimes came to fisticuffs. Dady and Fabarka, like the others, told their beads, more in order to pass the time than out of devotion.

Soon the crowd stirred, irritated by the long wait for the village chief and the Iman. The growing heat did not contribute to patience. In more than one row, people used their boubous as fans. As the sun continued to rise, a muffled murmur took the place of the prayers recited a few moments before. The sharpest protest was directed at the arrogant chief. Since the Iman was supposed to be the last to arrive, he could not appear until the chief was there, so the latter was responsible for the delay. At last he came, spurring his horse to paw the ground and raise a cloud of dust before he dismounted. Calls of "Tchrou! Tchrou!" greeted him from every side, bespeaking the hatred he had come to inspire in the village. Ever since he had been named chief magistrate, he had snubbed the local notables and forfeited everyone's esteem by his arrogance, nepotism, and above all his connivance with the government agents in their exploitation of the population. People obeyed him now more from fear of the regional *gardes de cercle** than out of respect for the man representing the ancestors.

Soon the sound of the tabali drums announced the arrival of the Iman, who was preceded by a long line of Koranic students. He wore a scarlet burnoose festooned with braids and green and yellow pompons, and he walked at a majestic pace, leaning on a long cane topped by an artistically carved leather knob. The crowd threw off its impatience. Some people stood up and others prepared to follow their example. The Iman, understanding their restlessness, quick-

* Low-ranking native officials in the French colonial hierarchy. The *gardes de cercle* were generally former military conscripts and acted as bailiffs or local agents for the regional, or *cercle*, administration. They were responsible for seeing that the orders of the *cercle* commandant were carried out on the local level and for collecting the various products requisitioned by the colonial government. The *gardes* were notorious for their excessive zeal and their personal corruption.—TRANS.

ened his step and started the prayer the moment he reached his place in front of the throne. Heralds circulated among the crowd, enjoining proper behavior. Soon everyone was standing behind the Iman and facing Mecca. The first words of the prayer plunged the faithful into a fervid communion with Allah.

The long-awaited prayer lasted no more than a quarter of an hour, after which the Iman mounted the throne and, under a white cloth canopy held over his head by some of the faithful, delivered his sermon, which everyone listened to piously. At the sermon's end, the faithful got up and fanned out in the direction of their houses. A contagious hilarity lit their faces, foretelling the start of the feasting.

Dady and Fabarka were soon home. Dady was in obvious good spirits, but not for long, for he saw Minignan sitting at the threshold, and this was not a good sign. Almost mechanically, Dady left the old slave and hurried toward his young and charming wife. Minignan was scantily clad, and her head was leaning heavily on her right shoulder, resting on the palm of her hand. Her eyes were half-closed, and she was not aware of her husband's presence until he called out in a tremulous voice.

"Younger, Younger, what's wrong with you on this festive day? Why do you look sad rather than happy?"

Minignan furtively wiped her eyes and pretended to be less sad than her husband supposed. He was not taken in and repeated the question, but elicited only sobs for an answer. His hopes of a joyful celebration of the end of the fast were dashed to the ground. Only an untoward incident of which he knew nothing could have caused his beloved wife such otherwise inexplicable sorrow. The only way to solve the puzzle was to fetch old Fourougnoniouman.

When he came to her house, she was sitting on a mat in the shade, casting cowrie shells whose configuration revealed to her the shape of events to come. She was not only Dady's advisor but also, in her spare time, a fortune-teller.

"Good morning, Wife," he addressed her, giving her this title

because she was of his grandmother's generation and a faithful family friend as well.

The old woman abruptly interrupted her reading of the signs, raised her head, responded to Dady's greeting, and excused herself for her absorption.

"How now, Husband? I should have gone to convey my greetings first, as custom demands. I was waiting only for your return from prayers to perform this duty. . . . But tell me, what's the reason for your unexpected visit? I'm so surprised to see you that I forgot to offer you a seat. Sit down beside me, Husband, and tell me what's happened."

Dady sat down and was silent for a moment in order to regain his self-control. At last he spoke.

"It's my wife. Just now, when I came back from prayers, I found her in a state of unaccustomed melancholy. There were even tears in her eyes. I questioned her, but she only broke into sobs. Can you, her confidante, give me a reason for her sudden affliction?"

Before answering, the old woman cast a sideways glance at the cowrie shells strewn before her.

"Yes, Husband, I know the reason. It all happened before my eyes in your courtyard, two days ago."

"In my courtyard?" exclaimed Dady, astonished.

"Yes, right there. Nakaridia had the effrontery to come with the Kouroubi dancers and to sing out a violent diatribe directed at your wife."

"But why would she do this to Minignan?"

"You mean you don't know?" replied the old woman. "How could you fail to see Nakaridia's hatred ever since you rejected her daughter in favor of Minignan? Of course, we women's petty affairs are of no concern to you men. Most of the time you're totally indifferent to them. But it's unpardonable that you shouldn't have noticed Nakaridia's evil goings-on with regard to your wife. After casting all sorts of spells to try to separate you from her, Nakaridia has resorted to direct insults to stir up trouble between you. Her song of

hate was like a poisoned arrow aimed straight at Minignan's heart, because it accused her of sterility. You've been married five years without having a child, while Nakaridia's daughter is now twice a mother."

The Kouroubi is a dance that the young girls in the Dyula country organize during the last three or four days of Ramadan. Its semi-religious character masks the dancers' desire to give a foretaste of the celebrations at the end of the fast and to create a certain gaiety among those whom thirty days of privation have disposed to melancholy. The dancing begins on the twenty-sixth night of Ramadan, solemnly preceded by a reading from the Koran in front of the mosque, which lasts from ten o'clock in the evening until the following dawn. Between the twenty-seventh day and the appearance of the new moon, the young dancers perform in groups in every section of the village. Every day, between two and seven o'clock, they go from house to house greeting relatives and friends. Each group is led by a few slightly older women. It was at the head of such a group that Nakaridia had come to Dady's house. At the entrance to the courtyard, a young girl stepped forward and sang the following song:

"My mother told me to make a bow
In passing before this door,
To greet the noble dwellers herein."

Minignan, who was in the kitchen preparing lunch, came innocently out to welcome the visitors. The other girls repeated the verse, but before they could finish Nakaridia's venom burst forth. She interrupted them to sing out:

"Is there any ornament as fine as a baby
  slung over a woman's back?
Is gold or silver the equal of a child?
Can a brother or sister replace a son or daughter?
You who deck yourself out in jewels,

You should know that a woman's finest ornament
Is a baby suckling at her breast!"

The mockery of Minignan's sterility was so pointed that she could not but retort. The code of Dyulan society demands respect for visitors, but under circumstances such as these it allows for a defensive reply. And so Minignan broke into Nakaridia's ditty with one of her own:

"You who preen yourself before me,
It's too soon to mock me.
Hold off, wait!
None of us can despair,
For none of us knows her fate."

Upon which another singer intervened as peacemaker:

"We came here to greet you,
Now let us go away.
Let us go, dear friends.
Farewell! We are gone."

At this injunction the dancers withdrew, leaving Minignan to collapse under the weight of her sorrow. She cried and cried until her husband's return. All evening, she managed to hold back her tears in order not to spoil his joy at the approach of the festivities. But the next morning, after her husband had gone off to the mosque, she was overcome by despair. She sank down in grief on the threshold of her hut, and a flood of tears washed down her face. This was how Dady found her upon his return.

After Fourougnoniouman had explained the situation, Dady went home. Minignan had tried to resume her housework and put on a happy air so as not to give further pain to her husband. But now that the old fortune-teller had told him the story, Dady took it to heart. Like his wife, and perhaps even more, he wanted a child. Other men had teased him, even to the point of hinting that he was impotent. He was anxious to console his wife and at the same time to find out more about her relations with Nakaridia.

"Come here, Younger," he said, stretching out in his hammock. "I have something to say."

"Just so long as it's not something serious," replied the young wife.

"A while ago, when I came back from the mosque, I saw that you were very upset. I was distressed myself, because I didn't know what had happened, and you only sobbed in answer to my questions. Now I have found out that Nakaridia was here yesterday and provoked you with a song about our childless marriage."

"Who told you all this?" asked Minignan.

"A little bird."

"It wasn't a little bird at all. It was Fourougnoniouman."

"How do you know?"

"By the same little bird."

"Tell me more about what happened."

There was a lump in Minignan's throat. All her repressed grief suddenly rose to the surface. At last she said, "Yes, I'm unhappy. Nakaridia isn't the only one to treat me this way. Hardly a day goes by but some young woman, envious, no doubt, of my jewels, makes fun of me for not having a child after five years of marriage. All the women my age have the joy of being mothers. Some of them even have three children. But me, every month I just get my feet wet."

"I'm just as sorry about it as you, Younger. If I don't show it, it's simply to keep up strength to console you."

"But you can have a child. You've only to marry another woman. I'm sure your friends give you this advice. But what can I do? Wait until the day when you tire of supporting a barren woman and throw me out? There's no prospect of going back to my family. I abandoned them to marry you."

Her voice broke with sobbing, and Dady was overcome with pity.

"Younger," he said at last, "I understand. I can't tell you how badly I feel. I want a child just as much as you do. I've been to see any number of sorcerers and fetish-makers and even marabouts with great reputations. I've sacrificed money, clothes, chickens, sheep, and cows in the hope of having a child by you. Although I haven't

succeeded, I haven't given up hope. God is great. But if I can't assure you that our prayers and the efforts of the good people that want to help us will be rewarded, I can tell you for certain that never will I take another wife. I haven't forgotten that you gave up everything for my sake. I'll always remember these among my mother's dying words: 'Son, take good care of your wife Minignan. Never cause her any sorrow, and always remember that she left father, mother, brothers, and sisters to follow you. It's up to you to replace all these dear ones. If you heed my advice, my blessing will accompany you to the end of your days.' What she said then is engraved on my memory."

"I know, Elder. I know you've done everything you could. I realize the extent of your sacrifices, and I hope with all my heart that they weren't made in vain. But tell me, how do all the soothsayers explain the cause of our problem?"

"I was just getting there when you interrupted. As I said, I've consulted more than one. Most of them said that a slender woman, with very black skin, balding, and tattooed at the corners of her mouth, was casting spells to prevent us from having children. And this description perfectly fits Nakaridia. Others said that our misfortune stems from the circumstances of our marriage."

It was true that Minignan had abandoned everything for Dady. They had met at the market in Kala, fallen in love at first sight, and decided before the day was over to marry. The parents on both sides had opposed the marriage because it was contrary to the custom that they alone should be the ones to make a match, but the young people had married in defiance of their parents' will. In a society that attributes total authority to parents over their children and makes no allowance for love matches, this constituted the greatest possible sacrilege. The fathers' anger, even though it was tempered by the tacit support of the mothers, had won the unconditional approval of all the village elders, ancestral guardians of these sacred and inviolable customs. Indeed, Dady and Minignan were promoters of a veritable revolution against the established social order, and their mar-

riage drew upon them a solemn curse, the only instrument of the elders' prejudice against innovation.

If the young couple carried out their plan, it was because they thought time and the ingenuity of their mothers would eventually overcome the collective outrage. Because they did not have their fathers' blessing, people said the marriage would never be happy. But Dady counted on his personal fortune to win a final victory. And, indeed, his distribution of gifts wore down the resistance of everyone except Nakaridia. Dady and his wife were powerless against her unceasing resentment.

Nakaridia's daughter had been Dady's parents' choice for his bride, but Dady had chosen Minignan instead and married her over all objections. Nakaridia had sworn eternal hatred, mustering occult and other means of every kind to satisfy her hatred and desire for vengeance. Minignan should never feel the weight of a baby in her womb as long as Nakaridia had a cowrie in her basket.

First Nakaridia decided to work upon the man, destroy his will, and then throw into his path her daughter, Nahawa, who had been armed with irresistible charm by various sorcerers and marabouts. All kinds of people supplied Nakaridia with a whole arsenal of talismans, creams, and powders that were supposed to prove their powers by responding to her invocations. So the reputed magicians assured her. She covered Nahawa with these cosmetics and with amulets and sent her daily to show herself to Dady. But the time limit set by the magicians was soon overshot, and still Dady displayed not the slightest interest in the girl.

Nakaridia did not give up easily. Next she turned her venom on Minignan, who she thought would be more vulnerable. And until the day she went to Dady's house to make this scene with his wife, circumstances seemed to prove her correct, for the marriage was still childless after five years. So it was in a triumphant mood that she went on this festive day to fan the flames of sorrow in the young wife's heart.

Dady knew that Minignan had been informed of Nakaridia's

machinations. Now he tried to persuade her that, in this frantic race to the marabouts, the victory would never fall to Nakaridia, whose steam was petering out from one day to the next. Their conversation raised Minignan's morale, and at the end she was able to give her husband a reassuring smile. By afternoon she was dazzling, elegantly draped in a pagne* made of the finest cloth woven in the region. Glittering with gold and silver, she sallied forth with her husband through the paths that led to the homes of their relatives and friends. At Minignan's insistance, they used the route that passed in front of Nakaridia's house. There they were joined by Doussou, who was passing by. A long promenade led them from the house of Fourougnoniouman to that of one of Minignan's aunts, with a visit to Fabarka in between. They did not return home until it was time for supper, which Minignan had prepared in advance. There they found Fabarka waiting for them.

The two men sat down while Minignan brought them couscous and mutton. Dady had recovered his good spirits after the damper they had suffered in the morning. The meal was not too heavy, for none of them had fully digested the one they had consumed earlier.

Hardly had they finished than there was a call from the door. "*Salaam aleikum*! Peace be with you!" Dady responded hesitantly, for he recognized the voice of Dielimakan, the loudest-mouthed griot** in the region. The griot's wife was with him, and he carried under his boubou a three-stringed guitar. The two visitors sat down on a mat proffered by Fabarka, and immediately Dielimakan came out with a stream of flattery:

"Dady Konaté," he began, "anyone hereabouts who tries to equal you is blind to reality. You are surely the tallest, the handsomest, and the one with the lightest skin. You are godlike, for God has said that, were He a human being, He would be a tall, handsome, light-skinned man. Indeed, you are even better than He, for He kills off

*A traditional West African woman's garment, consisting of a single length of fabric about six feet long by four feet wide worn as a wrapped skirt.—TRANS.

**A class of West African minstrel-storytellers and mountebanks.—TRANS.

griots, whereas you only kill them with kindness. I can't predict the day of my death, but I know that thanks to you I'll leave here clothed from head to foot."

And his wife took up the refrain. "You're the husband of the most beautiful of women, the lovely Minignan, whose eyes are so white that they seem to secrete milk. A noble man, paired with a noble woman! You fit the bill! We griots go for true noblemen, devoid of avarice, and we run from thieves. If you were a thief we'd avoid you. But where is your lady wife? I've come to greet her because I'm in rags, and I'm sure I'll go away clothed as befits my station."

Dielimakan nodded approval while strumming on his guitar a tune dedicated to the brave warriors of olden days. He was about to resume his flattery when Dady handed his old slave a twenty-five-franc note. The suppliants were struck dumb when Fabarka passed them the money.

"Thank you," said Dielimakan in a choked voice and immediately asked for permission to leave. He was deeply disappointed but consoled himself with the prospect of other visits that he hoped might be more profitable. Minignan, who had stayed inside her hut, had followed all this clamor without batting an eyelash. Fabarka left soon after the visitors did, and Dady rejoined his wife.

Early the next morning, old Fourougnoniouman came to present her holiday greetings. Minignan was visibly happy. Her despair of the day before had given way to hope fueled by Dady's assurances.

"Good morning, Husband. Good morning, Rival," said the old woman as she arrived. "I couldn't come yesterday, as I should have, to greet and bless you, so I'm doing it this morning. My greatest wish is that God may give you many offspring and, if my cowries don't lie, He will do so. I can't say when, but I'm sure Minignan will bear some children."

There was a radiant look in Minignan's eyes, for she had unlimited trust in the old woman. Now she promised her the gift of a heifer on the baptismal day of her first baby.

"I thank you in advance," the old woman exclaimed. "I'm sure I'll have my heifer."

"And I'll throw in a young bull," put in Dady. "That way you'll have a pair."

They were talking away when Mory, another family friend, came to present his good wishes. He was Dady's childhood companion and had been unfailingly faithful to him.

"I've wanted to come since yesterday," he explained. "I was prevented by the necessity of offering hospitality to a stranger."

"It must be someone important."

"Yes, it's a famous marabout. You must have heard of him. He's been for some months at Kala, where people have crowded to consult him. He has done things that border on the miraculous. Since yesterday, my house has been invaded by visitors of every kind, including the village chief and the Iman. That's why I was unable to get away any earlier. I advise you to go see him, Dady. He can surely help you in certain matters."

"I'll go to see him because he's your guest," Dady replied. "As for seeking his help, that's another story. I've been fleeced by enough marabouts, with no results. All of them are good men and miracle-workers, but 'the witnesses are always on the other side of the river.'"

"No, Dady, you're wrong there. This fellow isn't the sort to make big promises, take your money, and then disappear. He's the real thing."

"You speak as if you had proof."

"I do, Dady, of course."

"If you want to convince me, then give me proof rather than words."

"Do you know Meta, the wife of Valy?"

"Yes. What of it?"

"Do you know that she was a long time without a child?"

"I know that, too."

"Do you know that two months ago she had a baby, a little girl?"

"Yes."

"Well, it was thanks to this marabout. She'd heard of his reputa-

tion and went to see him. Three months later, she was pregnant. If you question her yourself, you'll be convinced."

"I've heard marabouts bragging of having brought on the birth of a boy here and a girl there, when it wasn't true. Frankly, I'm skeptical."

"Give this one a try, and you'll see."

Old Fourougnoniouman, equally skeptical, had remained silent. As for Minignan, although she put on an indifferent air, she had not missed a single word of the conversation. Deep inside, she resolved to go alone to see Meta in order to confirm the good things that Mory had said about the marabout. And, as soon as the visitors had left, she ran to Meta's house.

"Meta, I've come to see your beautiful baby. It's been a whole month since the baptism. How happy you must be! Yours is a happiness I'll never know. I'm fated to live in sorrow and to leave my inheritance to strangers when I die."

There were tears in her eyes, and Meta wept with her out of compassion. Finally she took hold of herself and tried to console her visitor.

"Don't give up hope. Nobody should do that. Who could have believed that I'd have a child? You've been married only five years, but I had to wait—impatiently, I can tell you—for nearly ten. I kept on hoping, and when I least expected it, I had this child. Be patient, and one day good luck will knock on your door, too."

"You can't make me believe that patience alone overcame your sterility, Meta. You must have called on occult powers to deliver you from the snares of your enemies."

"There you may be right. My husband and I consulted a host of fetish-makers, sorcerers, and marabouts around here and elsewhere as well. But nothing worked. Finally we resigned ourselves, waiting until such time as God should hear our prayers. One day, Providence put an old woman on our path. She had come from Mandé in search of a son who had left home more than twenty years ago. We met her in the marketplace and for three days lodged her under our roof.

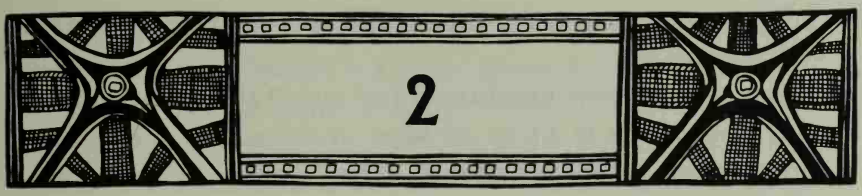
When she found that I was hoping in vain for a child, she gave me a concoction that I was supposed to take a week after I had my period. Shortly after she had gone, I gave it a try, and the following month I made it."

"An old woman?" Minignan exclaimed. "I was told you'd been to see a marabout at Kala, and that he was the one to help you."

"A marabout? Who told you that? For a long time my husband and I had given up on the marabouts. They made us pay through the nose and did nothing for us."

Minignan said no more. She had told a lie in order to get at the truth, and now, when she left Meta, she was puzzled as to whether Meta or Mory had deceived her. When she reached home, she had not resolved her doubt and resumed her household chores without saying a word to her husband about her little investigation. Had she let him in on what Meta had told her, he might give up the idea of consulting the marabout whom Mory had recommended.

But Dady, although he trusted his friend, did not go at once to see the marabout. He decided to send old Fourougnoniouman first to reconnoiter. Then, according to her report, he would or would not go in person.



2

When she left Dady, Fourougnoniouman had in mind a project of her own. She knew that, after having been cheated by the marabouts, Dady thoroughly mistrusted them. Having heard the conversation between him and Mory, she realized that Dady would not be easily won over. So she decided to question Mory, who was her cousin, further about the marabout and eventually to make contact with him herself. If the man seemed promising to her, she would encourage Dady to seek a consultation.

When she arrived at Mory's house in the afternoon a day or so later, she found him seated at his loom and singing a song whose rhythm went with that of the shuttle, which he manipulated with signal dexterity.

"Good day, Cousin," she began.

Mory stopped his shuttle among the threads of the warp and stood up to welcome her.

"Should I eclipse myself, Cousin?" he inquired ironically. "You've not been to see me in a long, long time."

"And you've been to see *me* so often that you're entitled to take me to task," she retorted in the same vein.

Mory burst out laughing.

"Go into the courtyard," he said. "I'll pick up my things and be with you in a jiffy."

Fourougnoniouman found the central area of the courtyard filled with people, most of whom she knew. A dozen pairs of eyes were turned on her, and she was troubled to feel herself an intruder. Hesitating to move farther, she waited for her cousin. Mory gathered up shuttle, reels, thread, and other tools, rolled the warp onto a long stick, and made his entry into the courtyard.

"Why didn't you sit down?" he asked the old woman.

"Don't you see how they're all staring at me? I can't venture alone into a group of men who look at me as if I were some sort of strange animal. That's why I waited for you."

"It's easy to see that you're of another day and age. A young woman of our times would stride right through this crowd of men without minding their staring."

"A young woman of our times, yes. In the old days, girls were subject to an iron discipline that left its mark on them for life. We couldn't look a man in the face, even if he was our own father. Today the atmosphere is so relaxed that we see young girls chatting with men, shaking hands with them, eating in public, and doing all sorts of things that were unimaginable in the society that I grew up in."

Mory did not insist. He placed himself like a shield between his old cousin and the assembled men, and then the two of them made their way to Mory's house at the far end of the courtyard. Mory went in first, laid down his weaver's tools, and held out a stool for his cousin. The old woman's joints cracked as she sat down.

"Where's your wife, Mory?" she asked.

"She went this morning to fetch water from the stream and won't be back until late."

At this season, water was so scarce that women walked for miles every day in order to bring back a big jug of muddy water, which they had to strain before they could use it for cooking. Sometimes they left with the first cock's crow and returned only late in the afternoon.

"Women are lucky now that there's a good road and they needn't fear running into a leopard or a hyena. In my time, men didn't wait in the village for the women to bring the precious water. They went with them, armed with spears and bows and arrows, to protect them against wild animals and also against bad boys who might jump out of the brush and rape them. You young men of today are spoiled!"

Then, changing the subject, Fourougnoniouman asked her cousin, "What's going on here today? It seems as if the whole population of Ganda has gathered at your house."

"You heard my talk yesterday with Dady. I said that I had offered hospitality to a famous marabout whom many of our neighbors have come to consult in order to have a child or get back a wife who has run away with someone else."

"But can he really fulfill their wishes?"

"Of course. I spoke yesterday of Meta, and there are other cases of which I know nothing. Isn't the presence of so many suppliants more eloquent than any number of attestations?"

"Yes, of course."

Fourougnoniouman felt no need to pursue her investigation further. The sight before her eyes induced her to make immediate contact with the marabout, so she voiced this desire to her cousin.

"It's easy enough," Mory assured her. "I see that you're too timid to go seek him out amid this crowd. I'll give him a sign to follow me to the hut over there. You can follow us, and then we'll set forth the purpose of your visit."

Mory went back into the courtyard and beckoned to the marabout, who excused himself from the company and followed his host into the hut. Mory gave the marabout a seat, then went for his cousin.

"*Salaam aleikum*," he greeted the marabout upon his return.

"*Wa-aleikum salaam*," the other replied.

Mory and his cousin waited at the threshold until the marabout had pronounced the formula that opened all such encounters. "*Bismillah*," he said. "In the name of God, the Compassionate, the

Merciful." When they entered the hut, Fourougnoniouman was struck at once by the amiability of the marabout's greeting. With one knee on the ground, she made a deep bow. The marabout responded in a grave voice, asked for news of her family, and gave her his blessing.

"Mory, what's the reason for your revered cousin's visit?" he asked.

"She came to greet us," said Mory. And turning to Fourougnoniouman, he passed on the marabout's question.

She cleared her throat and answered him. "I heard of this illustrious guest, and I have come to meet him and to ask him to help a young couple to whom I am very much attached. They have been married five years, and the cry of a child has not yet been heard in their house. The young wife is an object of jest to all the other women in the village. From this, she and her husband have suffered enormously. I share their sorrow, for I am as fond of them as if they were my own children. As you see, I am an old woman, and I would be happy if only God allows me to witness the baptism of their first child before I die."

Mory conveyed this information to the marabout, who was silent for a moment, then nodded his head and said, "It is easy for me to comply with her request. I can see that she is a good woman and is genuinely interested in the young couple. But I must make sure that the interested parties really want a child and are ready to pay the cost of the task she has asked of me."

Without even transmitting this statement to his old cousin, Mory made a positive reply.

"Mory," said the marabout, "you know that I have no secrets from you. And you know that the chief of your village called me here on an important mission. Because this requires my total concentration, I have so far turned down all other requests. I'm consenting to do something for her because she's your cousin and a good woman. But the husband of the young woman will have to come to see me first."

"Of course. He'll come whenever you say," said Mory without consulting Fourougnoniouman. "Dady's my friend, and he's so anxious to have a child by Minignan that he'll make any sacrifice. I guarantee that."

"Then," said the marabout, "I'll expect him tomorrow evening, after supper."

"My cousin will convey the message to him right away," said Mory.

"But remember," added the marabout, "that he must pay me five hundred francs in advance."

"On that score, you've nothing to fear. As soon as he gets the message, you'll have the money, I'm certain."

"I repeat that this sum is merely an advance and that I want to discuss the business with Dady directly."

At this point, the old woman broke in to confirm Mory's assurances as to Dady's genuine concern and his ability to put down the money. Then she took her leave.

But after she had left, she was gnawed by a certain worry because she had taken upon herself to see to it that Dady paid the advance. Hadn't she perhaps made this commitment too lightly? Would Dady, so mistrustful of marabouts, fulfill her promise? All the way home she mulled over this question. She had intended to report to Dady on her mission the next day. But the pledge she had given the marabout without having consulted Dady lay heavily on her mind. Until suppertime she remained perplexed. Finally she decided to go to him that very evening in order to resolve her doubts. She ate her supper earlier than usual and went to Dady's house.

"Good evening, Husband," she said as she went in.

"Good evening, Wife," Dady answered, somewhat surprised by this late visit. "I see that you really love me. You're not like Minignan, who would never have gone to so much trouble in the dark of night to come and see me."

"The young women of today don't appreciate the value of a good husband," Fourougnoniouman answered ironically.

Minignan, who had overheard this exchange, came out of the house. "Good evening, Cowife," she said. "Do you think you can take Dady away from me by coming to see him at this late hour?" she added teasingly.

"Of course! Didn't you hear what Dady just said? He says that he prefers me to you because I care more for him."

After this amiable exchange, Minignan withdrew, leaving the old woman alone with her husband. She went back into her own hut and posted herself in a place where she could hear their conversation.

"Since day before yesterday, you've disappeared from sight," Dady said to the old woman. "What have you been up to?"

"I may have disappeared, but I haven't been idle. After being present at your talk with Mory the other evening, I decided to investigate the competence of the marabout whom my cousin praised so highly. I went to Mory's house this afternoon, and through him I met the man. He made a very good impression on me and inspired my confidence. And so I asked him to work for us so that you can have a child by Minignan. I didn't tell you in advance what I planned to do because the other day I noticed that you were hanging back. If, then, I have committed you without your knowing, it's because the marabout's competence seems to me beyond discussion. He cited various cases, far more hopeless than Minignan's, in which he had helped out with good results. Did I do well? Did I do wrong? That's what I came to ask you."

"Wife, you did very well. I expected you to undertake a mission of this kind. More than once you've taken an interest in us as if we were your own children. I approve your investigation and any commitments you may have made in my name."

"Dady, you've taken a weight off my mind. The marabout has accepted the job on condition that you pay him a personal visit and make an advance payment of five hundred francs. But after I had left him, I was worried about your reaction to a commitment I had made without consulting you. Five hundred francs is no small sum. I'm relieved to learn of your approval."

"Is that all he asked for an advance?"

"Yes, five hundred francs."

"That's not much compared to the demands of other marabouts I've consulted, especially if, as you say, he's really competent."

"I'm not the only one to say so. His reputation seems to confirm it."

"And you're to go back to him tomorrow morning?"

"Yes, with the money."

"Well, here are the five hundred francs. Let him get to work!"

After going to say good night to Minignan in her hut, the old woman took her leave. Minignan had followed the entire conversation, but she said not a word about it.

Fourougnoniouman went home with her mind at ease. Early the next day, she went to Mory's to deliver the advance payment.

The marabout took the money and said, "This fulfills one of the conditions. The other is a visit from Dady in person. Until he comes, I can't start to work."

"Mory, tell the marabout that this condition will be met before nightfall. I'll bring Dady with me this evening, if that suits Karamoko,* our learned friend here."

"Mory," the marabout replied, "tell her that I'll expect them after supper."

The old woman got down on her knees and humbly begged the marabout to exert all his powers on Dady's behalf.

"It's not up to me alone," he told her. "It depends also on the amount Dady is willing to pay."

Upon this note, the old woman went away. She had an urgent wish to report to Dady on this second interview. When she came to his house, sure enough, she found him waiting impatiently. As soon as he saw her, he got up and hurried toward her.

"Good day, Husband," she burst out. "I've kept you in suspense for a long while."

*A title of address meaning "learned one." By extension, it also means "marabout."—TRANS.

"Yes," replied Dady. "I was beginning to grow impatient. But if you bring me good news, it will be an ample compensation for the time I've lost."

"I'm sorry to have been so slow, Husband," she explained. "I set out early this morning, but I haven't the good legs I had twenty years ago, and to cover the least distance seems like going to the ends of the earth."

She was obviously happy, and her happiness was a good omen. "The news is very good," she added. "The marabout foresees not only a child but other joys as well for you and your wife. The only difficulty lies in the sacrifice you are called upon to make."

"What does that mean?"

"You must sacrifice a white bull from your own herd. You are to cut it into pieces and distribute the meat as follows. The upper part must be eaten by you and yours, and the lower part, that is, the part that has been in contact with the ground, must be given to poor people outside the family circle. No bit of this latter part can be eaten by you or yours."

"A white bull, you say?" asked Dady.

"Exactly."

"Fortunately, I have a white bull in my herd."

"Then all is well. We have only to go after supper to the marabout."

"Good. I'll come by for you."

While Dady and Fourougnoniouman were talking thus, the marabout and Mory were getting ready for the coming visit.

"Karamoko, you see that I told you the truth. Dady lost no time in paying the five hundred francs, and he's coming to see you this evening. I trust you'll do all you can to overcome his mistrust and inspire his confidence."

"Leave it to me, Mory. I'll give him irrefutable proofs of my ability. You'll see for yourself. All I ask is that you find me a large new calabash and a little boy no more than seven years old."

"You'll have everything whenever you want it."

"The little boy must be bright and savvy."

"I have just the boy—my nephew, who's not yet seven years old and already knows half the Koran by heart."

"Just what I need."

"I'll go to alert him so that he'll be on the spot when we need him."

Mory took leave of the marabout and went straight to the school where his nephew was learning the Koran. It was the hour when the pupils were transcribing their new lesson on wooden tablets. The teacher was not there but had entrusted the class to the most advanced of the pupils, who was acting as monitor. Mory was disappointed to learn that the teacher had gone to a small nearby village and would not be back before evening. The boys were sitting in a circle on the ground, tracing with their forefingers the lines of writing crudely transcribed on the tablets, which were whitened with clay, and shouting out Arabic words that they had not known a few moments earlier. The monitor held in his left hand some pages of a Koran manuscript and in his right a leather-thonged whip ready to come down on any luckless boy who mispronounced a single word of the lesson. Mory greeted the class, and the twitter gave way. Only the monitor answered his greeting.

"Where's your teacher?" Mory asked.

"He's gone to a village nearby to officiate at a baptism."

"I came to ask him to permit my little nephew Balamine to come home this evening. He's needed for a family ceremony, but he'll be back first thing in the morning."

"I can't give any such permission. But as soon as the teacher returns, I'll pass on your message."

Mory thanked the boy and went away. Not once during this brief colloquy had little Balamine raised his eyes to his uncle. He knew that this indiscretion would be punished by a few strokes of the whip as soon as the latter had gone away.

The problem of the bright, savvy boy had been partially resolved. Mory felt sure that Balamine's teacher would not refuse to grant him

an absence of a few hours. Now he had only to find a large new calabash. He went slightly out of his way in order to pass by the market, where he was certain to find what he wanted. Fortunately Ouassabaga was there with an array of calabashes of every size. Mory greeted him and picked up one of the largest among them.

"How much is this one?" he asked.

Ouassabaga took the calabash and turned it around in his hands as if he had never seen it before. Then he said, "Eighty cowries."

"Eighty cowries for a calabash!" exclaimed Mory.

"I've stated the price. Now it's up to you to say whether you can pay it. That's trade. A market without bargaining is nothing but a gathering of women and puny men. Make me a bid, Mory, and we'll manage to make a deal."

"For a piece of goods like this, I can't pay more than twenty cowries."

"What? What's that you say, Mory? Twenty cowries? No, you must be joking. Come on, raise your bid a little!"

Mory pretended to think it over and then said, "I can add ten cowries to what I just offered."

"Come on! Be realistic!"

"Plus five more. Thirty-five is my last word, if you want to make a sale. Otherwise, it will be for some other day."

While the two men were bargaining, a third man was watching, and he entered in as referee. "Ouassabaga, take twenty cowries off your initial price, and Mory, up your offer by twenty-five."

Ouassabaga thought for a moment and then said, "A man can't turn down the intervention of Divine Providence. I'll take your advice if Mory does the same."

"What do you say, Mory?" asked the third party.

"I accept. It's no use opposing everybody."

"Agreed, then. Pay up, Mory, and take the calabash."

"So what does it come to?" Mory asked.

"Three times twenty cowries."

Mory drew a cloth purse out of his pocket and emptied the con-

tents onto the ground. He counted the cowries, two by two, and stacked them up in three piles of twenty each.

The referee took the calabash and handed it to Mory, while Ouassabaga crouched to pick up the money. Buyer and seller thanked the man sent by Providence, and Mory went on his way home.

"Ah!" exclaimed the marabout when he saw Mory coming. "So you've found a new calabash."

"Yes. I just bought it at the market."

"I see that you're really concerned about Dady's troubles."

"Dady's only enemies here are the godless. He's always kind and ready to help his friends," replied Mory.

"Now we need only the bright and savvy boy. Have you found him, too?"

"Yes. I already told you that was easy. I couldn't bring him with me now, because his teacher was away. But he'll be here this evening."

Mory put the calabash in his hut and came back out with his loom. He had already lost a good part of the day and was anxious to get to work.

The flow of visitors to see the marabout continued to be as large as on the first day of his stay in Ganda. The number of sheep tied up in the courtyard and of baskets of guinea fowl showed that the marabout, thanks to the salesmanship exercised by his wife, had won the confidence of the village people. Although the marabout himself rarely left the house, his wife had already made the acquaintance of practically everyone in the village. Her spying had dug up the secrets of all the women. From every outing she returned with new information about this or that family, which her husband engraved on his prodigious memory. In this way, he acquainted himself with the story of almost every visitor, and he was able to tell each one what troubled him even before the visitor could open his mouth. Wasn't it extraordinary that a stranger should reveal to you your secrets and your most intimate worries? Word of this phenomenon got around, and the number of visitors increased every day.

The only local notable who had not yet visited the marabout was Dady, but he was coming that evening. This was an important event for the marabout because it would provide bait for drawing still more fish into his finely woven net. And the marabout was ready. He would dazzle this skeptic by giving him the lowdown on his arch-enemy Nakaridia. If that didn't convince Dady, he'd fall back on the demonstration he planned with the little boy and the calabash. And if all that still didn't convince Dady, well, it was proof that God was definitely refusing him the joys of fatherhood.

Mory worked hard for the rest of the day, leaving the marabout to his visitors. He didn't leave his loom until the hour when the muezzin called the faithful to evening prayer. When he came back into the house, the marabout was readying himself to go to the mosque. Mory washed up and followed his guest. They didn't return until suppertime, when they found the bright and savvy little boy waiting for them in the courtyard. His teacher had returned and had given him permission to go to his uncle's.

"Who is this child?" asked the marabout.

"My nephew Balamine, the boy I promised you," Mory replied. "I told you he'd show up on time."

"He looks bright enough. I hope he'll give satisfaction."

"That depends on what you ask of him. If, as I suppose, it's a matter of scrutinizing the water in the calabash, well, he's used to that. You won't be disappointed."

"He's done it before, then?" asked the marabout with astonishment.

"Yes, he has."

"Then my task will be easy, and Dady will be convinced."

The marabout patted the boy's head. Soon the child would be his unwitting accomplice in winning Dady over.

"What's your name?" he asked the boy.

"Balamine."

"What Sura of the Koran have you reached?"

"Sura K."

"That's amazing at your age. Have you already been made to see *ruhaniyas*—you know, spirits—in a calabash filled with water?"

"Yes. My teacher has showed them to me quite often."

"And do you really see them?"

"Yes, I do."

"Your teacher is a great marabout. But this evening you'll see one still greater."

Balamine was astonished, because he couldn't imagine a teacher greater than his own.

"It's to be after dark, is it?" he inquired.

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Because my teacher has pointed out *ruhaniyas* only in the daytime. I've never seen them at night."

The marabout was visibly shaken by this information. He had promised to make a demonstration to convince Dady this evening, but now the child admitted to never having seen *ruhaniyas* in the dark. The performance had to go off well, or else Dady would be more mistrustful than before. Might it not be wise to postpone the whole thing until the morrow rather than risk failure?

At this point, Mory joined them and proposed to the marabout that he come to supper.

"First," said the marabout, "I'd like to tell you of a possible change in the program. I meant to give Dady a demonstration this evening, as you know. But the boy tells me he's never seen *ruhaniyas* in the dark. Now, even if they come, he may not see them. Our experiment would be a failure, and I'd lose face. I prefer to put it off until tomorrow morning. What do you say?"

Mory reflected a moment on the consequences of such a happening. "I understand your hesitation and share it. I agree to a postponement. I'll go alert Dady at once and ask him to put off his visit until tomorrow morning."

"In my opinion, that's not necessary. Let him come this evening for a preliminary meeting. I can prepare his mind for what I intend to show him."

"That's reasonable," Mory assented, and the three of them went to supper.

There were a number of visitors already sitting in the covered area of the courtyard, but this did not trouble the marabout. On the contrary, he saw a double advantage in this heavy business. In the number of visitors, Dady would see tangible proof of his reputation, and they, in their turn, would be impressed by the coming of so illustrious a client.

A few minutes after supper, Dady, accompanied by Fourougnoniouman, entered the courtyard. He was dressed in white, and the moonlight gave his clothes a soft, gay luster. His elderly guide wore a dark blue pagne and a long white veil that covered her head and hung over her bare torso. She was leaning on a long stick whose tap-tap on the hard surface of the courtyard seemed to beat out the count of her slow, hesitant steps.

"*Salaam aleikum*," said Dady, approaching Mory and his guest.

"*Wa-aleikum salaam*," the marabout responded. Mory told the marabout that this was his expected guest. "*Bismillah, bismillah*," intoned the marabout as he stood up.

He advanced toward Dady and grasped Dady's extended hand in both of his own. They remained in this posture for several minutes, inquiring for news of each other's families. Mory stood close by but waited for the end of these greetings before approaching to voice his own. The old woman had already settled herself on one of the mats spread out on the ground. Finally the marabout released Dady's hand and went to greet Fourougnoniouman.

"How is our good mother? For all of two days you haven't been seen."

"Good evening, Karamoko," replied the old woman. "Yesterday I stayed in bed the whole day because of pain in my knees from which I haven't yet recovered. But I made the effort to accompany Dady here tonight because of the promise I gave you the day before."

"I'm glad to see you here with our friend. It shows you are really fond of him and take his concerns very much to heart."

While Mory talked with Dady, the marabout turned to the covered area where his other clients were waiting for him. "I must ask you to excuse me for a while," he said. "I am going to talk with Dady, whom you all know. It was he who summoned me from Misséni, although he knew me only by reputation. It is on his account that I am here for these few weeks, and so obviously he takes precedence."

As soon as the marabout had finished this little speech, the visitors simultaneously rose and took their leave. Dady's importance was known and respected by all. Although he was standing discreetly apart, most of them greeted him as they passed by. When the other visitors had gone, Mory took Dady and Fourougnoniouman to the marabout, who was already seated under the awning. The guests and the marabout exchanged more greetings. The marabout was the first to enter the heart of the matter.

"I'm happy to make your acquaintance. We may like or dislike somebody without ever having seen him. It hinges on his reputation. Now I have heard you spoken of, Dady, in terms of greatest praise. One of my pupils who came here a few months ago told me of your affability and benevolence. My friend Mory, too, has only good things to say of you. It seems that, unfortunately, you suffer greatly from not having a child."

"Alas, yes," said Dady, with a sigh in which he was joined by Fourougnoniouman.

"I'll work on your behalf," the marabout went on, "and you'll have children. God has children in His hand, more than He knows what to do with, and He always grants the requests of those who know how to make them. I know how. I've handled cases where a man and his wife went twenty years without children. After my intercession, they've had all too many. My wife can bear me witness."

Upon which, his wife, who was seated on an enormous stool, began to enumerate all the women of their village whose sterility had been cured by her husband. The most desperate case was that of a certain Nassaran, who had been twice divorced because of her failure

to produce any offspring. "When her third husband heard of mine, he came to see him. I had to press my husband hard, because the problem seemed so thorny."

"I didn't want to proceed," continued the marabout, "for the good reason that Nassaran's case was out of the ordinary. Her desire to have children was being thwarted by one of her mother's cowives. The case of Dady's wife is due to the same cause. It's a woman from your own village who is interfering with her. That's what my first investigations have revealed. Dady himself must not be unaware of that."

Dady's skepticism began to melt. Wasn't the marabout referring to his archenemy Nakaridia? Fourougnoniouman looked on in astonishment. As for the marabout's wife and investigatory agent, she maintained a poker face that absolved her of all complicity.

"First of all, I asked for an advance of five hundred francs," the marabout went on. "And I expressed my wish to see Dady in person, in order to discuss with him the conditions of the job I am about to undertake. I think that our mother has told him these things."

Before he could finish, Fourougnoniouman gave Mory a five-hundred-franc note, which he handed over to the marabout.

"Good, that's done. I shall get to work at once. I'm not one of your petty marabouts who take credulous people's money and then do nothing but sleep on it. I'll effect the preliminaries this very night and report the results to Dady in the morning. Then Dady will know how to tell a genuine marabout from the others. Let him come to see me early tomorrow."

The marabout's wife opened her mouth in a large yawn. "Excuse me," she said, "but a marabout's wife shares his nights of vigil. I've been staying up every night this week."

This feminine ruse did not escape Fourougnoniouman. She thrust out her stick to scratch Dady's ankle. He took the hint and realized that it was time to "ask for the road," according to the Dyula custom.

"Mory," he said, "we shall go home now and allow Karamoko to

get on with his work. We ask his permission to leave, and I'll come back tomorrow morning."

Mory transmitted this request to the marabout, who at once replied, "I should have liked to chat more with our friend Dady, but, as he says himself, I must get straight to work. I grant him permission to take leave, in the hope of keeping him with me longer another day when we're both in less of a hurry."

With these words, the consultation came to an end. Mory and the marabout accompanied their visitors to the entrance of the courtyard.

Dady and the old woman walked slowly toward their dwellings, voicing their astonishment at the amazing revelations made by the marabout. The reference to Nakaridia filled their minds. The old woman saw that Dady was very nearly convinced and felt a certain satisfaction. Dady left her at her door.

When he reached his own home, he found Minignan spinning cotton by the light of a gas lantern and singing a song from the time when, as a carefree young girl, she could disport herself in the countryside.

> "Ah, the sweetness of youth,
> How much better you are than marriage!
> I run on the paths and through the brush;
> I leap through the fields;
> I pick fruit and paint my lips with *sagba*;*
> And, when I come home,
> No one asks me, 'Where have you been?'"

Dady knew the song. To him, too, it recalled the days of his youth, and so it did not offend him.

"I'm glad to find you in such good spirits, Younger," he said as he entered the house.

"You don't look exactly sad yourself," she answered smiling.

* An orange dye extracted from the twigs of an indigenous shrub, formerly used by young women in the Ivory Coast as a cosmetic.—TRANS.

"Not a bit of it. I've reason to be glad after this evening's encounter with the marabout. He revealed things that bode well for our future happiness."

"Ah!" Minignan exclaimed. "What did he reveal?"

"He said that a jealous woman has ensnared you. Then he cited similar cases where he has obtained a cure. And everything he said was confirmed by his wife. What struck me most was the knowledge he showed of our problems even before I spoke."

"Are you sure that no one had told him about them?"

"But who could have done that?"

"Mory or old Fourougnoniouman, for instance."

"Impossible! They were both present at our interview, and they seemed even more amazed than I when the marabout made these revelations. We have an appointment tomorrow morning to hear the results of the occult research that he has begun this very night. I've already given him five hundred francs as an advance. After I hear the results tomorrow, we shall discuss the terms for his future work."

Dady had a restless sleep, and when he awoke the marabout's words were still pounding in his brain. Immediately after breakfast, he set out to fetch old Fourougnoniouman, and the two of them went to Mory's house. When they arrived, everything was in order. The marabout was comfortably ensconced on a dingy blue cushion, embroidered in red, with Mory and little Balamine sitting across from him. The newcomers greeted him and sat down on a rough wool blanket laid out to receive them.

The marabout, eager to stage his demonstration, sent Balamine for the calabash. The boy returned panting under the weight of the calabash, which was filled with a dark liquid. He set it down at the marabout's right and took his place beside it, like an expert. The marabout grasped the boy's right hand and traced on the palm some tiny geometric figures studded with numbers. He asked Balamine to lick them. Then he told the boy to lean over the calabash with his head covered by a white shawl.

"Have no fear, Balamine!" he enjoined him in a firm voice.

"I'm not afraid. I've seen these things before."

The marabout picked up his prayer beads and, turning toward the east, began to slip them through his fingers. After a few minutes, he suspended his invocations and asked the boy, "Have you seen anything?"

"Not yet."

The marabout resumed his incantations. Soon the boy threw up his head as if frightened by a vision.

"What is it?" the marabout asked.

"In the water I see a man on horseback, brandishing a spear. He threatened me."

"Keep on looking, and above all don't be afraid."

"Another man has come. He's on foot. He has just taken the stirrup in order to help the horseman get down from his horse. Now the horseman is down and occupying a place that the other had prepared for him. He has put down his lance, and now he is smiling."

"Keep on looking, and don't be afraid."

"I won't be afraid."

"What's happening now?"

"He's holding a baby in his arms," replied Balamine.

"What's the sex of the baby?"

"It's a little boy. I see him quite clearly."

"Ask Samahourous* what baby this is."

"The one you've asked for, he says."

"Good. What else do you see?"

"A white bull at the horseman's feet."

"Thank Samahourous on my behalf."

Balamine voiced thanks and a moment later said, "Now they've all disappeared."

"Get up, Balamine," ordered the marabout. "You're an intelligent and obedient boy."

Balamine raised a face streaming with perspiration and gave a

*A jinn, or supernatural being, said to be totally devoted to the service of El Hadj Omar, one of the most powerful conquerors of Black Africa. Jinn as a class are said to be subject to magic control, and Samahourous is supposedly accessible to certain marabouts who claim to make miracles through him.—TRANS.

deep sigh. He seemed as exhausted as if he had just come out of a horrible nightmare. The marabout held out a small gourd filled with cowries. Balamine emptied the contents into the pocket of his indigo-blue boubou and went away, leaving his elders to their strange business.

"Mory," said the marabout, "I believe that what we have just seen happen before us dispenses me from any comment."

"Indeed!" Mory exclaimed. "You should address your remark to Dady. I know you, and no miracle you may perform surprises me."

Dady and Fourougnoniouman seemed literally thunderstruck. They both bowed down submissively to the marabout.

"The successful experiment that you have just seen entitles me to lay down my terms without any hesitation," said the marabout. "Isn't that so, Mory? But I shan't speak today of the price of my work. Just now, the boy reported, among other things, the presence of a white bull. This signifies that Dady should sacrifice a white bull, pure white, in his courtyard. You are to divide the meat into two parts, which you will keep scrupulously separate. The part that has contact with the ground is to be given away outside the family circle. No morsel of it should be eaten in your courtyard. Not a single one! The other part, that which has had no contact with the ground, can be eaten by you. This is of the utmost importance, and I can't begin the important phase of my work until the sacrifice has been made. It's an essential condition for our success, because it's the blade that will cut the knots in which the woman of whom I spoke yesterday has entangled your wife. Today is Friday, isn't it?"

"Yes," responded those present.

"That is the most propitious day for such sacrifices."

Dady and Fourougnoniouman bowed again before the marabout and thanked him almost piously. The marabout had obviously triumphed. The effect he had sought to make had just been obtained. As for Dady, he was in a hurry to get back to his house in order to see at once to the sacrifice of the white bull, so he asked for permission to leave. The marabout, having underlined the urgency of the

sacrifice, was far from displeased by this request, and so he did not seek to detain the visitors as Dyula custom would have required.

On the way home, Fourougnoniouman seemed somewhat preoccupied. Dady noticed her mood.

"You seem to have something on your mind," he remarked. "May I ask why?"

"Oh, it's nothing. I was thinking of the white bull. Pure white bulls are very rare."

"You're wondering how I can get hold of one this very day, is that it? Well, don't worry. Luckily, I have one in my herd."

Old Fourougnoniouman recovered her aplomb and was burning to talk to Minignan. The miracle stories would certainly reassure her and restore her taste for life. Instead of going home, she went straight to the young woman's house.

"Good day, my ugly rival!" she greeted Minignan, who was preparing couscous in the kitchen.

"Good day," Minignan answered with her usual amiability. "You look more spry than I've seen you for some days."

"There's a reason, Rival. I'm dying to dance, and only my stiff knees prevent me from giving this vent to my joy."

"You must be very happy indeed."

"Yes, I am, Minignan, and I can't keep from sharing my happiness with you."

"What's it about?"

"About the object of our prayers and hopes for ten dry seasons and ten rainy ones—the birth of a little boy. A little boy, that's what you're going to have, Minignan! The spirits showed him to the marabout in our presence."

And she told a detailed story of what had gone on with the marabout. A ray of hope and joy lit up Minignan's eyes, and her face shone as never before. She set down the calabash in which she was preparing the couscous and ran into her hut to fetch a fine indigo-blue pagne, which she wrapped around the old woman.

"Take this!" she ordered. "I'd give you a kola nut, if it weren't

that you've lost all your teeth. And remember the promise I made you of a heifer!"

While the two women were chatting, Dady went to lie in his hammock. He was still under the effect of the boy's hallucination. Fourougnoniouman went over to him, showed him the splendid gift Minignan had made her, and thanked both of them profusely.

"Wife, your friendship deserves far more of a recompense. It is priceless in our eyes," Dady told her.

Before going away, the old woman reminded Dady of the marabout's insistence that the white bull be sacrificed this very day.

"I'm going right now to send Fabarka to the pasture," Dady assured her.

"Don't put yourself out, Dady. I'll go by Fabarka's myself and tell him to fetch the bull for you."

Just at this moment, the old slave himself arrived on the scene.

"You've come in the nick of time," the old woman greeted him. "I was just going to look for you."

Dady took over. "Go to the pasture and tell the herdsman who's watching over the cattle to bring the white bull here immediately. I have an urgent sacrifice to make before the day is over."

The old slave looked at his shadow on the ground to ascertain the hour. "At your service, Master," he answered.

Old as he was, Fabarka was broken to the hard life of earlier days and had retained the agility of his prime. He quickly covered the mile to the pasture, whence the Peulh* herdsman was leading the cattle to other fields on a lonely hillside. There, at this season, was the only place where grass still grew abundantly. Fabarka caught him just as the herd was about to climb the hill.

"Good day, Herdsman," Fabarka greeted him.

"Good day, Slave," replied the Peulh.

* A widely spread African ethnic group who live as pastoral herdsmen and often own enormous herds of cattle. As seasonal emigrants to the northern part of the Ivory Coast, they are sometimes employed by the indigenous people as cowherds.—TRANS.

"My master wants you to bring the white bull to the village at once. He has urgent need of him."

"What for?"

"I don't know. That's his business."

"Another sacrifice, no doubt," the herdsman grumbled. "When he gets through killing off all the finest animals, our livestock will be badly depleted. Now, after so many others, the pride and joy of my herd must go."

"Don't waste so much breath, Herdsman. What's yours of this herd anyway, except the dung? Just obey orders. My master will do with the bull what he pleases."

The herdsman understood that further resistance would come up against sheer ignorance, especially of animal breeding. Fabarka was a man trained to obey orders blindly. And so the Peulh let the matter go. As for the old slave, every sacrifice meant a feast, for he had a right to the head, feet, and entrails. So his staunch defense of his point of view was due less to ignorance than to anticipation of his share of the meat.

The herdsman entrusted the cattle to a companion with whom he shared guard duties. He loosed the rope he wore around his waist and tied it around the horns of the bull, which obediently followed him, trustingly or perhaps with resignation to his fate. Old Fabarka took a branch, with which he struck the bull every time he threatened to leave the path for a tuft of green grass. This action had disagreeable results for the herdsman, who was alternately pulled back by the bull's sudden halts and bumped from the rear when a blow of the whip caused the animal to jump forward.

The sun was at its full height when they arrived at the village. The herdsman tied the bull to a post set firmly into the ground and went back to the other animals, not without a twinge of sorrow at the idea of abandoning the leader of his herd to the cruel end that awaited him.

The bull, which until now had been relatively calm, lost his phlegm and seemed to be shaken by a presentiment of his coming

death. His great, globular eyes expressed the resignation of a condemned man. He sniffed the ground, then raised his head to the sky as if to implore mercy. His nostrils swelled, and there was a rattle in his throat as if he were already in agony.

Minignan was stricken with pity for the poor beast and brought him some water to drink. She would have prevented her husband from killing him were it not that the sacrifice was supposed to overcome her sterility. Pity was quelled before her burning desire for a child. Everything was legitimate to this end.

"When are you going to kill him?" she asked Dady.

"Soon. Right after prayers."

"Can you find no other bull for the sacrifice?"

"I could, yes, but it would take several days, and the marabout insists that the deed be done today so that he can start his job."

"Then let me go hide when the moment comes. I don't want to be in on the death."

Fabarka did not go to prayers this Friday but busied himself finding helpers for cutting the carcass in pieces. When Dady came back from the mosque, the old man was waiting for him with a sharp knife in his hand, which he gave to his master. The animal had been laid on the ground with his legs tied together. Fabarka's two helpers held his horns and pinned down his head. The rattle in the bull's throat was louder and louder. Dady hesitated for a moment, then finally seized the knife.

"Hurry," said Fabarka, "or else the beast will throw us to the ground and run away. We can't hold him down all day."

Dady leaned over the bull and tremblingly held the knife to his throat. The knife slid over the white skin and penetrated the flesh. Blood spurted forth, hot and foaming. The bull pawed the air with his hooves, and the rattle sounded for the last time. Then his legs fell to the ground. He was dead.

Dady threw down the knife and left the scene, entrusting to Fabarka and his assistants the task of cutting up the carcass and distributing the pieces according to the marabout's instructions. When

all was done, the old slave went to call his master, who knelt down beside the two piles of meat, held out his hands, palms upward, over them, and murmured a few incomprehensible words. Then he ordered the pile of lower parts to be subdivided and given out to the villagers. The left half of the thorax was sent to the marabout. Every head of a village family received his share, and Fabarka's assistants helped themselves generously. As for Fabarka himself, he had to wait for the portion to be kept in the family. When the time came, he took the head, feet, and entrails, which were his due, and a few extra fatty morsels. He would roast some, fry or boil the rest, then stuff himself until he had diarrhea. Dady chose the tenderest meat for Fourougnoniouman and kept the rest for his own household.

When he arrived at the old woman's house later that afternoon, he found her as usual occupied in casting cowries.

"Good day, Wife," he greeted her.

"Good day, Husband. I acknowledge receiving my share of the bull. You've given me the parts most suitable to a toothless old woman. Thank you, and may God be pleased with your sacrifice."

"Now that the sacrifice has been made, I came to take you with me to the marabout so that we can discuss the terms of his work."

"I'm ready. Hand me my stick, if you please."

Dady picked up the stick, which was leaning against the wall, and handed it to her. Throwing her full weight upon it, she raised herself painfully, with her weary, stiff bones creaking.

Dady and his advisor went off to Mory's house. It was the market day at Ganda, and the marabout's usual visitors were occupied with their business affairs. Mory and the marabout were left to themselves.

"We've struck a lucky moment," said the old woman. "Today the marabout seems to be quite alone."

"It's the market day," said Dady, "and people can't attend to anything else."

The marabout was sitting in the shade, clad in a magnificent white damask boubou lavishly embroidered with pale yellow thread.

The two visitors greeted him respectfully. Mory was in his hut when he heard Dady's voice. He hastened to join the little group and to extend endless greetings and salutations.

"Mory," said the marabout after a moment of silence, "ask our visitors how their families are doing." Mory transmitted these words first to Dady and then to the old woman, both of whom had taken a seat.

"We came to tell the marabout that we have carried out the sacrifice of a white bull according to the rite that he prescribed," said Dady.

"I was just going to thank you for the honor you paid me in sending the choicest cut to my guest."

"Isn't he the guest of us all?" said the old woman. "We've done no more than hoe our own row."

"True, but courtesy demands that we thank a benefactor even if he's our own father."

The marabout burst into a prolonged loud laugh, then conciliated the two points of view by calling both of them right.

"We have come," continued Dady, "to discuss the compensation the marabout asks for his services."

This was the news the marabout was waiting impatiently to hear, and he didn't wait for Mory to transmit it to him.

"I know, I know," he answered, nodding his head. "Because through you, Mory, we've become friends, I shan't ask the full price. It would cost anyone else at least ten thousand francs, or else I'd simply refuse to do it at all. But to Dady, I can refuse nothing, and even less to my host, Mory."

Dady started and his eyes popped out of his head. He couldn't believe his ears; he had counted on paying no more than a quarter of this sum. He held his peace, waiting for Mory to repeat the words he had just heard. Mory, too, obviously found the amount exorbitant. But, without showing his feelings, he addressed himself to Fourougnoniouman.

"Did you hear, Cousin?"

The old woman, who had never counted anything but cowries and could not imagine such a sum of money, turned toward Dady and muttered a few words. Dady cleared his throat before making a reply.

"Mory, tell the marabout that, in hard times like these, that's too much money. I must ask him to bring down the price. I'm embarrassed, of course, to bargain with him for the price of his work, and I shouldn't do so if the sum of ten thousand francs seemed at all reasonable."

Again the marabout did not wait for Mory to act as intermediary. "So Dady finds my price excessive, does he?"

"Yes," said Dady. "I know you're a great marabout, and that no price is too high for a child. But think of the hard times and the expenses I've already had to bear."

"How much, then, Dady, do you want to pay for my work?"

"Twenty-five hundred francs," he replied.

"Ah! I see that you don't really want a child. Now I understand why you've never had a really good marabout. As for me, I would never invoke the name of God the All-Powerful for such a paltry sum. If you can manage seventy-five hundred francs, all right then, but that's my last word. If not, you can keep your money. Nothing is more difficult for a marabout to accomplish than this type of work, since in a manner of speaking he is the father of the child. He draws on his own credit."

"Karamoko," Mory intervened, "I ask you to consider five thousand francs. You come down by twenty-five hundred francs, and Dady goes up by the same."

Dady did not react but waited for the marabout's response. The latter said that, thanks to Mory's intervention, he would come down by five hundred.

"What do you say, Dady?" Mory asked.

"I can't pay more than twenty-five hundred francs, and you, Mory, know why. Because your cousin is my confidante, you know all there is to know about my affairs."

The marabout began to grow angry at hearing Dady disparage his work and the long nights of wakefulness that it entailed. But the anger was only a feint, part of the stock-in-trade of marabouts engaged in business dealings. Dady did not increase his offer, and the marabout would not consent to another reduction.

An icy silence filled the courtyard until Dady broke it by asking permission to withdraw. The marabout did not give back the five-hundred-franc advance. Although he regretted having been too obdurate, he said nothing for fear of losing face. His tactics should have been successful, since Dady, who had already committed himself by the sacrifice of his finest bull, seemed unlikely to refuse to finish the project. But the marabout had miscalculated. Dady had already been the victim of several commercially minded marabouts, and experience had taught him not to fall into the trap.

He and Fourougnoniouman took their leave. On the way home, she asked him what he meant to do next.

"I've never seen a marabout like that one! He talks like a king, demanding over seven thousand francs after having me sacrifice a bull of at least that value. I want a child, yes, but not at the price of such humiliation."

"Don't be carried away so quickly, Dady. It doesn't pay to cut off your nose to spite your face. I agree that the marabout went too far. Now you must be patient. I think it would be a good idea to go back to see him tomorrow morning. We might reach a compromise."

Dady listened without speaking.

While the old woman was exhorting Dady to show more patience, Mory, on his part, was trying to bring the marabout around.

"Karamoko," he said, "I think you acted a bit too brutally with Dady. He's a good fellow, but a sensitive one. It would have been better to seek a middle ground acceptable to him, something like three thousand francs. I'm sure that Dady would have found that reasonable and changed his attitude. He's an intelligent fellow, and the only person in the village able to pay you such a sum. To break off negotiations with him may do you harm. I hope to see you go

away with the greatest possible gains. But nothing is lost if you consent to see reason. If you allow me, I'll go see Dady on my own, in the hope of persuading him to come for further discussion with you."

This was the marabout's secret desire. "Mory," he said, "an outsider may have sharp eyes and yet see nothing. He's like a blind man. Only his local host knows the situation. I give you leave to try to settle this regrettable affair, even if I have to lose money. Do what you think is in my best interest."

Mory left the marabout and went to see, not Dady, but old Fourougnoniouman, whose influence on Dady he well knew. He hoped that, once he had told her the latest development, she would go with him to Dady.

"Good evening, Cousin," he greeted her.

"Good evening, Cousin. Sit down beside me and tell me what brings you here. We just took leave of each other, and yet here you are. What's going on? I'm worried."

"It's nothing serious. I came to ask you to help me to bring Dady around. After Dady left, the marabout was sorry to have acted like too sharp a businessman. I talked to him, and he took the hint. He is so anxious to reach a compromise that he has given me full powers to negotiate on his behalf. Come with me to Dady's, and we'll talk to him."

"Cousin, you know that where Dady's good is concerned, I'll stop at nothing. As soon as we left the marabout, I tried to reason with him. He said nothing, but that doesn't mean he didn't catch the drift of what I was saying. Even if he's resolved not to see the marabout again, I hope that he won't be too stubborn."

Mory helped his cousin to get up, and they made their way to Dady's house. Dady was about to go to the pasture to see his herd, now deprived of its precious leader, when Mory and the old woman arrived.

"Good evening, Dady."

"Good evening, Mory. How's your famous marabout?"

"He's well enough but in a bad humor."

"Why so?"

"That's what I came, along with my cousin, to explain. He agrees with me that he was too hard on you. Let's resume our dialogue with him. I'm sure that, after due thought, he'll be more conciliatory."

"My dear Mory, you know me very well. My patience is unlimited so long as everything stays within the normal bounds of courtesy. But the marabout's behavior verged on vulgarity and infuriated me. I trust that you, at least, were aware of it."

"So much so that I hurried to come plead with you to see him again. I'm sure that now you can reach an understanding. It's when the scaffolding collapses that we rebuild it more solidly than it was before."

"I can't refuse you. I'll come this evening and, if he's better disposed, I'm sure we can patch things up."

Fourougnoniouman, who had been listening silently, now spoke up to repeat the advice she had given Dady on the way home. When the two men had settled the evening appointment, she and Mory took their leave.

After supper, Dady picked her up and they made their way to Mory's house together. The marabout, alerted by Mory, had sent all his visitors away and stayed, with only his wife and Mory, in the covered area of the courtyard. The welcome was unusually hearty; the marabout seemed to have forgotten the events of the afternoon and put Dady at his ease with some friendly teasing.

Once the greetings were over, Mory opened the dialogue by saying to the marabout, "Dady's visit must come to you as a surprise, and probably you wonder about the reason. Well, after the unpleasantness of this afternoon, I went to effect a reconciliation. Dady's prompt response should confirm what I told you of the nobility of his character. As an old saw has it, 'The closer we are, the more we quarrel. Teeth and tongue, condemned to live together, often rub each other the wrong way.'"

The marabout listened attentively, nodding his head. Finally he broke in to say, "Mory, you have voiced a truth. Wherever there are

men, Satan is there also. To show his power, he sets one against the other over a mere trifle. We must ask God to defend us against his wiles. I approve entirely of your mission to our friend Dady, and I am willing to come to an agreement with him. I'm sure that in the future he will render me some important services."

These words were received with joy. The reconciliation was almost complete when Dady spoke up again.

"I grasp our guest's meaning. We let Satan trap us. Now that this cloud is lifted from the horizon, we can begin to discuss or, rather, to ask for Mory's mediation."

Everyone approved of this proposal.

"Thank you for the great honor you pay me," said Mory. "I submit the following proposition. Dady must up his offer by five hundred francs, reaching the sum of three thousand. I ask the marabout to accept it. His friendship with Dady is worth many times over the forty-five hundred francs he is losing. The world is wide, and life is long and filled with unexpected happenings."

The marabout raised no objection to Mory's proposition, and Dady had already nodded his assent. When the transaction was over, the marabout promised Dady to send him the next day an amulet with instructions as to its use. Dady and Fourougnoniouman withdrew, not before expressing their gratitude to the marabout and his wife and to Mory.

Hardly had Dady got up the next morning when Mory came to see him. After being welcomed and bid to sit down, Mory took from his pocket a little cloth bag, from which he pulled the promised amulet.

He handed it to Dady and said, "This amulet must remain in the bag and furthermore it must be wrapped in an untanned piece of rabbit skin, sewed carefully together. It must not spend the night at a shoemaker's. When it has been sewn into the rabbit skin, you will hand it over to Minignan and tell her to wear it in her hair night and day. She cannot take it off. You must insist that she follow these instructions to the letter."

Dady listened attentively. "I'll follow the instructions exactly,

and Minignan in her turn will see to it that the amulet is always in her hair. I'm willing to try the marabout's remedy, even if I already have some reason to doubt his supernatural powers. A marabout worthy of the name doesn't ask to be paid in advance. He waits until he has produced tangibly successful results. And he names no concrete amount, for God's name knows no price. If the customer is satisfied, he pays what he can, and a *real* marabout does not complain. However, I thank him, and also yourself, and I pray that God will help us all."

As soon as Mory had gone, Dady called his wife, showed her the amulet, and explained how it was to be employed.

"But how shall we get hold of a rabbit skin?" she demurred.

"Don't worry, Younger. My friend Gogan is a great rabbit hunter, as you know."

"Oh, I'd forgotten about him."

"I'll see him after lunch, and we'll have the rabbit skin by evening."

Minignan was burning with impatience and served lunch early that day. Dady, as impatient as she, gulped it down and went to call on the hunter.

"Good day, Gogan!"

"Good day, Little One!"

"Today you can call me whatever you like, so long as you do what I ask you."

"What can a poor fellow like myself do for the likes of you, Dady?"

"You can give me something you surely have, a rabbit skin."

"Oh, yes. I can have one for you by this evening when I come back from hunting. My dog Bêbi-Yereyé knows how to sniff out rabbits and outrun them. You can count on this old man."

Gogan was a lanky, loutish fellow with crooked legs and a little, round face, which was lit up by two protruding and generally tearful eyes. His chest, as muscular as that of a wrestler, was topped by a thick, long neck and a small head, which set him apart from his

brothers and sisters, all of them stunted and not at all athletic. His mouth was so crowded with teeth that he seemed to have far more than thirty-two.

"When can I fetch the skin?" asked Dady.

"Don't put yourself out, Little Brother. I'll come straight from the hunt and bring you both the rabbit and his skin."

"Thank you."

Toward four o'clock, Gogan, preceded by his faithful Bêbi-Yereyé—whose name meant "every man for himself"—set out to hunt. His cap, to which the villagers attributed unparalleled magic powers, prolonged his cone-shaped head to the rear. He wore a dingy yellow boubou and puffed trousers, both clotted with blood and studded with amulets as varied as they were mysterious. The garments were as stiff as a coat of mail and at the same time caused him to blend into the landscape. Actually, such camouflage was hardly necessary, for Gogan had a gift for making himself invisible when he was threatened by his prey or preparing to shoot it down. In his left hand, he held three clubs. An enormous knife hung from his waist by a cord of baobab fibers and slapped against his thigh as he walked. A large knapsack completed the outfit.

Bêbi-Yereyé proudly wore a crocodile-skin collar armed with long points. He ran back and forth, alternately holding his nose to the ground and pricking up his ears, his eyes gleaming. Soon he left the path, looked meaningfully at his master, and broke into a mad run. Gogan knew that the dog's acute sense of smell had already found a scent. He followed him, transferring one of the clubs to his right hand, ready to come to the dog's aid. These two beings lived in such harmony that they seemed to act as one. Gogan was not mistaken. All of a sudden, a big rabbit bounded out of the bush.

"Nab him, Bêbi-Yereyé, and don't let go! I'm waiting right over here."

The rabbit leaped higher and higher while the dog increased his speed, making occasional feints to confuse his prey. The rabbit reversed his course and headed toward Gogan. Bêbi-Yereyé was right

behind him. Gogan hid himself behind some tall grass and waited.

Now the rabbit was hemmed in. The combined actions of the two hunters left him no chance of escape. He made a high jump and was hit in full flight by the club that Gogan threw at him. He fell at the feet of the dog, who closed his teeth on the rabbit's throat.

"Give him to me, Bêbi-Yereyé! You're a chip off the old block! You'll go far. Tonight you'll get a good supper, won't you, boy!"

The dog laid the rabbit, which was still warm, at his master's feet, and Gogan put it in his knapsack. Before sundown, two more rabbits had bitten the dust.

Faithful to his promise, Gogan went straight to Dady's house.

"Good evening, Little One," he said as he arrived.

"Good evening, Gogan!"

The hunter drew the three rabbits from his knapsack and displayed them to Dady. "Choose the one you want," he said.

"But, Gogan, I don't care about the rabbit. I'm after only his skin," protested the delighted Dady.

"I promised you a rabbit, complete with skin, and that's what I've brought you."

When Dady hesitated, Gogan put the two smaller ones back into his sack, leaving no alternative to the biggest. Night had fallen when Gogan and his faithful hound reached home.

As soon as Gogan left, Dady called Minignan to come admire the rabbit in her turn. She was delighted with it. Her hope of soon having a baby had revived.

"What a beauty!" she exclaimed, stroking the animal's soft fur. "When are you going to skin him?"

"Right away," he replied.

Dady did not wait until daylight to skin the rabbit. The pelt had to be dried out as soon as possible. When it had been delicately peeled off, he hung it on the granary wall so that it would be exposed to a maximum of the sun's rays. A day later, it was completely dry. Dady removed it from the wall and took it to Makan the shoemaker.

"Good day," he said as he walked into the shop.

"Good day, Dady," the shoemaker replied. "To what do I owe the honor of your visit?"

"I've an urgent little job for you. I brought it to you in person, because it's a serious matter. You are to sew the amulet you see here into a piece of this rabbit skin. The job must be done before evening."

"Because your amulet mustn't pass the night under a shoemaker's roof, is that it?" Makan asked.

"Exactly. How did you guess?"

"From experience. The marabouts take this precaution because they don't want shoemakers to reveal their secrets."

Dady gave him the skin and the amulet. The shoemaker cut out a small rectangle of skin and folded the amulet into it. With a few strokes of his awl the task was done. He added a small thong with which to attach it to the hair.

"There you are!" he said, handing the amulet to Dady.

"How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing at all. I still haven't finished eating the meat you sent me the other day."

"Thank you," said Dady as he left.

When he got home, lunch was ready and Minignan had begun to eat in the kitchen.

"Younger, are you there?" called Dady.

"Yes, Elder. Lunch is ready. Shall I bring it to you?"

"Yes. But first come take the amulet. I know that you've been waiting impatiently. I oversaw the shoemaker's work to be sure that the marabout's orders were followed. Attach it to your hair immediately."

Minignan took the amulet, went to the mirror, and attached it firmly to one of her braids. Then she came back to show it to her husband and to serve his lunch. Dady ate with a good appetite.

When Minignan came to fetch the empty bowls, he said to her, "Younger, get yourself ready. After prayers, we'll go together to see the marabout, so that you can make his acquaintance."

"Yes, Elder."

Dady lay down in the hammock while Minignan hastily washed the dishes. After this, she had only to take a shower and begin her long-drawn-out toilet. Dady was dozing when he heard the voice of the muezzin. He leaped up, rubbed his eyes, and asked his wife for water with which to make his ablutions.

Once prayers were over, Dady and Minignan picked up old Fourougnoniouman and went to Mory's. Mory had gone to a nearby market to sell the rolls of cotton that he had woven during the week. The usual visitors were not there, and the marabout and his wife were alone in the shade.

"Good day, Karamoko," said Dady as he entered.

"Good day, Dady. How is your wife?"

"Very well. She has come with me to make your acquaintance."

Minignan approached the marabout, kneeled down, and greeted him.

"I am happy to know you," he said. "For several days we've been busying ourselves with your affairs. I'm told that you've lost all hope of having a child. This hope I can restore. You'll have children, if God wills it. My encounter with your husband is a sign of the Almighty's intention of acquainting you with the joys of motherhood."

"I brought my wife," Dady interposed, "in order that she might know her benefactor. She is already wearing the amulet sewn into a rabbit skin, just as you ordered. I saw to it personally that the shoemaker did exactly what you said."

"If that's so, then my work will succeed. Remember that your wife must wear the amulet at all times."

"Even when I comb my hair?" put in Minignan.

"You can do that without its leaving your person. While you're combing your hair, you can hold it in your hand or even tie it to your wrist."

The marabout was burning with eagerness to claim the rest of his payment, but he could not decently do so in Mory's absence. So for the moment he had to hold back.

While Dady and the marabout continued to talk, the latter's wily wife drew Minignan aside and struck up a conversation that she artfully turned to the subject of Nakaridia. But Minignan, ingenuous though she was, did not fall into the trap. She had no wish to confide family secrets to a stranger—even if the stranger was her marabout's wife—who, moreover, did not inspire her with confidence. She looked over at Dady and fluttered her eyelids, a subtle signal that he understood.

At this moment, there was a clamor of voices from the outside, signaling the arrival of some of the marabout's other clients. Dady took advantage of this interruption to ask permission to leave and, with his two companions, went away. Husband and wife escorted Fourougnoniouman back to her house and then went lightheartedly home.

Mory did not return until dusk. The marabout was waiting. Mory greeted him, then went into the house to take a rapid shower and came back to the marabout.

"Good evening, Karamoko," he said.

"Good evening, Mory. Did you do good business today?"

"Not at all. I sold only an arm's length of cotton, and that only at the last minute."

"I didn't want to discourage you when you left this morning, but I knew that it wasn't a favorable day. You set off in the direction of the spirits most unlucky for business. I could only pray for you all day long. Consider youself lucky to have come back safe and sound, and praise God."

"Thank you, Karamoko," Mory replied briefly.

"I almost forgot to tell you," the marabout went on, "Dady and his wife came by to see me today. She was wearing the amulet I had prescribed. In your absence, I refrained from asking for my payment."

"But, Karamoko, I thought that payment was to be made only after your work was successfully over—that is, on the day when Minignan bears a child."

"Not so! That's the way of petty marabouts who aren't sure of themselves, which is not the case with me. I promise success with certainty. I know God's familiar name, and when I call on Him by it, He replies. On this subject, I tolerate no doubt. And Dady, who knows about such things, will bear me out. He will surely make payment on demand. Actually, I set no date for the accomplishment of my work. I'll do so only when he has paid me. So tell him to come see us tomorrow morning."

Mory realized that the marabout's greed had caused him to lose his common sense. He couldn't help saying that, in a case like this, it was nobler and more honest to wait for two or three days before demanding payment. Reluctantly, the marabout yielded to this advice.

Three days went by without Dady's giving any sign of life, and all this time the marabout assailed Mory's ears with his importunities. How was he to dun Dady for the payment of a job whose success was highly problematical? This was the question ringing in Mory's head on the morning of the fourth day, when Dady came to see him.

"Good day," Dady said as he came in.

"Good morning, Dady. You're an early bird today. What's on your mind?"

"Nothing special. I came three days ago with Minignan to pay my respects to the marabout and to show him that the amulet had been sewn into the rabbit skin according to his instructions. You were away, it seems."

"Yes. I went to the market at Kata and got home late in the evening. Karamoko told me you'd been here. Indeed, he seized the opportunity to speak of his payment."

"I imagined something of the sort. If I didn't turn up for three days afterward, it's because I wasn't well. But I know the marabouts and their love of money only too well. So I've come now with the three thousand francs I promised to pay. I'm paying up not because I'm sure that he'll make a go of it but rather to fan the hopes of my wife."

"You're pulling a thorn from my foot," said Mory, taking the money. "Let's deliver it to the marabout right now."

They went to where the marabout was sitting in the courtyard and, after the conventional greetings, sat down beside him. He welcomed Dady warmly, but the latter was not taken in by his hypocrisy.

"Karamoko," said Mory, "Dady has come with the three thousand francs. He's sorry to have delayed, but he hasn't been well."

The marabout took the money, scratched his pocket three times, and tucked it under his cushion. Then he burst into expressions of gratitude and blessings.

"Mory," he said, "convey my thanks to Dady. I see that he's an honest man. He's paid in full, and now I have a debt to him, which I shall repay. If, after three months at the most, his wife isn't pregnant, I'll give him the money back in full."

Upon this, Dady withdrew and went home.

Minignan was glad to hear that Dady had paid up, because otherwise, she thought, the amulet might lose its power. Hope surged up within her, and she began to wait impatiently for the new moon to see whether or not she had wet more than her feet and was "in the mainstream." But no sooner did the new moon rise than she felt the usual premenstrual symptoms, and three days later she menstruated.

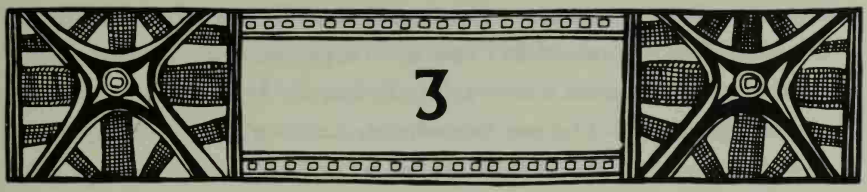
Some days after this, Dady was astonished to hear that the marabout had left Ganda under cover of night. At once he went to ask Mory for an explanation. Mory told him that the marabout had received bad news from his family and was obliged to leave in a hurry, promising, however, a speedy return.

Dady was speechless. Finally he said with a sigh, "I wager he'll never come back."

The next two new moons brought no change in Minignan's condition, and she became sadder than ever. Her despair was all the greater inasmuch as she had put all her faith in the amulet. Hadn't her husband and old Fourougnoniouman sworn to have seen the baby conjured up by the marabout? In spite of their efforts, she was

inconsolable. In the weeks and months that followed, she became more and more morose. Dady's mood was equally black, for he could find no more words with which to cheer her.

Months went by without news of the marabout. He was never to return.



3

That year the rainy season came early. The fields were plowed and sown before the usual time, but just when the young corn most needed water there was an unexpected drought, which filled the farmers with despair. It was urgent to consult the omens and make the offerings necessary to propitiate the gods.

There was in the region a famous hunter called Djinémakan. He was an expert in geomancy whose fame extended over many rivers. The village notables called him in, and so he came to Ganda. In the presence of the council of elders, Djinémakan spread some sand on the ground and undertook his consultations.

"I see the inevitable," he told them. "You must sacrifice four goats: one to the east, one to the west, one toward the land of salt, and one toward the land of kola. All the elders of the village must be present at the sacrifice. After this, the rain will pour down hard enough to carry away your houses. Djinémakan has spoken."

After this conclusion, he scooped up his little pile of sand and put it back in a bag that he dropped in the wide pocket of his medicine man's boubou.

The sacrifices took place an hour later. The village chief and all the notables were present, as Djinémakan had prescribed. The next

day, the village woke up to a torrential rain, which destroyed a number of houses. The rain didn't stop until every trace of the blood shed by the sacrificed goats had been washed away. Djinémakan became the village idol, and he was overwhelmed with gifts of all kinds.

In spite of his many disappointments, Dady had not given up the struggle to have a child by Minignan. Without mentioning it to her, he went to the place where the famous geomancer was staying. To his surprise, he found that the village idol was a friend of his youth whom he had forgotten. They had known each other more than twenty years before at Bougou, where Dady had spent part of his adolescence. Their joy at meeting again was matched only by their astonishment. At once Dady asked his old friend about the course of his life since the time when they had lost track of each other. Djinémakan told of his many adventures and of how he had chosen to become a hunter and how he had learned geomancy. As for Dady, he had fewer adventures to narrate, having rarely left his native place. But he told of his marriage to Minignan and of the trouble he had had with Nakaridia. Obviously everything centered on his chief preoccupation, his wife's sterility.

Djinémakan understood Dady's purpose, and that same evening the two men met at the latter's house. Meanwhile, Dady informed his wife of his discovery and of the prospect of Djinémakan's visit. Minignan tendered him a sisterly welcome.

After the two men had devoured the chicken that she had prepared in honor of Djinémakan's visit, they sent her back to her own hut. Then, by the light of the gas lantern, Djinémakan emptied his pouch of sand onto the ground and with his finger began to trace some magic signs in it. Several times he wiped out the signs and retraced them until he obtained the curious geometrical figures he was after. Then he stopped abruptly and raised his eyes to Dady.

"Cut the lemon, Dady!" This expression means that the magician has seen the inevitable.

Dady's curiosity was aroused. He pricked up his ears like a prisoner awaiting sentence.

"Cut the lemon, Dady!" Djinémakan repeated. "Your wife will have a daughter within a year at most. You have no more sacrifices to make except for a short trip. You'll go with her to another village, any one at all, provided it lies at a distance of a three-day march from here. There you'll meet a providential person of nondescript appearance who will be instrumental in giving you a daughter slated for great things. That's all I can tell you."

Dady was dumbstruck. After the miracle of the rain, Djinémakan's word could not be doubted. The first outburst of his joy was a call to his wife.

"Minignan, come here and listen to what Djinémakan has just told me!"

The young woman was almost trembling when she arrived. "What is it, Elder?" she asked as she came into the hut.

Djinémakan did not give Dady time to reply, but told her what he had just seen in the sand. Minignan could not believe her ears, but she too was mindful of the rain. Perhaps, she said to herself, this one isn't like the others. Her sorrow of the past months disappeared as if by magic. She sat down and took part in the two men's conversation until late at night. She would have liked to see Djinémakan repeat his experiment, but he had already put his precious sand back into the pouch and she had to content herself with the account Dady gave her after their guest had gone away.

All night long, Dady planned the trip in his imagination. He had to choose among a number of villages a three-day march distant from Ganda. Finally, he remembered that at Kata he had another childhood friend by the name of Bouakari, so he set this village as his destination. The next day, preparations were begun. While Minignan prepared the peanut couscous that they would eat during the three days of travel, Dady engaged a porter to carry their bedclothes and cooking utensils. Before setting the day of departure, he went to consult Djinémakan, who advised the fourteenth day of the moon. This was Saturday the twelfth, and Monday the fourteenth was, by custom, considered a lucky day.

Early that morning, Dady, Minignan, and the porter left Ganda. The first day's march was so difficult for Minignan that Dady nearly chose another village so that the little caravan could proceed more slowly and yet keep to the same three-day schedule. Fortunately, Minignan recovered her strength overnight, so the change did not have to be made. Perhaps it was the hope of having a child that restored her resolve, for she was of good cheer and got through the second stage with no signs of fatigue.

On the morning of the third day, they came to Kata. It was a market day, and the little square was already crowded with merchants and buyers. Dady looked in vain for the fields where he had gamboled as a carefree child. The village had grown beyond its protective walls and now spread out over the formerly empty terrain. How, he wondered, could he find the house of his friend Bouakari?

At this very moment, someone hailed him. Turning around, he saw his friend. Doubt gave way to rejoicing as the two men embraced. Dady introduced Minignan, and Bouakari, having relieved the newcomers of their bundles, led them to his house. His wife was in the kitchen when they arrived.

"Younger, come here!" Bouakari called out. "An illustrious visitor awaits you."

The porter, whom they had forgotten to dismiss, showed signs of impatience. Bouakari went with many apologies to help him unload. Bouakari's wife came to kneel down before Dady, who responded to her greeting and added teasingly, "The favorite one of all your husbands has come to see you. Bouakari has no place here. Let him go off with this ugly duckling I've brought with me from Ganda!"

"Of course!" she answered laughingly.

"Meanwhile, bring our visitors a drink of water," Bouakari interposed.

Adiata—this was her name—went off and returned with a calabash filled with *niofaran*, a beverage made of water, flour, and honey. She held it out to Dady, who drank his fill and then passed it

to Minignan. She took a polite sip and handed it back to Adiata. The hostess then carried it to the porter, who was squatting in a corner of the vestibule. He drank at length before returning the empty calabash to Adiata. Dady paid the porter his wages, and the latter started back to Ganda, taking with him the remains of the couscous.

Bouakari's home, like all the others in that region, consisted of a circular courtyard surrounded by huts built of mud and sun-dried bricks, joined together by walls some nine feet high. In the middle was the traditional seating area covered by an awning and, at the far end, to the west, a cylindrical granary with a pointed thatch roof. Two of the huts were reserved for visitors, and Adiata hastily swept one of these for the benefit of the new arrivals. Dady and his wife settled in after a refreshing warm bath. Minignan proceeded to enjoy a well-deserved rest until lunchtime, while Dady and Bouakari indulged in the exchange of endless tales of days gone by.

Finally Adiata served the two men lunch. At this moment, Bouakari's two little boys arrived, each carrying a dead lizard. They had gone hunting after their class in the morning and had now come back for the noon meal.

"Come and greet your father!" Bouakari called out when he saw them.

The boys threw down the lizards and ran to meet Dady.

"Are these your children by Adiata?" Dady asked his friend.

"Yes," Bouakari replied. "Before them we had a girl who died of measles when she was three months old."

"You're a lucky fellow, though!" Dady exclaimed. "I haven't yet had the joy of a child, and my wife is very unhappy about it."

"How's that, Dady? Have you consulted marabouts and medicine men?"

"Oh, I've tried everything, and to no avail. That's what is so distressing."

"You mustn't be discouraged," said Bouakari consolingly.

The two men and the children lunched together, while Minignan

and Adiata ate in the kitchen. Minignan noticed a third plate of rice and couldn't help asking her hostess for whom it was intended.

"It's for an old woman to whom my husband offered hospitality a couple of years ago. She's originally from Ganda, from which she claims to have been absent for more than twenty years. She lives in the hut over there by the granary."

"She's from Ganda, is she?" Minignan asked with astonishment.

"Yes," replied Adiata.

At once, Minignan longed to make the old woman's acquaintance, but she didn't show it. It might be a relative, she said to herself. In the afternoon, the two women went together to the stream to wash the corn and to bring back water for household use. Then they prepared dinner together. That evening, dinner was served early in order for the visitors to catch up on their sleep. After supper, the old woman came as usual to express her gratitude to Bouakari. Minignan had gone to bed early and was not present, but she got up early the next morning and went, with two cakes of black soap, to the old woman's hut.

"Good day, Mother," she addressed her.

"Good day, Little Daughter. Did you sleep well? How are the children?" The old woman thought she was speaking to Adiata and only became aware of her mistake when Minignan sat down beside her and gave her the two cakes of soap.

"What! You're not Adiata," she exclaimed.

"No, Mother. I'm a stranger from Ganda. I came here only yesterday."

"From Ganda?"

"Yes."

"And what's your name?"

"Minignan Konaté."

"From which family?"

"I'm the daughter of Balémori Konaté."

"And your mother's name?"

"Siata."

"Is she still alive?"

"No. She died two years after my father."

"So you're an orphan?"

"Yes, I am."

Tears welled up in the old woman's eyes. The names that she had just heard were not new. They belonged to dear ones whom she had been forced to leave under painful circumstances. While she wiped away her tears, Minignan began to weep without really knowing the reason.

"Do you know why I am crying, girl?" the old woman asked.

"No."

"I'm crying because the man you call father is my cousin. Now I understand why, ever since yesterday, the lid of my left eye has been quivering," she said.

Minignan couldn't believe her ears.

"I'm Nadia Konaté," the old woman went on. "I left my family under circumstances so painful that, for twenty years, I've never even dreamed of returning. My parents married me off to a man from Diabatera. Like all the young girls in those days, I never saw my husband until the day of the wedding. I had trouble adapting myself to his family. He himself, I admit, never did me any harm. But his mother, brothers, and sisters submitted me to all sorts of physical and mental tortures. They reproached me because after two years of marriage I had no child. My husband, of course, was deeply regretful, but he could do nothing to protect me from the hatred of his family. I was the object of constant provocation and humiliation. One day, the family got together, decreed that I was a witch, and called upon my husband to repudiate me. I was sent back to my own family, where the treatment I received was little better. The plot thickened until the whole village was up in arms against me. In my great trouble, no eye looked upon me with mercy. I left Ganda covered with ashes and followed by catcalls.

"Running like a madwoman, I took an unfamiliar trail, heedless of where it might lead me. I traveled, with no goal in mind, from

village to village, eating only two or three times a week, subsisting on scraps that kindly souls threw to me. One day, I came to a village far, far from here, in the region of Bougouni, where a man had just lost his wife and been left with a three-month-old baby girl. He was looking for a woman to take care of the child, and so, after six months, Divine Providence came to my aid. I was hired in return for board and whatever old clothes might occasionally be given me. I was treated as humanely as a poor pariah can be. The child loved me like a mother and never left my side. Her affection made up to me for all my woes, and she took the place of parents, husband, and friends. After three years, I finally found friendliness and was considered a member of the family. Thus I had my reward. The girl grew up quite normally until the year of her excision when, alas, she was bitten by a snake and died. She was my nearest and dearest, the only person who ever truly loved me, and I was inconsolable. After this tragic event, I made up my mind to return to my native region, but not to Ganda."

"But, Mother, why didn't you remarry?" Minignan asked her.

"Because I was disgusted with the race of men. And with no mother, brothers, or cousins, how could I hope to find a husband?"

Minignan listened compassionately. As she was about to take her leave, the old woman asked, "Why didn't you come with at least one of your children?"

"I've no children, Mother, although I've been married five years," said Minignan, rubbing her eyes.

"No children?"

"Not a single one."

"And what has your husband done about it?"

"Everything a generous-hearted man can do."

"Well, Daughter, be of good cheer! You'll bear children. I've told you my life story and all my sufferings. But even if I haven't had riches or what you could call good luck, there is a compensation. I have an infallible secret cure for every sort of sterility. Go and be happy! Divine Providence has sent you here. Come back to see me later, with your husband."

Minignan had firmly in mind Djinémakan's prediction, which had brought Dady and herself hither. Old Nadia was of nondescript appearance and truly providential, just as he had described her. There could be no doubt that she fitted his description. Minignan went joyfully back to the hut where she had left her husband.

Dady was surprised by her early-morning good humor. "Younger, what makes you so happy?"

"I've just found the providential person of whom Djinémakan told us. It's an old woman who turns out to be a relative, a cousin of my father." She gave him a brief summary of the old woman's story and added, "She wants us to go see her together."

"Good! We'll go after breakfast," Dady assented.

Minignan went to greet Bouakari and his wife, and the two women set about preparing their husbands' favorite dish of cornmeal mush. In the course of eating, Dady turned the conversation to the subject of the old woman. Bouakari's praise succeeded in convincing him that she did, indeed, fit Djinémakan's description.

Soon after this, Dady and Minignan went to see Nadia. Dady told her of his misadventures with the marabouts and of all the futile sacrifices he had made in order to have a child.

"My son," said the old woman, "you need make no more sacrifices. My prescription is infallible. There is only one difficulty. I need some elephant sperm, which is one of the ingredients of my remedy. Find this, and you'll have results within a month. Yes, that's what I said. One month!"

Dady was momentarily discouraged by the difficulty of procuring this essential ingredient. He went to speak about it to Bouakari, who was not a bit nonplused. Obviously he had a clue.

Actually, Bouakari remembered once having acquired some elephant sperm himself. "Look here," he said after a moment's reflection. "I know who might get us some. There's an elephant hunter called Djinémakan, whom I met here in the village. The only problem is to lay hands on him, because he's always on the trail of the elephant herds."

Dady started when he heard Djinémakan's name. "But I know

him, too," he exclaimed. "He was at Ganda when we left. In fact, he's the one who advised us to make this journey."

"Well, since you know him and have communicated with him just recently, he'll be glad to oblige you. The main thing is to get hold of him. I know a local friend of his who may be able to help us. He lives not far away, and we'll go see him later on."

A short time afterward, the two men went to the house of Moro, another renowned elephant hunter. He was preparing for an expedition and received his visitors standing and leaning on his old flintlock rifle.

"I've come with a friend newly arrived from Ganda," Bouakari began. "We have an urgent need to get in touch with your friend Djinémakan, and we don't know how to find him. Perhaps you can tell us how to reach him between today and tomorrow."

"You're lucky to have found me at home," replied Moro. "I'm just on my way to meet Djinémakan at our common hunting station. If he keeps the appointment, I'll relay your message, and perhaps we'll come back here together this very evening for a celebration that all the hunters of the region are preparing to hold in his honor two days from now."

"We're lucky, indeed," said Bouakari, taking leave of Moro. And as the two of them went away, he said to Dady, "Divine Providence is still on our side. This is a favorable omen, eh?"

"Yes. I believe you now," Dady responded.

Moro did meet up with Djinémakan at the rendezvous point, and the two men came back in the evening to Kata. Soon after they arrived, Moro sent his son to inform Bouakari and his friend. This news caused the whole household to rejoice. After supper, the four men met at Moro's house, where Djinémakan gave the visitors a hearty welcome. Moro initiated the conversation.

"Bouakari, I carried out your errand, as I promised this morning. We came back together, and I sent you word immediately of our arrival."

"We got the message and decided to come see you without delay."

"Now I shall leave you alone with Djinémakan," Moro proposed.

"Your presence is no intrusion. In fact, it may be useful, since you're on such close terms with him."

"Good! Then I'll stay."

There was no need of informing Djinémakan of Dady's family situation, since he already knew the problem. So Bouakari at once laid out the purpose of the present visit.

"We've come to Djinémakan," he said, "in order to ask him a favor which he alone can do. Our friend Dady Konaté wants to obtain some elephant sperm, the essential ingredient of a certain medical prescription. Djinémakan is eminently able to get it for us. He has surely already guessed what it will be used for, since, if I'm correctly informed, he was the one to propose that my friend and his wife undertake the journey which has brought them to Kata."

When Bouakari had spoken, Moro, who had listened attentively, transmitted the gist of his remarks to Djinémakan. The hunter, without saying a word, stood up and took down a bag hung on a nail in the wall. From it he extracted a leather box containing a small white cube of something that looked like alum.

Handing the cube to Moro, he said, "Our friends are really lucky. This is all I have left, and I'm happy to be useful to my old friend Dady by giving it to him."

Dady's eyes lit up at this manifestation of Divine Providence. They all thanked Djinémakan, and then the visitors made their way back to Bouakari's house.

"I'll take the sperm to Nadia immediately," said Dady, "unless by chance she's already sleeping."

"She doesn't sleep so early," Bouakari told him. "I'm sure she goes to bed later than we."

Sure enough, when Dady came to the old woman's door, he found that she was still awake and busy grinding up some sort of mixture in a mortar.

"Good evening, Mother," he greeted her as he entered the hut.

"Good evening, my son. Sit down!"

Dady seated himself and then took from his pocket the little

white cube wrapped in a piece of cloth. He handed it to the old woman.

She examined it and said, "It's genuine elephant sperm, all right. Meanwhile, since you left me this morning, I haven't been idle. I went out in the fields to gather the components of the drug that I shall prescribe. Everything is ready. Only the sperm was lacking. Come back tomorrow morning and get the medicine."

Dady thanked her and returned to his hut.

"What?" he exclaimed to Minignan. "You aren't asleep yet?"

"No, Elder. I was waiting to hear the results of your evening before going to bed."

"Well, you can be happy. Everything's going swimmingly. I got the sperm and turned it over to Nadia, who'll have the prescription ready by tomorrow morning."

"Here's hoping this time we don't fail!"

"I'm sure we won't," Dady reassured her. "So many signs of good luck can't lead up to failure."

Next morning Dady went to see the old woman. She had risen with the first cock's crow and finished putting the medicine together.

"Here's my prescription, Son," she said. "Every evening, beginning with today, you and your wife are to dissolve a pinch of this in a meat broth and drink it. It has a disagreeable taste, but it's definitely efficacious."

Dady took the medicine and thanked her profusely. That very evening, and every one thereafter, he and Minignan drank a broth to which a pinch of the mixture had been added. After the third dose, Dady began to feel more virile than ever before.

The new moon appeared a fortnight later, and Minignan waited anxiously for the usual signs of menstruation. The date came and went without its appearance. Dady also watched out for the fatal date, and he was overjoyed when, three weeks later, Minignan told him that she had not yet menstruated. He was eager to tell his old friend Bouakari and Nadia, but Minignan was more cautious.

"Let's wait until next month," she opined. "If I still don't menstruate, then we can proclaim our success."

Little by little, however, she felt herself growing heavier. She hadn't the energy to go about her daily tasks and underwent intermittent attacks of nausea. By the end of the third month, there could be no doubt but that she was pregnant; her belly was obviously distended.

Old Nadia took Minignan under her care. She told Dady that he should under no circumstances take his wife back to Ganda until after the baby was born. Every day, she gave Minignan a dose of *boum*, a calcium derivative that pregnant women of the northern sector of the Ivory Coast still take today, which seems to have the effect of fortifying the fetus.

As for Dady, he went once a month to Ganda to look after his affairs. Minignan's pregnancy developed normally until, one Thursday morning, she felt acute pains in her abdomen. When old Nadia was alerted, she came to the scene at once to help and saw that Minignan was in labor.

"Easy, easy, Daughter," she said. "In just a few minutes, when you hear the first wails of the little one now stirring in your belly, you'll be wild with joy."

And soon enough, the welcome wail was heard.

"It's a girl!" the old woman exclaimed. "A beautiful girl!"

A girl was what Minignan wanted. And the old woman announced the birth in a singsong to Bouakari and Dady, who were waiting in the courtyard.

"What has she given us?" Dady asked impatiently.

"A lovely little girl. Now I must tidy up Minignan and her daughter. As soon as I've finished, you can come see them."

Dady was beside himself with joy. His first thought was to buy some guinea hens for his wife. The two men went at once to Boukini the bird dealer and chose a half dozen of his fattest hens. Dady promptly wrung the necks of two of them in order to make a soup seasoned with black pepper, which new mothers are supposed to eat

for the first week after childbirth. Old Nadia, who with the aid of Bouakari's wife had effected a rapid toilet of mother and child, came to fetch Dady and his friend.

Dady was the first to enter the hut. Sitting down beside Minignan, he said, "Younger, our cup is running over. Let us thank the Almighty and pray for your swift recovery."

Minignan smiled a trifle wanly, and Bouakari and Dady leaned over the angelic face of the newborn baby.

"She's a pretty one!" Bouakari exclaimed. "I count myself lucky in sharing your happiness. May God grant that she grow up straight and strong and live a long life!"

Dady beat his forehead and said "Amen" to each of Bouakari's words. As soon as the two men left the hut, Bouakari sent a messenger to make the customary announcement to the village chief.

Dady came back to his wife after lunch to consult her about sending someone to Ganda to bring the good news to their relatives and friends.

"How's your daughter, Younger?" he asked, coming into the hut.

"She's sleeping, see," said Minignan.

"I want to send a bearer of the good news to Ganda," Dady told her. "Have you any suggestions?"

"All I can suggest is that you take special care to inform Fourougnoniouman."

"Yes, of course. My intention is that she shall be the first to know, and I'll charge her with passing on the word to our relatives and friends."

"And tell her to be sure to tell Nakaridia."

"Oh, yes! I nearly forgot her. Rest assured, Younger, Nakaridia will know. As a matter of fact, the announcement of your confinement will create such a sensation in Ganda that not even the deaf will fail to hear."

The next morning, a messenger went straight from Kata to old Fourougnoniouman. Two days later, the news reached Ganda with the effect of a bombshell. Fourougnoniouman summoned up her re-

maining strength and broke into a lame dance step. She then went straight to her cousin Mory and burst into song as soon as she saw him seated at his loom. Mory, guessing that she was the bearer of good news, leaped up and rushed to meet her.

"What is it, Cousin?" he asked after a hasty greeting.

"I just heard the best news of my life! Minignan gave birth to a daughter five days ago at Kata. A messenger from Dady has just arrived."

"Hurrah!" Mory exclaimed. "What a joy for Dady and Minignan! A miracle, I call it."

"Dady has asked me to spread the news among our relatives and our friends. But the task is too much for me, and I've come to ask you to take it on in my place."

"Gladly, Cousin. You needn't have asked. I'll tell everybody, including Nakaridia."

"Thank you, Cousin. I don't want to hold you back. The messenger will be returning to Kata tomorrow morning, and I hope I can send word to Dady that the mission has been accomplished."

"Don't worry. It shall be done."

The old woman went away, still singing with joy.

Before nightfall, everybody in Ganda knew that Minignan the barren had finally given birth to a daughter. "A miracle!" many of them said.

Only Nakaridia refused to believe it, but misfortune was soon to chastise her. Nakaridia's daughter, within three years of her marriage, had had two children. Now, soon after the birth of Minignan's baby, an epidemic of measles struck the village and within a week carried both of these children away. Nakaridia collapsed and went desperately from medicine man to medicine man to find out the cause of the tragedy. It was then that she learned that her misfortune was a punishment for the evil that her jealousy had pushed her to visit upon an innocent young woman. She could not but realize that this meant the enmity she had shown to Minignan.

The medicine men told her that her sorrows were not yet at an

end. The only way to stave them off, they told her, was to make a public confession and to ask the forgiveness of her victim. Confess publicly having done such wicked things? Beg Minignan's forgiveness? What humiliation! And yet such shame would not make a long-lasting mark on the memory of man. Between this passing ordeal and the succession of misfortunes that the medicine men had predicted, Nakaridia chose the humiliation. But how could she get in touch with Minignan and her husband, who were still at Kata? To go there was out of the question. Nakaridia did not know where to turn.

Two months went by after Minignan's confinement, and the happy mother was anxious to display her accomplishment to Ganda. But the baby was not yet sufficiently developed to endure such a long journey. Only at the end of the third month did old Nadia allow Dady and his wife to go home. They looked for a propitious day to start.

Then, Dady, Minignan, and the baby, accompanied by the faithful Bouakari, set out on the three-day journey to their own village. Although they arrived at the gate to the village very early on the third day, the little caravan waited until nightfall to enter. The next morning, all the inhabitants learned that Dady and his wife had returned with their little daughter. A procession of well-wishers came to greet them and to ascertain that Minignan had actually borne a child.

Three days later, the young couple was surprised to see their arch-enemy Nakaridia in one of these groups of visitors. After the guests had voiced their greetings and sat down, Bouakari asked for their news.

"This house is like our own," said their spokesman. "We have come here on good days and on bad. May God stave off all evils! Today we are carrying out a special mission entrusted to us by the village elders. Our sister Nakaridia, here present, is guilty of malevolence toward this house. She has recognized her guilt and has con-

fessed it to the elders, petitioning them to intervene with Dady on her behalf in order to obtain his forgiveness. The presence of Bouakari, who is a stranger to us all, is a favorable omen. Since God sent him here to us, we beg him to be our mediator with Dady and above all with his wife."

Minignan, who had stayed inside her hut, now came out triumphantly with her baby slung over her back and greeted everybody, even Nakaridia. Bouakari acquainted her with the visitors' mission. She listened attentively and replied without malice.

"Elder, what do you say? My will is yours."

"Let us forgive, Younger," Dady responded.

Then Nakaridia, her eyes filled with tears, got up and knelt down before Dady with her hands behind her back.

"For the love of God, forgive me for all the harm I did you!"

At these words, Minignan could not hold back her tears. She and her husband said together, "With all our hearts we forgive you."

The deputation thanked them and went away.

Shortly after this, Dady, Bouakari, Fourougnoniouman, and Minignan discussed the name to be given to the child. Up to now, they had called her "Moussokoura," that is, "new woman." Now, at Minignan's suggestion, they decided upon "Masseni," a proverbial name composed of the words *ma* (mother) and *seni* (gold) and meaning "you are dearer to me than my mother and more precious than all the gold in the world."

The next morning, the assembly of notables, which had sent the previous day's deputation, came to thank Dady and his wife for their magnanimity. Dady took advantage of the occasion to announce the date of his daughter's baptism and to invite the notables to attend. When the baptismal day came, the Iman proclaimed the child's name, Dady killed a steer whose meat was distributed to every family in the village, and all the guests received gifts. After the festivities were over, Dady gave Fourougnoniouman the young bull and the heifer that he and his wife had promised her.

"I shall never be able to thank you enough for this priceless gift," said the old woman, weeping with happiness. "But even more precious is the joy of holding Minignan's child in my arms."

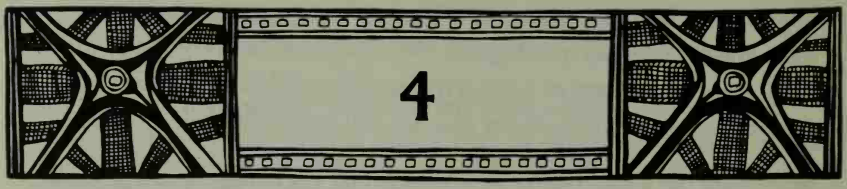
Masseni's still unshaped face already revealed the pure lineaments of an angelic beauty. As she grew, quite normally, Minignan decked her with gold and precious pearls. No girl in the region had more loving care or a better upbringing. As soon as she could walk, her little wrists were weighed down with gold bracelets and her ears with gold rings. These jewels became her slim little bronzed body as if it had been especially created to wear them. Her plump little neck, encircled with rings, was already elongating in a way that Black Africans greatly admire. Her perfectly oval face was lit up by black eyes as bright as those of a bird. With every passing year, she acquired greater beauty and charm. At the age of seven, she was intelligent and hard-working, never allowing her mother to perform household chores without lending a hand. She learned to cook, spin cotton, and use indigo dye. In short, she learned diligently to be a woman, as if she knew what her fate was to be.

At twelve, her figure took shape. Her perfect bust rested above a sylphlike waist. Two succulent, impeccably rounded globes adorned her chest, two beacons that swept before her all the morning fogs of life. All this was enhanced by incomparably shapely hips. Already she was a perfectly formed woman. She went with her friends to neighboring markets to sell kola nuts. It was then that her beauty inspired the poet Bacounandi to write this song:

> "Masseni, the morning star envies the brightness of your eyes;
> The horse's tail is jealous of your black locks;
> Rice covets the whiteness of your teeth;
> The vase seeks, in vain, to equal the length of your neck,
> And the palm tree the slenderness of your waist.
> Your limbs have no visible joints,
> Yet you are as supple as a cat,
> As light as a flake of cotton.

Dance, Masseni, dance heedless of the jealousies you arouse!
No girl here can match you!"

Her unusual charms attracted not only young men, but all the other girls of the village as well. Good humor, gaiety, and graciousness made her sought-after as a friend. Her only weakness was pride. But, in her place, who wouldn't have been proud?



4

Other days, other ways. The youth of those times knew nothing of the cares of the youth of today. A life led out close to nature was, in many instances, far more poetic. And an upbringing based from childhood on respect for tradition continued through adolescence under the discipline of the young people's associations. Outdoor work, a variety of sports from foot races to horseback riding, games, and dance made for a strong physique.

What, then, were these associations and what part did they play in village life? This we shall see in the present chapter. Generally made up of young people of both sexes and of the same age group, these clubs combined adolescents and adults, sometimes from the same neighborhood, sometimes from several, for the purpose of encouraging friendliness, comradeship, and mutual aid. They were directed by committees consisting of a president, vice-president, judge, one or more lawyers, a referee, and a bailiff charged with enforcement of the rules, who was actually the most active officer. The offices of president and of vice-president were open to young girls. And every girl had a cavalier entrusted with her protection within the association and also in the village generally.

Members had multiple and varied tasks to perform. There were

public works in the neighborhood, and the construction of huts for members in what was called the "young people's alley." The latter were veritable beaver operations that permitted the clubs to mass-produce its members' huts. Then there were the services rendered at marriages, baptisms, burials, and to the ill and injured. In addition to her cavalier, every girl had an official lover, who was not necessarily a member of the club. The cavalier was designated by the association, whereas the lover and his girl chose each other freely but maintained a purely platonic relationship. The cavalier was responsible for her protection, and the lover was responsible to the girl's future husband and to her family for her virginity.

The way a young man declared his love to a young girl was picturesque and poetical. They met, usually, on a market day in their native village or in one nearby. The young lover, accompanied by several friends, sent the girl, by one of these friends, a wand, preferably white and easy to break. The envoy gave the wand to the girl and supplied the information that it came from this or that one of his comrades, who had already made her acquaintance. The girl either accepted the wand or bluntly rejected it. If she accepted, she broke it in two and sent one piece back to the giver. This meant that his declaration of love was not refused, but neither did it receive yes for an answer. On the next market day, the envoy presented himself again to solicit a further response. Upon which the girl asked the ritual question "Does a leaf rot the day it falls into the water?"

This question signified postponement until yet another market day, but with the tacit promise of a favorable reply. The third time, the lover came with his best friends, and the girl likewise. Again the envoy presented himself to ask for her response, and the girl replied, "The wand has caught fire." Within the week, the happy suitor called on the girl's mother and gave her ten white kola nuts. The mother, already alerted by her daughter, accepted the nuts and informed her sisters and cowives, if she had any. All this was a women's affair, and the father was not supposed to know. From then on, the girl spent the nights with her lover but went home before

sunrise. The pattern continued until she was married or broke up with her lover.

The lover was responsible to the community for her virginity. The relationship could last for several years, and there were periodic checks to verify the girl's chastity. If, during one of these examinations or at her marriage, the girl was found to be no longer a virgin, a tribunal of elders met and pronounced severe sanctions, often exile, against the guilty lover—that is, if he did not voluntarily banish himself before hearing the court's sentence. These rules were so scrupulously observed that infractions occurred no more than once or twice a decade. Such sexual discipline obliged young people to master their impulses and ultimately had a beneficial effect on the society's sexual morals.

The lover's heavy responsibility gave him a right to expect equally good conduct on the part of the girl. If, for instance, she fell in love with another man, the official lover had a right to spy on her and, if he caught her in an illicit act with his rival, to seize the latter's bedclothes, which, under the escort of himself and his friends, the girl had to carry to the village chief. The seized objects became the property of the official lover, and the unfaithful girl was subjected to corporal punishment sometimes amounting to fifty lashes of a whip.

Like all her contemporaries, Masseni joined the local association and soon was unanimously elected president. Her cavalier was the former president. Her acknowledged popularity lent her immediate authority, which she used to build up solidarity among the girls. Every Thursday evening, they met at Masseni's house to spin cotton brought by one of their number, until every one had her turn. From a single evening, a girl could bring away enough thread to weave a pagne. This gathering was known as a *doun*. Soon young men began to come to these work sessions, spurring the girls on with songs and stories.

Regular meetings were held every week at the association's headquarters. Here differences between the members were settled and assignments were made.

Like all the young girls, Masseni went to the markets in the area

to sell kola nuts and to bring back all sorts of spices for her mother. In spite of her good looks and popularity, Masseni had as yet no lover, not that there were no aspirants but because her personality was so intimidating. One day, however, a young man named Bâbou, more daring than the others and driven by a secret passion, did come forward. For a long time he had loved Masseni madly. He had often been on the point of approaching her and saying outright, "I love you," but in her presence his courage failed him. The friends in whom he confided were pessimistic, but his ardent love continued to consume him and he grew sleepless. Either he must declare himself to Masseni and risk refusal or else he must leave the village and never see her again. He was wavering between these two solutions when finally one of his friends, Sanou, who was related to her, heartened him.

"Take a chance, Bâbou," he said. "You can never tell. Nothing venture, nothing gain! Masseni isn't as forbidding as you imagine. In your place, I wouldn't just skulk around her house under a pouring rain."

Bâbou's doubts and timidity were dispelled, and he acquired resolution. "Thanks," he said to his friend. "You've given me the courage to convey my love to Masseni. You would be the perfect intermediary. Will you do this for me, my dear Sanou?"

After a moment's reflection, Sanou consented. "I'll sound her feelings today and let you know the result," he promised. All of a sudden, Bâbou was happy. After he had thanked Sanou again and they had parted company, he sang all the way to his dwelling.

That evening, there was a *doun* at Masseni's house. Sanou took this pretext to go there and arrived ahead of the rest of the company in order to have a private word with his hostess. She had barely finished supper when he appeared.

"Good evening, Séni," he said.

"Good evening, Little Brother," she replied.

"You'd do well to respect older men if you don't want your hair to turn white!"

"Older men like you, is that what you mean?" Masseni retorted.

"What brings you here so early, when you're usually late? I have an idea you're in love with one of my pretty friends."

"That would be only normal. But today I'm not here on my own behalf. I'm charged with a mission to you. Try not to let me down."

"It depends on what you ask."

"You know that anything I may ask is for your happiness."

"Well, then? I'm listening."

Suddenly Sanou felt as if he too were hanging around the house. He had to make an extraordinary effort of will before touching on the reason for his visit.

"One of my friends," he finally said, "a very good fellow, has been in love with you ever since you joined our association. But, pleasant as you are, you are also intimidating. He has tried more than once to approach you, but every time he has been repulsed as if by an invisible power. He has been pining away and is on the verge of a nervous depression. I've been worried about him, and finally I asked him the reason. With tears in his eyes, he told me that he was wildly in love with you. None of his other friends would give him any support, and he was in a very bad way when he confided in me, probably thinking that our kinship might give me some influence upon you. I was so sorry for him that I promised to speak on his behalf."

"First of all, who is he?" she asked.

"Our friend Bâbou."

"The big fellow who dances the *coucou* so well?" The *coucou* was a popular drunken dance in that region.

"Yes, that's the one."

"To see him dance, you wouldn't believe he was timid."

"Who wouldn't be timid before you, Séni?"

"Why so? Do I have horns?"

"You've more than horns. There's lightning in your eyes."

Masseni smiled and said, "I've heard you."

And that was all Sanou could get her to say. Just then, the arrival of a group of girls broke off their conversation. Soon Masseni's hut

was crowded to overflowing, and the sound of distaffs and the songs of the young men filled the air until dawn.

For Sanou, there was no question of going to sleep. He had work that would not allow the slightest delay. He washed up, ate a rapid breakfast, and went to his loom. There he began to weave, singing in order to keep himself awake.

Soon Bâbou, who had spent an equally sleepless night, came to question him. Sanou gave a detailed account of his brief conversation with Masseni.

"What did she mean by 'I've heard you'?" asked Bâbou.

"What more could you hope for from a girl like Masseni? In my opinion, it's a good sign. The fact that she remarked on your ability as a *coucou* dancer gives you reason to hope."

"Thanks, Sanou, for the great favor you've done me. I already feel a bit better."

After he had left his friends, Bâbou indulged in endless conjecture as to the meaning of Masseni's phrase "I've heard you." No answer was satisfactory, and he decided to consult an elderly cousin on the matter, without revealing to her that it was on his own behalf.

"Good morning, Cousin," he said upon arrival.

"Good morning, Bâbou."

"Cousin, what does a young girl mean when, in response to a suitor's declaration, she says, 'I've heard you'?"

"First tell me who the suitor is, and then I'll give you an answer."

"But why do you have to know?"

"Because 'I've heard you' can have many various meanings. It can signify a postponement, or a polite refusal, or else something so indefinite that it leaves the door open to hope for a more favorable answer. It's up to you to say which case is yours."

"But I didn't say the case was mine."

"Cousin, you seem to me more royalist than the king."

And so Bâbou left his cousin without obtaining satisfaction. He pondered upon the three cases that she had enumerated, but none of

them seemed to fit his situation, so he resigned himself to waiting upon the consequences of Sanou's mission.

After the group of girls had left Masseni's hut, she washed, changed her clothes, and went to wish her parents good day. Then she breakfasted with her mother and lay down in her *tara*—a kind of bamboo chaise—for a short rest. The words "he's wildly in love with you" danced in her brain, and she could not go to sleep. When sleep finally came, she began to dream. She saw herself dancing the *coucou* with Bâbou, and she stirred so violently that she woke herself up. She felt herself overcome by a bizarre feeling. She was tempted to jump from her *tara* and go to Sanou to hear what he might have to say about his friend. Then she sat down and reflected a moment. Pride took over, and she regained her composure.

"No, I won't go to him!" she told herself. "I'll wait for him to come back."

Sanou, pressed by his friend Bâbou, did go back that very evening. He found Masseni in a mood that encouraged him to tease her.

"Little Séni, your words 'I've heard you' caused us to lose a night's sleep. My friend is wilder than ever, and his impatience to know your answer is preventing me from getting on with my work."

"I'm not saying either yes or no, and I'm not about to teach you how you should proceed from now on," said Masseni in a kindly manner.

Sanou caught on and did not press the point. Masseni wanted to follow the normal procedures, beginning with the presentation of a wand.

The day after the morrow was market day, and Sanou and Bâbou were sure that Masseni would be there. She did indeed come, surrounded by a number of friends. Because she anticipated an encounter with Sanou, she had taken particular pains with her toilet. Her hair was newly braided, and a thick coil hung over her pretty forehead, terminating in a queue at the bridge of her nose. There was a delicate line of kohl traced along the edges of her lower eyelids. Her breasts, left bare as fashion demanded, were more provocative than

ever. A splendidly embroidered short pagne revealed two impeccably shaped ankles.

Sanou and his friend were waiting for her. Masseni's group made a sudden appearance at the far end of the market. Sanou gave five cowries to a little boy and sent him to invite Masseni to come present her kolas. Within a minute, the boy reached the girls and gave Masseni the message. Immediately, the group complied with the request. According to the rules of the club, the girls knelt down to greet Sanou and Bâbou. The two young men took off their hats before responding. Bâbou was deeply perturbed. Masseni's flashing eyes set fire to his heart.

"Séni," said Sanou, "what have you to sell in your calabash?"

"Kola nuts, as usual," Masseni replied.

"And how much are they?"

"That depends on the size. Make your choice and I'll give you a price."

"When I buy kolas from a pretty girl, I don't choose among them. I take the lot!"

"Then let me make a count."

"Don't bother. Just take this bag of cowries in exchange."

Masseni nodded to one of her companions, who took the bag. Its weight indicated that the contents had twice the value of the kola nuts. Masseni's friends teased her noisily, and then the group of them withdrew.

"Well played, my friend," Sanou said to Bâbou. "I think we can send the wand tomorrow."

"Why not today?"

"It wouldn't be appropriate after the gift you just made her."

"All right, then. We'll wait for tomorrow."

The next evening, Sanou called on Masseni and handed her a wand—a white wand carved to resemble Masseni herself.

"Take this, Séni," he said, holding it out.

After a moment of hesitation, Masseni took the wand. Her sensual lips parted, displaying ivory teeth in an eloquent smile. Then

she examined the wand, broke it in two, and handed back one piece to Sanou. He left her, promising to come back the following day. When he came, she received him as her fiancé's official emissary.

Sanou sat down and said, "Séni, I've come for an answer to the presentation of our wand."

"Little Brother," she replied, "you know very well that a leaf doesn't rot the same day it falls into the water." This was a customary womanly phrase signifying that such delicate matters cannot be treated with unseemly haste. Sanou was prepared for just such an answer. He thanked Masseni and went to tell his friend that everything was going ahead in good order.

Three days later, he returned. This time, Masseni pronounced the ritual phrase, "The wand has caught fire," and winked at him.

"Now that my mission has been completed," said Sanou, "allow me to go back to Bâbou and quench his thirst."

"If you're satisfied, then you may indeed go. I fancy that from now on you'll not be coming here every day."

The two young people burst into laughter, and Sanou took his leave. He broke into a run because he was so eager to deliver the good news. From a distance, Bâbou guessed that all had gone well. But when they were face to face, Sanou mischievously affected a sorrowful air.

"What's the matter, Sanou? You look down at the mouth."

"Oh, the news isn't what I expected. I found Masseni rather ill-humored today."

"How's that?" asked Bâbou, his voice choked with emotion.

Then Sanou laughed and said, "The wand has caught fire!"

Bâbou was in seventh heaven. He threw his arms around his friend. "May God allow me to show my gratitude to you all my life long!" he exclaimed.

The next evening, Bâbou, Sanou, and a large group of friends went to present themselves to Minignan, who was now a sort of joint mother-in-law. Good manners demanded that Bâbou should not look Minignan in the face but that he stand self-effacingly in a cor-

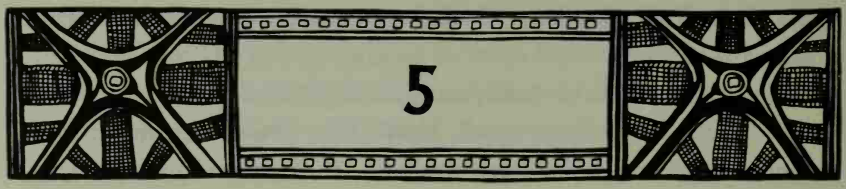
ner. Sanou had the honor of offering ten large choice kola nuts to Masseni's mother.

She examined them closely and, finding them up to scratch, declared, "The kolas are accepted. Masseni has already informed me of your feelings and of the steps you have taken. In our youth, we all have this experience. Go now with the nuts to my sister Doussou."

Doussou had already been alerted by both mother and daughter. She accepted the kolas in her turn and imparted some good advice.

The formalities were over, and from then on Masseni spent her nights with Bâbou. The two young people loved each other very much, but their love was chaste and devoid of any sexual overtones. Never were lovers more happy. Masseni was faithful, and Bâbou respected her virginal dignity.

But the day was coming when . . .



This was during the dismal period of forced labor with its inhuman train of intrigues and miseries, its flood of tears and sweat, its crippling accidents and deaths, when men, beasts, and things were subject to the constant threat of requisition by the government. The healthiest men and women were conscripted and sent to the lower reaches of the Ivory Coast to work on the French settlers' plantations and in their lumber camps. Those left at home were compelled to deliver the best of their farm produce to government-sponsored monthly markets. It was a glorious epoch for interpreters, when bailiffs, or *gardes*, of the administrative subdivisions known as *cercles* and representatives of the canton chiefs traveled through the countryside in the planting season to measure the cotton and peanut fields and in the dry season to requisition the crops, leaving the peasants sometimes with only enough to stave off starvation and sometimes with nothing at all.

On a certain day, one of these *gardes de cercle* came to Ganda. The village was supposed to supply a certain tonnage of cotton and rice for the next market. The *garde* went to stay in the village headquarters. In the evening, the tom-toms beat and the local notables, summoned by this sort of radio transmission, gathered with the village

chief. Quotas were set up for every individual, and the next morning each notable sent a chicken for the *garde*'s soup.

Masseni brought her father's contribution. The *garde* couldn't believe his eyes and saw her as a miraculous apparition. How could such a beautiful girl live in a village in the bush? But the facts were there before his eyes. Masseni was born and lived at Ganda. The *garde* was anything but blind. He lost his head and followed her, leaving the village chief alone. Masseni felt his presence behind her and quickened her steps, but he plugged on, like a wild beast stalking its prey, all the way to her father's house. He did not dare enter the home but made note of its location.

The next day at twilight he was there again. Masseni and her mother were preparing supper in the courtyard, and the *garde* walked up to them and greeted them. Only Minignan responded to his greeting.

"Good evening, *Soungourou*," the *garde* said to Masseni. She lent a deaf ear and did not even look him in the face.

"*Soungourou*, *soungourou*," he insisted, addressing her with the Malinké word for "young girl." "I'm here to greet you." There was still no response.

He saw then that Dady was in his hammock at the far end of the courtyard and went politely to extend his greeting. Obviously this was the father of the pretty girl who was snubbing him. Dady responded to the greeting and bade him take a seat.

"What's going on?" Dady asked.

"Nothing special. I'm not acquainted with your village, and I was taking an exploratory walk."

The two men chatted for a few minutes, and then the *garde* went back to his headquarters. The requisitioning was accomplished, and he was supposed to leave Ganda the next day. But he did not go.

Instead, at the same hour, he returned to Dady's house. Masseni saw him coming before he caught sight of her, and she went to hide. The *garde* entered the courtyard. Minignan was alone in the kitchen. He greeted her as before.

"Where is the young girl who was here with you yesterday?" he asked.

"She went this morning to another village."

"And when will she be back?"

"In three or four days. Have you anything against her?" asked Minignan worriedly.

"Not a thing," said the *garde* as he went away.

The next day he really had to go, because the bearers could wait no longer. He left Ganda with five cages of chickens. "I'll manage to come back soon," he said to himself. "I have all these chickens, and if I give two cages of them to the sergeant I should have no difficulty in getting him to assign me to Ganda again next month."

Come back he did. This time he was less interested in cotton and rice than in the pursuit of Masseni, whom he was resolved to possess at all cost. Having been unsuccessful with the carrot, he had recourse to the big stick. But this didn't work, either. He was dealing with a formidable opponent. Violence didn't work any better than gallantry had. He left again with several baskets of chickens and the hope of returning the following month. And with the help of the chickens, he succeeded.

But the deputy administrator, who had visited Ganda in the meantime, also saw Masseni and felt the same burning desire to possess her. The two wolves thus became rivals, and it was a question of which one had the longer teeth and claws. Thanks to his friendship with the interpreter, the deputy carried the day, and the *garde* was assigned to a district in the opposite direction.

Thereafter, the deputy never passed up an opportunity to come to Ganda. But neither his diplomacy nor his influence succeeded in breaking down Masseni's wall of smiling refusal. In vain, he brought pressure on Dady, who fell back on the custom that demanded that Masseni marry into the family of her mother. In those days, when a marriage was arranged it was stipulated that the first daughter to be born should be allied with the mother's family. This was known as

the "goatskin" stipulation. Dady was bound by this custom and found it a convenient refuge.

But the wily deputy had more than one arrow to his bow. He shifted his aim and tried to corrupt the mother by persuading her to renounce the "goatskin." But here too he ran up against an unbending will to follow established custom.

At this point he dropped his mask. When he requisitioned the cotton, he appointed Masseni to carry her father's quota to the *cercle* center where he himself lived. This stratagem bade fair to succeed, because in the city Masseni would be isolated and he would have other means of intimidation at his disposal.

Dady delivered his cotton but learned to his grief, the evening before the departure of the caravan, that his daughter Masseni, the apple of his eye, had been conscripted to carry it. He offered in vain to furnish one, two, or even three porters in her place. The deputy was obdurate. As for Minignan, she collapsed at hearing that her very own "Ma-Seni"—her "dearer than mother, more precious than gold"—must travel with a bale of cotton on her head to a town that she herself had never seen. She imagined her daughter, bent double under the burden, with blisters on her feet, covered with dust and dripping with bitter sweat, and she fainted away.

Masseni, on her part, was sick with worry for her father and mother and above all for Bâbou, her truly beloved. And when Bâbou heard the bad news, he had only one idea: to seize a knife and settle accounts with the unscrupulous usurper. But when all normal recourses failed, Masseni's dear ones resigned themselves to her departure. The whole village was thrown into a state of consternation, and Masseni withdrew to her mother's hut, where she spent the whole day weeping. That evening, no one in the household ate supper.

Dady and Minignan went to bed early, not to sleep but to collapse in their grief. Masseni stopped crying, dressed herself, and went to Bâbou, who was alone in his hut weeping. She threw herself into his arms and mingled her tears with his. When they finally drew apart,

Masseni looked her beloved in the eyes, and Bâbou was dazzled by a celestial light. Masseni was no fool: she knew full well what awaited her in the deputy's house at the *cercle* center. Still looking hard at her beloved, she made a final resolve. She would give herself to Bâbou rather than submit to the humiliation of rape by the uncircumcised agent of the colonial power. They embraced again, and Bâbou could not resist Masseni's invitation.

At the cock's crow, Masseni went back to her own house, where her parents still lay sleepless. Minignan got up to prepare breakfast and to put together a little bundle of her daughter's personal belongings. The signal for departure was given at dawn. Masseni placed a bale of cotton on her head and swung the bundle over her back like a baby. Dady and Minignan went with her to the first stream. There, under the pitiless eyes of the deputy, they left her brokenheartedly.

"Our blessings will be with you wherever you may go," they said in farewell.

The caravan marched all day long. Several times along the way, the deputy tried to soften Masseni's feelings, but none of his fair words overcame her iron will. She made no answer and refused even to look at him.

That evening, they came to Gbin, the main town of that canton, actually the deputy's birthplace, which was the first stage of their three-day journey. In order to protect the precious cotton from fire, it was decided to store it in a hut built of mud and sun-dried brick, located in the compound of the canton chief himself. The caravan made its way there as soon as it arrived. The chief's court was a square, in the middle of which stood his palace. All around were the huts of his thirty wives. The whole complex was protected by a wall some fifteen feet high, and the sole entrance was a massive clay-and-wood structure held up by columns made from tree trunks. It was in this vestibule that the chief and his courtiers spent the daytime hours.

The caravan had to pass through the vestibule in order to enter

the courtyard. The young bearers filed past, including the girls with bales of cotton on their heads. Suddenly the chief, who had been reclining on his bamboo chaise, drew himself up. Masseni was passing by, and he was overcome by the irresistible attraction she exercised upon men of every class and condition. He seized her left wrist.

"Where do you come from?" he asked.

"From Ganda," she replied almost inaudibly.

"And who is your father?"

"Dady."

"I don't know who put this load of cotton on your head. But he must have been quite mad."

Masseni said nothing. The deputy, who thought everything was perfectly planned for the success of his scheme, was taken aback. He realized that the chief's gesture was not disinterested.

"Go put down your load and come back here," the chief commanded. "Don't stay with the others."

Masseni shot an ironic glance at the deputy and smiled faintly as she went to put down her bale in the courtyard. She came back at once to the vestibule, where the chief offered her a place beside him on his throne. The deputy went away with his tail between his legs, as the saying has it.

Masseni was entrusted to the chief's senior wife, the Favorite, who had orders to give her special care. And the next morning, when the caravan departed, a male porter took Masseni's place. The deputy, his heart seething, took up the lead of the convoy of modern slaves. Along the way, he remembered the adage "One nail drives out another. What one power obtains, another can take away."

Masseni remained in the harem, treated like a queen. Early that morning, the chief went to the Favorite's hut, where Masseni was staying. When he approached, the Favorite came out to fall on her knees and greet him.

"How did your guest spend the night?" he inquired.

"She didn't sleep well. She seems very restless. Every time I raised my head, I saw her sitting up. She must have dozed off just before daylight."

"Can I see her?"

"Certainly. She's inside."

The chief went in. Masseni first rose and then fell to her knees to greet him.

"It seems you didn't sleep well last night," he said, sitting down on a stool. "What kept you awake? What's on your mind?"

"I'm homesick for my parents."

"Is that really all?"

Masseni lowered her head, and tears fell from her eyes. The explanation the chief expected was not forthcoming. Seeing Masseni's sorrow, he did not insist but murmured a few consoling words and went away.

Both the sorrow and the joy of those we love are contagious. After this brief conversation with Masseni, the chief was in a bad mood all day. Try as he would to control himself, he couldn't help displaying a certain nervous tension.

Meanwhile, Masseni tried to figure out the chief's sudden interest in her. If she had looked into a mirror, the answer would have been obvious. It was in her eyes, in her gait, in the whole of her being. Nature had lavished on her a beauty that brought both privilege and grief in its train.

When the chief came back that evening, Masseni's sorrow was not so acute.

"I find you less sad than this morning, my daughter," he began. "I hope you're ready to tell me what happened to you. I want only to help."

Masseni was put at ease by these words and told him of her troubles with the *garde* and the deputy.

"I guessed it," said the chief, "when I saw you with that bale of cotton on your head. But be of good cheer. You're protected now against any bullying."

These words made Masseni faintly suspicious, and she withdrew into silence. The chief went away, having decided to change his tactics. A few minutes later, he talked to the Favorite in his own quarters.

"I want to marry the girl I confided to your care. She just told me of the trouble she endured at the hands of the deputy and of a certain *garde de cercle*, both of whom wanted to rape her. After she had repulsed both of them, the deputy thought up a trick for getting her to the *cercle* center, where he lives and where he hoped he could do with her what he willed. If I send her back home, she'll fall into his hands again. I want you to help me before I deal with her parents. Please speak to her for me. Make use of all your feminine wiles to bring her around. If everything goes well, I'll see to it that you're rewarded."

"You can count on my efforts, Master," the Favorite answered. "I'll talk to her right away."

A few minutes later, she broached the subject with Masseni, dazzling her with all the advantages she would gain from a marriage to the chief and calling up the danger she would run if she rejected his offer and went back to her parents at Ganda.

Masseni listened in silence, then raised her head and said, "I understand what you've told me. Let me think it over until tomorrow morning."

"I see that you've a head on your shoulders. Other girls would jump at such a chance. I'll wait for what you have to say tomorrow."

Masseni realized that her suspicions were well founded. The chief had just shown his true motives.

As for the Favorite, she made an immediate report to her husband.

"What impression did you get from your talk?" he asked.

"I can't say for sure. But I'd make a guess that there's reason to be hopeful."

"Very good! We can only wait until morning."

Masseni did not shut her eyes all night. She had left an adoring

father and mother and her beloved Bâbou behind her. Her thoughts lingered over these things that would always be foremost in her heart. When she had left her village, she had imagined herself fated to suffering and even death, for she was resolved to resist her seducer to the bitter end. Now Divine Providence had taken her under its wing. Here she could find a happiness that would extend to her parents as well. And it all depended on the answer she was to give the next morning. If she said yes, it meant the opening of a privileged new life. And if she said no, terrible consequences would be visited upon both her parents and herself.

She thought then of the husband destined to her by custom, a nephew of her mother whom she had always found repulsive, a miserable specimen with an ugly overgrown head, incapable of so much as breaking a pigeon's egg. To have to live under the roof of this hideous monster would mean ruining her life in every way. It was this vision that caused her to make up her mind. Soon it was banished by a vision of life in the harem, with its attendant jealousies and intrigues, its possible poisons. She weighed these two prospects one against the other, and the second clearly appeared to have less dire consequences. All of a sudden, she remembered what Djinémakan had said to her father: "You will have a daughter slated for great things."

"My parents won't really object," she thought to herself before falling asleep shortly before dawn.

When, with the break of daylight, the Favorite realized that Masseni was still asleep, she came to rouse her. At the sound of the door opening, the girl awoke.

"Are you still sleeping, my sister? What's the matter?" asked the Favorite.

"Nothing's the matter. I just fell asleep late, that's all."

"Well, I'll come back later, after I've served the chief his breakfast."

Masseni got up, dressed, and waited in the hut. Soon the Favorite returned.

"So you're ready!" she said after greeting Masseni. "I hope that you've thought things over and come to a decision."

"Yes. I've decided to accept the chief's proposal. But one thing worries me."

"What's that?"

"The way you'll feel toward me when I become your cowife."

"Have no fear. I'll be not a jealous rival but a mother."

"Thank you for this promise. In my turn, I'll be a daughter to you."

Upon this bargain, the Favorite went back to report to the chief the success of her mission. He was carried away with joy. He thanked the Favorite, fetched an object from his room, and went to Masseni.

"Good morning, Masseni," he said.

She fell to her knees before responding to his greeting. The chief caught hold of her two hands and raised her up.

"You're not the one who ought to kneel today. That's for the man whom you've just rejuvenated by making him so happy, and who's come to thank you and give you this present."

Masseni opened the box that he held out to her. In it there were two superb gold earrings such as she had never seen before. She laid them on the palm of her hand and examined them with admiration.

"Thank you," she said. "I'm not marrying you for your gold. It's because of your great kindness. I'll never forget that you saved my life."

"Now that I have your consent," said the chief, "I'll send a delegation to your parents to ask them for your hand." Masseni nodded, and the chief went away.

A few days later, a sizable delegation of notables journeyed to Ganda to ask Dady for Masseni's hand. They arrived in the evening and were received by the village chief. When they had sat down, he asked for their news.

"We have been sent to you by the canton chief," said their spokesman. "He has seen a girl from your village who has pleased him. He

wants to marry her, and he sent us to solicit your mediation with her father in order to get his consent. The girl is Masseni, daughter of Dady."

"Masseni?" exclaimed the village chief. "We all thought that the deputy administrator had taken her for himself. I am really surprised!"

"That's very possible," said the spokesman for the delegation. "But when the caravan came to our town, the canton chief was so distressed at seeing such a lovely girl carrying cotton that he separated her from the other bearers and sheltered her in his palace. Now he wants to marry her and make her his *masri*, the wife who will accompany him on ceremonial occasions."

"Our village is honored that one of its daughters should have touched the heart of our great chief. I don't know what her parents will decide, but you can be sure of my support. As the wisdom of our ancients tells us, when you ask for a man's daughter in marriage you aren't his enemy. Rest here tonight, and tomorrow morning I'll take you to Dady."

The next morning, the delegation, accompanied by the village chief and a group of influential local notables, went to Dady's house. Ever since Masseni's departure, he and Minignan had not stopped mourning. Where and how was she? Would they ever see her again? Was she still alive? These unanswered questions fed their sorrow. The daughter whom they had produced after so many tears and sacrifices had been torn from their tender care. They cursed the despotic colonial government and all its agents who rivaled one another in exploiting them. Now, when they saw the delegation led by the village chief enter their house, their hearts pounded. What could be the purpose of this unexpected visit? Was it to tell them that Masseni was dead? They could not dispel their fears until the chief greeted them with a broad smile.

Dady bade the visitors welcome, while Minignan, still afraid that they were bringing bad news, retreated into the back of her hut. Dady seated his guests and asked for their news.

The village chief, who was the spokesman for the delegation, addressed himself to Dady. "My friends here arrived yesterday on a mission from the canton chief. They are here to ask you, on his behalf, for the hand of your daughter Masseni."

What Dady wanted most of all was word of his daughter. At once he asked, "But where is she, then? As far as I know, she was carried off by the deputy administrator and is gone I know not where."

"They tell me that the canton chief saw her among the cotton bearers, voiced his indignation to the deputy, and took her under his protection. And, in order that no such thing can happen again, he wants to marry her himself and make her his *masri*. This is a great honor for our village. That is why I have taken the liberty of accompanying the chief's envoys. If you make a favorable answer, we shall all be freed from the deputy's exploitation. You will have rendered a noble service to our whole community."

Dady listened to this plea and to the comments with which each of the delegates interspersed it.

"I am overjoyed at the news you give me of my daughter and thank you from the bottom of my heart for relieving my fears. But I must ask you to give me time to consult my family before I give you an answer."

The village chief thanked him for his hospitality and for the courtesy of his expressions. As soon as the delegation had left, Dady went to Minignan, who was eating her heart out in her hut.

"Younger, I've wonderful news! Masseni is with the canton chief, who was shocked to see her in the ranks of the bearers. She's staying in his palace."

Minignan was overcome by joy. Her daughter was alive and safe!

"God be praised!" she exclaimed.

"Not only is she safe and sound, but the canton chief himself wants to marry her. That is why he sent the delegation that you saw a few minutes ago. I've asked them to give me time to consult the rest of the family. But it's your reaction that I want most to know."

"What can a mere woman say in such a situation? Your decision is mine."

"Thank you, Younger, but in this case I must have your honest opinion. After all, Masseni was destined to marry your nephew."

"You know already that I never meant to condemn Masseni to live with such a good-for-nothing."

"Well, you see that I was right in wanting to know what you really think. What you have just said is very important. I too was never willing to marry off our daughter to such a worthless, lazy young fellow. We must find out now what the rest of the family feels about it."

"I don't care what they think. Family feeling matters little in comparison to my duty to act for my daughter's happiness. To let her marry my nephew would be to plant a dagger in my own heart. On this point I yield no quarter!"

"Calm yourself, Younger. Divine Providence has come to our aid. As soon as your relatives hear that the canton chief wants to marry Masseni, they'll not insist on their prerogative. We need anticipate no trouble. I'll speak to them, however, before I give my answer."

Subsequently, however, Dady changed his mind. Instead of going himself to see his wife's relatives, he asked the village chief to go in his place. But even before that, he killed a lamb and sent it over for the visitors' soup. In the afternoon, he went to the home of the chief to greet his guests and to ask the chief to persuade Minignan's family to give up their right to her daughter. If he could effect an amicable agreement, it would be to the general advantage. The village chief consented with alacrity, inasmuch as any favor he could do for the canton chief would redound to his credit.

With Minignan's family, the chief struck a humble attitude. He did not act like the haughty man whom we saw parading fifteen years earlier on the last day of Ramadan. Rather, he was a man who wanted to consolidate his position even at the price of a few humiliations, a man who knew how to play the donkey in order to obtain a ration of oats.

"The delegation that I have brought to your house this evening," he said to Minignan's uncle, "was sent by our great chief on a very delicate mission. You know, of course, that several days ago your niece's daughter Masseni was conscripted by the deputy to be the bearer of her father's quota of cotton. This abusive act sowed disapproval and consternation among all of us. We wept, all of us, but God heard our lamentation. The canton chief saw her in the caravan and was shocked over the deputy's treatment of her. He took her away from the bearers and kept her in his palace, where she is now in safety. The delegation you see before you has come on the chief's behalf to ask for her hand in marriage. Of course, Masseni is of your line, so it is up to you alone to decide whom she should marry. Of this, her parents are well aware. I call to your attention that the canton chief's request is an honor to our village and that his satisfaction will protect us from the deputy's exploitation."

Minignan's old uncle was so surprised that for several minutes he could not speak. He knew, naturally, what had happened to Masseni, and he had been incensed by it. But this unexpected turn of events left him in a state of embarrassment in regard to the family. To reject the canton chief's request entailed dire consequences for him and his children. But to give up his right over Masseni was a flagrant violation of custom that would be a fatal blow to the unity of the family community of which he had charge. He had to weigh the pros and cons before making a decision. He made this plain to the delegation and arranged to meet them the next morning at the chief's house.

That evening, Minignan's family gathered together to deliberate. Although they were all glad to hear that Masseni was well and under the protection of the canton chief, no one could hide the disquiet caused by the chief's request. Masseni was the "goatskin" that was theirs by right, and to give her up would set a deplorable precedent, opening the way to other similar violations of a cherished custom.

Now, most of the family's senior members still held to tradition. As for the head of the family, he was very mindful of the dangers

that the village chief foresaw if the family opposed the marriage of Masseni to the canton chief. Although the inexperienced younger members resented any encroachment on the family rights, he who had weighed the consequences of this opposition could not share their feelings. He believed that it was his inherited duty to the family community to save them from the anger of the high and mighty. So he set forth the pettiness of the advantages of Masseni's remaining in the family as opposed to the serious consequences of their opposition. He recalled the circumstances under which Minignan had trespassed against custom by marrying Dady. There was no assurance that Masseni would not act exactly as her mother had. Moreover, he concluded, the canton chief might well offer them another girl in exchange if they acted astutely. Because they had already been intimidated by the events of the recent days, the family finally gave their assent, more out of fear than conviction.

When he kept his appointment at the village chief's house the next day, Minignan's uncle gave an affirmative answer to the visiting delegation. A few minutes later, the chief informed Dady and Minignan of the decision. Dady's stratagem had been successful, and he had only to give his parental consent, which he did that very evening when the delegation paid him another call.

The next day the delegation went back home. When the members had made their report to the canton chief, he loaded them with gifts to show his gratitude. Now that he had obtained the consent of Masseni's parents, all that remained was to observe the formalities of the marriage. The delegation immediately returned to Ganda with gifts and the kola nuts that accompanied every marriage proceeding.

To bring Masseni back to Ganda for the wedding would have been too painful for her. Her parents went instead with their kin to Gbin, the seat of the canton, where the entire population greeted them with enthusiasm. The next Thursday, the wedding was celebrated with every solemnity. Never had the area seen such a grandiose wedding.

Immediately after the first afternoon prayers, the notables as-

sembled before the Iman for the religious ceremony. On such an occasion, all those in attendance were traditionally divided into two groups, on one side the attendants of the groom and on the other those of the bride. The representatives of the groom had the first word and presented a basket filled with kola nuts, cowrie shells, and garments for the bride, chief among them the wedding attire.

After accepting all this, the relatives of the bride then demanded the boubou due to her father and the pagne due to her mother. Traditionally, the groom's representatives offered, generally, a piece of fine white damask some twenty yards long. A representative of the bride took it in hand and examined it with a magnifying glass.

"We aren't used to wearing such common cloth," he declared. "We asked for a boubou. Now tell me, how is anyone supposed to wear this? What we call a boubou is sewn, with sleeves, a collar, and a large pocket. Here I see nothing like that." Then he threw the cloth in the face of the man who offered it.

The latter patiently picked it up and said, "You are quite right." And among the folds of the cloth he slipped some money, traditionally a five-hundred or thousand-franc note, according to the means of the bridegroom.

The bride's representative took the cloth back and declared, "Now the boubou is completely up to standards."

He then called for the pagne, which was brought to him. This is generally a length of locally woven cotton. He examined it and declared disdainfully, "You're offering a cloth with stripes in it. Our mother doesn't wear hyena skins." He threw down the cloth, and the previous manoeuver was repeated. The pagne came back with another banknote tucked into it. This is its turn was deemed suitable.

Then an old man from the bride's group stood up and declared, "One day, coming from my village, I arrived here hungry and thirsty, just when the sun stood at its height. I went to greet the canton chief, who welcomed me and offered me a nectar so delicious that I drank of it several times over. Then he offered me some well-roasted guinea fowl, of which I ate abundantly. That evening I suf-

fered badly from diarrhea. Now I demand reparation for this excess of generosity." A few fistfuls of cowrie shells were slipped into his pocket and he sat down, declaring himself satisfied. Obviously, the chief was generous, and Masseni could consider herself lucky.

When the clamor attendant upon the completion of this exchange was over, the bride's representative spoke up again.

"I see that our in-laws are solid, well-brought-up people. Now we come to serious matters. They are to present their intermediary for the marriage. For my part, I am the intermediary of the bride."

The bridegroom's representative came forward, knelt bareheaded before the bride's man, and asked him three times, in accordance with Muslim law and custom, for her hand. Three times it was granted. Only then was word given to the Iman to bless the marriage in the presence of God and the assembled faithful. In spite of the unusual circumstances of Masseni's wedding, this formality was still observed.

Custom also demanded that on the wedding day the bride's girl friends gather around her to sing and weep. And while the notables celebrated the marriage before the Iman, the girls stood around Masseni to mourn her separation from her former life.

"Oh, tom-toms of separation,
How sorrowful is your music!
You beat out to tear a girl
From the love of her mother,
From the inexhaustible tenderness of her father,
And the golden heart of a lover.
Oh, tom-toms of separation,
How sorrowful is your music!
You are heard
Beating out the knell of great loves."

After singing and weeping at length, the girls took Masseni away and hid her. It was the husband's task to retrieve and ransom her.

When the old women charged with preparing the bride came to the Favorite's hut, Masseni and her companions had mysteriously disappeared. Their hiding-place was not discovered until twilight, and the girls did not let her go until they were given due compensation.

Shortly after this, the ceremony of Masseni's bridal baptism began. She was seated on an enormous stool surrounded by older women. They washed first her head and then her body three times and made her perform her ablutions according to Muslim practice. Then they dressed her in white from head to toe. Thus attired, she was led with slow steps to the nuptial chamber.

Once Masseni was settled there, one of the old women went to call the royal bridegroom. At once he left the members of his court to be with his new wife. As soon as he entered the room, he closed the door behind him, put out the lamp, and approached Masseni, whom the women had laid out on a mat as custom demanded. Four old women, one of whom was the chief's sister, stood behind the closed door, where no sound from the room could escape them. Holding their breath, they listened. From time to time, they heard the mat flap against the floor and judged that husband and wife were engaged in a struggle.

The chief had thrown himself upon Masseni like a famished wolf upon his prey, for he had stuffed himself with aphrodisiacs the whole day long. Masseni resisted for a little, then he embraced her more roughly and she gave in. But the chief was badly disappointed. Masseni was not a virgin. It was a sacrilege!

"What have you done, Masseni?" he cried out.

"Nothing," she answered calmly.

"What do you mean, nothing? You're not the way I hoped to find you."

Masseni remained silent.

At this moment, the four watchers, who had heard the entire exchange, burst into the room. They lifted up the sheet covering the mat and saw that it was unstained. At once they submitted Masseni

to a rigid questioning, but she shut up like a clam. They would have pressed her further, but the chief stopped them with an injunction that they let out nothing of what they had seen.

"Keep the secret to yourselves. As for me, I'm happy to have Masseni. I've no thirst for blood."

The women withdrew in dismay. Never since they had exercised their supervisory function had they seen a husband put up with such an outrage so calmly. Others in his place would have inflicted exemplary punishment upon both the girl and her accomplice.

The chief, left alone with Masseni, pursued the inquiry on his own. "Who did that to you? Was it the deputy, the *garde de cercle*, or some shameless fellow from your own village?"

"No one did anything to me. That's the way I am made." This was all she would say.

Annoyed as he was, the chief thought it wise not to frighten her. He was too much enamored to take umbrage at something so futile. What he wanted, after all, was to possess her forever and make sure of her fidelity.

The next morning, he offered Masseni's parents the white ram that is the symbol of virginity, thus cleverly concealing the truth. At once, the celebrations began. The representatives from Ganda danced all day long under the illusion that Masseni had honored them by preserving her virginity. The festivities lasted a full week, until their culminating point the following Thursday, when Masseni left the nuptial chamber. Then the chief distributed more gifts and a few days later the representatives went back triumphantly to Ganda.

Only one man, Bâbou, knew the truth, and he was aware of what any indiscretion might cost him. Ever since the day when he had learned that Masseni was to marry the canton chief, he had been fearful lest she talk. The news that the delegation brought back to the village reassured him that Masseni had revealed nothing, which caused him to love her more than ever.

This same week, Masseni was comfortably settled in a large hut

arranged for her benefit. Her husband allotted her two young servant girls, and the Favorite, who still had special privileges, effected a new division of the functions of the other wives. Masseni was charged with preparing the chief's breakfast and his midmorning and midafternoon collations and all the details attendant upon them. Moreover, she was to accompany him on all his travels. This was, of course, a serious diminishment of the Favorite's prerogatives, but she took no offense. Experience had shown her the follies of men in love, and she knew, also, how high a price she would pay for any signs of hostility. So she decided that the best thing to do was to bend with the wind until the storm had passed. She took Masseni under her wing, for her own as well as for her rival's protection, and treated her better than her husband had hoped. Masseni understood the situation and kept her promise to respect the Favorite like a mother.

She performed her wifely duties with clockwork regularity. The chief always had what he wanted as soon as he wanted it, and he could never find fault with her. Soon he forgot the original affront and his love for Masseni knew no shadows. His greatest pride was to have her with him when the canton chiefs met to celebrate Bastille Day or at the receptions given by the governors when they toured the area. He took not a step without her at his side, and it seemed as if she were part of his ceremonial apparatus.

Masseni knew most of his secrets, but she never betrayed his confidences. Despite all these privileges, she never lost her head. On the contrary, she was a faithful friend to her cowives, always ready to respond to their needs. They all went to her to obtain certain favors from their common husband.

In the second moon of her marriage, Masseni did not menstruate. She was worried at first but did not inform her husband until the third moon. As the months went by, she felt herself grow heavier and heavier. She was subject to frequent attacks of nausea, and her belly grew larger every day. One day, she was suddenly stricken with

violent pains. She could neither sit nor lie down and went to and fro continually between her hut and the bathhouse. Soon, unable to control herself, she let out a piercing cry.

The Favorite, fearing the worst, came running, only to realize that Masseni was in labor. She ran to alert the chief, who summoned the four oldest women and confided Masseni to their care. They sat around her, each one murmuring something in a low voice, spitting into her hand, and rubbing Masseni's back and belly with the spittle. Night fell, and Masseni was not yet delivered. The women's anxiety grew.

Finally, one of them leaned over the girl and said, "Daughter, if you want to be delivered, you must name the man who violated you before your marriage. Otherwise, you'll die with the child still in your belly."

Masseni twisted and turned but said nothing. The three other women rallied their forces and confirmed the truth of what the first had said.

A cold sweat broke out on Masseni's forehead. Her beautiful eyes protruded from their orbits. With a supreme effort, she sat up.

"It was Bâbou, a young man of my village. He was my accredited lover. He's good and honorable and is not responsible for what happened. I seduced him in order not to sacrifice my honor to the deputy administrator, who was going to rape me. My husband knows about the deputy, since he rescued me from him. I repeat that Bâbou bears no responsibility. I alone am the guilty one."

The chief was informed at once by his sister of this confession. He was embittered but did not take out his resentment upon Masseni. Toward Bâbou, he did not have the same indulgence. He had indirect means of exercising coercion upon him, and of these Bâbou was soon made aware. Two months later came the military conscription. Bâbou was called up and drafted into the army, although he had not yet reached the prescribed age. Little did this matter in a country where civil rights had no existence. When he was discharged after

thirty-six months of military service, he thought it wise to go live elsewhere and went to join relatives in the Sudan. The 1940 mobilization of military veterans overtook him in his voluntary exile. He was drafted and took part in the war until 1945. He did not go home until after the suppression of forced labor and the death of Masseni's husband.

Meanwhile, the old women looked at one another as they listened to Masseni.

"You did nothing wrong," said the chief's sister at last. "Any quick-witted girl would have acted the same way under the circumstances."

Masseni gave a deep sigh and delivered the baby, a little girl. The women rushed all together out of the door to announce the good news to Masseni's husband. The chief came immediately, complimented Masseni, and cast a glance at his daughter even before there was time to give her her first washing. Then he left and went himself to tell the Favorite.

The news spread through the village, and the next day gifts for Masseni arrived from all directions. A week later, the baby was baptized and given the name of Mariama.

Masseni quickly recovered and went back to her usual occupations. The Favorite took care of the baby as if it were her own child, until one day her jealousy was kindled and tension arose between her and Masseni. Mariama, coddled as no other girl in the court before her, grew by leaps and bounds. Masseni's proverbial generous-heartedness reflected on the little girl while she was still in her cradle, because everyone wanted to show his gratitude to the mother through the child. At the same time, Mariama's arrival in the world had greatly augmented Masseni's prestige both within and outside the family.

One day, Masseni accompanied her husband as she always did to the capital of the *cercle* for the traditional Bastille Day commemoration. There were to be several days of celebrations, and the chief

gave her a considerable sum of money with which to buy new clothes. He wanted her to look more resplendent than ever for the occasion.

Masseni went to the capital's marketplace with one of her serving girls. As they made the rounds of the shops, they noticed that one was more crowded than the others.

"This must be the best," Masseni said to herself, walking toward it. As she entered, she was struck by the elegance of another woman who had apparently come to make purchases for the same reason. The stranger was wearing a white blouse whose collar was festooned with light blue lace, and she had on a blue velvet pagne. A madras scarf, knotted according to the latest fashion, surmounted her thick hair. Her oval, well-modeled face ended in a round, firm chin. A string of tiny gold disks arranged in a half-moon on her forehead set off its beauty.

Masseni was impressed by this lovely woman and also by the knowledge the elegant creature displayed of the various materials set out on the counter. She approached her, saying:

"Good day, Sister."

The woman turned around and acknowledged her greeting.

"I'm sorry to bother you," Masseni went on, feeling slightly embarrassed. "But I can't help saying how much I admired and liked you the minute I saw you entering the shop. I wish you'd do me the honor of becoming my friend."

"I'm the one to be honored by your offer of friendship," the other replied. "I accept it with joy."

The two beautiful women hit it off immediately.

"What's your name?" Masseni asked.

"Mabrontié. And yours?"

"Masseni."

"I had a childhood friend of the same name."

"I've come to buy clothes for the holiday," Masseni explained. "As a stranger in town I risk being cheated. I'm sure you can help

me. If it's not too much trouble, I'd appreciate your guiding my choice. Your taste will surely be the same as mine."

"This is a lucky meeting. My husband owns this shop, and he'll be happy to make your acquaintance. Come, let me introduce you."

They went to the office in the rear of the shop, where Mabrontié introduced her new friend to her husband.

"I'm happy to meet this newcomer," said the owner. "I presume she's not from our town or else I'd have seen her before."

"No, she's not from here. I haven't yet asked her where she comes from."

"I come from Gbin, and I arrived here yesterday with my husband, who is the canton chief," said Masseni.

"But I know your husband very well," said the shopkeeper.

"My friend has come to do some shopping and has asked me to advise her. She's interested chiefly in buying some cloth. I hope you'll make her a good price."

"Of course," said the shopkeeper. "She'll have the price I make to friends."

He escorted the two women back to the shop and told the clerk to quote Masseni the wholesale prices. Under the guidance of her new friend, Masseni chose the fabrics that pleased her: several yards of white damask with a bamboo-leaf design, some light blue velvet, a red velvet, and some pieces of Indian cotton of a kind rarely found today. She also bought madras scarves of various colors and some toilet articles. Everything was calculated at the wholesale price.

"Now that we've bought the materials," she said to Mabrontié, "I must find a good tailor."

"I know a very good one. He acts as my dressmaker. He works fast, and he's honest. If you like, we can go see him in the afternoon, because now I must prepare my husband's lunch."

"Good. But where shall we meet?"

"I'll call for you. I live not far from the visitors' compound where the Gbin delegation is lodged."

There the two women met in the afternoon, and Masseni introduced Mabrontié to her husband. Then the women went to the tailor's.

"Good day, Karim," said Mabrontié as they entered his shop.

"Good day," he answered.

"I've brought you a new and worthwhile customer, and you must cut her clothes in the latest fashion. She's here for the festivities, and if you work fast, you'll be well paid. My friend is only visiting here. And you know, of course, that the best way to advertise your work is to attach it to the neck of a traveling bird."

The tailor looked up at the two women.

"I'm happy to do the work," he said, "but you can see that stack of material piled up on the floor. I'm happy to serve you, but I have a host of other customers, all of them in a hurry. They all want their clothes in time for the holiday."

"My friend isn't in the same category. She's staying only a few days. And I told you you'd be well paid, because my friend is the wife of an important chief. And remember that she'll make good publicity for you."

The tailor got up, reached for his tape-measure, and took Masseni's measurements, lingering over certain parts of her body.

"Good," he said when he had finished. "I'll work day and night and risk earning the displeasure of my other customers in order to be ready on time."

"But, Karim, you haven't yet told us the cost."

"You know my prices and can pass them on to your friend."

"Good. When can we come back for the finished garments?"

"Tomorrow, in the late afternoon."

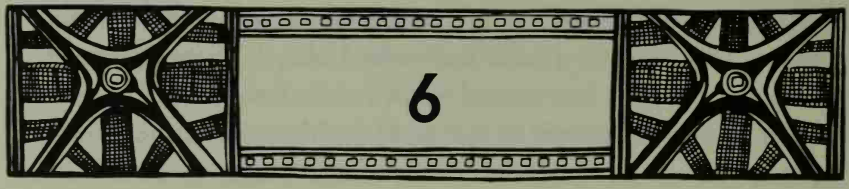
When the two women returned late the next day, the expertly cut garments were ready. For two blouses and two pagnes, the tailor asked four hundred francs. Masseni gave him six hundred.

"Thank you," said the tailor.

"You see, Karim," said Mabrontié, "that I brought you a worthwhile customer."

July 14 came at last. On the program of the festivities there was, among other events, a horse race at four o'clock in the afternoon. This was when the best-dressed women of the town showed off their finest clothes and jewels. In the morning, Masseni, in a blue velvet pagne and a white damask blouse embroidered in gold, stood at her husband's side with a fan, which she used to cool his face. In the afternoon, she put in an appearance at the racetrack, dressed this time in red velvet and decked out with jewels different from those she had displayed in the morning. So becoming was her attire that the general curiosity about who this woman was gave way to outright admiration. Beside her, the other chiefs' wives cut a poor figure. Her natural beauty and the stylishness of her clothes created a sensation, and her husband was properly proud.

That evening, when the festivities were over, Masseni went to thank the friend to whom she owed a great part of her success. The two women chatted together for a long time. Masseni was to leave the next morning, but at the moment of parting she urged Mabrontié to pay her a visit at Gbin.



After these days of festivity and triumph, Masseni and her husband came back on a rainy afternoon to their own village. Torrential rain from above and mud on the ground made the last stage of their journey particularly arduous.

Masseni had regretted leaving the *cercle* capital. Engraved on her memory were the happy hours she had spent with Mabrontié and the sight of so many elegant women. To be sure, this was not the first time she had gone with her husband to the Bastille Day celebration, but just now she had enlarged her acquaintance in a way that had given her a certain celebrity. Why, she wondered, didn't the white people celebrate the Fourteenth of July more than once a year? This would offer more frequent occasions for her to see the town, with its broad streets, fine shops, and the women whose elegant dress had so dazzled her.

Now, after a two-day journey, the caravan was on the last lap. Abruptly the rain stopped, and Masseni and her husband were able to change their soaked clothes. Drums were ready to announce the chief's arrival as soon as Gbin's dome-shaped cluster of silk-cotton trees appeared on the horizon. When everyone was ready, the caravan stepped up its pace, and soon the flutes broke into the "March of the Horsemen."

Suddenly a bird burst into song at the left side of the road. The chief reined in his horse to listen. The bird sang again, and in a flash it flew across the road in front of the caravan and was lost in the sky toward the right.

"What's that?" exclaimed the chief. "Bad news must be awaiting us. That's the bird's message. Probably there has been a death."

This interpretation of the omen threw the travelers into dismay. Already they could see smoke filtering out of the chimneys of the thatch-roofed houses of Gbin and rising slowly in slender threads toward the still lowering sky. Workers returning from the fields lined up to greet the chief with one hand, holding their hounds with the other. An upward slope of the road, the last before the entrance to the village, slowed the caravan down. The horses pawed the ground, sweat streamed down their flanks, and their nostrils quivered at the smell of the stables. Their whinnying mingled with the song of the flutes and the rumble of the drums. There at last was Gbin, its low, round thatched huts, its terraced houses, its granaries surmounted with conical roofs, its winding alleys, its square shaded by enormous silk-cotton trees, and the remains of the ancient walls that had so long protected it against its foes.

The caravan made its way down one of the alleys under the eyes of a few idlers, drawn no doubt by the sound of the flutes. Soon it came out onto the open space in front of the chief's palace, where several boys were bombarding each other with little balls of wet ashes. Their noise, even more than that of the flutes and drums, seemed to be drawing the crowd. The chief dismounted. While grooms unsaddled the horses, the village notables surged from every direction, doffing their hats with the left hand and bowing respectfully to welcome the chief. He answered their greetings with a nervous smile and an absent air. In the alleys, not a single woman was to be seen. The tinkling of a small bell and the sound of a tambourine, interrupted at intervals by a man's shrill cry, signaled the presence of the Kpélégué, a masked fetish that women, except for a few initiated old crones past the age of childbearing, were not allowed to see.

There could be no doubt. The village was in mourning, just as

the bird had announced. The Kpélégué confirmed this fact by his cries and the repeated tapping of a stick on his tambourine. Three taps meant the death of a man, four that of a woman. Who could be dead? One of the reigning family? The chief asked himself these questions as he entered the vestibule of the palace courtyard. He sat down on his *tara* without saying a word.

The Favorite, followed by two young serving girls, came to kneel before him and took from the girls' hands two calabashes, one containing water, the other *mîme*, a roasted honey flour which, mixed with water, makes a refreshing drink. She prepared the mixture, added some extra honey, and held it out to her husband, who drank a few swallows and then passed it on to the notable nearest to him. Only then did the oral greetings begin.

"Did you have a good journey, Master?" asked the Favorite, still on her knees.

"Yes," he replied.

"How are the people you left behind you?"

"They are well and send their greetings to you."

"And those whom you met along the way?"

"All well. They greet you."

The chief's other wives, huddled around the far door of the vestibule, came up one by one to kneel down and pose the same questions. Every time he made the same reply: "They are well and greet you."

Masseni had made her way to her own quarters and readied herself for a welcome warm shower, while her serving girls put her traveling cases on mats laid out against the far wall of the hut. The Favorite and her companions, meanwhile, gave way to the numerous notables whom the chief had informed of his arrival and who now came to pay him their respects.

Only the eldest of the village notables, Nalélé, was missing. The chief asked after him and was told that he had died the evening before. His house had collapsed in the middle of the night under the torrential rain that had struck the village. The old man's body, badly smashed, had been dug out of the ruins. The chief listened with a sorrowful air.

"I knew it," he said with a sob in his voice. "A bird signaled that something was wrong just before we reached the village."

Such a statement might elsewhere arouse surprise or even laughter. But here it was perfectly normal. Birds speak a language that certain initiates understand and interpret to perfection. This gift may well come from observations made over thousands of years and passed on to a chosen few in every generation. Some day, no doubt, science will tell us whether or not this is the explanation.

The victim of the tragic accident was an important personage. As dean of the local notables, he knew secrets that gave him a special rank in the hierarchy of the region's secret societies. Hence the council of elders decided to render him funeral honors worthy of his position. The ceremony was grandiose and had repercussions far beyond the borders of the canton. For a whole week, notables came from all over the region to pay tribute to this venerated old man. From a distance of more than two miles, there were heard the muted rumble of tom-toms, the melancholy notes of horns announcing the presence of masked figures reputed for their strength and their poisons, the melodious complaint of xylophones, and the deafening detonations of muskets.

Meanwhile, Masseni had bathed and dressed. She set off to greet her cowives, beginning of course with the Favorite, who was sitting in her great single-room apartment, surrounded by a bric-a-brac of fancy calabashes, earthenware water jugs, basins, and bowls of sculpted wood. Masseni crossed the threshold with a smile on her lips, visibly happy to return to a woman whom she considered not a cowife but a protector.

"Good day, Mother," she said, slightly bending her right knee.

To this warm filial greeting the Favorite responded with a chilly "Hmmm" and went on cleaning her teeth with a big stick of green wood. Before Masseni could recover from her surprise, the Favorite spat disdainfully in her direction. Masseni swallowed this double insult without flinching and went to the other wives, who were grouped around a mortar in which an enormous *foutou* was being pounded with a pestle. Masseni voiced her greeting, which was re-

ceived only slightly less coldly. Obviously there was a snake in the grass, and a tacit agreement between the Favorite and the others.

Masseni went back to her quarters perplexed. What had happened, she wondered, during her absence? Had she given offense to the Favorite at the moment of her departure, a week before? Searching her sharp memory, she could find no reason for the hostility directed against her. But the fact that she had nothing on her conscience only fired her uncertainty. She decided to wait until evening, after everyone was asleep, and to question her serving girls. Meanwhile, the wildest conjectures ran through her mind.

Usually the chief's wives ate supper together, but this evening Masseni did not join the others. Preoccupation with the unexpected and strange behavior of the Favorite cut her appetite and she drank only a few mouthfuls of a sorghum soup that her own girls prepared for her. In order to overcome her sleepiness, she spun some cotton, keeping her serving girls awake by telling them stories of Dogo-Sauzan and Koro-Souroukou, the hare and the hyena. When the last lamp was extinguished, plunging the courtyard into darkness, she laid her distaff aside and went out to make sure that no one was lurking around her hut. Reassured, she came back inside. Just as she was about to question her serving girls, the door-latch was softly lifted and a head, which she was quick to recognize, showed itself. It was Wétâ, one of the wives on whose friendship she had been able to count ever since she had become the chief's new wife.

"Good evening," said Wétâ in a low voice.

"Good evening, Wétâ. What brings you here?"

"Nothing too serious. It's just a little visit to warn you to be very careful."

"But I've always been careful, Wétâ."

"I know. But if I've come to tell you to be more careful than ever, it's because here in the court a danger is hanging over you. If it weren't that the Favorite is involved, I shouldn't have come to bother you."

"You're not bothering me, Wétâ. On the contrary."

"Let's get down to brass tacks. You're no longer a child, and even if you'd just dropped out of the sky with the last rain you couldn't help noticing the recent change in her attitude toward you. Everyone is aware that she's trying to damage you in one way or another. You follow me, don't you?"

"Yes, I follow you all too well."

"Good! I'm glad. The very day you left, the Favorite started to put you down. When we were all together at dinnertime in the refectory, she began to talk against you, accusing you not only of trying to supplant her but also of seeking to reduce the rest of us cowives to a humiliating state of subordination. When she thought she had sufficiently aroused our jealousy, she went on to incite us to join forces to isolate you. Her purpose is to strip you of our husband's esteem. She'll hesitate at nothing to turn the great love he has for you into implacable hatred. That's why I've come this evening to say that you should be constantly on guard against her machinations and also her poisons. And to tell you that you can count on the friendship of most of the rest of us. I'm the spokesman for the friendly faction, which is by far the larger. What I want to advise you, above all, is to be calm. When the moment comes, I'll tell you what course to pursue."

Masseni listened, not without emotion, indeed almost religiously, to this obviously sincere advice. She sighed deeply and said, "Thank you, Sister. Before you go, please tell me exactly how the others reacted."

"Frankly, it's hard for me to say, because there was no immediate reaction. But according to what I've overheard, very few of them are willing to go along with her. No one has forgotten the tyranny she exercised over us before your arrival. She was all-powerful, and woe to anyone who tried to stand up against her. She has more than her tongue for a weapon; she has terrible occult resources. Thanks to your providential arrival and the part you have played with our husband, the vise of her tyranny has loosened. None of your cowives is going to forget that. It doesn't mean that she'll find no allies. She

can always recruit them among some of these poor girls whom all those years of submission have deprived of all character."

"I believe you, my dear friend. But how do you explain their coldness when I went to greet them soon after my return? The Favorite's behavior didn't completely surprise me, I must admit. Before going away, I had caught a certain look in her eyes and some veiled words. But I was surprised by the rest of you."

"You're wrong to lump us all together, Masseni. Not all of us were around the mortar when you came. And even among those present there were more friends than you suppose. The evasive look in their eyes misled you. You have to understand that they were terrorized, that's all."

"I'm glad to hear all this from your mouth, Wétâ, because I trust you absolutely. I'll follow your advice to the letter. Do you think I should say something to our husband?"

"It's too soon for that. Let her bring out her bow and quiver. After she's shot her bolt, we'll pass to the attack. For the time being, we should wage an underground struggle. We shall succeed. I know the chinks in her armor."

"Dear Wétâ, I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

It was late at night when the two friends took leave of each other. Masseni got up early the next morning to prepare her husband's breakfast, a task allotted to her ever since, as a bride, she had begun to share the Favorite's prerogatives. After the conversation with Wétâ, she had spent a wakeful night cogitating her plan of defense. The Favorite had dropped her hypocritical mask and become her rival and sworn enemy.

When she had served her husband a copious breakfast, Masseni dressed herself in the fashionably cut blue velvet outfit she had brought back from the capital. No one had ever seen anything like it in Gbin. From a traveling case she took out all the trinkets she had bought for her cowives: necklaces of gilded beads, gilt pendants, plastic barrettes studded with brilliants, and a superb black niello

necklace with a thread of silver running through it destined for the Favorite. She went, first of all, to the Favorite's lodging.

"Good morning, Mother," she said as she came in.

"Hmmm," grunted the Favorite even more coldly than the day before.

Masseni pretended not to notice, drew up a stool, and sat down.

"Here is a memento of my journey," she said, handing her the necklace.

For the Favorite to refuse the gift would have been the height of discourtesy and thus a blunder that would have revealed her heavy artillery too soon. So she took the necklace disdainfully in her left hand, and muttered thanks between her teeth.

Masseni swallowed this further insult and took her leave without flinching. Wétâ had told her to be calm. Then she made the rounds of the other wives, distributing a necklace or a pendant here, a barrette there. Every one of them showed pleasure over the gift and thanked her profusely. Once more Masseni's generosity strengthened her position. When she had bought these trifles she had attributed to them no other merit than that of giving pleasure. Now they formed a shield against the Favorite's offensive. The recipients, one by one, went to show their gifts to the chief, who seemed delighted by them. Then they wended their way in a procession toward Masseni's dwelling, giving thanks in short songs or proverbial sayings. The last was one of the chief's youngest wives, who was noted for her sharp tongue.

"Thank you, Masseni," she said, adding with a laugh, "You're worth your weight in gold!" She spoke loudly, in order that the Favorite might overhear.

If the Favorite had nurtured any illusions, this simple sentence tumbled them down. Without naming names, the young woman had hit the mark. The Favorite was so wounded that she could hardly stay upright. Was her little plot nipped in the bud? Here she saw the meaning of the silence with which her cowives had received her campaign of slander

against Masseni that night when she had addressed them after supper. She couldn't believe it. The arguments she had spun, her references to the injustice of their husband's partiality toward this tardy laborer in the vineyard had failed to destroy the esteem in which the others held Masseni. Their reaction was just the opposite of the one she had tried to provoke. In order to hide her chagrin, she hid out in her lodging and did not come to the midday meal.

Masseni had won her first battle. Before the end of the meal, she learned even more than Wétâ had told her. She had indeed more friends than enemies. The Favorite could still count on a few supporters, but such was their cupidity that it was clear their loyalty would not hold out for long against Masseni's gifts.

Masseni's trump card was the great influence she had over her husband, which was due not only to her beauty but above all to the intelligence with which she had won his confidence. Her remarkable tact had won the friendship of all the most esteemed members of his entourage. The only weapons of the Favorite that she had to fear were invisible ones. How should she arm herself against spells cast by the many witches by whom the Favorite was surrounded? Masseni had not sufficient experience to solve this important problem alone. For a long time, she pondered the Favorite's terrible occult resources, of which Wétâ had spoken. All she could do was put her trust in Divine Providence. And Providence soon came once more to her aid.

The canton chief had left his palace early that day to attend a meeting of the council of notables held to choose a successor to Nalélé, whose funeral celebration was nearly over. He was sitting in the vestibule, and the notables had begun to arrive. Other people, chiefly women, were passing through the vestibule on their way to the courtyard. These were relatives of his wives—or so they claimed. They had free access at all hours and did not suspect that Gbombélé, the watchman, scrutinized them like a Cerberus. Now, as one of them went by, he seized her left wrist and shook it vigorously. Her old hand could not escape his iron grip, and she

dropped a little parcel that looked suspicious to Gbombélé. He did not pick it up but ordered the old woman to open it. She trembled all over, and two trickles of urine ran down her legs.

"Open it up, witch!" Gbombélé shouted.

The old woman collapsed. Gbombélé spat into the palms of his hands, picked up the parcel, and undid it. Inside, there was a little goat horn containing a black powder. Thanks to an application of cold water that someone sprinkled on her, the old woman came to but pretended she didn't know what was happening.

"Tell us what it is," Gbombélé growled, "or else I'll make you eat both horn and powder."

The chief and the other bystanders were struck dumb. The old woman crouched down and leaned against the wall, her eyes bleary. Gbombélé threatened her with a *koté mogognini*—a whip made of coiled hippopotamus hide that served as a powerful means of extracting the truth. The old woman raised trembling hands toward heaven. She did not wait for the blow to descend upon her.

"It's for the Favorite!" she cried.

The chief, who had been leaning on his elbows, drew himself up into an erect position.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"The horn and its contents belong to the Favorite. I'm only bringing them to her."

"But who's the sender?" several voices broke in.

The old woman hesitated. The look in Gbombélé's eyes was anything but propitious.

"I'll tell you, I'll tell you," she stammered. "Only don't hit me. It's . . . it's . . . Orokélé."

Clamor greeted this revelation. Everyone knew Orokélé, a highly reputed sorcerer who occupied a respectable rank in the hierarchy of the brotherhood. The clamor was followed by an icy silence.

"Someone go fetch the Favorite," the chief ordered, and several persons hurried all together to her door.

"The chief is calling for you," they announced.

Any woman, even a queen, would have been frightened by this summons. The Favorite stood up, and her pagne fell to the floor. She picked it up to knot it around her waist, but it fell again. A serving girl hastened to help her.

"What's wrong?" asked the Favorite.

But no one was there to answer. She dashed into the shadow of her hut, seized a little pot, and rubbed her face with a magic ointment. Before she could emerge into the courtyard another messenger came to fetch her. When she reached the threshold of the vestibule, she saw her devotee and understood what was afoot. She went on, then fell to her knees before her husband.

"It seems that you called me," she said with remarkable self-possession.

"I wasn't the one to call. It was this witch of yours," said the chief, pointing to the old woman. He added angrily, "Go sit beside her and ask why she has come."

The Favorite contented herself with looking over at the poor old woman. Then she turned to her husband.

"She's done nothing out of the way," she said. "She doesn't even know what's in the horn. All she's done is to bring it to me from Orokélé. She's completely innocent. She was my mother's slave and thus, as you all well know, owes me absolute obedience. If anyone's to be blamed, it's myself, and also you, my dear husband." She repeated, "Yes, you!"

Those present shifted their eyes discreetly from the Favorite to the chief. Once more, silence descended. Hastily the chief examined his conscience. What could justify his wife's accusation? For several moments, he seemed plunged in deep reflection. He was obviously embarrassed.

At this point, Blari, the oldest family slave from whom none of his master's secrets were hidden, rose to his feet. He alone knew what the Favorite meant. Crouching beside the chief, he whispered something into his ear and then went back to his place. The chief

seemed to be searching for words with which to explain himself to the council.

"Masters," he said, rising to his feet, "I ask you to put an end to this painful episode that has disturbed our meeting. It's a family matter and should be treated within the family."

All of those present looked at the chief questioningly. The expression on his face was calm, and Blari, after all, would not have spoken without his approval. The chief waited for the notables' response, which was unanimously favorable.

"You can go back to your own quarters," he said to the Favorite.

When she got up, her face was bathed with tears, tears not of fear or shame but of anger. This anger had boiled up under repression, and on this occasion she had hoped to allow it to explode in the light of day. But old Blari, with his quick understanding, had frustrated her plan. She left the vestibule without so much as a look around her. The council meeting was put off until the next day, and the notables went about their business. The old sorceress, more dead than alive, crouched in a corner, awaiting her fate.

"Go on home," Gbombélé told her at last.

She got up, shaking all over, and went away followed by a cloud of flies.

Echoes of the incident had already reached the ears of several of the chief's wives, brought, no doubt, by serving girls who passed continually through the vestibule in the course of their daily occupations. And the wives flocked to inform Masseni. She had put her trust in Divine Providence, but not passively. Now Providence had operated more rapidly than she had imagined, giving her an opportunity to count her friends. Friends there were aplenty, now that the Favorite seemed to be at the edge of the abyss. Their rush to confabulate with Masseni proved their opportunism.

The Favorite went back to bed and did not appear for the rest of the day. All those who had witnessed the poignant scene considered her guilty, no matter what griefs she had against her husband, for

they were sure that the contents of the horn were a poison. Only Blari did not condemn her, for only he knew what she had suffered since the chief's marriage to Masseni. Only he realized how her husband had insidiously stripped her of her prerogatives and transferred them to his new bride. She was the "favorite", now in name only, for she had lost all her privileges. She who had once called the tune was now insignificant. The injuries inflicted upon her body and soul and, above all, her heart had inevitably moved her to play for all or nothing. This explained even if it did not excuse her behavior.

Blari had long since been on her side because he had witnessed the terrible injustice to which her husband had subjected her. This didn't mean that he was hostile to Masseni, the involuntary cause of the Favorite's misfortunes. All that he wanted was a demonstration of the chief's gratitude toward a woman who, in her time, had given him the joys of a happy home, who had drunk honey with him and never turned aside when it was necessary to drink gall. As a kindly and unarmed champion of justice, he only aspired to an equitable solution, a reparation. His qualifications were his loyalty and fidelity to his master and his integrity in social and family matters. His only defense was his status as a slave and a descendant of slaves, a defense that would have carried little weight had he not been endowed with great courage as well.

As for the chief, torn between consciousness of guilt and the enigma of the goat's horn, he was unable to reach a decision. In his mind, he relied upon the perspicacity of Blari. The examination of his conscience, to which he submitted himself during the day, was unfavorable to him. What prevailed was his instinct for clarification. He must learn, first of all, what the little horn had actually contained.

"If it weren't for Gbombélé's watchfulness," he said to himself, "I would have been in real danger. If it really was a poison, I was helpless against it." The possibility of a long-drawn-out death was obsessive. He must ascertain the nature of the contents of the horn at

once. When he had found out whether or not it was a poison, he would know what attitude to take.

The old witch, when she left the chief's palace, went instinctively to the house of Orokélé. It was urgent to tell him what had happened and to find a notable powerful enough to intervene with the chief and save her from the worst. Perhaps the Iman could bring the most influence to bear. Once she had informed Orokélé of their common misadventure, she would go to the mosque.

Orokélé, for his part, was anxious to hear whether the little parcel had reached its destination. His envoy was late in returning, which was a bad sign. His worry was transformed into panic when he saw the old woman approaching like a ghost whom the ancestral spirits had sent back from beyond the grave. His heart began to pound.

The old witch stumbled rather than walked, and with her every step Orokélé's fear grew. When she reached him, she reeled like a sleepwalker. Orokélé just managed to catch her in his arms before she made a fatal fall.

"Water! Water!" he called out.

A little girl brought a calabash filled with water and, after a few swallows, the old woman regained some composure.

"What's wrong?" Orokélé asked her.

"I'm dead, dead," she replied.

"Well, tell me what happened to you."

"I'm dead, I tell you!"

"So tell me what happened."

"I'm dead," she repeated.

"Did they discover the parcel?"

She could only nod her head. Words failed her, but her silence was eloquent. Then Orokélé understood the extent of his misfortune. For decades he had served the devil and the devil's followers with impunity, "like a pitcher going to the well." Now he was caught like a rat in the trap, unable to escape punishment. He must make amends for the many misdeeds that had built up his enviable

fortune. In his dismay, he jettisoned his old accomplice. It was "everyone for himself, and the devil take the hindmost."

By the time the old woman had come to, Orokélé was running through the village alleys in search of a hiding place that some fellow sorcerer would put at his disposal. Suddenly he had lost the power to transform himself at will into a swallow or a mosquito or even to disappear completely. His much-touted science had left him in the lurch, and he was really in trouble.

The news had already spread through the village, and everywhere the fugitive met a cold reception, even from friends who he thought could never refuse him a favor. Oh, the solidarity of sorcerers!

In his mad run, he turned down an alley and came up against Gbombélé standing before him at a corner. He wheeled around, but Gbombélé had already fallen upon him like an eagle upon its prey. Orokélé cried out and fell to the ground. Three stout fellows grabbed his wrists, tied them together, and hauled him to the chief.

While this manhunt was going on in the village, the chief's family council was meeting in the palace. The Favorite was there, seated on a stool. She seemed calm, dignified, almost majestic.

Beside her sat the chief's eldest sister. All those present had witnessed the morning's scene except for the sister, to whom Blari made a point of relating it. She listened imperturbably, as if she knew about it already, having been already informed, no doubt, by her sister-in-law, whose cause she was ready to defend. What interested her at the moment was the nature of the powder contained in the little horn. Was it a poison or merely a love-philter? If a poison, then her plea of support would be a sign of complicity. But if a love-philter, she could hope by her intervention to reduce the damage. The Favorite was likely in either case to lose a few of her fine feathers. The only person who could really solve the mystery was Orokélé, who would soon be arriving. Indeed, Blari had hardly finished telling her the story when the three captors dragged their prisoner through the palace gate.

"Orokélé is in the vestibule," Gbombélé announced. "We nabbed him while he was trying to get away."

"Bring him here at once," the chief ordered.

A moment later, the men pushed him in. Orokélé's wrists were still tied, and his torn garments made him look like a Moorish beggar. His captors loosened his bonds and shoved him into the great council hall. The sight of the assembly made Orokélé's head reel, and he staggered forward. One of the guards seized him by the shoulders and forced him to a seat on the floor. His eyes crossed those of the Favorite. He lowered his head, and at the same moment Gbombélé struck him with a mighty blow of his hippopotamus-hide whip. Orokélé let out a bestial cry and rolled over the floor to the feet of the chief's sister. There he raised himself to a sitting position and clasped her knees, imploring her protection.

Gbombélé did not strike again. Already the Favorite had lost the self-assurance she had displayed before her accomplice's arrival. Now the interrogation began. Blari calmly came forward and threw the horn before the prisoner.

"Do you recognize this object?"

"Yes," said the sorcerer in a barely audible voice.

"Then tell us what it is."

"It's . . . it's a love-philter that the Favorite ordered from me."

"For whose consumption?"

"She told me it was for her husband. When she first asked for it, I feared the consequences and turned down her request. But when she insisted, I gave in."

"And what did she give you to make you change your mind?"

"Nothing. I gave in out of compassion when she told me about the misfortunes of her married life. Her husband, she said, for several years has neglected her more and more and reduced her to the role of a figurehead. She was stripped first of her material privileges and then of her conjugal rights. She was so sad and so desperate that I couldn't resist her."

"Well, well," said Blari. "I didn't know that sorcerers were capa-

ble of compassion. But let's go on, Orokélé. You claim, then, that the horn contains a love-philter and not poison?"

"Yes, I swear it."

The Favorite could hold back no longer and burst into sobs. "Would I have poisoned my husband?" she asked in a strangled voice. "You're the father of my children. You're the man I've loved since my youth and to whom I've never been unfaithful.

"I gave him the best of myself," she said to the assembly. "And for years he led me to believe that he loved me and showered me with favors over and above his other wives. You called me, all of you, his 'Favorite,' and you were right. Until the day when he married this accursed girl from Ganda, who has undermined my position and broken my heart as well. Today I still have this title, even if I've been stripped of everything that justified it. No, I couldn't possibly have wanted to kill my husband. I used every moral pressure and all my feminine wiles to win him back, but every day he only drifted further away. Those who used to tremble before me made me the butt of their laughter. And so I decided to make use of occult powers, of philters. Here, too, I have failed miserably. My God, what have I done to suffer such injustice?"

With these words her sobs strangled her, and she collapsed onto her stool. The members of the council were deeply affected, and there were tears in many eyes. For a moment an icy silence reigned. Even Blari's voice was torn with emotion when he resumed the questioning.

"Orokélé," he said, "you still claim that you made nothing but a love-philter? Are you willing to drink it yourself?"

Before Blari could even finish the question, Orokélé seized the horn, emptied the contents into the palm of his left hand, and threw them into his mouth. He swallowed and showed the group his blackened tongue. In his opinion, this was the best way to prove that the powder was not poisonous. The gesture put the Favorite and the chief's sister at ease, but not all the rest of those present were convinced. In various parts of the hall, there was a murmured question.

"How can you prove that you didn't have an antidote to your poison and that you didn't swallow it before you were arrested?"

Blari furnished an answer. "We'll detain him here under observation for a while. If nothing happens to him, then we can conclude that there was no poison. Personally, I don't believe he had time to take an antidote before his arrest."

"That's true, I swear it!" affirmed Orokélé. "I didn't take an antidote. Keep me here as long as you please. There was no poison. Why should I have concocted a poison for a woman who told me that she loved her husband and wanted only to be loved in return?"

The chief, who had so far remained on his couch leaning on his elbows, taking no part in the debate, suddenly drew himself up and spoke.

"I conclude that, since Orokélé has swallowed the philter, he is going to fall in love with my wife. Then perhaps I'll have a chance to prove that I've never stopped loving her."

This humorous remark provoked general laughter.

"Masters," said Blari, "I see no point in pursuing the interrogation. Orokélé admits to having prepared a philter, which the Favorite was to administer to her husband. It wasn't a poison, he says, but a product with the power to provoke amorous feelings in the recipient toward the one who administers it. In proof of this assertion, he swallowed it himself. We may suppose that, had it been a poison, he wouldn't have swallowed it. But that doesn't prove that he has told the truth. If the council agrees, we shall keep him under observation for several days. Then, if nothing happens, we shall pronounce our sentence."

"But," one of the judges interrupted, "how can we be sure that he doesn't take an antidote after his release?"

"We'll hold him long enough for the poison to take effect, if poison it is," Blari answered. "Gbombélé will be on guard, and we can have confidence in him."

A summary of the debate was drawn up and circulated from the youngest of the judges upward to the chief. After the last judge had spoken, the chief reflected for a moment.

"I have followed the debate," he then declared. "My wife has voiced her griefs against me, and a superficial examination would seem to give her reason. But you couldn't fail to note that she laid it on too thick. My house holds no secrets for any of you. Do I claim, then, to have no fault? No. But I am not guilty of the injustice of which my wife made such a point. We've been married more than twenty years, and for a long time she ran the household and did so with skill. I shall always be grateful to her.

"But, like myself, she has aged. She has no longer either the physical or mental ability to carry on this task. I am sure you all know what I mean. When I became aware of this, I had to relieve her gradually of duties that I thought were beyond her powers. She may remember having told me one day of certain physiological disturbances. This explains my attitude toward our physical relations, which is perhaps her main grievance. As for my feelings toward her, these have not changed except in her imagination. I have continued to hold her in affection. With a bit of tolerance and understanding, these things could have been settled between us. She has preferred to use means that cannot win anyone's confidence.

"Obviously, gentlemen, one of my many enemies could have taken advantage of the situation to substitute the philter with a poison. There you have the dramatic aspect of this affair."

Many of the judges nodded their heads in approval.

"As for Orokélé," the chief went on, "in three days we'll see whether he dies or falls in love with my wife. Whatever happens, I presume that he must bear a certain responsibility. He will receive the punishment due him for past misdeeds. This isn't the first time he's made trouble. And not all his victims have been as lucky as I. He may be responsible for the derangement or even the death of many of our fellow citizens. In any case, we must await the results of the period of observation before passing judgment upon him."

Upon which he closed the deliberations, just as the muezzin's strident voice called the faithful to evening prayers. Gbombélé led the prisoner away to his own hut, where they would eat and sleep together.

Three days went by without Orokélé's showing any out-of-the-way symptoms. On the fourth day, when Gbombélé led him again before the family council, anxiety and fear made his brow more furrowed than ever. The Favorite and the chief's sister were not present, and this gave him some faint hope. It might mean that the case was shelved or that he would get off with fifty strokes of the whip. Suddenly, the powerful voice of Blari brought him down to earth. The sentence fell, hard and heavy-handed.

"Orokélé, the council has decided to banish you from the canton. The chief and his family have been indulgent, because this punishment is mild in proportion to your crime. As your conscience must tell you, there are many precedents, and we cannot allow you to go on exercising your evil profession among us."

"What about his sheep?" a voice questioned.

"I almost forgot," said Blari. "The council has also decreed the confiscation of your flock of sheep."

Orokélé was utterly cast down. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out of it. He had hoped to get off with a few welts on his back. But to be forced out of the canton and from the secret society over which he had a certain influence was equivalent to a death sentence. Tears rolled down his cheeks. He wanted to speak, to beg the chief to think of his poor wife and children, but the looks that met his gaze were not encouraging. He continued to look around him, and everywhere there seemed to be a void. Even the wall against which he sought to lean had apparently melted away. He was in a sort of trance when someone in the hall cried out.

"Look at that! He hasn't even thanked his benefactor."

"Thank you, thank you!" he shouted, realizing that he could not get off.

"He must leave the canton by tomorrow morning," said the chief. "Gbombélé, you will carry out the decree."

Gbombélé signaled to the three stout fellows waiting in the vestibule. A moment later, Orokélé was dragged to his own house, where his wife and children, who had not seen him for three days, were shattered by the appearance of a man who looked little like the

one they were expecting. Could this living wreck be her husband? his wife asked herself, while the children rolled in the dust.

"What have they done to you, Husband? What bad luck has fallen upon us? Tell me, before I go crazy! Children, come here and see what is left of your father."

"I've been expelled from the canton," Orokélé explained in a hoarse, hardly human voice.

The children ran to their father, caught on to his torn garments, and called out, "Papa! Papa!"

Gently Gbombélé pushed them away. A cold chill ran up his spine, and for the first time in his life he knew pity. He saw Orokélé's wife, glassy-eyed, raise impotent hands to heaven and then fall onto her knees. He approached her and grasped her hands.

"Get up!" he said.

"I can't. I haven't the strength. Fate has utterly crushed me."

"Hear me, woman," said Gbombélé, taking her aside. "Your husband has been banished for having secretly sent a philter to the chief's wife. That's a serious crime, and he's been ordered to leave by tomorrow at the latest. I've the job of seeing that this sentence is carried out. When I came here, I admit, I was ready to do so vindictively. But the sight of these poor children has touched my heart. I want to help you. So get up!"

Buoyed up by hope, the woman rose to her feet.

"Help me?" she asked.

"Yes, and everything can turn out right if you follow my advice."

"Speak, speak, good man! Tell me what I must do."

"While I help your husband to pack his belongings, go to the Iman and ask him to intercede for you with the chief. The Iman is linked to the chief's family by an old friendship that goes back to the time when Samory passed this way.* Hurry up, and ask the Iman to act promptly, because time is short."

*Samory Touré, an African Muslim conquistador who led a revolt against French colonization in the hinterlands of West Africa during the last twenty years of the nineteenth century. By the time he was captured in September, 1898, he controlled a vast empire stretching from Guinea to the Ivory Coast.—TRANS.

She sighed and dried her eyes.

"Thank you," she said as she set off to see the Iman with her youngest child under her arm.

She ran rather than walked, half naked and dishevelled, toward this last hope. The other children began to cry, thinking that their mother, too, had abandoned them. Gbombélé tried in vain to comfort them.

The Iman was sitting under an awning in the middle of the courtyard, surrounded by students bent over their Korans. At the sight of the apparently crazed woman, he suspended his commentary and the young men ran to ward her off. She fell, frightened, to her knees.

"Let her come," said the Iman.

Reassured, she came forward.

"Come sit down," said the Iman, pointing to a stool. When she hesitated, he repeated, "Come."

She took a seat. The mad run had left her breathless and panting. She tried to speak, but the words would not come to her mouth.

"First of all, calm yourself," said the Iman.

She laid the child on the ground, swallowed her saliva, and said in a broken voice, "Save me, Father! Save me and my children, Man of God!"

"What's the trouble?" the Iman asked her.

"My husband has just been banished from the canton by the chief because he tried to supply a philter for the chief's Favorite to administer to her husband. The philter fell into the chief's hands. That's the reason why my husband is expelled and must leave by tomorrow. We have four little children, and we don't even know where to go. I'm half crazy."

"Are you sure there was no poison involved?"

"Yes, I'm certain. Gbombélé himself told me. I came to beg for your intervention. For the love of God, save us, Holy Man!"

"And there was no poison?"

"No, no! I swear it!"

"Then I'll take it up with the chief."

"Please hurry, Father, I beg you, or it will be too late. My

husband is packing his things this very minute, under the eye of Gbombélé."

"Mind you, I can't promise that I can make the chief go back on his decision. In matters like these, there's always the suspicion of poison."

Actually, the Iman was better informed than he let on. The old sorceress had already come, three days before, to beseech his intervention. The matter did not then seem urgent, and he had not yet found time to go to the palace.

"Calm yourself," he said. "I'll go see the chief immediately. Wait here for me."

The Iman made his ablutions and set off, accompanied by one of the notables who always went with him on missions of this kind. When the two men arrived at the palace, the chief was surrounded by notables who had heard the news and come to learn further details. In some cases, they wanted mainly to stir up trouble.

As he entered the vestibule, the Iman was aware of this situation. And so, after the first greetings, he requested a private audience, which the chief immediately accorded him. Followed by the Iman and his companion, he led the way to a small room reserved for this purpose. After settling himself on some cowhides laid out on the floor, the Iman called upon God to bestow patience and kindness upon mankind. Then he turned to his companion.

"*N'ta tiè*, Comrade, if I asked you to accompany me on this visit to my son, it was because I have been asked to intercede with him about a serious matter. I shouldn't have come were I not sure of the respect and friendship that he has always shown me. These are not due to my humble person but date back to a solemn pact between our grandfathers. Now is not the time to recall what passed between them, but it is on this basis that I have come humbly to ask him to revoke the decree expelling Orokélé. Actually, it is not for Orokélé that I am pleading. I should have done nothing if it concerned him alone. But the fellow has a wife and four innocent children who will perhaps suffer more than he from his expulsion. I admit that Orokélé

deserves this punishment and more, and I do not ask my son to completely reverse his decision, only to modify it. If the decree affected only Orokélé, I should be the first to applaud it. But the children also are victims. Surely it is not too much to ask that the punishment be reduced to a fine and to attendant penalties that will not fall upon innocent heads.

"But the important thing is the bond between us. That alone makes me so daring. Our grandfathers, our fathers, and then we ourselves have been bound together. I am the heir of the appointed Intercessor and he the heir of the Benefactor. I am honored by this relationship, which has grown in strength since the day you succeeded your father."

The chief listened impassively to the old man's peroration, but the last words caused his eyelids to blink more rapidly. While the intermediary repeated the address to him, the chief went over in his memory the past events that the Iman had just recalled. In his mind's eye, he saw his great-uncle's struggle against the formidable adversaries who contested his right to the throne. All this had happened long, long ago, before the white men's arrival.

At that time, the royal family was divided into two factions: on one side the nephews of the dead king, and on the other his brothers. The council of elders was unable to settle their dispute, each faction claiming that the successor should come from its side. Even after an appeal to the oracle, neither faction would give in. The chief's great-uncle, a strong and clever man who was a member of the brothers' faction, suggested recourse to the arbitration of a third party, the dean of the tribe, who had never left the village of his origin and who alone knew the exact location of the ancestor's grave. To rebel against his decision would have been a sacrilege that the ancestral spirits would not have left unpunished. And so the next market day at Gbin was set as the day of arbitration.

The old man arrived clandestinely the evening before. No one knew he was there until, at the cock's crow, a horn blew seven times from the sacred grove to summon the most ancient of the elders.

Only the great dignitaries of Poro,* with their bald heads, white eyebrows, beards reddened by log fires, and backs bent with age, could interpret the sound of the horn, which signified that the wisest of the wise men was calling them to consultation. Before the first light of the new day had swept away the shadows of the night, the long line of patriarchs marched slowly toward the sacred grove, which was still enveloped in a gray cloak of morning mist. The oldest of all led the procession, and the others followed in single file, in an order established by tradition. At the edge of the grove, they observed a ritual pause, and the horn sounded again. Only then did the procession enter the sacred gate, walking slowly and prudently as if into the unknown. For unknown it was. Who can know in advance the intentions of the Old Woman?**

Within the grove, just at the intersection of the four paths leading to the sanctuary, there was a hut where a wood fire was burning. Beside the fire, an old man sat on a stump that was smoothed by thousands of human flanks over generations and generations. No one knew who had put the stump in this location. The old man, bent over double, seemed unaware of any presences other than his own. Suddenly he raised an enormous head with a broad, overlapping forehead and a nose and mouth that seemed to mingle together. His eyelids fell heavily over his eyes, and in order to see he had to raise them with his finger. Time had pitilessly furrowed his face with deep dirt-filled wrinkles, which had not been touched by water for many years. His beard had deviated from his chin to his jowls, where it grew abundantly in two long strands that fell over his shoulders, lending him an aspect of terror. A short distance away, an old black goat, tied to a root, was munching dead leaves softened by

*A secret society that controls the political, social, and economic life of the Senufu people. Membership is obligatory for all men without exception, and members enjoy equal footing within the society, whatever their position in the world may be.—TRANS.

**In the Senufu cosmogony, the goddess mother from whom the entire universe descends and who is the infallible source of all wisdom.—TRANS.

the dew. From time to time, the harsh cry of a bat broke the heavy silence of the sanctuary.

Suddenly a voice cried out, seeming to come from the ground, rising and breaking against the vault of the forest and falling back onto the bald heads. This invisible voice made a roll-call of the patriarchs one by one, in traditional order. Each one of them, with his boubou raised over his left shoulder, came to bow reverently before the Wise Man, who responded to their greetings with a nod of his head. Then all of them sat down before him. He raised his eyelids with his fingers and slowly swept his porcine gaze over the assembly. Then, in a grave, tremulous voice, he spoke.

"We are called together this morning—a bit early, I must say—by the Old Woman. It concerns, as you have no doubt guessed, the succession of Dopé. On this subject, his family is divided, with the brothers on one side and the nephews on the other. They have not been able to settle it by the usual procedure. We have been asked to arbitrate, and so we shall do.

"The Old Woman has taught us that when the bull comes to drink at the stream, his hind feet never enter the water before the front ones. In other words, a nephew can never come before a brother, even if the latter is so young that he can stand erect under an upside-down calabash. So, on principle, we eliminate the nephews and take it upon us to choose among such brothers as are legitimate heirs. The royal family tree is always present in the infallible memory of the Old Woman."

Then the invisible voice called out in genealogical order the names of all the kings who had ruled since the death of the dynasty's founder. Never had a nephew taken precedence over a brother. Now seniority was the sole criterion, and this pointed to Zani, the present chief's great-uncle. The Old Woman decreed, through the voice of the Wise Man, that Zani should mount the throne. The decisions of the Old Woman could not be disputed and hence received the elders' approval. The throat of the old billy goat was slit; his blood was

poured into the Old Woman's bowl and the meat divided among the elders.

"It is done," said the Wise Man. "Bear the news to the council of notables. As for me, I ask permission to take leave in order to return as soon as possible to the land of our ancestors."

That very evening, the council had the news. Zani, proclaimed successor to the late king, was to mount the throne without delay. But the nephews, although their claim was rejected by the highest authority, did not give in and multiplied their intrigues in order to forestall Zani's coronation. It was no secret that a plot was brewing.

As the coronation date drew nearer, the threat took more definite shape. Rumor had it that certain members of the family planned to use the occasion to massacre Zani and his supporters. Precautions had to be taken. First there was discreet consultation of marabouts and fetish-makers. When they had confirmed the rumor, the sacrifices that the holy men advised were carried out.

The great marabout went in for action even more concrete than prayers and sacrifices. Without anyone's knowledge, in utmost secrecy, he mobilized among his students a group of intrepid horsemen, ready for D-day. The ceremony was organized feverishly, yet without arousing the suspicions of the conspirators; indeed, the rebels were allotted tasks in the preparations. The crowning was to be held at the traditional meeting place, under the old silk-cotton tree just west of the village. This was near a thicket reputed to be the abode of the protective jinns of Gbin, whose access was forbidden except to those who, at certain times of the year, came there with votive offerings from the village.

When D-day came, both sides were ready. The afternoon was sunny, and the sky clear and blue. Tom-toms were beating around the silk-cotton tree, where great bubbling jars of millet-beer were watched over by impatient serving girls. The dignitaries invited from all over the region had joined the tribal and village chiefs and the notables already seated in the shade. The arrival of the new king was expected momentarily. Suddenly, a horn blew three times, and

the royal procession, made up of family members and the patriarchs, appeared on the south side. The young king rode a gray mare whose skin was so shiny that she was called Moon. He wore a cotton boubou, belted with a broad, indigo-blue scarf, and on his head a scarlet phrygian cap whose point fell over his right shoulder. On his forehead, a triangular amulet, sewn into a piece of lionskin, ensured protection against the evil eye.

No doubt the king had taken this route hundreds of times before, but today he was supposed to follow it in ignorance of where he was going. He did not guide his horse, whose reins were held by the dean of the patriarchs, and his slow pace determined that of the whole procession. It came to a halt a hundred yards from the silk-cotton tree at the exact place where the original ancestor had founded the village by, as we should say, laying the cornerstone. This site, which had witnessed the good and bad fortunes of past generations, their joys and their sorrows, and incarnated the ancestor's soul, was a natural object of veneration. It symbolized the fidelity of a people to the memory of its predecessors and the register of its history. Here every king had bowed the head that was to receive the crown. Now a new ruler came to ask the blessing and protection of those who had gone before and to inscribe his name on the cornerstone.

The young king dismounted, took off his shoes, and advanced toward the stone as piously as if it contained the spirit of the ancestor. He was about to bow down when a man rose up out of the low branches of the silk-cotton tree and rushed toward him with a dagger in his hand. At the same moment, there was a volley of shots and the assailant fell to the ground short of his target. As if by magic, the marabout's men, twenty riders armed with rifles, came out of the thicket. They had been in ambush since before dawn, yet no one had detected their presence so close to the crowd.

This spectacular happening caused a moment of panic. The assassin's accomplices took flight, but they were soon overtaken by the horsemen. There were five of them, all drawn from the nephews' supporters and all armed with daggers. The coronation ceremony

was suspended, and the would-be assassins tied up and taken to the sacred grove, never to be heard of again.

Two days later, the king was crowned and took his oath of office on the cornerstone amid the acclamations of a rejoicing crowd. For three days they feasted and danced without pause. On the next market day, notables came from the four corners of the kingdom to pay homage to the new sovereign. The great marabout and his students were awarded all the honors due them for having saved the sovereign's life.

Amid this assembly, the king solemnly conferred upon his saviour the hereditary title of intercessor with the royal family. Three generations had gone by without any successor having abrogated the privilege. It was to this historic event that the Iman, descendant of the great marabout, referred in his intercession for Orokélé.

The chief knew the story well, for it had been transmitted to him by his predecessor. He was visibly embarrassed. To leave Orokélé's crime unpunished would encourage all the poisoners of the area, but to turn down the Iman's request would be a sacrilege laden with even more dire consequences. The spirits of the ancestors would bring calamities upon the whole population. The Iman, aware of his own strength, held back from asking that his protégé be completely pardoned. He proposed merely that the punishment be reduced to a fine and attendant penalties. Zani's descendant could hardly turn down this compromise, which would extract a thorn from his side. But he asked the Iman to grant him some time for reflection, meanwhile giving orders to stay execution of the decree of expulsion.

After the Iman had left her, Orokélé's wife could not dry her tears. In vain, his students tried to calm her desperate sobbing. When the Iman reappeared at the entrance of his residence, she rushed toward him on all fours like a child.

"Get up," he ordered. "I bring good news. Your husband will not be banished. This is a definite gain. He won't be pardoned, either, but will suffer other penalties. Meanwhile, you can go home. We'll hear of the chief's final decision tomorrow."

The poor woman, still on her knees, grasped the Iman's hands.

Had she understood? Undoubtedly she had, but she was still under shock from the apparition of her husband under the guard of Gbombélé. The Iman helped her rise to her feet. She thanked him profusely and started home, her youngest child under her arm. There she found Gbombélé and her husband sitting in the shadow of the house.

"Did you see the Iman?" Gbombélé asked before she could open her mouth.

"Yes, I saw him."

"And what did he do?"

"He went straight to the chief and obtained a revocation of our banishment."

At this very moment, a messenger came from the chief to tell Gbombélé that the decree had been suspended. Gbombélé could not hide his satisfaction. The crying of the children during their mother's absence had deeply touched his stony heart. Orokélé's crime was forgotten, and the children were uppermost in his mind. God had heard the unceasing prayers that he had addressed to Him since the moment when they had thrown themselves into the arms of their ragged father.

"Am I to take Orokélé to the chief or leave him here?" he asked the messenger.

"The chief says that for the time being you can leave him here. In any case, he is not to be expelled."

The children had run to group themselves around their mother. Before leaving, Gbombélé patted their heads, and the dumbstruck mother sobbed her gratitude toward him.

The Iman had just breakfasted the next day when a messenger summoned him to the chief's presence. For a moment he was worried. He had proposed a fine and attendant penalties, but what might these be? Would it be up to him to suggest them if, as was likely, the chief gave him the responsibility? Before their meeting he must think this over. Along the way he passed the various possibilities in review and conceived the idea of a public confession.

The family council was awaiting the arrival of the Iman, together

with his constant companion. They greeted the chief and sat down on cowhides that were stretched out on the floor. At once the chief opened the meeting.

"We are gathered this morning," he said, "to discuss the matter of Orokélé. The Iman came yesterday to ask me to commute the sentence of banishment into a fine and attendant penalties. I asked him for time to reflect, actually to call together the family council. This I did. The council accepted the request in principle and left it up to the Iman to set the penalties. Now we shall hear what he has to say."

The Iman stroked his beard as if it contained the answer.

"I am but a humble intercessor, and the honor you do me is embarrassing. My suggestion for a penalty is a public confession. As for the fine, I leave that to the council."

The council members looked at one another in surprise. The penalty seemed to them just, but, coming from the Iman, it seemed also very severe. In any case, they transmitted it to the chief, who, the moment he heard it, had thought of the same thing. A public confession would put an end to Orokélé's misdeeds and serve as a warning to his fellows. But the chief, too, was taken aback by the Iman's severity.

There was a surprise for the Iman as well. The council, after agreeing that the decree of banishment should be rescinded, had sentenced Orokélé to a lifetime exaction. He was to be left his flock of sheep only on condition that he provide the animal that the community offered to every important visitor.

The Iman showed both surprise and pleasure. His mission had been more successful than he had dared hope, and he gave thanks to God and to his ancestor. No one, he said to himself, can foresee how God will answer the prayers of His people. But this philosophical explanation did not completely satisfy him. Imponderables, he thought, must have come into play.

There had, indeed, been an intervening event that influenced the chief's decision. The preceding evening, just as he was going to bed, there was a knock at his door. It was his sister, asking to see him.

"What is it?" he asked as she came into the room.

"I've come to see you. A familiar saying has it that in a house there is a chamber and also an antechamber. Some things are to be said in the one and some in the other. I have come to ask you, confidentially, to commute the sentence of Orokélé's banishment. He is gravely at fault, but you are alive, thank God. Don't underestimate the occult powers you will come up against if the sentence is carried out. As another saying has it, 'Kill your bad dog and the neighbor's goat will bite you.' I am only a woman, and I can say no more."

"Thank you for coming, Sister. I'll give you my answer tomorrow morning."

"Good night, Brother, until tomorrow."

The chief was not too surprised by his sister's intervention. He knew of her ties with the brotherhood of sorcerers and the interest she had in defending them. When he was left alone, he weighed the pros and cons of the situation.

Before long, from north, south, east, and west, from earth and sky, there came a concerted hooting of owls, symbol of sorcerers, which could well have been instigated by his sister. Vainly he recited the incantation taught him by his mother for the purpose of exorcising sorcerers. The hooting of the owls grew louder and louder. He got up, poured the contents of a small jar into the hollow of his right hand, and washed his face with it three times. It was no use; the owls went on hooting. Then he ordered an incense pot filled with embers and in it burned some wood chips. An acrid smoke filled the room. But "tu-whit tu-whoo" was the owls' response. Obviously this was a sign of their connivance with Orokélé, and a dire warning to the chief.

For a moment, he was afraid that they had invaded the courtyard. He went outside but saw nothing. Like a lost soul he staggered to the vestibule, where Gbombélé was on guard.

"What's going on, Gbombélé?"

"I was just wondering. It must be a peaceful protest by the sorcerers against Orokélé's expulsion."

The hooting did not cease until very late at night. By this time, the chief knew that he must take it into account, that there was substance to his sister's warning. For the hooting of an owl always foretells a misfortune about to fall upon an individual or even a whole community. This presage had not fallen upon a deaf ear. After the chief had slept on the problem, he saw that there was only one solution.

Here lay the explanation of his indulgence after the night of reflection which he had asked of the Iman. The upshot was that, in good years and bad, Orokélé was condemned to donate a sheep on every occasion of an official visit. This was, of course, a punishment much less grave than expulsion. But the consequences were nonetheless far-reaching, for the obligation would be extended to his posterity. The village inhabitants humorously pinned the nickname of "Bazié," that is, Zié the "sheepster," upon his eldest son.

When the news reached the ears of Orokélé's wife, she danced the *maraba yassa*, a comic dance in which the dancer, her face powdered with ashes and rigged out in scraps of burlap and a broad-brimmed raffia hat, goes through the streets brandishing a bow as if to dispel evil spirits. A procession formed behind her until finally all the village women followed in her train, dancing and singing. The procession halted before the door of the Iman's house, and before he could recognize her in her bizarre accouterment she expressed her gratitude in song and dance to her benefactor. The accompanying crowd shared her joy, even without knowing the reason. The *maraba yassa*! The mere name is enough to attract women and rejoice their hearts. Every one of them hopes to dance it one day and to draw the same following. For it serves to thank God or the Devil, as the case may be, for the fulfillment of a secret desire such as every woman cherishes.

While his wife danced from door to door, Orokélé was summoned by the chief's family court to the palace in order to hear the sentence. He learned that, thanks to the Iman, the decree of banishment had been abrogated and he had only to pay a fine consisting of

the supply of the sheep traditionally offered to visitors of note. Every word of the sentence hammered deafeningly at his ears. Mentally he counted his sheep. They formed a sizable flock, but how long would they hold out against such an exaction? He took comfort in saying to himself, like a frog hit by a stone but only scratched as a result, "Better a grazed head than a broken one." In comparison with the decree of expulsion, this punishment was only a scratch, which time would heal. His flock had not been confiscated, and he could continue to profit from it. As for the multiplication of the sheep, that was up to his eldest son. He thanked the court and went home, stopping on his way to express his gratitude to the Iman.

He reached home shortly after his wife, who had doffed her *maraba yassa* costume but still had an ecstatic expression on her face. Now that she was once more recognizable, her children gathered around her while the youngest suckled greedily at her breast. Orokélé sat down beside her. She was surprised that he did not seem to share her joy.

"What's the matter, Husband? I thought I'd find you glowing with happiness."

"I'm not sad, but I'm worried."

"Has something new happened?"

"No, nothing."

"Then why are you worried?"

"Because although the second sentence is less severe than the first, in the long run it can have equally hard effects. I'm to supply a sheep every time the chief offers one. This could mean they'll ask me for a sheep every time a *garde de cercle* comes through. At this rate, our flock won't last long, for there will be many more visitors than I have sheep. What am I to do on the day when I'm expected to furnish a sheep and not one is left? If I can't produce one, I'll have to go away. So you see, it comes to the same thing."

"Your fears are exaggerated. God is great, and the Iman is always there. The flock counts vigorous rams and fruitful ewes. Come, let's live this day with joy!"

"I follow you. You may be right. But I can't get over my worry. Who knows what else may be demanded of me?"

"Calm yourself! We can always count on the Iman's support."

"Well, I'll try to follow your advice."

At dusk, when Bazié brought the sheep back from pasture, he found his father sitting in front of the door surrounded by friends who had come to express their sympathy. As the sheep leaped over the threshold and came into the courtyard, Orokélé counted the rams. Yes, his wife was right. They were a solid contingent.

The chief's sister, who had not put in an appearance during the day, came back to her brother that evening together with Orokélé. The courtyard was filled with a darkness so thick that you could have cut it with a knife. Gbombélé received the two visitors in the vestibule, astonished that they should have come at so late an hour.

"I understand your surprise," she said, "but I want to see my brother. Go tell him that I am here."

"Is he expecting you?" asked Gbombélé.

"Certainly."

Gbombélé did the errand and returned to say that the chief would receive them.

"What is the meaning of this late visit?" the chief asked his sister. "I thought I'd see you earlier in the day."

"Yes, I should have come before this. But other problems detained me."

"Well, what is it? I'm listening."

"You're surprised to see me with Orokélé. When I sent word by Masseni that I would be coming along with someone else, I didn't mention his name. But he asked me to bring him, in order that he might thank you and put all his humble powers at your service. It's no secret to you that he is the leader of a powerful secret society. What's surprising is that you haven't, like your predecessors, been initiated. All of them were members, some of very high rank. They obtained not only material gains but also protection for their families.

"I have reason to believe that advances were made to you, with all due discretion. You didn't reject them outright, but you held back because you thought that membership was incompatible with your Muslim religion. But I think you're wrong to put organized religion above a heritage of an equally spiritual kind bequeathed to you by your ancestors. An all-powerful ruler like yourself shouldn't scorn a long-standing institution whose members include most of the council of notables, who rightfully want you to join them. Some of them must have spoken to you on the subject, even if in a manner more veiled than mine. The incident of Orokélé may be a sign of our ancestors' wish that you, like them, should belong. I presume to be their spokesman and ask you to be initiated. Then you'll see how Orokélé can be useful to you. That's why I brought him along. And, after all, you and I are one."

"Thank you, Sister. I've never doubted your good feelings toward me. Meanwhile, tell me what was the meaning of the owl hoots that I heard after you left me the other evening."

"You'll know that after you're initiated. That's all I can say for the moment."

"And when would you initiate me?"

"That's up to you."

At this point Orokélé, who so far had been silent, entered the conversation. Out of a bag that he took from his pocket he pulled a little wooden owl and handed it to the chief's sister.

"Pray give this to my master and tell him to put it under his pillow tonight. Tomorrow morning he'll tell us what he saw in his sleep, and then we'll know to which spirit to dedicate him before his initiation."

The chief took the wooden owl mistrustfully into his hand, examined it attentively, and set it down near the kerosene lamp. After his visitors had gone, he stuffed it under his pillow and gingerly placed his head exactly over it. His sleep was slow in coming and restless. In his dreams he saw a black snake standing upright on its tail and provided with wings that had unusually long feathers. The snake

rushed at him, spitting fire. He wanted to defend himself, but his arm was not strong enough to raise his stick. At this moment, an eagle swooped down on the snake and carried him away. He could see the eagle rise into the air while the snake vainly twisted and turned. Soon the snake's wings and head fell to the ground beside him. The eagle came back and glided above him before disappearing into the sky in an easterly direction. He woke with a start and could not fall asleep again. At dawn the chief sent for his sister, impatient to tell her his dream.

She showed no surprise but said merely, "I'll consult Orokélé. But have no fear. Your dream is not a bad sign. Quite the contrary."

The conversations between the chief and Orokélé were, at this stage, secret, taking place only under the cover of night. That evening, Orokélé and his sponsor came earlier than before. Gbombélé admitted them without ceremony. The chief had not been reassured by his sister's favorable interpretation of the dream. For him, the vision of a winged serpent standing on its tail was not a good omen but presaged rather misfortunes and sorrow. But he was glad to see his sister arrive with a smile on her lips.

"Good evening, Brother," she said as she came in.

"Good evening, Sister. Here you are at last! I was burning to know the meaning of my dream. I trust that you've already described it to Orokélé, who you say holds the key to its interpretation. Let him speak!"

"Master," said Orokélé, "your sister has told me of what you dreamed after placing the object I gave you under your pillow. To an uninitiated man, this dream may seem threatening. But it tells us something of your personality and of the demiurge who has it under his protection. The eagle represents the demiurge and the black snake your enemies, and your protector has demonstrated the power he can put at your service if you are ready to comply with certain conditions."

"I'm ready."

"Then we'll come for you tomorrow evening, my brother," he concluded.

The next evening, they all set out from the palace together. As soon as they were outside the village, Orokélé ordered the chief to stop. His eyes were blindfolded, and he was carried away in something like a hammock. After journeying over several byways, they came to a halt, and the chief's blindfold was removed. Looking around him, he saw that he had not really been taken so far. Were it not for a tree to his right, he would have sworn that he recognized the clearing where the children came every year at harvest time to run races on horses made of millet stalks. But there was the tree . . .

Suddenly his companions abandoned him, bidding him to have no fear. A few seconds later, he heard, apparently coming from the mysterious tree, "Tu-whit tu-whoo."

From farther off, a human voice asked, "Who are you?"

And another voice answered, "Do you no longer recognize your children?"

"Ah, so it's you! Come closer!"

The chief saw figures advancing toward him. They wore hoods whose front flaps, studded with small cowrie shells, fell below their knees. In a low voice he launched into the incantation his mother had taught him. But the voice from the tree continued.

"Are you there, Eagle?"

"Yes."

"Good. Here is my son. From this moment on, take him under your protection. Keep him between your skin and your flesh.

Let not the enemy from the sky or the enemy from the earth assail him;
Let not the enemy from the East or the West assail him;
Let not the enemy from the right or from the left assail him;
May he not be tormented by either heat or cold;
Tu-whit tu-whoo! The greatest bird of the forests and savannas has spoken.

Now let my son cross the brook, the stream, and the river."

Two men seized the chief and stripped him of his worldly clothes. Then they led him under the tree. Here there was a line of cane hoops about two and a half feet wide and a foot and a half high. They laid him down, naked and flat on his stomach like a lizard.

"Swim across the brook!" they ordered.

He crawled under the first hoop.

"Swim across the stream!"

He crawled again, this time under two hoops in succession.

"Swim across the river!"

And he crawled under four hoops.

"Now get up!"

He rose to his feet, leaving the seven hoops intact behind him.

"Your son has crossed the brook, the stream, and the river without contaminating them. Tu-whit tu-whoo!"

"Now cover my son."

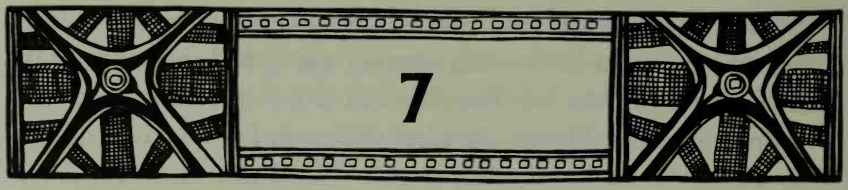
A hood was placed on his head and seven times he circled what he had taken for a tree. With every round he was stopped and given the oath to keep the secrecy of the organization and to be loyal under all circumstances to his fellow members. Then, at his invitation, the surrounding figures took off their hoods. His clothes were given back and he put them on, feeling as if he had emerged from another nightmare. He noticed that most of those present were old women. Among them he recognized several old men, including members of his own family. From their dress, he saw that his sister and Orokélé held an important rank. Soon these two came to stand beside him.

The first stage of his initiation was over. Orokélé, his enemy of yesterday, was now his godfather and charged with his further education. They walked together back to the entrance to the village. Here Orokélé took his leave, after impressing upon his pupil the secret character of what he had just seen.

One thing bothered the neophyte: the presence of the mysterious tree that he had circled seven times in a place where he remembered no tree. Was it a mystification? When he went to bed, he vowed to look for it the next morning.

At dawn he retraced, this time in a straight line, the path he had followed the night before. The clearing was indeed the one he had known since he was a boy. But there was no tree. He made up for his disappointment with the certainty that soon his spiritual master would furnish the key to this puzzle.

This is how our chief, the husband of Masseni, was enrolled almost against his will in a secret society that had heretofore met with his mistrust and disapproval. As the Iman said, "God's ways are inscrutable and beyond His creatures' understanding."



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For weeks, gossip in Gbin centered about the little horn containing the philter. Rumor had amplified and distorted the story to the point that the original narrators no longer recognized it. There was talk of a speaking horn and of a violent poison; several people who had seen it were said to have been struck blind, so that in the palace all mention of it was forbidden. The Favorite was held up to public obloquy and accused of having wanted to kill her husband in order to appropriate the gold that he had entrusted to her. As for Orokélé, he was said to have mysteriously disappeared, leaving his wife and children as hostages. All these things were in the air when a new scandal broke out in regard to the disappearance of a little pair of drawers.

The Favorite's position had deteriorated day by day to the point where the chief was ill-humored every time it was her turn to "make the bed." In her distress, she ran from magician to magician, and every consultation cost her the sacrifice of an animal or an object of value.

"Your enemy is very near. You live in the same house," and "You eat at the same table," one of the magicians told her. "She's younger than you. And I read in my sand that she's light-skinned and very beautiful. She's sapping the ground under your feet."

"Very true," the Favorite answered. "One of my cowives called Masseni fits your description. But what can I do? How can I maneuver her into bad odor with my husband?"

"It's both easy and difficult. Easy, because my master has never let me down. Difficult because of the object that I need to work with."

"What do you need?" asked the Favorite. "You have only to tell me. My honor is at stake, and no price is too high."

"It's not a matter of the cost. What I need is a piece of underwear that has been in contact with the private parts of your rival."

"That's the easy thing, not the difficult one," exclaimed the Favorite.

"Then get it for me, and you can rest in peace."

It was indeed easy enough for a woman as practical as the Favorite to secure one of the pairs of drawers, which, according to local custom, Masseni wore under her pagne. A clever serving girl could snatch one from under the eyes of Masseni's laundresses some wash day down by the stream. The Favorite had only to choose a trusted agent for this delicate mission. Her choice fell upon Ténin, a bright girl with a gleam of malice in her eyes, almost too discreet for her apparent age. Her mistress had used her for other such operations, so she was broken in.

Monday was the usual day for going to the stream. Ténin and a few of the Favorite's other serving girls would go with Masseni's laundresses as usual, but this time Ténin would be instructed to filch one of Masseni's many pairs of drawers.

Early that day, Gbin was flooded with sunshine, propitious to clothes washing and to the realization of the Favorite's project. Dirty linen was piled up in front of her hut, as in front of Masseni's. The girls, confined most of the week to the house, were thrilled to get out in the open air, to idle the day through far from the severe eyes of their mistresses and free to gossip about them. What envious glances the old courtiers threw on the girls as they passed back and forth through the vestibule. They would lunch in the shade of the trees and drink from the nearby well. While beating the dirty clothes, they would sing and spatter one another with soapsuds.

Above all, they would momentarily forget their mistresses' petty quarrels.

The stream, situated about a mile from the village, had, in addition to its clear waters, flat, rocky banks at the place where the village women and girls came every Monday to do their laundry. The best locations were reserved, of course, for the court laundresses. There the happy group came this Monday to set down their baskets filled with dirty linen, which, after it was washed, they stretched out to dry on the hot rocks.

Ténin was watchful and managed to spread her laundry right next to that of Masseni's servants. Thick cotton blankets, boubous, pagnes, and drawers were laid out haphazardly. While the other girls went to eat their lunch in the shade, she would stay behind and, unnoticed, snatch a pair of Masseni's drawers.

A gust of wind whirled the drying clothes into the air, mingling them together, and Ténin took advantage of the confusion to lay hold of a pair of drawers that she thought belonged to Masseni. She folded them up and placed them in her basket before joining her companions over their lunch. The meal was followed by a brief period of rest, after which the laundresses picked up their dry linen. When they reached home, the sun lay low on the horizon.

Proudly Ténin went to announce to her mistress the success of her mission.

"Did you get the drawers?" the Favorite asked her.

"Yes, I have them."

"Are you sure that no one saw you take them?"

"Yes, I'm quite sure. The others were eating, and a gust of wind, which threw everything into the air, made my task all the more easy."

"Thank you. You'll have your reward."

"Shall I give you the drawers now?"

"No, wait until night and give them to me after supper."

Ténin waited impatiently to get rid of the drawers, which weighed upon her like a state secret. The Favorite, equally impatient, had

arranged to have the drawers sent to her magician that very night. As soon as Ténin had gulped down her supper, she delivered the precious drawers to her mistress, who did not even pause to look at them but hastily made them into a little bundle.

A few minutes later, this bundle was attached to a rope whose end was thrown over the wall of the courtyard. On the other side of the wall, someone pulled the rope and the package rose until it fell over the wall into the hands of the person who was waiting for it on the other side. This was the magician himself, who, mindful of the saying "Once bitten, twice shy" and hence unwilling to employ an intermediary, caught it in his own hands.

He carried the bundle away, sure that the drawers belonged to his client's rival. Now he had only to perform his operation. He had already procured the other objects necessary to casting a spell: the nest of a weaver-bird and the branch that supported it, symbols of the love that binds a man and a woman. As soon as he got home, he undid the bundle, unfolded the drawers, and stretched them out on the floor. He took the branch and the nest, uttered four times the name of Masseni and three times that of her husband. Then he spat on the nest and the branch and enveloped them, like a corpse, in the drawers. When the village was asleep, he tucked the bundle under his arm and followed a path leading out of the village to the place where it split into two branches, one to the right and the other to the left. There he squatted, set fire to the false corpse, and beat it violently with a stick. When it was reduced to ashes, he gathered these up and scattered them to the four winds.

Now the chief's infatuation with Masseni was over, he said to himself. He had symbolically burned it up and scattered the ashes. Within a week, Masseni and the chief should be fighting like cat and dog. This was as certain as that two and two make four.

What he didn't know was that the drawers he had just burned belonged not to Masseni but to the Favorite. Once more Divine Providence, in the form of a gust of wind, had succored Masseni by mingling the two women's drawers together. The ones that Ténin

had stolen belonged to her own mistress. So the Favorite's weapon had been turned against her. "The lip of a badly built well is apt to crumble," as the saying has it.

The next evening, the Favorite came to see the magician.

"Good evening," she said as she entered his "laboratory."

"Good evening," he answered.

"I've come to see whether everything has gone as it should."

"Absolutely! I got the drawers myself and did my job at once. Now we can only await the result."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. We must wait for a week to pass."

"Tell me how much I owe you."

"For the job I've done, there is no charge. But you must make a sacrifice."

So saying, he cast his sand by the yellow light of his lamp and traced some geometrical figures. These he erased, replacing them by others, then suddenly arrested the movement of his finger.

Raising his eyes, he said, "I see gold. A gold ring, which you must give to someone whose friendship and loyalty to you have never been lacking. This sacrifice has nothing to do with Masseni. It is to protect your soul against all malevolence."

The next evening, the Favorite came back with a gold ring weighing about twenty grams.

"This is in response to what you told me yesterday. I choose to give it to you, because you are the most honest of my friends."

The magician took the ring with pretended surprise and beat it three times against his forehead.

"May your sacrifice be acceptable to God!" he exclaimed. "So it will be, for my master has never let me down."

The Favorite went away happy, persuaded that within a few days her rival would be definitely set aside. Already she planned her revenge. "I'll lower her to the rank of servant. She'll plant rice in my paddy. Never again will she look on the face of her sleeping husband or hear him snore. For my magician's master has never let him

down." This was not the first sacrifice she had made of a gold ring. But where did she get the gold?

"I know the chinks in the Favorite's armor," Wétâ had told Masseni. One of these was the use she made of the gold that her husband had entrusted to her before his marriage to Masseni. At this time, Wétâ had been the Favorite's confidante, although at the same time she had been exploited by her. One day Wétâ rebelled and demanded her cut of the pie—a very small cut. The Favorite turned a deaf ear, and this created a rupture between them. Now the Favorite and her magician confidently awaited the success of the spell. Every morning, the Favorite pricked up her ears, and all her servants were mobilized to listen at keyholes and find out what Masseni and the chief were up to.

What they learned was not good news for their mistress, and they took care not to report it. There was a rumor that the chief had got wind of the dwindling of his gold treasure. A questioning of the jeweler who had made the rings revealed that certain of them had come back to him under suspicious circumstances. There was too much talk, and the chief wanted to clear up the situation. The end of the week was near, and there was no sign of dissension between him and Masseni. On the contrary, her prestige seemed greater than ever. But clouds hung over the Favorite's head, and she alone failed to see them.

On the third day of the following week, the storm suddenly broke. The chief now knew for certain that part of his gold reserve had been stolen by the Favorite. One morning, at the cock's crow, there was a knock at her door.

"Who's there?" she asked.

"It's me. Open the door."

Recognizing her husband's voice, she let him in.

"Sit down," he told her. "I have something to say to you."

"As long as it's to my credit."

"Bring me the gold I left with you. I need money."

"All of it?"

"Yes. Even so, it may not be enough."

"Tell me what's the matter."

"You'll be told later. For the moment it's an important matter, and strictly confidential."

The Favorite got up shaking, and her husband heard her shuffling about in the shadows from one trunk to another.

"Hurry up!" he called out impatiently. "I have business I must settle before dawn."

At last she came back and, with a trembling hand, held out the case where she kept the gold. The chief opened it and counted the rings.

"The rings aren't all here. I gave you fifteen of them, and here there are only nine. Where are the others?"

"Wait a minute. I'll look further. In my haste, I may have left some at the bottom of the trunk."

And she retreated again to the far section of the room.

"They're gone, stolen!" she cried out. "I've been robbed! I can't find anything else. But who could have stolen the other rings? We'll find out! Yes, we will, whether it was a man or an evil spirit." She sobbed.

"Yes, we'll find out," echoed the chief. "In the meantime, come here."

The Favorite reappeared with a downcast face.

"A couple of weeks ago," said the chief, "there was question of a philter, perhaps a poison. To safeguard your honor, and mine too, I didn't dig into it too deeply. I tried to cover it up. But hardly had the rumors surrounding this affair died down than a new, more dishonorable scandal is breaking. It's up to you to stifle it. Tell me what you've done with the missing rings, because I'm sure that no thief would have taken only a part of them. If theft there was, I have means to discover the culprit. But if a scandal ensues, it will be to the damage of your reputation and of our marriage. On the other hand, if you tell me the truth it will remain between us, or at least within the court, for several of your cowives already know what you did with the rings."

The Favorite was speechless, and a flood of tears rolled from her protruding eyes. The figure of Wétâ flashed across her mind. "She must be the one who has sold me out," she said to herself.

"Well, then, what did you do with the missing rings?" the chief insisted. There was no response. "You'd better tell me straight out—that is, unless you prefer to face up to the jeweler. He says that just lately your magician brought him one of my rings with which you paid him for who knows what diabolical services."

This revelation undid the Favorite completely. She realized that she had been doubly betrayed and that her husband knew everything. This was exact. After the Favorite had been disgraced by the affair of the philter, Wétâ had put a bee in the chief's bonnet through the offices of a third party. She had instigated the questioning of the jeweler and little by little traced the thread between the gold ring and the drawers, in which the connecting link was the magician.

The Favorite was left petrified. Her husband did not press the point. The story of the gold ring and the drawers supposedly belonging to Masseni was verified. The jeweler had owned up, and so had the magician, so a confession on the part of the Favorite was superfluous. Moreover, she was presently incapable of uttering a single word.

The chief went away and called for his sister. Only an important event could have motivated such an early-morning call, she said to herself on the way. In her excitement she forgot her shawl and cane.

"What's the matter, Brother?" she asked after her greeting. "I hope it's nothing serious."

"It's serious, yes, especially as our ancestral inheritance is at stake. The sister-in-law whom you so staunchly defended in the affair of the philter has committed another crime."

And he told her the details of the story. For a long minute, she remained silent.

Then she said with a sigh, "So the gold that our ancestors piled up, generation after generation, has been squandered."

"Yes, alas! What an abuse of confidence, what a betrayal!"

His sister came closer and held out her right hand, palm up.

"Here is the palm of my hand! Tear out the hair you see upon it! Didn't I warn you not to entrust the family gold to an outsider? Didn't I tell you that an excess of confidence in your wife would yield unpleasant surprises? What can we do now to recover our sacred inheritance? What a sacrilege!"

"Yes, events have just proved that you were right, Sister. But it's no use to waste time indulging in futile regrets. We must act, and act quickly. Let's go now to my wife to see how we can recover the six missing rings."

The chief and his sister went at once to the Favorite, who was still sitting in the place where her husband had left her. The haggard and bloodshot eyes with which she stared at them had an inhuman expression, that of a ghost who inspired pity rather than fear. Her trauma was such that they could not get a single word out of her. Indeed, she seemed in need of urgent care.

The chief's sister was so upset that she instinctively called for help from Gbombélé. When he arrived, the poor Favorite was foaming at the mouth and shaken as if by epileptic convulsions. In vain Gbombélé breathed into her ears and nostrils and smeared her with mud. She had lost consciousness, and he had to admit that there was nothing he could do. To look outside the palace for a healer meant to risk the outburst of a scandal, which both the chief and his sister wanted to avoid. It was decided to put her to bed and wait to see what might happen. The chief and his sister went away, leaving Gbombélé to watch over the patient.

Gbombélé remained alone beside her. He murmured repeated incantations, spat into his hands, and rubbed her down. Hours went by without any sign of improvement. Gbombélé continued his massage, and the chief came from time to time in search of news. Only late in the evening did Gbombélé extract a few incomprehensible words, which were the only hopeful sign.

The chief and his sister forgot the matter of the gold and agreed to smother the whole business. The Favorite returned by slow degrees

to consciousness. At times she whispered something. From her gestures, Gbombélé gathered that she had her mind on sorcery. Only a week later did she recover her speech. But what was she saying? She spoke only of witches who had devoured a little girl, of the smell of a corpse in her hut and throughout the court. She didn't want to go on living. She wanted to go away, to hide from those who wished to devour her, to get away from the smell of decomposed flesh that infested the surrounding air.

She was mad. Finally the chief had to admit it, not without a guilty feeling. What was the importance of a few gold rings or even all the gold in the world compared to the life of a woman who was, after all, the mother of his first son? Visions of their youth flitted through his mind. He saw his wife at the height of her beauty and feminine charm and the happy days they had spent together. He cast a fatherly glance at the mat where she lay, raving about witches and the stench of a corpse. The sight overwhelmed him and his sorrow was boundless. At this point, he would have given the rest of his gold to cure her.

"Call Blari," he ordered.

As for the chief's sister, she could do nothing but weep. Her initiation into magic was of no succor; all she could think of was to send for Orokélé. But the memory of recent events restrained her. Gbombélé did come, bringing Blari with him. The old slave knew that the Favorite was indisposed, but he had no idea of the gravity of her condition. He too could not hold back his tears when he saw her.

"Blari, go for the Iman," the chief commanded. "Perhaps he can do something. But tell him to come alone."

Soon Blari came back with the Iman in tow.

"What is it, my son?" asked the old man as he entered the room where the chief was waiting.

"I've called you to do something for my wife. For days now, she has been raving mad. She can barely talk and then only about sorcery and the stench of a corpse."

The Iman without saying a word squatted beside the sick woman,

looked her over, and muttered some prayers. Then he addressed the chief.

"I know what it is," he said. "She has seen a malevolent jinn, the only kind that loves women. He appears in human form, in a dream, to the woman he desires, and when for some reason or another he cannot possess her, he becomes jealous and tries to destroy her. Things are not as bad as they seem. Thanks to God and my ancestors, I have means to exorcise him. But your wife must be brought to my house, for I can't move the tools of my trade."

"That's easy enough. I'll have her transported there immediately," proposed the chief.

"My work can be done only under the cover of night. Have her brought this evening. Meanwhile, I'll send you a calming medicine for her."

The Iman took his leave, accompanied by Blari who soon returned with a small gourd containing a magic potion. Some of this was administered to the Favorite orally, and the rest served to rub down her body. A few minutes later, she plunged into a deep sleep.

"If she falls asleep," the Iman had told Blari, "leave her undisturbed. The more sleep she gets the better."

Only the faithful and tireless Gbombélé stayed at the bedside. The sick woman slept for several hours, and when she woke up she asked—for the first time—for something to eat. Before this, food had been forced down her throat.

"What will you have?" Gbombélé asked her.

This question was a sort of test. When she failed to answer the question in this form, he shifted his tactics and began to list her favorite dishes. She nodded and half smiled when he proposed a pot of clotted milk. This she ate with a good appetite, under the hopeful eyes of her husband. In the evening, when she was taken to the Iman for treatment, she already showed signs of improvement.

Only her husband and sister-in-law were allowed to visit her. In the palace it was known that she had been taken away, but Blari and Gbombélé alone knew where and why. Her fellow wives hazarded all

sorts of guesses. Some said that she was dead, others that she was paralyzed. Most of them were happy, but a few, including, strange to say, Masseni, felt compassion. She had not forgotten all that the Favorite had done for her baby daughter. No sooner had the child been weaned than the Favorite had taken over her feeding and care and lavished upon her such love and devotion that the little girl thought she had two mothers. Masseni's compassion for her rival was sincere. She forgot everything that the Favorite had done against her and asked insistently for the privilege of paying her a visit.

The Favorite bettered rapidly, and Masseni was finally allowed to go see her. When she came to the Iman's house, the patient was taking a sunbath in the courtyard. She was no longer the proud cowife whose prestige had weighed so heavily upon Masseni during the first years of her marriage. This was a living wreck who seemed closer to the far shore of life than to the near one. Masseni could not hold back a sob. She went to kneel beside the sick woman and began to massage her feet.

It was then that the miracle happened. The Favorite clasped Masseni's hands in her own and said, sobbing:

"Forgive me, Daughter. Forgive me for the moment of weakness when the woman in me prevailed over the human being and the heart eclipsed the soul."

"No, Mother, no! I am to blame, and I have come to ask *your* forgiveness for what I did to you."

Masseni sat down on the mat and propped the emaciated body against her knees. The Iman and the other bystanders had tears in their eyes at the sight of this miraculous reconciliation. That evening, a happy husband witnessed the return of the Favorite holding the hand of the younger woman whom she had so recently considered her worst enemy. The Favorite had recovered her reason, and the next day there was a celebration among all the cowives. No more mention was made of the drawers or the gold rings. The miracle effected by the Iman was foremost in everyone's mind, before it entered the realm of legend. Peace reigned, and Masseni played her

role with discretion, taking care at every step to spare the Favorite's sensibility.

The friendship between Mabrontié and Masseni was enduring. Some weeks later, when Mabrontié came to visit, she was given a princely reception and was laden with gifts when she went away. Not long after, the chief was stricken with paralysis. Mabrontié obtained permission from her husband to visit him and to cheer up Masseni. But when she arrived at Gbin, the chief had already lost the power of speech. Two days later he died.

Everyone mourned him, but Masseni was inconsolable. Weeping and rolling in the dust, she said to herself, "Where shall I go now? What will become of me? This man was not only a husband to me but a father as well."

Mabrontié and her husband both attended the grandiose funeral ceremony. A few weeks later, there was fierce competition among the chief's heirs for his throne and also for the possession of Masseni, for in this region a dead man's wives, like his cattle, were part of the inheritance. Masseni was under siege, but she turned down all the candidates.

"I shall stay in the house of my husband," she declared. "He was a husband who denied me nothing and is irreplaceable."

Masseni was faithful to her dead husband for twenty years and intended to remain so until the grave. Her vow was sincere, but "man proposes and God disposes."

The political events that shook Black Africa beginning in 1946 carried away many colonial institutions. Among them was the function of the deputies of the colonial administrators. Masseni's husband was dead, but the deputy who had been so taken with her was still alive and had not forgotten her. Now that his presence was no longer needed in the capital of the *cercle*, he returned to his native Gbin and took up residence near the palace, only a few yards from Masseni's hut.

Masseni's refusal to give in to any of the brothers or cousins of her late husband had won her a wave of enmity. Only the former chief's sons were on her side. This enmity was at its peak when the deputy

came home. Trained as he was in the school of intrigue by a perfidious interpreter, at first he went with the tide and espoused the cause of Masseni, talking her up among her friends in the knowledge that this would be reported to her and touch her feelings. Patiently he wove a web of new alliances, more or less genuine. When he felt assured that Masseni would welcome his support, he went to offer it to her in person.

Masseni was on the brink of the cliff where her enemies had pushed her. In desperation, she snatched at the weapon offered in her defense by the man who had so cruelly broken her heart twenty years before in taking her from Bâbou. Now as then she had no choice. She accepted the poisonous support of the man who once had tried to rape her. Having won her over, the former deputy could count on the chief's sons and their powerful maternal uncles. Thus he reversed the tide in Masseni's favor. A sizable part of the notables supported her against the chief's brothers.

But when he had gained Masseni's confidence, the deputy dropped his mask. Now that Masseni was indebted to him, he took advantage of her stepsons' support to propose marriage to her.

Masseni was in a quandary. Twenty years before, she had been forced to choose between the canton chief and her own obnoxious cousin. She had chosen the chief and never regretted it. Now the man who had manoeuvered her into that position had come into her life again and, knowing that she needed his support, was proposing marriage. So she was once again in a dilemma between her vow to remain faithful to the memory of her late husband and the obligation of having to marry this scoundrel of a deputy. Since he had already won over the chief's sons and their powerful uncles, she had really no choice, and she consented to marry this man for whom she had never felt anything but aversion. She consented on condition, however, that she remain in the court of her late husband. But she did not count on the deputy's perfidy. He accepted the condition without intending to respect it.

Two years later, things went wrong. One day the deputy demanded that Masseni come to live under his roof along with his

other wives and, like them, work in his rice paddy. She rejected this demand and, with the support of her stepsons, divorced him.

She was happy to resume the life of a widow. But the devout Muslim notables did not see it that way. They were not her temporal enemies, but custom, religion, death, heaven, and hell were at stake. They let her know that if she died unmarried, she would have no right to a religious burial or to the prayers that would ease her sojourn in the grave and open the doors of paradise on the day of the Last Judgment. Wisdom counseled her to compromise a second time with the concept of fidelity to her late husband. With rage in her heart, she accepted the idea of remarriage when she could find an acceptable suitor. Candidates rose up on all sides, and at this point the Iman took over.

Among the candidates there was a wily man called Baladji, a merchant who, by money, obtained the Iman's support. The Iman threw all his influence onto the scales. So again Masseni gave in to the demands of society and made another loveless marriage on the same condition as before, that she would not leave her late husband's court. Two months after the wedding, Baladji intimated to Masseni his wish to introduce her to his family, which lived in the village of Tiola, a three-day march from Gbin.

"My parents will be very happy to make your acquaintance and welcome you into their midst. We'll stay there only a few days."

Masseni willingly consented, and they set off on the journey. Masseni received a warm welcome and numerous kindnesses. But after a fortnight she longed to rejoin her daughter and granddaughter at Gbin.

"When are we going home?" she asked her husband.

"In a few days. I have to go to a village not far from here. An important market is held there where I can buy rice, millet, corn, and cotton. I'll return in three days, and we'll go back to Gbin."

Baladji continued the journey alone and found a quantity of produce that he could buy without fear of competition. "If I were to make my home here," he said to himself, "I could do good business. At Gbin, the competition has cut my profits to nothing. Here I'd be

far from government control. I could pay whatever prices I want. I could use false weights and make enough money to add a young girl to my wives." He brought his own scales with him and, after a day's trading, he made as much money as in a whole month at Gbin. And so he resolved to break his promise to Masseni. She must come to join him while he made further purchases, enough to yield a maximum of money before other merchants got wind of the bargains. But how was he to persuade Masseni to come? Among the various solutions that he considered, he chose the simulation of a grave illness and his urgent need of her care.

That very evening, he sent word to Tiola, and Masseni, although she was not entirely convinced, went to join him. Although he spent the day of her arrival buying up produce, by the time she reached his side he had smeared his face with mud and coal dust in order to assume a sickly air. Masseni was taken aback at finding him in this condition.

"What could have happened to you in these three days?" she queried.

"I don't know. According to the soothsayers whom I've consulted, someone has cast a spell on me. They say it must be an individual envious of the purchases you can see stacked up in the storehouses over there."

Within a brief time, indeed, Baladji had filled two storehouses with produce. Masseni gave in to the evidence of her own eyes, but she had a vague presentiment of trouble to come. She had also an intuition that her new husband was trying to deceive her. He played the sick man for the rest of the day, but by evening he showed signs of sudden improvement.

"I'm feeling much better," he told her. "Your coming must be responsible. Perhaps by tomorrow morning I'll be cured."

He ate heartily and, before going to bed, showed Masseni a suitcase full of money.

"I made this much in three days and, if I stay here another week, I'll be richer than after ten years at Gbin."

Masseni glanced disdainfully at the money without vouchsafing

approval or disapproval. But she realized that her forebodings on leaving Tiola were well founded. The next morning Baladji got up early, in fine fettle.

"Masseni," he said, "you are really a good-luck woman, just as people told me. Ever since our marriage, my life has changed for the better. When we go back to Gbin I'll buy you some heifers and you can build up a nice legacy for your only daughter."

"But when will that be?" she asked.

"As soon as I've finished buying up everything that's on the market." And when Masseni sighed disconsolately, he added, "Here's money for supplies. I must be off, because sellers will be gathering around my scales."

With a feeling of sadness, Masseni took the money.

"How can I do my cooking?" she asked him. "I have no kitchen utensils, and since I know nobody here, how can I borrow pots and calabashes?"

"Don't worry about that. The wife of our host is a kindly woman. She'll lend you the necessary utensils and help you to purchase food and spices. I'll give her the word before I go."

"That's no answer," Masseni retorted sullenly. "A married woman should have her own utensils, even when she's on the road."

Baladji went off and returned a few minutes later with the host's wife.

"Here's our hostess," he said.

The woman smiled amicably, and Masseni responded by slightly bending her knees.

"Your husband says that you're worried about kitchen utensils. But you are at home here; what's mine is yours. Come with me, and take whatever you need. Then we'll go together to the market."

"Thank you," said Masseni.

While the two women confabulated, Baladji went his way. The women went to make their purchases. On the way back, Masseni noticed a line of women with gourds on their heads.

"Where are they going?" she asked.

"At this season there's a drought, and we fetch water from a

stream not far away. I'll lend you a gourd, and we'll go there later on."

This was the worst surprise that Masseni had experienced since her arrival. A few minutes later, Masseni, with a gourd on her head, followed her new friend on the path to the stream. Like others in the region, the stream was situated in a hollow dug out by the passage of time in the clayey soil. There were steep banks around it, and it required a certain agility to go down and climb up again with a gourd full of water on the head. Holes had been drilled into the bank to serve as steps, but going down was as difficult as coming back up.

When they came to the bank, Masseni hesitated. She would have given up had not her companion come to her aid. They went down together, filled their gourds, and started back up. In the more than twenty years since her marriage to the chief, Masseni had become unaccustomed to carrying a burden on her head, and now it cost her an exhausting effort. Moreover, she was deeply humiliated and said as much to her husband. The water sufficed for the day, but the prospect of the same fatigue on the morrow put her in a bad humor. She was morose for the rest of the day, but her husband was insensitive to her recriminations.

The next morning she was obliged to go back to the stream with her hostess. This time, she forced herself to make the downward trip without her hostess' helping hand. She succeeded without incident, filled her gourd, and tried to remount similarly unaided. She placed one foot in the first indentation and with the help of her left hand managed to make it. But when she was about to take her second step, the clayey soil crumbled under her foot and she slipped and fell back into the bed of the stream. She picked herself up, very much embarrassed, but the gourd was smashed to pieces. The hostess came to the rescue and helped her make the climb. She felt nothing on the way back to the village. Somewhat bitterly she told her husband what had happened and lay down to rest. "Devil take the midday meal!" she cried.

At this moment she began to feel sharp pains around her pelvis.

She cried aloud, and her husband came and found her writhing and groaning. She tried to sit up but fell back onto her pallet. By evening she was worse. Her money-grubbing husband was so worried that he ran through the village looking for a healer. Several offered their services, each one bringing a jug filled with a decoction of plant leaves and bark to be added to cold water and used to bathe Masseni.

It was the middle of harmattan, the hot-wind season. Before dawn, Masseni was carried into the courtyard and given her first cold bath. A few minutes later she was seized by convulsions, and by the afternoon she had a high fever. In the middle of the night, she had acute pain in the chest and difficulty in breathing.

The healers hurried back and gave her another cold bath, but in their hands she fainted away. When she came to, she was delirious and could only mumble incomprehensible words. In a clearheaded moment, she asked to be taken to the dispensary in the capital of the *cercle*, where she could be cared for by doctors and above all by her old friend Mabrontié.

A whole day went by in futile consultation. But when it was plain that her condition was worsening, a cyclist was dispatched to the dispensary. In the late afternoon an ambulance came to fetch her. The medical aide who came with it gave her an injection that would allow her to endure the journey. Mabrontié had been alerted and went to the dispensary to wait for her arrival.

The ambulance did not arrive until dusk. When Masseni was carried out of the ambulance, she was more dead than alive. Mabrontié burst into tears. As for Masseni, from her hospital bed she recognized her friend and struggled to sit up and speak to her.

This effort exhausted what breath was left in her body. She groaned, and her head fell back heavily onto the pillow. Her mouth hung open, as if it was still filled with the message that she wanted to convey to Mabrontié for her absent daughter.

the chief's large household, with its elaborate protocols, fawning advisors, and rival cowives and their retinues of servants and sorcerers, then many years later as a remarried widow in a primitive, drought-stricken village, represents the survival of a truly noble and courageous woman in a precarious world.

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TIDIANE DEM has held various posts in the government of the Ivory Coast and is the author of two historical works. *Massani* is his first novel.

FRANCIS FRENAYE is translator of *Napoleon and the American Dream* (LSU Press) as well as works by Balzac, Zola, Maurois, Croce, and Silone.

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