

Bamenda, 16th July 1962

Darling Mummy and Daddy,

Please excuse the pencil; I am writing in bed where I've been for five days – the direct consequence of spending a couple of days in Mamfe. I suppose it was worth it, since I can say that I have seen the forest, and what looked like a hippo too: I've walked over the cross river – two horribly insecure suspension bridges built by the Germans fifty years ago, hanging over a sixty foot gorge. Nothing to hold on to, and only 2 planks in the middle, through the cracks of which glimpses of the torrent below – the rest rotten! Hawsers almost rusted away. Ghastly noise of rushing water in one's ears; the bridge actually swaying as one walks and unnerving rifts in the planks, bits and pieces of decayed wood crumbling and splintering. And nothing to hold on to but a single limp wire that leaned out away from the bridge! Ghastly. I had to look straight ahead. Which was difficult because in the last half-century the thing had got somehow crooked. And halfway across, the worst thing possible happened: I stopped. Dry ache in the throat, I turned to jelly as the full impact of the yawning cliffs impressed itself on me. I thought I would have to kneel down and crawl over – and I still had to get back! But there were some women waiting at the other end, laden with pickins and baskets, so I had to go on. I made the crossing several times after that, and eventually got sufficiently used to it to take a photograph from it. And did I mention the crocodiles basking below?

But the net result of all this is that I have got Dengue Fever – or one of the innumerable plagues that haunt the Mamfe Basin. I've had fever since Wednesday, and today, Monday, with my head clear, my entire body is consumed with a burning rash. It is expected that the 3rd Act will bring a sensation as of one's bones breaking in pieces. And for this little number there is no remedy.

I was so upset that in spite of all my efforts to remind myself, I forgot to send you the telegram that I had meant. Pete's exam came up at exactly the same time, and in the excitement I only woke up to the date on the 29th which would have been too late. I do hope you had a good send off, and were not dismayed or disconcerted at the love which everyone holds for you: it's so rare – and such a good thing – to be able once in a while, to express love openly. I wish I had been there to join in.

Thank you for the cheque. Actually I thought of an alternative the moment I sent off my query: that of giving Didy a cheque for £30 on my Stroud A/C, so that she could give me a cheque of about £135 to cash in travellers cheques. But if you don't mind, I will keep your cheque as a safety device. I don't imagine I would have to use it.

Since yesterday, fresh symptoms as of Plague have begun to manifest themselves in my groin, and now I would be at all surprised if all my finger nails started falling out.

I shall be leaving here at the end of the month, going to Enugu (via Mamfe!) and taking a train up to Kano. Alan very kindly sent me a long letter and an address in Khartoum that I shall certainly follow up. But he no longer knows anyone in either Cairo or Khartoum, so I hope I hear something from Mme. Nachat. Didy says that if I want to use the house on Hydra I can, and this will solve accommodation in Athens. Just at this minute there's nothing I would like better than to get back the quickest

possible way, but I know that I would forever regret losing this opportunity. It will probably be the last bit of travelling I will do for a very long time, and I do love it so. Peter Fayre (the very nice American doctor here) is going to give me a cholera injection next Saturday, and I've got a new supply of Nivaquine. I've been given one or two addresses in Kano, and I hope that one might lead to another. Also, in places like Cairo, the consulates will be very useful, if I tell them that I am virtually hitching from West Africa.

Amanda. July 24th

Darling Mummy and Daddy,

I've been held up somewhat with this wretched Dengue Fever; I was only able to get up for the first time yesterday, and I'm still very weak at the knees and easily tired. I've been indoors all day drawing up a couple of posters for the Fete that Didy is organizing for the Mbingo Leper Colony, and listening to lovely records: Bach B minor Mass, and Peter Pears and Julian Bream singing Lute Songs. It is wonderful to think that I'm not too far from all that.

Lovely mail last Friday! Your two letters, with the cuttings of the farewell, and gorgeous ones from Joy and Ursula. Ursula had just 3 weeks in a caique, wandering round the Geek Isles, with Cecil and Jill Day Lewis, and was obviously still drunk with it all. I think next year I might ask Didy if we might not take the little house on Hydra for a couple of months: it would be a splendid holiday once you've moved into the new house. So exciting about the Clock House! It's clear from your letters that you all think it is the home you've been looking for, and from your descriptions it sounds delightful in its orchards. The thought of blossom and apple groves is piercing to us now, in the midst of rains and fog and rare clarity on the horizon. And your picture of Skye that arrived yesterday was lovely.

We have been seeing something of a very tragic family recently: a Mrs. Nono, with four children and one on the way. She is the English wife of a Camerounian who was brought out here, dubiously and against the advice of all her friends and relations, about a year ago. She is a Cockney (with, we've heard, a prison record and, poor thing, is completely crushed by circumstances. Her husband is a rogue, and is obviously interested in the children only in so far as they will bring him a good dowry later on. He would like to keep them with here. But the wretched wife is obviously at the end of her tether, penniless, without friends, and with her slatternly ways, a complete enigma to the Africans, who expect from white people the immaculate decorum of senior service individuals. So now there is a move to spirit Mrs. Nono back to England without the knowledge of her husband, and we have the Consul coming up here tomorrow night to arrange the flight across the border. The difficulty is the unborn child: Mrs. Nono doesn't know when it's due, and Peter Fayre can't be sure. All that's certain is that last time she had a haemorrhage that almost killed her. The only hope for the children is that they might find help from the Welfare State in England, their father is a washout, and the mother, although devoted to them, is simple and hopeless. None of us think that they would survive if left in the Camerouns.

It is extraordinary that this period of my life is almost at an end. Just by me, I have the menu of our last dinner on the Changuinola, signed with all our names, and it brings back with unfaded immediacy the moment when little Fiona, late one night on the deck, shouted "Land!", and we saw a single light of Africa far away in the dark; and then next day the extraordinary feeling, as we looked through our binoculars and saw the serrated horizons of giant trees silhouetted to the East; and the slender, leaf-like canoes of the fisherman; and the wonderful dawn as we nosed up the creeks past Casement's Isle, awaking the shrieks of birds from the depths of the forest whose walls we brushed. Conrad can describe that aspect of Africa marvellously. It's all unforgettable and almost incommunicable. If you should feel any doubt as to what it has brought me, I would say that it is one of the most wonderful things that ever happened to me. I wonder if I shall ever come back! I suddenly feel it's awful to be leaving so soon.

Bamenda, August 4th

Still here, but off, with any luck, midnight Tuesday. I'm going up to Benin by car with Ayang Beeley, a charming girl who is the African wife of the D.O.. I hope you will have a chance of seeing both of them when they come to England next year. This will give me a chance of seeing the Niger in flood, which should be impressive, and also more of West Africa. Benin is where the wonderful bronzes come from. I'm obliged to go up to Lagos in order to get all my visas in order, and from there it's easy enough to get up to Kano by train.

I had a couple of days at Bambui that ended in disaster. On the first evening I went out by myself to enjoy the sun. I walked up into the hills and climbed towards a narrow combe down which a little stream ran. It got more overgrown, and eventually, shaded by flamboyants and hanging bushes, I reached a small reservoir with a little waterfall dropping from its sluice. It looked delicious and I was very hot, so I stripped and placed my clothes on a kind of bollard with taps let into it, and stepped gingerly towards the curtain of water. A frightful repetition of something that had happened before: there, among the glistening stones, like a length of garter thrown casually down, slender and beady-eyed, stirred a young black cobra. I shivered back as though I had been given an electric shock: so near to my outstretched foot! Shaking violently, I clambered back into my clothes and gradually managed to control myself. I peered round the bollard, and the snake was still there, where I had left it. I was curious to see how long it was, so I stepped up, keeping a few feet of distance, and dropped a lump of moss on its head. It didn't seem to move, so I dropped another, and then a little piece of wood. At that, it suddenly galvanized itself, its pearly throat erect, eyes flashing, displaying unlimited potentials of malice. So I leapt away and fled from the idyllic spot, leaving it to the silent regency of the cobra. The next day I went for a long fifteen mile trek in the mountains above the plain of Ndop. It was misty when we left at 7.30, and so the views I had been looking forward to were hidden. Pat Hawkins, who took me, is the in the Survey Dept., loaned by the UN, and his task was to dig pits along the way, so as to sample the profiles of the soil. We had no maps: only aerial photographs and an altimeter. Our highest point was 7000', and we fell to 3000' It was all quite wild, only occasionally the wide prairies running with white Foulani cattle and herds of horses. Lonely little encampments, two or three huts, humped like igloos, and roofed merely with dried grass. We came

across a deserted crater, on the roof of the world, and we stood on its lip and looked at its marshy floor, a great expanse of waving grass, untrampled year in year out, (in which a horse would founder, we were told), spilling at its outlet into what should have been a heavenly view of the mountains and the plain but, that afternoon, was only a vague haze merging with the grey sky. Later on I slipped on the muddy path and twisted my leg, so that I had to be carried most of the remaining distance.

Lagos, Nigeria

Darling Mummy and Daddy,

I'm waiting here for my visas to be approved, at the same time as enquiring about a camera. I shall take the old one to the Kodak shop, but I don't hold out too much hope of repair, as it is clear that some damp must have affected it: the shutters don't close or open to their full extent, which explains why the slides were blank. If I can, I shall get a second hand camera; but if not an exact replica of the old one and put it into the old case so that I don't have to pay customs duty. I'm going to see the High Commission on Tuesday, and also a doctor so that I can get a cholera injection and something for my leg which is still troubling me.

Lagos is very impressive: magnificent, highly coloured sky scrapers soaring at the sea's edge; but, what with the enquiry going on, the void of thirty-eight million pound, and the grievances I have heard all round, the prosperity seems a fraud, and a slump is expected. I'm thankful of the chance of seeing Nigeria, for the hope that it gives one that, if they are able to keep their heads, the African is quite capable of improving himself. This was a moot point in the Cameroon's.

After a frantic journey of twenty-one mortal hours, I reached Benin on Wednesday, where I stayed with Ayang's family, delightful people, of a princely line, some of which had been in England studying law, engineering, etc. I had a chance of seeing the Museum and it was filled with wonderful things. The Benin work, dating from about 1400 and before, is very intricate, having something of the techniques of the Persians. (Chased silver grounds, Romanesque or Moorish – the kind of chain patterning you get in Durham and the Alhambra). And there is also a magnificent plaque of a horse's head that could be anything but African; small groups of votive figures like the Etruscan terra cottas I saw in Cyprus – wedding photographs; but, most characteristic, the figures of warriors, armed and helmeted, often in trios with the King in the centre supported by two comrades a step back, each holding a hand. These were executed after the arrival of the Portuguese in 1485. Incidentally, the fanciful urned (?) and porticoed mansions that raise their shuttered walls, flaked and cat-ridden, in many of the towns of Western Nigeria, are not remnants of Portuguese Baroque, as I had thought, but are the work of freed slaves who came from Brazil early in the last century. Lagos is the Portuguese for 'lagoon', beside which the town spreads, its marshes being reclaimed for the joy of the rich who build magnificent villas along the strand. I spent a couple of hours in the Lagos museum which holds a collection of just the right size of which every object is startling. Masks galore, the most save being from the creeks, Old Calabar (where Casement's ghost walks in the Old Residency) and Bouhy, the slaving posts: masks representing water spirits which

they float on the surface. Various accoutrements for casting divinations; runic stones; and splendid figures of leopards, cockerels, etc. from Benin.

But the real mystery is at Ife about a hundred and fifty miles away, set in a kind of orangery attached to the palace of the Oni, with tall windows and a colonnade outside. Its foundation is in the gathering of about twenty portrait heads, nine of which are in bronze, complexioned with sea-green and indigo, sometimes delicately scarified, stand in a semi circle like senators, aloof in their serenity. I can't remember when I was more moved by something strange. They are flawless, and seem exiled in their perfection. I stayed an hour with the sun slowly dying outside, going from one to the other and back again, trying in the short time I had, knowing that I'd never see them again, to catch them as in a net, to guess at their vanished community. Each possessing his own majesty, like Caesars, princesses, priests, Goddesses, before long shrouded, the features blurred, only a cheek or a diadem catching the failing light.

Fragment of letter sent to Didy Cameron from London (Hospital of Tropical Diseases)

(Kano) The walls a glorious biscuit-colour, mat and sun-baked. Sometimes decorated in relief with lozenge-shaped patterns, sometimes painted 'Cornish' blue and pink, with shallow domes, like cymbals. Small wooden shutters, and dark doorways from which the inhabitants emerge like troglodytes. Splendid market, with silversmiths (whose wealth resides in little heaps of Maria Theresa dollars newly minted from an ancient mould); sellers of spices; amber; gorgeous cam-rugs; precious stones; a strange silver mineral, which, when crushed to powder and rubbed in the eyes will cure conjunctivitis; white cloths, brightly embroidered with flowers and beasts, like Yugoslav, used on the wedding night to prove the bride. A snake-charmer threw two strapping cobras at my feet and proceeded to whip them to a frenzy. When I asked him afterwards why he didn't fall down dead, he said that he had medicine to protect him. If you fly back to England, why shouldn't you stop over at Kano for a night or two? It won't be any more expensive.

Unless you are actually ill, I shouldn't dream of coming to this dump. The tests aren't very nice – I've only had a cupful of blood taken from me – and there's a dreary crowd of colonials here. It would be different if there was a gang of us here.

I've just been offered a job in the BBC programme department, but I don't know details yet, so can't tell if it would be the right thing. My friends tell me that it would be a quicksand.

I miss you all so much, and Amanda with something approaching pain. It all seems far away, but aureoled, and intact, so that, faced with grey hospital walls, I can turn it on in my mind, like a tap, and let it run refreshingly through the long afternoons.

I hope I'll be out by Monday.