

Of all the different kinds of work my father performed, none fascinated me so much as his skill with gold, delicate touch; and, moreover, this sort of work was always a kind of festival: it was a real festival that broke the monotony of ordinary working days.

So is a woman, accompanied by a go between, crossed the threshold of the workshop, I would follow her in at once. I knew what she wanted: she had brought some gold and wanted to ask my father to transform it into trinket. The woman would have collected the gold in the pieces of Siguiri, where, for months on end, she would have crouched over the river, washing the mud and patiently extracting from it the grains of gold.

These women never came alone: they were well aware that my father had other things to do than to make trinkets for all and sundry! And even if the making of jewellery had been his main occupation, they would have realized that they were not his first or his only customers, and that their wants could not be immediately attended to.

Generally these women required the trinket for a certain state, either for the festival of Ramadhan or for the Tabaski; or for some other family festivity, or for a dance ceremony.

Thereupon, to better their chance of being quickly served, and the more easily to persuade my father to interrupt the work he had in hand, they would request services of an official praise singer, go between, and would arrange with him in advance what fee they would pay for his good offices. Another, for each charm had its own particular property: but exactly what property I do not know: I left my father's house too soon.

From the veranda under which I played I could keep an eye on the workshop opposite, and they for their part could keep an eye on me. This workshop was the main building in our compound. That is where my father was generally to be found, supervising the work, forging the most important items himself, or repairing delicate mechanisms; here it was that he received his

friends and his customers, so that the place resounded with noise from morning to night. Moreover, everyone entering or leaving our compound had to pass through the workshop, so that there was a perpetual coming in and going, through no one ever seemed to be in a hurry: each one would pause to have a word with my father and spend a few moments watching the work in hand.

Sometimes I would draw near the door, but I rarely went in, for everyone used to frighten me there, and I would run away as soon as anyone tried to lay hands on me. It was not until very much later that I got the habit of crouching in a corner of the workshop watching the fire blazing in the forge.

My private domain at that time consisted of the veranda that ran round the outside of my father's hut; and the orange tree that drew in the middle of the compound.

As soon as you had crossed the workshop and gone through the door at the back, you could see the orange

tree. If I compare with the giants of our native forests, the tree was not very big, but its mass of glossy leaves used to cast a dense shadow that was a cool refuge from the blazing sun. When it was in flower, a heady perfume was wafted over the entire my little friends used to tend an eager hand with it, too. They had all been invited and used to go for the food with the frank appetites of young wolves; but there was too much, there was always too much we could never get to the end of such meal.

“Look how round my belly is!” - I would hear myself saying.

“Yes, our little bellies were round, and sitting afterwards round the fire, solemnly digesting our food, we might easily have fallen asleep if we had not had such naturally lively dispositions. But we had our palaver to hold, like our elders; we had not seen each other for weeks, sometimes months, and we had so many things to tell each other; so many new stories to relate, and that was the time for them!

Of course we all had our own stories to tell, we knew lots of them, but there would always be some stories that we were hearing for the first time, and those were the ones we were most eager to listen to as we sat round the fire, and it was the letters of these tales who would get the most applause.

In this fashion my first day in the country would come to a close, unless someone brought out a tom-tom, for this was a special occasion. And in Tundican it was not every evening you heard the tom-tom.

December always found me at Tundican. December is our dry season, when we have fine weather and harvest which is always the occasion of great junketing and feasting, and I used to wait impatiently for my uncle to come and fetch me.

There was a terrific commotion going on all round me; my mother was shouting harder than anyone; and she gave me a few sharp slaps. I began to weep, more upset by the sudden uproar than by the blows I had received. A little later, when I had calmed down around

me, my mother solemnly warned me never to play such a game again; and I promised, although I could not really see where the danger in it lay.

My father's hut was near the workshop, and I would often play there beneath the veranda that ran round the outside. It was my father's private hut. It was built like all our huts, of mud that had been pounded and molded into bricks with water; it was round, and proudly helmeted with thatch. It was entered by a rectangular doorway. Inside, a tiny window let in a thin shaft of daylight. On the right there was the bed, made of beaten earth like the bricks, spread with a simple wicker-work mal om which was a pillow stuffed with kapok. At the rear of the hut, right under the window where the light was strongest were the toolboxes. On the left were the boubous and the prayer rugs. Finally, at the head of the bed, hanging over the pillow and watching over my father's dumber, there was a series of pots that contained extracts from plants and the bark of trees. These pots all had metal

lids and they were profusely and curiously garlanded with chaplets of cowrie shells; it did not take me long to discover that they were the most important things in the hut: they contained the magic charms, those mysterious liquids that keep evil spirits at bay, and, smear on the body, make it invulnerable to black magic, to all kinds of black magic. My father, before he went to bed, never failed to smear his body with a little of each liquid, first one, then without any fuss. That come to run and play and climb up the look-out posts and wander off into the long grass with the flocks and herds, and naturally I could not to do these without some damage to my precious clothes.

At nightfall, my uncle Lansana would come back from the fields. He would greet me after his own quiet fashion, for he was rather timid and spoke little.

Working alone in the field all day, you get used to being silent; you think of all kinds things, and then you start all over again, because thoughts are something you can never grasp completely: the mute mystery of things,

how and why predisposes you to silence. It is enough to call such things to mind and to become aware of their inserutable mystery which leaves behind it a certain light in the eyes. My uncle Lansana's eyes were singularly piercing when he looked at you: actually, he rarely looked at you: he would remain usually in that inner dream which obsessed him endlessly in the fields.

"The platform at the top, thad to keep away from the fresh-cut!" - Sheaves of corn, which were put here to be used for next season.

When we were all together at mealtimes I would often turn my eyes towards my uncle, and generally in catching his eye. There was always a smile behind the gravity of this gaze, for my uncle was goodness itself and he loved me; I really believe he loved me as much as my grandmother did. I would respond to his gently smiling glance, and sometimes, as I always ate every slowly, it would make me forget to eat.



At this curious knowledge. Now I understood how my father obtained his information. When I raised my eyes, I saw that my father was watching me.

“I have told you all these things, little one, because you are my son, the eldest of my son, and because I have nothing to hide from you. There is a certain form of behavior to observe, and certain ways of acting in order that the guiding spirits of our race may approach you also. I, your father, was observing that form of behavior which persuades our guiding spirit to visit us. Oh, perhaps not consciously. But nevertheless it is true that if you one day, if you desire to inherit it in your turn, you will have to conduct yourself in the selfsame manner; from now on, it will be necessary for you to be more and more in my company.”

He gazed at me with burning eyes, then suddenly heaved a sigh.