LETTERS FROM CAMEROUN

1.

Magistrates Court, Bamenda, Cameroun, West Africa
08/12/1961

To my friends :

I hope you will understand my sending you my news in this form : in the course of two weeks, so much has startled me that I have found it impossible to do more than to franticly jot down in reportage my immediate impressions, and attempt, in my few spare moments, to catch more exactly – as much for my benefit as for yours – some of the greater experiences. But it is *all* thrilling ! And I am very happy. Reading through what I have written, I am made horribly aware of deficiences of style, hollow pomposity, deplorable spelling, etc. I ask you to forgive it all as a symptom of light-headedness : I am drunk with the place, and must need fall short of describing it.

We got here yesterday, and I must try to efface the dazzling impression that Bamenda has made on us, in order to get down all that has happened since we disembarked. Pete met us early on Monday morning, and we all went by car, with our luggage following in a large landrover, to Bouia, the capital, where were to stay for a few days before coming on here.

The town is situated on the lower slopes of Mount Cameroun, an extinct volcano of 1300' ; and is fine position is somewhat marred by being more often than not decapitated by mist. Our hotel, which is the only one of quality in the West Camerouns, was quite comfortable, and we slept two by two in chalets dotted about a rather ill-kept garden. (Cannas, lilies, morning-glory, jacarandas, etc.).

The English population was just as could be expected : very blasé, but I should say efficient. We were invited to dinner at the consulate, a fantastic modern villa in the ostentatious style of Beverley Hills, which contained in its fabric some spectacular examples of African art. The entrance, reached by climbing a flight of steps from the drive, was very impressive, with great piers of ruddy and expensive-looking wood holding up a spacious balcony leading out of the reception rooms, which in its turn was shaded by a canopy supported by rich and vigorous totems. There were also some beautiful panels from the Benin, carved and unpolished, representing ceremonies and battles, which I would like to buy if any came my way.

We left Bouia next morning, squashed very uncomfortably into the Ford Consul, and had barely gone fifty miles before we had a puncture, the first of seven in the course of a two hundred and fifty mile journey. We travelled by way of the French side of the Camerouns, where the roads are a good deal better than the English ; and it was interesting and strange how the atmosphere changed as soon as we crossed the border. Apart from speaking true French as opposed to pidgin English, there was noticeable a certain chic, together with hardness, in the behaviour of the people, who had cultivated the manners of their guests. (The French colonialists). On the English side, where everything had been left undone, the freedom of the Africans appears in all things : the way they laugh and talk, their unselfconsciousness and lack of suspicion,

and their easy dowdiness. On the French side, however, the people all seem to have an unfortunate vanity ; or if not that, a sort of closed-in look.

The whole region of the Cameroons had originally been a German colony, seized in the eighteen-eighties as a 'protectorate' as part of the 'Scramble for Africa'. With typical – and sometimes brutal - thoroughness they had established an impressive infra-structure, governed from the capital of Buea in the South, later Yaoundé. Signs of their rule can be found all over the country in the massive stone-built forts and farmsteads which still remain. Following their defeat in the Great War this colony was partitioned between Britain and France, the bulk of the land mandated to France, and a rather thin strip bordering Nigeria up to Chad taken up by Britain. The French mandate was given the name of Cameroun, and the British that of North and South Cameroons.

These arbitrary decisions took little account of latent racial conflicts. There are more than two hundred and fifty distinct ethnic groups to be found in Cameroun. Indigenous groups include the Baka pygmy tribes of the Southern Forest, the Bansa based in the coastal regions, and the Bamilike from the Western Highlands. Then there are the muslem tribes from the North, the most numerous of which are the Fulani who rear their cattle and their horses in the Central Highlands. The incipient mutual mistrust among some of these groups – especially between muslem and indigenous tribes – along with the frequently insensitive administration often found in French colonies, eventually broke out in violent uprisings. In 1955 the UPC (Union of the Peoples of Cameroon), an outlawed group chiefly comprising Bamileke and Bassa tribes, launched an armed struggle for independence in French Cameroun. Out of this conflict, which cost many tens of thousand lives, resulted the Republic of Cameroun (1960). In February 1961 a plebiscite was held to determine the outcome for the British mandate, following which Northern Cameroon, predominantly muslem, voted to join Nigeria, and Southern Cameroon, with its varied indigenous population ceded with Cameroun.

Even after all the papers had been signed, violence still flared from time to time; and occasionally we would hear of 'terrorists', hi-jackings and kidnappings, especially on 'the French side'. A near neighbour had had a lot of trouble on his coffee-farm. It didn't do to drive across country at night, taking only the one car. I remember seeing a man being taken in for interrogation.

In those days South Cameroun still betrayed signs that it had been somewhat neglected under British rule. Everything looked a bit run-down: the roads in an appalling state, untarred, billowing with red dust from the exposed laterite; the office buildings also, tired, needing a lick of paint. Certainly not making any kind of colonial statement. Indicating a relaxed, laissez-faire attitude, sharply in contrast with the punctillious, officious manner – and indeed the beautiful roads – we encountered on 'the French side'.

Our route was very exciting, and it is difficult to recall the impressions made on me by all the new things that met our eyes. In Kumba we saw as we passed the market some most beautiful beds and cots, turned delicately, made of red wood ; splendid parasols, carried by the women as a shelter for their pickins, whom they carry slung to their backs in colourful bands of cloth. Their costumes, such as we have seen, are extremely elegant, and mostly comprise : first, a plain blouse with a simple neck ; a low hanging skirt, usually patterned with large flowers or such ; and round their waists a broad a gaudy sash which outlines their splendid figures, and allows their skirts to swing gracefully. This common design is very often embellished with winning flourish and dash by a bit of nonsense on the head, strings of beads, and earring or two, etc. But all this would be nothing were it not for the breath-taking lilt of their movement. Furnished with a calabash on the head, or a carboy of green glass, or even a basin with a chair in it, they seem like moving caryatids. And pregnancy, which accentuates their grace, brings swans, or ploughing galleons, to mind.

Facially the Camerounians are, I believe, very striking. Big Pete doesn't agree with me, and cites the Foulanis' and the Dahomey as being far more noble in feature. Here the women seem to have very open and generous faces, and the men a kind faun-shaped neatness of jaw and cheekbone. The children are charming, with adorable small heads like young coconuts, dusty. They are lithe and dancing in their play' but their eyes, thickly yellow like ivory, reveal an inward experience of ancestral suffering, rather than the innocence that we would like so much to be their possession.

Our journey to Bamenda ended in darkness, and we were doubtful that we would be allowed through the frontier, in case we should be molested by terrorists Feeling far from secure in the knowledge that we were ailing from a recurrent puncture, we travelled on, gradually climbing into the hills, with coffee plantations, cocoa, sugar groves on either side ; and scattered among them little hamlets of grass-roofed huts whose compact, bee-hive shape gave to each group, peeping from out of the tall grasses, an air of a sun-drenched plantation of mushrooms. " Like the Babar books", Fiona said.

Having arrived in the night we could make little of the house to which we had been led. We had a good meal, served by Gregory the steward – we have three servants – and after having unpacked a little and had a bath I was ushered by the light of a tilly-lamp down a roughly stepped path to the Folly, which lies about fifty yards from the house, a little below the level of the terrace. It seemed very small and was furnished solely with an iron bed; and it was strange to feel oneself suspended in a harshly lit cabin, with nothing beyond the windows but the night and the memory of the day's long journey. I had been told that the Folly was situated on the prink of the precipice, and that I was to be careful in stepping out not to venture further than four yards, or I would tumble down the steep – a drop of three hundred feet or so, sheer. Aas I fell asleep I cold hear the distant clamour of the village which lies at the foot of the escarpment, a thousand feet beneath us.

I woke with the light and opened my doors. The sun had not yet risen, and all about me, on my promontory, washing my feet, was an indistinct, spacious emptiness. As the light warmed, the monotone responded, sky lifted, horizon delineated, and colour gradually breathed into the grey, I became aware of the loftiness of myth eyrie, of the fellow cliffs striding on either side of me, and wherever I looked the distant mountain shapes. The village, far below, was disguised with white skeins of mist, which had long ceased to encroach upon the cliff; and these slowly evaporated leaving the landscape clear to gaze upon, totally green, hill upon hill, from the which the sound of drums arose.

Before we came here, Big Pete refused to describe to us in his letters our new home; and I think I have muffed it. But we have before us a grandeur that, a week ago, was inconceivable to us. And on that first morning when I was greet by it, the thought came to me that, were I to be offered, as a last temptation, the world in all its beauty,might be regaled with such a revelation.

The Republic of Cameroun is not one of the larger states of Africa. Tucked into the armpit between Nigeria and Gabon, at roughly five degrees above the equator, it covers an area of about 180,000 square miles, more or less the size of England, encompassing an astonishing geographical variety. Not without reason is it sometimes held to contain a microcosm of the entire continent. From the deserts in the far north of the country to the tropical rain-forests and mangroves found on the coast it exhibits within a relatively small area the most sharply contrasted range of terrain and climate. Mountains stretch, all along the so-called Cameroun Line from south to north, for hundreds of miles, among them many volcanoes. The most massive of these, Mount Cameroun (4040 m.), is still active, but some of those that are extinct, having become crater lakes, are far from dormant. In 1986 Lake Nyos exploded, emitting a cloud of CO2 gas in which 1700 people suffocated. The most temperate climate – and the most beautiful scenery – is found up-country, in the highlands of Bamenda and beyond, where the savannah grasslands with the blue mountains in the distance stretch for mile upon mile – not unlike the Great Karoo of South Africa.

Notes along the way:

Journey from Bamenda to Wum: waterfall at Menchum; first sight of Foulani herdsmen, figures from the Bible – Jacob and Esau – with swirling robes and loosely bound turbans, driving their long-horned cattle, white mostly, with great lyre-shaped trophies brandished on their heads; first sight of spears, bows and arrows, the universal and customary accoutrements of the country people.

Arrival at noon, creaking from the patina of terra-cotta (laterite) – the dust inescapable. The resthouse lies on the sides of Lake Wum, an extinct volcano; great

depth, with rather alarming worm creatures, viridian, on the floor, horridly still. They feed on the mud. Delicious warmth of the water; splashing about with the African children, one of whom possessed great beauty, a girl who had modestly covered her breasts with her orange robe before entering, but whose face became darkened with suspicion the moment she realized we had levelled our cameras at her. Women cover their breasts until marriage when, through suckling, they lose their figures and promptly reveal the ruin. Startling sight of a flight of aigrettes streaming across the lakeside, to settle, beyond our sight, in the trees. We are in the middle of fields of coco-yams, an edible lily with large leaves of jade-green. Across the lake shady groves of palms, flame trees, etc.; the water bottle green, shelving after the first few feet into unfathomable depths. Walk at noon with the African children down a narrow, sun-baked path amidst lofty grasses, smothered with flowers, wild orchids, yellow daisies, pungent-smelling and rank. Still, motionless harmony of dark-skinned trunks and limbs, standing amongst the riot of ochreous savannah. Graciously progressing cavalcades of wood-carriers; porters of single, lance-like bamboos balancing like a tightrope walker's lath, on worn shoulders; boat-shaped baskets piled high with green bananas; polished calabashes seasoned like tortoiseshell.

The market: nervous, exotically caparisoned bevies of Foulani girls, of the slim wrists and fine necks; their hair, like burnt grass, gathered with silver rings into tight wicks springing all over the head; lengthy, slender noses; inquisitive, experienced eyes; minute filigree of cicatrices at the corners of the mouth – delicate, like chased silver; vermilion of their dripping gums – they chew something like betel, mingled with powdered lime; and above all, their hectic animation; bespeak of an excess of inter-breeding. They are a wild people, and are loathed further south, where they bring their white cattle. Didy is reminded of the Cretans, and I of the Arabs. They are, in fact, the last remnants of the great horseback invasion from North Africa. We wonder if the lyre sprang from the horns of the Cretan bull.

I think it must be the aigrettes, the genii of this enchanted lake, which like an ancient dusky jewel lies fixed for ever within its slender-crested setting, unblinking beneath the sun; these heavenly white birds who drift across the lakeside, consistently a sunset, fairytale brothers and sisters bewitched, who utter the strange call, fluted in thirds, like the inversion of a cuckoo's call.

The bush: everything swollen, as though of liquor and generating juices there were than enough to spare in the earth. Trees, six feet thick, skirted strangely at the base with thick, unwieldy-looking plaits, soaring nakedly into the sky, where at a remote two hundred feet skimpy branches spring, as a shelter for big-clumsy birds. The Weever bird, a little pellet of yellow, builds its home in lumpy nests of mud, which hang like Christmas tree decorations on any tree to hand.

Visit of two Roman Catholic missionaries in their white soutanes: Father Ackermann, a Dutch pioneer of thirty years experience, and Father Henry, an African, whose acquisition of churchly folding of hands and lavish gesture, looks strangely with his comely black face. Father A. (who, we all feel, is a great man) is a thin, red-faced clown, with dry, sparse hair, and a big nose; his soutane is too short for him, and in

telling one of his stories, of sorcery and horse-treks through the bush, he would seem to be impaled in his chair, to allow of every limb to flail about in wild and exuberant illustration of his ghoulish fancies. One tale, of a Chief's burial, recounted at the dinner-table while our food congealed before us:

They sit the corpse in a chair outside his hut, with ladder behind his back, to which a cock is hung upside down. A dance or masquerade is performed, in delirium, and the machetes of the performers flash past the body in pantomime, never actually touching it. The dig a grave deep, with a chamber branching of the base of the shaft, in which a cage or sanctum of bamboo is fixed to prevent the earth from reaching the Chief. The Medicine Man, in a lewd mask, brings a calabash of 'medicine', and proceeds to seal up with leaves all the opening of the body, stuffing in mouth, ears, nose, etc. thick plugs of the stewy mess; and, having finished his decking out, he scoops up the dregs of the calabash, and sloshes it passionately on the face until the vessel is dry.

Father Ackermann designed and built the lovely basilica that stands on the side of the hills near Wum. He told us that it has been only in the last three years that what he has endeavoured has taken root. A friend of his had been *nine* years in the neighbouring district without conferring a single baptism. The whole country is under the sway of juju; and he admitted that the missionaries had to endeavour to convert the pagans by means of 'adaption'.

Journey from Wum to Nkambe: gigantic panoramas of endless grass hills; anonymous mountains the size of Cader Idris; blue valleys; empty burnt tracts of savannah, black, sown with stumpy mushroom shapes: the still-standing ant-ghettoes, swallowed in the holocaust; rocky bluffs, cooked in the fire, globed like blisters, 'Valley of the Rocks': a blasted landscape, visited periodically with ineffectual whirlwinds, cylinders of black ash winding vertiginously, swooningly over the plains, through which our road threads, endless, dusty, the ubiquitous laterite, arid, tangerine.

I don't suppose you will hear from me again before Christmas. Do be assured that I think of you all, often, and spell you out in my mind, one by one, like playing cards. I hope you are all well and happy as I am.
