

"Sell-Out!"

Chapter Five. The Chief and the House of Lords.

I read the "Times & Sun" for a while to check what's going on, but mainly to read the "Heard in the Streets" column on page three. This is the politicians' most feared reading. It contains league tables: The Adultery League (whose source is the impressive Restaurant Watch), The Ministerial Lies to the House League, The Incompetence Championship, the Biggest Expense Championship and so on. Hilarious stuff.

On the screen it says that the next caller is Chief Michael Obanga. This is surprising because he is the recently elected - and the first - President of the New Republic of M'pangwe-Ogowe and his Official State Visit is not scheduled until next month. Security comes on.

"The Chief's here, sir. Can we bring him up - and his assistant?" I tell them yes.

The door opens and in comes the Chief. He is a giant, resplendent in multi-coloured robes, and is followed by a dusky beauty wearing the latest from Milan, lots of gold jewellery and carrying a white brief case. It is difficult to say which is the bigger eyeful.

"I am Chief Michael Obanga," says the Chief, "and this is my assistant, the Princess Embiriwi." I offer them chairs and coffee.

"Water will be adequate," he says and the Princess nods agreement.

"We are here about the assets. I hope it is going well?"

"Well, it's early days yet," I reply. "But things are looking pretty good, thank you."

"You know about the New Republic of M'pangwe-Ogowe, of course." I am about to say yes, but he continues while the Princess looks without much enthusiasm at the portraits of Empire Builders on the walls

"It is, of course, an initiative the like of which does not exist in the history of mankind. An African country of which all the inhabitants are members of the same tribe. The same tribe, Dr. Briggs. Remarkable, is it not?" I nod sympathetically. The Princess is now studying a picture of Colonel Farquhar leading the charge of a thin red line in some far away territory.

"By this simple means, the possibility of continued inter-tribal wars within a national boundary has been eliminated. It should have been done decades ago as an example to all our nations. Economic progress has been too long impeded by inter-tribal fighting and has prevented our continent from taking its rightful place in the world of geo-politics. But now, M'pangwe-Ogowe will show the way! Tribal Re-alignment is the key! The key to the future of Africa, a future of internal peace, of stability, of the generation of wealth, of the re-emergence of the the great

civilisations!” The Princess looks at him with shining eyes.

“And I,” he continues, “I am the first President. Democratically elected. I am the one to whom this great duty has been given!”

There is a pause and I wait expectantly.

“But. But. Democracy is a delicate flower, alas - one swallow doth not a summer make - and must be nurtured with the greatest care, ‘ere it fade away and its tender petals fall in the enduring dust.” At this, I take a gulp of coffee. Fortunately, I do not have to respond as he leans forward in his chair, which creaks alarmingly, and says, with great deliberation:

“And that is why we are here today.”

“Ah,” I say enthusiastically and sneak a look at the screen to see what it has on M’pangwe-Ogowe and its President. The country is not naturally wealthy; no oil, no gas, no diamonds but, as its creation is considered a hugely important socio-political initiative, it is being given billions in global subsidies, by the World Bank, the IMF and the European Union amongst others.

A picture of the Capital, Matam, comes up. It could use a big investment in roads and a new bridge across the River Ogowe. Maybe the Chief wants to buy some concrete. The Princess has now given up on Colonel Farquhar and is studying a large canvas of Rear Admiral Bellamy directing the shelling of a tropical port and the repulsion of a flotilla of native canoes.

“I should explain,” continues the Chief. “My present visit to your country is in an unofficial capacity. It is to prepare for the State Visit next month. When that visit is completed I must return with some achievements made and these need to be prepared now. Such achievements must serve two purposes - they must please my fellow Ministers and they must please the electorate.” The Princess suddenly stands up and takes a close look at the background to Rear Admiral Bellamy’s activities.

“Do you know this place?” she asks me with a haughty look.

“I don’t think I do,” I say.

“It is Matam. The capital of my country. Your Rear Admiral slaughtered my ancestors. He was a savage.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I say.

“You should be,” says she, stamping her foot. The Chief interrupts gently.

“We must not bear grudges, Princess. I’m sure Dr. Briggs regrets such circumstances.”

“I presume he has ancestors, too,” says she, haughtily.

“My ancestors at that time,” I say firmly, “were too busy scraping a living from the soil, to bother about Africa, Your Highness.”

“Ha!” she exclaims, and goes into a fit of laughter.

“Ha, ha, ha!” laughs the Chief. I join in obligingly and we all have a jolly time for a couple of minutes.

“To business,” says the Chief. “We must discuss the House of Parliament for my new Republic. I must have one without delay. And I must rebuild the Capital. To do this requires concrete. To receive the concrete requires docks. To build docks requires concrete. To bring the concrete requires convoys of tankers. They must queue up outside the port to deliver their cargo. It will all take too long. But democracy must be seen to be flourishing. So I must have a House of Parliament

without delay. Therefore it has to be one that is already in existence. So that all that is required is removal from its present location to the site designated for it in Matam. Now Dr. Briggs. Your House of Lords is no longer in use. It would be ideal, would it not?" I pour myself some coffee and think fast. The Princess is watching me with a steely grin on her beautiful features. If we sell the House of Lords, it would leave a very nasty gap on the side of the Parliament building. I'm not sure the P.M. would like that. They say that he prowls around the building at night, apparently recalling all the great moments of political history that took place there.

"Chief Obanga," I say. "It could be a problem to sell you the whole building" The Chief looks very sombre and the Princess is now smiling broadly. I continue:

"But I'm sure there would be no problem with selling the interior to you. You would only need a small amount of concrete to build the exterior. Inside you would have exactly what you want. And I think I can confidently say that the Prime Minister would agree to the sale of the interior. But the whole building? Very probably not."

"Even for you, Chief Obanga," I add quickly. The Chief weighs the matter. The Princess is looking at me through slitted eyes. I wait.

"It will do," says the Chief. "How do you wish payment?"

"Funds will do very well.," I say hastily. Payment in obscure raw materials or unusual vegetables might not be acceptable to H.M. Government. It's curious that the Chief has not asked a price. He certainly won't have a problem finding the necessary, with all those Global Subsidies he's been given. At this crucial and satisfactory moment, his portapad rings. He conducts a brief conversation, his face growing puzzled, then angry and then apoplectic. He snaps something at the Princess, and they sweep out of the room. No goodbyes. No thank you for an interesting talk. No be seeing you. Disturbing. However, every communication to this building is recorded, so I hit the appropriate button and listen. The call was obviously from his Embassy in London. In the Chief's unofficial absence, somebody started a rumour that he had been abducted and probably assassinated. The value of the Pangwe had plummeted on the international currency markets and virtually overnight the country's wealth from Global Subsidies had been reduced to almost nothing. Obviously the Chief had to show he was safe and sound, fast, otherwise the country would be near financial ruin. I naturally excuse his hurried departure and hope he can rescue the situation and still want to acquire a House of Parliament, thereby allowing yours truly to enlarge his bonus.

It is interesting, is it not, to see how the workings of the great world, the calculus of international markets, and the shifting sands of geo-political machinations can screw up the ordinary joe's pay packet.