Chapter 1

THE AIR WAS STAGNANT and oppressive in the late tropical afternoon as I sat cross-legged on the floor of my hut, trying to restore life to a battered Tilley lamp. My thoughts rambled freely over a range of recent village events, while my fingers cleaned and repaired the pieces. The soft clapping of hands outside the open door announced the arrival of a visitor.

"My house is open," I called. "Enter and be welcome."

A dark shadow filled the doorway, briefly blackening the already dim room, as a huge man stooped and entered.

"Your house is cool and I am pleased to find you," the visitor intoned softly, "Greetings." His manner was formal as befits one who is a stranger to the house and its owner.

The man moved fully into the room as I looked up to inspect my unexpected visitor.

"Your visit is welcome," I said formally, rising.

Following the custom of the greeting I motioned him towards the only chair. This was a rickety cane structure which I found uncomfortable and seldom used myself, but it had been given to me by the village headman when I first came here, so I kept it. The

chair creaked in protest as the giant lowered himself into it and looked around the room.

My house consisted of only the one room. Compared to many others in the village it was quite large, about sixteen feet square, with mud walls and a thatched roof. The inside still showed the remains of some whitewash that had been applied long ago and badly needed repainting. I would do it one day. The shutters on the single window were open and hung slightly askew where the hinges had sagged. At some time in the distant past the shutters had been given a coat of green paint, but this too was now faded as time and the damp heat of the forest had taken their toll. Irregular poles cut from the stems of thin forest saplings, most of them still wearing their bark, were bound together with vines and overlaid with coarse grass matting that formed the foundation of the steep, newly thatched roof. The eaves were broad and low to prevent the tropical rain from eating away at the walls. Despite the stagnant air outside a cool current of air crept through between the top of the walls and the underside of the thatch.

My visitor's eyes swept the room slowly with the intensity of an electron microscope, and missed nothing. There was a bamboo bed in one corner covered with a piece of locally dyed cloth, two carved wooden stools from one of the northern provinces and a small table with one broken leg which was splinted and bound with raffia. A faded curtain hung from a pole across the rear corner, fresh grass mats partially covered the beaten clay floor, and finally there was me, surrounded by a clutter of assorted tools and lamp parts.

Outside the door, against the wall and sheltered by the eaves, I had buried two large earthen pots with only their thick rims showing above the ground. They had tightly fitting wooden

covers and kept the drinking water inside them cool. I took a small plastic jug from its place in the rafters above the door, filled it from one of the pots and placed it on the table beside my visitor. Behind the curtain in the back corner stood a basket filled with fruit which had been collected in the forest that morning. I chose the four best pieces and placed them in a smaller basket. Then, taking a clean glass from the shelf, I returned to my visitor.

He was staring intently out of the doorway, his attention fixed on something outside.

"The food is poor," I said placing it with the glass on the table.

The big man drew his attention back into the room, glancing first at me, then at the table.

"The food is good. You honour me," he said, in a slightly offhand manner but completing the sequence of the greeting.

For a few moments more he looked at me without expression then reached out and selected a mango from the basket. With no attempt to remove the leathery skin he bit into it savagely, squirting a brief fountain of juice which subsided to dribble down his round chin and drip onto the front of his shirt. With sluppering, sucking noises he consumed the fruit as if he had not eaten for days.

His presence completely dominated the room. I felt a faint tremor of apprehension and began, for the first time I could remember, to feel uncomfortable in my own home.

The afternoon light was dim inside the house but there was enough to let me see the man clearly and to examine his features and huge frame. By the way he had stooped to enter I judged that he must be well over six feet tall and he was massively built. I wondered if he came from one of the south-eastern provinces of the country, where many of the men were this tall. Certainly he

was unlike the local people who were wiry and slight. He spoke the local dialect well, but with an accent which showed the language was as foreign to him as it was to me. A dull green shirt stretched tightly across his barrel chest, the buttons straining to contain him. Heavily muscled arms, like those of a heavyweight wrestler, filled the short sleeves. His creased grey trousers were sweat stained round the waistband and grubby down the fly. They contrasted harshly with fluorescent pink socks and white plastic sandals. In the humid air, beads of perspiration coated his broad chocolate forehead. A thin scar ran from the corner of the right eye down the broad expanse of his nose to the corner of his mouth. His face and his overall appearance held a distinct aura of menace that was increased rather than dispelled by the brief smile as he finished eating.

He tossed the mango pip casually out of the open door and wiped his sticky fingers on the leg of his pants. Turning to look at me again, his eyes burned in the dim light. Again the tremor of apprehension fluttered through me and I hoped that it had not shown. I did not know this man. He was not someone I would forget easily and I wondered who he was and why he had come.

For a long moment we stared at each other as though neither knew what to say. Finally my visitor broke the silence. This time he spoke in good but heavily accented French. I tried to place his accent but could not.

"I am Kuloni Nkese. Do you know me, Kamran?"

His name was all too familiar and he evidently knew something about me for he had used the name by which the villagers now called me. It was the common name for a tall thin tree that grew in this part of the forest which Olidange, one of the villagers, had applied to me since I was over a foot taller than him

and he had to crane his neck back to talk to me. The others, who were not much taller, all laughed and the name stuck. Word travels fast in the forest, even among isolated communities, so I should not have been surprised that Kuloni Nkese knew this. Even so, his use of the name made the back of my neck tingle.

And with good reason. When people spoke his name it was with fear and with hate, invariably accompanied by a sign to ward off evil spirits. This man was the Party agent from a village some twenty-five kilometres to the east of here, across the Banaii River. He was hated by all, feared by most and spoken of well by none.

"I've heard of you," I replied neutrally. "I heard that you live at Kimwamwa," I continued, as if compelled by his very presence.

"That is so. What more have you heard?" The glint was there in his eyes again. He was enjoying this.

"Some speak of you with fear. Some speak with dislike because they are wary of strangers and you are not of these people. Some speak with respect," I replied evasively, not liking the way this conversation was going.

"So!" The huge man laughed with a rumble that came from deep in his belly and made him shake so that the old chair creaked and squealed in protest at its burden. "And you, what do you say, my friend?" His grin held all the menace of a hunting wolf, without its lean ascetic dignity. "How do you judge me?"

Broadside: every question was a loaded one. I wanted him to go, but now that I knew who he was I was also anxious to know why he had come and what he wanted. Men like him do not visit people like me in isolated forest villages for no purpose. After that initial tingle of apprehension when he had used my local name, alarm bells were now ringing inside me loud enough to raise the ancestors.

I wanted him gone but I had to know why he had come. Kuloni Nkese had an evil reputation and I had no wish to swell the ranks of those who had fallen foul of this particular Party Agent.

Legion were those who had reason to regret their encounters with Kuloni Nkese. I couldn't understand why the Party had never done anything about him. The Party was the *Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution*, or the MPR. It was the executive organ of the government in Zaïre. Divided into sectors, it exercised local authority, particularly in rural areas and, like any other political organisation in this continent, had huge defects. Whatever its failings, the Party did have rules and frowned on overt corruption. Abuse of authority such as this man was reputed to use could surely not be condoned.

Since coming to the country I had taken an interest in the local political system but always from the outside, as a detached observer. It was necessary to understand how things worked, if only to be able to cope with the ever-present mass of bureaucracy required for a foreigner to live and work here. But becoming politically involved was something I always tried to avoid. There were too many tales across the continent of outsiders who had meddled in local affairs, always with disastrous results. I had no wish to become one of them. Keeping an ear to the ground in order to know and understand what was going on is sensible enough and it can enable one to enjoy the country in harmony. Any involvement would be seen as meddling and lead inevitably to resentment and trouble.

Now this man seemed determined to involve me to a degree I always sought to avoid. True, I had met the President several times and carried, among my papers, his personal letter of authority for my work. But my acquaintance with Mobutu was a

private matter and I hoped the man was unaware of our friendship. I had never advertised the fact, and that particular document was best saved for times when I might be confronted by unavoidable and otherwise insuperable bureaucracy.

This situation was something I had never foreseen. I would need to tread warily.

"What can I say? I've heard your name but I've never met you before, so I know nothing. I am not your judge, nor any other man's," I said. But of course I was, and I had already judged him.

"But you are," he boomed eagerly. "You have heard of me. You think of what you hear. Like any other man you will judge. So, how do you judge me, Kamran?" It was obvious that he would not let me off this hook. He would force me to commit myself in some way, which he would then pick to pieces and certainly turn to his own advantage.

Kuloni Nkese's French was formal and precise but his accent was unusual and harsh on the ear. It had a slightly guttural quality about it, unlike most francophone Africans who had gentle, rather musical accents. This was so different that I wondered where he could have learned it. Probably not from native francophones.

My thoughts raced as I wondered what had drawn this man into the Party and then driven him so that he built up the reputation that walked with his name in this region, and possibly elsewhere, for all I knew. This was not his sector and he should have no Party business here, least of all with me. If the Party had any business with me, it would have been the local man who sat here, and welcome, or else I would have been summoned to his office in town. Something told me that this was a personal matter and again I hoped that this man was not going to involve me in the sort of thing I had always managed to steer clear of.

His presence was oppressive and malignant He made my home feel tainted. Little did I realise then that he was to do far more than that.

"I think you are a man who wants to ask for something, but I have no idea what it is," I said, trying to change the subject and make him declare himself.

He was not so easily diverted and was clearly enjoying my discomfort.

"You interest me, Kamran. First you lived in a smart house in the Portuguese district of the town, with electricity, taps full of water, and many rooms. Then, after only a short time, you leave and come to this place. What reason can you have to give up all that comfort and come to live in this… this mud hut?" Scorn fell heavily upon my ears as he spat the final words and gestured round my simple home with his arm.

I stared at him and said nothing. After a moment he continued.

"Why, I wonder, does an educated white man, a friend of the President, throw away such comfort and come to live among these stupid forest people? You are not one of the cursed missionaries who come to meddle with the spirits; to enslave men's souls and corrupt their children. You could live at ease, but you do not. But they tell me you choose… to live like this!" His tone was heavy with derision as he waved his arm again. "You are a mystery, Kamran, and this worries me. I don't like mysteries in my sector."

The last words were almost hissed. The gleam in his eyes showed a malevolence which clearly said he enjoyed bullying people. This time it was at my expense. Although I thought myself reasonably resilient to harsh words, he had caught me unawares and rattled me. I began to have sympathy with the unfortunate mouse quivering under the watchful gaze of a stalking cat, and

wondered how many others had received this sort of attention from the big Party agent. When he mentioned the President, I groaned inwardly and hoped that perhaps Kuloni Nkese thought there was more to the relationship than was actually there. If he did it might just stop him going too far for fear of greater wrath. Some hope; for this man, I was to realise later, was a law unto himself.

"Have you taken over this sector, then?" I asked. "I was talking to Nkwanu Knaii yesterday and he said nothing about being replaced here. Has he been promoted to another post?"

The big man said nothing. Suddenly he rocked the protesting chair backwards onto its back legs and watched me intensely through half-closed eyes. I carried on, feeling very uncomfortable, trapped into answering his other questions.

"It was Nkwanu Knaii who told me about this house and who helped me to arrange things. He knows why I choose to live here and sees no mystery in it."

Abruptly the smile faded from Kuloni Nkese's face and he rocked forward to rest his elbows on his knees so that he loomed over me where I was seated on the floor.

When he spoke again it was softly and in complete contrast to his previous manner.

"That girl outside, pounding manioc, she is your woman?"

At first I was not sure whether it was a statement or a question. Now that he mentioned it, I became aware of the rhythmic thump of the heavy pestle crashing into the huge hollow kumpunu log to pound the dried tubers into flour. It was one of those sounds that is so much a part of village life one takes it for granted. I could not see her, but the image formed in my mind of the girl at her work. Smooth flowing and repetitive, her movements had a fluid grace that made them physical poetry to complement the tone

poem I knew she would be humming to help maintain the rhythm.

The question startled me. Again I felt that twinge of apprehension.

"Abélé?" I answered obliquely. "She has no family and no house. She's only a child. It was arranged that she should live here and clean the house and cook the food. In this village, I am her guardian, her father."

"She lives here? She sleeps here, in this house?" The last word was loaded with scorn and at last gave me some direction for his questions.

"She sleeps on that mat," I said pointing to a rolled grass mat tied with raffia and propped against the wall. "Outside if it is dry, inside when it rains," I added unnecessarily as if justifying something that needed no explanation and was, in any case, none of his business.

"Do you use her?"

His question sounded enthusiastic and his manner was obscene. In a flash the prudishness of my Western upbringing raised its hackles. How dare he come into my house with his crude suggestions and probing insinuations?

The normal peaceful harmony of my home had been rudely shattered by his intrusion, but any fear I may have felt now turned to anger. "Abélé is only a child! She is as a daughter to me! She cleans the house and prepares food like any good daughter. That is all!"

Kuloni Nkese was delighted by my response. He threw back his great round head and let out a roar of laughter that made his fat belly shake. The cane chair protested and sagged a little more under his bulk.

"A woman as pretty as her lives in your house and you do not

use her? Kamran, you are indeed a strange man. You are a mystery!"

As suddenly as it had begun his laughter stopped. He leaned forward again with his forearms on his knees. His voice was almost conspiratorial as he launched his next thrust.

"Tell me, my friend, how much do you want for her?"

I wished he would not call me his friend, but it was my turn for disbelief.

"What?" I spluttered. Surely he could not be serious. My ears must be deceiving me. This must be another of his efforts to disconcert me before he came to the point of his visit. If that was the case he had failed, for this just brought my anger fully to the surface.

"What do you mean? She's not a bloody donkey! Abélé is not some slave to be sold on a whim like a sack of yams. She's a child." He could see my anger and it evidently amused him. "What do you want with her, anyway?"

"I want her. What is her bride price?" he asked again, grinning broadly.

"She is not for sale. I've already told you!"

The grin stayed and laughter rumbled again in his belly. The cane chair creaked ominously. When he spoke again his manner was more formal and less taunting.

"I want her for my wife. It is the custom here to pay *ibene* to the girl's father, but since she has no father of her own, I must ask you. That is the custom." His face lost all expression as he continued. "I could just take her, but she is of little enough value and it amuses me to follow the custom, even though you are only her guardian, and a *mundele*."

This changed things considerably, for what he said about the

bride price was quite true. A father or guardian was obliged to hear any serious petition and to set a price. Cunning devil, he had trapped me into a form of involvement that I had never even conceived.

It was all too sudden. The implications were too great for my sluggish brain to handle so fast. I needed time.

"So, Kamran, what do you ask? What is her *dot*?"

His question broke into my racing thoughts as I tried to find a way of legitimately denying him what he asked.

Outside Abélé had stopped her pounding and I could hear her scraping the flour into a basket. She would have prepared enough for two or three days and tomorrow she would sieve the flour and start the long process that would result in a heavy porridge, spiced with peppers and with a texture like old wallpaper paste. We ate a starch like this every day, with a variety of sauces and occasionally meat or fish. Mostly it was made from yams or other forest roots, but occasionally I bought manioc or grain when I went to Kikwit.

The afternoon light was fading now and it had become quite dark in the house. Even so I could still see the malicious glint in Kuloni Nkese's eyes. The silence brought with it a ray of hope and I realised how to get rid of the monster, at least for the time being. I would have time to think; time to talk with the villagers and ask their advice about what to do with this nightmare.

"You go too fast, Kuloni Nkese. You say that you're content to follow the custom. So be it. Tonight I will talk with Abélé and then consider this matter. I hear your request and, as custom requires, I will answer you, tomorrow," I said formally and he looked mildly surprised at my understanding of the local traditions. "You will go from here now, out of the village and

back to your own house. Tomorrow you will come at the same time and, in front of witnesses, repeat your request if that is what you wish. Then I shall answer. Until this matter is settled you may not speak with Abélé. That is the custom. Now eat! Abélé is a good girl and makes fine food. She collects only the best fruit. If this thing is to be, you must learn to appreciate her true value."

I hated myself as I said this because the less he knew and understood the better, but I too was now committed to playing out this game according to the local rules.

I poured water into the glass, placed it near him, then picked up the basket of fruit and offered it to him. Kuloni Nkese looked blankly at me as though he could not understand why I had not instantly agreed to name a price. He was about to speak, but thought better of it.

He took another mango and sank his teeth into it as he glared at me. He was obviously angry at being tripped up, the more so since he had done it to himself. I hoped he was not already plotting revenge, but felt sure he would be.

"What do you know of the custom, white man?" He snarled through a mouthful of fruit.

"Enough for the moment," I replied, my anger subsiding rapidly now that I could see some respite, however temporary, from his onslaught. "You have chosen the way for yourself, Kuloni Nkese. Now you are committed to follow the custom. Have you the patience?"

"You know nothing. These are not your people," he muttered thickly and tossed the half-eaten fruit onto the floor as a thinly veiled insult. The atmosphere in the house felt as tense as a drum skin and I could feel my own heart thumping inside my chest.

It was dark in the house and even the bright aperture of the

doorway was growing dim. Kuloni Nkese heaved his sweaty bulk out of the groaning chair and stood up. I rose too as he moved towards the door and leaned his arm against the lintel. He stared silently at Abélé clearing the ground where she had been working and I hoped he would not start some new trick. Perhaps there was still just enough of the traditionalist in him to make him keep his bond.

After several long moments he turned and straightened.

"You have made me welcome. I am honoured by your hospitality." He spoke once more in the local dialect, beginning the formal ritual of leave taking.

I heaved a mental sigh of relief. He had decided to keep the bond, for the moment.

"I am honoured by your visit. The house is honoured that you have eaten our food," I replied formally.

"Tomorrow I shall come."

With this he turned and ducked through the doorway. He strode off into the gathering dusk without once looking back. I went outside to watch him leave. His stride was an arrogant swagger, his bearing haughty. He looked round to make sure he was noticed. Soon he disappeared behind some bushes growing near the beginning of the track that would take him back to Kimwamwa. I wondered why he was on foot when he could have used his official vehicle.

I felt a surge of relief when he was finally out of sight and turned to look at Abélé. She was also watching the big man's departure, with an unmistakable look of fear on her face. As she became aware of me watching her, I smiled and she rushed over and flung her arms round me. She was shaking violently, a

frightened child seeking comfort from her father. I hugged her and, despite my own fears for what this affair might lead to, I felt warm and rich inside.

After a while she stopped shaking and loosened her hold just enough to look up at me. Her impish face made it easy to smile back. "It will be all right Abélé. Try not to worry. I won't let him hurt you." It was a promise that I had no idea how to keep, but I meant it.

"Will I make food now?" Abélé asked, loosening her grip a little more.

"Yes. You should prepare plenty. I'll ask Nkwanu Knaii and Ekwona and others to come. We need them to talk tonight so we should feed them well," I said.

Abélé brightened immediately at this. She always liked it when Nkwanu Knaii and the others came because they were kind to her and they liked her food.

"Will you go to the town for Nkwanu Knaii?" she asked. "You should bring some beer. And tin fish. What time will they come?"

"After the rain. Maybe nine o'clock," I told her. She nodded her understanding. Most of the villagers couldn't tell the time but Abélé had been keen to learn and I had hung a cheap clock on the wall by the door. She took great delight in winding it noisily every morning when she woke.

Now I reached for my shirt that hung on a peg just inside the door and put it on.

Walking over to where my Land Rover stood under a large tree, I wondered how I was going to explain this awful mess to the villagers who had entrusted a young girl to my care. How would I explain it to Abélé herself? Would I be able to find a legitimate

reason for denying Kuloni Nkese's request when he came tomorrow? If he came.

This could be some monstrous joke by him because he could find no other way of making trouble for me. Perhaps he would not come at all, leaving me, and Abélé, wondering when he would turn up, never knowing, never sure. But that would mean he had to give up the satisfaction of seeing my discomfort and I knew that he would be unable to stay away.

Stifling a futile curse, I kicked the Land Rover tyre in frustration.