1 ~ The village

DESMOND PARKIS WAS A government ferret from London. Just past his fortieth birthday, he was a well-built man about six feet tall with a shock of black hair and a drooping Fu Manchu moustache, a style popularised by the hippies and dropouts of the Sixties. Desmond was neither. He was a habitué of the city and suburbia: systematic, thorough and slightly cynical, prepared to think the worst of human nature. He wasn't born that way but the endless unravelling of other men's corruption had left him with a jaded perspective. Desmond could see the dark cloud around every silver lining.

So when British government mandarins became suspicious about reports they were hearing of strange occurrences involving a development project funded by taxpayer's money, they put Desmond on a plane to Africa to investigate.

I had been instructed to collect Desmond from Bamako airport in Mali. It was more convenient for him to fly there than to neighbouring Upper Volta, where I lived. I was to gather up Desmond and his belongings, give him a whistle-stop tour of life in an African village and some advice on how to conduct himself

appropriately where he was going, and send him on his way to south-eastern Nigeria.

Desmond arrived after a long overnight flight from Paris, tired and bemused, only to be bundled into the right-hand seat of a Cessna 180 and flown eastward into the unknown by someone he had only met twice before: me. This was his introduction to Africa.

FOR ABOUT AN HOUR and a half, the windswept plain that dominates the north-western corner of the country passed uneventfully beneath us. Then I tipped the plane onto its side and, announcing that we had reached our destination, began circling what from two thousand feet appeared to be no more than a random collection of hay stacks and walled yards, but which, on closer observation, revealed itself as a small village.

"Where's this?" Desmond's voice crackled over the intercom.

"This is where I live," I said.

"What?" Desmond said, a despairing tone in his voice. "You've got to be nuts."

I controlled the impulse to laugh aloud.

From our vantage point we could see the whole village and, of course, all the villagers could see us. They knew the aeroplane because I lived here, but as I had only recently acquired the Cessna as my long-range transport, the sight of it airborne was still a sufficiently novel experience for everyone to stop what they were doing and look skywards. Most of them were waving enthusiastically. I stuck my arm out of the window and waved back.

The village was the sort of place which, on the ground, would be easy to pass by and ignore. Indeed, this had been its main attribute since a few people had clustered together and built their

houses here about a hundred years earlier. There was no proper road by which to approach the place and nobody, except the inhabitants and folk from a few surrounding villages attracted by the market, had any cause to come here. The people called their village Anéhigouya; now I called it my home.

I was supposed to be based in Ouagadougou, the capital. That would have made more sense to my deskbound colleagues like Desmond because at the time I was the only member of our rural development team working in the former French territories. My area stretched from the Atlantic coast eastwards to the border between Sudan and Chad and from the fringes of the Sahara southwards to the coasts of Cameroon and Nigeria and included all the countries to the west, right the way round to Senegal and Mauretania.

For a number of reasons it had become impractical to stay in the capital so I had taken the unilateral decision to move myself to somewhere that suited my needs better. London didn't actually object, but it was clear from the enquiries they made that they didn't understand why I had moved and wanted some sort of explanation.

This, I concluded, was why Desmond had been sent to visit me. He was, after all, here to sniff out the trouble with a project in Nigeria that appeared to have gone off the rails. Perhaps he was also supposed to sniff out why I had moved to this village. Either way, they must have realised back in London that he was in for a severe cultural shock on his first visit to the continent. Somebody had had the bright idea of sending him to me so that I could give him an introduction to Africa and some of its ways before he met the hard boys down in the Niger delta.

Unfortunately they hadn't thought this through very well.

Hardly any of the London staff had been to this part of West Africa and those who had never stayed long enough to get more than a sketchy and superficial view. They all worked from information on paper, leaving the hands-on work and the understanding that came with it to people like me.

I had been stationed as a rural development officer in West Africa for several years, long enough to grow familiar with the squalor and fond of the simplicity of bush villages; surrounded by the hurly burly richness of tribal life, immersed in its complex customs, rituals and obscure hierarchies. Magic, sorcery and superstition so often permeated this environment that it had more pitfalls for the unwary than a potholed country lane in darkest Dorset. That was part of its fascination.

It was into this complex and convoluted society that our masters had plunged the unwitting Desmond. Having read my reports, he was curious to see what this backward little country looked like and welcomed the opportunity to stop over and see for himself why I had chosen to move out of the capital, with all its 'modern' facilities, and set myself up in an isolated village without running water, electricity or a telephone. That there were fewer than four hundred telephones in the whole country at the time, and that I had not had one previously, had obviously escaped both his and everyone else's notice back in London, as had the fact that the capital had fewer than a couple of dozen modern buildings and was in reality no more than a scruffy little mud city.

"It suits me," I said in answer to his question. "And it gives me the freedom to come and go as I want without being harassed by petty bureaucracy, unreasonable airport opening hours and extortionate fees. I can't afford to waste the tax-payers' money."

Anéhigouya: the sort of place that would be easy to pass by.

"Umpff! It looks run-down and primitive. Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Sure. It's ideal for me," I told him with real enthusiasm. "You wait till we get down there. We'll stop overnight and I'll fly you on to Ouaga in the morning."

"Oh god! Must we?" He was beginning to sound desperate. "It'll be flea-ridden and smelly. They warned me in London about the snotty-nosed, fly-festooned children and people who stare at you," he grumbled. I guessed one of the ethnic secretaries had been having fun telling him horror stories.

"And I don't suppose there's such a thing as a cold beer for hundreds of miles."

"All true," I said cheerily. "The people here love looking at strangers and some of them," I added mischievously, "will probably want to hold your hand as well. It's their way of showing friendship. You may, however, be luckier with the beer."

"Oh, is there a pub, then?" he asked, staring gloomily out of the side window.

"Not exactly, but the next best thing."

We had completed our second circuit of the village and I lined the plane up to land on the open strip I had cleared and now called my airfield. As we lost height I thought about the enthusiastic welcome our arrival would receive and wondered why someone like Desmond was even involved in rural development. He didn't sound as though he liked people at all, let alone the kind of people we were here to help. Still, I consoled myself as the wheels kissed the red earth and sent up a small plume of dust. He's really just an office *wallah* and only knows how to shuffle paper, I thought, he doesn't know what real work – and possibly real life – is.

OUR RECEPTION WAS every bit as lively as I had predicted. Desmond flinched and looked very uncomfortable when a small, naked boy with a big grin and green snot dripping from his button nose clasped his hand. Hanging on firmly, he trotted along beside him as we walked toward my house. Villagers chattered and called out greetings as was usual here so it was several minutes before we could hold a sensible conversation. The noisy reception was clearly purgatory for him.

Something inside me – call it what you will – decided it would be fun to prolong Desmond's agony so, after dropping his bag inside my gate, I took him on a partial tour of the village so that I could introduce him to our headman. Turning away from my house, we wound our way through the narrow mud-walled alleys with our escort of chattering villagers in close attendance until we came to the headman's compound.

The air was rich with smells familiar to me since my childhood and early years in Africa. The aroma of wood smoke infused everything but mingled with it were the sour smells of beer brewing, grain being toasted over hot coals and the usual rank smells of decay that surround any human habitation in the tropics. Added to these was the all-pervading smell of termites – a smell like stale urine – that is so characteristic of many parts of West Africa. In the alleys between the houses lay scattered animal droppings, occasional bits of rotting fruit or dead rats, all of which added to the muddy scent of hot, sun-baked mud walls. When you were not used to it, this could be a heady and confusing olfactory cocktail. For Desmond it was all new, raw and strange.

At the headman's gate we paused and I clapped my hands in the manner the villagers used, calling out a greeting to announce who desired admittance. The headman's son, a skinny lad of about nineteen with bright eyes and a ready lop-sided grin,

Village street: the muddy scent of hot, sun-baked mud walls... a heady and confusing olfactory cocktail.

opened the gate and invited us in to sit on a log bench in the courtyard for a few moments until his father appeared.

Aka'ami Mallam was a scrawny man who was only about forty years old, although he looked a lot older. The harsh environment added years to almost everyone's true age; life expectancy was generally less than forty-five for men and thirty-nine for women. Our headman had lost most of his front teeth; the two stained fangs that remained, together with his slightly crossed eyes, gave him features more suitable for a vampire horror film than for the amiable fellow he really was. It didn't stop him smiling, though, and his welcome was particularly warm on this occasion. He summoned one of his wives who brought a large calabash of *dolo*, the local home-made beer. He passed this to Desmond and encouraged us to drink.

Desmond was uncertain so I told him to take a good gulp and then pass the bowl to me. He had never tasted anything like this before and his face gave him away. Aka'ami asked me if there was something wrong with the beer.

"No, it is very good," I told him. "This man comes from a different tribe from me. His people always pull faces when they drink. He likes your beer." I repeated this to Desmond in English, telling him that for the remainder of his visit he must always pull faces when eating, or drinking *dolo*, as people would now expect it of him.

"That won't be difficult," he muttered. "That stuff is disgusting. How can you drink it like that?"

I had just swallowed a large mouthful and was taking another. "You get used to it," I said. "Anyway, I like it and this is quite a good brew, not too strong. Some of the women brew a very sour version that is thick with red sludge, but much more potent. Wait

till you taste that and some of their other concoctions."

"Umpff. No thanks, I'll stick to water or bottled beer from now on," Desmond replied. "Please tell the headman that I have tasted this out of respect but normally I seldom partake of alcohol."

I repeated what he had said to Aka'ami, who immediately issued a stream of instructions for one of his wives to bring water. Moments later another calabash, this one containing a pale red liquid, was thrust into Desmond's hands and the grinning headman again made drinking gestures. Desmond looked at the bowl with dismay and asked what it was.

"Water," I said. "Straight from the well."

"Bloody hell," he said, looking slightly shocked. "I thought you were supposed to be running a clean water programme."

"We haven't started on this well yet," I told him. "But I've tested it. Apart from a bit of stain from the soil, it's clean enough and quite safe to drink. Don't forget to pull a face as you drink and I'd suggest you finish that lot so as not to give offence." There was at least a quart of water in the bowl.

Desmond raised the bowl and drank deeply. He had no problem about pulling a face. As the water had a good earthy taste, his reaction was entirely automatic. Even so, he played the game well and drained the bowl, changing his grimace to a grin as he put the empty calabash on the ground.

"It tastes like muddy Epsom Salts," he said, shaking his head. "I shall probably have the runs later."

While feeling slightly sorry for him, I began to like Desmond a little. Perhaps I had misjudged him earlier.

As we left the headman's compound, the noisy escort of villagers flowed round us again. The same small boy grasped

Desmond's hand and clung on as though he were a favourite uncle. We made our way back through the narrow alleys of the village and said goodbye to our escort at my own compound gate, telling them we would not be going out again this afternoon as we had work to discuss.

As I closed the gate, Desmond looked around. "What's this place then?"

"*Chez moi*, of course."

"What? Two mud huts and a wall around a space no bigger than a ping-pong table?"

"Three mud huts and a couple of granaries," I laughed, pointing to the tall rectangular structures like silos on legs that stood in the corner of my courtyard. "Have a seat and I'll find you a proper beer." I pointed to a log propped up on two forked tree trunks which served as my garden bench. The tree trunks were buried in the ground and the log had been polished smooth by the hundreds of backsides that had rested there,

I went into the smallest of the huts, moved a heavy box and lifted the cover from my underground cache. Not many people in the village knew I had built this, so it was a useful place to put things I wanted to keep private. It had the added benefit of keeping bottled beer quite cool.

Desmond received the beer as if it were nectar. "Don't forget to pull faces," I reminded him. "People can still see you here."

"You mean you don't even have privacy in your own house?" he spluttered with disbelief in his voice and alarm on his face.

"You're not in Surbiton now, Desmond. This is Africa. You'd better get used to the idea. You're new, so you're a curiosity. People naturally want to know about you, so they'll watch." I nodded to indicate the small boy sitting on the roof of the house next door

observing us. Birrim's youngest son, Akubu, always took a great interest in whatever I was doing. "You're perfectly safe."

"I'm not sure I feel safe," he grumbled.

"Wait till you meet the Wa-Wa man later," I teased. "He'll peer at you and look into your soul as he works out whether you may be an evil influence here."

"What do you mean?" His head snapped round to stare at me in alarm. "Who or what is this Wa-wotsit person and what's he got to do with me?"

"The Wa-Wa man? He's our village witch-doctor," I said. "Courtesy demands that I introduce you." It didn't exactly, but I was still feeling mischievous. "Don't worry, he may look a little unusual, but he's a regular guy and he and I get along fine. He's a useful chap to have on your side, so please be nice when I introduce you."

"Bloody Norah! How on earth do you come to be tangled up with things like this? You do realise it's taxpayers' money that's being spent for the work you're supposed to be doing, and that shouldn't be frittered on black magic, village sorcerers, witch-doctors and... this sort of thing." He waved his beer bottle round to indicate the entirety of my courtyard. "Why the devil to you live here anyway in this... this mud hut?"

"Oh, loosen your gusset, Desmond. Things work differently here. Stay with me for a month and you'll see that we actually achieve quite a lot, even if our methods are not what city folk like you expect. HMG gets good value for its money, I assure you. You'll find much more peculiar things when you get down to where you're going in Nigeria. Their society is much more intense and they go in for heavy magic down there. I'm told they still eat people too in some parts of the delta."

Desmond looked as if he was about to be sick and I paused before answering his other question.

"As for why I chose to live here, it's very simple really."

IT STARTED WITH the aeroplane. When I had first got it, it was kept on the airport at Ouagadougou. But I had faced a constant string of petty restrictions about when I could or couldn't fly, arbitrary airport closing hours, the need to complete five forms before taking the plane out of the hangar. These were the product of arbitrary decisions by a petty *fonctionnaire* who didn't know the difference between an aeroplane and a frying pan but who wanted to wield his little bit or power and feel important. There was also a load of bureaucratic nonsense requiring innumerable forms every time I wanted fuel. With so much time wasted by this sort of thing, it was impossible to get any work done.

"Yes, but that's..." Desmond started but I cut him off.

"To make my life worse, the house I was renting was on the other side of the city and right next door to a mosque. At the beginning this wasn't a problem until one day the muezzin got himself a loud hailer and his favourite perch from which to call the faithful to prayer was eight feet above my roof. Suddenly his congregations swelled and I frequently came out of my own front door to trip up on a pile of shoes dropped in a chaotic scatter by the faithful as they trooped into the mosque."

"I suppose having that five times a day could get a bit tedious," he muttered.

"It was, but there were other factors. I needed somewhere that allowed me freedom of movement. Most of my work is out among villages like this one; many are hundreds of miles from here. It seemed sensible to live where I work. For those projects that

require me to go into the city, I can fly to the main airport. For village projects, I either land in the bush or fly to one of the nearby missions that has an airstrip. I have a Mobylette which I carry in the back of the plane and use for ground transport when I get there. Here, I use it to go to neighbouring villages but if I need to bring materials back from Ouahigouya or to go down to Bobo Dioulasso, I have a Land Rover."

Desmond's curiosity was aroused. "So how did you come to end up here?"

"The government water department had invited me to come and look at the wells here and in the neighbouring villages because the water table had dropped by over two metres in the last five years. Many wells need deepening but the water-bearing strata are friable and inclined to collapse on anyone who starts to dig, so many wells had fallen into disuse. They don't have the specialist knowledge locally or the skills to deal with this. I do, so they asked for my help."

His interest was engaged now, so I continued. "While going round all the villages surveying the problem, I realised it would be an ideal place to be based. Some of my other projects are located not far away, across the border in Mali. I established a well digging school there last year, ninety miles beyond the frontier and further west, in Senegal, there are several other schemes in progress. Most of my projects are in the Sahel, with others east of here, in Niger, Nigeria and Cameroon. Only a few are further south in the forest region or the coastal belt so, as a base, this area couldn't be better.

"When I first came to Anéhigouya, this house was derelict and unoccupied. The headman liked the idea of my being based here as it would give his village some prestige, apart from ensuring that

their water problems would receive my attention at the earliest opportunity. The Wa-Wa man approved and the villagers made me feel very welcome.

"So I bought the house and nineteen hectares of land in a long, narrow strip. I turned half of it into a landing field for my plane, the rest is waiting to be cultivated as soon as I've made a plough and trained a couple of donkeys to pull it. That promises to be fun; the people round here don't use ploughs, they do all their cultivation the hard way, by hand with hoes. All their donkeys do is carry loads or pull heavy metal *charrettes*."

As I explained all this to Desmond, I could see something like disbelief in his eyes. He understood that I needed to be close to the job, but as a way of doing this, my approach was clearly too new for him to grasp easily.

"Better you than me, mate," he said. "I need a bit of civilisation." He sounded homesick for his city with its bright lights, bustling traffic, crowded streets and pubs smelling of cigarette smoke and stale beer. He would have to adapt fast or he wouldn't last long without someone to hold his hand, to provide his food and to send him on his way. I almost felt sorry for him.

WE SPENT THE REST of the afternoon discussing the portfolio of development programmes for which I was responsible. With maps spread on the ground to help Desmond understand the geography, I showed him plans, and pictures where I had them, and otherwise described in detail the locations, the people involved, the aims and the work in progress of each scheme.

By the time the westering sun had dropped far enough for my little courtyard to be in full shadow, he had a comprehensive overview which included a bundle of detailed notes I had prepared

for him to take back to London. I left him reading these and went out for a few minutes to find something for our supper.

When I returned, Desmond was staring intently at one of my maps. "This place isn't even on the map," he said looking up.

I leaned over his shoulder and pointed to a small dot and the word Perdu. "That's it," I said.

"Lost?" He sounded incredulous, "You said it was called Annie something or other. Why's it marked as 'lost'?"

"Anéhigouya. It's an old name and goes back a long way," I said.

"What do you mean?

"The name is an old one from the days when this territory was occupied by the great Empire of Mali," I explained, wondering if he knew anything about the ancient history of this part of Africa. Few people do. "It dates from about seven hundred years ago. In those days Ouahigouya, which is the nearest large town, was the start of a trade route over the desert and its name meant 'The Great Gateway' or something equally poetic."

The legend was that a group of people became separated from a trade caravan coming in from the desert during a sand storm and they ended up here. The storm lasted for weeks. They couldn't move on so they built themselves crude shelters and stayed put. When at last the storm abated, they had no idea where they were or where to go. By chance they had stopped near a small water course.

"The land was still quite lush and well watered in those days," I said, "not parched as it is now, so they made their camp a bit more permanent and built a couple of mud brick huts."

They weren't discovered for more than a year until an outbound caravan happened to pass nearby. The caravan master

told them everyone thought they were lost forever but they were actually only one day's march from the gate and he offered them a guide to complete their journey. One man went with the guide and finally reached Ouahigouya, while the rest of his small band remained in their new settlement. He returned some days later and told them that they were now known as Anéhigouya which, he said, meant 'the people lost outside the gate'. "The place has been known by that name ever since and even managed to keep its name when other empires replaced the Mali Empire and eventually the Mossi people, who now populate the country, took over."

Watching Desmond as I explained this bit of background, I saw the idea that these people might have some history had captured his interest. I fed him another beer and explained some more.

"The reason the village is marked 'Perdu' on any maps which show it at all is said to be because the French cartographer who prepared the original maps, back in the 1870s, heard the tale of the lost caravan when he asked the meaning of the name and wrote '*perdu*' as the heading to his notes. He died before the map was completed and somebody else, who didn't have his local knowledge, misunderstood his notes and thought Perdu was the name of the village and Anéhigouya was the name of the person who had given the information. So, 'Lost' it became on the early maps and, possibly because this didn't make sense to other people in later years, it often got missed off altogether."

"Blimey! How did you find all that out?" Desmond asked.

"Same as you, I asked."

"Umpff!"

He returned his attention to my notes and I busied myself with chopping up the lump of goat I had bought from our village butcher. A sliced onion, a few cubes of yam and other vegetables

and some water went into my cooking pot with the meat. Then I lit a small fire in the hearth, covered this with lumps of fresh charcoal and put the pot on top, balancing it on the tips of the three stones that formed my cooking stove. The stew would take a couple of hours to simmer, which gave us time to go into the village and let Desmond meet some of its characters.

As well as talking about the current projects, I had told him about the people they were designed to help and some of the interesting characters who worked on them. I noticed a slight shift in his interest at the idea that these might be people with abilities and skills rather than just the backward natives he had called them earlier. I was pleased therefore, that he immediately stood up when I suggested we should make a tour of the village and introduce him to some of its residents.