

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Surfeit of Spanish Fly

*Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen sixty-three
(Which was rather late for me) –
Between the end of the Chatterley ban
And the Beatles' first L.P.*

Philip Larkin

The natives of the dark forests of Central Africa called it the 'Pepper Bug', for it imparted a pleasantly spicy flavour to the gravy when roasted, ground into powder, and added to their food. Far to the north, far beyond the burning sands of Libya, the Anglo-Saxon called it Spanish Fly. Here, those love-lorn suitors who were too impatient to be bothered with old-fashioned courtesies such as courting, added it discreetly in powder form to the drinks of their sweethearts in order to speed up the process of seduction a little.

I am no entomologist, and the thing looked a pretty ordinary beetle to me when I first saw it in Africa. It was about

Gone Native

an inch in length, with chitinous wing cases of a darkly iridescent blue hue. I had no idea what it was, but an English friend who claimed to be an expert on creepy-crawlies told me that it was a sort of cousin of the infamous beetle known as the Spanish Fly in the Anglo-Saxon world. The reason, he claimed, that the forest African never used it directly as an aphrodisiac was that he and she were absorbing it on a daily basis via the cooking pot, hence his permanently erectile condition and her eagerness to have it away with any man, anywhere and any time.

I could not quite accept this colonial cynicism, for I was generally eating from the same pot, and I had yet to experience lust so intense that I required a vast harem of wives to keep it under some measure of control. Perhaps, I thought with a sudden frisson of alarm, a childhood digging peats on some freezing Hebridean moor had done some serious mischief to my libido? Maybe something vital on me had succumbed to the permafrost? Perhaps a benevolent God was trying to repair some of the damage wrought upon me then by dumping me now amidst the greatest concentration of aphrodisia the world has ever known? It was a sobering thought.



Always Something New



To my delight, my first pygmy encampment was exactly as I imagined it would be, a circle of about thirty leafy, beehive-shaped huts in a clearing amidst enormous trees. It seemed deserted, but wisps of smoke from little cooking fires before the huts indicated that the inhabitants were not far away. I had heard that they were shy of strangers and I guessed that they were hiding in the surrounding undergrowth, watching to see whether we looked friendly. I had never smoked in my life but having been told that pygmies were complete slaves to the demon nicotine, I had come well stocked with cartons of cigarettes. I placed four packets on a tree stump nearby, sat down with my back against a tree, and waited.

I began to doze off in the dense, hot air. Suddenly, he was there before me. One moment, there was nothing but the somnolent churring of insects around me to suggest that anything lived here and the next, there he was. My first pygmy. He was quite the ugliest human being I had ever seen in my life.

He was standing on one leg before me, nervously, ready to vanish to whence he had come at the first sign of aggressive intent from me. He would have been, I reckoned, about sixty years of age, which would have made him, I was later to find out, very old by pygmy standards. He was coal black, barrel-chested, less than five feet in height, and with scrawny little Minnie-Mouse legs. He was stark naked, and he looked like a troll from one of the Brothers Grimm fairy tales of my child-

Gone Native

hood. His odour betrayed a chronic aversion to regular bathing habits.

He stabbed his chest with a bony forefinger. 'Me – Benjie!' he growled in a deep-brown Paul Robeson voice. He reached for a cigarette packet and removed a cigarette. He lit it with a brand from the fire at his feet. Then he cupped a hand to his mouth and uttered a loud halloo, a weird yodelling sound that reverberated throughout the treetops. Immediately, pygmies came drifting out of the surrounding bush in twos and threes, men, women and children. Although many were as black and unprepossessing as the one before me, some of the younger ones were very light-skinned, slender, and almost Pharaonic of mien. I wondered at the time if these could have been the result of miscegenation involving the African tribes from the villages skirting the forest, and I was to find out later that the latter did indeed enter into love affairs with pygmy girls on the odd occasion. (The pygmy girls, through generally completely faithful while married, could be quite flirtatious when single.)

These, then, were the people with whom I was due to live for the next few months. They would turn out to be quite the most entertaining months of my life.

Like all Africans who came from outwith these great forests, my porters were terrified of the little people. Highly exaggerated tales of their supposed lethal proclivities against those who earned their wrath circulated freely throughout the outside world, and their expertise with various virulent poisons extracted from the bark and leaves of the myriad plants growing around them was the stuff of campfire legend. They were taking no chances: they dumped their loads on the ground and insisted on an immediate return to Jacob's Camp. I paid them off and Kamara and I were left to our own devices. Kamara got a huge welcome from the pygmies, for he had been in this area before.

Always Something New

It would take them some time to fully accept me, but accept me at last they did, and they seemed eventually to become quite proud of their 'white papa', as they began to call me. I, in turn, became equally proud to be accepted as one of them.

Kamara and I were each given a hut at the far end of the encampment. The huts were tiny, but snug and waterproof, composed of large green leaves lashed down with liane on to a framework of pliable saplings. I just about managed to get my whole body inside mine by curling myself up into a foetal position but there was no hope for Kamara's lanky six-foot-six frame. His legs sticking out through the tiny door afforded the pygmies much amusement. Luckily, it was the dry season so apart from offering his ankles on a nightly basis to a wide variety of bloodsucking insects, he did not suffer too much.

I was assigned a girl to look after my daily needs, such as lighting a fire for my morning tea, cooking for me, washing my clothes, and so on. Her name was Kumunbrusadé, but she was known to all and sundry as 'The Dancer', on account of her expertise in the art of dancing, a very important skill in the pygmy culture. I think she was about fifteen years of age, but it was really very difficult to tell, for pygmies matured early and, indeed, the girls generally married at puberty. The Dancer's husband had been killed the previous year by one of the mad little red forest buffaloes that abounded in the forest hereabouts. She was not altogether sorry that he had been killed, she told me, for he was a drunkard and he used to beat her badly when in his cups. Also, he snored horribly, and furthermore he was starting to get jealous of her dancing naked before the others at the pygmies' regular soirées, and how could a girl of her status be expected to properly express the freedom of 'The Dance' if she was being hampered by clothing? One night, she said, she would dance for me, and I would see for myself what she