

## Retold from the French-2

## De Gaulle and the night visitors

FERDINAND  
OYONO

ENGAMBA WAS WALKING with the heavy trotting rhythm of the billy-goat he was holding on a lead. Never had he walked so fast. Though it was cool, he was sweating. Whenever the animal tried to break into a gallop, Engamba would wind the rope around his wrist, stop abruptly, and then begin to walk backwards. The goat kept dancing in all directions, Engamba, whose old legs were not overly resistant, sometimes found himself lying flat on his stomach beside the bush track. He would let go of his assegai while his hands clutched the rope as strongly as he could. The goat would nearly suffocate, and once his respiration was cut off, would remain frozen to the spot. Then Engamba would get up, slacken the strap around the animal's neck, and tickle his flank with the handle of his assegai. The animal would start off again at a walking pace.

Thus they walked through the bush till the night fell. Amalia still had her lead over him. Her basket was Engamba's road marker. She walked as if she had wings. With her basket resting in the angle formed by her back and her rounded buttocks, she forged ahead effortlessly, her hands cupped behind her head, which was lowered like that of a docile donkey.

"Don't move too fast!" Engamba shouted to her breathlessly, "don't move too fast, you know that my legs aren't any good . . ."

Amalia stopped for a moment and with a jerk brought the basket back into position on her back. She pulled on the strap of rattan cane which served as the handle of the basket and which, under the weight of the provisions, cut into her prominent forehead, which was running with sweat.

She looked behind her. When her husband was within call, she passed the back of her hand over her face and with an abrupt movement wiped off the sweat.

"Move a bit faster!" she shouted to him. "I wonder if we'll get to Doum by tomorrow?"

She resumed the gait of a beast of burden used to the pack-saddle. How many a heavy basket had she carried? Baskets of wood each time she returned from the fields, baskets of sand for their hut and for the road, baskets of stone for the house of the priest if she wanted to be admitted to confession, baskets of provisions for their journeys . . . All these baskets had carved into her back that sharp angle which resembled the gash on a vegetable stalk struck to death by a hoe. Her skin at that place had become as thick as that of an elephant.

"IS THIS MY OWN flesh and blood?" her mother sobbed when Amalia, still as flat as dough flung against the wall, pouted because she did not want to carry the provision basket specially made for her.

"Who will dare to marry such a weak girl?" she went on, "who

will dare to ask for the hand of a girl who cannot even carry a basket?"

Amalia loved her mother very much. When she wept, Amalia wept with her, and only then asked what it was about.

"The whole village is making fun of us," her mother moaned. "Everybody says you're not a woman . . . You can't even carry a basket . . . What will your husband eat?"

Amalia swiftly took up her mother's big basket and ran out into the fields. She filled it with enough food for two days and sat down to pass the three handles over her head and shoulders. She pulled up her legs under her belly, clenched her teeth, and then managed to stagger up slowly. She took that particular bush track which allowed her to arrive home after crossing the whole village. She even sang at the top of her voice. People came out of their huts to see her.

"There goes a girl who will know how to feed her husband," they said. "That lucky fellow won't starve to death. Atema — Amalia's mother — has a daughter blessed amongst daughters . . ."

On hearing these words, Amalia forgot the handles which were bruising her flesh and hurting her young spine bent with pain. Totally exhausted she fell down at her mother's feet. Her mother quickly closed the door to keep people from seeing the unfortunate end of this heroic deed.

Later, when Amalia rose after her illness, she received ten marriage proposals. Among the candidates was the rich Engamba from Zourian. Amalia gave the polygamist preference over the young bachelors.

"At least with him," she thought, "the job of a wife will be shared . . ."

That is how Amalia married Engamba.

THEIR TRACK LEFT the forest. It was already night. "We'll arrive at Nkongo before dinner-time," Engamba called out to his wife. "We'll have a rest, all right?"

Nkongo was the first small village one came through on the track from Zourian to Doum. It consisted of about ten dilapidated huts built around a straw shed, the palaver hut.

When Amalia and her husband arrived, they discerned black shapes squatting around a big fire. Somebody looked up over the flames towards the courtyard. "You passers-by, come and share our modest meal with us," he called. "Nobody travels at night. The night has many mysteries . . ."

Amalia preceded her husband into the palaver hut. "May the night be good to you," she said entering. "I am Amalia Etua, the wife of . . ."

"That's Engamba's wife," the one who had recognised her said.

"Oh, it's you, Binama!" she said, stretching out her hand to him.

"The very one," the man said, tying up the terry-towel he had rolled up around his loins. "Where is your husband?"

"Coming!" shouted Engamba, who was tying his goat to a stake in the yard.

Amalia got rid of her basket. Her husband entered. "I greet you, friends," he said.

"We cordially accept your greeting," answered voices coming from the shadows where one could conjecture forms which the

*The second of this series of translations by WILLFRIED FEUSER of the University of Ibadan is from Ferdinand Oyono's second novel Le vieux nègre et la médaille (Paris, Julliard, 1956). The book itself has been translated into German (1957), Dutch (1960), and Russian (1962) but not into English. His first novel, Une Vie de boy (1956) is appearing this year in an English translation by Clive Wake under the title Houseboy.*

light from the fire did not quite light up.

Binama stepped forward and shook hands with him. "Give your seat to this full-grown man," he said to a child who was stark naked, wearing a crucifix round his neck and licking a pot.

"That's De Gaulle,\* my second son," the man with the terry-towel said. "You remember, I married his mother after the war."

"Ah," Engamba said, "children grow like maize these days . . . Come say hello to me, De Gaulle."

The brat, intimidated by the stranger, had hidden himself in the shadows with his pot. When Engamba stretched out his hand to him, he hid himself a little more.

"De Gaulle, come say hello!" his father thundered. "Could I have begotten a fool?"

At these words De Gaulle, a finger stuck in his nose, drew near to Engamba. It was impossible to know exactly what his complexion was like. All the ochre dust of the yard mixed with that of the fireplace and the palm-oil which had dripped on his little distended belly had formed a multicoloured film streaked with the traces of water drops. His navel, firm and ample like the breast of a young girl, was tilted towards his little prepuce blackened by the bottom of the pot he had held between his legs.

Engamba opened his arms and his thighs. The child rushed into them.

"A jolly fellow already, that one is," his father said. Engamba held the child away from him a little to have a better look at him. "You're right there," he said, dwelling on De Gaulle with the tender glance of one who has desperately wished for children.

"Now to greet your 'Mammy' over there," Engamba said to him. "Come, little fellow," Amalia said. The child went over to her.

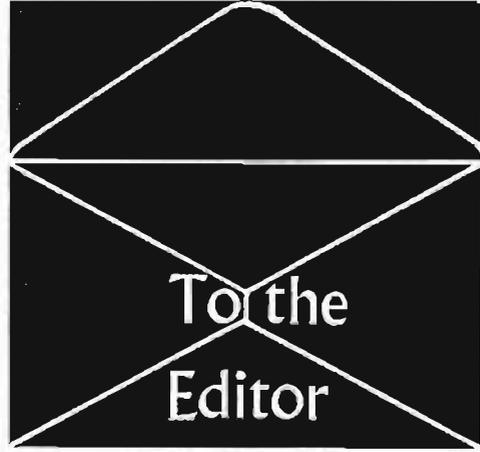
Binama's son was born at the time when the name of the famous general was in vogue. It was just after the Second World War. Everything was then "De Gaulle" just as everything now was *zazou*†. The general's portrait used to hang in every hut. There were girls called De Gaulle and there were boys called De Gaulle. The one dirtying up Amalia's thighs was five years old.

"Aaaaaagathaaa! . . ." Thus Binama called his wife from the palaver hut like a muezzin. "Yye-e-e-s!" she answered. "What's the matter?"

"Engamba and his wife are here!" he shouted. "Bring them something to eat, and welcome them at the same time." ●

†Zazou: a pre-existentialist cult of unconventional behaviour practised among the young during the years of German occupation in France and exported to the colonies after the war. W.F.

\*The spelling "De Gaulle" — with a capital D — is the one used in the book. *De* is part of one's name. The general, a commoner, changed it to *de*, which is the predicate of nobility. W.F.



A long cool look

STR, — Mr. Ike Mafole, in your June issue, has expressed some of the misgivings that assail not only the youth but people, like myself, of maturer years and of some political experience. If Mr. Mafole finds the Pan-African scene distressing, I find South African exile politics and politicians even more so. Are we not guilty of the opportunism, the self-seeking, the corruption of which Mr. Mafole so ably complains?

I think some serious heart-searching is long

overdue. And it is not good enough to indulge, like myself, in the politics of withdrawal. I realise that I might be accused of destructiveness. I might even be labelled a sellout. But I am fed up to the teeth — and I am sure I am not the only one. I am slowly coming round to the view that should freedom come to South Africa it will not be because of some of our self-styled leaders, but will be in spite of them. I suggest that the time has come to take a long cool look at ourselves; to come down from the grandiose platforms upon which we so love to strut. Grand posturing and all that will get us nowhere. Seeing motes in the Pan-Africanist eye is sheer diversion.

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