

# Chibuku beer and independence

THE RUMOUR WENT about that Rhodesia was sending tankloads of free Chibuku beer for the Independence celebrations. To taste Chibuku beer again was almost like news from home for six young students and refugees in Francistown. They had fled from the university during the upheavals and detentions that accompanied UDI. They were eager to attend the celebrations and I went along too with my water bucket. The whole afternoon it was continuously over-flowing with Chibuku beer. We formed a tight circle in a shed and were as nasty as possible to strangers who begged a drink. Everyone had pretty pink plastic throw-away mugs and at the beer tank the law of the jungle prevailed, the stronger shoving the weaker. We prided ourselves that we drank in peace and comfort.

There was just a raggle-taggle crowd of poor people wandering about aimlessly and uncertainly.

"They call this Independence," one of the students said scornfully. "Where's the excitement? Where's the fever?"

There were a lot more disparaging remarks.

"You should have been here at midnight," someone said. "The British flag was lowered in dead silence. Only one voice said hooray and everyone turned around to stare at the man in surprise. I was so furious I shouted: 'burn it.' Can you imagine my amazement? An old man standing next to me said I should not say such things. He said I am embarrassing everyone, especially the white people present."

Everyone laughed because the people of Botswana really baffled them. It's as though you are thoroughly astonished to find yourself at the dead calm centre of a storm that rages over the whole of Southern Africa. You never quite get used to it if you have fled the whole night and day through wild country expecting at any moment to feel a police bullet whistling through your back. And the students had that air about them — keyed-up, wild, excitable, feverish. They burst out singing the sad, defiant anthem of Southern Africa and raised their hands to the Botswana flag. "Africa is Ours," they sang. And they kept repeating the anthem for half an hour. This drew a

## BESSIE HEAD

fascinated crowd that stood around silently, inspecting us minutely as though we were zoo animals.

We also sang:

"How many years does it take for a man to be free? —

... The answer is blowing in the wind ..."

THIS DEPRESSED EVERYONE and we sat in glum silence a few moments. An old man was sitting nearby. He had a perpetual smile on his wizened old face. He had walked many miles from the bush to celebrate independence. The skin on his knees was deeply creased and abnormally stretched from having spent most of his life in a squatting position. He looked at us with his beautiful smile and said in a touching childlike way: "I like Francistown."

Oddly, this aroused the students from their depression. They started to abuse everyone and everything again.

"You're drunk old papa," they said.

"Who, just who in this silly country knows what independence means? Just ask anyone of these silly people."

"Just look at that plain, ugly flag ..."

"No, no," I cut in sharply, suddenly aroused too. "The flag is very beautiful. For one thing it is a flag for everyone, above party politics. For another it is truly symbolic of the country. One broad blue stripe represents the blue sky of Botswana, the other; the people's hope for rain to develop industry and agriculture. The black and white stripes, represents the ideal of racial harmony."

They were a trifle disconcerted and looked at the flag again.

"All right," someone said. "I only like it when it's not blowing out full in the wind. I just like that broad stripe of black in the middle."

Someone said something about the demerits of Seretse as an African politician. Then looked at me for I have lived in Botswana for almost three years.

"There's nothing wrong with the man," I said mildly.

"What do you mean? Give us facts. Is he really an African nationalist?" they asked critically, unbelievably.

I felt desperately uncomfortable being a non-supporter of politicians.

"He says sensible things," I said, help-

Francistown, Botswana  
Independence Day, 1966  
"there is something  
herein this country  
that is good"

lessly. "I mean, the government is quiet and when it says something one examines it closely to see if there is any evil in the statement but you can't find it. You think perhaps it might be sensible then."

"But is the man an African nationalist?" they asked.

"Yes," I said. "After a time I summed him up that way."

Someone said: "Actually, I can agree with her. I like a quiet man who shuts his mouth up when faced with a hopeless situation. Seretse is a much better politician than Dr. Banda of Malawi for instance. That man makes statements all the time and they are often detrimental to African interests."

OUR PARTY BROKE UP in a sudden, shocking and hilarious manner. We sent one of the students, a quiet, timid fellow to re-fill the bucket at the beer tank. Just as it was full he looked up into the sharp edge of a knife.

"Give it," a drunken voice commanded. He hastily surrendered the bucket. Then the whole drunken crew of men about the tank fell upon the bucket with wild abandon and pulled it from end to end bathing their heads in beer. This was too much for the students. They flew into the fray, their arms in the air like wild birds. A Botswana policeman calmly intervened and tipped the remaining contents of the beer on the ground. The students ground their teeth in frustrated fury.

"These Botswana police are silly," they said. "We could have made a coup on that bucket without any blood shed."

I WALKED HOME alone. There was the ever-familiar thorn bush lit up by the brilliant fierce beauty of a desert sunset. Only a new unfamiliar feature; the blue, black and white flag straining in the strong breeze.

"It is all right," I thought "The whole world seems topsy-turvy but there is a something here in this country that is good. Perhaps it is a weird kind of people who pull against the current; unprovokable; ever reasonable. Perhaps it is the rags and tatters of poverty that are worn with an upright posture and pathetic dignity. Whatever it is I say it is good because you feel it in your heart as peace." ●