

RETOLD
FROM
THE 8
FRENCH
translated
by
Willfried
Feuser

THE LAWS OF THE FOREST

Olympe Bhély- Quénum

Born in Cotonou (Dahomey) in 1928, Bhély-Quénum came to France in 1948, where he obtained his 'baccalaureat' and his 'license des lettres'. Editor of the now defunct "La vie africaine" and of the new magazine "L'Afrique actuelle", he has published two novels, UN PIEGE SANS FIN and LE CHANT DU LAC, for which he obtained in 1966 "Le Grand Prix Littéraire d'Afrique Noire".

While at school in France, Bhély-Quénum won a 'Zellidja' award, which enabled him to see Africa again after many years (The 'Zellidja' scholarship scheme, initiated by the French philanthropist, Jean Walter, covers a student's minimum expenses while he works his way through a foreign country).

In his intensely dramatic stories, Quénum condenses apparently disparate elements into a short time sequence. The present unpublished story, written at Abomey in 1954, will appear in a volume of 'nouvelles' the author is preparing.

HOULY GOT OFF THE MAILBOAT. This was his first time of coming to the cosmopolitan city after seven years' absence. The sea roared furiously after him and huge waves broke noisily on the beach of golden sand. The air vibrated with the deafening shrieks of sirens from the ships coming in from Europe, the United States and the Far East.

Niwa, the city of light, teeming with life and obviously overpopulated, stretched out before Houly. The sky was of an aggressive blue, the sun beat down pitilessly, the heat was suffocating. White and black, lightly dressed, perspiring like knocked up convicts, kept mopping their faces with their handkerchiefs or scraps of newspaper.

Cars whizzed along the streets, stopping or moving on in clouds of dust, adding their acrid stench to the blazing atmosphere . . .

Houly walked on, a smile in his eyes. His heart brimmed over with laughter. He loved that world, that stifling heat in which he had lived seven years ago, before his first journey to France. That was why he walked through the town with his soul full of unspeakable joy.

He was a young African of arrogant height, dressed in blue jeans and a khaki shirt with its sleeves rolled up. He entered the manager's office of "Oil Products Ltd". Two big ventilators fixed on the ceiling were churning at top speed. The air was cool.

Noubert, the manager, welcomed him with a big smile and kept looking at him with his hazel eyes.

"It's so nice to see you. I received your letter. A fellow must have guts to accept travelling from Normandy to Africa with only 20,000 francs in his pocket."*

"Jean Walter wants every young man to start life with a bet. Mine is insignificant but I don't mind undertaking my own tour with an option for what you consider an unreasonable wager," Houly said with a proud smile.

Noubert walked over to a window which opened on to a large yard surrounded by mango trees full of ripe fruits and moving shadows. He was a handsome man—the genuine Bordeaux type—with hairy arms and short-cropped black hair. He leaned over the window-ledge.

"Serge, news from France!"

Serge Fabier, a medium-sized young man with chestnut-coloured hair, crossed the yard and arrived with sweeping steps.

"I'd like you to meet Mr Houly, the Zellidja scholar, whose letter I showed you last Friday."

"You're coming straight from Normandy, if I'm not mistaken?" Fabier inquired.

"That's right."

"Did you ever live in Rennes by any chance?"

"I certainly did. I took my Part II of the Higher School Certificate there, and I was living on Lorient Street."

"That's fantastic! . . . It goes to show how small the world is. Your name seemed to ring a bell. In fact my mother quite often mentioned a Mr Houly in her letters, saying that he intended to work for a degree in engineering after his H.S.C."

The young African smiled. He was pleased to see right in front of him the man his landlady had talked about only a month ago.

"Yes, I really was Mrs Fabier's lodger, and when I saw you, I suddenly got the impression that I had seen you somewhere before. I now remember that there was a big photograph of you in the room I occupied in your mother's house . . ."

Houly talked for more than a quarter of an hour about Rennes, where Fabier had not been for five years.

"You'll drive our guest to our plantations at Sinta. Gisele and Marcel will also be very happy to hear the latest from Rennes," Noubert said.

Once more Fabier crossed the yard. Ten minutes later he was ready in the street with his jeep. He was accompanied by Messan, an African labourer all muscle, carrying a rifle.

Houly took his water gourd, put his log-book in his shirt pocket, buried the dagger dangling from his belt in its sheath, and then got aboard. The vehicle moved off.

The tarred road, shining in the sun — a sun which completely dazed the young African who had arrived from France a few hours earlier — stretching out in front of them as far as the eye could see, seemed to shorten rapidly before the jeep and to flee behind it in spasmodic contractions. On the

* Anciens francs = 200 NF, about £13.6s.6d.

right, green and smiling plains interrupted by maize or ground-nut fields, with sturdy baobabs and giant cottonwood trees emerging in the middle; on the left, plantations of coconut trees and oil-palms, orange groves, and again coconut trees . . .

A three and a half hours' non-stop drive . . . 135 miles covered. Then the jeep entered a forest crossed by a bumpy road. The sun disappeared completely from sight; the darkness seemed to get thicker as the vehicle, in a painfully slow crawl, drew near the heart of the jungle. During the last half hour a real forest night had descended on the travellers, and Fabier had switched on the headlights of his car.

Wild guinea fowls flying across the road hit the jeep, lost their feathers, shrieked with terror, dropped down dead or managed to escape from the danger. Suddenly the jeep stopped in front of a stagnant pool blocking the road for over sixty yards.

"Now we're in a mess. For over a month they've been talking about building a bridge here. After each tornado the road gets absolutely swamped for months . . . What you see in this place is from the rain we had last Thursday," Fabier said nervously.

He rammed his hands into the pockets of his khaki shorts, pulled them out again, started cracking his knuckles, then took his rifle from Messan's hands and slung it over his shoulder.

"All we can do now is cross the forest on foot, which gives us an additional three miles."

"Are we still far from Sinta?"

"A bit over one mile if we could follow the road."

"Then what about wading through the pond?"

"You never know what you may come across in this kind of water. Quite a few workers have been bitten by snakes around here. Let's rather cross the forest."

Messan gripped his machette tighter, Houly put his hand on his dagger, and the three men briskly entered the bush.

They had hardly done six hundred yards when the two Africans stopped dead as if a gorge had opened up in front of them.

"Let's return to the road; there's danger ahead," Houly said.

"What's getting into you?" Fabier asked angrily.

"I'm telling you we're in danger. A few steps more and we're finished!" Houly said hotly.

"You're absolutely crazy!"

"Make we turn back, Masta, dis place he smell like panther," Messan said in a terror-stricken voice.

"Is it a long time since you left Africa?" Fabier asked with disdain rather than curiosity.

"Seven years," Houly answered unperturbed.

"And you still have the scent of wild animals in your nose? That's really something!" Fabier said provocatively.

Houly smiled instead of getting mad. He was in the habit of smiling even if somebody made a remark in bad taste, as if he had not understood. Then he said, taking some vigorous strides,

"Let's get back to the road, I say . . . I'm a son of the forest and, thank goodness, I know something about its laws."

"I'm sorry if I've been rude," Fabier said.

They turned and were just walking hurriedly towards the jeep when five gunshots rang out in quick succession in the bush behind them. An angry crash, followed by howls of pain, rose to the top of the high trees, spreading panic among the herds of monkeys.

Fabier jumped and tore his rifle to his shoulder, Messan gripped his machette, Houly had already drawn his dagger but then changed his mind:

"A machette and a dagger . . . what use are they against a panther, maybe in his death struggle? Back to the road, quick! . . ."

They reached the jeep. Then Messan cupped his hands around his mouth and gave bush signals.

"What's all this racket?" Fabier asked.

"He's asking the hunters what's the matter."

Other strange voices sounded from the jungle. Messan emitted more questions which were answered immediately by the invisible hunters, and Houly translated the dialogue.

"A panther was killed around here four days ago. These animals have a strong family spirit. When one gets killed the others take revenge. They've now got the female of the panther but there are two cubs left which the hunters want to catch alive or maybe kill, too. This means that the part of the forest we've just left is still not safe. But we can get to Sinta taking a westerly direction, I suppose."

"Damn! What a nuisance! I'll never get to know Africa at this rate," Fabier said, walking around in circles and cracking his knuckles.

"Of course you'll get to know it, provided you don't mind listening occasionally to those who still have the scent of wild animals in their nose," Houly replied with a mischievous grin.

"I apologise once more. I know I was wrong."

"I'm not angry with you at all. I like to tease people, but hatred is quite beyond me. Let's get going to Sinta."

They penetrated the bush which soon swallowed them up. Giant trees proudly stretched their strong boles into space; their feet, splitting into buttresses with partitions between them, had been supporting them for centuries in their struggle against the storms; their heavy, intertwining branches formed an enormous high vault. The sky was invisible but occasional sunrays strayed through the smallest openings in the foliage caused by intermittent gusts of wind, and crossed the green dome, trembling along the trees.

The three men walked on. They were treated to the chanting and scoffing of birds of many strange varieties, the acrobatics and jumps of monkeys catapulting themselves from treetop to treetop, spinning in empty space with the ends of their tails rolled around a branch or shaking with elaborate mockery their oscillating cradles of lianae.

Suddenly they came out into a clearing. Fabier heaved a sigh of relief.

"We can't be far from our plantations now,"

he said happily, then started walking faster than his companions.

All of a sudden something that looked like a white silk thread glittering in the sun and that seemed to be fixed to a branch flashed before Houly's eyes. More than ten years' memories shot through his mind; he adjusted his spectacles and shouted:

"Stop, Fabier, you're in danger!"

It was too late. Fabier had already run into what looked like a silk thread and what was actually the spittle of a boa, which had dropped down on him like lightning and rolled itself around his body.

In the forest a boa, when he is hungry, sometimes climbs on a tree and lets his spittle drool to the ground. It strangely resembles a silk thread or a spider's web. Then he waits patiently for any animal imprudent enough to touch it ever so lightly, to attack it and engage it in a furious fight from which he usually emerges as the conqueror. The boa does not mind attacking man as well as lion . . .

The laws of the forest, like other African realities, are for the most part commonplace, but they cannot be safely ignored since even the panther and the lion observe them whenever the boa is concerned. Fabier also knew that, as he had heard people talk about it, but he did not think of it.

His double-barrelled gun had dropped beside him and he was unable to pick it up. Neither Messan nor Houly could grab it. While winding himself around his victim, the reptile lashed the air with his tail.

"Keep your legs apart! Don't let him get hold of them! Don't let him tie down your arms either!" Houly cried, waving his dagger, though he still was not sure how to use it.

Messan brought two thick long sticks. Houly put his dagger in its sheath and seized one of the sticks. Fabier was struggling to keep his legs apart and drumming on the boa with his fists, while the animal tried to roll himself around his neck or to seize his arms.

It was a huge boa, almost forty feet long, and of a beautiful yellowish green colour. Suddenly his tail shot up to the overhanging branches for support. If he managed to perform this manoeuvre, Fabier would die. Messan with his stick struck a violent

blow at the tail, which started to flail about furiously.

"Mother! Mother! He's smothering me!"

Fabier groaned.

"Keep breathing, don't let him get you. Don't spend your strength unnecessarily, he won't kill you," Houly said persuasively. Then the boa suddenly tore open his mouth — not to swallow his victim but to suffocate him.

Fabier felt a hot breath on his face and his eyes swam for a moment.

"Turn your head, Masta, and make you no let him breathe for your face!" Messan called out. He was getting confused, losing his nerve, and ready to fly into a panic.

Fabier obeyed promptly. The boa did not even have time to shut his jaws; Houly rammed his stick brutally down between them to force the boa to slacken his knots, then he heaved a sigh of relief.

"Cut his tail, Messan!" Houly ordered.

"A man must never —"

Messan could not finish his sentence. The boa had dealt him a terrific blow with his tail which sent him reeling among the branches, but he rose to his feet quickly.

"Give Fabier my dagger!" Houly ordered.

"I can't go on. I'm finished!" the victim moaned again.

He started weeping and could not make up his mind to seize the dagger. Messan was holding out to him in a rain of blows from the tail. Houly suddenly felt exhausted but he pulled himself together.

"I wouldn't like to be in your place, Fabier, but I wouldn't like either to have to go and tell your mother that you died before my own eyes. Now, if you cry, you've had it. Take the dagger, ram it into his mouth near the stick as deeply as you can. It's up to you now!" Houly said firmly, though he was having a hard time trying to keep the stick in place.

Fabier mustered all his strength and struck forcefully home. The blood squirted, then started flowing abundantly.

"I can't . . . go on," he said, completely out of breath.

At that moment Messan seized the dagger and finished the job while getting his face battered by strokes of the tail.

The rings slackened and Fabier was free. The boa, huge and hideously open, writhed in his own blood. Fabier, more dead than alive, was stretched out on the ground, sobbing. The two Africans cut sticks, branches and leaves; they quickly improvised a stretcher, and laid Fabier on it. He was moaning that his ribs were crushed, that his backbone had gone to pieces. So they carried him, and accompanied by the mocking laughter of the monkeys and birds they continued on their way to Sinta, walking across the thorns, over the spongy ground, amidst the hairy, sticky pebbles.