

# OLD WALL FACE

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SOMEWHERE AT THE FOOT of a rocky mountain stood a humble village. Among its inhabitants were a group of merry old men. Theirs was the life of people brought up in a special way under the maxim of village life in which they grow to like and enjoy it. Apart from the usual work of farming, these old folks had taken to distilling local gin secretly, somewhere in the forest, to meet the growing demand from the big towns, and to help augment their finances in times of poor yields from the farms.

Among this group of law-breakers was my dear old father. He never seemed to enjoy the fun of his colleagues, and was always glum and taciturn. For instance, he would not join them in whistling that same old tune his mates never forgot after a good session at the secret place. He would not even play that accordion which lay dusty and dormant on the table in the corner of the room. At times he would just gaze into empty space biting the end of his pipe. His face was without expression. I had once punched a village boy on the nose for describing my father as "Old Wall-face." Not that it wasn't a fair label, but did he have to say that to my face? I punched his nose and we became good friends ever after.

MY FATHER HAD BEEN like this since I grew to know him. He would talk of nothing save the old black curse which, according to him, had been cast on him.

He had known no happiness since. "Your poor mother was such a good companion of my life," he once murmured to me in a deep husky voice. "I'm sorry, my son, sorry that you lost both your mother and your little sister. That is the worst luck I can think of ever befalling a man. But you've grown up a nice boy. My only comfort in life." He turned his face away from me and I knew his eyes were filled with tears. I couldn't ask him why he was crying because my eyes were also filled with tears. He lit his earthenware pipe and puffed a thick cloud of smoke. I could smell the familiar tobacco.

My mother had died through delivery when I was but a toddling three, and I had been brought up under the tender care of my father. Our village lay on the southern bank of a little river in which we used to fish together. On one of our fishing trips, my father had told me of the black devil whose curse had killed a man in the neighbouring village. I had heard a lot of these strange stories to my liking and out of simple childish curiosity, I popped out, "Father, and would you say that this black devil had taken all our sheep that have been missing?" He looked at me with his familiar pan-face and said, "Of course, my son, and these folks in that village never found old Sambo's body till this day. I only hope you'll grow to believe it some day."

THIS STORY HAD HAUNTED me all day long but that would not stop me from going to hunt birds on the cocoa farms. My father had warned me against this and I had waved it aside with boyish impudence. I had taken to hunting since we began having less to do on our new cassava farm. I loved birds, especially their fine feathers; and when I had accumulated a basketful of fine multi-coloured feathers I would one day make a comfortable pillow with them. I would sleep on it and I would have pleasant dreams, perhaps about fine birds. I thought to myself: so I must shoot some more birds and add more feathers to what I have. There was no stopping me. I wished my father shared this ambition with me.

For some odd reason, he decided to share my interest in birds. I would find him standing a few yards away and he would even ask me the names of some of the birds. I usually knew when he was coming near. I could smell his pipe a good distance away, so I would prepare to tell him about some new birds I had found. They were always the cousins of the ones I already knew, and I would tell him why their colours differed. These were all my own formulations and I hoped my old man believed me. I knew he did, because he would stroke my tufty hair and say I was clever.

IT WAS ONE fine morning. The African sun was blazing like a furnace. We had been working on our new farm by the river. At noon, it became so warm we retired under a big shady tree that spread its graceful branches over the stream. After a short treatment to his pipe, my father lit the old favourite and gave a few puffs. The smoke rose slowly till it disappeared among the trees. He was enjoying it. I stared at him for a long time trying to find out why he differed from the other fathers in the village. I only saw what that cheeky boy said: "Old Wall-face." I smiled to myself and my father smiled back. I wondered what he was smiling at; per-

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haps at a similar recollection. It is interesting how memories could work on people. He took his pipe from between his teeth and said to me: "Tuli, will you go and bring some food from the village? And don't forget to bring some water from the large pot under the mango tree." These injunctions made me feel funny inside. The sort of funny feeling one gets, as a child, without rhyme or reason. To walk all that distance to the village and back. All on my own? I was afraid something might happen to me, or perhaps my father. I was sixteen then and had been in the company of my father most of the time. Always together. My father knew what was going through me, because he patted me on the shoulder and said, "My son, you'll have to pick up courage like a big boy. You are a big boy now; big enough to stand on your own feet. This vast land of mine will be all yours some day when I'm no more. Everyone has to die some day, but old men die first. Look at my age, (he pointed to his not-too-grey hair), I shall not be too young if I died now. I've taught you many things, you know all my borders from east to west and can handle my gun like any other youngster on this land. I reckon you're not a lazy 'un on the farm either. So you must pick up courage and live like a man when I am no more."

EVERY WORD SOUNDED like the blacksmith's hammer. Would he leave me one day to face this big, big wide world all on my own, and perhaps to pick up courage to defend myself against that old black devil he had so often spoken of? My father had been my guide all my life and what would this big, big wide world mean to me without him? I raised my eyes and when they met his, they were filled with tears. "Father," I sobbed, "I understand." Even though I didn't know what I understood. He stroked my tufty hair and said I was a good boy. I turned and walked towards our village.

His gun was resting comfortably against a young cocoa tree when I returned but my father was nowhere. I called, yelled and hallowed but in reply, an owl hooted back. How I hated owls! I had almost yelled myself hoarse and was on the brink of tears when I heard the sound of heavy footsteps behind me. I turned round in rapt anticipation only to be shocked by what I thought I saw. I knew I saw him because he spoke to me. He was a tall man with a long black staff in his long hairy hand. His eyes, which shone into mine, were like diamonds from King Solomon's mines. He bore all the features of the black devil that my father had spoken of. His lips sheathed a row of large white teeth and his protruding forehead stood like a cooking pot. I stepped back with fear, holding on to my father's gun. This made him laugh rather weirdly, revealing his giant teeth, and said; "So your father asked you to pick up courage against me, eh? Him you will behold no more, and you will not need that courage against me, the Old Black Devil of all times!"

THAT AFTERNOON WAS A STORMY ONE and it saw me walking along the banks of the stream. I could feel the wind biting my face, almost tearing my clothes from me. I held my father's gun firmly in my hand. It was my only companion, my last straw. There was little water in the river but it was running as usual. The white pebbles were more prominent than ever. The sun shone partially on the water and it looked cleaner than I had ever known it, so the temptation to drink from it was simply irresistible. I knelt down to drink but, to my horror, I saw the image of the black devil reflected in the water. My heart flew out of me. Was it my childish imagination or a reality? I sprang to my feet and found myself facing him. He was standing at the other bank of the river more devilish than ever. Filled with fear, and perhaps a little courage, I boomed: "You Black Devil of old, the robber of my happiness and the cause of my father's sorrows, wait till I teach you a lesson!" And without waiting for him to retort or call some evil curse on me I pulled the trigger of my father's gun. The shot sounded like a cannon. He screamed wildly and then moaning almost to a whisper, he murmured: "Oh you young man of great courage, my life is no more at your gun's end. Adieu!" He sank into the ground, melting into a thin stream of blood that ran into the river we used to fish.

I stood there like a tree stump, not knowing what to do. Then from the distance, I thought I heard my father calling. "Tuli, I told you not to play with that gun!" Was it my boyish imagination or a reality? I smelt the familiar tobacco and knew it was a reality. I turned and saw my father coming and smiling in a way I had never seen him smile before. I wondered why that boy in the village called him "Old Wall-face."