

Forest of a Thousand Daemons

A HUNTER'S SAGA



D.O. Fagunwa

Translated by Wole Soyinka

ILLUSTRATED BY BRUCE ONOBRAKPEYA



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Being a translation of
Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale
by WOLE SOYINKA

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Translator's Note

The pattern of choices begins quite early, right from the title in fact. Is *Irunmale* to be rendered literally 'four hundred deities' rather than in the sound and sense of 'a thousand' or 'a thousand and one'? Again, in one of the extracts which I translated for the magazine *Black Orpheus*, this phrase '*mo nmi bo bi agiliti*' which became 'my breath came in rapid bloats like the hawing of a toad' aroused some protest from a critic. Indeed *agiliti* is far from being the toad, it is more a member of the lizard species. But then neither toad nor lizard is the object of action or interest to the hero Akaraogun or his creator Fagunwa at this point of narration. Fagunwa's concern is to convey the vivid sense of event, and a translator must select equivalents for mere auxiliaries where these serve the essential purpose better than the precise original. In what I mentally refer to as the 'enthusiastic' passages of his writing, the essence of Fagunwa is the fusion of sound and action. To preserve the movement and fluidity of this association seems to be the best approach for keeping faith with the author's style and sensibility.

To go back to the first example, I have not only discarded the earlier 'four hundred gods', but now consider 'daemon' closer in essence to *imale* than gods, deities or demons.

The spelling is important. These beings who inhabit Fagunwa's world demand at all costs and by every conceivable translator's trick to be preserved from the common or misleading associations which substitutes such as *demons*, *devils* or *gods* evoke in the reader's mind. At the same time, it is necessary that they

transmit the reality of their existence with the same unquestioning impact and vitality which is conveyed by Fagunwa in the original.

Fagunwa's beings are not only the natural inhabitants of their creator's haunting-ground; in Yoruba, they *sound* right in relation to their individual natures, and the most frustrating quality of Fagunwa for a translator is the right sound of his language. This most especially has been responsible for my resorting to inventive naming ceremonies for some of his unfamiliar beings. The other solution, that the names remain in their original, is not so satisfactory, as the names no longer possess the same non-exotic validity in a new lingual surrounding.

Fagunwa's style fluctuates, for he is both the enthusiastic raconteur and pious moralist, and the battle of the inventive imagination with the morally guided is a constant process in much of his work. His total conviction in multiple existences within our physical world is as much an inspiration to some of the most brilliant fiction in Yoruba writing as it is a deeply felt urge to 'justify the ways of God to man'. The experience of sheer delight in his verbal adroitness is undoubtedly a great loss in translation, but is not reason enough to limit Fagunwa to the readership of Yoruba speakers only. As Fagunwa himself would have put it, *'oniwango di kiriyo, o l'oun o jo bata, ijo o gbo duru, ejika ni kōtu fa ya.'** The essential Fagunwa, as with all truly valid literature, survives the inhibitions of strange tongues and bashful idioms. But enough. *'Enu ko la nfi pe olowo ilu.'*† Let the story-teller himself persuade us.

W.S.

* The Christian convert swore never again to dance to Sango drums; when he heard the church organ, his jacket soon burst at the seams.

† Good drumming requires no advertisement.

I

THE AUTHOR MEETS AKARA-OGUN

My friends all, like the sonorous proverb do we drum the *agidigbo*; it is the wise who dance to it, and the learned who understand its language. The story which follows is a veritable *agidigbo*; it is I who will drum it, and you the wise heads who will interpret it. Our elders have a favourite proverb—are you not dying to ask me how it goes?—they tell it thus, ‘When our masquerade dances well, our heads swell and do a spin.’ Forgive my forwardness, it is the proverb which speaks. Now I do not want you to dance to my drumming as a mosquito to the deep *bembe* drums, its legs twitching haphazardly, at loggerheads with the drums. Dance my friends, in harmony, with joy and laughter, that your audience may ring your brows with coins and pave your path with clothing; that men may prostrate before you and women curtsy in sheer pleasure at your dancing. But for a start, if you want this dance to be a success, here are two things I must request of you. Firstly, whenever a character in my story speaks in his own person, you must put yourselves in his place and speak as if you are that very man. And when the other replies, you must relate the story to yourselves as if you, sitting down, had been addressed and now respond to the first speaker.

In addition, as men of discerning—and this is the second task you must perform—you will yourselves extract various wisdoms from the story as you follow its progress.

Well, I do not want to say too much at the start lest I become a loquacious fool, one who deserts the

clearly blazed path and beats about the bush. I will rather now take up my drum and set to it, and I request you to adjust your *agbada*, toss its sleeve properly over your shoulder, prepare yourselves for dancing, that the affair may dovetail neatly in the spirit of the saying, 'I can dance and you can drum; this is the meeting of two grubs.' That, forgive me, is a proverb of our elders.

It all began one beautiful morning; a clear day-break it was, the harmattan haze had retreated home, the creatures of the forest were still asleep, those of the backyard were feeding on the day's providence and birds were singing praises of their Maker. A beatific breeze rustled the dark leaves of the forest, deep dark and shimmering leaves, the sun rose from the East in God's own splendour, spread its light into the world and the sons of men began their daily perambulations. As for me I sat in my favourite chair, settled into it with voluptuous contentment, enjoying my very existence.

Not long after I was seated an old man came up to me and greeted me. I returned him courtesy for courtesy. Observing what appeared to be a desire to stay I offered him a chair and turned it to face me. Once seated, we began to exchange pleasantries and share jokes like old acquaintances. But it was not very long after when I heard the man sigh deeply as one whose mind was troubled by a heavy thought. Even as I began to consider asking him the cause, he began himself to speak thus:

'Take up your pen and paper and write down the story which I will now tell. Do not delay it till another day lest the benefit of it pass you over. I would not myself have come to you today, but I am concerned about the future and there is this fear that I may die unexpectedly and my story die with me. But if I pass it on to you now and you take it all down diligently, even

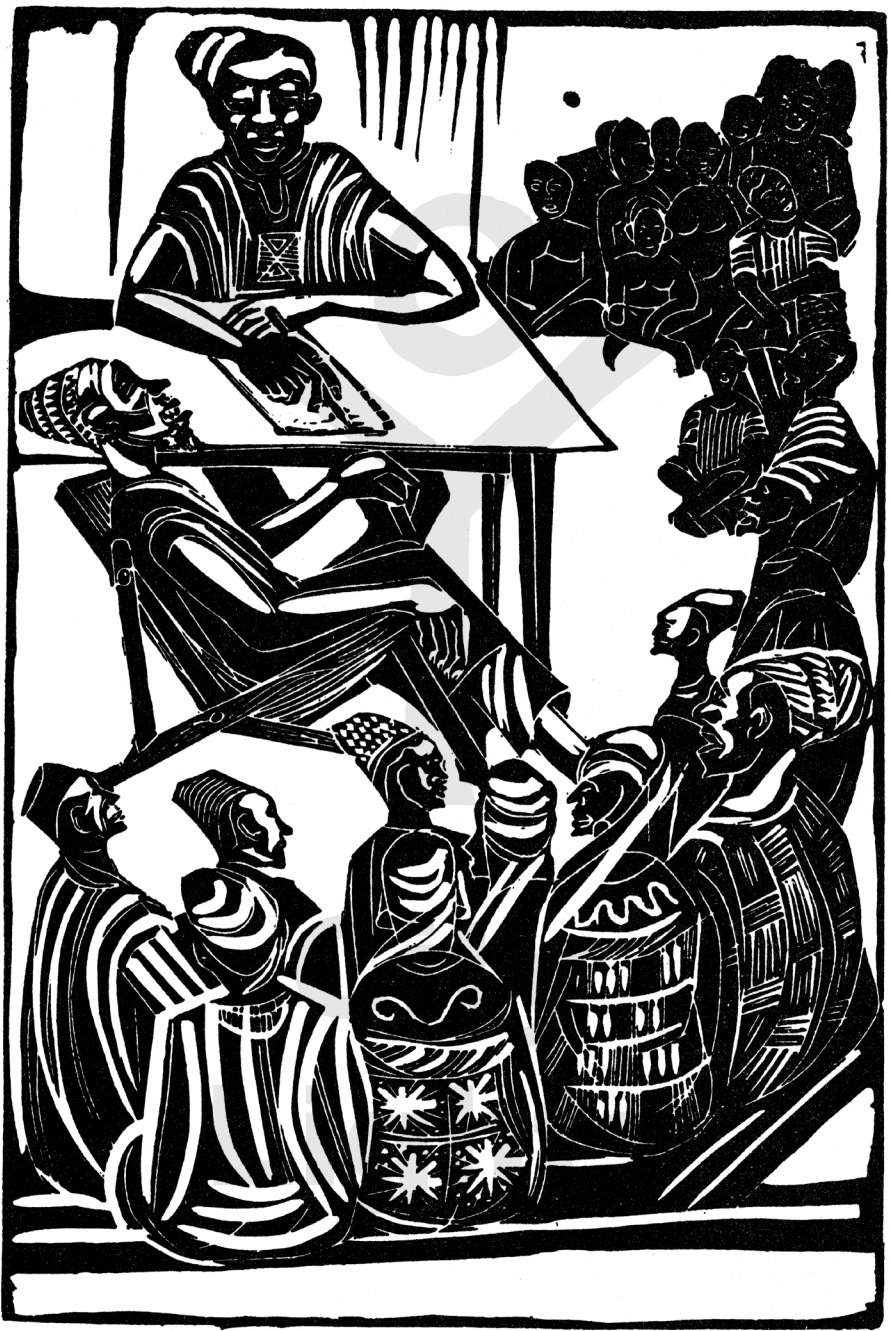
when the day comes that I must meet my Maker, the world will not forget me.'

When he had spoken thus I hurried to fetch my writing things, brought them over to my table, settled myself in comfort, and let the stranger know that I was now prepared for his tale. And he began in the words that follow to tell me the story of his life—

My name is Akara-ogun, Compound-of-Spells, one of the formidable hunters of a bygone age. My own father was a hunter, he was also a great one for medicines and spells. He had a thousand powder gourdlets, eight hundred *ato*, and his amulets numbered six hundred. Two hundred and sixty incubi lived in that house and the birds of divination were without number. It was the spirits who guarded the house when he was away, and no one dared enter that house when my father was absent—it was unthinkable. But deep as he was in the art of the supernatural, he was no match for my mother, for she was a deep seasoned witch from the cauldrons of hell.

Once my father had nine children, of whom I was the eldest; four wives and my mother was the most senior of them. She had four children, the wife who was next to her had three, the next two and the fourth had none at all. One day my mother and another of these wives had a quarrel and took the case to my father for settlement. He found my mother at fault and this so angered her that she resolved to take vengeance for the slight. She became so ruthless in her witching, that, before the year was out, eight of my father's children were dead and three of his wives had the same way. Thus was I left the only child and my mother the only wife.

Look on me, my friend, and if you are not yet married I implore you to consider the matter well before



'My name is Akara-Ogun, Compound-of-Spells.'

you do. True, your wife ought to be beautiful lest you tire of each other quickly; and a lack of brains is not to be recommended since you must needs hold converse with each other, but this is not the heart of the matter. The important requisite is that your wife should not be prone to evil, for it is your wife who gives you meat and gives you drink and is admitted most to your secrets. God has created them such close creatures that there hardly exists any manner in which they cannot come at a man; and when I tell you what my father suffered at the hands of this wife of his, you will be truly terrified.

It happened one day that my father prepared himself and set off to hunt. After he had hunted a long while, he felt somewhat tired and sat on a tree stump to rest. He was not long seated when, happening to look up, he saw the ground in front of him begin to split and smoke pour upwards from the rent. In a moment the smoke had filled the entire area where my father sat so thickly that he could not see a thing; all about him had turned impenetrably black. Even as he began to seek a way of escape he observed that the smoke had begun to fuse together in one spot and, before he could so much as blink, it fused completely and a stocky being emerged sword in hand and came towards my father. My father took to his heels instantly but the man called on him to stop and began to address him thus:

‘Can you not see that I am not of the human race? I arrived even today from the vault of the heavens and it was on your account that I am come hither, my purpose being to kill you. Run where you will this day; kill you I most resolutely will.’

When he had spoken thus, my father was truly afraid but even so he steeled his heart like a man and said, ‘Truly, as I observe you, I know you are not of this world, and I see also that the sword in your hand spells

mortal danger for me. Nevertheless, I implore you, and I charge you in the name of the immortal God, do not fail to tell me the nature of my offence.'

The man replied to him, saying, 'Do you not know that you have grievously offended your Maker? That you have ruined his handiwork even to this extent, that you sent eleven souls to heaven when it was not yet the hour allotted them by their God?'

These words of his were a great astonishment to my father, for while it was true that he was well versed in magic and charms, he did no one any evil. So he replied to him, 'If this is indeed your complaint then your mission is to a different man; it certainly is not I. Since the day I was born I have never harmed anyone: I do not see a man going about his business and take umbrage at his existence; I do not see a rich man and suffer thereby from envy. When I see a man at his dinner I continue on my own way. I have never inflicted wounds on any man, I have not shot a man down in my life, so how can you claim my life, and for a crime of which I am innocent!'

He waited for my father to finish his speech and then he replied, 'True, you have not with your own hand killed anyone, but you have been responsible for the suffering of poor innocents. With your eyes wide open to what you did you married a deep-dyed witch for the mere beauty of her body—is that an act of goodness? Does the blood of your many wives not call out to you? Does the crime against your eight children not hang round your neck? And, despite all of this, do you have the gall to tell me that you have never been guilty of evil? Indeed there is no remedy; kill you I must.'

Only then did my father call to mind the kind of woman he had taken to wife, and so he replied to him, 'Truly I see now that I have sinned. I have a wife whom

I cannot control, I strut like a husband merely in name. What I should have done I have left undone, the path I should have trodden I have neglected, the creature who deserved to die at my hand I have indulged with praises. Ah, stranger from the dome of heaven, forgive me.'

When he heard this, the man forgave my father and desisted from killing him, but he warned him that he must, the moment he returned home, put my mother to death. So saying, he turned into the forest and continued his travels that way.

When he had gone my father took up his gun and returned home. And it so happened that the path he took led him past a field of okro on the way to the town. It was evening when he came there, the moon was already up, and, coming up to the field he looked over to the other side and observed someone approaching from that direction. Quickly he climbed up a tree, waiting to see what this person was about. The figure came on unswerving until it vanished into a large anthill. Shortly afterwards, an antelope emerged from this anthill, entered the field and began to feed on the okro. My father brought his gun to bear on the creature and drove furnaces into its skull. The gun had no sooner roared than there came from the antelope a human cry and the words, 'Ah, woe is me!'

That night my father slept in a little hut by the field. When daylight broke he went to the spot where the antelope was shot, but he found nothing there, only blood. He began to follow the trail of blood, and it was with increasing astonishment that he found that the trail led homewards. He followed it until he arrived right home. But in midtown the trail vanished completely and he did not come upon it again until he was nearly at his own doorstep: then it led him straight into my mother's room.

I had not myself slept at home that night. Whenever my father was away I hated to spend the night at home because the spirits gave one no peace all through the night. Even my mother rarely slept at home and then only when my father gave his permission. I returned to the house just as my father was opening the door to my mother's room, and when he had opened the door and we entered, that moment when I caught sight of my mother, it was all I could do not to take flight. From her head down to her shoulders was human enough, but the rest of her was wholly antelope. She was all covered in blood and swarms of flies. My father touched her; she was dead and had begun to rot. Indeed she was the antelope stealing out at night to feast in the field of okro.

And so did my mother die, and hardly was a month over when my father also followed her. From that day was I orphaned, fatherless and motherless. And thus ends the story of my parents and comes the turn of my own. I greet your labour my friend.

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FIRST SOJOURN OF AKARA-OGUN IN THE FOREST OF A THOUSAND DAEMONS

The experiences which my father underwent proved to be nothing compared with mine. And when I go over it all in my mind, I am terrified to contemplate the case of those who are older, because if an old man began to recount all that had beset him on the path to the hoar on his head, many young men would pray for an early death.

By the time I was ten I had begun to accompany my father on his hunts and at fifteen I possessed my own gun. I was twenty-five when my father died, and, on his death, both the money he owned and the powers he possessed, all formed my legacy from him. Even before he died I had killed my first elephant, buffaloes had fallen at my hand, there were few animals in fact which my gun had not yet swallowed.

About the third month of my twenty-sixth year I seized my gun one afternoon and headed for Irunmale, the Forest of a Thousand Daemons. A huge forest is Irunmale, a full six hours from our town. The road to it is the same as that leading to Mount Langbodo, and that same road leads to the dome of heaven. There is no breed of animal missing in this forest we speak of; it is the home of every vicious beast on earth, and the dwelling of every kind of feathered freak. Ah, a most evil forest is the forest of a thousand daemons; it is the very abode of ghommids.

It was quite some time before I arrived at my

destination; night was falling, you could barely make out the lines on your palm. I was a little tired on arrival and could not even light my lamp for some night hunting. I made a fire in the hollow of a certain tree, took out a yam from my hunting-bag and began to roast it. After this I gathered up some fallen leaves and made a bed of them. My pillow served for a hunting-bag. I primed my gun soundly and placed it next to my head. That chore completed, I stretched out on my back and went off to sleep.

I had not slept very long when I awakened, and indeed it was the cries of ghommids coming to trade at the night market that woke me. For while it is true that they emerge both day and night from this forest, yet it is only at night that they conduct their business, and it is at night also that they bring all petitions forward to their king who is known as Olori-igbo, Lord of the Forests. With pity for myself do I tell you now that that very tree underneath which I had elected to build my fire was the abode of their king. Even up till the moment when I went off to sleep I had guessed nothing of this, and it was only when I woke up and heard the sales cries of the ghommids that I was smitten with fear, and, quickly seizing my gun and securing it across my shoulders, I hung my bag around my neck, caught hold of a creeper and climbed into the tree, little dreaming that it was the head of the king of ghommids himself on which I now chose to sport. Thus it was that I proceeded to add insult to injury; that I had camped at his feet was not enough, I had to climb the head of the unoffending man.

Some time went by after I had climbed to the distant treetops, and then the court nobility began to arrive. A huge fire leapt up from some quarter and the entire surround of the tree was lit up brightly. As the

ghommids arrived they sat round the tree; they were all of a great variety, like the clothing of *alagemo*—some walked on their heads, others hopped frogwise, one had neither arms nor legs; his appearance was like a rubbery tub. Last of all came the king's crier and he began his summons thus:

'Lord of Forests! Lord of Forests! you are the merchant prince of ghommids; I say you are the merchant prince of ghommids; there is no trader to equal you. The arm of the human kind accompanies the pounded yam when you dine, their fleshy breast provides the meat for your *eba*; when you drink corn pap, their skull serves you for a cup—what, I ask, can a son of man do to you? Forest Lord! Have you lately taken to walking on your head? I say have you now taken to walking on your head? For your eyes are now where your buttocks should be, spitting embers. Forest Leader, are you feeling tired? For why else have you not yet emerged? We are all assembled and still await you.'

When he was done, the Forest Lord himself raised his voice in a huge bellow. His voice totally encompassed the forest, the beasts of the forest were hushed, sleeping birds were wakened in their nests, fishes fled to the depths of the ocean, and all the leaves in the forest bowed in reverence. Not one thing rasped against the other, the lips of the forest were sealed in silence. The voice cried, E-e-e-e-e . . . eh! E-e-e-e-e . . . eh! That fire at my feet is the handiwork of man. Your Forest Lord cannot come out today, do you not see that dumbbelly object dangling from my neck?'

When he had spoken thus, they all looked up and saw me. A-ah, the dance-prone danced, the joy-filled rejoiced, they began to count their chickens for they looked forward to killing and feasting on me. Even as they began to plan how best to pluck me down, I

remembered an appropriate spell, *egbe*, the rarifier. Quickly, I invoked its powers and at once I found myself back in my own room, snatched thither by *egbe*.

When I had rested awhile and regained my composure, when I saw that I was truly back in my own room, I felt ashamed and said to myself, 'Is this not indeed matter for shame? I call myself a hunter, yet on my very first outing after my father's death I am forced to flee home in this manner! I who affect the name of hunter! No! Sooner death than this disgrace. I shall return to that forest—is not my name Compound-of-Spells? The witch who seeks to devour me will find her teeth all dropping off, the sorcerer who dares to look me in the eye will provide the next meal for my gun, any ghommid who wants to test the keenness of my sword will lose a hand in the encounter. The hand which takes food to the mouth always returns. The King of Heaven will surely see me return home safely!'

So saying, I repeated my incantations and commanded *egbe* to return me, but instead of landing me on that former tree, I found myself complete with gun on a palm tree, punctured by a hundred spikes. And as if that was not enough it began to rain; it beat down on me so heavily that I was well nigh deaf and it did not stop until near daybreak. When it was finally spent I came down from the tree, rescued my matches from where I had protected them from the rain, made a fire at the base of the palm, took off my upper clothing and spread it near the fire to dry. Before long it dried, so I took off my trousers also and dried them. After this, I took out a little yam, roasted and ate it. When that meal was finished I stuck my pipe in my mouth and lit it; the smoke fanned out smoothly—I was a much contented man.

As I sat puffing at my pipe and enjoying myself, I

heard a voice raised in loud grumbling close to a walnut tree some distance away. I raised my head in that direction and saw a huge swarthy man who kept up a stream of moaning: 'These stink-bugs are at work again, they simply will not give a man some rest.' I did not so much as give him a second glance, I merely intensified my smoking. I had recognised him, he was a walnut troll and it was my tobacco which gave him such offence—ghommids do not take at all kindly to unpleasant smells. When I saw that he persisted in his grumbling, I turned in his direction and proceeded to smoke him out; this only made him more furious and he became really abusive:

'Fathead, stinking corpse, when you wake you don't wash, when you excrete you don't clean your anus, every pore in the body oozes some smell, the entire spine is caked with dirt.'

When I heard this I grew angry in turn, I faced him squarely and said:

'And do you have the nerve to revile anyone in this world! You soot-grimy creature, you dead and bloated toad, if you don't watch out where you stand I'll blaze fire-tracks through your skull this instant.' When he heard this he said not another word; he merely turned his back on me, hissing contemptuously as he walked away.

It did surprise me that heavy as the downpour was during the night, the sun came out fully in the morning and shone throughout the entire day. As it grew near the hour for a morning snack, I picked up my gun, shouldered my hunting-bag and went after game. I walked for a *long time* without bagging anything; I did not even see any game at all, only heard the voices of birds. It turned out simply that I had not yet arrived at the real haunt of the animals. Some time later I came

there; my heart leapt when I saw these creatures disporting themselves and I sat and primed my gun. Afterwards I rose, cut a branch and stuck it in my mouth for camouflage and hid by the bole of a tree, waiting. At the moment when I had a really good chance to make a kill a singular being appeared, hardly taller than my waist. He had a small mat under his arm and wailed aloud. As he wailed tears fell from his eyes, his nostrils dripped mucus and his lamentations drove the animals away. At first I hoped his clamour would soon cease but he showed no signs of stopping. He would weep for a while, then let out a tremendous cry and all the animals would take to their heels. After a while I could not bear it any longer, I came out and faced him directly, saying in great anger, 'What a rotten race you ghommids are, you who drip incessantly from the nostrils! Just what precisely is the cause of your tragedy? What anyway does a thing like you want with a mat? If you don't shut your mouth this instant I'll shoot you where you stand.'

He heard me to the end, then looked at me as if I mattered less to him than a speck of dust. He eyed me meanly for a while and then said, 'Even so do you children of earth behave, you who have turned kindness sour to the charitable. We watch you, you whose eyes do not stay long in one place, you who chase emptiness all your life. Those who already boast a full stomach continue to seek glorified positions, seek to live like kings, forgetting that the fingers of the hand are unequal. And it is also in your nature that your minds are never at peace; those who find happiness today ensure that their neighbours find no peace the day following; death today, tomorrow disease; war today, confusion tomorrow; tears today, tomorrow sorrow — such is the common pursuit of you children of earth. And when

we think of your plight, we pity you, we weep for you and drip at the nostrils, but instead of earning your affection, instead of you dancing to greet us and fussing over us, you find even our mats a cause to despise us, our running nostrils become your favourite target, you speak of our solicitude as a punishment, our existence as beneath contempt—even to the extent that you have now coined the belittling expression, “Tears in the eye of a gnom.”

Let me not lie to you, I was somewhat ashamed listening to the words of this creature, for all his insults on mankind were well observed. However, inasmuch as I did not want him to realise how his words had hurt me deep inside, I burst out laughing and assured him that I was only teasing him anyway. He thereupon resumed his lamentations and went on his way. He had taken a few steps when I thought to myself, ‘A man mends his fate with his own hands, why do I not crave a boon from this creature?’ So I called him back, prostrated myself full length on the ground and begged him to grant me a boon. He was very pleased that I had acted in this manner and he gave me four pods of alligator pepper; he gave them to me in two pairs and instructed me that in time of danger I should eat a single pepper from one of the first pair of pods, whereupon I would grow wings and fly like a bird. And the moment I wished to retract the wings, one pepper from the other two pods would produce the desired result. When I tried out this formula, it proved a sure-fire treatment.

After he had passed on this gift, he went his way and I turned into the forest, seeking game. I walked some distance and the animals leapt about while I sought my chance to take careful aim. And yet again I came upon another abbreviated creature driving away the game. He was shorter still than the one I had met

before and his entire body was uncompromisingly black. Once again I grew infuriated and spoke fiery words to him: 'You are wicked creatures, you ghom-mids, pitiless as well, and that is probably why your growth is stunted since you are occupied with nothing but pointless acts. Game there is and in abundance but you do not hunt it, yet you will not let others alone to hunt.'

When I had thus berated him, he levelled me to the dust with one long look, hissed in contempt and began to speak:

'I am the Crown Prince of Forests, the bog-troll who lives in crevices of the mahogany. Have you never heard of me? Know you not that earthly beings dare not disrespect my person? That a mere son of man dare not affront my presence? It is lucky for you that I take pity on you or I would assuredly reveal to you that this forest in which you hunt is indeed the Forest of a Thousand Daemons. Diminutive though I appear, I pursue the task which my Creator has assigned to me: I walk the walk of the wise, I act with the nature of the discerning. I never reach for that which my hand cannot encompass, nor do I embark upon that which is beyond my power; I do not act in the manner of the thoughtless, nor do I complete an action which I then regret. I proceed along the course which I have set for myself, and pursue the task I have set my hand upon since the day of my creation by God the King. You arrogant creatures, you who throw good money into the gutter, you tell yourselves that you are buying clothes and waste your money because of the superficial pleasures of life. You want to live up to worldly expectations, so you attempt things which are beyond your powers, you forget that the tongue of men is merely slick, that a man they malign today they are quite likely

to praise tomorrow. When a man makes an effort at something, the sons of men sneer at him, but when success has crowned his efforts they turn round and hail him. There is no one immune from their calumny. They malign the poor and malign the rich; they malign the common man and malign the famous: when they feel like it they malign their king also. Therefore, continue on your way, and I also will follow mine. I merely go where my Creator has sent me.'

And thus he had his say and went his way. I was now thoroughly fed up with the whole business; every ghommid alike appeared to use me ill. After this one had gone, I began to sense the approach of game, leaping from tree to tree. Investigating, I found it was a brown and white-patch monkey. A shot bagged me the monkey, I tucked it in my bag, tossed it onto my head, and, gun on shoulder, directed my legs to my rude hunting-lodge at the base of the palm tree.

On arriving there, I took up my knife and skinned it, built a little truss no higher than my knee, stacked a fire beneath, piled my venison on top of it and fired it. That which I did not pile on the truss, the scraps and tit-bits, I began to roast in the fire, eating them on the spot. Highly enjoyable they were too for the meat of the monkey oozes delicious juices.

Not long afterwards, it darkened, and towards the eighth hour of the evening I lit my hunting-lamp and began to seek game. I did not search very far before my eyes fastened on another pair of eyes belonging to some creature, gleaming a short way from me. I shot and killed it and it turned out to be a civet. I took it to my camp, skinned and carved it, piled the pieces beside the monkey and cracked the fire up at them. I did not trouble to hunt any more that night, and when I had tended the civet, I lowered my back to the earth

and dropped off to sleep, and it was not till the cooing of the cuckoo that I awoke the following morning.

On the dawning of the next day therefore—and this was the third day of my sojourn in the Forest of Irunmale—I ate, filled up properly so that my belly protruberated most roundly. I reached for my gun, primed it diligently, seized my hunting-bag, slung it over my shoulder and so into the forest. It grieves me to admit that I had out-eaten remembrance of those charms which I should have taken with me. I left them at the foot of the palm and took nothing but the shot for my gun, and my cutlass.

I had not walked very far before I began to encounter game, but they would not be patient and persisted in running pointlessly about. And just when an opportunity presented itself for a shot, I heard a rumble as of six hefty men approaching; indeed, it was no less a monster than the sixteen-eyed dewild; often had I listened to hunters recount tales of him—Agbako, that is his name.

When I set eyes on him, I was—unless I lie in this matter—smitten with terror. He wore a cap of iron, a coat of brass, and on his loins were leather shorts. His knees right down to his feet appeared to be palm leaves; from his navel to the bulge of his buttocks, metal network; and there was no creature on earth which had not found a home in this netting which even embraced a live snake among its links, darting out its tongue as Agbako trod the earth.

His head was long and large, the sixteen eyes being arranged around the base of his head, and there was no living man who could stare into those eyes without trembling, they rolled endlessly round like the face of a clock. His head was matted with hair, black as the hearth and very long. Often swishing his hips as he

swung his legs, Agbako held two clubs in his hand and three swords reposed in his sheath. A very evil spirit was Agbako.

As soon as he spied me, he made my person his goal, treading the earth with purpose. And when I felt that he had come close enough, I ordered the road to seize him and it seized him and cast him in the bush. But even as the road obeyed me, so did it heave me also, and I found myself right in front of Agbako. I was terrified and conjured earth to return me to the road, and so it did. But even as I emerged on the road, who should await me there but Agbako! This time I invoked *ogede* and commanded the road to return him to the bush where the ropes of the forest would bind him. And the road obeyed and the forest bound him.

But just as he was flung into the bush even so I was served, and I found myself face to face with him and the ropes began to bind me. When the thongs began to strangle, I yelled on the forest to release me and set me back on the road. It obeyed. Needless to say, Agbako was there to welcome me. So, seeing how things stood, I prepared for fight and we joined in a death grapple. We fought for long but neither toppled the other. We were smothered wholly in sweat, my eyes were reddened and, as for Agbako, his eye-balls were as blood-drops. The ground on which we fought shone like glazing.

Later, I tired, but not he. I untwined my arms but he held fast to me. But when he perceived himself that I was too exhausted, he released me. Dipping into his pouch, he brought forth a gourdlet, and when he had walloped it hard, it turned into a keg of palm-wine. Agbako sat him down and began to serve me, and he refreshed himself also. When the keg of palm-wine was depleted by half and I had rested somewhat,



'I bulled into Agbako and seized him by the neck.'

he suggested that we had drunk enough and that we should resume our strife. This we did forthwith.

We had been wrestling awhile when I retreated a little and drew my cutlass and, even as he began to draw his, I slipped behind him and slammed him one on the back of his head. But it was my cutlass which broke in two, one half flirriting off, while he wasn't dented one bit. Then he turned from me, picked up the truant part of my weapon and, taking the stump from me, joined them together so that the break vanished completely and the cutlass was as before. And he said we should continue with the fight. And now I was truly exhausted; my breath came and went in rapid bloats like the hawing of a toad. Just the same I continued the fight and, lifting my cutlass, brought it down hard on his side. Before I could retract the blow, he in turn slashed me on the sword-hand, cutting it off cutlass and all. I followed my buttocks to the ground, wallowing in the throes of death.

Even while I groaned in pain, Agbako again took my missing arm, fitted it on the stump, spat on his hand, and when he had rubbed the spittle on the join, my arm returned to normal and I could not believe that anything had happened to it. Then he looked at me and, bursting into laughter, declared that we must continue the contest. My terror was now complete and I said to myself, E-ya! Is this not the certain approach of the end? So I cried aloud: 'Spirits of the woods! Pilgrims of the road! —hasten to my rescue!'

And shortly after, every being in the Forest of Irunmale came, the ghommids on one side, the birds on one side, the animals separately, but Agbako gave no sign that he saw anyone. He pulled me from the ground and we grappled anew. If I swayed him he swayed me, if I threw him he threw me. The fight was

long and fierce. Every leaf was stilled and the forest lulled in silence.

The ghommids had been watching us for a while when I saw one of them detach himself from the rest and come to the scene of struggle. He signed to Agbako to release me, and Agbako complied. Then he offered me a slice of kola-nut which I took and ate. And instantly a new vitality flooded me and my strength became the strength of sixteen men. I bulled into Agbako and seized him by the neck, when I had squeezed it hard he bellowed like a beast and all the ghommids cheered.

But when I tried to lift him from the ground and smash him in the fatal throw, his foot did not even turn aside; firm he was as a lode in a crag. And he in turn strove to lift my leg to his shoulder, slap off the other foot and paste my marrow on the ground, but he failed in this and I stood robustified. He fisted me and I felt it not, he kicked me but he did not triumph; then he turned scorching hot from his head to his toes, and the breath of his nostrils was like a violent storm.

And then it was that he slarruped sparks ablaze in my face, proving to me that he was indeed Agbako the Master. He thudded earth with his feet and the earth opened beneath us and Agbako and I were sucked into the void.

When I arrived at the interior of earth, I found myself in a strange house. Of Agbako there was no sign, and until my return from this trip I did not set eyes on Agbako again. Not until the day of our journey to Mount Langbodo was I to encounter him again — you will hear about this later — but what I experienced until my escape from the depths of earth I will never forget in this lifetime, and when I am gone to heaven I will remember it all, even there, for ever and ever.

The house in which I found myself was of modest

size, cowdung was used in plastering the floor and the walls also, but the ceiling was lined entirely with guns. There was neither window nor door, yet the house was full of light; where this light came from remained a puzzle. I first discovered myself right in the centre of the room, and even as I stood inspecting my prison, I saw the four walls of the house coming towards me, so that the room became progressively smaller as if the walls planned to squeeze me to death. I was most afraid, but when it lacked only a little for them to come to grips with my body, they returned to their position and the house was as before. And just as they regained this position and my heart began to settle back, the armoury of the ceiling began to fire, the house began to shake and I felt I was about to fall; disorientation became my lot like the monologue of a gnom. I stumbled here and there, fell, and settled on all fours. I was in this position when my eyes went blind and I felt hands begin to touch me: it was a very cold touch. After a while these people began to dance round me, clapping their hands above my head; I heard their footsteps distinctly, as the footsteps of a hundred people. They did not stay doing this for very long before they seized me and began to toss me up, catch and toss me up again. Not long afterwards they set my feet to the ground and began to undress me and place different clothing on me, laughing all the while. Then one rubbed his hand over my face and I regained my sight, but when I looked round I saw no one; I found myself on a large chair, my size was enormous and I was covered in feathers. I had grown in size, but my entire body was not uniformly increased; my arms had not changed, my legs had neither lengthened nor thickened, but my belly was twelve times distended and my head sixteen times its normal size. My neck was not much thicker but was

stretched beyond imagination. I was highly amused when I beheld myself, and there was no choice but to sit quietly. I did not rise for fear that my legs would not support my stomach, for even as I sat my head became a heavy burden on my neck; there was simply no strength to the neck.

Some time went by and I began to feel hungry. Even as I began to consider how I might find some way to a little food, I saw in front of me two balls of *eko* and meat stew. I tried to edge closer to start my meal but I soon discovered that my stomach permitted no approach to the food; it had taken up the entire room. As I began to manoeuvre towards this food, I was astonished to see it come towards me, and soon enough it settled where my hand could reach it. I took a morsel and accompanied it mouthwards but, alas, I found only then that my hand no longer came up to my mouth. My neck was excessively elongated, it more resembled a heron's, and its bone was hard as rock so that it could not be bent. Anyone who wants a laugh should have come and seen me struggling to lead some food into my mouth. Whenever it lacked only little for the morsel to touch my lips the arm would reach its limit, and when I tried forcibly to propel the morsel to its destination oil flowed down my hands and my neck was full of food crumbs.

Listen, my good friend, the soul which does not eat hot peppers is a weak soul; I *love* food, I simply cannot endure hunger. Because of this I was known to many people as 'Akara-ogun, the one who accompanies the cook to the grave'. This nickname of mine will give you some idea how my innermost being craved this food. Even as I continued the struggle I saw a small flat stick nearby, reached gingerly for it, dug it into the *eko* and began to convey some food to my mouth. The quantity

lifted by the stick was far larger than my mouth could admit for my mouth had not increased its former size, and when this huge lump of *eko* landed just inside my lips it blocked my mouth entirely, and as I strove to eat down the inside portion so as to attack the outside, that portion fell away from my mouth. Even so did I vainly struggle, and I could not enjoy my meal.

From the moment I began this effort to eat I had heard voices laughing quite close to me, but I did not see anyone. When I had done my best and eaten next to nothing, I cried to them:

‘You who laugh over there, I implore you in the name of God, if it was you who changed me into what I am this moment, do not fail to return me to what I was before. It was ignorance which led me to fight with Agbako; never again will I attempt such folly. If I hear news of Agbako’s approach in future I will learn to start a rapid dialogue with my legs and ram my head through forests. I appeal to you, kindly release me.’

When I had spoken thus, they remained silent. After a while, my stomach began to retract, my head diminished, my neck shortened and soon every part returned to normal. From the moment I returned to my normal shape I no longer heard a sound from these ghommids, but the house did not cease to behave in its original manner, and, anyway, I did not discover a means of escape. Some time passed towards nightfall, and then I saw a wall of the house split in two and a beautiful woman came in with a number of young maidens, several of them and all more beautiful than coral. I was smitten with fear at the sight of them and I threw myself face downwards on the floor. But the woman came to me and said:

‘Akara-ogun, you are aware that even as dewilds exist on this earth, so do spirits exist also; even as

spirits exist so also do kobolds; as kobolds on this earth, so are gnomes; as gnomes so also exist the dead. These ghommids and trolls together make up the entire thousand and one daemons who exist upon earth. I am one of them, and Helpmeet is my name. I love the Lord and he loves me also; he has never denied me aught, nor have I ever failed to perform an errand on which he has sent me. Thrice in one day I go through the world to visit the friends of God and to assist them in all their endeavours; whoever bears only a little love to Him, I perform a little service for him; and he who loves my God with a great love I care for in as great a proportion; whoever acts with concern towards Him I treat with concern, and whoever treats Him with disrespect even so do I act towards him; for whoever sows well shall harvest goodness, and whoever sows evil, evil shall come unto him. The truthful shall not fail to profit good, the deceitful shall gain nothing but deceit; even if it came to pass that the world turned topsy-turvy, that fowls grew teeth and the oil palm grew coconuts, God will not fail to reward every man according to his deeds. So now, you Akara-ogun, rise and follow me, for you are a most important instrument for your Creator.'

When she had finished, I rose and followed her, and we emerged from this house into a certain bush and so continued our progress. We traversed valleys and traversed hills; we crept under creepers and waded through swamps. After a while we arrived at a crossroads where she stopped and showed me a route, saying:

'Go on now and pay attention to the things you shall witness in this city; never fear and be not cowed by terror, my name is Helpmeet, I will never desert you on this earth.'

After which, I set my head along that road, and she also went her way. I walked a little while and arrived at a certain city. From my entry through the city gates until I arrived at the market square—this was roughly ten minutes—I heard not a single voice even though I encountered many people, and when I called out greetings to them they would merely mumble in their noses nor did I understand one word they mumbled. When I arrived at their market I stood by a certain tree and began to watch.

What amazed me most of all in this market was that many children were dead in it yet no one made any attempt to bury them. Corpses littered the place in prodigious numbers, the entire market stank and flies swarmed over it with an incessant buzz. I waited a little and then I saw a woman approach and greet me. This made me happy and I responded eagerly; I then went on to tell her how astonishing a matter I found it that no one spoke at all among these market crowds, that they should all merely mumble, and although I had greeted many of them whom I encountered not one of them deigned to respond to my greeting.

When I had had my say she looked at me and grew distressed, saying:

‘My name is Iwapele and the name of this city is Filth. It is a place of suffering and contempt, a city of greed and contumely, a city of envy and of thievery, a city of fights and wrangles, a city of death and diseases—a veritable city of sinners. Once upon a time, the people of this city committed a most atrocious crime; a very evil deed it was—so evil that the sun did not shine for six entire months, nor did the moon emerge for three whole years; the rain fell no more and the corn did not come to fruit, the yam did not sprout and plantains refused to ripen; everything was in utter

confusion. After a while, however, God took pity on the inhabitants of the town; he remembered that these people were after all his own creation; he forgave them but warned them never to repeat their offences, and everything returned to its previous good. But when they had again eaten well and drunk to satisfaction, they forgot who made them; they began to walk in the path of their own choosing and to act in any manner that pleased them. But their Maker saw them from heaven, for all acts of mankind are observed by God and there is nothing hidden from Him. Therefore He sent his emissaries to enquire into the misdeeds of this city of blood; they came in the guise of men and they lodged at my house. I took good care of them and honoured them; I welcomed them hands and feet, took such care of them as was within my power. They did not stay long with me, only long enough to deliver their message from the King of Heaven. They turned the dwellers of this town into a race of the dumb and punished them all with blindness; the city became a city of curses for ever, but I was spared by God. Now that I have set eyes on you I do not want you ever to depart from me. I want you to dwell with me that I may hold converse with you and you with me, for it is the company of the open that the open keeps, it is the company of the masquerade that the masquerader seeks, the fish swims after the company of fishes in the river; you are of my own kind.'

When she had finished I replied that I would do exactly as she counselled for I was tired of so much aimless wandering. But I sought her indulgence to stay a little and observe the events in this market before we went on to her home. It was only after her speech that I realised that these people were all blind and dumb, and the factor which had made me unsuspecting was

that their eyes were wide open as if they could see; little did I know that the eyes which they carried about with them were eyes of deceit.

Many, many things did my eyes behold but I will not state them all now, I will recount them another day. Nevertheless I will tell you a little of them lest it appear that I skip over this episode entirely.

The first incident I saw concerned a certain man, a cripple, who walked with the aid of a crutch. This man went very fast and hopped about on his staff, and he soon bounded past me in the direction of a pond. Seeing how close he was to it, I cried a warning to him that his course was no thoroughfare but he paid no heed. On arriving at the edge he leapt straight into the pond. He was thoroughly soaked and I found myself full of pity for him. But instead of distress, this man simply burst into laughter; he emerged from the pond and continued his mad dash all over the place. He had not hopped more than three times when he leapt against a woman. This woman was enraged but as she lifted her arm to strike the offending man, it was a totally different person whom the arm encountered and he in turn grew wrathful. He raised his hand in vengeance but administered the punishment to yet another man. Before long the fight spread to the entire market crowd and they began to strike one another. As they rushed here and there several babies fell off their mothers' backs and it was over their heads that the combatants charged to meet one another. In the same manner the aged among them who had little strength to prop them up fell and could not rise, while the entire populace made their bodies their thoroughfare. Often when a baby had fallen down on the battleground and the mother stooped to pick it up, instead of hers she picked up another's; some picked up dead babies

instead of their own living children, for God was full of anger against them.

One other thing I observed was that many of them wore their clothes inside out; some wore their *ag-bada* back to front, some among the women wore their head-ties inside out; every garment shone with filth, it was more like the inside of a hunter's bag.

Many sights did I witness in this market but they are far beyond what I can narrate at this time. When I had stayed awhile and had seen enough I followed this woman to her home and we began to live together.

I went often to their law courts. At times when a man had committed an offence and they sought to punish him, the policeman would seize one of the nobility, and before he discovered the victim's true identity, would have served him many slaps in rapid succession; at times when the king tried to mount his horse he landed on a cow; even so did the affairs of these people run higgledy-piggledy, topsy-turvy.

From the day of my arrival in this town there had been a room in the house where I lived which the woman, my host, would never allow me to enter. She had, shortly after my arrival, asked me never to go into that room as long as she was alive, but that after her death I could do whatever I pleased for the entire house would then be mine. The woman and I loved each other greatly; it was a great love and I began to consider seriously taking her to wife; and it was at this very time that she was laid prostrate by a sudden illness, and in the course of this illness that she died.

I had not thought that this woman would die before me, for I was by far the elder; only when she had thus died did I acknowledge that children and aged alike, none can escape the hand of death. After her death I wept till I nearly went blind, forgetting that

weeping does not bring the dead back to life, but only puts the living in peril. Let the wailer weep eternally and the sighing sigh for ever, he who must cannot help his going.

After the woman's death, I began to seek some way of escaping from this town and, as I sat down one day thinking how I should proceed, my mind went to the room which the woman had forbidden me to enter. I rose from the ground, put on my clothes and headed for this room as I wanted to see what it contained. On the point of opening the door, I was at first afraid, but when I recalled how much I had undergone in the past I said to myself that I simply had to open it; whatever would come of it, let it come: and so I threw it open. The very instant I entered the room, I found myself in my own room at home, and when I looked round I found my gun which I had lost at the place where I did battle with Agbako; I found my hunting-bag and a few other articles which I had lost in the Forest of a Thousand Daemons and when I looked into the corners of the room, I discovered a bag of money.

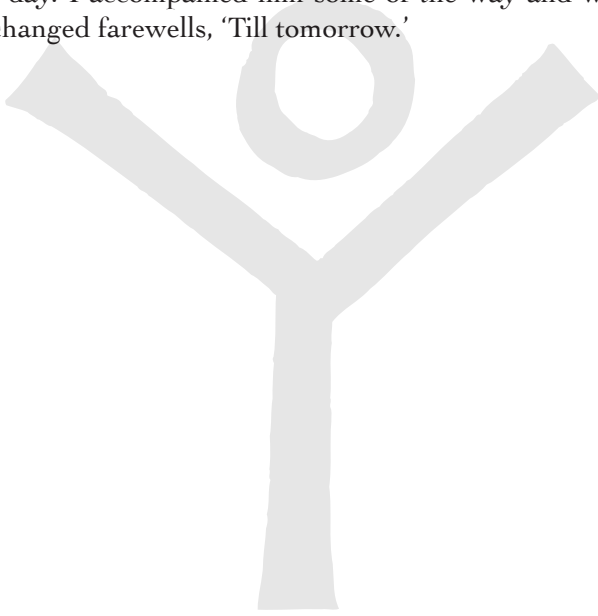
I spent this money in pleasures on myself, I ate, drank, draped myself in decent clothing.

Thus ends the story of my first sojourn in this most terrifying forest. I would now like you to find me a little food for hunger is at hand. When I have done with eating I will lay my tongue to the tale of my second journey, and that story is even more delectable than the one that has gone before.

* * *

Even so did this man narrate the adventures of his first journey to the Forest of a Thousand Daemons. When his tale was ended I brought him food and he ate, but

I saw that night was approaching, so I suggested that he retire for the day and return at break of the following day. I accompanied him some of the way and we exchanged farewells, 'Till tomorrow.'



City Lights