

Of all the different kinds of work my father performed, none fascinated me so much as his skill with gold, delicate touch; and, moreover, this sort of work was always a kind of festival: it was a real festival that broke the monotony of ordinary working days.

So is a woman, accompanied by a go-between, crossed the threshold of the workshop, I would follow her in at once. I knew what she wanted: she had brought some gold and wanted to ask my father to transform it into a trinket. The woman would have collected the gold in the pieces of Siguiiri, where, for months on end, she would have crouched over the river, washing the mud and patiently extracting from it the grains of gold. These women never came alone: they were well aware that my father had other things to do than to make trinkets for all and sundry! And even if

the making of jewellery had been his main occupation, they would have realized that they were not his first or his only customers, and that their wants could not be immediately attended to.

Generally these women required the trinket for a certain state, either for the festival of Ramadhan or for the Tabaski; or for some other family festivity, or for a dance ceremony.

Thereupon, to better their chance of being quickly served, and the more easily to persuade my father to interrupt the work he had in hand, they would request services of an official praise singer, a go-between, and would arrange with him in advance what fee they would pay for his good offices. another, for each charm had its own particular property: but exactly what property I do not know: I left my father's

house

too soon.

From the veranda under which I played I could keep an eye on the workshop opposite, and they for their part could keep an eye on me. This workshop was the main building in our compound. That is where my father was generally to be found, supervising the work, forging the most important items himself, or repairing delicate mechanisms; here it was that he received his friends and his customers, so that the place resounded with noise from morning to night. Moreover, everyone entering or leaving our compound had to pass through the workshop, so that there was a perpetual coming in and going, through no one ever seemed to be in a hurry: each one would pause to have a word with my father and spend a few moments watching the work in hand.

Sometimes I would draw near the door, but I rarely went in, for everyone used to frighten me there, and I would run away as soon as anyone tried to lay hands on me. It was not until very much later that I got the habit of crouching in a corner of the workshop watching the fire blazing in the forge.

My private domain at that time consisted of the veranda that ran round the outside of my father's hut; and the orange tree that grew in the middle of the compound.

As soon as you had crossed the workshop and gone through the door at the back, you could see the orange tree. If I compare with the giants of our native forests, the tree was not very big, but its mass of glossy leaves used to cast a dense shadow that was a cool refuge from the blazing sun. When it was in flower, a heady perfume was wafted over the entire my little friends used to tend

an eager hand with it, too. They had all been invited and used to go for the food with the frank appetites of young wolves; but there was too much, there was always too much we could never get to the end of such meal.

'Look how round my belly is!' I would hear myself saying.

'Yes, our little bellies were round, and sitting afterwards round the fire, solemnly digesting our food, we might easily have fallen asleep if we had not had such naturally lively dispositions. But we had our palaver to hold, like our elders; we had not seen each other for weeks, sometimes months, and we had so many things to tell each other; so many new stories to relate, and that was the time for them!

Of course we all had our own stories to tell, we knew lots of them, but there would always be some stories that we were

hearing for the first time, and those were the ones we were most eager to listen to as we sat round the fire, and it was the letters of these tales who would get the most applause.

In this fashion my first day in the country would come to a close, unless someone brought out a tom-tom, for this was a special occasion. And in Tundican it was not every evening you heard the tom-tom.

December always found me at Tundican. December is our dry season, when we have fine weather and harvest our rice. Year after year I was invited to this harvest which is always the occasion of great junketing and feasting, and I used to wait impatiently for my uncle to come and fetch me.

There was a terrific commotion going on all round me; my mother was shouting harder than anyone; and she gave me a few sharp

slaps. I began to weep, more upset by the sudden uproar than by the blows I had received. A little later, when I had calmed down a little and the shouting had died down around me, my mother solemnly warned me never to play such a game again; and I promised, although I could not really see where the danger in it lay.

My father's hut was near the workshop, and I would often play there beneath the veranda that ran round the outside. It was my father's private hut. It was built like all our huts, of mud that had been pounded and molded into bricks with water; it was round, and proudly helmeted with thatch. It was entered by a rectangular doorway. Inside, a tiny window let in a thin shaft of daylight. On the right there was the bed, made of beaten earth like the bricks, spread with a simple wicker-work mat on which was a pillow stuffed with kapok. At the rear

of the hut, right under the window where the light was strongest were the toolboxes. On the left were the boubous and the prayer rugs. Finally, at the head of the bed, hanging over the pillow and watching over my father's dumber, there was a series of pots that contained extracts from plants and the bark of trees. These pots all had metal lids and they were profusely and curiously garlanded with chaplets of cowrie shells; it did not take me long to discover that they were the most important things in the hut: they contained the magic charms, those mysterious liquids that keep evil spirits at bay, and, smear on the body, make it invulnerable to black magic, to all kinds of black magic. My father, before he went to bed, never failed to smear his body with a little of each liquid, first one, then without any fuss. That come to run and play and climb up the look-out posts and wander off



into the long grass with the flocks and herds, and naturally I could not do these without some damage to my precious clothes.

At nightfall, my Uncle Lansana would come back from the fields. He would greet me after his own quiet fashion, for he was rather timid and spoke little. Working alone in the field all day, you get used to being silent; you think of all kinds of things, and then you start all over again, because thoughts are something you can never grasp completely: the mute mystery of things, how and why predisposes you to silence. It is enough to call such things to mind and to become aware of their inscrutable mystery which leaves behind it a certain light in the eyes. My Uncle Lansana's eyes were singularly piercing when he looked at you: actually, he rarely looked at you: he would remain usually in that inner dream which

obsessed him endlessly in the fields.

'the platform at the top, That to keep away from the fresh-cut! sheaves of corn, which were put here

to be used for next season

When we were all together at mealtimes I would often turn my eyes towards my uncle, and generally, after a moment or two, I would succeed in catching his eye. There was always a smile behind the gravity of his gaze, for my uncle was goodness itself and he loved me; I really believe he loved me as much as my grandmother did. I would respond to his gently smiling glance, and sometimes, as I always ate every slowly, it would make me forget to eat.

At this curious knowledge. Now I understood how my father obtained his information. When I raised my eyes, I saw that my father was watching me.

"I have told you all these things, little one, because you are my son, the eldest of my son, and because I have nothing to hide from you. There is a certain form of behavior to observe, and certain ways of acting in order that the guiding spirit of our race may approach you also. I, your father, was observing that form of behavior which persuades our guiding spirit to visit us. Oh, perhaps not consciously. But nevertheless it is true that if you desire the guiding spirit of our race to visit you one day, if you desire to inherit it in your turn, you will have to conduct yourself in the selfsame manner; from now on, it will be necessary for you to be more and more in my company."

He gazed at me with burning eyes, then suddenly heaved a sigh.

"I fear, I very much fear, little one, that you are not often enough in my company. You are all day at school, and one day you shall

depart from that school for a greater one.  
You will leave me, little one..."

And again he heaved a sigh. I saw that his heart was heavy within him. The hurricane lamp hanging on the veranda cast a harsh glare on his face. he suddenly seemed to me like an old man.

"Father!" I cried.

"Son..." he whispered.

And I was no longer sure whether I ought to continue to attend the school or whether I ought to remain in the workshop: I fell unutterably confused.

"Go now," said my father.

"I want..."

And often it would happen that the woman did not know really what she wanted, because she would be so torn by desire,

because she would have liked to have many, many trinkets, all out of the same small quantity of gold: but she would have had to have much more than she had brought with her to satisfy such a desire, and eventually she would have to content herself with some more modest wish.

"When do you want it for ?" my father would ask.

And she would always want it at once.

"Why are you in such a hurry ? How do you expect me to find the time ?"

"It's very urgent, I can assure you," the woman would reply.

That's what all woman say, when they want an ornament. Well, I'll see what I can do. Now are you happy ?"

Then he would take the clay pot that was

kept specially for the smelting of gold and pour in the grains; thereupon he would cover the gold with powdered charcoal, a charcoal which he obtained by the use of plant juices of exceptional purity, finally he would place a large lump of the same kind of charcoal over the whole thing.

Then, having seen the work duly undertaken, the woman, by now quite satisfied, would go back to her household tasks, leaving her go-between to carry on with the praise-singing which had already proved so advantageous to her.

Time, with crossed legs, in front of the bellows; at least the younger did, for the elder would sometimes be allowed to take part in the craftsmen's work and the younger - in those days it was Sidafa - only had to work the bellows and watch the proceedings while awaiting his turn to be elevated to less rudimentary tasks. For a

whole hour they would both be working the levers fo bellows till the fire in the forge leapt into flame, becoming a living thing, a lively and merciless spirit.

Then my father, using long pincers, would lift the pot and place it on the flame.

Immediately all work would more or less stop in the workshop: actually while the gold is being melted and while it is cooling all work with copper or aluminum is supposed to stop, for fear that some fraction of these noble metals might fall among the gold. It is only steel that can still be worked at such times. But workmen who had some piece of steel work in hand would either hasten to finish it or would openly stop work to join the other apprentices gathered round the forge. In fact, there was often so many of them at these times pressing round my father that I, the

smallest, would have to get up and push my way in among them, so as not to miss any part of the operation.

It might happen that, feeling he had too little room "to work in, my father would make his apprentices stand well away from him. He would merely rise his hand in a simple gesture: at that particular moment he would never utter word, and no one else would, no one was allowed to utter word, even the go-between's voice would no longer be raised in song; the silence would be broken only by the panting of the bellows and by the faint hissing of the gold. But if my father never used to utter actual words at this time, I know that he was uttering them in his mind; I could see it by his lips that kept working while he bent over the pot and kept stirring the gold and the charcoal with a bit of wood that would keep bursting into flame, and so had to be constantly replaced



by a fresh bit.

What were the words my father's lips were forming? I do not know; I do not know for certain: I was never told what they were. But what else could they have been, if not magical incantations ? Were they not the spirits of fire and gold, of fire and air, air breathed through the earthen pipes, of fire born of air, of gold married with fire - were not these the spirits he was invoking ? Was it not their help and their friendship he was calling upon in this marriage of elemental things ? Yes it was almost certainly those spirits he was calling upon, for they are the most elemental of all, spirits, and their presence is essential at the melting of the gold.

The operation that was going on before my eyes was simply the smelting of gold; but it was something more than that a magical operation that the guiding spirits could look

upon with favor of disfavor; and that is why there would be all round my father that absolute silence and that anxious expectancy, I could understand, though I was just a child, that there was no craft greater than the goldsmith's. I was still too young to be able to understand why it was so protracted; nevertheless, I had an inkling, beholding the almost religious concentration of the all those present as they watched the mixing process.

When finally the gold began to melt, I used to feel like shouting, and perhaps we would all have shouted if we had I got up and went to my mother's hut. The night was full of sparkling stars; an owl was hooting nearby. Ah, what was the right path for me ? Did I know yet where that path lay ? My perplexity was boundless as the sky, alas, without any stars... I entered my mother's

hut, which at that time was mine also, and went to bed at once. But sleep evaded me and I tossed restlessly on my bed.

"What's the matter with you ?" ask my mother.

"Nothing".

No, I couldn't find anything to say.

"Why don't you go to sleep ?" went on my mother.

"I don't know".

"Go to sleep !" she said.

"Yes," I said.

"Sleep... Nothing can resist sleep," she said sadly.

Why did she, too, appear so sad ? Had she divined my distress ? Anything that

concerned me she sensed very deeply. I was trying to sleep, but I shut my eyes and lay still in vain: the image of my father under the storm lantern would not leave me. He had suddenly seemed so old, he who was so youthful, so active, more youthful and more active than any of us and who in the running or races never let himself be outstripped by anyone, whose limbs were swifter than the limbs of all our young men... "Father !... Father !... "I kept repeating it. Father, what must I do, what is the right thing to do ?" And I wept quietly, and weeping I fell asleep.

## Why We One

I was a little boy playing round my father's hut. How old would I have been at that time ? I cannot remember exactly. I still must have been very young; five, maybe six years old. My mother was in the workshop

with my father, and I could just hear their familiar voices above the noise of the anvil and the conversation of the customers.

Suddenly I stopped playing, my whole attention fixed on a snake that was creeping round the hut. He really seemed to be "taking a turn" round the hut. After a moment I went over to him. I had taken in my hand a reed that was lying in the yard - there was always some lying around; they used to get broken off the fence of plaited reeds that marked the boundary of our compound - and I thrust this reed into reptile's mouth. The snake did not try to get away: he was beginning to enjoy our little game; he was slowly swallowing the reed; he was devouring it, I thought, as if it were some delicious prey, his eyes glittering with voluptuous bliss; and inch by inch his head was drawing nearer to my hand. At last the reed was almost entirely swallowed up, and

the snake's jaws were terribly close to my fingers.

I was laughing, I had not the slightest fear, and now I know that the snake would not have hesitate much longer before burying his fangs in my fingers if, at that moment, Damany, one of the apprentices, had not come out of the workshop.

The apprentice shouted to my father, and almost once I felt myself lifted off my feet: I was safe in the arms of one of my father's friend !

The praise-singer would install himself in the workshop, tune up his cora, which is our harp, and would begin to sing my father's praises. This was always a great event for me. I would hear recalled the lofly deeds of my father's ancestors, and the names of these ancestors from the earliest times; as the couplets were reeled off, it was like

watching the growth of a great genealogical tree that spread its branches far and wide and flourished its boughs and twigs before my mind's eye. The harp played an accompaniment to this vast utterance of names, expanding it and punctuating it with notes that were now soft, now shrill. Where did the praise-singer get his information from? He must certainly have developed a very retentive memory stored with facts handed down to him by his predecessors, for this is the basis of all our oral traditions. Did he embellish the truth? It is very likely: flattery is the praise-singer's stock-in-trade! Nevertheless, he was not allowed to take too many liberties with tradition, for it is part of the praise-singer's task to preserve it. But in those days such considerations did not enter my head, which I would hold high and proud; for I used to feel quite drunk with so much praise, which seemed to reflect some of its effulgence upon my

own small person.

I could tell that my father's vanity was being inflamed, and I already knew that after having sipped this milk-and-honey he would lend a favorable ear to the woman's request. But I was not alone in my knowledge; the woman also had seen my father's eyes gleaming with contented pride; and she would hold out her grains of gold as if the whole thing was settled: my father, taking up his scales, would weight the gold.

"What sort of trinket do you desire ?" he would ask.

My father again was silent for a moment, then he said :

"You can see for yourself that I am not more gifted than any other man, that I have



nothing which other men have not also, and even that I have less than others, since I give everything away, and would even give away the last thing I had, the shirt on my back. Nevertheless, I am better known than other men and my name is on everyone's tongue, and it is I who have authority over all the blacksmiths in the five cantons. If these things are so its by virtue of this snake along, who is the guiding spirit of our race. It is to this snake that I owe everything, and it is he likewise who gives me warning of all that is to happen. Thus I am never surprised, when I awake, to see this or that person waiting for me outside my workshop: I already know that he will be there. No more am I surprised when this or that motor bicycle or bicycle breaks down, or when an accident happens to a clock: because I had foreknowledge of what would come to pass. Everything is transmitted to me in the course of the night,

together with account of all the work I shall have to perform, so that from the start, without having to cast about in my mind, I know how to repair whatever is brought to me; and it is these things that have established my renown as a craftsman. But all this - let it never be forgotten - I owe to the snake, I owe it to the guiding spirit of our race."

He was silent; and then I understood why, when, my father used to come back from a walk he could enter the workshop and say to the apprentices: "During my absence, this or that person has been here, he was messed in such and such a way, he came from such and such a place and he brought with him such and such a piece of work to be done." And all marvelled my little friends used to tend an eager hand with it, too. They had all been invited and used to go for the food with the frank appetites of young

wolves; but there was too much, there was always too much we could never get to the end of such meal.

'Look how round my belly is!' I would hear myself saying.

'Yes, our little bellies were round, and sitting afterwards round the fire, solemnly digesting our food, we might easily have fallen asleep if we had no had such naturally lively dispositions. But we had our palaver to hold, like our elders; we had not seen each other for weeks, sometimes months, and we had so many things to tell each other; so many new stories to relate, and that was the time for them!

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He gazed at me with burning eyes, then suddenly heaved a sigh.

"I fear, I very much fear, little one, that you are not often enough in my company. You

are all day at school, and one day you shall depart from that school for a greater one. You will leave me, little one..."

And again he heaved a sigh. I saw that his heart was heavy within him. The hurricane lamp hanging on the veranda cast a harsh glare on his face. he suddenly seemed to me like an old man.

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this point there was no foliage to diminish its intensity. Baked by the sun from early morning the ballast of red stone was

burningly hot; so hot in fact that the oil which fell from the engines was immediately evaporated, leaving not the slightest trace. Was it this over-like warmth or the oil, which attracted the snakes ? I do not know.

The fact is that I often came across snakes crawling over the sun-baked ballast; and inevitably the snakes used to creep into the compound.

Ever since the day I had been forbidden to play with snakes, I would run to my mother as soon as I saw one.

"There's a snake !" I would cry.

"What, another ?" my mother would shout.

And she would come running out to see what sort of snake it was. If it was just a snake like any other snake - actually, they were all quite different ! - she would beat it to death at once; and, like all the women of

our country, she would work herself up into a frenzy, beating the snake to a pulp, whereas the men would content themselves with a single hard blow, neatly struck.

One day, however, I noticed a little black snake with a strikingly marked body that was proceeding leisurely in the direction of the workshop. I ran to warn my mother, as usual. But as soon as my mother saw the black snake she said to me gravely:

"My son, this one must not be killed: he is not as other snakes, and he will not harm you; you must never interfere with him."

Everyone in our compound knew that this snake must not be killed; excepting myself, and, I suppose, my little playmates, who were still just ignorant children.

"This snake," my mother added, "is your



father's guiding spirit".

I gazed dumbfounded at the little snake. He was proceeding calmly towards the workshop; he was moving gracefully, very sure of himself, and almost as if conscious of his immunity; his body, black and brilliant, glittered in the harsh light of the sun. When he reached the workshop. I noticed for the first time, cut out level with the ground, a small hole in the wall. The snake disappeared through this hole.

"Look", said my mother, "the serpent is going to pay your father a visit."

Although I was familiar with the supernatural, this sight filled me with such astonishment that I was stuck dumb. What business would a snake have with my father? And why this particular snake? No one had to kill him, because he was my

father's guiding spirit ! At any rate, that was the explanation my mother had given me. But what exactly was a "guiding spirit ?" What were these guiding spirits that I encountered almost everywhere, forbidding one thing, commanding another to be done ? I could not understand it at all, though their presences were around me as I grew to manhood. There were good spirits, and there were evil ones; and more evil than good ones, it seemed to me. And how was I to know that this snake was harmless ? It looked the same as any other snake; it was, of course, a black snake, and certainly there was something unusual about it; but after all, it was only a snake ! I was absolutely baffled, but I did not ask my mother about it :

I fell I would have to ask my father himself about it, almost as if this mystery was something in which women could have no

part; it was a mysterious affair that could only be discussed with me. I decided to wait until nightfall. him glide through the little hole in the wall. As if informed of his presence, my father at that instant would turn his eyes to the hole and give a smile. The snake would proceed straight towards him, opening his jaws. When he was within reach, my father would stroke him with his hand, and the snake would accept the caress with a quivering of his whole body : never did I see the little snake attempt to do the slightest harm to my father. That caress and the answering tremor but I ought to say: that appealing caress and that answering tremor - threw me each time into an inexpressible confusion: I would imagine I know not what mysterious conversation... the hand inquired, and the tremor replied...

Yes, it was like a conversation. Would I, too, converse like that one day ? No: I was still

attending the school. Yes I would have liked so much to place my hand, my own hand, on the snake, and to understand and listen to that tremor too; but did not know how the snake would have taken my hand, and I felt now that he would have nothing to tell me; I was afraid that he would never have anything to tell me.

When my father felt that he had stroked the snake enough, he left him alone; then the snake would coil himself under the edge of one of the sheepskins on which my father was seated facing his anvil.

"I want..."

And often it would happen that the woman did not know really what she wanted, because she would be so torn by desire, because she would have liked to have many, many trinkets, all out of the same small quantity of gold: but she would have

had to have much more than she had brought with her to satisfy such a desire, and eventually she would have to content herself with some more modest wish.

"When do you want it for ?" my father would ask.

And she would always want it at once.

"Why are you in such a hurry ? How do you expect me to find the time ?"

"It's very urgent, I can assure you," the woman would reply.

That's what all women say, when they want an ornament. Well, I'll see what I can do. Now are you happy ?"

Then he would take the clay pot that was kept specially for the smelting of gold and pour in the grains; thereupon he would cover the gold with powdered charcoal, a

charcoal which he obtained by the sue of plant juices of exceptional purity, finally he would place a large lump of the same kind of charcoal over the whole thing.

Then, having seen the work duly undertaken, the woman, by now quite satisfied, would go back to her household tasks, leaving her go-between to carry on with the praise-singing which had already proved so advantageous to her.

"How did he make himself known ?" I asked.

"First of all, he made himself known in the semblance of a dream. He appeared to me several times in slumber, and he told me the day on which he would appear to me in reality: he gave me the precise time and place. But when I really saw for the first time, I was filled with fear. I took him for a

snake like any other snake, and I had to keep myself in control, I would have tried to kill him. when he saw that I did not receive him kindly, he turned away and departed the way he had come. And there I stood watching him depart, wondering all the time if I should not simply have killed there and then; but a power greater than myself stayed my hand and prevented me from pursuing, him. I stood watching him disappear. And even then, at that very moment, I easily have overtaken him; a few swift strides would have been enough; but I was struck motionless by a kind of paralysis. Such was my first encounter with the little black snake."

He was silent a moment, then went on:

"The following night, I saw the snake again in my dream."

"I came as I foretold," he said, "but thou didst intend to receive me unkindly: I did read it thus in thine eyes. Wherefore dost thou reject me ? Lo, I am the guiding spirit of thy race, and it is even as the guiding spirit of thy race that I make known to thee, as to the most worthy. Therefore forbear to look with fear upon me, and beware that thou dost not reject me, for behold, I bring thee good fortune." After that I received serpent kindly when he made himself known to me a second time; I received him without fear, I received him with kindness, and he has brought me nothing but good."

Immediately after the evening meal, when the palavers were over, my father bade his friends farewell and went to sit under the veranda of his hut; I went and sat near him. I began questioning him in a roundabout manner, as all children do, and on every subject under the sun. finally, unable to



restrain myself any longer, I asked :

"My father, what is that little snake that comes to visit you ?"

"What snake do you mean ?"

"Why, the little black snake that my mother forbids us to kill."

"Ah !" he said.

He gazed at me for a long while. He seemed to be considering whether to answer or not. Perhaps he was thinking about how old I was, perhaps he was wondering if it was not a little too soon to confide such a secret to a twelve-year-old boy.

Then suddenly he made up his mind.

"That snake," he said, "is the guiding spirit of our race. Can you understand that ?"

"Yes," I answered, although I did not understand very well.

"That snake," he went on, "has always been with us; he has always made himself known to one of us. In our time, it is to me that he has made himself known."

"That is true," I said.

And I said it with all my heart, for it seemed obvious to me that the snake could have made himself known to no one but my father. Was not my father the head man in our compound ? Was it my father who had authority over all the blacksmiths in our district ? Was he not most skilled ?

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was drawing nearer to my hand. At last the reed was almost entirely swallowed up, and the snake's jaws were terribly close to my fingers.

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The apprentice shouted to my father, and almost once I felt myself lifted off my feet: I was safe in the arms of one of my father's friend !

The praise-singer would install himself in the workshop, tune up his cora, which is our harp, and would begin to sing my father's praises. This was always a great event for me. I would hear recalled the lofty deeds of my father's ancestors, and the names of

these ancestors from the earliest times; as the couplets were reeled off, it was like watching the growth of a great genealogical tree that spread its branches far and wide and flourished its boughs and twigs before my mind's eye. The harp played an accompaniment to this vast utterance of names, expanding it and punctuating it with notes that were now soft, now shrill. Where did the praise-singer get his information from ? He must certainly have developed a very retentive memory stored with facts handed down to him by his predecessors, for this is the basis of all our oral traditions. Did he embellish the truth ? It is very likely: flattery is the praise-singer's stock-in-trade ! Nevertheless, he was not allowed to take too many liberties with tradition, for it is part of the praise-singer's task to preserve it. But in those days such considerations did not enter my head, which I would hold high and proud; for I used to feel quite drunk with so much praise, which seemed to reflect some

of its effulgence upon my  
own small person.

I could tell that my father's vanity was being inflamed, and I already knew that after having sipped this milk-and-honey he would lend a favorable ear to the woman's request. But I was not alone in my knowledge; the woman also had seen my father's eyes gleaming with contented pride; and she would hold out her grains of gold as if the whole thing was settled: my father, taking up his scales, would weight the gold.

"What sort of trinket do you desire ?" he would ask.

I got up and went to my mother's hut. The night was full of sparkling stars; an owl was hooting nearby. Ah, what was the right path for me ? Did I know yet where that path lay ?

My perplexity was boundless as the sky, alas, without any stars... I entered my mother's hut, which at that time was mine also, and went to bed at once. But sleep evaded me and I tossed restlessly on my bed.

"What's the matter with you ?" ask my mother.

"Nothing".

No, I couldn't find anything to say.

"Why don't you go to sleep ?" went on my mother.

"I don't know".

"Go to sleep !" she said.

"Yes," I said.

"Sleep... Nothing can resist sleep," she said sadly.

Why did she, too, appear so sad ? Had she divined my distress ? Anything that concerned me she sensed very deeply. I was trying to sleep, but I shut my eyes and lay still in vain: the image of my father under the storm lantern would not leave me. He had suddenly seemed so old, he who was so youthful, so active, more youthful and more active than any of us and who in the running or races never let himself be outstripped by anyone, whose limbs were swifter than the limbs of all our young men... "Father !... Father !... "I kept repeating it. Father, what must I do, what is the right thing to do ?" And I wept quietly, and weeping I fell asleep.

this point there was no foliage to diminish its intensity. Baked by the sun from early morning the ballast of red stone was burningly hot; so hot in fact that the oil which fell from the engines was immediately



evaporated, leaving not the slightest trace. Was it this over-like warmth or the oil, which attracted the snakes ? I do not know.

The fact is that I often came across snakes crawling over the sun-baked ballast; and inevitably the snakes used to creep into the compound.

Ever since the day I had been forbidden to play with snakes, I would run to my mother as soon as I saw one.

"There's a snake !" I would cry.

"What, another ?" my mother would shout.

And she would come running out to see what sort of snake it was. If it was just a snake like any other snake - actually, they were all quite different ! - she would beat it to death at once; and, like all the women of our country, she would work herself up into

a frenzy, beating the snake to a pulp, whereas the men would content themselves with a single hard blow, neatly struck.

One day, however, I noticed a little black snake with a strikingly marked body that was proceeding leisurely in the direction of the workshop. I ran to warn my mother, as usual. But as soon as my mother saw the black snake she said to me gravely:

"My son, this one must not be killed: he is not as other snakes, and he will not harm you; you must never interfere with him."

Everyone in our compound knew that this snake must not be killed; excepting myself, and, I suppose, my little playmates, who were still just ignorant children.