

DING DONG BELL

KWABENA ANNAN

NOR having much development in our village, we all agreed when the Government Agent told us that we should do something about it. I remember the occasion very well. It was towards the end of March when the cocoa was all in, packed and sent to the coast, and Kwesi Manu had started his house again. Every year he would buy the cement, engage a couple of Northern Territories' labourers, lay out the blocks, and then run out of money. The walls had been built two years back; last year, he had managed to get the roof on, only to have it flung off again by the great Easter storm which did so much damage. The iron sheets were flung like a handful of pebbles across the street, knocking down Ama Serwah's stall. The old lady put Kwesi before the Native Authority Court for failing to pay for the loss, and this caused a first-class row which lasted us all through the rains.

The village certainly needed to be improved. The roads were laterite tracks from which the dust rose like thunder clouds whenever a lorry went through the place. Goats, chickens and sheep wandered about its alleys and slept in the doorways. We were always complaining of the difficulty of getting supplies from the nearby town, and to hear the women grumble you would think that it was unusual to walk a mile or so to fetch water from the pool. Still, we accepted the life; it had been lived a long time, as we all knew, and if there had been nothing to complain of we might have quarrelled much more often among ourselves than we do now.

We hadn't any local council either. The chief was well liked, and we saw no reason to change. There had been talk of joining us up with the next village to form a "local authority area". The Government Agent was always on about it. But our neighbours were a grasping lot, always farming our land and trying to claim that it belonged to them, and we preferred our separate existence. I suppose it was this that made the Government down in Accra take up the idea of development. If we wouldn't join in a local council, it was because we were too set in our ways, and "development" would get us out of them. We understood all that. But when the Government Agent asked us whether we agreed to anything, we always said yes. It was easier in the long

run to agree and never did any harm. And as a matter of fact, on this occasion, we forgot all about the idea until one Wednesday morning when the chief beat “gong gong” to call us together. When we reached the palace there was *Nana* and an educated clerk sitting in the compound. I call him “educated” because he was obviously a town man, in neat city clothes, with a black book under his arm and pencils sticking in his hair. It turned out that he was a new clerk in the Government Agent’s office and had been sent to talk to us.

We listened to what he had to say, although we had heard most of it before: how we should think again about forming a local council, how we should pay the levy on time, why didn’t we help the local teacher and send our children to the mission school, did we not know that the Government had forbidden the making of *akpeteshie* because it was dangerous to drink, why had we not cleared the bush right down to the river. It was much like the regular routine visit, which kept the Government satisfied and left us alone, with the local Native Authority policeman standing there ready to walk round the village looking for *akpeteshie*, and having a quiet drink of it with the clerk behind the court house—until the clerk suddenly told us that the Government Agent had been so pleased when we had asked for his help that he was sending a Development Officer the following week to make a start.

We didn’t quite know what to make of this, and it soon slipped our memory—the next day being Thursday when we don’t farm, and a good week’s supply of liquor ready for use. I had business to do in Kumasi following week-end—I usually stock up with a few cases of corned beef and sardines for the store—and did not get back until late on Wednesday morning. The first thing I saw in the village was a large black car outside the chief’s house, with a Land Rover behind it stacked with pick-axes. The whole village had turned out to see what it was all about, and as I came up a tall thin European in blue shorts and shirt was standing in front of the crowd lecturing them. He couldn’t speak *twi* of course, but you could have told just by the way he waved his arms that he meant business. The chief looked as pleased as he could, but I could see that he was worried, and the elders sat in stony disapproval.

“Great changes are taking place in the country,” the European was saying through a rat-faced interpreter. “Last week I was in Accra and everywhere I could see great buildings going up,

good roads, good water, good schools. And what can be done in Accra can be done too in the villages." Well, I could have told him straight away that he was making a mistake. The one thing we detest hearing about is Accra and what the city crooks are doing with our money. Then before any one could stop him, he was off about our neighbours: how co-operative they were, how ready they had been for his help, how they said they were going to extend the lorry park and the market. ("So that they can put their prices up," shouted a voice, but this was hushed down.) Then he got on to us. He was worried about the water and the roads. Of course we agreed. If you ask anybody in our town whether this or that is good, you will always be told that everything is as bad as it can be. We don't boast and we like to grumble. So by the time the European had asked us about the latrines and the roads and the rains, and whether the harvest was good, and how we liked the new mission school, he must have thought we were ready for all the development there was in the country.

The only time he got stuck was when he suggested that we lined the streets with deep concrete gutters, and Tetteh Quarshie stood up and said, "No, that wouldnt do, he must have somewhere for his ducks to get food and drink." The European didn't quite know whether to take this seriously or not—and Tetteh stood there, bent with age and drink, clutching his cloth to his bony ribs and muttering like some one from the Kumasi asylum—so he left it and came to the point (which all of us could see he had fixed on long before he set foot in the town).

There was nothing wrong with the idea in theory. We were to dig out two or three wells by the forest path leading to the main road with the help of some "well-diggers", and a mason who knew how to case the sides with special concrete rings. We might have to dig twenty or thirty feet down, but there were plenty of rings and, when we were finished, the water in each well would stay sweet throughout the year. It took a long time to explain, but most of us soon grasped the idea. Only, we don't care to do things in a hurry. So the chief spoke for us all when, after politely thanking the officer for his trouble, he told him that we would discuss it and let the Government Agent know our decision. Up came little Francis Kofi with a basin of eggs which Opanin Kuntor handed to the clerk with a second round of thanks. And before the European knew what he was happening, the meeting had broken up and he was

being led to his car. Off it went in a cloud of dust, followed by the Land Rover, and we settled down again.

After this, of course, the letters began to arrive—"Your good friend this," "Your good friend that"; "His Honour was anxious to hear what we had decided"; "Could we agree to Monday week for the diggers to make a start?"; and so forth. We sat quiet and said nothing. There is no Post Office in our town, and the effort of getting stamps and paper is usually enough to deter the Chief from correspondence.

Monday came and went, so did Tuesday and Wednesday; and on Thursday we collected as usual at Kofi's bar. By three in the afternoon, we had started on the *akpeteshie*, and at half-past four no one noticed the arrival of the Government Agent and his car until he sent his clerk stumbling and sweating down the road to ask for Itals and the elders.

"He is not well," said Kofi Tandoh.

"He has travelled."

"He is mourning for his sister."

"He has the measles." This came from a young idiot of a schoolboy who had edged his way into the group.

The clerk stood first on one leg, then on the other, and scratched his head. He knew as well as we did that after half a bottle of *akpeteshie* the Chief might as well have travelled for all the help he could give. I believe the clerk said as much to the Government Agent, a fattish European with a red face and pale eyes, who immediately flew into a rage, cursed the Chief and the village, and then ordered the constable with him to go and seize the still and what was left of the liquor. But he was unlucky. We usually have two or three kerosene tins cooling off in Opanin Kuntor's yard, but this time, with the cocoa season over and a good number of funerals under way, we were down to a few bottles only. By the time he had collected these, and we sat there without raising a finger in apology or protest, Nana himself appeared. He was far from normal and came roaring out of the palace apparently thinking that he was celebrating the yearly *adae* festival. "Abrofo nyinaa akwaso," he was shouting, "afei oman yi nyinaa nkwaso, me Kweku Dua a me de 'Kuro yi nkwaso, mma me kote nwu mma m'ani mfura, mma m'ase nsi, mma me nya Aban amane."—"Long life to the white man and the people, myself Kweku Dua and the town; don't let my penis fail me, nor my eyes and ears close, don't let me quarrel with the Government."

The Government Agent gave him one look and drove off without a word. We all went back to sleep. But the next morning we were worried. We had a hurried meeting at the palace, brought in the schoolmaster to advise, and agreed that something must be done to turn away the wrath to come. The only way seemed to be "development". So we sent Francis Kofi on a bicycle with a letter drawn up by the teacher, with *Nana* and the elders making their mark.

It seemed to meet the case, for two days later the Land Rover came back, with the European. The site was cleared and we took it in turns to dig. It was easy work and unmarred by any mishap, except on the second night the European was with us when old Nyantechie went out before the moon rose to obey the call of nature, stumbled over one of the concrete rings and pitched into three feet of well. This brought out the European, twice as brave as Lugard, from the schoolroom where he had settled himself. He found Nyantechie on the ground nursing his ankle, crept back to the school and was shot at by the local escort constable who had't seen him go out and who fancied himself as something of a hunter.

Still, by the end of the week, the three wells were finished, with a concrete parapet and a rough awning of palm branches to keep out the dirt. There was a shallow depth of water in each, and as a parting gesture we all queued up, with the European and his clerk, to try it. It tasted terrible. But then, it was rare in our village for anyone to drink water except the children, and they complained that the water from the wells had no taste. The women like it all right, although I suspect that, being women, what they liked most was the opportunity it gave them of arguing who should have the first use of the buckets.

One might have thought that that was the end of it, with no great harm done and everyone turning back again to a normal life. But the village was uneasy. We didn't like it and wondered what might come next. Then Opanin Kuntor fell sick, and swore beyond reason that it was the well water which had brought him down. He told his maidservant to fetch his water from the pool again, recovered quickly and went round the village triumphant, warning everyone of what they might expect. Gradually, however, matters righted themselves. And we had something to take our minds off the Government in the "out-dooring" of Kwami Tweneboa's child. This was a high occasion.

Kwame was well over fifty, and although he had taken a second wife, neither had brought forth until now—and the woman herself was nearing forty. It called for a special celebration. We set to work, and Opanin Kuntor had the still going night and day in his yard. We had learned a lesson, too, from the previous occasion and decided to post sentries at the far edge of the village who would give the alarm should danger threaten: one shot for the local police, two for the Government Agent.

We slept well the night before the "outdooring". There wasn't a great deal to do on the farm so we ate and drank the day away, drank and gossiped into the night until the moon went down, when we went to bed and slept late. The next day, nearly the whole village went to pay their respects to the mother. The child, a boy, was named Osei Bonso after a famous ancestor of Kwame Tweneboa, and there was a good deal of friendly drinking, with the result that by mid-afternoon most of us were asleep again. The forenoon had been cloudy, with a leaden sky; but by midday a hot sun blazed from the pale blue shield of the sky, driving us into the shelter of the neem trees which straddled the road, or to the shade of the compounds. Goats and sheep browsed in the bush, and a stray hen scratched lazily in the scrubby ditch by the school where you could see the children sprawled across their desks or asleep on the verandah.

Suddenly, there was the sound of a double shot; then, to our astonishment, two more. There was immediate confusion. The Chief was still asleep; so were most of the elders. They were shaken into some kind of order while Opanin Kuntor hurried off to hide what was left of the *akpeteshie*. The rest of us collected round the chief's compound and held ourselves in reserve. There was the sound of a car, then another; the Government Agent's Vanguard pulled up outside the palace, with the driver signalling to a large touring car which followed to do the same. The Union Jack fluttered from the bonnet of the second car, and the driver—a uniformed constable—carefully chaperoned from the back seat an elderly European. Some one recognized him as the Regional Officer whom most of us knew to be next in power and glory to the Governor, if not to God Himself.

After the customary greetings had been made, with the Government Agent trotting up and down in attendance on the big man, we were told that the Regional Officer was interested in our town, that he had heard of our efforts to "improve the

amenities of the district through self-help," and had been good enough to interrupt a tour of inspection to visit us. This was said by the Government Agent in such solemn, satisfied tones that it was clear that, by digging the wells, we had helped more than ourselves.

Nana and the elders received this with perhaps less enthusiasm than they should have shown; they were alarmed at the second visit of the Government Agent, distrusted his intentions, and were concerned—as we all were—by the possible fate of the still and the rest of the drink. So it was with relief that we heard the Regional Officer saying that he would like to see the wells, and we led the way down the narrow path. Of course, when we got there, the Government Agent, with great satisfaction, thought he would like a drink. One of the women lowered the bucket into the nearest well and hauled it up on the rope. The Government Agent dipped a calabash into the half-bucket of water and handed it with delight to the Regional Officer who took a good mouthful, swallowed, then tried to spit it out, choking and spluttering with an agonized grimace. The Government Agent stared in amazement, and we looked uneasily at each other.

"Try it," said the Regional Officer, and spat into the bush; "Try it yourself," and he wiped his mouth with a folded handkerchief, still coughing and spitting, his eyes watering.

The Government Agent took a cautious sip, and a look of absolute disbelief came over his face. He turned, spat and shouted: "Salifu, come here. Taste this." The constable driver came forward and took a long draught. "Fine," he said.

"What is it?"

"Gin, sir, Native gin."

"How the devil did it get in there?" said the Regional Officer.

We all tried it then, including *Nana* who stood between the two Europeans with the *Gyasehene*. If possible, we looked even more astonished than they. None of us said anything, however, for the few who guessed what had happened didn't care to tell. Eventually *Nana* spoke; and it says much for his presence of mind that he kept a serene countenance and a solemn note to his voice.

"Owura," he said, addressing the Regional Officer, "what has been done was necessary and right. The spirits are angry that we have left our forefathers' ways and the pool from which

my father and his father's father drew their water. For this reason we have purified the well and placated the spirits with a little gin." "A little!" exclaimed the Regional Officer. "What would it have tasted like if you had put in a lot?"

"*Akpeteshie?*" asked the Government Agent sharply.

"No, no," said the Chief, with a dignified air. "That is not allowed, although it would have been better and cheaper." The Government Agent looked at the Regional Officer who said nothing. Then they turned and walked back to the village. I could see that the Regional Officer was amused; and slowly his good humour spread. By the time we reached the village there was a pleasant, unspoken accord between the two sides. Beer was fetched, and a bottle of whisky; the health of the Regional Officer, the Government Agent, the Chief and Elders, the village, and Kwame Tweneboa, were drunk. Finally, the two cars moved off, and we went back to the palace.

"How much did you put in there?" asked the Chief.

"Itals, it was three kerosene tins full," said Opanin Kuntor. "I was afraid. But I put the tins in complete. They must have leaked."

"Ah," said the Chief. "I'm sure they did."