

The Ill-Fated Hunting Expedition – Sample Chapter

IT WAS LATE AFTERNOON on Sunday December 3, 1939. The sun, the faithful and trustworthy friend of the residents of Kojokrom, was making its final rounds of the day in the blue skies high above the little settlement.

As was usually the case on almost every day of the year, the sun's journey through the tropical skies had begun around 6 o'clock in the morning. Around midday, it had assumed a position in the sky almost perpendicular to that of the little town. The sky was clear, blue and deprived of clouds, leading the community directly exposed to the intense heat emanating from its heavenly host. Everyone felt the heat and sought shelter under the roofs of the homes or under the shades of large trees.

After about three hours of a scorching midday heat, temperatures began to drop a few degrees. The villagers had still about three hours to get things done before the final departure of their daily heavenly visitor would plunge the little settlement into deep darkness. Devoid of electricity, they would have to resort to traditional-style kerosenepowered miners' lanterns and Swiss kerosene lamps to find their way in the dark.

Familiar with the short transitional time between the departure of the sun in the skies and the arrival of darkness, which on nights deprived of moonlight could be so thick as to seem almost palpable, creating the impression of the surrounding world being draped in a blanket of darkness, the three teenagers on a hunting expedition decided to call off their hunt and return home before the onset of darkness.

Though neither Attah Panin nor his identical twin brother Attah Kakra, nor Nyamekye their friend, possessed a watch, they had learnt, just like most others in the community, to use their shadows to estimate the time of day. In the morning, their shadows were long and to their left; at midday they assumed a short stature beneath them; towards the evening they became elongated again, but this time to the right side of their bodies.

The hunting expedition had been undertaken in spite of the disapproval of Asoh, the mother of the twins.

"Let's go hunting for Gambian pouched rats!" Nyamekye had come up with the idea as the three were out playing the night before. Nyamekye, though still a teenager, could well be described as a seasoned hunter. With the two dogs of his parents as his aid, he seized any opportune moment to go out hunting, targeting in particular Gambian pouched rats and grass cutters, all of which abounded in the thick tropical forest that surrounded the town.

"It's not a bad idea!" Kakra concurred. "We could give part of the catch to our parents and sell what is left and keep the money for ourselves!"

"Kakra and money; always coming up with plans to make money!" Panin retorted.

"My good brother, the reality is that without money you are nothing!"

"That does not mean we should spend all our time thinking about it!"

"You don't have to strive for it with the main intention of keeping it

for yourself”, his junior brother countered, adding, “But there is nothing wrong in seeking it for yourself and using part to help others in need!”

“This is no time for a philosophical reflection on the matter of money, Panin and Kakra”, Nyamekye cut in. “Are you joining me in the venture, yes or no?”

“Joining you!” the twin brothers replied as if with a single voice.

“Okay then, see you tomorrow! Are you coming with your dog?”

“He is good for nothing, our Big Ben!” Kakra laughed. “He cannot even catch a mouse!”

“Okay, then you can leave him to relax at home. I will come with our two dogs. They are really well versed in the business.”

Not long after that, they left for their respective homes.

As Panin and Kakra headed home, they knew their decision to accompany Nyamekye the next day wouldn’t go well with their parents, especially Asoh, their mother. The devoted Catholic that she was, she would almost certainly explode with fury at their decision to go hunting on a Sunday instead of accompanying her to church. Their father, Duku, wouldn’t be a problem. Though he was also a Catholic and attended church just as regularly as his wife, he was not as devoted.

It was his habit to visit the palm wine tappers’ hut, a drinking spot in the village, to enjoy one or two calabashes of palm wine – a whitecoloured alcoholic drink obtained by tapping the sap of the oil palm tree.

On his return home, his behaviour often led Asoh to suspect his mind had, even if temporarily, been taken over by alcohol, and she would confront him with these words:

“It is not a good Christian practice to drink!”

“Madam, did you not hear the passage read in church recently, I mean the one concerning Jesus turning water into wine?”

“That’s no licence to drink!”

“Drink, but not to get drunk!”

“But you appear drunk already.”

“Who is drunk?”

“I can smell alcohol on your breath!”

“In whose breath?”

“Yours!”

“It’s probably from my hands; I had to hold the calabash to drink from it!”

“You better be careful, my dear! That is how it all began with my uncle. ‘Drink, but don’t get drunk!’ he used to tell everyone who cautioned him about his excessive drinking habit. In the end he lost control over his drinking. At that stage, everyone was calling him ‘oweeye!’ (the Alcohol Addicted!). He kept on drinking until his belly became swollen, just like that of a heavily pregnant woman. One day he collapsed and died on the spot!”

Duku always sought a good opportunity to end the discourse with his other half before it turned into what he termed a never-ending moral lecture.

Indeed, he had been married to the woman he had in the meantime nicknamed “the Parrot” long enough to realise that unless he gave in on such occasions, she would continue to squawk on and on like a parrot – till who knew when?

On rising the next morning, instead of heading for the riverside to fetch water to wash in preparation for attending church, Panin and Kakra put on the worn-out khaki-coloured pair of shorts and blue T-shirts they usually wore when joining their parents for work on the farm. On seeing her boys clothed in this manner, Asoh immediately questioned them.

“What is the matter with you boys? No one is going to the farm today, so why put on these shabby clothes?”

“Going hunting!” Kakra replied boldly.

“Going what!?” Asoh inquired, not believing her ears.

“We’re going hunting – going after rats, grass cutters, squirrels!”

Kakra stated emphatically. Though the younger of the two, he had virtually assumed the role of spokesperson for the pair, ahead of his more reserved senior brother.

“You are going nowhere!” Asoh stated unequivocally, her anger clearly written on her face.

“Please!” both brothers pleaded.

“No; not on a Sunday!”

“Please give us this last chance!” Kakra persisted. “We hope to make a good catch. We shall donate half of whatever we get to the family and sell the rest for our pocket money.”

“No!”

“Please!”

“No!”

“What’s the matter?” inquired Duku, who had just returned home from a visit to the community male latrine at the outskirts of the little settlement.

“They are going hunting on a Sunday instead of attending church!”

“Leave them alone, Asoh! My boys are of age, so leave them to decide for themselves!”

“You, Duku!” Asoh replied, exasperated. “You must teach your children to serve the Lord!”

“But that is exactly what they do every day, my two decent, loving and polite boys – they let their light shine!”

“Going in search of rabbits and rodents on a Sunday, instead of going to church is not a good way of letting one’s light shine in the world!”

“I believe in practical Christianity rather than in Christian formalities. As far as I am concerned, one does not have to attend church every Sunday to be a good Christian. Have you forgotten the Bible passage read at church last Sunday... ‘The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath’!”

“Enough of that, Duku! You’re always quoting Bible verses to excuse the shortcomings in your Christian walk!” Asoh burst out, hardly able to hide her fury with the three male gang members of the family, as she sometimes called them whenever they stood together against her. As might be expected, Panin and Kakra were delighted by the intervention of their father and stood firm in their decision to join Nyamekye in the hunting expedition. Asoh, on her part, realising there was little she could do to dissuade them from their plans, kept quiet. Shortly after breakfast Nyamekye, accompanied by his two hunting dogs, Poor No Friend and Jack Tiger, came to call his two friends.

“Take good care of yourselves, boys”, Duku advised them as they set out. “Don’t wait till it turns dark before returning home!”

“Don’t forget to pray for us Mama”, Panin said, turning to Asoh.

“I will. This is going to be the last Sunday you are going on a hunting expedition instead of attending church – okay?”

“Well noted!” her boys replied in one voice.

As already indicated, the expedition was aimed in particular at grass-cutters, Gambian pouched rats and squirrels.

The grass-cutter, also known as the greater cane rat, belongs to a small family of African rodents. They can grow to about two feet in length in the longest individuals and attain a weight of about 20 pounds. The grass-cutter has rounded ears, a short nose, and coarse, bristly hair. They feed on grasses and cane; they also have a taste for cultivated foods, in particular maize and sugar cane. They were quite common in that area, inhabiting the thickets of the thick vegetation.

Also known as African giant pouched rats, the Gambian pouched rats on their part usually dwell in hillocks and termite mounds. They hide in their homes during the day and at night venture out under the cover of darkness to look for food – which is made up in the main of vegetables, insects, palm fruits, etc.

The hunting expedition turned out to be a wearisome venture with a meagre outcome. On a few occasions the intrepid hunters, assisted by their dogs, had given chase to grass-cutters hidden in the thick undergrowth. On all such occasions, the rodents virtually vanished into thin air before they could catch up with them.

The boys had had little luck with the Gambian pouched rats as well. On about half a dozen different occasions much effort was expended to provoke them to come out of their respective hideouts in the mounds, only for them to escape before their eyes.

It was long after midday, just as they were about to call it quits and return home, when they managed to obtain the only “hunting trophy” of the day – not without great effort.

On their arrival at a particular hillock every sign gave evidence of its occupation – fresh claw marks left in passages and alleys leading into the heart of the hillock or mound.

To get the rat out of its hiding place, they cut off a long stalk from the surrounding bush, inserted it into one of the openings and moved it to and fro in an attempt to disturb the peace of the occupant and by so doing force it into the open. Despite all their efforts, the occupant appeared unimpressed. Initially, they thought of giving up and returning home.

“No, let’s give it a last try”, Nyamekye urged. “I just hate the idea of returning home empty-handed after all our efforts!”

So they embarked on the next stage, to stuff the openings into the hillock with dried leaves that had fallen from plants growing in the area, and then set them alight, in the hope of getting the occupant to come out of its hiding rather than get suffocated by the smoke. To get the smoke into the heart of the hillock, they used a makeshift fan woven from the branches of a nearby oil palm tree. That did the trick! Minutes later the poor beast emerged from one of the openings.

Poor No Friend who was guarding that opening, showed no mercy at all. Pouncing on the animal, it grabbed it by the neck and mercilessly

bit it to death.

With at least one trophy in their hand, they called off the expedition and embarked on the walk back home. The expedition for the day was conducted mainly in a huge tropical rain forest that bordered the little town. Because they had penetrated so deep into the vegetation, they were about one and half kilometres away from home. They would have to walk about three hundred metres along a bush path in the heart of the forest before joining a rough, rugged road that vehicles scarcely frequented, that led to Kojokrom.

As they learnt from their parents, in former times the only way residents of Kojokrom and the neighbouring villages and hamlets could reach Oseikrom, the comparatively large town located on the trunk road leading to Kumasi, was by way of a bush path similar to the one they were treading.

Residents of the area did not only have to walk the distance of approximately five kilometres to Oseikrom to catch the next available vehicle to their various destinations, they also had to carry their dried cocoa beans ready for sale, on their heads, to the purchasing agents at Oseikrom. From there, further transportation would be required to reach the port at Takoradi.

As the production of cocoa beans, a good source of foreign exchange for the colony, increased, the colonial administration, probably on grounds of economics rather than love for the population, decided to extend the road from Oseikrom to Kojokrom.

The road in the meantime did not only facilitate the transportation of cocoa; it also facilitated the carting of tropical timber, abundant in the thick forest of the area, for further transportation to the port at Takoradi for export to far distant lands.

But for the trucks that turned up occasionally to cart timber and cocoa beans, the road was less frequently travelled. Indeed, days, sometimes weeks, went by without any vehicle turning up at Kojokrom, leaving residents who had something to do at Oseikrom and beyond little choice other than to undertake the journey to Oseikrom on foot.

Just about a hundred metres before the bush path joined the main road, Panin, who was walking behind the group, all of a sudden called out:

“Keep on going, boys! I’ll catch up with you in a moment.”

“What’s the matter?” Kakra inquired.

“I said, keep going!”

“What’s the matter?” Kakra persisted.

“Typical Kakra!” Nyamekye remarked. “As always, poking his nose into Panin’s affairs!”

“That’s exactly what he also does to me”, Kakra said in defence.

“I have to obey the call of nature! Are you satisfied, Mister Kakra?”

“Yes, I am, my dear. Take good care of yourself!”

“I will; see you soon.”

So saying, Panin made for the woods.

Just as they stepped on the main road from the bush path, Kakra and Nyamekye saw a military truck on the road, heading towards Kojokrom. It pulled to a stop on reaching them. There was a passenger beside the driver in the front compartment. Pretending they wanted to ask them the

way, they beckoned the boys to come near to the front cabin. "Is this the way leading to Kojokrom?" the driver inquired as the two approached.

"Yes indeed, we are also heading for that village", Nyamekye replied. Just at that moment two men in military uniform, each holding a gun, sprang out of the back of the vehicle and charged up to the boys, pointing the guns at them.

"Stand still, or else we shoot you!" one of them shouted at them.

"Climb into the vehicle!" the second man ordered them.

"Please, please!" both begged in unison.

"Hurry up and get on board if you wish to live!"

They hesitated a moment to follow the instructions, which caused the men to kick them violently, their military boots inflicting pain on their poor victims.

"Adjeyiii! Adjeyiii!! Adjeyiii!!" Kakra and Nyamekye shouted at the top of their voices, as if with a single voice, putting up as much resistance as they dared. Their words were in Twi (Twi being the language spoken by the Akan ethnic group) and expressed their distress and fright. "Adjeyiii! Adjeyiii!! Adjeyiii!!" they repeated the agonising cry a few times.

Meanwhile the dogs had begun to bark loudly.

"Get on board, boys!" one of the men shouted. "I'm counting up to 10. On the count of 10, I'll blow your brains out of your stupid heads if you are not in the vehicle!"

Sensing the seriousness of the situation, Nyamekye decided to give up any resistance and follow the instructions of their captors; he beckoned Kakra to do likewise.

Hardly had they climbed into the back of the vehicle when the driver set it in motion. Instead of heading in the direction of Kojokrom, it quickly turned and headed back in the direction from which it had come.

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Panin had initial difficulty pressing the waste out of his bowels. He seemed to be constipated, quite unusual for him. After pressing and pressing for a few minutes, he was done with it. Soon he was back on the path the others were treading. He hurried to catch up with them. Just as he was about 20 metres away from the road he was heading towards, he suddenly heard the loud screaming and yelling of the other two.

"Adjeyiii! Adjeyiii!! Adjeyiii!!" – accompanied by the loud and fierce barking of the dogs.

Panin ran towards the scene as fast as his legs could carry him, wondering what the hell was going on.

As he approached the scene, he could also hear the loud noise of an engine as well as the screeching of tyres – akin to that of a vehicle attempting to speed away.

Panin reached the road just in time to see the last traces of a dark green truck as it disappeared around a bend in the road, leaving behind it a trail of dust, the two dogs in hot pursuit. To his utter consternation, Kakra and Nyamekye were nowhere to be seen!!

Was it out of desperation, was it because he seemed momentarily to

have lost his mind, that Panin pursued the vehicle with all the strength he could muster, calling on the top of his voice the names of Kakra and Nyamekye as he gave chase?

After running wildly after the vehicle for several hundred metres, the reality of the situation began to dawn on him – the two had been forcefully abducted. For several minutes, he cried uncontrollably! For a while he thought he was in a dream – a nightmare for that matter. Kojokrom was a serene, peaceful little town; but for the rough, bumpy, little-used road ending at its very centre, it may well be described as a minute spot at the end of the world – literally cut off from the rest of the world. That such an isolated location could be the scene of such a spectacular abduction was beyond his comprehension. He wondered who was behind the forceful seizure.

There had been rumours of people going about in search of human body parts to be used in rituals. The rumours had it that such criminals pounced on their innocent victims in isolated locations, killed them in cold blood, took their body apart, removed the parts they needed for their rituals and either buried what was left of the bodies in hastily dug shallow graves or left them to the mercy of the elements.

Such seizures were purported to happen in the most isolated places. The perpetrators were said to resort to the method of ambushing. Hiding in the bush in pairs or in small groups, they were said to pounce on victims who happened to be passing by alone.

That was, however, a far cry from what he had just witnessed – a truck being used to forcefully seize two individuals they had come across by chance, reverse direction and speed away with their victims to “only God knows where” was incomprehensible to him.

Dazed, confused, unable to control his tears, almost paralysed by his emotions, he finally decided to head for home. The sun was setting; it would soon turn dark, so he had to hurry.

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Meanwhile the truck in which Kakra and Nyamekye had been abducted was speeding away, shaking violently as it sped along the rugged, pothole-ridden road.

The scene that met their eyes on climbing into the truck left them with little doubt as to the seriousness of the situation they found themselves in. Lying on mats spread on the floor of the vehicle, blindfolded and handcuffed, were three other captives, one of them about Kakra’s age, the other two about 10 years older. Keeping a close watch over them was a third soldier, also armed.

Kakra and Nyamekye were immediately blindfolded, handcuffed and ordered to lie on the floor, just like the other three, by the two soldiers who had been directly involved in their abduction.

After travelling a considerable distance over a stretch of road which, judging by the way the vehicle kept on shaking all the time they travelled, had a rough and bumpy surface, the vehicle suddenly pulled to a halt. Kakra wondered what the matter was.

“Anyone wanting to obey the call of nature?” one of three men guarding them inquired in the Twi language.

Was he aware not everyone in the vehicle was conversant with

the Twi language? Perhaps he was, for he repeated the instruction in a language that sounded like Hausa, a language spoken mostly in the north of the colony, and which was Latin in the ears of Kakra.

That was exactly what each of the captives had waited for, for each of them responded in the affirmative.

“You will be offered the opportunity to do so, one after the other”, the soldier said. “My colleague will escort you whilst I keep watch over the rest of you. Woe betide anyone who attempts to escape!” he warned, “That individual can count today his last day on earth! Has the message sunk in?” He addressed them first in Twi, then in the strange language already referred to.

“Yes”, Kakra responded meekly.

The four remaining did likewise.

As the first captive was led away, Kakra took advantage of the situation to put forward further demands.

“I do not only have the urge to open my bladder, I also feel thirsty and hungry!” he stated,

“Hungry and thirsty!” one of the officers who seemed to be the leader of the group howled at him. “We don’t have anything on board for you. You have to wait until we get to our destination.”

It took several minutes for each of the five captives to have the opportunity to empty his bladder, and in two cases to open the bowels as well.

Finally, after a break lasting about half an hour, the journey was resumed.....