The Dark Child, properly speaking, is not a novel. It is an autobiographical story to be read at one sitting, yet Camara Laye, with very simple means and without apparent art, manages to keep the reader in suspense until the end as in a work of pure fiction.

What gives it its charm, in my opinion, is the aura of dignity with which he has surrounded his family and his people as he paints them with candid sincerity, full of reserve and politeness, albeit without reticence. The measured frankness and tone of courteous modesty added to the authenticity of the testimonial catch one's attention from the very first lines.
I am afraid that those who would open this book with the thought of satisfying a hunger for the picturesque or escaping for a moment from the ennervating condition of "civilized" man will be left unappeased. Unless they absolutely insist upon it, prejudice being stubborn, they will not find the classic "darkest Africa" nor the "prelogical mentality" so dear to the heart of the armchair traveler.

Of course, the book deals with animistic beliefs and practices, spirits intervene in the day-to-day life and a whole chapter is devoted to the rites of circumcision, but obviously the basis of the story is not to be found here. It is primarily universal man, man unqualified, with whom we are concerned. As a matter of fact, Camara Laye was born at Kouroussa in French Guinea, a country with an old civilization. He is descended from the black Sudanese who in the Middle Ages founded the fabulously rich Mali Empire which was ruled for six centuries by the Moslem dynasty of the Keyats. If we are to believe the Arabian chroniclers of the time, the Malinké princes, who had about them theologians, scholars and musicians, carried on normal diplomatic relations and trade with the sovereigns of Morocco, Egypt and Portugal.

"The caravans," Roger Vercel tells us, "would go down to the South, charged with salt, dates, figs, coral and textiles. They came back laden with ivory and ebony, rich with gold powder and ostrich feathers."

The most famous of the Mali Emperors, Kango Moussa, known as Moussa I, made a memorable pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324, with thirty kios of precious powder and an impressive party of learned men, warriors and slaves, computed with characteristic oriental generosity as numbering between 8,000 and 60,000 persons. In Cairo, where they stopped on the journey to Mecca as well as on the journey back, the Sudanese made such extravagant purchases and gifts that the value of gold was affected—the misfal fell from twenty-five to less than twenty-two drachmas.

But Kango Moussa did not frequent only the luxurious bazaars of Cairo. "The bookstores received his visits," Theodore Monod informs us, and when he returned to the Sudan, he brought back with him "a whole library of Canonical law." Besides, he was accompanied by a distinguished scholar whom he had met at Mecca, the Andalusian Abou Ichak el Ghar-nati, a poet and architect, who later built him palaces and mosques of rough-cast stone and acacia-wood frames, with crenellated terraces and pyramid-shaped minarets as well as an audience chamber in the Egyptian style, "decorated with brilliant arabesques."

Victim of the envy of neighboring states, the Mali Empire fell in the 15th century. Soon the Negroes of Upper Guinea like their brothers from the coast were subjected to the raids of the slave trade for the greater profit of the traders and planters of the New World. The French colonization came later. Thus a quick darkness fell over the history of this people, which has been dispelled to some extent by the Arabian chroniclers of the past. But the griots, those troubadours of black Africa, still recall to the Malinkés of today the deeds of their ancestors.

Probenius has collected some of these legends (African Genesis, Stackpole Sons, New York, 1937). It is quite interest-
ing to compare their style with that of *The Dark Child* and to find in them the same biblical sweep, the same parallelism and repetitions:

Four times Waguđu stood there in all her splendor. Four times Waguđu disappeared and was lost to human sight: once through vanity, once through falsehood, once through greed and once through disension. Four times Waguđu changed her name. First she was called Diera, then Agada, then Gonna, then Silla. Four times she turned her face. Once to the north, once to the west, once to the east and once to the south. For Waguđu, whenever men have seen her, has always had four gates: one to the north, one to the west, one to the east and one to the south. Those are the directions whence the strength of Waguđu comes, the strength in which she endures no matter whether she be built of stone, wood and earth or lives but as a shadow in the mind and longing of her children. For really, Waguđu is not of stone, not of wood, not of earth. Waguđu is the strength which lives in the hearts of men and is sometimes visible because eyes see her and ears hear the clash of swords and ring of shields, and is sometimes invisible because the indomitable of men has overtired her, so that she sleeps. Sleep came to Waguđu for the first time through vanity, for the second time through falsehood, for the third time through greed and for the fourth time through disension. Should Waguđu ever be found for the fourth time, then she will live so forcefully in the minds of men that she will never be lost again, so forcefully that vanity, falsehood, greed and disension will never be able to harm her.

—*Gastire's Lute*, pp. 97-98

Yet Camara Laye does not speak to us of his people's past. He makes neither direct reference nor the slightest allusion to it, and he is content to evoke for us with emotional restraint the simple life of a dark child of the great plain of Guinea—a story told at first hand, since it is his own; but an awareness of this past helps us better to understand the psychology of the author and his characters. For me, this past—veiled as in a watermark—is always associated with the story, and I see it clearly in such remarks as this:

The woman's role in our country is one of fundamental independence, of great inner pride.

Or this other one:

Perhaps we remained silent because of pride, or because of loyalty to the school. I know now that whatever the reason, it was stupid of us to keep silent. Such beatings were utterly alien to my people's passion for independence and equality.

I am also impressed by the frequent use of the word dignity or of its implicit presence when he speaks of those near to him and those whom he respects and consequently loves, as in this portrait of his mother:

However, I am sure she walked away, as she always did, with great dignity. She had always held herself very erect, and that made her appear taller than she was.

I can not resist the temptation of applying to the whole Malinké people what he, an inhabitant of Kouroussa, tells us of the peasants of Tindican to whom he is so closely related:
I do not know how the idea of something rustic—I use the word in its accepted meaning: "lack of finesse, of delicacy"—became associated with country people. Civil formalities are more respected on the farm than in the city. Farm ceremony and manners are not understood by the city, which has no time for these things. To be sure, farm life is simpler than city life. But dealings between one man and another—perhaps because in the country everyone knows everyone else—are more strictly regulated. I used to notice a dignity everywhere which I have rarely found in cities. One did not act without duly considering such action, even though it were an entirely personal affair. The rights of others were highly respected. And if intelligence seemed slower it was because reflection preceded speech and because speech itself was a most serious matter.

These are cultural values that I feel should be emphasized, for I think that they have an interest at least equal to that of the superstitious practices to which the Malinkés still cling, despite their conversion to the Islamic religion, which already goes back about a thousand years. Throughout the world it is the primordial beliefs of mankind, particularly those of the popular religion, which are still the hardest. Thus the pagan worship of heroes, to mention but one instance, fully survives in the Catholic worship of saints. This also explains the ease with which the slaves of Brazil, Cuba and San Domingo (now Haiti), who were forcibly christianized on landing, in turn identified the saints with the Negro deities.

The conversion of the Malinkés, however, did not bring about the same syncretism. The Moslem religion was simply superimposed on the old African animism, discarding of course the principal gods to the advantage of Allah, while allowing the secondary spirits to survive just as they were. But fundamentally the difference is not important.

If it is true that animistic beliefs are general in Upper Guinea ("popular," in fact), there is nevertheless an élite which does not share them—men such as Camara Laye and his uncle Mamadou, who studies Arabian by himself so that he can better attune his conduct to the precepts of the Koran. But we are far afield from the intentions of the author, who wanted to tell his own story and touch the reader. We must admit that he has succeeded and that the book has the force of the nostalgia which spurred him to write it to relieve his exile at a time when he was far from his people. We are eager to know the rest—his life as a poor student in Paris, and most of all the return to his native land.

Philippe Thoby-Marcelin

Translated from the French by Eva Thoby-Marcelin
THE DARK CHILD
I was a little boy playing around my father's hut. How old would I have been at that time? I can not remember exactly. I must still 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 around 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 were always some lying around; they used to get broken off the fence of plaited reeds that marked
the boundary of our concession—and I thrust it into his 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, and the snake's jaws were terribly close to my fingers.

I was laughing. I had not the slightest fear, and I feel sure that the snake would not have hesitated much longer before biting his fangs in my fingers if, at that moment, Damany, one of the apprentices, had not come out of the workshop. He called my father, and almost at once I felt myself lifted off my feet: I was safe in the arms of one of my father's friends.

Around me there was a great commotion. My mother was shouting hardest of all, and she gave me a few sharp slaps. I wept, more upset by the sudden uproar than by the blows. A little later, when I was somewhat calmer and the shouting had ceased, my mother solemnly warned me never to play that game again. I promised, although the game still didn't seem dangerous to me.

My father's hut was near the workshop, and I often played beneath the veranda that ran around the outside. It was his private hut, and like all our huts built of mud bricks that had been pounded and moulded 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 was the bed, made of beaten earth like the bricks, and spread with a simple wicker-work mat on which lay a pillow stuffed with kapok. At the rear, right under the window where the light was strongest, were the tool-boxes. On the left were the fowls' house and the prayer rugs. At the head of the bed, hanging over the pillow and watching over my father's slumber, stood a row of pots that contained extracts from plants and the bark of trees. These pots all had metal lids and were profusely and curiously garlanded with chaplets of cowry shells; it did not take me long to discover that they were the most important things in the hut; they contained magic charms—those mysterious liquids that keep the evil spirits at bay, and, if smeared on the body, make it invulnerable to every kind of black magic. My father, before going to bed, never failed to smear his body with a little of each liquid, first one, then another, for each charm had its own particular property; but exactly what property I did not know: I had left my father's house too soon.

From the veranda under which I played I could keep an eye on the workshop opposite, and the adults for their part could keep an eye on me. This workshop was the main building in our concession, and my father was generally to be found there, looking after the work, forging the most important items himself, or repairing delicate mechanisms; there he received his friends and his customers, and the place resounded with noise from morning to night. Moreover, everyone who entered or left our concession had to cross the workshop. There was a perpetual coming and going, though no one seemed to be in any particular hurry; each had his bit of gossip; each lingered at the forge to watch. Sometimes I came near the door, but I rarely went in; everyone there frightened me, and I would run away as soon as anyone tried
to touch me. It was not until very much later that I got into
the habit of crouching in a corner of the workshop to watch
the fire blazing in the forge.

My private domain at that time was the veranda that
encircled my father's hut, my mother's hut, and the orange
tree that grew in the middle of the concession.

As soon as you crossed the workshop and went through the
door at the back, you would see the orange tree. Compared
with the giants of our native forests, the tree was not very
big, but its mass of glossy leaves cast a dense shade that kept
the heat at bay. When it was in flower a heady perfume per
vaded the entire concession. When the fruit first appeared we
were only allowed to look: we had to wait patiently until it
was ripe. Then my father, who as head of the family—and a
very large family it was—governed the concession, gave the
order to pick the fruit. The men who did the picking brought
their baskets one by one to my father, who portioned them
out among the people who lived in the concession and among
his neighbors and customers. After that we were permitted
to help ourselves from the baskets and we were allowed as
much as we liked! My father was open-handed; in fact, a
lavish giver. Any visitor, no matter who he was, shared our
meals; since I could never keep up with the speed at which
such guests ate I might have remained forever hungry if my
mother had not taken the precaution of putting my share
aside.

"Sit here," she would say, "and eat, for your father's sake."

She did not look upon such guests with a kindly eye. There
were too many for her liking, all bent on filling their bellies
at her expense. My father, for his part, ate very little; he was
an extremely temperate man.

We lived beside a railroad. The trains skirted the rear
dence of the concession so closely that sparks thrown off from
the locomotive set fire to is every now and then which had to
be quickly extinguished so that the whole concession would
not go up in smoke. These alarms, frightening yet exciting,
made me aware of the passing trains. And even where there
were no trains—for in those days the railroad was dependent
on a more irregular water traffic—much of my time was spent
watching the iron rails. They glinted cruelly in a light
which nothing in that place could relieve. Baking since dawn,
the roadbed was so hot that oil which dropped from the
locomotives evaporated immediately, leaving no trace. Was
it the oven-like heat or the smell of oil—for the smell remained
in spite of everything—which attracted the snakes? I do not
know. But often I came upon them crawling in that hot road-
bed. It would have been fatal if they had gotten into the
concession.

Ever since the day when I had been forbidden by my
mother to play with snakes I ran to her as soon as I saw one.
"There's a snake!" I would cry.

"What? Another?"

And she would come running 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 immediately beat it to
death; and, like all the women of our country, she would
work herself into a frenzy, beating the snake to a pulp. The
men consented themselves with a single hard blow, neatly
struck.
One day, however, I noticed a little black snake with a strikingly marked body. He was proceeding slowly in the direction of the workshop. I ran to warn my mother, as usual. But as soon as she saw the snake she said to me gravely:

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

Everyone in our concession knew that this snake must not be killed—everyone except myself, and I, suppose, my little playmates, who were still ignorant children.

"This snake," my mother added, "is your father's guiding spirit."

I gazed dumbfounded at the little snake. He was proceeding calmly toward the workshop, 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 a small hole in the wall, cut out level with the ground. The snake disappeared through this hole.

"Look," said my mother, "the snake 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 struck dumb. What business would a snake have with my father? And why this particular snake? No one was 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 surrounded me as I grew to manhood. There were good spirits, and there were evil ones; and more evil than good ones, it seemed. And how was I to know that this snake was harmless? He was a snake like the others: black, to be sure, with extraordinary markings—but for all that a snake. I was completely perplexed, but I did not question my mother: I had decided that I must ask my father about it, as if this were a mystery to be discussed only between men, a mystery in which women had no part. I decided to wait until evening to speak to him.

Immediately after the evening meal, when the palavers were over, my father bade his friends farewell and sat under the veranda of his hut; I seated myself near him. I began questioning him in a dilatory manner, as all children do, regarding every subject under the sun. Actually I was no more talkative than on other evenings. Only this evening I withheld what troubled me, waiting for the opportunity when—my face betraying nothing—I might ask the question which had worried me so deeply from the moment when I first saw the black snake going toward the workshop. 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."

"Yes," 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 concession? Was it not my father who had authority over all the blacksmiths in our district? Was he not the most skilled? Was he not, after all, my father?

"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 sleep and 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 him 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 under control or 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 him there and then; but a power greater than I stayed my hand and prevented me from pursuing him. I stood watching him disappear. And even then, at that very moment, I could 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 not receive me kindly; nay, rather I did perceive that 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 myself 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 the snake kindly when he made himself known to me a second time; I received him without fear, I received him with loving kindness, and he brought me nothing but good."

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

"You can see for yourself that I am not more gifted than other men, 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. 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, it is by virtue of this snake alone, who is the guiding spirit of our race. It is to this snake that I owe everything; it is he 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
motorcycle or bicycle breaks down, or when an accident happens to a clock: because I have had foreknowledge of what would come to pass. Everything is transmitted to me in the course of the nights together with an 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. These things 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 came back from a walk he would enter the workshop and say to the apprentices: "During my absence, this or that person has been here, he was dressed 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 at this curious knowledge. 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 sons, 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 same 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 he 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 will 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 an old man.

"Father!" I cried.

"Son..." he whispered.

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

"Go now," said my father.

I 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, and mine was a 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 did not come and I tossed restlessly on my bed.

"What’s the matter with you?" asked my mother.

"Nothing." No, I couldn’t find anything to say.

"Why don’t you go to sleep?" my mother continued.

"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 hurricane-lamp would not leave me: my father who had suddenly seemed so old and who was so young, so lively—Younger and livelier than the rest of us, a man no one could outrun, who was swifter of limb than any of us... “Father!... Father!...!” I kept repeating. “What must I do if I am to do the right thing?”

And I wept silently and fell asleep still weeping.

After that we never mentioned the little black snake again: my father had spoken to me about him for the first and last time. But from that time on, as soon as I saw the little snake, I would run and sit in the workshop. I would watch him glide through the little hole in the wall. As if informed of his presence, my father at that very instant would turn his eyes to the hole and smile. The snake would go straight to him, opening his jaws. When he was within reach my father would stroke him and the snake would accept the caress with a quivering of his whole body. I never saw 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 imagined I know not what mysterious conversations: the hand inquired and the tremor replied...

Yes. It was like a conversation. Would I too converse that way some day? No. I would continue to attend school. Yet I should have liked so much to place my hand, my own hand, on that snake, and to understand and listen to that tremor too; but I did not know whether the snake would have accepted 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 coiled himself under the edge of one of the sheepskins on which my father, facing his anvil, was seated.
Of all the different kinds of work my father engaged in, none fascinated me so much as his skill with gold. No other occupation was so noble, no other needed such a delicate touch. And then, every time he worked in gold it was like a festival—indeed it was a festival—that broke the monotony of ordinary working days.

So, if a woman, accompanied by a go-between, crossed the threshold of the workshop, I followed her in at once. I knew what she wanted; she had brought some gold, and had come to ask my father to transform it into a trinket. She had collected it in the places of Siguiri where, crouching over the
river for months on end, she had patiently extracted grains of gold from the mud.

These women never came alone. They knew my father well and other things to do than make trinkets. And even when he had the time, they knew they were not the first to ask a favor of him, and that, consequently, they would be saved from being the last.

Generally they required the trinket for a certain date, for the festival of Ramadan or the Tahaiki or some other family ceremony or dance.

Therefore, to enhance their chances of being served quickly and to more easily persuade my father to interrupt the work before him, they used to request the services of an official praise-singer, a go-between, arranging in advance the fee they were to pay him for his good offices.

The go-between installed himself in the workshop, tuned up his corn, which is our harp, and began to sing my father's praises. This was always a great event for me. I heard recalled the lofty deeds of my father's ancestors and their names from the earliest times. As the couplets were recited 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 with notes that were now soft, now shrill.

I could sense my father's vanity 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. She held out her grains of gold as if the whole matter were settled. My father took up his scales and weighed the gold.

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

"I want . . . ."

And then the woman would not know any longer exactly what she wanted because desire kept making her change her mind, and because she would have liked all the trinkets at once. But it would have taken a pile of gold much larger than she had brought to satisfy her whim, and from then on her chief purpose in life was to get hold of it as soon as she could.

"When do you want it?"

Always the answer was that the trinket was needed for an occasion in the near future.

"So! You are in that much of a hurry? Where do you think I shall find the time?"

"I am in a great hurry, I assure you."

"I have never seen a woman eager to deck herself out who wasn't in a great hurry! Good! I shall arrange my time to suit you. Are you satisfied?"

He would take the clay pot that was kept specially for smelting gold, and would pour the grains into it. He would then cover the gold with powdered charcoal, a charcoal he prepared by using plant juices of exceptional purity. Finally, he would place a large lump of the same kind of charcoal over the pot.

As soon as she saw that the work had been duly undertaken, the woman, now quite satisfied, would return to her household tasks, leaving her go-between to carry on with the praise-singing which had already proved so advantageous.
At a sign from my father the apprentices began working two sheepskin bellows. The skins were on the floor, on opposite sides of the forge, connected to it by earthen pipes. While the work was in progress the apprentices sat in front of the bellows with crossed legs. That is, the younger of the two sat, for the other was sometimes allowed to assist. But the younger—this time it was Sidafa—was only permitted to work the bellows and watch while waiting his turn for promotion to less rudimentary tasks. First one and then the other worked hard at the bellows: the flame in the forge rose higher and became a living thing, a genie implacable and full of life.

Then my father lifted the clay pot with his long tongs and placed it on the flame.

Immediately all activity in the workshop almost came to a halt. During the whole time that the gold was being smelted, neither copper nor aluminum could be worked nearby, lest some particle of these base metals fall into the container which held the gold. Only steel could be worked on such occasions, but the men, whose task it was, hurried to finish what they were doing, or left it abruptly to join the apprentices gathered around the forge. There were so many, and they crowded so around my father, that I, the smallest person present, had to come near the forge in order not to lose track of what was going on.

If he felt he had inadequate working space, my father had the apprentices stand well away from him. He merely raised his hand in a simple gesture: at that particular moment he never uttered a word, and no one else would: no one was allowed to utter a word. Even the go-between's voice was no longer raised in song. The silence was broken only by the panting of the bellows and the faint hissing of the gold. But if my father never actually spoke, I know that he was forming words in his mind. I could tell from his lips, which kept moving, while, bending over the pot, he stirred the gold and charcoal with a bit of wood that kept bursting into flame and had constantly to be replaced by a fresh one.

What words did my father utter? I do not know. At least I am not certain what they were. No one ever told me. But could they have been anything but incantations? On these occasions was he not invoking the genies of fire and gold, of fire and wind, of wind blown by the blast-pipes of the forge, of fire born of wind, of gold married to fire? Was it not their assistance, their friendship, their espousal that he besought? Yes. Almost certainly he was invoking these genies, all of whom are equally indispensable for smelting gold.

The operation going on before my eyes was certainly the smelting of gold, yet something more than that: a magical operation that the guiding spirits could regard with favor or disfavor. That is why, all around my father, there was absolute silence and anxious expectancy. Though only a child, I knew there could be no craft greater than the goldsmith's. I expected a ceremony; I had come to be present at a ceremony; and it actually was one, though very protracted. I was still too young to understand why, but I had an inkling as I watched the almost religious concentration of those who followed the mixing process in the clay pot.

When finally the gold began to melt I could have shouted aloud—and perhaps we all would have if we had not been forbidden to make a sound. I trembled, and so did everyone else watching my father stir the mixture—it was still a heavy
paste—in which the charcoal was gradually consumed. The
next stage followed swiftly. The gold now had the fluidity
of water. The genies had smiled on the operation!
"Bring me the brick!" my father would order, thus lifting
the ban that until then had silenced us.
The brick, which an apprentice would place beside the fire,
was hollowed out, generously greased with Galam butter.
My father would take the pot off the fire and tilt it carefully,
while I would watch the gold flow into the brick, flow like
liquid fire. True, it was only a very sparse trickle of fire, but
how vivid, how brilliant! As the gold flowed into the brick,
the grease sputtered and flamed and emitted a thick smoke
that caught in the throat and stung the eyes, leaving us all
weeping and coughing.
But there were times when it seemed to me that my father
ought to turn this task over to one of his assistants. They
were experienced, had assisted him hundreds of times, and
could certainly have performed the work well. But my father's
lips moved and those inaudible, secret words, those incanta-
tions he addressed to one we could not see or hear, was the
essential part. Calling on the genies of fire, of wind, of gold
and exorcising the evil spirits—this was a knowledge he alone
possessed.
By now the gold had been cooled in the hollow of the
brick, and my father began to hammer and stretch it. This
was the moment when his work as a goldsmith really began.
I noticed that before embarking on it he never failed to stroke
the little snake stealthily as it lay coiled up under the sheep-
skin. I can only assume that this was his way of gathering
strength for what remained to be done, the most trying part
of his task.
But was it not extraordinary and miraculous that on these
occasions the little black snake was always coiled under the
sheepskin? He was not always there. He did not visit my
father every day. But he was always present whenever there
was gold to be worked. His presence was no surprise to me.
After that evening when my father had spoken of the guiding
spirit of his race I was no longer astonished. The snake was
there intentionally. He knew what the future held. Did he
tell my father? I think that he most certainly did. Did he tell
him everything? I have another reason for believing firmly
that he did.
The craftman who works in gold must first of all purified
himself. That is, he must wash himself all over and, of course,
abstain from all sexual commerce during the whole time.
Great respecter of ceremony as he was, it would have been
impossible for my father to ignore these rules. Now, I never
saw him make these preparations. I saw him address himself
to his work without any apparent preliminaries. From that
moment it was obvious that, forewarned in a dream by his
black guiding spirit of the task which awaited him in the
morning, my father must have prepared for it as soon as he
rose, entering his workshop in a state of purity, his body
smeared with the secret potions hidden in his numerous pots
of magical substances; or perhaps he always came into his
workshop in a state of ritual purity. I am not trying to make
him out a better man than he was—he was a man and had his
share of human frailties—but he was always uncompromising
in his respect for ritual observance.
The woman for whom the trinket was being made, and who had come often to see how the work was progressing, would arrive for the final time, not wanting to miss a moment of this spectacle—as marvelous to her as to us—when the gold wire, which my father had succeeded in drawing out from the mass of molten gold and charcoal, was transformed into a trinket.

There she would be. Her eyes would devour the fragile gold wire, following it in its tranquil and regular spiral around the little slab of metal which supported it. My father would catch a glimpse of her and I would see him slowly beginning to smile. Her avid attention delighted him.

"Are you trembling?" he would ask.

"Am I trembling?"

And we would all burst out laughing at her. For she would be trembling! She would be trembling with covetousness for the spiral pyramid in which my father would be inserting, among the convolutions, tiny grains of gold. When he had finally finished by crowning the pyramid with a heavier grain, she would dance in delight.

No one—no one at all—would be more enchanted than she as my father slowly turned the trinket back and forth between his fingers to display its perfection. Not even the praise-singer whose business it was to register excitement would be more excited than she. Throughout this metamorphosis he did not stop speaking faster and ever faster, increasing his tempo, accelerating his praises and flattering as the trinket took shape, shouting to the skies my father’s skill.

For the praise-singer took a curious part—I should say rather that it was direct and effective—in the work. He was drunk with the joy of creation. He shouted aloud in joy, He plucked his cora like a man inspired. He sweated as if he were the trinket-maker, as if he were my father, as if the trinket were his creation. He was no longer a hired censer-bearer, a man whose services anyone could rent. He was a man who created his song out of some deep inner necessity. And when my father, after having soldered the large grain of gold that crowned the summit, held out his work to be admired, the praise-singer would no longer be able to contain himself. He would begin to intone the douga, the great chant which is sung only for celebrated men and which is danced for them alone.

But the douga is a formidable chant, a provocative chant, a chant which the praise-singer dared not sing, and which the man for whom it is sung dared not dance before certain precautions had been taken. My father had taken them as soon as he woke, since he had been warned in a dream. The praise-singer had taken them when he concluded his arrangements with the woman. Like my father he had smeared his body with magic substances and had made himself invulnerable to the evil genies whom the douga inevitably set free; these potions made him invulnerable also to rival praise-singers, perhaps jealous of him, who awaited only this song and the exaltation and loss of control which attended it, in order to begin casting their spells.

At the first notes of the douga my father would arise and emit a cry in which happiness and triumph were equally mingled; and brandishing in his right hand the hammer that was the symbol of his profession and in his left a ram’s horn filled with magic substances, he would dance the glorious dance.
No sooner had he finished, than workmen and apprentices, friends and customers in their turn, not forgetting the woman for whom the trinket had been created, would flock around him, congratulating him, showering praises on him and complimenting the praise-singer at the same time. The latter found himself laden with gifts—almost his only means of support, for the praise-singer leads a wandering life after the fashion of the troubadours of old. Aglow with dancing and the praises he had received, my father would offer everyone cola nuts, that small change of Guinean courtesy.

Now all that remained to be done was to redden the trinket in a little water to which chlorine and sea salt had been added. I was at liberty to leave. The festival was over! But often as I came out of the workshop my mother would be in the court, pounding millet or rice, and she would call to me: "Where have you been?" although she knew perfectly well where I had been.

"In the workshop."

"Of course. Your father was smelting gold. Gold! Always gold!"

And she would beat the millet or rice furiously with her pestle.

"Your father is ruining his health!"

"He danced the douga."

"The douga! The douga won't keep him from ruining his eyes. As for you, you would be better off playing in the courtyard instead of breathing dust and smoke in the workshop."

My mother did not like my father to work in gold. She knew how dangerous it was: a trinket-maker empties his lungs blowing on the blow-pipe and his eyes suffer from the fire. Perhaps they suffer even more from the microscopic precision which the work requires. And even if there had been no such objections involved, my mother would scarcely have relished this work. She was suspicious of it, for gold can not be smelted without the use of other metals, and my mother thought it was not entirely honest to put aside for one's own use the gold which the alloy had displaced. However, this was a custom generally known, and one which she herself had accepted when she took cotton to be woven and received back only a piece of cotton cloth half the weight of the original bundle.
I often spent a few days at Tindic, a tiny village west of Kouroussa where my mother had been born, and where her mother and brothers still lived. Since they were very fond of me, I was always delighted to visit them. They pampered me, especially my grandmother who made a festive occasion of my arrival. As for me, I loved her with all my heart.

She was a large woman, slender, erect, and robust. Her hair remained black as long as I knew her. Actually she was still young and had not given up farming although her sons, who were able-bodied men, tried to dissuade her from it. She disliked idleness and the secret of her youth can doubt
lay in constant activity. Her husband had died young, far too young. I never saw him. Sometimes she would talk to me about him, but never for very long. Tears soon interrupted her account, and I never learned anything about my grandfather, anything which might have given me a sense of the sort of person he had been—for my mother and my uncles did not talk about him either. In my country, the dead who have been much loved are hardly mentioned at all; we are too distressed when evoking such memories.

When I went to Tindican, my youngest uncle came to fetch me. Younger than my mother, he seemed nearer my age than hers. He was good by nature, and there was no need for her to remind him to keep an eye on me; he did so of his own accord. Since I was only a child, he would shorten his steps to suit my pace. He did this so effectively that we made the usual two hours’ walk to Tindican in four. But I was hardly aware of the length of the road, for all sorts of marvels lay along it.

I say “marvels,” for Kouroussa is actually a city and hasn’t any of those country sights which a city child always finds marvelous. As we walked along we were likely to dislodge a hare or a wild boar; birds flew away at our approach, with a great beating of wings; sometimes we would meet a crowd of monkeys. Every time something like this happened I felt a small thrill of excitement, for I was more startled than the game which had been suddenly alerted. Observing my pleasure, my uncle would throw a fistful of pebbles a long way ahead; or he would beat the tall grass with a dead branch, to dislodge birds and animals. I would imitate him, but never for very long. The afternoon sun beat fiercely on the savannah, and I would return to sit my hand into his. Once again we would go along quietly.

“Aren’t you getting too tired?” he would ask.

“No.”

“We could rest a bit if you’d like.”

He would choose a kapok tree whose shade he thought sufficiently dense, and we would sit down. He would tell me the most recent news from the farm: which cow had calved, and which had just been bought; which field had been plowed and what damage the wild bears had done. The newborn calves interested me the most.

“We have a new calf,” he would say.

“Who?” I would ask, for I knew each beast in the herd.

“The white cow’s.”

“The one with horns like a crescent moon?”

“Yes.”

“Ahh! And the calf. How is it?”

“Beautiful! Beautiful! It has a white star on its forehead.”

“A star?”

“Yes. A star.”

I would daydream a bit over this star. A calf with a star. It should become the leader of the herd.

“It must be very beautiful.”

“You couldn’t dream of anything more beautiful. Its ears are so rosy you’d think they were transparent.”

“I want to see it. Will we, when we get there?”

“Of course.”

“You’ll come with me to see it?”

“Of course. Chicken-heart!”

For I was afraid of the great horned beasts. My playmates
at Tindican were perfectly at ease with them in all sorts of ways. These children were not afraid to jump on the backs or hang from the horns of the animals. When I drove the cattle into the bush, I would watch them graze from a distance, but never came too close. I liked them, but their horns frightened me. To be sure, the calves did not have horns, but their movements were abrupt and unexpected, and one could not depend on them to stay in one place.

"Let's go on," I would say. "We've rested enough."

I was always in a hurry to get there. If the calf was in the corral I could pet it, for there the animals were quiet. I would put a little salt on the palm of my hand for the calf to lick. Its tongue gently grazed on my hand.

"Let's go," I would say again.

But my legs were too short for speed; my pace would slacken, and we would sooner along. Then it was that my uncle told me how the monkey had tricked the panther who was all ready to eat him, how the palm tree rat had kept the hyena waiting all night for nothing. These were stories I had already heard a hundred times, but I always enjoyed them and laughed so loudly that the wild fowl ahead of us took flight.

Before we had actually arrived at Tindican we would meet my grandmother who always came to greet us. I would slip my hand out of my uncle's and run toward her, shouting. She would pick me up and embrace me, and I embraced her in return, overcome with joy.

"How is my little husband getting on?" she would ask.

"Fine. Fine."

"Is that really so?"

And she would look at me and touch me to see if my cheeks were full and if I had anything but skin on my bones. If the examination satisfied her she congratulated me. If not—for growing had made me thin—she wept!

"See that. Don't they eat in the city? You're not to go back there until you've been decently fitted out with new feathers. You know what I mean?"

"Yes, grandmother."

"And your mother? And your father? They're all well at home?"

She waited for me to give her news of each one of them before she would set me down again.

"The journey hasn't overtired him?" she would ask my uncle.

"Not at all. We moved like tortoises, and here he is, ready to run as fast as a hare."

Then, only half-convinced, she would take me by the hand, and we would set out toward the village. I entered between my grandmother and my uncle, holding each by the hand. When we reached the first huts, my grandmother would shout:

"Good people! My little husband has arrived!"

The women would come out of their huts and run toward us, crying joyfully:

"But he's a regular little man. That's actually a little husband you have there."

They kept picking me up to embrace me. They examined my face closely, and not only my face but my city clothes which, they said, were quite splendid. They said that my grandmother was very lucky to have a little husband like me.
They rushed up from all sides as if the chief of the canton in person were making his entrance into Tindican. And my grandmother smiled with pleasure.

I was greeted in this way at each hut and I returned the greetings and it was important to me that the women with an exuberance equaling theirs. Then, as it was my turn, I gave news about my parents. It used to take us two hours to cover the one or two hundred metres between my grandmother’s hut and the first huts we had passed on the outskirts of the village. And when these excellent women did leave us, they went to oversee the cooking of enormous dishes of rice and fowl which they must bring us in time for the evening’s feast.

My uncle’s concession was enormous. If there were fewer inhabitants and it was less important than ours, it spread out nonetheless over an extensive countryside. There were corrals for the cows and goats, and granaries for rice and millet, for manioc, earth-nuts, and gombo. The granaries were like so many little huts built on stone foundations to keep out the dampness. Except for them, and for the corrals, my uncle’s concession was much like ours, but the wooden fence which protected it was stronger. In place of woven reeds, they had used heavy stakes which had been cut in the neighboring forest. The huts, though built like ours, were more primitive.

Since my uncle Lanasana was the eldest son, he had inherited the concession when my grandfather died. Actually he had a twin who might have inherited it, but Lanasana had been born first. Among my people the twin born first is the elder. On occasion the rights of the elder twin may be abrogated, for when there are twins one of them always has a stronger character than the other, and when this is the case—even if he is not the first-born—he becomes the heir.

As for my uncles, the twin born last might have been the heir, for he lacked neither prestige nor authority. But he had other ideas. He had no taste for farming and was rarely seen at Tindican. He led a roving life, and we knew where he was only by chance or when he made one of his infrequent visits. He had a taste for adventure. I saw him only once. He had returned to Tindican, and though he had been there only a few days, he thought of nothing but leaving it. I remember him as a most attractive man who talked a great deal. Indeed, he never stopped talking, and I never wearied of listening to him. He told me about his adventures, which were strange and bewildering, but which opened undreamed of vistas to me. He showered me with gifts. Was he taking special pains to please this schoolboy—for that was all I was—or was he naturally generous? I do not know. When I saw him leave for new adventures, I wept. What was his name? I don’t remember. Perhaps I never knew it. The few days he was at Tindican, I called him Bo, but this was also the name by which I called my uncle Lanasana. Twins are always called “Bo,” and this surname often makes people forget their proper names. Lanasana had two other brothers, one of whom had recently been married. The younger, the one who came to fetch me from Kokouassa, was engaged but still too young to marry. Thus it happened that two small families, those of each married uncle, also lived in the concession in addition to my grandmother and my youngest uncle. Usually when I arrived in the afternoon, my uncle Lana...
sana was still in the fields, and I went immediately to my grandmother's hut where I was to stay while at Tindican.

The inside of this hut resembled the one I shared at Kouroussa with my mother. There was even a calabash like my mother's for storing milk, covered like ours to keep out the soot, and hung in exactly the same way from the roof by three ropes, so that the farm animals could not get at it.

What made this hut remarkable, so far as I was concerned, were the ears of corn hung high in innumerable garlands, so arranged that they grew smaller and smaller as they reached the roof-top. The fire smoked the corn and protected it from termites and mosquitoes. These garlands could have been used as a rustic calendar: as harvest-time approached, their number decreased, and finally they disappeared entirely.

On these visits I only entered the hut to leave my clothes there. My grandmother thought that since I had traveled from Kouroussa to Tindican, it was first necessary for her to wash me. She wanted me clean, though she had no illusions I would remain that way. At least, she wanted me to begin my visit clean. She took me immediately to the bathing place, a small enclosed space near her hut, fenced in with reeds and paved with large stones. Then she went back to her hut, removed the pot from the fire, and poured the hot water into a calabash. When it had cooled to the right temperature, she brought it out, soaked me from head to foot with black soap, and rubbed me vigorously with a hempen sponge. The blood coursed through my veins, my face shone, and my hair was very black (for the dust had been washed out of it) as I left the hut and ran to dry myself in front of the fire.

My playmates would be there waiting for me.

"You have come back."
"I have come back."
"For long?"
"For a while."

Then, depending on whether I was thin or plump—for they too considered looks most important—but I was usually thin—I would hear:

"You're looking well."
"Yes."

Or:
"But you aren't plump!"
"I'm growing. When you're growing you can't be plump."
"That's so. But you aren't plump enough."

And they would fall silent for a while as they considered this growing period which makes city children thinner than country children. Then one of them would shout:

"Look at the birds in the field!"

This happened every year. There were always great flocks of birds attacking the crops and it was our chief task to drive them away.

"I have my slingshot," I would say.

I had brought it with me, never letting it out of my sight all the way, not even when I was grazing the cattle or watching the crops from the top of the lookout posts.

These posts played a very important part in my visit: they were platforms mounted on forked staves, and looked as if they were borne up by the rising tide of the harvest. They were everywhere. My playmates and I would mount
the ladder to one of them and aim with our slingshots at
the birds and sometimes at the monkeys which were de-
stroying the crops. At least that was what we were sup-
posed to do, and we did so without grumbling, either because it
pleased us, or because we felt it was our duty. Occasionally,
we became absorbed in other games, and forgot why we
were there. If I did not suffer for this forgetfulness, my play-
mates did; their parents were not slow to discover that the
crops were not being watched, and then—depending on how
much damage had been done—a sharp scolding or whipping
summoned the neglectful watchers back to vigilance. Duly
instructed in this way, we managed to keep an eye on the
crops, even if we were forever gossiping about matters hid-
den from our parents—usually our childish misdeeds. But our
cries and songs often sufficed to drive off the birds—all ex-
cept the millet-eaters which descended upon the fields in dense
flocks.

My playmates were extremely kind. They were excellent
companions though stronger than I and, indeed, rather
tough. In deference to the city boy sharing their country
games, they gladly kept their high spirits in control. Further-
more, they were full of admiration for my school clothes.

As soon as I had dried myself in front of the fire, I dressed.
Filled with envy, my playmates watched me put on my short-
sleeved khaki shirt, shorts of the same color, and sandals.
I also had a beret, which I hardly ever wore. The other
clothes made enough of an impression. These splendors
dazzled country boys whose sole article of clothing was a short
pair of drawers. I envied them their freedom of movement.
My city clothes, of which I had to be careful, were a great
nuisance, for they might become dirty or torn. When we
climbed to the lookout posts, I had to keep from getting
caught on the rungs of the ladders. Once on top I had to stay
away from the freshly cut ears of corn which were stored
there, safe from the termites, and which would later be used
as seed. And if we lighted a fire to cook the lizards or field-
mice we had killed, I dared not go too close lest the blood
stain my clothes or the ashes dirty them. I could only look
on as our catch was cleaned and the inside salted, prepara-
tory to being placed on the live coals. And I had to take all
sorts of precautions when I ate.

How I would have liked to have rid myself of those school
clothes fit only for city wear; and I most certainly would
have, had I had anything else to wear. I had come to the
country to run about, to play, to scale the lookout posts,
and to lose myself in the tall grass with the herds of cattle,
and of course I could not do any of these things without
spoilng my precious clothes.

As night fell, my uncle Lansana returned from the fields.
He greeted me in his usual shy fashion. He had very little
to say for himself. It is easy for men who work in the fields
all day long to fall into the habit of silence as they no end-
lessly over one thing and another. The mystery of things,
their how and why, conduces to silence. It is enough for such
men to observe things and recognize their impenetrability.
You can see this state of mind reflected in their eyes. My
uncle Lansana's glance was astonishingly sharp when it
lighted on something. But this rarely occurred. He remained
everly preoccupied, still in that reverie which he indulged
in endlessly in the fields.
When we were all together at mealtimes, I often stared at him. Usually after a time I was able to catch his eye. This pleased me, for my uncle was goodness itself, and, beside that, he loved me. I think he loved me as much as my grandmother did. I would return his shy smile and sometimes—
I always ate very slowly—I would forget to eat.
"You aren’t eating," my grandmother would say,
"I am too eating."

"Good. You must eat everything here."
But it would have been impossible to eat all the servings of meat and rice which had been cooked to celebrate my happy arrival. Not that my playmates were unwilling to help. They had been invited and came eagerly, bringing with them the appetites of young wolves. But there was too much food. It could never be consumed.
"Look how round my belly is!" I would hear myself saying.
Our bellies were round, and, seated close to the fire as we were, and stuffed with food, we would have fallen asleep had we been less full of energy. But we wanted to have a palaver like our elders. We hadn’t seen one another for weeks, perhaps months. We had many things, many new stories to tell one another, and this was the time for them.
In this fashion my first day in the country would end, unless someone brought out the tom-tom, for this was a special occasion. At Tindican the tom-tom was not heard every night.

December, dry and beautiful, the season of the rice harvest, always found me at Tindican, for this was the occasion of a splendid and joyful festival, to which I was always invited, and I would impatiently wait for my young uncle to come for me. The festival had no set date, since it awaited the ripening of the rice, and this, in turn, depended on the good will of the weather. Perhaps it depended still more on the good will of the genie of the soil, whom it was necessary to consult. If their reply was favorable, the genie, on the day before the harvest, were again supplicated to provide
a clear sky and protection for the reapers, who would be in danger of snakebite.

On the day of the harvest, the head of each family went at dawn to cut the first swath in his field. As soon as the first fruits had been gathered, the tom-tom signaled that the harvest had begun. This was the custom; I could not have said then why it was kept and why the signal was only given after the cutting of a swath from each field. I knew that it was customary and inquired no further. Yet, like all our customs, this one had its significance, which I could have discovered by asking the old villagers who retained this kind of knowledge deep in their hearts and memories. But I was not old enough nor curious enough to inquire, nor did I become so until I was no longer in Africa.

Today I am inclined to believe that these first swaths destroyed the inviolability of the fields. I do not remember that the reaping went in any particular direction, or if any offerings were made to the genii. Sometimes only the spirit of a tradition survives; sometimes only its form. Its outer garments, as it were, remain. Was that what was involved here? I cannot say. Although my visits to Tindican were frequent, I never stayed long enough to acquire a thorough knowledge of all that went on there. All I know is that the tom-tom sounded only after the first fruits had been gathered, and that we eagerly awaited the signal because we wanted to begin the work and escape into the refreshing shade of the great trees and the biting air of the dawn.

Once the signal had been given, the reapers set out. With them, I marched along to the rhythm of the tom-tom. The young men threw their sickles into the air and caught them as they fell. They shouted briefly for the pleasure of shouting, and danced as they followed the tom-tom players. I suppose it would have been wise to heed my grandmother's advice. She had warned me not to be too friendly with these players. But it would have been impossible for me to have torn myself away from their spirited music, from their sickles flashing in the rising sun, from the sweetness of the air and the crescendo of the tom-toms.

The season itself would not permit it. In December, everything is in flower. Everything is young. Spring and summer seem inseparable and, everywhere, the country, which, until now has been drenched with rain and dulled by heavy clouds, is radiant. The sky has never been clearer nor brighter.

Birds sing ecstatically. Joy is everywhere, erupts everywhere, and every heart is moved by it. This season, this beautiful season, stirred me deeply. And so did the tom-tom and the fresh air that our march acquired. It was a beautiful season, and everything in it—what wasn’t there in it? What didn’t it pour forth in profusion?—delighted me.

When they had reached the first field, the men lined up at the edge, naked to the loins, their sickles ready. My uncle Lansana or some other farmer—for the harvest threw people together and everyone helped everyone else—would signal that the work was to begin. Immediately, the black torsos would bend over the great golden field, and the sickles began to cut. Now it was not only the morning breeze which made the field tremble, but also the men working.

The movement of the sickles as they rose and fell was astonishingly rapid and regular. They had to cut off the stalk between the last joint and the last leaf at the same time that
they stripped the leaf. They almost never missed. This was largely due to the way the reaper held the stalks so as to cut them. Nonetheless, the speed of the sickle was astonishing. Each man made it a point of honor to reap as regularly and as rapidly as possible. As he moved across the field he had a bundle of stalks in his hand. His fellows judged him by the number and size of these bundles.

My young uncle was wonderful at rice-cutting, the very best. I followed him proudly, step by step, he handing me the bundles of stalks as he cut them. I tore off the leaves, trimmed the stalks, and piled them. Since rice is always harvested when it is very ripe, and, if handled roughly the grains drop off, I had to be very careful. Tying the bundles into sheaves was man's work, but, when they had been tied, I was allowed to put them on the pile in the middle of the field.

As the morning drew on, it became hotter. The air seemed to shimmer in a thick haze which was composed of a fine veil of dust from the trampled sod and the stubble. My uncle would wipe the sweat from his chest and forehead and ask for his water-jug. I would run to fetch it from under the leaves where it lay, all fresh and cool, and would bring it to him.

"Be sure to leave some for me," I would remind him. "Don't worry; I won't drink all of it."

He would take great swallows without touching the jug to his lips. "There now. That's better," he would say, handing me the jug. "This dust is sticking in my throat."

I would touch my lips to the jug, and immediately the freshness of the water would permeate my body. But refresh-
day-dreaming; my life did not lie here ... and I had no life in my father's forge. But where was my life? And I trembled at the thought of the unknown life ahead of me. Wouldn't it be simpler to take up my father's work? "School . . . school." I thought. After all, was I so fond of school? Perhaps I did prefer it. My uncles. . . Yes, certainly I had uncles who had followed in their father's footsteps without complaint. Others had taken a different course: my father's brothers had gone to Conakry; my Uncle Lansana's brother was . . . Where was he now? "Do you spend all your time day-dreaming?" my uncle would ask.

"Yes . . . No. . . I . . . ."

"If you keep this up, we won't be ahead any longer."

"I was thinking about Uncle Bo. Where is he now?"

"God knows. When he was here last he was . . . But I don't even know where he was! He's like a bird, never in the same place, can't stay on one tree. He needs the whole sky."

"Will I too be like a bird some day?"

"What's that?"

"But you just said Bo was like a bird."

"Do you want to be like him?"

"I don't know."

"Well, there's still time for you to make up your mind. Meanwhile, take this bundle.

And he started reaping again. He was dripping wet, but he returned to his work energetically, as if he were just beginning. And the heat bore down on us. The very air bore down. Fatigue suffused our bodies. Tumblers full of water couldn't have kept it away; We baled it with song.

"Sing with us," my uncle would command.

The tom-tom, which had followed as we advanced into the field, kept time with our voices. We sang as a chorus, now very high-pitched with great bursts of song, and then very low, so low we could scarcely hear. Our fatigue vanished, and the heat became less oppressive.

On such occasions, if I happened to stop work for a moment and look at that long, long line of reapers, I was always impressed and carried away by the infinite love and kindness of their eyes, as they glanced here and there. Yet, though their glances were also distant and preoccupied, though they seemed miles from their task, they never slighthearted. Hands and sickles moved without interruption.

And, what actually were they looking at? At one another? A likely idea! Perhaps at the distant trees or the still more distant sky. And again, perhaps not. Perhaps they were looking at nothing. Perhaps there was nothing to look at, and this only made them seem distant and preoccupied. The long line of reapers hurled itself at the field and bawled it down. Wann't that enough? Wann't it enough that the rice bowed before these black bodies? They sang and they reaped. Singing in chorus, they reaped, voices and gestures in harmony. They were together—united by the same task, the same song.

It was as if the same soul bound them.

Was it pleasure, and not the combat against fatigue and heat, that urged them on, singing? Obviously. The same pleasure filled their eyes with that lovingness which had struck me, delightfully and a little regretfully, for though I was near them, part of them, I was not entirely one of them:
I was a schoolboy on a visit; how gladly I would have forgotten that fact.
Indeed, I did forget it, for I was still very young. What crossed my mind—so many things were always crossing it—was more fleeting and less enduring than the clouds which cross the sky. I was then at the age—I have always been that age—when one lives entirely in the present, when being first in a long line of reapers was more important than my future.

"Hurry up!" I would urge my uncle.

"Well! You're awake?"

"Yes. Let's not waste time."

"Was I wasting it?"

"No, but you might. We aren't so much ahead now."

"Don't you think so?"

And he would look at the crop.

"Is this what you call not being so far ahead of the others? I haven't wasted any time, but perhaps I should now. Don't forget that I must get too far ahead of the others; it would offend them."

I do not know how the idea of something rustic—I use the word in its accepted meaning: "lack of finesse, of delicacy"—became associated with country people. Civil formalities are more respected on the farm than in the city. Farm ceremony and manners are not understood by the city, which has no time for these things. To be sure, farm life is simpler than city life. But dealings between one man and another—perhaps because in the country everyone knows everyone else—are more strictly regulated. I used to notice a dignity everywhere which I have rarely found in cities. One did not act without duly considering such action, even though it

were an entirely personal affair. The rights of others were highly respected. And if intelligence seemed slower it was because reflection preceded speech and because speech itself was a most serious matter.

At noon, the women, bearing smoking platters of couscous, left the village and walked, single file, to the field. As soon as we saw them we greeted them noisily. Noon! It was noon! And work stopped all over the field.

"Let's go!" my uncle would urge me.

And I would bound off after him.

"Not so fast! I can't keep up with you."

"Don't you have a hole in your stomach? I could stab an ox in mine."

And our appetites were in fact marvelously sharp. The heat could be very strong and the field, with its dust and its shimmering haze, might have been a furnace, but that did not interfere with our appetites. We sat around the platters, and the hot couscous, even hotter because of the spices in it, disappeared, washed down by tumblerfuls of fresh water which had been drawn from the great jars covered with banana leaves.

For two hours no one did anything. The men spent the time sleeping under the trees or sharpening their sickles.

Since we were not at all tired, my playmates and I gamboled about and went off to set snares. Although we made a great deal of noise as usual, we were careful, because the men were reaping, not to whistle or pick up dead wood: for fear of bringing misfortune to the farm.

The afternoon's work was much shorter and passed rapidly. It was five o'clock before we knew it. Having stripped the
great field of its treasure, we marched back to the village—the tall silk-cotton trees and the smoke from the huts signalled that it was time to do so. We marched, preceded by the indefatigable tom-tom player, and we sang the song of the rise.

Above us the swallows were already flying lower, and, although the air was as clear as ever, the end of the day was near. We were happy as we entered the village, weary and happy. The genius had taken good care of us: not one of us had been bitten by snakes dislodged when we trampled the field. The scent of flowers, awakened by the approach of evening, seemed to clothe us in fresh garlands. If our song had been less noisy we would have heard the familiar sounds of the day's end: cries and laughter mingled with the lowing of cattle returning to the corral. But we were singing. We were singing. Ah! How happy we were in those days!

At Kouroussa I lived in my mother's hut. But, since the hut were so small, my brothers and sisters, all of whom were younger than I, slept in my father's mother's hut. My mother kept my brothers and sisters in her hut while nursing them. But as soon as they were weaned—among my people children are weaned very late—she turned them over to my grandmother. I was the only one of her children who lived with her. But I did not have the second bed to myself. I shared it with my father's youngest apprentice.

My father always had lots of apprentices in his workshop; they came from far and near, often from very remote dis-