

Excerpts from *Tribal Gathering*, by K C Ryeland.

Eight stories set in 1960s post-colonial West Africa.

Story # 1. Hot Metal

....After walking through thick forest undergrowth for twenty minutes or so, the two men found themselves in yet another clearing situated at the foot of a small, rocky escarpment some fifty or sixty feet high and about two hundred feet long. To one side of the sheer cliff-face was a wide, dark fissure in the rock. The boy stopped close to the gaping crack and turned to face Peter and John as they struggled to free themselves from the vines and undergrowth that clung to their feet and legs with the tenacity of leeches. Both men looked at each other as the boy spoke with the strange, grown-up voice again, asking which of them was “Mr Staffo.”

Peter, amazed at what he thought was his name being used, said, “Do you mean Stafford?”

The boy nodded.

“How did you know my name? Who the hell are you anyway?” said Peter, irritably.

The boy said nothing. He simply motioned with his right hand for Peter to follow him. John made to follow too, but the boy told him he must stay. Peter found the boy’s influence almost overpowering. Something inside him wanted to obey the boy’s every word. Turning to John, Peter said in a low voice, “You stay here, just in case. I’ll call you if I need help.”

Reluctantly, John agreed, giving Peter the thumbs-up sign as he watched his friend follow the boy towards the gap in the rock-face.

One minute the boy was directly in front of Peter, the next he’d disappeared from sight. Only when very close to the huge fissure did Peter realise he must follow the boy through into the very heart of the rock.

The huge, triangular-shaped crack was about four feet wide at the base and ten feet high at the apex, although it soon reduced to little more than three feet wide and five feet high some nine or ten yards inside the rock. It proved to be something of a tight squeeze for Peter with his large frame, but he managed to stay close behind the boy despite the heavy going and the almost total darkness.

The internal surfaces on both sides of the fissure were dripping wet and covered in what Peter imagined to be mud and slime, for he could see nothing. As he moved slowly forward, Peter felt his shirt and shorts becoming wet and sticky, especially when forcing himself through some of the narrowest places. At one point the gap became so confined, Peter began to panic thinking he would become permanently stuck inside the dark, living rock. However, gentle encouragement from the boy, a yard or so in front, soon dispelled Peter’s fear and spurred him on.

Several minutes and many yards later, Peter and the boy saw daylight ahead and this encouraged them to move more quickly. They soon emerged from the gloomy, dank interior of the cliff into a strange, crater-like clearing completely encircled by high, rocky cliffs. When Peter’s eyes became accustomed to the light, he opened them wide and his jaw dropped at the scene before him.

Story # 2. Juju-Men

“Well, well. I know some of the ignorant people out in the bush are afraid of the white man’s so-called juju, but I did not think people in the township were taken in by all that nonsense. It just goes to show the world is full of surprises. I have been the tyler, that is our name for the outer guard of the Lodge, here for the last twenty years and I can tell you nothing but good has come from this place. It gives me great pride to see our people making headway in the white man’s world. I just do not understand all these bushmen (ignorant people) who complain about the white man’s magic. After all, we Nibanans are the absolute past masters at that sort of thing.”

Before Musa or the boy could make any comment, they heard a scuffling sound coming from the narrow corridor. Without hesitation they moved towards the noise with the tyler close on their heels. Moments later, Bande, still gripping his hostage around the neck, confronted them halfway along the corridor.

When Musa saw the knife at Ajayi’s throat, stark, terrifying memories came to the fore and a strange feeling of anger and fear began to build up inside the old soldier.

The tyler reacted to the situation by shouting and pushing his way between Musa and the boy so he could get closer to the problem.

“Hey, what is going on here?” shouted the tyler. “You,” he pointed at Bande, “put that knife down immediately and let go of our cook.”

Bande screamed at everyone to get back or he would kill the cook. The tyler, realising the seriousness of Bande’s threat, immediately moved back pushing Musa and the boy along with him.

Musa moved mechanically, his mind conjuring up scenes of desperation and horror, but with little clarity. He closed his eyes and the pictures in his head slowly became clear. Musa could see the muzzle and grenade flashes punctuating a pitch-black night, the split seconds of light illuminating a jungle scene in torrential rain. He could hear the explosions and the gunfire, the screaming, the yelling and the constant braying of terrified pack mules. He could feel the cloying mud underfoot and the needle-sharp rain on his body. Suddenly an oriental face loomed before him, its features contorted with hate and pain, then another and another. One by one the images raced through Musa’s head until he fell exhausted against the wall, his eyes still closed and the sweat running down his face in torrents....

Story # 4. The Visit.

....Arthur’s dilemma ended when a man, wearing green silk robes of the finest quality, suddenly appeared to his left. He addressed Arthur quietly in Pidgin English, telling him to remove his shoes and bow low before walking towards the emir. The man went on to explain that Arthur would be permitted to sit on the simple wooden stool that had been placed about ten feet away from the base of the raised dais.

After bowing low and taking a last glance at his shoes, which had been neatly placed on the floor near the doors by a servant, Arthur walked forward at a slow pace. At the command of the green-robed figure at his side, Arthur sat on the stool. Suddenly the emir began to address Arthur in the Usmar language and almost immediately the green-robed man began to translate.

After about five minutes of welcoming speech from the emir, it was Arthur's turn to speak. When he'd finished carefully explaining his reasons for requiring an audience with one of the most powerful men in northern Nibana, Arthur waited patiently whilst the green-robed interpreter relayed the message. For a fleeting moment, Arthur detected what he thought was a smile from the emir. He couldn't be sure because only the man's eyes were visible. Nonetheless, Arthur felt certain that between the heavy veil drawn across the lower portion of the emir's face and the bright green turban covering his head, the dark eyes had twinkled merrily in response to the interpreter's words.

The reply confirmed it. The emir, according to the interpreter, had expressed great pleasure at Arthur's visit and looked forward to meeting his old friend Hyde-Beecroft again after so many years.

Somewhat relieved that the interview had gone so well, Arthur thanked the emir and made to depart. However, before he could move, the interpreter said the emir wished Arthur to remain for a while longer and partake of refreshments. Arthur's heart sank. He had wanted to get out of the throne room as quickly as possible because his English suit and the dreadful smell from the torches and the smouldering sticks of incense were making him feel so uncomfortably hot and nauseous.

As suddenly as he'd appeared, the green-robed interpreter disappeared through a door to the left of the emir's dais. Then, much to Arthur's surprise, the two heavy-duty guards also departed through the same exit.

Somewhat bemused, Arthur found himself alone with the emir, wondering how he would communicate. Arthur's command of the Usmar language was basic, to say the least. No more than 'kitchen Usmar', fit only for stewards and smallboys not the most respected Usmar leader in the whole of the Northern Region.

The emir beckoned Arthur to approach the dais and began unwinding the huge length of cloth that formed the veil around his face and neck. The turban was the next article to be discarded and, as the emir stood up, he addressed Arthur in perfect English.

"Mr Meadows, I do hope you will partake of a cooling drink in my private quarters. I meet so few Europeans these days. Please collect your shoes, put them on and follow me."

Forgetting momentarily that the emir had attended university in England, Arthur hadn't expected to hear such impeccable English from a man who looked as though he'd just time-travelled from twelfth-century Arabia. It took Arthur several seconds to realise he was staring at the emir with his mouth partially open. Closing his lips tightly, Arthur quickly retrieved his shoes and followed the now bareheaded figure through a door on the right of the dais.

The emir led the way through a number of dark passages for what seemed like an age. Finally they emerged into a beautiful garden with fountains, green lawns and wonderful flowering shrubs that must have taken an army of gardeners and many thousands of gallons of water to keep in such excellent condition. In the centre of the garden was a bungalow, not dissimilar to the one Arthur and his family occupied. Typically colonial in style it had large verandas on all four sides and large, glass-panelled double doors leading into the living, sleeping and dining areas....

Story # 5. Boom Town.

....Later that morning, Charlie packed a canvas rucksack with clothes, spare bush boots and other personal items. He then visited Scroggins' office at the site, which, due to its considerable distance from the branch, had escaped destruction. Some forty minutes later, Charlie drove to the bank in Sapula. After completing all his business there he clambered back into the company Land-Rover, drove a few miles out of town, engaged its four-wheel drive and took to the bush. As he negotiated the scrub and undergrowth, Charlie thanked all the deities he could think of for the vehicle having been saved from the inferno when the chief clerk used it to look for the parachutist.

When the main Sapula Creek came into view, Charlie carefully followed its meandering course until he came to a suitable spot, well away from any form of habitation. Having parked the vehicle he changed into the clothes he'd packed earlier that morning and left what he'd been wearing in a neat pile on the driver's seat. He then locked the vehicle, deposited the keys into the tailpipe out of sight, and walked away through the bush. On reaching the main road some ninety minutes later, Charlie hitched a lift to Port Hassan in one of the many oilfield trucks that plied the roads day and night.

Before leaving the hotel that morning, Charlie had paid his bill and deposited a sealed envelope with the receptionist, telling the man to give it to the branch chief clerk when he called at the hotel. The hotel staff knew the chief clerk well, and Charlie had ensured he would visit the hotel the following day by arranging a meeting with him, ostensibly to discuss an insurance claim. Charlie knew no insurer would pay for an act of war, mentioning it was simply a smokescreen.

The envelope, marked 'Strictly Confidential', contained a letter to the chief clerk.

Dear Mr Atayi,

Please ensure the company Land-Rover is collected from the main creek, five miles east of Sapula. The ignition keys are hidden in the exhaust tailpipe. Please do not try to find me; by the time you read this I will have gone to a better place. The loss of my good friend Bruce McKinnon and the destruction of the branch, which I built up from almost nothing, are just too much for me to bear.

I gave the UK bank draft we talked about, which was due to be paid into the Chief Edenyi Estates' account at the bank in Sapula, directly to Mr Scroggins at his office on the morning following the accident. Thank goodness I was able to save it from the inferno. The company's total debt to the Chief for the land and building work is, therefore, cleared. The receipt I received from Mr Scroggins for the total amount is lodged with the bank manager. Our insurers will reimburse the company when you make the claim.

I have also arranged with the bank manager for you to sign on behalf of the company from now on. There is sufficient money in the company's account to pay you and all the men's wages for one more month, after which time you will all have to find other work. The oilfields are booming and, with the general shortage of manpower, none of you should have any trouble finding new work.

The balance of the company's money has been transferred to a special account that only the directors in Laguna and the UK can access. The bank manager said they might have to wait until the end of the civil war before they can transfer the money to the UK. As you know Obiland has yet to organise its foreign exchange arrangements.

I have tried my best to balance the company books, but as you know most of the information was destroyed along with the branch. However, with the rough notes I kept in my room at the hotel, I have been able to establish that I owe the company about nine hundred Nibanan pounds. The attached balance sheet should show how I arrived at this figure and all the other figures.

All my personal belongings are deposited with the hotel and I have instructed the manager to hand them over to you so you can sell them to offset the debt, but the company will have to forgo most of it I'm afraid. I have no more to give and, by the time you read this letter, I will not even have my life.

Mr Atayi, please say goodbye to all the men and thank them for me, and I thank you personally for all your help and support through the tough times.

*Yours sincerely,
Charles A Robinson.
Branch Manager, Warunda.*

Story # 7. Tief-Man.

....Idewu waited nervously near the old European cemetery. The lateness of the hour and the darkness played tricks on his mind and he began to imagine all those dead Europeans rising from their graves and chasing him. He nearly had heart failure when the unsavoury character from the marketplace grabbed his shoulder from behind.

The two men had walked but a short distance along the Enube Bridge Road when an old Datsun taxi stopped and picked them up. In addition to the driver one other man sat in the vehicle, but Idewu wasn't introduced to either one and so the journey continued in silence.

They hadn't travelled more than a mile when the driver pulled on to the forecourt of a large out-of-town hardware store. The store's night watch approached, exchanged some words with the driver of the taxi and then disappeared into the darkness.

"OK, this is it, everyone out," said the unsavoury character.

"A hardware store? What is there of value here?" said Idewu.

"There is a safe inside with the day's takings. It could amount to over two hundred pounds," said the driver. "So shut up and do as you are told!"

Idewu's part in the burglary required him to keep watch at the front of the building and warn the others if any traffic or pedestrians came along the road. The other three men disappeared around the back to where they intended get into the offices by means of a rear door that the night watch had arranged with one of the staff to be left unbolted.

All commercial premises and most private houses in Nibana had anti-theft bars fitted to window openings. Very often wooden doors would be reinforced with steel plates to prevent them from being smashed open. Therefore, to successfully carry out a burglary, it required an insider who would 'inadvertently' leave a door unlocked or some other means of entry for the thieves.

No one came along the road to disturb the thieves and within forty-five minutes they had finished. The night watch returned to collect his cut and that of the staff member who'd left the door unlocked. Moments later, Idewu and the thieves departed in the taxi.

"What about the night watch? He will be sacked the moment they realise the place has been robbed," said Idewu from the back seat of the taxi.

"He will say he was praying," retorted the driver. "The white manager will know the night watch could not have left the door unlocked because he has no access to the building. The manager will soon work out it must have been an inside job. It will take weeks to sort it out. You know how well we Nibanans can string white men along. In the end the manager will get fed up and employ additional night watches. Anyway, the old boy we saw tonight is due for retirement soon, so he will not be worried."

"Oh, I see," said Idewu, rather feebly.

They dropped Idewu and the unsavoury character off at the cemetery and the Datsun headed into town.

Idewu's companion gave him twenty pounds and said if he wished, Idewu could accompany them on more robberies. Idewu said he would think about it and meet his companion in the market at the usual place the following afternoon to discuss his further involvement....