

The Money Order

(1965)

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HIS BODY WAS RUNNING WITH SWEAT. HIS SHIRT CLUNG TO his skin. His face was shining. Breathing heavily, his mouth open, the postman struggled through the sand with his bicycle. Gripping the handlebars firmly, chest forward, he climbed the sandhill, cursing the inhabitants and the authorities.

'What are they waiting for to get the road tarred?' he thought.

Housewives returning from the market called out to him in fun:

'Eye! man, you've wet yourself!'

They left him behind. He stopped. Resting his bicycle against his belly, which stuck out suggestively, he wiped his face with his cotton handkerchief. He kept his eyes on the women's backs; nimble and light, their calabashes balanced on their heads, they hardly seemed to touch the ground.

He set off again at a slower pace.

The houses were nearly all identical: built of old, rotten wood, with roofs of corrugated iron, which was invariably rusty, or of old thatch that had never been renewed, or even of black oilcloth.

The postman stood his bicycle against the twisted stake of the doorway. Two women were seated on the ground. They returned his greeting with suspicion. They knew him, but because of his job, the man carried with him an unfavourable prejudice.

'Women, is your husband, Ibrahim Dieng, at home?'

Mety, the elder of the two women, and the first wife, looked up inquiringly into the man's face and then at his hands.

'Who, you say?'

'Mety,' interpolated the postman, 'Mety, I live in this quarter myself and I know that Ibrahim Dieng is the master of this house. I am not a toubab.'

'Bah (*the postman's name*), what have I said?'

'Nothing, in fact. Nothing that could send you to hell.'

'You know very well that our man is never at home at this time of day. Idle, yes. But wallow all day among our skirts, that, no! You ask as if you were a stranger.'

'I must do my work. When you see me, you women all act as if you'd seen an *alcati* (policeman).'

'You are worse than an alcati. You only have to leave a paper once or twice for the tax men to come and carry off our things. You have never brought good news to this house.'

'Just so. This morning it's the opposite.'

'Ah!' said Mety, quickly getting to her feet. Her dress hung from her prominent behind.

'Harpy! as soon as money's mentioned, there you are, wriggling like worms. It's money.'

'Where from?'

'From Paris. A money-order.'

'Paris? Who does Ibrahim know in Paris? Are you sure it is for him? Bah, don't kill us with hope.'

'There is even a letter with it. I know my job.'

'You heard, Aram,' called Mety, happily, to the second wife, who had come up to them. She was younger, thin and hollow-cheeked, with a pointed chin.

'A money-order for how much?' asked Aram.

'Twenty-five thousand francs!'

They marvelled at the amount.

'Yallah has come to us at last, Mety. And you were always going on about our bad luck!' said Aram.

Mety held the advice-note and the letter in her hand. It gave her a delightful feeling of power, of wealth.

'A letter and a money-order! Who can have sent them?'

'A toubab. In Paris there are only toubabs! Mety, do you think our man tells us everything?'

'Shall we give the letter to Bah?'

'No, women, no. It isn't my job to read or write letters.' With that, the postman left them.

During the previous night they had both been kept awake by the same problem. In their minds, they had gone the rounds of all the shopkeepers in the quarter. They owed money to all of them.

'We can't wait for our man to get back to find out what we will eat this midday. I'm sure that Mbarka will advance us a kilo of rice and half a litre of oil on the strength of this advice-note and the letter. There is still a little dried fish and nyebe left over from

¹Equivalent to 500 French francs, or about £40 sterling (Translator).

yesterday.'

'That is what we must do,' agreed Aram, after a moment's reflection.

Together they set off, each holding a child by the hand.

He had not asked where the rice had come from, so well seasoned with dried fish and nyebe. He had eaten his fill; it had been a real blow-out. He gave two magnificent belches and said, 'Allahou ackbar'. He was sitting on his sheepskin, at the foot of the bed.

'Is there a little kola left,' he asked, without addressing either of his wives directly.

'Look in the jar next to the drinking water,' called his second wife, from outside.

'Aram, these aren't left-overs!' he called out to his wives, as he made his choice. 'Four nuts of every shade! You aren't going to tell me that Yallah made it rain pocket-books full of money this morning or that one of you has inherited from old Lebu!'

'No, Dieng! Yallah, in his infinite goodness, never abandons his faithful.'

'Indeed, wives! Indeed, allahou ackbar! In his greatness, his goodness is immeasurable. He helps us day and night.'

'Wait ... wait, before you break the nut and share it out.' Mety entered and placed in front of him on the sheepskin a small bowl containing slices of juicy pawpaw swimming in a little sugared water.

'My favourite fruit! Wash the kola for me.' She went out again.

He bit into the soft flesh of the pawpaw. It melted in his mouth and the juice trickled over his lips.

'Bring me something to wipe myself.'

'Straight away, Dieng.'

Aram brought a piece of old cloth and sat down next to him. She busied herself tidying up. Dieng washed his hands again. Mety came back and he chose a quarter of kola from her palm.

He got up with difficulty and lay down on the bed, reciting verses from the Koran.

'I wonder if I'll have the strength to go to the mosque?' he said

to himself.

'There is an old beggar,' announced Aram.

Before answering her, he found a comfortable position and stretched out his legs. His wives and children were forbidden to give alms to able-bodied men or to young men. These two categories were parasites, he said, on the look-out for a free meal. When this was discussed at the mosque among the heads of families, he gave no quarter, relentlessly countering the arguments of his critics and demanding proof from the suras that the faithful had to give alms to these people.

'He is really an old man?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'All right, then. Give him the left-overs. And may Yallah make all our misfortunes follow them.'

This was his ritual form of words whenever he gave alms.

Every now and then, a cool wind made the curtains billow. According to popular belief, blessed wives living in paradise were fanning themselves. Dieng lay stretched out. He took a deep breath and yawned.

'Excuse me, Mety. Rub my legs for me. How I have walked today!'

'You musn't complain. Yallah is great. He will never abandon us.'

'Yallah! Yallah! One must cultivate one's field.'

Obediently, Mety rubbed each of his legs in turn, up to his back. Dieng was soon asleep. She crept out on tip-toe.

'Did you tell him?' asked Aram, when Mety returned to her place on the mat.

'Not yet. Let him rest. When the muezzin calls, I'll wake him and tell him,' replied Mety, looking round for a place to lie down.

Thanks to the stifling midday heat, they were soon asleep.

He had woken up, after the time for prayer. He emptied his anger onto Aram and Mety, speaking out loud to himself.

'Seems as if I live in a house of unbelievers and infidels. I wonder if you ever pray, either of you, when I'm not here. And I begin to wonder, too, about the faith of my children.'

Neither replied. After he had washed, as a good believer and master of his wives, he guided them along the path of Yallah. The two women stood a few paces behind him, imitating his gestures.

The prayers over, he was about to go out when Mety, like an old cat stretching its paws, said:

'Nidiaye, dear, Bah the postman came. You have a letter.'

'A letter? Who from? What colour is the paper?'

'No, it isn't a paper for the tax.'

'What do you know about it?'

'Bah told us it has come from Paris. The money-order as well.'

'Money-order?'

'Yes.'

'Who has sent me a money-order?'

'Your nephew, Abdou. He is in Paris.'

'Listen, let's go into the house. We can't talk about money in the street.'

Inside, Mety continued:

'Abdou has sent you 25,000 francs. There are 2,000 for you and 3,000 for his mother. The remaining 20,000 francs he wants you to keep for him. He greets you. He asks you to reply when you receive his letter and the money-order.'

'I hope the whole quarter doesn't know about the money-order.'

'Well ... I went with Aram to Mbarka's shop. Mbaye was there, and he read me the letter.'

'So Mbarka knows about it.'

Dieng raised his chin angrily.

'You should not have had the letter read to you, nor obtained credit from that robber Mbarka without asking me first.'

'There was nothing to eat for today.'

'Nor yesterday,' added Aram. 'We can't keep the children alive without feeding them. The children can't live on hunger.'

'A good wife waits to be told (*this was said in French*). Now the whole quarter will know that I've had a money-order.'

They bore the heat of their man's anger in silence. He told them off roundly. Then, with the letter and the advice-note in his

pocket, he left the house with a lordly step, his head high.

Dieng had a weakness for clothes. The silk embroidery around the neck of his large boubou had been done by hand in a variety of motifs in a blend of white, yellow and violet threads. This desire to impress his neighbour, this taste for clothes, always raised him a degree above the person to whom he was talking, whose only worth, in his eyes, lay in his appearance and his dress.

Mbarka's shop stood on the corner of the two streets. It was lopsided. It was shabby on the outside, and the inside was hardly any better. The merchandise was crammed onto rickety shelves held up by wire and strips of leather. In the evening, clusters of flies took up residence. The counter, made of unpolished wood, was thick with dust.

When Dieng entered the shop, the two men exchanged a polite flow of salamalecs.

'Mety came in earlier to buy some things. Did I do right in letting her have them?' asked the shopkeeper.

'You did right. In fact I have just received a small money-order which will enable me to pay my account,' said Dieng, sourly. 'Can you tell me how much I owe you?'

'May Yallah forgive me and forgive all believers the thought you seem to attribute to me. Perhaps I didn't hear properly ... Between neighbours, I think it is preferable to talk things over before they come to the ears of strangers. Why do you ask me for your account? It isn't because of that money-order, I hope! I only asked Mety to get you to call because I have received some rice. New, coarse-grained rice.'

With eyes bulging and eyelashes bristling, the shopkeeper looked first to the left and then to the right. He leant over to Dieng and carefully unfolded a square piece of red cloth in which lay a few fine, fat grains of rice. In a low, expressionless voice, he went on:

'It's rice from Indochina. Not American rice, or French rice. This rice is more economical than all the others. I only have enough for my special customers, like you.'

Mbarka wrinkled his forehead, his watery sheep's eyes sparkled.

Dieng was not enthusiastic, but he was anxious to keep the advantage, so he touched the rice with the tips of his fingers. Like an electric shock, a shudder ran through him, right to the extremities of his hair. Mbarka scrutinized his customer's face.

'This is the rice you ate today. What do you think of it? It is easy to digest. It doesn't stick together when you cook it, like toubab rice. It isn't starchy. Look at its surface, so natural! What do you think? I'll put fifteen kilos aside for you. I can't spare any more than that,' he concluded, re-folding his piece of cloth.

'How much is it a kilo?'

'The same price. Yallah is my witness, I had to grease a lot of palms to get this rice. What quality! And who for? For you, my friends. Do you think I want to make money out of you? If I told you how many people owed me money, you'd soon see how little profit I make. I merely believe I ought to get my money back. I'd rather lose my profit on the fifteen kilos of rice than lose your esteem.'

Mbarka had convinced Dieng. As for his account, he need only call in on his way back from the post-office. To prove his friendship, Mbarka broke a kola nut with him, saying, half jokingly, half seriously:

'Collect your rice soon, or I'll give it to someone else who can pay cash.'

Dieng did not wait to be told twice. He called out to a little boy who was passing:

'Fetch your mother Mety.'

Still without losing his advantage, he borrowed fifty francs from Mbarka to pay his fare.

Barely across the road after leaving Mbarka's shop, Dieng was stopped by his neighbour, Gorgui Maïssa, an incurable borrower and a rogue.

'Ibrahima ... Dieng!'

'Maïssa ... Fall! How are you?'

'Alhamdoulillah! ... And your family?'

'The same, alhamdoulillah!'

Gorgui Maïssa's head was round, in spite of his handwoven

cotton cap and his prominent forehead. His caftan fluttered in the breeze.

A few yards ahead, Bah the postman appeared over the rise, pushing his bicycle, his shirt unbuttoned; he wore nothing underneath. His stomach, bulging out around his waist, hung down over his knees. After the customary greetings, they walked side by side.

'You've seen the letter and the ...'

The postman did not finish. A look from Dieng reminded him that 'you don't talk about money in the street'. All the same, Dieng acknowledged the question with a grunt.

'News from where?'

'A nephew.'

'It is always a pleasure to know that the young are thinking of us. It's their duty to look after those who are older than they are. Alas, my nephews ignore me. I receive nothing from anyone,' added Gorgui Maissa.

'What do you expect? Things are given to me and I deliver them. I am everyone's messenger,' said Bah, feeling that he was being got at.

'I wasn't referring to you.'

'I'm a bit behind. See you later at the mosque,' said Bah, climbing onto his bicycle.

Dieng was not pleased with Gorgui Maissa's company. 'Does he know that I am going to the post-office? How could he not know? Mbarka's shop is a public place. Nothing is secret there.'

'Did you know Mbarka has got some very good rice in? From Indochina.'

'No,' replied Dieng.

'What? That's why I didn't come and disturb the two of you. Mbarka likes secrets that aren't.'

'I went to the shop to check my account,' said Dieng, in his most natural tone of voice. 'He is going to think I have some money. Where is he going, anyway?' he reflected.

'I'm telling you, then. He refused to give me credit. But you go and see him when we get back. He is selling it under the counter. He's a crook, that Mbarka. You owe him a hundred francs, you've only gone two steps and it's doubled. He would suck the bones of

a hundred-year-old corpse!

They fell into conversation. Both admitted they only managed to feed their families by living on credit. Prices had gone up so much.

'This world is a bitter place for us,' sighed Gorgui Maïssa.

When they reached the bus-stop, Dieng asked:

'Where are you going, Maïssa?'

'I'm going with you,' he replied, pulling himself onto the bus in front of Dieng.



THE INTENSE HEAT MINGLED WITH THE SUFFOCATING smell of exhaust fumes that fouled the air. The square swarmed with cripples, lepers and ragged children, all of them lost in that ocean. Drinking water overflowed from one basin into the cleaner one beneath it. Carts grated on their axles, cars and motor-cycles made a deafening din. A cunning old beggar held out his hand with its five fingers wasted by leprosy to the occupants of cars brought to a stop by the traffic lights. A blind woman, the mother of a little girl, lay stretched out in the road itself, calling in a barely audible falsetto voice.

Dieng and Gorgui Maïssa entered the post-office together. There were people waiting at all the windows. Gorgui Maïssa made inquiries and led Dieng to the window marked **MONEY-ORDERS**. There was a long queue here as well, with a fat old woman at the end of it. Probably because she was tired and at the end of her patience, she had sat down on the floor, indifferent to all that was going on around her. She looked like a shapeless stump of flesh, so completely had her features disappeared.

Leaning against the counter, Gorgui Maïssa, his face close-up, watched the clerk counting the notes.

The time passed.

'Keep my place. I'm going to find someone to read me my letter.'

Dieng found the letter-writer installed next to the post-box. He

was about to refuse the letter, but Dieng explained that his wife had opened it thinking it was for herself. The letter-writer had a nose like an elephant's foot, and wore steel-rimmed spectacles that kept slipping down his nose. He looked at Dieng over the top of his spectacles, making him feel awkward.

'The letter comes from Paris. It is from your nephew, Abdou.'
He read:

Paris.

19 July 196...

Dear Uncle,

I am writing to ask you for news of yourself. How are you and your family? As for me, God be thanked, all is well. I wish and pray God that it is the same with all of you. I am profiting from the visit of my friend, Diallo, to write to you.

As you have probably learned, I am in Paris. God be thanked, I am well. I think of you day and night. I have not come to France to play the beggar or the bandit, but to find work and earn a little money and, God willing, to learn a good trade. There is no work in Dakar. I couldn't spend my time all day, year in and year out, sitting doing nothing. When you are young, that is not good. I borrowed money to come here. It is true I never said anything to you or to my mother about my thoughts. I couldn't stay there just watching and living on the air of time. I am old enough now to marry, to have my own wife. I have repaid the money I borrowed. That is why I have never written or sent anyone any money since I arrived in France. God be thanked, my way is now clear. You mustn't listen to what you hear. If you are a failure in France, it is because you want to be one. After work, I come home and say my five prayers. If it pleases God and his prophet Mohammed, a drop of alcohol will never pass my lips. I am sending you this money-order for 25,000 CFA francs. Keep 20,000 francs for me. Give 3,000 francs to my mother and take 2,000 francs for yourself. I know you don't always have work. I have written to my mother. Tell her I am well.

I greet aunt Mety, aunt Aram and the children. Next time, I will send

the children something. Keep the money for me. If it pleases God, I shall return home. Do not forget me in your prayers.

I greet you.

Your nephew,

ABDOU.

The letter-writer translated into Wolof as he read. A beggar with watery eyes came up, led by a child, repeating all the time, 'Ngir Yallah, by the grace of God.'

The letter-writer handed the letter back and said:

'Fifty francs.'

Dieng hunted. He had only ten francs left. His fare, along with Gorgui Maissa's, had reduced what money he had by forty francs.

'I'll cash my money-order and come back and pay you.'

'What do you think I live on?' asked the letter-writer. He eyed his customer with suspicion.

Dieng held out the advice-note for him to see.

'All right, I'll wait,' he said, convinced.

The fat woman had left, muttering about wasting her time, even though she had got what she had come for. Dieng went up to the window. The post-office clerk extracted a slip and compared it with the advice-note.

'Ibrahima Dieng, your identity card.'

'Man, I haven't got an identity card. I have my tax receipt and my voter's card.'

'Is there a photo?'

'No ... No.'

'Give me something with a photo on it. Driving licence, military service certificate.'

'I have nothing like that.'

'Well, go and get an identity card, then.'

'Where from?'

All that could be seen above the window was an oval black ball, out of all proportion with the tubercular shoulders upon which it rested. At the question, 'Where from?', the clerk looked up at

Dieng. It was a closed face. From the neck upwards, it was all severity. Dieng was cowed.

'I've got an identity card,' intervened Gorgui Maïssa, stretching his arm out with his card held between thumb and index finger, and looking at the clerk.

'Is the money-order in your name?'

Gorgui Maïssa did not reply. He held his arm out for a few seconds, then withdrew it.

'Get away from here,' thundered the clerk.

'Ibrahima Dieng, are you going to give me your identity card or not?'

'Man, I have no card,' Dieng replied in a quavering voice.

'Go and get one.'

'Where from?'

They looked at each other. Dieng thought he saw a look of contempt appear in the civil servant's eyes. He suffered. He came out in a cold sweat of humiliation. He felt as if a painful bite had been taken out of his flesh. He said nothing. There came into his mind the saying that circulated among all the ordinary people of Dakar: 'Never upset a civil servant. He has great power.'

'Go and ask the police in your quarter,' advised the clerk at last, returning Dieng's advice-note. 'The money-order will remain here for two weeks.'

Gorgui Maïssa and Dieng hung around the window for a while. On their way out: 'Is that the way you pay me?'

It was the letter-writer, who grabbed Dieng by the scruff of his neck.

'What?'

'What? ... My work!'

'Ask your due without shouting or rumpling my clothes,' said Dieng, removing the letter-writer's hands from his boubou.

'Man, we haven't cashed the money-order yet. He hasn't got an identity card,' said Gorgui Maïssa, intervening in an effort to calm the scribe.

'That's not my concern.'

'Don't shout,' interrupted Dieng, haughtily. 'Yallah knows I

haven't got fifty francs. I am going to the police. I'll come back and pay you. I never use other people's property. I am a believer.'

'A believer? A crook, more like it. Go and find work instead of pretending to be a marabout,' sneered the letter-writer, going back to his place.

What was happening? Dieng did not know, but as he went down the stairs, he felt humiliated. In front of the post-office, the beggars, ranged like pots of faded flowers, held out their hands and their begging bowls, crying their woes. Dieng re-arranged his clothes, asking Gorgui Maïssa to see if they were rumpled or dirty behind.

'If we go to the police station, will we have time to come back for the money-order?'

Gorgui Maïssa examined the sky, the shadow thrown by the plane-trees and his pocket-watch.

'It is possible.'

'I mean on foot.'

'That changes everything.'

Although Maïssa's presence gave him moral support, he was thinking of his fifty francs. Had he been on his own, he would have been able to go there and back by bus.

'Are you coming with me?'

'Yes,' replied Maïssa, surprised by the question.

'I'll make him walk fast. He is banking on the money-order. What bad luck!'

Gorgui Maïssa trotted behind. He had found out at the shop that Dieng had received a money-order. As he wanted to touch him for a loan, he was staying with him. He was banking on at least five thousand francs. On his way out, he had said to one of his wives:

'Wait for me. I'll be back with money for the day's expenses.'

Exhausted and sweating, they crossed the courtyard of the police-station. Gorgui Maïssa promptly slumped down onto the steps that encircled the building: an old villa in the colonial style

turned over to the use of the police. Here and there, groups of people sat on the steps talking. Near a door two policemen in untidy uniforms sat with their legs sprawled out in front of them. In a weary voice, one of them indicated the way:

'Identity cards? Over there ...'

Dieng entered a corridor.

'Eye! Where are you going?'

Startled, he jumped. The voice had nothing normal or human about it. Dieng turned round. Nothing. Warily he advanced a few paces.

'Eye! It's you I'm talking to. Where are you going?'

The cavernous voice was clearly addressing itself to him. He started when a firm grip shook him roughly.

'Don't you know it is prohibited to enter here?'

A spasm of rage and repressed anger came over him, momentarily paralysing his tongue and his reflexes. A sensation of thirst knotted his throat. He made a great effort to swallow his saliva. He saw the face, turned three-quarters towards him. It was a face carved in charred wood, badly finished, with thick lips.

'That man over there told me this was the way for identity cards,' he replied, in a voice which betrayed his nervousness.

'Get out!' bellowed the man. '*Aitia cibiti.*'

Out of countenance and biting his lower lip, Dieng replaced his elhadj cap and slowly withdrew, nervously smoothing his boubou as he went.

'Money for a kola nut,' Gorgui Maïssa greeted him.

Dieng looked him up and down with contempt, then handed him a coin. He joined the queue.

'We have time for the tacousan prayer,' Gorgui Maïssa said to him.

Maïssa acted as imam. He was quick. Dieng went back to his place in the queue, taking a quarter of kola with him. The queue made no progress. There were murmurs of discontent about the slowness of the service.

All of a sudden, Gorgui Maïssa's voice drowned the other noises. He had become a griot, extolling the noble lineage of a young man

dressed in European clothes: the beauty of the women, the boundless generosity and bravery of the men, the nobility of their conduct, all of it redounding on the young man, pure blood, sang Gorgui Maïssa, from the purest of blood. And on he went, unflagging, from one theme to the next, in deep Wolof. He finally broke the young man's resistance, indifferent though he was to the traditional praises.

The crowd listened. The young man, visibly embarrassed, tried unsuccessfully to quieten this impromptu adulation.

'I don't sing for money. When one finds one's sanga (master) in such a place, it is right to make him known to the people of my station. I don't sing for money. I want to keep the tradition alive,' sang Maïssa.

Defeated, the young man slipped him a hundred-franc note. Maïssa's voice soared as the young man left.

'You know him?' Dieng asked, when calm had returned.

'Know him? You *are* simple. I heard someone mention his santa, his family name, and I embroidered on it.'

'As far as I could make out, you were getting the santas and lineages mixed up.'

'He didn't see that. He was happy to hear himself talked about. You know nothing about life today.'

'No,' admitted Dieng, overcome by Gorgui Maïssa's lack of dignity in pretending to be a griot.

'Neither does he. We are wasting our time here,' added Maïssa, his thoughts elsewhere.

Then came Dieng's turn.

Behind the window appeared an adolescent with close-cropped hair and sporting a pair of Lumumba glasses, which gave his juvenile's face the indefinable air of an intellectual.

'What can I do for you?'

'I want an identity card.'

'Birth certificate, three photos and a fifty-franc stamp.'

'Look, son,' explained Dieng, moving his head nearer, until the top of his cap pressed against the top of the window. 'I have a money-order to cash and if I don't have an identity card ...'

With these words, he produced the advice-note. The clerk took it from him. The glasses turned in his direction, far-off eyes fluttered their lids:

'It is true, but there is nothing I can do. Go and fetch your birth certificate, the photos and the stamp, old man,' he said in French, in an impersonal tone of voice.

'You want a piece of paper to prove who I am. I have my last tax receipt and my voter's card. Here ...'

'It is no use, old man,' he replied, pushing Dieng's hand away. Without photos, birth certificate and stamp, there is nothing I can do. Make way for the next person.'

Dieng straightened up. He felt dizzy. He looked around for Maïssa.

'Man, your friend has left. He said he had to go somewhere.'

'What?'

'He asked me to tell you.'

'Thank you, woman,' he said, going down the steps.

'A visit to the post-office and back isn't like climbing to the moon. Where is he? Instead of thinking of us and the children, he will be playing the generous rich man, and the money will flow from his hands like water through his fingers. Perhaps he's got his eye on a young girl! Some shameless hussy who will suck his money away like her mother's milk.'

All afternoon Mety's thoughts had run along these lines. Neighbours had sent their children once or twice to find out if Dieng was back. 'Parasites! As soon as they hear someone has money, there they are, like vultures.'

Dieng came home late. He had been to the mosque. The evening meal was the equal of the midday meal. The two wives anticipated his least wishes. After the kola nut, Mety, encouraged by the presence of her veudieu, ventured:

'How did you get on?'

'I have nothing,' he replied. 'I need an identity card. For that, I need a birth certificate, a fifty-franc stamp and three photos.'

They did not believe him. The two wives looked at one another.

Mety intended to pursue the matter further, but decided to wait for a more opportune moment. She told her husband that there were people to see him. She said how many.

'They are all going to believe that I have money and that I am refusing to help them. They can ask Gorgui Maissa. He was with me ...'

'It was only to borrow money from you that he went with you, the old miser,' objected Aram, interrupting him.

Dieng told them how Maissa had extracted a hundred francs from the credulous young man.

'He made himself scarce to avoid having to share it with you. Talk about mean! And you have spent your fifty francs. What times!'

A new arrival announced himself with a long litany of greetings. It was Madiagne Diagne. The women withdrew. The two men talked about one thing and another. The conversation was interspersed with periods of silence.

'I came to see you. I am faced with a serious, indeed a critical, situation and I have come to you for help.'

Madiagne Diagne paused. It was not easy to break the abcess. He must deploy his argument point by point. He must struggle, mortify himself by humiliating himself first of all for being in such need. His words must correspond with the expression on his face, his voice must be unctuous without any stress on the Wolof syllables. He must be ready to talk himself hoarse, giving his hearer time to be overcome, to be possessed by his misery. He must swear on the Koran and by Yallah, promise to pay by tomorrow before sunrise, knowing full well that tomorrow is not today's child.

Dieng half understood. For everyone, without exception, used the same approach. Firstly, appeal to your hearer's sense of solidarity with those in misery; by soft words, stir his feeling of fraternity, even though it evaporates from one day to the next. Dieng remained silent. Madiagne Diagne kept repeating, like a refrain, the arguments he had already used.

'Yallah is my witness, I have not cashed the money-order.

Perhaps tomorrow.'

'You don't need to swear, I believe you. I only need five thousand francs or whatever you can advance me. You are my last hope.'

'You can ask Gorgui Maissa. He was with me,' repeated Dieng, sympathetic.

'Perhaps you can lend me three kilos of rice. I heard you had received a hundred kilos.'

'People talk too much and exaggerate. I only have fifteen kilos. Mety! Mety!'

'Dieng!'

'Give Madiagne three kilos of rice.'

'Nidiaye, we haven't much left.'

'Mety, don't argue! Whenever I tell you something, it's always the same.'

'It is for my family, Mety,' said Madiagne Diagne. 'I swear to you that the children haven't eaten all day.'

'Madiagne, you know that our house is yours. I don't hide anything from you. I'll go and see what we have left. As he said, he hasn't cashed the money-order.'

The men renewed the banalities of conversation, banalities of the kind that people familiar with one another repeat several times a day, and which they find useful, although they are nothing more than a way of filling in the emptiness of their boredom.

Madiagne Diagne left with half a kilo of rice.

Mety and her veudieu could not understand their husband. His generosity was stupid. The whole quarter would come flocking and they would be left with nothing. Food was the province of the women, and they intended to defend it. They put their heads together. They would be the ones to decide who should be helped. Although generations of docility had made the women of our part of the world obedient and submissive, they had learned in the process that they could get anything they wanted from the men.

Other heads of family came in their turn. In spite of their pleas, they left empty-handed.

Before sunrise the next day, Dieng went as usual to the mosque

for the fadyar prayer. When he returned, the women had finished their household chores. He was drinking his quinqueliba tea, when Baïdy arrived. He was a walking skeleton, with very prominent features. He had not been able to come the day before. His presence this morning was of the utmost importance, he said, sharing Dieng's breakfast. Dieng did not let him finish. Full of regrets, he said, sadly:

'Yallah is my witness, I have received nothing.'

Mety, who was present at the discussion, put in:

'Baïdy, I was about to go round to you, hoping to find something.'

With his sculptured face, and his neck tensed with disappointment, Baïdy withdrew. Mety, pleased with her success, glanced knowingly at her veudieu.

From Dieng's house to the town hall was at least five kilometres. The thought of the distance appalled him. Go there on foot! If only he had twenty francs! Who could lend him the money? In his present situation, no one would help him. He thought of Gorgui Maïssa and his hundred francs of the day before. Maïssa's house was on the opposite side of the road of his despair. Recognizing Dieng's voice exchanging greetings with his wives, Maïssa came out to meet him. He drew Dieng out of the house and swore on the gods watching over him that he hadn't anything left. In fact, he said, he was about to call on Dieng. When Dieng told him he was going to the town hall, he excused himself on account of his rheumatism.

Dieng set off at a gentle pace on foot. Five kilometres or more!

The anonymous crowd flowed hurriedly in the same direction. The hooting of cars, the backfiring of motor-cycles, the ringing of bicycle bells, the flip-flop of worn-out shoes, the clip-clop of horses' hooves accompanied the crowd to the outskirts of what was known as the 'Native Quarter', where they split and went off in different directions. The noises gradually faded, but the veil of grey smoke still hung in the air.

Outside the main entrance of the town hall, and on the steps, swarms of people were gathered. Hands were being shaken all

round. An aged orderly, enthroned like a king, held forth with gusto.

'Birth certificate? Registry office, over there,' he answered, in reply to Dieng's query, his arm outstretched to show the direction.

'Another queue,' thought Dieng, seeing how long it was. He stood at the end. Different accents and guttural tones hummed around him. He began talking to the person in front of him: a thin fellow, whose face was scarred with tribal markings. It was the third time he had come for the same thing. He was a bricklayer and had found a job in Mauretania. He had been out of work for two years. Dieng wanted to know how long it would take to get a birth certificate.

'That depends,' said the bricklayer, 'on whether they know you or you have contacts. If you don't, all you can do is try not to get discouraged. But if you have money, well, then, things go quickly.'

Dieng confided in him. The bricklayer seemed to have experience. He explained that he urgently needed a birth certificate. It was not difficult to obtain a birth certificate. His name would be on one of the registers.

'Still, it's useful to have contacts these days,' repeated the bricklayer, in conclusion.

One confidence led to another, and more people contributed their grievances. The two latest arrivals also chipped in. The stockier of the two, who had come to fetch his son's birth certificate, argued that officials did not care and that they lacked a sense of duty towards the public. Then, when someone approached, they all stopped talking. The bricklayer shared out pieces of kola.

He got what he had come for. As he left, he shook hands all round. Then it was Dieng's turn.

'Man, let me breathe a little,' said the clerk, lighting a Camel. He began a conversation with a colleague at the other end of the office.

The hold-up continued. Behind Dieng, a woman's voice rose in protest:

'Stop grumbling,' snapped the clerk, returning to his seat, with bad grace. 'You! What do you want?' he asked Dieng in a sharp

voice that stung his ears.

'Me?' said Dieng, his thoughts interrupted.

'It's your turn, isn't it? What do you want?'

Like an eel, a beggar in a lofty turban and carrying a long string of beads suddenly slipped between them. He intoned:

'Ngir Yallah, Dom. By the grace of God, son.'

'Clear off,' the official jumped down his throat, first in French, then in Wolof. 'Good God, you are here morning and afternoon, splitting our ear-drums.'

Sheepishly, the beggar withdrew.

'Well, you, what do you want?'

'Me? ... A birth certificate.'

'Where were you born, and what was the date?'

'Here are my papers.'

'I don't need your papers. Your date of birth, and the place?'

Put off by the harshness of the man's tone of voice, Dieng looked around him for support, a frightened expression on his face. He showed his papers again.

'I am waiting, man,' the clerk said again, puffing at his cigarette.

'Come on, hurry up,' complained the woman behind Dieng.

'Can't anyone help him?'

A man in a bush-jacket came up.

'Go back to your place,' ordered the clerk bossily in French.

'Come now, speak politely,' replied the man.

'What? Don't show off.'

'Please note that at least I am polite,' objected the man and, turning to Dieng, read aloud to the clerk from his papers:

'Ibrahima Dieng, born in Dakar about 1900,' stated the man

'The month, I need to know the month.'

'I tell you, about 1900.'

'And you think I am going to hunt for it? I am not an archivist.'

These exchanges took place in French. Little by little, they became more heated until a violent quarrel broke out between the two clerks and the public. Everyone was talking at once. The man in the bush-jacket held his ground. He vehemently reproached the young man for his lack of civic sense and profes-

sional conscience. He took Dieng as his witness, but Dieng said nothing. He kept out of it. Although he recognized the justice of the accusations levelled by the man in the bush-jacket, he could not see their usefulness. Things began to turn nasty, for the woman impudently attacked the mentality of the administration since Independence. She spoke loudly: for more than a week she had been coming, morning and afternoon, and if anyone thought she was going to pay a bribe or open her legs, he was mistaken. 'She has no shame,' thought Dieng. He did not have the courage to tell her to be quiet and wondered if someone else would.

At last, an orderly arrived and calmed the woman. This had its effect on everyone else and voices dropped.

'Your date of birth,' the clerk began again.

'Ibrahima Dieng, born in Dakar about 1900,' stated the man in the bush-jacket.

'How many months are there in the year?' asked the clerk, irony at the corners of his mouth.

'Twelve,' said the man, glaring at him.

'In which month was he born, then?'

'Listen, friend,' intervened the old orderly, addressing Dieng. 'Listen carefully. In your quarter there must be someone whose date of birth is the same as yours ...'

'It is written here,' said Dieng, bristling. 'I have my voter's card. The date is on it.'

'Excuse me,' said the old man, brushing aside the man in the bush-jacket who, raising his honest face to look at him, saw in the orderly's eyes that gleam of madness that is characteristic of the obstinate. The old man addressed Dieng, whose clothes had impressed him.

'You are being fooled with your voter's cards,' he said in French. 'No one is going to be bothered about voting. You see all those registers? Well, there are even more in the basement. Every one of them will have to be gone through, one by one.'

'Can't he leave his name on a piece of paper?' said the man in the bush-jacket, intervening again. 'Then someone could search for it.'

'Do you want to teach us our job? If we did what you say, he'd wait more than two months.'

'That beats all!'

'Do as he advises you. Find someone whose date of birth is the same as yours,' said the woman, making her contribution.

Dieng suppressed an inclination to tell her it was all her fault.

'Or else find someone with influence,' the old orderly whispered into Dieng's ear.

'Who can I go and see? The imam at the mosque? No. He doesn't know anyone. He says so often enough. In this country you get nowhere if you don't know anyone with influence. The proof! Since I've been out of work, I have been promised I'd be taken back. All the other men I worked with have been taken back,' he soliloquized. From the Place de l'Indépendance, he walked towards the Sandaga market.

At the crossroads, he looked around for someone—he knew who would lend him twenty francs. All those closed faces were unknown to him. All those eyes, those mouths, those ears seemed to be without pity. Who could he go to? That man hurrying past? No, he could not behave like Gorgui Maïssa. A young man caught his eye. He reminded him of a distant cousin who lived nearby. The desire to go and see that distant cousin took shape in his mind. 'It would look as if I had come to sponge,' he said to himself. His hesitation was due to the fact that this distant cousin, who had recently come back from France, was married to a white woman. But the idea of going to see him persisted and finally got the upper hand. He would only ask him for twenty francs. He would not be able to refuse that.

He arrived in front of a wrought-iron gate. He examined the courtyard before deciding to place his finger on the bell. A cold sweat broke out all over him. A houseboy in a white apron came and let him in.

'Masser has just come home,' said the boy, taking Dieng into the sitting-room.

He was greatly impressed. The feeling that he was an intruder gnawed at his inside. His gaze went from one object to another.

Everything here imposed silence. He didn't dare sit down. He hoped he would only see his distant cousin, and not madame.

A man in shirt-sleeves of about thirty entered the sitting-room. As soon as he saw Dieng, he hastened to put the 'old man' at his ease, asking him for news of his family and their relatives. He called madame and his two children, to introduce them.

Madame did not remember this uncle. How could she put a name to all those faces she had seen just once, three years ago, and which had since disappeared from her horizon? Hadn't her husband said, during a conversation among mixed couples:

'Here, our relatives and in-laws only come to see us when they want something. So, why should we bother ourselves with African social custom?'

Dieng declined their invitation to stay for a meal. He had only called to find out how they were. When he left, the distant cousin went to the door with him. Alone with him, Dieng made his request. The cousin went back inside and returned with a hundred-franc note and a cheque for a thousand francs. He had no cash in the house. The uncle thanked him and promised to call on him again at his office the next morning.

Back in the sitting-room, the cousin found madame in a sulk:

'Money is all they ever think of, and that was all he wanted.'

He understood his wife's feelings, and looked at her with sympathy. The notion of the mutual responsibility that helps and sustains the members of the same community in time of need was foreign to their milieu.

'It is hard for us, but it is harder for them.'

Madame stalked out of the room.

Left alone, the distant cousin reflected: how was he to make his family understand they must only come and see him at his office?



AT THE BUS CENTRE, DIENG CHANGED HIS NOTE. THIS would obviate the need to show a hundred-franc note and thus

excite the envy of a relative encountered by chance, or oblige him to pay his fare. The bus was full. Next to him, on a bench for two, an old man with a worn, lined face was talking to a well-dressed man sitting opposite him.

'I didn't see the fellow you are talking about,' said the old man in a Cayor accent.

'You did give it to him?' asked the other.

'He wants too much.'

'Everyone has his price. The main thing is to get what you want.'

'Where is the country going to? Every time you want something, you have to pay.'

'Speak softly,' advised the younger man, looking round at the other passengers.

Dieng had missed nothing of their conversation. He was sure the old man had just had to bribe someone to obtain a service. What? If only he knew. He watched them through his eye-lashes. The younger man inspired him with confidence because of his neat dress. He had the shiny forehead of a believer.

The driver's assistant collected the fares. Dieng gave him two ten-franc pieces.

At the Gumalo stop, the old man and his companion got off. Dieng did likewise and walked abreast of them for a while.

'Excuse me, brothers, I heard you talking just now.'

The younger man's face darkened with fear, and he mumbled:

'We said nothing, my father and I. You must be mistaken.'

'That's right, man, your ears have deceived you. It was some other people you heard in the bus,' the father put in.

'Don't worry, I am not what you think I am.'

'Yallah is our witness that we said nothing. We are both Muslims. My father is from up-country. He came here to go to the hospital. That's all. We have paid our tax. Here, take this and buy yourself some kola.'

Dieng was flabbergasted. How can you make people believe you? The old man's son thrust a hundred-franc note into his hand. Before he even had time to draw breath or say anything, the father and son were at the end of the road. Dumbfounded, he stood there,

holding the note with the tips of his fingers.

It was after two o'clock when he walked up the main street towards the bank. On the pavement, there was an unbroken flow of people, and a constant coming-and-going of traders selling sun-glasses, cuff-links, lengths of cloth, combs, tailored trousers, statuettes and masks; very young shoe-shine boys; women selling groundnuts and blind people: every hundred yards, a human milestone sat on the ground, chanting. Human trunks on wheels propelled themselves between the legs of the passers-by.

Outside the *Africa* bookshop, Dieng was accosted by a discreetly-dressed woman. She needed ten francs to return home to Yoff. She had been robbed of all her money. There was nothing in her tone of voice or in her behaviour to suggest she was a common prostitute. Dieng sympathized with her and gave her twenty-five francs, repeating to himself the ritual phrase: 'May all my misfortunes follow these twenty-five francs.'

'Perhaps I know her family. How thoughtless of me! I don't know her name, but I'm sure I'll recognize her again,' he said to himself as he continued on his way. She had thanked him, wishing him all possible happiness.

The bank was not open yet. The clerks were waiting outside the staff entrance. Looking at the various groups in turn, he sought a familiar face. Near a pillar, he noticed a stout man, dressed in a well-cut suit and carrying a large brief-case. He examined him at length. The man sensed that he was being watched. Then Dieng went over to him.

'If there is money here, there is nothing to fear, you will be paid,' was the reply to his question.

Another man approached. He was thin; his tweed jacket was too big for him and sagged at the shoulders. They spoke in French, which Dieng did not understand.

'Why didn't the person who gave you the cheque make it payable to the bearer?'

'What do you mean, the bearer?'

He did not get his explanation. He arranged with the man in the tweed jacket that he would present himself to him when the bank opened. In the meantime, he must go round to the other side of the building and enter by the public door. When it opened, a crowd streamed into the hall of the bank. Dieng went and sat down, his heart beating. From time to time, a mechanical, vibrant voice called a number, and a man or a woman went up to one of the windows.

A toubab came and sat opposite him. Fear seized his stomach. His eyes met the toubab's a third time. He saw the toubab's gaze linger on his face and on his trembling arms. A strange, indefinable feeling came over him, like a feeling of guilt. His fear gave him the impression he was committing some wrong. Instinctively, he recited the protective verses of the Koran.

The mechanical voice disgorged a number. The toubab got up. Dieng followed him with his eyes, and his breast heaved a long sigh of relief. A hand on his shoulder sent a shiver down his spine.

'Brother, you are wanted over there.'

Behind the counter, the man in the tweed jacket said to him, in a low voice:

'This is your number. Listen carefully for it: 41. Ask the cashier for hundred-franc notes.'

Dieng went back to his seat, repeating to himself: 41 ... 41. It was not long before it was his turn to present himself at the window. The cashier asked him how he wanted his thousand francs. As he was leaving the bank, the young man in the tweed jacket stopped him:

'Alhamdoulillah!' said Dieng. 'Everything went well. Thank you!'

'Uncle (*there were no ties of family between them*), I beg you to think of my colleague. It is thanks to him that you have your money.'

'How much?' asked Dieng.

'You are a father of a family. Instead of four hundred francs, give him three hundred.'

Dieng thought the figure was rather high.

'Remember, my colleague was taking a risk. For your thousand

francs, he risked his future and his family's welfare.'

Hearing him expatiate on the risks his colleague had taken, Dieng gave him the three hundred francs. He grumbled about people who expect to be paid for every little service they render. But he also had to acknowledge that without their help, people like him would find life difficult.

On his way back, with the money in his pocket, he looked in all the richly laden shop windows. Outside the *Service des Domaines*, a crowd attracted his attention. It was gathered round an old beggar who was holding forth. He had hollow, empty eyes, his cheeks were like a pair of horse's bars, and he had a strong, piercing voice. Dieng felt in his pockets.

'Father! ... Father! ... Please!' he heard a woman's voice say next to him. 'Father, forgive me, I am a stranger to Ndakaru. I came here to find treatment for my husband, and Yallah has called him to him. Now I must return to my village. I appeal to your generosity, to the grace of Yallah and his prophet Mohammed.'

There was nothing about her reedy voice, with its even tone, to inspire either pity or morbid condescension, only a shining lake of tears welling up over her eyelids.

Dieng stepped aside to the left to allow two men to pass.

'Voi! Voi!' he exclaimed. 'I saw you just now. I even gave you twenty-five francs. It was a little further on, over there.'

Dieng was convinced it was the same woman, the same eyes, the same elongated face. Only her clothes were different.

'Me?' she cried, her hand on her breast. 'Me? You must be mistaking me for another woman, man.'

'No! No! Yallah is my witness.'

People were beginning to look round at them with hostility.

'Go on your way, man! I am not what you think I am. I am an honest woman.'

'How was it, then, just now, on this very pavement ...?'

'Man, go on your way,' she interrupted him again. 'You look like a marabout, and I would never have believed this of a respectful man like you.'

Dieng spluttered:

'If I am to say nothing, you, too, should keep quiet.'

'I left a father like you at home. Dressed as you are, you ought to be ashamed to make propositions to the women you meet,' she concluded, moving away.

Disconcerted, Dieng looked around him. He heard people condemning him. The sweat of shame broke out on his forehead. A man of his age, in the white uniform of a chauffeur, took him gently by the arm and led him out of the crowd.

'If honest people take to begging, where will it all end?'

The chauffeur did not reply. A little further on, he left Dieng and went on his way.

There was no point in getting the bus. With the money he had left he would go to a photographer and buy a stamp. In the Avenue Blaise Diagne, he examined the photographers' windows. In one of the studios, a Syrian woman with a tired face, her head covered in a white veil, asked him in Wolof:

'What do you want, man? Have your picture taken?'

'I only want to find out how much an identity photo costs.'

Without getting up from her stool, the Syrian woman told him the price. He thought it was too high. Five or six others all quoted the same price. He would have liked to go to Salla Casset, who had the best reputation, but the price put him off. In the end, he went to Ambrose. A small fellow with a very funny walk, Ambrose met him at the door of his studio, a disused garage. He sat Dieng down without giving him time to draw breath even. His apprentice, familiar with his employer's technique, adjusted the two lamps. They were so bright they forced Dieng to shut his eyes.

'Don't close your eyes, man. Is it for an identity card? Good. I knew it was as soon as I saw you. Raise your chin. That's right! Ready. There, it's done.'

Dieng found himself on the other side of the curtain. Ambrose took two hundred francs from him, saying:

'Tomorrow.'

Late into the night, forgetting his unfortunate experiences, Dieng lay thinking happily of the days of security ahead. He con-

gratulated himself on his great perseverance. He tossed and turned in his bed. He thought about the reply to Abdou he would dictate to the letter-writer. Suddenly he remembered the fifty francs. He dictated:

I have received your letter and money-order. For months we have been worried about your absence. Everyone was anxious about you. One day, one of your friends told us: 'Abdou has gone to France.' What you have done is not good. How could you go away without telling us, especially me? You know me, you could have told me. Perhaps I would have opposed it; simply because I would have been afraid for you. But knowing you are a good son, you would have had my blessing, especially as you were going away to work. For here there is no work at all. I am happy, very happy, to hear that you have found work.

So, you are in a foreign country. You are alone, without anyone to advise you. No one to tell you what you must and must not do. You are your own father and mother. Avoid bad company. Think, too, that you must come back. Your mother only has you for a son, and eight children to feed. Your needs must come after hers. Here life is getting more and more difficult.

As soon as I received your money-order, I did what you asked. I sent three thousand francs to your mother. I expect to hear from her in a few days. Perhaps she will come herself.

Dieng wondered whether he ought to mention the distant cousin. Better not to tell everything. He returned to the mental composition of his letter.

I am keeping twenty thousand francs for you, as you asked me to. I think you should send all your money to me. If you do that, I'll buy you a house for when you come back. Youth doesn't last forever.

He had dictated enough. Aram, whose aïye it was, received him twice.

The next morning he went to the distant cousin's office. The latter drove him to the town hall in his mini. He told him to wait with the old orderly, who recognized him. They talked. The distant cousin eventually came out with someone else. 'He looks like a boss,' thought Dieng. He watched them from a distance, and was

struck by their familiarity with one another. The distant cousin beckoned him with his finger. He wrote Ibrahima Dieng's date and place of birth on a piece of paper.

'Come back the day after tomorrow, uncle, and go up to the first floor,' the distant cousin's friend told him.

It was over. The distant cousin was unable to drive him all the way home, but dropped him at the Sandaga crossroads. As they separated, Dieng seized his hands and opened his palms, muttering verses from the Koran. The distant cousin let him have his way. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a policeman approaching them, feeling his chest pocket. When he reached them, the policeman looked at the two pairs of hands, at the man's face, then at the marabout (for he thought Dieng was one), and he joined his hands to theirs. Dieng took hold of one of his thumbs. He raised his forehead and his lips moved. Two passers-by stopped and held out their hands. When he had finished murmuring, Dieng sprayed saliva all around. They all replied, 'Amine! Amine!' and rubbed their faces as they broke up.

Gaily, Dieng returned home. He thought how he would have his birth certificate the day after the next and his photo the next afternoon. He had forgotten about the stamp.

FOR THE REST OF THE DAY, HE HAD NOTHING TO DO. THE following day he had to go to a baptism and then to a funeral. He could not get out of it. After the ceremonies at the mosque, he made his visits to the relatives and friends. On the Saturday, for reasons that were not very clear, he decided not to go to the town hall, putting it off until Monday.

In the afternoon, he went to Ambrose the photographer. The shop was closed.

When he returned home, he found his elder sister, Abdou's mother, had arrived. She was a large woman, with broad hips. Her face had been deeply lined by the Cayor wind and the whites of her eyes had turned brown. When the greetings were over, in

her rough, unemphatic voice, she explained the reasons for her visit. She wanted to leave again the next day. She had received her son's letter and had come to collect her three thousand francs. Dieng told her about his efforts to cash the money-order and that things looked hopeful. It was only a matter of days. Two, three at the most. He had even been to see the distant cousin, who had been very polite to him.

'Him! The son who now ignores us! And to think I used to wipe his bottom!'

'We have to understand ...'

'Hasn't he deserted us? We who bore him, nursed him? Because he has become a toubab. Don't talk to me about him. He knows we are desperate. I still have my dignity. I shall leave here without going to see him.'

'And your husband?'

'In the bush. I'm alone with the children, and we have nothing. Nothing at all. I had to borrow from left and right to get here. Even these clothes I have on, some of them belong to my second veudieu,' she explained. Her anger was evident from the way she spoke.

Mety brought the brother and sister a meal. As they ate, she insisted Dieng must find at least two thousand francs, so that she could leave the next day.

'I have nothing to buy my return ticket,' she said in conclusion.

'The rice you are eating was advanced to me at a ruinous price. I have only two hundred francs left.'

'I have also contracted debts after receiving Abdou's letter. And I promised to pay them when I got back. How can I return empty-handed? It is unthinkable. Go and see your friends.'

'I'm afraid times are hard. Life isn't what it used to be. You can't count on your neighbours any more. Nowadays everyone looks after himself.'

Dieng did all he could to moderate his sister's entreaties. She launched into a bitter diatribe. She talked about life in the country, where two months of hard work were followed by one normal month, during which there was just enough to eat, and then three months of chronic famine and depopulation. Several times, Dieng

tried to silence his sister. 'You should only say such things in a closed room to people you are sure of.' She spared nothing and no one. Raising her voice, she lamented that there were no brave men like there were in the past.

Aram came to her husband's aid. Tactfully, she invited her sister-in-law to rest after her tiring journey.

'I'll go and see what I can get,' said Dieng.

'Don't come back empty-handed,' she told him.

As he was leaving, Aram drew him aside and said:

'Try and sell these.'

It was a pair of gold earrings that Dieng had once given her.

'I'll find something without that. Keep them.'

'It is dark. If you find nothing, go to Mbarka. He doesn't turn his nose up at gold.'

Outside, he reflected. Who could he borrow two thousand francs from? No name or face came to mind. He knew from the outset that he did not have a hope. No one would help him. He was unlikely to find such a large sum of money in times like these, he concluded. He decided to take a long walk and then return home. Tomorrow, he would see. He knew his sister's obstinacy. She would spew out her anger, and that would be that.

From the shadow emerged the ghostly, shrivelled outline of Nogui Binetu, draped in her cloth. She was accompanied by one of her grandsons, a nine-year-old lad. They recognized each other in the dark. She was on her way to Ibrahima's house, she said. (Contrary to custom, she only used the family name on ceremonial occasions.) She asked Ibrahima to sit down beside her on the bricks.

'I was on my way to your house to ask you to lend me some food or some money. I need fifty kilos of rice.'

Dieng had guessed the moment they had met. The old woman's voice wound its way slowly through his brain.

A hawker crossed the road, chanting:

Powder to kill fleas, bugs and cockroaches.

Powder to give you a restful night.

'I am on my way to Mbarka's. I'll call on you when I come

back,' murmured Dieng, thinking to himself: 'It's no use telling her I haven't anything.'

They parted.

Two broad rays of light from the shop projected themselves onto the sand. By a door on the right, three men were comfortably installed around a stove on which mint tea was brewing. They were the shopkeepers of the street. They were engaged in lively conversation.

Dieng greeted them and went into the shop, where Mbarka was serving a customer.

'I hear your sister has come. Did she have a good journey?' inquired the shopkeeper, by way of greeting.

'Alhamdoulillah!' acquiesced Dieng. 'May Yallah be thanked!'

'Amine! Amine!'

'You came in to greet me?' Mbarka went on, anxious to avoid mentioning Dieng's account in front of a witness. 'Choose a nut from the bottle. I have been expecting you for days.'

Dieng selected a firm nut, broke it and held out his hand, first to the shopkeeper, then to the customer. The aroma of mint filled the air.

'You have come, I hope, to settle with me,' began Mbarka when the customer had left. 'You know I never badger my customers.'

Dieng tried to plead his case, swearing by the name of Yallah. Now he had his sister on his hands. Finally, he showed Mbarka the earrings. The shopkeeper examined them with an air of disdain, and handed them back.

'Mbarka! Mbarka!' called a voice from outside.

'I'm coming,' Mbarka called back.

'I only want five thousand francs for them. I'm sure I will be able to cash the money-order on Monday. I will come and see you before anyone else, inchallah. Help me, in the name of Yallah and his prophet Mohammed.'

'Yallah! Yallah! Do you think I make five thousand francs in a day?'

With purposeful gestures, he leafed through a register with a greasy cover inscribed in Arabic lettering. His index finger ran

down the page.

'There! ... Do you know how much you owe me?'

In a rapid, monotonous voice, he listed the various articles and concluded:

'You owe me twenty thousand seven hundred and fifty-three francs. And you have done for seven months.'

'Eye! Mbarka!' called the voice again.

'I'm coming,' he called back, still looking at Dieng.

The light from the ceiling made the top of his forehead gleam and the dark patch under his eyes extend down to his mouth, which jutted out like a dog's snout.

'Yallah knows I cannot. Go and see someone else and think about paying me, for I'm closing your account.'

'Listen,' begged Dieng.

Mbarka was already with the others, leaving him alone in the shop.

The shopkeepers sat around the stove, while one of them, his legs crossed, officiated: raising the teapot high, he poured the infusion into the glasses, where it landed with a dull sound, scenting the air.

Dieng stood watching them sip the hot drink greedily. His silhouette stood out against the pool of light.

Powder to kill fleas, bugs, lice and cockroaches.

Powder to give you a restful night.

Who wants some? It isn't expensive.

Once I'm home, I don't go out again.

And don't come and wake me, please.

Please, I have a young wife. Come on!

Buy some now!

Powder ... Good powder!

It was the hawker, who had stopped for a moment.

'What do you want, my friend?' one of the shopkeepers asked Dieng. He was reclining on the pavement, holding his foot, bent over, with his hand, so that it was off the ground. Speaking in their dialect, Mbarka put them in the picture.

'Let me see!'

Dieng leaned over to him.

'Are they gold?'

'Pure gold. Hallmark gold. I want to pawn them for five thousand francs. I paid eleven thousand five hundred francs for them.'

'I'll go and see.'

He got up and went into the shop. When he came back, he spoke to Mbarka. Then he addressed Dieng:

'We haven't any cash, as you know, but I see you really need money. I'll take them for three days.'

'Agreed.'

'Wait. I'll take them for two thousand francs. You will give me five hundred more.'

'Two,' countered Dieng, squatting down next to the man. 'I need five thousand francs, but give me three thousand. Mbarka knows I have a money-order from Paris.'

'I was trying to help you! Take back your jewelry. It isn't much use to me. It's tied money.'

The shopkeepers lost interest in him and returned to their conversation. The glasses passed from hand to hand. Dieng tried, but in vain, to invoke religious solidarity and the law that required each man to help his neighbour. Nothing made any difference. In the end, he accepted the two thousand francs.

'Listen carefully, my friend. If in three days—Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday—you don't come to redeem your earrings, you lose them and I will sell them.'

'Yes.'

'Think carefully.'

'I tell you, I have a money-order.'

The other man turned to Mbarka. They spoke in their dialect, which Dieng could not understand. Mbarka took the earrings, went into the shop, came back and counted four five-hundred franc notes into Dieng's hand.

At this moment, Gorgui Maissa arrived. After exchanging greetings, he walked along with Dieng.

'Each time I call on you, Mety or Aram tells me you are out. I have just seen your sister. She has lost weight, poor woman.'

'I'm always on the go these days.'

'I see everything is in order.'

Dieng did not reply. He was calculating: five hundred francs for old Nogoi, the rest for his sister. He would have liked to refuse Nogoi her five hundred francs, but he could not. 'She must have a gree-gree to force my hand,' he said softly to himself.

'Will you lend me two thousand francs? I'll pay you back at the end of next week. I am also expecting some money,' said Gorgui Maissa.

'Oh?' grunted Dieng, interrogatively, roused from his inner conflicts. 'I can't.'

'Try! Please, try! I'd be happy with even a thousand francs.'

'Maïssa, I cannot, believe me.'

'Ibrahima, people must help one another. Don't enjoy what you have by yourself. Think of others. Today it's you, tomorrow it will be someone else. Man's remedy is man.'

'Maïssa, the money you have just seen I obtained by pawning my wife's earrings. It is for my sister. I don't know myself what I am going to give my wives tomorrow for the day's expenses.'

'Still, you promised Nogoi something.'

'Ah!'

'I went to see her. She told me she was waiting for you.'

'I haven't cashed the money-order. Yallah is my witness. And the money-order isn't even mine.'

'I know,' replied Gorgui Maïssa, holding him by the wrist. 'You have known me for years. Think of the old days! We didn't hide anything from one another. As soon as I receive the money I'm expecting, I'll settle with you, down to the last sou. I'll even make it more. Help me. You know I don't want it to go on the spree. It's for my family ...'

'Maïssa, this money is not mine. This money-order that you are all building your hopes on is not mine.'

'I know. Before your nephew comes back from Tugel (Europe), I'll pay it back.'

'I haven't any money,' said Dieng sharply, going into Nogoi's house. 'It is a waste of time telling people the truth these days,' he

thought.

Being hospitable sisters-in-law, the two wives did not allow Abdou's mother to leave empty-handed the next day. Each had taken from the bottom of her trunk a choice garment to give her as a present. Her brother took her to the bus station, promising to visit her within a week at the latest. She had a great deal to say, and never stopped nagging him about her problems.

'Instead of trying to raise yourself to a more respectable place in society, you just squat in filth,' she told him.

On the Monday morning, after leaving the town hall with his birth certificate in his pocket, Dieng went on to Ambrose, the photographer. Twice he found the garage door closed. No one could tell him why it was closed. Was the photographer sick?

A heavy weight fell from his shoulders when, in the afternoon, he saw from some way off that the door was wide open. The apprentice told him that the proprietor was out. He did not know when he would be back. Yes, he did recognize him. He was the bringer of bad luck! Their camera hadn't worked for two days!

'Give me my money back.'

'Pa! Wait until the boss gets back. All I know is that the photos are a failure.'

The apprentice, seated on the edge of the table, with his feet on the chair, was ogling the naked women in the pages of *La Vie Parisienne*. Dieng grew impatient and fidgety as the wait dragged on.

'When you know your camera doesn't work, the honest thing is to give the money back. Did I haggle over the price? No! ... If your boss doesn't give me the photos, then he must give me my money back.'

'Pa! It's not my business. Stop bawling and wait. You are frightening our customers away,' said the apprentice, without raising his eyes.

'I've got children! My youngest is older than you.'

The apprentice lit a cigarette, indifferent.

'I was told to come back last Friday. It is true what they say about the children nowadays. You aren't even born yet, and already you are smoking.'

'Pa! It's not your money.'

As he spoke, the apprentice blew the smoke in Dieng's direction. He could not stand the smell, and the smoke went down to his lungs. It made him choke, and he coughed, clutching his throat. His cap fell off. Angrily, he tried to grab the adolescent.

'Pa! Careful now! I'll hurt you,' said the apprentice. 'Pa! Take care,' he said, pulling the table and turning it over. 'Look what you have done, you old fool.'

'Me? Wait till I get hold of you, you'll see!'

In a flash, the adolescent dealt Dieng two or three rapid blows on his nose with his fist. The blood spurted out, all over his clothes. The noise had attracted the passers-by, who collected outside the door.

'This Pa didn't find my boss in, so he wants to break the place up,' explained the apprentice, held now by a man from the crowd.

'You have no right to break a workman's tools. His boss is out, so you wait,' was the opinion of the man who had come between the two antagonists.

Wiping the lower part of his blood-covered face, Dieng had difficulty in putting across his own version of events.

'You are wrong,' the man said with severity. 'You don't fight in someone else's workshop. What can you do with these marabouts! They're a bunch of frauds.'

'Kebe, what's happening,' inquired a young woman with a strong Ndar-ndar accent, pushing her way through the circle of curious bystanders. Her headscarf made her look like an Amazon. Kebe, the pompous fellow, turned round:

'Nothing, Bougouma. It's this fake marabout who's been given a hiding by Malic.'

'Laihi lâh!' exclaimed Bougouma, the young woman, holding her chin with her hand in her surprise. 'He's swimming in blood,' she said. 'A real battering-ram. So, it's the fashion, now, in Am-

brose's shop.'

'Come, man. I live next door. I'll give you some water,' put in another, older woman, with a look of pity.

As he followed her, Dieng explained all the ins and outs of his misadventure.

Dieng had cleaned himself up and was sitting on the workbench in front of the woman's house. He was watching the photographer's studio. After an hour, he saw the little man approaching gaily in the distance, greeting all he met. He was on his home ground.

'So, there you are, you old Jonah,' he said in French when he caught sight of Dieng.

When he saw his studio, his happy expression froze into a hard mask. Erupting like a volcano, he broke into one of those rages to which Malic, his apprentice, had never accustomed himself. A tornado of curses battered Dieng's pious mind.

'Boss, he's the one. I swear it was he,' said Malic.

Dieng had seen people angry before, but the photographer belonged to an unusual category. His neck and face swelled up. His dark black skin turned a pale grey, his eyes stood out and rolled, bloodshot, and his lower lip dropped and twisted itself, showing his teeth discoloured by the cheap wine sold in all the bars of the Medina.

'Boss, I told him to wait, but he wouldn't listen. Look what he did,' added Malic, throwing oil on the fire.

Ambrose fulminated against all the Diengs in the country. His angry, aggressive voice attracted the attention of the passers-by:

'Get out! Get out, before I do something terrible. Do you think your miserable two hundred francs will pay for all this damage? Idiot! Stupid fool!'

Ambrose let him have it in every language. His great consumption of detective novels, his assiduous frequentation of cinemas where the cheapest kinds of French, American, English, Indian and Arab films were shown, had ripened his vocabulary.

Dieng was crushed, stupefied. His first impulse had been to

answer back, but he had been put off by the photographer's sudden attack. He said nothing and, like the curious bystanders, he listened to the other man's tirade.

'Old man, go,' advised someone in the crowd.

'He owes me money,' retorted Dieng, seeking, with his eyes, the support of a man of mature age wearing a caftan in a shade of egg-yolk and a chocolate-coloured arakiya on his head. Still looking at the man, Dieng continued:

'Days ago, I ordered some identity photos. Now, he and his apprentice refuse to give them to me. So let him give me my money back.'

'Ambrose is a crook. In spite of all the scandal he causes, the police never trouble him,' contributed someone in the crowd.

Ambrose leapt forward, snorting like a piglet.

'Who said that? Who is the son of a whore who said that? Let him show himself. The damage this old fool has done will cost me thirty thousand francs! Look at the mess! I am going to the police about it.'

Dieng turned a watery gaze on the photographer, then towards the man in the arakiya:

'There is no law in this country. You owe me money and you talk,' objected Dieng, in a moment of lucidity.

'Man, I implore you, go, quickly.' It was the man in the arakiya. His eyes met Dieng's. He repeated, in the same calm voice: 'I advise you to go.'

Somewhere, Dieng felt a pang. The blood flowing warm through him, making his heart ache, warned him of danger. Had he said too much?

'An informer,' murmured someone in the crowd, which suddenly melted away in fear.

'He owes me money,' Dieng tried to say again, raising his worried brow to the man in the arakiya.

'Where are you going?' the latter asked him, firm.

Dieng felt bewildered. A vague, lethargic heaviness held him rooted to the spot. In an instant, this feeling left him, and the effort restored his energy. His tongue was paralyzed. But the fear of

imminent humiliation strengthened the concern for his pride that came over him, and helped him to make up his mind to leave, to escape before the crowd surrounded him again. Speaking in the voice of a child, he said to the man in the arakiya:

'This way.'

The man ordered him to go with a nod of his head. A hundred yards on, Dieng looked back. The man was standing like a statue, watching him.

We must try and understand Ibrahima Dieng. Conditioned by years of blind, unconscious submissiveness, he fled from anything likely to cause him trouble, be it physical or moral. The blow of the fist he had received on his nose was an *atte Yallah*: the will of God. The money he had lost, too, it was ordained that it was not he who should spend it. If dishonesty seemed to have the upper hand, this was because the times were like that, not because Yallah wanted it so. These were times that refused to conform to the old tradition. In order to rid himself of his feeling of humiliation, Ibrahima Dieng invoked Yallah's omnipotence: for he was also a refuge, this Yallah. In the depths of his despair, and of the humiliation to which he had been subjected, the strength of his faith sustained him, releasing a subterranean stream of hope, but this stream also revealed vast areas of doubt. He did not, however, doubt the certainty that tomorrow would be better than today. Alas! Ibrahima Dieng did not know who would be the architect of this better tomorrow, this better tomorrow which he did not doubt.

DIENG DID NOT WANT HIS NEIGHBOURS TO SEE THE STATE he was in: his clothes spattered with blood, and his babouches as well. He had a precise notion of the esteem which he had come to enjoy since the advent of the money-order. For a week he had been on his own, and on his own he must face adversity. After he left the main street, he kept close to the fences, hurrying, unhappy but stoical, from corner to corner, his head low, and reached home without being seen by anyone.

He entered his house.

Aram leapt up to meet him, her eyes bright with fear. She looked at their husband's face, and down to his babouches. Dieng met her battery of questions with silence. Anxiety spread its dark carpet over the woman's heart.

In the room, Dieng lay down. With each heartbeat, his groans grew louder. Blood began to pour from his nose again. Her arms on her head, Aram let out another long, plaintive cry.

'Don't, it is nothing,' said Dieng, dabbing his face with a cloth. 'What happened to you?'

'Nothing. Stop bellowing. You'll bring all the neighbours out.'

'Lahila! he is dead,' she cried, at the sight of the blood, and rushed outside, her arms on her head.

In the yard, her cries grew louder, and the neighbours came running and assailed her with questions.

'He is inside, dying,' she wailed. 'His blood is flowing like the water at the fountain.'

Old Nogöi, still active in spite of being so skinny, marched into the room, followed by Mety. Disgruntled faces waited. For several days the Dieng family had been watched; everyone, deep down, wished them ill, without admitting it to themselves.

'He is going to die,' whimpered Aram again.

'They tried to kill him! As soon as he cashed the money-order, three men threw themselves on him,' Mety hastily declared in a loud voice. Making the most of the general consternation and the surprise effect of her announcement, she went on, in a plaintive voice, her eyes brimming with tears:

'If the money had been his, Yallah knows, we would not suffer so much. It was his nephew's money, who works in Paris. His sister came to fetch her share, and it is only thanks to Aram's earrings, pawned to Mbarka, that she was able to go home again. Now we have lost everything. Everything, even the esteem we had in the quarter because of the money-order.'

For a moment, everyone responded to the feeling of solidarity that binds the needy.

'Don't cry, Aram, and you, too, Mety,' said one woman.

'Everyone thinks we are selfish, that we are trying to get out of our duty to our neighbours.'

'Mety, don't heap us with shame! You hurt us. True, we heard of the money-order. What do you expect? When you are all one family and you are hungry, you believe what you hear. You know that people blame before they will understand.'

'It's because we are hungry,' another woman added. She had bulging eyes, like pearls, and was wearing an old, faded dress.

Tongues loosened, and the most secret thoughts emerged into the light of day: intrigue, nepotism, unemployment, immorality, the indifference of the authorities. Voices grew loud, and outstretched arms gesticulated wildly into the empty air. The amount of money involved came under discussion.

'A hundred thousand francs, stolen in a single day!'

'I'd heard he had been given a year's back-pay. He hasn't had work for more than a year.'

'His nephew is coming from Paris by aeroplane.'

'Let us hope and pray to Yallah that this nephew is a good Muslim and will forgive him.'

The collective monologue then returned to the state of the country: corruption, debauchery, police informers.

Old Nogoi re-appeared.

'Alhamdoulillah! He's asleep. Losing so much blood at his age! What sort of a country is this? I no longer count my years and I have never left Ndakaru, but I confess I do not recognise this country.'

More than an hour later, as evening fell, the women withdrew. The house was quiet. A small fire glowed sadly in the kitchen.

During the two days that Dieng kept to his room, he had plenty of leisure to reflect and to think about the money-order, to approach modern life analytically. Whenever he pushed his mental investigations too far, everything became blurred, and he lost himself in his head, as the local saying goes. It was a vicious circle. He felt suffocated. People seemed to be becoming more and more evil, with no respect for the property of others. As the old adage said:

it is easy for the enterprising to live off the carelss.

The men of his age-group came in after prayers for a chat. They all seemed to believe Mety's story. After they left, he reflected moodily about his first wife's allegations. What was he to do? He would have to start the process again, find at least three hundred francs for the photos and fifty for the stamp. After all he had spent, he could not afford to let the money-order be sent back. There were still four or five days to go before the fateful date.

It was the end of the morning, and he had worked out a careful plan. The children were playing, as usual, in the road. He scolded Mety severely, but she replied:

'Now you are in peace. You can come and go without having to say: 'Yallah is my witness, I haven't cashed the money-order.' You wasted your time invoking Yallah and swearing by his name and the name of his prophet Mohammed, no one believed you. It was being said everywhere that you had received a year's salary in back-pay. Others were saying your nephew had sent you two hundred thousand francs to build yourself a house. No one would speak to us, your wives. At the public fountain, they all came to us: 'Advance me a kilo of rice', 'Lend me a hundred francs', and so on. It was unbearable to have to say the same thing always. Tell them the truth? They wouldn't believe it. It's simple: the truth isn't any use any more!' said Mety.

'You must always speak the truth. However hard it is, you must always speak the truth. Now what am I going to say? You know very well that the money-order is still at the post-office.'

'So, you can go about cashing it without having people spying on you. People come specially to see what is cooking in our pots, so that they can say afterwards: "There, they have had the money." No, it isn't lying. It is simply a case of forestalling the unkind thoughts they have about you. And remember, Aram lent you her earrings for your sister. And the day to redeem them has passed.'

'I know that. You don't need to remind me, nor to insinuate that I prefer my sister to my wives.'

'Ibrahima, forgive me,' began Aram. 'We'll forget the earrings. If Yallah wills it, as soon as you are better-off, you can buy me some

more. Possessions don't save us from death, but from dishonour, for your possessions are ours. Mety is right. Forgive me for contradicting you. It was impossible for either of us to cope with all the requests. According to the gossip of the neighbourhood, we were selfish. All their hunger was channelled and directed at us.'

'Living with neighbours who are your enemies is unbearable. And you know yourself that we aren't the only ones to falsify the truth. We hide ourselves from one another. Why? ... No one has enough for his family to live decently. This new behaviour is the result of our wickedness. Life isn't what it was during our youth, during the youth of those who are the parents of today. How many people hide their bag of rice at night? And why? So as not to share.'

'What am I going to say when it is known that the money-order is still at the post-office?'

Mety raised her forehead. Her headscarf, tied on one side, emphasized the shudder that shook the lower part of her face. In her eyes was the light of accusation, which said: 'Is he really a fool, or does he think we are?'

'When the day comes, say it was Mety who lied.'

'Me, too,' said Aram.

Dieng retreated before their determination. 'I will have to lie to the end,' he thought.

Still weak and hollow cheeked, he walked like a convalescent. Outside the entrance, he inspected both sides of the road, and then made his way to the corner where Mbarka's shop was.

'Ibrahima ... Dieng,' announced Gorgui Maïssa by way of greeting. 'And your health?'

'Alhamdoulillah!'

Maïssa, his brow furrowed, watched Dieng suspiciously. Dressed in an ample indigo blue boubou, Dieng, with a deft, habitual gesture, gathered it behind his back with his hands.

'You were very ill the other day ... Where did it happen? ... It is hardly credible.'

'I have difficulty myself believing it. Yet ... Well, honesty is a crime nowadays in this country.'

'Ah!' exclaimed Gorgui Maïssa, his mouth open, revealing the

stumps of his teeth discoloured by kola juice. The brightness of the sun surrounded his irises with faint specks of silver, and a network of folds fanned out across his rough skin. Sceptical, he said:

'Perhaps you are right. But why do you say it? Is it right to plant different kinds of seeds all in the same field?'

'If the field is worthless, it doesn't much matter if the different kinds of seeds are all planted in it.'

'The complete possession of an object gives power to its owner. And impartial owners are rare.'

'A little knowledge in a variety of subjects, however little it may be, makes any fool wise in the midst of fools. I said and I say again that honesty is a crime nowadays in this country.'

Having said this, in order to escape from Maïssa, he went into Mbarka's shop.

Mbarka was serving two women. With a note of deference in his voice, he returned the new arrival's greetings.

'In spite of that cursed debt, I would have come to see you. Perhaps Aram did not pass on to you my greetings?'

'Oh, yes, this very morning.'

'It is unbelievable! What will become of us if it goes on like this, having one's wallet stolen in broad daylight! Have you been to the police? It is their job to catch robbers.'

One of the women, Daba—the 'black-one', was her nickname in the quarter—turned her coarse, voluminous face towards Dieng as she counted her tins of milk.

'You are right. I was thinking of doing it this morning,' said Dieng.

'You should have done it straight away. People will begin to doubt,' said Mbarka. Then, addressing Daba: 'Judging by the way you treat them, you'd think these notes had no value.'

'If you don't want them, I'll keep them. I'm not a miser.'

'Daba, you are the tip of a spear! Whatever you touch and whatever touches you, it's always the same, you draw blood.'

'Why do you turn your nose up at these notes? Isn't it enough that you cheat people? Do you want us to go down on our knees as well?'

'What are we going to do, Ibrahima,' asked Mbarka, changing the subject. 'My friend, you know these goods don't come from our country. I have my own commitments. The people I owe money to are not like me. They only know dates. Make an effort. While I think of it, it is too late now to redeem the jewelry you pawned.'

'I have only one word,' said Dieng, leaning on the counter and wondering what he would say to Aram about her earrings.

'I have a message for you.'

Mbarka came near and leaned over to Dieng, with his mouth against his ear. Slowly Dieng's face darkened and his features hardened.

'Never!' he suddenly exclaimed. 'Never! Sell my house? Why? To pay you? Is that what you want? Tell whoever it was sent the message that Ibrahima Dieng will not sell his house. Never! Poor, that's bearable, but poor with no house, that's death.'

'Don't shout.'

'You have the cheek to ...'

'And the money you owe me? I couldn't care less about your house. You owe me money. Pay it. That's all! For I, too, can shout. All your fine clothes are just wind. Yesterday, when you grovelled for a handful of rice, you didn't shout so much.'

'You gave me credit because I pay. Everyone knows you charge more than you should.'

A crowd gathered, invading the shop.

'You can die of hunger, you and all your family. No more credit for anyone. By my ancestors, you will pay me. I will go to the police.'

'Come, then! Come on!' yelled Dieng, grabbing him by the wrist.

'Let me go! ... Let me go, I say.'

'Come on!'

'You'll pay me, I swear it. But I'll never give anyone credit again.'

'Mbarka, address your remarks to Ibrahima Dieng,' intervened Ibou. 'And you, Dieng, remember, he who owes money should be conciliatory.'

'Ibou, I've had enough of being conciliatory. I'm not a mattress. Speak for yourself. Would you sell your house? Answer me!'

'It was a message, that's all! You owe me money and you shout louder than I do. You say you were attacked! You're bluffing. You want to profit from your money-order on your own. But you will pay me.'

At this, Dieng felt adversity weaken and give way. He straightened up, morally sure of himself. His eyes met others in which shone the light of accusing doubt.

'I was with him, Mbarka. Don't breathe poison into people's hearts,' declared Gorgui Maïssa, who had approached, his eyes on Dieng's bent brow.

'I doubt all the same. And you'll pay me before you leave the shop.'

Don't say that, Mbarka!

'Leave him. Everyone knows he had dealings with shady characters.'

'That is my business. No more credit for anyone.'

'Our husbands pay. Mine paid you yesterday,' objected one woman.

'It's true. When you owe money, you must pay it. The debtor must be careful of the language he uses to his creditor.'

'You, Daba, you have always been friendly with this robber Mbarka,' Mety intervened, roughly. A little girl had fetched her from the public fountain.

'I wasn't talking to you, Mety.'

'And I, Daba, am talking to you,' countered Mety, facing her. Mety's quarrelsomeness was legendary, in spite of her age. After Daba, she turned on the shopkeeper.

'What we owe you I have in my head. You will be paid. But we won't take ourselves to pieces to sell our flesh.'

'I am not talking to you, Mety. This is an affair between men. I am talking to your husband. He owes me money, and his name is in my register, there ...'

'Quite so. It's because it's my husband, and I was the one who bought the things. You have added it up and so have I. If it's

because of the money-order, you will have to swallow your saliva. He has been robbed.'

She gesticulated vehemently, shaking her index finger in Mbaraka's face.

More and more people gathered:

'Money! It's crazy how people fight over money since independence,' said a man in babouches, making his way through the crowd with his shoulders so as to have a better view.

'A curse on the man who invented money,' agreed a woman next to him.

'It is true. Money seems to have taken the place of morality in our country,' said someone else at the back.

'Yet all we want is enough to live on and to enable our families to live.'

Suddenly, a burst of laughter rocked the crowd:

'Shit!' exclaimed Mety in French, for the third time.

Old Baidy, all skin and bones, made a dramatic appearance. Tall and thin, his gaze swept the crowd. A few days before, when he had returned home empty-handed after his visit to Dieng, he had said to his wives:

'I'd rather die with hunger in the belly than hold out a hand to the Dieng family.'

Pompously, he declared:

'Truth for truth. When you owe money, you pay.'

'The man who has donkeys must be on the side of the owner of the hay. There is no virtue in paying your debts when you are rich,' Mety retorted, refusing to be quiet, in spite of the pleas of her husband and other people.

'When a man surrenders his authority, he becomes a scarecrow,' objected Baidy, his eyes riveted on Dieng.

'A man is only a scarecrow when he is nothing but words. There are men and men,' declared Mety, with energy.

The old man withdrew.

The women backed Mety, and formed a group round her. They called the shopkeeper all the names they could lay their tongues to.

Mbaye's black 403 drew up at the other door. With a lithe, feline tread, he entered the shop. His European clothes and his reputation in the quarter gave him a certain authority. He spoke gravely to the assembled people and within fifteen minutes had restored calm. The crowd dispersed. Walking away with Dieng, Mbaye asked:

'Uncle Dieng, I waited for you this morning.'

'I meant to come and see you, but then I fell into this ...'

'It's over now!' Mbaye said, interrupting him. 'Come and see me at two o'clock.'

He climbed into his car and the engine roared. Gorgui Maissa came and sat beside Dieng as the car drove away.

'He's somebody, Mbaye,' he declared.

'Thank you for just now in the shop.'

'It's nothing. We must stand by one another whatever happens. A tongue hurts more than a bullet.'

The 403 turned at the first intersection.

Mbaye belonged to the 'New Africa' generation, as it was called in some circles; men who combined Cartesian logic with the influence of Islam and the atrophied energy of the Negro. He was a businessman, always ready to do a deal, asking a percentage on each commission according to its value. It was said of him that there was no difficulty he could not resolve. With a villa on the far side of the southern sector, he also had two wives, one a Christian and the other a Muslim, and a 403. He had reached the top.

Mbaye's villa stood in the middle of the shanty town and its tumbledown shacks. In the sitting-room, crammed with armchairs, chairs and vases of artificial flowers, blue was the dominant colour. Theresa, the Christian wife, who was on the point of leaving for work, received Dieng and installed him in the sitting-room. She wore a floral dress and a Brigitte Bardot wig.

'Mbaye is having his siesta,' she told him in French, in her thin, reedy voice.

Seeing that Dieng was perspiring, she turned the electric fan on. Dieng looked around enviously at the furniture, and thought:

'Here is a man who has made it. Abdou will be like him when he returns from Paris.'

More than ten minutes passed before Mbaye entered the sitting-room, knotting his tie.

'What! You should have woken me to say there was someone,' Mbaye said to Theresa, who was impatiently glancing at the door.

'You said nothing to me, my friend,' she replied, still in French.

With a younger man's deference to an older man, Mbaye made his excuses.

'It is nothing. I came a little early. I understand. You must be tired.'

Taking care not to exaggerate too much, Mbaye spoke at length about the terrible disadvantages of modern life. He did not even have time these days for his siesta. According to his doctor, he ought to go to France for a rest cure.

A maid came in with a tray of coffee.

'Bring another cup for uncle.'

'No, thank you, I don't drink coffee.'

A car hooted three times. Theresa immediately rose, saying:

'Don't forget to turn the fan off ... See you this evening.'

'Remember to phone that man. Tell him I'll go to Rufisque this afternoon.'

'Okay.'

'Eskeiye!' exclaimed Dieng.

'Our country is making progress. The women have the same rights as the men.'

Saying this, he sipped his coffee. Dieng told him all about his recent difficulties, and even about the false story put out by Mety.

'Women are sometimes geniuses. I think it was a good idea. We'll go to the police station. First, we must get power-of-attorney. You will make me your proxy. For we haven't any more time to waste on an identity card. At the police station, there won't be any problem. You will have your money-order the day after tomorrow at the latest.'

'Inchallah! I am in your hands.'

'Oh!' said Mbaye, suddenly modest. 'There is a good chance

that the money-order hasn't been returned to your nephew yet.'

He finished his coffee and turned the fan off. His first wife appeared. She was in African dress. The introductions over, she took her husband aside.

Outside, Dieng was overjoyed. He did not know yet how much Mbaye would want. He did not know himself how much he would give him. A thousand francs? It was very little for a man like Mbaye. Five thousand? That was a lot. Two, three, four thousand? He would see.

They collected the power-of-attorney form at the post-office and then Mbaye drove to the police station. All the way, he did not stop giving Dieng advice for his nephew, Abdou. Sitting next to him, Dieng nodded agreement. As Mbaye had led him to expect, everything went smoothly at the police station. The power-of-attorney form completed, it was soon made legal.

'Uncle, it's finished now. I am a little late for an appointment at Rufisque. I'll be back this evening. Tomorrow morning, I shall go to the post-office myself.'

'Inchallah!' said Dieng.

'Inchallah!' echoed Mbaye. 'Come to my house at midday tomorrow.'

'Inchallah! I shall be there. Without you, I don't know what would have become of me.'

'It's nothing, uncle. We must help one another. Here, take a taxi. I haven't time to drive you home.'

'No! No!' Dieng tried to refuse the five-hundred franc note Mbaye held out to him. 'I can get back on foot.'

'Take it, all the same.'

Dieng could not get over it. Tomorrow he would have the money-order. With the five hundred francs in his pocket, he decided to go and see the letter-writer.

The bus dropped him outside the post-office. It was half empty. The old letter-writer only had one customer in front of him. He did not recognize Dieng. Dieng reminded him of the fifty francs and settled his debt. The letter-writer adjusted his glasses and took up his ball-point pen:

Dakar.

19 August 196 ...

Dear Nephew,

I am writing to ask you your news and to give you news of the family, which is excellent. Thanks be to Yallah! All of us here are thinking of you and pray to Yallah for you.

At last, I have the money-order. I didn't have an identity card when it arrived. Thanks be to Yallah, all is going well. Your mother came. She is well. Now she has gone back again. She only stayed one night, because of the work in the fields. I gave her her three thousand francs. She thanks you, greets you and prays for you. She asks you to send her some money to buy clothes and to pay the tax. This year all the prices have gone up. Last year's harvest was not a good one for them. You are her only support in the world.

For my part, I pray all the time for you. As soon as I received the money-order, I did as you asked in your letter. If it pleases God, you will find all your money here, even if Yallah calls me to him. I thank you for thinking of me and for having confidence in me. Nowadays it is so hard to have confidence in people. I beg you not to regard money as the essence of life. If you do, it will only lead you onto a false path where, sooner or later, you will be alone. Money gives no security. On the contrary, it destroys all that is human in us. I cannot tell you everything that passes through my head,

The letter-writer stopped. He raised his eyebrows above the metal frame of his spectacles. His customer seemed to be dictating his letter with a lump in his throat. Over the edge of his eyelids tears ran down in a clear stream. Dieng raised his head. Indeed, he, a grown man, was crying.

'Forgive me, man. It is my nephew. He is in Paris and he behaved like ...'

'Here I see and hear all kinds of dramas.'

'I was saying only this morning that honesty was a crime in this country.'

'I am listening,' said the letter-writer, catching sight of another customer waiting. 'You had got as far as: *I cannot tell you everything that passes through my head.*'

I thank you again. I'll never forget your confidence in me. Your aunts Mety and Aram and all the family greet you. With my next letter. I'll send you some gree-grees. Even though you are not in Ndakaru, you must protect yourself. Someone could put an evil spell on you. There is a real marabout here. I'll go and see him for you. I am very pleased to hear that you do your five prayers every day. You must go on doing them. Do not forget that you are a foreigner in Paris. Here, all the boys of your age have villas.

I have no more to say to you. You are a man.

Your uncle,

IBRAHIMA DIENG.

'The address?' asked the letter-writer, after reading him the letter and sealing it.

Dieng felt in his pockets.

'I have left it at home.'

'Never mind. You can find someone to write the address for you.'

In the street, Dieng, his heart beating for joy, generously gave ten francs to an old leper.

At home, he magnanimously forgave Mety the outrageous words she had used to the old man Baïdy.

'I understand why you did it. Our honour had been offended and in public.'

Afterwards, he went to join his peers at the mosque. There, before witnesses, he apologized to Baïdy, who said he felt no malice.

'Still, I want to know that you forgive me. And my family, too,' repeated Dieng, drunk with satisfaction.

'I tell you, I forgive you.'

'Alhamdoulillah! May Yallah forgive us. Me, too, I forgive you.'

'Amine! Amine!' said the onlookers.

'This is what we mean by being Muslims. To be simple and open towards one's neighbour. May Yallah keep us on that path.'

Gorgui Maïssa, whose mind was greatly exercised by Dieng's verbal exuberance, remained wary, watching him out of the corner

of his eye.

When the gewe was over, Dieng replied evasively to his questions. So, late into the evening, Maissa kept a watch on Dieng's house: who knew, but he had the money-order and would have rice brought into his house when night fell. They were long, uncomfortable hours of vain waiting.

The next day, excited by the feverish euphoria of the humble in their hopefulness, Dieng made a tour of the neighbourhood, conscious of himself as a man who belonged to a community. Everyone sympathized with him over his unfortunate experience, and offered him words of consolation. He repeated each time:

'A man needs enough to feed his family. When everyone has enough to eat, there will be peace in men's hearts, everywhere.'

Several times he put his hand in his pocket and felt the letter intended for Abdou with his fingers. It was crumpled. He thought: 'Mbaye will give me another envelope.'

Back home, he called out:

'Mety, have you seen Abdou's letter?'

'No. Perhaps Aram has.'

'Me? I haven't seen it either. Look among your papers.'

'You can never find anything in this house. Yet I certainly left it here,' he grumbled at everyone.

He found it in one of his pockets.

When the tisbar prayer was over, he went to Mbaye's house.

'Hullo, uncle,' Theresa greeted him. 'My man is out.'

'Didn't he leave a message for me?'

'Yes, he did,' she replied, patting a rebellious curl in her wig into place. She went on:

'I was waiting for the car, to drop it at your house. There is a sack of rice for you. It was delivered at midday.'

'I think there is a mistake,' he said, after a long pause.

'No, no, uncle. I haven't made a mistake. Mbaye left me a note. That damned chauffeur is never on time. Let's go inside.'

'When will he be back?' asked Dieng, sitting in the same place he had occupied the previous day.

'Uncle, he said nothing. He has gone to Kaolack.'

'Perhaps he will be back this evening?'

'I don't know, uncle. All the same, I'll go and ask my veudieu.'

She came back a moment later.

'She knows nothing either.'

'I will call again,' said Dieng, getting up, with the heavy weight of disappointment on his shoulders.

'You won't take the rice, uncle?'

'I'll wait for him to get back.'

Outside, his thoughts were in confusion. Until late into the night, he went back and forth between his house and Mbaye's. Each time, his anger grew along with his disappointment. At home, neither of his wives asked any questions. Everything about his manner gave away his anger.

The next morning, he went to say his beads in front of the villa. Towards eight o'clock, at the same time as the maid, he entered the sitting-room. The first wife, her forehead marked by a ring of sand (she had just finished her early morning prayer), asked him to wait. In less than half an hour, Mbaye came out, dressed, with his briefcase in his hand.

'They said you had been yesterday. I am sorry, I was at Kaolack yesterday.'

'I know you are busy,' said Dieng.

Mbaye's presence had given him renewed confidence, and his optimism returned. All the angry reflections of the night before burst like soap bubbles.

'You didn't take the sack of rice,' Mbaye began.

He was interrupted by the arrival of the maid to serve breakfast.

'Be quick,' he said to her. 'Bring the butter in the paper; the butter in the dish is off. Uncle, you'll have some coffee?'

'No, thank you.'

'With milk,' insisted Mbaye.

'No, thank you. I prefer my quinquelib.''

'I have the coffee bug. To be brief, I don't know how to tell you. You are my uncle. About the rice. I was calling on my Syrian, and since he had some rice, I bought some for you. I was thinking of the disagreement you had with Mbarka.'

'I don't know why it was.'

'Anyway, you did right. I couldn't explain it all to the women. You know what they are like.'

Mbaye spoke carefully, to make sure he was understood.

'I did in fact cash the money-order yesterday. I had some business in Kaolack, which I had to see to in person. When I got there, I parked my car opposite the market. You know Kaolack? A town of crooks! Leaving the car, I crossed the market. I bought something or other, and when I came to pay for it, I felt for my wallet. It had gone! Not only were your twenty-five thousand francs in it, but sixty others as well.'

'But ...,' Dieng began. He was unable to continue.

Mbaye dipped his bread in his coffee. Dieng lost nothing of the gymnastics of his jaws.

'It's like I told you.'

Their eyes met.

'You don't seem to believe me, uncle. Still, I am telling you the truth, the absolute truth. I swear it by the name of Yallah. At the end of the month, I will pay you back. I am the victim of my kindness.'

'No, no, my son. I am the father of a family. For a year now I have been out of work. Besides, that money isn't mine.'

'You think I have cheated you? No! Mety is a relation, and that is why I wanted to help you.'

Dumbfounded, Dieng found it hard to react, even morally, as he usually did. He opened and shut his hands mechanically. He could find nothing to say.

'Listen, uncle, here is my wallet and the five thousand francs I have. I give them to you. Take them. Yes, I know the money-order isn't yours. I'll have the sack of rice taken round to you. If I did not know you, I would say you did not believe in Yallah. At the end of the month, I'll bring you the balance. If, in the meantime, you need anything at all, don't hesitate to come and see r . '

Mbaye called the maid and said:

'Have the sack of rice in the next room put into the car. Come, uncle.'

Dieng was shattered. Anger and disappointment deprived him of all will to act. The violent reversal of his hope seemed to have destroyed his brain. Whatever it was, he followed Mbaye out. He saw two men take the sack.

He said, stating a fact:

'It's not a hundred-kilo sack, it's fifty kilos.'

'Yes,' replied Mbaye, interrupting him and tapping him on the shoulder. 'It was all I could get.'

The '403 dropped him in front of his house. With Mbaye's help, he unloaded the sack. Before he drove off, Mbaye made him a firm promise.

The fifty-kilo sack of rice lay outside the door. The passing housewives cast greedy eyes in its direction. One, plucking up courage, went up to Dieng.

'Is that rice, Ibrahima?'

'Yes,' he replied.

'Really, rice? If only I could have some!'

'You would like some?'

'Yes, Dieng.'

'Put down your calabash.'

He filled it for her. The others also presented their containers. Without a word, Dieng proceeded to distribute the rice. In less than thirty seconds, perhaps a minute, the news had spread.

'Ibrahima Dieng is giving away rice.'

Mety and Aram came running. They pushed the outstretched arms roughly away.

'Are you ill, Ibrahima?' remonstrated Mety.

'I was.'

Somehow the two wives managed to drag the sack away, as the other women hurled insults at them.

'Go back to your homes. It is finished,' said Aram, coming back to fetch their husband, who had remained outside.

'I am not mad!'

'Ibrahima, why this foolish prodigality? Where have you ever seen, since the world began, the poor throwing away rice? Even the rich don't do it. And you ...'

'And you, what?' interrupted Dieng, sitting with his head between his hands. 'It's your Mbaye ...'

'Mbaye Ndiaye?'

'Yes, Mbaye Ndiaye! I gave him power-of-attorney and he has stolen the money-order. Instead, he has given me a half a sack of rice and five thousand francs.'

'What? The money-order?'

'And my jewelry?'

'Aram, always selfish! Stop thinking of yourself. Do you know how much I have lost on account of that money-order?'

'And what about all that I have borrowed!'

'All that you have borrowed, Mety?' asked Dieng, looking up at his wife.

'The fifteen kilos of rice were used up long ago.'

'The money-order was not mine.'

'People of the house, are you in peace?'

'Peace, only, Bah!'

The postman sorted through the bundle of letters in his hand. 'Ibrahima Dieng, what is going on? In the next street, I heard you were giving away rice.'

Dieng told him. Bah lifted the visor of his cap and declared:

'What you did was an act of despair.'

'It's over now. Me, too, I am going to put on the skin of the hyena.'

'Why?'

'Why? Because it is only cheating and lies that are true. Honesty is a crime nowadays.'

Bah handed him a letter, saying:

'It is from Paris. It has the post-mark. You think everyone is corrupt? No. Not even those who have work are happy. Things will change.'

'Who will change them? I have been out of work for a year because I went on strike. I have two wives and nine children. Only cheating pays.'

'Tomorrow, we will change all that.'

'Who is 'we'?''

'You.'

'Me?'

'Yes, you, Ibrahima Dieng.'

'Me?'

A woman entered, a baby on her back, and interrupted Dieng with her greetings.

'Master of this house, by the grace of Yallah, I implore you to help me. For three days my children and I have only had one meal a day: Their father has been out of work for five years. They told me in the street you were kind and generous.'

Dieng straightened up. His eyes met Bah's. The begging woman looked at the two men.

No one said a word.