

JULIUS Obi sat gazing at his typewriter. The fat chief clerk, his boss, was snoring at his table. Outside, the gatekeeper in his green uniform was sleeping at his post. No customer had passed through the gate for nearly a week. There was an empty basket on the giant weighing machine. A few palm kernels lay in the dust around the machine.

Julius went to the window that overlooked the great market on the bank of the Niger. This market, like all Ibo markets, had been held on one of the four days of the week. But with the coming of the white man and the growth of Umuru into a big palm-oil port, it had become a daily market. In spite of that however, it was still busiest on its original Nkwo day, because the deity that presided over it cast her spell only on that day. It was said that she appeared in the form of an old woman in the center of the market just before cockcrow and waved her magic fan in the four directions of the earth — in front of her, behind her, to the right, and to the left — to draw to the market men and women from distant clans. And they came, these men and women, bringing the produce of their lands: palm oil and kernels, kola nuts, cassava, mats, baskets, and earthenware pots. And they took home many-colored cloths, smoked fish, iron pots and plates.

Others came by the great river bringing yams and fish in their canoes. Sometimes it was a big canoe with a dozen or more people in it; sometimes it was just a fisherman and his wife in a small vessel from the swift flowing Anambara. They moored their canoe on the bank and sold their fish, after much haggling. The woman then walked up the steep banks of the river to the heart of the market to buy salt and oil and, if the sales had been good, a length of cloth. And for her children at home she bought bean cakes or akara and mai-mai, which the Igara women cooked. As evening approached, they took up their paddles and paddled away, the water shimmering in the sunset and their canoe becoming smaller and smaller in the distance until it was just a dark crescent on the water's face and two dark bodies swaying forwards and backwards in it.

Julius Obi was not a native of Umuru. He came from a bush village twenty or so miles away. But having passed his Standard Six in a mission school in 1920 he came to Umuru to work as a clerk in the offices of the Niger Company, which dealt in palm oil and kernels. The offices were situated beside the famous Umuru market, so that in his first two or three weeks Julius had to learn to work against the background of its noise. Sometimes when the chief clerk was away or asleep he walked to the window and looked down on the vast anthill activity. Most of these people were not there yesterday, he thought, and yet the market was as full. There must be many, many people in the world. Of course they say that not

everyone who came to the great market was a real person. Janet's mother had said so.

"Some of the beautiful young women you see squeezing through the crowds are not real people but mammy-wota from the river," she said.

"How does one know them?" asked Julius, whose education placed him above such superstitious stuff. But he took care not to sound unbelieving. He had long learned that it was bad policy to argue with Ma on such points.

"You can always tell," she explained, "because they are beautiful with a beauty that is not of this world. You catch a glimpse of them with the tail of your eye, then they disappear in the crowd."

Julius thought about these things as he now stood at the window looking down at the empty market. Who would have believed that the great market could ever be so empty? But such was the power of Kitikpa, or smallpox.

When Umuru had been a little village, it had been swept and kept clean by its handful of inhabitants. But now it had grown into a busy, sprawling, crowded, and dirty river port. And Kitikpa came. No other disease is feared by the Ibo people as much as they fear Kitikpa. It is personified as an evil deity. Its victims are not mourned lest it be offended. It put an end to the coming and going between neighbors and between villages. They said, "Kitikpa is in that village, and immediately it was cut off by its neighbors.

Julius was worried because it was almost a week since he had seen Janet, the girl he was going to marry. Ma had explained to him very gently that he should no longer come to see them "until this thing is over by the power of Jehovah." Ma was a very devout Christian, and one reason why she approved of Julius for her only daughter was that he sang in the church choir.

"You must keep to your rooms," she had said. "You never know whom you might meet on the streets. That family has got it." She pointed at the house across the road. "That is what the yellow palm frond at the doorway means. The family were all moved away today in the big government lorry."

Janet walked a short way with him, and they said good night. And they shook hands, which was very odd.

Julius did not go straight home. He went to the bank of the river and just walked up and down it. He must have been there a long time, because he was still there when the ekwe, or wooden gong, of the night spirit sounded. He immediately set out for home, half walking and half running. He had about half an hour to get home before the spirit ran its race through the town.

As Julius hurried home he stepped on something that broke with a slight liquid explosion. He stopped and peeped down at the footpath. The moon was not yet up, but there was some faint light which showed that it would not be long delayed. In this light Julius saw that he had stepped on a sacrificial egg. There were young palm fronds around it. Someone oppressed by misfortune had brought the offering to the crossroads in the dusk. And he had stepped on it and taken the sufferer's ill luck to himself. "Nonsense," he said and hurried away. But it was too late; the night spirit was already abroad. Its voice rose high and clear in the still, black air. It was a long way away, but Julius knew that distance did not apply to these beings. So he made straight for the cocoyam farm beside the road and threw himself on his belly. He had hardly done this when he heard the rattling staff of the spirit and a thundering stream of esoteric speech. He shook all over. The sounds came bearing down on him. And then he could hear the footsteps. It was as if twenty men were running together. In no time at all the sounds had passed and disappeared in the distance on the other side of the road.

As Julius stood at the window looking out on the empty market he lived through that night again. It was only a week ago, but already it seemed to be separated from the present by a vast emptiness. This emptiness deepened with the passage of time. On this side stood Julius, and on the other Ma and Janet, who were carried away by the smallpox.