

Matey's Memoirs

By Robin (Matey) Martin

In his above titled book Robin Martin includes the time he spent in the Nyasaland Police in chapters 3, 4 and 5. Courtesy of his daughter, Anne Blackman, these chapters are available on the Nypol website. They are broken down into a number of parts and appear in serial form from month to month until fully available.

Chapter 5 ~ Part 3

Dedza continued

Visit to Chipoka

Chipoka was a little port on the lakeshore, where the lake steamers, which plied up and down the length of the Lake, called. Chipoka was also close to the railway line from Blantyre to Salima and there was small police post subordinate to my district station. There was no good road to the little settlement and often, when the earth tracks had been washed away or became impassable for long periods, the only way to get to the police post was via the railway line. One such time, a policeman cycled from Chipoka to inform



me of a murder there, so I set off with the doctor, Jimmy Whitfield, who was to make the post mortem report. We were to be away for two nights, so I took my cook with us and the doctor took one of his house servants. Our little party started out by car along a track to the railway station at Golomoti. (A huge solar plant and battery storage development is there now – Ed). The train only ran twice a week so the Indian stationmaster obligingly supplied us with a trolley and four men to push it. At certain downhill stretches the trolley made a very fast speed and the pushers were able leap upon it and

hitch a ride. They were a very good-humoured group and seemed to be enjoying the day out. It was a lovely way to see the country. The route took us through a predominantly populated and well-cultivated area of villages with mango-groves, gardens and maize and millet plots: each village cultivating land up to the boundary of the next. It was the rainy season and fortunately there had been good rains that year so all the vegetation was lush and green.

As we approached Chipoka Junction we began to travel through scrubland and trees for several miles, snatching tantalizing glimpses of the beautiful blue waters of the lake from the top of each little hill as we went. After a journey of about 20 miles we reached Chipoka Junction in the late afternoon and walked the mile to Chipoka itself, down on the lakeshore just under 2000 ft above sea level. The small settlement consisted of a few shops, a market, a sandy beach and a pier - for boats and the lake steamer to tie up to. Lake Nyasa (now Lake Malawi) is a very large lake, virtually an inland sea. Arriving there was just like arriving at a tropical seaside - with beautiful rocky coves, offshore islands, a reedy shorelines teeming with bird and wildlife and sandy beaches fringed with occasional coconut palms. Across the lake on the far side, were misty, blue mountains, above which the sun appears in beautiful sunrises. It was a most attractive and refreshing spot. In stormy, windy weather, however, the lake becomes very rough and dangerous, just like the salty seas.

I gave my cook some money to buy food to cook for dinner, while we made our way to the government (or possibly railway) rest house. By 7.30 pm the cook had purchased all our

wants and with the help of the doctor's servant served up an excellent, four-course meal, all made from fresh local produce. This consisted of soup, fish from the lake, roast chicken and a fresh fruit-salad of bananas, oranges, mangoes and paw-paw. As the doctor remarked, "It's amazing what these chaps can do in an emergency and under such basic conditions". Many times in the home, numerous misunderstandings could arise between African servants and their European mistresses, often due to language difficulties, inadequate training or cultural differences, but on their own, out on ulendo (travelling, visiting) in the bush, African servants were in their element and worth their weight in gold. The following day we concluded our official business and managed to travel back by train on the down run to Golomoti.

All this time I was, of course, doing all I could to learn the language and had picked up a certain amount. I was continually asking Inspector Lagson Kanzandu to tell me what this, that and the other, of the different expressions I had heard, meant. We had a chief in the area named Kachindamoto and I asked Insp. Kanzandu the meaning of this chief's name. He looked at me abashed, rolled his eyes and replied, "That is very bad, Sir. I cannot say that to you." "Don't be shy," I replied, "I'm grown up now. I shan't be shocked," but he was very diffident and skirted the issue. However, I continued to press for the meaning. "I know moto means 'fire', so what is kachinda?" a word not to be found in the dictionary of the Nyanja language. Insp. Kanzandu again repeated, "Please Sir, I cannot tell you that." I pressed him a little more, explaining that I wanted to learn all I could and at last he told me, "Kachinda means to sleep with a woman." "Oh, I understand. The Chief must be very hot stuff." "He was when he was young, Sir."



Col. Swift soon came to live with us in the little bush house at Dedza. While staying at the Grand Beach Hotel on the Lake at Salima he met Col. Saunders an agent for CATCO, who agreed to acquire a car for him. As Col. Swift was severely crippled with arthritis and could not drive, he engaged a driver/valet, Joseph, so that he would be entirely independent. Joseph was not a bad driver and generally gave satisfaction, but he was not totally reliable. He appeared to spend some evenings smoking hashish or some another drug,



and became quite strange - with a detached, far-away look in his eye. One day he went to the police station and laid a complaint against an African girl who had come to his quarters and stolen £1 from his wallet. He went on to say that the girl had left on the bus for Ncheu before he had been able to stop her. Insp. Kanzandu sent a telegram to Ncheu Police, asking for her to be taken off the bus and giving details of the offence. Two hours later we received the following telegram.

WOMAN FOUND ON BUS. SHE STATED THAT SHE WAS TAKEN TO THE HOUSE OF JOSEPH WHERE HE CONNECTED HER TWICE AND FAILED TO GIVE HER A PRESENT. SO SHE TOOK THE £1 AS A PRESENT FOR SERVICES RENDERED.

I often used to say to myself that I could be guaranteed a laugh every day in my work and this telegram was my laugh for that day: soon after Joseph was replaced by another driver.

As Officer i/c Police I was also i/c the prison. One day the corporal i/c the prison came to report that a "Watch Tower" prisoner, committed for non-payment of tax, refused to do any work. (A follower of the religious movement, Jehovah Witnesses – their main publication being *The Watch Tower Announcing Jehovah's Kingdom*) I walked over to the prison to see the man and told him that it was a case of, "No work, no food," and thought that would be enough to ensure that he started working with the rest of the prisoners. However, the next afternoon the corporal came to say that the "Watch Tower" was sick. I asked what was the matter with him was and was told he had not eaten. I walked over to the prison a second time and told the prisoner he had better change his mind and work, but I also told the corporal, "Make sure

he gets a good meal this evening.” About half an hour later, when I was back in my office, a trusty prisoner came rushing to the door, very excited and his face wreathed in smiles. “The ‘Watch Tower’ has surrendered – he his working,” he blurted out. This was most satisfactory and I breathed a sigh of relief, for I had never intended that the man should have no food: however, it taught me not to make light hearted remarks like this in the future, as they were likely to be taken seriously. We are all continually learning.

As Dedza was only half a mile from the frontier with Portuguese East Africa, the senior police officer had responsibility for Immigration and Frontier Control and so I also had to check on immigrant applications from Indian traders. Some of the claims to support the applications were surprising and I remember one particular instance where a trader had applied for his young nephew to come and assist in his shop, as he was completely alone and unable to get help. I went into the district to find his shop and was greeted by two young Indo-Africans, who were working away. They told me that they were the sons of the trader by his African wife. I then called on the man and asked how he could submit such an application when he had two sons already working in his shop. He replied that he did not regard these two as his sons as they were half African. The rationale for his request was not accepted as a sufficient reason to allow his nephew to join him.

Witchcraft

Witchcraft was a particular problem and very prevalent throughout the country, particularly as nearly all Africans believed in some form of it. Some found travelling the country as a “witch-finder” a very profitable occupation. A number of these were just confidence tricksters, but others were wickedly vicious and used to resort to what was known as trial-by-poison. The bark from the mwabvi tree can be pounded in water to produce a very poisonous drink. Poor people suspected of being witches were taken before a witchfinder and forced to drink this mwabvi. Usually, if they were able to vomit it back they were safe and considered free from the curse. If, however, they were not able to do this they very soon became ill and usually died. Then of course all would point the finger of accusation at the corpse and declare, “That one was truly a witch”.

I had a “witchfinder” operating in my area and when my policemen arrested him and brought him in, he was found to have a large bag of coppers (pennies etc), which when counted was found to be over £70. At that time a post office clerk was paid about £3 per month so “witchfinding” was a very well paid “occupation”. This particular witchfinder was not too wicked for he did not go in for trial by poison. If he found out by other means that someone was a witch, he would offer to cure them by some charms for a small sum of a few pence. He had done a roaring trade as village headmen had been taking their whole village population to him to be checked and I expect the headmen had also been drawing a little commission. On another occasion when the seasonal rains were late this witchfinder had set himself up as a rainmaker. I sent out a plain-clothes detective to follow the “rainmaker” around. His findings caused me some amusement as he told me how the rainmaker, accompanied by the headmen and villager elders, had walked along the water courses around the district and up the valleys and into the hills, all the while transferring stones from one area to another. At times he would look up into the sky and utter incantations, while on other occasions he would prostrate himself upon the ground. He was quite a showman, but was also operating at the right time of year, when some rain was almost certain to fall. He rather reminded me of the old story of the English village parson, who when rather too much rain had been falling asked his verger if he felt he should offer a prayer for fair weather. “No, Your Reverend, you had better wait until the wind changes,” he realistically replied.

Later in 1958, when I was stationed at Cholo, another witchdoctor-conman travelled into my area, claiming that he had the medicine that could make money grow. He

demonstrated how he could plant £1 notes and with a little slight of hand make it grow into £2. He then took several notes from the villagers, planted them and told the people concerned that they must leave the money to grow for 24 hours before they dug it up. Of course, when they came back and dug the hole where the money had been “planted” there was nothing there, so they came to complain to the police that they had been cheated. The scoundrel was arrested by one of my detectives and brought in. I took him before the Resident Magistrate and applied for a remand in custody on a charge of “obtaining money by false pretences”, but the “Learned” Magistrate refused my application and released the man on bail in his own recognisance. Now even worse deceptions were committed for the man went out to a remote village where the Headman was illiterate and using his official bail form, stated that it was a search warrant and that he was a detective empowered to search the Headman’s house. In the course of the search the conman stole a sum of money from the house and it took some weeks before the crime was reported and the man re-arrested. This instance and many similar, made me wonder how anyone, with sufficient intelligence and the study of law and become a magistrate, could have been as destructively naïve as he was.

On another occasion, in about 1952, a terrible thing happened as a result of the Resident Magistrate granting bail to a woman “witchfinder”. A woman had been conducting some of these awful mwabvi trails-by-poison sessions near Chiradzulu and a few people had died as a result. The “witchfinder” had been arrested and detained in custody, pending the Preliminary Hearing of the murder charge against her. However, the Examining Magistrate had found there was no case of murder but committed the woman for trial on a manslaughter charge. Then in his “wisdom”, or as it turned out, his extreme folly, he released her on bail - pending the manslaughter hearing. Two days later she was in my district, Mlanje, and conducting another poison session in which an old lady died and was automatically pronounced a witch. As soon as I heard of this case I went out and arrested the “witchfinder”. I can still remember finding the corpse of the victim, a poor little old lady lying in her hut and thinking what a pathetic sight it made. It was then that I heard that the “witchfinder” had recently been released on bail and I cursed the Magistrate for his stupidity. I had heard this particular Magistrate, described by a barrister at law as having “the best or finest criminal lawyer’s brain in the country”. Knowledge of the law he may have had but of common sense he was seriously lacking.

Memoirs of a policeman must, inevitably, include a large number of happenings in, and characters connected with, courts. On one occasion in Dedza, Birdie as DC, had asked the Provincial Resident Magistrate if he would come to Dedza to hear a Preliminary Inquiry. The RM, Max Figgis, arrived with his wife the afternoon prior to the case being heard and they stayed at the DC’s house. Molly Benson, “Mrs DC” was away on holiday at the time. After the Preliminary Inquiry was completed, the Magistrate and his wife returned to Lilongwe and Birdie called me to his office. “What do you think of this chap Figgis, Martin?” he asked. I replied, “He’s not so bad, I suppose.” Birdie wasn’t so sure and went on to say, “Well, they arrived at my house with his driver honking the horn for me to go out and greet them. Then later, when my houseboy brought in the dinner, she said, ‘What, same old shepherd’s pie!’ I told her that my wife was away and I couldn’t arrange more elaborate dishes. She could then see that I felt somewhat offended and I was rather cool to her. Figgis appreciated what had happened and tried to keep up some light-hearted conversation with me. Next morning however, it was obvious that she had been at him in the night, for they were both very offhand with me and I was glad to see the back of them!” I often think of this little episode when I have shepherd’s pie.