

# The Christmas Incident

## by John E Phillips

*For Chantal, Brazzaville, 17<sup>th</sup> January 2010*

And when the Foreign Office find a treaty gone astray,  
Or the admiralty lose some plans and drawings by the way,  
There may be a scrap of paper in the hall or on the stair—  
But it's useless to investigate—*Macavity's not there!*

T.S. Eliot, *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*



### *I*

Shaded by trees from the direct tropical sun and screened off from the mosquitoes and sand-flies, the verandah was a pleasant place to sit in the afternoon. Marta and Catrina, back from school for the Christmas holidays, had just finished making some decorations.

“Ore-ore-ore-oreo!” called Catrina. Oreo came trotting over to her, an athletic young tom with a glossy black coat and white underside. “There you are, now you match the Christmas tree.” She tied a shiny red ribbon round his neck, and admired the result. Very fetching. Everyone admired it, with the exception of Oreo himself, who made several attempts to remove the ribbon, before curling up and going to sleep in the Lego box.

The next thing was making some gingerbread, so the girls trotted into the kitchen. For a few moments this steamy part of Congo took on some of the appearances and aromas of Christmas.

## II

That night, as we sat in the darkened room and watched “A Christmas Carol” on the laptop computer, the wind had at first begun to rustle, then to swirl; the palm trees swayed and every so often a mango dropped on one of the tin roofs. Then there was a pattering, then a drumming and then a rush of raindrops on the roof, all but blotting out any other sound. The film over, the spiced bissap tea and gingerbread finished up, we went off to bed, lulled by the heavy rain and the cool breeze which came with it.

Only Fériole the night watchman was around, dozing in his shelter by the gate. His job was to look after the house and particularly the warehouse of medical supplies and humanitarian aid equipment, which stood towards the back of the compound. At some time in the early hours he was woken up by a sound. He stood up sharply, the bobble of his Santa Claus cap jumping up behind him. “Who’s there?” he called out.

At the back corner of the compound he could hear some movement on the tin roofs of the various out-houses, which abutted both sides of the perimeter wall. But as he cautiously approached it was too dark to see anything: the electricity had been out ever since the storm. Normally one touch of the roofing tin would zap an intruder and deter him from entering; so what better time to try and break in than during a power cut!

For the remaining hours of darkness Fériole patrolled the compound uneasily, but there were no further signs of disturbance.

At first light—that was at about 5.30 am—he went to see if he could find out what had happened in the night and what he found astonished him. As he walked towards the corner something almost invisible barred his way. When he looked more closely he could make out a scarlet thread, stretched across the path at about waist height. He traced it to the left: to his surprise it came from the neighbouring compound, and he could clearly make out where it started, hooked onto a jagged roof edge of the generator shed at the back of the Ministry of Agriculture. From there the thread jumped across to the wall, topped as it was by shards of beer bottles. It ran a little distance along the top of the wall before rising up into the stout, rough branches of an avocado tree. Next the thread dropped down on the nearside of the wall and got tangled with the seven-fingered leaves of a cassava bush before crossing the path in front of Fériole. But it didn’t end there: he followed it to his right round the back of the Unimog truck and there it came to an end, neatly hitched onto the edge of a splintered pallet, right next to the warehouse door.

## III

It was some time later, by full daylight, when I came out and found a knot of people standing around examining the thread. Everyone had their own theory: the driver thought the burglar had climbed over the wall and caught a thread of one of his garments. Somebody joked that we should go out looking for someone wearing a pair of very frayed, bright red underpants. Another theory, which achieved wide acceptance, was that the intruder was someone who knew the lie of the land and had come to mark the way to the warehouse so that his accomplices could come and break in later. They turned to interrogate Fériole: “You didn’t see the intruder?” “Yes,” he replied, “I only heard him”.

Just then there was a disturbance at the gate and a group of armed men in khaki came blustering in, in the company of Guy-Blaise the day guard. When he had come on duty he had heard what had happened and had rushed round to find out what on earth the corps of guards at the Ministry had been doing to let an intruder cross the wall, into the compound of an international humanitarian NGO.

The guards jostled and pushed their way to the scene of crime. There was a lot of waving of arms, accusations and counter-accusations. But the one thing that was clear from the thread of evidence was that

during the night someone had crossed the wall from one side to the other. This was a serious breach of security: the minister would have to be informed, and quickly before he disappeared for the Children's Festival holiday! The sergeant started to wave his mobile phone around.

## *IV*

Roused by all this disturbance, Catrina came out to see what was going on. She went and examined the red thread like the rest of us had done and began to laugh. "Ore-oreo, what have you been up to?" Oreo trotted over.

In the meantime the sergeant was hollering down the phone. "Allô, is that the minister's secretary? We need to talk to the minister right away, a security issue..."

Catrina showed us Oreo: that fetching red ribbon round his neck was no longer there. "Already last night the end had started to fray and he was trying to get rid of it. I think he caught the frayed end on the pallet by the warehouse there..." she pointed, "and then it began to unravel. Then he jumped up into the cassava bush, look," we all followed her explanation, "then up into the avacado tree, where he scrambled up the trunk and along the branch to the top of the wall. From there he picked his way between the shards and leapt across onto that other roof." Now that was the most plausible explanation we had heard so far: Oreo, after rubbing himself against the old pallet, had crossed over into the Ministry compound to ward off another tom cat. And all the way he had left behind him a red thread of evidence.

In the meantime the sergeant was a bit quieter: "Allô, Mister Minister, good morning... no, no, there is no problem, no, everything is just fine. No, I am sorry, Mr Minister, I... I just wanted to... to wish you a happy Christmas!"