A few hours later we came across some teenage boys on the track holding on to what was very obviously a dead rat.

'It is a possum,' said the tallest of the group. 'We are going to eat it and when these little ones grow up we are going to eat them as well.' In his hand he held three squirming, sightless baby rats. I thought about lassa fever and its main vector – rats.

With the sun beginning to dip, Johnson announced Bolahun was getting near. He was getting increasingly excited and I asked him if he had been to Bolahun before.

'Been here before? I was at school in Bolahun for twelve years in the 1970s and 1980s. It's like my second home but I have not been back for a year or so. I cannot wait to see everyone again,' he said with a broad smile. He had already told me his home village, Yassadu, was at least a day's walk north of Bolahun and I was curious how he came to attend a school so far away.

'I was born in 1972 and back then the people from the school would walk all around the region stopping at villages and asking if the local chiefs would allow them to select students. If the chief agreed, they would gather the children from the village together and ask a few questions. If you could answer the questions they would offer you a place at the school. The day they came to my village I must have been about six or seven but I was able to answer their questions.

'It was strange at first to leave my family and walk all the way to Bolahun for schooling. I come from a poor family of farmers and we did not have money to pay the fees so I used to spend the weekends there and some of the holidays, working at the school to make up for the fees. But the teachers were the best in all of Lofa County and it was the only way I could get an education.

'I really liked it, you know. It was the best of times,' he said as we walked into the soft light of sunset.

I had tried to ration my water during the day but the heat and the effort of the trek meant by now I was down to the last licks. We were as grubby, footsore and hungry as the original Episcopalian monks from the Order of the Holy Cross when they reached here, having themselves also walked from Sierra Leone to found the mission in 1922. The story goes that once they crossed the border they approached the first village chief they met to ask permission to build a Christian mission house but were refused because the local bush

societies, the Poro and Sande, were too powerful. So the monks just kept on going until eventually, near Bolahun, they found a chief who was not so cowed by the power of African tradition.

Graham Greene describes dumping his gear outside the mission house and collapsing exhausted on a seat to wait for the white priests to finish Benediction. Those monks had long gone by the time we arrived but their local successors, still struggling to keep alight the flame of Christianity deep in this African jungle, welcomed us warmly and fetched fresh water from a well. They watched in scarcely hidden astonishment as both David and I calmly drank pint after pint after pint and did not budge for at least an hour from the wooden bench they offered us. Neither of us had truly appreciated just how draining it could be to hike for seven hours along Liberian jungle tracks. Seeing our exhaustion, our hosts arranged for food and offered us a sparse but functional guest room with two beds, where Moses had already delivered our rucksacks. Barbara Greene writes that on reaching Bolahun she was so tired she was asleep within two minutes of lying down on her hard campbed. Ignoring the sound of scurrying rats, I think I probably beat her.

Day broke slowly over the mission's forested hills. The morning mist lay so thick that it seemed to muffle the bell summoning novitiates to prayer, defying the effort of the sun to break through. I was up early, keen to get my bearings around the old mission station, buckling my sandals gingerly so as not to anger my blisters. I had been so exhausted the night before that I had barely been able to make sense of the layout of the place, so I left David sleeping under his mosquito net and stepped outside.

The first thing I noticed was the silence. It was not the cloistered quiet of a religious order but more the silence of something broken. The buildings appeared solid enough but when I looked again I saw just how decayed they were. The corrugated-iron roof of the main mission house was not just rusty, it was distressed. Panel-beaten flat by seasonal rainstorms, the rusty iron sheets clung lamely to the roof beams. The lights had gone out at Bolahun a long time ago so when I walked inside I peered into the darkness to see daylight leeching through a web of holes overhead. As my eyes got used to the gloom I

noticed I was surrounded by books. This was the old library but the books were in an advanced state of decay. I picked one up, *A Pilgrimage to the Holy Land* published in 1927, but when I opened the covers its message of faith was lost, the pages crumbling to damp, dusty flakes.

Back outside, I walked to the edge of a slope and looked out through a screen of palms as the mission campus came into focus through the lifting mist. There were some old school buildings, burnt out during the war and not yet rebuilt and, in the distance, a stand of trees around the original church, St Mary's, started in 1923 and completed the following year, with every nail, tool and roof panel painstakingly carried here by porters from Sierra Leone. Graham Greene called it a 'little ugly tin-roofed church' and it was surprisingly well preserved. Concrete piles lifted it a few feet off the ground to save it from termite attack but a falling tree had taken a large swipe out of the tin roof and knocked down part of a side wall.

It was hard to imagine that a ceremony held at this church was reported on the front page of *The New York Times*, making the city, in the words of a columnist, 'stop in its busy stride to read the romantic story of an old man's adventure'. The ceremony was the funeral of Father Sturges Allen, one of the pioneering missionaries from the Order of the Holy Cross, who defied medical advice by coming out to Liberia late in life to help found the mission at Bolahun. Local experts said he would not last six months but he survived for six years before passing away at the age of seventy-eight on 26 March 1929.

After some searching I found the old man's headstone. It was badly overgrown and took several minutes to clear, but after tugging away the tendrils of some ground ivy, the white marble block came into view. I thought of the planning and effort that the stone represented. Someone in the mission would have had to order the stone from overseas and then arrange for it to be brought through the jungle, most likely by bearer party along a similar route to that which we had taken from Sierra Leone. And someone had taken the trouble to engrave on the stone a stylised book with the epitaph 'The Lord is My Shepherd', as well as the date when Father Allen took his vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in 1888, only the second monk to join the order.

I asked around Bolahun but could find nobody who had ever heard of the old man. It gave me a sense of time-worn neglect that made me think of the Philip Larkin poem, 'An Arundel Tomb'. Of all the material drilled into me by my English O-level teacher, a passage that has stayed with me touches on the fleeting power of memorials:

> Such faithfulness in effigy
> Was just a detail friends would see:
> A sculptor's sweet commissioned grace
> Thrown off in helping to prolong
> The Latin names around the base.

The Greenes stayed in Bolahun for a week. The first day's walk had taken it out of them so they needed to rest, and Amedoo, the servant hired in Freetown to look after Graham Greene, had already fallen ill. He was treated at the mission hospital, which was run by a German doctor who hung a portrait of Adolf Hitler on the wall of his house. In the mid 1930s loyalty to Nazism was to be expected by representatives of Germany deployed around the world, even in as remote a backwater as Bolahun.

The week-long sojourn was useful for the Greenes, as it allowed them to hire bearers willing to take them all the way to the coast on the other side of Liberia, hundreds of miles away to the south and east. It was a canny thing to do and added to my changing view of Graham Greene. Readers often take ownership of authors through their work, forming clear ideas of the characteristics of the writer. Through the Graham Greene novels I had read, the image that grew in my mind's eye was of a sophisticate who was most comfortable dealing with rarefied issues of human morality and spiritual belief. But as I followed him through West Africa, that picture grew in different, unexpected dimensions.

Throughout *Journey Without Maps*, Graham Greene seeks to present himself as an amateur traveller, a hapless *ingénu* even, blundering about the African bush, but I was learning this was not entirely accurate. It was no modest undertaking to trek through this inhospitable terrain and climate, and his insistence on forming a team of porters in Bolahun for the entire journey marked him out as wiser than other professional explorers who took on this region, experts

such as Sir Alfred Sharpe. They wasted time, money and energy travelling through Liberia because they hired a fresh set of bearers each morning for that day's walking. This would invariably involve talks with village leaders in the local palaver hut, where the community gathered for discussions, to arrange terms, something that would drag on and on. 'Palaver', a word that has come to mean time-wasting bother, comes from West Africa.

Graham Greene showed further nous when he bought from the Bolahun missionaries a pair of lightweight hammocks that could be carried by two porters, to supplement the single four-man version he had brought from Britain. The first day's walk clearly made him reconsider how tough the trek was likely to be. And during their stay they made time to relax and enjoy the hospitality of the missionaries. Graham Greene writes the fathers were well supplied with hampers shipped all the way from Fortnum & Mason in London to Freetown, and then onwards by train and bearer party.

The mission might have officially closed down in the 1980s but the old visitors' logbooks were taken back to the New York headquarters of the Order of the Holy Cross where they still survive. With the help of the order's archivist, Father Adam McCoy, I tracked down the page covering the Greenes' visit. Typed in clunky and occasionally eccentrically aligned letters it logged the movements of all the missionaries and their visitors. On Saturday 26 January 1935 it recorded, 'Mr Graham Greene and his cousin, Miss Greene (who are touring Liberia to write a book), arrived about 7 p.m.' On Sunday 3 February 1935 it simply said, 'Greenes left for Zorzor.' In between these bookends to their visit there were references to Father Joseph Parsell playing tennis with Barbara Greene and the Greenes hosting the fathers to tea on the eve of their departure.

I watched as the mission's morning rituals, religious and practical, were observed by a team of staff led by Frank Foday, who styled himself as the Caretaker Brother. After leading a dawn prayer in one of the gloomy rooms, Brother Frank was now busying himself re-stoking the previous night's fire to heat up some rice for breakfast. Cooking was done on a scrap of grass at the back of the mission house and I looked on as he went through a routine of drawing water from a

well, sloshing out the dirty pans and bowls, and blowing life back into the fire's grey embers.

'We try our best, and with blessings of God we survive,' he said with a voice as light as the morning breeze now stirring some banana trees close by.

'It was me who sent you that message the other day, Brother Tim, the message about the food. We have no signal here for the mobile phone but there is a hill nearby where you can sometimes get a signal, so when Brother Moses came asking about you staying I went there and sent the message. I hope you were comfortable last night.'

I thanked him and told him everything had been fine. The effort of the first day's walking had been prodigious but a bucket bath and a good night's sleep had me feeling at least partially restored.

He continued: 'I am forty now and my father was one of the first students ever to be taught by the fathers here at Bolahun. I have lived here all my life. The war was a difficult time and many of the things we were working on, like the hospital and the leper colony, were abandoned but today there is hope again. The war is over and perhaps we can get back to where we were before the war.'

He had a warm face framed by disfiguring growths like slabs of melted chocolate that clung to both cheeks. He could see I was curious so he offered a brief explanation. 'I was shaving one day and somehow they got infected. It was years ago now so I have just got used to it.'

Johnson came bustling round the corner, greeting Brother Frank warmly. He had spent the night with old school friends nearby and was keen to know what our plans were. The first day's walking had been tough so it made sense to rest in Bolahun at least a day before heading onwards and, following the example of Graham Greene, I asked Johnson if he would be willing to join David and me for at least the next few days of the trip. I had been impressed by how he dealt with the first day and felt he would make a reliable and useful companion.

His work as a tracing officer had ended long ago and ever since he had been without employment. It took him a second to agree so, after a brief discussion about pay, we shook hands and I asked him about our most pressing current problem, which was how we would move our rucksacks. Moses was busy with his aid work and would not be available so I asked Johnson if he could think of any local person with

a motorbike who could be hired as our luggage courier. He said he would make enquiries and disappeared back down the hill towards the village.

Over breakfast of unsalted rice and the remains of last night's chicken, Brother Frank gave me a potted account of what had happened at Bolahun during the war.

'You know we have been attacked so many times that I cannot quite remember which came first. The order in New York cut links when the first fighting began down in Monrovia around 1980 but I remember one of the white missionaries, Father Joseph, stayed on for a few years before the fighting got really bad. There were some terrible times, like when rebels came through here and we hid in the roof of the library. From up there we could see them take away the women who used to cook for us. We never saw the women again.

'But the truth is the mission here at Bolahun is well respected in the community. Its school used to be the best school in the region so there are many people who remember it and value it so the rebels knew there would be trouble if they destroyed everything. It was as if they were scared of something if they tried to fight the work of God. I honestly believe that God was protecting us. The rebels knew they were against the work of God. Let me show you something.'

He led me to the entrance of the mission house and showed me the old sign that used to say 'Holy Cross Episcopal Mission'. The word Holy had been deliberately scoured out.

'You see, they knew there was something godly, something blessed about this place. They seemed to be happy to rub out the word Holy as if that would be enough to defeat God but of course it was not. God lives on here in the work we do.'

'So what is there left for you to do?' I asked.

'The work of God is never done. Through scripture, education and love we do his work and there is still much to do.'

After breakfast, David and I were taken for a tour of the campus. I started to feel a bit dizzy with thirst, in spite of drinking a huge amount of well-water, a sort of delayed shock from the efforts of the previous day's walking. The tour was only a short distance but I remember sweating prodigiously, as if my internal cooling system was having trouble recalibrating, pumping out pints of unnecessary sweat.

Among all the decay the saddest sight was the convent where a

small community of nuns from Malvern had once lived. Barbara Greene describes them as the 'greatest, most human and most lovable teachers of Christianity that it is possible to imagine'. Set away from the main body of the mission station, the attackers had not spared their building, looting everything, defecating in the old chapel and vandalising what they could not carry away with them. On a wall was a message scrawled in black ash signed by 'Colonel One EYE' that said, 'First man BC. I do not be afraid. My boys and I was here. We will be back at Blood Wasting.'

As we walked back to the mission house Brother Frank said there was to be a football match that afternoon between the school team from Bolahun and another from the nearby village of Tailahun. He asked if I would accept the honour of starting the match with the first kick.

'We do not get many visitors here any more and it would be good for the children to see that outsiders are still interested in our work,' he said.

Kick-off was scheduled for the relative cool of late afternoon so I spent the middle of the day resting and trying to get sugar back into my bloodstream. In the absence of any Fortnum & Mason goodies, I made do by gorging on a series of pineapples Johnson bought in the village at a market stall. Since the government's State of Emergency over the plague of army worms poisoning water sources in northern Liberia, David and I had been on our guard about dirty water, but nobody in Bolahun had ever heard of these worms. The mission's well and a filtration pump brought by David meant we had, for the time being at least, no problems with lack of drinking water.

As kick-off approached Johnson came back up to the mission house with some news.

'I have found an old friend who has a motorbike and will be happy to help us carry our luggages,' he said solemnly. (We would go on to spend weeks together but, in spite of my polite urgings, Johnson doggedly stuck to the word 'luggages'.)

I thanked him and confirmed the biker would, like Johnson, come with us for at least a few days, perhaps even to the border with Guinea over on the far side of Lofa County. Then, almost as an afterthought, Johnson said something that really got my attention.

'And the devil is ready to dance for you after the game if you want.'

A crowd of a few hundred drawn from people living in nearby villages had gathered at the pitch near St Mary's. I kicked the ball onto the threadbare grass and the game began, but the crowd seemed more interested in a young madman who howled and screeched his way through the game, charging up and down the far touchline and hurling himself into the elephant grass that surrounded the pitch amid hoots of amusement from onlookers. He wore an Arsenal shirt.

Thoughts of an imminent encounter with a Liberian devil distracted me from the game. I chatted to a number of people in the crowd but as the match reached its end I was happy to see Johnson trying to catch my eye.

'It is time we went. The devil will be dancing soon and you do not want to keep him waiting,' he urged.

As full time blew on a 2–1 defeat for the home team, David and I followed Johnson down onto the dirt road that runs through Bolahun and began to walk north out of town.

'I have been told the devil will come somewhere along this road and there will be people with him making music. We must just walk until we meet them.'

We walked slowly and in silence. Twilight was approaching and with it a looming sense of menace. All of the buildings fronting the road bore damage from war and neglect. On one wall some wartime graffiti remained, announcing in large black letters the onetime presence of 'young col Black Gina' and promising 'No Die, No Rest, Blood Sprots in Lofa'.

After sundown the jungle has the effect of hurrying on the arrival of darkness with the tree cover making the shadows seem inkier and faster at massing. It was just at the point when I was struggling to see into the distance that the sound of the devil dance reached us. First, I heard drums and rattles, then voices chanting a chorus. Out of the gloom came a small group of people, huddled together as if for safety, and in front of them a swirling, shaking blur.

Cloaked in raffia, the devil was capped by an ancient-looking headpiece carved from a single piece of jet-black wood. There was a shrunken, human-like head with carp lips and oversized ears on an extended, twisted alien neck sticking out high from the baseplate of the headpiece. It was difficult to tell quite how large the being was below. One moment it crouched motionless, close to the ground, the

head no higher than my waist and the grass tresses of its coat hanging limply, and then, with an explosion of dust and screeching, it span and shook, the mask now above my head, the raffia startled with energy.

The musicians followed the performance closely. As the devil slowed and shrank so their music faded, but when he started to spin and gyrate, so their chanting and drumming grew in throbbing, repetitive turns. All eyes were focused on the performance of the costumed figure as the dust rose and the darkness gathered.

As well as the devil's musical entourage there was another attendant, a young man who fussed over the raffia coating, combing it flat in between spins to make sure nothing of what was underneath could be seen. Everyone in Liberia knows that under every devil costume is the body of a man but quite what has happened to that body when taking on the costume, what spiritual power has been assumed, remains an important and powerful mystery. The young man I saw flattening the raffia tendrils was simply protecting the spiritual illusion, doing something that the Greenes had also seen in Bolahun when they saw their first dancing devil. Graham Greene's description would have worked perfectly for what I saw seventy-four years later:

> The devil's interpreter squatted beside him carrying a brush with which, when the devil moved, he kept his skirts carefully smoothed down lest a foot or arm should show.

The energy of the dance was powerful and the setting amidst the darkness and war damage had a hint of menace but I was struck by the lack of threat in the devil's display. A few young children stared wide-eyed at his dance but on the faces of the adults there were smiles and looks of mild amusement. A dancing performance by the devil such as this was, above all, an entertainment. The devil was playing the role more of minstrel than magician, an entertainer rather than an enchanter. It was a very different performance from that when the same devil appears at initiation schools in the forest.

After his routine, when the devil had disappeared into the night, the musicians gathered round me expectantly and Johnson whispered something about me offering to pay. I proffered a bundle of grubby Liberian dollar notes and the comber, the young man responsible for

keeping the raffia costume in order, clasped both his hands round mine and thanked me solemnly. His hands were cold.

As we walked back through the unlit hovels of Bolahun, I listened closely to Johnson's thoughts.

'You see the devil plays an important role in all our village societies here in Liberia. Sometimes he can be bad but most times he is a person who entertains us, who helps us at important times like funerals and village ceremonies, with dances such as the one you have just seen.

'The devil you saw dancing here is the good devil. I only hope you never meet the bad devil.'

Bolahun felt like a barometer for attempts to develop rural Liberia. Founded in a rush of Christian zeal in the 1920s, the remnants of its buildings are an archaeological record of the country's troubled history. There was the original church of St Mary's, the one seen by the Greenes. Constructed by Father Sturges and his fellow missionaries, it was relatively modest but still standing, albeit battered by climate and time. The hospital where the Nazi doctor had worked was the next to be built, but had fallen into ruin as the money ran out in the late 1930s. Then in the 1950s a newer, larger St Mary's had been consecrated with new money sloshing into Liberia in the post-war boom years when the local rubber industry was taking off, and this was followed by the construction of new schoolrooms in the 1970s.

But conflict and chaos had ultimately prevailed over the missionary project. The school had limped on for some years after the foreign missionaries from the Order of the Holy Cross pulled out but the government had proved too corrupt and ineffective to run it properly. The decay was compounded when the war began, with various waves of rebels sweeping through Bolahun, plundering, looting and killing, and since the war attempts to reinvigorate the school had stalled. The strongest sense I got was of the power of African tradition prevailing over imported Christianity. The missionaries might have gone but the devil danced on.

I walked back up to the mission house in the darkness and found Brother Frank and a few other novitiates gathered in a room. It was lit by a single feeble bulb drawing power from an old solar battery and they were sitting in silence reading scripture. Brother Frank still

dreamed of a better Christian future but I could not help thinking of a comment made by Father Joseph in an interview shortly before he died when he hinted at how little impact the work of the mission had truly had on life in this part of rural Liberia. Father Joseph had arrived at Bolahun in 1934 – he was the one who played tennis with Barbara Greene the following year – and he lasted fifty-four years at this remote outstation but this was his assessment of the impact of the missionaries: 'They think things are accomplished here, but they are not.'