

The Phoenix

By Adrian Igoni Barrett

Due north of the conflux of the great rivers Niger and Benue lies a plateau inhabited by many tribes and village kingdoms. For as far as the eye can travel unimpeded the green plains of this land roll on gently, so level in parts that the storm waters stand nonplussed for a slope to run off. A cluster of hills span the eastern horizon of the fertile table-land, their distant peaks daily lost in morning mists.

Giant-sized outcrops of blue-black marble dot the landscape like broken eggshells. A sweet-smelling carpet of succulent-stemmed elephant grass dances slowly in the perpetual breeze of those rarefied heights. Furlongs separate the few trees that rise from the earth, each one shorter than a man and with near-leafless branches so intertwined that snakes dangle from them like macabre festoons, fatally ensnared. A thin trail from the far hills meanders through this land – now a sludgy footpath, then the treacherous currents of the muddy river Mada. From its riverbed net-traps dredge up finned relics of the dinosaur age. The mighty elephant once strode these plains, as did gorillas, ostriches and white missionaries: of them all, what remains is bleached bone.

This was the land of Tartius Abrachius' birth, the Shangri-La that he loved with a savage passion - until he lost both arms to the swing of a machete that had

coveted his life. He was lucky - he was the only survivor of a party of school children whose pearl-clear laughter was cut short in an ambush mounted by warriors of a neighbouring tribe. This slaughter spelt the deathblow to a decades-old truce between centuries-old enemies. Reprisals followed, and were endlessly reciprocated. By the time the conflict had exhausted its fuel of angry young men, Tartius Abrachius was in the prime of manhood.

In spite of his handicap - which had lain heavy on him, and had nearly broken his spirit (both arms lopped off at the elbow!) – Tartius Abrachius had from the outset refused to resign himself to the sad fate of a beggarly existence, forever dependent on the pity of strangers.

He had shrugged off the fears of family and friends and had chosen a trade. He had learnt it well, and with resourcefulness had compensated for his physical shortcomings. Tartius Abrachius was an itinerant tailor.

Two days after the completion of his tailoring apprenticeship Tartius Abrachius, again scorning the easy advice of kith and kin, abandoned the scene of his woe for the Big City. It wasn't an easy decision: the beauty of those verdant plains tugged at him like an umbilical cord, and almost made endurable the memory of his loss.

Plying his trade in the Big City, Tartius Abrachius was at first a novelty, and attracted custom only on the strength of this fact. For, at the sight of the armless man with the headless horse-shape of a sewing machine riding on one shoulder, and the twill cap of his trade set on his head at an angle decidedly rakish – (as if he had hands and they were thrust into his pockets); at the sight of this curious figure, Pygmy-short and as slim as a stoat, his features genial and untouched by his misfortune, the spring in his step disavowing worry - at the sight of Tartius Abrachius the housewives abandoned their chores and trooped out of their houses with armfuls of clothing that suddenly required the sartorial touch. And while he snipped and stitched away these busybodies hovered about, ostensibly for the gossip. He did not disappoint: he regaled them with tales blatantly traitorous to his own sex, and astounded their sense of wonder at the ease with which he executed the 'sleight of feet' involved in wielding scissors and threading needles.

Over time, seeing the quality of his work, and then coming to regard the moments spent in his company as respite from the trap of domestic monotony, he became a favourite amongst the housewives of the Okobaba and Makoko slums, and made a good living off their loneliness.

In the split-second before Tartius Abrachius was forever parted from his arms they had been outstretched - this following a mock throw-in to demonstrate the finer points of getting one's weight behind a hurled soccer ball. He was a soccer-

fiend. At an age when his co-evals were aspiring no higher than to become cartoon characters, he had decided upon his future profession. And, at a precocious twelve years of age, he had put the finishing touches to a work-plan for achieving his goals. But that was the year that Destiny intervened, and as no contingency plan of Man can salvage a dream that the Fates have repudiated, he watched his ambition shrivel and die.

Tartius Abrachius, with his sewing machine on his shoulder, and sauntering even in the heat of midday, raised his hand to scratch his nose - and saw the stump. He wrinkled his nose and smiled wryly. Even after all this time he still wasn't accustomed to his lack of hands, and the situation was not helped at all by the fact that he could feel them dangling at the end of nothingness: he could feel every muscle spasm and flex of a finger, and the weight of fingernails growing untrimmed, and the itch in his palm whenever money was expected. He jabbed at his nose with the stump and turned his thoughts to football.

His dream, years dead, had been transfigured from beyond the grave and now thrust itself once again upon his consciousness. The rolling away of the stone from the door of the sepulchre, so to speak, had begun with a football match he had stumbled upon.

Mrs. Akoy, a friend and customer, had recently lost her youngest daughter, and it was while on the way to her house to offer his condolences that he came upon a

grass oasis in that desert of brick and corrugated iron. There he experienced a vision: he beheld a group of disabled men engaged in the Beautiful Game. On sighting him they had let out whoops of brotherhood, and had invited his participation. He however declined on the day, seeing as the bereaved's house was within sight of the field.

But, after verifying that they were indeed a club, and that some of their members played professionally, and that they convened on that field of dreams on the same day of every week, he promised to put in an appearance at their next meet. That was today.

Tartius Abrachius' feet trembled at the thought of kissing the round leather. It had been years – years of stagnation, years of no passion. And yet there were others like him out there playing the game, living his dream! He would reclaim it. Maybe not the major leagues, the big clubs – but then again why not? Maybe he would make the paralympics, or, why not even the first armless man to play in *La Liga*. The Guinness book of records. A blessing in disguise. But the important thing was football.

“Thief! OI_! Hold him – please hold him! OI_!” A shape hurtled past Tartius Abrachius.

The woman who had raised the alarm, the victim he presumed, was running towards him, her efforts hampered by overweight and a wrapper that kept coming undone. Her cries had however sent some pedestrians in hot pursuit of the culprit, with more joining the chase as they comprehended the situation. And then the woman, still screaming entreaties, fell flat on her face.

“I am not disabled – I just have no arms,” Tartius Abrachius whispered – and then flung aside his sewing machine and set out after the crowd that had formed on the thief’s tail.

At his first step there was an explosion in his head - and then a strange calm settled. But, with no arms to steer with, he ran awkwardly, like a flightless bird. His spirits began to flag, and as his calf-muscles bunched in preparedness for pulling up, he remembered his soccer game. He exploded forward.

With the wind in his face Tartius Abrachius recalled the wide-open fields of his childhood, and the velvet softness of the earth beneath the feet, and the perfume of crushed grass, and his ambitions - and he ran. His legs pistoned as if their joy had suffered no hiatus, and tears squeezed from his eye corners and got sucked into the whoosh of his slipstream. He ran.

The crowd ahead had become a mob, but when the stragglers heard the rapid-fire slap of feet from behind them, they parted to let Tartius Abrachius through.

As he streaked through their centre, like a bullet train through a tunnel, they let out a roar of approbation and followed him. Tartius Abrachius, running like a banished demon, soon left their shouts behind. Pictures flashed through his head of him in *La Liga*, him tearing past the last defender, bearing down on the goalkeeper... Tartius Abrachius ran as if his life depended on it.

The quarry, fewer paces ahead of Tartius Abrachius than the mob was behind him, threw a wild look over his shoulder and saw that Tartius Abrachius was irrevocably gaining. His face held a plea, but Tartius Abrachius, blind to it on account of the dream that hovered before his eyes, nebulously real, tucked in his chin and gobbled up the distance. The man, on his last legs, reached a road junction and dived into it. Tartius Abrachius ran. He turned the corner just in time to see the man veer into an alley. He ran like he had never run before – he ran to catch a dream.

As he approached the alley entrance something on the ground caught his eye. But then he heard shouts bearing down from the road opposite the alley, and – so as not to be robbed of his prize – increasing his speed with an effort that caught his chest in a vice grip, he ran headlong into the arms of a second mob.

“Thief! OI_!” The tapestry of inflamed faces chanted at Tartius Abrachius, and as he grinned in breathless bewilderment, unable to speak for the pain in his chest, they plonked two tyres over his head and, dousing him in petrol, set him alight.

“Tailor!” he screeched, before the flames engulfed him.

The first mob arrived just as the charred mass that was once Tartius Abrachius gave the last whirl of its dance of death, and collapsed to the ground, never to rise again. They joined their cheers to those they had met. Then the woman who had given the alarm appeared. Her stolen purse was thrust into her hands. They had found it at the spot where the thief was caught.

“But that isn’t the thief,” she said, looking about fearfully.

“Na him – how you know – e no get face again!” came the angry replies.

“But this person doesn’t have hands. The thief had hands – how else did he grab my purse?” the woman argued, with irrefutable logic.

The mob fell silent, staring at the smouldering corpse. Someone burst into a retching fit. Another remembered that he had left his shop untended. Then, in little pockets, the mob disintegrated, leaving behind Tartius Abrachius in the ashes of his dreams.