

## Chapter 1

Mehuru woke at dawn with the air cool on his outstretched body. He opened his eyes in the half-darkness and sniffed the air as if the light wind might bring him some strange scent. His dream, an uneasy vision of a ship slipping her anchor in shadows and sailing quietly down a deep rocky gorge, was with him still.

He got up from his sleeping platform, wrapped a sheet around him and went quietly to the door. The city of Oyo was silent. He looked down his street; no lights showed. Only in the massive palace well could he see a moving light as a servant walked from room to room, the torch shining from each window he passed.

There was nothing to fear, there was nothing to make him uneasy, yet still he stood wakeful and listening as if the coop-coop-coop of the hunting owls or the little squeaks from the bats which clung around the stone towers of the palace might bring him a warning.

He gave a little shiver and turned from the doorway. The dream had been very clear – just one image of a looped rope dropping from a stone quayside and snaking through the water to the prow of a ship, whipping its way up the side as it was hauled in, and then the ship moving silently away from the land. There should be nothing to fear in such a sight but the dream had been darkened by a brooding sense of threat which lived with him still.

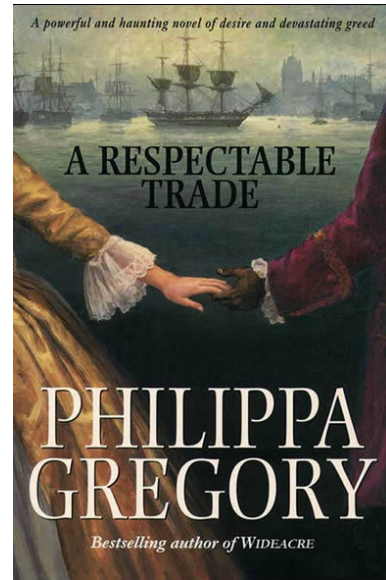
He called quietly for his slave boy, Siko, who slept at the foot of his bed. ‘Make tea,’ he said shortly as the boy appeared, rubbing his eyes.

‘It’s the middle of the night,’ the boy protested and then stopped when he saw mehuru’s look. ‘Yes, master.’

Mehuru waited in the doorway until the boy put the little brass cup of mint tea into his hand. The sharp aromatic scent of it comforted him. There had been a stink in his dream, a stink of death and sickness. The ship which had left the land in darkness, trailing no wake in the oily water, had smelled as if it carried carrion.

The dream must mean something. Mehuru had trained as an obalawa – a priest – one of the highest priests in the land. He should be able to divine his own dreams.

Over the roofs of the city the sky was growing paler, shining like a pearl, striped with thin bands of clouds as fine as muslin. As he watched they melted away and the sky’s colour slowly deepened to grey and then a pale misty blue. On the eastern horizon the sun came up, a white disc burning.



Mehuru shook the dream from his head. He had a busy day before him: a meeting at the palace and an opportunity for him to show himself as a man of decision and ambition. He put the dream away from him. If it came back he would consider it then. It was a brilliant cream and white dawn, full of promise. Mehuru did not want such a day shadowed by the dark silhouette of a dreamed ship. He turned inside and called Siko to heat water for his wash and lay out his best clothes.

In the Bristol roads – where salt water meets fresh in the Bristol channel – the slaving ship Daisy paid off the pilot who had guided her down the treacherously narrow Avon gorge and cast off the barges which had towed her safely out to sea. She put on sail as the sun rose and a light wind got up, blowing from the west. Captain Lisle drew his charts towards him and set his course for the Guinea coast of Africa. The cabin boy had lain out a clean shirt for him and poured water for him to wash. He poured it back into the jug, holding the china ewer carefully in grubby callused hands. It would be two months at least before they made landfall in Africa and Captain Lisle was not a man to waste clean water.