A DRINK IN THE PASSAGE

ALAN PATON

In the year 1960 the Union of South Africa celebrated its Golden Jubilee, and there was a nation-wide sensation when the one-thousand-pound prize for the finest piece of sculpture was won by a black man, Edward Simelane. His work, AFRICAN MOTHER AND CHILD, not only excited the admiration, but touched the conscience or heart or whatever it was that responded, of white South Africa, and seemed likely to make him famous in other countries.

It was by an oversight that his work was accepted, for it was the policy of the Government that all the celebrations and competitions should be strictly segregated. The committee of the sculpture section received a private reprimand for having been so careless as to omit the words "for whites only" from the conditions, but was told, by a very high personage it is said, that if Simelane's work "was indisputably the best", it should receive the award. The committee then decided that this prize must be given along with the others, at the public ceremony which would bring this particular part of the celebrations to a close.

For this decision it received a surprising amount of support from the white public; but in certain powerful quarters, there was an outcry against any departure from the "traditional policies" of the country, and a threat that many white prize-winners would renounce their prizes. However a crisis was averted, because the sculptor was "unfortunately unable to attend the ceremony".

"I wasn't feeling up to it," Simelane said mischievously to me. "My parents, and my wife's parents, and our priest, decided that I wasn't feeling up to it. And finally I decided so too. Of course Majosi and Sola and the others wanted me to go and get my prize personally, but I said, 'boys, I'm a sculptor, not a demonstrator'."

"This cognac is wonderful," he said, "especially in these big glasses. It's the first time I've had such a glass. It's also the first time I've drunk a brandy so slowly. In Orlando you develop a throat of iron, and you just put back your head and pour it down, in case the police should arrive."

He said to me, "this is the second cognac I've had in my life.

Would you like to hear the story of how I had my first?''

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You know the Alabaster Bookshop in von Brandis Street? Well, after the competition they asked me if they could exhibit my AFRICAN MOTHER AND CHILD. They gave a whole window to it, with a white velvet backdrop, if there is anything called white velvet, and some complimentary words.

Well somehow I could never go and look in that window. On my way from the station to the *HERALD* office, I sometimes went past there, and I felt good when I saw all the people standing there; but I would only squint at it out of the corner of my eye.

Then one night I was working late at the *HERALD*, and when I came out there was hardly anyone in the streets, so I thought I'd go and see the window, and indulge certain pleasurable human feelings. I must have got a little lost in the contemplation of my own genius, because suddenly there was a young white man standing next to me.

He said to me, ''what do you think of that, mate?'' And you know, one doesn't get called ''mate'' every day.

''I'm looking at it'', I said.

''I live near here,'' he said, ''and I come and look at it nearly every night. You know it's by one of your own boys, don't you? See, Edward Simelane.''

''Yes, I know.''

''It's beautiful,'' he said. ''Look at that mother's head. She's loving that child, but she's somehow watching too. Do you see that? Like someone guarding. She knows it won't be an easy life.''

He cocked his head on one side, to see the thing better.

''He got a thousand pounds for it,'' he said. ''That's a lot of money for one of your boys. But good luck to him. You don't get much luck, do you?''

Then he said confidentially, ''mate, would you like a drink?''

Well honestly I didn't feel like a drink at that time of night, with a white stranger and all, and a train still to catch to Orlando.

''You know we black people must be out of the city by eleven,'' I said.

''It won't take long. My flat's just round the corner. Do you speak Afrikaans?''

"Since I was a child," I said in Afrikaans.

"We'll speak Afrikaans then. My English isn't too wonderful. I'm van Rensburg. And you?"

I couldn't have told him my name. I said I was Vakalisa, living in Orlando.

"Vakalisa, eh? I haven't heard that name before."

By this time he had started off, and I was following, but not willingly. That's my trouble, as you'll soon see. I can't break off an encounter. We didn't exactly walk abreast, but he didn't exactly walk in front of me. He didn't look constrained. He wasn't looking round to see if anyone might be watching.

He said to me, "do you know what I wanted to do?"

"No," I said.

"I wanted a bookshop, like that one there. I always wanted that, ever since I can remember. When I was small, I had a little shop of my own." He laughed at himself. "Some were real books, of course, but some of them I wrote myself. But I had bad luck. My parents died before I could finish school."

Then he said to me, "are you educated?"

I said unwillingly, "yes." Then I thought to myself, how stupid, for leaving the question open.

And sure enough he asked, "far?"

And again unwillingly, I said, "far."

He took a big leap. "Degree?"

"Yes."

"Literature?"

"Yes."

He expelled his breath, and gave a long "ah". We had reached his building, Majorca Mansions, not one of those luxurious places. I was glad to see that the entrance lobby was deserted. I wasn't at my ease. I don't feel at my ease in such places, not unless I am protected by friends, and this man was a stranger. The lift was at ground level, marked "Whites Only. Slegs vir Blankes." Van Rensburg opened the door and waved me in. Was he constrained? To this day I don't know. While I was waiting for him to press the button, so that we could get moving and away from that ground floor, he stood with his finger suspended over it, and looked at me with a kind of honest, unselfish envy.

"You were lucky," he said. "Literature, that's what I wanted to do."

He shook his head and pressed the button, and he didn't

speak again until we stopped high up. But before we got out he said suddenly, "if I had had a bookshop, I'd have given that boy a window too."

We got out and walked along one of those polished concrete passageways, I suppose you could call it a stoep if it weren't so high up, let's call it a passage. On the one side was a wall, and plenty of fresh air, and far down below von Brandis Street. On the other side were the doors, impersonal doors; you could hear radios and people talking, but there wasn't a soul in sight. I wouldn't like living so high; we Africans like being close to the earth. Van Rensburg stopped at one of the doors, and said to me, "I won't be a minute." Then he went in, leaving the door open, and inside I could hear voices. I thought to myself, he's telling them who's here. Then after a minute or so, he came back to the door, holding two glasses of red wine. He was warm and smiling.

"Sorry there's no brandy," he said. "Only wine. Here's happiness."

Now I certainly had not expected that I would have my drink in the passage. I wasn't only feeling what you may be thinking, I was thinking that one of the impersonal doors might open at any moment, and someone might see me in a "white" building, and see me and van Rensburg breaking the liquor laws of the country. Anger could have saved me from the whole embarrassing situation, but you know I can't easily be angry. Even if I could have been, I might have found it hard to be angry with this particular man. But I wanted to get away from there, and I couldn't. My mother used to say to me, when I had said something anti-white, "son, don't talk like that, talk as you are." She would have understood at once why I took a drink from a man who gave it to me in the passage.

Van Rensburg said to me, "don't you know this fellow Simelane?"

"I've heard of him," I said.

"I'd like to meet him," he said. "I'd like to talk to him." He added in explanation, "you know, talk out my heart to him."

A woman of about fifty years of age came from the room beyond, bringing a plate of biscuits. She smiled and bowed to me. I took one of the biscuits, but not for all the money in the world could I have said to her "*dankie, my nooi*," or that disgusting "*dankie, missus*," nor did I want to speak to her in English because her language was Afrikaans, so I took the risk of

it and used the word "*mevrou*", for the politeness of which some Afrikaners would knock a black man down, and I said, in high Afrikaans, with a smile and a bow too, "*Ek is u dankbaar, Mevrou.*"

But nobody knocked me down. The woman smiled and bowed, and van Rensburg, in a strained voice that suddenly came out of nowhere, said, "our land is beautiful. But it breaks my heart."

The woman put her hand on his arm, and said, "Jannie, Jannie."

Then another woman and a man, all about the same age, came up and stood behind van Rensburg.

"He's a B.A.," van Rensburg told them. "What do you think of that?"

The first woman smiled and bowed to me again, and van Rensburg said, as though it were a matter for grief, "I wanted to give him brandy, but there's only wine."

The second woman said, "I remember, Jannie. Come with me."

She went back into the room, and he followed her. The first woman said to me, "Jannie's a good man. Strange, but good."

And I thought the whole thing was mad, and getting beyond me, with me a black stranger being shown a testimonial for the son of the house, with these white strangers standing and looking at me in the passage, as though they wanted for God's sake to touch me somewhere and didn't know how, but I saw the earnestness of the woman who had smiled and bowed to me, and I said to her, "I can see that, *Mevrou.*"

"He goes down every night to look at the statue," she said. "He says only God could make something so beautiful, therefore God must be in the man who made it, and he wants to meet him and talk out his heart to him."

She looked back at the room, and then she dropped her voice a little, and said to me, "can't you see, it's somehow because it's a black woman and a black child?"

And I said to her, "I can see that, *Mevrou.*"

She turned to the man and said of me, "he's a good boy."

Then the other woman returned with van Rensburg, and van Rensburg had a bottle of brandy. He was smiling and pleased, and he said to me, "this isn't ordinary brandy, it's French."

He showed me the bottle, and I, wanting to get the hell out of that place, looked at it and saw it was cognac. He turned to

the man and said, "Uncle, you remember? When you were ill? The doctor said you must have good brandy. And the man at the bottle-store said this was the best brandy in the world."

"I must go," I said. "I must catch that train."

"I'll take you to the station," he said. "Don't you worry about that."

He poured me a drink and one for himself.

"Uncle," he said, "what about one for yourself?"

The older man said, "I don't mind if I do," and he went inside to get himself a glass.

Van Rensburg said, "Happiness," and lifted his glass to me. It was a good brandy, the best I've ever tasted. But I wanted to get the hell out of there. I stood in the passage and drank van Rensburg's brandy. Then Uncle came back with his glass, and van Rensburg poured him a brandy, and Uncle raised his glass to me too. All of us were full of goodwill, but I was waiting for the opening of one of those impersonal doors. Perhaps they were too, I don't know. Perhaps when you want so badly to touch someone, you don't care. I was drinking my brandy almost as fast as I would have drunk it in Orlando.

"I must go," I said.

Van Rensburg said, "I'll take you to the station." He finished his brandy, and I finished mine too. We handed the glasses to Uncle, who said to me, "good-night my boy." The first woman said, "may God bless you," and the other woman bowed and smiled. Then van Rensburg and I went down in the lift to the basement, and got into his car.

"I told you I'd take you to the station," he said. "I'd take you home, but I'm frightened of Orlando at night."

We drove up Eloff Street, and he said, "did you know what I meant?" I knew that he wanted an answer to something, and I wanted to answer him, but I couldn't, because I didn't know what that something was. He couldn't be talking about being frightened of Orlando at night, because what more could one mean than just that?

"By what?" I asked.

"You know," he said, "about our land being beautiful?"

Yes, I knew what he meant, and I knew that for God's sake he wanted to touch me too and he couldn't; for his eyes had been blinded by years in the dark. And I thought it was a pity, for if men never touch each other, they'll hurt each other one

day. And it was a pity he was blind, and couldn't touch me, for black men don't touch white men any more; only by accident, when they make something like MOTHER AND CHILD.

He said to me, "what are you thinking?"

I said, "many things", and my inarticulateness distressed me, for I knew he wanted something from me. I felt him fall back, angry, hurt, despairing, I didn't know. He stopped at the main entrance to the station, but I didn't tell him I couldn't go in there. I got out and said to him, "thank you for the sociable evening."

"They liked having you," he said. "Did you see that?"

I said, "yes, I saw that."

He sat slumped in his seat, like a man with a burden of incomprehensible, insoluble grief. I wanted to touch him, but I was thinking about the train. He said "good-night" and I said it too. We each saluted the other. What he was thinking, God knows, but I was thinking he was like a man trying to run a race in iron shoes, and not understanding why he cannot move.

When I got back to Orlando, I told my wife the story, and she wept.