

## THE BOTTOM OF THE BOTTLE

CAN TEMBA

COMES a time when a man feels that everything in his personal organization cannot much go on as before. No dramatic decision may be taken, in some bursting hour of change. But all the same, a man may feel that those in their bits of rag who have for so long been meekly begging at the gate of his mind, can no longer be joked or carefully drunk away.

I remember well one of those days during my bottle blindness in Sophiatown. We were in the House of Truth—my room at 111 Ray Street, Sophiatown, Johannesburg—I and all those young frustrated Africans who flitted through the half-legal life of the urban African in the Union.

They were all there that day. Philip, the Health Inspector, who had been with me at Fort Hare; Peter, his younger brother, who was annually being baulked of Matriculation by the requirements of a supplementary examination in that malevolent subject, English (Higher Grade); Oubaas, the timeless one, who read morbid things like *'The Inferno'*, *'Paradise Lost'*, and *'Dr. Faustus'*; Maxie, scared stiff of two fingers of brandy, but obsessed with impressing the girls; the Kabaka (so called because his uncle once "exiled" him from home for his shiftlessness); Jazzboy, miniature like the saxophone that brought him girls, liquor and an occasional beating-up; I, their host.

The table was spired with bottles of brandy, gin, beer, and we were at the stage of high discourse, much like the majestic demons in the burning pit.

For a moment, as I looked at those young men around me, the luxury of a mild flood of conscience swept over me. They had all at one time or another had visions: to escape their environment; to oppose and overcome their context; to evade and out-distance their destiny; by hard-work and sacrifice, by education and native ability, by snatching from the table of occupation some of the chance crumbs of the high-chaired culture. Lord, it struck me, what a treasury of talent I have here in front of me. Must they bury their lives with mine like this under a load of Sophiatown bottles?

It was conscience that struck me, I say, because I knew that many of them looked up to me, my way of life, and repeated my despair and its defences behind my back. I knew that they were

excited by me when I said: "Why should one believe in anything, when one could live—live, gentlemen, at 212 degrees Fahrenheit? The trouble is, gentlemen, for me, human nature stinks; but that is all the material we have to work with." They said these things I said. But never with my own deep sense of doubt, the sleepless, tossing suspicion that often made me itch in the very heat of my enthusiasms.

I think the rest of African society looked upon us as an excrescence. We were not the calm dignified Africans that the Church so admires (and fights for); not the unspoiled rural African the Government so admires, for they tell no lies, they do not steal, and above all, they do not try to measure up to the white man. Neither were we 'tsotsis' in the classical sense of the term, though the 'tsotsis' saw us as cousins. I swear, however, that not one of the gentlemen who associated with me in that period was guilty (caught or not) of murder, rape, assault, robbery, theft, or anything like that. True, we spent nights at police stations, but it was invariably for possession of illicit liquor or, its corollary, drunkenness. We were not 'cats', either; that sophisticated group of urban Africans who play jazz, live jazz, and speak the township transmigrations of American slang.

We were those sensitive might-have-beens who had knocked on the door of white civilization (at the highest levels that South Africa could offer) and had heard a gruff "No" or a "Yes" so shaky and insincere that we withdrew our snail horns at once.

An incident that Oubaas related to us illustrates this "Yes". He had been working for a white man of truly untraditional generosity of spirit. This boss allowed Oubaas to drive his car on private jaunts, to share lunch with him, to visit his house for a drink. Sometimes Oubaas even brought him into the nether world of the township where he liked the abandon of its denizens. And his politics? Positively anti-white, if not altogether subversive! They were back-slapping buddies, Oubaas and his boss.

Then one day there came into the shop—a chemist's—an old white lady. She gave her order, and it turned into quite a fair-sized parcel. The old lady wanted to carry her parcel into her car, but the boss would have nothing of it. The old lady insisted that she could manage. And the boss insisted . . .

"Don't worry, my *boy* will carry it out for you. That's what I hired the *native* for."

*Boy* and *native* are hardly terms used in respectable race-relations society. Something in the white man's intonation makes these innocuous words feel like barbed wire across a bare back.

Oubaas, normally not ungallant, was furious. But, for us, the joke was on Oubaas. He did not walk out on that nice boss at once, but went on working for him long months afterwards.

But for the most we savoured of life pungently. Living precariously, cheekily confronting the world's challenges. I, for myself, deliberately cocooned my mind away from the stirrings around it. 1948, the Nationalists took over power in South Africa. 1949, the Youth League forced their Programme of Action into African National Congress policy. 1952, the Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign was launched. 1955, the Freedom Charter was proclaimed. 1956, the massive Treason Arrests took place in pre-dawn raids. 1960, Sharpeville! Colossal shadows of huge, angry politicians fell upon and affrighted us. Something there was that thundered in the skies.

Yet nightly we repaired to the House of Truth, swinging bottles of brandy filched from the dark cellars where the white man hid his courage from us, and drank ourselves cold.

By this time it was becoming clear to me that I was really fighting something inside that nibbled at my soaked soul. Yet, what the hell! We were cavaliers of the evanescent, romantics who turned the revolt inwards, upon our own bruised spirits. It was flight, now, no more just self-erasure.

Something happened one night that made me sit up and think. We had been drinking as usual, and the casualties were lying all over my room: on the bed, over the studio couch, sprawled across the floor. I was sitting at the table, with a half-full bottle in my hand, and trying to make a floozie who was too far-out to distinguish Cupid from Dr. Verwoerd. Then there came a knock on the door. I reeled over to open it and admit two very well-known politicians. The one was a shadow of a shadow, and he had that "lean and hungry look". But it was the other, bulkier man who really blurred through my half-consciousness.

He was huge and shaped like a barrel whose oblong began at the knees. He had arms like distorted zeppelins with Russian sausage fingers at their ends. His face ballooned at you as he breathed, and that face was black for you, wilfully black.

He spoke in a voice that was eternally hoarse.

"Can Temba, we'd like to talk to you," he grated.

I motioned them into seats which they took like senators.

He wasted no time. "Look," he said, "the fight is on. We know that you're not a membah, but this fight is for Ahfricah. We want you all, nice-time boys"—here he looked at me accusingly—"tsotsis, teachers, businessmen, lawyers, doctors, all! The Ahfrican Nahtional Congress is not a political party, it is the organization of every Ahfrican, every Ahfrican."

"But how do you know what I think?" I parried.

"Man," came the lean man impatiently, "you're black, are you not? You're an African, are you not? So long as you're black we know what you suffer and what you think."

"I see," said I, evasively. "What is it you want me to do?"

"We want your support, man," said the big one, aghast at this political moron. "We hear that you've got some young men about you, and you can make them do things, do things that we don't think are in the nahtional interest. Will you be with us?"

I jerked up my thumb automatically and barked, "*Afrika!*" "*Mayibuuuyé!*" they rasped.

They had risen at the salute, and nearly upset the table. My bottle was staggering, but I caught it swiftly. I served a glass and offered them some, but they refused. I gulped my drink down so that the tears came to my eyes.

"So you are with us?" asked the big man as they prepared to go.

"Sure," I said, "sure," hugging my beloved bottle.

But as they went out, I fancy I heard the lean one muttering: "He's drunk, that's all."

After that, perhaps largely because I paid more attention, I heard more and more *politics*: bitter, heady, virulent stuff. It expressed in venomous terms the wrath of a people who had come to the damn-it-all threshold. Also the despair of a people tied helplessly to an ant-heap: it was savage swearing. What struck me more those days was the great number of ordinary folk who spoke politics.

For the machine that was ploughing up the country could not leave one square inch undisrupted. In Zeerust, Sekhukhuneland, Pondoland, official policies were driving the tribesmen to resistance.

That was odd. Hitherto, the bad boys had been the urban Africans. They were "spoiled", tried to "imitate the white man", were the targets of "agitators, Communists and tsotsis", and above all a sore to the segregationist faith of our masters by

their insolent infiltration into the holy preserves of whitedom; they were the *black peril*, the direct descendants of the treacherous impis under Dingaan, if you can take the contradiction.

But, increasingly now, our all-tolerant country brothers rose up against the authorities, not in lawlessness, but because the Government's policy of retribalization rode rough-hooves over tribal custom and degraded the true position of the chief.

The tribal areas showed clearly that there had once been an ordered peaceful system by which tribes were able to live. It was a system of society and government that Africans knew to belong to their own customary sense of justice, and what was proper. The shadiest nuance of interpretation in the *Kgotla* (Tribal Council) could lead to spirited argument where even the chief could be required to explain his innovations. For the chief, too, was bound by custom.

With all its limitations, this other world composition served the needs of the times. It merged with the simple economy; it expressed the tribal psychology; slowly, with patient humour, it absorbed the wisdom and the philosophy of the fire-place—but it was so made that it could roar into violence at a moment's blowing.

The institutions of a system like this—a system that served the needs so well—could not just die, even with the change of times. They just adapted themselves by natural differentiation to new requirements. And the genuine among them asserted a new influence in an even more dynamic environment. The witchdoctor's craft survives in the most revolutionary politics. The principle of *free debate* attends every discussion of significance. The women exert their oblique, but very effective influence on every project of importance.

But our old-world tribal state was not to be left *virgo intacta*. The fifteenth century hurled at us the economic and adventurous restlessness of Europe, and subsequently the mania called the "Scramble for Africa" shuddered the sub-continent. The sheer physical impact of the assault was enough to stagger the edifice of tribalism. I can almost see my infinitely great-grandfather, leaping to his feet on a rock and gaping at a sailing ship seeking harbour—all his patriarchal dignity forgotten, as he exclaims, "*Hau!*"

Yet these white men did not just bring things of wonder: the Floating House, the Booming Stick, the gaudy beads. They also brought ideas—evil, good, indifferent—ideas such as could subvert and demolish our tribal system. Funny, the idea with

which they impressed us most is not Justice or Love Thy Neighbour or Liberty, Fraternity and Equality or Live and Let Live—no, but simply: you acquire a right to a right only by force. And they are still busy, through the centuries, trying to live down that spectacular bit of basic education. For us, it is only recently that you needed sugar-coated slogans to cover that profound “truth” of Western, civilized morality.

But then we were barbarians both.

The ideas did their bit, but it was only when our labour was needed that a deliberate drive was made to haul us out of our tribal havens to come out to work. And where tribalism did not help to demonstrate “the dignity of labour”, tribalism had to be smashed. They were so bloody successful that now they fear they have drawn too many of us into the fields of urban industry and have sired themselves a problem.

Obsessed with the one purpose of smashing a tribal system that seemed to spurn the blandishments of the white economy and so frequently to defy white authority, the crusaders of Western Christian Civilization sought not for a moment something in tribalism to be saved. The authority of the chiefs and of custom was scorned, the first called “barbarian savages”, and the second “contrary to the principles of natural justice and civilization”.

By Union the work of demolition was almost complete. All that remained now was the tidying of effective control over the Africans. It quickly became clear that the urban African was going to present the more intractable problem. He had so soon got the hang of the white man’s ways. He did not turn a hair at slurs that his grasp of “civilization” was purely “imitative”, “superficial”, “evanescent”. He just went on to learn how to drive a car, man a machine—good lord, he was even playing at trade unionism and politics!

Moreover, as the momentum of the initial process had not played itself out, more and more Africans were squeezed from the Reserves and the farms to try their luck in the cities. Again, they didn’t give a damn for those who lamented “the spoiling of the pure native”, “the falling for the temptation of cheap, city glitter”, “the misguidance of city spivs and incendiary agitators”. The city called and the peasants came.

Of course, some semblance of tribal integrity remained in the Reserves, but the migrant labour system made a pretty delinquent bastard out of it. Men came to the mines for a spell,

lived in compounds and soured the city only in hectic excursions, then went back to awe their home-keeping brethren, or to dismay their chiefs and elders with their outlandish ways.

But tribalism was crumbling all over and the Africans were fast becoming a race of city-dwellers, with snatched visits to the Reserves. Hard economic and social laws dictated that these people would seek to adjust themselves into some form of permanence and security; and in the process demand the conditions that would facilitate such adjustment.

Somewhere near this point, the authorities decided that the whole process of African urbanization should be repudiated as a policy if not altogether as a fact, let the skies crack! And the simple method projected was the retribalization of the people and the re-establishment of the authority of the chiefs—at least, that is, those chiefs who would keep their noses clean and obey the Government. And where tribal custom did not suit, for tribal custom chooses its own chiefs in its own way—well, who the hell is running the show, after all?

Meantime, however, other things had happened.

Largely because of the efforts of the African National Congress, but to as large an extent because of the industrial and population changes in the country and the excessive emphasis of white politics on *colour*, Africans were everywhere debunking tribalism and contemplating each other as *Africans*, themselves as a *nation*—whatever the guide-books of the State Information Office say.

And this African view of themselves does not confine itself to South African blacks. It identifies itself with all the black people of Africa; it breathes out the "African Personality"; it palpitates in time with the heartbeats of Accra. It strives hard to make itself vacuum enough to receive "the winds of change" from the North. And against this there is nothing to engender a peculiar South African loyalty: not a black middle class; not a stake in the land, its wealth, or, for that matter, its law, order and good government; nothing to make enough of them hesitate at the contemplation of this country's destruction.

The conflict between the opposed forces seems inevitable: the (roughly) white nationalism poised before the (not too roughly) black nationalism. The dilemma is so complete!

As I brood over these things, I, with my insouciant attitude to matters of weight, I feel a sickly despair which the most potent bottle of brandy cannot wash away. What can I do?