

HIGH FENCE

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THE store was always full on a Saturday morning. Most of the people from the Chief's kraal and the surrounding villages came in if they could on a Saturday morning. Some came to sell grain and to spend the money on new clothes and bicycle parts, but the majority came only to buy a tickey sweets or a shilling sugar and to stand and stare and talk to their friends.

Milton, the store manager, wrapped up a shirt for his cousin Amos and took the pound note offered and wandered up to the till. He stood waiting by the till for the owner to look up from his desk where he was trying to work out some invoices. Howard Loury got up and came over and took the pound.

"How much?" he asked.

"Five and six, 'Nkos."

Howard carefully pressed the right buttons, although the till was no longer able to register anything.

"Is it for that man at the end?" he asked.

"Yes, 'Nkos."

"A shirt his size costs ten and six."

"It's for his piccanin."

"Oh. That's your cousin Amos, isn't it?"

"No, 'Nkos. He's somebody else's cousin."

Howard wondered whether he should go down and look at the shirt. Then he thought it was too hot to take so much trouble. He went back to his desk. He sat and tried to concentrate, but he found it difficult amidst the noise of so many people.

Occasionally Howard looked over to where Milton was working. As often as not he found that Milton was looking back at him, sideways, out of the corner of his eyes, so that the white showed. Why does he look at me like that, thought Howard. What has he got to hide?

Later Howard went over to the grain-shed to buy grain. As he went out the door he stopped and looked at Milton. He wondered, as he always did, how much he trusted him in the store alone. But then, he didn't trust him even when he was in the store with him, so what difference did it make? He's on the wrong side of the fence, he thought. As my manager, he should be on my side, but he's still an African, on the other side, cheating me. He is ambitious, too. Some day soon he

will leave the Reserve with the money he has earned here and go into business in Bulawayo. He is on the way up. Just as I am on the way down, thought Howard. We should meet somewhere.

Of course, in a way they were related. Perhaps that was why Milton brought him chickens occasionally. He had never worked that one out. The chickens were tough old things, but a nice change from his usual dubious steak.

Howard forgot Milton and weighed and bought the maize and rupoka and kaffir corn (known here as K.C.). There was a long queue of young girls and mothers with grain in wide grass basins, enough to get them a new petticoat or head scarf; and there were some men leading teams of oxen pulling grain-loaded sleds made of a forked tree trunk.

When it was finished, he went outside and looked round the store buildings. He felt reluctant to go back into the store yet. It was getting on towards mid-day and it was very hot. The white-washed buildings shimmered in the heat and hurt his eyes with their brightness. The heavy thud-thud of the mill engine where maize was ground seemed to keep time with the ripple of the haze. He looked at the white buildings he owned, and looked down beyond them, to the cattle and goats grazing in the shade of spreading trees and the river running wide and reed-fringed now with the summer rains.

He flapped the flies away from his face. He felt very glad that it was Saturday and that he could close soon and go up and drink all the gin he wanted to without having to keep awake for the afternoon.

He went back into the store and took a turn at the counter. He liked getting things for his customers, and the money felt good when he knew it was his money. Every now and then he forgot the price of a bottle of liniment or a baby's water-proof pants, but he did not need to go and look it up in the stock-books. Milton knew. Milton always knew and would tell him with his head twisted sideways, looking up at him from the corner of his eyes, the white showing, a small smile on his lips, as though they were accomplices in some giant confidence trick. That was all very well, thought Howard, but then he goes away and sells something more to one of his numberless relatives at half its price, and we are on opposite sides of the fence again.

He was serving the last small boy wanting a packet of sweets, when he heard the sound of the car. He thought, there goes

my quiet drinking time. Yet these will be the first white men I have seen in a month. I should be pleased to see them.

He went outside. It was the Land Rover belonging to Harding, the Native Commissioner at Sentalo, which was the police and administrative centre of the Sentalo Native Reserve and lay thirty miles away over very bad roads. The car stopped by the path up to his house. He went over.

Harding got out. He was a thick dark man with black eyebrows. He had Witherton with him, the Agricultural Officer, who was lean and stooping.

"Hullo, Loury," said Harding. "We seem to have arrived in time for lunch. Quite a coincidence, hey? Ha. You know Witherton, our A.O.?"

"Yes," said Howard. "You go up to the house. I'll join you in a minute."

He went back to the store and gave out the weekly wages to his workers, deducting what they owed him in the credit book. Milton's wages were two pounds fifteen and he owed seventeen and six.

"Here's your money," said Howard, giving him one pound fifteen. Milton smiled at him sideways and went away.

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He went up to his house with the thatched roof among the bouganvillea, and poured them gins. They stretched out in his arm chairs and looked round with small interest at his books and pictures.

"Well," said Howard. "Have you come to see me?"

"Oh, no," said Harding. "Not at all. We just dropped in. We came down to see the Chief and tell him about next month's cattle sales. Why? Is something on your mind?"

"Oh, no," said Howard. "Not at all."

They sat and drank for a while in silence. Then they went into the dining room for lunch.

"Nice furniture," said Witherton.

"Why?" said Harding. "Is it something special?"

"No. Not very special," said Howard.

Old Moses waited on them in his white uniform. He gave them rissoles and salad. When he had gone, Howard got up and fetched from the sideboard the few bits of cutlery that Moses had forgotten.

"I gave a permit to some people from Bulawayo to come down

here and fish today," said Harding. "They'll be pitching up some time this afternoon and will be camping the night. They looked a pretty rough crowd to me. Two men and a woman. They had drunk a bit when I saw them."

After a minute he said, "I suppose you've got a gun?"

"No, I haven't, actually."

"Nothing at all? With the fine duck shooting you have here?"

"I don't want to shoot the ducks. They look very pretty."

"Supposing there is trouble down here amongst the natives. You're alone here, and it's two hours by road to us, and there is no telephone. Aren't you scared of that?"

"I am sure that you as N.C. will see that there never is any trouble."

"Ha. You must be scared of guns then. What do you do about snakes?"

"I've got an old golf club, a number seven. I hit them with that. It's very useful."

Presently Harding said, "I'm sorry you haven't a gun. With those people coming down."

Howard said, "I suppose I'll be all right. Don't worry about it."

"I wasn't worrying about you. You're none of my concern. But I don't want there to be any trouble down here with my people."

Moses brought in some tinned pears and a slab of cracked cheese. They ate those and then went back to the sitting room and had some more gin.

"Actually, there is something on my mind," said Howard. "One of my staff is stealing from me in the store."

"That's not my job," said Harding. "Send for the police. I'll get Sergeant Hunt to come down from Sentalo if you like."

"No, I don't want that. I have no proof. But I wouldn't want the police. I thought, since you know these people, you might be able to say something?"

"I couldn't say anything. You ought to speak to the Chief."

"I have. But he's a sly old devil. He looked at me and screwed up his face and gave me one of those toothless grins, you know how he does, and said, "Mr. Loury, you know that all black men are dishonest. There is little I can do. And you may find that what you are missing is not stolen but borrowed." I asked him what he meant by that, and he gave one of his cackles of laughter, the silly old man."

Harding said, "The Chief is a capable and just man. I will not have you laughing at him."

"I was not laughing at him."

"I am not surprized he would not help you if that is your attitude towards him. Now nobody will help you. Anyway, who do you think is the thief?"

"Milton, my manager."

Witherton laughed. "Then it's all in the family," he said.

Harding said, "That does make a difference, you know. In a way he is related to you."

"That's not true!" said Howard.

"Oh, yes. You have been sleeping with a native girl for some time now. And she's Milton's sister."

"How do you know?"

"It's my job to know things like that. I'm good at my job."

"Then how does Witherton know?"

"Listen, Loury, everyone at Sentalo knows. Why do you think nobody's invited you to any parties for so long?"

"All right. I see. Then we won't talk of it any more."

"Yes, we will. I have been meaning to talk to you about this, and now seems a good time. I hear this girl . . ."

"Please don't call her 'this girl'. Her name is Susan. She is a decent woman, and I paid a good lobola for her, and her father consented."

"I have spoken to her father. At the time he wanted the cattle, but now he is sorry. For I hear you have made this girl pregnant. Or did somebody else do it?"

"Certainly they did not. If she has a child, it is my child."

"That is a very great mistake, don't you think? What is going to happen to the child when you leave? For you are going to leave, aren't you, Loury?"

"I don't know."

"I understood you came out here on the death of your father because death duties and taxes were so heavy in England. You wanted to make some money quickly, and you heard you could make a lot of money out of a native store. Then you were going to start in business in Salisbury and bring a girl out from England and marry her. Isn't that so?"

Poor Margaret, thought Howard. I must write to her soon. I haven't written for a long time. "You know a lot," he said.

"It's my job. You are only here with my permission, and I only let you take over the store on the recommendation of

important friends of yours. They seem to have made a mistake. There is a law against what you are doing in South Africa. Perhaps there should be one here. To protect my people against people like you. But I can take back my permission and get you kicked out of this store within a month."

"That would help neither the woman nor the child."

"Then what are you going to do about them?"

"I don't know."

"How long will you be staying here?"

"I don't know."

"What will they do when you leave?"

"I don't know."

Later Howard stood and watched them as they drove away, bouncing back up the dirt road in a cloud of dust. I don't understand people like that, he thought. I don't understand them at all.

He went into his bedroom and took off his shirt and trousers and lay on the bed. He thought of Witherton, who had asked, "Do you have her in the house? I mean, does she live here as well as sleep here?" Damn him for his prurient curiosity, he thought. He only wants food for the gossips at Sentalo.

He turned and looked at the books beside his bed. There were a few books of poetry and some of philosophy. Which of them shall I read, he thought. He sighed and took up the Agatha Christie lying open face downwards on the table.

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It was much later when he was woken from a heavy sleep by a car hooting loudly down by the store. He got up and swore and put on his clothes and went out, the afternoon sun striking hard on his eyes still dark from sleep.

There was an old beaten-up Buick with a truck back standing by the petrol pump. It was covered with dust.

"Hi," called a man from the car. "Let's have some service!"

There were two men with heavy bodies and tough scarred faces. They wore shorts and a shirt and were very sunburnt. The girl wore white shorts and a tight shirt of some black shiny material. Her face was sharp and hard, with two thin lines of cracked lipstick across it. They are none of them very handsome, thought Howard.

He filled the tank with petrol. The pump was hand operated, and he was sweating when he had finished. "That's eight

gallons. At four and twopence a gallon."

"It's four bob in town," said the driver.

"There's the transport to pay for."

"It's too much."

He accepted four shillings a gallon.

"Why do you live in this god-forsaken hole?" said the girl.

"I like it."

"It's a god-awful bloody road you live on."

"Yes."

"You live here alone?" said the other man.

"No, Joe," said the girl. "Remember they told us he had a kaffir girl with him?"

"Oh, yah. So you're the guy with the black woman? Tell me, I hear they're pretty good? You know, they got all the tricks?"

I would rather like to hit him now, thought Howard. But really the afternoon was too hot to get silly.

"I live here alone," he said.

"No telephone here?" said the driver.

"No."

"What do you do with yourself? Do any shooting?"

"No. I haven't any guns."

"You hear that, Joe? He hasn't any guns."

"If you want to fish," said Howard, "the river's down there. Why don't you go and jump in it?"

"You watch your step," said the driver.

"What's your name?" said the girl.

"Howard Loury."

"Well, Howard, these boys are going to camp tonight, but I hate camping. What do you say that I come up and spend the night at your place?"

The men laughed. "You old bitch, Liz," said Joe.

"What's he got to offer?" said the driver.

Howard thought of it. It had been a long time since he had seen a white girl, and except for her face she looked good. Then he thought that he had no desire to be unfaithful to Susan.

"I don't think that's a good idea," he said.

"He would rather sleep with his kaffir girl, Liz," said Joe.

"You watch your step," said the driver.

"Jesus, the bastard," said Liz. "I wouldn't be in the same house with him. He probably smells like a black man."

They drove off down to the river. Howard looked after them

and thought, I don't understand them either. I don't understand those sort of people at all.

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He walked up the road between the kraals, avoiding the cattle standing in the shade and flapping his hand at the flies that rose round him from the dung. He came to the thorn fence surrounding the Chief's private kraal and wondered what he should do now, for he had not called on the Chief before, and had only seen him when he came down to the store to buy a plough or trek chains.

He called to a piccanin playing in the dust. "Go and ask the Chief if I may come in and speak to him," he said in Sindebele. The Chief's mud hut was set apart from the others and was square, not round, and had windows with glass in them. But then the Chief was a rich man, with more than a thousand head of cattle, a new Chev. truck, a dark grey pin-stripe suit he wore on his trips to Bulawayo, and a wife who had been a qualified teacher of music before she came here where there were no pianos.

The Chief came out of the hut and walked towards him as though Howard had summoned him. He was wearing his usual khaki shirt and old dungarees, torn at the knee. This is wrong, thought Howard, he should not come out to meet me. And when they went through the ritual of greeting, there was a gleam in the old man's eye, for he had come out with the purpose of making Howard uncomfortable.

"Chief," said Howard in English, "three people have come to fish. I don't think they are good people. They may want to cause trouble and break into my store."

"Yes," said the Chief.

"I was thinking that perhaps one or two of your young men would be able to guard the store, if you were to tell them."

"Oh," said the Chief. "Last time we spoke it was about a black man who was a thief. Now it is about white men who are thieves, and you want my black men to guard you from them?"

"Yes."

"I don't see how that can be. I agree it is well known that all black men are dishonest, but it is also true that all white men, who kindly bring us the law, are honest. Now you want thieves to protect your store against honest men?" He

screwed up his face and grinned.

He is laughing at me, thought Howard, and what answer can I give him?

He walked back. Down by the river he saw the egrets wheeling, white against the red sunset and the blue storm-cloud, in the north, and he heard the geese and the plovers and the herons calling to him, but he would not go down there this evening.

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It did not rain and the night was hot. Howard lay naked under a sheet and turned restlessly, not sleeping very much. He was awake when he heard, about midnight, a shot fired and, a moment later, another one.

He got out of bed and put on his dressing gown and took a torch in a hand that was not steady and went down to the store where the sound came from.

He saw the two men and the girl standing by the Buick. The driver had a revolver in his hand. In the back of the car he saw a pile of clothing and the safe from the store.

"What the devil is going on here?" he said.

"They attacked us," said the driver.

He swung the torch and saw Busu, a tall man, one of the Chief's sons, sitting on the ground looking at his leg which was bleeding fast. He had a native axe beside him. "My father told me to come down and watch," he said.

"I too came down," said another voice, and he saw it was Milton, with blood coming between the fingers of his hand, which he had clasped over his left fore-arm. "I was cutting the tyres with this," and he kicked another axe lying at his feet. By now there were many more Africans in the shadows.

"They attacked us," said the driver. "You see what happened. You better watch your step too. Stay where you are."

"Oh, no," said Howard. "I think it is all over now." He felt very much afraid, but it seemed to be an abstract feeling, without present relevance. He went up to the man. "You had better give me that gun and stay here," he said. "There's not much point in your trying to leave. Not with your tyres like that."

"We'll take your truck."

"No. I sent the distributor rotor up to the Chief to look after

this evening, in case you wanted to steal it. I'm afraid he will not give it to you."

"We shall walk then."

"This is a Native Reserve, and they wouldn't let you get very far, not after shooting these two. No, I think your best plan is to go up to the house for a drink. You would probably like one. Then the Chief's driver can take you over to Sentalo in his truck. That is probably easier than waiting for them to come and fetch you. You go up to the house, and I'll come and get you a drink when I've looked after these men. And do give me your gun."

Howard took the gun out of the man's hand.

He went over to Milton and looked at his arm. "I'm sorry you did this," he said to the driver. "These are brave men, and this man is a relation of mine."

Later that night the truck left for Sentalo with the three white people in the back. Busu needed to go to the Sentalo Clinic, and he travelled in front with the Chief's driver.

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The following morning they got the stolen things out of the car and put them back in the store. Milton helped, his arm in a sling.

When all the clothing was back on the shelves, Howard looked at it and said to Milton, "Are you sure this is all? I thought there was a bit more than this on the shelves yesterday?"

Milton said, "Perhaps those men carried some away with them. They were clever men."

Howard grunted. He did not think they had done so.

Later Milton came up to the house where Howard was having his Sunday gin. Howard went to the door and found Milton with two fat white chickens in his arms.

"I brought these for you," said Milton, "because I am sorry you are still missing some things from last night."

He stood twisting his head sideways, looking up at Howard from the corner of his eyes, so that the white showed, a small smile on his face. Howard took the chickens and started to smile too. Then he laughed, and it ended with them both laughing, for they understood each other very well.