AZIKWELWA !

JAMES MATTHEWS

He did not have to walk. He looked over his shoulder at the hundreds coming along behind him, all walking, and in front of him hundreds more, walking. It was the fifth day of their long walk to Johannesburg and it was his first. He was one of the few Coloureds who walked along with the mass of Africans. They were old and they were young, big and small, foot-firm and limping; mothers and sons, fathers and daughters, grandparents and schoolchildren; some dressed in neat clothes with horn-rimmed glasses and attaché cases; and many more in torn overalls and shoes with the soles paper-thin, feeling each stone they trod on. They were all walking the long walk to Johannesburg.

Nights before the boycott was due, the location's fast beating heart increased its pace. Wherever a man raised his voice, a group formed around him, and, as the hours passed, there were many such groups, until the location throbbed one great meeting-place. There were the wild ones whose eyes saw only violence and their cry was, "Burn the buses!" Then there were those, a few, who whispered, "Accept the terms." But there was also the many who defiantly said, "Azikwelwa! We will not ride."

When they started their walk the sky was still pulsating under the stars. He watched them from the inside of his room and after a time went back to the warmth of his blankets. Later, he had a bus to himself on the ride to the station. There were angry voices when he boarded the bus, but those who shouted loudest were restrained by others with rosettes pinned to their breasts. Then, when the bus passed the long firm line of walkers, he heard again their cry. His return from work found them homeward bound, a song travelling their length. A stone hit the side of the bus and he peered through the rear window. Four men were shaking a youth by the shoulders, and then they all disappeared from view as the bus turned a bend in the road.

As if by a pre-arranged plan, the location's streets swarmed with people who embraced each other and sang at the tops of their voices. In the backyards of the shebeen queens, skokiaan† flowed freely for those who had the money to pay for it, and even

† A drink made and sold by the 'shebeens' or illegal bars of the African townships.

those who came with empty pockets were given something for their throats. As they faced one another they cried, "Azikwelwa! My brother."

Four days he watched them walk the long walk and four nights he saw them dance and drink their tiredness away, and the spirit of their pride filled him. Their word was as good as that of the white man. They said they would walk the many miles before paying the extra penny the bus company demanded. There were many whites who scoffed at their determination, and there was their answer, in the line of empty buses. On the fifth morning, when the first wave of walkers passed his door, he joined them. From side streets poured rushes of walkers, and the mass of people flowed through the gates of the location.

On his left walked an old man who used a stick to help him along and in front of him waddled a fat woman with a bundle of washing balanced on her head. He looked around him. There were many such women and some had babies strapped to their backs, the heads of the babies jogging to the motion of their mothers' hips.

It was still early and the first mile was not done and they were in holiday mood. Bicycles carried two passengers. The ancient cars of the location, which always threatened to fall apart, were loaded to capacity and wheezed their way forward. One man, his boots tied around his neck, joked with his friend and said that it made for easier walking. All joined in the laughter. They were walking the long walk and they were proud.

The miles passed and the road was long and there was less laughter, but still they walked. The old, the sick, the weak, they dropped behind. The front of the column was wide, but behind, it tapered off to a thin line of stragglers.

Then suddenly there were the police and the cars standing in rows and the people inside pulled out and forced to the side of the road. And the owners protested that the cars were not used as taxis, but yet were charged with over-loading. The harsh demands for passes, and the fearful swelling as they waited for the vans to take them away. Then the next block of police waiting with out-stretched hands and ready batons for those who had not the slips of paper which gave them the right to stay and the right to move. There were many who slipped down side streets to escape the police, for the police wanted them to ride and not walk, that there should be no strength of will and they should be without voice.

"Pass! Where is it?", he was asked. The owner of the voice not bothering to look at him and only when he made no reply, turning his eyes.

"I don't carry a pass," he replied.

"Then what are you doing here?"

"I am walking!"

"Are you a Kaffir or are you a Communist?"

"I am walking!"

He walked past the policeman who had already grasped another victim by the shirt front, demanding his pass.

A large car pulled to a halt in front of him, behind the wheel a young, white woman. She opened the doors on each side and cried aloud, "Come on. Women and old people." No one moved. Then a woman with a child on her back and a suitcase in one hand shyly approached the car and got into the back. Others followed, but one old man shook his head, saying that he was not too old to finish the long walk. More cars stopped and their drivers were white and they took those who wanted to ride.

A car was stopped and the driver asked the young policeman on whose orders he was stopping the car and demanding the removal of the passengers. He stood undecided and the car pulled away. He rushed to the nearest man and screamed, "Kaffirs! Julle dink julle is slim!"

Messages were relayed from those arrested to those free. Messages to tell a father a son was arrested, to assure an employer that an employee would come back to his job, to tell the children not to worry and to help each other.

And those who walked were still many and their hearts were heavy, but they walked, and soon the long walk was at an end, for below them was the city. At their entry to the city, the people of the city looked at them in disbelief, and their shoulders straightened and their heads lifted and they smiled. They had done the long walk one more day.

It was late when he entered the chemist shop where he worked as a delivery messenger.

"Jonathan. Why are you late?"

"I walked."

"All the way?" The white man in the white coat looked at him with surprise.

"All the way."

"But why? You're not one of them."

He could not tell the white man of the feeling inside him, that when he was with them, he knew it was good.

He joined them on the Square at mid-day. They sat with mugs of coffee and still-hot fat cakes bought from the vendors with their portable coffee stalls. Some sat around draught boards, using bottle tops as counters, but most were clustered around those with newspapers. There were pictures on the front page showing the many walkers, and the reports stated that the boycott would soon be over and that the leaders of the boycott had come to an agreement. There were angry murmurs amongst them, and some said aloud that they did not believe it. One man said what they all had on their minds. "Why is it that we were not approached? Are we not the people who walk? Does the bus company think because it has spoken to a few men, we, like sheep, will now meekly ride instead of walk?" The last question was directed at one who wore the colours of the boycott organization on his breast at night in the location.

He was a short, wiry man and his eyes blinked behind the thick-lensed glasses he wore. He took them off, wiped the lenses nervously with his handkerchief and replaced the glasses on the bridge of his wide, flat nose. He cleared his throat before speaking and then, in a surprisingly loud voice, said, "Do not believe it my brothers. It is not for our leaders to say we walk or ride before first asking the will of the people of the location. The men of the bus company must think our leaders are but children to be easily swayed by their words. Pay no heed to what is written in the newspapers because it is the words of the white man."

His words reassured them, but there were the few, already tired of the long walk, who said it was a good thing. "The white man has seen that the black man is also a man of his word." Now they would ride.

Jonathan was filled with doubt. Always he was with those who suffered without protest. Always he was with those without voice. Always he was with those who had to bear the many pains. Always he was with those unwanted, and always they lost.

He had secretly thought that the boycott would only last the first day, then the people of the location with their tired limbs would once more ride the buses and once more a purpose would die. But when it entered the second day, the third day and the day following, his hopes mounted that this would be the one

time they would prove themselves men. It had become a symbol to him. As long as they walked, his life would not be altogether meaningless. He would be able to say with pride that he too was one of those who walked the long walk, when they proved to the bus company that they had a will of their own and were not to be silenced into obedience by words.

All through his deliveries Jonathan was depressed and, when he read the afternoon paper, his despair swamped him, and he felt all cold in the afternoon sun. He felt betrayed. The paper stated that an agreement had been reached and that the following morning the buses would be filled. The boycott was over.

To forget, he busied himself with work and was relieved when given a stack of deliveries which would keep him occupied for the rest of the afternoon.

Work done with, he joined the lines of walkers ascending the first incline out of the city. They were a silent lot, and when some one asked if it was to be the last day of the long walk, he was answered with shrugs of the shoulders and the shaking of heads in bewilderment. The lines merged into one huge column of heavy hearts and dragging feet. There were no jokes, no laughter. Only doubt and uncertainty, the ringing footsteps turned into drumbeats of defeat.

The walk was long and the road without end. The cars stopped, and they looked at them without interest and at those who got inside. They passed with apprehension the first group of grinning policemen and when they were not stopped, their betrayal seemed complete.

A youth raised his voice and said in a loud voice, "Azikwelwa!" And he was cursed by some around him, but he would not be denied and repeated it louder, his voice carrying further, "Azikwelwa! My brothers and sisters!" Those who heard the youth's outburst turned their heads and stared at him and they buzzed with curiosity.

"Has news been heard?" . . . "Do we do the long walk, tomorrow?" . . . "What has happened?" . . . They shouted but there was no answer. Then a voice cried, "We will hear tonight in the location," and it was taken up and passed through the ranks. And the pace of the walkers increased, and Jonathan's heart kept pace with their footsteps.

They passed further blocks of policemen, and there were no stoppings for the demands for passes, and the cars loaded with

people passed unchallenged. And the miles slipped behind as they hurried to the location.

His supper ended, Jonothan walked with the others to the football field where the boycott organization held its meetings, and pushed near to the front. The field filled and when he turned his head, the back of the field was blocked-out by the bodies of the many people.

A speaker mounted an up-ended crate, his hands held aloft. It was the same man who spoke on the Square during the afternoon. His voice roared.

"The bus company has taken it on itself, after speaking to those who could never speak for us, to have it printed in the papers of the white man that the boycott is ended, is done with. That we have, like little children, agreed to their talks and will board the buses tomorrow. But they are wrong. This is our answer. Azikwelwa! Azikwelwa! . . ." The rest of his speech was lost in the clamour pouring from the open throats, and when other speakers tried to speak they met with the same result. The people of the location needed no further speeches, and the crowd spilled apart.

Again the backyards of the shebeen queens were flooded and skokiaan was to be had for the asking.

Jonathan sat on a bench with his mug of skokiaan untouched, a bemused smile on his face. Opposite, a drinker was slumped against the wall and his wife looked boldly at Jonathan. Looking at her, and the people around him, Jonathan felt a surge of love sweeping through his body and raised his mug to the woman. "Azikwelwa! My sister." he said.