I HAD A BLACK MAN

MICHAEL PICARDIE

" I had a black man and he was doublejointed,
I kissed him and made him disappointed.
All right, Sally, I'll tell your mother,
Kissing the black man round the corner.
How many kisses did you give him?
Only two three four . . . etc."
(London Street Game)

SHE was lonely in London.

At seven o'clock she drew the flowered curtains of her bed-sitting room and opened the window. In the tombstone-grey light of dawn she watched her breath condense.

She read the letter again. To save her feelings, he had written that he didn't love her because they hadn't "enough spiritual kinship". That made her feel sick. Why couldn't he have told the truth—that he was tired of her? That she, Martha Hart, had a plain, dry, bony face, a frightened body, and a most ordinary mind.

She went to a piano recital that night alone. She didn't hear the music. The evocation beyond the performer's fingertips attached itself to those large words in which love at first had taken meaning: Beauty, Power, Creation, Tenderness—or a sun-like magnificence beyond words. She hated the music. She hated capital letters.

She thought of herself in the womb, insufficient, unendowed. Her father was seventy-four and her mother was dead. They were old even when Martha was born. She believed she was an afterthought, to decorate their return to England after her father's long service in the colonies; something to go with gardening and favourite books—roses, Emerson, military history and a small pension.

Martha didn't go to work that day or the next. She rang up her employer and said she had a cold. When her friend Hilda Manning phoned to arrange their weekly appointment for supper and a chat, she said she wasn't well enough to go out.

But she did go out. She walked up the Finchley Road and then across to Hampstead Heath. She fed squirrels in a copse upon a hillock where the great oaks grew. After that she caught a tube to the City and walked from the Bank of England down

to the river. On an obscure wharf behind the church of St. Magnus the Martyr and the Fishmonger's Hall, she fed the gulls crumbs left over from the squirrels. She saw two barges shifting gently at their moorings with the movement of the water eastward into the Pool of London and the sea. She saw her life drifting away with it. She told herself not to be silly.

When it got dark she trudged back through a crumbling alley along Upper Thames Street, across Lower Thames Street, and up the steps at the foot of London Bridge. Leading off from the landing there was a men's public lavatory. The air was rank with urine and fish from Billingsgate down the road. Misery returned in a second, and she wished the bridge would come tumbling down as in the nursery rhyme and crush her.

On the tube home she thought of all the concerts she would attend, all the walks across the Heath, all the trips to the river made alone. She felt afraid. That night she dreamt of falling into a hole where there was never any sun.

The following morning, while making breakfast, she tried to remember. She touched her face and felt the prominent bones beneath the delicate skin, as if the evidence of experience was recorded there. She shut her eyes and tried to imagine. She tried gold and marble, purple and wine, a tiger roaring, stars turning. Nothing would come.

It was when Martha put the kettle on the gas-ring for her tea that the only vivid image appeared. It faded quickly. It was the sun.

* * *

It was Hilda Manning's belief that progress depended not merely on what one was, but who one knew. It was, for example, undoubtedly to his Oxford background and the contacts made there that her fiancé, Jeremy Dove, owed his advancement as an accounts executive in the advertising world. His ex-university friends and, to be more precise, his friends' fathers and uncles formed a series of bastions all over London, the provinces, the Commonwealth and the colonies. They guarded entry (with, of course, a view simply to the preservation of the highest standards) into the forts of Anglo-Saxon business enterprise and the professions from John O'Groats to Cape Town. She might, she admitted, be exaggerating a little about this; but it was quite true that Jeremy had received personal offers of exciting positions in Nigeria, Hong Kong, Trinidad, and Johannesburg. Jonathan Smether, for example—St. Edmund Hall and a Boxing

Blue—had invited Jeremy to join him in his uncle's Johannesburg agency.

Jonathan's letters made much of the inefficiency of his office staff in South Africa. What with the Boers ruining the country at the top and the natives getting cocky at the bottom, an injection of British stock was badly needed to stabilise the situation. On the more practical level, did Jeremy know of a decent English girl to come out and do his secretarial work? The firm would pay her air passage out and reclaim half (it was better to be business-like) in easy instalments out of her monthly salary. She would still earn more than she ever could in London, and the cost of living was lower.

Martha, considered Hilda, was the very person. Now that Hilda was getting married, she felt obliged to have her friend settled for the better before her own happy engulfment. Martha had been jilted, she was lonely, without family guidance or money to help her through. She needed a change. It was simply no good getting depressed. It didn't help anyone. She broached the subject one Friday evening at an Indian restaurant, 'The Rajah', where they met regularly for supper and a chat.

"If you don't mind my saying so, Martha dear, I think you're in a tiny bit of a rut. What you need is a little bit of sun. England's such a bore all one's life. Thaw out in the south for a bit." Hilda broke off her remarks to smile at the handsome Indian waiter and order another glass of water to extinguish the fire of chicken curry pilau in her throat. This done she ignored Martha's doubtful expression and went on to outline Jonathan Smether's admirable scheme, and left Martha to think about it.

For six weeks Martha thought about it, from all angles. She examined her motives; she wondered about going six thousand miles away from home and not knowing a soul out there; she considered the natives and the Boers, unknown factors, perhaps hostile. And then she visualised the sun and the sky, and the stretches of still, uncluttered earth.

It was the noise that decided her mind. Only now that there was the offer of escape did she realise how much she hated London and its traffic: a gigantic glutinous amoeba split and spreading into every nook and cranny, flooding the mind, driving out reason, drawing the nerves out in strings, knotting them, closing the heart.

Seven months later, all arrangements having been made,

having said goodbye to her father, and visited her mother's grave in a village churchyard where flocks and climbing roses grew against the Tudor stones, she flew away in the pressurised belly of a Comet jet and waited there for a new birth in Johannesburg.

* * *

Jonathan Smether and his uncle were most considerate employers. They found her a sunny, airy flat (at first sight it seemed made entirely of glass) at the top of a modern building. It was built on a hill, Hillbrow, and commanded a magnificent view of the city, the surrounding hills, and the sky itself. The top storey reached six thousand feet above sea-level—the city's altitude was about five thousand eight hundred. "The closest I'll get to heaven," said Martha as Jonathan helped her move in, and they laughed.

The sun, the sun. Cloudy days presaged a violent summer thunderstorm and then everything was clear, still and hot again. It was never sultry. The altitude prevented that. She never remembered being so happy as on her second day after arrival when she went shopping with Jonathan's wife and bought swimming costumes, pretty cotton dresses, a straw hat and sandals.

After work and on week-ends, Jonathan drove her to his uncle's house. In the garden there was a swimming pool surrounded by kikuyu lawn and dahlia beds. At night the air was fragrant with jacaranda, mimosa, honey-suckle and magnolia, and the air voluptuously cool on her burning cheeks and bare arms. There was a barbecue one Saturday, and in the garden black servants with laundered white uniforms and snowy gloves served boerewors, mielies and Cape Tassenberg wine. Even at night she swam and saw the moon broken and shifting in the water.

She slept naked and before dropping off she would feel an animal contentment spreading through her body, her muscles supple and firm, and life seemed to have expanded and fallen into an easier rhythm. The ordinary fact that one could live off milk, salads, fresh fruit and ice-cream made one look back at England and English stodge with unbelieving distaste.

The other girls in the office regarded her as something of a curiosity. Her accent, voice, manners, and a delicate skin turned by the sun into an uncomfortable looking pink, betrayed an Englishness they found interesting. She enjoyed this sudden

small notoriety. It was delightful to be thought different. She contrasted this opinion of herself with her own image of a person regrettably nondescript.

* * *

Winter came, and the sunlight, now a coppery gold rather than white, still poured through the balcony windows of the flat. For about five months, from May to September, there was hardly a cloud to be seen, and the hazy blue of summer changed to a glassy mediterranean. The sun dropped cold and low to the north, the wind came up, and nights were frosty. Supposing that she had settled in at last, Jonathan Smether permitted his hospitality to droop. The young men she met at his uncle's swimming pool stopped popping in with invitations to drives and picnics. She looked at her face in the mirror often. She was twenty seven.

She began to wonder where Africa was. Looking out of her bedroom window to the south she saw the skyscrapers of mining and commerce, chaste fingers of white plaster and terrazzo. They indicated the heavens as if to point an answer. Beyond them, in a pall of smoke, concrete blocks of factories; triangular girder structures of mine-heads; yellow mine dumps—flat-topped pyramids, the sides eroded to form a friezework carved like ancient monuments in Mexico or Egypt—all stood evidence of what was new and man-made. The only forests were plantations of shaft timber, lakes were dams for washing gold ore, mountains were dumps of sand, rivers—the streams of industrial effluent. To the north the well-wooded garden suburbs of the white employers spread like a grafted skin over the original scrubby veld, the only evidence of which was heralded by the purple hills of the Magaliesberg thirty miles away.

Worthwhile piano recitals were infrequent. When she did go she felt the absurd incongruity of her favourite Chopin or Debussy sounding in the middle of an industrial island surrounded by Africa. Mazurkas in the City Hall were all very well, but what about lions, rivers shaped like elephants' heads—Limpopo, Zambesi, Congo—bush and sub-tropical coast, and the big black men who pounded drums?

* * *

The office boy was an African of twenty five years. No one in the firm could tell her his surname. It was recorded in a pass-book (issued by the Department of Bantu Administration and Development), a valuable document which Mr. Smether

senior signed once a month but never examined in detail. He was called Amos, or "the boy", or "the native boy".

Martha's interest was attracted by his habit of reading books. He did this during lunch-hour and when work was slow in a little room behind the main office, where tea was made and memoranda cyclostyled. It puzzled her that he had no chair of his own. He stood both at the enquiry counter, stamping envelopes and sorting mail, and in the little room, washing cups or attending the machine.

One lunch-hour she invited him to sit down at Miss Grobler's desk. There was no one else in the office, and she saw no reason why anyone should object. With a polite smile Amos refused and thanked her, making an excuse she couldn't follow, so heavy was his accent, the vowels over-rounded and prolonged, the consonants succeeded by the eliding "e" of the Bantu languages.

Two days later she saw him sitting on the curbstone in a side street. She was about to enter an Italian espresso bar where she sometimes had lunch. He had a Penguin in his hands, and the bold black print on the cover read '*Great Expectations*'. Other Africans played a game of draughts. They squatted on the pavement, their feet in the gutter, eating loaves of white bread and drinking Pepsi-Cola. It occurred to her that there was nowhere else for them to go during lunch-hour; no restaurant, club, and even the park benches were marked "Europeans Only". Something began to stir within her. Rather, it was like an irritating itch that one knew was there but couldn't reach.

She asked Jonathan Smether why there was no desk for Amos in the main office. After all, she declared, a little self-conscious of her own trepidation, his work, though humble, was as much a part of the office routine as her own, Miss Grobler's or Miss Mackenzie's.

Jonathan's exquisitely modulated Oxford voice took the inflection one might adopt towards a child who wanted to eat in the bathroom and wash in the dining room: "Well—er—it would hardly be convenient, now would it? I'm all for that sort of thing, but equality is one thing and harmony another. You know perfectly well how Miss Grobler and Miss Mackenzie would react." He cleared his voice, lit another cigarette, and invited her to accompany him and his wife to the Empire Cinema that Saturday night. There was a splendid murder on. However, he could see that Martha was still dissatisfied and

returned to the uncomfortable topic: "My dear Martha, let me assure you—and this goes for the old man too—*we* have absolutely no objection. He might have a desk in the office with all the pleasure in the world, *but* . . ." It struck her that this last phrase was singularly inept, all things considered.

She stopped asking questions and returned to her typewriter. Nevertheless she decided one should take care that one's accustomed habit of acceptance, and—its more positive side—one's respect for other opinions, did not degenerate into moral flabbiness.

That evening it occurred to her that this was an unfamiliar worry. In England one found a common ground of tolerance. There, equal treatment in ordinary matters (she didn't care much for high politics, economics, or the sociology of privilege) was something one took for granted. There one could pursue higher things unencumbered by the fierce distractions of a society whose civilisation, she suspected, cracked like thin veneer under the heat of even a winter sun.

* * *

Amos came to her with idiomatic expressions he didn't understand. His general grasp was excellent, all the more surprising to Martha when he told her that he had left school at fifteen because of his family's poverty and continued studying under the most difficult conditions. She made it a habit to return to the little room for a second cup of tea and talk to him. She found his company far more agreeable than Miss Grobler's and Miss Mackenzie's whose conversation centred round clothes, dates, holidays, parties, the latest films—the sort of thing one might hear in any office. Amos on the other hand was serious-minded. Amos was different. She felt she could do with a new set of eyes on the world; black eyes, native eyes. And Amos was ham-strung and oppressed. Amos had numerous crosses to bear.

Explaining to him something of Dickens's England, she found a fluency she never knew she had. England! How clear and real it seemed from six thousand miles, how worthy of description and how much sharper its outline as reflected in the mind of an African office-clerk! A hundred perspectives were gained, a thousand insights offered into both worlds—Africa and Britain—suddenly flashing like two mirrors in the sun.

* * *

They talked quietly about working together on his corres-

pondence course. If they worked hard she was sure he would pass his senior school certificate within a year. And then England: freedom from the daily humiliation, a chance to study further, a new world to explore. She would show him England.

He was puzzled by her urgency. She tried to get him to understand that it wasn't charity. She wanted to do it for her own sake. She looked into his face and wondered whether his impassivity of expression meant suspicion. But there could be no turning back anyway.

She suggested that they meet every other evening after work. Perhaps he might bring along others who were studying too. Where could they meet? he objected. He lived ten miles away in Orlando township, and Europeans were not allowed in at night without a permit from the location superintendent. It simply wouldn't be granted on such a pretext; not a white woman at night.

She hesitated and then said very calmly: "Well, there's only one alternative. You shall have to come to my flat." She felt proud using the imperative. For the first time as long as she could remember, she had told someone what he had to do.

Amos hesitated. Two days later he agreed. When he said "yes", he looked into her eyes. Then he smiled like a boy on the eve of an adventure. She wanted to hug him with delight there in the little room. She stood still and listened to the rhythmic clatter of the cyclostyling machine.

Together they left the office at five o'clock that afternoon under the narrow-lidded observation of Miss Grobler and Miss Mackenzie. Waiting at the lift she stared at him.He was not at all black but a rich chestnut brown. His skin reflected the fluorescent light in the passage. She looked down at her hands. Sun freckles were fading. Nervously she rubbed the skin at her wrist. It was dry. Blue veins showed through the whiteness. She thought of the dark mystery of his body. She told herself to stop it.

They walked along the crowded pavements to the tram terminus. He was saying something to her. Distracted by the frowning looks of passers-by, she didn't hear. He repeated that he would have to catch a non-European tram at a stop further along in Market Street. Abruptly she replied that she would meet him at the corner of Kotze and Twist Streets at the top of the hill, where the tram turned off to Berea and Observatory. They parted. She arrived there first. Six white trams passed and

twenty minutes went by before the first non-European tram arrived at the stop in Hillbrow. He got off and joined her, smiling wryly, as if to make a philosophic gesture to the inevitable. The service wasn't very good, he said. On the way to her flat she stopped to buy food for supper. Amos waited outside. They arrived at City Heights. There were two lifts. With an angry gesture she pushed him into the European lift and they went up. She smiled at him with relief. Silently he thanked God that no other Europeans were in the lift. He thought about England—Dickens, Shakespeare, Keats, Shelley. Mathematics was no problem, but English barbed with difficulties. It would be clear soon, though. But she was innocent, unwary. Her goodness made her vulnerable. He tried to forget that, and thought only with longing of the wonderful words springing out of her soil (she would know all, all) at last completely within grasp. And the white mystery of her body. He thought of it until they opened the covers of '*Macbeth*'.

* * *

A month later, toward the end of the twelfth lesson (they were doing grammar), there was a knock at the door of the flat. Martha was surprised. She had never had a caller as late as ten o'clock at night. She opened the door. A burly man in a grey felt hat, a tweed sports jacket and baggy grey flannels stood there. He had a large round red face. His breath smelt of brandy. He had distant blue eyes. He said:

"You Martha Hart." She said she was.

"I'm a police officer." He indicated his identification card in a leather holder. "I want to see your flat and talk to you." He looked over her shoulder. A passage wall obscured the sitting room from sight. He frowned.

"What do you want?" Her mouth went sour with fright. Her spine prickled in terror. She could hardly get the words out.

"Never you mind for the moment, lady. Jus' you come inside with me . . ." He moved in brusquely, and she had to step aside.

Amos sat still as a carved image on the Mexican rug that covered the divan. The policeman showed no surprise at his presence. He simply said: "Where's your pass?"

Amos produced a brown folder and stared at the wall.

"No special?" said the policeman after paging through.

"No," replied Amos.

"Right. You're in a white area after curfew. You got to have

a special for that. Right." He called into the passage, and an African constable in khaki and a topee helmet appeared.

"What are you doing . . .? Where are you taking him . . .? You can't . . ." She felt as if she were falling in a dream.

"Arrested. Native Urban Areas Act. Pass laws."

"But he's my friend . . . he comes here for lessons! You can't . . ." Her voice trembled. She followed Amos to the door.

"You just stay here lady. I want to have a little talk to you."

Helplessly she watched Amos taken away.

At the door they glanced into each other's eyes. She read his bitterness. His stare was hard and fierce. She wanted to plead forgiveness, as if her's was the responsibility for disappointment and humiliation. She felt ashamed, as if this violent incursion was just retribution for a betrayal, a false pretence on her part. Perhaps she had brought him to the flat for the very reason that the policeman took him away: that he was black, not that she loved him or even liked him; rather that she was obscenely intrigued by her own ignorance of his kind of mind and his kind of body. The door closed.

The policeman sniffed the air and walked round the room examining occasional tables, the writing desk. On the white enamelled mantlepiece he noticed two rings of light brown liquid. He touched one and smelt his finger. He turned on her and breathed a heavy sign, a sad sigh, redolent of the strain of responsibility which a man in his position had to bear. He looked under the divan cover. He withdrew two sherry glasses. He smelt the dregs.

"Sherry?" She didn't reply.

"Give him liquor?"

"What right have you . . ." Anger had broken through the dry ice of fear at last. "You can't come in here like this! You . . . where's your warrant?"

"Don't need a warrant. Criminal Laws Amendment Act. Suspicion that a crime has or is being committed on the premises. English aren't you? Nobody tell you what you're doing? People come over here interfering, causing trouble. He's a native. A kaffir." He emphasised the last as if to add precision to his meaning. He was silent and eyed her coldly.

"Funny place to keep glasses. Under the bed. What else do you keep under the bed?"

"Shut up!"

"All right lady. You'd better come with me. I'm arresting

you under the Liquor Act. Supplying intoxicating wines and spirits to natives."

Her knees shook, her hands trembled, her heart pounded in her mouth. Fear, anger, shame and a sense of violent outrage melted together into a fierce distillation that made her head reel. She protested, she gabbled, she stamped round the room. She could have flown at his thick red throat or bolted down the stairs to escape the monstrous oppression of his presence and the powers of law and state that loomed behind him. He waited till she had calmed down, and with the comforting assurance that she could phone for a lawyer from the police station, he accompanied her to the lift. Downstairs an American Ford sedan was parked in the road. Amos sat in the back with the African constable, and Martha in the front with the white detective.

* * *

They appeared at separate trials in the Magistrate's Court. Amos got two pounds or ten days for an offence against the pass laws. The Crown led no evidence except for the detective's statement, and Amos pleaded guilty. It was quick and cheaper that way. It was routine. Hundreds of cases of this nature passed through the court every week. Everyone pleaded guilty.

Martha's case was more lengthy. There were witnesses, examinations and cross-examinations. The caretaker of City Heights stated that she had seen a native visit the accused's flat on numerous occasions over the previous month. She didn't like that sort of thing. It gave the building a bad name. She reported the matter to the agents who advised the owners, who informed the police who took action on the night of the 25th in the person of Detective-Sergeant J. J. van Tonder. Giving evidence, van Tonder told the court that he found the two of them alone (there was a murmer in the crowded gallery), and sherry glasses under the bed. How did he know it was sherry? asked the defence counsel. He smelt it was sherry. Had he seen them drinking? No. Could she not have been drinking with another person before the arrival of the native? She could. What grounds, then, did the police have for assuming that an offence had taken place? Innocent people didn't hide glasses. But, replied counsel, innocent people, fearing a misconstruction of the very kind that the police were making, might hide glasses in a moment of panic. Detective-Sergeant van Tonder replied that there could have been no fear, because the accused

admitted at the police station that she didn't even know it was against the law to give liquor to natives. What about the native himself? He could have panicked. He knew. The policeman had no answer to this, and defence counsel sat down triumphantly.

Examined, Martha said she was a citizen of the United Kingdom and had been in the country eight months. She admitted, hesitantly, that she was not fully aware of social conditions and laws in the country. She was giving English lessons to the native.

Then came the cross-examination by the prosecutor. He had one question to ask. Did she say to Detective-Sergeant van Tonder going down to the station that she thought it was a monstrous law and was glad to break it? Defence counsel jumped up. The Magistrate refused an objection. The courtroom strained its ears.

Martha considered. The previous day she believed she had said she "*would have been*" not "*was*" glad to break it. In private consultation in his chambers, defence counsel had advised her to keep to this statement in court if questioned.

She looked round at the men who stared at her. She couldn't remember what she had said to van Tonder. It seemed absurd to have them waiting on the mood of an auxiliary verb—indicative or subjunctive. As if it mattered any more. As if anything mattered. She glanced out of the window above the magistrate's head. The sun was pouring through the bottom of the blind. His grey hair was touched with a faint halo of gold.

"I said I was glad to break it." The prosecutor sat down satisfied. Defence counsel swore under his breath.

The magistrate returned that afternoon to give sentence. He found her guilty and fined her twenty pounds or a month suspended for a year. Remarking on the leniency of the sentence, he declared he had taken into account the accused's clean record, good faith and her newness as an immigrant. At the same time he issued a warning that the courts took a serious view of such offences, especially at a time when inter-racial mixing was provoking conflict and the country was racked with the agitation of political trouble-makers, many of them from abroad. On this sober and thought-provoking note, the court rose and reporters hurried back to catch the evening edition.

* * *

Amos was in the corridor. She had not seen him for three

days—since the night of their arrest. He had not been granted bail. She had. His lips were split, swollen, thick. There was a black bruise on his forehead. "They beat you," she said.

"Yes," he replied, "I wanted to tell the magistrate but I didn't." Numb and dazed as she was, there was room for one more blow.

"Why not?" she demanded. His eyes shifted.

"I was afraid."

She wanted to cry but she couldn't. She wanted to take his slender shoulders and kiss his broken mouth, heal his wounds. She could not do it.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It's not your fault," he replied. "Goodbye." He walked away.

He said it finally, conclusively. She knew he would not want to see her again. She wanted to shout at him that he was giving in, giving up. He had betrayed as well.

Outside the court the sun was shining. It blazed its cold gold light on her face. She wept in the light. She wept for loss, for loneliness, for betrayal, for wrong.

* * *

She was lonely in London.

At seven o'clock she drew the flowered curtains of her bed-sitting room and opened the window. In the tombstone-grey light of dawn she watched her breath condense. She didn't care.