

OUT OF THE DARKNESS

ALEX LA GUMA

THE smell of unwashed bodies and sweaty blankets was sharp, and the heat in the cell hung as thick as cotton-wool.

The man on the rope mat beside me turned, grunted and flung a long arm across my face.

"How do you do?" he said, waking up and giggling.

"Very well," I replied soothingly, for he was a little mad.

In the dark other bodies turned, cursed and tried to settle back into perspiring sleep.

"Did Joey bring the eggs?"

I could make out the dim shapeless bulge of his body curled up on the mat. He had entered the seventh of his ten-year sentence for culpable homicide, and being shut up so long had unhinged him somewhat. He was neither staring mad nor violent. His insanity was of a gentle quality which came in spells. It was then that he would talk. Otherwise he was clamped up and retired, like a snail withdrawn into its shell. He was friendly enough, but it was the friendliness of a man on the other side of a peep-hole.

To the rest of the inmates he was known as Ou Kakkelak, Old Cockroach, and was either the butt of their depraved humour or completely ignored. He took everything with a gentle smile. From parts of his conversations during his spells I gained the impression that he was an educated man and might have been a schoolmaster before he had committed his crime. "Cora," he went on in the dark. "You know, I like that part where Juliet dies over Romeo's body."

From somewhere beyond the high barred window came the steady crunch of boots as a guard passed in the night.

"Is the heat troubling you?" I asked as kindly as I could make it. "It is damn hot, isn't it?" He did not reply. I decided to do a little probing. "You speak of Cora now and then. Who is she?" But he had turned on his side and was asleep again.

In the morning there was the usual shouting and clanging of doors. Blankets were folded; the long lines of convicts streamed down to the yards. The guards stood by, lashing out with leather belts.

"Spring bliksems! Come on, you black bastards!"

We squatted, packed into the cement yard, and breakfasted on mealie meal and black bitter coffee. Old Cockroach sat near me, smiling his gentle, vacant smile and wolfing his food.

I saw him again when we were locked up after supper. He sank down in his place beside me. Around us secret cigarettes were emerging, the primitive flint and steel contraptions were struck, and smoke drifted up from behind cupped fingers. Figures in washed out red shirts and canvas shorts packed the floor of the cell.

"Here we are," Old Cockroach said and giggled at me. "The wreckage which mankind, on its onward march, left behind."

"Well," I answered, smiling at him. "Perhaps its better to say that we are the results of mankind's imperfections."

"Perhaps. Perhaps. I wonder where Joey is tonight." He sat with his knees drawn up and his long arms clasped about his shins, gazing vacantly about at the faces around him. "Ah, there he is now."

I looked and said, "That's Smiley Abrams. Remember? That's not Joey. That's Smiley Abrams."

"Oh, ja. He's here for murder. I believe he's killed three people in his lifetime. They got him for the last one. An ape-man roaming a jungle. Here he is king. In a cave the cave-man is king."

He fell silent again. Around us conversation took the form of a low muttering that formed a ragged buzzing. I sat with my back against the concrete wall and looked at Old Cockroach. He was tall and thin and bony, folded up now like a carpenter's ruler. His skin was as dark as burnt leather, and he had slightly negroid features and kinky hair going grey, close to his skull, like a tight-fitting cap.

"This place is like an oven," I said, trying to build up another conversation.

"Cora," he rambled. "I think——"

"She'll turn up on visiting day," I told him, although I knew she would not, whoever she was, because nobody had ever visited him for as long as I had been in. I began to wish I could learn more about him.

From outside came the scrape and thump of boots on the stone staircase. Steel gratings clanged like boilers being opened and closed. Silence fell in the stone caserne with the finality of

sound on a radio being switched off. Cigarettes were killed and carefully concealed, and each man retreated quickly within himself and looked dumb.

Through the peep-hole in the heavy, studded door a voice trumpeted angrily. "Hou julle bekke! Shut your filthy mouths, you bastards."

The silence remained inside; a cautious, discreet silence which hung like a veil while the gratings clanged and the footsteps receded. When they had faded completely, the veil was lifted slowly and carefully as the broken murmurs came out of hiding.

Smiley Abrams climbed to his feet, kicked a pathway through the sprawling humanity around him and plodded deliberately towards the door. His great shoulders hunched under the torn red shirt. He hawked and spat straight onto the door and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. Then he turned and stalked back along the pathway to his place.

"Just a warning," Old Cockroach smiled. "No, not meant for those 'corpies'. He can't afford to be hard-case with them. That was really meant for us all. The ape must make it known that he is still king of the jungle, even if the elephant is bigger than he is."

The sun faded beyond the barred windows like lights being dimmed in a theatre. It had become hot again in the caserne, and from the bucket latrine came the sharp, acid smell of ammonia. Old Cockroach lay back on his mat and pulled the thin blanket up to his waist. He did not seem to feel the heat, but just lay there, calmly gazing at the dim bulb in the white-washed stone ceiling. It was as if he had drawn an invisible armour around himself.

"Have you any family, old man?" I asked, gently attacking the armour.

"Huh?" He looked blank and then smiled softly at me.

"A man's got to have somebody. People." But the armour was tightly strapped and riveted.

The next night started much the same. The heat was overpowering, and the stench of bodies increased quickly. Men fought and clawed around the water buckets, snarling like jackals around their carrion. The cave-man, Smiley Abrams, hurled men from the centre of the turmoil, growling and snapping at his cringing subjects. A man rose to challenge him. A great, clubbed fist drew back and then struck with the sound of a pick-handle against a pumpkin. The rebel went

down like a stricken ox and lay still, to be trampled by the others.

"A slave has revolted," Old Cockroach observed in a voice as gentle as the fall of dust. "Do you know that the whole of mankind's history consists of a series of revolutions?"

"You're an educated man, Old Cockroach," I said. "You don't belong here. How did you come to kill anybody? If you don't mind me asking."

"I used to be a schoolmaster," he replied, confirming my old suspicion. Then his mind wandered again, and he murmured, "I hope Joey brings that book he borrowed last week. Treasure Island. Have you ever read Treasure Island?"

"Yes. Long ago, when I was a pikkie."

The brawl around the water buckets had subsided since they had both been emptied. There would be no water for the rest of the night. Men sat around, hunched stark naked under the light, exploring their clothes and blankets for lice. The cracking of the vermin between thumbnails sounded like snapping twigs. My own body was slippery with sweat.

It was no better when the light was turned off. The cloying heat and the stench of the latrine seemed to take advantage of the darkness. Old Cockroach had settled down on his blankets and I could hear him scratching himself. I was doing the same, and sleep became impossible. From all around us grunts, curses and tiny cries came like suppressed voices out of hell.

". . . Cora," Old Cockroach's voice came out of the dark, quiet as a trickle of sweat. "Cora."

"Take it easy, old man," I murmured.

"Oh, you're not Cora. . . ."

"Nay, man. Sorry, though."

Silence.

I decided to probe a little more. "By the way, who is Cora?"

Silence. Then he said, "Hullo, Joey. I'm glad you've come. I'll tell you a story. Would you like to listen to a story?"

"Okay. That would be fine."

"Alright, then. It was a long time ago. A very long time ago, I think. I was in love with her. You don't think this is going to be a silly story, do you?"

"Certainly not."

"I was a teacher at a junior school and was doing a varsity

course in my spare time. And I was in love with Cora. She was beautiful. Really beautiful. Her skin was soft and smooth and the colour of rich cream. She was almost white, you see. I was in love with her. We had grown up together in Dublin Street in Woodstock, and I think I must have been in love with her as long as I can remember.

"I became a schoolmaster. We were going to be married, and I worked hard because I wanted her to have everything that would make her happy once we were married."

He was silent again while the sounds of sleep went on around us. When he went on his voice had taken on a dullness. "Then she began to find that she could pass as white. She could pass as white, and I was black. She began to go out to white places, bioscopes, cafés. Places where I couldn't take her. She met white people who thought she was really white, and they invited her out to their homes. She went to parties and dances. She drifted away from me, but I kept on loving her.

"I talked to her, pleaded with her. But she wouldn't take any notice of what I said. I became angry. I wept. I raved. Can you imagine how much I loved her? I grovelled. I was prepared to lose my entire self-respect just to keep her. But it wasn't of any use. She said I was selfish and trying to deny her the good things of life. The good things of life. I would have given anything I *could*. And she said I was denying her the good things of life.

"In the end she turned on me. She told me to go to hell. She slapped my face and called me a black nigger. A black nigger."

"Then you lost you head and killed her," I said quietly. "That's why you're here now."

"Oh, no," Old Cockroach answered. "I could never have done that to Cora. I did lose my head, but it was Joey whom I killed. He said I was a damn fool for going off over a damn, play-white bitch. So I hit him, and he cracked his skull on something. Ah, here's Joey now. Hullo, Joey. I hope you've brought my book. . . ."