

THE HEADMASTER'S BOOKS

JOHN TANN

HEADMASTER Maleketsi had twenty-four books, in addition to his pocket Bible and the other school text-books. The twenty-four books were Headmaster Maleketsi's own, and he had never seen another man with so many books of his own—not in any of the three schools near Mokolong where he had taught, or in the Mokolong Mission, ten miles away, where he had himself studied year after year until eventually he had passed his standard six certificate.

"I am very proud of my books," Headmaster Maleketsi would often say, and he said so now to his favourite pupil, Tall Kgloma, after Tall Kgloma had finished counting the books for himself. "It is not every boy at this school whom I would permit to handle my books as you have just done, Kgloma."

"Surely there is no Headmaster as wise as you in the whole of Mokolong, sir," replied Tall Kgloma. "For there is certainly none who has so many books of his own. Oh! sir,"—the boy wriggled with excitement—"Never have I seen books in such bright covers, and never have I seen books whose pages are so clean inside that a person needs to wash his hands before he touches them. It must be a task indeed to keep such books."

Tall Kgloma had made his speech, and he peeped up to see if his words had pleased the Headmaster. They had, and Tall Kgloma received a great favour. On any afternoon, the Headmaster said, when school was over, after he had washed his hands, Tall Kgloma might come into the Headmaster's room and dust the books. If he were very careful, he would be shown by the Headmaster how the covers were made, and he could then repair those of the covers which had become torn during their many years in the Headmaster's possession. The Headmaster had recently received some illustrated magazines of shiny paper from a relation of his in town, and, as Tall Kgloma could see, such things made excellent covers for the Headmaster's twenty-four books.

After that day Tall Kgloma was very happy. He spent hours squatting in front of the two cut-open paraffin tins in which the Headmaster kept his books. He dusted the books every day, handling them very carefully, and he made three new covers which the Headmaster himself wrapped round the outside of the

books. Sometimes, at first, Tall Kgloma used to unwrap the books and open them, to wonder at the cleanness of their pages and marvel at the freshness of their print. Then one day, to his horror, a page fell out of a book as he was unwrapping it. Fortunately the Headmaster was out of the room at the time, and Tall Kgloma was able to stick the page back with a little of some birdlime one of his friends had given him. From then on Tall Kgloma never opened any of the books, and he noticed after a while that the Headmaster never opened any either. Tall Kgloma wondered a little at this until he realised that, of course, the Headmaster must have read all the books long ago and the knowledge would surely be in his head. From the day he came to this conclusion Tall Kgloma regarded the Headmaster with a respect that came very near to worship.

In spring the Headmaster—for he was an old man—fell sick with a chill. Though he was ill and in bed the Headmaster gave orders that Tall Kgloma should continue to keep the books clean and in order, and for days the boy did his job in an awed silence. Then, because it was time to register the pupils for their end-of-the-year examinations, the Headmaster was up and about again. One of the first things he did was to praise Tall Kgloma for having kept his books so well.

“Not many boys would work in a room where a man lay sick, and work with the sick man’s things,” said the Headmaster. “I will reward you. The optional subject which you write this year shall be whatever subject you yourself shall choose. I will not choose for you as I do for the other pupils.” He gave Tall Kgloma a long list of all the subjects that could be written in this examination, and Tall Kgloma took the list outside where he spent many hours studying it in the bright sunlight of those hot days.

The day Tall Kgloma brought the list of subjects back to the Headmaster he found the Headmaster a little tired. But, when Tall Kgloma said that he wished the optional subject for his examination to be “BOOK-KEEPING I”, the Headmaster smiled and wrote Tall Kgloma’s name on the list.

“This will be a wonderful thing, Kgloma, for no pupil from this school has ever taken the examination of book-keeping before. I will write to the Department so that we know what work you must prepare for it.”

Tall Kgloma never heard what the result of the Headmaster’s letter to the Department was, for, though he had been about his work, the Headmaster had not been well. His chill became a

fever which dragged him to his bed in agony. Within a week of his writing the name of his first Book-keeping pupil in the examination entries the old man was dead.

For many weeks the school was in confusion. A white man from the Government came and took away the school register and with it a great pile of the Headmaster's papers. He also locked up all the schoolbooks in a great cupboard, and then he went away. No one could do any work except Tall Kgloma, and it was very difficult for him. The Headmaster's brothers had come from twenty miles the other side of Mokolong to bury him, and they stayed for two weeks deciding how his property should be divided. After a while they would not let Tall Kgloma into the hut where the books were kept because, they said, the boy only went in to steal. They were very scornful old men, and when after two weeks a white policeman came and told them that the hut and the furniture in it belonged to the Government they were more scornful still. Finally the policeman ordered them to return to their own homes by the following morning.

That night the brothers must have set the Headmaster's hut on fire. Tall Kgloma woke and ran there, thinking only of the books. The people crowded near the burning hut were in confusion: some were in favour of letting the dead man's hut burn, as was traditional; others, until it was pointed out to them that the hut was Government property, were in favour of trying to put the fire out. A man from one of the factions grabbed Tall Kgloma and prevented him from running into the flames.

The day after the fire, Tall Kgloma scraped among the ashes and found the bent and blackened pieces of paraffin tin. Under them were thick packs of burnt paper which had been books. To his joy he found that in the centre of three of the packs were cores of paper which had not been burnt up. Delighted, he carefully scraped the charred edges away and bound the brown, irregular chunks of pages into tight little packets. When he had done this Tall Kgloma felt enormously pleased, for he was sure that no-one who kept books had ever so successfully dealt with such a disaster.

A month after the Headmaster's death the New Headmaster arrived. He was a young man, a stranger to the district though he spoke their language, for he had been born in town, where he had just finished his teacher-training. The New Headmaster attended the schoolhouse every morning to mark the register, but then he would often leave two or three of the senior boys

in charge and go off to visit the unmarried girls of the neighbourhood. Once, while he was walking about the schoolroom after hearing some lessons, the New Headmaster came upon Tall Kgloma covering one of the packets of half-burnt pages of book with some shiny new paper.

"What are you doing, Kgloma?" asked the New Headmaster.

"Book-keeping, sir," said Tall Kgloma, and showed his work.

The New Headmaster looked very carefully at the packet, and when he saw what it was he laughed for quite a long time. Then he saw the pain and fear in the boy's face and stopped laughing, patted Tall Kgloma on the shoulder, and said more quietly: "Well done, Kgloma, well done. Yes, you are a fine book-keeper, indeed! Go on, boy, go on."

Towards the time of the examinations the New Headmaster spent more hours in the schoolroom, telling the boys how the examinations would be, and how a white man from the Government would come to watch them write, and how there was no need to be afraid of writing in front of the white man, but that on no account must they ask him a question, or speak to him except in salutation, for he was a very important white man who would surely fail anyone who bothered him with questions.

When the examinations came the New Headmaster always kept close to the white man to see that no one would disgrace the school by asking foolish questions. All went well until the day of the optional subject, which was the last day.

On the day of his optional Book-keeping examination Tall Kgloma went into the schoolroom with the others, all very fearful of the white man, and took his pencil and wrote his name on the handsome cover of the answer-book in front of him. Then Tall Kgloma was given his examination paper. He could not understand one word of the examination paper, and after a little while Tall Kgloma could bear it no longer. He stood up, burst into tears, and ran from the room.

"What is all this about?" the white examiner asked the New Headmaster, going to Kgloma's desk and finding there the knife, the strips of coloured paper, the string, and the chunk of birdlime which Tall Kgloma had brought in for his book-keeping examination.

"Oh," said the New Headmaster, very embarrassed, "Oh, that is just a poor boy, sir. He is very foolish, sir. Please take no notice of him."

The New Headmaster's request was fully complied with.