

A MANNER OF SPEAKING

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THE boy entered the small cottage housing the post office through the door marked "Non-Europeans Only—Alleen Nie-Blankes." Five steps, and he was at the counter. He stood to the left of it, near the six-foot wooden partition that divided the counter and this side of the cottage from the "Europeans Only—Alleen Blankes" bigger half of the building. He looked through the brass grille running lengthwise down the middle of the varnished counter. The bespectacled telephone exchange operator sat before her switchboard in the nearest corner reading a novel and slowly passing the fingers of her left hand through her curly, steel-grey hair. A younger woman, the Post Mistress, was looking out of a barred window, humming a liedjie. There was nobody else in the one-room cottage.

After a minute, he coughed. The young woman turned her head slowly. Her eyes narrowed as she recognized him. She looked out of the window again. He coughed louder.

"Ja! What do you want?" She asked, without looking at him.

"Two tuppence stamps, please."

She took the four steps towards the counter slowly, hands on broad hips and head stuck out ahead of the body. She stood across the counter from him, her grey eyes boring into his.

"Say 'Missus'," she said quietly.

The middle-aged woman looked up from her novel and studied the two.

He remained silent.

"If you don't say 'Missus', you're not getting your stamps!"

"Look, mevrou, all I want is two tuppence stamps. I've said 'please', and that should be enough."

"Say 'Missus'—or get out!"

He stared back for a moment, shrugged his shoulders, and strolled out.

"That's the trouble with these Kaffers who go to school. They become cheeky," the middle-aged woman said in a resigned voice. She went back to her novel.

The younger woman prowled the length of the counter.

"I'm going to teach that short-nose manners, if that's the last thing I do here. I won't sell him stamps or anything till he calls me 'Missus'!"

An eight-year-old boy padded into the tiny room on dusty, too-large feet. He peered over the counter at the two women. He put his right hand on the counter, on a level with his eyes. The hand was clutching a sweaty sixpenny piece.

"Two two-penny stamps, asseblief Missus!" he piped.

After one more walk down the counter, the young woman served the boy. The boy walked out. And then she heard a sardonic laugh from outside the door. She quickly leaned over the counter, then ran to the "Alleen Blankes" half and looked out of the big, barred and dusty windows. She saw the "cheeky Kaffer", unusually clean for an African in a country dorp, in his blue gabardine trousers and checked shirt, walk slowly past the window, round the corner and onto the veranda; past the "Alleen Blankes" door. He was licking stamps onto two envelopes which he pushed into the letter box. Then he climbed onto a shiny bicycle and rode away, whistling.

"That Kaffer thinks he's clever! You know what he did, Tant? He sent that little piccanin in here to buy the stamps for him! If I could be sure which are his letters, I'd get them out and—and—and tear them up!"

"You'd only get into trouble, Katie!"

Fifteen minutes and two miles later, James climbed off the bicycle, leaned it against a shady tree, entered a mud-walled yard, across the courtyard from the big house. He leaned against the door.

His sister, busy at the stove, looked round and then went back to her work. "What are you so happy about?" she asked.

He laughed. "Looks like this is going to be another of those holidays! Had another staring match with that girl at the post office. Wants me to call her 'Missus'—*Sé 'Missus', jong!*" he mimicked.

"You better be careful, Jimmy. You seem to be losing touch. This isn't Jo'burg. This is still the same Olifantshoek you grew up in. And here you don't argue with white people. You can get into serious trouble."

"I don't care where it is; but I'm not going to call anybody 'Baas' or 'Missus'—I wouldn't even say it to my bo—the man I work for!"

"Don't be too sure of yourself, Jimmy. You're still a child—seventeen is not much."

"Oh, well! I suppose I might say it to a cop—when I'm in trouble. But that girl—why, she isn't even as old as you are, sissie. And I don't work for her, her father or her brother! In fact, she works for me—she's a public servant, isn't she?"

"All right, Jimmy; you keep on being a Jo'burg clever and you'll see." She turned round to look at him.

Two days later a tall, stout man, his woolly hair almost completely white, walked under the "Alleen Nie-Blankes" sign at the post office. He leaned against the varnished counter, his face close to the brass grille. He beamed at the middle-aged woman: "Good morning, Missus!" his voice boomed. And when the younger woman came into view: "Good morning, Nonnie!"

"Good morning, Johannes," the middle-aged woman said, a patronising smile on her wrinkled face. "How does it go on the lands?"

"Oh, not enough rain, Missus! This is going to be a bad year!"

"Ag, you're becoming a bloody Jew! You get fatter and richer every year—and you complain more about the crops every year."

"You know, Johannes," the young woman said brightly, "you're a good kaffer. Everybody speaks well of you. But your son! You better teach him some manners or there'll be trouble! Since you sent him away to school he's become very cheeky!"

The woolly head moved from side to side. "What has James done? He's a good boy."

"If he's a good boy, then he must call me 'Missus'. I'm not ever going to serve him in here until he learns some manners!"

"Ag, Nonnie!" the big man chuckled. "What can I teach him? I'm an ignorant old man who only knows how to plant mealies and castrate bulls. But he—he is getting educated! At school they teach him to call people 'Meneer', 'Mevrou', 'Mejevrou' and such things. I never went to college and don't know about such things—so you are 'Nonnie' to me, and the ou vrou is 'Missus'! That's how I was taught."

"Well, then that school is teaching him the wrong things!"

"Ah! But it is a white man, he tells me, who is teaching them your language! You are the people who brought us education!"

"Ag, you're getting weak in the head, Johannes. You're speaking like a communist! What do you want?"

On Saturday morning, all the white farmers in the district were gathered, big-boned, khaki-clad, red-faced, loud-spoken, in front of the corrugated-iron shop across the street from the post office. The most important corner in Olifantshoek. They leaned against their jeeps, Land Rovers, pick-up trucks and cars. They talked, waiting for their slow-moving, broad-beamed women, in their black silk dresses and tired straw hats. They were haggling with the two Indians inside the overcrowded shop that sold everything except a complete tractor or truck—they had these in pieces. The shop, the post office, the police station round the corner, the railway siding and the manual-operated petrol pump in front of the store made up Olifantshoek. Saturday morning was shopping day. Everybody would hang around, waiting for the morning train from Middelburg.

Thirty minutes after it left, they would crowd around the veranda of the post office opening their green post office boxes to collect their mail. During the week this task was relegated to their more intelligent labourers. But Saturday was a social occasion.

Katrina, the Post Mistress, was setting up her rubber stamps in preparation for the mail; while talking and giggling with the four broad-shouldered young men who were "jolling" her from behind the brass grille on the "Alleen Blankes" bigger half of the post office. The few Africans on the other side of the partition had to wait longer than usual to be served.

James made two slow circles on his bicycle between the post office and the store. Then, stepping hard on the right pedal, he spun the back wheel in the loose earth, raising a cloud of dust. He had to brake and pivot the bicycle on his left foot to stop it inches away from the big, dusty thorn bush near the "Alleen Nie-Blankes" post office entrance.

"What's that town kaffer doing here?" one of the farmers said to the man leaning next to him against a pick-up truck. Any tidily dressed black man or woman was a "town kaffer."

"No town kaffer, that. It's old Johannes' son. Goes to school in Johannesburg or somewhere. Dresses like a white boy—and seems to think he's a white boy."

"Next time he makes dust around here, I'll use my sjambok on him."

"His father is a good kaffer. Makes too much money, that's all."

James was in a jolly mood. He walked into the post office,

pushing his cloth cap back on his head. He nodded to the two bare-footed boys waiting at the counter and leaned on the counter with his arms crossed on it. Katrina came giggling into view from the other half, walked to the open wall safe near the telephone exchange, and lifted out a registered letter. As she turned back, she faced the three black faces peering at her from behind the brass grille. The smile came off her face.

"And what do you want?" she said sharply, looking at James.

"Good morning, mevrou!" he answered lightly. "I'd like to buy a money order."

She snorted and disappeared behind the partition. A minute later she was back. Without looking at him she served the two other boys. Then she turned to him.

"What did you say?"

"A money order for twelve and sixpence, please!"

"Say 'Missus!'" she hissed.

He laughed.

"Are you laughing at me?"

"But why should I call you 'Missus'? You aren't married, are you? I don't see a ring on your finger!"

Her face reddened and her eyes dilated.

"You bloody, cheeky kaffer! What do you think you are, hey? Insulting me—a white woman! What do you think you are!"

"Now, mevrou! Don't get angry——"

"Who's that kaffer insulting you, Katie?" a youthful bass growled from the other side of the partition. "He wants to get a hiding."

"Don't just stand there and talk, Gert! Come *donder* him! Come quick—he's running out!"

James had no time to get his bicycle. When he looked out of the door, three of the young men who had been "jolling" the Post Mistress erupted round the corner from the "Alleen Blankes" entrance. James dodged round the thorn bush, jumped a smaller one, and came out onto the dusty street. He didn't stop to think of directions, he ran straight ahead, crossing the street, passing the crowd of farmers and shop on his right, running up the street that went past the police station a hundred yards further on.

Katrina was at the door of the post office, shouting at the three young men: "Catch the swine! Catch the dog! *Donder* the bloody kaffer!"

The farmers, their wives and the Africans milling round the shop all looked round in surprise at the hysterical woman, and then at the four runners.

“What’s going on here!” one of the farmers shouted.

The three farmers’ sons spread out in the street as they ran after James. They were wearing heavy army surplus boots; but these did not seem to impede their running. James ran, pumping his arms and head. The dust-thick road ahead was clear—except for a white police constable slowly riding a bicycle towards him.

“Catch him, Jannie!” one of the pursuers shouted at the constable.

The young policeman jumped off his bicycle and threw it to the ground. He jumped into the middle of the street and stood there, legs apart and his arms stretched wide open. James ran straight at him. When he was almost on the policeman, he brought up his right fist as if to strike him. The policeman’s hands jerked together to cover his face—and James veered sharply to the right and ran past him.

“Jou dom-kop!” one of the pursuers shouted at the constable.

The young policeman, turning red with anger and shame, swivelled round, his fingers fumbling at the flap of his holster. He jerked out the big, black pistol as the three men came abreast of him. He started running with them.

“Stand! Stand still, you kaffer! Stand or I’ll shoot you!”

“Shoot him in the leg, you fool!”

James crouched down, veering to the bush-thick side of the road on his right.

The constable stopped and fired a shot above James’s head.

“Don’t play, man! Shoot the bloody bastard!”

James almost tripped when he heard the shot. He was near the bushes edging the road and, after a quick glance back, he dived into an opening, landing on his hands and knees.

As he scrambled to his feet, wiping his dusty, sweat-streaked face with the back of his hand, he heard one of his pursuers shouting: “There he is behind that bush, Jannie! Get him!”

James blundered into a bush ahead of him.

The young constable aimed quickly and carefully. He fired three quick shots, moving the gun an inch to the right with every shot. With the third shot, there was a scream from the bushes.