

printed for general use, that the West German youth were allowed to study the past, including their country's immediate past, again.⁹ The new books and methods of teaching would, it was hoped, rid the country of the myths and legends that were so rife in the 1930's in Germany.¹⁰ History had now come to serve the new vision of mankind as one as exemplified by the founding of the U.N.O.

The past must be studied so that we may discern what factors were conducive to division amongst nations and what made for international understanding. I

should say that in the teaching of history it becomes our moral duty to stress the latter and expose and minimise the former. Thus international goodwill and peace should be our goals and not chauvinism, nationalism, bigotry, isolationism which very often harbour the germs of war. ●

⁹ F. A. van Jaarsveld: article cited, p. 17.

¹⁰ Occasionally, however, one still hears of outbreaks of anti-semitism in West Germany. This is not altogether surprising, for, many Germans who had served under Hitler now hold high official posts in West Germany.

The Mistake

A Story

JAMES MATTHEWS

FRIDAY EVENING AND the streets of District Six were filled with people glad that the work-day week was at an end and two days of muscle-relieving to come. They showed their appreciation in many ways and some had started earlier than others. Robbie Stevens was one of the early ones. He was drunk, pleasantly so, and as he rocked on his heels he looked at the world with a benevolence he would not accord it otherwise. For the moment this world consisted of a narrow, slum street with houses huddled together and all in need of a covering of paint to hide the exposed bricks where the plaster had crumbled under the onslaught of many a winter's rain. Two inhabitants of his world approached him—a small boy and a large dog. The boy stuck out his tongue at him and the dog urinated on his trousers in passing. He shrugged off both philosophically, his benevolence undiminished.

"Where issa moon tonight?" He sang, his voice loud and unmelodious.

A hawker, homeward bound, pulled his barrow to a halt next to him.

"How's it forra dop?" the hawker asked, voice hopeful. Robbie Stevens shook his head regretfully. "I'm sorry, ou pellië. Die Joep is klaar. Hard lines."

"Take some fruit home forra merrum and die kids." The hawker tried another line. "I give it to you cheap, special price. Luvly bananas. Sixteen forra bob. You can't go wrong with bananas."

More out of sympathy than need he exchanged his shilling for a parcel of bananas and the hawker pushed on with his barrow.

He stripped a banana, shoved it into his mouth, and with two swift bites swallowed it. He wiped his mouth clean with the sleeve of his jacket and continued his lament of love lost.

"'Cause I'm so blue without you."

He stopped as two old women drew abreast. They were dressed in black from head to foot and their jaws

worked industriously.

Their bonnets were of dark straw, decorated with withered blossoms, and their two-piece costumes no longer fashionable. Shoes with short, squat heels, the front long-pointed, covered their feet. The v of their necks, the only splash of colour, held identical blue scarves, each adorned with an old-fashioned cameo brooch the size of a pigeon's egg.

"Good evening, mums. What's up?" he asked them, head held quizzically.

They walked on, ignoring him, leaving behind a smell of musty cupboards tempered with the fragrance of peppermint drops. "Daai's mossie nice nie, mums" he rebuked them, adding, "And I was going to give you a banana."

They crossed the street and stopped at a door. Pausing for an instant, they tugged and jabbed at their clothing then entered. Before the door swung shut on them Robbie Stevens heard the sound of people singing. The tune sounded vaguely familiar. He recognised it. As he muttered the words of the hymn his tongue played him false and the words tumbled incoherently over each other.

AS IF THEIR ENTRY DECIDED the issue, he swayed across the street and knocked at the door. His knocking was longer and louder than he intended and when the door opened he was with his fist upraised, surprise etched on his features. "Ja, wat wil jy hê?" He thrust the parcel of bananas at her and lunged past without replying.

From a room nearest the door swelled a volume of sound and relayed by the people lining the passage to those in the kitchen.

Pressing forward he had a glimpse, over the many heads in front of him, of a brown, polished coffin with shiny, brass handles twinkling in the lamplight.

Those he pressed upon turned their heads and looked with indignation at his crumpled clothing. The rent in his shirt and the jacket flaked with dried vomit. His hair awry, eyes bloodshot, and his thick, coffee-coloured lips aslacked, revealing an inner-lining pink like the inside of a shell. They parted and he was in front. He was not cowed by the affronted respectability of those seated around the coffin.

'Let the water and the blood,

From their riven side had flowed.'

The voices were a mixed lot. Broken-down basses, quavery sopranos, and a few young tenors serving as a rallying force. He joined in, his voice out of key on the high notes.

The singing stopped and he shuffled forward to peer

JAMES MATTHEWS has had a collection of short stories published in Sweden, others in anthologies, and a first novel accepted for publication.

into the coffin. The body—except for the face and upper portion of the chest on which the hands lay folded—was hidden underneath a layer of flowers. The scalp was shaved clean and below the hairline, if there had been one, two dark eyebrows were raised, daring him to respond to the anytime-awakening set of the face.

“Just like! You too, ou pellic! We can do what we want but we can’t run away from it, and in the end it will take us all.” He sniffed audibly and took another shilling from his pocket, placing it in the saucer set aside for the purpose. As he turned, his sleeve knocked the saucer to the floor and the coins were sent spinning.

“Daar’s nou nonsense,” he said, dropping to his knees to pick up the money nearest to him. As he straightened, he bumped against the table on which the coffin rested. The coffin shifted alarmingly and people jumped from their chairs to rush across the room with restraining hands.

He stared at them in bewilderment as they surged around. “Who is he?” . . . “Where did he come from?” . . . “What’s he doing here?” Voices clamouring, they propelled him towards the door.

From their seats in the corner, the two old women watched the proceedings with unblinking eyes—the hurried champing of their jaws was the only sign of their interest.

“I know him . . .” He started. Then drunken tears tottered down his cheeks. His display of emotion brought further disapproval and he was hastily shoved into the passage, away from the mourners inside who sat with professional decorum.

He tried again. “But you don’t understand.” No one stirred. Finding no assurance in the backs presented him, he walked down the passage towards the kitchen.

TWO YOUTHS, WHO HAD gleefully watched his performance, waited until he was level with them one pushed out a leg while the other shoved him in the small of his back to send him sprawling into the kitchen. Suppressing their laughter they squirmed into the protective cover of the people grouped around the entrance of the room containing the coffin.

Five people—four small girls and an old woman—were in the kitchen. At his unorthodox entrance the girls fell into a fit of giggles quickly hushed by a glare from the old woman. She then turned her gaze upon him.

He pulled himself together and sat on a low stool, his neck resting against the wall and his feet stretched out comfortably.

The kitchen table seemed to have given root to a patch of flowers with crushed petals and heads suitably drooped for the occasion. Mounds of greenery were piled at their feet. The fragrance of the blossoms was not fragrant enough to dispel the odour of past suppers—fried fish and cabbage dominating.

The voices were raised in a new hymn and he sought relief in the sound. He sat with a bemused smile on his face as he watched the nimble fingers of the old woman transform a rough, wooden cross into a green symbol of sorrow.

He thought of the many wakes he had been to, accompanied by the one stretched stiff in the coffin inside; the many friends, dead; and always, at the many

wakes, there was the room, upstairs or downstairs, sometimes in the yard; the room where they always met to sit and talk of the one dead; and the many bottles of wine drunk while they talked.

Death, for him, held no terror. It was as inevitable as a shebeen packed on a holiday. He laughed out loud and the old woman raked him with a venom-filled look, all the while holding check on the small girls to prevent another spurt of hilarity.

He recalled the last funeral he had attended. He had turned up at the last moment, not altogether sober, and he had to borrow a tie. To follow a coffin to the graveyards without a tie was, to him, as unthinkable as refusing to share one’s wine.

He had first conveyed his condolence to the sorrowing family before moving to the back room. Then, when the coffin was transferred to the hearse, he took his place, not in one of the cars reserved for those nearest the dead man but in the bus hired from the bus company. Through an upper-deck window, he had traced the familiar journey to the cemetery.

They walked up the red gravel path, little pebbles splattering beneath their feet, past the many graves, some sunken, some freshly heaped, some with crosses aslant and some with cracked tombstones, towards the newly-dug grave.

With unerring instinct he edged into a group with a bottle in their possession. Behind the scanty shelter of some convenient bushes they emptied the bottle of ‘Blossom’. With watery eyes they rejoined the others at the gaping hole. When shovels were passed out, he manfully took one. Loading the shovel heavily, he swung it. The force of his swing pulled him forward and before he could stop himself, he was walking on air. Luckily, the grave was almost filled so that his fall was not far. He got to his knees, head level with rows of shoes, staring up into the horrified faces of the family. From behind them came the braying laughter of his drinking companions.

“MUMS, YOU SHOULD have seen it. I was never so embarrassed. There I was, and below me the coffin. I was lucky some manparra did not start shovelling sand. Then there would have been two bodies buried there in that grave.”

His narrative was received in silence by the old woman whose fingers flew faster as she pinned flowers on to the cross. The rest of his audience was more appreciative. They sat wiggling on their seats, eyes sparkling, and controlling themselves with difficulty.

“Many’s the time the two of us had had a dop together.” He paused so that the old woman would know who he meant, and to make quite sure he pointed a wavering finger in the direction of the front room. “The bars we’ve been to together. The girls we’ve had, and the times spent. He was always a game joeba. And now he’s dead in his coffin.”

“Stop it!” the old woman screamed, “Shut your foul mouth! Have you no respect for the dead, you son of satan? It’s my grand-daughter, sweet child, who is there cold in her coffin while the likes of you walk around talking lies, lies, lies!”

The little girls, freed from the old woman’s restraining eyes, collapsed with wild shrieks of laughter. ●