

The Bench*

[EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION: Perhaps the greatest indignity suffered by Africans under colonial rule was racial discrimination. "Natives" were forced to take second place to their white masters everywhere—in jobs, in schools, in shops, and even on sidewalks. Whenever a white man appeared, Africans were expected to "step aside and make way."]

To be treated like a second-class citizen because of your skin color is degrading, no matter where it happens. But it seems doubly degrading in your own country, on your own continent, and at the hands of foreigners. It was quite natural, then, for African nationalists to make racism a prime target in their attack on colonialism.

"The Bench" is a short story about a young African, Karlie, who becomes aware of the injustice of racial discrimination and decides to do something about it. The story takes place in South Africa, a country infamous for its policy of *apartheid*, or separation of the races. Most colonial regimes were not so oppressive as the South African government, but the awakening experienced by Karlie in the story is not unlike the awakening that took place throughout Africa during the drive for independence.

* Excerpted from "The Bench," by Richard Rive. Reprinted from *An African Treasury*, by Langston Hughes. © 1960 by Langston Hughes. Used by permission of Crown Publishers, Inc.

The author, Richard Rive, is one of South Africa's best-known black writers. Born in 1931 in Cape Town, he was graduated from the University of Cape Town and was at one time the South African hurdling champion. He now teaches English and Latin (and coaches track) at a Cape Town high school.

As you read "The Bench," think of these questions:

① Why was a "perfectly ordinary" bench so important to Karlie?

② Why was Karlie cool and the police "hot?"

③ What would you do if you were in Karlie's place?

"We form an integral part of a complex society, a society in which a vast proportion of the population is denied the very basic right of existence, a society that condemns a man to an inferior position because he has the misfortune to be born black, a society that can only retain its precarious social and economic position at the expense of an enormous oppressed mass!"

... Karlie stared at the two detectives who were busily making shorthand notes of the speeches, then turned to stare back at the speaker.

"It is up to us to challenge the right of any group who willfully and deliberately condemn a fellow group to a servile position. We must challenge the right of any people who see fit to segregate human beings solely on grounds of pigmentation. Your children are denied the rights which are theirs by birth. They are segregated educationally, socially, economically. . . ."

Ah, thought, Karlie, that man knows what he is speaking about. He says I am as good as any other man, even a white

man. That needs much thinking. I wonder if he means I have the right to go to any bioscope [movie], or eat in any restaurant, or that my children can go to a white school. These are dangerous ideas and need much thinking. . . .

Karlie's brow was knitted as he thought. On the platform were many speakers, both white and black, and they were behaving as if there were no differences of color among them. There was a white woman in a blue dress offering Nxeli a cigarette. . . .

These were new things and he, Karlie, had to be careful before he accepted them. But why shouldn't he accept them? He was not a colored man any more, he was a human being. The last speaker said so. He remembered seeing pictures in the newspapers of people who defied laws which relegated them to a particular class, and those people were smiling as they went to prison. This was a queer world.

The speaker continued and Karlie listened intently. He spoke slowly, and his speech was obviously carefully prepared. This is a great man, thought Karlie. . . .

The meeting was almost over when Karlie threaded his way through the crowd. The words of the speakers were still milling through his head. It could never happen in Bietjesvlei. Or could it? The sudden screech of a car pulling to a stop whirled him back to his senses. A white head was thrust angrily through the window.

"Look where you're going, you black bastard!"

Karlie stared dazedly at him. Surely this white man never heard what the speakers had said. He could never have seen the white woman offering Nxeli a cigarette. He could never imagine the white lady shouting those words at him. It would be best to catch a train and think these things over.

He saw the station in a new light. Here was a mass of

human beings, black, white, and some brown like himself. Here they mixed with one another, yet each mistrusted the other with an unnatural fear, each treated the other with suspicion, moved in a narrow, haunted pattern of its own. One must challenge these things, the speaker had said . . . in one's own way. Yet how in one's own way? How was one to challenge? Suddenly it dawned upon him. Here was his challenge! *The bench*. The railway bench with "Europeans Only" neatly painted on it in white. For one moment it symbolized all the misery of the plural South African society.

Here was his challenge to the rights of a man. Here it



This bench for Europeans symbolizes the apartheid system of racial discrimination still practiced in South Africa. Independence brought an end to such practices in the former colonies.

stood. A perfectly ordinary wooden railway bench, like thousands of others in South Africa. His challenge. That bench now had concentrated in it all the evils of a system he could not understand and he felt a victim of. It was the obstacle between himself and humanity. If he sat on it, he was a man. If he was afraid he denied himself membership as a human being in a human society. He almost had visions of righting this pernicious system, if he only sat down on that bench. Here was his chance. He, Karlie, would challenge.

He seemed perfectly calm when he sat down on the bench, but inside his heart was thumping wildly. Two conflicting ideas now throbbed through him. The one said, "I have no right to sit on this bench." The other was the voice of a new religion and said, "Why have I no right to sit on this bench?" The one voice spoke of the past, of the servile position he had occupied on the farm, of his father and his father's father who were born black, lived like blacks, and died like mules. The other voice spoke of new horizons and said, "Karlle, you are a man. You have dared what your father and your father's father would not have dared. You will die like a man."

Karlle took out a cigarette and smoked. Nobody seemed to notice his sitting there. This was an anticlimax. The world still pursued its monotonous way. No voice had shouted, "Karlle has conquered!" He was a normal human being sitting on a bench in a busy station, smoking a cigarette. Or was this his victory: the fact that he was a normal human being? A well-dressed white woman walked down the platform. Would she sit on the bench? Karlle wondered. And then that gnawing voice, "You should stand and let the white woman sit!" Karlle narrowed his eyes and gripped tighter at his cigarette. She swept past him without the slightest twitch of an eyelid and continued walking down the platform. Was

she afraid to challenge—to challenge his right to be a human being? Karlle now felt tired. A third conflicting idea was now creeping in, a compensatory idea which said, "You sit on this bench because you are tired; you are tired, therefore you sit." He would not move because he was tired, or was it because he wanted to sit where he liked? . . .

"Get off this seat!"

Karlle did not hear the gruff voice. . . .

"I said get off the bench, you swine!" Karlle suddenly whipped back to reality. For a moment he was going to jump up, then he remembered who he was and why he was sitting there. He suddenly felt very tired. He looked up slowly into a very red face that stared down at him.

"Get up!" it said. "There are benches down there for you."

Karlle looked up and said nothing. He stared into a pair of sharp, gray cold eyes.

"Can't you hear me speaking to you? You black swine!"

Slowly and deliberately Karlle puffed at the cigarette. This was his test. They both stared at each other, challenged with the eyes, like two boxers, each knowing that they must eventually trade blows yet each afraid to strike first.

"Must I dirty my hands on scum like you?"

Karlle said nothing. To speak would be to break the spell, the supremacy he felt was slowly gaining.

An uneasy silence, then: "I will call a policeman rather than soil my hands on a Hottentot, savage! like you. You can't even open up your black jaw when a white man speaks to you."

Karlle saw the weakness. The white man was afraid to take action himself. He, Karlle, had won the first round of the bench dispute.

A crowd had now collected. . . . Karlle merely puffed on.

"Look at the black ape. That's the worst of giving these kaffirs enough rope."

"I can't understand it. They have their own benches!"

"Don't get up! You have every right to sit there!"

"He'll get up when a policeman comes!"

"I've said before, I've had a native servant once, and a more impertinent . . ."

Karlite sat and heard nothing. Irresolution had *now* turned to determination. Under no condition was he going to get up.

They could do what they liked.

"So this is the fellow, eh! Get up there! Can't you read?"

The policeman was towering over him. Karlite could see the crest on his buttons and the wrinkles in his neck.



As "The Bench" indicates, some whites in South Africa struggle side by side with Africans to eliminate racial discrimination. Here a white woman, Mary Anderson, garlanded in farewell flowers, gives the unity sign as she leaves her friends to serve a prison term for distributing literature advocating the rights of black South Africans.

"What is your name and address? Come on!"

Karlite still maintained his obstinate silence. It took the policeman rather unawares. The crowd was growing every minute.

"You have no right to speak to this man in such a manner!" It was the white lady in the blue dress.

"Mind your own business! I'll ask your help when I need it. It's people like you who make these *kaffirs* think they're as good as white men. Get up, you!" The last remark was addressed to Karlite.

"I insist that you treat him with proper respect."

The policeman turned red.

"This . . . this . . ." He was lost for words.

"Kick up the Hornot if he won't get up!" shouted a spectator. Rudely a white man laid hands on Karlite.

"Get up, you bloody bastard!" Karlite turned to resist, to cling to the bench, his bench. There was more than one man pulling at him. He hit out wildly and then felt a dull pain as somebody rammed a fist into his face. He was bleeding now and wild-eyed. He would fight for it. The constable clapped a pair of handcuffs on him and tried to clear a way through the crowd. Karlite still struggled. A blow or two landed on him. Suddenly he relaxed and slowly struggled to his feet. It was useless to fight any longer. Now it was his turn to smile. He had challenged and won. Who cared [about] the rest?

"Come on, you swine!" said the policeman forcing Karlite through the crowd.

"Certainly!" said Karlite for the first time. And he stared at the policeman with all the arrogance of one who dared to sit on a "European bench."