

# The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses

*Bessie Head*



*Chain Gang* (1939–1940), William H. Johnson. National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C./Art Resource, New York.

Scarcely a breath of wind disturbed the stillness of the day, and the long rows of cabbages were bright green in the sunlight. Large white clouds drifted slowly across the deep blue sky. Now and then they obscured the sun and caused a chill on the backs of the prisoners who had to work all day long in the cabbage field.

This trick the clouds were playing with the sun eventually caused one of the prisoners who wore glasses to stop work, straighten up and peer short-sightedly at them. He was a thin little fellow with a hollowed-out chest and comic knobbly knees. He also had a lot of fanciful ideas because he smiled at the clouds.

“Perhaps they want me to send a message to the children,” he thought tenderly, noting that the clouds were drifting in the direction of his home some hundred miles away. But before he could frame the message, the warder in charge of his work span<sup>1</sup> shouted:

“Hey, what you tink you’re doing, Brille?”<sup>2</sup>

The prisoner swung round, blinking rapidly, yet at the same time sizing up the enemy. He was a new warder, named Jacobus Stephanus Hanneltjie.<sup>3</sup> His eyes were the color of the sky but they were frightening. A simple, primitive, brutal soul gazed out of them. The prisoner bent down quickly and a message was quietly passed down the line:

“We’re in for trouble this time, comrades.”

“Why?” rippled back up the line.

“Because he’s not human,” the reply rippled down, and yet only the crunching of the spades as they turned over the earth disturbed the stillness.

This particular work span was known as Span One. It was composed of ten men, and they were all political prisoners. They were grouped together for convenience, as it was one of the prison regulations that no black warder should be in charge of a political prisoner lest this prisoner convert him to his views. It never seemed to occur to the authorities that this very reasoning was the strength of Span One and a clue to the strange terror they aroused in the warders. As political prisoners they were unlike the other prisoners in the sense that they felt no guilt nor were they outcasts of society. All guilty men instinctively cower, which was why it was

the kind of prison where men got knocked out cold with a blow at the back of the head from an iron bar. Up until the arrival of Warder Hanneltjie, no warder had dared beat any member of Span One and no warder had lasted more than a week with them. The battle was entirely psychological. Span One was assertive and it was beyond the scope of white warders to handle assertive black men. Thus, Span One had got out of control. They were the best thieves and liars in the camp. They lived all day on raw cabbages. They chatted and smoked tobacco. And since they moved, thought and acted as one, they had perfected every technique of group concealment.

**T**rouble began that very day between Span One and Warder Hanneltjie. It was because of the shortsightedness of Brille. That was the nickname he was given in prison and is the Afrikaans<sup>4</sup> word for someone who wears glasses. Brille could never judge the approach of the prison gates, and on several previous occasions he had munched on cabbages and dropped them almost at the feet of the warder, and all previous warders had overlooked this. Not so Warder Hanneltjie.

“Who dropped that cabbage?” he thundered. Brille stepped out of line.

“I did,” he said meekly.

“All right,” said Hanneltjie. “The whole span goes three meals off.”

“But I told you I did it,” Brille protested.

The blood rushed to Warder Hanneltjie’s face.

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1. work span: a work group in the prison.

2. Brille (brīl’ə).

3. Jacobus Stephanus Hanneltjie (yā-kō’būs stā-fān’ūs hā’nēt-yē).

4. Afrikaans (āf’rī-kans’): a language closely related to Dutch and spoken by South Africans of Dutch descent.

“Look ’ere,” he said. “I don’t take orders from a kaffir.<sup>5</sup> I don’t know what kind of kaffir you tink you are. Why don’t you say Baas.<sup>6</sup> I’m your Baas. Why don’t you say Baas, hey?”

Brille blinked his eyes rapidly but by contrast his voice was strangely calm.

“I’m twenty years older than you,” he said. It was the first thing that came to mind, but the comrades seemed to think it a huge joke. A titter swept up the line. The next thing Warder Hanneljie whipped out a knobkerrie<sup>7</sup> and gave Brille several blows about the head. What surprised his comrades was the speed with which Brille had removed his glasses or else they would have been smashed to pieces on the ground.

That evening in the cell Brille was very apologetic.

“I’m sorry, comrades,” he said. “I’ve put you into a hell of a mess.”

“Never mind, brother,” they said. “What happens to one of us, happens to all.”

“I’ll try to make up for it, comrades,” he said. “I’ll steal something so that you don’t go hungry.”

Privately, Brille was very philosophical about his head wounds. It was the first time an act of violence had been perpetrated against him, but he had long been a witness of extreme, almost unbelievable human brutality. He had twelve children and his mind traveled back that evening through the sixteen years of bedlam in which he had lived. It had all happened in a small drab little three-bedroomed house in a small drab little street in the Eastern Cape,<sup>8</sup> and the children kept coming year after year because neither he nor Martha managed the contra-

ceptives the right way and a teacher’s salary never allowed moving to a bigger house and he was always taking exams to improve this salary only to have it all eaten up by hungry mouths. Everything was pretty horrible, especially the way the children fought. They’d get hold of each other’s heads and give them a good bashing against the wall. Martha gave up somewhere along the line, so they worked out a thing

between them. The bashings, biting and blood were to operate in full swing until he came home. He was to be the bogeyman,<sup>9</sup> and when it worked he never failed to have a sense of godhead<sup>10</sup> at the way

in which his presence could change savages into fairly reasonable human beings.

Yet somehow it was this chaos and mismanagement at the center of his life that drove him into politics. It was really an ordered beautiful world with just a few basic slogans to learn along with the rights of mankind. At one stage, before things became very bad, there were conferences to attend, all very far away from home.

“Let’s face it,” he thought ruefully. “I’m only learning right now what it means to be a politician.

“But I told you I did it,”  
Brille protested.  
The blood rushed to  
Warder Hanneljie’s face.

5. **kaffir** (kǎf’ər): in South Africa, an insulting term for a black.

6. **Baas** (bās): Afrikaans for *master*. The word has the same Dutch origins as the English *boss*.

7. **knobkerrie** (nǒb’kēr’ē): a short club with a knobbed end.

8. **the Eastern Cape**: the eastern part of the Cape Province in southern South Africa.

9. **bogeyman** (bǒǒg’ē-mǎn’): a terrifying figure of fear, dread, or harassment.

10. **godhead**: divinity; the quality or state of being a god.

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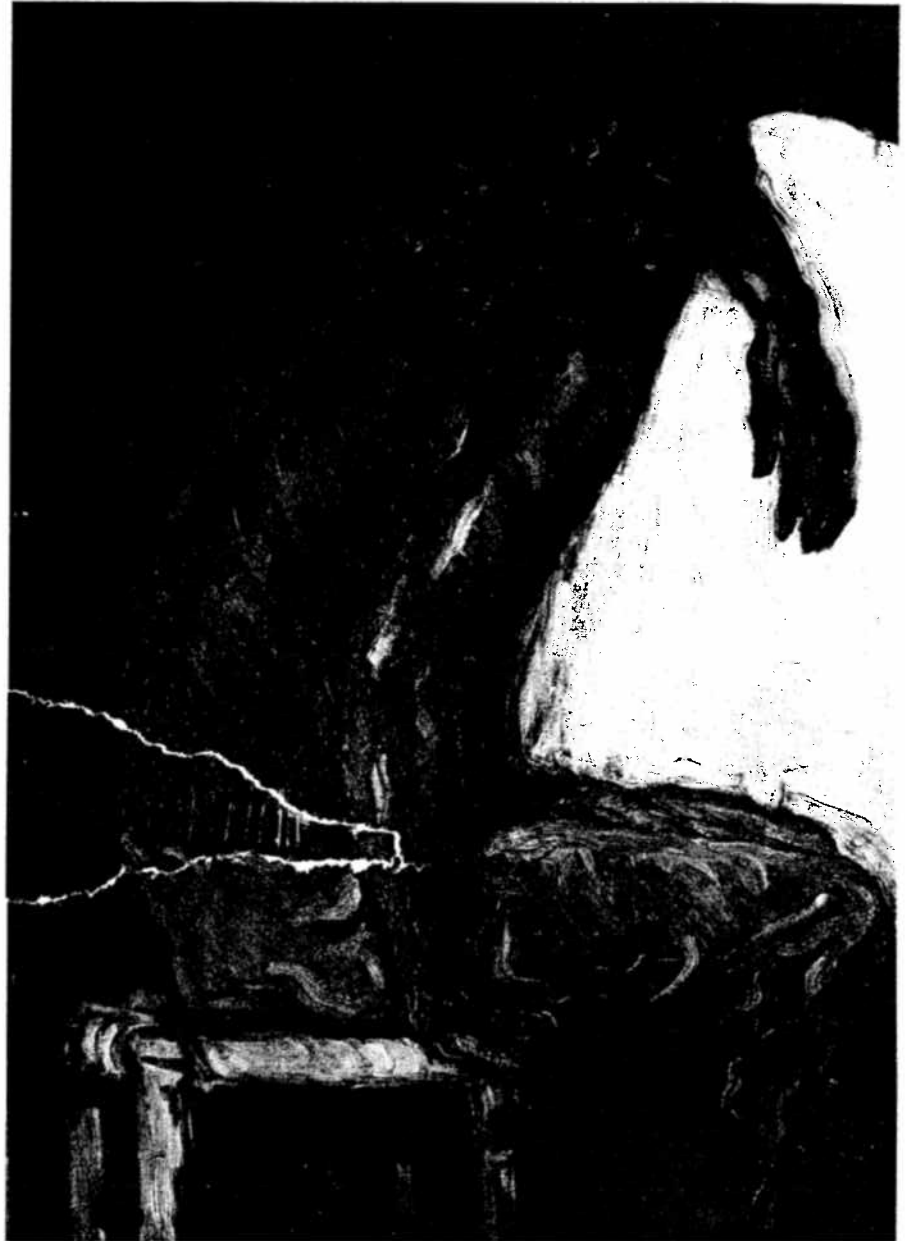
**perpetrate** (pūr’pī-trāt’) *v.* to commit

**bedlam** (bēd’lēm) *n.* a place or situation of great noise and confusion

**chaos** (kā’ōs’) *n.* total disorder

**ruefully** (rǒǒ’fē-lē) *adv.* with regret

*Le nègre Scipion* [Black Scipio] (about 1866–1868), Paul Cézanne. Museu de Arte de São Paulo (Brazil). Assis Chateaubriand. Photo by Luiz Hossaka.



All this while I've been running away from Martha and the kids.”

And the pain in his head brought a hard lump to his throat. That was what the children did to each other daily and Martha wasn't managing, and if Warder Hannetjie had not interrupted him that morning, he would have sent the following message:

“Be good comrades, my children. Cooperate,

then life will run smoothly.”

The next day Warder Hannetjie caught this old man with twelve children stealing grapes from the farm shed. They were an enormous quantity of grapes in a ten-gallon tin,<sup>11</sup> and for this misdeed the old man spent a week in the

11. tin: the British word for a can, used in South Africa and many other former British colonies.

isolation cell. In fact, Span One as a whole was in constant trouble. Warder Hannetjie seemed to have eyes at the back of his head. He uncovered the trick about the cabbages, how they were split in two with the spade and immediately covered with earth and then unearthed again and eaten with split-second timing. He found out how tobacco smoke was beaten into the ground, and he found out how conversations were whispered down the wind.

**F**or about two weeks Span One lived in acute misery. The cabbages, tobacco and conversations had been the pivot of jail life to them. Then one evening they noticed that their good old comrade who wore the glasses was looking rather pleased with himself. He pulled out a four-ounce packet of tobacco by way of explanation, and the comrades fell upon it with great greed. Brille merely smiled. After all, he was the father of many children. But when the last shred had disappeared, it occurred to the comrades that they ought to be puzzled. Someone said:

“I say, brother. We’re watched like hawks these days. Where did you get the tobacco?”

“Hannetjie gave it to me,” said Brille.

There was a long silence. Into it dropped a quiet bombshell.

“I saw Hannetjie in the shed today,” and the failing eyesight blinked rapidly. “I caught him in the act of stealing five bags of fertilizer, and he bribed me to keep my mouth shut.”

There was another long silence.

“Prison is an evil life,” Brille continued, apparently discussing some irrelevant matter. “It makes a man contemplate all kinds of evil deeds.”

He held out his hand and closed it.

“You know, comrades,” he said. “I’ve got Hannetjie. I’ll betray him tomorrow.”

Everyone began talking at once.

“Forget it, brother. You’ll get shot.”

Brille laughed.

“I won’t,” he said. “That is what I mean about evil. I am a father of children, and I saw today that Hannetjie is just a child and stupidly truthful. I’m going to punish him severely because we need a good warder.”

The following day, with Brille as witness, Hannetjie confessed to the theft of the fertilizer and was fined a large sum of money. From then on Span One did very much as they pleased while Warder Hannetjie stood by and said nothing. But it was Brille who carried this to extremes. One day, at the close of work Warder Hannetjie said:

“Brille, pick up my jacket and carry it back to the camp.”

“But nothing in the regulations says I’m your servant, Hannetjie,” Brille replied coolly.

“I’ve told you not to call me Hannetjie. You must say Baas,” but Warder Hannetjie’s voice lacked conviction. In turn, Brille squinted up at him.

“I’ll tell you something about this Baas business, Hannetjie,” he said. “One of these days we are going to run the country. You are going to clean my car. Now, I have a fifteen-year-old son, and I’d die of shame if you had to tell him that I ever called you Baas.”

Warder Hannetjie went red in the face and picked up his coat.

On another occasion Brille was seen to be walking about the prison yard, openly smoking tobacco. On being taken before the prison commander he claimed to have received the tobacco from Warder Hannetjie. All throughout the tirade from his chief, Warder Hannetjie failed to defend himself, but his nerve broke completely. He called Brille to one side.

“Brille,” he said. “This thing between you and me must end. You may not know it, but I

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**acute** (ə-kyōōt’) *adj.* very sharp or severe

**irrelevant** (ī-rēl’ē-vent) *adj.* not related to the matter at hand

**conviction** (kən-vīk’shən) *n.* certainty; a strong belief

**tirade** (tī’rād’) *n.* a long, angry speech

have a wife and children, and you're driving me to suicide."

"Why don't you like your own medicine, Hannetjie?" Brille asked quietly.

"I can give you anything you want," Warder Hannetjie said in desperation.

"It's not only me but the whole of Span One," said Brille cunningly. "The whole of Span One wants something from you."

Warder Hannetjie brightened with relief.

"I tink I can manage if it's tobacco you want," he said.

Brille looked at him, for the first time struck with pity and guilt. He wondered if he had carried the whole business too far. The man was really a child.

"It's not tobacco we want, but you," he said. "We want you on our side. We want a good

warder because without a good warder we won't be able to manage the long stretch ahead."

Warder Hannetjie interpreted this request in his own fashion, and his interpretation of what was good and human often left the prisoners of Span One speechless with surprise. He had a way of slipping off his revolver and picking up a spade and digging alongside Span One. He

had a way of producing unheard-of luxuries like boiled eggs from his farm nearby and things like cigarettes, and Span One responded nobly and got the reputation of being the best work span in the camp.

And it wasn't only taken from their side. They were awfully good at stealing commodities like fertilizer which were needed on the farm of Warder Hannetjie. ❖

"You may not know it,  
but I have a wife and  
children, and you're  
driving me to suicide."

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**commodity** (kə-mōd'ī-tē) *n.* an item—especially a farming or mining product—that can be turned to commercial use or that can provide another advantage