

Racial Problems in South Africa

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[Page 1] EACH country is a stage, a setting, for a part of our human world-drama. Each stage has territorial boundaries, often unguarded, yet terribly important; and more important still are the boundaries of thought and feeling. One of the newest of such stages is the Union of South Africa — a combination of the Provinces of Cape Colony, Natal, the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. It is but a small area of the immense total that is Africa, but it is a very significant one, for within its borders proceeds the unfolding of a very striking story.

About four hundred years of history lie behind the present situation. Portuguese, Dutch, French, British — each in turn in their inadequate little sailing ships went down the inhospitable shores of West Africa, weathered raging Cape storms, sailed up across the hot and steamy Indian Ocean and split themselves upon eastern shores — Ceylon, India, Java, Indo-China. Fate probably had it in view that they should bring to the outworn customs of [Page 2] the East some of the restless desire of the West for freedom and independence — individually, politically, nationally.

Back upon East African shores voyaged those little inadequate sailing ships, carrying spices and silks and the wealth of the East — and Malay slaves for the Cape. Sometimes fierce storms caught the tiny vessels and flung them savagely upon the shores of Natal. The survivors, both men and women, suffered agonies of endurance, incredible miseries; a few survived all trials. Slowly settlements were made and the making of them are epics, and are right royal foundations upon which a nation may build.

On the other side of the country the sailing ships swung down the seas — mostly Dutch, among them the one under the command of van Riebeck, whose name is graved so deeply upon the country's memory. There were Hollanders of all kinds, governors and commanders, merchants and farmers, preachers and lawyers. They settled round about magnificent Table Mountain, making beautiful homes. Its great bulk, solid, lofty and powerful, towers above all the district, a giant of quiet force whereon the elements play in brilliant sunshine or in the furious storms that pour over its broad upturned face. Came also the British because of the push of the adventurous spirit of those old days, or because of the political tides that came and went in Europe and caused changing [Page 3] ownership in these far off lands. Came also the Huguenots in their hour of stress, bringing with them the gift of the fruitful vine that flourishes so exceedingly. They gave a gracious strain to the sturdy Dutch, and fine and honoured names, and a delicate touch to the language — though French was forbidden them by the Government of the Republic of the Netherlands, so it quickly died right out of use.

Within the land and out of the north came stream after stream of dark peoples, all akin, but some, like the Zulus, with fiery qualities that produced mighty and ruthless warriors like Ichaka and others. I have pored

over a fascinating map whereon is depicted in colour these streams flowing from out the north. Sometimes they ran parallel, sometimes they coalesced, sometimes they flowed far south and then turned back northwards again. And these dark-skinned peoples marching over the land, and the white-skinned peoples who sailed over the seas, met and clashed. As was inevitable, the white-skinned ones prevailed. But not without long and bitter struggle.

The struggle for both was at first with the little elusive, primitive Bushman. He bore a fierce love for the lands that marked his hunting territory. Each tribe respected the boundaries of the other, else there was trouble, and among themselves poisoned arrows were effective weapons. Within the tribe was kindness and co-operation. When [Page 4] food was plentiful all shared it, when there was scarcity all went hungry. Artistic gifts and perceptions too, had this little man, as is witnessed by his paintings on cave walls and entrances. The Hottentot he was accustomed to warring against, but he had no means of defending himself from the guns of this strange new enemy looking so like a very hairy-faced lion. He resented intrusion upon his ancestral hunting grounds, and for that he was driven, as might wild animals be driven, from his camps to deeper less accessible fastnesses in forests and mountains.

There was also the white man's struggle with the raiding, foraging Negro peoples. They had always snatched where they could, the strong against the weak. Cattle to them were and are wealth. The lonely white settler was fair game. He was murdered, his delectable cattle driven off. That meant reprisals and troubles, the slow pushing back of the marauders. When captured they were made into slaves. Slavery was a habit of the times: Malays from the East; Hottentots of whom but few pure-bred specimens are said now to exist; Fingos, Bantus, and the rest whenever met and overcome. And out of it arose that inexplicable thing — the breeding of the white man with his women slaves and with others, and so his "coloured" descendants whom he despises, and who have so hard and anomalous a place socially now. [Page 5]

As time went on, a strong British contingent grew up in South Africa, especially at first in Cape Colony and Natal. As ever, the British element strove to fasten its political traditions upon the country, its own fashioning of law and order. But Dutch traditions had already settled and were held as precious and worth defending. Small republics and direct representation — these seemed desirable. Feelings were aroused, and in the Dutch a fierce resistance to encroachment upon their own ideals of political development. When they could no longer prevail against compulsion, little groups would combine and be up and off in their tiny "homes", the famous wagons drawn by many oxen, and the courageous "trek" would begin. This would end in some distant spot where lands were wide and guns would defend the little fearless band. Over to Natal they went, but again the British were there, with those tiresome British notions.

Families again set out to mount the tall snowy Drakensberg and to work out the tragedy of the betrayal of gallant Piet Retief by the notorious Dingaan. Then the later revenge for that, and presently the marvellous little epic, when the trekkers, numbering some three hundred Boers, stood isolated in those immensities against the trained, seemingly invincible, Zulu "impis". What a night of preparation! The wagons drew into a circle making a laager, men, women, children, cattle [Page 6] inside, and rough barricades between each wagon. Guns and intrepidity inside, prayers and the promise that, if God would but be on their side, they would build a chapel, and praise and prayer would go up from it. Morning, and ten thousand Zulus, Dingaan's chosen warriors, with knob-kerries and assegais — a veritable rain of them from the advancing hordes who despised the little band. Guns spitting viciously and the magnificent

hide-shields no protection. Check after check. The women loading feverishly, but the stream of dark warriors seemed endless. But they paused, they desisted and retired, leaving the flower of their army dead, to report fearsomely to their ruthless chief and meet death for defeat. Victory to the little band — a “chosen people! The conviction of being thus chosen has worked for both good and bad in the subsequent history of South Africa. Then the farther trek still, to farm, peacefully at first, in the territory of the “white waters” — the Witwatersrand — the later golden girdle of the Transvaal.

The discovery of gold and diamonds changed South Africa's history from one devoted mainly to quiet farming into a mad rush for wealth. Into her poured suddenly the clamorous greedy, either as controllers of the sources of this vast new wealth, or as manual workers, prepared to sell their health for high wages, workers of all nationalities and including many “raw natives” from distant kraals. [Page 7]

Such conditions compelled the rapid growth of towns. Inside fifty years from out of collections of tents and huts and wagons have arisen fine towns and the stately city of Johannesburg. Powerful among the Dutch towns (dorps) and head of the Transvaal Republic was President Paul Krüger. He typified the outlook of his people: direct, rugged, uncompromising, his conduct and opinions moulded entirely by the Bible, and by the Calvinistic interpretation of it. He, like all Boers used the Taal (tongue), a simplified form of Dutch — though education was still given in “high Dutch”, and the Bible was written in that language. Only quite recently has the Afrikaans edition been printed. (Afrikaans is the modern name for the Taal which has been, and is being, greatly improved and modified and is one of the two official languages, the other being English).

With the influx of foreigners, mainly British, came new and disturbing elements. They wished for political representation and a voice in the taxation of their growing numbers. But with the Boer's distaste for invasion and change “Reforms” were ignored or refused. The ill-considered Jamieson Raid provoked a war that bewildered the Boers. Of that three years' struggle many bitter memories still remain, though in decreasing measure; as new generations take their place and old memories die, racial antagonisms begin to fade, [Page 8] intermarriage brings understanding, and political parties refrain from provoking bad feelings.

After the war, the four great provinces involved were formed into the Union of South Africa, and for better or for worse the future had to be faced. Such is the background — already rich in history, heroism, patriotism and promise of the peoples of the Union. The whites are known as Afrikaners, though the names Dutch and British still persist. Under these names are classed also all sorts of Europeans, as well as Jews, and Syrians because the latter are Christians. Also the “poor whites”.

Some Theosophists are convinced that the best work, thought and effort of those members so disposed should be given to accelerating the growth of understanding between Briton and Boer. With those two strong and self-reliant groups united more closely than at present, they think the future would show a more rapid advance, especially in solving the delicate and subtle problems presented by the whole racial question. Such a closer union is most desirable and would bring to birth a people competent to contribute to the Commonwealth a fine addition: the qualities of strength and idealism, largely motivated by the desire for service to countless numbers of the “backward” races, essaying the first stumbling steps into a civilisation that is somewhat a strenuous upwards climb for them. [Page 9]

The outermost fringe of these two leading races consists of the "poor whites". They are mostly of Boer origin. They are so feckless often that they are the despair of all who work for their improvement. Curiously enough many of them are the grandchildren of those magnificent "voortrekkers" whose indomitable courage made possible the settlement of the country. When they settled they had enough for all their needs. They paid little or no attention to the education of their children. There was hunting enough, plenty of slaves, women to marry, children to beget — among whom their lands were divided and divided yet again by their grandchildren, till at last they were too small to support a family. They were not usually trained to any occupation other than farming, and manual labour was despised as "Kaffir's" work. So these poor descendants lived and live miserably, forlorn and uninspired. They cluster in towns, breeding freely yet poverty-stricken. Farming settlements have been made for them with varying success. As education is free and compulsory, maybe the tide will turn for them and a better type emerge. They present a curious case of how the neglect of culture brings in a low brand of intellectual and moral qualities. Many are learning to work on the roads, and at first were jeered at by the Kaffirs for so doing, but that is actually the first step along the road of their regeneration. [Page 10]

Between these and the natives are the "coloured" people. On the "white" side parentage is Portuguese, Dutch, French, British, and all sorts of other Europeans, Jews, Hindus, Muhammadans, Arabs and Malays have also contributed their quota. On the "native" side parentage is Hottentot, Bāntu, Fingo, Basuto, Zulu, Swāyi, and all the many other tribes as the "whites" met and miscegenated with them — without compunction. Such miscegenation is now unlawful; but some of it still goes on, as is witnessed in the native areas of any town where fair-haired, red-haired, more lightly-coloured children play with the natives, unconscious of the unhappy future that awaits them. For the "coloured" person is aware of strains of desire and of possibilities, and yet is forced either to consort with natives or with his own "Colour". The whites will have nothing of them, and ban them socially almost as completely as the native is banned. It is a cruel situation for many of them, particularly the "near white". In Cape Town and maybe elsewhere in Cape Province, these coloured people are growing into a very self-respecting community. Many have the vote, that was arranged long ago; there is a tendency to try and take it from them, for some resent that the "coloured" people should vote upon matters affecting the "white" man. The Dutch gave the unhappy name of Bastaard to these folk, and for a time they took and used it with some fierceness of pride. Some of them, [Page 11] under a capable leader named Adam Kok, trekked away to found settlements of their own, with varying success.

Those Theosophists who have the welfare of the people at heart would like to see them have more than their present place in society, and a more efficient education. There are missions among them of course, and they are mostly Christians, but they need some central *alma mater* where they could find themselves, and evolve their own notions as to what should befall them, and learn to live their lives without bitterness. They must of course have their dignified place in the South African scheme of things, and be given a chance to prove themselves, to search their own hearts and know what life should offer them. Many a student of the racial problems in South Africa wonders if the future of the country, *i.e.*, the Union, and maybe even beyond its borders, will be that of a "coloured" people. I am told that in Portuguese East Africa the Portuguese, even those in important Government positions, sometimes marry native women. Should white people visit them they permit of no question as to the courtesy due to their wives.

The natives have a strange fate in present-day South Africa. Rider Haggard introduced us to the splendid Zulu warriors, and in various wars with them we learnt to respect their manly and courageous qualities.

Rider Haggard was the first to write novels about them; now they begin to do it [Page 12] for themselves with odd and touching effect. But the sons and grandsons of those intrepid warriors have become the seemingly tame "house boys" who in their thousands under the direction of white mistresses bring their wild natures under the sway of a complicated modern civilization, and manage to do it remarkably well. Sometimes under the stress of "Kaffir beer" or other excitement, savagery will flash out and evil deeds be committed. It is not unusual to find the son of a ruling chief behind the cheerful face and shabby clothes of a labourer. Zulus take most readily to police and army work; they still have the sense of command and rule, and some rise high to positions of responsibility.

Agents recruit natives for all sorts of work in mines, on plantations, on farms, in factories, for road-making and so on. But it is a somewhat bewildering life for them. On the plantations conditions are often hard, food, clothing, shelter and payment of the minimum, as was revealed in evidence before a recent Native Economic commission in Durban. Some plantations treat their employees well, of course. Along the sixty miles of the famous gold reef, the Rand, there are roughly about one and a half million natives employed. They are accommodated in large and protected "compounds" under white managers, who select "boss boys" from among the best of them to assist in keeping control over their own [Page 13] set of compatriots. They are well fed, though very plainly, and medically cared for with skill and excellence so as to reduce mortality among them to the lowest possible rate. They are taught Red Cross work, and the various mines organise competitions among them. They compete for the prizes with zest. These men have mostly no family attachments around or near the mines, so their morals are curious and often difficult. Natives who are more or less de-tribalised and do not return to far kraals, as do the mine boys and others, congregate round the big cities in slums or in locations, and have their families live in bad and unsanitary conditions (though this too is altering very much). Medical aid is their special need. Mission bodies do some of this and native nurses are being trained. Doctors and materials are totally inadequate to the need; so many natives living under such conditions are congenitally diseased and a menace to the health of all. To deal with that is imperative. Native men have always been compelled to carry "passes" or permits upon them, and the police can demand to see these at any time. It is irksome, and much objection is raised to it, for failure to produce it involves the punishment of imprisonment. "Passes" for women also have lately been introduced. especially at night, for natives are not supposed to be about the streets after a certain hour. Much objection was raised to this, lest police interference should be abused [Page 14] and women unfairly treated. But undoubtedly the system on the other hand helped to clear the streets of a very undesirable type of native woman, a menace to the health and morals of any city.

In some towns there are native Welfare Associations promoted by interested white people. They advocate native townships in order to get the natives out of the dreadful slums and often bad locations; they seek that he should be set upon the right path to help himself to orderly self-respecting freedom. On the other hand there are groups of white people who form associations among themselves for the purpose of "insuring the lasting dominion of the white man in South Africa in a spirit of just guardianship over the native". They declare they will fight any "undesirable negrophilism", and that they will educate white youths "with a view to opening their eyes to the social relationships their forefathers have maintained for centuries. and to safeguard them against unwittingly succumbing to negrophilist influences in school, church or society". They advocate segregation of the native in order to maintain the equilibrium between white and black, at securing preference for European labour, at safeguarding South African industries for the native against imported labour, and to try and prevent the unskilled white labourer from being degraded to the status of the native and brought into unfair competition with him. The [Page 15] Government has actively supported this kind of opinion, and has urged the replacing of

natives by whites in a steady and regular proportion. There is a certain amount of justice really in this, for the towns are not the natives' natural home.

Segregation is a subject for heated debate. Eight per cent of the land of the Union is held by natives who are three-fourths of the population. In places like the Transkei, where there is real and natural segregation, whites have encroached on the plea of the need for more land. As there is not enough land now for segregation (and mainly farming) purposes on a large scale, some think urban populations are inevitable. This means better conditions and higher wages, but it will need to be in towns of their own. It is not possible to mingle the two peoples at present in one urban scheme. They are too far apart in every way. Then the burden will really be upon the native to see what he can make of his own town life. Such towns would need to be near enough to farming districts. Many natives would like to see segregation; they do not want to see their detribalised children brought up in the slums of the cities. They are ready to trek if land is made available. Many whites think this should be done to check the present drift into chaos, for the earlier "Cape View" of "equal rights for all civilised persons South of the Zambesi" does not seem justly realisable as yet. [Page 16]

Native idealism is of course greatly desired. There is lack of it. But native Christians are alive to the problems of their people, and pastors among them plead for definite instruction for their young folk in all matters of morality. Pointing to the rapid development of the American negro and the "passing" of so many of them into the ranks of the whites, he suggests that the same may happen in South Africa. There will emerge also what is called the "new negro". He will no longer be attached to old employers and masters. He will be proud to be a negro, and will reject the idea of inferiority to the white man. As in America they would have their own towns, universities, insurance companies, banks, factories, newspapers, business houses, doctors, lawyers, clergy and so on. They would supply their own educated and intellectual leaders, and might institute a movement to supply leaders for any native colony anywhere in Africa.

There are about one hundred different Christian sects at work among the natives along the Rand. This makes for confusion. They are however trying to understand the native as he is. The present is a real point of complete transition for the native. The white man says: "Come and do my work", but the native mother has hitherto raised her sons to be warriors and her daughters to work. That arrangement has no longer any value. The white man wants the sons, [Page 17] not the daughters, for work he has to offer. I have seen, in remote districts, native men riding on horseback dressed as Europeans and carrying nothing at all; behind him trudged sturdily his hefty wife in full native costume, a child astride her back and many family possessions piled upon her head. Both seemed entirely cheerful and satisfied. It was the custom. But — taxes must be paid, so the men seek jobs in the towns, working at anything they can get. Traders of gay objects and cloth are irresistible, and rates of interest of borrowing ruinous. Right from the wild into the heart of a complex civilisation, where the white man grabs all he can! As they learn to realise their position they often grow bitter and in their bitterness say:

When we people get a religion we're going to worship a black God, and when we paint the Devil we're going to paint him white, for all white men are devils.

[Quoted in *The Bāntus Are Coming*, pp. 36-37]

Think over this poignant cry from a Bāntu's heart:

Brother, come!

And let us go unto our God.
And when we stand before Him

I shall say —

"Lord, I do not hate,
I am hated;
I repress no one,
I am repressed;
I covet no lands,
My lands are coveted; [Page 18]
I scorn no peoples,
My peoples are scorned;
And, brother, what shall you say ? " [Joseph Cotter]

Europeans are taking considerable interest in and are encouraging the growth of sports organisations, and are coaching the natives into expertness. Many Bāntu Clubs exist already. [When the Bāntu was on his way downwards out of the north and settled at various points, he was held responsible for some of the great monuments of the past — as Zimbabwe — and for certain artistry in the making and decorating of pottery, *etc.*. Miss Caton-Thompson, who recently thoroughly explored Zimbabwe ruins, gave it as her uncompromising opinion that "Zimbabwe was of medieval and Bāntu origin". She said that the general style of work is conclusive argument for Bāntu architecture and work. All the objects nearly are of Bāntu nature, *i.e.*, pottery, bangles, *etc.*. The glass beads found, probably dating around A.D. 800-900, imported at the time, were as made in India. She was quite in sympathy with the idea that slaves did the work, but not under foreigners, as the Zimbabwe style was unknown to any of the suggested overlords. "Zimbabwe represents Rhodesia's oldest and best culture, and burst full-flowered during one of the medieval migrations of Bāntus southwards". Then culture deteriorated, probably killed by the Arab slave-trading and the Matabèle invasions. Miss Caton-Thompson further says this "remarkable achievement enriches our wonderment; a Bāntu origin enhances its inherent majesty... and the mystery of Zimbabwe is the mystery which lies in the pulsing heart of Africa." (From *The Zimbabwe Culture*, Oxford University Press.)]

(Bāntu is the name of one of the most progressive types of native, but it looks as if there is an effort to use it for natives as a whole, in preference to the [Page 19] appellations *negro*, not liked at all, and *kaffir*, merely meaning infidel and probably originally applied to them by Muhammadan slave-raiders and traders, and *native*, now coming to have an unpleasant flavour.)

Proper sports grounds are a great boon to these people who had no place of recreation save the streets, and few amusements save mischief and fighting somewhat murderously. Crowds of them now enjoy as hilariously as only natives know how the sports that take place. At first white men directed the clubs, but they soon elected Bāntus to take over the control, and these learned to direct them.

Thinking, intelligent natives realise that they and their people cannot go far without leadership among

themselves. There are five Christian Mission Institutions working to produce these leaders. One such is the Wilberforce Institute in the Transvaal, though there are others of greater note and in a more advanced state of work. It is under the direction of an African Bantu who was trained, I think, at the Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, U.S.A., and some of his assistants were either trained there or at other of the American Negro Colleges, or at Fort Hare or the well-known Loredale Institute in South Africa. The effort made at this Wilberforce Institute is pathetic but gallant. So little facility of materials, so much to do, so many eager to learn, so little funds at their disposal. The [Page 20] courses pursued range from a primary department to preparation of those who wish to matriculate, or to go on to teaching, collegiate or professional pursuits. All sorts of commercial subjects are taught, also many crafts. Music is given much attention, and the choir is noted for its singing of "spirituals". Girls are instructed in almost every department of domestic science. And all this at the rate of £ 12-10 a year including boarding! Even this humble sum is not always forthcoming, yet Dr. Gow and his able little wife try never to refuse an application. Dr. Gow has addressed meetings arranged by Theosophical Lodges, and the outcome of one such in Pretoria was the arousing of the interest of the Director of Education who visited the Institute and saw to it that a very welcome subsidy was granted to it.

Dr. Gow in his addresses says to the white people very simply: "Yes, we are children and need your help. But do not block our aspirations. We must progress; that is inevitable. Help us to do it happily and with amity".

This is but a rough outline of the racial problems which beset South Africa. Out of them must come a great new experiment in human growth. White people throughout the whole continent have most undoubtedly the task of assisting, sometimes forcing, these millions of dark and less evolved folk to emerge from their old modes of life into other manners and traditions. There is an effort at [Page 21] present to study tribal laws and customs to discover what in them may be treasured for foundations of future building, but it is doubtful if this will be of much value so long as the pressure of an envied other civilisation exists in their midst. They *want* to act and live as do white people. What is most wanted is a less selfish use of them by the more expert and clever whites. The natives are ready to follow leadership, and they have many admirable qualities out of which to frame a fine future. They are loyal, artistic, faithful to a trust, responsive to sympathy, full of courage, capable of devotion to a religious ideal, with much natural dignity despite their childlike nature, and with intellectuality that can be trained. Maybe the tone of their future will be one of joyousness, if they are not too much oppressed and made bitter. The Theosophical quality of fine discriminating Brotherhood should be the note in training and developing them. Then perhaps South Africa, or all Africa, will see all this conglomeration of peoples emerge unhurryingly into a fine demonstration of how justice may triumph over all prejudices of race and colour.