

nation of all vestiges of second-class citizenship under which Negro Americans suffer.

The increased tension of the last three years has brought no diminution in their will to achieve the goal of a single standard of citizenship for all Americans.

THE BAAS COMES HOME

OLIVER WALKER

EVEN the speckled guineafowl strutting near the wagon-track seemed to know that Cornelius de la Roux was coming home. From the height of his horse as he rode a little ahead of the wagon laden with seed, implements and food collected at the depot attached to the Middelburg concentration camp, he watched them ducking their beaks as if curtsying to the long-lost owner of Rhinoster-spruit Farm. But he knew them too well to imagine that if he lifted the rifle pouched beside his saddle they would remain within range.

He wished to kill nothing on this day of days, certainly nothing that could remind him of his farm and home after two years' bitter exile in Ceylon where the British had shipped him and two hundred more Boers after the surrender at Eland's Kop. The great empty cavern of his heart had been lit by the fires of a consuming hatred during those dreary days when the only news trickling through had been news of defeats and deaths that had carried off his wife and two fighting sons and numerous relatives.

The God of his forebears had turned His countenance away from the Boers in those black days. Messages had come at last speaking of a peace signed at Vereeniging. Cornelius was one of those who had refused to believe this was anything but another trick of the "Khaki" British until men of his own district had come over the ocean to tell him that the war was finished, that their beloved leader "Oom Paul" was dead, and that the British were indeed masters over all South Africa.

Some of the Dutch Volk said that the British had been magnanimous at the treaty and after. Cornelius was not one of these. Like others he had been given supplies free to rehabilitate his farm. That did not mean he should feel gratitude. He had been given money and a chequebook with the right to draw upon the bank

for several hundred pounds. Did that mean he had to kiss the hands of these accursed "Uitlanders" who, in their haughty might, had destroyed the Eden which he and his fellow trekkers had hewn out of the Transvaal wilderness?

Cornelius accepted these crumbs from the conqueror's table in implacable silence. He waited only for the day when he could escape the pestilential shadow the British had cast over the land, and stand unchallenged again as master of Rhinosterspruit's 6,000 acres in the Western Transvaal.

Only on that day would he cut his hair that now hung like a grey mane down to his shoulders as matted and almost as long as his beard. Only then would the red blood of health flow back into his veins, and the stoop go out of shoulders that were bowed with the pain of a bullet-torn muscle in his back.

Already the sight of landmarks was beginning to heal him. At first, on the ride from Blyfontein village, he had suffered, for he had seen only the roofless and windowless shells of farmhouses he had once known, and choked water-courses, devastated orchards and broken dams amid the lion-tawny vistas of winter veld. Even now, as he rode ahead to the last low eminence that should bring his own homestead into view, he could see like whip-wounds in the veld the deep ruts made by the gun-carriages of the British troops.

Painful though it was, he urged his horse into a gallop that took him as far as a clump of mimosa thorn already scenting the faultless blue air with the promise of spring though no rains had fallen. At the trees he reined in, and held his breath to survey what lay below. They had not cut down his bluegums! Two miles away at the bottom of a long downward reach of parched grasslands their foliage blew green blobs above the shining silver trunks. Sunlight glittered on water cupped like a jewel in the converging fold beyond. He had water in his dam! Then Cornelius knew that God was back in his heaven, and sat bemused while his dark, contracted eyes opened wide to study every line and contour in the total landscape of his private domain.

Smoke spiralled straight up near the homestead. It did not come from the chimney for he could see that the thatch was gone and the house was only four walls. But at least the walls were standing. Cornelius rubbed his eyes unbelievably when he saw the brown hides of several Afrikander cattle drifting leisurely away from the water to the lower pasture. He could only conclude from these evidences of continuing life that Mhlapo, his boss-boy, had returned to the farm and was getting it into some sort of order.

Cornelius stirred his bony old Army horse into the semblance of a gallop and so great was his exultation that he forgot the agony of his wounded back as he thundered down over the stone-studded veld ahead of the lumbering wagon and the tiny whip-cracking piccanin who drove it.

Fifty yards short of the house he slowed down to walking pace so as to take in more detail. Outside the roofless rondavels to the left where his farm labour had lived a Native woman was cooking over an open fire with a cluster of children playing with clay oxen in the dust and half-shade. He could see the cattle better now. They were skinny with hip-bones projecting and heads hung low, but they were alive. He did not recognise any of them. But it was Mhlapo who was in charge and who saw and recognised the figure of the horseman and came running in great, thankful strides towards him.

"Master!" he cried, his square black face split by the widest of smiles. Then, reverting to the more homely Afrikaans: "My Baas!" he hailed, and for a moment looked as if he would drop on his knees like a man seeing a miracle.

"How goes it, Mhlapo?" said Cornelius, moved to awkwardness by Mhlapo's emotion. "I see the red-necks burnt my farm, but they left us some cattle, eh?"

"Ja, my Baas." Mhlapo's face clouded.

"Are those my beasts, or whose are they?"

"They are mine, Baas," said Mhlapo, keeping his grey, woolly head down.

"Yours? How did you get hold of six oxen like that? Where did you steal them?" Cornelius's voice had recovered its familiar note of authority.

Mhlapo did not reply. Cornelius repeated his question, and came down off his horse to stand closer. Only at the third repetition did Mhlapo speak. Then he looked no higher than Cornelius's thick-soled brown boots. "They are a loan, Master, from my cousin Reuben."

Cornelius's voice had iron in it. "You mean you got them from the Khakis, eh? Did you work for the Khakis?"

"No, Baas."

"What were you doing when I was away?"

"I went home, Baas."

Cornelius read a different meaning in the hangdog look of his old servant. "I don't believe you, Mhlapo. I think you worked for the Khakis. Did you think I was dead? Did you think I wouldn't

come back? Did they also promise you my farm, perhaps?"

"No, no, Master. I knew you would come back. I heard in the village. That was why I returned—to make things nice for the Master."

The re-iterated use of "Master"—the English word, instead of the traditional Afrikaans "Baas" confirmed Cornelius's suspicion. Mhlapo had done what many more Kaffirs had done when the British came and their Boer masters had had to ride off on commando. They had deserted to them, worked for them, like traitors. Cornelius had heard many stories of their treachery—how they had mocked at Boer women herded off to the concentration camps, and made obscene gestures at them and been encouraged to do so by their new overlords. Some of them had even been given rifles to shoot at Boers. General Hertzog had issued orders that any found thus armed were to be shot out of hand. Some had waxed rich out of the war, it was said, and owned fine spans of oxen and Army Service Corps wagons bought cheap from the conquerors when they quit.

Cornelius tightened his grip on the rhinoceros-hide whip in his hand. He was master here and he knew how to act like a master when it came to cheeky Kaffirs on his domain.

"Come here, Mhlapo," he ordered.

Mhlapo did not move. Was there a hint of rebellion in his face? Cornelius reached forward and gripped Mhlapo's arm in one sweep. With the other he raised his whip and brought it flailing down on the servant's back. Mhlapo cried out, and tried to wrench himself away. But the strength of righteousness was in Cornelius's hands, and he did not release Mhlapo until he had laid a dozen searing cracks across the torn shirt on his back, and brought him kneeling and whimpering to the ground.

The Native woman at the fire stared at a spectacle she had seen before and did not raise her voice. Later, when Cornelius had stalked away and disappeared inside the doorless entrance of his home, Mhlapo, her husband, walked unsteadily towards her and said: "You saw him strike me. What have I done? It is not right for him to strike me, even though I am his servant. You shall tell what you saw."

Next day Mhlapo was not about the farm, and Cornelius could not find out much about him until he received a summons to appear in Blyfontein before the magistrate, Hercules van der Merwe, on a charge of assault.

Grimly Cornelius mounted the spavined old horse the British

had provided him with, and rode to the village where he was confronted by Mhlapo, still unable to look him in the face, in the temporary tin shed that served as a school-room and a magistrate's court. He did not trouble to deny Mhlapo's mumbled statement about what the Baas had done to him, or the evidence of the thick weals on Mhlapo's back. His contempt was equally divided between the Kaffir who dared to speak against him, and Hercules van der Merwe who was notorious through the district as a "hands-upper" who had gone over to the British and worked for them like any traitor when the cause was lost.

"You don't dispute that you flogged Mhlapo, Commandant?" Hercules, shifting uneasily in his thonged chair, could not prevent himself from using Cornelius's combat title.

"Why should I? The Kaffir deserved a thrashing, and I gave it to him. He has been spoilt—as some of our own people have been—by the Khakis."

Hercules pretended to study a paper on which he had laboriously copied down such evidence as had been proffered. "You had no motive, no provocation, from this Kaffir," he said, trying to sound virtuous. "I shall have to fine you, or send you to jail."

Cornelius had his whip in his hand and for one misty red moment he was tempted to use it on the sly, downward-bending head of the man sitting in judgment on him.

Hercules went on hurriedly: "Times are different now, Commandant. We must observe proper laws. You cannot make your own. I am the representative of the law, duly appointed."

"Do you take sides with this creature against me?"

"There is the law, and it is a good one. I must fine you or put you in the jail."

Cornelius sneered: "And how much, under your British law, does it cost a burgher who chastises a son of Ham?"

Hercules made a show of consulting the loose Proclamation papers littering the table he used as a desk. "You admit you are guilty? There is a fine of five pounds for this offence."

"Five pounds! For flogging a Kaffir! Very well." Cornelius banged his whip down on the table, and pulled out his new cheque-book. He leant over the table and took the pen out of Hercules' hand and scrawled the required amount on the topmost cheque and then his signature. He tore the cheque off, flung it onto the table, and then picked up his whip and pointed it at Mhlapo's uncomprehending face. "Go back to the farm, Mhlapo," he said coldly, "and see that the coffee is ready by the time I return."

Mhlapo looked up at Hercules, received a nod of dismissal, and went out of the door followed by the heavy-sounding tread of his master's army boots.

Coffee was ready, served in a tin mug on a bench outside the ruined homestead when Cornelius rode back to Rhinosterspruit an hour or two later. Mhlapo was not visible, but his woman was and harshly Cornelius shouted to her, asking her where the Kaffir was. He had gone down to the spruit, she said, to fetch water in a bucket for the master.

Cornelius sipped the hot, unsweetened drink, and then at leisure filled his home-made pipe—the pipe he had carved out of some dark Indian wood in the Ceylon camp, and went to sit in the shade of the bluegums to think. Mhlapo, for all his new-found insolence was a good Kaffir. He had had him as a servant now for more than 30 years. He could remember in exact detail the raid on a Kaffir location near the Bechuanaland border when, after killing the men and firing the huts, he had claimed the child Mhlapo and 20 cattle as his share of the loot.

He had made a good choice. He had taught the boy well, seen him grow to manhood with his own two lost sons, and learnt to trust him with every part of the farm management and stock. He had tended him when he was sick, given him clothes and food, and once a calf when Mhlapo had taken a wife and needed cattle for the bride-price. His absolute faithfulness and loyalty had never been in doubt before the coming of the British. That visitation Cornelius looked upon as the eighth plague of Egypt, worse than the locusts, worse than the killing of the first-born. The thought of all the desolation spread about him came back like a black cloud over his mind, and unshed tears were in his eyes when a movement to his rear informed him that Mhlapo had returned.

He looked round and watched the Kaffir heavy-laden with two buckets go inside the walls of the house. When he emerged again Cornelius called to him, and spoke softly but sternly in rebuke for his perfidy in going to the village and reporting him to the verdomde hands-upper Hercules van der Merwe.

Mhlapo listened with downcast eyes. He seemed to be in a proper mood of contrition, and to make sure Cornelius stood and took him firmly by the elbow.

"It is no place for Kaffirs to speak evil against their masters, Mhlapo," he said. "You are not among the Lord's anointed, or how is it that your skin is black? The Bible is the Word of the

Lord, and in it is written: 'Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren'."

Mhlapo had heard these words before. But he had also heard many other words in the two years and more of his master's absence while he had worked for the white lords from over the sea.

His eyes down he ventured an answer. "But, Baas, it does not say in the Book that I am cursed because my skin is not white. The preacher with the red-coats said there is no curse upon us because we are black . . ."

"He lies!" shouted Cornelius. "It is in the Book and I have read it there a hundred times and heard it a hundred more times from my father and my father's father." He brought his whip down across Mhlapo's back with a power that doubled the black man up, and still holding him he thrashed him till his arm was tired.

Exhausted but restored in morale he let Mhlapo go and turned to march into the ruined farmhouse and wash his hands free of the taint of blackness that contaminated them.

Mhlapo was not about next morning, and only under the threat of violence did his woman tell Cornelius that he had trekked off towards the village again. The following day Cornelius received a new summons to appear before Hercules van der Merwe. This time he put his rifle into his saddle-pouch, and took a handful of bullets with him. It was just like old commando days, he thought as he jerked the reins of his horse, and turned its head towards the horizon beyond which the village lay.

When he strode into the tin shed of Hercules van der Merwe's office he found the magistrate at his table smoking a pipe of the molasses-sweetened Magaliesberg tobacco and deep in papers while Mhlapo squatted in a further corner patiently waiting to substantiate his charge.

The proceedings were informal and took little time. Cornelius did not deny that he had again flogged the Kaffir. The Kaffir was his servant and he had been insolent. His fierce eyes remained fixed on Mhlapo while Hercules van der Merwe repeated his warning of their previous meeting and the penalties for such an assault.

"What is it this time?" Cornelius interrupted sharply, tired of hearing the same words.

"I'm telling you. I could make it ten pounds, Commandant, but I'm letting you off with seven. Next time it will be ten."

"The next time I will shoot you, Hercules van der Merwe.

That is the next time between us.”

“Are you going to pay?”

Cornelius wrenched out his cheque-book and wrote out the amount. He turned then to Mhlapo and spat out two words: “Hamba! Voertsek!” and without another look at Hercules van der Merwe walked outside to his horse, and straddled it to set off in pursuit of the trotting Mhlapo.

He soon passed him on the dirt track, but gave no sign that the Kaffir existed for him. When he reached the farmstead he sat down in the shade of the bluegums, lit his pipe, and waited sombrely for his servant to appear. After an hour and more a solitary figure moved over the brow of the hill and ten minutes later Mhlapo was within hailing distance. Cornelius let him come on, and when he saw the Kaffir swerving off in the direction of the cattle kraal to the west he called to him.

“Twice I have chastised you, Mhlapo,” he said heavily, as he levered his body upright, and towered over his servant’s drooping form. “And twice you have run away to that man who calls himself a magistrate in the village. It is time we understood each other, Mhlapo. It is time you learnt after thirty years who is your master—I, Cornelius de la Roux, or that renegade hands-upper down there who thinks he can preach the law to me. I am going to whip you, Mhlapo, because I am your master, and it is my right, and what are you going to do then?”

Mhlapo raised his eyes as far as the broad brass buckle of his master’s belt and then dropped on his knees with arms half-raised in salute and also to protect his head against the downward blow that might fall any moment. “Baas, you are my only Baas. The Baas is killing me, but he is my Baas. That man, Baas Hercules, is nothing. When I go to him and complain the Baas comes and writes on a piece of paper and goes free. The Baas has many pieces of paper in his pocket. I have seen how big the Book is. I will not speak to Baas Hercules again.”