

3. DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST

Rev. CHARLES HOOPER

Anglican Rector of Zeerust.

IT is, I suppose, no accident that the Anglican Rectory in Zeerust became for a time one of the focal points of recent events in that area. Accidents there were, however, such as our discovery that there was no place in Zeerust where defending counsel from Johannesburg could interview their African clients. It seemed reasonable to my wife and myself to offer the defence the use of the Rectory for consultations. We had seen the police breaking up attempts at consultations on the Zeerust pavements; and we knew that, apart from the pavements, the only place for consultation was Johannesburg, 150 miles away, or the Reserves, forbidden to Whites without permits, and scattered over 80 miles. From the use of the Rectory as a meeting place for client and counsel to the use of the Rectory as a source of help or a place of refuge was a quick and inevitable development.

But the basis of our involvement in the toils of the Zeerust agony is not accidental. It is really an exceedingly simple matter. Long before there was any question of the issue of reference books to African women, long before the holding of illegal tribal councils and the burning of houses, we had both come to know as fellow human beings the people among whom we had elected to work. My wife and I knew the names of their children, and the places of work of absent husbands. We accepted gifts of eggs from destitute widows, knowing the wound that refusal would inflict. We were asked to settle feuds and comfort the bereaved. Daily we moved among the Bafurutse in the relationship of missionaries to people entrusted to our care—a relationship as remote from the master-servant one as can possibly be imagined. There was, of course, an inequality about the relationship, for priest and teacher are in authority over their people. But one of the points of such authority is that it is something accepted, not something imposed; and it is counter-balanced by the example of Maundy Thursday, by the Christ who girded Himself with a towel and washed His disciples' feet. In the event, it was we who learned humility.

We were involved, also, by the simple fact that we are

South African citizens. To put it naively, we believe in law and order; and so, a year ago, did the Bafurutse. Before April, 1957, there could have been few more peaceful districts than the Reserves near Zeerust, where 30,000 African people lived, settling their differences quietly according to tribal custom, without the clash and violence that are so appalling a feature of South African city life. We have watched the destruction among our people of this acceptance of rule by law. We have watched the emergence of gangster chiefs ruling by fear, terrorising their own people with the arrogant impunity afforded by police protection. And we have watched the police themselves reducing the Bafurutse to an acceptance of the belief that might is right. We have listened with horror to our people arguing with each other about whether the only solution to their dilemma is not the murder of the 'rebels,' as they have come to call the gangster chiefs. Inevitably we have taken part in such arguments, pleading with our people, sometimes for hours, not to follow the gangster example which they were experiencing on this scale for the first time. And we have listened, with perhaps greater horror, to the conversations of policemen. On one occasion a policeman—a youngster of about eighteen—said to me: "The Chief Police Commissioner is here, I hope he'll give us permission to shoot these bloody rubbish." On another occasion I was told, about an Anglican woman who had been arrested with others for having allegedly burnt her reference book: "The others pleaded guilty, so we are letting them go. But this one wouldn't plead guilty, so we're sending her to gaol." The moment I offered to bail her out, she too was released. But the classic expression of the police attitude to the recognized processes of law came during the hearings of the Commission of Enquiry, when an officer complained bitterly that the police were being made fools of, because accused persons who had found themselves legal defence were being acquitted on a large scale. Their legal defence, he maintained, was a serious cause of unrest!

And far more destructive of trust in the law than police talk has been police action. Raids in the small hours of the morning; the indiscriminate arrest of nearly naked women dragged out of their blankets and out of their houses in the night; assault by the police or in the presence of the police; the levying of indiscriminate fines by pro-Government Chiefs on people arrested by the police in the presence of the police; the terror-

ising of people who have dared to seek legal help, or to appeal against fines—all these, and more, have been the order of the day in the Zeerust district for more than a year now. Coupled with the fact that in not one case has action been taken on behalf of people alleging assault and bearing the marks of assault, it all amounts to simply this: almost everybody is afraid of the police, and nobody believes that a blameless life is any protection.

Simply because we are South Africans, it has been impossible for us, either by co-operation with the authority which sanctions such violation of law, or by gathering up our skirts and passing by with eyes averted on the other side, to consent to the undermining of the foundations on which a sane society must rest: regard for the rights of the individual and an adherence to natural law.

Our involvement in the Zeerust disturbances has brought consequences both for the Church and for our people. From very early on, once our position seemed clear to those in authority, it has been virtually impossible to transact Church business with the Native Affairs Department. And since the hearings of the Commission of Enquiry last November, not only have our frequent encounters with the police in the Reserves been extremely unpleasant, but Anglican Church members have had to run a sort of gauntlet. In the village of Motswedi, for instance, Anglicans on their way to Church services have encountered roaming 'bodyguards' who have prevented their attendance on the grounds that, instead of the normal words of administration at the time of Communion, the priest has gone down the line of Communicants hissing to each woman: "Burn your reference book!" In this same village a sort of smelling out has been conducted. It has deviated from its almost forgotten traditional pattern in that the objects of enquiry have been, not witches and heretics, but A.N.C. members, Anglicans, and Huddleston-boeties! The irony is that a year ago none but a few of the intelligentsia in the area had heard of either the African National Congress or of Fr. Huddleston.

At the Commission of Enquiry we listened to the official attitude towards our deviationist behaviour. The then Mayor of Zeerust stated how, with his own eyes, he had seen us "shaking hands with, and conversing with, Natives in our back-yard." How, he asked, were the White children of

Zeerust to be properly reared with such an example in their midst? The Zeerust Native Commissioner described "how we enticed Natives with tea and cigarettes, had A.N.C. members on our premises, had our photograph published in *Drum*," etc., etc. This official indictment did not contain any mention of incitement or other illegality; yet the indictment was made to illustrate that we were "causes of unrest"—that we were, in fact, guilty without being law-breakers.

I do not know what the Commission made of all this, as it has published no findings. But without question, during the three months between the date when the Commission concluded its hearing and the date when our entry into the Reserves was prohibited by Dr. Verwoerd, the business of carrying on our ordinary missionary functions became nerve-racking to an almost unbearable degree.

We returned early in December from our annual leave to find the Reserves dotted with armed police camps. Life in the villages was fear-ridden almost to the point of panic; and where previously there had been no more than a trickle of people leaving the area, there was now a daily exodus on a large scale. A number left the district via the Rectory, afraid to go to the Zeerust railway station as it was raided from time to time by groups of 'bodyguards'. They spent the daylight hours hiding in the long grass or in the house itself; and by night they made their way to stations further up the line. I shall not easily forget the day when I walked into my study expecting to find it empty and found in it seven women, some with babies, lying flat on the floor. They had heard that the 'bodyguards' had come to town and they were in full flight. It emerged that these women were out on bail awaiting the hearing of an appeal. They had been chosen as candidates for bail because of age, infirmity, or the fact that with them in gaol had been ailing babies. On their return to their village a couple were beaten by 'bodyguards', and all were immediately hustled out again by their friends who chartered a lorry for the purpose. Their chief, it appeared, took the original line that, he having put them into gaol, it was an act of defiance for them to emerge, bail or no bail; and he went on to fine their menfolk up to £10 each for having the temerity "to treat these guilty women as though they were precious china". The chartered lorry drove straight to the Rectory.

As day succeeded day in December, as the Christmas holidays

came and went, leaving in their wake turmoil, burned houses, mass arrests, small-scale riots, and one death, the Rectory took on at times the feel of an air-raid shelter. And most horrifyingly, the main victims of assault were women, many of them old women; and the assaults were not idle slaps; they were vicious attacks with sticks, with fists, and with sharp-edged slices of car tyre. We did not see the weapons; we did see, frequently, their effect: weals inches long, a quarter of an inch deep; bruises on heads, arms, backs, thighs; loose teeth and clothes clotted with blood.

But there was nothing, apart from elementary first-aid and an attempt at encouragement, to be done about it. We tried.

One wet Monday we took three thoroughly beaten women and their attorney to the police station to make statements and lay charges. The women were afraid to go without us; so, clinging to our antique belief that a police force is designed to protect people and deal with offenders, we went with them. We waited outside the charge office, watching through open doors. The attorney was inside with her clients. Beyond saying that she had brought the women to make statements, she said nothing and did nothing except listen. Half-way through the second statement, a senior Pretoria officer appeared. He read through the first statement and then came over to the attorney. He did not look at her, but said: "You must get outside."

"I am here in the interests of my clients."

"If you do not get outside," the officer jerked a thumb in the direction of the door, "I will have you put out bodily."

"I see." The attorney joined us on the verandah, and the statements were completed. While we waited three men were brought in. Two I did not know. The third I did not recognize at first. Behind a policeman's back he caught my eye and made signs to show that he had been assaulted, and then I recognized him. A week earlier he had been at the Rectory, quietly well dressed. Now his face was thoroughly disfigured, his clothes torn and discoloured with blood.

On the Wednesday following the making of statements by these three women, a fourth woman arrived from their home village in a near-hysterical state. She had covered the 40 miles on foot, and she was related to one of the three. She pleaded with them not to return home. Her story was that their Chief would do them grave harm if they did return, as he had been

told by the police that these three women were trying to get him arrested. The women left the district, and there the whole matter rests.

The refugees who left the district, via our Rectory were a fraction of the total. Many left by less obvious routes, seeking shelter in Bechuanaland or, more precariously, on the Reef. When we went into the Protectorate to gain an inkling of the situation, an official there told me that Bafurutse were scattered from the border to the desert. We saw some: others, we were told, were in hiding in the hills, fearing that they might be returned to the Union.

By mid-January some of our congregations had melted away almost to nothing. But at least the fugitives were having a rest. The ones who stayed were the ones who paid.

On January 24th four people were shot dead and others wounded in the village of Gopane. The shooting took place in the morning, and shortly afterwards one of the villagers put through a telephone call to me. I could hardly understand his frenzied babble, and he rang off abruptly. So we went, and as we were on the point of leaving the village we met, inevitably, a large party of police, to whom, by then, we were well known. We spent forty minutes surrounded by sten guns, having inane questions barked at us about who we were, where we came from, what we were doing, where our identity cards were. A blustering performance. The man who had put through the call to us was subsequently beaten up in the presence of the police, and his sister told us that she paid £30 to have the assault called off.

We were not again treated to sten gun drill; but we did again encounter the tough manner. On one occasion we were entering another village (Leeuwfontein) when the car was stopped at a police camp. We watched policemen carving up an ox—a gift, perhaps, from a ‘loyal’ Chief who had in turn ‘fined’ it out of a villager? A sergeant detached himself idly and came over to us: “You’ll have to clear out at once.”

“Why?”

“The Chief doesn’t want your Church here.”

“I’ve a congregation to care for, whatever the Chief may want.” The sergeant fetched the Chief who repeated his piece. I repeated my piece and then asked for the officer in charge. I was taken to him.

“Am I being forbidden entry here?” I asked.

"I'm not forbidding you."

"Well, who is then?" The officer turned to the Chief. "Look, Chief, write that letter to the Native Commissioner and then we shall see what happens. We can't tell this priest not to go in." So we went in, passing people from the next village herded into a cattle kraal. Coming out we gave lifts to some who had by then been released. And they all had bruises and cuts on their faces.

Finally, a new technique was evolved. One Sunday, in Gopane, we found a police van with armed police inside, back and front, accompanying us wherever we went. They said nothing and did nothing—they just rode with us until we left. That was the end of any pastoral work in Gopane, as it did not take us long to recognize that the most brave Anglican would not be over-eager, in a village seething with fear, to receive benefit of clergy together with five police. Furthermore, the last man whom we visited was forthwith, on Sunday, taken by the police to the Chief and fined £40 for what was called a "Congress offence".

Earlier on the same day we had been chased by a police car, hooting all the way, down a road with a sixty foot sheer drop on the off-side—not the side on which the police seemed desirous of passing. I did not stop until I reached the bottom, when I was asked, to my utter astonishment, if I had seen a large green bus anywhere! Despite my inability to produce one, the interior of the parish car was inspected, and then we were allowed to go on. The police car turned back, questing no doubt for the large green bus which has not yet been found.

Even at home, in Zeerust, well out of the Reserves, the ordinary day to day transactions of Church life were drastically inhibited. The Rectory stands directly opposite the large, imposing buildings of the Native Affairs Department; between the two properties there is nothing but a road and a low wire fence. Each morning we would see our familiar informer taking up his watch on the Rectory, to be relieved at intervals during the day by other 'loiterers', and then ending his day affecting to read a newspaper—in pitch darkness. For teachers, clerks, African policemen, a call to the Rectory meant interrogation afterwards—questions to which the real reply that the call was made to pay rent, arrange a baptism, ask advice, discuss a premature pregnancy, was not acceptable. In the end much of our ordinary out of Church work was done in the late even-

ings. So great was the fear of the authorities that, during the day, except at times of worship, the most inoffensive and unpolitical of Anglicans tended to keep well clear of the Rectory. By the time we were banned, the routine of the Rectory had changed utterly: the business we dealt with was, for us, urgent, often grim, nearly always hurried, and quite unending. The days of impromptu parties with the Mothers Union, of play-production for the children, of vigorous and uninhibited unrehearsed 'concerts' round the Rectory tap, had given place to days that began before dawn with trouble, and ended after sunset with more trouble.

For a year now we have had a question put to us, by our own people, by visiting overseas journalists, by idly curious fellow South Africans: "What is going to happen? Where will all this end?" I do not know. But it is clear that the Zeerust district has become in some way a testing ground for new techniques. The police have learned, and taught, a good deal there in a year. Some Chiefs have learned new tricks, and a totally new method of rule; others cling with admirable determination to the old method, conscious for the first time of its value. The people have learned on a new scale the meaning of fear. I do not presume to predict the outcome, but of this I am certain: where a year ago there was a belief in peace and law, now there is hope only of an eventual dénouement which will have to be catastrophic, perhaps for rulers and ruled alike*.

* Those who are unfamiliar with the background to Rev. Hooper's experiences are referred to, "Zeerust — A Profile of Resistance" by James Fairbairn, in *AFRICA SOUTH*, Vol. II, No. 3.