

Sol Plaatje

Selected Writings

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CHAPTER 1

A Retrospect

*I am Black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of
Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon.*

*Look not upon me because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon
me: my mother's children were angry with me; they made me
the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept.*

– The Song of Songs

Awaking on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African Native found himself, not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth.

The 4,500,000 black South Africans are domiciled as follows: one and three quarter millions in locations and reserves, over half a million within municipalities or in urban areas, and nearly a million as squatters on farms owned by Europeans. The remainder are employed either on the public roads or railway lines, or as servants by European farmers, qualifying, that is, by hard work and saving to start farming on their own account.

A squatter in South Africa is a Native who owns some livestock and, having no land of his own, hires a farm or grazing and ploughing rights from a landowner, to raise grain for his own use and feed his stock. Hence, these squatters are hit very hard by an Act which passed both Houses of Parliament during the session of 1913, received the signature of the Governor-General on June 16, was gazetted on June 19, and forthwith came into operation. It may be here mentioned that on that day Lord Gladstone signed no fewer than sixteen new Acts of Parliament – some of them being rather voluminous – while three days earlier, His Excellency signed another batch of eight, of which the bulk was beyond the capability for any mortal to read and digest in four days.

But the great revolutionary change thus wrought by a single stroke of the pen, in the condition of the Native, was not realized by him until about the end of June. As a rule many farm tenancies expire at the end of the half-year, so that in June 1913, not knowing that it was impracticable to make fresh contracts, some Natives unwittingly went to search for new places of abode, which some farmers, ignorant of the law, quite as unwittingly accorded them. It was only when they went to register the new tenancies that the law officers of the Crown laid bare the cruel fact that to provide a landless Native with

accommodation was forbidden under a penalty of £100, or six months' imprisonment. Then only was the situation realized.

Other Natives who had taken up fresh places on European farms under verbal contracts, which needed no registration, actually founded new homes in spite of the law, neither the white farmer nor the Native tenant being aware of the serious penalties they were exposed to by their verbal contracts.

In justice to the Government, it must be stated that no police officers scoured the country in search of lawbreakers, to prosecute them under this law. Had this been done, many £100 cheques would have passed into the Government coffers during the black July, the first month after Lord Gladstone affixed his signature to the Natives' Land Act, No. 27 of 1913.

The complication of this cruel law is made manifest by the fact that it was found necessary for a high officer of the Government to tour the provinces soon after the Act came into force, with the object of 'teaching' magistrates how to administer it. A Congress of Magistrates – a most unusual thing – was also called in Pretoria to find a way of carrying out the King's writ in the face of the difficulties arising from this tangle of the Act. We may add that nearly all the white lawyers in South Africa, to whom we spoke about this measure, had either not seen the Act at all, or had not read it carefully, so that in both cases they could not tell exactly for whose benefit it had been passed. The study of this law required a much longer time than the lawyers, unless specially briefed, could devote to it, so that they hardly knew what all the trouble was about. It was the Native in the four provinces who knew all about it, for he had not read it in books but had himself been through its mill, which like an automatic machine ground him relentlessly since the end of the month of June. Not the least but one of the cruellest and most ironical phases – and nearly every clause of this Act teems with irony – is the Schedule or appendix giving the so-called Scheduled Native Areas; and what are these 'Scheduled Native Areas'?

They are the Native locations which were reserved for the exclusive use of certain Native clans. They are inalienable and cannot be bought or sold, yet the Act says that in these 'Scheduled Native Areas' Natives only may buy land. The areas being inalienable, not even members of the clans, for whose benefit the locations are held in trust, can buy land therein. The areas could only be sold if the whole clan rebelled; in that case the location would be confiscated. But as long as the clans of the location remain loyal to the Government, nobody can buy any land within these areas. Under the respective charters of these areas, not even a member of the clan can get a

separate title as owner in an area – let alone a Native outsider who had grown up among white people and done all his farming on white man's land.

If we exclude the arid tracts of Bechuanaland, these locations appear to have been granted on such a small scale that each of them got so overcrowded that most of the population had to go out and settle on the farms of white farmers through lack of space in the locations. Yet a majority of the legislators, although well aware of these limitations, and without remedying any of them, legislate, shall we say, 'with its tongue in its cheek' that only Natives may buy land in Native locations.

Again, the locations form but one-eighteenth of the total area of the Union. Theoretically, then, the 4,500,000 natives may 'buy' land in only one-eighteenth part of the Union, leaving the remaining seventeen parts for the one million whites. It is moreover true that, numerically, the Act was passed by the consent of a majority of both Houses of Parliament, but it is equally true that it was steamrolled into the statute book against the bitterest opposition of the best brains of both Houses. A most curious aspect of this singular law is that even the minister, since deceased, who introduced it, subsequently declared himself against it, adding that he only forced it through in order to stave off something worse. Indeed, it is correct to say that Mr Sauer, who introduced the bill, spoke against it repeatedly in the House; he deleted the milder provisions, inserted more drastic amendments, spoke repeatedly against his own amendments, then in conclusion he would combat his own amendments, by calling the ministerial steamroller to support the Government and vote for the drastic amendments. The only explanation of the puzzle constituted as such by these 'hot-and-cold' methods is that Mr Sauer was legislating for an electorate, at the expense of another section of the population which was without direct representation in Parliament. None of the non-European races in the provinces of Natal, Transvaal and the 'Free' State can exercise the franchise. They have no say in the selection of members for the Union Parliament. That right is only limited to white men, so that a large number of the members of Parliament who voted for this measure have no responsibility towards the black races.

Before reproducing this tyrannical enactment it would perhaps be well to recapitulate briefly the influences that led up to it. When the Union of the South African Colonies became an accomplished fact, a dread was expressed by ex-Republicans that the liberal native policy of the Cape would supersede the repressive policy of the old Republics, and they lost no time in taking definite steps to force down the throats of the Union legislature, as it were,

laws which the Dutch presidents of pre-war days, with the British suzerainty over their heads, did not dare enforce against the Native people then under them. With the formation of the Union, the Imperial Government, for reasons which have never been satisfactorily explained, unreservedly handed over the Natives to the colonists, and these colonists, as a rule, are dominated by the Dutch Republican spirit. Thus the suzerainty of Great Britain, which under the reign of Her late Majesty Victoria, of blessed memory, was the Natives' only bulwark, has now apparently been withdrawn or relaxed, and the Republicans, like a lot of bloodhounds long held in the leash, use the free hand given by the Imperial Government not only to guard against a possible supersession of Cape ideals of toleration, but to effectively extend throughout the Union the drastic native policy pursued by the province which is misnamed 'Free' State, and enforce it with the utmost rigour.

During the first year of the Union, it would seem that General Botha made an honest attempt to live up to his London promises, that are mentioned by Mr Merriman in his speech (reproduced elsewhere) on the second reading of the bill in Parliament. It would seem that General Botha endeavoured to allay British apprehensions and concern for the welfare of the Native population. In pursuance of this policy General Botha won the approbation of all Natives by appointing Hon. H. Burton, a Cape minister, to the portfolio of Native Affairs. That the appointment was a happy one, from the Native point of view, became manifest when Mr Burton signalized the ushering in of Union, by releasing Chief Dinuzulu-ka-Cetywayo, who at that time was undergoing a sentence of imprisonment imposed by the Natal Supreme Court, and by the restoration to Dinuzulu of his pension of £500 a year. Also, in deference to the wishes of the Native Congress, Mr Burton abrogated two particularly obnoxious Natal measures, one legalizing the 'Sibalo' system of forced labour, the other prohibiting public meetings by Natives without the consent of Government. These abrogations placed the Natives of Natal in almost the same position as the Cape Natives though without giving them the franchise. So, too, when a drastic Squatters' Bill was gazetted early in 1912, and the recently formed Native National Congress sent a deputation to interview Mr Burton in Cape Town, after hearing the deputation, he graciously consented to withdraw the proposed measure, pending the allotment of new locations in which Natives evicted by such a measure could find an asylum. In further deference to the representations of the Native Congress, in which they were supported by Senators the Hon. W.P. Schreiner, Colonel Stanford and Mr Krogh, the Union Government gazetted another bill in January 1911, to

amend an anomaly which, at that time, was peculiar to the 'Free' State: an anomaly under which a Native can neither purchase nor lease land, and native landowners in the 'Free' State could only sell their land to the white people.

The gazetted bill proposed to legalize only in one district of the Orange 'Free' State that sale of landed property by a Native to another Native as well as to a white man, but it did not propose to enable Natives to buy land from white men. The object of the bill was to remove a hardship, mentioned elsewhere in this sketch, by which a 'Free' State Native was by law debarred from inheriting landed property left to him under his uncle's will. But against such small attempts at reform, proposed or carried out by the Union Government in the interest of the Natives, granted in small instalments of a teaspoonful at a time – reforms dictated solely by feelings of justice and equity – ex-Republicans were furious.

From platform, press, and pulpit it was suggested that General Botha's administration was too English and needed overhauling. The Dutch peasants along the countryside were inflamed by hearing that their gallant leader desired to anglicize the country. Nothing was more repellent to the ideas of the backveld Dutch, and so at small meetings in the country districts resolutions were passed stating that the Botha administration had outlived its usefulness. These resolutions reaching the press from day to day had the effect of stirring up the Dutch voters against the ministry, and particularly against the head. At this time General Botha's sound policy began to weaken. He transferred Hon. H. Burton, first Minister of Native Affairs, to the portfolio of Railways and Harbours, and appointed General Hertzog, of all people in the world, to the portfolio of Native Affairs.

The good-humoured indulgence of some Dutch and English farmers towards their Native squatters, and the affectionate loyalty of some of these Native squatters in return, will cause a keen observer, arriving at a South African farm, to be lost in admiration for this mutual good feeling. He will wonder as to the meaning of the fabled bugbear anent the alleged struggle between white and black, which in reality appears to exist only in the fertile brain of the politician. Thus let the new arrival go to one of the farms in the Bethlehem or Harrismith districts for example, and see how willingly the Native toils in the fields; see him gathering in his crops and handing over the white farmer's share of the crop to the owner of the land; watch the farmer receiving his tribute from the Native tenants, and see him deliver the first prize to the Native tenant who raised the largest crop during that season; let

him also see both the Natives and the landowning white farmers following to perfection the give-and-take policy of 'live and let live', and he will conclude that it would be gross sacrilege to attempt to disturb such harmonious relations between these people of different races and colours. But with a ruthless hand the Natives' Land Act has succeeded in remorselessly destroying those happy relations.

First of all, General Hertzog, the new Minister of Native Affairs, travelled up and down the country lecturing farmers on their folly in letting ground to the Natives; the racial extremists of his party hailed him as the right man for the post, for, as his conduct showed them, he would soon 'fix up' the Natives. At one or two places he was actually welcomed as the future Prime Minister of the Union. On the other hand, General Botha, who at that time seemed to have become visibly timid, endeavoured to ingratiate himself with his discontented supporters by joining his lieutenant in travelling to and fro, denouncing the Dutch farmers for not expelling the Natives from their farms and replacing them with poor whites. This became a regular ministerial campaign against the Natives, so that it seemed clear that if any Native could still find a place in the land, it was not due to the action of the Government. In his campaign the Premier said other unhappy things which were diametrically opposed to his London speeches of two years before; and while the Dutch colonists railed at him for trying to anglicize the country, English speakers and writers justly accused him of speaking with two voices; cartoonists, too, caricatured him as having two heads – one, they said, for London, and the second one for South Africa.

The uncertain tenure by which Englishmen in the public service held their posts became the subject of debates in the Union Parliament, and the employment of Government servants of colour was decidedly precarious. They were swept out of the railway and postal service with a strong racial broom, in order to make room for poor whites, mainly of Dutch descent. Concession after concession was wrung from the Government by fanatical Dutch postulants for office, for Government doles and other favours, who, like the daughters of the horse-leech in the Proverbs of Solomon, continually cried, 'Give, give'. By these events we had clearly turned the corner and were pacing backwards to pre-Union days, going back, back, and still further backward to the conditions which prevailed in the old Republics, and (if a check is not applied) we shall steadily drift back to the days of the old Dutch East Indian administration.

The bill which proposed to ameliorate the 'Free' State cruelty, to which reference has been made above, was dropped like a hot potato. Ministers made

some wild and undignified speeches, of which the following spicy extract, from a speech by the Rt Hon Abraham Fischer to his constituents in Bethlehem, is a typical sample:

'What is it you want?' he asked. 'We have passed all the coolie⁴⁶ laws and we have passed all the Kaffir laws. The 'Free' State has been safeguarded and all her colour laws have been adopted by Parliament. What more can the government do for you?' And so the Union ship in this reactionary sea sailed on and on and on, until she struck an iceberg – the sudden dismissal of General Hertzog.

To the bitter sorrow of his admirers, General Hertzog, who is the fearless exponent of Dutch ideals, was relieved of his portfolios of Justice and Native Affairs – it was whispered as a result of a suggestion from London; and then the Dutch extremists, in consequence of their favourite's dismissal, gave vent to their anger in the most disagreeable manner. One could infer from their platform speeches that from their point of view, scarcely anyone else had any rights in South Africa, and least of all the man with a black skin.

In the face of this, the Government's timidity was almost unendurable. They played up to the desires of the racial extremists, with the result that a deadlock overtook the administration. Violent laws like the Immigration Law (against British Indians and alien Asiatics) and the Natives' Land Act were indecently hurried through Parliament to allay the susceptibilities of 'Free' State Republicans. No minister found time to undertake such useful legislation as the Coloured People's Occupation Bill, the Native Disputes Bill, the Marriage Bill, the University Bill, etc., etc. An apology was demanded from the High Commissioner in London for delivering himself of sentiments which were felt to be too British for the palates of his Dutch employers in South Africa, and the Prime Minister had almost to apologize for having at times so far forgotten himself as to act more like a Crown Minister than a simple Africander. 'Free' State demands became so persistent that ministers seemed to have forgotten the assurances they gave His Majesty's Government in London regarding the safety of His Majesty's coloured subjects within the Union. They trampled underfoot their own election pledges, made during the first Union General Election, guaranteeing justice and fair treatment to the law-abiding Natives.

The campaign to compass the elimination of the blacks from the farms, was not at all popular with landowners, who made huge profits out of the renting of their farms to Natives. Platform speakers and newspaper writers coined an opprobrious phrase which designated this letting of farms to Natives as 'Kaffir-

farming', and attempted to prove that it was almost as immoral as 'baby-farming'. But landowners pocketed the annual rents, and showed no inclination to substitute the less industrious 'poor whites' for the more industrious Natives. Old Baas M – , a typical Dutch landowner of the 'Free' State, having collected his share of the crop of 1912, addressing a few words of encouragement to his Native tenants, on the subject of expelling the blacks from the farms, said in the Taal: 'How dare any number of men, wearing tall hats and frock coats, living in Cape Town hotels at the expense of other men, order me to evict my Natives? This is my ground; it cost my money, not Parliament's, and I will see them banged (*barst*) before I do it.'

It then became evident that the authority of Parliament would have to be sought to compel the obstinate landowners to get rid of their Natives. And the compliance of Parliament with this demand was the greatest ministerial surrender to the Republican malcontents, resulting in the introduction and passage of the Natives' Land Act of 1913, inasmuch as the Act decreed, in the name of His Majesty the King, that pending the adoption of a report to be made by a commission, somewhere in the dim and unknown future, it shall be unlawful for Natives to buy or lease land, except in scheduled Native areas. And under severe pains and penalties they were to be deprived of the bare human rights of living on the land, except as servants in the employ of the whites – rights which were never seriously challenged under the Republican regime, no matter how politicians raved against the Natives.

CHAPTER 4

One Night with the Fugitives

*Es ist unkoniglich zu weinen – ach,
Und hier nicht weinen ist unwaterlich.**

– Schiller

'Pray that your flight be not in winter,' said Jesus Christ; but it was only during the winter of 1913 that the full significance of this New Testament passage was revealed to us. We left Kimberley by the early morning train during the first week in July, on a tour of observation regarding the operation of the Natives' Land Act; and we arrived at Bloemhof, in the Transvaal, at about noon. On the river diggings there were no actual cases representing the effects

* German: 'It is ignoble to weep – ah/And now it would be unfatherly not to'.

of the Act, but traces of these effects were everywhere manifest. Some fugitives of the Natives' Land Act had crossed the river in full flight. The fact that they reached the diggings a fortnight before our visit would seem to show that while the debates were proceeding in Parliament some farmers already viewed with eager eyes the impending opportunity for at once making slaves of their tenants and appropriating their stock; for, acting on the powers conferred on them by an Act signed by Lord Gladstone, so lately as June 16, they had during that very week (probably a couple of days after, and in some cases, it would seem, a couple of days before the actual signing of the Bill) approached their tenants with stories about a new Act which makes it criminal for anyone to have black tenants and lawful to have black servants. Few of these Natives, of course, would object to be servants, especially if the white man is worth working for, but this is where the shoe pinches: one of the conditions is that the black man's (that is the servant's) cattle shall henceforth work for the landlord free of charge. Then the Natives would decide to leave the farm rather than make the landlord a present of all their life's savings, and some of them passed through the diggings in search of a place in the Transvaal. But the higher up they went the more gloomy was their prospect as the news about the new law was now penetrating every part of the country.

One farmer met a wandering Native family in the town of Bloemhof a week before our visit. He was willing to employ the Native and many more homeless families as follows: a monthly wage of £2 10s. for each such family, the husband working in the fields, the wife in the house, with an additional 10s. a month for each son, and 5s. for each daughter, but on condition that the Native's cattle were also handed over to work for him. It must be clearly understood, we are told that the Dutchman added, that occasionally the Native would have to leave his family at work on the farm, and go out with his wagon and his oxen to earn money whenever and wherever he was told to go, in order that the master may be enabled to pay the stipulated wage. The Natives were at first inclined to laugh at the idea of working for a master with their families and goods and chattels, and then to have the additional pleasure of paying their own small wages, besides bringing money to pay the 'Baas' for employing them. But the Dutchman's serious demeanour told them that his suggestion was 'no joke'. He himself had for some time been in need of a Native cattle-owner, to assist him as transport rider between Bloemhof, Mooifontein, London, and other diggings, in return for the occupation and cultivation of some of his waste lands in the district, but that was now illegal.

He could only 'employ' them; but, as he had no money to pay wages, their cattle would have to go out and earn it for him. 'Had they not heard of the law before?' he enquired. Of course they had; in fact that is why they left the other place, but as they thought that it was but a 'Free' State law, they took the anomalous situation for one of the multifarious aspects of the freedom of the 'Free' State whence they came; they had scarcely thought that the Transvaal was similarly affected.

Needless to say the Natives did not see their way to agree with such a one-sided bargain. They moved up-country, but only to find the next farmer offering the same terms, however, with a good many more disturbing details – and the next farmer and the next – so that after this Native farmer had wandered from farm to farm, occasionally getting into trouble for travelling with unknown stock, 'across my ground without my permission', and at times escaping arrest for he knew not what, and further, being abused for the crimes of having a black skin and no master, he sold some of his stock along the way, beside losing many which died of cold and starvation; and after thus having lost much of his substance, he eventually worked his way back to Bloemhof with the remainder, sold them for anything they could fetch, and went to work for a digger.

The experience of another Native sufferer was similar to the above, except that instead of working for a digger he sold his stock for a mere bagatelle, and left with his family by the Johannesburg night train for an unknown destination. More Native families crossed the river and went inland during the previous week, and as nothing had since been heard of them, it would seem that they were still wandering somewhere, and incidentally becoming well versed in the law that was responsible for their compulsory unsettlement.

Well, we knew that this law was as harsh as its instigators were callous, and we knew that it would, if passed, render many poor people homeless, but it must be confessed that we were scarcely prepared for such a rapid and widespread crash as it caused in the lives of the Natives in this neighbourhood. We left our luggage the next morning with the local mission school teacher, and crossed the river to find out some more about this wonderful law of extermination. It was about 10 a.m. when we landed on the south bank of the Vaal River – the picturesque Vaal River, upon whose banks a hundred miles farther west we spent the best and happiest days of our boyhood. It was interesting to walk on one portion of the banks of that beautiful river – a portion of which we had never traversed except as an infant in mother's arms more than thirty years before. How the subsequent happy days at Barkly West,

so long past, came crowding upon our memory! – days when there were no railways, no bridges, and no system of irrigation. In rainy seasons, the river used to overflow its high banks and flood the surrounding valleys to such an extent, that no punt could carry the wagons across. Thereby the transport service used to be hung up, and numbers of wagons would congregate for weeks on both sides of the river until the floods subsided. At such times the price of fresh milk used to mount up to 1s. per pint. There being next to no competition, we boys had a monopoly over the milk trade. We recalled the number of haversacks full of bottles of milk we youngsters often carried to those wagons, how we returned with empty bottles and with just that number of shillings. Mother and our elder brothers had leather bags full of gold and did not care for the 'boy's money'; and unlike the boys of the neighbouring village, having no sisters of our own, we gave away some of our money to fair cousins, and jingled the rest in our pockets. We had been told from boyhood that sweets were injurious to the teeth, and so spurning these delights we had hardly any use for the money, for all we wanted to eat, drink and wear was to hand in plenty. We could then get six or eight shillings every morning from the pastime of washing that number of bottles, filling them with fresh milk and carrying them down to the wagons; there was always such an abundance of the liquid that our shepherd's hunting dog could not possibly miss what we took, for while the flocks were feeding on the luscious buds of the haak-doorns and the blossoms of the rich mimosa and other wild vegetation that abounded on the banks of the Vaal River, the cows, similarly engaged, were gathering more and more milk.

The gods are cruel, and one of their cruellest acts of omission was that of giving us no hint that in very much less than a quarter of a century all those hundreds of heads of cattle, and sheep and horses belonging to the family would vanish like a morning mist, and that we ourselves would live to pay 30s. per month for a daily supply of this same precious fluid, and in very limited quantities. They might have warned us that Englishmen would agree with Dutchmen to make it unlawful for black men to keep milk cows of their own on the banks of that river, and gradually have prepared us for the shock.

Crossing the river from the Transvaal side brings one into the province of the Orange 'Free' State, in which, in the adjoining division of Boshof, we were born thirty-six years back. We remember the name of the farm, but not having been in this neighbourhood since infancy, we could not tell its whereabouts, nor could we say whether the present owner was a Dutchman, his lawyer, or a Hebrew merchant; one thing we do know, however: it is that even if we had

the money and the owner was willing to sell the spot upon which we first saw the light of day and breathed the pure air of heaven, the sale would be followed with a fine of one hundred pounds. The law of the country forbids the sale of land to a Native. Russia is one of the most abused countries in the world, but it is extremely doubtful if the statute book of that empire contains a law debarring the peasant from purchasing the land whereon he was born, or from building a home wherein he might end his days.

At this time we felt something rising from our heels along our back, gripping us in a spasm, as we were cycling along; a needlelike pang, too, pierced our heart with a sharp thrill. What was it? We remembered feeling something nearly like it when our father died eighteen years ago; but at that time our physical organs were fresh and grief was easily thrown off in tears, but then we lived in a happy South Africa that was full of pleasant anticipations, and now – what changes for the worse have we undergone! For to crown all our calamities, South Africa has by law ceased to be the home of any of her Native children whose skins are dyed with a pigment that does not conform with the regulation hue.

We are told to forgive our enemies and not to let the sun go down upon our wrath, so we breathe the prayer that peace may be to the white races, and that they, including our present persecutors of the Union Parliament, may never live to find themselves deprived of all occupation and property rights in their native country as is now the case with the Native. History does not tell us of any other continent where the Bantu lives besides Africa, and if this systematic ill-treatment of the Natives by the colonists is to be the guiding principle of Europe's scramble for Africa, slavery is our only alternative; for now it is only as serfs that the Natives are legally entitled to live here. Is it to be thought that God is using the South African Parliament to hound us out of our ancestral homes in order to quicken our pace heavenward? But to go from where to heaven? In the beginning, we are told, God created heaven and earth, and peopled the earth, for people do not shoot up to heaven from nowhere. They must have had an earthly home. Enoch, Melchizedek, Elijah, and other saints, came to heaven from earth. God did not say to the Israelites in their bondage: 'Cheer up, boys; bear it all in good part for I have bright mansions on high awaiting you all.' But he said: 'I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows, and I am come down to bring them out of the hands of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey.' And

He used Moses to carry out the promise He made to their ancestor Abraham in Canaan, that 'unto thy seed will I give this land'. It is to be hoped that in the Boer churches, entrance to which is barred against coloured people during divine service, they also read the Pentateuch.

It is doubtful if we ever thought so much on a single bicycle ride as we did on this journey; however, the sight of a policeman ahead of us disturbed these meditations and gave place to thoughts of quite another kind, for – we had no pass. Dutchmen, Englishmen, Jews, Germans and other foreigners may roam the 'Free' State without permission – but not Natives. To us it would mean a fine and imprisonment to be without a pass. The 'pass' law was first instituted to check the movement of livestock over sparsely populated areas. In a sense it was a wise provision, in that it served to identify the livestock which one happened to be driving along the high road, to prove the bona fides of the driver and his title to the stock. Although white men still steal large droves of horses in Basutoland and sell them in Natal or in East Griqualand, they, of course, are not required to carry any passes. These white horse-thieves, to escape the clutches of the police, employ Natives to go and sell the stolen stock and write the passes for these Natives, forging the names of magistrates and justices of the peace. Such Native thieves in some instances ceasing to be hirelings in the criminal business, trade on their own, but it is not clear what purpose it is intended to serve by subjecting Native pedestrians to the degrading requirement of carrying passes when they are not in charge of any stock.

In a few moments the policeman was before us and we alighted in presence of the representative of the law, with our feet on the accursed soil of the district in which we were born. The policeman stopped. By his looks and his familiar 'Dag jong'* we noticed that the policeman was Dutch, and the embodiment of affability. He spoke and we were glad to notice that he had no intention of dragging an innocent man to prison. We were many miles from the nearest police station, and in such a case one is generally able to gather the real views of the man on patrol, as distinct from the written code of his office, but our friend was becoming very companionable. Naturally we asked him about the operation of the plague law. He was a Transvaaler, he said, and he knew that Kaffirs were inferior beings, but they had rights, and were always left in undisturbed possession of their property when Paul Kruger was alive. 'The poor devils must be sorry now,' he said, 'that they ever sang "God Save

* Dutch, 'Good-day'.

the Queen" when the British troops came into the Transvaal, for I have seen, in the course of my duties, that a Kaffir's life nowadays was not worth a — , and I believe that no man regretted the change of flags now more than the Kaffirs of Transvaal.' This information was superfluous, for personal contact with the Natives of Transvaal had convinced us of the fact. They say it is only the criminal who has any reason to rejoice over the presence of the Union Jack, because in his case the cat-o'-nine tails, except for very serious crimes, has been abolished.

'Some of the poor creatures,' continued the policeman, 'I knew to be fairly comfortable, if not rich, and they enjoyed the possession of their stock, living in many instances just like Dutchmen. Many of these are now being forced to leave their homes. Cycling along this road you will meet several of them in search of new homes, and if ever there was a fool's errand, it is that of a Kaffir trying to find a new home for his stock and family just now.'

'And what do you think, Baas Officer, must eventually be the lot of a people under such unfortunate circumstances?' we asked.

'I think,' said the policeman, 'that it must serve them right. They had no business to hanker after British rule, to cheat and plot with the enemies of their Republic for the overthrow of their Government. Why did they not assist the forces of their Republic during the war instead of supplying the English with scouts and intelligence? Oom Paul would not have died of a broken heart and he would still be there to protect them. Serve them right, I say.'

So saying he spurred his horse, which showed a clean pair of hoofs. He left us rather abruptly, for we were about to ask why we, too, of Natal and the Cape were suffering, for we, being originally British subjects, never 'cheated and plotted with the enemies of our Colonies', but he was gone and left us still cogitating by the roadside.

Proceeding on our journey we next came upon a Native trek and heard the same old story of prosperity on a Dutch farm: they had raised an average eight hundred bags of grain each season, which, with the increased stock and sale of wool, gave a steady income of about £150 per year after the farmer had taken his share. There were gossiping rumours about somebody having met someone who said that someone else had overheard a conversation between the Baas and somebody else, to the effect that the Kaffirs were getting too rich on his property. This much involved tale incidentally conveys the idea that the Baas was himself getting too rich on his farm. For the Native provides his own seed, his own cattle, his own labour for the ploughing, the weeding and the reaping,

and after bagging his grain he calls in the landlord to receive his share, which is fifty per cent of the entire crop.

All had gone well till the previous week when the Baas came to the Native tenants with the story that a new law had been passed under which 'all my oxen and cows must belong to him, and my family to work for £2 a month, failing which he gave me four days to leave the farm.'

We passed several farmhouses along the road, where all appeared pretty tranquil as we went along, until the evening which we spent in the open country, somewhere near the boundaries of the Hoopstad and Boshof Districts; here a regular circus had gathered. By a 'circus' we mean the meeting of groups of families, moving to every point of the compass, and all bivouacked at this point in the open country where we were passing. It was heartrending to listen to the tales of their cruel experiences derived from the rigour of the Natives' Land Act. Some of their cattle had perished on the journey, from poverty and lack of fodder, and the Native owners ran a serious risk of imprisonment for travelling with dying stock. The experience of one of these evicted tenants is typical of the rest, and illustrates the cases of several we met in other parts of the country.

Kgobadi, for instance, had received a message describing the eviction of his father-in-law in the Transvaal Province, without notice, because he had refused to place his stock, his family, and his person at the disposal of his former landlord, who now refuses to let him remain on his farm except on these conditions. The father-in-law asked that Kgobadi should try and secure a place for him in the much dreaded 'Free' State as the Transvaal had suddenly become uninhabitable to Natives who cannot become servants; but 'greedy folk hae lang aims', and Kgobadi himself was proceeding with his family and his belongings in a wagon, to inform his people-in-law of his own eviction, without notice, in the 'Free' State, for a similar reason to that which sent his father-in-law adrift. The Baas had exacted from him the services of himself, his wife and his oxen, for wages of 30s. a month, whereas Kgobadi had been making over £100 a year, besides retaining the services of his wife and of his cattle to himself. When he refused the extortionate terms, the Baas retaliated with a Dutch note, dated the 30th day of June 1913, which ordered him to 'betake himself from the farm of the undersigned, by sunset of the same day, failing which his stock would be seized and impounded, and himself handed over to the authorities for trespassing on the farm.'

A drowning man catches at every straw, and so we were again and again appealed to for advice by these sorely afflicted people. To those who were not

yet evicted we counselled patience and submission to the absurd terms, pending an appeal to a higher authority than the South African Parliament and finally to His Majesty the King who, we believed, would certainly disapprove of all that we saw on that day had it been brought to his notice. As for those who were already evicted, as a Bechuana we could not help thanking God that Bechuanaland (on the western boundary of this quasi-British Republic) was still entirely British. In the early days it was the base of David Livingstone's activities and peaceful mission against the Portuguese and Arab slave trade. We suggested that we might negotiate the numerous restrictions against the transfer of cattle from the western Transvaal and seek an asylum in Bechuanaland. We wondered what consolation we could give to these roving wanderers if the whole of Bechuanaland were under the jurisdiction of the relentless Union Parliament. It was cold that afternoon as we cycled into the 'Free' State of Transvaal, and towards evening the southern winds rose. A cutting blizzard raged during the night, and Native mothers evicted from their homes shivered with their babies by their sides. When we saw on that night the teeth of little children clattering through the cold, we thought of our own little ones in their Kimberley home of an evening after gambolling in their winter frocks with their schoolmates, and we wondered what these little mites had done that a home should suddenly become to them a thing of the past.

Kgobadi's goats had been to kid when he trekked from his farm; but the kids, which in halcyon times represented the interest on his capital, were now one by one dying as fast as they were born and left by the roadside for the jackals and vultures to feast upon.

This visitation was not confined to Kgobadi's stock. Mrs Kgobadi carried a sick baby when the eviction took place, and she had to transfer her darling from the cottage to the jolting ox-wagon in which they left the farm. Two days out the little one began to sink as the result of privation and exposure on the road, and the night before we met them its little soul was released from its earthly bonds. The death of the child added a fresh perplexity to the stricken parents. They had no right or title to the farmlands through which they trekked: the must keep to the public roads – the only places in the country open to the outcasts if they are possessed of travelling permit. The deceased child had to be buried, but where, when, and how?

This young wandering family decided to dig a grave under cover of the darkness of that night, when no one was looking, and in that crude manner the dead child was interred – and interred amid fear and trembling, as well as the throbs of a torturing anguish, in a stolen grave, lest the proprietor of the

spot, or any of his servants, should surprise them in the act. Even criminals dropping straight from the gallows have an undisputed claim to six feet of ground on which to rest their criminal remains, but under the cruel operation of the Natives' Land Act little children, whose only crime is that God did not make them white, are sometimes denied that right in their ancestral home.

Numerous details narrated by these victims of an Act of Parliament kept us awake all that night, and by next morning we were glad enough to hear no more of the sickening procedure of extermination voluntarily instituted by the South African Parliament. We had spent a hideous night under a bitterly cold sky, conditions to which hundreds of our unfortunate countrymen and countrywomen in various parts of the country are condemned by the provisions of this Parliamentary land plague. At five o'clock in the morning the cold seemed to redouble its energies; and never before did we so fully appreciate the Master's saying: 'But pray ye that your flight be not in the winter.'

REPORT OF THE LANDS COMMISSION

An Analysis

The first section of this chapter, examining in detail the report of the Commission region by region, has been omitted.

General Hertzog's Scheme

It may interest the reader to know that General Hertzog is the father of the segregation controversy. The writer and other Natives interviewed him before Christmas 1912, at the Palace of Justice, Pretoria, when he was still in the Ministry. We had a two hours' discussion, in the course of which the General gave us a forecast of what he then regarded as possible Native areas, and drew rings on a large wall-map of the Union to indicate their locality. Included in these rings were several magistracies which he said would solve a knotty problem. He told us that white people objected to black men in Government offices and magistrates in those areas would have no difficulty in employing them.

General Hertzog was dismissed shortly after, and it has been said that in order to placate his angry admirers the Ministry passed the Natives' Land Act of which this Report is the outcome. Judging by the vigour with which the Union administration has been weeding Natives out of the public service and replacing them with Boers without waiting for the Commission's Report, it is

clear that they did not share General Hertzog's intention as regards these magistracies. I cannot recall all the magistracies which General Hertzog mentioned as likely to fall in Native areas; but I distinctly remember that Pietersburg and Thaba Nchu were among them; while Alice and Peddie (and possibly a neighbouring district) were to be included in a southern reserve into which the Natives round East London and Grahamstown would have to move, the land vacated by them to be gradually occupied by the white settlers now scattered over the would-be Native block. He went on to forecast a vast dependency of the Union in which the energies and aspirations of black professional men would find their outlet with no danger of competition with Europeans; where a new educational and representative system could be evolved for Natives to live their own lives, and work out their salvation in a separate sphere. But the Lands Commission's Report places this plausible scheme beyond the region of possibility, for no Native area, recommended by this Commission, includes any of the magistracies mentioned.

General Hertzog's plan at least offered a fair ground for discussion, but the Commission's Report is a travesty of his scheme. It intensifies every Native difficulty and goes much further than the wild demands of the 'Free' State extremists. Thus, even if it be thrown out, as it deserves to be, future exploiters will always cite it as an excuse for measures subversive of Native well-being. In fact, that such legislation should be mooted is nothing short of a national calamity.

How They 'Doubled' a Native Area

Near the northern boundaries of Transvaal there lies a stretch of malaria country in which nothing can live unless born there. Men and beasts from other parts visit it only in winter and leave it again before the rains begin, when the atmosphere becomes almost too poisonous to inhale. Even the unfailing tax gatherers of the Native Affairs Department go there only in the winter every year and hurry back again with the money bags before the malaria period sets in. A Boer general describes how when harassed by the Imperial forces during the South African War, he was once compelled to march through it; and how his men and horses – many of them natives of the Transvaal – contracted enough malaria during the march to cause the illness of many and the death of several burghers and animals. Of the Native inhabitants of this delectable area the Dutch General says: 'Their diminutive deformed stature was another proof of the miserable climate obtaining here'.⁴⁷ When the Land Commissioners contemplated this 'salubrious' region, their

hearts must have melted with generosity, for whereas in our own healthy part of South Africa they have indicated possible Native areas by little dots or microscopical rings (as in Thaba Nchu for instance), here, in this malaria area, they marked off a reserve almost as wide as that described by General Hertzog himself at our Pretoria interview. It is possibly in this way, and in such impossible places, that the Commission is alleged to have 'doubled' the Native areas. In the rest of the country they ask Parliament to confiscate our birthright to the soil of our ancestry in favour of 600,000 Boers and aliens whose languages can show no synonym for home – the English equivalent of our *ikaya* and *legae*!

The Britishers' vocabulary includes that sacred word: and that, perhaps, is the reason why their colonizing schemes have always allowed some tracts of country for Native family life, with reasonable opportunities for their future existence and progress, in the vast South African expanses which God in His providence had created for His Children of the Sun. The Englishman, moreover, found us speaking the word *legae*, and taught us how to write it. In 1910, much against our will, the British Government surrendered its immediate sovereignty over our land to Colonials and cosmopolitan aliens who know little about a Home, because their dictionaries contain no such loving term: and the recommendations of this Commission would seem to express their limited conception of the word and its beautiful significance.

Ignorant of the Coming Servitude

All too little (if anything at all) is known of the services rendered to the common weal by the Native leaders in South Africa. In every crisis of the past four years – and the one-sided policy of the Union has produced many of these – the Native leaders have taken upon themselves the thankless and expensive task of restraining the Natives from resorting to violence. The seeming lack of appreciation with which the Government has met their success in that direction has been the cause of some comment among Natives. On more than one occasion they have asked whether the authorities were disappointed because, by their successful avoidance of bloodshed, the Native leaders had forestalled the machine-guns. But, be the reason what it may, this apparent ingratitude has not cooled their ardour in the cause of peace.

Today the Native Affairs Department has handed over £7,000 from Native taxes to defray the cost of the Land Commission, consisting of five white commissioners, their white clerks and secretaries – the printing alone swallowed up nearly £1,000 with further payments to white translators for a

Dutch edition of the Report. But not a penny could be spared for the enlightenment of the Natives at whose expense the inquiry had been carried through. They have been officially told and had every reason to believe that the Commission was going about to mark out reservations for them to occupy and live emancipated from the prejudicial conditions that would spring from contiguity with the white race. For any information as to the real character of the contents of the Dutch and English Report of this Commission, they would have to depend on what they could gather from the unsalaried efforts of the Native leaders who, owing to the vastness of the sub-continent, the lack of travelling facilities and their own limited resources, can only reach a few localities and groups.

It may be said with some reason that English leaders of thought in South Africa have had a task of like difficulty: that they worked just as hard to get the English colonists to co-operate loyally with a vanquished foe in whose hands the Union constitution has placed the destiny of South Africa. It could also be said with equal justice that the Boer leaders' task has been not less difficult, but it required their greatest tact to get the Boer majority – now in power – to deal justly with the English who had been responsible for the elimination of the two Boer flags from among the emblems of the family of nations.

But the difficulty of their task is not comparable to that of the Native leaders. English and Dutch Colonial leaders are members of Parliament, each in receipt of £400 a year, with a free first-class ticket over all systems of the South African Railways. They enjoy, besides, the co-operation of an army of well-paid white civil servants, without whom they could scarcely have managed their own people. The Native leader on the other hand, in addition to other impediments, has to contend with the difficulty of financing his own tours in a country whose settled policy is to see that Natives do not make any money. His position in his own country approximates to that of an Englishman, grappling single-handed, with complicated problems, on foreign soil, without the aid of a British Consul.

Bullyragging the Natives

For upwards of three years the government of the Union of South Africa has harassed and maltreated the rural Native taxpayers as no heathen monarch, since the time of the Zulu King Chaka, ever ill-used a tributary people. For the greater part of our period of suffering the Empire was engaged in a titanic struggle, which for ghastliness is without precedent. I can think of no people in

the Eastern Hemisphere who are absolutely unaffected by it; but the members of the Empire can find consolation in the fact that almost all creation is in sympathy with them. Constant disturbance has brought a realization to the entire universe that nature, like the times, is out of joint. The birds of the air and the fishes, like other denizens of the deep, are frequently drawn into the whirlpool of misery; and a mutual suffering has identified them as it were with some of the vicissitudes of an Empire at war. And they too have in their peculiar way felt impelled to offer their condolence to the dependents of those who have fallen in the combat on land, in the air, on sea, and under the sea. And while all creation stands aghast beside the gaping graves, by rivers of blood, mourning with us the loss of some of the greatest Englishmen that ever lived, South Africa, having constituted herself the only vandal State, possesses sufficient in compassion to celebrate the protection conferred on her by the British Fleet and devote her God-given security to an orgy of tyranny over those hapless coloured subjects of the King, whom the Union constitution has placed in the hollow of her hands.

Is there anybody left on earth who is just enough to call on South Africa to put an end to this cowardly abuse of power?

We appeal to the Colonists of Natal, who have declared themselves against the persecution of their Natives; and would draw their attention to the fact that in spite of their disapproval, expressed to the Lands Commission, the Union Government, at the behest of a prisoner, is still tyrannizing over the Zulus.

We appeal to the Churches. We would remind them that in the past the Christian voice has been our only shield against legislative excesses of the kind now in full swing in the Union. But in the new ascendancy of self and pelf over justice and tolerance, that voice will be altogether ignored, unless strongly reinforced by the Christian world at large. We appeal for deliverance from the operation of a cunningly conceived and a most draconian law whose administration has been marked by the closing down of Native churches and chapels in rural South Africa.

We appeal to the Jews, God's chosen people, who know what suffering means. We would remind them that if after 1913 there was no repetition of a Russian pogrom it was largely because the Native leaders (including the author) have spared neither pains nor pence in visiting the scattered tribes and exhorting them to obey all the demands of the South African Government under the Grobler⁴⁸ law pending a peaceful intercession from the outside world. But for this self-imposed duty on the part of the Native leaders, I am satisfied that numbers of the Native peasantry would have been mown

down early in 1914, and humanity would have been told that they were justly punished for disobedience to constituted authority.

We appeal to the leaders of the Empire – that Empire for which my own relatives have sacrificed life and property in order to aid its extension along the Cape to Cairo route, entirely out of love for her late Majesty Queen Victoria and with no expectation of material reward. We ask these leaders to honour the plighted word of their noble predecessors who collectively and severally assured us a future of peace and happiness as our membership privilege in the Empire for which we bled. They were among the noblest Englishmen that ever left their Native shores to create a prestige for their nation abroad. They included heroes and empire-builders, too many to mention, who all told us that they spoke in the name of Queen Victoria and on behalf of her heirs and successors. What has suddenly become of the Briton's word – his bond – that solemn obligations of such Imperialists should cease to count? And if it is decided that the Victorian Englishman and the twentieth-century Englishman are creatures of different clay (and that with the latter honour is binding only when both parties to the undertaking are white), surely this could hardly be the moment to inaugurate a change the reaction of which cannot fail to desecrate the memories of your just and upright forebears.

We would draw the attention of the British people to the fact that the most painful part of the present ordeal to the loyal black millions, who are now doing all they can, or are allowed to do, to help the Empire to win the war, is that they suffer this consummate oppression at the bidding of a gentleman now serving his term for participating in a rebellion during this war. We feel that it must be a source of intense satisfaction to Mr Piet Grobler in his cell, that the most loyal section of the King's South African subjects are suffering persecution under his law – a fact which, looked at from whatever standpoint, is equal to an official justification of the ideals for which he rose in rebellion. And if there is to be a return to the contented South Africa of other days, both the Natives' Land Act – his law – and the Report of the Lands Commission – its climax – should be torn up.

Courting Retribution

For three years and more the South African Government have persecuted my kinsmen and kinswomen for no other crime than that they have meekly paid their taxes. I had come to the conclusion, after meeting colonials from all quarters of the globe and weighing the information obtained from them, that in no colony are the Native inhabitants treated with greater injustice than in South Africa.⁴⁹ Yet in spite of all I had seen and heard, I must say that, until this

Report reached me, I never would have believed my white fellow-countrymen capable of conceiving the all but diabolical schemes propounded between the covers of Volume 1 of the Report of the South African Lands Commission, 1916, and clothing them in such plausible form as to mislead even sincere and well-informed friends of Natives. There are pages upon pages of columns of figures running into four, five or six noughts. They will dazzle the eye until the reader imagines himself witnessing the redistribution of the whole subcontinent and its transfer to the Native tribes. But two things he will never find in that mass of figures; these are (a) the grand total of the land so 'awarded' to Natives; and (b) how much is left for other people. To arrive at these he has to do his own additions and subtractions, and call in the aid of statistics such as the census figures, the annual Blue Books etc., before the truth begins to dawn on him. They talk of having 'doubled' the Native areas. They found us in occupation of 143 million morgen and propose to squeeze us into 18 million. If this means doubling it, then our teachers must have taught us the wrong arithmetic. Is it any wonder that it is becoming increasingly difficult for us to continue to love and respect the great white race as we truly loved it at the beginning of the century?

We would submit a few problems in this Report for the British people and their Parliamentary representatives to solve:

Firstly: Who are to become the occupants of the lands from which the Commission recommends the removal of the Native proletariat?

Secondly: In view of certain upheavals which we have seen not very long ago, and others which might take place in the future, it is pertinent to ask, concerning the 'very small minority of the inhabitants' – the whites – alluded to by Mr Schreiner at the head of this chapter,⁵⁰ (a) what proportion is in full sympathy with the ideals of the British Empire; (b) what proportion remains indifferent; and (c) what proportion may be termed hostile?

Thirdly: Does the autonomy granted to this 'small minority' amount to complete independence, or does it not?

Fourthly: Would it not be advisable also to inquire of 'the vast majority of the inhabitants', the King's black subjects, doomed by this Report to forfeit their homes and all they value in their own country, (a) how many of these are loyal, and (b) how many are not?

Finally and solemnly we would put it to all concerned for the honour and perpetuity of British dominion in South Africa, can the Empire afford to tamper with and alienate their affections?

As stated already, this 'very vast majority of the inhabitants' of South Africa has been strafed by the 'very small minority' for over three years. And when the

burden loaded on our bent backs becomes absolutely unbearable we are at times inclined to blame ourselves; for, when some of us fought hard – and often against British diplomacy – to extend the sphere of British influence, it never occurred to us that the spread of British dominion in South Africa would culminate in consigning us to our present intolerable position, namely, a helotage under a Boer oligarchy. But when an official Commission asks Parliament to herd us into concentration camps, with the additional recommendation that besides breeding slaves for our masters, we should be made to pay for the upkeep of the camps: in other words, that we should turn the colonials into slave-raiders and slave-drivers (but save them the expense of buying the slaves), the only thing that stands between us and despair is the thought that Heaven has never yet failed us. We remember how African women have at times shed tears under similar injustices; and how when they have been made to leave their fields with their hoes on their shoulders, their tears on evaporation have drawn fire and brimstone from the skies. But such blind retribution has a way of punishing the innocent alike with the guilty, and it is in the interests of both that we plead for some outside intervention to assist South Africa in recovering her lost senses.

The ready sympathy expressed by those British people among whom I have lived and laboured during the past two years inspires the confidence that a consensus of British opinion will, in the Union's interest, stay the hand of the South African Government, veto this iniquity and avert the nemesis that would surely follow its perpetration.

Her mind must have been riveted on South Africa when, quite recently, Ida Luckie sang:

Alas, My Country! Thou wilt have no need
Of enemy to bring thee to they doom ...
For not alone by war a nation falls.
Though she be fair, serene as radiant morn,
Though girt by seas, secure in armament,
Let her but spurn the vision of the Cross;
Tread with contemptuous feet on its command
Of Mercy, Love and Human Brotherhood,
And she, some fateful day, shall have no need
Of enemy to bring her to the dust.

Some day, though distant it may be – with God
A thousand years are but as yesterday -
The germs of hate, injustice, violence,

Like an insidious canker in the blood,
 Shall eat that nation's vitals. She shall see
 Break forth the blood-red tide of anarchy,
 Sweeping her plains, laying her cities low,
 And bearing on its seething, crimson flood
 The wreck of Government, of home, and all
 The nation's pride, its splendour and its power.
 On with relentless flow, into the seas
 Of God's eternal vengeance wide and deep.
 But, for God's grace! Oh may it hold thee fast,
 My Country, until justice shall prevail
 O'er wrong and o'er oppression's cruel power,
 And all that makes humanity to mourn.

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'A South African's Homage', in *A Book of Homage to Shakespeare* (1916)⁵¹

A Book of Homage to Shakespeare was published in celebration of the three hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's death. Plaatje had been invited to contribute by Israel Gollancz, the editor of the book and a professor of literature at King's College, London, whom he had probably met through his friend, Alice Werner, a lecturer at the same college. Plaatje subsequently visited Shakespeare's birthplace, Stratford-upon-Avon, later in 1916, where he was introduced at a Brotherhood meeting as 'a well-known Shakespeare scholar'.

I had but a vague idea of Shakespeare until about 1896 when, at the age of 18, I was attracted by the Press remarks in the Kimberley paper, and went to see *Hamlet* in the Kimberley Theatre.⁵² The performance made me curious to know more about Shakespeare and his works. Intelligence in Africa is still carried from mouth to mouth by means of conversations after working hours, and, reading a number of Shakespeare's works, I always had a fresh story to tell.

I first read *The Merchant of Venice*. The characters were so realistic that I was asked more than once to which of certain speculators, then operating round Kimberley, Shakespeare referred as Shylock. All this gave me an appetite for more Shakespeare, and I found that many of the current quotations used by educated Natives to embellish their speeches, which I had always taken for English proverbs, were culled from Shakespeare's works.

While reading *Cymbeline*, I met the girl who afterwards became my wife. I was not then as well acquainted with her language – the Xhosa – as I am now; and although she had a better grip of mine – the Sechuana – I was doubtful whether I could make her understand my innermost feelings in it, so in coming to an understanding we both used the language of educated people – the language which Shakespeare wrote – which happened to be the only official language of our country at the time. Some of the daily epistles were rather lengthy, for I usually started with the bare intention of expressing the affections of my heart but generally finished up by completely unburdening my soul. For command of language and giving expression to abstract ideas, the success of my efforts was second only to that of my wife's, and it is easy to divine that Shakespeare's poems fed our thoughts.

It may be depended upon that we both read *Romeo and Juliet*. My people resented the idea of my marrying a girl who spoke a language which, like the Hottentot language, had clicks in it; while her people likewise abominated the idea of giving their daughter in marriage to a fellow who spoke a language so imperfect as to be without any clicks. But the civilized laws of Cape Colony saved us from a double tragedy in a cemetery, and our erstwhile objecting relatives have lived to award their benediction to the growth of our Chuana-M'Bo family which is bilingual both in the vernaculars and in European languages.

In the beginning of this century I became a journalist, and when called on to comment on things social, political, or military, I always found inspiration in one of other of Shakespeare's sayings. For instance, in 1910, when Halley's Comet illumined the Southern skies, King Edward VII and two great Bechuana Chiefs – Sebele and Bathoeng – died. I commenced each obituary with Shakespeare's quotation:

When beggars die there are no comets seen;
 The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes.

Besides being natural story-tellers, the Bechuana are good listeners, and legendary stories seldom fail to impress them. Thus, one morning, I visited the Chief's court at Mafeking and was asked for the name of 'the white man who spoke so well'. An educated Chieftain promptly replied for me; he said: William Tsikinya-Chaka (William Shake-the-Sword). The translation, though perhaps more free than literal, is happy in its way considering how many of Shakespeare's characters met their death. Tsikinya-Chaka became noted among some of my readers as a reliable white oracle.