

THE RIDGE OF WHITE WATERS

ONE who is outside the danger-zone, as we are in South Africa, must feel bound to apologise for asking those whose thoughts are preoccupied with the war to consider other things. When men are fighting for survival it hardly seems the time to speak of the uncertain future and lands as far away as dreams. So it is with diffidence that I write this. But I write for three reasons. First: the work of God must go on as ever among those who have no fault or part in the great quarrel, and it may be a consolation to those in the war to know that it is going on. Secondly it should introduce to their thoughts of post-war reconstruction a land that seems to be destined for construction at a pace similar to that of the growth of the United States in the last century. Thirdly I believe that the place I am to speak of, the Gold Reef of South Africa, is a focal point in the war. When the German armies began the attack on France, the bells were rung (the German people were told) for the beginning of a battle that was to carve out for them a great empire. Empire where? Surely in Africa, where the German Empire had been. And which is the most minerally wealthy, and the most temperate part of Africa, that which the thorough German mind sees to be most capable of rapid development? Without a doubt it is South Africa. (The last German Emperor said he would never permit Britain to hold it). And the present centre of this desirable land and of its industrial possibilities is in the hills surrounding Johannesburg, called the Witwatersrand, or Ridge of White Waters.

Where the High Veldt of South Africa reaches its crown, before it begins to slope away northwards to the Low Veldt, there rises a ridge of hills that was given this name. Only a man's lifetime past, in the eighties, there were farms on its sheltered slopes. Its rocky Kopjes were bare from the day of their creation. Dutch farmers herded over it and looked northwards to patriarchal Pretoria. They were a simple stern and unprogressive people, and thought they had found in the Central and Northern Transvaal a piece of the earth that would remain primeval and as God made it, a sanctuary from the mining-fever, the liquor-traffic and the whoredoms of Kimberley. There Cecil Rhodes had made a fortune in diamonds and was planning a new united states (in the Empire) to stretch from the Cape to the Zambesi, with a million odd square miles to develop and play in.

Of the two dreams it is Cecil Rhodes' that seems to be coming true. Elderly natives who had watched the white men digging giant holes for diamonds and laboriously panning alluvial gold, had hinted that the latter was more plentiful on the Ridge of White Waters. One day it was found, as some living men remember. A gold-rush began. Sam Kemp, a sherriff's man in the early shooting days, wrote: 'Since that dust-try, blowing autumn when the human stampede surged to Johannesburg, I have seen the New Mexico-Arizona frontier in its palmiest days of villainy—a picnic ground for Sunday school compared to the Rand in the year following 1886.' The Rand is now a district as orderly, populous and industrialised as Lancashire. Electric trains connect it from end to end. Sky-scrapers are one's first impression of Johannesburg coming in by train from the South. Below it, and East and West along the reef, are the deepest and richest gold mines in the world. In the towns that have sprung up from mining camps in a generation are blocks of flats, cinemas and parks to rival London's. It has a population as cosmopolitan. The air, like London's, is industrially thick, not with black dust, but with the white silicate dust that drifts from off the mine-dumps under the perpetually blazing sun. It is now the Ridge of White Hills, hills hundreds of feet high, the mountains of white rock dumped from the mines.

And this has come only by the development of one small part of South Africa's mineral wealth. Diamonds would have made the country wealthy without it—if the marketers had been able to prevent themselves overflowing their own markets. There is platinum, already bought by the mines and to be worked if the gold gives out. Men who have camped on the Veldt will tell you how, in some places, the stones around the camp-fire explode from the metal in them. There is coal on the surface in places where it is forbidden to pick it up. The country is becoming linked from end to end by national roads, so that the thousand miles from the Cape to the Rand can be driven in two days. In the poverty of Europe after this war there will without doubt be an immense immigration. Everything points to a future for South Africa parallel to that of the United States.

The physical grandeur of the country makes one feel this instinctively, its masses of mountain, its unlimited Veldt, its mingled devastation and richness. Everything that is happening in it upholds the conviction. Its English-speaking population have the rude energy of Empire-builders, and still much of the feverish energy of the gold-rush. Its Dutch-speaking people have an intense national

consciousness, aware that they inherit the traditions of the Trekkers, who crossed the mountains from the fertile South and conveyed their whole household a thousand miles into a wilderness full of hostile and warlike tribes. Its native population, who now outnumber the whites by three or four to one, may die out, killed by vice and liquor as were the North American Indians. But there is extraordinary energy among the Natives, and they too have the blood of pioneers, the Bantu clans that swarmed fanwise over South Africa from the Central African Lakes to the Cape.

South Africa has a double racial problem, that of adjusting the claims of the English and Dutch speaking Europeans and calming their ancient bitterness; and that of the relationship between Black and White. The United States was united by a great war of North and South, fought over a Negro question. Britain was formed in the wars of Saxon and Gael. Such problems may be a stimulus to energy rather than a disruptive force. Behind every other thought looms that of South Africa's spaciousness, its temperate climate, its untold mineral wealth. Though they may quarrel over it men will always swarm to exploit it. And for this they will find, in general, that peace is necessary.

Here is a problem, and the opportunity which a problem always contains, for the Church of God. At the moment all the development, and the evils that go with it, are epitomised in the gold-mining area. The miners have been compared to ants. Like ants they are ever hurrying about some purpose hidden under the earth. In this underground business they throw up great hills, shift millions upon millions of times their weight in earth, moving, like ants, with superlative organisation. And—here is where the comparison affects the Church—if you attempt to turn them for an instant from their purpose, antlike they become panicky and hurry round you to come back to it another way. 'Blessed are ye rich' is their first beatitude; and not 'Blessed are the meek' but 'Blessed are the tough,' for it is not they but the other fellow who will go to the wall. No materialism ever surpassed that with which the Church has to fight on the Rand. Its labour knows not the Sunday from the week nor the night from the day. Overtime and Sunday work are a privilege not a burden, for they mean more money. The people are not unwilling to serve God; but they are determined to serve Mammon.

But this cuts both ways. If the pagans and the enormous percentage of lapsed Christians on the Rand are such it means that the active followers of Christ have to be strong. Every Sunday morning they have to make their choice, while their friends work

overtime for more money or glide off, in huge American cars, to spend it picnicing over a continent that is like a garden. They have to face being left behind in the race every time they give to the poor or the Church. The very irreligiousness of the atmosphere around them, if it makes sixty per cent. succumb, makes the others probably give Catholicism in this country a peculiar energy of its own, just as similar circumstances did to the Church in America.

The Dutch came second to the mines, and their quieter tradition is still strong. Since the day that Pieter Retieff led them over the Drakensberg, Bible in hand, they have had a strong Protestantism. Their Church is doomed now, first because it is wealthy, secondly because its Ministers have taken sides in the internal political quarrel and introduced their views into their pulpits. But the Dutch Reformed Church is so much interwoven into all their history and traditions which, with the impulse of racialism, they are passionately eager to revive, that its hold is still very strong. The Dutch are profoundly religious, in a dark Calvinistic way, have the Calvinistic emphasis on the family, and the exaggerated Calvinistic view of Providence and Destiny. When they come into the freedom of the Faith they make magnificent Catholics. Being religious they will look around for God now that their Church is failing, and there may be a great harvesting for the Church among them. The Church has been slow to learn their language, 'Africaans'; but this mistake is being rectified. Experience, notably that of the Dominicans at Stellenbosch, the Mecca of Afrikaanderdom, shows that prejudice thaws rapidly enough. It may be that, as the English-speaking population is decreasing while the Dutch-speaking is increasing, they will ultimately be the main body and chief strength of the Church out here.

The Natives are in a state of moral and mental chaos that defies description. Straight from their tribal superstitions they are being initiated into several hundred Christian (?) Churches, and Communism and Racism, all in one generation. Their wretched social conditions make good living virtually impossible in the towns, which set the pace for the Reserve Territories. Yet what a place is the Rand to cast one's bread upon the waters. Natives of every tribe south of the Equator comes here on short contract, and all the newest ideas, over this colossal area, are brought by the men returning from the mines. An American Missionary imagines the prayer of one who has laboriously to trek from one small village community to another in the vastness of Africa: 'Oh Lord, if thou would'st only bring these people together in some great place where thy words

might be preached to thousands instead of tens!' . . . If it is not fulfilled in the Rand Church in actual numbers, it is fulfilled in this, that here come all the most energetic spirits, destined to go home with enough of the white man's wisdom to make them leaders of their peoples for better or for worse.

Social Problems, 'Capitalism' gone to seed and spread and rooted and thriven through Gold, its owners living in sky-scrapers over a black underworld of cheap labour that is too simple to organise itself and is forbidden to strike; Racial Problems, three conflicting races inextricably mingled; Industrial Problems, a vast waterless land that must live by its industries rather than by its agriculture—South Africa has all these. The Gold Reef has them all concentrated and distilled. And yet South Africa's mineral wealth guarantees its great future—whoever may be the master thereof. And from the Ridge of White Waters, its spiritual watershed, down the slopes of the Veldt go the swirling ideas, carried on the rivers of commerce; to the Cape and to Natal; to Lourenço Marques and to Rhodesia and Nyassaland and Angola; and to whatever human life there is in the deserts to the West. What a place for the Church that chose Antioch and Rome!

All Catholics who have an eye on construction and reconstruction should remember this place, a predestined centre in the shifting colonisation by men of the earth to which he was given as master. For it is the chief known, and as yet unexploited, mineral resource of the world. And the Church is here, a seed as yet underground. There are threats to its growth, to its very life, which may mean that it has to die first. But that, to the seed of which we are told in the Gospels, is only the assurance that the plant will grow and bear fruit.

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