

THE POTATO HARVEST

TONY O'DOWD

PROF. DR. Woltemade Verkeerd was the Professor of History at the University of Pondoland. He was very kind to his students. Any one of them who had a problem could always come into the little ante-room next to the Professor's study and speak to him through the flyscreen. To assist freshmen who had not yet acquired the habit of independent study, there was a notice saying "Europeans Only" in the study and another saying "Non-Europeans Only" in the ante-room.

One day, Daniel Dhlamini, the brightest student in History III, tapped respectfully on the flyscreen.

"Yes, Jim?" said the Professor.

"Baas Professor," said Daniel, "I was wondering about this business of the English coming and conquering the Cape from the Dutch. Was there some trouble between England and Holland at the time?"

"In my very first lecture in History I," said Professor Verkeerd, "I told you that the purpose of learning history is to make us love what is our own. It will not help you towards that end to study the sordid bickerings of the imperialist powers of Europe. Besides, all the books on the subject are in English or some other foreign language. You don't want to grow up to be a black Englishman, do you?"

"No, Baas Professor, but all of us, even our Great President himself, are working for the preservation of European civilisation. So I thought it might be useful to know something about Europe, where it comes from."

"So you do, my boy, so you do. Didn't we do Luther and Calvin in History II?"

"Yes, baas, but . . ."

"Look here, let me explain the whole thing to you properly.

"It is true, in a sense, that European civilisation originated in Europe. That is to say, it had its first beginnings there—the foundations were laid there. By the year 1651, those foundations had been laid. You have studied one of the most important events in the process, namely, the Reformation. After the Reformation had taken place, the potentiality of a great civilisation was there. But unhappily, the Devil is ever on the watch to destroy what is well and piously built. When the Devil saw what was being born in Europe, he mustered all his

forces against it. He put the forces of sickly liberalism to work. He blew on the dying embers of popery and fanned them into flame again. He sowed the seeds of atheism and bolshevism. He tempted the peoples of Europe with the glittering prizes of plutocratic imperialism.

“And the Lord looked down and saw that the Devil’s work was being only too thoroughly done. Like the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, the peoples of Europe turned their backs upon righteousness. It was clear that the budding civilisation of Europe was doomed never to flower. So the Lord spoke to His servant, Jan van Riebeeck, and commanded him to seek out such righteous men as were left in Europe and take them to the Cape, where European civilisation could make a fresh start and realise all its wonderful possibilities.

“So it happened that, from 1652 onwards, South Africa became the only true home of European civilisation. Since then, Europe has been the most insidious enemy of that civilisation. To recognise Russia and India for what they are is easy. But the simple-minded can easily be taken in by British imperialism, French mongrel anarchy, Italian popery, American atheistic plutocracy, masquerading under the banner of the thing which they are trying to destroy.”

“But, baas, wasn’t America also colonised about the same . . .”

“Indeed it was. When the Devil saw that European civilisation was being taken across the seas to Africa, to grow and reach perfection there, he started a rival migration to America, in order to confuse men’s minds. In a desperate effort to lure men away from the southerly path of righteousness, he showered all the gifts of Mammon on those who went to America instead. He even snatched away some of the children of Africa, who might otherwise have known the blessings of European civilisation, and sent them to be turned into black Americans.”

“But, baas, if all the people in Europe since 1652 have been wicked, what about our Great Pres. . .”

“You have not been paying proper attention. I did not say that all the people in Europe since 1652 have been wicked. That would be nonsensical. Throughout the centuries, there have arisen, every now and then, righteous men in Europe who have come out here to join us in our glorious task. Our Great President is the most famous example of this. But, of course, we have also had the Devil’s fifth column coming here from Europe. We have had the missionaries of Rome, the

hirelings of Moscow, the paid assassins of . . .”

“Well, baas, since it is our duty to fight against all these people, shouldn't we study the history of Europe in order to know what to expect from them? Now, this book I have here has taught me a lot about . . .”

Daniel clapped his hand over his mouth in horror at what he had just said. The Professor stood up from his desk.

“What is that book, Jim?”

“No, baas, it's only the baas's book, baas. I was going to say that I had learned . . .”

“Give it to me.”

The book had a brown paper cover, and on the cover was written, “Die Konsentrasiekampe in die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog, deur W. Verkeerd”. But a man like Professor Verkeerd is not taken in as easily as that. He opened it, and, sure enough, it was Carlyle's “*French Revolution*.”

“It is a great pity, Jim,” said the Professor, “that the Bantu, in spite of all our efforts, are incapable of learning honesty or truthfulness. I see now that you came to me, not in a spirit of humble and honest inquiry, but in the hope of catching me out. No doubt you hoped that I would give you an account of those goings-on in France, and that you would be able to detect some discrepancy between my account and that which you have read in this meretricious volume. Then you would have gone back to your friends and sniggered with them over your supposed triumph. Oh, don't worry, I know the native mind. But your little scheme was foolish as well as wicked. I am not to be caught in such infantile traps.

“Fortunately for you, I am a merciful man, and I realise that your defects of character are the defects of your race, which you cannot help. Therefore you will not be punished. You will merely spend a little time in an environment which will be more healthy for you.”

He pressed a bell on his desk. Sergeant van Donder, head of the Special Branch at the University, answered the bell.

“Sergeant, you will first report yourself to your superiors for negligently allowing this book onto the premises. Secondly, Jim, here, has kindly offered to help me out with the potato harvest on my farm. He will sign a contract for six months. You will find contract forms in the Registrar's office. That will be all.”

“Yes, sir,” said the sergeant. “Come on, boy.”