

# THE VILLAGE AND THE CASTLE

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REALITY as we know it most is in the calm settled acceptance of social and personal relationships within a stable environment. In an ordinary environment it does not often happen that authority, acting blindly and needlessly, sweeps away these things, and substitutes a jumbled world of indecisive nightmare. When Kafka wrote of a young man called K. who arrived at a village subject to the arbitrary dictates and strange whims of the dwellers in the Castle above, he created such a world. So, with less genius, has the Nationalist Government in the Population Registration Act.

Kafka's hero never found out why he needed a permit in the village, or what sort of permit he needed. Neither did he know who was in the Castle, or by what right they governed. He did not know what set apart the dwellers in the Castle from the dwellers in the village, from where their authority was derived, or what the laws were that he had to be so careful not to transgress. He found himself in a strange nightmare world of apartness. The strange judgments of the people in the Castle decreed it. He could not understand why.

This is a predicament not unknown to the majority of our "citizens". The fact that they were born into it, and conditioned so from earliest childhood, may or may not make acceptance a little easier. The man, however, who comes under the shadow of the Population Registration Act has had created for himself the world of Kafka.

This is how Act No. 30 of 1950 has affected a great number of ordinary law-abiding citizens in Cape Town. The subject is leading a fairly ordinary life, normally in a working-class suburb such as Parow, Goodwood or Woodstock. He may or may not know that "coloured blood flows in his veins". He is certainly in intimate association with people who are accepted as "white". In some cases he is married to one; and in at least one publicized instance he was engaged to an ordinary South African girl—which means, *ipso facto*, to one possessed of ordinary South African colour prejudice.

He has his faults and failings and he has, within the scope his environment has permitted him, his virtues too. In short, it is reasonable to expect that he will be protected from

arbitrary processes of law. This particular citizen, however, has had the misfortune to have been born into Kafka's world. Someone might have formed an obscure grudge against him. Some zealot might think his existence among the people of the Castle threatens the fundamental moralities of the place. At any rate, someone writes a letter.

The letter probably goes to Pretoria, and will probably be placed in a buff file in the Population Registration Building. This is an interesting building, big and imposing, flanked in winter by the stark branches of the unbudding jacranda trees. Once it flaunted on its walls a statue of a half-naked man and woman, carved by Kottler, a famous South African sculptor. This was removed, however, as an offence to public morality, another uneasy symbol of a strange ethical code. Within this buttress of racial purity, due processes take place. Our subject gets a letter "inviting" him to appear before the race tribunal in Cape Town.

Now he can exist on a variety of levels. He can be white, and his whole family, to his knowledge, can also be white. He can be white with a few distant, never-referred-to skeletons in the cupboard. He can be a "play-white" with the consent of his family. He can also be a "play-white" subject to envy, or that strange thing "racial pride" which regards, with the usual Kafka logic, his rejection of his "race" as a disgrace. There have been many people, according to officials of the Population Register itself, who have been unjustly accused of this strange crime, but let us assume that our subject has, in fact, passed the "colour line"—it is difficult in this context to be more sparing of quotation marks.

He will appear by appointment at a bleak room near the centre of Cape Town. Two or three members of the tribunal will sit, in the accepted fashion, with their backs to the rather inadequate light, and the inhospitable quality of the room will be added to by grey drapes on the walls. He will enter, nervously, and he will be required to answer questions which he will regard as being of an almost unbearable delicacy. At this time, or subsequently, his family may be sitting with him.

Descriptions are taken of the colour and texture of hair, eyes, skin and bone structure of the face, and searching inquiries are made about ancestry, associations, social habits. The fact that no satisfactory definition of race has ever been formulated is, of course, ignored. A feat that would baffle any known

anthropologist is expected of comparatively minor civil servants. To a question asked by the *Cape Times*: "Is there an ethnological or anthropological formula which is applied, and if so what is it?", Officialdom replied: "Refer to Sections I (III), (X), (XV) and 3 of the Act.

To illustrate the peculiar quality of the definitions it is only necessary to quote them. Section I (III) states that a "coloured person" is a person who is not a white person or a Native; I (X) that a "Native" is a person who is, or who is generally accepted as, a member of any aboriginal race or tribe of Africa (What would an American Negro or a West Indian be?); I (XV) that a "white person" means a person who is in appearance obviously, or who is generally accepted as, a white person; and Section 3, that the particulars required for the compilation of the register shall be extracted by the Director from the forms and returns received by him under the Census Act.

We may assume that our subject has been tried and found guilty. The final decision has lain with the Director in his chaste and purified building in Pretoria, but there are "safeguards". Now officially coloured, our subject can appeal to a Board in Pretoria. He is, almost certainly, however, a working man with a modest income—those in different categories seem somehow to escape the net—and he will have to get leave from his work, convey himself and his witnesses, all at his own expense, a distance of roughly 1,000 miles.

From the decision of this Board, an appeal can be made to the Supreme Court. This has the happy effect of making the whole thing public property. And by this time too, of course, the expense is very far outside the compass of any ordinary wage earner. So he will probably accept his lot, and probably even regret the impulse that lead him before the Cape Town tribunal to protest against that initial little slip of paper which told him he had been removed from the voters' roll.

The strange underground workings of the mechanism of the Act can well be illustrated by an actual case, which is fairly typical. A man who lives in a European suburb and holds a fairly responsible job in a factory, out of a blue sky received a card from Pretoria telling him that his name had been removed from the voters' roll. No reason was given. A clergyman of the church where the man was married, it subsequently turned out, had two years previously received a notification from the Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages in Pretoria as follows:

“Sir, a request has been received for the amendment of register No. . . . . in respect of the marriage of . . . . . As the necessary documentary proof has now been lodged, please amend the original register of this marriage in terms of the provisions of regulation No. 13 (5) framed under Act No. 17 of 1923, as amended, by deleting the husband’s race description and substituting therefor ‘coloured’ ”.

The clergyman said he had assumed the request had come from the man himself, although it is difficult indeed to imagine why anyone should make such a request. It was not until two years later that he showed the document to the man concerned, who was bewildered and horrified. He sent to Pretoria for his birth certificate, which came back describing him as “coloured”. This man went to a European school, his father and mother lived as Europeans, his children played in European sports teams.

He and his wife and sons appeared before the tribunal. The children, for the first time, heard that their father might be classified as non-European. The effect on an average South African youth can be imagined with difficulty. The questioner made notes of the colour of their hair, eyes and skin, and each member of the family was asked whether he knew if any of his relatives was coloured. This family is still waiting for the verdict from Pretoria.

Other examples of the whimsicalities of the whole procedure are not hard to find. There was, for example, the woman who said that one of her children was illegitimate to prove the “whiteness” of the others; there was the engaged man who went to Pretoria to get a provisional certificate of “whiteness”. The fundamental point, however, was made with admirable directness by the Cape Town Nationalist newspaper, the *Burger*, which inquired: “How can there be race separation without race classification?” Satisfactory answer came there none. In other words, if one builds a society on Alice-in-Wonderland principles, Alice-in-Wonderland results can fairly be expected.

It is also, of course, an ingenious method of protecting privilege, simply by getting it down in black and white. Colour is not really sufficient of a rubber stamp. There is all this irritating borderline stuff, which must also be cleared up to preserve the lunatic logic of a caste society. A Nationalist Senator, the session before last, put the matter with appealing clarity. The Population Register, he averred, was a thing to be mightily thankful for, as now one knew whether one was white

or not. Much the same thought was expressed with more suaveness by the Minister of the Interior, Dr. Dönges, when he said in February this year: "To many a certainty has been given that they had never had before".

Now, it requires the utmost exercise of double-think to quite grasp how the individual affected by a declaration of his race is in any way altered, except in relation to the pressure of social forces upon him. The implication of the statements of Dr. Dönges and others is that there is a special mystique in whiteness, which must somehow effect some strange kind of inner essence.

Since the wrong kind of pigmentation is a distinct social, political and economic disadvantage, to be escaped by every means at the disposal of care and cunning, it must be completely obvious that very many people who appear to be above the disagreeable implications of the Act are not whole in their whiteness. Therefore, it would seem that the possession of "colour" can not really affect one's essence. The logic, however, stops there, and the protective double-think takes over again. So lack of colour, it might appear, is a gift not of God, but of the Director of Census and Statistics. That would certainly seem, in quite a number of "borderline" cases, to be exactly the case.

While not impugning the integrity—or as much of it as his job can leave him—of any official engaged in this unsavoury task, it must surely be possible to get a "case" where the white pro's and the black con's are exactly balanced. Let us say our official has an attack of liver on the morning when he is called upon to exercise this particular judgment of Solomon, and there are very few men who can rise above the functionings of their livers. Might he not, being a little less than divine, allow his judgment to be deflected into the black camp? Or does the doctrine of predestination affect him and impart to his actions a little of the godly, in spite of his liver?

Dr. Malan once described the Population Registration Act as the cornerstone of apartheid. It was the foundation of a glorious new era in our race relations. No doubt, the doctor had pondered the theological implications of the system, and, no doubt, he had found them to his satisfaction. To those of less biblical learning and subtlety they do not seem very clear.

It is obvious that, from an abstract and ideal point of view, no one should mind whether he has been classified as "coloured" or not, and that, in a sense, many of the people so classified are

hoist with their own petard, and are paying for their complicity in a gigantic swindle. The strange point is, however—and again this has the nightmare logic of a Kafka novel—that the effect of such classifications is a harsh and yet intangible punitive sentence for an unknown crime, committed by unknown persons. One cannot dismiss the sufferings of the convicted “play-white” as just punishment for a distorted social system.

There can also be little moral objection to the carrying and issuing of identity cards. It is normal practice in European countries, and is often a great convenience when one wants quickly to identify oneself. It also has a function in the tracing and detection of criminals—real criminals, that is. The moral objection in South Africa, however, is that a normal process of state procedure has been twisted into the “cornerstone of apartheid”. This, of course, is a fairly familiar process, about which many words have been written. But, in this instance, by acting as an extension of the already pernicious “pass” system, its effect is even more basic, and in its amorphous quality even more frightening, than any other item in the constant parade of diminishing liberties which are now as familiarly South African as biltong or a mixed grill.

Recently there emanated from the chaste headquarters in Pretoria a statement that several hundred “borderline cases who had lived under a racial cloud” now enjoyed security after being “upgraded” by the sympathetic application of the Act. Ignoring the fascinating implications of the phrase “racial cloud”, many people whose work takes them among the strata of society most affected by these fiats, said in a newspaper interview that they were appalled at this statement. One described it as a “bland and callous euphemism”. The point at issue, however, which State officials never seem to be able to grasp at all, is that the arbitrary lifting of people in and out of clouds, racial or otherwise, can hardly be said to be a recognized function of legitimate government.

Another interesting facet is the way in which the workings of the Act in application to the classification of “coloured” people first came to the public attention. The race tribunals, apparently, had been taking place for some time in a shrouded secrecy not only about the identity of the victims, but as to the very existence of the tribunal. In the course of a routine inquiry, a *Cape Times* reporter, Mr. Brian Barrow, discovered by chance that the “inquiries” were taking place, and that apparently the

officials whose lot it was to undertake them felt a little harassed about their work. He was told when he taxed the officials that under no circumstances could any information be given to the Press about the affair. His way out was to wait outside the building and to waylay the victims as they entered and left.

All of those he approached showed bewilderment and horror—to such an extent that most agreed to talk about their experiences. He discovered, for instance, that several people under this racial cloud had left the country—and exile seems a heavy penalty to pay for an unknown crime which the fugitive did not commit. One man, it seems, had a wife of inviolate whiteness. He left by himself.

Kafka's hero K. to whom miasmatic nightmare eventually became a reality, apart from his difficulties with identity cards in the environs of the Castle, also found himself on trial before unknown inquisitors, and for an unknown crime. Called upon to address the court of unknown authority, he said this, and his words will find an echo among the largely inarticulate victims of this persecution.

“There can be no doubt that behind all the actions of this court of justice, that is to say in my case behind my arrest and to-day's interrogation, there is a great organization at work. An organization which not only employs corrupt warders, stupid Inspectors and Examining Magistrates of whom the best that can be said is that they recognize their own limitations, but also has at its disposal a judicial hierarchy of high, indeed of the highest rank, with an indispensable and numerous retinue of servants, clerks, police and other assistants—perhaps even hangmen, I do not shrink from that word. And the significance of this great organization, gentlemen? It consists in this, that innocent persons are accused of guilt, and senseless proceedings are in motion against them, mostly without effect, it is true, as in my case. But considering the senselessness of the whole, how is it possible for the higher ranks to prevent gross corruption in their agents? It is impossible. So the warders try to steal the clothes off the bodies of the people they arrest, the Inspectors break into strange houses, and innocent men, instead of being fairly examined, are humiliated in the presence of public assemblies.”