

# THE WIDOWS OF THE RESERVES

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WIDOWHOOD—a life of void and loneliness; a period of tension, unbalance and strenuous adjustment. And what can it be to those thousands of African women—those adolescent girls married before they reach womanhood, thrown into a life of responsibility before they have completely passed from childhood to adulthood; those young women in the prime of early womanhood left to face life alone, burdened with the task of building a home and rearing a family; those young women doomed to nurse alone their sick babies, weep alone over their dead babies, dress and bury alone their corpses? What can it mean to those young brides whose purpose has been snatched away, overnight, leaving them bewildered and lost, leaving them with a thirst and hunger that cannot be stilled?

And yet this is the daily lot of tens of thousands of African women whose husbands are torn away from them to go and work in the cities, mines and farms—husbands who because of the migratory labour system cannot take their wives with them and, because of the starvation wages they receive, are forced to remain in the work centres for long periods—strangers in a strange land—but equally strangers at home to their wives and children.

These women remain alone in the Reserves to build the homes, till the land, rear the stock, bring up the children. They watch alone the ravages of drought, when the scraggy cows cease to provide the milk, when the few stock drop one by one because there is no grass on the veld, and all the streams have been lapped dry by the scorching sun. They watch alone the crops in the fields wither in the scorching sun, their labour of months blighted in a few days. They witness alone the hailstorm sweep clean their mealie lands, alone they witness the wind lift bodily their huts as if they were pieces of paper, rendering them and their children homeless. Alone they bury their babies one by one and lastly their unknown lovers—their husbands, whose corpses alone are sent back to the Reserves. For the world of grinding machines has no use for men whose lungs are riddled with T.B. and Miner's Phthisis.

For miles around throughout the country one sees nobody but these women—young and yet stern-faced with lines of care on

their faces. This one climbing the slope with a bucket of water on her head and, if lucky, a baby on her back; that one going up the hill with a heavy bundle of wood on her head; another following behind a span of six oxen drawing a sledge with ploughing implements and only a youngster of ten or twelve years as her help; and yet another driving home a scraggy herd of cattle or a flock of sheep numbering twenty at the very most, with yet another small boy by her side.

In the ploughing season they are to be seen behind the span of oxen, holding the plough, leading the team of ploughing oxen. In the cold winter months, alone with young girls and boys they reap the fields, load the waggons and bring in the harvest. A poor harvest! What else could it be? "Bad farming methods of the Native", is the official attitude of South Africa. But how could it be otherwise when the farming is left to women and children, when the whole task of home-building is on the shoulders of these young women and children?

At home in the morning these lonely women see to it that their children get ready for school—those under-fed and scantily-dressed children whose breakfast is a piece of dry bread, mealie-pap without any milk, and for many just cold samp and beans. Their desire to see their children educated is so great that the women themselves go out with the stock in order to keep their children at school—to give them the education that will free them from poverty, the education that has given the other races so much knowledge and power.

At the close of day they light their fires to prepare the evening meal. The fortunate ones milk and shut in the stock, but for most there is no stock to shut in, and their children do not know the milk from the family cow. For some there is a letter of good news from the father and husband far away in the work centre—the long-awaited letter with money has come—part of the debt at the trader's will be paid off. There will be bread, sugar, tea and a few extras to eat for at least a few weeks. For others it is bad news. The loved one far away is ill, has met with an accident, has been thrown into jail because he failed to produce his papers when demanded by some government official. Not that he did not have them, but just that by mistake he forgot them in the pocket of his other jacket. A Black man in South Africa cannot forget! It is a sad day for this one. Her children look up anxiously in her face. They fear to ask her any questions, and she does not know how much to tell them.

“Tata sends his greetings”, she manages to say at last, “but says we will have to be patient about the money we asked for; he has had some trouble and has used up all the money”. The rest of the evening is spent in silence. And when they kneel down to pray, this lonely woman sends to heaven a prayer without an “Amen”. Small wonder most of them are old women at the age of thirty, emaciated, tired and worn-out.

Sometimes, in despair, they get caught up in the snares of unscrupulous men of means—the only people in the whole community who can relieve them of their burdens. These men alone are well-fed, full of energy to satisfy their sexual desires; these men alone have the money to satisfy the material needs of these women, clothe them and feed them and their children. Prostitution! Call it what you may. But if they be prostitutes it is not of their own choosing. It is the system that has kept them on starvation wages so that they and their children can perish slowly but surely; a system that has made them barren and their men impotent; a system that has demoralized and dehumanized a whole people—making the ratio of women to men in the Reserves as high as 8:1 and so enabling the man who has the energy and the means to have as many women as he chooses; a system that has kept the men in the towns in a perpetual state of war, in battle-camps where masturbation, homosexuality and rape are the order of the day, turning otherwise decent human beings into beasts which see a woman not as a human being but as a source of sexual satisfaction alone.

Three things break the monotony of their lives. First is the Church where at least they can take a few hours off from their work, where they can sing and unburden themselves in prayer to a God who never seems to hear them; the church which promises them an abundance of life in the next world.

The other is the ceremonial feast—the marriage feast where they can sing and dance and laugh, rejoicing with the young couple. But it is a joy mixed with sorrow, for they know that the joy of the young people can but be short-lived, that they are entering upon a life without a future, a journey's end. And the initiation feast and the beer party—at one time occasions of great pomp and rejoicing—are today poor imitations of the ceremonies of the days gone by. For now the women sing and dance alone, with but the aged men, the blind and the cripples to join in the dance and song, and all miss the rich deep bass chorus of the men.

The third is the funeral—yes, the funeral—where they come together to weep and mourn over their dead, where again alone, except for the Mfundisi, the teacher, the cripple, the blind and the very aged, they accompany their husbands and fathers and brothers on their last journey. The countryside is today so empty of men that it is these women who keep vigil over the dead before burial—a thing once quite unknown in African society.

Tired of their hard life in the Reserves and in despair, they resort to all sorts of ways whereby they can get to the work centres in order to join their husbands. But the pass system which is used to control the movements of the whole African population throughout the country makes it well-nigh impossible for them to do so. Under the influx control regulations, all the railway stations have been instructed not to sell tickets to Africans proceeding to any of the major cities in the Union, unless such Africans produce exit and entry permits from some government official granting right of entry or exit. If it is for the purpose of consulting a specialist in the major cities—the only places where such specialists are to be found—a doctor's certificate to that effect has to be produced. But sometimes even with the doctor's certificate, the official may refuse to grant such right of entry, if he is convinced in his own mind that the woman does not need specialist treatment. If it is for the purpose of tracing a lost husband, brother, or son, or rushing to the sick-bed of a husband in the city, all relevant information—no matter how private and intimate—has to be given, and again it is the official who has to decide whether the matter is urgent.

To by-pass the refusal of tickets at railway stations, these women fall victim to unscrupulous men who offer to carry them in their cars and lorries to the cities where they can join their husbands. Is it the lure of city life that makes them abandon their homes—homes they have struggled hard to build; leave alone the lambs and calves they have brought up by hand; leave their children behind in the care of relatives and friends? Is it the talk of an easy life in town; is it the thought of the cheap jewels they will wear on their ears and round their arms that makes them pay huge sums of money to racketeers, run the risk of landing in jail for entering a proclaimed area without a permit? It is merely the will to live!

In the towns new difficulties arise. The police hound them and, should they catch them without the necessary papers, fine them or lock them up in jail and then truck them back to

the Reserves. If they cannot get the papers legalizing their stay in the towns by fair means, then they get them by foul. Would-be helpers are not wanting here too; men who batten on their agony. These are willing to "help" them by selling them the papers at a sum of £15—£25 a piece, though, for a woman with good looks, it may be much less—£5—£10—if she is willing to add herself to the price.

Those of them who are lucky to get jobs on arrival in the city are tied down to their employers under unbearable service conditions. The pass laws, the influx control regulations and the contract system which give their employers the right to cancel their permits and have them endorsed out of the area, give their employers also the power to bully and blackmail, to offer them low wages and the worst of service conditions.

Even at this very moment in the Western Province, those of them who have slipped through are being hounded out and sent back to the Reserves, leaving their husbands behind. And those of them who are in service are required to "sleep in", while their children are sent back to the country whether or not there is some one to look after them after they get there.

In this way many African homes are broken up, families are split up. No wonder the people term the Women's Registration Office in Langa the "Divorce Court". And yet Mr. Rogers, Superintendent at Langa, can say that he and his men will carry out this breaking-up of families as "humanely" as possible. And the Mayor of Cape Town, Colonel Billingham, when the matter was brought to his notice, said he was satisfied that Mr. Rogers and his men would carry out their work "humanely". But how can the splitting-up of families, the separation of wife, children and husband, be carried out "humanely"? How can anybody speak of acting "humanely," when the breaking-up involves so many thousands of women in Cape Town alone? Would these men consider it "humane", no matter how sweet and gentle the officials in charge, if it was their own wives and children who were being torn away from them? It is only in South Africa and when dealing with the Blacks that anybody can speak of carrying out such a breaking-up "humanely"—an action that has brought suffering and misery to so many people—young and old. Back to the Reserves all these must go; back they must be sent to join those hundreds of others to whom each day is like another—one monotonous song of droning flies, sick babies, dying stock, hunger, starvation and death.