

DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

(A review of "Riotous Assembly", by Tom Sharpe.)



Familiar Landmarks of Piemburg

by Jonathan Crewe

According to D.H. Lawrence insincerity — the irremediable vice of the minor writer — consists in unwillingness to admit, or inability to recognise, ones true feelings. By this definition *Riotous Assembly* is a classic of insincerity. Ostensibly a 'black comedy' of the South African situation; a satirical scourge wielded against the ruling whites in an insane society, *Riotous Assembly* turns out in the end to be something more akin to romance.

The novel is set in 'Piemburg', capital of 'Zululand' — a decaying Edwardian provincial city, still dominated socially by the descendants of 'Sir Theophilus Hazelstone', whose claim to fame had been the annihilation of 17,000 Zulus at point-blank range with the aid of ten-inch naval guns. The Union Jack still flies over the 'Alexandra Club'; precedence is still the ruling passion of the O.N.F. inhabitants, and Jacaranda House, home of the Hazelstones, is a national institution. In the heart of the city, however, the S.A.P. and the Security Branch have established themselves, and they are represented by Kommandant van Heerden, Luitenant Verkramp and Konstabel Els. Between Jacaranda House and the Piemburg gaol, the political extravaganza unfolds.

It must be admitted that Mr. Sharpe misses few of the jokes that his situation offers — though in trying to cap the inevitable jokes with ones a great deal less inevitable (chiefly concerning the perversions of Miss Hazelstone and her Zulu cook) he writes passages duller than anything a facetious public-school boy could invent to amuse the dormitory after evening prep.

MISS HAZELSTONE

The novel begins with Miss Hazelstone, every inch a lady, and doyenne of O.N.F. society, reporting to Kommandant van Heerden (who has a secret admiration for the aristocratic English) that she has murdered her Zulu cook Fivepence in a 'crime passionel'. The murder of a Zulu cook is, of course, neither here nor there — what transfixes van Heerden is her admission that Fivepence has for eight years been her lover, and that she has been forced to adopt certain bizarre stratagems to turn him into a satisfactory bedfellow. From here on the book develops into a 'scream' (the method is slightly reminiscent of Kingsley Amis's): a state of emergency is declared, twenty-one policemen are slaughtered by an over-enthusiastic colleague, Bubonic plague and Rabies scares occur, as do interrogations, hangings, heart transplantations, and much else; and finally the battle of Isandhlwana is re-enacted by the black and white inmates of 'Fort Rapier', in the course of which the two groups of indistinguishable maniacs wipe each other out. (If the book has a 'moral', perhaps it is contained in the last-mentioned episode.)

NEAR MYTHICAL VITALITY

The interesting thing about this fundamentally childish book is that for all the left-wing satire, it invests 'Piemburg' and its leading *dramatis personae* with an almost mythical vitality. Miss Hazelstone, Kommandant van Heerden and Konstabel Els are the book's heroes, indestructible, and a good deal larger than life. Miss Hazelstone wipes out Fivepence with a four-barrelled elephant gun, Konstabel Els blows up a Saracen, takes pot-shots at delivery-boys for amusement, bites to death a savage Doberman Pinscher, rapes black prisoners, and is the supreme exponent of interrogation by means of 'electro-therapy'. The stupidity, depravity, amoral brutality, etc. with which Sharpe invests his characters become interesting idiosyncracies, and the achievements of these characters are unconsciously, or half-consciously, *celebrated* by an author whose political sentiments would no doubt be irreproachable. Mr. Sharpe does not really *care* about the victims of Els's savagery: whether he knows it or not, he is of the devil's party. (One would be willing to bet heavily that the years Mr. Sharpe spent in Pietermaritzburg were the most vivid ones in his life.) The effect of *Riotous Assembly* is not so much to induce horror or compassion as it is to subvert the humane conscientiousness it appears to endorse. Raw vitality, however appalling, is king.

There is no point in pretending to be merely scandalised by such a performance. The liberal (or humanitarian) conscience, like any other institutionalised conscience, has its oppressively orthodox and anti-vital aspect; what Norman Mailer refers to as 'the great Left pall'. What is regrettable is that *Riotous Assembly* is not a far better book, and that Mr. Sharpe shows so very little reluctance to sell his birth-right for a mess of pottage. His novel, lacking any basis in real compassion or indignation, fails as satire, and the vitality it offers is a cheap product, dearly paid for in offensive cynicism. The book ends with the triumphant Hazelstones winging their way to Cambridge, leaving behind them a farcical chaos. Like Mr. Sharpe they can have their cake and eat it. □