

HAROLD JENKINS

WHERE SHALL JOHN GO?

IX—SOUTH AFRICA

Dear John,

If you do decide to come to South Africa, it is to be hoped you will come by sea. To prefer a ship to an aeroplane, the old to the new, will be at once to violate all the prejudices of the country; but that can't be helped. For years after the war air-travel is likely to be expensive enough for an arrival by sea to be comprehensible if undistinguished. And in exchange for your loss of prestige you will have the æsthetic satisfaction of beginning with Cape Town seen from Table Bay (if you are lucky, just before dawn) instead of being dropped down on the bare and featureless highveld on the outskirts of Johannesburg or Pretoria. Johannesburg will be your ultimate destination, but coming from the old world, you will not confuse the ultimate end with the immediate, or speed with comfort. So you will forbear to short-circuit the grand approach which Nature carefully prepared for you.

Cape Town (you will hesitate, I suppose, about whether this is one word or two. Only habit will resolve your confusion: the practice of the inhabitants will not)—Cape Town will be marked out for you in an arc of lights around the bay, and behind them more lights in clots and clusters and irregular spokes reaching high up into the darkness. (You will understand what this meant to many thousands of British troops arriving fresh from years of an English blackout.) But these upward-reaching spokes will not prepare you for the height of Table Mountain, which will reduce them to a tawdry little frill around its base when in the dawn it astonishingly looms a vast solid mass of grey rock, flat-topped like a table standing three thousand feet above the sea. More likely than not a table-cloth of cloud rests lightly on its surface as you watch from the sea and the sun slowly rises on your left. 'On your left'—you think nothing of that at the time, but later your subconscious presents you with it as a conundrum of geography:

poised at the southern tip of Africa, Cape Town actually faces north. And that is Cape Town's spiritual geography too. It stretches an arm backwards round the mountain with exploratory fingers creeping south towards Cape Point, but its body is sheltered by the mountain, and its gaze is fixed timidly, eagerly, over your shoulder towards the European lands from which you come. It looks to the north, basking in the sun, but stifling in the summer.

Soon you will want to go up Table Mountain. If your pride and strength are what they were, you will go sweatily in shorts, otherwise by the cable-railway to the little white salt-cellar you saw at the right-hand edge of the table which now transforms itself into the upper cable-station. Back at sea-level, with that over and your mind accordingly at rest, you will loiter easily a week or two, drinking tea in the mornings on a balcony on the shady side of Adderley Street, strolling under the oaks in the Gardens beyond it, occasionally taking the electric train out to False Bay, the inlet of the Indian Ocean which comes behind the mountain, where you will bathe in a sun-warmed sea. At Fish Hoek the water may easily be seventy degrees. If petrol rationing is over, a friend is sure to drive you round the peninsula, and your admiration of the sea and mountain scenery will be both expected and sincere. In suburban gardens you will see red hibiscus, blue agapanthus, giant flaming cannas, perhaps purple bougainvillea massed against white wall. In rare moments of energy you will walk among the pine-trees on the mountain slopes. You will explore a little the country round, its vineyards, its old Dutch farmhouses with their graceful curling gables. Cape Town itself has few dignified buildings, but you will find it one of the few places left on earth where you can achieve the dignity of leisure. And that is another reason why you should take Cape Town first. For dignity you will hardly see again.

When you have discovered that Cape Town is not South Africa, you will quickly book a first-class seat on the next available train for Johannesburg. You will grumble at the fare, but you will not go second, and only natives travel third. You may ruminate on this odd social and economic feature of South African life. The ordinary man, assuming him to be white—and the franchise, at any rate, shows small cognizance of other colours—will usually choose the more rather than the less expensive.

Booking at the theatre in England, you may sometimes have been disappointed at 'Nothing less than eight-and-six, sir.' In South Africa that would be impossible: the dearest seats sell first. That explains why South Africans who travel overseas think London a mighty expensive place to live in. They stay at high-priced West End hotels; they shop at the dearest shops, and think they would lose prestige if they did not. They overtip—if they tip at all. There is no established aristocracy, the ordinary man is as good as his neighbour, and only the best will do for him. All of which is very democratic—so long as you remember that the ordinary man is white. Naturally the black and the coloured, though more numerous, are not ordinary. They are something less. On the train, they *may* travel first-class—though not in the same compartment as you—if they can pay the fare. Usually the compartment reserved for such an eventuality travels empty.

Possibly you will be surprised at the slowness of your train. Travelling by car is much faster, in spite of poor roads in the large tracts of country away from the big towns. When you have got used to the country, and petrol is once more plentiful, your high-powered American car will cruise for hours at fifty or sixty, speeds to which South African trains do not aspire. It is all but a thousand miles from Cape Town to Johannesburg and your train will take about thirty-five hours. This will give you plenty of time to get used to the landscape. When you have passed through the coastal range of mountains, always glistening, in winter with snow, in summer with heat, and have slowly puffed and zigzagged on to the interior plateau, you will be in the vast semi-desert called the Karroo, where the dusty earth shows nothing but small brown shrivelled-looking bushes and range after range of low hills. Occasionally for variety a solitary hill crops up as flat as if its top had been sliced off with a knife, occasionally—very occasionally—a lone white farmhouse with its line of cypresses to break the wind, and sometimes not far from the railway track a group of dirty-looking, unkempt sheep. Once in several hours you stop at a little station with its adjacent row of corrugated-iron cottages in a thin shade of pepper-trees, and are besieged by half-naked black urchins with hands held out in prayer for pennies or scraps of food. At length the Karroo gives way to the veld (you will soon learn to spell it without the *t*), shrivelled bush to parched yellow grass. The hills disappear, but the wide open

spaces go on. Those you will have learnt to expect, but perhaps you did not expect the wide open spaces to be as empty as they are, when every tree is an event, so that you positively welcome Johannesburg when at last it appears, heralded by white and glistening mine-dumps and squalid dusty slums. As the sun catches its tall white buildings, you will be half-incredulous. After a thousand miles of next-to-nothingness, the first astonishing thing about Johannesburg is that it should be there at all; the second that, being there, it should pack all its shops and offices, its commerce and industry, into a square half-mile, or little more, of narrow, crowded streets. One of the principal daily problems for every Johannesburg business-man and shopper is where, oh where, to park his (her) car. Garages are few, and anyway the streets are public, aren't they? In the congestion and the bustle, you will speedily forget Cape Town, which if you ever revisit it, will seem to you now like a return to Europe. Not like England, of course. Like the Mediterranean? Perhaps (you decide with a shrug). But anyway, quite different from this foreign, polyglot city, which is coming, for good or ill, to represent South Africa. Under the arcadings of Johannesburg's big stores, browbeaten by its tall blocks of flats, bewildered by its straight streets, all cutting at right-angles and all exactly alike, so that your only hope of finding your way about is to learn off the names of the streets and the order in which they come—here you will forget not only Cape Town, but the veld itself, the original South Africa, which Johannesburg's street planning is quite determined that you shall not see. Some of my friends deplore this, many more are only too glad to be sheltered from the aspect of those empty, rolling, monotonous, grand and friendless plains. Fresh from England's neat and cultivated countryside, even from its crowded towns and collisions on the pavement in the blackout, you may easily feel that way too. So as you look the length of Pritchard Street, you may spare a friendly nod for the mine dump at the end, crowned nightly by a brilliant sunset, which for ever blocks your view. But occasionally, as you rush from office to cinema and cinema to dance-hall, you may momentarily regret that this big city in the middle of a vast and empty land finds space anywhere near its centre for only one tiny park, a trifle bigger, perhaps, than Russell Square. Out to the north, where the wealthy live (and they are many), Johannesburg is spacious. But there equally the veld is

denied. You will admire the elegance of roads lined with jacarandas, large houses set among trees in well-laid-out gardens. Green grass is coaxed and inexorably watered; dahlias or cannas, salvia or zinnias abound; and often, perched on solid rock, on a site to stagger your economic mind and its inevitable thought of building costs, a house looks down on terrace after terrace with rockeries full of aloes, cactuses and carefully nurtured succulents. When you find that even a house with five rooms (all on the ground floor, of course) and a jakes in the garden in one of the mother suburbs can be sold for two or three thousand pounds, you will come back towards the centre of the city and decide to look for a flat. At present you will not find one, but it is no good moving on to somewhere else. Any other town will be equally full. Perhaps one day I will go away and lend you mine. Then from high up above Pritchard Street, wandering out on to the balcony (which you will soon be calling 'stoep'), you will gaze among square blocks of concrete rising anything up to fourteen stories to the minehead which conveniently fills a gap. Glancing down, if you look so far below, you will be surprised to see, in this city of the new, a little corrugated-iron shack, dilapidated and rusty, with its solitary pepper-tree, left behind from when all this was veld. Its aged owner still sits short-sleeved in the sun on its paintless stoep, thinking, one supposes, of when Johannesburg was a mining camp. Ugly as it is, it seems a pity that even the shack is for sale. When the war is over you might buy it and build your own block of flats and wave to me across the street—though this would hardly make up for your having stolen my one little bit of view. It would be an excellent investment—and investments are what count in Johannesburg, where the key moment of the day comes in the lunch-hour, when you listen to the broadcast of the prices ruling in the stock exchange at one o'clock.

You will not find it cheap, living in Johannesburg. I am told it and Pretoria are more expensive than New York, though my own experience doesn't enable me to make the comparison. Clothes can be got without coupons but at half as much again as in London. Food used to be cheap but isn't any longer. Fruit by your standards will be plentiful. This is an excellent year for mangoes, but a shilling will buy you only three or four, or perhaps five peaches, if they are small. The price of grapes is now controlled at a maximum of sevenpence a pound, after being a

shilling for over half the season to customers who have been brought up to think them very dear at fourpence. You will rejoice to find meat, tea and butter unrationed, but your smile will fade if you (or your native boy) come back from the shop without any. Rents, luckily, are controlled at pre-war levels, but even so, if you manage to find a flat, and can afford to buy furniture to put in it, you will pay twelve to fifteen pounds for two rooms (wherefore most single people and many couples live in a flat with only one). With your flat, however, you will have an electric stove and a refrigerator, constant running hot water, and the services of a native 'boy' in a periodically white house-suit to clean for you every morning. For a tip of ten or twelve shillings a month he will also wash your dishes and possibly clean your shoes. And you will be glad to let him do that, for of course those are black men's jobs. No white South African, man or woman, could contemplate washing dishes and survive.

The 'boy' you will find considered one of the advantages of living in Johannesburg or Durban rather than in Cape Town. In Cape Town you would have a 'girl', but she would be difficult to get, need careful handling, since she would know you couldn't do without her, and would vanish in the evening to look after her own house and family. Your 'boy' will live on the roof or in the basement. He has a family, too, but they are far away, in the northern Transvaal or Zululand. He sends them money regularly out of his monthly five pounds, visits them every two or three years, when the roof of their hut wants thatching or he has scraped up enough savings to buy a little leisure, and then returns to start all over again and to hear a few months later that his wife has another child.

Your 'girl' at the Cape would not be a native (Bantu), but a 'coloured' girl, that is a member of that half-breed race, mixture of Bantu and Hottentot, Malay and European, which seems to have been brought into the world to do all the domestic and manual labour of the Cape. You will see few of them in the Transvaal, many fewer indeed than Indians, whom you will often observe in their little greengrocers' shops, or sometimes in the street—women in gay-coloured saris or a boy, perhaps, wearing a fez. To see *many* Indians you would have to go to Durban; the Transvaal rejoices to leave the Indian 'problem' to Natal. In Johannesburg most of the faces which are not white will be

beneath the black woolly hair of the Bantu. The Bantu you will see nearly everywhere you go. Enormous washerwomen stride past with bundles on their heads and babies on their backs. Workmen sit in the gutter in the lunch-hour playing games with draughts or bits of stone. Errand-boys in khaki uniforms, bare-foot domestics in blouse and shorts, and crowds of other black people, not a few in filthy rags—they will brush against you on the pavement—and occasionally one will get cuffed by some young white ruffian, though you yourself may mind the jostle of a black man less than the lighted cigarette-end which falls from an upper window as you pass. They will not be in the cinemas ('Europeans only', your ticket may say, in case there should be any doubt, though there is none), nor, except as servants, in restaurants or the houses of your friends. Nor will they ride beside you on the bus or tram (if you are so plebeian as to use those modes of transport), as your coloured servant might in Cape Town—whence many Cape Town people prefer the suburban railway, which at least has separate classes. In Johannesburg natives have special trams, aluminium-coloured instead of red; or by favour of the conductor they may ride on your tram upstairs at the back.

You will be astonished to discover that most of these black people do not live in Johannesburg. Unless they live on their employer's premises—in a hutch in the back garden (never inside the house)—they must live outside the city, in native townships or 'locations' like Orlando. If you go to Orlando, you can see some thousands of little detached brick houses set out in straight rows, each with its two little rooms for its family of native occupants, its little rectangle of garden in front, but *no* kitchen, bathroom, pantry, cupboards, ceiling, floor, light, water (except in the street, one tap to five houses). But Orlando is the most lordly of the native townships and will seem like Paradise when you have seen, as somewhere or other you easily may, natives living in a shed put together from bits of tin, with a sheet of corrugated iron for a roof held on by a boulder at each corner.

Of the native children in the Transvaal (and the other provinces may be taken to be much the same) seventy per cent do not go to school. Most of those who do leave when they have learnt as much as the average European child of nine or ten. A few adult natives are rescued from illiteracy in the handful of night-schools, which are run two or three nights a week by tired

and devoted white school teachers, university students, and even enthusiastic fourth-form boys. The actual achievement of these altruistic people is small, but no more pathetic than any other small attempt to remedy a great evil. High education is not entirely barred. Orlando has its native high school, and in the lecture-rooms of the University of the Witwatersrand you may see an occasional native mingling with the other students on equal terms. Natives may also take the degree examinations of the University of South Africa, though they will sit in separate rooms. (One recent examination put its candidates in three rooms—Europeans, non-Europeans, and Chinese.)

If you bring your son with you, he of course will go to high school; and you can set against your big household bills the fact that he will go there free of charge. There he will meet lots of others like himself with only a slightly different accent and a little more tan to their skins. But he will meet no little Afrikaners, for the grandsons of the Boers against whom your father fought attend a different school, where the lessons take place in Afrikaans. Your son will learn Afrikaans, and will probably find it quite as irksome as you in your schooldays found French. Yet if he stays and present government plans mature, in five years time he will not only be taught Afrikaans but have to use it as the language medium for half his other lessons. You will probably hear much talk about this plan for bilingual schools, which has been for several years the dream of a few enthusiasts with ideals of racial co-operation. Perhaps you will be surprised to find that the immediate result of the Government's sponsorship of the scheme has been rather to exacerbate than mitigate racial animosities. Among independent and proud-spirited people compulsion does have that effect. Many Afrikaners are afraid for the future of their own language if their children are made to talk English as well as Afrikaans; and you yourself may feel a similar distrust, a fear that your son's education may in the end be sacrificed.

You will see Afrikaans along with English on many of the street signs and on every official notice. But in Johannesburg you will hardly ever hear it in the shops or about the streets. On the tram? Perhaps, on rare occasions when you take the tram to Newlands or Melville, suburbs of the Afrikaans working or lower middle class. Or the conductor may speak it to the driver, though he will address you in English, if he speaks to you at all. So you

will probably not learn Afrikaans. Yet you would be wise to do so if you intend travelling much in country areas (the 'platteland', or, with some disparagement, 'backveld'). Not that you will not be understood if you persist in speaking English, but you will probably be disliked. This will puzzle you at first; for you will know that the present pro-British government is made up largely of Afrikaners, and you will have come across many Afrikaners who are proud to have fought on Britain's side in the war and glad to call an Englishman their friend. But by degrees, as you go about the country and hear whispers of what is said in the Afrikaans papers, which you will not read, you will know what it means to feel unwanted—hated even, not for yourself as an individual but as a member of the nation to which you happen to belong. With sorrow you will come to a keener understanding of the sort of racial problem which has in the past made things difficult in eastern and central Europe—the Sudetenland, for example—and is certain to do so again. Perhaps that is one reason why, as a student of social and political problems, you should come.

You will not, then, I expect, be very comfortable in your mind in South Africa, but physically you can be comfortable enough in Johannesburg, so long as you have money. And the climate is superb. There are half-a-dozen or so days in the year when the sun does not shine. For weeks on end the thermometer goes above eighty every day without touching ninety as much as once a year. In contrast to Cape Town, where it rains in winter, the highveld goes in for violent summer thunderstorms accompanied by brilliant spectacles of lightning. The winter is dry and sunny, with a hard bright light, and though it may freeze now and then, you will rarely think of putting on an overcoat before evening. A youth about to pay his first visit overseas confided to me: 'Shall I have to wear a vest? I've never worn one yet.' But don't think you will never be cold in Johannesburg. You will suffer much indoors—from the superstitions of acquaintances who believe that a fire in a house is unhealthy, a fire in the day time positively degenerate, and suffocation the inevitable nemesis upon the opening of a window. You will be polite as always; but budding friendships have been nipped by little more than this.

As for the friendships you will make, I think you had better be left to make them yourself. Forgive me if I seem to have dwelt

too long on the people you will move among but will not 'meet'. You will understand why when you get here. For to anyone who doesn't take it for granted, the colour-bar is easily the most conspicuous feature of South African life. I have not bothered you with details about malnutrition or the restrictive native pass laws. If you come, you will soon find out about those, or you can read about them, in, say, *The Black Man's Burden*, by John Burger. Nor have I even completed the tale of the racial medley. But then, in comparison to the colour-bar, it matters very little that you should know, for example, that of the white population of Johannesburg roughly a tenth are Jews. They are not liked, of course, though they get on better than in most places. They are prominent among doctors and lawyers, in some retail trades, in the theatre, in all left-wing groups, and on every single committee which engages in social work or helps the natives. Such committees are not few: don't imagine that Johannesburg is conscienceless or that you will not find a very enlightened intelligentsia with whom to discuss all that is up to date in literature, music, politics or social affairs. You will. They may not know about *HORIZON*, but they will all read their *New Statesman*. So you may expect numbers of liberal and internationally minded people to set against those intellectuals from the Afrikaans universities who use 'liberal' as a term of reproach.

I may as well confess that Afrikaans literature, which you naturally want to know about, puts me in a difficulty. One can't ignore it and I am not competent to say very much about it, though it is clear that a young and robust people, intensely self-conscious about its culture, provides a ready market for anything readable in its own language. Adventure stories, detective stories and thrillers with South African settings are conscientiously turned out for the masses who would otherwise have no popular fiction. The number of Afrikaans novels published annually has doubled in the last five years; but in order not to give a false impression, one should add that the number is now about eighty and that in 1941 (a peak year, before the paper shortage had serious effect) the number of *books* (not of novels) published in South Africa in all languages was 435. The more serious Afrikaans novels deal with such subjects as the social and family complications that ensue when an Afrikaner falls in love outside his own race, the financial collapse of a farmer who finally has to sell out

to a Jewish storekeeper, the tragedy of a family who discover that they have native blood. For something more cosmopolitan in outlook (those who seem to know talk about Dutch influences) and more modernistic in technique (without knowing Afrikaans you can gauge a little from watching the irregular lines of some of the poems in the Afrikaans journals) you should turn rather to the poets, notably the brothers Louw, or of course Uys Krige, South Africa's most interesting poet at the moment, who writes both in Afrikaans and English. His experiences in Spain, the Western Desert and the prison-camp put him in touch with a wide modern audience, and you will find little that seems strange, though much that is novel, in his imagery and his experimental metres. Yet his rhythms have a tempo and sometimes an elaboration not common in modern English verse. You will have come across examples of his work before now in HORIZON; but you will not get the most out of his poems until you have heard him read them.

Most South African writers in English tend to have a sense of frustration. Their home market is very small: don't forget that Manchester and Liverpool between them could just about house the South African public for English books. The Afrikaans public is no bigger; but unlike the Afrikaners, English writers must compete with all the latest books from England and America. A South African imprint does not help—rather the reverse, for if the book was any good, one thinks, an overseas publisher would have accepted it. It is taken for granted that the author would prefer that; and since all writers like a wide public and big sales, of course he would. His eyes are turned to London, or at least to Europe, and if he can he goes there. Writers like Roy Campbell and William Plomer, whose work you will know as well as I, are hardly South African any more.

It is the same with actors, and even more with actresses, who not unnaturally regard their local stage as the platform from which trains leave for the West End, if one can only manage to get on them. The war, however, sent a few trains in the reverse direction. The arrival of Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies and the return, for a space, of Leontine Sagan began a boom in the South African theatre; and South Africans like Marda Vanne and Nan Munro are at present acting and producing before their own compatriots. The standard of amateur acting strikes me as extremely

high in Johannesburg, where you will fare better for the theatre than in all but one or two of the provincial English cities. Unfortunately the interest in acting is much greater than in drama. I have known an actor spend longer rehearsing a spotlight effect than the delivery of his lines. And audiences applaud the acting and the sets rather than the play. One society advertised a discussion—I assume in all seriousness—on whether the author, the actor, or the producer contributes most to the play. The Johannesburg Repertory Players, with a subscribing membership running into four figures and a waiting list of applicants, is sure of its audience whatever it cares to give them, and therefore has immense opportunities—not to say responsibilities—in the matter of elevating public taste. It has been known to do O'Neill and Pirandello with some success, and it promised well for 1944 by starting off with *The Doctor's Dilemma* and *The Rivals*; but noticed nothing incongruous—and what is worse, was about as well received—when later in the year it descended to the puerilities of *Life with Father* and *Cottage to Let*. (Puer—boy, age perhaps eleven.) The Press does not help. Standards of criticism are at a low ebb, as they say, except that an ebb presumes a flow; and the only possible sign of that is, I should say, in *Trek*, a progressive Cape Town fortnightly, which is achieving a circulation.

The attraction of bad plays is in most cases that they have been successful in London or New York. This attraction is a real one and not altogether to be despised. South Africa goes to the best shops, but may not have the discernment to get served with the best goods. So anything you can do to improve the taste of London may have its reflex here. For English culture in South Africa is a provincial culture, looking to its metropolis overseas. And this is inevitable. The alternative would be for South Africa to cut itself adrift not only from the other English-speaking countries—the bond, however, is too strong—but from the rest of the modern world. Yet one of the saddest sights in South Africa is the label 'Imported' flaunted in a shop window. That is not, like 'Made in Germany', a government-decreed stigma protecting local industry. It is an unashamed advertisement.

POINTS FROM LETTERS

GERMANY, BY A GERMAN

... 'The story of the occupation, in this zone at any rate, is, in my opinion, a story of a tremendous opportunity totally missed. Two things were needed: reconstruction as an aim, and firm guidance in carrying it through. The Germans are not interested in "democracy" which, under the circumstances, is not a serious proposition; they do not care for the interplay of parties which, under the circumstances, can only be an empty shadow of real party politics. And they are therefore not at all impressed by having parties again. But they were as ready to obey Americans and Englishmen as they were ready to obey Nazis. In fact, as always, they were eager to show their efficiency, discipline, their will to work under the new masters as under the old. They got no guidance, they were not told what to do in the task of reconstruction, they were not in any way integrated into the Western world, but instead were left to dream of the "good old days" of Hitler. I do not think for a moment that, for a very long time to come, Germany could be a political power able to threaten anybody. But I do think that in her slow and terrible disintegration she is becoming a centre of moral infection and economic decay for the Continent and for the world. It is impossible to let the second biggest economic power of the world, the biggest European nation on the Continent, rot, without a consequent spreading of the decay far beyond the borders of Germany. Here, nobody seems to think of all this, largely because everybody except those who would not find a job at home is thinking of one thing only, to wit, how to get home. I understand—at least it is the common opinion of Germans—that in the North-Western zone all this is much better. I think it is probably so, and at any rate I dearly hope so. ...'

Germany. 3 April 1946.

ENGLAND, BY A FRENCHMAN

... 'Je vous écris la joie profonde que j'ai ressentie de mon séjour à Londres ...'
... 'Pour la première fois, depuis six ans, j'ai trouvé un pays libre, des hommes libres, ayant un goût pour la discussion d'idées et une horreur de l'âpreté. Comme le malade qui entre en convalescence éprouve à nouveau et plus fermement que jamais la joie de vivre, celui qui a vécu quatre ans sous l'oppression et qui voit son pays revenir, trop lentement à son gré, vers un climat de liberté, est absolument bouleversé par la vie anglaise dès qu'il a la chance d'y être mêlé ...'

Paris. 16 April 1946.

ON THE BANNED WAGON

... 'In the *Stars and Stripes* I read that over 50,000 G.I.s asked for my books in Paris alone. Two months after invasion over 10,000 copies of the banned books had been sold. Ten thousand of each were printed (15,000 of French