

# THE OLD MAN

## A story

COLLINGWOOD  
AUGUST

IF WE HAD BOTH not missed the fast train, we would never have met. Now we were to spend the next 24 hours together on the slow train from Johannesburg—where we had gone on holiday.

I was not yet 17 years old and I don't think he was quite 71 years. So, befitting the difference in our ages he set the pace of the conversation—but he would have set the pace of any conversation, that Old Man.

On a long journey like this your travelling companion, although you may never have met him before, is soon one of your best friends—even if the friendship is only a transient one.

The evening before we had only made passes at one another and this long Sunday morning we spent telling one another stories. But, as I have already said, he was the pace-setter. This is the one story he told me that I still remember:

"Now, my son, when I was a young man, hardly older than you—for you are still a boy, I went to work. In those days going to work meant going to the diggings of Kimberley.

"Today, I see, young men go to Johannesburg to dig for gold in the entrails of the earth, or to Cape Town to dig for goods from the countries over the seas in the stomachs of ships, or, like you, to school to dig for knowledge in the pages of books.

"It was quite pleasant this digging for diamonds because we worked in the open. I don't think I could enjoy this digging for gold in the ribs of the earth. They say the people who dig for the gold never even see it; they just keep on shovelling mud. The gold-diggers will never know the pleasure of finding a stone in the earth—even if you had to give it to the white man immediately you picked it up.

"There were the days, My Son, of little things and little pleasures before the world got so wise and unhappy.

"But there was one thing that spoilt Kimberley for me—it was a white man. We nicknamed him Littlegreeks. Now that was a strange name to give him for he

was not small at all; he was almost as big as I am and you can see for yourself how big I am. The red down on his thick arms made him look like the fearful caterpillars that infest the thorny mimosa when its yellow flowers appear in the Christmas month. Also, he was not a Greek, he was an Englishman. And there was only one of him although he was almost as big as two men.

"Now, Littlegreeks had a habit—a bad habit, he did not know how to speak. I want to say to you that he could only speak by beating people. Never was a mistake made and there was Littlegreeks already hitting a man. Never was anyone allowed to make a word of explanation. But the thing I disliked most was that not a single one of them he hit ever stood up to Littlegreeks as a man ought to stand up to another man. He beat them all as if they were his children and they accepted it as such.

"Let me tell you that in those days, My Son, I was young and hot-headed and did not mind a fight. Now I fight only the Devil—on Sundays more than on any other day.

"Each time Littlegreeks hit a man my heart bled blood for man and I prayed to God to tempt Littlegreeks to hit me. It wasn't only that I disliked what Littlegreeks was doing, also I had never been bested in a fight. And so I looked forward with eyes that are black to a fight with this brave warrior Littlegreeks.

"DON'T MAKE A MISTAKE, now. I did not go out of my way to provoke war. I just got on with my work as well as I could. But the day that is a fool came and I made a mistake. I don't remember what the

mistake was; it was so long ago. With the speed and temper of a disturbed puff-adder Littlegreeks was on me. The sound of his thick fingers across my face was like the sound of the *blamskoot* of a whip. Tears were coming out of both eyes—not tears of rage or sorrow—but the water that Littlegreeks had struck out of the springs of the eyes.

"But the salty slime that came to my mouth killed all the evil temper that was just beginning to rape my senses. And I thought to myself: I hope you can fight like a man so that I may not be sorry if I kill you.

"Suddenly I realised my nose wanted blowing. I closed one nostril with a finger and blew hard through the other at Littlegreeks. I caught him neatly between the eyes. The Kimberley sun had burnt him an ugly red — like the overbaked feet of a pig. But when I caught him he became a darker red and I thought to myself: I have got you now; I like you angry as you are.

"Again his fingers were at me, but this time I saw him and bent my knees slightly so that he hit the air above me.

"Now, my son, do you see how big this hand of mine is? I folded it and hit Littlegreeks on the side of the jaw. As I hit him, I saw him open his eyes wide — not close them as other people do when they have been hit. Then he fell down on his knees and tried to hold on to the earth as if it would help him not to fall.

"Then I felt like one standing on a hilltop and looking down upon the land. I saw that the black and white people who had been working together like a mixed flock of sheep and goats were now separating—the black on their side on my left and the white on theirs on the right. Inside me I felt that the black people were deserting me and saying to the white, without

COLLINGWOOD AUGUST *left*  
South Africa as a political refugee during  
the 1960 Emergency and is working in  
Britain in journalism and publishing.

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saying it, 'We do not know him. We wash our hands of a black man who raises his hand against a white man.' But I was not angry with them for a man must fight his own fights sometimes. I also felt that the white men were separating in order to gang up on me—like the turkeys do. But this was as it should be, for they are the kings of the earth. And just as a boy among us can never best a man so among them a black man cannot best a white man.

"Now Littlegreeks was standing up again. This time I hit him with my left fist—the fingers of the right were still numb from the hardness of Littlegreeks's jaw.

"But Littlegreeks did not reach the earth this time, for as he was going down I saw a phalanx of spades shining in the sun from the polish the Kimberley earth had given them. Then I knew how that Egyptian whom Moses killed must have felt.

"Behind me was the Big Hole, in front of me was Littlegreeks, and beyond were the white people with shovels in their hands.

"Now, let me tell you about that Hole, in case you don't know. It is so wide that you can't throw a pebble across it; if you throw the pebble down the hole the sound of it reaching the water at the bottom comes back to you when you have forgotten that you ever threw a pebble.

"So you see how it was. I could not go forward because of the shining shovels and I could not hope to jump across the Hole. I picked Littlegreeks up in my arms just as he was reaching the ground and carried him the four or five paces to the edge of the Hole. The shovels say my intention and paused in their advance. Littlegreeks saw my intention and started screaming like a stupid monkey that has been trapped with a handful of mealie grains in a gourd.

"I looked at his frightened coward's eyes and felt humiliated for having fought a woman. I felt more humiliated that I was just about to throw a woman down that Hole.

"But Littlegreeks kept on screaming at his friends to drop their shovels, and they did, and I dropped Littlegreeks — on the ground not down the Hole.

"HOWEVER, THIS WAS NOT the end of the matter. I had committed the biggest sin a man can commit; I had raised my hand against a white man and so the mine police who had been attracted by the commotion marched me off to the lock-up in the compound. Here I had time to think about this and how to get out of it.

"I knew that if I appeared before the magistrate on the following morning I would be put in prison for a long time. You know the common saying: Prison is the home of all men, but I can assure you that no man ever willingly goes to that home. I tried very hard but I could not think of a way of escaping.

"Later in the evening two of the mine police — they sent two I think because they were not sure I could not overpower

one — came to escort me to the private house across the courtyard of the compound. The moon was full and the sky was clear even at the home-in-law of a dog. And I thought to myself: Even if I overpower these two hounds of the Great Place I cannot get far without being caught for there is no darkness to hide me.

"They opened the door of the private house for me and I pushed the bolt from the inside. When I had finished what I had gone to do there I saw suddenly, as if I had been struck by lightning, the manner of my escape which was like this:

"I pushed the bucket, it was full, through the trap door at the back. But the bucket fell on its side and dirtied the ground behind the compound. Fortunately the police standing outside the door of the private house did not hear the noise of the falling bucket for the men in the compound were dancing, singing, and keeping time by clapping their hands — and you know how much noise that makes.

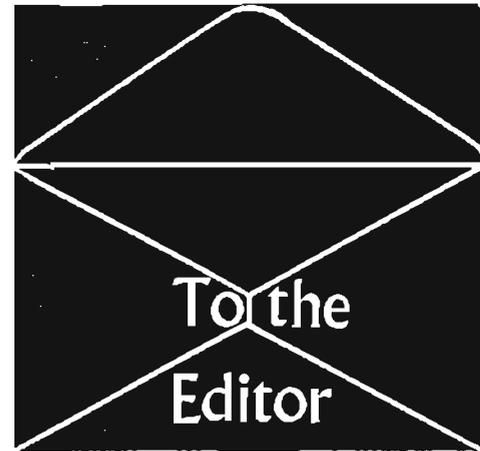
"I went out by the head through the hole one squats on and then through the trap door on the other side — the trap door that the Baca people use for removing the buckets; but not without a mighty struggle for you can see how big I am; and not without getting dirty from all the smelly waste that had fallen out of the bucket; but I did not mind; a man, if he is going to be a man, must undergo such trials.

"As soon as I was standing outside I said, 'My shins what did you ever do for me?' And I can tell you that day my shins worked as they had never worked before. Running, then, in that bright moon which turned night into day, I expected to be shot down at any moment. But I got away safely. I sometimes wonder what ever happened to those guards for they were black men like me and the owners of the mine must have thought they had conspired with me to let me escape. As you well know, My Son, white men can never think straight; they always see what is not there. Thus it is sometimes easy to deceive them.

"Anyway in three months I had walked to Cape Town. I did not dare go by train in case they had sent my description up and down by the wire and I did not dare go to my home because that is where they would look first for me — anyway all my money, about £15 in the gold sovereigns you never see in these days, was locked up in my kilt with my belongings.

"The manner of my getting to Cape Town is a story I shall tell you later, if you want to hear it. The important thing is that I was never caught. In Cape Town I even changed my name and never wrote home, so that in time I came to be forgotten and five years later I returned to my home.

"Now, I am sure, you want to know why I am telling you this story. Well, it's like this: At home it is my name that is on the preaching plan to give today's sermon and this is the story I would have told the people of the Lord in an effort to show them that if you have outwitted the Devil you should never remain to discuss the matter with him — if you can. ●



### Portuguese students

SIR,—Having been represented at the first Conference of Portuguese Students Abroad which took place in Brussels between February 19th and 21st this year, we are sending you the Final Declaration of the Conference in the hope that it may be published in your paper, if not in its entirety at least some extracts.

We emphasise the importance of this being the first time in the forty years of Salazar's dictatorship that Portuguese students have been able to meet in freedom.

The Committee is sure that the publication of this document can help to clarify public opinion internationally of the hopes of the Portuguese students in their own country and abroad.

JOSE LARANJO

Secretary, Portuguese Students Association  
Committee in Great Britain, 11B Bromley Grove  
Shortlands, Kent, England

[Space permits us to print only this extract:

"The large number of expulsions from Portuguese universities, the colonial war, the anti-democratic policies of the Salazar Government and the mediocrity of Portuguese education have forced many Portuguese students to leave the country. But our meeting was not convened with the sole aim of solving the problems which arise from our exile.

"We also wish to give all our support to the struggle of Portuguese students for freedom of association, an integral part of the fight of our people for democracy, against the colonial war and for the complete independence of our country from foreign economic, political and military control. Also in these last few years, the fascist character of the Portuguese dictatorship, which murdered General Humberto Delgado, has revealed itself in a particularly violent form when seeking to crush the struggle for independence of the peoples of Guinea and Cape Verde, S. Tomé and Príncipe, Mozambique and Angola. We strongly condemn the colonial war, and hold Salazar and those who support him responsible for the deaths which this war is causing amongst the peoples of the colonies and also amongst our own people. We also hold his régime responsible for the increasingly dependent situation in which Portugal is being placed by this war. — EDITOR]

### Frontier

SIR,—Thank you very much for your letter giving me the names and addresses of those people to whom you are sending FRONTIER on our behalf. I should be very interested to hear of what is happening to them from time to time.

I'd like to take this opportunity of saying how important I think your magazine is both in showing the way in which art and literature are flourishing and in being able to get across to South Africa that there is still some humanism left in the world.

NATALIE REIN  
277 Trinity Road, London, S.W. 18, England

[So far 62 subscriptions have been donated. We have several hundred names and addresses of fighters against apartheid in South Africa to whom we are hoping to send FRONTIER — see p. 82. — EDITOR]