

A chink in the curtain

IN THE CORRESPONDENCE
OF A 'FRONTIER' DONOR
AND READER

WE MET through the columns of *The New African*. Not through one of those kinky advertisements of the *Private Eye/New Statesman* type (there are none in *The New African*) and our meeting held no promises of fast drives in Jaguar cars ending in sexy deviation on the M.1. Our advertisement simply said that if I'd like to subscribe to *Frontier* it would be sent every month on my behalf to people in South Africa who were banned or under house arrest or were in other ways the victims of the regime.

In order perhaps to deal with my own feelings of inadequacy in the face of the appalling apathy in England over the question of apartheid or perhaps for other less clear reasons I sent off the subscription and hoped somebody would receive *Frontier*, enjoy reading it and feel slightly less alienated. During the following weeks I thought a lot about this small action which maybe would create a chink in the sombre curtain which had been forcibly drawn to separate freedom from tyranny. But as is London and as is life itself the everyday minor problems of living and coping with job, home, children and our own immediate social problems blurred my mind. Only the occasional story in the newspapers of further horrors in Johannesburg, Durban, Cape Town or the Transkei and of more iniquitous laws heaped on those already so restrictive ones, helped to keep alive the nagging misery of a situation which had already existed before — thirty years before, in Europe. For that my generation has been able to blame others being ourselves then only very small children.

THEN, AMONG OTHER, more pedestrian mail one morning came an Air Letter from South Africa which began: "This morning I received *Frontier* which contained your address. I make free writing to you. It is my privilege to tell you there is much humanism in South Afrika. Since humanism is, in this country, akin to communism it is suppressed."

From this letter has grown a relationship between an elderly South African who is under banning orders and who has recently been imprisoned for his beliefs and myself. We write frequently and our air letters are closely typed so that no space is wasted. From him I am learning firsthand of the hell of being banned, restricted and imprisoned. No newspaper article can bring about this kind of personal involvement. We discuss, too, all the everyday things concerning racialism and race relations. The visit of Robert Kennedy to South Africa — "Am pleased to report that I listened with another 6-7,000 people outside the hall where he spoke. I waited for two hours in front of the hotel to see him . . ." he wrote to me. The banning of Ian Robertson, UDI in Rhodesia and the racial struggle in the US. All his letters show the confusion he feels at the treatment he and many others are receiving at the hands of the country of

their birth. "I must confess," he wrote on one occasion, "that I personally feel as if I am locked up in a small space of which the walls are irresistibly moving in to an even smaller space," and on another, "Racialists in power here rape and twist all basic human rules in so far as they apply to black Africans and Indians and those effectively opposing them," and again, "This coming spring it will be three years that I was restricted. Many a night I laid awake at the time pondering 'Why, why?'"

FOR MY PART I CAN only give my version of the outside world's attitude to South Africa. I tell him what people here think and feel about apartheid and of any 'blow for freedom' which I feel is being struck in England. When it happened I wrote him of the televising of Ruth First's story and of the emotional battering received by her husband and Lewis Nkosi on a television programme later that same night. I told him, too, of the Rhodesia march here in London and we discussed its misrepresentation in the South African press.

I know our letters are very important to both of us. To me because I am being confronted all the time with this horrible and serious crime from which I am not having the privilege of escape. For him because I believe that every letter from England, however poor it may be, brings a flicker of light. But as with all important relationships this one too brings its own responsibilities. I do not feel I can delay in replying to his letters and so drop everything to answer. Then I worry if he doesn't reply promptly. Has he been arrested again and if so how will I find out? What can I do to help? Whom should I contact? Or is he just ill? This would be quite normal — he is an elderly man. Have my letters been confiscated? Is he not receiving them? All these problems go with a relationship like ours.

His first letter to me ended thus, "The outside world ought to find a way to oust the prejudice from the minds of those in power. We, living here are made impotent, action besides words and prayers not feasible, the prayers mainly from private individuals since the churchgoers pray for their own well-being, later, in heaven."

I guess this is what this article and *Frontier* are all about.

[We have many hundreds of names and addresses of victims of the apartheid regime in South Africa. Please enable us to send them FRONTIER. There is an order form on page 204. — EDITOR.]