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TOM SHARPE

OPSAAL! DIE BLOEDBAD KOM!

KOMMANDANT van Heerden was sitting in his office staring with moody admiration at the portrait of the Queen above the fireplace when the call came through.

"Pretoria on the line," said the police operator who was under strict orders never to interrupt the Kommandant's hour of meditation after lunch unless there was a genuine emergency.

The Kommandant stiffened in his chair. Calls from the Ministry of Law and Order were definitely emergencies and usually of the most unpleasant sort. The last time had been when an American TV team, hoping to record the sexual foreplay of the aardvark, had inadvertently stumbled on Konstabel Els executing his duty and two black husbands who had foolishly objected to his raping their wives.

Pretoria had been most upset about the incident.

So had Kommandant van Heerden.

"Why the hell didn't you shoot the swine?" he had demanded of the Konstabel who usually shot anyone or anything that came his way.

"They were taking pictures of me," said Els, looking crestfallen.

"All the more reason. Anyone taking pictures of you ought to be shot."

"But this was TV. I thought they might be watching me overseas."

The Kommandant shuddered at the notion.

"All the same you shouldn't have beaten them up in the cells afterwards. The Americans are our allies. You've got to be nice to them. They're helping us to fight the Communists."

Els had gone away chastened and had tried to be so nice to two elderly tourists from Idaho

who had come to visit the Kruger National Park that they had left for home next day unwilling to see any other wild animals in their natural habitat.

But this time the call from Pretoria was strangely enigmatic.

"Opsaal, die bloedbad kom," said the voice. "I repeat - Opsaal, die bloedbad kom. Message ends, over."

"Message received," said the Kommandant, who didn't have a clue what it meant.

He put the receiver down and looked hurriedly out the window. Whatever bloodbath had come, he was grateful to note that it hadn't reached Piemburg. In fact the little town was pleasantly quiet and all the more so since the boycott of white business had started. The Kommandant was secretly in favour of the boycott. It added veracity to his happy illusion that he was living in some secluded county town in England and besides, having blacks off the street meant that Konstabel Els had to go out to Kaffirtown when he felt like shooting someone. It made life so much safer for ordinary white shoppers.

Just the same, the message, "Saddle up, the bloodbath comes," was hardly reassuring. All his life the Kommandant had been living in terror of the bloodbath. Hordes of Zulus would suddenly descend one morning on every white household in South Africa bringing four million cups of tea in one hand and as many assegais in the other. The Kommandant had given up his early morning tea years ago. There was also the chance that it might be poisoned too.

He got up and crossed the room and turned the portrait of the Queen round so that she faced the wall and in her place Mrs Thatcher

looked sternly down on him. Not even Lieutenant Verkramp, who hated the British, could accuse him of being un-South African for having her picture on the wall. She had always been staunchly pro-South African and there was even talk of elevating her to "Ouma" Thatcher for her contribution to the maintenance of White Supremacy and the implementation of Apartheid in Britain.

Having provided proof of his patriotism, the Kommandant sent for Lieutenant Verkramp. The Head of the Security Branch would know about the bloodbath, if anyone did. The bastard always knew everything.

"Message just in from Pretoria," said Verkramp as soon as he entered the office. "Opsaal, die bloedbad kom. I repeat. Opsaal, die bloedbad kom."

"Where?" asked the Kommandant, glancing anxiously out the window again. "You'd think we'd hear some screaming. Anyway it's supposed to come with the early morning tea."

Lieutenant Verkramp looked at him contemptuously. He'd always distrusted the Kommandant. In his opinion Van Heerden was soft and stupid and ought to have been replaced years ago. Afrikaanders who hid portraits of the Queen on their walls were obviously traitors.

"It's the code word for total emergency," he explained. "We are empowered to impose an absolute news black-out; the townships must be surrounded and all ANC terrorists rounded up immediately."

"But we rounded them all up last week," said the Kommandant. "You mean there are still more of them?"

"Millions," said Verkramp. "Particularly in the Churches, the Black Sash and..."

"But the Black Sash are all white women. Very respectable too."

"ANC terrorists," said Verkramp. "That's why the sash they wear is black."

"I hadn't thought of that," said the Kommandant. "All the same I don't think Mr de Graaf is going to like having his wife rounded up. He's already had two strokes and without her to push his wheelchair..."

"We all have to make sacrifices."

"Yes, but what are we going to charge her with?" asked the Kommandant. "All she does is stand outside the Town Hall in silence."

"We don't have to charge her with anything. Don't you know your law? Under the Emergency Powers what we say is the Law."

Kommandant van Heerden gave up. He didn't want any part of arresting Mrs de Graaf. She'd once invited him in for coffee.

"Well, since you're Head of Security, I'm putting you in charge of Operation Bloedbad as from now," he said.

Verkramp smiled unpleasantly.

"I am in charge already," he said and left the room.

THE Kommandant sat down and thanked God. If Verkramp cocked things up and he was almost certain to, at least no one could blame him. And if the bloodbath had really started, the Kommandant preferred to sit it out in the comparative safety of the police station. He leant back in his chair and wondered if Ouma Thatcher was a member of the Black Sash. He rather doubted it. The expression on her face didn't suggest she went in for non-violent protests.

An hour later Lieutenant Verkramp drove out in a Caspir armoured car to the Drill Hall to issue orders to the five hundred policemen assembled there. At long last his hour had come. Operation Bloedbad would ensure the supremacy of Afrikaanderdom and the White Race and the name Verkramp would go down in the list of Afrikaans Heroes. There might even be a statue of him in the Voortrekker Monument. Best of all the credit for Piemburg's safety would come to him. Kommandant van Heerden had shown his true colours. In Verkramp's eyes they were red and had a hammer and sickle on them. Lieutenant Verkramp climbed on to the dais.

"Men of the SAP," he declaimed, "tonight we are going to break the African Nationalist Communist terrorist revolutionist organisation in Piemburg."

He paused to let the message sink in.

"All over South Africa dangerous terrorists are going to learn... the whole world is going to learn that we are the last bastion of Western Civilisation in Africa."

In the front row Konstabel Els

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looked puzzled. Civilisation was not a word he liked. Someone had once told him it meant not killing blacks. Lieutenant Verkramp's next remark was more comprehensible.

"You are authorised to arrest by whatever means you choose, dead or alive, any person resisting arrest or suspected of furthering the aims of the communist conspiracy. You cannot be held responsible or sued in the courts for anything you do. No radio or TV coverage is to be permitted. You are to arrest and detain any reporters who obstruct you in the course of your duties. This applies particularly to TV cameramen who are foreign agents of the ANC's propaganda cadres."

Sergeant de Kock put up his hand.

"What's a cadre, sir?" he asked.

Lieutenant Verkramp hesitated. He wasn't entirely sure himself what a cadre was. It was something he'd heard at a special course he'd attended on Marxist-Leninism at the Police College.

"It's a Jewish commissar," he said finally. "Joe Slovo is a cadre."

The Sergeant had never heard of Joe Slovo.

"All right then, Dr Levy is a cadre," said Verkramp and put the best dentist in Piemburg into a new category.

It was two in the morning when Operation Bloedbad really began. Lieutenant Verkramp led the First Task Force. It devoted its attention to the white terrorists without whom Verkramp knew the blacks would be leaderless.

"Kaffirs are too stupid to organise a revolution," he told the Sergeant as the armoured truck rumbled up Town Hill. "It's in the Bible.

Blacks are hewers of water and drawers of wood. Like Hitler said, the Jews are behind the communist revolutionaries."

"But I thought the Jews wrote the Bible," said the Sergeant. "How come they are communists now?"

"Because they know we Afrikaaners are God's really chosen people," said Verkramp. "And they're jealous."

BY four o'clock the First Task Force had accomplished its objectives. The Reverend Smail of the Presbyterian Church had been arrested. So had the Anglican Bishop of Piemburg. Fifteen nuns in a mini-bus had been stopped at a road block on their way to a special Mass for multi-racial unity in Durban and had been body-searched with the aid of enemas to ensure they were not carrying explosives in their persons; the editor of the *Piemburg Witness* who had once written a leader on police brutality now knew exactly what he had been talking about; Mrs de Graaf had been dragged from her bed in her night-dress and locked with two other Black Sash women in a cell holding a suspected black rapist.

"I don't know why you're grumbling," said the warder. "I thought that was what you people wanted, equality. It proves we're dismantling apartheid."

But it was in Kaffirtown that the threat to Western Civilisation felt the full force of South African justice. Twenty-two black school children driven from their homes by tear gas were shot with their parents for defying the curfew they hadn't been told about; two churches, a creche and the medical centre were burnt to the ground; Konstabel Els had the time of his life ending a dozen other people's, and hundreds of Africans had been arrested for having black skins. Operation Bloodbath had lived up to its name. As dawn broke, a pall of smoke hung over the township and on the unpaved streets, the bodies of the dead waited for the flies and the noonday sun.

"We have struck a blow for freedom," Verkramp announced triumphantly when he returned from a tour of the carnage. "Like the Battle of Blood River, God has been good to us. The ANC has been crushed."

"How many of the swine did you capture?" asked Kommandant van Heerden. He had spent a disturbed night listening to the sound of distant gunfire and the screams of those being tortured in the cells below.

"Hundreds," said Verkramp and waved a bloodstained sjambok in the air. "We've got them in the Drill Hall. You want to see them?"

Downstairs a group of lawyers and reporters were trying to find out what could be legally printed. Verkramp told them.

"Under the Emergency Powers ▶

"Under the Emergency Powers invested in me, you may not name any person who has been arrested. Similarly the law doesn't allow any arrested person to consult a lawyer. Any relative mentioning that another relative has been detained will be arrested and held indefinitely. It is illegal to publish or state or refer to anything that might aid the enemies of South Africa."

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"That doesn't leave us much to say," muttered one journalist.

"You can always write about sport," said Lieutenant Verkramp. "South Africa has always been a very sporting country, you know, and that's a very healthy topic."

There was nothing very healthy about the topic being discussed at the Drill Hall. Konstabel Els had commandeered seventeen milk floats and was encouraging a number of prisoners with a sjambok to take the tyres off the wheels. Kommandant van Heerden was appalled.

"Els, you bastard," he yelled. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Els lowered his sjambok.

"Obeying Lieutenant Verkramp's instructions," he said. "He said to necklace the sods."

"But those milk floats are white property," said van Heerden before the full implications of Els' statement hit him. He stopped and stared at Verkramp. The Head of Security smiled.

"It's in the Bible," he explained. "The Good Lord said, 'Do unto others as they would do unto you.' You can't deny what God said."

Kommandant van Heerden preferred not to. All the same his next remark was an unwise one.

"I am your Kommandant and I will not sanction the use of tyres from milk floats to..."

He stopped. Verkramp had taken his revolver from its holster.

"You are under arrest," he shouted.

"Me?" squeaked van Heerden. "How can you arrest me? And what for?"

"As officer in command of Operation Bloedbad, I am placing you under arrest for using an inflammatory word."

"What word?" said the old Kommandant, eyeing the muzzle of the gun with alarm.

"Don't try to trick me," said Verkramp. "You know what word."

"You mean 'sanction'?" said van Heerden. "But..."

"That's twice," snarled Verkramp. "I always knew you were a commie bastard. I hereby arrest you for subversive activities and advocating an anti-South African policy."

As ex-Kommandant van Heerden was hurled into the back of the police van he cursed himself for a fool. He should never have allowed Verkramp to take charge of the Operation. The man was mad. South Africa had gone mad. Not for the first time, he wished he'd been born an English gentleman.

In a final act of defiance he clutched the bars on the window and shouted, "God save the Queen."

But the words were drowned by the screams of the milkman. Konstabel Els had lit the tyre.