



1. HALF-COCKED ABOVE KOKSTAD

It makes off with a low whistle across the rocks and stubble of an ill-disposed Brooks Nek ridge, darts down wide around the top end of Usherwood, regains the ridge, then up and cuts it for the Ngele Mountains to the east, all broken and precipitous. Good fences make good neighbours and this is a good fence, stronger by far and more costly than any other around Usherwood. It is also electrified.

That it carries no current at present means only that it could – at any moment. For behind it, by kind permission of the state, lies the Transkei, whose quarantined hollows are now filling with the early shadows of a late, leap-year afternoon in early February.

Let's breach it.

Breach it? You mean snip it?

Quite.

Patch it once through?

Or leave it.

Exactly. Who'll ever know it was us?

And yet hedges have eyes.

And donkeys ears. And bees knees.

Sunlight catches brightly, quizzically, the pale green and white-washed walls of scattered huts studded in tiers out of sight around distant north-facing slopes. An awful and potentially debilitating form of incomprehension grips us momentarily. It has just gone half-past four and it is as well we left when we did.

Two hours ago, when we stepped forth from under Usherwood's trees, we reasoned that not only was it time we left but that by leaving as late as we did we would be leaving that much less to the unforeseen. Not that we are surprised to find this fence some twenty kilometres from Kokstad, flung down before us like a rampart around old Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey from our starting point. We knew what to expect the minute we were told to not 'make the mistake of forgetting things you might need' and to not 'take things you won't need'. Not even James Muller, squire of Usherwood and steady border man, has mentioned a fence though, he most likely having seen it so often before.

There is a gate here, for reasons unknown to us, appearances perhaps, but it is chained and padlocked and we cannot go back now and ask for a key. We are travellers and must keep on.

So what about the old man then, the little old man, whom we have never met?

James Muller, living up against the marches as he does, has an employee stationed up here, an agent whose job it is to deter invaders or raise the alarm at least. We off-load the donkeys and, somewhat dejected, pile our trappings in a corner of the fence next to the gate, dusting our hands off with business-like slaps.

They say there is trouble and travail out there in the Transkei, but even with binoculars, all remains unclear. Pete goes over the gate at its banging post and wanders off up Brooks Nek ridge, map in hand, to see if this is the gate we should take – if we can. I walk back to the old man's hut, stopping in passing at another hut, where, earlier, we had frightened a child at play. Clapping eyes on us it had scurried, chubby-thighed, back into the dark of the hut, only to emerge, peeping, once we had passed.

The same child is here again, but more composed now, and a young woman. She sits tending a meal on a trim fire on the ground in the near centre of the hut, her legs together, folded around her left side in apparent comfort. I sense resignation at my intrusion.

She does not have a key but, yes, she is sure the old man does. I think I see her make to rise as I leave. But the aged sentinel is nowhere to be seen. His door hangs ajar by a chink, secured with a cheap lock, hasp and staple. Faded clothes flap from the barbed wire of a nearby pen, hung there to dry. I notice, particularly, a T-shirt, gone at the neck, the logo SAR&H (South African Railways and Harbours) only just visible.

Then I hear voices and find more huts just over the ridge but still on this side of the fence. Buildings they are rather than huts. With corrugated-iron roofs. A group of teenage girls back off as I draw near. The girls move out of sight and pretend they have not seen me. They go somewhere and

crouch down with their hands over their heads and begin to rock.

I approach the open door of a room in which I am sure I heard women talking only a minute ago, talking and smoking no doubt – Xhosa women are inveterate smokers. But it is empty now, quite empty. I hover self-consciously and then back away.

Molo molo molo!

A man's voice behind me, loud, over-confident, challenging.

I whip around. Cautious looks. What am I doing here? Who are you?

He is not the old man, but he also works for Boss James and he has a key.

And not only does he have a key, he will open the gate right now if I want. I sense a misunderstanding. This is too easy. Making stricter use of the laws of euphony by modulating our accents for accuracy and manipulating our hands for emphasis we retrace our conversation. It turns out that he does have a key but not to the gate we want. His gate is near the buildings here.

I'll talk to my partner, I say, and we'll return tomorrow, if we do.

Your gate has no key, he says.

Euphonics, metaphors. It is dark and cold by the time I rejoin Pete and fog is blowing in from nowhere. But fog is fog, it comes and goes, and nothing is going to prevent the quaint lights of Kokstad from twinkling foolishly up at us, as if in emanation from another life, others' lives. To think that if we had been up here about two weeks ago we might have seen a puff of smoke rising like an exclamation mark, a beery burp, from the Kokstad Men's Club – across from the police station – where a limpet mine (planted, some say, by a cadre of the ANC) exploded.

One-hundred-and-twenty-five years ago, in February 1863, on the far side of Kokstad, on the slopes of Mount Currie, a group of about two thousand people settled. A hybrid society, the Griquas. A lost tribe. Their leader was Adam Kok III. They came from far off Philippolis, a town just north of the Orange River in today's Free State, and trekked east for more than a year. Their journey was as arduous as any of the treks of the Voortrekkers, who had fled the abolition of slavery and, to a lesser degree, the British three decades earlier.

Mistrustful of white people generally, both Boer and British, the Griquas had long been desperate to establish their own identity-cum-nationhood, on their own land. They thought they had found this in Philippolis but their unease was soon compounded by the encroaching

trekboers from the Cape. The final straw for the Griquas was the creation, in February 1854, of the Boer Republic of the Orange Free State, within which Philippolis was incorporated. They were prepared to make for the moon, they declared, if they had to in order to escape.

This may be conjectural, but it seems there were no borders then, no zones, no boundaries, no districts, no provinces, no territories, no reserves. What there was on the land made available to the Griquas was, well, nothing. No people, that is, but most importantly for the Griquas no white people. In fact, the authorities had already christened this area Nomansland.

No man's land. No-man's-land. Nomansland. Which carries less menace? Pangaea broke up. Who could have foreseen the man-made fractures that would form across what was left of Gondwanaland, the patch now known as South Africa? Xhosa against colonist, Boer against British, Zulu against Zulu, and now the underground war that sends smoke out of Kokstad. When Adam Kok died in 1875, his followers split, some of them returning to the road and pressing on south-west from Kokstad to Plettenberg Bay.

In our own journey west and into the future we tether our donkeys to a stanchion on a lonely hill above Kokstad, next to a fence in a fog, fashion a shelter from groundsheet for the dogs, and pitch Pete's tent for the two of us. But sleep does not come easy and when it does it is soon over. There is a reason for this.

Before we set out this afternoon we conducted a modest, private ceremony under Usherwood's trees to proclaim the carefree spirit of our tramp. An attempt, it could be said, to temper our fear of the unknown and to fortify ourselves against the unearthly. We said certain words and made certain signs, intoning *Be these the tenets by which we will live*, before slipping over our donkeys' necks strips of new leather to which we had earlier attached their very own bells.

They are ringing in the fog outside right now, so remote and ghostly that neither Jimbo nor Zapper has stirred. Wendell's could be something an altar boy would carry, Sway's is a miniature imitation of a Swiss cowbell.