

COWBOY (and other strange encounters)

Through all those decades, Africa wove such tapestries for us. They may well fade in time, but not before the last member of the British South Africa Police has ridden away forever. We were fortunate to have lighter moments to help us through the grim realities of policing our patch of the Dark Continent. I was always intrigued by the number of harmlessly deranged people who ambled through our lives. Adrift in the world of the sane, their condition insulated them against the ugliness of Life. Certainly I never saw an unhappy one, and I remember many of them in far greater detail than the thousands of other faces that flitted by.

John the Baptist, re-incarnated, that was Cowboy. This towering, wild and ragged hessian-clad figure was sent to try us from time to time. He was intelligent, of that, there was no doubt, conversing in three languages at once, delivering shouted monologues in fluent English on any subject. It was also quite apparent that he was enormously powerful and nobody tried his patience. Such as it was.

Cowboy, in good form, could clear a charge office of more timid and sober citizens, it took some effort to remind oneself of Queen, and Country and that joining the exodus might be construed as deserting one's post.

Redolent with the smoky, bush smell of the truly uncivilised, and draped with such trinkets as a motor car timing chain and other assorted refuse from the municipal tip-site, Cowboy would strike a pose and recite a few lines from the Bard or the Bible - with improvisations, as the mood took him.

The worst was when, leaning over the counter, accoutrements clanking and leaking sump oil on your paperwork, and with a gaunt hand that looked and smelled as though it had been exhumed, slowly and painfully grasped your wrist or hand, while he told you what a fine job you were doing. Having felt that grip, I could imagine its effect on a new recruit, riveted to his stool, typing arrested, goggling at this apparition, whose scabrous grasp and hypnotic glare were draining away his newfound authority, along with his circulation.

Although preferable to the criminal element, Cowboy tended to be larger than life and he seemed to lurk outside the station until we were at our busiest. Then he would stride imperiously past the gate-guard, trailing his rags like the robes of a prophet, a-clink with this week's ironmongery, full of a real lust for life and a good session of the Scriptures - according to Cowboy.

It was Cowboy who head-butted the protective grill off a township bus radiator because the hydraulics hissed at him as he passed.

Bernard was very different. You never seemed to see him coming in. In the usual Sunday night bedlam of shouting, arguing and weeping in the Charge Office as black Africa

counted the cost of one last, defiant gesture against the inevitability of Monday. And suddenly, you'd look up and he'd be there. Sitting between the man bleeding morosely in the corner and the woman clutching her squalling infant and shouting her discontent through the interpreter. The floor would be spotted with blood, beer (before or after filtration through human kidneys) a-litter with garments, baskets, blankets and leaking plastic bags. Constable Pretorius would be displaying a ham-like fist to a swaying complainant; another botched statement snatched from his battered Olivetti in his other hand.

His constable would be stolidly translating the tirade in the vernacular. It wasn't so much that they changed their stories, but a story is not to be told without embellishment - it cannot be coldly reduced to black marks on paper, and when the drink is in him, a man warms to an attentive audience.

And through it all, Bernard would sit there, in his ragged, brown-checked jacket with the hairy sisal string about his waist to close it, hands under his thighs on the cold concrete bench, bare feet neatly together. He had only one expression, sad and thoughtful, his eyes full of unspoken things. Things that only Bernard could understand. We spoke to him often and he would listen gravely and politely, but nobody ever heard him speak, so he was left alone and seemed to like it that way. I came to welcome his silent vigils. Sometimes it was as though he and I were the only sane ones in a world of unhappiness, pain and aggression. In the end, I was the only person who ever heard him make a sound.

It was the night Bernard sat beside the drunken tax-driver. My constable was translating an angry statement from the fat and trembling mother of a snuffling child. There was a long and vehement torrent of vernacular, too rapid for my halting Sindebele to follow, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw Bernard stiffen. He leaned forward slowly, the better to see the speaker, and sat there, staring at her. His lips were moving silently, stubbly beard bobbing.

The woman's voice died away, and she sat there awkwardly, comforting the child, scrubbing at her nose with the heel of one plump hand. The subject of Bernard's intent scrutiny showed every sign of huge embarrassment and gradually the rest of that noisy crowd fell silent, too.

Bernard looked down at the floor for a long time, and then, almost imperceptibly, shook his head from side to side. Then he let out the loudest and most eloquent Bantu click of disgust I've ever heard. Another sad shake of the head and he rose and stalked out with enormous dignity.

The motley sea of black faces watched the door for some time in silence, and when the noise grew again, it was subdued. I'm not suggesting that Bernard's patent disapproval had any effect on those normal people. For he really was quite, quite mad.

Peter Shova was always good for a laugh. You'd hear the imperious ringing of his bicycle bell at the station gate and look out to see the gate-guard waiting for permission to let him in. A wave of the hand would bring two answering flashes of white teeth, and Peter would sweep in grandly on his beloved bicycle then fuss about, locking his imaginary bicycle and fuss about locking this delusion to the railings. He carried a stout chain for the purpose and a lock that would have held King-Kong.

He was short and very cheerful, if you knew how to handle him. Peter was very public-spirited and must have enjoyed a good education, because he was fluent in English and Afrikaans, as well as two or three Bantu languages. His education showed in the long letters he wrote to the Bulawayo City Council, flowery and full of the clichés to be found in "The Better Letter Writer"- a set book for African schools. The city fathers had been moved enough by one such epistle to greatly improve the standard of public toilets and municipal beer-halls.

Peter never lost an opportunity to flourish the dog-eared, thumbed response from the Council that started off, "*Dear Mr Shova, We are in receipt of your letter, dated....*" below the Municipal crest of an elephant rampant, bisected by an oblique brown crease that showed daylight in places.

He'd smooth it out on the counter, adding more stress and grime, then launch into his latest complaint. Someone always found time to listen to him and he always left satisfied. If you were too busy, a good ploy was to slide a pencil and paper across the cracked Formica counter and let him write a formal statement. Most of us had one or two of those tucked away for posterity.

One sweltering Christmas, I was driving up Abercorn Street when I saw a seasonal Santa on the corner. Fat and jolly in the best tradition, equipped with a truly clangorous bell, he was sweatily exhorting passers-by to patronise the Bata shoe shop, black cherubic face partially concealed by a moulting cotton-wool beard. Then, a happy shout of recognition from Peter Shova. Somehow, after that, Santa will never be the same.

One night, a white-faced motorist came in to report a near miss on the road from Makokoba to Mpilo Hospital. He'd hooted at a solitary pedestrian in the centre of his lane and expected him to leap to the verge. Only reflectors festooned on string behind the man's back had made him visible, and instead of the usual dash to safety, he'd made an imperious gesture for the car to overtake him,

All I could do was thank him, sigh, collect my cap and swagger stick, and take the Duty Inspector's car out to talk to Peter again.

It didn't help. We never got Peter to accept that he didn't own a bicycle, although he bought a licence every year, and displayed it in a disc holder on his belt. Along with the bell and the reflectors.

Mike Job