

THE MIGRANT LABOUR SYSTEM

By JESSIE HERTSLET

(By Courtesy "Evening Post")

THE CUSTOM OF MIGRANT LABOUR, provision for it and even legal foresight for its continuance — all this is unique in South Africa. Other newly industrialized countries put up with it for a period, but soon make arrangements for normal family life to continue among the labourers.

There must be definite reason for the difference here. The long distances from kraal to gold and diamond mines started it; African docility endured it; the "Get-Rich-Quick" principle consolidated it.

Now we have scores of barracks, housing so-called "bachelors" near to the factories, docks, mills, mines and even plantations or other enterprises, scattered over this land and acting as dormitories for the workers.

Even as near as Rhodesia, the normal family plan adopted in European industrial lands can be seen. It is rumoured that some of our entrepreneurs have studied these centres of home life, seen their advantages, and have begged to be allowed to provide the same manner of workmen's villages inside our borders.

But such is the worship of **apartheid** that such villages filled with the happy life of Blacks are obnoxious when within sight of White inhabitants.

A couple of breaks — perhaps more — have been made, with great success, but life in barracks is the fate of most African workers.

There are certain evils in this system which must inevitably work out their course.

The character of our Africans, the subtle something which makes them the labourers desired by industrialists from abroad, will not survive an unnatural life.

With ordinary men the early years of married life are an invaluable education; responsibility is learned; virtues are acquired and passed on into the very core of the race.

But the "bachelor" living in barracks becomes again a selfish child, concerned only with himself — except in those rare cases where an association of friends is made to care for each other.

The strength and firmness of the family-man is foreign to him and, in his short visits home, he cannot acquire full manhood.

Do we connect in our minds the incredible number of inmates of our prisons — said to be 63,000 out of our small population — with this evil system which deprives young boys of their fathers' control? If anyone thinks about it, perhaps they imagine stern control in the kraals.

They could not be more mistaken. The able-bodied men are mostly away and the neglected children no longer honour old age.

Migrant labour has persisted for two generations, and is largely helping to furnish the supply of undisciplined African lads who have never known the father-image as a guide through life.

Apart from those who have an absent father, are the tens of thousands nowadays who are not owned by any specific father, but are the illegitimate by-blows of the Bantu maidens at work within reach of the barracks. These babes are generally handed over to ancient relatives in the country.

They probably get a smattering of education, but the loving daily discipline of parental family life, with its sense of security, is lacking for too many children produced by our work system.

The irony is increased for those of us who know the excellence of African family unity and discipline — before their world was crumbled by the White man's demands upon them.

Much could again be restored, before the old ways are forgotten. Enough remains of the inherent African character to salvage this fine race of people, could the example of the few successfully humanitarian industrialists be followed.

Tongati village in Natal is a model of happy home-life, so are the Wankie coal mines; Phalaborwa in the Transvaal promises to be another such centre of good living. Vanderbylpark on the Vaal demonstrates what an industrial township can be for all races.

An attempt has been made this year to interest every thoughtful woman in the Republic in the danger and disgrace of migrant labour. The number who have responded promises a new climate. They will urge their menfolk to insist on our working class having the amenities of home-life, proper food, and the family relationship which alone produces people worth their salt.