

# The Benefit of the Doubt

JOYCE HARRIS

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**I**T IS IMPOSSIBLE TO BELIEVE that the white people of this country, the Government included, can be even remotely aware of what the prevailing policy is doing to the black people of this country. If they did know, if they had even the slightest inkling of the suffering being inflicted on innocent human beings whose only sin is that they were born with black skins they would surely immediately and categorically repudiate responsibility for this cruelty, and would take the necessary action to bring about instantaneous change. No human being would willingly do to another human being what is being done daily to unknown numbers of African people who, through insufficient knowledge or foresight have failed to accumulate constant and irrefutable proof of their existence in a particular place at a particular time, something which is exceedingly difficult for them to do because of the circumstances of their lives. The fact that they are, visible, tangible, is not enough. Only the little bits of paper, so difficult to obtain and so easy to mislay, are valid proof, proof which is not required of any white person.

**I**S there no way of getting across to the people of South Africa — the white South Africans, the presumably decent, law-abiding and law-making individuals who cherish their families, their friends, their honesty, their integrity, their moral values — that events are occurring daily which would shatter them completely if they were unfortunate enough to be the victims? If only they could somehow be brought to a realisation of the human suffering for which they are responsible by their action or inaction, if they could establish sufficient empathy to enable them to imagine how they would feel if faced with similar problems, their common humanity would surely immediately assert itself and they would use their unquestionable power to remedy the situation.

No-one could possibly react with indifference to the hopelessness and anguish of young people who are not allowed to live with their families or work where they want to work and who are sent away to some place where they know no-one; of married couples who are not permitted to live together; of fathers who see their sons imprisoned for technical offences which they often cannot understand; of widows who lose their homes because they are careless enough to lose their husbands; of parents who have struggled with grinding poverty to provide their children with an education and sent them away to school, only to find that the absence of the children from home during this period has lost them the very right for which their parents have striven so hard — the right to return home and work and benefit from their hard-won education.

There can be no possible justification for the infliction of such torment. It is beyond credibility that it is being inflicted intentionally, and the determined and unwavering pursuit of a policy which results in such infliction can only be explained in terms of abysmal ignorance of its dreadful repercussions. No-one could possibly mean to separate loved ones from each other or to stifle and destroy the ambitions and the potential of the young, yet this is what is occurring all the time.

That this country has problems no-one will deny, but its fundamental problem is one of human relations — inter-personal and inter-group — and the destruction of existing relationships with the inevitable fostering of animosity and ill-will is no solution. A society which bases its well-being on the suffering of others is undermining its own well-being and sowing the seeds of its own destruction, particularly its moral destruction from which many future evils will inevitably flow. Condoned inhumanity breeds a form of heartlessness which eventually becomes capable of doing and accepting utterly unspeakable deeds, and the writing is already on the wall.

If every white person in this country could only be made to understand what is happening to the black people of this country they would surely re-assess the path they are travelling and would seek other and better means of ensuring a place in the sun for everyone. There is no simple answer to this problem, but South Africa is not short of brain power or of sun, and if mankind has the ability to land

men on the moon then it should be able to find the means by which man can live on earth in harmony with his fellow-man. In this respect South Africa is a microcosm of the world, with its variety of peoples and cultures, and it should set itself the task of finding a *modus vivendi* which is acceptable to all without the suppression and maltreatment of the have-nots by the haves. This is what is happening here in ever increasing measure,

though it seems to be utterly impossible to get this fact across to the public, for it is only personal contact and personal knowledge which brings it home with a devastating impact which words alone apparently fail to convey.

People would be devastated if they knew the facts, wouldn't they? They must at least be given the benefit of the doubt or there can be no future for anyone.

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## A Reminiscence – Jessie Hertslet

PATTIE PRICE

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**IT WAS TWELVE OR MORE YEARS AGO** — but I remember the occasion clearly. One of those days indelibly imprinted on the memory.

I had called in to see my old friend — old in friendship — I never thought of age as anything to do with her. Such a visit was always an occasion to me. For I never left the little farm at Diep River without a feeling of having had a re-fill.

There was a sort of spiritual overflow that affected anyone who came into her ambit. A re-awakening of the importance of those things that matter in life. What is happening to our fellowmen. Are we sitting back and letting it happen?

Discussions with a lively mind on books and plays. And, of course, refreshing memories and reminiscences of a life as the wife of a medical missionary in Zululand. Those twenty years had given her a deep understanding, and love of the African people. The Zulu women had called her 'Nompilo' (Mother of Health).

This particular afternoon she surprised me by saying she was retiring from the battle. She was opting out of the hurly-burly of political strife.

"I feel I've had enough. I've tried to keep my end up, but I'm eighty now and some of the younger ones must take over. I have such a craving for a little peace. Time to write what I want to write. Stories for children. Stories about the Zulu people. I can do that."

The news that she was 'Eighty now' came to me as a shock. I hadn't realised that she

had reached that august age. I would have given her seventy — if I had thought about it at all which I didn't. Nobody did.

I wasn't surprised at her longing for peace. With a couple of decades to spare I was beginning to have the same longing for a little 'time of my own'. But I knew she had earned it, although I sighed at the thought of how we would have to get used to being without the support of that fertile mind, that fearless and forceful pen.

As I came away I had the shattering thought that this might be a presentiment on her part that she was nearing the end — not merely of her capability of taking part in the 'hurly-burly' of life — but of life itself. And I prayed that she would be spared to enjoy some peace, and the leisure to write what she had wanted to write for so long.

Three days after she phoned me again. She wanted to see me. Would I come along?

"Today?" I asked.

"Today. This afternoon if you can." I went of course. She was waiting for me.

"I'm so glad you could come," she said. "You remember what I said?"

"About retiring from the 'hurly-burly'?"

"Yes. But I've changed my mind." Her voice was alive, vibrant.

"Pattie — I've had a call. It came across in a dream. I had been thinking so much about the separation of the African man from his family. This 'migrant labour' means the whole break-up of family life, and the ruin of the children. No one seems to have really realised what this can mean to the African.