

THE BEECHER STORY

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ONE of the famous funny stories of the London blitz was told of a man who staggered out of a smouldering ruin saying indignantly: "All I did was pull the chain—and the whole damn building fell down on me."

A similar note of outraged innocence was struck by South African Nationalists when their treatment of two-year-old Thomas Beecher resulted in an explosion of overseas disgust that was rivalled last year only by the reaction to the Mafekeng Affair.

The political columnist of *'Die Burger,'* who writes under the name 'Dawie', had the typical "it just came apart in my hands" tone of voice when he wrote: "The case of the Beecher boy could just as well have taken place under General Smuts . . . the State can take no part in the adoption of a Coloured child by white parents. If such an attitude is cruel, it is for the good reason that it is the only way to prevent more serious cruelty in the future . . . we in South Africa could not have acted otherwise under any other conceivable government."

These, very briefly, are the facts in the Beecher story, which caused such hatred of South Africa overseas, and which has much more local significance than 'Dawie' would have us believe.

Thomas, when he was a few hours old, was found in a carrier bag in a Cape Town suburban church. No one has ever discovered who his parents were. Welfare workers, assuming he was white, gave him as a foster child to Mr. and Mrs. Frank Beecher, a British couple with two other children who had been in the country eleven years.

By the time Thomas was one year old, he had become vaguely sallow, and some of the Beechers' neighbours started muttering about him. One flower of Western civilisation studied him in his pram and then said to Mrs. Beecher: "That child looks like a Native and smells like one. Get rid of him!"

The Beechers fled from this sort of thing to another suburb, in a largely Coloured part of the Peninsula, where they hoped to find less prejudiced neighbours. But at this stage the race classification officials, assisted by the welfare authorities, took over as persecutors from the nattering housewives: without

any real evidence (Thomas is paler than half a dozen Nationalist M.P.s I could name), they decided that Thomas had to be reclassified as Coloured and taken from the Beechers' care.

The Beechers refused to part peaceably with the child they had grown to love, and this led to some nerve-racking melodrama. For weeks Mrs. Beecher was virtually in hiding with Thomas, staying with a friend during the day and only venturing home at night. Once she cowered in the corner of a curtained room, stifling the baby's cries while welfare workers and three policemen marched round the house and hammered on the door, apparently with the intention of literally snatching the screaming child from the mother's arms.

Then the newspapers seized hold of the story. A lawyer was hired who restrained the welfare people from baby-snatching while he investigated the legality of the child's classification (on the face of it, it seems legally indefensible). From England Mr. Beecher's old trade union, the Society of Woodworkers, offered to pay the whole family's air fares back to England. For Thomas to leave the country special permission was needed from the Minister of the Interior. After a nervous two-week wait, permission was granted; and on December 14—almost a year after the first official doubts were expressed about Thomas's whiteness, during which time Mrs. Beecher had lost over 30 pounds in weight—the family took a Comet to England and tolerance.

They were greeted by television cameras, big headlines in all the newspapers and a chorus of editorial comment, all of it unfavourable to the South African Government—it ranged from a sentimental "Letter to Tommy" in the *Star* to a stern rebuke about Commonwealth unity in the *Daily Telegraph*.

"Since the Pharisee thanked God he was not as other men were, I have not heard such self-satisfaction," was the comment made by 'Dawie' in *Die Burger*. But 'Dawie' fools himself if he thinks he can dismiss all the criticism as insincere and smug.

The Beecher story was, of course, tailor-made for the popular press—a British couple, a baby, melodrama—but it was also a very penetrating illustration of the moral decay that makes South Africa such a stench in the nostrils of the world. What reason could there be for snatching Thomas Beecher away from parents who loved and cared for him? It is sometimes argued that apartheid is based on genuine "differences in cultural levels" or "differences in background", but obviously Thomas had exactly the same cultural level and background as the rest of

the Beecher children. He was being condemned solely because South African officialdom did not care for his complexion.

This, in the eyes of the world, is irrational, neurotic behaviour. The thought of punishing a child by taking him away from the love and care of his family, of denying him the ordinary rights of citizenship throughout his life solely because of some fortuitous external physical characteristic, is repellent to normal minds.

But among South African whites, of course, prejudice is the primary virtue; and not even such a clear-cut demonstration of their insanity as the Beecher story can cause them any discomfort. Some seem genuinely unaware that the whole of civilised thought is against them. Among the letters the Beechers received, for instance, was one from a nursing sister who wrote: "Whether you stay in South Africa or return to England will make little difference . . . Thomas cannot marry a white girl because he is Coloured. It will be difficult for him to understand, because he has been brought up in a white family and naturally expects to have all the privileges he cannot have. Think, oh think, my dears, of the heartbreak he will have when he finds he is an outcast . . ."

With what astonishing complacency 'Dawie' is able to write in *'Die Burger'*: "If such an attitude is cruel, it is for the good reason that it is the only way to prevent more serious cruelty in the future." That more serious cruelty he is talking about is the daily humiliation of about twelve million non-whites, and 'Dawie' is not concerned to alleviate or abolish this cruelty: he just wants it applied evenly and early.

'Dawie' adds that no other conceivable government could have acted differently. But this is not true. The Congress Movement, the Liberal Party and—to a certain extent—the Progressives have conceived of a South African government that is based on reason and morality and that would have more important things to do than worry about the complexions of two-year-old babies. It is possible that Thomas, by moving the world to compassion and anger, has hastened to some slight degree the inevitable day when such a government might restore sanity to South Africa.