

Extracts from a forthcoming novel

SARA LIDMAN

A comment on Sara Lidman's novel, I And My Son, by Elly Jannes, Swedish literary critic and journalist

"APARTHEID is necessary, because I have my son. Were it not for him, I could say: 'Let them scatter! Let those who wish to live in the city, anywhere they like—after all, it is their country too!' But they would turn Jo'burg into a location within a week, and my son, who was born to lay others at his feet, would be trampled down before he had even begun school . . . Why should I alone preen myself with a private conscience and think it a dirty trick to let the blacks work for nothing, when everyone else thinks it is all right. It's all the same to me how I make a fortune, as long as I make one. The blacks will be exploited in any case . . ."

The capitalist view of life with its crude choice between devouring or being devoured, narrow-minded family egoism dressed up as parental love—that these are the most deep-seated reasons for apartheid in South Africa is the conviction which permeates Sara Lidman's most recent book, *I And My Son*.

The Europeans who come to South Africa have only one aim: to secure, in the shortest possible time, a safe future for themselves and their families. Solidarity, yes, with their own relatives and perhaps with their own race, but nothing further, otherwise the whole system of exploitation would break down. "God so loved the white men in this country that He endowed them with richer sunshine, cheaper labour and a more comfortable way of life than it has pleased Him to give to any other people in the world." On the day that Africa's original inhabitants achieve civil rights, all the white men's privileges will collapse, and that is why they must be protected, even by those who realise that the critics are right.

The chief character in Sara Lidman's book has also come to South Africa to scrape together a fortune, but his attitude of "boss" is undermined when he finds that the Africans see through him and recognise him. He never has time to adopt the white slogan—"you can never understand a native, anyway!" Instead, it is the Africans who understand him, who tease him and ask him how it feels to earn five times as much pay as they do for the same work, now it feels to live in the shelter of a social legislation. And Gladness, the nannie who looks after his child, is like a big sister, as indomitable in anger as in joy. He degenerates into a thief, an informer and a blackmailer. Tries to soothe his uneasy conscience: "Blackmail, though, is particularly despicable . . . why is it more despicable than squeezing a maximum of work for a minimum of wages out of thousands of Africans!"

This statement does not hold water as an excuse for the individual, nor for the chief character in the book, yet it contains an inner truth. The biggest criminals in South Africa are those who never exceed the letter of the law, who never need to exceed it because they themselves have made the laws to further their own interest. They have done this without reflecting that their children will one day have to foot the bill.

We are told in church that "the Son has taken over the responsibility for our lives on earth." In *I And My Son*, these words are put forth not as a doctrine of atonement, but as a bitter accusation against the White Father in the world today.

SARA LIDMAN, Sweden's most admired woman novelist, visited South Africa in 1960.

What do they want of me?

● ● ● ● ● ● But what a difference in the factory. There we are ten whites and ninety blacks. To induce the boys to hand over the necessary tools, one has to shout and swear for the whole of the first hour. They slack off at once if one does not keep them at it. They are listless. Not one of them has had a cup of tea, or any sort of breakfast. But as the morning wears on, they derive strength from the mere fact of their mutual effort. They lift the cables with mechanical regularity, twelve by twelve, accompanying each phase of the work with some sound, they lift in a common rhythm which transforms the lifting to a dance. Rhythm has to offset weight. When, at last, they have lost themselves in these sounds and swaying movements, a force is released in them, coaxed from them, which moves and offsets the weight without the men knowing it. They come and go like the waves of the sea, unaware of the ship's destination.

But when the rhythm is broken by accident, there is a curious moment of flatness, when the clucking, groaning sounds of lifting cease and the men can no longer be mistaken for waves or any other phenomenon of nature—they simply stand there as human beings, each one with his special characteristic, as different from one another as only individuals can be, gazing at you with eyes that have begun to glitter with hunger—eyes which are not feverishly unaware, but which are clear, and look straight into your brain—that is the moment or two before the ten-o'clock tea is brought to you and to the other nine. There are still two hours to go before the lunch pause, when the boys will eat a slice of bread and drink a ladleful of water. You can see their hunger—and the swarm of hungry children behind each of them—their silence is a question—and you can feel how they grudge you your tea, the tea you are about to drink, the tea you drank in the morning, the morsels of food you give your beloved little child—Igor, who eats so little, yet they even grudge him that, these savages who themselves could gobble up an ox for breakfast. It makes you dizzy. There are so many of them. You can't see a white face anywhere, they are all in other parts of the hall. You hear a European laugh, impossible to mistake with its message of "us only-ness", and its disdainful, auxiliary tones. Nobody but you feels oppressed by the boys, they press their hungry darkness into you, they threaten your life and long for you to die, so that they could get that wretched cup of tea you have merited. How far would one cup of tea go among so many, it wouldn't be sufficient to wet their lips. They long for you to die, so that you will not be able to drive and fetch your son from the crèche, they want to see him standing there alone inside the gate, waiting for a father who cannot come home because he is dead. They grudge thee thy son, thine only son. Each of them has so many children, that they don't know what it is to have only one child, a little god—when not even I can fully grasp his value, how can they?

The eternal overseer

Why do they look at me as if I were a bloodsucker? If they only knew what an inhuman responsibility has been laid upon me through my son, Igor. What do these black ragbags want with me? They are staring as if they were ready to eat up my son, upon my soul I believe they might.

They have surrounded me. I would be a fool if I did not notice that. Suddenly I remember a horrible sight I saw in the bush, early one winter morning. A snake was trying to writhe its way out of a circle of black birds—I don't know the names of plants and animals in South Africa—the snake was large and light yellow, the birds looked like nordic thrushes. They were hopping round the reptile, and now and then they pretended to stand at attention so that he could pass them unmolested. But each time he made a quick movement to try and get through, the opening was blocked by tripping, twittering birds. I watched this for an hour. I don't know how long the encirclement had been going on before I came, but the snake showed obvious signs of exhaustion. The birds did not go to attack, they merely studied their arch-enemy, and extracted the snake's hypnotic ability with their hundreds of eyes, dividing it up between them. Finally, he lay down flat and drew in his head. The birds stood quite still, watching how the snake, with much difficulty, hid his head inside his own skin. When the head was completely covered, a unified screech rose from the circle of birds and they pounced on the powerless hypnotiser with beaks and claws, killing him.

I don't know if the feeling of nausea came on before this memory, or because of it, but I have to get out at once. I swear at a couple of boys, who back away, cross a floor which rises and sinks, wait for them to attack me from behind, hear the sound of a blow and expect to fall and, looking round, see two blacks in a furious row. I go on out. They meant it for me. I know that, in heart, eyes and entrails. But they do not dare to attack. The foreman has a revolver. They hit each other, kill each other in a hate which has gone astray.

I don't want to know how the fight ends. Last week it finished up with two concussions, five nosebleeds and ten instant dismissals. I refuse to stay any longer today, here my son and I are in mortal danger.

I lose nearly a whole day's earnings by going, but I would suffocate if I stayed here. Blasted firm—which doesn't give a shilling in compensation if you get ill. Don't they realize that you have a son who is dependent on your income?

I tell the foreman that I must go off duty for the rest of the day, and he says that he can see from my mouth that I am out of sorts. He shouldn't have said that, it mustn't show, it mustn't be said of me, "he has a weak heart."

Down in the street, the first thing I hear is a successful boss saying to another successful boss: "A European who hasn't been able to make a fortune in South Africa in ten years is no good anywhere. He's just an idiot. No guts, man."

● ● ● ● ● The street is beginning to dance before my eyes, and I wonder if I am about to be belched forth from the land of the living. But this has nothing to do with me, it is something that passes me by. A meeting between paving stones and thirty bare-foot heroes from Basutoland, heroes whose stride has been fostered in wildness. They move as they are accustomed to at home on the mountains, where the leopard reverts path and paw in the same step.

The street, which is used to indifferent walking, trembles at this joyful rhythm.

The men laugh with their white teeth, the day is not well-nourished, but pleasant, as most days have been in their lives. Basuto blankets across their shoulders, staffs in their hands, the thought of home in the shape of their hats, plaited from rough Basuto grass.

The young men walk hand in hand or with their little fingers hooked together, not noticing the interpretation which enlightened Europeans read into such gestures of tenderness. Each of them has a woman in Basutoland. Grandmother, mother, sisters, cousins and aunts wept yesterday, when the white men came, tempting them to the mine in Jo'burg. But for the sake of the woman, the special one who crowned his passion during

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the night and walked two steps behind him in the daytime, as befits a queen, for her sake he had joined company with the overseer from Jo'burg. *Hamba kahle*—walk with care—are the words of farewell.

Africa's sons descend into Africa's earth to dig out precious stones and gold to be exchanged for bread and words, to fetch a ring for the girl-wife's finger—for the mutual comeliness of that gold and that skin.

How can Africa's sons know anything about the days in the camps, their concentration and smell and colour, how different they are from the days and nights which went unmeasured among the mountains of Basutoland? Or how wildness loses its moderation and taste in crowded tunnels, how the glimmer of gold grows dim, like the eyes of captive leopards. Where is the joy and grace of that dance which the overseer orders every night? Naked, African men have to stretch out their fingers and toes, one by one, open their mouth wide, hold their behind apart, lift up their member—in case a grain of gold is found on you, you black thief—ask your friends how one is cured from that mote.

Sons of Africa fetching gold out of Africa's soil as a token of eternal faith for millions of non-African women across the sea. Authenticity above all. The highest number of carats and the highest cultural level. Top youth demands top quality. Send a piece of brass wire to the bride in Basutoland, she is yours for ever anyway.

If you try to make off across the barbed wire one night, and the police catch you, as you have no pass, and you are sent to Potgieter's prison farm in Africa's Heidelberg, then you will not have hopes of Basutoland any more, then the mining camp will be good enough for you to long for. Pretensions drop on Potgieter's farm. Black men drop to the edge of the hole of death on Potgieter's farm in New Heidelberg. "The rats that are there are very big."

In the mine compound, food is worth more than it is elsewhere.

Soon you will not be asking so many questions.

Five thousand men and no women, and the innocent hook of your little finger despairs and grows all twisted, until you suddenly realize why the overseer smiled so mockingly at interlaced men's hands that day, when nobody knew more about the night than that woman bore its glory.

The street trembles beneath the men's graceful walk. Their legs are still shiny after the farewell anointing.

The overseer is white, relentless, full of human wrath. His hatred is much bigger than himself. The recruiting sergeant for King Charles XII's last army. The debt-collector. The foremost among citizens. The eternal overseer.

Does anybody notice the white overseer and his catch from Basutoland? No, nobody, for *The Star* has just appeared, and all those who can read are learning some more about what Eichmann did some twenty-five years ago. "How could people at the time have been so blind? Let us never forget what happened then."

The street trembles in astonishment. The stones of Jo'burg rise and fall before my eyes. But my heart is silent.

EPISODE

IN

THE

WESTERN

CAPE

PETER
COD

HAIRY CAME UP to see me. He was restless. "Let's go to the bar," he said.

"No bar here."

"Let's talk to the bar tender."

"No bar tender either."

"Let's go to a bull-fight."

"No bull-fights on Table Mountain."

"Without these things how do you live here?" Hairy asked.

"I came here to escape civilisation."

"Sure have," said Hairy.

"Let's make money," said Hairy.

"There's my boy," I noted.

"Let's write a musical glamourising shebeens," he said breathlessly (although that way it was difficult to say). "It will be a certainty because this is the time with this new liquor law coming up for legislation sometime this year and all and we could cash in with our Re-quiem for Shebeens."

"Yeaaaah," I said, stretching it to capacity (a one-word rhapsody).

"We can also glamourise violence," he said, "and Township Life."

"But no politics," I stressed.

"No politics!", he agreed.

"We will call it a Jazz Opera," he went on. (Man, he has a *creative mind*). "And have an 'all African cast'."

* * *

I threw my arms around him in a moment of silent worship.

PETER COD is a pseudonym, the metaphor drawn from the finny tribe, which puts me in good company with contemporary columnist fashion. See the *New Statesman*, if you are prepared to risk it. Drawn, too, from the name of a political organisation I used to belong to, an organisation with an atmosphere as strange, innocent and sinister as a Graham Greene novel—*Our Man in Havana* to be precise.