

Coloured Son - I

JOHAN DE LANGE

I AM THE SON of a member of parliament, a member of the government of the Republic of South Africa. I have had a hard and bitter time because my mother is not a white woman. In our sunny and fertile Republic it is more than a curse not to be white, and what has made my struggle all the more difficult is that my father and my mother were not married. She is the wife of another man, he the husband of another woman.

I do not believe that he ever loved my mother—it was nothing more than lust and insensitivity on his part. And there were other women, women who were not white, with children.

To begin with I knew nothing about all this. When we were still living on my real father's farm there was little cause for me to become aware of all these things. Although I can still recall certain incidents at a later stage, my childish mind was too innocent to notice anything out of the ordinary.

There was, for example, the time when a certain woman, not white, remarked to her friend one fine afternoon that I resembled my father very closely. I must have been about eight years old then. That remark made me feel really proud, for what boy, especially of that age, does not feel proud that he is like his father? That I, of all my eight brothers and sisters, should be most like my father made my little heart beat faster with joy. It never dawned on me that my mother's husband, her lawful husband, was almost black and that I was white. I was naturally and happily unaware which father was being referred to.

I was an innocent child, and, metaphorically speaking, colour-blind.

I LATER HEARD of a peculiar incident. When I was only two years of age, a prominent white woman came to call at the home of my true father, who was at the same time my other father's boss. My half-brothers and I were playing in the red dust of the farm road when her shining motor-car drove by. When she reached us she stopped near me. It seemed as if she wanted to take me into the car with her. My heart started to beat faster, partly out of fear and partly out of mis-placed respect for the white woman. But it was a momentary fancy, or so it appeared, because she went on to the farm-house.

According to the servants the woman arrived short of breath and most perturbed as she knocked and was admitted. When she was face to face with her hostess she came emphatically to the point. "Really! How can you bear to let your little one play out there with the Hottentots, in the blazing sun and so far from the house?"

The hostess blushed to the roots of her hair. The visitor wondered why her friend behaved so strangely. Had she perhaps overstepped the mark? Then she followed her hostess's eyes, and the child in question came toddling out of one of the rooms. It was not her hostess's little boy she had seen among the "Hottentots" but me, her host's son.

Today I understand all these things.

In these autobiographical notes by the illegitimate son of a former South African member of Parliament are glimpses of that half-world inhabited by light-skinned "coloured" people fathered by white men, often prominent citizens.

There were, of course, scores of such incidents, but the greatest struggle of all began when our family moved nearer to Cape Town and I was completing my schooling. But I am going too fast. First I must relate why the family had to leave the farm where my parents had given more than twenty years of faithful service to my real father and his father before him.

I myself, not yet nine years old, had never dreamt that we should have to leave the farm. For me it was the beginning and, so I believed, the end of everything. It was my home and represented the whole world to me.

THE CUSTOM OF THE FARM in question was that certain families among the labourers had from time to time to supply a youngster to work in the kitchen. The turn came for one of my elder brothers to go. He flatly refused to work in the kitchen. What aggravated things was that another boy was there with whom my brother (half-brother, rather) could not get along. The two were always arguing and fighting.

Because this brother of mine was more accustomed to work in the vegetable garden—he was about twelve years of age—he joined the gang of workmen in the garden instead of going to the kitchen. That made the farmer very angry. He ordered the lad to the kitchen at once.

My black foster father had by then had enough of many things, one of which was the bickering of the two boys, and I think another was the farmer's secret amorous attentions to my mother. By then my parentage had ceased to be a secret among the neighbours.

"Listen, Boss," said my foster father that day. "my boy is not going to work in the kitchen. He and the other boy keep on quarrelling and wrangling and I have had enough of it. And in any case the boy is happier in the garden."

"It seems to me that you want to give the orders around here. Your boy can work in the kitchen or you can get out." The farmer walked off and left my foster father dumb-founded. This from the man who, so to speak, had upset my mother's home and made my black father a laughing-stock.

Much later I found out that it was the boss's wife who was behind his harshness. She must have drummed many things into her husband since that friend of hers had mistaken me for her child. Indeed, I daily grew more like my father, even more like him than his own sons, and something had to be done to get rid of me, to remove me from the farm, where my presence was an embarrassment to the white people.

The day my foster father came into the field to collect us I was aware that something was very wrong. After school we usually went into the fields or gave a hand in the garden. The sun was still high in the heavens and there was much to do.

On the way home I gathered from the conversation of my elder brothers that we were leaving the farm.

That day my poor mother looked quite



downcast. It seemed that she could not quite believe that they had to leave the farm after such a long time and all that had happened. She and my foster father were beginning to age, and to make a fresh start somewhere else would be very difficult.

WE WENT TO LIVE on a farm at Elgin. We children had to walk nearly five miles to a school at Grabouw. I can remember the bitterly cold days when the sharp stones and frost hurt my bare feet. At such times I envied the white children going to school in their comfortable buses. No white child in South Africa walks more than two miles to school—the government, the government of apartheid, sees to that. It even hires taxis when necessary to transport some white children. It does not worry about children who are not white.

Life did not run smoothly at Elgin. My mother, though only in her early forties, began to fail in health. It was the middle of the winter when we reached the new farm, far from store and doctor, unlike the previous farm, where there were two stores nearby and we needed no doctor for we were well and my mother was not ailing.

One day two dealers (they were not white) arrived from Cape Town, buying fowls and pigs from farm labourers. We had a couple of pigs and some fowls that we had been fattening. The dealers were delighted with our animals and wanted to know how we went about getting them into such a condition. The animals belonging to the other people could not hold a candle to ours. They learnt that my foster father had a fund of knowledge about rearing poultry and pigs.

While the dealers and my foster father were busy in the runs, my mother sent me to invite them in for a cup of coffee. At coffee, one of the dealers asked my father whether he would not come to the Cape Flats and run a poultry farm for him. He added that later he could keep pigs too. My parents accepted the offer.

By this time my elder brother had married and moved to the Cape. My mother was most concerned about him and wanted to be near her firstborn son.

AND SO WE MOVED to Philippi, a rustic, sandy region of the Cape Flats, covered with scrub. Luckily for us children, we were accepted in the local school. It was here that trouble about my colour began. When school came out one day a couple of boys attacked my little brother. They were teasing him because, so they said, we talked dialect and were different. I flew to his aid and they ran away.

As they ran, one of them shouted at me: "You white Boer. You are an apartheid Nationalist, you dirty Boer!"

I was deeply shocked. It was the first time in my life that anybody had abused me for my light skin. I did not think it was any crime to be light. Indeed, until then I had hardly realised that I differed so much in colour from

most people who were not white.

When I got home I told my mother what had happened. She did not say much but her expression changed to one of inward pain.

A week later two welfare officials visited the

school. When they saw me they carried on a whispered conversation with the principal. I learnt later that they wanted to know whether I was a white child. ●

[to be continued]

Comment

Selma
1965

NO ONE WAS QUITE SURE how they were to act. The mimeographed programme handed around in front of the capitol on Thursday afternoon scheduled five minutes for "Old Testament Reading" and five minutes for "New Testament Reading". It also noted that there would be a presentation of a replica of the Liberty Bell by the Philadelphia City Council. But nobody opened a Bible all day and the Liberty Bell never had its chance. For within minutes after the clustered professional folk singers had finished and almost as soon as the whole crowd of thirty thousand had welled up to flood the top of Dexter Avenue, the tone of the climax of the Selma to Montgomery March became clear and people all of a sudden knew why they were there. This was something new in America.

Through the five days of marching the Christian militants had mixed with the political militants, the bleeding hearts mixed with the adventurers, the professional liberals with the Black Belt peasants. Only at the end, below the steps of the capitol, did they all find out what they were there for. Only there did they sense their capacity for revolution.

MOSTLY UNCONSCIOUS of the implications of their demand for a revised America, these good people marched up Dexter Avenue behind the United States flag and sang the National Anthem behind Mrs. King's reedy lead. Everyone's first personal concern seemed to be not to offend. These *were* good people who had marched gently and self-consciously to correct, to rectify, something in their country (Ralph Bunche justified their being there when that afternoon he said:

"No American can be an outsider anywhere in America.") which history had carried beyond. Yet they shook the earth with their soft feet. Whatever their intentions were before they actually stood there in Dexter Avenue looking up at the startlingly white capitol building, the act of their being there was an emphatic assurance that America was going to change itself, that the nasty license of a "we" and a "they" had expired in America.

That day in Montgomery the best in the country served notice that the United States would soon be truly one country with one people. The issue that afternoon was not segregation or miscegenation or equality under the law. It was freedom, freedom within the explicit constitutional ideal of the American experience.

THE OLD HORSES LIKE A. Phillip Randolph talked for only a few seconds. The political radicals like James Bevel and Fred L. Shuttlesworth shouted good-natured taunts up toward George Wallace, hidden high behind the venetian blinds. The leaders from the field like James Forman and Albert Turner took their opportunity to inform the crowd of practical matters like the many dozens of activists sitting in Alabama jails without bail money. And Martin Luther King, often referred to publicly that day in the African political mode of "My Leader", perorated all remaining question out of the gathering and then told them to go home quietly. They did, many of them even still unconscious of the implications of the exhilarating change which they had just helped to begin. D. E. STEWARD ●