THE LION AND THE COCKEREL

MICHAEL PICARDIE

Arrested in Johannesburg during the first police raids in March as a member of the Congress Movement and the Liberal Party. He was released 12 hours later on a writ of habeas corpus—the state of emergency not having been properly proclaimed at the time of his appearance in Court. Before he could be re-arrested he slipped out of the Union to Swaziland, from where he made his escape to Britain.

Friday, the 25th March. Five days after the shooting had taken place we were on our way to Sharpeville. There were two others in the car, S. and G., both of them second-rank African National Congress leaders. S. was ebullient. He chattered away in English, Afrikaans and Sotho, filling the car, the windows of which were closed against the autumn highveld air, with the sweet-sharp smell of illegal home-brewed beer. G., who sat in the back with the pamphlets, was silent. The Lion they call him, a man of over 70, the father of many children. Roaring at meetings, he would rouse his listeners to anger at their wrongs, an old man yet not quiet in his age, not preparing himself to slip quietly into his grave, but ready still to rage until the last of life.

"We're on the move, boy," said S. "The game is on!" His voice was exultant—the very sound of power. "Passes suspended! The cops afraid to come into the townships! No liquor raids! Man, do you know what I saw? A black bastard like me drinking gin out of a bottle in Commissioner Street. In the middle of Jo'burg! Verwoerd's retreating!" He took another of my cigarettes and puffed away decisively.

"Who says the Government won't attack again when the panic passes?" I said.

"*Ag*," said S. disgustedly, "so they attack! This is a fight, man. It's just the first round. Attack, retreat—it's all in the game." The Lion grunted and sighed and peered ahead of him through the window as if the animal he was stalking had just appeared through the reeds of a bushveld watering place where prey was to be found. But there was nothing much to be seen except a grim man-made landscape; mine-dumps yellow and worn by the wind into the symmetry of ancient monuments, plantations of blue gums for shaft timbering, dams of water for washing gold ore—these are our mountains, our forests, our lakes.

"You talk as if you, the A.N.C., were responsible for setting the ball rolling. The people came to Sharpeville last Monday to

listen to the Pan-Africanists, to Sobukwe's men, not to your's,'' I said.

''Sobukwe made a mistake,'' said S. ''The time is not yet ripe for a defiance campaign against the pass laws. There was no organisation—nothing. But now we have to make the best of it. We cannot abandon the people now. Now that there is power, resistance in the air, we must grab the people and carry them forward!'' He crowed like a cockerel. I felt a tremor in my bowels. I felt afraid and proud as if the dawn we hoped for might be tomorrow . . . but only the road lay ahead. And then we came to a bend.

''Dutchmen!'' hissed the Lion. I slammed on the brakes and we skidded to a stop.

''What is it?''

''Police!'' A hundred yards ahead there was a troop-carrier illuminated by the headlights of a squad car parked behind it at the side of the road: the gleam of rifle butts, brass buttons and polished leather on khaki.

''That's Sharpeville ahead,'' said the Lion, ''the main entrance.''

''Thanks for telling me,'' I said, and made a swift U-turn.

''We'll have to go round the back way,'' said the Cockerel cheerfully.

''You're mad,'' I said. ''We'll never get through safely. The place is infested.''

The Cockerel placed a warm brown hand on my shoulder. ''Don't let us down, boy. Not now. Don't worry. The Lion knows a safe way in, round the back door. All right, *ntate*, father?'' The Lion grunted his assent.

I sighed. This was a new kind of white man's burden—transporting the revolutionary blacks on an impossible safari into the urban wildernesses. I agreed, having first checked in the rear-view window that the Lion's Dutchmen were not following us.

''It would be better,'' said the old man, speaking slowly, ''to leave Sharpeville till later. The Dutchmen will get tired and go to sleep. Now we must go to Evaton. The old man Msimangu is waiting for us.''

So we went to Evaton—off the main road and onto an ill-lit dirt track. I parked the car in the shadows not twenty yards from the location superintendent's office. The Lion placed his own battered felt hat on my head so that I should be less recognizable as a white man. Passing for black is the order of the day

in the Transvaal maquis. The Cockerel hopped out of the car and strutted towards the entrance. A municipal African policeman challenged him. The Cockerel began to crow and flap his comb.

"What's happening?" I said.

"He tells the policeman that he is Pitje, the famous lawyer from Jo'burg who has an M.A. from the University, and he must be allowed in to see his client Msimangu on an urgent matter of business, and if he refuses then S. will tell his important white friends that he, the policeman, is a rogue who stops people going about their ordinary business and he will get the sack within a matter of days. The policeman now laughs a great deal and says that the African people are proud to have an educated man like Pitje amongst them, but that the Big Chief is coming to Evaton tomorrow and Pitje must be quick about his business because there is much trouble these days." The Lion sighed with relief.

The Big Chief was none other than Dr. Verwoerd who was due to address a great republican rally in Evaton the following day. Notwithstanding the imminence of great events, the Cockerel was allowed in; and presently he returned with the old man Msimangu, deficient in many teeth, but wise in the use of strategem, who was grateful to accept certain bundles of legal documents and place them in the carrier of his aged bicycle for distribution among the venerable Pitje's clients in the location the following day. And off we sped, to the joyful overtures of a Sotho hymn from the Cockerel, with the Lion providing the *basso profundo*. Compared with Evaton, Sharpeville was a piece of cake. The only depressing feature of this part of our mission was an encounter with a group of Africans trudging along the road to Jo'burg. They had been to the hospital to visit relatives wounded in the Sharpeville shooting, but had been refused admission by the policemen guarding the casualty ward. Also, they had burnt their passes—at the instigation of the Pan-Africanists, or rather the tough guys, the tsotsi crowd, who had jumped onto Sobukwe's bandwagon, and they were afraid to go home without their documents, and would we give them a lift to Jo'burg where they should not be known and not fall into the hands of the police so easily. There is no room in the car, said the Cockerel, and ordered me to drive off. "Pass burning—a mistake, a big mistake," said the Cockerel as we drove away leaving them still on the road to *Goli*—the Golden City.

Saturday the 26th March. A meeting of Congressmen in Johannesburg. We were waiting for a message from Pretoria where The Chief—Chief A. J. Luthuli—and other Congress leaders were in conference. Someone opened the door and stood framed there in his open shirt, blinking behind his spectacles, motionless for an instant, as if History was about to take a photograph for posterity. "The Chief has burned his pass!" he said. "The game is on."

Instructions were given. I was to take a car out with pamphlets propagating the new strong line—pass-burning. No one stopped to wonder at this change of policy or to question the wisdom of trying to outbid the Pan-Africanists at their own fiery and heroic game. It was as if individuals and even organizations were no longer responsible for decisions, but that the tide of events would carry us forward, and that if we were hasty or misguided, our faults were not so much in ourselves as in our stars—which is the terrible but necessary abdication from morals that revolutionary power demands.

Sunday, the 27th March. My first stroke of bad luck: Jimmy, a big black Othello of a man, and I, were stopped by an armed police block on our way to the West Rand, at the gates of the first location. We were detained, our literature confiscated and our names taken. After three hours of telephoning to the Special Branch the station commander was instructed to release us. We returned to Jo'burg to print more pamphlets. But the bonfires were burning already. The African townships do not need pamphlet-dishers to get to know the news. Events seem to take the form of spontaneous upheavals. I began to doubt my indispensability. The liberal's dilemma: with or without you, the people make their own history. Why, then, take risks which have little influence on the course of events? Conscience? When the nemesis comes you will regret that. Well, content yourself with the thought that in doing right, you legislate for mankind.

Wednesday, the 30th March, 2 a.m. Nemesis. Knock, knock, knock on the door. I jumped out of bed, switched on the light and tossed the remaining pamphlets out of the window. They fell into the jasmine bush that grows lushly, and fragrant at night-time like an Eastern bride, against the backyard wall of the house: irrelevant and cruel of the senses to register its honey-heavy smell, the smell of love and promises and a gentle future, at that

particular moment, with the police knocking at the door. It is not the smell of Africa, not the strong grass smell after the rain, the smell of the sun-laden dust, and river slime, and electric thunderstorms, and a carcase rotting at drought-time, and the bushveld thorns dusted over with acacia pollen—enough thorns in the bushveld for ten million crowns for a contemporary Christ—and, oh Lord, we do need him now. A Johannesburg garden tries to escape all this. It smells of freshly cut lawn and roses and jasmine and water piped into a hose from a civilized reservoir—grafted skin upon the veld beneath.

I walked down the passage which echoed the voices of the policemen and Ben, my brother, who was at the door, and Yael, his baby daughter, who howled. I opened the door. There were two of them. They asked me my name and I told them.

"We are instructed to arrest you." They showed me their police-officers' cards. The older one, who smelt of brandy, was called Jacobus Christoffel du Plessis. The other one, Ignatius Hattingh, was young, deeply tanned, handsome, strong-jawed, close-cropped—the rugby player in the ads who drinks the man's drink—Lion Beer. Du Plessis was less impressive. His eyes were a bloodshot watery blue. Ginger moustaches drooped apologetically under a spreading flattish nose. His lips were thick, his forehead receding slightly and his greying hair had an indefinite curl.

"We are here to arrest you and search your room," repeated du Plessis.

"Under what powers and on what charge? Your warrant?"

"Never mind about that, man, we don't need a warrant," growled du Plessis.

"Under what law are you acting?" I insisted.

"*Godverdomme!*" grumbled du Plessis. He was sleepy. Breathing laboriously he searched his pockets and after a struggle emerged with a scrap of white envelope. "Public Safety Act, 1953," he announced. "There's a state of emergency proclaimed. We're detaining you."

"Why?" I said.

"*Ag*, man, don't ask me. I've got orders." And Hattingh added: "Now, where's your room?"

I led them down the passage. I knew that they would find nothing. The pamphlets were safely out of the way and I had destroyed my diary and certain Congress minutes the previous day. The Marxist literature of my student days gathers dust in

a grandfather's innocent cellar amidst a chaos of samovars, warming pans and Hebrew volumes of the Babylonian Talmud—Marx and Rabbi Hillel side by side in theological conference. But they did find something that interested them. It was a photograph of a girl called Gitanjali whom I'd met on a previous visit to England.

"Friend of yours?" said Hattingh.

"Yes," I said.

"Indian girl?" Oh, hell, I thought. I'm a threat to the morality as well as to the public safety of the race.

"Yes, she's Indian," I said. "What's it to you?" Ben made a cautionary gesture, as if to say, don't provoke them. Ben is a doctor, calm and gentle by temperament, rationalistic in outlook, his eyes large and dark, his skin olive, his cheeks haggard, nose long and delicate, hands long and fragile. He reminds me of Spinoza, and although our grandparents come from Baltic Russia, there must be a deep Spanish or Portuguese strain in the family—the Sephardic strain.

"An Indian girl, eh?" said du Plessis presently. He handled the photograph gingerly, as if the brown of her skin and the black of her hair might rub off on his fingers.

"Yes, I met her in England while I was studying. Interested? Want a pen-friend?"

"Think you're funny, man," said du Plessis grimly.

"No, man," I said. All white people are called "man" in South Africa. To be white is to be "a man", that is, adult. Africans are called "boy" and "girl", irrespective of age. To be black is to be infantile.

By this time Hattingh was in a rage. "Bloody communists!" he swore under his breath. He snatched the photograph out of du Plessis's hand and tore it up. It happened in an instant—a reflex action, as unpremeditated as the movement of a wild animal who is wounded. Du Plessis tried to stop him and when the pieces fell on the floor he rebuked the younger man angrily. All Hattingh could do was stare at me in incredulous fury—his head shaking and nodding, as an old man's might. "*Ag, kom. Daar is niks hier*," he said and he stalked out of the room.

I packed a small bag with a change of clothes, toilet things and a number of books. "Yes, take a good deal," said du Plessis quietly. "You'll be away a long time."

We drove away leaving Ben on the front step. "Don't worry," I called out through the back window. He waved back in a dazed

fashion, his eyes larger than ever with their melancholy Jewish droop, in his striped pyjamas, looking at the police car—as an inmate of Belsen might gaze upon some nameless horror suddenly set upon him—with a puzzled child, legs akimbo, upon his hip.

We drove through the suburb of Saxonwold and past the Zoo. A lion was roaring. There was something hoarse and hollow in its quality—an old lag of a lion mourning the kudu, the wildebeest, the zebra, the long-lost watering place, the flat-topped bushveld camelthorns, the kloof where the baboon and leopard cry, the loss of the stars, now black-barred. The loss of Africa.

Mayibuye Afrika! Let Africa return! And she will come back. There are many lions roaring. The old Lion of the East was roaring at that very moment as they tried to track him down in Meyerton. One day they will break out.

"*Ag,* shame," said du Plessis. "Man, listen to that old lion roar! Why must they put them in a cage?"

"Yes, terrible," I said. "It's cruelty." And the Sharpeville dead, hardly buried, smiled and turned.

On our way to Marshall Square prison we passed through the Indian quarter of Ferreirastown. In someone's courtyard, where very often you may find a fig tree, I heard a young cock crow, and arching his neck for very joy at the morning star that hung over the eastern mine-dumps.

A new dawn. When will it come?

Note to the Special Branch of the South African Police:
The events that form the background of this story are true. None of the characters described here, however, bears any resemblance to any person, living or dead.