

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



Sid James

Cliff Goodwin

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About the Book

Known as the man with the dirtiest laugh on film, Sid James was also one of Britain's best-loved actors. Twenty-five years after his death, Cliff Goodwin, bestselling author of biographies of Catherine Cookson, Tony Hancock and Oliver Reed, has brought this first biography of the star right up to date with new material and never-before-seen photographs.

Covering Sid's early years in South Africa and life as a ladies' hairdresser, his obsession with gambling and women, his questioning by Scotland Yard in a murder case, *Hancock's Half Hour* and the *Carry On* films, and Sid's death on stage at the age of 63, Cliff Goodwin reveals the amazing truth behind the legend.

About the Author

Sid James is one of Cliff Goodwin's four best-selling biographies. He is also the author of *To Be A Lady: The Story of Catherine Cookson*, *When the Wind Changed: The Life and Death of Tony Hancock* and *Evil Spirits: The Life of Oliver Reed*.

Cliff Goodwin was born in London in 1950. He was educated in Slough, Berkshire, and joined the town's weekly newspaper as a trainee journalist in 1968. Since then he has worked in newspapers, magazines, public relations and for the local radio. His coverage of the 1988 Lockerbie air crash earned him a regional press award. In 1993, after 25 years of journalism, he decided to concentrate on full-time writing. He lives in the north-east of England.

SID JAMES

A Biography
Cliff Goodwin



Preface and Acknowledgements

‘Comedy is hard work and I’m not really a comedian,’ Sid James once admitted. ‘I’m an actor who plays comic parts. I need funny people around me to get the best out of myself. I’m more a counter-puncher, a sort of reactor.’

But Sid James was much more. He was unique. Not simply because his professional career – from his 1946 arrival in England to his death on a Sunderland stage in 1976 – lasted just thirty years. Nor that he crammed into that time no less than 457 radio, television and film appearances. It was that, with his battered features, throaty smoker’s voice, twinkling eyes and lecherous laugh, he was one of the true British working-class heroes of the 1950s and 60s.

Sid James’s enduring ability to make people laugh – never his first acting ambition – remains with us forever. His cult status continues to grow not simply because he was funny and captured the loyalty of a particular generation; more because he repeatedly reinvented himself and was rediscovered by each new generation in turn.

As a comedy actor, Sid James grew with a nation. First on radio and television in 162 *Hancock’s Half Hours*, as a young and energetic chancer. Later as the cheating, sex-mad hero of the *Carry On* films. Finally, in television’s *Bless This House*, as a battered and bewildered middle-aged father.

It was Sid James’s peculiar achievement to take his place in the British imagination at a time of profound transition: as the austerity of the post-war years gave way to the atomic 50s and finally the superfluous freedom of the 60s. No other actor reflected an audience’s own sense of humour so accurately. We were never simply watching Sid James at work. For three decades a nation’s ability to enjoy – and mock – its own fallacies and fantasies was hilariously exploited by one man.

Sid James’s workload was as exhausting as it was impressive. One hundred and twenty-eight radio appearances, excluding one-off roles in plays and remakes for BBC worldwide transmission; two hundred and five episodes of television comedy, as well as

Christmas and other specials, and no less than one hundred and twenty-four recorded film appearances. He starred in several West End musicals and, in later years, toured the world with a succession of sell-out stage comedies.

The time and help I have been given with this biography – both in 1995 when it was first published and this new edition to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of Sid James's death – have been immense. There is no practical way, therefore, I can thank every single individual.

Those in the entertainment and film industries who gave up their time to remember and talk about Sid James, or who granted permission for the use of photographs or copyright material, deserve a special mention. Sadly, some are no longer with us. They are:

Bernard Cribbins
Ray Galton
Dilys Laye
Olga Lowe
Keith Morris
Peter Rogers
Michael Sullivan
Barbara Windsor

Jack Douglas
Miriam Karlin
Moirra Lister
Michael Medwin
Peggy Mount
Alan Simpson
Victor Spinetti
Ronnie Wolfe

There are two people whose patience I have tried more than most. The first is Sarah Berry, my bullying friend and secretary. The second my agent, Jane Judd, who celebrates the dubious honour of having represented me for ten years.

My deepest thanks must, however, go to Reine James not only for the memories of her father and the photographs she has allowed me to use, but for her inspiration and support.

Permission to use copyright material was kindly granted by the BBC, David and Charles, Methuen, Headline and *Woman* magazine. While every effort has been made to trace all the copyright holders, I apologise for any oversights and to those I may have inadvertently omitted.

Cliff Goodwin, 2001

‘A person is worth more than a book’
Miep Gies

PROLOGUE

Sid James was a rare bird. He wasn't much of a comedian and he wasn't much of an actor - he was something much more. He always spoke directly to the audience and whatever he did gave a kind of deep feeling to the people watching him.

Frank Muir

He belied his brash image and all the things he looked like. In fact Sid was a very kind man - yes, and chivalrous. That old-fashioned word really applied to him. He cared for all his friends and they cared very much for him.

Hattie Jacques

Monday, 26 April 1976

A knock on Sid James's dressing room door at the Empire Theatre, Sunderland. It opens and a middle-aged man steps into the room. The 7.30 p.m. curtain is fifteen minutes away and Sid is putting the finishing touches to his make-up.

The man shuffles nervously. 'Excuse me, Mr James, could I have your autograph?' he asks. Sid smiles at the image in the brightly lit mirror above the dressing table and continues with his make-up. 'I could come back later if you're too busy.'

Sid turns and waves the man in. On a side table is a pile of photographs. Without getting up Sid slides one from the top, signs and dates it and hands it to his visitor. 'There you are, mate,' he says, 'be my guest. I hope you enjoy the show.'

Off screen he was a very quiet man with lovely manners and very protective towards women. He wouldn't allow

any foul language and he always stood up and opened doors for women. I loved him dearly.

Barbara Windsor

Meanwhile, on stage, Keith Morris settles himself on his mark in the centre. In the wings, waiting to make her first entrance, is Audrey Jeans.

It is Morris's second run with *The Mating Season*. The previous summer he opened the farce during its ten-week summer season in Blackpool. The play is now in the early weeks of a full-length provincial tour. Last week Richmond, Surrey. This week Sunderland. Next week Yarmouth. It is a punishing schedule and a punishing play. Like all the Sam Cree plays written especially for Sid James it means he is on stage for almost the entire performance.

Morris is dressed in a T-shirt and shorts. He can hear the sound of the opening bars of the Mr Universe cha-cha music from the auditorium speakers. As the curtain rises he begins to exercise with a chest expander. Audrey Jean walks on and delivers the opening line: 'Are you still trying to build up your chest, Mervyn?'

A few minutes later Morris makes his exit. Standing in the wings is Sid James. He is sipping whisky from a glass. 'Good evening, Sid,' says Morris. 'How are you settling in?' Sid had only arrived in the Wearside town that morning. The rest of the cast and the scenery had moved into the Empire Theatre on Sunday. The two actors talk. Morris thinks Sid looks relaxed but tired.

Sid had feelings of protection, chivalry almost, about women which some may find old-fashioned these days, I suppose. But I know I appreciated them, and I think most women still do.

Joan Sims

Another person who notices the change in Sid is actress Olga Lowe. While she and Sid watch the opening minutes of the play from the wings, they chat and share a joke. Lowe, too, thinks Sid has lost his sparkle. He looks exhausted. His movements are slow and deliberate.

Sid James makes his entrance. He is greeted by applause, which is quickly followed by non-stop laughter. The opening night performance is going well. At exactly 7.45 p.m. Lowe steps on to the stage. She and Sid exchange a couple of lines and Lowe walks upstage to face the audience. Sid is standing behind her.

Lowe continues to deliver her lines. She is suddenly aware that she has not received an answer. Unknown to Lowe, Sid opens his mouth to speak, takes two steps back and lowers himself on to a sofa. He appears to be holding his chest. Lowe glances over her shoulder. Sid's head falls back, his mouth half open, and his eyes roll back in their sockets.

At first Lowe thinks it is a stunt. She ad-libs: 'Oh, come on, Sid, I've come all this way to see you and you treat me like this.' The audience erupts in laughter.

There is obviously something wrong. Lowe continues to ad-lib as she sidles toward the wings. To her horror the laughter continues. One or two people clap.

'For God's sake bring down the curtain,' Lowe hisses at the prompt assistant. The wings are empty. The prompt assistant runs into the darkness to find a stage hand. Lowe goes on ad-libbing and getting laughs.

When the curtain finally falls Sid is still sitting on the sofa. He slumps slowly on to his side.

Sid James was the anchor man of the Carry On films. He didn't mind what he played, large parts or small parts, so long as he was in them. That's how he felt and that's how we felt. There was always the sense of safety with Sid around.

Peter Rogers

Mel James, the Empire manager, approaches the star. He can see Sid is not breathing. He pushes his way through the curtain to deliver the classic comedy line: 'Is there a doctor in the house?' It receives the biggest laugh of the night. 'No, no,' he pleads, 'this is serious. Mr James has collapsed.' A man in the front row gets up and the manager waves him to a side door.

It is obvious to the doctor that Sid James has suffered a heart attack. He is told an ambulance is already on its way.

Valerie James, Sid's wife, has been watching the performance from the back of the stalls. She arrives in the wings as Sid is being lifted from the sofa and laid on the stage. Valerie clings to Olga Lowe's arm. 'Oh God, oh God, oh God,' she repeats as she watches the doctor attempting to revive her husband.

Valerie accompanies her husband in the ambulance. The doctor continues to work on Sid during the short drive to Sunderland Royal Infirmary. It is too late.

Sid James was dead.

Part One

'I'm the eternal dirty old man. I'm a car salesman by nature, a jockey by profession, and as far as the birds go . . . cor blimey.'

CHAPTER ONE

His wide-boy attitude to life; his gravel-throated accent; his indignant aggression; his innocent palliness; his rhythmic swagger; his smile; his yak-yak laugh. For millions Sid James was the archetypal Cockney. A real diamond. Nine carat.

‘My grandmother was a Cockney seamstress,’ he would boast, giving the impression that his own South African birth was nothing more than a step towards his ultimate return to England. In truth, his family’s residence in London was itself no more than a respite in a journey which criss-crossed mainland Europe and went on to span most of the globe.

Laurie Cohen – Sid’s father – was born in London, the youngest of Rahle and Solomon Cohen’s twelve surviving children. Between their Eastern European marriage in the 1850s and their latest son’s arrival in late 1870s’ London, the couple had produced fifteen offspring.

Solomon was born in 1835 in Polongen, a small coastal village in what was then known as Kurland, later Latvia. The area’s main industry was the excavation and fashioning of amber, a yellow fossil resin used to decorate ornaments. By his teens Solomon had moved to Lebo, on the German-Russian border. It was here he married Rahle Davidoff, three years his senior, whose Granada ancestors had fled the Spanish Inquisition to northern Europe.

To escape conscription into the Russian army to fight the British and French in the Crimea, Solomon needed to shed his Russian name and establish a German ancestry. The couple adopted Rahle’s grandmother’s maiden name – Kahn – and prepared to head west across Europe.

Always intent on reaching London, Rahle and Solomon Kahn settled for a year or so in Amsterdam. It gave them time to earn enough money to pay for the passage to England. In the late 1850s the couple set foot on British soil

and were promptly given yet another name by the fateful hand of a lowly clerk. What little English Rahle possessed she spoke with a thick German accent, an inflection she retained for the whole of her life. The clerk recording the emigrants misheard her pronunciation of Kahn, and henceforth the family were known as Cohen.

Within a year of their arrival Rahle had given birth to Harriet, the first of her fifteen children. More followed in almost annual succession, between 1860 and 1878, with five boys and seven of Rahle's daughters reaching adulthood. Even before the youngest, Laurie, was born, the family had lost touch with some of the older children. One family legend tells the story of how one of Sid's uncles, Rahle's favourite son, went to sea at the age of sixteen. Several years later another Cohen was drinking in a Rhodesian bar. He raised his glass and announced: 'It's my mother's birthday - drinks all round.' The stranger standing next to him confided it was also his mother's birthday and joined the toast. It soon became apparent the men were long-lost brothers. When Solomon died in May 1911 at the age of seventy-six, all twelve of his children were living abroad either in North America or southern Africa.

Between pregnancies, and to ease the financial pressure of supporting her ever-growing family, Rahle earned a little extra by making and mending clothes and selling her crochet work. By the turn of the century the Cohens were living in Horsley Buildings, a cramped cul-de-sac of small houses not far from Sidney Street in the London borough of Stepney-near-Bow. Each dead-end street was known locally as a 'lane'. Rahle and Solomon Cohen's home was at the far end and directly opposite the street entrance.

Not long after the turn of the century Laurie Cohen - whose name was shortened by the family to 'Lou' - met and fell in love with Reine Solomon, the daughter of a musical hall entertainer billed as 'Ma Solomon'. He soon discovered

the family's history bore an uncanny resemblance to his own.

Reine's ancestors were Sephardic Jews and considered themselves of a higher order than the refugees from Eastern Europe and Germany. They had originated in Spain and had also fled the peninsula at the time of the Inquisition. Unable to protect them, the Spanish crown had granted them safe passage to Holland, where many settled and thrived. Reine's grandparents were Dutch. The de Wildts lived in the Jewish quarter of nineteenth-century Amsterdam between the Amstel river and Prins Hendrik Kade. They had two daughters, Flora and Karolyn. Despite their parents' objections both daughters married Eastern European Jews who promptly took their new wives off to London.

Karolyn Rosenberg, a placid and homely woman by all accounts, quickly accepted the limitations – and demands – of her new life. Like Rahle Cohen, she too earned extra pennies as a seamstress during a succession of thirteen pregnancies.

Flora Solomon had greater ambitions. Between the birth of her three children – Sonnie, Lily and Reine – she found limited fame as 'Ma Solomon'. Her guttural Dutch accent was still so strong she was forced to abandon her singing career and concentrate on dancing.

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century 'Ma Solomon' was a regular down-bill performer in the music halls in and around London. The atmosphere and bawdy excitement infected her blood as quickly as the crude greasepaint ingrained itself into her skin. Reine, her youngest daughter, was soon addicted.

Just when or how Reine and Lou Cohen decided that their future lay in showbusiness is not clear. It is almost certain the suggestion came from Reine, a fiercely ambitious woman who craved respectability and despised failure. Lou Cohen, with whom she had fallen hopelessly in love, was already an enthusiastic gambler. He took success wherever

he found it and was attracted by the potential riches of a stage career. Sometime before 1910 'Ma Solomon' decided to try her luck in South Africa. When the interest of theatre managers there finally came to an end Granny Solomon – as the family knew her – retired to open a theatrical boarding house in Hancock Street in Hillbrow, a suburb perched on one of the many hills that make up Johannesburg.

It was at the instigation of Granny Solomon that her daughter and son-in-law – already earning a living in England as the comedy and dance duo, Reina and Laurie James – decided to emigrate to the newly constituted Union of South Africa. One of their last bookings was at the Royal Standard Music Hall opposite Victoria railway station. Seventy-four years later Sid would step on the same stage of the rebuilt and renamed Victoria Palace theatre. After the couple's cramped rooms in the East End of London and the austerity of a steerage voyage to Cape Town, the Hillbrow house must have appeared almost luxurious.

Most Johannesburg roads were rutted, sandy and untarred. In winter the vicious winds mixed the loose sand from the streets with the dust from the mine dumps to the south of the town. Semi-detached houses were interspersed with superior, single-storey detached homes. Almost all had corrugated, galvanised iron roofs which roared under the beating of the frequent highveld hailstorms.

The couple lost no time in exploring their new surroundings. From Hillbrow they could hear the familiar sound of trams travelling down Rocky Street in the valley below. On the other side of the hill, to the south, they could see – but not recognise – the business centre of Johannesburg, the three- and four-storey buildings contrasting with the gold-coloured slag heaps and the silhouettes of the mine headgear beyond.

Johannesburg was still a frontier town. But the new money was demanding a new, more sophisticated, lifestyle. To Reine's delight, and Granny Solomon's regret, the raucous

music hall entertainment was being replaced by the gentler art of vaudeville. Reine and Lou reworked their act and changed their stage name to Potash and Pearl Mutter. And, with Granny Solomon's introductions, found a ready supply of vaudeville bookings at the Orphean and the Standard Theatre in Johannesburg's Rissik Street.

Vaudeville had its parental roots in music hall and variety. But if music hall attracted its share of female patrons, variety was an all-male domain, where the entertainment wavered between crude and vulgar. Together they spawned vaudeville.

In 1894 a Boston showman recognised the need for a new style of family entertainment. His ambition was to create a theatre where families could enjoy good, clean fun. He called it vaudeville, named after Vau de Vire, a region in Normandy renowned for its ballads and homely songs. Vaudeville played in plush, comfortable theatres with carpets instead of sawdust on the floor. Alcohol was banned. As the audiences arrived they were handed leaflets requesting the men to remove their hats and refrain from spitting.

The performers were governed by equally rigid rules. A notice displayed backstage in most vaudeville theatres proclaimed: 'You are hereby warned that your act must be free from vulgarity and suggestiveness in words, costumes and actions . . . and all vulgar, double-meaning and profane words and songs must be cut out of your act before the first performance.' The inclusion of the word 'damn' meant instant dismissal.

By the turn of the century vaudeville was firmly established in England, from where it spread to the colonies. The theatres, many of them purpose-built, also brought with them vast improvements for the performers. Both sides of the house were warm and luxurious. There were usually two or three performances a day, with around eight acts on the bill. These would include animal acts, acrobats, dance

teams, one-act plays, comedians and singers. Reina and Laurie Cohen usually took the second spot on the bill, traditionally a duet. Laurie, billed as Lou James, was also an accomplished stand-up comic.

Within a year of their arrival Reine discovered she was pregnant. She gave birth, in 1911, to a boy. Lou suggested he should be named Maurice after one of his older brothers.

By August 1912, Reine was expecting her second child. This time she was determined the disruption of her career should be kept to a minimum. There had also been gossip – all of which Lou denied – that during Reine's absence from the theatrical circuit Lou had entertained several women performers in his dressing room.

On 8 May 1913, Reine gave birth to a second boy in a back bedroom of Granny Solomon's house in Hancock Street. ('They must have known Tony was coming,' their son quipped many years later. 'There couldn't have been any other reason.') This time the baby was named Sidney Joel Cohen. Once again both forenames were suggested by Lou. Joel was his father's middle name. Sidney came from Sidney Adler, who had married Lou's sister Kate. The couple were now living in Newcastle, Natal. Before the boy was a week old, both names had been replaced by Sollie.

Legend has it that the infant Sollie made his first, albeit unenthusiastic, stage appearance before an audience when he was just a few months old.

'As soon as my mother was able to get up and about my parents were on tour again,' Sid would frequently recall. 'I was in a skip in the wings while my mum and dad were on stage doing their vaudeville act. I was usually bawling, and Mum used to nip off the stage between scenes to finish feeding me.'

During one performance Reine placed her son in a trunk in the wings hoping he would sleep through the act. Sollie had other ideas. Startled by the band and the bright lights the baby decided to exercise his embryonic James voice. Soon

the infant found himself flying through the air between his parents' arms to the wild applause of the paying customers. When he grew too large, Lou would carry his son on stage and show him off to the audience.

Sollie was a precocious and confident child. By the age of three he had been enlisted to scatter the sugar on the stage for his parents' sand dance. The following year he was on stage among the action.

Life at Granny Solomon's boarding house was equally exciting. In 1919 the 'family' was joined from England by Flora Solomon's thirty-year-old unmarried niece, Miriam Rosenburg. But young Sollie's favourite visitor was his father's older brother Louis. Already into his forties, Uncle Louis was considered the 'tough egg' of the family, a hard-drinking, hard-living, compulsive gambler who descended on Hancock Street whenever he needed a free meal or somewhere to hide from his creditors. Sollie adored his uncle and, although a confirmed bachelor, Louis in his own way adopted his lively and talkative nephew. It was a bond Sid would never forget yet rarely recall. Many years later Sid admitted it was his uncle and not his father who first introduced him to gambling.

Young Sollie came to depend more and more on the pleasure – and love – he found in the company of his uncle and the motherly attentions of his grandmother. His parents' peripatetic lifestyle meant they were spending weeks, sometimes months, away from Johannesburg. Very occasionally they took Sollie with them, leaving Maurice at home to attend school. Some time before Sollie's fifth birthday Reine and Lou James joined Boswell's touring circus. Sollie was encouraged to join in and would become an unofficial member of the clown troop.

In 1919 Reine and Lou were spotted by a booking agent and offered a tour of Australia. After years of mediocrity it looked as though things were at last about to improve. There was no hesitation – at least not from Reine. The

responsibilities of a mother never appeared to cloud her ambition. Sollie and Maurice were to be scooped from the only home they could remember to live with relatives in Natal. To Sollie it was a cruel and treacherous act which shattered his relationship with his parents – and particularly his mother – forever.

In 1919, Newcastle – like its British counterpart – was a noisy and energetic town at the centre of a spider's web of high-quality coalfields. Surrounded by well-watered, fertile land and rolling green hills, its booming steel mills cast a gritty shadow across the north Natal landscape.

Communication between Johannesburg and Newcastle, to the south-east, was by rail. What roads existed were dusty and bumpy and slow. 'To anyone living in Johannesburg,' recalls one of Sid's cousins, 'Newcastle was looked upon as moving from England to Spain or Italy.'

Ethnic and religious communities congregated as much for protection as companionship. In 1919 there were only four Jewish families living in Newcastle, most related in some way. Sollie and Maurice were deposited in the childless home of his Uncle Abraham and Aunt Esther. Abraham Cohen – always called 'Bob' by the family – was Lou's older brother and a bookmaker. The town's solitary hotel was owned by Sid's namesake, Sidney Adler, and his wife Kate. One of the family guests staying at the time was Adler's brother, Michael, who had been Senior Jewish Chaplain to the British forces during the First World War.

The two boys soon made friends with their cousin Lily Adler, now Lily Mervis. They walked to and from the Government School together and spent much of their playing hours in each other's company.

Sollie soon impressed his cousin with his talents. He could already sing and dance, and play the piano and the ukulele by ear. 'He was a grand boy,' recalls Mervis, 'full of fun and

laughter and with a terrific sense of humour.' The older Maurice, she remembers, was 'quieter and more reserved'.

Sollie's life with his immediate family had effectively ended before his seventh birthday. Undoubtedly a favourite with his aunts and uncles, the sudden adventure turned first to a sense of abandonment and then resentment. The separation Reine and Lou had promised would last only a few months dragged on through one year, and then two. When the Australian tour finally ended in 1921 it was Reine alone who arrived to collect her two children.

As the train pulled into Johannesburg station, Sollie soon discovered he was returning to a dramatically different way of life. Granny Solomon's boarding house had moved from Hancock Street to the Joubert Park district. Reine had ended her career on the stage. And Lou, whom Sollie would see only occasionally, was living with other relatives while the couple's divorce took effect.

One evening, soon after his return, eight-year-old Sollie was informed he would be attending Hospital Hill Primary School, where his cousin Joel Cohen was already a pupil. Joel, five months younger than Sollie, was the youngest son of Lou's sister Deborah. To avoid family confusion Joel, soon after his birth, had been dubbed Sidney.

After the disruption of his early years Sollie found the regimentation of school restrictive. While in Newcastle he was frequently punished for talking in class or interrupting lessons with practical jokes. At the end of each infant and primary school year the pupils sat an examination. Sollie consistently achieved the lowest marks. At the age of ten – in Standard Five – each pupil attempted to gain a School Leaving Certificate to allow them officially to finish their primary school education. Those who passed went on to High School. The remainder were enrolled at a Trade School to qualify as bricklayers, joiners and electricians.

'Sid didn't do very well at school,' Joel Cohen recalled many years later. 'He wasn't the brightest of students.'

One classroom incident in Johannesburg changed young Sollie's life for ever. He had arrived at his new school and been given a desk next to his cousin. Before the first lesson began, the teacher, armed with the registration cards on which were printed the boys' real names, asked: 'Which one of you is Sidney?'

Both boys stood up, Sollie because it was his real name and Sidney because that's what everyone called him.

'Which one is Joel?'

Once again both Sollie and Sidney stood up.

'OK,' countered the teacher, 'which one of you is Cohen?'

Sollie and Sidney rose a third time.

The teacher thought for a few seconds and then asked which of the two cousins was the older. Sollie raised his hand.

'Right,' announced the teacher pointing at the younger cousin. 'From now on you will be Joel. And Sollie, you will be called Sidney.'

When he returned home that afternoon, 'Sollie' announced his new name and described the classroom confusion to his parents. All right, said Reine Cohen, we'd better change your surname too. When he returned to school the next day, her son informed the teacher that from that morning the world would know him as . . . Sidney James.

CHAPTER TWO

Sid's hatred of school was matched only by his teachers' insistence that he should learn a 'worthwhile trade'. Not surprisingly, Sid had failed his School Leaving Certificate. Separated from his cousin Joel – who went on to qualify as a surgeon – he was allocated a place at a nearby Trade School and told that his only hope of earning a living would be to qualify as an electrician. Sid had other ideas. During one practical lesson he deliberately mis-wired a household circuit. When the power was switched on the cables burst into flames and the fusebox exploded. The incident did not produce the hoped-for expulsion, but Sid's attendances at school grew less and less. 'I think he more or less dropped out,' recalls Joel Cohen.

Many years later, Sid would retell an edited version of the incident as part of a series of alleged teenage travels whilst attempting to earn a living in Depression-hit South Africa. In it, Sid had signed on as an apprentice electrician. Just why he was helping to re-wire a house after only three days is uncertain but, as he told it, the fusebox sparks were so fierce they set the wooden house alight.

Sid's manipulation of the truth was not confined to the classroom of his Hospital Hill Trade School. His 'education' – which in truth lasted no more than eight years – ranged, according to him, from attending a primary school in the exclusive Johannesburg suburb of Yoeville to studying at various colleges. Two of these that Sid often named are Grey College in Bloemfontein and Houghton College, both far beyond Sid's academic ability.

Confronted by her son's truancy and his growing rebelliousness, Reine turned once again to the family. Not long after his twelfth birthday Sid found himself on his way back to Aunt Esther and Uncle Abraham. The family break-

up - this time with no hope of eventual reunion - was painful and deep, and seems to have left Sid with a mistrust of both women and emotional relationships for the rest of his life. Sid felt his mother no longer loved him. It was a classic psychological set-up. The loss of his mother left him with what psychoanalysts describe as a 'failure of transference'. As he grew older Sid was unwilling - indeed, unable - to transfer the love a boy feels for his mother to any other woman. As an 'orphan' in Newcastle Sid was spoiled, but spoiled without the benefit of human affection.

The result of this crisis was immediate yet lifelong. Again, Sid's was a classic reaction. He devoted much of his energies to remodelling the unhappy and unsatisfactory real world into a parallel world of invention and personal propaganda. Sid also felt compelled to wield power, at least until he reached his forties, particularly towards women, as an expression of his ego. Women, he evidently grew to believe, were there to satisfy his libido. Any attempt to control or shape his life, as Reine had done, would be met with fierce and violent jealousy.

For a few years at least Sid was under the controlling influence of his Newcastle relatives. He returned to secondary school there and renewed his friendship with his cousin Lily Adler.

The approach of Sid's thirteenth birthday in 1926 brought with it a further problem for the town's Jewish community. Traditionally Sid should have celebrated his barmitzvah in a synagogue. With a shortage of permanent Jewish families in Newcastle and no synagogue, it was decided he should have a special party instead.

An elderly man, recently arrived from Lithuania, was recruited to teach Sid a few prayers. These Sid recited before his thirteenth birthday party got under way.

One Jewish family who attended the event were Max and Sarah Kahanovitz. They had arrived in Newcastle the year before with their nine-month-old son. Max Kahanovitz had