

CHAPTER

5

‘Now We See Him, Now We Don’t’: The media and the ‘Black Pimpernel’

Litheko Modisane

When it comes to speech acts Mandela works best
when he is an absent cause.

— Simon Gikandi,
‘Nelson Mandela: The Absent Cause’

After being acquitted of high treason on 29 March 1961, Nelson Mandela went underground. In May of the same year, Mandela, then secretary of the All-in African National Action Council, organised a stay-away in protest of the declaration of South Africa as a republic. A warrant for his arrest was issued on 24 May and he was charged with organising the national protest. In the hostile and anti-black terrain of the early 1960s, and prior to his long incarceration, Mandela was already becoming a public figure and symbolic legend. He referred to this legend in his autobiography, as well as the moniker he was given: ‘the Black Pimpernel.’¹ Although it is not clear when this was first used, Mandela attributed it to the press during his underground years.² This small but significant attribution points to the role of the press in the evolution of the legend. Taking a cue from his reference to the press in the popularising of the Black Pimpernel, this chapter examines a selection of press interviews, reports, articles and images of and about Mandela during his underground years: April 1961 to August 1962.