

SWEET HEAVEN

D. A. LEONARD

WHO could ever have guessed that the portly little man who had polished my car so gravely every morning for nearly two years was a Bishop.

True, he did not wear gaiters. His threadbare blue overalls were badly worn at the knees and he carried a yellow duster. He had a jaunty goatee and a twinkle in his beady black eyes unusual in a dignitary of the Church . . . but he was an unusual Bishop . . . and his Church, well . . .

One Tuesday evening at eight o'clock Bishop Isiah Molatsi stood at the door of his Church, a garage in my back yard, and welcomed each of the forty or so members of his congregation to their weekly prayer meeting.

He was dressed in a white robe edged with crimson and a high white hat similar to a chef's and elaborately decorated to match the robes. He carried a white staff with a small red cross set at the top, and he used it as a drum-major flaunts his great stick, carrying it aloft when he walked and keeping it on the ground at the full stretch of his left arm when he stood still.

Bishop Isiah looked shabby in the bare light of the white-washed garage. His robe, shrunk from washing, no longer concealed his black shoes and thick socks and the frayed turn-ups of his brown trousers.

The members of the congregation arrived at irregular intervals, for they were domestic servants who came straight from their kitchens. Some still wore their white suits or maid's overalls. Others had put on their robes, the colours or ornamentation of which indicated their rank in the Church.

The Bishop greeted each arrival formally. "Good evening, brother Timothy", he said, taking Tim's big rough hand gently and avoiding the sight of his bare feet, with their misshapen toes and broken nails and rhinoceros-like skin. Tim was dressed in the robes of an ordinary brother, blue edged with white and a red cross on his back. His long face stiff with awe, he took off his white skull cap and bent low to receive the blessing which the Bishop mumbled, face averted and right hand stretched out over Tim's shaven head.

Next came the fat and comely Rachel who sensed the Bishop's eyes upon her as she crossed the yard. Settling her green robe

over her big hips, she smiled demurely, her black eyes glowing. As he kissed her warmly on both cheeks she giggled, fiddled with her white collar and settled her white doek with its little red crosses before she bowed her head. She entered the gathering with the Bishop's blessing in her ears. "May the good Lord shelter you for all time, beloved sister Rachel."

So they came, bowed and entered the church in a state of blessedness until at last the place was full.

There were no decorations in the church, nor were there any chairs or other furniture. The walls were bare save for two worn tyres hanging from nails. The people stood about, talking quietly until the Chief Lay Sister Lydia switched off the lights and lighted a candle.

They all formed a circle as she intoned a preliminary prayer. She was tall and bony with a long face and a big mouth and wild eyes. Her hoarse voice soon rose to a shriek as she worked herself into a frenzy, waving her arms and rolling her eyes.

The circle opened towards the door which the Bishop had locked. Carrying the candle, Lydia preceded him as he walked slowly round inside the circle. He held his head on one side, his eyes were half closed and he muttered a prayer, pausing before each person with his white collection tin and nodding his head as each coin clattered in. Then he took up his position before the congregation, carefully avoiding the black smudge of old oil on the stone floor.

The service commenced and the Bishop's voice rose and fell in a prayer punctuated by a chorus of frequent amens and accompanied, when he chanted hymns, by the sweet voices of the company. As the tempo of the service quickened, the clear chirping of crickets in the garden outside was slowly submerged by the rising tide of song and prayer now rising now falling, surging ever higher until the sudden grave chime of a clock, a single note at a quarter to ten, brought silence.

The worshippers bade one another good-night in clear tones and streamed away to get home before the siren wailed the curfew hour.

Rachel hesitated, waiting to catch the Bishop's eyes which had been on her so often during the service. He smiled at her and nodded graciously and then turned away, busy with the contents of the collection tin. She minced excitedly to his room at the far corner of the yard, went in and closed the door.

The Bishop put seventeen shillings and fourpence into his

savings bank behind a loose brick in the wall of the church. With an anticipatory smile on his face and his head on one side, he walked slowly towards his room rubbing the palms of his soft hands gently together. He paused and looked round the yard before he closed the door gently. . . .

When he awakened at six o'clock the next morning, Rachel had already gone. He spent his usual day as my servant Isiah, on his knees with rolled-up trousers as he polished the floors, stripped to the waist under the afternoon sun as he pecked with a pick at the dry ground.

In the evenings when his work was done, till late into the night he sat at the door of his room mending shoes. He had a constant stream of visitors, customers and members of the Church. He was always surrounded by women, not the flighty young ones dressed in the height of their mistresses' last year's fashion and looking for a good time, but the serious calm-faced churchwomen in their ankle-length drab dresses and sober doeks, trying to impress Bishop Isiah with their love for the Lord.

As Isiah tapped at his shoes and stitched, the people talked. Usually he remained silent, nodding his head wisely from time to time; sometimes he took part in the discussions or gave grave answers to their questions. Behind his urbane smile and his alert manner his mind was often far away, occupied not only with the women who solicited him and to whom he sometimes granted the favour of a night but also, more often, with the problems of his own future.

He did not like his occupation. He aimed at higher things. He did not want to be a Bishop all his life.

Bishop Isiah wanted to become a taxi driver. With his own car he could earn big money.

He had always wanted his own car. As a ragged piccanin he perched on the side of the road watching the cars pass, longing to stroke their shining bodies, imagining himself at the wheel, a master of power. He had often dawdled among the parked cars in the nearby town carrying a duster, earning not only a ticky but also the right to fondle the car he cleaned.

One evening as Isiah worked at his cobbling, he thought of a plan to increase the Church membership and so increase the collection which was his episcopal fee. He would hold prayer meetings at the nearby dam every Sunday afternoon, when crowds of people congregated there.

The following Sunday his followers met shortly after three

o'clock, when the washing up was done and the white folk lay replete on their beds.

All were in full robes. The Bishop was in high spirits, his thoughts on a seven-seater black Packard which was for sale down at the local garage, second-hand of course. A nice profitable car to run, with passengers packed in rows on one another's knees, almost bulging through the windows . . .

They straggled somewhat self-consciously in procession down the street, with Isiah at their head. He carried his white staff under his cloak of red, which he wore over his robes.

Lydia walked behind him, trying to keep step with his short hurried paces. His eyes were on the ground; his right hand fingered the collection tin which hung from his belt. Three fat women, the Standard Bearers, followed Lydia, over their shoulders carrying the long bamboos on which their flags were mounted. Behind the people of rank were the ordinary brothers and sisters. They were followed by Tim the gardener carrying a large drum for Sam Mabuye, a little hunchback with a wrinkled face and simian eyes who hobbled painfully along swinging his long arms.

The place about the dam was crowded. Smartly dressed ladies and gentlemen were taking the air, chatting and flirting in the sun, sitting on the grass or strolling and flourishing their multi-coloured umbrellas. Loving couples sat in secluded spots or lay on the grass. Young men in long trousers, the ends stuffed into their socks, played cricket or hurled balls high over the heads of the crowd.

There were numerous groups of young folk dancing and singing to portable gramophones or musical instruments, playing rock-and-roll and jive. Among them were gawky teenagers new to the kitchen and the strange backyard life of the suburbs. The girls wore berets and down-at-heel shoes without stockings, their short skirts and flamboyant blouses barely concealing their full thighs and breasts; the boys had cloth caps pulled well over their eager black eyes and were drably dressed either in tight-fitting trousers and leather lumber-jackets or grey flannels and sports jackets several sizes too large.

Bishop Isiah and his congregation formed their circle under the great gum trees, which towered white and straight in a gloom relieved only by the occasional bursts of sunlight that broke through leaves and branches stirring in the breeze. There was no grass, no sound, only the pervasive smell of rotting

leaves. Nearby, a group of women sat cross-legged on the ground, selling oranges from geometric piles and mealies that they stripped and roasted on embers.

At a signal from the Bishop, Sam Mabuye embraced his long drum and began a rhythmic beating with his restless hands. The rolling call spread through the surrounding cacophony, till more and more people stirred towards the drum and the congregation around it, at first curious and then interested. A crowd slowly collected.

Bishop Isiah stood on the trunk of a fallen tree and led the chanting and singing. The congregation echoed his words, clapping their hands to the beat of the drum.

The audience hummed appreciatively. The worshippers responded, singing excitedly.

The three fat Standard Bearers moved into the circle, leaving their bamboo poles planted in the soft ground near the Bishop, and began to dance, sedately at first, turning as they moved round inside the ring, using their arms in stiff gestures.

The drum began to beat faster. Other women joined in the dance. The tempo of singing and clapping followed the drum.

Faster . . . faster. . . .

The prayer meeting was becoming a rival of the rock-and-roll and jive nearby.

A multitude of Sinners was beginning to see the Light . . .

The time had come to take round the collection tin.

Lydia took over from the Bishop, who walked among the crowd with his white staff and his right hand raised.

Blessed be he who puts coins in the tin . . .

Suddenly as the service proceeded, Lydia threw up her hands and began to scream hoarsely, exposing her big teeth in her anger, compelling an abrupt silence on the crowd. Then she began to preach from her place on the tree trunk, reviling the sinners for their loose and evil ways, calling down the wrath of the Lord upon them for their blasphemy. Her tirade, laden with fire and brimstone, at first petrified her audience. However they soon began to disperse. The spectacle seemed over.

Bishop Isiah ruefully shook his tin, clanking the few coins in it together.

What a fool that Lydia was . . . so earnest . . . He should have known she would let her religion run away with her . . .

He made his way back to the fallen tree, prepared to pull Lydia down from her pulpit and continue his service.

Before he could reach the front of the diminishing crowd, a youth playing a recorder sprang in front of the Bishop, into the midst of the congregation. The high notes seemed to mock the whole proceeding. As he played he danced in ridicule of the service with grotesque gestures and grimaces, a faun in short trousers and a torn white shirt.

His friends came from the crowd and joined him, leaping and capering as they sang.

The people loved their antics and crowded round, laughing. Someone pointed out Lydia, still on her log screaming madly, her eyes terrible and her face contorted with passion. The poor woman was helped by her friends to a spot further into the trees. There the remnants of the congregation gathered and stood in silence beside the sobbing Lydia, bewildered, unable to understand the mockery, the blasphemy among their people. The Standard Bearers stood with their bamboo poles, the flags limp in the still heat.

Tim the gardener, his honest face wrinkled with perplexity, looked from Lydia's tear-stained face to the Bishop, whom he could see as he edged about the crowd shaking the collection tin which was now too heavy to rattle.

Slowly Tim made a decision and ambled into the crowd, making his way gently though with his vast strength he could have forced an easy passage. He had difficulty in reaching the Bishop. On the way he found Rachel, laughing happily as she sang, dishevelled and sweating as she danced.

"Come, sister Rachel, our brothers and sisters are waiting."

She looked at him without recognition and giggled. "Can't you see I'm dancing with someone . . . Isn't he handsome?" she called, linking her arm with a smart young man in a blue suit and grey hat who danced with a walking stick on his arm.

Before Tim could reply she had whirled away beyond his reach. He continued his search for the Bishop and eventually caught up with him, protecting himself with his white staff as he stumbled about in the jostling crowd, muttering inaudibly.

Tim tugged at his robe several times before he turned. He looked tired and acted as though in a trance. "Ah, brother Timothy," he mumbled and held out his tin. "Come brother. Welcome to our gathering. A small contribution, if you please, to our church taxi."

The gardener did not reply. He guided the dazed Isiah to his group of followers.


The little procession formed up once more. No one saw them go. They passed Sam Mabuye beating his drum joyfully but did not stop for him.

At the church Lydia opened the service as usual. The proceedings were subdued and ended early. The depleted congregation left with barely a word. . . .

Bishop Isiah Molatsi sat at the door of his room, his thoughts far from the rubber heel he deftly fixed to a black shoe, as far away as his Packard taxi was now.

He was thinking of the days which lay ahead, of the early mornings when he could go out into the crisp air with the birds lively and the quiet . . . the motor-car all cold and shining to be pushed into the drive for cleaning . . . the soft crunch of the tyres crushing pebbles on the drive . . . the yellow rag caressing shining curves. . . .

“Truly,” he murmured peacefully, “the heathen are not ready for the Word of the Lord . . . as I am not ready for his divine bounty. . . .”

| | | |
|-----------------|---|-------------------|
| PRESENCE |  | AFRICAINE |
| Cultural and | | Political |
| Publications of | | the African World |

The Review “*Présence Africaine*”, published in English and French, is a bi-monthly. Put out by Africans, its pages are, nevertheless, opened to all contributors of goodwill who might be able to help define African originality and to hasten its introduction into the modern world.

READ “PRESENCE AFRICAINE”

—AFRICA’S OWN LITERARY REVIEW

Présence Africaine Publications have published over 85 literary works including books and reports by African political leaders and intellectuals.

Write for full list and details to:

PRESENCE AFRICAINE

42, rue Descartes, PARIS Ve (France)