

An African Affair

THE town of Bloemhof has little to recommend it. In summer it is hot and dusty; a dreary outcrop of red brick and corrugated iron. In winter the only change is in temperature—the dust and dreariness persist. Even the most loyal of its five hundred inhabitants would scarcely have considered it a suitable setting for a miracle, but one did, in fact, occur. On a Christmas morning, in the Bloemhof Great Church, Tant Alie received a visitation from the Lord.

Tant Alie's full name was Mevrou Adela Johanna de Jager. To-



gether with her son Gideon, she managed the farm "Houtkop" several miles from the town, and for fifteen years she had never missed a service at the Great Church. She was a large woman—"well formed" she called it—and she felt the heat more than most people. Because of this, she found the crowded Christmas service oppressive, and she would mop her face and shift uneasily on the hard pew, counting the minutes, until, the last hymn sung, she could emerge to the street. The memory of her sin would stay with her for weeks afterwards, and many times she would pause in her day's work to ask God's forgiveness for her inattention.

On this Christmas morning, her discomfort was greater than usual. The perspiration stood out in little drops on her broad red forehead, and she frowned and rubbed the damp palms of her hands against her skirt. "Magtag," but it was hot! She pursed her lips, almost as if she were about to whistle, but she did not whistle. Instead, she expelled her breath in a sharp "Tch" and, staring crossly at the shiny varnish of the pew back, she thought again of the discovery she had made earlier that morning. It had worried her then, and it worried her still.

Eight months previously, there had been in Tant Alie's employ a kitchenmaid, one Hettie. This was not her real name, for Tant Alie was not in the habit of using her servant's baptismal names—she called them by names which were short and easy to remember, and it was an arrangement she had found highly satisfactory. Tant Alie had been kind to Hettie. She had fed her, found her a place to sleep, even provided her with spending money. And Hettie had stolen from her. She had stolen two packets of tea, four bars of soap—Tant Alie could remember the exact amounts—and one of Tant Alie's silver "apostle" teaspoons. That Tant Alie had subsequently discovered the teaspoon did not serve to allay her suspicions. She had dismissed the girl and, locking the spoons away had taken unto herself another kitchenmaid, who, she hoped, would prove more reliable. Hettie, unrepentant, had set off for the town, and Tant Alie had not thought of her again.

But now—and this was the discovery which had served to mar the serenity of Tant Alie's Christmas—Hettie had come back. Gideon had seen her that very morning, talking and laughing with some of the picannins near the dairy.

She had done it on purpose, of course. It was her way of humiliating Tant Alie, of undermining

her authority. Like the serpent in the Garden of Eden she was probably at that very moment sowing the seeds of wickedness and discontent, but now there was no Angel of the Lord to drive her with his flaming sword into the wilderness. Tant Alie sighed, her eyes still staring at the pew in front.

The dominee entered, but she did not look up. To live as she did . . . to suffer so . . . With no one to turn to but God. Her kaffirs losing their respect for her. Government restrictions robbing her of even her small measure of authority over them. Who could tell how it would end! All her kaffirs now regarded a monthly wage as theirs by right, even the smallest and laziest herd boy. And this was Government doing. That a picannin, ten years old, should be paid five shillings for looking after the cattle, seemed to Tant Alie a scandalous state of affairs. And that was not the worst of it. There was even—and she knew this for a fact—a Government school in the town where kaffirs were taught to read and write. Tant Alie knew from experience that it was impossible to educate a kaffir. She knew this, but the Government did not, and she was quite content to wait and let them find it out for themselves. How she would laugh when that happened!

The dominee was reading the text for the day. The pew was narrow and Tant Alie uncomfortable. She could feel the material of her dress sticking damply to her body and she moved heavily. With faint, almost imperceptible regret, she fixed her eyes on the book in her hand and prayed a little, quietly to herself. When she rose for the hymn her bearing was devout.

"Sinners contrite gain eternal reward

In the kingdom of Heaven and the sight of the Lord."

sang Tant Alie, keeping her voice soft, and listening to its tone. She was saving her full volume for the last two lines.

"And Satan is banished from here evermore

That all men together the Lamb may adore."

Upon the word "adore," her voice rose so triumphantly that the ostrich feather in her hat seemed to quiver in appreciation, and Gideon, from his seat in the choir looked across at her admiringly. Even the dominee turned his head to smile, and Tant Alie was flattered.

Of all God's ministers, Dominee Muller was her favourite. He was a stern man, and his congregation respected and feared him as they respected and feared the forces of Nature, which, when they had sinned, punished them with droughts and hailstorms, and when they had done well, rewarded them with clement weather. Tant Alie regretted often and fervently that there were not more like him.

He started his sermon as she had known he would do, recounting simply and tenderly the story of that first Christmas, and Tant Alie gazed peacefully at the whitewashed walls of the church and thought of God. She found the familiar pattern of his sermons infinitely soothing, though their content was not always so—for Dominee Muller spoke as readily of Hell as of Heaven, and his descriptions of the torments of the damned would set her shivering with delicious fear. He was speaking of Sin at that moment, and she sat hopefully upright, smoothing the satin of her dress over her knees.

"There are, among us," said the Dominee, "many who are the

By JOAN GIFFORD

enemies of God. Hating Him, they seek, in their wickedness, to desecrate this, His Day, with sinful and idle pleasure-seeking. With blasphemy and paganism, with the glitter and folly of baubles, they seek to draw us away from Him. They have tempted us with worthless trinkets and like the unjust steward we have made ourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness.

"Is it possible we have sunk so low that the vulgar glitter of a Christmas tree is more to us than the worship of the Lord? Are our children so corrupt, their thoughts so contaminated, that the name of Our Heavenly Father means less than that of a legendary Father Christmas? Have we allowed such evils to enter our lives unchallenged—to flourish there unchecked?"

He looked directly at Tant Alie and although the sins were not hers, she felt uneasy. Could it be that Gideon . . . He was over thirty and no longer a child, but could he not once have had these thoughts of which the dominee spoke? Perhaps when he had been younger . . . But no! Her face quivered as she thought of it.

"The sins of the wicked are insidious. They flourish like an unclean thing, in the dark, and no sun shines on them. Beware ye sons of men, for the Devil has many guises. Beware, lest he catch you unawares, for like a weed which grows and multiplies, destroying all else,"—Tant Alie shuddered—"so this evil, which has



been planted amongst us, will, in the end, destroy us. I say to you: Rise up and crush this thing. Destroy it before it is too late—and you are destroyed by it."

Tant Alie could listen to no more. Thoughts of the weed, the Devil, Christmas trees, and Gideon's possible sin, rose up and danced in her mind like shapes in a nightmare. She closed her eyes.

It was then, at that very moment, in the midst of all the heat and confusion, that Tant Alie received her Call. In the Bloemhof church, on that hot Christmas morning, God spoke to her, not, of course, in words, but by a means infinitely more subtle and powerful. One moment she had been a bewildered and unhappy woman worried by the heat and the manifold sins of humanity; the next, her wickedness left her and she was filled with a sense of Divine Power. Before her rose a vision of God, his face the face of Dominee Muller, and his eyes filled with a great sadness, and she knew without doubt that he had need of her. She was to be his instrument of Divine retribution—she knew this as surely as if he had told her in so many words, and she knew also that when the time came, she would not fail him.

It was not until they reached the farm that she became aware of the sweat streaming down her body. In her room she took off her dress and dried herself, sprinkling a little scent on her shoulders and in the hollows of her arms, for she was a fastidious woman. That done, she lay on the bed and indulged in the luxury of contemplation. Closing her eyes, she tried to recapture the ecstasy

of that moment in the church. But nothing came—she felt a little hungry, that was all. She heard voices, but they were of this world, the hoarse and raucous voices of picannins playing in the yard beyond her window. Heaving her body clumsily off the bed, she opened the shutters, and was on the point of ordering them away, when she saw something that puzzled her. On the ground, in the centre of the group, was a very small tree. It stood in a little tub, and its branches were hung with a number of coloured balls. For a moment she was at a loss to explain this phenomenon. She had seen trees of this kind before in the town shops, but how had one come here? It was all very strange. She leaned out of the window to see it more clearly.

Then she remembered two things. First, she remembered the return of Hettie. These trees were sold in the town. Hettie had come from the town. To Tant Alie, it was abundantly clear that this then must be Hettie's tree—and she was angry.

She had reached the back door before she recalled the second thing. Had not Dominee Muller spoken that very morning, of Christmas trees? Had he not instructed Tant Alie to destroy these things? She knew now that the thing in the yard was without doubt a Christmas tree, and her anger grew stronger and more righteous. She thought again of how God had appeared to her in the church, and she knew that the destruction of this tree was the task which he had set for her.

"So soon, my Lord, so soon," sang the heart of Tant Alie, and her eyes burned with fervour.

In her petticoat, she bore down on the group of picannins. She swooped upon the tree, her face radiant, and tearing each shiny ball from its perch, crushed it to dust on the dung-spattered ground. When there were no balls left, she snapped the tree in half, and threw the pieces into the furthest corner of the yard. Then she turned to the picannins.

"Bring me," she said to the smallest one, "the sjambok from behind the kitchen door," and he did so. Because he was little, and because the evil had probably not entered too greatly into his soul, she gave him only three strokes, but to each of the others she gave six and her arm was filled with a strength that was not her own. The Lord was in her—she was indeed the Lord and she dealt with these miserable sinners as He had with the money lenders in His temple.

She spoke no word. When she had finished she made her way back to the house, the sjambok held firmly in one plump hand. In her room she paused, very calm and very happy. It was done. It was over. The softness of the



pillow as she laid her head on it was infinitely caressing and she was very tired.

In the kitchen Hettie flirted with the cook boy.

He was showing her with many flourishes exactly how Tant Alie had beaten the picannins.

She was thinking about Tant Alie in a petticoat.

Together they smiled.

Judges' comment: "This could have been a terrible story, the irony searing, a scathing comment on the perversion of man's religion when warped, amongst other things, by racial prejudice. Instead it is merely quaint and not quite convincing. The dice are too heavily loaded against Tant Alie. We do not believe in her. The irony doesn't come off. Tant Alie is belaboured with a hammer, not pierced again and again with the sharp rapier point of true ironic insight. The idea of her destroying the Christmas tree has great possibilities . . ."

Next week: "The Shattered Dream," by M. Mashigo.

RACE CLASSIFICATION SCANDAL

(Continued from page 1)

But it is in the homes of the Coloured people that the real tragedies are being enacted.

In Pretoria last week I visited the home of a couple where the husband had been classified African and the wife Coloured and where such strain had been introduced into their relationship that a divorce seemed imminent. In another home the father had been classified African, the mother Coloured. What would their baby—to be born shortly—be? Would they lose their right to freehold in Lady Selborne?

In every house I entered the first topic was Coloured classification and the race tests.

The tests and the Appeal Board hearings are a nightmare among Pretoria's Coloured people. People go in dread of informers who might appear before the Board to give evidence against them and say: 'I've seen Africans going into their home more than once'; or 'He speaks Sechuana.'

As one man classified African because he speaks Sechuana said: "I can speak a little Arabic but that doesn't make me an Arab."

Some families are hiding from their friends and neighbours because they have "failed" the tests. Others are racking their brains and looking for advice on what a Coloured really is and what evidence they must produce to prove their case; others are trying to find the money needed for legal assistance. Many already feel helpless and at the mercy of the classification officials and the Race Board. Others are angry but looking for a way out.

The Coloured people have never known such misery and anxiety before.

O.F.S. Women Oppose Pass Laws

BLOEMFONTEIN.

A mass meeting to protest against passes for women was held by the ANC Women's League at Freedom Square, Bochabela location, Bloemfontein recently, presided over by Mrs. Ivy Mafora, the President of the Women's League.

Mrs. Mafora said the Government planned to issue the reference books for women in the Free State in the near future. They had decided to start in the Free State because they thought it the weakest province, but they had reckoned without the African National Congress. She called upon all the women of the Free State to stand together to fight the pass laws.

Other speakers were Mrs. M. J. Mthakoana, the treasurer, and Mrs. J. C. Motshabi, the secretary of the Women's League. The meeting was attended by several hundred women who agreed unanimously that they would not take the passes.

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