

Easter Sunday Morning

HAZEL D. CAMPBELL

It wasn't me playing the organ that day, you know. It was like those mechanical pianos that play by themselves. My fingers were moving I know but I wasn't responsible. The organ play louder and louder and keep on playing even when the hymn suppose to stop. I didn't even know what was happening down there because my head stiff straight ahead. Lord, it was frightening! And when the notes just start crashing together I was so scared. And then immediately after that I found myself playing 'Praise God' and the people start singing it same time as if I had already introduced it.

Not even rector don't talk about it yet. It's like everybody still trying to understand what happen.

Some of us would like to pretend that it didn't happen.

You notice how church full up since then.

Yes. It's like it was a sign or something. Like the church renewed. It's real scary.

I never felt so in touch with God since I going to church as on that morning. It was frightening.

I sensed trouble the moment she walked through the door.

I sense trouble through the whole service. We were sitting behind her and she was restless the whole time.

It's when the folk group start singing the Zion songs that she really started getting excited. The moment the drums started she start to twitch.

I don't know. I still think it not quite right to sing them Poco songs and beat drum in church. I don't know. I just not comfortable with it.

I don't know either. Mark you, I like accompanying them. You know it's different and I enjoy it. But I not so sure you're

EASTER SUNDAY MORNING

supposed to enjoy yourself in church like that. All that clapping and swaying about almost dancing in church, and the drums, I don't know.

The scariest part was how Mass Luke find the bunch of burn up bush right in the middle of the aisle.

You think she came back?

No. They say nobody has seen her since that.

It was the very first time that they were discussing the incident together. Three weeks had passed and the church was still trying to understand what had happened that Easter morning. It was the one time that an incident with so many eye witnesses didn't have different accounts of what had taken place. Everybody gave almost the same details. There were minor differences only in the estimate of the length of time the incident had taken and the organist had fixed the time almost to a second. It was the length of time it took to play the hymn, 'Oh God unseen yet ever near', twice.

The universal sentiment was that nobody knew exactly what had happened but that it was very frightening.

The April Easter Sunday morning had dawned fresh and calm as the dew-covered trees and bushes and meadow-grass in the village of Walkup Hill. Rainfall in March after a long drought had brought an outpouring of the signs of spring from a grateful earth. Easter morning praises could be heard and seen everywhere. Birds twittered and chirped and sang whole songs as they darted from tree to tree. Every bush and every weed was painted with vibrant colours testifying to its joy at being alive.

Walkup Hill was peaceful, content and holy as the church bells at St Peter Anglican Church began to peal, summoning the faithful also to praise God.

Easter morning service was always extra special at St Peter. For some reason which nobody could remember, that particular church had combined a kind of mini Harvest

Festival with the Easter service so that in addition to the white lilies and other Easter flowers, the church overflowed with the many other gifts of the earth: red otaheite apples, bright yellow oranges and grapefruits; sugar cane, yams and sweet potatoes. Green bananas hugged each other in large bunches, voluptuous ripe plantains tempted the touch. The sights and smells of the Easter celebrations at Walkup Hill Anglican Church injected a special earthy sensuousness into the worship that no other service had.

When the middle-class people who had moved into the area in and around the village had first attended this service, they had thought 'how quaint'. But they had liked it, so that the only change now was that the baskets were prettier and more artistically arranged by the Decoration Committee and everybody was pleased.

It was like this with many things in Walkup Hill these days, a mixture of old customs and new ways. For the village had been changing from backwoods on the outskirts of the city to a middle-class suburb.

It had started with one man, a lawyer, who had his roots in Walkup Hill and who had built his home right beside one of the many streams which tumbled through the village on their way to the thirsty flatland below. His friends had envied him the peaceful nature of his home far from the city crowds and noises, and since it didn't take more than three-quarters of an hour to reach the city, the villagers found themselves being besieged by requests for land. One enterprising developer had even turned what appeared to be a rocky hillside into a very charming housing scheme.

Now, in the mornings, the narrow road winding out of the village was busy with fancy motorcars and villagers with their donkeys often getting in each other's way as old-timers and newcomers learned to tolerate each other's ways. In truth most of the villagers didn't really mind the change. For one thing the newcomers didn't plant food so

the tiny market did good business most of the week and some villagers who used to go to the big market in the nearest town at the foot of the hill now found that they could sell their foodstuff right there in Walkup Hill.

Several village daughters found employment in the new homes. The village shop expanded to take care of the increased demand for goods, and with the cash for the land they had sold, old-timers fixed up their houses or bought more animals and tools and Walkup Hill assumed an air of prosperity which other villages further away envied.

The newcomers also took over leadership of community organizations and since they had money to contribute or were good at fund-raising, these also prospered – like the new Community Hall and the improved cricket pitch, the toilets in the market, and most of all the churches.

Walkup Hill had two churches. Three really – the Methodist Church, St Peter (the Anglican Church) and the Church of the Holy Redeemer of the Resurrection. The last named, a revivalist church, usually had the largest weekly attendance although most of the villagers would tell an outsider that they were either Anglican or Methodist meaning that they had been christened in one or the other.

By coincidence it seemed that many of the newcomers were Anglican and they quickly took over St Peter.

Attendance used to be so small, the church had been looked after mainly by a deacon, a parish rector visiting once a month or less to administer communion and oversee church matters. But in no time at all this changed and it was established that the congregation was large enough and contributing enough to have its own parson. A rectory was built, facilities at the church upgraded, a few additions made and St Peter instead of sitting forlornly on the peak of a hill as it had been wont to do, now stood, its old stone walls softly proud of the new attention and a sparkling new cross on its roof testifying that it was taking over the

leadership of the spiritual community in Walkup Hill.

Some of the old-timers who had kept things together through the years of its backwater existence were a little put out by the new leadership which tended to ignore them, not out of malice, but simply because they were anxious to get on with their jobs and were impatient with the slower, more cautious manner in which the old-timers lived their lives.

Anyway, St Peter became the pride of Walkup Hill and many villagers who had ceased attending now resumed their membership to the detriment, in particular, of the Church of the Holy Redeemer of the Resurrection.

One such was Mother White. She had come back to St Peter, she told somebody, because it seemed that the church had got new power, power which she coveted.

Mother White was not an ordinary villager. She could see things and do things – so people said. They didn't actually call her an obeah woman, but it was said that she had strange powers to cure people of strange illnesses. Illnesses which ordinary doctors could not even diagnose. She could take off evil spirits, and a bush bath by Mother White could cure the most serious disease.

But strangely she didn't always practise her calling. Very often she was an ordinary citizen like anybody else. But sometimes . . .

Once there was a girl given up for dead. She came from another village and her people brought her to Mother White as a last resort. Her case was so hard that Mother White had left her lying in the thatch-covered room where she gave baths and had disappeared for a whole half day searching for the bushes which she needed.

She returned almost exhausted with a tale that the spirit riding the girl had followed her and had tried to prevent her getting the right bushes.

As she told it: 'Everytime I put out mi hand fi pull up the right bush, wha you think come up? Stink weed! A looking

guinea hen, a find horse whip! A looking rosemary, a find lovebush! This is a hard case.'

She had kept the half-dead girl for two days giving her baths and potions and the whole thing had ended with a drum ceremony to pin the evil spirit so that it wouldn't follow the girl home.

Since the girl lived far away, the villagers never heard if she had recovered but nobody doubted Mother White's powers.

Until her own son began to act funny.

It was said that he had given a girl in a nearby village a baby and had promised to marry her but during the time that she was sexually unavailable he had taken up with another girl. The baby's mother had 'put something on him' in revenge.

The villagers looked on curiously to see how quickly Mother White would cure her son. But nothing happened. Ceremony after ceremony was held, but, if anything, the boy got worse. One day he ran amok with a machete and was taken away to the asylum in the city.

Had Mother White lost her powers?

It was during this time that she returned to St Peter where she had been a confirmed member a long time before.

The first Sunday morning she appeared in church the newcomers, many of whom had never heard of her, were quite startled.

She was dressed in bleached calico with two or three layers of thickly gathered long skirts. Her head was tied with calico under her hat. When she entered the main doorway she did a kind of curtsy then walked up the aisle to the altar where she made the sign of the cross and spun around three times, her many skirts billowing around her. Then she walked down the aisle stopping at the pew which caught her fancy.

This she did every Sunday morning and at communion

time she would be among the first at the rail, where after receiving the sacrament, she would walk straight out of the church and go home without talking to anyone.

After many Sundays witnessing this behaviour the church relaxed since it seemed that she was harmless. Some of the younger members even began to giggle at her performance. Some of the old-timers, however, were apprehensive. Later, they would say that they knew something was wrong from the beginning, but since nobody listened to them any longer . . .

It was a child who first awakened the church to the fact that Mother White was up to no good.

One Sunday morning, on their way home after service, the Wynter family passed Mother White walking her stiff, swift walk through the village centre on her way to her home hidden away in the bushes.

One of the Wynter children suddenly asked, 'Why that old lady don't like the communion, Mama?'

'Of course she takes communion, every Sunday,' the mother answered.

'But she don't drink it,' the child insisted.

'What you mean?'

'Last week I was outside – you member I went to the toilet? – and she came out of church and spit out the communion in a bottle that hide in her skirt.'

Wynter mother and father looked at each other puzzled, then the mother said quickly, 'I'm sure it wasn't that. And, by the way, don't I tell you not to linger when you have to go outside?'

In that way she shifted the conversation from the child's interest in the strange woman. But later she discussed the situation with her husband who thought that there had to be a simple explanation for what the child had seen.

'Why would anyone want to spit out the communion?' he asked. It didn't make sense.

His wife however was sufficiently puzzled to mention it

to some other church members the following week, and she asked the same question – 'Why would anybody want to keep the wine? It has its place only in church!'

Two old-timers were in the group and didn't contribute to the conversation. However, during the week, the church later learned, a group went to the rectory to tell the parson about their suspicion that Mother White was using the church and the communion for evil purposes. That could be the only reason why she was not swallowing the communion wine but saving it.

The parson, brought up in the city, had a modern scientific mind and was inclined to dismiss the story.

'True, the woman is strange, but each of us has our little ways,' he told them. 'It's just that Mother White is a little more eccentric than most.'

Still they insisted that he should at least observe her so that they could be satisfied that everything was all right. Great harm would come to the church, they predicted, if she was really using the communion for devilish purposes.

When the parson asked what she could possibly do with the communion, they told him in some detail what they knew of her history.

The following Sunday he was away, so communion service was not held. But sure enough, the next communion Sunday, Mother White turned up, went through her usual act and those watching saw how, as she stepped outside the church, she stopped, took a bottle from her pocket and spat out what had to be the communion wine into it. She also wrapped what appeared to be the wafer in a piece of paper, put both in her pocket and walked quickly away.

Parson was surprised and a little worried when he heard this report. He had no choice but to put the matter before the church's Advisory Committee. So he called a special meeting and together with the witnesses they discussed the situation. Nobody had ever heard of such a thing

before. They were appalled and a little bewildered and afraid, because the old-timers were talking about obeah and devil dealings and they were not quite sure how to handle Mother White.

It was decided that the parson should seek advice from the bishop but meanwhile they would withhold the communion from Mother White.

As the parson summed it up, 'We can't prevent her from coming to church but we can withhold the communion since we have witnesses that she is not receiving it in the holy tradition of the Church.'

'Suppose she makes a fuss?' somebody asked.

'That would only prove that she was up to no good,' another replied.

It happened that the next communion service was held on Easter Sunday morning.

The church was packed, as usual, on Easter Sunday. Many who hardly attended church during the year made a special effort to be there at Easter and at Christmas. Indeed one of the parson's favourite jokes was to wish some of his audience Happy Easter at Christmas and Merry Christmas at Easter.

So St Peter was full. Old-timers and newcomers dressed up, feeling peaceful and content with the world as they walked in quietly and took their seats.

Easter lilies filled the brass urns at the altar. Brightly coloured fruits and other offerings wooed the congregation into a feeling of worship and praise, for the Decoration Committee had spent a busy Saturday and had outdone themselves with the flower and harvest arrangements. They were both celebrating the resurrection of their Lord and reaffirming his goodness in providing mankind with so many gifts from the earth.

The organist entered and began the soft prelude. The congregation sat in expectation of the grand march up the aisle of the altar boy with the cross followed by the rector

and choir. This was one of the few occasions when St Peter followed a formal pattern, for their services tended to be more informal than in many other Anglican churches.

Suddenly there was a rustle at the main door and a harsh voice crying 'Holy is God! Holy is the Lord!'

Everybody turned around and there was Mother White at the entrance.

Her calico skirts looked whiter and stiffer than usual. Beneath tie-head and hat her wizened features glistened from the oils with which she had rubbed her face.

In her hands she held a bunch of dried bush which looked as if it had been slightly scorched by fire. She also had a single dried mandora coconut, large, smoothed like a calabash and shining as if it too had been rubbed with oils. She walked slowly up the aisle and those sitting near could smell white rum and strange oils as she passed.

At the altar rail she plunked her bunch of burnt bush into the midst of the beautiful white Easter lilies, rested the coconut on the ground, made the sign of the cross, spun around three times and then returned down the aisle.

At the end of the aisle near the doorway she spun around three times again, then, counting off seven rows from the door, she indicated to those in the crowded pew on the left side that that was where she intended to sit.

Two people got up and gave her the aisle seat while others shifted uncomfortably. Somehow her presence had introduced a new influence into the church. Many could sense it and it made them uneasy. The smell of alcohol and strange oils were an unwelcome addition to the already heady odours in the church.

One woman, outraged at the ugly bush in the midst of the lilies, plucked it out and went to a side door and threw it angrily outside. Somebody else spirited away the coconut.

Somehow, after all that, the holy procession up to the altar seemed something of an anti-climax.

It was to be an unusual service that morning for the Advisory Committee had decided to get a group of folk singers as part of the entertainment during the service. Many of them felt that the church could do with a little modernizing of the pattern of its service. Some churches, they argued, were even including dance as part of the worship. The Freedom Singers were seated in the front pews and the two drummers were already stationed near the organist waiting to offer their praises in the folk tradition.

Things went calmly enough for the first part of the service. They sang the usual Easter songs of praise and joy for the resurrection of Christ, and the choir did a special number. It was when the drummers for the Freedom Singers struck up that the first obvious signs of trouble began.

The Singers started with 'Me alone, me alone in a wilderness'.

Those near to Mother White reported that she began to twitch and shake as soon as the drumming started. So much so that two more people left the pew. When they started to sing 'Moses struck the rock', she got up and began to wheel and turn in the aisle.

A few visitors thought that this was part of the entertainment and were delighted. But the parson, who was a red man, turned redder, and many in the congregation began to frown. Mother White was going too far.

Still nobody made a move to try to quiet her or lead her outside as had been done on occasion with certain stray persons who had tried to disrupt the service. And after the drumming ceased she returned to her seat where after a few more twitches she kept quiet and the parson with a feeling of great apprehension began his sermon.

Jesus Christ by his resurrection had enabled Christians everywhere to overcome Evil and the Power of Darkness – was the main message.

Much later when they were still trying to analyse it, the congregation would agree that it was from this point that the battle began. Imperceptibly. Nothing spectacular. Just a heightening of tension in the church; a strangely powerful ring in the parson's voice affirming the power of Christ in a way they had never heard him do before; and quite unexpectedly storm clouds shielding the sunlight so that someone got up and turned on all the lights in the church.

Then came the invitation to communion.

'My brothers and sisters in Christ, draw near and receive His Body which He gave for you, and His Blood which He shed for you. Remember that He died for you and feed on Him in your hearts by faith with thanksgiving.'

Mother White was among the first to move out of the pews to go to the rail to receive the communion.

Organist and congregation prepared to sing 'Let us break bread together on our knees' as usual, but the parson surprised them by giving instructions for the hymn,

O God, unseen yet ever near,
Thy Presence may we feel;
And thus inspired by holy fear,
Before thine altar kneel.

He recited the words as the faithful took their place waiting to receive the body and blood of Christ.

Mother White was second at the rail and when he came to her, the words 'The Body of Christ given for you' just would not come out, so he shook his head and whispered, 'Mother White, I cannot in all good conscience offer you this sacrament.'

There was a pause as Mother White looked in her upturned hands where there was no expected wafer. She looked up at the parson puzzled but he was moving on to the person beside her.

The first most of the congregation knew about what was

happening was when she sprang up and began to stamp her feet and shout:

'I want me communion. I come fi mi communion and I must get it. You have fi gi me.'

For a second there was a shocked silence in the church, the singing petered out and the bewildered congregation wondered what was happening.

The parson repeated loudly so that all could hear, 'Mother White, I cannot in good conscience offer you this sacrament.'

As if on cue, those who had been in the aisle waiting their turn quickly retreated to their seats as if clearing the battleground as Mother White began to shout and stamp in earnest.

As if on cue too, the congregation took up back the hymn and without knowing why, began to sing louder and louder. The louder she screamed and shouted, the louder the organ played and the louder the congregation sang. When they reached the last verse,

Thus may we all thy word obey
For we, O God, are thine;
And go rejoicing on our way
Renewed with strength divine

they sang with a fervour and belief that most of them had never before felt in their faith.

Meanwhile the parson stood motionless at the altar, the Host still in his hands, his head bowed in prayer.

But still Mother White shouted and when the hymn ended the congregation started it all over again without even a pause. The organ pealed out as it had never done before and the congregation sang as they had never sung before. Small children hugged their parents in fright as Mother White began to foam at the mouth. She spun around not three times but seven times one way and seven times the other. She rolled rapidly on the floor down the aisle and returned as rapidly. She stood up and her body,

washed with sweat, shook and trembled. At one point it seemed that her head alone was spinning leaving her body motionless.

And still the congregation sang.

Suddenly, when it seemed that they could get no louder, when it seemed that their very souls were being lifted out of their bodies, the organ made a loud crash of discordant notes frightening everybody, and in the silence which ensued Mother White shook herself violently once more and then quite calmly and peacefully took up her hat which had fallen on the floor and walked out of the door.

And without any directive, organ, parson and congregation burst into the hymn

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise Him all creatures here below;
Praise Him above ye heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.
Amen.

At Amen, without another word, as if still on cue, without waiting for the established dismissal everybody quietly and quickly left the church and went home.

No lingering to greet each other and exchange talk and comments on the service as usual, for the emotional experience they had just undergone was too much for discussion yet.

Even the parson, who usually stayed until all had departed, left St Peter that morning without a word to any of his flock.

And as they hurried away the rain clouds dispersed and the bright April morning Easter sun streamed down on them once more, warming them and lighting up the cross on the roof of the church triumphant.