

Rock, Church, Rock

BY LANGSTON HUGHES
CHAPTER I

Elder William Jones was one of them rock church preachers who knew how to make the spirit rise and the soul get right. Sometimes he used to start talking real slow, and you'd think his sermon wasn't gonna be nothing, but by the time he got through, the walls of the building would be almost rent, the doors busted open, and the benches turned over from pure shouting on the part of the brothers and sisters.

He were a great preacher, was Rev. William Jones. But he wasn't satisfied, that was his trouble. He wanted to be greater than he was. He wanted to be a Billy Sunday or a Aimie McPherson or resurrected Rev. Becton. And that's what brought about his downfall - ambition!

Now, Rev. Jones had been for nearly a year the pastor of one of them little colored churches in the back alleys of St. Louis that are open every night in the week for preaching, singing, and praying, where sisters come to shake tamborines, shout, and get happy while the Reverend presents the word.

Elder Jones always opened his part of the service with **IN HIS HAND**, his theme song, and he always closed his part of the services with the same. Now, the rhythm of **IN HIS HAND** was such that ones it got to swinging, you couldn't

help but move your arms or feet or both, and since the Reverend always took up collection at the beginning and end of his sermons, the movement of the crowd at such times was always toward the collection table which was exactly where the Elder wanted it to be.

In His Hand!
In His Hand!
I'm safe and sound
I'll be bound —
Setting in Jesus hand!
"Come one! Come all! Come my Lambs," Elder Jones would shout, "And put it down for Jesus!"

And poor old washer ladies and big fat cooks, long lean truck drivers and heavy set roustabouts would come up and lay their money down, two times every evening for Elder Jones.

That minister was getting rich right there in that St. Louis alley.

In His Hand!
In His Hand!

With the piano just a going the tamborines a flying, and the people shouting right on up to the altar.

"Aw, rock, church rock!" Elder Jones would cry at such intensely lucrative moments. But he were too ambitious. He wouldn't let well enough alone. He wanted to be a big shot and panic Harlem, sew up Chicago, and then move on to Hollywood. He wasn't satis-

fied with just St. Louis.

So he got thinking, now what can I do to get everybody excited, to get everybody talking about my church, to get the streets outside crowded and my name known all over, even unto the far reaches of this nation? Now, what can I do

Billy Sunday had a sawdust trail. Rev. Becton had two valets in the pulpit with him all the time as he cast off garment after garment in the heat of his preaching, and used up dozens of white handkerchiefs every evening wiping his brow and calling on the Lord to come. And the Angel of Angulus Temple just kept on getting married and divorced and making the front pages of everybody's newspapers. She's news.

"Now, I got to be news, too," mused Elder Jones. This town's too small for me! I can't holler! I want the world to hear my name.

Now as I've said before Elder Jones was a good preacher and a good looking preacher, too. He could cry real loud and moan real deep, and he could move the sisters as no other colored preacher on this side of town had ever moved them before. Besides, in his youth (as a sinner) he had done a little light hustling around Memphis and Vicksburg — so he knew just how to appeal to the feminine nature.

Since his recent sojourn in St. Louis, Elder Jones had been looking around for a likely female Lamb to shelter in his private fold. Out of all the sisters in his church, he had finally chosen for his own specially beloved Lamb, Sister Maggie Bradford. Not that Sister Maggie was pretty. No, far from it. But Sister Maggie was fat, well fed, brown-skinned, good natured, and prosperous. She owned four two-family double houses that she rented out, upstairs and down, and she made a good living. Besides, she had sweet and loving ways and interest of her pastor at heart.

Elder Jones confided his new ambitions to said Sister Bradford one morning.

"I wants to branch out, Maggie," he said. "I wants to be a really big man! Now what can I do to get the 'tention of the whole world on me? I means in a religious way?"

They thought and they thought. Finally, Sister Maggie said, "Bill Jones, you know something I ain't never forgot that I seed as a child? There was a preacher down in Mississippi named old man Eubanks who one time got himself dead and buried and then rose up from the dead. Now, I ain't never forgot that. Neither has any body else in that part of the Delta. That's something memorable. Why don't you do some thing like that?"

"How he do it, Sister Maggie?"

"He ain't never told nobody how he do it, Brother Bill. He say it were the Grace of God,

that's all."

"It might a been," said Elder Jones. "It might a been. He lay there and thought a while longer. By and by, he said, "But, honey, I'm gonna do something better'n that. I'm gonna let myself be nailed on a cross."

"Do, Jesus!" said Sister Maggie Bradford. "Jones, you's a mess!"

Now, the Elder, in order to pull-off his intended miracle had, of necessity, to take some body else into his confidence, so he picked out Brother Hicks, his chief deacon, one of the main pillars of the church since way back, long before Jones came as pastor.

It was too bad, though, that Jones didn't know that Brother Hicks more familiarly known as Bulldog used to be in love with Sister Bradford. Sister Bradford had never told the new Reverend about any of her former sweethearts — so how was Elder Jones to know that some of them still coveted her, and were envious of him in their hearts?

"Hicks," whispered Elder Jones in telling his chief deacon of his plan to die on a cross and then come to life, "that will make me the greatest colored minister in the world. No doubt about it! If not the greatest of them all! And when I get to be world renowned, Bulldog, and go travel-

I'm white as snow — I'll have you know Setting in Jesus hand!

take you with me as my chief deacon. You shall be my right hand, and Sister Maggie Bradford shall be my left. Amen!"

"I hear you," said Brother Hicks. "I hope it comes true." But if Elder Jones had looked closely, he would have seen an evil light in his deacon's eyes.

"It will come true," said Elder Jones "If you just keep your mouth shut and follow out my instructions — exactly as I lays 'em down to you. Now, listen! You know and I know that I ain't gonna really die. Neither is I gonna be really nailed. That's why I wants you to help. I wants you to have me a great big cross made, higher than the altar — so high that I has to have a step ladder to get up to it and be nailed thereon, and you to nail. The higher the better, so's they won't see the straps — cause I'm gonna be tied on by straps, you hear. The light'll be rose colored so they can't see the straps. Now, here you come and do the nailing — nobody else but you. Put them nails between my fingers and toes, not through 'em, and don't nail too deep. Leave the heads kinder stickin out. You get the jibe?"

"I get the jibe," said Brother Bulldog Hicks.

"Then you and me'll stay right on there in the church all night and all the next day, till the next night when the people come back to see me rise. Ever so often, you can let me down to rest a little bit. But long as I'm on the cross, I plays off like I'm dead, particularly when the reporters come round. On Monday night, Hallelujah! I will rise, and take up collection!"

"Amen!" said Brother Hicks. Well, you couldn't get near the church on the night that Rev. Jones had had — it announced that he would be crucified, dead, stay dead, and rise. Negroes came from all over St. Louis, East St. Louis and might nigh everywhere else to be present at the witnessing of the miracle. Lots of 'em didn't believe in Rev. Jones, but lots of 'em did — cause sometimes false preachers can get you so you can't tell vonder from whither — and that's the way Jones had them.

The church was jack packed and jammed. Not a seat to be had. And tears were already flowing long before their Elder even approached the cross, which was looming up behind the pulpit, made out of new lumber right straight from the sawmill. In the rose colored lights, with them big paper lilies that Sister Bradford

had made decorating the head and foot, it looked mighty pretty.

Elder Jones preached a mighty sermon that night, too. And as hot as it was, there was plenty a-leaping and jumping and shouting in that crowded church. It looked like the walls would fall. Then when he got through preaching, Elder Jones made a solemn announcement. As he turned it his last pronouncement.

"Church! Tonight as I have told the world, I'm gonna die. I'm gonna be nailed to this here cross and let the breath pass from me. But tomorrow Monday night, August the twenty-first, at 12 P. M. I am coming back to life. Amen! After twenty four hours on the cross, Hallelujah! And all the city of St. Louis can be saved — if they will just come out to see me — Now, before I mounts the steps to the

cross, let us sing for the last time our song, **IN HIS HAND** — cause I tell you, that's where I am! And as we sing, let everybody come forward to the collection table and help this church. Give largely! The piano tinkled, the tamborines rang, Elder Jones and his children sang:

In His Hand!
In His Hand!
You'll never stray
Down the Devil's way
Settin' in Jesus hand.
Oh, in His hand!

In His hand!
Though I may die
I'll mount on high —
Settin' in Jesus hand!
To Be Continued Next Week

William Green:
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"EVERY CAR that still runs is an essential cog in the country's whole transportation scheme. As the older cars quit, the ones still left get more and more essential.

"I'm not making scare-talk when I say that even standing in a garage most of the time, your car gets run down. Metals corrode. Oil gets dirty and sludgy. Grease dries out. The battery runs down. Spark plugs get fouled up. Radiator hose connections go bad. Tires get soft, so the sidewalls bend and crack.

"In these times, it's a crime to let this happen. Because you don't have to! Almost anyone's car can see him through, if he'll give it a chance.

"We're still here with everything it takes to help protect your car, whatever make it is. You find us short-handed sometimes, but we're long on experience and good equipment and reliable Esso products. "However little you drive, you need winter oil and a winter grease job. Your battery fit and strong.

Your radiator tight and ready with anti-freeze. Your tires checked over, maybe patched around to get the most out of them. This is mighty important right now — to keep your car in service for the duration. Come on in. Right this week. Winter's getting close!"

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