

Father Divine's Strange Kingdom Grows

By WILLIAM FULTON

New York, N. Y.

ONE of the last places in the cosmic universe where the average pilgrim would look for heaven is in the heart of seething and noisome Harlem, down an untidy little street, up three broken stone steps and in the rickety interior of a faded and crumbling old red brick building. Yet heaven it is—the heaven of Father Divine, whom thousands of followers call God.

This is heaven number one, center of the rapidly expanding kingdom of this strange leader. From it stem more than a score of extension heavens or lodging houses, garages, stores, and hundreds of lush farm acres in upstate New York known as the "Promised Land."

Thirty years ago Father Divine was an obscure Negro named George Baker employed as a hedge-clipper in Baltimore at 50 cents a day. Today the wealth under the control of this short, stocky, bald-headed Messiah runs into the millions of dollars. The total cannot be estimated. Divine's assets are like quicksilver—as elusive as moonbeams. He has no bank account and the vast properties of his kingdom are all held in the names of his followers. In the eyes of the law he is penniless and judgment proof.

The fountain head for the seemingly endless golden flow of revenue into the kingdom is the absolute devotion of the "Master's" followers. For their seats in heaven—which Divine "tangible-ates" for them—they contribute all their worldly goods.

The world awoke to Father Divine in the winter of 1931 and 1932 when, as M. J. Divine, a quiet little cult leader running an employment agency on the side in the suburban town of Sayville, Long Island, he was arrested on a charge of maintaining a public nuisance. The grand jury indicted, a jury convicted, and Supreme Court Justice Lewis J. Smith of Nassau county laid down the maximum sentence of a year in jail and \$500 fine.

Then a week later Judge Smith suddenly died! This fortuitous coincidence was immediately seized upon as proof of the deity in Father Divine. A higher court reversed the verdict

Money Pours Into Harlem Heaven

ture fruits of their toil to it. The "children" attend meetings but are still too worldly to make the required sacrifices. White persons are sprinkled through the following although the colored race predominates.

Angels are reborn into the Divine kingdom after they have shaken off the sins of their erstwhile mundane existence. As a reward they are allowed to change their names. Names of the newly reborn, to mention only a few, are as follows: Blessed Pure in Heart, Peace Branch, Lovely Best, Virtue Bloom, Sunshine Bright, Martha Determination, Faith Love, Grace Faith, Mary Lamb, Purity Lamb, Patience Simplicity, Mary Bird Tree, and Understanding Wisdom.

At times the new names seem to fit the angels in reverse.

For example, there was Mary Patience Humility, who aimed a kick at the chairman of an election registration board one day and was arrested for disorderly conduct. This was during a controversy over whether the angels would be allowed to vote under their new names, a dispute that Divine won.

And more recently there was the case of Faithful Mary, the right bower of Father Divine, who betrayed him with the announcement that he was "just another damned man." Divine had been arrested in connection



gling with runners for the policy game, bookmakers, young and aged prostitutes of several races, sepi girls laughing and ogling at the sheikhs of the neighborhood, a beggar with a capful of pencils, a peddler pouring wine from multicolored bottles in his cart, a toothless hag leering drunkenly... the kingdom germinates from this melange. The newcomer quickens his step.

Up the cracked steps and safely inside heaven the neophyte is directed to the auditorium on the main floor. There on benches suffused in a hazy yellow gleam from gaudy electrolights above are 300 or more worshipers. At the rear of the hall seats incline upward like ball park bleachers. In front, above a sort of choir loft, hangs a gilded banner proclaiming the words: "Father



(Associated Press photo.) Under the slogans of Father Divine, the watermelon table at Kingston, N. Y., where the cult's "heavenly Olympics" were held this summer, was a popular place among "angels" and "children."

(Associated Press photo.) At left: Faithful Mary, who recently turned against Father Divine, calling him "just another damned man."

Divine is God of the Universe." Sayings of the evangelist are plastered on the walls.

Father Divine is not present, but the meeting goes on nevertheless. Down in front a colored woman, clad in a tattered blue print dress and wearing a hat that looks for all the world like a wicker basket of fruit suddenly upturned, is confessing her sins. The voice is high pitched, the body is swaying, twisting, jerking. There is a rhythmic clapping of hands and then a scattering of singing, swelling like a gathering storm that finally spreads over the entire assemblage. The song is in praise of Father Divine, the "world in a jug" hymn written by a convert, a dressmaker. The chant fades away and another of the children springs to her feet.

"I want to thank you, Father, because —" she begins the recital of her life of sin from which she was plucked by the Harlem Messiah.

Divine seldom visits the auditorium nowadays, but at some time during the evening his message pours out of the loudspeaking system, tinny and grating but food for the faithful. They shout their thanks. The words are coming from the evangelist's penthouse atop the building.

Late at night Father Divine descends to the great banquet hall on the second floor and makes for an ornately carved chair marked "God" at the head of the large double U shaped table.

"Peace, everybody," he shouts, and the heavenly host of angels yell back at him—"Peace, Father!"

Then everybody settles down for the moment. The table is heaped high with food, for these angelic spirits have healthy appetites. Plates and cups are sent up to Father Divine. He does the serving. During this love feast



(A. P. photo.) Father Divine, dusky Messiah of New York's Harlem.

together platonically, as brothers and sisters.

Escape from sexual difficulties is promised for those who follow his leadership. Virginity is guaranteed for the reborn no matter how stained their past may be. "Twelve million virgins is the goal set by Father Divine for the coming year," sneered one hostile Negro newspaper. Meanwhile, business at the Harlem birth control clinic dwindles.

Divine also insists that the reborn adults, some of whom are illiterate, attend public school. The motive for the edict, it has



(Tribune photo.)

The little Negro prophet and his wife at a Harlem meeting. The wife, commonly called Mother Divine, stays in the background most of the time.

the testimonials and confessions, the bodily gyrations and songs continue at frequent intervals. The banquet continues far into the night. Sometimes until dawn.

"This table is but the outer expression of the condition of the consciousness within," explained Divine on one occasion. "There is no limitation, there is no lack, there is no want—the Abundance of God has made this so to you."

The ecstasy of these banquets, the songs and rhythm, the spiritualistic outbursts—all suggest the love feasts of the early Christians.

Messianism is not new to Harlem but Divine differs from his precursors in several important respects. For one, he does not allow sex to mix with religious ecstasy. Angels are segregated by sexes when they fold their wings at night and depart for the sleeping quarters of the kingdom. Divine loudly preaches that men and women should live

been charged, is the desire that all the children be able to meet voting tests. Any political strength has yet to be demonstrated, however. Before the last election, Divine, vexed because the politicians would not endorse his teachings, instructed his following to boycott the polls. Despite this mandate from on high Harlem cast the biggest vote in history.

Myths about the Messiah's power and wealth are growing, nevertheless, and are shrewdly cultivated, for it is a land of ever-flowing milk and honey about which he preaches.

His Rolls-Royce is commonly referred to as a "\$25,000 limousine" and yet it is of most ancient vintage, at best not worth more than \$150 on the used car market. His "\$40,000 airplane," in which Flying Angel takes him around occasionally, is an old Ryan monoplane of the type in which Lindbergh flew to Paris, a model that is no longer manufactured. It is valued at \$700. The Messiah also is known to



(Acme photo.)

One of Father Divine's food dispensaries in Harlem, where groceries and vegetables are sold to the faithful at cost.

have purchased suits for \$8.99 apiece, an extra pair of pants thrown in.

What little the poor mortals below have learned of the extent and source of "God's" wealth is largely due to the efforts of William W. Lesselbaum, an attorney who picks up each dissatisfied angel as he or she drops from heaven and takes the complaint to court. The current action in the Supreme court of New York is for the appointment of a receiver to take over the kingdom, liquidate it and divvy up the remains among the angels and children.

The case was brought by one Verinda Brown ("Rebecca Grace" during her angelhood), a colored maid, who swears she contributed wages and property amounting to \$4,476 to Father Divine.

She is backed by her husband, Thomas, known as "Onward Universe" before his fall.

Diligent search by Mr. Lesselbaum revealed that Divine had purchased 24 parcels of property for the "Promised Land" in Ulster county, located on the west bank of the Hudson river about 10 miles north of Hyde Park, President Roosevelt's estate. Affidavits were taken that Father Divine paid for the parcels in cash, extracting the bills in large denominations from a little black satchel which he carried with him. Arthur Madison, Divine's attorney, claims that approximately one million dollars has been spent on the purchase and development of the "Promised Land."

The properties are in the names of several angels as joint tenants with the right of survivorship, a device by which Divine prevents his followers from succumbing to the temptation of disposing of their shares. Big plans are in the making for transporting deserving children to this land of plenty, and branch heavens are being fashioned for their lodging. Nearby chambers of commerce are not entirely sympathetic.

In New York City the kingdom embraces the main heaven and its annex and fourteen extension heavens or lodging houses, a hotel, a dress shop, bakery, grocery store, and two garages. Father Divine is said to be Harlem's outstanding landlord. Another activity is the distribution of coal at low prices to the faithful.

Father Divine cuts under the prices of his mundane competitors in Harlem and elsewhere because he isn't bothered with any labor problem, or C. I. O., and worries not at all about social security.

The kingdom is expanding. Besides branches in numerous cities in the United States there are branch heavens in Alaska, Australia, in London, and in Switzerland. Small wonder then that a few weeks ago Father Divine received without delay through the regular mail service a picture postcard from China addressed to "God—Harlem—New York City—U. S. A."



(Acme photo.)

Under the persuasion of his oratory, and the advantages offered by his shops and stores that sell at cost, the kingdom of Father Divine is expanding. Branch heavens have been established in various cities in the United States and abroad.



(Tribune photo.)

Crowd greeting Divine after one of his court appearances. Arrow points to the cult leader.

in the case. Henceforth Divine was to triumph in every tilt with the law and each victory accelerated his upward climb.

The growing legend that Divine is God walking on earth, much like "De Lawd" of Marc Connelly's "Green Pastures," has never been specifically denied by him and all attempts to pin him down on this point by judges and lawyers have met with failure. He preaches God in man, any man. The aura of mystery about his own existence and the past from whence he sprung is a definite aid to him in his ministry. For those who have dropped out of heaven there is no mystery, however. "Father Divine just takes ignorant people and makes them ignorant," was the explanation of his activities given by one of them.

Today in the advanced stage of the kingdom the followers of Divine are divided roughly into two classes, "angels" and "children." The "angels" are those who turn over all their earthly goods and cash to the movement and thenceforth yield all the fu-

with a most unholy stabbing fracas in heaven number one. The case against him was dismissed a few weeks ago.

One of Divine's white disciples and secretaries is Heavenly Rest, a Wellesley graduate. That honor of the past she shook off upon her rebirth.

These are the people who work in Father Divine's business establishments without pay or who bring their earnings to him if their employment is outside the kingdom. With the exception of a few disgruntled angels like Faithful Mary, most of the followers worship their leader and feel, possibly, that they're getting their money's worth in religious ecstasy. A visit to the kingdom helps one to understand this phenomenon.

Heaven number one tunes up every night soon after dusk. Bright lights from the archway of the faded building wink down on a street scene that is both exciting and dangerous, for here crime and vice abound. At night Harlem is like an evil old woman with a knife in the folds of her dress. In front of heaven urchins are playing in the gutters, min-