

The Village Saint

(1977)

Bessie Head

People were never fooled by façades. They would look quietly and humorously behind the façade at the real person – cheat, liar, pompous condescending sham, and so on – and nod their heads in a certain way until destiny caught up with the decrepit one. The village could be rocked from end to end by scandal; the society itself seemed to cater for massive public humiliations of some of its unfortunate citizens and during those times all one's fanciful, heretical, or venal tendencies would be thoroughly exposed. Despite this acute insight into human nature, the whole village was aghast the day it lost its patron saint, Mma-Mompati. She had had a long reign of twenty-six years, and a fool-proof façade.

Oh, the story was a long one. It was so long and so austere and holy that it was written into the very stones and earth of village life. And so habitual had her own pose of saintliness become to her that on the day her graven image shattered into a thousand fragments, she salvaged some of the pieces and was still seen at the head of the funeral parade or praying for the sick in hospital.

Mma-Mompati and her husband, Rra-Mompati, belonged to the elite of the village. At the time of their marriage, Rra-Mompati held an important position in tribal affairs. It was so important that he lived in a large, white-washed, colonial-style house with many large rooms. A wide porch, enclosed with mosquito netting, surrounded the whole house. It was to this house that the elders of the tribe retired to discuss top-secret affairs and it was in this house that Mma-Mompati first made her *début* as the great lady of the town.

Their only son, Mompati, was born a year after marriage into this state of affairs – he was born into the Bamangwato tribe, which, as most people know, was famous or notorious for a history of unexpected explosions and intrigues. The child was welcomed tenderly by his father and named Mompati – my little travelling companion. All three members of the family were spectacular in their own ways, but people tended to forget the former names of the parents – they were simply known as Father of Mompati or Mother of Mompati. The child, Mompati, hardly fulfilled the forecast of his name.

Indeed, he travelled side by side with his father for sixteen years, he travelled side by side with his mother for another ten years but when he eventually emerged as a personality in his own right, he became known rather as the warm-hearted, loud-voiced firm defender of all kinds of causes – marriage, morals, child care, religion, and the rights of the poor.

Mompoti started his career early in that great white-washed colonial house. Whenever an explosion occurred, and there were many at one stage, the elders of the tribe did not wish the people to know of their secret deliberations and this left the people in an agony of suspense and tension. Some people, under cover of dark, would try to creep onto the wide porch of the house and hold their ears near the window to try and catch only *one* word of the hush-hush talks. A little patrolman soon appeared on stocky, stubby legs with a set, earnest expression who took turn after turn on duty around the porch to keep all eavesdroppers at bay. Seeing Mompoti, the eavesdroppers would back away, laughing and shaking their heads in frustration.

‘It was no good,’ they would report to the people. ‘The little policeman was on duty.’

And so life went on in that great house. The tribal intrigues and explosions came; the intrigues and explosions became irrelevant. The great lady of the town, Mma-Mompoti, was seen everywhere. She had the close, guarded eyes of one who knows too much and isn’t telling. She presided over teas and luncheons in her home, just like any English lady, with polished etiquette and the professional smile of the highborn who don’t really give a damn about people or anything. And as though to off-set all the intrigues and underworld deals that went on in her home behind closed doors, Mma-Mompoti assiduously cultivated her ‘other image’ of the holy woman. No villager could die without being buried by Mma-Mompoti: she attended the funerals of rich and poor. No one could fall ill without receiving the prayers of Mma-Mompoti. Two days a week she set aside for visits to the hospital and in the afternoon, during visiting hours, she made the rounds of the hospital ward, Bible in hand. She would stop at each bed and enquire solicitously:

‘And what may ail you, my daughter? And what may ail you, my son?’

At which, of course, the grateful ailing one would break out with a long list of woes. She had a professional smile and a professional frown of concern for everything, just like the priests. But topping it all was the fluidity and ease with which she could pray.

‘Oh,’ she would say, stricken with sorrow. ‘I shall pray for you,’ and bending her head in deep concentration she would pray and pray to either God or Jesus for the suffering of the world. Needless to say these gestures were deeply appreciated.

Then one day, without any warning, Rra-Mompoti brought his world crashing down around his ears. He just preferred another woman and walked out of the security and prestige of his job and home to live with her. It was one of those scandals that rocked the village from end to end and for a time Rra-Mompoti shuffled around shame-faced at his appalling deed. He averted his face so as not to catch the angry looks of the villagers which clearly said: ‘Now Rra-Mompoti, how could you leave a good woman like Mma-Mompoti? She is matchless in her perfection. There is no other woman like her.’

On this tide of indignation Mma-Mompoti swept sedately into the divorce court. The whole village memorised her great court oration because she repeated it so often thereafter. It was to God, the Church, the Bible, the Sick, the Poor, the Suffering, the Honour of an Honourable Woman, the Blessings of Holy Matrimony and so on. The court was very impressed by this noble, wronged woman. They ordered that Rra-Mompoti, who was rich, settle her handsomely for life, with many cattle. Life in the village became very difficult for Rra-Mompoti. People muttered curses at the very sight of him, and as for his new-found lady-love, she dared not show her face. He was also advised by the elders that a man of his low morals could not be in charge of the affairs of the tribe and he ought to look for another job. Rra-Mompoti failed to defend himself, except in odd ways. After a long silence he told a sympathetic friend that he was sick of the nonsense of the village and would retire permanently to his cattle-post and live henceforth the life of a cattle-man. He was highly indignant, in an illogical way, at people, for turning against him.

Rra-Mompoti was very indignant with his son, Mompoti, for turning against him in support of his mother and he clung to these two indignations with a strange stubbornness. Soon after the father had disappeared from the village, he was pursued by Mompoti in a heart-breaking attempt at reconciliation. Mompoti returned to the village with a shocking story. On approaching his father's cattle-post, he said, his father had walked out of his hut and pointed his hunting gun at him. Then he'd shouted: 'Get away from here! You can support that woman if you like!'

Oh, the Devil had taken Rra-Mompoti's soul for good, people said. He would surely burn eternally in hell-fire. Soon after this Mompoti became very ill. He lay down for months. He had a terrible weakness and pain all over his body. He developed a fear of any chill or draught. It would end his life and he enveloped himself with warm clothing and blankets in an effort to save his life. Not once did he relate his nervous breakdown to the actions of his father but when he recovered a little he told people very earnestly that he was suffering from 'poor blood'. He kept this ailment as a kind of chronic condition and winter and summer he wrapped himself up warmly against the elements. In summer, the sweltering desert heat of the village reached temperatures of a hundred degrees in the shade. Mompoti was wrapped up in two jerseys and an overcoat on such days. One day a perspiring villager remarked on the heat and looked meaningfully at Mompoti's jerseys and coat. Mompoti shivered and said: 'I have to protect myself. I must take care of my poor blood.'

Mma-Mompoti settled in a little Mother Hubbard house with her son. It was neatly fenced. A water tap appeared in the yard, and vegetables and flower gardens tended by servants sprang up all round the pretty little house. Mompoti found a job as a manager of a village store and together they resumed the broken thread of their lives. Mompoti was seventeen then and astonishingly like his mother in appearance and behaviour. Mma-Mompoti kept to her round of funerals, hospital visits, and church-going and her son built up a public acclaim all his own. Like his mother, he cared about everyone and it was due to this that he managed one of the strangest stores on earth. It was always crowded with people but it often ran completely out of goods. Above the clamour of voices, every now and then rose the deep, booming bass of Mompoti, either in a hearty

laugh or in stern and forcefully delivered advice to those in conflict or pain. He sat in a corner with piles of accounts and book-work but he could be easily distracted from his work. Every now and then he would look up cheerfully at the approach of a friend but that cheerful smile could, in a split second, turn to a worried frown. He would have one finger on his accounting – it would remain firmly pressed there – and a half an hour might pass in earnest discussion of the friend's latest problem. Suddenly, the bass voice would boom through the shop:

'I say, my friend, if you spare the rod, you spoil the child.'

Shoppers never knew the whole story. It did not matter. It mattered that some living being cared intensely and vividly and gloriously about his fellow men. A slight hush would descend on the shop as the bass swelled out and people would smile to themselves. It swelled out about God who was important and behind all things; it swelled out about the morals of the land which were disintegrating and later, when he married, it swelled out about the virtues of family life. He threw his whole heart into people's affairs and then, at the end of the day took all his book-work and accounting home, sitting up until late at night to make up for the hours lost in conversation during the day. Sometimes shoppers humorously queried:

'Mompoti, why is it that there is no flour or soap in this shop? I've hunted for these goods for a whole week here and I cannot find them.'

And Mompoti would reply: 'That's just what I was praying to God about this morning: "Oh God," I said, "I've forgotten to order the flour and soap again. I beg of you to help me, God, because my memory is so poor." My prayer has been answered my friend, and I expect the flour and soap to be here next week . . .'

This went on for ten years. Both mother and son lived a busy life and people imagined they were two peas in a pod, they seemed so alike in their interests and behaviour. Then Mompoti fell in love with Mary Pule, a thin, wilting, willowy dreamy girl with a plaintive, tremulous voice. She had a façade too that concealed a tenacious will. She was so anxious to secure Mompoti permanently as a husband that she played a hard game. All during the time he courted her, and it took months, she led him this way and that, with a charming smile. Oh, maybe she loved him. Maybe she did not. She wasn't sure. Mompoti was intense about everything, so he was intensely in love. He shared his depressions and elations with his mother. The girl was invited to teas and showered with flattery and teasing until, in her own time, she accepted his proposal. It had nothing to do with either Mompoti or his mother. It was her own plan.

A small flat was built in the yard in preparation for Mompoti's future married life, and all proceeded well up to a certain point – the month after the marriage. Then Mma-Mompoti began to undo herself. Throughout the ten years she had lived with her son, she had played a little game. Mompoti used to bring his pay-packet home intact but she wanted him to buy her just a teeny-weeny something – a pair of stockings, a bottle of scent, a little handkerchief or a new dress. It just pleased her, she said, that her son cared about his mother. So she always extracted a teeny bit for her share and handed him the rest. She soon informed her daughter-in-law of this procedure and like all powerful personalities, she secretly despised the weak, wilting, plaintive little wretch her son had married. She needed to dominate and shove the wretch around. So at the end

of that month, she over-stepped the mark. She opened the pay-packet as usual and suddenly needed an enormous amount of things all at once—a pair of shoes, a new dress, and a necklace.

What she handed over to her son could barely keep him and his wife in food for a week. She could not follow them into the privacy of their home, but unconsciously her vampire teeth were bared for battle. She noted that her daughter-in-law often looked gloomy and depressed in the ensuing days; her son was cold and reserved. She attacked the daughter-in-law with brittle smiles:

‘Well, what’s wrong with you, my child? Can’t you greet an old person in a cheerful way?’

‘There’s nothing wrong, mother,’ the girl replied, with a painful smile.

At the end of the next month, Mompoti walked straight to his own flat and handed his pay-packet intact to his wife, ate a good supper, and fell into a sound sleep after many nights of worry and anguish. The following morning he left for work without even a glance at his mother’s home. Then the storm burst. The pose of God and Jesus were blown to the winds and the demented vampire behind it was too terrible to behold. She descended on her daughter-in-law like a fury.

‘You have done this to my son!’ she snarled. ‘You have turned him against me! His duty is to respect me and honour me and you cannot take it away from me! You see that water tap? You shall not draw any more water from it while you are in this yard! Go and draw water at the village tap in future!’

And so the whole village became involved in the spectacle. They stopped and blinked their eyes as they saw the newly-wed Mary carrying a water bucket a mile away from her own home to the village water taps.

‘Mary,’ they asked curiously, ‘why is it you have to draw water here like everyone else when your mother-in-law has a water tap in her yard?’

Mary talked freely and at great length – a long weepy story of misery and torture. And people said: ‘Well, we can’t believe that a good woman like Mma-Mompoti could be so harsh to her own child,’ and they shook their heads in amazement at this thunderbolt. That was the end of Mma-Mompoti. No one ever believed in her again or her God or Jesus Christ but she still buried the dead and prayed for the sick.

Her son, Mompoti, set up home in a far-off part of the village. He never discussed the abrupt break with his mother to whom he had once been so overwhelmingly devoted, but one day his voice suddenly boomed out through the store in reply to some request by a friend:

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I never do anything without first consulting my wife . . .’