

UNSHACKLED

By Valerie Crichlow

The one-room shack served as living and dining room, bedroom and kitchen. Dozens more of these rickety structures, fragile and overcrowded littered the landscape in this area. They sheltered numerous undernourished families, who were daily succored by very little. Squalor, destitution and degradation were the essence of their wretched existence. Hopelessness gave way to crime and other illicit activities.

Seth stumbled wearily unto the hard bunk that was jammed up against the wall. He stared blankly up at the wooden rafters that crisscrossed beneath the rusty brown galvanize sheets.

"Seth boy yuh gone to bed already?" came his mother's enquiring voice.

He didn't reply. He was exhausted from the many errands that he had to run for the man who was visiting his mother that day. The boy closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep, with a smile upon his lips. The light from the living room section of the house played upon his ten-year old baby face. It touched his tousled black hair, and his smooth chocolate brown skin, the pride of his mother's heart. Seth slept on and began to dream. He was drifting off somewhere, and he thought that he heard excited voices with shouts of:

"Fire! Fire! Oh God look de house burning...!"

"Get de children out fas fas...!"

"Seth Seth...oh God Seth ...where yuh is chile...Seth!"

Was that his mother calling him so urgently?

What could be wrong?, wondered Seth as he dreamed on feeling warm and secure.

Women bawled, children screamed, men ran wildly through the smoke with useless buckets of water. The fire raged on like a demon, consuming everything in its path.

Seth dreamed on. He continued drifting away. He was floating upwards away from his bed, through the ceiling and past the housetop, higher and higher up towards the stars. He felt light and free, as a bird. He heard his mother's voice again calling, imploring, wailing as if in terrible agony:

"Seth ...! come to mama, please...please come to me Seth...Seth...oh God Seth!"

He heard a final piercing, terrible, heart-rending cry, then no more. All was quiet now. He looked down, and beheld the burning inferno that was his home.

As he stared into the fiery furnace below, it suddenly struck him: was this hell with its leaping flames, scorching heat and screaming souls? He was unafraid. He stared deeper into the horrible brightness below, as scenes from his earlier childhood danced before his eyes. He saw himself hungry, unable to attend school; he saw his four brothers, two sisters and himself huddled together in the shack when it rained, for the roof leaked badly. He saw his bent, toiling mother, her tired face, and her dry calloused hands. During the day, she worked as a washerwoman for a meagre pittance. By night she was forced to entertain men to supplement her income. He saw the faces of many men who had visited his mother - some kind, some violent, others indifferent. His mother had tried her best. He must look ahead now.

His glance swept upwards to behold a brilliantly-lit stairway, majestic and beautiful. It extended upwards to the sky. Filled with wonder and awe, he began to ascend the stairs. Suddenly the air was rent with a thunderous burst of music. Seth looked up to behold, a host of winged angelic-looking figures, clad in white robes. Each wore a rainbow on his head, and a cloud beneath his feet. Some blew bugles, some trumpets and others flutes. They smilingly beckoned him up. This must be heaven, he thought. He floated past dozens of radiant faces, delighting in the sound of the most beautiful music that he had ever heard. He felt so happy as if his heart would burst. Abruptly, the stairway ended. One of the angelic beings took his hand gently, and led him away to a nearby hill.

Seth looked down at himself in amazement: he too was dressed in fresh white robes. Looking up, he beheld in the distance a grand golden city, gleaming and splendid. This was heaven! Next to the city was a beautiful garden, through which ran a crystal clear river. This was surely the finest garden that he had ever seen. There were flowers, plants, shrubs and lush green grasses. There were trees laden with all manner of fruit, most of which Seth had never tasted before. He also saw animals of all types mingling peacefully together. Seth was ecstatic. He loved it here. He could live here forever. His sorrows had ended. He was happy at last.