

Cordella Lewis

BROTHER JONATHAN



Mamma was never going to know what almost happened the night the peas-shelling was taking place in the out-shed out of sight of all those adults and children who wished her so well and thought she was so safe, so untouchable. It had happened within hearing but no one in the noisy, happy throng heard anything above the chatter and banter. It had happened within hearing but there was nothing to hear, for his whispering was hoarse, and her throat had tightened like the rope around the neck of a tethered goat caught in a thicket. And the girl shook her head and marvelled once again how close she had come to having her maiden run down her legs in thin pink streaks as the whisperers had averred, but more, how unaware a careful mother really was of any young girl's dilemma, all along!

Brother Jonathan was a nice up-and-coming young man who had gained much awe and respect from the villagers, especially after he had donned the revivalist head-wrap which identified him as a Child of God and an Inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven. Walk the length and breadth of the district and you find young men willing to live a life of irresponsibility. Theirs was a precarious life, roving around the village, catching young girls who dropped ripe under any fruit tree, arriving just when the pot is lifted off the three firestones and slapping empty back pockets in raucous laughter. Hanging on eye-top – everyone knows if you blink, they drop bouf.

Brother Jonathan was a living exception to the rule. Always clean and neat, he was expected to save sinners and was naturally welcome at mealtime.

No one could rightly recall whence he came or how long since he had blended in so quietly. What they knew was that ready laughter which crinkled the corners of his dreamy eyes, and that friendly approach to one and all alike. The night preaching and the sankey singing with its attendant houn'ing had surely brought a delicious and appealing hoarseness to his throat. Big People, many of whom regularly attended the lively, gut-wrenching and soul-stirring sessions without sanction of their regular church parsons, reported on his prowess on the central threshing floor where the sins of the faithful are mercilessly trampled in the ancestral three-step. Not hampered by pain-a-joint, his agility in jumping off the podium had become something of a legend; being a pleasant, agile and not least, a good looking male, he gradually came to be pampered by the matronly figures who handed him culinary delights under the anonymity of gowns and wraps and dish towels embroidered in coloured threads.

Shepherd Leader often looked proudly as his young charge led the women in his flock in the expected 'trup' and 'trump', and the wheel and tu'n around the enchanted circle. Brother Howland who ruled the Meetin' House with a steadfast hand, was too busy healing the bruised and broken-hearted, and handing out the expected little packets and vials without which no self-respecting wearer of turban and robe would be accepted. After being acclimatised to the desired codes of conduct, Brother Jonathan had gradually taken up the seemingly charming, seemingly harmless habit of roaming all over adjoining neighbourhoods during the days, shaking hands and cultivating goodwill. His flexibility did not go unnoticed when the Leyland unloaded its precious cargo of farm workers returning from Uncle Sam Country. It was indeed a nice thing to keep the religious fervour burning outside the be-flagged compound where glasses of holy water perched atop tall posts. Jonathan, knowing he could turn up anywhere without invitation and could make any utterance without earning a wrathful backlash, at times felt his head grow as he embraced each new upsurge in his status. The harvest will be good, he exulted.

It did not look suspicious for him not only to pass by Miss Etelda's board house but to make a stop while she was out attending to her husband's business. After all, in the district it was easier to trust a man of God than any other young man who might smell and bleat like a rammy, and likewise could not be let loose just so among young nanny-goats. A man of music could deceive them with sweet sounds and skill on the instrument. Yes, it was easier to trust the young preacher with the ready smile than the self righteous police officer flashing his prominent gold tooth wearing govament boot and riding govament horse while the dumb creature fanned flies with its groomed tail. If you come to think of it, the man who was most trustworthy was poor blind old Franko, roaming the earth in search of food to sustain his meagre frame and of ears to hear him recite out of his repertoire of woe. Brother Jonathan always politely cleared his throat on approaching through the khus-khus patches which stood guard stiffly out there with their sharp-edged leaves between the Walsh house and the dusty road. Moreover, he had long realised that the prize daughter was almost always alone at home. Jonathan always delivered his hoarse laughter before asking Thank you kindly for a drink of water, knowing that this well-mannered girl was going to serve him from the jugful of rain water reserved for visitors on the side-board covered with an embroidered doily, and in a glass tumbler rather than a plastic cup. He always encouraged her to sit across from him at the little wooden table on the side veranda where her father ate his dinner, rather than stand there holding the door and only putting her head out to smile. Feima was a bit puzzled as to whether he reserved certain jokes to show that he was human, or freely dispensed others to put listeners at their ease, but she had noticed for some time that the stories were not exactly un-worldly.

Taken from a certain text about the two angels walking to Emmaus disguised as men, Brother Jonathan's local version that day assured her that in 'bibical' times, they appeared with alarming regularity and familiarity. This time it was among people engaging in riotous living in some desert somewhere on top of Africa. On this occasion 'they' were in fact talking with a twang and laughing 'kiffim kiffim'.

The two, he said, was walkin' to a place call Gum Arrow where there happened to be a spring. As they walked they was talkin' up in they nose about them people livin' bad life into one desert them call Saddam who neva know they was comin'. So hear one, me will appear sudden in the room altho' the door shet, frighten them they wet they swaddlin' clothes (because is swaddlin' clothes them-they people used to wear you know), an' the odder one say me will lead de deestant family membas outside the town near the spring, becausen when fire-bun start the husban cool

because he chosen, but the wife don't know that she gwine look back an wham! One pilla of coarse salt comin' up.

Jonathan delivered the angel dialogue in exaggerated nasal tones with all accompanying laughter and gestures and with one hand on the table.

Feima looked on in amazement. She was thinking more about the possibility of it being one of those places they call oasis, than on the actual joke. Brother Jonathan stood up at the word 'wham' and slapped the shaky little table in tempo with the final words, as if he were playing a game of dominoes. And from what she knew of domino playing it was a six-love kind of slap. His blue turban with the yellow lead pencil standing up straight in it looked shaky like it was about to come loose ... She drew a sharp breath.

'I frighten you?' he asked, suddenly solicitous, hand stretched out and step advancing. The next thing he knew was that he was looking at the door handle and she was looking out at him through the curtains and wood en louveres.

'No' really', she breathed as he stepped off the wobbly boards.

A faint smell of essence hung in the air.

Feima could not decipher immediately the reason for the sense of unease that enveloped her. Was it because of the jokes about angels, because a preacher talked ordinary or was it the incense? However, she decided not to think too badly of Brother Jonathan's efforts to entertain, being no stranger to Dadda's unrepentant and unholy jokes such as the one about Abel and his navel made behind Mamma's backl.

Peas-shelling in the yard was a big event that Jonathan looked forward to, for he had grown up under the damp skirt-tail of the Blue Mountains with its plantains and coconuts towering over wet, grass-lined trails. He found himself fascinated with the communal attractions of big reaping, as was the case with red peas, corn and cocoa depending on the season and the size of a farmer's holding here on the fringes of what they called the Cockpits. After the shelling, he had noticed in his two-plus years of sojourn, dry pods were exposed longer to the sun, spread sometimes on a barbecue of paved marl and stones before being stored in the butchery for re-planting. Corn he already knew, required the husking of its trash while the thick fleshy protective husk of the cocoa pod was chopped in half to let the grains and the sweet preserving water out. Everyone came to their neighbour's yard prepared with thin peeling knives which would be made to walk skilfully between the tortuous bulbous 'toes' of the ginger. On healing mission trips to St. Ann he had seen more pimento than locally where even children knew that atypically this crop was reaped by ripping the branches off the trees in order to get hold of the pungent smelling seeds. And just recently Shepherd Howland had been reminding the flock that no matter how much MacDonald Almanac they tried, they could not make pigeon-gungo peas and sorrel arrive together at any other time than at Christmas time. The young man thought he saw a budding sermon on unity in the practices of lend-hand and day-work. Yes, people came unbidden from all walks of life except of course the policeman, teacher and sanitary inspector who probably thought it below their dignity to flop on dirt floors

No one showed any surprise when the affable Brother Jonathan showed up and pitched in, and no one thought it strange that he wore black, for strange are the ways of God's messengers who traverse the land at night. At short notice they might find it absolutely imperative to cut language and make sign to turn back rolling calf, or to transform into duppy conquerors. Who knows what demons they have to face, or what angels – fallen or otherwise – they might have to wrestle with till the break of day.

Willing hands worked far into the night. Naturally, sweet-wood was added to the fire instead of the harsh burn-eye; refreshments were served and many stories went the rounds accompanied by

loud laughter. Meanwhile, the welcome guest who was also the Lord's anointed and therefore privileged to leave whenever the spirit bid, was served his fried fish, potato pone and bread first, and ears picked up when his turn came to add to the repertoire of jokes.

Feima herself liked to stand a little in the shadows and watch the eyes glow as the fresh, friendly grains rolled almost eagerly out of their pods in green and multi-coloured globules varying with every grain and laughingly thrown with some skill into clean butter pans. One of the growing-up stories she still felt a little awed about was how inquisitive spirits should be kept at bay, but not by throwing water out inadvertently. The ancestors, those faithful protectors of navel-strings planted under fruit trees – one for each child - were never too far away, and were even seen and heard at certain times, she was made to believe.

Feima was out and about helping to serve and sharing in the fun but mostly in a non-verbal way. Her remarkable eyes lit up often, particularly as she enjoyed wearing one of Mamma's calico apron-bibs with rick-rack braid outlining the pockets and listening to the squeals of the children like Nadia and her friends who were given special privileges at peas-shelling every year, she noticed. She liked the idea of them being allowed to carouse disgracefully until the wee hours even if there was school next day, and to participate in number games such as 'ship sail, sail fast' by guessing how many grains of roasted corn or peas the player held in the fist. This was an occasion when children could temporarily acquire adult status, take liberties without penalty – giving laugh for peas-soup, so to speak. This year Vester and Caro-Lou were playing big, leaning forward with lower backs to the wall, hands on knees, eyes bright as peenie wallies.

Big People paused gleefully, tobacco pipes hanging from the lips of both men and women, to acknowledge that it was those worms which came tailor-made inside the pods that made the greatest impact on the young ones like the Dixon twins. How they got into the sealed pods was a question without an answer, and every year brought the same results. All eyes turned on Nadia who this year must either brazenly decide to shed the fear of the little wrigglers or end up being laughed at especially by Vester who had long passed that stage. Valda and Vinny were getting ready to show-off on her by flapping and screeching around the out-house like owls well hidden in the tall night trees asking 'whoo-who?'

At such times Mr. Walsh was in his element. The good nature that was hiding under that cap pulled down as if to hide his eyes got a chance to shine. He it was who held out a broad fleshy palm with a worm that had been pulled with some effort from a half-eaten grain. It was a moment of stillness as some craned necks to watch this show. This particular caterpillar tinged with black was not the usual plain common green specimen. Small hairy spikes on its back complemented by a shiny beak and beady eyes. Feima noted carefully that when Dadda nudged, it bucked and reared its middle, then flattened and reared again, pushing itself along his palm like a dwarf locomotive. Voices screamed when it almost fell off.

Feima knew that Dadda's balding pate was being seen for the first time by many who never guessed what it looked like in daylight. It shone in the light of the lanterns hanging on pegs nailed around the planks of mahoe for those who recalled only hearing him mumble 'mawnin' on the dawn road as he towered over them on his faithful Dinah. His eyes were shining too and his voice touched the children now with unaccustomed warmth.

'Look good', he cooed, 'it a little vex but will never bite. Won't bite you now nor never. It gat no teeth. De mout too feeble fe hol' on to flesh, see?'

He held out his large hand again as smaller ones reached out tentatively. Pulled back. Reached

again. Giggles spilled over into the respectful silence. Hands covered mouths, then a brave one: Gi me, put it in me han-middle. Me no 'fraid'.

The man gently tilted the bewildered creature onto the little palm, and hastened to reassure:

'Same thing with lizad !'

But a shout of disbelief rose at the mention of lizard, and the caterpillar holder was suddenly left to his own devices as Dadda's voice to include all.

'A lizard wi aswayl a-run from you. Him won't run after yu. So tell me now, what sense it make running from somet'ing dat running from yu? Tell me dat!', he ended triumphantly.

Even the oldsters were by then nodding agreement, murmuring

'Fi true, fi true'.

Refreshments arrived then, and general laughter and goodwill prevailed.

The peas shelling resumed with renewed enthusiasm as Feima was returning to the kitchen holding an almost empty tray. She met up with Sister Puncey, Miss Meemie and Cousin Jumima - the last of the frying and the sharing and the pouring and the washing-up brigade - who had just left the kitchen to re-enter the fray, but now more to match wits than to partake of the job in hand. Feima was putting one hand out towards the kitchen door when someone grabbed it before she could open her mouth to say 'a-who'. Suddenly she found herself jacked up, as the common phrase and matching sentiment implied, against the wattle and daub on the far side. She saw the black turban before hot breath brushed her face. Her eyes touched the tray lying upturned on the grass where it had fallen with a muffled sound then moved to the darker patch under the arm of the black sleeve now restricting any movement of her head. Black as sin, her mind screamed, but her mouth opened and closed wordlessly as he flung his body at hers in order to pin her more firmly against the rough surface. Feima stiffened a little as she felt his hardness against her leg and resolved almost without thinking to clean the spot extra that night and rub it with bay rum or jeyes during ablutions which she would now necessarily have to repeat.

'You father not gwine turn me down. He know I decent enough for him son-in-law'.

His breath came hotter with the urgency, and at last, in the half-light, she looked into the whites of his eyes. His other hand moved across her breast. As she gazed at the raw hunger she felt a sense of light-headedness because that raw hunger had somehow freed her from the numbing fear that had threatened to engulf her only a moment ago. And in that moment when she experienced the relaxation of a triumph, he assumed he had won her will.

'I will care you good', he said, half turning toward a row of shrubbery.

'Good like you parents them. Them love you one way, but me love you anodder way so you can to leave them and cleave unto me. The Good Book say so'

Feima reluctantly followed.

'A notice you not sayin' anything' he whispered, head half turned toward her. 'If you doubt me, a can show you the half acre I pay down on. Fe buil' me own little meet'n house...'

'Come', he said throatily, leading her to the deeper shadows. Suggestively, in the custom of the roving brigade, he tickled her palm. The effect was that he unwittingly lightened the pressure on the fingers of the hand he still held captive, as he moved.

A brief tussle ensued in a desperate resistance borne out by a strength she had not known before. And she saw the look of astonishment as his foot slipped and the loss of balance eased him effortlessly off the edge of her faithful little gully bank. He was holding on to a stodgy banana plant and its six-hand bunch and, she thought ruefully, it gwine be a long fall down to that bottomless pit where Mamma eleven breadfruit tree always holding hands. Before turning her back, it crossed her mind fleetingly that when day light out, a muddy black turban might be found under a flattened bunch of banana, and someone will be wondering out loud if the messenger had lost his guard by taking in too big a tot of Dadda's johncro' rum ...
...for I the Lord am a jealous God.

It was Sista Puncey who met her at the shed door coming back.
'Miss Fee, a was jus' comin' back to help you clean up what rubbish lef' out dere. You do enough work fo' tonight'.
Feima leaned a weary head on the rough post.
'True. True. Tell Mamma fo' me please, I goin' to take a little lie down. My chest feel a little tight'.
'I can come with you, mam'. Puncey knew when respect was due.
'Okay, you can jus' walk me to the door and tell Mamma what I say'.

Feima turned to watch Sista Puncey turn into the shed.
But she didn't really see her.