

FINDING A WIFE

By Valerie Crichlow

To Jem and Jerri, their father Julius Fields was the kindest man they knew. He was a gentle and friendly person.

"Hello! hello!" He would wave a big hand in greeting to many homes as he walked by.

He always had a word of greeting and encouragement for everyone. He had a warm smile, and a personality that saluted every man as a friend. Julius was big, dark and robust. His handshake was strong and genuine. He seemed to know everything about gardening, animal farming and building things. He was happiest when handling a big fork, a rope, or a hammer.

Julius was a country boy from Wallenville in the south of the island. His father was a well-known landowner in that district. He owned hundreds of acres of land there, and elsewhere. He was a cocoa proprietor with many acres of sugar cane as well. The Fields were well-known reputable people whose sons were also involved on the property. Of all the sons, it was Julius the youngest, who was his father's most faithful assistant.

"Julius is the son of my right hand," the old man often said.

This son's obedience and devotion to his father was great. Julius was committed totally to the land, and loved the tough physical demands of his daily activity. The family farmed fields of plantain, bananas, corn, peas, ground provisions, citrus and much more. They reared cattle, pigs, and poultry. Food was plentiful in the Fields' home. They lived the country-life with zest and ease. Sunday was their day of rest, and they worshipped at the little Baptist church in their district.

At last it was time for Julius to find himself a wife. It was "popa" who pointed this out to his twenty-seven year old son.

"It is high time you get yourself a companion, son..."

"Yes popa, I know, but who?" came the reply.

"Go to Rivervale," the old man's voice was full of concern.

"Pastor Payne talk highly about the Maxwells...Job Maxwell is an upright man with good daughters...maybe you should visit their home ..."

Julius didn't need to be told more.

Rivervale lay about fifty miles to the west of Wallenville. It was a long way off. Transportation was via bullock-cart and train. Julius got his best friend Edmund to accompany him on this trip. He hired a bullock-cart to take them to the station at Liberville. Then, one morning very early, they set

out on their journey. After three hours of steady rolling and rocking in the sturdy box-cart, they arrived at the train depot. They paid the driver, alighted, and proceeded to await the train, which would take them to Rivervale. The journey would take several hours. Julius and Edmund sat at the depot for forty five minutes, before the next train appeared. They boarded, purchased their tickets and took their seats. Throughout this leg of the trip, Julius was very pensive. Was he really doing the right thing? Would the Maxwells be pleased about his mission? Would he really want one of the daughters for his wife? He trusted his father's judgement and that gave him confidence.

Finding the Maxwell home was not difficult, for they were well known in that district. Mr Maxwell received them courteously. He was a handsome man, middle-aged and bald, with a humorous spark in his eye. His wife had passed away years before, and he had the ominous task of raising his three daughters himself. Though comfortably seated in the Maxwell home, Julius was tongue-tied. He fidgeted with his big hands, his palms were moist, and his mouth felt dry. He looked down, and saw a reflection of himself on his well-polished shoes. Julius was not handsome. He was well-built and strong, with a quiet look of good breeding. He was neatly dressed for the occasion. Job Maxwell eyed them curiously, and enquired about their mission.

"I am Julius Fields from Wallenville. I am seeking a good girl to make my wife. I was sent to your home, for your daughters were highly spoken of by everyone. I would like to court one of your daughters with a view to marrying her, if you will permit me Sir."

"Umm hmmm..." was the older man's response.

"Who is your father?" he continued pensively.

"Jacob Fields."

"Oh, you mean Fields, the estate owner?"

"Yes Sir."

Job Maxwell was certainly impressed. The Fields were well-known estate owners, wealthy and respectable. Job Maxwell himself was a tailor by trade, and hoped to marry again one day. It would be a good thing to have his daughters married and secure before he did so.

"Well young man, my daughters are out for the day. Perhaps you could visit us again soon. Then we would know how they think in this matter."

This was settled. The young man departed for home with a ray of hope within his breast.

On Julius's next visit to the Maxwells' everyone was at home. The girls: Priscilla eighteen, Elvira sixteen, and Evita fourteen, were all informed about the nature of the stranger's visit. Their brother Reuben, the eldest of twenty one years, hovered in the background. Priscilla already had a suitor, and was therefore unavailable. Elvira, perhaps the beauty of the lot, was already being courted by a young man, and so, she too was out of the question. On this second visit, Julius fell into conversation with her. He was unaccustomed to these matters, and so, felt his way rather shakily.

"So, er...Miss Maxwell, er...if you are already spoken for ...what about your younger sister?"

Just as this question was being asked, the youngest sister, Evita was passing by a window of the room where the three men were seated. At fourteen she was lovely both in face and figure. Her dark thick hair was plaited and tied back with a tiny coloured ribbon. She was of medium height, strong and supple in build. Her honey-coloured skin glowed with youth and health.

Evita overheard Julius's question, and was quite taken aback. Hastily, she concocted a sewing errand, and ran off to her cousin's house a few streets away. She needed to hide herself, for she felt shy of this new situation. While at her cousins' place, she realized that the news of Julius's mission was already making the rounds. Her cousin Koonce, pounced on the subject eagerly,

"So ah wonder which o' the Maxwell girls it is that Mr Julius going after...mus be you Vita..." she finished with a mischievous wink.

"Who me? oh no," was Evita's lame reply, knowing that it could very well be so.

Koonce had long stopped hoping for marriage, even though her mother still made plans to get her a good match. When she first saw the stranger Julius, she immediately began making plans for her own daughter. After all, the Maxwell girls were still very young, and her Koonce was fast becoming an old maid. But what could she do?

Evita at her cousin's house later overheard her grandmother and a friend chatting:

"I see Mr. Maxwell and Mr. Julius in a deep talk at the top of the hill."

"He looking at pretty face..."

Could that be a reference to herself? she wondered.

Evita returned home when she felt sure that Julius had left. Her father got right to the point.

"Vita, how would you feel about marrying Julius Fields?"

Evita, though barely out of her childhood, was somehow prepared for such a query. She studied her toes for a while.

"Well Father," she eventually replied, "whatever you say. If you say no, I say no; if you say yes, I say yes; whatever you say..."

Job Maxwell was pleased. The Fields were good people. He would allow the couple a courtship period of one year. Then, when Evita was fifteen, they would marry.

It was now courtship time at the Maxwells. Julius visited his young fiancé, once every fortnight. As usual on a Saturday morning, he was driven from his home to the train station on a

bullcart. He arrived in Rivervale on the last train which entered the station at seven pm. On arrival at the Maxwell home, he was treated to a hot meal which was prepared by the girls. After eating, he would sit with Evita in the living room. He engaged the shy girl in some conversation about herself, or about life at his home on the plantation. The blushing girl tried her best to relax with this man who would share the rest of her life. As he talked, she looked at his hands. How rough and coarse they seemed! And he was not even handsome!... not like Baptiste. Now he was a good looking boy who liked her. He wanted to marry her one day too, but he was young and had no money...

Whenever Julius visited, he would spend the night accommodated in Reuben's room. The next day, Sunday was spent at Church then lunch at the Maxwells. Later in the afternoon, the courting pair often joined a group of friends for a stroll down Tabajal Road. Singing, laughing and telling jokes, this jolly bunch would have a merry time in the gentle evening sunshine. Sometimes, they would persuade Julius to entertain them with a dance, for he had claimed to be good at it.

"Come on Julius...come on, show us what you can do...please..." they chorused.

As this was the Tabajal Road, screened on either side by cocoa trees, they were quite private. Julius entertained the group by capering around comically and moving to the strains of some imaginary tune. Clapping their hands gleefully, they egged him on, while Evita looked on shyly, yet approvingly. Julius was very popular with that group.

During the courtship period, Julius presented Evita with a pretty engagement ring with a tiny stone at the top.

"But Julius, this is too big for me...it will fall off and get lost...", Evita protested lamely.

"Don't worry, if you lose it, I'll get you another one", came Julius's gallant reply.

Indeed the ring was too big for her tiny finger. As predicted, one day it did get lost under a plum tree. Julius promptly replaced it with one of more suitable size.

As the months went by, preparations were afoot for the grand occasion. Invitations were sent out, and a menu was planned. Uncle Ralph and Aunt Maude provided the bride with both dress and cake. There were three bridesmaids, with Elvira being the chief one. The wedding ceremony would take place at church, and the reception at the bride's home.

On the night before the wedding, Evita could not hold back the tears. She cried and cried, feeling bewildered at heart. Reuben, her brother hugged her close and sang to her:

"Come sit by my side little darling,
Come hold your cold hand on my breast,
Promise me that you will never,
Be nobody's darling but mine"

This brought on more tears, and Reuben gently put his weeping sister to bed. Eventually the tears subsided, and Evita stared up at the ceiling of her room, hugging the

warm blanket to her breast. She felt small and afraid. She thought of her mother. It was now four years since she had passed away. Evita trembled. If only Mother was alive, she would know what to do. She had been sick for many months before she died. Evita was never sure what her ailment was, but she remembered her being weak and bedridden. Her flesh had wasted away, and her once plump face was dark and thin with large sunken eyes. Only a week before she died, she had expressed a great longing for ice, and she had sent Evita out to fetch it.

"Vita child, go to Harry shop and buy me some ice...hurry child..."

To the consternation of the poor girl, her mother seemed much worse after taking a few chilly draughts. She developed a terrible cold, and passed away within a few days. Evita was heart-broken. Was she the cause of her mother's sudden passing?

"It was not your fault Vita..." her father consoled.

But Evita could not be comforted. She often experienced guilt pangs at the memory of her dear mother.

Her wet sleepy eyes drifted around the small room, and rested upon the light curtain, bathed in the pale shades of moonlight. The ivory glow of the moon created a silvery, peaceful beauty, and a fragrant calm that lulled her tenderly to sleep.

The next day, Julius and Evita were wed. Uncle Ralph was supposed to be her Father giver, but his car broke down. So he was unable to fulfill his duties. William, Julius's elder brother substituted for him. It was a grand wedding. In those days of buldcarts and bicycles, there were thirteen cars in attendance. As the vehicles moved slowly from the church along the streets of Rivervale, villagers waved and smiled. Street vendors who got close enough to the bridal car, were full of praise:

"Well done chile... yuh mother dead, and all yuh girls keep yuhselfes good... well done, God bless yuh chile," they waved and smiled.

Evita and Julius made their home at the main homestead of the Fields' estate at Wallenville. Evita, the pretty child-bride was the subject of conversation at many dinner tables for miles around.