

## THE VISIT

*By Valerie Crichlow*

Julius Fields was a natural story-teller. On many evenings when the day's work was over, Jem and Jerri would pass many pleasurable hours just listening to their father's stories. He told many tales about his boyhood experiences. He would also tell stories about Brer Anancy, Brer Lion and Brer Tucuma. The look in his eye, the nuances in his voice, the movement of his hands, all blended to lend him the aura of a sage. Jerri loved stories. Whenever someone visited her home, she would patiently await her chance to ask shyly,

"Please tell me a story."

Very often, Jerri suspected that Father was embellishing his stories, just for the benefit of his young audience. She loved them anyway. Her main hobby was reading. Many times, she could be found curled up in a corner, enjoying some adventure or mystery story. On Tuesday evenings, she would sit close to the radio, and enjoy Auntie May's six-thirty "Storytime." Stories caused her to day-dream about people and places far away. She would soar above the clouds, light and free; she would look in at life in distant lands; she would mingle with new people and become involved in their affairs, weeping or laughing as the case may be. She would touch and smell dew and flowers and enjoy the laughter and song of happy voices. One night, Father told a strange, yet true story, that filled her and her brother Jem with awe for a long time.

Julius Fields was a security guard with a well-known publishing company in the capital city. He had to assume his duties each day at six am. On this particular morning, he left his home in Longentown as usual, long before dawn, and taxied to the Chacaban roundabout. Here, he would await further transportation to take him to the city.

"It was around five o'clock that morning, and still dark," Father began his tale. Jem and Jerri sat attentively at his feet.

Father continued, "As I stood there, waiting for transport, I noticed a man sitting on the curb nearby. Though it was still a bit dark, I could see that his clothes were torn up with blood all over them. He looked tired and sort of in a daze. I just stood there staring at him awhile." Father paused...

"Morning...morning," he offered a greeting to the stranger in his usual friendly way.

The man barely grunted in reply. Vehicles continually roared by along the highway nearby.

"Busy morning," Father tried at light conversation.

The man sat with shoulders hunched forward. Just when Father thought that conversation was over, the stranger asked him where he had come from. Father then learned that the man had come from Longentown also, and had reached that spot hours before. Suddenly, the stranger blurted out,

"Ah had a experience last night, dat would scare a big man out o' he boots."

On hearing this, Jem and Jerri drew closer to Father's knees. What experience could this be?

"I moved closer to the man," Father continued. "He was pale, and maybe about forty...he looked really very tired."

"A friend o' mine who own a business place invite me home to have a couple drinks wid him," the man continued.

The stranger was from the South, and on the previous afternoon, had journeyed to Longentown to his friend's home. The friend lived upstairs of his liquor shop. Both men sat around a small table, talking, arguing, laughing and drinking the hours away. They had not seen each other in years, and so, they had much to catch up on. Apparently, the host's family was away somewhere, for no one else was around. Father noticed that the stranger grew restless as he continued his tale. Father himself grew more excited as he recalled it. Jem and Jerri hung on to his every word.

In the midst of all the carousing of these two friends, a large clock on a nearby wall struck twelve o'clock midnight. The visitor was just about to rise to leave. Somehow, he had not noticed the rapid passing of time. Before he could leave his seat, something happened to his friend the host who sat opposite him. Father's eyes bulged as he spoke. Jem's mouth was open, and Jerri's heart thumped against her chest.

"At the stroke of midnight, de man suddenly turn beast right dere before meh eyes... right in front o' meh," the stranger almost shouted at his listener.

"A b...b...beast?" stammered Jem.

"Yes a beast," said Father. "The shopkeeper turned into a beast right before his friend's eyes... a beast big and ugly, with horns and a tail...he glared at the visitor."

"So, so, what happened to him...the visitor?" Jerri asked, in a small voice.

The visitor was terrified, and remained fixed in his seat. Then, overcome with the horror of it all, he took to his heels. He was sure that he was seeing the devil from hell. He raced across the room, falling over furniture as he went. He tumbled headlong down the stairs and out the door. Forgetting the way to the gate, he attempted to scale the wall that enclosed the building. To his further dismay, the top of the wall was lined with sharp pieces of broken bottles, that glinted threateningly in the dark.

"Oh God help meh...help meh!" he wailed despairingly.

There was no turning back now. He had to scale the wall. As he did so, the bottles tore at his arms, legs and clothes. His blood trickled slowly down in the gloomy night. Panic-stricken, he tumbled into a clump of bushes on the other side. Fortunately, it was a vacant lot of grassy land. Lying on his back in the dark, he grimaced in pain. He was unsure about the direction from which he had come. There was no time for thought. He scrambled up, and set off at top speed down the dark road, hoping that he had chosen the right way.

His whole body ached. He ran as he had never run before. Questions about his friend kept milling about in his mind. One side of his shoes was lost and his bare foot was cut and burning. He was glad to be on the right road. He never stopped running until he reached the Chacaban roundabout. On reaching there, he sank down onto the grass at the roadside. Totally exhausted, he lay there on his back, panting, and aching, yet relieved and feeling secure.

"And that is exactly where I found him hours later," Father ended his narration.

Jem and Jerri remained staring at their father in amazement. For a while, no one spoke. Father had given such a graphic account, of these weird happenings, that the children were temporarily speechless.

"But Father, how a man could turn into a beast?" Jerri finally found her tongue.

"I don't know Jerri, but the man told me he saw that. I saw his torn bloody clothes, and his wounds. He had no reason to tell me lies," Father replied.

"Maybe the shopkeeper was in league with the devil," Jem suggested.

"That's what the stranger thought too. He felt that maybe his friend had made deals with the devil, in return for promises of wealth and prosperity. I heard that some people do that."

In her bed that night, Jerri pondered the story over and over again. Needless to say, she was afraid of the shadows that lingered in the dark. Next morning, she thanked God that her sleep was completely without dreams.