

THE DAY THE SUN WAS HIDDEN - 010

I remember well, said Father Brody, despite the fact that the incident occurred nearly fifty years ago.

The morning had broken fair and sunny, with a refreshing breeze stirring the tree-tops above the village that lay huddled around the little church of St. Alban's. It was, indeed, such a day to delight our hearts, for it was upon that day we had fixed to consecrate eight souls with the holy rite of baptism, and, as is the custom among many of our county congregations, the sacred rite was to have been followed by feasting and picknicking and hymn-singing on the sea-shore.

As I picked my way that morning through the wild sea-grape vines and went down the shore to the spot where the band of worshippers had gathered, the sea, which had lashed the shore the night before with a forbidding din, was now as quiet as a sheltered font. At sight of me the people broke into beautiful singing, and with my heart full of joy and holy zeal I led them into the water and began to perform the sacred rite.

As I worked I noticed that something I knew not what, seemed suddenly to have gone wrong with the morning as the last of the eight souls came up from the water my observation was confirmed, for the sun, which was approaching its zenith, started gradually, but unmistakably to lose its light. An ominous, greyish-black cloud that knew no boundary encroached upon the erstwhile blue sky, until in a few minutes the sun, and light, and the whole azure vault were gone,

and the green countryside which but a few short minutes before had revelled in the morning sun, now knew the thick canopy of night. The birds, shocked into silence by the day's short span, tucked heads or sought their younglings' nests. Above, one felt rather than saw the blanketing cloud settle nearer, bent, one felt, on the obliteration of all light and life; and over the whole wondering land lay darkness, and quiet, and the fear of God.

An hour or two later the volcanic dust (for such it was from a volcanic eruption in one of the neighbouring islands) was falling fast. The sun appeared no more that day, and when it did on the following morning its light, on account of the thick pall of dust that hung in the atmosphere, was weak and tarnished, like the light that filters through stained glass. The roads and paths were covered ankle-deep with the fallen dust, and in some places even deeper, and many green fields of young canes and corn perished beneath the heavy fall. Everywhere could be seen people scraping and sweeping the dust from their house-tops, for it was rumoured that the dust would destroy new shingles in a fortnight.

That black day was, continued Father Brody, for my parishioners who had their hearts set on picnicking, an unfortunate occurrence. But I will tell you of one, at least, for whom the phenomenon of that day was a blessing.

Five minutes' walk from the church of St. Alban's, in the middle of the

acres which its former owners once ruled, stands the old plantation house called Newcastle, a relic of slavish days, with its stuck mill and abandoned, dilapidated slave quarters.

The estate changed hands often in those unsettled, changeful days. At the time of which I speak it was owned by a Mr. de Santos, a native, I gathered, from some South American state who, when I first met him, could hardly speak a word of English, and who had brought with him a craze for breeding choice cattle. He was a squat, fierce man, callous and vengeful of nature, with a profusion of red hair covering his red skin, and a waxed moustache curling like the horns of some of his pet steers about his thin mouth.

Among the servants at the Great House, as it was often called by the people of the parish, was an old menial called Jonathan, a freed slave who, through his intelligence, honesty and trustworthiness, had repeatedly won the favour and recommendation of the former owners of the estate, so that he passed from master to master like a chattel, on each occasion the estate changed hands. He was of fine stock, tall and broad-shouldered and upstanding, even though he had long passed his prime. Late in life, by great application and under my tutelage, he learned to read and mastered the rudiments of grammar. He became a devout Christian and a good speaker, and had for a constant companion a small, morocco-bound New Testament which I had once

given him. He was a natural singer a true tenor, such as I have never before nor since heard, and I always thrilled to hear his voice leading the worshippers like a silver bell.

Now it was Jonathan's duty, under the mastership of this de Santos, to take care of his prize animals, and I used to see him, day after day, leading the fine cattle to pasture.

And then, one day, as I was supervising some slight repairs which a number of masons were doing to the church, a woman, her garments and grey hair flying in the wind, came running and laid hold of me, and pulling me toward the road, begged me with panting, desperate breath to run to the Great House immediately if I would save the life of her brother.

I gently loosed her hold upon me and, bidding her go into the church and rest, for she was on the point of dropping from emotion and spent breath, I hurried away to the Great House as fast as my legs could carry me.

As I strode through the gate into the mill yard a cruel sight met my eyes. Manacled to a staple in the old mill wall with chains that had been used in the same way for the chastisement of slaves was Jonathan, his bloodied shirt torn to shreds by the horse whip de Santos was savagely plying.

I pushed my way through the crowd of servants and villagers that were looking on, and arresting the tyrant's arm, enquired in the name

of God and our good Queen what such barbarity meant. The cruel man blasphemed terribly at my intervention and turned on me like a rage-maddened bull.

But I am a big man, continued Father Brody with a slight smile of modesty turning up the corners of his mouth, and in those days my muscles were still responsive from the hard work done in preparation for my university boxing finals. It did not take me long to impress even upon the wildly furious man that he was no physical match for me, and finally he kept his distance like a snarling, baffled hound. I turned to Jonathan to find out what it was all about, but Jonathan, I found, had fainted, and so I received the information from his sister who by this time had rejoined the lookers -on.

It appears that earlier in the day, while Jonathan was pasturing his master's prized animals on one of the slopes that border the eastern side of the village, he was taken with thirst, and left the herd, which had settled to feeding as soon as it reached the grasslands, and had gone a hundred yards or so to the far side of the slope to the spot where a small spring lies cradled in a hollow. While quenching his thirst he heard the wild calling of a heifer whose young calf had been let out for the first time Jonathan broke off drinking and went running back to the herd, but when he reached it, search as he would, nowhere could he find the calf, which was highly prized by his master. On driving the herd back home and relating, with his head hung and tears in his eyes, the story of his loss, his master, believing that he had made away with

the animal for his own ends, went mad with rage and hate and after beating the man down with his bare hands, ordered the other servants to chain him up in the manner I had found him.

I tried my best to console and placate the cruel man, but it was to no avail. Jonathan was handed over to the law, charged and arraigned for the theft of his master's goods, and sentenced to a long term of imprisonment.

On the day the sun's light was hid Jonathan had served some six months of his sentence. I visited him in his confinement whenever an opportunity was granted me by the governor of the prison, who was, and still is, a staunch friend of mine. Jonathan's misfortune had greatly affected his spirits, and he seemed to have aged ten years in the short while. It was not so much his confinement that mattered, he told me, but the shame and dishonor with which his fellows looked upon him, and which would go (for he had not long to live, he told me) with him to his grave. Jonathan was a freed slave, but he held honour high as any storied knight.

And now, continued Father Brody, Let me tell you about the strange way in which this honest old fellow won his freedom.

Much of the dust from the volcano had settled on the church's roof, and it became a bother in every way. It worried our nostrils, it infiltrated everywhere. Finally I decided to have the roof cleared once and for all, for I remember a particularly long dry spell followed the fall of the volcanic dust, and we had no rain to assist in washing away the nuisance.

On the day the work of cleaning the roof was being carried out, one of the men employed shouted down to me that if I would venture to climb the ladder and scale the shingled roof carefully I might be able to explain a strange find which they had made, and which, they believed, might have had something to do with the imprisonment of poor old Johnnie, as they called him.

I immediately did as was suggested, for in those days I was quite young and agile. There, in the channel where two roofs met, the workmen showed me what I at once recognized to be the weather-bleached skeleton of a young calf. I stood mystified and wondering for a long moment, and then, like a flash of light, memory and the truth flashed upon me.

A mile's walk from the church of St. Alban's where the infirmary now stands, stood, at that time, the home of a Dr. Thellusson. He, like myself, was a Scotsman, but had emigrated to and made his fortune in Africa. On his retirement he came to Barbados, bringing with him, as the saying goes, a regular zoo. Lining the entrance and grounds of his home were cages and animals of all kinds: tigers, monkeys, leopards, chimpanzees, snakes, orang-outangs, bears—ferocious and outlandish creatures of all sorts; but most surprising among them all, a caged, full-sized eagle.

About a week before the loss of de Santos' calf Dr. Thellusson had sent one of his servants to me saying that if my duties took me in his

vicinity within the next day or two I might drop in for a cup of tea. My duties did take me around Dr. Thellusson that very day, and while I was there he mentioned casually that while being tended his eagle had slipped its cage. He did not suppose there was any real danger, he said, but if I cared I could warn the people of the parish to keep a close eye upon their young children until when and if the eagle was recaptured or was definitely known to have flown the district.

I did as he advised me, from the pulpit and in my daily ministry. As is the case with villagers, the scare was rife for a few days, and parents kept their young ones close while it lasted, but no sign of the eagle having been reported, it was soon forgotten.

Bending down to examine the skeleton closer, I saw the indents which the eagle's cruel beak had made upon the creature's bones. The eagle, thank God, had taken no villager's child, but had carried off Jonathan's beastly ward.

It cost me some expense and trouble, finished Father Brody, to reopen the case of poor Jonathan (who, by the way, did die soon after), but I was fully repaid by the look that shone from the honest fellow's face the day the judge pronounced him a free and guiltless citizen.