

Young Heroes



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**Fictional accounts of the National Heroes of
Jamaica as children and young people written by
Gwyneth Harold.**

Illustrations by Taj Francis

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**William Clarke
(Alexander Bustamante)**

Strengthen us, the weak to cherish



The rain was coming down harder now, and William pressed Señor into a canter. He still hoped that the ford between him and Lucea was still passable despite the rain, but the small crowd ahead told him that it might already be too late.

The ford was small, but notoriously prone to flash flood, and at the moment the water would be knee high for his horse. William made his decision and urged Señor through the cool stream, feeling the willing animal lose his footing more than once on the gravel that was also in motion beneath the water. They claimed the other side, and without pausing, William touched his heels into the horse's sides and they continued their brisk journey to the parish capital, leaving walkers sheltering under banana leaves, waiting on the water to subside.

Reaching his work, where he clerked for a dry goods store on the wharf, there was a small group of people at the counter, and the proprietor alone behind it.

"Good, you reach, cause nobody else don't turn up as yet," the owner said, which meant that William had to do bookkeeping, and also serve the customers that morning.

The owner promptly walked out, to conduct his business down on the wharf.

William had wanted to use the first few minutes to unpack his sack of soaked clothes and hang them up on the rafters, but instead went to the flour stores to fill the first order.

He was excited that today he would be going aboard a steam ship to Central America and satisfy his yearning to live in fabulous places and use his wit, intelligence and strength to create an exciting life for himself.

He settled Señor in the stable near to the store, taking time to give him a thorough rub down with a blanket, put some grass in the stall. William already had lined up a buyer for Señor who expected the horse to be delivered in the afternoon; but before all of that, saltfish and grain had to be weighed and sold. It was a busy day because every time William went into the storeroom, the bell on the front door would ring as someone else demanded attention.

By lunch time, the weather had deteriorated and the shoppers stopped coming in. William shut the door to keep out any rain that might blow in. If a customer came, they would ring the bell. He hung his clothes on the rafters to dry, stretched out on some sacks and promptly fell asleep to the loud splash of water exiting the guttering and hitting the concrete piazza.

A small sound just outside the wooden store wall woke him up. William opened his eyes in the dark storeroom and listened again. The rain had held up, and he could clearly here a child complaining, and then the sound of a bottle breaking.

William went around to the front, opened the door and looked around the corner. Under the eave of the building, a man was trying to take away a cloth bag from a small girl who was resisting him. The unmistakable thick drip of honey was seeping through the bag.

“Hey, leave the girl alone!” William demanded. The man quickly looked William up and down, and ran off behind the building where the backyard gave way to bush. He was not in the mood to fight a strong man who was more than six feet tall.

“Come here little girl. What you doing out here. Why you never ring the”

The child was about ten years old, but short, and she was looking into the bag, vexed.

“I come to see if you want to buy some of my honey,” she said. “I had five bottles, but one break, so is only four now.”

Feeling slightly guilty for shutting the front door, William led her into the shop where she allowed him to take the sack and clean off the remaining bottles.

“I see when you and the horse swim cross the river this morning.”

“You were out there?”

“If I never jump, the mud would splash me. I had to turn back and come over the hill to get here.

William looked at the child again, in this weather, the detour would have added a few hours to her journey.

“So why you had to come today?”

“My father sick sir, and my mother send me to sell this and buy some medicine to give him.”

William decided to buy all the honey from the girl for the shop and also footed the bill for the broken bottle himself.

“In this rain, you not going to reach home tonight.”

“I know the way very well, sir, and I don’t believe in no duppy.”

William thought, however, of the man who tried to rob her, and he decided to take her home.

His boss would be upset at the store left closed, but he was going away tomorrow anyway. He left a note to say that there was an urgent matter and he had to leave.

William went out and bought the medicine, then saddled Señor and put the girl on front and set off. The sun mid afternoon was now out causing every water droplet it touched to sparkle like a crystal. It would probably rain again in a few hours, so it made sense to act with haste.

He knew that going through the ford was now impossible, so allowed Señor to gently and carefully walk along the narrow hillside pass. After a while, this passage became too treacherous for a horse, so he tied him to a tree in a safe place, and they continued on foot.

Her home was, as he expected. A small, unpainted wooden house set into a stony hillside. Two dogs rushed out at them barking aggressively, and a few chickens were scratching at the roots of the plants around the house. A baby was playing on the front step with a toddler.

The girl went immediately inside the house, and William waited outside, carefully watching the guard dogs, wondering if he should leave. Then a young woman came out.

“Thank you for taking Maybell home, Sir. I was worried about her and the river.”

“She is a brave little girl. How is your husband?”

“Bad sir, but the medicine will give him some rest. We give thanks.”

William placed the money for the honey in her hand. It was used to hard work. If her husband was so bad that she had to send her small daughter across many miles in bad weather, who knew if he would get better soon. How far could money for a few bottles of honey support the family?

The woman thanked him very carefully, and William knew at that moment that no matter how far he travelled and who he would encounter, he would not meet more human dignity in adversity than this family. Jamaican people must be among the best in the world.

On impulse, William told her that she should go into the town the next day and ask the livestock trader for a donkey that Mr Clarke had left for her. He then took leave of the family and returned to Lucea.

When he finally parted with Señor that evening, William went to the donkey trader, paid him for the healthiest female on the lot, and told him the name of the woman who would collect her.

He thought of the determination of the little girl called Maybelle who could not get his attention because she could not reach the bell.

“Do something for me tomorrow man,” he told the seller. “Tell the woman that this animal will be a very reliable help for her and her family, and that she must name her Belle.”