

[Mattie Jamison]

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I USED TO BE A BAD NIGGER Original Names Changed Names

Mattie Odessa

Mrs. L. S. Croxton Mrs. C. J. Turner

Elk's Club Manufacturers' Club

Bishop Grace Bishop Judah [???

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I USED TO BE A BAD NIGGER

Odessa's house in the alley was one of the type known locally as "shotgun houses" because they are said to be a stack of boards held together with nails shot [hap-hazard?] from a gun, but the rooms were clean and neat. She pulled up a chair and said, "Set right down here, lady, and rest yo' hat." The rocker was comfortable but she put me to close to

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the laundry heater and I had to move. The room was stifling with the odors of sweat and ironing. Odessa went back to work, glad to talk.

"I been livin' right here in dis same house nigh onto sixteen years, workin' out cookin' and den takin' in washin'. I don't make much because I's gittin' old and de younger niggers kin git about a heap mo' better'n I kin and dey gits de work.

"I ain't now, but I use-ta be a bad nigger. I use-ta work for Miz C. J. Turner and some time when I'd go to work I'd be so drunk I couldn't do nothin' but go to sleep. Miz Turner was good to me and never said nothin'. She'd gimme sump'n to eat and tall me I ought to ack better'n dat.

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"But I got so bad she had to let me go. I went down to do Manufacturers' Club to cook, and de reason wasn't nothin' but bein' able to git all de liquor I wanted. Dey liked my cookin' and didn't care what I done long as I cooked good. Dey like to worked me to death. Could git liquor there and could git it at home, dis alley bein' right behind de po-lice station.

"One day whilst I was workin' at de Club one dem nigger men said, 'Odessa, you wanta go hear Bishop Judah? I'll wash dese dishes if you does.' Well, I had cu'ros'ty 'bout de Bishop and wanted somebody else do dem dishes anyhow, so out I goed.

"I got down to do tent and peoples was lined up in front do stage to be prayed fur, colored and white. Bishop had a big yella woman up waiting on him and he tole her to git dat little bottle outen his suitcase. Two gals a-settin' on de bench whisperin'. One says, 'What dat he got in dat bottle?' Other says, 'Sump'n to fool de peoples wid.' Bishop heard 'em and he says, 'No, tain't. It's olive ile de same dey use-ta 'noint de Savior wid. And you better be careful or somebody'll hafta tote you outa dis tent.' No sooner he said dat den kerflop! Dey bofe fell over and had to be toted outen de tent.

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“He put some dat ile on his hands and rub it on us 3 face. Us all fall over like de lightnin' had struck us. I was piled up in people waist high. Colored and white, all out flat.”

Odessa pointed to a picture of the Bishop in ceremonial clothes.

“You see dat picture? I don't never hafta go to no doctor when I'd sick. I goes and stands in front o' de picture and tells Daddy all about it and he heals me. Other day I was washin' under dem trees and I tuck sick in my stummick. I tried to git froo 'fore I come in de house but de mo' I waited de wuss it got. I come in de house and stand in front o' dat picture o' Daddy Judah and said, 'O God o' Heb'n, God o' de yearth, heal me froo grace so I kin git dis washin' done.’

“I sent on froo de house and I didn't feel no better. I got outen de house and laid down on de ground and talked to de Lawd Hisse'f, and I was healed. Dese here is de same clothes I was washin' dat day.

“I don't git much for dis work. All comes up to 'bout fo' dollars a week. Desa 'nough to take care me and my ole man. He's sick all time. I declare, a po' nigger has one hard time. But I got my religion and dat's worf de whole worl'.

“Peoples tells stories on Daddy Judah. Says he takes 4 all de niggers' money, but dat ain't so. Ev'y penny he gits goes into dat buildin' and de expenses. Got to have lights and coal and a heap o' things. Sometime a man gits up and says, 'Chillun, us got to have Daddy's car fixed. He got to ride and spread de Gospil.' Den we collects de money to git de car fixed so Daddy kin travel. 'Cause he's got to go!

“One day we was shoutin' and I says, 'Daddys how come you don't shout?' He says, 'Chile, I can't shout. When I shouts I goes right on up to heb'n.' One day us had a picnic for him and tole him to come on and le's eat. He says, 'Y'all go on and eat mine. I got to

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go to heb'n a little while.' He goes up to heb'n ev'y oncet in a while. Look at his feets in dat picture. Dey ain't like men's feets. You kin look at 'em and see dey's angel feets."

The Bishop's feet were in sandals.

"One day dey had Daddy in court. One dem other preachers had him up 'cause he said Daddy had done took all his people. De jedge set there and look at Daddy and he look at de preacher, and he ast de man how come he had Daddy 'rested. De man say, 'He done bruck up my church. He done tuck all my members.'

"Jedge says, 'Did Judah go down to yo' church and walk 5 out wid all de members?' Man says, 'Naw.' So jedge says, 'Well, if yo' members dess up and lef' yo' church and went to his'n, it shows he's a better preacher'n you is, so don't you bring him up here agin. If you does I'll clap you in jail!'

"I got to git Daddy to pray for my teef. I got to git 'em worked on and ain't got no money. My fo' dollars a week pays de rent and gits us sump'n to eat but dat is sure all. It looks like it could be some other way to git money but just by work, because work don't begin to bring in much as you needs.

"But I trusts in de Lawd. I's 'umble. People is got to be 'umble to de Lawd whatever else dey is. De yearth is 'umble. You digs a ditch and it stays dug, 'cause de yearth is 'umble. De yearth is 'umble 'cause de Lawd's little body was laid in it when he died fur us. De yearth smells sweet 'cause He had p'fume on Him when He was buried in it. Take a axe and go and chop down a tree and it won't do nothin' but lay still and rot—'cause it's 'umble. 'Umbly 'cause he made it wid His little hands.

"Jonah won't 'umble and look what happen. God says, 'Jonah,' and Jonah says, 'Here I is, Lawd.' 'You go to de city o' Nineveh and preach!' 'Yes, lawd.' He knowed all time he won't goin'. He knowed he was goin' to git on dat 6 boat quick as it lef' town. He knowed it was a mean town and he was 'fred he'd git mean too.

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“Well, he got on de boat and he went down to de injin room and he laid down by de fire”—Odessa lay down on the floor by the laundry heater. “De mens on de boat seed de wbale a-follerin' and dey telled de Cap'n. He says to frow off some plank. But dat didn't do no good and de whale kep' right on behine 'em. So de Cap'n says, 'Dey's sump'n else. Go see what it is.'”

“Dey comes down to de b'iler room and finds Jonah and frows him off de boat. De whale swallers him and heads right back where Jonah lef' from and spews him up. Jonah was real sick and laid down right out in de hot sum.

“De Lawd looks at him and says, 'Come 'ere, angel. Go down yonder and plant dis gourd seed so Jonah'll have some shade on him whilst he's sick.'”

“Well, de vine sprung up so quick and so tall Jonah stan' up in de shade. It was real nice and cool and when he got well he wouldn't budge outen dat shade.

“Lawd looks at him and den looks around. 'Come 'ere, inchworm,' He says. You know what a inchworm is—you've seed 'em on collards many's de time. 'Go down yonder and cut dat shade offa Jonah.' So de inchworm cut de stem o' de gourd vine and it died. Den de Lawd stood by Jonah and 7 says, 'Jonah, Jonah, ain't you gonna preach?' Jonah said, 'Well, I doe know what to say.' So de Lawd says, 'Go on anyhow. I'll speak fur you.'”

“De people thought it was Jonah preachin' and all time it was de Lawd. Dat shows if you don't be 'umble first, you will sure be 'umble last.

“Now I gwine tell you what de Lawd has done and showed me 'bout de sun. You gits up in de mornin' and you see de sun a-shinin'. Dat's Jesus' face shinin' down on you. De sun is Jesus, de moon is Mary, His Mother. One dese mornin's de sun is goin' to rise and it's goin' to slide right 'crost de sky and turn 'round and come right back to de east. Den de

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lawd will come down from heb'n in his golden frone and de angels will play 'em harps in de air. I am goin' to put on my whigs and shout wid 'em. Glory to God!

“Le's have a cup o' coffee. It'll make us feel mo' better.”

The coffee was good and we drank it without talking. Odessa was considering something.

“Miss,” she said at last. “You seem nice, but—is you saved the way I is?”

I admitted that my religion is not like hers. She was concerned.

You better had git on de Glory Train,” she warned. I never lets a unsaved person leave my house till I prays 8 fur 'em. Bow down.

'Oh Lawd, he' me to git froo dis prayer. I comes befo' You wid a heavy heart. Dis white lady ain't saved. Strike he down with Yo' power!” She hit her thigh with all her strength to show how He must strike.

“Make her shed tears from her heart! M-m-m-m Hm-m-m-m! She is a nice lady but You know how it is. We wants to ride in de Chariot but if we can't ride in de Chariot, try us out wid a pair o' wings! Glory to God! Take her in de palm o' yo' hand and save and guide her. We ask in Judah froo Jesus name. Amen.

“Now I got to git back to my arnin' 'cause I's gonna need all de money I kin git tomorra. Rent's due. Ain't you got none you kin give me a little? I done he'ped you so you oughta he'p me.

“Thank you, honey. And don't you forgit to pray.”