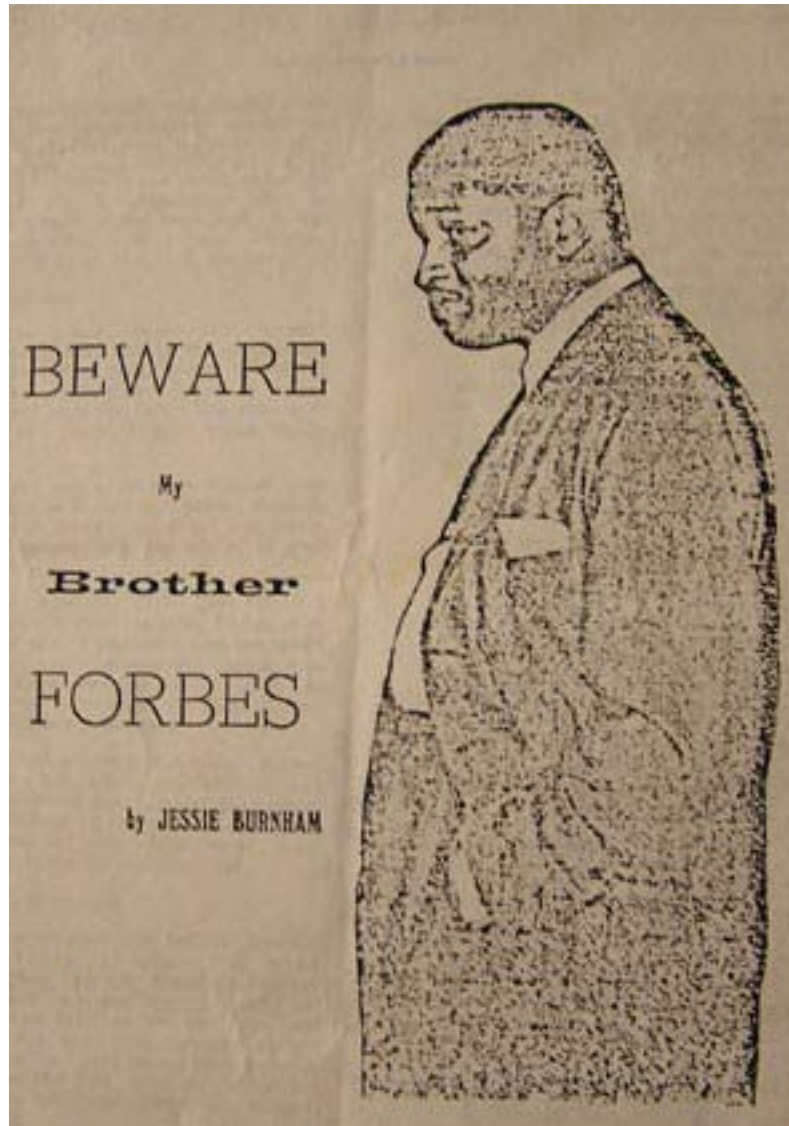


BEWARE, MY BROTHER FORBES

By Jessie Burnham



I remember vividly one Sunday while Forbes and I were studying and the rest of the family were either resting or relaxing; a religious programme “Bringing Christ to the Nation” was on the radio. The preacher was so enthusiastic that he shouted himself breathless. It was indeed disturbing to anyone studying. Forbes told me to switch off the radio.

I complied.

Mother, a few minutes later queried about the sudden halt in the programme. Forbes replied quickly, “Jessie turned off the radio.” Forthwith, I had to defend myself and state my case. The same attitude is still there. “I plan, others implement.”

Mother was a religious woman with strict ideas on moral and proper conduct. She used to speak often about the importance of honesty and the worth of good character. Often, especially as he grew older, I would catch mother watching Forbes with a worried eye. I knew she was concerned about him, about his apparent change generally. When he left for studies in England, her fears about the kind of man he was becoming deepened.

I couldn't see it at the time. Forbes and I were very close. As brother and sister, we shared many, many good times and confidences. I was not old enough to understand or appreciate what was happening in his life and character.



A young Forbes Burnham.

But I know now.

I have watched this brilliant brother use his brain to scheme, to plot, to put friend against friend, neighbor against neighbor, and relative against relative. I have watched him use this one and that one, and then quickly discard them when they have served their purpose. I have watched him with his clever wit and charms manipulate people like puppets on a string.

All this I have seen. But up to now, I must repeat, I HAVE BEEN SILENT. After all, I told myself, *he is my brother*.

But I can be silent no longer.

For today, I fear for my country and my people should my brother become PREMIER or PRIME MINISTER. It is from this fear, this concern that I speak.

BEWARE, I say, of “MY BROTHER FORBES.” His motto is, the personal ends of power justify ANY means use do achieve them. His Bible is *The Prince* by Machiavelli. And we the should he come to power will be only pawns in his endless game of self-advancement.

Make no mistake about it, the attraction of political life for Forbes is the attainment of power and glory. The number of times he had ignored the offer of a coalition supports this. And I know from personal experience what I am talking about.



Jessie Burnham, the only sister of Forbes Burnham

It was not always so.

Forbes and I grew up in the family house at 4 Pike Street, Kitty. Our father was the head-teacher at the Kitty Methodist School for 37 years as well as a member of the Village Council and lay reader in the Methodist Church for about 51 years.

Our home life centered around my mother, whom Forbes adored. It was frequently said, by old family members, that Forbes began to change when mother passed away. But as I look back now, the signs of his selfishness and boastfulness now so familiar a part of his personality, were evident long before.

He was small for his age. His schoolmates Central High School were so jealous of his ability that they took to giving him daily whippings. Mother became concerned about his health and he changed to Queen’s College (QC).

I vividly remembered one Sunday afternoon, when Forbes was shaving my father, I heard them both talking about what he would be when he grew up. He told daddy he had six goals:

1. To win the Percival Exhibition (at QC)
2. To win the Guiana Scholarship
3. To be Mayor of Georgetown
4. To become Chief Justice of British Guiana
5. To become the first Prime Minister of the West Indies Federation
6. To be the first Prime Minister of the West Indies

“Boy, you’re mad or what?” asked my father. “Be sensible. Start as a magistrate and work up your way up to be Chief Justice.”

“Magistrate?” retorted Forbes scornfully. “There’re always exceptions and why can’t I be one?”

This burning ambition, if channeled properly, could have made him one of our country’s great Statesmen-leaders. It would have, had he coupled this ambition with a genuine concern for the welfare and needs of the people, given him all he sought, in life. But along with ambition, he developed certain slickness, a sly glibness. He began even as a boy, to depend more and more on his skills with words to achieve his goals.

Today, he runs his Party like the way King Christopher once ran Haiti. While terror is no stranger to our country, it has never been used to suppress FREEDOM, the liberty of speech, worship and the press. Would these freedoms continue under my brother? It is my concern in this area...personal individual freedom...that causes me to say to my people, to Guyana, “BEWARE, MY BROTHER, FORBES. Watch carefully to whom you hand your Government.”



Forbes Burnham and Dr. Cheddi Jagan

By the time he left this country to pursue his legal studies, my father had retired. He had a pension of \$22.00 per month, and so it was necessary, since Forbes was going abroad, for me, the youngest, to become the breadwinner.

I became a teacher at the Plaisance Methodist School, and later at the Bedford Methodist School. My salary was \$20.00 a month to start. Eventually, I earned \$120.00 a month, but this was much later. Each month, I would give all my earnings to mother, keeping out \$10.00 for personal needs.

Every other month, the family would send \$120.00 dollars to Forbes in England. “Help out now,” mother told me, “and when Forbes comes home, he’ll make it up to you.” It is perhaps, a basic indifference to others that my brother has never found occasion to “help out” or, for that matter to even express his thanks for the sacrifices all of us made to help him get his start. I don’t regret assisting him. I’d do it again. He is, after all, my brother.

He was never very keen on my entering political life. When asked to assist me to come to a decision his answer was in half-anger, “You have to make that decision yourself.” But I wanted a part in helping my country receive its independence, so I ignored his opposition.

On the Monday the week before the 1953 Elections, when my canvassers and I were planning strategy, he walked into the sitting room.

“Are you all fooling Jessie?” he asked my associates. You know she can never win the seat.”



Election year in 1964; troops in the city just outside the courts and parliament buildings.

When I won my seat, he came over and shook my hand in an elaborate mock-gesture of congratulations. When I visited his counting centre in Kitty, he actually kissed me.

The issue of Party leadership came to the fore immediately after the election. It has always been interesting to me that Forbes, alone among our key PPP leaders, did not go to jail following the Suspension of the Constitution. Could it be I've frequently asked myself, that when Governor Savage remarked that "certain Ministers have come to me," he might possibly have had in mind my brother? Could it have been his hope to shatter the Party, bring down the Government in disgrace, and then perhaps, be around to pick up the pieces? It is, one must admit, an intriguing question.

After the formal split in 1955, Forbes began visiting other countries on a fairly regular schedule. What could have been the motive? Would he, the supposed nationalist, become the victim of his pet phrase, "I will not sell my country for a mess of pottage?"

Forbes made his formal bid for power at the meeting of the Party's General Council immediately after the 1953 elections. Up to that point, he carefully masked any ambitions to be leader. Then, to the astonishment of his colleagues, he demanded the post of Legislative Leader as the price if his continued support.

"It's Leader or nothing!" he angrily shouted.

When I heard him, I smiled. It was so typical of my brother. This was indeed the moment of truth: leader or nothing. It was, perhaps then, for the first time, I became fully aware of his "winner take all" attitude, his unending zest for the trappings of power, the frightening egotisms of the man.

Eventually, in a move mediated by Aston Chase, Forbes Burnham backed down and accepted the Ministry of Education. But things were never again quite the same.

That his love for personal power is so great he will trade anything to achieve it. That nothing is safe, no person, no liberty...that stands in his way.

That is why I say, in all sincerity, "BEWARE, MY BROTHER FORBES."

Behind that jest, that charm, that easy oratory is a certain dark strain of cruelty which only surfaces when one of his vital interests is threatened. There are two Burnhams; the charming and the cruel. I saw BEWARE of both.

I do not want to see my country become a police state, where power-hungry men can sacrifice our liberty for his personal gain. Many men are selfish. Many men are cruel. Many men love power. The world can tolerate such men as individuals. But our beloved country cannot tolerate such men as LEADERS.

I have said enough. I end with the hope that it is not too late for me, for my friends, and most of all, for my GUYANA.

By speaking as I have, I risk much, even perhaps life itself. For we live in lawless and dangerous times. But if what I have said can save our “world” from chaos, then any risk is worth taking.

On December 7, when you mark your ballot box, remember carefully what I have said and “BEWARE.”

[This famous and personal article was retained in what is believed to be, its original form. We have adjusted for minor grammatical changes. The original images to this article have not been recovered, except for the cover. Instead, we have inserted others including one of Jessie Burnham, about the time when she was a member of the People’s Progressive Party after the split in 1955—Editor, www.Guyanaundersiege.com]